

Tribute

Dr Helen [Halima] Knight

Dr Helen [Halima] Knight (1899-1984) was a British philosopher and an extraordinary personality. As mentioned in her entry in Wikipedia, she took a First Class degree from Cambridge in 1923 and was a Research Student at Newnham College till 1925. She gave up formal studies at Cambridge when she married the psychologist Arthur Rex Knight in 1926, but returned to Cambridge in 1932 as a Research Fellow, completing her Doctorate in 1935. Her important research publications appeared in the 1930s. She lectured on Aesthetic Philosophy at Cambridge till the Second World War, and after the War emigrated to Australia in 1949 to take up a teaching position at the University of Melbourne [Janet Clarke Hall]. Dr Knight remained in Australia after moving there apart from two visits she paid to Pakistan in the 1950s. How her life intertwined with ours is a most interesting story.

It was firstly as a postgraduate student of philosophy that Helen Knight [as she was then] attracted the attention of the famous Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher who taught at Cambridge. She was one of a group of prized students entrusted with making lucid condensations of his recondite lectures. At Cambridge, Helen Knight also met and interacted with Choudhary Rahmat Ali, the ardent advocate of Pakistan, at Emmanuel College. In 1936, Helen and Rex Knight were divorced – and Professor Rex Knight went on to marry his second wife Margaret the same year.

In a letter dated 8 September 1978 to my father, also her former student Professor S M Jamil Wasti [author of 'My Reminiscences of Choudhary Rahmat Ali, Karachi, 1982], she writes:

I think it is a very good thing that you are writing a book on Choudhary Rahmat Ali. I had tea with him several times while he was living at Cambridge... We talked a good deal about his work for the independence of Pakistan and he gave me many of his pamphlets on the subject. We also talked about my being a Muslim, and about this being due to my talks with you. I enjoyed meeting him, and admired him very

much, especially for his sincere and deep devotion to the cause of Pakistan.

The above excerpt brings out some important [if not generally known] facts, viz., Helen Knight knew and admired Choudhary Rahmat Ali; she had accepted Islam; this acceptance was due to her conversations with Prof. S. M. Jamil Wasti. The student [whom she met for the first time at her lectures in 1937] had helped to change the world-view of the teacher to one that was a larger, broader and more profound. It is common for persons to be less knowledgeable and less conscious of the religion into which they were born. But it is extraordinary for them to jettison their long-cherished beliefs and accept a world-view at variance with them. As a highly intelligent, observant and logical person, Dr Knight could not fail to be swayed by the truth of Islam when presented in a clear perspective. She chose for herself the name of the Holy Prophet's wet nurse, and became Halima Knight for those who knew her as a Muslim.

Dr Halima Knight [or 'Aunty Halima' as we called her] was especially fond of my elder brother Tanvir who was a precocious lad.

On 21 December 1981 my father was killed in a car accident near our home in Karachi. I wrote to Aunty Halima, who had carried on an intermittent correspondence with him for over 40 years, giving her news of the event. She expressed her sincere grief to all of us and also mentioned his proposed book on Choudhary Rahmat Ali thus:

I very much hope that the book on Rahmat Ali will be published, and that I will receive a copy. As you may know, I met Mr Rahmat Ali several times in Cambridge.

After my father's death, the health of my mother started deteriorating and I mentioned this in my letters to her. She replied: *'I am extremely sad about your mother's illness.'* To my suggestion that she write her autobiography, she responded: 'No, I couldn't write an autobiography – my writing skills are of another kind.' Regarding the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, she wrote: 'I feel very sad about their plight'.

As the 1980s drew on, Aunty Halima's health worsened. She had been born in 1899 – thus making her 6 years older than my father. I sent her his book on Rahmat Ali and she replied as follows:

It successfully satisfies a real need and I hope it gets many readers... He makes one realise the efforts and eagerness that went into Rahmat Ali's pursuit of the cause of Pakistan.

In a letter to my mother [who also wrote to her], she writes:

I hope all your family is well. Munir mentioned in his last letter that I must remember very little of them as it is so long

since I was last in Pakistan. Long it is, but I remember you all very well.

In her last letter written at the end of 1983 [jointly to my mother and myself] she states: ‘I have been thinking of you both such a lot, and hope Mrs Wasti is getting better’.

I received a letter from Australia dated 30 March 1984 informing me of Aunt Halima’s death on 10 March 1984, stating: ‘Dr Knight had been terribly ill, and all the staff and doctors will miss her terribly’.

After I learnt of her death, I held a *Quran-khwani* for her. May the mercy of Allah shower upon her!

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