

Face to Face

# Nilufer Yasmin: On love, life and songs

When the day is gloomy and everything seems to have gone wrong, she finds herself humming to Tagore's various tunes. Sometimes, Nazrul's songs come to visit, to enchant, to take her away from lonely afternoons. Behind every song Nilufer Yasmin sings, there is life, there is love, for which she has worked very hard throughout her life.

**N**ILUFER Yasmin is a highly acclaimed Nazrul Geeti (songs of Quazi Nazrul Islam) exponent. However she has equal passion and expertise in songs of Atul Prasad, Rajanikanta, Kanon Debi, D. L. Ray and, to a lesser extent, Rabindranath Tagore.

"I have more opportunity to sing Nazrul songs in television and stage because of the different programmes in his memory. On the other hand, I have limited scope to perform songs of other Pancha Geeti Kabi and hence I've been classified as a Nazrul Singer," she said while talking to The Daily Star at her Eskaton Road residence.

Music has been an integral part of Nilufer Yasmin from the time she was a young girl. Her mother sang very well and one of her earliest memories is one that of her mother playing the harmonium while all the members of her family sang one after the other. It was like a game to the young mind, like the card game of 'patience'.

"I still remember my father singing *Din guli mor shonar khancha* and *Ami kaan petey rot*. He was very fond of Rabindra Sangeet, especially those sung by Pankaj Mallick. My mother loved all sorts of songs and sang accordingly."

Music, in fact, runs in her blood. Her mother learnt to sing professionally at a time when people looked at singing with scepticism. Nilufer Yasmin's grandfather, who was a lawyer, took time off his practice to be with his daughter when she sang. Therefore, it was quite natural that young Nilufer would take up music as well.

"Perhaps it was a natural

consequence. Among four sisters, three of us sing professionally. The other, although not a singer, has a keen ear for music. But my mother has always been my inspiration."

When her parents decided to teach their two elder daughters the essence of music, Durga Prasad Roy, a classical setarist came by to teach them. Hearing her sisters sing, little Nilufer

learnt a lot. Sometimes their *ustadji* (mentor) told her to sing. One day, he told her sisters that Nilufer would do well if she specialised in classical music.

Her eldest sister, Farida Yasmin, took music as an optional subject during her matriculation exam. They were in Narayanganj then. She remembers her father's trip to Dhaka just to get the music syllabus.

"I don't remember whether she finally sat for the exam or not, but I think this speaks a lot for the interest our parents took in music."

Her mother has been her teacher throughout. But a point came in life, when her mother felt that her teachings were not adequate; she felt the need for a more professional teacher for her daughter. In 1964, P. C. Gomez started to give her lessons in classical music. He was her teacher for around twenty years until the day he passed away, one fine day in 1984. Although he was ill for some time before his death, Nilufer Yasmin did not feel the need of another teacher. His presence was enough for her.

Nazrul songs came to her easily.

"I enjoyed forming songs from the notations. It was like a game to me, a game I became quite good at some time later. For a long time, that was my sole lesson in Nazrul Geeti. Much later in life I had had the opportunity to take lessons from Shiekh Lutfur Rahman and Sudhin Das. In 1985, after the death of P. C. Gomez, I went to Calcutta to take lessons from Srimati

Misa Banerjee. Then in Dhaka, Ustad Sagoruddin Khan and Ustad A. Daud from India gave me lessons."

By Navine Murshid

She did her bachelors and masters in sociology. Her studies and music went alongside one another. Since songs were her mate from childhood, she never felt that it was interfering with her academic studies. But she was not a very good student.

"Now I feel I was not a bad student either. I had received two scholarships that gave me a pocket money of Tk. 35, which, in those days, was not a matter of joke. That was also the time when I got into singing on radio, so that was a source of finance as well. It was during my honours that I got enlisted as a senior artist after general audition. I was no longer a child artist then and that was very important to me."

Nilufer Yasmin's introduction to Kirtan, songs of Atul Prasad, Rajanikanta and the like came much later in life. She feels that this has been the contribution of her husband Late Khan Ataur Rahman. He told her what kinds of songs would suit her voice and how she could improve. "He often selected my

songs for cassettes and he selected them well. He had a good sense of music and I trusted him to do what is best for me."

She still finds strength in his inspiration.

Now, she likes to sing classical-based Nazrul songs more than his other songs. Songs with a Raga (classical)-base have a magnetic effect on her. She is fond of modern songs as

well provided that the lyrics and music combine to form a beautiful harmony; provided that she can truly feel the song.

"I need to be able to feel that the song is talking about me."

Listening to songs is also one of her favourite pastimes. She loves to listen to all kinds of songs but the lyrics and the music have to have an appeal to her. She recognises that different artists have different types of voice, but still the music has to be adhered to. Originality of different songs have to be maintained. Band music is a new addition in the Bangladeshi music context. She feels that here, too, there has to be an understanding between music and the words of the songs. The fundamental musical notes must be there.

Her son, popularly known as Aagun, is very much into band music and has made a name for himself in this respect as well. In this context, she holds no dogmatic view, but feels that a minimum standard should be maintained in terms of cultural heritage and background.

"He has a good music background. He knows the

base. He knows the good things. I've heard him listen to songs of Bhupen Hajarika, Mehdi Hasan, Manna Dey and I've seen him learn them and perform them. I've seen that when he listens to songs and when he performs, he does so for love. And so, I'm not scared that he will move away from his roots."

Her liking for songs depends on her mood and temperament. When alone, she finds herself humming Rabindra Sangeet.

"This is not a conscious effort. It is as though I traverse into another world. Then, it is my heart that sings, and I have no control. Sometimes, I sing one line from one song and another line from another. My voice gets a life of its own. Sometimes Nazrul Geeti and modern songs find their way in my thoughts too. Some songs repeatedly come to me when I'm sad. It is different when my feelings are mixed up like when I'm lonely and sad, lonely and humiliated. This is one time, when my heart rules."

At present she is a lecturer at Dhaka University's Music and Drama Department. She also teaches classical music and Nazrul Geeti at her residence once a week to a limited number of students.

"I take very few students because I want to give each of them proper attention. In my life I have been very lucky to have teachers who have always wanted to teach me everything they know. They have helped me overcome barriers using different techniques and mechanisms while practising. They have taught me with a lot of love and care, which has placed me in where I am today. It is very important that an aspiring singer gets good guidance.



And that is what I want to be for my students."

To be a good singer one need not be an expert in classical music, but a minimum practice is required. She feels that classical music is needed to nurture the voice, to make it flexible, to have volume control, to increase the voice range and to control voice throwing and pronunciation. She feels that to bring out the inner appeal, to create variation and to express through the voice and music what one feels, classical music and *rewaz* (practice) is very important.

"I would not say I am a very good singer, but I would

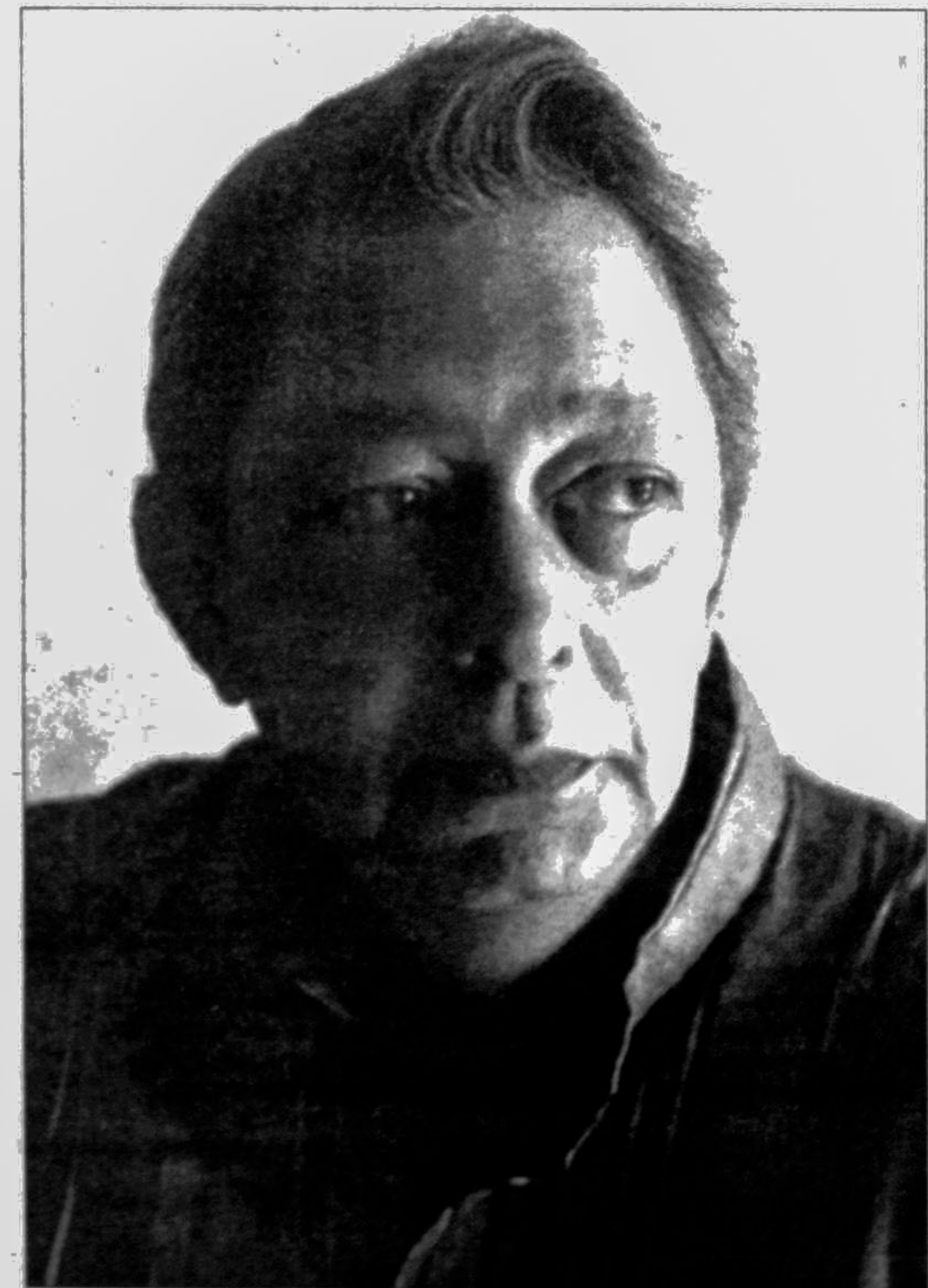
say I work very hard. And I value hard work as well. This is about lifestyle - the way I want to live and spend the rest of my life. My path has been a path of hard work. Whatever I did I always strived to do my best. Having such a family background was also an advantage. My added advantage was the guidance I've received in pursuing my career."

She is very hopeful about aspirant singers of the country. She feels that to be a good singer, one must love the songs and be willing to work hard.

"I believe that love should be the reason to sing. To be good singers, they

must be able to sustain constructive criticism. They should be able to learn from the comments of other people. The audience need not be professional singers, but their opinions matter, too. They have to be able to take these with an open mind and not get defensive about it. Singers should always keep in mind that lessons never end. They should never feel as though they have reached the peak; they are the best. Such beliefs often prove to be harmful because this stunts their learning abilities. They lose the capacity to take in what they are being taught. In fact that is the beginning of an end."

When I was A Teenager...



## IN CONVERSATION WITH GOLAM MUSTAFA

**I**f you have ever seen an "elderly father" or a "family man" in our television serials, and then seen him again and again in ever-changing roles, you might as well shorten your list to a handful of few artistes who are capable of such feats. One such club member is Golam Mustafa, the renowned and versatile actor, dramatist and cultural connoisseur of the Bangladeshi arts. But then he insists poetry recitation is his passion. So how did he come to where he is now? Golam Mustafa's childhood days were not the most convenient stepping stones to a chequered career. As the actor takes a trip down memory lane, he reveals some of the instances that have shaped his life into an eventful one.

Mustafa's teen days started, unfortunately, at a time of tumultuous family life. At the age of ten, his father died and his elder brother, barely twenty then, found the reins of the family in his hands. This in a queer way put some of the prohibitions of those days out of young Mustafa's way. Conservative parental doctrines were somewhat relaxed and he got exposed to a more diverse world. A diverse world? Golam quickly jumps to clarify.

"You see after my father died, my elder brother was not that strict on us, and also family life was not that settled as we tried to cope with an altogether new situation. Take an example. In those days people,

especially the younger generation, could not read what they liked and when they liked. Reading love stories by famous writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sharat Chandra, were tabooed pastimes for a teenager. But in our house I could take a book off a shelf and start reading it just like that. No one would be watching over my shoulder. This was healthy exposure for me to good literature and

probably, if not unconsciously, kindled my first interests for the arts."

Being a teenager was not easy for Golam Mustafa. These were the years that had the most impact on his future life.

"Indeed, I was affected a lot during this period. The ethnic riots had started to brew and in the midst of it all I was a confused and "ignorant" teenager. "Ignorant" because then the "learned" people had to know that if you were a Muslim you had to kill the Hindu neighbour whom you had known for years. I had many Hindu friends, actually even Christian ones, but we never knew or noticed, at that age, their religions. So when I saw the first corpse in a lane, or at least what was left of it, it left a hideous imprint on the young heart."

Even before he was a teenager, Mustafa had seen the effects of World War II - "people dying of hunger, injuries" - and these

incidences considerably changed his attitudes towards life. Today's Golam Mustafa insists on this quotation:

"Life is a grindstone. Whether it grinds you down or polishes you up; depends on what you are made off."

At school Mustafa was not an athletic boy. Some football that he played could not survive to be recorded and it seemed the cultural spheres pulled him in more

By A Maher

strongly. But to be fair, fresher Mustafa did make some ripples in the college pool. After school, while in Jagannath College, young Golam got his first solid opportunity to enter the drama and acting world. He got enrolled into a cultural organisation, of which a close relative was the founder, and started practising. At this stage the junior member of the *Agrani Shipa Sangha* realised some important and fundamental aspects of what he is so well-known for today.

"One of the most important things about stage acting, poetry recitation and plays is not 'acting' at all but communicating with an agenda. You are on stage, acting or reciting with a message. It is a platform for standing up to and defending your rights; advocating what you believe. Earlier I thought it was only giving pleasure to people.

"There was also an earlier instance which inspired me more into dramas. It was at home when I was going through two of George Bernard Shaw's plays which were very absorbing plays."

Was teenage life different in his days? A world apart! With an exception in some topics. *Addas* were strictly with male company and conversation (not so strictly) about female

counterparts. And how were these damsels impressed? It was the time of the books and literature and verses from one or some line from another would fly yards to sting the softer hearts. For this is how eve-teasing would take place.

"If a girl passed in front of a group of scouring young men, she would probably be the victim of a Rabindranath abridgement describing the finer points of a woman's gait. Sometimes I feel there was a healthier atmosphere then than today's instances of obscene comments flung at young ladies." Mustafa recalls.

The Language Movement, in which he was involved, had an impact on young Mustafa's life. Freedom to the language meant freedom to practise the native arts and culture. But dramas blossomed slowly then; when he was acting in university productions it was very hard to find girls willing to play some role or

the other. Sometimes professional artists had to be brought in on payment. Mustafa had further reason to be advantaged because of his meetings in person and, lucky exchanges, with Surahwardy and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, especially when the latter came to Jagannath College. Interactions with them proved to be of great value later in life for the young artiste.

What about today's teenagers?

"Teenagers have the right to commit mistakes" was how present-day Golam Mustafa started off. "They are a unique community Page 2 of 2 within our social structure who have the broad discretion and freedom to launch crusades that start revolutions and bring in changes to society."

Another quote, on the role of teenagers, which has greyed with the man himself:

"To fight for the things that they can change; to accept the things they cannot; and have the wisdom to know the difference between the two."

But this advocate of the young finished with a fitting repartee for those who might have brought Bangladesh's teenage society to what it probably is now.

"Though teenagers will always be unruly in the eyes of their elders, I have this prodding feeling that we have failed somewhere."