



ARTS GAZE BY LUBNA MARIUM

Of 'crème de café' and 'dal tadka' at interstices of alterity

'It is the inbetween space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.'

— Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

Two Bangladeshi dancers, a couple of Croatian-Canadians - one a well-known filmmaker and another a student of political thought - and a German Professor of Comparative Mythology, chatting over cheese and wine, in a quiet Toronto neighborhood, was almost a surreal coming together of alterity or 'otherness'.

The newly married couple, Tahmina Anika, from Dhaka, and Zoran Swanson, from Toronto, had invited me to join them at Zoran's god-mother, Gabriella Martinelli and her husband Max Fischer's house for a quiet lunch. I was there to reinforce the young couple's invitation, to our hosts, to join in their upcoming wedding reception in Bangladesh.

Though once quoted to have said, 'I just do what I love. I haven't changed the world or anything', the quiet and unassuming Martinelli has quite a formidable bulk of work in her name, both as a documentary film-maker and a producer. She's worked with some of the biggest names in film - David Cronenberg, Baz Luhrmann, Leonardo DiCaprio, Clive Barker, Jeremy Irons, and now Sophia Loren and her son, Edoardo Ponti. And her filmmaking CV includes credits on *M. Butterfly*, *Romeo + Juliet*, *Naked Lunch*, *Dead Ringers* and *My American Cousin*. Her spouse Max Fischer, on the other hand, is more the truth-seeker, who has moved away from the complexities of German philosophy to a retired life dedicated to studying the work of Edmond Szekely, the founder of Rancho La Puerta, a unique fitness retreat based on traditional and indigenous understanding of nature and human community.

That lazy afternoon, we epitomized, influential cultural and post-colonial theorist, Bhabha's 'Third Space', referring to the interstices between colliding cultures, a liminal space 'which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.'

Gabriella's curiosity about dance in Bangladesh, led Anika and me to relating the

history of our language movement, and soon to a discussion on eco-linguistics. As our hosts walked us to their favorite Indian restaurant, 'Bhoj', we discussed the importance of the stories we live by and how they form the cognitive structures in the minds of individuals or across a society, influencing how people treat each other, other animals, plants, forests, rivers and the physical environment. Our discussion on languages continued, through a delicious meal of 'dal tadka and rice', and Max informed us that, 'The wisdom of humanity is coded in language and once a language dies, the knowledge dies with it.'

'What does being a God-mother signify?', I ask. This leads Gabriella down memory lane, as she poignantly recalls how she and Zoran's late mother were childhood friends who had both traveled by boat with their families from Split, in Croatia, to Canada in the early 1950s; how their mothers tailored similar clothes for them for school; and how it was only natural that she was chosen as a godparent to take an interest in her friend's child's upbringing and to take care of the child should anything happen to the parents. 'All the more reason to visit Bangladesh', I reply.

In consonance with the expansive mood of inclusiveness, Gabriella insists that we move on to the nearby pizzeria, Caffe di Portici, for dessert. There I was introduced to 'crème de café', literally and deliciously, cream of coffee. As I relish the treat, I vaguely remember reading about the Italian traveler, De Varthema and seeing sketches of India related to his travels there in the 16th century, giving historicity to cross-cultural encounters.

When our conversation veers towards my work with the 'snake litanies' of Manasa and other myths of Bengal, Max, smilingly quotes, 'Myths are stories about the way things never were, but always are'.

I quietly bid adieu, understanding how a place can simultaneously 'be' and 'not be' familiar.

Back home, I curiously downloaded Max Fischer's insightfully annotated translations of Herman Hesse's poems 'The Seasons of the Soul', to read,

'Every blossom wants to become fruit.

Every morning turns into evening without regret.

Nothing on earth is eternal

except change, except taking leave.'



LIFE'S LYRICS NASHID KAMAL

Carrying the music and being a winner

'Safa' got her name from the two hills in Mekkah Sharif. She is the daughter of former Minister Late Mr. Hafizur Rahman and Begum Anwara Rahman. When she was only three years old she learned all the songs that her mother was singing, it included songs from all genre. At the age of six Akhter Jahan alias Safa joined the children's organization titled 'Mukul Fouz' where folk maestro Abdul Latif and Tagore exponent Sanjida Khatun taught their respective genre. Later, at nine, she went to the Quamrunessa Girl's school Sunday Class and learned from many teachers including Bedaruddin Ahmed. She became more keen on Tagore songs and even tried writing one or two in those styles.

At thirteen, she found herself in Karachi, where her father was posted. Later, in Dhaka, she took up music as a subject in her matric exams and trained extensively under Ustad Munir Hossain Khan. She participated twice in East Pakistan Education week competitions and won the first prize in Tagore songs.

To continue her pursuit of music, she went to enroll in Lahore Women's College, which had music as a subject, ultimately that didn't work out. She shifted to Kinnaird College in Lahore and continued private lessons under Ustad Abdur Rahman. Lessons included western music too as well as the piano. Again she had to come back to East Pakistan to study in the Dhaka University, she took part in the East Pakistan Education week, this time to earn two gold medals (in ghazal and folk songs). At the behest of the famous trainer, singer, composer Abdul Ahad Akhter started performing in the Radio.

She was displaying a streak of genius for Tagore songs, specially 'toppa' and was invited to Chayanaut to teach Tagore songs. There she met Ustad Azad Rahman and also started training (in classical) under his tutelage. At this time, some of her songs 'chade jabar shopno jokhon', 'dui dike dui pahar' and 'amar kanna elo tomar chelemi dekhe' gained immense popularity as modern songs. Her rendition of



Tagore songs and some special Nazrul items are still in demand as collector's items. The smoothness in her voice, coupled with some nasal delivery where needed, her understanding of the emotional upheavals in the song, makes them unique through ages.

Just when she was enjoying this glory and even participated in assertive chorus songs against the military junta, the army cracked down on the night of the 25th March. Her husband was a lecturer in the department of Political Science of Dhaka University, they had a son, they were forced to leave the country for safer havens in Australia.

Akhter was always a meritorious student. She completed her masters in Political Science as well as Psychology and joined in the Department for Social and Community Welfare, South Australia. From a clinical psychologist she became an Expert Witness in the Youth Court for the Crown Solicitor which changed her profession to Senior Clinical Psychologist. The pursuit of music continued and during her free hours she took opera lessons for two years from Norma Hunter (in 1977). Sometimes, she lost her voice due to overwork or other trying situations, she never lost hope. She knew she would sing one day. She did voice lessons and got back voice. After her retirement from full time service Akhter created a musical team named 'Jazz masala' with local residents and performed her music all over Australia. She has recorded three wonderful albums, one entirely on Tagore songs and her song 'shokoli phuralo' written by the Gurudev after the demise of his wife, deserves special mention. Other CDs have Nazrul songs and popular folk songs, all testifying to her undiminishing thirst for singing. All three CDs have been accompanied by both Bangladeshi musicians as well as Australian musicians from her band. They are available online. Having completed a full circle of life, all her dreams have come true one by one. Today, she lives in Australia and true to her grandfather's words, her eyes remind you of the deer, and her voice 'the nightingale'.

