

MUSINGS

ALL ROADS LEAD TO GULISTAN

BY GHAZALA SCHEIK AKBAR

She stood at the edge of the elegant Jinnah Avenue, a stone's throw away from the leafy environs of Government House, the undisputed Queen of the cinemas: Gulistan, the 'rose garden' of Dacca's cinema-loving public. She wasn't just a neon-lit symbol of the newer and modern Dacca. She was its centre. All roads led to her vicinity. "Gulistaner peechey," "Gulistaner aagey," "Gulistaner shonghay," "Gulistaner paashey"...., that's how you gave directions. Ask any Rickshawallah above 55 years of age and he will confirm her importance.

She was the focal point between old and new Dacca. Behind her lay the railway Line, Nawabpur and all of the crowded old town leading to Sadarghat and the banks of the Buriganga. In front or within its environs lay the smarter shops, offices, businesses, that had mushroomed when Dacca blossomed along with the Khirshnachura trees into a leafy, sedate capital city. Al- Amin Fabrics, Kash bakery, Baby ice cream parlour, Beauty Shoe company, Bham and sons, Ganny's -- to name a few -- all bustling with energy and the promise of prosperity for the newly created Eastern wing of Pakistan.

Built and owned by the enterprising Dossani family, migrants from Calcutta, the Gulistan wasn't just a cinema hall -- it also housed a warren of shops and offices including 'Maison Musique' where we bought our records and record players or celebrated family occasions eating at Chu Chin Chow, one of the earliest Chinese restaurants in Dacca.

Long before the advent of television and home entertainment systems that so dominate our lives today, cinema-going was a serious social and cultural event for 'Dacca-ites' of all denominations. The Gulistan with its gaily (often lurid) painted billboards, smart foyer, broad circular staircase, plush velvet seats was the place to see... and to be seen. In the early 50s and 60s English language films were all the rage: epics like *The Robe*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Androceles and the Lion* were much-anticipated events. Tickets had to be booked by telephone or purchased well in advance to avoid the disappointment



PHOTO: NASREEN AHMED



Show at around 11 on Sundays. This would be a different movie to the one showing on weekdays, especially if the main film happened to be a blockbuster or an Urdu/ Bengali film (eg *Talaash*, *Chanda*, *Saat Bhai Champa*) that would run for months. These morning shows attracted a very select, well-heeled and educated audience. However, once the smaller, cosier Naz cinema catering to the niche market for English language films, was added to the Gulistan complex, they ceased altogether. Such was the demand for foreign films however, that Gulistan introduced the 1:30 pm show which ended just in time for the main show at three o'clock. These were finely edited to fit time constraints but with heavily discounted tickets for students we didn't care if a few scenes were chopped off.

In the early 50s, the Gulistan Management also ran a club called 'Gulistan Children's Club' which screened special films for kids. During the interval there would be a talent show. I vividly recall reciting 'twinkle twinkle little star' to a packed audience at age 5. This momentous debut is mentioned in the Club's newsletter which I often pulled out from a drawer that my father filled with such mementoes. Reading and re-reading my glowing review and misspelt name filled me with immense narcissistic pride!

In the mid 60s, as the city, traffic and the population expanded further and wider, the Gulistan lost some of its sheen and its monopoly, with serious competition from the newer Modhumita and Balaka cinemas. These were more conveniently located and also showed English-language films, but to my mind they could not be compared to the stately elegance of the Gulistan in its prime. As I pass by these days, one cringes: the original building has been torn down and in its place, there is an ugly monstrosity known as a shopping mall. Gulistan, garden of roses, lies only in my fading memory.

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of the 'House Full' sign. Sometimes films were designated 'For adults only' (Brigitte Bardot's *And God Created Woman*) but we managed to get round that by wearing sarees and pretending to be grown up! The ushers looked the other way!

Before each show, there was an excited anticipatory buzz as the eager crowd arrived, dodging hawkers, eve-teasers, black market touts and beggars. And if things got rough and the crowd unruly, order was maintained by half-pant clad policeman brandishing lathis! The well-to-do came smartly attired, fingering their dress circle, balcony or box tickets, ascending the staircase to the upper foyer, waving to friends using their candy flosses. Those of humbler pockets sat in the seats downstairs munching on chana choor.

Once the doors opened, everybody was ushered in to their respective seats by uniformed staff. As we settled in, there was more craning of necks to see who was there and with whom! Then the sound system piped in the latest foot-tapping instrumental music (Billy Vaughan's 'come september, 'tequila' by the Champs) before the curtains parted dramatically to show the Pakistan News Pictorial ... a compilation of news events that often drew a few jeers and cheers from the more politically astute in the audience. This was the days before television news; so a glimpse of a celebrity or two or a fleeting moment of a cricket match was a special treat.

Next came the advertisements as we absorbed the benefits of using brylcream and cherry blossom shoe polish! Then the trailers began with a

promise of future attractions (Yul Brynner telling Eli Wallach to 'ride on' in *The Magnificent Seven*) and... finally with a swish, the curtains closing and re-opening, a grainy censor board certificate gave way to the main attraction, the much anticipated feature film.

For the next few hours the magic of the cinema had us mesmerized, the spell broken by a brief interval, enlivened by the much-welcome appearance of the potato chip seller with his one-anna bags... or if our parents were feeling particularly generous, we treated ourselves to chocolate ice cream from the soda fountain in the foyer.

In addition to the three daily shows, (matinee, evening and late- night) the Gulistan, would also have Morning

The Bluestocking Salons of Eighteenth-Century Britain

MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN

I enjoyed reading my teacher and mentor Fakrul Alam's "The Literary Club of 18th-Century London" (*Daily Star*, 20 August 2018). Referring to our age-old practice of having literary *addas* (chatting circles) and London's "The Club" better known as "Literary Club" which Samuel Johnson (1709-84) and Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) founded in 1764, he pointed to a comparable literary tradition of Bengal and Britain.

It is believed that Johnson was inspired by Francis Bacon's precept that "reading makes a full man, conversation a ready man, and writing an exact man" and used to devote "most attention to how to communicate useful and pleasurable knowledge successfully." So mainly because of Johnson's witticisms, sense of humour and the entertaining conversations of the Club, it received wide coverage in the national and international media of the time. Johnson's and Reynolds' Club attracted other great writers such as Adam Smith (1723-90), Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74), Edward Gibbon (1737-94) and James Boswell (1740-95). However, the fact remains that it was an all-male circle of interlocutors.

The title of Professor Alam's essay stirred in me an anticipation that it would touch on the eighteenth-century bluestocking circles which were perhaps equally vibrant. It did not do so, to which I drew his attention. This essay represents my attempt to act upon his *adesh* (compelling advice) to "write about [bluestocking]" and thus to complement his piece by offering some insight into eighteenth-century Britain's bluestocking salons.

Bluestocking circles were led and hosted by women -- such as, Elizabeth Vesey (1715-91), Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800) and Frances Boscawen (1719-1805) -- in the 1750s and "continued well into the 1780s with a

second generation of hostesses and societies in London and the provinces" which included Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97). Such salons brought together both women and men. In some circles, Johnson was a regular attendee. Importantly, the name 'bluestocking' is associated with the erudite and witty Benjamin Stillingfleet (1702-71).

Bluestocking circles were exclusive and most participants, affluent and well educated. Initially, they were required to



wear formal dress which included black silk stockings. However, Stillingfleet could not afford to buy the conventional black or white silk stockings, so Vesey allowed him to attend the gatherings in the everyday modest attire of blue worsted stockings, normally the garb of working men. This was because Stillingfleet became

an integral and indispensable member of the circles, as he was very entertaining, fun to listen to and went down very well with the female participants. They were ready to delay their discussions until his arrival, stating: "We can do nothing without our bluestockings." Eventually, such feminist salons came to be known as bluestocking circles and became less formal as opposed to the formality symbolized by black stockings.

Women in eighteenth-century Britain

had limited access to the public sphere and were subject to multiple discriminations and exclusions. Defying social restrictions on their participation in the public realm, bluestocking women used the literary circles to sharpen their wits and interact with "other educated women and men". Given the strong prejudice against

women of intellectual ability and creative potential in eighteenth-century Europe, bluestocking literary gatherings involving women were considered unconventional and even deviant, and therefore viewed negatively by society. As a result, although denoting any learned or literary lady, the term bluestocking took on derogatory and stereotypical connotations and "women known as 'bluestockings' were generally regarded with suspicion."

Referring to this phenomenon, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain compares the patriarchal prejudice of Bengal and Britain, stating: "In every society there are men who are against female education. Men in England used to ridicule educated women and call them 'bluestocking' while Bengali women are denounced as novel addicted." In the same vein, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf said:

It might still be well to sneer at 'blue stockings with an itch for scribbling,' but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses. Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle class woman began to write.

While pre-eighteenth-century British women writers mingled among acquaintances in what Margaret Ezell terms "coterie circles", bluestocking women made one step ahead. They enjoyed a greater space and their gender-neutral gatherings placed them on a complementary equivalence with men in literary discussions. Emphasizing this aspect of bluestocking

intellectual life, Bridget Hill, in *Eighteenth-century Women: An Anthology*, states that bluestocking women "not only insisted on their ability to converse on equal terms with men, but in their salons demonstrated such ability and received public recognition for their intellectual attainments and their conversational wit."

One reason why first-generation bluestocking women writers of eighteenth-century Britain remained in a marginal position and received comparatively less literary attention is their conservative outlook in political and sexual matters. As in "Bluestocking Feminism" Harriet Guest puts it:

[T]hese women did not obviously or vociferously attempt to reform the condition or treatment of women. They spent much of their time socializing with men ... who were also conservative. It is perhaps because of that character ... that they did not become prominent as a result of the drive to unearth hidden ancestors and to meet the pre-feminist family of the past that energized so much feminist enquiry in the 1970s.

However, in recent literary studies, bluestocking women have re-emerged with some distinction. Through a feminist retrieval approach to past literature, they have been discovered and brought to academic attention and their intellectual contributions, recovered and recognized.

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