

The Music Session



“OH, no, there’s someone at the door— just as we’ve sat down to eat. Now all the food will get cold-” I couldn’t help feeling irritated. As it was, Atul had returned so late.

“Who can it be at this time?” muttered Atul, opening the door.

“Namaste...”

“Namaste, namaste! Come in, come in, *bhai* Nitin. What’s the matter ? Why so flustered?”

“No, nothing. I’m disturbing you at the wrong time, I...”

“Doesn’t matter. Do come in. But what is it ?”

“I hope you haven’t come to say that we can’t have our get-together?”

“No, no, of course we can. But I came to ask— I hope your landlord won’t object to Mohini Bai’s coming today ?”

“I don’t think he will. Old Babaji is deaf— he won’t hear a thing, and poor Singh Saheb is a gentleman and a sensible fellow too.”

“That’s true, but just now I happened to meet Karim Khan and reminded him to be here with the *tabla* at eight sharp, So he said: ‘Why don’t you confirm everything in advance to avoid any possible unpleasantness later ?’ We all respect her very much, you see. It was from her that Karim learnt his *tabla*-playing”, added Nitin.

“But why should they object to our having a get-together in our own house?” I put in.

“Well, after all the house does belong to them. Suppose they suddenly turn up and ask : ‘What is this *tamasha* going on ?’ then what will you do ? Of course,

she’s ugly to look at, and about 60 or 65 years old!”

“How does all that matter?”

My voice rose to a sharp edge. “It’s a musical evening—where does the question of a *tamasha* arise ? What’s wrong with inviting anyone who sings well ?

“You’re an educated lady. But the people around here are very backward—who knows what they may think? They’re not so liberal as to take such things in their stride !” Evidently, Nitin had guessed that I was making an effort to be liberal and generous.

I hastily tried to cover up “No, no, that’s not what I meant. Personally, I don’t see anything wrong in it. Anyway, as far as Singh Saheb is concerned, he won’t raise any objection. At worst, he will keep away.”

“Well, that’s fine. He needn’t come if he doesn’t want to”, agreed Atul “What more can he do? What d’you think, Nitin?”

“Yes, Yes, you’re right. OK, I’ll make a move then.”

“It’ll be good if you try and come early,”

“And tell Ruchi she must come too”, I added.

While I was still in the kitchen, I heard people coming up the stairs, I hastily drew the curtain across the doorway and went to have a wash, Atul put his head in : “She’s come too !”

“I’m coming in a minute. And listen— ask Ruchi to stay in the sitting room till I’m ready.” While changing my sari, I had heard Ruchi’s voice on the stairs.

A thought flashed through my mind: “She’s old, but who knows— she may still be good looking ? Oh, no, didn’t Nitin say she’s quite ugly to look at? And so what, even if she is good looking ?” It was not too difficult to make this concession, now that I had created good reasons to reassure myself!

I came out into the sitting room. There she sat, in a white sari, her head covered. I said sat down near Ruchi, and Atul: “Please give her one of the round cushions to lean on.”

She was talking to Karim. One couldn’t hear what they were saying but her voice was strangely heavy. A very plain face, though the eyes had a peculiar glow. Perhaps plainness is not considered too big a drawback for a singing woman. Perhaps there is some other requirement which doubtless she possessed. Somewhere in my mind, feeling of satisfaction that today I was able to honour a woman so dishonoured by society. Singing as she habitually did, besieged by slaving male lips, salivating jaws, she must never have been honoured for her art. And of course “ladies” are not supposed to feel any respect for such women. The very nature of the relationship between them precludes respect.

I had no uncomfortable feelings. My mind was as ordered and undisturbed as usual. Perhaps I felt so calm because I smelt no danger. And after all, were we not paying her a compliment by inviting

her, giving her the respect one would give to any established, well-known singer ?

But what if this woman had been young and beautiful, with a voice like an angel—then would you have been able to invite her with such ease ? Would you have been able to respect her ? Suddenly this question arose in my mind. Sweat drops gathered on my brow looked furtively around to see if anyone was observing me.

She ran her fingers over the harmonium. But her voice—what a voice, what clear, vibrant notes, what varied hues—incalculable that such music should issue forth from those toothless jaws ! I began to relax. Her singing gathered strength, There was a tremulous quality to her voice, layer upon layer, shade upon shade in her tones, which seemed able to lay bare the minutest detail of an emotion, an experience. I'd heard that she sang well, but I hadn't expected this,

A feeling of intense gratitude overwhelmed me. After all it is these women who have preserved the tradition of classical music even if in the process, they have had to trade not only the music but themselves as well. I don't know why it was, but the realization that in some way her situation, her work, was greater, more significant, than my situation, my work, gave me pleasure, made me feel generous towards her, I began to think—should I not give her at least 10-15 rupees as a token of my gratitude and pleasure? Or may be I should give her a white sari. After all, what is 10-15 rupees these days? And then—she must be singing for very wealthy men, must be used to munificent monetary gifts. What will a few rupees mean to her—they will be a mere drop in the ocean. But then I began to think—whatever the value of money may be these days, will it not be an insult to myself if I give her money ? How can I so degrade my emotion ? Is emotion not priceless ? Better to let it remain within me, unspoken. My enthusiastic wish to give and bestow was suddenly quenched, and I started returning to an easy, healthful state of mind.

But I could not help feeling surprised at myself for the turn my thoughts had taken. After all, I have heard so many famous male singers but however much I may have enjoyed their singing, it never occurred to me to give them money. Then

why this sudden desire to give *her* money? I began to feel ashamed, revolted at myself. I felt as if through that one thought I had joined those hordes of men who try to assert their own superiority and degrade a woman dancer or singer by the insulting gesture of throwing money at her. How could I have behaved like them—I, myself a woman ?

Maybe she doesn't feel insulted when she gets money from men. She has reconciled herself to the fact that this is the only relationship possible with men, but how would she feel if a woman related to her in the same way? I began to feel suffocated, terribly out-of-place in that set-up. Perhaps if I did some house-work, I would feel more at ease. I got up and went to make tea.

As they sipped the tea, nearly everyone joined in praising her voice and her singing. There were three or four other singers present but they had all slipped away to the back as if the evening



-Jolly Rohtagi

was hers alone. She began to sing again. Loud expressions of appreciation filled the room. I dislike such vulgar ways of complimenting which almost seem to defile the music, so I sat quietly, listening.

While she was singing, a couple of gentlemen got up, went and sat near her, and began to sway to the music, noisily giving vent to their appreciation. It felt as if someone had flung filth into clear, silently running water. I began to feel very restless.

One gentleman piped up: "Great, Mohini, great! You still sing exactly as you did in those days! Exactly the same flavour!" As she sang, a glow, a faint smile came into her eyes. Somehow, I

didn't quite like the familiar tone in which he addressed her. His tone was not so much that of an admirer as that of a man who thinks that such a woman deserves no respect, that anyone has the right to approach her with insulting familiarity.

The song suddenly came to an end. Startled, I looked around. So engrossed had I been in my feelings that I hadn't heard anything of what she had just sung. I got up and went to the next room to fetch the *pan*.

She began a *ghazal*. It started in a soft near-whisper and suddenly swelled forth ; "*Bahut yaad aaye magar tum na aaye*" (many memories came but you did not come) or something of the sort. Before I came back into the sitting room, two or three men suddenly came striding in at the door—as if the house belonged to them, I felt we were being made outsiders in our own house. Before they had crossed the room to go and sit near the wall, they had already interjected several exclamations of "*Ai-hai, kya baat hai*" and "*Kamaal kar diya*" between the words of her song. The same tone of insolent familiarity. They knelt down near her.

I could not recall ever having had so much as a nodding acquaintance with these new entrants. Who had invited them who had informed them? When I went to put the *pan* tray in the centre of the room, they greeted me but I ignored them.

Ruchi shrank back and sat close to the kitchen doorway. There was just enough space for me to squeeze in beside her. But the newcomers were not content to sit still and listen. They began to sway to and fro and join in with her: "*Bahut yaad aaye...*"

I glanced at Ruchi, stood up and walked briskly into the kitchen. It was impossible to sit and watch those men turning my own house into a brothel. Ruchi followed me. Almost trembling, I went into the passage towards the other rooms, which were in darkness.

"Listen Ruchi, who are those disgusting people? What have they come here for?"

"I don't know, Didi, They're Karim's neighbours so they must have got to know..."

"But without being invited ? We don't know them from Adam."

“They know it’s a music session—that’s enough. Why should they wait for an invitation ?”

“Ill - behaved brutes ! It’s difficult to sit in the same room with them. Feels as if we’re in a brothel. They should learn how to behave, how to appreciate music, before they come barging in like that.”

“*Magar tum na aaye...bahut yaad a...aye.*” Murmuringly, the *ghazal* died away. Karim pushed aside his *tabla* and went out to clear his throat.

Atul came in, looking perturbed—he had sensed that I was angry, “It’s—things have turned out strangely today”, he said, scratching his head.

“Who are those rude, vulgar

creatures? Why don’t you throw them out of here?”

“Heaven knows who they are. Nitin’s uncle has taken them away with him, but... listen...as he was going, he said...”

“Well, what did he say?” “That...well, that she’s a prostitute, so we should be sure to give her something. She’ll be expecting it.”

“Prostitute indeed ! Have we invited her as a singer or as a prostitute ? This is not the first music session we’ve had. And we’ve never given money to anyone before, have we ?” I was bursting with rage.

“Anju, why don’t you try to

understand what I’m saying ? They will all think I’m a penny pincher. As a matter of fact, I’m also feeling awkward about giving money like this, just as you are. But what will all of them think, if I don’t give?”

“All right, if you must give something, then here, give this.” I opened my trunk and put a white silk sari in front of him.

Atul stared at me, dumbfounded and withdrew his outstretched hand. That was the sari which he had given me on my birthday, barely a month ago .

(translated from Hindi by Manushi)

Nawal El Saadawi Arrested

Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian doctor, novelist and militant writer on Arab women’s issues, has been arrested by the Egyptian government and detained without trial. She was one of 1,535 people arrested in Egypt in the week of September 6. She is being held under the so-called “law of ethics” or “law of shame” which allows her to be kept in custody for six months, extendable to a year. The law also means she can be refused any post where she might influence public opinion and refused leave to travel and these measures can be extended to her family. She has never belonged to any political movement or party. Her crime is “contribution to sectarian strife” that is, not agreeing with the government. Nawal has a history of a lifetime of feminist resistance. 25 years ago, when she began to write and Egyptian censors turned down her books, she shifted their publication to Beirut. In 1972, her book “Woman and Sex” evoked the antagonism of political and theological authorities. As a result, she was dismissed from her post of Egyptian director of public health. Undeterred, she published in Arabic “Female is the Origin”, “Women and Neurosis” and “Man and Sex”. Her latest book “The Hidden Face of Eve” was published in Arabic and English (excerpted in Manushi No. 8).

Nawal dared to raise women’s issues which had for centuries been veiled in secrecy. Based on her personal encounters with thousands of Arab women patients, she wrote of the brutality perpetrated on women within the family - the circumcision of young girls (of which she herself was a victim), sexual aggression by male family members, the insistence on proof of virginity at marriage, lack of proof often leading to murder of the woman, prostitution, double standards of sexual morality reflected in marriage divorce and property laws. She is also an outspoken opponent of western and US imperialism, and a supporter of national liberation struggles. All this drew on her the wrath of the ruling regime, culminating in her recent arrest. All those involved in the women’s movement must protest the detention of Nawal El Saadawi. Letters from feminists all over the world can help protect her against torture while she is in detention and may embarrass the government into releasing her. Write, demanding her release, and that of all others detained without trial to : The President of Egypt, Cairo. Or send the letters to us and we will have them forwarded; Manushi, CI/202 Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi-110024.

