

BOMBAY'S SECRET HEART

I never forget the hot summer evening in California when I looked over, at the end of a movie, and saw tears streaming down the cheeks of my fifty-eight year-old father. It shocked me—and moved me—because my father was a celebrated man of words, a philosopher and a dazzling mind who could improvise lectures for hours on everything from the anarchist thought of Bakunin to the wiles of the CIA, from Marlon Brando to the final romances of Shakespeare.

But now he sat, completely stripped of words, as the credits for the Academy Award-nominated film, *Salaam Bombay!*, scrolled past, and we tried to find any information we could, in those pre-internet days, about the old souls who had cracked open my parents' hometown—my parents themselves—with such wisdom and feeling. The director, we learned, was a woman from Delhi, Mira Nair, just out of her twenties, who had won a full scholarship to Harvard; her tastily named screenwriter, Sooni Taraporevala, turned out to be another young scholar from India Nair had met at Harvard, who had gone on to study film at New York University (the cradle of Martin Scorsese, Ang Lee and Oliver Stone). But none of that began to explain how the screenwriter had got into the life and being of a boy on the streets of Bombay with such soulful depth that the only response was tears.

After we got home, my parents, proud Bombay partisans all their lives, told me—as they often did—how they had grown up surrounded by Parsees with names like

'Taraporevala', and how these long-ago immigrants from Iran were the generous, merry, highly cultured—and delightfully eccentric—souls who made up the secret heart, and energy, of Bombay. Not long thereafter, I learned even more about this distinctive, irresistible community through the immortal novels of Rohinton Mistry and the spirited stories, from the Pakistani side of things, of Bapsi Sidhwa.

But still, nothing accounted for how the woman with the name I found so difficult to pronounce had unearthed such compassion and universal simplicity in telling the story of the children they found handling garbage outside the railway station very close to Taraporevala's neighbourhood. So I researched a little more, and encountered a story as zesty and improbable as any to be found in a peeling (and fun-filled) Parsee living room.

Taraporevala's granduncle, I read, had been a studio photographer in Bombay, and her father had been an amateur photographer, too. She had acquired her first Instamatic when she was sixteen and then, at Harvard, thanks to a loan from a roommate, she had made just one major purchase: of a Nikkormat camera. That treasure had been stolen, alas, but when she returned to Bombay in the 1980s, she had begun working as a freelance photographer, using a Leica and her father's Nikon.

I heard no first-hand reports of her; I'd never been in the same room as this magical master of words and images. But—true to a cheerful fairy tale—I learned that she had met the great photographer Raghubir Singh in 1982, and he had been so impressed by her promise that he had lent her film and lenses and equipment. Yes, he saw, she had the eye, the patience, the empathy of a seasoned portraitist; but she also had something even harder to find—a lifelong, unillusioned, affectionate closeness to an entire community whose numbers were dwindling with every passing year.

What I realized was that Taraporevala was at once anthropologist and storyteller, elegist and celebrant; she had brought out a book of photographs of her Parsee community in the first year of the new millennium and it was soon picked up by a major publisher for distribution across the world. She had directed her own film, *Little Zizou*, at the age of fifty—set in the community and places she knew inside-out—and she had told eager interviewers, with evident relish, that Mira Nair's father had referred to his daughter's Parsee collaborator as a 'rudderless ship'. One wonder of her life was that, while cosmopolitan enough to trace the first pangs of cross-cultural wistfulness (in writing Nair's ground-breaking *Mississippi Masala*), she was still deeply rooted, writing scripts, I read, in a house that had once belonged to her granduncle, minutes away from where she had grown up. Another was that, as she said in an interview, 'I like mad people,' and yet was able to find the gentleness and poignancy in them, as well as the sense of fun.

Those lucky enough to enjoy her photographic work won't find it hard to locate traces of both her first immortal film and her celebrated earlier book, side-by-side; one of her graces, clearly, is that she's as responsive to the dispossessed and street-smart in Bombay as to what look to be more privileged and comfortable souls. Here are kids who might have been extras in *Salaam Bombay!*, yet lit up, always, by a fond and somehow forward-looking eye that refuses to despair; even images of little boys with guns here carry little menace because there's so much else, in a very different key, going on. And here, too, are members of her own family—her son and daughter both played central parts in the film she directed—showing us the savoury, civilized interiors of their inimitable world.

You soon see, when you meet the photos here, that Taraporevala is a connoisseur of intimacy, and therefore of mixed feelings (no wonder one of her wistful, dignified, quizzical portraits adorns the cover of Rohinton Mistry's rending novel, *Family Matters*). Everywhere in this only child's reflective portraits is a disjunction between public and

private: people surrounded by the posters and billboards and enticements that summon them into a larger world, a boy turning away from a street-filling crowd outside.

I love the sense of privacy all this conveys, the intimation that the photographer has been admitted into a secret moment that now she tenderly brings home for us. I love the way we don't know what to feel, exactly, when we see a boy perched on a bicycle, looking out into the uncertainty of the city, or a nurse whose silhouette echoes that of the 'India-like' demagogue, now fallen, who towers above her.

I feel I can smell the quiet rooms that Taraporevala observes for us, that I've spoken to the people sitting in their chairs in the seaworn heat. Of course, these pictures are beautifully framed and lit—what more could be said about the city than that interior showing an empty room next to the Gateway of India? But in the end, what really touches me is her reminder of the impression I've often carried back from trips to Bombay. The crowds, the public world, the shared dreams are all part of a sometimes devouring disorder that shows no signs of subsiding; but in the eyes and lives of individuals is a dignity, a resilience and a sweetness that nothing can erase.

And now there has to follow a small coda to my story, twenty years after the unforgotten evening when I watched *Salaam Bombay!* with my parents (an evening doubly indelible because my father died seven years later, and I never saw him as visibly affected as he had been by Mira and Sooni's film). As a writer, I've staked my life on the conviction that words can do things that images never can, and that novels, deep down, have to be written precisely because their stories can never be told more powerfully in another medium.

One day, in California again, I sat down to watch a film of Jhumpa Lahiri's hugely influential novel, *The Namesake*, and now it was I who was trying to hold back tears. The book had struck me as a quiet, careful kind of diagram of the gaps and stresses that haunt those caught between cultures, and the spaces of incomprehension that are amplified when that dislocation plays out across generations. But the film was devastating beyond all explanations. In everything its lead couple exchanged through gestures, in the words and images that kept recurring, in the seamless with which we slip back and forth between a fraying, evocative Calcutta and the lonely convenience of suburban America, the movie felt more novelistic than most of the novels I cherish.

Much of this was due to the great literary craftswoman among contemporary filmmakers, Mira Nair; much was due to the rending, heart-scorching performances of Irrfan Khan and Tabu, actors I'd never seen before whom I will now follow anywhere. But what struck me the most as a writer was that the writer responsible for the script had, I felt, gone deeper into the story and its possibilities for nuance and global resonance and heartbreak than even the original, brilliantly gifted novelist had. This time I wasn't surprised to find that her name was Sooni Taraporevala; she has changed the world many times over already, through her words—and, no less, through her rare visual artist's feel for all those silent images that make every word redundant.

Look again at that image of the distinguished-looking old men carrying on a conversation in front of a busy city street, and tell me you haven't seen everything that makes Bombay reviving, touching and indelible.

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