

# A FORM OF MAGIC

In conversation with Preeti Thandi | ANOKHI Magazine | Spring 2006

Sooni Taraporevala starts her photographic journey on quite an endearing note. Her desire to hold on to precious childhood moments leads her to photography, which she describes as a form of magic. The enchanting resonance she creates speaks out in her images. Her book, *PARSIS: The Zoroastrians of India - a Photographic Journey* captures the sentiment beautifully. A woman of both visuals and words, Taraporevala is revered for her panache in writing screenplays for films like *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala*, *Such a Long Journey*, and the much anticipated *The Namesake*, which is set for a 2006 release. A close friend of Mira Nair, Taraporevala is also privy to what she calls "Mira's Magic". The friendship culminated at Harvard and both ladies walked the red carpet at the Oscars seventeen years ago. Taraporevala attributes getting into screenwriting to her acclaimed friend, yet she has her own concoction of heady humour and flair for telling stories visually. Creatively inspired by life, Taraporevala hopes to make her own film this year.

As a Harvard freshman, she started clicking pictures with a gifted instamatic camera in 1975, at a time when owning a camera was considered 'special'. Totally enamoured by the play of seasonal colours, she captured her first fall and winter. As the novelty of the snow wore off for her, she itched to get a camera that could do more. A chance meeting with Steve Geovanis, a fellow student photographer and stringer with the *Boston Globe*, was the answer. She borrowed \$200 from her roommate Cathy Dement and went to Boston with Steve to buy her first SLR - a Nikkormat.

She still remembers the feel of the camera in her hand. She learnt the basics from Geovanis and used black and white film to photograph. She also learned how to print and started sending pictures back home that were keenly appreciated by her father. A few years later she met the celebrated photographer Raghubir Singh who suggested a photographic study of her own community. In *PARSIS: The Zoroastrians of India - a Photographic Journey*, she brings the Parsis to life as each image narrates its own story.

In a special interview for ANOKHI, Sooni Taraporevala speaks to Preeti Thandi about her visual journey.

## **If you could capture your life's journey in an image, what would the picture look like?**

I couldn't do it in a still image. It would have to be a movie - of interest to nobody including myself!

## **Why did you choose photography as a career after completing film studies (before screenwriting)?**

I never studied screenwriting - never imagined I'd be a screenwriter. I was a graduate student in the cinema studies department of NYU studying theory and criticism, because I enjoyed watching movies, analyzing them and wrestling with intellectual concepts. But neither of the two options open to a cinema studies graduate appealed to me. I didn't want to teach. I didn't want to be a movie critic. But I still loved photography. I had my camera. So that's what I went into.

## **What attracts you about photography and what does it mean to you? How has it changed through the years, given your success as a screenwriter?**

The magic of photographs for me has always been the medium's ability to stop time - to take a moment from life's ceaseless flow and freeze it forever. The only thing that changed is (that thanks to screenwriting) I didn't have to make a living from photography, so I could photograph for pure pleasure. From the earnings of *Mississippi Masala*, I went to town and bought myself cameras and lenses I could never afford before. And that has continued. My screenwriting finances my photography and my expensive toys.

## **What was the most unusual moment(s) you experienced during the process of publishing your book? And what were the important lessons learned?**

I got spondylitis. I woke up one morning with my neck at a frozen fifteen degree angle. I had never had this before. It was entirely stress related. The important lesson I learnt was to balance

optimism with pessimism. Now, there are quite a few visual books on Parsis - but in 2000 mine was the first. I wondered, "How many to print? Would it sell or would I be stuck forever with a mountain of books?" They sold faster than I expected. I printed a second edition in partnership with Overlook Press in New York. Compared to the first run, this one is moving much slower. So once again I occasionally have the same nightmare; living with mounds of unsold books.

### **How did you get into scriptwriting?**

Thanks to Mira. *Salaam Bombay* was my first screenplay. I had not studied screenwriting and was unaware of even the most basic screenwriting mantras like the three act structure. But I did understand story and characters, from a lifetime of reading, writing, studying literature. I understood cinema from having watched and analyzed so many films - and I understood the visual aspect of it from being a photographer. So that's how I got into screenwriting - through Mira and my checkered history.

### **What elements do you think make a good script great?**

When you read it you don't want to put it down - you can see the story - you feel for the characters, there's subtext, simplicity, authenticity and a certain seamless quality.

### **Which scripts and movies are your personal favorites?**

I hate these kind of questions because I have so many favourites from different stages in my life - too numerous to mention - and if I try and cull down the list I feel I've shortchanged the unmentioned ones.

### **What was your experience like scripting Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*?**

It was a very long journey! Seven years and four directors. Each time a new director came on board I'd have to rework the script for them. When I started, I was single. When the film was shot I was married with two kids. But I never gave up hope that one day it would get made. When I saw it on screen for the first time I forgot about the long trek. It's like labour - you forget the pain once you set eyes on your beautiful child.

### **What was it like scripting *The Namesake*? How was it different from other processes?**

*Namesake* was the opposite. It was accelerated fast motion. From the time Mira first discussed it with me, to the time it was shot, was one year. In that one year I wrote numerous drafts. The first draft was written in twelve days. *Salaam Bombay* was the same. Fourteen months from start to shoot. I call it *Mira ki kamaal* - Mira Magic.

### **From *Salaam Bombay* to *The Impressionist*, your journey with Mira Nair seems remarkable. What is it like working with Mira creatively and professionally? What do you share in common?**

Mira and I were friends before we started working together. We were both undergraduates at Harvard. It was only eight years after we first met that we did *Salaam Bombay*. What I share with Mira is lots of memories from various stages of our lives - the personal and professional overlap. We've had some good times and lots of laughs. We also have always shared a love for films and books. I've learnt a lot from watching Mira work. I followed her model of independent filmmaking when I published the first edition of my book. Financing the print run by pre-selling it, I was able to maintain creative control by producing it independently - a smaller scale version of how she's made many of her films.

### **Can you tell us a little about your family and kids?**

My husband Firdaus Bativala is one of India's finest dental surgeons (and this is an objective, non-wifely view). He also studied in America, and later we discovered we were in many of the same places but our paths had never crossed. We met in Bombay, we had both moved back home. Dentistry is his profession, flying his passion. He owns a Cessna 172 and flies it every weekend.

Our children Jahan, 10, and Iyanah, 8, go up with him. Their mother stays home and waves from the window! I'm an earth sign - I like to have my feet on the ground. They both attend Bombay International School - a parent-run, non-pressured environment. Jahan is a good footballer. Iyanah is a fantastic mimic. They are both, touch wood, happy and enjoying their lives.

Toots is two years old. She has a very sweet nature - her favourite place is our bed, as is Jahan and Iyanah's. Two adults, two kids and a dog on one bed might seem a bit cramped but it's actually quite cozy.

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