

HOW CAN ALL THIS BE REDEEMED??

- AMOL PALEKAR

When I was reading Saramago's 'Death with Intervals', I had paused after the first epigraph wondering who all should I put on the list of "never to let die". *TAI* was indeed the first name. But then I knew that she would be opposed to that idea. Explaining it in the language of symbolic logic, if one says *p*, 'not *p*' was her immediate and natural answer! She would have said, "There is no place for me in this commercial world. A price tag sans any divinity is the world of music today! I wish to depart. Don't keep me bound." Before I could even think of launching a rebuttal, she would have reached another echelon. In fact knowing *TAI*'s propensities, I could imagine her criticizing Saramago for not quite meeting the challenge of exploring original images, new linguistic fields while dealing with death as a realistic character. I could vividly hear *TAI* giving a parallel with her inherent confidence, "see how *Re* is applied in the ascent while singing *Bhoop* and how *Ga* is sung directly after *Sa* while skipping *Re* in the ascent in *Raga Deskaar*... that's an original approach... unlike your mono-dimensional character of death."

My imagination had taken a tangential route just as *TAI* would do very often while discussing any subject other than music. She had opinions, very strong ones... about current events, political developments, books, cinema, television serials, fashion, pollution, cuisine, corruption... any topic under the sun! Her most favorite sharpening stones were the changing values and contemporary sensibilities. *TAI* found no sound note with the younger generation; her negative adjectives used for them were in superlatives. Worse was if I would even attempt to present my contrary views, she would lose her cool. I was left with no choice but to resign to her.

In the hindsight, over three decades of our acquaintance, I think we had more discord than concurrence. The contrast often perplexed me! While on one hand I worshipped her music, on the other hand, I tolerated her perspectives on life which were completely incongruent to that of mine. She despised modern art and when I would explain my attraction for non-representational forms in art, she would ask me to keep mum. "पुढे ओलूच नकोस." She did not like the fact that I painted abstracts in oil... to the extent that she refused to visit my solo exhibition in Mumbai. I could never tell her that the abstraction in her music was the most captivating element for me. Her ornate *bol-aalaps*, her poised gliding from one note to the other, stirring experimentation with *jod-ragaas* transcending the traditional *Jaipur gayaki*, her rousing master strokes presented every time on the stage, her rendition of speedy phrases with aplomb.... Beyond and through all this, what I would take home was the abstract imagery which used to be with me for days thereafter! Had I gathered some courage to share all this with her, I would have been reprimanded, "भाय अघ त्यातला... ती आर्तता पोचते की नाही ते सांग." (Just see if my emotions reach you or not.)

One early morning, Sandhya and I were summoned to her residence for her *riyaz*. It was an ultimate privilege since apparently she allowed no one to be present during that sacred time. "take a shower before you come." She did not forget to instruct me. I knew that this was going to be something exceptional. I had seen her worshiping in front of her *devghar* and painstakingly arranging flowers, adorning the deity with sandal wood paste, all in an immersed state. My atheism never precluded me from appreciating her beauty even in that state. From the movements of notes that few of her disciples were practicing, Sandhya told me, "it's going to be *Raga Lalit*." As *TAI* settled down, everyone felt restive with her despotic cough. I had no clue as to when I had entered that meditative and serene zone where I could not feel her presence; it was just her pure music. After about an hour, I felt almost dehydrated. I was exhausted. I felt all were absorbed in the craft whilst I stood alone in the midst of an eye of a hurricane. I could not handle the experience any further. I had to walk out. Later when she came out of the room, she noticed my completely surrendered state. "Do you still think God doesn't exist?" She definitely knew how to win in all respects... and all the time! After that encounter, I decided never to challenge her ritualistic belief or her faith in *Raghvendra Swamy* or whosoever. That day I also realized the serious limitations of "processed / amplified sound" whether heard during a live concert or through a very super fine instrument. Music stops being a performance in the absence of any gadgets. The omnipresence of her voice devoured that day will never be erased.

Thus our association was mutually antithetical in many respects and yet I deeply shared her core as a genius artist. I decided to focus only on her artistry when I made the documentary, *Bhinna Shadja*, on her. Had I not taken that decision, there could have been a lot of clatter in her depiction. "We lack the caliber to make a film on her." Was Sandhya's reflexive reply when I shared with her the proposal initiated by *TAI*. I disagreed with her as I did not feel the hierarchy that Sandhya, as a student of music, felt. I never sensed restricted by the grammar of music, which probably allowed me to remain uninhibited by her aura as a musician.

Gender was yet another layer which I somehow disregarded even in her presence. I'm sure she would not have liked to hear this from me. "Do you see me as a skeleton? In fact if you do not see me, you must be a robot." I imagined her dialogue. I do recall Sandhya sharing once with me that *TAI* wearing the same saree for all the concerts was her attempt to deflate her gender. *TAI*'s superstitious belief was the reasoning offered by her close disciples.... just like she always carried that awful, red handkerchief in one hand!

Ironically, now that she is no more, I am analyzing the layers of my relationship with her. I deliberately did not wish to dissect her as a human being and chose to remain an onlooker throughout *Bhinna Shadja*. "Why is she so bitter about life? Is she really unhappy with herself? Why is she competing with others? Why can't she perceive her superiority sans cynicism? Why does she feel cheated upon by most? Is her anger a weapon or a shield? Why is her world so intensely insular? Is it our fault as an audience that we bestow pious, classical values upon an artist and use those to

judge her? Was she as a woman equal to her art? Was her intellectualization of music contrived?" Many more such academic as well as personal questions were decided to be kept unanswered. Probably because of my uncontested acceptance of her for who she was! Thanks to all her idiosyncrasies that the narratives around her did not become hagiographical.

At 11.30 pm on the 3rd of April, Sandhya got a message "The filigree of *Jaipur* gayaki is orphaned!" Her departure was as unpredictable as her being. Yet her mellifluous voice has continued to fill my musical universe.

TAI, you have no clue how much in abundance you have given to the audience for whom music is an imperative need. Through your immortal musical phrases, we have survived the absurdities of life; have encountered the Freudian 'oceanic feeling' (of being in love where the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away, as Freud stated!) Your emotive though intricate music is the indissoluble bond that we all will cherish forever! Your ingenious renditions will always be eternal for generations. Thank you *TAI* for giving us all the strength to exhaust the limits of the possible! It is this unique power that you possess to transmute your pain into art that ultimately gave people like I, the strength to survive the Sisyphean curse.

How can all this be redeemed?

(co-authored by SANDHYA GOKHALE)