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THE SARI AND THE FAN

- The astonishing difference between two famous women

Second Thoughts / Githa Hariharan



The quality of beauty

Clearly his heart was not in punishing these files full of scraps of paper, the face of the file invariably covered with ambitious working titles and deadline dates. When this man found the flat's one Godrej cupboard? an imitation one called 'Be Happy'? his faith in humankind, and in happiness, must have been somewhat restored. (There were large patches of blood-coloured *gutka* spit on the floor by the cupboard, patches I take as evidence of relief that he could now get down to some serious thieving.)

Of course, there was no cash or jewellery there, so his night was wasted, at least by the reckoning of any self-respecting thief. But he got a consolation prize? my three wedding saris that I had stored in the cupboard, just in case my offspring decide to marry in a more suitable fashion than I did. He also got a bonus? the fourth silk sari, a sari M.S. Subbulakshmi gave me when I was nineteen years old. I had never found occasion to wear the sari? it had too much gold for that. But, in December 2004, when MS died, I took it out, admired it, and promised myself I would wear it one day.

No one in her right mind would associate Subbulakshmi with Imelda Marcos. But I met both in the same year. More accurately, I met Imelda Marcos briefly, in a group, because of Subbulakshmi's visit to Manila. The pineapple fibre fan I got as a token of my visit to Malacanang Palace lay among the mementoes of the years in the same cupboard. The

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burglar took Subbulakshmi's sari and threw Imelda's highly wrought fan on the floor. There is a moral here, I suspect. Now the fan, which I had pretty much forgotten, serves to make me remember, and mourn, Subbulakshmi all over again.

In 1974, I was at that awful point suffered by so many young people, between my BA and MA, unsure of what to do with myself. I spent most of this restless year with my parents who then lived in Manila. The high point of this limbo-like year was Subbulakshmi's visit to Manila to receive the Ramon Magsaysay award. Soon after the award was announced, we also heard that Subbulakshmi was to be our houseguest, along with her husband Sadasivam and his daughter Radha.

The closest we came to having family heroes were Carnatic musicians. So my mother's shining eyes and barely suppressed excitement shouldn't have surprised me. But it did, because my mother is the sort who is, in principle, scornful of any kind of celebrity worship. If we admired anyone only for fame or social position, she liked to ask, with great sarcasm, "Has this person's head grown a horn?" (This is a far more effective question in Tamil.) So my mother's anticipation was a measure of the honour of playing hostess to Subbulakshmi. It was as if she was letting me know that anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear knew that Subbulakshmi was not just any accomplished musician. I saw my mother's point the instant I first set eyes on Subbulakshmi.

I had grown up hearing her music and seen any number of photographs. Still her beauty came as a discovery. It was the quality of the beauty — an inadequate word to describe her. The innocent eyes and the warm smile; the fragrance of jasmine and sandalwood; the soft-spoken voice that never seemed to say anything unkind even if someone was asking for a put-down: all these came together wonderfully in Subbulakshmi. Part of her beauty was her genuine lack of consciousness of the fuss and attention surrounding her. Once or twice, sitting next to her, I heard her humming under her breath as people made the kind of long and boring speeches of praise that invariably accompanies any award. For me, this was the first inkling of how a real artist sets her priorities.

It was after the award ceremony, I think, that Subbulakshmi and her troupe were invited to meet Imelda at a Malacanang lunch. My mother and I went along. The lunch — the food that is — was a bit of a fiasco. Clearly the palace officials had not done their homework, and course after course of meat and fish came and went, untouched by the guests of honour. Imelda, wearing a dress with her trademark butterfly sleeves, ignored this like a well-trained *memsahib*. She turned to her neighbour, the Indian ambassador, and asked whether Subbulakshmi was from the North or the South. She then looked soulfully at Subbulakshmi and made a little speech about how she had always found the music of South India especially spiritual. On Imelda's request, Subbulakshmi sang a *bhajan* at the table, though she must have been tired and hungry, and though there was no accompaniment.

On the way back, Subbulakshmi, incapable of thinking badly of anyone, made only one remark of the visit — that Imelda seemed to have *gnanam*. Imelda Marcos and *gnanam* — my mother and I were silent, but we exchanged an eloquent look. We had our revenge though. When we were back home and Imelda's guests were breaking their fast with *idli* and curd-rice, Subbulakshmi's daughter opened the extravagantly packed boxes she and her mother had received from Imelda. The boxes were full of cigars. There was no

more talk of Imelda, her gnanam or anything else. Luckily, as a fringe member of the group, I got a fan, not cigars. And for some reason, it still lies in my cupboard all these years later, ready to tell me of the kind of astonishing difference that can exist between two famous women.

I'd rather have kept the sari as a memento of my first meeting with Subbulakshmi. But the burglar changed that story. I too must change his. I have imagined into existence an ending for my burglar's encounter with my cupboard. It is an open ending, the kind I like. I have firmly resisted the unhelpful suggestions of friends that by now, my silk saris must have been melted down for a few little lumps of silver. This is what I see though I have not seen my burglar: I am convinced there must be a woman in his life, and that he has given her Subbulakshmi's green and gold sari. As a bonus, I would like to think that the sari, despite its years of hiding, despite the dishonest way it was made to exit from my life, will bring some grace ? some kind of soul-changing music ? into this woman's life.

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