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- The continuation of volume 1 « The wisdom to love », volume 2 « The inner forge ».
- Nominated in 2005 for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Zarina KHAN

The ode to joy

The Wisdom to Love - Volume 3

An Autobiography

The actress and philosopher, Zarina Khan, a member of a women's group nominated in 2005 for the Nobel Peace Prize, has written "the true novel" of her life in three volumes.

After *The Wisdom to love* for which she was awarded the prestigious Seligmann prize against racism and *The Inner Forge*, the third and last volume *The Ode to Joy* has now been published.

The young Russian Pakistani woman who just got married in 1977 is thrown back again into a chaotic life. After the birth of her two children she then realises the man she married is suffering from insanity. While entertaining at home such jazz celebrities as Claude Nougaro, Stan Getz, Michel Legrand... she is also enduring the violence of an abusive husband who beats his wife.

She soon ends up on the streets with her two children trying to survive in the urban Parisian jungle.

All her dreams vanish but she then finds in Art a soothing territory, creative writing becoming both her haven and livelihood.

Becoming a "smuggler of freedom", she decides to open creative writing workshops especially dedicated to those whose voice is not heard. She stubbornly mixes what is constantly pulled apart: Drama and democracy, the sacred and secularity; for her these notions are like inseparable twins. She created a string of creative writing workshops around the world as well as programmes called

"*Drama and Freedom in war times*" or "*Resisting and telling for Individual Freedom*". These activities took her from Sarajevo under fire to Beyrouth under siege, building bridges between these conflict zones and the underprivileged suburban ghettos around Paris. She made these forgotten impoverished teenagers perform in the most prestigious European and ancient Greek theatres, heralding thus a new era of acting. But Pakistan came back to the fore in her life when one day an unknown sister of hers knocked on her door. And after 33 years of separation she was to be reunited with her father, a Pakistani prince.



Zarina KHAN

A philosopher of Russian Pakistani origin, born in 1954 in Tunis, she is committed to the defence of the rights of men and children. Her expertise for the culture of peace is accredited by the Unesco. She created her own theatre company in 1984.

She started a movement called "*Drama and Freedom in Wartimes*", organising creative writing and drama workshops in Sarajevo (1993) and Beyrouth (1998) at war. The play entitled "*The Dictionary of Life*" is the outcome of these workshops. A year later she made a film called "*Ados Amor*". The actors were teenagers from the deprived suburb of Saint Denis, on the outskirts of Paris. The film was selected at the Cannes Festival in the junior category. In 1999 she made a documentary "*Essabar, the Shelter*" which highlights the meeting between young French drifters and Tuareg tribesmen in Mali. The film was awarded the Unesco prize and was acclaimed at the Lorquin Mental Health Festival.

Zarina Khan now lives in Mirabel in Ardèche, France, where she organises intercultural meetings and where she has created a new theatrical concept called "theatre on the move".

She is the author of numerous essays, plays and books such as "*The Right of Children*" (Nathan 1999) and "*The right of Men and Children*" (Nathan 2000, 2005).

Zarina KHAN - **The Ode to Joy** - Extract 1

We leave Ancona and fly to Sarajevo in a small clackety-clack military plane, surrounded by jute bags bursting with food. The engines are so noisy that no conversation is possible. We're sitting on shaking rundown seats that get caught in the nets that hang along the metal walls of the plane. Three soldiers are posted in front of the windows and fathom the empty sky. We are given old, worn out parachutes. I just wonder what I could do with one if I had to jump. There's no directions for use on it. I hadn't thought of getting some information beforehand. There's no parachutes in The seven against Thebes...

The landing is terrifying. A soldier is screaming "we're being shot at", his eyes riveted to the window. I shout to him "What are you staring at?" Without turning round he says "I'm keeping watch on the tank: if they hit it we're done, it will take fire". The pilot manages a bumpy landing in a deafening racket. The backdoor bursts open, "now, you've got to run really fast. You've got to reach that point over there". The soldier points to barracks faraway. "Once there, you'll be safe, sheltered. I slip on my backpack. It weighs exactly my weight. I realise I won't be able to run. I may even die because of a few packets of coffee and rice. This is ludicrous. However I manage to run, my body swiftly carrying me like an amazing steed. The barracks are empty. Here and there through the holes in the roof some rays of light filter in. Murky dust specs jostling about. All around there's only noise and confusion. A soldier is standing by a makeshift security gate. He peruses each of our passports. He scrutinizes the various stamps at the bottom of each page. His sullen face looks warped with suspicion. Finally he gives us a piece of paper with a number he just scribbled. He adds: "You'd better learn it by heart, that's your exit code, and sniggers "No code, no exit."

On the other side of the gate there's a UN tank absolutely crammed with men standing, most of them in uniform that I can't identify. I manage to sneak in among them. As soon as the armoured vehicle starts, the door at the back shuts with a bang. From the upper little window I can catch a glimpse of a 5 or 6 year old child. He is running like mad and shouting Take me with you, please, take me...The driver does not slow down, doesn't stop and I can see the small figure of the child slowly disappearing in the distance. When I caught the desperate look of the child left behind to fend for himself among snipers and bombshells, at that precise moment I realised that for me the war had started.

The child is crying and his tears are blood red. His grief is that of a child lulled by death.



When I finally lie down in a bedroom with flower-patterned curtains, I find it hard to believe that outside it is war. However early in the morning I am awakened by shots. Meho is on the veranda.

He's shaving in front of a car mirror hanging on the wall. He laughs. "I can't see a thing inside! I do have to shave, don't I? I hope your meeting goes well. You'll tell us about it tonight, won't you? I hope our young Bosnians will be up to your expectations."

The air is cool. The army is all around, at the top of all the deep green mountains that surround us. Kira cups my face in her hands in a gentle motherly gesture and then smiles. I think it was love at first sight.

Now I'm walking alone in the streets. The town is under siege. It has been deserted. At the bottom of the street the cathedral, side by side with the mosque, the Jewish temple and a small Orthodox church. The architecture is a living proof that different religions can co-exist peacefully, harmoniously. Lumberjacks have just cut wood for the hijacked population, nurses have come to heal the wounds and I've come here to do the only thing I can do: I'm going to open a creative writing and drama workshop. Amid all this absolute horror I'm going to collect testimonies of human grandeur. Suddenly I feel I'm out of touch. A workshop of creative writing and drama? In the heart of this bloody war, among mourning children?

Today is October first 1993. The war has been on for over a year. I have an appointment at 9 a.m.

I keep folding and unfolding the little map that Meho had roughly sketched for me in case I get lost.

I am still walking and I come across a UN white armoured vehicle-a blind and deaf entity- racing at full speed in the empty streets. According to the map two streets lead to my meeting place where I'll run the workshop. I'm not sure which one to choose. One is a tarmac road, the other one is paved and probably older. I chose the cobblestoned one. I love cobbles. They're beautiful.

All of a sudden, a shell fell very close, probably in the other street, the one I didn't take. Everything now is shaking. My whole body starts shaking all over. I can hear the crashing noise of windowpanes exploding onto the ground now covered in glass debris. I stop breathing, my knees are wobbly. Everything is shaking. *The whole city is rumbling. A net is spread all around it to encompass its towers.* Suddenly all these questions rush into my head crashing against one another.

What am I doing here? What did I come here for? Why on earth am I standing here? For Art? For the work of art yet to be created? Who will ever attend this ill-timed meeting supposedly to write a play and perform it? Am I completely losing touch with reality? Is Art more precious than life? What kind of parents will allow their children to leave safe shelters to attend a workshop run by a complete stranger, a stage director coming from Paris?

Zarina KHAN - **The Ode to Joy** - Extracts 2

● ● ● ● ● I refuse to give a conference at the university. I thought my academic knowledge sounded flimsy in these circumstances. At our last meeting with the students' club I had suggested I'd rather meet junior and senior high- school students with whom we would finish off the series of conferences by staging a play and performing in it. They had told me they would do their utmost to pass the information but all the schools had been closed. Perhaps no one would turn up at the workshop...

I go on walking, like a robot, short of breath. I give a last glance at the map I'm holding in my still trembling hands. I'm almost there. The square must be round the corner.

It's just there, the place where we are supposed to meet. My ears are still buzzing after the shock of the shell explosion. I can see them. They're here, standing outside. They hadn't run to a shelter, for fear of missing me, of missing the appointment they told me later on. The teenager standing there surrounded by trees in the background. They see me arriving alone in the empty square. All those youngsters who don't know me, who don't know anything about me- I'm a complete stranger to them- greet me with their arms outstretched and a broad smile on their face. They gently hug the stranger in their arms. They still look worried about what has just happened but also immensely relieved. One of them shouts "She's alive!". "She" referring to me, "me" who has nothing to prove, "me" who at that instant only shares with them the fact that we are all still alive. They smile because I'm alive. I smile back because they are alive and because we are lucky enough to share for a few hours, a few days maybe, this improbable experience together.



They look at me intensely. They are ready to believe in what is impossible. We have four days to write a play and present it. The fifth day will be devoted to the performance. They have never written in their life, they have never performed either. They are soon full of confidence and are having a lot of fun.

They have lost a father, a sister, a cousin, a friend. The dark circles round their eyes betray their grieving. War has caught them in their teens, at the time when adolescents rebel, when they usually test the limits of authority, when they feel they can't go wrong, when they fall in love for the first time. I look at them. My task is to give them a topic to start with. A topic ... How can I find the words? I immediately decide to give up all the guidelines I had prepared beforehand. I close my eyes and try to find an answer within me. I feel so far removed from all this horrible violence which kills in the name of God, from international politics that use the name of God to pursue their own interests. I feel alien to the whole world that still allows wars, feasting on the never- changing, endless confusions between politics and religions, faiths and beliefs. I can hear myself suggesting: "An alien female lands on planet earth so as to understand humans and write a dictionary of life that will be brought back to the planet she comes from. Unfortunately, it has landed in Sarajevo today and has met you." The youths start laughing. A young girl holds up her hand: "Can I play the part of the alien? I have so many more questions than answers!" Of course, what's your name? "Alma". The soul. Of course, Alma.

They rush to get some paper and start writing in silence only interrupted by the shots on the front line. No, they don't write about religion, neither about politics, faiths or beliefs. They write about their fears, their grief. They tell how much they miss freedom, how much they want to live life to the full and like the alien they want to understand the world around. As soon as I start reading what they have first written, I can see the premises of a hymn to peace, a hymn to peace arising from war. And they start crying and laughing. They unleash the hymn that is singing inside them, in this room.



I'm burning in my red dress. Why on earth did I decide to wear that fiery red dress? Maybe because the magic alchemy is completed. It is said that alchemy evolves in four stages. At each stage the matter grows into a different colour. The alchemist keeps grinding the mysterious mixture in his agate mortar for months, even years. First the blackening process involves attacking death, dissolving mercury and making sulphur coagulate. Then the whitening process starts under the sign of the moon. It is the purification stage, the washing, the fluorescent liquid solidifies and separates. There remains slag that is eliminated with each washing and is replaced by a universal solvent, the elixir of life.

The Small Work has ended, that is the spiritualization of the matter.

The yellowish process is next: The purification leading to sublimation.

Finally the reddening process is the last transformation. Gold is flowing, the philosopher's stone is revealed as a fountain of nuclear energy in suspension. This is the Great Work: The incarnation of the spirit in the matter has taken place.

I haven't found any other agate mortar than art. It is through the creative process that the artist lets die his doomed former self that is being washed and washed again, eliminating slag, finally purified and becoming transcendental through sublimation. It is then that one is born again, new and lofty, the spirit wrapped in its ruby red coating of matter.



The crew of *Ados Amor* meets around the aftershow dinner buffet. I kiss each member and congratulate them. The Grande Halle exhibition centre is beginning to empty. The spectators are reluctant to leave. The group of actors and script writers are still there, overwhelmed by these waves of emotions that gradually intensified.

Tonight in the limelight that is about to be turned off, beyond the time-honoured four step pattern of alchemy, I can see the fifth step in all its luminous glory *The ode to Joy*. It is in this last work that ordeals are transformed, transfigured into joy. The projectors are switched off but the inner light remains.