

# ***Lalon: Heart of Madness***

**Filmed Theatre Review by Nasreen Akhter**

Lalon is considered as one of the greatest philosophers and spiritual poet-musicians in the Indian subcontinent, especially in what is now Bangladesh and West Bengal. Reputed to be born in 1774 and living to the grand age of 116, he did not have any institutional or formal education. Yet he left behind a vernacular legacy that is unbeatable by even the most prolific of minds. This Baul fakir or wandering spiritualist created between 2,000 to 8,000 mystical, social and political songs that passed over the generations through his followers – a fact that is little known outside of Bengali/Bangladeshi circles. Although Lalon has been mostly renowned for his philosophy on *dehotottow* – that is, ‘truth in the body’, the central theme of Baulism that the universe resides in the receptacle of the body - he also espoused the idea of releasing oneself from the bonds of self. He truly believed that we are all equal, not just with regard to class, caste, and religion but also gender.

It is with this message that the play, *Lalon: Heart of Madness* - written by Raminder Kaur and directed by Mukul Ahmed - shines with brilliance. Luna, a British Bangladeshi woman in her late twenties, travels to Bangladesh to enjoy her last moment of independence as a single person before getting married, arranged by her family. Played by the singer and actor, Sparsh Bajpai, she is also commemorating her father’s death by exploring her *desh* - her country of roots from the routes that her family had taken to live in England decades ago.

While she was visiting the riverside town, Kushtia, with her younger brother (Sheikh Naz) - famous for its Lalon Akhra, the shrine of Lalon fakir - Luna experiences a renewed calmness and sustenance in the meaning of life that is inherent in Lalon’s songs, mysticism and philosophy. This is the main thread of the drama, *Lalon: Heart of Madness*, which I had the pleasure to watch on a digital platform at a time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The filmed theatre was first screened as part of the Season of Bangla Drama festival in November 2020, followed by a fuller version in December 2020 by an impressive team working for the producers, Sohaya Visions and Mukul & Ghetto Tigers.

I truly appreciated how the writer tried to integrate Lalon's songs into the narrative of the drama by weaving the past of Lalon's era and the present of Luna's dilemma between independence and betrothal. The songs were beautifully re-enacted by the performers, Delwar Hossain Dilu and Sadia Chowdhury. And the message was profound: based on Baul philosophy, the irrelevance of barriers such as caste, class, and religion and, in particular, the fluidity of gender and women as the embodiment of fundamental powers and *nareer shakti* conveying her power to choose.

A young woman, born and bought up in the so called 'modern world' yet living under a strong patriarchal system (emphasised ironically by her widowed mother who 'now wears the trousers'), Luna realised that she had the *shakti* inside her to choose the 'madness' of the divine universe rather than the '*maya*' or veils of deceptions erected by people. Inspired by the philosophical songs of Lalon, she discovers the strength to resist social stigmas and slurs at such a woman as 'a slut', or 'a mad and bad woman' in the eyes of the world.

Even though in a patriarchal society like in Bangladesh, women have been considered as submissive and dependent on men – father, brother, husband - the drama shows how this phenomenon continues to apply to women from more modern contexts such as London. In this respect, Lalon was a revolutionary and a visionary: at a time when the norms of society were regulated by gender, religion and caste, Lalon spoke, or rather sang out against their artifice and evils so many years ago. Luna chose to respond to this message.

The drama starts with an ethereal rendition of *Ami Opar Hoye Bose Achhi (Helpless, I'm Waiting)* by what appears to be a woman dressed in white walking through a forest. Lalon's songs are then conveyed through a male figure. This transition was intriguing and powerful as if it did not matter who wrote or performed the song. It is the song's lyricism and significance that mattered the most.

The songs immediately transported me to the Lalon Akhra, where Lalon's followers and Bauls made their home, and annually celebrated with a festival. Though it was an artificial set, I felt that I was walking amidst the magic of that spiritual land. The sounds of the river - finely edited by the filmmaker Tarun Jasani and the sound designer Sarah Sayeed - reminded me that we are all but one miniscule part of that river, every person flowing

and mingling like the rippling and cascading currents no matter what their individual identity. It was an evocative metaphor for each of our life's journeys.

Luna too gets lost in the flows of the river and everything it evokes and encompasses – people, life, death, and different times and spaces. She wants to reconnect with her brother as much as she does with the spirit of her father, also an enthusiast of Lalon. She wants to forget the Whitechapel that she came from in east London and explore the Asian shrine that inspired her in north Bangladesh. Provoked by her conservative elder cousin (Rez Kabir), she realises it was this spirit that she needed to chaperone her, not a male relative. She discovers that as a woman she has the *shakti* to overcome the hurdles and carve out her own path even though she might be called a slut, *beshya*, were she to do so. Through Lalon's vision and calling, she finds the power to shake off social shackles and become her true self.

In one of his most famous compositions, Lalon said: 'Everyone asks, to which caste does Lalon belong? A Muslim is marked by the sign of circumcision; but how should you mark a woman? If a Brahmin male is known by the thread he wears, how is a woman known?' Way over a century ago, Lalon noted the limitations of identity for a woman, but this message is still relevant to the contemporary, materialist world of the new millennium where women and their roles continue to be defined by menfolk.

Lalon steadfastly celebrated the powers of women: 'in the ancient temple women were the prime priest, respect women for the *shakti* she holds. Everyone has a choice'. And when a Baul extends an invitation to Luna to join the madness of the universe rather than the *maya* of the world in the drama, Luna inevitably chose madness – the true reality beyond the veils of caste, class, religious and gender distinctions. This is the most enthralling theme of all - who are we to categorize or compartmentalise the universe or those within it? The drama elevates this theme with elan, prompting me to think that we all are part of the flow of the river, enhanced by the sounds of its currents and the place at the creek 'where different rivers meet and merge into the sea of oneness that is deeper, richer and more liberated.'

Lalon's philosophy proclaims *manobotabaad* (humanity and humaneness) where there is no discrimination. It is a humanist vision but not one that owes to Eurocentric Enlightenment ideas that, however enlightened, still discriminated against women and other races and ethnicities. *Lalon: Heart of Madness* is an instructive reminder that Europe is not the only origin or fount for free thinkers and progressive philosophers. In an original and alluring way, the drama emphasises that philosophers, secular thinkers, or progressive free-minded intellectuals emerged in the Global South as well. It also highlighted how women always had and have the power to choose, to carve out their own path, that South Asia is not just the site of their submission.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a lot of chaos, misery, grief, isolation and challenges to our everyday lives. But it also brought profound creativity, amplified by digital platforms. Even though I could not applaud the drama as I might as part of a live audience, I applauded it and all those involved in it from the madness of my heart.