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CHRISTMAS IN OAXACA



Photo: Jörgen von Tangen

A quintessentially unique celebration

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THE POWER OF (ZAPOTEC) WORDS

NATALIA TOLEDO is the first woman to win the Netzahualcōyotl poetry prize.

By CARLOS MARTÍNEZ
Photos courtesy of CONACULTA

Natalia Toledo looked surprised and bewildered when asked what her prize meant for the Zapotec culture. It seemed as though the poet hadn't fully realized the importance of her success to a marginalized indigenous community that has mostly experienced discrimination and humiliation in their own country. Toledo exemplified in all honors, the greatness of the indigenous culture in Mexico, and for a few moments at least, captivated a few dozens with the melodious rhythm of her Zapotec poems.

"This price [Premio Nezahualcōyotl] is a recognition to the [Zapotec] language," said Toledo. "I devote this price to them [Zapotecs] because it's them who are living with their own language. They're the ones that are really doing something for the language by using it."

On Nov. 12, at a small but memorable ceremony at the Palace of the Fine Arts (Palacio de Bellas Artes) in Mexico City, Toledo received the Premio Nezahualcōyotl de Literatura 2004 from the hands of Sari Bermúdez, president of the National Council for the Arts and Culture (CONACULTA) for her poetic work *Black Olive* (or *Gui'Yaase'* in Zapotec). Toledo, the oldest daughter of painter Francisco Toledo, became the first woman ever to win the price, which included \$55,000 pesos, a diploma, and the publication of her poems in the upcoming year.

CONACULTA established the Premio Nezahualcōyotl in 1993 "with the purpose of recognizing and stimulating the literary creativity of the indigenous writers of Mexico [...] who have incorporated the richness of expression from the indigenous languages and cultures into the various genres of contemporary literature." So far, eight different indigenous writers have been awarded.



It's interesting to note that three of the eight price-winners, including Toledo, are Zapotec writers. One would expect, based on representation, that more Náhuatl writers would be awarded given that Náhuatl is the most spoken indigenous language in Mexico (1,448,936 speakers in 2004). Toledo however, attributes the abundance of Zapotec writers to the importance of poetry and literature in the Zapotec culture. "The first recordings of writing in Mesoamerica were found in Oaxaca, in San José Mogote (the capital of the ancient Zapotec civilization).

"The Zapotec culture has always given great importance to language and literature. We have always been close to imagination and creativity," said Toledo. "The [Zapotec] language is very metaphorical" (for example, the word *Beleguf* that means star in Zapotec, comes from two words that mean fire and sky). "It's like a constant invitation to imagine where the words can take you," said Toledo.

Unlike previous years, when the Premio Nezahualcōyotl was awarded to the lifetime work of indigenous writers rather than a single piece of work, Toledo won this year's price for her poetic piece entitled *Black Olive* (or *Gui'Yaase'* in Zapotec). The masterpiece reflects the memories of Toledo's early years in her beloved Juchitán, as well as the interpretation of the world from the Zapotec cosmo-vision.

It took Toledo a full year of hard work to finish *Black Olive*, which includes 50 poems in Zapotec and Spanish, and although Toledo is fluent in both languages, she constantly consulted with elder Zapotecs to ensure her translations and use of words was correct.

Last Dec., while everyone was thinking about their New Year's resolutions, I wished I could win the Premio Nezahualcōyotl, said a jovial Toledo. "Now, look at me. Guess you better be careful of what you wish?"

Like most poets, Toledo began writing as a need to express and reflect on her feelings—most of which dealt with her departure in her early years from Juchitán. "For me, poet-

ry became of life or death when I was left alone and abandoned," said the Zapotec poet. "Suddenly I felt the need to write [in Zapotec and about Juchitán] to remind myself of who I was, and never to forget it."

Toledo's poetry has also helped her express her deep—and sometimes silent—admiration toward her father's artistic work. The Zapotec poet dedicated a whole poem collection (*Mar de Micas*) to one of his father's art exhibitions. In 25 poems Toledo described the aesthetic beauty radiated from her father's paintings.

Although Toledo prefers not to talk much about his father, she recently co-worked with Francisco Toledo in a book called *La Muerte Brincando con Animales* (the *Death Jumping with Animals*) that will be soon published by the Economic Cultural Fund (*Fondo de Cultura Económica*). Toledo was in charge of writing a short story based on the paintings of her father.

"He (Francisco Toledo) suggested the idea to me, so I did it. I really enjoyed the genre," said Toledo, who refused to talk about how it was to work with his father.

Even though Toledo's passion for poetry and writing is indisputable, with 35 years of age, the Zapotec poet sadly admits that making a living off poetry is almost "impossible." Instead, Toledo has opted to make a living from designing and selling jewelry and huipiles (traditional Zapotec garments). In fact, on the night she was awarded the Premio Nezahualcōyotl, Toledo wore one of her self-designed huipiles with one of her poems embroidered on it.

On December, Toledo will hold a major sale in shop Q (Bravo street No. 109) of huipiles and jewelry with designs from Francisco Toledo's paintings.

Whether writing poetry, designing huipiles, or cooking traditional dishes, Natalia Toledo is destined to exalt the Zapotec culture and revived the importance of indigenous culture in Mexico.

A sweetheart in Mexico

By Arnab Jan Deka

Rio was in fact my destination.

I had commenced my journey with the dream of participating in the world-famed carnival at Rio-de-Janeiro, passing the carefree evenings along the sprawling Copacabana sea beaches and also witnessing some of the exciting football matches as one of the two hundred thousand strong spectators at the Maracana Stadium.

By the time our Greyhound bus covered the extensive tiresome stretch to arrive in Florida from California, where I had accomplished the preliminary works of realising my long overdue dreams of making my first Anglo-Assamese bilingual cinematic venture as well as the formalities with regard to setting up of our Limited Liability Company at Philadelphia with my friend Vavani as the anchor person and myself playing a supporting advisorial role, my financial state was not quite enviable. The dollars given in exchange of the Indian currencies were simply inadequate to completely cover my stay in the expensive States.

Had I not been hosted by Vavani's family in California, those of Manoj and Sibashis in New Jersey, besides that of Amiya Dada at Tallahassee in Florida, by this time I would have been forced to return to my pavilion. Else I would have had to eke out the living costs by acting as a restaurant waiter or an assistant in a garage or a gas station at one of the places. Thanks to the hospitality of these people, I was saved from such embarrassments.

The southern Florida town of Tampa Bay besides the seashore fell in my itinerary for the singular reason of giving the final touches to a long-standing project I had taken up with Debbie of a decorative design company.

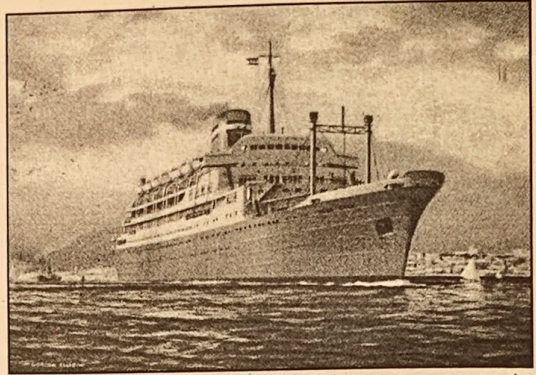
Debbie a.k.a. Deborah Ann Sumlin had to undergo immense trouble while despatching the sample of her hand-made plexo-glass designs to me. Two of her earlier parcels had got misplaced while on postal transit. Finally, I directed her to send the third one to Monideep in Miami who in turn despatched it to Vavani in San Francisco. Finally, I got Debbie's gift from Vavani, who personally handed it over to me during his visit to Assam. And, after going through the samples, there was simply no question of skipping my appointment with her in her homeground in Florida. This, in a nutshell, is the story behind my trip from California to Florida.

It was during my stay in Tampa that I decided to visit Rio. I would have only myself to rue if I miss the carnival in February.



Debbie too had been repeatedly inviting me to her home town of Land O' Lake. She regularly visits her younger sister Donna in Tampa.

What a lovely maiden meeting it was! I did not have to take the trouble of going all out in search of her though there was an almost irre-



sistible desire to take a trip to her township. As the name connotes, its dales are dotted with lovely water bodies of various shapes and sizes - from small ponds to large lakes. Like a concise and compact verse, this picturesque town came alive in Debbie's descriptions. It would have been quite enervating to have stayed in that place at least for a few days. It was also scheduled that after returning from Brazil, I would put up at her place for a short while.

The Rio carnival is an annual affair. If I miss this event, it would be a tedious wait for another twelve months. But, this time Debbie would be there when I return from Rio. Besides, the town of Land O' Lake would also be waiting for me.

Donna is an enterprising lady. She is much more worldly wise than Debbie in practically all affairs. She dabbles in a number of diverse trades. Donna on her own accord conducted all necessary communications pertaining to my trip to Rio.

She gave me a sound advice,--" Why don't you do one thing? Proceed from Tampa to Mexico by sea and then fly out to Rio from Mexico City."

"How would I stand to gain in the process?" I asked nonchalantly.

Donna replied in a professional manner: "You would be a gainer in three ways: Firstly, you would be able to cut on unnecessary expenses. Voyages are cheaper than flights. The airfares from Mexico City to Rio are much less costly than those charged from the States. Secondly, it would be an exotic experience for you to have made a ship journey cutting the deep blue ocean currents of the Gulf of Mexico. You might chance upon a seascape view of Cuba from your ship, besides. Thirdly, you will gain the experience of setting foot in a culturally rich country like Mexico at least for some moments."

Really proficient advice. I got attracted to the idea.

"That's fantastic! Do arrange the trip for me. How can I help you?"

That evening itself, Donna made me fill up a number of forms. After that I had little to worry.

On the D-Day, Debbie along with Donna and her husband came to Tampa port to bid me bon voyage. As the ship moved away from the port, I frantically waved them goodbye. Debbie too shouted back something to me. Though the words were inaudible, yet I could make out the gist of the message: "Happy journey... Be careful... Return early... We will wait for you..." and so on and so forth. Holding tightly to the railing at the pier of the ship, I kept on looking at the figures of Debbie, Donna and others till they faded into the horizon.

"Your family?" The question came from the direction of a girl holding on to the railing besides me.

"No!" I replied without looking at her for I did not want to miss the moments of having a last look at Debbie and others.

"OK. I suppose your girlfriend," the girl persisted with her query.

This time, I looked at her.

The girl was almost of my height. She was kept occupied by the sea breeze, which had been disheveling her long hair. Her blue eyes reflected all the youthful restlessness and curiosity of the world. She was fair complexioned.

"But which one? I saw two pretty girls!" she posed with a naughty smile on her face.

Though she had a pure American accent, yet her appearance betrayed her Mexican or South American roots. She too acknowledged my supposition.

"Yes, I am Mexican. But where are you from? Nicaragua, Guatemala or Panama? How did you correctly guess my nationality? My English accent must have been real bad." The dame's prattle continued uninterruptedly.

I replied, "Actually, one cannot say that you are not American judging by your looks or your accent. Still I guessed correctly..."

"But, how?" she again questioned.

"Your inquisitiveness, the eagerness to start a conversation with strangers... Well, I have not yet come across this facet among American girls. Your attitude and body language also hints that you do meet the Americans pretty often. Thus, I surmised that you can't hail from any Europe as well," I explained.

Her bright eyes livened up with joy and a sense of self-satisfaction.

"So, you deem these as positive traits in my personality...?"

I became wary. "Why? Am I wrong?"

Once more she began: "My mother always says that this is a really dangerous quality in my persona. I get excited at the slightest pretext and develop friendship with all - be it a stranger or any acquaintance. Mom warns - People are very complex. But I like everyone. All looks charming. You know... You're really handsome. I am crazy about the Latino looks. How come you haven't told me where you've come from!"

This time I had to perforce reveal my background a little.

"I have come all the way from Guwahati City... Typical urbanite... love to travel... and try to make the most out of the rare occasions that I come across."

"Wait a moment. What did you say the name of your town is?"

"Gu-wa-ha-ti!" I stressed on each syllable to acquaint her with the word.

She too pronounced the word a number of times.

"What a strange coincidence!" her large eyes cast a bright shade of light towards me.

"I am from the Guadalajara City. Have you heard of it?"

"The name 'Guadalajara' is familiar. Isn't it the second largest city in Mexico?"

"Wow! You surely did your homework!"

"Weren't some of the World Cup soccer matches played in your hometown as well?"

We got friendly with each other with ease very soon.

"Wasn't a poet from your country recently awarded the Nobel Prize? He happened to be in India for several years as the Ambassador of your country. Octavio Paz ---- my favourite poet," I said.

"Are you a poet, too?" asked she.

"Well, at times I happen to compose a few lines. But, actually, I am a Civil Engineer."

"Is it so? I am also studying Engineering. Industrial Engineering to be specific. Am now in the Third year at Guadalajara University," she told me about herself with one added information: "My dad is also a Civil Engineer."

I came prepared for a lonely voyage. This lovely encounter that has blossomed into an effortless bond with a hitherto unknown but ever-smiling bright, extrovert, simple and lively beautiful damsel--- who could be likened to a carefree and restless free-flowing hilly spring-- was somewhat unexpected. Savouring every moment whole-heartedly, I am also searching for uncomplicated, straight-lined joy in the youthful company of this new acquaintance who is lost in accumulating the joy of unstained time by playing with the colours and light of the blossoming youth not yet mellowed by the pains, sorrows and complications of life.



Familiar salty exhale is wafting in the sea wind. Chirping multifarious birds of varied hues are flying past our vessel touching the ship's flagpole. While we leave the shores of Florida, fun seekers were cruising around us in a flotilla of small dinghies with masts, motorboats and cruise-liners in search of the colourful life in the sunny mid-day bright-blue waters of the sea.

The passengers gradually gather at the ship's deck. The motley crowd represents a gallery of characters--some are enthusiastic tourists, others have professional gaits, some more are with the unkempt anxious Mexican look, yet others are jumpy Caribbeans besides groups of Red Indians. While a few are counting the waves of the sea and looking for romance in the leathery water left behind by our liner vessel by leaning against the railing like us, a number of people opt to laze on the armchairs, still some converse loudly and others browse through paperbacks.

To be continued...