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## Bombay's Godard connection

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**Godard was a sadist. He liked to see how far he could go with somebody and that didn't show immediately. He would test and see if you yielded. He made me stand up from my bench in a restaurant**

By Sumesh Sharma

*Lila Lakshmanan, the Bombay-bred editor who cut her way through French New Wave Cinema in the 1960s, describes her life and times working with the stalwarts.*

Editing was seen as a woman's job, we cut and stuck and it needed thin nimble hands. We learnt how to work with the egos of the male directors who stood above you in the editing room. But this has since changed. I never worked in the new forms of editing," says Lila Lakshmanan with a smile that emanates a humour that is both painful in nostalgia and self-negation, when we meet her in an old age home, located north of Paris.

The octogenarian was as an assistant editor to French-Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard in *Breathless*. She took on the role of editing *Une Femme est une femme*, *Vivre sa vie*, *Les Carabiniers* and *Le Mépris*. In 1962, she edited the movie *Jules et Jim*, on the young lives of Paris, directed by Francois Truffaut, who was one of the founders of the French New Wave in the 1960s.

Born in 1935 in Jabalpur to Lakshmanan, the director of All India Radio and a French mother, Lila moved around India from Lucknow to Delhi and finally to (then) Bombay. In fact, she lived a good part of her life in Bombay. She left at 12 to a boarding school in England, as her parents separated. At the boarding school, she was bad at sports, “but its strictness forced her to evaluate life from many corners,” she says, in her south-Bombay accent.

Today, France has the largest immigration from South Asia, people arrive from various ports that once formed gateways to the British Indian Empire. Over the last four years, I have been having multiple conversations with Samit Das, Melanie Bouteloup and Emilie Villez on the deconstruction of Indian Modernism. The complexity of this question could not be answered without defining what was modernism for an India that was diverse in language, religion and particularly race and caste. Judy Blum Reddy, whom I closely work with, introduced me to Janine Bharucha, the daughter of the Indo-French Polymath from Bombay Jean Bhowmgar. These alternative histories have been part of our activity in our alternative art space in Colaba, Clark House; where our modernist history is extremely flawed and non-inclusive, specially toward women. Modernism is almost imagined by a male painter painting a nude. When I spoke of this to Bharucha, she asked me to meet with Lila Lakshmanan. So, we drove one day to her old age home outside Paris. Lila, as I learnt, is an exceptional life we need to hear. So, I invited Hsia Fei Chang to collaborate on a movie with her.



## Bonjour Paris

At 14, Lila went to a student's ball in Paris. This was during the World War II. She met with a 24-year-old actor who wrote and made films. She recalls how he flirted with her, "and I thought all grownups do such things."

He wrote to her for a whole term in England. "And then it stopped, as he realised I wasn't the main aim in his life," she shares. "I then decided from that age that I would marry or be with a filmmaker."

She went to Sorbonne to study English Literature when she was 17. "But I failed with bad marks (two on 20). My teacher said, 'poor thing she doesn't know how to think'," says Lila. "I was not dismayed. I managed to learn how to think. The French way of thinking is based on logic and construction and the thought must be synthesised. The English prefer you to be know your subject well and then allow you to present your thoughts in your own rendition coherently."

Lila successfully graduated and went to study at the French film school ID'HEC, where she met her first husband, Jean Herman, now better known as the French writer Jean Vautrin. She was studying editing as she didn't think she was creative enough to be a director.

### Bombay magic

During her last year at the ID'HEC in 1955, she gave birth to her son. Lila's mother, with the help of Bhowmagary and others she knew in Bombay, found a job for Jean Herman teaching French Literature at the Wilson College. They lived two full years in the city until the end of 1957. "Bombay was an expensive city and the rents were horrendous. So my uncle, a well-known dentist also with the name Lakshmanan, found us an apartment in front of the Prince of Wales Museum in Amarchand Mansions," she says. "We stayed as paying guests with an Anglo-Indian woman. She always talked about her home without ever having been to England. She was happy to have us home as my then husband was white. In fact, when I bought a sari on my first shopping trip with my aunt, my landlady was upset that I was going native and wanted me to go back to my western ways."

Meanwhile, Lila's mother convinced Italian director Roberto Rossellini, whom she knew well, to take on Herman as his assistant for his movie India, Terre Mere. "I remember when he flew into India, I was with Rossellini, when he met Sonali Das Gupta. He was a man who had the accomplishment of perusal; he would be convincing and would get his way with people," says Lila, throwing a glance at Bharucha. "When Sonali's affair became public, she came and lived with me on Carmichael Road. By then, we had found a house after my husband came to work with Jean Bhowmagary. We also stayed at the home of the Bhowmagary family; they would baby sit my son. I had to work to pay for my living in Bombay. I taught French at the Alliance Francaise, which made me nervous as I had never studied French grammar."



Le mepris



Une Femme est une femme



Vivre sa vie

### Exploring French cinema

Two years later, the couple returned to France. One day, when she was walking down the Champs Elysées with Herman, she met a man who was also walking down the same path. "It was Jean Luc Godard; my husband asked him if he could employ me as an intern and Godard agreed, that's how it started and I became his assistant editor. The first film I worked with him was Breathless," she says with a smile. "It was a weird experience because he didn't know what he was doing. He sort of imposed me onto the editor Cecile Decugis, who was in the Algerian Resistance. Godard was a sadist really, and he liked to see how far he could go with somebody and that didn't show immediately. He would test and see if you yielded. He would make people move around in a restaurant; like he made me stand up from my bench in a restaurant."

Apparently, Godard always had women editors. “Godard never took anyone’s advice; he had always made up his mind. We used to scratch the films and stick them together. If you missed a frame, it was considered bad luck. Godard used to stand over the editor to see if she did not make a mistake. I wasn’t intimidated by him because he tested me and he knew I could step over his toes,” she says. “I would make him buy my Gitanes cigarettes. And he would complain against me smoking, as he thought it would waste the time of the editing team.”

The editor later found a job with Truffaut and worked on his epic film Jules et Jim in 1962. “Truffaut was independent-minded like Godard. He often put his mind to work and was more organised than Godard. He had a clear plan; he wrote his own scripts. There were men that would control directorship, editing and scripting of the movie,” she says.

It was during this time, Lila separated from Jean Herman, who had become the writer Jean Vautrin, and she married Atilla Biro, a longtime admirer. Biro was a Hungarian architect turned surrealist painter. “We travelled back to India often, though I haven’t been there in about a decade or more,” she says, seated comfortably in retirement home, where she has placed an elegant photo of her aunt in a chiffon sari sitting beside her. “Now I remember the streets, and remember as I sit in this retirement home. My aunt died and I do not have any reason to go back”

*Lila is the protagonist of a film made by Hsia Fei Chang: Bella Ciao; 90 minutes with Lila in conversation with Janine Bharucha and Sumesh Sharma. It is on view at the Villa Vassilieff Montparnasse, as part of a show curated by Samit Das*