

Echoes of Chiaroscuro

“Along the way, the book becomes a powerful meditation on love, legacy, beauty, and the universal threads that bind us. A profound song to life, culture, and tenderness as strength.”

—Elia Appert

Former High Civil Servant, French Ministry of Finance & Economy

“This book stands as a radiant testament to intellectual elegance and cultural richness. It powerfully reminds us that Central Asia has always been a crossroads of global thought—and, with roots in Samarkand, this family embodies a tradition of ideas that are not only conceived at the center, but continue to evolve and resonate far beyond it.”

—Prof Akmal Akhatov

Vice Rector, Samarkand State University, Uzbekistan

Echoes of Chiaroscuro:

Unspoken Stories of Light

By

Farangis Nurulla-Khoja
and Nargis Nurulla-Khoja

**Cambridge
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Publishing**



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By Farangis Nurulla-Khoja and Nargis Nurulla-Khoja

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Dedicated to our mother, Munira Shahidi,
a scholar of comparative literature of the East and the West;
founder of the Ziyodullo Shahidi Museum of Musical Culture,
established in honor of her father.

*The stars above rest content with their place,
Yet I seek worlds unseen, paths untrodden.*
Munira Shahidi

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The book is authored by me, but I received invaluable support from my sister, Nargis, who brought some important perspectives. For this reason, she rightfully stands as a co-writer.

FOREWORD

GILLIAN TETT

The Central Asia region is famous for its stunning rugs and tapestries, woven diligently from multiple threads to create shimmering whirls of colour. And the book which you are about to read, about the life of Munira Shahidi, is the literary and intellectual equivalent of this type of glorious tapestry.

That is because her daughters, Farangis and Nargis Nurulla-Khoja, have woven together threads from their memories, journals and Shahidi's own words to create a luminous picture of their mother's extraordinary life. Moreover, her story is the human embodiment of Central Asia's Silk Road, that ancient route where different civilisations and cultures traded with each other, and exchanged goods, crafts, words, religions and philosophies too. For while the Shahidi family initially hailed from Samarkand, her mother moved to Dushanbe during Stalin's rule, and Shahidi then built her academic career travelling to places such as Moscow, London, Delhi, Tokyo and New York - until civil war then scattered the family again to Sweden, Yemen, Canada, Hong Kong and more. She is a woman, in other words, whose life has been woven out of ideas, texts, music and traditions from around the region and the wider world.

However, this book is not "just" an account of one remarkable academic, who forged a path when few women were doing this; nor should it only be of interest to those who care about the Tajik cultural heritage. Far from it. Central Asia is a region which should offer hope and inspiration to us all, even (or especially) in these troubled times - and even for readers who know almost nothing about the Silk Road.

This may not be obvious from global news since the media outside the region tends to downplay - if not ignore - Central Asia, and insofar as it does cover the region this is often presented in a negative way, with stories about environmental disasters, interethnic conflicts, imperialist power games, oligarch corruption or war. But while the region does have challenges, it is also a place of extraordinary creativity, resilience and hope. Above all, it demonstrates the power of the inter-ethnic collaborations and collisions

which were at the heart of the ancient Silk Road, since centuries of migration (forced and unforced) and trading made the region a vibrant ethnic melting pot that transcends political boundaries.

Modern day tourists can see this with their own eyes if they visit the (increasingly fashionable) destinations such as the Silk Road cities of Samarkand or Bukhara; while these technically sit in the country now labelled as “Uzbekistan”, they are cultural centers for the Tajiks and other ethnic groups, with a complex interethnic past. You can see this cross-cultural blend in the region’s reverence for the poet Rumi, who inspired so much of Shahidi’s work - or in the music that Shahidi’s father created, which drew on both Western and Eastern traditions.

The key point, then, is that the region - like Shahidi - is a complex cultural crossroad. And the tragedy of Central Asia is that this complex tapestry is so often at odds with the artificial modern national borders that Stalin devised to create separate nations. The nation state model, in other words, does not fit easily with the dynamic ethnic patterns of the region; a more collaborative model is needed.

Hence why this book is so relevant. Munira Shahidi’s own story, and that of her father, shows the rich creativity that can arise from cross cultural exchanges. It also shows that different national traditions are never entirely “pure” or exclusionary, but always created from collisions. So you can read this tale as an inspiring example of how one woman became an academic pioneer with resilience, determination, curiosity and courage; however you can also read it as a call to arms for us all to weave new creative tapestries in our own lives, that transcend narrow national identities. We need this now, more than ever, not just in Central Asia but across the world.

Gillian Tett, May 2025, Cambridge
Columnist and Editorial Board, FT.
Provost, Kings College, Cambridge

PROLOGUE:

A NIGHT IN THE MUSEUM

The museum settled into silence. In the reading room, under the amber glow of a solitary lamp, a tiny sun ringed with shadow, my mother, Munira, sat as a guardian at the altar of memory. Before her, a constellation of manuscripts lay unfurled, their edges frayed by time, breathing the dust of ages: musty parchment and the lingering ghost of polished wood. With hands that seemed to channel a subtle magic, she cradled one of my grandfather's scores, a relic of frozen melodies. She leaned in until ink brushed her breath, her fingertip tracing the staff like a riverbed.

At her touch, the long-sleeping harmonies stirred. For a moment, balanced between reality and reverie, the air seemed to vibrate with the first fragile strains of music, intangible yet vivid, like mist lifting from the manuscript. Melodies moved through the room like ghostly dancers, appearing and fading in a ballroom made of memory. The harmony shifted in low, soft phrases and gentle tensions, entwining and resolving until each strain sank quietly into rest. Sound swirled and eddied in her mind, like echoes returning from across time to whisper the secrets of a past both lost and carried in the marrow of our shared history.

From the doorway, I lingered, reluctant to intrude. She sensed me; her gaze lifted, and her face softened into a smile, a gentle invitation.

"Come," she said, her voice low and melodic. I stepped closer. She turned back to the page, her fingers tracing the notes.

"Did you know," my mother went on, thoughtful and distant, "your grandfather composed this when he was just seventeen? He told me he heard the melody in his dreams long before his hands found it on the keys."

Her words settle into the silence, filling the room with something more than sound, an awe, a delicate significance that hovers between us. It feels like we're no longer in the room but standing on the threshold of another world, a place where time folds back on itself and we are brushed by the presence of those who came before.

Her fingers drift over the page for a moment before she continues:

“This music,” she whispers, her voice a subtle weave of tenderness and unwavering resolve, “it transcends the boundaries of time and space, outlasting the soul that first gave it life, to settle in every heart that opens to listen.”

For a moment, her words rest in the stillness, mingling with the imagined strains of the melody. Then she looks at me, her eyes shimmering, as if she’s waiting for me to say something, to carry the moment forward. But I have no words. I can only nod, letting her voice, her belief, her certainty wash over me like a tide, filling the spaces within me I didn’t even know were empty. She turns back to the partition, and as her fingers begin to move again, I think I can almost hear it too, the melody, rising like a faint, unbroken thread, weaving through the air, through her, through me, and perhaps, through time itself.

I moved to sit beside her, the warm glow of the desk lamp illuminating the faint creases in the manuscript and the unwavering resolve in her expression. In that moment, I felt the enormity of what she carried, not just my grandfather’s music, but the spirit of a culture, the memory of a family, the fragments of a time that might otherwise dissolve into obscurity. It wasn’t just preservation; it was an act of defiance, of love, of faith in the enduring power of art to hold us together.

Echoes of Her Voice

My son, Ravshan, once said to me, “Buvajon has a magical voice.” He wasn’t referring to my mother’s singing, though that too holds its own gentle charm, like a melody carried by the breeze. No, he meant the cadence of her words, the rhythm in the way she speaks, transforming even the simplest tale into something grand, a story that feels as though it has always existed, waiting for her voice to bring it to life. I’ve witnessed these magic countless times. At family gatherings, my mother would begin with a story from her childhood, her voice weaving the strands of memory and imagination into a rich mosaic so vivid it seemed to shimmer in the air. As she spoke, the room would grow hushed, captivated by the depth of her words. By the end, silence would hang in the air, heavy with reflection, as if the story itself had become part of the room. And then, like a conductor signaling the final note, she would laugh, a warm, melodic sound that released us all. The room would erupt into chatter, her story unlocking a flood of memories and sparking new connections among us.

Light does not seek permission to fall, nor does it announce its arrival with grandeur; it simply exists, transforming all it touches with a subtle inevitability. My mother carries this truth, not as something she controls, but as something innate, a radiance woven into the threads of her being. Her brilliance reveals itself in many forms: the reach of her intellect that holds the lore of generations, the devotion of her motherhood that nurtures endlessly, and the stillness of her solitary moments, where silence becomes its own kind of strength. Her presence alone is a river, vast and open, flowing with an ease that conceals its depth. It moves through her children, who carry echoes of her courage; her grandchildren, who inherit her dreams as if they were their own; and her great-grandchild, who, in meeting her, may one day come to grasp the enormity of her love. It flows through students who've held onto the resonance of her words, through colleagues who've stood beside her in moments of triumph and challenge, and through siblings who've shared the contours of her journey, shaped by her strength yet warmed by her unwavering kindness. It touches nieces and nephews who find gentle inspiration in her grace, friends who carry the imprint of her serene wisdom like a treasured keepsake, and my father, whose consistent presence has been the mainstay beneath all she has built. Together, they form a harmonic weave of lives bound by love, unity, and the profound magic they leave behind a constellation of stories that illuminate the paths they've walked.

Her gift to the world is limitless, an inheritance of presence and purpose. Hers is not a legacy of towering monuments or grand proclamations but of an enduring rhythm, a life lived with love, intention, and a grace so natural it feels like an unspoken hymn, rising and falling in peaceful harmony with the world around her.

This rhythm reveals itself in the way she observes the world, with eyes that notice both its gentle beauty and its hidden treasures. She often marvels at how some people seem to move through life untouched by curiosity: blind to the poetry of existence, to stories etched in tradition, to the artistry of everyday gestures, to the music borne on the wind of shared memory. To her, that absence is not merely a lack; it is a silence where song should be, an emptiness where connection and meaning might take root.

For her, culture isn't confined to museums or books; it lives in how we treat one another, in honoring the past as we embrace the present, and in finding splendor in the simple and near.

I am endlessly grateful for the chance to gather the threads of her life, a rich, elaborate arrangement of experiences, insight, and love that lingers within

me like the haunting refrain of an ancient cradlesong, its notes shimmering through the mists of time, eternally resonant in the chambers of my heart.

For years, I have filled the pages of my journal with glimpses of my mother's universe: the stories she shares on the serene evenings, when even the shadows seem to lean in to listen; the truths she offers so subtly they feel like gifts meant to bloom in their own time; and the soft strength she reveals in gestures so unassuming yet so profound that they carry the essence of entire lifetimes. Her life is not a straight path but a mosaic of contrasts, humor interwoven with sorrow, courage entwined with vulnerability, intuition meeting knowledge. These elements do not clash; they flow together in a rhythm that is wholly her own.

In attempting to capture her story, I've come to understand that it cannot be bound by facts or even memories. Her life demands more than a recounting; it asks for attention to the silences between her words, to the unspoken truths carried in her laughter, and to the rhythm of her days, which rise and fall like movements in an unwritten symphony. What she gives cannot be held or contained; it can only be carried forward, passed along like a melody that transforms with every new voice it touches.

As I turn the weathered pages of my journal, the fragments begin to align, as though drawn together by an unseen force. They coalesce into something far greater than a mere collection of memories; they become a vivid portrait of a woman whose depth, humor, and profound sacrifices form the invisible architecture that anchors us. Writing this book feels like a conversation with her, offering not just a chance to preserve her past, but to illuminate her enduring presence, a light that continues to guide me and, I hope, will inspire those who come to know her through these pages.



PART I

MUNIRA

I

A LIFE ILLUMINATED

Some names seem destined to carry their own kind of magic, as if whispered into existence by unseen forces waiting for the perfect moment to give them voice. My mother's name, Munira, *bearer of light*, is one of those rare treasures, a gift that feels less chosen than discovered, as though it had always been hers, waiting silently to be revealed. It wasn't her parents who bestowed this name but the poet Abulqosim Lahuti, a visitor to their modest home, whose words had already become a cornerstone of their cultural heritage. In naming her, Lahuti offered a piece of herself; he handed her a spark, a promise, a luminous thread to weave through a world so often cloaked in shadow.

The spring of 1943 arrived in Stalinabad (nowadays Dushanbe) with a beauty that felt almost rebellious, as if the season itself refused to bow under the weight of war. The cherry trees lining the streets erupted into blossom, their petals scattering across cobblestones polished by years of footsteps. The air carried the mingling fragrances of spring rain and blooming flowers, wrapping the city in a fleeting sense of renewal. Neighbors gathered at doorsteps, sipping tea and exchanging whispered news, their voices softened by the heavy backdrop of global uncertainty. Amid this fragile yet vibrant moment, life persisted, not boldly, but with the inner determination of roots deepening unseen beneath the earth.

It was into this world, balancing on the edge of hope and despair, that Munira was born. Her arrival, though unaccompanied by fanfare, carried a resonance that seemed to reverberate through the air. Later that day, as her family gathered in their modest home to celebrate her birth, their door opened to the presence of Abulqosim Lahuti. The poet stepped inside like a gust of wind carrying the scent of jasmine, his voice rich and sonorous as he greeted the family. His scarf, embroidered with elaborate Persian patterns, draped over his shoulders, its deep colors complementing the silver threads in his hair.

Ziyodullo Shahidi, a young composer and new father, had completed his work earlier that day, setting it aside just as the news arrived, a daughter, their first child, had been born. Now, seated beside his wife Marhabokhon, who rested peacefully on a low divan, he leaned forward, attentive as Lahuti began to speak.

“Tell me,” the poet said, his voice warm with curiosity, “about this new light that has entered your home.”

“A daughter,” Ziyodullo breathed, his voice a tender whisper imbued with the profound reverence of a man whose universe had been irrevocably transformed.

“But we have not yet named her,” he continued, the unspoken anticipation of this sacred task evident in the gentle tremor of his voice.

Lahuti's piercing gaze softened, his eyes moving with deliberate grace between father and mother, as if carefully weighing the gravity of his impending words. The renowned poet's countenance, usually etched with the lines of revolutionary fervor, now bore a gentle, almost paternal expression.

Marhabokhon, a picture of serene strength, sat peacefully on the low divan. In her arms, she cradled their newborn daughter, her face a palette of tranquil radiance, illuminated by the ineffable glow of new motherhood. The infant, unnamed yet already imbued with infinite potential, slumbered peacefully, oblivious to the significance of this moment. As Marhabokhon's eyes met Lahuti's, a current of unspoken understanding passed between them. The poet inclined his head in a subtle nod, a gesture that acknowledged not just their shared cultural heritage, but also the profound responsibility of naming, of bestowing identity and destiny upon this new life.

“Then allow me,” he offered, his voice deliberate yet imbued with an undeniable assurance. “Call her Munira. It means ‘bearer of light.’ Let her name be a promise, a reflection of the radiance she will bring, not only to your lives but to the world itself.”

In the stillness that followed, the impact of his words settled over the room like a blessing, binding their small family to something timeless. Marhabokhon smiled softly, her gaze dropping to the baby in her arms, and Ziyodullo, with the tenderness of a father holding a newfound dream, nodded in silent agreement.

From that day onward, Munira carried within her the light of dual gifts, her father's melodies, resonating like prayers from the soul, and the poet's timeless words, etched into the depths of her heart. Yet it was her mother's tender care, an enduring presence that carried Munira through each step, becoming the gentle pulse of her life's grand concerto.



A Home filled with Music

Long, long ago, so long that time folded in on itself, when a sieve rested inside a straw, when Qeas bore heavy loads and camels wielded razors... when spirits played ball in the palace courtyard, when I cradled my grandfather as an infant and sang my father to sleep... when time ran like a river in reverse, and God's creatures were as countless as grains of wheat, their voices rising and falling like the wind, back in that world, there lived a...

Munira's earliest memories were a medley of sounds, every note woven into the story of her childhood. There was her mother's voice, soft and lilting, as she sang while kneading dough or tending the *tanur*, a clay stove in the outdoor kitchen, where she baked *non* - bread that filled the air with its earthy, comforting aroma. There was the lively chatter of her father's friends, their conversations animated by debates about art, poetry, and the elusive shape of beauty. But above all, there was the music, a constant flow, threading its way through their lives like a stream, clear and ceaseless.

The house that cradled these moments was more than a home; it was a living chronicle of profound endurance, built by Ziyodullo's own hands, brick by resolute brick, with a determination that resonated in its very foundations.

Humble yet alive with an innate harmony, it held four rooms and a sprawling veranda, its radiant windows capturing the world beyond with the vision of an artist. Every corner thrummed with its own subtle energy, as though the home itself respired in unison with those who found refuge within its welcoming walls. At the core of this modest sanctuary lay the study, a chamber where silence metamorphosed into symphonies and the ethereal essence of contemplation met the vibrant resonance of melody, Ziyodullo's piano stood sentinel there, its polished surface reflecting countless hours of devotion and artistic pursuit. This grand instrument, its ebony and ivory keys worn smooth by years of passionate caresses, rested in tranquil majesty near a window that served as a portal to the verdant world beyond, inviting both the golden threads of sunlight and the whispered secrets of the garden to dance upon its strings. It was in this hallowed space that creations took their first breath, where inspiration flowed like a gentle, never-ending stream, its currents carrying fragments of dreams and half-formed melodies. Here, Munira would often sneak in to listen while her father composed, drawn by an invisible thread of curiosity and wonder. The room seemed alive, the soft resonance of his instrument mingling with the rhythmic scratch of his pen on paper, as if the air itself carried the pulse of creation.

The garden beyond the window was a world unto itself, a domain beneath which nature and memory merged in a chorus of colour, shadow, and scent. Cherry trees stood like sentinels at its edges, their blossoms unfurling in spring as though the earth itself exhaled beauty, their petals cascading in soft whispers carried by the breeze. At the garden's heart, a stout quince lifted its boughs, the fruit turning to golden jewels, aglow in autumn. Winding through this verdant space were the reins of grapevines, their leaves thick and sprawling, stretched across a wooden trellis. The vines formed a natural roof, a living canopy where sunlight filtered through, dappled and ever-changing. Beneath this shade, the family often gathered, their chairs placed in a loose circle around a low table. This was the cradle of conversations, where laughter rose like a hidden spring, and the simple act of sitting together became its own kind of ritual. The air here carried the mingling scents of ripe fruit, fresh earth, and sun-warmed leaves, while the faint buzz of bees added its own melody to the scene.

At the far edge of the garden, tucked between the trees, stood the outdoor shower, a humble but ingenious creation of Ziyodullo's. Its simplicity belied the care that had gone into building it, the sturdy structure offering refreshment on summer days when the air seemed to shimmer with heat. Water had to be brought for each use, a task that might have felt burdensome but instead became a shared endeavor, its rhythm marked by laughter and the

clink of metal pails. The cool spray beneath the open sky, surrounded by the whispers of trees, turned each shower into an experience that felt both ordinary and extraordinary. Stone paths wound their way through the garden, uneven yet well-worn, connecting the cherry trees, the persimmon, the grapevines, and the shower into a harmonious whole. Every tread on those stones seemed to carry an echo of the lives lived there, of the conversations shared, the songs sung, and the silences observed.

The kitchen, separate from the main house, was both practical and magical. Marhabokhon worked there with effortless grace, the *tanur* glowing softly as it baked bread that was imbued with the warmth of her care. She sang as she worked, her melodies rising and blending with the sounds of the courtyard, the rustling of leaves, the faint notes from Ziyodullo's piano drifting through the air.

Munira, still a child, often wandered between these spaces, her world a harmony of music, conversation, and the gentle rituals of daily life. She spent countless afternoons in her father's study, perched on the piano bench beside him, her small hands hovering over the keys. Though too young to play, she mimicked his movements, her fingers tracing the air in clumsy imitation. She watched with wide eyes as her father's hands moved effortlessly, drawing melodies from the piano as if drawing secrets from a living being. Occasionally, he would pause, turning to her with a smile that carried both tenderness and purpose.

"Do you hear it, Munirajon?" he would ask, his voice low but resonant, like the first note of a song. "Music isn't just sound. It's feeling, it's the story we can't tell any other way." She didn't yet grasp the depth of his words, but she nodded solemnly, sensing even then that the music held something infinite, something sacred.

Ziyodullo Shahidi had a presence that emerged with a subtle yet profound impact, like the first notes of a *maqam* melody that gradually fills the air. His calm intensity, an energy did not demand attention but gently called it forth. His chestnut hair, meticulously brushed back, framed a face carved with precision, strong cheekbones softened by the tender curve of his jaw, and a broad forehead that seemed to house the placid blizzard of his thoughts. His eyes were an ocean of stillness, deep and reflective, glowing with the kind of serenity reserved for those who see the world not just in its present form, but in its hidden potential. They held a piercing, attentive gaze; at times, just faintly, an almost imperceptible flicker of amusement, hinting at a secret known only to him. He moved with unhurried poise, as if

time kept his pace. Nothing in his stride was aimless; no moment lacked calm certainty. His clothes matched that restraint, soft, muted tones, crisp shirts, and jackets chosen with care rather than display. A brown hat, set just so, completed the look, less a necessity than a signature.

For Ziyodullo, music was not a craft, it was an extension of his very breath, as natural to him as the air that filled his lungs. He approached it with a deliberation that mirrored the tenderness he brought to his family: structured, yet profoundly human, every musical phrase left a delicate imprint of unspoken emotion. The piano was his companion, his bridge to an invisible realm of sonority that resonated far beyond the instrument. When his fingers touched the keys, they didn't merely play the piano; they invoked something deeper, an endless, unfathomable well within him, from which melodies rose like the morning sun. There was a subtle sacredness to his work, a devotion so profound that it pulled others into its orbit without ever seeking the limelight. He didn't seek applause; his brilliance lingered, a single note whose resonance reached the heart before the ear.

And then there was Marhabokhon...she was the very essence of wisdom.

Munira's mother radiated an inner strength that seemed to flow effortlessly from her. Her almond-shaped eyes, always bright with compassion, carried a depth that hinted at the stories she never told, while her soft smile offered a comfort so enduring it felt like a constant, no matter the storm. Her presence was not one to command a room, but to fill it, gently, with a warmth that made those around her feel seen, understood, and held.

She moved with a natural grace, whether folding dough at the *tanur*, or bent over her sewing, the needle flashing in her deft hands late into the evening. Marhabokhon did not merely sew dresses; she designed them, sketching patterns in her mind that seemed to come to life beneath her fingers. The soft swish of fabric and the rhythmic pull of thread were as familiar in the household as the scent of fresh bread or the murmur of family conversations. Her dresses, elegant and unique, were imbued with her essence, their ornate details reflecting her creativity and subtle brilliance. Her manner of dress mirrored her work, an exquisite blend of simplicity and refinement. She adorned herself in *kurta and ezor*, a dress and pantalon, crafted from luminous Atlas silk that draped her form with graceful elegance. The *kurta*, falling in soft cascades, bore subtle patterns that seemed to undulate with each movement, its delicate motifs revealing new depths as light danced across the material. The *ezor*, equally resplendent, complemented the dress perfectly, its loose fit a nod to both tradition and comfort. She tied her *rumol* -

headscarf with a precision that spoke of years of practice, its folds framing her face like a master painter's careful brushstrokes. Her attire, while rooted deeply in the rich textile heritage of Central Asia, transcended mere tradition. It was a living mosaic, a daily expression of her cultural identity interwoven with her personal artistic vision.

When Marhabokhon walked, her steps carried a subtle intention, a tempered grace that seemed to gather the gentle weight of her devotion, movements shaped by years of enduring tenderness. Even in the busiest moments, there was a serenity in her bearing, as though she moved to a secret rhythm that softened the noise of daily life. She was the contemplative architect of her family's world, her resolve woven into the very essence of their days. In every gesture, whether threading a needle with precision, kneading dough with patient hands, or tenderly helping her youngest child with his shoelaces, Marhabokhon turned ordinary acts into sacred rituals of love.

One evening, as the family gathered for tea in the warmth of their living room, Ziyodullo reached for a well-loved copy of *Shahnameh*, Ferdawsi's timeless epic. The flickering light of an oil lamp danced on the walls as he began to read aloud, his voice weaving the tale of *Rostam and Sohrab* into something vivid and alive. As he read, Ziyodullo's hands became players in this ancient drama. With practiced grace, he cast shadows on the wall, here the imposing silhouette of Rostam, there the lithe form of Sohrab, their shadow-selves locked in eternal combat. The family watched, spellbound, as the story unfolded both in word and in shadow, the two art forms intertwining to create a multisensory epic that seemed to breathe and pulse with life. Munira, sat cross-legged on the carpet, her small frame still and attentive, as though the words carried a meaning just beyond her reach. The heroic battles and fateful twists filled her mind with images that felt as real as the world around her.

"What happens next, Dadajon?" she asked eagerly, her small voice cutting through the stillness with unguarded curiosity.

Ziyodullo smiled, a silent delight playing on his lips.

"Ah, that is for another night," he replied, his tone as deliberate as the phrases of a careful composition. "A good story, joni Dadesh, is like music, it must unfold slowly, allowing you to feel every note before it fades."

Marhabokhon, seated nearby with her sewing in hand, chuckled softly.