

KAVYA BHARATI

Special Issue
Poetry of the Indian Diaspora - II

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
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Number 17
2005

FOREWORD

KAVYA BHARATI-17

True to our reputation as an 'occasional' journal *Kavya Bharati-17* is before you a year late. We are not going to say we regret the delay because the delay was caused by the overwhelming response from people of Indian origin and from some with a rather pronounced Indian interest to the Special Issue of *Kavya Bharati* showcasing poetry of the Indian diaspora. So here you have the poems, translations and essays from our pravasi friends.

We are indeed sorry that we have to keep the desi poets waiting for more than a year. We have contributions received and accepted, that could very well fill two volumes of *Kavya Bharati*. We thank the poets, readers and scholars for their patience and also their continued interest in *Kavya Bharati*.

We do welcome your comments on the two special issues on the poetry of the Indian diaspora. We do not have a letters column. We assure you we'll read your comments and criticism which could help us serve the cause of Indian poetry better.

And so we move onward. *KB-18* is already in preparation. It will include poetry from Kamala Das, Hoshang Merchant, Ranjit Hoskote, S. Murali, Neeti Sadarangani, Prabhanjan K. Mishra, T.R. Joy and many others.

A subscription form is enclosed in this present issue. We hope to hear from you!

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Editor: R.P. Nair

KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 17, 2005

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UMA PARAMESWARAN

THIS LAND WHEREON I STAND

I

(1975)

Let us pledge to stand together
As the Inuit igloo
 of packed snow
 tight smooth edgeless
Withstands the Arctic's wintry wind.

Come, let us build our temple
Where the Assiniboine flows into the Red.

II

(June 23, 2000)

Long a celebrant
of this lovely land of endless skies,
whose earth I've walked into horizons,
whose skies I've flown from sea to sea,
in whose rivers I've seen my own--
the singing waters of my native Narmada,
Kaveri, whose rapids feed ancestral fields--
I come, bearing votive incense and a pledge.

I, who have brought Ganga to our Assinibone,
and built my temples where it flows into the Red,
and seen the fluteplayer dancing
on the waters of La Salle,
now stand on the ocean's shore
and know
I must walk farther,

fly higher, dive deeper
to find the fire
that is now but ember
in empty pyres
that smoulder ever
waiting for the hopes,
the bodies, that lie strewn
on ocean floor.

Earth, air, fire, water,
Progenitors of all life,
Inspire, exhort, goad, needle us,
I pray,
That all who live
in this lonely land of endless skies,
Remember now and forever
the dates etched in caves of memory
where there and here come together
to make us who we be.

Dive deeper.
July 23rd, 1914, dark day of ignominy,
When Komagatamaru was driven into the open sea,
while people and newspapers screamed:
Keep Canada white, true north strong and free.
(As though the first nations of this land
never were, had never been.)

Fly higher.
June 23, 1985, dark day of ignominy
when Mulroney sent condolences to Rajiv Gandhi
for “your great loss”
after Flight 182 hurtled through the sky
into the Irish sea,
stopping three hundred Canadian hearts
and breaking three thousand more.

Cry rivers.

June 23, 2000, dark day of ignominy,
when the criminals who sent limbs and hearts
hurtling through the sky into the Irish sea,
have still not been brought to book
because of an Inquiry that drags its feet.

She said, Dark, dark your memories.
Surely there are sunnier ones that shine
Through the spruce green of your prairie mind:
November 2nd, 1949, when Jawaharlal in person
Stood on the Pacific shore and thanked
the Ghadars for their part in freedom's cause.
February 21st 2000, when Ujjal took oath of office
to the sound of India's drums and dance.

Yes, yes, and I have sung psalms to those.
But I come today to light camphor marker,
stupa, gnomon, pyramid, obelisk,
and to sing dirges to the dead, who,
denied funeral pyres,
shall glow forever
in history books and hearts
of all who live from sea to sea.

III
(2005)

I am come to a place past a fading collage

of nostalgia for another land where mangoes yellow and red
peeped with wonder at the purposeful spruce spare and tall
against blinding snow;

of protests proclaiming alienation, marginalization,
discrimination, racialization

of women, races, classes, ages, shapes and colours
in language deemed meet
for poetry
and for the corporate ladder we call academe;

of thankless service to various causes
social, political, altruistic, educational;

of secret trysts with the muses moving to music
beyond measurable decibels,
dancing with their shadows as they teased me
with poems and stories to magical dells
that have ever been and never reached.

I am come to a place where the land I stand on
Calls me
To know it as I had never known before.

I had searched and sieved through history texts
for resonating names to suit my prairie rhymes--
 Johann Cabot, Jean Baptiste La Verendrye,
 de Champlain, Vilhjalmer Stefansson,
oh how the syllables echoed like an honour roll of drums,
and names that are etched in the honour rolls of war--
 Allan Edy, 25; James Johnston, 26; Harry Edwards, 24;
 James Smith, 27; Normand Edmond, 21; Frederick Watson, 26;
 Mark Brown, 30; all pilots in the Battle of Britain.
And met too that nameless woman who from Orkney Islands
came across the seas in search of the man who had sired
the child within her, first white woman to stand on the patch
I call my own, this prairie gold once bush,
through which in travel and travail she sought for help.
Nameless she remains, woman-mother-pioneer.

I did not know then
when the mangoes red and yellow
peeped with wonder at the purposeful spruce,

that history texts had redefined, obliterated or consigned
to nothingness the unwritten, deeply etched memories
of peoples who had walked this land longer than anyone
can rightly ascertain.

Now I walk the land whereon I stand
to meet the past beyond my past
that has been forever, never known.

Aditi, goddess of the seven dimensions of the cosmos,
celestial light that flows through the universe,
permeates the consciousness of sentient beings,
mother of humankind,
I see you here,
Aataentsic, who, seeking for healing herbs,
tripped and fell through a hole in the sky,
and was caught in the wing-arms of the Great Geese,
who set her up on the back of Turtle,
which became the earth we know,
where she gave birth to humankind.

Aditi, mother of us all,
Did the birds walk kiiqturtut around you
as you lay birthing?
And when the babies came,
Did they swaddle your babies in qilittaq,
spear fish with their kakivak to feed you,
and dance the qilaujaniq?

Aditi, mother of us all,
Did you send one of your sons,
a sage with knowledge drawn
from the fount of Vedas
to our Arctic snows?
and did he teach the Harvaqturmiut
about reincarnation? that the souls of the good
return to earth again as human beings

and that the souls of the evil as beasts?
and to give the name of the noble dead
to the next newborn so he will be here again?
Nowhere else do we find this thought,
not even among those nearest them,
the Quernermiut, Haunektormiut, Hailignayokmiut,
Inuits with other sagas than ours.

Aataentsic, mother of us all,
I stand enthralled in the presence of your children,
with their stories and myths so like our own,
with names more liquid gold than any I've known:
Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, Nootka,
Mohawk, Mikmaq, Salish, Haida,
sounds that danced to caribou drums
ere the Kabloona came
and stilted their steps,
and changed their names,
and penned them in the rez.
And fed them booze,
and no, let me not go there,
for we dance to the future,
red, white, black, yellow and brown
we dance together around the totem
Maple Leaf white and red
and the purposeful spruce
straight and tall
against blue-tinged snow.

Aditi Aataentsic, mother of us all,
Bless us now.

Notes to II above

Air India Flight 182, bound from Toronto to New Delhi via Heathrow Airport in England, was blown out of the sky off the coast of Ireland on June 23, 1985. There are several annotations as it were that are needed for my poems.

The name of the airliner was Emperor Kanishka. Though it was common knowledge soon after the crash that Khalistani terrorists were responsible for placing the bomb that caused the crash, even fifteen years later, in the spring of 2000 when I wrote the poem, the Inquiry had not led to any arrest.

Secondly, 329 people died, of whom 278 were Canadian citizens or landed immigrants of Indian descent. The first official Canadian response to the tragedy was that Prime Minister Brian Mulroney sent a message of condolence to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on “your great loss,” thus clearly articulating the general Canadian perception that Indo-Canadians are non-Canadians and belong to India, not to Canada. This is an attitude that the Indian diaspora in different countries should be aware of, the perception that we don’t belong here as equal citizens of Canada or the United States or wherever we are.

Another reference is to the Komagatamaru, a ship carrying about 350 prospective immigrants from India to Canada that was denied entry into Vancouver port early in 1914, because British Columbia and perhaps all of Canada, was in a state of racist paranoia about the presence of Chinese labourers who had been brought to help build the railroad, and the 2000 Indian labourers who were in the lumber industry. Like the internment of the Japanese-Canadians during the second world war, this is one of the dark chapters of racism in Canada.

Another reference is to Ujjal Dosanjh, the first Indo-Canadian to be premier of any Canadian province, who took office just about the time I wrote these poems.

Notes to III above

all the following are Inuit words:

kiiqturtut: walking in a circle around a woman in travail

qulittaq: caribou-skin parka

kakivak : spear fish

qilaujaniq: drum dance

kabloona: Inuit name for non-Inuit i.e. white people

JEET THAYIL

SPIRITUS MUNDI

I was born in the Christian South
of a subcontinent mad for religion.
Warriors and zealots tried to rule it.
A minor disciple carried his doubt,
like a torch, to temple and shrine.
I longed for vision and could not tell it.

The cities I grew up in were landlocked.
One, a capital, buff with architecture,
the other lost for months in monsoon.
One was old, one poor, both were hot;
the heat vaporized thought and order,
drained the will, obliterated reason.

I settled, twenty and morose, in a town
built by a patricidal emperor
whose fratricidal son imprisoned him,
for eight years, with a view of the tomb
he built for his wife, to remember her.
I was too much conscious of my rhyme,

and of the houses, three, inside my head.
In the streets, death, in saffron or green,
rode a cyclickshaw slung
with megaphones. On the kitchen step
a chili plant grew dusty in the wind.
In that climate nothing survived the sun

or a pickaxe, not even a stone dome
that withstood four hundred years of voices
raised in prayer or argument. The train
pulled in each day at an empty platform
where a tea stall that served passers-
by became a famous fire shrine.

I made a change; I traveled west
to watch a century end
and begin. But I can't recall the summer
of two thousand one. Did it exist?
There must have been sun; it must have rained,
it must have, though I cannot remember

a time before autumn of that year.
Now forty-five, my hair gone sparse,
I am a poet of small buildings,
the brownstone, the townhouse, the cold water
walkup, the tenement of two or three floors.
I cherish the short ones still standing.

I recognize each cornice and sill,
the sky's familiar cast, the window
I spend my day walking to and from,
as if I were a baffled Mogul in his cell.
I call the days by their Hindu
names and myself by my Christian one.

The Atlantic's stately breakers mine
the shore for kelp, mussels, bits of glass.
They move in measured iambs, tidy
as the towns that rise from sign to neon sign.
Night rubs its feet. A mouse deer starts across
the grass. The sky drains to a distant eddy.

Badshah, I say to no one there.
I hear a koel in the call of a barn owl.
All things combine and recombine.
The sky streams in ribbons of color.
I'm my father and my son grown old.
Nothing that lives will ever be gone.

THE OPPOSITE OF NOSTALGIA

I'm trying to forget
those days, one day at
a time:
the pitiful rooms
with their puddles of light,
the women I haggled with,
the car stopped in the street,
the wife barefoot,
on the run,
car keys in her hand.
And I'm back, the sum
of my ambition
defined by an old
rage, my anger like a slow child,
hitting out at anyone
who comes
her way. I'm thinking
of the negotiation
with strangers, the attempt to say
things differently,
the men's room at the airport,
the glassine bag, the rolled-up note,
the line hitting the back of my throat
with a kick
like an anaesthetic,
and, later, the paramedic
saying I'm lucky
to be
alive, and telling him
he's wrong, I'm
not lucky or alive,
just high.

THE PENITENT

I'm back where my life and I parted ways.
I'm talking to the coffeemaker,
to the face towels folded by the sink,
to the air conditioner that conspires
with my enemies against me.
Even now, in the midst of my extremity,
my eyes are dry, and if I jump repeatedly
against the window I can tell myself
I'm being lifted by a great joy,
until the glass smites my face
and I cry out your old name.
The room is empty, lonely as a still life,
but the water stains speak with your voice,
Honor me, honor everything.
I'm saying that is what I'm doing here,
I am honoring you the best way I know.

QUIET AND CONCERNED WITH PROVENANCE

Around the room are people that I know
who stare at me in such a way that I
am frightened for my sanity, and so,
ears buzzing with a sound I fear, my eyes
scraped to a raw insomniac glaze,
I go to the pitiless father and son
whose motion shrugged the world in place,
whose stillness makes it come undone.
I'm asking, I say, for a little time.
I'll pay what I owe just let me stay
a moment in the sun, correct my rhyme,
collect my mind, and take leave of the day.
It struck me then I would not speak again,
no one would, except the murmuring rain.

GHAZAL

Who among us will escape the hand of water?
No cheek, no eye is dry in the land of water.

Bolt tight the windows: the wind is fierce tonight.
Read the collected works, unsigned, of water.

Tomorrow, my love, we'll walk our bereaved city,
And see what the streets understand of water.

How can I believe that your love will abide?
Your eyes are wet with the brand of water.

Someone is singing a widow's song in Malayalam.
I reach for your hair, beribboned, of water.

When the starlings return to the streets of Manhattan
Wake me! Until then am I a man, unmanned, of water.

In the Almanac of Rain you will find my lines,
Each word, period and ampersand of water.

Jeet meet Shahid, your guide to the future.
He will teach you to play a baby grand of water.

MONA DASH

BELONGING

Corporate men in pinstripe suits
Sitting around the table in deep discussions
In accents of Lilting French, Baritone German, Twangy American
Among them an Indian, worse a woman, Indian.
When I speak in tone, walk with the step
Eyebrows raise, they lean forward to hear better
Talk louder when addressing me, as if I were deaf
Telling me silently
“You shouldn’t be here.”

A crowded English pub, people
Standing in spaces too small for them
Leaving my group I go to order the drinks
The bartender stares and doesn’t get it when I say
“A Bacardi breezer and 3 pints of lager”
Looking confused, Leaning forward closer,
Telling me silently
“You shouldn’t be here.”

Welcoming smiles, women in sarees
Sitting in front of a TV, talking about the day
Grinding masalas, rolling chapattis, content
In the four walls, within the set boundaries
My hometown, my roots, so far from my branches
Ill at ease I sit
Listening to my own voice
Telling me silently, loudly
“You shouldn’t be here.”

ADVICE TO MY UNBORN DAUGHTER

My dear little one. My dear Miliani
Born brown as warm earth
Head filled with hair black as kohl
These Indian signs I cannot change.
But the small things I can.

As I tuck you in every night
I will place a pink flower on your pillow
Paint a star on your feet
Braid your hair with beads and glitter.
Will paint for you a picture
Of you on a white horse
Riding in Hyde Park
On a Sunday morning
The air washed clean
From rains before.
Hair streaming behind you
Straight backed and proud
Queen of what you see.

And when they come for you
As surely they will with red bangles
Vermillion pots for your hair
And ask you to cover yourself in sarees
Sacrifice and live in devotion
Tell you stories of how this will give
You a lifetime of love and respect
Promise me my child
You will not forget
Me, the vision, our vision
Of flight, rain, wind
Whipping through trees
You will swim as always
Graceful as a ballet dancer

And, teach your daughter to do the same.

WOMAN

I am no different from you
Homeless, grey saree in tatters
Matted hair, uncombed, unoiled since weeks
Red bindi smeared and a vapid smile on the face
Running through the streets
To cries of mad woman
For the son killed in a streetfight
10 years back.
I too have buried my flesh.

I am no different from you
Sometimes in glittering cocktail dresses
Sometimes in red sarees, shiny blouse
And see through petticoats
Crimson lipstick and flowers down
Scented black hair
Stoned in public
For the lack of her morality
I too have traded my flesh.

I am no different from you
Attached when defence-less
Touched when not asking to be
Nails trying to gouge eyes out
But always failing
To stronger biceps.
A victim's vulnerability
A victim's blood, oozing slowly
I too have had plunderers on my flesh.

Always a different name,
A different country,
A different Life
A different version
But the same I.

SUJATA BHATT

BUDDHA'S LOST MOTHER

The mask
the mask-maker didn't want to sell
ended up with you
 a favour, a gift
you brought back from Korea.

A mask so human,
 a laughing shaman

Smooth pale wood,
 heavy and firm

Face of an old man,
 his long hair tied up
into a loose knot
on top of his head

Face of an old man, who could be
 an old woman in reality.

An old woman in hiding

Buddha's lost mother.

Anonymous would have looked like this,
 I'm certain.

But will she feel at home
 over here, on our wall
 with the crocodile
mouth from Indonesia, a deep red mask
with whom she probably has nothing in common.

Will she mind
the pretending to sleep masks from Nigeria?

The scent of green ginger
fills my kitchen.

Every day her laughter
grows more pungent.

PURE LIZARD

She is
part lizard, part woman,
and one of her ancestors
must have been a monkey.

Her skin is pure lizard.
Perhaps she's also part chameleon.
Her eyes are tiny. Her face is
narrow, angular.

I am four in this memory,
four when I see her
standing on a wall
There's a crowd listening to her.
She can even speak Marathi.
She's just as tall as I am--
but so old, and her skin hangs
everywhere from the bones in her body.

I think she is a hairless monkey
and I want to go closer
to listen, to speak to her.

I want her to tell me everything
 about monkeyhood.
I want to see if she actually
 has a tail.
I want to play hide-and-seek
 with her.

Now, what is she telling the people?
She is shrill, crying out to them.

There is so much urgency
rippling across her skin
such desperation in her voice.
And yet, some people are laughing.
I want to know why
but I am pulled away,
told that it's time to go home.

I thought of her again today,
 still certain of my memory.

Could she have been the Sibyl?
 Then, I wonder,
why did she leave her cave?
And where is she now?

PHYTOREMEDIATION

Do they gasp for air?
Pores choking on metallic dust
 for the lack of ozone

Or do they choke on the idea
 of excessive ozone
in mixed up atmospheres?

Bees crawl across their faces.

Do they gasp in pain?

Or is it joy? Are they drunk on sunlight,
drunk on blue air?

Their greens and yellows reeling with the wind

These sunflowers, so tall, almost gawky,
they are faster than Death.

Undemanding queens-- What do they know?

Spartan beauties, I call them, sisters
of cacti, for they need so little, almost
nothing from the soil.

Do they never tire of looking at the sun?

The sun over Chernobyl,
for example, where they live--
roots soaking up radioactive uranium
stems humming radioactive cesium,
radioactive strontium a chemical heat
buzzing with zeros

What do they mean with their glances?
Their electric, burning glances
still beseeching bees,
still daring birds to eat their seeds,
still glaring at the sky
Still egging on the sun.

SUDEEP SEN

MEDITERRANEAN

1

A bright red boat
Yellow capsicums

Blue fishing nets
Ochre fort walls

2

Sahar's silk blouse
gold and sheer

Her dark black
kohl-lined lashes

3

A street child's
brown fists

holding the rainbow
in his small grasp

4

My lost memory
white and frozen

now melts colour
ready to refract

JACKET ON A CHAIR

You carelessly tossed
the jacket on a chair.
The assembly of cloth

collapsed in slow motion
into a heap of cotton--
cotton freshly picked

from the fields--
like flesh
without a spine.

The chair's wooden
frame provided a brief
skeleton,

but it wasn't enough
to renew the coat's
shape, the body's

prior strength,
or the muscle
to hold its own.

When one peels off
one's outer skin,
it is difficult

to hide
the true nature of
blood.

Wood, wool, stitches,
and joints--
an epitaph

of a cardplayer's
shuffle,
and the history

of my dark faith.

[based on Cezanne's *Jacket on a Chair*,
graphite and watercolour on paper,
47.5 X 30.5 cm, 1890-92]

PRAYER CALL: HEAT

*I wake cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.*

Thom Gunn, "The Man with Night Sweats"

Outside, "Allah-u-Akbar"
pierces the dawn air--
It is still dark.

Inside, electric light
powers strength
to my feverish body.

Mosque minaret
radiate prayer-calls
all around--

Kavya Bharati 2005

like coded signals
emanating
from old radio

transmitter-towers--
relaying the dangers
of heat in this stale air.

* * *

A bare body
sleeps peacefully
beside me--

her face's innocence,
and generous curve
of her eye

lashes, try to sweep
away my
skin's excess heat,

one that is fast
making my bones
pale and brittle.

* * *

A brief lull
lingers outside.
I cannot hear

the heavy lyrics,
their rhymes
trying to invoke

peace and respect,
their wafting baritone
instilling faith.

Such things
are luxuries
for me now.

I lie, trying
to piece together
the eccentric song

of my own
inadequate breathing.
It is a struggle.

* * *

It is also a mystery.
Mystery of a body's
architecture,

its vulnerability,
its efficient circulation--
they are perfect

models I remember
from school's
very early lessons.

They are only
how things ought to be,
not how they are.

* * *

Only now, I realise
the intent
of prayer's persuasion,

its seductive expression.

I also value
the presence and grace

of the body that willingly
lies next to me,
as her breath

tries to realign my will's
magnetic imprint, and
my heart's irregular beat.

My vision is awash
with salt
of her night-sweat.

My hearing is trapped
within diaphragm's
circuitous drone--

in Arabic's passion
that etches
its parabolic script,

sung loud
so that no
slant or serif

can be erased,
altered
or misunderstood.

* * *

Religion's veil
and chiffon--
its sheer black

and translucence,
its own desire
to give and want,

its ambition
to control
and preserve.

Such songs
mean nothing
to me

if one's own
peace and privacy
remain unprotected,

or, are not at ease.
I want
the chant's passion,

its heat
to settle
my restlessness.

I want the song
to soothe
my nerve-ends

so that the pain
subsides
and faith's will

enables to rise.
I also want
the beauty

of this faith
to raise
its heat--

not body-heat--
but the heat
of healing.

* * *

But for now,
the diaphanous lull
is a big boon.

Here, I can calculate
the exact path
of my body's

blood-flow,
its unpredictable
rise and fall

of heat, and
the way it infects
my imagination.

* * *

I step out
of the room's
warm safety.

I see
the morning light
struggling

to gather muscle
to remove
night's cataract.

* * *

Again,
the mosques threaten
to peel

their well-intentioned
sounds--
to appease us all.

But I see
only darkness,
and admire it--

I also admire
the dignity and gravity
of heavy-water

and its blood--
its peculiar
viscous fragility,

its own struggle
to flow,
sculpt and resuscitate.

* * *

In quiet's privacy,
I find
cold warmth

Kavya Bharati 2005

in my skin's
permanent sweat,
in its acrid edge,

and in my own
god's
prayer-call.

* * *

SHANTA ACHARYA

YASHODA'S VISION

Krishna, barely past crawling on all fours,
full of a child's curiosity and love,
eager to devour the world--

Is one day accused of eating dirt.
His playmates complain to Yashoda,
Krishna's foster mother
who unable to ignore matters further
is forced to chide her charge; she commands
Krishna to reveal the contents of his mouth.

As she kneels to peer inside this tiny cave,
she witnesses the birth of the universe--
the sun, moon, stars, galaxies,
the oceans, earth, deserts, volcanoes,
animals and plants long extinct,
time, love, death, birth, pain, wisdom, ecstasy;
not a life, leaf, stone, word, person missing.

Yashoda sees herself, all her past
incarnations, with all the dirt, the dust
of the universe in its place; for a moment
blessed with insight, essence of creation...

BHARATA NATYAM

The dancer's inaugural prayer
establishes the connection between all beings:
her *Kauthuvam* to Ganesha, Kali and Nataraja
transforms London's Bloomsbury Theatre
into the precincts of a temple panoplied with stories.

We are transported into the arena of gods and goddesses.
The dancer, the devotee, a replica of sculptures
on Tanjore temples, alive on the chanting of *slokas*.

This *devadasi* explains the intricacies of classical
Indian dance to an audience uncertain of itself--
its notions of Truth, God and Love.

Her *Varnam*, eternal search of the lover
for the beloved concealed in *maya*,
smoke gets in your eyes when there is fire in your heart.

Bharata: *bhava, raga, tala*; expression, melody, rhythm.
The inner state of being mirrored in *abhinaya*.

Musical notes of *raga charukesi* embellish this mood
that adorns the *ghunghroos'* *adi-tala* rhythm of her feet.

When hands can speak, eyes can kill, feet can draw--
bodies move in spheres of mystic law.

The white garland of jasmine on her swinging plait
is a snake enchanted by the charmer's twisted reed.

While the dance is on, a spell is cast upon us all;
we, dancer and the dance, remain enthralled--
not knowing who is lover and who the beloved.

SHUNYA

It took centuries, the journey from nought,
cipher, invisible wedge, thing of no importance

To zero, absolute reality, point of reckoning--
a piece of the unknown fathomed,
being counted, standing solidly on the ground,
three dimensional, banishing mystery
altering the lives of men forever;
establishing one's significance in space,
time, trade, science, lending the world order;
measuring phenomena,
not just the freezing point of water;
creating certainty,
absolute zero, devoid of all heat;
zero hour when battles commence,
at the centre, holding things together:

Shunya, vessel taking the shape
of whatever is poured into it,
godlike, containing everything and nothing--
pregnant with concepts of probability,
poised between positive, negative,
life and death; vanishing point, knowing infinity,
drawing down divinity, creating opportunity,
reflecting the sum of the universe,
reducing all to Itself, always transforming...

THE WISHING TREE

*... to hope for Paradise is to live in Paradise,
a very different thing from actually getting there.*

Vita Sackville-West

I

Children conspiring at the bottom of the tree
in the park clamour to reach the branches
decorated with carefully scripted dreams:

If only I could walk in the hearts of my enemies...

Let father be able to speak again...

Let my sister regain her sight...

Let mother come home soon from hospital...

Let my brother who left home a year ago return...

Let there be peace in our world...

Let no child die of hunger or pain...

May God hold us always in the palm of his hand...

A father hoists his son on his shoulders
holding him high as he ties his special wish to a branch.

A mother helps her daughter spell out her dream
as others catch the light swaying gently from branches--
inscribed on tinsel, confetti stripes and stars;
poems of love, sparkling coins at the bottom of a well;
prayer flags at monasteries in the foothills of Himalayas.

II

When you want something they say the universe
conspires with you, helps you to achieve it.

One can easily lose count of wishes,
each breath is a moment fulfilled;

Not all are born to realise their dreams,
not all our questions face their answers,
only enrich us in the asking...

Having tossed coins in rivers, fountains, wells,
sometimes over my shoulder

in more sacred places

I care to remember; climbed mountains,
hugged pillars, trees; kissed icons, shrouds,
Shiva linga, images of gods, goddesses, saints;
made donations; tied strings on trees and stones;
fasted on different days of the week; prayed
to the moon, sun and all the divine powers;
lighted candles in churches, cathedrals, temples,
knelt reverently in mosques and pagodas--

I have learnt that wishes are milestones
marking our journey through the universe
for nothing disappears without a trace;
the pilgrimage transformed as we celebrate
our brief passage with grace...

LAST NIGHT OF THE PROMS, 2001

I

Emotions swell in me to the rhythms of Beethoven,
the passion of a deaf man conducting his Ninth Symphony,
testament of a lonely soul evoking the brotherhood of man.

What forgiveness is there father for the world
watching in disbelief, horror exploding as reality stabbed,
the twin towers of the World Trade Centre collapsed,
wreaking havoc reminiscent of Hiroshima?

How different this from the super-cyclone
devastating Orissa in October 1999
when you were there, witnessing the wrath
of wind and water, wiping out thousands
of lives; usurping millions of livelihoods.

Is this the will of God?

we asked as orphaned children wailed,
lost without parents, family and friends.

Bloated bodies floated in and out of devastated
homes immersed in putrid water; no walls or doors
keeping out carcasses, snakes and other creatures;
with women and children
perched precariously on roof-tops.
Millions of trees lay uprooted like slain soldiers.

Nor was this, the earth's drunken dance of destruction
in Gujarat, days before you were summoned
to renounce your family and this world?

But you took the knowledge with you
of what it means to lose your home,
lucky to be woken in the middle of the night,
a frightened spectator, watching a terrible
drama unfold; homes used as stage props,
families enlisted in a violent drama,
disappearing in one stroke behind the curtain,
as the earth yawned and stretched,
a demon demanding unimaginable sacrifice.

II

This was not the Great Calcutta Killing either
before India was broken up like a wafer,
carelessly carved up by her bankrupt master;
Hindus and Muslims slaughtering each other.

There the enemies stood face-to-face, eyes
reflecting fear, revenge, passion and anger
as swords severed head, limb, torso.

The victims of 11th September
pulverised with the imploding towers to dust.
Relics of a few bodies were recovered;
most got cremated in Ground Zero,
smouldering for days in one gigantic funeral pyre
of cement, steel, pylons, wires, human parts--
Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus with the non-believers,
three thousand lives extinguished in a single holocaust.

Who can tell me what is worth dying for--
are these the same things worth killing for?

BORI NOTESZ¹
For Miklós Radnóti

If I placed my faith in miracles
 thinking there was an angel walking beside me,
do not judge me for my thoughts were only of you--
 I cannot die, and cannot live, without you.
I saw the blue of your eyes in the sky
 shining like the angel's sword protecting me

¹ In November 1944, near the Hungarian town of Abda, Radnóti was shot, along with twenty-one other crippled and emaciated captives, while being force-marched towards Germany during the liberation of the Balkans. His body was exhumed from a ditch after the war, and identified from the notebook (*Bori Notesz*) of poems in his raincoat pocket. I am indebted to various translations of *Camp Notebook* in the writing of this poem, capturing his voice as reflected in the notebook.

as I fell, a ghost in the glow of dawn.
But I was lifted by invisible wings
and marched on ignoring the ditch's embrace.

As long as I knew my way back to you,
I was prepared to walk on live coals,
bear witness to the barbarism of human beings
for man is the lowest of all the animals--
setting houses, fields and factories on fire,
streets overrun with burning people, men twisted,
then like a snapped string they sprang up again, dead;
twitching like a broken twig in the ditch.
Women screamed as children were dashed
against walls: *What is the purpose of this, Lord?*
I asked. I survived, fixing my thoughts on you.
You were the constant in this churning, smoking mess.

I can only leave you my anger, my powerlessness
at finding my world in ruins, left with neither
faith nor hope, compassion nor redemption;
for I know nothing can save me now...

If I placed my faith in miracles
thinking that there was an angel walking beside me,
judge me only by my thoughts of you in a world rebuilt
where my song will live and be heard...
I cannot die, and cannot live, without this thought.

FEROZA JUSSAWALLA

HI TECH CITY

In the midst of
Hi tech city, I try
unsuccessfully to use
the telephone. Hello,
Hello, Govt of India
operator, ma'am,
What number you want
Ma'am? No ma'am--
trunk calling cannot go
through ma'am, must add
2 before all numbers ma'am,
lines to Bombay always busy ma'am.
And then she says, "You
have cell phone? Try cell
phone ma'am."

And fiber optic cables wrap
round and round, the round
perfectly feng shui'd Tata tower
built by Shapurji Pallonji
around my pather-pati rocks, which they say
sprang at the moment of creation,
rocks piled upon rocks.

Fiber optic cables wrap
round and round the
round buildings and round rocks
erasing old memories, bringing in
the new Huppies, Hi tech
yuppies. Hyderabad yuppies
a new class, a new aristocracy
dining in a fancy Haveli

not a hut, as a Haveli is meant to be,
But a palace,
Haveli, a restaurant by day
a computerized back office support
at night--2:00 a.m. in Hyd'bad
2:00 p.m. in the doctors office
in California, whose medical
dictations are being transcribed
for cheap by cyber coolies,
though prosperous ones,
from those same network ports
where American-returned
software engineers work on
laptops eating tandoori pomfrets--
“Not a minute to spare,” they say,
they’re being paid by the hour
by Morgan Stanley and working
and eating in the Indian style would
take the dollars away.

Behind the massive mall that
houses Haveli and the shahi libas
and Hyderabad pearl and diamond
stores, is a real haveli, alongside shanties,
grass huts, hutments, lean tos, of the lean
coolies, real coolies who carry
bricks in tin bowls on their
heads, construction workers
whose bathrooms and kitchens are
these lanes between tall buildings
which they build, to construct
Hi tech city.

CUTTING CANE FOR THE FAMILY

On the road from Mysore
to Bangalore, they are cutting
cane for the family. It's
like a dance: women in
purple, fuschia saris, bend
with scythes, cut the cane, spin
ball-change, pass the cane to
the spinning woman who catches the
cane and passes it on, to the man
in white with a maroon turban, to
bundle, who passes the bundle on
to the lorry driver, who loads
it onto his truck painted blue
with a large maroon cross on top
that says, "Jesus saves."

When that
lorry is filled, there is another
to be loaded, blue with an idol of
Shri Venkateshwara, Balaji,
the God of South India,
balancing atop the cab,
like a perfect ballerino
presiding over the dance
spin, ball change, pass,
perfectly coordinated, choreographed
What difference will a few
Hitech jobs in Bangalore make
to this age old dance?

But perhaps, if there is the money
to buy the sugar, the dance will
continue.

POOVAN MURUGESAN

MY FIRST SNOW FALL

The white surprise blanketing
the streets and settling on Douglas firs
like fragile smudges of heavenly kisses
was long expected
but a surprise nonetheless
as it sneaked in
in the dead of night.
My first snowprint looked like
the giant leap of Armstrong,
it felt like one for sure.
The snow-topped bus ambled over
like an amiable ghost,
its muted purr stirring no flakes.
It glided past snow-bound buildings
like a boat oared by wheels.
It's as if the entire town had gone mute
and all the colors had fused into one.
The flakes still fell but as silently
as flowers on a casket.
At fourth and Ankeny
a girl in knee-high boots
took a tumble on a
patch of ice. She gave out
a wild shriek of surprise,
pain, and challenge.
For a few seconds,
the snow was beaten
in desolate defeat.

THE DEATH OF A PHARAOH

In the stratification of our own making
you were at the top and I, a slave,
at the bottom. I had never even seen
you, but had heard about your glory
and trembled like a papyrus every time
your name, like the gods, was invoked.

Now, consumed by the unknown corners
of the earth, I watch you reappear to the world
in all your ancient but forgotten glory
as a mummy, fragile to the touch.
Pathetic, and worse than the dust
of which I have become.

You are poked at the joints with
a needle and looked at under
magnifying glasses of all sorts
like a piece of chemical
to find out what all the
royal inbreeding had wrought
to your flesh, bones and brain.

A lot, I must say.
You wanted safety, privacy,
and access to all comforts
you were used to,
but ended up as a museum piece
to the entire cosmos.
I enjoy everything you craved for:
Undisturbed oneness with the gods,
with all the “comforts” I was used to.

SUNSET 1969

Back in 1969
you posed for the camera,
a cigarette dangling
from your quivering lips,
eyes mimicking the sunset
you dared to look straight at,
alcohol streaming up
and down your veins,
the tousled hair like an
aura of carelessness,
leaning gently against
a wall.
We all thought it was
so cool that
we mimicked you
whenever a camera
clicked far or near.

Now the picture is
yellowed around the edges
and so dated
that it makes
us laugh aloud
at our own foolishness.
But you still stand there
like a hero and an artist
making a statement.

ORYX

(Dreading My Turn)

A perfect creation for survival
in the harsh, unforgiving African desert.
Its skin the color of sand
to merge with the landscape--
a natural camouflage. Its hooves
wide enough to skim the dunes
like a boat on fleeting feet
and its ears sensitive
even to the mildest decibels of danger.
Endowed with the guile
to stay away from fights
with stronger preys,
it could withstand
scorching, dry heat for days
and sustain on the moisture
of sparse desert vegetation for days.

Yet it's extinct,
emptied from its habitat.
Just like that.
It's not its fault;
no species, including humans,
is fast enough and tough enough
to compete with progress.

CULTURESHOCK

He was sixty-six and a year
into his well-earned retired life.
He had a mop of gray hair,
a zip in his walk
and a forehand that
left you breathless.
No heart attack or cancer,
not even a car accident.
He died of the anxiety about
getting old that had grown
in the cerebrum, the seat of emotion,
and exploded when a teenager
on a skateboard, careening down
the sidewalk, yelled, "Get the hell
outa my way, old man."

He had everything to live for--
a family, money and friends.
He also had one thing that could
kill him: the culture--
the culture of youth.

IMMIGRANT ART

Emigration is half-death (Alastian proverb)

I am a moron from the Third World
who doesn't see art in the mischiefs
of affluence--internal parts of pigs
in air-tight glass cases,
heaps of rusted iron or
child-like, careless brush strokes.
Nor do I understand modern stories
that have no beginning, end or center.

Art is what the artist sees, some say.
I see art in the struggle for survival,
acts of kindness, the prattle of innocence,
a bowl of flower-soft rice
and dignity in the face of death.
I am a moron from the Third World
who is afraid of going too far with ideas.
But I have traveled too far with my soul
and I am still far, far away
from where I want to go.

SIXTY

It doesn't sneak in
as thirty does
when you are blithe
and irrepressible
as if you are immortal

It doesn't tiptoe in
as forty does
when you try to hide
your gray and bald spots
under overgrowths elsewhere
and tuck your tummy to pose
and sport vanity by circling
the bases with no apparent lapses
in speed or agility.

It doesn't barge in
as fifty does
with its bad news
of numbers--wrong numbers.

Cholesterol count, and blood
pressure and sugar levels
You don't care to hide the gray,
the gut,
money problems,
or the failed expectations
of your children.
Thoughts of romance,
sex and youth
safely on the trophy shelves
you whine to your cholesterol's content.

You are prepared for sixty
You know all about
retirement accounts,
equity, tax-exempt
deductions and
stocks and bonds.
A veteran of checkups
and lust control
your thoughts are on
holding off
everything that's declining
and must decline.

A warrior at last.

BIBHAS DE

MOHUAMILAN

It was in the old land that I once met a man,
A Relieving Assistant Station Master, he said,
From a small railroad stop called Mohuamilan.
Mohua the flower; milan a conjunction.
And that was that.

Except it now seems that it never was.
That place I never saw nor knew for
Its imagined mystery nights, the airy aboriginal
Nights I sometimes compose in my mind.
The saals, pials and tamals cover the land
But never that intimate smell of mohua,
Always and everywhere--all these and a single
Ribbon of red dust that may in the end run past
The teashacks of Titikatta in brisk commerce, or
Soon Tatijharia's lazy noon on a red dusted day,
Not unlike the one that winds down here today
Under a wide salmon sky, with the sunbird
Mo'utusi's looting of the mohua's honey,
Honeybees' scouting too, and over in a mud-walled
Earth household, its yard fresh lain with mud,
The sweet scent of mohua soaked in that too,
The veilless mistress in fullness of youth,
Red-rimmed sari diagonally across bare breasts,
Prayers on full lips, kneels to the sunset--
Young gods in Amaravati please bless her brood--
Who now sit to homework as hurricane lanterns
Begin to flicker in every hut on the leafy dark
Of saals--night rhythm now begins to heave and
Grow widewise--and in that place at that time
An aimless wind from far fragrant hills
Blunders in willy-nilly, bringing the forest's
Personal smells, folding senses into desires--

Earth's indifferent primary scents over the close in,
Fresh-bathed redolence of a woman in a holy stance--
On this airy aboriginal night, the mystic night of
Conjunction, of absolute senses, of original desires.

MY MANGO BLOSSOM MAY

Sorrows lengthen on a seagull's wing.
Eyes watch me in every sky,
In Julian or Juliaca;
Be it January, be it June;
The eyes fix me in a disappointed gaze.

Not thus in those simpler days of May,
My mango blossom May,
When dreams floated in down the river
Though from my Geography book
I imagined another river Reba,
For the music of that name alone,
Rebanadi re sa dha ni sa, with
Dreams and riverboats, dreams on riverboats
And we waded knee-deep to meet them.
And whoever dreamed in May
Planned a most extravagant fall.
The eyes watched then in seeming approval.

Alas O bird we're a sky too far.
The dreams have all flowed out,
Out where Reba pours towards Vaitarani,
(Rebanadi ni dha ni re sa)
The river of the Last Crossing.
Sorrows lengthen on a seagull's wing.

If my mind turns to Vaitarani, I veer away.
I live in May, my mango blossom May.

MOLSHREE

WHEN A WOMAN WANTS TO FLY

When a woman wants to fly
They almost always flip out
But why he says,
Don't you love me?
Once you said you loved me
And now you can't change
Can't need anything more
Or less

When a woman wants to fly
When she wants to sing the blues
When she wants to take snapshots of the world she sees in front of her
And speak in foreign tongues
And kiss foreign lips
They will hold her back with both hands
Now they will want to go dance
Now they too will want to sing
Never mind years
In front of mindless televisions
And changing diapers at 19
And studying by torchlight in the late hours
While the formula cooled and warmed again
And her husband's bed too cold
Without her
And the needs of the many
Those needs too which they now throw at her
How could she just walk away?
Doesn't she know?
Didn't she think of anyone?
Of the child, of the love they have, and the house
With red, saffron walls which she painted

But poof she'll be gone
To Mongolia
To many road trips
To the jazz bars
And the
Friends will ask her
Can you afford to do this
And she will think
Can she afford not to
Maybe in the end
It will be her and her baby
Maybe in the end it will be her
Maybe they will come again
The lovers
And the companions
But maybe she will just die
Blissfully happy
That she lived
And she loved
And she felt so much pain, jealousy, fondness and despair
And the music she heard
And the poems she read
And the letters she wrote
Made her dance
This time to her
Own tunes.
And let her sway
Any which way the breeze
Carried her

UNTITLED

He keeps asking me why I won't write him a poem
"You've written one for everyone else
For your friends, the odd lover, children, even the dog
So why can't you write me one?"
I can tell
He's about to quit
He's just about had it
By the impatience in his voice
Slight edge in the tone
Two fingers fumbling in nervous anger for his lighter
His coffee spilling slightly
As he raises his cup
It's no trivial hurt

What should I say in response?
Poems are written for those
Who need tangible reassurances
Like many harsh letters
Hallmark greeting cards
Of course it means something
The world can understand

Poems are written for those
I can have coherent thoughts about
And can discipline myself
To abandon my fairy spirit

With him it was all different
My eyes which brimmed over with so much sadness and bliss
When I saw him
The sweat on my fingertips the day I knew I would meet him
My hands that reached over for his
In friendship

And my lips which quivered
When he smiled
Those crazy dreams at night when he left
Making my legs shake, getting a life of their own
And many arms that I put forward for him to hold
Cryptic meanings of things I said to him
Begging him to understand

Doesn't he know
There was to be no poem between us
No language to hold us captive
But just love
Unrestrained, full and complicated
Now he's made me write
And I've taken his bait
Like a senseless fish
What can I tell him now of these words that he has forced me to
write
These words that have caused me to put him on a page
And get him out of my system.

LETTER TO A CHILDHOOD FRIEND ON MY 25TH BIRTHDAY

When I think of you
The moment of tense anticipation before I purge
Many nervous fingers pushing back scattered strands of hair
With you these feelings of incarnations ago
Surface through my hard flesh, my bones, my dark skin
To be alive for this moment
Is almost unbearable

UNTITLED

One sleepless night in your arms
A story I cannot remember
Will you tell it to me again?
I feel next to me
Boyish laughter and something on your breath
The smell of anxiety
What will you do with all that feeling later?
Will you bury it under your books?
Refuse to read between the lines?

This is not a poem for you
Because I know
You hate them
Words only serve as barriers
To what you and I are trying to say

Love me slowly
I die a little tonight
Because you have not told me
Any secrets
Because you have not held me enough
For just a moment I am alone
In limbo or perhaps freely falling
In the space behind your sea green eyes

This is not your poem
Nor mine really
We are not the type to talk of love and tears
You live solely by wit
And I laugh at your jokes
You can tease me with your games
I will play as long as you will
Because we will not sink
Into confidences or complications
We will laugh

Till we burst
Till we lose our breath
Till we can keep doing it
Till our eyes are cried out and dry
And then one day inevitably
One of us will not get it
Will not be able to bear the pain of the punch line
All there will be then is
A thousand monsoons
Between us.

BETH THOMAS

THE VEIL

A boy spreads along his mother's shoulder,
star--
fish mottled red, a singe-colored mouth,
slack
under milk-sweet eyes slid halfway
closed;
his mother barter an orange for rice,
cold
and heavy child bearing down, I see him,
her,
as clearly in my head as if they were
mine.
My husband labors out the story of them.
"You,"
he says, "wouldn't believe what I saw," then
drinks
something iced that cracks cold, "I watched
her
carry on with food shopping and I know,
know,
her baby son was dying, he was too slack,
still,
completely done with breathing, he rasped--
breaths
rasped out of him and then I couldn't tell,
hear
him breathe after that, and I'm supposed to buy
gum--
that boy hard at it breathing, then not breathing,
no!
I'm supposed to pick up the gum and hold it
tight

and pass through the mobs outside the hotel,
 mobs
begging and picking everyone's pockets.
 Dead
inside the market, like that, and I'm supposed to
 breathe
but I can still see her back and that long red veil,
 limbs
rolling back and forth down over that long red veil,
 loose
like braids, you know how braids fall down the back,
 swing,
when a woman walks, and she held the rice on her
 head
walking home. I went back to the hotel like I said,
 ran
to the elevator, holding my pockets closed--it's
 like,
it's like--and I started to count backwards to calm
 me
down. The air in the room was cool, they'd even
 sent
some honey-covered bread and oranges, one
 whole
bowl of oranges, oh yeah, and the bread was
 placed
on a gold plate, arranged in a flower, kind of,
 round
and so totally perfect I felt sick. I felt like a perfectly
 sick
dog walking in that hotel, wanting a shower, I couldn't
 clean
myself clean enough there, you know that feeling,
 dirt
underneath your skin. It was a long time standing
 mid-

way between the food and the shower, stupid with,
with,
well I don't know what and I still don't know what,
why
I finally sat down to write you and the girls, something
sweet
you'd think was nauseating, 'Kiss our gold-headed
girls
for me. I miss them and the roses falling on the driveway,
miss
you, my dear, sweet solid wife' and then what I really sent
mailed
to you on a postcard some three weeks late. I'm in Bombay and safe.
How are you and the girls?
Have the raspberries gone?
How much did you get?"

GHAZAL
For Steve Jimenez

When you undress the martyr, care where you begin.
There will be a false sense of knowing what to do.

When you address the cloth, keep your distance.
Use silence--Distance is showing what to do.

Be solemn, be brave, the hieroglyph will tower,
though untrue. It's called bluffing what to do.

Praise those surviving murder that didn't love
enough to tell the truth, imploding. What to do?

Trust all paradoxes in the story. Whoever said
he never knew the victim knew, ignoring what to do.

You must impair our illusion of his death in a field.
We fell in love with his suffering--what to do.

A deer lay beside him. I liked this part. The deer
remained outside the story. Selecting's what to do--

We liked that part, watching our grief's response
to violence, then violence. Watching's what to do.

If it happened to me. If it happened to you.
When you steal this rapture, hiding's what to do.

Hiding isn't possible in a landscape of horizons.
What God witnessed and said: leaving's what to do.

That part never happened and happened. That's God
for you, always a possibility. Supposing's what to do.

When you bring God into a crime, He's the victim's
father. *With Him, now*. Promoting's what to do.

I like Heaven. It's clean, and the chairs are white
in a circle of forest creatures. Lying's what to do?

A vigil of candlelight pushed in the dark, and singing
(The truth took long) a round imploring what to do.

Before a flower's seen, it ruptures. Far as we know
the process is silent. Far as knowing what to do?

When I stop grieving as Beth, I see things through you--
small wonder we met. Suffering's shaping what to do.

SELF-FORGETTING

Pulling a basket from the river, Sara
tosses it to the twilit sky.

fielding it to a bald moon,
no wax, no clay,

watching it fall to the ground,
tied willow, wrenched willow,

cradling the ripe contraption,
spare work, deep bowl,

turning it upside down,
by twig, by lash,

half in water, half on land,
looking deeper for what's missing.

CYRIL DABYDEEN

DEMERARY (1860)

For Reuben

Indenture

1

i have come to the place
of three rivers
i have come
i have come

i am here--
at the sangam
--I'm also looking
for *bhayr*
for Ritibarran, my young brother,
a promise of plums
I'd made to him.

i am indeed here,
& this broker came,
made an offer to me
with his trickery of words--
he kept telling me
i could enlist in the British army
& become rich--
time of the Raj, you see.

A young man i was then, six feet tall,
with a wife
I'd left in the village of
Belwasa in Bihar--
Rajput-proud, of the kshatrya caste,
--real Indian--
to the white sahib
i said *acha*
in Allahabad.

2

I was quarantined at a depot
in Kolkata
with others--
awaiting the vessel to take me...
and others...to where?
To Demerary, a far shore.
It was against my wish--
yet i signed a contract
little as i could read--
pledging myself to
indentured labour
in British Guiana.

How could i escape
with armed men all around?
The ship crossed the ocean
for weeks--waves buffeting from all sides--
and how we suffered....
until we arrived in Demerary;
and for ten years,
I did backbreaking work
in the sugar plantation--
from morning to night.

I yearned for the ones i left behind;
& the lashes meted out
to those who didn't want to work--
oh such labour it was on;
& living in a logie we were--
as all the while
i thought of my family,
& Ritibarran
waiting for the plums--
and the sangam's holiness,
not far from my ken

But maybe fate brought me here--
this destiny, i must live with,
hoping one day to attain Nirvana.

3

The years seemed so long,
transforming me almost--
and my becoming, well,
creolized--
mixing with other races, creeds,
others also brought from afar--
everyone grunting and sweating...
people from Africa, slaves who'd gained
their freedom...and formed freetowns.
What freedom?

The Return

1

At age eighty-two,
how i yearned to return
to Belwasa--
to once more see my village
and the house i left behind,
to meet my wife & family,
& my brother, Ritibarran.
Remember?

In the year 1920, when i returned there,
already an old man.

Where's the house? I exclaimed.
Blown away by the monsoon, i was told--
and Ritibarran and everyone else
thought I'd been dead a long time.
Oh, their surprised looks,
as if i was a ghost--
and where had i been
all these years?

I remained for a while in Belwasa,
with two places always in my mind's eye;
and Ritibarran, now older, kept reminding me,
“Do you remember the bhayr
you promised to bring
for me?”
Do you?

2

Then it became time for me to return
to Demerara,
to see my new family there--
a wife & children left behind,
as things never seemed the same
in Belwasa, sad to say--
I, Ramlaggan Singh,
creolized, determined
to return to Demerara

Maybe i wanted to call Guiana home now,
with my new religion, you see
--starting all over,
with so much memory i kept
in me all these years
because of distant places
& a ship in the ocean with
waves once more rising.

3

The sense of new beginnings--
a faith yet i had in me,
because of who i am,
& who i've become--
history taking its toll
because i'd come from Belwasa
by the Daha River--
where i will always want to return--
but no more.

ALLAHABAD

The snake charmers
and the dancers
perform
to entrancing
music
which touches
the soul

The smell of burning
incense
& the sweet fragrance
of flowers
pervade
the atmosphere

But it's the grunting
of camels,
the bellowing of
bulls,
the trumpeting
of elephants

The neighing
of horses,
& the ringing of bells
& the procession
of naked ash-smearing
sadhus

To the beating
of drums
& vedic mantras
which leave
us in a state
of enchantment

DARIUS COOPER

FREEWAY

Free Sonnets in 8 & 6

We leave San Diego with a mantra:

Wear your eyes well.
Protect them behind
a dark vision of plastic.
Tinted blue or glazed yellow
what does it matter
when occasional clouds
will always cover this constant sun.

Cut the price-tag quickly
with the tiny scissor
buried in that pen-knife.
A bit of a struggle.
But now we are ready
to face the freeway.

At Cardiff-By-The-Sea, the yellow line:

on the left
of this speeding road
is the margin
for every secret desire
turned over and over
by the urgency
of our collective unconscious:

ALWAYS a little ahead;
JUST a little ahead
of all
our secret mani
festations
of the regularly practised
auto-erotic.

Passing by Del Mar Fair, why are DJ's:

So unnecessarily loud
So early in the morning?
A radio song:
"Where were you
when we were getting high?"
is challenging for a dinosaur like me
desperately trying to

maintain his balance
on the backseat of the car.
But that question remains unanswered
even when the cello sounds nice
in the oasis hands of a rock musician
crawling closer and closer to the edge.

EXIT at Capistrano, to swallow:

a Jack-in-the-Box breakfast
where a young boy removes
all the rings
from his mother's ancient fingers.
When the game is over
and he is asked
to return the merchandize

ONE of the rings gets stuck
in the boy's index finger,
and as the father rushes outside
to start a desperately old car,
the management posts a new notice
beside the regular "Combo" special:
SORRY. WE HAVE RUN OUT OF ALL SOAP IN THE RESTROOM.

Near Torrence, they continue:

to tear up this freeway
putting in yet another cable,
the latest current
of underground technology.
This is supposed to bring us
and all these others
traveling on the same route

closer. It doesn't,
in spite of all the tar and cement
poured into these gaping pot-holes.
This yearned for smoothness
over which we think we'll ultimately drive,
is in the final analysis, only MAYA, an

ILLUSION, near Chesboro Road, where I expect:

Cowboys riding down these hills;
but no 73 Winchester of Hi Ho Silver
is heard. And when
a dirty unwashed transient
suddenly emerges from the bushes
all legends of the cinematic west
are equivocally laid to rest.

The air becomes cleaner and purer
as we climb towards Cambria,
but its natives have turned their
backs on nature. Here many residents pack
portable oxygen cylinders and commit
to memory their penultimate breaths.

In an old apple mill, near Harmony:

where twelve disciplined wines
are reverently distilled, I find
durries/rugs earmarked for sale
at preposterous prices.
And in bold letters I am
informed of their manufacture, by
CHILD LABOR IN INDIA.

Such arrogance
makes me want to turn
all these wines
into water
on behalf of all the exploited
children of the third world.

All freeways
come to an end
when cultures
are made to collide
in such insensitive ways.
And none of these roads
over which we have driven
can ever
merge
or vanish
into third eyes
standing like frightened hitchhikers
in the middle
of deserted foreheads.

N. ANNE HIGHLANDS TILEY

POETESS

For Sujata Bhatt

Sujata stands petite and genteel.
Her back is firm and straight
But her fleshy shoulders curve in gentleness.
She stands unto herself.
She stands into her voice.
We hear her throat meet her tongue. The voice
Of herself shapes a continuity unbroken
By the variety of inflexions she offers
To share a concert of linguistics,
To make familiar the melodies spoken,
The spoken songs of the streets
Through which her legs flexed imperceptibly.
To know her ancestry, we listen.
To hear her footsteps, we watch the movement
Of her lips. She does not raise her eyes
From the path her words travel
Until she has reached her destination,
Completes her entrance into our hearts.
Sujata folds the pages of her book,
The pages her hand has shaped
With the secrets of vowels and clattering consonants.
We yield to a knowledge of her name.
She has freed her daughter
From the channel of entrapment.
She has held her grandfather's hand
Before the rhythms of Tennyson.
She has breathed the legends swathed
In the girdle of the liberator.
The clock tower can not confine her
Premise that she is born free.
Sujata is not bound to us by the chord
Knotted at her daughter's belly,

Yet we are nurtured as if her dress
Slid from her shoulder.
Sujata sits alone. We gaze at the nape
Of her neck, beneath the fringe of lush dark hair.
We are at her back, supporting it
As if she had given us a spine
That we climb to construe a bower
Of acquaintance connecting the remote and familiar
With the links of sounded chords
She has played against the grill of her teeth
And stung like gut strings from the rings of her fingertips.

PRESENCE

Aja has spoken. The voice is Aja.
Words are the knowing before knowing.

Their pilgrimage took her to the lake of Tirtha.
In her pen lay the dimensions of the Hindu temple.
She stood four feet, erect.
Do not approach her with embrace.
You cannot hold her.
Extend your hand. She will or will not take it.

She reads, living with her eye.

“O wealth,” Saint Appar was singing,
“My treasure, honey, red flame of
Heavenly hosts that excels all luster,
Embodied One, Siva, my kin, my flesh,
Heart within my flesh, image within my heart,
My all bestowing tree, my eye,
Pupil of my eye, image seen in that pupil,
Save me from the disease of the
Powerful karma.”

She ran down the mountainside as if a native,
Bells ringing from her slender ankles
To warn the tigers of her approach
To the waiting mail at the village post office.

And Rudra, guardian of the Uncreate
Lifted the arrow of time,
For Rudra is consciousness
And his actions are its forms.

She paced the recesses of the temple.
Her toes received the dust of devotees.

In the ambulatory west of the shrine:
Siva in serenity, Siva in his fury,
Slayer of all demons.

She is the author who wrote
“When the gods are seen at play”
There is but one God in eternal play.
At her table sat a small cat
And she dined on baked fish
In a casserole of tomato and cinnamon.
There was baked potatoes, halved
And eaten like rolls, two little parabolas
Finding their other halves on her tongue.

Stella builds stone temples with her words.

At the high point two arcs meet.
One rises from the left foot of Siva,
Ascends over the head of Brahmā;
One curves upward from the right foot
Of Parvati, touches her right shoulder.

Her husband has entered the solitude of silence.
She stands alone,
Collects each year the hand made dishes
That were a wedding gift.

She is the reserved curator,
Delivers the presence of Siva.

South of the cave: Ardhanārīśvara.
South of the cave: Sadāśīva.
South of the cave: Ganyādhara.
Composure in the three heads of Sadāśīva.

On Philadelphia Sundays
She goes respectfully to mass
And her nostrils fill with incense.
Her small hands fold in prayer.

With her hands she has built temples,
Has witnessed worship there

Around her rosary another scent lingers.
Her fingers do not bleed.

GURCHARAN RAMPURI

Gurcharan Rampuri, a Punjabi-Canadian Writer from Vancouver, British Columbia, author of seven volumes of poetry, has won many awards. His *Collected Poems* appeared in India in 2002. Many of these have been set to music and sung by well-known singers such as Surinder Kaur and Jagit Zirvi.

REST

My friend the psychiatrist examined me
and sat me down for a chat.
He gave me a shot--
that is all I remember.

Hours later, what I woke up in another room,
the psychiatrist's friendly smile
surely lifted my spirits.

A beautiful nurse offered
"Would you like a coffee, please?"

Then she touched the most tender spot
when she gently asked,
"Why were you crying like a baby?"

"But how would you know?" she went on.
"You were in some far-off place of dreams.
I know artists are emotional people
but it seemed you were in some cavern of distress.
I'm sorry, life has not let you hide your pain
and the value of your art has not been recognized."

I listened speechless,
wondering what secrets I had blurted out.

She said, "Don't worry. There are still
some in the world who value art.
Art is not a counterfeit coin, after all."

In the evening my doctor friend came again.
Smiling, he reassured me.
“No damage done. But
you need complete rest. You must not
be disturbed by even the slightest
contact with thought.”

I said to myself:
that should be easy enough.

I lay down on the blue bed,
relaxed my limbs, and closed my eyes.
And then I saw thousands of figures:
my family praying for my health
even though for them
my art had provided no bread or cloth,
and my admirers and critics
whose costly praise was beyond my humble means to buy.

And yes, I also saw those other friends--
who needs enemies with them at your side?

Waking, I wonder if she knows,
she whose innocent glances teased
and brought me to this state,
she the cruel one--
does she know what misery I am in?

Why do I think at all?
Am I not forbidden to think?
My illness requires complete rest,
with “Do Not Disturb”
to ban thoughts from entering the door.

(Translated from Punjabi by Amritjit Singh and Judy Ray)

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The century in which I was born
has also been my father's partner,
and it is like my father.
This century too is caught in the claws of time.

Just as that eagle called time swooped down on my father
and carried him away,
this century too will fall asleep
after a few winter nights of
indulging in parties and pleasure.

This century that is my father's peer
will hold a salient place in human history.
With one foot trapped in the stone age,
it steps with the other into the open skies of the space age.
A tiny, invisible particle
guided it past the stars.

While some in this century have mapped the heavens for humanity,
others remain blind.
They will not waste even a smile on their fellow human beings
and, suffering hell themselves, they are intent upon pushing others
into hell.

This century lays one hand on the prophets' holy shoulders,
but finds its other arm being tugged by demons.
In the midst of this tension,
this century, my mothers, radiates a generous smile
as I wait to see where and how it will end.

(Translated from Punjabi by Amritjit Singh and Judy Ray)

THE PRIMAL ACT LEADS TO BEAUTY

When I first met her
I knew she was the one I had been searching for.
I had found my dream
and my aimless quest had at last found purpose.

She saw me, drew back in fear, then smiled.
Covering the secret centers of her body, she blushed.
My eyes lingered on her striking beauty
and in my turmoil I lost my bearings.
Neither of us knew the right words
yet somehow we found them.
Our hands touched first, then our lips,
and then we were as one in a love embrace.
I was in her and she had entered
every pore of my being.
Lightning exploded in the sky
leaving us dazzled by its brightness.

As if enjoying a carnival in the middle of a forest,
I had a wild time with her.
There were butterflies hovering all around
and birds in their courtship dance.
With our coming together in love and joy of life,
with color, warmth and closeness conjuring the creating of beauty,
I felt surrounded by peace, reveling in scent and light,
her rosy, glowing skin,
the experience of a repeated miracle.

Then the priests and holy men arrived
and these fools began to preach about beginnings and ends.
With their mumbo-jumbo tales
these nincompoops delivered unwanted sermons.
They told me, You have been ensnared by the Snake,
by Satan, and tangled in poisonous vines.
Your actions have angered God,
and you stand expelled from paradise.

And this was my reply to them:
I need no intercession to justify
my union with the beautiful one.
I have stolen riches from no one.
I am surrounded by heaven, which I embrace.
As for this delectable primal act
which creates such beauty--
how can anyone call it a sin?

(Translated from Punjabi by Amritjit Singh and Judy Ray)

SLEEP

Sleep is like a woman--
When you invite her, she declines.
When you try to banish her
she lays her palms on your eyes.
And when she does arrive
she floods your heart with dreams.

When sleep stays for only a fleeting time
it leaves you so racked,
as if with sharp shards of truth and lies,
you cannot even wring your hands.

(Translated from Punjabi by Amritjit Singh and Judy Ray)

THE COURTESAN

Always we have been told:
Why does the obvious need to be proved?
Yet all truths come to light
from the shelter of doubt.

The rising and setting of both moon and sun are lies.
The blue bowl of the sky above our heads
is an illusion, too.
Those stars, sparkling like pinholes of light,
are greater than a million earths together.
Flowers weep, and stones writhe.
Even within the ocean an immense fire may burn.

A person proclaiming human rights
may inside be an ugly Hitler.

We have traveled to the moon and back
but have yet to overcome boundaries between nations.

Politics, Religion, Civilization--
these all resemble the courtesan's smile.
But how can she who is for sale be loyal?

(Translated from Punjabi by Amritjit Singh and Judy Ray)

KUTRALA KURAVANJI

A *Kuravanji* in *Kutralam* was composed by Melagaram
Tirikutarasappa Kavirayar in circa 1715.

VASANTHA VALLI SEES LORD SIVA, THE HERO OF THE DRAMA, APPROACHING IN HIS PROCESSION

*Who is this Mystic? This magnificent person has come,
mounted on His bull!*

He ties a snake around His arm,
and holds the poison in His throat.
He ties up the forests so even the crows
can not go in. He has His woman,
pretty as a parakeet, seated just
to His left, yet He desires this other
woman whom He has set in His hair.

*Who is this Mystic? This magnificent person has come,
mounted on His bull!*

...

Just by looking my way
with His gracious eyes
He turned my body
into molten gold.
As soon as I saw Him I realized
His majesty, and all the magic
that He works. He must be
our holy Lord of Kutralam!

...

*Who is this Mystic? This magnificent person has come,
mounted on His bull!*

VASANTHA VALLI'S REACTION
WHEN SHE SEES THE LORD,
BUT HE DOES NOT ACKNOWLEDGE HER

Oh, how I melted when I gazed upon
that handsome man! A kind of trance
came over me. Is this that thing
they call love?

I've never known anything
like this before. My skin
has gone mottled, spotted
all over with gold, my own
mother's words seem bitter
to me now. I'm full of nothing
but this thirst. I can't even see
the bangles on my own wrists.

...

Tender breezes pounce
like tigers, springing at me
from all directions,
oh god of love! Then
the cuckoo blares out
his song, and I lose all
my appetite, oh god
of love! My sister, my very
best of friends, is making fun
of me, oh god of love, and
not only her, but even my mother
has turned into this wicked
old devil, oh god
of love!

Look, little boy, you god
of love, at all my friends

and all the rest of this city!
Even the sleep in my eyes
has tuned into my enemy, oh
god of love! And those big drums,
let alone the loud horns,
what are they all about,
little boy, you god of love?
Does it make you feel manly
to wage your wars on this little girl,
oh you little boy, you god
of love?

SINGAN LAMENTING THAT
HE COULD NOT FIND SINGI

I set a snare to catch a female cuckoo,
then I went for a rock pigeon too.
I caught them both, the cuckoo and
the pigeon, but I cannot find
my funny little Singi.

I set a snare to catch a pretty peacock,
then I went for a marsh tern too.
I caught them both, the marsh tern and
the pretty peacock, but I cannot find
my bewitching little Singi.

I threw myself into my bird hunt, but
I lost out in my hunt for love.
It's that old story all over again:
catching the civet, while the bat
flies away.

This pain that has entered into my heart,
how can I ever get rid of it?
With her red mouth so sugar-cane sweet
she is my luscious vine of love, but
I cannot find my Singi,
can I?

...

*Singi, Singi, I can't find her! I cannot find
my darling Singi!*

Singi! That luscious green parakeet
of a woman! That ocean of music
who sings out the grandeur of the name
of the excellent Lord of Kuttralam!
Such a sweet woman, she's funny, she's charming,
and she says such loving things.

...

*Singi, Singi, I can't find her! I cannot find
My darling Singi!*

(Excerpts from the translation from Tamil by David C. Buck)

20.

Don't think those born of the same body are friends.
Fatal illness springs from the body too.

Far away
In the highest hills grows medicine that heals.
There are people like that medicine, too.

26.

Between the king and the careful poet, the poet
Has greater glory.
Set apart from his kingdom
The king has nothing. Every place the poet goes
He gathers praise.

(Translated from Tamil by Thomas H. Pruiksma)

PREM KUMAR

i...no more a child of fear

days linger
when you stand in the doorway
watching the dusk
dusk that breeds
dusk that feeds
hopes, fears, dreams

you wait with laden eyes
for another dawn
and when the first ray of the sun
tiptoes the backyard...you hide
afraid that the night will swallow the sun

when the summer comes
you fear...the frost
will freeze desire in the bud
and the thought of winter
brings terror...the spring may never follow

you fear the rains
that the sky will shelter you no more
and drifting with the clouds
you will fall from the center of your being

season after season
you harvest the fears you sow
and you wonder
if you were meant to survive
the setting sun
to walk into the sunset
with the grace of a dying day

you enter the dreaded zone
where fear leads into despair
where pain spawns anger
in the eyes that do not cry
and you say with faint resignation
why mourn stillborn dreams
dashed hopes, broken wills

standing in the doorway
you watch fingers in the sand
drawing lines that grow into walls
and faces peering over the walls
with fears lurking in the hearts

you watch the flames of distrust
burning holes in history books
you hear the battle cries
of shadows willing to self-destruct

you watch hands washing stains
of blood in bloody cesspools
and lines becoming circles
and you inside the circle
and the doors closing in on you
and you are afraid
and you scream with seething rage
O, mother of all fears!
sever the umbilical chord
i am no more your child
i am a child no more...

(Transcreated from Punjabi by the author)

AKSHAYA KUMAR
**DIASPORA PUNJABI POETRY¹:
HYPHEN/HIGH-FUN UNTAPPED**

The corpus of Punjabi diaspora poetry is too enormous to be reduced to a homogeneous and regular field of inquiry. Yet for any subsequent critical dismantling, it is strategically important to begin with its tentative but distinct structural *topos*. Apparently two extreme tropes--one of existential loss and the other of metaphysical resolution--seem to emplot or configure its cultural praxis. An acute sense of alienation and dystrophy and an equally overwhelming sense of cosmic expansion of the self operate almost concomitantly in this poetry. The swing from self-deprecation to self-expansion is too swift and spectacular to be described in terms of the poetics of transition and progression.

I

The alienation, to begin with, is twofold, and therefore not easily reconcilable within the frame of negotiation. One, it comes as a result of displacement from the nativeland; and two, it comes from a sense of cultural lag that the Third World postcolonial diasporic subject suffers in the First World. The romantic and robust Punjabi self undergoes moments of unprecedented existential angst; loneliness becomes the chosen subject matter of *parvasi* Punjabi poetry of the post-Ghadar phase. In the Ghadar-phase, the fire of patriotism had lent expatriate Punjabis a sense of purpose and cohesiveness. Later diaspora being primarily economic in nature fails to hold the Punjabi self intact. The combative edge is lost; the martial instinct gives way to a sense of compulsion:

loneliness is a flight of a wounded bird/it is a
painful voice of a dying man/ it is a treasure of
sighs and sobs/ it is a tangled warp and woof of its
own life/ it is a journey from sorrow-to-sorrow,/
devoid of every delight.²

The idiom of this poetry turns overtly existentialist as an acute sense of desolation engulfs the wandering persona. The communitarian Punjabi self is besieged with loneliness which in turn only generates visions of suicide:

in the sorrow of death, self-inflicted / we liquidate,
body-mind rather everything liquidates/ how shall
we cross the threshold of our houses/ with
disintegrated, liquidated selves?³

The credit of ushering in modernist Eliotesque idiom into Punjabi poetry, in a very significant way, goes to diaspora poets. But the loudness with which existentialist concerns emerge in Punjabi diaspora poetry raises doubts about the very authenticity of its experience and sensibility. The idiom is more cultivated than felt. It is more academic than poetic. The poetic models of the diaspora poets suddenly change; bhakti and sufi saint-poets give way to new European writers like Camus, Kafka and Proust.

Some of the diaspora poets however fail to internalize the existentialist jargon, and continue to invoke inherited archetypes. The bird of imagination is either badly bruised or caught in the whirlpool of life. More than the experience what seems to inspire this poetry is the conventional imagery of man as bird lost in the wilderness of life:

in the wilderness of forest/ on the heart of a barren
land/ separated from my flock, I am a bird perched
on/dried tree's dried branch/ wings broken....⁴

The romantic and 'enterprising bird'⁵ is all bruised and forlorn; it has lost its wings and indeed the capacity to take off. The modernist sensibility which the diaspora poets seem to dwell on is defined through the loss of romantic arcadia, consequently birds and trees continue to dominate the landscape.

Whether it is bird wounded or a fish out of water, the tone continues to be semi-elegiac. The modernist dislocation is couched in an imagery of romantic tragedy; the new experience is articulated in a medieval frame; the uniqueness and postmodernist currency of diasporic position is lost in conventional tropes: “words like fish once out of the ocean/ lose their identity/ forge new meanings/ hurt the heart/”⁶ Amarjeet Chandan does try to re-vigorate the stock binary of bird and cage, but the image itself is so stale that it fails to generate new semantics; it occurs with monotonous regularity:

all of a sudden the window of the cage opens itself/
the bird stepping outside, sitting at the window
starts brooding/ has it forgotten to fly/ or did the
sky appear to him a cage?⁷

The rhetorical question towards the end is more affirmative than interrogative, pointing towards the existential weariness of the dislocated self. Both the material instinct and the romantic strain--so characteristic of native Punjabi poetry--thus give way to an idiom of loss and defeat, couched in either the fashionable existential jargon or the predictable tragic-romantic archetypes.

The non-egalitarian metropolitan space does not permit easy assimilation of the Third World ethnic diaspora into it. The refrain of loss is understandable, but the easy polarities between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘East’ and ‘West’ reduce the expression into a polemic:

so much has been lost here/ the night of the dark
moon/ when the sky spread out/ like a field of
cotton-blossomed/ the night of the full moon,/ and
its dazzling chirpy radiance/ the delight of walking
bare foot on dewdrops/ The fragrance of
impregnated wheat crop/ the beauty of mustard
flowers/ In the mist of England/ how much I have
lost....⁸

Such an uncritical nostalgia for the agrarian past is cherished all the more from the highly competitive industrialized perch of the postmodern First World. Much of the diaspora Punjabi poetry comes across not as much a poetry of clash of distinct civilizations, but as a clash between agrarian and urban ways of life. More than the cultural icons and symbols, what the diaspora poet invokes are the memories of the natural landscapes of the rural homeland.

II

Punjabi diaspora poets, almost without exception, continue to be apologetic or what Rushdie terms as “guilt-tinted”⁹ for not being able to stay in their native space, which is sacred, pristine and pure except for its lack of economic avenues:

we, the revolutionary embers who wanted to
become the destiny of the nation,/ kept rolling
abroad as mere pawns/ now as when we see
towards this non-life as economic chess/ we feel
that life is a continuous cry against crassness....¹⁰

The diasporic dislocation is approached at times as patently unpatriotic, at other times almost as a religious sin, as an act of blasphemy and betrayal.

Instead of perceiving diasporic dislocation as a journey across well-mapped geographies and cultures, it is seen as a toss up between the mythical domains of hell and heaven: “in this heaven/ each one lives through a hell/ and from the hell left behind/ every one cherishes his heaven.”¹¹ There is no ‘interstitial space’¹² between the hell and the heaven. Such is the level of despair and repentance, that instead of looking upon himself as an enterprising global citizen, the subject of Punjabi diaspora poetry begins to lament his homelessness, as exile from transcendence:

I am your culprit / I am my own culprit./ in this
strange city/ and in these confused times/ I had
turned away/ from that sacred bond. . ./ I did not
know that/ existence can lose context/ and life
without context/ is breathing death.¹³

The space of diaspora, remarkably enough, does not offer a living zone of contact; rather it is a state of post-death wherein the subject lives in a limbo. The poets are apologetic to the extent that the spirit of adventure or enterprise that is usually required for self-inflicted/ self-willed migration goes understated, if not unstated.

III

From existential abyss to metaphysical elevation, Punjabi diaspora poetry hits another equally inexplicable exaggerated extreme. The spirit of adventure sublimates itself rather wishfully into an uncalled for transcendence, a teleological liberation of the self. Search for infinity is the grand pretext: “I went out of my home/ to become infinite/ to disperse into the open fields/ I do not want lines, enclosures and borders....”¹⁴

Belongingness is condemned in favour of nomadism which in turn is seen as a signifier of mobility in the realm of the eternal. Foregoing the quotidian matrices of the challenges of diaspora, native space is elevated to cosmic space:

my punjab is as big as the world/ it is my unheard/
all rivers flow from it/ everyone hears the silence
in punjabi/ it is a call of a fakir...¹⁵

The image of a wandering fakir or that of ‘the unheard’ definitely lends seriousness to the poetic utterance, but it is incongruent to the diasporic experience. This is an attempt to appropriate the sacred *bhakti* discourse to postmodern purposes. The global is not a

synonym of the cosmic, the former is a term that stands for a barrier-free international market; the latter is a signifier of transcendental expanse beyond the world.

Instead of locating their sense of enterprise in history, in its existential praxis, the Punjabi diaspora poets tend to locate it in the metaphysics of flux. A river in flow is the handy metaphor that these poets constantly invoke; it runs in their unconscious:

that rivers are just rivers/ like saraswati/ flowing
through our veins/ they never go dry/ like the
script/ our tongues are used to/ when we turn
silent/ they speak/ when we turn blind/ they see/
they are answers to/ questions hanging mid-
air....¹⁶

This slide into the pristine and primordial past is atavistic as it bypasses the causal processes of history. Such tropes tend to underplay the constitutive aspects of the evolution of the self. Diaspora is more a project of reconstitution than of resolution or renunciation. The Orientalist hangover of mysticism belies the this-worldliness of the diaspora.

Dariya, the flowing river emerges as a binary opposite to *dayira*, the narrow personal self. Navtej Bharati accounts for the diasporic dislocation in the eternal flow, the cosmic drama of life, the *leela*: “I do not seek water/ from the river in flow/ I seek its urge to flow/ my thirst is different.”¹⁷ It is ironical indeed that ‘different thirst’ is sought to be quenched through means/ metaphors all too familiar. Ajmer Rode would stretch the same metaphor to mystical limits: “look at entire creation, it is a river/ whose banks are infinite/ in whose stream, the water of change is flowing...”¹⁸ The sweep of displacement has co-ordinates as enormous as ‘entire’ and ‘infinite.’ Such limitless flow lacks both direction and magnitude. Diaspora consequently loses its vector.

Even if one were to deploy the *bhakti* imagery at all, diaspora is more an experience of/ for the well-defined *sagun*, than a realization of the boundless *nirgun*. It is also not a journey across the whole creation. The claims of the diasporic subject in the following poem border on over-statement: “I come on this earth as seasons/ by becoming a river I orbit around it/ this is my movement...”¹⁹ The propensity to traverse the entire cosmic space is too pronounced to allow the Punjabi diasporic voice to gather historical authenticity.

Neither *leela*, nor the flowing river, nor the blowing wind therefore can possibly account for the diasporic displacements, for such cosmic, natural currents do not grant agency to the migrating subject. The novelistic enterprise, with all its open-ended possibilities, is rather wishfully raised to an epic scale: “attribute any meaning to waves wandering in the air:/ vagabond noise or divine resonance....”²⁰ The image of ‘vagabond noise’ for the contemporary diasporic situation does convey the decentering of the self, but the alternative image of ‘divine resonance’ appears too soon to let the noise prevail even for a moment. The leap from ‘noise’ to ‘resonance’ is not only inexplicable; it also forbids heteroglossia of speech as necessarily a condition of disadvantage.

The historicity and particularity of the migration is spiritualized denying agency to the subject: “there is neither desire, nor way/ neither destination nor distance/ it is a journey from zero/ to zero.”²¹ Diaspora is seen more in terms of journey into eternity, rather than journey into a different culture. It is seen more as a metaphor of de-contextualization than re-contextualization; more as a process of de-territorialization than re-territorialization. Instead of realignments, what emerges is detachment in form of quasi-spiritual escape.

Surjeet Kalsi employs the exhausted metaphor of Siddharth to forge the dynamics of what she terms as “new salvation”; the tone and the tenor is unmistakably that of *bhakti* and renunciation:

just like siddhardh, once again with movement
tagged onto the feet, mortgaging land and gold, I
have abandoned a sleeping pregnant (wife), a
house almost empty, self-denying desires,
ambitions and blessings full of emotions and
beliefs of belonging....²²

If at one level objective correlatives from the sacred, spiritual past lend a sense of continuity to the human experience, at another level they dehistoricize it. Identifying a Punjabi diasporic subject with a Buddha in search of *nirvana* is poetic license; such metaphors create more wedge than bonding between the things compared.

History is repeatedly forsaken in favour of metaphysics, mythicality or cosmic natural evolution. It is seen as an ephemeral bubble on the mighty waves of an ocean: “the waves of ocean throw behind shells and snails, we address them as history....”²³ Subsuming history in the oceanic timelessness is detrimental to the dynamics of diaspora. The temporal disjunction implicit in diasporic dislocation may not be tsunamic in proportion, yet it has a definite bearing on the ordinary human self leading life “outside the habitual order.”²⁴

The sudden trip into metaphysics or spirituality has definitely to do with the originary impulses that ghettoized diaspora is often driven to invoke. In moments of crisis, it loses its secular character, and takes on communal character, and even acquires fundamentalist overtones. From metaphysics, the diasporic subject turns towards the sacredness of its own origins, or what is termed as “mantric re-iterations of the embattled past.”²⁵ Neither the

mystic meanderings of Ramta Jogi, nor the feverish, fundamentalist invocations to one's sacred origins offer befitting correlatives to diasporic mediations. What is required is ideological finitude and not just metaphysical/religious take off.

IV

Since Punjabi diaspora poetry is so tropical in its structures, the possibilities of form remain almost untapped. It takes conventional forms--forms which do not really show the cultural mixing that a diasporic subject undergoes. Both loss and liberation are so intensely lyrical that the multivalency/hybridity embedded in the diasporic situation remains unrealized. The trope of loss is articulated thorough elegiac songs and gazals, farewell folk-songs, the tragic monologues or solemn requiems. Invoking Shiv Kumar's *Loona*, a woman poet, for instance, breaks into a dirge, without much of re-writing or parodic reversals:

throughout the night I wipe off my forlorn face/
with lukewarm tears/ throughout the night wiping
my forlorn face continuously/ I just pull along with
the deluge of sobs....²⁶

The trope of metaphysical emancipation manifests itself in sacral forms of hymns, prayers, shabads, or invocations. Amarjit Chandan often lapses into prayers; the first four poems of his collection *Bijak*²⁷ are invocations: "Manglacharan," "Shukrana," "Arti" and "Deepdan." Another poem in the mantric mould is "Jot":

a drop falls into the ocean/ one flame lights
another/ before raining one cloud merges into the
other/ the entire earth is *wet*/ the prayers of a
humble one are answered / a flame is lost into
another as it lights it²⁸

The sacred or the mystical is often perceived to be a remedy for the ills of diaspora, but such stances run the risk of degenerating into fundamental positions. Besides being trans-historical, such mystical clamoring points towards a poetics of escape and nonparticipation.

Dev is a poet of shabads, and his poetry is an extended invocation to the word. In these forms 'words' do attain incantatory resonances:

words are a ship/ that take me/ across the harbour/
towards the sea of curiosity/ a fairy land of
surprise/ inside the golden domes/ basking in
moonlight/ I am all adrift with words/ in the realm
of the fantasy of poetry....²⁹

But this is the realm of transcendence, of magic and fantasy. The elevation to this exalted space is more epiphanic than causal. It is already a completed whole, a rounded journey. There is no abyss in the self. The tragic and the transcendent are so compatible that the comic and ironical remain forever obliterated from experience of the diaspora.

V

The upward leap of metaphysics and the poetics of fall that goes into the narration of loss at best constitute movement along the vertical axis--which is the axis of filiation, of the non-negotiable inner self. Punjabi diaspora poetry more often is poetry of originary longings. The challenges of exploring the horizontal axis of affiliations, which are central to spatial displacements, have, therefore, not been adequately met. Though there are poems which evince some measure of postcolonial solidarity, yet they fall short of 'true internationalism.' In the following poem, for instance, the Punjabi diasporic self does share the anguish of fellow postcolonial subjects, the oppressed and the marginalized people of the entire world:

in every nook and corner of the world/ Punjab
sobs/ under different names/ somewhere it is/ in
the ruins of Beirut/ it is pigeon in fright/
somewhere it is the yards of low-caste workers/ or
the ghetto of black Africans/ or the wounded
reserve of red Indians....³⁰

Here again, it is not the diasporic Punjabi self that seeks relations with other displaced communities; rather it is the general Punjabi self that seeks affiliations. The tendency is to somehow describe the whole of Punjab in a state of exile which is historically and culturally untrue, the rhetoric of post-nationalism notwithstanding. The semantic associations of a diasporic Punjabi self with Siddhartha on the one hand and an oppressed and exploited black African on the other are too arbitrary and extreme to afford the possibilities of dialogue in a real time context.

The potential of postcolonial solidarity is hinted at in Ajmer Singh Rode's "Antar Rashtri Kitchen" ("International Kitchen"). Kitchen is an assortment of different things that come from different postcolonial societies reminding the poet of displacement of cultures that these societies have undergone:

in this boiling tea/ the steaming gasps/ you hear,
are of Darjeeling/ these gasps stem from/ the
conversation / of tea-plantation labourers/.../ this
cheap and best/ coffee is from Sudan/ (where
once upon a time, / fields yielded food-crops, /
now, for exports,/ coffee is planted).../ the
bananas are big/ they come from Panama./
(instead of banana-trees,/ once in Panama, / food-
crops used to sway/ across fields,/ now for
exports,/ bananas are planted)...³¹

The poem offers a rare example of postcolonial internationalism, but what characterizes it, is anguish, and not 'postmodern ease.'³² True it is that 'anguish' is paramount to the postcolonial subject, but after years of experience in the west, it should have been negotiated long back.

At times the pure economic-mindedness of the Punjabi diaspora is self-mocked in a manner that is more sarcastic than comic. The resultant self-reflexivity yields polemics rather than a discourse of dialogics:

very busy we are/ many worries bother us/ we
don't have time/ to go to Hyde Park/ to participate
in any demonstration against racism/ that's why we
do not hear the sound of bullets/ piercing the chest
of a Philistinian child/ that's why we fail to ask
about the sorrows of South Africa,/ and also we do
not have any memory /of how long Nelson
Mandela remained imprisoned. . .³³

More than the diasporic strain, it is the characteristic Marxist pull that seems to shape the sensibility of some of the Punjabi diaspora poetry. The diaspora poets differ from their native Marxist counterparts in the respect that they do not merely address the theme of economic disparity; issues like racial discrimination and gender inequality also catch their attention. The inclination of Punjabi diaspora poets towards the new left does sober them down quite a lot, but prevents them from 'mixing' in the global arena. Diaspora is not just movement across cultures, it also involves movement across ideologies. In fact as a phenomenon of social magnitude, it becomes viable only in the wake of the death of ideology. Punjabi diaspora poets continue to retain their defunct ideological baggage.

VI

What does really prevent the Punjabi diasporic subject from being postmodern/ global? In Punjabi diaspora poetry, the nation-state continues to be a major presence, it never relents, or it is never allowed to relent. The binary that emerges in this diasporic poetry is more the binary of the national and the local, rather than that of the global and the local. While abroad, the diasporic subject is acutely conscious of the politics of the national and the local. A poem of Surjit Kalsey is quoted here, which spells out that while Panjab has gone beyond the dark days of pre- and post-Bluestar, in Vancouver the shadows of its wounded past still persist:

so much has happened here/ so much has elapsed/
people move forward/but one who returns has his
predicament/ he brings back/ those arrested
moments of life/ which he had taken along with
him /when he returns/ he re-starts living from those
moments only/ which he had left behind./ by that
time, he is too late/ never does one test the truth/ of
arrested moments abroad/ when time stands still in
pulses/ we live in this arrested time.³⁴

The sense of the persecution by the nation-state is so ubiquitous that it does not let the diasporic subject be at ease with him. He continues to negotiate with the nation-state, rather than with the global arena he has descended upon. The authenticity that Sikh diaspora seeks to gather is provincial, and not as much international.

The native noise is too much. It does not let the diasporic subject be memory-less even for a while--a condition necessary for global mixing, for hyphen/high-fun. The disturbance pulls the diasporic subject back to the native land. The poet tends to regress more into a spiritual mould:

make this house think all over again/ teach it how
to be silent/ ask it to meditate/ forsake all power/
let it re-sing true wisdom/ let it open its third eye/
let it look within/ and let it come out with pearls
from beneath the ocean of words....³⁵

The message is to descend to the plane of meditation:

on the plane of meditation everything happens/
peacock dances/ pea-hen is seduced/ drinking his
tears she becomes pregnant/ peacock craves for
clouds/ clouds for the soil below....³⁶

Since the poets nurse strong grudges against the excesses of the nation state, their expatriation turns into exile. Instead of cultivating an expatriate-specific scrupulous identity, what they ultimately nurse is an “indulgent and sulking”³⁷ subjectivity of an exile. The opportunities of ‘contrapunctal’³⁸ relationship with the alien adopted landscape go almost unexploited.

VII

The actual site/ constituency of the diasporic mediations should ideally be the first or second generation diaspora. What is being bandied about in the name of Punjabi diaspora poetry is actually the poetry written by those native Punjabi poets who had started writing poetry much before they sailed abroad. The fact that the space of Punjabi diaspora has failed to generate its distinct and patent voice not only augurs bad for the future of Punjabi poetry as a whole, it also underlines the unmistakably pure economic character of Punjabi diaspora. In other words there are hardly any cultural stakes involved in the very enterprise of Punjabi diaspora. The new generations are cut off from their native culture; their subsequent ghettoization prevents the opportunities of true global mixing.

The first or second generation Punjabi diaspora, instead of being the happy player of the global circus, resents the migration of his forefathers to the First World. Its tone is accusatory. It seeks a journey back:

I am a foreigner sahib/ born of a father/ who,
forsaking his identity,/ country, came to an alien
nation/ for the sake of a big bunglaw, gold etc./
you who came/ in this alien country/ are the
murderer of my mother-tongue/ are the murderer
of my dreams /you are murderer of my laughter/
memories, longings, fragrances....³⁹

If such is the response of first or second generation diaspora, the possibilities of hyphenation are difficult to come by, and the poetry though spatially spread over different pockets of the whole world would remain provincial, if not the poetry of a ghettoized world. Overall, this poetry does offer us a subaltern interrogation of the nation-state, but it does not suggest a substantive transnational configuration of the Sikh diaspora. The critical 'third space' remains almost uncharted and unoccupied.

Notes/ References

1. The quotations from Punjabi poetry incorporated in the paper have been translated by the author himself. The translations are of working nature only.
2. Gurdeep Singh Puri, "Tanhai," *Pardes Giyon Pardesi Hoyon*, ed., Surinderpal Singh and Harchand Singh (Jalandhar: NRI Sabha, Punjab, 2000) 51.
3. Surjeet Kalsey, "Asin Parwasi Pancci," *Fauna Naal Guftgu* (Chandigarh: Raghbir Rachna Parkashan, 1979) 13.
4. Gurcharan Saggi, "Me in te Rukh," *Pardes Giyon Pardesi Hoyon* 55.

5. In Punjabi poetry instead of the imagery of ordinary birds like pigeons and parrots, the imagery of hawks as signifier of violent anti-hegemonic struggle features quite regularly. Baba Farid in the twelfth century writes:

The crane, perched on the river bank enjoys (his hunt)
But, lo, while enjoying this, he is pounced upon by the
hawks Unawares!

Yea, when the hawks of God pounce upon him, all revelry goes
And that what was never in his mind comes to pass
Oh, such are the doings of God. ("Shalok 99," *Shaloks of
Baba Farid, Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Vol IV, trans. Dr.
Gopal Singh [Delhi, London, New York: World Sikh
Centre, 1984] 1314).

Later in the seventeenth century Guru Gobind Singh in a small composition attributed to him juxtaposes sparrows with eagles thus: "Unless I raise one to stand against many/ cause sparrows to spurn hawks, I shall not deserve to be called Gobind Singh." Shiv Kumar Batalvi employs eagle imagery to underline the carnivorous character of his beloved thus: "Oh mother! I have chosen the eagle as my friend/ . . . mashed crumbs/ he does not take/ I have fed him/ with the flesh of my heart!..." ("Shikara," *Shiv Kumar: Sampooran Kavi-Sangra* [Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, 1999] 199-200). While in prison, Pash is overtaken by this whole legacy of eagle imagery. Pash would rather prefer to chase eagles as the very collection of poems that contain his prison poetry is entitled *Ud de Baajan Magar (In Pursuit of Flying Eagles)*.

6. Amarjeet Chandan, "Lafaz," *Mur Nahin Hoyia Watna Noon*, ed. Gurdeep Singh Puri (Amritsar: Ravi Sahit Parkashan, 1996) 33.
7. -----, "Pinjara," 88*Cchanna* (Delhi: Navyug, 1998) 55.
8. Shivcharan Gill, "Mera Kinna Kucch Guwach Gaya Hai," *Mur Nahin Hoyia Watna Noon* 184.

9. Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991) 15.
10. Baldev Doohere, "Sabhayachar di Maut," *Mun Pardesi Jo Theeye*, eds. Gurcharan Rampuri, Surjeet Kalsey and Sufi Amarjeet (Vancouver: Punjabi Lekhak Manch, 1993) 74.
11. Sadhu, "Aapo Aapna Itihaas," *Pardes Giyon Pardesi Hoyon* 105.
12. Along with 'interstices,' Homi Bhabha employs terms like 'in-between' and 'third space' as markers of that productive space which spills beyond essential categories of cultural containment. It is in this space that a new political identity is formed which is "neither the one nor the other." *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge) 25.
13. Baldev Doohere, "Be-sandharabh Astitav," *Mun Pardesi Jo Theeye* 70.
14. Avtar Jandialvi, "Nahin Chahidi," *Mur Nahin Hoyia Watna Noon* 24-25.
15. Amarjeet Chandan, "Punjab Mera," *Goodti* (Delhi: Navyug, 2000) 53.
16. Darhsan Bulandavi, "Dariya," *Dhup 'Ch Jagda Deeva* (Delhi: Aarsi Publishers, 1998) 19.
17. Navtej Bharati, "Tooran de Dhuh," *Leela* (Vancouver: Rainbird Press, 1999) 45.
18. Ajmer Rode, *Leela* 910.
19. Navtej Bharati, *Leela* 293.
20. Ajmer Rode, *Leela* 478.
21. Gurmail, "Sipher Sipher," *Sipher Sipher* (Delhi: Navyug, 1984) 23.
22. Surjeet Kalsey, "Phir Tooriya Siddhardh. . .," *Pauna Naal Gufigu* 10.
23. Navtej Bharati, *Leela* 411.
24. Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2001) 186.

25. Leela Gandhi uses the phrase “mantric iteration of the embattled past” (“One World,” *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* [Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999] 28) to highlight how in the wake of postmodern/postcolonial overlap, such an iteration has exhausted itself.
26. Sarabjeet, “Main Vi Loona Haan,” *Pardes Giyon Pardesi Hoyolj* 29.
27. It is significant to note that Kabir's collection is also entitled *Bijak*. Amarjeet Chandan fashions himself to be a modern Kabir. It in a way reveals how desperate the Punjabi diaspora is to appropriate the indigenous *bhakti* discourse to account for their migration to the affluent west.
28. Amarjeet Chandan, “Jot,” *Bijak* (Delhi: Navyug, 1996) 31.
29. Dev, “Pari Desh: Achambha,” *Shabdant* (Delhi: Navyug, 1999) 159.
30. Iqbal Ramoowalia, “Mahiman Nahin Jande,” *Pani Da Parccavan*,” (Delhi: Navyug, 1991) 35.
31. Amarjeet Chandan, “Antar-rashtriya Kitchen,” *Leela*.
32. R.Radhakrishnan's observation on the ‘sulking’ nature of postcolonial diaspora is quite pertinent: “The crucial difference that one discerns between metropolitan versions of hybridity and ‘postcolonial’ versions is that, whereas the former are characterized by an intransitive and immanent sense of jouissance, the latter are expressions of extreme pain and agonizing dislocations” (*Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* [Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996] 59).
33. K. C. Mohan, “Asi Jo Blatiye Haan,” *Mur Nahin Hoyia Watna Noon*, 69.
34. Surjeet Kalsey, “Samaan Jad Nabjan vich Thahir Jandan Hai,” *Mun Pardesi Jo Theeye* 32.
35. Gurcharan Rampuri, “Es Ghar Noon Moor Sochan Lao,” *Agnaar* (Amritsar: Ravi Sahit Parkashan, 1993) 21.
36. Amarjeet Chandan, “Mor,” *Jadaar* 27.

37. Edward Said would like the exile to learn, rather than sulk: “But provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity (“Reflections on Exile,” *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays* [New Delhi: Penguin, 2001] 184).
38. Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* uses the term ‘contrapunctal’ to suggest a strategy of reading *from* outside. He formulates that we read *from* an external perspective: “...with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) 66.
39. Amarjeet Chandan, “Kalam Valaiti Munde Da Apne Baap Naal,” *Jadaan* (Ludhiana: Aesthetic Publication, 1995) 86.

CECILE SANDTEN
**SUJATA BHATT'S AND SHANTA ACHARYA'S
SHAKESPEARE-POEMS**

You asked me who I envied most:
Which writer? Which poet?

Who would I want to be
if I could choose
to be other than myself?

Shakespeare, I said,
almost automatically.

(Sujata Bhatt 2000, 106)

1. Introduction

In this article I will introduce two Indian poets: the Indian-American, German resident poet Sujata Bhatt and the widely-travelled, London-based poet Shanta Acharya, and their poetic Shakespeare adaptations. A problem that I have to confront when working in the field of Shakespearean adaptations, rewritings and trans-cultural appropriations is the relationship between the “seed-text,” or the source, and the adaptation of that source in a poem. Usually one would think, especially when working with trans-cultural literary texts, that the “seed-text” is perceived as being superior to the adaptation, which has often been relegated to the position of being merely a copy, the essence, a mutilation, written maybe in a non-European language and therefore not being accessible or “controllable.” This discrepancy has often been encoded into a general thinking about Shakespeare and the adaptations, rewritings, spin-offs and reworkings of the bard’s texts.

In the following, I will show that assumptions about the dominant powerful standing of Shakespeare are being questioned; and that the English playwright is challenged and creatively appropriated, also with reverence, as is the case in some poems by Bhatt and Acharya. Their creative adaptations will be placed *next* to Shakespeare as each approach is a unique intercultural mode of appropriation, and thus a unique artistic and aesthetic work in its own right.

Bhatt is bicultural by birth and migration, and is tri-cultural by marriage. She was born in Ahmedabad in 1956, and when she was twelve her parents moved to the United States where she studied literature and creative writing at various universities. Her husband is a German writer and radio editor/producer, and since 1988 Bhatt has been living in Bremen (northern Germany), where she works as a free-lance writer. In her poetry she evokes the day-to-day realities of her life in India, America, and Europe. Moreover, Bhatt fuses different cultures, environments and perspectives, writing with a sensitive comprehension also about other species and surroundings.

Shanta Acharya was born in Cuttack, in the eastern state of Orissa, and was educated at the local convent school. She completed her Master's degree in English Literature from Ravenshaw College, Cuttack; and in 1979 went to Oxford where she wrote her doctoral thesis on *Emerson and India*. In 1983-84 she was a Visiting Scholar at Harvard. She now lives in London, where she works as an Investment Manager in the City. In her poetry, she demonstrates a distinctive voice which bridges aspects of two cultures: the materialism of the West and the spiritualism of the East. In some of her poems, she takes on the abstract, metaphysical or spiritual, and hence uses the idiom such themes require.

2. Sujata Bhatt's and Shanta Acharya's "intercultural" mode of writing

Although their poetic Shakespeare adaptations must be approached and understood separately, there are nevertheless moments which makes a comparison of their poems worthwhile. First, this is due to their style of writing which should most generally be termed "intercultural." The double heritage of their "Indo-English" past is reflected in many of their poems. Yet, their poetry should ultimately be considered "intercultural" instead of "post-colonial" as post-colonial critics assume a common experience in all post-colonial literatures: the experience of colonisation. Therefore, post-colonial readings frequently emphasise the notion of writing back to the colonial centre, and focus on the idea that (post-)colonial authors write in answer to the (ex-)colonisers. In contrast, Bhatt and Acharya focus on an intercultural dialectical movement which constantly takes place: the perspective from outside is mediated by the perspective from within, and *vice versa* (cf. Bredella 1988, 14). Further, their outlook is distinctively female, which might be the reason for their engagement with plays by Shakespeare such as *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, or *King Lear*. Both poets concentrate on female characters like Ophelia, Cordelia or Gertrude, who play a decisive role for the development of the plot of each play but have according to the Shakespearean "seed-text" been isolated and ultimately silenced. Bhatt and Acharya are no longer engaged with the master-slave theme as initially represented by the Caliban-Prospero relationship in *The Tempest*, but use Shakespeare in order to address topics such as sexuality, love, utopian ideas, or male-female relationships, archaic human themes which Shakespeare's plays provide next to others. In their poetry, Bhatt and Acharya move beyond colonialism, they acknowledge their different and diverse roots and traditions but they also celebrate their acquired "Europeanness."

In seeking access to the poems by the two writers in which both creatively adapt Shakespearean plays, I will briefly elucidate

one mode of appropriating Shakespeare which the two poets use. In post-colonial literatures, Shakespearean adaptations, rewritings and appropriations have first taken shape within the resonance of the asymmetrical relations of power that operated under colonialism. But the second generation of writers after independence from colonisation rather turns away from the colonial discourse. There are several strategic approaches and attitudes to the English playwright, ranging from the concept of “writing back” to the former “colonial book” to an approach that would be a deglamourising version, focusing on the aspect of entertainment, which might eventually be characterised by a “mutilation” of Shakespeare’s plays (cf. Loomba 1997, 27).

Bhatt and Acharya would rewrite a Shakespearean play according to a specific national, regional or local mode, adapting the text to fuse with a particular socio-political and cultural, dramatico-theoretical and/ or historical matrix which allows the elements of the play (theme, plot, characters) to live and resonate in their specific transcultural context. This approach might be the one that is most prevalent today, especially in more recent Shakespearean adaptations. It is also a very individual and transformative approach to Shakespeare from an instance of marginal protest into an exemplar of a new aesthetic, *in spite* of colonialism. It might not necessarily have to be political, it can be with or without reverence for Shakespeare. The Shakespearean texts in this approach are frequently used as vehicles for the writer’s own creative matters resulting in a, rather, intercultural standpoint. This approach might be concerned with exploring and exploiting the empire’s cultural material to the advantage of the writer’s own literary tradition.

3. Sujata Bhatt’s Shakespeare-Poems

Bhatt acknowledges her indebtedness to a mosaic of authors ranging from poets to novelists from various literary and cultural backgrounds and countries. Although most of the writers she names

are located in the Western literary tradition, she says that they all trigger Indian memories in her. For Bhatt, ultimately, Shakespeare unites the whole world. In some of her poems, the emphasis lies on the love for the “old” literature as in the poem “Nanabhai Bhatt in Prison” (Bhatt 1991, 27-29). Bhatt was educated in the British school system in India, and studied English literature in the United States. A very important person in her life was her grandfather Nanabhai Bhatt. He was a teacher and was engaged in the Indian independence movement. Because he was a very close friend of Mahatma Gandhi and because of his “civil disobedience” he was imprisoned several times. In “Nanabhai Bhatt in Prison“ the lyrical persona prefers the culture of the former colonial power--represented by Tennyson and Shakespeare--to the Indian or American literary culture:

One semester in college
I spent hours picturing him:
a thin man with large hands,
my grandfather in the middle
of the night, in the middle of writing,
between ideas he pauses to read
from Tennyson, his favourite--

[...]
I know that
as a student in Bombay
he saved and saved
and lived on one meal a day for six months
just so he could watch
the visiting English Company
perform Shakespeare...

In these two stanzas there is a classic instance of the colonial double-bind by living in India and loving Tennyson and Shakespeare. In this poem, Bhatt describes an inter-historical

situation. It is the persona who tries to find an orientation for her present situation by looking at the cultural and historical past of one member of her family. The poet refers to a difficult period in the history of India which had personal consequences for her own grandfather. Yet, his love for Tennyson and Shakespeare dominates the poem, though the ambivalent situation is particularly surprising when taking into consideration that Tennyson belonged to a group of writers who wrote during the time of high imperialism. Or as Edward Said argues: “What Ruskin, Tennyson, Meredith, Dickens, Arnold, Thackeray [...]--in short, the full roster of significant Victorian writers--saw was a tremendous international display of British power virtually unchecked over the entire world” (Said 1993, 126). On the one hand, the persona’s grandfather studied in Bombay and used his education in order to resist British colonial power. On the other hand, he was eager to participate in the culture of the Empire. The persona tries to picture her grandfather during his time in prison. She does not criticise his love of English literature, but, on the contrary, holds on to it herself in order to study the same writers which he read. In addition, the persona shows her grandfather’s glorification of Shakespeare as well as her admiration for her grandfather for doing so. In this poem, Bhatt demonstrates that it is a person’s own perspective that decides which cultural artefacts will be loved, treasured or used for consolation. Even though the grandfather suffered under British colonial rule, it was still possible for him to love English literature. In “Nanabhai Bhatt in Prison” the historical and cultural interaction between India, Great Britain and the United States is highlighted through the focus on literature. The love for English literature also represents a cultural home and identity, which the persona discovers through her studies of the same literature that her grandfather studied. She is therefore trying to make connections to the past, however ambivalent the past seems to be, in order to find fertile cultural and historical aspects for her own future.

The poem “Ophelia in Defence of the Queen” (Bhatt 1995, 93) is written “*after Marina Tsvetayeva*” who is one of the most

important Russian poets.¹ The free translation of the poem was commissioned by the South Bank Centre for *Poetry International 1992*. Ten poets were given a literal translation of ten poems by Tsvetayeva. It is interesting to note that Bhatt did not have any influence on the choice of the poem. Yet, the poet has taken liberties with her poem and changed some lines into the voice of Ophelia who is talking and using a language that would be Bhatt's usual talking language.

Hamlet is the most prominent and ambivalent of Shakespeare's plays. The poem "Ophelia in Defence of the Queen" is first of all a re-construction of parts of *Hamlet* from Ophelia's viewpoint. Consequently, the reader's perspective is also changed: Bhatt forces her/him to give up her/his habitual identification with the Shakespearean text as parts of the plot are disrupted and put together in a new mode (cf. Prießnitz 1980, 14). What is important for the poem is that Bhatt rewrites the plot of *Hamlet* by focusing on one specific scene in the tragedy, the closet scene (3.4.). This scene is, on one level of the play, the climax, and, on the other hand, it is highlighting most significant aspects in the relationship between Gertrude and Hamlet. Besides, it is Ophelia who talks back to Hamlet to defend the Queen.

In Shakespeare's tragedy, Gertrude is generally seen as a sexual *object* – by the male characters. The same is the case with Ophelia. In "Ophelia in Defence of the Queen," Bhatt depicts Ophelia as a strong woman, as Hamlet's passion, "I, your passion that refuses to die," who replies angrily to the Prince. This aspect is already addressed in the first stanza in the lines "Prince Hamlet!

¹ Marina Ivanovna Tsvetayeva (b. Sept. 26 [Oct. 8, New Style], 1892, Moscow, Russia, d. Aug. 31, 1941, Yelabuga), was a Russian poet whose verse is distinctive for its staccato rhythms, originality, and directness and who, though little known outside Russia, is considered one of the finest 20th-century poets in the Russian language. She also composed two poetical tragedies on classical themes, *Ariadne* (1924) and *Phaedra* (1927) (cf. Encyclopaedia Britannica 1997, CD-Rom).

I've had enough/ of your stirring up the worm-ridden bed," and in variation in the second stanza: "Prince Hamlet! I've had enough/ of your degrading the Queen's womb." Moreover, Gertrude is characterised as a woman who is capable of true love ("Can't you see the roses?"; or: "It's not for virgins to judge/ such passion. Phaedra's guilt weighed heavier:/ Even now/ they can't stop singing of her./ And let them sing!") which is connected to the physical experience of love. In Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet is not able to accept the concept of the human, as he is thinking it in absolutist values: women are either saints or whores. This image of women is constantly applied to both Gertrude and Ophelia. Hamlet, like the classical character Phaedra² who accuses Hippolytos of having attacked her, accuses Gertrude of inconstancy and incest. For Ophelia, he draws a similar picture. Gertrude's and Ophelia's sexuality is, next to the theme of revenge, the most important aspect in the tragedy, as not only the ghost but also Hamlet is to a great extent interested in Gertrude's "seemingly" lustful inconstancy, with the idea that Gertrude and Claudius are enjoying themselves in Hamlet's father's bed. The difference, though, between Hamlet and Phaedra is that the Prince reacts out of the feeling that Gertrude's remarriage is a betrayal of his father, whereas Phaedra reacts out of disappointed love, thus "they can't stop singing of her."

² In Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus*, he was son of Theseus, king of Athens, and the Amazon Hippolyte. Theseus' queen, Phaedra, fell in love with Hippolytus. When Phaedra's passion was revealed to him, he reacted with such revulsion that she killed herself, leaving a note accusing Hippolytus of having attacked her. Theseus, refusing to believe Hippolytus' protestations of innocence, banished him and called down upon him one of the three curses the sea god Poseidon had given to him. Poseidon sent a sea monster that frightened Hippolytus' horses until he could no longer control them. They smashed the chariot and dragged their master to death (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1997 CD-Rom).

The poem “Ophelia in Defence of the Queen” takes place on two levels: first, the simply emotional, second, the context with regard to civilisation, deconstructing the character of Hamlet as *the* representative of the modern Western civilisation. In the lines “Have you ever/ noticed all the different sorts of skin/ that cover your body?”, the speaker of the poem expresses a double meaning: The first reveals the fact that Hamlet is not in touch with himself. He denies all passion which is inside him such as feelings and emotions. At the second level the above-quoted lines express the idea that Hamlet is not at the core. These two aspects, to be in touch with oneself and to be at one’s core, could be considered the Indian as well the female point of view regarding feelings and emotions. The Danish Prince is a virgin in terms of sexuality. He seems almost dead as he does not listen to his physical impulses. In this poem, he is characterised by suppressed emotions. In addition, the poem hints at the idea of deconstruction: There is first of all the construction of madness which Hamlet represents in the original, and which has to be seen as being ambivalent. Frequently, it has been interpreted in the sense that all activity by the Prince is judged as madness. The Prince, as many critics argue, is still in total control of his actions, but according to the poem lacks a lot in terms of emotions and sexual experiences.

According to the speaker of the poem, Hamlet is “chalky” and “mouldy”, someone who should save his “curses for dead bones”, and someone who passes false judgement on true love because he is himself both too occupied with revenging his father, and too inexperienced with true love. Further, the Prince is demoted to the ranks of a common person, to someone who is actually not able to pass judgment on matters which he is not entitled to evaluate: “Prince Hamlet! Who do you think you are/ to pass judgement on blood that burns?” At the end of the poem there is even a warning: “But if...Well then, watch out!”

In the poem, there are hints at a bi-cultural even tri-cultural dialogue. Using the tragedy *Hamlet* as a vehicle for expressing her

own creative matters, Bhatt also articulates an Asian body awareness when referring to the skin, which means that feeling one's own body, one might find the answers to one's questions. Besides, Tsvetayeva's direct style and her adaptation of one story from the classical Greek mythology resonate in Bhatt's poetic Shakespeare adaptation. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia's story is mainly "told" by male characters. In this poem, Ophelia has a strong self-confident voice, who, on a deeper level, might also represent a post-colonial country, such as India. The poem offers a reading of a contemporary *Hamlet* in the sense of a civilised mind on the part of Ophelia, as Hamlet's opinion of and actions against women are seen as being very restricted--to him, women are either whores or saints. Though in spite of its provocative, even disrespectful formulation, the poem offers an opportunity to re-examine the original (cf. Prießnitz 1980, 15) in order to re-evaluate certain ideological implications which were common during Shakespeare's time.

In the poem "The Stinking Rose" (Bhatt 1995, 39), Bhatt focuses on sexuality and fertility in connection to garlic and Shakespeare. How garlic is experienced in a poem--in contrast to its experience that is grounded in the senses, such as taste and smell--is demonstrated in "The Stinking Rose". Bhatt describes the cultural and symbolical characteristics of garlic and has the lyrical person love it greatly:

Everything I want to say is
in that name
for these cloves of garlic--they shine
like pearls still warm from a woman's neck.

[...]

Everything is in that name
for garlic:
Roses and smells
and the art of naming...

The persona introduces garlic, which reminds her of pearls, as a lover. In this poem, garlic is estimated more highly than the rose, the European symbol of love. To show her love for garlic and as an example of intertextuality, Bhatt takes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* two lines from the balcony scene: "What's in a name? that which we call a rose,/ By any other name would smell as sweet..." The love of garlic is estimated even more highly than these lines by Shakespeare as the persona gives it the name *The Stinking Rose* in contrast to the love expressed by Juliet for her Romeo:

But that which we call garlic
smells sweeter, more
vulnerable, even delicate
if we call it *The Stinking Rose*.

The European metaphor of the rose is combined with the adjective "stinking," which stands for garlic, something that emphasises a mixture of the European and Asian cultures, with the help of a quotation from Shakespeare. In the poem "The Stinking Rose" many different images and emotions are pondered upon which the poet associates with garlic, and at the same time, with a sexual desire. However, this sexual desire is initially grounded in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Garlic has the specific power of disturbing the senses and producing desire, too. In this poem, Shakespeare serves as a signifier of an old love that is replaced by something new, which is grounded in a new metaphorical and intercultural way of writing connected to all the senses.

The poem "The Stinking Rose" is also a poem about linguistic concepts. By naming a thing one defines what it is, means that one creates new cultural concepts. For instance, the metaphor of "this garlic will sing to your heart" fuses funny elements which form a very individual writing code. The rose, of course, represents the romantic idea of love. Moreover, in this poem Bhatt connects cultural implications with food. Actually, the poem does not read

like a poem but rather like a story. It describes a situation of a loving couple: there is a “he” who loves a “she”. Nature is expressed by Bhatt through words such as “garlic,” “rose,” “body,” “neck,” “fingernail,” “prism.” In this poem one finds a combination of both traditions, the Indian tradition of love and the Western tradition of love. There is a re-evaluation of both by using garlic as a sign of de-evaluation of Western and Eastern traditions. Thus, the poem is in essence an example of deconstruction and bi-cultural dialogue. In this bi-cultural dialogue, garlic represents a syncretic idea.

4. Shanta Acharya’s Shakespeare-Poems

The poem “Daughters and Lovers” (Acharya 1995, 40-41) is simple in style and imagery, and based on two plays by Shakespeare, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. The two plays are reflected in the two parts of the poem, respectively. Generally, the poem explores the love relationship between daughters and fathers and that between lovers. Like many other poets, Acharya is working to a great extent with the technical device of alliteration, internal rhymes and repetition of words in order to underline the content. Both parts are re-tellings of the two dramas, essentialising and condensing the most important aspects of the plots as the first two lines already indicate: “Cordelia could not heave her heart into her/mouth even for her fond and foolish father.” The poem continues in this style:

Lear had loved her most, but in a moment’s
reversal disowned her without any dowry,
without his grace, his love, his benison;
becoming thus the natural fool of fortune.

The word “dowry” also functions as a signifier for an Indian context where it is still an important custom to have one’s daughter bring property and money to her husband in marriage. The “seed-text” *King Lear* originates in a time when it was important for a

King's daughter to be married off with a reasonable dowry. But the consequences of Lear's action fall back on him: "becoming thus the natural fool of fortune." Additionally, Acharya tells Lear's story by ridiculing the original with the help of a contemporary expression: "He went to night school in the storm on the heath." In the fourth stanza the poet presents the King's downfall from King to man, a theme almost all literary critics reflect upon. Furthermore, Acharya jokes about the term "fool" in order to underline that it plays a decisive role in *King Lear*. She is thereby indicating her indebtedness to the original: "his poor fool hanged, fools both of fate;/ fools of the god of human nature." Incidentally, the metaphor "the god of human nature" can be interpreted as Shakespeare's concept of the human, representing different aspects of human fallacy, and yet it might also be seen in very different context, namely the Indian context, as there are numerous different gods and goddesses which reside in the Hindu pantheon. Maybe the malignant aspect of Agni stands for "the god of human nature."

In part 2 of her poem, Acharya focuses on *Hamlet* and interprets the tragedy within an everyday-life situation, recounting the failed love story of Hamlet and Ophelia. Again, as is the nature of poetry, Shakespeare's "seed-text" becomes a very condensed version of the original. Like Bhatt in her poem "Ophelia in Defence of the Queen," Acharya highlights, too, the female character of Ophelia. The girl recounts what she was told by her father, Claudius and Gertrude: that Hamlet's distraction is the result of his love for her. But Ophelia is suspicious: "In two simple sentences he confirmed her suspicion -- / *I did love you once. And then -- I loved you not.*" In addition, the speaker of the poem refers to the "sincerely meant" speech by Hamlet in which he advises Ophelia to get herself to a nunnery. Acharya also introduces a very compressed characterisation of Hamlet: "A self-obsessed mind holding the mirror/ to his cracked image of himself." But Ophelia in Acharya's poem as well as in the original would not be able to get to know the character of Hamlet: "Hamlet's self-knowledge was all his own/ It was not something that Ophelia could glean."

The following stanza is a quotation from *Hamlet* in which the Prince's resolution of women is unmistakably expressed as well as his misogynist viewpoint:

*If thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool;
for wise men know well
what monsters you make of them.
To a nunnery, go...*

For Hamlet all women are either whores or saints. In order for Ophelia to remain or become a saint Hamlet advises her to go to a nunnery, hence judging over Ophelia's sexuality. The speaker of the poem asks a rhetorical question: "How now prince, was that wisely/ spoken to true Ophelia?"--which in style resembles the Elizabethan speech pattern. Of course, it was not wisely spoken to true Ophelia, as one knows judging from the original. The last four lines of the poem eventually express the speaker's concern with Ophelia:

Orphaned and spurned by her Prince Charming;
drowned, not knowing if she was loved or not:

Ophelia died without any such illusion.
It is the sort of thing that lovers do.

By the expression "Prince Charming" a critical estimation of Hamlet is introduced: Ultimately, it seems as if he was not sincere in his love of Ophelia but used her only as a toy for some time. In contrast to Hamlet, Ophelia is capable of true love as she "died without any such illusion." In these lines, an Indian/ Hindi aspect enters the poem as the Hindi word for illusion is "maya." "Maya" stands for the need to create illusions, as well as for the suffering they cause. Therefore, Hamlet is the one who is looking for something which he can not have as he is not capable of true feelings. Like in Bhatt's poem, Ophelia is at its centre, and in "Daughters and Lovers" her sad story is re-told and questioned

because of Hamlet's seemingly insincere behaviour. In the end, the speaker of the poem holds Lear and Hamlet responsible for the deaths of Cordelia and Ophelia, respectively. Acharya concentrates on two very personal relationships in the two tragedies. She ridicules both plays. In both parts she criticises the male ignorance which expresses itself in self-obsessed persons like King Lear and Hamlet. She refers to Shakespeare as a writer, as a neutral point of reference which she infuses with Indian aspects, and as a source for her own creativity. Shakespeare seems to be still dominant in her mind. She rewrites the plays as a picture of characters one has in mind through one's knowledge of the plays. Finally, Acharya transforms the characters into a picture of common people.

The second poem in which Acharya draws on Shakespeare is the poem "Names As Homes" (1995, 56-57). Like Bhatt in her poem "The Stinking Rose," Acharya turns to the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* and the most popular scene in the play, the balcony scene. In this scene Juliet puts forward her linguistic and utopian concept of re-naming things when she learns that her lover is of the enemy's family: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose,/ By any other word would smell as sweet." (2.2.47-48). In Acharya's very personal, even autobiographical poem Juliet's idea is rejected because of her experience that "Everything!" is in a name. The poem opens with Juliet's accepted question, and goes on with a conversation between two people. The I-speaker is most obviously the poet herself, whereas the addressee is most likely a person from a Western background who seems to be knowledgeable in Shakespeare and assumes that Acharya is so, too. Juliet's very serious even philosophical question is used by the addressee in a playful manner. It becomes clear that the two people in conversation have Shakespeare as a common denominator. And it is this question, tersely put forward by the addressee, which is the initial trigger of the poem:

What's in a name? You jokingly quote the bard.
Everything! Take mine, for instance:

“Shanta Acharya,” I introduce myself
and the faces suddenly go blank,
not the oriental sort that reveals nothing
but a western impasse that conceals nothing!

By the code-name “bard,” Shakespeare is, of course, introduced. As a consequence, the first line is also addressing the reader of the poem who is also knowledgeable in Shakespeare. During the course of the poem, Acharya goes on with the stylistic means of conversation. Her position is that of trying to “connect and negotiate” as she underplays her embarrassment. She explains the meaning of her name and talks about her outward appearance: “I do have a pan-Indian sort of name and face,/ quite difficult even for an Indian to guess!” In the fourth stanza the two people talk about Acharya’s place of birth, “Orissa,” which the addressee mistakes as “Mauritius”; thus the two are disconnected once again: “but having lost our way all over again,/ we are on another journey through unfamiliar terrain.” In the fifth stanza the conversation goes on about places, and “thanks to Mother Teresa,” Calcutta seems to be familiar to the addressee: Through her help and that of others it has been “put [...] in the map of the world.” In the next stanza Acharya is even more precise about her place of origin, “Bhubaneswar/ the capital of Orissa, in the middle of the east coast,/ south of Bengal and north of Andhra Pradesh!” Finally, the speaker of the poem relates the geographical details to the actual distances she has to cover:

While it takes me two days to travel
from Bombay to Bhubaneswar by train,
we get somewhere over a drink in one evening.
My history and geography remain the same,
and I retain my name like an ancestral home.
So, you see my friend, there’s a lot in a name.

In this poem, Acharya rejects the Western concept of re-naming things, as put forward by Shakespeare’s Juliet, as in her opinion

and judging from her own experience of being the “other,” names are very important indicators for one’s identity. For the poet, her name is “like an ancestral home”; as a result, she will neither be able to change it, nor is she willing to do so, as it is part of her personality, identity and history. In this poem Shakespeare functions as the starting point for a discussion about identity. In the tragedy as well as in the reality of Acharya and maybe in the reality of many people who travel the world and hence become foreigners, Juliet’s philosophical notion of re-naming things remains a utopian idea.

5. Conclusion

Bhatt’s and Acharya’s poems are translations of the poets’ own multicultural experiences. These experiences are infused with ideas from Shakespeare which have been appropriated to contemporary situations. Neither writer necessarily partakes in the post-colonial notion of “writing back” when they make use of the former “colonial book,” Shakespeare. Rather, both poets refer to the playwright in order to express different perspectives in an intercultural mode of writing. This intercultural mode of writing is further characterised by a strong concern with female, if not feminist, issues generated by different plays by Shakespeare.

A creative adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays in poetry has to be, by the nature of poetry, always a reduction. On the other hand, poetry offers a different aesthetics, as T.S. Eliot put it when he commented on the highly constructive organisation of poetry: “Poetry is not an assertion of truth, but the making of that truth more fully real to us.” To gain access to the poems by Bhatt and Acharya I have applied the term inter-culturality in order to designate forms of cultural change which are fundamentally selective and dynamic. The term presupposes an openness to, and creative reception of, the disparate and heterogeneous cultural environments the poets inhabit. To give an answer to the question

which kind of strategic approach and attitude to Shakespeare has been used, I argue that both poets employ Shakespearean plays as an exemplar of a new aesthetic. It is also striking that Bhatt, as becomes most obvious in the introductory quotation from the poem “*Ars Poetica*,” writes with great reverence for Shakespeare. For both poets it is not important that Shakespeare was once the “colonial book.” For them it is important that the English playwright can be used in a sense of a “contact zone.” Therefore, Bhatt’s and Acharya’s approach might be less concerned with “writing back” to the former Empire than with exploring and exploiting the empire’s cultural material to the advantage of their own literary tradition and poetic concept.

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MADHURITA CHOUDHURY
**RE-PRESENTING THIRD WORLD WOMEN:
SELECTED WRITINGS OF
DEBJANI CHATTERJEE AND SUNITI NAMJOSHI**

For all information-savvy people, the Oprah Winfrey show is unarguably one of the most radical talk shows in the world. When it came to selecting an Indian woman for one of the shows, Oprah Winfrey chose Nisha Sharma. Nisha Sharma was the girl who picked up guts and the phone last year and called the police to arrest her would-be husband for demanding dowry. This undoubtedly was an act of courage, but what rankles is Oprah Winfrey's choice. Only a victim-turned-survivor must represent Indian woman?

This not very significant fact brings to the fore a very perplexing question: How are Indians or for that matter Third World Women represented in Euro-centric worlds? Post-colonial feminists take up this process of representation of Third World Women, and critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sara Suleri, Kumkum Sangari, and Chandra Talpade-Mohanty among many others analyse and explore the issue.

During the 1970's and 1980's, since the rise of second-wave feminism in the West, there has been a recurrence of non-dialogue between women from the First and Third Worlds at international conferences. Third World Women felt that dominant women, or in Spivak's words "hegemonic feminists," were constructing them solely in terms of barbaric customs and subjugation. They do not take the social and economic contexts into account. Third World Women thus get defined in terms of their problems or their achievements in relation to an imagined, free, white, liberal democracy. They are thus eternally constructed as powerless, subservient and unemancipated victims who need to be "versed and schooled in the ethos of the Western Feminism."¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her elucidative essay titled "Under Western Eyes"

describes how Western Feminism posits the notion of the Third World Woman as monolithic. She contends that the category of sexually oppressed woman is located within particular systems in the third world which are defined in a scale which is formed through “Euro-centric assumptions.” She further argues, “This mode of feminist analysis, by homogenizing and systemizing the experiences of different groups of women, erases all marginal and resistant modes of experience.”² Thus, like patriarchy, the category of Third World Women gets posited as a universal, unchanging, consistently-enacted category.

Postcolonial and diasporic feminists have resisted this tendency of Western feminists to posit Third World Feminism as a unified entity, homogenous in nature, essentialized under the trope of the ‘Third World Woman.’ These feminists have also resisted the Universalist, essentialist and globalising tendencies of the Western feminism that presumes a universal condition of oppression and subsumes all other feminist concerns.

One might agree with Virginia Wolfe that “as a woman I have no country.” But considering the fact that geographical borders can and do pose unequal power--relations on both local and global scale--one has to interrogate the more complicated issue of a woman’s identity and its representation in the Other World.

This study attempts to look at Debjani Chatterjee and Suniti Namjoshi, two prominent women writers, both of them diasporic with multicultural identity. These two writers present two different positions of representation of Third World Women. These positions are not necessarily feminist or anti-feminist, but they definitely contest and confront the Universalistic tendencies of Western Feminism.

Debjani Chatterjee is an expatriate UK-based writer and storyteller. She was born in India, educated in Japan, Bangladesh, India, Hongkong, UK and Egypt. Her title poem in her first

collection, "I was That Woman," celebrates womanhood; but later on she, like a conscious postcolonial feminist who is concerned with the plight of Third World Women, presents woman in a myriad of mythological roles, from Sita and Draupadi to the modern urban workingwoman. Chatterjee's poem "I Remembered Cinderella" stands out specifically because it reminds us of the 9th Century Chinese foot fetishism as the origin of the seemingly innocent Cinderella tale. Chatterjee, in this poem, debunks the Western concept of beauty, juxtaposing the images of Cinderella's small feet and the ancient Chinese practice of binding the feet of women so that they are forced to take "tiny mincing steps." The poem illustrates that both exemplify the same male fetish thrust upon woman. Like a true diasporic writer, Chatterjee does not present a modernist, celebratory and nostalgic picture of a woman that distances the perceiver from the perceived, but she seeks a closer alliance between two locations--Cinderella of the West and Chinese women with bound feet of the East.

Another remarkable poem of Chatterjee is "Transfiguration." It depicts the plight of Ahalya. In the Hindu myth, Ahalya is the wife of a devout sage, Gautama. Indra, a god in Hindu myths, once made love with Ahalya. As a punishment, Gautama transfigured her into stone. Years later Lord Rama lifted the spell by touching her, and thus liberated her. This myth is an excellent example of patriarchal versus matriarchal values. Ahalya asks in the poem:

"Am I inanimate, a nothing on the ground?"

She retaliates in her own way and promises:

"That celestial nymph is no longer in history,
the earth's alchemy has wrought its own mystery
and made of me an ageless rock. I cannot act,
I do not move, I only am. But it is fact:
I am not stone, I am evolving. Oh I swear
I am not the same."³

Thus, Chatterjee chooses a well-known Hindu myth to debunk the picture of an innocuous, subservient and perennially victimised Third World Woman, or in Talpade Mohanty's words "a singular monolithic subject." She presents to the Euro-centric world an image of a forthright, changed and un-Universalistic woman from the land of Gods and Goddesses, to show how these women are evolving and recognising their worth.

In "Manu's Wife" Chatterjee presents a rebellious First Woman on earth objecting to her being taken for granted by Manu, the First Man:

Manu was the first man.
And I?
I too was there.

Interestingly Suniti Namjoshi too presents a pleading Adam, the Biblical First Man on Earth, who fights his case and holds Eve solely responsible for the sin. In the epigraph to the first section of her volume of poetry *The Jackass and the Lady* he says:

It is not, Father, I who have sinned.
I beseech Thee take this whore from my side.⁴

Namjoshi, a well known UK-based writer born in India, strategically uses The Bible, the loaded patriarchal text, to re-write and interrogate the Universalist image of Woman, and thus attempts to go beyond geographical boundaries. Most of her early poems take a critical look at this image rather than limiting herself to any country or continent. But in her prose Namjoshi takes a revisionary journey to negotiate a new image of the Third World Woman. In her *Feminist Fables* she presents an ingenious reworking of fairytales. She invokes the familiar world of Greek and Sanskrit mythology and reconstructs it, after shedding its redundant patriarchal content. She subverts all forms of patriarchal power and unsettles the popular yet conventional notions of order and authority. Jancy James, in her brilliant essay "Remythologizing

as Expatriate Vision and Art: An Intertextual Reading of Uma Parameswaran's *Sita's Promise* and *Meera*," speculates on a diasporic writer's fascination for Indian myths. She believes that a diasporic writer adopts two ways to establish metaphoric connection with his or her homeland. One is to be nostalgic and to recreate the past in her works. The other is a revision/reappropriation of history, epics, legends and myths of the native land. The writer also has "an existential need to relocate the philosophy and vision of the homeland in the midst of the alien host culture."⁵

Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* is a collection of 99 stories dealing with Anderson's tales, Panchatantra stories and other texts. These tales are retold from an essentially feminist perspective. The first story in the Panchatantra exposes the inequitable practice which reviles women, and how gods are alibi to it. Another story delineates the plight of a typically overworked mother whose duty is to shower unconditional love to her children. The moment she starts showing irritation, her children start blackmailing her emotionally. In a subtle yet poignant manner, Namjoshi here debunks the universal institution of motherhood that does not rule out recognition of the father's social, cultural and even emotional power. Most of Namjoshi's retold stories deconstruct gender, hierarchy as well as the pattern of hierarchy between man and animals. Though some of her stories are basically Indian, her perception and perspective are more global and universal.

In the end it is worth reiterating that Namjoshi and Chatterjee are writers who are geographically located in the western lands of emancipation and progress. Yet they choose to return to the Third World metaphorically to relate to their experiences as women of Third world countries. Each one of them presents a unique point of view of Third World Women. Debjani Chatterjee radically and strategically situates the Third World female in an attempt to contest the very ahistorical colonialist power/ knowledge networks of Western feminism; whereas Suniti Namjoshi through her *Feminist Fables* uses the female characters of Indian mythology and fables to present oppression and subjugation of woman as a

singular monolithic subject. Rather than segregating Third World Woman as a category, these writers attempt to initiate a dialogic relationship between the East and the West. Taking their setting from the specifics of Third World culture, each one of them critiques patriarchy in her own way. Instead of looking at the Third World Woman through Euro-centric eyes, they try to orientalise the perception of western viewers. Their works thus deconstruct and decentre the dominant Western discourse from within. They attract a slew of positive media and reader's attention and awards because they deliberately choose not to represent Third World Woman as victim-turned-survivor. Instead, their women are individuals with their own cultural, political and social identities. No wonder their works are seen as path breaking ventures in feminist / postcolonial writing.

Endnotes:

¹Valerie Amos and Parman Pratibha, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," *Feminist Review* (Autumn, 1984): 7.

²Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds., *Feminisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 93.

³I am grateful to Debjani Chatterjee for sending me some selections of her poems online and also for taking personal interest in this study. The quoted poems are from her collections, *I Was That Woman* (Hippopotamus Press), *Albino Gecko* (University of Salzburg) and *Namaskar: New and Selected Poems* (Redbeck Press).

⁴Suniti Namjoshi, *The Jackass and the Lady* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1980) 10.

⁵Jancy James, "Remythologizing as Expatriate Vision and Art," *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. ed. Jasbir Jain (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003) 198.

NIRANJAN MOHANTY
**MEMORY IN THE POETRY OF A.K.RAMANUJAN:
A STUDY**

To a question raised by Chirantan Kulshrestha in an interview conducted in 1970 at the University of Chicago with regard to special meaning played by memory in A.K. Ramanujan's poetry, Ramanujan himself honestly explained, and what he explained thirty years ago is meaningful, even today:

I don't really know. I simply write poems as they occur to me; I have to have no theory. It is true I have a number of poems which are obsessed not only with memories but with memory itself, memory as history and myth, memory as one's own past--the presence of the past--the way the present gathers to itself different pasts. This kind of concern can, of course, lead to the no-more and the have-been and the not-yet all weaving into and out of the here-and-now. You have to find a way of bringing all these together and still not confuse or diffuse the form of the work. But this is nothing new.

(2001, 48-49)

Ramanujan explains the strength and vitality of his poetry in handling memory--the collective memory available in history, in myth and the personal, private memory of his own experiential past. Ramanujan also partly explains what T.S. Eliot in his seminal essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" discussed as the 'historical sense,' the presentness of the past or the simultaneity of all times--past, present and future. By the help of collective memory, Ramanujan tries to relate himself, revitalize himself, as the veritable and verifiable product of a culture that has sanctioned his Brahmanical, Hindu and South-Indian identity. By the help of

private memory, Ramanujan tries to re-locate, re-vision the self that has been lost and found again and again, to be lost again and again amid the inevitable flux of time, amid the changed and changing flux of cultures--each orienting, constructing a self which tries to accept things as they are, a self that encompasses, and often shields a tension of being faceless and restless, without which his poetry would not have achieved the kind of distinction that it enjoys today.

In the essay “The Ring of Memory” Ramanujan stated that in the past, “Remembering was not a mere skill to show off, it was the means of enlightenment and salvation” (2001, 85) and referred to Buddha’s recollection of his past lives. Exploring the psychological phenomenon involved in memory, Ramanujan pointed out:

According to the doctrine of *vāsanās*--memory traces or smells--perception itself is half memory. One remembers because one sees a partial similarity between the object present and an object one has seen before. So one needs remembrancers so that one may remember, recognize--literarily re-member or reconstitute the object in front of us--by reconnecting present impressions with past memories of that object.

(2001, 88)

With such clues given by the poet himself, it appears that it would be pertinent and meaningful to study and examine Ramanujan’s poetry with a view to identifying the ways in which memory plays a significant role. One would not venture to examine if Ramanujan achieved ‘enlightenment’ and ‘salvation’ in the profoundly spiritual sense. But it would be quite relevant to show how ‘enlightenment’ was only a variation in degrees or scale so far as the poet’s own identity is concerned.

In “Farewells” Ramanujan moves from depicting ‘formulaic’ farewells at the railway station when the train gets delayed by two-and-then-another-two hours, and the farewell to the lady president of the co-operative society with an uninscribed medallion, to the farewell given to him by his mother:

Mother’s farewell had no words,
no tears, only a long look
that moved on your body
from top to toe
with the advice that you should
not forget your oil bath
every Tuesday
when you go to America. (2001, 8)

With the present experiences of farewells--official, formal, formulaic--the poet ‘re-members’ or ‘reconstitutes’ the farewells by reconnecting them to the non-formulaic farewell of the mother. Both, the poet’s irony and his willingness to subvert the present by the past, appear distinct, persuasively clear. Through juxtaposition, the poet not only evidences the fatuity of the formulaic farewells in the present but also valorizes the experiences of the past embedded in memory.

The poem’s implied movement from an impersonal world to a personal world through memory, indicates another movement too: the movement from discontentment or disapproval to contentment or approval. The image with which the poem gets concluded is rewarding in the sense that it not only suggests the gap between the formulaic farewells and the unformulaic ones, it also elicits the enlightenment for the poet--obviously not in the Buddhist sense or spiritual sense, but at least in the sense of contentment embedded in and evoked by memory.

In “Returning,” Ramanujan employs another technique to suggest the importance of memory. In fact, in his “The Ring of

Memory” essay Ramanujan, while examining Kalidasa’s play *Sakuntala* (5th century), made a reference to ‘amnesia’ which he thought ‘a curse,’ “a form of alienation from one’s self, for one’s self is largely constituted by memory” (p.86). But Ramanujan subverts this theory of ‘amnesia’--in this particular poem, because ‘amnesia’ becomes instrumental to continuity of a belief in this presence of the mother who is really absent. Dusyanta’s amnesia is disruptive, so far as it alienates Dusyanta from his lost self as a lover and it wounds Sakuntala infinitely too. Ultimately the ‘ring’ disrupts Dusyanta’s amnesia and becomes instrumental to Dusyanta’s recovery of the lost self. In “Returning” Ramanujan shows how amnesia can also bring ‘relief’ to him, as it orients the self to perpetuate the belief that the absent/dead mother is present/alive. The poet shows what happens when the journey or the movement is from amnesia to memory. Here the amnesia creates an illusion of the ecstasy with the belief that the absent mother is present. This illusion of ecstasy gets disrupted by the recognition of the ultimate reality about the mother’s absence. Thus, I think, Ramanujan has woven into the body of the poem a miraculous role of memory, which recovers the poet from false ecstasy to the acceptance of the real, however painful it may be. I quote the whole poem here to show the uniqueness of Ramanujan’s handling of irony and the use of amnesia and memory:

Returning home one blazing afternoon,
he looked for his mother everywhere.
She wasn’t in the kitchen, she wasn’t
in the backyard, she wasn’t anywhere.

He looked and looked, grew frantic,
looked even under the beds, where he found
old shoes and dustballs, but not his mother.
He ran out of the house, shouting, Amma!

Where are you? I’m home! I’m hungry!
But there was no answer, not even an echo

in the deserted street blazing with sunshine.
Suddenly he remembered he was now sixty-one

and he hadn't had a mother for forty years. (2001, 14)

Falling back on memory, the poet constructs the image of home and the centrality with which the mother functions as an embodiment of love and affection, as the ultimate redeemer of hunger of the belly, as the ultimate caretaker who brings "tea again at 6 a.m. / before she dies in another time zone" (2001, 5).

In another poem "Children, Dreams, Theorems" Ramanujan establishes a connection between dreams and memory. He believes and argues that dreams "get lost/ if their tails are not knotted/ for memory" (12). Thus memory for Ramanujan assumes a dream-like quality. It is, to my mind, so because memory takes one from the present to the past and hence divorces or distances one from the world of reality. This dream-like quality of memory acts as a safety valve, as an instrument of escape, as an agent of release, as a contrivance of re-visioning the lost dimension of one's self, lost in the flux of time. Ramanujan does not consider himself as an exile nor as an expatriate because, as he explained, "I've done a lot of work on India since coming to this country. I've done it more comfortably here than I could even have done it in India" (2001, 52). I sincerely believe that Ramanujan is passionately an instinctive insider--i.e. always being involved in recreating, re-visioning, reconstructing a self for whom memory actualizes a connection, reaffirms the process of enlightenment.

The Hindoo poems serve as a spring board that re-establishes connections, and at times, critiques those connections. The Hindu rites and rituals occupy a large space, in his psyche. These rites are nothing but trials of memory, and because of the distance of space and time such traces could be objectively viewed, bereft of any bias or prejudices. Ramanujan does not hesitate to critique his own self. His Hindoo poems are manifestations of the collective memory,

which are studied and examined by an individual's perception about the collective memory. Often it is argued that Ramanujan critiques Hinduism through these poems. But studied closely, these poems reveal an attitude of the poet towards those rites or superstitions which are accepted by some with a kind of rigidity that makes people orthodox devoid of compassion and humanness, which are at the core of Hinduism. Had Ramanujan been ironic towards Hinduism, he wouldn't have re-visited and used the Hindu myths to critique his own self and to show inadequacies of his own self in his Mythology poems. Almost two decades ago S.K. Desai in an interesting study harped on Ramanujan's 'imagism,' 'expressionism' and above all his 'modernism.' Desai observed:

For instance, we will realize that his Indian memory is but a peg to hang his modernism on and not his central concern.

(Desai, 113)

A little later in the same essay he further argues that "there is no search for roots (the kind of thing we see, say, in Parthasarathy)" and that "Ramanujan's poetry is primarily the poetry of 'seeing' and not of 'searching.'" (113) I beg to differ from Desai's observation, precisely because my reading of Ramanujan's poetry is different. I don't know why and how Desai could compartmentalize the two ways of Ramanujan's poetry, i.e. one of 'seeing' and the other of 'searching.' 'Seeing' precludes the notion of 'searching,' and searching involves seeing. S.G. Jainapur thinks that Ramanujan's handling of memory is experimental:

The memory, which is his essential mode of creativity, is presented from the subjective, objective and organic angles in a skilful wayRamanujan regards the past, not as a tale, but a truth....Sometimes he starts presenting memory as subjective and then tries to transform it objectively. But this attempt of fusion of the

two remains problematic and experimental.

(Jainapura, 113, 114)

Preoccupation with memory and past is indirectly the preoccupation with time. Ramanujan is “looking for all sorts of proof / for the presence of the past” (1995, 89). This is possibly why memory becomes singularly so significant in Ramanujan’s poetry. He tries to understand and explore the connection that exists between memory and the present. Ramanujan’s poetry assumes complexity for such startling and strange modes of amalgamation or even of juxtaposition.

Whenever we think of Ramanujan’s use of memory, we are at once reminded of a host of poems like “Snakes,” “The Opposable Thumb,” “A Leaky Tap after a Sister’s Wedding,” “On the Very Possible Jaundice of an Unborn Daughter,” “Lines to a Granny,” “Still Another for Mother,” “A River,” “History,” “Obituary,” “Of Mothers, among other things,” “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day,” “Any Cow’s Horn Can Do It,” “Love Poem for a Wife 1,” “On Memory,” and “A Minor Sacrifice.” In these poems Ramanujan’s sole purpose is not merely to locate, re-vision, the past or past moment or incident or event, but also to reallocate its relevance to the present. Such an intention would not permit any artist to harp on the chasm caused by the fleeting nature of time between the past and the present. Such a motif would also not permit to hold an entirely holistic or essentialist view of the past. Ramanujan makes memory an agent or a tool that can orchestrate an assimilation of the twin faces of time leading towards the future. The kind of assimilation that memory does is similar to what the ‘Professor of Sanskrit on cultural exchange’ does in “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day”:

suddenly comes home
in English, gesture, and Sanskrit,
assimilating

the Swastika
on the neighbour's arm
in that roaring bus from a grey
nowhere to a green. (1995, 75)

In "Lines to a Granny," the poet requests his granny to tell the tale of the wandering prince and the princess. The granny in her youth accepted the fact of the tale to be true--a tale that has been orally transmitted, a tale that reveals a fact of life, the veracity of life's experience. Now that the story-teller is dead and the tale is gone into the distant past, the poet's interrogation at the end of the poem becomes quite meaningful in the sense that the poet can accept, with some irony, that this is 'no tale, but truth':

But tell me now: was it for some irony
you have waited in death
to let me learn again that once you learnt in youth,
that this is no tale, but truth? (1995, 17)

In most of Ramanujan's poems one finds a host of images which relate to, get connected with an event, a situation, or individuals. These images succeed in creating an inscape, which may not bear any historical significance but which gets automatically signified in order to substantiate the poet's identity. The immediate referent in these images remains tied to the present, that whirls back to a past and establishes a connection with the past whose manifestation is an unsentimentalised memory. When one examines the poem "Snakes," one encounters a gradual movement, a progression, taking place automatically through the images, and it is from the present to the past and then back to the present, as though the poet was preoccupied with a cycle, with a sense of completeness or wholeness through that cycle. This completeness of the cycle stems from Ramanujan's attitude towards the flux of time, the temporal traces of time which never get lost. Retrieval of such traces makes Ramanujan's poetry a meaningful record of his search

for his identity. In a poem “Traces,” the poet tries to allude to the importance of traces as they spring from time itself:

The earth itself has layers of time,
shelves of fossils that carry traces
of anything that will leave a trace,
like seed, shell, a leaf pressed
on clay, wingbone or cowskull,
waiting for people to decipher
and give themselves a past
and a family tree. (1995, 204)

Ramanujan is busy in deciphering such traces to locate his own self and to support the relational integrity emanating from such location. In “Snakes” one observes how from “museums,” “book stakes,” the poet moves to the “book” with golden spine that compels him to “think of snakes.” Snakes remind him of mother giving milk in saucers to the snakes, and father giving “smiling money” to the snakeman. What is interesting is that the poet, relating himself to his childhood, is reminded of his fear of snakes. From mother, the poet moves on to sister, whose “knee-long braid has scales” (1995, 5) reminding apparently of the gleaming scales of snakes. By the line the poem comes to an end, we find that neither frogs nor the poet himself is afraid of the snakes. Thus the “snakes” give the kind of connectivity that is needed to the context of the poem. The poet’s duty is to weave this connection not only to give a direction to the poem but also to suggest the connection that exists amongst family members because of which the poet so assuringly returns to these members who do away with the poet’s fear.

Similarly the “thumb” in “The Opposable Thumb” takes us to the “grandmother” and “grandfather” (1995, 6) and their relationship. “A Leaky Tap After a Sister’s Wedding” unravels familial relationship through the image of kitchen and of the poet’s wish, shared by the sister:

My sister and I have always wished a tree
could shriek or at least writhe
like that other snake
we saw
under the beak
of a crow. (1995, 10)

The last image takes one to the poet's childhood. The "Swing" in "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" takes the poet to the childhood of the girl who felt her cousin "in the lunging pits/ of her feeling" (1995, 19). The possible strangeness of his identity disappears with the discovery of the signature of his father in the corner of the portrait in "Self-portrait" (23). The wobbly top gifted by his father turns seeming still; the top serves as an agent that takes the poet to the memory of his father (60). The "twisted backbone tree" in "Of Mothers, among other things" (61) takes the poet to his mother's sarees which do not cling. Memory for Ramanujan remains a "sun-struck house of mirrors that shelters impressions of the great-aunt ("History," 107-8), father ("Obituary," 111); that allows the poet to recognize his own identity as the product of "father's seed and mother's egg" (121); that takes him to the mother who would not allow cutting down a "flowering tree" ("Ecology," 124); that drifts him towards the "father's Magic Carpet story" ("In the Zoo," 129), or towards the realization that his "head's soft crown (was) bathed in mother's blood" ("Questions," 131), and even to the discovery of his own DNA:

The DNA leaves copies in me and mine
of grandfather's violins, and programmes
of much older music;

the epilepsies go to an uncle
to fill him with hymns and twitches,
bypassing me for now;

mother's migraines translate, I guess,
into allergies, a fear of black cats,
and a daughter's passion

for bitter gourd and Dostoevsky;
mother's almond eyes mix with my wife's
ancestral hazel

to give my son green flecks in a painter's eye,
but the troubled look is all his own. (158)

This store-house of memory preserves the record of the extended family in which the poet's gestural traits resemble grandfather, father, mother, daughter, son, grandson, great-grandson ("Extended Family" 169-70). How troubled and wounded the poet was at the quarrel over his mother's rights in "On Not Learning from Animals":

I forget how troubled I was when I saw,
at seventeen, after quarreling
with my father about my mother's rights,
a female ape with a black striped snout
sort out patiently with her long hands, then
sniff, and lick lettuce leaves clean for her lord
and master while he growled all through. (217)

Parading through the great historical figures like Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, Gandhi and through the famous cities like Bonn, Chicago and Zurich, Ramanujan's subtle irony exposes the helplessness of mortals in front of death. One would have the feeling that the poet is infinitely wounded because of the rise and fall in the history of human civilization. The concluding part of the poem "A Report," therefore, epitomizes the poet's sense of helplessness and disappointment. But this increasing sense of disappointment could be redeemed by the "blue Mysore house"--by the whirling back to his memory of the lost house. This process of falling back on the

past, on the memory of his South Indian experiences--whether of childhood or of parents, uncles or of the home in a lost hinterland--acts as an anodyne for the poet's sense of helplessness and isolation. The reiteration of this phenomenon in Ramanujan's poetry makes him an instinctive insider. "A Report" ushers in this kind of an unsentimentalised awareness of his lost hinterland:

Yet what can I do, what shall I do, O
god of death and sweet waters under or next

to the salt and the flotsam, what can I do,
but sleep, work at love and work, blunder,

sleep again refusing, lest I fall asunder,
to dream of a blue Mysore house in Chicago? (249)

Ramanujan depicts the ordinariness of living, and consciously harps on the importance of a process embedded in the living:

...They live and die
again and again in followers who buy

potatoes, foreign cars, or just bidis
changing coins and bills with Kings and Gandhis (248)

This process or flux of life, its ruptures, gaps, odds and evens are beyond the control of the poet and that is why his helplessness from which he seeks a release by dreaming of the "blue Mysore house." In "The Last of the Princes" the poet, while depicting the changes that have gone into the lives of princes (who were rich once and are poor now), tries to make it clear that the past never leaves us but that its events pass into the conversation of those who survive. The poet aptly sums up the composition of his own identity in the concluding part of the poem "Elements of Composition":

and even as I add,
 I lose, decompose
into my elements,

into other names and forms,
 past, and passing, tenses
without time,

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
 being eaten. (123)

Past or memory is not viewed in isolation. The poet thrives on eating the past and in the process he gets eaten by the past to assume a timeless identity. Past or memory gathers meaning, gathers significance in relation to the present. Ramanujan's poetry encompasses this unsentimental absorption of the past. This, to my mind, is an achievement.

In a series of short poems entitled "Images" Ramanujan tries to clutch and cling to those impressions which never disappear, which always leave traces. In "Why I Can't Finish this Book," a short poem from "Images," the poet catalogues without being sentimental those images which never take leave of him. Through such images the poet revisits, re-vitalizes his sense of the past--albeit, a private past:

Letting go
of fairy tales
is letting go
of what will not
let go:

mother, grandmother
the fat cook
in widow's white
who fed me
rice and ogres (260)

In “Prayers to Lord Murugan” the poet reiterates the tiny individuals’ prayable prayers. The poet’s banter at the modern man’s prayers is remarkable. Yet there are lines which offer sincere prayers--prayers which retain the capacity to redeem an individual from the plight of misery in the present:

...Lord
of faces,

find us the face
we lost early
this morning. (116)

or Deliver us O presence
 from proxies
 and absences

 from sanskrit and the mythologies
 of night and the several
 roundtable mornings

 of London and return
 the future to what
 it was. (117)

The poet’s prayer reiterates his faith in the past, in the things which are either obsolete or absent. The juxtaposition of prayers full of irony and prayers full of sincerity and genuineness of feeling gives this entire poem a complex pattern, enshrining a kind of tension which, to my mind, is a possible vindication of the modern man’s question of identity--neither here nor there but always hung between paradigms of possibilities.

Ramanujan’s poems also contain traces of collective memory in which the individual or subjective past gets erased, gets suspended temporarily to register the poet’s faith or confidence in the

collective memory or past, whether it is religion, rituals, mythologies, legends or whether it is language or literature, which give a community or a nation its uniqueness or distinction. In identifying such distinction of the collective memory or past and relating his own self to it, Ramanujan locates his own distinction or uniqueness. It does not, therefore, mean that the poet endorses all that the collective memory retains. Had he done that Ramanujan's works would have been a victim of a mere sentimentalized representation of the private or the collective past. Ramanujan's poetry chooses not to register value judgments but to present things as they are and to record his choice or preference for his cultural moorings. In "Death and the Good Citizen," the poet juxtaposes two kinds of funeral rites with his own allegiance to the one that can inscribe his cultural specificity to legitimize his own identity:

But

You know my tribe, incarnate
unbelievers in bodies,
they'll speak proverbs, contest
my will, against such degradation.
Hidebound, even worms cannot
have me: they'll cremate
me in Sanskrit and sandalwood,
have me sterilized
to a scatter of ash.

Or abroad,

they'll lay me out in a funeral
parlour, embalm me in pesticide,
bury me in a steel trap, lock
me out of nature
till I'm oxidized by left-
over air, withered by my own
vapours into grin and bone.
My tissue will never graft,
will never know newsprint,

never grow in a culture,
or be mould or compost
for jasmine, eggplant
and the unearthly perfection
of municipal oranges. (136)

The poet depicts a cultural divide in terms of funeral rites, without failing to justify his own choice. The poet's choice has been sprouting from the beginning of the second stanza (of the quotation) with the use of "Or abroad." Being in the U.S., the poet appropriates a native speaker's dialogue, and re-affirms his status as an instinctive insider or a home-bound pilgrim.

In "Waterfalls in a Bank," the poet makes his choice clear in highlighting the losses he experienced in another country:

As I transact with past as with another
country with its own customs, currency,
stock exchange, always
at a loss when I count my change (189)

Is it not an honest acknowledgement of the poet's allegiance to his past, to his native land, despite poverty and superstitious habit of its people?

In "Conventions of Despair" the poet uses similar strategies to register his allegiance to his own religion and culture that once upon a time sculpted the idea of despair emanating from the concept of the hell. Despite the persona's willingness to be "modern" by way of "marrying again," seeing "strippers at the Tease," becoming the Marginal Man or the Outsider, he is reminded of the "hell" as composed or constructed in the Hindu psyche. The persona therefore, decides:

I must seek and will find

my particular hell only in my hindu mind:
must translate and turn
till I blister and roast

for certain lives to come, 'eye-deep',
in those Boiling Crates of Oil; weep
iron tears for winning what I should have lost (34)

There is irony involved in registering the choice with such determination. The persona may not like the Hindu concept of sin or hell, but he accepts it as his own: "No, no, give me back my archaic despair" (35). This is precisely so because the body is a house of fears and memories:

It's not obsolete yet to live
in this many-lived lair
of fears, this flesh. (35)

In "A Hindu to His Body" (40) Ramanujan harps on the popular Hindu concept of body--both as the house of collective memory, and as the tree whose roots lie deep in heaven with the branches towards earth. It is from the heavenly sap collected by roots of the tree that the tree gathers strength; in other words, it is this "pursuing presence" that "brought me /curled in womb and memory" (40). In "A Minor Sacrifice," the poet juxtaposes two narratives--one epical, legendary and the other real and contemporary; the one gets endorsed by the other, bringing to clear focus what sin, when committed, can earn for an individual in the form of suffering culminating in death. The king in the epic because of his mischievous act of killing a snake and winding the same around a meditating sage's neck, earns a curse resulting in his death by snake-bite. The king's son arranged a magic rite to entrap and kill all snakes. Snakes were drawn to death. The narrative that follows is a real one in which Shivanna and Gopu proposed to

cleanse the earth of all scorpion-poison. In order to appease the god of scorpions, they caught one hundred live grasshoppers on a newmoon Tuesday. Gopu and Shivanna did not have sleep. They dreamt of punishment in the almanacs of Hindu hells. Wednesday morning Shivanna was known to have been admitted to the hospital, developing a twitching disease and ultimately dying there. Shivanna's mother who tells the truth of her son's death, the uncle who provoked the children to catch grasshoppers "to feed / the twelve-handed god of scorpions" (146), and finally the poet who juxtaposes these two narratives based on sin and punishment--all endorse the Hindu belief / superstition. The poet uses irony in the poem to show the disjunction of the narrative. The sin committed by children is pardonable. The sin, in the narrative, has been committed, in the real sense, however indirectly it may be, by the uncle who remains unpunished. Ramanujan deliberately makes the narrative end with the uncle's apparent innocence and explanation.

‘Did you know, that Shivanna,
he clawed and kicked the air
all that day, that newmoon Tuesday,
like some bug
on its back?’ (148)

As an instinctive insider Ramanujan has every right to bring to focus the ruptures in our system of beliefs or superstitions.

In "Mythologies 1" the poet uses the same strategy and juxtaposes two narratives, the one influencing the other, the one affirming the other. Poothana, the demon, was employed by her brother Kamsa to kill baby Krishna, who redeemed her:

She changed, undone by grace,
from deadly mother to happy demon,
found life in death. (221)

The poet who experiences death in life every moment offers his prayer to be redeemed. There is no iota of irony in the honest and humble prayer of the poet:

O Terror with a baby face,
suck me dry. Drink my venom.
Renew my breath. (221)

Similarly in “Mythologies 2” the poet brings in the mythological figure of Hiranyakashyapu whose son Prahallad was a devout worshipper of Vishnu. Hiranyakashyapu made all attempts to kill his son, who survived because of Vishnu’s grace. Vishnu tarnished Hiranyakashyapu. Ramanujan’s apt depiction of the boon received by the tyrant king, and the ultimate end, make a moving record of the poet’s faith in the Indian scriptures and mythologies:

not to be slain by demon, god, or by
beast, not by day nor by night,
by no manufactured weapon, not out
of doors nor inside, not in the sky
nor on earth,

come now come soon,
Vishnu, man, lion, neither and both, to hold
him in your lap to disembowel his pride
with the steep glint of bare claws at twilight. (226)

The narratorial voice intervenes in the narrative only to ascertain the poet’s faith in Vishnu, in his capacity to put an end to pride. The poet’s faith gets ascertained by his prayer, obviously, to Vishnu:

End my commerce with bat and night-
owl. Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble,
so I too may see all things double. (226)

Even for a ‘double vision,’ the vision with which the poet can have vistas or glimpses of ‘here’ and ‘there,’ of the two worlds that epitomize his problem of identity, the poet reassuringly offers his prayers to Vishnu.

In addition to such fascinating uses of memory or past-private, personal or collective--Ramanujan cultivates in his poetry the importance of a linguistic and literary past in order to give his creative medium a certain distinction. Traces of classical Kannada and Tamil literary tradition are available in Ramanujan’s inward-looking yet amalgamating poetry that fructifies the amalgamation of a classical and a modern sensibility, the one inherent and the other acquired. Even if image is central to Ramanujan’s creative process, he uses it with a difference and a deference--a difference because it embodies a rare sophistication of its weaving to arrive at a fulfilling sense of completeness, and a deference because it owes its allegiance to a rich literary tradition. “On the Death of a Poem” illustrates the precision, sharpness and obliquity with which Ramanujan handles the creative medium and the images in a poem:

Images consult
one
another,

a conscience-
stricken
jury,

and come
slowly
to a sentence. (142)

R. Parthasarathy in the “Introduction” of his *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* observes the centrality of ‘image’ in poets like Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Mehrotra and Shiv K. Kumar. He writes:

In Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Mehrotra and Kumar, the image is not only the springboard of poetic composition, but the kernel as well. Underneath the poems one can decipher the pattern in which they seem to think--the pattern of images. Thus, their basic means of expression is subliminal, and it lies below the threshold of language. The images are primarily visual. Words tend to collocate together into an image which then triggers off the poem. The entire poem is, in fact, one image or a complex of more than one image. It is in this context that the use of the image is seminal. (9)

Ramanujan's poems are image-oriented. They breathe in through the images, speak through images. But Ramanujan's use of images is different from other Indian poets, as he banks partly on the authenticity of the experience to be represented through images and partly on the rich deposits of Tamil poetry.

One can re-read "The Black Hen," in which the suggestive richness of the images holds them with such tightness that the idea stemming from one image gets fused into the other, without distorting their individual identities:

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all

yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it's all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you're afraid (195)

The creative process is hinted at without failing to harp on the culmination of that process. Ripeness in the image of the black hen ushers in a sense of fear, the fear of one's death. The poem reveals the possibility of other modes of creation or creative process than that of the celebrated English Romantics. In the last section of "A Minor Sacrifice" the poet deliberately delays the version of the uncle who should have been punished instead of Shivanna. Such a shift or a twist in the narrative flow makes the reading gratifying precisely because of the fact that the poet has succeeded in his subtle use of irony. A reader who must be blaming the uncle in particular for provoking the children to catch one hundred live grasshoppers in order to appease the ten-handed god of scorpions would not have felt easy had the poem not ended with the uncle's provocative interrogation. In the usual time-scale or narrative-scale the poem could have ended with "We never see him alive again" (148). Nothing can happen after the death of Shivanna. But with the progression of the narrative, the action of the narrative moves backward referring conveniently to the unusual symptoms of Shivanna's gesture. The poet brings the past to the future of the poem's progression. We can not say that this was due to a lapse of memory on the part of the uncle, who was instrumental in the death of Shivanna. Similarly in the Mythology poems, the Hindoo poems, and poems like "Obituary," "History," "Prayers to Lord Murugan," the movement is from past to present. In "Small-scale Reflections on a Great House," Ramanujan's handling of time-sequence is startling. The narrativity is so intense that one can not separate one even from another, as though they were interwoven with such dexterity that the past gets woven into the present, and that all time is eternally present in the narrative flow and context of the poem. For Ramanujan, possibly, the in-withinness of an image is more important than the in-between-ness:

Nothing stays out: daughters
get married to short-lived idiots;
sons who run away come back

in grandchildren who recite Sanskrit
to approving old men, or bring
betelnuts for visiting uncles

who keep them gaping with
anecdotes of unseen fathers,
or to bring Ganges water

in a copper pot
for the last of the dying
ancestors' rattle in the throat. (98)

And the easy, casual depiction gathers seriousness and weight with the concluding image of death of a nephew “somewhere in the north” whose dead body arrives faster than the telegrams. The poem ends like the ending of the poem “History”:

and the dark
stone face of my little aunt
acquired some expression
at last. (108)

Or even like the ending of “Still Another for Mother”:

something opened
in the past and I heard something shut
in the future, quietly,
like the heavy door
of my mother's black-pillared, nineteenth-century
silent house, given on her marriage day
to my father, for a dowry. (16)

This circularity of the narrative represented through the subtle weaving of images makes Ramanujan's handling of the creative medium unique and distinctive. In this circularity past, present and future lose their identities, dissolve their identities in such spectacular and unexpected ways that one experiences the reading--rewarding and fulfilling. For Ramanujan, the past is "a drying / net on the mountains" (85). This net has "Many eyes and knots" (1985, 46) eyes to view what is yet to come, and knots to bind all that come along. While reading a perceptive article on Ramanujan's poetry by Professor Akshaya Kumar, I was struck by his observation:

In fact the contemporary theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism provide Ramanujan paradigms and tropes basic to his creative output. These theories deliver him the poetic design, the metaphor, and in fact, a much-sought-after 'different' poetic idiom. (413)

I beg to differ from Professor Kumar's critical analysis and observation, partly because of the orientation of this article, that seeks to locate Ramanujan's 'different' poetic idiom in the contemporary literary theories and not in the richness and sophistication of a literary culture. Finding out traces of theoretical ideas in poetic compositions is appreciably insightful; but it is untenable to assert that the creative process of Ramanujan is a quintessential absorption championed by Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard or Barthes.

Not only in terms of the use of rhythm in the narrative, but also in terms of the involuted image-pattern in English poems, Ramanujan remains indebted to the classical Tamil poets; and poems like *Purananuru*, *Kuruntokai*, *Malaipatukatam*, *Tirumurukarrupatai* influenced Ramanujan so much so that they constituted his "inner forms" (Parthasarathy, 96). He made these "inner forms" available to us in his writing in English because of

Western education and settlement. Ramanujan came across an early anthology of classical Tamil poems, edited by U. Ve. Caminataiyar in the then Harper Library of the University of Chicago. He read the poems with passion, and discovered the richness of his literary and cultural roots. Ramanujan wrote:

As I began to read on, I was enthralled by the beauty and subtlety of what I could read. Here was a world, a part of my language and culture, to which I had been an ignorant heir.

(1985, xvii)

P. Marudanayagam in a perceptive article observed:

Ramanujan's creative adaptations of Sangam lyrics and his conscious / unconscious borrowings from them reveal his admiration for classical Tamil Poetry.

(47)

Ramanujan's admiration for Nakkirar's *Tirumurukarrupatai* gives meaning to his understanding of the literary and cultural past of his native land:

The six sections of the *Guide to Murukan* celebrate six holy places, which are identified with His six faces, thus making Tamil country the body of the god. In this poetic act, the poem, the god, and the country become homologues of one another. This long poem is the first great bhakti poem in Indian literature.

(1985, 311)

Ramanujan's translations of classical Tamil poetry must have given him an opportunity to realize this fact that Indian writing in English, if it intends to achieve a timeless quality, should bank on

the rich resources of our regional or native literatures. This would obviously amount to a kind of distinction, a definable identity. Past or memory--subjective or collective--enshrines a vision that comprehends all other visions, encompasses a sense of continuity whether of the past, present or future, or of all times simultaneously.

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PRAMILA VENKATESWARAN
DOCKING AFTER AN AMAZING RIDE

Ralph Nazareth. *Ferrying Secrets*. Hyderabad: Yugadi Publishers, 2005. Rs.150 (India); \$9.95 (U.S.).

Reading *Ferrying Secrets* is to surrender oneself to the tidal wave of historical catastrophes such as Hiroshima, the Cold War and nuclear proliferation, Vietnam, and the Emergency in India, while being rescued now and then by the susurrus of children's lyrical voices, a grandmother's pronouncements, and the poet's own playfulness in the backyard of his imagination. "In the End Times," the culminating epic-length poem, is a realization of Ralph Nazareth's talent in language and form as well his vision of human self-destructiveness, a vision he would like to be rid of with a smidgeon of hope, that lone, inner voice that persists even as the world plummets. Set in the nuclear freeze movement of the late '60's through the '70's, "In the End Times," evokes that era's vision of the end of the world from nuclear war, in fact, the death of imagination itself. The poem's medley of voices, among them the poet's and lay people's, plus a chorus, succeeds in shaking our complacency today about our competition for nuclear weapons. Playfulness with language and form is in tension with the doom of the narrator's vision; only language finally is the thin thread the poet can hang on to while reality free falls into a darkness of the soul where god has erased itself: Only snow remains in the place of any "higher" being--"Om Shantih Snow Shantih Snow...Snow Om Chitty Chit Shantih Snow;" metaphysical reality reduced to a seemingly nonsensical chant to counter the paralysis of the "half-living."

While *Ferrying Secrets* seduces us into the poet's doom-and-gloom vision of how history plays itself out, perhaps its value lies in the nugget of poems where we hear the voices of children, their small gestures of attention towards the parent. Poems like "Beanbagging," in which the father hopes for kindness from his son in his old age, or "My Daughter's Beauty Parlor," where the father

allows himself to be “gussied up and slicked,” by his teenage daughter, or “How Come the Earth Spins,” which highlights the profundity in the daughter’s observation about everything in the world being attached “‘cus if it wasn’t it would come apart / and go to pieces” save *Ferrying Secrets* from becoming a mere diatribe on politics. It is in the voices of children the poet finds hope, although there is a darkness that he cannot escape even here. Basic relationships between parents and children and between lovers and spouses hold the world up and become the laboratory where abstract philosophical notions of attachment and letting go are tested. It is in these very poems where Nazareth’s language gains in its lyrical simplicity. A poem like “A Question for Vaclav Havel,” is one more example of a witty and funny poem that speaks to the variety of Nazareth’s art. Darkness is almost always punctuated with humor.

What can redeem the human predicament is the knowledge of the possibility of creation that exists together with destruction, as seen in his tiniest poem, “bOMb:”

is this
(also)
what
Krishna
meant?

This poem which serves as an epigraph to “In the End Times,” captures the paradox of the terror and the beauty in the ultimate revelation that is central to the *Mahabharatha*, which is picked up by Oppenheimer in his pronouncement as he witnessed the first atomic test explosion in the desert of New Mexico: “I am become Death.”

Ralph Nazareth’s success as a poet goes beyond labels such as his background as a Mangalorean Catholic, or as an Indian-American, or his inter-racial marriage. While his identities do filter into his poems, his craft takes him far beyond the restrictiveness of

Nazareth's volume is testimony to his defense of not just hybrid American identity but the singularity of voice that writers strive for. In it one hears this poet's voice that has absorbed the traditions of Indian literature, the native idioms of Catholic culture, English literary tradition as well as the literature and culture of the United States--the secrets that the poet has ferried across and planted in the home of his imagination. Waiting for the god-lover fired by devotion, a characteristic one finds in the bhakti tradition, is also a quality Nazareth has imbibed. In "The Water Path," the speaker, an old woman who has been a nurturing presence in the poet's life, speaks of her waiting along with other women for a love that is timeless.

Together we trim the creeping spinach,
string the jasmine, sprinkle it moist,
stir the rice, saying our beads,
standing in line
with those who came before us
and those who will follow,
all devoted to a life of God,
waiting, watering the sheep,
waiting long after the darkness
has fully fallen.

While his work is out of range of the scathing criticism of Bhasha writers who are contemptuous of work produced in English by diasporic South Asians that bears any hint of nostalgia, Nazareth's work shows that both Indian and diasporic Indians may do well to hone qualities from their very own tradition, such as the sophistication of bhakti poetry. Or if you are an Indian-American, you have a range of choices, one of them being the feverishness and irreverence of a Ginsberg. In the voice of the Beat generation that ushered the poet into the United States, Nazareth writes:

I need you Allen to sing of your loves big and little and of
your goddamn sphincter may it be loose and relaxed as
long as there are penises, fingers, coke bottles, carrots and

bananas and may it take its rightful place beside the sacred heart, the jewel in the lotus, brain cells, Perlman's fingers, Subbulakshmi's voice, Fisher's antics, Stieglitz's eyes and Gandhi's bowel movements

And in the same vein we are not to miss the quirky title of this three-page prose-poem: "Allen Ginsberg at Stew Leonard Shows Me the Democratic Vistas of Unending Cheeses, Walks Me Past Singing Cows, Banjo-strumming Bands and the Seven Deadly Sins, Chief Among Them, Gluttony and Talks to Me with Buddha Compassion at the Checkout Counter."

This variety in form, language, and content is a relief from the superficial bicultural poems selected for their "multicultural" content in American anthologies and writing conferences. Nazareth's poems work the middle ground where life in its ugliness and beauty exists in its unrelenting reality, leaning to neither of the two extremes--the poetry heavy with irony bereft of emotion or the mushy sentimentality of exilic writing.

Every poet hopes for his or her work to be universal and, if possible, timeless. Writing in the coming of age of Indian-American poetry, Nazareth's talent lies in his ability to open the deeply personal and make it universal as well as give the vast political drama of our times a deeply personal meaning. This is why a complex poem like "In the End Times" moves us as much as "Lightning Bugs," a poem about letting go, or the pickles cooking in their wells under "spice-soaked muslin" in "The Pickle Room." *Ferrying Secrets* weaves worlds with a few words, emulating a glass blower's art of "stretch[ing] little / into much," a poet's ultimate dream of an economy of words to encompass both our largeness and our smallness, our desire to know and be awed by the things we cannot know. The concluding lines of "Questions for Eleni" capture this human paradox best:

I know my India no better than I know your Greece.
Ignorance is my name and my belly's full of desire.

SHANTHI PREMKUMAR
WRITING FROM A BORROWED LAND

Pramila Venkateswaran. *Thirtha*. Stamford, CT: Yuganta Press, 2002.

The author of *Thirtha*, Pramila Venkateswaran, emigrated to the United States in 1982, in pursuit of a doctoral degree, and is now a naturalized citizen of the country, living on Long Island with her husband and two daughters. This book, though her maiden publication, has poems published through the years in several journals and magazines, since her entry into the US.

The book hinges rather heavily on the ever ubiquitous, and by now almost inevitable dilemma of the diaspora. The poems are divided into three sections. “Thirtha” or journey is the central metaphor, holding the book together. The poems are a spectacular rendering of the history of a diasporic soul with all the trepidation, the inevitable confrontations, the clashes and the struggle--inner and exterior--and the final quiet. Four stages of progression are in fact clearly identifiable in the process of fitting in, as outlined in the book. From being a native of one land in feeling and emotion; shifting on to that hazy area dividing yet connecting continents, where you are still an outsider gingerly trying to put your foot in; right through to the phase, when you are in the thick of things, blown about by both currents, actively fighting, absorbing, letting go in turns, trying to find your own; and at last the quiet settling down, when you have finally understood your place and can even journey back and forth, back and forth, with just the right amount of sentiment to add colour to the almost tourist-like detachment.

The narration begins with an introduction to a voice that endears itself to us right away. A voice that yearns to shake free of restrictions of nation, race, even of gender to strike at the confines, rise to rarefied heights and express itself. It succeeds in its endeavour:

The wind has hit the mountain
It has lifted itself over (3)

The clash of the cultures is portrayed with remarkable clarity. There is a clear statement of the mental dilemma:

Like you I live in a borrowed land (23)

...Imagine your daughters
empty of your India,
she bangs on a wall
Indian grand daughters empty of your oils,
Your smells, your tongue! (7)

Again there are the compromises. The author takes the slightly disparaging note in “dotheads” in her stride. But her daughter gives back as good as she gets, balling her fist and ramming Billy’s taunt right down his throat:

I won’t tell on you, she says,
straightening her small body. (15)

Even her name, that her grandmother divined, “new as nylon” is “whittled down to fit the tongue”--a disturbingly ironic yet accurate rendering of so much of diasporic way of living.

Conflicts are there, compromises too--but ultimately they work out solutions in myriad individual ways. The younger generation for example puts up a tough front, yet is more poised towards “a pure mix”:

I hold on to the counter
While our daughters stand on the shore
Ready for the mixing. (7)

At the other end of the social ladder, the poet bares to us the pathos of lives jailed by dollars--some behind the burning heat of

the tandoor, others under the dull ache of the never stopping needle. The air is thick with the weight of disturbed dreams and bonds stretching along miles of separation. The lines are heavy with the unfairness of it all--with the crass materialism of the dollars making everything right.

In my dreams, Munnu, as fair as a white boy
Calls me, "Ammee, come back"
And I wake up. (36)

Her birthland retains its sway over her. The wounds of history are raw in her. She lets "Ganga plunge in her" with its anger against the "mud, bones, metal." There are repeated references to the history of injustice against not only her people but against other unfortunate ones driven to extinction in the land of dreams of now.

These waters whisper
reappearances of native flight
narratives in books
of brown people cutting across mountains.
spiting death. (17)

In a "song's short life," she travels back a half century reliving the death on her native shores, the battles, massacres, the passing of the Mahatma and so on.

An arresting array it is of images of diasporic life, in all its varied ramifications--disturbing, pathetic, challenging, blending, breaking away, fitting in! Well, fitting in "one hemisphere into another" is not easy: the poet acknowledges that it is like trying to make "jasmine thrive on ice." Yet there is a definite indication that the poet has survived the initial roughing up. The initial incompatibility is only a step towards a more lasting kind of harmony. Her growing fascination for the ideology of her country of adoption is evident.

This is how I want America
paint its sun in my nails (25)

and her daughters sing “Star-Spangled Banner” on July 4 to an audience of crows sitting in a row on a wire. The interesting, absolutely unarguable logic of finding safety in precariousness must be certainly true of the mindset of millions of diaspora spread across the world.

Eggs sitting on the edge
cannot be snatched. (25)

Maybe they do prefer to sit on the edge, responding to the emotion of your native land, yet blending with the spirit of your adopted land. It need not in fact necessarily be the much-talked about dilemma. It could be a happy, graceful harmony of both cultures. For the poet, at least it is.

The quiet flapping
Evades intersections (55)

There is the clear message that she has found a home in the new land without any major qualms of the kind that disturbed poets like R. Parthasarathy. For him,

The spoonfuls of English brew
never quite slaked your thirst

My tongue in English chains¹ was his lament, while Pramila Venkateswaran announces smugly, almost happily,

I feel my Tamil slip from me
as English plants its flag on my tongue. (23)

Indeed, when her heart melts for the drunken vagabond dragging herself on the streets at midnight, when her plight moves her as

much as the urchins elbowed out of well kept temples in India, she recognizes that she has found a home in the new land.

Can the river be holier than
the heart, I wonder.... (8)

She immerses herself in it and rises, shedding barriers

.....tides rise
and fall, storms rage, unconfined by borders... (60)

Now she is a world citizen, “her feet parked in different hemispheres,” towering large beyond confining borders.

Though the “process of fitting in” is the predominant concern in the book, now and then we get enchanting little glimpses of other areas touched by the poet’s sensibility. Nature overwhelms her in its immensity. The human journey, despite all its aspirations, struggles. Soaring ambitions and joy and grief look so insignificant against the awesome backdrop of nature weaving its tale in the ocean turf and the wind and sand and rock ceaselessly over the ages.

That wind and sun, sea and sand
Weave into us their tales
Makes this human telling
the least spectacular of all. (39)

Well, in grace, in mercy, in heartfelt tears, in art, in our striving and sacrifice we make our bids for a little piece of that magnificent eternity. Pramila Venkateswaran makes hers through her poetry. Poetry is to her a communion with spirits from the past. Peopled with pregnant words, it constitutes the grey area of infinite understanding that is nearest to the soul centre of silence.

These words I write pass through me into a vastness
I do not know. (61)

The feminist's voice that comes through is not of the bitter antagonistic brood, but nevertheless carries strength and conviction. Femininity is viewed as something magnificent. There is an impression of vastness, of woman in all her limitless expanse, mysterious, all encompassing, embracing the whole world in her softness and strength. Her she-god had fashioned the female form, out of pure snow.

....defying space, as lines cut
Time. She ushers out the first woman... (42)

"Shame" delights with its crisp censure of the role delegated to the South Asian female by a largely inhibitionistic society.

Don't let her wear those tight t-shirts
Chi-Chi--She's a big girl now. (33)

The stark, simple picture gives us a taste of feminism at its sincerest. The basic right to glorify and delight in the self is expressed in powerful simplicity.

My shoulders droop. The knitted shirt
Embroidered with rose buds that hugs
My skin, no longer thrills me as I move. (33)

There is again the cry of rebellion that challenges the unfair preference for a male heir.

....In silence
She will carry my name
driving the dark voices away
over the city. (35)

She is at her ironical best in

Their lovers don't make the news. (29)

The path of love is not smooth, say the worldly wise but the discerning see the additional message in fine print “only for the woman.” The poet lists out the females--traditional Indian female or modern western ones. She sees no dichotomy in their plights.

The woman in the news had
jumped out the window
of her fifth floor apartment
in New York city
while her mother was
rolling out chappathis
Anna, Juliet, Cleo, you continue
to list them
dead white and cold
singed hair or toast
smoking in griddles (29)

Echoes of war poets like Wilfred Owen are heard in the war-weary lament,

gaps gape in homes other wars can't close. (44)

“Thirtha” is not one journey, but a conglomeration of journeys--spatial, physical, spiritual--into realms of music and depths of heart, into noisy faith “ricocheting off stone and sky,” into silence “where impurity falls, a worn garment.”

It is an intensely, rewarding experience, being a co-traveller. The poetry is alive with a host of different shades of meaning, each light as air, elusive to the touch but moist with emotion. Poetry is a delightful game of hide-and-seek between word and feeling, at the best of times. Pramila Venkateswaran however shows herself to be a facile player. Word matches feeling, word for word, feeling for feeling. With sharp, terse expressions, where the sense could have lost itself a little if weighed down by ponderous details, she uses the light, sure touch of a skilled surgeon. Touching upon the right word with one swift stroke, she delves deep, right into the core of the

meaning she wishes to express. The swiftness belies the effort that must have been spent. Concentrated thought is compressed into each word.

Images, similes and metaphors delight the senses and enchant the intellect at once by their novelty of expression and ingeniousness and accuracy of message. Getting rid of Tamil influences in her spoken English is as difficult as “wiping ripples off a pond.”

From untamed depths,
inflections unsuspectingly
wash up in
crevices between syllables. (40)

About the fitting in of cultures, she says,

The fit is never exact.
It's like the lid
that needs to be a teeny bit wider
to grip the can's mouth vacuum-tight. (40)

There is the gentle poke at marriages decided by horoscopes.

A page of classifieds-hearts encashed in stars and
planets. (6)

And in the secret map of her love life,

the tumbling sky love books
talk about
will be an understatement. (46)

Native mythology also plays its role in informing and enriching her images from within.

we imitate divinity
with our feet parked in
different hemispheres. (60)

And so we have *Thirtha*, as pleasing as the first sliver of sunshine, and holding as much promise of similar sensitive treatment in the future, of new wider horizons and more varied subjects.

Endnotes:

¹ R. Parthasarathy, *Rough Passages* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980) 45.

² Parthasarathy 45.

USHA KISHORE
*MUSHAIRAS*¹ IN THE UK

Debjani Chatterjee. Ed. *Generations of Ghazals*. Tr. Debjani Chatterjee and Basir Sultan Kazmi. Bradford, UK: Redbeck Press, 2003.

Generations of Ghazals, is a multicultural venture to import the delights of the rich tradition of *ghazal*² poetry into the UK. The collection houses the English translations of the ghazals of two generations of Urdu poets: father and son, Nasir Kazmi and Basir Sultan Kazmi. Many of the *ghazals* in the collection have been jointly translated by the well-known Indian-born British poet, writer and translator Dr. Debjani Chatterjee in collaboration with Basir Kazmi, while some *ghazals* are translated by Chatterjee herself.

In a highly comprehensive introduction to this collection, Chatterjee journeys into the Persian and Arabic origins of the hybrid *ghazal* repertoire. She also traces the roots of Urdu and explains to the Western reader the complex structure of the *ghazal* and the intricacies of its conventional imagery and symbolism. In the introduction, the translator exposes some of the challenges in the translation of the *ghazal* such as the rigid structure, the metrical nuances and the rhyme scheme, not to mention the cultural paradigms in the imagery like the firefly, the moon and the cruel lover. The symbolism, with its Sufi connotations and allusions to the history and geography of the Indian sub-continent and to Persian and Arabic poetry, has all been elicited in the introduction. The translators have observed some metrical/syllabic regularity of the *ghazal*, the couplet structure and the “signature line” in the final couplet of each *ghazal*. The individual translations have all been

¹ Urdu designation for a gathering of poets, where ghazals are recited, with instant response from the audience. *Generations of Ghazals* 13.

² Urdu lyric poem. The word has two literal meanings: "talking to women" and "the cry of a stricken deer." *Generations of Ghazals* 16.

titled, as opposed to the originals which are untitled, as is the tradition.

Chatterjee feels that: “Each couplet of a ghazal is an aphorism, often gnostic. This is especially so in the case of the final couplet, which is often the opportunity for some philosophical musing.”³ A brief introduction to the Urdu poets Nasir Kazmi (1925 - 1972) and Basir Sultan Kazmi (1955 -) is also given.

The lingering melancholy and romanticism of the *ghazal* mark the lines of Nasir Kazmi:

*Once more the monsoon wind blows and I remember you,
once more the leafy anklets chime and I remember you.*
(Monsoon Moments)

However, his poetry is no mere lyrical exercise. The Sufi revelations in “The First Rain” come to light in the following lines:

*I lived lifelong without You,
yet people say that You were mine.*

*O Sender of the first rain,
I thirsted for sight of You.*

The seeking of God through nature and the *khudi* (selfhood) and *khudai* (divinity) elements of Sufism can be glimpsed here.

Like many other writers who were witnesses to the partition of India, Nasir Kazmi, too, portrays the anguish of lost homelands in the stylised images of “Dreams of a Forgotten Land”:

*Dreams of a forgotten land
kept on melting in the eyes.*

³ *Generations of Ghazals* 16.

*Shadows of the courtyard wall
Spread everywhere like a shawl.*

There is also the agonising cry to his relatives in Ambala, India, to flee the city in “Flight.” This was a direct reaction to the communal strife and political changes taking place in pre-Independent India:

*This city is a sad place of doom.
Flee this city. Quickly! You must run!*

There is also the refreshing attempt to bridge Hinduism and Islam in the poem, “On the Surma’s⁴ Banks.” This follows the footsteps of many contemporary *ghazal* poets, who effectively use the Radha-Krishna myth:

*That day upon the Surma's banks
the winter held its first carnival...*

*The maid Radha and the boy Mohan -
O when did I ever see such dance!*

This poem by a Muslim writer in the proportions of the *Gita Govinda* brings to mind the verses of Malik Mohammed Jaysi.

The *ghazals* of Basir Sultan Kazmi reflect the postcolonial sentiments of migration, displacement and dislocation:

*My bags have always been few and my luggage weighed little.
Like a nomad just passing through, I have lived here and
there.*

(Passing Through)

The racial inequalities faced by British Asians in their field of work comes across in “Working for Them”:

⁴ The Surma is a river in Bangladesh.

*Night too resembles day,
so when should we have rest?*

The poet uses the binary opposites of night and day to portray the Anglo-Saxon and Asian races. He later effectively uses his verse to highlight the enterprising nature of the Asians in Britain and challenges the host population in these lines:

*Leave these dead jobs, Basir:
let's do things for ourselves.*

The frustrations of highly qualified first generation Asian immigrants in the UK are portrayed in “Rightfully Mine”:

*There was another age when one chose one's work,
Now, the skilled must tackle anything.*

*Master, I'll only take what's rightfully mine.
Then I haven't asked for anything.*

The above couplet is a tongue-in-cheek colonial address to the white employers. The sentiment of frustration is re-echoed in “The True-hearted:

*The same lack of reward awaits accomplished hands.
In the end the mountain-cutter breaks his own head.*

In the same poem, Basir Kazmi comes to terms with his self-exile:

*The true-hearted can settle--no matter which land.
A flower wants to bloom, wherever its garden...
When do habits and desires ever change, Basir?
Whichever the forest, a peacock needs must dance.*

“Finding One's Place” is yet another *ghazal* that signifies Basir Kazmi's ambivalent attitude to the UK:

*There is no charm here in living, or in dying.
Who counselled you to inhabit another's place?*

*I grumble about you, but there is also love.
There is room for both - each has its distinctive place.*

But Basir Kazmi's *ghazals* are not all postcolonial angst. They also employ classical imagery, elegant diction and lyricism. The *ghazal* hyperbole finds its way into "Turbulence":

*There is turbulence in the heart's ocean:
your moonlike face creates this tidal flow.*

And the melancholy of Urdu *ghazals* lingers in "A fistful of Tears":

*O firefly, for whom do you search
In the desolate wilderness...*

*All night I set my blood on fire
and achieved a fistful of tears.*

The aphoristic/Gnostic elements of *ghazals*, as highlighted in the introduction can certainly be found in the lines

*Grief is a banyan tree, thick with leaves
While joys are tender flowers.
(One Small Mistake)*

The *ghazal* translations here are a change from current trends in prose written by Indians abroad, which tends to concentrate on the negative aspects of the Indian sub-continent. This collection is an affirmation of Indian culture and tradition. It can be considered also as an attempt to bridge India and Pakistan, paralleling current literary traditions in the sub-continent, considering the fact that both Debjani Chatterjee and Basir Kazmi are tireless *ghazal* promoters in the UK. They are both founder-members of the multi-cultural and multi-lingual poetry group, "Mini Mushaira," along with British

teacher and writer Simon Fletcher and the Anglo-Irish writer and poet Brian D'Arcy, who is Chatterjee's husband.

From a translation point of view, there seems to be no struggle for space between the Urdu context and the English language, but rather a clear attempt at assimilation which has been very successful. The post-colonial "contact zone" seems to define itself in the translations in the form of multiplicity, exchange and negotiation. English has been definitely Indianised in imagery, techniques and style, but the interesting fact is that the collection does not read as a translation but as multicultural English verse. Here, Chatterjee has certainly employed her linguistic skill as an Indian poet writing in English. This transliteration of Urdu's most popular poetic form could be the herald of a *ghazal* tradition in English verse, not dissimilar to the English version of the Japanese *Haiku*, *Tanka* and *Renga*.

CECILE SANDTEN
LOOKING BEYOND THE SURFACE

Raman Mundair. *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers, and Thieves*. Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree, 2003.

"How do you speak, where there are no images of self to claim?"

The cover of *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers, and Thieves* (2003), the first poetry collection by Asian-British writer Raman Mundair, is already somehow provoking. A naked, supposedly Asian woman, with a gold bracelet on one of her wrists and her head turned back so that her long black hair is falling over her shoulder, is standing in-between empty wooden market stalls. It looks as if it had rained not long ago. In front of the naked woman lies a piece of a corrugated cardboard on which is written "2 for £ 1" and "1 for 60p." The title words are scribbled in big purple and lilac letters across the naked body. The body is neither sexy, nor pornographic, nor shameful. Yet, the cover arouses our interest.

It already indicates what the reader actually gets when encountering the poems: they are very direct in tone and voice, thought-provoking, in short, they draw one in. Mundair is sometimes using a colloquial language which is frequently interspersed with faecal words. The poems repeatedly stir because of their form, and most strikingly, they challenge due to the themes which are depicted, especially in the poems in the "Lovers"-section of the collection. The poems seem to be very personal accounts of their speaker, a lyrical persona, in whose voice most of the poems are written. In spite of that, we do not know whether the accounts described in the poems are experiences of Mundair herself. However, we get the notion that the events illustrated are based on "Asian-British," "female," "immigrant" experiences.

The collection *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers and Thieves* is centred around themes such as a strict patriarchal hierarchy which is

criticized, child abuse, domestic violence, a child's sexuality, love, desire, the body, wounds and blood. It is also about a Muslim boyfriend, immigration to Canada, immigrant disillusionment or racist murders, and it is also inspired by the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, and accounts and aspects from the Indian religious and everyday life. The issue of a patriarchal hierarchy dominating the women's lives is highlighted in the very first poem "The Folds of my Mother's Sari" in which the persona alludes to "My father's crow-like sisters,/ diminished by years of strict/ fraternal rule" (11). The collection seems to be ordered chronologically, as in part II of the above-mentioned poem the persona talks about her first experiences after being born. She recounts her "sultan body" and her "first/ object of desire":

Suckled by an unknown breast
I awoke.
As is custom
The first *dudh* to pass my lips
was not my mother's own.
A neighbour took
my sultan body
and coaxed my lips
to clamp aroused
around my first
object of desire. (12)

Nearly every poem in *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers and Thieves* refers to the writer's Indian background, as Mundair is using words and sentences in Punjabi, Urdu or Hindi which are explained either in the poems themselves or in the "Notes" which the reader finds at the end of the book. This makes the descriptions of the "Asian-British" and "immigrant" experiences even more "authentic." In the poem "Name Journeys" (16) we learn that the persona is confronted by the English "infertile soil" and the English language as she is "travelling from South/ to North, where the Punjabi in my mouth// became dislodged as milk teeth fell/ and hit infertile English soil" (16). At the beginning of her immigrant's experience, as is depicted

in the poem "Refractions" (17), the persona, who is "unused to dialogue, broken/ Punjabi jammed Bollywood Hindi," is learning "survival essentials" such as "Thank you Thank you/ Very much Very much/ Please Please/ Sorry, so sorry...." (17-8). The poem "Asu Tears" (31) is a bilingual poem in which each line in Hindi is directly translated into English. The poem is marked by repetition and thus reminds one of an Indian-style love song.

The whole collection is about desire, about the search for identity and the search for love. In the poem "Osmosis" (14) the persona's mother, who is preparing an Indian dish, gives rise to a great sexual desire in the speaker of the poem, a little girl who is sitting on her mother's lap and is touching herself "coyly identifying my own special place" (15). When her mother asks her "What are you doing?" she answers: "My hand wavers and works/ its way back up./ I say, calmly, clearly/ 'It feels good, mummy,/ it feels real nice,/ when I touch myself/ here'" (15). As a reader, one gets the idea that this desire--and the speaker's love for her mother--can be characterised as a love for a woman, a theme which is taken up once again later on in the collection. Thus, Mundair is introducing different voices and personae, identities and preferences, an ability which can be related to her experience as a writer of plays, and the writing for the screen.

The poem "Excuse for a Father" (19-20) involves domestic violence and child abuse generated by the immigrant in an "abrasive country," "a world that made you feel like nothing" (19). This is put forward by the persona in order to excuse her father's brutal transgressions. The poem is written like a story in which the father, "Papa," is directly addressed by the speaker of the poem. He is accused, on the one hand, but also excused, on the other. In this poem Mundair describes, in a strange combination with faecal language, the father's trance-like rage. "Is there anyone in?/ Papa?

Daddy? Father?" (19), the speaker asks. The last question in the poem "Do you feel?" is repeated four times: And the poem ends on the word "Shame". Similar to this poem in tone and voice are the following four poems: "Body Memories" (21-22),

"The Red Chamber" (23-25), "Walking Wounded" (26) and "The Red Chamber Revisited" (27), though these poems seem to be, rather, about sexual violence, as is highlighted by lines such as the following:

... the grooves
imprinted on her cheek
where his thick metal
watchstrap has been indented
proof of forced contact
against her skin
against her will ... (22)

Other lines also indicate sexual abuse: "I am your plastic, fantastic lover,/ I can take anything you give and, baby,/ I never die/ I am a cat with 90 lives/ living forever" (23). "The Red Chamber" reminds me in its depiction of brutality and bodily/sexual abuse of the fairy tale "Bluebeard." As we know it today, this story is the creation of French writer Charles Perrault--first published in 1697 in his collection *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (*Stories or Tales of Past Times*). It is a frightful and warning tale about the dangers of marriage and the perils of greed and curiosity--and is more reminiscent of contemporary horror films. Mundair's poem describes the horrors of violence against the persona, a woman, openly, by also indicating the man's surreal projections and fantasies: "I am your anglemartyrwitchwhore--too magical" (25). She is caught in this situation and seemingly not able to leave this claustrophobic brutal life: "I am sitting on an overfull suitcase/ compress/ suppress/ repress/ depress/ oppress" (25). The poem "Walking Wounded" (26) is characterised by repetition and variation of lines as if in a prayer. In each of the five stanzas the persona says: "Inside my body there's a war going on/ Seemingly invisible to your eyes." This poem, too, relates to the memories of child abuse and violence. It is about the confrontation with the wounded, and the refusal of the brutal male to acknowledge his deeds: "You step neatly out of my way/ Safe in knowing what's 'your shit and what's mine'" (26). The last line of the poem indicates

that victim and offender are both "the walking wounded" (26) as they are equally trapped in a vicious circle. The last poem of the section "Lovers," "Mysore Sunset" (28), is placatory in tone, and highlights a love relationship in a romantic setting that the title already suggests.

The section "Liars" of Mundair's collection is basically about relationships. In "The Meeting Point" (33-35) a kind of arranged marriage is described, as the Black British persona flies to Canada in order to meet her future Indian husband/lover whom she only got to know through letters and a picture: "I felt your gaze.// It was as if I were being scrutinised by prospective/ in-laws. But then, I suppose ours was an arranged liaison, of sorts" (34). The native totem the persona sees on the way to the car park, and which she describes as "[an] auspicious welcome," is revealed by her (actually by him) as a "tourist ploy to lull naïve innocents/ like me to think Canada to be truly a land of freedom/ and democracy" (34). So the persona's future lover seems to be a disillusioned immigrant. This sort of disillusionment is also described in the poem "Three Photographs of You" (36-38). In this poem, his "obstinate nature" is depicted as being "held in Moghul profile" as his eyes are "masked,/ hiding the battle within" (37); he appears in a "Count Dracula cape," his "T-shirted torso red/ underneath" (38), signalling danger. After having read the poem "Excuse for a Father," the last lines come like a warning: "and for a moment as you bent/ down to kiss me, I saw/ my father" (38). The next poems in the collection, "Close Encounters I" to "Close Encounters IV" are about the relationship with a Muslim boyfriend who takes his girlfriend home to his Muslim parents. She sees herself as being characterised by them as "an 'infidel,'" who "talks of freedom, love and choice" (41). "Close Encounters IV" (44) involves "dead woman's clothes" which hang in his wardrobe. However, the relationship seems to come to an end, as she is "left [...] kneeling, bleeding, but not yet dead" (48). The "dead woman's clothes" reappear in the poem "Light Relief" (49) which is about his "woman of fantasy" who is able to "dance like a courtesan," "cook Thai, Italian and Indian/ with equal flavour, fragrance and competence," who speaks fluently many languages,

"converses eloquently/ on all topics," who dresses in Indian clothes, "who goes down on [him] without question" and "slips effortlessly into the dead/ woman's clothes" which hang in his "wardrobe" (49). The speaker of the poem finally says: "The women of your fantasy are as diverse as you are inconsistent,/ and you demand me to wear them, like the dead woman's clothes/ in your wardrobe" (50). The speaker is confronted by all his past memories, wishes, desires and expectations. As it turns out, their relationship has come to an end. The poem "Small Things" (53) underlines this idea, as it involves things which he did not like, such as "the mess from a woman's body,/ unruly body hair,/ oral sex./ Small things/ perhaps, but hugely significant all the same" (53). In the poem "The Catch" (58-9), the persona is even dreaming of killing him with her mother's *kirpan* as he is unfaithful to her. In the first line she addresses him: "thief of my heart, you flew/ from here to another isle, oceans apart" (58). Later on in the poem Mundair writes: "I will know that you can no longer use my heart," "I shall remind myself/ that there are plenty more fish in the sea" (59), thus expressing the search for love.

Part three of the collection, "Conjurers," contains reflections of the relationship of the persona with her boyfriend who seems to have been a "Father Figure" (65) for her:

When I look at your face,
a face that I could look at forever
I do not understand
whether it is the father
I never had
or the first love I lost that I see.

This part of the collection is also about travels to and experiences (e.g. Spring) in Stockholm ("The Transformation," 66). The section "Conjurers" also presents a new love and the persona's marriage to him: "Under chlorophyllic cathedrals/ oozing soft green light/ we marry [...]" ("Surya," 68). This section contains two poems are about "Pakeezah--Pure of Heart (Urdu)" (69-70) and her

dance ("Naatch," 71). These poems are characterised by the love of a woman who, in the first poem, calls herself Pakeezah. Originally, "Pakeezah is a [fictional] female Hindi film character, now an icon" (93). In the "Notes" it is said that "Pakeezah dances on broken glass in order to prove her honour" (93). With this reference, Mundair turns to an Indian aspect. The speaker of the poem starts to love this woman and uses her as a painkiller after her latest broken love relationship. This woman "in a Gregory Isaac style,/ became 'nightnurse' to my wounds" (69).¹ The story of the melodramatic Hindi film centres around a courtesan's love affair with an aristocratic young man and the social obstacles which come their way. At the end of Mundair's poem it turns out that Pakeezah is only a fiction who starts to bore her spectator after some time of comforting. Further, after being fully recovered, the spectator discovers Pakeezah's stereotypical character: "How easy she is to take! No challenge./ Easy game. Fully recovered. Bored. I look away" (70).

The poem "Jealousy" (72) relates to lesbian love. "Release" (73) depicts strong sexual desire, and "The 4:10 Bangalore to Mysore" is also about lesbian desire, whereas the poem "Coke Break" (76) centres around oral tastes, especially that of *Coca Cola*, "a colonizing taste that quenches all colours/ of tongues." It is interesting to note that the original logo of *Coca Cola* is inserted into the poem. The persona's memories of heat, taste and a specific atmosphere are connected to drinking *Coca Cola*.

The last section of the poetry collection, "Thieves," has two poems which dramatise the racist murders of Ricky Steel and Stephen Lawrence. They are written in tribute for the two boys. "Thieves" is also about the Partition of India and Pakistan which Mundair describes as "[a] seismic fault/ that continues/ to tremor" (82). In this section, Mundair, again, turns to other places such as

¹ Gregory Isaac is a Caribbean reggae musician who published his album "Night Nurse" and a song with the same title, a compilation of ballads, in Bob Marley's Studio Tuff Gong in 1982.

Stockholm. In the poems about Sweden's metropole she puts forward the question of belonging:

The little girl is back, google-eyed.
I lean back and stretch, uncomfortable
under the glare

of the sun and try
to remember places
where I belong. (85)

The poem "Kulturhuset, Sergals Torg" (86) has to do with democracy. The last poem of the collection, "Last Night a Poet Saved My Life" (90)--as a variation of and an intertextual reference to the song (by Mariah Carey) "Last Night a DJ Saved My Life"--is a most reconciling meta-poetic poem about the production and reading of poetry itself.

Raman Mundair is writer, playwright, poet, and performer. Her work is informed by the personal journeys she has negotiated as a young Indian Punjabi woman living in England for most of her life. Mundair's family came originally from Ludhiana, India, but moved to England when she was a little girl. She was brought up in Manchester and Leicestershire. She began writing as a child, using it as a survival mechanism in a world where she felt different. So far, her writing career has taken her to Namibia, Sweden, Italy, and to the Shetland Islands as the Shetland Arts Trust Writer in Residence. These different places seem to have triggered her imagination. One of her poems, "Piercing Flesh," which has been published in the *New Shetlander* (No. 225, 2003, p. 14), relates to Abas Amaini (who is an Iranian Kurdish political poet), and Shahin Profefeb (who is Iranian), and it is dedicated to the two men. As one can read in a note to the poem, it centres around the two poets' experience of torture in Iran. They sought asylum in the UK. But their applications were refused, and in protest at this decision they sewed up their eyes, lips, and ears.

Generally, Mundair is writing about very personal things and about the nature of being human, though at times she can also be very political. Her poetry has to do with questioning and looking beyond the surface. This is evident in many poems in which she depicts a world beyond Britain. What is most striking about the poetry collection *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers and Thieves* is that Mundair is able to catch the reader and put her/him inside the experience of the poems. Each poem has its own distinctiveness, its own voice, its own environment, but there is also an architecture to be seen in the collection which makes it a satisfying whole.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Usha Kishore, who lives in Onchan, Isle of Man, and currently is lecturer in English at Isle of Man College, was born and brought up in Kerala. She has published poetry, reviews and articles in U.K. and Ireland, and a substantial study of Tagore in *Kavya Bharati*.

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Prem Kumar, who is senior instructional designer with Boeing Aircraft in Seattle, has taught English in several American Universities. Born and raised in Punjab, he has written and translated much Punjabi poetry. He is founder/executive director of the Indian American Education Foundation, which supports education of Indian children with disabilities.

Niranjan Mohanty is currently Professor of English at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. He has published six volumes of poetry, the latest being *Krishna* (2003), and has also extensively translated Oriya and Bengali into English.

Molshree is a licensed attorney in the state of Illinois in the U.S., and works there for Asian Human Services in the area of Domestic Violence Law. Her poetry has appeared in several previous *KB* volumes. She resides in Oak Park, adjacent to Chicago.

Poovan Murugesan lives in San Diego, California, where he teaches Physics. His India base is in the south of this country which he frequently visits.

Shanthi Premkumar writes poetry in Tamil and English and translates Tamil literature. Her own poetry collection *Nilaa Pennae* was recently published. She teaches English literature at Thiagarajar College in Madurai.

Thomas H. Pruiksma is at work translating into English all thirty-one of the poems in *Mūturai*, of the 12th century poet Avvaiyar. Co-editor of *A Feast for the Tongue*, he currently works under a Fulbright fellowship at Ohio State University, Columbus.

Judy Ray co-edited, with David Ray, *Fathers: A Collection of Poems*. Her books include *Pigeons in the Chandeliers* and *The Jaipur Sketchbook: Impressions of India*. She is a volunteer teacher of English to adults in the community in Tucson, Arizona.

Cecile Sandten lives in Bremen, Germany, where she is Professor for English, New English Literatures and Postcolonial Theory at Bremen University, and Founder/Chair of the University's Institute for Postcolonial and Transcultural Studies. Her publications include essays on Indian and black British literature and on Shakespeare, and a book-length study of Sujata Bhatt's poetry.

Sudeep Sen's multinational experience includes residence in London, Edinburgh, Dhaka and New Delhi (where he currently lives). His poetry, which has been translated into more than twenty languages, has won the Pleiades and Hawthornden awards. Among the most recent of his prolific publications are *Postcards from Bangladesh*, *Prayer Flag*, *Distracted Geographies* and *Rain*.

Amritjit Singh, professor of English at Rhode Island College, has authored or edited over a dozen books on American and Indian literatures. His most recent co-edited volumes include *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman*; *Interviews with Edward W. Said*; and *Pedagogy, Canon and Context: Towards a Redefinition of Ethnic American Literary Studies*.

Jeet Thayil, who lives in New Delhi, was born in Kerala, India, and educated in Bombay, Hong Kong and New York. He is Editor of the Boston-based journal *Fulcrum's* new anthology *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: Fifty-Six Indian Poets (1951-2005)*. His own most recent book of poems is entitled *English*.

Beth Thomas currently lives in rural Maine, the northeastern-most of the United States. Her poems "Ghazal" and "The Veil" in this issue are from her volume *Transfiguring Beauty*. Her other published poetry appears in many journals, including *Seneca Review*, *River Styx*, and *Heliotrope*.

N. Anne Highlands Tiley, who has published poetry in Indian, Japanese and American journals, lives now in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in the United States. Her poem "Presence" in this issue was inspired by Stella Kramrisch, curator of the Art Museum in Philadelphia, and author of a classic study of *The Hindu Temple*.

Pramila Venkateswaran, who teaches English and Women's Studies at Nassau Community College in New York, has published *Thirtha*, a volume of poetry. Her writing has appeared in many literary journals of Canada, India and the United States, as well as several anthologies of poetry from around the world.

SUBMISSIONS

Kavya Bharati welcomes contributions of poetry in English, review articles and essays on poetry or particular poets, well recorded interviews with poets, and translations of poetry from Indian languages into English: from resident and non-resident Indians, and from citizens of other countries who have developed a past or current first-hand interest in India.

We prefer manuscripts on A4-size paper that are typewritten, or computer printouts. We will also process and consider material that is sent by e-mail. Submissions of essays and review articles sent in any format whatever must conform to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

All submissions must be accompanied by the full preferred postal address of the sender (including PIN code), with telephone and / or e-mail address where possible. With the submission **sufficient biodata must be sent**, similar to what is given in the “Contributors” pages of this issue. In the case of translations, please include the biodata of the source poet also. All submissions must be sent, preferably by Registered Post or Courier in the case of manuscripts and printouts, to Professor R.P.Nair, Editor, *Kavya Bharati*, SCILET, American College, Post Box No.63, Madurai 625 002 (India).

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INVITATION TO JOIN IN THE INDIAN CRITICS SURVEY

An on-going autonomous, self-funded, non-profit project is now surveying via an open-ended questionnaire the opinions, methods, proposals and suggestions of all kinds of critics writing in all the Indian languages, including English, who have been actively publishing in India during the past dozen or so years. In 2004, some 250 responses to the survey were posted for public access on the project's website: www.samvadindia.com/critic--which we invite anyone to visit for data about India's varied critical activity.

The aims of the project are

- To facilitate a more productive sense of community among Indian critics in all languages and of all persuasions;
- To provide information about the diversity and commonality of their views, procedures, projects and crucial issues;
- To reduce dependence upon methodologies, attitudes, and approaches of limited use in the Indian critical and multi-cultural context; and, most generally and optimistically,
- To strengthen awareness, self-criticism and self-confidence in individual critics and their self-defined groups; and thus,
- To increase the productivity and usefulness of Indian criticism as a whole for its Indian participants and society.

Individual replies to the survey questionnaire will be categorized, the critical types and issues commented upon and all the information published as soon as feasible. Initially the replies are being posted in unanalyzed form on our website in order "to facilitate communication among us all."

Anyone in India actively involved with criticism, whether literary or more broadly cultural and/or social, is invited to participate. **Please join in this project by visiting the above-named website** in order to get further information and to register reactions. Additionally the organizers may be contacted: Dr. (Prof. Ret) S. Sreenivasan, Editor, Journal of Literature & Aesthetics, Kollam, Kerala 691 021 (jla@vsnl.com); JNU Prof. Makarand Paranjape, New Delhi (pmakarand@hotmail.com); & (Prof. ret.) John Oliver Perry, Seattle, (joperry2@aol.com) for questionnaire forms.

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AMERICAN COLLEGE, MADURAI

The Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, better known by its acronym, SCILET, has one of the largest databases in Asia for Indian Literature in English. Its ten thousand books include texts by fifteen hundred Indian and South Asian authors. From other books and from more than sixty-five current journal titles and their back issues, critical material regarding many of these Indian authors is indexed and included in the database.

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