# KAVYA BHARATI

Tenth Anniversary Issue

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
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# FOREWORD

With this issue *Kavya Bharati* completes its first decade. The editorial staff is delighted with the contributions of many old friends which grace *KB* 10, some of whom having appeared in four or five previous issues. But we are equally pleased with the new friends included here--almost a dozen writers who are publishing in *Kavya Bharati* for the first time, in this tenth anniversary volume.

New friends remind us that we must find new ways to serve our audience. *Kavya Bharati* appreciates the kind words that many readers have sent us. But we need to have more substantive reader response. One essay in an earlier journal evoked a spirited rejoinder from a critic, which was promptly published in our next issue. Our journal is eager to see more of this kind of response, and to publish it whenever possible.

News about poetry writing in India is another area into which we can more pointedly move. One previous issue had a "Poetry News" page. But this could become a regular feature in each *Kavya Bharati*. Seminars involving Indian poetry; poetry writing workshops; contests; new poetry centres and journals; libraries: if readers can send us responsible news about any such events our journal should attempt to publish it.

New poetry publications also need to be noted, even if we cannot review every one. *KB* appreciates copies of books sent to us, and those which have come recently will receive note in our next number. Perhaps "Books Received" can become a regular feature of each issue also.

But what else would you like to see in our "review of Indian Poetry"? As we move into our second decade of publication, *KB* solicits ideas from our readers that will help to enhance its value. Perhaps not all such suggestions can be implemented. But they will alert us, and keep our minds working to find new ways of making *Kavya Bharati* a better journal during our next ten years.

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Editor : R.P. Nair

**KAVYA BHARATI**
*a review of Indian Poetry*

*Number 10, 1998*

# CONTENTS

***Poetry Section***

## JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

# DANCE OF THE FIREFLIES

Coolness
of the first June rain.
Already in the far distance
is the cloudburst which was here minutes ago;
cries that splattered from treetops of tall sals
have also fallen silent.
Only a roll of thunder
softly strokes the dark corners of the sky's blue.
Cricket-chirps start to spill from the roots of trees.
From the isolated glow
of a log cabin in the thick Similipal forests,
the monsoon evening becomes an abyss
that swallows the city-world one left the day before.
All around, the jungle seems to take deep breaths
which make the earth's breast move,
as though earth itself
goes on working in the absence of time.
Darkly green, the rain-wetness slowly
flows out of the thick bamboos to settle on the skin.

It is dusk soon, velvety, vast.

Hills turn into dark blotches on the horizon,
shades of night stretch their strange hands
toward the blanket of trees floating in the breeze,
A deer barks close by.

* * *

Without warning then,
a million windows of dusk are suddenly aflame.
Dark tree-masses break down.
Before the listening eye,
a celebration of passion begins,
as the moist wind answers to some primeval call
in a thousand tones in wingbeat and grass.
Here movement is reality.
Far and deep into the hills
some ancient tapestry takes shape. as countless gems
of fire begin swaying to a strange rhythm
against the forest's sensuous arc.
Everywhere, swarms of fireflies
rise into the air and fall, wave after wave,
their lights trembling to sinuous forms,
in resonance with that unity of being
nature only knows how to brace.

This earth around us, this dance to death,
is a touchstone,
a weapon one must learn to use.
And something touches the silence of deep roots.
I draw away, like a June rain,
no more eager for answers.
Just pure fires
keep on breathing from our open eyes.

## MEMORY

Out there, a line of gray windows,
black spaces in them.
Something is supposed to be hidden there,
but it just won't fit.
It's like the clock --
No one disturbs it.

Does every man have to bear his,
for him to go on ?
At times it's a scar from another's,
staring moodily at the twilight body.
Sometimes a wisp of high cirrus
that can't see its way in impossible skies.

This evening, maybe
it will stand by my bed again,
a hollow word, an old harlot.
There was never any choice;
proof perhaps of some human grace
before we escape its curses.

## NIGHT

Once again,
how night comes by
to stand under the window.
In the tall grass on the other side of the wall.

But this night,
what can one speak of it?
That it ushers in the dark,
and that who becomes the hunter, who the hunted,
no one can tell?
Does anyone know who eats up whom
on the other side of the window ?

No use keeping my window shut.
Night in the room too.
And far inside me, this night of the heartwoods
where I could be lost for years
before I found my way out.
Or where it could be
that instant in which I would discover
it was already morning.

I find I am always
pulled down to the light,
to the morning, the afternoon;
from a secret world life made for itself,
and face the insanity of my experience.
All I have left is this moment
when it leads me into my little room
with the cot and the sleepy grey blanket,
and the stack of old *National Geographics*.

# ORISSA

Into a long captivity of graceful ruins,
breathtaking statues, earth the color of dried blood,
and the lover's long gaze, Orissa steps in.
Men press up against her breast and belly and thighs.
Like a sleeping baby, the Right Rock of Dhauli
hangs limply from her hands, deathly still.
Here the grieving wife measures the earth
from her throat of sunlight, rain and grass,
in the slow dread of the future
growing behind her, through the perpetual mist
that surrounds tantric laws and mythical ikons.
In her slime a lotus flowers,
from the gathered bone of spirits pure as tears,
the darkness of centuries bleeding in its wings.

## SMALL TALK

We talk to bring about
a little change in our lives.
Even small talk. About rising prices.
Tiresome, in the clutches
of the long droughts across the desk,
in the empty rooms,
with the roles metaphors can sometimes play.
We pick our way through silence;
the cracked earth knows how
from each bit of land
the birds have flown.
The rain has moved further away
as we watch.
A rickshaw puller
stops, stares at his childhood
the fare has left behind in his palm.
Time doesn't overlook our meanest thoughts.
Perhaps these words never seem to see
anything amiss, and I cannot think
what to say to the little child
waiting kindly for me to begin.
I watch the air fill with the need of trees.

# WALL

I'm here, on this side.
On the other,
childhood skies,
a grandfather, father,
shapes leftover from sleep,
and the cricket's song
when the evening shakes loose
the lost light of a star.

A wall, is it merely
a lamp one would lift
futilely to the moon?
To reveal that voice
which always calls for help?
For a poet to stay safe
through each brick of the poem
on his side of his wall?

Wake this wall in you
so love stumbles
among the stubborn bones of vows,
so a son doesn't feel lost
to see his father's face
appear in his.

I, on my side.
And the darkness of the day.
As though a prisoner,
who turns toward his wall,
looking neither to dark nor light.

## KAMALA DAS

### WIDOWS

At Kashi
On the temple ghats
slither not reptiles
or lizards
but widows, beggared
by their loved ones' death
Give them a coin or two
to earn merit
they eat sweetmeats
and break every rule
they giggle, they cackle,
and on the moonlit patio
sprawl themselves to sleep;
their moistened limbs
arouse some casual lust.
Lewd are the comments
the devotees make
gazing back at them.
Even the young have
wrinkled paps
and gaps between teeth
but their eyes impale,
bruise the insides,
and the palpitating core.

## MOTHERS

Life's venom,
I cannot throw up
For I have seen love's
pitiful end
and have watched sons
grow into sullen strangers
their mothers so often
stain their dreams
and cause errors
in the computers
of their lives.
Mothers are a sort of waste
where shall they dump them
old homes are expensive
the tidy ones with liveried attendants
the cheaper ones compel
the old and weary to sing
litanies in praise of God
sing in quavering voices
forever and ever praise
the glory of his love.

# POETRY

A divining rod
I misplaced somewhere
is my poetry
I am now mute and
irreversibly remote
I am beggared
by its loss
It seems like the withering
of a limb
with blinded eyes
I search for the treasures
of my past
I cannot recognize
my friends or my foes
I am a mute remnant
of what I was
the embers of a fire
someone other than I
put out

## KEKI N. DARUWALLA

### LIVING ON HYPHENS

Living on hyphens
a man needs to anchor himself.
Between hammer-impulse
and the crippled word;
between dream and landscape
and between dream and the dark blood
congealing on the cobblestones;
between the lung of meditation
and the exhaust fumes of desire;
between hierarchy and disorder;
between the slow rhythms of the seasons
and the frenetic pace of blood;
a man must arrive
at some sort of understanding.

Some people are lucky:
they function under two skies;
a sky of feeling
for each dialect of love
they instinctively possess.
And a different sky of history
over each separate past.

Between the face and the mask
that looks better than the face;
between love for the land
and hatred for the times;
between the smog one lives in
and the dream one lives on;
a man, a woman
must come to an understanding.

But happiness lies in the familiar,
in the penumbra one can sense.
Not soot from the heavens, necessarily
and the grit-encrusted air--
but yesterday's blue space still pulsing
with yesterday's light and radio signals.
Happy with just one boxed-in sky,
one feeling -- love,
one sense--of loss,
one window--despair.

## NOTES
(Dream-dust, Aphorisms)

At the frayed end of it all,
a little light drifts in from somewhere,
its origins unknown.
You can't believe your luck!

A little light
with no star-pulse to push it
no black-hole to devour it.

*  *  *

A poem rises like yeast
and keeps rising, moving, mutating,
when the language
is dark with dream.

*  *  *

He could never find the dream
even as the wall of the night
gave way
to the void of the day.

*  *  *

A poet's life-graph
can at best be short:
overhung with shadow
overtaken by form;
distorted by moulds
in which a habit settles.

Then, dissipation of form;
the sloughed off shadow;
and shape dissolving
to accommodate the unseen
heart of the poem.

* * *

The ultimate aspiration:
an exact forgery
of the ideal.

* * *

The wet feet the warm breast
the cold cheek
are they different stratagems
or one unified plan
to ensnare the lover?

* * *

Distrust him
this Dionysian
who, with a face full of light,
brings to his poetry
a language dark enough
to be coincidental with the night.

Distrust him
he who makes a great show
of exploring the black void,
and with each line
opens up another black void.

And him
who brings such ferment to his images
that they read different
each time you go through them.

Embrace those
who are opaque as dirty ice,
but always talk of the labyrinth.
They can do you no harm.

*  *  *

Dream and reality
never converge, isn't it?
Never once or almost never--
it comes to the same thing.
Somewhere, on some far continent,
a poet talked about his arms
turning into green branches.
Our limbs will never turn
into green sprigs.
Dry branches will attend
on our funeral pyres.

The good news is there is only one tree
and that's the tree of life.
There is no tree of death:
only dry logs, fallen branches.

*  *  *

Talking of unease, distrust those,
who, perched on the tree of life,
sing of death;
and those sitting on the tree of death
sing of life.
There you are, contradictions by the shovel!
But so what? the times are full of them.
If old skull-and-crossbones
gets hold of a scaffolding
and wants to call it a tree, let him.

The bird of life and the bird of death,
must, among other things, fight.
The mystic tells us
that the bird of life and the bird of death
are the same.
But this is beyond me.
I want the two birds
always fighting
or always making love,
or half the time fighting
and half the time making love.

* * *

## THE NETS WAIT

The nets wait outside the cave,
this cave which has no walls;
the cave within water and aloof from it;
the nets wait for silver fish,
silver dust hauled up,
moving in or moving out
from sea shore, sea floor or your own heart.

Always a word crossing over to you
on its voyage towards amnesia.
Always the cluster of images.
Always the mist around the edges;
event and movement, seen
from the hazed lens of distance--
Father walking away, so close
you could hold him by his shirt tails.
Seeing always the essence of the man,
not the attributes he's clothed in,
nor his coat, his trousers
(you just talked of his shirt tails!)

And sometimes, if not always
a moment so vivid, you'd think
it travelled to the eyeball
on a surge of blood.

The nets wait outside of all this,
waiting for a harvest that will never come;
only to find at the end of it all,
that neither prosody nor prose
can reach out to the dream.

*  *  *

## NOTES AGAIN

Aphorisms are not truths;
they are a fragment
of an ongoing dialectic;
pitch-and-toss.
You should place them,
one against the other.

Truths also oscillate,
they are a part of a dialectic,
of pitch-and-toss, to be propped up
one against the other.
Is that what truths have come to,
mere aphorisms?

*  *  *

## THE WORD

Forget the root of the word
the pollen around the word
the black flower
at the heart of the word.

Let us strip the word
of all its veils
its garments
its haloes.

And don't talk about
the silence of the word,
for it is sound;
and often comes to us
through dirty lips
floating on a spray of saliva.

*  *  *

2

One thing you can't peel off
from the word
is the fog it carries.
Don't get worked up:
for the person who uttered it,
the fog was more important
than the word.

## SIDELINES

Live on the fringe,
on the grey margins of light
where shadow is for ever debating
whether to intervene or no.
To look for the point
where the concentric started
its furious circling is futile.
Exploring the centre
can be as bad as living there.
Even the search in the weed-ridden
shallows of the heart
needs to be cautious.
Shallows can hurt profoundly.
The deeps are as bad.
Don't let it tempt you,
this search for the
centrality of the whirlpool.

2

Live on the fringe, but die at the centre.
A good aphorism is one
which is true on the flip side as well.
So die on the fringe but live at the centre.
But don't for Pete's sake
live on the fringe and die there too.

## SHIV K. KUMAR

### DEW-DROPS ON LOTUS LEAVES, NAGINA LAKE, SRINAGAR

I saw them drinking off the green platters
floating on the abluting waters
their wings a-flutter, like butterflies
questing for manna,
before the sun's oven eye
would burn it all up.

Pre-dawn is the hour when gods
relish their nectar in conclave.

I bent over a leaf, with seven crystal beads,
like white Basra pearls arrayed
on a jeweller's red velvet tray for display
and imagined some monk in his cell
letting each drop of his benedictine linger
on his tongue and praying:

> "O Lord, I may not so much seek
> to be consoled, as to console . . .
> But give me also enough courage
> not to deny my flesh, as the spirit
> is always a whiplash."

Then, on a wanton impulse, I flicked out
my triple-sabred pocket-knife and nipped a leaf
off its stem-base, like a midwife severing
the umbilical cord.

Why not a memento for my love,
still dreaming away in bed?
Suddenly, a voice rose from the waters,
now incensed: "Murder of a foetus at matins-hour!"

And I heard the gods shedding tears
into my green platter that now seemed to carry
the head of John the Baptist.

# ON MOVING INTO A COMPLEX OF APARTMENTS

*"There should be a law against living in an apartment"*
(Arthur Miller : 'The Death of a Salesman')

One cannot always claim dominion over a candid sky
and a Chinese lawn
to nurture dreams
for compulsions have their own logic.
Horoscopes are never governed
by terrestrial laws.

So now I have moved into this beehive
whose walls relay ghostly mutterings
of the old woman
who sighs out her loneliness next door

while the urchins romp up and down the dark passageways
and the snakes crawl up the drain-pipes
carrying scandals from one floor to the other.

Here I'm now ensconced in my tiger-cage
watching the shadows dance on the walls.
The papier-maché pansies in my brass-pot
grin at my wizened self.

Since breeding in captivity is a perversion,
my wife sleeps away in a corner
lest from her groin springs
a Lilliputian or a basilisk.

Last night, I dreamt of the moon and stars
serenading a grasshopper in his mating dance
on the Chinese lawn of my old house.

## ON LISTENING TO MOZART'S 'REQUIEM'

Knock, knock, knock!
There's that stranger again,
eyes glowering through the slits of his black mask.

Yes, I'm packed up
with my knick-knacks:
a handful of black marbles I used to play with
in my childhood, some autumn leaves from my mother's
grave, and the feathers of a dead sparrow
that stayed on my window-sill as I wrote
the scroll you'd commissioned me
for someone already gone.

But who has unlidded my music-box
to let out the sound that wails like a deer
shot through the intestines?

Now the murky boom that spirals to the sky's
dome, then plummets down to the earth
fading away in fitful gasps, while a drum
beats the retreat.

A pause, as if the scroll has run itself out
but the cistern again begins to fill up
for there are enough raindrops lingering on the window-pane--
and my tears
that had remained mute like brine and silt.

Now I see the mourners filing past a coffin
in the chapel's navel, singing a dirge
I'd written for the fisherman who never returned home.
The sound of their footfalls is like the combers lisping
as they wash the deadman's feet before
the river swallows him.

Another interlude of silence, as if it's
now time to meditate on destiny. But if
the mourners have forgotten the words,
I have them all tattooed on my chest--
from beginning to end.

I know when the wind waves its wand,
it's time to give up.

But I cannot help wondering if that scroll
was my doing
or undoing.

The last drum-beat, throbbing to a crescendo
in a remote valley of the mist
where the gods and mortals will finally rest in peace.

Yes, Sir, I'm ready.
It doesn't matter who you are--
man, angel or Yama.
Sorry, I kept you waiting so long
in the wings.

## MEENA ALEXANDER

### RITES OF SENSE

In twilight as
she lies on a mat
I rub my mother's feet
with jasmine oil

Touch callouses
under skin, joints
upholding that fraught
original thing

Bone, gristle
skin, all that
makes her mine.

All day she swabbed
urine from the floor,
father's legs so weak
he clung
to the rosewood bed
tottering.

She rinsed out
soiled cloths,
hung them to dry
on a coir rope by the vine--
its passion fruit
clumsy with age, dangling.

She lies on a mat
a poor thing beached,
belly slack
soles crossed
sari damp and white.

I kneel in darkness
at her side
her oldest child
returned for a few weeks
at summer's height.

She murmurs my name,
asks in Malayalam
'Why is light so hot?'

Beyond her spine
I catch a candle glisten.
The door's a frame
for something
I'm too scared to name:

A child,
against a white wall,
hands jammed to her teeth
lips torn, breath
staggering its hoarse silence

All night a voice
laced through dreams
tiny eyelets for the smoke:
'Amma, I am burning!'

I'm breath
slit from sound
just snitches
of blood,
loopholes of sweat,
a sack of flesh
you shut me in.

What words
of passage
to that starless place?
What rites of sense?

Amma, I am
dreaming myself
into your body.
It is the end
of everything.

Your pillow
stained with white
tosses as a wave might
on our southern shore.

Will you lay your cheek
against mine?
Bless my bent head?

You washed me once
gave me suck
made me live
in your father's house.

Taught me to
wake at dawn,
sweep the threshold
clean of blood
red leaves.

Showed me
a patch of earth
dug with your hands
where sweet beans grow
coiled and raw
fit to be picked
in misty light

Taught me to
fire a copper pan
starch and fold a sari
raise a rusty needle

Stitch my woman's
breath into
the mute
amazement
of sentences.

## RED PARAPET

Sister you live
in a very private place,
an extremity of sense

I watch you in mother's garden.
Plucking jasmine petals,
you set then in your palm
and how they burn.

A rat indigo with rain
races under the banyan tree.
You point it out,
prise stones from soil,
lift up your sleeve,

Make me see the bruise
blackish, saffron edged
where you hurt yourself.

Touching you I think:
we pay with our lives
they become us.

And I need to write
as if penitence were
the province of poems.

Dear sister
I pray a time will come
when voices that poke you
with white hot pincers

Flicker and drop,
harmless
as bats in the jamun tree

And monsoon rivers
swarm back into clouds,
and waft through the mirror
in our grandfather's room

And time turns tail
in a great unhappening of things,
a cobra that pours
over threshold stones

I six, you barely one
face shining in my skirts,
gazing as it leapt
clean out of its skin

Up the red parapet
and we smelt ebony flesh,
the whole darting heat of him,
the blessing.

## CHENNAI AFTERNOON

It was flinty hot,
you know how it gets.
Two stones could have raised a fire.

Three of us,
Anandi, the little one and I
worked our way across a gravel path
to a tongue of rock spat out by the sea.

My chappals off
I hitched my sari to my knees
the little one was straining at my thighs.
I gripped her tight, pointed out a speck
streaming on the horizon:
'Noke! Noke!'

She pinched me hard
bit me like a wild cat might
leaving four tooth marks
yelling from that sweet dark throat:

'I'm going amma into the blue
never coming back to you.'

The seawind hit me tight
I was a jamun splashed on rock
no breath, no fight.

It was Anandi who caught her
sari dripping salt
my child dipped in sand, water
streaming from her eyes

so black and beautiful.
At night they called me up
appa and amma,
he'd been so ill, remember
right at death's door.
Heart stopped, doctors
pumped him hard, ribs, chest
till it started ticking again

that slow sad breath
that keeps us afloat.

'It's election time, please stay home'
they said. 'There are bombs in Chennai.
Why just last week in the market place
by the grape stall

'A few feet from her mother
a child was blown up.
Just a scrap of her pink frock left.
Ah!'

I think they wanted to scare me,
as if it's love that makes fear start.
As I thrust the little one apart
something burst in me

Slow and terrible like the sea.

## A NEIGHBOURLY THING

She beckons from across the road
red earth damp with running mist
lets me in the metal gate
notes my cotton sari, 'amma's is it?'

Plucks at the milky bloom
petals licking the humpbacked tree
'saughandi, I love that scent
less piercing than jasmine
and sticky somehow!'

All this in English for my benefit
then strikes into our mother tongue
a rocky darkness lit in me:
'Uthe Orkunondo?'
Repeats herself -- 'Do you remember?'--
sparking the fault of recollection.

Then jabs her thumbnail
lets me stare beyond the broken wall:
a whitened square jawed thing
under its roof a jutting sign
painted in clear black capitals
I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Each morning waking early
the almond tree outside, butting
its hard green element into my dreams
I waited for the crick-crack-creak
of the oxygen cart, music to my ears.
Rusty metal strapped to two blue wheels
drawn with such ease, the heady stuff inside
delicate, flammable.

They were on their way the white robed ones
to care for him.
Waiting till they prised the curtain free,
I fled the night cell where my father lay
and walked across the unploughed field.

The light was sulphur on the blades of grass.
I did not know if I could pass.

And there it sat, driven out of soil,
its door agape
readied for our dead.

She jogs my elbow leaning close
'The morgue is for the benefit
of those like you, by which I mean
it'll keep our precious dead for burial.

'They've built another floor,
there's room in there for twenty persons more,
demand so high.
When a bucket clangs at dawn
or the rope creaks in the well
I'm never scared -- a neighbourly thing --
its close quarters I think,
they have needs like ours the newly dead
baths, breakfasts, the lot.'

She pulls her sari tight around her waist
lets me stare at her forearms,
ageing flesh, dimpled with monsoon mist,
tiny hairs on her wrist dark as almond leaf
that made a halo round my father's head
as we wheeled him through the hospital door.

As high as his throat the winding sheet
red earth packed against our feet.

His voice fluttered, pricked by delirium
a keening sound in his guts, quietened down,
a sparrow dropping to a muddy pool
then grazing lotus petals as it soars
into a knot of blue,
unquiet fire:

'Is my father there?
Tell him to wait for me
I'm coming soon.
Or my batchfellow Kuriakose
who played cricket so hard
he struck the ball right into the church well.
He's joined Kotakal Ayurvedashala
he'll have some herbs to help me through.

'And my mother, is she there?
She's part of the Kannadical house having married in,
call her, call my kinsfolk too
they'll reach out their hands to guide me through
they're all we have in this red earth
where the rain pours.'

His voice was touched by tender notes,
the prosody of our mother tongue
a fiery root of sound in me.
I felt he was a
a burning bush still green,
seeking burial:

'How still she sits my mother Mariamma.
You were named for her.
Her rosewood chair, drawn to the wellside
how straight she sits.
Look, the chair shifts with her weight,
the wellside sands boil at her feet.

'Now stormclouds make a halo for her face
her arms reach out, blue as Mary's grace.
She cries to me!'

Hearing my father call
I raised my sari over my ankle,
stepped clean over my neighbour's broken wall
into the rainsoaked field.

The newly dead pressed to the morgue gate
watched me pass
their features sharp as unripe almond flesh,
their fingers harps as each one
stretched out skin and bone to me
in a raw music

And I smelt a mortal fragrance binding me
quick silver
like grandmother's hair blown free,
and sticky as the scent of the saughandi tree.

## VILAS SARANG

### SUMMER MORNING, KUWAIT

The foul smell of the sea
burgeons in the heat;
the boats wrecked in the Gulf War
still rot
by the shore.

The sun rose today
at 4.46 a.m.
A busload of Bangladeshi sweepers
arrived at 5.15 as usual.
Their voices rise
and settle with the dust they raise.

In crowless country
the arms of a scaresparrow
flap in the wind.
I wonder if the desert across the bay
will be visible today.

There will be time to remember
words from other languages,
and to think of other obscurities.

## SHANTA ACHARYA

### GOOD LUCK HOME

You presented me with two scarabs,
hieroglyphs etched on their lapis-lazuli backs,
from the gift-shop of the British Museum.

*It's for good luck*, you said;
I surveyed the pieces, their sacredness
treasured in the hollow of my palm,
imagining them alive, at home in a desert.

They nestled behind a coral stone and a pearl
framed in rings of beaten gold on my fingers;
charms given by my family to protect me from evil.

I find the Egyptian scarab couple their own home
away from the crowded open-house of my Indian gods,
transforming each corner of my living room
with the gifts of fetishes from around the world.

Two Chinese cats guard my speculative angle of vision.
Even Ganesha travels with me in my handbag
to help me overcome obstacles in my adopted homeland.

The seven gods of luck from Japan smile on
as you eye my marble turtle god with its fine chiselled look,
its beady eyes, hand-crafted, appraising your secret nook --
leaving us with the legacy of an understanding--

The knowledge of what it means
to carry a whole household in oneself,
to be so perfectly self-contained, poised
at the centre of all manner of creatures unsheltered.

## HOUR GLASS

I lean out of your attic window,
a not-so-lithe gymnast in life's circus,
my legs balancing on an unsteady ladder,
sometimes on your head and shoulder.

It was me who offered to count the missing tiles
on your roof; dealing with insurance claims
can make anyone feel lost. I float in mid-air,
a pillar of strength, as you mentally lean on me.
You suffer from vertigo; I have no fear of flying.

The velux window see-saws reflecting your face in
the clouds; you stand on edge, streamlined as a stalagmite,
on the spiralling staircase, steadying me with your touch.

*This can't be love?* I ask myself as I perch on your roof
surveying the texture of weather-beaten tiles with a field-glass.
I catch cats, birds, clouds, all independent creatures,
in my crystal cage instead of monkeys, peacocks, eagles,
and brightly coloured washing waving to the sun with
stranded paper kites stretched like bats on coconut trees.

I remember swinging in a garden on a roof-top in Orissa,
undulating as the green fields of rice, the concave blue sky,
divine hour glass, changing its features as I floated by.

Here we stand like soul-twins, houses semi-detached;
cemented in the middle by a wall of looking glass,
your hands connected to my feet as our eyes cross over.

I climb down the ladder into the magnetic field of arms,
as I remove you further through the eyes of the fieldglass;
glances slipping on glass as cats on a hot, brick roof.

## SHRINGARA

The image in the mirror is no longer frozen
in an unimaginable longing. There was no place
for anything other than romancing
in the courtyard of the temples of our daydreaming;
transforming the shroud for a wedding veil.

The silver petals of the fragrant jasmine
in my windowsill glow like fireflies in moonlight.

A participant in life's carnival, I prepare for illusion.
Elizabeth Arden's flawless finish foundation frosts
on skin breathing Shahnaz Hussain's sandalwood face cream.
Givenchy's mascara thickens and lengthens eyelashes,
rosewood powder blushes on cheeks. My mask is complete
with desire red, double colour, ever lasting Estee Lauder lipstick.
I spray myself generously with Nirvana and Samsara.

I travel towards what end I cannot say--
along the way, those I meet and those I do not;
all that happens and all that I wait to happen
keep defining me in some inexplicable way.
Daily the mirror mocks my wrinkles and streaks of grey.

If I am the result of an unrepeatable set of circumstances,
what use is there in seeking escape from self enunciation?
In the end we are all dead. The days become my shringara.

## HIGHGATE CEMETERY

I wandered among the dead in a cemetery town
exploring the winding paths where angels, carved in stone,
stood silently directing me through the green alleyways.

This island with overhanging yew and trailing clematis,
with unifying ivy nurturing insects, larvae, butterflies and birds
has more to do with the living than the memory of the departed.
We need the solace of the Comfort Corner more than the dead.

Through the hawthorn and blackthorn, field maple and elm
a cool wind blows steadily through our realm.
The voices of children from the playground across the school
confirm the inscription on Karl Marx's tomb:
*The philosophers have only interpreted the world*
*in various ways. The point however is to change it.*

Everyday our little world changes a little bit,
whether we like it or not is quite irrelevant.
I imagine a dialogue between Marx and Krishna.
It is easier I confess to alter myself than the world!

When our friends start to leave our company,
it is time to take stock of our coming and going:
*Of those immortal dead who live again*
*in minds made better by their presence.*

In the unmapped terrain within us we bury
in terraced catacombs painful memories.
If only we could let them grow out of us like trees.

## MAKARAND PARANJAPE

[Note: These poems are to feature in a new collection tentatively entitled "The Continent of Love". This book is meant to complete the trilogy of which the first two books, *The Serene Flame* and *Playing the Dark God* have already been published.]

### THE RELIGION OF LOVE

Love is religion, a faith, a cult,
and those who are its votaries
are a breed apart, with their own
secret rites and rituals, beliefs
and dogmas. The church of love
has its own priests and laity, adepts
and novitiates, its own ceremonies
of innocence, its own flag and banner.
Love is a country, a state, a city,
with its own government and management,
its own laws, its own machinery of
enforcement, its own constitution,
its own President or Head of State.
The Republic of Love is democratic
for love abhors coercion; hearts
freely given and taken are its mode
of exchange. The currency of love
is innocence; it is never devalued
or upgraded. The fluctuations of
the international economy do not
affect its fortunes. Speculators
and other such hustlers don't always
fare well here because no matter
how many hits they score, they still
cannot enter into Love's hall of fame.
That's because there's an unwritten
but well-known code of conduct which

determines the course of love on earth.
The first principle is fidelity:
never betray anyone in love, never
make false promises, never break a
heart, never use another merely for
one's pleasure, never destroy hope,
in short, never hurt any one, but
always remain true to love. Those who
cannot follow these simple rules
aren't fit to enter its magic demesne.
Those who love will not be judged
by the standards of this world, but
by principles far higher: even
if they fail in earthly terms,
they must satisfy more stringent
measures; heaven itself will judge
them according to laws not human
but divine, for, ultimately, the true
Beloved is none other than God.

## FALLING IN LOVE

Let me forget myself momentarily
as God did himself when he made this
beautiful world of sound, light, and colour,
and peopled it with all kinds of creatures,
great and small, peaceful or violent.
So let me lose myself completely in the object
of my desire, let my Self be totally lost
in the Other, let me thus become a woman,
and fall hopelessly in love with the man
in woman. Let this love have no destination,
no hope of fulfilment or consummation;
let it be entirely futile, pointless, even
inconsequential. And let my heart be riven,
broken, crushed, scattered beyond all
retrieval or recognition, let all my poise
and self-control, my pride of manhood
be totally undone in this all-consuming
passion. O Victory, I shall seek you
in my utter ruination, like a desperate
soul seeks solace in everlasting annihilation.
My obsession brooks no restraint or qualification;
I must be totally destroyed before I finish,
no particle of me left safe or undone.
I risk all to gain all; I am reckless in love
because I know that the one I love, after all,
is not I or you, but the lost whole of which
both are parts. I am willing to wager all
because I know that my love will be as safe
with you as it is with the Mother of God.

# OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Of course, the woman's body is an object of desire,
but it is not the body itself which is desirable;
rather, the idea of desire as it is projected on to the body
enthralls. When just the body of a woman is given,
it's very availability sometimes leaves one cold.
One sees, touches, tastes, smells, hears that body,
enters and reenters it at will; fondles, manipulates, even
hurts it, attempting to extract some pleasure, some comfort
from it, yet it yields nothing--no joy, no solace, no peace,
no satisfaction. One wonders where one went wrong,
what one did or didn't do. The body in one's arms
is incomprehensible, itself puzzled over its inability
to attract or arouse. It is only when the body dissolves,
ceases to be mere flesh, but is transformed by the glow
of yearning, that the sleeping senses are aroused, like flares
in a dark night; then, the boundaries between two beings
are banished, making both an interplay of passion and power.

## CREATURE COMFORTS

In the season of passion
the body rises to the occasion:
beyond one peak of pleasure,
lies another, still higher,
still more alluring ... and beyond
that? Just the infinite sky,
overarching above all joy
and pain, in cascades of light and
shade. There the very body cries out:
enough--I have tasted all that flesh
can offer; truly, I seek no more.
But then, when the months of drought
return, like a salt-starved palate,
the body screams of its hungers:
I want love, I want solace, I want pleasure.
Mahatma Gandhi had no desire, loved
his grandnieces as a mother would her daughters;
but even a mother needs to be hugged and held
sometimes; so even he needed the comfort that
one body can give to another.

## PRACTICAL/IMPRACTICAL

O love be not practical always
count not your gains and losses,
like a miser his petty change,
worry not overmuch about the
consequences of your desires,
forget about the morrow with
all its cares and disappointments.
Seize the day, as the poets say,
enjoy yourself, before your body
itself withers or decays, but best
of all, try to obtain the object
of your passion, the Other, like
a ripe fruit, plucked, consumed,
and savoured--relish unparalled.

O love, be practical nowadays:
distrust Love's sugary words,
recognize his various guises,
fear the end of passion, beware
of its bitter aftertaste like
wormwood or gall, preserve your-
self at all costs, yield not
to momentary temptation, but
be well-guarded against any
stray desire or blandishment
lest you awake from your trance
utterly undone, bereft, lost--
damaged and twisted beyond repair,
unfit to give or receive happiness.

O love, be neither impractical
nor practical, neither careless

nor too careful, neither brave
nor fearful, neither too eager
nor too restrained, but always
poised in the self, surefooted,
balanced in body and mind; neither
seek nor refuse the joys of this
earth, the pleasures of sound or
sense, the myriad flavours of the
flesh, but calmly partake of
whatever happiness or pain comes
your way, shunning the excesses
of both denial and indulgence.

## TOUCH

Two people in love always touch each other
one way or another. They huddle together
when they talk, some part of their bodies
in contact. When they are sitting apart
at dinner or entertaining friends or out
at a party, suddenly their eyes meet
across the room, as if bringing together
two worlds riven apart by fate or chance.
When they sleep, they save energy in winter,
her warm and comfortable leg thrown over
his skinny calf; when it's hot, they need not
nuzzle, but even in sleep, there's always
an occasional, reassuring brush. Best of all
when they make love, leisurely or urgently
as the mood demands, their two bodies
throb as one. When it's over, they still
touch, chatter about, or laugh; or else,
the act itself is prolonged, remaining
just comfortably arousing, not orgasmic;

and often their love-making is not even
genital. But don't such lovers sometimes
need to withdraw into themselves? Don't
they require some privacy, some space
of their own? Actually, there are no
private places in love, no separate selves--
it's not that everything is common or shared,
but only that there's no individuality
left, at least in the conventional sense,
no ego, no self obssessed with its own
fragmented happiness. The whole is holy,
as a great writer said: so there's only
love, no lovers at all. But what happens
when lovers such as these quarrel or separate,
even destroying each other in the process?
What happens to their love? When a friendship
breaks, when lovers part, go their different
ways, Love always remains intact, immaculate:
only, it withdraws itself from their lives,
alighting like a dove of peace on another pair.
But what of couples, who like fine wine age
so well together, so assured and confident
of each other's care that they rarely need
to demonstrate their affection and, sometimes,
have very little even to say to one another?
Even in their oneness, when they appear to be
two, then they touch each other with their
silences. Together or apart, alive or dead,
those who love always stay in touch: somehow,
somewhere, their lifelines have mereged,
never to be plucked asunder or split again.

## LOVE AND ITS OBJECTS

Love always exceeds its objects
which, however great or beautiful,
are subject to time, decay, and death:
after their brief season in the sun,
they lose their fresh bloom of truth,
harden slowly or rot in their youth.
But love remains eternally youthful,
whether embodied as a silly, naked boy
wilfully shooting his invisible darts
at unsuspecting victims, or entirely bodiless,
too subtle to behold, but still quivering
in every heart's secret places. Love is not
subject to us, but we are subject to it:
it changes its objects like soiled garments
or a deathless soul its transient bodies.

## GRACE DESCENDING, GRACE WITHDRAWING

She stood surprised and shaken
as grace descending
almost swept her off her feet
in its sweet, sudden, swirling embrace.

Her sharp features softened
as it caressed her gently and smoothened her wrinkles away.
A smile bloomed on her face.

Like rain lashing a dry and thirsty
continent, turning brown to green,
it quickened the empty valleys of her mind
with sunny ideas, verdant, teeming, energetic.

Her being swelled out, filled with light
like a hard, bony body suddenly turns

woman; the very perspiration on her brow
and upper lip was like the nectar of gods.

Her eyes shone with a strange resolve,
she heard voices and sounds from far off,
like the faint but enchanting music
of the spheres; almost, she became wise.

Then, unexpectedly, it stirred again,
commencing its swift, relentless departure,
leaving her stranded, almost helpless,
her being's puzzle still unresolved.

She stood surprised and shaken
as grace withdrawing
almost pushed her off her feet
it its rough, rude, unceremonious ascent.

## LOVE'S DESSERT

I sacrifice myself at the altar of your desire,
pouring my heart's blood into the cold chalice
of your unfeeling eyes; afterwards, I collapse,
drained of all vitality, helpless and bereft.

Like a beheaded hero I have fallen, unclaimed,
on some savage and futile battlefield far away,
a useless corpse, mangled beyond recognition,
attacked by scavenging birds and stray dogs.

When I return to myself, I'm desolate. No spring
sings in my heart's barrenness; only a shallow,
stagnant puddle, overgrown with weeds, remains:
how I have exhausted myself in your sandy wastes.

My passion is defeated by your indifference
like God's love wasted on erring mortals.

## LOVE PERFECTED

Consider this body to be just a symbol
which hides and suggests something far greater,
a superb knowledge and transcendent perfection,
undefeated by the contingencies of daily
existence. Even if the sharp image of desire
beguiles, seize at once upon that, which
once attained, will forever free--grasp only
the thing itself, shorn of appearances. Similarly,
when pursuing love, seek not what is thought of
as love, but what it actually is, a power, a force,
a gift, a divine presence. That is the secret
meaning of its descent into our world of hatred.
Remember always, then, that one is not in love
with anyone else, but with Love itself. So prepare
to surrender even if the heart is frightened.

## EPILOGUE:
## HEARTTHROBS

Before the third day,
the day of departures and forgettings,
through half the night
I utter her name,
alternating it with the name of God.
Like Beatrice she smiles at me
her smile of total understanding
and acquiescence.
All night my hands rove
over the same territories of desire
until they are sore,
the same two and a half cubits

of flesh and blood, now warm
and pliant under my electric fingers.
Then she lies quietly in my arms.
On waking I find myself
bereft on an empty bed
and ah! such desolation of the spirit...
My soul howls like a hyena
its cry of primeval anguish--
where is my fulness? Who has stolen
my ecstasies? Why is the thorn of love
lodged so deeply in my breast?
As the day smiles on the wreckage of my dreams,
somewhere in the corner of my mind
she still smiles at me
that smile of fixed, vacant approval
as empty and meaningless
as that of a marionette.

## PRANTIK BANERJEE

### THE WELL

I cannot draw water
anymore from the well--
the rope's braided nerves
frayed between slippery fingers
clutch the wheel, drawn full
circle in a noose; the bucket
dented by sharp, devil-may-care dives
has rusted in iron will.
A toothless mouth now scrapes
rock bottom to slake the thirst
in spectral eyes.
With each watershed year
the waters have run dry
like blobs of an idiot's drivel,
while crows in ever closing circles
draw near the forsaken pitcher
open-mouthed in its empty horror.

The ripples of my history
are embedded in ancient stone.
My cracked lips only lisp
accent of raindrops on shuttered
memories, for I can no longer catch
water I have wilfully spilled.

Only echoes throb
in the silence of a loamy pit.

## IN THE AUTUMN OF MY MIND

In the autumn of my mind
memory, an old patriach,
stoops to gather
images crinkled by time.
Grainy, gecko fingers
try to uncurl their edges
winced at twice-taken steps.

Wind broken on a shepherd's pipe
rustles old fevers
in serrated lines;
the forest's edge no longer
invites panting breaths
to set the grass ablaze.

Hopes that have grown
unruly in a green old age
niche the colours of butterflies
in the bark of honeydew sleep.
Blood clots heart's romance
with the vendetta of time.

The sun sets
betraying no shadow of doubt.

## CHARRED

When your love spreads out
branches in the night sky,
sharp and clear, its meaning
dense like the foliate rose
cloys the green nescience
of a trembling leaf.

My cupped hands slip
your warped essence;
desire races the blood,
then plunges into the burning
bush around which fireflies
dance in synchronized dream.

Where is the meaning ?
What is it all ?
The odour of ash
is very strong !

## BREATHLESS

Words are asthmatic,
pause and gasp
on accents strong.
Stop briefly, just a sec,
gather breath,
clear off chesty syllables
with commas, dashes, and rest--
then spellbind
the silverfish dream
biting the line.

How violently
the sputum fullstops
a sentenced thought!

## CATCH

In winter the sea is
a whale of time; desire
crabbed in memory's shell
hibernates in slow breaths.
Greedy waves claw the remains
of an insouciant beach:
beer bottles, broken slippers,
ice cream sticks have left
summer scrambled on sands.

The fisherman,
his kedge drawn around his feet,
stitches the net
empty of silver change.
Coiled secretly
inside his wife's bellybutton
is a hook that catches
the alarm of circling gulls.
The game has a little respite.

When the sail is far out again
the odour of jasmine
will draw throbbing loins
in a mesh of heat.

## PAGE

You
are always inviting.
Terrified of webbed shadows
I scurry to your touch
every night.

The only permanence
in a life of broken ties,
your ever-yielding softness
is violated
by my voracious self.

Not one syllable
you whisper back;
suffering in silence
like a prostitute's cry
in menstrual blood.

Your fate and mine
are the crisscross of kites:
as I live, so must you
as I die, so will you.

Till then
I thrive leech-like
on your battening white,
embossing with a tip
a minefield of set traps.

## ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

### THE ARCHIVIST

Beloveds are best documented
out of the corner of the eye
where the retina meets the imagination.

You have the freedom now to archive
all that the taxonomists haven't yet sauteed
into points, cleaved into zones.

The austere collage of seasons
that is his face and the caesura
of the navel, counterpointing
the serrated comma of a forgotten
appendix operation.

Breathe deep the wild marsh scent
of groin, wonder at the obstinate
gradient of toe and middle finger,
observe in the gentle curve of calf
and flank, the karmic imprint
of a life that once lolled negligently
on pillows of silk and goosefeather.

Recognise too the puzzled snarl
of pain that suddenly
winters
the eyes.

Perhaps it would be wise now
to tell him of your love.
Profundities are best uttered in profile.

## JEET THAYIL

# GENESIS

At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.
DEREK WALCOTT, Archipelagoes

At the end of this line there is an opening door.
DEREK WALCOTT, A Santa Cruz Quartet

I

Monsoon

It starts with a change in the smell of weather,
a sour breath of moist air encumbered with soil,
its many pockets and spaces readying to shed
upwards their dark uncoilings; the earth unfolds
its gaseous element, changing the smell and colour
of the day, so every living thing must pause
in its proven endeavour and strive to replace
the very contours of geography slipping away
to an essential stillness before the chaos of wind;
even the river knows something grave is happening
to its grim and single-minded currents furrowed
by the keel of history, trawled by the many spinning
sleepers fallen to its endlessly revolving arms;
even the changeful river knows a change is coming,
so when it does with a random casual thrust
of power mindful of its furthest reaches, it whips
brown vine and cracked bark, mangosteen and jackfruit,
slaps the baby palm, uproots the tapioca and lemon,
flattens the cowering tufts of pineapple, then douses

the world in unimagined torrents of water, maddened
by infinite rage and the resource of heartlessness
for unclocked hours, a constant torment of deluge
on the green land, the river, the annihilated air,
snake-holes flooded, spider-monkey and woodpecker
silenced, cats made fearful, cattle clustered,
the houses funneling that rush of wild water,
water pluming through its own wet world, fierce
in its dream of water, and water made flesh of water,
in a perfect craze of water, the mother of water,
of the water creatures born of the water in this line.

II

Summer

Colour here is more than the pigments of vanity,
investiture of life holding fast its beating pulse
from the arid and featureless plains of shifting sand,
scooped and raised as if by a giant waving hand
in an endless symmetry of white on white; crested
motion stands apart in the colours of the desert,
always the brightest, to make up for the absence
of language and landscape, white boats of folded light
set off across the splintered air, our footprints filled
and sifted in terrifying unison, rhythmic curls
of disarray breathing past the ocean of uniformity,
that sardonic sea without humour or pity, or water,
only the permanent cadence of sand, aged and heated
till its harsh advance invades our secret places,
sets up home in our beds, our food, our buzzing heads,
investing its duned colonies, monuments to itself,
conspiring with the constant anxieties of wind
to make unequalled works of bright imaginings;
this pitiless masterpiece fashioned by the patient
fingers of the sun to last, outlive all others,
from crawling krait to scorpion seed and spiderspawn,
the shuffling aimless human form, all go silhouetted
against the enormous completion of sand, the sun's
gravedigger, a maker of monolith and fossil, mad
memorials to the foolish and defiant, heat so dry
no figures move, no trees or caravanserai, no birds
but the friendly blurs of fever-strained invention,
the only sure escape from the always breathless
loving embrace of the empty metropolis of sand,
sand-made, to sand returned, drifting words of sand.

III

The Moon

Arched and pitched to light tight as a talking drum,
I move diurnal systems to a pure perpetual frenzy
of concentrated merry-making, my single-irised stare
pins lovers in their vestments, spins unproven music
to Dionysian currents purple in subordinate air,
fills this miser's ward with the silver coin of plenty;
I am Anarch, mistress and master of great Stonehenge,
my flock of caparisoned bearers make the mountain's song
in languages unknown to babbling man, to you I am moon,
call me by my proper name for though my name's too rich
my name is moon, it is not moon, I am moon, I am not moon,
my sly and slitted eye makes testaments unshed in flight,
self-regulated to that turn of tight and crescent compass
tuning proven to the breakers time and time again;
when your barred room takes you hurtling past the fields
of burnt-out resin, mark the nodding poppies of oblivion,
fix your eyes upon my spilt wide-open single one, focus
your skidding mind on the pursed essential questions
of earth and sky, of being, of birth in bloody robes
to the pealing loons of childhood, answer me no answer
remote enough to deny its slight and slender secret,
yield it up without demur to my burning Cyclops eye,
know that I am your place in the comfort-making hearth,
that cell of bone and runic parchment, of papyrus pap
and driftwood, the last warm entreatment of the dark
before the trumpets shrill; I am your sister, your mother
moon am I confidante of couches robed in the analytic
cloth, visitor to hell, friend to traitor and debauch,
whore of god, my faith condoled by hellion and monarch,
I am this I am, moon-made and blighted, maker of moon.

IV

Dawn

Surrounded by revellers of starlight and sea-scrum,
our green-grown house rehearses its strangest music,
electronic currents sparking triple-headed serpents
luminous and phosphorescent as sea monsters on shore,
for the slowed time when all motion stills to a stop,
the hiss and slap of surf remains, other sound importuned
by torpor of fear and the random killing of the light,
the stilled breath of air a mirror of our crowding need;
then the first anonymous flicker, instantly dismissed
as the coy fumblings of some vacated hallucination,
newly made irrelevant, until the true paleness begins
to bleed across the baited sky a circumscribed swell of bass
cryptic as the unseen beat of Eden's demoniac percussionist,
a pulse-strumming contrarian whose perverse enjambments
thicken the air to a glowing bubble of reflected firelight,
drives the dawn to a prodigious flowering, counterpoints
the sudden crack of crow and squirrel, mynah and parrot,
harmonises with the bone engine of chattering castanet
the swift machine of morning, scattering miracle's discs
like so much small change, desirous and profligate,
that oracular dawn reveals us for what we are:
a heaving tribe of rainbow bodies managing the feast,
as if each were a bowstring plucked and left to ring
within some signature time, a new and tonic metronome
more varied than the multi-modal jugglings of the sea;
out of control, speed-shaken, fearful, wide-eyed, weeping,
we grapple with the permanence of ecstasy and time,
negotiate the overwhelming steep anapests of our love
for all this frenzied mythmaking, its airiness and sound,
for the mystic sundered morning's holy page of dawn.

V

Winter

Waking early in blue light I left the ancient house
you share with husband and child, left you sleeping
there, your unnamed encroachments creeping loud upon you,
to stumble past sequoia and oak, their twisted turrets
of upreaching wood gathering inwards a chill disclosure,
half-understood in the apocryphal fall of seasons,
a secret of sieved conspired light reluctant to he shared,
up where the delicate sister of air served up a shiver
so generous it propitiated every morning stir and spill
in the curving mists of mind-made Doune, where you wake
in your house of light to desolate knockings of the dead,
morning's slow-moving secret already spread, intoning
the monochrome inversions of tree-hole and stone,
appropriating hue and tone, the tumult of sunlight,
irregular pulsings of soil and dew, depleted and tamed
by the absence of filigree, the suspension of colour,
October's reasoned hibernation of flowering plants
snuffed to a distant knowledge of ash, grey on grey
in a blanked-out sky, a sky so distracted by cold
it can engender nothing, hinting then at even less,
its half-hearted promises nulled by a purifying
storm of tight impacted measure, as I hug my coat,
close to this conclusion, knowing well how it will be,
the practiced poise of winter, its insistent soothings
and gaunt precisions, a sharp Omega of clarifying
sealed into stone by the billowing white linen of snow
made omniscient, and so--I know and bless this ground,
the sodden bench where soon one morning you will sit,
unable to engineer a nostalgia of smell, or of me,
overcome by the winter first told you in this page.

VI

Grandmother

What stories you must know, there in your closed dominion,
secret narratives composed for the doomed enclosures
of bone, hair and fingernail fragments, the ancient
hoops of gold removed from your ears and wrists.
The light drowns to a shoreline uncertain and unseen
from this dim church, whitewashed on a hill in the lush south.
The congregation stands entranced, our white shirts and *mundus*
starched, sung aloft on ancient rhythms, the talismanic glow
of hymns repeated in a tongue all of us remember and nobody
understands, some words promising a casual redemption:
*barachimo*, *deyvam*, *slomo*. The censers trembling
in the calloused hands of the patriarchs, passing the smoke
from hand to hand to the very end of this crowded room,
where Syriac, the first figure of testamented faith, waits
with his fierce accountings; your ally in the conundrums
of Christ, the mother, her open heart in the calendar;
the two single beds in the hall where you and your husband
lived your lives in chaste matrimony, a wedlock holy as hands,
perfected your many children, the young dead become legend,
oversaw your strict enunciations of shekels, rice and prayer.
Then the slow erosions of memory, your tidy acres overgrown,
the ungentle stripping of names, faces, an ignoble disrobing
for the writer you were, the first of our long line,
until, stretching into eternity, alone in the old house
generations of sons and daughters embarked from, you faced
the curse of longevity visited on the women of this tribe
with a wilful retrieval of dignity: the refusals
of food and water, the final nay saying to the sanctification
of all who lived to your great age: a life-affirming No
that resounds still through the halls of your ruined house.

## NANDINI SAHU

# THE INSCAPE

Every morning I get up
habitually to perceive, then to listen
to the long, sulky, complaining, musical
melody of a bird
so close to me in my visionary hours
whom I've never seen
whom I search endlessly through my
pretty little windows.
The secrecy adds more fancies--
how would it be?
Red? green? yellow? pink? violet? zinc?
Or the colour of all my dreams,
the "dapple" ?
Swinging with the peculiar tune
I do my brushing, bathing, prayers mechanically,
dancing with the melody I forget
this body, this existence,
get into the vacancies of blue,
feel a rhythmic pulsation and wait
for another song, undeceiving, pure
like a rainbow.
Though the strangers outside and the
most intimate stranger in the mirror
every moment wish me to forget the inscape,
to get me caught,
the echo of the little one's song
reminds me throughout my days and my evenings
of life's melodious modes meandering
that go in a separate route
which I must discover,
of life's peculiar bonds where
my bones and veins sway in a chain
more humane,
which I must encounter.

## GAYATRI MAJUMDAR

# I FALL INTO YOU

I.

I fall into you, deep,
empty myself of life as I
know it. You give me shape,
fashion me after your design
from algae, water-residues and fossil memories;
stroke a certain half-tone--
I become light
and you throw me, flotsam and all,
back to shore.
I wait here for the high tide.

II.

I used to be somebody's home;
my body protecting one pearl
zealously guarding its shine and hardness
and now it dangles
from a string around her neck.
From the light of yesterday's shipwreck,
I can still see the amber of his eye
even as the hot sun grows
inside my empty womb.
I would fly at this hour
when the light is white
and my body is light,
if I could. But, I am stuck here
in-between the sea, sand and the sun.

## HEAVEN IS A DEPARTMENT STORE

Only if I withdraw and die,
Heaven--the department store's
door will open. It would not
then be a dream-text
saturated with a lot of useless
words; words that make no sound,
fiction and lie--
their music not even a note.

The glass steps
cover rose petals, goldfish
and green stuff, and on the higher
shelves, miniature black elephants
and sea-horses sway in fresh water:
this is a true representation of Heaven,
the department store. I have been there.
Chinese Ming vases,
old lac-like men abound
here and there--third eyes
watching your moves: what you
pick and choose
in this museum of dreams;
take away with you, shoplift,
reject or foolishly pay a fat price for.
What colour, underwear?

As if it matters, anyway,
what they deduce
when you are the dirt between
a touch and slice of blue strawberry.

## WINGS OR OTHER THINGS FOR YOU

Come Thursday and I mackerel
ready to disintegrate into deep blue
and, in a jiffy, I am
suspended from, where else, but nowhere:
it's Friday again. At times such as these,
I am that space on the shelf
where the book used to be
(your eye re-adjusted already)
hovering, of course, like words
that burn-out and smoke.
Always black ink rains the edges of the cot
pushed against the wall,
everything here is in a mess: black smudges
the pulp, plastic and the prayer bells;
the smooth curvature of the grey television speakers.
I have to be some kind of a beautiful leaf--
all goldenly and crackle
the four o'clock sun brushes its cheek
against my tummy; at the stem
where water-nerves just about begin to break amok.
Then again, I could be wrong:
this could be a thriving industry
where hungry angels with dirty nails
manufacture Wings & Other Things for you.

Well, as you can imagine,
I try and choose my elements very discreetly
lest I be left behind.

## SUSAN A. BHATT

### GOLCONDA FORT - 26TH JAN.

We could not hear the sounds of silence
the tombs sent forth
Nor catch the clap of ancient acoustics
fashioned to echo to the fort
For loud speakers pulverised
the catacombed kings
To one more republic day pattern of dust
the *kachnar* bloomed
A flowering nun, amidst those tombs
pristine, profligate of perfume
Golconda passes into the permanence of stone
boulders bloom
Bald obscene busts
patted and rounded
To fashion those hills
to house these tombs in
The valley of its thighs.

P. LAL and NANDINI NOPANY

# THE BHAGAVATA PURANA

Transcreated from the Sanskrit of Vyasa

Book X: Canto 20

## MONSOON AND AUTUMN

Sri Suka continued:

The cowherd boys narrated to the ladies of their homes all the splendid feats of Krishna and Balarama, their rescue from the forest fire, and the killing of
1 Pralamba. The elders listened to the stories; awe-struck, they looked at Krishna and Balarama as if they were two
2 gods born in Vraja.

The monsoon descended
The wondrous life-giver.
The skies thick with clouds.
Dark-blue rain-clouds
Shroud the glorious sun,
Spouting thunder,
3 Spitting lightning.
The splendid sun is obscured,
Like Brahman,
The divine breath of life,
Covered by the gunas,
The three physical attributes,
Sattva, Rajas and Tamas,
Like soul covered by body,
4 Like spirit covered by matter.
The moist richness of the soil,
Sucked by the splendid sun
Over a period of eight months,
Is now graciously returned
At the auspicious time
To the waiting earth
5 By the rain god Parjanya.

The almighty clouds,
Lightning-charged and wind-driven,
Lavish rejuvenating showers
On the dry begging earth
Like rich donors pitying
A poor supplicant.
The body of an ascetic
Practising tapasya
Glows with radiance
When he achieves success;
So the dried up earth,
Shrunk in the summer heat,
Radiated new health
With the drenching showers.
In the Kali Yuga
The ignorant and the wicked
Drive out the learned and the good;
So in the monsoon
The dark clouds gather,
And the fire-flies take over,
Blotting out the stars.
Hearing the rumbling and roaring
Of the rain god Parjanya,
The frogs, silent so long,
Now croak continually
Like dutiful Brahmins
Chanting their rituals.
The summer-dried rivulets
Now overflow their banks
And run in wrong channels,
Like the wealth of people
Enslaved by their passions
Used for wrong purposes.
The earth miraculously
Becomes a glory of green,

Green grass upon green grass;
The earth miraculously
Becomes a glory of red,
Red upon red
Like the Indragopa beetle;
The earth miraculously
Becomes a kingdom of umbrellas,
Mushroom on mushroom,
Like royal parasols
11 Of unparalleled prosperity.
The fields blossom with grains,
Delighting the farmers.
Destiny grants this prosperity,
But the ignorant thriving farmers
Wrongly take the credit
12 For this divine largesse.
All land and water creatures,
Drenched in the monsoon,
Become lovely, lovely, lovely,
As lovely as are devotees
13 Who propitiate Divinity.
And the ocean becomes agitated
With streams and rivers inflowing
And winds blowing waves,
Like an immature yogi
Agitated by kama
14 And desires for worldly things.
Though torrents of rain strike them,
The hills stand firm;
Though sorrow and suffering
Afflict them continuously,
The devotees of Divinity
15 Remain firm in their faith.
Pathways unrepaired
Get cluttered with moss and weed,

Like the scriptures of Shruti,
The Vedas and Upanishads,
Obscured by neglect
16 If left unstudied.
Even bolts of lightning
Are unable to disperse
The people-friendly clouds
Bringing fertile rain.
Lustful women, similarly,
17 Cannot seduce the noble-minded.
The guna-less rainbow
Shines with soul-strength
With thunderous impact,
Like the guna-less Purusha,
The essence of the universe,
Transforming his energy
Into the world of gunas.
The rainbow of Indra,
The unphysical reality,
Thrills us with physical sensations;
The unphysical Divinity,
The essence of the universe,
Fills the whole world
18 With physical variety.
The individual soul,
Covered by the ego,
Which it itself produces,
Is unable to shine forth;
So the moon in the sky,
Obscured by the clouds
Which shine in moonlight,
19 Is covered by them too.
Like householders entrapped
And vexed with domesticity,
But ecstatic when worshippers

Of Divinity become their guests,
So the peacocks scream joyfully
When the rain-clouds arrive.
Now trees with their roots
Suck sap from the soil,
Become lush-green and flowering;
Like those who do tapasya
Become well-fed and stout
When their goal is achieved.
Self-centred people
Never free themselves
From tiresome daily duties
Of dull domesticity,
Like cranes living in lakes
Mud-filled and weed-choked,
Who lift their beaks high
But never fly away.
With the rain pouring down,
Sent by the chief god Indra,
Roaring sheets of water
Break down bunds and bridges;
So the paths of the Vedas
Are destroyed by the sophistry
Of Kali Yuga arguments.
The wind-propelled clouds
Shower ambrosial rain
On the people below;
So the leaders of people accept
The wisdom of Brahmins
Given at the right time.

One day, during this monsoon season, Krishna and Balarama decided to have a bit of fun. With their cowherd companions and a herd of cattle they entered a thick forest lush with dates and blackberries. The milch cows proceeded slowly because of the weight of their

milk-filled udders; but as soon as they heard the call of Bhagavan Krishna, they rushed ahead, their udders oozing
26 milk out of affection. The forest dwellers were enchanted. The forest trees dripped honey. The hills cascaded with waterfalls. The mountain caves reverberated with roar of
27 the falling water.

When it rained heavily Krishna sheltered under a large *kroda* tree or slipped inside a mountain cave. He scoured
28 the forest for edible fruits, shoots, and roots. He would sit on rocky slabs near flowing waters, and enjoy the curds-and-rice in the company of Balarama and the
29 cowherd boys. Bhagavan Krishna saw the oxen, calves and the milch cows lying in the lush green grass, chewing the cud with their eyes half shut. The milch cows were tired out with the weight of their heavy udders. Krishna saw them serene and relaxed. The loveliness of the monsoon reflected the loveliness of Sri Krishna himself;
30-31 he basked in the enchantments of the season.

Monsoon passed and autumn came, with Balarama and Krishna frolicking in Vraja. The clouds disappeared, the water in the lakes became translucent, the air pure and
32 dust-free. Autumnal lotuses blossomed, lakes and rivers regained their original beauty--like people who fall from grace recovering their virtuous nature by the practice of
33 yoga. Just as bhakti for Krishna removes the sorrows of the four castes, the autumn season removed the clouds from the skies, dried up the slush of the earth, and purified
34 the scum in the waters. Casting off their load of rain, the clouds shone with a white radiance, like holy men who, having cast off their desires, are freed from their burdens
35 and shine with spiritual peace. The mountains flowed with clean pure water in some places and no water at all in other places, like wise men imparting the nectar of
36 wisdom to some people and withholding it from others. Creatures who thrive in shallow pools fail to notice the water level diminishing day by day; similarly fools bogged down in family matters fail to realise the daily

ebbing away of their life. Even poor and undisciplined people, when busily involved in looking after their relatives, become unaware of their own sufferings; similarly, creatures living in shallow pools of water are not afflicted with the heat of the autumn sun.

Slowly the soil lost its excessive moisture, and the plants lost their unripe state; like wise people who give up the egoism of "I" and "mine" which springs from the physical body. With the advent of autumn the water of the ocean became a sheet of unmoving tranquillity, like a holy man who becomes totally silent and serene when he gives up all physical activity. Peasants obtain water for their fields by channels and dykes; similarly yogis obtain knowledge by disciplining the physical energies of their senses. The moon soothes the pain of creatures caused by the heat of the autumnal sun; similarly Sri Krishna through self-knowledge removes the misery generated by egoism. The cloudless autumn sky shines with a host of scintillating stars; a mind made pure by virtue and goodness shines with the knowledge of a darshan of the Shabda-Brahman, the Word which is God. Surrounded by the mandala of stars, the autumn moon dazzles in the sky; so Krishna, the Lord of the Yadavas, shines on earth, chakra in hand, surrounded by his subjects. Basking in the balmy breeze wafting from flower-gardens, the people of Vraja forgot their fatigue; similarly the gopis of Vraja, whose hearts had been enchanted by Krishna, forgot their loneliness in the poignant pleasure of love's separation. Cows, does, she-birds, and females of every species are chosen for mating in autumn and find fulfilment in procreation; similarly virtuous actions choose the doer of good and fulfil his desires. All water-flowers, with the exception of the lotus, blossomed when the autumn sun shone in the sky--like all subjects, with the exception of thieves, becoming fearless on the occasion of a king's coronation. The fields bloomed with the beauty of the harvest, and the

Great Festival of Agrayana was celebrated; but the real source of happiness on earth was the fact that Krishna and
48 Balarama were incarnated on it. Merchants, holy men, kings, and *snataka* Brahmins emerged from prolonged hibernation in their homes during the monsoon; similarly, *siddhas* emerged from the disciplines in which they were engaged for long periods and obtained success
49 at the proper time.

## R. AMRITAVALLI

### THE CAUTIOUS CENTIPEDE

for Shyamala

In my study
the cautious centipede
alternates its careful feet
onto the greeting card I hold for him

like the mother duck Gerald Durrell saw
test with a foot forward each floating leaf
as she stepped across the water
with her ducklings behind her

The duck has two feet
and the centipede many, many more
to test the ground under them

little do they know
of the underwater stems
and the still hands
that hold steady the leaf and the card
for their feet to step onto

# VIETNAMESE SALAD

for Jayasri

I was hungry
Father was vegetarian
Don't eat the goat, he said
that runs in the sun
he soaked instead
a fistful of *moong*

I was hungry
Mother was pious
Don't eat the egg, she said
that houses the chick
she wrapped in white muslin
the sprouting *moong*

I was hungry
On the third day I saw
the *moong* had arisen

it stood in the dish
shrouded still in muslin
roots pushed through damp cloth
to the bedrock of the dish
shoots, yellow still, searching
for the light

I was hungry
I made Vietnamese salad
out of sprouted *moong*

but my child saved
some sprouts to plant
on the fourth day she showed me
how green were the leaves
of her sprouts

as she watered them

## DARIUS COOPER

### From A RENAISSANCE JOURNEY

FIRENZI/FLORENCE - DECEMBER 29

Not A Divine Comedia

In the city
which baptised and exiled Dante,
this city,
I feel uprooted and at home.
Standing opposite Dante's church--
Santa Margherita di Cerchi--
I search for the exact spot
on this pavement
where Dante, all dressed
in red, stood,
as Beatrice slowly emerged
through this church's door
trailed by a newly minted husband
and a small boy throwing flowers.

Which way did Dante turn
after swallowing this painful image?
Maybe he turned and circled
and circled and turned again
clutching a violent book
of leather
in which Beatrice the girl
became Beatrice the whore,
no, Beatrice the wife,
no, Beatrice the mistress,
the madonnamagdelaine
who pierced and shattered
and tore his comedia apart
as the divine became the profane
and the straight line of love
became circles of lust

circles of anger
circles of rage
as circumferences were shattered
and centre were uprooted
right on this very spot
under the scattered weight
of all those
freshly cut flowers
thrown by a completely
wide-eyed innocent
who aimed and never missed
his targets
not knowing that the enemy
was watching him
watching him
watching him.

VENEZIA - JANUARY 2

Death In Venice

"Between those two granite columns
on which the lion of St Mark rests
and the other where St Theodore stands
the enemies of Venice were publicly executed."

I pour water over our enthusiastic guide's utterances.

To Die
with so much beauty all around you.
To Feel
the reflected loss of freshly bathed flesh
in a city
where glass competes constantly with water.

To See
these gondolas enter the waters
for the very last time
like long dark coffins . . .
just as the axe is raised
just as the noose is tightened
just as the smile
on a once upon a time loved face
drowns with dignity.

But who will collect all these sighs
left behind on the bridge?
Will the color
of all this spilled blood
ever match
Tintorettol's baroque splash
on the Doge's walls?
Will all these pacific seagulls
quarrel for pieces
of our capsized souls?

But Look
look at the water of the Adriatic.
See how
it bubbles through the floor
of the Piazza San Marco
making the Executioner's feet
uncomfortable.

## MONUMENTAL AND INTIMATE SPACES

As the neighbour's rabbit
enters my garden
and begins his careless
desecration of
flowers fruits and water sprinklers,

from my intimate space of
table pens and paper

I dream of the aged Shah Jehan
groaning
on his marble varandah
as his daughter
runs
for the hakim.

Supreme builder of the Taj Mahal,
I see him painfully
prop himself
and focus his watery eyes
against
a tiny jewel
embedded
in the wall:

a precious circular space
in which is reflected
the monumental glory
of the Taj.

Unable to find the hakim
his daughter returns

to embrace the injected stabs
of a father's venom

once again
granted in absentia
to a son
bent over the Koran
on a narrow throne.

Exhausted
the old king collapses
into that conjuctivital nightmare
where soldiers return
again and again
to empty into
that jewelled circumference

hundreds of laboring eyes
and archifractured wrists
of all who had wrestled
with the Taj
exactly
like this rabbit
stubbornly entangled
in a lettuce warfare of
vegetable fruit and water

uprooting
an entire row
of freshly planted cannas
so serene in chaos
so supremely oblivious
to its mate's
pawing despair

in her narrow space
on the other side of the fence.

Catching the rabbit's eye
I wonder about traps
and why
they are always
so cunningly baited
in
intimate spaces.

I remember Last Tango
Schneider and Brando
comingtogether
and coming apart
behind closed shutters

where the mere mention of a name
was banished to a (w)hole forgetting
under the guillotine roar
of the metro outside.

I get up from my protective desk
chase the rabbit
and painfully swallowing
the insult of a
recently beheaded garden
I return
and finally begin my own untying

as Shah Jehan drops like a pin
into the ultimate bubble
of his marble space

jewelsmeared

by a final
faltering
thumbprint.

## TRENCH WARFARE

Remember how we laughed
watching a morning-show print

of two Hayley Mills contriving "parent traps"
in reels mixed up by the Bandra New Talkies projectionist?

How pollyanna, pollyappa, pollyamma we feel now
as we confront our children's strategems

wailing and thrashing about as the shells explode
in halfyankee, halfhindusthani helplessness.

In trench warfare of this kind
they will always be cunning

for there is more to their east of eden
than our clumsy offers of sense and sensibility.

In trench warfare of this kind
we will always lose

having neither a partioned garamkot
or gogol's nehruvian overcoat

and the one lent by our adopted country of stars
is so quickly torn into mercurocom stripes

bandaging over all these shifting perspectives
this daily procession of endless wounds.

Can third world tropics ever find a first world equator?
I hesitate even to chart out an answer

for the waters round these capes of good hope are deadly.
So all I can say as I repeatedly come up for air

is I can give them a push here a nudge there or
maybe lend a helping hand to steady our wounded presences

as the trenches rapidly fill up
with our children's compulsively shredded skins.

## HOSHANG MERCHANT

### THIS SPRING A KOEL TURNING IN A TREE

This Spring a koel turning in a tree
Black and goldbrown/red eye in a green neem tree
I did not hear I only see
In my mind's eye
Black gold and green: A koel turning in the tree

It is morning  It could be high noon
It is Spring  It could be Summer's green
And leaves falling green to brown
And black wings turning in a tree
The wind rising as at dawns

It could be night
And as at old age a man perceives his youth
I still see the morning bird upon the tree
Turning and turning upon a branch
As if bound and caged in love for a leaf
a fall

Then I suddenly turned
Heard the leaf fall
Saw night descend
And remembered the scream of the koel.

# AN ARIZONA OF THE MIND

1

An unseen land
is more real
because it's Imaged: Imagined

There's a myth about a man
going to hell for a woman
Hell's lord let her go
But he looked back
and lost her
Yet she returns each spring

2

At the zenith
of Prescott Pass
where scrub gave way to juniper
The White Mountain was glimpsed
Not stone but mist

3

Sister wanted to spend the night tired
in a ghost town, Jerome
The vast hotel/The abandoned goldmine
And men still panning gold
Fixing old Oldsmobiles and Vauxhalls
(Things don't rust here)
At a bend in the road
Transfixed, marooned
like the hill-hotel overlooking the valley
--a boat before a sea

What sinuous rills, ascents, staircases!
Mirrors throwing back light
Or taking you in
From them look out laughing gold-diggers
And sad, lonely eyes of '20's men

4

The Canyon's southern rim
All red stone
And suddenly Sedona
like the mystery of an Oriental Suntemple:
Stone idol and supplicant
Carved by wind and winding river
Action of water on stone
Everything washes away/Only water survives

And the boy in the bowl
of the parking lot
His hair rippling like light
His laughter, rippling like light
What dream had he seen last night?
How did the Navajos interpret it?
Had he decided to be a moon-child
A bird-child transformed on a mountain
Double-sexed like an arrow-weed?

I saw the eagle circle over us thrice
I will remember that sight

What a man dreams in his heart
is his real self/It is his wish

5

Then sister took ill
on the mountaintop Breathlessness
And I promised Whabiz blood-transfusions
transplants
Mine:
She was after all mine
(And we only momentarily forget we're all dying)
But she being small could only fit
a child's heart

Cursed once again by man-curse
Once again I wished to mother
to child
The roads on the map, all arteries
all choice

6

Then it rained
I remembered India's rains
But the leaves are narrower here
And the rain comes down noiselessly
Good dreams come from the moon
The bad, from the sun
So the two are always on the run
Indian mothers teach children
to hoard their dreams

And a rainbow appeared

7

How we cheered as children
at the Living Desert matinee
The Disney cat on the saguaro tree
with the coyote baying beneath!

8

In the beginning was fire
And then when the lava congealed
Mountains painted green and red appeared

When the rock cooled the land was fissured
From this fissure I rescue my poem

Majnun in the desert and Ghalib's cry:
Seeing the Sahara my home I remembered
Lifting stone, Majnun His head he remembered

9

Nogales (N.M.) last night on TV
Children of the sewers
connecting desert and desert
Living like rats or bats
who respect no borders

Telling the newsmen:
If you're ever homeless you're welcome here

10

The sudden creak of a pistol-shot!
It's John Wayne shooting a movie
in Greer: The oldest inn in Arizona, 1860
And he'd left no tips
Next morning's help found $5 bills under every cover

And Jane Wyman suddenly smiles
from the mirror
turns and is gone

for Sunday lunch at the only inn
in a one-horse town
Real myths having ridden on. . .
He flattened Copper Canyon into the ground
Dante's hell too was such a bottomless pit

15

I knock on a door
Someone answers Who's here? (Hoosier?)

I'm a homesteader 100 years late
Come to a New Harmony, West
The Temple in ruins eternal
And a train departs who knows to what Belsen
I correspond with Carthage and Rome
They reply
Delhi, CA lies a highway away

Yet where in what Temple will I find
Again That old American mind?

Virgil and Xenobia Anais and Carmela
I owed them a life I lost

16

At sunset
flying over Ispahan
from a fogged plane window
like an old man
tracing the contour of a youthful love
I see the camel-humped mountain
But not one blue dome
All Alexander's army trapped in the desert

11

Don't shoot here
You'll kill deer

Three looming fates we came upon
on the highway Earth coloured
Stood a moment dreaming
the dream of time

Startled and were gone
in the direction they came from

Only the mother went the other way
to rescue her fawn

12

And when Marco Polo
was already in China
The Indians still chiselled on rock here
Labyrinths from the loom of time

13

Then cowboy took to cowboy:
Don't make love
You'll frighten the horses!

14

And in cowboy suit
after church Dodge Phelp's CEO
Helps his peroxide lady out of a Ford Bronco
Shimmering mirages out

Mutinying to go home
After all the travels in the desert

On the world's other edges Marco Polo's Gobi
On this the old artist-lover's cry
Bihzad! Bihzad!

Come home!

Epilogue:
And now it rains in Swat
The desert taxidriver can see it in my eyes
in his rearview mirror
Yet nothing comes of loss but loss
I shut my eyes and see
New cosmogonies
Scenes never seen
but suspiciously like old ones
Aren't all oceans the nascent waters of our births?

I will be the cat that climbs the cactus-tree
And I am the coyote baying at me

It rains the rivers of India in my eyes
And from the cracked mirror my mother the poem smiles.

(for Aga Shahid Ali) *June '95*

## BIBHAS DE

### SPIRIT HORSES

The waterhole of the wildhorses
Is not open to view; the mystery
There, at evenings in particular,
Defies even the seer's divination.
Rimmed by a spirit forest, lit by a
Spirit moon, the evening waterhole
Of the spirit horses is forbidden
To view. Envision or imagine,
Overfly or scout, the communing at
The waterhole is withheld from view.
When seasons turn, meadows flower
And waters rage, the yogi's meditation
Deepens a bit: half-formed words
Flit, holographic images re-form;
But the shaping of the mindhorses
Still diffuses just beyond sense.
Analyze what is knowable, argue
What is not; cull out the objective
Reality from that which is altered
On perception; but the evening
Rituals of the wildhorses still elude
Observation. The jungle murmurs at
A whisper though, that there's granted
But a joint view, one glimpse to a pair,
A man and a woman in constant bond,
Unfailing even as youth fails,
Sworn each to each to the end of
The way--a look they store in the
Shared memory, not open to view.

## THE LOST WORD OF THE MONSOON LAKE

From cicada's ceaseless sound
On the moist air of a monsoon lake
At a sky's brief respite--sunned yet,
Between lovers out on a forest walk,
At composing a life in language,
Suddenly, from out of a sentence
In midair, a word is lost.
In the wet lichens and moss,
Beneath the cicada's noise floor
Or in the scent of wildflowers, from
Out of airwaves, a word is lost.
In the blank space of the sentence
There is dark foreboding.
The jungle withholds its breath,
The cicadas the sound
And the wildflowers the scent
As if to facilitate the retrieval.
Where is the word,
The jungle sighs in uncertain guilt.
What was the word,
The cicadas intone in near apology.
Was it the verb, was it the adjective
Or the adverb, the wildflowers wonder.
The sentence gapes ungrammatically.
On a blackening lake raindrops renew.
The man puzzles, pensively,
At the sloe-eyed loveliness of a face,
At a pearlesque teardrop--
A tiny speck at its center
Glistening with meaning.

## LAMASERY WILD BERRIES

The ageless rock face has aged
In the sound; long low wailed
The long brass horns, the chant
Grew and fell, rose and ebbed,
Then grew to a resonant high,
Steeped deep in the pore space
Of rocks, to daily affirm a
Wholeness of harmony, till
The day the horns, till the day
The chant, of music sapped,
Struck the transforming note:
Monk into exile, rock to sponge.

In the stunted shadow of bonsais
Dimming now--wisteria, ezo
Spruce, cranberry cotoneaster
In miniature berries--definition
Blurring now on the rock garden
Floor, fresh raked to ash gray,
Transplanted patterns of remembered
Harmony, sunned the whole day
By lodgepole pines, rowed ungapped
To the abrupt hills, sudden
Sentinels at watch over the
Summering rill, pebble deep and
Fast eddied, indistinct mirror
On the prayer flags, colored
Lure-bright and hoisted trade
Wind high, well willed to draw
The blessings of seven seas, not
Unmixed in the redolence of
The coastal temple gardens, their
Coconut groves seacooled, in that
Stunted shadow of shimpaku junipers
Blurring now, a day is done.
The monk into his sanctum,
Seaward the sun, this day is done.

## POOVAN MURUGESAN

### NATURE

After feeding our dachshund
two pounds of prime steak
and real biscuits to celebrate
his fourth birthday
we sit down to a dinner of
escargots, roasted wild game,
green salad and
honey vanilla ice cream,
all washed down with
aged red grape blood.
Then we watch a pack of
hyenas maul a deer cub.
My five year old whimpers
and turns her head away.
Tears roll down in torrents.
I click the TV off, scoot over
to sit beside her and say,
Honey, that's nature.
You'll understand it when
you are older and richer.
Maybe she didn't.
Maybe she couldn't.
I feel two small fists
come down on my head
with all the force
they could muster.

## RAW

in memory of Allen Ginsburg

The howling, cussing and drooling maniac
Reminded me of raw flesh hanging in Moroccan shops
On its way from grazing lands to the dining table,
Slaughter-house wounds still fresh dripping with blood,
Or of naked light bulbs in unpainted, garbage-strewn,
Foul-odored rooms with a view to the cemetery
So raw as a matter of fact that he flinched
When he saw daylight and breathed fresh air.

With the geography and the times on his side
He romped the world with words--
Prose, prose, prose, prose, prose-poems--
Raging against all attempts to freeze them
More incendiary than the napalms of the War
That scorched the young minds and his soul.
A Buddhist's chants of agony and despair.

The shock-value of his high-voltage words
Drowned out the meaning in a babble of outrage
Always with an accountant's eye for detail
To scold everybody who dared to raise eyebrows
At the streak of irresponsibility that said:
The words are mine, but their meaning is yours.
We have limped away a long way from Nam
But we still need him as a symbol, an emblem
Of what all is wrong with us. Amen.

## THE MITTENS ARE MINE

The mittens, soft and warm, are mine
Though knitted by you between
Dizzy spells, naps, meals, medications,
And complaints of aches and pains.

Put together by your gnarled fingers
With a skill "still good after all these years",
The creaking joints encased in a rocking chair
And whining and wheezing through the winter air.

The woolen threads were bought
By selling eggs that you couldn't
Bend down to pick up and
Would have loved to eat them scrambled.

The mittens are mine though
Because they are too small for you.

## MOLSHREE

### POEM

Two lovers
Like day and night
One says I am his
And holds my hand
He is the bold type
It doesn't matter who knows what
It doesn't matter who I am
He loves me still
Like the sun
We are light and bright and open
We meet people
And they talk to us
And even though I hide it
He joins my name to his

The other one is my secret
A warm secret
A funny scented secret
We too share
Conversations and dial tones
He leaves me to lead my independent life
He is the cautious one
Moments are beyond him
Only the years ahead
Keep him thinking

I know them both
I know which one will say what
Sometimes I love them,
Sometimes I cry
Because even though they are two
I am still alone

I wonder if they know
Restlessly the soul beats in the darkness
Each one inflicts a wound
Each one twists a nerve
And I bleed and I bleed

My friends say I am a modern woman
I am a clever woman
I am the winner in this game of people
Both light and darkness are mine
I do not tell them
That the beauty of sunrises and sunsets are escaping
Through huge empty spaces
Between these two lovers
And me

## SNOW

Snow falls outside
and covers
the city unknown
and miles away in the yellow sun my heart searches
for life

The white makes me think of a body elevated
a procession
chanting

The white makes me think
of sheets crumpled and tossed aside after many promises
after much love

The white makes me think of the woman
who stands alone after they have had their fill and left her
arms bare, focused on the stars they said would be hers

It makes me think of the nakedness of the house once the betrayal
is over
of the silence of loneliness once the songs have been sung
and the solid stillness of the eyes after the tears have fallen

## POEM

One night
Two names lose meaning
They are lovers in darkness
They divide the weeks sorrows among themselves
Silence
Interrupted only by sounds of bodies
Passion
Fierce passion
Free passion
Free to leave in the morning
Hands in pockets
Whistling
Names back on the faces
You are a distinct you
I am a solid I
Beyond the imprisonment
of words
like
us
and
we

## AN UGLY SORT OF NIGHT

Outside the stars are falling from the night sky
It is indigo
The woman inside is a little deranged
She watches them drop
and turn to silver water
and smudge her kohled eyes

They had hailed her once
She was the modern sort
She drove a modern car
and smeared her lips with glossy browns
and used herbal shampoos on her hair
She was the intellectual sort
She could talk of Indian English writers
and changes in cinema
or some vague buddhist philosophy

A real artist too
she had a string of strange relationships
In the morning she was brilliant
as if she had been reborn
And at night she bitterly raved and cried
Stars dribbled down her chin
They fell from her face
which became an ugly sort of white
when she died.

## JAMES B. SWAIN

### THE TOMB

*"Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death."*

You can't dissappoint your mother.

> You study hard, but don't make the grade,
> what do you do, go home and say "I walked
> memorizing my questions round and round and round
> the tomb, there, behind the college, and before
> the great talab and nothing came of it?" I can see
> my father in the star of an ascetaline torch
> up by the great dam in the mountains, welding
> to keep me studying. I can see my brother, hurrying
> among school children, not yet wondering, quite,
> what he will do, when round and round and round
> he too finally may or must go, with his
> Sham Sher Khan buried in the middle. I thought
> of toppling death by studying; I thought death
> would topple me before I'd tell my mother how
> round and round . . . . The eucalyptus had rain
> running down their leaves in the fresh compound
> of the small white temple behind the campus. You leave
> the temple to come to the college by road, past
> the servants' lines, and you can go visit
> anytime. But somehow it's hard to tell your mother
> that you are less, or not what she thought
> you were when your father thought differently . . . .

It is a very disappointing thing.

> Grandmother is very strict. A real Sharma
> does not eat onions or garlic, and their plates
> are not crockery but metal, or is it crockery
> but not metal, I forgot. But when I go home

I can remember having circumambulated
that great Moghal tomb, studying my lessons.
Why is it so hard to settle down
in the Centre for Post-Graduate Studies? Dhobies
are perfectly visible from the Hostel next
to it. Buffalo, with their attendent milkmen,
graze on the bank of the great king's talab.
I am at home and not at home, the open book
not being precisely what I thought;
but arts was my choice, and to teach arts my ambition.
After all,--the Kohinoor was here!

I can't disappoint my parents.

What is it that I can tell her when I go
this weekend to change her image of me a little?
There was a time, when had her husband died
which God forbid she'd have gone in the flames too.
What will she do when I tell her that possibly,
though I will fight it out, a little of me too
has died that she has tended, weened, nursed
bore and helped conceive, and *that* in a world
that rounds the old tomb? . . . Religion, I note,
is in there now too. Somebody has put lights
on the whitewashed cenotaph, and marigolds
in garlands withering, somehow disappointed.
The stairs up to the tomb's galleries are bricked up.
The stairs down to the grave are bricked over.
The place is inhabited by bats and Government's
good intentions to restore it. Who
can disappoint his mother lovingly
when there is me and India to think of?

## FARIDOON SHAHRYAR

### DUST OF SADNESS

I saw a dream:
'Dust of Sadness'
Scattered on the
Pavement of the forehead,
Some specks lying as well
On the unconscious eyelids,
Their weight a problem,
A mild burden to bear.

I wake up, tired,
And realise,
The smiles of humility
Are difficult to manage.

### ECHO OF EXPECTATIONS

An echo of expectations,
Resonates profusely
In a dim-lit room;
A shadow of dreams
Saunters along,
Halting briefly
To move again,
Lost in its reverie.

It is a sin to 'expect'
The 'voiceless' screams!

## WINDS OF HOPE

Windows of life were opened
In a year that passed noiselessly.

Seasons of vicissitude
Played their music, as always,
Different it seemed this time;
Ears were tuned, eyes felt the scene.

Winds of hope may flow favourably
As I wish to fly, to places far away.

## SAND HOUSES OF PATIENCE

Ice winds knock impatiently
At the door of tremulous hearts;
Dark rains wash
The walls of silent breath.

Sand houses of patience, wrecked,
By a playful wave.

## NEETI SINGH SADARANGANI

### SAND AND DUST

The dust swats my feet
my waist my breasts

It spirals and swirls
in the late afternoon sun
It scampers
like a dozen brown mice beneath my feet!

My yellow full-skirt
puffs up like a balloon--
sunflowers in the sun!

The many-headed horse
that is my born,
leaps across the sky
in a hopeless bid for wings. . .

When my daughter, the mirage,
yawns--
the arid earth shakes.

There is no thirst left

The mist of a kiss
slips upon my nape,
the skies blush

With the setting sun
I go to sleep.

## THE JUNGLE

Like a rolling black boulder
the bulky swaggering gait
of a tusker through the jungle
scattering dust-sheets
upon the undergrowth.

The prince of vibrations
a prince in elephant's clothes.
'DHUB'
'DHUB'
shakes the red earth.
From their root-mouths in the pit
the trees break,
in epileptic fits the drums of wind--
whirlwind.

Like a wild boar
the forest runs,
grunts-up
a gasping maniacal rage.

It unleashes like a python
and swallows the hemisphere's face.

## R. RAJ RAO

# LEFTY

In the Fort campus library,
readers stare at you
for writing with your left hand.
You want to tell them
you don't get it right
when you write with your right,
nor are you what is known as
ambidextrous.
But you keep shut.
Speaking isn't allowed inside the library,
though looking is,
there are no laws against looking
a family member used to say.

But there are signboards saying 'silence' all around.

You wish the Fort campus library
had mirrors for walls
like Kyani's or Bastani's
where you have fried eggs with your lover,
great levelling mirrors
that right all wrongs
and achieve a degree of justice
even the Bombay High Court cannot.

## DATE

Meat is what you decide to do at the Gaylord
but he chickens out in the end,
not sure what will happen to him.
You are left to fish for another,
egg him on to have a meal with you
so your table reservation does not go waste.

Being is becoming,
Mr. Ditcher says to you on the phone next day,
quoting Jiddu Krishnamurti.
Your being is a threat to society
and now you must aim at becoming
a thread.

The food at Gaylord wasn't even good.

## MOIN QAZI

### CREATING A POEM

I sit confused at my table.
The mind ablaze
with great visions, fleeting memories
I want to clothe these images
but my pen won't write.
The point has blunted
and the storm in the mind
won't calm down.
Endless bands of images
cross each other,
but they won't settle
to let me dress them in words.
I give up my plan
until I am forced to write.
Now the words flow
like a serene cascade
driven by primal force.
And I hear God speaking to me as the
images get clothed in a fine apron.

## ENDLESS NIGHT

Tonight I sit alone in the night
Hoping against hope for sleep to benumb me.
My eyes are heavy
But my brain continues to tick.
Could somebody kiss my swollen eyes,
It would wipe away the painful insomnia.
Could somebody kiss my burning head,
It would douse the leaping flames.
Could somebody open the distant door,
It would allow the breeze to walk in.
I feel somebody walking down.
No, the heavy feel has grown softer
And suddenly there is grim silence.
I have to live through the tortuous night.
Darkness is its apparel, weirdness its face.
It is a passage only of a Night
But it becomes a journey through Hell.

KRISHNA RAYAN

# SUGGESTION ACROSS ASIAN LITERATURES

The *Dhvanyāloka*, a Sanskrit treatise by Ānandavardhana (9th century A.D.), presents what is probably the most rigorous and elegant development yet in any language of the theory of literary suggestion. It is grounded on the binary opposition which had general acceptance until as recently as the era of the Yale Deconstructionists--to use Paul de Man's contrary pairs, rhetorical/grammatical or figural/literal. Traditionally, connotational/denotative, oblique/direct, implicit/explicit, plural/specific and perhaps more authoritatively than these, suggested/stated are antinomies which have reigned in different systems and in different times as categories of meaning. Ānandavardhana's formulation of stated, suggested and (thirdly and perhaps less extensively) transferred meaning and their modes of generation and their mutual relationships is exhaustive, detailed and tautly reasoned. Where, however, the *Dhvanyāloka* fails to impress is in the samples of suggestive writing provided, which are mostly pedestrian, trivial and at times inane--like for instance the following piece:

> Here's where my old mother sleeps,
> And here my father, still older.
> Here sleeps the maid, thoroughly fagged out,
> And this is my room; and I'm lonely,
> With my husband away on a long trip . . .
> Thus the girl to the visitor,
> Seemingly speaking a formal welcome.

It is true that Ānandavardhana wishes to demonstrate here how the expository last line cancels out the force of what the rest of the poem conveys by suggestion. But the whole passage is a mere piece of the sly discourse of amorous intrigue common in a highly repressed society and can in no sense be treated as a specimen of literary suggestion or *dhvani*. And the tone and level of the passage are in startling contrast to the elevation and sophistication with which the theorizing is conducted.

It is an interesting circumstance that when the *Dhvanyāloka* was being written, the T'ang poets, following a tradition that had ruled Chinese poetry since the 5th century B.C. if not earlier, were writing octets and quatrains that were accomplished exercises in the *dhvani* mode and would have served as apposite illustrations of the obliquity and economy of utterance, the gaps and indeterminacies, which are the defining characteristic of suggestive writing that Ānandavardhana must have had in mind. Wang Wei's *lü-shih* "Living in the Hills: Impromptu Verses" is a very representative specimen of such language:

> I close my brushwood door in solitude
> And face the vast sky as late sunlight fails.
> The pine trees: cranes are nesting all around.
> My wicker gate: a visitor seldom calls.
> The tender bamboo's dusted with fresh powder.
> Red lotuses strip off their former bloom.
> Lamps shine out at the ford, and everywhere
> The water-chestnut pickers wander home.

The poem is a succession of free-standing images, each with its own field of signification; and the space between each image and the next is as eloquent as the images themselves. The translation is by Vikram Seth who complains about the hazards of the job: 'Even in prose the associations of a word or an image in one language do not slip readily into another. The loss is still greater in poetry, where each word or image carries a heavier charge of association, and where the exigencies of form leave less scope for choice and manoeuvre.'(Seth 1992, p.xxv) Seth is here referring to all languages and to all poetry, but the point he makes applies with special force to Chinese poetry. Yet in translating Chinese poetry, he can at times undo its suggestiveness by joining the discrete words in a line or lines into a syntagmatic chain and imposing coherence and explicitness on them. Take for instance the concluding lines of Wang Wei's *lü-shih* "In answer to Vice Magistrate Zhang:"

Your question failure success principle
Fishers' song enter estuary deep

Seth translates the lines thus:

You ask -- but I can say no more
About the success or failure than the song
The fisherman sings, which comes to the deep shore.
(Seth 1992, p.11)

With the grammatical connectors fitted, the utterance acquires unfoldedness and accessibility and the suggestive energy is turned off.

At times a brief encounter can help spot the dominant characteristic of a body of writing more easily than long familiarity can. Dennis Brutus, a South African poet, visited China in August-September 1973. Brutus's earlier reading of Chinese poetry and then the brief exposure to its native ambiance enabled him to identify the mode that is specific to it. He describes it thus:

> The trick is to say little (the nearer to nothing, the better) and to suggest much--as much as possible. The weight of meaning hovers around the words (which should be as flat as possible) or is brought by the reader/hearer. Non-emotive, near-neutral sounds should generate unlimited resonances in the mind; the delight in the tight-rope balance between nothing and everything possible; between saying very little and implying a great deal.
>
> (Brutus 1975, p.35)

Right from China's earliest recorded poetry--the pre-5th-Century-B.C. collection, the *Shih Ching* (the *Book of Songs*)--suggestion rather than statement has been the dominant language of Chinese poetry. This is a necessity imposed by the nature of the language and by the length constraints of the *lü-shih* and the *chüeh-chü*. It is equally a preferred mode promoted by

tradition dating all the way back to the *Book of Songs*. The components of the mode are easily identified. There is, to start with, the rhetoric of verbal austerity which consists in minimizing the number of words (economy) or omitting some (ellipsis). Such succinctness can either be the cause or the effect of reticence--the practice of silence rather than speech, of expressing by suppressing; of implying rather than verbalizing concepts and affects. The most potent means of such suggestion is the free-standing image--particular, phenomenal, individual--a microcosm of complex accumulated meaning. In Chinese poetry, an image can "stand for" another entity relatable to it; or have no entity to stand for; or stand for an entity related to it by non-congruence or opposition. By thus complicating the tenor-vehicle relationship, Chinese poetry can be said to have anticipated one of the important strategies of High Modernist and subsequent writing in the West. By this token, the Imagist movement which was the midwife of Modernism in English can be seen as having originated in Chinese poetry. This is a familiar fact of literary history; what is not so widely known is that Western Imagism in its turn had a retroactive impact on Chinese poetry.

The *lü-shih* consists of 8 lines with 5 monosyllabic words each, and the *chüeh-chü* consists of 4 lines with 5 or 7 monosyllabic words each. They necessarily do with the sense what a Debussy chord does with musical sound--they leave it suspended. The length constraints dictate concision and compression and promote density and richness of verbal texture.

Yet another source of suggestiveness in Chinese poetry is its marked intertextuality. Apart from its general allusiveness, Chinese poetry, following a convention, has, or had, frequent allusions to the *Book of Songs*, which are either open or veiled, with several levels and fields of association.

* * *

In analyzing the activity of suggestion in Japanese literature, it would be useful to have the Indian response as a point of departure, as was done with Chinese literature. Jayanta Mahapatra visited Japan in 1980 and then as a participant in the Asian Poets' conference in 1984. As with Dennis Brutus in China, Mahapatra's short and intense experience of Japanese poetry, in its home environment if not in the original, enabled him to intuit what was most characteristic of it. He said in a lecture the following year:

> Yet there are those Poems which choose a moment, a single moment, and hold it there, for all of us to see and feel; and that moment plucked from the flow of time becomes a part of knowledge for readers of poetry to share. I recollect a short Japanese poem of the great Haiku poet Basho (1644-94) which celebrates the coming of dawn:
>
> Summer moon--
> Clapping hands,
> I herald dawn.
>
> When one reads this poem and thinks of it, the poem appears quite common, as if merely recording a trivial scene. The recorded moment clothed in the minimum of language is fragile enough but precious; the poem's plain language pulls the sensitive reader into a realm beyond the summer night, and the separation between the reader and nature closes down until it is no more physical--so much so that it might take the reader into the hidden depths of himself. (Mahapatra 1985, p. 11)

It is perhaps not quite precise to describe Bashō as a Haiku poet; also the translation used probably captures the mood and meaning of the poem but clearly fails to conform to its structure with a

longer middle line; but Mahapatra's success in instinctively seizing upon what lies at its heart--or indeed at the heart of any poem in its tradition--is evident from his identification of the defining characteristic of Japanese poetry:

> Japanese poetry seems to have feeling at its core, and when this feeling heightens, reaching a peak, nothing remains to be said. We face silence. Silence soothes, heals. When a poem expresses everything fully, completely, no scope is left for suggestion. And suggestion runs at the root of Japanese poetry.
>
> (Mahapatra 1985, p. 12)

A different kind of reader--a former editor of India's leading newspaper--responding to a different kind of text--a Tanizaki novel--has the very same insight. N.J. Nanporia says:

> In keeping with their technological accomplishments, a minority of Japanese, mostly businessmen, have taken to speaking with what they assume to be an American forthrightness. Yet this is against the traditional grain which prescribes that whatever is worth communicating can be got across effectively by suggestion, obliquity, hints and indirection; and that conversely, whatever is bluntly stated is instantly killed. It is this authentic Japanese voice that can be heard in Junichiro Tanizaki's novels, notably in the latest title available here, *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi*, a tangled portrayal of psychological obsessions, ancient and modern, kept within the bounds of coherence by an asceticism which is entirely traditional.

> There is here a highly developed pictorial element, a tightly packed intensity of suggestion, and multiple layers of meaning which interact with one another.
>
> (*The Times Of India*, May 13, 1984, p.8)

Thus suggestion, rooted in social communication, creative expression and other forms of the country's culture, is found to be the constitutive force in texts across genre boundaries in Japanese literature. However, it is the activity of suggestion in rigidly minimalist verse forms that has had the widest influence on other literatures. Within Japanese poetry, the *tanka* is among the oldest of these forms, and its structure of 5 lines of 5,7,5,7,7 syllables was the base of subsequent variations, chiefly the *renga* and the *haikai*. The *haiku* was evolved in the 16th century, reconfirming, after a millennium, the pattern of alternating lines of 5 and 7 syllables first introduced in the 7th century. Within this extremely limiting mould are cast presentations that are subtle, complex, full-blown--an achievement made possible by ethnic characteristics such as taciturnity and restraint, the structure and nature of the Japanese language promoting compression and brevity, and the conscious employment of various strategies of suggestion, chiefly the single image, concrete, immediate and undiluted by exposition. The natural object presented in the *haiku* functions as an eloquent metaphor for a human situation, and the elimination of discourse creates in the poem space for emotional richness and depth. A widely translated and variously imitated poetic species, the *haiku*, because of its unrelocatable suggestive meaning, is essentially untranslatable and inimitable.

The *haiku* nevertheless has extensively influenced literary practice outside Japanese. So has *No* drama--a *No* play is, if anything, a long imagist poem, a kind of extended *haiku,* marked by a succession of recurrent images exercising a unifying effect. The evocative rhythm, with the conventional alternation of 5-syllable and 7-syllable lines, the stylized movements and dance, the music, and the wealth of allusion make *No* a densely suggestive form.

* * *

To move from East Asian to South Asian literatures, from Chinese and Japanese to, say, Tamil and Sanskrit--specifically, Classical Tamil and Classical Sanskrit--is to pass from praxis ruled by implicit concepts of suggestion to theories of suggestion which are spelled out and which codify past and existing practice and stimulate and regulate further practice. A word of explanation here. In repeating the ideas from classical theories in a current language, if we content ourselves with using the present-day dictionary equivalents of critical terms from the distant past, not much fidelity or intelligibility will result. If, on the other hand, we are not strait-jacketed by literal translation and use approximations and near-equivalents from today's languages--ensuring, of course, that distortion is not risked--the original pronouncements are more likely to prove comprehensible and assimilable.

Classical Tamil literature and theory belong to the Sangam period (roughly 1st Century B.C. to 3rd Century A.D.)--a high noon comparable to the T'ang period. The dominant force in this body of writing was a treatise on literary theory (*Porulatikaram*) forming the third section of the *Tolkāppiyam,* a composite work on grammar and rhetoric. Classical Tamil poetry, which, presumably, partly influenced and partly was influenced by this treatise, consists of a collection of ten long poems and a large number of anthologized short pieces which, to be sure, are not as severely minimalist and densely packed as Chinese and Japanese poems but are brief enough to be covered by the law that to be short is to be suggestive. The Tamil terms for suggestion are *uḷḷuṟai* and *iraici*; an *uḷḷuṟai uvamam* is a suggestive metaphor which can either be a figure productive of a local effect or a textwide means of figuration. What gives this kind of metaphor its suggestive potency is the fact that as in Chinese poetry it is without comparison markers such as "like" or "as if," and what is more, the vehicle is often not named. In Sangam poetry it was possible to suppress the vehicle without suppressing the meaning, because by common acceptance within the literary system certain vehicles had a predictable reference to certain tenors. Thus in *akam* poetry--the

poetry of private life--five states or moods of love were assumed: *punartal* (the lovers' union), *oodal* (sulking over infidelity), *irangal* (anxious pining), *iruttal* (patient waiting), and *pirital* (separation). These were suggested, in the same order, by five flowering plants and their locales: *kurinci* ("conehead"), which grows on the hillside; *marutam* ("queen's flower"), which grows in the lowlands; *neytal* ("the dark lily"), which grows on the seashore; *mullai* ("jasmine"), which grows in the woods or on grazing land; and *pālai* ("ivorywood"), which grows on arid land. Landscape is thus the suggestor, and human experience is what is suggested. The suggestor/suggested relationship is essentially the same as the object/emotion equation in Western aesthetics and the signifier/signified bond in semiotics. Take, for instance, the poem by Otalantaiyar:

What He Said
In this long summer wilderness
  seized and devoured by wildfire,
If I should shut my eyes
  even a wink,
I see
  dead of night, a tall house
  in a cool yard, and the girl
With freckles
  like kino flowers,
hair flowing as with honey,
  her skin a young mango leaf.
(Ramanujan 1985, p.263)

The "informed reader" will be quick to perceive that what is suggested without being named in the opening two lines is separation in love, and in the rest of the poem, union in love. Admittedly there is a degree of phenomenal congruence between the lonely lover's desolation and the wilderness (*pālai*), and between the reunited lovers' sensuous joy and the *kurinci* images of flowers, honey and tender leaves. However, the bond between landscape and feeling, between object and emotion, is not an innate or natural bond but as in the relation between the signifier and the

signified, something arbitrary and conventional, a cultural given. And although the relationship can retain fixity in a culture like the Sangam culture which had stability and continuity for some six generations with a large heritage of shared assumptions and expectations, yet change within a culture and interchange across cultures are more normal in history, so that the passage from object to emotion, from landscape to feeling, is by a process of loose, fluid, variable signification; in one word, suggestion. This is almost the formula of a literary work, because literariness is defined by the successful action of the objects in the text--language, character, narrative, rhythm, landscape etc.--generating by suggestion the reader's emotional response.

The *Tolkāppiyam* devotes an entire chapter to these responses, examining them in their various facets. It isolates eight of them as dominant or recurrent in the experiencing of written or performed texts--the term used for them is *meypāṭus*. Although there is the view that *meypāṭu* is a feature of stage acting, it can be more accurately described, as has been done by the Tamil/English critic K. Chellappan (who equates it with the Sanskrit *rasa*), as 'the effect or change in the perceiver's mind.' (Chellappan 1987, p.12) The eight *meypāṭus* identified are:

Sensual love
Amusement
Grief/Pity
Anger
Heroic Courage
Fear
Disgust/Scorn
Wonder

* * *

As it happens, the *Nāṭyasāstra*, a seminal work on dramaturgic and literary theory in Sanskrit, codifies the same eight emotions as *rasas*:

Love
Amusement
Sadness and Pity
Anger
The Heroic Mood
Fear
Disgust
Wonder

Between Tolkāppiyar, the eponymous author of the Tamil classic on literary and linguistic theory, and Bharata, author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it is impossible to decide who borrowed from whom. The two works could have been written at any time--and in any order--between the 2nd Century B.C. and the 3rd (in the case of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the 4th/5th) Century A.D. It is, however, generally believed that Bharata occurred earlier--Chellappan (quite unselfconsciously affirming the temporal priority of Bharata) says that Tolkāppiyar 'also arrives at eight *rasas*.' (Chellappan 1987, p.12)

In an aphorism which has become the *locus classicus* in all theorizing about the nature, and the mode of generation, of *rasa*, Bharata states that *rasa* is "made manifest" by the objective elements in the text, written or performed, acting conjointly. These are the *vibhāvādis*; defined inclusively, they may be said to consist principally in language, imagery, rhythm, character, narrative and landscape. By being silent upon how precisely the *rasa* is made manifest by the *vibhāvādis*, how precisely the emotion is aroused by the objects, Bharata's dictum led to prolonged speculation by scholars of the generations that followed until the definitive answer was proposed in Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* (9th Century). The emotion, according to him, emerged from the objects not by inference nor reference nor one-to-one signification but very much as complex, rich, plural meaning arises from statement by a process, as said earlier, of "loose, fluid variable signification: in one word, suggestion." The *Dhvanyāloka* is a complex, closely reasoned exposition of a theory of meaning which enshrines *dhvani* or suggestion at the core of literariness. Ānandavardhana assumed

three kinds of meaning: stated, metaphorical, and suggested; he valorized the last, the kind of meaning which is non-discursive, oblique, multiple, highly interpretable. He conducted a uniquely minute and wide-ranging examination of the relationship of unstated to stated meaning, of suggestion to statement, largely in terms of the image of the lamp and the jar. The study yielded several major insights, but in a short survey like the present one, one cannot even begin to try to provide glimpses of these, or of the rigour, depth, detail and sophistication with which the theoretical enquiry is conducted throughout--one cannot even try, although that would be a correction of perspective badly required in a survey which opens with a complaint and an odious comparison. By the time it concludes, the *Dhvanyāloka* has more than established the validity of the claim it refers to at the outset: that *dhvani* (suggestion) is the *ātman* (the "soul," or loosely the core) of *kāvya* (poetry, or loosely literature). Ānandavardhana wins credibility for *dhvani* as a real category and a valid concept and demonstrates that no poetry can be ranked above exclusively suggestive poetry. One of the memorable illuminations that he provides is when he sees beyond and underneath the surface of the two chief Sanskrit epics. Beneath the violence and turbulence, the hate, cruelty and treachery, in the *Mahābhārata,* he senses the dominant *rasa* of the epic as quietude (*sānta*); and he divines pathos (*karuna*) as the ruling *rasa* of the *Rāmāyana*, for all its celebration of Rāma's matchless prowess and valour and his stern and unbending devotion to justice and duty.

To Ānandavardhana, if *dhvani* is a product of the total text or a segment of it, it can also be, in a different way, a product of a minimal linguistic unit in it--a conjunction here or a prefix there. The difference is the difference between macro and micro, between structural and textural, between suggestion as the output of the *vibhāvādis* textwide and suggestion as the local richness of meaning developed by a fragment of the verbal fabric through the activity of an image, or a gap, or an evocative or highly charged word: through elliptical, pregnant or ambiguous discourse.

The *Dhvanyāloka* was elucidated, interpreted and refined by Abhinavagupta and others after him, so that Sanskrit has a long succession of heavyweight theoretical works largely upholding Ānandavardhana's conclusion. But the student of *dhvani* can, if he or she chooses, move beyond theory and can experience suggestion in literature itself. Then the reader will encounter, for instance, something like Act IV of Kālidāsa's *Śākuntalam* which is--there is no other word for it--great literature. Sakuntalā, the departing foster-daughter, is here the "object" of the *vatsala-rasa* (parental love), its "seat," amazingly, being Kanva, the ascetic, who had evolved beyond all emotions. But there are moments in the Act when the focus shifts and Sakuntalā becomes the seat of the emotion of "parental" love, and the objects are the creeper and the fawn whom she has helped to raise and whom she has now to leave behind. The Act is packed with objective correlatives which build up this emotion by suggestion. The Act also has a parallel activity in the form of local suggestion, most memorably in four quatrains instinct with unspoken meaning.

Suggestive writing is frequently encountered in Sanskrit literature, not only because literature by its very nature tends to be suggestive but also because when an important theoretical formulation like Rasadhvani affirms the centrality of suggestion to literature, it inevitably influences practice. This has been the case not only in Sanskrit but in all Indo-Aryan literatures and also in Indo-Dravidian literatures like Tamil. In fact, while the *rasa* concept, as we saw, was borrowed from Sanskrit into Tamil, the *dhvani* concept presumably originated in Tamil (where, as already mentioned, it was known as *uḷḷuṟai* or *iraici*) and moved into Sanskrit via Prakrit, as George Hart believes.(Mukherjee 1981, p. 16) One can choose between this view and the view that *dhvani* originated in Sanskrit as part of Bhartrhari's concept of *sphota*. On the whole, Rasadhvani, under whatever guise or name, was, and to a large extent is, an insistent presence in Indian literatures across the spectrum, extending to Sindhi which is at quite some distance from Sanskrit-- the only exception being Urdu which is firmly in the Persian tradition, although this has to be qualified, as we will see next.

* * *

In Persian, suggestion is active in the *ghazal*, the short lyric. Early in its history the *ghazal* managed to shift its weight from the court poet's praise of the royal patron and the romantic lover's expression of profane love, to sacred love which is the stuff of mystic poetry. The *ghazal* shares the one-to-one symbolism which is universal in mystic poetry but is not quite in consonance with suggestion as defined by us -- it is more akin to allegory. Thus the lover stands for the devotee, the "Beloved" for God, and wine-imbibing for mystic rapture. The *ghazal* with its formula of A-stands-for-B suggestion, is very much a living form not only in Persian but in literatures like Urdu, and composing and singing *ghazals* are commonly practiced arts and widely liked forms of entertainment which enable suggestion to reach out to popular culture.

* * *

In the literatures covered so far, suggestion and statement are, explicitly or otherwise, treated as a hierarchical opposition, with suggestion as the prior or superior member of the pair. It is true that at times the ascendancy of realism has promoted the statement mode, but each time this trend in due course has sunk to the status of an aberration. In Arabic, however, suggestion and statement are critical positions competing on terms of equality, with each commanding wide support. The two schools are the Batinites and the Zahirites. As Edward Said explains:

> Batinites--as their name implies--believed that meaning in language is concealed within the words; meaning is therefore available only as a result of what we would call an inward-tending exegesis. The Zahirites--their name derives from the word in Arabic for clear and apparent and phenomenal--argued for the surface meaning of words, a meaning anchored to a

> particular usage, circumstance, historical and religious anomaly.

Said comes down in favour of the Zahirites:

> Once you resort to such a level (i.e. a hidden level beneath words, available only to private initiates), anything more or less becomes permissible in the way of interpretation: there can be no strict meaning, no control over what words in fact say, no responsibility toward the words. The Zahirite effort was to restore and rationalize a system of reading a text in which attention was focused on the words themselves, not on hidden meanings they might contain.

Said adds:

> . . . Language is regulated by real usage, and neither by abstract prescription nor by speculative freedom. Above all, language stands between man and a vast indefiniteness; if the world is a gigantic system of correspondences, then it is verbal form--language in actual grammatical use--that allows us to isolate from among these correspondences the denominated object.
>
> (Harari 1979, pp. 167-169)

The presence/absence of a covert meaning which this debate turns upon is only one facet of the suggestion/statement dichotomy; one of the other facets is the divide, emphasized by the Russian/Prague Formalists, between literary or poetical language and standard or ordinary language. Orientalists feel that in the Koran the portions concerned with the "Signs" of God are in poetic language while the portions concerned with laws and injunctions are in ordinary language. The cleavage line, in fact, seems to stretch down the course of development of Arabic poetry. Abu

Nuwas practised a sophisticated simplicity and Abu L-Atahiyah chose an ascetic simplicity; on the other hand, Abu Tammam wrote a self-conscious style which was highly wrought and figurative to point of being faulted as artificial. The other facet of suggestion is the symbolism of the *ghazal* (already referred to), enriched by a perennial ambiguity (which neither the reader nor the poet himself could resolve) as to whether the "beloved" is God or a mortal. In the 20th Century, to this Sufi Mystic Symbolism was added the more complexly suggestive French Symbolism, with Bishr Faris as its major poet in Arabic, while Ibn al-Arabi and Ibn al-Farid (both 12th/13th Century) had been the major Sufi Mystic poets.

* * *

Just as Hebraic culture can be seen as defining itself differentially against Hellenic culture, several qualities discerned in Hebrew poetry are found to be the opposites of those in Greek poetry. In his analysis of the form and style of the Elohistic text in the Old Testament (as scripture, as history, and as poetry, the Old Testament has dominated Hebrew during the Biblical Period and since), Erich Auerbach identifies its chief characteristic as "the suggestive influence of the unexpressed." He refers to such features of the text as leaving what it mentions "half in darkness," "interrupted connections," and "multiplicity of meanings." On the other hand, to him the language of Homer's poetry is statement--"copious direct discourse," "uninterrupted connections," and "unmistakable meanings." The present survey, which started on Asia's east coast, has now arrived on the west coast and is completing its course; it incidentally strikes one that the difference that Auerbach mentions is rather like the difference between a normal day on the Mediterranean, bright, clear, blue, and the dust haze in the deep interior of Asia's Mediterranean seaboard. Auerbach sums it up memorably, defining in the process the concept of suggestion itself:

> It would be difficult, then, to imagine styles more contrasted then those of these two

> equally ancient and equally epic texts (the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament). On the one hand, externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feeling completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense. On the other hand, the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed towards a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and "fraught with background."
>
> (Auerbach 1953/ 71, pp. 11-12)

The contrast between the Homeric style, with its insistent lucidity of statement, and the Old Testament style, dominated by suggestion, should not be taken inclusively as a contrast between the European and the Asian literary complexes. Auerbach's thesis in the book is that 'the two styles exercised their determining influence upon the representation of reality in European literature.' In fact, since Edgar Allen Poe, who saw suggestion as an indefinite undercurrent of meaning, and Mallarmé, who saw it as a method of not naming the object and instead letting the reader divine it gradually, suggestion, named as such or not but consistently practised by modernism and subsequent movements, has been a major presence in Euro-American literatures--but that is another story.

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**LAKSHMI KANNAN**

# ETHNIC ASSERTIONS IN POETRY

If we must continue with the demarcation of 'post-colonial' as a measure of time even in India, then what strikes me the most in Indian poetry of this phase is the multicultural energy and the plurilingual voices manifest in poems that take on the sparkle of originality. This voiced multiculturalism has probably become some kind of a *zeitgeist* in our times, the way it has brought about a new ethos, as it were. In seminar language, it could perhaps be called a multilingual democratization of culture, without wanting to sound pedantic. Why it has come about is quite easily answered, but exactly how it functions and shapes poetry and motivates poets is what really interests me. I would like to draw upon the insights of some sociological thinkers--and writers with this unusual gift--who address themselves squarely to the sensitivities of colonised cultures and the equivocal layers that an otherwise innocuous factor such as ethnicity can take on. Joshua A. Fishman, originally a socio-linguistician, pretty much dominates debates about di-glossic societies as does Karl Mannheim who grapples with the very basic issue of one's citizenship. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who so passionately fought against the totalitarian forces of his neo-colonial regime, and who was incarcerated on 31 December 1977 for preferring his mother tongue Gikyuyu to English in his writings, was stung to even more well-defined perspectives from inside his solitary cell No.16 at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. The prison only honed them sharper, and while one part of him submitted to the humiliating suffering at the hands of servile minions with native cunning, the other fully opened itself to what must have been a searing, cathartic realization which offered to the world the seminal book, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.*

Karl Mannheim in his *Essays on the Sociology of Culture* (xviii) suggests that "a sociology of citizenship" should develop, an idea that can be linked meaningfully with the English sociologist

T.H.Marshall in *Citizenship, Social Class and Other Essays* (Marshall: 1950) where he argued for a social set-up that would enable a citizen to participate fully in the national culture.*

We find a curious paradox here. There is this mounting pressure to 'go international' (another phrase that is put to facile use) while at the same time there is a felt need to come up with something culturally distinct, a dialectics where we have a wish to modernize, running counter to an equally strong wish to respond to the emotional pull of one's heritage. Happily though, it is when an ethnic identity meets with an opposition across its boundaries that it gets fully articulated. In the energy of this struggle in modern Indian poetry, the voices come through more alive for the tension, because quite a few, if not all poets, are bicultural in sensibility. In fact, almost every Indian is bilingual when he/she is not trilingual, although that in itself is not quite enough. In order to write--or to live--with a 'fullness', the poet needs what Joshua Fishman phrases as 'societal disglossia', ie., "an enduring societal arrangement where two languages have their secure, widely implemented functions" (Fishman 179). One instance of this is the status of English and Hindi in the northern parts of India.

Let us see Fishman's understanding of ethnicity: "Ethnicity is rightly understood as a collectivity's self-recognition as well as an aspect of its recognition in the eyes of outsiders", combining both 'inherited' and 'acquired' aspects (Fishman 24). But we know that when it comes to actual experience in the rough-and-tumble market place of writing, editing, publishing, 'performances' of readings, and in the more furtive circuit of fly-by-night bats that move in the politics of inclusion/exclusion in

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*Another person who was influenced by Marshall is Talcott Parsons, who contributed to the evolution of the concept of 'cultural citizenship'.

anthologies, this definition if much too neat for application. For there is an endless perception-game going, a game in which there is every hazard of ethnicity being misconstrued as being just an inch away from 'ethnocentricism', or worse, from an 'ethnocultural nationalism' (there is no dearth of fashionable academic phrases, which mercifully, quickly go out of fashion). For instance, there could well be two ways of looking at A.K.Ramanujan's lucid translation of a Tamil Puram poem in *Kuruntokai* 3 (Tevakulattar), "What She Said", in his collection *Poems of Love and War* (Ramanujan 5). The whole poem is tightly wound around the culturally loaded metaphors of *Kurinci*, a mountain flower of the strobilanthus genus which grows only 6,000 feet above sea level (it blooms once in twelve years and suggests a young girl coming of age; this flower is so rich in honey that the bee which visits the flower visits no other, thus making what bee-keepers call 'unifloral honey', rich, rare and pure). Heavily annotated, the poem has its due place inside the covers of Ramanujan's book as an economically rendered, sensuous poem. But out of its cultural context, it could well be taken as an 'ethnically encumbered' poem, depending on which side of the telescope one has trained one's eyes on.

Given the power differentials in the Anglo-centric temper of our times, where ethnic or language loyalty is looked upon as something that may disrupt the smooth functioning of a larger system, it is not surprising that writers, editors, publishers, organizers of literary meets and foundations that sponsor programs take the easy way out of the complexity, a way that may be a faster route to success, even if it smacks of a neo-colonial stance. Notwithstanding the affirmation of ethnicity where he rhapsodies about it as a new aesthetic, Fishman readily recognizes the less commendable truth in the scenario: that 'the art of opting to be neo-colonial for material gains works in a pattern of reward and punishment' until a writer is taken as 'O, he is one of us, we speak the same language'. By the same logic the Kenyan writer Ngugi Thiong'o could have easily blazed a trail if he had made the safe

choice of writing exclusively in English--particularly when he was given a kick start in his youth by an invitation to attend the historic conference at Makarere University at Kampala (Uganda), a conference that was somewhat quaintly called 'African Writers in English Expression'. Contrary to normal expectations, it only provoked Ngugi Thiong'o to introspect with an unsettling honesty that is beyond compare amongst writers. He noted with painful guilt how the conference excluded the great East African poet Shabaan Robert who wrote in Kiswahili, and also excluded Chief Fagunwa, the major Nigerian writer who wrote in Yoruba. Writes Ngugi: "The twenty years that followed the Makarere Conference gave the world a unique literature--it was the literature of the petty-bourgeoisie born of colonial schools and universities" (Thiongo 20). After 17 years of writing in English, Ngugi started writing in Gukyuyu, a Kenyan language, and was promptly arrested and put in a cell where he answered to a mere number K6,77. He said the cell became for him what Virginia Woolf called *A Room of One's Own*. "Struggle," he wrote on toilet paper (he was denied writing sheets), "Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being"(108).

In a larger context, we are probably dealing with what Fishman calles "the self-actualizing of submerged nationalities" (Fishman 139). Ethnicity overcomes a loss of identity and a sense of fragmentation in these submerged nationalities. "It counteracts the anonymity and insecurity of post-traditional lifestyles. It strives for emotionally satisfying interactions between community members"(Fishman 113). It combats the sad undervaluing of one's own culture. In a title that takes off from where Fanon left, "Brown Skin, What Mask?", Meena Alexander writes:

> No flim-flam now; card sharp, street-wise
> I fix my heels at Paul's Shoe Place for a dollar fifty
> get a free make-over at Macy's,eyes smart, lips shine.
> Shall I be a hyphenated thing, Macaulay's Minutes
> and Melting Pot theories not withstanding?

> Shall I bruise my skin, burn up into
> She Who Is No Colour whose longing is a crush
> of larks shivering without sound?
> (Alexander 11)

This cultural retrieval brings in its wake what could be called 'peopleness', a "historically deep cultural collectivity" (Fishman 217), a collective memory which assumes a time, a space, shared emotions, legends, folk tales, songs and values that may give a sense of belonging to a poet, or equally, a sense of the obsolescence of certain cultural values. The telling inscapes in Imtiaz Dharker's poem "Purdah I" re-create a haunting critique of the society described:

> We sit still, letting the cloth grow
> a little closer to our skin.
> A light filters inward
> through our bodies' walls.
> Voices speak inside us,
> echoing in the spaces we have just left.
> (Dharker 3)

There is a self-discovery at work here, a self-discovery of a social group. Remarkable is the absence of self-consciousness in both Alexander and Dharker.

Ethnicity indeed has a close, vital link with the phenomenology of language, *per se*. In his chapter on "What is Ethnicity and How is it linked to language? Phenomenological and Socio-Historical Considerations", Fishman points out some modern autochthonous theories that "gravitate toward metaphorical and metaphysical views of the language and ethnicity links", theories that see language and ethnicity as initial essences or causes (Fishman 17). It creates a latitude and mutability of language that can be interesting. Or consider the naturalness with which Eunice D'Souza captures the Goanese ideolect and speech rhythms in the poem "Bandra Christian Party":

Hubby emerges from coal bin
bottles under arm
face a smirk.
Hot stuff, he says.
The gathered goans giggle.
Dirty jokes:
hot stuff and sex.
Fred the comic slaps hubby
on back
now the party'll go men go
says Fred
goans giggle
Fred laughing loudest
(he's the big thing
this side of Hill Rd.)
What personality says Dominic
such pink lips men and
look at that chest
so comic says Mabel
keeps the crowd going
says Hetty
Fred is the life of the party.
Come on men Fred give us
a song calls Mabel
what personality says Dominic
such pink lips and look
at that chest. (Daruwalla 52-53)

Ethnicity then enlarges its dimensions and links up with other cultural groups toward what could best be described as a 'transformational culture', which is not to be confused with 'universal culture'. While still being grounded in the specifics of a local culture, space and time, a work may take on larger paradigms that reverberate and reach those living outside that particular culture. What was self-contained (Fishman's description of how "Ethnicity strains toward a self-contained, self-sufficient, culturally autonomous basis of aggregation, ie., it strains towards and is experienced as societally complete, inter-generationally continuous and historically deep") as essentially a "self-and-other" equation, amazingly links up with other identifiable groups through a reciprocal recognition. It is only when the extreme pressures and

speed of modern life threaten that the work retreats into a private corner of social experience. The poem "Mother" in Kannada, by P.Lankesh (1935), is rooted in Karnataka, but is large, expansive and epic in scope and reverberates with a raw power:

My mother,
black, prolific earth mother,
.....
.....
No, she was no Savitri
no Sita or Urmila,
no heroine out of history books,
tranquil, fair and grave in dignity;
nor like the wives of Gandhi and Ramakrishna.
She didn't worship the gods
or listen to holy legends;
she didn't even wear, like a good wife,
any vermillion on her brow.

A wild bear
bearing a litter of little ones,
she reared a husband, saved coins in a knot of cloth;
like a hurt bitch, she bared her teeth,
growled and fought.
.....
A jungle bear has no need for your Gita.
My mother lives
for stick and grain, labour and babies;
for a rafter over her head,
rice, bread, a blanket;
to walk upright among equals.

(*Translated from Kannada by A. K. Ramanujan*
[Dharwadker, 6-7])

Vinay Dharwadker, who put together, with A.K.Ramanujan, a diverse bunch of poems for *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry*, admits in his "Afterword" that it was "difficult and confusing"(Dharwadkar 187-88). But he locates three broad contexts, the historical, the literary and the

social framework, on the basis of which he traces movements and counter movements. He remarks how interestingly the national and the regional generates "unexpected continuities and discontinuities among the languages"(187) and calls it the "intertexture" of modern Indian poetry, particularly from the turn of the century. Sujata Bhatt's bi-cultural sensibility helps her a great deal in the poem titled "Parvati", where she laments the fact that the famed Darjeeling tea is taken over by Twinings.

> "Parvati, oh Parvati
> where is the mountain today, where did you
> take it away?
> Parvati
> oh Parvati, hide the tea-leaves
> while they're still growing--
> don't let them come near Darjeeling.
>
> Parvati
> why did you let Twinings take everything?
>
> Parvati
> I must confess
> I like Twinings the best. (Bhatt 43)

Dharwadker does not forget to notice one obvious truth, so obvious that it is often glossed over or not talked about, that a "crucial context of modern Indian Poetry is its varied social world, which shapes the lives of the young poets, their education and literary training . . . as well as their identities in a rapidly changing literary culture" (198). It is a humbling education in itself to enter the world of "Household Fires", the poem in Marathi by Indira Sant, who lived a hard life as a young woman, widowed and with three children to look after, a job to attend to along with her sustained commitment to poetry:

> The daughter's job: without a murmur
> to do the chores piling up around the house
> until she leaves for work,
> .....
> The son's job: to get fresh savoury snacks

for the whole household to eat,
to bring back the clothes from the washerman,
to clean and put away the bicycle,
.....
The younger daughter's job:
to savour the joys of shyness,
to shrink back minute by minute.
The younger son's job:
to choke all the while, grow up slowly
in states of wet and dry.

Four children learning in her fold,
her body drained by hardship,
what's left of her,
this mother and wife? A mass of tatters,
five tongues of flame
licking and licking at her on every side,
fanning the fire in her eyes
till her mind boils over,
gets burnt.

(*Translated from Marathi by Vinay Dharwadker* [Dharwadker 48-49])

Colonialism then has done us a lot of good, after all. One of its benefits is the way it has, even if on the rebound, tapped alive the slumbering ethnicity of the earlier decades (Dharwadker calls the trend in the 1930's "the Indian counterpart of Anglo-American Modernism" in which poets broke away from tradition [189]). One is tempted to do a pastiche of the tiny, epigrammatic poem in Gujarati by Labshankar Thacker (b.1935), substituting 'culture' for 'word' and 'colonial' for 'adjective':

The word is fast asleep
under the blanket of the adjective.
Shall I wake it up?

(*Translated from Gujarati by Sitanshu Yashashchandra* [Dharwadkar 99])

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**NIRANJAN MOHANTY**

# TIME AND BODY IN THE POETRY OF A. K. RAMANUJAN
## The 'Black Hen' Poems

A.K.Ramanujan's *Collected Poems* appeared posthumously in 1995. It includes a selection of sixty-two new poems from amongst "one hundred and forty-eight poems on three computer discs"(*The Collected Poems* xv), entitled "Black Hen".

Apart from examining Ramanujan's new poems entitled "Black Hen" in the light of the poet's reiterating concern for time, body, death and family, this study would try to verify how Ramanujan succeeds in establishing a link between his subjective self within and the objective world without.

"Ramanujan's poetry is like a circular labyrinth," writes Vinay Dharwadker in the introduction to *The Collected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan*, "in which all paths lead back to the point from which we start, no matter where we begin: the body in nature embodies natural time, which is the clock ticking inside history, which in turn is the clockwork mechanism inside a society that is paradoxically contained by its most prototypical part, the extended family, at the centre of which stands the self, housed in a real and imagined body. But this seemingly closed system, in which everything appears to be connected to everything else, does not come to us neatly encapsulated in such a form in his poetry, and hence cannot be an integrated 'system'"(Dharwadker xxxvi). Dharwadker's observation, obviously, helps one perceive the richness and sophistication with which Ramanujan handles the language creatively, but deprives one of discovering the necessary connections with which the poet, willingly or unwillingly, but conscientiously, tries to enrich the integrated system that the poem is.

II

Ramanujan's new poems are in many ways an extension of and a departure from the early poems. These are an extension in the sense that Ramanujan's concern for family and home has

intensified; his sheltering beneath the family tree has been precipitated. These poems instance a departure from the early ones in the sense that the poet has succeeded in establishing a viable link with the world outside his own self, without marginalizing the significance of nature, animal kingdom, and the ecology. In course of establishing such a link and carving out such a necessity, Ramanujan celebrates body and time. A change in the tone of voice is also distinct; it has become sombre and grave, may be because of the concern for death, for the fleeting nature of time. Technically speaking, the poet has achieved the desired precision, the desired perfection in handling the creative medium, the desired effect of the images, crisp, crystal-clear, logically oriented, retaining the usual ambience and circularity. Nothing seems to have vanished: neither the centrality of whirling back to a usable past, nor the intensity of a self-critical stance.

*The Black-Hen*, beginning with "The Black Hen" and ending with "Fear No Fall", outweighs all the three earlier volumes of Ramanujan, *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971) and *Second Sight* (1986), both in terms of quantity and quality: quantity because none of the earlier volumes retained so many poems, and quality because of the richness, sophistication in style and an all-embracing poetic vision that verifiably affirms its faith in the body, culture and time.

Ramanujan, who had been a conscientious creative artist all his life--both as a poet and a translator--is increasingly preoccupied with the problems of a creative writer in these new poems. The title poem, as Molly Daniels-Ramanujan has observed ("A Note" 279), bears the symptoms of such a preoccupation. Ramanujan's use of irony as a device to look at things as they are establishes a link with his other volumes without failing to harp on the problems of the artist--the problem of facing his own art when it is all over. This small poem permits multiple interpretations. The Keatsian echo with which the poem begins at once initiates a comparison between two types of creativity: one natural and the

other artificial--the poetry that comes naturally like leaves and the poetry that one writes because of an artistic and linguistic competence perfected through practice. It is pertinent to raise a question here. Is Ramanujan self-critically examining his own poetry in English, as English is not his mother-tongue? Perhaps, at a deeper level of the poem, like R. Parthasarathy, he comes to realize that "language is a tree (that) loses colour/ under another sky" (Parthasarathy *Rough Passage* 15). The images of "knitting" and "stitching", of "dropped and found again", perhaps suggest and relate to the second category of poetry which is not natural or spontaneous. The complexity of the poem emerges with the last tercet:

> and when it's all there
> the black hen stares
> with its round red eye
>
> and you're afraid (*The Collected Poems* 195)

Hence the hen's stare makes the poet conscious of the limitations of what he created, the symbolic manifestation of which is the black hen. This is perhaps a simplistic way of looking into the poem. Conversely, it can be maintained that the artist or the poet contemplates on giving a shape to his experiences and feelings. This shape is manifested in the black hen. By virtue of the poet's imagination and intensity of his experience, the black hen is animated, is given a new life and meaning. The life embodied in art is due to the extinction of the poet's personality. The form of art is enlivened because of the death of the artist or the poet. The poet is afraid because he is conscious of his own death. Thus, with every work of art, the artist/poet goes on sacrificing his own self, negating his own self with a view to giving a new life to the art. Ramanujan, whose sensibility is oriental but whose intellectual make-up and outer form are shaped by English language (Parthasarathy *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* 96), must have attempted such an approach to his own poetry. It is a very significant poem which not only sums up the poet's relationship

with his poetry and the creative process involved therein, but also contains a premonition of his own death. This poem, to my mind, presupposes another poem entitled "No Fifth Man" in this volume.

In "No Fifth Man" the poet recreates the Sanskrit parable of five Brahmins who went abroad to master sixty-four arts. When they came back learned, except the fifth Brahmin, they chanced upon a femur bone of a tiger. Ultimately the form of the tiger was completed. The fourth Brahmin was about to give life to the frame when the fifth Brahmin intervened and requested them to wait a little while. Subsequently he climbed up a tree and the fourth Brahmin introduced the life-spirit into the frame. All at once the tigress stood with its natural rage and hunger. It ate up all the four learned Brahmins, leaving the fifth safe in the tree. Ramanujan concludes the poem in this manner:

> Poetry too is a tigress,
> except there's no fifth
> man left on a tree
> when she takes your breath
>
> away. (*The Collected Poems* 245)

The poet cannot be analogous to the fifth Brahmin. He is the first person and the last to infuse a life-spirit into his poetry. And when this is done, the poetry assumes the shape of a tigress to take away the poet's 'breath'.

There are many poems in this new volume which explicitly evidence the poet's preoccupation with or meditation on death. Even in his third volume, *Second Sight*, some poems obliquely touched upon death. In "Fear", the poet upholds two kinds of fear, the impersonal and the personal, the objective and the subjective. He makes it clear as he writes :

> My fear,
> small,
>
> is a certain knock
> on the backdoor

a minute
after midnight,

thirty years ago
or anytime now. . . . (*The Collected Poems* 132-133)

This 'fear' inhabited the poet's mind thirty years ago, and even now it exists there. It can arise at any moment resulting from the plight of a 'tiny white lizard', 'sleeping, ignorant / skull'(133). There is no difference between a lizard and a human being for death. It reduces the body to the skull, to the biodegradation of nothing. Ramanujan's poetry reveals that he is very concerned with, if not perturbed by, the fear of death. He accepts death in its usual form. At times, he uses irony against the rituals which his own ancestors and fellows in India performed in order to get salvation.

In "Death and the Good Citizen" Ramanujan shows how he wears the "tatters of attachment" of the family. Like a true Hindu and like his own fellowmen the poet believes in the liberation of the soul in death. The ironic mode in which Ramanujan is most comfortable also testifies to his own sense of attachment. Here lies Ramanujan's uniqueness. He does not fully disown his past or history when he is critical of them. It is a direct way of becoming critical of one's own self, however apparently one may maintain a very scientific and objective stance. He writes:

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 will cremate
me in Sanskrit and sandalwood,
have me sterilized
to a scatter of ash. (*The Collected Poems* 136)

In "Birthdays" Ramanujan tries to see the significance of birthdays in the light of death anniversaries. Yet the poet shows the difference between the two irreversible but mutually non-inclusive

processes:

> Birth takes a long time
> though death can be sudden,
> and multiple, like pregnant deer
> shot down on the run.
> Yet one would like to think,
> one kicks and grabs the air
> in death throes as a baby
> does in its mother's womb
> months before the event.(*The Collected Poems* 206)

The poet, who believes in the perpetuity of life, or the life-spirit, cannot accept death as an end in itself, a final cessation of all activities. The poet believes that death is a new beginning and an instrument that is responsible for the continuation and expansion of this beginning. He asks, in order to highlight this positive instrumentality of death,

> but death? Is it a dispersal
> of gathered energies
> back into their elements,
> earth, air, water and fire,
> a reworking into other moulds,
> grass, worm, bacterial glow
> lights, and mother-matter
> for other off-spring with names
> and forms clocked into seasons?
> (*The Collected Poems* 207)

In "Death in Search of a Comfortable Metaphor", Ramanujan harps on a similar kind of suggestion, that death ushers in a new beginning, and that in and through one's death alone the life cycle is perpetuated. He finds such a metaphor from what his grandmother had told him once, discovering in the scorpion an apt figure for death:

> Maybe death is such
> a scorpion: bursts its back
> and gives birth

to numerous dying things,
baby scorpions,

terrifying intricate
beauties, interlocked
in male and female,
to eat, grow, sting,
multiply, burst their backs

in turn, and become feasts
of fodder for working
ants, humus for elephant
grasses that become elephants
that leave their herds
to die grand lonely deaths.
(*The Collected Poems* 273)

Ramanujan through the scorpion tries to reveal the continuous cycle of birth and death so as to understand the full fathom of life's totality. It is interesting to observe the harmony that the poet sustains between his theme and his labyrinthine style, between the content and the form.

In "One More on a Deathless Theme", the poet celebrates the immortality of love. Ramanujan insists on the union of the bodies for transcending the bodies. He strongly believes that the "out-of-bodies" ecstasies are possible only through a perfect merger or fusion of the bodies--male and female--that elevates one to an androgynous god. For him, the physical union serves as the common denominator which elevates one to godhood and at the same time equates one to animals, like dogs and insects, like the praying mantis. The need to be united physically is a permanent passion or urge with all--the human and the non-human. Yet one is very much aware of the limitations of the body, of the physicality of our existence. The poet limits this paradoxical angst of our sense of mortality. He is sure that the body

will one day be short of breath,
lose its thrust,
turn cold, dehydrate and leave

a jawbone with half a grin
near a pond. . . . (*The Collected Poems* 209)

The body always permits itself to be tested by time, to be scanned by time that only "circles/ making no mark in space"(200). Even a dog on the street experiences the impact of time on its body. The poet moves from his body to the dog and then to the people on the streets. It's precisely because of the inevitability of death that the poet tries to assert its universality:

Everyone in this street
will become cold, lie under stones
or be scattered as ash
in rivers and oceans. (*The Collected Poems* 210)

Ramanujan's faith in the Hindu rites is strong enough to relate himself to his country's cultural heritage and tradition. The second section of this poem creates an image of hope by the assertion of the need for physical union, of the urge to be united--whether it is in humans or insects:

and the praying mantis astride
on another praying mantis,
green and still on the seasoned
apple tree,

would be forever there
waiting for me. . . . (*The Collected Poems* 211)

This inevitable, invincible urge does not care for death, does not fear time, for it is timeless and ageless and thus assumes an immortality.

In "Sonnet" the poet summarily shows how time's fleeting nature influences him, affects him and finally takes him away from his home. Time's restless movement makes the poet restless too. It is perhaps for the poet that time establishes a link between his own self and the objective world outside. The poet is conscious of the circular movement of time:

Time moves in and out of me
a stream of sound, a breeze,

an electric current that seeks
the ground, liquids that transpire
through my veins, stems and leaves
towards the skies to make fog and mist
around the trees. Mornings brown
into evenings before I turn around

in the day. . . .
and take me far away from home
as time moves in and out of me.
(*The Collected Poems* 220)

With the movement of time, the poet is sure of going "far away from home", to another home where he can renew his breath. In "Mythologies 1" the poet revisits the myth of child Krishna's killing of the devil Putana by his single bite at her breast. The poet's prayer to be redeemed of the venom, earned by living on this time-bound earth, is honest. His prayer, at the moment of death, sharply relates him to the Hindu belief and faith in the incarnation of the god on earth. This is also another way of reaffirming his relationship with the Hindu way of life. So Ramanujan treats the multiple forms of death as agents or instruments of renewals of life.

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

Similarly in "Mythologies 2" the poet recreates the myth of Hiranyakashyapu, the atheist father of Prahallad, the devotee of Lord Vishnu. The poet realises the necessity of being cleansed:

. . . slay now my faith in doubt.
End my commerce with bat and night-
owl. Adjust my single eye, rainbow bubble,
so I too may see all things double.
(*The Collected Poems* 226)

The poet's prayer is to have a total vision of reality, to comprehend both the good and bad with equanimity. A change in his attitude to his culture, tradition and religion has crept in. The tone has obviously shifted from his earlier "Prayers to Lord Murugan" to

these poems on mythologies in which the praying voice has acquired a rare kind of solemnity and humility. The ironic mode has paved the way for simple, honest articulation of prayer from a person and poet who is waiting to be redeemed and sincerely renewed.

In "Pain" the poet's prayer to be free from physical suffering is sincere. He prays the god to send the mother of ignorance to him so that she can banish his pain. The poet at the fag end of his life, failing to tolerate physical hardships, prays

> O god of knowledge, busy wizard
> of diagnosis, father of needles, dials,
> and test tubes, send your old companion here,
> that mother of mothers, goddess though of ignorance,
> send her soon so she can kiss away my pain
> as she has always done. (*The Collected Poems* 274)

The poet intends to free himself from all kinds of pain and to sleep on the lap of the goddess of ignorance. He is using a new metaphor to unlearn all that he had learnt and to present the picture of his own death.

In "Fear No Fall", Ramanujan recreates the myth of the Tamil saint Arunagiri. Arunagiri was very rich and spoilt. He spent lavishly on women. But one woman "sucked him dry/of all his juices", and as a result he was unhoused. He moved through a town and reached a cliff, whence he could see the sight of the world he had left behind. He then jumped from the cliff, but nothing happened to him. A very old man told him, smiling, to sing the name of Lord Murugan. He told Arunagiri the first line of this song. The old man disappeared. Arunagiri spent his lifetime trying to find him. In the second part of this poem, Ramanujan depicts his own plight. He was looking for a place to find a foothold. He was afraid of breaking his neck. He heard a voice:

> . . .'Fall, fall,
> you'll never fear a fall again,
> fall now!' (*The Collected Poems* 277)

The voice from the air annointed his ears with the wisdom that death can happen only once to an individual. Through this image the poet asserts his fearlessness.

"Traces" is yet another poem in which Ramanujan records the effect of time on body and mind. The poet insists that the body of the earth has the capacity to contain the layers of time. Ramanujan strikingly assimilates ideas and experiences in his poetry in such a way that the exterior gets internalized and the vastness gets absorbed or contained within, whether it is the human body or the mind or the family tree. Two possible explanations can be suggested for this process of internalization. One, the poet may be interested in establishing a link between the subjective and the objective worlds; two, the poet may be interested in reflecting on the complementarity of the two worlds in order to authenticate a sense of totality or completeness which his poetry intends to envision. It is time that always leaves traces of its moving on the earth; and without such traces time is likely to lose its usual meaning. Ramanujan observes that

> 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 and cowskull,
> waiting for people to decipher
> and give themselves a past
> and a family tree. (*The Collected Poems* 204)

Time leaves its residual marks on the earth, on the human body and on the family tree. Ramanujan invents for himself a means to remember the significance of the fleeting nature of time--spanning whole months. In "August" the poet uses this method successfully. The poem begins describing the significance of August and ends in that of July--almost all the months of a calendar year except October--so as to define how the flux of time can be arrested and endeared, by internalizing it and relating it to the different persons in the family. In August and September, the hot months, three of

his brothers and two of his own sisters were born. Mother died in November, father had a stroke in December. To remember the climate of February, March and April the poet compares it with his grandmother's tepid "coffee" in her village house (212). The poet's description of summer is unique:

> April to June burned
> night and day like
> a temple lamp kept alive
> by a cripple praying
> for her legs (*The Collected Poems* 213)

And finally the poem ends with July when the divorce papers are signed between husband and wife and when children become helpless. Ramanujan's subtle irony shows how ruptures creep into the family over the period of a year. He believes that time in isolation is abstract. Only when it is related to a context, or to a person, or to an event, time can create traces which stay with us as we grow old.

Repeatedly the poet is haunted by the images of the family tree. As time drags the poet towards the moment of silence, his ties with the family tree get strengthened. Even if time lets the poet go, the poet will not relinquish the images of his own family. In a series of short sequences entitled "Images" Ramanujan asserts what will not leave him :

> of what will not
> let go:
>
> mother, grandmother
> the fat cook
> in widow's white
> who fed me
> rice and ogres (*The Collected Poems* 260)

The poet like a child enquires: where do the images of the family go as time draws on? In "From Where?" he recollects the painful moment of the past when his mother became a widow :

> far back in '65, May 14,
>
> cutting across the bangles broken

on mother's hour of widowhood. . . .
(*The Collected Poems* 271)

The poet painfully recollects the ritual of widowhood of his mother. Although he was critical of these rituals in his early poetry, he seems to have realized their significance later. It is, perhaps, true that the rituals alone make the moment memorable, and the members sheltering under the family tree even more memorable. The present, for the poet, always draws its sustenance from the past. The present whirls back to the past to discover for itself those images which would always make the present relevant and meaningful. Ramanujan recollects the moment when he left for the United States:

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 (*The Collected Poems* 259)

Indeed, what a tender piece of recollection when the poet himself completes his 'task' on the earth! Whether during the poet's stay in the U.S. he did abide by the sweet advice of the mother is altogether a different matter. What, for the poet, matters is the unalloyed affection that the mother always retains for her children; what is worth preserving is the mother's 'long look' that posited all the concern for the parting son. In the small poem "Tooth" from the "Images" the poet relates his own tooth-ache to his mother's. One is not only indebted to the family members for bearing physical semblance, but also for the kind of diseases that one suffers from. In "Not knowing", the poet tries to relate his own physical features to some of his relatives'. In search of his own identity, he ransacks the cupboard of those family features. But his inability to discover resemblances forces the poet to delve into the labyrinthine alleys of his family. He looks at the mirror in a mirror shop to discover himself:

till mirrors in a mirror shop
break me up into how many I was
show me in profile and fragment

whose head I have whose nose
how tall how old my hair
how black my shoes how red
(*The Collected Poems* 216)

One is reminded of the poet's ways of discovering the elements of his own composition. Composed of elements such as "father's seed and mother's eggs", of earth, air, fire and water and most other chemicals, the poet could never remain blind to the 'lepers of Madurai', nor to the 'stone-eyed goddess' of dance. He believes that the composition of his self contains the elements from his own family and from the world outside. Thus the self is the product of the forces which come from outside world as well as from within. The poet harps on the peculiarity of his own identity:

I pass through them
as they pass through me
taking and leaving

affections, seeds, skeletons. (*Second Sight* 12)

The inner and the outer forces become intertwined in such a manner that one is indistinguishable from the other, that one remains integrated with the other. In fact, here lies the uniqueness, the richness and sophistication of Ramanujan's poetic vision and of his poetry.

III

It is evident that Ramanujan's later poems keep abreast all the diverse themes (such as family, time, body, modern man's loneliness, identity and death) which constituted his early writing. In his later verse, death and the fleeting nature of time are given primacy over all other themes. Ramanujan registers no fear for death, because he asserts death to be a new beginning, a new opening that perpetuates life and the life-spirit. The tone of voice has acquired a smoothness, a simplicity unaided by the stark ironic

stance. His poetic vision encompasses the human and the non-human and strengthens the ties between the subjective world of self and the objective world outside. The poems are built up by clearly defined, sharp images which turn and turn, and are linked with such legendary flexibility that to separate one from the other becomes an impossibility. At times one image leads to the other; and at other times, one image presupposes the other with such ease that one cannot but appreciate the sophistication with which he creatively handles a language not his own. His use of persona and ironic twists and turns contributes to the kind of objectivity with which his poetry becomes unique. Parthasarathy observes:

> His poems are like the patterns in a kaleidoscope, and every time he turns it around one way or other, to observe them more closely, the results never fail to astonish. (Parthasarathy *Ten Indian Poets* 96)

I believe Ramanujan has succeeded in turning the 'kaleidoscope' towards himself so as to show his readers what happens to him as time draws on:

> 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. (*Second Sight* 13)

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# MOHAN RAMANAN

G.N. Devy, *'Of Many Heroes': An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography.* Mumbai: Orient Longman Ltd., 1998. pp. 213. Rs. 290.

There are decisive interventions in intellectual life which herald paradigmatic shifts and enable new ways of feeling and thinking. Devy's new book is one such intervention because it says important things about the possibilities of literary history in the Indian context. His aim is simple--"to understand and review the conventions of literary historiography in ancient, medieval, colonial and contemporary India"(4). This, of course, is a tall order, and inevitably results in a sometimes sketchy account, but Devy has shown the way for more work on this subject which sadly has been neglected by Indian scholars. Indeed, after Sujit Mukherjee's *Towards a Literary History of India*, which was limited due to a European bias, and Sisir Kumar Das' seminal work, Devy is perhaps the first person to attempt anything like a systematic exploration of the subject. He is charmingly modest when he disclaims any wish to theorize and remarks that "if, in the process, my explorations are found to have any theoretical substance, it should be seen as an entirely unintended effect"(4). This, however, does not quite camouflage Devy's tendency to moralizing and theorizing and to bluntly stating his conclusion and opinions. But of that later.

II

Devy's argument, in brief, is as follows. He believes that there are some insistent Indian questions relating to the writing of literary history. The sheer diversity of Indian literary traditions, both verbal and oral, makes it difficult to talk of a Pan-Indian Literature. For Devy this is "non-existent" in spite of the pervasiveness of the belief. Devy's view is that when one studies literature one is actually studying its history. Institutional study of literature implies the construction of a canonical system which in

turn means that there is a process of selection and exclusion. Canon formation, like literary history, is a view of the past in the context of the present. As far as English literature was concerned, and Devy cannot but refer to the impact of that literature on Indian thinking, canon formation went along with imagining a nation. Devy is quick to point out that whether it is literary history, canon making or imagining a nation, the activity is a narrative and narrative is fiction. Historical narration depends on shared notions of Time. The West has a notion of linear Time and has tended to see India (and other colonies) as the 'other', where Time is cyclical. This binary opposition was of course a convenient tool with which our Western masters could control us. They saw linearity as a knife puncturing cyclicity and asserting its superiority. Also by positing a notion of cyclical Time it was possible to speak of a past that was wonderful in India and of a degenerate present which needed the therapeutic Western touch of practicality, positivistic thinking and civilisation. Devy's analysis calls into question this convenient polarity and attempts to re-examine Indian historiography on its own terms, eschewing the Western bias which has prevented a proper re-examination.

Devy's digressive study (there is much virtue in digression, as Devy must have known from his experience in the English classroom) next takes him into a disquisition on the two paradigms of History, one of which is informed by the idea of a single-hero (*parakriya*) like Rama in the *Ramayana*, the other by the view that there are several heroes (*purakalpa*) as in the *Mahabharata*. If the former implies organic unity, the latter bespeaks plurality, and an analytical, if not dialectical view of history as narration. Devy refers to the answers Bhoja gives Rajasekhara, whose organicist assumptions are questioned by Bhoja. The point, of course, is that, contrary to received opinion that Indians usually think in cyclical and organic terms, there is actually a strong countercurrent of dialectical and deconstructive opinion. But the more important point is that in India *both* the organicist *and* the dialectical view co-exist creating thereby a rich

and complex tapestry. What is important is the use to which a concept is put and not whether organicity is preferable to dialectics. The same emphasis on use is seen in Devy's discussion of Bhartrihari's suggestive discussion of *Time*, and its relation to the sequential flow of *time* and to the *instant* (*sphota*). Here again Devy marshalls the arguments of not only Bhartrihari but also of Kumarilla Bhatta, Dignaga and others. Devy's conclusion is that Indians were not necessarily content with a 'timeless' sense of things or with allowing things to float in cosmic space eternally. They also had a Heraclitean sense of flux, and in their multiple approaches to Time they displayed a depth and variety which Orientalist essentialist formulations refuse to acknowledge.

The concept of Time naturally affects literary history. Indian literary tradition is multiple. We have *Suta*, *Mantra*, *Shastra*, *Akshara*, *Prakrit* and Tamil *Sangam* traditions: each tradition is pressured by a different conception of Time, and a different approach is required to handle the nuances of each tradition. The simplistic linear approach of the West is simply inadequate for such purposes. India's methodological variety can actually give lessons to the West. *Suta* literature, for example, would show the *presence of the past in the present* while *Mantra* literature would clearly demarcate the *past in its pastness* as separate from the present. The *Shastras* are not of Time but functional, while *Akshara* literature and *Prakrit* are more implicated in historiographical thinking than other categories. *Sangam* literature broke through historical sequence to organize itself around categories of class, race, religion and social status. It is clear that in a situation of such multiplicity and plentitude no simple linear view of literary history will do.

An offshoot of such multiple and pluralistic thinking is available in the *Jnaneswari*, where three levels of discourse operate simultaneously. Jnanadeva was writing a Marathi work using the Gita as his starting point. There is in the *Jnaneswari* the conversation between the narrator Sanjay and his interlocutor

Dhritharashtra, that between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, and a third between Jnanadeva and his timeless listener Nivrittinath. Jnanadeva introduces polemics in favour of the Marathi language (Bhasha) and challenges the Brahminical and Sanskritic tradition which had been dominant so long. An offshoot of this is the sectarian or panthic consciousness which produced literature in India. One thinks of the Varkari sect in Maharashtra and the Sikh panth in the Punjab. These dimensions of Indian literature simply complicate Indian historiographical thinking, leading to a rich and profound tradition of discourse. Devy points out that the sects and panths set up their canons and that Indian traditions of canon formation existed before colonialism.

But colonialism brought with it English and the English classroom and a crude periodization of history which in its linear character offered violence to the complex fabric of Indian literature. Thomas Warton's belief in the refinement of Taste, and the Eighteenth Century as an Age of Civilized Sensibility which transplanted the rude barbarism of the past, was influential in matters of literary historiography. From this standpoint to seeing ancient Indian literature as barbaric, requiring the tempering touch of civilized refinement, was a natural step. Indology and Orientalism, therefore, have to be seen as an aspect of savageology, all tending towards refinement of Taste. It was of course, left to Sir William Jones and historians like Dow, and the Romantic Renaissance (called by Raymond Schwab, the 'Oriental Renaissance', a point and an author Devy curiously misses out in his otherwise erudite work) to resuscitate that past, to freeze it so to speak in historical terms, and to initiate that whole discourse of otherness which left the colonies in a shattered psychological state. An offshoot of this Orientalist thinking, for example, is seen in William Archer's attacks on Indian culture to which Sri Aurobindo responded in 'nativist' terms. But Sri Aurobindo's nativism is different from U.R. Anantamurthy's or Balakrishna Nemade's.

Devy next focuses on the English classroom (as indeed he had to because the whole book could have been written only by one who professed English, and like countless others, including the present reviewer, became affected by a kind of cultural sehizophrenia) where the canon was formed and debated. Devy spends some time taking a look at English education and the formation of the English gentleman and its impact on colonialism. Interesting but not too precise disquisitions on the Coffee Houses, Public Schools, the Civil Service and so on are part of Devy's digressive style. From here Devy moves to a survey of Western historiography (Jauss, Crane, Lukacs are touched on) and refers to the eight-fold path of post-colonial historiography, by his treatment of Sri Aurobindo, Sujit Mukherjee, Sisir Kumar Das, Gayatri Spivak, Pawar, Sangari, Rushdie, Patke, Anantamurthy, Nemade. This looks at times like a mandatory list of all major Indian scholars, but Devy does manage in a diffuse way to score a point or two. From here the conclusion--taking in questions of comparative literature, translation, nation and narration and so on--is speedily arrived at, but Devy does no more than touch on burning literary critical issues of our times. One does feel that a little more system in his approach might have helped.

III

Traces of a system, what Devy calls 'theorizing', are certainly available in this book. The mental habits evidenced in Devy's now somewhat notorious book *After Amnesia*, which I did not much like because of its complacent tone and moralizing tendency, are not entirely absent here either. Indeed, Devy has a problem of tone and even in this book, for all his disclaimers, one gets the sense of a professorial talking down. He often explains things which do not require explanation--certainly not for those 'native' to the soil. And so I am led to believe that Devy is talking as an English teacher to a fraternity he has abandoned and to which he probably regrets having belonged. For the English teacher (and I

am one myself) is perhaps more in need of this 'Indian' education, and Devy obliges in a self-conscious way. We must then be grateful to him for his assertions, except when one feels that an obvious thing has been said. "No literature, recognized as literature, escapes the fate of being represented by literary historiographers." Did we not know that? And did we not know what, Devy in a pontificating voice says, happens when a politically dominating culture swells and overwhelms the literary history of the dominated culture which shrinks and internalizes the forms of the former: "It is when cultural ingression follows colonial formations of literary aesthetics that literary canons of the dominating society become the literary *kanuns* for the dominated society"? We could have been spared the homophony, and in any case this is the perception of an English teacher and one only an English teacher can be impressed with. One wonders how our Bhashas, of which Devy is such a passionate defender, existed for so long and in a continuous stream. How does one account for the uninterrupted stream of our classical music? No English intervention there surely! While English was doing its colonizing work, the fact is that our languages and literatures continued to be productive and meant a great deal to those native to the tradition. It is the Anglicised English teacher who feels troubled. Amnesia affected not the natives but the English elite, and since this is a small minority Devy's arguments do not have that large and profound a significance for the whole of our people. I think the plain fact of the matter is that there has been too much fuss about colonialism and its impact, and I shall stick my neck out and also say that the impact of colonialism on the native soul was not all that deep either.

Having said this I must compliment Devy on taking a small step to enable the building up of structures which will ensure that a comprehensive History of Indian literatures will be written. He has wisely avoided the totalizing habit of centripetal thinking. Instead, with Lyotard, Devy implies that there are little histories to be written and therefore concentrating on the local and specific is the main thing. Devy is a historicist of the new school and is able to

locate various manifestations of literary critical thinking in a framework. This, for example, comes through in his excellent analysis of the Indian historians. He denies a pan-Indian character to things literary and his sub-title significantly reads 'an Indian Essay in historiography', implying that it is *one* of a possible many. While I am distracted by Devy's habit of writing long contextual passages on a variety of subjects all linked together by a thin thread, still one must be grateful to him for having dared. The conclusion Devy suggests could be further explored, and perhaps Devy's book will find its fulfilment in someone else's substantial work or a series of closely argued monographs by other scholars.

One last word. From the point of view of English studies, a book like this shows up the limitations of English, but at the same time it is like a romantic crisis poem. In stating the crisis poets like Wordsworth or Coleridge overcame it. In Devy's book does not one detect clues and hints on how an English teacher can reforge the destinies of his discipline by reshaping and rethinking his subject?

## E.V.RAMAKRISHNAN

# POETRY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

K. Satchidanandan, *How to Go to the Tao Temple and Other Poems*. Har-Anand Publications Pvt. Ltd. 1998. pp.85. Rs 150.

Is poetry losing its relevance to our everyday living? Is there a growing gulf between the poet and the reader? Going by my reading in Malayalam and Indian English, I can definitely see a lull in the creativity of poets. Though a lot of poetry is written and much of it is readable, its audience has definitely shrunken. The feminist poets in the young generation have something new to say, but they remain isolated voices in an otherwise unexciting scene. In the absence of a well-defined socio-political movement that can transmit the energy of poetic speech into the social life of the community, their radicalism remains largely academic. The fact is that the relationship between poetry and the public sphere of the society has weakened. In stark contrast, the range of vibrant voices available in fiction has proved that they can match the diversity and complexity of life lived in our times. This is not to say that poetry is on the decline. It only means that poets have to innovate and renovate their medium (and idiom) to remain contemporary. It has to assimilate a large amount of potentially unpoetic material into its form and content.

Satchidanandan's poetry is contemporary in this creative sense of the term. He remains restless and alert as ever. He is willing to take risks with his art. His activist days are over but his commitment to socialist values remains strong. It is true that Satchidanandan's poetry has not been able to recapture the poetic heights he scaled in *Ivane Koodi* (1987), a path-breaking volume that captured the most transient and the most enduring images from the life of the eighties. That fluency of idiom was made possible by a particular socio-political moment in the life of Kerala. It coincided with the poet's agonising search for the secular-spiritual beyond the merely materialistic and the existential. In subsequent volumes such as *Kavi-Buddhan*, *Desatanam* and *Malayalam* the

secular-spiritual has become more clearly defined. The socio-political environment that made it possible for the poet to be heard beyond a closed literary circle no more exists in Kerala. To that extent the poet has become lonely. This underlying loneliness seems to control the syntax of several of his poems in recent volumes. The present anthology contains three long sequences--"Northern Cantos", "Dilli-Dali" and "Five Poems about Love"--along with 27 poems. They are fairly representative of his preoccupations in the nineties.

The loneliness of the poet mentioned above has been compounded by his move to Delhi. In several of these poems the voice of the solitary exile can be heard beneath the surface. In the poem 'House' in the Delhi-sequence, he looks for his house and finds it in the crematorium. The poems, "Noah Looks Back" and "Farewell", speak of the pain of exile. The speakers in these poems are dejected heroes who have problems with their homes and memories. Noah asks himself: "Today I wonder:/ What was that adventure for? Was/ the voice I heard really God's?/ The laughter of my mockers/ haunts me like a truth I ignored./ Who was right, they who yielded/ to their mortal's fate with no complaints,/ or me who gave rise to/ generations of sinners?/ Whose was the true devotion, the true humility?" The poem ends with the lines: "Believers have not saved mankind,/ only doubters have." This can be read as a self-critical appraisal of the poet's own radical phase. In the conversation with Makarand Paranjape that is appended to this volume, the poet says: "My poetry entered a period of critical retrospection and introspection; I had never abandoned my scepticism even during the heady seventies; I had always been critical of Stalinism. Even now I did not abandon socialism: but grew more critical of the authoritarian tendencies of Marxism itself and more aware of its crucial silences." In "Farewell" Ashoka says: "These pillars that proclaim dharma cannot hide my sin." The poet's disillusionment with militant and aggressive postures must be read against the backdrop of the breakup of the Soviet bloc and the erosion of ideology in public life. The images of Buddha, Christ

and Gandhi figure increasingly in his poetry of the 80s and 90s. The sense of waste that haunts Noah and Ashoka is born of an awareness of the complex nature of contemporary history. The poet feels the need to return to the inclusive view-point of humanism as interpreted by Bhakti poets and, more recently, Gandhi. In the poem, "Gandhi and Poetry", the poet describes an encounter between a lean poem and Gandhi. Gandhi's advice to the poem is: "Go to the fields. Listen to/ the peasants' speech." What the poet would like to preserve in his poetry is the earthly robustness of a peasant's vision.

The poems in this volume move between the political and the spiritual in its search for a humanist perspective that would balance a critique of the present with a vision of the future. In the poem, "The Indian Poet", Satchidanandan describes the Indian poet as a three-faced God with six arms: "His metaphors of the future have/ the stench of Moghul tombs." The Indian poet has to make sense of his past in order to project himself into the future. He has to recover history from myth and rewrite myth as history. In the urban chaos of Delhi the metropolitan and the mofussil look equally out of place. In the Qutab Minar, the poet reads 'evolution, creation, the end of power.' Hastinapur is now a huge mound of earth. Love in the city is "the one smuggled cyanide pill/ the prisoner manages to swallow at last." He will never know whether it tastes sweet or bitter. The lullaby of the New World rises from the Stock Exchange, as the earth derailed from its orbit is slowly moving away from the Sun.

"Northern Cantos" is a sequence based on the poet's visit to China. Over the years Satchidanandan has written several such sequences based on his travels to foreign countries. The flexible format of the sequence is effectively employed by the poet to comment on people, places, monuments, nature and culture. Satchidanandan's mastery over the imagistic idiom is deployed to its full ironic potential in the title poem, 'How to go to the Tao Temple', and 'The Last Emperor'. The former poem captures the

essence of Taoism in a series of resonant images. To follow Tao is to give up all striving and to escape from the illusion of desire: "No pride: you are not even formed./ No anger: not even dust is at your command./ No sorrow: it doesn't alter anything./ Renounce greatness: there is no other way to be great." Running through the sequence is a subtle critique of the centralisation of power and its disastrous effects. The great wall of China inspires this thought: "The emperors might never have thought/ this would one day become/ the tourist's curiosity/ and the children's camel." When the poet sees that ordinariness has been restored in the Tiananmen Square, he thinks of the tempest snorting from under the earth. In another poem of the sequence he comments on the eleventh contradiction which develops between the State and the People in a post-revolutionary society. In a poem addressed to the Chinese poet, Ai-Ching, Satchidanandan says: "No ruler ever understands poets, Ai Ching./ they fear poetry's ever-open eyes,/ its thousand rebirths./ Honesty and loyalty no more go together./ The cup still has some poison." In "Behind the Curtain" the poet observes: "Behind the curtain/ murder always waits,/ like the dictator/ behind the revolution."

The cup of poison is a reminder of the violence that lurks behind our institutional frame-works. In order to resist its logic the poet very often employs a surrealistic idiom that can tease and test our common sense. "The Mad" and "The Tale of the Tongue" are poems that move with a brisk pace unfolding fresh images at every step. The mad are those who refuse to be domesticated. They have to pay the price for being different: "They have another measure /of Time. Our century is/ their second. Twenty seconds,/ and they reach Christ; six more, they/ are with the Buddha." Satchidanandan's ability to encode political subtexts in the body of poetic texts gives poems like this a rare kind of resonance. His surrealistic idiom incorporates the subversive and the sarcastic with equal force.

It is true that the poems in the present volume written in the nineties sound less urgent and more withdrawn. Perhaps the poet is convinced that poets cannot hope to set the social agenda of our fast changing society. His plea is for greater compassion, understanding and openness. There are many who feel that in the days of channel surfing and multi-media, images and metaphors have lost their power to move people. The urbanised Indians are fast becoming willing prisoners of a precarious virtual reality that inoculates them against all social action. In the post-Ayodhya Indian society, social inaction can mean, to borrow a phrase from Arundhati Roy, the death of imagination. These poems understand the challenge but fail to meet it imaginatively. This is the impression I get even after reading these poems in the original. The most striking piece in his latest volume in Malayalam, titled *Malayalam*, is a tediously romantic celebration of the history and power of the mother tongue. The sequence of poems he has published on the Bhakthi poets of India very often do not go beyond the banal. This is not to say that Satchidanandan has come to a dead end. He retains the power to surprise the reader with fresh ideas. He is bound to discover new ways of seeing and new ways of saying things. But taken as a whole, as the representative work of one of the most alert and critical voices in Indian poetry, these poems do not measure up to our expectations.

Except one, all these poems have been translated by the poet himself. All of them read well but one is left with a feeling that many of them could have worked better with greater attention to line-breaks and syntax.

## KRISHNA RAYAN

# ELDERS THREE

Jayanta Mahapatra, *Shadow Space*. Kottayam: D.C.Books. 1997. pp.82. Rs.65.

Kamala Das, *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing (Selections)*. Kottayam: D.C.Books, 1996. pp.142. Rs.95.

Keki N. Daruwalla, *A Summer of Tigers*. New Delhi: Indus (Harper Collins), 1995. pp.72. Rs.125.

Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das and Keki Daruwalla are among the seniors of Indian English poetry, the generation which preceded Midnight's Children. The three books between them establish--although the Kamala Das selection, not being chronological, does not do it clearly--that the elders are still very much in business. It is no small achievement, although poets have done it before, to keep writing over three decades or longer and practise what business schools call "change management," interacting with and developing in sympathy with waves like avant-guardism, postmodernism and now decolonization/ post-colonialism and yet firmly remaining recognizably themselves.

Jayanta Mahapatra, age-wise the eldest of the three, is, in terms of creative puberty, the youngest. When he brought out his first book of poems, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*, in 1971, Kamala Das, six years younger, and Daruwalla, nine years younger, had already published their first collections in the previous decade. The late start would account, if only superficially, for the undiminished vitality a quarter of a century on which *Shadow Space* evidences--a capacity for phoenix-like self-renewal through switches and shifts in concerns and idiom. To quote his lines out of context:

On the ashes of an old fire,
can I defend myself
from sweeping into flame
elsewhere?
I wake, to shadow space,
perhaps to watch the sky
come floating into the light . . .

Light-and-shadow in fact supplies the formula of several poems in the book, but it is not something as simple as chiaroscuro which is a familiar technique with painters--painters are interested in patterns of light and shades, while Mahapatra is interested in the existential opposition of the two states. Nor is his light-and-shadow like the recurrent images which critics of two generations ago laboured to catalogue and analyse. The two words have a different connotation in each poem and serve as a key which locks up the meaning just when it seems to be about to unlock it. Actually, within the same short poem, the word "shadow/s" which supplies its title occurs six times and each time with a different unchartable resonance. Yet if the word is habitually turned inward and its face hidden, it can also at times point outward, as when Mahapatra defines his country to himself as "a land of fluctuating shadow and sunlight." Generally, though, the word works the same way as "rain" does across the whole range of Mahapatra's poetry. In fact, in the present collection we pick our way through a brooding landscape much the same as in his earlier works, a terrain dotted with heraldic figures and haunting forms and forbiddingly unmappable. Nothing has changed, we say to ourselves, as we read *Shadow Space*.

Yet much has. There was, and still is, the Jayanta Mahapatra who preserves the hermetic inaccessibility of high modernist writing; but there is now another Jayanta Mahapatra who speaks the transparent language of the market place and is presumably driven to doing so by the wrongs of the market place. The two Mahapatras alternate, coexist, overlap. The cynicism and callousness, the hypocrisy and duplicity and the chicanery of the

political class is one face of this evil: ". . . politicians/ adept at catching their own smiles;" their "talk of freedom/ freedom from want, social injustice and greed/ poised above the bleeding heartland;"

> And a little tired, the minister
> who finally had to resign.
> In the half light, his pride sitting
> quietly in this chair, the bodies of five-year plans
> strewn around, their mouths open to the sky.

The other face of the age of evil is the violence and cruelty: ". . . a woman felt that her death by fire/ was definitely easier/ than death through constant beatings and torture;" "The odour of a raped woman through the wetness;" and

> . . . six of a family screaming loud in a flaming shack,
> as they slowly burnt to death, simply because
> they had another faith. And of that thing called God
> they could wall up in marble and gold leaf
> but never own in a million-windowed city.

Inevitably, the contemplation of evil makes Mahapatra deconstruct the twofold concept of divine omnipotence and benevolence, so that his God comes to resemble Thomas Hardy's President of the Immortals. Mahapatra reinvents the God image in terms of contemporary pain:

> The vicious assault on another young girl
> progresses handsomely, breathlessly, without hope.
> God still looks at me, his silence deep and famous . . .

The insistent pressure of external reality--unlovely, but too solid to be ignored--on a consciousness that had for long been self-focussed has been responsible for a switch from introspection to communication, from a withdrawn, oblique, somewhat esoteric mode of speech to a lucid medium of social communion. Strangely, the most successful exercises in this new-found mode are not the passages of bitter political satire but statements such as that of the

elegiac emotion ( "A Day in Marburg on-the-Lahn" ) or that of visionary experience ( "Someone in my Room" ). These are impressive achievements, but at the end of the day it is an inescapable fact that the recurring references to "shadows," "words," and "history" (to mention just three such symbols) which dominate these poems and owe their disturbing nature to their subliminal activity ensure the continuing presence of the inwardness, taciturnity and obliquity which have been the defining characteristics of Mahapatra's poetry.

* * *

Writing about confessional poetry some time ago, I had said: 'Now the "I" of the dramatic monologue denotes only its protagonist, and if it ever has any relation to the poet, it is to the poet with the "mask" on. This "I" is, therefore, a franchise for the imaginary in content and the imaginative in style. On the other hand, the "I" of the avowedly confessional poem stands, quite literally, for the person who wrote it and commits him to accurate presentation of autobiographical fact and, equally, to a language appropriate to unrefracted transmission of information.' I am not sure I would care to be heard saying this today, as literary theory has since restated the distinction between the two 'I's as not just the simple distinction between the man and the mask or the one between dramatic speech and personal confession but as the distinction--basic and universal in discourse--between the subject of *énonciation* (the speech event) and the subject of *énoncé* (the narrated event). I was therefore guiltily pleased to find K.Satchidanandan in his essay prefaced to the selection of Kamala Das's poems mentioning independently the distinction I had referred to between the real and the poetic self and the idea that the legitimate language of confession is statement as opposed to suggestion. It is also pleasing to recall that in the same context I had qualified what I had said about the confessional "I" and added that it can "even admit self-dramatizing to some extent." This is indeed a tendency that is conspicuous in Kamala Das's *oeuvre*:

And so,
with every interesting man I meet . . .
I must
most deliberately
whip up a froth of desire,
a passion to suit the occasion.

I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
autobiography.

What applies to the meeting with a man applies equally to encountering the reader. Whether the emotion expressed be spontaneous or induced, real or fictive, the presence of the listener or reader is implicit in the act of expression; in Jakobson's model of the speech event, the addressee is indispensable. As we know, in Christian practice, the term "confessor" means both the person who makes the confession and the priest who hears it. In all confessional writing, therefore, communication must be achieved, and this involves accessibility, coherence, unfoldedness. The dominant characteristics of Kamala Das's poetry accordingly are explicitness, emphasis, lucidity, elaboration and fluency, and as the poems in the selection show, she has, over the years, preserved these resolutely in defiance of the contemporary literary mores.

One of the pleasures of having an ample and representative selection of Kamala Das's poems in a single volume is that you can occasionally turn away from the pervasive theme of femininity and sexuality to other passing concerns. There are the pieces on her family: her father, her grandmother, her sons. Then, despite her protestations 'I do not know politics' and 'I never knew any politics,' she offers the products of her Sri Lankan sojourn, portraying the violence against the Tamils which made the early eighties a nightmare. There is also the poem on the comparable violence against the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. These are most welcome departures from the dominant pattern. The finest among them, "The First Meeting," records a visit to an unnamed political mother figure:

Your fragile
Comeliness was a shock, for I had seen
On posters spanning the widest streets of
Every city that I lived in, only
A giantess, protector of myriad
Destinies, holding things together
With weathered hands, one who wore on her face
The features of an entire land. When you
Put aside your pen and turned, even that
Impersonal smile, worn quite detached like
A rose, seemed to be a present picked out
For me alone.

The poem, being a celebration of personal experience, proceeds to direct the focus back to the poet's self, but what is significant is that the body of the poem is a notation of ambient reality, at least an important bit of it. More such occasional transfer of emphasis from the inner to the outer, from the one to the many, would have added to the authority of Kamala Das's work.

* * *

To turn from Kamala Das to Keki Daruwalla is a transition from the lyrical to the dramatic, from the tortuous alleys of solipsistic contemplation of oneself amid a web of personal relationships to the highways of external reality, a seemingly infinite universe of variegated and incandescent colour, shifts of light, and the play of innumerable patterns and shapes. Yet it is not a one-dimensional tapestry with a merely visual impact, but a human world of turmoil, violence, cruelty, pain, laughter, love, hope, compassion. It is a crowded guided tour (comparable for variety and liveliness to Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrimage) "from China to Peru" in Dr. Johnson's phrase, taking us across the Japanese seas, Iran, Kuwait, 19th Century Egypt, the Tyrrhenian Gulf, medieval France, contemporary Norway and England, and Argentina. At the end of the adventure we are in Jaisalmer or

Bombay, "finally and irrevocably home." *A Summer of Tigers* thus has a span extending over large stretches of land, history and myth and carries the reader through disparate cultural contexts in each of which a situation remote from common experience or fading on the horizon of time is summoned to bright, sharp life by the text's intensity and virtuosity of verbal life. The character of the English winter is captured in a vivid image:

> . . . the whole earth blessed with green
> under skies always cursed with grey--
> and all the trees charred by an unseen fire.

"The Poseidonians (After Cavafy)" defines the core of deracination as the forgetting of the mother tongue and tells how the Greek exiles meet once a year and mourn the loss of the linguistic heritage:

> What does one do with a thought
> that embarks on one script and lands on another?
> A hundred years go by, perhaps two hundred,
> living with the Tyrrhenians and the Etruscans,
> and they discover there is more to a language
> than merely words, that every act,
> from making wine to making love,
> filters through a different prism of sound,
> and they have forgotten the land they set sail from
> and the syllables that seeded their land.

The barbarity of the Bhagalpur blindings sends the poet to a volume on the Middle Ages in Europe; the most disturbing report in it is the one on the plague:

> In their frenzies they never knew
> if it was God's curse, rat-flea or vector
> that brought it on. Smoke-pots burned in the house
> and for remedies, powdered staghorn was enjoined,
> and crushed pearl, myrrh and saffron. And still
> next day buboes covered the armpit and the groin.

Doctors were important, they went about
in purple gowns and belts of silver thread,
the medieval versions of our saviour,
those who will avert war and lower the price of bread.

But, for the full horror of the event to come across we have to turn to our own time and our own land and hear the version of the visitation offered by the "slum-bastioned, sewer-city" rats:

Fear and the flea sit on our rubber backs.

Of a sudden there's commotion, even though
the sky's stopped tilting and the earth is still.
Our pointed noses and our soundless feet
trigger panic as some of us take ill.

We flail around in a kinetic explosion
lurch zigzag and flop, petrified and grey.
The slum-bastioned, sewer-city comes apart . . .

The moving threnody on the last whale in the Japanese seas is in the truest elegiac tradition. Not all the poems, however, with a foreign locale are apocalyptic. The guide's narration, for instance, of Mohommad Ali Pasha's postprandial decimation of the Mamelukes is delicious comedy.

The Indian poems are a mixed bag. The letter to the Goddess which the blind singer scribbled on a slate the day before he died is memorable:

There's no escape from each other
We both know that.
Either I crawl to your threshold
or you descend
on the nervous stillness that is I.
I await you
like a chord
apprehensive
of a musical note.

"The Chillum" captures the ultimate rapture of smoking:

> Flame and powder
> and the left palm overshadowing the right,
> and the mouth homing for the butt
> of the embering clay pipe.
>
> Ecstasy is smoke, smoke ecstasy,
> as the thin, reedy, ever so long-drawn
> inhalation occurs.

"History" tells how in India

> History always came on horseback
> clad in britches, stinking of unwashed bodies, holding
> stronger-thewed bows
> and spark and powder and matchlock.

"Ratfall" (from which I have quoted already) and "Revisit," both of which, as it happens, end with a reference to a Hanuman image, are powerful statements, as is "Jaisalmer Prophecies," but the rest of the Indian poems are undistinguished. Some of them are redeemed by humour, which is more than can be claimed for the two poems clearly meant to be important: "Childhood Poem" and the second of the "Letters to Pablo."

Maybe the distinction between poems with an Indian setting and those with a non-Indian setting is a superficial one. Some with no identifiable setting seem to succeed better: the requiem for the tribal way of life in "Finalities," the celebration of transparency (in the literal sense) in "The Glass-Blower," the chronicling of temporary amnesia in "Disparate Pieces," and above all, the vivid anthropomorphic animation of chess pieces in "Chess." And "The Foal" puts Daruwalla in a class with Ted Hughes in his prime--which brings us to "Don't Expect," Daruwalla's tongue-in-cheek manifesto:

> Don't look for revelations:
> the sulphur match-head
> flaring in the dark crypt.

Don't think the high grass will part
as if the wind had been through it
or a tiger had left one of its black or gold
stripes on the savannah.

Lower your sights, reader,
to five feet five, five feet six maybe,
to ground level, to ground - fog level.

This is not the right age
for tall poets.

If what is referred to here is garishness and loud colours, one can accept the repudiation at its face value. But if what is intended is a disavowal of vitality and passion, Daruwalla's own poems do not fill the bill. Even where it is an ironic eye that roves over what is attractive or otherwise in the ambience, or a poker-faced deadpan style that drily records what is gruesome or bestial, the words pulsate with a suppressed strength and vigour. And the syntactic cadences and semantic nuances of the language, sensitively acquired, supplement this energy.

**LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM**

# THE ONE WHO ALWAYS GOES AWAY

Sujata Bhatt, *Point No Point*. London: Carcanet, 1997. pp.149. £.7.95.

Sujata Bhatt's *Point No Point* brings together a decade of poetry, selecting from *Brunizem* (1988), *Monkey Shadows* (1994), and *The Stinking Rose* (1995). It is a skilful and coherent collection, drawing out the themes which run through each of the earlier books: childhood, language and bilingualism in *Brunizem*; the encounter between human and animal, the vulnerability of children, the birth of her own child in *Monkey Shadows*; and the absurdity of geography and geographical notions and divisions in *The Stinking Rose*. (My own favourite among these earlier collections is *Monkey Shadows*, where I believe the inter-connectedness of individual poems is most evident.)

*Point No Point* is, as it were, prefaced by its title poem. This is a poem about the absurdity of a place-name which begins by reflecting upon the travellers' confusion and lack of direction; it ends with the extraordinary epiphany they are granted of orcas swimming in the sea, 'an innocent violence spinning within their grace. . . that made our blood learn.' The collection is brought to a close with "Many Voices". 'I used to think there was/ only one voice', the poem begins, and goes on to admit, 'I was wrong./ I can never finish counting them now.' And there is this sense of development throughout: in a collection of poetry whose habitual stance is one of questioning, there is a deeper thrust, a raw edge of pain in some of the later poems.

Sujata Bhatt's is very much a modern voice. Having lived in India, the United States and Europe, and having travelled very widely, she brings together a broad sense of time, place and history in concretely imagined (timeless) moments: for example "Sujata: The First Disciple of Buddha"; "Eurydice Speaks". There are

poems that take off from a contemplation of natural landscape, or modern European painting, or the fascination and beauty of modern science ("Counting Sheep White Blood Cells"); poems that are sparked off by the history of our times, for example the effects of the Chernobyl disaster, or the phenomenon of mass immigration. Yet what is characteristic of Sujata Bhatt is the ease with which she moves between different times and cultures, sometimes making bizarre and quirky connections. (I like very much "The Women of Leh" where she sees Gertrude Stein selling horseradishes and carrots among the Ladakhi women).

Bhatt does not, as many men and women of the 'Asian Diaspora' do, make a post-colonial issue of her (or a community's) displacement:

> I am the one
> who always goes
> away with my home
> which can only stay inside
> in my blood--my home which does not fit
> with any geography.
> ("The One Who Goes Away")

This sense of the absurdity of global geography as we know it is one of the most exhilarating aspects of her poetry and complements her ease in many cultures. (Hence I am sorry that two of my favourite poems from *Monkey Shadows* are not included here: "Distances" where Africa, America and Europe seem to meet in the Atlantic Ocean offshore from Conil; and "Sinking into the Solstice", where, in the beginning of winter, the poet sees the moon at night:

> He, she, it, hermaphrodite moon,
> changing its resilient sex
> as it crosses over borders
> from one country to another,
> accommodating every language, every idea - )

The same insight into the unity of nature and the artificiality of man-made boundaries is very much there in "How Far East is it Still East?"

Such ease with herself and her world is perhaps possible only because of an unselfconscious rootedness in her childhood--one to which she always returns, but which she never describes as entrapping:

> But I never left home.
> I carried it away
> with me--here in my darkness
> in myself.
> ("The One Who Goes Away")

Hence the Monkey poems, in particular, draw from a well-spring of vivid memories of her childhood in Gujarat, shared with a brother. But there is also throughout the collection a sense of personal history and its importance: hence the connectedness between herself and her grandfather, Nanabhai Bhatt; equally, her own daughter makes a connection between herself, her mother and her grandmother, in "Genealogy".

Such a rootedness in personal history and in the sensitive understanding (and re-making) of childhood experience is also the basis, in Sujata Bhatt's poems, of her response to modern history and politics globally. So the news of Hindu/Sikh riots sends her back, in "3 November 1984", to her childhood memory of playing with the Sikh boy, Amrit; both of them with newly-washed hair of the same length. Ahmedabad is still her reference point for poverty, hunger, suffering; the monkeys of her childhood the touchstone for her empathy with animals, her sensitivity to oppression and pain, particularly when suffered by children and women. From such roots come "Oranges and Lemons" (about Anne Frank), "Mozartstrasse 18" (about the Jewish tailor's family who disappeared in Nazi Germany), "Wine from Bordeaux" (about Chernobyl, 1985) and "Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, July 1990":

Looking across the water
I think of those people from Vietnam.
The mothers, the fathers,
what they wouldn't have given,
what they would still give--
their blood, their hair, their lives, their kidneys,
their lungs, their fingers, their thumbs--
to get their children
past the Statue of Liberty.

Threading through the entire work as presented in *Point No Point* are poems where Sujata Bhatt writes simply--or rather, primarily--as woman, lover and mother. There are poems of shared compassion (and sometimes complicity) with other women, as in "Muliebrity", "The Women of Leh" (which I mentioned earlier) and the Hirabehn of "A Story for Pearse". There are poems of great sensuousness, which are hilarious and moving at the same time, like "Love in a Bathtub":

Years later we'll remember the bathtub
the position
of the taps
the water, slippery
as if a bucketful
of eels had joined us...
we'll be old, our children grown up
but we'll remember the water
sloshing out
the useless soap,
the mountain of wet towels.
'Remember the bathtub in Belfast?'
we'll prod each other--

It is the utter simplicity and lack of self-consciousness in such poems, underplaying the erotic (which is always there, all the same), that makes them so delightful--and indeed powerful, as in "The Need to Recall the Journey" which tells of the birth of her baby. As with many women writers of her generation, gender-consciousness becomes part of her poetic and aesthetic sensibility, and does not stand outside it.

From her earliest poems, Sujata Bhatt's poems are marked by her sharpness of image, the originality of her choice of detail (for example, 'It is the tail that has to blink/ for eyes that are always open', from "The Peacock") the vividness and economy with which she lays out a landscape, or, often, a seascape. Her poems are marked also by their sensuousness--a fine sensitivity to colours, smells, tastes, unusual shapes and forms (as blood-cells or preserved lungs, both of which become wonderful things in her poems). Yet hers is also a spare speaking voice. We have many elegant and passionate poets writing in English from India, but few, I think, so completely at ease with a colloquial and spoken register. (The paradox is, of course, that many of her early experiments were bilingually poems, written in Gujarati and English, where she says, of her two tongues, it was the 'forgotten' Gujarati that would 'blossom out of my mouth', pushing English out. In this collection, the bilingual poems are represented only in the first, *Brunizem*, section). Finally, the poems in this collection are marked by a questioning individual voice. Sometimes it is quizzical, delighting in the absurd, 'Why name a place Point No Point?', 'What is worth knowing?'; more often it is a genuinely seeking stance, 'What is magic, What is freedom?', 'What does it mean to feel at home?' This self-questioning has a sharper edge of pain in some of the later poems. It is there at the end of "Your Sorrow":

> Is it reprieve
> the journey's end should bring?
> Or is it enough
> simply to have gone away--
> to have gone away so far
> for so long that finally reprieve
> is too gentle a word, too one sided
> for what you need,
> for what you've already stepped toward.

It is there most directly and unsparingly in one of the last poems in this collection, "*Frauenjournal*", which is about television journalism:

*Why do I think I have to watch this?*
*Is this being a voyeur?*
*Or is this how one begins*
*to bear witness?*

And finally, and for a poet most poignantly,

*How can you bear witness*
*with words, how can you heal*
*anything with words?*

This is a truly sophisticated and eclectic collection of poetry, and one which also speaks from the heart.

## LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM

# SNAPSHOTS OF A CHIMERICAL WORLD

Shanta Acharya, *Numbering Our Days' Illusions*. Ware: Rockingham Press, 1995. pp.87. £.6.95.

This is Shanta Acharya's second collection of poems. The first, *Not this, Not that*, was published by Rupa is 1994. In this, her new collection, her themes have crystallized more clearly. In the first place, there are a good number of poems which engage with the metaphysics of identity, or the modern dilemma of double and multiple selves:

> perpetual engagement
> of disinherited self with self.
> ("Lacking a Nadir")

At another time, she writes:

> I strive to escape continuously
> the incarnation of my several selves
> strewn casually over our encounter in time.
> ("A Giddy Mannequin")

This struggle with various selves, or the attempt to know oneself 'by meditation on the unexplored selves' leads to a reflection upon the illusory--both of the external world ('snapshots of a chimerical world/ through a filter of illusion'), and of the inner world which nurtures self-illusions. Moving only a little away from this theme, there is a clutch of poems grappling with the difficulty (and often failure) of relationships; failure of love. Interspersed among these largely abstract and metaphysical poems are also some about living and working in the City of London, and a very few in which 'living abroad alone' becomes at last something positive, a means by which a flexibility of vision is granted the poet.

It is courageous of Shanta Acharya to tackle themes which are so large and abstract, and she does indeed risk an overload of

metaphor and an overload of abstractions. For example:

> The mind's swirling sky
> now emptied of its thoughts in snow-storm
> ("After Great Struggle")

It is as if Acharya has not quite found her own voice in such poems. For example, sometimes there is a kind of awkwardness in such lines as 'mind-blanched, winter trees' sky'. Sometimes there is a curious ring of the archaic:

> your words in farewell
> birds of twilight in arabesque
> dislimn poems in retreat.
> ("Speech after Silence")

Occasionally there are echoes of Emily Dickinson ("After Great Struggle") and Sylvia Plath ("Meditations in a Bathtub"). This is not true of the whole of this collection, it has to be said. There are other poems with a greater use of wryness ("Arranged Marriages", "The Party") and a few that are self-mocking and acerbic, elegant without being brittle ("Daughters and Lovers", "The Seagull") where the language flows more easily. So *Numbering Our Days' Illusions* does have its surprises and ironies. Yet the over-all impression that this collection of poems leaves upon the reader is one of painful honesty and integrity, of the poet's truthfulness to her experience, and of her self-analysis that stays this side of the 'confessional'. One must admire these attributes.

**SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY**

# POETRY FOR PSYCHIC SURVIVAL: THE POETRY OF SITAKANT MAHAPATRA

Sitakant Mahapatra, *The Ruined Temple and Other Poems*. New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 1996. pp.153. Rs.195.

Among the Oriya poets/writers who have distinguished themselves at the national and international level, poet Sitakant Mahapatra's name comes readily to mind. Although the Oriya literary scene is quite active and vibrant, there is unfortunately not a commensurate awareness of the strength and resilience at the pan Indian level. Sachi Routray, Gopinath Mohanty, Ramakant Rath and Pratibha Ray are some of the better known Oriya writers--perhaps chiefly because they have won national awards and have been translated into English and regional languages. It is therefore in the fitness of things that Sitakant Mahapatra, winner of several prestigious awards such as the Sahitya Akademi (Central and State), Kumaran Asan, Sarala and Visuva awards, has been recently acclaimed by winning the coveted Jnanpith Award for 1993.

Sitakant Mahapatra is a widely anthologized poet who has been translated into some of the major world languages such as Spanish, French, German, Russian, Swedish, Rumanian, Danish, Hebrew and Macedonian. *The Ruined Temple and Other Poems* is the most recent to appear after his earlier success of *Death of Krishna and Other Poems* (1992).

As can be seen from the cover and content page, *The Ruined Temple* does not claim to be an entirely new collection. It represents an attempt to bring together some of the best poems of Mahapatra. After all, a major literary event like the Jnanpith Award exposes a successful writer/poet to a wider cross-section and therefore does justify the making of a new collection.

Born into a modest rural family, Mahapatra came from a village that lies on the bank of the river Chitrotpala in the Cuttack district. The village, the poet's grandparents and the river find recurrent mention in the poetry of Mahapatra. After his early schooling, he joined the historic Ravenshaw College and later became a member of the Indian Administrative Service. However, Mahapatra's first love seemed to lie in poetry and literature. Creative writing did survive the rigours of a bureaucratic life and Mahapatra steadily made a mark for himself in some of the leading poetry journals of Orissa. He inherited the tradition of Oriya literary modernism from poet Guruprasad Mohanty and Sachi Routray. Guruprasad's landmark "Kalapurusha" and "Samudrasnana" were consciously modelled after Eliot's *Waste Land.* This marked a clear break from Oriya Romanticism. Similarly, Sachi Routray evinced a powerful social empathy in much of his poetry. Both Mohanty and Routray in this sense seemed to have had formative influence upon the poetry of Mahapatra. It is not surprising that in his Jnanpith acceptance speech, Mahapatra said that "poetry is the courage of the humble, its vulnerability and humility are ultimately the source of its power both to subvert and to console". He also sees poetry as therapeutic, an antidote to fear, affirming basic human dignity. His modernism is critical and constantly yearns for a human face.

Sitakant Mahapatra's poetry is strongly rooted in Orissa's regional culture and in its social matrix, its tradition and mythology. He evokes the ethos of the land, the world of temple, rivers, dance forms, costumes and pageantry. Nor is there an abdication of the contemporary world of poverty, destitution, pain and suffering. There is also an awareness of Orissa's tribal life and culture. Throughout, Mahapatra shows a steadfast commitment to this reality. He holds a doctorate on tribal culture and has translated many volumes of tribal poetry for UNESCO. However, how does one bridge the gap between the mythic and the modern? How does the tribal reality negotiate with the challenges of modernity and our notions of development? It goes to Mahapatra's credit that the statements that his poetry makes are always lyrical and meditative.

They seldom dwindle into trite one-dimensional utterances, endemic of much of the so called "political" poetry which employs often a shrill, didactic and hectoring tone.

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Altogether, there are sixty-four poems in *The Ruined Temple*. They cover a wide spectrum, capturing the nuances of the rural urban continuum, typical of the Indian experience. These are vivid cameos of family life and relations such as the father, the son, the grandmother--poems which remind you of A. K. Ramanujan. Then there are poems of seasons such as "Winter Evening" and "Old Man in Summer"; poems about tribal experience too such as "Dhangda's Love Song" and "Returning from a Tribal Village in the Evening"; poems which have a setting on foreign soil such as "A Day in the California Desert"; and those that deal specifically with the mythical such as "The Song of Jara" and "The Song of Kubja". But whether religious or secular, sacred or profane, Mahapatra's poetry in *The Ruined Temple* eschews the commonplace and the straightforward. Each poem is carefully structured and presents an arresting insight with the help of a telling phrase and expression. The reader's pleasure is undiminished, especially because the poems have passed through the hands of three of the ablest translators of Orissa: Jayanta Mahapatra, Bibhu Padhi and Bikram Das, the first two of whom are poets in their own right.

Some poems seem to make a statement primarily through an image. For instance, "Confessional 1" reverses our habitual expectations. Instead of words that indicate the nature of a confessional mode, what is offered here dominantly is a picture:

> For truth was ever like this. . . .
>
> A fine crop of anger
> when words die at the throat
> the skin blues and cracks
> and the horizon suddenly closes in
> and collapses on you.

Underlying many poems is a sepulchral presence. There is a constant juxtaposition of the will-to-live with the death-wish. For instance, in the poem "Autumn Leaf ", 'the merciless hissing of snakes' is a counterpoint to the sun's warmth. Similarly, in the poem "A Morning in the Rains", the season of rain seems to herald not joy or a celebrating mood but closure, confinement, the fact of impending death and the imminence of the 'next birth':

> Who is asleep in those houses?
> Indifferent parents?
> Complacent Time?
> Dark fear of Death?
> Like a peacock sighting dark clouds
> Death and the child
> are both eager, restless.

But finally death does not conquer. Mahapatra's poetry offers many strategies for psychic survival. Speaking of poetry's function he says:

> Poetry to me is *paravidhya*, the supreme vidhya. It liberates me from all fears of animals, men, Gods, demons, even ourselves, our lesser, meaner selves. And nothing characterizes our times as much as fear. Haunted by fear words become slogans and rhetoric, the camouflaged expression of fear like a lonely man on a dark road singing loudly only to reassure himself.
>
> (Jnanpith Acceptance Speech 5).

That is why even a piece of driftwood, in the poem by the same name, must not be pushed into 'hearth-fire'. We must let the 'Sun-god confront it' (after all, the idols of Jagannath were carved out of driftwood, we must remember). The driftwood itself may not be bereft of heart. Therefore the reader is exhorted to treat it with care and tenderness:

> do not burn it down
> in the slow fire of indifference.
> Rather, if you can,
> place it in front of the loving sun
> consign it to the gentle wind.
> May be they would whisper in its ears
> some *mantra*, unknown to us all.

At times the persona engages in a casual *jeu-d'esprit* with death, divesting it of the element of fear. In the poem "You could come some other time, Death!" the persona begs Death to "come as you wish / at any other time, but never / during the hour of impending rain. . . ." Here, rain serves as a rich metaphor at many levels at once, kindling memories and desires. The irresistible urge to tear 'hand-writing notebooks' for paper boats sailing 'on the rapids' affirms the value of childhood and primal innocence which the persona longs to recapture. However, despite the seductive charms of 'death's dark-perfumed call' there is no spirit of surrender, only a patient wanting for the sail boats to return:

> Even today, at this age,
> I wait on the banks of the river of dark clouds
> for those sail boats to return;
> perhaps they'd be sailing back, filled with
> innumerable dreams, hopes, memories, sadnesses,
> in response to death's dark-perfumed call.

Mahapatra feels strongly attracted to the symbolic milieu. What the 'civilized' society has forgotten, he remarks, is still retained by the world of the tribals: the Munda, the Oraon, the Kondh and the Paraja. "For us in the modern society," says Mahapatra, "the symbolic milieu has been completely fragmented. The mythical universe is no longer part of a living tradition in most urbanised communities. On the other hand the perception of the tribal is always concrete." The world of the myth always interpenetrates the world of everyday reality. Consider for instance the following Munda song:

> Dreaming of you in bed
> I woke and took to the road
> Stumbling the stone
> On the village road I remembered
> I remembered my caste, my gotra
> And stood transfixed.

It is therefore not surprising that one of the most moving poems in *The Ruined Temple* is "Dhangda's Love Song". The lover's desire to have 'love, dreams, / a touch, tobacco leaves. . . .' is foiled again and again by the beloved because no place is truly bereft of 'presence',

and the refrain 'not here. . . . not here' builds up hauntingly a mood of a great emotional effect:

> The whole world had dropped off to sleep,
> even the moon and the stars,
> I asked for your touch, asked for life,
> and for my helpless, shivering soul, begged for
> a small place in the nest of your body.
> And you said: Even in the dark, inside
> your eye's mirror, everything is clearly seen.
> Not now, not now.

Perhaps there may be an answer in the performance of the ultimate sacrifice, as indicated by the persona:

> Plucking out my eyes, I give them
> to you, like a lotus-gift. Take them.
> And now give me the touch, the love, the dark,
> give my lonely soul its much needed shelter.

In sum, it may be said that unlike much of the modernist poetry marred by a dense and abstruse language, Sitakant Mahapatra's poetry in *The Ruined Temple* is refreshingly lucid and transparent.

However, the transparency conceals a wealth of poetical nuances and a complex web of insights. The poems never cease to surprise us with their dramatic appeal, and with the poet's ability to weave in many contradictory emotions. Despite the prevalence of despair, love ultimately triumphs, a point clearly underscored in the title poem itself: bats, we are told, may fly out from the 'dark womb' of the 'ruined temple'. But the temple is home to hope, all the same:

> A smile on the water's broad and shining face
> becomes a gesture of sudden hope
> and pulls the temple's shadow
> and the rising moon
> together, lovingly.

*The Ruined Temple* will certainly be welcomed by all lovers of poetry.

## PREMA NANDAKUMAR

# AN AUROBINDONIAN POET

R.Y. Deshpande, *The Rhododendron Valley*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 1985. Rs.35.

R.Y. Deshpande, *All Is Dream-Blaze*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 1992. Price not mentioned.

R.Y. Deshpande, *Under the Raintree*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 1994. Rs. 40.

British rule in India may have come to an end in 1948, but the English language has remained with us. During the last fifty years it has prospered so well that Indian writers in English are on top of the world at the international level today.

In the realm of poetry, the achievements of these writers are manifold. Lyrics, narratives, epics, dramas: why, even limericks get noticed as contributions to serious literature! There are many strains too and one of the best exponents of the Aurobindonian school is R.Y. Deshpande.

When Sri Aurobindo was asked why he chose to write poetry in English, he gave four reasons:

"1. The expression of spirituality in the English tongue is needed and no one can give the real stuff like Easterners and especially Indians. 2. We are entering an age when the stiff barriers of insular and national mentality are breaking down (Hitler notwithstanding), the nations are being drawn into a common universality with whatever differences, and in the new age there is no reason why the English should not admit the expression of other minds than the English in their tongue. 3. For ordinary minds it may be difficult to get over the barrier of a foreign tongue but extraordinary minds (Conrad etc.) can do it. 4. In this case the experiment is to see whether what extraordinary minds can do cannot be done by Yoga."

Sri Aurobindo was also the cause of poetry in others. Those who wished to write poetry as part of their spiritual discipline were encouraged and Sri Aurobindo corrected their poems with maternal solicitude. To the first generation of Aurobindonian poets belong K.D.Sethna, Nirodbaran and Dilip Kumar Roy. Nearly fifty years after Sri Aurobindo's passing away, the Aurobindonian tradition has continued to flourish. R.Y.Deshpande is one of the finest exponents of this tradition.

In accordance with the Aurobindonian yoga, no quarter is given to tears, self-pity, self-deprecation and perversion in verbiage or thought by Sri Deshpande. A trained physicist and researcher in atomic energy, a Professor of Science and an editor, Deshpande does not allow any of the irritations associated with these disciplines to mar the Ananda of structuring a poem. Primarily a lyricist, his verse collections to date are *The Rhododendron Valley* (1985), *All is Dream-Blaze* (1992) and *Under the Raintree* (1994).

Deshpande's science and spirituality meet and merge in the spaces of Nature. The Aurobindonian tradition, which traces its roots in the Vedas, has always seen God through Nature, and hence Nature is the base for Deshpande as well (as the titles of his volumes make it clear) to build the spiritual aura of myriad colours:

> When I went to the 'City-Woods'
> I found they are not wings,
> What they give me are but moods
> Of silence that sings.

Experimental physics can take us to the very heart of the atom, but still the scientist is unable to explain the power that holds together the atoms. Nor can he explain why Nature continues to he predictable and unpredictable at the same time. A Palaeontologist like Pierre Tielhard de Chardin confesses that it is not external phenomena but the spirit within that can bring man together. The scriptural dictum alone holds good: "Love one another, recognising in the heart of each of you the same God who is being born."

Deshpande also speaks in these accents and keeps close to flowers, birds and beasts, but with a surrealist approach. There is an unmistakable sprinkle of scientific terminology in his diction:

> Light halo'ing the sun of white mystic light,
> A flame-omnipotence girdling the flame!
> It is the same in microbe or galaxy:
> A serpent-force rushing to lotus of the crown
> Or a calm blaze of stars burning in Time.

Nature remains a constant wonder that can turn the telescope into the spaces within man where glows a spiritual Ananda. Call it a poet's imagination or an aspirant's vision, the end-product sounds a mythic resonance in our hearts. Even the rose which has been, perhaps, an over-worked metaphor in western poetry:

> Roses are horses of song
> Agallop for the distant tunes;
> Roses are a mystery's throng
> Flaming for the swiftest noons.

The philosophy which inspires Deshpande to go in search of symbols like the rose, the kingfisher and the raintree, calls for a double-movement. There is the aspiration from the poet who is pursuing his vocation as a sadhana which is answered by an unfailing grace as lightning-streaks of ecstasy. The opening poem of his latest collection demonstrates this double-action very well:

> I would know your soul, O Hill,
> From the look you have thrown
> And surely it can bear in its ceaselessly climbing height
> The weight of the Infinite. . . .

Nurtured in the Aurobindonian canon, Christ's Passion also becomes an image for the hurdles that are placed across a soul's adventure towards the infinite:

Can I pay for wounds he bore for me,
Redeem with chants jeers he received?
My wounds are so small and petty
That, indeed, I never had grieved.

Can such aspiration be taught? Deshpande says that one must learn to open the door to the Infinite with the key which is in the heart. A key within the heart? Yes! Here are some shapes in which the key is found:

You may pick up a joyous song,
or a bright colourful brush,
And draw a rainbow of moods
To find where resides the hush.

There the eye defines a shape
Of the invisible one,
Even as the words reach it
In the overhead sun.

This is how art becomes sadhana. Art not for art's sake but art for the Divine's sake! It takes time, years, maybe several births. But it is a sure pathway that brings us face to face with God:

The key is splendid and sure
When absolutely still
You wait upon the truemost
In his luminous will.

In a century of fractured psyches, broken images, opaque fables, cacophonic sneezes and desecratory fantasies, the Aurobindonian School moves forward with the morning sun in its face, overhearing whispered messages from infinity, vibrantly symbolistic and deliberately spiritual. R.Y. Deshpande is delicately lyrical, but he has not so far redeemed the promise held out in *The Rhododendron Valley* that gave us strong poems like "Vamadeva had Immortal Births" and "Will Chuangtse Climb up the Mountain?" With the rare gift of crystalline poesy in his hand, Deshpande must come forward to gift us narrative poems that reveal the nuances of our great tradition of secular legends. We shall wait.

# CONTRIBUTORS

*Shanta Acharya* resides in Highgate, London, where she hosts monthly poetry readings. Her own *Numbering Our Days' Illusions*, reviewed in *KB* 10, joins her earlier published volume of poetry, *Not This, Not That*. A third volume, *Looking Glass* awaits publication.

*Meena Alexander*, who teaches English and creative writing at Hunter College in New York City, was the focus of a special section of *KB*5. Her wide range of distinguished publications includes memoirs (*Fault Lines*), "reflections" (*The Shock of Arrival*), fiction (*Manhattan Music* most recently), poetry (*River and Bridge* among other volumes), and several long critical essays.

*R. Amritavalli* teaches at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages in Hyderabad. Her special interests are in theoretical linguistics, and in writing radio and television programmes for teaching English. She also maintains a strong love for Karnatak music.

*Prantik Banerjee*, a lecturer in Hislop College, Nagpur, has published poems in several leading poetry journals in India, and expects the publication of a first book of poetry shortly.

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*Keki N. Daruwalla*'s book, *A Summer of Tigers*, is reviewed in this issue, and is the latest poetry volume in a distinguished career which includes *Winter Poems*, *Under Orion* and *Crossing of Rivers*. He has also produced several volumes of short fiction, the latest being *The Minister for Permanent Unrest*. He resides in New Delhi.

*Kamala Das*'s outstanding career as a poet is sampled extensively in her latest collection, *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. Several volumes of short fiction and an autobiography, *My Story*, are among her other well known writing. Her international repute is demonstrated by an extensive anthology of much of her writing, published by CRNLE in Adelaide, Australia.

*Bibhas De* is a research scientist who lives in Laguna Beach, California. His published volumes of poetry include *In Winter Once* and *On Grunion Shore*.

*Lakshmi Holmström* has recently published her "retelling" of the two great Tamil verse epics, *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. Her extensive translation work includes a volume of Ambai's short stories (*A Purple Sea*) and she has edited *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women*. Her recent work includes translations of Tamil Dalit literature.

*Shiv K. Kumar*'s long and noted career includes poetry (*Cobwebs in the Sun*, *Woodpeckers*, *Trapfalls in the Sky*), fiction (*The Bone's Prayer*, *Nude before God*), translation (*Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*) and numerous critical studies. Much of his work is collected in a volume of *Journal of South Asian Literature* published from Michigan State University.

*P. Lal* is renowned for his forty-year leadership of Writers Workshop, which has introduced dozens of Indian poets and some of our country's best known writers to the general public. His own published work includes essays on Indian literature, several volumes of original poetry, multiple translations and transcreations, and *Lessons* (memoirs of a critical trip abroad).

*Lakshmi Kannan* is a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla. Her volumes of poetry include *Exiled Gods*, *The Glow and the Grey* and the forthcoming *Unquiet Waters*. *Parijata and Other Stories* and *India Gate* are among her best known collections of short fiction. She has also written extensively on the art of translation.

*Jayanta Mahapatra* founded *Kavya Bharati* in 1988 and was Editor of its first two issues. His most recent English poetry volumes are *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992) and *Shadow Space* (1997), while *The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra* (1995) brings together poems from many earlier volumes. *The Green Gardener* (short stories) appeared in 1997, although much of his more recent publication has been in Oriya. He is now Editor of *Lipi*, a magazine of creative writing.

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*Hoshang Merchant* is Reader in English at the University of Hyderabad. His many volumes of published poetry include *Flower to Flame* and, most recently, *The Birdless Cage*. He has lived in both West Asia and the United States and continues to travel to that country, as his poetry in this issue attests.

*Niranjan Mohanty*, Professor and Head of the Department of English at Behrampur University in Orissa, has published critical essays, translations and original poetry in many journals in India and abroad, in addition to his longer poems *Prayers to Lord Jaganathan* and *Krishna*, both of which were published as separate books.

*Sachidananda Mohanty*, Associate Professor of English, University of Hyderabad, is involved with Oriya literature through translation and extensive research. His publications include travel pieces, interviews and original poetry, in addition to two book-length studies of D.H.Lawrence. His many recognitions include Salgburg and Fulbright Fellowships, and a Katha-British Council translation award.

*Molshree* is a student at University of Illinois, Chicago Campus. Her writing has appeared in many journals in India and overseas, and a volume of her poetry, *Debris*, has also been published.

*Poovan Murugesan* lives and teaches in San Diego, California, but travels frequently to south India.

*Prema Nandakumar* is known for her prolific and pertinent book review writing, and for her collaboration with K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar in the several editions of the monumental *Indian Writing in English*. She has also published a novel, *Atom and the Serpent*, translations, and book-length studies of Sri Aurobindo, S.Radhakrishnan, and Subramania Bharati.

*Nandini Nopany* has completed three anthologies of quotations and has collaborated with P.Lal in translating a novel and three volumes of short stories. She is currently in charge of the philanthropic activities of the M.P.Birla group of industries.

*Makarand Paranjape*, who teaches in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, is currently at work on poems for a new collection that is to complete a trilogy, along with his previously published volumes, *The Serene*

*Flame* and *Playing the Dark God*. A novel (*The Narrator*) and a short story collection (*This Time I Promise It'll Be Different*) are among his other publications.

*Moin Qazi* lives in Nagpur and is an officer in the State Bank of India at neighbouring Warora. He has published poetry in many journals of India and overseas, in addition to a collection of poems, *A Wakeful Heart*.

*E. V. Ramakrishnan*, who is Reader in English at South Gujarat University, Surat, has published criticism, poetry (*Being Elsewhere in Myself* and *A Python in a Snake Park*), and *Making It New* (a study of Modernism in Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi poetry), in addition to extensive translation work. His *Tongue Tree: Modern Indian Poetry 1972-1997* is soon to be published.

*R. Raj Rao* is a member of the English faculty of the University of Poona. He has published one volume of poems, *Slide Show* and is at work on a second, as well as a biography of Nissim Ezekiel. He has participated in the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa and has published plays and short stories in journals in India and overseas.

*Krishna Rayan* has taught English in India's National Defence Academy and in universities in Zambia and Nigeria. Apart from many articles in Indian and overseas journals, his full-length critical study (*The Burning Bush: Suggestion in Indian Literature*) has been widely used. He currently resides in Bombay.

*Mohan Ramanan* is Professor and Head of the Department of English, University of Hyderabad. He has held important responsibilities at American Studies Research Centre, and has published '*Difficult Balance*': *A Study of Contemporary American Formal Verse*, as well as many articles on poetry, narrative, and literary theory.

*Neeti Singh Sadarangani*, who resides in Baroda, has published a first book of poems entitled *The Serpent of Slumber*.

*Nandini Sahu* teaches English at Kalinga Mahavidyalaya in Udayagiri, Orissa. She has published poetry in English and in Oriya in several different journals, and is currently at work on a Ph.D. thesis which involves four major Indian poets.

*Vilas Sarang* is Professor in the Department of English at Kuwait University. He has published a novel, *In the Land of Enki*, and a short story volume, *Fair Tree of the Void*, and has edited an anthology, *Indian English Poetry since 1950*. He was formerly Head of the Department of English at University of Bombay, and Editor of the *Bombay Literary Review*.

*Faridoon Shahryar*, who writes from the campus of Aligarh Muslim University, has published poems in several different British and Indian journals.

*Arundhati Subramaniam* is a free-lance journalist who has published poems and articles on the performing arts in many major Indian journals and newspapers. She is also programme coordinator for the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Mumbai.

*James B. Swain*, who resides in Middletown, Connecticut in the United States, previously taught English at Baring College, Punjab, and Woodstock School, Mussoorie, U.P., over a period of almost two decades.

*Jeet Thayil* is Literary Editor for *Gentleman* magazine. He has published a recent volume of poems, *Apocalypso*, an earlier collection with Vijay Nambisan entitled *Gemini*, and is at work on still another volume, *Genesis*.

# OBITUARY

The staff of *Kavya Bharati* is deeply saddened by the death, since our last issue, of two of our well known contributors. Both of these contributors had done extensive translation work most of their lives, and their loss is keenly felt particularly for that reason. *Kavya Bharati* records their loss here, and shares with our readers a sense of profound regret and deprivation.

*M. S. Ramaswami* was a retired magistrate residing in Coimbatore. He translated for publication two volumes of *Modern Tamil Short Stories*, two additional short story translation volumes under the title, *The Vision* and two volumes of poetry translated from Tamil to English. In addition, he translated individual poems and short stories for many journals in India. He published translations of Tamil poetry in five different issues of *Kavya Bharati*, many of which drew highly appreciative reader response. In his last weeks he donated most of his collection of books to the SCILET library.

*P.S. Sundaram*, who lived in Madras, had been Professor of English in several different universities in India. He published multiple books and articles on the writing of R. K. Narayan, but was perhaps best known for his translations of the poetry of Subramania Bharati, of Thiruvalluvar's *Kural*, and of the *Kamba Ramayanam*. His translation of selections from the Tamil *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* was first published in the distinguished Penguin Classics series. He also published articles on Tiruvalluvar, on *The Kural* and its translators, and on translation as an art. Much of his other translation work was unpublished at the time of his death.

## SUBMISSIONS

*Kavya Bharati* welcomes contributions of poetry in English, review articles and essays on poetry, 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.

Authors should submit two typewritten copies of each contribution, preferably on A4-size paper. In the event that handwritten submissions are considered and later published, *Kavya Bharati* can take no responsibility for discrepancies between its printed text and the author's intentions. Manuscripts of essays and review articles should conform to the latest edition of the MLA Handbook.

All submissions should be accompanied by sufficient bio-data from the writer, such as her or his current work, place of residence, previous publications, other relevant literary activities, and pertinent extra-curricular interests. But for a fuller range of appropriate bio-data writers should consult the "Contributors" page of this issue.

All submissions should be sent, preferably by Registered Post, to The Editor, *Kavya Bharati*, SCILET, American College, Post Box No.63, Madurai 625 002 (India). Writers should also include their clear and full postal address, with Postal Index Number in every case. An E-mail address where possible will also be welcome.

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