KAVYA BHARATI

Special Issue
Poetry of Indian Women

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
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The Editor, *Kavya Bharati*
SCILET, American College
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Editor: R.P. Nair

FOREWORD

This issue of *Kavya Bharati* speaks for itself. It is an anthology of poetry written currently by forty Indian women, and shows once again that in the outpouring of Indian literature in English during the past two decades, the role of women has been fully as significant as that of men. By now this fact should not come as a surprise to anyone.

What *is* noteworthy in this issue of *KB* however is the variety represented by its contributors. In terms of experience, this volume ranges from veteran poets to several who are appearing in print for the first time. Geographically our writers come from all sectors of our country -- Orissa, Punjab, Kerala, Bengal, Andhra, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Tamilnadu -- to say nothing of our expatriate poets who are well represented here. And they pursue an abundance of extra-literary interests, from business reviews to film production, from social work to painting, from administration to finance and accounting.

Kavya Bharati is always eager to hear from our readers. Particularly regarding the contents of this issue, we would like to know your reactions -- what you like about it, what you wish had been done additionally, or differently. We would be glad to know of any other kind of special issue you might like to have *KB* produce -- any other aspect of Indian poetry in English that would make up an appropriate future Volume. Or there may be other "departments" of our journal which you would like to see extended -- interviews with some of our more experienced contributors; bibliographies of their work; news of other activity in the field of Indian poetry in English. Let us hear from you!

For this issue of our journal, we are particularly indebted to John Paul Anbu of the SCILET staff for solving a legion of difficult formatting problems -- a responsibility he has quietly assumed in the production of most of the issues of this past decade. His role in the development of *Kavya Bharati* has been crucial.

KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 12, 2000

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General

KAMALA SURAIYA

WILD HONEY

You gave me a jar of wild honey
I gave you my love
My love is so much
like honey collected from the forests

Several springs lie dissolved in it.
Each night the
weight of your body
wearies my arms.

But you lie against another
woman's body in a town
far away from my home

How long is it
since you and I began
to run round the rim
of a circle seeking
out one another?
I cannot guess
Today
I do not even know
if I am pursuing you
or if you are pursuing me.

The thought that
morning is leagues away
makes me lie
each night sleepless.
Was it in another
life perhaps remote that
I heard for the first time
your soft voice, your
gentle words?

Why do you stand
silent outside my door?
Your silence thumps against
the walls of my Heart.

Who built a shrine
at my feet?
Prayer bells trill in my ears.
I am a river that flows
on, unaware of its
limitations. On an
evening after the sun had
set you visited me.
It was then that it flowed
as if in spate.
Who can now stem its flow?

At which fated hour
did my arid life
turn into a plaything
meant only for you?
You were a scholar.
You roamed around
scattering shreds of moonlight.
Today you are wise.
You burn like the Sun.
But I tremble fearing
that one day you might
discover the transience of
our love. Am I
to get scorched by the sun?

We had as
weapons only our religions.
We had to abandon
them on the floor
before we could embrace
each other.

Why do you
stand before me with
the troubled face of a
convict? Why do you
tremble in fear before
the one who loves you?
I admitted you into
the interiors of my
home only because you
were an innocent.

Are you forever
seeking in me the lost treasures
of youth? Oh pilgrim
late in arriving, your
only duty is to give
me my last drink of water.

Your finger tips
are blunted for you chew
your nails. With blunted
fingertips you strum my
heart strings, you liberate
strange melodies. This is to
be our honeymoon. We
joined the suicide squad
ready for self-sacrifice

And if love is not
a sacrifice what then
is its meaning?

THE MASK

How can I love him without causing
his mask to crack, a mask more cherished
than his naked face, one of intense
piety that glows like an auburn sun
against the horizon while the wine
of his tremulous voice is poured again and
again into goblets of adorers' ears?
Transient as the splintering sun
in the moving river beside his home
was his love and transient the leap
of desire in his burnt sienna eyes
But how shall I survive the aftermath
of love and the sudden awakening
in him of reasons, the silence banked
as snow in the Nokia he gifted a month or two ago
returning from a Gulf-land to my impatient arms?

LAURENTIAN POEMS: QUEBEC, CANADA

THE MAPLES ARE GREEN STILL

Perhaps in slumber lies
as yet unemerged
the tarnished copper of their leaves
and my beloved's too
I remember the red hot rages
that awakened
under my gypsy lips.
Was there ever a woman
able with words to describe the splendors of her
lover's body?
Ya Allah
import for us
for my silent one and me
from the heavens above
a language that is versatile
and conveys love's anguish
and the concomitant bliss
with words that resemble the sighs
of moments when we cling
and afterwards uncling
in leisurely detumescense
Ya Allah
I thank you once again
and again and again
For this gift of a man
who is now my sustenance
the draught I thirsted for
and the sole raiment
for my nudity, both my body's
and my soul's.

THE SEPARATION

Among the maples
and the pine
among the cedar
and the birch
descends the hurricane
of my desire for you
an untimely one that must
shake down the limbs of trees
and bruise the forest,
these hills . . .
Your stricken eyes
tinged red
bother me my love
In the stillness of a Canadian night
I hear the resonance
of your voice
calling out my name
and the body lying disciplined
under the eiderdown trembles
recalling our last embrace
You asked for a maple leaf
to keep pressed in a book
If this anguish lingers on,
lingers on and on
I shall bequeath you
my heart, chilled and red
so like a maple leaf in autumn
to keep pressed
between the pages
of your prayer book
a relic to remind you of
promises left unfulfilled
and happiness dreamt of
but not realized.

Don't turn your face
or look at me, dear one

I dare not gaze again
into the depth of sequestered pools
Behind the layers of cold skin
may lurk sleeping suns
that might rise out of the water
like naked leprechauns
to beguile
to please
I dare not play the games
adults seem to play
the game of enticement
the game of laughter
and the final one of abandonment

A MOMENT'S PAIN

Words pelted at me
in sudden
casual malice
scar the veneer of my pride
till it crouches like a stray
beside the sewers of
dark consciousness
Within a flawless form
the invisible trappings hurt
and I see myself a cripple
crutches under arms
begging with eyes
for kindness
For love ...
I must arise
I must depart
to the yellow lights of
prosceniums
the din of crowds

closing in on me
and the deafening applause
the embrace of rustics
the unlearned ones
who give unquestioningly
their love
and their underarms' smell
to these I must return . . .

To the maples
taking their own time to redden
to the elephantine rocks
to the pines and the birches
to the glimpse of
        silvery lakes
to the thrumming air
        of the forest
to the birds crying out
        their creator's name
I discover that I do not
belong
and that I shall not ever belong.

SCALPELS

You gave me no wedding ring
or even a promise laced with hope
You held me in your arms
and passed on your cough to me
After half a year has passed
the cough still lingers on:
Love too endures, I hope...
On the phone at your hospital
your voice, a steely scalpel
probing my innards,
drives me to the farthest
periphery of your world
I shiver like an outcaste
I taste the cold metal of defeat
Perhaps only in my arms
you soften
adopt a human form
At such moments you serve me
ladles of silence
in a leisurely way
the silence of old trees
adorning your family home
which remember you as a child
the silence of birds that roost
invisibly in the trees
the silence of distant hills
in the wake of a storm.

KATIE - 2000

Katie
pink as pastry
laid out at a children's party,
ageless and exquisite,
wept in my embrace
at the doorstep of her home.
I had not thought I would
see you again, she said
in a voice soft as the sigh
of wind in the lush foliage
of the Laurentian woods
The passage of years, the years between my first visit
and this, had not crocheted
her skin or dulled her eyes
She spoke freely now
of the topics women fancied most,
of the love stories she read
avidly each day
to chase out the aloneness
of one who had performed her duties well
had nurtured a robust offspring
and had watched her descendants thrive

MERRILY

This time
my friend Merrily
has got herself a bore
as houseguest
a love struck woman
wandering blindly
through the maze of
a new found love
whose eyes
now opaque
reflect not the verdure
or the sky
but the swarthy man
she left behind
in exchange of girlish prattle
accustomed to
for years
From the beginning
of the friendship to this day
she stops so often to pause
and then changing the topic
narrates the fond details
of her male
But Merrily braves it all
shrugging her shoulders
crinkling the corners of her eyes
and uproariously laughing
a laugh of fiestas
and fairs, a laugh that
rides a ferris wheel
a laugh gaudy as a circus tent
This is what brought me here
priceless one
the laughing water
of your voice

and the way you have
of pulling out
like skeins of wool
one by one
my dismal memories
folding each sorrow
and putting it away
in the cupboards of your room.

SUE AND JOE

Sue, light as a feather
has a springy gait
all her own
and walks briskly to her
niece's home
nimble feet crunching
the gravel and the grass
She moves as a fawn does
leaving the forest
more or less undisturbed
although her red blouse alarms
the birds that hide in the bough
Her face gleams like a well-lit door
and behind it loiters
a laugh rooted in affection
There is within her the warmth
of carnivals where children lark
and couples in love waltz half
the night away.
Does she not still recall
every now and then
how she danced with her Joe
making a conspicuous pair?
It will be folly she thinks

if I invite him now to dance with me
he has screws in his pockets
and nails in his mouth
he hates to leave the work undone
the fitting of a lintel there
a hinge here, a whole window
to be squeezed in.
Joe works on and on
his work is never done
he is unaware of spiders
climbing up his arms
unaware of the fierce summer sun
beating down on him
Joe hammers
he tightens the screws
and polishes well
the polished ledges of his home.

ALIEN TERRITORIES

Today I leave Merrily's home
for a land that's far away
where I shall not smell the birch leaf and the spruce
Here I was the owner of my time
each tranquil hour my own
none to make claims on the vitality
and the depleted assets of age
none to plead with sunken eyes
for permanent sustenance
or for a roof above her head
Ya Allah
how long can I aid you
in your ordained bondage of love?
How brief my earthly sojourn
how eternal thy pursuits
If you have visible feet my Lord
I shall press my lips to them
I shall dampen your toes
with my tears
that seem to flow
from a remote interior
that is perhaps within me
and yet seems alien
a territory bequeathed
a territory unearned

SUNITI NAMJOSHI

MARES

When she appointed me
Keeper of the Horses,
I mumbled, smiled, explained
I was unworthy . . .
She smiled back:
nothing at all
was required of me.
Which is why a hundred
thousand mares now gallop
through my head,
foam-flecked and excellent,
shape-shifters all,
caressed by the sea.
I stand very still.
I have no part
in this gorgeous commotion,
though I am admiring.
Later I realise
that I too have suffered
a metamorphosis:
not to a mare, nor to a woman,
but to a solid and good sort of tree.

DEAF EURYDICE

Sometimes the murmur of longing is so
tentative, and the thought of a caress so
tangential, that the senses strain to hear what,
after all, cannot be said.

And it's then that
the temptation arises: to write a lie
on the water, scribblings on sand, or to descry
from the way the leaves moved and the light
fell what shadows portend. This is twilight
time, Orpheus time, Demeter time, when they
call the long dead, and deaf Eurydice
struggles to hear and hearing nothing falls behind
till her footfall makes no imprint save on the mind.

Note: Poems of the following seven writers were produced during a Workshop at SCILET which was directed by Suniti Namjoshi

SANDHYA RAO

HIBISCUS

They say the hibiscus is
A flower of power
Flower of the goddess
Red power.
Beautiful on a young girl's plait
It blacks my graying hair.

POEM

She yearns but does not have
She speaks but is not heard
She lives and is forever after--
An echo

PRIYA KRISHNAN

HERO

Exotic worlds, damsels in distress
Concordes and speedboats
He's on a quest.
He's the slayer of dragons
Who likes his Martinis
Shaken, not stirred.

DEEYA NAYAR

HE'S GROWN

From pirate cakes and Leo trucks
To Corrs and Board exams,
He's grown.

"Don't call me a child," he says,
"I'm eighteen now."
"Why then," she asks, "look at me
With the same hurt eyes,
Why show me a cut
That does not bleed?"

SAMINA MISHRA

AYESHA'S SONG

No kitchen for me,
No kitchen, no kids, no catastrophes.
I make my own rules,
I walk, I run, I ride,
I fight battles --
Everyday.

How can things not break?

She was young and strong,
Watchful, behind the veil.
Ayesha,
The lover, the warrior, the woman.
Flogged and praised.
She remains --
A memory, a moment, a schism.

NILIMA SHEIKH

POEM

Fever sometimes
is self indulgence.
Do I still need to recall
quiet summer afternoons of rest?
Eyes closed, smells of soft food,
keys and bangles, starch on cotton, sounds
reminding me that my mother
stayed home.

VIBHA CHAWLA

THE ACT

Oedipus entered his mother's room and
stood there watching her, fast asleep. He could
not bear it any longer. He advanced towards
the bed. He pulled out the dagger and plunged
it into her breast. He had avenged his father.

ZAI WHITAKER

THE GOLDEN CUP

Dancing, feet clashing
Like cymbals
Meera takes the golden cup
And tosses it back
With cavalier grace.
The King's eyes narrow
then widen

As she crumples
Like a paper heap,
Hands outstretched in dance.

LAKSHMI KANNAN

EKADANTA

You were there
curling your trunk over my happy phrases
you were there
lending a lambent glow to an idea
you were there
breathing life into the voices on the page
you were there
flowing through my pen to give me words
from a mnemonic promptuary
you were there
in the images they called lovely
in the lines they found powerful
in the ellipses that were limned in light.
You made them so.

Yet equally, you were there
wrapping your trunk over my inept phrases
you were there
clouding over a failed idea
you were there
breathing confusion
over the tone of the voices
you were there
calcifying words which turned brittle
you were there
in the images they called trite
in the lines they found weak
in the passages that were prosy.

Did you make them so?
I don't know,
But I do carry you everywhere with me.

Who but you
could forgive my fallibility?
Who but you
with the single tusk in your elephant-head,
unmatched with the rest of the body.
You, with the dear imperfect form
will someday absolve me from words
as I search for the aphonic realm.

FOR ARUN

A droplet of water
On a lotus leaf
Is said to symbolise detachment.

But see how
the veins of the leaf are magnified
through the pearl of water

And how
the droplet turns
a radiant emerald on the leaf?

Water and leaf
jewelled together
even in their separateness.

Lakshmi Kannan

YOU LINGERED

Actually, you had left the place
long ago. With finality.
Now there was no looking back.
None whatever.

I wandered along the rows of houses
on the street where dusk had settled
with the heavy odour of jasmines
the relief of tight buds
unfolding secretly in the dark.

The unclear smog carried the smell
of other flowers,
camphor and your skin.
You hung by the

shingled roof-tops sloping charmingly,
with old-world grace,
you were wrapped around the houses
and yes, you walked the street with me.

THE SEA OF MOTHER'S BLOOD

I noticed how mother, of late,
accepted our gifts
kept them for a while, then
returned them politely.

One by one by one
they were returned with that look
we dreaded. Sorry, but I can't
take them with me, can I? it said.

I saw a sea in her eyes then.
It has since spilled over to the rest of her.
Mother has grown large, very large
her waves arching high, unafraid.

They swept over the gifts, the waves,
they threw them back on the shore --
the sarees, the handbags,
the Chola figurines in bronze
she once shined lovingly
with the juice of tamarind,
the prints of Monet and Van Gogh she treasured
the fragile crystal ware, the books. . .
How very small and trivial they looked
for the sea.

The huge waves washed over them
dashed them back to the sand furiously
along with the molluscs
that stumbled out, staggering with the weight
of their moist shells on top.

The salty froth rushed, tickling our feet.
Mother had the last laugh.

Lakshmi Kannan

VISARJAN

He was the formidable
Lord of the *ganas*
yet he went down easily
in the waters.

Just as early, he dissolved
his earthy form, sending up afloat
a few flowers and *kusa* grass,
his parting gifts.

I have dived in and out
of the same river,
my body unmelting, unmeltable,
stubbornly solid.

Would I ever learn
from him to dissolve, to mix
the earth of my being
with the waters?

EUNICE DE SOUZA

MOFUSSIL STUDENT

Asked to write about the stream of consciousness
he writes about ‘the consciousness of streams.’
The Wasteland yields King Fishers
and plants where birds can hide.
‘Is it necessary to live’? says Ros to Guil.
‘I don’t know’ says Guil.
‘What you wish’?

He will be graced of course.
How many lambs can one slaughter?

MEENA ALEXANDER

FOR A FRIEND WHOSE FATHER WAS KILLED ON THE LAHORE BORDER IN THE 1965 WAR BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

I come to you
nothing in my arms,
just this bundle.

Cloth covering
what the pity of war
could not render up

The bones of a father.

The horses of Uttarakand
wept salt.
Their necks were torqued.

At the gates of Central Park
you search for me.
Birds stalk clouds

Clouds hang cold.
On a hill of gold
stick insects clamor.

You grew up
without him, wondering
what kinds of creatures fathers made

Moustaches messy with smoke.
What shit poured from their sides.
If the waters they swam in turned dark.

Where are the burnt plains
of the Punjab?
The killing fields of Partition?

At the mouth of Central Park
apple blossom sifts your breath
and you search for me.

I long to come running to you,
hair flying utterly ready
a girl again

In the moist air
in the ordinary light
of a garden

But how shall I hold you,
this bundle in my arms
love's fierce portion?

How shall we face
the burnt rim of green,
the horses of Columbus cut in steel?

NOTEBOOK

‘Il grande ponte non portava a te’

Eugenio Montale

TRANSPORT

I was young when you came to me.
‘Each thing rings its turn’
you sang in my ear, a slip of a thing
dressed like a convent girl
white socks, shoes,
dark blue pinafore, white blouse

A pencil box in hand: *girl*, *book*, *tree*
those were the words you gave me.
Girl was *penne*, hair drawn back,
gleaming on the scalp
the self in a mirror in a rosewood room
the sky at monsoon time, pearl slits

In cloud cover, a jagged music pours:
gash of sense, raw covenant
clasped still in a gold bound book
pusthakam pages parted
ink rubbed with mist
a bird might have dreamt its shadow there

Spreading fire in a tree *maram*.
You murmured the word, sliding it on your tongue
trying to get how a girl could turn
into a molten thing and not burn.
Centuries later worn out from travel
I rest under a tree.

You come to me
a bird shedding gold feathers
each one a quill scraping my tympanum.
You set a book to my ribs.
Night after night I unclasp it
at the mirror's edge

Alphabets flicker and soar:
Write in the light
of all the languages
you know the earth contains
you murmur in my ear.
This is pure transport.

CHORIC MEDITATION

I know where I saw the pasteboard wall:
by the steps of Grand Central Station
Wild Things painted on it, matted fur
and pointed claws, a river sketched in indigo
with tall trees of the jungli sort
to hide the mess of pipes, a stairwell exposed and singed.

As I brush past the wall
I hear a voice: 'Cara, write your poem well.'
The hard poem about the self
when there is nothing else quite like it
a tiny 'i' cleft from its shadow,
hardly breathing, form's terror

And the upcoming storm
I heard about it on the radio
riffles the leaves of the maple
by the station steps
flusters the seller of hotdogs
the lone buyer of newspapers.

Shall I stand up and sing?
make choric meditation in a time of difficulty?
We live in a raw territory
bristling things we cannot name take hold.
The fig leaf by the river of my childhood
bears no fruit, its leaves are scratched with steel.

In its shade, someone whose face is turned away
is crying out aloud.
'I am your soul' she sings, her arms open wide
'Your dark body alive: press through the wall
into the humming station, swim in the black river
as if you were a girl again and find me.'

PROVENANCE

The bowl on the ledge has a gold mark
pointed like a palm.

I leave the bowl empty
its pallor pleases

Plain glass marked with a sign
of no lasting consequence.

I lead you into the page.
With you I enter a space where verbs

Have little extension, where syntax smoulders.
I hear you murmur:

What consciousness takes
will not survive itself.

I repeat this as if knowledge
were its own provenance, as if the sun

Had never risen on intricate ruins,
Mohenjadaro of the mind: cool passage ways

A grown woman might stoop to enter
gazing at walls stuck with palm prints

And on damp ground, pitchers of gold
holding clear water.

FRAGMENTS

I start to write fragments
as much to myself as to another

(Who lives in my mind?
Can the mind hold its hope?)

I want to write:
The trees are bursting into bloom.

I felt it, though it did not come
in that particular way, the sentence endstopped.

Could sense come in feverish script
finicky with rhyme, sharp as a wave?

Or was that the wrong way around?
The hold of things was perpetually askew

Hard as I tried to figure it through:
a branch surprisingly stout

Thrust out of the main trunk
level with my ankle

The slash in it bright gentian,
cupped in a bracelet of dew.

MAP

I am writing a simple set of directions
a map to no place in particular:
at the head of the stairs turn right,
when you find yourself at the end of the landing
swing open the bare door -- bare meaning
scraped free of vermillion lacquer --

In the white room at the window's edge
polished free of grime, is a mirror.
Where all that is falls
pictureless, abyssal.
What turns and echoes?
What burns the inner ear?

A spot on the mattress
propped up on the floor
darkness by the basin,
a snip of hair
bronze in a sudden
bend of light

And on the upturned bucket in the corner
a bottle of antimony,
a silver stick at its rim
beckoning her eyes
the pupils brilliant indigo
edgy, inscrutable.

What the mirror never finds
is vanishing.
Somehow you hear a voice cry
in lost vernacular:
`Where is God these days?'
You answer with tilting hands, a child again

And turn to face a wave of light
at the mirror's edge.
You know it can pitch houses over,
shred staircases, landings, floors
into splinters of molten wood:
eternal evanescence.

HOUSE

You set it up: an armature of bamboo
doors wide open, threshold in sparks.

What does it mean to summon up ancestors
make them responsible

Make them speak to us in the way a body
lined with flame might, had it voice?

Best perhaps at the water's edge
on a mound lit at the rim with flares.

Muse of memory, maker of sense
barely lit by mirror or lens

Your house is a package of reeds
flickering in a lake at twilight.

What would it cost to etch
your supernal architecture?

What pitch of gravity?
What squaring of loss?

SHE SPEAKS TO A MAN IN A RED SHIRT

‘Quick! Are there other lives?’
Rimbaud

I

` We are poor people,
a people without history.’

She saw his shirt
red cotton, open at the throat

Hair on his chest
taut as the wind blew.

She could not tell
which people he meant

His shirt open in that way,
his flesh hard under coarse cloth.

II.

If she were to write a poem
it would start like this:

A woman stood at the edge of a terrace
saw white letters someone scrawled

FROM THURSDAY ON TILL NEVER
THIS JOURNEY IS A NARRATIVE OF LOSS.

Beyond the terrace
is a river few boats cross.

III.

Call out the phoenix, let it shake
its wings, soar over water.

What burns is loss. History comes
without cost, in dreams alone.

Our poverty is in the nerves,
the stubble of migrancy, tied up with hope

Stacked in a wooden boat,
the sails lie flat.

IV.

She hears his words:
Let us be one people.

Man in a red shirt,
why move me so?

Touching you,
will I know how the wind blows?

TRANSLATED LIVES

The past we make presumes us
as pure invention might, our being here compels it:
an eye cries out for an eye a throat for a throat.

We muse on Rimbaud's mouth caked with soil
His Parisian whites stiffening:
Quick! are there other lives?

Who shall fit her self for translation?
Letter for letter, line for line
eyes flashing at squat gulls

In this mid-Atlantic shore
with sail boats rudderless
a horizon scrawled in indigo.

What water here, or air?
A terrible heat comes on
birds scurry

Swallowing their own shadows,
lovers couple on hard rock
groping for the sea's edge.

Neon mirages mock
the realm Columbus sought.
In Times Square selling the National Debt

Electronic numbers triple on the light strip
and where the digits run -- pure ciphers -- 000
mark heaven's haven.

Into that nothingness, a poverty of flesh
track tanpura and oudh
the torn ligaments of a goat's throat

Still bloodied, strummed against sand.
As boats set sail through our migrant worlds
as faxes splutter their texts

Into the crumpled spaces in our skin
and the academies bow low: white shirts, threadbare elbows
scraped into arcane incandescence,

Shall we touch each other stiffened with sense
bodies set as if in Egyptian perspective
full frontal necks craned to the glint of the horizon?

Will a nervous knowledge
a millennial sense be kindled?
Must the past we make consume us?

CIVIL STRIFE

- For Ngugi Wa Thiong'o --

The ink was very old
palm leaf brushed with the bruise of indigo.
In ancient silk I heard a bird sing
the body's emptiness, a sari swirling on a twig tip.

In the mirror I saw a girl turn into a tree
Her fingers blossoming freckled petals,
greedy hands tore at her
she fell handless footless into a ditch of dirty water.

Soon there was an altercation
in the frame of things
I could not tell when the threshold stopped,
where barbed wire would work its bounty.

A child's toe starred crimson
bullets in guava bark
civil strife
crowding the rivers

I had to tell myself that birdsong
in a partitioned land
is birdsong still.
And if moving were not music

Of its own accord
I might have stuck forever
at the mirror's rim
seeing a child see a naked thing

Split from a misty tree
her self as other parting company.
But the monsoon broke
the river coursed unpredictable.

Black water drew me home.
In my own country
I saw cotton, linen, silk
blown into threads

The bridge of belonging
shattered
cherished flesh
burst into shards of thingness

A summer surplus
a bloodiness.
I felt all this fall out
of any possible business of the ordinary.

Yet what was the ordinary but this?
In the tale the girl-tree is recognised
her scent inexorable draws her lover on.
Moving metamorphosis.

Yet what could this mean to me?
I sought out the philosopers, read Nagarjuna:
If fire is lit in water
who can extinguish it?

In trains and planes,
whose quicksilver speed kept me alive,
I murmured after Heraclitus: One summer day
at the water's edge *I set out in search of my self*

INDIGO

Already it's summer
a scrap of silk floats

by a vat of indigo.
Ai, that monsoon wind!

Each shadow has its muse.
No one can read your hand writing.

I almost wanted it that way
then came memory

Knee back, tiny toe
thighbone brushed in blood

Each shadow makes a ruse.
My script hovers

At the edge of the legible.
O muse of migrancy

Black rose
of the southern shore!

Already it's summer
clouds float in silk

I search for my self
in the map of indigo.

MIRROR OF EARTH

Drawing on ground is not what it seems:
the wind turns you around
quite close to where the twigs splatter.
One caught in my bicycle wheel
and cracked with a loud ‘treep’.
I could not sleep that night

Musing on what you had called
‘the delirium of history.’
Were you quoting someone?
What on earth did you mean?
But even while listening to you
I was trying to figure out what the moths were doing.

One big creature opened its brown wings
and hung on the screen door.
It was as wide as the mandala I made on the dry earth,
a wafer thin thing outspread
to catch the tunnel of light through the trees.
I worked in what I hoped was imitation

Of the Tibetan monk I saw decades ago in Delhi.
He carried palmfuls of sand
allowing the grains to brush the air
a bright mortality.
Us, in a mirror of earth
glimpsed in rare transport

The self turned outside in
approaching where there is no turning back.
So I gathered soil
and trickled it over my thumbs
and let my bare feet catch the shadow of the twigtips.
When you came to see the moths at play

Only the big one, speckled and soft was left.
It hung on the door
an edgy susurrus
and you thought you could hush me so quiet.
As I stood watching your hands
I was whispering: 'That one is called Death's Head.'

GLYPHS

I went by Cascadilla Gorge and slid down to water
a thin sheet rose over my ankle bones
the rising and wetting of it polished my brain

Sandstone, ripplestone, slate
the ice-age inscriptions are on me
tumult of glyphs, zone of grace

Where I need not fend for myself anymore.
I see the double jointed seed of the sycamore
afloat in summer air.

One fell on your bare thigh
as you stooped at my threshold
centuries ago

Watching as I cut the letters of our names
in hard soil with a stick.
The water parts my bones

It makes a sanctuary
and I do not know how I learnt to spell
out my days, or where I must go.

VALLEY

Be grateful for the rain when it falls.
The valley is full of bits
plane wings, glider strings parachute straps
all the unreal equipage washed clean
And erstwhile passengers shedding kin.

Why am I here? I cannot tell.
They left me here so long ago
so I could flourish as a green bouquet
By a red tiled house
streaming with rain.

I have no name,
I think you know. You murmur:
'The ocean is the hardest thing.'
And I: 'How did we get here
surrounded by hills rough as waves?'

I touch your shoes, sturdy leather
knotted with rain, dangling free.
your shoulder blades bronze
as a parachute string, picked clean by sun,
drawn sharp by earthly gravity.

NOTEBOOK

I write a poem and before it's done
I set it in my notebook, the one with blue lines.

A black hair from somewhere on my body
attaches to sticky tape and will not come off.

Outside this bare room
piled with papers: sunlight
clouds afloat, cries of young children.

My body is remembering you.

Note

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Under the title of 'Notebook' a cycle of fourteen poems was published as part of the catalogue for The Mirror's Edge, at the Bildmuseet, Umea, Sweden, 1999. It first appeared in an English text with Swedish translations. This cycle of poems will form part of Meena Alexander's new volume of poems Illiterate Heart (Tri Quarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2002).

SUMA JOSSON

DEATH-MASK

If this is what love is all about
I do not want anything to do with it
I thought it would be easy to hold
like the picking up of a leaf
gone golden in its season --
instead when I let go of it
the wind cold shapes
my face like the mask
death prepares for it --
in exact form and proportion
like the one in life.

BUBBLE

Like the bridge on which I stand
reaches from reed to love --
I too measure the moment
with breath --
it is enough to fill the bubble
held between two jagged rocks --
unable to move with current.

CHLOROPHYLL

What does one do
when you cannot measure
the number of atoms
in a stone
carbon dioxide in laughter
the number of times
you breathe in love
and store pain
like a tree does
with sunlight.

FULL MOON

It edges in
like a jagged
mountain of salt
and remains
in your throat --

the water does not go down
and gradually as it
rises to the level
of an ocean
it begins to dissolve --

like the centre
of a monsoon
lashes against
its own season --

a seed fragmenting
the tiny, tiny moments
imploding --

like a moon
being filled
with white --

distant

as an eye
closing
on a morning sky --

and you grope
to hold the space
between death.

RECIPE

I cup sour buttermilk
3-4 garlic flakes
much happiness
sauté
450 gms thinly sliced meat
a handful of fresh mushrooms
no hope
a pinch of salt
100 grams of pain
ghee for frying
a letting go
2 teaspoons of cardamom seeds
crushed
a quiet desperation
a splutter
a breathing out
red chilly powder
or black pepper
according to taste
chopped onions
marinate in memory
ginger minced

years soaked overnight
in water
pumpkin cut into
8 pieces
a holding in
of love

POEM

At the end of this verb
that you have just scribbled
and before the next
life in an idea
takes form in some
unexplored constellation --
and before you know
that fate is waiting to strike
between the moment you rise
from your chair
and move to a point
by the grilled window
to inhale the white jasmine
in bloom --
you pause
to take in silence
and hold it
and continue
to remind yourself
that on letting it go
the blood-vessels
in your laughter
saved for the next summer
would burst
like a water-spring
fresh and
out of grief.

Suma Josson

FEATHER

When the sparrow appears,
alights upon the branch
of the bougainvillea --
without notice of time,
its moment,
and springs up and down --
joy becomes the mind
a feather between leaves
bouncing even as the bird
moves on and you are the wind

ANUBALA S. VARIKAT

DESERT TUNES

I

The Leaf

A tremulous little leaf,
A pale little wisp of a leaf,
Once said NO
To the wind himself
And Laughter
Rang out in the Cold Air.

II

The Dreams

When you think of these things,
The flowers and the dreams and the spring,
When you think of them,
Do not cry, my love.
Do not let the tears flow,
For there is song under clouded skies too,
Frolic in the cold, cold air.

III

The Mania

And what if you should break, my friend?
Your lamp will not go out so soon
Others will come this storm-tossed way
And their task'll be easier because you once were.

What if your truth should break?
You'd yet have done better than those who walked straight
'Cause they looked not beyond the truths of their world.
Yours is the courage,
Yours the glory,
Fear nothing
And go your way.

IV

Nonsense Verse

A king sat on a throne
A door banged shut
Midsummer frost
And chocolates for dinner
A computer laughed
The women fetched water
And Rational Man Sublime.

V

The Life Unlived

What would you have
Of me,
My friend?
A song unsung,
A tear unwept,
A dream undreamed,
These, the burden of a
Life Unlived,
Are all I have
To give,
My friend.

VI

The Thought-Filled Eyes

The Pain of Ages
Lies bare in my soul
The infinite sadness of night skies
And the whimpering of their stars
The Pain of Ages
Gulps down its tears
And smiles within my soul
And in what Space
And in what Time
In what eras, aeons to come,
What depth of dark, unlighted Space,
Will at last be
Quenched
The Anguish of the
Thought-Filled Eyes?

SUJATA BHATT

COFFEE

The signs are mostly in Tamil
at this tiny railway station.
It is the time between sunset
and a completely black monsoon sky.
And then the vendors come, walking
back and forth along the platform
beside this train.
‘Coffee, coffee, coffee, coffee...’
an old man cries out-- even as I buy
a cup and then another--
‘Coffee, coffee, coffee, coffee...’
through the bars of the window.
He doesn’t bargain, doesn’t raise his price--
Trusts the amount I give is correct.
Wait, wait! I’m about to say, don’t trust me, don’t
trust anyone-- But there he goes--
‘Coffee, coffee, coffee, coffee...’ he continues
calling as if he lived beyond this world already--
He stares ahead, looking somewhere
into the distance, beyond the train--
And I look at his dazed eyes: red, feverish--
yet strangely focused--
and his eyelids: red, swollen--
but still, his face is quiet -- yes,
it is a small, quiet face.

PARVATI TEMPLE, PUNE

Once upon a time...so the story goes,
a girl of two ran up the steps
on the hill where Parvati sits.
She ran up so fast, even her mother
couldn't keep up--
Luckily, someone stopped the child
before she reached the top, before
she reached Parvati-- and told her
to wait for her mother.
I think of this story
as I climb the steps today
knowing it was about my own
mother who had lost her daughter.
And my mother's voice saying:
'Don't you remember? I always
took you there-- Yes, also
when you were older.'
Today it's still early-- still
the coolest part of the day.
No one is here-- except
for the joggers, racing up and down, they are
so oblivious to the view.
It is my second day in Pune
after so many years-- and I am
not oblivious. I can sit with Parvati
for a long time. I can look into
her stern eyes and wish for more dreams,
more journeys-- And then,
when I stand up and turn around
I can admire Nandi's black stone skin
forever--
While Memory laughs in my face
saying: 'I dare you, I dare you
to remember--'

GAYATRI MAJUMDAR

WATER DESERT

1.

That night the full moon

thirsty gliding.
The house ungrounded
bricks undone

I have never been
here before
till now

in the dark
water
desert.

2.

You slide from awareness
into the familiar
- serene confusion.
I know that place.

3.

Water wouldn't go.
Stuck and unwanted,
it stayed
only that night
when a million moons were darkened
unrecognised
surviving

coming tides.

4.

I look for books
I don't need to read
(you know what I mean)
chapters that tell no story,
sentences saying nothing.

In the moon's shadow
    I fall on water
        dying
on your computer screen

and words fall
        drop by drop
on everything
you cease to be

5.

What's that question again?

Rivers, seas, hydroelectricity
        everything water.
I know who you are.
No, that is a lie.
It should read I want to

block traffic, the sun
and assorted matter --
make shadows that mix with passion;
intensity with death.

I'm witness (this is where)
to the slow killing
  of desire,
ambition and frugality.

Come home on nights
  like these --
when snakes journey fast
  and all news
  is of you.

6.

This used to be forever.
Bodyless, sexless,
mindful eternity.

Authentic illusion;
yesterday's pain --
shared compassion
on our desktops

in a room
(always rocking loud)
inside a house afloat,
unsure destination
with untold secrets --

pleasant and acceptable
(such a leveler)

Water-block
drowning
and unwilling

to rest.

7.

This, this but also that.

With lights gone
and a fake moon,

I surf
    for connections --

jump
from rooftop to revelations

not knowing
where to quench
in a water desert.

MOLSHREE A. SHARMA

TWO LOVERS

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

YOUR FACE MY FACE

Like a submissive Chicago sunlight
Rare and faltering
My poem shakes
Breaking the smooth caress of continuity
The day has gone by
Offices, people, words
Precise shapes and weights
And I am adding premise with premise
Leading down is a structured, straight corridor of conclusions

The day has gone by
Under the covers
Heat and fascination with the smell of my own finger tips
Turning stones over to see worms and fungus
Or watching my hair being snipped off
Falling, falling
Each luscious lock
Brown, auburn hair
Blue, green hair
Red, red hair
Falling

Now it is short
Now it is spikes
Now I am bald
Like a nun
Or a baby in an innocent pink pram
Sensing somewhere deep inside
Crimson and more crimson

This is your face
You love it
I play with it
Eyes with beautiful black borders
The faults of my skin
Smoothed over
And the lips, painted some bold, appealing color
This face is only yours
You possess it
Demand it
And change it with your own norms and interpretations

This is my face
And I love it
I love that it is my face
My skin is not uniform and artificially soft
But free to be rough and patchy
My lips are pink and raw
My eyes are wide and rid of boundaries

When the beauty of your face
The one you make me create
Smudges on cotton and peels
Or washes off with water
Underneath I know for sure
My face is made of stronger stuff

BEYOND IMPRISONMENT

One night
Two names lose meaning
They are lovers in darkness
They divide the week's 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

Molshree A. Sharma

PIPES

The little men living in the pipes
Are running around trying to get out
Before the nocturnal rush hour begins
Even in Pipe City traffic can be a killer

Fresh peppermint toothpaste
The night is soon to mature
Inhale the cool crisp air between your teeth
And breathe

The smells
An old smoky sweater
The eyes of dark glinting stones
Staring out from the hand which lies exposed stretched from
beneath the covers

A fuzzy sense of sleep
A strange soothing nausea
And words tumble out without inhibitions
Pipe men
Pipe dreams
Floating little pipe sequences
And an old tired poem
Too beaten to stand on its own

I write because I have not written for so very long
Old roads led to older ones still
And love stood smoking a cigarette in the corner
We embraced
And yes it had been a while
The same seeping unsteadiness

So we lived
And we lived intensely
And played with made up stories
The men clogged up our pipes
With their loud disagreements
I buried my face in the chest of my lover
As they threw pots and pans
Broke the glasses
Cut paper noisily
Furiously moving miniature scissors
A loud gun shot
The sound of the plastic orange pipe hero's weapon falling
One was down and bleeding
They rushed to the doctor
Reving up their pipe mobile
The stamping of a million or more scampering boots
As they yelled out panicky, conflicting instructions
Their eyes were filled up with crayola blue tears

In all that commotion
My lover said to me
Staring deep into my eyes
He said to me
I love you darling
And so I replied
I said
I love you too my darling
And the rest
We pretended not to hear

Molshree A. Sharma

TEA

Tea
Water boils
I can hear it
frantic now against the metal sides
I watch my face
distorted
it rises and spills
“How absent minded you’ve become”
“Yes”, I nod
What would you think if you knew
I have been standing here for so long
attentive to every drop

Talk shows
Today, “Women Who Love Men Who Kill”
And you say, “How can they be like this”
What would you think if I told you
That at night
I plan out details of murder
One day I want to have the weapon
With you defenseless

Betrayals
when they ask me my opinion
You are always there as my voice
“I don’t believe in such things”
What would you think if I told you
That when the “bad girl” next door used to come home late night
red smeared on her lips
I secretly wished it had been me instead

What would you do if I said
“I dream of being high heeled and haughty”
“Maybe I should try my luck in Bombay”
“Maybe I should write a short story for Femina”

"Enter the contest, they're on the lookout for a raspy voice to do nightclub scenes"
Perhaps you would think it's the effects of this new land
of alienation
and be an understanding man
and tell me not to give up
After all I come from the land of great women
who show their strength again and again
In the tests of Fire

SUSAN BHATT

PANCHMAHIRI

The sun shall not set in Panchmahiri
on this quiet cantonment in the hills.
Here farthingaled cottages curtsey to the Raj
and Mary Palmers fringe porches like
memsahibs in bonnets.
Here waterfalls, half-a-league away,
charge down cliffs the light-brigade way
while yews and conifers salute the
change of guard at close of day.

The bugle's cry at dawn
startles sleeping sepoys
while church spires dream the
afternoons away,
Beyond the hills the jungle hums
the incessant name of Shikar.
Dragonflies large as sapphire pins
pleat running water into rivulets.
In the west the sun is about to set
but is held aloft by the hills
in Panchmahiri, in Panchmahiri.

JEZEBEL

Palm to Palm
cheek against thorn
the pilgrim prays
in sack-cloth brown
head bowed down
a sudden gust, the bush trembles
as wings fall open wide
to reveal the Book of Kings
calligraphed in purple, green and gold
inlaid in Arabesque incarnadine.
Like stained-glass windows
framing cathedral altars
the wings flash fervour
breathless with adoration
I drop to my knees
seeking benediction of such artifice.

SMITA AGARWAL

AN ADDRESS TO INDIA

Mother of swamis and milk-sipping Ganapatis,
In the throes of your menopause, pray for us -- Om, Amen.

The devout Hindu woman goes round her tulsi.
The earth circumnavigates the sun.

In a Hindi *phillum*, a heterosexual
Pair indulges in foreplay, runs

Round a tree singing a duet. India, you're
On the threshold of the twenty-first

Century, and I can't identify my tulsi,
Sun or tree, as meaning is continually

Deferred. What'm I to do with the nuclear
Explosion in my mind? Sitting in an

Armchair, I tour the streets of Parma and
Petrograd, fall in long-distance love with a

Yankee, shirtless in tight blue jeans. Satellite
TV is my third eye; my exploded

Mind is one large porous World-Mind, any-
Thing and everything comes in and goes out;

We're all connected via Internet. Soon, I shall
Construct the material conditions of well-being

And happiness needed for a full and un-
Fettered development of my Human Perso-

Nality. I see: God switching off,
Receding into a black box, while I,

Strapped to my armchair in front of my
TV, allow bolts of consciousness-raising currents

To open my Pandora's box of
Freedom and fear of freedom.

GREENHORN

Right now, there's work to be done.
Looking out of the saloon window, across
the dusty street, I see that the gulmohur
has just about got a flame started;
silk cotton has snuffed out its blaze,
swaddled itself in white, isn't distracted
by the hydra-headed eucalyptus humping
the wind. As I down my nth drink, the mirror
in front shows summer walking in: slow,
deliberate steps, spurs jangling. I
can't vamoose now, can I? I've stuck
around, haven't I? Oiled my gun, knowing
this would come. I have to turn, watch
not his holster-hand but wait for the
glint in his eye, then pull out my six-shooter,
and point it like a finger at his cry, *Draw*.

SAROJINI NAIDU AND SHE

She casts about; tries to get a grip --
Shocked at the sodden similarities
Of lives with separate histories,
Somehow on the same bloody trip.
Why should the two of them flip
Their lids for men much older; ignoring
ground reality,
Wish to compose poetry, as if the hilarity
Of the first choice isn't enough to have
them labelled hip?

Indian women poets are plump; never thought
of as bright.
They're packed off to Cambridge when the one
They want to marry is deemed the wrong guy.

At Cambridge, some Englishman teaches them
right.
With their clutch of poems, they head back
for the Indian sun,
Marry their old fogey; make the family
tut-tut and sigh ....

MAKING OUT

As always, below a benign
sun, under a wide-open sky,
trees dozing in the wind, I make
love to you.

The way the two of us make love--
no bodies touching, not a sound:
locked-in eyes...

You shrink into yourself. All of
your six feet seems to be folding
up. Your loose clothes are flapping
in the wind--

Your scooter helmet's foam inner
lining is torn. You are greying.
You are balding. You're tongue-tied
and blushing--

A teenager overwhelmed by
his first love . . .

ANJUM HASAN

SIX HAIKU

Mist smooth and thin as
the skin of the wrist conceals
the forest's dark blood

Fireflies spiral through
a blue net of stars burning
their ancient signals.

Far on a farm deep
among the wild fruit trees a
child stirs in her sleep.

Cold puddles reflect
children in wet cemeteries
searching for the sun.

In the earth's last light
the sky is lavender, the
wood-paths darkly brown.

Warm, windless night. From
its tattered pool of light an
old mouth-organ weeps.

KITCHEN

The kitchen is a laboratory, a prison,
an anti-thesis of dream. It is colour and pain:
lime juice on wounds and hard black nouns
hiding like poisonous ants beneath every upturned cup.

The kitchen is my grandmother's crinkled skin
on my fingers and one hungry voice in my ear.
Its yesterdays smell like its tomorrows and
that frightens so many women: those who are
old with the sameness of it, like the salt jar,
like the ancient frying-pan; those who are young,
like a mint leaf or a bursting tomato.

From my kitchen I can see another woman
working in hers, cocooned in the yellow light
of distance that makes her appear happy and loved.
I forget the onion's sting, water's scalding pain
on nights when it rains, and I see her moving silhouette
among many reflections of steel and talking children.

The kitchen is comfort, a picture to touch,
a place of perpetual evening. It is a temple
of the naming word, the word that never
betrays, but never changes.

To stay where you are, to measure and chop,
to never harbour false hopes.
To fashion life into a thing eaten, worked,
slept away, to meet despair with tea,
to be like your mother.

My kitchen will not hold me, will not
teach me the good in repetition.
I will be an awkward woman full of horrible
doubts and an unreasonable love for shining adjectives.

Anjum Hasan

MISTER LANGUAGE

At seven years
with a poem burning in my throat
I was the crystal-souled fruit
that hung from scraps of leaden sky,
I was the orange's sour Novemberness.

At seven one must be heard
or one learns solitude.

From our spiked iron gate
I could see only as far as
the purple hill that arose
the street near the football field.
In the evening the smells
were the smells of stale frying
and there were type-writers jangling
and crows to darken
the soft blues of dusk.
The tower on my humped iron was God:
taller than any tree
but blanked out by a thumbnail if I chose.

That is how I grew;
jumping on evenings to make them
stay longer in my fortified city of cars,
and waiting, face pressed between bars,
for something nameless, forgotten, remembered
from the womb.

FILM (BLACK AND WHITE), 1976

When Jesus came over the gray hill,
the wind, turned to violins,
slashed its tongue on his beauty:
his eyes the unblinking stones
that rivers smooth, his face
like dirty snow.

He walked into the heart of a game
like a horse panting into its stable.
"I am Jesus", he said, not pleading
with those sullen-mouthed kids
but just waiting, drinking the wind.

Later they fastened the door of love
after him; hid him, in his broken shoes,
in a barn the colour of shadows.
He became their secret: a doll
with bones and a woman's mouth.

They took him bread from their plates,
passing it from hand to hand under the table.
Again the wind, as three children
and a man with half a black river of hair
sit talking in the cold, smudged light
of coming night.

When the police came for him the next day,
they said he was a common thief,
and took him down the gray hill
he had climbed in his broken shoes.
On the sky the children danced with grief
and Christ in his going, in his
old black greatcoat,
felt a crack pierce his body of marble.

Anjum Hasan

AFTERNOON IN THE BEAUTY PARLOUR

Neither in convents sealed off from the world
by oak doors and starched white veils,
nor in maternity wards made obtuse by pain and waiting;
neither in the back-benches of classrooms
where girls exchange the hot, whispered secrets of sex,
nor in the ladies' rooms of railway stations
with their air of enforced sorority,
but here in this small saloon where the sunlit dust
enhances the drowsy hum of distant traffic,
where jealousy, men and untruthful mirrors are denied entrance,
is genuine sisterhood established.

Here unacknowledged solicitude casts its spell
and Saturday afternoon melts languorously
in the hands of women with scissors, cold wax and curling tongs.
The vulgar, aching need to be beautiful is out in the open:
it sits with jars of cream and faded pictures of beauty queens
and finds fulfilment in the swathes of hair that carpet the floor
and in the eyes of other women that are dark, happy, more calm
than they could ever be turning to look at love.
But this itself is love, this lambency of skin and mingled scent
of different hair, this surrender to a body that is never ours
without a sense of strangeness and regret. . . .

The beauty parlour -- crass shop with old smoked windows
and a hand-painted sign ‘For Ladies Only’:
too scandalous for seminarians, too invincible for demonstrators,
too ancient in its eternity of mirrors and combs
to ever alter the irredeemable character of the street.

A good place to grow old in:
the radio crackling in the corner,
the whores coming in with red nails
on Saturday morning and later,

schoolteachers, mothers with young sons
who take in everything with the detachment of artists,
sales-girls, girls with hungry eyes. . . .
Everyone coming in free of man-kind,
Everyone going out eager for its terrors.

IN MY MOTHER'S CLOTHES

I walk in my mother's clothes on the street,
feel the cool sweat under my arms soak her blouse
timidly: shy, damp flowers of my sweat on her blouse.
I let the white dust with its years of spit and sweet
wrapper, its agonising lifelessness, pass over me
in my mother's clothes, her rust and bright blue
and burnt orange, my mother's colours on my skin
in the dust, as if they belonged to me. I cheat people:
men, girls in high heels who pretend not to look
and fidget and sulk, girls lovely and empty with want
whom I destroy with my Look of Elsewhere.
It's so easy to break girls, spoil their carefully planned
afternoons, their elaborate ploys to sweeten the air,
tantalise. Their eyes are bright with their love
for themselves, while I walk on the street
in my mother's clothes, laughing inside, relieved
of the burden of being what one wears, since in my
mother's clothes I am neither myself nor my mother.
In her inky silks, her cool green gardens of chiffon
that once filled me with thirst, I dream of elusiveness
(which is actually the dream of all girls in high heels
on the street, whom I scorn !) Is it only one woman we all
want to be? The woman who opens her eyes and looks
at the mirror into the eyes of a child. The child who drifts
like a shadow through long summer afternoons when
everyone sleeps, the spindly creature of six who slips
onto her fingers her mother's gold rings, pulls on

an old cardigan that smells of sunlight and milk,
and conducts herself, drowsy with love, through rooms
with their curtains drawn against the honeyed light of June.
Does she always begin like this -- seeking love by trying
to become the person whose love she seeks? Rolling up
the sleeves of her mother's cardigan and sitting with legs
dangling from a high chair, her frail little shoulders stiff
with pride, her sisters jealous. Her mother slowly waking
to the calm evening light, laughing at the serious girl-clown
who is opening her eyes to look at the mirror into the eyes
of a woman, when all that there is of that unfathomable
grace she has taken with her, and you are suddenly cold
in her cardigan.

NOT ALONE

If you think to be alone is to walk about in the rooms
of your house and hear the neighbours dying on their terraces
and see the evening busily gathering in the jacaranda trees,
you're wrong. You're not alone yet.

And if you think to look into the mirror is to be alone,
you're wrong again because the mirror says, you're poor,
perplexed, where is the centre of your light, where is that
essential recognition? Of yourself?

You're not alone when you sit alone on your bed and suck
at a fruit and let the juice dribble down your chin, onto your chest,
down between your breasts and then fall asleep with sticky fingers,
dreaming. Any dream proves it.

To be alone is to be here, but I am always somewhere else.
I am always falling, my love: a parachute on fire, the last branch
of the tree that stands apart, the cloud that somebody tore up,
the dream weighed down with pillows, the descent. . . .

SHIELA GUJRAL

WOULD BE DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

Lift the veil of mystery dear
reveal your rapturous form.
Soothe your mother-in-law's yearning heart
dear daughter of my dreams!
Who says you are not my daughter
my darling child.
Though not conceived in this ma's womb
not nourished on these waiting breasts
you are the offspring of my dreams.
Cradled on my rocking breath
sculptured on my non-stop blessings
reared by my constant prayers --
a progeny of my dreams!
When both my sons greet and hug me
filling our home with laughter,
there's still a void,
a sense of something missing,
the heart clamours for that more --
a daughter's touch
her giggling glee
and echoing plea
to fill the notes of joyous music
and soak with ecstasy
this long awaiting heart!

(*Translated from Hindi by the Author*)

WET KISSES

Thoughts stepped on the blank paper hesitantly,
but the wet kisses of the luminous ink
urged them on to move faster.
Suddenly they flowed like Monsoon rain.

RETURN OF A PRODIGAL SON

The nest you left to scale the soaring heights
haunts your famished heart.
You fly back to nestle in its cosy warmth
It's hard to re-enter
Has it, really, shrunk?
Perhaps, you have ballooned with alien air!

CO-EXISTENCE

Through the left door
deafening noise of
shrieking, squirming,
ghashing, grumbling,
cursing, clouting,
thumping, thrashing,
echoes constantly
to raise my blood-pressure high!

Through the right door
the soothing calm
of a mother's lullaby
a soft whisper
of a passionate lover
a nostalgic rendering
of Raag 'Bahar'
a fragrant warmth
of soul-stirring Guitar
signals occasionally
to raise my flagging spirits high!

APOORVA BHARADWAJ

TO ROBERT FROST

Long, long ago a voice rose from the fields,
The fields of New England
Of a man who ploughed the soil
With hands smeared with labour's sweat
And lips tuned to sing songs
On the simple rhythms of the Yankee tongue
Filling the ears of America
Narrating tales of that humble life
Which nature breathed into her denizens

He sketched pictures of the pastoral world
With lines that revealed through their simple curves
The eternal fate of the human life
With no obscure colours to tease the common sight
With meanings camouflaged behind their opaque looks
With no urban smoke of soulless machines
Masking them in its dark veil
But taught in their sweet philosophical tones
Little lessons which make life great

And thus a farmer who once sowed
The heart of earth with his fertile hands
Reaped a rich harvest which still decks
The vast field of poetic art
Basked in the sunshine of fame
Unchallenged by the changing seasons of time
Untouched by the canker of oblivion,
Though he himself has been sown
In the mortal field of immortal death.

SUKRITA PAUL KUMAR

CONNECTIONS

Thank you, Amma
for the moon, thank you

I had stood
stretched
longer than my life
stiff on my toes
heels aching
heavy
with the unexpressed

seeking
the silver moon
carrying a million
in its orbit

Greetings to you
my dear
for walking out of
childhood dreams
for unfreezing
those wrinkles,
shedding tears
and smiling,
rising with the new sun
a lease of life

not an illusion
nor a trap of compassion
a mirage in the golden sands,
firm-edged love
twinkling through
round spectacles
with copper rims

food for the starved

Thank you Amma
for carrying the cross
our cross
vibrating on your lean body
through so many homes
and alleys, backlanes
and galis
in transit
always
stepping in and out
of dreams

all those
moons and stars
toss and turn
in the universe
waiting for you, Amma
to connect them
with us
sleepwalking
on the earth

SHANTA ACHARYA

LONELINESS

Sore red, splayed silently in pain, the dappled sky,
a woman bleeding, giving birth, dying,
sacrificing her body in the cycle of creation.
Loneliness is a mother holding her son crucified.

It is that lying awake at 4am feeling,
anaesthetized by the faces of dead children.
Irma, Alice, Shanti, Xian . . .
The names and faces scroll on from all over the world.
Loneliness is coming home to an empty pram filled with toys,
but none there to shake the rattle and make a noise.
Loneliness is when your young wife dies in childbirth.

Loneliness stalks everywhere, like air;
even in the core of deepest love, it is there.
Loneliness has been experienced at the height of ecstasy.
It is our saviour, so make friends with loneliness.

It is the human condition, a vocation;
passed on from generation to generation.
In it you can experience the road not taken,
or the loneliness of a musical instrument untouched,
not breathed into, not played by passionate human
hands. Loneliness is banished, temporarily,
when two people come together in love.
Loneliness is when you have no one to love.

Discover in loneliness the continents of your self;
it is a secure place to wander in for nobody can trespass
unless you let them in. It is an island of freedom and peace.

PATIENCE

Four cards spread on the table, it was my turn to deal --
the Queen of Hearts blushed next to the King of Spades;
the Ace of Diamond jostled with the Knave of Clubs.
They had a lesson for me as the game was to reveal.

I could not have succeeded with all of you.
Hearts are fragile and tend to break. Power and wealth,
are two imposters, here today and gone tomorrow.
Knaves remain knaves, whether of Hearts or of Clubs.

I picked up one rascal from the pack to pass the time,
not knowing where our association might lead.
I was supposed to set an example like the Three Graces,
play the game of life without losing myself,
without dictating how I wanted things to be.

I tried again and again, hoping that fickle Luck
might have gone Cupid-blind and directed
randomly one arrow at me: 'It could be *you*.'

I tossed aside a lifetime of dancing, paper men
with their ramshackle houses of cards,
each one flawed in some unredeemable way.
I quit the game when I stumbled upon my joker.

THE THREE SISTERS

She sits janus-faced, identical twins,
posing for her portrait. This is Present,
phoenix-like she perishes and is born again.
You cannot tell her schizophrenic selves apart.
This female Gemini, caught between
Future and Past, jealously guards the
umbilical corridor connecting women.

Looking through a magical arrangement
of mirrors and reflections, creating life and images
in the prism-womb of time and space,
she wears spectacles for her two human eyes --
the darkened past, a tinted future; the third eye
reserved for the present, the composite angle of vision.

Future is the fairest of the three --
beckoning us to new horizons, promising things.
Past is enchanting too, transforming herself
when viewed through the chameleon looking glass
of the mind that turns things inside out, upside down
with intuition sharpened with experience.

Past greets the arrival of Present and Future
mixing them up like pieces in a kaleidoscope,
refracting memories and experiences selectively
through magical glasses. The three sisters dance,
chant and fly like three witches casting a spell.

There is no escape from the tyranny of their presence
as they hypnotise each other along with the onlookers.

THE ANNUNCIATION

The book she held half-open, half-closed,
clasped between her startled fingers,
her thumb, a pagemark; the others curled
gently over the covers, slightly ajar.
Seized in a moment of contemplation, the spirit
of quiet ravishment had not quite effaced her.

The rich maroon and purple-blue sleeves of her dress,
embroidered with golden borders, caressed the letters
of the illuminated script as the shadow of Gabriel
intercepted the direction of her thoughts.

The painting was a silent church
before the service begins. A time for waiting.
Did Mary have a premonition of portentous tidings;
did she fully comprehend the divine dispensation?

What were her thoughts when that voice was heard,
her trance shattered with the dove's laser beams?
What was the book she clasped in her hands,
her memoirs or a book of prayers?

What was Mary doing, dressed like a queen,
as if waiting for a rendezvous with a secret lover ?
Did she feel the stirrings in her womb,
the poetry of great white wings flapping?

Shanta Acharya

AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

(After Anish Kapoor's 'creations' at the Hayward Gallery)

The queue outside is stretching
like an alley cat, waiting
to prowl inside the crowded gallery,
explore the plugged-holes at the centre
of walls and ceilings; not enough time or
space for all to experience ways of defining it,
of lending shape, colour, sound and meaning.

Once inside, the world is turned upside down,
inside out, disoriented through double mirrors,
emptied of space funnelling into *arupa*,
untitled, leaving us newly-born, fearful of oblivion,
unprepared for the descent into limbo.

In the beginning (or is it the end?)
securing myself a discreet position,
I get sucked into my mother's womb,
peering at deep, dark shrines of
my body, her body; our bodies
moving in rhythm to creations,
holding light and darkness, with eyes
at the vortex, doubly-inverted images,
when I become pregnant, making the world many.

We praise or criticise according to our measure
the open-endedness of things; making friends,
alienating others in the process of configuring
a nose, a breast, a man posing in his briefs?
It could be any one of all those things
or all those things, or something new
waiting to be seen. The eye loses itself,
imagination turns earth and stone into sky.

In the dark, polished hollow of a marble mummy,
a fleeting spirit appears. A twisting column of light,
I flicker imperceptibly before giving up the ghost.

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA

URBAN KRISHNACHURA

Softly on a mid-December afternoon,
Urban Krishnachura at the street corner
Rains gold drops on the black-brown road,
Golden granules on a dusty path.
Leaf-drops, leaflets once green, now gold,
Swirl earthwards in a silent gold shower.

In late January, dark brown branches
Stretch stark, straining skywards,
Cold winds chill the barren barks,
Tall Krishnachura at the street corner
Waits forlorn in outstretched prayer,
Yearning for the lost leafy cover.
Derelict, skeletal dark brown branches
Like petrified limbs, in a frieze,
Till warm, early summer wind
Coaxes the green to grow.
Green banners sway in the breeze,
Bursts of orange-red blossoms ignite the blue sky.

Glowing russet hue on moonlit nights,
Radiant red on silver summer days,
An annual sport by unseen players,
An exhibition game, unmatched.
From green and red, to gold, to dark brown
Then green again, sportive, silent champion.

SHAME

On my seventeenth birthday
My mother gave me a silk saree
The soft swish of the silken pleats
The shimmering, seducing cloth
Carressingly clung to my lissom limbs
Shielded my ripening bosom from hungry stares.

The saree folded me with care
I folded myself into the saree
Till years later I suddenly saw
My legs were lost alas
Shrouded in five metres of graceful cloth--
Draupadi's textile trap!

“Shame” is the glutinous lotion
Clogging the woman's breathless pores.
Stepping out of textiles
Stripping to be herself at last
She is the sky-clad dusky Kali
Shining rapier in uplifted arm.

A garland of skulls round her neck
The dark woman warrior
In tempestuous rage
Flings off the shame-shielding textile
Night-shawled Kali on the kill --
Woman Terminator annihilating shame-enforcing demons.

Where oh where are my legs
Those strong, long limbs
That made me race through the fields
Playing with the gusty spring wind
Climbing guava trees
Perching in the comforting hollow of a banyan tree.

Now enfolded, slowed, shackled in cloth
Lifelong imprisonment of shameful vulgar limbs
I hide and seek lifelong.
Saree shackled woman,
Crippled but with limbs intact,

Waits and waits and waits
For that midnight hour
Of metamorphosis.
I am now stark dark Kali
With flying tresses
Unbound.

TO RABINDRANATH

I bask in rays therapeutic,
As this strange sun shines and soothes
Nightlong,day in, day out.
Whenever it rains or a heat wave scorches,
Whenever I am cold, parched or bruised,
Your healing rays, mellifluous notes,
Embalm each wound with loving care,
I can still feel and also dare.

A sudden snatch of song rises
Like fine smoke from a magic lamp,
It thrills and succours my very being,
As light engulfs me everywhere.
Like a patient parent to a sick child
Are you to me, rare Rabindranath.

DILEMMA

Trees like tall dark sentinels line the main road
But I have sauntered off.
Scampering down the roadside I run
Through the green rice fields;
My city high heels hurt, I take them off
I feel the soil under my eager feet
I dig in my toes, I want to be a tree now.

I want to have birds in nests, leaves, flowers, fruits
These are the treasures that I seek;
My feet cling to the earth child-like
But my eyes rest on the beckoning path
That unknown feet have traced.
I tear myself from the moist soil's grip
I follow the winding brown track.

As the fields grow all around me
Curious green shoots wonder who I am;
My head suddenly turns towards the far road;
A car speeds down, raising dry leaves and dust.
I stand uncertain as my eyes wander.
Should I hail a cab and leave ?
Should I stay here till birds, flowers, fruits hide me?

ECSTASY

In the smug Sargasso sea
Of chores and chatter,
Narcotic domestic daze,
Every dark dawn a renewal
Of routine pledges.
Then, suddenly
Like the orange-red dripping disc
Rising out of the blue-black sea,

Radiant rays light my space,
Release from myopia.

I now traverse the sunlit beaten track,
Light suffused everywhere,
Ripples arise in the Sargasso sea,
Placid waters heave and churn,
Till in a strange ecstatic frenzy
Water rises like a fountain of joy,
Vertical silver streams jet out
To the benign sun,
Shimmering silver union
At last.

MYTHS

Life-smeared threads in this wheel of fate,
Three old sisters, tireless skilled fingers,
Callous, cruel or just mechanical,
Spin, shape, cut with severe hands,
Floor strewn with hacked threads,
Tenderly new, some not so, some threadbare.

Diligent children of Nyx,
Stern daughters of Zeus and Themis,
Destiny designers of this global boutique,
Where all are cut down to size.
Klotho spins, Lachesis measures, Atropos snips,
And it is all over.

Look, what strange bird is that,
Rising from severed shreds,
Wings flapping in the blue,
Joyous journey in the void,
Tranquil, triumphant,
As the sisters slog on.

MELANIE CAMPBELL

THE SOLID SUN SHINES ON

Pollution engulfs the once germ-free air,
taking command.
Factories multiply without stop.
In the obscurity of night
        lurks unsoundness of mind,
causing mishap and corruption.
Innocence is lost,
too fast to understand.
Poverty captures millions,
        unwilling to let go.
Death's icy grasp,
uncommunicative, uncontrollable,
knocks forcefully
        at the door.

Yet children still dance
amongst purple poppy fields,
chase butterflies till dawn,
their laughter, never ceasing,
like silver bells ringing,
resounds throughout the town.
Rain still falls,
clear droplets from the sky,
washing away the filth
so we may begin again.
Amidst all the wretched weeds,
there springs a flowering seed
        of hope.

After the darkness of the night,
the solid sun shines on.

HOUSE FULL OF ROOMS

At times she thinks,
a woman's nature is a great house full of rooms.

In and out through the hall everyone passes.
Receiving of formal visits in the drawing room.
Family found in sitting room, coming and going as they fancy.

Far beyond lurk handles of doors, perhaps never turned.
No one knows the way.
Innermost, the room holy-of-holies lies.
Souls sit in solitude,
Anticipating a footstep
That never arrives.

K. SRILATA

THE HOUSE

Many poems nestle inside houses.
Like this woman with a sad, crumbling face
her soft saree mocking her every move
coming apart at leisure.
I think of how someone must have loved her
as a baby
caressed her baby toes, skin, hair.
They say:
She comes from a rich home
but married the wrong man--
a dried up stick who cannot understand
the poem lingering on her face.
They say:
Hurt has made her barren
though actually she loves children.
They say:
She is a healer.
She even healed her mother-in-law's cancer.
They say:
She sleeps little.
Some nights she wanders through the run-down garden
looking for a peace that the day does not bring her.
They say:
She speaks to no one.
In fact, she stopped speaking years ago.

Sometimes the poem sitting in that crumbling old house
urges me to knock
at the door
and touch her face.
Each day every day
I pass the house.
I just pass by.

A SEPARATE ANGER

But this must be some growth, doctor!
During the day it lies dormant
(I feel no pain).
At night when they are home
it creeps up my wind-pipe
and quietly settles there--
This thing, whatever it is.
To them
I am invisible.
It is with difficulty that I breathe
and speak.
(The trouble is that I don't quite manage madness.)

The X-rays can't be right!
Surely, it is not just my mind, doctor.
This
This Separate Anger Growing Inside Me.

WANTING

Baby pink nylon saree
flying bravely
against the sun.
A child's face
gazing down at you
at you wanting strength
willing it.
A child
wanting to hold hands.
Wanting someone to hold your hand.
Wanting someone to touch
your face.
Wanting.

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

AMOEBA

You are linear
without bulges.
You are not me--
red, unformed, gelatinous,
in hidden crannies--
and even if you were,
I know I must not see it.

Not even if I dared
to be an amoeba.

No more
than a smudge of organic paste,
no skins of memory,
no faces swirling in my cytoplasm,
a single inviolable nucleus,
unselfconscious and yet aware
of my fluctuating frontiers,
never burgeoning with too many selves,
no messy nuclear explosions,
a simple solution to every cellular crisis--
sever self from self.

But would there be just a fleeting recollection,
just that familiar twinge
as I watched you,
self contained and immaculate,
swim like a virgin
into your ever unruffled watery domain?

ADVICE TO A FOUR YEAR OLD ON HER FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

"This
is the sacred litany.

Right hand margins,
pin-drop silences,
pattern writing
(without ruptures in the joineries),
sharpened HB pencils,
double finger spaces,
fingers on lips.

Pink-and-white girls
who can play fairies in end-of-term plays.
Symmetrical girls
who don't stick out at odd angles in the march past.
Geometrical girls
always equipped with compass boxes.
Cultivated girls
with dictions manicured by militant horticulturists.
Musical girls
who chorus good mornings in orchestrated D minor.
Softspoken girls
with tones so hushed it's pardonable they don't curtsey.
Streamlined girls
who don't run into awkward lengths in 4 line report cards.
Ornithological girls
who prefer wrens and martins to day-dreaming.
Respectable girls
who prefer daffodils to Venus fly traps.
Down-to-earth girls
who know that boys are extra-terrestrial.
Dumb girls
who believe that Pavlov's dog will have his day.

Now repeat."

TO KARTIK

You spoke with decision
Of the terrorism of the state.
And I, furtive-eyed,
Of the mind.

The vodka clouded
Sentimentally,
A cordial of fuzzy peace,
Making us believe, almost,
In a shared folklore, a common
Heritage of warriorship.

That traditional repertoire
Of ripostes, slippery
Pink with undergrad wisdom;
Some kisses, moon-chilled, inevitable,
In a darkened car; photographs
Mirth-riddled, fast fading into
Generic sepia; and cups of tea
Burnt orange by the rage
And sunlight of college cafeterias.

But on nights of black slate,
Buses, old insomniacs,
Have long had the habit
Of erasing pedestrians,
Sometimes friends.
Like you, they rarely equivocate
In matters of life
Or death.

And so, comrade with an alien
Vocabulary, seeker on a journey
I almost understood in a sly

Crustacean sort of way,
One night you flattened
In an instant from
Rebel, splendid, young,
Tormented
To reminiscence.
And the vodka doesn't taste of sunshine anymore.

DEEPA AGARWAL

TO A GIRL CHILD

Uncelebrated your birth
Yet joy blooms
In the tendrils of your hair
Deepens the dimples
In your petal cheeks

Eager you burst forth
Riding the tides of pain
Unbidden, unsought
Your coming a song
Enchantment
A burst of light
An avalanche of thought

I have given suck
Felt the dagger of love
Twist, sear
Felt the heat of the star
That draws you
Out of the labyrinths
Where darkness compresses

Straight be your flight
Little blossom
Cleave the sky
Arrow-sharp
Arrow-swift
Buoyant the winds
That carry you
Wherever
Your wish takes you

THE DEMON LOVER WHO WASN'T

The wanton moment
Flits past
Like a butterfly on the wing
But I have already captured
In the congealing amber
Of my heart
The flicker
Of your eyelid
The wistful magic
Of your smile
The rush
Of breath
The flash
Of eye
That quickened my pulse. . .
Your voice
Will always echo
Vibrate
Trapped in the labyrinthine
Channels of my ear
So...
You haven't
Escaped me
You know. . .
You've left
An instant photocopy behind
Not as good as the original
Maybe
But close enough for comfort

Deepa Agarwal

LANDSCAPE

Smoke spins up
From glistening roof tops
Trickles into the sky
Wisp
By formless Wisp

Behind
A pine tree
Branches out proudly
Shaking green-gold hair
Which the playful sun
Gilds with translucent light

Behind
The hills
March on
In twisted serries
Reaching out
To wayward clouds
Roaming the sky
Restless
Undetermined

Below
Fields spiral out
Ripple down
To sink
Into a valley
Where
A shred of silver
Squeezes through
The weighty land
Secretly presses
Further
And further
To an unknown
Unimagined sea . . .

THOUGHTS ON A RITUAL

Tracing yellow lines
On broad banyan leaves
Winding the holy thread
Round and round...
My thoughts
Vagrant butterflies
Take flight...

Savitri
Constant wife
Faithful lover
Woman of power
You conquered death
Yet
Your womb was too narrow
It could only hold
A hundred sons
Not a single daughter.

SMITA TEWARI

INSCRUTABLE STRANGERS

Friends from an alien world
connected in silence, with a warmth
reaching out in time, at the arched gate.

Watching the snow-peaked mountains,
you with your lap-tops,
me with my pen and paper
at a Tibetan tea-shop.

Like mirrors we reflect back to each other
staying without barriers, no walls
behind and between our different cultures,
with shapes unable to shake our deeper dynamics.

We hold together, live together, without a past or a future,
giving each other, even losing ourselves
only to realise that a wave can be held
only by another trembling wave.

We may stay in touch, we may not,
not that it would ever make a difference.
When the seas fling us apart,
we shall still be there, whenever, wherever.

TWILIGHT ZONE

The price one pays for maturity
when one has ceased to feel the stirrings
of the first rain.

Even as it pattered against the window-pane
and created rivulets below,
where children cried with joy!

When their paper boats sailed by,
and hands and feet splashed away,
one stood rooted, motionless.

Having lost the urge to run out,
or to wait breathlessly for a rainbow in the sky,
or for the rivers rising with their dignity.

Even the springs or the water-falls
fail to bring back an excitement, a nostalgia,
the price one has paid for having come a long way,

The price of the twilight zone.

SAINTHOOD

I saw life in the faces of saints
full of false promises,

I saw in their austerity
a glimpse of the politician;

their search for truth a hoax or a passion
escaping from life, from its illusions.

I saw in their eyes a fear of love
being as ephemeral as life itself;

I saw in their faces the mask of eternal bliss
deluded by the transitory, by its trappings,

a lurking fear that others might know
that even they were suffering from the

claustrophobia of sainthood.

SYNTHESIS

Sounds that the deaf have heard
over soft human voices,

visions that the blind have had
which we could neither see, nor perceive,

Illusions that have undergone
the catharsis of reality,

when pain turned into alienation,

when one stopped living in the past
or even delving into it

perhaps, now, more than ever,
to meet a present equally meaningful,

to look towards the future where
sounds and visions shall meet

In a synthesis of their own.

KRISHNA BOSE

THE FAMILY ALBUM

Leaf by leaf in the album
those faces in different angles
against a landscape flayed to bones
tiptoed like the flames of the slow candle
into the net of rose-tinged memory
flapping against the arc of russet gold.

The yesteryears shook like a boiling purge
on the beaten frame of my mind.
A sea's gorgeous surface thickened
as every twig of the past moment
chinked with spring's brilliance
and moved faster than tears.

THE LIZARD

The lizard on the wall
threw tantrums of delight
at the sight of the moth perched
on the ridge of the ceiling
defaced by the teeth of the time.

It preferred not to stutter
in a place cold, loveless
immuned to a hurting nothingness.
Loneliness running its webbed fingers
over a spilling distance.

The hoary, midnight air blurred
the tuneless vanities cutting vivacious curves
on cheeks pounding with wrath
A solo soprano hitting the trees
made severely wet like scales of fish.

ARCHNA SAHNI

BECAUSE WE MIGHT NEVER MEET AGAIN

Because we might never meet again,
I will walk
into our fairytale future
and tell our story
to armfuls of our grandchildren
at every bedtime.

Because we might never touch,
I will be the snake
climbing up my spine
to unite with her lord:
you in my mind.

Because you have frozen time --
I will slide down on it
as the light
that will meet the one
that will leave
from between your brows
with your last breath.

DREAMING OF LALLA[1]

I

You walk intoxicated in your
splendid nakedness, heedless
to my call. You walk on, through
barracks and broken homes, taking
the paths you took six hundred years
ago, and vanish around the bend --

I am a five year-old standing
at your feet, imploring you to show me
the Pond on your head, your walking on
water, and all the things my Nani said
you could do[2] *-- but you simply laugh and*
walk on. You do not mean ill but I am hurt.

I find you in the family album,
a presence hovering somewhere
in the fading colour photographs
of my parent's honeymoon,
urging them to drink deep
of this ancient land;

at least
my mother did, and so
brings you to me thirty years later
in her early morning chanting,

Om Namah Shivaya
Om Namah Shivaya

I am a young woman,
standing in front of you as you sit
with eyes closed, asking you to
teach me the secret science of breath.
But you do not open your eyes. You are
gone when I close and then open mine.

Om Namah Shivaya

I close my eyes
and begin to chant to your lord,
knowing this to be the only way to you.

II

Om Namah Shivaya

In the infinite
space of sound
we finally meet
face to face
in our common mourning
over our lost paradise.

And I can see you are in no mood for peace --
Centuries of poise have shattered
and fury has opened your eyes.
The faiths your breast held as one
have broken loose
and your hair is waving wildly.

At the foot of the Shivalik hills
I can hear your valley
thunder deafeningly
as your soul leaves the cage
of your body
to roar your naked
song of rage
and hurl down water
from your pitcher
as unending rain.

Enfold me, Lalla, in your arms,
as the sound of the bullets
rises from the valley
to salute

your final retreat
as you vanish

into dreams
of the exiled.

[1] Lalla, also known as Lalleshwari and Lal Ded, was a great mystic and yogini, poet and prophetess, who lived in 14th century Kashmir. It is said that she wandered and danced naked, ecstatically singing her songs.

[2] Legend has it that Lalla crossed a river before dawn by walking across it to reach a shrine of Shiva where she meditated. Another legend narrates how in order to punish her for arriving home late, her husband one day threw a stone at the pitcher of water she was carrying on her head. It broke but the water froze on her head as a pitcher-shaped column. She threw the water outside which, miraculously, collected into a pond which came to be known as "Lalla Trag", or the Pond of Lalla.

DEATH AND NACHIKETAS[1]

Death met Lieutenant Nachiketas
at the enemy border wearing
a shalwar-kameez, and greeted
him with a salaam. He took

Nachiketas to his home and offered
him food and drink. Although it was
Nachiketas who was under house arrest,
it was Death who played the victim.

"I was like this when I met your
namesake, son of Gautam, ages back,"
said Death, puffing up his cheeks
and indicating the phantom bulge
in his upper arms where now
there was none. Death spoke in
Urdu, of course, the official tongue.

"Listen to my tale of woe and win
back your freedom," Death proposed.
Nachiketas did so, and found himself

walking into the border of his country,
wondering how the great terror
of mankind had shrunk his tongue
to speak one language, and taken on
the colour of a neighbour's face.

Lieutenant Nachiketas felt he had
won his freedom too easily.
He was embarrassed he would
have no tale of glory to tell.

[1] A few weeks before the Kargil war with Pakistan, the jet plane of Lieutenant Nachiketas crashlanded close to the India-Pakistan border where he was taken captive, then released after a while. I have allegorized the Lieutenant's ordeal as an encounter with Death. The poem plays with the lofty allegory of his namesake Nachiketas' encounter with Death, which occurs in the *Kathopnishad.* The young boy Nachiketas' similar encounter in the *Kathopnishad is* symbolic of his quest for the Ultimate Reality. The majestic and all-knowing figure of Death, called Dharma Raja, subjects him to numerous trials to test his sincerity as a spiritual seeker, and offers him his teaching on the nature of Ultimate Reality as his third boon to Nachiketas. (The boy remains unfed for three nights in the house of Death. To atone for his inhospitality Death offers three boons to Nachiketas.)

SHE WHO TEARS APART THOUGHT[1]

She Who Tears Apart Thought
tore me into two,
chewed me up,
spat me out new.

She showed me how to go
beyond my own mind
when she danced
up my spine.
When a few moments before
I lay pining
for a mortal man's love,
She yoked me
to the source.

The flesh fell away
like stagnant mud
when the lotus bloomed.

Petals of light killed
desire at the node.
She rose and rose.

She rose like the tossing
river of nectar
rushing to the source.
She rose like the sap
of the Ashvat tree
rushing to the roots
merging into the blue.
She rose and rose.

She was the silver

grin of lightning
ripping the blinds
that were my eyes:
the flooding darkness
turned into light.
She was the warrior bride
rising to wound
her groom sleeping above.
She was the dove
ascending by my side.
She rose and rose.

Who knows who
was I and who
was She when She
rose and rose
unfurled Her toes
into swords
tore me
chewed me
spat me out
spun me round and round
till we were lost

in that one
humming
syllable
of sound.

[1] "She Who Tears Apart Thought" refers to Goddess Chandi. The poem attempts to articulate a mystical experience I had in 1994 during a period of spiritual crisis. The title of the poem is borrowed from *Chandi Path* translated by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, where it forms the subtitle. The poem, however, bears no relation to the text.

K. B. BINDU

FACE TO FACE

The gold rimmed glasses
Of the old man
Perspired in the heat
Of the coffee cup,
As the headlines emerged
Dark,
Bold and juicy,
Dancing in the morning light.

Word after word,
A shaft of magic light
Gently poured into
Still unprepared eyes,
That shrank in strangeness
And distorted his face.

The refreshed man
Put down the newspaper
To clean his vision.

APARNA TAMBE

HOM

It is a glory to see an old house burning,
House that the waters and winds have rejected,
Old house of unholy tenaciousness,
Gathering layer upon unthinking layer
Of slumber and dirt,
Unswept courtyard and uncleansed kitchen --
Ready, yet unwilling, somehow unable, to die.

Fire at last is the redemption
Of many an old house that will not fall,
Fire that masticates all,
Reducing the unmanageables to final peace of ash.

This old house of the soul,
This creaking mansion of little worth,
Has waited, groaned, waited,
Unable to surrender, too frightened to call.

O Agni, insatiate mouth of many tongues,
At last let your grace descend,
Let the hand of flame finally touch
Walls that guard nothing of value,
Transform in one timeless moment
Falling roof and rotting cornice
To glorious torch of flaming penance.

O Agni, O primordial friend,
To you I give
Libation of my breath in song,
Do stretch my hand
In final longing to burn.

May the burning be in peace,
May the hand's reaching out to flame
Be in gladness,
Let the closed eyelid not flutter in its pain,
Let the breath not waver,
Nor the rhythm of the song be disturbed.
At last, let all that has been saved be given,
Saved in fear, saved only
For thieves to steal and moths to rust,
At last, let there be surrender,
Born of gladness,
Surrender of shape and form
In final freedom, anonymity, eternity of ash.

NEETI SADARANGANI

ON GRANNY'S DYING

It rained all night.
Next dawn the garden lay swooning
in mist.

When the curtain cleared
the lilies were replaced with
red blue bulbs of zero watts
dancing dimly upon their stalks.

Through the mist at dusk
I saw them glow

deep red
deep blue
spots

floating in the frothy cloud-mass
like rubies and sapphire on a blotting sheet.

The grass turned blond.
Granny in her sleep
crouched shrunk further --

and further
till she became
a doll-ball

lavitated

oscillated

and shot out like a meteor through the window
into the Mist.

MIDNIGHT IN ALIBAUG

Unclothed I stand
flapping by the sea
a mast, a sail of bone and skin

breathing in
the freedom the wind
has just drummed in

the moon and the sea
rub skin with skin
the serpent sways
the song begins

pitch darkness holds
the churning milk,
the horizon wears a string of ships --
a diamond web of tossing jewels
spanning its sensuous swaying hips.

The sea in darkness weaves magic.
Wave on wave, sound on silence
slap the nape of beaten rock

an orchestra of crab-thought.

so much has emerged
from this.

I feel like a kitchen-drawer
lined with tiny cockroaches
and black eggs, like cumin-seeds.

I need to be cleaned
I need to kill
with insecticide.

Also some compost
and deworming --
the night-queen and the champa within

have caught termite.
They must parch for a while
and then bathe and drink

generously from the hosepipe.

ALAKA YERAVADEKAR

MOTHER

She waits at the window
with anxious eyes that
scan the street below
as dusk darkens to inky blue
and street lamps, bright yellow.

Figures hurrying home --
men and women from work.
Was that the doorbell?
only a watchman . . .
what dress did she wear today?
and the colour of her dupatta?
ah! that's her!
no, a middle-aged woman
with a basket . . .
surely, she would carry a purse . . .
The phone rings . . . no,
just a wrong number...
the tea has grown cold -- just like her
not to ring up when late...

The bell of the next door flat.
Through peephole she sees the neighbour
come home from work.
Opens door hurriedly.
" Are the trains late?"
"No, on time -- absolutely."

The T.V.! the News!
anything happened anywhere today?
Only a minor reshuffle.
And a volcano erupting
in some godforsaken place, thank god.

A call to the office. Night Security answers.
“Let me check.”
heart thudding
“No, nobody on late duty madam.”

She comes to stand by the window again
to see lights go off one by one in nearby homes.

Feet aching, a numbness of heart, a desperation.

God.
There is no god.
Else, why is her daughter
not home as yet?

ALL I ASK

I want to fly again.
I want to try again.

To spread once-broken wings
and soar with the rising sun,
to glide in the cool of eve,
to waltz and weave and somersault
till You call my play to a halt.

All I ask is one more chance.
All I ask is one more dance.

ANJLI JOSHI

AGING TIME

In the light of the setting sun,
An eerie wind casts waving shadows
Of obstacles lying ahead.

There lies the fort, once filled with color,
Now alone and withering away.

The cold sets a sudden chill,
A breeze of memories--
The warmth, the joy and
Happiness, slowly fading.
The voices of laughter,
The smiling faces . . .

Slowly she walks,
With a patience and wisdom of age.

She grips a metal bar,
Her long fingers run over the rust,
Paint chips away, the wood has
turned brittle
Aging as the playful spirit.

The memories so young,
The time so long ago.

MAUREEN FADEM

"TRANSLATION: AN ART OF NEGATIVITY": A CONVERSATION WITH MEENA ALEXANDER

> "Each language has its own genius. The task of a good translator is to make a space within the new language and gather up the elements that will make a good poem out of what the original in English or Malayalam rendered to the translator. It's a hard, subtle, delicate task because, as a translator, you are *making* a poem." -- *Meena Alexander*

The work of Meena Alexander reveals one of the freshest, most original voices in women's literature today. In Alexander's work we discover a contemporary woman poet speaking poignantly and honestly about women's issues and women's lives. She joins many of her contemporaries in this endeavor. Where Alexander's writing departs from a number of her contemporaries, however, is in the distinct, precise suggestion of power that is made throughout, and its attendant subversiveness. A special confidence in "woman" winds its way through the entire body of her work.

The critical cornerstone for Alexander's writing is the unique coupling of stark realism and honest passion that resolves into conviction and boldly re-solidifies -- taking shape in images that radiate with hopefulness, and in stories that end with the coming of new life. While it is critical for contemporary authors and scholars to document women's challenges, to employ discursive political strategies by working their "stories of struggle" into the discourse, it is likewise pivotal to "the project" of global women's writing to envision and configure possibilities *beyond* those struggles -- to forge new paradigms, inspire solutions for women, substantiate trust in women. One such visionary is the poet Meena Alexander.

In the conversation reported here, the subject matter moves away from the prevalent themes of Alexander's work and from women's issues, to questions involving the *craft* of poetry and the translation of poetic works. Meena Alexander's poetry has been translated into various languages, including Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, German, Swedish and Urdu. Frequent international appearances--at poetry readings, conferences and other literary events--give rise to the continual translation of her poetry worldwide.

Alexander and I talked one spring afternoon in the sunlit Dining Commons of the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Our conversation was spirited and impromptu, reflecting Alexander's refreshingly spontaneous yet always polished style. We talked about what the process of translating poetry means to this poet *as* a poet, and how, for translators, she believes that the translation of poetry is itself an art-form, one that is, by necessity, "an art of negativity." Here, Alexander discusses what she has called the "zone of radical illiteracy," and shares her thoughts on questions of intersecting languages, of living life "bordered by many" languages, and, of the fusions of those languages with the rhythms of life -- and possibly of poetry.

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Maureen Fadem: Speak to me a little about your thoughts on the translation process. What happens to a poem in the process of translation to a different language? Is poetry even translatable, given its subtlety -- given the qualities that make poetry poetry?

Meena Alexander: Let me respond to that as a poet, as a practitioner, rather than as a reader of poetry. I find it is a more valuable place for me to think from and think through. I'm also talking in the light of these rather detailed e-mail conversations I've had with Fahmida Riaz in Karachi, Andrea Sirotti in Florence, and Jonas Ellerström in Sweden, who've all, roughly concurrently, been

translating poems of mine over the last three or four months. In that process, they have been sending me questions, having conversation. What I am trying to work out, or think out, is something like this: in order to write my poems I need to go to a place where words don't attach. So, the act of writing the poem, for me, *is* an act of translation.

You know, in the old sense, the word translation was actually 'transport,' to carry across. When I get questions from the translators, often it shows that they have actually touched a place underneath the words, a place that I had to go to in order to make the poem. So that then, translation at its finest becomes an art of negativity, perhaps in some way analogous to the act of composition. Now, I am just thinking this out as I talk, but that is the way it makes sense to me because I do not read Urdu script, I do not read Italian and I do not read Swedish. The translated poem looks like a new creation on the page, and I am delighted to see it, but I cannot judge. There is a certain measure of trust involved. I think there is also a way in which, as interpreters and as readers, we do have to go to the place in-between the lines in order to make sense.

Since I do not know these particular languages, I have no way of judging when someone says to me, "I think I'll use that word." I can't say, "No, that's the wrong word." If it were French I could say that because I know French very well, but in these cases I can't say, "It's better to put it this way rather than that way." So there is a way in which the translated work actually becomes another poem -- is it still my poem? It has my name attached to it, yet, it is another poem. Particularly in the world of poetry the act of translation is a very powerful one, because poetry, unlike prose, is very small, very slight. It's often carried around in memory.

MF: Yes, and it is less literal than prose will often be. With poetry, we're dealing with symbolic language, also idioms or phrases with which there may be specific allusions, say cultural or historical

references, that are central to the meaning of the original poem. In such a case, when "transporting" the poem into German from English for example, the translator might not recognize these associations, and could therefore interpret and render such ideas quite differently.

MA: Yes, that's right. And, as someone who does not know German intimately I really would have no way of gauging it. And that's OK.

MF: It is?

MA: Yes, that's OK. You know, when I grew up in India, I was always bordered by many languages, three or four languages; and I didn't know all of them equally well and I used them in different places and in different spots. Even inside the house we had three or four languages, it's very common in India. Then when I went abroad to North Africa, Arabic took the place of Hindi. So, I'm very used to being in the company of many languages, some of which I can barely understand, some of which I understand very well, and I am not uneasy if I do not understand fully.

In fact, I'm always more comfortable when there are many languages floating around because I am just familiar with that. Of course I do live in English in many ways, but I dream in Malayalam; Malayalam is my mother tongue, it's very intimate for me. As a poet I am particularly interested in those areas of our experience where language cannot easily attach, that are not easily mapped out in words, and I think that is a particular realm for poetry.

MF: Yes, especially for poetry. And might that have something to do with the fact that poetry is more than "words in combination that give rise to meaning"? The poem is a combination of various features, and some of those aspects dwell outside or are independent of the literal meaning conveyed by the words.

MA: Yes, there's the music and the rhythm, etc. Often, when I compose, I need to walk around, in and out of rooms or places, on the bus or the subway. Very often something comes as a rhythm, not always -- sometimes there are words or images, sometimes there is just a line. But you have to learn in making a poem to trust the inarticulate. Otherwise, you can't "go there." I remember Adrienne Rich once said that if you're a poet you have to "go where the fear is" -- and I understand that. You have to go to the place where the words don't come very easily, and perhaps don't come at all.

MF: It sounds like a place where there is an almost complete lack of definition or structure, and there could be fear associated with that. Speaking from a reader's point-of-view, poetry can be intimidating. Readers have a tendency to shy away from poetry, they can be uncomfortable with analyzing poetry, I think, for some of the same reasons you have disclosed with reference to the composition of poetry -- it is like going where the fear is. The meaning, image or emotion -- what the poem is or what it expresses -- isn't something that is easily identifiable. A traditional prose story is quite a different thing, much easier to absorb; we have to work a lot harder to "get" poetry.

MA: And yet, poetry is very very close to us. It seems to me that there is something primal about the rhythm piece of it. Children flow into poetry so easily. The fact that adults sometimes feel nervous is the fault of our pedagogy, I believe. Also, I think to reach a poem, to enter in there, in some ways you have to strip away a lot of the "taken for granted-ness" of the everyday. A poem is small, it's just a little thing.

MF: In translation, the poem enters a new space, right? In doing this, it is at once the same poem and yet, it is not the same poem, as we have discussed. When that "medley" of poetic facets -- the verbal, the musical, the typographical -- has been upset, or

uprooted, the musicality may still exist but might have become an entirely new cadence. What are your thoughts on this?

MA: Yes, the cadence, and the entire poem, will be altogether different. Each language has its own genius. I think the task of a good translator is to make a space within the new language and gather up the elements that will make a good poem out of what the original work, in English or Malayalam, rendered to the translator. It's a hard, subtle, delicate task because, as a translator, you are *making* a poem. For example, when you are a critic or you write an essay about a poem or poems, you are interpreting them, and the task of the translator is different, but perhaps in some ways analogous.

It's different because the translator has a form that guides her, which is the text on the page in the original language, but the translator has to de-create it, which is why I said at the beginning of our conversation that translation is really an art of negativity. The translator will then have to create it in his or her own language. So, there are at least three parts, I would imagine, to this process. As you know I do not translate but I am a poet, and the whole question of process fascinates me.

MF: Today's conversation has also reminded me of questions of "process" in terms of the "life" of a poem. I am not a poet or creative writer, but as I understand you: an idea or image first resides in a zone or place where words don't easily attach. The image is then "translated" into words initially as it becomes the original poem. Eventually, the poem is published, moves out into the world, and lands finally in a reader or translator's hands. At that point, the poem is being interpreted. As a reader, I come to a point at which I say, "Yes! I've got it." But what I think I'm "getting," again, may not have words that are readily available to me and which might adequately explain it; it could just be a feeling or mental picture that I can't "re-translate."

MA: That's the thing about poetry, it does work through images and the image makes sense in an instant. How does Pound define the image, he says it's "an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time." It's like that shock of recognition you get. That's the extraordinary thing about poetry. Think about Haiku, which is the most delicate form of poetry but also the most resilient. How do you translate seventeen syllables of Japanese into English or Malayalam? It's a real task of love.

MF: Yes, in that instant of time, a smile suddenly spreads across your face because, in that moment, you have understood, and that understanding…

MA: …you don't have to put into words.

MF: Yes, it can be very hard to do that.

MA: As critics, the most intimate thoughts you have in reading the poem are not necessarily what come out when you write your exegesis. It is very hard.

MF: Earlier you said that some of the questions being asked by the three translators with whom you have worked seem to originate from a place that is between the lines, or underneath the words -- perhaps one that is not altogether unlike what you have called a "zone of radical illiteracy."[1] *A few minutes ago you compared the act of translation with the act of composition; were you suggesting that there is a correlation between these "places"-- are translators and readers capable of coming into the poem, and, by experiencing it, getting somehow back to a "zone," like the place where the poem began?*

MA: Yes, or, their version of that place. That's the glory of art. You "make the place" as you look at the image, read the poem, or walk through the installation. When I write it, it does have words, words that are sculptured and refined, and made very carefully for a particular kind of fit in the language that I write in, in English.

You know, it is interesting to think about how I use English. I don't write in Malayalam, but people who know Malayalam often say that there are rhythms of Malayalam in my poetry. I can't tell that, but I'm sure there are. I am sure that the patterning of the writing is driven in some ways by a speech that is not English.

MF: You said before that you have always been "bordered by many languages," that it is familiar to you, perhaps even more comfortable for you, to be surrounded by the sounds of different languages. It is interesting to think about that in light of how we express ourselves in *language -- how that expression, as you suggest, may in some way be connected with the things around us, the rhythms of life -- rhythms that may come from outside the language we write in, but that, nonetheless, transfer or translate* into *our writing.*

MA: You know, this question of the rhythm of things is very important because a lot of the power of poetry lies in its musicality. And you know how music is, it does not exist in space, it exists as it is being played or digitally rendered for a certain span of time, which is also precisely why I think the typographical element of the poem is so crucial -- because in the end it must give pleasure, through all the difficulties. People read poems again and again and again and again and again; that is because, in the end, poetry is a mnemonic device, it gathers the light to it. I think it's precisely also for that reason that poetry is very hard to translate, but also, paradoxically perhaps, the *most* translatable of writing if you have two people at either end, the poet and the translator, who are in some kind of sympathy, who are both attuned to the language.

MF: Yes, and I wonder if that is because there are so many aspects of the poem one can attempt to translate? As an author, how does it feel when something you've created is transported into a different language, like Swedish, and you don't know what it says or how it's been interpreted? Does it feel like a loss of control?

MA: No, it doesn't at all. In fact I felt much more nervous when I had a poem that was performed off Broadway; I was traumatized by the thought of it being on stage. I thought, "How can you understand this poem that is set in Kerala?" It was my poem *Night-Scene, The Garden*.[2] They did it beautifully, choreographed the whole thing, composed special music for the occasion; it was fabulous. But I found it so very hard to accept that it was being rendered in another medium. I could not absorb that -- with poetry, it's there, on the page.

There's something else, Maureen, that may simply have to do with my biography. You know I was raised partly in Khartoum in the Sudan. When I was very young, twelve or thirteen years old, I started writing poetry in French, and then I gave that up and started writing in English. My first poems written in English appeared in print in translation, in Arabic. They were published in one of the local newspapers in Sudan. I was about fourteen or fifteen at the time, I was living in an Arabic speaking country, one which, at that point, also had a very thriving arts culture. Later of course, with the Islamic regime, that was knocked out to some extent but it was a moment of great excitement, struggles for democracy. So, my first publications were poems in Arabic that I could not read. Nevertheless, as a writer, those were my first published works. People would say, "I saw your poems in the paper and they were great," and I'd say, "Oh wonderful," but I could not *read* them. So that history is already there with me.

MF: A related issue -- what happens as the result of a poem's translation and publication culturally, when a poem "travels"? For example, you are familiar with Irish language poet, Nuala ni Dhomhnaill. When Nuala's work is translated from Gaelic into English, the poem in some sense 'grows' in size, whereas originally the work was accessible to a very small number of people, a minority even in Ireland. After translation it is available to readers on a global scale. Her choice to write in Irish I think is certainly a personal and private one, but it is also a political choice.

MA: And, it is a very powerful choice, it positions her art within a certain tradition. It's an act of resistance, much as it is also where she is biographically. I think it is wonderful.

Most of us don't have a choice about the language we write in. We may know many languages, but for the purposes of our writing, one may be more intimate to us, because there are all sorts of biographical facts which are not in our control. So, in the end, I think a language has to choose you.

MF: On the question of who should do the translation, do you prefer, regardless of language, that someone else translate your work?

MA: Absolutely. Several years ago, I was in Kerala at the time, and Ayyappa Paniker, he's a major, very important Malayalam poet, wanted me to do a translation for a Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters in India) volume that he was doing. He wanted me to translate Sugatha Kumari's *Kalia Mardanam*, it's a poem about the dance of Krishna, and the 'kalia,' the snake. It is a poem that's really very much sound based, it uses onomatopoeia, it really plays through sound, a very powerful poem.

So, Sugatha Kumari and I had tea lots of times and really got to know each other, which was great. And you know, Maureen, I sat with the poem, I sat for ages and just looked at it, and heard it, and read it -- I couldn't get a translation -- I wrote my own poetry! I said, What is this? I can't write -- I read her poem and then I write my own poem! So, you know I think I am a dismal failure as a translator. There are some wonderful poets who are fabulous translators, I just cannot do it. And I think it has something to do with a very peculiar sense of what it means to take up residence in language. That's a topic for a whole separate conversation, you know, what it means to dwell in language. But I think I just couldn't *move* it -- I think deep down I didn't want to, although I did try, I gave it lots of afternoons. It didn't make sense to me deep down so I didn't do it.

MF: It seems to me that sometimes when a poet or novelist translates their own work, it can be a dismal failure; for example, friends of mine who are Bengali speakers feel that Tagore's English translations of his own work compared somewhat poorly to his originals in Bengali.

MA: Some do it well, for instance Krishna Baldev Vaid translates his own work from Hindi into English, he knows both languages very well. Translation is a hard business and I could never do that. It's possible to read the translation in some cases and offer comments. But, I trust the people who are translating my work, I figure if they want to translate it they must have a desire to do it well, it's not easy stuff. It's just like if someone wants to read it -- for me the impulse that makes you want to translate is an extension of the impulse that makes you want to read, right?

MF: Yes, because in fact that is what you're doing, isn't it? I mean, both a reader and a translator are "translating," aren't they? It is what you do in order to understand the poem. The translator is simply taking that a step further by transporting the work into a different language. You said before, "we keep going back and re-reading poetry," which is so true. But why do we do this? Is it in part because we are translating and re-translating the poem and its meaning?

MA: . . . Putting it into, or, making a structure that bodies forth what you can take from it. Earlier, you spoke of a medley of poetic aspects and it led into all of these other areas, but towards this point in the conversation we've really reached a place of quite extraordinary complexity that has to do with a palimpsest of sense making and, it has to do with questions of interpretation and the linguistic bodying forth of sense and, underneath it all, the whole question of cultural translation -- what it means to move in and out of spaces that have their own meaning, where we record meaning differently.

For example, Andrea Sirotti said, "Meena, I very much wanted to translate *Brown Skin, What Mask?*, but I couldn't do it because I didn't understand words like 'bulbul,' 'gulabs,' 'koels.'" You see, it's a poem about language, about playing between Hindi and English. And, I put things in there like 'rose-gulabs' and it threw him off because he didn't know what this referred to. He wanted to translate it but he did not understand these other words which I had packed into the poem.[3]

MF: This is something I too have thought about -- the question of dual-language poetry in which the poem is written primarily in one language, but words from other languages dot the poem. The question is: how do you translate such a poem? Do you just translate the English into Italian and leave the Hindi words, the Malayalam words, the Spanish words, as they were originally written, or as you say, were "packed into the poem"?

MA: It's interesting, because actually the first poem in this cycle called *Notebook*, that Jonas Ellerström is translating into Swedish, is called *Transport*, and towards the very end it has these lines:

> "write in the light
> of all the languages
> you know the earth contains"

And in that poem I use a number of Malayalam words, including 'penne' for girl, and 'maram' for tree. In *Illiterate Heart*, which is the title poem of my new book of poetry, I deliberately put in lines from Malayalam and Sanskrit.[4] So, if you are translating that poem into say, Italian, you have to leave the Malayalam and Sanskrit words there because there is a kind of density to it -- it's like putting a piece of an opaque material in there for the English reader, therefore the Italian reader also has to have that piece.

Which means that what you as a poet are saying is this: I am encoding into my text this piece of untranslatable poetic property. And that is very very important for the kinds of displacements of sense that the poem works. To do otherwise, for

example for a publisher to ask a writer to translate the Malayalam or Sanskrit words into English, or into the language of translation, well that would be like an old colonial hang-up.

MF: It is very important politically to let the non-English words of an otherwise English language poem stand, remain.

MA: Yes, it is actually very relevant. What I am doing within this space is saying, "You can't meddle with this." It's been set *into* the music. I'm actually saying that I am taking the liberty that this will not make sense to readers, which is deliberate.

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Endnotes:

1. See Meena Alexander, 'Zone of Radical Illiteracy: Poem Out of Place', Connect, Arts International, inaugural issue, Fall 2000. See also Meena Alexander: 'Civil Strife: Home at the Edge of the World', presentation at the House of World Cultures, Berlin, International Symposium `Where and What is Home in the Twenty-First Century?', June 3, 2000.

2. Meena Alexander, 'Night-Scene, the Garden' (New York: Red Dust, 1989). Performed Off-Off Broadway by the Medicine Show Theatre Company.

3. For this poem, see Meena Alexander, River and Bridge (New Delhi: Rupa, 1995 / Toronto: Toronto South Asian Review Press, 1996). For related issues of feminism and crossing borders see also the essay by the poet in which she refers to this poem: 'Rights of Passage', inaugural issue Interventions: The International Journal of Postcolonial Studies, (Volume 1, no 1, 1998/ 99).

4. Meena Alexander, Illiterate Heart (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, forthcoming 2002). The title poem appears in a special, year 2000, issue of the journal Ariel on colonial pedagogy.

Author Bibliography: Meena Alexander

Her poetry includes:
Stone Roots (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, l980); *House of a Thousand Doors* (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, l988); two long poems published as chapbooks: *The Storm, A Poem in Five Parts* (New York: Red Dust, l989) and *Night-Scene, The Garden* (New York: Red Dust, l992); *River and Bridge* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1995/ Toronto: TSAR Press,1996); *Notebook*, a cycle published by the Bildmuseet, Sweden (1999); and, forthcoming in 2002: *Illiterate Heart* (Chicago: Tri-Quarterly Books, Northwestern University Press).

Her prose writings include:
The novel *Nampally Road* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1991 -- a VLS Editor's Choice); *Fault Lines*, a memoir (New York: Feminist Press/ New Delhi: Penguin India -- a Publishers Weekly choice as one of the best books of 1993); *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*, essays and poems (Boston: South End Press, 1996); and, the novel *Manhattan Music* (Mercury House, 1997).

She is also the author of:
The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1979/ USA, Humanities Press); *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley* (London: Macmillan, l989/ USA: Barnes and Noble).

She has written prefaces for:
Truth Tales (New York: Feminist Press, 1990); *Blood into Ink: South Asian and Middle Eastern Women Write War* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1994); *Cast Me Out if You Will: Selected Writings of Lalithambika Antherjanam* (New York: Feminist Press, 1998).

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA

MALLIKA SENGUPTA AND THE POETRY OF FEMINIST CONVICTION

Born in 1960, Mallika Sengupta is a lecturer in Sociology in a Calcutta college. She received the M.A. degree in Sociology from the Kalyani University, West Bengal and is at present engaged in research for a doctoral degree. She has been writing poetry since 1981, and has published four books of poems. These are Chalish Chander Ayu (1983), Ami Sindhur Meye (1988), Haghare O Debdasi (1991) and Ardhak Prithibi (1993). In 1994 her prose treatise Stree Linga Nirman on feminism was published. Her poems are regularly published in Desh and other Bengali literary journals.

Mallika Sengupta is an admirably alert, ardent and articulate person. Feminism is not just an academic issue for her. It is a conviction and a challenge. Socio-cultural issues, sexual politics, patriarchal tyranny are recurrent themes in her committed poetry. In Mallika's poems the history of woman and the evolution of society have been aesthetically rendered. In her poetry womanhood does not remain an interiorized awareness; it becomes an energetic protest against marginalization, interrogating women's position in society as the oppressed other. About herself she writes, "I feel I am that girl from whose hands the Vedas were snatched away, who was forced to speak in Prakrit instead of Sanskrit."

Her poetry exudes the courage of her convictions. Evasive or indirect strategies in presentation of themes and purposes, so common among women writers, rarely focus in her texts. She could well be described as the Tasleema of West Bengal for in her poetry we hear the same unembarrassed voice of determination and power. So in "Tell Us Marx" Mallika interrogates Marxist male-oriented precepts. And in "Open Letter to Freud", in a tongue-in-cheek manner, she debates the viability of the binary oppositions such as male/female, domination / subordination, superior/inferior, aggressive/docile, active/passive, among others. "Bruise" and "Girl

on the Sunlit Road" are poems about domestic violence and sexual harassment rendered in a narrative mode. "Magic Mirror" knits together the timeless fairy tale of Snow White and her stepmother with the pathetic plight of a postmodern woman possessed by the same "mirror madness". "Salt" expresses distress and outrage about the coldblooded murder of newborn girls. This is a theme that is represented in the work of other women poets as well, such as Krishna Bose and Jaya Mitra. But Mallika's feminist poetry is not about alienation and anger. It focuses, rather, on integration and equality. Mallika believes that the personal is the political, and her voice or power reverberates as she writes,

> . . . I am a confident, complete woman
> A sensitive dark girl of the Third World.

Image, symbol, metaphor and myth are felicitously fused in Mallika's poetry bearing evidence of her knowledge of Indian culture, folklore, ethnic tradition and contemporary issues. Therefore, sociology, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, recent trends in literature, all such multidisciplinary facets inform her poetic art. So she states, "Whenever I can bring together a mythical parallel with a contemporary issue I experience a sense of satisfaction while writing such poetry". Also, referring to the autobiographical representations in her poetry, Mallika writes, "I do not think that personal experience and a person's imagination can be separated easily. Moments of one's childhood experiences mould a person's personality from which are born the imaginative propensities". Mallika's views echo Baudelaire's and T.S. Eliot's opinion about the dynamism of childhood experiences which are significantly represented in one's poetic imagination.

Interestingly, in comparison to her earlier poems, Mallika's later poetry is increasingly showing signs of having become more purposive and more polemical. In this respect her poetry remainds one of the poetry of Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker and Tasleema Nasreen. In an interview referring to

the propensity to prioritize feminism in women's poetry Mallika analyses, "I feel that without such pronouncements as 'feminism' or 'I am a feminist' one can speak about one's womanhood and about the women around the reach of certain spaces. I try to reach that certain space without announcing that I am a feminist".

In most of Mallika's poetry feminist consciousness and concern, heritage, history, tradition and contemporaneity exist in a harmonious balance of form and content. "When I write, I write about experiences which have percolated through tradition". Tradition, experience, experiment and a fine creative instinct combine with promise in Mallika's poetry.

Some of Mallika's earlier poems have been translated and published in journals and anthologies. She has attended poetry reading sessions in Bhopal, Stockholm and Australia. She has written two feminist novels, Sitayan and Slilata Hanir Porey. In early 1999 she published two more volumes of her poetry. She is married to poet Subodh Sarkar and has a seven year old son.

RESPONSES: FACE TO FACE

Malika Sengupta interviewed by Sanjukta Dasgupta

Sanjukta : You are a sociologist by profession. Why and when did you start writing poetry?

Mallika : I started writing poetry when I was studying for my M.A.degree. I fell in love with a poet who is incidentally my husband now. So, poetry came with passionate love in my life. From the very beginning Subodh inspired me to write, his presence in my life was the turning point, I suppose.

Sanjukta : Who are the writers who have influenced you most? Any other influence?

Mallika : I am influenced by myths, epics, histories and contemporary issues. I feel inspired by Adrienne Rich and Kett Milali. Often, I use sociology and anthropology as my source material. Obviously, I am indebted to the whole tradition of Bengali literature.

Sanjukta : As a married woman poet what are some of the gender specific problems you have faced in pursuing your career?

Mallika : Fortunately, I have a household favourable to my career. But certainly I have some gender specific problems, primarly motherhood. I feel I could have written more, if I were the father of the child. I have a strong desire to live in tribal or ethnic communities and write about them as a participant observer. But I cannot do this because of my little son. I can fight against any bondage other than motherhood.

Sanjukta : Would you describe yourself as a feminist poet?

Mallika : Why not?

Sanjukta : What, in your opinion are some of the advantages and limitations of being a woman poet writing in Bengali?

Mallika : A woman writing poems is always regarded as "woman poet", and never as a "poet". She is always compared with other women. Readers have some specific expectations about what a woman should write and what she should not write. Often I fail to fulfil their expectations because I do not write lyrical love poems or soft nature poems. I always face questions like, why do you write such "strong" poems? Why do you write only on women's issues? Some complain -- these days you are becoming more a

feminist and less a poet. I do not find any special advantage for being a woman writer.

Sanjukta : Should poetry be didactic? Does the scope of poetry become restricted if the poet is an ideologue?

Mallika : Ideology ruins poetry, but not always. Rather every poet has to face this challenge at some period of her life. From ancient times poets are regarded as profound observers commenting on social issues. Almost all good poets try to convey their convictions and ideologies through poetry. I think a good poet can always insert ideology into poetry without destroying the aesthetic conditions. This is how a good poet is tested, at least in my opinion.

Sanjukta : What are your views regarding contemporary Bengali women's poetry?

Mallika : More and more women are coming to the field of Bengali poetry. This is a positive sign. They have come forward to reveal the untold women's experiences with courage and sensibility. Women are writing good poems.

Sanjukta : Do you think translation of poetry is necessary? How far can a translated poem replicate the original?

Mallika : Yes. That depends. But translation is very essential. Specially contemporary Bengali poetry needs to be translated much more.

Sanjukta : T.S.Eliot defines poetry as "excellent words in excellent arrangement and excellent metre". How would you define your own poetry?

Mallika : My poetry possesses neither excellent words nor excellent arrangement nor excellent metre. This definition does not go with today's conception of

poetry. I would like to use everyday language used by common people. I do write in metrical form too but there are many good poets who do not bother about metre either. An anti-metre poetry movement is found all over the world.

Sanjukta : What about your work in progress and future plans?

Mallika : I am writing a novel about sexual harassment and its aftermath. I have a plan to combine strong women's issues with rhythm, metre and lyric. This would be an experiment.

MALLIKA SENGUPTA

INSIGNIA OF BLOOD

Man, I've never raised my arms against you

Slitting the hair-parting the day you drew the insignia of blood
I felt pain, I didn't tell you

On dry soil no rose blooms, no peacock dances
Yet digging the sandy terrain we drew water
With son on the lap have watched glowworms, pointed out Orion.

We know earth is woman, the sky primal man
Then why have you chained my arms?
Why didn't you let me see the sun for a thousand years?

Don't insult the earth that holds you
Man, I've never raised my arms against you.

(*Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta*)

TELL US MARX

She spun rhymes, wove blankets
The Dravidian woman who sowed wheat
In the Aryan man's fields, reared his kids
If she isn't a worker, then what is work?

Tell us Marx, who is a worker, who isn't
New industrial workers with monthly wages,
Are they the only ones who work?
Slum life is the Industrial Age's gift
To the worker's housewife
She draws water, mops floors, cooks food
After the daily grind, at night
She beats her son and weeps

She too is not a worker!
Then tell us Marx, what is work!

Since housework is unpaid labour, will women simply
Sit at home and cook for the revolutionary?
And comrade is he alone who upholds hammer and sickle!
Such injustice does not become You

If ever there's a revolution
There'll be heaven on earth
Classless, stateless, in that enlightened world
Will women then become the handmaidens of revolution?

(*Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta*)

THE GIRL ON THE SUNLIT ROAD

As the shadows of Minto Park shifted
They too moved away from the sun's heat
The two creatures who had left the dreadful house
Two storm-tossed birds -- daughter and mother.

What took place in the night's darkness? Outrage! Outrage!
Incessant violence would tear up the woman
While the eyes of the mute girl steamed
She watched nightlong, nightlong, blood trickling down
Her mother's bruises.
The nightly eyewitness from a neighbouring window
Flared, slamming his window shut he says, "I want privacy,
privacy"

Window cries out, "Why are you beating your wife?"
"My goat, whether I slaughter it head or bum foremost
That's my business", the man said.
This is termed privacy My Lord.

If one human being kills another
You will keep quiet!
Where's the human being! That's the man's wife.

Police Officer turns philosopher--
"Resolve your domestic conflicts at home
If husband hits you a little
Why do you rush to the police station? Go, go devote yourself to the family."

"They'll kill my mother"
The girl wept at her maternal grandmother's feet
Her granddaughter's face made the old woman's heart tremble
Her sense of duty is relentless -- throughout the ages she has learned
A woman's real space is her husband's home
"You have to return whatever the agony"

Where will the woman go with her young daughter!
Today a friend's house, tomorrow another's
But day after tomorrow
The day, day after?

Mother and daughter sit in Minto Park
Clasping her mother the girl cries uncontrollably
"I shall not return to that man"
To the daughter and mother who have escaped from home
Home is a black hole
Her vagina would be ripped from incessant brutality
Yet the man's fury never seems to abate
"No I will return no more"
Holding her daughter fast
The woman walks down the sunlit road.

(*Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta*)

OPEN LETTER TO FREUD

In man's body an extra limb
Invested eternal power, earth's ownership
According to Mr. Freud for lack of it woman is inferior
As an underling she envies man's virility

Nature is uncaring
Man is uncaring
Children are uncaring
Only Freud cares for women!

Who cares for compassion! Chitrangada? Joan of Arc?
Simone De Beauvoir or dark Draupadi!

"Penis-envy" is a term
Introduced by Mr. Freud
That extra which only man possesses
That's what diminishes woman
So she is uncertain in childhood
Decorates the Shivlinga with flowers at girlhood
Her play room is full of dolls and utensils
For it's said that she is her mother's replica.

Whereas Rohit rehearses for war
American soldiers in fatigues in his room
Machine guns fusillade tra-ra-ra
As man's aggressiveness grows in him
If he claws cheeks with sharp nails
Man child's extra prowess makes grandmothers beam
That extra bit in his body, that's the licence
Which will make him the world's owner.

Rohit will be the owner of which world?
Where Rohita is his partner! Inferior sex!
On galloping horseback with drawn sword

Emperor Rohit will sit to conquer the world
And he will be decked for war by mother, sister, wife
This is just what you wanted Mr. Freud!
If a woman warrior arrives from the opposite side
Will he abandon arms like Bhishma--
"I will not take up arms against women"
Implying woman won't be allowed to acquire arms--

This is primal man's sexual politics
Freud, because you belong to the extra limb group
You assume women are inferior and hence envious!

During my childhood I felt no penis-envy
My self-identity was complete
Even today I'm a confident, complete woman,
A sensitive dark girl of the Third World
Shall stand against you from today
Who is inferior who superior which is more or less--
Who has given you the duty of solving
Such a political debate Mr. Freud!!

(*Translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta*)

MY DAUGHTER

The young woman who just got burnt -- Book is her name.

For her, the sleepless nights of the wise
For her, the love-lorn craze of frenzied young men over the ages
For her, the guard stands at the library door
For her, the whole of Calcutta
Converge on winter afternoons, covering their hair with dust.

It was she, for loving whom
Khanaa had to face a torment worse than death
Shadowed by assassins, Rushdie has to fly . . .

How I yearn to be mere letters,
Little black moles stamped on her breast
Ignoring a thousand luxuries
I live, clutching her to my heart

Why did *this* young woman have to burn?
Whose sin is it that roasted my innocent daughter in an oven?

Yes, she did get burnt.
But, from the ash-heap touching the horizons
The newborn girl rearing her head once more
Is also called Book.

Notes:

Khanaa was a woman astronomer of proto-historic times (towards the end of the Gupta dynasty, circa 800 BC), whose tongue was slashed because she had the courage to point out an error in her father-in-law's (also an astronomer) calculations.

This poem alludes to the annual Calcutta Book Fair of 1997, which was entirely gutted.

(*Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee*)

NABANEETA DEV SEN

Born to parents who were towering literary figures of their times, it is hardly surprising that Nabaneeta has been delighting readers in Bengal and elsewhere with her prolific writing. Essays, travelogues, prose, poetry . . . And the most rewarding element in her writing is that it is like reading different authors. Needless to say, she has been widely published, and in translation also. It is an interesting aside on Nabaneeta that this professor of Comparative Literature translates others, but never her own work!

THE LAMP

(In memory of my mother's birthday)

-- 'Go to bed now, dear Mother,
'It's past eleven o'clock.'
-- 'Since when is eleven late?
'You go to bed, got college tomorrow.'

Mother sits on her armchair
Thick glasses sitting on her thin nose,
A magnifying glass between her fair fingers,
The Statesman spread on her lap.
On the table beside, a flask of tea, medicines,
Her *paan* and *zardaa* in a silver case,
A brass spittoon, a cash-box made of brass.
Behind her, a three-legged table with an earthen vase,
A bunch of night-queens -- mother's favourite,
And a cane table-lamp, made in Agartala --
An alarm clock ticking away in front:
A travelling clock.

Mother turns a page in the newspaper,
The harsh rasping sound fragmenting the soundless night.
I close my book to return there.
As I step into the room, I sink neck-deep
Into the fragrance of night-queens.
The young nurse snoozes on her chair.

– ‘Mother, dear, please go to bed now,
‘It’s half past one in the morning.’
– ‘Half past one?’ -- she scolds -- ‘How come
‘You’re still up? No college tomorrow?’
Despite the rebuke, I persist, shameless that I am --
– ‘You’ll feel unwell, dear, don’t stay up like this . . .’
– ‘Unwell?’ Sparkling like a bejewelled body
Mother smiles.
– ‘How worse can I get, my dear?
‘And what am I to do with well-being, anyway?’

Have to go back once more before I go to sleep myself.
– ‘Half past two, Mother dear, call it a day --
‘Come, lie down in your bed.’
– ‘I shall, I shall, just this little bit left --
‘Reading isn’t easy any more, thanks to the cataract!’
Smiles a trifle awkwardly, drowns in printed letters again.
The glow from the table lamp, the shining
Concentration of the magnifying glass,
Rub out the ticking away of
The alarm clock.
As I return to my room, I hear
Mother telling her nurse -- ‘No, no, dear child,
‘Don’t switch the light off,
‘Let the lamp glow --
‘One more page is still left’ . . .

One more page is still left, one more
Paragraph, one more sentence left --
Give her one more word, dear Nurse,
One more day.

TO THE LION-TAMER

Wouldn't I remember? Bah! All the
Whip scars, each bruise, everything
Remain covered under this brown fur.
Remember well, indeed.
Just that 'swish' sound once, up on my two feet.
Begging alms with my two front paws. 'Swish, swish' --
With my mane and all, rolling
On the concrete floor, rolling, summer or winter
Notwithstanding. If the 'swish' sound is heard thrice?
    Unhesitatingly I
Jump straight into the
Inescapable trap of fire. Once more?
Once more --

Remember well, indeed.
Into my ears an intoxicating, tender 'swish' --
Without faltering I jump into the blazing
Ring of fire. Again?
Again --
From the dark
Rings the inescapable spectre's call, like a chain,
Jangling claps, enmeshes me all over
Like a snake. -- My two eyes
Get dazzled by the beams
Of the floodlight rings. Even the fire
Is nothing much. Ring master,
Forgotten nothing at all. What I don't remember

Is my earlier name. Remember not
What the forest was like?

(*Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee*)

BIJOYA MUKHOPADHYAY

This eminent poet of contemporary Bengal hardly needs any introduction to poetry-lovers here or elsewhere. She has been writing for a long time, and has been widely published in journals and book form. Her poetry has also been published in English translation in journals in India and abroad. The poems translated here have been taken from her latest collection *Saamne Aapnaaraa* (You all in front of me).

A MONOLOGUE WITH MILI

1.

Dawn is breaking, Mili. This early in the day --
Will you have some tea? -- Written a poem, want to
Read it out to you. Don't have to praise it, just concentrate
And listen. Look at me, please -- here's your tea -- I'm reading --

> If I'm qualified, condemn me
> If I'm honoured in my life, condemn me
> That is how this world is, full of impossible mistakes --

Got any meaning out of it? Not much. Well, then listen to
Another --

> The ring is round, and so
> Can't keep anything tied
> Fastens only the fiancé's hesitations.

Mili, I'm feeling well. How about going out just like that
Today -- fishing, a boat trip, a swimming bout
For the whole day? Mili, will you live in the jungle with me
-- As in that story -- will you stay for a few days? Feeling
Sad about your father? Don't worry, you'll learn to bear it.
A tunnel under the river -- starts where?
Under the earth, and the mountains, under the fathomless water

A rickety bridge. Someone calls, asks me to sink, to touch
The truth; someone punctures my heart with that call. Mili, we must
Walk along that sunken bridge, looking for the point where it starts.

Do not be afraid, by and by you'll learn to endure
This sinking deep.

2.

Winter is almost here, Mili. In this filthy, muddy city of ours, a few transitory days of pleasure. Roads carpeted with the red and yellow of dry leaves, our days for walking. Guests from the lands of snow have all flocked here, crowding the Institute, Nandan, Jorasanko -- just like Siberian birds.

Summer had been my season so long, Mili. Today, I realize, even winter fulfils me. Staying up the night for a music conference -- after how long, tell me! A host of people, prim and proper, on the tarpaulin-covered field -- some acquaintances, some friends -- taken trouble to be here, to overcome their pains. As darkness begins to lift, I trample the dew-moist grass to return home, to catch the dawn breaking. My head lolls, as if drunk, about to explode. Behind me, the fading strains of Jasraj's *Bhairavee* -- facing me, the next solid day, waiting to be hatched.

Care to go for a trip, Mili, before the winter ends -- towards the Western Ghats, the Arabian Sea? Let's go to the sands; wade in the saline water. Just wishful thinking, of course. Won't go anywhere, in fact. Uncrowded silence is a sky-flower -- a flint covered in dust. Will take me to the jungles -- Lala had said. A rich man's whimsical words, could they ever be true? Had an invitation to a tea garden, another to the Ayodhya hills. I have no companion. My companion has no time. Only, my time flows unheeded.

It's getting over -- the cold, sun-bright days, the days of *aamon* rice, the absolute last day the aged would have, the day of the son's return from the army.

3.

How longer, Geetanjali Iyer, will you be reading the
news with a face so perfect?
How many more women prisoners will you tackle,
Kiran Bedi, how many more hapless truants?
Will the light in your eyes never fade, dear
Jochhonakumari?

People like such lines, Mili. Friends feel pleased. But, is that my sole mission -- pleasing them? I have no other duty, in fact. No lights in the room at this moment, the coals in my flashlight are weak. All this writing at midnight, as I lie on my stomach, all this aching love -- just want to spread it inside your dreamless sleep, among the lonely winds. I'm like a haunted conscience, in fact, the hesitation of gentlefolk, failed indecision. When I go, Mili, hope I leave in complete silence -- no one should know -- except the tremor in these hands, and this pale beam of light.

The sky has now been touched by stagnation. This 'I' has been
flowing for so long --
As if I'm going, as if I want to go now. My eyes just skim the surface, my mind can perceive from Inside the eyes. My mind can sense -- a huge body of water ahead, lacking colour and touch, Soundless, long-flowing water pervades all as it encircles me.

Why does that water appear, Mili, with so much ado, like a long
poem -- only to
Break into fragments -- this tiny little earthen lamp, flowing with
shivers all over?

(*Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee*)

Bijoya Mukhopadhyay

THE DESTRUCTIVE TREE, WISH-CREEPER

Midnight is behind me now.
As if the sly, bright stars have gone to sleep
Their masks laid off, inside out.
Even the sly crave rest; the burnt-out crave glowing festival lamps.

On my body, just this scorching, sleepless night
That knows only an empty-house star,
Asks through its signal light -- for even more intense burning.
On the palm-leaf mattress floating in sweet water
The cunning, huge fish lies on its side,
In the summer garden, the poison of flowers pours into my ears.
In this darkness, cover up just the softness of the soil
Sow a seeding banyan tree there
So that a destructive tree can grow
Complete with its dark shadow.

When the beams of the signal fade, I look down on the soil.
Humid earthen smell hangs on the blurred balcony
Rainwater caught still on the compound, like an enduring drawing
Rainwater slides down the tiles on the roof to drench
The leaves of the creeper in pinkish bloom,
The deep eyes of its darkened leaves.

Only my wish-creeper
Goes adrift in these untimely rains
On its destroyed leaves float the dark shadow, the inescapable kiss.

(*Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee*)

THE LIVED TRUTH

I watch him. He sits with half-closed eyes,
Grave silence emanating from his curled-up body. Not all of it is play-acting, maybe.
Comes inside with soundless steps, goes out without making any sound, as well,
Rich whiskers brushing his lips, a victory-mark adorning his forehead.
He knows he is a male cat.
His solitude, his fearless personality --
Just a rehearsal before the debate begins.
All the qualities of an experienced mass leader evidently there in him.

Do we, human beings, alone fear solitude, like plants?
The leaves of a creeper, a care-flower
Delicately covered by the leaves,
A potential seed in its womb, a shade for the future held in that seed . . .
The lived life is just like that, entangles in a mesh of associations.
What, then, is free love? Does it exist only in theory, not in truth?

Rows of ants crawl in haste towards safety, carrying white eggs in their mouths.

(*Translated from the original Bengali by Paramita Banerjee*)

M. K. NAIK

IN THEIR OWN VOICE:
Recent Indian English Women Poets: A Critical Survey

Four decades ago, Kamala Das had urgently articulated "the muted whisper at the core of womanhood", expressing "the endless female hungers". During the last two decades, several younger women poets have taken up Kamala's 'brown burden', and presented many more aspects of the complex fate of being a woman in modern Indian society.

Before the work of these poets is considered, it is necessary to look back at the women poets of the previous generation, and note how many of them have continued to write beyond 1980. Unfortunately very few have and this includes Kamala Das herself. The publication of the Collected Works of a writer normally indicates that their work is now complete. Kamala Das's *Collected Poems*, which appeared in 1985 seemed to suggest just that. Later, she published only one more collection: *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections from Kamala Das* (1997). It does contain a few new poems, but they do not constitute a distinctly new departure. Another senior poet whose *Selected Poems* (1988) have appeared is Leela Dharmaraj.

But a very large number of the contemporaries of Kamala Das have published virtually nothing after 1980. Among these are Monica Varma, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Tilottama Hajan, Mary Ann Dasgupta, Gauri Pant, Indira Devi Dhanrajgir, Mary Erulkar and several others. The reasons for their continued silence are not known or cannot be guessed, except in one or two cases. Gauri Deshpande has reportedly said, "I could still churn out Indian English poems by the bushel, but I began to see, thanks to Nissim (Ezekiel) that what I have is a knack, a talent, not a calling. My calling is narrative fiction, mostly in Marathi, and thanks to Nissim, I discovered it" (Rao 155). Mamta Kalia is a bilingual writer; after making a spectacular beginning with *Tribute to Papa* (1970), she seems to have preferred to write in Hindi.

Only less than half of the senior women poets have still continued to write. In her *The Jackass and the Lady* (1980), Suniti Namjoshi's irony has lost none of its edge, seen in her earlier *Poems* (1967). She deftly turns traditional fables upside down, as in "Beauty and the Beast": "Beauty loved the ugly beast / And thinking 'twas a prince she'd wed, / waited for his shape to change / And found there were two beasts in bed". Two more books of verse by Namjoshi were published in Canada in the '80s: *The Authentic Lie* (1982) and *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares* (1984). Her *Blue Donkey Fables* (1988) are in prose, but there are also some poems in the collection. Namjoshi's perceptions are usually aggressively ironic, but occasionally she surprises us by writing in a different vein altogether, as in the Sonnet, "Weed", which presents an unsentimental, clear-eyed view of modern love. "Let's take an axe, my darling, and hack / at this weed. . . . We did not plant it. No, neither you nor I / need admit to such a thing. We both know / how on several occasions we willed it to die, / and, believing it dead, we let it grow. / It's already a sapling. Once we're dead / and lie helplessly in the earth below, / it will wave its triumphant green overhead. . . ." One wishes Namjoshi wrote more poetry in this vein. Irony is delicious, but our Age has perhaps supped irony fully, and other and equally valid perceptions are possible.

Margaret Chatterjee, an Englishwoman married to an Indian, and living in India for the last fifty years and more, had published four books of poems between 1967 and 1987. Her fifth book, *The Rimless Spectacle*, appeared in 1987. As a teacher of philosophy for a number of years, Chatterjee writes a verse full of quiet reflection, without, however, any startlingly new insights. *The Rimless Spectacle* does not evince any development or growth which would warrant a fresh appraisal of her work. Another minor talent, Anna Sujata Mathai, had begun to publish in 1970 (*Crucifixions*). Her *The Attic of Night* came out in 1991. Mathai's chief weakness has been her tendency to lapse into the conventional. Her new book shows that she has not yet got over it.

The train journey as a symbol of the journey of life is now a very hackneyed motif, used even in popular film songs. Yet, Mathai uses it without batting an eyelid in "Journey"; and when, in "Voyage" she tells us, "To begin to love / is to set out to sea / in a small boat / destination unknown", we find ourselves asking, "Haven't we heard this before?".

Among the 'New' poets, a sizable group was part of the school called 'Bombay Poets', associated in one capacity or another with Nissim Ezekiel, virtually the 'father' of Modern Indian English Poetry, either as student or colleague, or associate or friend or disciple, or admirer or well-wisher. These women poets include Eunice de Souza, Tara Patel, Kavita Ezekiel, Imtiaz Dharkar, Charmayne D'Souza, Melanie Silgardo, Menka Shivdasani and Mukta Sambrani.

Eunice de Souza, the senior most of these poets had already made her mark earlier in *Fix*(1979). To this she has now added *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988) and two books of *Selected Poems: Ways of Belonging* (1990) and *Selected and New Poems* (1994). The prevailing tone in *Fix* was bitingly ironical, as the poet pilloried the bigotry, hypocrisy and duplicity in the Goan Catholic society in which she grew up. "Feeding the poor at Christmas" shows how it is not so much true Christian charity as vanity and self-interest that can be the real motive behind this gesture. So, the speaker in the poem tells the poor, "Say thank you / and a rosary for us every evening". "Catholic Mother" presents Francis X. D'Souza, "father of the year", and "Pillar of the Church". He declares, "By the grace of God . . . / we've had seven children / (in seven years) . . . Lovely Catholic Family / says Mother Superior / The pillar's wife / says nothing".

Women in Dutch Painting shows both continuity and change, with change predominating. The chip-on-her-shoulder, acid-on-her-tongue speaker in *Fix* now confesses that she is "a sour old puss in verse"; she admits that "There is poison in my tongue. /

I maul. I calcify". But she has mellowed now and her irony has become much milder, as in the 'Encounter at a London Party' of the "Five London Pieces". Here, the speaker, an Indian lady, meets an Englishman, who wonders "in what language" to speak to her, and desperately trying to find a way out of the difficulty offers her "a pickled onion on a stick, instead". The lady's response is full of mild irony: "You are young and perhaps forgetful / that the Empire lives / only in the pure vowel sounds I offer you / above the din".

In fact, irony now even makes way for compassion, as in section IV of "Return", in which, addressing 'Temple-tarts', who have given up their sordid, traditional calling to become college students, the speaker says, "You hear catcalls in the street", but "Sitting alone in a Bombay restaurant, / listening to the innuendoes of college clerks / . . . I know something / of how you feel".

From compassion to affection is but a short step. In "For Rita's Daughter Just Born", the poet's persona reveals a tenderness which the author of *Fix* could perhaps have never imagined she would ever be capable of. Her prayer for the new-born child is "Luminous new leaf / May the sun rise gently / on your unfurling / in the courtyard always linger / the smell of earth after rain. . . / (and may you never hear) the shrill cry of kites".

A new note of introspection is also struck now. We hear a cry of anguish in "Pilgrim": "Where does the heart find rest?". The speaker is even ready to "flay myself in poems", in trying to achieve this happy consummation. In all humility, she prays, "Let me grow / as the grass grows". The title poem, "Women in Dutch Painting", perhaps indicates the ideal to be followed: "The afternoon sun is on their faces. / They are calm, not stupid, / pregnant, not bovine". Apparently these women seem to the speaker to exude a spirit of serenity, maturity and calm. The bitter satirist of *Fix* has at last found her haven of peace.

Love is not one of the values of life which de Souza seems particularly to care for. But it is at the centre of the verse of Tara Patel. In her *Single Woman* (1991), she touches upon several facets of love, "this alien magic", which is so potent a spell that "Just once, just once, you want to be in love".

First, there is that insatiable hunger for love, which makes you beg "at life's alter / one crumb at a time to stay alive". Yet you find that "you have made yourself at home in hell, / waiting for a man to come naked and / with no price tags attached".

But the irony of fate is that always "He is another woman's man, / . . . in your rosary of crumbs. Other women's men offer you love / in rationalised crumbs". If, on one occasion, the poet's persona feels that love is "an acquired knowledge, a developed taste", on another, she declares, "Love. . . is a kind of freedom". Then she asks, "Can a man take you by the roots / of your anguish / and set you free?" In such a man's arms it must be "Permanently afternoon". In a darker mood, however, she dismisses love as an "illusion I've lived with for long. . . ."; and then her cry is, "my permanent address is hell" . . . "I function as a one-woman court-room. / I have sealed up my life in black envelopes / addressed to no one in particular". Then, in a fit of generosity, she tells her lover, "I only wish someone will love you / as much as I do".

This love is not just an eternal emotion; the speaker in one poem frankly tells us, "I want to touch a man. . . ." and in another poem, the woman's cry is "Touch me, touch, touch me somewhere,/ give me permission to touch you" because touch speaks a language which communicates far more effectively than mere words: "once touched, silence is articulate".

An interesting feature of Patel's verse is the sparseness of imagery in it. It is a poetry of transparent directness. It is perhaps here that the influence of Ezekiel is to be seen.

It is unfortunate that Patel has ceased to publish after her first collection. She reportedly said it was "because my own poems started to upset me, the way I was writing them" (Rao 290). One hopes second thoughts will prevail, for the 'single woman' is too precious to remain single for long.

One turns to Kavita Ezekiel's *Family Sunday and Other Poems* (1989) with high hopes, for she is a daughter of Nissim Ezekiel. But there are very few poems in this slender collection which do credit to the Ezekiel name. Only in a couple of poems irony is deftly used, reminding us of Ezekiel himself. "Family Sunday" is a lively picture of a routine Sunday gathering, with the same people, the same place, the same food, the same remarks, and the same jokes. Parents think that this is the way to spend a happy Sunday, and "we children / are supposed to be content". "Love Poem After Marriage" enunciates Love's commandment as "Change the baby's diaper, dear."

It is surprising that a poet capable of such ironic flourishes should lapse occasionally into sheer banality, as in "Siddharth". Here, returning to her small son in the evening is for the mother "a time of more than return, / a time for peace, love, joy / and above all, Hope / which springs eternal. . . ." In "Something to Live For", one vainly looks for the ironic tongue in the cheek, as the poet solemnly admonishes us, "You must have a path / to pursue: / an object to work for, / a plan and a purpose".

This kind of conventionality is unthinkable in the case of Imtiaz Dharker, perhaps the only Muslim woman poet of note we have so far. In her *Purdah* (1988) and *Postcards from God* (1994), she looks at the world through the eyes of an intelligent and sensitive Muslim woman, reacting to her experience in different ways, in different moods, because, as she herself says, "There are so many of me". Purdah is naturally "too much" with her, but she finds different meanings in it, at different times. It is "a kind of safety. / The body finds a place to hide", but then, it is the safety of

the tomb. When you wear the purdah, people you have known "make different angles / in the light, their eyes aslant, / a little sly". Purdah makes you carry "between the thighs, a sense of sin". It is after all, a symbol of religious, moral and social taboos, which a spirited young woman would like to break; but worst of all is the purdah of the mind.

In other poems, it is not the young Muslim woman, but the woman that speaks. She too complains about taboos, 'do's and don'ts', restrictions and prescriptions. Some of these are listed in "A Woman's Place". "Mouths must be watched, especially / if you're a woman. A smile / should be stifled with the sari-end. / No one must see your serenity cracked, / even with delight. / If occasionally you need to scream, do it / alone in front of a mirror...." In spite of these handicaps, woman is no subject of pity for the poet; on the contrary, she celebrates the feminine mystique in these lines: "it is women who know. / You can take in / the invader time after time / and still be whole".

Dharker writes in a spare, controlled style with minimum use of imagery, a feature rather surprising in a poet who is also a noted painter: she has held exhibitions both in India and abroad.

One is immediately reminded of Ezekiel's wit, when one reads Charmayne D'Souza's *A Spelling Guide to Woman* (1990). The title poem indicates the prevailing mood and tone of the book: "Woo men / womb men, / woe men, / whim men, / warm men, / who, men? / no, woman". D'Souza's view of the man-woman nexus, love and marriage is unromantic to the point of bordering on the cynical. In "When God first made a Whore" she tells us, "One day / God will ask for this sweaty body / of mine, / but, like all the rest, / He will have to stand in line".

The speaker in "The Rational Animal" describes a woman who is "ready to throw herself / under" a man "though he may have/ only a follicle of charm, / only the sinecure of intelligence, /

and seem to be / relatively free / of syphilis, grease / or small pox", and adds, "After all, men are such animals, / little thinking that by acting / the sacrificial goat, / she too comes among the genus / of quadrupeds". And this is how the male speaker in "Strange Bedfellows" sums up marriage: "Her mangalsutra / will be a bullet to her breast, / My garland / a hempen rope / around my neck. . . ." But there is perhaps wisdom as well as wit in the distinction the poet makes between happy and unhappy marriages: "Happy marriages / make good wars, / with decisive victories, / decisive defeats. / Unhappy marriages / only make for witty epigrams / and guerilla attacks".

Melanie Silgardo's (b.1956) poems first appeared in *Three Poets* (1978), and her first independent collection, *Skies of Design*, was published in 1985. Like D'Souza, Silgardo also is a feminist, but she speaks in a different idiom, which has little use for wit. She too takes an unblinkered view of all human relationships. Her persona in "For Father on the Shelf " bluntly tells her parent, "Father, you will be proud to know / you left something behind. / The year you died / I inherited a mind". This bluntness makes Silgardo's irony corrosive when she uses it, which is not too often. In "Goan Death", the mourners at the burial of "my father" are "Vultures clustered round / in lace and satin blacks / weeping salt, / raw red their mouths, / mumbling incoherent prayers, / their dentures going brown". The speaker adds, "Wife, my mother / . . . wept / no salt-corrosive. / Destruction clung inside her. / But, / Vultures . . . / picking entrails neatly / said: / Were you true wife / your head be bowed, / in weeping, mourning state."

Totally uncharacteristic of the Ezekiel school, however, is Silgardo's surrealistic imagery, as in the following: "You balance mountains on your forehead / and pine trees on your fingertips. . . ." and "The insane need / to roll up the sky. / Stand it up / in some convenient place. . . ." Another example is "Then he plucked the moon / like a deformed berry / lifted the sluice horizon / and let the seas cascade."

Surrealistic imagery is also the fate of Menka Shivdasani in her *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990). The speaker in her "Repair Job" tells us, "Yesterday I slit a jugular / that had strayed into a corner of my brain. / Nobody screamed. . . . I put the jugular together, / stuck the slits together with gum. / Nobody noticed what happened; / the businessman -- he smiled and proposed". In "Protein-Rich", we are told, "I look the world in the eye; / it congeals like a stale / egg-yolk. . . . The earth fluffs up like albumen".

"Iron", says Shivadasani, "is short / for ironic", and the iron has entered many of her pages. Her persona in "Are you There?" says, "I have a sneaking suspicion / god died of indigestion. / The raw rice they kept giving him / must have proved too much."

A strong note of feminism is struck in "The Game You Play": "Football is another world / where only men belong. / What the hell / am I doing / being kicked around / just because I've got this / leather hide?".

Another theme is the sordiness of city life, which is summed up as "a pointless journey / between Churchgate and insanity, / always along the same tracks. . . ." Here you live your life in "a bottleful of gas" (which refers to both atmospheric pollution and Coca Cola); the workers in a chemical factory are seen "spewing out at five like fumes"; and in the midst of the crowd, you feel "solitary / as a murderer and that your soul / is made of teak".

Urban life is also one of the preoccupations of Mukta Sambrani, whose *The Woman in This Room Isn't Lonely* (1997) is perhaps the latest work of the school of the women poets of the Bombay circle. Sambrani sums up the urban world-view as "making up for Monday morning lows / with Saturday evening highs". She also keeps thinking about womanhood and all that it spells. "The Same" is one of her finest poems: ". . .this is the same woman / as the girl in the picture, mister / only a little older / her

mother has slapped her cheeks flat / the road has sucked her feet dry / . . . someone has had her dreams / someone has had her stories. / This is the same woman, mister, / the girl-child in the picture. / This is the same".

The speaker in "Two ways of Being" declares, "There are two ways a woman can become a coconut or a coconut tree / either she shoots up or falls and turns soft inside." "One or Two" presents a no-nonsense attitude to the eternal man-woman nexus: "We / have resolved all that emotional stuff between us / It is like / filling an empty ditch and running a road through / So, we / can walk our two ways and wave and smile / There is a road between us now / It is the same thing we could say we share".

Apart from an occasional lapse into banality as in "Spring is the time for love and trees" ("And This One"), Sambrani writes in a limpid style which is the hallmark of the school to which she belongs.

Apart from the Bombay school, there are several other women poets elsewhere in India and abroad whose work compels attention. Chronologically considered, the earliest of them is Sunita Jain, whose first book, *Man of My Desires* appeared in 1978. Her subsequent collections are *Between You and God* (1979); *Beneath the Frost* (1979); *Lovetime* (1980); *Silence* (1982); and *Find me with Rain* (1984). *Till I Find Myself* (1986) is a representative selection, with some new poems.

The most noteworthy feature of Jain's verse is that in an age when the poet almost habitually lisps in irony (because the irony comes a little too easily, perhaps) she has the courage to celebrate love and its various facets including the romantic one, as in the short poem, "Is It?": "The mirror asked the mirrored, / 'Are you sick, your colour is high?' / 'No.' / 'Are you drunk, the eyes are bright?' / 'Oh, no.' / 'You are all aglow, is it. . .?' 'Hush. Silly . . . hush!' ". But the darker side of love is not ignored. "The Prey"

expresses this idea laconically: "the angler / so patient / expectant / the prey / so curious / starved / bait / wait / watch / duck / dash / caught / he tired / she dead". But love can also be self-discovery; hence, "Till I find myself / or till / you find me / I wish to walk in crowds / . . . Ignored." And "What Hurts Now" presents an unusual response to love: "What hurts now / is not that it ended / but that in the aftermath / it was easy / to learn without you / to live".

Equally unusual is Jain's imagery, as in "my kerchief world", "I have been tied to an elephant's foot", "hair orderly like school-children in a file", "the sieved soul"; and "lodged like a sorrow / in the Helen of my heart".

In contrast to Jain, Meena Alexander is a poet with a wide range of references. Beginning her poetic career with *Stone Roots* (1980), she has thereafter published *House of a Thousand Doors* (1985), *River and Bridge* (1995) and *The Shock of Arrival* (1996).

Alexander has been living abroad for a number of years, but her roots are firmly planted in her native Kerala soil. Hence, while reacting to her Western experience, her mind keeps on making an effortless transition to the Eastern milieu. Thus, the speaker in "City Street" in the USA turns for a simile to "a burnt dosa on a griddle / . . . idlis wasting in steam". And "at the edge of San Andreas Fault", her persona remembers the "tin pins you get / a paise a dozen in Moor Market". From Central Park, New York to Deer Park, Sarnath is but a short step for her.

A strong political awareness is another striking feature of Alexander's poetry, and this is a trait which few contemporary women poets share. In "News of the Word", a woman from Cambodia remembers how, during the political trouble there, "I carried / my mother's head in a sack / and ran three days and nights / through a rice-field. . . ." "The Young of Tiananmen" is a moving tribute to martyrs of the notorious Tiananmen Gate massacre: "As blood swallowed them whole / they became our blood. . . ." "Prison

Cell" is an imaginative reconstruction of Nelson Mandela's experience in prison, where "even an ant, a fly / would be company". The poet also writes about Safdar Hashmi, the Marxist playwright, who was killed by a mob, while performing a street-play in support of striking workers. Her keen political conscience makes note of "Turks burnt alive in Germany"; a Muslim woman in Sarajeve shot to death; a man in Somalia "locked to his starving child"; and "Hundreds hacked to death in Ayodhya / in Ram's golden name".

Alexander's reflective poems are far less successful. Lacking a solid grounding in external reality, they tend to be obscured by half-articulated thought in dangerous league with private significance, resulting in a miasma of vaguely conveyed meaning.

Precisely the same complaint can be made about Suma Josson, the author of *Poems and Plays* (1982) and *A Harvest of Light* (1994). In "Island", Josson's persona describes herself as "marooned / in the making of my own body. . . ." As opposed to this, Josson the poet, could best be described as "marooned in the making of her own mind". Hers is an intensely inward-looking poetry, in which nature in its different manifestations, external reality, diurnal happenings, and private memory are only starting points for the journey within to map out the mental world. This strategy succeeds best when the connection between the stimulus and the response is firmly established, and the resultant mapping of the mind is sufficiently meaningful, as in "The Separation". Here, the speaker tells her grandfather that one day will separate them, "Just as that morning, / when I was six, / you abandoned me / for a moment / on the beach. / The first lesson on fear".

It was perhaps inevitable that a poetry preoccupied so fiercely with the world within should employ surrealistic imagery as its natural mode of expression. So we are not surprised to hear the following feats being performed: "I tied the sun to the wooden

wheelbarrow / that childhood's carpenter had nailed out for me....”; “the earth came to me in the rain, / as a rainbubble in my palm”; and “stars / became a bunch of golden hibiscus in my palms”.

Poles apart in response and method from Josson, Vasantha Surya (*The Stalk of Time*, 1985) writes a verse which is immediately accessible, perhaps at the cost of depth and subtlety, for her irony operates mostly on the surface. The objects of her irony are religion, tradition, society, marriage, and science. “Lord of the Seventh Hill” describes the deity on the hill in terms of an efficient professional: “Your charge for consultations / is reasonable, considering your experience / in the field, and your varied clientele.... / Today's professionals could learn a thing or two / from you, about goodwill, / and how to keep the image (pun perhaps intended) credible”. “Wedding procession” offers a cynical view of marriage: the nadaswaram player who leads the procession “straddled the whorish street” and “sprayed a raga / like a tingling balm / over her trampled body” leaving her “naked / under torn cinema posters / to a cuckold / in an obsolete red Chevrolet convertible-- / suited, booted, / rose-garlanded”.

A South Indian like Vasantha Surya, Lakshmi Kannan, the author of *Exiled Gods* (1985) seems to be more conscious of her southern heritage. “Burnt Brown by the Sun” contrasts the North Indian notion of Aryan superiority with Dravidian diffidence, “fed . . . on curds and Kamban”. The poem ends with an ironic flourish: “This Aryan . . . said the other day, ‘you know, you are quite an attractive woman / Even though you are from the South’ ”. Apart from this great divide, there are the linguistic differences between the States, which often cause problems: “In polyglot country / mother tongues drip blood / . . . . Only those that recant / tongueless, faceless, nameless / will be non-maligned / in this our non-aligned, non-violent / non-acting, nondescript / non-nation”.

Like many of her contemporaries, feminism is also one of Kannan's preoccupations. Kanyakumari is viewed as “the eternal

virgin / frozen in history. . . ."; she lives "within every woman / reserved, aloof. . . ." And Draupadi's significance is that "She has done it / Has offended the supreme male / into a sullen silence / by her terrible nakedness". Woman is viewed as a "tired tenant / eager at last to own a house / and not be owned by one". "Femaleness" is "an indiscretion", "pressed / with the weight of history / a long gallery of / lonesome female specters". Hence, the female infant's cries mingle with "the moans of the women around / lamenting the birth / of a baby girl".

A curious feature of Kannan's style is the strange mixture in it of accomplished phrases and worn-out clichés. She can startle us by speaking about "honey-heavy" blood and "afternoons of pealing stillness" and then disappoint us with the banality of "deafening silence" and "the cold finger of time".

A poet with a far more sure sense of style, is Sujata Bhatt, whose first book, *Brunizem*, appeared in 1988, and was followed by *Monkey Shadows* (1991), *The Stinking Rose* (1995), *Point No Point: Selected Poems* (1997), and *Augatora* (2000). "Brunizem" is a coinage compounded of French and Russian elements, and refers to the dark brown prairie soil of a kind found in Asia, Europe and North America. The relevance of the word is made clear when one notes that Bhatt's verse deals with all the three continents. She is a widely traveled poet, and we encounter her in the New York subway, the Durban Botanical Garden, a super-market in Gronningen and even in a bathtub in Belfast.

At the same time, Bhatt has not renounced her oriental heritage. She is as much interested in Sujata (her namesake), the first woman disciple of the Buddha, as in Euridice; the massacre of the Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 moves her, and so does the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. And we find her spending a whole day with buffaloes and goats in a Gujarat village, and later, ten 'how-do-you-do' minutes in Iowa city, USA.

This is probably why Bhatt seems to be obsessed with the question of language, which she looks at from different points of view at different times. Aware of the limitations of language, she confesses, "The best story, of course, / is the one you can't write / you won't write / it's something that you can only live / in your heart, /not on paper". She writes, "The other night I dreamt English / was my middle name", but goes on to use not only words and phrases from Gujarati, but also whole lines, pleading that they alone can express her meaning fully. This raises an interesting question which needs to be examined more fully.

An expatriate like Sujata Bhatt, Debjani Chatterji, daughter of a diplomat, grew up in Japan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, and Egypt and had her higher education mostly in England, where she has been living for the last three decades and more. Her *I was that Woman* was first published in England in 1989. Like Bhatt, Chatterji also is preoccupied with the question of language. In "To the English Language", she tells English, "register me among your step-children" because "that special love that flows easy with my birth-right / is for Bengali, my mother. . . ." Yet, "For generations you called to me, / siren of the seven western seas. . . I have subverted your vocabulary / . . . . I have tilled the frozen soil of your grammar/ . . . but I do not come to your rhythms empty-handed / -- the treasures of other traditions are mine. . . ." She ends by saying, "I have learnt to love you / -- the hard way".

The immigrant's fate is another of Chatterji's concerns, as in "Primary Purpose": "No matter though you're British born, / All know you are an Asian woman. / No matter what your generation,/ You will always be an immigrant".

Chatterji is a committed feminist. The title poem, "I was that Woman", is a celebration of womanhood. Woman is presented here in her several roles, from Eve, "the first rebel", to Sita, Draupadi, Joan of Arc, and lastly, the modern working woman, "who typed away from ten to five with two tea breaks". "I

Remembered Cinderella" gives us a shock of recognition by pointing out that the ancient Chinese practice of binding the feet of women so that they were forced to take mincing steps, and the glorification of Cinderella's small feet in the Western fairy tale are both examples of the same male fetish thrust upon Woman.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair's *The Hyoid Bone* (1992) has more than its usual share of the exuberance that a first book of poems normally has. She does not want us to forget that she is a specialist in linguistics. In "Language Lessons" there is actually a list of "Related Reading", in which Saussure and Chomsky rub shoulders with Panini and Patanjali. Her linguistic experiments, however, remain on a rather elementary level, as when, in "Genderole", every line has all its words dovetailed: "Considerthefemalebody yourmostbasictext". What exactly is the effect sought to be produced by this is not very clear.

There is considerable variety of scene and setting in the book, which takes us from a small medieval castle in England to Singapore, and from California to Japan. But *The Hyoid Bone* (which means the bone at the base of the tongue that makes speech possible) would have been a far better book if its variety of locale had been made to yield more meaningful insights, and had the linguistic play been less clever and more serious.

Nair's *The Ayodhya Cantos: Poems* (1999) is a more ambitious undertaking. *The Cantos* deal with the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fanatics in December, 1992. The *Prelude: Journey from Baroda* is, according to the poet, an "attempt at a 'national allegory'. . . .(it) tries to describe some of the syncretic traditions that have gone into the making of modern India -- symbolized by the figures of a Sufi ascetic, Meera Bai and Mahatma Gandhi". The three main characters in the *Cantos* are Hanuman, Sita and Vishnu, while goddess Bhavani is an "immanent presence." There is also a chorus of Priests, chanting verses in praise of the goddess. The postscript, *Towards Bhimbetka*,

deals with the colonial history and pre-history of the sub-continent, together with its Buddhist and Greek associations.

In *The Ayodhya Cantos* the poet has evidently bitten off more than she has been able to chew properly. Neither the *Prelude* nor the *Postscript* organically connect with the Cantos, and the poem seems to suffer from a basic confusion. What exactly is the poet trying to do? Is she trying to write a long poem with serious political content, or writing in the mock-heroic vein? She cannot obviously do both at the same time and expect to achieve unity of effect. The "Finale" exhorts the people of Ayodhya to "above all, act"; but just a few pages earlier we are told how "meticulously Vishnu planned the whole operation" (i.e. the Masjid demolition). Again, Vishnu is made to wear a wrist watch. Nair's geography is equally surrealistic, without achieving any tangible artistic gain. She describes the "frozen peaks" in the Dandaka forest, which is describing a man dying of sunstroke in London in December. And what, one may ask, is Bhavani, a Vedic goddess doing in the Epic story of Rama, who, curiously enough never appears at all in this *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. The poems in the last Section, "Gargi's Silence", which are rich in reflection are perhaps the most rewarding part of the collection.

Like Nair, Chatterji and Bhatt, Rachna Joshi also takes us abroad frequently in her *Configurations* (1993), but it is clear that her heart is in India, always preoccupied with configurations of memories, personal and familial. Her persona tells her grandmother, "you fed me milk-- / rubbed me in butter, / left me some impalpable strength / to face the reiterated patterns of pain and healing / that have followed me here, to this alien land" ("Untitled"). There are sad memories also, those of "lost years / ....lost because we failed / ...to open our hearts" ("Manque"). They refuse to die, because it is "simplistic ...to imagine / that you can.... forget those faces, / because you have moved away" ("Vacuity").

In fact, in a sense, it is memory that constitutes being. Hence, the speaker in "Transition" confesses, "I see myself only as woman when I think back. . . (though) here I am. Oceans / away from home. . . ." The most persistent memories are those of home in Lucknow, as seen in "The House" and "The Old House in Lucknow": "Pale straight lines / clean-cut verandah / a backyard full of vegetables / and a basement crowded with books / . . . . remain in my memory" ("The House"). What does it matter if the old house was not exactly a paradise? "I thought I never wanted a patch of earth-- / patch of discord, feuds, vendettas./But I am weakening." For, home is always home, because it is home.

Other poetry collections of the last two decades include Vera Sharma's *Random Thoughts* (1980) and *The Blind Musician and Other Poems* (1988); Rooma Mehra's *For You* (1985); Achala Bhatia's *The Awakening* (1989); Renne Ranchan's *Pain Propels* (1989); Malavika Sanghvi's *Poems: Recent and Early* (1989); Vijaya Goel's *The Autumn Flowers* (1990); Anju Makhija's *View from the Web* (1995); Neelima Wig's *Among the Stars* (1996); and Dineka Rayasam's *Phases of the Moon* (n.d.). Divya Rao (b.1985) is perhaps the youngest Indian English poet to have published a book. Her *A Drop of Knowledge in the Ocean of Truth* (1997) appeared when she was only twelve. Senior to her by two years, Natasha D'Souza published her *Stepping Stones* in 1998. Leela Gandhi's *Measures of Home* appeared in 2000.

In addition to these, there are several first books of verse, mostly by young women, whose enthusiasm for writing verse is as commendable as the quality of their work is generally lamentable. The proper place for them is in a Bibliography.

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C.VIJAYASREE

TEXTUAL TRANSGRESSIONS: A READING OF SUNITI NAMJOSHI'S POETRY AND FICTION

> The house made of candy, the witch wicked; but now that they are outcasts and must live in the forest, to whom can they turn? Gretel takes charge. She is braver and wiser. Besides it is distinctly possible that in this wild witch's world she stands a better chance. She tells Hansel to wait behind a tree and walks up the path and knocks on the door. The witch lets her in. Hansel is frightened. The house of candy has swallowed her up. After a while the door reopens. Gretel calls out, 'It's all right, little Hansel. You can come in now.' But the witch frightens him. He runs back home to his wicked stepmother. When he grows to be a man, he will fight them all. But Gretel doesn't run, she stays on. (*Feminist Fables* 93)

The story sounds familiar. Of course it is the story of Hansel and Gretel, but it reads differently. Isn't it Hansel who should be the stronger of the two, and Gretel who should get frightened and run away? Well, what's happening here and where did the narrator go wrong? On closer analysis we find that the narrator here has not gone wrong but is righting the wrong in addressing the gender bias of the original story. That is what Suniti Namjoshi's tales often do: invoke the familiar world of fairly tales and fables, empty them of their original patriarchal content and charge them with new meanings underscoring the need for reviewing old worlds and stereotypical modes of perception and representation. To examine the existing systems of thought, to interrogate the texts and contexts of male authority, and to offer alternate modes of cognition and perception -- these are among the prime concerns of Namjoshi's creative work. She achieves these by changing the place and place-value of things, by re-telling old tales

from shockingly new perspectives, by subverting all forms of authority, and by unsettling all conventional notions of order.

Namjoshi's re-visionist writing may best be viewed as a part of contemporary women writers' rejection of traditional narratives. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, sees this revisionany critique as a major thread in the work of twentieth century women writers:

> There is a consistent project that unites some twentieth-century women writers across the century, writers who examine how social practices surrounding gender have entered narrative, and who consequently use narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and socio-cultural construction of women. . . . Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. (1985 : 4-5)

Transgression is the key to transformation here, and appropriation turns into expropriation. Much of Namjoshi's work is marked by artful transgressions of standard narrative in thematic, technical and narratorial terms. Such transgressions necessitate an ironic vision, an ability to imagine beyond the limits of the so-called 'normal' and 'standard', and an intent for transformational change. The best part of this transformative exercise of Namjoshi lies in the general mood of playfulness in which it is all done.

This strong impulse to look at life from a different angle, to interrogate conventional value systems, and to make fresh and original discoveries seems to have guided not only her creative work, but also all her major decisions in life. She has lived life differently right from the beginning. Namjoshi, born in a highly influential Chitpavan Brahmin family of Pune, was determined to

be somebody in her own right and she was hardly twenty-three when she qualified for the Indian Administrative Service, the most highly regarded government position even today. But even as a young adult she was not enamoured of the plum job and the power it brought. As she herself put it, she was "bored" once "she figured out how to stay out of trouble." She then took study leave to pursue a master's program in Public Administration at the University of Missouri, Columbia. In 1969 she resigned from the Administrative service and moved to Montreal, Canada to do a Ph.D at McGill University. She worked on modern poetry and was awarded a doctoral degree for her thesis, "Ezra Pound and Reality: The Metaphysics of the Cantos." Namjoshi's serious preoccupation with the question of reality seems to have begun at this stage.

A major shift in her career as well as creative life occurred during the first sabbatical she spent in London and Cambridge between 1978-79, when she came under the influence of Feminist and Gay Liberation movements which provided her the idiom to define and articulate her own beliefs and inner compulsions. This was a period of intense introspection for Namjoshi. She defined and developed for herself strong political and ideological positions that manifest in and sustain her later poetic and fictional compositions. In 1988, she resigned her teaching position and moved to Devon where she presently lives and writes. A refusal to be bound by conventional roles, a restless striving after reality, a quest for alternate modes of perception and expression mark her life and work.

If there is a single theme that connects her work, from the early poems published in the sixties to her most recent novel, *Building Babel* (1996), it is a strong commitment to the belief that change is the law of life. She launches a ceaseless attack on stereotypes of all kinds since she believes that fixity and rigidity go against the grain of change and growth. Transformation is the key word in her scheme of things. Namjoshi's literary career began with the publication of a slim volume of poems in 1967. These are

poems on random themes, but reveal the unusual sensitivity of the author. In the same year she also published *Poems of Govindagraj* which she translated from Marathi with her mother, Sarojini Namjoshi. Another two anthologies of poems of Namjoshi, *More Poems* and *Cyclone in Pakistan* came out in 1971, and these early attempts are characteristic of some of the vital traits of her more mature work. For instance, her predilection for introspection and her preoccupation with societal norms and systems have always run parallel in her work. Her sensitivity to the essentially paradoxical nature of life and her reluctance to attribute fixed meanings to the phenomena of existence are manifest even in some of her early poems. I wish to quote from her first collection, *Poems*. The poem is titled "When I die I might be rich". The persona here begins by speculating on her own death:

> When I die I might be rich.
> A lawyer might come to my stately home
> And make an inventory, a collection of records,
> A collection of books, valuable perhaps?
> Odds and ends, paintings, tables and chairs.

At this point a shift in perspective occurs. While the countable material riches may be subject to assessment, invaluable natural wealth she has enjoyed all her life is beyond all reckoning. She therefore acknowledges

> But the things on which I had a lease-hold,
> Trees, grass, and blue sky
> And those I consumed free,
> Clear water and sun, friendship and love,
> Who's to account for them?

The last line sums up the paradox effectively;

> Midway
> Through my wealth, I acknowledge my debt. (*Poems* 16)

One notices a strangely felt tension between the logical workings of the reason and non-logical associations of the intuition in these early attempts of a young poet to come to grips with the enigmas of existence. The doubt, tentativeness and ambivalence that mark most poems in these anthologies anticipate the complexity and the open-minded nature of the vision of Namjoshi that is to emerge more completely in her later work.

It is with the publication of *The Jackass and Lady* (1980) that Namjoshi consolidated her poetic achievement. By this time Namjoshi's political development is complete and she comes out openly and boldly with clear indications of her own ideological positions as a feminist and a lesbian. Her inner impulses and sexual preferences, camouflaged in symbolic cocoons so far, are now laid open, and some of her most powerful and evocative verses are found in this collection. This anthology clearly indicates the directions her creative impulse is to take in her subsequent work: playing with notions of identity, revisionist myth-making, subversive re-writing of old texts and celebration of lesbian love. Familiar figures of the classical literature such as Narcissus, Circe, Psyche and Galatea are all reinvented in these verses, bringing the ancient texts and their values under critical interrogation. Some of her favourite themes, such as the burden of the past, the identity of individuals and the need for relationship where there is no other transcendence, find their clarifying focus here.

Beginning with *Jackass*, in all her later work, animals and human beings love each other and live together, unmindful of class/category/gender divide. In fact, animals and humans have similar characteristics (or animals often emerge better beings, if at all different); one can even move effortlessly from one form of identity to another. Beast to Namjoshi is not 'bestial' in the Western sense but a creature like man or woman. Such a position contradicts the values of the humanist universe which is male-centered and which relegates women as 'the other' with beasts and birds. In the world of living, Namjoshi affirms, there is variety and no hierarchy.

She has a poem about animals in her poetic forest in the *Jackass* collection. She finds the animals in the forest incorrigibly friendly and when asked "why do beasts inhabit your mind?" her reply is: "They like it there." Namjoshi succinctly sums up her position in this regard when she says "bird, beast, and fish is all that / I am." She also adds: "And bird, beast and fish is all my theme" (*The Jackass and the Lady* 49).

Namjoshi's next collection of poems, *The Authentic Lie*, published two years later, focuses on the theme of death and is rich in metaphysical speculations. These poems are autobiographical and deal with the poet's childhood grief on losing her father. Her father, who was a test pilot, was killed in a plane crash when she was hardly twelve. This childhood trauma remained with her and she turned the agony of a bereaved child into poetic themes in *The Authentic Lie.* As signified by the title this collection is rich in paradoxical thought and expression and reflects the philosophical disposition of the poet's mind. A curious contradiction marks this work: the emotional dependence of a female child on her father, thematized in these verses, is contradictory to the feminist ideology that the author has so zealously embraced.

It is after more than a decade's poetic work that Namjoshi turns to fiction writing. Generic differences are not of any paramount importance to her. She deliberately transgresses generic conventions to drive home the point that literary conventions are also constructs that often conceal dominant ideologies of class and gender. Namjoshi has always had a fascination for fables and fairy-tales, and indulged in de-constructive readings of these texts playfully exposing the discriminatory practices that informed these apparently harmless children's stories. Namjoshi's most popular work to date is *The Feminist Fables* (1981). Coming after her complete conversion to feminist ideology, these stories reveal Namjoshi's active engagement with the project of feminist re-vision of knowledge. Adrienne Rich, in her theoretical essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision", stresses the importance of re-

writing old stories and myths from a female perspective in the feminist cognitive revolution. Rich explains the objectives of this re-visionist myth-making as follows: “Re-vision -- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction -- is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (1975: 90). In Namjoshi revision is not only an act of survival, but a strategy of emancipation.

Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* is a collection of ninety-nine stories dealing with a range of familiar fables and fairy tales from a feminist perspective. She makes a clever use of Anderson's tales, *Panchantantra* stories, Aesop's fables and other texts as intertexts to deconstruct the patriarchal world order securely ensconced in these seemingly innocent stories on which generations of children are raised. Even nursery rhymes and songs are re-viewed from a feminist perspective. The result is astounding: No form of knowledge, no scrap of writing, no act of narration is free from the guilt of complicity in the promotion of the male hegemony.

Namjoshi’s *The Feminist Fables* effects a cognitive revolution featuring startling heroines, inverting some popularly known tales of the past, interrogating conventional systems of thought and morality and forging alternative perspectives of looking at life and experience. Namjoshi retells some of the familiar tales such as “Red Ridinghood”, “Hansel and Gretel”, “The Princess and the Pea”, “The Ugly Duckling”, “Cinderella”, “Perseus and Andromeda”, from an essentially woman’s point of view. Even as she uses these tales as intertexts, it is the androcentric culture that she actually takes up for a critical consideration. Namjoshi retells these tales with slight but careful slippages, and gives them a subtly subversive twist which practically makes them stand on their head and lays open an unreasonably biased social order contained within them. For instance, Namjoshi’s little Red Ridinghood makes a new connection between the wolf and the forester; Gretel stays with the witch, while Hansel runs home scared; the little princess wears

men's clothes and challenges her brother to a fight; the ugly duckling is not really ugly but a swan among ducklings; Cinderella does not live happily ever after but gets separated from her handsome husband; Eve makes paradise where she walks; and there are several such delightfully shocking subversions which invent an emancipatory relation to the dominant discourse.

Namjoshi's feminist re-readings and re-writings of old fables accomplish two complementary things: they appropriate positive but male-oriented symbols by feminizing them and they renew negative female-associated symbols by endowing them with positive value. Namjoshi's play with old texts continues into her subsequent work gaining in fact in its revolutionary strength and often turning into an aggressive opposition. In a collection of poems she published in 1984, significantly titled *From the Beside Book of Nightmares*, Namjoshi attempts an ironic re-inscription of texts inherited from the English canon. Here she records her response to the Western society and culture by exposing how it prizes the white male and regards women along with the rest of the creatures as 'the other'. In the first section, "From Baby F with much love", Baby Frankenstein views the family and the familial relationships from a female perspective. She loves and hates intensely, and is savagely critical of the social institutions that have demanded girls and women to be self-effacing and passive. She tries to explore her matriarchal lineage and asks:

> We loved, those kindly gentlemen, I mean,
> your own father, and your daughter's father,
> But in our long ancestry where are the women?
> (*Bedside Book* 13)

She refuses to become another faceless nameless female, and demands that the family saga be retold from a woman's point of view.

In the second section, several voices from old texts come alive to articulate their views. They refuse to remain true to their

authors' representations of them, and declare their independence. The reformed Antigone decides to save her own life rather than bury her brother. Penelope weaves her interminable web not out of love or duty or virtue, but out of "a rage". In this section, there is a poem "for the student of literature" too. She starts off as "a female protagonist straight out of James" and with a centre of consciousness so "indisputably human," but turns " a little villainous" "even obnoxious and cruel" (*Bedside Book* 35), because she does not shut up and she is not dead.

The third section, "Snapshots of Caliban," revalues power politics in the postcolonial world, and examines the struggle between combating egos by re-writing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the paradigmatic text for a study of colonial relationships. Namjoshi's Caliban is female and literate; she maintains a diary, records her grief, love and suspicion. Miranda is nice but jealous. Somewhere along, Caliban and Miranda become friends forming a "sisterhood" much to the bewilderment of Prospero. Prospero no longer appears a wise and benevolent sage, but emerges a doodling manipulative egotist that created both Miranda and Caliban. At the end of the tale, Namjoshi's Prospero introspects his own motives in enslaving others:

> I made them? Maiden and monster
> And then disdained them?
> Was there something in me
> That fed and sustained them?
> Are they mine or their own?
> I dare not claim them. (*Bedside Book* 70)

Namjoshi's re-inscription of the canonical text successfully explodes Prospero's old myth, redefines the identity of Caliban and Miranda and underscores the need for re-reading old texts for resistance. In a series of re-visionary moves, Namjoshi enters and re-imagines traditional, canonical texts -- glossing and subverting, reversing and transforming them -- writing them into her own time and into her own frame of reference.

Namjoshi has always preferred symbolic and allegorical mode to realistic presentation. She increasingly makes fantasy and fabulation her base to launch a satiric attack on the anomalies she finds in the world around her. The use of fantasy in subversive fiction, particularly in feminist subversion of gender constructs, has been critically noted. To quote Nancy Walker, it is "the combination of fantasy and irony -- particularly fantasy viewed ironically -- that constitutes a fundamental critique of cultural realities in the contemporary novel by women (1990:7). Feminist writers like Ursula Le Guin, Angela Carter, Jody Scott, Margaret Atwood have all moved away from realism since they believe that the reality that the so-called realist literature represents is the patriarchal reality flawed by gender bias. They use fantasy to explore areas of life that realist literature tends to deny or repress, and forge concepts and ideas that contradict patriarchal ideology. Namjoshi uses fantasy as a technique of defamiliarization in *The Conversations of Cow* (1985) and *The Mothers of Mayadiip* (1989).

The Conversations of Cow does not belong to any known genre; it is a novella, a feminist utopian tale, a piece of speculative fiction, a lesbian *bildungsroman*, all in one. This erasure of boundaries between literary genres is important in the feminist enterprise of negotiating in-between spaces and creating alterities. In *Conversations* Namjoshi employs postmodern techniques such as self-referentiality, magic realism and unconventional plot structure to tell the story of a lesbian coming to terms with her own identity. The novel is about quest for identity and a spoof on the typical quest narratives at the same time. Suniti, the protagonist here, begins with an initial tentativeness about her lesbian identity and progresses towards a celebration of the same. The magic cow who acts as Suniti's mentor and guide constantly changes identities, becomes a white male, an Indian woman and the mythical cow by turns, and shows that identity is after all fluid and changing. Fact and fiction, dream and reality, magic, myth and metaphor all mingle with each other providing a properly fluid atmosphere for the protagonist's experience of perpetually shifting identities.

Namjoshi's *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988), a book of fables, fabulation and verse, is populated by a variety of animals: tigers, robins, rabbits, pigs, cats, monkeys and so on. Here Namjoshi turns to a light-hearted play with ideas, ideologies and identities. She acknowledges that the inspiration for these comic satiric sketches on contemporary life has come from Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll, the two master story-tellers of the fantastic. From Swift she has absorbed imaginative inventiveness, while from Carroll she learned how one could effect paradigm shifts, playing with structures and systems. *The Blue Donkey Fables* comprises more than seventy short pieces -- some in prose, some in verse -- all marked by an unmistakable sense of mirth. There is criticism -- criticism of the anomalies of the contemporary world -- but it evokes mirth and laughter more than rage or revenge. The fictional world of these tales is peopled by talking beasts and birds, and incidents included are absurd and incongruous, such as one-eyed monkey going into print, parrots and tortoise planning the creation of a planet sans human beings, a cat engaging in poetic practice, three piglets going in for an aptitude test, and so on. The narrator comments on this anomalous, incongruous and absurd world in a mood of detached amusement. It is important to notice, however, that the absurdities in the animal world described here are actually a parody of what goes on in the human world. The central character here, the Blue Donkey, is among the most delightful characters Namjoshi has created. The Blue Donkey is clever and witty, wise and worldly-wise, amiably sarcastic, compassionable and on the whole endearing. She writes poems, tells stories, occasionally delivers discourses and holds conversations with animals and people. Her derisive wit satirizes every one and every thing -- poets and poetry, critics, publishers, patriarchs and feminists.

Namjoshi's strength as a fabulist lies in crafting fantastic and farcical situations. She creates strange ‘Looking Glass Countries’ where things happen in an apparently bizarre fashion, but reveal interesting patterns on a closer analysis. All fiction is in some sense fantasy in that it is an imaginative construction, but the

pervasive use of fantasy as an organizing principle and mode of perception as in the case of Namjoshi's work suggests an overwhelming need for imaginative release from objective reality. To quote Rosemary Jackson: "The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent" (1981:3-4). Namjoshi's *The Mothers of Mayadiip* (1989) is a feminist dystopia focussing on the complexities of gender relations. The novelist presents not a single utopian world but multiple worlds each following its own social organisation. There are as many as four models of human society here: Maya Diip, an all women state; Ashagad, an all men society headed by a matriarch; the materialist world of male androids; and Paradise full of gallants perpetually engaged in wooing mothers. Whatever be the permutation and combination of male-female relationships, the old repressive structures of heterosexuality return in explicit or disguised form in all these societies. Fantasy provides Namjoshi suitable fictional space for unfolding narratives of lesbian desire and experience. Namjoshi is the first Indian woman writer to have openly declared her sexual choice as a lesbian and has since held that the kind of sexual life one chooses to lead is a purely personal matter, where an individual's autonomy should neither be checked nor curtailed. She views compulsory heterosexuality as a repressive social structure that systematically subordinates women and reduces them to the status of 'the other' in a male dominated socio-cultural system.

Suniti Namjoshi continues to play with ideas, ideologies, concepts and literary texts of the past in her next book, *Saint Suniti and The Dragon* (1994). As the title suggests, this book is about Suniti's quest for sainthood and her encounters with the dragon. Like much of Namjoshi's earlier work, this too is allegorical in nature: the novel is not so much about canonization as about deviation from the path of virtue, which is an essential aspect of the human condition. The author is considering here one of the most popular themes of literary and philosophic discourse -- the question of evil. In doing this she freely draws on a variety of mythical and

literary sources. "Saint Suniti and the Dragon", the allegorical title, at once brings to our mind the patron saint of England, St. George, the adventurous hero who rode up on his white charger, overcame the dragon and delivered the princess. Besides, there are direct albeit playful references to the national epic of Anglo-Saxons -- *Beowulf*. Suniti's encounters with the dragon are counterpointed with Beowulf's battles with Grendel and his mother, the demonic creatures who harass virtuous people. One cannot miss the echoes of the *Book of Genesis* and the myth of the fall, the central myth of English literature. Namjoshi makes intertextual references to a number of earlier texts establishing curious parallels with the world of the past through parody, pastiche and playful allusion. There are, for instance, references to the jewelled serpent in the blissful garden, which invariably invoke not only the Biblical tale but also Milton's recreation of the same in *Paradise Lost*. Again, "Songs of Despair" are reminiscent of Blake's songs, but present a vision of good and evil that is contradictory to Blakean interpretation.

Suniti's (mis)adventures with the dragon are presented in twelve brief episodes in the manner of (mock) epic tales. In fact, the thematic motifs of quest and journey, and the protagonist's evolution through her experiences with evil, place *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* in the genre of quest novels and link it with Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the cult text of this genre. As in Dante's work, the poetic journey to the life beyond is actually a representation of *this* world *here*. However it is important to note that Namjoshi's text in most cases holds an enigmatic relationship with the earlier literary texts it invokes.

The protagonist here is Suniti, obviously the author's alter ego, and the dragon symbolizes evil. Suniti's quest for sainthood and her encounter with evil operate on three levels: firstly, at the psychological level, one should come to terms with one's inner fears, monsters of one's own making; next, at the quotidian level, one needs to come to terms with the world around on a day-to-day basis; finally, at the wider historical and political level, there is a

great deal of evil manifesting in the form of war and socio-political violence, and an individual feels totally helpless faced with such violence. Suniti's quest registers these three phases and in each phase she moves closer to an understanding of evil, though no where near conquering it.

"The Solidarity Fables" constitute the second half of *Saint Suniti and the Dragon*, and these fables deal with a variety of issues such as power relations, social systems, cultural and literary conventions, and trajectories of revolutionary movements. The title is ironic and the stories are not so much about solidarity as the lack of it. Namjoshi's irony gains a sharper edge in these fables but her vision emerges more enigmatic. This may be so because her preoccupation in this set of fables is essentially with concepts and her objective is to effect a transformation at the conceptual level. She raises difficult questions about good and evil, civility and rusticity, ordinary and extraordinary, patriarchy, power and domination, through subtle inversions of stereotypes, juxtaposition of the contraries, witty word play and an interesting interplay of images.

The most important contribution of Namjoshi to contemporary Indian fiction in English lies in creating an active, responsible and participating reader. The reader of Namjoshi's work is never allowed to remain passive and complacent; the writer indulges in parodic and metafictional writing and weaves a whole lot of intertextual allusions into her work. In doing so she lays bare the accepted literary conventions and codes. The reader, therefore, must accept responsibility for the act of decoding. Her novels do not provide an order and meaning that readers can readily recognize. Instead, they demand that the reader be conscious of the work, the actual construction that he/she too is undertaking because it is the reader who concretizes the work and gives it life. Namjoshi's most recent novel, *Building Babel*, directly co-opts readers into co-authorship in the process of building Babel.

Another important issue Namjoshi addresses explicitly in *Building Babel*, and implicitly in a good deal of her earlier work, is the power of language to both control and subvert authority. The issue of women's language is the subject of much contemporary debate and the need for women writers to reclaim a language of their own free from the influence of male conceptualizing is often stressed. For some critics such as Helene Cixous language is tied intimately to gender. "Woman must write woman. And man, man" (1976:877). Female writing is bound up in female biology, she maintains, because women have been taught to feel guilty about both, and the courage to claim and proclaim both language and biology is for her the first step towards "transformation". Sisters engaged in Babel building in Namjoshi's *Building Babel* too are inspired by a similar vision. They analyse the situation thus:

> "The problem is we've all been typecast!"
> "The problem is God!"
> "No, no, the problem is man!"
> "The problem is us. For original sin/ Look within."
> "The problem is mother!"
> "The problem is words!" (*Building Babel* 29)

A quest for new words, therefore, becomes an important aspect of women's movement for liberation.

Another important motif in Namjoshi's work is identity or selfhood -- concepts that are particularly complex in an era in which feminist psychology poses challenges to Freudian and post-Freudian theories of human development. Women writers contest the notions of self that are forged by traditional psychoanalysis and the quest for alternative selves. Self-definition, therefore becomes an important concern for them. Namjoshi shares the feminist concern for identity politics, but rejects the notion of a unitary self. Instead, she endorses the concept of plural and shifting selves. Such a notion is in consonance with the Hindu concept of

transmigration of souls, and it enables her to de-construct not only gender-hierarchy but also hierarchization of living species.

Namjoshi's work -- poetical as well as fictional -- despite its overtly political designs is more than a literature of protest. It is provocative, engaging and entertaining. Fantasies, excursions into strange places, free traffic between animal and human worlds, outrageous inversions of all accepted notions of order are delightfully inventive. Through a successful subversion of canonical texts she rewrites and unwrites the master narrative, dethrones the textual authority and liberates the objects of the imperial/male discourse. Her work announces textual revolt, opposing and decentering the dominant discourse from within, and thus achieves a major break through in feminist/post-colonial writing.

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MEENA ALEXANDER

CIVIL STRIFE: HOME AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD*

Presentation for What and Where is Home in the Twenty-First Century? Symposium at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin
June 2nd through June 4th 2000

For me the question of home is bound up with a migrant memory and the way that poetry, even as it draws the shining threads of the imaginary through the crannies of everyday life, permits a dwelling at the edge of the world.

I use that phrase edge of the world since the sensuous density of location, the hold of a loved place, can scarcely be taken for granted, and the making up of home and indeed locality, given the shifting, multiple worlds we inhabit, might best be considered part and parcel of an art of negativity, praise songs for what remains when the taken for grantedness of things falls away.

And I speak as someone who even as she writes in English thinks through the rhythms of many other languages, Malayalam, Hindi, Arabic, French, so that the strut and play of words, the chiselled order of lines permits a sense crystallized through the seizures of dislocation.

And the migrations of sense a poem requires are tied up for me with what forces forgetfulness and yet at the very same time permits passage. “A bridge that seizes crossing” I wrote trying to touch the edge of migrancy that underwrites the world. The poem is called “River and Bridge” and I composed it at a time when I was new in America and felt that I needed to begin another life, to be born again.[1] And now I think to be born again would also be to pass beyond the wounds of otherness visited on us.

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* Editor’s Note: The poems referred to in this essay will be found in the Poetry Section of this issue of *Kavya Bharati*: “For a Friend whose Father was Killed ...” (Page 27) and “Civil Strife” (Page 40).

There is a violence that works into my vision. Not that it is something I could have predicted when I started as a poet, but it comes with the shifting worlds I inhabit, the borders I cross in my dreams. The questions of identity that haunt me -- an Indian woman, living and working in New York City -- are inseparable from an intimate violence that has entered my probings into the bonds that link inner and outer realms, self and world.

Who am I? Where am I? When am I?

These perfectly ordinary questions that a writer asks herself require an acknowledgement of the violent densities of place. How can we move into a truly multicultural world, reimagine ethnicities, without an acknowledgement of these hard, overlapping worlds? The Muslim women raped in Surat, the Hindu women stoned in Jersey city, co-exist in time; cleft by space they forge part of the fluid diasporic world, a world in which I must live and move and have my being.

I think of Derek Walcott's lines: "that terrible vowel, that I!"[2] And I understand that my need as a writer, to enter richly into imagined worlds, cannot shake free of what my woman's body brings me. I cannot escape my body and the multiple worlds of my experience. As a child I moved between India and North Africa and those years are vivid to me. And the sort of translation the poem requires, 'translate' in an early sense of the verb meaning to carry over, to transport -- for after all what is unspoken, even unspeakable must be borne into language -- forces a fresh icon of the body, complicates the present till memory is written into the very texture of the senses.

Awhile back there were a series of racial incidents in New York City. Black people physically hurt, small retaliations, an Indian child caught in the middle. I wrote a poem called "Art of Pariahs", 'pariah', as I understand it, being a word that has come from my mother tongue Malayalam into English. I think of this

poem as laying bare the underbelly of multiculturalism. I imagine Draupadi of the "Mahabharata" entering my kitchen in New York City and the longing to be freed of the limitations of skin, colour and race, singing in the poem.

I was in Delhi for an International Symposium put together by the Sahitya Akademi. Writers, artists, filmmakers were invited to ponder the ethnic violence that was threatening the fabric of secular India. Worn out by the flight that got me in at one in the morning I turned up a few minutes late for the start of the conference. The hall at the India International Center was packed. There were half a dozen people on the podium, dignitaries including Mulk Raj Anand, grand old man of Indian letters, the novelist who had written about the lives of Untouchables. There was nowhere for me to sit. I stood uneasily at the edge casting about for a place to sit, watching as a man dressed in white khadi, looking much as I would imagine a contemporary Tagore, spoke eloquently about the destruction of Babri Masjid and the communal riots in different parts of the country. "Our novelists will write about this" he said "but it will take them several years to absorb these events." He paused adding "As the poet said", then after what seemed like a space for a long drawn out breath, he recited the whole of my poem "Art of Pariahs." He did not mention the poet's name, but anonymity made the matter sharper as the poem, in his voice, flowed through the packed room. And listening, standing clutching my papers, I felt emotions course through me, deeper than the power of words to tell. For a brief while, a poem composed in solitude in a small New York City room, had granted me the power to return home.

Art of Pariahs

Back against the kitchen stove
Draupadi sings:

In my head Beirut still burns.

The Queen of Nubia, of God's Upper Kingdom,
the Rani of Jhansi, transfigured, raising her sword
are players too. They have entered with me
into North America and share these walls.

We make up an art of pariahs:

Two black children spray painted white,
their eyes burning,
a white child raped in a car
for her pale skin's sake,
an Indian child stoned by a bus shelter,
they thought her white in twilight.

Someone is knocking and knocking
but Draupadi will not let him in.
She squats by the stove and sings:

The Rani shall not sheathe her sword
nor Nubia's queen restrain her elephants
till tongues of fire wrap a tender blue,
a second skin, a solace to our children.

Come walk with me towards a broken wall
-- Beirut still burns -- carved into its face.
Outcastes all, let's conjure honey scraped from stones,
an underground railroad stacked with rainbow skin,
Manhattan's mixed rivers rising.[3]

But what would it mean for the mixed rivers to rise? By way of answer I would like to turn to a recent email exchange that highlights the questions of home and locality, the bristling weave of borders and languages that make us what we are. Fahmida Riaz the Pakistani poet lives in Karachi. But we had met on a cold snowy day in upstate New York and during one of our intense conversations, she said she would like to render my poem "Passion"

into Urdu. Our email correspondence began after she returned to Karachi. More than a half-century after the Partition of India we began a conversation underwritten by a fluid cyber geography, the seemingly instantaneous back and forth of immaterial text.

Fahmida's response to the poem was detailed and we went back and forth about the particular worth of words, in Urdu, in English. Somehow it seemed to me that each in her own way, we were each reaching under the hold of the given, reaching into that zone where poems are made. Reaching beneath a given syntax, beneath the rocks and stones and trees of discernable place in order to make sense.

Zone of radical illiteracy out of which we translate in order to appear, in order to be in place. Zone to which words do not attach, a realm syntax flees. I need to go there in order to make my poems.

I think of it as a dark doorway that lets me in: slides shut, then ruts open again.

I fell through that door as a child of five. Crossing the Indian Ocean each summer my mother and I returned from Sudan to India. I landed in Bombay and found my new-found Arabic vanishing in the hot winds and Hindi which I had known since earliest childhood ringing in my ears. But when I opened my mouth, no sounds came, nothing.

I could hear my mother saying something to me in Malayalam, but all that came was the swirl of emotion, a sense that I was plunged into a space where words did not attach, where a mother's hands could not rescue.

Zone of radical illiteracy out of which I write, translating myself through borders, recovering the chart of a given syntax, the palpable limits of place, in order to be rendered legible through poetry.

Poetry which fashions an immaterial dwelling yet leaves within itself traces of all that is nervous, stoic, edgy, the skin turned inside out, perhaps what Walter Benjamin evokes when he alludes to the "interior" as the "asylum of art. . . ." He muses "To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior these are accentuated."[4] The interior of the house of language, fitful, flashing. Under it, a space of fiery muteness. Where we go when words cannot yet happen, where a terrible counter memory wells up. And for me this is akin to what Frantz Fanon evoked: "a zone of occult instability" through which a culture of decolonisation emerges.[5]

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Email of Sunday, March 26, 2000 4:03 pm

Dear Fahmida, sister poet,

So glad the book reached you. One never knows with packages somehow. . . . Just now I'm trying to write a poem having as its setting (or one bit of the setting) the border between India and Pakistan -- a little poem about the pity of war. Shall send it to you when its done

Affectionate regards
Meena

*****

Date: Monday, March 27, 2000 11:08 AM
Subject: Re: book

Dear meena, thanks for your reply. About "passion", it has a number of meanings. It can't be translated as "ishq" ... is it best to translate as a kind of forceful feeling...what word of hindi would you think of? I have written "bala khez". We write "Ishq-e-balakhez" for passionate love... Please do send me your poem. Everything seems so bleak right now.

Yours,
Fahmida riaz

Email of Tuesday March 28, 2000, 8:46 am.

Dear Fahmida

It's a cold, rainy day. tight green buds on the leaves. A little fog. There is a gathering of south asians to protest police brutality -- an unarmed black man was shot 41 times, as he stood in his doorway. A dark doorway. I feel my soul is there. I said I would write a poem for the occasion and read it. So let the words come, in fire. One must hug the green tree as the words come, so the body is not burnt. I was very moved by your poem that you read about the adulterous couple being stoned and the man bending over the woman to protect her. Will you send it to me? [6]

love

meena

*****

Email of Wednesday April 5, 2000, 7:56 am

My dear Fahmida,

1 have never done this before, emailed a poem just the minute it was finished But this is the poem I mentioned earlier. You wanted to see it and I feel it right thing to send it through this immaterial medium, across the borders. As poets we write in such loneliness and I wanted to share this with you. I think it has the sorrow and pity of war in it. Let me know what you think.

With love

Meena

Email of Saturday April 15 2000, 12:58 pm

Dear Meena,

Got your poem. Liked it? 1 wept when I was reading it. I'm writing a paper on " shared dreams and metaphors" that I will be reading in N dehli on 27th of April in the SAARC writer's conference. I hope you don't mind that 1'm beginning the paper with your poem. Passion has been translated into Urdu. . . .

*****

And so our conversation went on. She read my poem on the Lahore border in the heat of Delhi. The very same evening -- given the ten hours of difference, daylight saving time -- I read my new poem in the pale sunshine of Massachusetts, a gathering at Smith college.

A few words about the figure of the poet in our century.

She is a homemaker. But an odd one.

She hovers in a dark doorway. She needs to be there, at the threshold to find a balance, to maintain a home at the edge of the world.

She puts out both her hands. They will help her hold on, help her find her way.

She has to invent a writing marked by many tongues.

As for the script in which she writes, it binds her into visibility, fronting public space, marking danger, marking desire.

But behind her in the darkness of her home, and through her, pour languages no one she knows can read or write. They etch a *corps perdu*, subtle, vital, unseizable body.[7] Source of all translations.

Endnotes:

[1] Meena Alexander. River and Bridge. Toronto: TSAR Press, 1996. p.12.
[2] Derek Walcott. "Names." Collected Poems. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1986. p.306.
[3] Meena Alexander. The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience. Boston: South End Press, 1996. pp. 8-9.
[4] Walter Benjamin. The Arcades Project, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. p.9.
[5] Frantz Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth, translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1991. p.227.
[6] Fahmida Riaz. "Stoning." We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry. Ed. Rukhsana Ahmed. London: Women's Press, 1991. p.67.
[7] I borrow the phrase, with gratitude, from Cesaire, turn it to my own uses. Aime Cesaire, Lost Body, translated by Clayton Eshelman and Annette Smith, illustrations by Pablo Picasso (New York: George Braziller, 1986). 'Corps Perdu'is the title of this book and also of a poem within it (pp.121-123).

E. V. RAMAKRISHNAN

WOR(L)DS LOST AND FOUND

Sujatha Bhatt. *Augatora* (With Drawings by Michael Augustin). Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000. £. 8.95.

Those who are familiar with Sujatha Bhatt's earlier volumes such as *Brunizem* (1988) and *Monkey Shadows* (1991) must have noticed her tussle with words and images to articulate shades of reality that refuse to be drawn into words. She inhabits that no(wo)man's land between languages and continents where one has to invent one's own language every day. Born in Ahmedabad, raised in Pune, educated in the United States, she now lives in Bremen, Germany with her husband, Michael Augustin who is a German writer. The title of her first volume had referred to the dark brown prairie soil found in Asia, Europe and North America. The title of the present book refers to a lost word which in old High German meant "eye-gate", close to the modern "window". The acts of looking, searching and locating seem to be central to these poems though the frames of perception keep changing. She adapts her free verse to narrative and lyrical uses as the occasion demands.

Memory plays a key role in these investigations into the landscapes of the mind. "A Memory from Marathi" records the memory of a three-year old girl. When her father does not return from the kitchen where he has gone to fetch water for her she gets up and sees a snake between him and her. He kills it and carries it to his lab the next morning. When the father and daughter talk about it years later, he tells her how he had to kill it for "he couldn't let it hide / in the kitchen". This reflective mood is characteristic of several poems in this collection. She remembers her virologist father in the poem "The Virologist" as someone who wrote to his mother how he did not feel particularly pure after a bath in the Ganga. The father's mother is remembered in the poem "Honeymoon". She was obviously attached to her son and must have felt insecure when he married a woman " so beautiful,/ one

considered to be so perfect/ in her goodness like the heroine in the legend/ who is always saved by the birds / and the deer in the forest." The poet as child could sense the conflict between her grandmother and mother. She says: "I could see / the hurt darkness in my mother's eyes / turn into stones. . . ." In "Partition" one sees her mother, now seventy, recalling the violence of partition and commenting, " 'How could they / have let a man / who knew nothing / about geography/ divide a country?' "

In these memory poems the angst of the exile is characteristically absent. This is because Sujata Bhatt is able to see her journeys as part of the condition of modern existence. A poet like A.K. Ramanujan returns to the world of memory seeking shelter from the outer world. In Bhatt, the sense of the trauma gives way to understanding and acceptance. In the long poem "History is a broken narrative" she places her own personal memories in parenthesis with the journeys of others. At the age of five she learnt English in New Orleans which slowly replaced her Marathi. The process of learning and unlearning is vividly captured in these lines: " Afternoons my mother / led me through our old alphabet --/ I felt as if the different scripts / belonged together: I felt them raw, / clotting together in my mind , / raw, itchy -- the way skin begins to heal." The emphasis is on healing, not on the wound. The healing itself is born of the conviction that the personal cannot be separated from the social and the political.

This must be the reason why she does not overplay the feminine element in her experience. The only poem in this volume which could be described as explicitly feminist is the "Voice of the Unwanted Girl". However, it sounds sentimental and unrealistic, beside the portrait of the woman Abuela in "The Woman they Call *Abuela*": "Thirty seven years a widow -- / She watched Franco's men ride by: / Moroccan mercenaries took over/ the bunker in front of her house -- / And she watched Rafael Alberti back from exile/ walking by her door. . . ." The personal is braided into the historical without reference to the heroic. There is a subtle feminism here

which is different from the poem mentioned earlier. In "Language" one notices her attempt to reach out to her husband's German poems, "unmediated, untranslated. . . ." It is this determination to cross boundaries and make connections that finds expression in the lyrical stasis of "Equilibrium" in these words: "For the mind /would not be yearning/ but simply being -- while the waves/ would pull away thoughts --/ just pull away thoughts / and keep them forever."

I found the long sequence "The Hole in the Wind" tedious. The details seem to be assembled from diverse sources. The grotesque descriptions of ship-wrecks and cyclones may interest those who are looking for the sensational. The other sequence, "The Found Angel : Nine Poems for Ria Eing" has some fine moments, though. The understated violence of "The Fox and the Angel" and "The Snail-ear" evidence the untapped emotional resources of the poet. The last section "Ars Poetica" once again brings out her ability to investigate the borderline between the familiar and the fantastic. The poem titled "The Multicultural Poem" may be read as a statement of her own poetic predicament. She states: "The multicultural poem does not expect/ the reader to 'understand' anything. / After all, it is used to being misunderstood."

Sujata Bhatt is a major poetic voice who is at ease with a wide range of themes and styles. One does not feel claustrophobic in her poetic world, which can be relaxed and intense at the same time. There are occasional traces of Plath or Bishop in some poems, but in her best work, which the majority of her poems collected here evidence, she is emphatically herself. A poem like "Squirrels" captures the liveliness and playfulness that she wants to celebrate and explore at the same time. Under a sky "nude in its eloquence", the squirrels chase one another with their "wired energy". She wonders whether it is lust or anger which makes them so volatile and mobile. Some of their mysterious restlessness comes through in these poems.

C. VIJAYASREE

CELEBRATING POETS AND POETRY

Talking Poems. Ed. Eunice de Souza. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology. Ed. Eunice de Souza. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Lives of poets have always been of special interest to readers, and biographies of and interviews with poets have often met with enthusiastic reception. We, in fact, get to know about a poet more directly through a good interview than through a biographical account, since the latter is a more extensively mediated form. Eunice de Souza's *Talking Poems* features interviews with ten contemporary Indian poets in English beginning with Nissim Ezekiel, the Grand Sire of modern Indian verse in English. The other poets included are Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das, Keki N. Daruwalla, Mamta Kalia, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Arvind Mehrotra, Imtiaz Dharkar and Malanie Silgardo.

There is something very interesting about this collection. Since all the interviews are done by de Souza herself, there is a single unifying authorial voice, and a certain degree of consistent structuring. Yet the interviewees are given a free reign to reminisce, digress, and recall their past in any random manner of their choice. From the structured part we get to know how different poets respond to certain vital issues related to poetic art and practice, such as what creativity means to them, or how they actually produce a finished text, or what the significance of location to their creative activity is. However, it is in the side-tracks and by-lanes of these conversations that the poets often reveal themselves, letting us peep into their personal lives. For instance, whether it is Ezekiel's recollections of his association with A.K. Ramanujan, or Mamta Kalia's passing references to her writer husband, or Imtiaz Dharkar's reminiscences of her controversial marriage, or Daruwalla's experiences as an insider in the corridors of power, or

Gieve Patel's account of his experiences in the Mirtola Ashram, such casual observations give us a glimpse of these poets' personalities totally new and hitherto unknown to us.

The real pleasure of the volume lies in hearing each poet's distinctive voice emerge as they reminisce freely and relaxedly on how they came to be poets. As we read about Ezekiel's juvenile efforts to write poetry at the age of nine, or the first love poem Kamala Das had written in class nine to her forty-eight year old English teacher, or the formative influence his father had on Daruwalla, or Adil Jussawalla's debt to his school teacher Ryder Salman, we not only get to know these writers more personally, but also see how poetry has been a lifetime passion with them.

Another interesting aspect that emerges from these interviews is how these writers view their location with respect to their vocation. Imtiaz Dharkar, who grew up in two continents and has lived in three cities (Lahore, Glasgow and Bombay), prefers to assume an outsider's perspective and makes this the source of her creativity. Yet she is sure that living in India suits best the creative work she pursues. She feels that in Pakistan she could not have done the kind of writing she does (113). Allahabad is the only city where Mehrotra can live and write. Mamta Kalia too expresses her preference for the same city when she says “Allahabad is a writer's town”(62). Ezekiel is sure that Bombay is the place where he belongs, while Kamala Das feels rooted in Kerala and not “so comfy in Bombay”(34). Kolhapur means a lot to Kolatkar and Melanie Silgardo complains that staying away from home has been detrimental to her creativity: “I haven't written very much in the last fifteen years. I feel not so much blocked as blank. And that may have something to do with leaving India” (127). Critics of Indian writing have all along suspected that this body of writing lacked a regional location. But the experiences of poets seem to point to the contrary. Notwithstanding English is the medium of these poets' creative expression, they still situate themselves and their work in their specific regional locales.

The readers, I am sure, will find *Talking Poems* a book of pleasant discoveries and surprise illuminations about poets whose work they had read and admired but of whose lives they knew little. There is plenty of biographical detail and random facts about each of these writers, some excellent reflections on other poets, occasional discussion of specific texts and a lot of useful information about poets and their work. Madhu Kapparath's photographs of the poets are an added attraction to this volume.

A special anthology of Indian women's poetry in English is long awaited. The existing anthologies of Indian English poetry have given women mere token presence and often featured softer and less problematic poems of the writers they had chosen to represent. *Women Writing in India*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, the most extensive collection of Indian women's writing, leaves out writing in English on the grounds that this body of work is more easily available to the reader. Eunice de Souza's collection attempts to fill this gap by putting together selected poems of nine Indian women poets in English: Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Melanie Silgardo, Eunice de Souza, Imtiaz Dharkar, Smita Agarwal, Sujata Bhatt, Charmayne D'Souza and Tara Patel.

The collection is sensitive in its editorial approach and gives voice and literal space to some of the female poets who consistently remained invisible in other anthologies, such as Melanie Silgardo and Smita Agarwal. The collection gains from de Souza's bold choice of a fewer names since it enables her to give adequate representation to the variety in each writer's work. She gives us a mix of popularly tried and tested poems, and new and lesser known ones. There are all-time favourites such as Kamala Das's "Introduction", and "Looking Glass", de Souza's "Catholic Mother", Imtiaz Dharkar's "Purdah" and Sujata Bhat's "White Asparagus". There are some delightful new finds such as Tara Patel's "In Bombay" and Smita Agarwal's "The Salesman".

Editorial introductions perfectly contextualise the work of the writers included.

Anthologies often forge a notion of tradition, and de Souza's anthology too does this. She leaves out Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu and begins her anthology with the work of Kamala Das, identifying her as the major influence for Indian women's poetry in English. But what guides her choice of the other poets is not made clear anywhere. De Souza's explanation that the anthology includes "poets who I feel have extended the subject matter and the idiom of poetry"(5) sounds too subjective a statement coming from such a perceptive critic as de Souza. While anthologists generally attach poetry to history by pronouncing their enterprise epochal, contemporary, new, modern and so on, anthologists of Indian English poetry have often preferred numerical description and spelt out in their titles only the number of poets included, ten, twelve or nine what ever the case may be. Such a lay out may give the anthologist freedom to include what he / she wants to include without having to conform to fixed criteria, but it is likely to be disorienting to the readers. This happens with de Souza's anthology too. We are happy to find poets like Smita Agarwal and Melanie Silgardo whose work is not yet very popularly known; but all the same we feel disappointed that very important voices such as Suniti Namjoshi and Gauri Deshpande do not find a place here. This perhaps only goes to prove that that a sequel to the present work is much needed.

SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY

NEW VOICES OF WOMEN POETS

Shiela Gujral. *Canvas of Life*. New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1998. pp.62. Rs. 100.

Sunanda Swarup. *In Grey Circles*. New Delhi: Har Anand Publishers, 1997. pp.65. Rs.100.

Laksmisree Banerjee. *Fire Offerings*. New Delhi: Har Anand, 1997. pp.87. Rs.150.

Sumita Gangopadhyay. *The Sound of Music*. Trans. Shoma A. Chatterji. Calcutta: The Brown Critique, 2000. pp.75. Rs.125.

Sanjukta Dasgupta. *Snapshots*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1996. pp.43. Rs.60.

I have always found a curious mismatch between the publishers' assessment of what sells and the authors'/readers' view of the matter. After the initial boom of poetry titles by Indian publishing houses, especially Rupa's paperback editions, handsomely priced and elegantly produced, now there seems to be an unfortunate slump. Abroad, the story repeats itself and is in fact more dismal despite a greater number of outlets. The venerable Oxford University Press, after a market survey, decided, alas, to phase out its poetry programme. It claimed that poetry has insufficient readership (or rather insufficient numbers of buyers) and poetry publication, even by renowned and award winning poets, is not a viable financial proposition. (Does it mean poetry has no future?!). OUP even went back and annulled the signed agreements it had with a number of leading British poets. The bards themselves, as well as poetry lovers in general, deplored the onset of this new philistinism and published signed statements in the national media. But predictably, it has had little effect on the publishing barons or their decisions.

Back home, I shared the concern and anxiety of poetry lovers. Last year, I published a piece in the literary supplement of a leading national daily. It was entitled "The Poetry Society of Hyderabad". The essay profiled a historic body that has been linked with illustrious poets like Tagore, Iqbal, Ramanujan, Shiv K. Kumar, Keki Daruwalla and others. What surprised me was the deluge of responses I received. It was amazing to see the number of people reading and writing poetry, even if one were to make due allowance for a small section of "fashionable" poets, genuine connoisseurs, dedicated to the Muses and the cause!

Fortunately, this experience gets reconfirmed with reassuring regularity each time I receive *Kavya Bharati* and letters from its enthusiastic editor, R. P. Nair, as well as Mr. Gopi Kottor's *Poetry Chain*. I feel comforted with the notion that we can still ward off what F. R. Leavis gloomily projected as the onslaught of the Techno-Benthamite Civilisation. It was therefore with a sense of relief and exhilaration that I received five books by women poets for review in *Kavya Bharati*.

The poetry titles before me are composed by bards that have an all-India geographical spread. Although they represent varied experience, it would not be incorrect to say that they are all from the middle class, English-educated metropolitan background. Not necessarily a fault in itself! Some, like Sanjukta Dasgupta, are fairly well known academics. Others, like Shiela Gujral and Sunanda Swarup, are familiar names: being spouses of celebrity politicians and bureaucrats makes them center stage whether they like it or not. Working as they do under the inevitable shadow of their famous husbands, the latter group of poets manage nonetheless to explore their unique poetical selves with their own idiosyncratic share of protest, rebellion and reconciliation. The absence of the names of their spouses in the volumes concerned is by itself an important political statement of their desire for independent public space.

There are others, like Bengali poet Sumita Gangopadhyay who is translated by the well-known journalist and translator Shoma Chatterji, who is also the poet's daughter. Most of the titles carry prefatory statements / forwards such as by Keki Daruwalla, as in the case of *Fire Offerings*, by Sitakant Mahapatra in *In Grey Circles*, by Kathleen Raine in *Canvas of Life*. Sumita Gangopadhyay is the only poet in this group who is content with a self-introduction.

Sunanda Swarup is described in her book as a freelance writer and producer of documentaries. Born in the Andamans and educated in Nainital and Shillong, she is particularly drawn to the sea and mountains. She prefers to write poetry dealing with her private space, her immediate environment, related to the world of daughters, friends, domestics and others and beyond. The tone "ranges from affection, compassion and sadness all the way to satire and bitterness." Sitakant Mahapatra declares in the "foreword" that Sunanda's poetry "has the voice of subdued and quiet attachment and love and determination to face the loss through understanding and memory."

Sunanda brings in striking cameos from cityscape. Many of such poems are short and dramatic. "Death in the Auditorium" captures the sudden death of a spectator due to heart attack: "The show goes on -- / Tragedy trapping light and sound. . . ." "A page from Namrata's Diary" is about the death of Namrata who leaves the earth in "a ring of amber and gold / spinning to the silence / of the stars."

Many poems unconceal the pretensions that work behind the barriers of class. "A Better Design" takes the persona back to the memories of an elitist upbringing of staid respectability and boarding schools that insist that one should not eat with one's fingers because only "low-class Indians do." The last two stanzas revert to the present with the persona's role as the mother.

However, the circular movement suggests nothing radically new, only "an old patch / on a new dress." There is clearly no radicalism in the world of Sunanda.

Similarly, "Lament of Urmila" takes us into the world of the Ramayana; Urmila, Laxman's wife must forever face her desolate self. Her "memory" and "desire" can never find transcendent normalcy. Another poem is about domestic violence--and male tyranny. The world of claustrophobia of the female self appears particularly acute, given the recurrence of the disturbing lines, "It's normal with us."

Several poems capture a sense of cynical acceptance of the drudgery and cliché-ridden existence of a bureaucratic life. For instance, "On Being Transferred" contrasts the world of "farewell parties", "old scrapbooks" and pasting messages, vis a vis what can never be left behind: "Emotions -- Where do I pack them?" Likewise, "Elections" succinctly reveals the view from below: "We're the grass / Does it matter / which donkey / grazes on us / and when?"

Kathleen Raine considers Shiela Gujral's poems as "essentially feminine (not feminist)." They "arise from her response to the happy simplicities of loving relationships within a family."

Most of the poems here contain memorable vignettes of life experiences. Although Shiela has a gift for a poetical turn of phrase, most of these poems do not go beyond imaginative prose. Consider the title poem, "The Canvas of Life":

> A sudden jolt
> Stirs my soul--
> The reality dawns!
> I cautiously fill in
> All the blanks
> But no success--

The ink-blotched canvas
Is truly beyond redemption.

Similarly, look at the poem "Avalanche":

Frozen grief
Locked with grace
No trace, on her solemn face
Till home they brought her injured son--
And how she screamed.

Here again, as in most other poems, there is the spectacle of arresting experience which fails to be transmitted into a lasting poetical experience. This is manifest in poem after poem, in the face of near-escape in the poem "Mother's Love," in the agony of the riot-wracked land of the poem "Wailing Echo," and in the notion of the persona's sense of isolation in the poem appropriately called "Misfit." Some poems succinctly hold on to an effective image. Mention may be made of attempts such as "Night Queen", "Birth", "Release" and "Wind Storm." These achieve a moderate degree of success.

Shiela Gujral writes in Hindi and Punjabi as well. It would be interesting to compare her renderings in these languages vis-a-vis her achievements in English. Her English poems, on the whole, do not rise beyond the level of adequacy.

Laksmisree Banerjee is described as "a poet, critic, musician and Keats scholar." She is given to the play of irony and paradox in many of her poems. For instance, the poem "Burning" employs an effective contrast between the persona as a burn-victim who makes her consciousness "wait outside" so that "the body had to revive / and the spirit to die." There is a recurrence of wounds, bandages, surgery in many poems such as this one and others like "Fire and Forgiveness", "Grafting" and "Scars". The imagery here is effectively brought in to speak of the emotional and psychological malady of the persona.

Laksmisree's world constantly battles against the tide of sorrow, longing and desolation, against the "storm of fire" and "overwrought malice". However, this journey is not without its share of wish fulfillment and joy. Indeed, some poems like "Arising" are redolent of the Keatsian sensuous touch when there is a fitting union between the persona and the beloved:

> He raised me to the music
> Of the sunny skies wedded
> To wetness:
> As we mingled, God raised his
> Benevolent palm
> In assent.

On the whole, Lakshmisree's poems are like "fire offerings." They have a great deal of flow, and even when they speak of the average experience of love and loss, they are embodied in a language that is lyrical. Perhaps such poetical attributes come from her abiding interest in Keats and her grounding in music.

The most amazing of this collection of poets is undoubtedly Sumita Gangopadhyay who writes in original Bengali. Her first collection came out in 1986 when she was already sixty-three. She has been a self-taught creative dancer who choreographed, directed and performed in Ballet. Sumita's intellectual work has been shaped by Marx, M. N. Roy and Tagore. M. N. Roy, we are told, "was a frequent visitor at their Shivaji Park flat in Bombay". A real privilege this!

Sumita's poems cause a strange effect on the readers. The original cadence and spirit in the Bengali text seems to break through an alien tongue. The lines have a charming simplicity, and yet the thought behind them is invariably profound. This comes out again and again. For instance, the craving for "a jungle flower" is a striking puzzle:

Never mind however much you drug
the cuckoo with opium,
it will still twitter once, but once. . . .
The golden sun falls across you
When you turn your glance earthwards,
Yet, it will never fail to
kiss the earth once, but once.
Then. . . .
Why must you crave
For a jungle flower?

We see the same spirit of questioning in another poem entitled "Sin, Salvation." Sin can never be a benign or brotherly presence: "Can a sister dot a brother's forehead / in mid-February, when the heat is on?" she asks.

There are other poems that stem from the commonplace experience of routine, domestic life. "The Burning Boy" and "Sound of Music" are good examples. Other poems like "To Calcutta" must sound effective in Bengali. But somehow in the English version the total impact is somewhat lessened, although the underlying thought retains its dramatic quality when the speaker addresses Calcutta:

You offer your open arms
to all those who arrive
But you cast me away
along with the crate of milk
To you,
I shall give away
My last dream.

Sumita's poetry reflects powerful imagery and emotions. It covers many generations of Bengali social and political milieu and yet remains personal all the same. More power to Sumita Gangopadhyay!

The collection I enjoyed the most among the five undoubtedly is *Snapshots* by Sanjukta Dasgupta. Poetic taste always remains subjective and personal. Even so, I find a good many reasons why Sanjukta's poetry here is particularly impressive and memorable. I have known Sanjukta for several years as a dedicated academic of English Literature. Although I knew that she was a poet, I must confess I was totally unaware of her real poetic talents. They become clear from the title poem "Snapshots":

> As the years fly, sellotaped snapshots
> Overcrowd the wall behind my writing table.
> Memory with visual frames clings to my wall
> Engaging me in an incessant soliloquy,
> Silent monologue with faces and moments,
> A strange resurrection.

Sanjukta shows in most of her poems a deft ability to combine emotions with the world of concrete objects, somewhat in the manner of metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Take, for instance, the poem "News Missile", where news invades our lives with a sense of demonic fury:

> Early morning each day
> The world lands on my balcony.
> Either like a speeding missile,
> Or flops between the five pots of foliage,
> Often injuring a leaf or snapping a twig.
> Hurled upwards, not air dropped.

Similarly, the poem "Rigmarole" captures the ennui and boredom of urban existence that reaches its nadir in the last stanza:

> Late night, in the alcove, alone,
> Wearing words in bizarre tapestries,
> Midnight lingers on the threshold of new day,
> A strange stinging calmness
> Of memories and mosquito bites.

This sense of irony pervades many other poems such as "Jones", "Scavenger", "Coke Can", "Technology" and "Quo Vadis -- Melody?"

Sunjukta's success in these poems lies in the way she can use rhyme, rhythm and a clear word play in order to bring out subtly the irony behind the experience. She constantly observes with a sense of detached humour even as she is involved in the experience of living. Her lines appear with a sense of inevitability. As she aptly remarks in her poem, "Poems", "In fevered frenzy the poem writes itself". Take the poem "Coke Can", for instance, which remains my favourite sample of the globalization of culture:

> Third world tax payers' latest craze
> Portable power in a red white can.
> Balm of parched throats . . .
> Alas, in the hand of a beggar woman
> Her sadly jingling begging bowl
> At the car window.

And now look at the use of devastating humor at the end of the poem:

> Inside sat blissful ignorance
> Clad in jeans, T-shirt, cellphone
> Stunned at such shameful sacrilege,
> Crass callousness irredeemable!
> Official Coke in such an unofficial role!

There are many other poems that make a savage indictment of the inhumanity of city life. Many contemporary tragedies such as the murder of socialite Naina Sahni, or the untimely death of Jessica the Child-pilot of seven years' age are recorded with pathos and pity. The ultimate tragedy, of course, is the utter isolation of the self. Even the ants are perceived superior. For unlike they who are "always together," we stand alone: "Miners with no headlamps / We falter and fall."

And so, what could be the outcome of this urban bedlam, this insanity? This is inimitably captured in "Quo Vadis -- Melody?"

> Acid, hard, metal rock
> Booming boulders, crashing shock.
> Apollo tears his strings in rage,
> Pan chews his flute in a daze. . . .
>
> Postmodern, postcolonial Indian craze
> Cocktail culture, Star, Zee, MTV maze.
> Tagore weeps, Nazrul groans. . . .

Thus, from "Fire Offerings" to "The Sound of Music", from "Grey Circles" to "Snapshots," these women poets emerge as powerful poetical voices. Both old and young, they straddle the world of personal and public memories. With a varying degree of success, their achievement is testimony to the resilience of poetry in the context of contemporary culture.

CONTRIBUTORS

Shanta Acharya, whose roots are in Orissa, freelances as a writer on both literature and economics and gives readings of her poetry in both England and India. Two volumes of her published poetry are *Not This, Not That* and *Numbering Our Days' Illusions*.

Deepa Agarwal, based in Delhi, writes poetry and fiction in English, and translates from Hindi into English. She has published several children's books in both these languages.

Smita Agarwal lives in Allahabad and lectures in the Department of English at the University there. She has published poems in the U.K. and Canada, and a selection of her work appears in *Nine Indian Women Poets*, which *KB* reviews in this issue.

Meena Alexander, Distinguished Professor of English at the Graduate Center and Hunter College of the City University of New York, was born in Allahabad and has lived also in Kerala, Sudan and England. An extensive bibliography of her multi-genre publications appears on Page 144 of this issue. Publication of her new volume of poems, *Illiterate Heart*, is due early in the year 2002.

Paramita Banerjee, who claims to translate only as a passion, has nonetheless published a significant translation, from Bengali into English, of Mahasweta Devi's children's stories, *The Non-veg Cow*, and has published many translations of Bengali poems into English, ten of them for *KB* 9's special Translation Issue.

Apoorva Bharadwaj, who is a full time lecturer in Priyadarshini College, Nagpur, also lectures in the Postgraduate English department at Hislop College, and is currently pursuing research in American Literature. She has published articles, short stories and poetry in many newspapers and literary journals.

Sujata Bhatt, who resides in Bremen, Germany, has published five volumes of poetry, of which *Brunizem* won a Commonwealth Poetry Prize and *Augatora*, her latest, is reviewed in this issue of *KB*. She has also translated poetry from Gujarati, her mother tongue, into English.

Susan Bhatt, a Reader in the Department of English at M.S. University, Vadodara, works in the area of translation studies and conducts creative writing workshops for students.

K.B. Bindu teaches in the Department of English at J.B.D. Arts and Commerce College in Surat. Her poetry has been published in many nationally circulated journals.

Krishna Bose, who is Reader in English at F.M. College, Balsara, Orissa, has recently won First Prize in the Poetry Writing Competition 2000 organized by the Kerala Poetry Society.

Melanie Campbell is a nineteen-year-old student, at present preparing to enter college after living in a variety of countries in Asia. She is currently a Volunteer in shelters and homes for the mentally and physically handicapped.

Vibha Chawla teaches at Vasant Valley School, New Delhi, where she "puts together" English text books for children, and helps to develop a teacher resource centre for the school.

Sanjukta Dasgupta, Head of the Department of English of Calcutta University, has published *Snapshots*, a collection of her poems (reviewed in this issue), in addition to a study of *The Novels of Huxley and Hemingway*. She is Associate Editor of the *Journal of the Women's Studies Research Centre* in the University of Calcutta.

Eunice de Souza was for many years Head of the Department of English at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. Most recently she has edited a book of "Conversations with Poets" (*Talking Poems*) and an anthology of *Nine Indian Women Poets*, while *Fix*, *Women in Dutch Painting*, and *Ways of Belonging* are single volumes of her own poetry.

Maureen Ruprecht Fadem, Adjunct Professor of English at City University of New York's Borough of Manhattan Community College, is pursuing a Ph. D. in that University with concentration in Women's poetry of South Asia and Irish Literature. She is also the moderator for the South-Asian Literature Listserv KavitaList.

Shiela Gujral writes poetry in English, Hindi and Punjabi, much of it translated into foreign languages such as Arabic, and regional languages of India. Her poetry has received many distinguished awards, in Japan and Korea as well as in India. *KB* reviews her *Canvas of Life* in this issue.

Anjum Hasan is a Programme Executive at the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore. Her poems have appeared in many well known journals in India.

Anjli Joshi is a fourth-year student in University College, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Her poetry has won awards in Canada and in the United States.

Suma Josson, born in Kerala and a graduate of the College of St. Teresa, Minnesota in the United States, has made many documentary films, and a feature called *Janmadinam*. She has published *Poems and Plays, A Harvest of Light* (another poetry collection), *Circumferences* (a novel) and a book on experimental primary education.

Lakshmi Kannan writes novella, novels, and short stories in Tamil, many of which she has translated into English, and has done extensive research in the impact of judicial and social reforms on women of South India. *Exiled Gods*, *Impressions* and *The Glow and the Grey* are three published volumes of her English poetry. A fourth volume, *Unquiet Waters*, is in preparation.

Priya Krishnan has been a freelance writer and has extensively reviewed children's literature for several newspapers. She is now an Editor for Tulika in Chennai, where she currently lives.

Sukrita Paul Kumar, who teaches at a College of the University of Delhi, is an artist who has held exhibitions of her paintings in that city. She has published three poetry collections, *Oscillations*, *Apurna*, and *Folds of Science*, as well as several prose studies.

Gayatri Majumdar is Editor of *The Brown Critique*, a distinguished sister journal published in Calcutta. She earlier worked as a journalist and has contributed many poems and articles to poetry journals and magazines big and small.

Samina Mishra is an independent film maker, living in New Delhi. She has published and made photographs for *Hina in the Old City* (a children's book), has translated from Urdu a book of short stories by Dr. Zakir Hussain, and has produced *Dish Is Life, an Essay in Image Journeys*, exploring audio-visual media in India.

Sachidananda Mohanty, Professor of English at the University of Hyderabad, has been a British Council Scholar in U.K., a Fullbright Post-doctoral Fellow in the United States, and a Salzburg Fellow in Austria. In addition to award-winning translations, he has published two books on D.H. Lawrence, edited three other books, and contributed essays and articles to many widely-read journals in India.

M.K. Naik, our foremost living historian of Indian literature in English, has published more than a dozen volumes in this field, surveying different genres or focusing on important individual authors. A new volume, *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey*, with collaboration from Shyamala A. Narayan, is in press. Professor Naik resides in Pune.

Deeya Nayar's career has included singing, writing and editing. She currently is an Editor with Children's publisher, Tulika.

Suniti Namjoshi, originally from Mumbai, has served in the IAS, taught at Fergusson College in India and at the University of Toronto, and currently lives in Devon, U.K. Her published writing includes multiple volumes of fables and of poetry, but an essay in this issue of *KB*, with bibliography, details the complete range of her work.

E.V Ramakrishnan, Reader in English at South Gujarat University in Surat, has published two volumes of poetry (*Being Elsewhere in Myself* and *A Python in a Snake Park*) as well as *Making It New* (a study of modernism in Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi poetry).

Sandhya Rao, an Editor for Tulika Publishers, has previously worked on the staff of both a newspaper and a magazine. She currently resides in Chennai.

Neeti Sadarangani lives in Baroda and has recently submitted to the M.S. University there her Ph. D. thesis tracing the impact of Kabir and Nanak on Tagore and Aurobindo. She has published *The Serpent of Slumber*, a book of poems.

Archna Sahni has lived and studied in Kuala Lumpur, Chandigarh, Mumbai and Toronto. Until recently a college lecturer in Chandigarh, she is currently at work compiling *Inner Demons*, a book of her poetry, and completing a Ph. D. thesis which compares the story of Draupadi in the *Mahabarata* with its modern Indian depictions.

Molshree Sharma continues to send poetry from the United States, where she has been a student at the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois.

Nilima Sheikh is a well-known artist of the Baroda school, the city in which she lives and works.

K. Srilata has won prizes in competitions organized by the British Council and by the Poetry Society of India. Many of her poems have been anthologised, and others published in several major poetry journals.

Arundhathi Subramaniam is Programme Coordinator for Mumbai's National Centre for the Performing Arts, and is a member of the Committee of the Poetry Circle in that city. She has published poetry and reviews of the performing arts in a wide variety of journals.

Kamala Suraiya, who is known to many readers as Kamala Das, continues to publish poetry, short fiction and other prose works in both English and Malayalam, after four decades of national and international distinction as a writer. *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* is a helpful and inclusive recent selection from her poetry in English.

Aparna Tambe, who lives in Nagpur, is publishing her poetry in *Kavya Bharati* for the first time.

Smita Tewari, a Reader in the Department of English at the University of Allahabad, has published *Time Recycled*, a collection of her poems, in addition to individual poems that have appeared in many anthologies and journals.

Anubala S. Varikat, a new acquaintance for *Kavya Bharati*, sends her poetry from her residence on the campus of the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi.

C. Vijayasree, a Professor in the Department of English at Osmania University, Hyderabad, is also Secretary of the Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. Her book-length study of the writings of Suniti Namjoshi is in press.

Zai Whitakar has taught at Kodaikanal International School, and has published novels (*Up the Ghat*), biography (*Snake Man*), and children's fiction (*Andamans Boy*) in addition to film scripts, short stories and a travelogue. At present she is living in Chennai.

Alaka Yeravadekar works with a multinational firm in finance and accounting, dabbles in painting and sketching and has recently translated a handbook on birdcalls from Marathi to English. Her contributions to this issue of *KB* are her first published poetry.

SUBMISSIONS

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