KAVYA BHARATI

Special Issue
Poetry of the Indian Diaspora - I

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
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FOREWORD

KB-16 and More

When we were planning to produce a Special Issue of *Kavya Bharati* highlighting poetry of the Indian diaspora at least some had expressed their misgivings and reservations. But we were in for a pleasant surprise when contributions began to reach us from different parts of the world. The quality and the quantity struck us. We are indeed constrained to hold over some excellent work received to yet another issue, in fact the very next, of *Kavya Bharati*.

Dr. Manmohan Singh, inaugurating the third Bharatiya Pravasi Divas on 7th January 2005 in Mumbai said: "If there is an empire today on which the sun truly cannot set it is the empire of our minds, that of the children of Mother India, who live today in Asia, Africa, Australia, the Americas, and indeed on the icy reaches of Antarctica."

This and the next issue of *Kavya Bharati* are dedicated to all those people, not just poets, who have left our shores "seeking opportunity and challenge, knowledge and adventure and the excitement of discovering a whole new world." Let the sun never set on this empire of minds--and let there be more poetry that pass through multiple filters.

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Editor: R.P. Nair

KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 16, 2004

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MEENA ALEXANDER

COSMOPOLITAN

You want a poem on being cosmopolitan.
Dear friend what can I say?
Sometimes I cannot tell mulberry skin from blood on the hands of children.

Nor stop myself from tugging a cloth where ghostly knives, cups, forks flutter
Where stones surrender
To the hunger of exiles.

Yesterday I jumped the metal door confusing D train for A,
Doors clashed, I tore a sleeve, saved my arm.
Pacing the ill lit platform I heard the bird of heaven call.

A cry huge, indigo, bursting the underground tunnel.
A simple enough bird
Whose voice alone forces it apart.

A dun coloured thing feathers moist it likes best to perch on green tamarind
Or on a bamboo branch.
The kind of bird you see painted on palmyra fans

Or at the rim of raw silk furnishing a woman's garment.
As the A train spun in I saw claws scoring a stubble field,
Rails melting into bamboo hit by a lightning storm.

Ill suited for that train and where ever in the world it might take me,
I set both hands to the tunnel wall.
In cracks of the broken wall I touched dirt, moist, reddening.

It came to me foolish perhaps, yet insistent as night wind
After a storm has passed,
A slow sweet tapping on the tympanum--

This is where your home is laid, scales unsung and secret geography.
Odd questions massed in me.
Who knows my name or where my skin was torn?

If I could would I return to Kashi?
And might the queen of trumps intercede for me?
On an island, in a high room, on a kitchen table, by a chopping board

I set a book you once gave me, *The Travels of Mingliaotse*.
That ancient sage whispers in my ear--*I have seen the sea*
Changed three times into a mulberry field and back again into the sea.

TRANSIT LOUNGE

A woman in a spotted vest counts out coupons with names
Hair bristling she stands in my way
It's a long wait for the plane to Orange County.

My name floats away.
I have no stitch of sound to call my own,
Neither cotton nor silk cling to me--I'm stuck in a thicket of passengers.

Who does she think she is, my given name,
Traipsing away like that?
A man approaches, he's from my father's side of the family.

His hair is filled with sand from Sinai's shore.
I call out to him--Look my name has taken flight!
I'm milk splattered on dirt, salt on a cracked threshold, a cloud in grandmother's well.

Can't you see? he replies--
She strolls in a forest of bruised tongues, past bushes that burst into syllables.
She waits for you by a river that quickly changes color.

Deer drink there, the gold leopard, also speckled souls.
She wants you to know that however long you wait
You'll never make the plane for Orange County

NOMADIC TUTELAGE

You strike your head against a door and pluck it back again,
Ancient gesture, ineluctable.
Bone bruising wood

And the lyric rears itself, a silken hood.
Gamba Adisa
You have come to say

Afraid is a country with no exit visas.
You taught me to fetch old meal for fire,
Sift through an ash heap,

Pick syllables, molten green,
Butting sentences askew.
I try to recall the color of your face.

Was it lighter than mine? Was it the color of the East River
As the sun drops into soil,
As once a child by the wellside

Packed her mouth with stones?
So darkness crowns the waters
And the raw resurrection of flesh unsettles sight.

We would journey
Before light into a foreign tongue.
I hear you and I am older

Than moonlight swallows swim through.
Cries of hawks mark out
Four points of the compass

Nomadic tutelage of cactus and rose.
Blunt rods strike blood,
Toss nets of dreams across salt shores.

SALEEM PEERADINA

BOMBAY TIMES

Someone is feeding us indigestible news.

The icing sends our sugar level soaring
But the cake is missing.

The gravy growls through our nightly heartburn
But where's the meat?

No veggies, no salad, no curds either. Instead,
The chefs whip up concupiscent froth.

The trays are all asizzle with garnish,
And everything is topped with silver leaf.

Someone disconnect the stoves, mop up the ink,
Put the editorial cooks out to pasture.

Dump the pundits, gag the columnists. Make sure
The kitchen help gets a decent deal elsewhere.

Someone stop this feeding frenzy.

INSIDE STORY

Pulled into her magnetic field by a pointed
question-mark look, I hoist my carry-on
in a pretend-gesture of cooperation
and unzip my wares for her inspection.

She starts off gently, almost reverently, to lift
the top items to put aside -- suede jacket, sweater,
books, camera. The mouth of the bag gaping
like a surgical cut to her marauding hands,

She peers in, turning like a page the shoulder
of a shirt, the waistband of a trouser.
There's no stopping her now. Plunging past
underwear, lumps of socks, handkerchief, sandals,

Pyjamas, her fingers hit the bulge
of a toilet bag. Pulling it up by the tail,
she rattles, pokes, then casts it aside, belly-up,
like the day's unusable catch. More digging

Unearths two pairs of glasses needing explanation.
Weakly, almost apologetically, I atone for
the two too many: one for reading, one for the sun,
not counting the one already on my nose.

She's getting the scoop on my life, my guts spilling
all over the table! And we've hardly met!
Not finished yet, she goes back for a final thrust
cupping and eyeing a tiny tupperware box.

If I was bashful then, I'm really sheepish now.
"It's tea bags," I grin.
"You thought of everything, didn't you?" she responds,
suddenly softening, classifying me in her album

Of men, poor creatures, she found so touching.
As I scoop my cornucopia into the bag, she offers
the firm pressure of both hands, so I can zip up
my open wound. "Have a nice stay," she says cheerfully,

As I lurch out of Canadian Customs,
a lot more scrambled than I was coming in.

PROTOCOL

As I'm stepping out of the building into prime afternoon
Fall light, I see her getting out of the car
And heading in my direction. It's Ann Marie,
And her walk tells me something's wrong.
She missed class, and I am about to be handed
An excuse. Rotating mid-step, I turn
To face her and find her face dissolving
Heldback tears. Ann Marie's a good student, mindful
At all times, so this is no performance.
She didn't return from her weekend visit home

Because her aunt -- her favorite aunt --
Had died in a crash. Turned out to be
An accident in which a racing car
(Her aunt worked the race-track in Michigan)
Coming in to be serviced, knocked her down
Cracking open her skull. Sobbed out
Breathlessly in seconds, her words leave
Smudges in the dizzy Autumn glare,
The blue now burned to a crisp. Torn by
Contrary impulses, I want to sit her down

On the steps, so I can stay close
To her grief, allow the broken words to sink in,
Then, by a gesture as simple as a touch
Of the hand, enter her circle of sorrow.
Simpler still would be a hug -- honest, heartfelt,
Wordless. But in the shadow of these walls
Caution grips my stomach -- and my arms back down.
I offer clumsy solace, incoherent comfort,
To the young woman who stands proud
In the postscript of her pain.

She had stayed behind because the family,
In worse shape than she was, needed her

There. Filling its emptiness
Had helped subdue her own sense of gloom.
No teacher or book could have driven home
That lesson. Reclaiming her life now,
Revaluing friendships, catching up with
Missed work, her sunlit eyes greet
The unread future rushing at her
As she leans against that still fresh, momentous loss.

THE OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD

Milestones, landmarks, city limits, shorelines, the entire
subcontinent had zoomed and receded into the quarter century's
rearview mirror before we met again,

Quite by chance, in the old neighborhood.
I say, a quarter century, unable to fathom
the swing and stretch of time that has revolved

The earth and spun our days in dizzying cycles.
Though twenty-five years of changing skies
have kept our sense of place intact,

Two decades and a half of lost tracks and
no contact have piled up like unread mail brimming
with news: postcripted memories.

*

Though I had lived across the street from you
for two years, we were never close.
We were graduate students, intellectual buddies

Whose minds crossed over nimbly and eagerly
into each other's house. As we played coldly
with ideas, we eyed the possibilities, afraid

To be singed by the ardor that glowed underneath.
It held us, yet kept us apart, watchful,
hanging on to the other's alibi.

Today, we meet in your bungalow on the hill
now wedged in by the city's intrusive zeal--
this overgrown city besieged by greed, stale

Glamour, fresh fires of hate, that same low tide stench,
incessant noise pounding the streets, the shaded
birdsong lanes still sticky with our footprints.

Yet, I smell in your embrace the scent of forests
and mountains, of ruins and tombs, of smoke
rain and salt, rust, and concrete. And tumbling

Out of your mouth are a quarter century of
untold stories, expeditions in distant continents and
journeys between the walls of houses settled

And moved: that sacred turf in which children romp so tangibly
and absently, layering the age-defying crust of our being
with such rich formations of rock and silt.

*

Today, like the haunting melody of an old ghazal
that resurrects the heart, this moment, this tentative
embrace, brings a quarter century to a lurching halt.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I am a man of the streets, a citizen of bazaars
Loitering on railway platforms, idling at bus stops.

Look for me at panikum chai shops
With autoricksha drivers, muzdoors, and bank tellers.

Look for me at wayside idli & dosa joints
Chatting up flower sellers and fruit vendors.

I don't need to be ushered to my table
By a hostess. Or sit stiff, hands tethered,

While a waiter delicately places a delicacy
On my plate. Can I dispense with

The silverware and scoop the chana with the bhatura
And with fingers shovel the rice and fish curry

Into my mouth? The ambience would be far nicer
If those phony paintings were taken down

And that fake folksy pottery and metal craft
Was given back to the folk. I don't belong here.

Especially not for me the club with cold leftovers
Of hunters' trophies staring glassy-eyed

Over my shoulder as starched uniforms fuss
Around the lunch table. Sign me off

This colonial guest-list. Forgive me,
But I will not enter the upscale replicas

Of the durbar either. For the price of a five-star meal
My mother's maid could survive a whole year

And fund her children's education too.
Forget dinner. Just hand me the cash.

My appetite's gone, but I know where to find
The ones who need to be fed.

Saleem Peeradina

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

For Phil Blosser

Poetry and thought, each needs the other in its neighborhood. It is well, therefore, to give thought to the neighbor.
Martin Heidegger, "The Nature of Language"

A philosopher brings the good news--
Poetry resides in the dwelling next door.

Philosophy can sense the presence of Poetry
But not its nearness. It can be heard, singing

Above the whistle of the kettle.
It can be seen, dancing from room to room.

When spicy aromas travel from Poetry's table
To stir the neighbor's appetite, Philosophy thinks

It is time to make the call. It steps out
To run smack into Poetry and feels upon its skin

The breath of rock, water, plant, and animal. Here,
In this shared space, words can speculate, play,

Or break out into song. If this encounter were
To suffice, Philosophy would return enriched to its fold.

But how much sweeter for Philosophy to want
To taste the French kiss of Poetry!

SLOW DANCE

For me, this night blooming into day is enough.
This day blazing into noon, then gliding under
Shadows, feels complete. Light chasing the dark,
Night trailing day like the squeaky motion
Of a swing, takes me up in an arc
To kiss the sky.

If someone can make safe bets
On a calendar of months, years running
Into decades, it is the swift of foot, the quick
Of tongue. The young can wager, unafraid
To build on the back of a hunch.
To them I bequeath my fire.

All I own I fit into a single bag, and walk
With free and empty hands. For stops,
A bare room with a long view will suffice.
Time now to mend the seams of kinship, call on
Old loves, shrug off pretenders. I'm ready
To roll up the mat.

Yet, time hangs still like an unrung bell.

Saleem Peeradina

FOR THE BIRDS*

Long-distance travelers from the Arctic freeze,
They follow beacons of the sun, the arrows
Of the stars. Out of the blue haze they descend
On an isolated farmhouse where a woman
Looking up at the sky sees them
Flapping down in the stubble of her fields.
As she inches forward to greet them
They approach--warily, as Eurasian cranes will,
On long riveted legs--and eat
Out of her outstretched hand.

The world is mapped *inside* her.
She lets them know she will be home
Year after year awaiting the peck and shiver
Their bladed beaks deliver. And season
After season they will touch down, interrupting
Their relentless migration South, to be fed
By her. After a night's halt,
Their wingspans fingerprint the dawn sky.
Guests from afar, she muses,
The honor is mine, all mine.

*After watching *Winged Migration*

DEBJANI CHATTERJEE

THE LAST MOUNTAIN

Once we mountains sported wings,
soared proud above the heavens,
frolicked among fleecy clouds
and slid up and down the rainbows
that groaned with our mighty weight.
Rushing wind was our element;
we played the music of the spheres.
The sky gifted us a giddy lightness
that stole the breath away.
But we took our freedom for granted
and jealous gods have clipped our wings.
Now distant thunder growls our grumbles
as my brothers and sisters tower in dreams
of how we once were monarchs of the air.
But I, the smallest of the mountains,
escaped the wrath of gods.
I hide in the frothing ocean and, sleepless,
I bide my time with folded wings.
The sea soil rumbles my secret songs
as I call to my family to take heart.
Their trust will strengthen me
and lift me up to strike a blow for our kind,
to fly up to the sun itself if need be,
to dance in our remembered freedom,
for faith, they say, moves mountains.

Note: Mountains once had wings according to Indian myths.

A WINTER'S MORNING IN TIMARPUR

The black and white cat snoozes in the play of light and shade
on the carport's tin roof, under the crumbling mango tree;
tail twitching, it dreams of plump pigeon and tender blue tit.
The scent of a hilsa fish curry floats from the kitchen window;
infiltrates its dream and teases it awake till it yawns and blinks.
A family of sparrows hop in the pomegranate tree:
twittering delight at the young green of its leaves,
playing among the orange of its buds.
Frenzied bees weave among white lemon flowers
and crimson frangipani fragrance the air.
High on a branch of the drumstick tree a tailor-bird's nest swings
in the November breeze, fresh with a hint of henna coolness.
The coral-stemmed white *shefali* flowers make *alpona* patterns
as they fall on the dew-damp grass.
The hibiscus still droops in prayer
to the early morning sun, its double petals
luscious red like much-kissed bridal lips.
A squirrel mother and child stir in their telephone-box nest
and milkmen balance heavy canisters on bicycle bars.
The roadside *chaiwalla* lights his charcoal fire *biri*
and the newsboy flings, with practised ease,
a rolled *Hindustan Times* to the third floor verandah.
Trucks and buses piled with raw produce and day labour
thunder imperially down the Grand Trunk Road
from the conquered pastures of Punjab and Haryana.
The black and white cat shadow boxes a Tiger Swallowtail
as a sleepy corner of Old Delhi wakes--and stretches.

REASON FOR COMING
(for Nadia and Abdullah)

"We had to come to Britain for our son;
more can be done for him here,"
you said. Your role was simply caring.
Now Sheffield holds his eight years' bones
and you are still in thrall, grieving.

THE SUN HAS NOT RISEN

The British sun has not risen
on this bleak February noon.
It sets, like *maya*,
spectacular on an empire
of Turner galleries. Skeletal trees
loom, like Lowry men, in the gloom--
gaunt old-timers with shaking limbs.
Grey buildings droop on ash-wet streets
where speckled salt bites in soufflé peaks,
crocus shoots are muffled in mulch.

Smothered in an anonymous
duffle-coat, I brave the harsh air.
Not even a card robin splashes
its melody of Christmas coral.
But on a lone bush the bloodstain
of poinsettia flames kindle
cindered memories till I feel
another sun bless my bowed head
and, to a veena's *raag*, I hear
my mother tongue singing to me.

RAIN

When the heavens drenched the earth,
there were those who said that,
rumbling Vedic mantras,
Indra poured down oblations.

Others spoke of Indrani's tears,
showering both joy and sorrow;
or even Indra's winged elephant,
splashing and sporting while bathing.

(Airavata did incline
to ecstatic cleanliness.)
But Indra shook his royal head:
"Sometimes it *is* just rain I send."

A BIRTHDAY KISS FOR SIMON
(For Simon Fletcher)

Your birthday, Simon,
was an auspicious day for us
to drop in on the Scousers in Liverpool,
ghazal-*ustad* Basir, you and I,
from Manchester, Shrewsbury and Sheffield,
to break a leg--as they say--
only our one voice would carry us
in a *mushaira* in three tongues.

I'd packed a present for you--
a book of verse, what else?
My bag also held the green pin
with a smiley face that my Brian,
grown more Irish with the years,

sent you. Smile, Simon,
smile, it's your birthday.

I smiled to myself--my train
passed Warrington Central--
should I give you a kiss,
though I'm not one for kissing?
Perhaps, I thought. I knew you
long enough and well enough.
And yours was a birthday
when one needs the prop of friends.
At forty, you remain my junior,
and your Mum says you don't look thirty.
It was okay to kiss the young,
a young friend on greeting,
especially on your birthday.

I panicked as the train
approached Liverpool Lime Street.
My silk sari rustled, upbraiding me:
how could I, sari-clad, kiss a man
not my husband? In a sari
I would not kiss even Brian in public--
and God knows how kissable he can be!
My sari like a silk glove packed
the punch of my Indian austerity.

I saw you waiting at the platform.
We waved. "Happy birthday, Simon!"
I kissed your cheek.
You were pleased I'd remembered.
The book, the pin, exchanged hands,
smiles connected.

A year later I offer this poem.
May each year bring you this good day
in Liverpool or Lahore, Manchester or Mumbai.
Smile, Simon, smile green on each birthday.

Debjani Chatterjee

FIVE THINGS TO DO IN WAITING ROOMS TO GET YOU NOTICED

Just nip out to the corridor and, in a twirl or two--
    a ballerina pirouette of course--change your costume
and go save the world. Then return to your place in the queue.
    Super heroes set good examples in the waiting room.

While others check out the magazines or attempt crosswords,
    flip out that *War and Peace* you carry around to impress
on these occasions. Insert a page-mark about two-thirds
    of the way. Soon you will feel flushed with the rush of success.

Do a spot of yoga meditation--nothing tranquil--
    I'm talking headstands, bellows breathing and breath retention.
The lion pose--rolling eyes and tongue well out--will fulfil
    your objective of capturing everyone's attention.

Read: 'Five Things To Do In Waiting Rooms To Get You Noticed'
    and respond without inhibition. Either read aloud
for *all* to hear--assume they are deaf and need your practised
    and boisterous laughter (therapy, that--infects a crowd)--

or at the very least, jot down your 'Five Things *Not* To Do'.
    It may give you perverse pleasure, but won't provide much wealth.
Or waggle your ears and twiddle your thumbs--that's restful too.
    No one can say that you neglect your own or others' health!

‘OLIVER CROMWELL’S GOOD WIFE’

My friends, I beg thee to pray for me,
for mine is a great and honourable burden.
One rants and raves and petitions for annulment
when one’s wedded spouse takes
some other lady to bosom
or commits gross bigamy.
At the very least one nags one’s lawful spouse
and, by select neglect, discomforts him;
or complains to friends and basks in their sympathy;
or, if one has a mind to, indulges in fantasy
about torments to inflict on him if one only could--
for all would abhor such actions that run contrary
to God’s laws and prove man’s bestial frailty.
In another age, if all else failed,
then I could get me to a nunnery.
But none such expediency, alas, can solace me--
and more shame on me for thinking thus--
for he is a most righteous man and godly
who constantly reminds me of my beholden duty
and daily bids me join him in humble prayer
for my rival’s welfare and long-lived success.
My friends, I beg thee to pray for me,
for he, in troth, is wedded to the Commonwealth
though all still name me ‘Oliver Cromwell’s good wife’.

TABISH KHAIR

(*The selections below are from a work in progress,* Manifest O: The Cognition of Shakuntala)

SHAKUNTALA'S AUNT HAS A VISITOR FROM THAT PAST NOT ABASHED LIKE A DEMURE BRIDE

At noon the sun is closest to the memory of our failures
And it is at noon that Comrade-Chacha arrives: old man
Of many words who once rocked Shakuntala on his knees,
Singing songs of revolution, sprinkling her clean frocks
With the Holi-red colour of the paan he is always chewing.

What brings you here, old man time has left behind,
Bilge that dredges up at palatial homes of old friends,
Blood friends whom the tide has swept to new islands
Where they build great kingdoms on the sweat of Man
Fridays, once-red friends now in the pink of wealth?

What brings you here, decrepit old man who lacked
The sense to make it good, switch horses mid-stream?
What brings you here hoarding the coin of your cough,
The sweat and rasping breath of bronchial asthma,
Your uncompromising views, your lack of shame

At what even a chit of a girl like Shakuntala knows,
Her bird-brained generation knows, were pipe dreams
Of pale young men in opium dens before they walked
Into police ambushes or polite careers, what brings you back,
The aunt murmurs and sends out her niece to inquire.

The noon light is whitening with summer.
The koel now fills the lengthening hours
With stories of drought and emptiness;
Sweetly sings the koel, she doesn't digress
On the falsehood by which she won her ends,
Her egged deception of future and friends.

Shakuntala wonders how he has nursed his nickname,
Comrade-Chacha, like the sherwani he wears, once
The pride of dresses, now cut to an old fashion,
Worn threadbare and tight at the wrong places,
How he has changed from man to scarecrow,

Though he still walks tall and erect, unbowed
In the face of the cackling laughter of failure
That surely he must hear behind his back.
Shakuntala wonders why she refuses to look
Into those eyes in which she had once found

Hope reflected and humour, though this
Is a murky memory and will dry with time
Leaving in her soul one of those spaces
Where water has been and now a white,
Powdery dryness remains.

Comrade-Chacha who comes with the odd
Request--a job for a youth, some villager
To be bailed from custody--why does he
Make Shakuntala feel sad and angry
Relaying her aunt's bitter-sweet excuse?

Awara hai phir koh-e-nida mein jo bashaarat
Tamheed-e-mussarrat hai ke tul-e-shab-e-gham hai?

Kis akas sé hai shahar ki dewaar darkhshan
Yé khoon-e-shaheedan hai ke jarkhana-e-jum hai?

Halkaa kiye baithe raho ek shama ko yaaro
Kuch roshni baaki to hai harchand ke kum hai. [1]

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY OF THE CONCENTRATED EYE THAT ENDS WITH THESE WORDS: HE CUT OFF THE TREE-PERCHING ARTIFICIAL BIRD'S HEAD WITH THE HONED BLADE OF AN ARROW AND MADE THE TARGET TUMBLE TO THE GROUND

The aunt Shakuntala knows is like one of those cards
That turned show another picture. No trick of light,
By sheer will she has kept herself tilted at one angle
Where all Shakuntala can see is the starch-saried aunt,
Long-sad-faced, bony-hipped, always right.

---

[1]

FAIZ AHMAD FAIZ, TRANSCREATED

The voice that is lost in the cave of mysteries,
Is it the harbinger of hope or sorrow's cry?

A shadow's shine has set these city walls aglow:
Is it the fire of people's hope or silver's lie?

Still sit surrounding, sheltering this glow, O friends:
An ember's left though raging fires appear to die.

And walking back, excuse conveyed, Shakuntala recalls
That memory she believes was a dream: one night
When she was a child of nine, lightning in the trees,
Thunder that could not drown the knock on the back door,
Her father's footsteps padding down marble stairs,
Creak of the door opening, whisper, sound
Of someone groaning, running water, voice
Of Comrade-Chacha raised in anger, subsiding
Before her aunt's hissed warning: You'll wake her up!

In this dream where sight blurs, somehow sounds
Ring clear in her memory, like single drops of water
Plinking into the metal sink: *Police warrant, naxalite…*
They will never look here. Yes they will. *Nahin they won't…*
I have my daughter to think of. *So has he--three, in fact…*
No not your paisa. I have money of my own to give dammit.
The banging of a door, the scrubbing of floors.

In all of this her aunt stands a statue carved of granite:
Mythic mother guarding her family, night after night after night.

THE AUNT'S SONG ON CONCENTRATED (TILTED) FORM

I know the word they do not say:
Nullipara.
It seems to come from long away,
A ghostly era.

And yet I let them think the lie
That makes me live,
And say with sorrow how I
Had so much to give.

His death is double grief to me,
Or so it's known,
Because I never had a baby
Of my own.

They never think, I forget too
Often the knowledge
That men, husbands, can jostle you
To the edge

Of being where you stand and look
Across the known
And see your dreamt of life a rook
Flying alone.

I turned away from the mossy stone
Of my own soul:
The knowledge that a life alone
Would leave me whole.

I founded my life on a lie;
It grows in me.
I feel it kick and almost cry:
Death, my baby.

SHAKUNTALA AWAKES THE MORNING AFTER THE NINTH FORM OF MARRIAGE KNOWN AS BEING LAWFUL

The wind peels off the dried crust of last night's wound,
And through the thin bandages of cloud draping the sky
A weak yellow pus permeates to the hostel's window-sills.
Woolly wads of silence still stuff the throat of each room,
She can feel the students sleeping like loaves on shelves,
She will hear them rising soon, less noisy than yeast
To her pierced ears used to morning bells, crow-cries,
Voices of vendors, squabble of children, kitchen-clang,
Water cascading into buckets, the clear shout of sunlight.

What is sound but a state of mind
Not policed by custom officers,
Whose absence is what she hears
In this land of regulated waves;
What is knowledge but the plant
That sprouts from the seed of loss?

The kitchen is gauzed this early in the morning. Shakuntala
Thinks she is alone there amid cups, plates, the fridge's hum,
Until she sees the man in a corner, back late from a night's ravel,
Observing her with blood-shot eyes and a smile. He is old
And introduces himself as a rock musician staying the week
In a friend's room. It's morning he says, lurching to his feet,
And I am a burnt-out star about to set in bed. A star, he adds
At the door, is not stone but memories. Shakuntala is caught
In the web of this language, words that slip so easily from couch
To bed and do not struggle like the streets of a small town
To find expression. Will she ever discover that a burnt-out star
Is not just spoken memory? It is evidence of the act:
How the murder of matter leaves fingerprints of light
Traceable by thought across a billion years,
How in the loneliness of intergalactic space, we are points
Of fire visible from a host of other stars--we are never
Without the company of eyes we seldom give thought to.

She sees for the first time those hollow eyes outside her house,
She vaguely hears for the first time the streets outside her walls:
Soon their absence will fill her with the nectar of nostalgia, which
Is a glass of half-lies she will have to drain to the dregs before
She sees reflected in its emptiness the few truths of loss: how
Its roots stretch from this hostel to the walls of her home, how
She cannot shatter her fetters as long as they remain in chains,
How memory can be either opium or the forge of anger.

The hawk bears down upon the dove;
The angels sing of peace and love;

The scholars here debate and say
'Revolution' has had its day.
But as she works her way inside
The skin of all that they deride,
As years are piled upon her head,
And though her aunt and father's dead,
I wish her strength to break the rhyme
Of Reason divorced from all time,
I wish her sight to see the danger,
I wish her will, I wish her anger!

THE NIGHT-BLOOMING LOTUS IS WHITE LIKE MOLTEN LEAD

It is almost dawn: the volkswagon a beetle crawling up the curtain of winter,
The dark skeletons of trees stand sentinel over her loneliness. Holger
Is angry at the way she secluded herself from others at the party. He keeps
His cool, hisses words of anger in English, clenching the steering wheel until
His knuckles are white like the bone within: It's not fair, it's not fair
Of you not to give it… them… us, us, *us* a chance now you are here.
It was such a cosy party, he adds, and then uses the right word in Danish:
Hyggelig! How can she explain to him the stab of that innocent word
Which sets out to regulate happiness by the complicit placement of candles,
Takes for granted the punch line of every joke, makes of you a monster
From the dark den of despair or the petty provinces of protest: you smile--
Feeling all the while like a cracked face of plaster on a leaden body,
That statue someone put out in a garden corner and forgot to sparrows--
You smile to hide all that the word conspires to deny. She bites back
Her words, not wanting sympathy, the empty echo of 'roots'
That comes from the hollow space of his wholly human heart.
Tradition holds no terror for him; his past is packaged;
'Roots' a metaphor to hide the clumsy split reality of legs,
To help him forget that the roots human beings grow move,
Wave, hang like the peepul's trunk-tubers through the air
Of language and memory before gripping the soil of other flesh.

Her absent-minded refusal to forget completely is too much
For him whose full world fulcrum's a fantastic forgetfulness.

2 a.m.

Below the highway, darkness turns the heath
To ancient shapes, to where the wind is hooves,
The mist a cloak swirling, or further back
To that with eyes and claws and scales and beak.

He grips the wheel, following dotted lines:
No traffic and yet he keeps to the lane.
A tic could throw his lighted world out of gear,
The earth erupt into all that has been there.

AS THE BEAUTY OF A SHINING MIRROR IS MARRED BY BREATHING OR IS IT

Some days fog fills this street like incense smoke,
Glazing the high beauty of a delicate green decay,
The proof of what time and air can do to metal roofs.
On both sides the massive gods of commerce stand,
Their many avatars--McDonalds, Burger King--
Their loud bells tolling in the minds of customers,
Piping in the children, and in between the small
Lisp of lesser gods, Kebab Palace or Pølsevogn.
Glass lines the street making a parody of Plato:
What exists is similar but not shade or shadow.

What surprise then that on this street one longgreyday
When the clouds were like running sheep in the sky,
A memory of what could have flocked the square across
In this place which was once a combustible haymarket
And still sometimes flares up at the thrown matchstick

Of drunken revelries and soccer rivalries, matches struck
And cupped in the pampered prejudices of the “people”,
What surprise that on this street of new play and old pelf
Shakuntala should turn one thin grey day and see
A face from a land and past which won’t set her free?

A face so different, she had thought, from her own,
Different as the lengths of their hair, cuts of their clothes,
Lurch of their lives which for the other woman had been
Preordained by faith and family: Anisa’s cousin,
Brought up, unlike Shakuntala, to pray five times a day,
Married at 20 to a suitable boy (suitably foreign-settled),
No problem child in school, studious, docile, dupattaed,
No Shakuntala she, and yet what strange trick of light
Or fraud of fate made Shakuntala discern in that face
An image of herself floating like weeds under the surface?

> The moment has come but will she learn to see
> Beyond the play of shadows and similarities?
> Will she in this temple of the gods of air
> Learn to speak the thought she’s come to fear:
> How all her differences have not left her alone,
> How others too carry the burden of stone
> And faces change into the mask of the other
> Of creed or sex, culture and colour,
> How living flesh is butchered to cut types,
> How two women come to trade their two lives?
> Will she stop in a cafe, pour coffee, and hear
> The cousin’s tale of that face we’ve come to share?

STONE: OR THE COUSIN’S TALE

The west wind will blow for you, coming, as it does, from the land of the living:
It was a prophecy to awaken the dead.

When you turn fourteen your clothes jump two sizes ahead.
It is not just in hopscotch that the flat stone is always in front of you,
And on it you can lay the spread of an afternoon's picnic
There where sal leaves went sailing in the breeze and your hair
Was not held firmly in place by dupatta, clip, rubber-band.

To know when to look, to know when to laugh:
These are delicate knowledges, enshrined in postures of the body
Which have grown into you like the dirt once under your nails.
Your nails started being examined around the time you turned fourteen,
Cleaned, shaped, polished: you were being prepared for something.
You guessed the day your dupatta slipped and you heard the crash
Of something breaking that was always too big to mention.

What prophecy this
where the angel keeps the book to himself?

It was like a storm: the thunder of music, the lightning of bulbs,
The rain of tears that was false as custom and true as parents.
Though you recall the day with the help of smells: the various dishes,
Murgh Musallam, Shahi Korma, Seekh Kabab, Pulao, Makuti.
And there was something else after it all, but you were prepared:
It was a small price to pay for those dreams of escape.

What revelation this
where the angel never intercedes before the slab?

Distance and dollars have made the dupatta disappear,
But you stay in place behind a table of rubber-bands and clips,
Fake mahogany it is, and marble-topped: polished, flat stone
In its own square in the city of your escaped dreams.

Buzzer, button, shelf, file, computer, Mr. Jacobsen,
A print of nude natives by Gauguin (who had a Danish wife),
An echo of the Scream by Munch (who had a Danish shrink),
And you (with your Danish visa) adding trans-local colour
To the true colours of a global office: the perfect frame

Behind which is hidden the ignominy of your arrival, the body
That could not pass through Customs on its own and followed
The stony tinkle of metal. You are here for their sake.
They decided to make your picture real. Yes, Mr. Jacobsen?

These metal slabs to which you were tied by a proud parent
Who had also heard the prophecy and whom no angel stopped,
This game of perpetual movement you play on only one leg:
Can you decipher their secret before closing time today?

The west wind has blown for you, coming, as it does, from the land of the living.
There is no prophecy to awaken the dead.

EPILOGUE

They tell you the end of the world has come,
Or is it the end of history?
But your life has only just begun,
You wrote no valedictory;
If this is death, how is it real,
This life you know, this pulse you feel?

There are deaths of course, seen and unseen,
It is knowledge that you've:
Of guillotine, of nicotine,
The passing of friends or love;
With death like this you are intimate,
For life to life it catenates.

And yet the trunk of peepul marks
Each year of death, of life
With just as much care on its bark:
What makes nature so naïve,

It disregards the much prophesied
End of the lion and centipede?

The ook-ook of the Jungle crow,
Or its urban cousin's ka,
The twit-twit of the grey sparrow,
The gargle of the myna:
Such great ignorance of the doom
Announced in papers and lecture rooms!

The narial grins in Portuguese,
Its Sanskrit is still water:
They tower deathless all these trees,
Impervious to slaughter
By science and hand, thought or tongue;
They flourish on refuse and dung.

I pass you this technique, the cult
Ivation of the last:
That stem that binds the sky to mulch
(The present to the past),
Is what they've chosen not to see,
Those drumming the death of history,

Their well-clad bodies blooming like
A helium-filled balloon,
Ungripped by gravity, the fright
Of those marooned
Between the dark and Dark
On a bench in the park.

Against such morose conviction
All that I offer you
Is a seedling hope in the sun
(Your ability to do),
No epic of lush lines,
But hear - a sense of rhyme…

DARIUS COOPER

MONUMENTAL AND INTIMATE SPACES

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

from my intimate space of
table pens and paper

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

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

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

Unable to find the hakim
his daughter returns
to embrace the injected stabs
of a father's venom

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

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

hundreds of laboring eyes
and archifractured wrists
of all who had wrestled
with the Taj

exactly
like this rabbit
stubbornly entangled
in a lettuce warfare of
vegetable fruit and water

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

jewelsmeared

by a final
faltering
thumbprint.

SIENNA – DECEMBER 28

Meditation at a level crossing

The Stationmaster of Sienna
chases us
screaming and cursing in Italian
as we cross his railway tracks
with our heavy bags
at the level crossing.

He wants us to fall down
on our knees
REPENT…
and crossing all linguistic barriers
stutter
SCUSI SCUSI…

But after so many frescoes
of crucified sinners
and martyred saints
we do not feel like obliging
this neo-realist official
emulating Il Duce.

Not before you
I scream back at him in Inglesi.
Not before your Christ
or even your Pope.
If we'll kneel
we'll only kneel
before Leonardo
Raphael
Michelangelo
and Carravagio.

FERRARA – JANUARY 1

Musings of a Duke on his last Duchess
Conveyed to me on Binero/Railway Platform 4 at Ferrara

The cold hits us hard
as we huddle in the waiting room
surrounded by thick transparent glass.
Only the Duke of Ferrara is warm today
as he arranges himself before a mirror
after drawing the curtain
over that painting
he has refused to sell to the Uffizi.

Did I have to kill her?
After all these years
and a second wife who has obeyed me so well
I have failed to repeat that passion
which only she was fated to give me.
Ah, cruel lady, how you mock me
with that painted smile
for which you paid so dearly.

It is cold now
and our fabled Ferrara sun
can no longer make me smile.
I have whipped that donkey enough
but that offensive beast
refuses to run circles on my terrace.
Now, even a simple owl of cherries
reduces me to tears.
Proud officious Fool--
how I detest the very sound
of my one thousand year old Name.

O, my Beloved,
this cold in my bones
is not from an ancient skin
constantly flinching
from the sudden cold touch of marble.
The face in this mirror mocks me
"and you call yourself a Renaissance Man?
Look how ugly all of this has made you.
Look how your young wife shrinks
from you after feigning pleasure
in your bed.
She finds it only in her bathtub
after discreetly drawing the shower curtain."

But there is another who smiles at me
another who will always belong to me.
After I cross this wretched threshold of life
I'll find a way, I'll find a way
in that common darkness to claim her
once again. I don't know how
but darkness will show me the way.
Yes, I am certain, it will, it will…

…a train's whistle is heard…
That consoles the Duke.
He has to receive a Gallery owner from Milan
and the trains these days
are always on time.

I must go a little early
and chat with the station-master
and humor his pathetic artistic talents.
After all, I am the only person
allowed to cross the railway tracks.
Maybe today
I shall use the underground.

SUNITI NAMJOSHI

MODES OF FLYING

… Tripitaka … turned to thank the old man, only to discover that he was already rapidly disappearing into the sky, on the back of a white crane. Presently there came fluttering down from the sky a paper-strip on which was written, "I am the spirit of the Planet Venus…." Wu Ch'Êng-Ên: Monkey translated by Arthur Waley (Penguin Classics 1961) pp. 138-9.

Angels have wings,
and they clearly fly,
though the anatomy doesn't work,
as they also have arms, with hands to match.
So that it may be
that angels are not an earthly species,
and did not evolve.
It may be that their mode of locomotion
is beyond emulation.

Apsaras are different.
These heavenly nymphs
levitate or gravitate just as required.
They arrange their limbs in graceful fashion
and float down to earth or ascend to heaven
on affairs of state.
And they never look tired--
Their decorum is such, and such
the ethereal stuff of which they're made.

Superman, of course, is made
of steel.
He's just and generous, kind and good,
and though an alien,

loves humanity just as he should;
but as for his flying,
even fans admit, it's about as beautiful
as a blunt bullet.

Then there are machine gods,
balloonists and such,
whose clever contraptions haul them up;
but they're not reliable.
Should a string snap, a strut break,
they hang in mid-air,
or drift skyward, which, after all,
is awkward.

Probably the mode I like best is
the Buddhist one,
in which I can say,
"Please. Come now,"
and a swan or a crane obligingly descends.
I seat myself
on the soft feathers and do not
hurt it at all,
because in this mode everything I do
is light and easy,
and even my messages fall like confetti.

NEW YEAR'S DAY POEM FOR MARY

Joy on this New Year's day
has to be looked for.
On the ground perhaps
in leftover snow?
But joy on this New Year's day--
Yes, I know,
"has to be looked for".
Among leafless trees?
Well, why not? A crow's nest,
or a squirrel's nest,
might reveal--
only its own untidiness.
But Joy--?
Lurks in the hedgerows?
Is borne on the wind?
Yes, that's what I meant--
about joy,
which the wind and snow
left behind.

[Written Jan. 2002 for Mary Meigs (1917-2002)]

AMONG TULIPS
(A prose poem)

Suki among the tulips in the English spring felt that now she was sufficiently disguised. No, not as a flower. No Burmese cat ever looked like a flower. Not even a poet had ever said that. But as a rabbit perhaps. Or a groundhog or a hamster. Wrong country. Wrong climate. But then Burmese cats.... It would be best perhaps to belong to some rare and unknown species, something Australian, something that traversed the usual distinctions between fur and feathers. She could, for example, be a flying fox, or an egg-laying mammal, or she could be an ordinary cat. In Australia, at one time, that would have been very unusual. But it would be best probably to be unique: a solitary individual, comprising in herself an entire class. The Mythical Mammal. Yes, that would be best. Then she could tell herself stories about herself, about her origin for example, about her transformation, her many transformations, eventually, if she liked, even about her stellification. It was exhausting just to think all that. It was mind-boggling. It was an occupation that could take up an entire life. She nuzzled a tulip. 'Feeling is believing, thinking is seeing. And lying in the sun and falling asleep is essential to living...' Suki yawned. Whatever it looked like, Suki the Cat was inventing herself.

R. PARTHASARATHY

AUBADE

Under the warm coverlet my woman sleeps on;
I am drenched in the intractable scent of her hair.
The notion has often crossed my mind:
I should crumple it up like a handkerchief
that I could press to my face from time to time.

Meanwhile wakeful hands peel the skin off the night;
I drink from her tongue in the dark.
Our breath tips the room over to one side:
the tight hardwood floor groans
under the slew of discarded clothes.

We shut the whole untidy threadbare world out--
dogs, telephones, even the small indifferent rain.

PILLOW TALK

You wake up and slip quietly out of the room,
shutting the door behind you. Eyes closed,
I clasp the pillows one after another,
often press them to my nose in hopes of smelling out
the faintest trace of your body's secret perfume.

What nights we have ridden out on these pillows!
What strange cargo of dreams and memories
has washed up on these shores!
Never before have I held you more closely
as I hold you now in your absence.

But you, you hug the morning paper to your chest
in the kitchen, washing it down with a cup of tea.

SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

I am not a Pakistani. I never wanted to be one….
My roots are still in India
-Attia Hosain

Past the swelling domes of mosques and imambaras;
past the remains of palaces and tombs,
the scarred walls of the Residency on the hill
and the obelisk along the river; past the roofs
of terraced houses shaded by a flight of pigeons,
the gates of the old house sweep into view
to the surprise of weeds and bramble, that lift their heads to the wind,
where Mushtari Bai's voice once filled the air:
Even if you rubbed salt in it, I know my wound will heal.

I walk the entire length of the house,
dragging room after shadowy room behind me, lost in thought.
Not a whisper can be heard now; only the echoes of footsteps.
Gone are the chandeliers, the upholstered chairs,
the paintings on the ivory walls, the lime-green damask curtains.
Gone are the cries of street vendors beyond the high, encircling walls.
Such desolation in the thresholds!
But wherever I go, I carry this house on my back.

And who is left to speak our beloved language,
dearer to us than the air we breathe,
since those who spoke it fled in haste across the border,
taking with them all its graces, all its courtesies?

I'd like to know what a home is, and where do we look for it
when even the courtyards and streets and neighborhoods,
that we had called ours, have vanished forever.
Who could have thought that our world would end like this?

Who is left to mourn for Lucknow? Not Mir, surely,
over whose grave the indifferent trains still rumble by.

R. Parthasarathy

TALKING TO A STATUE

i.m. Osip Mandelstam, died transit camp near Vladivostok, 1938

Poets are always right; history is on their side.
-Bukharin in a letter to Stalin

Your face, Osip Emilevich, is spat upon
by vandals who have put out your eyes,
broken an arm here, a nose there, screaming
obscenities at you: *No monuments to Jews!*

How, even in the grave, the odor of Stalin's breath
still clings to you! Far from Peter's town
that you loved, death waited for you like a lover
on Ilyicheva Street, where a shadowy

gulag moon sunk its fangs into your throat:
I do not want to die yet, Petersburg!
How that cry ran in blood down the Kremlin walls
even as your defiant body wound up in a pit!

As you lie in the rugged, Siberian earth, tell me,
who can stop you now from moving your lips?

AMRITJIT SINGH

SOUTHWARD

She merges with the evening sun
so she can watch me drive
southward
under the copper-bright canopy
of a summer sky.
She stretches against the horizon,
arms lifted,
breasts heaving,
the whole body aflame
in twilight colors.
As my tongue tips southward
my car moves forward
till a cloud covers it all
and my eyes jerk back to
the highway ahead of me.

The moment licked eternity
again
when we stared bedeviled into each other's souls
and you, believing me statiated,
saw me turn suddenly and asked,
"And where are you headed now?"
"Southward," I say, and we both laugh.
Our spirits intertwined,
we worship our bodies
in a pilgrim hour.
We meet like satellites
and I waive your apologies
when we part like falling stars.

highways
bodies
airports
souls

The following morning
alone
and aiming to travel north,
I drift southward
almost fifty miles
before I turn around
to curse the cosmos.

A MORNING WALK IN JAMIA NAGAR
(New Delhi, July 2004)

I
Blazing blue in my kurta shirt,
as if at the muezzin's call,
I walk down the narrow road
with Jamia College on the left,
and fenced rubble on the right
that promises new Public Schools,
teaching shops that cater
to middle-class longings.

A cyclist, a young father,
looks wistfully over a wall,
late already
for his master's morning calls.
But before he bikes away,
he imagines his little girl
playing in the schoolyard.

II
I turn the corner to find
make-shift dairies
where buffalo milk is served
to those who have its virtues
instilled in them in childhood.
But the milkman feels virtuous
as he waters down the fat,
knowing well his clients
in three-storied flats nearby
need fewer calories in
their bourgeois obesity.

At another dairy,
a woman grieves over
a buffalo, now almost a skeleton,
as it faces its death.
What will the creature say about Jamia
when it faces its Creator,
who might arrange its rebirth
as a dog or a man?
"A male has it all, doesn't he?"
whispers the veiled mistress
to her buffalo breathing its last.

III
I would love to walk in the park
around the next bend,
but a "for members only" sign
directs me to walk farther along.
I meet dozens of people
waiting in a queue
for the municipal tap to crackle,
their faces as unfazed
as their empty plastic containers.

A poster on the opposite wall
exhorts the residents to
a "spit-spit" campaign.
"Whenever you see a cop
on the streets," it says,
"send a spit in his direction
to show your contempt
for police corruption."
Will the campaign succeed, I wonder,
when the judge and the culprit are the same?

IV
My NRI turban sings red
in this green town within a town,
the whispering ghetto
in a blare of unity slogans.
A rickshaw stops to ask me
where "36 Noor Nagar" might be.
And suddenly I feel I am home.

As a turn back toward
my air-conditioned guest room,
I meet a teenage girl on a bike
in her blue-and-white uniform,
her eyes fixed not on the road
but on the tomorrow of her dreams.
I walk right into a bright summer sun
And the slow salute of the guard at the gate.

LOVE IN THE RAIN

One hot morning in Tucson
I offer to walk Daisy,
my friend's hybrid dog
as he waits for a package
that might bring him scents of
traveling girlfriend,
a business executive he has
not seen for a fortnight.

Daisy and I walk the
neighborhood streets,
and I give her more time
than her master would
to ferret out food and smells,
rodents and objects,
with her paws
and proverbial dog-scent.

I wonder if Daisy too
is looking for a special package.
I would give anything to
read her dog-mind.
When she stops at the next street corner
she would not budge from her smelling
for a full five minutes
before barking out
what sounds to me like,
"Bobby, Bobby, Bobby!!"
And although I know she is neutered,
I imagine Daisy in her favorite fantasy,
making love with Bobby
in the rain.

ONE MORE TIME

When I see you
my spirits
lift up
in flight.
My body
greeting
its peer
seeks
a
separate
peace.

Body bruised
body denied
reclaims
the spirit in flight.
The two together
gush forward
like
torrential
rainwater
in uncharted course.

The aching spirit
told to end
its co-dependency
on the body
confronts
the buzzing lie
in hungering curves
and crevices,
receiving
marigold offerings
from a secret garden--
one more time,
one more time.

DOG ENCOUNTER

The distinguished philosopher
invites his visiting friend,
a poet from overseas,
for a morning walk
with his high-strung dog.

Just as they turn into
an unfamiliar street,
he sees a woman walking
toward them with two big dogs.
Quickly he turns back to face
yet another man walking
in his direction
with his German shepherd.

Knowing his dog's aggressive ways,
the professor stops dead in his tracks.
As he ponders the epistemology
of his next move, a young man
rummaging through his car trunk
outside his own home,
eyes him and his foreign friend
suspiciously to shout,
"What is going on here?"

The choicest of curse words
Preface the professor's
own yell, "For Pete's sake,
I am trying to avoid
a dog encounter."
And soon the human encounter
becomes a spectacle
for four big dogs
who look askance
at the poet from abroad.

RAMAN MUNDAIR

A CHOREOGRAPHER'S CARTOGRAPHY

These are not tentative steps
on terra infirma, this woman
feels the ground beneath

her feet. Read this
as a new dance
Improvise--find free

ways to claim space
inhabit your body
set forth with natural grace.

Mark this ascent
in 16 beat time. *Ek, do, teen,*
char, panch, che, satt, ath,

no, dus, gyarh, barah, terra,
chaudah, pandrah, sola
--Solar rhythms spin,

disrupt cultural boundaries,
create a fluent physique full
with emotional geography.

You need no passport for pliant limbs
loose with joy. No visa,
no nationality needed for loving

kindness, claim your right for asylum
under this bright expanse,
read this as a new dance

part of a loquacious movement,
that celebrates difference,
and bridges border crossings

with bodies that boogie with belonging,
tap dance this tenacious topography
you are here

raise your flag, feel the funk
get into the groove,
and pogo like a punk.

Lilt and sway with the reggae chill,
waltz around the world, re-orientate
with the thrill of a highland reel

do the two step, fox trot, twist and twirl
this is a choreographer's cartography
a seductive salsa, sinuous with sight

this earth, everyone's sanctuary
fandango this formation
take a partner, tango, do-si-do

grapevine, calypso
merengue, bhangra, danzon
breakdance, bulerias, and disco

read this as new dance
a choreographer's cartography
bodies that boogie with belonging
this earth, everyone's sanctuary

BLOOD SEASON
(Week beginning 18th March 2003)

1

This night will haunt
highly strung, taut, ready
to recoil. Brittle like the day
before the blood comes. Tomorrow
vibrates in the distance, the threat
comes close, hour by hour,
developing into a slow shriek;
nails across a blackboard,
revealing the scream of the empty
space underneath.

All hail
this international sport.
Watch the players
from the relative safety of your home.
Witness the blood
season begin.

2

Bald-eagles circle
under a hexagon of stars
the olive branch, long forgotten
over the years,13 arrows
and more have arched
in deadly flight. Who now
will strip this blind might?
Annuit coeptis protects
and serves The White
House. Allies busily barter
around the big white hive.

Bittersweet honey aids pledges
in allegiance to the blood
trade. Discount brothers
in arms, take the fatal sting
for black gold.

3

By mid morning they have begun
and I begin to oscillate wildly,
without voice, my head in spin cycle,
free falling with the rolling
news, trying to make sense
but feeling sick at the heart,
wrung out. Not knowing
what the future holds. Stretched
beyond wear, hope hangs
herself out to dry.

4

Today the children
left their desks,
and asked questions

outside, on the streets
their mouths open,
their voices strong

(throughout the week, British children took to the street in protest)

5

And now,
for our viewing
pleasure, music
to segue pictures
    of death
in slow motion

(in their live war broadcast, CNN used muzak in between rolling images of the Iraq war)

6

The Oscars,
America's finest,
careful, glistening,
in 'shock and awe'
at the surprising results.

PIERCING FLESH

*for Abas Amini and Shahlin Protofeb**

And when did the pain begin?
The piercing
  of flesh--
    the needle,
   the thread
that can not piece you
together again
          but can stop
your innards leaking--spilling
miles of intestine laid out for all
to see your human-ness.

And what will it take to have a voice?
to be seen as one
and not a generic other?
And how close to the edge do you have to be
before you are invited in
to the privileged safety
of the centre?
And with your eyes sewn shut what dreams
did you dream?
Was your freedom to be, unquestioned?
What colour is freedom?
And with your ears sewn shut, what sound is
freedom?
What tone and timbre does it take,
and whose voice carries it?
And with your mouth sewn shut what a song
you sang, what a poem
to pin back deaf ears--what a noise,
what a cacophony
and what a silence
to greet it.

*Abas Amini is an Iranian Kurdish political poet. Shahin Protofeb is Iranian. Both men experienced torture in Iran and fear for their lives. They sought asylum in the UK. Their applications were refused and in protest at this decision, they sewed up their eyes, lips, and ears.

VICKY AND THE SIKH

Movement One

Victoria, gray Queen of a blood red imperial empire
had a penchant for Sikh warrior men. Had a fine specimen ordered
from the 'orient', to stand watch as she lay in her bed

from where she liked to watch him
erect, tall and proud, tresses tucked seductively
under the twist of a cloth crown.

When alone, her blue blood, rising
she sought him to let down his hair, unravel
and turn, his abundant locks creating a peacock spray in the air

until, no longer able to contain herself
Victoria gathered him in her arms
and took her humble Sikh for a waltz.

Movement Two

The Sikh, a fine fellow, a distinguished Sardar,
who went by the name of Harminder Singh Sahib,
bemused by the ash lady's advances,
would try to Bhangra his way out of her iron clasp.

But alas,
The asphalt-hearted Queen would only be further fuelled
and ardently continued her enthused advances.

The stoic Queen, a pious widow, a true lady of grit
cloaked only in shades of black and gypsum gray,
(and perhaps, an occasional splattering of white or cream lace)
was to many in her kingdom the epitome of God's grace.

Indeed Vicky was viewed as an infallible Regina,
by her loyal subjects, whose feelings
towards their Royal remained forever fervent.
Her self-control was greatly admired, as was her charitable toil,
and her infamous mourning for her Albert, was debated near and far,
and it stood to reason that her noble, shy, Sardar
be deemed the perfect accompaniment for a woman born Royal.

Movement Three

The lady took to clandestine clutches waltzing Harminder Singh Sahib
but it was not an easy task; for the man whose land was Punjab,
the place of five sacred rivers, moved with a fluidity, rhythm and grace
most unbefitting to the rigid, 3/4 discipline of the waltz.
After much coaching and coaxing Victoria was almost at the end of
her royal tether,
her warrior man would passionately pulsate with a secret music
that Her Highness was unable to dictate. Furthermore, he had a
tendency
to refrain from holding her close (Victoria's unquenched desire
and of course essential to the etiquette of the waltz)
'The Dance! Harry! The Dance!' Vicky would hysterically shriek
as Harminder Singh Sahib, sought his leave to retreat.

As a last ditched, desperate measure Victoria decided to bind them
together
with a ball of leather twine; Thus ensuring that both partners were
bound
in the interest of and rhythm of 3/4 time

Back Straight! Back Straight! She bellowed into the Singh's delicate ear
The poor fellow already near crippled by the old lady's weight,
as her heavy hand bore down on his arousing gait,
She marches their bodies into a burgeoning spin
Madam Please! Madam Please! The Singh pleads,
his patience at an absolute end
But the old lady is for turning
and took her captive man for yet another spin
and orders Again Harry! Again Harry! Again!

PRAMILA VENKATESWARAN

RHYME WITH ME

You have to look away
from Baghdad blushing
from sudden soft blooms
of whispered bombs
to campaign for metaphors
and hypnotize with rhyme,

as mothers in subterranean
spaces open up a page from Rumi
to soothe a child with visions of sunset,
of a man on a donkey sailing on the sand
to his beloved, the moon for company.

And the silence of her words
will fill his wracked bones,
spiting atomic shudders,

as black Baghdad, painted by oil
and blood, a mural in rooms,
cafes, slums, ports and resorts,
drives your hunger for a Faiz,
an Akhmatova, a Darwish, to quell
the smoke billowing within,
opaque, velvet, unrelenting,

so emotion un-fleshed
is bearable, a crude comrade,
when you look away.

SEE THE FACE OF

Sometimes I have a pain I cannot touch;
it is beyond the skin and muscle my fingers
probe to soothe the spot close to the ache,
my body a sky hovering over a dark world.

I wonder if it is a tangled nerve that needs
straightening, a boil at the point of bursting,
a cloud, unable to find an aperture
to escape into, hangs heavy in my center
like dull fog settling above the Sound
curtaining the lights pricking the horizon.
This pain I can see in my mind's eye
is now a wonder, something I can only
give a face to by analogy to things known.

Such is God, a formlessness I attempt to sculpt
within space and time, anchor it to things I see,
touch, smell, hear, like the buds of June
just breaking into blush, the fishy breath
of the harbor after the boats dock for the night,
the final ripple of a prayer bell still in my ear,
all these awaken and form the untouchable
fog within, spasmodic, moody, rising, fading.

I am afraid if I do grasp all of its treatise-
loaded descriptions, see the pain in the face,
for what it truly is, will it be a Nothing
in my hands, air tinged with blood and mucus?
But isn't there a micro space within the air,
the blood, the mucus that is untouchable,
within this Nothing a rock where I will wash up?

USHA KISHORE

INDO-PAK RELATIONS

Here on this island, we get together and talk
of back home - Karachi, U.P, Lahore, Kerala…
Back home, you play war games, shake hands,
issue nuclear threats and deliver patriotic
speeches; religions must be appeased, regions
contested, elections won and human beings
ignored…
We eat samosas, sip cold drinks and talk of
the British weather, Bollywood heroes and
Manx Education, while our children scream
in the background - being an exile is unique
indeed, even enemies become friends…
You dig trenches, exchange fire and call each
other names - you who were brothers, now
play at Abel and Cain…
We giggle at old photographs and reach for
our glasses cluttering the low table -
Unknowingly, we exchange our glasses -
there is no Hindu *paani* and Muslim *paani*
here, no watery grave that devours humanity…
You debate over the LoC that parted the land
and a few hearts, you carry out your suicide
missions; your newspapers throw word-flares:
"fragile", "fuming", "explosive", while your
film industries market: "Hate Thy Neighbour"…
We curse the partition, the prize-fighting, the
politics and watch the television in silence as
the British Prime Minister takes the hand of
history and flies to the subcontinent, to undraw
a line drawn by long ago…
Peace, to us, is a vision that rises from across the seas,
Peace, to you, is a crevasse trapped in the Himalayas…

AGNIPARIKSHA
(*The Test of Fire*)

Into the fire, I throw you Woman, daughter of Sita,
to purge yourself; your body is clay, your womb is
water, your mind is air, your soul, the sky…

Rama denied twice, but you, daughter of Sita, would
be denied countless times over the eons; only then
Woman, would you find yourself…
Your being is wrenched apart by your sobs, your
psyche is burnt by your tears - but wipe your tears,
Woman and rise like a Phoenix from the ashes,
singing the raga of hope…

Time robs you of your beauty, man thieves your heart
and loots your body; children drain your bosom away;
But emerge Woman, from the pain of darkness into
an eruption of light…

Topple the tall towers of Troy; turn the world into yet
another Kurukshetra; turn into stone, all who deny,
by the snakes that are your locks; then in the fire of
awakening, cleanse yourself…

Woman! You are the mother, the lover, the wife,
you are energy incarnate, you are kindness frozen
on ice; yet the world breaks your brittle heart -
Then, break, Woman, into the atoms of fury and
release yourself…

Woman! You are the back-bone of man; as Eve, they
said, you sinned; but then Woman, you taught the
world the lessons of motherhood, by the searing pain
of your body and your screams of agony…

Behind the veil of your self, they shut you out; they
plunder and loot; on the tides of time, you are beaten,
again and again and again -
Then fight Woman! daughter of Sita!
Let the skies thunder with your dreams; let the
seas echo with your thoughts; let lightning flashes drop
from your eyes and crash into history hills, smash future
rocks and shatter the chains of the *She-Prometheus* …
Then Rise Woman and flood the world with your smiles!

KATHAKALI DRUMS

Thai thadhim thakida dhimdha
Thai thadhim thakida dhimdha
Thadhim thakida dhimdha thai
Dhimdha thai, dhimdha thai…

Drum-beats beckon from temple spires,
Drum-beats beckon from festival courtyards;
Drum-beats beckon from a childhood lost…
In the shadows of the giant temple lamp,
the stories unfold, the masks unmask and
the drums beat in the tales of yore…
Here, a woman stolen by a demon, hidden
from the world in his garden of *Asoka* trees;
There, a woman disrobed by monstrous hands,
her five husbands sit with bowed heads -
Here, a woman betrayed in the middle of
the forest; her lord flees clad in half her *saree*-
There a woman, self-immolates and another
rises from the fire thirsting for blood…
All woman, but no woman - the drum-beats
chant a story of womanhood…
The drums beat on and on and I re-incarnate in
myriad forms - I am Sita stolen, I am Draupadi

disrobed, I am Damyanti betrayed, I am Sati
charred and I rise as Kali in rhythmic anger…
The drums beat on and on and I travel through
time, womanhood's grief pounding my heart…

Thai thadhim thakida dhimdha,
Thai thadhim thakida dhimdha
Thadhim thakida dhimdha thai
Dhimdha thai, dhimdha thai…

Notes

Kathakali - A temple art form of Kerala, South India. It performed by masked male dancers (who also play women's parts) to the accompaniment of drums and singers. The drums play a major part in the dance. Kathakali is a form of dance-drama, in which the dancers enact stories from Indian myths.

(A particular rhythm of the Kathakali drums is given at the beginning and the end of the poem.)

SHANTA ACHARYA

SOMEWHERE, SOMETHING
(For R.S. Thomas)

We travel not to explore another country
but to return home refreshed,
bearing gifts rejuvenating our lives--

Our lives airports from which we fly forth
days the journeys we make,
past the continents we leave behind
with hope sheltering our future.

Surely there is somewhere something
that justifies our coming and going?

Isn't that why we seek evidence from each other
of experiences worth dying for
as we partake love in starlight
brittle with frost and the sharp taste of blood?

Let me grow wings of faith as I take off,
not be blinded by light that casts such shadows.

THE MORNING AFTER
(*For those who lost loved ones to the super cyclone in Orissa, October 1999***)**

Thinking we had seen it all--
floods, droughts, earthquakes, famines et al--
survived the deaths of thousands year after year,
we prepared for this cyclone as any other:

How were we to know that heaven
would turn upon us,

not God’s chosen, simply godforsaken;
that the wind would lock itself by night into
a narrow tract destroying everything in its path;

Plucking out ancient trees like weeds,
trees so old nobody knew their age,
tossing them with the fury of one possessed;
the more stubborn snapping like twigs,
brave soldiers slain in battle?

The wind went howling, prowling
at speeds unknown to our hunter ancestors,
more unpredictable than a mad elephant
on a marauding spree--
houses, livestock, old men and women,
were shaken like dice before being rolled out;
railway and power lines collapsed into crumpled pylons.

The rain got crazy too, fire hosing gallons
of water through barricaded doors and windows
flooding homes, fields; wiping out livelihoods.
The wind transformed into an evil spirit
hammered incessantly, threatening
to crack open the fragile walls protecting us.

The ocean turned against us without any mercy,
we were no match for the waves rising above us
and twice as strong as the best of us;
all creatures alive were stunned into harmony,
snakes sharing their private space with us.

Like hungry crocodiles the waves crawled the coastline
lashing out at dilapidated huts, families, animals--
luckily most drowned in sleep.

The morning after the sun shone brilliantly
in a freshly painted sky with not a single leaf in sight...

Shanta Acharya

POSTCARD FROM PETERSBURG

No map could have illustrated its character--
its cathedrals, palaces, museums; its culture
surviving the schizophrenia of the past century:
Three revolutions, as many name changes,
a 900-day siege is about enough
for a city celebrating its 300th anniversary.

Avoiding the crowds teeming with pickpockets,
we arrive in the resplendent Palace Square
where two revolutions began. Unprepared we were
for the treasures of the Hermitage:
A moving mirror of facades, the majestic Neva.

We greet The Bronze Horseman crushing treason,
haunted by the fate of Pushkin.
As we leave Yusupov's Palace,
a prayer escapes my lips for Rasputin.

How different from Dostoevsky's dark world
the light in Sennaya Ploshchad; its tree lined
canals a haven for all sorts during the White Nights,
perfect after *Swan Lake* at the Mariinskiy.

Strolling down Nevskiy Prospekt, buying caviar
at Yeliseev's, window-shopping at Gostinyy Dvor
and Passazh Arcade, its glass canopy turning
sky into ceiling, letting the sunshine flood in--

We emerge at the colonnades of Kazan Cathedral,
taking in the view across the canal with a Church
gleaming in the background, beckoning us
to pray for a city built on bones and spilled blood.

THE SAVIOUR
(After the icon by *Andrey Rublyov*)

Your eyes pursue me everywhere
with a light that illuminates
the mind's undiscovered caverns.

I try to take in the guide's lecture--
"Very little is known of his life;
chronicles say he was a monk.
Frescoes in the Annunciation Cathedral
of the Kremlin were painted by
him, Andrey Rublyov, and Theophanes.
Rublyov also created the icons in the Dormition Cathedral
in Vladimir in 1408. His *Trinity*,
the greatest masterpiece of Russian art,
was created for the Trinity-St Sergius Monastery.
The paintings were destroyed in the 17th century …"
Her voice fades as the tourist group
dissolves in the Tretyakov gallery.

Unable to shake off your stare
that fills me with love,
lungfuls of air,
I return to feast my eyes on you,
worship at the frayed edges of perfection,
a portrait preserved for posterity
in a not-so-immaculate condition.

After the configuration comes abstraction,
from an oppressive yoke seeking liberation.

I DO NOT KNOW
(After *Shaikh Fakhruddin Ebrahim Hammedani*)

Are you the universe and all existence,
in all things and beyond all things?
I do not know….
Are you the breath that keeps me alive
or the moments that take my breath away?
I do not know…
Are you the slayer or the slain, both or neither
I do not know….
Why does your omnipotence tolerate so much injustice in this world?
I do not know…
Are you immanent or transcendent,
unknowable or the One reaching out to us?
I do not know
Do you pour suffering on us to mould us towards your purpose?
I do not know….
When I find doubt reigning supreme in my heart,
is that also your way?
I do not know….
Why do you hide from your creation?
I do not know….
I thought I had an understanding with you
but you took it away years ago.
Did you replace it with a superior covenant
or simply reneged on our contract?
I do not know…
If I cannot find you in my heart, in the sunset, in the eyes of strangers;
where can I go looking for you,
let me know for I am tired and bewildered.
I do not know…
If I cannot see your terrible beauty, recognise your magnificence
what hope is there for me?
I do not know…

You taught me to find nothing in my heart
except the compassion of your Love
And yet I do not know…
When will I be released from this separation;
where do I end, and you begin?
I do not know…

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN
(For *Keki and Khurshid*)

What might have been,
could have been
yesterday, today, may happen tomorrow
or the day after; may never happen,
may never have happened…

It happened, but not to you.
It happened, you never found out--
for one reason or another.
It had to happen; it was waiting to happen.

What if you had not taken the car,
that train or plane?
What if the car had broken down,
or you missed that train or plane?

If only you had not left home that day--
any number of things could have prevented you
from being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

You were at the right place at the right time!
You were in luck--
a narrow escape, an oversight, a reprieve,
a horn, a beam, a brake, a nail, a thought,
an inch, an instant, a particle of dust in your eye--
as a result, because, although, despite…

A split second when the world changed.

SPECIAL

There is so much good in the worst of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it hardly becomes any of us
To talk about the rest of us.
Anonymous

There is nothing special about you or me
except our thinking that makes it so.

Some grow up thinking they are special,
others do so imagining they are not so.
It is our parents' caring or the lack of it
that makes us feel special or not quite so;
not the way we were made by our Maker.
That recognition comes in life much later.

Most nations believe they are special.
People who've lived together as neighbours,
suddenly turn against each other and fight on for years.
Others declare war for no special reason or purpose.

Most races think they are superior to others.
each race has its Hitler and its Jews.

We are all so special that in time we all must disappear.
In the interim, we pay the price for being *special*
or not so, not knowing if it is worth paying for.

There are times for feeling special,
times for remembering and doing things special
but knowing always, it is our thinking that makes it so.

There is nothing special about you or me,
there is much that is special about each one of us.
It is our thinking that makes it thus and thus.

JOHN OLIVER PERRY

THE INTEGRITY OF A.K.RAMANUJAN'S POETRY

The Oxford India Ramanujan. Ed. Molly Daniels-Ramanujan. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004. Rs.875/-.

The omnibus *Oxford India Ramanujan*, edited by Molly Daniels-Ramanujan, brings together all his poetry, including all his translations from Tamil and Kannada classics. Bibliographic details are that Oxford University Press-India, in New Delhi, published it in 2004 (ISBN 019566478-7) at Rs. 875, that, though 2.75 inches thick, it is not consecutively paginated, but comes to over 1500 pages by my estimate, and so certainly is a great bargain even were the quality of poetry only average. (However, the production of my *KB* review copy was not carefully quality controlled, for it is missing a whole signature, duplicates another and has one and then three unintentionally unprinted pages at least in two places, so *caveat emptor*.) To be quite specific, after including a 1970 interview by Chirantan Kulshrestha, "Part I, Poems" provides all of *The Collected Poems* (O.U.P., 1995), which in turn reprinted *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), and *Second Sight* (1986), and added *The Black Hen*--sixty-two or so poems chosen by eight editors from a manuscript (three computer disks) of one hundred and forty-eight poems almost ready for publication at his premature (and shockingly unnecessary) death in 1993 at age 64. Then follows a reprint of the thirty-two poems with "an unsuspected depth of darkness" from *Uncollected Poems and Prose* (OUP-India, 2001; the quote is from my review in *KB 13*). "Part II: Translations" is about two-thirds of the 1500 pages and reprints four books. The first section, "Classical Tamil (AD 50 to AD 300)," opens with AKR's essay on "On Translating a Tamil Poem," which supplements nicely the tripartite apparatus--Foreword (Introduction or Preface), Notes (or Glossary), and Afterword--that Ramanujan urged and used in the next two fully included books, his ground-breaking translations in *The Interior Landscape* (Indiana UP, 1967; Midland paperback, 1975, 125 pages) and *Poems of Love and War*

(OUP-India, 1985; a 330 page book with very full apparatus) as well as in the other two--*Speaking of Shiva* (Penguin Classics, 1973, including the two original appendices on Kannada culture, one by William McCormack) and *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Visnu by Nammalvar* (Princeton UP, 1981), which make up the subsection "Tamil and Kannada Bhakti Poetry (AD 600 to AD 1200) and which is introduced by "A [Brief] Note on Bhakti Poetry by Eleanor Zelliot." It is this panoply of contents that dictate the sheer volume of this volume.

For some unexplained reason two other books of AKR's translations (which, like all the above named, I fortunately have as independent books on my shelf), are not included: *Some Kannada Poems, Transcreated from the Original Kannada* by A. K. Ramanujan and M. G. Krishnamurthi (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1967; second edition 1975) and *When God is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Ksetrayya and others* edited and translated by AKR, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman (OUP-India, 1994, but in press just at AKR's death in July 1993). A possible explanation for the omission (not likely to be widely missed or deplored) is that AKR's fifteen of the early Kannada translations recur in another form in *Speaking of Siva* and that those from Telugu were not entirely his, but depended on the collaborators' work, for he was not so fluent in Telugu as in Tamil, his mother's tongue, or as in Kannada, the language used all around him in his early years.

English, he repeatedly explained, was used whenever he went upstairs to the study to talk with his father, a university astronomy professor who also, strangely to the non-believing boy, delved into astrology. AKR's fluency, if not his later acquired "inwardness," with English was a result perhaps more of this fact than of his thirty year residence in the United States. But a justifiable suspicion is voiced repeatedly by the Malayalam poet, English professor and critic Ayyappa Paniker in an enormously revealing interview with AKR in 1982 (published only recently in *Journal of Literature and Aesthetics*, 2:1, Jan-June 2002, 139-150). Was it something more

than his father's academic training and use of English (or even the two courses in poetry writing that AP recalls AKR taking during his scholarly linguistics work for a Ph. D. at Indiana University) that made possible "a certain neatness of execution" (AP's phrase) which characterizes AKR's poetry in English (and, indeed, his prose as well). Surely, Ayyappa suggested, "Living among native English speakers later in America might have had some influence, don't you think? … it has something to do with the environment, the linguistic environment."

As it happens, this is precisely the reason for my own decision generally to differentiate Diasporan Indian writing in English from Indian English writing, something rarely done by poetry critics, whether Indian or not. (Bruce King's survey, for example, overlooks such differences.) The working conditions of the two groups are clearly quite different and must affect, I think profoundly, the final output and thus the choice of critical perspective, quite likely as well the underlying aesthetics or poetics (understood as flexible and variable for each poet), that is proper for interpreting, analyzing and evaluating the two groups of writers. (It is also and quite defensibly for this kind of reason that Indian English writings are not generally coalesced or compared with Anglo-Indian ones, much less, of course, British or American ones, even though Indian English authors certainly read and even imitate them.) So, looking at AKR's work from that point of view, noting also how well supported it soon became (undoubtedly because of its and his high standards, whatever their shaping forces), it is difficult for me to compare his superior achievement with that of Indian English poets in India. The best of the latter do not reflect the narrowness of diction and the solecisms or Indianisms of usage that mark most Indian English as ultimately a school-learned and often academically supported language. Those top Indian English poets are what AKR and AP called the "less academic" ones like Jayanta Mahapatra, Nissim Ezekiel, or Keki Daruwalla, who are briefly discussed in the course of their interview, but all three have some connections to academe, if not to English Departments. Even more difficult would be to evaluate Ramanujan's poetry in comparison

with that of regional language poets, frequently asserted, without possible evidence, to be superior to anything in Indian English. Certainly comparison cannot be made with those who translate--or "transcreate"--their work into English, whether Tagore, Satchidanandan, or Ayyappa himself. Besides the changes imposed by translation, their underlying aesthetic is clearly different, even if Ramanujan's work too was influenced by the poetics shown and adumbrated in ancient Tamil classics.

But it is fruitless to speculate whether Ramanujan would have had the poetic and linguistic tools to create the poetry in English that he did without the Indiana or Chicago years, though those years were certainly spent in and under the influence of academe as well as of a pervasive native (in this case, American) English-using environment. Something about his integrity, which comes through vibrantly and personally in this interview (as indeed in all that he did), makes it seem likely that whatever poetry he wrote or however he translated, whether in Kannada, the medium for his first efforts, or in English, he would ultimately have freed his poems from the dryness, the formality, especially the "literariness," that academic living and thinking and speaking almost inevitably imposes on one. And the English of his poetry would not, with his dedication to linguistic as well as poetic perfection, seem at all limited, that of a non-native. Indeed, he said quite explicitly to Ayyappa:

> **A. K. R. ….** Of course that's bound to happen in any writing. In Kannada or Tamil there is academic writing. That's always a danger. The whole business about learning a language is to reach a point where it doesn't sound as if it is learned. I don't know if one [i.e., I--a stray Briticism of his father's?] has reached that, but that's the dream, isn't it? To write one's native language as if one is not fully native and to write a foreign language as if one is not a foreigner. That's what I am saying about Kannada and English. One has to renew the native language

> to a kind of refinement or expressiveness which somebody who is nearly native in the language cannot attain. And singularly because we need to immerse ourselves enough in foreign, [or] so called foreign language [i.e., Indian English], or by whatever accidents like mine we are immersed in, so that we no longer think about it. When I'm talking to you [here in Chicago?] I am not aware I'm speaking in English.
>
> **A. P.** So you can also get drowned in language or be immersed in it and afraid of drowning; using a language is parallel to what the Vaishnavite poets speak about any experience.

[Earlier the Conradian distinction of immersion from drowning, anent the controversial title for his fourth book of translations, *Hymns for the Drowning*, had been explored.]

> **A.K.R.** I think so. And to do that without self-consciousness, without academic doctrine is difficult. It is a particular danger for us, it's hard for us.

There is much more of AKR's unaffectedly self-aware and self-critical "way of thinking" (and being) in this interview to ponder, but returning to the matter of this enormous Ramanujan poetry anthology, it has one new piece of writing that may almost be worth duplicating all one's Ramanujan holdings to get: "An A. K. Ramanujan Story," the entirely new introduction by his nearly life-long wife, Molly Daniels-Ramanujan. She begins: "It all started with Ramanujan stumbling on two texts in the University of Chicago Library. One ordinary afternoon, in the fall of 1962, he went to the library and two great books literally fell into his hands. The two texts, *Kuruntokai* and *Tolkappiyam*, changed the direction of his life forever." The rest of her twenty-five page introduction traces in detail and with examples how this change worked its way

through his poetry and translations from *The Striders* and *The Interior Landscape* of 1966 and 1967 to *The Black Hen* at the end of his life.

This insight from the poet's life partner supplements and puts under revision, as the Frenchified theorizers would say, the standard perspectives that come from critics like R. Parthasarathy, who have conventionally emphasized how AKR's characteristic poems are "many luminous evocations of [South Indian Hindu] family life." And again, "The poems emerge as a sort of microcosm of his family history," and "Ramanujan's repossession, through his poetry, of the past of his family, and of his sense of himself as a distillation of that past, is to me a signal achievement, … of value to other poets … looking for a kind of poetry to teach them the use of their own voice." ("The Exile as Writer," *JLA* 2:1) Although Ramanujan's range clearly is quite wide and includes many poems with explicit and implicit Western modern settings, the poems using distinctly traditional South Indian subject matter repeatedly dominate anthologists' or critics' selections of Indian English poetry. But even the ever popular "Reflections on a Great House" is better seen (by Vinay Dharwadker, one of AKR's closest and most sympathetic young associates in later years) as a metaphorical history lesson of the whole culture, not merely a nostalgic memory of his life back home. Molly's emphasis is on how the discovery of the classical Tamil Sangam (group) poets was "a turning point in his life." This point she convincingly develops, first by analyzing very closely "The Striders" itself and showing how the traits evident there "were nourished and made bolder by each book of translations." For, as she later states quite precisely: "Our task in this preface is not to repeat what has already been explained [by Dharwadker and a few other critics who attempt to know Ramanujan's poetry for what it is, rather than how it can support their own work], but to put together a narrative about the interconnectedness of everything Ramanujan published." (xxi)

Taking this narrative seriously will be seen to modify profoundly even the more technically sensitive, broad-ranging

understandings of AKR as an ironic modernist, almost, as Dharwadker opines, a minimalist, yet with a subtly complex vision from the start entirely his own. But Dharwadker too was taken by surprise by the revelations in *The Black Hen* collection, though AKR had shown him individual poems from it as early as 1989 and at least forty poems together in 1992.

> These [new] formal and thematic elements now alter our understanding of what the poet felt and thought, why he chose certain voices, images, and metaphors, what his conceptions of nature and culture were, how he re-imagined time and human history, where he located the conflicts and interdependences of society, family, and self, or how he resolved some of the ethical dilemmas of poetry in the late twentieth century. But even as the finished work enlarges and rearranges his poetic world, it reinforces the continuities between the various phases of his career over three or four decades. … [L]ong-standing preoccupations combine echoes and resonances with variations and counter-points to achieve an integrity [for me the key word] that is at once essential and ironic. (xvii)

Dharwadker's "Introduction" to *CP* sketches in twenty pages how he sees that process working its way through the four books of poems, but it is only Molly Daniels' "Story" that ties in the translations and may justify critically this massive collection.

What made this collection feasible apparently was OUP's expectation of a sizeable readership, possibly based on how quickly *CP* has sold, probably going out of print early like its constituent three books. The phrase "a collector's item for Ramanujan aficionados" is repeated in various OUP sales pitches, but surely that group would be insufficient were it not that libraries cannot easily acquire the complete poetic works, certainly a requisite item

for any comprehensive post-colonial Indian or merely Diasporan Indian collection, whether in English or not. And furthermore, as I remarked initially, the consumer's price for this vertically imposing, 3.2 inch, 3.6 pound production has been kept quite low at Rs. 875, probably by virtue of a well-balanced OUP agreement with non-OUP copyright holders. It will be interesting to discover, however, in the year or two ahead, how well the product goes over in India itself, as distinct from sales in the widely dispersed, largely English-using Indian Diaspora. How well attuned is each group to Ramanujan's subtleties and complexities, to tracing out his interweavings of several cultures and their languages identified with but differentiated thoroughly from their populations, how deeply will they dive into his highly personal creations of a dark ironic world vision?

But the marketing problem that strikes me most keenly is that the sheer size of this compendium--is it designed as a kind of vertical coffee table book for idle eyes?--makes it virtually unreadable. Who reads poems holding a 3.6 pound book in hand or on lap? Obviously it can be managed only at a desk, so that the major use will be, ironically, academic, bookish, as a research tool that brings all Ramanujan's poetry, including the translations, together in one place, convenient to handle or not. In any case, the publishers seem to be counting on the fact that, despite the drawback of bulk, at this low price, all the disparate needs of "aficionados" and librarians who have wanted to fill out their collections with one or another or several of the included volumes, can be satisfied with one republication, rather than a dozen. And purchasers may be glad to get some volumes they would not have sought out, whether their main interests were in classical Dravidian poems in translation or in Ramanujan's original poems. The wish that Molly Daniels expresses that readers will work out the various connections among all these works will thus be given a practical boost, but it remains an optimistic hope. What it will involve is a dedicated readership, or more likely a set of academic thesis writers, or, better, if it exists, a discriminating group of critics knowledgeable about ancient and contemporary Dravidian culture

as well as capable of sensitively analyzing English poetry. These persons will need to devote considerable time and energy to the collective process of interpreting all these materials, no doubt drawing on additional resources, written and otherwise--including AKR's essays and folk tale collections and any other remaining marks of his activities--to make the most inclusive sense of the art, the imagination and the hard work over many decades of one of the most productive minds of his generation.

After calling for such high critical and scholarly dedication, it would be presumptuous of me to try to make here a significant contribution to that body of serious criticism. Still, several key issues have occurred to me that could provide some details for this tall general order. For example, as I have implied, we need to work out, as part and parcel of the relationships between AKR's original poetry (with its antecedents) and his translations from ancient Tamil and Kannada texts, those relationships between or rather among all his other culturally significant productions, as linguist, anthropologist, folklorist, archaeologist, and whatever. In that way we will be better able to see the whole man of integrity that the poems endeavour to present, according to his revelations in the interview with his friend and fellow poet, Ayyappa Paniker. Also, we need somehow to determine just where all AKR's work fits into the whole complex and divided cultural scene within which he worked--globally, historically, nationally, cross-culturally, transitionally, or otherwise categorically. Lacking such a larger context, appreciating his contribution to human understanding and self-understanding will be hollowly abstract and isolated. Part of that project will involve making sense of historical coincidences and continuities with which he was intimately involved. A simpler task, but requiring a broad awareness of taste and technique, will be to establish AKR's place in the several relevant canons of poetry--how formative, for instance, was the confessional mode of Robert Lowell, et al., that burgeoned in the 1960s? As I have earlier suggested, we critical readers need to adjust our general understanding of the core and extent of his work, particularly of his poems: their changing characteristics and the most characteristic

exemplars of each. Biographical research and analysis needs to be done to give further substance to intimations that emerge from memoirs, interviews, and sensitive analysis of his varied activities, in writing and otherwise. What importance can be given to the shifting character of contemporary poetry and culture, Indian, Diasporan, Euro-American, world-wide, while his own work developed? How much does it matter which contemporary poets he read and admired, which writers of the past he turned to most frequently? Hagiography is an evident risk, but the temptation to cut the reputation down to ordinary size needs also to be resisted.

Most of all, perhaps, critical practice with the Ramanujan poetic corpus will have to be extraordinarily multidisciplinary, open-minded and self-critical like its creator. So, lastly, let us hope that the understandings that emerge from all this critical activity do not seek to define his achievement according to some single overarching theory, on the one hand, or, reading back from his final works and days, according a depressed image of a darkening end--a tendency evident in my own thinking as also in such statements by family members and empathic critics as: "The [*Black Hen*] poems are metaphysical and full of a frightening darkness;" "what is astonishing is that the idea of nothingness, of zero, occurs frequently;" and Ayyappa's remembering how they stopped at a cross roads where Raman said, with sad irony, "There are only two classes of people: homicides and suicides. The motorcyclists are all suicides, the car-drivers are only homicides." But Ayyappa in the same obituary-memoir recalls that "Ramanujan was a pleasant host" and that "he could charm his guests by his disarming simplicity and self-effacing efficiency." Trying for the kind of integrity which also characterized the man, we can most appropriately think of the poetry of A. K. Ramanujan as incorporating a complex irony that can accept and sustain life without denying or attempting to transcend its obvious limits.

Finally, I want to offer here fresh examples from AKR's early and middle and last poems, together with a couple of translated poems, but let readers decide which is which.

He too Was a Light Sleeper once (Key 1)

He too was a light sleeper once.

A chuckle in the hall,
the pulse in the neck of a bird
that felt like his own,
a bloodred beak in a lime
tree, a nightmare prince,
anything at all
could wake him to coffee and a mountain-climb
of words on a page.

But now, after sudden jail
and long exile,
fruitbats in his family tree,
marriage of his heart's
little bird
to a clawing cat,
cigarette burns
on children's most private parts,
and the daily caw
at the window
of quarreling carrion birds,

he just turns,
clamps a curse in his jaw
as he gathers his heap
of limbs to climb again to other slopes of sleep,

the iron taste of print in his mouth.

(Key 2)

My little girl says,
"I've no relatives here
and everyone here is my relative."

"I'm the one who makes relatives relate,"
she says.

"I also end relations,
and to those related to me
I become all relations,"
she says.

Can it be the lord of illusions
beyond all relations
has come and taken her over?

How can I tell you,
my kinsmen,
what she means?

Instead of a Farewell (Key 3)

To meet and say farewell
to this part of me
that turns and returns
with a different partner
in a square dance,
meeting before I begin to see,
seeing after I have done
with meeting,
squaring at last in a glimpse
the ancient circle
of you and me:

how can I say farewell
when farewells are made
only for people who stay
and only for people
who go away?

(Key 4)

What's this darkness
on the eyes?
this death on the heart?
this battlefield within,
this coquetry without,
this path familiar to the feet?

Museum (Key 5)

As people who appear in dreams
are not themselves, the horses
are not horses in the Chinese painting
that prance out of the walls
to trample the flowers
in the emperor's gardens
night after night.

Those children on the swing
are your childhood;
old men the ageing cells,
portraits of Spinoza and Confucius
wisdom of the hardening
artery, ancestors of family joke
and legend in the faded sepia
photographs on the puja wall.

Flowers are inward vaginal
Georgia O'Keefe spirals
not darkening but swathed
in more and more light
as they deepen.

Or erect male stamens
dotted moist with yellow
pollen ready to seed your eye
mouth ear nostril
reeking with lowtide smells
even as you watch
in the white museum
with guards in navy blue
uniforms.

KEY: 1. *Second Sight* (1986), 56.
2. *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), 75.
3. *Striders* (1966), 22.
4. Speaking of Shiva (1973); Allama Prabhu, #316.
5.*Uncollected Poems* (1995; i.e., probably by 1992), 23.

SHANTA ACHARYA

THE CONTRIBUTION OF POETS FROM INDIA TO AMERICAN POETRY TODAY

Meena Alexander. *Raw Silk*. Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2004.

Meena Alexander. *Illiterate Heart*. Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2002.

Agha Shahid Ali. *Rooms are Never Finished*. W.W. Norton, 2001.

Agha Shahid Ali. *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. W.W. Norton, 2003.

Vijay Seshadri. *The Long Meadow*. Greywolf Press, 2004.

Ravi Shankar. *Instrumentality*. Cherry Grove Collections, 2004.

Jeet Thayil. *English*. Penguin, India and Rattapallax Press, 2004.

Reetika Vazirani. *World Hotel*. Copper Canyon Press, 2002.

Introduction

Indian poets have been enriching the American poetry scene for several decades. The award-winning poet and translator, A.K. Ramanujan, was the William E. Colvin Professor of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, Linguistics, and a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Vikram Seth's exquisitely crafted, delightful novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*, described by Gore Vidal as "The Great Californian Novel," could not have been written without his life in the US. American universities have been pioneering in introducing special literature courses on South Asian/ Indian literatures and languages as well as supporting journals dedicated to these genres. *The Journal of South Asian Literature* (Michigan State University), established in 1963,

actively promoted creative and critical work; the *South Asian Review*, founded in 1977, has been instrumental in carrying the torch. According to *The New York Times*, by 1999 there were over 43 Asian American studies programs at universities across the US, twice as many as just a decade earlier.

In the words of Ravi Shankar, an editor of an anthology of contemporary Middle Eastern, East Asian, and South Asian poetry to be published in the US: "These poets rewrite tradition and broaden American literary awareness." There are some 40 or so 'emerging' South Asian poets writing in America today with a few recognisable names. According to Jeet Thayil, who is editing an anthology of Indian poetry for the Boston-based poetry annual *Fulcrum*, "There are excellent Indian poets at work today, and though the Indian poetry diaspora is vast, it is also vastly underrated, particularly when compared to fiction."

As there are many poets writing today, this introduction limits itself to established poets who have published full-length collections since 2000. They include Meena Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali, Vijay Seshadri, Ravi Shankar, Jeet Thayil and Reetika Vazirani. These poets are increasingly being recognised. Vijay Sheshadri's *The Long Meadow* won the 2003 James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets. Reetika Vazirani was the recipient of a 2003 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for her book, *World Hotel*. Meena Alexander's *Illiterate Heart* was the winner of the 2002 PEN Open Book Award.

Meena Alexander

Meena Alexander, the author of several books of poetry, currently lives in New York City with her husband and two children. She was born in Allahabad, spent her childhood in India and Sudan. Her two collections under review, both published by Triquarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, are *Illiterate Heart* (2002) and *Raw Silk* (2004). In *Illiterate Heart*, dedicated to

the memory of her father, she pays tribute to him acknowledging that he "taught me to hope that lines scribbled in a secret notebook might one day enter the world." In "Elegy For My Father," she sings with the three priests who beckon her as the oldest child to cover his eyes: "If this is the end of life,/ …/ what use are *gnanam*,/ *dhanam*, *kavya*?" "Why am I here? I cannot tell" the protagonist questions in "Valley." She utters "the immigrant's fury"--"who understands my speech,/ further what is my speech?--" and questions: "Whose tongue is this/ melting to the quick of migrancy?" (Gold Horizon)

The answers appear tentatively in the same book, invoking poets and writers as diverse as Rumi, Ginsberg and Conrad while she explores her journey. In "An Honest Sentence," she notes: "In seeking answers/ the hardest script will do.// A child's upright hand --/ stony syntax, slow work// in part-time English,/ trying to forge an honest sentence…" In "Muse," she acknowledges, "*Write in the light*/ *of all the languages*/ *you know the earth contains*,/ you murmur in my ear./ This is pure transport." The search for self, "the self turned outside in/ approaching where there is no turning back" (Mirror of Earth), and not knowing "how I learnt to spell/ out my days, or where I must go" (Glyphs) is pursued deftly in *Raw Silk*, where the purpose of *kavya* (poetry) is reckoned with in no uncertain terms. *Illiterate Heart* is a finely honed, moving account taking the reader on a deeply personal journey. "How did I come to this script?" she questions in the title poem, "Illiterate Heart": "In dreams I was a child babbling /at the gate splitting into two,/ three to make herself safe."

Raw Silk, her latest collection, is an autobiographical cycle of poems which, in the words of Marilyn Hacker, "demonstrates the rare blend of an acute, utterly contemporary intelligence with a sensuality that is, in itself, a radical way of processing information. In its profound and polyglot sense of world citizenship gained through the indelible experience of exile, Meena Alexander has written what is--not at all paradoxically--a book that's quintessentially a New Yorker's."

Meena translates her experience of exile into poems that explore identity and self by establishing a global persona reflecting all that it takes to 'be' in a changing world. The themes of poems in *Raw Silk* are wide ranging--from the aftermath of America's 9/11 to the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat or apartheid in South Africa. They invoke Ghalib, Kabir, Sankara, Lorca, Verlaine, Akhmatova, Amrita Sher-Gil among others.

Just as she had "heard Verlaine singing" in the sandstorm of her childhood, after the pain and shock of September 11, 2001, she notes: "it was a pleasure to read Lorca's *Poet in New York* and reattach myself to place through some, and I stress *some*, of his words. At times his lines startled me--'If it isn't the birds/ covered with ash….'" She felt Lorca was speaking to her: "then it happened," she wrote--"I started to hear Lorca's voice as I walked about the city." In "Aftermath," she writes: "There is an uncommon light in the sky/ Pale petals are scored into stone.// I want to write of the linden tree/ That stoops at the edge of the river// But its leaves are filled with insects/ With wings the color of dry blood.// At the far side of the river Hudson/ By the southern tip of our island// A mountain soars, a torrent of sentences/ Syllables of flame stitch the rubble// An eye, a lip, a cut hand blooms/ Sweet and bitter smoke stains the sky."

The title poem describes how "Raw silk/ brought all the way from Varanasi" was "the wedding sari with its brocade/ saved from the bonfire Gandhi had ordained// was wrapped in muslin/ set in a wardrobe, the door locked tight." The poem ends with: "Amma there are silkworms/ dancing in the firmament// above your head and mine,/ and the mother of worms// doffs her veil/ and darkens her lips// and sets a crown/ of mulberry leaves on my head.// When I open the drawer/ to search for silk// I touch smoke,/ raw silk turned to smoke in the night's throat." This shock of recognition, the loss of home and a violated world where "ground rules are abolished" lead her to "take comfort in sentences." Out of a deep sense of loss, "you hear her words unfurl on the screen,/ bare sound, filled with

longing,/ syllables of raw silk, this poem" ("Triptych in a Time of War"). Out of the powerlessness of poets and artists come "these poems, cloud-tossed particulars,/ sharp with need, sprung in the ash" of her new country.

Meena Alexander writes with moving intensity about the poignancy of living in fragile places, in the world that is a forest on fire. In "Fragile Places," she sums it up thus: "Who dares to burn/ with the stamp of love?// Words glimmer/ then the slow// march to sentences./ Sankara speak to me." Sankara, the philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, believed that the phenomenal world was *maya*, unreal. And so she speaks to us: "Nothing is changed/ by the strength of reflection// and everything." With Rabindranath Tagore's words she reminds us that she too has picked at words, "*tried to redeem them./ They cry as sinners might.*"

Agha Shahid Ali

Born in New Delhi in 1949, Agha Shahid Ali grew up in Kashmir. He was educated in Kashmir, India and America, where he taught at a number of prestigious institutions including the University of Massachusetts, at Amherst. He is the author, translator and editor of several publications. The two poetry collections included in this review are *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; both published by W.W. Norton.

His previous collection, *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), was widely praised as a poignant and nostalgic evocation of not only his lost homeland, but as W.S. Merwin wrote: "Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir, in his poems, is our own lost but inalienable homeland." With the prevalence of war and homelessness in the post cold war era, and the increasing displacement of people in our time, Agha Shahid's voice represents that of all exiles. A haunting volume, it helped establish his reputation as a poet. In the words of

John Ashbery, Agha Shahid Ali's poems are "translucent elegies 'for the city that is leaving forever' (Srinagar) from one of its sons, who also happens to be one of America's finest younger poets."

"Because both countries (India and Pakistan) are nuclear powers now, international anxiety has increased: Kashmir, it is feared, may be the flashpoint of a nuclear war. The ongoing catastrophe--the focus of *The Country Without a Post Office*, my previous volume of poems--provides the backdrop to this volume," writes Agha Shahid Ali in the introduction to his collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished*. Though India and Pakistan fought several wars over Kashmir, Agha Shahid's upbringing in India and Kashmir influenced his thinking. As with his previous book, *Rooms Are Never Finished* excavates the devastation wrought upon his childhood home. In also depicting a deeper, personal tragedy, his mother's death and the journey with her body back to Kashmir via Delhi, he appropriates the ancient style of the ghazal that can be traced back to seventh-century Arabia and brings to his voice a tragedy and yearning of loss that transcends all divisions. "It was the only thing to do, for she had longed for home throughout her illness," he tells us as an explanation for taking her body back to Kashmir. His mother had come to the US for treatment of brain cancer in January 1996; she succumbed to her illness and died in April 1997 in a hospital in Northampton, Massachusetts.

He was imaginatively and emotionally preoccupied with Kashmir, which he visited regularly. He was utterly devoted to his mother and to his country. In writing about the scale of such loss, he fell back on traditional poetic forms to take on the "big subject matter" enabling him to acquire "a certain fullness of voice" as he put it. His death in December 2001, also of brain cancer, silenced this extraordinary voice, which was so suffused with the passion of grief and loss.

In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, "the lyric amplitude throughout interweaves mythic context and personal narrative--his closeness to his mother, her death, the fraught return of her body to Kashmir--

yoking the individual and the global. We read, in part, to understand 'the other.' He wrote, in part, to help us understand," comments Ellen Bryant Voigt. Agha Shahid Ali was able to achieve that understanding through an angle of vision that unified apparent disunities. While his "paradise on earth" had turned to hell, in the poem, "Summers of Translation," he strikingly weaves words and images that draw upon Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *bhajans* (Hindu devotional singing) harking back to Krishna and Radha, Begum Akhtar, Muharram, Zainab, Karbala, black and white Hindi films and songs, and his Mother! Through his poetry he achieves a felicitous co-existence of disparate traditions that has torn people, cities, countries apart. To that extent his poems are political, taking a stand on how things could be--if human beings were not blinded by their own limited beliefs.

Agha Shahid Ali's verse is deeply imbued with the romance and cadences of Urdu poetry; he brings to his work an inventive formalness acquired from his extensive knowledge of western literatures. "Shahid worked assiduously to establish a place in American literature for the formal discipline of the ghazal," notes Agha Iqbal Ali and Hena Zafar Ahmad in their "Foreword" to the book, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. In this posthumous volume, we are offered gems from Agha Shahid's ghazals. In "Arabic" he writes: "They ask me to tell them what Shahid means –/ Listen: it means 'The Beloved' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic." Agha Shahid Ali, "the beloved witness," witnesses the world in this collection from an angle that is deeply personal and truly tragic. During the time of his writing of the poems in this collection, he was also confronted with his own mortality while undergoing treatment for brain cancer, having already lost his mother to the same illness.

It is perhaps not surprising then that the story of Ishmael in the Koran made an indelible impression on him. In the "Foreword," there is an explanation of the story of Ishmael, which runs briefly as follows: "Directed by God, Abraham says to his son, Ishmael, 'I see in a vision that I offer thee in sacrifice.' Differing from the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, the sacrifice is demanded

not only of Abraham, but also of Ishmael. Ishmael's willingness to be sacrificed (as cited in the epigraph to the Foreword '…do as thou art bidden;/ thou shalt find me, God willing,/ one of the steadfast': *The Koran*, Surah 37: 102) heightens the beauty of God's redemption where He says: 'This is indeed a manifest trial.' " Agha Shahid Ali's personal life amounted to such a trial.

His experiments with the ghazal form in depicting the very human trial he underwent will remain his lasting contribution to the world of English poetry. In his introduction to The Ghazal in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, he wrote: "The opening couplet sets up the scheme by having it in both lines, and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet--i.e. the first line (same length) of every succeeding couplet sets up a suspense, and the second line (same length but with the rhyme and refrain--the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain) delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding." In ghazal after ghazal, Agha Shahid's virtuosity can be witnessed over and over again. As with Urdu ghazals, his poems come alive when recited, preferably before a group of connoisseurs. And he was never short of friends and admirers.

Vijay Seshadri

Vijay Seshadri was born in Bangalore, India, in 1954, and arrived in America at the age of five with his parents. He grew up in Columbus, Ohio, where his father taught Chemistry at Ohio State University. Vijay subsequently lived in many parts of the US, including the Pacific Northwest, where he spent five years working in the fishing and logging industries, and New York's Upper West Side, where he was a graduate student in Columbia's Ph.D. program in Middle Eastern Languages and Literature.

He has received several prestigious grants and awards for his work: John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation grant in 2004; MacDowell Colony's Fellowship for Distinguished Poetic

Achievement as well as the Academy of American Poets' James Laughlin Award in 2003, which is given to commend and support a poet's second book. He currently teaches poetry, and is the director of the graduate non-fiction writing programme at Sarah Lawrence College. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and son.

Vijay's first collection, *Wild Kingdom*, was celebrated as one of the most exciting debut publications in years. *The New Yorker* hailed him as "a son of Frost by way of Ashbery: both the high-frequency channels of consciousness and the jazz of spoken language are audible in the poems." *The Long Meadow* is spiritually centred in New York City; in the title poem, we find ourselves in a park--in the Long Meadow in Prospect Park--where the poet takes his dog for a walk. Nothing is more commonplace or domestic than that. Yet the poem deals with issues that are far from common. This delicacy of touch, this juxtaposition of the cosmic and domestic, real and illusory, casual and sublime, urban and rural, ironic and serious makes our journey with the poet rewarding. The book begins with "Immediate City" and ends with "The Long Meadow," poems that deal casually yet brilliantly with issues such as justice, loneliness, devotion, awareness among others. In "Immediate City," he offers hints and guesses about the nature of the City: "Tall and plural and parallel,/ their buff, excited skins/ of glass pressed to glass and steel/ bronzed by the falling sun,/ the city's figmentary buildings dream/ that they are one with the One." In a few powerful lines he portrays the soul of New York City; the first line poised, confident, breathing the same air as Whitman.

"North of Manhattan," conceived in his head *en route* to work one morning, has a title that recalls Robert Frost, but "is a poem written in the shadow of Whitman," explains Vijay Seshadri. "It is concerned with Whitman's spiritual location, the city of New York. It responds to the city, and looks at the same thing Whitman looked at: the fecundity of life in the city, its overwhelming plenitude, which in Whitman is usually, but not always, glorious, at least in Whitman's work prior to his experience of the Civil War. In 'North of Manhattan,' that plenitude is seen as energetic and vital, but also

as destructive. There is a way in which I am looking through that poem to Whitman, and arguing with him." The poem portrays "not extensively but briefly and emphatically, the vocal variety of New York. And New York is, of course, a cosmos rather than a mere city."

In "The Long Meadow," the poem originates from an incident in the *Mahabharata*, the Sanskrit epic poem, which Vijay appropriates and distorts like a Picasso to great effect. When the protagonist, the "son of righteousness," "finally arrives at the celestial realm./…/ The god invites him to enter." He does not see "his beloved, his brothers, his companions in war and exile,/ all long since dead and gone--" but sees "sitting pretty and enjoying the gorgeous sunset,/ his cousin and bitter enemy, the cause of that war, that exile,/ whose arrogance and vicious indolence/ plunged the world into grief." Then "The god informs him that, yes, those he loved have been carried down/ the river of fire. Their thirst for justice/ offended the cosmic powers, who are jealous of justice."

In a post-9/11 world, Vijay is making what he refers to as "a large statement": "This is the final illusion,/ the one to which all the others lead." The illusion is one of expectation--of justice, of a system of belief where a God or cosmic power or perhaps the most powerful government in the world is supposed to deliver justice but does not. He is essentially telling us that our notions of justice etc have little to do with God, governments or those in power capable of delivering it. He has inverted an idea that is widely prevalent, forcing us to reconsider our preconceived notions.

However, that is not all either. In his own words: "The poem is not about the cosmic drama that it relates in the first part, nor is it about the domestic drama of the anticlimax. It's about the relationship between the two. And managing that relation, making the relation the poem, was something I had never been able to do before, and I was very happy. It's not often that you get an opportunity to manage an idea in that way." The poem swivels from the cosmic theme to the quotidian, and the solace that our ordinary,

daily lives offer in the company of those who do not let you down. Building an idea into a climax while holding on to what he refers to as the "quotidian" is a technique that he uses with masterly effect.

There is no guessing Vijay's Indian background from his writing. In "The Long Meadow," apart from the reference to the "kingdom being carried/ as on the back of the tortoise the earth is carried" there is no indication that the poem sprung from the famous Indian epic poem. One of the things he says about his 'Indianness' is that, "whatever else it was, it wasn't, when I was growing up, social. What I mean by that is that it wasn't collective. It was unique to us as a family, and unique to me as a child in my family. We were effectively the only Indians in Columbus, Ohio… almost everybody else in the world I lived in was white Anglo-Saxon Protestant." Vijay Seshadri's worldview, shaped as much by mid-century American ideals as Indian thought and culture, comes across in his poetry refreshingly as his own.

Ravi Shankar

Ravi Shankar was born in Washington DC, grew up in Virginia and studied at Columbia University and the University of Virginia. He is currently poet-in-residence at Central Connecticut State University, and an editor of an anthology of South Asian, East Asian, and Middle Eastern poetry, due to appear in 2005. *Instrumentality*, his first collection of poetry, is a series of meditations on life with an ironic and lyrical look at human experience. According to Vijay Seshadri, "Ravi Shankar's poems are immortal in the flesh, finding in the life of the mind--its interpretations, its 'instrumentality'--the surpassing, transient lyrical moment; and in the life of the world's body the permanent, unflinching presence of thought, unconfined by time or space. They are the verbal artifacts of a singular, many-sided, and distinguished consciousness."

As Charles Bernstein points out, *Instrumentality* plays expectations and delivers uncanny reformulations that seem "predestined, in retrospect." In "Fabricating Astrology," for example, the poem begins innocently with: "I lie on my back in the damp grass,/ Staring at the stars' mineral precision." Before the reader gets lost among the stars, we are led to "Masses of gas, bearers of dead light," and then an encounter with "Death, Provider of cardinal boundary," drawing us out to concur with him: "This much is certain:/ Today, I'm a day closer to extinction." It is every poet's dream to replace extinction "with these words." However, every serious poet also plays out the dialectic of the self/soul and the limitation of words/language in understanding the world/reality in all its fullness, physical and metaphysical.

In the impressively crafted title poem, "Instrumentality," Shankar speaks of "action's unstuttering arc, which is eloquence and muteness/ At once," turning " the bars of time into a provisional, shoreless field." "Was it corporeal act/ Before idea, disembodied before uttered as sound?" The answers lies in the last two lines of the poem: "before the invention/ Of the pump, there was one less way to understand the human heart." "There is considerable distance to travel from page to page," wrote E. Ethelbert Miller of Ravi Shankar's book. "Even in a poem like 'Home Together' Shankar detects a vacuum in love. From a men's room to a San Francisco sunrise, Shankar emerges with a pocketful of koans reflecting the wisdom hidden in the stars." The fifty-two poems in this collection indeed carry the reader over long distances in content and style.

In the poem "Exile," he writes about the need to belong while acknowledging the impossibility of ever achieving that: "There's nowhere else I'd rather not be than here,/ But here I am nonetheless, dispossessed,/ Though not quite, because I never owned/ What's been taken from me, never have belonged/ In and to a place, a people, a common history./ Even as a child when I was slurred in school--/ *Towel head, dot boy, camel jockey*--/ None of the abuse

was precise: only Sikhs/ Wear turbans, widows and young girls bindis,/ Not one species of camel is indigenous to India…"

For someone who was born in Washington DC, and who conjures "sustenance from thin air" and admits to "the smell/ Of both camphor and meatloaf equally" repelling him, he also admits to feeling "extraneous." While acknowledging that "to be rooted/ Is the most important and least recognized need/ Of the human soul," his admission that "This alien feeling, honed in aloneness to an edge,/ Uses me to carve an appropriate mask each morning./ I'm still unsure what effect it has on my soul" is instantly recognised by exiles all over the world.

Jeet Thayil

Jeet Thayil was born in Kerala, India, and educated in Bombay, Hong Kong and New York, where he received an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College. His two previous collections of poetry include *Gemini* (two-poet volume, 1992) and *Apocalypso* (1997). Jeet now lives with his wife in New York City, where he works as an editor and writer. *English*, his second full-length collection, was first published by Penguin Books India in 2003, and is also published by Rattapallax Press in New York.

English, "is more than a language--it is a metaphor for divinity, and it holds a hard-won tenderness for all things living." As Philip Nikolayev says: "Thayil's *English* first spices a transcendent command of diverse registers of literary and colloquial speech with certain sprung local talk, but then melts all that into an infinitely focused and inventive, personal and emotional dialect, delivered in one of the most unforgettable voices of our time. He is the master of the knockout lyric punchline."

In the faux prologue poem, "About the Author," he introduces himself as having spent his youth under "the twin shadows of madness and avalanche." He uses various registers of English as he

writes in different voices: “Title for an imaginary sequel:/ Ishmael, Fishmeal, call me what you want,/ just call me, okay?” Readers of Agha Shahid Ali’s *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* cannot help making the connection though Jeet himself clearly had Melville and *Moby Dick* in mind.

In a ghazal called “Beyond English,” Agha Shahid writes: “No language is old--or young--beyond English./ So what of a common tongue beyond English?// I know some words for war, all of them, sharp,/ but the sharpest one is *jung*--beyond English!// …// Baghdad is sacked and its citizens must watch/ prisoners (now in miniatures) hung beyond English.” While Agha Shahid is clearly referring to the 1991 Iraq war, Jeet is witnessing “The Mother of All Battles” in the heart of New York City: “I’m standing on Sixth, watching ruin, with/ a handful of rain and a prophecy,/ no idea in my head what next to do,/ say, be, or think, or anything, except// a taste of ash in the pulverized air,/ …/ …just before the savage winter of/ 2001, everything settled/ at last, the star anise folded between/ my eyes saying, I am not of your race.” His poems convey multiple outsider perspectives with an insider’s poise.

The poem, “Moveable,” takes a look at events of 9/11 in a different perspective. “Alright I admit it, I am struggling, I am./ Naming the sacred is not a job you take/ lightly, not that is, if you want to live/ to any half-ripe sort of age.” He begins and then goes on: “Who would have guessed the disaster/ in store, or how rarely you would appear/ in the decade of denial? I am in my thirties,/ shirtless, a baby elephant’s head grows/ out of my shoulders, I carry a beer-/ belly and shades. My mother is bathing./ I am on guard duty, which I enjoy./ As my Asiatic time came to a close,/ you and I grew reckless…” Even Ganesha, the Hindu deity, remover of obstacles, is helpless at the precise hour of need. “On the airplane, we sat/ by the aisle … measuring our journey/ in statute miles. At JFK, you scurried/ off for coffee. ‘Back in a mo’ you said,/ ‘and remember, yaar, the nail in your head/ is moveable. So move it, why don’t you?’/ In the fall of 2001, I do ….” The poem ends with: “You, I am beginning to suspect, are not here.” One could have

arrived at the same conclusion in "Meanwhile, Over in Orissa," where "the Australian missionary/ and his two small sons/ who pray in a burning jeep./ Saffron men dance around them, their ash-lined foreheads/ tremble like crosses in the heat."

The pace and flexibility, the seriousness, the humour of the narrator's voice conveys a dramatic effect all its own. One is inclined to agree with Vijay Seshadri: "I revel in Jeet Thayil's poetry. He seems to be one of the most contemporary writers I know, and contemporary precisely because he has such command of the poetic and historical past, and because his invented language has such depth, archaeological richness, and reality. The staying power here and the imaginative strength, which allows the soul to be forever balanced on the cusp of the inner and outer worlds, are nothing short of remarkable."

Reetika Vazirani

Born in India in 1962, Reetika Vazirani came to the US when she was six years old with her family and settled in Silver Spring, Maryland, where her father, an oral surgeon, was a faculty member and dean of students at Howard University School of Dentistry. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1984 and received an M.F.A. from University of Virginia where she was a Henry Hoyns Teaching Fellow. Recipient of a 2003 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for *World Hotel* (Copper Canyon, 2002), and a Barnard New Women Poets' Prize for *White Elephants* (1996), she received a "Discovery"/The Nation Award and a Pushcart Prize.

She was a writer-in-residence at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, and was part of the core faculty of the Callaloo Creative Writing Workshops. Later in 2003, she and her partner, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet, Yusef Komunyakaa, were to join the faculty at Emory University in Atlanta. For such a promising life, the circumstances of her death and that of her son, Jehan Vazirani Komunyakaa, are tragic. Mother and son died on

July 16, 2003. In the context of her father's suicide in 1974, her own is all the more disturbing.

Reetika came late to poetry, in her mid-20s. She once said that her family background meant she had "no sense that there was a place for me in the world except in books." As an immigrant, she thought she had very little else to distract her when her family first came to the US in 1968. She is reported to have said, "I needed to learn English, and I could spend my time on that as I did not ski, ice skate, roller skate, swim, or do much of anything else for that matter." But she knew "that reading was the most magical way to spend my time. I would copy verbatim anything I wish I had written. And so in fact I would write it, copy it, and that is how I became a writer. I was a scribe first." Later on, she attended Derek Walcott's poetry seminars in Boston University, and was introduced to poets like Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney. "I have no end of gratitude," she wrote, "for my lucky circumstances, having studied with poets so squarely rooted in the English tradition, and who brought to it influences which are changing the language from their own old and varied traditions."

In the epigraph to *World Hotel*, Reetika quotes Louis Bogan: "Women have no wilderness in them,/ They are provident instead,/ Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts/ To eat dusty bread." The discontent in her heart she herself could not contain. In many of her poems, she explores the question of belonging, of home and identity. For someone who moved twenty-two times in eighteen years after graduation, it is not surprising that places trigger her poetic imagination. Many immigrant writers come to exile and homelessness early in their careers. *World Hotel* appears to be a fitting title for someone whose work often revolves around a sense of being "unhomed," as she refers to it. In "Aerogram Punjab," she writes: "You're good with maps; to find me/ first find in your atlas, your page,// not a tropic, a dashed line--/ … Find/ the page black. *Chota bhai*, tell me// where the world goes." In "It's a Young Country," she warns "pack lightly we move fast."

Reetika explores conflict--between mother and daughter, eastern and western cultures, colonizers and the colonized. "She's truly an international, lyrical poet," comments Sam Hamill, whose Copper Canyon Press published *World Hotel*. "She wrote about being in both cultures and between both cultures." She was a representative of the new world voice, dealing with issues of finding one's place or home, after immigration. "Inventing Maya," the opening section of *World Hotel*, is a sequence of poems loosely based on the life of her mother. By the time Reetika wrote these poems, her life was more secure than it had been in a long time; she was a mother by then and successful as a poet.

In the final analysis, her sense of isolation perhaps never disappeared. In "Daughter-Mother-Maya-Seeta," she writes: "*Hello son this is your mother*/ …/ *I am proud to have borne you*/ *When you gather around me*/ *newness comes into the world*." Tragically she denied herself such hope. In "Lullaby," she wrote: "I would not sing you to sleep/ I would press my lips to your ear/ and hope the terror in my heart stirs you." It is painful to read her lines in "Dedicated to You": "This poet loves her readers/ and you loved him who died before you were born."

Conclusion

The nature of exile, the role of language and poetry in defining a new personal identity are common among creative writers and thinkers, but more so among exiled poets. Both Meena Alexander and Reetika Vazirani grew up hoping that "lines scribbled in a secret notebook might one day enter the world." Both took "comfort in sentences" (Meena Alexander) and had "books to brace them in the havoc" (In "One Week In the Village," Reetika Vazirani refers to women who "had no books to brace them in the havoc"). Her experience of homelessness was transformed into poetry. As Vijay Seshadri puts it: "Art seems to be the only place we can liberate our many selves." Ravi Shankar delves into the effect that 'alienation' has on the human soul and Jeet Thayil uses the English language as

a way of belonging. And, if--as Meena Alexander says--"Home is where when I go, they let me in," then these poets have indeed arrived. And poetry their "short incantation,/ my long way home" ("Blue Lotus," *Raw Silk*), though sometimes home is a strange, fragile, fractured place.

Poetry is not only the way home; it is also a way of healing. "I'm always turning to poems," says Vijay Seshadri, "because they're the only way I can resolve all this stuff that's happening, which assaults one, which one cannot escape from. 'The Long Meadow' was, for me, a kind of release. I was feeling very desperate about the state of the world, and it really helped me, helped me get out of the state of despair I was in at that moment." Tragically, poetry could not sustain Reetika Vazirani, though her quest for love, identity, belonging through words and language is common among creative individuals. Reetika, at the age of 40, at the peak of her creative powers, took her own life along with that of her 2-year old son. There is no indication in her writing of such self-destruction. One can share Meena Alexander's confusion: "How can I know/ that in someone else's kitchen/ she will take a knife/ first to the child, then to herself?/ I cannot bear what she has done…" ("Opening the Shutters," *Raw Silk*). And, despite poetry's therapeutic powers, it is no panacea for a brain tumour; Agha Shahid Ali died of one in 2001.

While it has not been possible to examine the contribution of the emerging generation of poets such as Maya Khosla, Srikanth Reddy, Prageeta Sharma and Pireeni Sundaralingam among others, their collective voice is increasingly being recognised and continues to sustain the thriving contemporary American poetry scene. Maya Khosla, an environmental consultant and writer, received the 2003 Dorothy Brunsman Poetry award for her book, *Keel Bone*. Prageeta Sharma was the winner of the Fence Modern Poets Series, which led to the publication of her book, *The Opening Question* in 2004. Pireeni was named as "one of America's emerging writers" by the literary journal *Ploughshares* and her work is to feature in the International Museum of Women in 2005. Srikanth Reddy's book,

Facts for Visitors, was published by the New California Poetry series (edited by Robert Haas, Calvin Bedient, and Brenda Hillman), whose official artistic positioning is to "present works that help define the emerging generation of poets--books consistent with California's commitment to the Black Mountain tradition and reflective of California literary traditions--cosmopolitan, experimental, open, and broad-ranging in their intellectual makeup."

CECILE SANDTEN

KINDRED SISTERS: SUJATA BHATT'S POETIC ADAPTATIONS OF PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER'S SELF-PORTRAITS

Introduction

On a cold morning in March 1985, the Indian-born, American-educated, and German-resident poet Sujata Bhatt visited the *Kunsthalle Bremen* for the first time--it was also her very first visit to Germany. And it was there in the *Kunsthalle* that she had her initial encounter with the paintings by the most important modern German woman artist, Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907).[1] The first true modernist in German art, Modersohn-Becker's work defies all attempts at categorisation. She discovered Cézanne's work for herself in Paris in 1900 before he became famous. Her work was open to influences from many artists such as Maillol, Gaugin, Rousseau, van Gogh, as well as the ancient Faiyum painters of Egypt. Some of her last paintings are said to anticipate Picasso's work. Fascinated by a number of self-portraits by Modersohn-Becker, Bhatt in her fifth and most recent collection of poems, *A Colour for Solitude* (2002a), imagines the painter's inner and outer worlds, and also explores Modersohn-Becker's friendship with Rainer Maria Rilke and Clara Westhoff.

In this study I will first concentrate on the theoretical concept of "intermediality." I will then show that Bhatt's creative response to the painter's work is a way for the poet--the ultimate foreigner--to enter and try to understand a completely alien culture and

[1] Bhatt learned about the painter through Rilke's famous poem "Requiem for a Friend" (1908); she also knew that Modersohn-Becker had been a close friend of Rilke's wife, the sculptor Clara Westhoff (1878-1954), who was, with Modersohn-Becker, one of the women artists at Worpswede artists' colony near Bremen (cf. Bhatt 2002a,9).

country, time and space--which are present in Modersohn-Becker's work. Thus, a dialogic process between text and image will be highlighted.

Sujata Bhatt is bicultural by birth and migration, and is tricultural by marriage. She was born in Ahmedabad, India, in 1956 and when she was twelve her parents moved to the United States. In the US she started out studying science, but in the end, she received a degree both in Philosophy and English. She completed her Master of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa, where she met her husband, the German radio producer/editor Michael Augustin. Bhatt moved to Bremen, Germany, shortly before her first poetry collection *Brunizem* (1988) was published. When asked to describe her cultural identity today, Bhatt answers:

> I would say that I'm like a blend of different cultures or a hybrid. In some ways I am Indian, in other ways I've been very much influenced by growing up in America. And I would say that I'm influenced by living in Europe, in Germany. […] There is a European style of meeting and socialising that I also feel a part of. Very broadly I would say I'm an Indian in the diaspora. But there are many of us, and everyone is different. I think I'm a mixture by the way I live: It's all so blended together. I can't separate it any more. (Bhatt in Sandten 1998, 21)

Locating Bhatt's poetry in any one of the currently available categories, ranging from Commonwealth literature[2] to postcolonial literature or the New Literatures in English--including the notion of

[2] For her poetry collection *Brunizem* Bhatt received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) in 1988, to mention just one prize.

the literatures of the South Asian diaspora--proves difficult, as her poetry transgresses several boundaries. I do not want to classify Bhatt's writing as being part of postcolonial writing as she has been living as a migrant for so long. She can write from a perspective that does not deny the colonial past, yet does not have the colonial past and political independence of India as her main subject. Rather, these subjects enter her poetry in a personal mode, drawing on her childhood experiences, as she does in some of her most recent poems, too, which are inspired by her visit to India in the year 2000.[3] With a certain nostalgia she uses the cultural and historical text "India" as subtext or source of her imagination. Bhatt's formal structure belongs to the open form favoured by what is described as free verse or "organic poetry."[4] In addition, Bhatt's language is characterised by sound and rhythmic effects such as onomatopoeia, repetition, echoing or elaborate metaphors. Her poetry can be read as part of a very small minority of poets who creatively combine different languages and cultures, "East and West"; or it can be seen as the expression of an Indian woman who has been living in Germany for a very long time and is presenting her very own voice. Thus, the overall thesis that a multicultural way of life leads--in the case of Bhatt--to an intercultural way of writing is valid here: her life enables the poet to articulate an original, critical and very unusual perspective on the different societies and cultures she actively experiences.

[3] Cf. Bhatt's six poems in *P.N. Review*, 5, 28, no. 145 May – June 2002, 46-49.

[4] Denise Levertov, a Welsh-Russian-American poet, and one of its practitioners, evidently influenced Sujata Bhatt's free verse or as Levertov terms it, "organic form": The poet's experience and perception--also the inner perception, e.g. dreams--shape the development of each line and stanza which proceeds not according to strict prosodic criteria but in a subjective manner of perception and feeling the poet wants to express (cf. Levertov 1973, 14).

Mirror-Images

Alongside the writing strategy of interculturality, Bhatt also uses that of "intermediality," by which I refer to the poet's extensive use and creative adaptation of other media as a trigger or as "external stimuli" for her imagination. Many paintings by various artists such as Edward Hopper, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, or Paula Modersohn-Becker (to mention just a few) of different cultural and national backgrounds serve as mirrors for the creation and formation of new cultural identities, new perspectives, and plurality within the creative writing process. These other media are first experienced visually in order to subject them to a creative, productive and selective process of adaptation. They are characterised by non-verbal sign systems and dissimilar systems of reference and serve Bhatt as mirror-images. Frequently, these other media provide positive reflections of herself by which she, by entering completely different cultural contexts, is able to re-negotiate and investigate "historical changes in perception, iconographies and textual representation" (Brosch 2002, 103), and to express new perspectives in her quest for her cultural identity which has been disrupted by her migrations.

When paintings are concerned the writing strategy could be interpreted with the aid of the term ekphrasis, "the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text in a non-verbal sign-system" (Clüver 1997, 26). Rewritings or re-imaginings of media from non-verbal sign systems correspond with the actual prerequisites of the literary genre of the traditional *Bildgedicht* which is a verbal or poetic description and linguistic visualisation (cf. Klarer 2001, 3). The poetic description and linguistic visualisation of a painting is carried out by using a semiotic, metaphoric and illusionistic equation of the real objects that are

represented in the painting.[5] Consequently, Bhatt is transgressing several boundaries by using paintings as "external stimuli": generic, medial, cultural, historic and illusionistic. She thus engages in medial interference and intermedial referencing. The adaptation of the source medium, here painting, is related to its specific semiotic, aesthetic, technical and organisational conventions and possibilities, therefore the target medium seems to be limited or restricted (cf. Bogner 1998, 355). Yet, poetry as a genre as such is not touched. In the case of Bhatt, there is, as Werner Wolf (1999, 42 f.) argues, "an involvement of […] two conventionally distinct media." In that vein, Wolf suggests that "only one (dominant) medium appears directly with its typical or conventional signifiers, the other one (the non-dominant medium) [is] only indirectly present 'within' the first medium as a signified (in some cases as a referent)" (*ibid*.). Thus, the non-dominant medium is "'covered' by the dominant medium […], and hence the two media cannot be

[5] I do not want to go into detail regarding the lexicography, history and the field of research of the term "ekphrasis" as this has been done, among others, by Mario Klarer (2001) in his fairly recent study *Ekphasis. Bildbeschreibung als Repräsentationstheorie bei Spenser, Sidney, Lyly und Shakespeare* (Tübingen: München, here, 2-23); by Renate Brosch (2002) in her very useful article "Verbalizing the Visual: Ekphrasis as a Commentary on Modes of Representation," in Jutta Eming, Annette Jael Lehmann and Irmgard Maassen, eds. *Mediale Performanzen: Historische Konzepte und Perspektiven* (Freiburg/i.Br.: Rombach Verlag: 103-123); by Peter Wagner, ed. (1996), *Icons – Texts – Iconotexts. Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, here, 2-40); or by Hans Holländer (1995), "Literatur, Malerei und Graphik. Wechselwirkungen, Funktionen und Konkurrenzen," in Peter V. Zima, ed. *Literatur Intermedial. Musik – Malerei – Photographie – Film* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft). The term "ekphrasis" has been variously defined and variously used, and a definition ultimately depends on the particular argument to be deployed.

separated from each other, as in the case of overt/direct intermediality" (Wolf 1999, 42 f.).

Therefore, a hybrid character in terms of an interplay between different media is responsible for the creation of a specific atmosphere which enables a space in which new ways of interplay and interactivity come into existence. A poem, however, as the literary genre of the greatest complexity, necessarily leads to a reduction of the source medium. On the other hand, a poem provides a new potential of representation, creation and structuring, and therefore offers diverse aspects of innovative rewriting of the source medium. A poem might lead to a fictitious creation of authenticity, in other words, to an individual voice that a painting can only offer indirectly, as the painting can not "speak." Hence, the poem is providing "a crucial meta-representational commentary" on the painting and is thus highlighting the poem's "transformative potential" (Brosch 2002, 110).

In the following, I am focusing on a communicative-semiotic and hermeneutic approach which I find particularly helpful for a detailed analysis of both systems of signification, poem and painting. The questions of how meaning is constituted and re-constituted and of how a poem by Bhatt, with its own specific literary devices, adapts, describes and structures themes or elements of a painting by Modersohn-Becker are most interesting to me as I can thereby focus on the result of the intermedial referencing. In order to identify and establish proof of Bhatt's intermedial referencing I will also turn to the sources the poet herself used. Bhatt's medium--a poem--as a product of an intermedial process, refers to one other medium: a painting. The poem adapts this with its own means of representation, structuring and meaning. This form of adaptation could, thus, be called a monomedial process. In this context Renate Brosch refers to James Heffernan who "suggests that the reader responds to the painting in the text as text rather than as static object, reading the larger painterly aesthetic generated" (Brosch 2002, 107). In the case of Bhatt this position

becomes even more obvious as Bhatt not only refers to Modersohn-Becker's paintings as texts, but also focuses on various biographies, letters and journals, art criticism and other sources of information about the painter, and is, therefore, also engaged in an intertextual process, adding to the painting information that its observer does not necessarily have access to. Although a literary text is not able to fully realise but only discuss, imitate or evoke the source medium (cf. Rajewsky 2002, 57) such as a painting, Bhatt's poems show, nonetheless, a multi- or polymedial character as they refer to additional textual information.

A Colour for Solitude

For a long time Bhatt had "thought of eventually writing a sequence of poems entirely devoted to and drawing their inspiration from Paula Modersohn-Becker's paintings, especially the self-portraits of which there are more than fifty and which appear at every stage of Modersohn-Becker's artistic development" (Bhatt 2002, 11). In *A Colour For Solitude,* there are twenty-seven poems that draw their inspiration from Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits, which are unusual and radical for a woman of her time. In all the poems we find a poetic description of the paintings. Chronologically ordered, Bhatt frequently addresses the painter directly in the second person singular, clearly presenting a persona as the observer of the painting and the painter herself. In other poems, Bhatt speaks in the first person singular as Modersohn-Becker. Thus, the painter becomes the object/subject in the painting, talking about herself--as Modersohn-Becker--and also talking about the painting process which in the painting itself that we see today is already finished. In another category of poems, Bhatt uses her inspiration in order to present associations with the colours, themes or structures of a particular painting. Other poems are written in a dialogic mode either to Rainer Maria Rilke, Otto Modersohn or Clara Westhoff or in a monologic mode focusing on the persona herself. Further, it is interesting to note that Bhatt

frequently draws attention to the relationship between Modersohn-Becker, Rilke and Otto Modersohn, interpreting the letters and diary entries of Modersohn-Becker in the sense that the painter had a love relation--even suggesting an intimate one--with Rilke whom she clearly depicts as Modersohn's rival, although Modersohn-Becker must have been very clear about her feelings for Otto Modersohn.[6] In addition, in most of her poems, Bhatt explains the setting of the painting. In her poems in which she creatively adapts the paintings by Modersohn-Becker, in most of the cases analogously to the paintings, the motif of the independent woman as artist together with the theme of pregnancy are dominant. In all her poems, Bhatt tries to enter the painter's mind, and further, uses the self-portraits as a form of theatre.[7] On the one hand, the poet engages in the act of viewing by carrying out "a performative element, emphasising on the act of spectatorship that [draws] attention to ways of seeing and its implication in contemporary culture" and by conferring "a temporal quality onto the 'static image' and its specular qualities" (Brosch 2002, 122). On the other hand, Bhatt "displaces the tensions and ambivalences of ekphrasis onto a figure or action in the text" (Brosch 2002, 109).

Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits are mirror-images of self-questioning and self-assertion, of self-display and thus self-revelation; they are mirror-images of many diverse self-sights (cf. Götte 1993, 8). The self-portraits are impressive because of their strong confidence and inherent composure, a very specific usage of colour and the aspect of two-dimensionality. The harmonic and equable facial features of the painter in her self-portraits make the observer think that a conversation with herself seemed to be more important to Modersohn-Becker than a conversation with other people (cf. Murken-Altrogge 1995, 17 f.).[8] It is, however, interesting to note, that from Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits we

[6] Cf. Letters and diary entries in Busch and Reinken 1979, 220-247.
[7] Bhatt in conversation with Sandten, 24 July 2003.
[8] For a detailed description of Modersohn-Becker as a human being *and* painter cf. Murken-Altrogge 1995, 17-18.

learn nothing about external events which influenced her life. She does not tell stories from Paris or Worpswede but she, rather, paints and draws paintings of a self-determined existence (cf. Götte 1993, 8). Characteristic of her self-portraits is also the repeated decorative usage of highly symbolical attributes such as necklace, flower, fruit or mirror. The self-portraits by Modersohn-Becker reveal the steps in her inner (personal) as well as her artistic development (cf. Hülsmann 1988, 62). In her earlier self-portraits it seems as if the painter anticipated her untimely death at the age of thirty-one, an aspect that Bhatt is also drawing attention to by foreboding as to what is going to happen, whereas in her later self-portraits Modersohn-Becker seems to have arrived at a fully developed self/soul. This aspect is also adapted by Bhatt in nearly all of her poems by referring to the female, the openness, the questioning in the face and the deeper goal of Modersohn-Becker to become a fully acknowledged artist in spite of her gender.

In many of her poems Bhatt has worked with different art objects and artists.[9] But it is the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker whom Bhatt has felt particularly close to. No other poet has focused so intensively on one single artist.[10] Since living in Bremen, Bhatt

[9] The following poems are inspired by different works of art, as is always explained in a footnote by the poet: “For Paula Modersohn-Becker” (1988a, 76), “Paula Modersohn-Becker Speaks to Herself” (1995, 91), "Rooms by the Sea" (1991, 92), "Sunlight in a Cafeteria" (1991, 95), "Portrait of a Double Portrait" (1991, 97), "The Fish Hat" (1991, 78), "Cow's Skull--Red, White and Blue" (1995, 24), "Pelvis with Moon" (1995, 35), "Kaspar Hauser Dreams of Horses" (1995, 89) or "Lizard, Iguana, Chameleon, Salamander" (1995, 97). Further, there are poems in which Bhatt is occupied with artists such as Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe or Emily Carr without indicating the fact.

[10] In his poetry collection *Turner. New & Selected Poems* (1994), Caribbean-British writer David Dabydeen published a long prose poem that was inspired by the painting “Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying” (commonly known as “Slave Ship”) by the British

has devoted herself to the work of the German painter. The way this strong artistic affinity expresses itself in her poems can be seen in all of the poems that are triggered off by Paula Modersohn-Becker's paintings. As I have to restrict myself in terms of time and space, I can only focus on a selection of poems in order to highlight Bhatt's different modes of adaptation.

Self-Portrait as Aubade
1897

The gaze in the mirror:
Straightforward yet unconscious--
the self-assessment is open to the bone,
open to the soul--

Will the quest begin now?

Outside it is Berlin,
it is 1897--
the colours of a cold spring morning--

You are all-knowing but innocent.
Not smiling, not coy, not sad--
And your face: moonstone white--
blue-grey shadows make you
almost marble, almost--
if it weren't for the wash of tan, the tinge
of beige beneath the white:
colours of blanched almonds--

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painter William Turner. In some of his poems William Carlos Williams refers to paintings by Breugel; the poetry collection *For The Time Being* by W.H. Auden is based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; the poet has also written some poems that are triggered off by paintings; or the Irish poet Paul Durcan has written poems for the National Gallery of Ireland by focusing on some of the paintings the gallery owns.

You are serious, wide-awake--already
no trace of sleep in your eyes--
A self-portrait as waiting for
the aubade,
as waiting for you don't know what.

How long do you need to wait? How long
will you need--before the quest
can truly begin?

Meanwhile, you give me
yourself
waiting in front of the mirror:
meanwhile
your green broken with black branches
enters the mirror--your green invites
the aubade--gives fragrance to your waiting--
however dark this green--your black
making it olive--however dark this green,
still, there is the fragrance
of a cold spring morning.

The gaze in the mirror is steady
and the part in your hair is so straight--

the green surrounds your moonstone skin--
your memories of blanched almonds--

untouched and aching
to be touched--

But you *are* the aubade
and do not know it-- (Bhatt 2002a, 17)

In this first poem in the collection *A Colour for Solitude* Bhatt refers to one of the earliest self-portraits by Modersohn-Becker,

"Selbstbildnis, frontal, 1897" ("Self-Portrait, frontal 1897"), in which she also discusses--in the sense of a polymedial process--the emergent consciousness of the artist Modersohn-Becker. This is already metaphorically indicated by the poem's title, "Self-Portrait as Aubade, 1897," as "aubade" is, according to the *OED* (1997) "a musical announcement of dawn, a sunrise song or open-air concert," thus highlighting even an audio-visual aspect. In the poem, Bhatt mentions biographical details such as "the gaze in the mirror" (l. 1) as Modersohn-Becker most frequently painted herself in front of a mirror, or "Outside it is Berlin,/ it is 1897--the colours of a cold spring morning--" (ll. 5-8), referring to the fact that during this time Modersohn-Becker was an apprentice at the "1867 Association of Berlin Women Artists" for six weeks. Bhatt is influenced in her creative re-writing process as a knowing observer of the painting and a thorough reader of the biography of the painter. She also draws attention to Modersohn-Becker's search for herself as artist by highlighting the question "Will the quest begin now?" (l. 5) which is repeated in the poem (ll. 22-24) and which can be interpreted as a form of foreshadowing Modersohn-Becker's life and career as one of the most important modern female painters. In addition to a precise description of the face and the background (ll. 1-2; stanza 3, ll. 9-16; stanza 4, ll. 17-18; stanza 6, ll. 23-33; ll.36-37), Bhatt also introduces her own interpretation of the painting and is thus constituting and re-constituting its meaning: "A self-portrait as waiting for/ the aubade,/ as waiting for you don't know what" (ll. 19-21). Because of the dark-green colours that dominate the background of the painting and the "moonstone white" (l. 9) of the face, the speaker of the poem is of the opinion that the painting is set "of a cold spring morning" (l. 35). In this poem, Modersohn-Becker is spoken to directly by the persona of the poem who introduces herself in line 25: "Meanwhile, you give me/ yourself." Bhatt imagines Modersohn-Becker's memories: "your memories of blanched almonds" (l. 39). Finally, Bhatt arrives at the interpretation that Modersohn-Becker is the aubade: "But you *are* the aubade/ and do not know it--" (ll. 42-43) which sums up Modersohn-Becker's opening career as an artist in the sense of a

foreshadowing and the beginning quest for her female artistic identity. Bhatt's poem "Self-Portrait as Aubade" is characterised by repetitions of words and images that are most important for the poet's own interpretation and rewriting of the painting (aubade, the idea of waiting, green, moonstone white, cold spring morning, blanched almonds) and which also structure the poem analogously to the self-portrait which is characterised by symmetries in the colours, face and background. Bhatt is, thus, engaging in "a performative element, emphasising on the act of spectatorship that [draws] attention to ways of seeing and its implication in contemporary culture" (Brosch 2002, 122).

Self-Portrait with Your Jaw Set
1905

If truth is impossible
then are you good
at telling lies?

Woman of Pompeii, of ancient Pompeii,
you have made yourself
so regal, almost matronly
with three children at home.

But yours is the face in the mosaic--
Yours is the face in the fresco.

Liquid gold
thick around your throat--

And the gold is everywhere:
flickering in your eyes
washed across your hair--

Your jaw set
against Vesuvius--

Pompeii glancing out of your eyes
as if you were about to say,
'I dare you--' (Bhatt 2002a, 43)

In her poem "Self-Portrait with Your Jaw Set, 1905," Bhatt is trying to appropriate the power of the image and is, thus, participating in iconic qualities (cf. Brosch 2002, 106) and a re-interpretation of ancient myths. In this respect she is in line with Modersohn-Becker's re-interpretation of ancient art, without which this painting cannot be adequately placed in art history. Modersohn-Becker most obviously refers to Faiyum mosaic paintings, an aspect Bhatt also focuses on in her poem. Bhatt opens her poem with a rhetorical question addressing the painter directly in the second person singular which she already does in the headline: "If truth is impossible/ then are you good/ at telling lies?" (ll. 1-3). Of course, the painting cannot answer. But the speaker of the poem sees in Modersohn-Becker a "[w]oman of Pompeii, of ancient Pompeii" (l. 4) who has made herself "so regal, almost matronly/ with three children at home" (ll. 6-7), thereby referring to the main characteristics in the painting as well as to a fictitious aspect, not only seeing the individual Modersohn-Becker in the painting but an ancient woman who is privileged because she has been painted and has, in addition, three children at home. Bhatt is obviously comparing this painting with the Faiyum mosaic paintings and thus re-negotiating and investigating historical changes in perception, iconographies and textual representation as she is discovering Modersohn-Becker's "face in the mosaic--/Yours is the face in the fresco" (ll. 8-9). Drawing attention to the thick golden necklace around Modersohn-Becker's neck, Bhatt sees this golden colour also in the eyes and the hair which the painting already suggests in order to highlight its own integrity. Referring to the ancient myth of Pompeii, Bhatt associates Modersohn-Becker in the painting with a woman whose "jaw [is] set/ against Vesuvius--(ll. 16-17) and Pompeii is glancing out of her eyes as if she were about to say, "'I dare you--'" (l. 20). Thus Bhatt is re-interpreting the fact that on the 24th of August, 79 A.D., volcanic

ash spread from Mt. Vesuvius, and Pompeii and nearby Herculaneum disappeared from the face of the earth. Herculaneum was rediscovered in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748. By the mid-eighteenth century, when scholars made the journey to Naples and reported on the findings, the imagination of Europe was ignited. Philosophy, art, architecture, literature, and even fashion drew upon the discoveries of Pompeii. In her painting Modersohn-Becker in a sense imitates these re-discovered mosaic paintings; whereas Bhatt goes one step further, granting the self-portrait such a strength as if the person depicted in the poem was able to prevent what had happened in Pompeii, thus re-interpreting Modersohn-Becker's adaptation of ancient iconography. The ancient Faiyum paintings influenced Modersohn-Becker for all her subsequent self-portraits.

Nude Paintings[11]

In her nude paintings Modersohn-Becker is becoming more radical due to the focus on her own naked body. The portrait of a female nude by a female painter did not only mean a transgression of moral conventions and thus a provocation of her time, but particularly the nude self-portraits of the years 1906/07 have to be seen as an unequivocal breaking of taboos (cf. Hansmann 2000, 177). The representation of a female artist as nude was not only seen as something completely new in art history; but especially the fact that the painter dared to present herself the way she did and

[11] In this part of my study I am referring to the following paintings: "Self-Portrait with an Amber Necklace, Nude Torso, 1906"; "Self-Portrait, Nude, about 1906"; "Self-Portrait as a Standing Nude with Hat, 1906" and "Self-Portrait on My Sixth Wedding Anniversary, 1906"; and the similarly titled poems: "Self-Portrait as a Nude Torso with an Amber Necklace, 1906" (Bhatt 2002a, 62); "Self-Portrait as a Life-Sized Nude, 1906" (Bhatt 2002a, 68); "Self-Portrait as a Standing Nude with a Hat, 1906" (Bhatt 2002a, 69) and "Self-Portrait on My Fifth Wedding Anniversary, 25-5-06" (Bhatt 2002a, 59) which I will discuss in detail.

thus took the freedom to decide on her own body in a painting was considered revolutionary (cf. *ibid*.). As a woman and artist, Modersohn-Becker saw herself confronted not only by a long tradition of self-portraits but also by an enormous amount of female nudes; actual role models in the sense of a nude self-portrait by a female artist, however, were not to be found in art history and the iconographic tradition (cf. Hansmann 2000, 171).[12]

In her "Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag, 1906" ("Self-Portrait on My Sixth Wedding Anniversary, 1906"), which is the most interesting and most revolutionary painting, the painter depicts herself as a woman in the state of a phantom pregnancy: according to all art critics Modersohn-Becker seems to express her wish to be pregnant. However, this wish to be pregnant has to be interpreted in different ways: the painter regards herself as a container or vessel which, on the one hand, is able to carry a most valuable fruit of life, and, on the other hand, is also the producer and product of art. As Modersohn-Becker is adding specific attributes such as flowers or fruits to her nudes, the female self-nudes represent a pan-religious power and symbolise an archetypical idea of fertilisation on the part of the woman (cf. Hansmann 2000, 169). In most of her nude paintings, Modersohn-Becker dispenses with the shamefaced covering of the private parts of the female body, as she does in the life-sized nude paintings. All self-portraits as nudes are

[12] Modersohn-Becker was fascinated by Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85), (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) which she had already read during the years 1898/99 (cf. Hansmann 2000, 183). The painter's self-nudes have to be seen in relation to the following aspects: The upcoming ideas about nude culture at the turn of the century as a counter-movement to the hostility to the human body of that time, together with Modersohn-Becker's strong awareness of her own body, which lead her to physical activities in a naked condition; and Nietzsche's interpretation of the body, which can be regarded as Modersohn-Becker's unconscious theoretical concept that might have influenced her nude paintings (cf. Hansmann 2000).

representations not of the Fall (nakedness as sin) but in the sense of the initial and fertile female nature (cf. Hansmann 2000, 169).

Self-Portrait on My Fifth Wedding Anniversary, 25-5-06

I will become amber.

Daphne wanted
to become a tree.
I think
it was she who chose sweet laurel,
she who chose leaves that are always green.

But I need to go
deeper, into amber.

Already this light,
this sunny May morning
in Paris
has turned my hair amber
the dark russet kind--
more red than gold.

My eyes: brownish amber
sparkle brighter than the necklace
I wear today--large oval
beads of amber--so heavy.

It's too warm, too early,
but never mind. I'm half-naked. It's easier
to paint what I mean to paint
this naked way.

How would I look
if I were pregnant?

Like this? My nipples, still so pale
would also turn to amber.

And my blood?
I imagine it too will become stronger.
It will stop its rush-rush river sounds
it will stop pounding
my blood will become quiet
        silent--
and in the end
it will harden into amber.

My belly is so white!
So white!
How round should I make it?
How big will I get
when I'm with child?

Oh I will paint it round enough
so there will be no doubt
about my condition.

This is a self-portrait
of a pregnant woman
who secretly knows
she will become amber.

This is a self-portrait
in which I don't care
what anyone says.

Exactly five years ago today
we got married--Otto and I.
But this May I am alone
at last with my *self*.
My *self* that now only speaks
to me in Paris.

I need to live
more fully through
the body to find my soul.

Yes, the body, this woman's body
that is mine--
I need to go deeper
into amber.

Should I have a baby?
And if I did?
Then, would my body be able
to teach my soul something new? (Bhatt 2002a, 59)

In the poem "Self-Portrait on My Fifth Wedding Anniversary, 25-5-06"[13] Bhatt transforms the painter Modersohn-Becker of the self-portrait into a lyrical persona who is given a voice to speak and is, thus, displacing "the tensions and ambivalences of ekphrasis onto a figure or action in the text" (Brosch 2002, 109). The theme of motherhood has been studied by quite a number of painters.[14]

[13] This poem was first published under the title, "Paula Modersohn-Becker Speaks to Herself" (Bhatt 1995, 91) in *The Stinking Rose*, Bhatt's third collection of poetry. For a detailed analysis of this poem see also Sandten (1998), chapter 7.1.

[14] The depiction of the "mater gravida," which means the "secret life of Jesus," was a very important theme in the Christian iconography of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in East and West alike (e.g. Piero della Francesca, "Madonna del Parto," about 1460). Consciously or unconsciously nearly all profane depictions of motherhood in contemporary times refer to these earlier examples: for instance Leopold v. Kalckreuth in his drawing "Sommer" ("Summer") (charcoal, about 1890), Käthe Kollwitz in her drawing "Schwangere Frau" ("Pregnant Woman") (charcoal, 1910), Gustav Klimt in his painting "Die Hoffnung" ("Hope"), 1903, and also Paula Modersohn-

Modersohn-Becker saw motherhood not in the sense of "survival of the species" but as a great experience granted by nature only to women. Their power to produce human life and thus to maintain the circle of nature is present in Modersohn-Becker's paintings in a mystical way, full of power and warmth (cf. Murken-Altrogge 1995, 20). This aspect is also taken up in Bhatt's poem together with the introduction of the personal situation of Modersohn-Becker who was separated from her husband Otto Modersohn during that particular time in Paris and was not pregnant, by which fact the fictional aspect in the self-portrait is given greater meaning. With this painting Modersohn-Becker had caused great outrage during her time as she had presented herself most tastelessly naked till above her navel, as one of the critics formulated in his review in 1921 (cf. Scheffler in Götte 1993, 23). The criticism was written long after Modersohn-Becker's death in 1907, but the poet imagines the persona to have been aware of this criticism, thus creatively and polymedially adapting extra-textual information that is not present in the painting itself.

This particular self-presentation formulates a self-confident view of a woman regarding her own body. By relating to the colours of the painting as well as to the amber necklace, Bhatt introduces the speaker's associations with these colours and the necklace. The persona is looking for amber, a fossil tree resin, into which she has to go deeper, "But I need to go deeper, into amber" (ll. 7-8), and by which the aspect of eternity is raised. Bhatt is also introducing extra information that the observer of the painting does not have access to: that the persona is in Paris, that "It's too warm/ too early" (ll. 19-20), that she is thinking about having a baby, "How would I look/ if I were pregnant?" (ll. 23-24), "Like this?" (l. 25), thereby introducing the most important theme in the poem that the painting most obviously depicts (Modersohn-Becker's phantom pregnancy and women's ability to have children). First, Bhatt

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Becker in her "Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag" ("Self-Portrait on the 6th Wedding Anniversary"), 1906 (cf. Busch 1981, 178).

describes different parts of the persona which she connects to amber. Later on in the poem, the poet refers to inner qualities of the body by mentioning blood which is not present in the painting itself, thereby underlining the aspect of the different systems of signification. In addition to her outer body parts that, according to the poet, seem to become stronger in terms of the painter's self-confidence, inner parts of her body also improve--the blood hardens like amber. By raising the questions "How round should I make it?/ How big will I get/ when I'm with child?" (ll. 37-39) Bhatt is addressing the act of painting and the condition of a pregnancy. Thus, taking up Modersohn-Becker's elements from the painting in the poem, the act of painting that the poet describes seems to lead to the painter's self-fulfilment: the woman as artist who is fully aware of her natural abilities. With this idea, an analogy to the painting is emphasised, as it seems to represent just a snapshot of the painter's life: there is no movement, everything is still, quiet, hardened like amber. Bhatt depicts amber as the symbol of pregnancy and, hence, as the elemental force of women to bear children. With the lines "But this May I am alone/ at least with my *self*. My *self* that now only speaks/ to me in Paris" (ll. 52-55), Bhatt, again, refers to aspects of Modersohn-Becker's biography, and especially to her last longer visit to Paris, which the painter also undertook because her relationship with Otto Modersohn was in a crisis.[15]

[15] In February 1906, Modersohn-Becker went--quite unexpectedly--for more than one year to Paris. Without the knowledge of her husband she had prepared everything in case she would have stayed forever in France. This time she wanted not only to use her stay there for her artistic career but especially in order to become clear about her relationship to Modersohn. For him her decision to go to Paris was a slap in the face. His desperate letters moved her, but she let him know that she was not able to come back to him, yet, and that she was not in the mental state to have a child with him: " 'Ich kann jetzt nicht zu Dir kommen, ich kann es nicht. Ich möchte jetzt auch gar kein Kind von Dir haben ... Ich muß warten, ob es je wiederkommt oder ob etwas anderes dafür wiederkommt' (9.4.06)" (Murken-Altrogge 1995, 28 f.).

Further down, the persona says: “I need to live/ more fully through/ the body to find my soul” (ll. 56-58). These lines seem to introduce something organic. The persona discovers the connection that exists between body and soul through her own creativity. The painting of her own body as nude is the expression of the search for Modersohn-Becker’s own soul in terms of a distinctive self-display. The poem functions as a reflection and poetic visualisation of this search. The positivistic notion, “Yes, the body, this woman’s body/ that is mine--” (ll. 59-60) underlines the search for the soul through the body as part of nature which is reflected in the romantic motif of the search. With the perception of her own body, the persona is able to reflect her new and consciously chosen as well as symbolically grounded identity: her female body, which is associated with amber, and thus with eternity, light, warmth and the eternal power of women. At the end of the poem the persona raises three questions: “Should I have a baby?/ And if I did?/ Then, would my body be able/ to teach my soul something new?” With these questions the persona addresses once again women’s ability for a unity of body and soul.

In the poem “Self-Portrait on My Fifth Wedding Anniversary, 25-5-06” Bhatt focuses strongly on Modersohn-Becker’s biography, and describes the painter’s striving for independence and self-assertion in the art--and especially in the art by women. According to her adaptation of the painting, Bhatt is able to discuss the outstanding abilities of self-creativity and self-fulfilment in the image of a pregnancy. She shows that writing opens other possibilities, to creatively and productively imagine and adapt different ways of life, and to create facets of and a space for the quest for her identity. It is interesting to note that Modersohn-Becker is strongly provoking the usually privileged “male gaze,” inviting the “female gaze” like that of Bhatt to identify with what is represented in her paintings. Thus, Modersohn-Becker and Bhatt participate in a construction of femininity not as an object but as a subject of vision and discourse. Modersohn-Becker is already disrupting and disturbing the “male gaze” which Bhatt analogously

also does. She uses ekphrasis to create a female subject by way of an "emotive reception" (Brosch 2002, 119).

Conclusion

One element of art is to compose, create, hold on to and frame reality. These are characteristics that also hold true for poetry. By creatively adapting paintings and poetically visualising them, Bhatt finds herself between two worlds: the world of images and the world of language; the first is considered to be "evident," the latter to be "abstract." In her poems Bhatt combines these two elements and, hence, creates a new piece of art that distinctively sticks to its own genre: poetry. Particularly her poems as reflections and transformations, as well as intermedial referencings of Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits, are examples of Bhatt's rich and sensitive power of imagination. In the poems discussed in this study, the idea of the "language" of the painting that Bhatt also finds in Modersohn-Becker's letters, journals and diaries, is strongly connected to the organic form of her poems; thus producing, on the one hand, a semi-biographical and hence intertextual sub-text to the paintings, and, on the other hand, a particular vividness and almost a narration (together with her own associations and interpretations) of what the observer sees in the paintings. Modersohn-Becker's conscious representation of her own face and body especially in her self-portraits has been represented linguistically and analogously anew by Bhatt, by often using a common iconographic vocabulary (cf. Klarer 2001, 14) which is grounded in the art history that was available to both painter and poet. Bhatt's "ekphrastic redescription" (Brosch 2002, 120) and "emotive reception" (*ibid.*, 119) serves as a tool for readdressing the independence of a female artist. Thus, she is able to create a space for the quest for her own cultural and artistic identity. Both Modersohn-Becker and Bhatt create their own identities, Modersohn-Becker by presenting her own image and body in a great number and variety of self-portraits and nude paintings, Bhatt by creating different voices, settings and

atmospheres analogously to the paintings.[16] Thus, the reception of Bhatt's poems leads the reader to temporarily adopt an alternative viewing identity, too (cf. Brosch 2002, 122), and to not give preference to one medium but to consider both, as Bhatt is emphasising the dualistic structure of visual poetics and intermedial referencing. The poet is thus assuming that painting and text are related to each other complementarily, as they do not serve the same purpose (cf. Holländer 1995, 134).[17]

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[16] One very striking exception to this is the poem "Self-Portrait with a Lemon, 1906/07" (Bhatt 2002a 84), in which Bhatt associates and evokes an Indian context.

[17] In addition to Bhatt's adaptations of Modersohn-Becker's paintings there exists the musical piece "Méta P.M.B." after poems by Sujata Bhatt (a piece for speaker, female voices, flute, guitar, percussions and tape), composed by Tatjana Prelevic (Hanover) which was first presented on 22 June 2003 in Bremen. The music would be interesting to discuss in relation to Bhatt's poems and Modersohn-Becker's paintings as further "intermediality."

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MEENA ALEXANDER

COMPOSING POETRY

(Parts of this essay were first presented at the University of Hyderabad, in a series of two talks given under the auspices of the English Department and the Centre for the Study of the Indian Diaspora, October 15, 2002. A later version of these thoughts under the title "Composing Poetry" became the Manuel Memorial Lecture, English Institute, Kerala University, November 21, 2002.)

Hyderabad is set at the navel of the subcontinent. When I was young I took a slow train from Hyderabad to Cuttack to visit the poet Jayanta Mahapatra whose work was such an inspiration to me. Jayanta pointed out the shapes of earth and sky and tree, taught me how landscape can slip into the lines of a poem, shape the soul. Those were the years I read Kamala Das' poetry with great care, moved by the way in which she was able to bare the quick of her desire. With great excitement I read *Old Playhouse* again and again, also the poems in which she spoke of a Kerala house and a lost grandmother. Somehow I feel that all this has entered into my own work, perhaps in hidden ways.

Those were the days of the Emergency and my office in Hyderabad was just across the wall from a police station. I could hear the sounds and cries of prisoners who were being beaten. All I saw of their bodies were shadows on the white wall. I wrote poems, for that was the most I felt I could do, and the least. The poet must do her work, write the truth of the heart, the difficult truth of the world, one and the other melded in the crucible of form. One of my poems was accepted by the journal "Democratic World" but when the journal came out there was a blank space the size and shape of my poem. It had been censored. That poem later appeared in my book *I Root my Name*.

I lived and worked near Nampally Road and the riots in the street, the rape of a woman in a police station all became part of the world in which I lived, the sounds and sights and smells etched deeply into my consciousness, and borne in memory across the black waters. The multitudinous acts that thread our lives together become history--the density of the secret interior life, embedded in the world that composes it.

The shape of the world keeps shifting and it is into and out of the world that the poem works its sense. Time becomes us and the poems that we compose are part of the fragile compact we make with history, part of the precarious balance of our interior lives. To compose a poem in this manner of reckoning makes the act an intrinsic portion of a phenomenology of the real.

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For those who write poetry there is nothing like the particular species of energy the activity brings, a very special pleasure--sound fastening sense till the rhythms of feeling rise up. Feelings and a whole realm of perception that could not exist without the poem to bring it into being. For poetry is knowledge, a first knowledge that allows us to crystallise the chaotic press of language, illuminate if only for a moment the dark horizons of our experience.

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I started writing poetry young. I was eleven or twelve. The reason why I keep writing is still the same. For me it is the music of survival. There is an inner voice that speaks to me, makes music out of words, makes notes out of syllables, makes rhythms out of what words cannot reach. I wrote the poem “Muse” as part of a cycle called **Notebook**, reflections on the act of composition. A year ago I wrote:

"In this cycle of poems I have tried to catch something of the internal architecture of sense, the objects of our metamorphic life--a trajectory from the pitch of memory to the possibility of a shared existence. Yet I am haunted by what my words can barely mark, what for want of a better term I invoke as muse, that invisible space where meaning is made and unmade."

Now it is quite true that I meant this note when I wrote it, but it is also true that the muse I write of comes to me not as nothingness, but as an Indian school girl, dressed in a dark blue pinafore with shoes and socks. A girl child who must learn. There is something utterly simple about her appearance. She is just there. She has nowhere else to go. She carries her pencil box and book in hand. She learns words that turn for her into a dictionary of desire, single words, girl, book, tree. She learns them both in Malayalam and in English.

When I said she has nowhere to go, I meant it for it is only through the utter stillness, of being thrown into the world, of being there that she is able to fulfill her task.

I think the lines she whispers in my ear, "Write in the light/ Of all the languages/ you know the earth contains," came to me by themselves, came first and stayed with me as a haunting melody. And the rest of the poem came and wrapped itself around. Then too the child who speaks these lines to me is also my sole self, cast back in the mirror of time. She comes as a schoolgirl who travelled long and hard, across continents. She has swum through many languages, several of which she could scarcely understand. Yet the light of the sentences she reads marks her for life. Even now, as I write, it is as if I swim in an English into which many other streams pour their waters.

I have chosen to speak of this poem for in many ways, though I do not begin my book *Illiterate Heart* with "Muse," I think of it as the first poem of this volume.

I should add that there are two earlier poems I have called "Muse." One is simply "Muse." Its companion poem is "Muse II." They appear side by side in the volume of poems *River and Bridge*. In each poem the female figure is unhoused, quite marginal to the world she comes from. In the first poem she is glimpsed as a grown woman, "a form of fire." She kneels by a river and on a bald stone, cuts glyphs. I realise now that there is something of her presence in the poem I have recently completed called "Tribe, Tribute, Tribulation." In its last section the speaker finds herself by a rock on an island city where twin towers burnt. By being there, she is making a choice. In an earlier draft of the poem I had written "I take my stand ..." but it seemed too sharp fisted. So this is how the stanza goes in the final version of the poem. Surely I think, in this poem written after the burning of the twin towers, there is an echo of that first "Muse," a resonance of the bald rock with writing on it. But now instead of a ghostly figure spoken of in the third person, the speaker is in a real place she chooses to call home. Beloved voices reach her, voices of poets who have shown her the way.

> I search out a bald rock between two trees,
> ash trees on the river bank
> on an island city where towers blazed.
> This is my short
> incantation,
> my long way home.
> William, Rabindranath, Czeslaw
> Mirabai, Anna, Adrienne
> reach out your hands to me.
> Now stones have tongues.
> Sibilant scattering,
> stormy grace!

But this grace had a rocky beginning, and I speak of the genealogy of feelings. Lines echo other lines, the honeycomb of consciousness filters desire for as long as time lets us be.

To turn back to an earlier poem, in the 1996 "Muse II" the figure is furious, she has nowhere to be. Her sari spills off her flesh. Her flesh is burnt with words. She is hurt. Her language is in ruins.

Somehow I had to wait many years to make another poem called "Muse," to make reparation. Another poem, a third poem if you will, that allows the traumatised figure of the woman to metamorphose into a child, a child who shines in an interior space where meaning is made. The words the child gives me are first words, the beginning of things, not their ending.

***

There are many other things I could share with you about the composition of poetry. How as a girl child I wrote in secret, in the bathroom so no one would see. How I hid my scribblings in the folds of my knickers. How I felt a sense of shame at what was so intimate to me, felt that what I had made could never measure up to what the world believed in. So in some sort of fear and panic I set up the world and its measurements as forever inimical to what I might write. At the very same time I held onto the belief that the things I made were fierce and pure and needed to exist. For I thought and still think of my poems as made objects.

It seems to me as I think back that right at the start I did not feel the need to share what I had written with others. It was enough that I had written the poem, that the poem existed. The need to share, to publish, to have others acknowledge what I had written, that desire, that longing came later. And perhaps that longing is also part of needing to belong, needing to be in place.

It seems to me that the composition of poetry cannot be cleft from the complex density of place, and the sights and sounds and smells the sensorium of the body makes us heir to. For place bears the mark of history. It is the wound that memory returns us to so that in poetry we can commemorate, we can remember. This

elegiac function of poetry, it seems to me, is of great importance, part of its ability to store the voices that otherwise would vanish. No, I am not confusing the poem with what we think of as oral history; rather that within the poem the shadows cleft from their bodies, the rack, the wound, the violation all still live.

We need to remember so that history is not erased as the tomb of Wali Gujerati was erased one fine morning in the city of Ahmedabad. Months later, at the crack of dawn when the birds were just stirring in the great banyan trees, I drove there with a friend in search of the dargah. “It’s somewhere by the police station” she said as she drove very slowly, but where it might have stood, this tomb of a poet, was mere surmise on our part, for the asphalt rolled, road over polished road in cunning smoothness, covering up what might have remained as a monument to a poet, a necessary portion of our history. In the throes of communal violence the monument was mutilated, razed and then, so that no one would remember, a brand new road was laid over it.

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Poetry and place. If poetry is the music of survival, place is the instrument on which that music is played, the gourd, the strings, the fret. A few years ago the poet Allen Ginsberg passed away. The week that he was dying it so happened that I was reading his “Indian Journals” with great care. I was struck by the clarity of place in his writing even as the Rajasthan of his imagination splintered into brilliant surreal fragments. Each day I took the book with me on the subway, and getting off at Columbus Circle I pulled it out of my bag as I walked the few blocks uptown, by Central Park. Once or twice on my way to catch the cross town bus at 65th, I sat on my favourite rock in the park, close to the street. I spread out my things, book bag, pen, paper, water bottle, and I read his journals again. I was near the park when I got news of Ginsberg's death.

I shut my eyes. I saw him in Rajasthan. He was walking with Mirabai in the heat. It was Rajasthan and it was not, it was Central Park and it was not. I saw Mira approach him by the black rock. Together they walked towards the lake.

I like my favourite people to meet, even if they are separated by thousands of miles and several centuries. So it was with these two poets. In "Indian April," an elegy for Ginsberg, I try to make a palimpsest of place, layer after layer of sense turned to a tablet for memory, multiple locations floating each over the other as transparencies might. Places real and imagined drawn together, borders of time edged together, life lived, and the dream of life lived, fused in the crystal of the poem.

In the end, one might call it simply a matter of self-fashioning. In composing a poem, I am composing myself.

Poems Cited:

Two poems from Meena Alexander, *River and Bridge* (Toronto South Asian Review Press, 1996)

Muse

She walks towards me, whispering
Dried petals in her hair
A form of fire

But her skin,
like finest Dacca cotton
drawn through a gold ring, spills

Over bristling water.
Something has hurt her.
Can a circlet of syllables

Summon her from the Vaigai river?
She kneels by a bald stone
cuts glyphs on its side, waves to me.

Our language is in ruins--
vowels impossibly sharp,
broken consonants of bone.

She has no home.

Why gossip about her
Shamelessly--you household gods,
raucous, impenitent ?

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Muse II

“Our language is in ruins.
No--not Something,” she whispers to me
“not About or Here.
It’s a doing thing that spurns me

“The prams are filled with ash.
These are my syllables.
Can you understand that?”

Furious now, red sari whirling,
she’s naked by the Vaigai river.
But no one cares, neither washermen
nor moist buffaloes.

"Creatures of Here and There
we keep scurrying
Madurai, Manhattan, who cares?"

When she turns it is etched on her:
words, sentences, maps,
her skin burns bright:

Sheer aftermath.

Two Poems from Meena Alexander, *Illiterate Heart* (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2002)

Muse

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.

****

Indian April

I.

Allen Ginsberg on a spring day you stopped
naked in a doorway in Rajasthan.

You were preparing to wash, someone took a snapshot:
I see your left hand bent back
cigarette in your mouth,

metal basin set at your ankles
heat simmering at the edges of your skin
in Indian air, in water.

Rinsed clean you squatted at the threshold again,
struck a bhajan on a tin can.

Watched Mira approach, her hair a black mass
so taut it could knock over a lamppost,
skin on her fists raw from rubbing chipped honeypots.

In the middle distance
like a common bridegroom,
Lord Krishna rides a painted swing.

You ponder this, not sure
if an overdose of poetry
might crash a princess.

Later in the alley way you note
a zither leapt from a blind baul's fist.

William Blake's death mask,
plaster cast with the insignia of miracles.

In a burning ghat the sensorium's ruin:
a man's spine and head poked with a stick

so bone might crisp into ash, vapors spilled
into terrible light where the Ganga pours.

II.

I was born at the Ganga's edge.
My mother wrapped me in a bleached sari,
laid me in stiff reeds, in hard water.

I tried to keep my nostrils above mud,
learnt how to use my limbs, how to float.

This earth is filled with black water,
small islands with bristling vines afford us some hold.

Tired out with your journals you watch
Mira crouch by the rough stones of the alley.
Her feet are bare, they hurt her.

So much flight for a poet, so much persistence.
Allen Ginsberg, where are you now?

Engine of flesh, hot sunflower of Mathura,
Teach us to glide into life,

teach us when not to flee,
when to rejoice, when to weep,

teach us to clear our throats.

III.

Kaddish, Kaddish I hear you cry
in the fields of Central Park.

He brought me into his tent
and his banner over me was love.

I learn from you that the tabernacles of grace
are lodged in the prickly pear,

the tents of heaven torn by sharp vines,
running blackberry,
iron from the hummingbird's claw.

He brought me into his tent
and his banner over me was love.

Yet now he turns his face from me.
Krishna you are my noose, I your knife.

And who shall draw apart
from the misericord of attachment?

IV.

Holy the cord of death, the sensual palaces
of our feasting and excrement.

Holy, the waters of the Ganga, Hudson, Nile,
Pamba, Mississippi, Mahanadi.

Holy the lake in Central Park, bruised eye of earth,
mirror of heaven,

where you leap beard first
this April morning, resolute, impenitent,

not minding the pointed reeds, spent syringes,
pale, uncoiled condoms.

You understood the kingdom of the quotidian,
groundhogs in heat, the arrhythmia of desire.

I see you young again
teeth stained with betel and bhang,

nostrils tense with the smoke of Manhattan,
ankles taut in a yogic asana, prickly with desire.

You who sang America are flush now with death,
your poems--bits of your spine and skull--

ablaze in black water drawing you on.
Allen Ginsberg your flesh is indigo,

the color of Krishna's face, Mira's bitter grace.
Into hard water you leap, drawing me on.

I hear you call: *Govinda, aaou, aaou!*

Poem from Meena Alexander, *Raw Silk* (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2004)

Tribe, Tribute, Tribulation[1]

"It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves"

(Wallace Stevens)

1

Twilight, I stroll through stubble fields
clouds lift, the hope of a mountain.
What was distinct turns to mist,

what was fitful burns the heart.
When I dream of my tribe gathering
by the red soil of the Pamba River

I feel my writing hand split at the wrist.
Dark tribute or punishment, who can tell?
You kiss the stump and where the wrist

bone was, you set the stalk of a lotus.
There is a blue lotus in my grandmother's garden,
its petals whirl in moonlight like this mountain.

[1]In *Raw Silk* (pp.41-44), the full poem as quoted here is entitled "Blue Lotus." 'Tribe, Tribute, Tribulation' is the final section of this poem.

2.

An altar, a stone cracked down the spine,
a shelter, a hovel of straw and sperm
out of which rise a man and a woman

and one is a ghost though I cannot tell which
for the sharpness between them scents
even the orchids, a sharing of things

invisible till the mountain fetches
itself out of water out of ice out of sand
and they each take tiny morsels

of the mountain and set it on banana leaves
and as if it were a feast of saints
they cry out to their dead and are satisfied.

3.

I have climbed the mountain and cleared
away the sand and ice using first my bare hands
then a small knife. Underneath I found

the sign of the four-cornered world, *gammadion*,
which stands for migration, for the scattering
of the people. The desolation of the mothers

singing in their rock houses becomes us,
so too the child at the cliff's edge
catching a cloud in her palm

as stocks of blood are gathered on the plain,
spread into sheaves, a circlet for bones
and flint burns and the mountain resurrects itself.

4.

Tribe, tribute, tribulation:
to purify the tongue and its broken skin
I am learning the language again,

a new speech for a new tribe.
How did I reach this nervous empire,
sharp store of sense?

Donner un sens plus pur etc. etc.
does not work so well anymore,
nor *calme bloc ici-bas.*

Blunt metals blossom.
Children barter small arms.
Ground rules are abolished.

The earth has no capitals.
In my distinct notebooks
I write things of this sort.

Monsoon clouds from the shore
near my grandmother's house
float through my lines.

I take comfort in sentences.
“Who cares what you write?”
someone cries.

A hoarse voice, I cannot see the face.
He smells like a household ghost.
There can be no concord between us.

I search out a bald rock between two trees,
ash trees on the riverbank
on an island city where towers blazed.

This is my short
incantation,
my long way home.

William, Rabindranath, Czeslaw,
Mirabai, Anna, Adrienne
reach out your hands to me.

Now stones have tongues.
Sibilant scattering,
stormy grace!

_____

USHA KISHORE

DISTRACTED GEOGRAPHIES AND PRAYER FLAGS

Sudeep Sen. *Distracted Geographies: An Archipelago of Intent.* San Antonio, USA: Wings Press, 2003/Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree, 2004/New Delhi: Indialog, 2004. Rs.195.

Sudeep Sen. *Prayer Flag: Poetry & Photography*. (Includes CD and Book). San Antonio, USA: Wings Press, 2003/Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree, 2003/Distributed in India by Mapin Publishers.

Sudeep Sen has always been hailed as a cosmopolitan voice. His poetry has been regarded as *avant garde*, intellectual and technically sound. There is a tendency to experiment with form and a postcolonial *penchant* towards alternative interpretations of language and culture. There is also an inclination towards interweaving eastern and western elements in his poetry, creating a kaleidoscope of images that can be defined as "dreamlike." One also wonders whether there is a touch of magic realism!

Distracted Geographies: An Archipelago of Intent can be considered a poem with novelistic proportions, a novella. It can also be interpreted as a minimalistic narrative poem. Sen calls it his "Scottish book," as it is based in Scotland. Various themes such as love, loss, illness and passion are juxtaposed in this long narrative, comprising twelve sections. The book runs more like a movie, with flashbacks, scene shifts and cuts. The form and structure of the piece seems to be inspired by the architecture of the human body and the shape of Pablo Neruda's Odes (that reflect the shape of the Chilean map). There is a strong numerological element in the book. The twelve sections correspond to the twelve bones of the human ribcage and the twelve months of the year. The 206 pages of the book match the number of bones in the human body. The poem is

written in couplets that "echo the two-step footprints, a pathway that is mapped on an atlas." [1]

The poem is born in the basement of a fifteenth century Scottish mansion called "Gartincaber," in Doune, Scotland. The book eventually took six years to complete and is in the form of a journey through private and public spaces, loves, losses and desires. As mentioned earlier, the book comprises twelve sections that include the illustration of the human vertebral column. Many sections include prefatory materials in the form of quotes from Dom Moraes, Rainer Maria Rilke, A.K.Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Pablo Neruda and others. The first verse defines the structure of the poem:

My thin country,
  my own spine.

Locked dactyls,
  unconnected,

stretched,
  deeply fused.

There is an intertwining of imagination and reality in "Imagination I," where imagination is wrought out of memory, pain and distractions of humour:

Only
  imagination,

memory,
  pain,

and distractions
  of humour,

keep me
  alive.

[1] *Distracted Geographies*, front jacket flap

This imagination again arises in the II part as the poet's only possession:

All I'm left
with

is my fatal
imagination,

the conjured
dreams, and

a summer
of metaphors.

Intellectualism and technical skill are clearly the strengths of Sen as a poet. One such instance is reflected in the binary opposites that take the form of an oxymoron: "the dead's living heartbeats" in "Graveyard":

tin-scratch
breath of

my frayed
lungs,

and the
dead's

living
heart-beats.

This adds to the highly reflective and introspective character of Sen's verse, that is clearly fashioned out of long study of and reflection on literature and other arts. Another illustration of introspection and reflection can be glimpsed in the eighth section, "Indoors/Outdoors." Here, Sen draws inspiration from Pablo Picasso's statement, "Every human being is a colony," and writes

I too, am
a colony,

and
the coloniser.

The fusion of Western and Eastern elements is displayed in "Church Notes," where the poet hears the *chandipaat* (the prayer to the Goddess Durga) in the cello notes of the church:

fingers stroking
the cello,

the *chandipaat*
baritone

invoking the myth
of Durga's

incantatory
verse-prayers

This fusion of diverse Hindu and Christian religious elements is an attempt at unity in diversity and at bridging the serenity of the church with the volatile energy of Goddess Durga. Sen hears the power of the *chandipaat* in the tranquillity of the church notes. From a religious point of view, this can be interpreted as the power and glory of divinity.

In "Archipelago," Sen uses illness to map his exile and displacement in a post-colonial sense:

I am
an exile

everywhere--
within

my own self,
in my own

country,
in my

adopted
homeland.

I am
an outcast

This use of illness seems to be rather unusual as it is combined with the sense of exile and displacement. The state of body and mind are thus juxtaposed to create highly thought provoking lines.

The poet gives an intellectual twist to his erotic themes. In "Fifteen moments on Erotica" (Section VII), we are taken on an erotic journey into the in-between world of imagination and reality:

a desire,
permanent

like the ocean
bed,

its pulses
uncontrollably

rocking--
the waters,

the bodies,
the dreams.

This intellectualism is one feature that runs right across *Distracted Geographies.*

Prayer Flag: Poetry and Photography is a book where poetry is illumined with photographs. Sen's visual imagery seems to enhance the colour of the photos, both realistic and abstract. There are Bengali translations of the poems by Aminur Rahman and photographs are by Sen himself and Deb Mukharji. The CD, which is part of the book, has readings from the book and other works of the poet. The Bengali translations of Sen's verses are read by his translator, Aminur Rahman. The CD opens with a Sanskrit invocation to *Gayatri Devi*. Following this, Sen reads his "Prayer Flags" to the backdrop of the Tibetan Buddhist Prayer, *Om Mani Padme Hum*. The CD also has a range of musical instruments, both Western and Eastern, in the background enhancing Sen's incantatory voice. The performance angle of Sen's poetry is brought out in the CD and one is surprised at how well this works at a phonological level, given the highly technical angle of the poems.

The first poem gives a vision of prayer flags on Manas Sarovar, Mt.Kailash:

> Frayed, flapping in the high winds--
> prayer flags gently unravel--
> homage to the day's first light.

Here the *Atma* seeks the *Parmatma*. This Hindu dichotomy is presented in a contemporary mode:

> No one is here, except for a woman
> staring far away,
> wrapped in her sanctity
>
> of continuous linen--her own sari
> like a prayer flag--
> though devoid of any colour.

The white sari seems to be a reflection of the snows of the mighty Himalayas and one wonders if the woman were Mother Nature herself. The Eco-feministic element, so popularly used in Indian

verse, attains fulfilment here. Again the natural and supernatural components are highlighted in "Glued," which can also be read as a love poem:

GLUED

together, we lie
  incurably conjoined.
Just as the sky
  and the earth are joined

by an indeterminate
  horizon, so are we, made
one by an indeterminate
  faith.

A political angle manifests itself in the poem "During the Street Play," dedicated to Safdar Hashmi, the political playwright, killed while performing on the streets of New Delhi in 1989:

  In the cobbled quadrangle
rises a primitive voice:

  clear, and elemental.
His figure, draped in raw linen,

  carrying a staff.

Very soon,

…the police arrive,
dismantle the props, oust

  the actors, as they exit
protesting in words.

The political protest by street plays, very common in various parts of India, is drawn upon, and the high-handedness of the Indian police is alluded to. The poet's concerns are also global, as reflected in "Remembering Hiroshima Tonight." Sen's Hiroshima is a shrine full of origami garlands. The past is remembered in

> Suddenly the clouds detonate, and all the petals,
> translucent, wet, coalesce: a blossoming mushroom…

The poet consoles himself and his readers in the next few lines:

> But that's only a dream.
>
> Tonight, real flowers are blooming
> in the ancient Japanese moonlight.

Another poem that I quite liked with its dry sense of humour is Sen's definition of the "Conceit":

> Whether it is
> metaphysical conceit
> or
> human conceit,
> the oddity of image
> remains.

Sen's poetry is certainly different in every respect--in content, structure, style, intention and every other way. Both books have been an English teacher's delight. Sen's technical skill is highly praiseworthy indeed. His metaphorical techniques of using representational, sensual imagery--visual, auditory and tactile--the structural features of listing and repetition and his rhetorical techniques of onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance all blend into the creation of a wonderful atmosphere in all his poems. This technical skill and Sen's experiments with language take me into English classes and compel me to define his verse as "pure poetry."

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA

A POET'S ROUTE MAP: OVER TWO DECADES OF SALEEM PEERADINA'S POETRY

Saleem Peeradina. *First Offence*. Bombay: Newground, 1980. pp.69. Rs.200.

Saleem Peeradina. *Group Portrait*. New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1998. pp.61. Rs.70.

Saleem Peeradina. *Meditations on Desire*. Roseville, MI, USA: Ridgeway Press, 2003. pp.64. $8.00.

Reviewing poetry is always an exciting challenge. As everyone knows, both within the academic ghettoes and the wider, less well defined counters of the world of the casual reader, poetry has that mercurial quality of being the proverbial bird in the bush--tantalizing, elusive, frustrating and fascinating. Hence though there are indeed readers of poetry, publishers lament that there are no buyers of poetry. A Kolkata poet had once queried, in a burst of indignation, that if no one reads poetry, including the then Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, is poetry then read by demons? That explosive interrogation, by the Bangla poet Subodh Sarkar, is contrary to the mode of poetry writing that Saleem Peeradina pursues.

I am grateful to the Editors of *Kavya Bharati* for sending me all three books of poems by Peeradina. It is very rarely that a reviewer gets the opportunity of reviewing all the books published by a poet till date, and therefore I feel this is indeed a great privilege, enabling me to track the poet's career through a period of over two decades, that is, from 1980 to 2003, precisely. The arithmetical total would be about 100 poems, some very long as "Beginnings" in five sections (*Group Portrait*), and some just six half-lines, as in *Meditations on Desire*, written in an aphoristic style, sensitive and well wrought.

Peeradina's first book of poems, *First Offence*, was published in Bombay, and the title of the very first poem is "Bandra," a popular area of Bombay city. The poem expresses the typical attraction-repulsion syndrome of a young poet for a city, addressing various locations--it is feminized, domesticated and also engages an inexplicable mystique by re-creating the rhythmic pace of the Lord's prayer and Hail Mary, in unmistakable ironic overtones reminiscent of the school of Eliot:

> O Mother
> we are in fever
> lie by our side, soothe us
> mother…

The thirty-one poems in this book are divided into three sections--***Bandra***, ***Still Life*** and ***Another Life***. In ***Still Life*** the poem titled "Tree**"** asks a tongue-in-cheek question:

> It is like every other tree
> Do I need to know its family history?

Peeradina uses the English language with competence and sensibility and there can be no doubt that English is his first language, though we also know that he has translated Hindi and Gujrati poetry into English.

In ***Another Life***, the poem "At Large" merges the concrete and the abstract in a philosophic rumination, anticipating the later poetry of Peeradina:

> We burn
> as we should, daring
> the blight of minutes. Certain only
> Of the oncoming heat of revelations.

A subtle sense of humour suffuses his poetry even in such a title as "To a Wife Not My Own,**"** and many poems explore

relationships with a sense of commitment and sincerity such as in "Marriage Manual" and "Wife's Touch."

In Peeradina's second book of poems, *Group Portrait*, we are ushered into the overpowering sense of family and inter-personal relationships that characterize Indian English poetry by both men and women. As a matter of fact, preoccupations with the macro world of wars and violence are sifted through the homely strainer of personal concerns, that are noticed as complementary to the public world. So expectedly the three sections of *Group Portrait* are titled ***Family Mirror***, ***Transitions*** and ***Beginnings***, and the book is dedicated "to the girls in the family." So the poem "Homecoming" scripts the affectionate bonding that makes returning to the haven of home so very enchanting:

> Two loving devils are bad enough
> and one's wife too many at times. So fierce
> is the rivalry in an all-women household,
> the lady is often the eldest child
> and the little ones bristling with womanly designs.

Then follows a sense of complacent resignation that the mellow years inevitably lead one to speculate on, so the poem aptly titled "Speculations" concludes on this note of emotional support and optimism:

> He is now ready to count the days, making
> No conditions. The wife, he knows,
> Will stand like a rock against the blow.
> The kids will grow, instructed by life.

Peeradina's sense of humour, a special quality of his poetry, bursts forth in the following lines:

Tall, handsome prince wishes to rescue
lovely, helpless princess from mother's clutches

To settle in his own ….

Heavy smoking, drinking, egocentric, manic depressive,
asthmatic wreck needs young beauty to drag him around
bringing joy into his life and nobility in hers.
("Counter Proposals")

The wry macho sexist humour of the above lines are self-explanatory.

However, it is Peeradina's third book of poems *Meditations on Desire* that seem to indicate that the poet has reached a turning point in his poetic career. The prefatory Note too indicates quite clearly that the poems of 2003 have been written in an entirely different mode:

> *Meditations on Desire* takes its cue from the tradition of classical and medieval devotional poetry in India, blends enroute with Urdu romantic lyrics, and finds a kindred voice in Roland Barthes.

Most of the pieces in this "cycle of poems" are written in short lines having one, three or four words in most lines, and the total length of each of these poems is rarely more than six to nine lines. The poet quite categorically dismisses negotiation between the abstract and the concrete, as he states:

Only in the abstract
can words attain
such luminosity.
On contact
with the flesh
they burn up.

The ascetic energy and intensity of the lines is very powerful and reminds the reader of the poetic style of Kahlil Gibran and Rumi. In *Meditations on Desire* Peeradina seems to have determinedly liberated himself from the quotidian, mundane and fascinating micropolitics of daily living, in a focused desire to penetrate the axis of reality. There are few historiographic references in his poems. On the other hand, though the poems are not religious or devotional or related to organized religious practices, God emerges as a recurrent point of reference is all of this poetry. But the God that Peeradina celebrates as his first child is born--"god alone could have sowed this urge/in the womb's/Ancient slush"--becomes in *Meditations* a mystical presence, in a pervasive sense of silent absence:

> The point about God
> is not the existence
> or attainment
> of an absolute.
> It is the longing,
> the longing.

Desire, longing, anguish, sorrow, yearning for the out-of-reach, unattainable and mystical aura are the cherished human responses that validate humaneness, beyond the cold-blooded world of instant gratification, and the much hyped feel-good factor. Peeradina's philosophic ruminations and his meditative discourse in very chiseled, compact and nuanced phrases are like feather brush strokes on a stringed instrument. The strings come to life as they are subtly touched and they resonate with a melodic sensitivity, like a bouquet of intangible tunes, flowering in the ether. However, the agony and angst linger as does the sense of dissatisfaction: the poet sometimes is like a thirsty traveler in search of a pool of water in a sandy desert. The mood swings of ironic detachment and hopelessness disturb the philosophic calmness of many lines, as desire disturbs meditation and is simultaneously at the core of all human yearning:

Desire
without hunger or appetite
craves a satisfaction
beyond satisfaction. Its end
is to outlive
its yearning.

Peeradina has brilliantly merged experiment and experience in the aphoristic style in which he writes this recently published book of poems. It is more than obvious that Saleem Peeradina has definitely reached a turning point in his poetic journey of self-discovery and discovery of the world, which spans the more than two decades of his poetic career.

LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM

THE INNER AND THE OUTER

Acharya, Shanta. *Looking In, Looking Out*. West Kirby, UK: Headland Publications, 2005.

Shanta Acharya, born in Orissa, has lived in England for about twenty-five years. This is her third collection of poetry, the first two being *Not This, Not That* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 1994) and *Numbering Our Days' Illusions* (Ware, Herts, UK: Rockingham Press, 1995).

The fifty poems in this volume were written over ten years, and several of them have been published before, in a variety of journals, internationally. Yet the anthology has a wholeness about it: it is put together with great care. The poems work individually, but also relate to each other, commenting on the themes of the collection as a whole.

The title of the book is both playful and serious. There is recurrent imagery throughout, underlining and enabling the themes of 'looking in, looking out': mirrors which reflect or distort, spectacles which can 'correct' vision, different kinds of light, windows. As one who was brought up on Tamil poetry, the title also reminds me of the two great categories fundamental to classical Sangam Tamil poetry: 'akam' and 'puram'; the inner and the outer world of experience.

Shanta Acharya has arranged the poems most artfully to reflect the themes of the inner and outer worlds. The first nine poems are inspired by different works of art--modern and ancient. European, African, Mexican, Indian. This series opens with "At the Edge of the World," inspired by Anish Kapoor's '*creations'* at the Hayward Art Gallery in 1998. Acharya is fascinated by the way the distorting double-mirrors point up the "open-endedness of things," changing, mobile, constantly creating things anew. The series ends with

"Yashoda's Vision" which does not refer to a single work of art, but rather to the beautiful myth of Yashoda looking into the open mouth of the baby Krishna who has been eating dirt, and finding there the whole universe. Looking at the universe objectively, Yashoda also finds herself: looking out, looking in,

> For a moment
> Blessed with insights, the essence of creation.

At the centre of the book, there is a small cluster of poems about being a poet and about the relationship between a poet and her poems which tend to take off into their own individual lives. Acharya's is not a romanticized notion of poetry, there is no mystification here; rather, a wry and honest observation. The last dozen or so poems are among the most personally felt in the collection; some of them about love and loss. "Sleeping Beauty" tells with poignancy of the late awakening of love and the simultaneous realization that "All human relationships have a life-span." "Taking Stock" accepts wisely that

> I cannot say this is exactly the way
> I wanted it to be. But life has a way of turning out
> as it does.
>
> We are not measured by how our lives evolve for us
> Only the manner of our moulding it as it is briefly
> lent to us.

Intercepted between these three sections, Acharya has arranged two sets of miscellaneous poems. There are poems built on a conceit or a series of images ("Snowdrop," "Azaleas in Spring"); there are poems which are fables ("The Fly and the Bee"); there is the weird and wonderful "Mrs Kafka's Dilemma," and a number of poems which are generalized reflections, such as "Some People," "Survival," "What is there to Know."

It is particularly through these poems of reflection and objective observation that Shanta Acharya develops her special 'voice,' ironical, witty, wry. At its worst it can be brittle; there may be the odd awkward line. But at its best it can be stylish, and also wise and compassionate. (A fellow poet, Mimi Khalvati has commented on Acharya's "intelligence, sagacity and wicked sense of humour.") Often the shape of the poem in itself allows the voice to emerge through the choice of wry rhymes and wide-ranging allusions. For example, from "Bharata Natyam":

> …eternal search of the lover
> for the beloved concealed in *maya*
> smoke gets in your eyes when there is fire in your heart

Often a final couplet will stand away from the main poem, sometimes with deliberate, down-playing bathos, sometimes with a sharper sting:

> We are not measured by how our lives evolve for us
> Only the manner of our moulding it as it is briefly
> lent to us
> ("Taking Stock")

> Let me be, dear friend, on my own but do keep in touch
> Thank you for asking; very sorry I cannot come.
> ("A Poet's RSVP")

The poem, "Perhaps," dedicated to Nissim Ezekiel, strikes me as significant:

> Perhaps we were never meant
> to be like other creatures
> more at home in their environment;
> driven by instinct, their natures…

Acharya shares with Ezekiel both that tone of pained honesty, and at her best, the elegance of his lines; but there is greater sensuousness and passion in her work ("The Eating of Fruits," "Azaleas in Spring").

It is also notable that Shanta Acharya does not seek after obviously 'Indian' topics; there is, rather, an easy taking for granted of her Indian cultural heritage, as her occasional allusions reveal. For example, Ganesha is but one of several "gifts of fetishes from around the world" in her poem, "My Good Luck Home":

> Even Ganesha travels with me in my handbag
> To help me overcome obstacles in my adopted home.

But neither is there, in these poems, the anguish about identity (the 'identity whinge' as someone put it) that so much marked the poetry and fiction of the Indian diaspora in England and the US not so long ago. This is the work of a cosmopolitan woman, very certain and at ease in an international scene, comfortable about living alone in a big and busy metropolis. Perhaps with writers such as Shanta Acharya and others, the poetry of the Indian diaspora has come of age.

KEYA MAJUMDAR

NATION AS IMAGE, IMAGINATION OF THE ALIEN: A GLIMPSE INTO AGHA SHAHID ALI'S BOOK, "THE COUNTRY WITHOUT A POSTOFFICE"

Imagination on the part of the Diaspora is Agha Shahid Ali's greatest strength, whether it is Andersonian imaginative community, or the poet artiste's double perception of the country he is in, and country he is from, that creates a vision of the echoing richness of poetic mechanism. The poems of Agha Shahid Ali included in The Country without a Post Office (Poems 1991-1995) are the record of the fact that Diaspora's point of departure can never be fixed positively in time and place, as he is on continuous flight to and from the home / host countries to make the connection/ communication via his poetry if not via the post office. Hence the presence or absence of the post office, stamp, or mailman as significant tropes are rhetorically ricocheting in these poems. The fundamental importance of location thus becomes a 'passage' where temporality becomes dynamic, forging out a new affiliation. The poet lives in that space and creates that image of his nation where formal filiality (political-religious-social) is certainly not the only point of reference; the identity is constituted gradually through repetition of echoes, fluid poetic experiences of fantasies, associations, recollections, visions and revisions articulated afterwards through objectified forms of poetry. Thus, the Indian immigrant poet making his so-called home in America, and writing from that space elaborates Fanon's spectacular insight on cultural citizenry, that is, that a "national consciousness, which is not nationalism, (is) the only thing that will give an international dimension" (247).

This international dimension has been externalised poignantly in the poetry of Ali, as he takes on the process of overarching the concerns of his native land as well as the hostland, through his globalised poetic vision, intensified by startling coagulating imagery. In order to explore the diasporic poetry of Ali, presented

in this collection through three main points (longing for communication, identity/ space problematic, and culture representation, this study would enquire into the multilayered crisscrossing of spatio-cultural frames as the gradual transition of longing from being to becoming. In that course, however, it would attempt to look into the assimilation and appropriation of images by which nation as 'imaginative construct' is realized by the poet in various ways. In order to intensify my examination and exploration of Ali's poetry, I would restrict myself to this one collection only, and the references to his poems would be simply by page numbers.

I

Inventing, investigating and refashioning the self with all its fractured bits is the problem of all diasporic writings, especially poetry. Ali's poems, specially in the present volume, narrate the saga of the bereavement, longing and pain of a helpless spectator who sees from thousands of miles away his beloved Kashmir, the paradise of earth, on fire, eternally besieged, being the innocent scapegoat of a political game played on its surroundings, citizens, hopes, dreams :

> … expelled from the glass
> of someone's eyes as if no full-length glass
> had held us, safe, from political storms? Pain,
> then, becomes love's thirst…. (63)

Person-places-predicaments, love-loss-loneliness are all stitched together in rich tapestry of organic precision following the motif of yearning for belonging. Through its absence, the emblematic post-office of communication is rhetorically present in the poems, making connections, as each poem acts as a stamp itself: the authorial intention to reach the desired home and/or create a private space for belonging, reinventing Kashmir through dense images of paisleys, qasidas, Himalayas, threadwork and so

on. The images act as gossamer environment to his poems, saddening or enlivening as the situation might be:

> time to return there--before ash filigrees
> roses carved in the wood of weeping trees. (19)

In the same way the image negotiates the distances between feelings and emotions evolving a new poetic idiom and a new context simultaneously:

> The paddle is a heart; it breaks the porcelain waves…. (9)

Myriad representations of nation are made into crystal images that refract the emotions of a migrant sensibility through the haze of foggy yearnings to belong, to go back to the culture of the homeland, in order to form an identity of not the migrant's but the Kashmiri's:

> I write on that void:
> Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir. Or *Cauchemar* in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere? (3)

This Whitmanesque mouthful of repetitive pronouncement becomes itself an image of his homeland, that constantly echoes back and forth in his consciousness, with many fragmented visions that pierce him as shards of glass of a broken mirror. Extending the boundaries of the known to the unknown, familiar to unfamiliar, dear to strange, indigenous to alien, the migrant roams the hybrid place as memory; fantasy and history interplay in chiaroscuro in his poetic sensibility.

Boundaries are of no significance to the exile's imagination, as the valleys of Kashmir melt in the peaks of Zabarvan, or the hurting, frayed maps of Chechnya, Bosnia, or Isfahan, melt with

Massachusetts to create a greater map of human anguish that rootless, dislocated dis-membered expatriates undergo in their search of identity.

> …(it rains in Kashmir,
> in Lahore, and here in Amherst tonight) (64)

In similar fashion the boundaries of his sense of belonging and sense of exile become fuzzy, as he superimposes montage after montage of Kashmir in pain, Kashmir in glee of autumn, Kashmir incandescent and incensed. He reconstructs his boundary by evoking a chain of correspondent, mythmaking images and situations that repeat themselves in poem after poem with intense concentrated appeal.

> … all my words sylvanite
> under one gaze that filled my glass with pain.
> That thirst haunts as does the fevered dancing,
> flames dying among orchids flown in from Sing-
>
> apore! Sing then, not of the promising
> but the Promised End. (62)

As far as boundaries of cultural and historical perspectives are concerned, Ali is taking up voices of Eliot, Shakespeare, Neruda, Merrill, Faiz, Begum Akhtar and many more to weave his tapestry of diasporic texture, reaching far and wide in cultural connectivity, defying the socio-geographic limits of nationality. In the vigour of his rainbow that scales the whole length of sky, the teardrops are bejewelled with the illumination of such wide ranged cultural manifestations of India as Sufism and Hinduism, music and painting, Krishna and Hussain, Karbala and Parvati's anklets, Shiva's Trident and Quran, and so on.

> And my lament
> is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
> to this world whose end was near, always near.
> My words go out in huge packages of rain,
> go there, to addresses, across the oceans. (28)

The journey backward to his native country and forward to the adopted one is a continuous process of trying to find spatial extension of the diasporic self.

> This is an archive. I've found the remains
> of his voice, that map of longings with no limit. (27)

As essentialism is replaced gradually by differences in the postcolonial culture of appreciation of aesthetics, the notion of cultural hybridity takes place especially in diaspora identity, which is free to move, taking and sucking in all that is valid for its richer entity. In the case of a bilinguist immigrant writer, his mother tongue and the alien language become a double edged sword which he is forced to bear, as the alien language also takes root with its cultural ramifications, making two strange languages co-exist in one synthesised sensibility: "When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:/ his *qasidas* braided, on the horizon, into knots of Arabic" is both the challenge and the achievement of the diaspora in lines of utter poetic excellence. How the two languages 'become' a unified synthesis to him is described by Ali himself: "I have not surrendered any part of me, rather my claims to both Urdu and English have become greater. The way the raga and the poem become each other's for Begum Akhtar, so have Urdu and English become for me" (Rebel's Silhouette, 1992). And so, trying to pinpoint some unifying principle, some constant to establish a pattern among various poetic disciplines, Ali also takes on writing Ghazals in English too: the typical, concentrated elixir of poetic essence held in couplets; a distinct and distinguished cultural tradition of Urdu: like "Kashmiri paisleys tied into the golden hair of Arabic."

II

The notion of nation and national space / identity is also reinvented by the diaspora. To heal, to come to terms with the ruptures of the forsaken connections, the diaspora aesthetic is always in search of imaginative reunification in one form or another: "Beloved-/Your word has spread across broken nations" (51).

In view of the engagements of the diaspora with the imaginary homeland, Ali creates the famous trope of the country without a post office. Reinforcing the void and the emptiness experienced by the exile in the space determined for identity, Ali raises up varied images of loss, war, relationship, nostalgia, home and indigene culture.

The second part of the book with its four intensely poignant poems called "A Pastoral," "The Country without a Post Office," "The Floating Post Office," and "The Correspondent" appropriates deftly the floating diaspora's acute and universal need for correspondence.

The metaphors of representations of scores of metanarratives of desire, discovery and recovery are created to position oneself within the given created or imagined cultural identities:

> For he soaked the wicks of clay lamps,
> lit them each night as he climbed these steps
> to read messages scratched on planets.
> His hands were seats to cancel the stamps.
> This is an archive. I've found the remains
> of his voice, that map of longings with no limit. (27)

Articulation of the ancestral voices is another connection, and their tug at heart another metatext, which Ali's diasporic voice always relates to by superimposing blocks of images that stitch themselves through the paisley pattern of his poetic text. Intense in essences, his text thus offers multiple readings. The interplay of images challenges the reader to decipher their complex visual patterns: "words breathed aloud but inward bound." His is no doubt "an exhibition of miniatures, such delicate calligraphy." But the leitmotif throughout the book is the stitching image--stitches that coalesce, and connect the severed parts, thus putting into focus the essential fragmentation of exile identity:

> Always these scissors, only these scissors,
> and in the stars' light each of us lonely
>
> with threads--trillions (34)

He looks back with longing and feeling at the purity of the atmosphere of the homeland where

> The air
> chainstitched itself till the sky hung its bluest
> tapestry (40)

Through various shifting terrains the exile's displaced identity gets suspended between the familiar 'self' and the 'other,' as the exile goes on projecting image after image, as he is unable to identify that 'I' objectively, thus making the 'identity' an "absent construction, the lost master Key," as Breytenbash observes (148/149).

> And we'll try
> the keys, with the first one open the door
> into the drawing room. Mirror after mirror,
> textiled by dust, will blind us to our return ….(24)

The exile had already chosen the way of no return, howsoever the ancestor's cry pierces his ears--"Why aren't you here? Where are you? Come back"--and for answer the exile has only silences galore: "Only silence can now trace my letters to him."

With his fine poetic output that aptly represent the diaspora identity problematics, Ali re-stitches the discourse of 'otherness' by cutting down the repressive walls of monolithic, static national identity. In this way he admits a rich embroidery of cultural contexts from the tales and legends of Habba Khatun to the tale of Noah's Ark, from Muharram in Srinagar to the Norwegian hostage Hans Christian Ostro's cruel killing by Kashmir militants. Besides plurality of readings, these polyphonic dimensions of his text investigate the contemporaneity of the ever-wandering nomad's mixed allegiance throughout the world. So Kashmir becomes another trope for any state or homeland, for any migrant's nostalgic self, searching out to restore imaginative fullness to the broken memories / histories, through shared frames of reference; to discern patterns of compatibility on the similar ground of in-betweeness of two cultures. Valorising the concept of world-suffering in one scale or other ("I am being rowed through Paradise on a river of Hell" [8]), the speaker "I" changes position endlessly within different layers of cross cultural experiences.

Anderson's " imagined communities" and Partha Chatterjee's idea of many alternative spaces within the broad database of nationality, lead to multiple spaces inhabited by modern rootless people as they go on constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the ideological construct of 'Identity' across the geopolitical, linguistic, racial or religious fixities of boundaries. All through the poems in the present collection, Ali is threading together the pattern of human suffering and longing irrespective of country, race, religion or creed, giving them multiple utterances where history, memory, and myth work together, mingle together seamlessly. They are all "calls to prayer/to deaf worlds across continents."

Be they Asian, American or European, immigrants in search of an ideological home and fruitful connectivity anywhere in the world are all included in the brief, concise, elliptic, pointed utterings and arresting metaphors of poems, as they grope, feel or grab confusedly at their daily existence in different geopolitical bases.

> Your ships wait there. What other cargo is yours?
> What cables have you sent to tomorrow's bazaars?
> What does that past await: the future unfurled
>
> like flags? news from the last day of the world? (41)

His poems in all these five sectors of the book running through history, memory, longing, wish fulfillment, and absence, do secure a jewelled presence in response to various degrees of dissonances. That fact shows how human consciousness takes on the politics of shared strategies to survive in his 'private space.' Distance from his beloved land and lack of communication has endowed his diaspora perspective with a rare ability to view his own culture through a better understanding of all other national cultural complexities.

In its function as important documentation of the progress of human civilizations through ages and nations, through progress and digressions, diasporic poetry seeks to make room for the innermost soul of a human being which is forever on a journey. The exile's identity cannot have a fixed point. So his images, like stars, stardust, roses and thorns, glass and broken glass, post office and mailman, threads of stitching, tying, and loose tendrils come as foamy bouquets of felt experiences on the brink of loss and pain, death and absence. Carrying this sense of absence within self that corrodes, pricks and yells to get represented in recognizable forms, the exile's creative impulse approximates rhetorically what Homi Bhabha describes as the need to "introduce another focus of inscription and intervention, another hybrid, inappropriate

enunciative site." So the poet declares, "in each new body I would drown Kashmir" (64). The internalization of space or homeland is duplicated also in the externalisation of that very private space in 'other' lands and nations, homes and relations, blurring the boundaries of self and space. The voices and visions that erupt from such encounters and arrangements are not just 'national' any more. More symbolic and connotative than different complex versions of nationalism, Kashmir as a framed picture dedicated to nostalgia, as a referential point of departure, as a text to be re-read and interpreted, stands out and intermingles with the urge of articulating the symbolism of loss and absence. Ali's aerial perception, floating between two and more worlds, allows him, as it were, to rise above the prevalent situation, through narration of the nation in his poetry, enriching the in-between space (where he lives as diaspora)--a valuable, fruitful, and energized place still fertile with different possibilities. This is the place where infinity could exist with limitless empowerment, as the poet reaches out for the country without a post office to hold his ground, to stir across limitless probabilities of poetic perceptions. So, from Becoming to Belonging, from Imagining to Creating the image, for the lost space as well as the acquired space and to the space beyond, Ali's poetry moves effortlessly, gracefully punctuated with the agonized concern:

> Say farewell, say farewell to the city
> (O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!),
>
> the Alexandria that is forever leaving.
> I'm running toward a barbed-wire fence
> and someone is running after me, shouting,
> *Take your name away, leave us in suspense:*
>
> *whether you vanished? or survived?* (53)

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POETRY OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA II
A Preview

As the Foreword to this issue promises, there will be another issue of *Kavya Bharati* devoted to Indian Diaspora poetry. This issue, *Kavya Bharati* 17, scheduled for publication later in 2005, will include work of

Poetry

Jeet Thayil
Feroza Jussawalla
Sudeep Sen
Darius Cooper
Mona Dash
Poovan Murugesan
Anne Highlands Tiley
Beth Thomas
Bibhas De
Usha Akella
Cyril Dabydeen
Shanta Acharya

…And others

Essays and Reviews

Niranjan Mohanty on A.K. Ramanujan
Cecile Sandten on Shanta Acharya and Suajata Bhatt
Madhurita Chaudhuri on "Representing Third World Women"
Usha Kishore on Debjani Chatterjee
Shanti Premkumar on Premila Venkateswaran

…And more

Translations

Amritjit Singh, poetry of Gurcharan Rampuri
David Buck, excerpts from a recent translation of a Kuravanji in Kutralam
Prem Kumar's self-translations

Subscription forms are included in this issue, and are receivable NOW!

INVITATION
TO JOIN IN THE INDIAN CRITICS SURVEY

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN
THE INDIAN CRITICS SURVEY

An on-going autonomous, self-funded, non-profit project is now surveying via an open-ended questionnaire the opinions, methods, proposals and suggestions of all kinds of critics writing in all the Indian languages, including English, who have been actively publishing in India during the past dozen or so years. In 2004, some 250 responses to the survey were posted for public access on the project's website: www.samvadindia.com/critic--which we invite anyone to visit for data about India's varied critical activity.

The aims of the project are

To facilitate a more productive sense of community among Indian critics in all languages and of all persuasions;
To provide information about the diversity and commonality of their views, procedures, projects and crucial issues;
To reduce dependence upon methodologies, attitudes, and approaches of limited use in the Indian critical and multi-cultural context; and, most generally and optimistically,
To strengthen awareness, self-criticism and self-confidence in individual critics and their self-defined groups; and thus,
To increase the productivity and usefulness of Indian criticism as a whole for its Indian participants and society.

Individual replies to the survey questionnaire will be categorized, the critical types and issues commented upon and all the information published as soon as feasible. Initially the replies are being posted in unanalyzed form on our website in order "to facilitate communication among us all."

Anyone in India actively involved with criticism, whether literary or more broadly cultural and/or social, is invited to participate. ***Please join in this project by visiting the above-named website*** in order to get further information and to register reactions. Additionally the organizers may be contacted: Dr. (Prof. Ret) S. Sreenivasan, Editor, Journal of Literature & Aesthetics, Kollam, Kerala 691 021 (jla@vsnl.com); JNU Prof. Makarand Parnajape, New Delhi (pmakarand@hotmail.com); & (Prof. ret.) John Oliver Perry, Seattle, (**joperry2@aol.com for questionnaire forms**).

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Kavya Bharati welcomes contributions of poetry in English, review articles and essays on poetry or particular poets, well recorded interviews with poets, and translations of poetry from Indian languages into English: from resident and non-resident Indians, and from citizens of other countries who have developed a past or current first-hand interest in India.

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All submissions must be accompanied by the full preferred postal address of the sender (including PIN code), with telephone and / or e-mail address where possible. With the submission **sufficient biodata must be sent**, similar to what is given in the "Contributors" pages of this issue. In the case of translations, please include the biodata of the source poet also. All submissions must be sent, preferably by Registered Post or Courier in the case of manuscripts and printouts, to Professor R.P.Nair, Editor, *Kavya Bharati*, SCILET, American College, Post Box No.63, Madurai 625 002 (India).

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