KAVYA BHARATI

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
MADURAI

Number 18
2006

FOREWORD

KAVYA BHARATI-18

We, at *Kavya Bharati*, had the unenviable task of working through manuscripts of poetry received during the course of the past three years from poets living in India. We thank all the contributors for waiting patiently while we were bringing out the two special issues of *Kavya Bharati* Nos. 16 and 17, showcasing the poetry of the Indian Diaspora. For obvious reasons of space limitations, we have not been able to publish all that we have decided to accept for publication.

KB-18 presents some of the good poetry that we have been able to salvage. Along with the established poets we have attempted to include a fair sampling of poetry from promising new poets. This is in fact in tune with our editorial policy right from the beginning, that is, to make room for new talents who deserve encouragement.

We have also reasons to be happy that we are able to include poetry from different parts of India from Kashmir to Kanyakumari as the saying goes.

We are bringing out this issue of *Kavya Bharati* at a time while we are recovering from the loss of the poet K. Ayyappa Paniker (1930-2006) who served in the Managing Committee of the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, for over a decade. *Kavya Bharati* is SCILET's journal and Dr. Paniker was a great friend of *KB* from its inception. Published elsewhere in the pages of *KB*-18 you will find tributes paid to him by Paul Love and Gopi Krishnan Kottoor.

We dedicate *Kavya Bharati*-18 to the memory of K. Ayyappa Paniker, poet, scholar-critic, teacher extraordinary and a wonderful friend of SCILET. For all of us here at *Kavya Bharati*, K. Ayyappa Paniker will continue to be a living presence and a source of inspiration for years to come.

Kavya Bharati is a publication of the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, American College, Madurai 625 002, Tamilnadu, India.

Opinions expressed in *Kavya Bharati* are of individual contributors, and not necessarily of the Editor and Publisher.

Kavya Bharati is sent to all subscribers in India by Registered Parcel Post, or by Courier. It is sent to all international subscribers by Air Mail. Annual subscription rates are as follows:

India Rs. 200.00
U.S.A. $15.00
U.K. £10.00

Demand drafts, cheques and money orders must be drawn in favour of "Study Centre, Kavya Bharati".

All back issues of *Kavya Bharati* are available at the above rates.

All subscriptions, inquiries and orders for back issues should be sent to the following address:

The Editor, *Kavya Bharati*
SCILET, American College
Post Box 63
Madurai 625 002 (India)

Phone: (0452) 2533609
E-mail: scilet@gmail.com
Website: www.scilet.org
www.scilet.in

Registered Post is advised wherever subscription is accompanied by demand draft or cheque.

This issue of *Kavya Bharati* has been supported by a generous grant from the South India Term Abroad Programme.

Editor: R.P. Nair

KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 18, 2006

CONTENTS

Poetry

Translations

Interviews

Reviews

Essays

KAMALA DAS

I WALK THE LAST MILE…

Perhaps I walk the last mile
my speech incoherent,
a mobile phone, its battery
low. Words thud
down the stairways;
they can no longer ascend
where is the firmament
I am accustomed to?
and, the terra firma?
I thought myself
a scatterer of commandments
I thought--like pollen in the wind
my words would fertilize
a million blooms
I thought I would fall as rain

BELL'S PALSY

I saw his first pitiless gaze
Had I lost totally
the remnants
of a land conquered?
Had I without looking
into his eye
cried goodbye?
In a sudden chill
my mouth twisted
the lips twitched--
a third attack of palsy

A Tsunami has turned
my axis somewhat
I wear a strangers face
Even my mate
sweet with tact
shuts his eyes
when I touch him
on rooftops
while beneath, the children
lie asleep but their dreams
awake to stalk the corridors of night
I did try for weary years
to locate my name
to compile as best as I could
my ancient antecedents
Can a god turn blind
and stumble clumsily
on broken ground
I could not hold to my breast
the bushel of grain
I reaped
There's no time left
for any harvest now.
I walk the final mile alone.

MOHAN RAMANAN

ENGLISHE'D

The officer says to the Montagus and the Capulets
"All are Punishéd"
and I was thrilled with that Zeferelian touch.

But how to convey
The thrill and the frisson of Shakespeare
To these disadvantaged ones
Ignorant alike of mother tongue and foreign tongue
Because in teaching them Shakespeare
"Punishéd" and "Englishéd"
would be one and the same thing
for teacher and taught

PRAYER

In what ways will you spite me?
You sit in comfort and smile complacently
While I am buffeted--a measles there
A pox here, an accident
And a near death--is this
Your justice?

Am I Job? That I am Not,
So take care—serpent--couched Trickster
How You treat me--

Lay off or else I shall abandon You

CATTLE

From the arid plains I saw You
Watering life and providing forage
For the cattle
Which walked in no clear formation.
Aimless, desperate and numbed--
And those waters, they quenched my thirst
And fed my hunger more
And so from the plains I walked up the hill
And became quite breathless in adoration,
A slightly better version of the cattle seeking
Your waters and your provision of fodder.

FOR CDN

Why do I feel uneasy at parting?
Is it fear for you or is it uncertainty for myself?
Perhaps it is a little of both because
Who is to say that either you or I will experience the sense of
dejavu--
Our little solid substantial talkative walks
From Dhvanyaloka to Dhvani in the Speech and Hearing Institute--
And then the toast and coffee, freshly brewed and served by the
Holy Family
The talk, the compulsive and compelling song I must sing for
your wife, now dearly departed
Chikkanna's hot water duly served in large buckets,
The anticipatory bath and the much needed breakfast--
You would insist on all eating well and eating the vegetarian fare,
Our own idlis, dosais which the firangis thought were pancakes
Our fill of tea and coffee
And then the intellectual tussles following the gastronomic excess
Those hours with the Leavises and the Richardses and the
aestheticians

Surrounded as we were by the tomes and volumes well-thumbed
And written by you and countless other beneficiaries of
your intellectual hospitality
Staying as they did in the Thoreau Vanam
Or sitting as they did in the Sanjay Vichar Mantap
Australians, New Zealanders, Africans, Italians and Spaniards
and of course we native
Wanderers
We gaped at you and your energy
Looked forward to the expected, though always perennial and fresh
wisdom
In your hard-hitting Introductions
Oh! I would roll or crawl to Dhvanyaloka to recharge my batteries
To enable brief but necessary escapes from the tiresome and
tendentious debates of the University
And I would give everything to trek to the Hills of Devi and to Her
Commend you and yours
For her to keep and protect--
She must for us who are your acolytes,
For us who need and depend on you.

DARSHAN SINGH MAINI

A DAY IN CAPE COD

It’s a green Sunday in
Clear blue May, and a yawning
Indolent sun smiles on
A field of Titian flesh and foam.

Sons and lovers and spent
Spouses, pink parasols, sunshades
And spreads--all, all, turn
This Turner into a Freudian drowse.

A breeze blows up dunes
Of sand into figures of
Plum and peach, as sea-gulls
Come trailing symphonies of sound.

Schools of freckled girls
Dip and plunge, as this
Beach of roused blood and bone
Explodes into a long carnival.

And full fourteen years today,
I see a figure draped
In the mists, and a face
Framed as though in a dream.

She lies supine, hooding her
Hazel eyes with a braceleted
Arm, while the pink buds glow,
And the white birds rise.

The mouth draws the answer
In mouth, and the hair

Weaves poems on the face,
As the winds whisper around.

The Atlantic now breaks
In enchanted ears as
The promise of honey and salt
Till dawn drowns this day.

A LONG LEAP

I took a long leap
Into the arbours of romance
A whole grief age,
And I thought I had
Worked out the key
To the golden gate at last.
It seems now I was riding
A tiger then, and became
A limerick for the parlours
Of my friends and foes.
The dark comedy, in sum,
Turned me into a sabled clown,
And I laughed out the past
To save my kit and crown.

ICONS OF AMBIGUITY

There was a time memories ago
When desires turned into dreams.
And the dreams into signs
And icons of ambiguity,
And of veiled truth.
I could but ride
The imperious steeds to the point

Where the horizons of truth
Dissolved into a fable
I could but dimly perceive.
Still the hunt wouldn't end,
And the riches of those dreams
Grew fabulously like spring leaves
Even as my hungry heart
Remained a musing mendicant
At the dark door of life.

EROSION

She vanished a love ago
In the age of the roses
And the swans, when
The flame turned academic,
And the pupil heart
Learnt the beauty
Of a silent blow.

Thus she withered into a wife,
And nursed the protocol
In silent rage, though once
On a dark night of pain,
The hand that could not
Hold the hand in vow
Made overtures across a knife.

And now she dies, alone,
A stately, clinical death,
All signatures in tact, all
Tokens and treaties in tow;
A woman bleached white
By rectitude, and stitched
Stiff from bone to bone.

THE ECLIPSE

It takes a heart to hold
A hand offered in broken vow;
You shield, you temporized,
And as I scanned the moon
Of your face, I knew
The eclipse had started
In the solar plexus below.

But you would still
Pack ice and burn
The breast of night
With dark arctic dreams,
As though love were
A glacial house pitched
Between the poles
Of two hibernating streams.

I suppose though, you know
The sun never touched
The orchards of icicles
Nurtured on tears of now.

PRIYA SARUKKAI CHABRIA

MONSOON VIEWS: A DOZEN VERSES

1.
All night, through dreams, heavy rain.
At dawn: Curled clouds, bright
green leaves. Scarlet
petals stain damp earth.
Something's always got to give.

2.
Something's always got to give:
Damp earth spreads
as clotted clouds, gutters gurgle
choked with leaves.
I could be this.

3.
I could be this: Siren
wailing over shiny streets, dark forking
paths, broken
glass beneath soggy shoes.
Crunch embeds in the sole.

4.
Crunch embeds in the soul.
I asked for it, not trusting
the body's reign. Now it rains.
Rein in the flow that chokes
my veins. Or give in?

5.
Give in: Call
back the wet neon glare
of lust or perhaps love's speechless
glow, leaning back, your
arms crossed across my breasts.

6.
Your arms crossed across my breast
my skin damply calm on yours,
rain stilled in mid air
in its fall. What
did you say that I didn't hear?

7.
What didn't I hear
that you said and what
did I hear, that scent of feeling, what
did I fear beyond trees of lightning
storming down?

8.
Beyond lightning trees storming down
your mouth traced leaves of loss
in my ear. Love, you said, be
with me. Blaze shot
up boughs, trees flamed in rain.

9.
Trees flamed in rain. Your words torched
the lull of bodies stilled in peace
when all of history is put to sleep.
You made time start again: Tell
me not your dreams, speak no more.

10.
Speak no more and
I shall hear your fingers lull
dreams to sleep and the volcano
into its bed beneath the sea,
make it all disappear.

11.
Speak no more of dreams and
I'll return like rain
on hills, my hands as streams, my body wet
ground again, my rained hollow holding you
so you sleep in me, head on my shoulder.

12.
Head on my shoulder, speak to me
my love, but not of love. Part
clouds so the horizon peeks.
Something's always got to give:
Scarlet petals stain damp earth.

SHOBA ALBERT

STORM

Thoughts plop in dark pools,
Rippling the still surface,
Creating pygmy waves
That flatten and
Disappear.

In the depths,
Walls narrow and
close in;
Arms stretch--scrambling,
Grabbing--
Fingers touch and trace grooves on the scarred surface.

Feet step out
Gingerly,
Searching for purchase--
Even a toehold.

The murky liquid shadows
shield secrets
Of events that raged, thundered, shrieked and found release in resolutions.
Steaming mysteries boiled
with ambiguous despairs
that heaved among rolling tempers and
dark uncertain humours.

To just
Wait it out.
To seek footholds and grooves--for
reassurance.
To sense

the steep incline,
Knowing sometime,
Soon,
The heat wound go;
And the dark churning disappear;
Leaving
only
the quiet
sediments
of a storm.

REFLEX

Did you hear it?
A knock on the door.
It sounded
Urgent.

Did you see it?
A flash of red.
It looked
Important.

And so I answered the knocks,
And sought feverishly after the reds.
Because we were agreed, weren't we?
That it was urgent.
And important.

Just now
Thinking about it
It is rather tiring.
And I wish someone would tell me…
Was that the phone ringing?

Shoba Albert

GOODNESS-OF-FIT

A revision of dreams,
A pull here, a tug there,
An attempt to
compromise

Of oysters and playgrounds.
To regress in time
When living was a tumbling sequence of larger-than-life
technicolour;
And pots of gold were
A Sure Thing.

An update in thinking.
A reality check;
From wide-eyed wonder to meditative musing…
On the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
and
Serendipity.

It is the Triumph of Reason.
A hunkering down of soul to
The Real World.

But,
Sometimes,
Somewhere,
A windowpane creaks open,
And the firmament streams in--
A gleam here, a glistening,
A sparkling of silvery gold stardust.

And quietly,
Not that you were supposed to notice,
A book props it open.

A pull here, a tug there
A revision.

SILENCE

The walls spoke--
Sheer and impenetrable;
The façade in excellent repair;
Unscalable.
The tomb lay silent--cold and dank;
The stone in dutiful phrase documented;
Love eternal.

"IMAGINE…" MILLENNIA CONVERSATIONS

Just between you and me,
I look forward to the day
When women are
A non-issue.
When world Bodies, learned panels and
School Debating teams
Find something else to talk about;
When celebrities and politicians
Find other hobbyhorses to ride,
And feminism
Goes out of fashion,
Along with child abuse, poverty and
War.

I imagine, with pleasure, the day
When "burning issues" will not refer
To dowry deaths
And rape laws,
But, say, for instance--
Eco-friendly incinerators.
Or, when people are talking ponderously
About the 'weaker sections" of society,
They're actually discussing
Our Olympic Games contingent.

But,
Irony
Wears many faces.
There she stumbles:
The Goddess Shakti,
Ancient deity,
Thrust into the dust--
Cowering.
See, there, she stands.
Waits.
Walks:
The Royal Consort Sita,
Mentally undressed,
Accessed and violated;
Jostled and crowded--
Defiled.

Come, friend,
Now just imagine
A serene stroll on the beach,
Just you, your thoughts and the
Orange-gold setting sun--
On a whim.
Or, doing the long planned jogging routine,
On quiet back roads--
On a promise.

And then,
Imagine, friend.
Not being able to.
Warnings and fears--the demon without and within.
“Are you crazy?”
“Alone?”
“In the dark?”
“Asking for trouble, aren’t you?”

Are you?
You just
Want
To be.

RACHNA JOSHI

CROSSING THE VAITARNI[1]

Crossing the Vaitarni
frees one of all desires.
Nishada Raja washed Lord Rama's feet
while he took him across the Ganges.

Tulsidas says
"I am my, you and yours--this is
the Maya by which all beings are bound.
One must free oneself of Maya at the earliest."

You come in various guises
as lover, as guide, as adversary.
You come down the ages
blowing me away and my concepts of selfhood
destroying my ego and shaking me up

Crossing swords
we do the polka
in this postdiluvian anarchy.
Harking to the whirling dance of the dervishes
you lead me on,
and then having brought me to this pitch
you escape again.

Where will I meet you again
O worker of miracles,

[1] The Vaitarni is the mythical river which one crosses after Death. Symbolically it expresses a release from the sufferings caused by unfulfilled egocentric desires. The search for release from suffering leads to a spiritual quest. This poem begins with the path of love and devotion (Bhakti Marg) of Shri Tulsidasji and goes on to other seekings, specially the Sufi's mystic search for union with the divine.

of charms, of spells.
This fever that you have created
does not abate nor does it die.

SUNITA

We met again that summer
at the tiny flat above the post office
and talked about the holidays we spent
in Fernlodge as children
listening to Baba's tales of Lal bhujakkar
and Labar Dhon Dhon; or our
long walks to Kulri and Landour--
You, the usual leader of the group of cousins
not faltering even at the steep slope
beyond Wynberg Allen.

We talked of your college days
when you struggled and studied
and still found time to feed us
vadas and tea. When you
laughed at a joke in
Khushwant's book and said
"He can hit on target."
That was you--the effervescence,
the warmth, the bubbling
out of laughter.

The last time you left for Delhi
dark glasses on
ready to go back to teaching--
a glance, a wave of the hand,
and then you moved on.

I find that I can no longer go back
to the last few images sedated by morphine

unable to walk
wanting so desperately to hold on to life.
Then you passed away
breathing “Om Namah Shivaya.”

May your daughters left behind
discover the same gift of sharing joy!

WORKING WOMEN’S HOSTEL

High walls, unkempt lawn--
inside the lounge, a dusty picture of Adhya Jha hangs
with cobwebs.

From the mess, Rajrani waddles through the door
while Jaswant and Babu Lal laze in the sun.
It’s the month of Magh
the coldest of the year.

Freezing in heaterless rooms;
fingers numb with cold, Sheela and Sonia
wring socks and undies in dingy bathrooms.

Togged up to go for outings to Hauz Khas village
and drink orange juice at wayside stalls
we splurge on a bandhni sari for Iori
or the occasional party where you meet the bohemian crowd--
the bearded painter delighting everyone
with an impromptu sketch;
visits to Belu mamu near Sangam cinema.

Glued to Aap ki Adalat on T.V.
we hide the hair dryer
from the snooping eyes of the warden’s pet.
Forging signatures in night-out registers,
we eat Manipuri chicken and dosas

and drink beer in camaraderie
behind closed doors.

Late at night, when all are asleep,
I can hear Dhaneshwari sweeping the floor,
rotting food, and cats overturning the garbage bins
as Rajwati bunks the third day.

Everyone waits for release
from the hostel,
which comforts and cramps
stifles and protects.
Sanctuary or cell!

THE PARTY

We're talking gibberish while we
wait and watch the chicken tikkas turn
Saurav has cast aspersions on my ability to pay for lunch
and I've said "shut up" in my best convent accent to Ruchi.

This is how the party unravels
from the fake camaraderie of submerged bon vivants
to luxurious living and good eating--
without a thought for the morrow.

Ruchi is talking about her intimate weekend
on the Coromandel coast,
while Saurav exudes the smell of money
talking about some Mughal miniatures he's just bought.
Is this the aura that attracts
women like flies to Saurav?

I sip my fresh-lime soda
While the umbrella's awnings
Shield us from the gentle winter sun.

This is an odd kind of harem arrangement
with three women vying for one man.

"Can you actually teach Fine Arts?" asks Saurav
while I defend my educational background.
Ruchi laughs at my discomfiture
and a wizened Vinita gazes
at us--"What new courses have they devised?"

Wiseacre Naveen interjects with his quips,
the acerbic University professor to the core,
talking about someone's wife leaving him
because he's started writing such crap.

Saurav tries a new gambit--makes a pass.
From the office to the classroom--
not one will let an opportunity go.
We discuss the North-east
and how 'folksy' the people are back there.
I remember Kohima and Shillong
and immediately my sympathies shift
from the party to the North-east.

There is some talk of the Trust of the Cosmic Lotus
which holds talks on intellectual topics
like psychophysical software and Ultimate Emptiness.

2 o'clock and like Pavlov's dog
I rush back to work
leaving the rapidly unravelling party to its fate.
We toilers have to work
while others may spend all day in the sun
discussing Canetti and Spinoza
or New Haven in autumn
when the first leaves begin to change.

Rachna Joshi

VARANASI

Shikharas
sloping ghats
the expanse of the Ganges.

Where the dead are burnt amid woodlots--
Manikarnika ghat

Where the sorrowful tale
of a legendary King was immortalized--
Harishchandra ghat.

Tales of Siva
entering the city on Mahasivaratri
float around.

In the Vishwanath temple, I
throw coins into the well
below which flows mighty Bhagirathi.

Spark,
I shall return
To the light.

Chidananda rupah
Sivoham, sivoham.

THE CILANTRO

Dressed In a starched white apron
she is neatly serving them.
She takes me to the bakery
of the Cilantro--the oven
and the kneading equipment.

She pulls out a freshly baked loaf
of French bread and passes it to me.
Next time, she tells me, I will
bake you a pecan pie.

I am back in the classroom
teaching her reading and writing skills,
watching her dark Madonna face
break into pieces while the tutor beams:
“She wants an abortion
I want to give her some info
for a safe one.”

I walk out, holding the warm stick
of bread close to my heart.

HOSHANG MERCHANT

DADDY

It's eleven years
Since father died
Sometimes he comes in dreams
So sorry Like he never was in life
Once alone he screamed like he always did
                And never, never reappeared
My sister sees him locked up in hell
I smell his approach
I feel his coat
English wool wet in the Bombay rain
A lion in a lamb's pelt
Daddy whose bullion flashed blindly in bank vaults
And was stolen by Parsi crows within minutes of his death
Just as his flaccid white body must've been by vultures
                on Malabar Hill
Daddy who toiled all his life to come to this
Who forgot to make an heir for his all
'He did not love me' he complained of me
Who by then had a heart grown cold
Why then does his woolen coat smell so warm
                in this dream-poem?

THE MASON, AN ARTIST

Making mock emblems in cement
On the walls of the neo-nobility:
His hands, big and once useless
        have found a métier
His tools are humble:
        a cement-spade, a bamboo twig to shape
        a brush to smoothen rough edges

His hands hover over his holy trinity
As if to see his essence is still in place
When with his inferiors
His voice booms
Recognition from the masters
Gives his face a human form
He looks at me with sidelong glances
Bursts into song

Such a quarrel!
Between the Brahmin apprentice and the Lingayat master-mason
The Master had gone to his village-wedding
The apprentice dreamt of becoming Master:
He worked diligently such work he produced in the
master's absence
The Master awoke from his drunken stupor: Usurpation!
That night he went to the apprentice's house
Roundly cursed him, his father
The polite apprentice would not raise his hand
on a man not in his senses from drinking
The next morning the apprentice reported to work
But without his lunch-pail
And in his Sunday best
(Did the girls' hearts skip a beat!)
Then the day's revenge of the night before:
The Apprentice gave his Master the same choice abuses
he had so patiently heard the night before
'Your father's ass'… 'I shall bury you…' … 'hang you'
Men posture/swagger/bellow
But no man can get on without an apprentice
No apprentice without a Master Building bodies, souls, cities
There may be many apprentices
But only one Master
The apprentice lost his commission
I got mine: I took the apprentice in

TWO SEA POEMS

1. *Tsunami Sutra*

Why is the sea ebbing so far
Into itself? To crash better, onto the land

Animals have inner hearing. Birds inner sight
Even reptiles sense all with their skins

Then why does the human mind set store by things
Not sense the sea of pain receding and churning
onto the shores of this world and the next?

A butterfly's wings in Chile. Set up a typhoon in China
I was Chuang-Tzu: I slept and dreamt I was a worm

I woke up to become not poet, not worm
But a butterfly who set up a typhoon in China.

2. *Sea Sonnet*

As a child I saw three veiled ladies on the sea
Drink coconut water from shells like cracked skulls

Then I learnt Kali drank human blood thus

As an adolescent from my father's Bombay veranda
I wished upon a star and dreamt of Arabia

As a young man I got all the riches of Arabia

Then the recourse began: The stranger sea-music
Loren sea-faring from Spain to New York

Columbus the Genoese humanizing the Natives
This they call the burden of the cross:
So many lesser gods sank under the waves

Christ's tears too are salt as he trips lightly over the waters.

IRAN

Memory comes
as wave upon wave
of fire
Washes over me
Burns into my skin
Burnishes the paper I wrote on
The flagstones I tread on
In alley after alley after alley
Looking for the nursery
Where heroes birth and die
Birth and die
Cradle to grave
(The grave a cradle)
Where mothers come mourning
Laying springs of gladioli
Spring bulbs that bloom again
from the loam mixed with blood
Here he sowed the dragon teeth
Here 10000 heroes sprouted
Here the rode off on horseback
Here they were felled, bare backs
to the wind and the rain
Sprouting as ears of grain
For this they were made
and prepared
As the sacrifice:
On each nation's gate it is written:
Let the grain die
Ground into bread
Eaten in graveyards in death
as at a picnic in life
And the river washes the stones
And the domes watch over the river
As it rushes to the sea
Waves and waves of emotion

Wash over me
I look for my lover
In chai-khaneh and Zur-Khaneh
He's not there, not there
He's here with me
Laughing from the grass

LOST LOVE: IN RETROSPECT

For Nanju

What did the boy see in me?
Why was he on fire?

What did I see in the boy?
Why was I melting like water?

It was a marriage of fire and water
Such marriages are found in alchemy books

They are written in the stars
But stars that make can also mar

His book caught fire
My look caught fire:

'You wound me with your smiles
Your rosy smiles…'

I read faces
I read hands

I read palms
I crossed paths

I crossed palms with bribes
of beauty, bright futures, duties

Nothing worked:
the thermometre broke / Damburst…

MOTHER'S ABSENCE

For Joy Roy

Absence, large as Mt. Lebanon
Adonis, Syrian poet

You move around her rooms
Feeling her air cling around you
And her absence palpable
As the three arches in the middle of the room
That being Nothing allow passage
from Something into some other thing:

Or, that space within her pitcher
Into which you pour all your substances
Or her empty space at table
Which indeed is your true sustenance
Or, still, that still flowering tree
Each Spring birthing, shrieking red
From whose arms you see her fling
Great emptiness out for you

So that if at all you move, you move
Like a bird that feels the empty air he moves through

EURYDICE

(Or, The Sixteen-year-old Saira Banu)

After Rilke

There was always within me a little girl
Who danced with my sister under the cherry
Who slept in my ear when I slept
Who leapt out of my mouth when I spoke
So that the whole world stood transfixed

The girl walked with me the sea-city's streets
And took into herself the sea, the city, the streets
The towers and the hovels and the men inhabiting them
And when they slept they slept with me

So that if a sixteen year old nymph
Sang a lovesong in a movie
It was sung to me: It will be a great favour
if you let me love
So were many wet nights put to sleep with me

Orpheus went to Hell to bring back Eurydice
So did I when the little girl in me died
It was at the moment of looking back at her
That Eurydice was lost but Orpheus saved

A thousand things are born from Being
But Being itself is born from Non-Being.

PARTITIONS OF MEMORY

For Gurdit

What is lost is lost
Why look for it in the heart
Hindu Moslem and Sikh--all lost
Homes shrines entire villages
What god-given right did the Angrez have?
Look at our rivers: Do they respect borders?
do they not rise here and go there?
Birds, windblown seeds, the air itself…?
Who put the sword in the heart
the knife in the back?
Do we not all turn our backs on our childhoods,
our parents?
What is motherland without mother
or, the other way round?

2.

When the motherland was bartered away
Our mothers were bartered away
Some died of dislocation
Some of the effort to transport themselves in new soil
Some survived rape
Some went over to the enemy, the new reality
Some were simply pushed into a well

3.

There is a lady who refused to draw water
She is the one who survived the well-drowning
Her men from the other side of the border have come to take her home
If you feared water all your life, you die by water
It is the same for air, fire, earth…

4.

Our bodies
This little box, this little chest of secrets
O set it afloat on the flowing water
Do let it go All rivers end
You have died many times before and rebirthed
Now obliterate all your traces
That you ever flowed…

S. A. PRABHAKAR

A HELL OF YOUR OWN

The roof is where
I come up for air
After the day's fighting is done
To nurse my wounds
From my corner
Littered with dead leaves and limbs
I watch planes
Heading for greener pastures
Why is paradise, always, beyond the skyline
Happiness, always, somewhere else
The victor, always, someone else
Why are the stars farther away than yesterday
The moon so reluctant to rise
The breeze still trapped in the trees
At this hour of retreat
Why do I think of someone
Condemned to eternal pain
Though allowed to suffer unseen

MOTHER TO A SON

With you in my arms
I befriended the world again--
Grim neighbours stopped to grin
Feel the softness of your skin
Indulge in baby-talk--
I rediscovered that the moon
Waxes, wanes and disappears
That the stars twinkle
The planets do not blink

I stood and watched with you
The day fade to a blue darkness
Wondered why the sea
Never tired of
Wanting to come ashore
There were the sleepless nights too
When fevers so seized and shook you
That I thought evil had entered the house
And death stood at the door
Still we lived, grew up
Lost our innocence, both
With that the tide retreated
The world turned inward
Closed its doors, kept to itself
Then when you went away
With that siren as I feared
I learnt what it was to cry
What it was to die

WHAT COMES BETWEEN

Sometimes, what comes
Between friends is time
Unravelling the bonds
Of shared escapes and tears
A letter unanswered
A call not returned
Can sometimes
Make the road
Between them longer
Sometimes friends
Disappear into cities
And are never
Heard thereafter
As if the sirens

They went dancing after
Turned them into swine
Knowing no Ulysses
Would come looking for them
Sometimes, what is lost
Between friends
Is not just the past
But even the fragrance
Of their dreams

NOT TO BELONG

I cannot tell you
Where I'm from
The place I was born
Was not where I grew up
One's just a name
The other was a shame
Both had temples though
One of a reclining god
The other of a dusky goddess
I'd visited more often
Yet she just watched
As hunger sat
Unsatiated at my door
And chaos swept in
With rapid eyes
And still swifter tongue
Speaking of unseen things
Railing at unknown foes
Everyone just watched
The personal, a spectacle
Whose sacrificial fire
Had I been thrown in
To mitigate whose misery
What god was it

That slept through my nightmare
What goddess, scorched by whose sins
Stood transfixed, as I cried in torment
I was burnt to the bone
Still lived and learnt
Not to strike roots in air
To let things go
To look and not to long
To be and not belong --
Beloved, you still want to go see
The reclining god, the dusky goddess
Maybe, you will see him stir
And the other smile.

DEEPA AGARWAL

THE GRAVEYARD HAS SHUT ME OUT

I cannot be laid to rest
like Rilke
in the earth I have chosen
for my own burial.
That much is certain, for
the graveyard has shut me out.
Not for me the dreamless sleep
beneath benign deodar trees, which stretch
tireless arms, sifting
sunshine and rain.
Not for me the granite gravestone
preserving my name,
modest cenotaph
an idle stranger might wonder at,
the way I have mused over Sarah Elizabeth
and Baby Mickey.
Sure, I will become dust and ashes too,
but nameless dust flung far from the walls
of a beloved graveyard,
walls that shut me out
growing higher
each time I attempt the leap.

CHILDHOOD RAIN

Rain in childhood
falls without explanation
simply pouring out of the sky.
Now we do not dance in it (like my children will one day)
but don raincoats and unfurl umbrellas, and stoically
set out for our Saturday evening walk,

hand in hand
two by two
a twisting navy blue crocodile
creeping between two green slopes--
the one that stretches upwards
draped with silver sheets which reach down
like Rapunzel's hair inviting us
into the castle of the sky,
the other that tumbles down
into a shrouded sea, daring us to
surrender to its obscured embrace.
But the navy blue crocodile wriggles on
indifferent, postponing the moment of decision
as it waits for the sun to shine and clear the mist.

CLOISTERED GIRL

Smiling, she dances to her own music
within the tortoise shell
of her fate.
Not for her the risks of late night movies
Nor the need for timepass thrills.
Not for her the frenzied disco,
smoky with longing,
Nor the need to let booming heartbeats
blow her mind away.
Perhaps she feels
there is enough laughter echoing
within her tortoise shell. And no
need to see it
second hand anywhere else.
No need to question her fate either,
Or wonder if life has passed by
While she has been dancing only to
her own music
and has never heard any other.

MEENA KANDASAMY

MULLIGATAWNY DREAMS

anaconda. candy. cash. catamaran.
cheroot. coolie. corundum. curry.
ginger. mango. mulligatawny.
patchouli. poppadom. rice.
tatty. teak. vetiver.

i dream of an english
full of the words of my language.

an english in small letters
an english that shall tire a white man's tongue
an english where small children practice with smooth round
pebbles in their mouth to the spell the right zha
an english where a pregnant woman is simply stomach-child-lady
an english where the magic of black eyes and brown bodies
replaces the glamour of eyes in dishwater blue shades and
the airbrush romance of pink white cherry blossom skins
an english where love means only the strange frenzy between a
man and his beloved, not between him and his car
an english without the privacy of its many rooms
an english with suffixes for respect
an english with more than thirty six words to call the sea
an english that doesn't belittle the brown and black men and women
an english of tasting with five fingers
an english of talking love with eyes alone

and i dream of an english

where men
of that spiky, crunchy tongue
buy flower-garlands of jasmine
to take home to their coy wives
for the silent demand of a night of wordless whispered love . . .

NON-CONVERSATIONS WITH A LOVER

don't talk to me
of sudden love…

in our land
even the monsoons come--
leisurely, strolling like
decorated temple elephants
(the pomp, the paraphernalia)--
after months of monotonous prayer,
preparations and palpitating waits.

my darling
his silence
(those still shoulders)
but his eyes dance
his eyes dance
(so wild, so wild)

i am taught to think
of raging summer storms--
like uncontrollable tuskers
trampling in *mast*
(the madness, the lust)--
across the forests
of our land

STORMING IN TEA-CUPS

"a cup of tea is not a cup of tea…
when you make it at twilight
just for him."

call it a love potion.
liquid dreams.
scented desire.
wishes boiled to a blend.

milk thick as cream
three cinnamon pods
the dried Darjeeling leaves
simmering to a syrup to be filtered.

as you sweat in its vapours
and imagine how the tea tastes
against his lips his teeth his tongue
and the pale pink insides of his throat

as you stir in the sugar
and test a spoonful to see
if it stings and soothes and
stimulates the way you intended

as you pour it into his cup
with eyes mirroring supernovas
and study the desirable brown of the tea

an entire shade that fits exactly
between the desert sand of your skin
and the date palm of his.

almost the color
of your possible child.

TOUCH

Have you ever tried meditation?
Struggling hard to concentrate,
and keeping your mind as blank
as a whitewashed wall by closing
your eyes, nose, ears; and shutting out
every possible thought. Every thing.
And, the only failure that ever came,
the only gross betrayal--
was from your own skin.

You will have known this.

Do you still remember,
how, the first distractions arose?
And you blamed skin as a sinner;
how, when your kundalini was rising,
shaken, you felt the cold concrete floor
skin rubbing against skin, your saffron robes,
how, even in a far off different realm,
your skin anchored you to this earth.
Amidst all that pervading emptiness,
touch retained its sensuality.

You will have known this.

Or if you thought more, variedly,
you would wonder about taste,
and later discount it--as the touch
of the tongue. Or, you may recollect
how a gentle touch, a caress changed
your life multifold, and you were never
the person you should have been.
Feeling with your skin was
perhaps the first of the senses, its
reality always remained with you--
You never got rid of it.

You will have known this.

You will have known almost
every knowledgeable thing about
the charms and the temptations
that touch could hold.
But, you will never have known
that touch--the taboo to your transcendence,
when crystallized in caste
was the paraphernalia of undeserving hate.

NEETI SADARANGANI

TWO PROSE POEMS

Twenty Six Thousand Souls And The Demon Tsunami

Death has come crashing this morning in the Tsunami liquid wall, demons of the ocean-army have licked the earth, men, women, children, building, car, ship, and all.

Thousands of souls, 26 thousand souls, released from their bodies stand watching their own drowning in a circled scream of mute horror. Behind silent sheets of glassed-anguish they stand flailing white sacks of spirit bodies, watching helplessly their loved ones search as they swear and weep, and search again for they are human still. And these have left their bodies.

O the stifling blanket of thick black anguish; in the swamp of emotion, soot-lead lament a father's, a mother's, a sibling's wailing. Fear stands de-homed and rudderless in rags of tattered shock. Death comes crashing this morning in the Tsunami liquid wall. The crystal leapt, curled, fell and crashed murder upon patches of pygmy brown earth. Demons of the ocean tongued the city, island, coast, and all with it. From an uninterrupted, century-long sleep, the green-blue demon arose, orange-eyed and fire-breathing, slowly like a python unwinding its miles-long tail and scales like a flesh, from the sea-basin where it lay near Phuket, Thailand. In circles it moved, and spread growing rings of growing terror…smooth and swift its killing ways.

Twenty six thousand souls this morning, last night, have encircled, in a floating silver ring the whole of South-India, Ceylon,

Thailand and Islands in the Indian Ocean. Twenty six thousand souls have wailed and sung with the living, their deathly songs. Drum beating their hearts, with the stab of parting so rudely from a parent who held on to them till he lost consciousness and lost them forever. O the circular rings of growing menace, the killing was short, liquid and swift. Babies, so many of them, were sucked up by the sea. There should be a limit to sacrifices god damn it! O sea god, your green blue glory stinks today with frozen blood and swollen body. O broad-chested Ocean, O father of India, today you too have died, not once but 26 thousand times.

Go, sleep now for 26 thousand centuries.

Which Face Hides a Wolf And Which a Krait

Neha's lovely skin and the lies that blacken her sparkling white teeth. Surely she must use Colgate (or Close Up, is it?) that gives shining teeth? Close to your mouth I could smell garlic, or whisky? Which was it? Black Label, Old Monk, or Vat 60? Which brand smells like garlic? You must have had paranthas too. Up close I can smell the ghee upon your nostril! There! I can tell exactly what you eat even if I am absent from your business lunches!

O there is such a zing in these new songs of today, such foot-tapping sagas of romance, such swaying. Umph… The song continues to play and the body sways to the rhythm, even while one defecates. The plumber, a thin man with grey hair, dropped last evening a slice of fear upon my plate. You never know darling, these days there is so much theft, kidnapping and rape. Who knows which face hides which wolf and which a krait?

There is smoke everywhere and lady dust swirling, hand in hand in the company of pigeons and parrots. Like two asthmatics, unseen they conspire, they nudge, they nestle, like silken lambs against the lung-mass and cough up a cancer. A hairless, hollow-eyed, sunken-checked cancer. The sick yellow face of cancer reminds me of Mr. Pinakin who in turn reminds me of the puny plumber who promised to return for more repairs next Sunday. I cannot forget his gaze however. His lingering gaze had some thought of theft. Who knows which face hides which wolf and which a snake.

Who was it that raped Dr. Zeba of Bombay? A nameless hospital attendant. He choked her throat with a dog collar. Zeba struggled and fell and fell and slithered like a bitch with a collar. Even blood, the doctors say, was denied passage to the brain. Brainless she lay, a body with a noose. The maniac guzzled as he chewed, and plumbed his way through the gyre of climbing lust. Her brain, Dr. Zeba's brain, lies upon my plate today. I just refuse to eat it. "No no Madam it is a lamb's brain. Such a delicacy." O never mind the brain, I will stay hungry today. I am delicate.

Who knows which brain hides which wolf and which a lamb? In the company of pigeons and parrots I escape. Outside the night lies breathing and hungry. Bulky bored buses fart and sputter and fart. The speeding traffic has no heart. The road chokes upon dust-clouds and smoke-frills. I choke upon the brain you dropped. I choke upon the howl of a dog. I walk strong and swift. I break into a running red sweat. Fear stalks the street like a rapist. Woman you are upset. Who knows which face hides which wolf and which a krait?

S. MURALI

I LIKE TO LET THE WORD FLY ABOUT

I like to let the word fly about
Not tied down to its meanings
Like a dog on a leash
And be walked on the beach.

But let it prance around, flip and turn
And perch on the tiniest branch
Of suspense and dream
In the balmy glow of a rainbow
Like a crazy cormorant
Caring not a fig for gravity.

I like to let the word
Make mouths of mockery
At those who take it to mean
Like the sea and sea weed moth-green

I like to clutch them and scooping
Fling handfuls into the sky
And watch them rain
Poetry.

KAIKEYI

Call me by what name you will.
Riding the chariot in furious battle
I saw the loosening axle shaft
And held on with my bare hands--
My delicate finger steadied the wheel
And the heroic steeds.
Such a simple deed, and yet

It gained me my love's adoration.
I didn't want anything for myself.
I never did. Now, when I did
Desire the throne for my own son
You dubbed me evil and cast me
Into perdition's depths. I know
Rama of the noble soul is my son too.
Dasaratha's darling cannot
Bear out his heroic destiny indoors--
The demons are all about in far jungles
And across the seas. You saw the
Hunchback hobble, the goddess
Upsetting her utterances, and she is now
The witch for all times. Turned in epic perfection
The tale is all set to order. My son too
Reads my misdeeds in the text.
I am not too sure of myself anymore.
Call me by what name you will--only
Lead me to my own space
Having disordered my ordered destiny.
Let me read myself afresh
In the crushing might of turning wheels.

EKALAVYA

All things for all are never the same.
For instance this sky and earth

Fused as one like
Feather and shaft.

Like this wide water
And fire--

Like my sliced thumb;
Never again the same for me

As for them.
Their dogs are out there, somewhere

Tongues stitched to their open jaws.
Witness the relics of my achieved archery.

Still can I feel
The grip of feather and leather

Against my cheek--
Fused like the sky and earth.

My bare hands are freer now
Swift yet my arrows can fly

Seeking no mark.
--my guru's desire

forged in anguish of that one great warrior
split through my right thumb;

It was my bow string that did the rest.
My thumb now lies shriveled beside his idol.

Will I prove to be
Mightier by far--I know not yet.

How did I fail to discern that simple *truth*
That heads far beyond the knower?

The fear that lurks beneath the idol?
That fire of self-seeking ambition?

Like deer to the hound
And hound to the hunter

I am bound body and soul
To this shattered stone visage.

Why turn that stone over now?
Let it remain forever in its moral guise.

Unhook the eagle from the skies.
Pluck out the fish from the water.

And yet who can figure out the acts of men?
Nothing's ever the same for all.

If I speak or sing, they'll come for my tongue.
My heart, if I love or hate.

Like a torn thumb I now hang
Between devotion and disdain--a mortal remnant--

All green closes round me
Timeless trees and shrubs,

The endless blue and purple of hills
Lone birds, and I await the dark lord.

No harp, no tempura, I hold nothing.
Expect my bow, except my bow.

GRACE

That woman had nothing
to give when that little monk
in saffron thrust out his bowl

and cried *bhavati bhiksham dehi*
in front of her shack--
except a ripe gooseberry.

The little *sannyasin*
took her offering
with a smile gracious

that like clear water afterwards
graced
her entire being with radiance.

She stood there drenched
under a rain of golden gooseberries
while the little boy

turned and walked away,
his palms closed round
the still bitter-sweet fruit;

only he knew
how to take away
the bitterness.

T. R. JOY

REMEMBERING NISSIM EZEKIEL

A regular Friday
after a Poetry Circle reading--
a coincidence, may be.

It was at the restaurant
we got the news.
Then the sudden silence,

the murmur of memories.

A sagging line across his room
gathers a few clothes,
wet and bewildered.

The last time we met
he smiled as usual
wearing the unrest gracefully,

lost in the struggle.

A troubled dream
among those unhinged lives,
he fumbled with pen and paper

realigning some more psalms
lingering in tangled nerves
to reclaim the voice

misplaced elsewhere.

What is a dead poet?
Cells dissolved in print,
a lapsed riot of metaphors?

Ripe within the dark
without the distorting lights,
the seed can wait

for the next wind and the rain.

THE REAL BUSINESS

Archiving destiny's breathless ways,
tongues and tales ferment ancient scrolls
ripening in secret cellars
guarded by mystical sand dunes.

A dry stick of the covenant,
the relic of a rare miracle,
never sprouts a spring on the rock,
a promise lost in the desert.

Those chosen conspire with demons,
bloody the land and its people.
The prophet's cry hangs on the cross
startled by God's own betrayal.

The Holy of Holies tore the veil,
and the people's temple buckled;
the flaming new sign on the sky,
squandered by their own feuding gods.

Between Abraham and Isaac,
the knife and the bullet change hands;
and the Lord's voice can't intervene
bullish stakes and capital bargains.

The prodigal doesn't stand a chance;
the eldest has honed his cunning.
He won't bet on old parables,
to prospect today's salvation.

Sermons and services on the web,
credit emailed on change of heart;
the New Gospel of the virtual,
a slick trade on our PC's.

No more arid trails to paradise,
nor the Shaman's dance in the wind.
No gypsy chieftain can herd
the storms of our turbulent lands.

The soul is a groping smoke
the body, heavy and ashen;
we can't hold it any longer,
the fine sheen of an illusion.

THE TATTOO

the kiss
that stays
in the solitude
together

the blaze
in their eyes
that wakes up
the night
the moon

then

a smile
half-opens

tattooed
on an ecstasy

reluctant
to miss it all

DION DE SOUZA

MENDING THE NEGLECTED HEART

I grow cold.
My heart is impoverished.
It hangs around street corners,
little beggar
dressed in tatters.

Sometimes, I pick it up--
poor raggedy thing,
and replace it.
But mostly, I let it
lie out in the cold.

Today, I kiss it, caress it,
begin to suck out
the poison and bad blood.
Worms and rodents
have been at it.

I'll buy a small packet of love
and cement the notches;
clean, rinse
and clothe it.
Very gently, I shall reattach

the veins, the arteries,
then fix it firmly
back in place.

A POEM FOR A FORGOTTEN, OLD COTTAGE

I.
I waited in the darkness,
but no one came,
The suns rose and set,
same as ever.

I waited in the darkness,
yet no one came.
The moons rose and set,
same as ever.

Rose and set,
rose and set
same as ever.

II.
The tiled floor split,
and sprouted life.
Bits of almost ancient roof
and wall crumbled
and caved in.
Rodent eyes twinkle
from fortresses of debris,
their obese bodies scuttle
across on tiny feet.
The creepers slowly devoured me,
beginning with the wrecked porch.
The broken windows let them in.
The broken door put on a brave face,
and stared ahead resolutely.
Spiders and tired pigeons worked
day and night to drape me--
Yet no one came,
no one came,
no one came…

OCTOBER 11, 2003

It is one of those days
when words refuse
to come easily,
when you have tea-breath
and your head feels heavy.
When angels grumble,
and devils seem holy.

Memories come unbidden
Of a girl who crafted dolls
by entwining candy wrappers
around sticks from brooms.
Of wearing rubber slippers
and padding to the beach,
wet, pink soles receding
with foamy waves, in squishy sand.
Of a mock-turtle who offered to hold my hand.
Of a boy who always wanted,
cried into a pillow.
Of a man and woman who soared,
and left me low.

SHANTHI PREMKUMAR

MIRROR

Flying clips and scattered blouses
Blaring tape and insolent stares
Tears and fury--morn, noon, and night
Peace and quiet--O, no way!
Conflict is the order of the day

Blue I choose, no--purple it is!
Chappathis would be nice--but idlis I end up with
A French plait would look elegant
But when a boy cut is IN, why rave and rant?

Hugs and kisses and pleaded favours
Pushed back to realms of memory
Holding place with well-worn photos in thick albums
The raised voice now jars--
Where the lisped nonsense was music

What is this?
Is she the same soft bundle
My pride and love and joy
My little daughter of dark hair and trusting eyes
On a shy tilt?

All aflame with query
I look into her eyes
Her eyes are suddenly mirrors
And I see myself
Young and angry and thirteen years old!

RIZIO RAJ

MATHERAN[1]
(Dussera, 2004)

This winding path
is not of the mountains;
it is along a crease on your brow
that I ride, like a dream.
The pale moon that falls through the woods
does not belong to the night;
it is your desperate smile
spreading into my memory.
The music that I hear
is not that which the cicadas make;
it is the symphony of the calls
of all the birds that I have not seen.
Because I know these,
I believe them, too,
when they tell me
this forest still smells of blood,
gunpowder, and patriotism.
Tonight, love, these heights
are so much like the way you are to me,
and the way I am to you:
at once present and absent.

[1] A hill station near Mumbai

REKHA
(An Elegy)

Rekha, I did not imagine
you would ensure
that I acquired every element
of your presence.
In fact, I never thought
you would go away at all.

I suddenly find them waiting
to be owned:
your soft laughter
your husky voice
your awkward gait
your small feet
your caress on my arm
your lonely eyes.

Now, I do not know
how to undo my absence at your departure.
But, couldn't you have waited for my return
this time too, as you always did,
at least to ask me if I wanted these?
Perhaps, I had taken you for granted?
Or, was it you who took me for granted,
this time?

SRIDHAR RAJESWARAN

A BRIEF STOP-OVER AT BRUSSELS BAHNHOFF

Brussels Bahnhoff
Where Croissants cost a full meal
If you pay in a different currency

Foreigner

You could eat them amidst cold stares
In waiting rooms with certain other homeless
Who came to take in a little warmth

Hungry

And watch it soon change
Into a scorching Indian Summer
Through ubiquitous occupational looks

In the first world

Of a nomadic criminal *polizei*
Meandering cowherds hustling
Mostly their own

Less humane

The stares stopped before me
And in quickness double shifted away
As if they knew their beef was cow to me

Only living

AN EVENING WITH CATHY

Cathy Waegner
Anglistik teacher
After *café, kuchen* and apple tea
Waters her vegetables

As usual it's for her plants and poets

Karin and Nilufer, poet and writer-critic
Watch a football game
With Heinrich, teacher of English
And theatre man in Werthenbach

Basking in an ambience of careful bonhomie

A measured evening over food
Lacing palates with politics
Tasting camaraderie studied
Rather dramatically

All the while the lone black cat purrs away

The burnt out ends of my butt
I consign into the marked blue box
Along with other debris
A little tentatively

Memories after all for an other day

Sridhar Rajeswaran

SIEGEN REVISITED, A MEMORY BIRTHED

"Counting colours in a rainbow"
with Cathy, teacher of Anglistik
Clicking champagne glasses

And over severed tomatoes
Searching her web page
Of newer links

Slicing, piecing, cleaning
On a cutting winter eve

And amidst the miasma of split ash
Seeking a togetherness in crowd
Even as my memory in solitude births

A phoenix story
Exclusively mine

JIJU VARGHESE

TO THOMAS MANN, WITH LOVE[1]
(The Death of the Author)

After I carried home the box of Christmas presents
after his arm was caught in the chair's slot
he could not move it, gave raw screams
when I bent it through his coat; after we reached
Casualty's grey chairs, he stretched both arms
to a huge and battered bear. After this hard
day, he sleeps, wrapped warm; while bearing rubbish,
wildly tired, I cross our door's backyard.

Dark? Look up. The sky is glowing white,
the ground before my feet is dry and still.
Something finds my cheek, drops heavier
than air, quiet as the wasteland of hill,
which rushes me with secret touch, the snow,
more gentle than a Man(n). It will kill.

[1] The poem has its roots in the novel *Death in Venice* by the German novelist Thomas Mann which depicts the complex interplay of a fascinating relationship between Gustave von Aschenbach, a celebrated writer and Tadzio, an exotic young boy, which eventually culminates in the death of the author.

MADHURITA CHOUDHARY

SPIRIT OF FIRE

Dormant fire, walking alone,
A singer's whistle floated ashore,
Whistled to convey praise of a kind,
Murmured they, "Oh! Never mind."

Into a bus, feet on rest,
A man so near pressed her breast,
Pressed to feel body of a kind,
Murmured they, "Oh! Never mind."

Entered the ring: licensed violence,
Volcano within plugged with silence,
Battered, beaten, love of a kind?
Assured they, "Oh! Never mind."

Magma still, on life road track,
When pounding heart began to crack,
She wailed and pleaded, mercy of a kind,
Bellowed they, "Oh! Never mind."

Bruised burst, molten rock,
The world which bore a shock
Arose to ask for right of a kind,
Said she now, "Why shouldn't I mind?"

Found course with spirit of fire,
Spitting fire for wish and desire,
In came hands, like her kind,
Roared she, "Yes, I do mind."

A compass needle, unwavering now,
Soon she learnt the why and how,
Must she dare spar with the Sun?
No one cares till she has won.

The fight is on, or is it a fight?
No bugle sound for right or might.
Asking for share of growing root,
We, the bearer of flower and fruit.

M. K. AJAY

GULMOHAR TREES, BEYPORE

Resolute, this air's coolness
is a tree outstretched
as billowing brittle branches.
Tree-prints stand
on a glazed plate of blue
and dampness in this two-dimensional
province carved from illusion
and scent of coconut trees.
These trees in robust tender alertness,
are murals set against many skies
created after rainbows,
our hunger for freedom held
into wood and angry red
blooming along a brick wall
flirting with crooked tar roads
and fishermen's routes.
Wild grasses touching our feet--
a passive ticklish resistance--
instill fear of venom
and much promise of mirth;
the quietness around us
is replete with legends
and elephant dung, threaded
into a story of accents
lent by crows fighting
for a right to inhabit our ancestry
and steal at will. Scarlet waves of lavish petals
dart through a wedge created by sun
with a broken branch's connivance, a slice of
sunshine broken away from the dawn sky,
settling on gulmohar trees as wasps,
stinging our solemn eyes.
Words we desired in poetry

strung through our vision,
impaled smells.
They exploded, those scarlet gulmohar petals
in robust tender alertness.

EYE

I am an accursed
white bag of coarse fluid.
My fragile inch
bridging world and retina
is a taut slice of history:
an army of nerves
and hope fighting
impulse to look away.
Age weakens me
with foresight and sly
darkening circles of innocence;
age removes magic
kindling Spartan oddity.
I paint scenarios
scratched with fallen eyelashes
and lose hold on outlines
of matter, common truths.
I am colours
etched into striated flesh
waiting behind language of sight
and translated worlds.
I become sights I see, subject
and imprecise object.
Eyes see, therefore, I am.

WALKING TO THE DUCK POND

Beyond my ancestral tug
stepping out into wide open paddy fields
along a cool slush
of rain-swept granite-edged canal,
two frail old women scurry
with baskets of paddy husk
and burden on their heads.
Their eyes dislodge colours
packed into this sunshine and monsoon's fertile touch,
ignore bone's wear and bored tear,
configure muddy rectangles
of green beside memories.
Beyond them
a few sodden footprints
and mukkutti blooms
snared in this field's smothering crowd
of stalks and insects in toad territory.
And a path that ends
in a duck pond, as if surprised.

The sun is stretched
into this pond, and its fire
has turned a soft green
reflected from this water
and arguably, celestial envy.
You ignore the sun's pond-smoothened hue
a habit born from fear of eclipses
and primal reflex,
like reptilian revulsion.

On the pond, banyan tree leaves
and what remains after duck's courtship,
ripples, feathers and other sulking birds.
You remain in this banyan tree's shade
fraught with daydreams and prospect of rain.

The two old women have disappeared, white clouds
swallowed by hillocks a hundred yards away,
clouds waiting to talk to earth's dryness
and prayers of farmers snared by these paddy fields.

You sense this afternoon is crowded.
It is waiting to erupt
with voices snared by these paddy fields.
As clouds gather, mynahs hiding in the fields
adjust the urgency of their mating calls;
only banyan leaves clasping the pond's unguent textured
ripples remind you of your aloneness.
Quietness and disappearing grandmothers
cannot conceal facts:
this afternoon is crowded
waiting to erupt.

AYSHA VISWAMOHAN

WOMAN! ORDINARY?

“FEEL SENSUOUS TONIGHT”
the tall, curvaceous model
on the city-hoarding
proclaims silently,
as she stands swathed
in crepe de chine,
arms akimbo, hips slightly
jutted out, like those sculptures
that attract the tourists so much,
like those goddesses, who dominate
the dreams of so many.
She dazzles, she shines, she sparkles.
Actually, her sheer ensemble
reveals more, and covers little
but nevertheless…
Untouched perfection, carved in flex.

Right beneath her, reluctantly
caught in a traffic, trying to find her way
is the girl--she could even be me,
or any of my sisters--sweaty, greasy, near-sighted.
Feeling the nameless
eyes and faceless fingers
all over her average, non-descript body.

Jostled, shoved, handled,
she moves on.
She commutes daily
but today missed the bus
(of course, sometimes these things happen).
She continues to make her way

through the seeming deadlock
of clouds of dust and smoke
and the customary sound
of state transport buses
with broken silencers.

At twenty-six, she's got used to all this.
It has been five years, already.
Five years of her typist's job.
Of tolerable drudgery,
sitting at the computer, using MS Word,
pinning in memos/agendas/ minutes of meetings,
keying in orders/ apologies/confirmations.
Smiling at her boss's humorless jokes,
sharing the meals (and concerns) of her colleagues,
taking the calls, pleasant through it all.

Eight hours of routine
could appear worthless to others.
But for her, it's the way of life--the only way she knows it.
These eight hours define her.

ABDULRASHID BIJAPURE

THE VANISHING VISION

A vague confused sensation at first
gradually a distinct image.
He didn't know what it meant.

The man in the pin-striped suit
walking with a brief-case
day after day, from the parking lounge
to the entrance of the tall building.

Near the young plant
a palm from a coastal forest
of the dark continent
which had not yet grown to expose
all its future splendor to the viewers.
…Beyond the ken of his vision
it was there.

A distorted shape of a young boy
untimely old with deep wrinkles
on the kerb behind the plant.
A bug-infested greasy quilt
Slipping from his right shoulder.

Anger and hatred in the eye
overgrown blackened nails
gnashing the teeth frighteningly, and
emitting cries of agony,
alternating with
the other-worldly whistling shrieks of a witch
creating a vomiting sensation in the young executive
grimacing at him…yet,
vanishing the moment he turned at him.

Who or what is the fellow
what relation has it got with him
why the accusation?
He has done no wrong to him.

Perhaps, amid all the covert rituals of power,
it is one of the crushed bodies
desperately trying to cling like mud
to the living present
before entering finally
the dark vault of extinction.

AARATI MUJUMDAR

LIFE

Miles and miles
Of parched brown land
Expectantly look at Heavens,
Like a childless woman
Waiting to get impregnated.

Dark clouds on the horizon
Streaks of lightning
Signal of new life.

Roll of thunder, gusty winds, torrential rain
Lash her.
She laps it all, greedy for more.
Now calm and peaceful
Seed within her watered
Waiting to germinate, bloom and blossom.

UNFATHOMABLE

We stared
Into each others
Deep unfathomable
Salt lakes
Silently wondering
Silently asking
Whether there was
Any hope left
For both of us.

JAYANTA BHATTACHARYA

VOID

I dwindle
on the lip
of a void
that confronts
the hell
and the paradise

I huddle
on becalmed parapets
with snaffled hunger
and hear
unnumbered slabbering voices

I swindle
at the edge
of the earth
and peep
through a veil dark
as a void

SITAKANT MAHAPATRA

JOURNEYS

Unaccustomed to the desert
we meet it everywhere
within us and out there,
in howling markets, jostling streets
choked driveways and in our hearts;
its empire keeps expanding.

Others knew the desert, lived there happily
were used to its groaning sandstorms
its beckoning stars, its infinities
its colourful but lonely austerities
celebrated in silence.

We have mowed down trees, whole forests
that composed poetry in the sky
butchered them for our unmeaning words
measured by tonnage or else
to swell the purse of the unscrupulous.

We have journeyed long
riding on ambition, greed.
There was a time when we begged
of the stately palm tree for a few leaves,
trusted the sun to season them in right measure
and, as we etched, backs bent,
trusted the iron stylus to say our thoughts.

We have journeyed long since then;
riding a donkey across the equator
through heat standing taller than us
past continents, colonies empires
riding the waves

past solitude, silence, ice-caps of poles
and howling winds; and now ready to sail
across dense darkness, void
to neighbours whirling in the dark.
If only our souls could enter
and build a colony of nests
within those birds paddling blissfully
in the blue lake of the sky
not far from us!

THE BIRDS SEEM SURPRISED

The birds seem surprised as they watch me.
a perfect stranger.

The rising sun calls out loud
the orphan wind's caress
and the consolation of stars fading away
wake me up.

Getting up, I sip my tea lazily
mix my words with
the dialogue of the pine trees and the sea.

Meanwhile more car bombs explode
all over Iraq
more kids die in Darfur
world-bodies juggle with words
the birds stop singing
and fly away.

In the garden
the creeper's tendril clutches
at a dry stick seeking
some more steps sunward.

A VILLAGE GOES TO THE MARKET

A village goes to the market.

With ample care it carries
a few cocks, some *mahul* flowers
mushroom, brightly coloured
bamboo baskets,
shawls woven in tiny looms
and honey collected from trees and caves
in high rock-faces.

In animated conversation
the long road becomes short;
in no time the village meets the market
swarming with people.

There is very little purchase to be made;
only the meeting with so many friends
who live in tiny villages
across the hills;
they are friends not only to-day
but of many many births.

Day for a festival is fixed,
marriages negotiated
with handia drink many dreams are dreamt;
the sky studded with stars
is joined to dreams about children's future;
the ancient tragedies of ancestors are linked
to to-day's sorrows and despair,
stories are woven cancelling
time, sorrow and death.

In no time the day comes to an end
like life of a man;

stealthily darkness submerges everything
but the light in the heart
lights up the road.

Quietly a village returns
from the market.

(*Translated from Oriya by the author*)

DINA NATH NADIM

Dina Nath Nadim, a Kashmiri poet who has received several awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to Kashmiri poetry and literature. He introduced the sonnet form, blank verse, and opera into Kashmiri literature. The translator has suggested that the following bits of verse could be called "anecdotes."

ANECDOTES

I

A path, running through a field,
ended near a stream.
Over the other bank
they shaped a road
that led to a village.
Someone sent a message
over the stream.
The stream howled
as
it heard the tales
of the village
and
the city

II

A chrysanthemum espied a marigold
and said
"Why hurry!
Stay a while.
The sunshine is still all colour."
The marigold replied:
"You are in the dawn of youth,
my childhood died long ago.
Yours are the shavings of autumn;
mine is only the incense of spring."

III

A flower spoke to the soil
but its pains remained untold:
the bushes were pruned
but
they were trapped in sorrow.

They say the garden is abloom,
the sunshine washes the flowerbeds
and the cool reigns.

IV

The dew was born
in the silence of the night.
Each leaf perspired.
The morning ray was aghast
and
died near the frost.

V

By the foot of a hill
a butterfly winged back trembling
to its home.
On the way
flowers welcomed it and said:
"Come,
sit beside us
and
live beside us
and
live your youth."
The butterfly replied:
"You tempt and unfold and madden.
I show my colours in vain."

VI

A wind
carrying twigs
climbed down a hill
and
walked on the riverbank.
The twigs got stuck against a mound of sand
and
found their place.
Since then the people say:
“The twigs are always for the fire.”

VII

Springwind passed by our door
and
with restive fingers
beat its breast.
I asked a flower, “What happened?”
In a corner
it puckered its lips.
Soon a dry petal appeared
and
the springbushes
beat their breasts.

VIII

The crows shouted
for
they knew not how to spend their leisure;
the nightingales adorned their nests,
the hay became stacks.
The nightingales hatched
their breaths were visible.
One flight
and the world knew the newborn.
Suddenly all shouting stopped.

IX

A sculptor sculpted a relief,
painted it
and
rediscovered its every limb.
When he looked at its face
he found the lost
and
lost the find.

X

A shoe
with its mouth open
lay on the road
longing for a draught of water.
A dog came,
shattered the shoe
and
took it to a drain.
Thirst may quench today!

A brick said to a stone:
"You are a part
I am the whole."

XI

A leaf detached from a tree
and
fell upon the earth
the turf said
"This is a friend come
from the uneven
and
fallen upon the level."

XII

Myanas espied a small blackbird
and
from afar said:
"Hey, where are you going so early?
Who do you call up at this time?"
The blackbird replied:
"You have to hide the booty of autumn,
I have to collect the treasures of spring."

XIII

A lone naked poplar stood aloof,
there was a crowd of crows.
The leaves of a Chinar shook
and
the children shouted: "Caw…caw."
The crows fled like the wind
and
the branches trembled.
The poplar looked all around
and
found itself alone.

XIV

A broken mirror
shone on junk.
A cow came
and
looked at it;
a dog came
and
breathed at it;
a mad woman lifted it
and
wrapped it in her rags.
Nobody knows
what happened to the broken mirror
afterwards

XV

A vessel
washed by the raindrops
looked like a woman's liquid face.
The raindrops
washed off its sins.
Somebody came
and kicked the vessel.
Shards lay here and there.
Two days later
children played with the fragments.

From heaven to hell
there are two and a half steps.

XVI

A hut leaned against a house
counting its days
winter after winter.
One winter
snow shattered its roof;
another winter
rain felled it.
Someone bought the house
and
raised a bungalow instead.

Once upon a time
a hut was there;
now
it is sod.

(*Translated from Kashmiri by Arvind Gigoo*)

PIJUSH DHAR

Pijush Dhar is a Bengali poet who edits *Pahariya*, a Bengali magazine devoted to poetry from the Northeast. He has published five collections of poetry and recently retired from the Accountant General's Office in Shillong.

IRAQ I: THAT ANCIENT HOUSE AND ITS LIGHT

Now the creases on my wife's forehead
        and beneath that
                the film of my vision captures a passing thought.
Like an intricate postscript we see awakening
        the defacing spider web on the veranda
and the darkness dances like death…
and then my eyesight fixed like a button
        hears the footsteps of doomsday's season in the dark alley.
Like petals the shopping list of my wife
inside the kitchen changes into each and every corpse…
I wonder how much the waters of the Tigris will swallow.
        From my mindset
                I perceive the light
                        of that home of civilization.

(*Translated from Bengali by Parnab Mukherjee*)

YOUR MEMORY--MANJUSH DASGUPTA

The apple orchard's last sigh of the sea
Now the resting house…and slowly unwinds
        the saint-of-the-sand's
cloudy shroud.
Keeping one's hand on the dial of the rain
                one would have taught the *mantra*

of how the young sunlight can become the sky
even as the torn moon bursts.
Today that laugh awash with foam
in that invisible air seems
a museum that genuflects
and sprinkles the blood's debt.

(*Translated from Bengali by Parnab Mukherjee*)

PRISONER OF THE BAMBOO

Nobody writes in the empty room
anymore
letters…
The envelope is filled with emptiness.
On the path that has been
seized
a car with red flashing lights speeds away.
Twenty yards down the road
the eye behind the bamboo railing
in drunken eagerness to penetrate the map
sees nothing…
Like this, days go by--swimming in that tide
awaiting and listening to the vigil's whistle
twitching fingers
wrapped in soggy towels
chewing the cud
day is ushered in
in night's meander.

(*Translated from Bengali by Parnab Mukherjee and Bhaskar Gupta*)

Pijush Dhar

ACCORDING TO MY AGE MY VISION DECAYS

According to my age my eyesight fails
amidst the hair on my head
graying locks announce the allergy.
I pluck that grayness
thinking it is more like gray mountain clouds
like that wonderfully wrinkled old lady's back.
Those bygone days of books' *desi* covers
caught in the geometric patterns of buying and selling,
pronouncing a bout of asthma.
Actually the air lacks healthy paradigms.
In that musical slogan, one plunges of course
in the make-believe sea
displayed on bright front pages of governmental news.
In highest courts, appeals with their heads down
plod on, knowing the futility of deliverance.
However, it was important to know how long citizens
in that stagnant pool, amidst adjourned meetings,
would remain whole without committing suicide,
and false teeth will reveal
drunken governance and its sick roots.

(*Translated from Bengali by Parnab Mukherjee and Bhaskar Gupta*)

CHILDHOOD DAYS SPENT WITH RED BOILED RICE

The *aush* crop's bent tips
are laced with a dreadful nervous tension.
The boat sways with the rhythm of the dance,
on its eyes
a *diwali* is composed.

Conversations concerning labour
seem meaningless then. The heaving waves
do not touch us
especially the curves of the stricken body.

Even then the thread of the logic…
the *aush* crop of the month of *sravan*…
the feeling of jealousy leaves no imprint and
with all the genius of childhood
writes no émigré sentence
and boyhood days are spent
munching red boiled rice.

(*Translated from Bengali by Parnab Mukherjee and Bhaskar Gupta*)

AMBIKA ANANTH

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHANTA ACHARYA

Shanta Acharya's four books of poetry are *Shringara* (Shoestring Press, UK; 2006), *Looking In, Looking Out* (Headland Publications, UK; 2005), *Numbering Our Days' Illusions* (Rockingham Press, UK; 1995) and *Not This, Not That* (Rupa & Co, India; 1994). She is Director of "Poetry in the House" based at Lauderdale House in Highgate, London, which she founded in 1996.

Born in Cuttack, Orissa, she won a scholarship to Oxford, and was among the first batch of women admitted to Worcester College in 1979. After the completion of her doctoral research at Oxford, she was appointed a Visiting Scholar at Harvard from 1983-5. Her doctoral study, *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*, was published by Edwin Mellen Press, USA, in 2001.

Currently, she is Associate Director, Initiative on Foundation and Endowment Asset Management at London Business School. She is the author of *Asset Management: Equities Demystified* (Wiley, UK; 2002) and *Investing in India* (Macmillan, UK; 1998). She was the largest institutional investor in India when she was at Baring Asset Management when the Indian stock market was initially opened to foreign institutional investors. Her third book, *Endowment Asset Management: Investment Strategies in Oxford and Cambridge* with Elroy Dimson, is to be published by Oxford University Press, UK, in 2007.

She is widely published, and is considered a highly evolved and 'happening' poet. Reading her poetry is an intimate experience; it is like seeing the way she sees the world, and her interpretation of her experience settles in unobtrusively. As one of her poet-friends, Mimi Khalvati, said, "Shanta's poetry shows a rare combination of lyricism, intelligence, sagacity and a wicked sense of humour. She is not afraid to tackle large themes, to take on the abstract, the

metaphysical, or the spiritual, or to use the idiom such themes demand. It is refreshing to find these qualities in such an engaging and individual voice." Her various worlds blend with ease into her work.

Shanta Acharya, in conversation with Ambika Ananth, explains how she achieves these qualities, and other interesting facts about her poetic oeuvre.

* * *

INTERVIEW

***Ambika Ananth**: Your background as an author ranges from poetry, literary criticism, reviews and articles to books on asset management. Such a range of skills is rare, indeed. What is the connection between poetry and asset management?*

Shanta Acharya: As E.M. Foster said, "Only connect." At a practical level, there is definitely a connection. I was born to a family of teachers and academics in Orissa, and my education had certainly equipped me to be one myself. But thanks to market cycles, laws of probability, karma--whatever you prefer to call it--I ended up in London working in the asset management sector. I am not complaining, but such are the vicissitudes of life! As far as writing poetry is concerned, it has been the only steady thing in my life; the only link between my past, present and hopefully future. It keeps me sane and alive.

The apparently conflicting worlds of poetry and business are not as opposed to each other as they are made out to be. Having lived in various worlds, I have learnt that the best business people are not dissimilar to great artists, thinkers or poets; both are driven by the power of imagination, their creative instincts. Both are visionaries, their clarity of vision enables them to be disciplined in thought and action.

Coming to your question about how I blend these disparate worlds. When I write I am not conscious of the need to keep my worlds apart or otherwise. On the contrary, as T.S. Eliot reminds us, a modern poet is skilled in multi-tasking. To what extent two opposing worlds exist in one space depends also on the reader. We see what we want to see; we see what we are capable of seeing, and also we see things we do not understand. There are various kinds of seeing, knowing, understanding. What I put into a poem may not be what you get out of it. But does it matter? Perhaps not, as a great poem ultimately stands on its own. The poet becomes redundant once the poem is delivered to the world. One of my poems, written in two sections, "Dear Tech Support" and "Dear Customer," has taken a life of its own in cyberspace. There is no mention of me as the author. I would definitely appreciate the recognition, but in other ways it is amazing that the two poems are so realized in the minds and lives of others. Are they great poems? I don't know. Only time will tell; even if a single poem of mine survives, I will have achieved my goal.

Coming back to the process of writing, it is alchemical. Sometimes, I switch from polishing a poem to revising the draft of my book on asset management or vice-versa.

AA*: Would it be correct to point out that each of your poetry books has a unifying theme with a distinct voice?* Looking In, Looking Out *is quite different from* Shringara *though they both appeared within a year of each other; similarly with* Not This, Not That *and* Numbering Our Days' Illusions*. So, to understand your poetry, one really needs to read all the books, or end up with a partial picture, perhaps? Also, is there a chronological progression of ideas, thought, and diction, between your books? Is there something about the publication history of the four books that might shed some light?*

SA: You raise many valid points here. Yes, each of the collections has a distinct personality as it were. *Not This, Not That*, my first

book, as the title suggests, explores the idea of the Self arising from the Hindu concept of *neti, neti*. While not a religious person, I find the notion of *neti, neti* of tremendous relevance. In fact, *Numbering Our Days' Illusions* carries on with that theme, albeit at the level of relationships between men and women. *Looking In, Looking Out*, appearing almost a decade later is poised, has more fun playing with issues relating to how we see reality, the inner and the outer etc. *Shringara*, my latest collection, explores death as it defines life, and loss as a means of defining oneself. Shringara, as you know, in classical Indian paintings and sculpture is typically represented by a woman (could be a man in the modern world) getting ready, putting on make-up, sitting/standing in front of a mirror, facing herself, her world. Preparing for life, her lover, whatever... That image reminds me of Shakespeare's 'ripeness is all.' We all prepare every day, put on different clothes, to face the day. When we die we are also 'made up.' Shringara for me refers to all kinds of preparation we need in our lives for Life itself. Our families, friends, experiences (both the ones we have and the ones we don't) all shape us, make us who we are… Don't you agree? So, there is an integral connection between the four collections.

Regarding the question of simultaneity of experience, the publication history may shed some light. The journey of a poem from when it is born (i.e. written by the poet), then published in a journal to finally finding its home in a book can be an interesting process. Most poets manage to get a collection published every few years; the intervals may vary somewhat, but publication is fairly steady. To that extent, my experience is very different, if not unique.

When Rupa accepted my first collection, may I add as a result of Keki Daruwalla's recommendation, the volume had gone through several iterations. *Not This, Not That* appeared finally in 1994, by which time I had written a lot more poems, as you will appreciate. As a result, *Not This, Not That*, included poems that were written as late as 1993, "The Night of Shiva," for example, and others as early

as 1978. *Numbering Our Days Illusions* also has poems that were written over an equally long period of time.

My publishing record has been rather promiscuous, but that is not uncommon in the field of poetry. So, the long journey a poem makes from conception to finding a home in a collection can be a fascinating process. One good thing about these long gestation periods is the luxury one has of not just re-visiting the poems, but also in sequencing them in a body of work; like making a quilt, finding the right ones that fit together. Thus, each volume has a unifying theme though containing poems written over decades; perhaps that is why the collections have that element of simultaneity.

AA*: Some of your early poems are short; each line of these poems is also short. For example, poems like "Prayer," "Wisdom," "Faith" in* Not This, Not That. *Then, the poems towards the end of that collection have longer lines; the poems are longer too, as is the case with the powerfully moving "Belshazzar's Feast" or "The Night of Shiva." Both types of poems have a very strong impact, the ideas behind the shorter poems are no less powerful than the ones inherent in the longer ones. How does the process evolve?*

SA: It is true that more of my early poems are short; they also have shorter lines, while my more recent poems tend to be longer and individual lines can also be long. I don't think there is anything unusual about that. I reckon each poem demands its own structure; style and content go together. What is expressed is perhaps as important as how it is expressed. So, best words in the best order are best reflected by the supporting theme, as long as the integrity of the poem is maintained. Some poets value style more than content; for me a great poem is one that wins on both counts. My early poems are more concentrated, in the sense that I have focused on one image; like meditation. It lets the mind fix on that image and then the reverberations follow; it is similar to throwing a pebble into a calm pond. The equivalent for the later poems is like bathing

in a river where you have to be alert to the underlying currents. There is a narrative supporting the other elements in the poem; the lines are long, tensile, stretching the imagination.

AA*: You have now lived abroad for over two decades, mostly in England; you've also been actively involved in the world of poetry. You were on the Council of the Poetry Society, and you have been hosting monthly poetry readings at Lauderdale House in London since 1996. Do you think your work is being better recognized now within the mainstream in the UK? What is your view of contemporary poetry in Britain?*

SA: There are two different questions here. The first one is perhaps easier to answer: do I think my work is better recognized within the mainstream of poetic writing in the UK? The answer is "don't know"; it is difficult for me to comment; you should ask some "mainstream" critics, poets in the UK what they think.

What I can tell you is some 200 poems of mine have been published in 60-70 journals in the UK. If you include my publications worldwide, these numbers double. So, whenever I feel my poetry is not being adequately recognized or appreciated within the UK or any where else for that matter, I remind myself of the occasion when I was told by a "famous" poet in the UK that she had not received the kind of attention she deserved. So, these things are relative. The mainstream in all constituencies is defined by exclusion. Perhaps I have not received the sort of attention I deserve, but I prefer to think that the glass is half-full rather than half-empty. Also, why should I attach more importance to an incestuous circle of blinkered editors in the UK, supported by the Arts Council, when I want my poems to be read and appreciated by people any where in the world?

As far as the second question is concerned--my view of contemporary poetry in Britain--it is too big an issue to deal with in a few words; that would demand an article on its own. In brief,

contemporary poetry in Britain is thriving though dominated by what, for lack of a better word, I refer to as "establishment" poets. The predilection for "celebrity" culture is also a sign of our times--even in India. In the UK, one is branded as an "Indian" poet, and left in the outer margins of the grand circle of British poets. Black British poets have fared better than poets from an Asian background. Major publishers of poetry in Britain, all substantially supported by the Arts Council, do not typically have an Asian list worth talking about. Faber has recently published an Asian male poet, while Bloodaxe and Carcanet among them have published three Asian women poets! The smaller presses are more open, but they simply do not have the marketing budgets available to larger publishing houses. Though not all small publishers neglect their minority poets, some do. The profile of Asian poets in the UK is therefore barely visible.

AA*: You have written a book entitled* The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Would you like to comment on that?*

SA: The book is based on my doctoral dissertation submitted for the D.Phil in 1983 in Oxford. It is encouraging that it was published 18 years after it was written; I cannot imagine anything similar happening to the research I have done on asset management, for example. So, it is quite reassuring to go back to some poems written over a quarter century ago, and still find them fresh, new and well worth re-reading.

As far as Emerson is concerned, Indian thought played a number of complex roles in the writings. My book traces his evolution as an American 'renaissance' man of his time. I seek to establish the relevance of Indian thought to the development of Emerson's mind, and more importantly his mode of expression. I examine major themes in his writing--with regard to his idea of the Self, Illusion, Evil, Compensation--and the revaluations he was able to achieve in

defining his own self. Only if more people were like him, capable of keeping an open mind--particularly as they get older.

I had personally embarked on a similar journey that Emerson had undertaken in his lifetime. The four years I spent in Oxford reading Emerson not only helped me understand his mind, but also in getting to know myself better. As you remarked earlier, the process never ends unless you allow it to do so. In my view, it is death, when you lose that "original relationship with the universe," as Emerson put it.

***AA**: You have several publications related to the field of asset management, not just books but also articles, reviews and interviews. How do you manage to maintain the balance that finds the time and the inner resources for your poetry?*

SA: Poetry, literature, and the arts are something I have to return to again and again like a diver seeking a breath of fresh air. No motivation required; it is vital to life, to my survival. Though I found myself in the world of finance more by accident than design, I consider myself fortunate to be given an opportunity not only to acquire a new skill, but to understand how the world works. Had I remained an academic in an English department somewhere, I would be grappling with all sorts of issues that have nothing to do with the reading and analysis of original texts.

What I find fascinating is that similar developments occurred in the world of investing. The pioneers of the investment world took risks and created wealth; not many investors today have sufficient knowledge of the underlying businesses they invest in. Just as literary theory has usurped the space the text occupied in the teaching of literature, in the world of investing modern theories replaced the need to know the underlying businesses one invested in. I'd like to think that the range and depth of one's experience in different aspects of human activity can only enhance one's reach as a writer.

SUDEEP GHOSH

AN INTERVIEW WITH SONJOY DUTTA-ROY

Sonjoy Dutta-Roy teaches in the Department of English, University of Allahabad. In 1995-1996, as a Senior Fulbright Fellow at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, USA, he worked with Prof. James Olney (Editor, *The Southern Review*) on the relationship between the writing of poetry and the writing of autobiography. His work has recently appeared in book form entitled *(Re)Constructing the Poetic Self: Tagore, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot* (Pencraft International Delhi). The book has been selected under the Government of India scheme of the HRD Ministry (Dept. of Education) for distribution to universities and libraries. Sudeep Ghosh discusses the critical proposition of Sonjoy Dutta-Roy and a few key issues pertaining to Indian Writing in English.

* * *

INTERVIEW

***Sudeep Ghosh**: To begin with, what is the relation between poetry and autobiography?*

Sonjoy Dutta-Roy: Autobiography is a narrative that uses the connecting distributing qualities of language while poetry celebrates the compressed, intense, focused quality of language. Yet when a poet looks back at his/her landmark poems written at different points of life and selects, edits, arranges them forward in book form, the act is no different from the autobiographical act. The difference is that here the material in which the mind works is not the lived life but the poetic text. This is the life that is played out in the poetry. To me, the reconciliation of these two fundamental modes of language is central to the creation of the symbolic life of which our real lives are a part.

SG: *How does autobiography contribute to the study of a poet's creative process, his growth and his works?*

SDR: It is through re-reading their own works, discovering the hidden meaning sown by their earlier selves that poets grow, as memorial acts surround earlier memorial acts. This autobiographical act is a reflection of the work upon itself. An old Yeats or Whitman or Tagore or Eliot thinking back about their entire poetic oeuvre and reading a symbolic order that they earlier never knew existed, is it not growth and maturity?

SG*: Prior to you, attention to this area of thinking is scarce. What led you into this?*

SDR: Two seminal works: James Olney's *Metaphor and Self* (Princeton, 1972) and Hazard Adam's *The Book of Yeats' Poems* (Florida State University Press, 1991). My discussion with Prof. Manas Mukul where ideas range from the '*Jeevan Shilpi*' to '*Pran Pratishtha*' have somewhere entered into the discourse.

SG*: Your first collection of poems* Absent Words *(Writers Workshop, Kolkata) has profound autobiographical overtones. Have you consciously fashioned it to realize your critical premise?*

SDR: Yes, the poems were written ranging a span of 20 years, published in journals and magazines. But the later selection and organization did have strong autobiographical overtones and undertones.

SG*: How different is your forthcoming collection of poems* Into Grander Space *from the previous one? Does it goes beyond autobiography?*

SDR: This is a long narrative poem with two narratives running parallel. In one a father speaks to his adolescent son, in the other Vyasa speaks to Janmejaya. At one level, it occupies the space of

autobiographical narrative, at another it moves into grander mythical space.

***SG**: Your poems appeared in* Kavya Bharati, The Telegraph, *the British Council anthologies and your critical writings in journals of India and abroad. How do you strike a balance between the poet and the critic in you?*

SDR: Critical activity carries a tremendous responsibility--it has to be objective and impartial. Yet the subjective and the partial will always vie for attention. The creative faculty is fundamentally subjective, seeking the universal. They approach each other from opposite directions. They have to meet and merge for fullest self-realization. It is a precarious balance that one seeks.

***SG**: In Indo-Anglian writing, novel enjoys huge media-hype. Short Story is also making inroads. But poetry has no takers. Why is it so? Do you envisage a change?*

SDR: This is still the age of reason and the media always follows the easiest path. Poetry, the primal *vak*, though the source of language, is a difficult proposition in an age that seeks what is quickly and easily understood rather than the subtle and uneasy demands of the mysterious paths. Besides, the Indian poetry in English has had its elitist Westernized (Indian) advocates, who have created a poetry that has lost its own readership and is floating and gloating in its own limited space. Take for example some of the recent anthologies that have failed to do their basic homework and have just advertised the same old stuff in a new garb, with a few new friends' names added to the list. But I am hopeful. Poetry is still being written and read in myriads of forms, maybe not adhering to the high horse standards that your new pundit editors advocate (all for their own cause). Publishers need to tap this hidden readership--woo them instead of shooing them off with poetry that they can not respond to. I am hopeful.

***SG**: Talking of Indo-Anglian Poetry, we hardly come across an anthology highlighting the new crop of poets. Where do you see the hitch?*

SDR: Even the ones that do highlight the new crop of poets have their own axes to grind. They are more concerned about themselves and their circle rather than the true worth (objective and impartial) of what is being written. Just a look at the variety of poems short-listed in the anthology of the British Council and Poetry Society (India), and I am not talking only of the prize-winning and commended ones, gives us an idea of the excitement and variety that poetry still symbolizes. Discovering good poetry needs tremendous labour and originality; that, unfortunately, none of our recent editors or publishers have displayed.

***SG**: Noted poets from the diaspora like Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Sudeep Sen, Debjani Chatterjee, Shanta Acharya et al, who are preoccupied with the ambivalence of the Indian situation, do not usually figure in anthologies of Indo-Anglian Poetry. What do you attribute this lacuna or shortcoming to? Are the editors of these anthologies ill-informed?*

SDR: Who figures in the anthologies? What is the basis of selection? Inadequate and partial considerations are dominant. A generation of poets established itself at the cost of annihilating an entire tradition (as imitative in diction and abstract philosophical in content) and though they concretized poetry, were still imitative in a new fashion of changed and existing trends imported from the West. Why are we so scared to acknowledge the original in ourselves and to establish our own standards of excellence in defiance of the existing power structures in poetry/literature? Understatement, no sentimentality, strict images--cryptic and concrete, economy of words, shunning the abstract and philosophical, emotional restraint, objective stance…where have we learnt these from? Are they part of us?

***SG**: Pidgin English in Indo-Anglian novels is a familiar sight. But in Indo-Anglian Poetry, with the exception of Nissim Ezekiel, it is seldom found. How do you account for this?*

SDR: Ezekiel used it but made fun of it. He did not have the courage to celebrate it. Some writers (especially fiction) today flaunt it as if it is a brand name for the authentic Indianness. In drama, you cannot escape it--which is why you have such a miserably small numbers of Indian dramatists writing in English. But it is picking up. There is hope. Poetry can be dramatic, but it is not dialogic, therefore unless it represents the speech of a certain character it will always tend towards grammatically and phonetically correct standards. But poetry too will be moving towards greater experiments with variations in spoken English patterns. Let us hope so and also hope that we can do it without being apologetic or ashamed of ridiculing somebody.

***SG**: You have been reviewing books for* The Statesman. *As a leading literary critic, are you satisfied with the quality of reviewing in English dailies and weeklies? Do you think journalists, passing for literary critics, often fail to deliver? Here I am reminded of the Jnanpith awardee Dr. Indira Goswami's counter-criticism against the review of her book in* India Today. *Hers is not an isolated case. Do these reviewers pass muster?*

SDR: The pressure on journalists is that they have to be jacks of all trades. That is understandable, along with the pressure of producing a certain number of words everyday. But maybe literary criticism requires a certain expertise and knowledge in the subject concerned that goes deeper than the merely popular demand that is being catered to in the garb of literary criticism. One does see reviews (and not by journalists--though there can be exceptions here as well) that are insightful, and illuminating new areas of thinking, mostly by specialists and academicians who have, naturally, a far subtler knowledge of the subject than a journalist can possibly have. No offence meant, dear journalists, but this is

the truth. No, barring a few, reviews in dailies or weeklies are hardly satisfying.

***SG**: In the event of the raging debate and dissent between the Bhasha writers and the Indo-Anglian writers, can translation bridge the chasm between these fighting groups?*

SDR: Translation can only begin a dialogue, but the hurt lies deeper. It is the false hierarchy that tags along with the English language and its smart baggage of accessories that creates the problem. We have to get out of this colonial mindset. I know it is difficult because fame, power and money have their insidious hold, and intellectuals and writers are subject to these pitfalls as ordinary mortals. The world offers more than the nation. The nation offers more than the state. The state offers more than the region. Is this not the order of things? English is the key to the world, whereas the Bhasha limits you. Translation releases Bhashas from the limits of the region but can it invert this existing value-structure? The Picaro can learn something from the native and the native can learn something from the Picaro. But for this they must meet on equal grounds.

***SG**: Last but not least, what are your forthcoming projects?*

SDR: First, the long narrative poem *Into Grander Space*, which blends autobiography and myths into a wider, fuller and richer creative realization. Secondly, theories of narrative structures where historiography, myth-making, biography, autobiography and poetry are being examined. Thirdly, a translation project from Bangla into English.

E.V.RAMAKRISHNAN

INTERRUPTED JOURNEYS

Jayanta Mahapatra. *Random Descent*. Bhubaneswar: Third Eye Communications, 2005. p.80. Rs.145/-.

It is unfortunate that a leading poet like Jayanta Mahapatra has to bring out his volume of poems on his own. This reflects the state of affairs in our culture. While even a mediocre Indian English novel can find a major publisher, some of our best poets are left to fend for themselves. It is wrong to say that poetry has no readers. Serious academic publishing is a profitable business in India. Nobody complains that such books have no market. There is a committed readership for Indian English poetry and Indian poetry in English translation. Poetry will always remain a minority art and there will never be the "breaking news" kind of sensational headlines from the domain of poetry. It is not surprising that Indian English poetry has kept its distance from 'market-friendly' forces. This is true of genuine poetry everywhere. Poetry is concerned as much with moral questions of everyday living as with an abstract world of universals. Jayanta Mahapatra's new volume testifies to the power of poetry to question the codes we live by.

The present volume has three sections. The first section, "Old Violins of Legends" is the longest with thirty-five poems. The second section, "Another Ruined Country, 2002" has ten poems while the last section, "Shores of Darkness and Light" has four poems. The first section which has an epigraph from Baudelaire ("And, without dreams or music, funerals/ File past, in slow possession, in my soul;/ Hope weeps defeated; Pain, tyrannical,/ Atrocious, plants its black flag in my skull.") brings out the darker side of the globalized India which has hunger, disease and violence writ large on its face. The second section is the poet's response to the 2002 genocide of Gujarat. The third section is personal and reflective and has some fine lyrical moments tinged with melancholy.

In 'Winter in the City,' the poet contrasts the paraplegic boy "who stands like a cross" with "tireless corporate offices" that keep thundering "with a sense of wholeness of life" (14). The poet comments on the predatory aspects of the new socio-economic order, by drawing our attention to the Siberian geese which do not take "more than what is needed." The cold that envelops the city presages a dark winter of discontent: "The cold rolls around my feet, and bites,/ tiny leaves flutter on the trees like shadows;/ if this is just a plan for another approaching spring,/ I wouldn't notice the boy, or drag my ancestors around"(14). Mahapatra's poetry has always been concerned with the other India of famines, illiteracy and epidemics. In 'Total Solar Eclipse,' a poem he published in the early 1980s, he had compared the crocodile that "pushes its long snout from the deep water" to "the fearsome Brahmin priest in the temple." The rural and backward India is disabled by being caught in a time warp it cannot disentangle from. The brooding tone of the present volume is born of the poet's realization that part of his own self is rooted there. In poem after poem he speaks of its dark slide towards further chaos and violence. 'Genesis,' the opening poem, speaks of the myth that has its head "stuck in the fork of a tree" and is held in check by "the spirit of knowledge." The world of legends is as much haunted by bad faith as the invading logic of rationality. The underlying tone in these poems speaks of an impasse, of being besieged by forces that one can neither comprehend nor evade. These poems convey a sense of paralysis that cannot be overcome by an act of will.

"Blue of the Sky" is a succinct statement of this crisis. He contrasts "the old violins that fill the air with mute sleepless wailing" with the trees that wear "the blood of men for clothing instead of leaves" (18). Neither technology nor religion seems to relieve the present of its deepening contradictions. The terrible look of cities keeps a prisoner of the sun and the tortured temple doors are guarded "by crude prayers." This tone of deprivation deepens in poems like 'Rice' and 'Freedom.' In the former the sight of "crumpled old villages/ overgrown with skin and flesh" prompts the poet to recall the famine that forced his grandfather to embrace

Christianity, at the age of 16, in 1866. In the endless night of hunger, "he learnt that truth itself was a metaphor." In 'Light Thinking: Clutching at Straws' he says: "Tenant of your house, Hunger, you still persist as the new narrative of our civilization" (37). Our otherworldly philosophies have no use for existential questions of survival. But poetry cannot subsist on transcendental fictions alone, and need to concern itself with the problems of living in the present. It is the mutually exclusive nature of these two worlds--of myth and knowledge, hunger and progress, violence and modernity, social oppression and democratic order, everyday living and art--that these poems address in different contexts throughout the volume.

The girl child becomes a recurring metaphor for the violence of our times. In 'Traveller' he speaks of the "girl dying in her mother's arms" (19). 'Palmistry' traces "the cage built by the frozen lines on the girl's palm" (16). In 'The Uncertainty of Color' he refers to the girl who was set on fire "for the color television she did not bring as part of her dowry." She does not figure in our narratives of power and progress. All these poems deal with the collapse of the moral order in our times. Patriarchy, a protean ideology, takes on several forms, when combined with the ruthless will of the feudal-minded upper class or the blind desires of a new self-seeking middle class. The image of the woman "with her knees drawn to the chest" sums up her objectified state. In the poem addressed to Madhuri Dikshit he tells her: "It's your body we see, March's fickle weather,/ behind which your untold pasts and futures lie abandoned/ like a pit, a nut or stone." The male gaze produces popular images that circulate in the world of culture. The social and political institutions we have built partake of the same logic of repression. The poet drifts past prisons and their torture chambers knowing well that "the calmness my father / showed once is a thousand miles away." 'Blue' becomes a recurring image in these poems to suggest stillness and passivity. The poet often doubts the very purpose of art in a world that has lost its moral fulcrum. In the poem 'Rice' he describes his poems as futile. In 'Happening' he asks: "how does one know what is real anymore?"(22). At the end

of a poignant poem probing the impossibility of communication in a disintegrating world, he says : "Like a dying man confined to his bed, paralyzed/but aware, was poetry itself,/ watching the ones he loved pilfer his familiar goods"(46).

Orissa is a strongly felt presence in these poems. Its relentless struggles to stay human and question the myths of time are heard in many poems. 'Song of the Asokan Edicts, 261' talks of "maps mildewed in the old rain of rites." The great battles and conquests of the past have little relevance to the pervasive gloom of the present. The line "Someone's rotten blood has gone into the stone," explains why those who struggle to find a foothold in the present, find the "the worn-out letters of ruin" part of the everyday fire-walking they have to do. 'The Stones,' one of the finest poems in the volume, shows how observed reality takes on a visionary element in Mahapatra's poetry. Orissa informs these poems more like a deep rhythm which controls the movement of syntax than a physical landscape with its changing seasons. 'The Stones' shows how this works. Stones remind the poet of those shadows of ours which do not leave us. We may remember here that in the poem, 'Shadow' he describes the shadow as "the keeper of terrible mysteries." The silence of the stones holds a kind of mystery which frightens us. He adds: "Like shells lying around from the last battle/ they make us feel that/ something like hate or power is real"(47). It is an irony of history that, beneath their 'bloodied walls' stones are turned into gods. These are the very stones "whose long arms batter and kill/ a young woman accused of adultery." Stones, thus, are in and out of history. In 'A Brief Orissa Winter' he looks for life signs in an atmosphere of defeat, and he finds them in the image of the bird that whistles down the mountain to "where the clouds floated along,/ floating past the way they always had"(42). A similar moment of sudden illumination is found in 'Dance of the Fireflies' when "far and deep into the hills/ some ancient tapestry takes shape," and swarms of fireflies rise into the sky and fall, wave after wave, "in resonance with that unity of being/nature only knows how to brace"(57). 'One Day, Standing in a Corner' speaks of another kind of epiphany when the poet, "standing in a corner of a strange city" feels his history inside him like his own skeleton that intrudes like an alien inside his flesh. He does not think there are ways one

can transcend the violence of history: "I was suddenly aware nothing could ever/ repair things, napalm could flower on the breasts/ of a young girl to give democracy its wings, my mind a dead leaf caught by a lazy autumn breeze"(46).

The same tone of anguish can be seen in the poems of the second section which records his deeply felt pain at the turn of events in Gujarat. In 'The Portrait' he asks: "Does a raped sixteen year old girl/ build a hymn of the world/ where living is a flamboyant metaphor?" Believers have turned into "sacred hangmen." The weight of his guilt is unable to overcome his resistance to hug the raped body of the little girl. In the poem 'I Am the One' he again speaks of the guilt that refuses to leave: "I am the one who has killed you,/ with my emptiness/ with the universe of my words,/ with the thousand shards of conscience/ and the bloodlessness of my limited existence"(69). 'The Land That is Not' begins with the lines: "The land some love to call holy/ is not the one I want to live in"(70). And he begins to fear the poem's knock. The metaphor of the river in this poem ("I only want to renew myself / like the old river's quiet") becomes links this section with the last section where thoughts of death seem to loom large. 'The Shore' uses the metaphor of the boatman one finds recurring in Indian poetry. It invokes a chain of metaphors associated with border crossing, revelation, transcendence and reaching out to the other. But these poems are about moments of desertion and darkness as suggested by the lines from Wordsworth chosen for epigraph. The rituals of oil lamps no more signify the sacred as that very principle has vanished from life: "Their light makes no sense to me." And the last poem in the last section ends on a sombre note with the image of the spider, "weaving that net where this death appears,/ overcome by the freedom that lies ahead in/ the dark, still and shadowy, spectre at a feast"(79).

This volume is Mahapatra's Black Book where he takes a long and hard look at the darkness that seems to deepen around us. His unusual turns of phrases, arresting images and elegant lines that slowly grow on us make the reading of this volume a refreshing experience. Mahapatra remains one of the most sensitive writers writing in India today.

KEKI N. DARUWALLA

OF ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

Arundhathi Subramaniam. *On Cleaning Bookshelves*.
Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 2001. p.71. Rs.150/-.

Arundhathi Subramaniam. *Where I Live*.
Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 2005. p.77. Rs.150/-.

I first heard of Arundhathi Subramaniam from Gieve Patel and Adil Jussawalla. Both spoke highly of her. Both of them know more about poetry than I do. Reading her two books I find how right they were. Arundhathi Subramaniam comes to the reader fern-cool from "a lagoon of language, without sediment," "through dew and cinnamon and starlight," her voice "filtered through the crust/ of morning dreams." Her verses come from "the mint-green underbelly/ of grime-roughened thought," and from the "mud of tactile memory." I am not sure if they emerge from "the crevices of festering karma." (All the quotes above are from her first book).

Hers is not a poetry of large themes. In fact people who dabble in the larger variety sometimes appear pretentious. Don't expect long (and often boring) poems on death, despair and love, peace and war. Not even poems on the coldness and fickleness of the male--something her peers from Kerala have mastered and dined on. No poems on the veil (obvious, because she doesn't have to wear one), and not even an inland letter to God. No spraying of Gujarati or Tamil words to heighten the exotic effect. (Anglo-Saxon critics, and our own chauvinists fall on their backsides in awe when that happens--the former because of the novelty, and the latter because of the 'nativist' angle.)

Subramaniam's poetry is one of illumination. She flashes a pencil-torchlight on a subject, and you suddenly feel you are the richer for it. Hers is a poetry that lights up a moment, a place; puts across something which occurs in our everyday life. She does it with originality, such rapier-sharp observation, and puts everything

in such a new light that the reader is pleasantly astonished. At least this reviewer was.

We have all dealt with really old books, felt the paper disintegrate on our fingers. Take these lines from the title poem of the first book, 'On Cleaning Bookshelves': "take the occult insignia of silverfish/ on paper that crumbles at a touch/ into dragonfly wing-dust." Could anyone have put that better? And earlier in the poem she has talked of "the frowning grandeur of Russian classics," and the old leather-bound books, "still fragrant with the smoke/ of old cheroots." Or take another poem, a feline one this time. A cat, "swathed in a chiffon of languor" starts thinking, "she is the pin-up idol" of the leopards of Nepal and Tibet ('Ode To a Cat'). Her body is "tensile with the jungle wisdom/ of a primeval huntress," and in the next poem we are told she has "ice-box eyes."

The reader often encounters an insight and a subtle twist towards the end of her poems. In the last lines of 'To My Mother,' the poet wonders in surprise at her mother "deciding terrifyingly/ to forego/ the option to despair."

My favourite poem is '5.46, Andheri Local.'

> Like metal licked by relentless acetylene
> we are welded—
> dreams , disasters,
> germs, destinies,
> flesh and organza,
> odours and ovaries
> A thousand-limbed
> million-tongued, multi-spoused
> Kali on wheels.
>
> When I descend
> I could choose
> to dice carrots
> or a lover.
> I postpone the latter.

Anyone who has travelled on a Bombay local, standing cheek by jowl, belly to belly, the elbow caught in someone's armpit, your knee in someone's groin would know what the poem is all about.

Where I Live is a more meditative book. When you meditate and look back into the long mirror of the past, verbal pyrotechnics are not your main concern. The verse becomes more sedate in keeping with your mood. 'Madras' becomes a key poem here, a place she hasn't grown up in but still tugs at her roots. Cities annex you she says, "through osmotic memories" and a particular flavour of coffee. Madras becomes the "City that creeps up on me/ just when I'm about to affirm/ world citizenship."

There is almost a defining process at work here--of space, of consciousness, of milieu, and it starts with the title poem 'Where I live.'

> I live on a wedge of land
> reclaimed from a tired ocean
> somewhere at the edge of the universe.

These lines seem to foreshadow concerns beyond the merely physical, but that is not the case. The city (obviously Bombay) is described refreshingly--city of "garrulous sewers and tight-lipped taps," "deciduous with concrete," city, "where you can drop off/ a swollen local/ and never be noticed." Then, in imagistic terms, comes the knock out:

> City of the Mahalaxmi beggar
> peering up through
> a gorse-bush of splayed limbs.

Arundhathi's métier is short. With another poet this could have meandered into a longer poem. It ends with a statement that in this city "it is perfectly historical/to be looking out/ on a sooty handkerchief of ocean,/searching for God." She stops short of some

grating introspection between "the edge of the universe" of the first stanza and the search for God of the last. But then that is her style. Not for her those long expeditions into the metaphysical, which with most poets, nearly always end in flops. Reading her one could almost define poetry as precision. Look at the way she talks of "a sea as Arabian as the spirit": "snorting steed with cumulus mane/ pounding into the tides,/ foaming galaxies of unbottled fiction,/ deferred coastlines" ('Side-gate').

Even more than precision, what defines her verse is its subtlety and the angle of vision from which she sees life. She has a fine poem on as unlikely a subject as "How long it takes to reach/ a moment / that is not the past." It would be too mundane to try and explain the poem, for its essence lies in its gossamer subtlety. "In the turn of the line/ the bend of the road" even in "an alien language/ stubbled with memory," she finds something familiar. And a moment after you've reached the present you realize "you've been here before" ('Been There'). In her own nonchalant, fitful way, Arundhathi has meditated on space and time and our psychic suburbs in the volume *Where I Live*. She would perhaps need another volume to delve into "the crevices of festering karma."

This reviewer has always wondered at the magic by which good women poets can turn something cooking on the stove into literature, and bring out from the "hush of granaries" and "the deep slumber of lentils," the "first tremulous shoot/ of a dream" ('Where Lentils Sleep').

I consider myself fortunate to have read these two fine volumes.

Allied Publishers have done a good job. Incidentally, these two volumes, four years apart, carry the same photograph of the author. Would the publishers oblige us with another photograph, when her third volume comes out?

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

POEMS OF PRECISION AND PASSION: TWO SIGNIFICANT DEBUTS

Jerry Pinto. *Asylum*. Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 2003. Rs.150.

Marilyn Noronha. *Different Faces*. Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 2003. Rs.150.

First, the admissions. I know Jerry Pinto and Marilyn Noronha and I have known their poetry for more than a decade. At our fortnightly Poetry Circle meetings in Mumbai, I have heard them read their poems, have shared mine with them, have offered my feedback on their work, have welcomed their responses to mine. If I do not hesitate to review these two books of poems, it is because I believe that a certain implicit understanding of their creative process and approach to their poetics could actually help deepen my critique.

If I regarded the critical function as a magisterial one, perhaps I would be unwilling to take on this task. But as someone who holds that a sympathetic witness often has a perspective denied to the hierarchical legislator (whose dispassionate stance is so often a kind of cosy self-delusion), I refuse to be squeamish about this role. Publisher critic Michael Schmidt writes that the reader's responsibility is to set a poem free for which she has to hear it fully. I like to believe that my insider's knowledge of the poets' aesthetic preoccupations does, in fact, help me to hear their work more 'fully.'

Jerry Pinto's debut collection of poems, *Asylum*, is a book that reminds you that precision and passion needn't be mutually exclusive. They can be complementary, even an inseparable part of the poetic enterprise.

Pinto's book tries its hand at several modes and approaches that engage the reader at various levels. There is the lively conceit poem, 'Alphabet Soup,' as well as a small grove of 'tree' poems, some haiku-like in their elliptical pictorial style: "You are not a baobab./ You are a complacent, middle-class/ Clerk-in-a-sari/ Who would not share her chestnuts" ('Tree 4'). There is the strangely disquieting prose poem, 'Sleep.' There is the narrative poem, 'Incident at Chira Bazaar' and the still-life poem, 'Dadiba's Matka' (which reminds you just how animated still-life can be). There are ironic poems ('Well, If You're A Poet, Write Me A Poem'), and poems of wry self-deprecation: "And I know that another body awaits me/ And another, another./ Each rebellious, different, uncompromising/ Built in with state-of-the-art aches" ('At Thirty').

There is a poem--my personal favourite--that offers a comic-apocalyptic vision in which paper mutinies against a bewildered humanity, ushering in a terrifying world: "Rivers black with ink/ Bank notes printed with runes/ Textbooks in lost languages/ And poetry replaced by Reader's Digest mailers" ('The Quiet Rebellion of Paper'). Appropriately, images pervade this vividly dystopic poem thickly, profusely, and in "kamikaze squads." And yet, the poet is also capable of restraint and effective understatement when required, as in 'For Allan Whom I Never Saw' ("Only a baby could be distracted/ From the important business of dying") or 'Rictus,' a poem about the death of a parent: "What flows out of his body?/ Ordinary dreams and old fables/ A few riddles, a moral of two, some gaps/ The last fear."

But the poems that stand out in this collection, to my mind, are those that grapple with a welter of emotions--raw, messy, contradictory, unsettling, often overwhelming. The operative word is 'grapple,' for the poet does not resort to the easy options: pat irony, intellectualism or sentimentality. The result is poetry that allows itself awkward angles, edges, jagged pauses, hoarse moments, uneasy alliances between imagistic spareness and excess. There is a capacity for vulnerability, for self-implication, an acknowledgement of a soiled self that finds it difficult to forgive

itself. This is a voice that realises that "clerks, like poets, need to dream," but then finds it has to deal with the complex demands attendant on the decision to be inclusive, on the acceptance of contradiction, even dysfunction.

And so you have the teacher who longs to tell his students that he has "wanted to ask the same questions," and has "accepted the same lies." There is the lover's need for resolution: "Do you live in terror of a chance meeting/ A semaphored recognition, a face jerked away? …I do." And there is the need to bridge the emotional impasse with a parent: "I wish I could keep my heart unguilty, my love fresh/ My thoughts wide-ranging, my eyes new…"

What makes these moments work is the fact that they are arrived at through a journey--sometimes shared, sometimes implicit--that is as existential as it is linguistic. *Asylum* offers us a voice that is accomplished enough to acknowledge those areas where accomplishment must be abandoned, craft surrendered. Pinto's poetic skill lies in knowing when to make that surrender.

Marilyn Noronha's book, *Different Faces*, is a quiet and accomplished debut. The book is divided into three sections: "Staying Alive," "Being Woman" and "It Will Be Different." As the section titles suggest, the poems segue between the individual and collective voice, the personal and the social landscape. These are poems that seem to draw not so much on the resources of image as of tone to create a variety of emotional ragas. The 'I' speaks in different tones, ranging from the muted to the celebratory, from the ironic to the elegiac, from the reflective to the exultant, the poignant to the irreverent.

The recurrent trope is negotiation and survival in a far-from-innocent world. There is the recognition of a self that gets abraded, even wounded in the process, but the poetry is always rescued from self-pity by generous doses of humour, directed as much at the self as at the other. But this is not poetry of bluff good cheer either. The

humanity is hard-won. The poet can write of a seemingly simple, almost prelapsarian world where a hug from 'my fat aunt' is all it takes to find "answers/ to so many things/ that other grown-up people have forgotten." But the vitiated reality in which she now finds herself is also acknowledged. There is a penetrating discernment of deceit and humbug of all kinds--of "all counterfeit attempts at comfort," of "gloating" that "tries to masquerade as counsel." And for all its conscious adoption of humour as a survival mechanism, there are moments of unbridled rage: "You surge forward, frightening/ in your fury, till camouflage is chased/ out of the temple./ The anger makes the difference."

There is a certain envy of what seems like the uncomplicated life of the other: the self-containment of beautiful people who inherit the world, the instinctual life of the worms "never yearning/ never striving." But there also remains a stout awareness that life at the margins brings its own rewards: "being a black sheep/ could be fortunate." And even the lemming, programmed to perform that last ritual of collective suicide, knows that if all living beings are born to die, "we lemmings are born/ more chosen than others."

There are times in this book when you ask yourself whether this poetry is much too simple. Is it accessible to the point of being obvious? But the suspicion is quickly dismissed as you realise that Noronha's work is precisely about employing the singsong cadence, the seemingly jejune quality of the nursery rhyme to make its point. The resources of children's verse are used consciously and to great effect, leading you through innocent narratives that are suddenly fractured to give you a terrifying glimpse into a hinterland of grief, throbbing rage and darkness.

The nursery rhyme strategy is at its most overt and successful in a poem that starts out as a wry appraisal of the self in the mirror: "Mirror, mirror on the shelf/ tells ghoulish tales about myself…/ Points out wrinkles near my eyes,/ shows I've grown to twice my size…" Colleagues and acquaintances, self-righteously frank, are also mirrors that point out "that my front tooth's chipped, I've a

double chin,/ my glossy mane's now listless and thin." You read with progressive unease about the boss who believes "removing a gall bladder's routine… and the same with the uterus." And you finally realise how deluded you were to believe this was a poem of facile wit: "Till the mind struggles free, flees to my silent space/ where I call up my names, look each one in the face--I am Warrior, Healer, Siren ….mirror, mirror on the shelf…/ Daughter, Mother, Sister, Lover, Friend --/ I have embraced myself."

Noronha's poetry works precisely because it doesn't strain for profundity or humanity. It is to my mind at its least successful when it feels the need to underscore its moral or 'universal significance,' as it does in a poem like 'It Will Be Different.' There is compassion in this poetry, but it is not of a jingoistic kind. Its finest moments are those when Noronha rediscovers the magic of the quiet uninflected statement, the poetic craft lying in the refusal to strive for effect: "When my fat aunt/ sits me on her lap/ it's better than my water mattress…/ When we laugh together,/ she and I,/ everything feels perfect."

MAKARAND PARANJAPE

THE DEMANDS OF A LONG POEM

Sonjoy Dutta Roy. *Into Grander Space*.
Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2005. Rs.150.

Author of *The Absent Words* (Writers Workshop, 1998) and Professor of English at Allahabad University, Sonjoy Dutta Roy now offers us his second volume of poems, *Into Grander Space.* This is a long poem or rather a set of two intertwining long poems. In one of these, Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, speaks to Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit, the only surviving scion of the Pandavas. This exhortation touches on some of the main events and themes of the epic, even as it urges the prince to renounce hatred and revenge. The other poem, more contemporary and autobiographical, is an address by a father to an adolescent son. The son seems to be a version of the poet himself just as the speaker, who is supposed to stand for the poet's father, is also another version of the poet. The setting of the second poem, which is the longer of the two, is in a hospital, where an old lady, nearly ninety, probably the poet's grandmother, lies dying. The father finds letters written by the poet in her chest of drawers. These letters, which describe the poet's first school trip, trigger the speaker's musings. The speaker, gathering the wisdom of the ages, tries to prepare his poet-son for what is to come. So the poem, set in the past, with the hindsight of the present, predicts what will happen to the poet-protagonist. In addition, there are other stories, fables, and parables interspersed through the two poems.

Without question, *Into Grander Space* has both ambition and scope. The epic and the lyric modes intertwine to create a vast sweep in both time and space. Temporally, going back into pre-historic, mythic times, the poem comes right into the present. Spatially, it stretches across from Bengal and the Gangetic plains to England and the United States, where the protagonist travels as a Professor of English. What is more, there is always the presence of

didacticism here, the promise of a bigger message or distillation of wisdom that will justify the two long narrations. Considering that very few long poems are written anywhere these days, Dutta Roy must be congratulated on this effort. This is a noble, moving, even charming poem in parts. Apart from grand scenes and reflections, we also have lofty descriptions of nature, especially of the Himalayan foothills:

> Further interior waited the thick bamboo woods,
> the slushy swamplands, the swaying elephant grass,
> the rolling meadows, the dense Sal forests,
> the Jamun, Mahua and Pipal trees.
> In summer, the forest humped in scorching stillness.
> In the first monsoon cloudburst,
> the full throated harmony
> of crickets, cicadas, bull frogs and toads. (46)

There is an especially beautiful passage about the mysterious pool from whence the protagonist seems to derive his inner strength, that which makes him swim against the current, as it were, resisting the compulsory rat race, seeking something higher, even if not properly defined:

> You will rush through the gap,
> dip your face and hands into the sweet, clear,
> swiftly flowing water, blurring your image
> till you come to *the pool*
> where for a brief space and time,
> the waters slow down, move in ritual circles,
> and you see a face, long forgotten,
> shocked in recognition,
> before it tumbles in a cataract
> down its steep mountain stream. (29)

The metaphors of water persist through the poem, gushing streams descending from glacial mountains, merging at holy places, before going down to the seas to lose their identities. Bengal, Allahabad,

England, and the United States, thus, fuse and crisscross in streams and currents of the poet's consciousness.

The catastrophe happens overseas, in the U.S., far away from home. It is the by now clichéd but no less deadly cause of so many disasters--drunk driving on a Friday evening: "the reckless madness of a wild Friday night hits you bang in the solar plexus." The poet-protagonist recovers to a new life, almost miraculously. From the sterile and meaningless earlier pretensions of friendliness, he now encounters genuine sympathy and camaraderie. His academic advisor tells him

> "this is the route that vehicle took,
> there are the lights he jumped.
> Look we have passed it.
> It is way behind, a memory and a narrative". (43)

as he retraces the scene of the accident for the protagonist. The cultural mix that the whole experience engenders is permanently etched in the eyes of his son, in such a telling concretization of hybridity:

> Caught between cultures
> you observe your son's
> marked southern drawl,
> his transplanted cornea,
> lighter in colour
> than the deep tropical brown
> of the other eye. (43)

It is as if one of the son's eyes is literally Indian, while the other is American. Throughout, the protagonist marvels at such crossovers. The Thames silting the banks of the Hoogly, Oxford University reproducing itself in Allahabad, his own and his ancestors' journeys and the kind of patterns they form. Gradually, the poet matures, both physically and emotionally. He knows the joys of sexual and spiritual awakening. The accident in the distant land is the ultimate

rite of passage which initiates him to his body, as it were. The Mahabharata story goes over the waste and sorrow of the great war, the sad story of Karna, the quintessentially modern hero in his loneliness and injustice, the hard-earned wisdom which one might forget only at one's own peril:

> *But wisdom lies in* the quiet mind *that can stay remote*
> *in contemplation*
> *even as the world whirls in its circuitous routes.* (50)

True, this is the message of the Bhagawat Gita re-told in Dutta Roy's words, but it still bears repetition.

The difficulties and drawbacks of the poem have to do with both its form and content. In terms of form, the two narratives don't quite intermesh coherently. It is not clear how one informs or even undermines the latter. They seem to remain separate though interspersed, somewhat unconnected. The opening exhortation of Vyasa to Janamejaya, for example,

> *And so, Janamejaya*
> *restrain the violence in you***,**
> *the lust for revenge.* (9)

seems irrelevant to the other poem, where there is neither war nor violence. To me, the contemporary story is far more effective. It is personal, deeply felt, and produces by and large the better poetry. The Mahabharata rendition is very difficult to pull off in a manner that is meaningful. The power of the original does come through, of course, in flashes or glimpses, but conclusions drawn seem so much weaker and unconvincing. Vyasa doesn't sound like what we might expect him to, while Janamejaya remains a cipher. There are also one or two errors, both factual and grammatical, which jar. For instance, Vyasa tells Janamejaya, "*As you move through the various Varnashrams,*" Janamejaya would have to make certain choices. One moves through the *ashramas*, from Brahmacharya to Sannyas, but how can one move through the *varnas* or caste-types? At

another point in the poem, there is a long verse-paragraph which begins with "What is this force…." but forgets that this suggests a question (mark) at the end. I also worried about why the poet's vocation never comes up in the narrative. Why, if poetry is what defines the protagonist, is it absent in the story of his growth? The letters he wrote to his grandmother could easily have suggested more substantial writerly predilections. Is it this absence of self-definition that also allows slack and cliché to spread their tentacles through the lines? Though Dutta Roy attains the high note once in a while, soaring to touch the sublime, so often one feels the lack of the kind of pressure in the lines that makes memorable verse. This is where the demands of the long poem cast their equally long shadow on the work, with many a lesser practitioner using the genre more to camouflage weak lines than to cover substantial thematic and narrative ground.

This said, *Into Grander Space* remains a poem worth reading, enjoying, and celebrating for both its vision and endeavor, a welcome addition to Indian English poetry.

SHANTA ACHARYA

CELEBRATING KAVITA: THE GOLDEN JUBILEE OF INDIA'S SAHITYA AKADEMI

Ketaki Kushari Dyson. *In That Sense You Touched It.* and Lakshmi Kannan. *Unquiet Waters*. Ed. with an Introduction by Keki N. Daruwalla. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005. Rs.90/-.

Anna Sujatha Mathai. *Life on My Side of the Street.* and Priya Sarukkai Chabria. *Dialogue and Other Poems*. Ed. with an Introduction by Keki N. Daruwalla. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005. Rs.90/-.

Introduction

In its Golden Jubilee year, in 2005, the Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters) "endeavoured to project Indian poetry in English by women writers, so that the larger reading public becomes aware of their nuanced sensitivity and the infinite variety of their concerns," writes the series editor, Keki Daruwalla. An anthology of Indian women poets is reported to be under preparation as well. In the meanwhile, the Akademi has come out with these two-in-one volumes. One consists of poems by Dr Ketaki Kushari Dyson and Dr Lakshmi Kannan, both established bilingual poets and translators. The other consists of a study in contrast with poems by Sujatha Mathai who has three collections of poetry and Priya Sarukkai Chabria whose *Dialogue and Other Poems* is her first collection.

While the editor of any anthology is faced with the dilemma of which poets to include/ exclude, in this instance, as the selection is limited to four women poets, this editor's task must have been especially challenging as there are a number of Indian women poets to choose from. *In Their Own Voice: The Penguin Anthology of*

Contemporary Indian Women Poets, edited by Arlene Zide and published in 1993, contained some 145 poets. There have been other Indian women poets' anthologies with fewer poets. In his introduction to these two two-in-one collections, Keki Daruwalla does not explain the rationale behind the selection criteria. Having raised the issue, one can safely suggest that any group of four Indian women poets selected by any editor would have suffered from a similar handicap. One way of rectifying it is of course to keep on publishing more women poet collections though the balance would never be achieved as men poets would then feel excluded.

Thus, as a reviewer, personally well acquainted with three of the poets and the editor, the rational response is to focus on the collections individually; treat them as four newly published volumes of poetry. And, there is a lot to recommend. Here are individual, recognisable voices that are lyrical, meditative, humorous, inclusive, formal, based on experiences that are personal and universal, local and global. They share aesthetics and concerns, deal with women's issues. Lakshmi Kannan even has a poem on "A Seminar on Indian Women Poets"; its disarming humour, irony and thoughtfulness takes us straight to the heart of the matter: They write as they live--intensely, painfully but always with intelligence and sensitivity.

In That Sense You Touched It by Ketaki Kushari Dyson

Ketaki Kushari Dyson has published some thirty titles in a diversity of genres--including six collections of poetry in Bengali, three novels, three plays, as well as translations of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Born and educated in Calcutta, she came to Oxford to do a second B.A. degree, which she received in 1963. She then returned to India, got married in 1964 and came back to England, had a family before going back to do a D.Phil. which she received in 1975. She lives in Kidlington, near Oxford, with her two sons,

Virgil and Igor, and physicist husband Robert, to whom the collection is dedicated "for our forty years together."

Ketaki Dyson is considered a significant writer of her generation, and writes poetry both in English and Bengali. She has received the Ananda Puraskar from Calcutta twice and the Bhubanmohini Dasi Medal of the University of Calcutta for 'eminent contribution' to contemporary writing in Bengali. She has translated Rabindranth Tagore's *Selected Poems* as well as the *Selected Poems of Buddhadeva Bose*, which was published by Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003. Her doctoral thesis, *A Various Universe: A Study of the Journals and Memoirs of British Men and Women in the Indian Subcontinent 1765-1856*, was also published by OUP Delhi in 1978. With this publication by the Sahitya Akademi, it can be said that India has been generous in recognising her many gifts as a poet, translator and critic.

Her latest previous collection of English verse, *Memories of Argentina and Other Poems*, was published in 1999 by her graphic designer son, Virgil, whose company is aptly named Virgilio Libro. In 'Making Logos,' she acknowledges how with "lips twitching, eyes hooked on the screen,/ day after day, creative and keen,/ he designs publicity" for her play. It is hoped she has sparked off a trend in poetry publishing, as major UK publishers remain largely ignorant of poets and poetry from the Indian subcontinent. Her translations have fared better in the UK: Tagore's *Selected Poems* was published by Bloodaxe Books in 1991, and was a Poetry Book Society Recommended Translation.

The 29 poems in the 95-page collection under consideration cover a wide range of themes, from "Making Sambar" to "Making Logos," from "Uyghur Men and Maidens from Chinese Turkestan" to "The Gods of Bastar." As Daruwalla points out: "Though Dyson is a diaspora writer, she is not afflicted with nostalgia, a typical element in the diaspora syndrome… She is at home both with the English and the Indian landscape. Of course the gravitational pull of the mother country is present, 'the other half of normality,' as she

calls it in a long profound poem." Rooted in two cultures, she moves effortlessly between her various concerns, be they local, global or both at the same time.

'A View from the Balcony in Lake Town, Calcutta: A Man, A Dog, and Some Crows,' has the quality of a still painting that comes alive as the man squatting "on his haunches/ in the mid-morning sun,/ cleaning and slicing carp/ before a rich man's mansion," walks away with the "guts and gills and other messy stuff" and tips them on the grass when he reaches the neighbouring park where "the dog and the crows make a rush/ for their necessary snack." From the balcony on the other side of the street is the poet watching the scene as the man "looks at them affectionately for a moment,/then goes his way./ He must sell more fish, then he too/ will lunch at midday." Her poems contain many such images that critique society. In 'On the Speed of Things,' she describes a man in a Paris Metro station "lying on a bench, clutching his drinks can./ His urine trickled from his dirty trousers,/ forming a pool, a dark stain on the platform,/ while everyone just looked the other way."

Her poems are also meditations on the state of the world and our place in it, "knowing how travel we must/ from dust to butterflies, from butterflies to dust" ('Dream of Butterfly'). She knows too that "man is error-prone--he flounders--and at the same time/ he's a stubborn optimist, hoping that God's a good guy,/ is on his side, and will protect him in the end./ And sometimes he wins/ and sometimes he disastrously loses." The tribal folks of Bastar appear to have got it right for "Every year they bring their collection of gods/ ceremonially to trial." The gods "are scolded, found guilty of criminal negligence/ of their caring duties towards humans." "The gods receive a jail sentence, are placed in a special cage/ for several hours, in displayed disgrace./ Afterwards they are pardoned, permitted to go home,/ warned they must behave better next year.// Every year it's the same story."

In 'Plans for a Funeral,' she suggests: "Let's bury the whole lot of them," referring to the plethora of gods. But, gods have a

"nasty habit/ of resurrecting themselves." In 'The Failure of Burial' she reminds us of their power to mutate: "They are superpowers, supernovae,/ exploding asterisms, mobile axes of evil,/ instruments of mass destruction/ capable of inflicting catastrophic damage/ and uncontrollable, uncontrollable/ sky rage."

As a poet she journeys seamlessly between many worlds. In 'March Magic,' when "spring's doing her best/ to slip unscathed from old man winter's grip," she takes us on a personal journey starting with the film *Chocolat*, which though "a feast for the senses" is not as convincing as her favourite *Babette's Feast*, to "foot and mouth, the nation's towering crisis," where "the good rural folk/ were praying for themselves only, not for their slaughtered kin./ Sadly I recalled--animals had no souls/ in this God-view/ and were beyond the pale of prayers." In a world where "a Buddha of Bamiyan" is "blasted for ever, for in another God-view/ God himself--poor soul--is so shit scared/ of his creation's creations.…," she suspects that "perhaps nothing works--tears, prayers, poetry," but emphasizes her "need to believe my words, heard or unheard,/ Can matter, do matter--in however small a way--/ or my will to live dies." Her words linger in us, "holding in their own hungers within them" ('Extra Virgin Olive Oil').

In 'Three poems Exploring Themes of Inclusionality,' she explores space "not as an empty container for things, but as part of everything, included in everything, and boundaries as locations of inner-outer dialogues." She continues to write in her Preface: "In my poems I am trying to understand the context of happenings and the connections between apparently discrete events which are hidden from view….How is the past 'included' in me? What are the obscure ways in which it has shaped me, both through my knowledge of various details and equally through my ignorance of other details?" In the last of those three intricately connected poems, she concludes: "In that sense we have all touched it/ and it has touched our being,/ even my ignorant bliss." One can say the same of her work.

Unquiet Waters by Lakshmi Kannan

Lakshmi Kannan's sixteen books include three collections of poems in English, the latest being *Exiled Gods* (1985), fiction which she writes in Tamil, and translations. Two collections of her short fiction appear in Hindi translations. English translations of her stories have also appeared in anthologies and journals. As an academic, she taught for seventeen years at various institutions. As a writer, she held many positions: Writer-in-Residence at the University of Kent, UK; International Writing Program at University of Iowa, USA; Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study at Shimla; Convenor of the Tamil Bhasha Samiti.

Lakshmi's new poems, in the words of the editor, are about "mortality, family relationships and their networks, rivers and river-myths." One cannot miss the feminist edge in these poems, nor the symbolism of water as the title suggests. She sets the scene by quoting lines from both *Agni Purana* and *The Old Testament*, where "He (Lord Svayambhu Brahma, the self-born) created waters first," and "the waters are referred to as *narah* because they are the creation of the supreme spirit." Similarly, "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

Unquiet Waters, also the title of a poem, offers a reality that is altogether more human, female and complex: "I take the shape/ of the receptacle that holds me./ I take the contours of the earthen pitcher/ tall, squat or lean/ I take the form of the bottle/ or the glass on the table/ I even take on the colours of the utensils/ in which I dwell." While this quality of blending in can be godlike (see "Visarjan"), women like the water in the pitcher, trapped by society or family, lead unfulfilled, unhappy, *unquiet* lives. Hence the poem is in the voice of waters that cannot be quiet and must speak: "If you can but break the pitcher, just once/ and set me free/ I would flow into the stream. Gurgling, I'll catch the sun/ in a jewelled glitter."

The possibilities of individual freedom and self-fulfilment are manifold. In 'Ask for the Moon,' the female protagonist cannot accept that the "*Gayatri mantra is for men,/ period*." As she points out, "'Gayatri is female, after all./ She is both Saraswati and Savitri, don't forget.'" The poem cries out against the injustices perpetuated on women in a society where a man can "marry a second time/ because his wife gave him no sons," and where she is reduced to "a forgotten piece of furniture,/ hobbles around on arthritic legs,/ groping, eyes blinded by cataract./ She is never shown to a doctor." Asked to pluck jasmine buds for the puja the day after, and left with a large bowl of water, "I didn't touch the buds though/ but watched the moon descend on the waters// in the bowl, clear, round liquid," she says. And thus invites us to join her adventure as she breaks the code, sips at the jasmine moon, little by little; "but the moon remains whole,/ shiny as the one above,/ complete with the same lustre, the same flaws." She finally lets it flow down her gullet and clears her throat to recite the Gayatri. "The sounds tore through the darkness// the moon shivered just a bit/ in the waters/ before it went down my throat/ easily."

The 50 poems in this 85-page collection cover a wide range of themes. 'Don't Wash' is a moving account of the struggle of Rasa Sundari Debi, the first woman to write her autobiography in Bangla. She lived in an era when literacy was denied to women. To educate herself, she tore a page from *Chaitanya Bhagavata* when her husband left a copy of the book briefly in the kitchen. She stole a palm leaf from her son for her writing. The effect of such traditions on the life of women is exploited to great effect in 'An Autopsy,' where "when they cut her open/ everything was in order./ Just about everything was identifiable, teachable/ in short, under control./ That is, everything except her brains." There was a honeycomb "where there should have been grey matter." She had "stashed away her private moments," "sheltering them from the dour,/ censoring eyes of the world." This had "gold-browned the insides/ of her brains in a wild-grown honeycomb/ that glistened defiantly under their questioning eyes." In 'Meenakshi's Parrot,' frozen in legend and "stone, silver, bronze, *panchaloh*, copper or wood," we move to a

scene with a real parrot, "domesticated inside a cage," and on to the parrot who turned into a canary "and sang her own tune/ and flew off the page."

She conveys her ideas through startling images. In 'Family Tree,' she describes how women "water the family tree everyday/ with the rain" of their sweat and care. Yet when the woman is older, her tendering done, she is unable to shelter in the tree's cool shade. Her revolt against the "trivialization of the role of the woman by the male world," as Daruwalla puts it, takes an ironic, subversive tone in 'High and Dry': "Gomti. It's only when you swell in pride/ every few years,/ it's when you rise in fury/ lashing at bridges, embankments/ shaking up the whole of Avadh/ till it trembles by the brick and mortar/ of its being, that's when we see you in your element./ It's when you menace buildings,/ gobble up boats, cattle, huts,/ or a whole village and ask for more,/ that's when the entire city wakes up to you.// When you're quiet and acquiescent Gomti,/ you're left high and dry." In 'Un-housed,' she writes about a girl who doesn't know her place in the emptied space of her father's house, while her brothers, "rightful heirs," stand there, "the ground firmly under their feet."

The collection is dedicated to her husband Arun who died after a period of illness and hospitalisation. The first poem, 'For Arun' poignantly captures the relationship between husband and wife. Though steeped in Indian thought, the poem stands on its own, its logic and metaphysics intact: "A droplet of water/ on a lotus leaf/ is said to symbolize detachment."// But see how/ the veins of the leaf are magnified/ through the pearl of water// and how/ the droplet turns/ a radiant emerald on the leaf?// Water and leaf/ jewelled together/ even in their separateness." Hers is a world of positive sum games where beings, identities, things influence each other to greater effect, reminding one of Ketaki Dyson's 'Inclusionality' where every thing influences the other and is influenced in turn while creating a new identity.

She writes movingly about her mother, inviting her to an open, honest relationship: "There'll be no room here for dusty lies/ to cover up,/ no room for subterfuges or sham/ only a clean interior/ washed every day with waters that carry/ the salt of my being,/ the floor patterned with *kolam*.// Come, mother." In "Aarti," she in turn as a mother sets afloat green, leafy boats carrying the flames for her two sons and watches "till Ganges became a river of hope burning,/ setting thousands of flames on a voyage/ to their distant destinies." This letting go, not only of her sons but of her own self, is striking: "I could not tell// the flame of my elder son/ from the younger one./ Nor could I tell the boats I lowered/ from the ones set adrift by others.// I could not even tell which was me/ from the rest. All I saw/ were tongues of wayfaring flames/ their lustrous images trailing on the waters." Her images too trail in our memory.

Life On My Side Of The Street by Anna Sujatha Mathai

Anna Sujatha Mathai has been writing poetry for over three decades: her three published volumes of poetry in English are *Crucifixions*; *We, the Unreconciled*; and *The Attic of Night.* She feels a "deep sense of loss" at not being able to write in Malayalam, her mother tongue. She studied at the universities of Delhi, Edinburgh, Bangalore and Minnesota, and taught English at Delhi University. Her poems have been translated into various Indian and European languages. She was for many years an actress and founder director of the Abhinaya Poetry Theatre Group in Bangalore. Her poems, according to Daruwalla are "lyrical and meditative at the same time. There is a fluency and effortlessness about her poetry, not just in the cadence but also in the flow of thought and how a metaphor moves to a conclusion."

In 'Pilgrims,' an apparently simple incident of pigeons on her roof turns into a tattoo dance "of desire,/ webbed feet slipping on the fibre-glass,/ adding a frenzied footnote to the slippery game." As "a couple of crows add to the clamour," we are reminded how "death and desire are coupling," as the protagonist lies alone in bed

"aware of a tumult of feathers./ Icarus, with grey and black wings,/ is making his first ever flight/ from the launching pad of my shade." We transcend from an ordinary afternoon in Delhi to a world of myths, metaphors where "Dreams, wings, melting in the sun,/ vivid, alive, for a moment,/ now dashed to pieces on the rocks below./ All, all of us, pilgrims of the skies." The last line sums up for us not just the human condition but that of all living beings. We are no longer alone, but share in the fate of Icarus, who in Greek mythology flew with his father from Crete, but the sun melted the wax with which his wings were fastened on, and he fell into the sea. Dreams too get dashed, easily. The projection of the personal to the universal is not unique: most writers make use of such strategies. What is interesting is how she infuses meaning into an otherwise sleepless afternoon.

Writing about the creative struggle of the poet, she says that her "poetry didn't come/ full-blown,/ a perfect flower,/ every petal proudly placed" ('Goddess Without Arms'). "It was never a goddess/ rising from the waters/ seated serenely on a shell, emerging from a lotus/ all her arms gracefully extended,/ a Canova Venus or a Saraswati,/ resplendent in her plenitude,/ certain of her sovereignty." On the contrary, "it grew painfully,/ armless,/ limbless,/ somewhat blind,/ a few stray petals, here and there,/ more like wounds.// But day by day,/ inch-by-inch/ it gathered grace,/ arms, limbs, eyes…/ wholeness." The ease with which she blends western and Indian references, Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus,' Canova's Venus and Saraswati, illustrates the kind of inclusiveness we encountered in Ketaki Dyson and Lakshmi Kannan.

In the dramatic title poem of the book, the poet lies at the point of death, and is asked to choose between life and death. "With only one choice,/ I chose life as my beloved./ Having given my love to this mysterious stranger--/ should I now repent/ and hand back my ticket to God, like Karamazov?/ No. For though I cannot hold her close/ Or even look her full in the face,/ Enough for me she lives/ on the same busy street,/ Life…always on my side of the street." Sujatha Mathai harks back to Marina Tsvetayeva, the Russian poet,

who wrote: "It is time to hand back my ticket to God," a reference to Dostoevski's Karamazov, who defiantly offered back his entrance ticket to Heaven, so long as Heaven was built upon, or despite, the sufferings of children on earth. In doing so, Sujatha places herself in her own literary tradition.

In 'To Marina Tsvetayeva,' whose tragic life led to her suicide in 1941, Sujatha describes the fate of poets who "throw parts of themselves into the sea,/ Their hearts--their souls--/Messages in bottles/ Which survive a generation,/ And are then cast by the tide/ On some distant shore,/ Foreign, alone, unrecognised." But then "A stranger finds the message in that bottle,/ And carries that still warm, living heart/ To her silent, inner room," and resuscitates the poems and the poet back to life. Sujatha bestows her personal stamp of recognition on Marina, restoring her with "She lives again, who had but slept,/ in the hopeless web of death./ Her death a lonely act of despair,/ her voice unheard, her life spent, unshared./ She, whose immensity of spirit/ was defeated in a small/ and measured world." These last lines are taken from Marina herself: "What shall I do … with all this immensity in a measured world?". In the final paragraph of the poem, Sujatha becomes Marina and in doing so their lives spark again: "Now, her spirit revives again/ in an unknown woman's/ lonely room./ Now someone listens,/ someone's heart is wrenched, someone cares./ Her parting from her lover is relived,/ the pain of her betrayal,/ her child's death./ Someone walks with her upon the mountain,/ shares with her/ her despair,/ and her bitter end./ In a distant land, in a stranger's room,/ in another woman's heart,/ her life-spark burns again."

Dedicated to her parents, Samuel and Mary Mathai, the 43 poems in this 66-page collection cover a variety of themes, though there remains a "melancholic strain running through many of her poems" (Daruwalla). But, there is no self-pity, even in the depth of despair. In 'Hot Coals and Diamonds,' she confirms: "I have looked into the abyss,/ over the edge of the volcano crater/ and the fire has singed, but not burnt me." In 'Aging Narcissus,' we are told that to have glimpsed "that eager, searching look/ in the restless shifting

water…/ the magic of that brief reflection/ it was enough./ No need for mirrors./ Seeking only the living God… the God of the moment,/ asking no more than a sip of the drink of life." But Narcissus as she ages (Sujatha supremely acquires the feminist agenda by turning Narcissus into a female personality; in the Greek myth, Narcissus is a beautiful youth loved by the nymph Echo who curses him for repulsing her love) "bids the water become static,/ and wants her name/ written on paper, her image/ on canvas and marble./ She seeks to bind the moment,/ hold the music/ which cannot be held,/ that music which will sing with the wind/ over her dying eyes." Sujatha acknowledges her debt to *The English Patient*, quoting Michael Ondaatje: "It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself."

There is a cluster of poems about children, including one about the child she never had ('That Child'). As she writes in 'The Pattern,' "I've woven a tapestry of sorrow/ in many colours./ It was meant to be a/ pattern of joy/ A carpet for people to tread,/ Gentle with dreams and fulfilment." As Daruwalla points out, "Mathai has to be respected for culling intense poetry from anguish and her dark world view." In 'Death and the Poet,' Sujatha sums it up thus: "We are all called to the same Festival,/ And are but fragments/ Falling, bright sparks from a careless hand,--/ Children, for a brief day in the sunlight/ Before the dark waters embrace us." In her latest collection of poems, she reflects a deep, human need to discover the meaning of life before the dark waters embrace us.

Dialogue and Other Poems by Priya Sarukkai Chabria

Priya Sarukkai Chabria's first novel, *The Other Garden* (Rupa, 1995) was praised for its "rich imagery, clever word play, soaring imagination that borders on poetry." Awarded a Senior Fellowship for Literature by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in India, she recently completed *Or Else*…, her second novel. *Dialogue and Other Poems* is her first poetry collection, though she has published individual pieces in various journals in India. She has worked as a freelance journalist, writing primarily on women's

issues, travel and the arts. She co-founded the film society, *Friends of the Archive*, and co-scripted the short film, *Dhaara*, which opened The Critics Section of the Oberhausen Film Festival in Germany in 1989.

Priya Chabria experiments with poetic forms, drawing upon the wealth of different poetic traditions. She also draws upon her impulse as a novelist: "I tend to write series of poems that form loose narratives, and I like to adopt personas while writing poems." She goes on to add: "I love poetry from many traditions--Western and translations from Old Tamil, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Japanese and Chinese. I enjoy probing the political valences of forms and the languages of imagination that these poets used." Like the other poets in this series, she too transcends the personal to signify the universal; and quotes Seamus Heaney in asserting her faith that the poet "needs to get beyond the ego in order to become the voice of more than autobiography." She then goes on to add that the poems not only "conversed with each other," but that she "was constantly in dialogue" with herself. She reinforces the "*rasa* theory of aesthetic" that "a work of art is complete only when the reader brings to it her or his imagination." It is worth noting that Sujatha Mathai's poem, 'To Marina Tsvetayeva,' makes a similar point very effectively.

The first section of Priya Chabria's collection, *Dialogue--1*, adopts the Tamil poetry's *akam* style that prevailed for some four centuries around the time of the birth of Christ. Martha Ann Selby in her anthology, *Grow Long Blessed Night: Love Poems from Classical India* (New Delhi: OUP, 2000), explains: "*Akam* is half of the most basic genre division of *cankam* poetry. The other half is *puram*, …. At their most basic levels of meaning, *akam* means 'inner' and *puram* means 'outer.' By extension, *akam* comes to refer to a person's 'inner life.' More specifically, *akam* means 'love' in all its textures and hues. *Puram* is all that is outside *akam*." While the earlier writers of *akam* were usually men, Priya pays "tribute to this form by giving it a passionate and contemporary female voice." She also assigns a voice to the male lover.

So, "*She says to her lover:"* "I'll tell you this in advance--/ You who will be enclosed in my flesh, your rhythms/ mine, our hands like a thousand comets descending/ towards pleasure, your sweat becoming my skin,/ listen: All this I want, and more." Then, *"He says:"* "Through widening darkness/ she entered my vision like lightning/ dipped in gentleness./ I wished to hold/ her like a mountain holds fire-clouds,/ free yet bewitched, her tenderness/ raining down the slopes of my life." Love in all its manifold guises is experienced, explored and accepted in these poems: "There is a victim, but no victimizer, in love" even as the coldness between lovers, passions spent, becomes "a tattered sheet/ of melting pain."

The sequence of poems called *Dialogue--2*, written for a stage production, *Fireflies*, combines Bharata Natyam dance language, Kesavadasa's 16th century *Rasikapriya*, poetry in English, and 18th century Japanese tradition where, as the poet briefs us, "fireflies were kept in paper lanterns by the bedside in the pleasure quarters of Kyoto to shed an intermittent light on lovers, and mimic the brief glow of love." In 'Expectation,' the *nayaka* "teetering on the girder of expectancy" talks of "fireflies rising from my pores." Perfumed with passion, she is ready: "My body is a bed." In 'Loneliness,' she lies "crying my body's harsh cries,/ quills leaping from my limbs, parched./ It's the body of a dead peacock,/ neck stretched." In 'Loss,' the *nayika* says "I should accept it./ Call it quits as each day the earth says to the sun/ or vice versa: Enough./ Hope needs to end somewhere." In the second 'Loss' poem, the *nayika* says: "There is no point in asking why./ It happens./ Like a snake sloughing off old skin,/ he leaves./ Leaves me with scales of memory./ An empty garland."

None of her poems are derived from a single source. In the section, "Plant-Life-Stories," she explains that she draws upon "the sculptured figures of *salabhagikas* and *yakshis* and other tree spirits that emerge from stone and fresco in Sanchi, Ajanta and Ellora. And from folktales heard as a child, of tree spirits that bewitch and destroy. And, in my mind, Demeter and Menaka roam a common fertile space, as do Asvatthaman and Icarus." With "The Grove" poems "the impulse was, primarily, to document the small happenings in a grove near my home when I learnt it was to be

axed." In poem 1, she writes: "I shifted near a grove./ Here time spreads on gossamer paws/ and birds cut life/ to size in clear notes./ My writing rooted./ Trees flowered, murmuring// with bees, fruits formed full, fell./ And flowered;/ words rose sharp with sap./ Now they say: The trees will be cut/ for buildings to come up.// There goes my view/ of my secret life./ Or does vision open/ as light departs?" She moves to a "contemporary reality with considerable finesse," observes Daruwalla.

The 8 sections in this 78-page poetry collection cover a wide range of style and subject matter; from the 'Dialogues' of love to the political 'Conversations.' The "Hospital" series of poems are perhaps "the most confessional"; all the poems in this section are for her grandmother. 'Roommates' is a touching portrait of her grandmother and the love she bears for this extraordinary woman: "I hang like a bat on a leafless tree,/ blown between her averted embolism// and fluctuating BP,/ and dazzled by life at ninety-three." In 'Grandmother's Tale,' her (grandmother's) body is described as "a swaying/ bridge unravelling at both ends,/ with twists of words/ and leakage tilting./ Her counsel--*Girl, protect yourself!*/ is lost in dribble that drips into my heart." The poet counsels herself: "Torch/ your hatred, burn like a rainbow, girl/ there's no protection./ *Prepare the pyre within/ before the bridge falls in*."

There is much to admire in Priya Chabria's poetry; though she suspects her "incessant evoking of forms may well be an attempt to survive the lost certitudes of location, specifically rooted diction, and meaning. I don't know." In a world that is bringing people closer than ever before, where cyberspace is perhaps as relevant as earth-space, where the earth's atmosphere is more important than where we live, perhaps her concern for poetic forms does matter, but as a sign of attention to detail. What increasingly matters is what we choose to ignore and what we elect to preserve. As George Szirtes says, her poems "are passionate, sensuous and intelligent, full of energy and enterprise. They hold their dramatic shapes with grace and establish her as a poet to read and return to time and again."

Conclusion

The Sahitya Akademi deserves commendation for bringing out these two collections featuring the poems of four women whose voices could not be more different, and yet share a lot of common ground. While Ketaki Dyson and Priya Chabria stand at the opposite ends of the scale in many ways, when placed alongside Lakshmi Kannan and Sujatha Mathai they appear as part of a greater whole. May the Akademi's endeavour to show-case the range of Indian women poets continue! The editor, Keki Daruwalla, himself one of India's major living poets, deserves our thanks for his choice of poems, and for his "unsparing critical response," as Lakshmi Kannan puts it. She adds: "Every writer needs another writer who can offer this rather disconcerting help to his/ her manuscript." The cover photographs by Alain Willaume, who also designed the covers of these soft back imprints, are evocative in their symbolism.

Issues surrounding self-definition, the role of language and poetry in establishing a personal identity are common to these four poets. Ketaki Dyson talks of "space not as an empty container for things, but as part of everything, included in everything, and boundaries as locations of inner-outer dialogues." Priya Chabria refers to the *akam* and *puram*, "the co-mingling of space--inner and outer" drawing her to these forms. In "Plant-Life-Stories," she refers to the inclusiveness of her sources, and how in her mind "Demeter and Menaka roam a common fertile space, as do Asvatthaman and Icarus." These words of Priya Chabria take the reader straight to Sujatha Mathai's "Pilgrims," where "Pigeon-feet and crow voices join,/ both katha and hallelujah chorus!" Ketaki Dyson's poems are full of what she calls "inclusionality." Chabria's 'Spirit of Water,' brings to mind Kannan's poem 'For Arun,' though the contexts differ. There are many such connections that one encounters; the poems speak to each other as well as to the reader, thus giving the reader a very rewarding experience.

CECILE SANDTEN

"A PARTICIPANT IN LIFE'S CARNIVAL" DIFFERENT MODES OF REPRESENTATION

Shanta Acharya. *Shringara*. Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2006. £8.95 (Great Britain)

This most welcome new volume of Shanta Acharya's work is handsomely produced and bears in its title, *Shringara*, the concept of representation. According to Acharya "Shringara in classical Indian paintings and sculpture is typically represented by a woman (could be a man in the modern world) getting ready, putting on make-up, sitting/standing in front of a mirror, facing herself, her world. Preparing for life, her lover, whatever…." This image reminds the poet of Shakespeare's "'ripeness is all'" in the sense that "we all prepare, put on special clothes etc., even to face the day… even when we die we are 'made up.'" Shringara, for Acharya, refers to all kinds of preparation which are needed "in our lives for Life itself. Our families, friends, lovers, experiences (both the ones we have and the ones we don't)--all shape us, make us who we are." At the very end of this volume the title poem 'Shringara' (61) stands as a clue as to how to understand this specific concept of representation. This concept is also used in a self-reflexive mode which draws attention to notions of 'otherness,' 'heterostereotyping' and 'homostereotyping' (of how we are seen and defined by others and of how we are seen and defined by ourselves), displaying all the uncertainties and ironies of the non-resident Indian poet in search for cultural identity as it is put forward in the poem:

> Along the way, those I meet and those I do not,
> all the things that happen to me and those that do not
> keep defining me in some inexplicable way.
> Daily the mirror mocks my wrinkles, streaks of grey.

Having to face the transformation of oneself/ the body in terms of the inevitability of aging, this self-mocking search for cultural

identity is referenced back to India in the very last line: "The days become my *shringara*." In this poem Acharya highlights the fact that ethnic signs of Indian origin have been mixed up with brand names of the primarily Western beauty culture industry:

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

Thus, the act of putting on a mask is something very Indian *and*, at the same time, something which the capitalist Western system uses to make women believe that they need to buy and apply beauty culture products in order to look young and beautiful.

Some of the poems in this collection appeared (sometimes in an earlier version) in different magazines in the UK, Bangladesh, Canada, Ireland, Nepal, India and the USA, thus giving emphasis to Acharya's reception on an international scale.

Framed by the notion of representation, *Shringara* reverberates with emotions of sadness, grief and loss but also with an irreverent sense of wit and humour, which the frequently used odd rhymes and funny metaphors in her poetry, which is characterised by the open form, underline. One of such metaphors can be seen in the last line of the last stanza of the poem 'Here, Now':

> Making us not fearful, not holding back,
> not simply doing one's duty
> but filling ourselves,
> taking flight like the smile of a camel. (2)

As becomes obvious from this quote, Acharya's language is pleasantly complete in itself and never overloaded. The poem

'Morning After' (25) which is an interesting account of the effect of the cyclone in Orissa, October 1999, displays a great number of stylistic and rhetorical means, however, without begging the reader for compassion. In spite of the fact that the poem is "[*f*]*or those who lost loved ones* […]," the poet is very remote in tone, using personification and internal rhymes as well as witty metaphors in order to describe the impossible natural forces that were at work: "The wind went howling, prowling […], more unpredictable than a mad elephant […], […] children/ were shaken like dice before being rolled out;/ railway and power lines collapsed like pylons.// The rain got crazy too, […].// The ocean punished us without mercy, […]. Like hungry crocodiles water crawled over the coastline." In the two last lines of the poem nature is depicted as having come back to normal, yet the reader might guess from the description of the cyclone in the six earlier stanzas that it killed and left thousands of people homeless: "Morning after, the sun shone brilliantly/ in a freshly painted sky with not a single leaf in sight…." This mode of writing is also used in the poem 'Loneliness' (8) in which "loneliness" is personified and, in effect, leads to most interesting philosophical insights such as "[i]n it you can experience the road not taken" or "[d]iscover in loneliness the continents of your self."

Next to poems that contemplate on life and death, as is done, for instance, in 'Highgate Cemetery' (1), in which the *persona* imagines "a dialogue between Marx and Krishna" while wandering "among the dead in a cemetery town," and instead of changing the world, as Marx proposed, "confess[es] to alter" herself, the reader often encounters places and situations inscribed with painful memories. Food, in this respect, serves as a sight for cultural identity. In the poem 'Coconut Milk' (23), the speaker of the poem is cooking an Indian dish--"but the coconut milk was missing"--and enjoys the presence of her father, imaginatively, while at the end of the poem, her "eyes are blinded with grief and a child's fury." In 'Silent Witness' (22) the *persona* travels the London underground together with her (dead) father, as she envisions this situation:

> […] Other commuters who join us
> at Archway, Tufnell Park, Kentish Town, Camden Town
> would never have guessed they were related,
> thick as blood, father and daughter.

Yet, the speaker has to recognise that she is "[…] forced to face a lifetime without a father." The theme of grief and loss also resonates in the poem 'Missing' (21) in which the speaker's father's "features appear in every stranger's face,/ lips transform into smiles in our nondescript streets." Yet, this poem ends on a reconciliatory note as the *persona* is able to recognise "the myriad ways of our losing and finding."

Again, as in her earlier collection *Looking In, Looking Out* (2005), Acharya takes one of her epigraphs from Emily Dickinson, who in her poetry offers a meditation on life, death, and poetic creation:

> *This is the hour of lead,*
> *Remembered if outlived,*
> *As freezing persons recollect the snow--*
> *First chill, then stupor, then the letting go.*
> --Emily Dickinson

This epigraph thematically fits very well with many poems in Acharya's new collection, for example with those in which the poet mourns people like her own father and grandfather who both died within ten months, or with poems which are urgently heralded by '9/11' (26), 'London: 7 July 2005' (28) or '11 July 2005' (29), the latter being a poem about the tenth anniversary of the massacre in Srebrenica. 'Bori Notesz' (38) is dedicated to the poet Miklós Radnóti who was shot in November 1944, "along with twenty-one other crippled and emaciated captives, while being forced-marched towards Germany during the liberation of the Balkans" (39), as is explained in a footnote. "Bori Notesz" (*Camp Notebook*, Engl. transl.) is a notebook of poems by Radnóti. In 'Why?' (57), near the end of the collection, Acharya asks the rhetorical questions: "Why does death disguise itself in so many parts?/ Could *we* not have a

choice in the matter,/ departing in peace, our dignity not in tatters?" Furthermore, she ponders upon the many different modes of dying: "[…] – blasted away by a bomb in a bazaar/, in a car, tram, train, plane, or/ collapse with a heart attack somewhere, any where?"--to mention only a few which are described in the poem. Acharya comes to the following conclusion: "Endless the manner of our dying, I do not know why?", and connects this question to life, thus underlining the Hindu concept of life and death, which simultaneously includes the way how people live: "Think then of how we must live, not how we might die…" If the Indianness of the speaker seems rather unquestioned and well-defined in many of her poems, her Western mode of life proves more ambiguous as the poems 'Speechless' (37), 'The Last Illusion' (60) as well as part 'IV' (7) of 'Aja' (4) underline. In this fourth part of the poem the speaker seems to always have been divided in her soul related to her "home" London as her grandfather was supposedly very critical of this city:

> The constraints of your body gone,
> you could visit me at home in Highgate –
> something I could not achieve in your lifetime.
>
> Perhaps you won't think of London
> as this unreal city
> unsuitable for your granddaughter?

In spite of the poems in which Acharya mourns her relatives or a lost love as in 'Speak to Me' (10), in which the *persona*--Ophelia-like--associates the addressee with all kinds of flowers which are connected to the speaker's Indian past, there are also poems which are characterised by an irreverent sense of maturity and knowledge as poems such as 'Shunya' (50) and 'This Connection' (55), among others, convey. The poet frequently also seemingly incorporates Indian imagery into an instantly recognisable moment: In 'Family Portrait' (3), Acharya paints a most interesting picture of the members of her family by describing what everyone is doing with their hands in terms of "finger prints" and a "candelabrum of gifts":

"Father's green fingers keenest when gardening […].// Mother's hands do extraordinary things/ as they dance to cook, clean, scold and caress. […]// My brother's fingers daily guide the scalpel/ swimming below skin and flesh mending bones […].// My younger brother's fingers have not forgotten/ the art of spinning cricket-balls. […]// My youngest brother's poised hands/ photograph the world in its intricate dance" (3). And the speaker's "hands pulsate with new insights/ knowing they could barely move otherwise."

In *Shringara*, Acharya, though not so extensively, also incorporates the idea of "intermediality," by which I refer to the poet's use and creative adaptation of other media as a trigger or as an "external stimuli" for her imagination. This mode of writing is already practiced in her earlier collection of poems, *Looking In, Looking Out*. In this collection some paintings or art creations by various artists 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, as the front cover which shows Chagall's painting *Paris Through the Window* (1913), already underlines. In *Shringara*, this mode of re-writing is used in the poem 'La Pieta' [our lady of pity] (36). On the one hand, the subject matter of this poem, which is obviously adapted from Michelangelo's sculpture, fits very well with the overall theme of this collection (grief, pain), but on the other hand, the sculpture seems to disturb the speaker of the poem so intensively that she raises the question of identity: "I kneel, empty myself of desire, silently cry/ beneath your painted sky: *Who am I*?" The notion of "Knowing Thyself" is also a very Hindu precept.

Shringara's essence, though, is captured most accurately in the seemingly binary concept of the world of its very first poem: life and death, here and there, losing and finding as well as in the philosophical idea that "[w]hen our friends start to leave, it is time/ to take stock of our coming and going" (1). Life goes on (and ends) and moves in sometimes mysterious ways which we are not able to predict, an image that the front cover photograph (by Sanjay Acharya, the poet's brother), which shows a tree in full red bloom, underlines.

K. S. DUGGAL

THE MYSTIQUE OF MOTHER TONGUE

Shiela Gujral. *Cosmic Murmur*. Transcreated from Hindi by the author. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2004. Rs.95/-.

I suppose I have narrated this anecdote earlier somewhere, but it merits repetition. During my tenure at All India radio, Lahore in the undivided Punjab, once Maulana Abdul Majeed "Salik," the noted Urdu poet came to see me and in a highly serious note asked, "Duggal, tell me, how do you write in Punjabi? When I think of it, I can only talk love or abuse someone in it." I laughed it out. Maulana Salik was an *Ustad*, a friend of our Director General A.S. Bukhari. Several years passed. India was divided. Transferred to Delhi, I was posted in Broadcasting House. It was in the early Fifties when sitting in my office, I noticed Maulana Salik with his typical stick in the corridor, walking to my room. I knew that he was in town in connection with the annual Delhi Cloth Mill Mushaira. I went out to receive him with due esteem. As he occupied his seat, Maulana started the dialogue saying, "Duggal, Delhi Cloth Mill Mushaira this time was only an excuse. I came particularly to see you."

"It is an honour!" I was excited.

"I've a news for you, I have started writing in Punjabi." I didn't believe my ears as Maulana went on exuberantly. "Not only this, I have stopped writing in Urdu. We have started a monthly journal called Panj Darga (Five Rivers) and are collecting funds for a daily paper in Punjabi…"

"But how did this miracle happen?" I still did not believe my ears.
"Yes, it is incredible, but it is an interesting story."

What Maulana Salik told me was, indeed, revealing.

Living in Muslim Town, a suburb of Lahore, Maulana was used to coming to the city for work by bus. On that fateful evening while returning home the bus conductor missed issuing a ticket to Maulana and passed him by. Noticing this, Maulana shouted "*Are bhai tum mujhe ticket deni bhool gaye ho*." The conductor, who was a refugee from Delhi, looked at the Maulana contemptuously and said "*Mister, ticket 'deni' nahin hota, ticket 'dena' hota hai*."

As Maulana heard this in the bus full of Muslim Town fellow-travellers, he felt as if he had been slapped on his face. Here was a semi-literate bus-conductor who had corrected an *Ustad*, because Urdu was his mother tongue. At that very moment Maulana Abdul Majeed Salik, Chief Editor of a front-rank Urdu daily decided that he would speak and write only in his mother tongue, Punjabi.

Reading Shiela Gujral's latest collection of poems entitled *Cosmic Murmur*, I am again and again reminded of this happening.

Like most of us in the Punjab, Shiela Gujral too, started her career as a creative writer in English. Having studied with English as medium of instruction and then taught Economics in English in a college, in a way it was quite natural. But sooner than later, she realised that creative writing is best done in one's mother tongue. She went back to Hindi and then over to Punjabi. The result is what we have in this slender volume under review. By providing the original in Hindi along with its transcreation into English the poet has not only enthralled the reader with the sensitivity of her approach in the original but has also fascinated us with its rarified charm in English.

A few bytes from this treat:

Olive-coloured sentinels
stand in a row
lest the virulent Sun
in a fit of excitement
rob the blooming sun-flowers
of their virgin glow.
('Spain II')

Tickled by the breath of Sun
the garden slipped out from the sheet of snow
With its new-born babes in arms.
('Early Spring')

Encaptured the *Sanyasin*
humming, dancing
romping in ecstasy
descends down the hill.
('Mountain Stream I')

The Sun salutes
the snow clad-tree
the wind whistles in glee
whisking me to join in the spree
('Winter Scene')

Overwhelmed by the sobs of earth
a tiny cloud
ventured alone
to heal the wounds of
a scorching land.
('Humanism')

USHA KISHORE

SAROJINI NAIDU: A VOICE BEFORE HER TIME?

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) has often been misread as she has been brushed aside as a minor lyric poet without any substance, experimenting purely with English stanzaic forms. But from a postcolonial point of view, Naidu can be read as anticipating many politive concerns such as the centre-margin debate, nationalism, hybridity and syncretism. These anticipatory postcolonial elements in Naidu make her a voice ahead of her time. Naidu's poetry coincides with her active participation in the Indian Independence Struggle and can be interpreted as the literature of colonial encounter. In Naidu's work, there is a convergence of some of the main political, social and cultural changes that took place during the transition from the period of the Colonial Raj to the Independence of India in 1947. There is a "precarious vulnerability of cultural boundaries in the context of colonial exchange."[1] Sara Suleri feels that in "the rhetoric of English India," there is an ambiguity as the colonised culture expresses itself in the language of the coloniser, within colonial parameters. The colonial power censors the colony's narrative of history and culture; this gives rise to the dichotomy of the self and the other--the colony and the empire. In Naidu's work, in spite of these dichotomies, we can see (a) the pattern of a subjugated culture emerging from the claws of coloniality and (b) the confluence of cultures, literatures and languages. Naidu's work is an epitome of contrapuntal forces at work; it highlights nationalism and articulates cultural difference in the language of the coloniser.

Naidu and her British patrons

A major issue that can be examined in a contemporary context is the centre-margin debate, reflected in Naidu's poetry. Naidu's themes were manipulated by her imperial patrons and her work

becomes a cultural palimpsest in which the old writing has been erased under imperial influence in order to produce new writing, with Western parameters. The dichotomy of the imperial centre and the colonial margin (periphery)[2] has been one of the most contentious ideas in postcolonial discourse. The evolution of Naidu's poetry effectively illustrates this centre-margin dichotomy.

The centre-margin debate in Naidu's poetry can be traced from her student days in England. In 1895, Naidu sailed to England for higher studies and spent the next three years of her life in England and other parts of Europe. Naidu began life as the typical Macaulayan Indian, who was sent to England to imbibe the superior culture. She was another of those experiments, who was to be trained as an interpreter between the British Raj and the governed Indians - "to be Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."[3] Naidu was educated in Girton College, Cambridge and King's College, London. As a student, she frequented the Rhymer's Club. Founded in the 1880s by W.B.Yeats and Ernest Rhys, the club's members included prominent literary figures like Oscar Wilde, A.C. Swinburne, Edwin Arnold and Francis Thompson.

At the Rhymer's Club, Naidu met many literary personalities and struck literary friendships with eminent critics of the time, especially Arthur Symons and Sir Edmund Gosse, who later became her literary patron. The influence of Gosse made Naidu change the course of her writing from the descriptions of English landscape to the culture of India. Edmund Gosse advised Naidu "to consign all that she had written in a falsely English vein to the wastepaper basket and start afresh with some sincere, penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion, and of the soul-stirring mysterious intimations of the East."[4] Hypothetically speaking, if this advice were not heeded, Naidu would have developed naturally, with the possibility of a pre-twentieth to early twentieth century Indian woman performing the

role of Rudyard Kipling in reverse, projecting the colony's view of the empire.

Gosse exercised an ideological control over Naidu's choice of themes, projecting his orientalist view over her subject matter. Gosse advised Naidu to look at Indian themes within her poetry and not to write about England. Naidu's poetry thus becomes a site of cultural control, in which the imperial Centre dictates to the poet of the colony and fixes her under the sign of the marginal Other. This can be interpreted as the narcissistic demands of the colonial power that wants to fix the image of a contrasting cultural and ideological Other.

The formative poems of Naidu place her in the imitative canon, but she was not allowed to develop her poetry along these lines, as they were considered to be written "in a falsely English vein." Very few of Naidu's early poems are easily accessible these days. The poem "Traveller's Song"[5] written in 1892, in traditional English stanzaic form, is one of the earliest poems of Naidu:

> O'er Italia's sunny plains
> All aglow with rosy flowers,
> I wander now, 'mid fallen fanes
> And now amid of the myrtle bowers--

Another poem "Love"[6] (1894) which depicts the poet's love for Dr.Govindarajulu Naidu, takes after Elisabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet, "How Do I Love Thee":

> I love thee with a love whose faith
> Is changeless as the stars of night
> My love is stronger far than death,
> My love is pure as morning light.

Gosse advised Naidu not to be a "machine-made imitator of the West" but to be "a genuine poet of the Deccan."[7] Gosse's advice not

to write about "robins and skylarks of the Midland counties, but about fruits, flowers and trees of India, especially of the Deccan,"[8] shows his awareness of Naidu's southern home province of the Deccan, reflecting the contemporary Western pre-occupation with the mystical Orient. The pre-occupations with the East and the romantic assumptions about new cultures seem to be seeping through Gosse's Edwardian Era, even before the advent of Modernism.

It is indeed a paradox that many of the Western orientalists of the time like William Jones, W.B.Yeats and Rudyard Kipling were qualified enough to make assumptions of the East and incorporate them in their cultural translations, poems, novels, and political accounts; while Naidu, the so-called "oriental" was denied the right to incorporate her observations of the West in her work. Gosse's advice provokes a number of questions. Was this the creation of an Indo-Anglian sensibility or the limitation of Naidu's ability by restricting her themes? Or was it cultural domination stating the norms of the centre and periphery by pointing to Naidu that she is not allowed to write about England and that she should adhere to her own land and culture?

On the advice of Gosse, Naidu indianised her themes. The blend of pan-Indian and Western elements in Naidu’s poetry could be read as a negotiation between her English patronage and Indian sensibility. This is illustrated in the oft-quoted metaphors in "Leili,"[9] where Naidu's sensuousness and imagery attain fulfilment:

> A caste-mark on the azure brow of Heaven
> The golden moon burns sacred, solemn, bright
> The winds are dancing in the forest-temple,
> And swooning at the holy feet of Night,
> Hush! in the silence mystic voices sing
> And make the gods their incense offering.

This comparison of the moon to a caste-mark on the brow of Heaven could be considered a metaphysical conceit in Western terms. However, this use of metaphor, familiar in traditional Indian poetry, could also be considered a cross-cultural translation of Indian classical imagery. The moon on the brow of the Hindu God Shiva (portrayed as the sky/heaven) is also alluded to here. This poem on the whole can be classed as a reverie, which describes the heroine, Leili's rendezvous with nature. "Leili" is unique as its theme is Muslim, the imagery Hindu, and the medium of expression English. The Muslim heroine of the poem is portrayed in the Sanskrit convention of the *Sringara Nayika* in the English language. The Western trend of oxymorons and synaesthetic imagery are used to good effect here, in the lines: "…in the silence mystic voices sing/And make the gods their incense offering." The auditory imagery of prayer by music and dance and the olfactory imagery of incense are both Islamic and Hindu. "Leili" is thus an example of the assimilation of Indian and Western poetic traditions, with a political undercurrent of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Another example of this blending of traditions can be seen in " A Song in Spring," published in the collection, *The Bird of Time*: [10]

> Wild bees that rifle the mango blossom,
> Set free awhile from the love-god's string,
> Wild birds that sway in the citron branches,
> Drunk with the rich, red honey of spring.

Here, the references are to the Indian flora and fauna, and the cultural paradigm in the allusion to *Kamadeva* is again Indian. This would have certainly satisfied Naidu's English patrons. Naidu's poetry thus becomes a focus of colonial discourse, where power intersects with the subject matter of the text and can be categorised under the large body of texts that Edward Said[11] chooses to call "orientalist." The closeness of the Indian writer and her imperial patron makes her text an "oriental" one. This "orientalisation"[12] of Naidu involves a relationship of power, of domination and of a

complex hegemony. Naidu was considered an oriental because influential nineteenth century Europeans like Gosse and Symons felt she was one. This is evident in Gosse's self-satisfying comment of Naidu's "corrected" work, in his introduction to *The Bird of Time*: "She springs from the very soil of India, her spirit, although it employs the English Language, has no other tie with the West. It addresses itself to the exposition of emotions, which are tropical and primitive…. (The poems of Naidu) have the astonishing advantage of approaching the task of interpretation from inside the magic circle, although armed with a technical skill that has been cultivated with devotion outside of it." Gosse's distinction and manipulation of Naidu's work anticipates the concern raised by Edward Said that the cultural and historical phenomenon of "orientalism" is directly linked with the political domination and hegemony of the West over the East.

Gosse's orientalisation of Naidu contributed to the creation of a powerful genre--Indian Poetry in English, that portrayed India not only in beautiful lyrics but also in grand themes such as nationalism and national culture. Revisiting Edward Said in his afterword of *Orientalism* that the post-colonial engagements of the 1980s have taken account of his work as antecedent,[13] I ascertain that Naidu's work seems to be anticipatory not only of Said's analysis of orientalism but also of ensuing postcolonial debates.

The centre-margin debate in Naidu's poetry also projects another important point: the imperial control and manipulation of the Indian press and publications. Simon During[14] in Homi Bhabha edited *Nation and Narration*, suggests that the postcolonial writer in English searches for a global, metropolitan audience. This audience could be obtained only through the imperial centre. Although there were publishing houses in India, they could not guarantee an international audience for early Indian writers like Naidu. The popularisation of the Indian poets in their own country needed the imperial centre's blessing. The patronage of Gosse was irresistible to Naidu, as she was one of the pioneering Indian poets

in English and needed publication amongst a wider audience. It is to be noted that a private collection of Naidu's work, entitled *Songs*, was published under her maiden name, Sarojini Chattopadhyaya in 1895. This volume did not have a wide audience. Thus, Naidu seems to have chosen English publishers for her next three collections,[15] in search of this wider global audience.

Although Naidu succumbed to her orientalisation, she was certainly successful in transforming Gosse's imperial advice into pioneering Indian Poetry in English. She appropriated the metropolitan project by nativising her colonial experiences in the coloniser's discourse. Thus, the Gosse - Naidu saga can be considered as one of the earliest centre-margin debates of Indian Poetry in English.

The Cultural Context

The poems written by Naidu, following the advice of Gosse (in 1895), incorporated Indian themes and references. As mentioned earlier, many of these poems coincide with Naidu's role as a leader in the Indian Independence Movement. In these poems, Naidu translates her Indian culture and consciousness to the Western audience. Her "Songs of Springtime," which form a part of *The Bird of Time*, are illustrative of this. They are full of sensuous imagery portraying nature in the Indian context: "honey birds pipe to the budding figs,"[16] "poppies squander their fragile gold" and "honey-blooms call the bee." The poems in *The Bird of Time* contain a profusion of Indian flowers like *champaks*, *sirishas*, *gulmohurs* and *ashokas* and contain references and allusions to gazelles, elephants, peacocks, pigeons and bulbuls, which are all essentially native to different parts of India. There are also references to Indian history, myth, legend and traditions. This cultural narrativisation could be read as a nativisation project, intended to re-awaken the Indians to the glories of their homeland.

The language of the coloniser is thus appropriated to express the nationalist cause.

Sarojini Naidu's poetisation of Indian festivals could be read as the direct outcome of Gosse's advice, and at the same time, as the revival and celebration of Indian culture and traditions, many of which pertain to Hinduism, the predominant religion in Naidu's India. In fact, Gosse's orientalisation of Naidu seems to have been a blessing in disguise as it seems to have contributed to Naidu's nationalisation project. The revival and celebration of Hinduism is actually an awakening of the passive communities towards a nation that was to be India. The Hindu idiom in Naidu's poetry shows the influence of her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, a philosopher and a Sanskrit scholar. Naidu was also inspired by the writings of Anand Coomaraswamy and Rabindranath Tagore who were reviving Indian's neglected cultural history[17] and promoting nationalism by invoking the glorious past of India.

Hindu festivals and their symbolic aspects are elaborated in Naidu's poems like "Festival of the Sea" and "The Festival of Serpents." The communal ecstasy and camaraderie are highlighted in these poems and the spirit of Hinduism invoked. "The Festival of Serpents"[18] describes the festive rituals performed during *Naga Panchami*. Indian women invoke the serpent gods like *Anantha, Vasuki, Adishesha, Thakshaka* and *Kaliya* for blessings of fertility, chastity and prosperity. Prayers are also offered for protection and cessation of sorrow:

> O spread your hooded watch for the safety of our slumbers,
> And soothe the troubled longings that clamour in our breasts

Through such poems, Naidu revives the tradition of nature worship, which is very much a part of Hinduism.

Nariyal Purnima,[19] described in "Festival of the Sea,"[20] is an homage to the sea delivered by the sea-faring merchants and the fisherfolk of Western India. The Hindu pantheistic element is delineated here:

> Suppliant we bow to thee,
> Bountiful Mother Sea…
> Fill thou our heaving net
> With living harvests
> Warm from the green floating groves of thy tides.

The communities who live by the sea (the fishermen, sailors and merchants) are aligned to it, as the rhythm of its ebb and flow is reflected in their life. They pray for a good fishing harvest and good winds for sailing. These people perceive the sea as "The Bountiful Mother" and hail her as the triune giver, "Lakshmi, Chundee, Sarasvati." These are three goddesses of Hindu myth and this reference recalls religious motifs in traditional Indian poems. "The Festival of Serpents" was included in *The Golden Threshold* in 1905 and the "The Festival of the Sea" (written in July/August, 1927) was published in the 1961 posthumous collection, *The Feather of The Dawn*. This idea of solidarity and Indian unity projected through communal festivals seems to be an ongoing theme in Naidu, as the first poem certainly shows influence of the Indian cultural renaissance and the second poem seems to be anticipating a Post-Independence effort toward the maintenance of Indian culture and unity. Other Festival poems include “Raksha Bandhan,” "Harvest Hymn" (sung during the Harvest Festival) and “Vasant Panchami” (The Spring Festival).

The festival poems represent a revival of Indian culture in British India. Naidu uses the indigenous Indian culture to create a tradition that is the coloniser's other. Hindu pantheistic practices were equated to pagan rituals by the Western Christian missionaries, who came to India along with the British Raj. Although Hinduism is a secular faith that respected other religions,

the Hindus felt that their customs and traditions were denigrated by the British Raj and that Christianity was being employed as a political tool by the colonisers to undermine Hinduism and Indian tradition. Here, Naidu's revivalist strategies seem to be influenced by the *Swadeshi*[21] movement. Naidu embraces the Hindu tradition in order to publicise a political cause. Hers is a literature of combat, as discussed by Frantz Fanon,[22] because it "moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons." Naidu re-discovers past traditions as a means of rehabilitation for a wounded nation and moulds the national consciousness, giving it cultural forms and contours. Her work expresses the vision of freedom and encourages the Indian people to take responsibility for their nation, culture and traditions.

Naidu's was a traditional society in transition, at the time of the colonial encounter, where the changes were dictated by the British Raj. The poet encourages the people of India to exercise their choice in the transition. Hers was not simply a nostalgic idealisation of the past; but in fact she was returning to the people of India their diverse, independent cultures that had been denigrated by the coloniser. Thus, we can see that Naidu's work demonstrates a negotiation between colonial rule and Indian subjectivity. Although Naidu succumbs to the advice of her patrons and Indianises her themes, her poems portraying Indian culture and landscape can be considered subversive as she appropriates colonial intervention and introduces nationalism.

Hybridity and Syncretism

Naidu's language is simultaneously reflective of hybridity and syncretism, which are postcolonial concerns. These two elements would certainly serve to illustrate the fact that Naidu was a voice ahead of her time. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define hybridity as the creation of transcultural forms, as a result of colonization.[23] This intermingling of eastern and western elements in a creative

format has cultural, political and linguistic connotations. However, I would like to modify the postcolonial term hybridity to include internal Indian elements. Here, I would like to use the term "internal hybridity," as Naidu incorporates pan-Indian elements in her poetry, illustrating a transcultural form that charts the various cultures and regions of India. The mingling of the *desi* (folk) and *marga* (classical) traditions and Naidu's poetry on various Indian festivals, India's varied geography and Indian traditional oral narratives are not only reflective of her internal hybridity but are also a part of a nationalist project.

As a Bengali brought up in Hyderabad, as a Hindu surrounded by Muslim culture, as a North Indian married to a South Indian and as a product of English education, Naidu is an epitome of hybridity herself, and her poetry is paradigmatic of her Indian background and English education. There has been a positive mix of Eastern and Western elements in her hybridity and at the same time a unification of India, which was tottering under the British Raj. Naidu's hybridity thus becomes a productive aspect of colonialism as elaborated by Homi K.Bhabha.[24] Naidu's hybrid poetry is an intercultural hybrid genre in itself. This hybrid subtly changes its terms from colonial to native and sets up a space for itself, challenging colonial authority.

Naidu's text can be read as the "colonial space of intervention."[25] Gosse intervenes in the subject matter of Naidu, exerting his colonial authority, and diverts Naidu away from the subject matter of England. He negotiates the cultural space in which Naidu is allowed to express her creativity. Gosse recognises Naidu's cultural otherness and encourages her to express herself in English stanzaic forms. The narcissism seen here is that of Gosse's insistence that Naidu follow traditional English verse forms and techniques. This again has been appropriated by Naidu as she integrates verse forms and techniques from both Indian and English poetry. This intercultural hybrid exercise of Naidu challenges the boundaries of colonial discourse and the very authority of the

British Raj. She is hence using the "powers of hybridity"[26] to resist colonialism and the narcissism of Gosse. However, there has not been a total disavowal of the native culture and traditions on Gosse's part. He seems fascinated by the native culture and this takes us back to the idea of orientalisation and the West's pre-occupation with the East. At this juncture, I would like to highlight yet another complexity of the Indo-British relationship: although there have been denigrations of Indian culture and languages politically, and to a certain extent in literature, it is amazing to find pockets of patronising Western acceptance of Indianness. This is clearly evident in the Naidu-Gosse saga. Gosse's patronage of Naidu seems to be poised midway between the postcolonial theories of denigration of the colony and Said's orientalisation. On the one hand, the downgrading of Indian culture and languages by the British Raj was a political tool, which was transferred into literature. On the other, there was this British fascination with all things oriental!

Naidu's hybridity coincides with the syncretic potential of her medium of expression--the English language. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define syncretism as "the process by which previously distinct linguistic categories, and by extension, cultural formations, merge into a single new form."[27] In the case of Naidu, the unification of the different cultural formations within India in her English poetry can be considered as syncretism. The hybrid text of Naidu exploits the syncretic potential of the English language. Naidu's poetic unification of the various Indian cultures and regions is indeed a pre-cognition of postcolonial syncretism. The language is remodelled as Naidu uses indigenous words, refers to Indian flora and fauna by their local names, and employs classical Persian and Sanskrit imagery in her poetry.

The productive aspect of hybridity can be illustrated in Naidu's poems that signify national unity. This ideology of national unity could be the influence of Naidu's political guru, Gopalakrishna Gokhale. Naidu's poetry has a unifying outlook,

especially in Pre-Independence India, where the regions and provinces were already trying to find "unity in diversity." Naidu's poetry encourages the diverse regions of India with their diverse cultures and languages to unify against the British Raj. In her poetry, Naidu spans the length and breadth of India, creating a national awareness, stressing the need for unity and highlighting communal events in the regions. Naidu's poems are set in many geographical regions of India--from the Coromandel Coast in the South to the North Western frontier, which is now part of Pakistan. In retrospect, Naidu seems to reflect Ernest Renan's (1823-1892) theory that "geography is one of the crucial factors in history."[28] In the essay "What is a Nation?" Renan states that geography or natural frontiers undoubtedly play a considerable part in the division of nations. We can see this geographical unification in Naidu's historic nation building poems. Naidu's India was not only under the yoke of the British Raj, but also comprised the Portuguese colonies of Goa, Daman and Diu and the French colonies of Pondicherry, Karaikal and Mahe. Naidu's was a divided India, not only because of the topographical features of the land and the resulting divisions in history, language and culture, but also because of the history of many foreign rulers occupying various geographical positions, and because of the fact that India was ruled by more than one occupying force during the period of the Independence Movement. Naidu's attempt was to unify all three Indias, her unification was both a metaphoric and a cartographic one. Naidu's poetry foresees the Timothy Brennan idea of "the creative side of nation forming,"[29] giving a cultural importance to a dry political fact. Out of the multiplicities of nation, race and political structure, Naidu tries to create a national culture with uniformity and specificity. It is interesting to note that India was a group of princely states, before the British Raj; it was the colonial rule that prompted India to unify and struggle for freedom. Naidu not only awakens the nation to be, but actually invents it by unifying the various regions and cultures. The national longing for form, in India's case, takes its origins in the writing of Naidu. Naidu raises a submerged history to recognition and ignites the need for

independence. This is done by portraying the diverse geography of the Indian nation and looking at the history and culture of these geographical regions in her "national unification poems."

Through her "unification poems," Naidu celebrates "Nariyal Purnima" with the people of the West coast in "The Festival of the Sea," sings "A Song of the Khyber Pass" with the Pathans of the North Western Frontier, rejoices with "Spring in Kashmir" and philosophises with the fisherfolk of the Coromandel Coast. These unification poems are seen in all four of Naidu's collections. One cannot find another Indian poet who has traversed all over the country in his/her poetry. In Naidu's time, most poets wrote about their individual states or regions, but Naidu has successfully represented India's diverse regions and cultures in her work. Her India is more than a geographical entity, it was the union of diverse cultures and peoples from diverse regions coming together as a free nation. Naidu's poetry can be paralleled with Tagore's song *Jana Gana Mana* (1911), the national anthem of India, that celebrates national diversity.

One of these unification poems, "A Song of the Khyber Pass"[30] evokes the spirit of the tribesmen in the then North-Western Frontier of India, which is now part of Pakistan. This North-Western frontier has also been the setting of many a Kipling story. This poem published in the posthumous collection, *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961), could be hailed as an attempt to unify the North Western Frontier province with the rest of India. This seems to be an unrealised dream of Naidu as the region was already part of Pakistan when this poem was published. The poem, however, was composed in 1927, before Indian Independence in 1947.

"A Song of the Khyber Pass" praises the resilience of the Pathan tribesmen who live in the Khyber Pass. The rugged terrain of the Himalayan range is elaborated through the lives of the Pathan tribesmen. These frontiersmen live at the historic crossroads of crisis as India has been invaded many times through the Khyber

Pass in the Himalayas. The survival of the Pathans in the passages of history and geopolitics is brought out in the following lines:

> Children of danger,
> Comrades of death,
> The wild scene of battle
> Is breath of our breath.

The environment and the Islamic faith juxtaposes the tribes' involvement in battles and highlights their life of survival and fortitude:

> Wolves of the mountains
> Hawks of the hills,
> We live or perish
> As Allah wills.

The bravery of these warriors who live in the borders of the Himalayas is epitomised as something to be followed by the rest of India. Their warlike nature is also invoked in the context of Independence. Other poems on the various regions of India include "Songs of my City," set in Hyderabad, and "A Rajput Love Song,"[31] based in Rajasthan. "A Rajput Love Song" in particular demonstrates a highly indigenous trend, as it illustrates the sensual love element portrayed in Rajput History and Literature. The images used are also typical of Rajasthan, in North India, where love and war are interwoven in a chivalrous and romantic poetic framework:

> O love! were you a shield against the arrows of my
> foemen,
> An amulet of jade against the perils of the way,
> How should the drum-beats of the dawn divide me
> from your bosom,
> Or the union of the midnight be ended with the
> day?

These poems show Naidu's appreciation of the cultural diversity of India, and the Northern Indian poems are indeed an attempt towards the North-South Unity of India.

The unification poems discussed here were composed between 1910 and 1927, and project Naidu's lifelong commitment to the unification of India. The British Raj employed the pragmatic policy of divide and rule and Naidu's unification strategy is a counter-discourse to this political ideology, as it unifies the various regional identities of India into a collective national identity. Naidu was one of the pioneers who have demonstrated literature's ability to function as a signifier of national identity and heritage. She defends Indian traditions, cultures and languages in her poetry, and in a way re-distributes the resources within the nation that is to be India. Nationalism is thus projected through and to the various Indian regions. It is significant that in Naidu's poetry, politics and culture are not oppositional; the ideas of political rebellion and resistance are planted in the minds of the Indians, through cultural and literary mediums.

Naidu's hybridity, that can be read as a form of political resistance, is further illustrated in "Imperial Delhi."[32] This poem is not just a celebration of the Indian capital, but a charting of the city's historic past, ruled by many Indian kings and colonised continually by the Moghuls, by other Persian rulers and then by the British:

> Thy changing kings and kingdoms pass away
> The gorgeous legends of a bygone day,
> But thou dost still immutably remain
> Unbroken symbol of proud histories…

The poem presents a complex historic and cultural situation, where a free Delhi as the capital of India is seen emerging from various cultural representations and alien political structures. The hybridity of Delhi, and in fact India, is depicted as "the process of cultural

osmosis engendered by a long history of different colonisations, before the recent English wave."[33]

"Imperial Delhi" was published in Naidu's third collection in 1915. It portrays the tragedy of colonisation in the lines:

> Imperial city! Dowered with sovereign grace
> To thy renascent glory still there clings
> The splendid tragedy of ancient things,
> The regal woes of many a vanquished race…

At the same time, freedom is visualised in the words "renascent glory."

Although Naidu's Delhi is the complex product of historical and political conjuncture, it is constructed as representing a rich cultural past, incorporating the cultures of many invading forces and the shibboleths of a future independent India. Naidu's Delhi occupies the complex space between Indian, Persian and British tradition; its cultural representation cannot be pin-pointed to any one tradition. Naidu's Delhi is hence an illustration of both hybridity and syncretism. Naidu uses the city theme in the context of the freedom struggle of India, its near independence and its emergent nationalism. The city of Delhi is celebrated as a multicultural, syncretic entity and can also be read as Naidu's visualisation of the capital of free India; not a geographical territory belonging to the British Raj. This could also be seen as one of the early outlines of decolonisation. Although Sarojini Naidu writes in colonial space, the de-colonising process around her is thus reflected in her poetry.

Hindu- Muslim Unity

Naidu's advocacy of Hindu-Muslim unity can be read as another productive element of hybridity. The religio-political

aspects of Pre-Independence India are elicited in Naidu's theme of Hindu-Muslim Unity, when India was poised to split into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. This theme of Hindu-Muslim unity also coincides with the Gandhian principle of *Ishwar Allah tero naam.* Nowhere in Indian Poetry in English has a Hindu poet praised Islam in such glorious terms as Naidu. The renaissance of Hindu tradition in Naidu's poetry is juxtaposed with her celebration of Islam. This unifying strategy was perhaps to promote a multi-religious solidarity, which opposed the British Raj. "Songs of My City," "Street Cries" and "Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad"[34] illustrate a confluence of Hinduism and Islam, and evoke historical memories and folk-customs. The poem "Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad" projects Hyderabad as a city from The Arabian Nights. The Islamic culture of the city is highlighted by the Hindu poet Naidu:

> Hark, from the minaret, how the muezzin's call
> Floats like a battle-flag over the city wall…
> Round the high Char Minar sounds of gay cavalcades
> Blend with the music of cymbals and serenades

The "muezzin's call" and the architecture of The Char Minar, a landmark in Hyderabad, are evocative of the Islamic presence in Hyderabad. The Islamic culture of the city is celebrated in "the muezzin's call," which floats like "a battle flag." "The battle-flag" seems to be an indication of the revolt of the city against imperial rule.

Born, brought up and married into the colourful and oriental backdrop of feudal Hyderabad, Naidu celebrates the multicultural city, a confluence of Hinduism and Islam retaining the glamour of princely Persia. India's Islamic past is revoked in "The Royal tombs of Golconda,"[35] situated in the outskirts of Hyderabad:

> The ruined grandeur of your fort.
> Though centuries falter and decline,

Your proven strongholds shall remain…
Incarnate legends of your rein.

Naidu draws inspiration from her home-city of Hyderabad, where the synthesis of the two cultures, Hindu and Islamic, is a reality. The example of her home-city is then transferred to the national context as part of the freedom struggle.

But, in spite of Naidu's nationalism and appeals for unity, there is a self-contradiction in Naidu's work as she celebrates feudal Hyderabad, especially in poems like "Ode to H.H. the Nizam of Hyderabad" and "Ya Mahbub." The "Ode to H.H."[36] typifies Naidu's glorification of feudal Hyderbad. Although Islamic culture is revered with references to Baghdad, the Arabian Nights, *Saki* singers and *ghazals*, the poem is really a celebration of feudalism and not a revolt against the princely states for the sake of a unified and secular India. Nevertheless, the poet cleverly interweaves her favourite theme of Hindu-Muslim unity by praising the Muslim Nizam (ruler) for his religious tolerance towards the Hindus. The closing lines of the poem almost elevate the Nizam to the status of the Emperor of India. Naidu compares the Nizam to Shershah, one of the Persian rulers of India, who is praised by the Persian poet Firdausi (930-1020) in his epic, *Shah-Nameh*:

So may the lustre of your days
Outshine the deeds Firdusi sung
Your name within a nation's prayer,
Your music on a nation's tongue.

This poem seems to be written in the *Reeti*[37] tradition; as is "Ya Mahbub,"[38] a memorial verse, in which the poet mourns the death of The Nizam of Hyderabad, who is compared to various Islamic philanthropists like the legendary Hatim Tai and Haroun-Al-Rashed, the Caliph of Baghdad. The title itself is based on the words on the State banner of the Nizam "Ya Mahbub," which means "O Beloved." Mahbub was also one of the names of the

Nizam (Mir Mahbub Ali Khan). This advocacy of feudalism reveals a surprising angle of Naidu's work, as most of her poems support the formation of India as a unified nation. It is well known that the Nizam was one of Naidu's patrons, and she was sent to England for further studies with a scholarship from the Nizam. Nizam was the patron of Naidu's father Dr.Chattopadhyaya, who was temporarily banished from the state as a result of his political activity. Naidu's husband, Dr.Govindarajulu Naidu too was an employee of the Nizam. Hence this loyalty to feudal Hyderabad can be appreciated not in the nationalistic context, but in the light of *Reeti* tradition that demands the glorification of one's patrons.

In spite of this feudal digression, Naidu negotiates between Hinduism and Islam; this is both personal and political as far as Naidu was concerned. Naidu seems to have been influenced by the Islamic trend of the *Brahmo Samaj*,[39] of which her parents were members. Naidu uses the Islamic tenet of universal brotherhood to promote Hindu-Muslim unity; this also signifies the pre-existing hybridity and syncretism between these two religions, within India. This confluence of Islam and Hinduism is seen in the Indian Sufi poetic tradition, especially in the works of the *Bhakti*[40] poets Kabir and Mallik Mohammed Jaisi, as early as the 1300s. The unification of Hinduism and Islam through English poetry is yet another illustration of Naidu's hybridity and syncretism.

The poem, "The Night of Martyrdom"[41] commemorates Moharrum rituals of the Shiaite Muslims and depicts Moharrum mournings of the three martyrs--Ali, Hassan and Hussain. There is almost a religious crescendo in the following lines:

> From the haunting legend of thy pain,
> Thy votaries mourn thee through the tragic night
> With mystic dirge and melancholy rite,
> Crying aloud on thee - Hussain! Hussain!

The poem is an evocation of the spirit of sacrifice and brotherhood through suffering and martyrdom. The trance-like rituals of Moharrum are also relived in "Imam Bara."[42] Imam Bara is the chapel of lament in Lucknow, where the passion-play of Moharrum is enacted to the refrain of "Ali!Hassan! Hussain!" In these two poems, Naidu illustrates the collective Islamic rites of renewal and re-generation. Again, this can be viewed from a nationalistic angle, as many of these Islamic poems coincide with Naidu's speeches on the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity. She often felt that "the mystic genius of the Hindus" must be united with "the dynamic forces of Islam."[43] "Imam Bara" appears in the collection, *The Broken Wing* (1915) and "The Night of Martyrdom" in the posthumous collection, *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961). These poems are representative of Naidu's continuing endeavours towards Hindu-Muslim unity; this ideal of hers, however, received a major setback by the partition of India in 1947. It is well known that despite the partition, Naidu emphasised the need for unity between these two religions.

Conclusion

Naidu's negotiation of tradition and modernity, within the framework of Indian culture, projects a poetic voice preparing the nation for Independence, revering its past and emphasising the need for change. On one hand, there are traditional elements in Naidu's poetry like Hindu motifs, Indian festivals and folk elements. On the other, one can see the evolution of a *Brahmo Samajic* multi-faith secularism. The folk ingredient in Naidu is unique, as it incorporates both *desi* (folk) and *marga* (classical) traditions, and can be seen at its best in poems like "Village Song," "Spinning Song," "The Palanquin Bearers," "The Corn Grinders," "Indian Weavers" and "Snake Charmers." This folk element in Naidu is often charged with falsifying "the Indian scene by filling it with romantic stock-types"[44] of beggars and tradesmen. These characters are certainly not the remnants of Kipling's India, as stated by Paul

Verghese,[45] but in fact, are a true portrayal of India. The idea of snake-charmers, tree-worshippers and wandering mendicants seems antiquated to many critics like Verghese. This so-called antiquity is actually a part of Indian tradition. In the *Kumbh Mela*, broadcast regularly on world television, one would get a glimpse of Naidu's palanquin bearers, snake charmers and *sadhus.* They are very much a part of modern India and not anachronisms. In India, modernity and tradition co-exist. Snakes and trees are still worshipped, festival songs are still sung and folk-culture, still revered. The past is never discarded; it is absorbed and assimilated into the present and this is reflected in contemporary Indian identity. Naidu was always impressed by the continuity of Indian tradition in the midst of change, and her poetry is a reflection of this continuity.

Literary figures, like Naidu's contemporary James Cousins and later critics like Nissim Ezekiel and Rajeev Patke, and even her ardent enthusiast P.V.Rajyalakshmi have all come down heavily on Naidu's form, style and diction. This pre-occupation with style seems to be an obsession among Naidu's critics. Let me argue that style itself is not the only determinant for the quality of poetry or for readings into the text. Time and again, the historical and political contexts of Naidu's poetry have been overlooked. If only the content and context of Naidu's work were examined in a postcolonial light, they would open up many a debate and signify that Naidu was certainly a voice before her time. The subversive elements in Naidu's poetry, like Hindu-Muslim unity and rejuvenation of tradition, are attempts to develop a collective Indian consciousness, away from the political machinations of the British Raj. In Naidu's hands, the English language becomes a powerful tool of subversion; she manipulates the coloniser's discourse for a nationalist cause. Naidu shatters conventions that define fixed perceptions of national identity and unveils the complexity that is India--culturally, religiously and linguistically.

Notes

[1] Sara Suleri, "The Rhetoric of English India," in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London: Routledge, 1995) 111.

[2] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies (London: Routledge, 2000) 36.

[3] Thomas Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education," in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, 428-430.

[4] Sir Edmund Gosse's "Introduction" to Sarojini Naidu's *The Bird of Time* (London: William Heinemann, 1912) 4-7.

[5] "Traveller's Song" cited in A.N.Dwivedi, Sarojini Naidu and her Poetry (Allahabad, India: Kitab Mahal, 1992) 21–22.

[6] Cited in Sarojini Naidu and her Poetry, 23-24.

[7] Sir Edmund Gosse's "Introduction" to Sarojini Naidu's *The Bird of Time*, 4-7.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Sarojini Naidu, *Sceptered Flute: Songs of India* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1917) 31.

[10] *The Bird of Time* 37-38.

[11] Edward W.Said, Orientalism (London: Penguin, 1978).

[12] Said 5.

[13] Orientalism 350.

[14] Simon During, "Literature - Nationalism's other?" in Homi K.Bhabha, ed. Nation and Narration (London: Routledge, 1990) 151.

[15] The poetry of Sarojini Naidu occupies four main volumes viz:

The Golden Threshold (London: William Heinemann, 1905).
The Bird of Time (London: William Heinemann, 1912).
The Broken Wing (London: William Heinemann, 1915).
The Feather of the Dawn (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, published posthumously 1961).

A fifth collection entitled *The Sceptred Flute* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company) was published in 1917, housing the first three volumes.

[16] "Spring," in "Songs of Springtime," *The Bird of Time* 35.

[17] Vishwanath.S.Naravane, Sarojini Naidu--Her Life, Work and Poetry (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1980) 76.

[18] *The Sceptred Flute* 100-101.

[19] Nariyal Purnima--Literally translated as "The Coconut Full Moon." This is the festival of the sea. It is celebrated by the sea-faring folk of Western India. The festival marks the end of the monsoons and the beginning of the fishing season. The sea is worshipped during a full moon day. The association with coconuts is that coconuts are used for worship in Hindu culture. Coconut palms are also seen in abundance in the West-Coast of India.

[20] *The Feather of the Dawn* 7-8.

[21] Swadeshi, literally meaning National/ Own Country. This was a nationalist movement, which had its roots in Bengal. Originally, the Swadeshi movement (1905) aimed at the revival of Indian arts and crafts and regeneration of the decaying village life.

[22] Frantz Fanon, "National Culture," in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, 154.

[23] Key Concepts 118.

[24] Homi K.Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders," The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 114-120.

[25] "Signs Taken for Wonders" 115.

[26] "Signs" 118.

[27] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back (London: Routledge, 1989) 15.

[28] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" in Nation and Narration 20.

[29] Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form" in Nation and Narration 49.

[30] *The Feather of the Dawn* 12-13.

[31] *The Sceptred Flute* 80.

[32] *The Sceptred Flute* 156.

[33] Susheila Nasta, Home Truths--Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 144.

[34] *The Sceptred Flute* 55 -57, 105-107.

[35] *The Sceptred Flute* 59-60.

[36] *The Sceptred Flute* 29-30.

[37] During the Reeti Age (1643 - 1800) poets composed poetry on their patrons, who were usually kings and emperors. These poems were then presented at the royal court.

[38] *The Sceptred Flute* 157-158.

[39] The Brahma Samaj, founded by the Bengali reformer, Keshub Chandra Sen, in 1868. The Brahmo Samaj was an organisation that aspired to create harmony between the different faiths and had its foundations in the dogmas of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. This Samaj was deeply influenced by the Bengali social reformer, Raja Ram Mohun Roy. Naidu's parents were members of this organisation.

[40] Bhakti, literally meaning devotion. The Bhakti age (The Age of Devotional Poetry) is considered the golden era in Hindi/Indian Literature. It spans the geographical regions of India and dates between AD 1100 -1600.

[41] *The Feather of the Dawn* 6.

[42] *The Sceptred Flute* 152-153.

[43] Sarojini Naidu, Speech on "Hindu-Muslim Unity" in Virender Grover and Ranjana Arora (eds.) Sarojini Naidu - A Biography of her Vision and Ideas. (New Delhi: Deep and Deep, 1998) 110.

[44] P.V.Rajyalakshmi, The Lyric Spring--A Study of the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977) 139.

[45] Cited in The Lyric Spring 139.

AKSHAYA KUMAR

THE MYTHICAL, THE SELF-OBSERVED AND THE NATURAL: CO-ORDINATES OF MODERNITY IN INDIAN POETRY

I

Most of the studies on modern Indian poetry tend to project modernism as a uniform pan-Indian cultural movement sans any remarkable regional differentiation. More disturbingly, there has been a tendency to foreground this modernism in twentieth century Western thought.[1] At times modern Indian literature is even seen at best a derivative, 'pastiched version'[2] of modern European literature. Modernism as a cultural impulse of upward reasoning and 'self-criticism'[3] manifests itself in different ways and in varying degrees in different streams of contemporary Indian poetry. Though in the post-independence phase of assimilationist politics efforts were made to forge an essential unity among different Indian language-literatures, of late the emphasis has shifted to underlining the heterogeneity of responses. In this paper, a comparative study of three long-poems--one in Hindi entitled *Atmajayee* by Kunwar Narain, one in Indian English entitled *Jejuri* by Arun Kolatkar, and one in Punjabi *Rukh te Rishi* by Haribhajan Singh--is undertaken to bring forth the subtle cultural differences that exist within Indian modernity as such. Although there is a risk of lapsing into sweeping generalizations in choosing three texts from each stream as representative ones, yet these texts, keeping in view their overwhelming reception in their respective streams, do offer us different and distinct markers of modernity embedded in them.

II

In modern Hindi poetry, the process of self-interrogation and existential enquiry is realized, more often than not, through mythical-correlatives. Such a creative trope, if on the one hand it underlines the foregrounding of modern-consciousness of Hindi poetry in the mythical, on the other hand also reveals its relative

unease with secular, autotelic and personalized poetic metaphors. It is through the sacred that the contemporary Hindi poetry articulates its 'modernity.' In this process the sacred is secularized, and the secular is rendered sacred. There are not many 'long poems'[4] that exploit personalized narratives or what postmodernists would have termed "mini narratives"[5] as frames of self-reflexivity. Of course there are shorter poems that do without any apparent mythical correlatives, but for a sustained inner introspection, "Hindi poets prefer to re-write the given cultural narratives in the context of modern experience."[6] The grand-narratives continue to inform the credo of questioning in 'modern' Hindi poetry. The archaic is not utterly dysfunctional or irrelevant, as it continues to provide frames for modernist self-analysis.

Kunwar Narain goes back to the mythical episode of Nachiketa to express his own inner journey of self-inquiry. *Atmajayee* is an extended narrative poem (*prabandhkavya*) on the ventures of Nachiketa, a child of a learned father Vajshrava, as he dares to argue with Yama, the God of Death, on the forbidden mystery of death. In this creative enterprise, the myth of Nachiketa is re-invented to probe into the psychological and mental condition(s) of modern man without any intention of dislocating or disrupting the original myth. However, it does not imply that all mythical details have been retained or that *Atmajayee* as a collection of poems is a plain and simple exercise of interpretation of the *Kathopnishad*, the original source of the myth of Nachiketa. In his introduction to *Atmajayee*, Kunwar Narain clarifies:

> These poems are not interpretation of *Kathopnishad*. Only simple clues have been taken from different slokas of *Kathopnishad*--without retaining their exact meaning and order, and without accepting any type of constrain on poems. Often a fundamental difference could be discerned in the intentions of slokas and poems, but despite this difference, the effort has been

> not to allow any conceptual incongruity in the whole work.[7]

Obviously in the poets's mythopoetic vision there is no apparent clash or contradiction between the mythical reality and the modern experience, as the latter dovetails into the former without much alteration. The poet discovers a striking relevance of the myth of Nachiketa, *sans* its rigid or fundamental religio-philosophic associations, in the contemporary context:

> Without bothering much about the religious and philosophic aspects of *Atmajayee*, I have emphasised more on those human experiences which contemporary man is undergoing, and of which Nachiketa could be an important symbol. (10)

Very significantly, the myths are not dismissed as mere irrational narratives devoid of any human content.

The myth of Nachiketa provides a befitting cultural correlative to a modern man's inquiry into the mysteries of life and death. Kunwar Narain resuscitates myth not to debunk or dismiss it as some fanciful fabulation of a primitive mind but to extend it by way of its acceptance as a cultural paradigm relevant for modern times. Contrary to contemporary theoretical expectations emanating from the high West, in new Hindi poetry myth is not dislocated in a radical manner, rather it is revived and restored positively as a narrative of the 'modern' past. There is no such post-modernist obsession of inverting the established, the pre-meant and the apriori. Mythical situations are of course lifted beyond their immediate religious contexts though the poet recognizes the falsity of separating Indian myths from their immediate religious context:

> . . . But today it is nearly impossible to separate Hinduism from Hindu mythological past,

> whereas Greek myths remained almost untouched from Christianity and European mysticism. The influence of later religious fervour on Indian myths is so deep that imparting a pure human import to them looks suddenly difficult. (10)

A detailed textual analysis of *Atmajayee* reveals not only the poet's creative approval of the myth of Nachiketa, but also its relevance as an archetypal framework of man's search for truth in life. Nachiketa in this sense is an archetypal and cultural symbol of modern unfinished consciousness that revolts against rituals of mere existence.

As modern man, Nachiketa favours an untamed and untainted pluralistic vision of truth--a vision that cannot be contained in any monologic framework: "Truth, which we easily believe to be/ on our side, has always/ remained rebel-like" (23). As representative of new thinking, he refuses to fall into any ritualistic paradigm of golden past:

> New life-consciousness is no more satisfied
> with such answers that are related
> not with present but with past
> not with logic but with ritual. (24)

Clearly in Nachiketa's individualistic vision, any readymade reference in form of dogmatic rituals is shunned to measure and predict the vagaries of human predicament. In fact, in the entire range of new Hindi poetry, the protagonist does not depend on divine boons.[8] Even Nachiketa feels that seeking boons from gods is a kind of "give-and-take" business in which the ever-demanding gods erode the individuality of a worshipper in lieu of their boons. The urge, therefore, always is to devise new indigenous strategies to understand life afresh without waiting for the promised boons that some heavenly oracle might pronounce.

The clash of the individual with the system constitutes an inevitably important phase of the modern man's rather quirky life-graph. Vajshrava, the patriarch of society, fails to withstand the interrogating onslaught of Nachiketa, his teenaged son. In sheer retaliation, cursing the blasphemies of Nachiketa, he seeks his death to choke all notes of dissent. Vajshrava pronounces the sentence: "Death be granted to you" (28). Nachiketa, very much like an ordinary existential being seems to succumb to the deadly and suicidal pressures of day-to-day living with almost an irrevocable sense of resignation. He undergoes a morbid phase of self-extinction as he doubts his own individualistic mission:

> Punished by the stubborn truths of my own ones,
> defeated by their senseless faiths
> and their ignorance
> I am somehow proved as though I were some criminal,
> as though I were my own murderer.
> What complex duality of life is this? (30-31)

Nachiketa realizes the emptiness of his whole being thus: "But having spent my soul/ and having accumulated just a perversion in return/I have emptied myself" (32).

The existential truth of his being alone in his fight against the monolithic society constantly bedevils his sense of resolution. Banished from age, exiled for life, excommunicated from religion Nachiketa in moments of self-doubt asks:

> Am I just alive as a lost being
> amidst public?
> Not available to anyone
> helplessly roaming
> in the numberless labyrinths of dreams
> through the ages? (33)

Outer fears and disruptions dislocate and overwhelm Nachiketa's inner being to an extent that even in his dreams he is terrorized by apocalyptic events like an ever-burgeoning deluge or an increasing life-consuming darkness. External turbulences generate an inner insecurity. To counter the external upheavals the unfinished man often retreats to his inner chambers only to return to the outer objective world with a new resolve. Nachiketa too internalizes the outer existential worries of loneliness and belonginglessness as he dreams that some "ignorant father/ has thrown a nascent baby into a sea" (35) of violent waves, only to be tossed and later on engulfed by them. In the wake of the rising sea-level, Nachiketa's spirit (to hang on) touches the nadir:

> Rising from below is the ocean,
> Standing on its shoulders of convictions is
> life's one dejected point,
> centre-of-consciousness, worried man
> hanging in the dreadful mid-air
> partly safe and partly caught
> in the lips of life and death. . . (38)

Disillusioned Nachiketa is inevitably driven into self-interrogation. Stunned by the heinous dream(s) of the turbulent sea and its criminal darkness, Nachiketa is besieged with the eternal worry of “what am I?”.

> All around there is dome-like iron-silent darkness
> on whose walls these striking voices
> resonate only the stunning stillness all the more
> All these echoes
> travel back to me each time--
> Where am I?
> What am I?
> What am I? (53)

Indifferent, inert and non-responsive environment tight-corners the sensitive and hyperactive Nachiketa into self-annihilation. Nachiketa, as an ordinary mortal, almost succumbs to the lures of suicide. Dark shadows of death chase him thus:

> I want to jump over to any side--
> be it abyss, be it fire, be it water
> because far more horrible
> than all this is that deception
> which is neither death nor life
> but only one bewilderment
> emanating from the two. (55-56)

Of course there are moments of hesitation and conflict: "Not like this--not like this--not like this./ Life is a *dharma*--not to be condemned vehemently,/ not to be thrown into an abyss for the deadly dogs" (58). The evolutionary gusto of Nachiketa almost comes to a standstill. As the circles of conflict grow thicker, higher and insurmountable, Nachiketa falls flat on the plain of reality like a bird with broken wings.

In Indian philosophy, it is established beyond doubt that fear(s) of liquidation and dispersal consolidate the identity and the integrity of the individual all the more. Kunwar Narain's remarks in this context are very pertinent:

> . . the consequence of this 'fear' or 'unrest' would ultimately be only pessimistic--such a thinking would mean a wrong understanding of the delineation of one important situation in Indian philosophy. Any thinking on death should generate only pessimism towards life, this is not necessary--some altogether original point of view might come forth. Buddha contemplating on disease, old age and death, has given life such a philosophy which has been alive even

> hundreds of years after him. The subtle insights of Shankracharya, Kabir etc. was activated by their intense realization of death. (6-7)

Nachiketa's serious contemplation on death does not mean his death as such, rather it is a productive enterprise that might yield an altogether new vision--a vision that trusts life and its infinite creative potentialities with a greater vigour than ever before. Kunwar Narain further adds:

> …the frustration of Buddha is not very different from that of Nachiketa. Similarly in Gita, when Arjuna lays down his arms saying, 'I shall not fight,' at that moment becoming suddenly conscious of meaningleessness of life, Arjuna's agony is without any end. (7)

Nachiketa undergoes a series of epiphanic revelations. First he sees himself as "a self-proclaimed... presumptuous sprout/ of some impatient creativity,/ an indefinite primary-event/ prepared for any eventuality" (110). An aesthetic vision of "rays/pure like a swan,/ bright picturesque like nature/ filling wet colours/ on man's heart" besieges his consciousness; "on the rhythms of dance/ intellect/ searches some eternal couplets of life-truths" (113). The vision is followed by a vision of peace that passeth understanding: "In this immeasurable/ [there is] a realization of the ‘immeasurable peace’; a feeling of imperishable love" (115). Finally Nachiketa has an endless urge:

> to live in the unfathomable time
> absent like an artistic god--
> only as soul
> immortality
> and wonder
> banished in the great *shunya*
> constructing-deconstructing his own dreams

in the midst of fatal faiths--
natural!
incomparable!
unequalled! (118)

This open-ended vision of making and re-making oneself continually towards a vision of supreme life constitutes an inevitable part of modern man's evolutionary credo.

Nachiketa does not straight away fall into the lap of the spiritual. His ego is constitutive in its character as it grows step by step with each quantum of experience till it liberates itself from the immediate physical sources of its birth. In Hindi poetry, modernism is a rigorous process of self-interrogation, a pre-condition for any spiritual resolution. Those 'orientalists' who describe Indian wisdom as plainly spiritual, simply fail to appreciate the 'process part' or the 'material dynamics' of Indian quest. Nachiketa, Kunwar Narain's model of the being, undergoes a process of becoming whose dynamics, despite some unavoidable intermediate somersaults, work in a direction that inevitably gravitates towards the spiritual and the metaphysical--but only through an intense and first-hand experience of the physical and the existential. In Hindi poetry, the mythical, the metaphysical and the modern are thus not disparate impulses.

III

If Kunwar Narain's *Atmajyee* records the inner journey of a searching soul, Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*[9] too is a poetical output of the author's journey into a temple town in Maharashtra, named Jejuri. Except for this common leitmotif of journey (or quest) the two collections present striking contrasts, revealing the different attitudes of the two poets towards the myth or the mythical. Whereas Kunwar Narain maps out the contours of modernity through a well-established mythical paradigm of Nachiketa, Kolatkar never lets his own distinct persona lapse into the mythical without uneasy questioning. Instead of sailing along the myth, he

creates his own secular schema to challenge the myth. Does this capacity to forge one's own narrative or to project one's own self as protagonist stand for some kind of confidence of the Indian English poet which his Hindi counterpart lacks? Or is it a result of the Indian English poet's acute alienation from his mythos? Is Indian English poetry an outcome of some kind of morbid self-indulgence? There cannot be any definite one-sided answer to these questions, but what is quite apparent is that Indian English poetry is more autobiographical than Hindi poetry. In Indian English literature, more than the mere authenticity of tradition, it is the authenticity of the self-observed experience that counts. Empirical veracity of experience, from a withdrawn perch, is the locus of modernity in modern Indian English poetry.

The modernity is expressed in terms of understatement and subtle parody. In modern Indian English poetry, the poets seem to have internalized the 'sophistication' and 'decency' of English language and culture to the extent that they do not overplay their protest. Nachiketa has the conviction to flout his political, scrupulous father in rather bold and blunt terms; in Kolatkar's poetry this protest does not go beyond the level of doubt and empirical probe. Nachiketa is involved deeply in his ethos; Kolatkar's persona under the garb of impersonality and objectivity, always distantiates himself from the actual scene of crisis in a calculated and measured way.

Right from the beginning there is a pre-conceived air of skepticism signifying an unconventional attitude of the protagonist towards the hitherto accepted icons of the divine and the reverent. Instead of indulging in an unqualified adoration of the god, the protagonist takes a typical modernist stance of doubting the very sanctity of his pilgrimage. The pangs and pains of travelling in a "state transport bus"(9), also remind him the ordinariness of his mission thus: "With a thud and a bump/ the bus takes a pothole ..." (11). If the pilgrimage turns out to be just another journey, the priest at Jejuri also turns out to be just an average human being

with nothing priestly about him: "The bit of betel nut/ turning over and over on his tongue is a mantra" (10). In the stark objective consciousness of the persona the ruins of temple are nothing more than a sanctuary to the stray animals:

> A mongrel bitch has found a place
> for herself and her puppies
>
> in the heart of the ruin
> May be she likes a temple better this way. (12)

This inverts the sublime status of the temple as "the house of the god" (12). The "heavy medieval door" of the decrepit temple "hangs on one hinge alone" just "for/ that pair of shorts/ left to dry upon its shoulders" (15). The door of the temple does not show any divine promise of its being a gateway to heaven.

The common sight of the worship of wayside stones as idols of the divine gives a rude jolt to the rationalistic inclinations of the poet-pilgrim thus:

> what is god
> and what is stone
> the dividing line
> if it exists
> is very thin
> at jejuri
> and every other stone
> is god or his cousin. (28)

The practice of stone-worshipping invites the wrath of the protagonist at many junctures during the pilgrimage. In his three "Chaitanya" poems this identification of stone with god is ridiculed with postmodern playfulness:

sweet as grapes
are the stones of jejuri
said chaitanya
he popped a stone
in his mouth
and spat out gods. (23)

What is all the more disturbing is that these stones are painted in various colours to deify them as markers of the divine:

wipe the red paint off your face
I don't think the colour suits you
I mean what's wrong
with being just a plain stone
I'll still bring you flowers
you like the flowers of zendu
don't you
I like them too (16)

Various myths and legends are associated with these stray stones rarefying them further in the popular orthodox perception. "A herd of legends/ on a hill slope" returns to its grazing the moment Chaitnaya crosses over the hills. Chaitnaya here is the cherished ideal of the poet-persona; he stands for an informal, open and non-sectarian view of religion.

At every step the poet-persona is disillusioned not as much by the ignorance of priests but more so by the falsehood they spread to perpetuate their regime of blind faith. To his utter spiritual discomfort, he comes across "A low temple (that) keeps its gods in the dark." As he steps inside this low temple, the encounter with the ignorant (not innocent) priest shatters his belief in the temple all the more. An eighteen-arm goddess made visible by the light of the match-stick remains "an eight arm goddess to the priest" amply revealing the hypocrisy of the entire priestdom. The priest's son has the social sanction to take over the role of his father after his death

without any interruption. This dynastic perpetuation of the priesthood frustrates the searching protagonist further. A priest's son recounts the old story of "five hills" as "five demons/ that Khandoba killed" (26) without believing it:

> do you really believe that story
> you ask him
> he doesn't reply
> but merely looks uncomfortable
> shrugs and looks away (26)

In the poem 'The Blue Horse' corrupt and cunning practices of priestdom are held to ridicule:

> You turn to the priest
> who has been good enough to arrange
> that bit of sacred cabaret act at his own house
> and ask him,
> 'The singers sang of a blue horse.
> How is it then, that the picture on your wall
> shows a white one?'
> 'Looks blue to me,'
> says the priest,
> shifting a piece of betal nut
> from the left to the right of his mouth. (48)

The poet-persona is shocked to see a rather lurid and ghastly dance being performed in the name of religion in the house of the priest himself.

Despite the fact that both Nachiketa and the protagonist of *Jejuri* look forward to a vision of pure knowledge, their approaches vary drastically. The former explores modernity through a typical Indian way of personally undergoing and even internalizing the suffering of the outer world; the latter seeks resolution of his crises through cold impersonal Western reason and logic. The former

risks his life to the point of total physical annihilation and liquidation; the latter does not commit himself to his problems with such self-denying convictions. At no point does the protagonist of *Jejuri* dive headlong into the muddle of religion and idolatry with any spiritual gusto or intensity. With the non-serious spirit of a peeping Tom, he looks inside the temple. The conspicuous tone of indifference in the poem 'Manohar' predicates the protagonist's approach towards temples and temple-worshipping thus:

> The door was open
> Manohar thought
> It was one more temple
>
> He looked inside
> Wondering
> which god he was going to find.
> He quickly turned away
> when a wide eyed calf
> looked back at him.
> It isn't another temple,
> he said,
> it's just a cowshed. (20)

This confusion of a cowshed with a temple is deliberate and mischievous. What is personally observed and experienced is authentic; the poet-persona refuses to succumb to the pressures or seductions of objective tradition.

It is this 'lack of involvement,' casting doubt on his vision, which reduces the temple into just another utilitarian structure, the idol into a wayside stone, or legends into mere fanciful stories. Even the medieval *bhakti* poets (Kabir, Tukaram, Nanak and so on) ridiculed the extreme ritualization of religion; but they never subverted the religion the way Kolatkar's protagonist does it. The irreverence in *bhakti* poetry stems from a deep understanding of the divine; the irreverence in Kolatkar's poetry stems from an equally

acute understanding of the grossly human. Kolatkar overlooks this gap between these two levels of understanding (that is, the understanding of the divine, and that of human) when he makes such statements to redeem his brand of irreverence: "As far as irreverence goes, there is irreverence found in Tukaram. Just because it is devotional poetry it is not wishy-washy. Irreverence as an attitude is to be found in the saint poetry. Sometimes they make fun of the poses of the God. Tukaram says he is willing to come down to gutter level if necessary in dealing with God."[10]

Rather, these poet-seers dissolved themselves into the cesspool of life without any self-preserving interests. Kolatkar's protagonist does not evince this selflessness. The poem 'Makarand' throws an instructive light on the rather mundane and casual vision of the poet-persona thus:

> Take my shirt off
> and go in there to do pooja?
> No thanks.
> Not me.
> But you go right ahead
> if that's what you want to do.
> Give me the matchbox
> before you go,
> will you?
> I will be out in the courtyard
> where no one will mind
> If I smoke. (39)

Smoking outside the temple premises as an alternative to pooja inside the temple reveals the subversive character of the poet-pilgrim's religious mission. This is in sharp contradistinction with the inherent reformatory character of the modernity of *bhakti* poets.

Bruce King, a perceptive critic of modern Indian poetry in English, defends Kolatkar's playful subversive poetry as the

modern equivalent of the medieval *bhakti* poetry. He observes: "In Kolatkar's hand the tradition of saints' poetry takes the form, in our age of self-conscious disbelief, of an ironic parody of a pilgrimage which while mocking institutionalized religion affirms the free imagination and dynamism of life."[11] While the first part of the observation confirms our reading *Jejuri* as an ironic parody of the saint poetry, it is difficult to accept the latter part of King's observation. This latter part is a facile comparative statement, for neither is *bhakti* a poetry of disbelief, nor is Kolatkar's poetry is a vibrant affirmation of life. The act of smoking cigarettes outside the temple sanctum is an act of evasion and escape. *Bhakti* poetry never denies the role and importance of the divine and the spiritual; it only debunks its excessive institutionalization. Kolatkar's protagonist does not give any space to the transcendental signifier. As a character of post-modernist leanings this protagonist deflates the established canons of belief and conviction without ever suggesting plausible cultural alternatives.

Of course, there are a number of references to animals and other minor insects and organism revealing the poet-persona's liking for a pretension-free life of the animals. But this is again a non-human option underlining the persona's escapist tendencies. Moreover none of the animals represented in the collection comes up with a vitality and energy of life that is often associated with animals. "A mongrel bitch" along with her "pariah puppies" does not present a picture of animated life. The butterfly that catches the fancy of the priest's son is nothing more than "a pun on the present." This butterfly has "no story behind it/It is split like a second./ It hinges around itself./ It has no future./ It is pinned down to no past" (27). The temple rat that "Oozes halfway down the trident" or "Stops on the mighty shoulder/ of the warrior god" does not have the courage to withstand the violence of ringing bells; it simply "disappears in a corner of the sanctum/ just behind the big temple drum./ Not a minute too soon./ Because just then the bell springs into action" (40-41). Obviously these animals caught in their most casual postures only join in the poet persona's mocking

intentions; they do not present any consolation to the poet-persona's deep seated disbeliefs.

Moreover the *bhakti* poets assign prime importance to *karma*, i.e., action or participation in life. It is through action that a man emancipates himself from the quagmire of ordinary living. Nachiketa is a *karma-yogi* who enters into life, without succumbing to any of those pragmatic considerations which call upon an average man to withdraw from life in favour of certain compromises. Kolatkar's protagonist does enter into life; the very act of pilgrimage proves this; but his responses are all too predetermined. The pilgrimage only provides an outlet to the persona's penchant for quirky humour and blasphemous banter. His trajectory of journey does not stretch beyond the human. His *karma* therefore is conditional, always checkmated by the compulsions of middle class human living. Ideologically Nachiketa's forays into the unknown are not very different from the spiritual poetic speculations of the *bhakti* poets; whereas the predilections of Kolatkar's persona are very much foregrounded in Western humanism. "In our time 'humanist' often connotes a person who bases truth on human experience and bases values on human nature and culture, as distinct from people who regard religious revelation as the guarantor of all truths and values."[12] Using Aurobindo's terminology, Nachiketa undergoes a longer journey starting from the infra-rational and culminating into the supra-rational through the intermediate phase of rational; Kolatkar's persona seems to settle at the rational level of awareness, albeit without an air of finality or certitude. His search for the divine also remains inconclusive; humanistic and rationalist considerations happen to be his compulsions rather than his aspirations.

IV

Haribhajan Singh's long poem *Rukh te Rishi*,[13] takes on yet another distinct form of modernity. There is neither any grand-myth, nor any personalized narrative which could sustain the self-interrogating credo of the poet-persona; it is through 'a self-

questioning tree' that he discovers the meaning of his self. In contemporary Panjabi poetry, nature (‘kudrat’) is the most secular spiritual site, untainted by the sectarian politics of exclusion and inclusion. The quest of tree-as-poet-persona is most authentic for not only is it a quest of a well-rooted, well-anchored self, it is also a quest of someone who knows how to un-self himself every year in the season of autumn:

> For thirst, necessary it is
> to absorb in your life-breath
> every drop of water you
> drank before.
> For writing, necessary it is
> for the books to turn into blank pages,
> all over again. (15)

By way of contrast, the persona of Indian English poetry evinces neither this level of rootedness, nor the capacity to un-load his self to this extent. Also by foregrounding his quest in nature as against the more favoured cultured medium of myth, the poet seems to locate modernity in the state of nature itself. As against the sanskritized Hindi sub-textual narratives, the local poets writing in the vernaculars harp on the rhythms of nature, which were ritualized as archetypes of culture later on by the sanskritic order in the form of grand narratives.

The narrative takes off when the poet-persona, leaving behind his roots and native ambience, marches off in search of a guru. An (inner) voice speaks: "jettisoned from their ecology/ rootless trees always dry up/ none has seen them going far in time and space" (19). Modernity is inside, it is never external. But it requires a journey outside to realize the modernity inside. The journey is a mandatory trope of modernity: "Let us go and be perishable" (20).

The second section of the poem dwells on the existential ordeals of the uprooted self, even asking for a guru is a risky enterprise:

Should I ask about rishidev?
Well, it could lead to some misunderstanding
I might be mistaken as spy of some other country
why invite trouble. (31)

In the process, some moments of revelation do occur: "Life is a journey of going away,/ far away/ from one's own self" (39). A tree once turned into a man, cannot go back to its innate organic past. Very much like Nachiketa, the tree undergoes bouts of despair and self-doubt. Invoking the local narrative of Pooran and Loona, the poet-as-tree does question his credentials of undertaking a metaphysical quest.

Go, turn back to your house,
you are not qualified to meet Pooran
there is no infamy on your head as yet
neither have your hands been chopped off
nor have you been thrown into a well. (42)

The tree as wanderer is supposed to exceed Loona. Even Lord Rama, in exile, is not considered worthy of being an archetype of self-inquiry. He, as a captive of *maryada*, is condemned to idolization. Even dreams are denied to him.

Loona, nevertheless constitutes the seminal phase of process inquiry. "I am your quagmire, I am your Ganga" (51), thus Loona, the dejected tree, exhorts passing through the process of fire. If the persona has to seek a guru, he must know how to undress himself: "Take off, throw your outer clothing" (53). In his journey, the poet-as-the wandering tree does gather some questions: "On way, I did discover some questions/whenever you will meet me/ I shall put them before you" (54). There is an unmistakable element of conflict in the persona: "Remove my conflicts, O gurudev/ at times I feel there is someone else in me/ I am in someone else" (61). What should the poet-persona divest his self of? "In the body are inscribed worms/ which wittingly or unwittingly take part in my

doings-undoings" (65-66). Such acute levels of self-reflexivity should allay any misgivings about native Indian poetry as merely metaphysical or naively sentimental.

It is in the fifth section of the poem that the persona begins to have some transient glimpses of awareness. But this awareness comes in the form of a sensual encounter, a necessary condition of modern self-reflexivity: "The moment of meeting a girl...was too short" (70). But such a fleeting encounter does leave its traces: "The sun, hot like the face of the girl, has gone/ but has left behind its warmth" (72). The whole experience does yield some measure of self-knowledge: "The moment when we think/ that someone looks at us/we stand outside ourselves" (73). A dialogic relationship between these two positions of the same self is "rishi-karaj," a way to self-awareness. The persona realizes the plurality of his self: "one has so many versions/ difficult it is to say/ whether he is one or many" (89).

The prescribed codes of morality are done away with in any discourse of modernity. This is how Haribhajan Singh's persona reacts to the truth embedded in (sacred) books: "He will read them/ believe them as well/ will lose path in the process/ there is much in them which is false and defunct/ why didn't I burn all those books" (90). The poem ends on a note of rare open-endedness: "the feet that run never stop/ therefore it is journey without end/ the finale lies in endlessness" (98).

V

The different configurations of modernity suggested above are not absolutely exclusive to each other; however they do underline the heterogeneity in approach to modernity within the vast gambit of contemporary Indian poetry. Each stream of Indian poetry has its specific source, site, tradition and history of modernity, which is at times shared by other streams too. The dynamics of exchange between different language-specific modernities however does not override the culture-specific impulses of the poets. The modernity

specific to each stream of Indian poetry also dispels the notion that Indian modernity across regional literatures is irrevocably inspired, coordinated and controlled by some monolithic, all-informing Euro-American modernity. The argument that Indian poetry in this sense is nothing but a pastiche of trends, motifs and images borrowed from the modern West not only overestimates the influence that colonialism has on us, it also undermines the role of the indigenous traditions in the shaping of our creative imagination. The third and most important corollary of the argument is that Indian modernity stems from its own traditions: the very binary of tradition versus modernity thus becomes irrelevant and utterly superfluous. Other binaries such as culture versus nature also do not carry much significance, as in the local narrative poetry nature happens to be the very site of modernity.

Notes/ References

1. For instance, E.V.Ramakrishnan, a comparative analyst of modern Indian poetry, in *Making It New* (Shimla: IIAS, 1995) 19, holds that "If we are to isolate the most significant factor that has been responsible for the development of modernity in the poetry of Indian languages, it is the Western influence."
2. Jaidev's *The Culture of Pastiche* (Shimla, IIAS, 1993) brings forth the derivatedness of contemporary Hindi writing.
3. Octavio Paz observes, "Modernity is not measured by industrial progress, but by the capacity for criticism and self-criticism" (quoted by E.V.Ramakrishnan in *Making It New*, 85).
4. ‘Saroj Smriti,’ ‘Andhere Mien,’ ‘Mochiram’ etc. are some poems which do not derive their structural narratives from the myths, yet such poems are very few in comparison to poems based on mythical sub-text. From ‘Saket.’ ‘Kamayani,’ ‘Ramki Shakti pooja’ to ‘Samshay Ki Raat,’ ‘Ek Kanth Vishpayee,’ one can cite a number of long poems which re-write the mythical narratives in modern contexts.

5. Mini-narrative is used as here as synonym of 'petite narrative' -- a term which Lyotard deploys as an answer to Enlightenment grand-narratives in his oft-quoted book *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Paris: Minuit,1979). Such narratives have local determinants and are rooted in the experience of the individual.
6. Doodhnath Singh, a leading critic and short story writer of Hindi, in his remarks on "Long Narrative Poems" in the context of Nirala's poetry, makes significant observations on the role of tradition as against history or biography in the creative dynamics of Hindi literature. According to him most of the Hindi poems avoid personalized narratives, as Hindi poets tend to enlarge their experience by way of locating it in the mythical or larger cultural narratives. Except for Muktibodh, or to an extent Ajnenya, most of the Hindi poets, viz. Nirala, Prasad, Naresh Mehta, Dharmvir Bharati etc. articulate not only their own but also national longings/ conflicts/ frustrations through mythical grand-narratives, both as basic structural and as cultural frames. See *Nirala: Atmahanta Aastha* (Allahbad: Neelabh Prakashan, 1972) 101-70.
7. Kunwar Narain Singh, *Atmajayee*, 8th ed. (New Delhi, Bharatiya Jnanpeeth, 1990). No separate notes are given for the subsequent quotes from the poem. The respective page number has, however, been mentioned against each quote. All the quotes have been translated into English by the author.
8. Contrary to common perceptions, the devotee in modern Hindi poetry is not at all submissive or is eternally at the receiving end of god's graces; he too asks questions and seeks a space for his own self. Here is a translation of one of the prayers of Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena:

    When did the odourless flower seek
    fragrance from you?
    When did the sharply pointed thorn seek
    tenderness?
    Whatever you have granted, is granted.
    Whatever now is, is mine.

So you sleep, now I shall wake up
through the painful night.
No, no Lord from You
Never shall I seek power ("Prarthana 1,"
Kavitaien II, [Delhi: Rajkamal, 1978]).

9. Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri* (Bombay: Pras Prakashan, 1978). No separate notes are given for various quotes from the poem. The respective page number has however been mentioned in parentheses at the end of each quote.
10. Arun Kolatkar, "Interview with Four Indian English Poets," Ed. Eunice de Souza, *The Bombay Review*, 1989, No.1, 82.
11. Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: OUP, 2001) 170.
12. M.H.Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Banglore: Prism Books, 1993) 83.
13. Haribhajan Singh, *Rukh te Rishi* (New Delhi: Navyug Publishers, 1992). All the quotes from the Panjabi text are translated into English by the author. There are no separate notes given for various quotes of the poem used in the argument of the paper. However, respective page numbers have been given against each quote.

GOPI KRISHNAN KOTTOOR

AYYAPPA PANIKER
TEACHER, POET, AND RISHI FOR EVERYMAN

> What do I know about man's destiny? I could tell you more about radishes.
>
> -Samuel Beckett

It is very difficult to believe that Dr. Ayyappa Paniker is no more. Even at seventy-six, until the first signs of breathlessness caught up with him, he was bubbling with energy, writing and reading his poetry, attending creative writing workshops and conferences all over the place. It looks just as T.S. Eliot said in "The Wasteland," a poem which was to have a significant influence in the mind and poetry of Dr. Paniker.

> 'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
> They called me the hyacinth girl.'
> --Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
> Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
> Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
> Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
> Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
> *Oed' und leer das Meer*.

Dr. Paniker made his presence felt in ways too numerous for many to attempt or make possible in one life. He was the path breaking Malayalam poet, brilliant conversationalist where it mattered, eminent trend setting critic both in English and Malayalam, editor and translator--and Professor of English and American literature few could equal in the classroom, with the wit that could rub shoulders with Shakespeare's wisest clown that he often interspersed in his poetry of wise thoughts and images. No teacher, the best of his students would vouchsafe, could handle American poetry better. His renown as teacher rose to such esteem that not to know Dr. Ayyappa Paniker's influence in English studies

in India would be to reveal your ignorance of English studies in the country. I have seen scores of scholars and academicians, from the world over, come knocking at the doors of "The Institute of English" asking for Dr. Ayyappa Paniker. Such was his renown as professor of English, eclipsed only by his fame as a major Malayalam poet and trendsetter.

Though Dr. Paniker towered over an entire empire of literature and modern day values, he was both by appearance and conduct a simple little man. For us students, Dr. Ayyappa Paniker's classes were always worth waiting for. Though we often bunked other poetry classes, there is no instance on record of any student ever having willingly let go of a "Paniker class." To hear his sonorous chant of verses from "The Waste Land" was the delight of any true student of English Literature. In fact Dr. Paniker taught Eliot with the frenzy of perhaps Eliot himself reading from his poem. Almost thirty years later, I can still see him at the table, the little big man we came to respect and love, reading as though Eliot had entered him "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih shantih shantih." Poetry was to Dr. Paniker his life breath. He enjoyed teaching poetry to his class of students, and it was this inner joy of breathing the poetry he taught that made it come alive in the classroom.

In his office room at The Institute of English, where Dr. Paniker was Reader, before he rose to Dean and Head of the Department, it was almost impossible to actually see the 'little man,' clean shaven, from among the piles of books upon his desk. Of course, the books were all poetry or criticism in English, books of poetry sent in by poets, or would be poets, or poets in the making from all parts of the world where poetry was being written in English. There would always be piles of invitations to attend conferences on poetry and literature, wherever, and it was as though the name of the 'little man' was known all over the world where literature and poetry mattered.

That was the end of the seventies. The height of pop song culture, of the beat poets, Allen Ginsberg, and the flower people. Professor Paniker had yet to grow his fine beard. It was after he came back from Czechoslovakia that the beard came with him. It was 1978. Dr. Paniker was away for a month or so, and when he came back with a small trimmed slowly graying beard on his face, he looked pretty serious as he read his poems from Czechoslovakia to us students in the Institute Hall. I remember, we even made a passing joke on his newly set beard. But the beard had come to stay, and to give the poet-professor the classic 'Paniker look' for posterity.

Dr. Paniker's enthusiasm for Indian English poetry will always be remembered by the torch bearers of Indian Poetry in English. In fact Dr. Paniker is himself a part of the history of that growing body of literature which is making its presence felt. In college, he formed a poetry circle, with a group of a few of us who were interested in reading poetry written in English by Indians and were also attempting to write poetry in English. It was a time when Indian Poetry in English was still being spoken of only in whispers, with no visible future seen in its pursuit. Dr. Paniker was however convinced that there was indeed a need to inspire and promote creative writing in English, and stood by those who made their first feverish attempts, encouraged group interactive poetry sessions, and created opportunities for students who wrote poetry in the college to read their work before audiences. Almost all the poets who have made their mark in Indian poetry today have come seeking his blessings. These were occasions for me in the college to meet poets like Kamala Das, R. Parthasarathy, Keki Daruwalla, and Dom Moraes. Dr. Paniker prided himself on the fact that it was one of his early reviews of Jayanta Mahapatra that aroused critical attention to his works in the seventies when Jayanta was beginning to make his mark as a poet.

It would be impossible, in a few paragraphs, to list Dr. Ayyappa Paniker's contributions as critic and as advisor in the

boards of celebrated international bodies in English, national literary bodies, and in Malayalam: his contributions as part of a life long endeavour have been quite extraordinary. In Malayalam he steered a decadent poetry and set it on the road to modernism, such that he may rightly even be called the father of modern Malayalam poetry. "Kerala Kavitha," which he edited as a forum for New Poetry in Malayalam, continued without interruption for over thirty years. His work also extended to research fields in Medieval Indian Literature and significant commissioned work on translations of Shakespeare into Malayalam. Even after age seventy-five, Dr. Paniker used to attend poetry workshops and be a beacon light for emerging talent, listening with the air of a restrained philosopher who sees all, and speaks little, but offering participation and feedback with a nod or a smile, and a look from over his spectacles, giving his visage the grace of child-like innocence.

The rare lung disorder 'Idiopathic Interstitial Lung Disease,' that left the poet gasping for breath and increasingly in need of periodic home oxygen supporting systems, began to make its presence felt eight months ago. Until four months ago he would come to the phone, but you could hear the rush of breath through the receiver soon after the familiar "Hello," and then he would put the receiver down. The days were beginning to be hard on him, as he lay ill with his lungs slowly and repeatedly inflamed, scarring and growing stiff, while his bones began to weaken. The last days of the poet must have been agonizing for him, especially as he remained conscious throughout the ordeal.

The end came on the evening of 23rd August. Evenings always held a special fascination for the poet as evidenced in his poem "Dusk." The poet had traded places for the kingdom where "there is no more daylight, no more night." And the time now comes for us to linger on the lines of his poem "The White Clouds" ("Where else can we find the beauty of such whiteness?"). The truth is that we can find such beauty nowhere else: it rests with the immortal poet and gifted teacher, Dr. Paniker.

PAUL LOVE

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

We are saddened--all of us--by the passing of Dr. Ayyappa Paniker. It is a great loss for the community of all those who love and study literature. I am sure that each one of us individually feels deprived and diminished because he is no longer with us.

At the same time, perhaps this is a good opportunity to give thanks for his life, and for all the many ways in which he blessed us and made our lives richer. Against the current of our sadness, I especially remember Dr. Ayyappa Paniker's joviality and lightness of touch.

I first met him twenty years or more ago when he came to the annual Pegasus programme of American College's Department of English. He gave no lecture--just an informal talk about literature, laced with good humour, which had our audience alternatively in rapt attention or bubbling with laughter. But then, afterwards, instead of relaxing with the faculty, he moved over to the student lounge with a more intimate group of young people, where he captivated them for two more hours, reciting his poetry, singing, or occasionally even inviting them to join in.

This was an aspect of Dr. Ayyappa Paniker that surfaced continually. We saw it when he came with us for three days of a writing workshop in Kodaikanal, where he kept the routine light-hearted and stress-free with his relaxed approach to the writing of poetry. This same quality dominated even as he skillfully participated as a member of SCILET's Board of Management. It was he who inspired our Board to launch its successful "Friends of SCILET" financial campaign, with his comment that "we must never allow SCILET to become a Skeleton!" And at the last Board meeting, in his home city of Trivandrum, he honoured us with the presentation of a delicious cake, which kept the atmosphere

informal and refreshed as we discussed weightier matters throughout the morning.

So the man whom we remember now was not only a serious scholar and an inspired poet, but one who always kept each moment of life in perspective, continually relieving situations with the light touch, and graciously interacting with those who were privileged to know him. He was truly a man for all seasons. We take heart in our great loss by remembering Dr. Ayyappa Paniker in this way.

(*This tribute was part of a programme presented to honour Dr.Ayyappa Paniker by SCILET, the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, at American College, Madurai, September 12, 2006.*)

CONTRIBUTORS

Shanta Acharya, whose book, *Shringara*, is reviewed in this issue of *KB*, has published three earlier poetry volumes mentioned in this *KB*'s interview with her, in addition to a study of *The Influence of Indian Thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Her current position is in the field of Asset Management at the London Business School.

Deepa Agarwal has published both poetry and fiction extensively as well as translations from Hindi into English. Her *Ashoka's New Friends* won a National Award for Children's Literature, and two fellowships for further research in that genre. She lives in Delhi.

M.K. Ajay, who was born and raised in Kozhikode, Kerala, has contributed poetry to many Indian journals and has recently published his first poetry book, *Facsimile of Beliefs*. He currently resides in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Shoba Albert had submitted a doctoral thesis in Industrial Psychology at I.I.T. Madras, before she succumbed to injuries suffered in a road accident in Chennai. Some of the poems she left have been given for publication here by members of her family.

Ambika Ananth is a freelance journalist, creative writer and translator, based at Bangalore. She is Poetry Editor for *museindia.com.*

Jayanta Bhattacharya, who is Administrative Officer in a Public Service undertaking in Kolkata, has published both Bengali and English poetry in many Indian literary journals.

Abdulrashid Bijapure, who resides in Dhule, Maharashtra and is lecturer in English at SSVPS Sanstha's College, has published short stories and essays, and *An Exotic Tree*, a first book of poetry.

Priya Sarukkai Chabria, a freelance journalist, has presented papers, essays and readings in Germany and Spain as well as in India. She has written two novels, and her volume *Dialogue and Other Poems* is reviewed in this issue of *Kavya Bharati*.

Madhurita Choudhary has published poetry and research papers in many Indian literary journals. She currently teaches in the Department of English at M.S. University, Baroda.

Keki N. Daruwalla, who has retired from the Indian Police Service after a distinguished career, has published nine volumes of his poems, some of which have been translated into various other languages and many of which are brought together in his *Collected Poems 1970-2005*. His many awards include the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for Asia (1987).

Kamala Das's extensive publications include her autobiography (*My Story*), memoirs (*A Childhood in Malabar*) and short stories (*The Sandal Trees*). She is known internationally for the multiple volumes of her poems which have also been collected in *The Best of Kamala Das* and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*. She resides in Ernakulam.

Dion de Souza writes poems and short stories, and is a senior year student in the Postgraduate Department of English Literature at Mumbai University.

Kartar Singh Duggal has published many volumes of short stories, poetry and dramas in addition to ten novels, several works of literary criticism and a two-volume autobiography. He has received numerous awards, some for individual genres of his writing, others for the totality of his contribution to Indian literature.

Sudeep Ghosh teaches in the International Baccalaureate programme at Sela Qui World School in Dehra Dun. He has published his own Urdu and Hindi poetry, as well as translations in Hindi from English poetry and short stories.

Arvind Gigoo, who has translated Dina Nath Nadim's poetry, now lives in Jammu City, and has taught English in several different colleges in Jammu and Kashmir state. He has published translations and original poetry in a variety of Indian literary journals.

Rachna Joshi is an Assistant Editor with the *I.I.C. Quarterly* of the Indian International Centre. She lives in Delhi.

T.R.Joy teaches in the Department of English at Loyola College, Chennai. He has been on the editorial staff of the journal, *Poiesis*, has published a book of his own poetry, *Brooding in a Wound*, and most recently has translated a collection of O.N.V. Kurup's poetry in a volume entitled *This Ancient Lyre*.

Meena Kandasamy has won First Prizes for her poems in contests conducted by *Disha* and *Indian Horizons*, and has published other poetry both in India and overseas. She has been Editor of the magazine *The Dalit*, has translated ten books from Tamil into English, and has published essays and literary criticism in multiple Indian journals.

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

Gopi Krishnan Kottoor, founder-editor of the quarterly journal, *The Poetry Chain*, has also edited an extensive anthology, *A New Book of Poems in English*. His own poetry has won several prizes in British Council-sponsored poetry competitions, and his additional published work includes drama and translations.

Akshaya Kumar, who teaches in the Department of English at Panjab University, Chandigarh, has recently completed a major UGC research project in "Modern Hindi, Indian English and Panjabi Poetry," from which his essay in this issue of *Kavya Bharati* is taken.

Paul Love is Director of SCILET, the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation at American College, Madurai.

Sitakant Mahapatra has done major work in translation, particularly in translating oral poetry of Indian tribes into English. His own Oriya poetry has been translated into many languages, and his English poetry is collected in such volumes as *Let Your Journey Be Long* and *The Ruined Temple and Other Poems*. He now resides in Delhi.

Darshan Singh Maini, formerly Professor and Head of the Department of English, Punjabi University, Patiala, has published many volumes of poetry (including recently *The Aching Vision*) and both serious and lighter essays. A festschrift, *The Magic Circle of Henry James* (1990), honoured his extensive critical studies of that author.

Hoshang Merchant, Professor of English in the University of Hyderabad, has published multiple volumes of poetry, from nine of which his *Selected Poems* (1999) was compiled. His latest volume *Homage to Jibananda Das* (2005) was published overseas.

Aarati Mujumdar is a lecturer in the Department of English at M.S. University in Baroda. She has previously taught at the Regional Institute of English, Bangalore.

S. Murali teaches in the Department of English, Pondicherry University, and has recently published a volume of his poetry, *Conversations with Children.* His paintings have been given several public displays.

Makarand Paranjape's original poems in English include the volumes *The Serene Flame*, *Playing the Dark God* and *Partial Disclosure*. He has also translated Marathi poetry into English, published short stories (*This Time I Promise It'll Be Different*) and edited two anthologies of Indian poetry in English.

S. A. Prabhakar, a Senior Assistant Editor with *The Hindu*, has written film reviews and literary essays for other publications. He lives in Chennai, a city which he claims as his muse.

Shanthi Premkumar, who writes poetry in Tamil and English and translates Tamil literature, has published her own poetry collection, *Nilaa Pennae*. She teaches English literature at Thiagarajar College, Madurai.

Rizio Raj writes poetry in English and fiction in Malayalam. She currently works as Editor, Navneet Publications in Mumbai.

Sridhar Rajeswaran has recently returned to his residence in Mumbai after a year-long teaching assignment at the University of Hodeidah in Yemen.

E.V. Ramakrishnan, who teaches at South Gujarat University in Surat, has published three volumes of his own poetry, most recently *Terms of Seeing*. He has also edited *The Tree of Tongues*, a book of translations of modern Indian poetry, and has published *Making It New*, his study of modernism in Indian poetry.

Mohan Ramanan, Professor of English in the University of Hyderabad, has published his poetry in journals both in India and overseas.

Neeti Sadarangani, who teaches English literature at the M. S. University, Baroda, has published a book of her poetry, *The Serpent of Slumber*, as well as her doctoral thesis on *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India*.

Cecile Sandten is Professor for English, New English Literatures and Postcolonial Theory at Bremen University, Germany, and is Founder/Chair of the University's Institute for Postcolonial and Transcultural Studies. Her publications include studies of Indian and black British literature, Shakespeare, and Sujata Bhatt's poetry.

Arundhathi Subramaniam, who heads *Chauraha*, an arts forum at Bombay's National Centre for the Performing Arts, has published two volumes of poetry (*On Cleaning Bookshelves* and *Where I Live*) which are reviewed in this issue of *KB*, and has co-edited with Jerry Pinto an anthology of Indian love poetry, *Confronting Love*.

Jiju Varghese, who writes poetry in Malayalam and English, is engaged in Doctoral research on the work of Derrida and Paul de Man. He teaches at Government College, Munnar, Kerala.

Aysha Viswamohan has published literary articles and short fiction in Indian and American journals, as well as a novella, and a critical study of the dramas of Arthur Miller. She teaches English at I.I.T., Madras.

SUBMISSIONS

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

We prefer manuscripts on A4-size paper that are typewritten, or computer printouts. We will also process and consider material that is sent by e-mail. Submissions of essays and review articles sent in any format whatever must conform to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

All submissions must be accompanied by the full preferred postal address of the sender (including PIN code), with telephone and / or e-mail address where possible. With the submission **sufficient biodata must be sent**, similar to what is given in the "Contributors" pages of this issue. In the case of translations, please include the biodata of the source poet also. All submissions must be sent, preferably by Registered Post or Courier in the case of manuscripts and printouts, to Professor R.P.Nair, Editor, *Kavya Bharati*, SCILET, American College, Post Box No.63, Madurai 625 002 (India).

Utmost care will be taken of all manuscripts, but no liability is accepted for loss or damage. *Kavya Bharati* cannot promise to return unused manuscripts, so the sender should not include return postage or cover for this purpose.

The Editor cannot promise to respond to inquiries regarding submissions. The sender is free to give such submissions to other publishers if he or she receives no response from *KB* within one year of dispatch. Courtesy requires, however, that in such cases the sender will give prior written notification to *Kavya Bharati* that his/her submission is being withdrawn.

***Kavya Bharati* assumes that all its contributors will submit only writing which has not previously been published and is not currently being considered for publication, unless the contributor gives clear information to the contrary. Aside from the statements made here, *Kavya Bharati* cannot be responsible for inadvertently publishing material that has appeared elsewhere.**

INVITATION
TO JOIN IN THE INDIAN CRITICS SURVEY

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

The aims of the project are

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

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

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

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE (NIRIEL) GULBARGA

NIRIEL (National Institute for Research in Indian English Literature) has been established with the conviction that research in Indian English literary studies can be fully realised if books, journals, and other relevant materials are made available to scholars at one place which can also eventually function as a nucleus for discussion and debate.

NIRIEL, at the moment, has a considerably substantial library of primary and secondary sources, and scholars (especially those that are doing their M.Phil., M.Litt., Ph.D., etc.) are welcome to visit it and make use of the modest facilities it offers.

Membership of NIRIEL can be acquired by paying the Life Membership fee of Rs.3000/-. Members can consult books, journals, and similar other materials at the Institute. They will also get all possible bibliographic guidance/assistance.

All payments should be made through drafts drawn in favour of "NIRIEL".

All correspondence may be addressed (with self- addressed stamped envelopes/international reply coupons) to:

Dr.G.S.Balarama Gupta
Director, NIRIEL
4-29, Jayanagar, GULBARGA 585 105
Karnataka, India.
Phone: (08472) 2445482

Donations of books/journals/cash are welcome and will be gratefully acknowledged.

Gulbarga is well connected by rail/road with all metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Bombay, Madras, Madurai, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Bhubaneswar, etc. The nearest airport is at Hyderabad.

SCILET

AMERICAN COLLEGE, MADURAI

The Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, better known by its acronym, SCILET, has one of the largest databases in Asia for Indian Literature in English. Its ten thousand books include texts by fifteen hundred Indian and South Asian authors. From other books and from more than sixty-five current journal titles and their back issues, critical material regarding many of these Indian authors is indexed and included in the database.

SCILET is thus equipped to offer the following to its resident members and its growing numbers of distance users in India and overseas:

1) Printout checklists of its holdings related to any of the authors mentioned above, and to selected topics pertinent to Indian and South Asian Literature.

2) Alternatively, these checklists can be sent by e-mail, for distance users who prefer this method.

3) Photocopies of material requested from these checklists, wherever copyright regulations permit.

Membership in the SCILET library is required in order to avail of the above services. Current membership rates are Rs.200/- per year for undergraduate and M.A. / M.Sc. students, Rs.350/- per year for M.Phil. students, and Rs.500/- per year for all others. Application forms for membership are available from the Librarian, SCILET, American College, Post Box 63, Madurai 625002 (India).

SCILET is developing a significant collection of material related to women's studies in South Asia. Its library also holds other small "satellite" collections of Sri Lankan, Australian, Canadian and Native American literatures.

Details regarding any of these additional collections can be furnished to SCILET members on request. Log on to www.scilet.org or www.scilet.in for further information.

Statement about ownership and other particulars about
KAVYA BHARATI

FORM IV (See Rule 8)

Place of Publication	American College Madurai 625 002
Periodicity of its Publication	Yearly
Printer's Name	T. J. George
Nationality	Indian
Address	Lokavani-Hallmark Press (P) Ltd 62/63, Greams Road Madras 600 006
Publisher's Name	R. P. Nair
Nationality	Indian
Address	C/o American College Madurai 625 002
Editor's Name	R. P. Nair
Nationality	Indian
Address	C/o American College Madurai 625 002
Names and Addresses of individuals who own the newspaper, and partners and share holders holding more than one percent of total capital	Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation American College Madurai 625 002

I, R. P. Nair, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to my knowledge and belief.

(Signed) R. P. Nair
Publisher