KAVYA BHARATI

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
MADURAI

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2007

FOREWORD

MOVING ON

*Kavya Bharati*19 is in your hands in the year 2007 when India is celebrating sixty years of independence. Even while the celebrations are on we do remember the trauma of partition, the demographic dislocation, and the unprecedented violence. The lines that were drawn across the map of India continue to remind us that we are one people, despite those lines drawn in blood. Akshaya Kumar's long essay in this issue "Nation and *Beyond*" is on Poetry from Pakistan. We hope to hear those voices from across the border more often.

While as a nation we celebrate sixty years of independence, *Kavya Bharati* has quietly completed twenty years of our existence. We felt this calls for some kind of stock taking, if not a celebration. *Kavya Bharati*20 will be a special issue that will map the development of Indian poetry during the past sixty years and assess the contribution of the poets who dominated the scene of Indian poetry during the last six decades. We continue to remind the readers that Indian poetry speaks several languages including 'angrezi'—but not just angrezi. We rededicated ourselves to the exploration of poetry in India and offer a hearty welcome to our fellow travelers in the pages of the very special issue of *KB* 20.

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Editor: R.P. Nair

SIXTY YEARS OF INDIAN POETRY!

KB 20
A Celebration of Indian Poetry since Independence

As part of *Kavya Bharati*'s own twentieth anniversary, *KB* 20 invites feature writing involved with Indian poetry during the past six decades. We are looking for material related to this topic in any of the following ways:

- Surveys of the general development of Indian poetry during this whole period
- Essays on particular developments in **recent** Indian poetry
- Articles on any individual poet(s) whose work has shaped the course of Indian poetry
- Particular publications that have influenced the recent development of Indian poetry
- Articles on gifted translators who brought regional language poets into national focus

You may have some other topic in mind, regarding Indian poetry of the last half century. Whatever you send, we will be glad to look at it.

But remember the Deadline!

Last date for receiving your material is
Monday 30 June 2008.

Don't miss the cut-off. Start thinking / Writing now!

KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 19, 2007

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KAMALA DAS

A DULL ACHE

If I had not lived
so haphazardly
with none to charter
my course
neither a mortal
nor a God
would I have retained
happiness
instead of this dull ache
within the sternum
that I do not even dare
to identify?

FAME

Fame is merely the smoke
the kitchen-chimney emits
when you cook a meal.
Do not be awed by it
or give in to pride.
Smoke is ordinary
all it does is
cloud your vision.

ALZHEIMERS DISEASE

Alzheimers Disease
is a spider
deadlier even than
the tarantula.
It weaves its web
within the brain
a web rugged like
wrought-iron
and thought-proof.
My mother
for seven years had
Alzheimers.
It looked out
through her eyes
although she was
silent as a safe
emptied of memories.
Her disease talked
like a Buddhist monk
It said
Life is sorrow.

A DOUBT

Youth is no rare acquisition
and age does not necessarily
bring the desired dose
of sobriety.
In which amorphous stratum
can the human wretches thrive?

NOOSE

I broke loose
from the noose
a religion provides
to stand face to face
with God
who knowing the answers
asked no questions
Love nourishes love
It gnaws at the vitals
of reason
and silences
with a kiss.

SUKRITA PAUL KUMAR

IN THE GALLERY

Steel shadows
Fluid contours

Passing into

Darkness
Within and without

……

Souls wrapped in gunny bags
Stiff creases and starched stitches

Headless bodies
Regimented in rows
Chests waiting for bullets

Nature's finishing touches.

……

They are
"Coming and Going Pieces"
of art
She said,
created
Out of live tree trunks

Always in transition
Always waiting for
Something to happen

A withering or a blossoming

……

INSIGHT

In the centre of
That circle of light
Rising slowly
over the river of experience
panting and huffing

Lies the truth of my life

so white
I cannot see it

All colours merged
Lives absorbed
The white becomes whiter
And I
More blind

TRIAL BY LIFE

Twenty years ago
In the operation theatre
Of the hospital
Anesthesia awakened me
To you;

All at once, you emerged
From the pits of my being;

Like lightning rose
The voice of God
Blinding the face of darkness;

Green masks and cat eyes
Flashing their dangerous competence
Ready to terminate life
At its root,

I ran for your life
Salvaged you from
The murderous tools
Of the doctor, that pursued me
And entered my dreams forever

I built a cocoon around you
Protecting you from evil spirits;
From the foetal state
To your adult being
Rearing you with
The pain of repentance;
The devil and God have
Battled in me

We both burn
In the passion of your revenge
And remain suspended
Between life and death
As if on the operation table
Both of us
The centre of the universe
With green masks and cat eyes
All around us.

CYRIL DABYDEEN

BURNT OFFERING

1

My first morning in Delhi,
and you make breakfast,
eager to do your best--
    then suddenly throwing
the toast away, saying
it's burnt, which I might have
    preferred anyway.

In answer to my question,
you tell me of Indian children
     being close to their parents--
it's what you will miss most
    when you are married...
such inevitability.

Your father's now busy arranging
for a prospective groom--
"a suitable boy," like sacred duty,
    with phone call
after phone call.

I admire his gusto; later your father
tells me that the boy’s parents
    are disappointed because
the potential groom will not agree.
Ah, you are yet determined, filial
duty or innocence--
    despite what astrologers say.

2

On my return to Canada your father
writes a letter, telling me that you will
now be getting married; and I reply saying
I want to come to your wedding--
and offer to dance.

Months later on the phone, I hear
that you and your husband are living in Miami,
being professional and smooth...
with an American accent no less.

A father's reckoning with a daughter,
or just burnt toast, stars moving about
as I obey signs from above
thinking of greetings that are still warm...
in my astrologer's turn.

THE POEM WISHING ITSELF

Here's a poem wishing itself a newness,
a safe place to hide under,
to sit back and mull and tell secrets
away from the busy Corporation

To leave the Chairman of the Board,
President and Vice-Presidents, executive
assistants, secretaries and clerks--
so it could go about its own business

The poem merely wishes to dream,
mull over despite the frenzy of pain,
voices locked in its head for years...
from somewhere else, returning

With a distress signal, and the poem
takes over with mellowness, wants
to talk only with itself,
hair standing on end--

Trying to make things whole,
images merely, with a triumphant
tone, pretending to be different--
in a new time or new place.

CANADIAN WAYS

From Ghana he has come to Ottawa
to learn about “Canadian ways”--
being trained on how
to become a bureaucrat,
hoping to foster rural
development in Africa.

At the Federation of Canadian Municipalities,
the Director, born in England,
who wears a tweed jacket and tie, says,
"Kwaku doesn't write things down;
not the way our Dan does!"

Dan steadfastly takes notes at meeting
after meeting; he’s well-schooled
on how the system works;
he has a degree in Public Administration
from Carleton University, you see.

The Director laments the Ghanaian's
errant ways. “It’s odd,” he says,
muttering about a “racial divide”
and shakes his head
in dismay.

Ah, Kwaku is from an oral culture,
you fool, I want to tell him–
it's what's going on inside him
that matters.
No thought's ever wasted;
all to the Director's dismay.

(Postscript: *"Our Dan" is still writing notes,*
which he will put in a file and never look at again.)

HOSHANG MERCHANT

SUNDAY, 13th MAY 2007, NM

My sister has come to New Mexico's clear air
After a lifetime's breathing Chicago petrol fumes
She has a pre-fab trailer home:
Adobes won't do / They block out views
She'd rather breathe in formaldehyde
See the shimmering Sangre de Cristos
Centred like some Mt. Meru
She's on oxygen
(She who was my heart-lung machine)
All trussed up with tubes
that entangle our legs
as she goes about her business
Giving up a lifetime of files she's kept on me
Cooking daily as she's done for a lifetime of men
Believing still in the civilising West
While I did my best to cosy up to de Sade
--disillusioned with the Enlightenment…
We're living at the wrong altitude
I get altitude sickness
I sleep a lot
I pad around an unfamiliar house
On sea-legs; I've not found my land-legs yet
Just off the boat for the umpteenth time

II
The doctor will see what's wrong with me
Sister's got lots of money
She still believes in Progress
Between violent bouts of coughing
The doctors' helped her lick TB twice
Now she's got something she can't lick
But my knee needs key-hole surgery
I settle for cortisone
The surgeon and I

if not blood-brothers
are brothers beneath the bone.

III
Out into the sunlight
dappled by rain-clouds
The rain raining on distant peaks
Coming down in shafts
like God's mercy

IV
Back home there's a double emergency
Sister's cough / My bad knee
I've to run to her aid double-time
When alarm bells shatter
My American toilet-reverie…

V
Nothing ever ends
It's simply our bodies' giving up:
Eyelashes whiten, lungs puncture, knees buckle under
Records kept of everything:
Journeys, betrayals, loves, whorings, baptisms
Women are the keepers of the tribe's myths
--my elder sister gives everything over to me
I give them over to a student-son
before I die
'Now go back to the beginning'
a voice intones before I die, at our ending

VI
We burrow into time's tunnel
Some can barely walk
Some are short of breath
But out into the open we are cast
We contemplate a wide open space
An objectless view
Which is what is finally poetry's real business.

6TH AUGUST 2007
(Remembering Hiroshima During the Iraq War)

'I' is un-important
All I is drained out of me
It has gone into You
You are pouring into Me
I and You become indistinct: WHERE IS I
If You are Me

Hiroshima was not necessary to conquer Japan
Nagasaki was not necessary to end the War

When they tested the Bomb at Los Alamos
Where sister lives
The radiation burnt everything
Leaving charred reflections of windows on walls
Like charred reflections of love on our hearts' walls
Now sister is dying
I write this poem
Hiroshima's last survivor remembers it all Still

(for Adnan)

The cloth is torn
Come, love, bring me a needle
The needle of love
For the torn cloth of friendship, my friend, my love
Let us make love one last time…

My sister, my spouse lies dying
My love stitches a shroud
Death's golden needle points to the grave
I go around a graveyard but can't find your tomb

This page is a rose-garden I go around
My dead blossom here
And darken my eye
with the light of a 1000 thousand suns

FIRST DAY OF SPRING

For Ashfaque

Love walks on swift feet
And carries you back to your first love

Your first love enters your married home
On swift feet and turns it into a foreign land

All the years feel like a dream
And the dream moment is the only reality

He was but a pimpled boy
Why did he want to know women's ways?

Cupid is winged
And acned

The trees at your window burst their seed pods
They waft through your house like stars in a summer sky

Is this a new love or an old one?
Love is not love if it is defined

Love is a tent filled with light
To which lovers move for ages and ages

As if in a dream you rise
Morning to a strange yet familiar music

IVANA'S FREEDOM

Lives in a 16th C. palazzo Genovese
Her friends, in the 21st Century
Her parents are like her farm-friend who paints
On board or wood he finds
Moon, pool, spring-branch of his mind
There's a city-air and a country-air
Paganini melting like black notes on canvas
Mozart at his furious best
Mixed with a black madness
Ivana found a girl, her throat slit, on her doorstep
--Did she miss home? Did someone call for her return?
Midsummer midnight revelry can madden
as do gasoline-fumes and drugs:
What does Erasmus say on that?
The day Ivana jumped into a car to Lausanne
She found some 5th Dynasty bronze looklikes, Egyptian
An Egypt Jew heard a call to return
So Ivana hauled those treasures back to her basement
Her bedroom, parlour, kitchen, bath
Make room for his art
33 m^2 suffice to sleep, breathe, cook, eat
she's free

II

At St. Bernado she supplicates
Whose timber from storm-tossed ships
That broke on shore will not rot
The 11th C. artisan overlaid it with gold florettes and angels
I sleep on a bed of nails…

III

Everything turns and turns again
old into new New into old
old Madonnas into new…

Those who weep at Pasolini's Callas
weep but over themselves…

11 November 2006
Genoa Old City visit

RAIN-SONG FROM *GUMNAAM*, 40 YEARS ON

It rains on-screen and it rains in my heart
A man and a woman forever young, forever cavort
The people I've loved have moved on
Some left, some died, some simply disappeared
Mother Father Sister Lover Son
But here, now, in the rain everything is palpable

As the heroine's arms; everyone, culpable like the hero
They sing as they turn; turn by turn talking of water and fire
A fire in my heart dies and burns

The singing voice quivers; the flickering flame burns
Steadily in this fantastic outpouring of the heart's weather
Whether the night will outlast the storm is anyone's guess
Clouds part and I weep like a child for the past.

UNTITLED

Each morning I open shop
Eight to eight keeping vigil at doors

Five brothers pass by all morning
At noon the father appears

Do tell me whom shall I take first
The father or the son

I have seen strange things
I've seen rivers swallow the sea

Clouds eat up the sun… Tell me
Who comes first: The father or the son?

I slept lazily upside down Reading Mira and Kabir
They passed by and mocked me seeing a naked fakir

All bodies are shadows
Shadows turn bodies in Love

What precedes a man as he walks
But his organ of love

Yet men mock me for talking
For sleeping with father and son

I have seen strange things I tell you
I've seen serpents swallowing suns.

THE ST. FRANCIS CANTO: A FIRST DRAFT
(For Clare, Dancer)

Clare danced for me the canticle
in seven stages (seven veils removed)
Of the sun-salute
(royal seven-gun salute)
I knew him as hindoo:
Apollonius' India voyage
(Venus' bikini his raft):

THE WHOLE UNIVERSE IS ALIVE

Brother Sun, Sister Moon
(the full moon my pin-up)
Be my sister
--to Clare, quite gone on him
…too extreme s/d Clare of her patron-saint
the sunny gals put Dad in the shade
Deserv'dly so
Seeking Francis' light
For everything a cause:
Rats' gnaw / bees' sting / geese's cackle / squirrels' paw
the thrush's liquid song
What of Brother Wolf?
--Pure blackmail:
Feed me daily
I'll spare you my terror
--Was the Medici Bank in league?
Genoa still had its usury left
Its medieval gilt room
Its beggars: baroque, naked
Wolf-dad s/d:
Give my money back
Francis returned even his thong:
'The body being within the soul'

The Bishop clothes / The Pope…
…good for a calendar, at least.
No darkness hellish as the Mind's:
At his Ecstasy
The Pope shielded
Bishop got flustered
(The Body can take anything but not terror)
Papal Order: Little Brothers say 'non' to banks' Perugia wars
'si' to vineyards

If one hardy man toils not
If one woman weaves not
There's shortage
Clara baked cross'd buns
Kept Sultan from the city-gate

Against Clara's love
His courtesy clothed
--he treated *her* real saintly
(his mom at home missed his talk)

He voyaged to Morocco
(on the virgin's veil)
(No popery in Islam)
Francis kept the diaphanous veil

Came Sister Death:
God took

Came earthquake:
Village stood
Dome took
(the Basilica's i.e.)
Once each stone
From each home
built his church
Now a mere hut under a crack'd Dome

Don't ask questions
On Heaven, earth, man:
Cut the cackle! Get to work!

Excess is wearing
Humility survives…

5 November 2006
Bogliasco

CANTO: INDIAN ARTIST (VIVAN S.) ABROAD

By the King and Castle I found him
Where Souza had been before him
and I followed, after everyone had gone before
Where he poked holes into Kitaj's painting
like Thomas the Doubter digs into Christ's wound
(à la Strozzi)
In Rembrandt's brown hat
he found war-heroes' helmets
On the Thames shale he found
Elpenor's footprints
In the Himalayan foothills
he found shale
(The sea-bed having heaved up before *The Odyssey*)

Before him went an Indian Mary, 15 Virgin
at the captain's table with another Merchant
(no relation)
a film-maker-to-be
Not yet with his Ivory
1956: The Suez Crisis
Only way to Europe was da Gama's
(of the striped muslin pyjamas)

36 days at sea
36 days of mirth
(The Pisa towers alabaster, not ivory)

And before Mary, her mother
Another innocent
of the Flanders field
Met and married an Indian Hercules
a decade later

Three closed gates:
Grandmother--Mother--Daughter
A virgin marrying, birthing, dying
First of all came Kapurthala's Anita Delgardo
(another Sardar's)
--whom Anais faked--
Sisters all, dancing on a gold coin
Was Kitaji a Hungarian Jew?
Had he not known hungry Hungary
in the painter aunt
the fakir aunt

Of the beestung lips
the saree clips
the Paris salons
Dead of an abortion…

At the British Museum they weep not
The Mughal miniatures
They keep their bright skies
Under the grey curators' eyes, the London skies
Their colour shall seep into India's new painters
nephew and aunt

Of all things colour is most made of light
Since all things that are / Are light
Zarathustra: desuete?
In one door and out of the other:

Light through a prism
Pickpockets through London's revolving doors
Very convenient to make a living here
--Except you be an artist
Where did you lose a tooth Vivan?
--In a cat-fight?
A dog-fight? Pugilist!
I remember your hand-clasp
grasp of a boxer
a lobster-claw
a scorpion-pincer
baby-hands at a breast
Between your Beloved's breast
flows the Arno
Under your caves, the Siennese

Blood has become water: Water flows
Oil used to flow like water: Now, blood flows
Jew and Arab held backwards over a barrel--of oil
You smudge your canvas with motor-oil
You dare to get your hands dirty

II
Now you most resemble the politics
You pow-wow with
(if news is ever to be believed)
Do you teach frottage?
Kitaj is dead:
The butterfly that flew out of your Bombay harlequin's pyjamas

Landed on my hand
Dare I catch it?
I let it go…

Like you I sing old cities
Ravenna, Bombay
I see them slip right back into the sea.

ALAN JOHNSON

ON FIRST SEEING THE TAJ MAHAL

If there be a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.
Once written on the entrance to the Mughal Court, Delhi

The way into paradise is pain.

When I was young and first saw the tomb of Mumtaz
(then tried to frame its memory
long after leaving Agra),
I was frightened.
What could possess a man in grief
to conjure above his select wife a tomb
that billows in the Jamuna's hot winds
or under a mica moon,
that stumps your best attempts
to fit it to the mind's
groove
the way the Taj Express hiccups
on rails to the beat of your heart
all the way back to Delhi?

I should have read the omen:
Paying for our tickets
in May's heat
we jostle a wasp
so yellow
I mistake it for fallen jasmine and
miss its sting
to the flesh between
my father's forefinger and thumb.
The ticket taker clucks and grips
this burning hand like a palm-teller,
pulls forth an iron key

and dips it in a tin of rusting water.
He rubs and rubs it to a blur
along the stone-ledged window
as if strumming a guitar
smoothed by a million minstrel plucks.

A moment, and he's pressing the hot key
to my father's pustule
now in pink bloom.
A crowd blooms with it:
my father winces less.
The way into paradise is pain.

Like a fond farewell,
the throng waves us through the arch to
the other side, to
the marble dome,
a bubble,
a great and perfect gasp
of one man's grief.

In life, Shah Jehan was shut up
by his son in the red fort a mile off,
could never come as we did,
only toss his gaze
across the river's bend
to his stung pearl
like an Urdu couplet
unstrung.
In death, they're joined.

If there be a heaven on earth,
it is this, it is this, it is this:
pain intermingled with bliss.

CHURCH, INDIA

In her dead white-knuckled clutch
a stiff, half-eaten chappati,
unleavened and brown,
like the skin tenting
her bones.

Tannin from tea she dipped bread in,
ammoniac stain,
and week-old jasmine
meant for Krishna
and Jesus.

It is Buddhi, Old Woman,
whose ritual after-hours visits here
fringe my memory:
pupils dilated, full of earth,
staring as if startled by feet
cracked and splayed;
lips within wrinkles
jostling for space:
parishioners in ribboned pews.
I am six.

Beside the street,
on the church portico's smooth cement
strewn with chappati shards,
as though a eucharistic offering
broken from her body,
she lies like yesterday:
propped against her bags,
waiting even now for
the parting of doors.

My senses splinter
when I hear buses pass

in a chorus of carbonate breaths
and horns, the hawkers for “vegetables, fresh-fresh!”
prodigal tunes of rickshaws bikes scooters
to which my scolding father leads me,
away from that precise and steepled grace.

HE PREACHED

like a cat
clawing the pulpit’s polish
whose shine glinted his eyes
with something deep down
the text he was living in.
The words “Blessed,
blessed are the meek”
addled in globes of sweat
blearing his spectacles,
bestruck
Michael, Luke, and Paul
in their glassy genuflection as,
along a pew, a minuet of hands
traded bibles stressed
by years of assiduous reflection.

The inclinations and declensions of
his insufferable words
stained his hearers,
heeled the saints,
stopped the dance,
and filled with bile
the cavities of strategists
who thought they’d come for tea
and sweet digression.

SHIELA GUJRAL

HOPE REVIVED

Roaring, rattling
hissing, howling
screaming, shouting
weeping, wailing….
I hear odd sounds
and freeze with cold
shaking with fear
I open my eyes--
the heater is on
the bed is cosy
what a dreadful night-mare!
Tsunami seeped my heart

Too early to wake
gasping, breathless
restless, morose
lay for a while
trying to sleep
but no success
picked up the quilt
and left the bedroom

As I reached my work place
with a view of the garden
I lay on the sofa
tried to sleep
Out in the garden
chirping, cheeping
the birds beckoned me
dancing across the window
peacock solaced me,
there from a distance
their healing touch

erased my tension,
restored my sleep.

Happy Birthday, Dadi
why are you sleeping
asked Diva, with a kiss
while Deeksha tickled my nape.
Refreshed by their smiles
I woke up with a resolute will.

PHILANTHROPIST

One at a time
three, Wives!
large ‘haveli’
pots of Jewels
stringent habits
frugal life-style--
the jewels seldom saw
the light of day
year after year
the wealth multiplied

Fag end of life
he bought a ‘Mercedes’
hired a chauffer-
cook-cum butler
A few times a year
he had a ride,
on special days along with wife
all decked out in jewels ancestral
beaming with pride!

The end arrived
his last wish

was a meal for destitutes
an act of generosity!
He murmured,
“One anna per head!
in Banares it is half the price.”
Patiently he bore the loss
died in peace this Raja Kuber

Suddenly there mushroomed
scores of aspirants
none could establish his claim.
Destiny helped him
a ‘Trust’ was formed
now a school, a college, a dispensary
all acclaim his name.

MA!

Transplanted to a far off land
new style, new culture
new food, new flavours
a robot moving up and up
winning titles, honours, fame
the blazing candle melted fast.

The flame has slowed down
the receding river is almost dry
In the darkness of gloom
in the soft blue dusk
I see your thought-filled eyes
reflecting the love
for your erring son.

PANDIT JI

Hurricane jump
On 'Bhaktins' bed
a quick thrust
a shriek of ecstasy--
leaves behind
drops of ambrosia
on dazed bhaktin's
virgin loins

PETS

Opening the cage
the birdies flutter
to reach my fondling hands

AWAKENING *

Like a fish in a frozen sea
I hibernated
under the solid rock
of salt-imposed silence
no one missed me.

Days-months-years passed,
I felt stifled!

A whiff of fresh air,
a wandering sun-ray,
a melting moon-beam
none came to caress me.

Pining for a sympathetic glance
a trailing smile
or a flying kiss,
I tossed in the cauldron of memories
sizzling with burning desires.

Then,
wrapping the flame
in a bundle of metaphor, sound and similies
I launched it on the wings of poetry
and dropped it into the critics' camp.

Instant explosion!
an avalanche of abuses followed
shooting, hitting, smashing
the rock of silence.

Liberated,
I am back to life
joining others
in the glorious task of exploring
the mystery of life and universal love.

* (*Translated by the poet from Hindi*)

K. RAMESH

GYPSY LOVE

July morning.

Not a speck
in the blue sky
as I bicycle.

I see them daily
on the way to
the tea shop:

the young gypsy couple.

They sit in
the shade of a tree--

Seems to be their
favourite place--
by the side of
the road

Taking a break
from their job of
collecting garbage
from the bin--

For romance.

How different they are
from other couples
who sit in cars
with all the windows shut.

I'm glad to witness
the joy in the smiles of
the gypsy couple,

as their romance happens
when there is breeze
and sunshine
under the blue sky--

on this July morning.

WAITING FOR MANGOES

A flash of lightning.

I remember another night;

Dinner over,
we wait for Father to cut
mangoes with a sharp knife.

We were never allowed to touch it.

After cutting the fruits,
He would wash the knife
and put it back in the cupboard.

How the yellow peel
would curl over the mango
and fall on the table!

A cool breeze enters
through the window;

The sound of rain
falling on the roof again...

My little daughter asks me,
shall we play,
`snake and ladder'?

A POEM FOR HER

My little daughter
Knows that I write
Something called poetry.

One night
She asked me,
`Will you write me a poem?'

We both sat on the bed,
I had a pen in my hand.

Suddenly I sneezed;
The sound was big
In the silent night.

She started laughing.

Then we heard a kitten mew
When my wife opened the door.

Immediately the girl ran out;

I knew what she would be
Doing next:

She would carry the kitten,
And keep it closer to her face.

I continued to sit on the bed
By the window,

With the pen in my hand.

ANJU MAKHIJA

ARTEFACT

The portrait, shrouded in plastic,
hangs in the loft like an exhibit
in the Gallery of Modern Art.
Inside, a face, bust size,
patchy skin, penetrating eyes,
mole below lips, eyebrows thick,
singular features in an innocuous face.

Terrifying, this packing away
in coffins, polythene, white cloth;
like monks in saffron robes,
the silence never wears off.

Moth-chewed lips,
mildewed nose,
white ant devoured ears,
spider webs, chin to forehead.

Leprosied, left to its fate,
colours bleed, the blush fades.
The portrait mutely marks time.

OPEN HOUSE

Firmly fettered
behind the rose bush,
blood oozes, barbed wire
skins the dog's shin.

Cats chase tails,
stash away mice,

creep into fishy nooks,
nocturnal crooks!

Moles sink teeth
into the earth,
sneak into tunnels,
pave watery graves.

Bright red bougainvillea
sting onlookers,
rape the hell
out of thumping hooves.

A lizard, tail cut,
hovers around the light bulb,
flicks its tongue,
ingests insects whole.

Ants besiege corpses,
vanish
without trace or scent
into the cracked cement.

The spider entraps
ghosts of glass,
lingering on window panes,
hangs foes without suicide notes.

Torture, day and night
in a house
built
to keep inhabitants out.

THE SOLO ACT

The reptile stood firm
on a blade of grass,
silver streaks flanking
a body Santro-smooth.
Head held high, now curving
like a bend on the hill,
eyes glassy still.
Then a sharp hair-pin left,
U-turn right, vaulting
up the tree, a bow,
out of sight.

Driving into the city,
round about left,
dodging loaded trucks,
stray dogs, dozing cops.
A halt at the red light--

To my surprise, the chameleon
appeared on the glass pane,
leapt, boogie-woogied,
and when red turned to orange,
he seemed to say:
Why leave us behind?
City mortals certainly
no match for us country kind!

S. A. PRABHAKAR

BHOGI

On the day of jettisoning
I keep more things
Than I throw into the flames
Like the evening sky
Clinging on to hues
Long after the sun is gone
I treasure the debris of my prime
And put them to bed in the loft
The New Radiant Reader with the song
That opened my eyes
To enchanted isles
The hockey stick bare at the joint
That once proved that the game
Was in my blood and I
Was a chip off the old block
The blue translucent marbles
Reminiscent of train night lamps
That I did not dare flaunt
And carried hidden with me
For days with wonder
I remember with a smile
My father's angry face
When I wanted to throw away
His own memory-wrapped trivia
That did not survive him long
As you grow old you grow fonder
Of things that need to be thrown away
Of odds and ends fit only for the attic
For like you their time has come and gone

S. A. Prabhakar

IMITATORS

I've often wished some blight
Would make me old in a night
So that the world would give up on me
As fit only for the grave
So I wouldn't have to listen
To imitation voices
Telling me, always, to be someone else
And wanting like Willy Loman
To make me think I'm
Somebody I'm not
Pointing to victors I know for beasts
To send me panting across horizons
On journeys that would keep
Bringing me to the same doors
That remain forever shut
To the same temples
That tell me I don't belong
That my touch is unclean
That even my prayers pollute

ON AN UNKNOWN CORPSE

Traffic pauses
Even on arterial roads
For the dead to pass
Those on their last journey
Have the right of way
At least, here
Bipeds treat others of their irk
As their own,
and clean or unclean don't
Refuse to share the cremation ground
Or allow them passage
Even after they have passed away
From one oblivion to another…
The colourful wake
Of rose and marigold
And blasted craker paper
Tell of a fitting farewell…
Does Death come
As a libeator
To those who wake up everyday
Reluctant to live
Does it speak of last wishes
Whisper the mystery of life
Mention new destinations
Or does it come
Like a usurer
Calling in a debt

USHA AKELLA

TURMERIC HUE

In one hour we will host a dinner, I will serve
paneer rolls stapled with mango--
my creation--and marinated kababs, again my creation.
They will walk through my house, admire my art,
Décor, brother's talent, my creativity, our daughter's
old soul--she is three as she shows off her boo-boos or cart wheels,
our house will become a museum, all of us pegged on the walls.

And I will subside into a cauldron of shyness, words eyeing me coldly
in the distance as I mumble "I am a poet," "as well…" trail off,
conscious of the irony, my rounded belly, a possible migraine
and clutter in the wardrobes. I will not mock humanity like
T.S. Eliot and write a poem on women coming and going and
drooling. I will love humanity though I would rather write a poem
than have hours vaporize into cumin and hinge fumes.

One hour to go, I'm on the floor at Borders, the books lined like
spice jars,
reading how different poets nibble on the world differently
and leave their crumbs in pages. And I on my knees lick my fingers
pick their leftovers, taste how they taste the world hoping to see
myself in their tasting. "Mummm," they will say, "Is it curry?"
And I will patiently explain, "Curry is not a spice but a dish--
any vegetable or meat dish--curry as you call it is actually turmeric.
That yellow hue." *Like voice in poetry*, I will say to myself.
Later this night I will seize my day and
the poems will splutter into space like mustard seeds.

BOLLYWOOD BONANZA

You are a bonafide NRI Indian when you pledge
allegiance to Bollywood Bonanza. Customarily
you must gather with friends and family,
your tongue on fire with pakoda, your eyes singed
by the screen's seismic sensory onslaught, your soul
seduced by sexual metaphors erupting as hibiscus.
To you the film unfurls as the Indian flag, you fill
with patriotic fervor, lure of shared language, warmth
of kinship; the sub-structures of culture work as yeast
in the moist dough of your yearning. You swell with
familiar idioms, platitudes, clichés--the same-old re-worked
with sleek technology, and Japanese fight-visualizers.
Elders' feet are touched, fathers nostalgic for India feed
pigeons in Trafalgar square, wives and mothers worshipped,
Love is sacrificed, bindis paraded, the poor get the rich,
order is reached, and you climax with the film, sigh satiated
in the end. Amitabh's still sexy as hell at 60. Your kids root
for Shah Rukh Khan, and Rai is the new face of India
even if you can't be like her. Your kids jhatka in front
of the screen much to the delight of your American guest
reveling in the visual jazz. "How delicate your romance
is. By now our Hollywood heroines would be naked."
A little pleased and puzzled, you watch groins straining
in fully clothed bodies dancing in front of pyramids
and think, "Well, maybe the world's getting India. Finally!"

KRISHNA BOSE

A MORNING AT SRINAGAR

The orange veils of the morning
fell on the shoulders of the city
rising slowly from the clutches
of heroin-addict stillness

Tremors of love fluttered on the pines
running down the serpentine roads
still washed with uneven greyness
roped sunlight poured in the bus windows.

A riot of colours broke here and there
as the mind leaned and flagged
with the breath of the chinars
grabbing the rolling countryside.

Sometimes in chunks of dusty mindlessness
the soul pawned itself across the tops
burning in constant whiteness
coughing sparks of violet dusk.

Spools of hope circled like a ghost
on the harshness of bones
as the morn stirred and stretched
on rows of foam-flecked roof-tops.

GRANDPA'S REMEMBRANCE

Grandpa with his usual debilitating strokes
of colour and brush
in exciting spins of diverted river
shelled out his soul
vowed sincerity willfully played
from dawn to dusk.

None questioned the face
not even grandma in intimate moments
nor wheeling, nudging children
Only festoons of doubt fluttered the square
At times irritably hard.

Under the moon's wild eye
the speechless innocence eked out
A lump of summer flowers smoking up
Stomping across the edge of dream
inconsolably burning
turning wee windows of hope
into rectangles of yellow.

Moments soft and sweet grew
in the sleekness of rain clouds
among those stony whispers
in plateaus gone dawn-clear.
Tenderness nestled the imbalances
of chaste childhood.

LANCE LEE

SCULPTOR

Dust on his pants, chips at his feet
    time chisels my woman's face.
First her features were an infant's:
    smiling, sometimes weeping
he reworked into the teenager
    I knew possessed love:
still he chiseled towards a beauty
    he paused to contemplate,
as if content, and resumes--
    his sharp edges grave fan-like
traceries from her eyes. One day
    he will chisel a fraction too far
and there will be just that dust
    to shake from his pants,
those chips to knock from his shoes.
    But as she looks in the mirror,
shaking from his pounding, dabbing
    powder to soften his lines, I feel
tenderness rage helplessness
    at how careless he is of the living
stone under his hand.
    We surrender to his blows because
we must, whether or not he
    dreams like us, somewhere, some-
time he will say "*Ah, that's it.*
    You are the one. You can stay"
and stop.

SNOW

falls when I sleep, when cars are few
and buses huddle against each other
in their sheds: when a fox hurries along
the snowy road and turns down
an alley between homes, slips
under the fence no matter how often
we try to stop the hole, and slides
into his den hungry. Dreams bring
delusions of warmth, of flesh
seamlessly young when beauty and
muscle are enough, but I hug myself
as I grow aware in the cold dawn,
shrugging on warmer clothes,
of the first crush of wheels hissing
on the streets. Outside, the wonder …
thickly flurried then thinly as snow
slips from treelimbs and clotheslines
to give them a raddled look. Rain, and
meltdrops that swell on limb and eave
mix with snowflakes as morning wears
until they melt as they fall.
I don't hurry to roll a snowman,
or lob balls at each other, or sled
downhill for wind to paint my face
red in that vivid dream called *youth*
I have woken from… Soon gritty
streets remain, some white patches
in the shade, slush that waters as
clouds break and sunlight paws
the demi-ice, steam rising equally from
roof and street. I wonder if carefully
writing this down gives some sort of
immortality, and know. I go on,
anyway.

Lance Lee

SUMMER'S END

Winter surf beats the shore with
    its fists, hair blown back by wind,
then streams across the beach,
    eating half summer's sand in hours.
Dowitchers and banded willets,
    curlews with bent smiles and
stabbing long-beaked godwits
    reclaim the foamy edge between
the settled and insecure. I long
    for day to crisp the air, night to weave
cold and smoke from a thousand hearths
    as heat and cold become lovers
who cannot be with, or without, each other,

    for I do not know myself in summer anymore.

Fishing boats trawl nearer shore,
    afraid the storm will outrace them home,
no longer picturesque but manned by
    men in earnest who know how waves
become steep islands toppling from
    their weight, or towering foam
that sweeps the headland where summer
    tourists stood to admire the shore
below. I go down in myself to the forging
    fire atom, stone and marrow recall:
crouch, as though by flames in the lee of
    a dune to count the warm days left
like coins from a small, hidden hoard,

    for I do not know myself in summer anymore.

HERON

Old man heron stalks the bog channels
and pond, solitary, quawking when I
startle him in this late, clement air--
spring's melt bared three brethren

winter ice and snow overwhelmed,
and little clothes his hollow bones
beyond the flesh of memory. Hawk and
kestrel coast the bog that forgets its

cranberries and steps towards wildness,
young oaks and pines, tall grass and
bayberry cover beds, subtle fox and
coyote hunt, while wolf noses south

as the forest retakes New England's
empty, stony farms. These hear claw
sniff pounce through snow or pursue
countless voles, mice, rabbits, but when

an arctic wind snaps off the last russet
and Indian red leaves--when sleet,
not drizzle, snow not rain, drift and
patter from a pewter sky--old man heron

skates across the pond, beak hammering
foot-thick ice until a night the stars scatter
from their cold, icy heights and warmth
marbles outward in. He sees life's silver

flash in his black dream, draws back his
head to the painful edge of release--
fox and coyote crouch in fear when
that great beak stabs upward into peace.

Lance Lee

FORSYTHIA

The forest is a city bombed to abandonment,
the sky a blue sheen found on a sharp blade:
even in these ruins, the autumn light is heart-
stopping, as though My Life and Man's History
and the History of Trees are all equally part of
nature's metamorphoses. But how can I bear
this bank of barren bushes rising across the river
that in spring blind with yellow bursts? Their
memory glows in winter woods where death
walks supreme through that desolation
closest to nature's heart, unless that is partial
seeing, one thing broken into pairs, life and death
which, like love and hate, we know at heart
are the same? How to explain death unless it too
is the after-glow of some blooming never
wholly done, always renewed? Even now as
I stare at the bleak limbs I see their yellow blaze,
for they are on fire with the fire that does not
consume but stuns the mind and humbles the heart.
Is that the hidden cause that makes bareness
and fullness beyond bearing? The river flows,
the bushes are a clock ticking, full--bare--
full-- . Time only seems to pass. I know nothing.

AUTUMN LIGHT

The brilliance of this late light!
The sun at noon is low as late
afternoon in summer, its light
honed to an edge summer forgets,
sheathed in air crisp past the edge
of breaking. My fogged mind clears,
heart soars, and I almost forget
this is not my spring, but autumn,
that a leaner season has come
when apples left on the bough turn
sweet and sag inward with frost's
first touch, when sap urges the root
to prepare spring's burn through
winter's sleep. I envy wood's steadier
strength--when my time comes
I will only sleep. Yet this light…
To soar in the fall of an age, to find
life taste so sweet now gray sheathes
my head! To feel my blood sing
instead of anger or despair clot its flow!
Explain that. I will walk here as
sunset sharpens the air, never more
alive than when darkness grows.

Lance Lee

THE OAK

Years storm past. Leaves young
    with spring's growth or summer's
strength hold through all, except a few
    curled husks on the ground--
but in this slant late light, leaves
    that burned brightest at the end lie
storm-stripped in the woods:
    only this oak still wears russet.
I stretch my arms around him, ask
    his secret: when he is silent, I whisper
words only he hears--a heart quickens
    under his bark, mouth shapes
arms swing as first one then another
    root shakes free. He takes a ground-
shaking stride, smiling until he sees
    the ranks of winter skeletons, the
lightning-split and wind-sheared
    wreckage of limbs and trunks.
He curses my gift of man's fate, to know
    he must die, and plunges his legs
into the ground, spread arms freezing
    into place, himself again, wooden
to my pleas. Once I wanted to burn
    brightest at the end too, but now I
would settle even for his thoughtless
    power if I could.

KEYA MAJUMDAR

GOODBYE

And the moon rose
silently up
As the noisy cars, honking bikes, and
Giggling students whirled past
Leaving me crouching on a roadside block,

As the silent roads intercrossed
Themselves, running busily from this side to that
Wearily dispersing after exchanging notes,
The students with their files and cycles
Trudged past me
To the drab food of their hostel
At the intersection.

At the intersection,
As the weary sun went off
To nudge the other part
Of the world
And as the chirpy breeze
Blew my dupatta away,
Running after it
I saw the moon coming up silently
Wrestling itself free
from the leaf-shorn neem tree

Time to go home.
Somewhere, someone boomed, pack up.

Keya Majumdar

IT'S YOUR CHOICE

Sitting in the crow's-feet of your eyes
Your guilt averts my glance

Hiding the Opportunist Move with piranha's kiss
with feline grace you wipe your face

and wipe your hands off before reaching
for a greener pasture. Only something--

Something gets stuck in the throat
some thing that you can neither swallow nor throw up--

nor slither.
your feet itch; you

Have to live on however with the eyes,
kisses, faces, hands, throat, and feet
fragmented, until they come back

It's your choice after all.

WHAT IS IN A NAME

I reside in the gap _____
between word and silence,

mapping the subject of my choice
the area of my existence,
the choked out, caved in
utterings
of Christ on the Cross

of Joan at the Stake
of Theresa in Sainthood
of Panchali on Womanhood
of TomDickAndHarry
whoever rides the circular staircase
on and on
up and down
ultimately reaching nowhere.

I reside in that nowhere;
Some might call me Poetry.

DIN OF SILENCE

The noise of Silence
insistent as an alarm bell
knocks down my whole citadel
of resistance with its death knell.
As I refuse to listen
to see or to pay attention
to the bursting cannon
of unsaid protest and repulsion
The scorching eyes
that set fire to tears
watch motionless,
Desperation comes to roost in stoic Silence.
Focused as the supersonic jet
lethal as the missiles set
dreadful as the hawk eye, the net
of Silence enwraps me perfectly
in all its armour consistent.
As I bleed to death in Silence
Explosions give way to autistic cheers.

BIPIN PATSANI

A MOTHER IN TOWN

Brought to live in town
with her working daughter-in-law,
a mother awoke one morning
and found herself surrounded with
all the affluence of the middle class home
heading up, she did not know to where.

It was a whole new world of concrete,
shining wash-basin, cream and colour;
the washing-machine, T.V., fridge and cooler
occupying their place in the dining space
and images in the dressing mirror looking taller.

But one thing was missing there,
one very important thing was certainly not there,
the thing which was very important to her
all her life, held so dear.
In the grand show of glistening gadgets
and home appliances, she saw herself nowhere.
Lonely in a son's house, contrary to
the long summer when she had her way,
all she could do among several odd things
was to keep watch.

An old woman in her seventies
out of her mud haven in the village,
she felt so much a stranger
in the artificial world and was so scared of
late night parties that one such night
she had to hide herself under a cot
until her son returned with his wife and kids,
lest some burglar should break in,
strangle her or cut her throat.

Neither the smooth marble floor
nor the bathroom shower
could tempt her to stay there.
So she came back to her soil at home
where the air was humble and the sky clear.

There were of course no more rotis
to slide in with some meat and curry
unbecoming of a poor widow;
but she had nothing to be afraid of,
none to make her feel ashamed or sorry.

BIRGIT LINDER

INDIA

A sudden surge of elation
Like milkweed butterflies in March.
India, my Imagination!
Though a pelican in the wilderness
I dance under a copper moon,
from Cow Hill to Elephant Hill.
Long dormant desire kindles
to the bliss of sheet lightning.
Half-lidded gaze hallows
nippled roofs of devotion.
And my feet touch the ground
Like a Pivangi do Norte[1].
I chase your ghosts
and your swift sand serpents.
And watch the turtles dance
at the dawning Bay of Bengal,
all the way to Nicobar's Tillangchong!
Even when moody winds shake
sweetness out of summer,
And the coconuts drop
On bronze colored soil,
Joss stick and saffron bewitch
India, my love!

[1] grows roots wherever the branches touch ground.

ARATHY ASOK

IT

It is soon time to go
Night will fall in a moment's pause.
Twilight is done.
Before the finale
Let the flame burn out
The days falling off
Like a lizard's tail
Let what will rise from the ashes
Burnt and dark
Frighten, as it may.
No more to be said.
No roles to be seen.
The script is lost
(The papers are a maze)
Gather all the flowers
And burn them in dung
Soon, sooner
Night will fall.
(And I will love you forever.)

SHANTHI PREMKUMAR

BEING GOD

It's fun being God in these parts
You never endure a dull moment
You are either getting married
Or celebrating the birthday
Of one of your relative gods

You're decked in the choicest finery
Not to mention designer jewellery,
Any day, any time!

People throng to see you!
Poets reel out verses
Faster than you can hear them
And even the VVIPs
Walk in with their paraphernalia
Once in a while
So there! You get to strike the newspaper headlines too

But it does get a little too much
Now and then
When
Important leaders
Out of supreme love for you and their country
Organize verbal duels and even fiery battles
With a neighbouring god or two.
Your birthplace is discussed with great care
Holy men gather and even experts
Are consulted on the matter
Maybe one day you'll duly be given
A nativity certificate, no less!

It fills a few dull moments for them
They say

What if a life or two is lost by the way
It's all for the love of God!
You can only grin and bear the occasion
With maybe a friendly wink or nod
At your enemy-designate neighbour god

For you see,
They like you best
With your silent, wise, all-knowing smile
So much as a shake of your head would shock them!

Well, on second thoughts
It's not all such fun
Being god in these parts!

DESIRE

I mixed wood apple and sugar.
Mighty fond, I am of it too.

The little cup on the sill,
seconds I must have been still.

And lizards do
make bold at home
now and then--
the closed warmth could be one reason why--

Criss crossing floors,
even climbing up pillows.
I know not
what minuscule wave turned me

I saw
It poised,
balancing on the rim,
ever so delicate
flicks of the tongue
lapping up the brown shiny pulp,
desire pulsing through
the slim scaly cream translucence.

Quite human like, now and then
he lifted his gaze,
A slight tremble in the tongue
the only sign of shift in
rhythm.

Repulsed, fascinated
perverse
and with a pat
on the sill
I removed the cup to the kitchen sink
There was a teeny traced circle
of gooey mix on the sill,
right where the cup had been.
The lizard was wiping it clean,
the darting flicks
repelling, fascinating.
It went up, round
down, about
and came searching
every time to the clean wiped spot.

I remember the tremble in the tongue
--Passion

M. MOHANKUMAR

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN OFFICER

Waking, he rubs the lingering sleep
From his bleary eyes, proceeds to brush
His teeth: his first brush of the day.
A cup of sugarless tea that tastes bitter
With the morning news. Hot-water bath
At 8.00. *How one gets into hot water,*
Unawares, in office these days.
Dyed and trimmed and breakfasted,
He swallows a few pills and hurries
Off to work. Then the brush, half way
Through, bumper to bumper, hot glare
And honkings from behind.

A pile of dog-eared files, stuck with
'Urgent' slips. He unties the tapes,
Flips the notes, refers some files, marks
Others up/down. Nothing of his own.
Why court trouble when you can
Simply coast along?

At 3:00, visitors stream in. He listens,
All patience. At the review meeting
He speaks of distressed men behind
The files, waiting for relief, justice.
Jump levels, use delegated powers.
The boss summons him to a meeting.
Long-winded man who loves his voice;
Treats you as Prospero did Caliban.
Will we now make it to the first show?
At 6.45, back at the wheel, he wonders
How he will face the music at home,
Music of the most cacophonous kind.

THE ACTOR

When all this is over, said the actor,
I want to retire to my village and be myself
Again, discarding tinsel and grease-paint,
Having all the time to chat and reminisce.
At the twilight hour, I will sit by the
Darkening river, listening to its sorry tales,
And at night hear, as of old, the howl of wind
Tearing through the palmyrah fronds.

And I'll have a garden laid out in the house,
Nurse the flowers under the mellow sun,
Speak to them, see them brighten in my
Caressing hands. And this I know: when I'm
Sad or desolate, they'll be there, my flowers,
To dance for me and laugh and cheer me up.

THE DROWNING

That evening we saw it, blow by blow,
on the TV: The madman on the steps
of the temple tank, threatening to drown
himself, trembling on the brink, yet
holding back. The crowd at a distance.
The water in the tank turning silvery
White. For a long while, nothing happens.
Till, at last, a temple guard walks boldly
In. Then the scuffle, the push that sends
him reeling into the tank, the mad one
plunging and pushing and standing
over the sunk body, grim and silent,
till no sign of life is left
and all is quiet.

And, all the while, the crowd watching,
excited, not one man stirring, not one
man rushing to loosen the deadly grip.
And we remembered the gladiators
butchered to make a Roman holiday;
the countless bodies burned at the stake;
the public executions;
the excitement of the crowd

in those far-off days
not as refined as ours,
so we claim.

STOPPED IN THE TRACK

Having heard
You were the one
To win
'Musical chairs'
Every time
You ran for one,
Having heard
You were the one
To outrun others
Every time,
Lemon on spoon
Perfectly poised
Between lips,
I had thought
You would outlast
Me in this game
Of life. But I
Was shocked
To see you stop
Suddenly
In the track
And sink
To the ground.

BENUDHAR PANIGRAHI

AND THEREAFTER…

I

And hereafter

Shall we clone
Civilizations, cultures
Ethos and traditions
Tears and smiles
Impulses and emotions
Every movement of consciousness
Every shade of sensibility
In the laboratory?
Almost complete
Is the research.

II

After being relieved
Of the labour pain
What is the necessity
Of motherhood!
After all the concepts of love
Transmuted
A monotonous mechanism,
But sex will be
Production and consumption,
The simple equation of life
Forever Death shall die
Grafted this life
Morbidly revolving
In the sterile, labyrinthine
Orbit of time.

III

The sun of diversity
Is vanished almost.
After all these
Time'll get itself cloned,
Past will melt into
The flaming, torrid zone of present
Future will halt, anchored
As the invisible shadow of the present
Stupefied, shocked.

IV

And thereafter…

NEHA MISRA

ON A GRUESOME LANE

Those shrunken faces--
festering over swollen hunger
and drooping with indignation
towards a wicked fate--
lingering around some corner
of a fast running road
where money plunges and bounces
within the pockets of many--
unknown to them,
who are unaware of
the horrors maturing
beneath the shadow of their eyes,
the hunger penetrates
the bones of skinny bodies.
But still a dream persists
of a stomach full of rice
and a sleep full of tranquility.

GAJANAN MADHAV MUKTIBODH

Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh is one of the most distinguished modern Hindi poets. He greatly influenced the course of contemporary Hindi poetry.

THE CAPITALIST SOCIETY

So much vitality, so many hands, so much intelligence
So much knowledge, culture and sanctity
So much divinity, so much grandeur, so much power
Such beauty, such singularity, such devotion to God,
So much poetry, so many words, so many material forms
The more ingrained hypocrisy, the more unrestrained gratification.
Such a subtle, such a strong and beautiful snare
Just to ward off a burning truth.

Ah! Leave this all; there's only loathing and stench,
That blind silken culture of yours
Fills me with anger, deep burning anger.
Even in your blood there's a blockade of truth,
Even from your blood does an intense disgust emanate.
Your very sight instantly provokes nausea,
Even in your laughter there are violent germs of disease.
Your ruin is fuming at you, ready to strike.
My flame, becoming one with the flame of the people
Will wash away imprudence with its heat.
You are death, you are empty, you are useless
Your destruction alone is the sole purpose of your being.

CROSSROADS

At every step
Crossroads greet me
With open arms!

As I put a step forward
A hundred paths sprout,
And I wish to tread them all;
All look very pleasing,
Their experiences and our dreams
They all appear to be true;
A strange uneasiness grips the heart,
I wish to move down somewhat deeper
Who knows what treasure I find there!

I fancy that in every stone
There is a bright diamond,
In every bosom there is an unquiet soul,
In every smile there is a pure ever-flowing stream,
It seems as if in every voice
There is epic-pain,
I wish to pass through them all in an instant,
I wish to swim across every heart.
Thus I wander giving myself away,
What a strange life!

Just to be befooled
I carry myself all around,
And greatly enjoy to find out
That I am deceived…
In my own heart
Dwells a self-pleased fool

Whose irrepressible Laughter makes him tearful,
Makes him intoxicated,
As if the whole world is about to come under his sway.

Collecting stories and offering something to me
These crossroads spread out,
I stand there for a while
And talk about certain things…
…Novels are found here.

The tales of woe, grievances of various kinds,
Ego-analyses, character-descriptions,
The living scriptures of the times
Are heard here.

Poems vie with each other smilingly,
Love and talk
On the burning staircase of life and death,
Faiths clamber ahead.

When, with bewildered symbols and smiling images
I return home,
The similes, on reaching the door-step, say
That I must live
Yet another hundred years.

At home, too, crossroads are met at every step,
Everyday a hundred paths greet with open arms,
Branches and sub-branches go on sprouting,
Hundreds of subjects with every new look and sight
Are found everyday.

(*Translated from Hindi by M.S. Kushwaha*)

ANVAR ALI

Anvar Ali is from Trivandrum. His first collection of poems in 1999 established him as one of the prominent voices in contemporary Malayalam poetry.

KAFKA[1]

Furious summer

Atop a coconut palm,
a crow tore at the sun rays
that drilled the wood.

When it began to soar
impishly drilling the sky,
towards another tree
which stood erect
beyond thousands of apartments,
it rained,
all at once.

A man and a woman
making love
on the 21st floor balcony
of one of the apartments
watched it,
astonished:

Across the rain
a Kafka
stretching in a straight line,
alone.

(*Translated from Malayalam by T.P. Rajeevan*)

[1] Japanese author Haruki Murakami's novel *Kafka on the Shore* has its hero named Kafka after Franz Kafka; the word really means a 'jackdaw,' which is a large Eurasian bird related to the crow. In Malayalam, the word for 'crow' is Kakka. Here, it occurs as a strange coincidence.

FROM THE HELL NAMED *PUTH*[2]

Adorning himself in winter
he waited.

Snow lamp, snow shrubs, snow home
His body of snow
on the snow bed in the room of snow

And yet, she didn't come.

The roar of the wind alone
shot through the skies.

Snow melted.

Now, the brain is turbulent blood
sight, rheum
hearing, ear wax
and nose, a stench.

The dead chest floated
on tongue's frozen pond.
Stomach hung itself
on the whirl of entrails.
Limbs, octopuses.

Earth broke open;
everything flowed
into the soul of the *Saraswathi*[3]

Lingam alone rose
upon the Himalayan peak

[2] According to Hindu belief, a son (Puthra) is one who rescues his father from the hell called *Puth*

[3] A mythical river believed to be hidden in earth

like a tall, branchless trunk.
Sperm turned into swans;
they swam across *Maanasa sarovara*[4]
tiding over the roar of the wind,
and merged into the sky's belly.

A tiny star winked
when the winter passed.

Making my subterranean solitude fertile,
it glides down the thread of a cry, "Father…"

Has she ever known?

(*Translated from Malayalam by the poet*)

THE NIGHT I READ TSVETAEVA[5]

(To your sojourn and to our poetry nights
on the bank of River Nila[6])

The room upstairs
the moon at the window--
Marina Tsvetaeva
whom we read.

Do you hear?

I've shifted
the dwarf moon

[4] A lake atop the Himalayas, believed to be the abode of gods where golden swans are supposed to be swimming all the time.
[5] Marina Tsvetaeva: Russian poet; hanged herself in 1941
[6] Nila is a thinning river in Kerala

towards your window
that lags by many hours.

O, prism,
do you hear now
the broken image
the moonlight paints?

Though flung to shatters

her verse
in my throat,
slim as the waning *Nila*:
'We have grown into one'[7]

Do you see?

(*Translated from Malayalam by T.P. Rajeevan*)

DON'T BE ANGRY

Don't be angry.

Last night,
unbeknown to you,
I kissed our love
that was buried on your left palm
close to the life line
between two trace lines,
before it could sprout into a boy or a girl.

[7] A line from Tsvetaeva's 'Poem of The End,' the love poem with seven segments which elaborates the moment that two lovers separate for ever.

It asked me: “Why?
For raising me in the last life,
the very apple of your eye?
Or, to be deserted
on the streets in the next?”

“No”: I replied.
You are the reckoning that has befallen me
and she who lost out on being your mother
for tearing away from each other
to dry on the clotheslines
of two different homes
on an evening
when the rains drenched this life,
just before twilight hanged
the forlorn wayside trees
upside down
from the earth to the netherworld,
with the sole witness
of the rumble of a passing *Lambretta.*

It smiled and rose,
wearing my kiss
and came along.

Don’t be angry;
avenge me tonight
unbeknown to me.

(*Translated from Malayalam by Bindu Krishnan*)

AVVAIYAR

Translations from *Mūturai*, a book of 31 poems by the 12th century poet and saint Avvaiyar. To this day, her poems are among the first words a child studies in Tamil Nadu.

THE WORD THAT ENDURES

Poems from *Mūturai*

7.

With the water, the lily rises; with books studied
Climbs subtlety of mind.
Deeds in the past fix the wealth of the present;
Lineage, the limits of character.

8.

To behold a good person is good. To hear
His words full of meaning is good.
To speak
Of a good person's character is good. Good
To find a place in his company.

9.

To catch sight of an evil person is bad. To hear
His words without meaning is bad.
To speak
Of an evil person's character is bad. Bad
To find a place in his company.

17.

Like water birds that leave a dried-up lake,
Those who flee trouble are not friends.
Like the lilies
And lotuses staying in that lake,
Those who stick with you--friends.

18.

Even when ruined, the noble are noble.
When the ignoble fall, what's lost?
Even when broken
A golden pitcher is gold. When a clay pitcher falls,
What's lost?

(*Translated from Tamil by Thomas Pruiksma*)

BASHIR ATHAR

Bashir Athar is a Kashmiri poet who has worked in the Srinagar Television Centre. His poems given below have been translated from his volume *Kani Shahar* ("Stony City").

BROKEN PLATE

Both of us ate
Rice and curd together
Off the same plate, and
Still you preserved your own entity
I my own.
But eventually
The plate broke apart
Spilling rice and curd on the floor.
And then
You established your own house
I my own.
We bought new plates
And thus
Divided became rice and curd.
But alas!
We didn't care to see
While eating from the broken plate
That underneath was
A snakeling silently thriving
On seeping milky juice
That grew into a huge python.
And
Devoured both of us mercilessly.

DIVIDED

You divided the sky
Divided the Universe too
God too you divided, and
Divided the countries all over.
You divided the shade of trees
Divided their greenness and freshness
Our traditions rich you got divided
Bonds ever thick you divided
You divided water, air too
Divided his soul, his psyche too
You divided the love
Of our mothers; brothers' and sisters' affection too.
Keep on dividing my friend
Till you are exhausted!
But tell me
How will you divide my
Motherland, my homeland
Where you live, I live, and
Our ancestors lived?

(*Translated from Kashmiri by S.K. Raina*)

KUNTALA KUMARI SABAT

Kuntala Kumari Sabat, the first woman novelist in Oriya, was a physician, a poet, an essayist, an orator, a patriot, a rebel, a social reformer, and a feminist. The following is one of her most important poems.

ODE TO SAHAKARA

1

Sahakara!

Whom do you belong to Sahakara,
I am thinking about it.
Why does your body look so beautiful today?

O you mango tree!

Whom do you hope to come,
so you adorn yourself so much?
New mango-flowers are blossoming,
the breeze spreads its fragrance.
Bees come humming.

O you king of trees!

Why do you bedeck so nicely?
It is fragrance time.
Calm and sweet breeze is blowing.
Flowers are blooming,
cuckoos are singing,
adorned with fragrance of flowers, you tree,
you are ready to meet the lovely Spring.

Tell me O best tree!

Are you a devotee or a lover of the Spring?
Flowers are blossoming everywhere.
It seems fragrance increases a hundred times more.
It seems holding delicate flower bouquets,
the deep green foliage
is waiting to greet the Spring.

2

Filled with nectar the earth enjoys
and laughs in great joy.
It seems nectar fills every leaf in every bough.
A look at these makes the heart content!

Adorned like a bridegroom
and overwhelmed with love and joy,
the Spring came to earth, his wife.
The touch of the gentle vernal breeze
filled the earth with blossoms.
It seems the earth burst into laughter.
Lotuses bloomed in ponds
and the Sun shone with love.

3

Adorned with flowers like
palasa, ashok, lotus, niali, kamini
and dressed in the golden rays of the Sun
today the lovely earth is waiting for the Spring.
It seems waves of joy spread everywhere!
The earth shines beautifully
like a loving and charming new girl!
It seems, like a shy new bride,
it spreads sweet love through
fragrance of flowers by gentle breeze!

Birds sing melodious songs in joy,
and forests resound in their sweet voice.
The music of the gentle breeze
and the humming of honeybees
make it seem someone plays the veena
or animates and inanimates are singing
the wedding song of the earth and the Spring.

Now tree!

Mango-flowers are blooming
amid new leaves on your branches.
It seems you are decked
like friends of a bride.
Or you have stood
holding flower bouquets
to enhance the loveliness of the wedding.
Do you want to bring
the Spring, the bridegroom, to the earth
binding him with garlands of mango-flowers?
You feel joyous seeing others joy.

4

Big tree!

Tell me where shall I get
an object to compare with you.
How lovely leaves and colouring in green
God has arranged in order!
Every bough is full of blossoms
Only you are the comparison of your own.

O you mango tree!

Who can know your virtues
Except poor Indians!
You are really the loving portrait of the Spring!
Hundreds of trees stand on the earth.
Tell me, which one surpasses you
in loveliness, softness, delicacy and calmness
and is filled with nectar!
When honeybees hum amidst green leaves
and mango-flowers bloom in mango groves
in the morning of the new Spring,
when cuckoos sing in your secret holes,
and breeze brings that sweet music,
it enters my ears all on a sudden
and surges agonies of heart.
It seems a distant voice stirs my heart
and tears stream down my cheeks in love.

5

O you Sahakara!

Of all trees, you are adorned with all beauties.
Can any one equal you in looks and virtues?
Your flowers and fruits are treasures of India.
What juicy, what sweet, what colourful, what lovely fruits!
Can apples of foreign countries
be equal to your fruits of nectar?
How can diamond and dew equal
in looks and quality any time?
How can brass equal gold!
How can pearl equal dew!

6

O mango tree!

How can I forget your calm green picture?
You are not very big, not very small.
Yet you are chief among the immovables.
Not looks, but virtues are great in the world.
When the dry and thirsty earth
Looks like a desert in the Summer,
a look at your green portrait
takes away all sorrow.
    Gentle breeze moves
    under the deep foliage.
Fruits hang from boughs.
Monkeys dance on boughs
plucking mangoes before time.
    Jungles look attractive,
    fruits look appetizing.
You bear all oppression without complaint,
How lovingly you behave with your enemies!

O you tree!

You surpass humans in tolerance.
You give shadow to the one who sears you.
You possess so much beauty,
yet you are not proud.
Covered with fruits,
you remain looking down to the ground.
I am proud, I am blind.
How can I equal you!
A true possessor of virtue is humble and great.
An ignorant person becomes proud in vain.
Do you teach others silently this lesson?

O you juicy tree!

You hint at my self-illusion.
You give endless shadow to travelers
Who are scorched, tired
and worn out in hot summer.
Do you give example of your humble duty
of doing good to others?
Teach me how I can be
Meek and humble like you.
I shall do service to
the world without hesitation/
I shall take away much pain of others
with my little efforts.
I shall do good to others
Getting nothing in return.

(*Translated from Oriya by Mary Mohanty*)

AKSHAYA KUMAR

NATION AND *BEYOND*: SPATIO-TEMPORAL MATRICES OF PAKISTANI POETRY IN ENGLISH OF LATE 90S

The implications of 'Pakistani' in Pakistani Poetry in English are far more serious than mere adjectival for they involve an understanding of a whole range of spatio-temporal vectors that possibly go into the making of the nation or nationality specific to this poetry. Even if one concedes to the (in)famous postcolonial proposition[1] that third world literatures are allegories of the nation, the problems of the prefix 'Pakistani' are not fully resolved. Which Pakistan does its English poetry ultimately allegorise--the post-Partition Pakistan as an Islamic nation-state or the pre-Partition Pakistan as part of the secular Indian sub-continent? Right from its rather cataclysmic formation as a separate nation-state to its subsequent rise as a frontline Islamic state in contemporary post-nationalist civilizational politics[2] in the late 90s, the discourse of Pakistan has taken different turns--national, sub-continental, trans-national, post-national etc.

How does a contemporary Pakistani poet in English negotiate the insecurity[3] of his nation whose past is subsumed by the sub-continental Indian past, and whose future stands aligned with the emerging Islamic Central Asian crescent? Which time-zone does he prefer most--the shared historical time, the existential present or some absolute time? Which space does he dwell in--the local, the national, the sub-continental, the global or the cosmic? Does he regress into some romantic private time-space away from the glare of national(ist) politics? Or does he just lapse into the realm of the infinite? The kind of historylessness that a Pakistani poet suffers is quite different and unique in the sense that it is not as much an absence of history as it is the lack of an exclusive and autonomous nationalist past. Negotiating nation both in terms of space and time thus emerges as a major poetic challenge in modern Pakistani poetry in English.

I

More often than not, modern Pakistani poetry in English is neither 'modern,' nor 'Pakistani' as it tends to steer clear of the chronotope[4] of 'nation' through some all-encompassing spatio-temporal topologies that allow it to transgress the contingencies of the uneasy historical time. Instead of operating within the measurable calendar time, the poets choose to lapse into either the pre-national cosmic time or the prime geological time. Salman Tarik Kureshi, for instance, seeks to delve into the infinite cosmic time where the *leela* of the universe is eternally at play:

> We attain
> a place
> where planets are conceived
>
> where comets fatten and swing
> outward, seeking
> their appointed orbits.
> ("The C Minor Prelude and Fugue being Played",
> *A Dragon fly in the Sun*, 216)

The planetary paths are beyond the pale of human history and nationalist politics. The search for the authentic self takes the poet right into the vortex of universal churning. Instead of mapping the genealogy of his self from the days of pre- and post-Partition-politics, the poet goes back to the entirely speculative trans-historical beginning. Mere reverie is not adequate enough to describe the geographical location for rivers change their courses rather unpredictably. He seeks what he terms as "the plutonian source" ("Perverse Rivers", *Landscapes of the Mind*, 16) to go beyond the geography of "strange rivers". This yearning is for "water unrestrained".

In another poem "Switchboard" (*Landscapes of the Mind*, 29-31) from "trees", "neighbours" and the "world", Kureshi seeks to

extend his awareness to the entire universe. He yearns to become "a disembodied consciousness,/ no longer circumscribed/ by bounds of sight, hearing." The body becomes the locus of universal stirrings:

> . . . . You sense
> the swirls of nebulae condensing into stars, the birth pains
> of planets, crackling energies
> and the long, slow dying of the universe.

The self becomes a planet, a heavenly star undergoing pangs of dispersal and attrition to attain memory-free consciousness. The last switch on his switchboard is that of 'consciousness', which once pressed on, cannot be turned off.

Gulam Farriduddin Riaz clamours for a pre-historic geological time of tectonic transformations as he portrays with rather bold strokes "the simmering chaos that churns beneath" ("In Search of Truth at the Geological Museum", *An Anthology*, 18). The raw sensuousness of the geological prime is unmistakable:

> From ocean-brimming continental troughs,
> Meeting the land's skinned desert hems,
>
> Rising to the verdant of renaissance of plains,
> Gathering in upsurging snow-starched creases
> In collateral quests, bristling with peaks,
>
> Where the glaciers, grown monstrously,
> Inch down, climbing one upon the other,
> In laborious mating on haggard heights . . . . (17)

The "solemnity" of the erotica calls for total surrender and devotion. The geological museum that hosts the prime show stands transformed into a "place of worship", and a visit to it turns into a holy pilgrimage. The whole experience is trans-continental/ trans-

oceanic in its sweep and depth, affording little scope for nationalist histories:

> There is something of a place of worship
> In a museum. The sapient ceilings reflect
> The sombre sounds of reverence accrued

The conflation of geology first with the process of procreation, and then with the metaphysics of devotion turns 'physical time' into consciousness, a pure abstraction, a reverence unqualified.

Foregoing the pressures of petty nationalist histories, Zulfikar Ghose moves towards an understanding of his anthropological origins. The search is unmistakably for an absolute origin beyond national time:

> From where did you come? I glance at mirrors,
> inspect my nose, the fullness of my mouth,
> and from the grains of my skin pluck out hairs
> to look for roots. Rain clouds travel south
> in the Indian summer; did you, oh my fathers
> come with the rain, tired of northern drought?
> ("To My Ancestors", *First Voices*, 12)

The poet looks beyond official histories to trace 'his' origin as he falls back on the apolitical geography of the tropical region to account for his physical features. For him, being tropical is home-bound and the "convivial attachment to the sun" is an act of "love" (Zulfikar Ghose, "An Attachment to the Sun", *First Voices*, 20).

II

The challenge of the sun is met by being intimate to earth: "To meet the challenge of the sun/ One must be baked to earth's brown/ This sun is my sun" (M. Athar Tahir, "This Sun is My Sun", *A Dragonfly in the Sun*, 397). No wonder much of the modern

Pakistani poetry in English is 'poetry of earth's brown' whose co-ordinates exceed parochial political cartographies: "The roots go deep,/ in the sun-warm'd/ wind-blown earth," declaims Perveen Pasha, in her poem "Homing" (*An Anthology*, 67). Instead of seeking any national or ethnic or religious identity, the poet craves to return to the primordial earth:

> you are to me
> a homing -- an expanding of love
> beyond wantingness
> beyond liberation. (68)

The poet is earth-bound and therein lies his/her liberation. The love for the earth subsumes the love for the nation as well as for the lover/ beloved.). Another poet G.F. Raiz also puts his stakes on the mother earth thus:

> And the earth shares my secrets,
> It knows each one of us as if we
> Were its real children, and perhaps
> We really are and it is our only mother.
> ("Song of the Daughter of the Earth", *Baramasa*, 47)

By reclaiming the earth as mother, and sun as the paternal star, Pakistani poets relate themselves to the cycle of seasons, to the very natural rhythms of replenishment and exhaustion. In this natural communion, postcolonial identitarian politics takes a back seat.

Zulfikar Ghose expresses his disgust at the way the mother earth is divided into political enclosures by ultra-nationalists all across the globe. Taking a dig at "earth-kissing Zionists", the poet laments at its gross commodification for political and economic purposes:

for sacredness is suspect,
the earth more a problem for conservation than
a banner across a jingoist breast, and the land
merely a real estate speculation.
Countries, countries! Brand-
names, faded and disfigured, on the wrecked

product . . .
("It's Your Land, Boss", *The Violent West*, 8)

The urge is to approach the mother earth without the claptrap of "patriotic rites and sacrificial feasts" (8). He fears that "the coarse, porous earth" would turn rather "soulless" if it is to be used for political gestures. For a modern Pakistani poet writing in English national identity is nothing more than a working address, what he seeks is an entirely pre-political earth when the "world then was horizontal/ lustrous green" (Perveen Pasha, "Homing", *An Anthology*, 67).

The urge is to dwell forever in the pristine and pure timelessness of the pre-society state. Therefore in the poetry of Perveen Pasha the primeval is peaceful and going back to caves is perhaps better than chasing modern-day illusions. The primitive caves not only provide a fitting contrast to modern-day skyscrapers and multi-storeyed apartments; they also suggest a definite regression into pre-historic antiquity:

Shall we go then
back to the caves?
Or sit here endlessly
chasing shadows; gathering
("Back to the Caves . . .?", *An Anthology*, 76)

The unofficial, unnamed caves act as perfect hide-outs for the retrieving self of the poet, rescuing him/her not only from the

excesses of nation-state, but also from the entire progressive discourse of modernity.

III

From the open unbound geological and anthropological spatio-temporal matrices, the poets of modern Pakistani poetry in English come down to the cyclical play of nature--from the falling of the leaf to the flight of birds at the traffic lights--to hit upon organic non-fossilized props of mortal sustenance. The leap is from 'time-infinite' to 'the cyclic natural time' as the poet seeks to go past the "curious valley" of the time-past towards the fruit-bearing trees of the future:

> It is the cyclical crops I was looking at --
> and the interminable deltas of hope,
> where the rivers are either in torrent or slow endless flow,
> the past being a curious valley, the present tense.
> Future's the only flower worth tending in this earth,
> where I sow my words daily: and you know,
> these good trees bear fruits round the year, discreetly,
> moving along the waterways
> and four seasons of the faithful sun.
>
> (Alamgir Hashmi, "Pakistan Movement",
> *A Dragonfly in the Sun*, 374)

Unsure of 'curious' past and 'tense' present, the poet invests in the future, which he believes would flower like a tree every season. The trees as well as the falling autumnal leaves bring hope to the beleaguered poet as the cyclical processes of nature ensure the revival of life after its temporary eclipse.

An autumnal leaf becomes the metaphor of the dangling self for Ghulam Fariduddin Riaz as he observes its half-tentative descent from the tree-top: "A small leaf drifts/ Down through the air,/ Entirely golden, completed, . . ("Leaf Falling", *An Anthology*,

20). The mortality of being is accepted with grace. Like "the small leaf", the poet does not grudge his final fall:

> There is not the slightest
> Whisper of a breeze, or
> Any other complaint. It falls,
> Falls, and is lost among others
> On the grass, aflame
> With red orange hues.

The ordinary time-event of a falling autumnal leaf turns out to be the moment of epiphanic revelation as the poet resolves "To live, on the brink of stillness/ Within the private spectrum of/ Unimportant happenings, convincingly". The private time merges with the impersonal natural time as both tend to complement each other.

Falling leaf, otherwise a stock symbol of fall from grace, emerges as a symbol of self-esteem for many a Pakistani poets. Taufiq Rafat discovers rare aerodynamics in the downward descent of the falling leaf:

> A lone ignited leaf
> Downsailing from the moment
> It takes to air
> Till it touches ground
> Has a significance
> No jet can imitate.
> (Taufiq Rafat, "To See Fruit Ripen", *A Selection*, 4)

The clumsy ascent of tumbling birds caught in "traffic's trance" imparts visions of temporary resurrection to Shahbano Bilgrami. These birds swarm across the cemented pavements like a flock of fallen leaves but very soon they are compelled upwards by the hurly-burly of life below:

The passive leaves rise as resurrected,
Grow, expand with outstretched wings,
And in a breath, a moment's glance,
Compelled upwards,
Wearily climb towards their dusty heaven,
Wings folded to pray and await
A careless, smokeless paradise.
("The Resurrection", 84)

Even in the fallen leaves, the poetess seeks a possibility of revival. The smokeless paradise is the zone of the infinite, uncorrupted and unpolluted by human waste.

Instead of religion or the politically invented icons of nationality--from national flag to national song, it is the trees in general without any regional specifications that fill the space of delight in Pakistani poetry in English. Nature precedes religion[5] as well as nation. The tree is a testimony of life in flow. Riaz very pertinently asks:

Who could be more sincere in beauty rapt
Than this simple generous being
Under whose shade we gather together
And become one of many, a family?'
(*Baramasa*, "Do You Fill Your Space with
More Delight . . .", 70)

The tree is a recurrent fixture in Pakistani poetry for it makes up for the lack of exclusively Pakistani nationalist monuments. It rather becomes a historical monument unto itself. In Kureshi's Lahore, "ancient incredible eucalyptus [that] arches over/ the street past my [his] home" along with other trees "become mouldering monuments,/ musty with their wooden centuries". ("Banyan Trees", *Landscapes of the Mind*, 9). Daud Kamal while searching his remote beginning thinks of finding "his true inheritance" in "the

mad calligraphy of trees" ("A Remote Beginning", *A Selection of Verse*, 19).

The downtrodden, rough and uncouth grass, rocking the earth from below, lends Whitmanian glimpses of divinity and transcendence to the poet. "In a strong wind I am like a dervish/ bringing ecstasy to your doorstep" (Taufiq Rafat, "This Blade of Grass", *A Selection*, 33). From the rooted grass to the winged geese, any natural object is the obsessive hub of modern Pakistani poet in English as s/he endeavours to rise above both the national or communal forms of identity. More than the prophet's journey into cave, it is the flight of geese that enthrals the poet Taufiq Rafat:

> And a flight of geese
> Rising from our marshes at dawn
> Drives a wedge
> Into history more deeply
> Than a prophet fleeing to a cave
> Or an ultimatum.
>
> ("To See Fruit Ripen", *A Selection*, 4)

The first hand experience of watching the birds taking off from the marshes constitutes authentic history; the rest is mythology and untruth.

While lost in the ecstasy of total time/ silence, the national time is only a momentary diversion, a hiccup in the flow of life. The poet Taufiq Rafat does not mind interruptions provided they occur only once in a while:

> For one moving into total silence
> the loud rehearsals
> of celebrating planes
> is a welcome diversion. . . .

For one moving into total silence
Even the slam of a door
When all doors are closing
is an affirmation.
("Tomorrow is Pakistan Day", *A Selection*, 55)

The nation is thus not totally forsaken, nor is it totally bypassed, but it is not a sustaining sentiment. Nation is an 'occasional' intervention in the sublime play of nature. It is "the slam of a door"--a noisy and violent reminder of this-worldliness. The propensity invariably is to transcend the ordinary praxis of life, its 'loud' rituals of politics and history.

IV

As the soaring 'cosmic' poetic imagination relents, it seeks horizontal affiliations within the scope of its assumed cosmopolitanism[6]. The overarching spatio-temporal trope of cosmopolitanism puts the nation-state once again on the backfoot as the local strikes a relationship with the global and both become 'natural' extensions of each other, without much postcolonial ado about spatial identity[7]. Shuja Nawaj, a poet otherwise so well-anchored in the native soil, feels at home in the hilly Virginia landscape:

A quiet descends upon the troop exhausted
as the road dips before the climb
back into these oldest hills
hazy blue on a fading confederate sky,
evoking memories of mounts and fields
across Seven Seas, almost beyond recall.

Suddenly, the hills fold us in their embrace
and we feel the warmth of home again.
("Virginia Landscape", *Journeys*, 52)

Apparently, it is the similarity in landscape that engenders a sense of belonging in the alien self. Zulfikar Ghose, after the initial sense of loss, also tends to locate 'home' in the alien west through striking similarities in the natural landscape:

> I drive in south Texas where
> the land is as flat as the Punjab and grows
> cotton and citrus fruits. I could not be closer
> to whatever my instinct knows
> to be home. The mimosa,
> the bougainvillea, palms, sugarcane, all share . . .
> ("The Violent West", *The Violent West*, 10)

The new 'home' happens to be "the best compromise" (10) in alien situations, and the poet is happy to re-cover his lost childhood in the similar landscape. The cosmopolitan sensibility in a way lapses into a sensibility for the natural landscape across national geographies.

Alamgir Hashmi engineers a typical postcolonial twist to his cosmopolitan sensibility as instead of his becoming Americanized, it is America that becomes Punjabi. The cloud of his cigarette smoke inside a New York hotel-room takes the shape of "a camel/ freed from/ a U-Haul cart/ in Karachi" ("America is a Punjabi Word", *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*, 47). The poet extends the metaphor as he discovers in the hump of this cloud-turned-into-Karachi-camel "the difficult curve of the earth." What connects Karachi to New York is the difficult curve of the humped camel – natural objects, animals included, provide the necessary locus of cosmopolitanism. To the poet, a new postal address does not suggest dislocation; rather it marks new beginnings:

> With a new postal address, each
> year brings a fresh childhood window
> from which to peer
> into the street

wave and smile to
upon recognition.
("In a Lighter Vein-I", *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*, 14)

Each new destination opens a fresh childhood window. Interestingly enough, in all the three poets--Shuja Nawaj, Zulfikar Ghose and Hashmi, it is the local (Punjabi) that comes into relationship with the cosmopolitan; the national is simply glossed over.

The so-called cosmopolitanism of Pakistani English poetry, despite its overt gestures of assimilationism, remains wishful for when it comes to culture (as against nature), there are moments of stalemate. The poetics of stalemate remain however entrapped in the macro level binary of East *versus* West; the co-ordinates of the national culture remain elusive as ever. Maki Kureishi's "Kittens" (*The Far Thing*, 7-8) is literally "snagged/ by two cultures" – not as much as by Indian *versus* Pakistani, but as by the European *versus* the Eastern. As an unduly large number of kittens crowds her home, the poet is in quandary whether to leave them on the roads or to just drown them in water. The native way would be to "take them to bazaar/ and let them go/ each to its fate". The European way is more violent and unkind:

The European thing to do
is drown them.
Warm water
is advised to lessen the shock. . .

The native 'oriental' response is typically fatalistic; the European attitude in contrast is clinical and cold-blooded.

Salman Tarik Kureshi, despite being kept warm by the common distant sun in the high west, is taken aback by the rather steep business towers of Manhattan thus:

The logic of right angles
pervades those people: straight lines
obsess them

How else explain Manhattan?
("Big Town", *Landscapes of the Mind*, 44)

The cosmopolitan sensibility operates only in the friendlier natural landscape; otherwise the mercantile culture of the first world affords little respite. The poet dreads to look outside the window of his multi-storeyed apartment for fear of falling headlong into the street:

Here you could, if you leaned out far enough,
drop a straight furlong to the street

And--this being a free country--

They'd let you do it.

The democracy of the capitalist world is dizzy and even suicidal. Manhattan with its geometrical skyline does not fit in the curvilinear or circular imagination of the third world poets.

V

From the cosmic and the cosmopolitan, modern Pakistani poetry in English does take an occasional plunge towards the grossly terrestrial as some poems 'dare to suggest' the ground reality of the present-day Pakistan in markedly low-pitched and intellectually calibrated idioms. The poets descend to the plane of reality but their contact is rather fleeting and tangential. Alamgir Hashmi while on some 'cosmopolitan flight' makes a 'stopover' at Karachi thus:

The airport is empty,
its planes gone to pray till 4

p.m. while bombs
in the lockers snore

Not even a visit by God
will change it.
("Karachi Stopover", 17)

The images of desolate and irredeemable Karachi airport, where even bombs snore and planes pray, speak of the turmoil Pakistani society is undergoing at present. In yet another poem by Maki Kureishi, Karachi is approached in terms of bombing and praying, but here the scenario is violent:

We are bodies of passers-by
Flung about like toys.
Starved out of besieged homes
Gunned down
By killers who are half-machine
And pray five times.
("Elegy for Karachi", *The Far Thing*, 16)

As modern Pakistani poets in English stop over their nation for a brief halt during the course of their ambitious cosmopolitan odysseys or cosmic semi-spiritualized take offs, they hear either the din or the silence of bombing and praying. The subtle struggle for ordinary human survival in the interior landscape, however, does not register as much.

Even when the poets are not air-bound, their preferred terrain of travel ranges from highland passes to the sandy deserts--the anonymous lanes and by-lanes of everyday life remain the least traversed. Journeys mapped across rough natural passages end up more often as mere dreamy sojourns, with very little intervention of history and politics. As the limits disappear in the desert, the convoy of camels during night "look[s] dreamy/ proud or erudite/driven by robed figures". Far from being a site of self-

attrition, desert emerges as a site of "the unassertive flow of temporality" ("Night Train", Adrain A. Husain, *Desert Album*, 13). The journey through the mountains is lofty:

> Everywhere the river
> merges
> into the stillness
>
> beauty fertile but withdrawn
> defies our climb, . .
> ("Mountain Journey", Adrian A. Husain, *Desert Album*, 24)

At Khyber, however, besides "the vulnerable valley, pass", the poet does discover "signs of an unyielding" in the form of "the fort that stands/ . . . [where] the invasions/ are recorded in marble" ("Khyber", *Desert Album*, 33). The history makes its presence felt but it is frozen in time and snow. As Salman Tarik Kureshi looks down from the glorious heights of Bolan, he finds "Between the feet of mountains/ . . ./ Armed men/ bristle/ at the town perimeters" ("Above Bolan", *Landscapes of the Mind*, 10). The military presence is hard to ignore from the distant perch of Bolan mountains.

When occasionally the Pakistani poets in English hit the road, they choose national highways that run through its main metroes. Most of the times, the attitude is that of an alien insider, taking quite an orientalist perspective of the post-independent nation thus:

> An oxcart in the front seemed
> to carry a hill. It stopped with a
> jerk that pushed its back
>
> up to a vulgar height
> . . . . . .

People had gathered
to see how the wise ox
had cleansed himself . . .
(Alamgir Hashmi, "Poem of the Road", *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*, 6)

As the poets stare out of the car-windows, they encounter poverty on the pavement: "A woman on the pavement . . . / holds her dismal miscellany/ of things: old tin, rags, gunny, rind. . ." (Adrian A. Husain, "On the Pavement", *Desert Album*, 18). At other times they even do not stare out and just look into the receding images of idyll landscape in the car-mirrors:

An idyll our car mirrors
Bisect--a mere reprieve--
viewed as if from the last bogey
of a train, lengthening as it recedes.
("Car Mirrors – Pakistan 1996", *Desert Album*, 42)

At the traffic lights--quite a landmark in Pakistani poetry in English --the poets tend to stop and stare. Shahbano Bilgrami comes across the poverty of a boy selling the national flag amidst "eternally turning wheels/ Through dust and gas and grime,/ Through choking fumes,/ Exhausted" ("Buy My Flag", *An Anthology*, 88). The colours of nationalism contort "into someone else's/ Dream of grasping a ten rupee note".

VI

At times when "old metaphysics of love" or the "proverbs of tenderness" ("No More Voices", Shahryar Rashed, *An Anthology*, 94) fail to sustain the soaring imagination of the cosmopolitan Pakistani poet in English, it lapses into the quagmire of 'this-worldliness'. Instead of negotiating existence in terms of the native experience, the poetry takes on a typical existentialist character that once marked the experimental western poetry of the 1930s. The

conservative and communitarian imperatives of the native space go begging as themes of loneliness and anxiety begin to manifest. The imported modern European poetic idiom with all its Eliotesque derivations[8] subsumes the native experience, and indeed becomes the poetic end in itself. Right from the poetry of Zulfikar Ghose to Alamgir Hashmi, what strikes most is the rather stylized voice of an alien(ated) self:

> you are a collage of what you were, torn
> with pain. You are a doodle, a pretty
> picture disfigured. True likeness has gone
> from the canvas of your identity.
> (Zulfikar Ghose, "Disfiguration", *The Violent West*, 51)

The splintered self is least authentic for it takes after the tentative Prufrock, rather than the firm nationalist Porus. The cosmopolitanism of the poetry partly lies in its being a clone of the exhausted colonial poetic models and metaphors.

Loneliness, quite conspicuously, becomes the reflex of the disfigured self. It is either "the hand dragged over the face/ slowly, measuring the stubble" or "the cleaning of fingernails/ with a used matchstick" (44). The beleaguered self is quite literally besieged by the city-walls:

> Loneliness means impenetrable walls
> streaked with betel-juice and snot,
> and a single skylight, high up,
>
> through which the air dribbles in
> like saliva from an old man's mouth.
> (Taufiq Rafat, "Loneliness", *A Selection*, 44)

This self quite visibly models itself after Eliot's "patient on an etherized table/ spread out against the evening sky". Despite references to the betel-juice, the loneliness suggested is not the kind

of loneliness that one suffers in a third-world ghetto or in the traditional walled-cites of the subcontinent.

Hina Faisal Imam also undergoes bouts of loneliness in terms that are typically metropolitan.

> I live in apartment loneliness
> dream-scratch glass
> and paper ash
> freeze an image of you
> that holds me
> like bottled wine. . . .
> ("Loneliness", *Midnight Dialogue*, 171)

The ashen imagery is yet again typically Eliotesque except that instead of coffee-mugs, the patently *sufi* "bottled wine" comes to the fore. The medieval *sufi*-lore is used for quite modernistic ends. In the poem quoted below by Salman Tarik Kureshi, the coffee-mug once again acquires the centre-stage:

> Stirring
> sugar into
> a late night cup of coffee
> at your dining table, you described
> the day's happenings
> to your wife.
> ("Sword-IV", *Landscapes of the Mind*, 37)

The dining table becomes the site of the day's dissection, replacing the medieval chessboard over which the Mughal warlords used to discuss strategic issues. The time-span of a day is all that constitutes 'history' for the poet-persona.

VI

History is one discourse of space and time which modern Pakistani poetry in English prefers to skirt around in favour of the un-cartographied primordial landscape. If at all history is invoked, it is partitioned in time and space. Post-partition Pakistani poetic imagination, which otherwise is free and footloose, at times nosedives into the restricted official nation-space. Succumbing under the pressures of nationalist history, it happens to appropriate those experiences and events that are sub-continental in terms of their ramifications. From within its officially demarcated geography, it dwells around those landmarks that not only feed its nascent nationalism but also engender a sense cultural antiquity to its rather recent political present. The ancient Hindu past is strategically by-passed, if not erased altogether. Mohenjo-Daro, the epicentre of Indus Valley culture, thus, emerges as one of the chosen sites of Pakistani poets for two reasons: one it provides them a much-needed ancestry, and two it also in a way snatches from India its claim of being the mother-culture. The focus on Indus Valley Culture engineers a shift away from the predominantly Indo-Gangetic culture of the subcontinent. The originary longings of Pakistan as a nation are well-served by this ancient town.

A graphic description of Mohenjo-Daro's "crested tumult of living" at a time when even the Indus and the Himalayas were not given their names, lends in the poet Ghulam Fariduddin Riaz a certainty of a vibrant civilizational past. In swift strokes, the poet catalogues, the excavated public buildings--"Covered sewers, temples, baths, cloisters, courts, . . ."--as well as the inner day-to-day domestic objects of the ancient culture:

> Metal ornaments, beads, sea-shells on rings,
> Clay animals, stone-weights, and red earthen pots,

> Convuluted inscriptions and great-humped oxen
> With pondrous heads and curving horns on seals
> ("Mohenjo-Daro, City of the Dead", *An Anthology*, 15)

The range suggests fullness of life, and an evolved level of civilizational maturity. The poet as historian re-produces the whole mechanics of power thus:

> There is a certainty in the citadels of power,
> In the face of the priest-king, bearded, erect,
> The true believer, scornful, sure as a rock. (15)

There is a clear attempt to portray the imagined Indus Valley king as a Muslim Emperor, a "bearded, erect,/ true believer" exercising absolute powers.

The terracotta figurine of the dancing girl with "One hand on her hip, the other arm covered/ with metal bangles, jingling even at rest" (16) is no different from the gypsy-girl that the poet finds "walking along her gypsy cart/. . . legs smeared with mud". The remote past is discovered in the immediate present with a teleological sweep that bypasses the long and uneasy processes of history. The famous Indus Valley icon of the Earth-Mother, the poet believes, continues to ensure eternal fecundity for the whole land. The sensual and the devotional merge in the description of the icon thus:

> The Earth Mother, comfortable and wide-hipped,
> Disc-eyes staring, hypnotic and glacial,
> Immune to the snares of reason or of doubt,
> She would be eternally fecund, cornucopian. (16)

The secular image of the Earth goddess gels well with the larger cosmic (pre-)tensions of modern Pakistani poetry in English. "The fragments of ancient feeling" are recollected so as to negotiate the predicament of belonging--spiritual and material both:

Fragments of ancient feeling, recollected
The necessary paraphernalia for the soul,
The patterns of joy, the geometry of love,
The bones of fear and dread, all sorted now. (16)

Mohenjo-Daro, the city of the dead, ironically enough, animates life as it reverberates as a presence among the people of the region even today.

The well at this Indus Valley site with its "unblinking Cyclopean eye" sends echoes of a 'living' past as casual tourists throw stones into it: "The falling message wakens echoes/ that are added to the laden air" (Shuja Nawaz, *Journeys*, "The Well at Mohenjo-Daro: 2500 BC",1) Daud Kamal, in deft temporal manoeuvre discovers a live Mohenjo-Daro in the day-to-day life of contemporary Pakistan which eventually would be excavated centuries later to ascertain the continuity of life thus:

The sweat of man and animal
sinks into the moist earth--
heavy drops impervious
to the sun's barbaric thirst

Children are climbing all over
a broken cartwheel and a young woman
admires herself
in the running mirror of a stream.

A thousand years later
they dig up figurines of gods
and goddesses and a baked-clay jar
half full of blackened wheat.
("The Plough and the Oxen", *A Selection of Verse*, 13)

The present is an action replay of the past. The "young woman . . . in the running mirror of a stream" is the dancing girl of Mohenjo-

Daro, "broken cartwheel", "baked-clay jar/ half-full of blackened wheat" suggest life interrupted in its full flow to be excavated a thousand years later. Mohenjo-Daro is a recurrent experience, it comes back now and then, reminding the poet Taufiq Rafat of the strange loops of time: "I note how time curves/ back on itself/ like an acrobat" ("Thinking of Mohenjo-Daro", *A Selection*, 13). Passing through the dilapidated city, he writes: "the crumbling fort/ you pass is your home". Mohenjo-Daro thus becomes the metaphor of life's cycle, its ups and downs, its exhaustion and replenishment.

VII

Besides Mohenjo-Daro, the other 'non-Hindu' event that attracts the attention of modern Pakistani poetry in English is that of Alexander's invasion of India around 327 B.C. More than his victories, the poets celebrate the fall of Alexander near Multan as much as they hail the moral heroism of the vanquished local king Porus. Ghulam Fariduddin Riaz tends to valorize his motherland Multan for being the site from where downfall of Alexander begins: "In Multan an arrow struck deep into his chest, irreverently/ Piercing his lung, it gave him his first shudder of death. . ." ("Alexander Comes of Age", *An Anthology*, 24). In a poem "The Leap", Daud Kamal privileges the native space for its powers of transforming the aggressive Alexander into a seeker of spirituality. The leap into transcendence is traced thus:

> Alexander on horseback
> leapt over the Indus here,
> or so the storytellers say,
>
> and on the other side
> of that hill in a grove
> of mango trees he listened
>
> in a rapt attention
> to a naked sadhu

talking of immortality.
("The Leap", *A Selection of Verse*, 14)

Instead of approaching Alexander's military successes in India in terms of the multiple weaknesses of the local kings, Pakistani poets tend to redeem them for their moral/metaphysical superiority. Shuja Nawaj, a poet of journeys, goes back to Porus to trace his proud lineage. As Porus stands as a "captive before the conqueror of the world/ to proclaim the ethics of warrior's blood: 'Do to me as it behoves one king to another'" ("Porus", *Journeys*, 18), he transforms his defeat into moral victory. This is a moment of native vindication for the poet: "So, when they brought the news that you have lost,/ I knew, yes, my father, I knew you had won." There is no Ashoka, Harsha or even Chankya in modern Pakistani poetry in English; if at all there is any native hero in Pakistani poetry, it is the local king Porus.

Once again steering clear of the formidable Hindu heritage, new Pakistani poets in English are smitten by the beaming smile of the non-violent Gandhara Buddha. Buddhism features quite regularly--in terms of its presence it overtakes even Islam--in Pakistani poetry in English. There are hardly any 'sustained poetical references'[9] to much orientalized Hindu motifs like dancing Shiva, *Kama Sutra*, doctrine of *karma*, philosophy of *advait* etc. The 'deployment of Buddha'[10]--a patently non-Islamic god/ reformer, is as much poetical as it is political. If on the one hand, Buddhism serves the quasi-metaphysical longings of Pakistani poetry, on the other it provides a safe third space away from the typical sub-continental hostile communal binary of Hinduism *versus* Islam. Adrian A. Husain, mesmerized by the terracotta images of Buddhist monks at display in a museum at Taxila, makes the non-dyadic position of Buddhism amply clear thus "the self-absorbed figures – / proffer/ a history not ours/ not theirs" ("In the Museum at Taxila", *Desert Album*, 32).

Shuja Nawaj, writing much before the days of Taliban intolerance, also locates Buddha beyond history, "on the mantelpiece/ of Time" as one who has subsumed "all that precedes/ and all that follows" ("The Stone Buddha", *Journeys*, 21). Taufiq Rafat also bestows "perfect vision" to Buddha, and indeed seems to be among those "lucky handful [who] follow to the radiant conclusion" ["Return to Rajagriha", *A Selection*, 11-12]. Maki Kureishi envies the Gandhara sculptor for crafting a perfect Buddha in stone: "Nirvana: an elusive clarity/ my senses cannot shape" ("The Gandhara Sculptor: Circa 100BC-300AD", *The Far Thing*, 25). It is significant to note that Buddhism in Pakistani poetry in English appears more as a discourse of meditation and spirituality, than of existence or middle-path.

History on the whole remains an inconvenience as well as an embarrassment to the Pakistani poet in English. The ancient non-Islamic sub-continental past does not enable him much; the medieval Mughal past, which is officially reckoned as the foundational period of Pakistan movement, also does not comfort him. Except for a minor invocation to some medieval *kissa* or romance or Mughal miniature painting, the poetry remains primarily a-historical in nature and scope, even the impact of *sufism* which is otherwise quite pronounced in Pakistani poetry in Urdu and Punjabi does not emerge as strongly. *Gazal*, a poetic form specific to delicate sufi romance, can only be seen at best operating at a tropical level[11], it is not practised exclusively by the modern Pakistani poets in English.

XI

As victims of 'multiple historical betrayals'[12], Pakistani poets in English seek refuge in the pre-historical and the trans-national. There is no postcolonial anxiety to possess the nation; rather the endeavour is to by-pass it or to touch it tangentially on way to larger cosmopolitan journeys. Nation is a marker of a stay; its English poetry is however all voyage. Except for momentary

nationalist diversions, the poetry sticks to its high course of exceeding the self. The cosmic and/or cosmopolitan longings of Pakistani poets in English do come into clash with their originary impulses, which they negotiate by invoking the pristine unmapped landscape that does not need any nationalist address.

Notes

1. The reference is to Fredric Jameson's pronouncement that "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the from of national allegory. . ." (320).
2. Samuel Huntington looks at global politics after the Cold-War as more inter-civilizational than inter-national thus: "In the post-Cold War world the most important distinctions are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural… [People] identify with the cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and at the broadest level, civilizations." (21).
3. Thomas Perry Thornton in his analysis of the fifty years of Pakistan observes: "Even more than in 1947, Pakistan is an 'insecurity state' because of weaknesses in its national unity, political system, social infrastructure, and economy" (187).
4. 'Chronotope' means merger of space with time. Time becomes the fourth dimension of space. Bakhtin explains the dynamics of chronotope thus: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible, likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope" (84).
5. M Athar Tahir in his "Introduction" to Taufiq Rafat's *A Selection* refers to the poet's preference for nature over religion thus: "Rafat was as much at ease with Hindu and Buddhist traditions as with Islam. . . He seemed to prefer nature to religion" (x).

6. Ken Goodwin's observation about Alamgir Hashmi's cosmopolitanism can be used almost as a paradigm to understand the dynamics of location in modern Pakistani poetry in English thus: "Hashmi is a cosmopolitan writer, educated in Pakistan and the United States, but one who is equally at home in Europe. Yet one can never dissociate his work from his homeland." The observation can be extended to poets right from Zulfikar Ghose to Maki Kureishi.
7. About Maki Kureishi, another poet Adrian A. Hussain writes: "Born a Parsee, married to a Muslim and attended convent school and American College . . . Kureishi brought to her writing a cultural fecundity and uniqueness of perception such as we will seek in vain in the poetic realm in Pakistan. Post-colonial in her poetry does not, however, stylistically or thematically, reflect the typical problems of mainly spatial identity which much post-colonial writing of the subcontinent has been plagued" ("Introduction", vii). Post-colonialism in modern Pakistani poetry borders more on cosmopolitanism than on nationalist assertion.
8. In their introductions to various poetry anthologies, the critics refer persistently to Eliot's unmistakable impact on Pakistani poetry in English. Kaleemur Rahman in his "Introduction" to Salman Tarik Kureshi's *Landscapes of the Mind* does mention about the abiding presence of Eliot in Kureshi's thus: "Perhaps. T.S. Eliot is a stronger and more abiding influence on Kureshi's poetry. Images of sterility and dryness in *April* and *Perverse Rivers* point toward The Waste Land. The poems entitled *Delphi* and *Omphalos* appear to have been written with T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* in mind" (xii). Ken Goodwin while reading Alamgir Hashmi's *Voyage East* thinks of Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* thus: "In a journey reminiscent of T.S.Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, the traveller in some ways comes by hard stages . . ." – "Preface" to *A Choice of Hashmi's Verse*, x. Talaat Morweau in his "Introduction" to Adrian A. Husain's *Desert Album* observes: "Eliot's influence

is apparent in Husain's poetry, as indeed it has been with a whole generation of poets" (xii).

9. From an American Emerson to an Australian Les Murray, Hindu metaphysics and mythology have been the subject-matter of poetic speculation all over the world, but Pakistani poets--the co-inheritors of the Hindu past, prefer to shy away from everything which is patently Hindu.

10. The critical comments of Marcell C. Sirhindi on recent trends in Pakistani painting are quite relevant here: "Younger artists less connected with the Islamic heritage and the Muslim poetic tradition adapted themes from the Indus Valley Civilization and from the Buddhist Gandhara period" (26).

11. Pakistani poets in English hardly ever try to forge an English *gazal* a la Kashmiri poet in English Agha Shahid Ali or Australian poet Judith Wright.

12. According to Stephen Philip Cohen, "Betrayal is a pronounced leitmotiv of Pakistani explanations for the state's problems . . ." (47).

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LANCE LEE

A UNIQUE VOICE HAS COME AMONG US
THE POETRY OF SHANTA ACHARYA

Celebration is in order when a promising voice reaches a confident maturity and we discover a commanding new poetic presence among us like Shanta Acharya. Typical of such maturity is the forging of a distinctive poetic style, and a hundred years after the advent of modernism, the way Acharya moves beyond its now repetitively exhausted experimentation and various post-modern reactions is a good example, in her quiet way, of the nature of the poetic project now.

Thanks to modernism and its offspring we no longer hanker after the epic, external undertakings of the Victorians, a prosodic enterprise with the poet invisible behind the scenes or immanent in other personae; we suspect the very impulse behind such efforts, although Christopher Logue's reinterpretation and translation of the *Illiad*, or the fresh versions appearing of the *Aeneid*, *Beowulf* and others help recover some of the size and impact possible in such undertakings. *Our* emergent poetics is deeply rooted in the experience of the continuing upheavals of this most revolutionary period in human history, and emphasizes instead the saga of the individual voice in conflict with the dissolutions these upheavals cause. A poet now must forge a coherent vision and unity within a redefined lyric 'I,' at once personal and shared, but as far from the 'me' of confessional poetry as from the actual poet queuing for an exhibition or a place on a bus…

Acharya's experience has led her into this effort naturally, driven by need: she is an expatriate Indian living in London, a woman working as an economist for her daily bread, a feminist by virtue of butting her head against corporate and academic glass ceilings, her family largely on another continent, her sense of being at home torn between two homes, two languages, two life-visions, concerned she does not fully belonging to any. That is our central modern experience in a society that thrives by reducing individuals

to the manipulable and conditional, rootless in time and place. As such we cannot avoid the manipulation of desire, natural and mass-produced, that drives our market and maintains our even more comfortable, if pointless lives.

In this context the reassertion of the personal voice and the development of a coherent personal vision that lets us be our own masters is radical, as radical as the rediscovery of the classical heritage would be with its emphasis on the individual as the measure and one's fullness as the goal of living.

Acharya's double debut of *Not This, Not That* (1994) and *Numbering Our Day's Illusions* (1995) first gave hope of such a development. A poem like "Creation" sounds the first nodes of that voyage,

> As a child
> I created friends
> like a magician god
> from songs I heard
> stories I read
> inside my head

but she realizes what growing up is about, after she "bled":

> and my mother
> explained
>
> What creation
> and womanhood meant.
> *God does it everyday!*
> She heard me say.
> I make my life too
> In my own way.

That self-making is *the task* of the modern poet. The audaciousness of that enterprise is virtually thrown away in the casualness of the last two lines, a simplicity of tone characteristic of Acharya. Our lives are not given, received, inherited, or fixed in tradition now, but float on the restless surface of modern society, helpless until either we surrender to an 'ism,' or make in our freedom a sense of self strong enough to supply for ourselves the standards and rootedness otherwise missing.

The modern dislocations of experience Acharya wrestles with leap out in a poem like "The Night of Shiva," combining reflections, memories of growing up in India in the province of Orissa, and their dissonance with her chosen life in England.

> In my top floor maisonnette
> solitary in Highgate,
> on the eve of *Shivaratri*
> in my own way I celebrate
> Shiva's commemoration night…

She remembers going to Shiva's celebration:

> with my father in white, crisp dhoti
> and tussar Punjabi-shirt;
> mother in yarns of peacock-
> throated pasapali silk changing colour…

Her detail is exact, her tone apparently prosaic until you let the words' richness pile up on your tongue. But her mothers were in "jeans/ T-Shirts, Seiko watches, Nike shoes." Off to the temple they go, "lost sheep in search of our shepherd," where she is amused by Shiva's "munificent phallus" worshippers kiss "without shame or thought." Amusement, the trait of an *outsider*, wry to sometimes hilarious, peppers Acharya's work; she, like the rest of us, struggles with the modern disease of standing aside from our own experience, then viewing that as material to be used, whether

for a poem, or altered, as in a trip to the plastic surgeon. We are all more or less disassociated.

The poem continues, taking us through Shiva's celebration, not neglecting the "mud, ooze and slime" underfoot, celebrating in Shiva the ultimate creator, "While myths and legends stretched my notions of humanity…"

But where is she now? In London, willing to meet Shiva in any guise, anywhere locally,

> With your dread-locked hair,
> your tiger-skin mini skirt
> …
> with Parvati break-dancing down Trafalgar Square.

She doesn't expect him to call, of course. She "will be waiting here/patiently keeping my solitary/vigil…."

> The phone rings
> and I hear a strange voice say:
> This is Shiva speaking….

It is her first great poem, and sounds many of her themes: memory of India, her struggle for meaning, solitary life in London, the eerie visitation from a god, the ultimate creator, the source of life. The poem becomes an act of self-creation and unification.

The poem in her other debut volume, *Numbering Our Day's Illusions*, strike these notes but add to them those of a woman enthralled but baffled by passion and the way it does not lead to a stable relationship. Titles like "All For Love," "Fool For Love," "Love's Delay," "Loveland," "Lovegames" give some idea of the volume's obsessions. We can't always tell enough of the specifics of the experience underlying these poems, but a number break

through with telling impact. "Arranged Marriage" combines Acharya's heritage with her insight of the price of love:

> Impossible union with a stranger.
> Love will rise like a phoenix, they said;
> Friendship will follow with the children of god.
> But first one has to be turned inside out.

Shakespeare gives a pointed focus for our love-driven follies in "Daughters And Lovers," first between a father and daughter, with Lear driven "to night school in the storm on the health" without learning enough to save himself or Cordelia, while Ophelia's suicide is the disillusioned "sort of things lovers do." The bitterness of loss pervades these poems' sentiments: something like "City Slickers" with its exact imagery and sly humour bring this love-thread together with the tension of womanhood in a man's world, watching a muscle-bound window cleaner:

> A single Indian female, I am trapped, alas,
> In a cage of bomb-proof, shatter-proof glass!
>
> The Jurassic laws in the City continue to spawn
> Dinosaurs that even a Spielberg cannot improve upon.
>
> Next time these helmeted musclemen blow me a kiss,
> I will signal to them to rescue a woman in distress.

Acharya is at her best in those poems where her separate strands coalesce: the "Indian female" trapped within the glass walls of one of England's most resistant male worlds. In "City Life" she congratulates herself on her good record of picking winning stocks, but is confounded by her "poor investments in a partner":

> I have thus mastered the art of winner loses all
> For not everything that goes down in reverse is a fall.

> Nor do things I give boomerang back to me
> In equal measure for then life would be *mon ami*.
>
> Living alone, I try not to become a weekend worrier.
> *I can't see the future through a rearview mirror.*

"Loose Talk" takes us beyond these concerns and gives some insight into the development of Acharya's unique voice. Her grandmother counseled holding your tongue to hold your peace; a tongue-tied woman,

> I encouraged her to loosen her tongue
> for it was her story I yearned to hear
> in her words, unfurling like the national flag
> on Independence Day…

Her mother spoke Oriya, "mysterious as lake Chilika and lyrical as Konarka," but Acharya grew up speaking English, her "runaway" tongue.

> Critics, like ruthless children, pelted my snake-
> tongue which had not learnt to rattle.
> In a world devoid of plainspeak, I sought
> remedy from my gods: *Hiss, child hiss!*
> And I graduated from an obedient lisp
> to shedding my shame and singing my song.

And to what purpose?

> With tongues of fire I must speak
> for grandmothers and mothers in silent revolt,
> daughters and sisters, all striving to sing one story,
> variations of similar fate…

Acharya's language is that deliberate "plainspeak," dispensing with whatever is poetically fashionable for the far larger enterprise

of giving a sense of shape to a seemingly hopeless and chaotic modern world. Such a poet tries to speak to us, not to other poets.

Her plainspeak lets Acharya in the best of the love poems fuse her strands of meditation and passionate knowledge into a bitter irony, giving a lover's disappointed turn to that most Socratic and reasonable of injunctions at the gateway of Western culture: "Know thyself." "Sometimes" ends:

> Sometimes, when I think I had
> given you all, that you turned
> aside full of me and all I offered,
> I breathe solitude none can share.
>
> Knowing it not, whatever one desires
> one is; knowing is all.

We think "knowing" will be a flash of light, a moment of redemption, of being set free by the truth, but what one ultimately knows is the shape our desire has warped us into, "Knowing it not." *Our* knowing only brings us up against our own blindness. How brilliant too with "I breathe solitude none can share" to evoke the suffering growing out of our perceived inadequacy, the ultimately private moment of hell that nonetheless we have all touched. What is the point of a poet if he or she cannot fixate us in our shared humanity as if that was the most important thing in the world? Our contemporary lyric 'I' achieves just that enlargement.

The weaker poems in these volumes, where her voice struggles for shape, her insights for specificity, are not failures: one doesn't look in early work for what doesn't work, but for the promise of the future in poems that give us the sense of coming into the presence of someone with original force, one bale to extend our borders.

Ten years passed before Acharya again released another volume, *Looking In, Looking Out*, followed a year later by the masterful *Shringara*. Promise is one thing, fruition far rarer, yet in these volumes there is no gainsaying the leap in ability, confidence, range and, most importantly, maturation of a unique poetic 'I.' Acharya has become a major voice in her own right.

A characteristic of a 'voice' gaining maturity is its ability to *see* tellingly. "At the Edge of the World" starts observing a queue at a gallery:

> The queue outside stretches
> like an alley-cat, waiting
> to enter the crowded gallery…

"The Annunciation" starts:

> The book she held, half open, half closed,
> clasped between startled fingers,
> her thumb, a page mark; the others curled
> gently over the covers, slightly ajar…

and ends:

> What was Mary doing dressed like a queen
> seated among the lilies and roses,
> as if waiting for a rendezvous with a secret lover?
> Did she feel the stirrings in her womb,
> great white wings flapping?

This is exact, simple language, a "plainspeak" focused and driving to the simple question, 'What was she doing?' Anyone who has ever tried to be exact, simple and pointed knows simplicity isn't how a poet begins, clarity and initial gift, exactness a given: these are hard-won qualities, with simplicity an outward sign of great sophistication. The poet who is able to see, who has something to

say, who wants urgently to be heard, doesn't use ornate language or depend on footnotes.

There is a similar direct power now in handling love poems, as in "Broken Glass," where a former lover appears in a dream to announce his wedding. So intense was their love once that:

> …It took us days
> to quench our exquisite though volcanic passion.
> You wanted no other man to see the face of my satisfaction.

The last line drives home the passion of their lovemaking, a depth of surrender and fulfillment jealously guarded that drives the experience home to other lovers who shared that private moment. Yet Acharya remains a single woman:

> How did we come to such an unseasonal end?
> Why appear now like an angel with your annunciation?
> With each passing breath, I died a little with you.
> With each death, I learnt to love a lifetime without you.

This simplicity and power overshadow and bring to fruition the love poetry of *Numbering Our Day's Illusions* ten years earlier. The last line is typical of Acharya's mature voice, shifting a particular experience into her abiding wrestling with the meaning and purpose of her life. death, we will see elsewhere, can have a generative power…

The title poem of *Looking In, Looking Out* develops this wrestling further. Here a lover has come to visit, oohing and ahhing over her art collection, to tell Acharya he will not spend his birthday with her, but his parents, babbling shop-talk to bury the hurt of his decision. They distract themselves:

> I remember opening a window in my ancestral home
> to watch the electric monsoons through the night.

> Tonight we open another window switching on the TV,
> watch helplessly how frail windows can be
> failing to protect women and children
> caught in civil wars in their streets…

a perception that doesn't lessen the sense of loss by generalizing it, but augments that by dissolving the barriers between private and public elsewhere, her own just one grain in the large pour of misery, for:

> I can no longer recall what it felt like to be desired,
> I gaze into your eyes but can find no help there.
> …
> love grows wings and flies out of hearts and homes.

Love will not stay to be "entombed": if only 'I' could be like the tree outside the window, that yet laments it has no "opportunity to escape from/ the light of day." For the mind's "windows" are tainted, and we, no more than our thoughts, which are like flies beating against another window, can escape ourselves or our losses. Impermanence is our condition, however we wish it otherwise--yet permanence, imagined, is a terrible burden…

Our experience may be rootless; it may not add up; even the most passionate of love, like the electric displays of nature, is spectacular while here, but passes by. 'Passing by' becomes a synonym for our lives, the sad loss of even the memory of feeling desired another characteristic modern element, yet the shaping of this wearing, amorphous experience by a poet into a coherence easily grasped is a gift, a stone in the flow of experience that alters its current. 'Stone' is misleading: that shaping is a coherence of self in motion, one that helps the self endure even as it evolves.

"Of Magic and Men" touches on the war between reason and faith in this troubled world:

> Ganesha and Nandi, Lord Shiva's bull, suck milk
> Simultaneously in various temples of the world.
> TV cameras religiously broadcast these scenes
> from a multitude of angles that prove or disprove nothing.
>
> "It is all in the mind:" the guru-busters explain.

Nonetheless, a physicist friend still indulges in mystic practice despite his Harvard training, although this is not a faith vs. science kind of evocation--

> Both sides remain united in the struggle,
> God's in heaven and all's wrong with our world--
> except miracles unfurl daily to the faithful
> not impervious to the mystery of the universe.

This 'passing by' quality of contemporary life with its collision between the scientifically "hard-headed" and believers does confront us with a sense of mystery: here, the faithful" are those not caught up in traditional religious observance, but those keeping faith with the underlying mystery of our experience ("of the universe") for whom miracles are possible. But they too pass by: remember, she is the poet who speaks of no longer being able to remember being desired…

It's a good thing in such a difficult world that Acharya's wit has sharpened as well, whether in "Dear Tech Support" and its companion, "Dear Customer," which reimagines the difficulty of relationships in terms of computer programs: "Husband 1.0," "Romance 9.0," "Real Passion 10.0" and so on, with "Husband 1.0" acquiring a mind of its own, driving the poet to ask how to restore it to "Boyfriend 5.0," answered in "Dear Customer" with a reminder:

Be realistic and not too critical; bear in mind
That Boyfriend 5.0 was an entertainment package
But Husband 1.0 is an operating system.

"Job Hunting" takes on the demeaning task of a woman doing just that:

My application
supplication
duplication
transfiguration
for a position

lands her in the boss's limousine, where:

As he breathed all over me
a Maharaja's grin spiced with whisky
fangs bared, moustache caressing
cheek bones, with double-fat lining--
he promised me a job in
exchange for favours…

She flies out of the car:

Accosted by a tramp, later
for a few pennies from heaven
I explode, F—k off, lecher!"

The tramp is shocked, the poet mortified, and hands him a fiver:

"God bless ya…"
I heard him singing after
me as I was lost
in the twilight rush hour.

It would be wrong to think this an exceptional experience.

The poem is interesting to look at another way, too. One of the hallmarks of the maturing voice is the way language itself comes alive, lines crackle with movement. Look how the line enjambments force movement, as in "I heard him singing after/me as I was lost," while the line actually preserved with its breaks, "me as I was lost," is at once typically causal yet metaphysical in its implications. This casual carrying of weight is just how a poet with something to say tries to reach out to real people. Understand what you can--it is there for you to take as far as you can. 'You' are 'the measure.' Line liveliness is a key to modern as opposed to traditional prosody with its well-known bag of meters and rhymes. It is a fresh way for cadence to be imbued with meaning, not in the rhythms of the Hebrew or King James Bible, or in the paternal drive of iambic pentameter, but in the shorter, nervous rhythms of our own speech.

It is *Shringara* that drove me to reread Acharya's poetry and trace the development of so powerful a book, for in the poems of loss in its first two-thirds there is a depth of feeling and mastery that compels complete attention.

Two poems bracket the book: "Highgate Cemetery" and the title poem, "Shringara."

> I wandered among the dead in a cemetery town
> exploring the winding paths where angels carved in stone
> directed me through green alleyways

Acharya begins in "Highgate Cemetery": she hears the voices of school children as she arrives at Marx's tomb and reads its inscription:

> *The philosophers have only interpreted the world*
> *In various ways. The point however is to change it.*

and imagines Krishna and Marx in a debate, bringing her Western and Indian strands into direct collision, and coming down not on

some grand reconciliation, but on herself: "It is easier I confess to alter myself than the world." If only the "painful memories" we bury within could "grow out of us like trees."

The informal note, "I wandered among the dead," as if this was the easiest thing to do, the collision of the Western idea of social change with the more profound, irreconcilable Eastern view of an endlessly repeating cycle of life and death, and her purely personal assertion. It also shows again how the new poetry is at once personal yet reaches outward to the 'other,' the reader taken on this casual exploration of a "cemetery town" to a moment of a shared coherence, even if one of wish-fulfillment only.

But this wished for coming forth, this letting our experience (memories) "grow out of us like trees" is an element of *Shringara*. By the end of the book "The image in the mirror is no longer frozen/in an unimaginable longing," in a life where there is only the possibility of "romancing," meaning fooling ourselves in "the courtyard of our daydreaming," where the daydreaming transforms the shroud to a wedding veil. No, now she is self aware:

> A participant in life's carnival, I prepare for illusion.
>
> Elizabeth Arden's flawless finish foundation frosts
> on skin breathing Shahnaz Hussain's sandalwood face cream.
> Givenchy's mascara thickens and lengthens eyelashes…

It is one thing to be taken in by life, another to knowingly play the game. Along the way, those we meet and those we *do not*:

> all the things that happen to me and those that do not
> keep defining me in some inexplicable way.

The mirror may mock her wrinkles and grey streaks, but, if

> …I am the result of unrepeatable circumstances,
> what use is there in seeking escape from self-enunciation?
> In the end we are all dead.
> The days become my *Shringara*.

Our lives, shaped by their countless known and unknown influences, are all we have: we can be taken in, helpless, be broken: or we can live so that who we are shines forth in our actions. Will that change any one self? Will it change the world? I am reminded of the end of *Middlemarch* with its splendid evocation of how minute acts of goodness flow into the broad stream of the (in a moral sense) changeless world; although seemingly lost, they imperceptibly alter its flow. Something similar happens in Acharya's *Shringara* volume, but a pointed way for the modern, conflicted individual in a world that socially and technologically is the opposite of changeless. How does she get there?

She imagines a family history in "Family Portrait" focused on hands: her father's "keenest when gardening," also educating others, "scribbling notes on a blackboard"; her mother's hands that do "extraordinary" things among the most common activities, so they "pray when writing letters" and give "Blessing" to her lists of chores; her older brother whose fingers "daily guide the scalpel," "surgical hands patiently sewing new life"; her younger brother whose hands "photograph the world in its intricate dance." What does this have to do with the poet?

> My hands pulsate with new insights
> knowing they could hardly move otherwise.

For all of these others are part of the "unrepeatable circumstances" that we both know and do not know but which dynamically continue to shape our growing and feed what shines from us.

Death, however, is the greater molder, in the sense that confronting it forces Acharya to bring her disparate strands into

high focus and to underscore the struggle for a sense of cohesion, for "In the end we are all dead." This is not the depressive exaltation of death by Existentialism and its dreary worldview in the past, grim century--that is not, as we see, where Acharya arrives. That phrase, "intricate dance," gives a much better view of what her *Shringara*, 'growing out/coming forth from herself" permits her knowingly to join, and not unhappily.

So in poem after poem she wrestles with death's facets: the death of her grandfather and father, of friends, of those massacred at Srebrenica, those killed in the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks in New York and London, those killed by a cyclone in Orissa, the mundane passing of a neighbor, the death of a poet in World War II. She remembers a friend in one poem, Gandhi in another.

"Aja" draws together her Indian experience and London exile with the passing of her grandfather, who did not want her to go to England, but nonetheless blessed her. She had no premonition of his death, and remains open hopefully for some message: perhaps he will:

> Let us know why God chooses
> not to give better evidence of His existence,
> nor intervene in our unjust world?

That is one of our repetitive, great unanswered questions, so casually posed to her grandfather, "If you possess a superior consciousness" where he has gone: perhaps, the "constraints of your body gone," he could visit her in Highgate.

Maybe London would become real for him, then. I may not be halcyon, but where, outside the Himalayas, might we find such a place?

> Crocodile-like I am at home in this swamp,
> unseen, unknown, watching the world pass by.

A crocodile, I might add, is not defenseless. She takes stock of herself in "Loneliness":

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

It is a positive spin on loneliness we don't often see: usually a descent there soon brings us to depression, psychotherapy, and pills. After all, "Nothing's a gift" in the poem if the same title: "Was I hoping to be saved?…/ We are here to offer an account of ourselves."

Her father's death is also unexpected. She "never knew how much you meant to me/ until you were gone." His death has left the family "unsheltered/ orphaned," but again, rather than sink into depression, she reflects on her memories of him that are like light on:

> …icons in life's monastery
> carrying me like music from image to image
> resting on your face framed in a light, a vision.

She is thoroughly aware of the limits of words to affect reality. What do they matter in the face of the silence death imposes?

> Unable to settle for words
> my body reminds me it was never so deceived
> bursting into uncontrollable tears
> without regard to time, place or decorum.

Our lives are not just thought: there is a physical root, something a woman who knew she was real when she bled is acutely conscious of, which has a way of bracketing words with apostrophe marks. There is the great world beyond us, the universe in Krishna's mouth…

> There is something elemental about cremations,
> letting the body turn to ashes and bones.
>
> Life reconfigured in space, time, conception;
> the horizon a mirage of our limitation.

Death becomes a 'growing, coming forth' in its own way, however grievous, however much a closure--in this world of illusion. A cyclone may have exacted an appalling loss of life in Orissa in "Morning After," but even if:

> Like hungry crocodiles water crawled after the coastline.
>
> Morning after, the sun shone brilliantly
> in a freshly painted sky with not a single leaf in sight…

Anyone who has known a New England autumn storm knows the morning after the simultaneous sense of devastation in the woods, and the exhilaration of the brilliant, fresh sky, crisp air, and unmatched clarity of light… Again, there is no blinking away the mystery and misery of death: "9/00" reimagines that event in the context of even greater losses of life from natural disasters, leading one to ask, "*Is this the will of God?*" Those killed in 9/11 had:

> No way out; no time to fight back,
> offer peace, negotiate a deal,
> come to terms with their fate--
>
> As they were pulverized
> with the imploding towers to dust
> …
> smouldering for days in one funeral pyre
> of steel, stones, wires, human parts:
> …
> Who can tell you what is worth dying for?
> Are there the same things worth killing for?

We may be called to give an account of ourselves, but that accounting must include acts like these, whether we knew or didn't know about them. Underneath a Terencian thought is working: nothing human is alien to me, and we have done these things to each other.

"Farewell Ghazal" brings much of this together in one place in an unusual formal way, but then the modern 'voice' has not forgotten its heritage, but uses and attunes it for our own conditions. I quote it entirely.

> When I lie bereft, broken and dejected,
> crossed by life, by the wide world rejected,
>
> I rejoice you no longer have to face humiliation--
> such is the fate of the human condition.
>
> When darkness descends upon me, thick as fog
> obliterating my view, turning my mind into bog,
>
> I rejoice you no longer have to endure perdition
> such is the fate of the human condition.
>
> When the slings and arrows of fortune pin me down,
> leaving me to lick my wounds, blood trickling from my crown,
>
> I rejoice you no longer have to wrestle with salvation--
> such is the fate of the human condition.
>
> When family and friends misunderstand me and each other,
> grief makes children of us all, we cry and fight together,
>
> I rejoice you no longer have to witness alienation--
> such is the fate of the human condition.

When death can come in the stillness of the night,
take someone you love and you cannot even put up a fight,

I rejoice you no longer are defined by our limitation--
such is the fate of the human condition.

Still, "the more I try to forget the more I remember" she reflects in "Remembering," after Emily Dickinson: rather than be haunted, she will "let the winds of change scatter my pain like ashes": "Perhaps, the less I try to forget the less I will remember." Meaning: the fuller I will be. She tries to recapture Mikos Radnoti's voice from his notebooks, a poet shot in 1944 by the Germans. At its end her Radnoti imagines:

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

If the modern poetic enterprise of assembling an enduring self in a "universe,/ reducing all to itself, always transforming" (from "Shunya"), then that enterprise must be *shared*--it is not a hermetic undertaking. The enduring self is bound up in resonances it both knows and doesn't know. Nor is this a confessional undertaking: much as the facts of a poet's life may enter into the poems, as Achayra's life enters hers, it is the transformation a poet is able to make of these that matters, not their report. The latter is merely an exercise in ego; the former, of creating the modern lyric "I" which grows out of the poet, a kind of Shringara in itself, but one also felt to belong to the reader, the other.

This unique way of bearing witness has a peculiarly American root, steeped in Emerson and Thoreau who emphasized at once the primacy of the self and, in Emerson, the way the deepest, most private introspection brings us in touch with our common humanity,

not our private obsessions. Emerson's remains an insight of great power, and one largely lost in the development of American and Modern thought into the atomistic self, more or less neurotic, at the mercy of the great machine of modern industrial and post-industrial humanity, rapidly homogenizing the world whatever atavistic self-inflicted tragedies accompany that process. This radical upheaval has not lessened, is not just a matter of the 19th or 20th centuries, but is accelerating in pace and implication, an ever more dehumanizing experience we must re-humanize. It is something Emerson would have understood, and we have lost sight of, as someone does of the forest who concentrates on this tree or that.

This influence is not distant for Acharya: she wrote a book on the connection between Emerson and Indian thought. Given her heritage she is open to the way our self relates to the greater Self that is the being of the world, and universe. Again our individual, authentic voice struggles to be heard, the solitary 'I' to speak out of his or her experience in such a way it becomes an 'I' common to all, using language in a way that reflects our own casualness, hurry and confusion even as it achieves insight and cohesion.

So I come back to the very particular Acharya of "Shringara" before her mirror, a woman and a poet applying her makeup:

> …My mask is complete
> with desire red, double colour, ever lasting Estee Lauder lipstick.
> I spray myself generously with *Nirvana* and *Samsara*…

(*Nirvana*: beyond suffering, free of the cycle of birth and death in the material world, happy; *Samsara*: steeped in the cycle of death and rebirth in the material world, miserable):

> I travel towards what end I cannot say--
>
> Along the way I meet 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.

If I am the result of unrepeatable circumstances,
What use is there is seeing escape from self enunciation?
In the end we are all dead.
The days become my *Shringara*.

On the way may there be a good dinner here and there, and because we live in hope, another with whom we can share *our* journey, for on that journey towards the achieved self we go forth looking for her companions.

P. RADHIKA

THE CREATIVE MIND AS A TRANSPARENT CRUCIBLE

Jayanta Mahapatra. *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs*. Delhi: Authorspress, 2007. Rs.375/-

A canon that boasts of seventeen volumes of poetry in English, four collections of Oriya poems, an anthology of English short stories, eight books of poetry translations and numerous essays is a wonderfully prolific one by all standards. It appears more so when we consider two other facts: one, the writer was formally trained in science, not literature, and worked as a teacher of Physics in a college for several years; and two, by conventional standards, his entry into the field of literature was at a late and mature age of thirty-eight. Indeed, a phenomenal output within a career spanning four decades to date! Jayanta Mahapatra's claim to fame, one has to admit, rests on very solid foundations. And the enviable position he enjoys among Indian poets in English is ratified by the fact that he was the first writer to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award for English poetry (1981).

Composing poems has never been a casual pastime for Mahapatra; he views it as a serious occupation that demands dedication and hard work. As he has said in numerous interviews and as his works themselves reveal, poetry offers him a convenient as well as suitable forum for articulating his responses to the world and the events that shape or destroy it. In his own words, it is a "compulsion, I feel, / that is implicit in the poems I write" ("The Unease of Quiet Sleep"). It is only natural then for his recently compiled anthology of literary and personal essays to reflect some of the same social concerns as well as his convictions about his chosen vocation.

Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs reveals Mahapatra's private universe of philosophical contemplation and poetic preoccupations. Directly or otherwise, nearly all the thirty-seven

essays in this collection revolve round the two major factors that have influenced his vision and shaped his identity--poetry and Orissa. Here the reader gets a glimpse of the creative mind as a transparent crucible, where the poet's spontaneous emotional response to the beautiful as well as ugly scenes of the outside world are subjected to high temperatures of intellectual debate, before being poured into designer poetic moulds.

Scattered among Mahapatra's essays on poetry are his objective assessments of the state of Indian writing in English, his thoughts about the style, content, and purpose of his own compositions, his confessions about his still-unresolved inner conflict regarding the social relevance of poetry, his ideas about the importance of regional literatures as well as traditions in India and so on. His jottings on Orissa take on a less intellectual tone; they are warmer and more personal in nature. Most of them reveal his passionate love for the Orissan landscape and the Oriya way of life. He is clear-sighted about the warts and wounds defacing his native land--her poverty and squalor, her natural catastrophes and diseases, her milling crows and corruption. But he also notices that his home state has her own spots of beauty, her unique fairs and festivals, her exquisite architectural style and natural scenery. All these, he concedes, have gone into the creation of his poetic personality.

His essays on poetry cover a wide range of topics--from the abstract to the concrete. To those readers familiar with some of Mahapatra's poems that deal with the theme of poetic craft, this is a familiar and well-trodden turf. He is as much fascinated with the mysterious germination of an idea in the mind as he is with the manner in which his own artistic hands draw it out and coax it into a tangible shape. For instance, in "Freedom, as Poetry: The Door" he mentions how he is totally at the mercy of the Muses, implying the poetry writing is largely a matter of instinct:

> Sometimes, for hours together I sit through the night watching despair--this blank sheet of paper in front of me. I experience the fearful pull of gravity which pulls

> me down when words fail to appear on the paper. Then, suddenly maybe, the language is there, flowing into rhythm, like the unseen wind moving the branches of the mango tree in my little courtyard. (5)

However, in "Face to Face with the Contemporary Poem" he mentions how much poetry is the product of serious and self-conscious effort. In this essay, Mahapatra states that poetry conveys more meaning than prose because it uses language with special care and attention. He says, "For language to be successful in poetry, it must be made to work for the poet, with an additional boost. In other words, poetry has to make use of *language plus*--that is, a human language (not utilitarian like science or day-to-day speech), a language of over-and-above noumenal concerns" (88). This seeming contradiction, readers know, is not a blemish. Rather, it only underscores the inexplicable nature of creative power, the secrets of which are hidden even from the eyes of those who possess it.

Some of his other essays on poetry succeed in revealing, at least partially, the workings of an imaginative mind. They provide excellent examples of how a committed and inspired poet manipulates his meaning with the help of old myths, thus giving his language a new, connotative buoyancy and richness for sensitive readers to savour. For instance, in "Containing the World that Contains Us: Myth/Symbol as Metaphor in Poetry," Mahapatra selects four lines from one of his own poems "Indian Summer" for analysis:

> Over the soughing of the summer wind,
> Priests chant louder than ever;
> The mouth of India opens.
> Crocodile move into deeper waters

and he discusses at length the thoughts that decided the choice of certain figures of speech in that piece:

> When I referred to "the mouth of India" and said that it "opens", the statement could literally deal with the hunger of our people, spiritual of course (the physical one being always there, and cannot be denied even today), and which opens in the manner of a fledging opening its mouth. But this one is the more apparent meaning. A poet would always like to talk in parables and speculative words. And it is here that a deep-rooted Hindu myth comes into being, with the idea or picture of Krishna opening his mouth on the battlefield of Kurukshetra and revealing the ultimate reality to Arjuna. Possibly every Indian has come into contact with the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, and can very well connect this "mouth of India" in the poem with Krishna's revelation without effort from his or her side. (185)

These lines offer a good view of the lateral thinking processes of the poetic brain. Incidentally, they also give practical tips to readers about a methodology they can effortlessly adopt in order to unearth the hidden texts within a poem so that they may enjoy pure, aesthetic pleasure.

Perhaps the most endearing aspect of this anthology is the strain of absolute honesty that informs all the essays. For instance, on the question of the exact mode of his poetic composition, Mahapatra makes no bones about the laboured nature of the writing process. In the essay "About 'Hunger' and Myself," he writes: "Even today I have to ruefully admit that poems come to me the hard way. They have always been so; and it makes me ask myself: Why is it that I can't write poems more easily?" (20). One cannot help recalling how in his poem "The Trail of Poetry," Mahapatra likens the poet's chore to a conscientious parent's painstaking duty: "Nurture it up from its diapers, / for it to become a man."

In "The Inaudible Resonance of English Poetry in India" he goes a step further and confesses: "For as a practicing writer (if I can call myself that), even after years of continual struggle I see

myself suddenly faced with the inconsistent character of my poetry. This, my realization of my incompetence, becomes a strong ground for dissatisfaction, a sore that often festers to dismiss the workings of my imagination as irrelevant" (43). It is the same trait which makes him admit in "Mystery as Mantra" that he is plagued by genuine doubts about the usefulness of poetry: "And I would like to ask myself: what exactly is the relevance of such poetry to a society which has as its basic problem hunger? I have no answers" (34). Paradoxically, such an attitude of self-doubt persists even when he believes that poetry has the power of elevating readers and "making us human and benign" ("Freedom as Poetry: The Door" 3) or "expanding the horizon in which the reader finds himself" ("Mystery as Mantra" 21).

Blistering honesty again when he goes hammer and tongs against contemporary Indian poetry in English in "Of the Lowly Potato: Indian English Poetry Today." He takes a formidable inventory of defects: "Indian poetry in English lacks ideas"; "our poems are characterized by a thinness"; barring a few specimens most "poems exhibit a one-dimensionality that reveals their meanings straightaway"; they do "not touch us in our deepest, most enduring self…" (129). Mahapatra does not flinch from facing the truth, frontally and unsentimentally. And in "The Inaudible Resonance of English Poetry in India" he pinpoints the reason for this shameful mediocrity--Indian poets writing in English do not have an in-depth knowledge of their regional languages and literatures; they have no roots in their native tradition (49-50).

If these literary pieces appear serious or even cynical, there are two interesting essays that read almost like short stories. "The Moving Horizon: Visiting America" narrates two of Mahapatra's near-epiphanic moments: one, on seeing the giant and ancient sequoias in a forest:

> I touched the coarse, deeply-furrowed bark, marveling at the reservoir of its age, the stillness of its massive body. I let my own body reach out toward this other one,

> stretching pathetically against, it feeling time, and the brief flash of understanding of what a light year was. (76-77)

And the other, on looking at the river Edisto:

> Fringed by maples and cottonwoods, the waters of the Edisto looked dark and foreboding. The currents were swift; leaves and small twigs were swept downstream as though with some dark, strange purpose. I watched the scene before me with potential unease….The river Edisto is unlike any other river I have seen; centuries stare back at you with black, haughty eyes. (78-79)

One sees how his intellectual understanding of time, gained through his training in Physics, gets subsumed under the sheer emotional experience of it and how the poet in him effortlessly learns more profound truths from Nature than the scientist in him had studied in the laboratory.

The other essay "An August Day in 1942" is a poignant narration of a childhood episode in which Mahapatra saw and experienced his father's tender love and concern for him. Sadly, the true significance and profundity of that paternal anxiety dawned on him only in his adulthood:

> Only years later, when my three-year-old son was lost at dusk on the seemingly endless sands at Puri, did I see that face of his [his father's], rich and burning with care and anxiety.
>
> And I knew then what my father had felt that long-ago evening of August 1942. (98)

It takes another intensely personal piece "The Door" for the readers to actually fathom the depth of Mahapatra's emotional dependence on his father. As a very sensitive boy, the first-born in the family, there was very little in his early life to feel cheerful

about. His mother's over-strict ways inside their "drab, ghostly old house" were as inscrutable and intolerable as the Second World War raging outside. Mahapatra's brief description of the bleakness and the sense of claustrophobia that vitiated his tender mind is heart-rending:

> My hours in the house became a sort of constant torment, subjected as I was to the whims of Mother. There did not seem to be any way out. I was too timid, too cowardly in those early years, but I did harbour thoughts of running away from home. I only wished my father was there--instead of those brief, infrequent visits when he came home on leave to Cuttack. (159)

The same essay, interestingly, throws light on the metaphoric significance of the title of the book and the role literature has always played in his life. The physical door of his childhood house had shut out the terrors of the outside world but also locked him inside the loveless atmosphere inside, thus becoming "both a haven and a prison." Similarly, the poetic door of paper of his adult days is at once an oppressive obsession he cannot escape from and a liberating instrument of intellectual debates he cannot do without.

The usefulness of *Door of Paper* is indisputable no doubt, because it brings together articles that lie scattered in several journals, both Indian and foreign, across several decades. However, it seems to have two major shortcomings. First, it does not carry an introductory article which, if included, could have given readers valuable information about the different contexts in which these essays were written. Second, the essays are not placed in chronological order. The blurb declares that they were composed "over the last thirty years" but without any concrete mention of the years in which the individual pieces were composed, it becomes difficult to trace any evolutionary pattern in Mahapatra's thoughts.

Just how significant this lapse is can be seen when we compare passages from two essays. In "Stranger than Brothers: Writing at the Edge of Anonymity" he expresses his deep distrust of academia:

> Today, I feel that the reasons for the growing separation between the serious writer and the potential reader can be pinned down to the Indian academic and critic. It is mainly he who ever fails to speak of the mystically inherent character of the Indian mind whenever he discusses a book….all this talk of the 'Indian sensibility' in our writing only helps to sustain the academic's own idea of nationalism. (152)

This comes as an unexpected and rude jolt because in "Translating from Oriya: An Approach", placed earlier in the anthology, Mahapatra had, however obliquely, drawn a clear distinction between the Indian sensibility and the Western one:

> The separation of Radha from Krishna, the forlorn waiting of Radha, and Radha's longing for union, lose their special poignancy when rendered into English. How does one explain an emotional quality inherent in *leela*, or *abhimana* or *rasa*! Here arises the fundamental difference between two distinctly separate cultures, for which no solution is apparent. And yet, translations from one regional language into another in India pose no special problems. (104-105)

Needless to say, an elaborate introductory essay and a chronological ordering of the pieces would have pre-empted whatever confusion the book in its present form is likely to generate in its readers. It would also have provided information as to whether this anthology of Mahapatra's essays is a comprehensive one or not. These lapses notwithstanding, *Door of Paper* succeeds in simultaneously providing an insider's view of the poetic craft and a poet's assessment of the social forces and the intellectual ambience that nourish his creative spirit.

DEBORAH CORDONNIER

LIFE'S QUESTIONS, RANDOMNESS AND MEANING: DARUWALLA'S POETRY

Keki N. Daruwalla. *Collected Poems: 1970-2005*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006.

Suitably, Keki N. Daruwalla dedicates this not-quite-definitive edition of *Collected Poems: 1970-2005* to his father N.C. Daruwalla, a professor of English who first taught him about poetry,[i] and the poets with whom he grew up--Nissim Ezekiel, P.Lal, Kersy Katrak, Gieve Patel, Adil Jussawalla, and Eunice de Souza. The collection opens with twenty new poems (2000-2005), which demonstrate continuity and development as well as explore in addition to possible new directions. Then, beginning with his first title *Under Orion* (1970), selections from all his poetry volumes are included: *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982), *Landscapes* (1987), *A Summer of Tigers* (1995), *Night River* (2000), and *The Map-maker* (2002). As with many collected editions, readers may be disappointed to discover that one of their personal favourites is missing from the oeuvre. The largest excision of twenty-four poems was made from his second book of poetry *Apparition in April*; likewise, his first title *Under Orion* was reduced by sixteen poems.[ii] From the remaining seven volumes, most poems are there to be read and enjoyed once again.[iii]

Collected Poems reliably incorporates all the essential elements of Daruwalla's poetry: **mythology**, or the recasting of it, as in "Dialogues with a Third Voice," "Carvak," and "The Immolated Kings;" **history**, with its narrative exactitude ("Recreating the past is important to me")[iv] as in "The Revolt of the Salt Slaves," "A City Falls," and "The Poseidonians;" **landscape**, ever present fluctuating between interior and exterior as a way to understand life and its meaning as in "The Dip," "Crossing of Rivers," the poems of *Landscapes*, "Going Down the Night River" or the "Island Poems;" **politics**, saturated with satire, criticism, and

disillusionment, as in "Curfew in a Riot-torn City" and "The Revolutionary;" **monologues**, a love started with "Monologue in the Chambal Valley," continues in "The King Speaks to the Scribe," moving to the set of monologues in *The Map-maker*; **poets and artists**, with acclaim and appreciation dotted with inquiry as in "Four for Ted Roethke," "To Georges Braque," "Letter to Pablo," "Exile and the Chinese Poets" and the "Stalking Mandelstam" poems; **social concerns**, areas of moral unease examine issues of hunger, violence, corruption, or greed as in the poems included with "Hunger 74,"and "Variations," "The Middle Ages," or "Meursault;" **religions**, rich with irony, sarcasm, guilt, a transcendent moment as in "Shiva: At Timarsain," "The Cross at St. Giles," "The Birth of Maya," or "Century-end Prayer;" and finally, the **competing themes** of life, death, decay, rebirth, war and peace weave together his ever expanding vision.

Daruwalla's twenty new poems not only continue these requisite ideas but also intimate new directions. For example, "The Tawang Monastery," a retelling of the search and discovery of the holy ground on which the monastery was to be built, and "Epiphany"(The Traveller Speaks to the Lama), a questioning by the traveller of The Lama about whether after "Forty years in the monastery/ have you ever received a sign?" and "Before the Word," or "We, the Kauravas," repeat Daruwalla's concern for the retelling of history and find some understanding of religious belief and the role of destiny. "The Fish" and "O Ledges and Moss," like earlier nature poems such as "The Hawk" or "The Last Whale," serve as mirror images for a better understanding of our humanness. "Fish" has wonderful rhythm, which replicates in six stanzas the sea's ceaseless energy. All of these poems pursue life's questions, randomness, and meaning.

The opening poem of *Collected Poems*, "Bypass," offers a metaphorical route for navigating existence. It confronts the unexpected and unmarked roads of loss and mourning; it's a more personal poem--and that's a new direction.[v] "Creativity needs a trigger," Daruwalla once said.[vi] No doubt, the loss of his beloved

wife unleashed these verses. While riding the bypass appears to be the safest option, unfortunately, something is still lost: "And you will think of what was said that day/or not, and hence will now remain unsaid." Indeed, "Bypass," with its initial wishful avoidance of grief, travels through six sections in sonnet form moving toward an acceptance of life's ultimate end: "don't dream of elsewheres--there's no elsewhere to go./…One moves into the future,/ even as it closes in."

In "Notes from the Underground" with its Nikos Gatsos' epigraph, "In the courtyard of mourning black grass grows," this sense of loss and painful memory is repeated. The speaker of the poem is "between betweens,/ to the left of voices/ to the right of memory" has "no one to say this to/ except the typewriter," but knows that his beloved is "with me always." And yet, the anguished speaker confesses, "Forty years with you/ and I am a better man," but "The trouble is/ you can't hear me."

Continuing an attempt to assuage this sense of loss and isolation, "Underwater Notes," suggests, "Counsel yourself, there's no one else to do it," and the speaker warns, "reality slips by" and "the marvelous in the everyday real/ has passed you by." So one should "slot your time properly" because memory remains. Plagued by haunting memories and the stark realities of the passage of time, the speaker of the poem recounts poet Czeslaw Milosz's magnanimous proclamation: "Whatever evil he suffered, he forgot." Then, the speaker questions Milosz's experience as true, saying, "Now that's a scrap of myth, isn't it?"[vii] because in all his attempts to "forget", including "altitude" trips to the Karakorams at Siachen, Nubra, and Tsomoriri, he still drowns as Tsomo and the yak in uncertainty (reminiscent of Prufrock).

Another personal poem "Nurse and Sentinel" (Poem to a Dead Wife) celebrates the wife's altruistic behavior, her unconditional love. The speaker recounts the wife's care: "Once there wasn't any lunch for you," given to an ailing father.

Regrettably, this selfless care was neither appreciated nor understood by others: "How you trusted the imagination of others!"

Not all the new poems are focused on mourning. Another direction is an inclusion of women as either narrator or subject in his poetry: "Sappho Poems," "Poem for a Granddaughter," and "The Happy Woman Speaks to Herself" are the beginnings of this fresh focus. With his love for imagining and retelling what might be missing in history, along with his love for reading and responding to poets, Sappho's poems are a wonderful addition to his register.

In the *Anthologia Palatina* an epigram attributed to Plato exclaims: "Some say the Muses are nine: how careless/Look, there's Sappho too, from Lesbos, the tenth." Though this poet of antiquity was popular and prolific in her day (7th century BCE), only one full poem has survived the centuries; the rest of her lyrical poetry is fragmented. One might imagine Daruwalla's excitement with the challenge of piecing together the fragments, both in Sapphic stanzas and in her standard themes of love: yearning and loss. "Sappho to Aphrodite," the first of Daruwalla's Sappho poems, is a restored fragment of Sappho's "Invocation to Aphrodite," both in subject matter and in measured syllabic lines: "Your love-demented Sappho pleads/…I haven't had a word from her!/ Once again, make her my lover/ in bed and bower, her breasts should flower,/ in my hands./…Come foam-born and Cyprus-born/ Goddess of love and the lovelorn,/ My altar awaits you with fire-urn,/ incense and myrrh."[viii]

"Poem for a Granddaughter" is filled with gentle, reasonable explanations given as to why the granddaughter should not fear the dark. Many adults may read this poem to help ease fearful children into sleep. The final poem of Daruwalla's new section is the fascinating fifteen-stanza monologue of "The Happy Woman Speaks to Herself." Here once again, the speaker of the poem is a woman (judge for yourself whether she is happy or not), narrating her life experiences with a man who, unlike herself, is "stodgy" and

uncomfortable with his own nudity. Halfway through her narration, we learn she is in her eighth month of pregnancy. By the end of the poem, her beautiful but wrinkled female child is born. Who is happy now?

Collected Poems (1970-2005) preserves the scope of Daruwalla's poetry and presents new avenues for us to travel as he continues to poignantly pursue, as Jorge Luis Borges bemoaned, the poem that has not yet been written.

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[i] Eunice de Souza, *Talking Poets: Conversations with Poets* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) 41-55. In this interview, Keki Daruwalla speaks of his father's education. From his father's teachings, he was conversant on Burke, Sheridan, Lamb, Hazlitt and could still recite large sections of Macaulay's "Lays of Ancient Rome" and Sir Walter Scott's "Lady of the Lake" (43-44).

[ii] The twenty-four poems omitted from *Apparition in April* in sequence are "With Vultures," "Leper at the Taj," "The People," "Karna," "Martin Luther King," "Aftermath," "Trilogy For Y," "Indian Adolescence," "Spring Sap," "Clairvoyance," "The Meeting of Shadows," "Charity--3 Faces," "Advice to Weak Stomachs," "Maulvi Sahieb," "To Gandhi," "Swatstika--The Nazi Cross," "The Young Crucifixion," "The Old Man of the Sea," "The Psycho Speaks," "Sword and Abyss," "Guru," "To Fellow Indian Poets," "Sparagmos," and "Vow." *Under Orion* (1970) when revised in 1991 lost five poems: "Ledge-Walker," "Towards Reality," "The Hero," "The Assassin," and "Rumination II," but it also gained one poem "Collage II." In this edition, *Under Orion* has eleven fewer poems: "Shiva: At Lodhishwer," "Elegy III," "Elegy IV," "Easy and Difficult Animals," "You Were the First," "In the Tarai," "The Parijat Tree," "The Beggar," "Graft," "Rumination," and "Railroad Reveries."

[iii] *Crossing of Rivers* was trimmed of one poem "The Fighting Eagles" for this edition. *The Winter Poems* (1980) experienced the removal of stanza numbers in its second printing (2000). And then for this edition,

eight poems were removed: "Angst," "Paradise," "Yes, Friends," "The Wringing of Hands," "Caries," "The Professor Condoles," "Einstein Explains to God the End of the World," and "Bombay Prayers." *Keeper of the Dead* (1982, 1991) loses only "The Parsi Hell" in this edition. Likewise, in *Landscapes* (1987) only one poem is dropped, "." *Summer of Tigers* (1995), my favorite title and dedicated to his mother, is reduced by six poems: "Night Thoughts While Travelling," "Ratfall," "Of Dreams," "In the Footsteps of Sanskrit Poets," "Jaislmer Prophecies," and "American Poetry Workshop." Night River (2000) loses seven poems: "Of Sages," "Under the Ionian Seas," "Dareios," "Chopper Poems," "The Trouble with Reviewing Seth," "The Night Sky Lands on Doha," and "Harbour Count." And finally, *Mapmaker* (2002) is reduced by eight poems: "Church?" "Lost Poem," "From the Seafront," "On Marsden Hartley's 'Fishermen's Last Supper,'" "Space-Time Instruction," "Alakananda," and "Caravan from Tibet."

[iv] De Souza, *Talking Poets*, 49.

[v] As one of the facilitators of the Creative Writing Workshop sponsored by SCILET and Kodaikanal International School, I was given the opportunity to make the three-hour journey from Madurai, with invited guest writer, Keki Daruwalla, and SCILET's Director, Paul Love. During that trip I asked Mr. Daruwalla, if he ever wrote any personal poems! In a recent email, he reminded me of my comment and suggested that I look to his new poems.

[vi] Comment made by Keki Daruwalla at the 2003 Creative Writing Workshop, Kodaikanal, Tamilnadu.

[vii] Milosz's line reads: "Whatever evil I had suffered. I forgot." Czeslaw Milosz, "The Gift," in *New and Collected Poems* (1931-2001) (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 1988, 1991, 1995, 2001).

[viii] Sappho, "Invocation to Aphrodite," one translation of this first line of the fragment reads, "Come hither foam-born Cyprian goddess, come." Stanley Lombardo completed the newest translation of Sappho. Sappho, **Poems and Fragments**. Stanley Lombardo (trans.), Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.

SHYAMALA A. NARAYAN

LOST IN THE LABYRINTH

Lakshmisree Banerjee. *I am the Woman: I am the World*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 2004. Rs.300/-

Lakshmisree Banerjee is an academic; since obtaining her Ph.D. from Calcutta University, she has been teaching English at Jamshedpur Women's College (Ranchi University) for three decades, and is currently the Head of the Department of English there. In addition to being a poet and literary critic, she is also a gifted singer, trained in Hindustani classical music. *I am the Woman: I am the World* is her third collection of poems, after *Flames and Flowers* (1987) and *Fire Offering* (1997).

The poems in this collection have a wide range of topics, from the potholed roads of Jharkhand to the horrors of Bosnia and Chechnya. The personal voice is always present; it is a sensitive woman who is observing the vagaries of life. She has no feminist agenda, though she pays more attention to the exploitation of women. Many of the poems describe her experiences abroad (she has given scholarly lectures and vocal recitals at many places in Europe and America). The poem "Communique International" laments the lack of the human touch in automated telephonic messages:

> I entered the rut,
> the sound labyrinth
> and lost myself in
> "To speak to the operator
> Press- 1",
> "To speak to the customer service
> Press – 2",
> . . .
> Not knowing how to speak
> I floated, lost and mired
> in sounds without voice,

answers without warmth,
courtesies without grace,
response without meaning.

The poems about girlhood and growing up in India strike a sombre note; "Strange Colours" begins:

Out of a frock,
into a saree,
Mama said women need to
bandage
their bodies and souls
. . .
Nature was punished for its
crimes of innocent efflorescence.

"My Spectral Life" reveals the aridity of an arranged marriage, "the screaming in-laws/ and erring servants":

My dreams did not stir
from the golden cages
my husband knew nothing
of husbandry or love
except making love.

In many of the poems, the versification is somewhat arbitrary (a weakness that *vers libre* is prone to). The imagery is effective, but it is difficult to see the poetic logic of having lines with just one or two words in the poem "Tivoli":

Riotous hues
Danish, Turkish
or European
spread around
in summer beds
of flowers in
circles, angles,

squares,
varied techno-tools
of delight,
amusement unbarred
in gurgling
loud laughters.

A poem like "Bubbles and Balloons" about her experience in Versailles is more musical because it uses longer lines.

The poems set in Jharkhand (formerly Bihar) present a depressing picture of poverty and deprivation. The poem, "Moon-Spindles at Singhbhum" talks about the fate of Adivasi women:

Their black burnish'd bodies
marvellous oily statuettes
used for hard sun-burnt labour
picking up firewood
or dry, half-rotten fruits
in deep, pachyderm-infested jungles…[*sic*]

for back-breaking chores
in devastated fields, farms or homes,
for leasing themselves out
to lazy, lascivious males,
owners or husbands
in liquor-stupor.

The poems "Sita and Sati" and "Lakshman Rekha" re-examine the Sita myth. "Lakshman Rekha" can be considered representative of Laksmisree Banerjee's poetry, in revealing her strengths and weaknesses.

Why did Sita cross the Lakshman Rekha
(or did she trip over it?)
between life and death
that shrouded secrecy

between light and darkness
. . . .
leave behind her own garden,
her own home, her own *aangan*[3]. . . . [*sic*]
wrench in distressed pieces her own dreams, desires,
drapings, sarees, *ghunghat*[4] in wreathed agonies,
show the fearful fissures engulfing her own self
in the grand finale of fire and tears… .[*sic*]
was it to punish Ravana[5]
or Rama[6]

The content is original and thought provoking. Did Sita cross the Lakshman Rekha consciously in order to punish Ravana or Rama? But the expression leaves something to be desired. Lakshmisree Banerjee is fond of alliteration. Take the phrase "fearful fissures" for instance; if she is referring to the fissure in the earth, when the earth-goddess, Sita's mother, opened to receive her into her bosom, the fissure was not "fearful", it was welcoming. The word "drapings" seems to be there only to go with "dreams, desires", it adds nothing to the meaning (what does "drapings" refer to, anyway?). Is "wrench" the best word for breaking something into pieces?

At many places, we feel that some words can often be replaced by more suitable ones. In the poem about Singhbhum quoted earlier, the poet has made good use of alliteration--(black burnish'd bodies", "lascivious, lazy"). But in the line "in deep, pachyderm-infested jungles", the word 'pachyderm" seems to be used because it goes with "deep", we cannot see any justification for not using the more common word "elephant". The word 'infested' is seldom used with reference to elephants. When the poet refers to the hard work the women do, collecting firewood, would not the word "gathering" or "collecting" be better than "picking up," which involves less effort? If we try to visualise the "dry, half-rotten fruits", we find a contradiction; in real life, fruits which are dry are not rotten. It would be better if the poet had visualised the fruit clearly, instead of using it in a vague, metaphorical sense. Why

should the fields be "devastated"? The poem itself provides no explanation, perhaps the land has been devastated through mining or industrialization.

Another problem with the language is the use of terms from Hindi or Bangla. In the poem about Sita, words like *aangan* and *ghunghat* are used. It may be difficult to find an English equivalent for *ghunghat*, but there is little justification for *aangan*. In the poem "From Here to Eternity", when describing marriage rituals, she uses "*uloo-dhwani*" with a footnote, instead of ululation. The notes and references are not well written. An educated reader does not need notes on Ranchi ("the capital city of Jharkhand"), Palamau, the Tatas, purdah, Surat, mantra or yagna. Sometimes the notes can be offensive: Bihar is footnoted as "a poor and backward Indian state" (with no mention of the importance of the kingdom of Magadh in Indian history), Champaran is "a district in Bihar symbolizing poverty". *Sindoor* is explained as "vermilion, an identifying mark on the forehead of a Hindu married woman. The *sindoor* ceremony is an important part of a Hindu wedding, primarily symbolizing the stereotyping of a married Hindu woman, whose husband is still alive." This note is misleading on two counts – *sindoor* is worn on the parting of the hair, not on the forehead. It also conflates North Indian wedding rituals with Hindu rituals – *sindoor* is not worn by Hindu wives in South India (they wear kumkum on the forehead), so brides in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala do not have a *sindoor* ceremony. And what has stereotyping to do with *sindoor*?

The target reader is probably non-Indian, so Laksmisree Banerjee attempts the impossible task of explaining Sita, Ravana and Rama, in the notes to "Lakshman Rekha":

1. Sita: primary female protagonist of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, a symbol of female fortitude and Rama's wife, who went through severe trials and ordeals.

6. Rama: primary male protagonist of the Indian epic *Ramayana* and the husband of Sita.

Many words are used where one would do; a literary work has only one protagonist, there cannot be primary and secondary protagonists. It would be simpler to say that Sita is the heroine of the *Ramayana*, and Rama the hero.

There is no inevitability about the choice of words. The title poem declares the universal solidarity of women (and men):

> the fancy clouds dispersed
> the shell of shibboleths
> built safely around her womanhood
> had fallen apart.
>
> Here she was a Kunti or a Miranda
> in kaleidoscopic unfurling
> . . .
> riding a bus to the University
> driven by a black woman driver.
> She sat beside an Islamic girl
> with scarf on head
> and books in hand,
> walked across the street with her
> against zipping cars
> boldly, strongly
> into the heart of learning
> with other browns, blacks, whites,
> men and women across borders.

One wonders why Kunti and Miranda have been picked out. The "Notes and References" are no help: Kunti is "a major female protagonist of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, known for her courageous and outright nonconformity" while Miranda is "a Shakespearean female protagonist signifying avant-garde movements of a brave, new world." One wonders why the poet

considers Kunti a nonconformist; according to my reading of the *Mahabharata*, she lacked the courage to rebel against society; she abandoned her first-born son Karna in order to conform to societal expectations. As for Miranda, she is perhaps the most colourless Shakespearean heroine. "Islamic" is not the correct adjective to denote a person following Islam, "Muslim girl" (or Mohammedan girl, to use an older term) would be better. The last line reads, "I am the World—I am the Woman"; the use of the definite article narrows it down, makes it less forceful, "I am Woman" would be a more universal assertion. But every literary artist has the liberty of choosing words, and opinions may differ on the merits of certain choices.

MALA RENGANATHAN

POETRY FROM SHILLONG

Anjum Hasan. *Street on the Hill*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 2004.

I started reading Anjum Hasan's poems hoping to find a routine book of poetry that requires a routine review, but to my pleasant surprise, I found this book extraordinarily delightful. After thoroughly enjoying this reading experience, I think I would rather express my understanding and interpretation than write a review. One thing that impresses me when I read Anjum Hasan's poems is the pristine quality of her verse and her light-hearted humour.

In Anjum Hasan's anthology of poems *Street on the Hill*, thirty six poems are mapped out in 5 sections titled 'Time of My Childhood,' 'Families,' 'Small Town,' 'Where I Now Live,' and 'A Place Like Water.' The first section has no prominent thematic unity except that it discusses a variety of childhood experiences. In these poems the female persona passionately recalls her childhood days and culls out memories of things around her like the middle class home, a dark room which a child fears to tread, childhood associations with people on the street, winter holidays, loneliness in childhood, convent school, the Bihari pakoriwallah, the mother seen in a child's heart, and so on. A tinge of irony and humour endows all that she places before us with a lasting impact. In "*June Night in a Middle-class Home"* she makes a graphic presentation of the lifelessness of a middle class home on a summer night. The lifelessness is seen in bedrooms with 'medicines and shelves of yellow-paged novels,' the girls who have lost their grand dreams,' children who grew up impatiently and also in kitchens that have an awful smell. The lifelessness is contrasted with the only life-like thing in the home:

> The only thing like life is pushing
> Under the skin of the still potato,
> Under the zinnia's tight bud (4)

"*Dark Room"* is a poem that symbolizes the refuge adolescents seek in order to escape embarrassments caused by adults, as well as anxiety about becoming adults who 'speak in tired vowels and practice deceit' (5). "*Time of My Childhood*" lists the persona's associations from childhood like the monkey trainer and knife-grinder, 'women who led wordless lives, men who ran sweet-shops in faded black ties.' In her poems Anjum Hasan makes familiar images new again in the way she thoughtfully renders them, viz, "I was orange's sour Novemberness" ("*Mister Language,*" 7). Later in this poem the poet's itch for writing a poem at the age of seven itself probably makes her the 'orange's sour Novemberness.' Orange, a recurring image in this book, is the sole winter fruit that is paralleled here with the poet's loneliness in childhood. Loneliness in this poem receives an apt description in her act of 'waiting, / face pressed between bars, for something nameless, / forgotten, remembered from the womb' (7).

"*Coming of Age in a Convent School*" is different from other poems in its mood, particularly in the sense that the recurrent brooding solitude in several other poems is gone here. There is an unspoiled humour in the manner in which Anjum sketches memories of her adolescent years in a convent school. I particularly enjoyed reading the last three lines of the poem:

> This is the year I realize that there are only,
> Only women in the entire school building
> And am astounded at the thought (8-9).

In the above lines there is a touch of irony that topples down notions of adolescent girls' preoccupation with sexuality. The next poem "*Learnt*" to me seems to narrate the story of a film in which the children protect and keep a stranger hidden until the police take him away. The poetic personae feel betrayed because of their 'affection for unreal things' (10).

"*Neighbourhood*" makes use of a telegraphic style of verse that reflects the persona's excitement at finding a Bihari

pakoriwallah making love to an unknown woman in front of her house. She calls it an 'amazing act' and 'different' and admires his 'half-hour island of the defiant passion on the steps of somebody's house,' while there is chaos and an abusive atmosphere around him (12). There is honesty in the poet's perception and she presents unadulterated truths in her poetry, the voice of which has the potential to evoke universal response. An example of such poetic voice is "*In my Mother's Clothes*," which traces the adult female persona's thoughts on how it felt to wear her mother's clothes. It gives her the unique feeling of being 'neither myself nor my mother' but rather like the six – year old who 'slips on to her fingers her mother's gold rings' (13). There is an element of revelation here when she says that the act of wearing her mother's clothes makes her neither a mother nor herself, but takes her on a journey down the memory lane to her childhood. Is this mix of adult and child consciousness responsible for her poetry being so unspoiled and untouched?

The second section 'Families' consists of eight poems. In "*My Folks"* the poet characterizes certain uncharacteristic qualities of her clan / folks, who despite having 'hills in their blood' seem to be moving out of the hills, and who, despite being story tellers 'with vast memories' have 'no name-plates.' Hence they are in a place and yet far away 'to another place and time' (17). They are extraordinary because they can never do ordinary things like 'lose shyness' or 'build houses unselfconsciously' or 'live outside books.' Could we say that in the poem "*England*" there is a diasporic touch in the speaker's nostalgia for England, the country she leaves as a child for the 'small hill town'? Images of England preserved in several artifacts seem to slowly vanish away:

> Images from
> childhood turned island as images around them were eaten away (19).

and then 'we became other people.' Thus the poem ends in its travail for nostalgia of England with anathema:

> This idiotic recollecting, this tender ache just below our
> breathing – what should we do with England?' (19).

In "*Shy"* Anjum's examination of shyness is strong and the poem characterizes shyness as 'quivering emotion' associated with 'quiet bedrooms on winter afternoons in near-forgotten, hill encircled towns, where children lisped tentative answers to the question of some serene matriarch, and ate, anguished by undistinguishable crunching, the brittle butter biscuits from her tins.' Once again attitudes about shyness have undergone a sea change:

> There's no longer the implication
> of grace in being reserved (20).

Even the simple idea of 'ordinary days' turns special and regains colour in the hands of this poet who writes that 'we are the sum of our ordinary days' (22).

The anthology contains refreshing reminiscences of Shillong, a hill town where Anjum spent much of her life as a student. "*To the Chinese Restaurant*" recalls the time spent by youth in a Chinese restaurant to while away the boredom of their small township. "*November Haiku*" is another poem of a hill town's winter, with 'early dark tumbling from leaf to cherry leaf' (25).

"*Boats*" seems to be a kind of surreal poem that depicts dreams of the subconscious for fulfillment of the heart's hopes. In "*Families*" families with 'things' and the 'thingless families' are brought under a simultaneous scrutiny and comparison. 'Families with things' are "steeped in recollection and / private wit, in shopping bags, records, curtains, letters, / our things – in lieu of, to fill in, give weight to," whereas the 'thingless families' are characterized as "the straw-haired children who build / their make-believe home in a disused jeep trailer" and by the 'one-bed empty house' (27).

'Small Town,' is the third part of Anjum's collection that begins with a poem that typifies a woman writing a poem. The persona of "*The Pregnant Woman*" traces her experience of the aches rather than the joys of pregnancy, in which she states that:

> She isn't ill
> But in the night her child lies awake inside her.
> That's like being ill. Not knowing
> What your body is thinking. (31)

I find each of Anjum's poems to be a snippet that traces a minuscule thought on tiny but significant issues like pregnancy, people's idiosyncrasies, life in a small town, etc. In "Afternoon in the Beauty Parlour" the poet makes a valid point about where 'genuine sisterhood' lies – in a convent? maternity wards? the beauty parlour? Yet the ironic view that culminates in this exploration is that it lies not in a convent or maternity ward but in the beauty parlour, which is a 'good place to grow old in' and 'where jealousy, men and untruthful mirrors / are denied entrance' (33).

The two poems "*Small Town*" and "*Hills*" describe the quality of a small hill town with the smallness of the people and their indifferent attitude. The first poem sketches a sporting goods store owner who has an opinion about a 'man knifed and left to die with his face down / in a drain,' but who however 'shuts his door and sleeps' (35). The second one contrasts the attitude of the hill people with the grandeur and solemnity of the hills. It describes the quality of the hills from varied angles – as 'home,' as 'rabid, / the small people fighting their toy fights / but drawing real blood,' 'the tomfoolery of the houses,' and at night time revealing the 'romance of lights' (37). In contrast, the attitude of one hill town's people is viewed against the backdrop of the attitude of another hill, which has witnessed the humility of the emperor Tipu Sultan, who never thought that he owned the hill near Mysore.

The next two poems "*March*" and "*Songs of the Fruit*" bring out a very imaginative description of the seasons. March is seen as a transitional month from winter to spring and autumn is seen as breaking into winter. The poems follow the various fruit seasons that are typical of hill topography. The hill scenes depicted reveal Shillong viewed in its varied hues and shades of nature. The last poem in the section "*Mawlai,"* describes in a nostalgic tone an area in Shillong called Mawlai, which one crosses daily on the way to the North - Eastern Hill University. The poem captures the unchanging nature of the familiar scenes one sees from the NEHU bus while crossing Mawlai, viz 'mauve beef hanging in its pockets of fat' or 'the new houses and old houses where the same sort of people lived', and so on. The whole irony of passing for 17 years through a place, where they never really got off' or 'bought things from its shops' or 'stepped into someone's boiled vegetables-smelling houses' is noteworthy. It brings out the divide between the passers-by and the area they dare not explore. Hence the last three lines bring out the idea of the place as a blot or a blank spot in one's memory of Shillong:

> We'll keep quiet
> then
> and try to ignore that sense which is not pain but has
> pain's
> cloudliness
> and its regret and its way of going and returning (42).

The fourth section 'Where I Now Live,' commencing with the poem of the same title, effectively reflects the divide in the persona between her alienation and her longing to be part of the life around her. Though she says:

> I long to be part of the sweat and the sunshine,
> The vinegar and blood of people together anywhere (46),

She is 'ill at ease' and 'like a parachute on fire' or 'this cloud somebody tore up,' she is bound to be alone. "*Kitchen*" renders a detached description of the Indian kitchen--its frightening sameness, its cocooning comfort. Her metaphorical associations with the

kitchen ring true: 'my grandmother's crinkled skin on my fingers,' and 'one hungry voice in my ear' (46). Again 'To fashion life into a thing eaten, worked / slept away, to meet despair with tea, / to be like your mother' illustrates the women's lives spent all in the kitchen. However, the final lines bring out the contrast between the arbitrariness of the kitchen and the detachment of the observer:

> My kitchen will not hold me, will not
> teach me the good in repetition.
> I will be a doubting woman
> with an unreasonable love
> for shining adjectives. (48)

"*Gluttony*" identifies a vivid memory of the food cravings one had earlier, and its reverse now--'the dreams of having 'chicken noodles with crisp cabbage' or 'thinking being older will make up for the times we've said no / at a party when we meant a loud craven yes' (51), reveals the idea of gluttony taken with a pinch of salt. However, with age the persona is anxious to see anything other than food as seen in her lines: 'all we want is a clearing somewhere / like a page in a book suddenly without words.' "*Holiday*" has a tinge of irony when the detached poet - observer makes note of a holiday her friends from a vast city have in 'a dirty town at the base of a hill,' with its 'white-haired waterfalls.' Equations are worked with the play of light and darkness, tidy and untidy, pure and impure between the little town and the vast city, with the inhabitants of the town blank, hungry, tacky and those from the city full of deceit, flashy and rich. "Rishikesh" paints in prose a sardonic picture of the sad state of another hill place where tourists throng. The prose form in verse suits the mood of the poem that tells indirectly that there is nothing great or sacred about Rishikesh, where 'religion is touched with the mud of poetry.'

'A Place Like Water' constitutes the final part of this anthology. The final set of six poems serve as a quiet finale to the whole poetic anthology, with their silent ruminations on the 'real sea,' the 'wet city,' 'food of love,' and 'yellow curtains' and so on.

Each one of these poems etches a sensation, a feeling and a train of associations that deviate from the routine processes of thought on these issues. For instance, in "*Beach Town: Off Season*" one finds that the sea with its commercial attractions has become unreal and artificial. So the persona longs for the real sea, 'beyond the exterior of things that want / but ought not to hold us' (58). Similarly, curtains in "*Yellow Curtains*" bring with it associations with 'acts of selfishness' which turn the house neat, guileless, middle class' and so seem to be like 'iron curtains that create a divide between the haves and have-nots.

Anjum Hasan has a great future as an Indian English poet. Her poems are well-crafted and express a depth and ingenuity uniquely characteristic of poets like Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan. The poetic texture and the diction in her poems reveal the great capacity of this artist, who is not only a poet but also a novelist in the making. This first anthology published by Sahitya Akademi speaks volumes of the great potential in Anjum Hasan, who, perhaps because of her exposure to philosophy (as a student) and to literature, has successfully brought out not only poems but also a novel.

MALA RENGANATHAN

EXPLORING THE CANON

Jaydeep Sarangi. Ed. *New Explorations in Indian English Poetry*. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2007.

Jaydeep Sarangi's edited volume *New Explorations in Indian English Poetry* attempts to offer a holistic perspective on the twentieth and twenty first century Indian poets in English. The nineteen units of the anthology, including an interview by the editor with one of the poets, cover around six well known canonical poets like Sri Aurobindo, Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Meena Alexander, and also around ten non-canonical poets like Swami Vivekananda, Arun Kolatkar, O.P. Bhatnagar, Bidhu Padhi, Vikram Seth, D.C. Chambial, R.C. Shukla and also poets of the Indian diaspora like Shanta Acharya, Saleem Peeradina and Tabish Khair.

The first essay "The Two Titans in the realms of Indo-Anglian Poetry" by P. Gopi Chand and P. Naga Suseela begins with a comprehensive overview of Indo-Anglian poets from the nineteenth century to modern times, and ends with a brief discussion of Nissim Ezekiel and A.K.Ramanujam as the two titans. Nevertheless the lopsided discussion deviates attention from the two titans. In the second essay "The Mystic Muse: Poetry of Swami Vivekananda" Subhendu Mund considers Vivekananda a great poet, so far ignored by the canon, inspiring critics such as M.K. Naik to argue that he is a genuine poet and that he is an influential poet in the renascent country.

The next essay by A.K. Jha, on Sri Aurobindo's poetic achievement, discusses the rare qualities of his poetry like his excellent blank verse, skillful use of quantitative metre and how he lays bare a rhythmic life beyond the ranges of inspired consciousness. R. Arunachalam makes a threadbare analysis of A.K. Ramanujan's poem "A River", but the literary analysis gets lost in the linguistic analysis, which is again too technical for non-linguist scholars to comprehend. There are two good articles on Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry, one by Archana Kumar on the poet's syntactic choices and other by Kasthuri Bai on his poetic responses

to contemporary abuses. The first makes a meticulous reading of Mahapatra's poetic syntax and the second one analyses the poet's response to ailments prevalent in society through a poetic idiom.

Among the two essays on Kamala Das' poems, one by Sudhir K. Arora makes an effective examination of the poet's exploration of the female self that oscillates between the ideas of lust and love, and the other by Bikram Kumar Mahapatra compares the confessional mode in Kamala Das' poetry with that of Sylvia Plath. A. Raghu's "The Desperate Kisser: Nissim Ezekiel and the Search for Home" offers a very interesting peek into Ezekiel's personal life when the recurrent motif of a search for home in Ezekiel's poems is seen through the prism of his personal life.

C.L. Khatri's article evaluates Meena Alexander's anthology of poems *Bird's Bright Ring*, which explores the issues of exile, politics and the search for identity. A valid point is made in this article about which yardsticks decide who is diasporic, i.e., whether to consider a poet diasporic based on a few works and whether to consider a writer as diasporic based on the writer or the work of art. The essay by Ashes Gupta makes a close reading of A. Kolatkar's poem "*The Bus*" as an exposition of post-modern poet's 'vacillating duality of existence', i.e., between the duality of his inevitable cultural and traditional roots and his predominantly westernized education. Some introductory discussion on the poet could have provided a clearer context for the readers.

D.C Chambial attempts a poetic appreciation of O.P. Bhatnagar's lesser known poems from his anthology *Thought Poems*. Pradeep Kumar Patra's studies the 'rain poems' of Bibhu Padhi, the poet from Orissa, in whose poems rain is vivified revealing how integral rains are to Oriyan life. Binod Mishra's re-reading of the same poet and the Lawrentian influences in his poetry is brought to the fore in an interesting and thought-provoking manner through a close reading of his anthology *Living with Lorenzo*, which was inspired by Lawrentian ideas and thoughts. N. Sharada Iyer's "Vikram Seth's *Golden Gate*: A Versified Slice of Modern Life" makes an exhaustive commentary on Seth's verse novel with a detailed discussion on his versification, style, etc.

Sujaat Hussain throws light D.C. Chambial's poem, which according to the critic, gives a 'view of life' (200). Nevertheless the essay is sketchy and does not elaborate on the writer himself in order to state whether the poet's view correlates with his personal life.

The present editor's essay on the need to replace the canon in the post-colonial space of Indian poetry in English discusses briefly the diasporic voice and cultural hybridity in the poems of new diasporic poets like the Orissa born Shanta Acharya, Saleem Peeradina, and Ranchi - born Tabish Khair. Jaydeep Sarangi here recommends a judicious selection from a large range of poets existing today in Indian English poetry. Sarangi's attempt to replace the canon could have been more fruitful only if he had not come to a conclusion that replacing the canon should be done only with diasporic poets living outside India. What about the umpteen number of poets today in India itself, living in places far away from their home states and writing about their home in a place where they live and speak a language alien to them? Should we not also call them diasporic? The final interview with D.C. Chambial by Jaydeep Sarangi once again seems out of place to me in this collection of critical essays on the poetic giants of Indian English poetry.

Overall the critical volume is interesting for its inclusion of research articles on non-canonical writers. Nevertheless the outcome could have been better if proper editing and proof-reading had been done. Some of the articles give the impression that they have been written years back without any care to update information, so much so that a dead author has been brought to life!

While Sarangi's attempt to include essays on non-canonical Indian English poetry is appreciated his non-inclusion of any representative poets from Eastern India (except Mahapatra and Bibhu Padhi) is regrettable. The whole lot of non-canonical contemporary poets like Temsula Ao, Robin Singh, K. S.Nonkynrih and Anjum Hasan of the North-East, and also poets like Sanjukta Dasgupta from Kolkata merit attention and could have been discussed in one essay at least.

NIRMAL SELVAMONY

OCULAR NOISE
POETISING THE SEMELE-ZEUS SYNDROME

Sampurna Chatterjee. *Sight May Strike You Blind*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007. Rs.50/-

Sight May Strike You Blind collects in ninety pages forty-nine texts, which are usually described as "poetry." The number of texts may vary depending upon the method of counting. According to the Contents Page of the book the number is forty-nine, but if one chooses to count separately the eleven texts grouped under, "Object Lessons: One to Eleven," the count will be fifty-nine. Similarly, one could count the eight pieces put under "Try Describing" separately instead of as just one text. By the same logic, one may want to take both "Journey on a Grey Day I" and "Journey on a Grey Day II" as one text instead of two (as they appear in the volume) under a single heading, say, "Journey on a Grey Day" with two sections. Such alternative counting will apply to "Signal on a Rainy Day I" and "Signal on a Rainy Day II" also.

The title of the volume, "Sight May Strike You Blind" means that if one were to see certain objects, one might even go blind. This is the basis of the myth about Semele who was burnt when Zeus, her husband, appeared before her in all his splendour. Significantly, this myth underlies several texts in the volume under study. Basically there are two parties in this archetypal predication, the gazer and the scorcher. Some metaphorical "gazers" in the text include: Ganapati (92), the city (44), and the female protagonist (49, 52). There are also several blind personae mentioned in the texts, but one does not know whether they are victims of a desire to see the unseeable. Soordas (78), Borges (78), the bat, the pup and the peacock (77), the prehistoric lizard with gigantic blinded eyes (39), and the city (44).

Scorchers include Saturn (92), Surya (73), Siva with his Third Eye (78), Durga, Kali and to some extent, Lakshmi (24), Evil Eye

(76), the sky which shuts out the light of the city (44), beautiful mortal women (49, 52), and mortal males (22). "The bristly boy at the shop" who eyes a girl's "too-short skirt, / her naked feet, her nervous skin" (60), and the female protagonist who renders a pillion-riding female human "translucent" with her "darting alleycat eyes" (43) may also belong in this category if she is invested with destructive ocular powers. A milder scorcher is Dhritarashtra who has "reproach crawling/out of his eyes" (71).

Several texts in the present volume reveal what I would call "the Semele-Zeus Syndrome." This syndrome refers to a specific kind of desire and action on the part of the personae. The abovementioned syndrome combines two separate syndromes, the Semele Syndrome, and the Zeus Syndrome. If Semele Syndrome involves a desire to see the unseeable or extraordinary and the consequent act of seeing and the destruction that results from such sight, the Zeus Syndrome reflects the desire to destroy those who try to see the unseeable, and the consequent action of that destruction. A hybrid possibility is the Semele-Zeus Syndrome which involves both types of desire and action.

In "Fairytale" the speaker-persona admits that she is "Despised and denied/ the peculiar joys/ of being whistled at and wolfed down/ by male eyes" (22). The desire to be abused by the love object demonstrates the Semele Syndrome. In "To Surya, the Sun-God," the female speaker-persona wonders: "But why blaze/your thousand-rayed fury/ on me, my lord?/ I am no goddess,/ I could go blind/ just thinking of you (73). Though Gandhari blindfolded herself voluntarily when she married her blind husband, Dhritarashtra, her condition cannot be described as Semele Syndrome, because she was not a masochist like the female personae in the present volume in question.

"Saturn's burning gaze" mentioned in "Object Lesson: Eleven" could illustrate the Zeus Syndrome. Saturn figures in the myth as a scorcher who burnt Ganapati when the latter's mother Parvati tried to show him the deadly planet's beauty. Like Ganapati,

the Cyclopes were also victims of the Zeus Syndrome. They were blinded in order to prevent them from seeing and knowing that which was forbidden. They were skilled workmen subdued by blinding one of their eyes in order to restrict their movement. It is a well-known fact that the rulers did not hesitate to incapacitate their artisans, especially the best ones, so that they would remain under the thumb of the ruler. Castrating normal boys or men to make them eunuchs so that they could guard the harems is not unknown in history.

Like Zeus and Saturn, the other women also have the power to blind and hurt the female protagonist. This is the burden of the section, "The Bodies of Women." Admiring the ravishing beauty of another female human, the speaker-persona confides in us: "Her skin burnt holes in my eyes/piercing through her long white dress/ in a blaze of splendid brown" (49). She also exhorts others to be cautious: "Hot coals on tongs,/ this girl with thongs./ Look away—before/ she burns holes in your eyes" (49). In situations such as the one described above, one cannot be sure whether the victim is a masochist or not. In other words, what is evident is not merely Zeus Syndrome, but Semele-Zeus Syndrome. A similar lesbian variety is found in the following lines from "Markings II":

> Pierced through ears nose and
> tongue you draw my gaze like gauze across your face
> …
> you are a marked woman: your look
> pierces me through the heart. (52)

Yet another example is from "Couple, Riding Home" in which the pillion rider becomes a "Translucent woman" to the "darting alleycat eyes" (43) of the female persona.

The mortuary personnel in "Rigor Mortification" (37-38) wanted to see only money ("A quick flip of crisp notes/ That's what they wanted to see"), a Zeus-surrogate which made them blind to the painful reality around them, especially the agony of a daughter

who lost her mother. The woman who flew at the female protagonist and pecked her eyes in a dream (18) is also a scorcher-type.

The gazer and the scorcher engage in a relationship that is anarchic and destructive. The very few texts which deal with kinship, especially mother-daughter relation (9-10; 11-12) do not fall under the category of anarchic relation and as a result the parties involved in the predication are not of the gazer and scorcher types. One of the best texts in the volume, "Going Against The Grain" (13) belongs to the non-anarchic category. It deals with the roles of the mother and daughter in terms of preparing rice for cooking. This is a unique text which tries to imitate in language the act of cleaning rice before cooking it. The niceties of the action find convincing verbal correlatives.

Most texts articulate an anarchic relationship between the gazer and the scorcher because they do not view the other as a relational entity but as an autonomous one. This is true of all those texts cast in the Imagist dye, especially the eleven "Object Lessons," and "The Bodies of Women." The assumption of the Imagist is that the other is an autonomous entity which could be known in its in-itself state. This assumption is consistent with the reductivism of modern Western science. For example, when one sees the human body or a part of it isolated from its primordial relation to the universe, or oikos (of which it is a part), the result is sexual fetishism (which should be distinguished from religious fetishism). Such partial seeing turns pornographic in orientation. "Amplitude," "Drawing," and "Ravishing" are examples of such partial seeing. In "Amplitude" the female persona admits that "Her hips are all I see" (47). In "Drawing" the fetishistic object is a pair of shoulders: "I am drawing your shoulders./ Your shoulders have drawn me" (48). In "Ravishing" it is the skin of a woman that becomes the object of desire: "Her skin burnt holes in my eyes" (49). Fetishistic partial seeing gets voyeuristic when the persona views the sexual act of a couple in "Fear and the Smell of Old Sheets" (21).

Partial seeing could also be interiorized, as in "Drawing." Here the female persona does not draw the shape of the other female literally but only mentally: "I'm drawing your shape in my head…/ I charcoalstroke you into my mind with soft firm lines" (48).

Another variety of seeing is seeing oneself not in relation to the world, but as an isolated entity. Such seeing is Narcissistic. In the case of the youth in the Greek myth, self-seeing was inflicted upon him a punishment for rejecting the love of a girl named Echo. The Narcissistic tendencies of the female protagonist are evident in "Fairytale" and also in "Third Eye." Her optative confession in the latter: "If only I had/ a third eye to see me through," (48) actually results from her dim binary vision ("Left and right are dimming"): "All seeing reduced to this ocular noise/this slight malfunction, this haze" (78). "Fairytale" makes the intention of the persona quite clear: "Beauty, leave some rags for me/ that I might presume to be/ a woman: beautiful bedecked believable" (22).

Her desire to "see through herself" is not one of Socratic self-examination, but an obsession with the idea of better physical appearance. The third eye she wishes to have in order to x-ray herself will only burn her (even as Siva's third eye consumes what it gazes at). The myth of Narcissus also clearly shows how mirror-gazing can only lead to wasting away and death.

The anarchic relation engaging the gazer and the scorcher is often violent and mutilative. The most common predication of the relationship is "piercing": "pierced at the navel and the groin" (22); "Her skin burnt holes in my eyes/ piercing through her long white dress/ in a blaze of splendid brown" (49); "Don't pierce (the bellybutton) like a nose" (51); the freckles of a woman are "facing each other slyly/ threatening to pierce through" (50). In "Markings II" we have "Pierced through ear nose and/ tongue you draw my gaze…/ and your look/ pierces me through the heart" (52). Cyclops "pierces through to the deep" (75). "Object Lesson: Eleven" speaks of "the saintly son born of a piercing light" (92). Variants of piercing are "prickling" and "seeping." Accordingly, we have "Cold

prickling into/ a pattern of needles on her legs" (60), whereas "The dawn seeps through a leak/ in her sleep" (60).

A much stronger expression of the impactive predication renders the woman edible, as seen in the following: "I'd like to be/ A sliver of orange/ Turned inside out/ And eaten" (16); "I cracked you open/ and ate you, you cried" (18). The female persona cautions, "You are prey to my gaze" (81), and also speaks of the peculiar joys of being "wolfed down" (22). On another occasion, she recalls, "You flew at me and pecked my eyes" (18). The corollary of ocular cannibalism is not only ocular murder ("your look/pierces me through the heart" 52; "Saturn's burning gaze" 92), but also other forms of murder. For example, cooking is "perfect slaughter" in "Bloody Deeds" (15) and "Mother and Daughter: A Duet" (11-12).

Other violent encounters may also be found. The female protagonist admits to shooting down a female persona (18). In "After the Journey" the speaker-persona exhorts the reader: "Take your eyes out/ and put them on the table there" (41). The tender coconut seller "Twisted the knife around/ each woman's little wound" (19). The baby on its part rooted its rebellions in the mother "thrashing and smashing" its "pubescent rage" sucking at the mother's "teeth-torn breast" (7).

Evidently, the emotional equivalent of violence against "objects" is anger and it tinges the entire verbal horizon of the volume. A typical example may be found in the piece, "Mother and Daughter: A Duet":

> When she gets angry she smiles
> and sweetly excusing herself
> she flees to the kitchen
> and picks up the knife.
> There, with a wild and murderous rage,
> she chops and cuts and slices and dices
> …

she gouges out eyes
she grinds her teeth with the spices
and she roasts and she fries.
She burns the milk…
She boils the water.
She simmers the tea. (11)

It is hard to overlook the equivalents of anger in the text. If anger increases the body temperature, verbalised anger, ubiquitous in the present volume, tends to increase the textual temperature, a phenomenon akin to global warming. In several languages, anger is associated with heat, for example: "heat," "warmth," "breathing fire and fury," "growing heated," "being in a boiling rage," "burning with rage," "letting off steam," "getting inflamed," and so on. Such Tamil equivalents are "*vethirppu*," "*puzhungal*," "*kodhittal*," and "*pukaithal*." True, there is a kind of positive anger necessary for proper community living (*Tolkaappiyam* III. 6. 11. Somasundara Bharatiyar's commentary). The word, "*munivu*" (anger) often denotes the positive variety and marks the noble "cool" persons ("*andhanar*") who have rebuked evil and embraced good. They are not susceptible to hot anger. The anger ("*vekuli*") which *Tirukkural* speaks of in ten couples in a whole chapter is the negative hot variety. Evidently, it is this negative variety which is in evidence in the present anthology: "wild and murderous rage" (11). The female protagonist is quite explicit about her kind of anger:

I have taken Kali's anger and made it mine.
My black moods are hers,
my irreverence.
I whoop, I rant, I rage,
a belt of severed hands at my waist. (24)

Kali "sticks out her tongue/at all who dare to look at her./ A red tongue, thirsty/ for another demon to quench" (23). The red tongue is a weapon that kills the gazer. Dwelling on the relationship between Gandhari and her husband, Dhritarashtra, the speaker-persona wonders whether reproach was "crawling/ out of his eyes?"

(71). Surya's "thousand-rayed fury" is unbearable to the persona (73).

Hence, heat is a recurrent motif in the texts. A typical specimen is "Kiln" (a term etymologically akin to "cooking") which devours human bodies at 1800 degrees Fahrenheit (56). In "Simmer," "She boils over/ like a cauldron/ covered and unattended" (17). "Boxes" mentions "the harsh October sun" of the city (64). The object of the speaker-persona's attention is a woman who is "as warm/ as she is voluminous" (47).

"Ravishing" is another text which has a high degree of verbal temperature. It speaks of burning, blazing, and piercing. The scorcher in this text possesses "skin coppersmelted into gold still hot/ uncooled and shimmering" and she is "Hot coals on tongs/ this girl with thongs" (49). A similar description is found in "Markings I": "Trouble is an amulet/singed into your arm" (52). In "Third Eye" the female protagonist speaks of "the/ glitterwince of the noonday sun" (78).

Even as there are a few texts which are not based on the anarchic relation between the persona and the other, some poetic features such as rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, and figurativeness are readily visible. Since the texts we are dealing with are not metrical, the term "line" does not have its proper prosodical meaning, namely, a poetical linguistic unit made up of a specified number of feet. On the other hand, it means "a horizontal row of written or printed characters" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*). What follows are some examples of each of the poetic devices.

Rhymes are predominantly internal, though there are occasional end rhymes.

Internal rhymes:
hoops/loops; design/realign (13)
festers/pesters (17)

other/mother (7)
wife/life (12)
tea/me; mild/child (11)

End rhymes:
sad/glad (12)
lips/tips; tails/trails (14)
dread/red (15)
said/head; drool/fool; eyes/skies (18)
eyes/thighs; wed/head; me/be (20)

Partial internal rhymes:
come/home (15)
spot/sprout (20)
red/blood (81)

Partial end rhymes:
flow/stew (14)
crack/beak (16)
owl/all (24)

Alliteration:
wetlipped wanting (7)
rooted your rebellions (7)
wild and vivid child (7)
beautiful bedecked believable (22)
carrots potatoes cauliflower and cabbage (11)

Parallelism:
so blue in the morning, so gladhearted by noon (3)
broken by her fingers, eaten by her pores (3)
butter in my hair and pepper on my tongue (3)
hand making arcs in the water
water making arcs in the bowl (13)

Literary Figures:
Metaphor:
a river of desire (24)
I rise, a dreaming-weed (24)
road, a long petrified snake of tar (39)
the big red cyclops (signal) (42)

Simile:
It grows on you/like lichen (30)
The body thrown like a sack (38)
Familiar like a witch's cat (3)

Personification:
Rubies, fill your blood on my throat.
Emeralds, your envy.
Beauty, leave some rags for me (22)
Everyday the city grows taller, trampling underfoot/students wives lovers babies (44)

Animation:
This figure does not attribute to a non-person qualities of a person but some other organism
reproach crawling/ out of his eyes (71)

Pathetic Fallacy:
scornful skin (21)

Transferred Epithet:
a slithering of thought and shade (70)
frozen panic (88)

Oxymoron:
Strange familiarities (5)
No frigid fires here (47)

Paradox:
Night ruled
in the place
blazing white lights (26)
I see enclosure, escape (89)
Unseen map so vivid in my mind (3)

Contrast:
As a principle of organisation: "Age" (4); N.H.17 (62)
The shirt's still whole. It's him that's frayed (5)
She taught me when to raise my weapons,/ and when to lay my head in my mother's lap (25)

If the abovementioned poetic features help organise the textual cosmos, there are a few factors which introduce an element of chaos. Firstly, the grammatical error: "Wavering candlestick dip and gleam (5) and secondly, redundancy. For example, in "Age" the last three lines are superfluous (4). In "Fairytale," "Beauty, leave some rags for me/ that I might presume to be/ a woman: beautiful…" (22). Thirdly, the neologies which play an ambivalent role in the ordering of the textual cosmos: examples are "nicecold" (41); "spindrifting" (74): "glitterwince" (78); include "cloudmazed" (78). But the fourth factor, namely, the typographical liberties a la cummings as in "Evil Eye" are unambiguously chaotic. The fifth factor contributing to the disorder is the principle of lineation. One does not know why certain "lines" are set down either as single lines instead of more or as two instead of one. Arranging unmetrical lines in a pattern often does nothing to the text itself except create a visual pattern on the printed page. Setting down unmetrical lines as "tercets" or "quintains" merely appear to be stanzas while in reality they are no such thing. By the same token, one wonders why "Evil Eye" is not given any pseudo-stanzaic breaks.

Since all poetic features except metre are common to poetry and non-poetic discourse, it is metre alone which can properly define poetry. It was Coleridge who affirmed that "Metre is the proper form of poetry and poetry imperfect and defective without

metre" (Biographia Literaria. Chapter 18. Paragraph 17). Though we have an ample crop of unmetrical writings in several languages produced in the last hundred odd years, the fact remains that metre is the defining principle of poetry. Tennis played with the net down is no tennis indeed! If so, the texts collected in the present volume can only be dubbed "poetic prose" and not "poetry."

In sum, *Sight May Strike You Blind* is anarchic both in content and form. The Semele-Zeus Syndrome expresses a destructive epistemic tendency on the part of both the gazer and the scorcher. The gazer desires to see the unseeable even as Dr. Faustus, but the scorcher does not educate or enlighten the gazer; rather the scorcher hastens to destroy the other. In other words, both the gazer and the scorcher overstep their measured boundaries. Most of the poetic prose texts of the present volume are marked by this anarchic syndrome. Such content finds its formal fit in the modernist anarchic free verse which does not properly measure out the sound of its language. This results in "All seeing reduced to this ocular noise/ this slight malfunction, this haze". Sight does strike you blind when you overstep your measure.

NIRANJAN MOHANTY

IN SEARCH OF A CANON?

Hoshang Merchant. *Homage to Jibanananda Das*. London: Aark Arts, 2005.

Bibhu Padhi. *Living with Lorenzo: Poems on D.H. Lawrence*. Cuttack: Peacock Books, 2003.

Bibhu Padhi. *Games the Heart Must Play: A trilogy of love poems*. Bhubaneswar: Pen & Ink, 2003.

M. Mohankumar. *The Moon Has Two Faces*. Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2004.

Four books under review by three poets--Hoshang Merchant, Bibhu Padhi, M. Mohankumar--are from small presses but the poets are neither new nor unfamiliar. For over three decades now, Padhi and Merchant have figured in national and international journals and have many volumes of poetry to their credit. Mohankumar's other volumes include *Pearl Diver*, *Half Opened Door*, and *Nightmares and Daydreams*. Padhi and Merchant teach English. Mohankumar retired as a bureaucrat. The purpose in scripting such minor details is to harp on a few painful facts of Indian poetry in English today, as well as to bring to clear focus the diversity inherent in it, both in terms of themes and the poets' professions. Despite what we say, write or do, it is painful to reiterate the fact that poetry in English in India has always experienced an extremely limited readership, even more limited readership than poetry written in our regional languages. This is equally true in English-speaking countries, but there lies a difference between the poetry-writing-and-publishing scenario here in India and in countries like the U.K. and U.S.A.

What is surprising and shocking in Indian poetry in English is the absence of a representative volume. This does not therefore mean that volumes have not been edited or circulated, but a volume

involving the diverse voices of today is conspicuously absent. Yet individual voices have not been silenced by publishers' indifference or apathy. Such indifference is dampening, and it is responsible for jeopardizing the status of Indian poetry in English. Yet there is no point in losing heart as poets like Merchant, Padhi and Mohankumar eminently illustrate the fact that Indian poetry in English is likely to enrich the storehouse of Indian Literature in English.

Merchant's volume, *Homage to Jibanananda Das* contains seventeen short poems, each sparkling with sharp, chosen, and chiseled images. All try to authenticate a voice that has successfully captured the nuanced-rhythms of time and its effects and impressions left on the body and mind, epitomized captivatingly in the concluding poem "The Last Scene of the Last Act in the Last Play" that acts as an epilogue to the volume:

> In our old age the poet Yeats knows:
> Bodily decrepitude is wisdom
> Young we loved and were ignorant (20)

In trying to find the meaning of life, Merchant ransacks the cupboards of human relationships--both hetero and gay. But his ultimate realization is that life sustains itself, resuscitates itself through time, for it is time that augments thirst and quenches it:

> Everything flows away into night--
> Thirst is no more (6)

Like Jibanananda Das, Merchant also celebrates life with an impassioned delight, despite 'martyrdom' (8), despite the disappearance of 'men' and the 'boy' (9), despite the earthquake. The poet remains a sincere seeker of love and dreams to overcome the burdens of "a hand/advancing towards me in darkness" (10). Evoking the images of Kali and Durga, the poet has succeeded in bringing out the violence that permeates the world:

Baghdad is being destroyed
The young girl
Her American mother back home
Stays with her Moslem father
Their home has been destroyed (11)

The violence comes full-circle through the image of Durga, the Hindu goddess who tarnished evil:

Durga meets her Bhakta
The buffalo demon she rides
Then eats (11)

Not only Hindu gods and goddesses, but also Parsi rites capture Merchant's sensitive eyes. In "Towers of Silence," one is fascinated by the allusion to Jibanananda Das:

The lady moon hides
In a cloudy night:
Let's eat a rat or two tonight! (12)

The poem concludes with a striking image of the 'Tower of Silence' where the dead are consigned to the infinite hunger of vultures:

Having been grounded
for a day or two
The birds heave and veer off
to the deadly river Vaitarni (12)

In a poem like "When I See," one comes very close to echoes of Jibanananda's concluding lines of "Banalata Sen." Merchant's lines acquire the intensity through the haunting perpetuity of the search:

All days end all rivers come home
Except the man who went
And I still pine for the boy (9)

Merchant's poems in this volume, specifically the shorter ones, bristle with incisive images, striking and startling, flanked by an ironic tone of voice ("The Peepal Tree," "Time Stands Still in my Father's Pali Hill House," "Iranian Revolution," "After Hafiz") and steeped in the slouching shakes of inter-textuality.

Bhibhu Padhi's *Living with Lorenzo* contains fourteen short poems. It not only captures an imagined relationship between the poet and the celebrity writer and poet D.H. Lawrence, but also creates an atmosphere and an ambience with which the poet intends to try to fathom life in its variety, richness and totality. In "What This Night Has to Tell About You," the poet honestly records why and how Lawrence occupies such a significant space in his thoughts, "in the sheer possibilities of passion and play" (11):

> I know why you wake me up
> from sleep, seep into my
> waking hours, like chilled water,
> which I love to drink
> whenever I feel thirsty. (19)

But Padhi soon realizes that Lawrence's passion and zest for life are beyond the world's comprehension, as Lawrence lived much beyond the frame and fabric of his time:

> I know what the night says
> about you, your dreams,
> your passion for things
> that would have been
> too much for the world-- (19)

In poem after poem Padhi holds on to the ideas and values that Lawrence held dear and represents them in his work. In "A Day With You At Puri-on-Sea," Padhi tries to capture the artist's dream and long cherished wish to "create someone/who would lead, simply, a free,/ all-exempted life" (20). But Padhi knows very well that artists' dreams are always likely to remain unfulfilled. Yet the

poet in Padhi adheres to such freedom, such all-exempted life with a view to unravelling the intrinsic meaning of life for an artist. The poet, despite being obsessed with a sense of loss and absence (of Lawrence), quite consolingly comes closer to advising Lawrence to consign everything--the desires and wishes or dreams, fulfilled or unfulfilled--to the one "who brought you/ to this world of things" (15), and requests him to "sleep now" (13). The poet, in pushing Lawrence to a zone of timelessness, also tries to follow suit. The poet's escapist but transcendental fantasy summarily depicts his own dating disenchantment with the words:

> And hence, this thought of not being
> here at all, but at some place
> where time can't reach so easily.
> Let us be together in a zone in which
> time is stilled by our needs, silenced
> by our incorruptible faith in ourselves. (22)

Padhi as a Lawrencian (sic) scholar and a sensitive poet seems to have been ensconced in the conviction that Lawrence belongs to all countries, belongs to the continents of life as he pursued and perpetuated his journeys "through the world's obscenities and griefs" (23), promises and dreams. The wounded heart of the poet tries to gather solace by believing simply:

> I look forward to your reappearance
> in order to revise your
> textual lives, our lives,
> once again, rewrite our lives. (27)

But the concluding poem "Yet Another Wish For Lorenzo" is revisionary in nature in which Padhi expects Lawrence to remain there in the realm of timelessness and of fairies, from where he can initiate another dialogue, and can "write a very different story" (28). The volume is indeed a lofty tribute to a creative genius who deserves it. A deliberately constructed intimate tone, clear-cut visual images, anecdotal narrative strategies can account for the

volume's success, but not without an overdose of sentimentality which at times dwarfs and dilutes the intensity and the poet's sincerity.

Padhi's next volume under review, *Games That the Heart Must Play: a trilogy of love poems*, is sharply divided into three parts: 'Dream Children' (35 sections), 'Today' (33 sections), 'Daughter' (32 sections). It takes a reader to yet another subjective world where the speaking voice of the narrator assumes a father-like personality, but is hardly bereft of a perambulating sentimentality which tries to juxtapose dream and reality, fiction and fact. Padhi's volume is built upon love as the central image that flows and glides with such earnestness that it refuses any formulaic categorization.

In an age of disbelief and machine, Padhi seems to champion that love that can bring panacea for the wounded and the depraved. The poet's love for the dream-children, his child-like inquisitiveness to know about time, seasons, places and people, his undiluted and unsoiled sympathies for children far and near, tend to generate the feeling that the poet attempts to insulate the innocent, pure and angelic realm of children so that it retains its primordial innocence beauty and truthfulness against the mad flow of time's unreliable machinations. In doing so Padhi rather indirectly but consciously records his own disenchantment with the world where nothing remains constant or incorruptible. In section 10, the poet summarizes the essence of the dream children, and in a way makes a distinction between the child-world and the adult world. In other words, the poet longs to whirl back to that idealized world of innocence:

> You are the poem whose first line
> I've been looking for over centuries.
> You are the angel who has forgotten me
> for forty-three years on a timeless history. (11)

The poet becomes skeptical of his ownership of these children because of the fleeting nature of time. Yet through the children, the

poet tries to repossess the dreamy, phantasmagoric world of innocence, the world full of bliss and beauty:

> In my dream house, at
> each of its doors and windows,
> you are standing, eager
> to be seen and possessed. (27)

But the poet's dream-house experiences a sudden collapse with the simplest realization that the matter-of-fact world hardly cares for our subjective dreams and whimsies. The poet ruefully laments:

> Today I know that the world
> Cares very little for us. (28)

Yet the paternal speaker can wish only for an eternal 'spring' for his dream-children. The second section 'Today' pins one down to the present of the speaker. Thus the poem ingrains a progression, a movement from the past to the present, from dream to reality. Such a movement makes the poet aware of the "death-drawn life" (56), of the embittered fleeting nature of time in which everything has changed. The poet's agony stems from such a change:

> Today, our lonely ancestors
> slip through our doors and windows,
> so they might see how different
> we have been since their days,
> find their own antique comfort. (42)

Though living in this changing time, the poet has not left contact with his dream children, with his yesterdays. The poet breathes in a simultaneity and a coexistence of the past and present, looking ahead towards the future in the last section 'Daughter.' He cherishes a hope to be a 'rose bush':

> Daughter: Teach me that language
> Make me a wild rose bush,
> allow me to speak with you. (76)

For the poet, the daughter is "the burning/wick of flame on the earthen pot/inside the sacred chamber of my heart" (85); "the poem that always/sings through this fugitive body/the song that quietly travels through/the layers of bone and flesh/until it reaches the darkest/skin of my heart" (85). The imagined daughter, the frail and tender daughter can not belong to the time-tethered world. She belongs to the realm of "cloud," to the "sculptor's dream-figure" (89). This dream-trilogy can only whirl back to the dream of the poet's own making.

If Merchant repossessed the dreams of Jibanananda Das and celebrated those dreams in his own way, and Padhi could fathom the depths of the dream-world of Lorenzo and his own, M. Mohankumar in his *The Moon Has Two Faces* weaves another dream-world of his own. Here, the memories of his wife occupy a significant space, nurturing the poetic utterances which ooze from the heart without any contrived motif and fashionable strategies. What remains striking is the directness and lucidity of expression, bereft of any deliberate stylization. The fourth volume (as I presume from the blurb) is comprised of sixty poems of varied themes reflecting the two faces of the poet: the one looking at and into the bounties of nature, and the other watching the life's dance, the diverse rhythms of this dance. Both the faces try to find out a meaning in life, celebrating life with heart's simple beats. The poems from "The Moon Has Two Faces" to "Vyasa's Worldview" appear to endorse the idea that a deep communicative ability without digressive and disparaging obliquity and obscurity can make good poetry or sensible and sensitive poetry.

As an astute advocate of dreams, the poet strongly believes that dreams brace our life and make it meaningful. In "Dreams" he persuades everyone to nurture "a beautiful dream," for dreams are short-lived:

> If you still have a dream,
> A beautiful dream,
> Hug it like a child

Close to your heart.
Feed it with milk
From your breast.
Give it warmth
The warmth of your soul.
Till it grows strong enough
And strides forth
To fulfil itself. (3)

And when the advocate of dreams faces the real, harsh world, his sympathies for the poor young mother become distinct, as she has nowhere to so, she has no house of her own. The poet out of his sympathetic curiosity raises some vital questions:

Is there a shelter, somewhere,
For her to go back to?
….
A castaway
For the advancing night to
Enfold in its licentious arms? (13)

Facing the hardness of life, the poet seeks to know from his grandfather how to overcome the cross-roads of life. The poet's helplessness in the course of living is reflected while seeking his grandfather's advice:

Tell me grandfather,
How you feel as you look back at the crossroads,
Those highways and by-ways of your life.
Do not put me off in your stoic way.
Saying that you never look back. (14)

The poet's sympathies with Eklavya, Kannagi, the changed village, the devotees who suffer a godless-emptiness in their visit to temple, and with his own lonely self in the absence of his wife allude to the set of values which his poems tend to hold dear. In "What Remains" the poet paints the dark face of his increasing sense of loss and loneliness:

This, there, is what remains:
A house full of things,
As she left them,
Empty like the broken heart.

Or even in "Evening walk" the poet feels the bitter sting of loneliness:

But I walk alone,
Weighed down by an absence at the core.
Sometimes I turn back and find myself
Staring into vacant space. (78)

The poet in the absence of his wife feels the absence of her sympathetic eyes, which read and appreciated the poet's poems once:

Her glasses. They are there,
Where she left them, months ago.
And months after, I write poems
In bits and bytes, unprinted,
Unnoticed by sympathetic eyes. (82)

The poet has with all sincerity made attempts to reveal his two faces--the poetic and the personal, one complimenting the other, one endorsing the other in a meaningful way. Burrowing into himself in varying degrees, each poet--Merchant, Padhi and Mohankumar--tries to unravel the meanings gathered from the book that is life.

JOSEPH DORAIRAJ

TWO POETS FROM ORISSA

Ramakanta Rath. *Poems*. Bhubaneswar: Grassroots, 2004.

J.P. Das. *Poems*. Bhubaneswar: Grassroots, 2004.

Ramakanta Rath, born in 1934, has nine volumes of poetry to his credit and has received numerous awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award (1978), the Sarala Prize (1984), The Saraswati Samman (1992), the Kabir Samman (1993) and the Rashtrabhusan Samman (2002). His *Sri Radha*, originally composed in Oriya, has been translated into English and several Indian languages.

Poems contains 36 pieces and it must be noted that they have been translated from Oriya into English by the author himself. Of these, two ("I Had Spread My Net of Words Around You" and "What are You?") are from an earlier volume titled *Ten Love Poems* and ten pieces have been culled from *Sri Radha*. They are: "The Morning Today," "They All Heard You Playing the Flute," "A Friend Enquired," "When, for the First Time," "Come, Take Half," "The Inside of this Body," "You a God?," "You Are the Fragrance of Rocks," "Reports of Your Grievous Injury" and "Reports of Your Passing Away."

Notwithstanding the fact that the author has put together some of his favourite and best poems from his earlier anthologies, there are certain unifying threads/motifs as far *Poems* is concerned. Four dominant themes or motifs are quite clearly evident. The selections from *Sri Radha* are steeped in the *bhakti* tradition and speak of a mystical union between God and the devotee. The second theme which underpins this volume is the theme of love, specially pining for the beloved, which sadly remains unrequited till the end. The third theme is a political commentary on state of India, which has been ravaged by blatant communal politics and the "syllabus of hatred" ("Clouds"). The fourth theme is sadness bordering on despair which pervades the entire volume. There are a few poems

such as "On Meeting Father" which do not belong to the above mentioned categories and therefore form a cluster of their own.

The best poems in this collection are "Where Are They?," "Lovers at the Railway Station," "Grammar," "The Soldier in Exile" and "I'm Leaving Behind." These poems are remarkable in their tone, clear in their diction and syntax, and sharp in their political commentary, and contain some brilliant lines such as:

> I am alive, but they all have
> moved away with their shops
> To some place where people don't die
> Of bullets marked with God's name?

"You Are the Fragrance of Rocks" is a selection from *Sri Radha* that, following the Indian tradition, comes up with different names and attributes for the myriad headed Godhead such as "the monsoon in an apparel of leaves and flowers" and "the unspoken sentences at farewell." "You a God?" looks at the divine from an anthropomorphic perspective and comes up with exquisite comparisons. The *bhakti* tradition presents devotion as a game of love wherein the devotee aspires to reach her beloved but he playfully escapes the mad but devout pursuit of the devotees, and thus (re)kindles their desire for communion with the divine. This is amply reflected in the *Sri Radha* poems.

"The Song" is a tender piece that lingers in the reader's mind long after she has read the poem.

> Everytime I see it I remember
> I'd travelled that day without a ticket.
> I was an unauthorised traveller
> and an unauthorised companion
> of that song.

The word "unauthorised" highlights the speaker's position with reference to the singer/lover. This piece is about love, pure and

tender, which is unrequitted till the end. And this is one of the most memorable pieces of this collection.

"Where Are They?" is a notable piece, as it highlights the pressing need for communal harmony in today's context. The poem condemns in unambiguous terms the growing religious intolerance and violence that is stoked and fuelled by communal politics, all in the name of God and religion. The lines:

> I had looked at the man who shot me
> and was sad beyond words.
> Poor chap, what does he live on?
> The hatred he feeds on every day
> can't taste as good as Zachariah's tea

are 'a slap on the face' of all religious bigots and fanatics who hack at the secular roots of our nation.

"I Had Spread My Net of Words Around You" highlights the poverty of the linguistic medium in spite of its "multiple meanings" to express certain profound and recondite experiences in life such as love between human beings as well as love of god. This piece presents a clear and convincing case for the generous use of tropes in poetry.

"Lovers at the Railway Station" is one of the most poignant poems in this volume. It speaks of love against the backdrop of terrorism. The tone is quite matter-of-fact but it strikes a chord in the reader's soul. The lovers meet at the railway station--probably a secret rendezvous--and try to be as inconspicuous as possible in a place teeming with people. The concluding lines literally rip apart the lovers and their love along with the nation's rich legacy of *ahimsa* and *dharma*. The lines:

> A bomb suddenly went off
> and the platform's roof over their bench
> fell like a mountain of debris

starkly portray the growing gun and bomb culture in the Indian Subcontinent.

Some other memorable lines from this volume are:

> My body, condemned by the history
> that never left me,
> stood like an unfinished house
> abandoned by its builder. (“The Listener”)

> You taught me to cease to hope
> The art of robbing memory of all its weapons,
> not because of lack of compassion
> but because of understanding
> too large for tears. (“On Meeting Father”)

Lines such as “Death was like a Sunday” (“What Shall I Wear on the Day of My Death?”), “Is it the moonlight that shines on rifle barrels” (“Lifetime”), and “The words of the song arrived/like rows of boats laden with moonlight” (“The Listener”) establish Rath as a genuine poet.

This volume yokes together brilliant poems with run-of-the-mill pieces. Poems like “A Kissing Episode” and “On the Banks of this River” lack a clear focus and lines like

> How could she have known?
> the thousand-fold greater deadliness
> of my poison? (“A Kissing Episode”)

do not sound poetical by any standard. I wonder if they sound different in Oriya!

When the speaker addresses Krishna as “a lover without a body” and adds “you erase/like the night” he is definitely out of favour with the Muse, for the word “erase” stands out like a sore thumb in this context. Similarly, the devotee addressing the Lord as

"Pure movement, and nothing but pure movement" ("Who are You?") does not sound elegant. "Motion" would have been a better choice than "movement." In "I Had Spread My Net of Words Around You" the lines "You were the past, the present, and the future/the single moment of the incomings and outgoings" ("of all seasons") sound inane.

"On the Banks of this river" is yet another piece which lacks a clear focus and orientation and contains some jarring lines such as "even the sky terminates in you" and "Come back in the rain's moment". The lines

> Why didn't I summon the rain
> to enter our weather
> and wash his body clean? ("Because I Didn't Stay")

hardly sound poetical and portray the poet in a poor light.

The volume contains a few stale and inelegant expressions such as "a fate like a ship/stalled at midsea. . .". "Stalled" does not fit in here; "stranded" would have been a better choice. "The inside of this body/is filled with very loud clamour" ("The Inside of this Body") sounds grating to the ears and is far away from euphony and good poetic sense.

The following lines from "It was Evening when He Came" sound empty and barely express any thought or emotion. The last line is clumsy with the repetition of the word "insatiable."

> He was the river that forgets
> every transiting boat,
> the cloud that never stops,
> the insatiable hunger and the insatiable thirst
> for all that we are after.

Rath is at home in the realm of devotional poetry and produces his best when the theme hovers around socio-political issues. But he

gets lost in the mire of contrived existential themes and pseudo-mystical concerns. On the whole this slender volume is refreshing and the reviewer would recommend it to all lovers of modern Indian poetry for three reasons. First, the diction and syntax is clear and in most cases elegant and the rhythm is quite natural. Second, these poems are largely free from contrived classical allusions and regional inflections. Many writers these days hopelessly bank on classical and regional features to make their poetry esoteric, but Rath has not fallen a victim to this temptation. Third, quite a few poems stand out for their ideological underpinnings and this makes the volume a meaningful one. After all, what we need today is an aesthetic and poetic of politics, not an aesthetic and poetic of silence and navel-gazing solipsism.

Fortunately there are only two typographical errors in the entire volume (pages 41 and 51) and *Grassroots* has to be congratulated for the neat printing, attractive cover and the get up of this volume. I wonder why neither the creator nor the publisher could think of an apt title for this volume, for the title "Poems" is sadly prosaic. This is no paperback edition but still Rs 195/- for his slender volume seems to be a little expensive.

* * *

Jagannath Prasad Das, born in 1936, is a versatile artist. He is a poet (some of his notable collections available in English translation are *First Person*, *Love is a Season*, *Timescapes*, *Silences*, *Diurnal Rites*, *The Unreal City* and *Lovelines*), a short story writer (some of his well-known collections in English translation are *The Pukka Sahib* and *Dear Jester*) and a playwright (some of his popular plays in English translation are *Before the Sunset*, *Two Plays*, *The Underdog* and *Absurd Play*). Das is also a historian and has published *Puri Paintings*, *Chitra-Pothi* and *Palm-leaf Miniatures*.

Poems contains 41 pieces and these are translations from Oriya by the author himself. The collection includes 20 "Nonsense Verse"

as well which form a sort of an appendix. There are both short and fairly long poems in this volume. While pieces such as "Beginning" (four lines), "Flight" and "Truth" (nine lines each) are short pieces "Waiting for You," "After You Leave," and "Poetry" are fairly long pieces, each running to a little more than three pages.

Three dominant themes are perceptible in this volume. The first seventeen poems deal with the theme of human relationship and highlight the fact that many relationships are fragile and tenuous. Some of the notable poems in this category are "Mask," "At the Stroke of Six," "Waiting for You" and "Never Leave Me." Next, socio-political poems such as "Bustee," "At the Traffic Lights" and "Archaeology" attempt to instill a social consciousness in the readers. Finally, topical poems such as "Kalahandi," "Riot," "Pokhran" and "After Gujarat" contain scathing attacks on communal politics in these poems. A few other pieces such as "No Islands," "Gandhi" and "Poetry" cannot be listed under these three categories.

Some of the strongest poems in this volume are "Never Leave Me," "Kalahandi," "Woman," "At the Traffic Lights," "Poetry," "Riot," "Archaeology," "Historical Truth," "Pokhran," "The Daffodil" and "After Gujarat."

"Poetry" is one of the most tender pieces in this volume. In fact there are two pieces on poetry. "After Gujarat" is also partially about poetry. In a cerebral world like ours the number of people who doubt and question the very purpose of poetry are numerous. This piece throws light on poetry's ontology and is a gentle reminder about the place and value of poetry in today's techno-crazy world.

> A poem is somewhat like love
> or like time, if you please,
> it's fulfilled in itself.

These lines would definitely answer the queries of many prosaic individuals who question the meaning and relevance of poetry today. The poem closes with these memorable lines:

> what is life itself
> but a few obscure lines
> of some stray poem?

"At the Traffic Lights" is a powerful poem in the sense that it makes the reader a little uncomfortable after reading it. The contrast between the two worlds--the world of the rich and of the poor--is stark and vulgar as well. "The skeleton with a dead child/in its bony hands" proves too much for the person inside the car and the fact that she is perturbed by this sight, even if it is only a fleeting experience, exposes the wide chasm between the two strata in this country.

"Archaeology" and "Historical Truth" raise thorny and fundamental questions about historiography, a hotly contested area today. There is no denying the fact that history is written predominantly by the winners and these two pieces lay bare this truth. The poem highlights the ugly fact that history can be cleverly distorted by those in power:

> History can be auctioned
> and given away
> to the highest bidder.

The following lines take us back to 6th December 1992:

> History can be consigned
> to the blazing flames
> like a flimsy effigy
> by a frenzied mob.

They are a stark reminder to shameful communal politics. Let not history repeat itself!

"Kalahandi" is one of the most poignant pieces in this volume. It is heartening to note that Das has articulated in a clear and loud voice that not only are clouds and daffodils fit subjects for poetry but hunger and riots too can serve as suitable themes for poetry. It is time that we all realized that the Muse is a multifaceted character.

"Kalahandi" is not about Orissa alone, for the poet clarifies that "wherever there is hunger/ there Kalahandi is." The poem (which must have been written at the turn of the century) closes with an anguished cry:

> How could we then walk
> into the celebrated portals
> of the twenty-first century
> leaving Kalahandi behind?

"The Daffodil" is yet another provocative poem that raises basic questions about the question of the canon, especially in the postcolonial context where notions of universality (in literature) are debated from a hermeneutical perspective. Incidentally, Wordsworth's "Daffodils" is widely anthologized and almost all Indian textbooks include this piece, ignoring the question of cultural alienation/distancing. Das boldly exposes the cultural barrier and in the bargain critiques the imperialist ideology. The following lines highlight the pressing need to decolonize our consciousness and rework the canon:

> The empire may have dried up
> ……..
> but the daffodil lives on
> tossing its head
> in a sprightly dance.

"After Gujarat" is a powerful piece. The poem is not about Godhra alone but also about Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Babri Masjid and 9/11 and Iraq. It tells us of man's inhumanity toward his fellow man (no gender bias implied here) in the name of race and

religion. It is to the poet's credit that he can talk about poetry against this deadly backdrop and poetry here is used as a metaphor for life itself, especially its creative and tender side. The poet affirms that humanity will somehow redeem itself from these racial and religious bigots and fanatics. To the question "After Gujarat/will there be poetry?" the poet replies that "It's not possible/to banish poetry?" and adds "Poetry is written/despite fatwa and bans." This positive and affirmative tone needs to be commended for it is such faith that keeps humanity going forward despite Hiroshimas and Godhras.

The volume opens with "Beginning" and closes with "End." While the opening piece talks of "chance meetings" in "the blind alleys of life" the concluding piece closes out on a disappointing, not a despairing, note wherein the speaker points out that "We have left laughter behind/somewhere on the way." But the tone is definitely neither cynical nor pessimistic.

Some of the most memorable lines in this volume are:

> In the blind alleys
> of life,
> chance meetings
> are promises ("Beginning")
>
> Some faces are twinkling down on me
> like morning stars ("Some Faces")
>
> Indifferent priests chant away hymns
> in muted monotony
> of unintelligible words ("Till the End")
>
> Fear is the tenuousness
> of relationship that hangs
> from the everyday discordance
> eternally afraid
> of snapping itself ("Fear")

Sheltered in your tresses
I have seen the night nestling there (“Sanctuary”)

When curfew was clamped
gods went back their way
to their ordained heavens (“Riot”)

There is a natural rhythm in Das’s poetry which approximates natural speech. The following lines attest to the fact that the poet has a sharp ear for the everyday speech and natural rhythm.

Some other faces
plain and pitiful
with vacant eyes
look into mine for shelter (“Some Faces”)

Das’s volume is not without its pitfalls and limitations. Poetry is--to repeat the cliché--the right word in the right order. But a few poems suffer from syntactical clumsiness and inappropriate lexes too.

In the line “It shatters the easy equipoise” (“At the Traffic Lights”) “easy equipoise” is far from euphony because of its weak collocation. In fact “easy” sounds redundant in this context. Perhaps it was inserted just for the sake of alliteration.

The following lines from “My World” appear a bit ungrammatical.

yet my life, leashed to it,
keeps moving endless
round and round

The poet should have used “endlessly” instead of “endless.” In fact these lines would read well even without the word “endless.”

What I supposed was
the colour of your sari
were only shattered clouds ("Till the End")

The above lines appear inept because of the mix up in the metaphors. The "colour" of the saree does not harmonize with the idea of "shattered clouds."

The reviewer is unable to decode the meaning and significance of "escapeless echoes" in the following lines from "Six Hours":

The six hours will return
gathering themselves in a self-confidence
like escapeless echoes

His hunch is that this expression ("escapeless echoes") would have sounded better in Oriya and therefore something has probably been lost in the translation. It is unfortunate that the poet-translator has sacrificed semantics to alliteration.

The reviewer is at a loss to understand the lines: "Many searching hands/my million seeking eyes" ("This Moment"). What do "searching hands" and "million seeking eyes" signify? Clearly something is amiss in these lines. They are not poetic, not even good English.

In the lines "Unconscious tears of my eyes/and exhausted nerves" ("Some Faces") "of my eyes" is patently redundant and "exhausted" could have been replaced by a better expression, say, 'frayed" or "tired." A monosyllabic word would have harmonized better with "nerves" than a trisyllabic word such as "exhausted."

In the line "let your hands be octopus and crush me" ("Goddess") the imagery is not apt and fails to create the desired effect. In the piece "At the Stroke of Six" the expression "fevered sleep" does not sound grammatical, much less poetical. In "Looking for Myself" there is syntactical clumsiness in the lines "But there

will be you by my side/ incarnate in my whole being" The expression "there will you be" does not flow easily.

In the line "the mysteries of darkest night" ("At the Stroke of Six") the definite article is sorely missing and it has to be underlined that the addition of the definite article would not have in any way altered the rhythmical pattern because it is only a grammatical word, not a lexical one, and therefore an unaccented one, implying that it would not have affected the metrical pattern in any way.

The line "All quiet peaceful calm and static" ("Till the End") would definitely read better with proper punctuation marks. Not that it is difficult to decipher this line without the punctuation marks, but it would read better with commas in the right place. After all, poetry is not confined to sense and sensibility, for craft too matters. Yet another specimen from the same poem is the line "of moon sun planets and stars." Commas would have ensured that this line read well.

Notwithstanding these limitations we have to congratulate Das for this refreshing volume. While there are many who wail and weep about life, here is a poet who is life-affirming in the midst of harsh realities such as Godhras and Gulags. This is definitely comforting and assuring, for humankind constantly needs reassurance in its arduous journey of life. Secondly, we congratulate Das for dispelling the romantic notion that poetry is all about love, lilies and lotuses. Echoing Pablo Neruda, Das has made it abundantly clear that good poetry can be written about riots and revolutions as well.

There is a lone typographical error in the entire volume (page 28) and *Grassroots* has to be congratulated for the neat printing, attractive cover and the get up of this volume. The author or the publisher should have thought of some apt title for this volume for the title "Poems" is sadly uninspiring. This is no paperback edition but still Rs 195/- for this slender volume seems to be a little expensive.

SHANTHI PREMKUMAR

A WHOLLY HUMAN KRISHNA

Niranjan Mohanty. *Krishna: a long poem*. Bhubaneswar: Avanti, 2003.

"Love and Love Only" could well be the title of the book. Supposedly divine acts of creation and salvation are pushed to the periphery, as love springs forth as the one all-consuming predominant emotion in Krishna. The relationship between Krishna, the supreme godhead and Radha, a simple cowherdess holds a special place in Hindu mythology. Through centuries of imaginative effort in India, the pair has remained the symbol for romantic love and the inspiration for art forms seeking to depict the same. Krishna has been designated the object of love in several volumes of poetry in almost all major languages of the country. For example, during the medieval period poets in South India called the Alwars portrayed themselves as the female lover and their theme was longing for a union with the Lord.

Whereas love has often been examined from the perspective of a female persona, keeping Krishna as an all seeing mask, Niranjan Mohanty teases apart that mask to peek at the mind inside. Here one would do well to recall the work of Mohanty's ancient and illustrious predecessor, Jayadeva, the 12th century Oriyan poet. Krishna sings passionately in Jayadeva's verses:

"the poison of love has rushed upto my head. Only your tender rose-coloured feet on my head will chase the poison down my body."[1]

Niranjan Mohanty's Krishna is wholly human. His need for Radha is human too. In this light, his immortality is a frustrating burden that hangs heavy. He can never get close enough to his beloved. He tries to touch mud and it changes to a bunch of flowers. The gap between his immortality and Radha's mortality is tragic to him. He rallies against "his irksome totality." He yearns for the pure human form, when he would no longer be "divine, absurd,

distant or dizzy" to her, when the infinite goings-on in the world would not distract him from watching "her matchless eyes"--when she would smell of his sweat and serve him watered rice and brinjal fry and he would not think that heaven was any thing different.

We see a heart overflowing with an all-consuming passion, straining at the limits of divinity, raring to go, to break the bounds and dissolve in an ocean of muddy, clayey, absolutely earthy and beautiful human love for his Radha. Here the poet emphasizes his stand in favour of life on earth in comparison to an imaginary heaven.

Krishna's love for Radha is a thick ball of fire in which he burns, a willing victim. It is at once romantic, passionate, intensely sexual and infinitely tender. He sings only for her.

"Would you never realize this tiny fact that I sing only for you, if time stops or the wheeling universe, I never mind?"

His passion is barely contained. It is an "upsurging ululation" clamouring to claim her as entirely his. It is intensely erotic in places as:

"Nothing keeps me cool and quiet, no order of things restores me to sanity until I taste the immensities of your virginity..."

"A garland of your memories, I wear to subdue the obstinate fever mounting on my restless limbs."

Radha is everything to him-his life, his love, his song, his boat, his oars, his sleep, his sky, his earth, even the death that he can die.

"You're my shadow, my meadow
Can you be my widow, someday?"

His argument for his love is, however, not a self-righteous claim of divinity. He only pleads:

> "Can't we make rules for ourselves only with such selfishness
> That they appear vague and jejune?"

In the game of their love for each other, there is no place for sordid rules. Their heart and soul is in the game, so why worry about rules that they have never learnt?

We see rather the defiance of the very young in love. Yet with the characteristic contrariness of youth, he also grieves about what history would say of their love. He wonders if their love and togetherness would be condemned as a crime. Maybe the world would call him a lecher, a seducer. But suddenly he finds that it really doesn't matter to him whether the world was going to call him 'Lord' or 'fraud.' Why should he care? His calls "shall go on flowing, touching the vale of her love only." In a bout of clarity he realises that the essence of heaven permeates everything we see and have around us.

> Blood, bile, phlegm, laughter, smile, prick, vagina.....
> everything
> Powder them into particles of dust
> or burn them into ashes, they change
> only form, become earth, air, water, fire and ether.....
> they only disseminate one light that is the light of
> heaven.
> They sing only one song that I sing,
> Nothing in them is sinful.
> Nothing reduces them to vulgarity.

Through births and deaths the only enduring reality that mattered to him was his all-encompassing love for Radha. Her husband turns her round, testing her after her nightly absences--looking for tell-tale signs of their love-making. He notes but cares not to register the sadness in her eyes. But for Krishna, "the stars

and the sky" speak to him of her sadness. His flute has only songs that echo her sobs. His dreams about her, his wishes for their togetherness, lie in ever so many shreds in his brain. He tries to count them and the effort beats him as if he were counting the stars.

A feminist reading of the poem would equate the flute that he says she does not have with the phallic wish. Radha however is not of the eternal feminine. In the poet's words, she is not the vine that creeps on the elm. Rather, she is the mighty oak and he, a mere sprig of grass. He is the withered twig and she, a lofty tree.

One cannot help but look around for a glimpse of Krishna, the deliverer of the Gita. There are philosophic echoes now and then as in:

> Do names matter?
> Can you tell me the name of the bird that sits
> and sings in the cage of your body?
> Where do the names go, where do the words go
> when body becomes a mere shadow?

The sound of philosophy is however too faint to be heard in the torrent of love sentiment.

The ten cantos of three lined stanzas speak variedly of the multiple facets of love. Beginning with Krishna's yearning as he flutters about, drifting along, "almost insubstantial till her touch would heal him and make him whole," it moves on to list what Radha is to him. There is chafing at the tethers as he bemoans his immortality and her ties. The book ends with the final question of whether love can be defined by rules, whether something as pure as the feeling distilled out of a vortex of emotions can be labelled by narrow moral ethics?

The length of the poem surprisingly does not weaken the force of expression. There is an all pervasive sense of heaviness as if one feels the tangible burden on Krishna that cruelly denies him

'the art of cuddling his wife under the rustic roof." The tragedy of Radha eluding his grasp as he eternally flounders about in "the gap that stretches between his immortality and her mortality" is powerfully expressed.

The epilogue provides a certain relief, as it seems to reiterate the mythical idea of Krishna and Radha being twin aspects of the same absolute truth. Krishna searches for Radha, here, there, everywhere--and finds her, curled up and sleeping within himself.

The poet's championing of all that is mortal deserves praise, as do his quaint images and metaphors that have the flavour of watered rice, the fragrance of plough-shares and soil. Niranjan Mohanty's words keep true to his claim of "an English that is half Orissan-half English."[2]

"..... I am the devotee of my devotees. I am their ice-cream in summer and a blanket or a quilt or fire place in winter."

Radha is "the mango" that Krishna's "tongue longs for and tastes." Her lap is "lotus soft" and her breasts are "pitchers of honey with wild bees around." Colour is used powerfully by the poet to add wordless depth to the verses. Krishna would arise and go to Radha "to suckle the blue waters of her eyes."

He would further "drink away her blue anguish." Shadows assume shapes of "blue whispers." He makes this earth beautiful only "for her white presence."

He would like her to know "the colour of his sobs."

"The white whispers of his heart turn blue" after swallowing the poison of her absence. The syntax of his waiting is "blue." He wants his ancestors to bless them to sing "white hymns of love," while he promises Radha not to wound her with "the blue arrows of his tactical absences."

There is a predominance of blue and white colours, as if the poet repeats the theme of his art in the substance of a tapestry as well. Blue is the colour of Krishna while myths connected with the Holi festival say that young Krishna was envious of Radha's white colour and so smeared her with all other colours. Here and there, we have a smattering of these other colours.

Krishna's face becomes "red with the biting of Radha's lips" and the joy of their union is "emerald" in hue.

The poem is a celebration of the sheer joy of love--in its search and discovery, in its tears and smiles, in its listless depression and ecstatic high, in its biting frustration and crazy enchantment, in its pain of separation and joy of union!

[1]Jayadeva. *Gitagovinda*.

[2]Niranjan Mohanty. *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha*. New Delhi: Indus, 1994.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Kamala Das's collection of published works includes her autobiography (*My Story*), memoirs (*A Childhood in Malabar*), short essays (*The Path of the Columnist*), and short fiction such as *The Sandal Trees*. Her extensive body of poetry has been collected in *The Best of Kamala Das, Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*, and in a generous volume published by the CRNLE Institute in Australia.

A. Joseph Dorairaj, Reader in English at Gandhigram Rural University in Tamilnadu, has published *Myth and Literature: A Hermeneutical Interpretation of James Joyce's "*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*"* His other publications include research articles and a collection of poems, *Yatra*, which he co-authored.

Shiela Gujral's *My Years in the USSR*, her published children's books, and her multiple volumes of poetry reflect in part her deep social, cultural and literary concerns. *Two Black Cinders*, translated into Arabic and recently issued in a second English edition, is representative of her highly regarded poetry output.

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Hoshang Merchant, Professor of English in the University of Hyderabad, has published multiple volumes of poetry, much of it included in *Selected Poems* (1999). He has also published *Homage to Jibanananda Das*, and edited an extensive *Anthology of English Poetry*, as well as *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India*.

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S.A. Prabhakar, a Senior Assistant Editor with *The Hindu*, writes poetry and has contributed film reviews and literary essays to many other publications. He makes his home in Chennai, a city which he claims as his muse.

Shanthi Premkumar writes poetry in Tamil and English, translates Tamil literature, and has published her own poetry collection, *Nilaa Pennae*. She teaches English Literature at Thiagarajar College, Madurai.

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Nirmal Selvamony teaches courses in Madras Christian College in "Ecoliterature," and "Music and Literature," as well as literature itself. He has directed, scripted and scored music for plays. *Persona in Tolkappiam*, a "Best Monograph" award winner from the International School of Dravidian Linguistics, is one of his many publications.