KAVYA BHARATI

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL - I

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

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Foreword

20:20

Twenty years ago the inaugural issue of *Kavya Bharati* had Meena Alexander as our mascot. "The Storm: a poem in five parts" was the lead poem in *KB* 1/1988. Meena Alexander is again with us to celebrate our 20th anniversary with yet another poem – "Landscape with Kurinji." We deem ourselves lucky.

The response to our request to celebrate sixty years of Indian poetry since Independence has been quite overwhelming. Because of certain limitations set on us by our printers, we are compelled to have our 20th anniversary special issue in two separate volumes. What you have before you is just the first part. Part II of the Twentieth anniversary special will have all the material that we could not accommodate in a single volume. So 20:20 it will be. Please have patience and wait for the second part.

While we were busy putting together our 20th anniversary special, we received the shocking news of the death of Dr. Niranjan Mohanty, a regular contributor to *Kavya Bharati*. He passed away on 28th July 2008. We have in this volume his essay, "Indian Poetry in English: The context of canon, challenges and future directions." Elsewhere on the pages of *KB* 20 you will find tributes to Niranjan Mohanty by Gopi Kottoor and Jaydeep Sarangi. *Kavya Bharati* joins them in mourning the loss of Niranjan Mohanty.

We place on record our thanks to Ellis Ballard and T. Ganesh Babu for their expert editorial assistance and advice in the production of *KB* 20.

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Editor: R.P. Nair

KAVYA BHARATI
a review of Indian Poetry

Number 20, 2008

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MEENA ALEXANDER

LANDSCAPE WITH KURINJI

A forked road leads into no season that I know:
Footpaths dusty, sideways drifting

A coil of bushes, petals fluted indigo, pistils violet,
Milk-streaked, whispering *Love each other or die!*

Feverish imaginings surely,
Trying to front where on earth we are

Here in the only home we know.
Time's lapse, a torn shutter, a click hoisting us

Into a landscape flicked by clouds:
A blaze, a scattering, a harvest scrawled by bees,

The ether of longing dragged in my mouth
And in your mouth the taste of mine, utterly secret.

We are made up of place – corpuscles of soil,
Reamed with chalcedony, dirt of broken blood vessels

Cliffs scarred with bloodstone, gobs of gunfire,
Grenades' catarrh, cleft throats of children,

Red runnels of water, an offertory to the gods
Who barely speak to us any more.

Twelve years from now, when the kurinji
Blooms again, where will we be?

Sitting in sunlight, on warm stones at the edge of a wall?
Pacing a hospital floor as the wounded are brought in?

Or, in some terrible dream of home,
Rinsed clean, sky-blown, shot free of a stumbling story?

CYRIL DABYDEEN

THE MUSE: AT A READING
(for Meena Alexander, May 6, 2000)

The poet
flutters her eyes
under the tent
in Providence,
Rhode Island–
I keep watching

The poet
flutters her eyes
with Ginsberg
on her mind,
and Central Park,
New York City

The poet
flutters her eyes
and trills her *r*'s
for emphasis,
making me think of a Bali
dancer in South Asia

The poet
flutters her eyes,
affecting me with her
reading persona,
bringing me closer
to a global village

Taking a few steps
at a time,
a new meaning—
which words
alone—
cannot signify.

GOPI KOTTOOR

A POEM FOR NIRANJAN MOHANTY
(1953-2008)

How soon can a rose tie its petals to the sky?
A rose? Yes, a scented one,
Cut for God's blue tabletop.
In quiet perfume bottles your fragrances stayed.
I knew you were true.
I used to dip into your fragrances with my watered hands.
One day you blew a petal to me. One red petal.
The beauty and the fragrance. They were both ours.
And you said, why is it no one cares?
Why is it that the world goes after paper roses
Trampling upon real ones crushing them with the dead?
This is the answer. Now feel the flow of perfumes.
Now it is time. Wake up and see.
Cut rose, how you have grown sky-high.

ORCHIDS

Hugging dry husks, charcoal lumps,
The neon tube roots run stealthily all over.
In pillowed dark, in moist rays,
A light green periscope shoots high, spurts
Its riot of colour,
Spilling spring in a wind – dance
Of transcendental trance.
Atop damp walls, upon mango boughs,
The orchids, wave their kaleidoscopic flames
Bringing down the sun to pieces.

PAPA'S IRON BOX

I remember papa's heavy iron box.

Neat at first and shining in new born sunlight from the glass window,
His certificates bright as gold on his wedding finger.

Well, we now broke it open at last.

The silverfish dived deep into his interview coat
Darned before a world war.

Eggs rolled, of tiny wasps knitting history upon small ancient wounds.

It is rust now, the scrap man says, 'give me,
The room will get some space. What use is a gone man's coat
And certificates?'

I watch the scrap man go, the trunk, swinging on his old bike
Like something that lost an only wing.

And I see Papa's face, his wet eyes
I can no longer touch,
vanishing in a stampede among the falling dinosaurs.

GRAVES OF ENGLISH SOLDIERS OF WORLD WAR II
(Kirkee, Pune, India)

The Pune dust
Does not seem to settle
Upon these granite crosses of death
Laid out in turf'd rows
Among the Deccan flowers
And looking sadder than white mushrooms
Whose wounds have turned from forgotten red
To green moss,
Traveling in fresh mist
Across the carefully crafted names
Once brave as Owen, mad as Gurney,
Gentle as Brooke.

THE EXTENSION

The last time that we met
We didn't know
He would be around
Until just Saturday next.
Saturday noon to be exact.
He looked very excited.
"Will get an extension,
Son will be through school final
Daughter will clear her engineering'.
He drank from the bottle he always held in hand
Pink Gelusil
Like it was real booze.

Saturday found us looking for that exact spot
as into a greek myth
but just around the corner
Where the lorry tires
Gripped him in its tread
We kept looking for a drop of blood
And wondered how merciless
Friday night rains could be.

THE RAT TRAP

A pair of round blue eyes
Stare at me this morning
Through the rusted iron bars
Of the rat trap.

They'll drown you in the pond any moment now
With a red loop tightened upon your neck,
It won't matter
That you have the heart of a child
or in your own heart,
You have done no wrong.

Stay. You must cross murder.

Yet,
God could even have made you, The Buddha,
Little one.

TIRUPATI DARSHAN

The bright bougainvillea bloom
Falls with its ribbons
From God's blue morning hat.

We pass by
The child with no hands.
A dog runs past; it is not at all auspicious now to see
All its open lesions with fat blue flies caked in them.
Upon the hill
Is the magnificent temple.
We'll now tonsure our heads
Lay our hair like black flowers at His feet

Strain for the perfect darshan,

but don't fail to miss
that 24 carat brassiere sparkling upon the Hundi.

SHANTA ACHARYA

LIVING IN INTERESTING TIMES

My partner and I are now an 'item' living in sin,
why unnecessarily become Mr and Mrs Perkin?

We may marry for tax reasons or if we plan a family
like our neighbours, a homosexual couple, happily

Married; one African, the other of Caucasian origin,
nice people, well-off, with two adopted children,
one from Albania or Romania, the other from Benin.

If we later change our minds, no messy divorce;
relationships are like supermarket take-aways.

You can accessorize, mix and match your desires,
families come in all shapes and sizes these days.

Capitalism, choice, value for money is what we swear
by, markets as you know thrive on greed and fear.

Dinner talk is about house prices, stock markets, salaries
and bonuses of investment bankers and footballers!

Young people no longer learn to count or spell;
they have spell-check in computers, Excel

Spreadsheets, smart calculators that talk and sing,
iPods, MP3 Players, Mobile phones that speak and ring.

The State tells us what to eat, how much exercise
we need, how to be a Good Citizen in language precise.

In our cosmopolitan, multicultural cities
children don't respect authority; do what they please.

Lacking a common social, ethical set of beliefs
we describe blindfolded the elephant called prejudice.

Nothing is; everything seems as it did to Alice-in-Wonderland.
I am stood on my head, incomprehensible the New World.

My word is no longer my bond;
language has lost its meaning –
where is the honour in honour-killing?

There is nothing friendly about 'friendly fire,'
no equity in Equitable Life.

Northern Rock dissolves into clay.
Things fall apart, the Old Lady of Threadneedle
Street can no longer hold her sway.

There is no end to our inventiveness,
we trespass on the moon, create the world wide web
discover the human genome, learn how the mind works
but find no cure for poverty, war or sickness.

We phone some stranger in Bangalore or Madras
to help us with our problems in Inverness.
Whether any help arrives is anybody's guess!

We bomb Iraq, hang Saddam, start a civil war,
defend our stupidity with passion that raises the ghost of Olivier.

Yet we can find no justification whatsoever
to depose Mugabe or intervene in Darfur.

Living in interesting times, we have forgotten
there is a place for justice and goodness,
that change is eternal, stands its ground, keeps its mind open.

SHAADI.COM

My ideal partner would be someone like my self –
preferably never married; will settle for divorced
or widowed with children with the right chemistry.
Tall, dark, slim and romantic; must have a GSOH.

Kind, understanding, generous, loyal, trustworthy,
goes without saying. Financially, emotionally secure;
well-educated, thoughtful, a man of action he must be.
Non-smoker, occasional drinker, must enjoy good food;
but be prepared to eat anything unless he wants to cook.
Must like reading, travelling, have a passion for Life.
Religion? A Brahmin would be nice but not essential.

I wrapped my expectations with a neat summation:
Don't have a fixed idea of what I want, but know that
when we meet, I will know and so will he...

Having spent one balmy summer evening registering
I decided to cool off with a glass of chilled wine
thinking of the beautiful boy doing his best in time.

But I received a response straight away:
No matches found; change your criteria; be realistic.

That my ideal man was not found was a blow I confess.
It doesn't mean such a man does not exist
I reasoned pulling my self-esteem back into harness.
He is simply not registered with this agency!

Having determined to do something about it
I persisted in my pursuit of Mr Almost Right.

Must try other agencies, cast my net wider;
meanwhile, no harm in checking out what's on offer,
be less fussy, let Karma in on such a deep matter –

Age: Doesn't matter; Marital status: Doesn't matter.
Children: Doesn't matter; Country of residence: Doesn't matter.
Height: Doesn't matter; Education: Doesn't matter.
Religion: Doesn't matter; Occupation: Doesn't matter.
I was inundated with suitors, crashing my computer.

BEYOND BELIEF

(For *Mark Abley* with acknowledgment to *Spoken Here*)

When Captain Cook's *Endeavour* touched
the shores of what became the metropolis
of Sydney, his sailors confronted Aboriginals
who found them peculiar beyond belief –

Instead of bark canoes, the oddly coloured strangers
rode enormous vessels on which flat plant
material hung between trees. Instead of wooden spears
the newcomers had long sticks, hard as stone,
producing a terrifying noise as they moved a finger.
Instead of walking naked, they wore bright disguises
even on top of their heads.
They hid their manhood; were they men at all?

The bravest among them poked at British breeches
until an embarrassed lieutenant
ordered his sailors to display their genitalia
to the Iora men assembled on the beach.
When they complied, the crowd '*made
a great shout of admiration*' goes the British version.

TESTING THE NATION

If the Hundred Years' War lasted a hundred and sixteen,
and the October Revolution took place in November

If Chinese gooseberries are from New Zealand
and Panama hats from Ecuador

If cat gut is made from the bowels of sheep and other
animals, and camel's hair brush from squirrel fur

If the Canary Islands were named after dogs
and King George VI's first name was Albert

If English muffins are not from England,
nor French fries from France –

Waht is rong if r chilren
canot reed or rite, lak comun sens,
tink egs do not gro in Grate Britun
and potatos r milkt from caus?[1]

[1] Answers given by children in a London primary school when asked where eggs and potatoes came from.

DARIUS COOPER

FIRE SERMON

Once my house
belonged to love.
Now it belongs only to fire.

Once the mornings
began with birds
who came to my lawn
in search of water
from the sprinklers
to bathe
before looking also
for nests
in empty flower pots
suspended from the ceilings
to house their new families in.

Now the arrival of every morning
only carries deep within it
the departure of every evening
with a long night,
a long long long night,
in between.

When love was around
the kitchen roared with fires
transferred quickly
from the heated oven and the gas rinks
to the warmth of plates and palettes
where a restless tongue
roamed the forests of the mouth

hunting for the tiniest morsel
of love, again and again
and again.
Now there is only a purple flame
that burns silently and steadily
inside the gas stove's pilot light.

The open door
that once welcomed the outside
to sudden and prolonged rejoicing
is now shut even when it is open,
for he who goes outside is alone,
and he who comes inside is also alone.

This fire
cannot be quenched by water.
This fire
cannot be enlarged by flames.
No,
I am not quoting from the Gita.
Once love dies inside a fire
it never scorches
or is extinguished.
It
merely
burns.

ENTERING THE THOUGHTS OF MY SON AS HE WATCHES HIS BEST FRIEND BURY HIS FATHER

Thank God
my father's kidneys are fine
even though
he has five stents
freshly implanted in his heart.

He's fifty-eight.
Ten years younger
than the deceased,
and apparently healthy.

To lose a parent is terrible,
especially for me,
since tears don't come so easily
like my friend,
(he's Lebanese),
weeping so copiously
and unwilling to let go the casket
before it is lowered
into the freshly dug grave.

His brothers have to gently
make him let go
the wood, first,
and then, their dad, inside.

My friend is lucky
to have two brothers

to shoulder
this enormous weight,
left behind, so suddenly,
by an absent father.

I am my father's only son
and we are a constant couple.
To stand alone
and say a few words
on that dreaded day,
as these sons are doing now…
how can anyone's entire lifetime
be summed up
in just a few words?

And why should these be
so calculatedly chosen
like the opening and closing remarks
before a grand jury?

I shall merely say
what comes naturally,
for that's the way dad would like it.
He was
a great believer
in spontaneity,
especially on formal occasions.

The sun is busy
and, as usual,
is picking out the tears,
especially from those faces

trying, very hard, to hide them.
I would rather see
my father's calm dead face
blessed by the same sun,
but without any emotion.

Perhaps that would be the best way
for me to respond
to that electricity
that would soon turn him
into an urn of ash.

When I see him
standing next to me, now,
I wonder
what he is thinking?
I don't sense any weight.
I never have, so far,
but when he finally goes away
I know I'll feel
that awful burden,
like my weeping friend
who keeps complaining
that his father
should have, at least, waited for him
as he went in search
of that final glass of water.

Why did he have to die
with that thirst still in his mouth?

I hope I'm not caught
in such a capricious errand.
I hope my dad
arrives at some remarkable finality
before letting go of this world.
I'm sure he will be
as orderly in death
as he was in life.
There are two photographs
of my friend's father:
one, as a very young man, and
one, taken only last Christmas.
The one I will have of my dad
is the one I took of him
standing in front
of an EXILE painting
in Bombay's Jehangir Art Gallery,
that year when he suddenly renounced
his desire to settle in India.

I had heaved a sigh of relief
for that had been a painful holiday
watching him drift
further and further away
from his own family,
who in their collective
age and youth
had never made the slightest gesture
to understand or welcome
his bohemian attempts
at forging acceptance
in a family, his way.

So, all of this,
has only drawn me
closer to you, dad,
for now I am free
to finally share this country
in which I was born
with you,
determined to die in it
as my father, yes, but
hallowed in my name.

THERE IS SOMETHING TO BE SAID ABOUT TRUE FRIENDS

When you ultimately find
the kind of friends
you have always wanted

the first person you find is really yourself:

for they parade that thought
and perform that feeling

you were always secretly so afraid of:

and they make you see
with a confident finality,
that life is lived best
only in absurdity.

They face
everything you efface.
They say
everything you keep silent.

They show you:
how to lengthen and shorten shadows
without the help
of the sun:

How to hide and seek
with the moon
in a clear sky
without the presence of clouds.

Some do nothing
and reminisce about the past.
Some don't have to do anything
and contemplate the future.
Some don't think at all
and pursue idleness
transparently, movingly,
honestly.

At the center, and
at the margins,
they always manage
to remain the same.
No distant horizon
diminishes them.
No immediate proximity
enlarges them.

There is something to be said about true friends.

AMIRTHA-VALLI MELCHIOR

TELL ME

Tell me,
have you ever wanted to lie down upon a floor
scattered with rounded pebbles covered
in water
just lie down upon such a floor
and absolve the world of you…

no poetry in this arresting of breath
neither violence nor beauty in such a death
just the quietest of needs
to take away me
from the obstacle course that you face.
To lie curled in my bed
never to wake
for my breath to dissolve with the waking of day.
Absolving you of me.

M. MOHANKUMAR

READING POETRY WITH AYYAPPA PANIKER

Once, tongue in cheek, he said he had an enemy
Called Ayyappa Paniker bent on frightening him
With his fierce, penetrating stare. He was not
One to be so frightened. But did he outstare
Him, as he said he would? He was so gentle and
Generous. Not merely to us, as he sat with us,
So close, and yet so distant, around the table.
Month after month, eyes closed, soaking himself
In the poems we read--our lugubrations, good,
Bad and indifferent. He didn't wear the mantle
Of the great poet he was. Nor ever spoke of
The wisdom he had gathered from the depths
He has plumbed. Not for lack of words; for
At his bidding, words would come rushing.
This complete consort dancing together. We
Received just a nod or a smile. Or at best
An approving grunt. And the meagre words
He spoke were deft touches that altered and
Enlivened the scene. Did he believe poetry is
Bred in the bones, only to be nourished and
Cannot be taught? He gave us the venue and
The ambience. And as we meet again, around
The same table, it is as if he is still with us,
So close, yet so distant, listening and smiling.

A FEW TRICKS OF MAGIC

There was a time
when I wished I had learnt
a few tricks of magic.

Once they chained me
to a massive post.
I could have broken free,
had I known the trick.
But stood listless there,
wasting away
till the chain hung so loose
I could slip away.

Then they boxed me in
and locked the box
with a heavy lock.
Doomed, I thought,
not knowing the vanishing trick,
And nearly died of
claustrophobia and asphyxia
when the box burst open…

Later, I was hoist,
(no, not with my own petard),
a haystack beneath me—
and a torch-bearing man.
I wished I had learnt
the 'fire escape act.'
Then came the snag
that spoiled the plan.

And now?
Now no need of tricks
Now that I have quit.

GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

Up above the stars, as some believe?
Or on some lofty mountain peak?
Or in the once fertile plains, hemmed in
by two rivers? Or in men's minds?
Or mere imagination? No, we say,
it is here, in this land nestling between
the sea and the mountain range, once
so green, and fabulous with its spices,
and timber; where the seasons never failed
and crops were bountiful, watered by
the ever-flowing rivers, sun-ripened;
where there was no flood or drought;
no theft or foul play; and people plied
their trades without let or hindrance;
and the fruits of peace and plenty
were shared by all. Elysian fields.
God's Own Country, as it was.

And so it is, we maintain,
though conditions have changed,
so drastically.

HOSHANG MERCHANT

ANHAD GARJÉ
(after Hafiz)

1
I am in a hurry
to read the lines in his palm
to go past the bustle in the market
to his room's quiet

I step quickly and do not know
I'm pressing god's most precious part underfoot

God has given me a precious life to play with
But fool that I am! I'm in a hurry…

2
He
Is so adept at arguments
Of the marketplace; of politics

His face is so bright
I could believe he invented the wheel
(All the time some music plays in his head)
But like all the bright boys
He doesn't know, god's going to send him back

To school to learn how to re-fashion
The broken spokes on Love's wheel…

Our world, our city, our bodies
Are prisons

I have not come here
To make you a prisoner

We can live in rules of friendship
And set each other free

3
Last night there was an orchestra
You and I did not hear it

How can we hear it tomorrow night?
—Neither do you know / Nor I!

OBJECT OF DESIRE

May-December

Almonds and ice
Something moves in space towards another thing
One always moves towards the other: Insect to Bird
Bird to Beast
Flower to Fruit
Man to Woman
They say: He is a Bird and I am a Beast
(But it could easily be the other way round)

2
He moves in space
But not towards me
He moves around me

He walks towards me
Stops Stands Stoops Watches
If I look at him looking at me he looks away
Flowers did not have the look of flowers that are looked
those days

3
The Self was distracted
Blouse unbuttoned / laces loose
It was the look of a madman looking for something

Dope wouldn't do Nor Woman
The other is clean-cut
Grows a beard of our ancestors
Hair well-oiled
The other will slay the self
Staying is a Power But Love is power, too.

II
The Alps move around in rings
Lovers get buried under snow

The Himalayas rise in chains
Today morning I arose in the Himalayas

From the air I see the Descent of the Ganges
Our Hindu ancestors imaged it: looking up from earth

Birds and beasts move in rings
Pashupatinath—the Linga—stands still.

(Nepal 1.3.2008)

SUMMER OF 42

That story was a rage!
A teenager saw a woman his mom's age

Undressing at the window:
Love became his window into a New Age.

IN MEMORIAM
The Sufi Master, Hasan Askari, d.2008

After that moment we will meet
Companion, once again we'll meet

You are ahead
We, behind
In dance and song again we'll meet

What! don't eyes
and dreams
reach the same home and meet?

Then waking moments
sleeping moments
Why don't the two ever meet?

You're Sufi
I'm seeker
You know in sleeping there's wakefulness
What difficulty in wakefulness!

My companion! Friend! Fellow traveller
You went ahead
We remained behind

NEPAL

I had a vision of the Himalayas
And within that vision slept other visions
Like Vishnu upon a serpent
I thought I saw a Newari Vaskar
Go by on a bike with wife and kid
(Vaskar while loving Him always
Threatened to start a family)
All the Ranas ride horseback on bikes
(Like Yunus who died under a bike's wheel)
It was as if Time passed with closed eyes
before my eyes

2
It was not that I lost out on boys
It was that they lost out on my poems
which is to stay on god's play…

3
Now there's this chauffeur to the tourist gods
Who stole my heart from the rear-view mirror

What's the first letter of his alphabet.
A or O?
How does it matter?

4
It was then I knew
That the Beloved always knew
What I know
Before He was born.

IRAN

There are movements in history
Some peoples go West / Others, come East

My people and yours came East
We met

But now I wish to go back West with you
To write from your young mouth my old untold history…

(May-December)

2
This is the Season of Spring
Where a lion cub whelps into life

The trees that are old
Put on new leaves

Old people sing new songs
You were born
But now in your 20th year
You spring from childhood into manhood

The pools of life reflect the old trees
Drowned and springing into a sky

We give ourselves a Name
And stick fast by that Name
Love like God is beyond names

—

If you're terminally ill
The physician will slowly increase the opium doses
Till you painlessly die

No one will do you such favours in Love.

—

What did Hussain's murder prove?
That innocence is ever unvanquished.

SHIVA

I've seen Shiva dance
The tandava on Kailash

He was bodiless
He was Time

No man, he
He was energy, personified

(1993) Shivratri, 2008

OUR FRIENDSHIP IS LIKE THIS

(*for Ajay of Nepal*)

You feel cold
I reach for your hands
Warm them till each fingertip tingles

You feel hungry
I empty my wallet
Go buy food I say

You stand up and embrace me
in farewell
I lay this entire book of poems
at your feet

the night before my departure
Both of us tossed in separate beds
Thinking of the other

Why did I not bring a rope
And say to you:
Here tie yourself to me for life

And weep no more

(Shivratri 2008)

SHIVRATRI 2008

How is the linga connected to the sky?
It pierces the sky

(The sky is a void)

How do the bull and monkeys move?
Monkeys chase each other; the bull stands still.

(Monkeys set up shrill cries)

How does the temple spire aspire?
(It aspires to be Kailash)

(Mt. Kailash too pierces the sky)

How is the void populated?
Birds, beasts, flowers, mountains, valleys flourish in the void.

(This is foisson)

Parvati sits on Shiva's lap
Tonight is their marriage

I dream of my Nepal; lover-to-be
And write this poem

THE SECRET-SHARER

It is a gash
In the pomegranate
—A smile showing all teeth
A blush
No, a wound
With blood oozing hour by hour

Pomegranates!
—The globes of her breasts
The globe of our ruby-red rounded world
between her arms and mine
A world complete / a month complete / a complete circle!

—Who is the third who walks among us?

A wife's husband
is housebound
She can bind his body
But the mind's globe
The heart's seeds flow free…

What does woman want?

Before the thought was spoken
it was articulated
Before the sentence was over
it completed itself
My friend! My mind's companion

Angel!
Why were you sexless?
—Because all angels are
And because you fell to earth
But at the ill-fated hour

I was already another's

Return angel!
There you shall live
And I, here
Each knowing each pines
to be in the other's realm

Music means to make thirds No words!

And I here rooted
A cedar struck by lightning
Burnt out
But still somehow alive

SUNITI NAMJOSHI

ANIMALS

You spoke
and the animals returned to their cages,
though all they had done was stand and look.

"Animals," you said.
"Why do poets write about animals?"

My heart lurched.

"It's their silence," I mumbled,
knowing,
I had pitted my speech against their speech
precisely in order to mine that silence.

PERSPECTIVE

Because she is old and tired,
she walks through the walls of her memory
and the boundaries collapse noiselessly.
And where her foot alights unexpectedly,
every flower she has seen or thinks she has seen
bursts into bloom outrageously.
which she understands and does not mind.
She says it puts things into perspective for her.

KINGFISHER
(*For Radhika*)

A kingfisher who lived on the Axe estuary had practised so hard and become so proficient that in the end she had become a celebrity. Young kingfishers came from far and near to ask for tips.

"Is it," asked one earnest thing, "a matter of understanding the theory perfectly? Should one be able to calculate the angle of refraction, the veering vectors of one or more fish and the precise path of one's own trajectory, before one proceeds to the practice of fishing?"

The kingfisher sighed. She hadn't understood what he was talking about. Probably about fishing. That was all anybody ever talked about. After a pause she murmured slowly, "It all depends, don't you see?"

"On what?" cried the young one. At last they were getting to the heart of it.

"On the angle of the wind," said the kingfisher firmly.

"Thank you! Oh thank you!" came the reply. He spent the rest of his life building wind socks to calibrate the speed and direction of the wind.

Another kingfisher had her own ideas about the nature of fishing.

"Madame Kingfisher," she bubbled enthusiastically, "I am, as you must have guessed, a fan of yours. But be honest. Just between us, it's all a matter of luck, isn't it?"

"I have been fortunate," admitted the kingfisher.

"Well, if I fished on the Axe estuary, and sat on the precise spot where you are sitting, in brief, if I were you, I too would catch a great many fish, would I not?" demanded the fan.

"Undoubtedly," the kingfisher answered, and the fan flew away to tell the world how right she had been.

And so they came and went, until at last, when the kingfisher was old, a very tiny kingfisher arrived.

"I've retired," muttered the old kingfisher.

"It doesn't matter," replied the little one. "I want to learn whatever it is you want to teach."

"All right," sighed the kingfisher. "Sit down and wait."

The little kingfisher sat down and waited. "Right," she said. "Now what?"

"Think."

The little kingfisher thought. After a while she said, "I've thought and I've waited. I've waited and I've thought. What happens next?"

"Nothing," the kingfisher told her. "Keep doing it. That's what you have to learn. That's what I have to teach."

"But what about the fish?" demanded the little one.

The old one shrugged. "Fish are like poems, you catch them when they leap."

S.A. PRABHAKAR

TOMORROW

I looked for tomorrow and tomorrow
Hope rising with every sun
Yet only yesterday came, like yesterday
In rags, clutching obsolete coins
Pointing somewhere ahead
Where the road curved
"I've seen him in my dreams
Rosy-cheeked, white-robed
Sometimes with a halo
Sometimes with a sword!"
Down the very road I've been
He hobbled on, with others in tow
Each clutching the god
He was born with
Muttering familiar prayers
Or paradise for the poor
Freedom from birth
Of messiahs and avatars
Coming again
Pointing somewhere ahead
Where the road curved
Looking for tomorrow
And tomorrow and tomorrow
And finding only yesterday, like yesterday

INVITING

The sodium vapour lamps
Come on early like the night
Despite the illumination
My glasses look like they need changing
The air in my lungs
Whistles as it comes out
I think I should wear my woolens
Next time I dare to stir out
When I see girls go laughing along the road
Savouring cone ice creams
Mocking the nip in the air
Even death seems seductive

MARGAZHI

You can hear
The drip of time
From the quartz clock
Only on a night like this
When it is so cold
You cannot leave the fan on
And muffle the noises
From the house and street
Here comes the watch
Blowing the gates
Angry dogs in his wake
Like the ghosts
That sometimes keep you awake

You don't mind
Losing some sleep
If you can get to watch
The mist paint halos
Around the saffron lamps
In the year's coldest month
Beloved of the God
Beloved of the Kuselas

WHOSE GOD

I cannot leave
But my footwear
When I enter temples
My marks remain
When I pray.
When I close my eyes
Before indifferent deities
Desires buzz the flies
Around a dung heap.
I admire the beauty
Of the camphor flame
I do not see in it
Life's evanescence.
When I smear the sacred ash
On my forehead
I do not think of pyres
I find the fragrance sensual
The man who cannot enter
Does he know whose God is here?

RAILWAY COLONY

Did you know me
When I was there
Watched with glee
As I walked on air
After the day was done
And all the players gone with the sun
On the Red Fields we sat and let the match run
In the mind, found how we lost and won
You taught us how to win, how to lose
How to come back, chase the blues
Go crying to bed but wake with a smile
Fit to light a mile
The train's impatient horn
Told us we had to move on
For dreams have to be met head on.

I SMELL RAIN

All day long
I keep hearing
The kuyil's song
Though the sun's searing
And no breeze blows
All's not lost, the bird knows.
When you curse the noon
When you wish for the moon
Do you not see the flowers
Of delight in the spring colours?

The cobbler in the shade
Watches feet unstopping go by
Wonders when his day'll be made
Looks up at the sky with a sigh.
There the kuyil is singing again
As if there is no past, as if there is no pain
Though the sun glowers
And all cheer devours
The bard smiles, looks ahead
Smells rain, sees clouds overhead

EPIPHANY

Grown-up Tom Sawyers
Swing from bus windows
Trying to woo care-worn Bettys
Move on! Move on!
Cry harried conductors
At swaying commuters
Yet to find their feet
Randy men paw tired women
Rushing home to more chores
Blame it on the crowd
When the victims flare up
Flower-sellers brawl
Without a blush
Even as their fingers string
Modest jasmine buds
How endless it all seems
For the traveller in transit
Destinations no nearer

ON THE MARGIN

Above the loud hoardings
Stoking a thousand desires
The trees stand tall and clear
More of the sky than earth
Darker than green
In the gathering night
Like the parrots now hastening home
With their happy screech and long tell-tale tails…
On the road margin
Preening eves keep craning their necks
For buses which never seem to come
Or keep going the other way…
Near my feet, the vagrant stirs
Rubs his eyes, looks around
Misses his dream,
And falls asleep again.

NEIGHBOURS

Doors bang shut
At footfalls on stairs
Conversations freeze
For the intruder to pass
Faces turn away
At chance encounters
Or make strained smiles
I know these vain bipeds
Owning prime spare feet

Sniff at tenants like me
"Lock the gate!"
Somebody yells at me
I sheepishly turn back and obey…
Outside on the street
Mongrels in a turf war
Bare fangs and snap at each other

MAYA

The sun didn't rise
Nor did it set
The sea didn't fall
Down the horizon
Under the feet
Unfelt by us
It was the earth
That spun round the sun
Held in place by distant orbs
Through strong unseen strings
Pirouetted through the dark
Giant or pygmy traveler in space
Cocooned in a safe placenta
All moving, when not moving
Unknowingly, circumambulating
Brethren living in hovels
Next to the new age road
Do they ever look up at the stars
Ponder this play of illusion
When the sun in their stomach
Is the centre of their universe
Their only hell, their only heaven?

STANLEY MOHANDOSS STEPHEN

THE HOME-LESS[1]

Living paradox in the land of Canaan,
the young and old in street corners,
holding placards that ask for alms,
what a rude shock to a man from India,
where imploring for alms is no sin.
Levite like, I pass by, wondering,
Who the old lady at the traffic island is,
where will she hide herself during winter?
Won't the empty churches in every street corner,
play the Good Samaritan to such bereft souls?
The old man at the traffic junction!
I bet, you have a sad story to share,
Where are your beloved ones?
Don't you have a stone to repose?
I am sure, you will pass for a Prince in my land.
I look around … Hey, Alien Workers!
slogging to send dimes back home,
bunkering in nostalgia for a lost home,
visiting home frequently in virtual reality,
you are the ones! Lost the Home! The Home-less!

[1] A reflection on seeing the 'Homeless' in the United States on a recent visit.

THE ROCKIES
(Colorado 2007)

My apartment window frames the Rockies,
Mt. Sinai … Mt. Kailash … abode of bliss.
The day I whirred through your whorls,
you bore me on your back without a grudge,
to where it meets the sky, highpoint of Man's attempts!

You are Mt. Sinai … but where is Moses?
Where are the stone tablets? Where are the edicts?
"Thou shall not kill … Thou shall honour your parents."
Where is Manna of Heaven?
I see only Modern Moses consuming Hamburgers and Starbucks.

You are Mt. Kailash of the West… but where are the rishis?
Where are their meditative asanas amidst glaciers?
Where are their topknots and kamandalas with holy water?
Where are the famished pilgrims circumambulating thy sacred self?
I see only headgeared bikers and joggers with coke cans.

Inching up the mountain is breathtaking,
Yet, is it not an awesome exercise for the soul?
What a futile attempt it is,
if it fails to consummate in spiritual ecstasy,
if it fails to satiate the soul that journeys upward.

SUJATHA MATHAI

DEMOLITION

True, houses are nothing—
just shells, like the body.
The clay pot is shattered
only the spirit remains.

This house, which my parents built,
where the spirits of my loved ones still linger
is about to be demolished.
Stone by stone, brick by brick,
teak carried from the lumber yard,
Mother sat in sun and rain,
only an old umbrella shielding her,
supervising the building,
counting every rupee
of their small lifetime savings.
Father was a scholar, a thinker, a dreamer,
he left it all to her.

Forty years of living,
the laughter of aunts, uncles, cousins,
voices of people coming and going,
the cars coming up the driveway.
Who ever thought
my mother would sit years after,
alone in her wheelchair,
longing for visitors who never came.
Grandfather lived here,
till he fell like a leaf from the tree,
at the age of 97.
Ripeness is all.

Fate took away my sister's husband and mine,
and tossed us alone onto distant sands.
The loved child, later the fatherless one,
found shelter here.
Both mother and father died here, and
their bodies were laid upon the wicker divan,
while people passed by
    to pay their
        last respects,
or kiss their cold foreheads.

Why do we pride ourselves
    upon our wealth,
    our beauty, our strength,
    our wisdom,
for all is swept away.
But these are the things we loved.
The human face, the house, the earth.
The clay pot shatters
the strongest house falls.
The imprisoned spirit, a bird,
flies to the skies above.

Years later, alone, dreading
    the demolition of the house,
I lay, distraught, upon my bed,
    watching a crow
    fly low against my bedroom window,
    almost crashing into it,
    cawing piteously,
then fly round to the balcony,
    still cawing,

and I feared it was going
to come right into my room,
but it flew off, and sat
on the neighbour's roof,
seeming to cry out to me.
Our neighbour said
it was the soul
of a loved one
trying to speak to me.
And I believed her.

When a person dies,
a whole world
dies with him or her.
That world passes into
silence and oblivion.
In that very silence,
that closing of the breath
Leaf falls upon leaf,
stone upon stone.
New shapes, sounds,
voices emerge –
The story that was broken
the lines that blurred,
and disintegrated,
are transmuted into
other stories, other faces, other lives.

THE HIDDEN FLOWER

I reached the door
But the door was closed.

I walked the road
But found, on looking back,
The road had disappeared.

I found the love of my dreams
But had to turn and walk away.

I unclench my knotted fist,
Gaze at my empty hands
And find a small flower
of life
Hidden in my open palm.

COSMIC DRAMA

These days of passion and
of magic,
So shortlived in a cruel
metropolis,
How subtly they attend
to summer's initiation.
These girlish days, hinting of
secret joys,
and covert laughter
Will soon disappear,
give way
To searing heat,
and days of blinding
whiteness.

A mystic ceremony
of sunrise –
and sunset,
and nothing but the sun.
Crows sit listlessly
upon dying rooftop gardens,
And the tarred road
throws up
The shimmer of a false oasis –
Summer's initiation
is a cruel rite
covered over by the
cool night.
The 'loo' rages with
angry dust
Choking the unresisting
with the fury of a dacoit.
In the sky, the moon,
bitter over her eternal
separation
From her one true love,
the sun,
Sheds a tear or two,
As her reserved and remote
daughters, the stars,
look away, or just gaze
into their mirrors.
Neither moon nor stars
dream of the passion
They invoke in earth's lovers,
Who, bathed in ethereal light,
Breathe in the cool
summer evening,
And become infatuated
with the beauteous Other,
These – the children of earth.

SALT

My son has not learnt
flattery.
I asked him if he loved me
He said No but your
hands are warm.
That was better
than Cordelia's answer.

EVE SPEAKS

We were touched by fate,
Our love was doomed
Though we never knew it.
We wandered hand in hand.
Always together, bound by a
wordless innocence.
An ice-blue moon came between us,
We lost the words that
could have saved us.
In fact, we had no words.
We could not blame the serpent
Nor God, who does not pity lovers.
So we were driven from Eden
To roam for ever,
separate and alone,
In darkened fields,
and thorny byways.

Across the hills,
the sun rose and set
In heartless perfection.

BUTTERFLIES

Flirting with flowers,
drunk with the pollen of life,
Doomed aviators,
Seeking the beauty of flowers
on their radars,
seeing reflected, their
own brilliant colours –
magenta and purple and orange.
The world is theirs for a day,
Till their wings burst and
disintegrate,
Their adventurous flight
Is crushed,
Some schoolboy pins
their exquisite wings
upon a page.
Cruelty preys upon beauty,
Beauty is doomed to
end in a museum.
Wings float away –
Oh human fate!

APARANTA
(Sanskrit for "that which lies on the horizon.")

That voyage was the first
leaning over deck rails,
young and full of hope,
as familiar faces became
blurs
on a distant pier.
The horizon lay beyond,
inviting, appealing,
the pain of parting softened
by the thrill of the unknown.

Older, the faces that vanish
on the pier,
the ocean unfamiliar,
the horizon darker.
Faces one will never see again
Haunt one in this last voyage.
The stars that crowd the sky
Speak of this world lost
Other worlds, unknown.

MANI RAO

SLOUGH

Nude, the poet has to fashion masks out of his own diaphanous
slough.
Extract expressions and adore each as a face.
There is no face, only a deft masker.
As shadow to body, body to rhythm—follow the ruse—this far—
this guise, this guile.

Slough must be eaten to the last shred.
On the last journey, tracks made by the head must be covered up
by the body.
Coil to the shape of a bracelet, place tail inside mouth, fasten clasp.

The womb never leaves a child. You wear it on your back even
as you look for it in absent-minded mourning.
The new skins you grow are slough, but this is flesh – kin –
Slide back into its canoe, bark curved from memory, ad thus
dressed, go to the shore of your bride death.

POL POT

Piece by piece the clothes fell, skin peeled and flesh ran in lumps
and gravy
Her sidelong glance still tosses lazily on your hammock smile,
icecube swirling provocation in your glass
The bones are good to drum with
Tusk plucked and thrown like a gauntlet
Row of ivory pawns, pillars in war of no ceiling

You relieve the palms of superfluous arms and use their sawtooth
blades to slice our necks
Shells of infant heads you smash on trees, oil stains trunks as tears
of elephants
We play calm host to your furrowing worms, rats tentative in our
gullies, radio flies
When you tap for one last formal dance we show up in crossbone
bow-ties, jiggling our hips we make the ratatat-tat of
castanets
Your raised leg swings the ball of your foot bounces tilting the
earth, the heel falls correcting the tilt, chandeliers heave,
marbles Rrrrrr
Our skulls your lost beachballs; someday some snake our scarf or
rag will loop through our sockets to polish us

BIRD UNION

This bird is the same as that
Has put on some weight around the middle
Is having a bad hair day

What's your name, I asked, for future reference.

Omnibird, said it, in surround-sound.

No prima-donnas among us.
One sounds like another of its kind

And doesn't mind the rhyme.
It's the art of singing in a choir

Even when singing solo.
Petition, re-petition.

A signature campaign.
Second sopranos

Clamouring to be first.

S. MURALI

FOR ALL THE HISTORY OF EARTH

A poem for Lonappan, friend and intellectual extraordinaire

Utilizing nothing more than the light
Reflecting off the streets, he lay curled
On the hard tiled floor of his huge study
Tired eye-lids refusing to fall asleep
Scouring the printed words on book after book

Reading and reading and reading

A rich man's son willing to declass himself
In all conscious efforts—with Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre, and
Lukacs and all the *history of class-consciousness*.

Wearying to reach the stars before anyone else did
With everything more than anyone ever willed
Straining every nerve, straightening every curve
Logically, rationally, disinclined to refrain,
Return without anything concrete—
Even searching minutely
Between the pages of *Being and Nothingness*
Because nothingness cannot *be*—
Ending in sole silence the tiring curvature of critical arguments.

For all the history of earth
Given the magnitude of being what he was
Caught between the stalagmites of sorrow
And the stalactites of joy
He could not be anything aught.

An intellectual angel
His efficient flight
Took him beyond all the stars.

BEING, DWELLING, AND LOCATION
(For John Abraham, film maker and friend)

The oracle prefers anonymity and creates its own language.
We presume to understand. It is part of our everyday deception.
Spontaneity is a later attribute to the river flowing through
Us and our village, bisecting our world into this bank and the other.
You were oracle without language
Dwelling in silence and dreams
Purposeful in a world devoid of gravity and reality
Locating us in time and out of time
Temporal and transcendental
In locale and image. The river becomes one and many.

Your cinemas were
Chimeral, never unilateral.
The donkey in the poet's village, the persecuted clinging to the tree,
The forlorn mother's anxieties*, all working backwards
And untying the text of history and apprehension.
Alcoholic, dirty, unkempt
You walked in and out of our language and towns
Mixing memory and desire, with all the leisure of a madman.

Once for a review of your work in *The Times* you had to consult
The British Library's reference shelf, and I walked in with you.
The library staff wore horrified looks at your disheveled bearing
Little recognizing the genial soul behind that awful façade.

You had nothing to hurry towards, no one to convince.

*The reference is to John's films, *Agraharathil Kazhuthai, Cheriyachchannte Krurakrityangal, Ammayariyan etc.*

You booed the hell out of everyone—prophet and poet
Local and global. Stinking to the core
You put off every undesirable element out of breath
And freed our cinematic art from its make believe.
This is real. You are no more.

Our entries and exits are relatively easy.
We do not linger around for purposeless chatter.
When the world parodies everything in time
The sole aim of all art is to keep recording
Till the very end.

Your camera eye is still open.

RENO* POEMS

Reno
the bluey blueness
of Tahoe, and the road
bent on the mountain's brow. Snow.

Night in Reno
who has pulled
all the stars down
and drained the rainbow
of all its colours?
Might be the playful
children of the Reno valley.
The night is still young
in the Casino.

Dawn
stretching and pulling
the dawn is a cat
now a mat
strongly
pulled away—dawn

Yoga
the meeting of simple silent self
and howling Brahman—
peace that passes all understanding

Haiku
the melody of a single line
and a mask ripped away—
the irony of an unsaid word

Aspens in Autumn
yellow gold
in the gambling valley
trembling: who's next?

*Reno is a big small-town in the *State of Nevada, US*—it is famed for its snow-capped mountains—sought after dearly in the skiing season— the placid Lake Tahoe, the river Truckee, and of course the ubiquitous Casinos— second only to *Las Vegas* in this regard!

JENNIFER DKHAR

A BEING CALLED MAN

The wrath of Nature is painful
The anger of man so real!
I wonder in amazement:
Is this human existence?
Born to lead a hideous life!
Does man need to change his ways?
Or is it too strong and tough a task?
Certain I am the decline has come
The wrath of God is yet to be defined.
Battles and wars, hatred and anger,
Jealousy of Man!
How I dread to see the failure
Of leading a cheerful happy existence!
Wherever we turn only pain abounds
Torment and torture, blood and pus
What oozes out is no blood of man
The heart of the Divine in twain is cut.

On man God worked His mould so fine
On man God sees his soul divine.

God bleeds with every cut and wound
Real tears of blood and pain!

Dear God I wonder once again
How belittled are we in your eyes
To dare shun the love of God
And open our arms to a devil unkind.
The temper that brought woes on earth
Has conquered man through his evil ways
The rule of the devil is seen in all
When will dear God redeem us all!

RABINDRA K. SWAIN

ANTONIO IN SEARCH OF SHYLOCK

At a time
When the glaciers are melting
More than before

and Tsunami is no more
just the matter Pacific,
you say, "My pound of…"

Why don't you be kind
and slay
me?

That'll fetch you
not one
but a hundred pounds.

Where are you now?
I am moving
with all my mass,

including
your pound
of flesh,

now fast
on the crest of
the Tsunami waves

now slow
on hollow ice
to make myself light

of my guilt
not to have
paid back

your dues.
It's not just
a miracle that

while the rest
perished
you and I

have survived.
We are that
flotsam and jetsam

thrown into the attic
of the collective
unconscious

so that
we can be
used as archetypes,

so that
they can be
human beings

and carry on
business
in our clothing.

IN DESPAIR

I.
What's this,
the god's gift,
the desire to sleep
with a woman
when you are neck-deep
in worries, trying
to escape, flip
a coin, peer
into its obverse,
inverse sides
looking for that niche
where your fate,
despondent, lies?

II
You often think
of that you abandoned,
incomplete,
but Manu, its worry,
is in your mind
always with his desire
to balance a mountain
on a rock
at right angle,
seeking
every night
love,
not lust as we may
name

it
in our depravity
and blame it on his bad luck.
If it's so
it's not because,
he says,
we cannot humour
our plight
but
because we refuse
to reckon
that
those who are
our friends
could be only
less than us—ancillary
deities.

THE FACE OF THE EXTINGUISED ONE

I think I have seen
that face of the extinguished one
        from the tower.

        But I am in no mood
to stick to the mouth
from which I erupted,
to be no lava nor larva
of a renewed life.

Who are you calling me,
calling my mother's name,
my sister's, my ancestors'
from there?

It is because
I am a mat, rolled, now resting
against the wall,
now slumping to the floor
that has floored me since how long
I do not remember;
I am just that nail
of a lie to take out all the nails
of lies from the blind eyes.

All I know of irony
is that it sits across a fence,
cherishing this feeling—
that it could be erased
from the slate, could be written
again, a practice in calligraphy.

Where are you,
the face of the extinguished
rainbow, who pricks me
no more? When did you realize
that I am a crown on the head,
a nail in the sole?

SOME PEOPLE

Some people can harass
Some people for
Sometime.
Some of the victims may survive
As they do, nevertheless you,
A painful heir, collect the bone-mills
Of the body-in-pain
In the vase of your palms,
Season it with the water of your tear,
Grow a bonsai of your muted desire
With the air of your sighs
And the light of your dried eyes.
A bonsai is a plant too,
You tell yourself,
Luxuriant with its urge to grow tall,
Reminding the mutilator—
It's they who can never be
Extinct—of his deed, his sly creed,
His ingenious guilt,
Appeasing the gods modelled by and
Melded to his need, sacrificing
The one of your kind, each time
He decides to weed his dreams.

WHAT YOU MISS

All along it has been there.
You felt its presence
But could not be sure of the space
It occupies.

It played with its shadow
Till sundown. With the dark
It crept under the door.
You felt its rustle but couldn't

Touch it, sense its breath.
The walls you stared at
Drew only a blank.
It sensed your despair
And dropped its quills.
Failing to get its hint
You sulk and then wilt.
Dawn is a petal; dawn is a quill.

RANU UNIYAL

WOMAN TO WOMAN
(Kamala Das to Judith Wright)

You tell me of a sorrow
That was mine
Yesterday
I brushed my hands
The rough edges of my nails
Had another sorrow and underneath
It was all wet, wet with sense of despair
Are they all the same the men we loved?
The one who promised and walked away
And the one who married
And the one whose seed I held inside
With such unholy patience and longing

You share with me a joke
That is yours
Today
I laugh with you
It is another tale of a woman
Who like us
Did odd jobs, a house, a husband and a child or two
Or none what difference would it make?
Yet in place and she danced to the tune
Until it soured her bones and soiled her blood.
But she smiled and hugged her tears as if
Nothing at all had happened.

There she was at the bus stop,
At the post office
In bed and the kitchen
Beside the computer and the bath room

Unlike Clytemnestra unlike Draupadi
Unlike Medusa unlike Anusuya
Kicking her angst afraid
It would not just eat her inside out
But follow her like a ghost and then
They would all know
These smells of the sweat
Only dead possess.

LAUGHTER

Is not to be practiced in the open
As we walk in groups of ten and twos
It chooses to sit in the remote study
As and when I give myself to you.

BEHIND THE PERIYAR

To convey the words we need
A pen and paper and a sheaf of emotions
All wrapped like a neat bouquet of different hues
To protect from memory which often
Rues the actual days of togetherness
And often blows out of proportion the
Nights that we could not spend together
The haunting desire to renew all contacts
Pushes itself from my worn-out corridors
And I helpless as a lane that was long forsaken
Hang on to those alleys stunned by silence.

REALIZATION

You who might have been in love with ten odd women
But without any pangs of shame held on to her
Like a wild orchid that is tight-shut in a five feet old Egyptian vase
It is a man of skill who fights when half the pulse is gone

No matter what they say and how they do
You have become one with the shadows of memories
They are there in plenty not as lilies that have lost its smell
Spruced and full of light refusing to blur with time

Where is the chrysalis that has shaped my knowledge?
When my own flesh has been in the company of strangers
How is it that I speak with such confidence only of you?
One who was never mystified by my absence?

KAPAD BEACH IN CALICUT

I walked hand in hand with memories that belonged
To those footsteps of life I had never seen,
Inside that vast current of numberless zones
I found myself like a bubble waiting to uphold
The slush of serenity throbbing with defiance.

The waters green and played with shades of blue.

Eyes remember the shrill patois as it held Azam's laughter.
But mouths refused to speak
Yes you were there in every glance and muffled yawns
Of the wide beach caressed the winds, the skies, the sand
While the sun watched with envy.

SMITA TEWARI

PAST SINS

Do I have to beg
Rebirth
To become whole again?
Atone with a thousand dips
In those Holy rivers
Mounts of purity
Names familiar in books
Or on the lips of
Pilgrims, fanatic in belief
I had always mocked.

Take back all that I ever chastised
Or made mockery of
Goddesses in bright red sarees
Dark faces smeared with red hot vermillion
Yellow flowers adorning the notch in a tree
Mini temples dotting roadsides to protect
The millions in the country of India
Those Gods on wayside shrines
I had never bowed to

Should I retrace my steps?
This time with burning incense
And coconuts bursting with juice
When cracked open on a stone.

To go over each of those moments
Where in can I find my forgiveness?

If undergoing sorrows is the natural result of past sins
For sins I do not remember having committed
How do I atone
In this inevitable path to death
Carrying a body which was given to me
Incomplete, defective.

Would atonement bring completeness?

PRAYER

I have with me
A beautiful shoe but a broken foot
A smile, but no mouth
Where do I wear my happiness?

In a silent prayer to You

I try to fold my hands
My arms are cut at the wrists
Knobbly stumps of flesh remain

I try to shut my eyes
But the eyelashes are torn
and the edges bleeding.

I have in my heart a prayer
but nothing to offer it with.

T. GANESH BABU

INEVITABLE EVIL

What a tiny little creature
you are;
with your size
would anyone think
that you are
such a troublesome brat!

Chasing every individual
to the core.

Get me the person
who invented you;
I would KILL him.

And now that
you have almost become
a part of me
I cannot even desert you
at this stage.

… … … …

Do you think
you have commonsense?

If at all you have,
without my command,
you would not have
woken me up
Sunday morning at five.

If at all you have,
you would not have
girrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrred
when my boss was
dictating
a very important letter.

If at all you have,
you would have allowed me
to piss in peace.

How many times you know
you have threatened
in the bathroom,
whenever there is a ringtone
unable to identify
whether it is actually ringtone or …

I am waiting for the day
when you are upgraded
so that
when anyone calls,
you would read my mind,
and answer:

"THE SUBSCRIBER
YOU ARE DIALLING
IS CURRENTLY **VERY ANGRY**;
PLEASE
DIAL
WHEN HIS SOUL
RESTS IN PEACE."

KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

HAIKUS

Juicy looking plums,
watery taste. Shouldn't have
plucked on rainy day.

Sluggish drain flow—
city folk
going to office.

Monsoon runnels on hill slopes—
city folk
rushing from office.

Raining days on end—
only soldiers' clothes flapping
on sagging clothes line.

Never knew bulbuls
feeding at dawn, noisy as
Khasi funerals.

Rule-the-roost gridlock—
naturally, cars don't have
death rate, only birth.

Drizzling in the sun—
at the end of a rainbow,
there's a filthy stream.

Canine love-making—
more embarrassed he who looks
than he who craps

Autumn sky spreading
heaps of cotton wool—all set
to make winter rugs.

Aroma of brewing tea—
dawn?
Village Defence (midnight) Party.

Creepy caterpillar,
just when did you change into
these flying colours?

Last haiku of Basho—
alone,
facing blank page.

Fiery pomegranate
bursting with ripe seeds—earth
bursting with humans.

TRANSLATIONS

VIHANG A. NAIK

WORD IN A CITY

among the noises
among the crowded smoke

word in a city

struggles for breath
in the web of life

jeevangeet[1]

GHOST AND FUTURE

looking back
you find your by-
gone days scat-
ered here
and there
here seeing the past
you begin to turn
ghost or looking at
future's thin lanes
you are lost
in the sky
of a city

[1] The Song of Life

N – THOUGHT

war
is

a nuclear thought
takes birth

before
the global contract of peace

now
who shall be

the epic
poet

of our nuclear race?

THAT POET

he wrote a gazal
he turned his heart out

that poet at the shore
he drew his poem

MORNING

black
tea

or
coffee

with
news

paper
in

black
letters

after
turning

news
the

day
begins

uncertain

MADRAS CAFÉ

idli
dosa

chutney
wada

sambhar
half

bitten
bites

and
then

left
her

taste

MINE

after
rains

dirty
filthy

streets
words

and
memories

mine

LOVE

yes, there's
a word

used
without concern

and care
this way

and that
always

in
a diff-

erent sense
yes, there's

love

LOST

a word
lost

in a puzzle
meanings

take birth
in a poem

a poem
turns into

a slut
searches

a poet
whose

existence
lost

in the puzzle
of the

word

LOGIC

what are these
logical speculations?

here colour-
less butter

flies
flutters

logic
philosophic

here seven
colours

of the rainbow
dis-

appears
in

colour
less

answers
and

questions

PENCIL

(1)

these lines
dance

on the sharp end
on this palm

beauty

(2)
rubber
sharpener

blank
paper

and
the pencil

takes
the shape

of a beauty
and

is erased

(3)
beautiful
apsara

the pencil
turns

into
a snake

and
is lost

(4)
the sharp end
the pride end

this
pencil's

sharp end
pride end

often
breaks

down

(5)
on
the blank

paper
shapes

sense
philosophy

life

salvation

death
often

gives
this

beauty

(6)
scriptures
come

to life
with the pencil's

sharp end
the pride
whose
existence

becomes
a word

takes shape
then 'tis

lost

(7)
l-o-n-g
p-e-n-c-i-l

with its sharp end
with its pride

l-o-n-g
p-e-n-c-i-l

turns
short

shorter
shortest

on
a paper

turns
into

a word
is

crucified

(*Translated from the Gujarati by the poet*)

MUKUNDA RAMA RAO

Mukunda Rama Rao, born and brought up in Bengal, has published four collections of poems. Some of his poems have been translated into Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and Kannada.

THE DESERTED HOUSE

My dear son, mother
is at the end of her life,
and I am no better,
come again, if possible:
though you speak
from distant America,
this is father's anguish.

* * *

Though mother has
many complaints against father,
she has turned into a cot:
a scrawny frame, wrapped in skin,
with life flickering in it.

Father, an easy-chair at the doorway,
waited on by mother,
how changed is he now
forgetting himself,
he is anxious to save her.

* * *

Perhaps old age
is dying bit by bit,
a time to know others

deeply.
The house they leave by turns
is a tree, dropping seeds.

Though children stay behind
like walls of memories,
how deserted is the house.

(after father (91), and mother (86) passed away in the span of a week, ending 80 years of their life together)

SEEDS

Fear, pain,
sorrow, hurt:
my friend wants me to avoid
those very words: says,
for ages they have been
a part of our life,
and so are worn-out.
* * *

Love cannot be asserted,
just as pain cannot be located.
Neither can be handed down
like a heirloom,
or can be flaunted
it is not feigning, but feeling.

When I tell my children

at different times about parents,
who do they see:
me in them or them in me?

Some probing, and then
a happy chuckle of awareness.

* * *

Indecipherable letters,
Pauses at the end of lines,
Strange use of words
And language voicing emotion

All these become our language,
once we get used to them.

THE SECRET METHOD

Abruptly,
leaving my outer body,
I get into my own,
crossing the limits of gravity,
feeling the cosmic touch from above.

There
joyfully I watch again and again
with my inner-eye
the treasure I have hoarded.
I lose myself in fusing the fragments

gathered now and then
with the abandoned abstract pictures
to form a full living figure.

Though from beginning to end
everything goes on without a hitch,
a fire of dissatisfaction
lurking in some corner of mind
keeps on scorching me.
Reconciled or seized with doubts,
I observe secretly every day
From different angles,
With hope and distress
The unknown visages with known details
And sound the depths of the known ones.

I get perplexed with the strange methods
I use, as I don't know which shape my endless
Scrutiny vivifies or which deficit it fulfils.

While I struggle with the unknown procedure,
my outer bodies that are hooked up to me
yank me out, as if shaking me out
of the hug of quiet slumber
of dragging me out of a comatose state.

How should I tell them
that this body is not mine?

IN THE CURVED LINES

I am drawing my own portrait—
in it there are traces
of my ancestors.

Troubles and thoughts,
anger and rage,
shards of dreams,
endless humiliations—
all are seen in those layers.

The lines and colours in the picture
change without my knowledge,
the I you know
and the I in the portrait
are different.

I tame and ride the sea
that lashes our feet
with the waves, and drags us.

I am trying to predict
how the road should move,
after dashing against the trees
and splitting,

the picture is lifelike,
yet looks grotesque
in the curved lines I see;
it remains incomplete
though finished.

(*Translated from the Telugu by Veni Sukumar and D. Kesava Rao*)

S. SHAMIULLA

Shamiulla, a school teacher, holds a doctorate in Telugu on the topic, "The Theoretical Background of the Poetry of Minorities." Many of his poems have won awards.

TREASURE

Either at home
or outside,
no traces appear
of having dug up for hidden treasures;
still,
I have rushed to this place
Without knowing who has chased me.

I don't know which dark angle
of life this exposes,
but till now no one muttered
anything about it.
Frankly, I didn't even lose
the desire for carrying on with the journey.

I don't know how long I should burn
as a secret candle
at the invisible doorstep,
yet an unappeasable passion
continues to blaze in me.

Sometimes I feel
that this corner doesn't lead me
to the right pathway,
but even so, this raunchy life
hankers after the spittle-defiled
food till the end.

DOORS

Though imperceptible,
we can't say there are no doors:
if you take a peek
they do appear:
indistinct, dense but impalpable.

I imagine they detect the depths
I haven't even suspected existed,
and I seem to know the meanings
they don't even understand.
For that reason, when I push them
they creak with a moan,
just as in the house,

a brittle noise, sometimes,
soft or rasping.

When they open or close
is inconceivable,
but at the sight of some
they open by themselves,
just as they shut with a thud
when they notice others.

Doors don't always open,
as in the house.

You may ask, why the doors
as in the house?
Will there be any man
or a house without doors?

Not only doors,
there are walls and windows too.
They also have ridges and curtains:
unless you open them,
you do not notice
the red line of summer
between shadow and murk.

(*Translated from the Telugu by Veni Sukumar and D. Kesava Rao*)

ALI SARDAR JAFRI

Ali Sardar Jafri, an award winning founder of the Progressive Writers Movement, has published a number of collections of poetry and has edited a few journals.

WHO THE ENEMY IS

This tank, artillery, bombshells and guns ablaze
Whence have you procured? Whither are they pointed?
Has the realm of Waris and Iqbal these bounties bestowed?
You stirred the storm of strife Nanak land
Are you up to unleash fire on the abode of Kabir?

Slaves we were, not long ago
Freedom too came drenched in blood.

The first breeze of morn has just begun to blow
Buds have not opened their eyes yet
Lips of spring are yet to beam
Countless stars in gloomy eyes,
And myriad roses to adorn hands forlorn,
Are craving yet for colour and glow.

What have we got except the shared pain?

Think of the joys that could have been ours
If only we could come together
Strive to heal our battered souls
Plant our garden with our own hands
You in our woes and we in yours
Could join hands and then we could
Together rejoice the dwelling's ebullience

But expressions bizarre your eyes betray
Which way do your wayward steps stray?
Where are you headed to try your sword?
What to you is nation's border
is our essence where heart and soul converge
Beauteous, elevated, revered, youthful, pure
We call it the Garden of Eden of Kashmir
We call it the garden of Delhi and Punjab
We also fondly call it Lucknow sometimes.

Your armed hands can dare not touch
This holy land of Ghalib and Meer
Nizam, Kaki and Chishti too
on this very land, found their perch
Come to this land with reverence.
Turn down your swords,
in this realm of benevolence.

Both spleen and love our hearts replenish
Union indeed is our soul's wish
Yet to our dislike, let us admit
Burnished sword is our retort to souls amiss.

Your side of fence features sisters, brothers and kin
Memories of past peers of potion
Partners-of-prison, comrades-of-cross some
Some like us victims of beloved's abhorrence
Lips beaming with delight of days present
Eyes dreaming of days bygone
Hearts radiant with the ray of hope for 'morrow

All those strangers are but our own.
Our side too has flocks of friends,
It also swarms with masses impassioned.
It has no dearth of loving ones.
History of million years bears witness
We bear wounds on chest like blooms
Memory of Heer enlivens our hearts.
Chinab, Jhelum, Ravi kindle it with love.

Between us stand rivers of fire
Seas of blood, yours and ours,
towering, dreary barriers of hostility
We can bring it down with a loving glance
annihilate all memories of affliction
and hold you once more in close embrace
You too will have to break your sword
Drain the mantle, which is blood soaked
We will not remain strangers thereafter.

You carry flowers from gardens of Lahore
We bring the brilliance of Banaras morn
The cool freshness of Himalayan breeze
Then ask ourselves, 'who the enemy is.'

A NAZM

Where will you escape from me,
O radiant suns!
The turbulent stream of night awaits you,
and the tides are high.

O nascent moons adorning the poetic horizon!
The darkness is rummaging its way
to reach out to you.
I know the way, O wreck'd ones!
for you too dwell like me
in the abode of light,
beyond the pathways of pain,
across the river of tears,
in that country of sorrow.

Conspiracies float in the sky like vultures.
Their weary wings will wither away.
They will cease before they gain your heights.
But you will soar in the same way.
Your glittering wings,
shall forever sing,
songs - brilliant, dazzling.

O my fierce falcons!
Come! Show me your magnificent words.
Tell me is that really true,
that your crafted words do not
carry a trace of my voice?
My voice, which was Ghalib's once;
which gave vent to Iqbal's spirits.
It then metamorphosed to lend
itself to the modern-day muse.
Perennial, it flows on,
towards the vale of morrow's dawn.

Fire amidst stones,
A dew drop in fire,

A tempest in the whirlwind,
My voice echoes
in your hearts too.

Tell me the truth
O brilliant books of times to come!
Where will you escape from me?

GHAZAL

A stream of pain,
Flows through my being entire today
In my veins a volcano vents fire today

I have sewn my lips
Lest my woes should burst forth
But all my wounds
Do eloquence acquire today

Life seems sunken in darkness deep
Her fair face rescues me from this mire today

I climb the gallows with pride such
My soul distressed,
My eyes beam like flower today.

This is the time to live, the time to die
Heart is filled with such pleasure today.

All tales of chivalry mirror my state
I identify with each martyr today.

Prisoners crushed the arrogance of tyranny
Where is that pomp, that power today?

(*Translated from the Urdu by Nishat Zaidi*)

DEEPAK MISHRA

Deepak Mishra (1938-2008), an Oriya poet, won the Central Sahitya Akademy Award, but could not live to receive it. The following poem *Paribeba* is one of his famous poems.

CROSSING

It is a more difficult work
To cross time
Than to cross fire,
To cross a river;

After crossing fire,
You may find water.
After crossing a river,
You may be united with soil;

But everybody crosses
The ruined shore of time
Bearing what is decreed in their fate;
Sometimes the sky of life is clear
Sometimes it is heavy with dark clouds.
Who can say before crossing time
What is decreed in his fate?

Who can say if any one showers
Flowers there day and night
Or death falls like pure sanctified powder
On the shoulders of men?

One has to pass the sad days of time,
Being firm and patient like Ekalabya.
One feels the joyous days are blissful
Like the sacred morning song.

So Chandi Das[1] says
Time sleeps in the warm lap of Rami.
There he forgets all joys and sorrows,
Scorching heat of time and shame of life.
Live makes one cross the searing time
Like a tired river losing itself in the sea.

(Translated from the Oriya by Mary Mohanty)

[1]Chandi Das was a Bengali Baishnav poet

NIRANJAN MOHANTY

INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH: THE CONTEXT OF CANON, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Any discussion or critical evaluation of Indian poetry in English, both in terms of its achievement or failure, as well as its possible future, can hardly ignore the uneasy trepidations caused by a familiar question, raised from the very beginning: Is creative writing possible in a language not one's own? – a question that has been answered partly by the achievement of our creative writers, and partly by our willingness and efforts to nativize a language not our own and to claim it as our own. With the assumption that we have nativized English language to suit our purposes, both at the national and trans–national levels, this paper makes an humble attempt to discuss the canonical status, the challenges and future of Indian Poetry in English.

There can be no doubt that Indian writing in English, and more particularly, Indian fiction in English, has already earned its canonical status. Debates of whether this came independently or under the homogenizing umbrella of postcolonial literature are immaterial, as the term postcolonial, despite interrogation and debate, is here to stay. Indian poetry in English, from Derozio to the youngest poet today, has succeeded not only in establishing a tradition of its own but also in arriving at canonical status. This canonical status stems partly from the acquired critical attention and acclaim and partly from this genre's entry to college and university syllabi, both within India and beyond. I would like to suggest certain principles or tenets to examine its canonicity. These tenets are mutually dependent on one another. These are historicity, acceptability, accessibility, availability, adaptability, centripetality, centrifugality, universality, objectivity and elasticity. Of course, other tenets can also be identified to examine

the canonical status of a genre. The tenets I have identified are self-explanatory in nature. Any genre that acquires a canonical status is likely to have a long history that would show its origin and growth, without ignoring or marginalizing its ability to absorb changes. Its acceptability is dependent upon its historicity. By accessibility I mean the reader's accessibility to the genre or the reader's familiarity with the genre. By adaptability, I mean the ability of the genre to accommodate diverse forms and themes--from the hackneyed to the serious and the sublime--and the creative writer's propensity to adhere to such forms. By 'centripetality' I mean to imply the ability of Indian poetry in English to discover for itself a centre to which it can unobtrusively relate. The nature of this centre may vary from one poet to another. It may metaphorically become home or family, tradition, culture and the values which govern such unwritten institutions, and will invariably register a kind of identity to whatever it appropriates or encompasses. I am inclined to believe that without this 'centripetality' no literature or genre can authorize its identity. Similarly by 'centrifugality' I propose to suggest the ability of the genre or the body of writing to relate itself to other writings, global or national or regional, so that it does not develop an island existence. In other words, it should contain the resilience or elasticity to absorb influences from outside to enrich itself and exert this enrichment to other bodies of writing. I'm drawn to believe that a literature or a genre must retain this quality so as to authenticate its legitimacy and relevance. The centrifugality must not, however, distrust or distance or dislodge its centripatality. A.K. Rumanujan once stated:

> English and my disciplines (Linguistics, Anthropology) give me my 'outer' forms – linguistic, metrical, logical and other such way of shaping experience, and my thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the

> classics and folklore give me my substance, my 'inner' forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where. (Parthasarathy 96).

By citing Ramanujan I would like to suggest that a body of writing can assume a canonical status if it can contain such 'outer' and 'inner' forms which place it in the foreground and give it substance.

Let's examine if Indian poetry in English has been able to assume a canonical status. For such an examination, this paper would bank on the responses or attitudes of the critics and literary historians, keeping in mind the tenets or parameters already suggested. Adil Jussawalla, a powerful voice in his own right, once made an acerbic observation on Indian poetry in English. He observed:

> If the writing of poetry implies a particular kind of sensitivity to language and willingness to tax and stretch the language, the best poetry in English has been written by Indian novelists. No Indian poet writing in English has equalled the kind of verbal dexterity we find in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* or G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatter*… though Indian Poetry in English is supposed to have its roots in the 1820s, it is reasonable to expect its earlier practitioners to have been regarded with a familiar mixture of colonial condescension and drawing room tact …Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1827-73), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) were doubtless rather fine people but they wrote some atrocious verse. And it needed saying when they wrote it ….[1]

Down right rejection of "some verse" of Dutt, Naidu, and Aurobindo, without harping on the nature and quality of their verse, without taking into account the historical situations in which they wrote, obviously cannot be the measure of the canonicity of Indian poetry in English in its formative years. Interestingly, William Walsh, the British critic and professor of Commonwealth Literature at the University of Leeds, offers almost similar disparaging remarks about the poetry of the 19th century. Walsh observes:

> Genuine Indian poetry in English really began in the nineteen fifties and the reader of today who is strictly interested in poetry can ignore, except for historical purposes, earlier versifying. This is true of the English version of Bengali poetry of Tagore admired by Yeats, and of the English verse of the distinguished thinker and spiritual luminary, Sri Aurobindo. His *Savitri*, for example, a work on the relation of Spirit to Matter, unwinding through twelve books and some 24,000 lines, is a vast onion of a poem of which the layers gradually pull away to reveal nothing. (Walsh 127)

Can Indian poetry in English establish for itself a canonical status with such biased, jaundiced, and sabulous critical insight which can neither fathom the immensity of Tagore's creative vision, nor can appreciate the cultural diversity, and spiritual intensity of a country which is essentially lyrical, both in terms of comprehending the world and re-presenting that world? But Walsh's views on the new poets, (poets like Ezekiel, Parthasarathy, Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Kolatkar, Shiv K Kumar, A.K. Ramanujam, Jayanta Mahapatra) offer a welcome change. He argues that it is because of these poets that Indian poetry in English could achieve a canonical status. Walsh states:

> And yet there are poems by Indian writers which seem by any standard to belong to the canon of poetry. There are those which seem to be the product of a natural instinct rather than an artificial taste. (128)

I nod in agreement with Prof. Walsh, but at the same time, I think that his comments on the nineteenth century poets lack objectivity and insight, and suffer from a colonizing indifference. Let us now consider the views of Professor Buddhadev Bose included in Professor P. Lal's enthusiastic volume, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*:

> The best of Indian English verse belong to the nineteenth century, when Indians came nearest to 'speaking, thinking and dreaming in English.' In authenticity of diction and feeling Sri Aurobindo far outshines the others, but Toru Dutt's charming pastiche still holds some interest. As for the present-day 'Indo-Anglians', they are earnest and not without talent, but it is difficult to see how they can develop as poets in a language which they have learnt from books and seldom hear spoken in the streets or even in their own homes, and whose two great sources lie beyond the seven seas. As late as1937, Yeats reminded Indian writers that 'no man can think or write with music and vigor except in his mother tongue'; to the great majority of Indians this admonition was unnecessary, but the intrepid few who left it unheeded do not yet realize that 'Indo – Anglian poetry is a blind alley, lined with curio shops, leading no- where.[2] (*Modern Indian English Poetry* 5)

Professor Bose champions and appreciates the poetry of the nineteenth century but is skeptical of the possible growth of Indian poetry in English. I don't understand why Bose's remarks should

not be applicable to the poets of the nineteenth century. Whatever the case, both Walsh and Bose laid the foundation stone of the canonical status of Indian poetry in English. In response to Bose's caustic and pungent remarks, Nissim Ezekiel, who has been hailed as the father and lawgiver of the modern Indian poetry in English, maintains:

> What is so surprising about? Is Mr. Bose completely devoid of a sense of history? Does it not occur to him that since English was introduced as a medium of higher education in India, some Indians *naturally* took to writing verse in it, just as other Indians wrote political commentaries, philosophical essays, sociological surveys, economic studies, and so on? Historical situations create cultural consequences …To write poetry in English because one cannot write in any other language is surely not a despicable decision.[3]

If M.K. Naik, the celebrity literary historian, shies away from making assessment of Sri Aurobindo's poetry because of "the extreme positions taken by his admirers and detractors" (Naik 6), and remains contented with *Savitri's* "thematic richness and technical skill,"[7] his assessment of Tagore seems to be dependent on the changed stances of Yeats and Pound corresponding to their early and later views. Naik states:

> …but as far as Tagore is concerned, one sees the strange spectacle of his erstwhile admirers like W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound themselves turning later into bitter critics. (Naik 7)

But M.K. Naik does not completely reject the poets of the nineteenth century and argues:

> But the stark realities of literary history cannot be brushed off by one sudden stroke of the pen like this. Surely, a tradition could not have survived for a century and a quarter without having had at least some areas of excellence, whatever its deficiencies, and it is equally obvious that post Independence Indian English poets did not suddenly fall from heaven. (Naik 1)

In fact, Naik was trying to respond to R Parthasarathy's comment that "Indian verse in English did not seriously begin to exist until after the withdrawal of the British from India" (Parthasarathy 3). I beg to differ from Parthasarathy's point of view, by raising certain questions: did either Derozio, or Toru Dutt, Man Mohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, Kashiprosad Ghose, write without seriousness to postpone the existence of Indian poetry in English until the withdrawal of the British from India? A simple answer to this question would possibly terminate those views which did not permit Indian poetry in English its canonical status. It is true that apart from the distinction, achievements of the poets in their works, the critics have a meaningful and positive role in shaping and authenticating the canonical status of creative writing. M.K. Naik in his attempt to highlight the achievent of Indian English poetry offers a judicious view which evidences and amply illustrates the canonical status of Indian poetry in English and the direction it is likely to take to ensure its potential. Naik writes:

> The modern Indian English poet often shows an enviable technical control and verbal expertise, but even his best friends will have to concede that he has yet to develop into a major voice, though the potential is undoubtedly there. And if this potential is to develop fully, he must – though the idea would undoubtedly shock him – follow, at least in

> essential part the example of the major Indian English romantics. *Savitn*, *Gitanjali* and the finest lyrics of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu were born when their authors had reached the very core of their Indian experience. (Naik 13)

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in his "Introduction" to *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* appreciates the quality of poetry written during the colonial period, and highlights its significance:

> One consequence of the changes taking place in Indian society under colonialism was that Indians had mastered the coloniser's language (as the colonisers had mastered theirs) and going one step further, had by 1820s begun to adopt it as their chosen medium of expression. These pioneering works of poetry, fiction, drama, travel and belles-letters are little read today except by specialists, but when they were published, they were, by the mere fact of being in English, audacious acts of mimicry and self-assertion. More than this, the themes they touched on and the kinds of social issues they engaged with would only be explored by other Indian literatures several decades later. (Mehrotra 6)

I think, Mehrotra's objective evaluation of the contributions of the pioneers of English writing in India should outweigh other views which reject this body of writing that flourished during the colonial period. It is Bruce King who advanced the view that Indian Poetry in English has been heading towards a canon and devotes a chapter entitled "Towards a Canon" (60-72) to evidence the formation of the canon. King maintains:

> A canon of Indian English poetry has been forming, although like most canons it is subject to change. While

> publication by Oxford University Press and in R. Parthasarathy's Oxford University Press anthology has normally been most influential in the creation of this canon, publication by Clearing House or New-Ground, or appearance in Peeradina and Daruwalla anthologies, has been of importance. Publication of a book by reputable publishing houses or by commercial houses (in contrast to self publication) in India also strengthens a poet's reputation. (King 67)

King's liberal and sympathetic attitude towards Indian Poetry in English can be of certain relevance here. He believes: "A canon is an average of varied opinions, judgments and tastes than a strict consensus." (66)

King also makes an interesting observation on the role of the critics in canon-formation: "While taste and a canon are usually handed down from poets to critics to teachers of literature, there have not yet been Indian literary critics who have had a role in influencing opinion." (67)

The scope of this paper does not allow me to make a critical evaluation of contributions of, say, H.L. Vivian Derozio and other poets, responsible not only for the formation and continuity of the tradition but also for elevating Indian poetry in English to canonical height and status. For the poets of the pre-Independence era, who have been described as our Romantics, what was of supreme importance was that they used English "as a tool to embattle the vanity of the masters as a superior race and culture…and to mark their competence and not to exhibit their slavery."[4] Championing the cause of India and glorification of its rich cultural and religious

traditions were a historical necessity which prompted Derozio to write in "The Harp of India":

> Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?
> Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;
> Thy music once was sweet who hears it now?
> …
> Harp of my country, let me strike the strain. (*Poems,* 1)

In "To India – My Native Land" Derozio records his love and anxiety for his country--a love and anxiety that bind the poet to his native land:

> My country! in the day of glory past
> A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,
> And worshipped as a deity thou wast.
>
> Where is that glory, where that reverence now ? (*Poems*, 2)

In "The Fakeer of Jungheera" one comes across Derozio's instinctive and passionate celebration of his native land:

> O! lovely is my native land
> With all its skies of cloudless light,
> But there's heart, and there's a hand
> More dear to me than sky most bright.
> I prize them – yes as though they were
> On earth the only things divine,
> The only good, the only fair
> And O! that heart and hand are thine. (178)

When Yeats celebrates Ireland through its landscape and myths or when Whitman celebrates America or the spirit of democracy in America, we consider their poetry to have achieved the status of canon. But when either a Derozio or a Toru Dutt or a Sarojini Naidu does that, why cannot we assure him/her of a canonical status? I strongly believe that Derozio's *Poems* (1827), Kashiprosad Ghose's *The Shair and other poems* (1830), Toru Dutt's *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1875) and *Ancients Ballads* (1882). Sarojini Naidu's *The Golden Threshold* (1905) laid the foundation stone for the canonical status of Indian Poetry in English. While offering such a viewpoint, I am reminded of what Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature,* observed:

> A critic who is content to be ignorant of all historical relationship would constantly go astray in his judgment. He could not know which work is original and which derivative, and through his ignorance of historical conditions, he would constantly blunder in his understanding of specific works of art.[5]

What to my mind is important today, as we discuss on the canonical status of Indian poetry in English, is whether the poets of the pre-Independence period could through their poetry capture the rhythms of time and place, without sacrificing or marginalizing their vision as poets, or without sacrificing their national and cultural identities.

In the post-Independence period, the Indian poets who perpetuated the tradition of Indian poetry in English came under the influence of Modernist aesthetics of Yeats, Eliot and Pound. Needless to say poetry of this period made a sharp departure from their predecessors, in terms of using the creative medium, forging a new style and giving it an inward-looking force which culminated in

authenticating a new voice and engendering a new vision. For evolving a canonical status such a change, such a striking shift, was necessary. The shift was also historically significant, because it coincided with the changed status or destiny of the country. Once the country's identity is validated, the individual poet's identity got defined. With this identity, each poet, in his or her own way, began to relate to the place, immediate surroundings, the cultures and subcultures, rites and rituals which intensify and consolidate one's identity. As these poets were writing in English, they became self-conscious of the medium and many began to defend their choice of the creative medium. They became critical of everything: of the past and present, of the agents of governance, of the immediate surroundings ridden with poverty, corruption, injustice, increasing disparity between the rich and the poor. They became critical of their own identities as poets with the conviction that unless their work is recognized by the West, they would be nowhere. Yet many had shown promises of excellence in their poems. They got critical attention and acclaim nationally and internationally. Interestingly enough, under the aegis of postcolonial literature these poets began to draw considerable attention. This, in fact, is no mean achievement. Yet M.K. Naik's warning can not be ignored. Naik wrote:

> The vitality and funding of post-Independence Indian English poetry are certainty remarkable. But the euphoria this situation seems to have generated must not blind us to the fact that this verse has still remained greater in promise than in actual fulfillment. What the poetic horizon today shows is only a glimmer of the modern dawn: the sun is yet to rise. This is evident from the fact that the new Indian English poet has not so far produced a single work which can be held as a masterpiece. His quest for roots and his scrutiny of self and society have still to attain the penetration

> and the profoundily which alone can guarantee substantial achievement. (Naik 12)

Almost twenty five years ago Naik wrote this piece. And I'm sure he will have to alter his opinion now, and think of Nissim Ezekiel's *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), A. K. Ramanujan's *Second Sight* (1986) and *The Black Hen* (1995), Jayanta Mahapatra's *A Whiteness of Bone* (1991), Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (1974) R. Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* (1977) and Kamala Das's *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1999) as the possible measure of the achievement of Indian poetry in English.

Ezekiel's Bombay, Ramanujan's Madurai, Mahapatra's Orissa or Kalahandi, Kolattkar's Jejuri, Parthasarathy's Kodambakkam, Kamala Das's Malabar have assumed such metaphoric heights like R.K. Narayan's Malgudi that they not only illustrate how the Indian poets writing in English have consistently tried to evoke a sense of place and time but also evidence how meaningfully they have integrated themselves to the kind of life lived there so as to urge upon a voice that is distinct, authentic and profoundly human. In the formation of a canon, this profundity matters - the profundity that subsumes the national identity within the regional and individual identity, the profundity that encompasses all, that contains multitudes.

Nissim Ezekiel, living "among the beggars/ Hawkers, pavement sleepers,/ hutment dwellers, slums/ Dead souls of men and gods,/ Burnt-out mothers, frightened / virgins" (*Collected Poems* 131) and watching the monkey show on the streets of Bombay, has learnt how to endear the city and hold on to its diverse electrifying facets of survival, and remember the city even on his visit to Edinburgh:

> I have not come
> to Edinburgh
> to remember

Bombay mangoes,
but I remember them
even as I look
at the monument
to Sir Walter Scott,
or stroll along
in the Hermitage of Braid.
Perhaps it is not the mangoes
that my eyes and tongue long for,
but Bombay as the fruit
for which I've lived
winning and losing
my little life. (293)

A.K. Ramanujan who lived and died in the U.S., in 1993, remains an instinctive insider, a home-bound pilgrim. His poetry captures the nuances of South Indian experience and by re-creating those experiences, he tries to overcome the burden of alienation in another culture. He wishes to be cremated in "Sanskrit and Sandalwood" (*Collected Poems* 136) and believes that there are certain things which do not go away:

Letting go
of fairy tales
is letting go
of what will not
let go:
mother, grandmother, the fat cook
in widow's white
who fed me
rice and ogres. (260)

Towards the fag end of his creative career, Ramanujan whirls back to the day when he left for the U.S. In "Farewell", he harps on the overwhelming and rewarding presence of his mother when he left for the U.S:

> Mother's farewell had no words,
> no tears, only a long look
> that moved on your body
> from top to toe,
> with the advice that you should
> not forget your oil bath
> every Tuesday
> when you go to America (259)

After Ramanujan's death, another poem entitled "Returning" was retrieved from the C.D which is remarkable in its tone, emotion and efficacy of expressing an impelling longing for the mother.

> Returning home one blazing afternoon,
> he looked for his mother everywhere.
> She wasn't in the kitchen, she wasn't
> in the backyard, she was not anywhere.
>
> He looked and looked, grew frantic,
> looked even under the beds, where he found
> old shoes and dust balls, but not his mother.
> He ran out of the house, shouting, Amma!
>
> Where are you? I'm home, I'm hungry!
> But there was no answer, not even an echo
> in the deserted street blazing with sunshine.
> Suddenly he remembered he was now sixty–one

and he hadn't had a mother for forty years.
(*Uncollected poems and prose* 14)

Kamala Das, who used the creative medium with ease and felicity, could at once bring to clear focus the feminine psyche, its fissures caused by patriarchy. Caught in the currents of time, lacerated by selfishness of the world she lived in, and inflicted by the absence of genuine warmth and love from the male dominated world, Das turned to the sweet memories of her grandmother who used to wait for her with a lantern burning in her room of the four hundred year old family house. Grandmother remains a source of solace for her in the jejune present:

All through the sun singing
Day, all through the moon waiting night, I think
Of her, of the warmth that she took away.
Wrapped in funerary white, a fire that
Stayed lit while her blood cooled and there was no
More of it for me, for, no longer was
There someone to put an arm around my
Shoulders without a purpose. (*Collected Poems* 97)

R. Parthasarathy, whoring after English gods, realizes that his tongue is in English chains, in spite of success and critical acclaim earned by his *Rough Passage.* After continued silence over twenty five years, his poems in *London Magazine* show the same degree of inwardness with which his *Rough Passage* ended. In "One or two places", the poet not only constructs the image of India through his village near Kulitalai. He is tired of hearing about India in the U. S. He turns back to the image of the village, as he can easily relate himself to it. The poet's neat depiction of the village with minute details evokes intimacy:

It often gets feet in the river
and coils of rain hiss and slither
on the roof. Even the well boils over.
Her eight-house lane is bloated
with the full moon, and bamboos tie up
the eerie riverfront with a knot of roads

A black Pillaiyar temple squats
at one end of the village, stone drum
that is beaten thin on festivals

by the devout. Bells curl their lips
at the priest's rustic Sanskrit. Outside,
pariah dogs kick up an incense of howls.

And beyond the paddy field,
dead on time, the Erode Mail rumbles past,
a light needle of smoke threading

remote villages such as ours,
that are routinely dropped by schedules.
Here no trains are ever missed.[6]

In *Jejuri*, Arun Kolatkar not only critiques the two institutions, the temple of Mallarai or Khandoba, thirty miles away from Pune, representing Indian religious faith and the Railway station – representing an insignia of colonization *vis-a-vis* modernization. The poet is critical of and skeptical about these two institutions, as in both corruption is deep-rooted. The poet discovers some meaning in his visit to the temple. This meaning he discovers neither in the Railway station as the gateway to god's door nor in the temple of Khandoba but in the open space between these two. As the persona

stops halfway between Jejuri and the temple, he catches sight of dozens of cocks and hens in a kind of harvest dance where seven jump straight up to at least four times their height and five come down with grain in their beaks. Kolatkar's concluding image in *Jejuri* achieves profundity as it unravels the life-principle or life-spirit, the instinct for survival which predates all civilization and tradition; it is older than both ancient religious tradition and industrial civilization. Such a spirit cuts across the limits of tradition and modernity, inspiring Kolatkar's willing celebration of it through the jubilant hens and cocks.

Jayanta Mahapatra won the Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1981 for his volume of a long poem *Relationship* (1980). He could not go to Goa to receive the Award, but sent his acknowledgement which was read at the Award-giving ceremony. I cite his words:

> To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past, and in which lies my beginning and my end, where the wind keens over the great grief of the River Daya and where the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konarka, I acknowledge my relationship.[7]

Both in his earlier volumes, as well as the later ones, Mahapatra perpetuated this relationship. Through his creative utterances, Mahapatra neither sentimalized his private past nor has romanticized the past of his country. But a deep strain of melancholy continues to govern the intensity of his poetry. Striking, unusual metaphors, lilting lyrical quality, a surprisingly inward – delving insight to know the self and time remain gifted qualities of Mahapatra's anglo-phone poems. I cite here a few lines from his poem "House" in which the poet persuasively sculpts his willingness to become a child again:

This house, my room, yesterday's flowers,
there are corners my hands have never touched.
Once I touched a woman here,
her breath warm as *loo* that blows in summer;
who could think then
that the lonely body held so much of blood?

On the room's west wall
the white of photograph's flight
has dulled slowly into grimy brown.
A breath that trembles in a spider-web there
could bear witness to my faith in love as memory,
held as I am here by a fear creeping along the skin.
Light tricks, revealing unknown bones of the air.

In the house I figure the possibilities
of life: could I
hide again as a child, someplace here?
(*A Whiteness of Bone*, 22)

Mahapatra's later volumes *Shadow Space, Bare Face* (2000) and *Random Descent* (2005) – retain the same melancholic strain, the same strategies, articulating a subdued protest against the changing attitude towards human values, and sharpening a feeling that poetry really does not make anything happen. Between *Relationship* and *Random Descent* Mahapatra's representations of the self, the world around and poetry have been painful, giving us the picture of a dark and dreary world.

Soon after this generation of poets – as critics and publishers believe a vacuum has been created, and not much quality writing is available. I personally do not endorse such a view. There has been no vacuum whatsoever. It is only that our attitude towards poetry has

changed; our appreciation of poetry and an objective evaluation of the poetry of the next generation have experienced a set-back. Critics and publishers begin to think that mediocrity has made inroads to the domain of poetry. But I'm sure any objective evaluation or critical judgment would be able to sift chaff from paddy. Mention may be made of those poets who have contributed significantly to this rich tradition of Indian Poetry in English. Whether they have really contributed anything to canon-formation can be judged by objective critical insight of the readers and critics. Bibhu Padhi, Makarand Paranjape, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Sudeep Sen, Tabish Khair, R.K. Singh, I.K.Sharma, Ranjit Hoskote, Vijay Nambisan, Jeet Thayil, Hoshang Merchant, Smita Agarwal, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sharmila Ray, Robin S. Ngangom, Rabindra Kumar Swain, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander. Shanta Acharya, Prabhanjan Kumar Mishra and Niranjan Mohanty. I hope that critical attention would be drawn towards these poets to verify whether Indian poetry in English can be said to have achieved the status of a canon, overcoming its visible and invisible challenges.

Bibhu Padhi's latest volume, *Games the Heart Must Play*, a trilogy of love poems, consisting of "Dream Children", "Today" and "Daughter" tries to capture the rhythms of a paternal heart – a heart that tries to relate to the dream children who, as the poet thinks, should not be corrupted by the forces of time. The poet raises certain questions rhetorically to equate his own innocence with children's:

> Do you stare into the sky
> just as I do?
> Do you stare beyond the stars,
> the interstellar spaces, and think of
> how small you are.
> Do you remember in Late November
> the quiet warmth of an early
> March day, just as I do? (18)

Tabish Khair who teaches English and lives in Denmark, like other poets of Indian Diaspora, records how the distance from home makes the home and its inmates very dear. In "To My Father, across the seven seas", he writes:

> Why is it that always across
> The seven seas I grip your hand
> More firmly than when we sat
> Over the wicker table with cups of tea
> And the newspaper lay loosely in your lap?
> (*Reasons for Belonging* 19)

In "Amma", Khair records the fond memory of his grandmother:

> Down the stairs of this house where plaster flakes and
> falls,
> Through the intimate emptiness of its rooms and hall,
> I hear your slow foot steps, grandmother, echo or pause,
> As they used to through long summer afternoons spent
> within . . . (22)

Ranjit Hoskote, a Bombay-based poet, was a visiting writer and fellow at the International Writing Program (1995) and winner of the Sanskruti Award in 1996, has three volumes of poetry to his credit: *Zones of Assault* (1991), *The Cartographer's Apprentice* (2000), *The Sleepwalker's Archives* (2001). Hoskote writes with precision, using sharp images and harping constantly on the metaphoric interiority that his creative medium so keenly contains, whether it is in "Effects of Distance" or "Anomalies" or "Moth"[8]. In "A poem for Grandmother", Hoskote recollects what his grandmother, "consumed by giving", advised:

Hoard your powers, she says, do not give
from the core, my son, do not give.
Giving spites the flesh corrodes intention.
Most unreliable of barters, most memorable of sins,
giving kills. My son, do not, like Karna,
rip off the armour that is your skin.[9]

Hoshang Merchant has been prolific in publishing many poetry volumes. Mention may be made of *Flower to Flower* (Rupa, 1992), *Selected Poems*, (Writers Workshop, 1999) *Belagio Blues* (Other Wise Books, 2004) and *Homage to Jibanananda Das* (Ark Arts, 2005). Merchant's use of wit and irony, a low-keyed satirical tone, a compelling willingness to refine the creative medium with sharp, detailed images make his poetry rich with verbal images. In "Time stands still in my Father's Palli Hill House" one discovers the vitality and freshness of Merchant's language and the profoundity of his sinceremost feelings:

Time stands still at Palli Hill
The teak sofas. The Persian carpets
Cognac that is redder in red glasses
Blue crystal broken / Fit only for vinegar
The sun dissolves at dusk
like a pearl sunk into blue liquors
The snake slithers golden at noon
to the water trough

Mother is a river who runs to meet the sea
Water in water is only Infinity.

In anger Mother stamped her feet
Crushing Taurus, Virgo, Scorpio, Pisces …[10]

Rukmini Bhaya Nair who lives in New Delhi and is Professor of English at IIT, Delhi, has two volumes of poetry to her credit: *The Hyoid Bone* (1992) and *The Ayodhya Cantos: Poems* (1999). Nair makes use of the creative medium in a challenging manner to allude to the new dimensions of her own creative utterances. I cite a few lines from her poem "God from Bankura" to illustrate how easily Nair handles her creative medium and creates an ambience in which the cutting edges of the image capture the attention of readers:

> A god has to be. Smart, that is.
> Four arms were quite respectable,
> Really. Belly button, long proboscis,
> And a dhoti – all his. Admittedly, he
> Lacked detachable parts – unless one
> Counted missing toes, which one can't,
> Can one ?[11]

I have, honestly speaking, tried only to present here samples from very few poets who have been writing poems in English for more than two decades. I do not know the reason why much critical attention has not been given so far to these poets and many others. Not very many anthologies[12] have been published so far to represent the diversity, the richness, the sophistication of this ever-growing body of Indian Poetry in English. The poets of this generation do not bother much about the creative medium. They feel that they can quite comfortably and easily write in English and can match to English writing anywhere in the world. Their poems do not suffer from obscurity, impertinence, incoherence or incongruity. Their poetry embodies a sense of time and place, engendering a sense of contemporaneity, a voice and a vision which can hardly be ignored

today. I strongly believe that their contribution would surely enrich the canon.

I wish to conclude this paper by citing a few lines from my poem "A Tribute to Dad", that I wrote in Iowa during my visit to the University of Iowa, U.S.A, as a writer and fellow from India to its International Writing Program in 1994:

> Teach me dad, how to make use of pain,
> how to order words in a poem,
> how to get along the road that gets crowded
>
> by uneasy faces of foes or of woes,
> tightening gestures of unknown shadows
> when trucks carry grenades and gunpowder.
>
> Can't you teach me, dad,
> the alphabets of love, their compelling
> connections, so that my poems
>
> become a bower or a cross
> to take away pain and aguish of others.
> Teach me how to master
>
> the green grammar of grief
> so that I won't get scared
> of my own irrelevance, someday, somewhere.[13]

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3. Nissim Ezekiel in response to B. Bose's introduction in P. Lal. (ed). Modern Indian Poetry in English. Calcutta: Writers Workshop. 1969: 5.

4. O.P. Bhatnagar "East-West Encounter in India Poetry in English." The Critic with a Big Heart (ed). I.K. Sharma. Jaipur: Rachana Prakashan, 2006.

5. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren. Theory of Literature (Chap. IV "Literary Theory: Criticism and History" 38-45) Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949. rpt. 1993. 44.

6. London Magazine (Aug.-Sep. 1997) published Parthasarathy's "Taj Mahal," "Darjeeling Tea," "Hair," "Penance," "One or Two Place." (61-64).

7. Niranjan Mohanty (ed.). The Golden Voices: Poets from Orissa Writing in English. Berhampur: Poetry Publications, 1986. ii.

8. These poems were published in Ranjit Hoskote (ed.) Reasons for Belonging. Delhi: Viking, 2002. 29-35.

9. ibid. 31.

10. Hoshang Merchant. Homage to Jibanananda Das. London: Ark Arts, 2005. 13.

11. Rukmini Bhaya Nair. "God from Bankura." Reasons for Belonging. Ed. Ranjit Hoskote. Delhi: Viking, 2002. 64.

12. Bruce King in his influential Modern Indian Poetry in English (1987) observes:

> "Where no purely statistical approach can be an accurate indication of the canon of a still evolving body of contemporary literature, there is enough readily available evidence of what might be regarded as the canon at present." (69)

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JAYDEEP SARANGI

NIRANJAN MOHANTY (1953-2008) IN MEMORIAM

Niranjan Mohanty (1953—2008), the noted Indian English poet, critic and a devoted teacher, spent most of his life in the eastern Indian state of Orissa. A pioneering critic of Indian Poetry in English, in the last phase of his career as a Professor of English he was in the *ashramik* environment at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan (Birbhum), the abode of Rabindranath Tagore. He has published seven volumes of poems (*Silence the Words, On Touching You and Other Poems*, *Life Lines, Prayers to Lord Jagannatha, Oh This Bloody Game!*, *Krishna* and *Tiger and Other Poems).* His poems have appeared in magazines in India, UK, USA, and Canada, such as *Chandrabhaga*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Indian Literature*, *Journal of Literature and Aesthetics*, *Kavya Bharati*, *JIWE, New Quest*, *South Asian Review*, *Toronto South Asian Review, Hundred Words, Tandem, International Poetry Review, Suns Stone* and *Ucon Directory*. He was awarded an Honorary Writing Fellowship at the International Writing Program, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA in 1994. His poems have been translated into Hindi, Spanish, Portuguese and Urdu.

Inward-looking, but still deeply rooted in cultural and interpersonal realities, his poems speak to us with frank generosity, hinting at the mysteries of life through the linguistic mélange of his creative utterance. His willing leap into the pool of memories creates a sense of presence through the metaphors of absence. The haunting presence of the metaphor of death invests his poems with a sense of mystery; the fleeting nature of time creates a sweeping sense of absence. He speaks for the mystery of love, the mystical element embodied in the man-woman relationship. His poems record and celebrate "blue whispers of hearts, immaculate," the innocence grained in our sense of mortality, in the immaculate sense of things passed by.

THE STRENGTH IN MY BONES
(By Niranjan Mohanty)

The strength in my bones
comes from a moment's breath
or breathlessness.

With this strength,
I cling often to faces;
the face of my eager father,
restless to know if the pain
because of a nightly scorpion's sting,
has subsided; the face of my mother
where kites of her joy fly
after my success in the last examination;
the ecstatic twitch on my sister's eyes
for getting her an embroidered shawl
that winter; the sad eyes of my wife
when I had the first cardiac attack;
the glittering delight of my son
for getting a toy-gun on his seventh birthday;
and of course, I cling to the breath
of my mother earth
who teaches me how to master
the grammar of pain, and how to go mad
with dew-drop delight when the day breaks.

Only these,
strengthen my bones and breath
to live by.

Niranjan Mohanty, an Orissan poetic pilgrim and a reputable Indian critic, grew up listening to the incessant pitter-patter of raindrops, visualising the mud houses, the silent cry of village birds and animals far from the hue and cry of the busy metro-world. The poet in Mohanty identifies himself with rain. In the absence of rain, he creates a house of water and under its roof he sits in order to listen to the sound of "rain-drops falling all night." Mohanty, like his poet contemporary Bubhu Padhi, loves dragging the wings beyond the demon of sound; exploring the rain song, the twittering of birds and the sound of whispers. He belongs to the land of Jagannatha; the rich socio-cultural and religious heritage speaks through his poetic lines. The Orissan landscape has a mysterious charm that turns man to gaze on the panoramic view and feel a bond with humanity. He embraced English to spread that native fragrance:

> I know that my English is not English
> The music I seek in my words
> Or in their premeditated silence is not English
> It's half-Orissan, half-Indian
> It gives me the flavour of watered rice
> The fragrance of plough-shares and soil.
> (*Prayers to Lord Jagannath*)

Like other postcolonial poets, Niranjan Mohanty was haunted by the language question. Here I will quote a part my interview (*CV*27) with the poet:

J.S.- Did your family speak English ? Why did you start writing poems in English ?

N.M.- No. My family language was Oriya. After Intermediate in Science I was attracted to the Romantics and the Modernist poets. My early education was in West Bengal. I started

reading English from class–II. I was good at English from the beginning. It matured gradually. I was a science student but later on changed to English Hons. I was moved and touched by the English authors. That possibly, tangentially rather, forced me towards reading more English poets. When I felt that I was confident in English I started writing in English. By this time, I didn't come across any Indian poets. I was drawn to the beauty of language, the felicity of expression in English. If you ask me who were the poets influenced me most – Eliot, Yeats, Whitman and Stevens.

J.S.: How was your early education ?

N.M.: I studied in a Bengali medium school at Beleghata, Calcutta. After class V, I went to Orissa. My medium of instruction changed from Bengali to Oriya, from Corporation School, Calcutta to A.B. High School, Basudebpur, Balasore.

J.S.- Did your education in English Literature help you write poems in English ?

N.M.- Obviously, my training in English Literature helped me a great deal to become a poet in English. For my training in English literature I was fortunate enough to read the great poets of the West. They continue to attract me since my college days. I can never ignore the influence of Shelley, Keats, Donne, Shakespeare, Eliot and Yeats when I was first introduced to them.

J.S. - Do you rate yourself as a bilingual poet ?

N.M.- Not necessarily, even if my First language is Oriya. I wrote some poems in Oriya, published in *Jhankar* and *Asanta Kali*.

I also recited my Oriya poems for All India Radio, Berhampur and Cuttack.

J.S.- Who are the contemporary Oriya poets you like?

N.M.- I like the poems of Ramakanta Rath, Sitakanta Mahapatra, Hara Prasad Paricha and Bipin Nayek. But, I am always reminded of another significant voice in Oriya poetry – Bibek Jena, who is no more.

J.S.- Can you tell me the poets who influenced you?

N.M- In the formative stage of my creative career I was influenced by Eliot, Pablo Neruda, and Wallace Stevens also influenced me. The intensity in the lines of their poems hypnotised me. The sheer magic of words and the rhythmical beauty they created in their poems were the sources of my inspiration. Keats and Donne became my favourite in a later stage.

In *Prayer to Lord Jagannatha*, a sprawling prayer poem, the poet thinks that 'prayer' is the only means to reach his Creator and that human life is made of 'prayer and prayer'. The poet's *Prayer to Lord Jagannatha*, his first long poem in 840 stanzas of three lines each, is an intense exercise in poetic meditation, self-denial and celebration of humanity and divinity at the same time. Mohanty, a poet of 'absences,' builds up the poetic texture of prayer to extol life and existence in its duel continuity, in the perspective of an Indian experience that is strange and unique to his readers. The force of his poetic art, and the insight in his reflections, rests in Mohanty's social and academic roots which ennoble and glorify the Indian sensibility. The poet-speaker in his long narrative poems is a devotee of the Indian Bhakti cult. When he intimately addresses Lord Jagannatha

we are baffled by how he can accuse, acquit, hate, love, provoke, pacify, ignore and adore him. But in the process a philosophy of existential relevance is revealed in the poetic corpus. In the 'Epilogue' of *Krishna* Mohanty writes, "I sculpted my loneliness /on the sleek back of darkness." The poet's heart is wet with tears of loneliness, jotting inscriptions in 'flaming blood'. Like a devotional poet, Mohanty longs for Lord's 'umbrella', signifying love and grace, when it rains and in the hour of distress. Niranjan Mohanty's fame in Indian English poetry rests on two long poems; one deals with the metaphysical myths and legends of Lord Jagannatha and the other is about the *bhakti* tradition in Indian religious space in relation to Krishna.

Mohanty uses the metaphors of 'prayer' and 'love' to record the Indian sensibility. For the poet, both 'prayer' and 'love' are personal experiences, not community experiences. These cognitive experiences help him to shape his private identity as a poet in close proximity with the land where he is rooted. His search for this identity continues beyond 'the storm of irrelevance'. At the moment of experiencing the Truth, he closes his eyes in absolute solitude, a manifestation of prayer in Indian *bhakti* tradition. Lord Jagannatha guides him to enlightenment, just as in the poetic space Krishna blesses him with hymns of love. Krishna Himself is the narrator of the poem, who experiences his love for Radha. The poet does not divinise mundane experience. He views Krishna and Lord Jagannatha as he views himself. Here the poet follows the Indian tradition of *adwita-bad* (non-dualism). The long poem, written in tercets in ten sections, presents Krishna absorbed in Radha, respecting the (ultimate) union of husband and wife in the Original Couple. He projects human love as the re-enactment of metaphysical love. In his long poem, *Krishna*, Krishna adores Radha, showing the divine energy in humans as the manifestation of sexual urge. *Krishna* is the poetic discourse that extols the mundane glory of his beloved and expresses his desire for physical union with her without being erotic. Mohanty accepts the ancient Hindu view that the force of sexual desire in a person is intrinsically

divine; the sexual energy is converted into *tapas*, a radiant inner heat. For Mohanty love is a sanctifying experience that elevates the soul. In Indian religious tradition, Love is a form of yoga that articulates fellowship. The poet wants to elevate and sanctify the world by singing music of love of the ordinary hearts. Archetypal Love is not chained to the language of time; it is the acme of human need.

In all his poems Niranjan Mohanty craves for the romance of the past and indulges in celebrating loneliness; he explores himself against a fallen world, fraught with missed connections, loss, grief, fear, frustration, darkness, death-wish, self-pity, unrequited passion, and feelings of irrelevance. Emotions run from mild confession – often autobiographical — to bemused distraction. His verbal maneuvers, lyrical and meditative, seem to dramatise the self rather than to explore, or expose, some higher reality, truth, or history.

For the last two years or so Mohanty was preoccupied with Tiger poems. The 'Tiger', an archetypal symbol, takes man to the silent zone of the anecdotes of roots and lullabies. His 'tiger' represents his 'strength' of the 'bone'; the bodily resilience. His tiger poems open the floodgate of silence. His last volume of poems *Tiger and Other poems* (2008) records a mature poet; the theme-song of life:

> I'm no emperor, merely a pilgrim
> I shall implant white whispers of Buddha.

We are bewildered to read his prophetic lines in the poem, 'The Other Tiger' included in *Tiger and Other Poems:*

> Yet another tiger
> Like loneliness, sin or waiting
> Comes towards me

Tiger is not merely a physical symbol here; an abstract quality. 'Tiger', for Mohanty, is cold death which comes near the poet. It is the final biological experience, a clinical truth of life. The poet uses the tiger symbol to designate the beauty of things, even the beauty of death. The tiger poems are written in unstopped lines (enjambement), the continuation of an idea from one line to the next without a final pause. Most of his tiger poems are verbal inscape; distinctive and queer.

A beguiling sense of trauma of living and the paradoxical overlapping of time and space pervade Mohanty's poems which probably spring from his own private (maybe mental) agony, living in a morbid world where basic values do not matter. Indeed, each poem in *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha* to *Tiger and Other Poems* is rich with varied dexterity. His poems are subtle and elusive, exploring states of mind and genuine sentiments. Like his contemporary Orissan poet Bibhu Padhi, Mohanty explores the tantalizing gap between the space, 'grammar of pain' and the agonizing experience of mortality he writes from.

The great soul is mute; sudden cardiac arrest has stopped the flow of blood in his body. But, the final answer of my interview with Niranjan Mohanty lingers in my ears:

J.S.: What's your immediate wish?

N.M.: I wish to write as long as I could and to inhale the fragrance of words and silences. (CV 29)

Reference:

Jaydeep Sarangi, 'An Interview with Niranjan Mohanty', *Contemporary Vibes*, 2.8 (2007).

NIRMAL SELVAMONY

PORTABLE HOMELAND: ROBIN NGANGOM'S TAKE ON THE DYING *TINAI* TRADITION OF THE INDIAN NORTH EAST

Robin Ngangom. *The Desire of Roots*. Cuttack: Chandrabhaga, 2006.

Robin Ngangom's writings are quite unlike most Indian (so-called) verse in English in their approach to nature. In the latter, nature is often a mere backdrop for human action or sentiment. Even when natural phenomena are the subjects of literary treatment, ultimately they subserve only human interest. Basically, there are two ways in which nature is treated, subjectively and objectively. Here is an example of objective treatment from Manohar Shetty:

> Ants
> Infinitesimal frenzies
> They have banded into gangs
> Mobbing an upturned insect,
> Lifting in flanked procession
> The palanquin of flesh.
> (*Indian English Poetry since 1950: An anthology* 146).

Dom Moraes's "Snow on a Mountain" is a good example of subjectivising nature:

> That dream, her eyes like rocks studded the high
> Mountain of her body that I was to climb.
> One moment past my hands had swum
> The chanting streams of her thighs:
> Then I was lost, breathless among the pines. (91)

Here is another example:

> Mountains
> They are the tombs
> of the dead Titans who of old,
> in the hot youth of the world, rebelled:
> rose up against the universal dooms
> of likeness and equality—
> against the Matter that would mould
> all Life's variety
> into one smooth monotony.
> (Gokak 212-213)

In Robin's writings, nature is neither seen as an object (though one of the two sections of his collection reads, "Subjects and Objects") nor as a pretext for subjective expression; rather, nature is seen in relation to humans and values which are cultural and spiritual. A typical example may be found in his "Tura, September 2004":

> Friends, when hemmed in by mountains
> look at the sacred Durama peak
> and remember Denison the consumptive lover
> who was young and handsome once. (53)

In the above lines there certainly is a relation between the mountains and Denison. But the relation cannot be reduced to a subjective one. The mountains are larger than any human life in Tura and this is clearly brought out by the sacredness of the mountain. The human does not regard the mountain as any other object but dwells in it like its flora and fauna. These lines may in some ways compare well with a brief Tamil *cankam* poem of the pre-Christian era:

On those full moons of yon yestermonths
our father we had
and our hill others could not capture.
On this full moon of this month
the emperors with victorious drums
took away our hill
and our father we lost.
(*Puranaanuuru* 112. Trans. Nirmal Selvamony)

The daughters of the chieftain, Pari, who are the speaker-personae of the Tamil poem, also do not fail to point out the greatness of their hill. Even as their father, their hill gave them identity and shelter like their own motherland. Loss of the hill is loss of home. The hill resists subjectivism because it is much larger than any human subject.

When humans, nature and the spiritual realm are regarded relationally, humans do not occupy a central place as in the objective and subjective types of treatment mentioned above. In the relational approach, humans are only a part of the relational web. In fact, it is the place which gains precedence over all else that is related. U. R. Ananthamurthy's "What Poetry Meant For Our Ancients," expresses this idea forcefully:

"Nataraja dances"
is not what our ancients say.
"Here
in Chidambara, Nataraja dances,"
they point,
showing where.

Since place is the primary principle in literary representation, it is meticulously described in several ancient texts. Often, a persona is

defined by the place where one is. This means the place is, to a great extent, the persona. This is why in early Tamil poetic tradition, in both long and short poems, a considerable amount of poetic space is given to place description.

In Tamil poetic tradition, the relational web integrating the human, nature and the spiritual realm is known as "*tinai*." All Tamil *cankam* poems are based on the foundation of *tinai*. *Tinai* tradition was both practised and theorised by the ancient Tamils. The earliest known theoretical account may be found in Tolkaappiyam. According to this account, the three basic constituents of *tinai* are, the primary aspects (land and time), the generative aspects (naturo-cultural features), and the appropriate aspect (agentive elements). Basically, there are four types of *tinai*, easily distinguishable on the basis of the land ascribed to each of them: the scrub jungle-based *tinai*, the montane *tinai*, the riverine plain *tinai*, and the coastal *tinai*. As part of the naturo-cultural features, each *tinai* had its own human communities also. So, we have shepherds in the first *tinai*, the mountain dwellers in the second, the farmers in the third and the fisherfolk in the fourth. Since the naturo-cultural features included worship, music, economic activities, governance and communication, each *tinai* is also a social order by itself. In short, each person inhabiting a *tinai* will be part of a community of human and non-human beings who inherit a set of cultural practices from their ancestors. *Tinai* social order is in fact not unlike what is known as tribal or primitive social order.

In the writings of Robin Ngangom, we can find a *tinai* basis, which is not to be found in any other Indian writings in English originating from any other part of the country. In this respect, the writings of the North East are unique and require appropriate critical criteria for understanding and evaluation. These writings, for example, cannot be simply taken as "postcolonial" or "postmodern" writings

calling for theoretical attention in the light of postcolonial or postmodern or some such modern critical perspective. Certainly, such elements may be the result of Western and pan-Indian influence. But, such influences should not cloud their uniqueness.

The most important feature of this writing is its place-centredness. The writings revolve not only around such places as Gangtok (56-58), Imphal (the poet's birthplace, 74) and Laitumkhrah (64), the Southeastern Hills (18-20), the city (61; 75-77), and the native land (81). Several texts contrast the city or town with the hills:

> In the sultry city where happy
> consignments fail to arrive.
> …
> I fade into the distance, harking back
> to open fields of rice, away from your exhausted
> cough of factories and engines, touching
> braided roads to reach the hills.
> ("Poem for Samir" 31)

and also:

> Exile is always long in a city
> When there are green hills
> In your blood.
> ("Poem for a City" 76)

"Revolutionaries" (54-55) contrasts "life in the jungle" with the life in the towns. "Gangtok, February 1998" expresses this contrast in the following manner:

> When we contemplate your emerald tongue
> quivering on pale sad rock
> we grow more weary of striving cities,
> and desultory roads. But you will
> teach us to name the forest and the mountain. (56)

"City of Baked Clay" contrasts the "primitive villages" in the mountains and the towns:

> She said the old ones
> like to sit and dream because of
> the undying gifts of mountain summers;
> they spurn the towns
> and choose to die
> in primitive villages. (61)

The protagonist reminisces in "The First Rain":

> When I listen to hills
> I hear the voices of my faded life.
> Whisky and Mehdi Hassan and Billie Holiday
> make for strange fruit on nondescript evenings. (78-79)

Of all the place-words in these texts, the hill (43) seems to be the most representative *tinai* place. In several texts, the protagonist expresses his desire to return to the hills (31, 59, 60, 76, 78-79, 80). The bonding with the hills is very much like the bonding between a heterosexual pair of lovers as in *tinai* tradition. In some places the poet identifies the hill with the woman: "the breast of the hill" (23); "A new valley that seems/ to rise from the ashes every dawn/ its breast oppressed by fog" (85); "I dreamt of your breasts/ bright with wet moonlight" (61).

In fact, in *tinai* tradition, it is one's own place or home that integrates all the aspects of a specific *tinai*. Significantly, *tinai* is one's greater home. In Robin's texts home has some variants, "homeland" (34, 35, 67, 71, 74, 83, 93, 94), "motherland" (55), "land" (18, 20, 34, 35, 61, 70. 74, 80), "native land" (59, 81), "lair" (75, 78) and "house" (26, 28, 31, 38, 55, 61). If "roots" (80), "rented room" (74), "nest" (64), and "hideout" (62) may be called, "para-homes," the "prison" (71), and the "cage" (63) may be termed, "anti-homes."

In *The Desire of Roots*, the protagonist is homeless and expresses a strong desire to return home. In "Prospects of a Winter Morning" he says:

> I know where I was born,
> Or the street I grew out of
> Like a trembling branch,
> But I don't know where my home is. (85)

"Native Land" (81) shows how terror was unleashed on his state, Manipur. One may want to compare the situation in Manipur with the one in Arunachal Pradesh. Here are the words of the persona in "On Top of a Hill" by Almond Dean Syiem:

> I'm standing on top of a hill
> Which is bare like a naked woman
> Whose breasts have been uncovered
> By a ravishing madman. (Satpathy)

Monalisa Changkija, a Naga woman poet bemoans the devastation of her state, Nagaland:

Yes, I have seen our rice fields
Turn into factories and hills
Reduced to barren brown
Our rivers have dried
And our once sparkling fish
Lie dead on sandy banks. (Satpathy)

Manipur has been plagued by border dispute also: "We've drawn our borders with blood." (79). Fleeing from such a strife-torn state, the poet Robin chose to reside in Shillong. Though he has a comfortable life in the new city, he is troubled by an irresistible desire for his roots. "The First Rain" narrates the story of his exile and his desire for his roots:

Perched like the houses on the edge of a cliff
I've lived more days in exile
than my poor childhood.
As a fumbling fifteen-year old
I abandoned only forward-looking native people
who entrusted terror, drugs and
a civilized plague to children. (78)

I'm the anguish of slashed roots,
The fear of the homeless,
And the desperation of former kisses.
How much land does my enemy need?
…
I'm the pain of slashed roots.
…
I'll leave the cracked fields of my land
And its weeping pastures of daybreak.
Let wolves tear our beloved hills. (80)

Besides being a metaphor for home, the root is a connective between two ends, the tree and the earth. If the protagonist is the tree, and Nature, the earth, then the root is that which transfers earth's energy to the tree. The spatio-temporal energy which could also be called the "sacred." Spatio-temporality may be regarded as the empirical and accessible form of the sacred or godhood. As far as the texts of Robin are concerned, the root is language itself, a form of spatio-temporalized energy binding the central persona and Nature.

A natural language native to a place is part of the entire energy complex of that place. Even as water binds a plant with the earth, language is communitarian energy that binds people and nature. Language is not a wholly human activity. If Nature does not actively collaborate with the human, language will not be possible. Though it is partly true that language is symbolic and signific too, it cannot be reduced to a set of symbols or signs. It is in fact the air people breathe at a particular place like the food they eat there.

If the air that humans require to produce speech sounds is from nature, the process of writing is not possible without natural materials. Further, is not also wholly localisable within the body and mind of a human; rather, it is an inter-human reality. Even as part of the wind energy keeps the human alive, another part of it becomes language and fulfils the human needs by connecting one person with another and also with nature. A natural language indigenous to a specific region defines both the idiorhythms and also the collective rhythm of the community. In fact, the specific culture of a community is made possible by the linguistic energy.

Each language is a kind of linguistic energy germane to a human community. Being part of a community means sharing certain

patterns of the flow of the linguistic energy. These patterns help form the values of reliability, sincerity, genuineness and the meanings of emotional responses. This is why a person sounds more convincing in the mother tongue than in another tongue. Mother tongue is preferred to a second language in intimate occasions because the patterns of the linguistic energy flow are familiar and acceptable to the members of that linguistic community. One may generalise the linguistic energy patterns in generic terms. For example, if English patterns are angular, Tamil ones are sinuous and these patterns are in keeping with the behaviour and temperament of the speakers of the languages. But one cannot ignore the specifics of each language; say for example, the differences between two languages which are generically sinuous. The difference between English and Meiti is not simply due to the nature of the language families to which each belongs, but also due to the nature of the different places from which each originates.

Immigrants very often changed the names of places because the native names called for a kind of articulation of linguistic energy the immigrant was not familiar with. In Tamil Nadu the British changed the Tamil place name, ezhumuur (literally, "seven villages") to Egmore (which has no etymological explanation either in Tamil or English) because they could not "do" the former easily. A Tamil place name, not quite unlike a Tamil person's name is inaccessible and unperformable to a British. This also means that the latter does not have power over that place. This explains why the speaker-persona in "To a Woman from Southeastern Hills" exhorts the woman in the following manner:

> Let us refuse these names, woman,
> our names we proudly put down on pages,
> these names that come between our lips
> cold as parchment.

Mark how the persona refers to the somatic element of the place name also.

Changing native place names to place names from the language of the colonizer is one of the aspects of colonization. Renaming the places in a colony with names from the colonizer's language is part of the process of subduing the colony. For example, Virginia, New York, Carolina and so on in the USA, and Queensland, Melbourne and Sydney in Australia are all European names which replaced the original native names. Despite all attempts to colonise language, several native place names have also ironically survived in the colonies. For example, Illinois, Arkansas, Utah, Massachusetts, Alabama, Nevada, California, and Texas are all American Indian names which fossilize native culture. However, it is also true that the coloniser has altered the native names to suit his linguistic energy pattern. This means that a language of a community cannot be reproduced as such by another linguistic community. This is why the speaker-persona says,

> They can never learn
> our songs, or feel the drumbeats of our hearts.
> How could they harness the rivers
> in our blood, rushing without boundaries,
> or tame our precipices and sullen fields? (19)

The deictic "they" refers to those who introduced alien culture in Manipur. Those who gave us "religion to divide us" (19), brought in "science, civilised laws, and rock music," "coat and nylon," "temples and churches" and the "English tongue" (19). A non-Manipuri cannot learn the Manipuri names and songs because the former cannot feel the drumbeats of the hearts of the Manipuris. The unique somatic rhythm of the Manipuri cannot be reproduced by a non-Manipuri.

This is because the rivers in Manipur flow not only on the land in Manipur but also in the blood of the Manipuris. For this reason, the precipices of the Manipuri hills and sullen fields of Manipur are ultimately inaccessible to non-Manipuris.

To put it differently, anthropos and topos are closely connected. Anthropogeography teaches us that place shapes organisms, including anthropos. Your voice is soft because "mountain streams/ taught your heart" (18). In "The First Rain" the speaker-persona says,

> When I listen to the hills
> I hear the voices of my faded life (78-79)

In "Genesis's End" he adds that the cry of the Khyrim woman originated from the stones of the hills and that her mute cry "wanders the slopes" (23). She is a stone of the hill itself (23).

Even as specific place rather than space is important in *tinai*, specific time of day or year rather than mental time is significant in *tinai* writing. Accordingly, in Robin's writings we do find the persona mentioning the time of action wherever possible. The writer uses English terms like "spring," (87, 89) "summer," (23, 27, 33), "autumn" (23, 53) and "winter" (24, 41, 49, 55, 59, 60, 62, 64, 81, 85) to denote the Indian seasons though he uses the Indian month name, "Baisakhi" (87) as title in one of his texts. Rarely does he use a Khasi month name, *Naitung* (33). English month names also figure in the texts: September (53), "a darkening December sky" (38; 39), January (39) and February (56), "March" 16, "June" (21). Just as in *tinai* tradition, in some texts in the present volume the seasons are associated with human emotions. Accordingly, in "Poem Against the End" we have, "O, those seasons of anxiety" (11). This remind one of the rainy season (known as "*kaar*") in Tamil which is associated with the wife's patient waiting for the arrival of her husband.

If natural diachronic time is divided into seasons and times of day, cultural diachronic time is spoken of in more ways than one. "To a Woman from Southeastern Hills" (18-20) assigns the life of the Manipuris to two time-periods: time before civilization, and time thereafter. The former time is rendered by means of an effective transferred epithet, "bare-bosomed time" (time when Manipuri women did not cover their bosoms). In the present displaced condition, "bare-bosomed time" is available to the protagonist mainly through the modes of memory (11, 12, 18, 21, 23, 25, 26, 31, 33, 34, 36, 39, 44, 50, 57, 59, 64, 65, 66, and 85) and amnesia ("forgetfulness of being" 19). It must be pointed out that time as memory and dream (18, 23, 26, 32, 35, 45, 47, 59, 61, 66, and 79) are interiorized modes of time and they are not the characteristic temporal modes in *tinai* tradition. Understandably, the non-*tinai* temporal modes get privileged due to exile and the consequent crumbling of *tinai* life. Due to the influence of alien culture, the Christian calendar ("a former calendar" in "Summer" 27) also marks the time of the events of the *kosmos* of Robin's writings ("Christmas Eve" 26; "Christmas" 66; "Easter" 41; "Easter Sunday" 41; "Maundy Thursday" 41; "Monday" 31; "Saturdays" 64). Further, native culture itself is referred to as time "past" (32).

It must be added that *tinai* tradition, being earthy, does not set great store by synchronic time. On the contrary, in the present writings, synchronic time is quite significant mainly because of the deprivation of linear diachronic time. The following lines from "The Gazelle in Winter" will illustrate this point:

> And for one instance of blinding eternity
> without anyone knowing it
> she belongs to the poet entirely,
> although he can't speak to her

or make love to her,
and she may be thinking of a tall man
all the same. (25)

In "Pastoral" the moment of listening to the rain is set against the various other activities which mark diachronic time (38). The following lines from "Loneliness" point to a state of timelessness and recall Shakespeare's "And time, that takes survey of all the world,/ Must have a stop" (*Henry IV, Part I*. V. iv. 82-83; later adapted by Aldous Huxley as the title of one of his novels):

One uneventful day
without warning
everything came to a stop, (45).

The physiological correlate of timelessness is "benign stupor" (48). While speaking of the revolutionary in an ironic tone, the persona observes, "You will never grow old or ugly like us" (63). Infinite time also marks extraordinary human existence:

During day we walk disembodied
as leaden ghosts in the streets. (82)

Disembodied existence is as good as death:

The women we loved left us because
we died in their arms, we have no homeland,
no forwarding address. We must be dead. (83)

As for the generative aspect of *tinai* in Robin's writings, a few survivals are in evidence. A typical example occurs in "Tura, September 2004": "bamboo-leaf eyes." (53). According to Tamil *tinai*

theory, bamboo, being montane grass, should be regarded as a generative element of the montane *tinai* community. Like the early Tamil poets who chose details from their respective *tinai* for the vehicles of their comparison, Robin also uses a montane detail for his metaphor. Another detail that serves a similar purpose is the cherry tree:

> Winter languishes in the street
> like an old man who refuses to stir
> when constellations swing ingeniously
> and cherries turn red like the luminous
> lips of girls eager for kisses. (41)

Cherry is associated with winter in "The Gazelle in Winter" also: "The gazelle in winter/Walks beneath cherry-trees."

The willow tree, as in the literature of the western hemisphere, symbolises sorrow:

> Until one day
> out of our cherished sorrows
> a willow tree ascended
> and fed its weeping
> to a river. (36)

In "Genesis's End," a Khyrim woman becomes the details of her landscape probably after the lover lost her. Mark the poignancy of these lines:

> Your dying laughter withers the rock's lip,
> trees possessed by your eyes,
> after you changed into an unearthly desire,

…
Wedged between the stones of origin
your mute cry wanders the slopes
while we search for days on end, (23)

The pines provide a fit simile for the weavers and herdsmen of the hills:

What they don't need is poetry,
these gnarled men and wrinkled women who
work on slopes
swaying in the rain like knotted,
weather-beaten pines, breathing
mountain air, those weavers and herdsmen. (16)

Tolkaappiyam mentions deity as the first generative aspect. Since the North East came under the influence of Christianity, and the poet also happens to have a Christian religious background, the tribal *tinai* form of the sacred (animism) has been replaced with Christian spirituality. However, it survives in "Tura, September 2004" as "the sacred Durama peak." The Tamil equivalent for the montane *tinai* is "Ceeyoon" (he who is red). The masculine ending (*-an*) does not mean that the deity is anthropomorphic.

Like the early Tamils, the hill people of Manipur also have their share of fermented drinks like "rice wine" (18), which is a part of the larger generative category, food. Montane animals such as tiger (63) and gazelle (24) are mentioned in the texts. The mention of lair on two occasions suggests that this could be in reference to mountain animals (75, 78). "Your Name Protects" mentions a primitive musical instrument which is a relic from the tribal *tinai* past: "the sad refrain/ of the *duitara* waiting/ to be mended." (50). This is a two-stringed

yaazh of the wandering minstrels found all over the country. The footnote says that this is used by the Khasi folk musicians. We learn that these people had a special cloak for the purpose of story-telling (19). "Poem for a City" mentions "the plaintive Bihu songs they brought/ from the native villages/ when they too are lonely." (76). The effect of music and poetry on non-human life is the subject of the following lines:

> When he hears poetry
> the peasant will lean on his hoe
> in exasperation while his fields lie fallow,
> the hunter will return empty-handed with
> a sad poem, and if the goatherd listens
> to poetry's demented cadences
> his goats will not give milk. (16)

It may be surmised that the peasant, the hunter, and the goatherd mentioned in the text represent different *tinai* regions, the riverine plains, the mountains, and the pastoral region respectively. In the olden times each should have had his own musical traditions. What is referred to as "poetry" is only a later name for what was known as "song" in *tinai* societies. Significantly, the power of human music on non-human beings has also been observed and recorded in early Tamil *tinai* music. One of the texts (*Porunaraarruppatai* 21-22) tells us how the waylaying robbers dropped their weapons unconsciously when they were spellbound by the musical mode known as *paalaippan* of a bard. Another speaks of a robust tusker that stopped eating the millet, stood still and fell asleep uncontrollably to the song a mountain girl (*Akanaanuuru* 102). Along with traditional music the persona ("To a Woman from Southeastern Hills") juxtaposes the "dolorous guitars" (18) also, which belongs to the post-*tinai* phase of the North Eastern life.

The Tamil generative elements generate ideas, feelings in the mind of the humans. This function of the generative elements is evident in the following lines:

> You, woman, from southeastern hills,
> cloud-covered mystery, gliding on rain,
> deep drink of rice wine with eyes closed,
> child of the dancing bamboo, unction
> of ginger on the wagging tongue.
> Your voice is soft because mountain streams
> taught your heart (18).

As for the appropriate action for each *tinai*, the present volume does not provide any definite data on this matter. The reasons are not far to seek. *The Desire of Roots* portrays the westernized life of the people of the North East and the present essay attempts to shore the fragmentary elements in the volume against the ruins. It will be necessary to read the traditional North Eastern texts in order to reconstruct the entire edifice of *tinai*.

Though one can see rudiments of *tinai* in these North Eastern texts, it is evident that there was a time when it was functional and dynamic. But what is represented in these texts is only a dying tradition. *Tinai* survives in this volume more as homelessness than as home. Homelessness has other equivalents here, uprootedness (59, 71, 74, 80), and exile (14, 18, 76, 78). The protagonist rephrases his desire for his home in "Everywhere I go…": Everywhere I go/ I carry my homeland with me" (93). Shanta Acharya, an Indian immigrant in Britain suggests a similar possibility through her speaker-persona:

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

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

The knowledge of what it means
to carry a whole household in oneself,
to be so perfectly self-contained, poised
at the centre of all manner of creatures unsheltered.
("My Good Luck Home" 19)

An archetypal portable household rather than homeland may be found in *The Ramayana* of Kamban. While Ravana carries off Sita and flies to Lanka in Valmiki's version, he digs up the shelter where Sita was dwelling in order to avoid physical contact with another's wife and flies all the way to Lanka (*Kambaraamaayanam* 72-73).

Now, this raises an interesting question: "Can one carry away one's home?" The theory of *tinai* lays down land-time as the first principle in order to show how the community of human and non-humans is a stable and durable entity. Land in several early Tamil poems stands for stability and immovability. Therefore, portable land is no land at all and such land cannot be the first principle of *tinai*. However, the idea of portable land may be seen as a symptom of a deeper ailment. It reveals an inexorable dilemma faced by the protagonist, a sort of *trisanku* state, a neither here nor there situation. Even in exile, he has not wholly given up on his original home. He

has an intense desire to return like a migratory bird. During exile, he has not attempted to take on the identity of the adopted home too. In other words, though he is not home yet he believes that he somehow possesses it. This paradox expresses itself in significant ways in the texts. Consider the title of his text, "Genesis's End" (23), "the bittersweets/ of verse" (24), "young women/ sweet and bitter with juice" (27), "our buried-alive beginning" (36), "buried beginning" (36), "The silence of birds and fog/ have roused the hill as we slept" (38), "happy illnesses" (41), "our/ deep loss when everything is found" (48), "During day we walk disembodied/ as leaden ghosts in the streets." (82). A clincher may be found in "Poem for Samir": "I come from a country where they took our pasts/ and returned them as terrible dreams" (32). In his paradoxical *trisanku* state, the protagonist considers his memory his home.

If homelessness introduces an element of chaos in the texts, it is particularly evident in the form of the texts. The writer neither uses the traditional Manipuri textual forms nor proper metrical verse. Instead, he plumps for poetic prose and prose. If most of the texts are prose with poetic qualities, a few like "Revolutionaries" (54-55) and "Bad Places" (62) are prose without any pretensions.

Robin's prose is embellished by his own language and also by borrowings. The line, "How much land does my enemy need?" is an allusion to Tolstoy's story, "How Much Land Does A Man Need?" The reference to "an unexamined life" recalls Socrates (70). "Sackcloth" (70) is one of the several Biblical expressions. If the phrase, "death by water" (43) is borrowed from T.S.Eliot's "The Waste Land," "forgetfulness of being" (19) is from Heidegger, and "the will to live" (45) is indebted to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The lines, "Who are the artisans of wood that left/ no names on the palace gate of the Chogyal?" (56) remind one of the line, "Who are

these coming to the sacrifice?" in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The first line in "Loneliness," "There was something alive then" (45) reminds one of the first line of Ted Hughes's Thought-Fox": "Something is alive." The utterance, "Peace be unto you" is from Christian liturgy (89).

In spite of the literary allusions and several literary devices, Robin's harp does not sing in exile, by the rivers of Shillong. Obviously, the death of *tinai* has taken a toll on the literary form also. However, the reader hopes that someday Robin will live out his assertion:

> I must stop agonizing or save what I can
> Such as the tunes of my homeland
> which dance in my blood. (94)

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KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

THE POET AS CHRONICLER: AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Critiques of the poetry of North-East India by analysts from the mainland commonly carry flamboyant headlines like "Poetry in the Time of Terror," "Poetry from the Troubled Zone," "…The Literature of 'Real Conflict'…."[1] and so forth. A cursory look at these headlines tempt one to think that the mainlanders are unduly engrossed with sensationalising anything to do with the North-East, including poetry. But if the truth be told, there is a good reason for the region to be always in the news for being "'a seething cauldron' torn by the ethnic crisis, economic failures, terrorist violence and mounting claims of regional autonomy and separatism."[2] And when serious literary commentators describe its poetry in these startling terms, it may be safe to assume that this reason goes beyond the need to sensationalise the subject. In fact, it may even be said that such descriptions are inspired by the subject, by the very nature of the place and the poetry.

The North-East is of course not one homogeneous province as it is commonly depicted. Its eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are inhabited by such a conglomeration of peoples, with such a melange of cultures, languages and religions, that it would be simply an injustice to make any generalised statement about them. While Assam and Tripura may be said to be dominated by Assamese and Bengalis belonging to the broad Indo-Aryan group, and the rest of the states by some distinct tribes, the real picture is actually much more complicated. Meghalaya alone includes around 20 ethnic groups in its list of Scheduled Tribes, and all of them can be broken up into

a complex network of sub-tribes and clans, speaking their own languages and dialects. The same is more or less true of all the other states.

And yet despite this confusion of tribes and sub-tribes, cultures and languages, the literatures of the region are not so tangled as one might imagine, and some broad statements can still be made about them. One of the primary causes for this relative simplicity and commonness in these literatures may be sought in their origin and history. Apart from the Assamese, the Manipuris and the Bengalis of Tripura, who had their own distinct scripts and whose written literatures could be traced back to the 15th century and earlier, the literary history of most of the other communities is fairly new, as recent as the advent of the white missionaries from Wales and America in the middle of the 19th century. In the Khasi Hills, in about 1841, Thomas Jones of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Mission cast the Khasi language in written form using the Roman script. As recorded by Nigel Jenkins, "The success of the Welshman's script led eventually to the adoption of Roman rather than Bengali letters by the neighbouring Garo, Mizo and Naga peoples,"[3] and later by almost all the tribes except for the Kokboroks and Chakmas of Tripura, who are using the Bengali script, and some in Assam, who are using the Assamese script.

Given this background, it was only natural that the majority of the tribes would take to the same kind of literature and influence, which were exclusively Christian and English, in contrast to the Assamese, Manipuri, and Bengali who were exposed to Sanskrit and Hindi literatures as well. The literary legacy of the missionaries has been said to be two-edged. While on the one hand they gifted the tribes with a common literary heritage, on the other they made them deny the existence of their own literatures in their rich oral traditions

and blinded them to the possibility of such an existence by teaching them to be ashamed of thier own traditions as pagan and irreligious. That is why the poetry of some of the hill tribes even today still seems to be either singing hymns or paying tribute to cuckoos in the woods and nonexistent daffodils in the vales. But this "neo-Victorian windiness," which "offers at best a chocolate box view of the tribal past and has virtually nothing to say about the agonising dilemmas of the present"[4] is definitely not the contemporary, modern verse of the North-East. Modern poetry in the region can be found in the free verse of Bengali, Assamese, Manipuri and those tribal poets of the different states who write in these languages and in English. These writers, with their extensive reading of modern world literature as it comes to them from English translations, passionately grapple with some of the psychological and social difficulties of present-day life. Having "cut their teeth on Lorca, Seferis, Arghezi, Neruda and the hard-edged modernists of the Third World"[5] they find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the particular predicament of their people.

Writing a foreword to the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*,[6] Jayanta Mahapatra draws attention to the common concerns and shared values of the North-East poets: "Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will not keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast of our country." Why is the poetry of contemporary North-East unifying? Of his own poetry Neruda writes:

> Ehrenburg [Spanish poet], who was reading and translating my poems, scolded me: too much root, too many roots in your poems. Why so many?

> It's true. The frontier regions sank their roots into my poetry and these roots have never been able to wrench themselves out. My life is a long pilgrimage that is always turning on itself, always returning to the woods in the south, to the forest lost to me.[7]

This same rootedness is visible everywhere in the poetry of the North-East poets today. The roots of their beloved land; the roots of their people's culture; the roots of their times; and most of all, the roots of the past that is "lost" to them, have sunken deep into their poetry. And this is the chief reason why their poetry is found to be so bonding even though it may come from "the very different regions of the Northeast".

In his "Foreword" Mahapatra finds it "strange that a poet from Mizoram might be speaking of the same values as a poet from Assam or Manipur." But when one understands that these poets are bound together by their great love for the land one no longer wonders why we have a poet like Thangjam Ibopishak who declares in the title of one of his poems, "Manipur, Why Shouldn't I Love Your Hills, Marshes, Rivers, Fields, Open Spaces." Driven by this profound emotion, Nature is an overwhelming presence in many of their poems. As K. Satchidanandan observes in his preview to the anthology, "…the river with its magical voice, the twin gods of water and mist, the land heavy with memories, the forest that lingers… One can sense a mythopoetic imagination here." There is in the poetry of Mamang Dai glimpses of the mist-covered mountains, extensive rivers and primal forests of Arunachal Pradesh. One gets a feel of Assam in the poems of Nilmani Phookan: "When you reach out/ the plantain leaf trembles." Or in the poems of Nilim Kumar's: "families of bamboo" and the children playing round "An anthill" with tiny "canes in our hands/ and long snakes in the pineapple shrubs." The poetry

of Robin S. Ngangom, captures, as Gopi Krishnan Kottoor puts it, "the mists of the green tribal [read Meghalaya] hills, and is vivid with native imagery, just as in the poetry of his poet-friend Kynpham Nongkynrih" who speaks "the poetry of the verdant hills…of red cherries, or of winter oranges ripening in the sun" [8] and the baptising rain

> linking my soul forever
> to its cloud-tending wind
> and cherubic mists
> hanging from summer trees in sanctified woods.
> ("The Rain Waited with Its Holy Waters")

The "untamed hills" of Nagaland with their "soil young and virgin" are eulogised in Easterine Iralu's poetry, while the scent of tribal Tripura is unmistakable as Chandrakanta Murasingh unfolds in his "A Poem"

> … the *maichu** of words
> With a roasted crab
> And the *gudak* ** scented with *jhum*-coriander.

But in their love for the land and everything that it represents, in their careful and imaginative, and often romantic chronicling of its landscape, its sights and sounds, and its life and manners, the North-East poets are not blind to the fact that this land, to quote Ibopishak, is also "The Land of the Half-humans" where "For six months just head without body, six months just body without/ head…." rules. This disease is what the editors of the anthology call

* Lunch packed in banana leaf.
**Traditional curry

"the banality of corruption and the banality of terror." Corruption in the North-East is basically the result of the unholy nexus between unscrupulous politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen and of course, the ubiquitous militants. It has indeed become so banal and so commonplace that no sphere of activity is left unaffected by it. The proliferation of this vice is best described in the words of the Khasi poet laureate Soso Tham, who had, way back in 1936, written about it in these words: "Government, Justice, Advocate, / It glues with pus the Silver Piece." [9] Added to this frightening condition is the menace of the gun and terrorism that came with insurgency.

The growth of militant nationalism and insurgency whose demands vary from greater autonomy to outright sovereignty had started with the country's independence and the annexation of many of the tribal states through the Instrument of Accession. But perhaps the trouble would have been neutralised if, after the annexation, the successive Central governments had not treated the region and its people with what has been termed as "such gross negligence." The dismissive attitude of the Centre generates a sense of alienation among the people and aggravates the already strong anti-Indian sentiments resulting from the tribes' natural fear of being swamped out of existence by the unceasing influx of migrants from the more populous communities of the mainland. The upshot of all this is the continuous worsening of the situation with more and more tribes taking up arms not only against the Centre but also against each other. And what should have been treated with utmost sensitivity has simply been dismissed as a law and order problem to be put down by military might, thereby plunging the whole region into an area of vicious conflict.

In this kind of atmosphere what is the poet to do? Writing a review on the anthology in *Chandrabhaga,* [10] Rabindra K. Swain finds

fault with the North-East poets for being too preoccupied with the political conditions of life. But Swain is making a statement without proper appraisal, jumping into a judgement that he is ill equipped to make. When corruption "glues" everyone with "pus" and when terror, as Kunjarani Longjam Chanu (Manipur) says, "stand[s] in front of you" like "hunters… with poison arrows," it must fall on the poet to speak the truth, to sing of what is beautiful, and to resurrect the social conscience. Forced to be a witness to the ugliness of these precarious times, the North-East poets inevitably become non-objective and involved chroniclers, and the poetry that they write is what Tariq Ali calls the literature of "real conflict." [11] And this is not so surprising given the ground realities and also the considerable influence of poets from Eastern and Central Europe, the Middle East and Latin American countries on their poetry.

Reacting to the rampant corruption that has spawned unrelieved poverty, hunger, diseases and illiteracy, the poets resort to the only weapon available to them— satire. There is a lot of it in their poetry as they denounce, with anger and disgust, those who are turning the place into a habitation of headless and bodiless monsters, where nothing constructive can happen and nothing wholesome can evolve. Their irony is double-edged as they rail others and themselves in the same breath. But the hallmark of their satire is their sardonic humour as they ridicule their self-seeking and unprincipled political leaders who, as one Khasi poet describes, "change parties and governments/ like Hindi film stars changing dresses in a song." R. K. Bhubonsana's (Manipur) "Should Lights be Put Out or Minds Kept in the Dark" is a brilliant example, mocking politicians for their indifference towards the cause of education. And so is Murasingh's "Of a Minister," which condemns the nihilism of those in power in one telling line: "The minister has neither inside, nor outside."

But as the poets denounce corruption like a moral teacher (and this, as Swain said, is not "poetically incorrect" since it is done with lyrical grace), they are more ambivalent towards insurgency. While they talk of the perils of terrorism, they also talk of the greater peril of lawmen turning into terrorists. But whatever may be the case there is no denying the fact that as the common man gets caught in the unending cycle of violence and the crossfire between insurgents and security forces, the poetry of the North-East poets becomes more and more a reflection of this reign of terror. There is a preponderance of bullets in their poetry. The image of the gun—"thrummed calmly and gently by fingers" as in Saratchand Thiyam's (Manipur) "Gun", or blossoming like flowers as in Ngangom's "Arms Will Flower Here Too"— comes from every corner of the region, while the only "Colours of Truth" for most of the poets here are "disgorging blood" and "life-erasing black."[12] Even a more philosophical poet like Nilmani Phookan, whose "sage-like" poetry normally grapples with the more general existentialist questions of life, talks of traversing "Across knee-deep blood" and carrying "a fire…On the palm" of his hand as the evening watches over "the inextinguishing funeral pyre." All things considered, there is in the North-East poetry of the gun a sense of pity at this wanton bloodletting, and looked at in this way, the poetry is truly in the pity. This sense of waste is most poignantly captured by Thiyam when he says:

> Till today, I haven't heard any hypnotic voice rising
> When a gun is thrummed calmly and gently by fingers.
> Like one demented, smitten by a melody,
> No one has been stupefied
> Except for lifeless bodies lying around unconcerned.
> ("Gun")

In this poetry of a strife-torn world it is only rarely that one comes across a sanguine statement, but there is indeed much hope and considerable faith as "the haunting *madhavi* escapes the rustle of spring, / acrid with the smell of gunpowder" in Murasingh's "Forest— 1987."

In his review Swain observes, "A land torn by terrorism can get balm only from a sage-like poet [like] Nilmani Phookan. He can only think in the line of 'an earth warm with love.'…In his quest for spiritual uplift, relief from the contemporary turbulence, Phookan seeks shelter in the legend of the protective Da-Parbatiya 'Ageless/ those two women.'" It is true that myth and tribal folklore are among the core subject matters of the North-East poets in general. But there is certainly more to it than simply questing "for spiritual uplift, relief from the contemporary turbulence" and seeking their shelter as a form of Romantic escapism. The truth of the matter is that the North-East Indians suffer intensely from a deep sense of alienation. They are at once unable to integrate into mainstream Indian cultures, and challenged to integrate into their own cultures as well. This is especially true of those from the tribal belt who have truly become what Meenakshi Mukherjee calls the exiles of the mind, "outsiders in their community either through loss of the mother tongue or through a system of education that superimposes an alien grid of perception on immediate reality."[13]

The system of education that Mukherjee speaks of is none other than the one outlined by Thomas Babington Macaulay for the whole of imperial India in 1835, whose purpose was "to form a class … of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, moral and intellect." (11) Macaulay's scheme fitted only too well in tribal North-East which saw more and more of the communities deserting their own cultures and their own past for the charms of

Western culture, religion and values. Compounding the problem are the violent cultural changes brought about by the continuing influx of outsiders, new industry and rapid development such as the rise of information technology. As the poets see their people, often themselves included, losing their way in the chaos of the times, there is born a desire to rehabilitate the past as high culture, or at least as interesting primitive lore. So they turn to legendary heroes and their people's mythology to provide a mooring to prevent this directionless drift.

When poets from the North-East talk about their myths and folklore, therefore, they are making a statement as much as they are making a quest. Thus we have a poet like Dai, who adopts a proudly tribal stance declaring:

> Yes, I believe in gods,
> in the forest faith
> of good and evil,
> spirits of the river,
> ….
> I know,
> …
> in these lives
> that have crumbled,
> that the past lives
> ("The Balm of Time")

Or someone like Easterine who, in "Genesis," sings with wistful longing of her people's dream-time, declaring that even the so-called pagan culture had a golden age. Or poets like Esther Syiem (Meghalaya) and Temsula Ao (Nagaland), who simply tell a tale from the past, which becomes a parable for the present. But most of all,

when the poets here speak of their people's past, they are saying, and I quote from an article I had published in The NEHU Journal (2003):

> I too wish to address my people directly. …I would like to tell them of the absurdity of trying to deny their own roots and the anarchy that follows in forgetting their own identity. I would like to talk of our great festivals… and the vitality of their part in our social life… I would like to remind my people, as a poet raconteur, of the virtues of their ancestors' ways and the necessity of perpetuating them. I would like to talk of our myths and legends and let those, who will, cull lessons from them….

The poets realise that in every myth is embedded the wisdom of the race and that every legend speaks in symbolic overtones. Their quest, therefore, is not merely for a diversion or a safe haven, but for this wisdom. Thus we have a poet like Desmond Kharmawphlang (Meghalaya), who supplicates with the village shaman:

> 'We came,' I plead, 'to learn, not to teach.
> We come with longing, we are
> The forgetful generation,'
> ("Letter from Pahambir")

But what should they do with this wisdom that they seek? As Tham had taught the Khasis:

> I do awaken, with words that are clear, for the love of one's own country from the Virtues and enlightenment that we have from the ancient. Like a child who absorbs his strength and energy from the mother and who takes care of her in

> return, we too should first sink our roots into our own Past. The Seed that falls on stony grounds— without its roots— wilts as soon as the sun turns hot.[14]

What Tham is saying, and what the contemporary North-East poets are reiterating, is that the present should be guided by the lessons of the past, that it should draw its sustenance and its strength from there as it journeys into an uncertain future.

What has been done in this essay is to highlight the common ground and identify the broad themes that most typify modern poetry in the North-East. But these themes are by no means the only ones, and it would be a mistake to typecast the poets on this basis alone. The North-East is a great melting pot of cultures and there is in it an "uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the westernised, virgin forests and car-choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant corruption, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament…." [15] As chroniclers of their subjective realities, the poets of the region do reflect in their poetry this "world of eerie contradictions" [16] even as they explore their own mindscapes and tackle the eternal themes of poetry and the many-layered complexities of human relationships. But if, after reading the poems in the anthology, Mahapatra still feels that "They certainly convey, in spite of our differences, our commonality and mutuality," it is because the poets from the North-East, being both witness and participant, "cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce" [17] write what Leigh Hunt called the poetry of "felt thought." Therein lies the universality of their poetry.

The universal appeal of modern North-East poetry is also because it is first and foremost good poetry. As Neruda suggests, it does not matter if one's poems have sunken their roots deep into

one's native soil; it does not matter if they are born of indigenous wind and rain or have emerged from a localised landscape. If they are worth their salt they must "come out of that landscape… to roam, to go singing through the world…." [18]

Endnotes

[1] The titles are from reviews in *The Telegraph*, 19 September by Rajlakshmi Bhattacharya; *Kavya Bharati*, No. 15, 2003 by Rana Nayar; *Indian Literature*, March-April 1999 by Sumanyu Satpathy.

[2] Rana Nayar, "Poetry from the Troubled Zone." *Kavya Bharati* 15 (2003): 125-31.

[3] Nigel Jenkins, "Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis." *The New Welsh Review* 21 (1993): 56-82.

[4] Jenkins 56-82.

[5] Jenkins 56-82.

[6] Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom, ed., *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University, 2003). From here on the book will be simply referred to as the anthology.

[7] Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. Hardie St. Martin (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1984) 191.

[8] Gopi Krishnan Kottoor, ed., *A New Book of Indian Poems in English* (Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2000) 145-51.

[9] Soso Tham, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* (Shillong: Primrose Gatphoh, 1976) 14.

[10] Rabindra K. Swain, "Some Things Are Sacred." *Chandrabhaga* 9 (2004): 115-23.

[11] Tariq Ali, "Literature and Market Realism. *New Left Review* 199 (1993): 22.

[12] Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "The Colours of Truth." *Kavya Bharati* 15 (2003): 51.

[13] Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The Exile of the Mind," *A Sense of Exile*, ed. Bruce Benneth (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1988): 11.

[14] Swain xv.

[15] Nongkynrih and Ngangom ix.

[16] Nayar 125.

[17] Nongkynrih and Ngangom ix.

[18] Neruda 6.

HOSHANG MERCHANT

SIXTY YEARS OF GAY POETRY IN INDIA

SULTAN PADAMSEE (d: 1946)

Sultan Padamsee is India's first gay poet in English. He was a closet queer in 1940s Bombay high society. His sister Roshen Alkazi denies this. His best friend, Jehangir Bhownagary told me so in so many words when I first visited him in Paris in 1973.

My student S. Anand has written the first ever post-graduate thesis on Padamsee. Anand claims that it is wrong to build poetic lines and find missing links. He also erroneously equates Padamsee with the NRI gays. What Anand misses is the homosexual underground culture of 1940's Bombay in its theatre and art circles. Rudy von Leyden, the art critic and patron was gay. So was Padamsee who painted, wrote and acted in plays. Art was a mask with which an artist could present to bourgeois Bombay his gay face. To not know this is to miss out on the reason why so many gay writers including myself opt for poetry: because poetry is a telling but a telling at a slant. It is oblique utterance. It is a subterfuge and a disguise. It is also a relief to be able to reveal while hiding. Closet homosexuals even today congregate at public urinals and never exchange names. The West created the glorious convention of the 'glory hole' where the anonymous sex organ to be fellated is inserted literally in a hole in the wall to receive a blow job from a faceless mouth on the wall's other side. Not to know this is to miss out on the poetry's poignancy and mode of disguise.

Padamsee is the link between Aurobindo and Ezekiel. (Ezekiel edited the Poems brought out by P. Lal's Writers Workshop). Aurobindo's mysticism is translated into Padamsee's Christianity

(crucified Christ, the javelin-thrusting centurion, Magdalene et al). Ezekiel's wry irony is anticipated by Padamsee. But Padamsee's irony is of the apocalypse of Wartime London. Ezekiel's tongue-in-cheek is reminiscent of Pound salons but Padamsee's cock-in-mouth is of the dismembered Guernica variety. It may be currently unfashionable to trace literary lineages and construct literary dynasties. But a people without a prophet need one and create one, a nation without a poet finds one. In fact the poet founds his own nation, which is what Padamsee tried to do, the gay working for an independent India sensitive to the arts.

Padamsee was interested in magic and his suicide at 23 was a performance, robe, diadem, Funeral March, candles and an overdose of dope. Bhownagary was there 'When I arrived early morning at Sultan's as we did daily. Adi (Marzban) was already there and sobbing violently. Bobby (Sultan) had died hours earlier that night. Jehangir Bhownagary calls it 'an accident,' the sister calls it a suicide.

When I revisited the Bhownagary's in 1995 they made available to me Padamsee's manuscripts which were typed by the poet himself.

I can do no more than present Bobby to a larger audience and assert his gay identity. We need heroes just as the Dalits need modernity, its bourgeois Marxist interrogates notwithstanding.

SULTAN PADAMSEE'S VEILING

Sultan Padamsee engaged in his life and art in the trope of veiling. We will content ourselves here with a poem, 'O Pomponia Mine.' Sultan (aka 'Bobby') was born Bohra Moslem but he was brought up Christian by two Irish lady-tutors. He only spoke English. Born

Indian he became a brown sahib, Naipaul's 'mimic man.' Finding himself to be homosexual he lived in the closet, appearing as a straight man in public so as not to offend his powerful and beloved mother, Kulsumbai. He became a poet, imitating T.S. Eliot who himself was a gay masquerading as a straight. In 'O Pomponia Mine,' he has a gay man taking a straight woman (his mask, his 'beard') out on an expensive date. In real life he had a crush on his slightly older teacher Kamal Dastur (later married to the drunk Irish poet and India's freedom fighter Wood). He calls her his Pomponia: a wife of a Roman consul in England who had quietly converted to Christianity. So we have shifting power centres in the poem due to shifting loyalties that aren't apparent at face-value, but form the poem's argument.

ADIL JUSSAWALLA'S 'KARATE'

Adil Jussawalla's argument from the closet was mainly political, though the mis-en-scene in his poem is of a brown-skinned gigolo hunting down a white (sex) client in London, probably at the Thames Embankment. The client gets 'rolled' in more than one meaning of the term.

It is pay-back time. The brown man will have his revenge and repay the white man for subjecting Blacks to insult, torment and unemployment. Jussawalla realises that the White man is exploited in his (sexual) need and so also pities him.

The short poem is a long bravado from the mouth of the brown gigolo, a creepy character. But the insight is from Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon and Jussawalla realise that if the White man subjugates the Black, at the same time he, the White, fears the potency of the Black rage in overthrowing the Whites. Once again, shifting

power-centres. The action takes place not on the periphery (in the erstwhile colonies) but in London, once hub of Empire where Jussawalla lived in the 60's and eked out a living as an English teacher.

> Eyes sewn, my head a bag of tricks,
> I pad down streets to find my enemy.
>
> He's cat-like (like the Prufrockian night-fog).

The enemy is within; the oppressed gay, the colonised mind. 'Tricks' is a pun (gays call casual encounters 'turning tricks') so may be 'head' and 'bag' referring to the male sexual organ.

> New York London or any tall
> Story I've a part in,
> He is the same
>
> White man whose daily dis-
> Appearance is my brief.

It is a poem of sinister puns. 'Story' is of course the multi-storey buildings of New York. It is also the multi-storied story of gay life: front/ back, active/ passive, above/ below, bottom/ top. White men live daily in Dis (Dis being the poetic word for hell). Appearance is my brief: in my briefs is a big virile organ but I may be a passive gay who becomes strong by sexually serving a politically-powerful white client, then beating him up. White wars have put Blacks on 'a *false* if nimble footing.' Colonialism has falsified faces: black and white, gay and straight, active and passive.

The violator and violated are faces of the same coin: 'tame' by day/ 'fratricidal fox by night,' symbiosis of loving that must kill,'

'big-time twin,' 'pigmy/ giant.' In fact pigmy becomes a false giant. The two could be one; the oppressed has become oppressor.

They both disappear along 'the fatal error of some steps.' The oppressor fears the oppressed, the oppressed becomes oppressor. Fatal error leading in the poem to the White man's death and the vindicated brown gigolo tasting ashes in his mouth, swallowing a sleeping pill ('yellow' as the fog in *Prufrock*), tasting a hollow victory.

RAJ RAO'S BOMGAY (LONDON, 2006)

Raj Rao lives in Bombay (not Mumbai i.e. India not Bharat). But it is only Bharat that can satisfy India's gay sons. So he has to go 'Underground' in a poem. (Read: Toilet in the sub-way of a Bombay suburban train station). The station is conveniently named Churchgate, so you can have a parodied 'baptism' when the upper-class gay is beaten up by his lower-class (or caste) lovers. 'The fault-lines are anal.' You get 'ghost-shit on your tongue.' 'In the company of friends death is a nuptial feast.' 'You want to throw loo goo on his face.' 'But you give in meekly.' The meek shall inherit the earth. And on Doomsday too the first shall come last and the last shall come first. This is only a parodic dress-rehearsal. Patently you can see here that the 'meek *shan't* inherit.' You stand with the city as 'your headload.' This is a bizarre and bold statement of poetic and life-masochism. It is a poetry of statement not subtlety. It makes for a good film (shot by Riyad Vinci Wadia, scion of Wadia Movietone, who died of AIDS). But it's not a good life. And it certainly does *not* bridge the caste-divide in spite of heroic efforts to do so sexually. The caste-divide persists. As Christ said: 'There will always be the poor.'

I have a similar poem on sex in public latrines in my second collection, Yusuf in Memphis (Calcutta, 1991). It is titled 'I am Tammuz.' The title itself puts the sordid experience on a mythic level. (My teacher said I wrote poems 'to beautify' my ugly sex-life). The poem is set 'in the familiar terrain of hell.' 'It is Limbo/ where limbs fly away … coalesce … and fly away.' The image is from the gay Canadian film-maker Norman McLaren's '*Pas de deux*' where he shoots a heterosexual couple in dance at the start of his career. (At career's end he became bold enough to give us two gay men dancing together in Narcissus). 'Love me on my terms' is the rant of the selfish child in this 'hell': it is no Love at all. There's a dirty pun on 'Uranus' ('your anus'), the coveted 'heaven' (place of sexual bliss) in this hell. I even quote Rimbaud: 'Life is elsewhere …' to give a high Orphic tone to high art about low-life. My erudition should tell the reader I'm high-class, 'different' from the other 'kotis' in the gay john. I end with the lines of the Syrian poet Adonis: 'I am Tammuz' etc.

Now, is this 'representation' (mimesis) or presentation? I argue that I present myself centre-stage in my work as my heroine and role-model Anaïs Nin did. I, similarly, have the same problem as she did with the critical reception of my work. Critics find me not mimetic enough.

THE POETRY OF VIKRAM SETH

My favorite of Seth's books is *The Humble Administrator's Garden*. He is imitating a Chinese analogue (he was a student of Chinese demography, a study he abandoned for writing). The book has a China part, an India part and a California part named after trees Wutong, Neem and Live Oak respectively. I think the Administrator here is his mother Justice Leila Seth. The title poem talks of Mr. Wang:

"He may have got
The means by somewhat dubious means, but now
This is the loveliest of all gardens. What
Do scruples know of beauty anyhow."

That is a gay thought!

"What do scruples know of beauty anyhow." Those with scruples will not know beauty.

The poet's protagonist like the poet himself is smug:

He leans against a willow with a dish
And throws a dumpling to a passing fish.

Are there no gay men in China? 30 million unmarried men, thanks to one child norms and female foeticide. And no homosexuality? Seth is in the closet. He's not telling.

Earlier in a poem in his book Mappings he's told us he's bisexual:

Some men like Jack
and some like Jill
I'm glad I like
Them both; but still
……

In the strict ranks
of Gay and Straight
What is my status?
Stray? Or Great?
—'Dubious'

My personal favourite in Mappings is 'Six Octets.' They go from 'You have the slimmest body' in Octet 1 to 'You don't love me at all' of Octet 3 to 'I will/ Keep clear of you' in Octet 5 to the final 'Here are the plums. Take all you can, my friend'; ending

> These plums that we will separately eat.
> For all their sourness, they are wild and sweet

Back to the Humble Administrator's India: 'Neem,' 'The Comfortable Class at Work and Play' show the Seth family perhaps as smug as China's Mr. Wang. But Seth is a family man: perhaps a reason he lived so long in the closet. (He came out 'like Noah from the Ark after the Flood' as I'm won't to say!). For all that he is 'Homeless.'

> I envy those
> who have a house of their own

He longs for

> A place on the earth untenured
> To know that I may die as I have slept
> That things will not revert to a stranger's hand;
> That those I lose may keep what I have kept.

He did later share a London home with a British musician lover for ten years, someone he dedicated *An Equal Music* to. They've since parted, but he keeps the house still.

The 'Neem' section's best poem is *The Babur Nama*. It recounts in Babur's words the love for his friend, Baburi in the poem's opening section and the father Babur's love for his son Humayun for whom

he lays down his life in the poem's final section. The Baburi episode is too well known to be recounted here but one reads it afresh and marvels at its freshness after so many centuries. (In a middle section Babur, a prose stylist admonishes his son's letter-writing style like any middle-class father!).

Seth lives in his affections. He writes an affectionate and affecting poem. Babur says of his son:

> Nothing was dearer
> Than his life save my own. I offered it.

Simple! The father dies, the ill son regains his health.

> I entered the chamber where my son was lying
> And circled his bed three times, saying each time,
> 'I take upon myself all you suffer.'
> I forthwith felt myself depressed and heavy
> …….He rose in perfect health.

Love-sacrifice of a father for a son. But also a father's self-castration so a son may father, so that heir may turn king.

In another sense the Babur poem is an expatriate poem. The House of Timur were expatriates in India. 'You rule Hissar; let Kamran be in Balkh.' Seth himself was an expatriate in California.

My favourite California poem of Seth's is 'Ceasing upon the Midnight.' It is Keatsian in its title but in the death-wish has all of Baudelaire's 'spleen and ennui' that the fullness, comfort and complacency of California thrusts upon one. Seth wishes to die because he's so bored with comfort. Because comfort is killing him.

He gets drunk, lies upon the grass as if dead, rises to write a beautiful poem. Weltschmerz. The purple poetry of the post-Romantics. But so right in its ring of Californian truths: 'The phone rings,' 'Something hums./ The fridge.' 'The furniture of days,' 'Joy, frenzy, anything/ But this meandering.'

> He thinks
> of other moons he's seen
> And creates he has been,

Life is a game. And dying is a game. Life is a place. And death is a joke: ah! California!

> To cease upon
> The midnight under the live-oak
> Seems too derisory a joke.

Could gayness be a way out of boredom? Could the gay life's quickness be a way out of suburban deadness?

But Seth enjoys the cornucopia of suburban comforts. See his *Golden Gate* for instance. I was too harsh on him once. I now see him in a mellower light.

AGHA SAHID ALI (b. 1949) – I

Agha Shahid Ali is the most gifted poet of his generation, gay or straight. It is noteworthy that his was the only name mentioned among poets by Rushdie in the New Yorker article on post-independence writing. Since Agha Shahid Ali is an intensely private person (he has rebuffed several attempts at friendship on my part), I

will concentrate on any analysis of the gay subtext in his *Poetry Review,* Vol.83, No.1, Spring 1993 poem on Kashmir titled, "The Country Without a Post Office' dedicated to the gay American poet James Merrill which begins with a Hopkins epigraph.

> …letters sent
> To dearest him that lives alas! Away.

I would pick the points and put the exclamation mark before 'alas' after 'lives' to make the line read:

> …letters sent
> To dearest him that lives! Alas away.

For the burden of the poem is a love letter to a Kashmir lover who might be dead in the insurrection whom the poet hopes against hope is alive.

Kashmir is the background of so many of our dreams and nightmares. The 60's Eastmancolour Hindi film was shot in Kashmir. (With the Civil War on in Kashmir the film locales have moved to Switzerland). Kashmir is now a nightmare landscape:

> And today a 14 year old boy
> was killed in Kashmir for nothing

I wrote in 1989. It is 1997 today.

Kashmir is the land where the 'Shahed' (the witness) was born. He bears testimony to his heritage, his birthright, his nation. Living as he does in the USA he returns each summer to Kashmir like his poems' protagonist there to find charred ruins of a lost home, a lost

childhood, a lost nation and to resurrect them in memory and words. His poem on his Kashmir grandmother pulling poems out of the air ('Dacca Gauzes') is well known. (Shahid grew up knowing Begum Akhtar and Faiz; his grandmother quoted Hafez, Ghalib and Milton with equal fluency). So this is again the gay poet's apprenticeship in the harem or the zenana, the veiled life, the veiled utterance being then or later no stronger to him.

Shahid's passion is the passion of a Majnun, a lover of the Urdu love lyric. He blends this passion with the dispassionate eye of an Emily Dickinson. (He now lives in Amherst and is writing a cycle of poems in the style of Dickinson, his heroine); 'Tell it but tell it at a slant.'

The poem's objective correlative (Shahid wrote a doctoral thesis on Eliot's criticism) is the Kashmir paisley, an almond which then becomes the enslaved country's new currency, a stamp of its freedom from oppressors, political and of the spirit. Because war is a prohibition on love. Death is the end of all relationships. Or is it?

'When the muezzin died, the city was robbed of every call.' Call: calling, love-call, the call to prayer, the call of the dead to the living.' Hence:

> Now each night the minaret
> I lead myself, guide, mad keeper, up the steps
> I throw paisleys to clouds.

For the paisley, taken over by Bond Street designers as a mere decorative motif, is originally a Sufi emblem of the Cypress tree bent in the wind, symbolic of the Sufi bowing to God's Will in which submission is a triumph of the human spirit. The homosexual

Hopkins, a tormented Jesuit, does not preface the poem for nothing. The poem ends:

> Send your cries to me, live, if only in this way
> Be pitiless, lost letters, you whom I could not save.

The reconnection in words is not only with a lost lover but a lost nationhood. The poet is a homeless man longing for a home. The ending is moving yet resolute. He is defeated but not for want of trying. He is heroic but so are the lost unsaved ones as heroic or more heroic than he is. His is the compassion of the unaccommodated man for other lost souls, of the unfulfillable lover for the lost love.

In an interview with the *Pioneer*, Delhi (16 August '97), Agha Shahid Ali says he does *not* feel exiled (from Kashmir) in the USA and that the best rasagolla of Rash Behari Street is only an affordable plane ticket away. He cites the Palestinians among others as truly exiled. I would like to recall here my experience in the ballatta refugee camp outside Nablus in the West Bank. 'I too am homeless,' I began an address to a group of poetry-loving protestors only to be greeted with titters. The Palestinian in a refugee camp is on a piece of terra firma labeled 'Palestine' in his heart: 'Home is a place in the heart/ Without it you cannot build out of defiance or out of stone' (Brodsky). The homosexual alone is truly exiled; truly homeless.

He also says that he tells his Creative Writing class at Amherst, 'You are what you are. Obviously you can't write as Martians. So concentrate on craft.' What he means is what one is will obviously come through in one's poems.

SUNITI NAMJOSHI

The Unicorn

I rode the wild unicorn;
In the green light of trees,
In the dark light of night,
Past leaves and silver thorn,
In love and foul weather.
Love, will you ride with me?
But my love stayed behind,
Far away behind me,
And I rode the wild unicorn
Past love and foul weather.
Poems (Calcutta: 1976)

What does she mean? What is a unicorn? I speculate this poem of 10 lines in two parts about two loves. The love of sexual (lesbian) indulgence and the love of literature (poetry). A unicorn is trapped when the Lady stands against a tree to attract him. As he charges at her to gore her with his single horn she moves away and he gets trapped by his horn in the tree. A unicorn is a symbol for Christ. It has a spiritual value. So does poetry. The unicorn/ poet metaphor is transparent. The lesbian lacks a horn (a phallus, hence uses a dildo, a substitute phallus) in bed. Love is 'foul weather' even if its thorns are 'silver.' Love denied, the poet rides 'the wild unicorn (of poetry)/ past love and foul weather.'

Suniti, an aristocrat, quits the Indian Administrative Service, gets a Ph.D. on Ezra Pound from McGill University, Canada, and settles in Devon to be published by the Feminist Press. She asks: What is a lesbian? What is my place in the world? How can everybody live in peace with each other?

She re-writes *The Tempest*. She is a female Caliban. She, not Ferdinand, finds Miranda wondrous. She is flogged by Prospero for that. They give her liquor. She thinks she's a god. They get the secrets of the land from her and steal her land. She thought the White man a god, she does not think so now.

She's a poet-colonial, post-feminist lesbian. She breaks down the hierarchy between Man and beast, Men and Women, Hetero and Homosexual, Europe and Asia, White and Black. Gender and Genre become co-related and camouflaged. She breaks both gender and genre. Her genres flow between autobiography and novel (*Goja*), prose and poetry (*The Fables*) and between history and fiction (*Sycorax*).

Blue Donkey Fables detail the difficulty of being a woman-writer. *St. Suniti and the Dragon* is a feminist re-telling of Beowulf. *Building Babble* has several narrators. Every reader is co-writer. It ends with: Now you write. It is a story in cyberspace. It is a de-centreing of the narrative mode making it truly democratic. *Mothers of Maya Deep*: Talks of Dys-topic (anti-Utopian) societies of all men and all women where both men and women are up. It is a negative utopia.

I do not know what to do with Suniti. No one knows what to do with Suniti. Suniti finds life's tragedies very painful. But she finds her own life very funny. No one can fool Suniti. Anyway Suniti is here to tell all of us to stop fooling ourselves with received cultures and genders.

T.R. JOY

AMBUSHED BY THE MAGIC OF WORDS

Ranjit Hoskote. *Vanishing Acts: New and Selected Poems 1985-2005*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2006.

Ranjit Hoskote has already established himself as a fine poet. After his apprenticeship with *Zones of Assault* (1991), his other two books of poetry, *The Cartographer's Apprentice* (2000) and *The Sleepwalker's Archive* (2001) have distinguished him as a remarkable poetic voice in the new generation of Indian English poets. His ability to sculpt words on the page with evocative metaphors is well and widely recognized. Keki N. Daruwalla's observation, quoted on the blurb of the Penguin edition, is quite representative: "It is the way he hangs on to a metaphor, and the subtlety with which he does it, that draws my admiration (not to mention envy) … Hoskote's poems bear the 'watermark of fable': behind each cluster of images, a story; behind each story, a parable." Even Manohar Shetty, critical of the "dilution of quality" and "clouded … judgment" in Hoskote's *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (2002), approves of his poetic ability.[1] Indeed, *Vanishing Acts*, which includes selections from all the three earlier books, is a welcome and impressive addition to the growing body of Indian English Poetry.

This collection of 219 pages of poetry is quite substantial with close to 130 poems, of which 50 are new, sectioned as *Vanishing Acts*: *New Poems (2001-2005)*. Penguin Books deserves applause for bringing out such a volume of poetry. All the same, we hope Penguin will practise more of its cultural commitment by supporting other poets of the new generation in India.

In this review, I intend to focus on Hoskote's new poems. I would like to explore the core concerns and content of his verse—

how much of it "still claws at the fibres of the heart" (157) as Ghalib's friend tries to find out in one of the poems in this collection. The visual tactility of his diction and imagery starts with the very first of his new poems.

> Pressed up against the narrow pane, the moth is rust,
> its wings the colour of blood drying on stone. (155)

The painterly quality and spectacle are sustained throughout as in "one cubic dark" of "the house and sky" and in the "clots of light, straining through his palms."(155) And the poem, 'Moth' confirms it:

> He comes to the window again, next dawn. There is no
> moth
> to reach for. He slashes his palms on the fire-sharpened
> glass. (155)

All eyes are on the painter that works in the poem, 'Mountain'. As an art critic and curator, he could be a painter ambushed by the magic of words and tricked into poetry. The technical diction of painting fills the poetry, supporting the claim. Look at a few such painterly expressions even in this single poem (italics mine):

> 1. *mountain framed against* the slow-burning sky:
> 2. Twilight's secrecies are about to shroud that *right-angled sky.*
> 3. *the massif prints itself* on every face we see.
> 4. He enters the *full moon, thumb-printed in his log.*
> 5. The mountain darkens to a *deeper shade of night.* (159)

Another poem with wholesome visually tactile imagery is 'A View of the Lake: Villa Waldberta'. The speaker may be on a package tour or on a stay in a hotel with the luxury of that kind of a view of the lake and its sylvan ambience. The view that he enjoys or imagines for himself unwinds itself as if in the eyes and mind of a visual artist. The very first stanza foregrounds this admirable painterly quality of the whole text:

> The man in white stands back to survey the landscape:
> snow-melt just where he wants it and the crystal lake
> an eye widening in a forest of viridian strokes.
> Careful visitor from another planet, he probes,
> then trails his brush across the canvas, a lull
> before the sharp cobalt flick that unites water
> with heaven; steps closer, dabs
> at the palette, brush lighter than before,
> the tempo languid, the man hardly there
> except for the hand weaving images of itself. (194)

"The man in white", who is a "careful visitor from another planet" with "the exquisite manners of a ghost / trained in an older school of grace" (195) might evoke thoughts of the almighty creator. But images of transcendence pale in comparison to the romanticised celebration of a master artist the poet admires. This master craftsman, the protagonist of the poem "calculates differently", never bothering to "remind the present of its failures" (195). He focuses fully on "the icon coaxed from dripping wax, ... / the reason distilled …on the wine-press of thought" to achieve the "form his reward" (195) towards the end of the poem. As a result the totality of the metaphoric dynamics here opens up a *sanctum sanctorum*, the very sacred sphere of the classical artistic process.

It is also interesting to note how Hoskote interlaces a poet's world of words with an artist's world of colours. Beyond the hazy insinuations of that in "the hand weaving images of itself", it becomes linguistically pronounced in the third stanza once "he lets the figures grow / again:"

> … the mountains and thickets, the clutter
> that signals where *the slang of boat and pier*
> has ruptured *the grammar of leaf and wave:*
> his strokes are discreet ampersands that keep
> *the broken sentences of the district* together,
> gestures that *compose an air* more rarefied, an earth
> more dense, … (194-195)

Nobody can miss the symphonic assemblage of words and tropes, scenes and stories in all the orchestral sophistry and choral complexity. There is a sudden holding of breath and its palpable quiet. This comes out of an overall dictional strategy that works also in the ascetic piece titled 'Quietus'. For the clarity and resonance of the unspoken, let me quote the whole poem in four lean couplets.

> Silence is clean, a frigate leaving a harbour
> with no siren wailing.
>
> Silence is a tureen that needs no scouring
> for the last stains of grammar
>
> Silence is fire,
> a threat with no reprieve.
>
> Silence is a panther
> that stalks us through jade eyes. (188)

The range and nature of the artistic process which is metaphorically conceived as vanishing acts in the book reveals itself in the iconic representatives as protagonists of most of the new poems. Quite a few of the pieces are also dedicated to the contemporary creative colleagues of the poet himself. One of the many classical types of the hallowed creative vocation is the scribe. The magical-realist dream in the poem, 'The Scribe', the "I" of the speaker experiences the augurs and the anguish of the witnessing process of writing, as he "watch[es] myself burn":

> The faithful witness tears his flesh
> with a blade he's tempered in the dark:
> the phrases searing down his arms
> spell a sentence that's howled itself
>
> hoarse in his mind for weeks before
> this final spasm, the knife a shriek
> he couldn't hold back, the pain
> a horse he couldn't curb. (161)

The intense sympathy Hoskote feels for the kindred souls of creative mastery is quite valid in the context of the dark nights of creative process. Frequently he employs the image of suffering and sacrificing prophets in the mould of the biblical son of god. This could also be real and justified in the context of the psychic process of creativity as implied in another poem in the collection, 'Overleaf':

> What's left of my body
> after the whirling blades of lights
> have done their work
> on skin and hair, nails, nerves and skull (162)

In that sense the phrase *vanishing acts* might hide an irony. That is to say, the acts are not really of the vanishing kind, especially those of the canonical ones.

Except for a few personal and ambivalent ones, most of the poems belong, as I see them, to a category of public poems. They are set in the larger context of history, culture and the globalised rites of passage. They are the privileged acts of an exclusive class of masters and maestros, Hoskote selects to explore the mysteries of the artistic process from a classical historic sense. The subaltern and the gentile perspectives are not allowed to contaminate the sacramental canvas of *Vanishing Acts*. Even Kabir, Tukaram and their kind wrapped up in legends and "the torn fabric of sky (174), have been certified as "bird [s] of paradise judged by earth" (175) once they had travelled "the century" (175) and cannot but be accommodated into the domain of the sages. But, it is only in the beatified 'Landscapes with Saints' they act "dropping [their] nimbus in the grass" (174) while "Neglect leaf[ed] through [their] pages"(175) maybe, once upon a time. It is very rarely that a "sword-maker" is allowed a "lullaby". And that exposes the dirty underbelly of all royal and hegemonic feuds, of course, for the education of the little prince:

> cunning as poets, the oldest swords can drowse
> on your walls, but roused will recite
> the butcher's anthems burred beneath our tongues:
> yes, even yours, little boy among the dreaming spaniels (183)

In an interesting process poem 'Paete, Laguna', the persona is "the carver" who is more "like a surgeon" (185). In the process of acquiring the core competence of his trade, "he's studied the lesions of hate, greed's eczemas." (185) And the poem ends with an insight central to the relation between art and life: "he's a relaxed connoisseur,

cherishing the crooked timber of humanity, the regularities of the misshapen day" (186). However, this insight does not seem to prominently affect the poet's choices of characters and their exigencies in most of the new poems. A similar feeling occurs when I read another, 'At the Ferry Wharf" set in a Goan landscape and legend. Though conventional, the image of the river as symbolic of history and of irrevocable change is relevant here. Hoskote recognises elsewhere that "between two versions / of an echo, the past doesn't happen" (181). Still, the poetic design and dynamics of the text seem to follow the classical historic narrative, even if intertwined with the personal dilemma of a poet-persona's duty as a witness. It is a view of history that looks for turning points, heroes and their heroic detractors. Everything and everybody else can be a metaphoric background in terms of "the profits of betrayal, the penalties of defeat" (156) as Ghalib puts it, and like the faceless animals and images falling prey to poachers in the poem:

> Like animals in a sanctuary, images survive
> in the eye, outliving pogroms and inquisitions,
> falling prey to occasional poachers
> but otherwise beyond extinction. (215)

Maybe I am more touched by the poetic poignance and compassion with which an Arun Kolatkar, Philip Levin, Imtiaz Dharker not only celebrate the subaltern experience but expose the oppression of the marginalised.

Of course, a writer is entitled to the kind of choice and focus he/she wants within the domain. It is yet curious in the specific case of Hoskote. Whatever little I have read of his cultural and art writings, he comes out as engagingly democratic and secular. Recently *Tehelka* reported about a successful exhibition, specifically praising his ability

to feature the wide range of Goan artistic expression. Hoskote himself reportedly spoke about "these artists" having "a richness of process and a variousness of material …."[2] In another of his cultural – artistic pieces on "Heritage as Commodity, Culture as Process" in *Art India*, he takes up "civic activism at its most inclusive level."[3] He feels strongly about the "elite-driven urban renewal versus urban renewal based on community participation; and human rights versus the mandates of natural and architectural conservation."[4] Pointing out several inherent flaws in the urban heritage conservation, he takes a categorically pro-people stand to criticise "the relative neglect of the people and public use / behaviour patterns that define its life."[5] It is true that there is a change of audience or readership visualised in each of the kinds of writing we talk about in Hoskote's instance. Nevertheless, even if one is writing for different audiences, should an individual writer's worldview differ field by field, domain by domain?

It is also admirable of Hoskote to have boldly articulated his secular and egalitarian stand against BJP's "politics of hatred" in another of his cultural articles, "Ayodhyas of the Heart".[6] In this cultural critique "on the eve of the twelfth anniversary of the demolition of Babri Masjid", his write-up reflects "on the travels of the Ramayana through South-East Asia, as a text resonant with the themes of compassion, honour and human vulnerability."[7] So, it surprises me how his "sensitivity committed to liberal ideals"[8] almost completely exclude an aesthetics of compassion and inclusive variousness in thematic concern as well as in the choice of poetic protagonists.

It is true we are gifted with multiple identities and faculties. Still a conflict in the worldview or philosophy of life in the same individual between his poetic priorities and theoretical expediencies can signal

an unsettled deeper core. It is also possible that such contradictions in one's worldview might generate poetry that synchronises the poet, the curator and the theorist in one. Is it deliberate on his part to forge an exclusive aesthetic sensibility and outlook for his poetic enterprise alone, distancing it from the subaltern worldview and aesthetics of *Kala Ghoda Poems* of Arun Kolatkar, *I Speak for the Devil* of Imtiaz Dharker, and the secular aesthetics of A.K. Ramanujan? I am sure Hoskote's muse will travel further and his poetic praxis will welcome "the creative pluralism"[9] he emphasises in the context of the travelling literary / cultural texts of Ramayana. All the same, Hoskote deserves all congratulations on achieving this landmark volume in his poetic career in such versatile linguistic facility and spectacular mosaic of imagery.

Endnotes

[1] "Four Too Many." *The Hindu Literary Review* (online edition), 5 May 2002, 2.
[2] Sonia Faleiro, "Palettes borrowed from the sun", *Tehelka*, 28 April, 2007, 27.
[3] *Art India.* Vol. 5, Issue 3, Quarter 3, 2000, 64.
[4] *Art India.* 64.
[5] *Art India.* 64.
[6] *The Hindu* Magazine, 5 December 2004, 1.
[7] *The Hindu.*
[8] *The Hindu.*
[9] *The Hindu.*

PATRICIA PRIME

POETRY: PERSONAL AND REVELATORY

Radhey Shiam. *Song of Life*. Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2003.

As the blurb on the back cover of Radhey Shiam's book informs us:

> *Song of Life* presents essence of life in a most practical manner as well as in simple lucid and picturesque style. It unravels mysteries of life, soul, religion, the Absolute in the most simple words, answers age old questions, provides invaluable tips to subtle philosophical riddles and conceptions of ages.

Shiam sees the world as a place of beauty, love, peace, truth and divine light, but the poet is essentially a man who aspires to the real world of struggle and torment with his soul and with the temptations of the everyday. On the other hand, he says to his Lord, "I am a simple and perishable reed, nay a docile instrument in thy hands." And that is his sharpest point of divorce from nature. We no longer believe in miracles—nothing is more obvious. Those mircales that we have abandoned are nothing compared to those which reside within each person's imagination.

This conflicts with the Platonic world of shadows cast by the ideal. It is instead a world of fragments that the mind greets with small shocks of indefinable recognition: the world that Shiam continues to describe in these songs, as on page 3:

> Oh, Flute Player, breathe in a melody so sweet and so delightful, that may mysteriously drown the dust of my sinful sorrows in the sea of roaring joys, wrecking the tricky rocks of desires on the shores of natural sacrifices. Each particle

> of the rocks may be my tears of joy, gleaming in the dark like stars and beautifying my long face with a joyous lustre.

The part is greater than the whole, for were you to see the whole you would give it limit. The poet does not so much interpret as point the mind towards the problems facing us every day. The next therefore becomes a collaboration between writer and reader, for the reader must confirm from his/ her resources what the writer describes, the search for significance in this life is a joint venture.

The poet's vision is less as expositor than facilitator; his job is to give insight miraculous domain by way of "sketches from the common life to reconcile the reader after virtues like truth, love, peace, harmony, moral excellence all leading to the realization of the ultimate truth." Rather ordinary slices of life and reminders that death is not far round the corner imbue these sketches with tranquility and hope.

Such writing calls for a craft of constraint and simplicity, but there are times when the author overwrites, strains his fancies too hard or loses balance. Unfortunately this happens most often in the opening sections. There we find such pearls of wisdom as "who is filling the heart of the sky and the earth, and a voiceless I, with the delight of eternal songs?" (4). And, in another section, "amongst myriad notes, echoing the universe, I hear someone, unknown and unseen, singing mysteriously within me" (8).

There is too a kind of gaiety typified in the sketches by this ending to a description of the poet "Drowned in the darkness of despair," when:

> To my amazement, the golden shower drenched me with a blissful awareness of the eternal divine and supreme. I found myself one with the golden awakening of joy. (12)

Yet even coy clichés and superfluity of adjectives do not detract from the poet's message. The sketches hardly vary from each other. Furthermore, the general tone of evangelical fervour is genuine. There is much world-weary skepticism typical of modern times displayed in the songs.

Reminders of the struggles of life are everywhere, although the possibility of renewal is firmly and explicitly accepted, as in the following passage:

> Seeing me struggling with the harshness of the path as well as with my within, thou keepeth me absorbed in enjoyments of the sports to delude away all my weariness. So kind thou art, my Lord to show the light. So I am moving on and on. (20)

And again:

> O lord, thou with kindly silent voice only guideth me through the dark, step by step. (22)

The pieces in this collection progress by means of a largely autobiographical mechanism. References to specific events position the writing within a designated cultural heritage, but the juxtaposition of these against the rawness of the apprehended present creates a sense of dislocation that could never be mistaken for the nostalgic.

> Deliverance is only a dream of an unknown world. I cannot slam the doors of my eyes from the functioning realities. (27)

Other sections are more studied in their approach, if only because, in modernist terms, there is a requirement for the images to be fundamentally expressive; in the voice of the raven we hear praises of the Lord:

> In very early hours, the black raven comes flying from the old neem tree to sit at the railing, on the upper storey and peeping here and there, praises the Lord in its coarse and loud voice. (36)

The voice, too is personal, in that events are experienced first-hand, or are integral to the process of reconciliation between the poet and the Lord. From the beginning, the elegiac dominates, as we see in this scene where the poet asks the Lord for perseverance in carrying his burden:

> O Lord of the world, thy world, thy world of wonderful pleasures has curved my backbone and overburdened my feeble shoulders to hang down. O Lord, can my staggering legs carry me to thy gate? (37)

The character is archetypal, the journey allegorical. A sense of place and in it the poet's sensibility to the past, an acceptance of the human condition, are expressed in simple phrases:

> O my Master, I sigh to see glories of nature, raining in abundance around me. My eyes are thirsty. My lips are dry. I long for drops of natural freedom. (46)

The myth of the eternal is examined in the closing sections. The progressive layering of imagery seen in the songs, "O Life Giver! Thou hast been moving throughout the universe to tell all secrets of living, from ages to ages" (48), succeeds to that of acceptance: "But is thy kindly touch, my Master, that world miracles with my sweet silence" (52).

The drastic, over-dramatised image of the poet is used to great effect and presents him as a solitary figure in the chaos of modern times. Yet one does not have the impression that the poet's concerns are abstract. Indeed from the start of the book the poet is intimately engaged with the issues of the times. The poet accepts and welcomes the Lord in all his disguises, whether it is as Flute Player, Master or as nature itself. In the later stages of the book the Lord appears to the poet as a woman "wearing a silver-brocaded black sari" and

> Like a love laden maiden, thou playeth games in the lovely palace of my heart. Thy holy steps smooth the rough surface, making it brighter and brighter. I being the only partner in dance, with thy graceful hand round my waist, thou joyfully dance away the whole night, thrilling each corner of the palace with divine jingling music. (60)

And though the innocence of the poet is captured in these words, we feel that the adult poet in his "room of air" is ready to receive the Lord's message and that he is prepared and willing to sweep his "chamber off the dust of evil thoughts and remove off the sinful rubbish of ages from every corner." He becomes the prophet of the coming age, foreseeing also the meaning of his life, as in a paean of musical phrases he sings:

> O Lord! Let us breathe in air of freedom, free from fear, hatred and violence, filled with sweet fragrance of brotherhood. (96)

The book is a long one, composed of over 150 songs, and its simple linear text enables one to read and savour the full text at one sitting, or to browse amongst them. A sustained reading will show that through all the songs and the complexity of their ideas, there is balance, synthesis and affirmation. Within the poet's process of self-examination, through which he becomes more conscious of his place within a world seething with phenomena, the experience of the poetry remains personal and revelatory.

NISHAT HAIDER

A REVOLUTIONARY JOURNEY

Ranu Uniyal. *Across the Divide*. Calicut: Yeti Press, 2007.

Bright, witty and insightful, Ranu Uniyal's debut collection of poems, *Across the Divide,* is an impressive addition to the Indian English literary scene. It is a set of poems that rises above sentimental drivel and frivolity and engages the reader on a level that knots the present and the past in a warp of identities and personal histories. These poems deal very powerfully with social, religious, racial and, above all, sexual entrapments.

Ranu Uniyal's cultural experiences span two continents and three cities; she was born in Lucknow, and educated in Lucknow, New Delhi, and the UK, where she worked as a Commonwealth Scholar. It is from this life of transitions that she draws her themes of childhood, journeying, homesickness in an alien land, home and religious ambivalence. It is difficult in a short space to convey Uniyal's range of sophistication from street-smart to erudite, the depth and flexibility of her poetic tones and languages, key indices of the lived-with intelligence as well as the witty acuity and technical mastery to be found throughout these poems.

Uniyal's title poem "Across the Divide" traces a complex and revelatory journey, starting with a psychical striptease where the claims of nationality, religion and gender are cast off, to allow an exploration of new territories. Strong and economical, it raises issues of identity, homesickness, urban violence and religious anomalies in the most ordinary and unobtrusive of settings. While Uniyal covers some of her familiar concerns about the self and the world in *Across the Divide* she breaks fresh ground as well. Memory, for her, always serves as a crucible through which the poetic self flows and apprehends the

world. The collection is a "poignant tribute to lives that have made a difference and will continue to do so." Notable amongst these poems are "My Grandmother's Sister", "In Conversation with Jayanta Mahapatra", "From my Aunt", "My Son's Father" and "A Song for You". The poem "Father" is dedicated to her father whose "familiarity breeds contempt", Memory, in this collection, serves as a medium and a metaphor. Kaleidoscopic images emerge from the past and jostle for possession of the self, always fragile, unstable and precarious.

In a curious way, this poetry of loss becomes a counterpart to the act of composition. Grammar, syntax, vocabulary and idiom are recurrent images that dissolve the barriers between linguistic and emotive frontiers, collapsing generic boundaries between ethics and aesthetics. Words in her poetry are not fixed inanimate terms of reference; they are always alive, fluid and explosive. In fact, they smolder and burn: "I speak of the three sisters from my old, lost town/ It is said the father could not afford their dowry/ And husbands cost a packet." One of the finest poets, she is alive in a unique way to language and to issues of politics and gender.

Uniyal's writing also questions patriarchal constructs like marriage and family. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* observed, "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men." Women writers as they deconstruct literary forms and politico-social constructs continue to struggle with the ghost of their fathers as is evident in Uniyal's "Father" and the inheritance of their mothers ("Mama"). Uniyal spent the last two decades of her life trying to write during "stolen moments" while raising a son and holding a job in the Lucknow University that effectively silenced her as an artist. Bored with what she saw as the confines of feminity, Uniyal writes: "Oh yes, I am sure mama, I wouldn't want to be like you" ("Like You

Mama"). Her poems, particularly "A New Year Gift", "Like You Mama" and "Amma" endeavour to establish that a woman is more than a sex object, a mother, a wife, and the sacrificing person in the family. While many women view motherhood, the ultimate aim of traditional feminity, as less central to their identities, Uniyal, (though she positions her own mother as a long suffering victim) suggests the great value of motherhood and love for her son in poems like "A Poem for My Son", "Mukund" and "Born With a Difference".

One outcome of the search for a true woman's voice in Indian English poetry is the attempt (both overt and covert) by some women poets to write in a deliberately 'anti-poetic', almost prosy style in order to overcome the expectation that women will continue to write in the 'sweet' (sometimes saccharine) voice of the 'poetess'. Certainly, the stark poems like "The Couple at the Corner Shop in Cottingham" the deliberately monotonous, non-sung, non-rhythmic poem like "raison d'etre" or the intentionally 'shocking' subject-matter of poems like "A Dust Storm in the Middle of the Night" are expressions of this attempt by Uniyal to break through the traditional expectations regarding women poets in India.

Ranu Uniyal's debut collection of poems *Across the Divide* is a compelling read for all lovers of modern poetry. In her poems Uniyal shows how both profound social issues and intimate personal moments can be imaginatively probed through the disciplined exercise of sensitive intelligence, passionate inquiry and unflinchingly open-minded, readily self-critical discernment. The book is a new pace-setting level of poetic achievement in India.

INTERVIEWS

USHA KISHORE

AN INTERVIEW WITH KAMALA DAS

This interview with Kamala Das took place on the 23rd of January, 2007 at the poet's residence in Cochin. Das was in bed, recovering from a fractured shoulder. Although she was in a lot of pain, she agreed to this interview, which was in the form of a conversation that lasted for about two and a half hours. The conversation was interrupted by numerous visitors as Das was leaving Kerala for Pune within a few weeks. The conversation was bilingual - in English and Malayalam. For the purpose of this publication, I have translated the Malayalam elements into English to the best of my ability. (Earlier I had been in touch with the poet in Cochin from the UK. It was then that Das flatteringly addressed me as *mole* (Malayalam for little girl or daughter) and gave me the permission to address her as *Amma* or mother).

* * *

INTERVIEW

Usha Kishore: *Amma*, *I realise that you are not very well. I can postpone the interview.*

Kamala Das: No, I must do my duty. I did agree for this interview and I will keep my word.

UK: *Amma, as mentioned to you over the phone, this interview is for my research project. I am hoping to discuss certain elements within your poetry and your thought processes behind them. Perhaps we could include instances from your personal life and how they have influenced your poems.*

KD: Okay, *Mole*. What is it that you want to know?

UK: *I am looking at your poems from the angles of Identity, Language and Womanhood.*

KD: Am I the only poet in your project?

UK: *No, I am also looking at Rabindarnath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Nissim Ezekiel.*

KD: Oh! Nissim? I used to know him very well. We were good friends. We have read together in many places.

UK: *That is interesting. Can we start with your poetry?*

KD: Fire away!

UK: *The identity in your poems is very much South Indian, is it not?*

KD: Yes, very much so, I wanted my South Indian, Malayalee, Dravidian identity to be brought into my poetry. When I started writing and getting published, there were not many South Indian Poets, who projected their identity. My poetry proclaims my pride in what I am.

UK: *The references in your poetry are very much Malayalee. Not a lot has been said about that?*

KD: I am afraid that most critics wanted to write about my projections of femininity and thus other aspects of my work have been ignored.

UK: *The Kerala references, especially those of the Malabar region are very relevant to the projection of the South Indian identity, are they not?*

KD: Yes, I wanted to project my Malabar origins and also the culture, the heritage and most importantly the people.

UK: *Inevitably this leads us to the question of your ancestry and the Nair* tharavad. *How much have you succeeded in bringing this to light?*

KD: I have tried my best and I think I have succeeded in creating a strong picture of the Nair *tharavad* and this takes us back to your question of the South Indian identity.

UK: *You have explored the Nair matriarchal tradition in depth. But you have also moved away from tradition.*

KD: I think my poetry reflects a period in which there were changes within the Nair tradition and it was this change that I have highlighted within my poetry. Although I have adhered to certain elements of the Nair tradition, I have also traced the death of the matrilineal system and signalled the naissance of the new order of patriarchal, nuclear families.

UK: *While doing so, you have broken quite a few gender stereotypes.*

KD: You think so? My novel *My Story* and some poems too have broken away from tradition and questioned certain set practices that were subjecting women, within the matriarchal hierarchy. I had two options to be a married mistress or a matriarch, I chose to be a matriarch! I chose to be a matriarch with a difference! My works outline my past that is the matrilineal tradition and my Nair heritage. You know that we are a matriarchal community and children take the mother's family name rather than the father's. Yes, I did protest against injustice to women. I did raise my voice against oppression, and thus projected a woman's voice from the cloister of the matriarchal

tradition. This way, I was adhering to tradition and also rebelling against it.

UK: *This takes us to the question of your influences and your poetic ancestry.*

KD: Go on!

UK: *Were you very much influenced by your mother, the Malayalam poet, Balamani Amma?*

KD: As a child, I have often seen my mother writing poetry, that too sprawled on a four poster bed. So, I thought this was the right thing to do. To lie face down on a four poster bed and write poetry. This is where the influence stops.

UK: *Unlike other poets, you have not used a lot of Malayalam words or words from any other Indian language in your poetry?*

KD: I did not feel the need. My references though are Malayalee, primarily Malabari. So, that speaks for my language and identity.

UK: *I feel that your use of language is very much postcolonial, do you agree?*

KD: Do you think so? I started writing during the British Raj and as a child, I often felt overwhelmed by the British usage of English. Although we spoke English, people like us were always given second class status.

UK: *Did this convince you to contribute towards Indian English?*

KD: Indian English was already in the making. I wanted to use Indian English in my poetry to create a difference.

UK: *Was yours a deliberate attempt to use Indian English or is it unconscious?*

KD: It was a bit of both, I should say. The Indian English that was in existence filtered into my poetry. There was also a deliberate attempt to create a difference as I had earlier said.

UK: *Was this difference influenced by anything?*

KD: Yes, even as a child, I was aware of the inferiority complex bestowed on us by the British. In those days, we lived in Calcutta and India was still under the British Raj. My father had contacts with the British people and even as a child, I felt that we Indians were given only second class status. I went to school with some British children, who taunted us for the colour of our skin and our Indian accent. This had made me very angry.

UK: *I remember the incident in My Story, where you have mentioned that your poem was read by a Scottish girl, Shirley and it was announced that she had composed the poem.*

KD: Yes. It was very humiliating. I think rebellion was brewing in me, even then. Later, after independence, when I started getting published, I did want to create an Indian idiom with Indian references and even the Indian usage of the language.

UK: *Amma, You mean Indian English similar to that of Nissim Ezekiel?*

KD: No, *Mole!* I am sorry but I do not like Nissim's Indian English poems. His was a deliberate attempt to poke fun at Indian English.

UK: *Wasn't this Ezekiel's attempt to decolonise English?*

KD: I do not agree. Nissim had his moments when he really ridiculed Indian English, totally forgetting the fact that he was Indian. I remember, especially when we all went abroad, Nissim would put on this ridiculous accent and read the "Miss Pushpa" poem and others with great bravado, just to amuse the Westerners. We were all very embarrassed then. The audience was amused, of course and Nissim secured the best applause. Wasn't he really trying to stereotype himself and Indians as a whole? Nissim was really an intellectual and he need not have presented himself in this manner.

UK: *But Amma, was that not Ezekiel's way of creating an Indian English dialect, away from British English, something like the Caribbean dialect?*

KD: No, I don't agree! After Independence, there was an attempt to create Indian English alright, but Nissim's Indian English poems were over the top. The Westerners were just waiting for an opportunity to ridicule us. Imperialist attitudes die hard! Nissim was just playing into their hands. He was catering to the already present stereotypes and popular ideas about India and Indian English in the Western media.

UK: *You used to know Ezekiel well. What were your experiences of the poet?*

KD: We were good friends. We used to meet in poetry readings and other literary get-togethers. Nissim was a sweet man. He was always very pleasant, especially to the ladies. As I mentioned earlier, there was an intellectual air about him. I like his Bombay poems very much.

UK: *Ezekiel has had a reputation of being a ladies' man. This comes out in his poetry. You also read about this in biographies and critiques.*

KD: He was a ladies' man, alright. But, I don't think Nissim was as much a ladies' man as he portrayed himself to be.

UK: *But he presents various innuendoes in his poetry, related to women and there are other rumours. His poetry also presents the omnipresent predatory male…*

KD: Most of it is his imagination running riot. Nissim was this thin man with glasses, at least when I knew him, and to attribute a predatory quality to him, I think is absurd. You should differentiate between the poet and the person.

UK: *They cannot be totally inseparable.*

KD: I agree! But in spite of that, I would say that Nissim was not what you would call an out and out predator, at least as I know him. As for the predatory poetic personae, well, perhaps they are what Nissim aspired to be! It is what you might call "Magic Realism" in your critical terminology!

UK: *I have come across a biography of Ezekiel by Raj Rao.*

KD: Have you? I have differences about the presentation of intimate details of Nissim's life. If this comes from Nissim, it is okay, but…

UK: *But, surely an autobiography should be true to life?*

KD: Perhaps, we can agree to disagree on this subject.

UK: *You spoke about reading abroad. You have travelled well haven't you Amma?*

KD: Yes, I have been to the UK, Europe, Far East and Australia.

UK: *What are your experiences in the UK?*

KD: Not very pleasant. When I was in the UK, I felt colonialism still lingering. The British High Commission and the British Council arranged our readings and sometimes the representatives of these organisations, who were British, were not very pleasant. Once a British lady told me that all Indian poets who come to the UK were mercenary and were primarily after pounds. They sometimes even refused to give us our subsistence allowance. This was really very demeaning. I managed to survive as I had relatives in the UK and at one point, I told the above-mentioned lady that I did not need any charity. It is all well said about multiculturalism and the Commonwealth and so on and so forth; but when it comes to the crunch, the British did demonstrate imperial attitudes. Two hundred years of the Raj must still linger on British minds. Do they still exist?

UK: *I would be lying if I told you that they did not. However, there certainly has been a gradual change for the better as far as imperial attitudes are concerned and I am able to say that I have experienced this change in the last ten years or so. Coming back to your poetry, I find strong political connotations, be it in the "Colombo poems" or in "Delhi 1984" or in the poems like "Nani" raising your voice against crime against women.*

KD: Do you? Yes, I do agree that there are political connotations.

UK: *But you have said in the poem "An Introduction" that "You do not know politics".*

KD: That was then. Perhaps, it is up to the reader to interpret my lines!

UK: *Vrinda Nabar says in her book "Endless Female Hungers" that she does not see political elements within your poetry. I disagree with that.*

KD: Vrinda Nabar and I have always had strong disagreements. I do not agree with some of her interpretations of my poetry. However, as an individual, I have political views. You might have heard about my Lok Seva party and my contesting the elections?

UK: *Yes, I have…*

KD: Well, that's another story. Next question?

UK: *Now, moving on to religion and faith , I feel that there is some ambivalence in your poetry, especially the recent Ya Allah poems. There is a marked difference to your earlier adoration of Krishna, is there not?*

KD: Somewhere along the lines, I converted to Islam and this has created a marked change in my belief systems. My poetry reflects this change. I am still in the process of changing and reflecting on these belief systems. The *Ya Allah* poems as you call them are my initial reactions to Islam. Now that I have experienced Islam, I don't know where I go from here or where the poetry goes. You could say I am in a crucial phase of my belief systems. But I know that I will keep writing…

* * *

At this point, I had to stop the interview as the poet was in pain and was getting tired. Kamala Das invited me over the next day in order to continue with the interview. However, I did not have the heart to go back as I felt that it would not be ethical or human to inconvenience somebody who was in a lot of pain. As a result, my questions on Das's metropolitan sensibility and her expressions of womanhood were left unanswered. I am grateful to Kamala Das for giving me some of her time, especially during her convalescence.

SMITA AGARWAL

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARILYN HACKER

This interview with Marilyn Hacker was conducted via email. Hacker is the author of eleven books of poems, most recently *Essays on Departure*, *New and Selected Poems*, which appeared in the fall of 2006 from the Carcanet Press. *Desesperanto* was published by W.W. Norton in 2003, along with *First Cities*. She received both the Lenore Marshall Award of the Academy of American Poets and a Lambda Literary Award in 1995 for *Winter Numbers*: her *Selected Poems* was awarded the Poets' Prize in 1996. Hacker received an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2004. *La Rue Palimpseste* (translated into French by Claire Malroux) was awarded the Prix Max Jacob Etranger in 2005. she has published five recent books of translations: *A Long-Gone Sun* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2000) and *Birds and Bison* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2005) both of poems by Claire Malroux, and *Here There Was Once a Country* (Oberlin College Press, 2001) and *She Says* (Graywolf Press, 2003) both by Venus Khoury-Ghata and *Charlestown Blues*, translations of poems by Guy Goffette (University of Chicago Press, 2007). Marilyn Hacker lives in New York and Paris. She teaches at the City College of New York and the CUNY Graduate Center, and is an editor of the French literary journal *Siècle 21*.

INTERVIEW

Smita Agrawal: *How did poetry come to you?*

Marilyn Hacker: Through reading poetry.

SA: *Did you always know you'd be a poet?*

MH: I'm not always sure that I am one now, except when I am actually working on a piece of writing. But did I start writing poetry as a child, as an adolescent: yes.

***SA**: Is there a relationship between poetry and politics?*

MH: There are many possible relationships, none that can be prescribed: poetry is always, whatever else it is about, about the relationship between language and meaning. Which is, in itself, a political concern. Sometimes the poet writes and speaks openly of political issues to an audience waiting for that from him or her, like the public which would now wait for new work by Adrienne Rich or by Mahmoud Darwish; sometimes the political nature of the poem is necessarily "told slant" like that of some of Akhmatova's or Tsvetayeva's work. But there can be bad poems with good politics, and good poems with dubious opinions. Thank heaven. And the politics of poets themselves change, evolve, advance or retreat. Think of Auden – who for me remains a great poet both in his overtly political and his later ironic, even quietistic work. It is the same verbal imagination at work.

***SA**: Has the ghazal in English been used in a political manner by you?*

MH: The peculiar non-linear structure of the ghazal, with the paradoxical unity created by the rhyme echoes of the qafia and the repetition of the radif, mirrors in an interesting way the interplay between the private and the public, the anecdotal and the essential in the human mind: it seems almost to illustrate how the "personal is political" – and the political deeply personal – by the unexpected links it can make.

***SA**: How did you discover the Urdu ghazal?*

MH: I had read translated ghazals – versions of Ghalib and Faiz—by English language poets like Adrienne Rich and Galway Kinnell, and indeed Rich's own excellent free couplet ghazals based on her work on Ghalib. I first saw the actual schema of the Urdu ghazal, with the matla, the qafia and the radif, in John Hollander's book on verse forms, *Rhyme's Reason.* But it was the formal ghazals in English of Agha Shahid Ali, first in the collection *The Country Without a Post Office*, and then in *Rooms are Never Finished* and in the (alas) posthumous *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* that fascinated me with the rigour and the play of the form, with its possibilities.

***SA**: What problems did you face in transposing a poetic form from one tradition into another?*

MH: The problem here is that my acquaintance with the ghazal came to me through English – through translations and through other poets', especially Shahid's, use of the form. So I wasn't transposing as I would have been if, for example, I were myself a translator of Urdu or Farsi.

***SA**: Humour, irony and satire are the bedrock of your ghazals in English. What were you thinking when you ushered in this innovation into a poetic form that was essentially courtly, romantic and philosophical?*

MH: Shahid's ghazals, too, employ irony, juxtaposed with the erotic and the philosophical (and he refers to these juxtapositions in the work of Faiz as well). It was precisely the non-linear nature of the form, in which the same poem could shift in mood and tone from couplet to couplet, which appealed to me. But then, so many received forms in various traditions have changed in tone and valence in different countries and at different times. The sonnet has gone far astray from its "courtly, romantic" origins, to be used as a religious

poem or sequence, a historical or political poem, a satirical poem – and some, though not all, of that happened in the sea-changes between languages.

***SA**: Which is your favourite "great poem"? Please let us know what you consider to be the essential elements of a "great poem".*

MH: I couldn't possibly say what my "favourite" was, because there are so many, and because a different frame of mind or concern leads me to different reading matter – whether it's Dante or Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, John Donne, Marie de France or Louis MacNeice or Adrienne Rich, Akhmatova, Mahmoud Darwish, Derek Walcott or Wislawa Szymborska. I don't think I'm competent to say what the essential elements of a "great poem" might be except that it's one which continues to be read, remembered, discussed, and not always for the same reasons. A great poem addresses human concerns in a way that remains relevant across cultures, languages and epochs.

***SA**: Do you feel poetry is outmoded as an art form in the contemporary world?*

MH: In a word, no. Poetry is portable, it is memorable, it is easily reproduced — copied in the most difficult circumstances. Think of the importance of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry to the Palestinian people, of the hand-written samizdat poems that circulated during the worst dictatorships, of Miklós Radnoty writing poems on the Nazi death march which ended his life.

***SA**: At a reading, are there certain responses from the audience that you look for in order to let yourself know whether the reading has been successful or not?*

MH: I'm usually just glad it's over. If people buy books (or have brought copies of books they've already got), it's rewarding. Your

questions about readings make me wonder if readings have a different or a larger part of the culture of poetry in India than they do in the United States and Great Britain.

***SA**: The same poem is read to a live audience as well as is read by a distant reader. What are the differences that creep in?*

MH: For me, the poem's primary existence is on the page; the performance of the poem might as well be done by a different person: in fact, I think of readings as performances, not that much different than if I were reading a speech from a play, a poem or some other text by another writer. It's the poem on the page that is, for me, the writer's challenge

***SA**: Which Indian poets, other than those writing in English, are you fond of?*

MH: My interest in the ghazal form in particular was awakened by the translations of and responses to the poems of Ghalib by American poets like Adrienne Rich and W.S. Merwin, as well as Aijaz Ahmad's writing about Ghalib's work and about the form, and by translations of the work of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, including Naomi Lazard's, but especially those of Agha Shahid Ali in "The Rebel's Silhouette," and his eloquent introduction. You unmask a great ignorance on my part here, as the Indian (or Indian-born) poets whose work I know tend to be those writing in English – it's not the answer you solicited, but I greatly admire the work of Dom Moraes, Eunice de Souza, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, Meena Alexander, Vijay Seshadri, Reetika Vazirani, who died tragically young, younger poets like Jeet Thayil and Sampurna Chattarji. And of course the Kashmiri-American Agha Shahid Ali.

***SA**: What advice would you offer to struggling poets?*

MH: I don't quite know what you mean by "struggling": Engaged in a political struggle, trying to earn a living (no one earns a living as a poet), or simply "trying to get published" – which is not exactly the same level of "struggle." If the "struggle" is to write better, I would say read more, and read widely, while remaining engaged in the world outside of books. If the struggle is to earn a living, the answer is different for everyone. Some poets and other writers thrive in the academy; for others, it kills the spirit and the imagination. For some, earning a living in a way unrelated to "writing" is essential; others draw energy and use the discipline gained, for example, as journalists or critics.

NILANSHU AGARWAL

AN INTERVIEW WITH SMITA AGARWAL

> If I were a creepy-crawly,
> or an airy-fairy, I'd at least
> stick to instincts…

The just mentioned emotional outburst from the pen of Smita Agarwal reveals the lyrical intensity of her poetry. Poetry, it appears, is an outlet for her emotions. Eunice de Souza has written thus about her poetry, "Smita Agarwal is frequently concerned with pain, but in the tradition of impersonality, it is expressed through the dramatized consciousness of other people, or other forms of life."

Her poetry collection *Wish-Granting Words* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2002) exhibits her profound veneration of poetry, which according to her "performs a civilizing function." Her poems have appeared in prestigious journals and anthologies like *Kavya Bharati*, *The Scoria*, *Literature Alive*, *The Journal of Poetry Society* (India), *Indian Literature*, *Indian Review of Books*, *Wasafiri* (London), *Poetry Review* (London), *Ariel* (Canada), *Thumbscrew* (Oxford), *Verse* (U.S.A.), *Poetry India: Voices for the Future*; *Poetry India: Voices in Time*; *Poetry India: Voices of Silence*, ed. H.K.Kaul; *Nine Indian Women Poets*, ed. Eunice de Souza, 1997.

Currently, she is a Professor of English at University of Allahabad and has been a writer in residence at the Universities of Sterling and Kent in 1999. She is also a vocal artist for All India Radio. This emotional, creative artist, who holds a doctoral dissertation on Sylvia Plath talked to Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal about her love for poetry and music along with several other important issues like eroticism in literature and current curricula of English Studies in India.

INTERVIEW

Nilanshu K. Agarwal: *Poetry comes naturally to a poet. It emerges as spontaneously in the human heart as the leaves on the branches. In your poem 'According to my bond: no more or less', you say, "The universe is intentionless." I say, "Poetry is intentionless." Wordsworth has also called poetry 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.' That is, poetry can not be created by way of force. It is spontaneous, natural and instinctive. Sage Valmiki too experienced the poetic upsurge in his heart, when he was filled with pathetic sentiments at the killing of the Kraunch bird. Poetry, it appears, has come spontaneously to you too. Pain is paramount in your verse. The inner emotional pain has made the natural poetic effusion possible in you. Externally, your poetry poses as impersonal and objective. You talk about nature and other external things. But, a poem like 'At Forty' clearly indicates that behind this impersonal grab, there is sufficient personal emotion. I suppose, 'she' of the aforesaid poem is none other than you. Am I right? The line 'At thirty-eight she loses her dad to diabetes' is clearly written from a personal angle.(As per Wish-Granting Words, your father left for his heavenly abode, when you were 38 and in the poem 'Joyride', you have referred to his diabetes.) Should I call you a subjective poet, who is hiding her personal emotions under the guise of impersonal thought? In a way, you have universalized your personal anxiety and pain. Is my hypothesis correct?*

Smita Agarwal: I am a human being; I have a mind and a heart. The objective of my poems is to use art to find that fine balance between reason and feeling where all who read the poem feel as if it were theirs. As I have said in my interview with Eunice de Souza in *Nine Indian Women Poets*, OUP, 1997, p. 60, " … a poem performs a civilizing function, answering not only a human need for emotional expression but for rational control as well."

NKA: *Due to the presence of the just mentioned feverish strife in your psyche, you involve in an imagery which indicates the emotional outburst of your heart.*

I think in the poem 'The Map', the picture of volcano is nothing but an extended image of your own disturbed heart. "Geophysicists peer into its smoking vent,/ Wondering how, for over a thousand years,/ It has been fuming yet never allowed/ Its seething discontent to spew out." The above-mentioned lines just bring out the inner frustration and seething discontents of your heart. What factors, other than those mentioned in 'At Forty' (considering it to be a personal poem), are responsible for your lyrical effusion? Or, were the reasons mentioned in the poem sufficient to cause poetic upsurge in you?

SA: The reason for writing poetry is life itself: its complexity, beauty, ordinariness … discontents … I am careful to allow any and everything to move me. Most agitations drift away into space. Only some gift me a poem. I never know which one will do that but I am constantly alert and I try.

NKA: *What is the way to come out of this distress? Can poetry, music and arts help us in finding a way out?*

SA: I am a poet not a spiritual guru so I cannot guide. You must find the answer for yourself as I have found mine. Poetry and music make me happy. I cannot live without them. When I am happy everything around me is warm and good and beautiful.

NKA: *In the poem 'Monsoon Cantata', you have talked about 'suicide-squad assassinations', 'communal conflagrations', 'scams', 'arms deals', 'a tribal woman gang-raped' and 'mute deaths in custody'. This derailed social system is perhaps due to the fact that "Standing in a hall of mirrors he sees/Everywhere only himself." This expression from 'Man on the Make' shows the basic selfishness of man. This approach is robbing man of his divine virtue and making him a mere beast. What are the possible solutions to this selfish bestial approach of man? Can Literature be a guide to solve this problem? There is a problem here too. In the contemporary age of Information Technology, young men and women*

have lost interest in Literature. Somewhere, you have also written,"…they don't understand much of what you write" (Qtd. in Eunice de Souza 61). The youth sees his ideal as top MNC Executives. They do not care for Literature, music and other arts. To be very honest, 'the world is too much with us'. How can the interest of the youth be restored in creative art?

SA: I think that the beauty of Man is that he is both beast and divine. This is of great interest to me as a poet. I would rather let Man be as he is. Who wants an insipid, perfect God? As for your second question, yes, contemporary life is very demanding on young people and maybe it does not offer them much time to read, write, sing and dance. But is that really so? We still find time to see movies, go to discos, participate in family weddings where we sing and dance, go to *melas*, fairs, *mandirs* … all these are cultural activities. We do what is best and easily available to us. We cannot exist in a cultural vacuum … whether it is high, low, popular or folk, each one of us is a part of some cultural activity. I don't think the creative arts can die out. Periodically they impact human life. As, after 9/11, *The New York Times* reported a flurry of poetic activity by bruised and stunned Americans.

NKA: *Sometimes, your poetry indulges in explicit love imagery. The poem 'Parrots' is an example in this case, where the third stanza reaches the height of forbidden subject. Can traditional Indian readers accept this type of content easily?*

SA: Dear friend, what do you mean by the traditional Indian reader? India has a tradition of the erotic as exemplified by Khajuraho, Kalidas, Jayadeva, to name just three. The list is really long. There is no forbidden subject in art. Art breaks boundaries, allows new things to be born and the old and accepted to grow … Yes, the erotic may be uncomfortable to read or see but that does not make it irrelevant.

Please read my article on erotic poetry published in *Poetry Review*, London.

NKA: *You seem to be a close observer of nature. The expression "Rain is tattooing on the roof, tap-tapping/ On the thin sunshade of the kitchen window" in the poem 'Monsoon Cantata' exhibits your keen observation of a natural scene. What is the significance of this natural imagery in your poetry?*

SA: How should I put it? I love nature because maybe I am made that way. Maybe because I belong to the hills I grew up with nature, as you call it. My father used to take us for trips, nature walks; point things out to us. I married a man who loves traveling and gardening. It could be all of this.

NKA: *In your poem 'Joyride', you are nostalgic about your father. How does the nostalgic past enhance your poetic sensibilities?*

SA: Memory and memorability are linked. In order to remember and preserve, the human brain resorts to rhyme, symbols, metaphors – the tools of poetry. Memories of irrevocable loss tend to be nostalgic – a civilized way of grieving for what is lost. Memories of pain and loss are a rich mine poets have mined across time and cultures. "Joyride" is a villanelle echoing Dylan Thomas' elegy "Do not go gently into the Night …". The strict rhyme scheme keeps a check on sentimentality. The refrain, "Till daylight fades out on every side", (the slow growth of darkness that ultimately engulfs all life no matter how beautiful or how powerful) makes the poem an elegy and a lament.

NKA: *Simon de Beauvoir called women 'the second sex.' Your poem 'Enchilida' deals with this suppression of the woman. The subjugation of the woman is brought out in the opening stanza itself, where you write, "She wonders if she'll ever know/ This Man./ Five or Fifteen years of marriage,/ He is still a closed*

fist." Similarly, the poem 'Discord' brings this strained man-woman relationship to the fore in the last line-- "Like two crossed knives, husband and wife." Is there a way out of this jungle of male patriarchal system? How can the rainbow of emotional bond arise in the dismal sky of man-woman relationship?

SA: Again, you ask me a question as if I were a swamiji with vibhuti up my sleeve. I am a poet. I write of what I see – without praise or blame. However, I do feel, much depends on the man and woman concerned. If there is love and trust, they can aim for a relationship of equality and mutual respect.

NKA: *Has this patriarchal system of society been an obstacle in your growth as a poet and a teacher? How did you encounter male prejudice towards a woman, while advancing your career as a poet, teacher and a singer?*

SA: When one is young one reacts to male prejudice. It enrages you because it is unfair. As one grows older one learns to do the job well so that the very men who stand in your path learn to respect you for your expertise and individuality.

NKA: *You are also a vocal artist for All India Radio. How has this art helped your creativity in poetry? Do you find some affinity between poetry and music? What do you prefer-- poetry or music?*

SA: Poetry *is* music, is it not? Even in free verse we aim for internal rhyme, assonance, repetition, alliteration, anaphora, for what purpose, if not to create the music of sound? Certainly my training in music has taught my ear to catch even the softest of sounds and rhythms. There is no question of preference; both make me happy, make me feel good, grant me a sense of being free.

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