

KAVYA BHARATI

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL - II

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
MADURAI

Number 21

2009

YET ANOTHER DECADE

The second volume of the 20th anniversary Special of *Kanya Bharati* is before you.

We enter yet another decade in our effort to further the cause of Indian poetry in English and in English translation from various regional languages of India. The space we offer is for you to explore and experiment.

During the course of this year we lost in the death of Kamala Das a great writer and an ardent supporter of the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and *Kanya Bharati*. Years before Salman Rushdie, the novelist came on the scene it was Kamala Das who created a language that was all her own and liberated a lot of Indian writers.

The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest
It is human.

These oft-quoted lines are from “An Introduction,” a poem from Kamala Das’s first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). By writing *My Story* her act of transforming experience through fictive fabulation, she proved to be a powerful inspiration to countless women writers.

Kamala Das has been close to us through all her incarnations. She visited us in the Eighties to read her poetry, as a guest of the PG Department of English. Kamala Das was a resource person in the Creative Writing Workshop that SCILET sponsored in the year 1994. She came as Kamala Suraiya to grace the literary festival PEGASUS in the year 2000.

The absence of Kamala Das in the 20th Anniversary Special is something that we regret. We dedicate this volume of *Kanya Bharati* to the memory of Kamala Das.

KB expresses its deep gratitude and appreciation to Dr. N. Poovalingam for letting us use his portrait of Kamala Das in this issue.

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Editor: R.P. Nair

KAVYA BHARATI

a review of Indian Poetry

Number 21, 2009

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The poems "Past Sins" and "Prayer" appearing in KB 20, wrongly attributed to Smita Tewari, are actually by Mona Dash and are reprinted in this issue. We regret the error and extend our profound apologies to Mona Dash and Smita Tewari.

KEKI N. DARUWALLA

LADAKH NOCTURNE

The temple bell is still
and its heavy metal ring
that cleaves the blue sky at dawn
is quiet;

Quiet as the stars that lie still
in the unruffled pond.
Bird-dreams are also silent,
as crow and mynah roost on the lone tree
in this grassless landscape.
Birds go back in time;
these dreams that flash like
magic lantern slides across their eyes
are from the silent movie era.

The prayer drums that girdle this holy
conglomeration of stones
are one with the stillness of the night.
The Gompa is surprisingly stable
atop that rocky hill, which looks
like a cataract of boulders
halted in descent.

The Shakyamuni inside in his lotus pose,
gold and nirvanic peace painted on his face,
is meditating on eternity,
even as a thin shawl of mist wraps itself
around the monastery, so that it looks
like a mound of incense smoking up
from the shale-valley to the stars.

Kavya Bharati 2009

OLD DANCER

(From an Old Poet)

Thirty years earlier, having watched Yamini,
easily the greatest dancer of the century,
I saw another big name tonight,
though perhaps two decades after her heyday.
Her feet tapped slowly to the tabla's beat,
as if abating the *tabalchi's* frenzy.
Her *mudras* were right, the forefinger raised
for the Sudershan Chakra;
her smiles lit up the stage, her frowns
darkened the spotlight itself.
Her eyeballs swiveled though her trunk couldn't.
She was heavy-hipped and her waist
was truly equatorial as she
pirouetted slowly like the earth
spinning round the sun, or the moon
twisting its way through a fatigued sky.

The bald *tabalchi* too was old
(he wouldn't have been bald otherwise)
but he was on the sidelines,
and so was the flutist, whose
gap-toothed exhalations brought forth lovely music
from the pocked bamboo.
He too was on the margins of the spotlight.
But she was centre stage and she couldn't bend.
An old dancer has no place on the stage,
as an old poet has no business on the written page.

Keki N. Darunwalla

APOSTROPHE TO...

Sorry for the apostrophe--
(dated stratagem of dated versifiers like me)
but we have a lot to do with each other, you and I--
bird call from the jamun branch
purple birdlime under the jamun tree;
tree root drifting blindly
towards underground lakes;
crackle of arctic ice as Jap whale boats
meet icebergs instead of whales
(may they meet icebergs instead of whales);

memories (you're a part of the system I address)
Kabir's memories woven on a loom
memories and mother, the creases--
dry river beds that ran down her wrinkled cheeks

rhetoric, conversions, Easter,
Christ-bird winging away from the cross
the burning of the guy who talked about it,
slogans, fires, is it newsprint dark with last night's
arson smudging the fingers black?
black magic and *jadu tona*,
what is good literature but jadu tona?
people still talking of
Rasputin, Raskolnikov;
cosmology, you too come in somewhere
black holes and the
endless nocturnal brooding of comets

in short Reality, we have an appointment.
Choose your weapons.

Kavya Bharati 2009

DEFINING A SUFI

It is difficult to define a Sufi
but I'll try. Always try.
Never say die!
(I am good at counseling myself, as you can see.
No one else would give a langur's ballocks
for my advisory dollops,
pardon the poor *angrez*).

A Sufi is he who as he enters
a Bangladeshi fake tandoori eatery in Brixton
thinks he is in Moti Mahal or Khyber.
(He can't think of Bokhara as yet--
to think of Bokhara you have to be
spiritually very elevated.)

A Sufi is he
who as he downs one of our beers
with enough glycerine in it to embitter a jar of honey
thinks he is imbibing a Pint, mate,
at 'Fox-on-the Hill' in Camberwell.

A Sufi is he
who when he converses with long-haired Muzaffar Ali
thinks he has just spoken to al-Halaj.

A Sufi is he
who, as he watches someone suddenly stand up
and shout 'Haq! Haq!' in the heart of Cairo
falls at his feet, crying 'Master! Show me the Way!'
and when the master asks
'Do you have a match and a cigarette to light it with?'
replies 'you mean, Master,
'a cigarette and a match to light it with?'
and the master shakes his head and moves off
saying 'you'll never be a Sufi.'

Keki N. Darunwalla

A Sufi is he
who when he sees others
run away from a wolf
knows it is just an Alsatian
and moves forward to pat him.
(What happened to the Sufi later
is another story.)

A Sufi is he
who when his acolytes confuse
crucifixion with castration
admonishes gravely
'they are different.'

A Sufi is NOT he
who, when the hand of God
reaches out to bless him,
thinks it is Maradona's.

A Sufi never marches
with reality in line;
he is always a step ahead
or a step behind.

DUSK ON THE TABLELAND

High plateau, low breeze,
breeze lower and slower
than cranes landing
around the pond.
Chanting in the monastery
guttural as bear speech
rising from pious gizzards.

SUKRITA PAUL KUMAR

END FROM THE BEGINNING

Ensconced in the leafy heart
of the forest Jahanpanah,
away from the concentric paths,
is an ancient well
dreaming in deep sleep,
hissing with kobras and
vipers
beneath the cover of thorny bushes;

unseen and unheard,
still and undisturbed
through several centuries

The blind darkness captures
the madness
of Mohammad Tughlaq
the king who first created
and then abandoned all he created
who returned to Adilabad
the fourth city of Delhi,
where breathed, heaved and
sighed the forest

throbbing and blushing
with the break of dawn

inviting lovers
to come down the spiral steps
carved on his chest,
to reach the womb of time
and touch the
beginnings of history.

Sukrita Paul Kumar

THE CHINESE CEMETERY

The smile in the photograph
Is no reflection of what lies
In the dark hollow of the tunnels
Behind cement squares in rows,
Each, one-by-one in size
Marked by dates, picture and name
Of a tiny flash
A dot of life in the universe

Ashes in urns
Ancestors as concepts
In treasure vaults
Wrapped in rituals
Recycling memory
year after year

For the snow to melt
And the river to flow

Bones crackling
In sacred pyre,

The funeral
In *The World of Suzie Wong*
Consumed the baby,
and then, lapped up
-the letter of introduction-
“To whom-so-ever it may concern”,

Flames are messengers
Carrying the known
To the unknown

Life to afterlife

Kavya Bharati 2009

OF NEW LIVES

What is that,
Yonder, out there?
Not a shadow, not indeed,
But definite contours of
A body reflecting an already tough mind
A stubborn shadow of her own
A fledgling come into a lingering adolescence
With threatening wings
large and awkward

A warring life
Marching in defiance
Deadening the mother, her adventures,
Leaving her cold and alone
A corpse
Inside the tomb
Strangled by fear and caution

It's the daughter giving
Birth to a new mother,
A mother-fledgling fluttering for
Fresh skies and new grounds
For yet another journey.

Sukrita Paul Kumar

ARRIVAL

Java House, Iowa City

Café au lait

Unleashed from the contours
of a smile
I felt the American Indian
feel me
with his brown native eyes,
reaching out from just above
the edges of the table
pushed against the farthest wall,
on which hung his portrait
with his arms as if
resting on the table

In Java House
amidst the buzz of
alien coffee percolators
and strange twangy English,
he and I
waited for the first move

he with his crown of feathers
I with the perfect round
teeka on my forehead,

both Indians in exile
one on his own land
the other for whom
the rising of the sun
was at once its setting
as on her own land
seven seas away

Kavya Bharati 2009

In the corner stood our witness
The piano with its
stern, philosophic countenance
European in its temper
Pregnant with sopranos and crescendos

Our homeland
we agreed
was the horizon
where all the Indians go
after they die

Delicate rings of smoke
rose from coffee-cups
and the songs of silence drowned the piano;

Inside Java House
the earth met the sky
for us to reach
our homeland
without dying.

Sukrita Paul Kumar

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Buried in the debris
near the blind well
in the jungle
are a thousand tales
nibbled by scurrying rats
and infected by amnesia

Bits of tales peep out
as if sticking their tongues
through fine slits
in the wrinkled surface
of the heap
hardening over time,
with more and more
thorny creepers and shrubs
gripping the forest
in a net
from which slip out

dead voices severed
from their bodies,

Compressed sighs
rising occasionally
as white smoke
and bouncing as cold echoes
against the walls of the deep black pit

Kavya Bharati 2009

spewing the romance,
hidden snugly,
of times immemorial
in the tunnel built,
as they say, from the
bottom of the well
to his majesty's fort
at Tughlagabad

The flash of light,
an end of the long night,

slides down the spiral steps
to kiss the mouth
of the passage
to the regal splendour
at the other end,
yielding fresh bodies
for the voices
and softening the earth
to impregnate her with a million
more legends of love...

SUDEEP SEN

CHOICE

*drawing a breath between each
sentence, trailing closely every word.*
—JAMES HOCH, 'Draft' in *Miscreants*

*some things, I knew,
were beyond choosing:*

didu—grandmother—wilting
under cancer's terminus care—

mama's mysterious disappearance—
ventilator vibrating, severed
silently, in the hospital's unkempt dark—

some friends' biting silence—unexplained—
promised loyalties melting for profit
abandoning long familial presences of trust—

devi's jealous heart misreading emails
hacked carefully under cover,
her fingernails ripping
unformed poems, bloodied, scarred—
my diary pages weeping wordlessly—
my children aborted, my poetry breathless forever.

these are acts that enact themselves, regardless—

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helpless, as I am,
torn asunder permanently, drugged, numbed.

strange love, this is—

a salving: what medics and nurses do.

i live buddha-like, unblinking, a painted vacant smile—
one that stores pain and painlessness—
someone else's nirvana thrust upon me.

some things I once believed in

are beyond my choosing—

choosing is a choice unavailable to me.

WINTER

Couched on crimson cushions,
pink bleeds gold

and red spills into one's heart.

Broad leather keeps time,

calibrating different hours
in different zones

unaware of the grammar
that makes sense.

Sudeep Sen

Only random woofs and snores
of two distant dogs

on a very cold night
clears fog that is unresolved.

New plants wait for new heat—
to grow, to mature.

An old can recliner contains
poetry for peace—woven

text keeping comfort in place.
But it is the impatience of want

that keeps equations unsolved.
Heavy, translucent, vaporous,

split red by mother tongues—
winter's breath is pink.

THE WAILING WALL, REVISITED
Jerusalem, 2008

*A human being
is not symmetrical.*

—SRECKO KOSOVEL

1.
I gently touch you now

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not the way I did
eleven years ago—

not with that yearning
for faith and peace,
but with a private prayer

for inner calm, care,
stillness, and
for forgiveness and love.

The gleaming hand-worn
shine on Jerusalem stone,
where the public merges

with the private,
where prayer and passion
collide and unite—

where a certain kind
of kindness changes
to another kind—

where a certain kind
of passion changes
to another kind

of desire. It is
a blessing of time—
eleven years is a lifetime.

2.

As I tried once again
to wedge in
a piece of coded-paper

into the cracks
and joins of The Wall,
I discovered

another paper piece
behind that new one
resisting my approach.

I tried to force it in—
the more I tried
the more impossible it got.

Failing, I now tried to
take out the old paper
that prevented my will,

take out that piece
to resize
my own new prayers—

but the longing
of past years resisted
to dislodge the old.

I prised out
the old folded sheet—
it looked weathered

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and yellow
 like the local stone's
sun-stained ochre.

I opened it—
 it was the same one
I had put in

eleven years ago.
 Time had preserved
memory,

preserved my wishes.
 Was I the same then
as I am now?

Was the feeling then
 more sincere
than now?

Passion for life
 never wanes for some.
New love

like old love
 balance
their inherent truths.

3.
Here, gun-slung soldiers,

Sudeep Sen

pilgrims, children,
and men in black garb—

move forwards
and backwards—
their axis, their waist—

a symmetry
that instills and heightens
their own faith—

a symmetry
I cannot hope
to aspire to,

as I am—
like Kosovel's man
not symmetrical.

MATRIX
for PSC

Birds fly across the pale blue sky
cross-stitching a matrix in Pali—

a tongue now beautifully classical
like temple-toned Bharatanatyam.

Dialogues in the other garden
happen *not just* in *springtime*. Yet

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you stare askance *talking poetry*
in silence, an angularity of stance

like a shot in a film-noir narrative
yet to be edited to form a whole.

What is a whole? Is it not a sum
of distilled parts, parts one chooses

to expose carefully like raw stock—
controlling patterns in the red light

of dark, a dark that eventually exposes.
There emerges at the end,

nests for imaginative flights to rest,
to weave our own stories braving

winds, currents, and the elements
of disguise. *Fireflies in the grove*

do not belong to numbered *generation*—
they only light up because line-breaks

like *varnam* keep purity alive—
enigmatic, disciplined, spontaneous.

Let the birds fly tracing angular paths,
let the dancer dance unbridled,

let the poet write unrestrained—
natural as breathing itself.

Sudeep Sen

Matrix woven can be unwoven—
enjambments like invisible pauses

weave us back into algebraic patterns
that only heart and imagination can.

*She walks porcupines—as you do—
and listens to the sound of the sea in a conch.*

ALMAYA, JAFFA
for Ya'ir Dalal

*I like to keep my doors open—
It is like sitting in the desert—*

Under studio's arched ceiling flutes,
roof-paint uncoats, peeling lime white.

Reverberating invisible sounds—
oud and violin, and a lone desert voice.

Outside, the sea picks up its waves
in harmony. Inside, there are red
oriental rugs, an uncleared stage
with things from a concert past,

kettle for sage tea, Iraqi sweets,
bottles of various shapes, and chairs—
lots of mismatched chairs
like relatives from different tribes.

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*I like to keep my doors open—
It is like sitting in the desert—*

‘Two flaming loves can burn you,’
you say. A Japanese girl
who once heard you at a WOMAD
concert in Australia stumbles

past your door, then stops
to look inside. ‘Is that you—
the one in the poster on your door’,
she asks. You nod humbly

in your oblique quiet way.
‘Almaya’—the name of your space—
is christened then— ‘the universe
That embraces the waters’.

*I like to keep my doors open—
It is like sitting in the desert—*

The calm of the desert,
the turbulence of the sea,
the early whistling of winds
before a gathering storm,

the Bedouin’s elongated cry,
the brothers’ lisping embrace,
hand-woven cream pashmina
shawl—all score, the elements.

*I like to keep my doors open—
It is like sitting in the desert—*

SMITA AGARWAL

MOVING ON

She smiles, finds herself chuckling, when recalling
you, cock of the walk, leading her up the aisle
to the altar ... The exchange of rings, the passionate
kiss, then, you looking over your shoulder old man,
and getting cold feet ...

Still smiling she recalls neither panic,
nor pain, nor grief ...
Just stillness and a comforting silence ...
What Buddha must've felt when Yasodhara ranted;
I'm sure, Gandhi must've felt, at times,
when Kasturba raved ...

Let things come, let them go ...
for such is their nature ...
No agitation, no rancour.
And a gratefulness for
Manipulation, cowardice and deceit
For making us what we are ...
Human and cheap ...

LOPAMUDRA¹

Come quickly old man! come see ...
You who hanker for immortality,
Look, what my burnished
Copper mirror shows ...
Both you and I shall be immortal ...

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You'll be reputed as an author of hymns
And I, Lopamudra,
Your young wife with animal charms,
Will be remembered as
The woman who perfected erotism.

Old man! you're always fretting,
Pulling long faces ...
If only you'd let me get close
I'd wrap my limbs around you ...
Nibble your ears ...

I want you most
When you take on those vows of celibacy.
Austerities make you lean and glum,
But my breasts swell ... the nipples itch ...
And the two-little-fish-in-a-cow's-hoof-pond², throb.

I take in your scent as you come in ...
My doe-like eyes follow you ...
The enterprise is in my rushing towards you
To rub my hard tits
Against your skin ...

You become all the more desirable
When you gently, very gently,
Try to push me away saying
We two must always strive
Against each other ...

Really, old man! is asceticism
The only path to immortality?
What about your ancestors
Suspended by their heels
In a pit?

Smita Agarwal

To rescue them you must
Get a son. Isn't that why
You created me – fashioned me
Out of the most graceful
Parts of different animals –

The exact complement to
Your moments of lust?
Now, when I purr,
Like a lioness in heat,
You turn away ...

What's the point? You want
The son. You need me.
Come old man, come,
The two-little-fish-in-the-cow's-hoof-pond throb.

O damn! I tell you
You'll be immortal ...
In ages to come, people
Shall christen their sons
Agastya. ...

When languages multiply,
Cultures clash and unite,
A novelist will name
The hero of his story, Agastya ...
The hero's buddies
Will nickname him, August ...

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In that age called post-modern,
Poetry, which you say is vatic,
Will have become jingle ...
It'll merrily be marrying sounds
Like that of the proper noun August
To that of your venerable name, Agastya ...

You bullied my father
Into consenting to give me away
To you – I, a princess, bred
In voluptuousness, sent off

With a hermit ... It's just about
Tolerable, you being stingy
About this and that, us sleeping on
Grass mats, eating roots and fruit

The forest has on offer ...
Must you be miserly
About love too?
All day, I've searched out

Stalks of *soma*³, ground them
And collected the juice.
Come old man, sip this.
Worn out after day-long austerities

Come slough off your high-moral-stance ...
Look out beyond our hermitage,
At the twin peaks in front;
Between them, a milk-white Himalayan cascade:

Smita Agarwal

Like the Earth-Woman
Having parted her thighs,
And, from the cleft within
Gushing out, a stream of
Immortalising *soma* ...

Endnotes

¹Lopamudra and Agastya, a sage couple, authors of several hymns in the Rig-Veda.

² A Rig-veda metaphor for a woman's outer sex organs.

³The juice of a plant, extracted, fermented and drunk for its exhilarating qualities during Rig-vedic times.

JOSE VARGHESE

VISION

The corridors from the optometrist's cabin,
and then the road outside
were a blur to my freshly dilated eyes
which endured sharp light-needles from
careless fingers of close inspections
under the pretext of restoring the once-perfect
vision failing now for no reason.

The familiar taxi stand
and the monsoon rain that fell merrily
on my open umbrella were hazy memories,
the nearby fruit stall and tea shop
offered distilled smells of past cravings.

The commotion at the turning
where people huddled over something
too small for even a healthy eye
reminded me of my recent handicap,
but I tried hard to focus on the spectacle
and gather the story from many mouths.

"Why did you do this?" shouted a taxi-driver,
and then lifted in his arms
a soiled bundle in tatters that looked like a boy,
I tried to see the pool of dirty water
and mud where it belonged, while the man
started sobbing loudly all of a sudden,
the crowd murmured its prompt surprise.

Jose Varghese

As he walked to the tea shop with
the boy (yes it was) still curled weightlessly
in his arms, the crowd dispersed,
scattering bits of meaningless information
on the horror of it when
a hungry street boy has to eat mud,
and I kept on wondering about
the need to restore my failing vision.

LOVE LIFE

Dealing with my
serendipitous finding
of some love-scrap,
and huge distress
at every turn of it,
I stumble upon you
and decide
to stay with you,
life.

But forgive me
I have nothing much
to offer you
other than some
cavities and stinking flesh
left by those who have
taken me for a
ride.

TREE OF DESPAIR

Once I defied the good advice
Of my elders
And swallowed an orange seed
Hoping that it would sprout in my gut
And it did sprout, to my surprise
And as I felt the secret pleasure of
A forbidden sapling taking root inside me
I looked for some external signs as well.

One day, the overgrown branches of the
Orange tree did break through my fingertips
Amusing my friends
And family members
And in no time my skull opened up
In bizarre acquiescence to the
Pressing needs of a strong willed tree
Sooner the branch that showed through
My ears did blossom
Spreading its sweet fragrance all about.

No one noticed the bitterness
That lingered in the fruit waiting
The fruit in waiting...
The forbidden fruit of
All my sweet frustration...
And the roots clutching the ground
On which all my
Elders stood.

ROBIN S. NGANGOM

SAINT EDMUND'S COLLEGE

(After Jotamario Arbeláez)

To Basu, gardener, whom marijuana kept alive
To an Irish Brother shipwrecked in a hill-station
Facta Non Verba.

Wedged between fifteen
And Lum Mawrie hill
One winter I burnt
Pine needles, cones, branches
On its sepia slope
Avoiding fetes,
Fiercely intelligent classmates
But lusting the nymphs
Who came to smoke in the forest
Or watching movies
In the school hall
While the principal smirked
At demurely horrified Loreto girls
During a naked scene.

I avoided the German shepherds
Of the principal
Lurked in the corridors
Severed pictures of nude Greek goddesses
Inside the library of gravitas
Took my turn at graffiti
On the toilet wall
If you can reach this height
The fire brigade needs you
The future is in your hands
Shake well after use.

Robin S. Ngangom

of Mawphlang cherry brandy with friends
from Calcutta at Chowdhury's pharmacy, but
ending up inside greasy-red Sterling restaurant
savouring cubes of liver in the first mixed chowmein.
Youth was there when whores turned us into Bollywood stars
for a flat student rate of 5 Rupees
at AC Lane now closed for repairs, youth was also in the queue
for advanced cinema tickets at 6am to impress
college girls and at 6pm sipping lonely Old Monk
with big momos and listening to Radio Beijing
inside Bombay, I was one of the lowlifes in the square
trying to fix a date for the next fishing Umiam or
rambling 10kms for a whiff of fishy women on Xmas eve.
youth was passing all the while in the sexy rain
listening to "Strawberries, cherries, and an
Angel's kiss in spring".

AFTER 'JASH-E-AZADI'
(A film on Kashmir by Sanjay Kak)

The kite transforming into smoke lacing
The *chinars* is not a symbol.
The rose has migrated from the garden of paradise.
Freedom will never come
Poured into goblets waiting to be raised,
Martyrdom is a handout from god the hagiographer.
Only poetry of ruins is real.
The incoherent rose still blooms
From some beloved breast torn open.

HOME

Home no longer sweet
But bitter with
Rats, dogs, crows, arsonists
Thieves, murderers who profess their love every day
And therefore I will smuggle out poetry,
Dance, recipes and children.
Poetry will be an airplane to escape
From the mountain-fastness of my home.
Home, once handsome,
Now an impassable swamp,
Of dead cinemas, charlatan temples,
Indifferent shops,
Anonymous streets.
I wonder if its heart's still beating
Although I'm no worthy son.

Home, where my people are
Turning 'death-worshippers'.
I know that the grain of our lives
Could not be cut down by guns
But how shadowy our lives have become,
Ingrown toenails
Feeding on our own lives,
Only brusque journeys
To the land of the dead.

CHARANJEET KAUR

THE CRACKS WIDEN

*Every line chiseled into your face
Has its own story to tell.*

One by one,
You discard them all, peeling them away, painfully,
The masks lie in a heap at your feet, every evening.
But the remains of the day have seeped through them
And found a home on your face.

The face, rocklike in its grace,
Yielding to the delicate blows falling on it
Acquires the fire of life from within
The look of the elusive blood
Coursing violently - just below the skin.

The darkness under your eyes
Etched in sharp, distinctive circles,
Shadows the explosive riot
That your eyes strive to hold within them.

The lips break out into a smile
Arrested in the strong jaws that capture it
Refusing to let go...
Day after day,
The laughter become louder, insistent, social, indifferent...

The cracks widen
The cracks spread out
The cracks reach out beyond the silent sky.

Your silhouette
Waits for the chisel to carve again.

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PRAYER AT SHIRDI

The pilgrimage, my Lord,
is incomplete.

You know
that amidst the throng -
heads bent in devotion
voices raised in solemn incantation
hopes,
prayers,
unfulfilled aspirations,
the unease
the nascent heat
sacred spiral confusions
the mothers' impatience,
the infant cries,
clanging bells,
silent questions,
the jostlings ...
your eyes take on such a distant look;
beatific, kindly, full of grace, yes,
but still, oh, so indifferent!

You always seem to look
far beyond into the distance.
Almost
as though you have actually
Shut
your marble-steady eyes.

You look away, Lord.
Don't pretend you don't.

What you need to understand is
that it doesn't matter
if the pilgrimage remains incomplete forever;

Lord, if only I could teach you
to look straight into my eyes
and face yourself in there!

THE PUBLIC FACE

wide, long space, enclosed by walls
that close in as soon as he shuts himself in it –
his room, that is;
objects gathered in more than twenty years,
strewn carelessly,
like grains that spill over the urn that houses them,
a bed here, three broken chairs,
the computer/telephone astraddle the faltering table,
gods, dotted with tilak and chandan ash,
casually collected and deposited on the shelf
by casual visitors who dared not bring anything else;
a clothes cupboard at the far end,
aluminium trunks with memorabilia, perhaps?
[old letters, colourless photographs, gilt-edged greeting cards,
books with pencil jottings, newspaper cuttings,
some sketches, drawings, pens without covers,
yellowed diaries with brief jottings of routine events]
all pushed deep under the bed,
then, hidden with
the bedsheet stretching right up to its feet

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calculated to hide the moments that remain engraved
with only the gathered dust to shield them;
tubelights and curtains
hanging tenuously on thin plastic strings,
a lone photograph of a man in white shirt and black trousers
crookedly hung at a height that would obscure him,
a tv turned on relentlessly;
no windows, and just the door to let him in,
the door on which the same key
has turned in the same lock, for, yes, twenty years or more –
itself both sentinel and enemy
that lets him in after the white noises,
the hysterical applause
of the populous, teeming day
have receded;
opening inwards, so that
he can step inside
and be absorbed by the darkness that grows
within
waiting for him the whole, long day.

SUNSET POINT

At what point of time
you saw that the sun would set
Is a mystery.

You look at it
with fear, perhaps, that
it does not mean the same to both of you;

its warmth rekindles the old fires
in the veins that have seen the freeze;
the mind goes blank
while the bright orange inward glow
throws patterns on the curtains of the mind.

Your mind fills with sadness
as you watch his face light up -
you have seen it wait patiently the whole week
that long wait for this one moment
when the two of you would sit silent -
you absorbed in yourself
and he watching pensively
the glow of the setting sun
on your face,
with its imperceptible creases,
which he straightens out with his caressing eyes.

His eyes, too, take on the sadness of your smiling face.

He knows
that when the sun actually sets
you will come back to this sunset point
again and again
and try to say aloud
all that his ears have patiently waited to hear...

The light sinks slowly into
The womb of the earth...

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REFLECTION

The earth remains a silent witness
as the eagle ascends towards the vast blue sky
its strong wings, tender, fragile...
the feet impatiently touch the ground
the eyes pierce with a sharp focus
absorbing the mountains, oceans, valleys, fields
and the teeming life above, below and all around;
equidistant from all,
yet touching each one of them
with a look that takes in all.
It soars
till it is just a speck,
a dot in the vast distance
the higher it goes...

The patient earth has seen it all,
the first flight, the falls, the struggles to rise,
the flowers that cushioned it
and the thorns that bled it...
And
the earth has known all along
that the bird will find itself again
when its feet touch the cold waters
of the ocean once again...

The earth remains
When all else is dark
... silent ... a witness.

Charanjeet Kaur

BUDDHA...THE COSMIC CALM
(Poetry that begins in pain, ends in equilibrium)

jabs of hostility
knife into the flesh...
as one averted
 unlook
repairs, revives,
 heals...

in moments do we live the Grace of God
its moments that fill our days' reward
they end – they do – yet remain alive
sparkle, dance and the dark mind revive.

BIBHU PADHI

GRATITUDE

(for Harish Narang and Makarand Paranjape)

What loss is lost on me day after day,
enough so that I feel lost so easily?
The world is all about me, deep within,
far out, shaking its ancient claim for beauty:

The tree that wouldn't let its leaves fall,
making its flowers stay on in their budded
splendidness all the year long, persuading
its fruits to grow into their magnificent maturity;

the father who can cry in my arms,
longing to replace the memory of his son
through me, renewing my long-dead father,
consoling me when I cry back to him;

the far and near friends pleading for
love and cheer, look around and find
where pleasure lies unnoticed, unattended,
ready to be taken over fondly, like a flower.

The sad-eyed woman from Ranchi who
shared her hopes with me, forgetting her
own past and failures, urging me with a touch,
to be with her.

The kind editor from Kent at the Commonwealth
Conference, to whom I introduced myself in my usual
provincial pride, who just smiled and asked for the two poems
that she might use with all her new love for me.

And all those editors who have been generous
in their praise for me, calling me “admirable,”
“excellent”, reassuring me about my
“dedication,” “fine craftsmanship.”

My patient wife, who doesn’t mind listening to
all my stupid sleeplessness and anxiety through
the night. Dear children of our blood, each
competing with the other for their father to be
beside them in an intimacy of bodies, entangled
like the branches of our backyard’s old oleander tree.

At this hour, as I write these lines, the world seems
to be all mine, mine only. And how do I repay
all that it has given away to me, strange gifts of surprise,
waiving my inabilities? What kind of loss is still lost
on me, on my receiving all those gifts so selfishly?

Something today said to me: *Bibhu, dear companion
in pleasure and pain, you’ve been ungrateful, thankless,
too preoccupied with invented loss to praise God
for all his blind efforts to keep you happy.*

I know little—a man of forty who always returns
to a time of childhood, always complaining,
never at peace with the things he already has.
Now I weep within closed doors, pat my own
lean cheeks for a surprise, wondering what went wrong,
where, when exactly, and ask in whispers, “Dear God,
teach me how to obey, please, one last gift—
the language of gratitude and repayment, to raise
a clean, irreversible utterance of admiration and praise.”

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FOR OUR CHILD: 3+, FAIR, AB+ve,
SUFFERING FROM A BITTER COLD
(for Siladitya)

One of God's finest gifts, this three-year-old
child of the future, distracting our present
by a misleading cold and loss of sleep.

The late-night sounds of February in Cuttack
are there still, somewhere received clean by
delicate ears, remote from our habitual wishes.

The objects and things too distant for our
very human senses, are caught by small wondering eyes,
played about, winked at, as though they knew

what it all was, why so. "Come on dear, let us sleep
together, please. It's Winky time, you know!"
A half-minute goes. "My this eye has sleep, but

this, my other, is so wide awake! I can't sleep,
can't want to." And so it goes on and on,
the minutes move in a circle of anticipation

around themselves, ticking away our own words
in an ignorant repetition of varying notes.
We change ourselves, our voices softer, full of concern.

"Does the cold bother you a little too much?" I ask him
and don't wait for an answer. "Come on, let's put
cold balm on your chest and throat, so the cough will go."

We do what we like, while he just looks on and smiles. "See *Nana*,
my cold is there, below, there on the road, playing with other colds.
Over there." He points his finger at the ceiling, the further door.

“Can’t you see?” We cannot indeed. The night sounds go faint,
disappear. We just look on, wait. The clock’s tick-tock is clear.
Moments pass, we don’t remember. And then, wary fingers

tiptoeing their way on fair cheeks and lips, blood
stroking blood, skin warming up skin, and then bodies
bursting in a wilderness of kisses and laughter.

THIS BLANK PAGE, LOOKING FOR YOU,
LOOKING FOR ME, THIS DAY
(for Subasish Mishra)
(1 Feb 1980 -- 15 Feb 1990)

This page of a missed yesterday, this hour
of last year, this passing minute of today.
The day is not too far away. Why?—so near indeed
that I could place it on tomorrow’s date.
You are missing too, in you own dreamy,
departing way—lost to me, your parents and sister.
You should’ve known you’re lost also
to this page, this backward-looking day.
But for all I know, you might be enjoying
your sleep at this moment in a land
that belonged to you, you only—
a six-hour slumber extending over a year
of loss and reward, game and play,
the rest of a lifetime of yet another life, choosing
to prolong over an eternity of dream and stay.
You didn’t choose to stay with us though—
mortal as we are, always looking at

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death's marginal, disabling ways. Perhaps
you were right. We were wrong in all our
hopes, all our plans for the future days,
but look dear, even now the page looks
so terribly blank, deserted, looking for you,
looking for me, to accommodate both, lovingly.

Believe me, I left these words incomplete
Yesterday—unfinished but waiting for today,
the dusky hour a year ago later this day,
for the too precious moment of our parting
for our very different ways. I know you are enjoying
your long, never-ending week and holiday
while I'm struggling against all odds to keep
myself intact, like the tree that can't flower
against the sun or the rain, your own friends
who have grown beyond you into a future
that may not be theirs, children of my blood,
who can't see the dark predator lurking
somewhere along their way. You are fortunate—
a good-luck boy who longs to see everyone happy
while they are still here for their appointed days.
Keep your smile on us, forgive us for our mistakes,
our stupid means of remembering what indeed
is already beyond all remembrance or forgetting.
Forgive me for missing this page yesterday, for
the whole of last year, this lazy minute of today
that wouldn't move despite all my efforts to keep it
away, all my self-persuasive efforts to give way
to the rest of the year's passions and prisons,
smiles and tears, growth and decay.

LAKSMISREE BANERJEE

HARIA

Haria is not allowed
to cross our threshold
or enter the thirty-three million
doors of our gods.

He can hardly combat
deceit.

His dreamy eyes clouded, dark, are
folded and supplicant like
the green, timid under-creeper.

The brooms of cactus-life
help him to clean our dirt with
the breath of a hopeful vigilance
for a simple flash of instant salvation
with a lurking fear of a ruthless eternity
of god knows what,
never leaving his heart.

He sweeps our outside verandahs, porches,
the dusty pathways, the lavatories,
cleans our sullied bins and grimy cesspools,
frittering away his doomed hours
on the dim margins of hope
which never arrives.

Our Brahmin cook with
a noose of a sacred thread
around his neck,
pounds painful thunders on him
driving him away like a street dog.

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OF MOTHER AND TREES

My Mother perhaps was born
on the same day as Anne Frank

Anne saw the cherry blossoms,
dreamt of the chaste beauty of life
in cloistered darkness
till life said good-bye.

Her dreams were fulfilled
in the buoyancy of eternity.

My Mother planted her hibiscus tree
watered its roots daily

added vital soil to nurture
its soft growth and
save it from the burning sun
while she always dreamt.

Her dreams lived throughout her
full life, forever unfulfilled.

MONA DASH

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 can I find my forgiveness?

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If undergoing sorrow 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.

EXPECTATION

It sits down on my sofa,
Prominent in the room
As Kafka's spider would be

Large, black, wanting and greedy
Eager to feast on every moment of happiness
Following every moment, every birthday
The broken tooth of my little girl,
Every curry made
As if starving,
Wanting to be a part of every present
Of every penny raised
Of the painting carefully selected
From museums, auctions
You want the same for your own
I leave homes, cities, countries, continents
But the expectation from their son
To be permanently
part of an offspring's Life
Lives
And makes home
In my home
Slowly eating away
At any tree I plant.

SHRINE

I made a shrine of my past sorrows
Hung them up on the wall
In the back of the room
In a secret alcove.

I paid homage every day
To the memory
To the shrine
Treasured it like my secret
A secret I would tell
Only if they were close enough
To move beyond the threshold
Into the innermost recesses.
A secret shared as if a symbol of friendship
A reward for closeness.

The shrine, my identity
Different from those around me
So I held on to my sorrows
And made a sacred shrine of them
Not knowing that a shrine grows
Out of the alcove,
Into the room
Outside the house
Slowly permeating life
And memory becomes reality

Mona Dash

To cast it all away
As if a deity on a river
With flowers, fire and incense
To forget, to let go
Would have reduced its potency

But now it is too late
The shrine lives, and grows
Its tendrils into my life
Making sorrow eternal

SUDEEP GHOSH

THE ETERNAL VAGABOND

I stand halfway in a spell
Suddenly mobbed by the swelling mist
murmuring wistful notes
You surge over
blotting out Kodai landscape
You film my eyes
as you go sniffing the docile air
I wonder at your erratic trade
nosing out all the affairs
You snake away impishly
not before slipping words into my pocket

A gaggle of memories
peer out through the fluffy haze
I wake to fits of inflamed whispers
long unheard in the dizzy days
I feel your breath
in every fibre of my being
flaring up within

Mists behind my windows
prop themselves against the wind-swept limbs
as even-drenched shadows lengthen.
I dip my hands into my pocket
and feel the lingering wet of a tramp.

BOORI MA¹

The frantic jangle of her keys
is crushed, rattled by
a train of flint-like voices
that clang across her battered breast

Shell-shocked, struggling to her feet
she lets out an impotent yell
Her voice is overcast
with a threat of voiceless rain
Her skeletal frame winces under rues
An angst of unknown space
invades her cavernous eyes
She flings up her frail, ebony arms muttering -
'All addresses flow into no man's land.'

Rumours, with frills and flounces,
flutter in and out
of the face-crammed apartment
Passions in full-blown lust
go rampant mouthing abuses
'She is a thief, a downright liar.
Smear her face with feces.
Kick this scumbag out!
Words scrunch beneath her feet.
She slumps on the edge of emptiness

¹ Inspired by the protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri's *A Real Durwan*

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For the last time,
she looks at the cultured facade of the apartment
she looks at the band of renegades with grinning cheeks
she looks at the cramped stairwell, her own world,
where she would treasure her palmy days

She now begs for her blazing belly
till Calcutta drains the remains of her day's din
Passers-by turn their eyes away
Some wave a flirty farewell
She is left groping in a glut of excuses
The night empties its dross into her grimy palms
where hunger dodges through the spider-web of fatelines

One evening,
at the unlit crow-clogged corner on Bow Bazaar
I stumbled upon her, lying flat
near an upturned wastebin
The keys, clutched in her claws,
stared at me with gnawing silence.

ESTHER SYIEM

U KSUID TYNJANG¹

His itch is the legend that has never been scratched off
the dread, that lent us wings
when we walked at night
only when we had to,
reminding ourselves to hold steady our torches
to drive him to the outer seams of night
with flames that would lick him clean.

The legend hunkers down to be scratched
cajoling, threatening, demanding, willing
pliant fingers to scratch the itch on his back
till skin peels off our finger-tips,
till nails break off on nerveless hide,
till blood erupts to flow all night,
till scratcher turns to legend
in the coming dawn.

Yet the itch never seems to be scratched away;
the legend wails in outermost reach of earth
frantic for enthralling game re-runs,
greedy for the sensual *trud*, *kbob*, *trud*,²
of captive, kneading fingers
on his back. The faceless legend,
we hoped would dissolve in the blaze
that we despairingly wielded if caught,

strikes endless bargains for right of way
shakes ramparts loose, desperate to be let in,
raises hell to be heard, devises ways
to lure us to the game of *kbob*
to perpetuate a legend
intractable as the inerasable itch
within us.

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MEMOIRS OF A DISTRACTED LOVER³

There's a yellow haze
drenching earth

It disturbs me
when I stroll the walkways of heaven

I see it even in my nights with her
for it was the colour she courted me with

It fills me with want
for shimmer of crystal waters

where, wet, I would preen myself dry
unsuspecting of the moment when she wooed me

with the colour that would titillate
and daze my dull plumes.

This fantasy in yellow--
as unconditional as her conditional love--

can it also be mine
as she became mine?

that familiar thrill,
the tingle of nerves reviving up

the chase for this serenading yellow
that I must pay homage to.

2

When her tears bruised my feathers
I took flight for another feast

in what I thought were my blotched peacock hues.
A spread for me alone

that curdled the instant I saw
a meadow, adorned in the obtuse yellow

of a mustard field in bloom,
imitating the very colour of her love.

I swerved to catch the updraft
that'd steer me back to her.

3

Too easily was I lured by the bait--
so the men would see the hidden face again

and feel her nourish them once again
for she had dallied too long with me, they said--

that snitched me completely.
The plunging weight of her tears

splashed life on my plumes
but reduced me to a miming bird.

Despite the adulterous stain
that feeds voyeuristic embers

I will clutch at any straw
to dance her back to me.

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4

I hadn't gambled on defeat
on the diatribe raised by the men

and the flow of bigotry
that cramps my style.

My own diatribe, my step-dance,
intensifies with the fulsome colours

of my plumage. I will stake my full claim
Strut. Turn. Dance. Woo me back to her again.

ONLY FOR THE BIRD-BRAINED

(The strange testimony of the late Ekstanley Īanphñiam)

I wrote a letter to the birds
and posted it on my bamboo banner
to tell them not to raid my fields
on the one day that I worshipped Him.

They called me names and laughed at me,
as naïve and bird-brained as the birds themselves, they said
but, did they understand that gaps
in life were solely of their own making?

Communication with the birds took time
as one by one they flew in
from far away as *Langdongdai* and *Mawthengkut*,
the *Lyngngam* jungle and *Nongtraï* range.

They rustled up their friends in twos, in threes,
In batches of avian curiosity that fell in line

to read the comedy of my attempt to write to them;
more like a stepping back to the days of *Īew Luri Lura*⁴
(when speech was alive and writing: mere twigs
planted in forest paths/ symbols on earth/
slashes on barks of trees).

Their comprehension was excellent, for with a swoop and a peck
at the unguarded grain, they twittered incessantly, conspiratorially;
arty witnesses of literacy among the bird-brained.

Success it would seem is only for the bird-brained.

My eloquent friends made weapons instead,
used care-worn scarecrows and tautened, sharpened stakes; bird-traps
anticipating a windfall of deaths. Pellet-brained upstarts all, trying to
stop the avian raids; pitching their wills against avian solidarity.
The birds made their dives anyhow, for the gastronomic spoils
that would swell their crops.

I meet my Maker every week.

It's only me they don't begrudge my one day of rest;
I did lose all on the year that I wrote the letter
but that I understand was only, that
ruffled feathers take time to digest the hottest news;
titter the latest reviews, headlines and editorials,
and broadcast the contents of my letter
to distant country cousins.

On weekdays, however, we call off the truce.

Endnotes

¹ In Khasi lore, *U Ksuid Tynjang* is believed to be a spirit that waits in the darkness to pounce on human beings to force them to scratch his back all night. Fire is the only weapon effective against him.

² *Kbob/ trud* - scratch.

³ In Khasi lore, the lover is the peacock who was wooed back to earth from his mistress the sun, by a field of yellow mustard. It is said that his feathers were originally dull, until the sun's tears gave them colour.

⁴ When all living creatures were able to talk to one another.

MUKESH WILLIAMS

ODAIBA BEACH

As the sun sets over the sea
A beam of liquid gold
Hits the watery surface
Refracting against the reef
Revealing the secret shadows
Of an unmanageable past
And the pretentious convenience
Of the present.

LIQUID CHAOS

You can swim in its placid waters
Ride the big waves,
Snorkel or do deep sea diving,
But a tempest or a storm can
Wreck havoc on your worldview,
Destroy all your meticulous connections,
So unerringly told and retold
By Shakespeare and onwards.

All liquids interact with you
From the edge of chaos
To the living reality,
So you can never be friends
With the sea,
Only a silent observer
Throwing upon it
Your moods and concerns.

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REMEMBERING NAGASAKI

When all the certitudes are gone
And you think everything is lost
Life again emerges from the wreckage.

If you leave the debris for a decade
Flowers bloom once again
Together with scars and remembrances.

AUTONOMY

Do not give in
To dreary thoughts that sap your spirit,
Do not touch their congealing shadows,
Do not enter their beguiling caverns,
Smother your affection for shadows
That steals your mind away.

Instead
Let your spirit soar above the shadows,
Escape the orbit of judgments,
Reroute your thoughts and
Enter the unfading luminescence of
Autonomy.

DION DE SOUZA

MONOLOGUE

“Take this, child, and eat it:
This is your own fatigued body, tramping
about with its moth-eaten ponderings.
Take this, child, and drink from it:
This is your own thirsty blood
riding its meandering courses.
Take this, child.
Child, take this.

“Child, take this axe
and hack up your complexities.
You’ve quibbled and quivered
too long in your uncertainties.

“Child, pick up the worms
and put them back in the pickle jar.
Mop up the unfermented wine.
Child, stay a child.
Cap that hungry mouth,
that importunate mind.
For your own little sake,
Learn to stay a child.”

Kavya Bharati 2009

SCENERY

The hills, the way they are drawn,
holding hands,
a cloud on every shoulder.
The sun, a smear of smiling
orange,
right in the centre.
Palms, rippled,
crawling with stagnant leaves.
Birds like ash
suspended
in an expanse of vacuous blue.
Fish (three bubbles apiece)
deep
deep under a crumpled stream.

K. RAMESH

JOURNEYS

On the way to the railway station,
I notice the secondhand books store
as I wait for the signal to change;

How many times Father and I would
Have stood inside the small room browsing!

We would cross the road then,
To take a bus home
Carrying a sweet load of books.

He used to clutch my hands tightly
When the buses passed by honking.

Now with a heavy suitcase
in my hand I wait for
the signal to change;

I turn to look at
the secondhand bookstore...

once more.

Kavya Bharati 2009

FILM SHOW

After washing her face--
drawing water from the well
in the backyard--
she now stands before the mirror;
her eyes search and quickly
notice the red *bindi*
stuck on the dark teak wood
of the framed mirror.

Placing the *bindi*
on her temple,
she looks at her face carefully;
not satisfied,
she makes a face and
slightly shifts
the *bindi* again.

She is ready;
with a smile,
she steps out of the house,
and her friends--
girls younger than her--
join her soon.

All in a row,
they walk to the talkies
for the evening show;

walking on the footpath
through the fields,

K. Ramesh

as the long palm trees
cast their shadows,
and the air is rich
with the scent of grass;

when the sun is
like a big red *bindi*
in the western sky.

ON THE WAY

winter dusk...
watching
the birds
return
slowly,
I walk
alone
thinking of
what I
did not
say

Kavya Bharati 2009

HALF WAY ON THE LADDER

Pausing on the steps
of a ladder leaning
on the greasy wall,

the little boy with a box
full of nuts and bolts
in his hand,
looks outside
the small window;

in the dark blue sky,
a full silver moon.

The boy stands there
watching...
oblivious
to the world below;
unaware of the honks
of the vehicles
passing by
in the street.

Suddenly from
the cash counter
the owner shouts;

'Come fast,
you lazy fellow'

USHA AKELLA

KALISHTA MONASTERY

Through the lattice of a look he says:
Something exists. We do not know the name but something exists.

He speaks of his knowing as if it is my knowing, knowing not
he has spotted your ghost in the balcony

of my eyes, heard your footsteps in my house,
seen your sheen in the shore of my soul. I and he know. It exists.

But I alone know he will be exiled from his heart as I am from mine.
Icons are painted over in Pantelejmon, blasé,

they are painted, as Love paints names over names
heaping them in the mausoleum of the heart. Behind us a monastery,

in front, a red rose offers herself to the blue of the Ohrid.

Kavya Bharati 2009

THE POST OFFICE WITH MANY COUNTRIES
(For Agha Shahid Ali)

You whispered truths. Your songs floated down the valley to Amherst,
Echoed in Manhattan. The streets followed you like incense.
You who could not go home, hear now, "It is here. It is here."

Kashmir your bangles are broken

The children are in plastic bags clear as grapes plucked from the vine.
Are they mine? Did you write your poems with ink clear as plastic
Or tears. Shall we mourn in rhyme? Refrain. Refrain. Refrain. Refrain.

Kashmir your borders are open

Build a church within a mosque within a temple within a heart within a poem,
You found your home. Is it mine? To whom shall we leave our lines instead
of LOCs? Whom shall we bribe for air? The children are harvested in our time.

Kashmir your lines are on our palm

You never named the enemy or the Beloved. You knew the nameless horror.
To whom will you post your letters now? To whom shall we be faithful?
You've crossed the river. Kashmir is upon us as rain. We are stained.

Kashmir your heart has no borders

RAINING ELEPHANTS

One poet enlightens us about her ovaries and suicide,
another is lofty-visioned, big bells toll and we
are like mice cowering in the crevices of her voice,
one about push-up bras... foxes, communion, origami,
the laws of physics, fences, Pleiades, hats, cherries,
faucets, God, molasses—the plenitude of the universe.

All I want to write about is Love like a wilting
unquenched 16 year old—its gasping notes, its
fractured limbs, its puckered face, its broken wrist.

And about poetry; that sits like an idol on my countertop,
stalking my attention, sniffing out my suitability
in the middle of the night offering me skeleton hands,
her bony embrace I need to flesh out with more vapor.

Chastised by the voluptuous imagination of poets
who know the names of things, and don't say *trees*.
Flowers. But *belladonna*, *forzythia*, *witches hazel*,
and hyphenate oak into its kinds, and dissect the
Earth in its latitude, and break the many rules of poetry
I can't recall, as I never knew in the first place, I ask
myself, why cannot I write about... say this new New York
season, a monsoon-like thing raining cats, dogs and elephants,
reminding me of another city, 10,000 miles away, women
walking, their saris gathered up, feet darting about as fish in water.

Kavya Bharati 2009

TRUE TO THE LAKE

The tiny ripples of the Ohrid are true to the lake, I see, and
I affirm I will not lie as a poet, I will tell the truth about

this pavement, this sun staining the blue sky
like a bride's ripening henna, the lines of my palm—
a hidden hieroglyph, I shall tell the truth

about who breathes through me, this leaf, this boldness
of the hibiscus and how she takes her throne

in the universe like an empress, the truth about my lineage,
my heartbeat, relationships,

how each person is a mirror and a reflection
at the same time, how poetry is a lover, god

and torturer, and I the slave, the one who holds the pen,
the truth about how I get from one point to another,

from somewhere to my mother and then from home
to homelessness, the truth about why I love this universe

winding itself about me like thread around the bobbin...
all of which I know nothing.

SRIDHAR RAJESWARAN

PROVENCAL NIGHT

She, an American immigrant in France,
Is now leading the way
Through the intertwined maze
Of what are the labyrinthine streets of Avignon

Through trellised corridors
To her room with a view
Whose casement reveals
The stark virginity of a Provencal night

We sit in the courtyard
That has pulsated life for 400 years
Savouring the memorable mustiness of history's sweat
Blanked by a sheer expanse of wall on one side

Contemplation fixed
On the cracks, the fissures
And also on the beings
Who have haunted that space

Her landlady is Arabic and ninety
She owns the mustiness of age
And lives alone

Her son needs freshness
So he lives in Africa
With his wife

Her other tenant
Hangs a sword on his wall
And has a dog

Kavya Bharati 2009

That tradition bound
With its master rushes out
To ward off the unknowing burglar

He is known to like history
And he alone is usually there
To keep company

He struts across
Sniffs my *ratatouille*
Surveys all and shines away

Alone
Under the midnight blue of a Mediterranean stillness

ACHEN

Aachen Cathedral
Seat of Carl the Great
Self-appointed saint amidst the canonized
Whispering now
Silences of a vacant kind
Callings marked
By a cleft foot and a thumb
Stuck in a door jamb

The lone wolf trudges in unguarded
Its sand bag emptied
In the desert sands of a differential destiny
Lying
Patterned now myriad

Sridhar Rajeswaran

Underneath an octagonal candelabra
Dappling old heaven on new earth
In and through glasses
Stained sheer by the blood of time
Mirrored reflections all
Casting speckled shadows from spaces far away

While outside screams and shrieks
An ever flowing Bäckau
The spectacle of inebriating *wassa*
To envelop body, entrance self
Enshrine spirits, ensnare life

I paced the streets of pleasure
Twice-religiously
Gathered the sulphurous aqua
In an un-Roman palm of pent-up passion
A recalcitrant taster still thumbed
Drinking under the watchful eyes of a throne sepulchral
Uncomfortable with certainties
Weary yet confident
As she still walked beside

SOME SECRET HARMONIES

That stone bollard
Takes to only absolute beauty
Pastel or otherwise

Now
It is mooring
Another astonishing apparition

Kavya Bharati 2009

Striking
Ravishing in a black sleeveless slip
Un-extravagant

'Match demeure'
To a blood red full-length
Slit skirt
That parts over her
Cross-legged profile
With an ease of grace

Revealing
As much as concealing
Long slenderness
And a delicate move that vies
In earnestness
With the milkiest of arms

Even as she unknowing sits
Innocent to all
Sun-shaded by a straw hat
Whose ochre glows around her
The mystifying essence of sunflowers
Ethereal

A Provencal picture perfect
Swaying imperceptibly
To some secret harmony
Mysteriously etched
On the printed pages
Of the text she is magically lost in

Sridhar Rajeswaran

THIS BEGGERLY HABILIMENT

The organ player with his dog
The solo flautist
And in his footsteps his artistic wife
Setting 1/4th charcoals, crayons

“Of some beggar sheltering from the wind”

Clown Pierot
Splendidly contrasting in gold
The white might of Roman legacy
Unfurled umbrella likewise gilded

“The exorbitant dreams of Beggary”

Shaking a hand, pointing a finger
Tapping the point to softly draw
The attention of the little one
To register a clink in his bowl

“The beggar deaf to all but hope”
Bribing him with candy
To make other unseeing
“Driven by wealth as beggars by the itch”
A shade more generous

“The beggars had changed places. But the lash goes on”

MADHURITA CHOUDHARY

NOW I KNOW HER

I had read a lot about her--saw her now
She visited my home last year, I saw her closely:
Adamant, barefaced, self-centred.
Who says she kills? She is like an antihistaminic--
Suspends one pain but generates another.

Like a binocular she simply shifts your priorities--
Your views, purpose, system and life
Now you stay alive not live,
Fragment by fragment.

She gives your life an anti-clockwise alternation
Like an aged merry-go-round.
Tiffs, conflicts, ego, appear paltry
Sermons are plenty--
Like pills from druggists.
Cut from one side, she grows the other
Like a lizard's tail.
Crave for amnesia--people wouldn't let you.

Like the West Wind she preserves the body
And destroys the soul, uncontrollable, feral--
A celebrity in her own way,
She now lives with my family--
Cancer.

Madhurita Choudhary

FORCED TO BLOSSOM

Cut at the tip, lilies sold at market
The youth of today
Coloured, trained, practiced--
By politics, selling themselves
In the market of votes.

Asking them to follow us?
To commit the same blunders?
To tread the same path?
Why not ask them to take
A road less-travelled?

Hegemony shall not be broken
Forcing them to plunge
Into the murky, shallow pits of politics
'Ideology', you say.
I say 'oppression.'

SHANTHI PREMKUMAR

THROUGH

People—
They take over
Faceless, one melting into another
They take over,
To beat the chest
To bend together in a curve
And wail

Eyes are on
—some slant
Some covert
Expecting—
Eyes burn with the effort
It's between you and me
This weight of your smile
The hurt of your love
The dreams in your eyes
And
The laughter

One horrid detached nook
Wonders if the two day
Sprout
Would feel the same
As ever

The smiles and the touch
The time that I
Did not sit by the bed
The words that your eyes told

And I did not hear—
They crowd round
In the space between you and me,
Hanging thick and heavy
The weight of it
Would choke me
Now in a minute,
If I don't open my mouth
And wail soundlessly
I beat around
Gasping unbelieving
Hurting to catch hold
Of one at least—

A nudge somewhere in the back—
First born, you must cry
Beat your chest and wail
Your father's soul
Would be hanging around,
Your wails would
Soothe his spirit

Day cringes—
The loud tubelights
Out front
Talk death

The garlands move
They lift you for your bath
—Head first, he should go
Out of his home
For it is his last journey

Kavya Bharati 2009

Bathed, clothed
Perfumed
Your hands feel limp, papa

We feed you your rice
to see you
through your hunger
through generations,
through what?

The spirit would come visiting
It would remember, it would come
thirsting for water
They leave a mud pot
with water in the street
For you to drink
And a burnt log
to scare you away
For—the spirit would remember, they say
Would you—
Remember?

through births and deaths
through mileless mindless space
through expanse and pause
Through what?
—this hand that you held
—our laughter and love,
—this, your home!

FAREWELL

It's prepaid fare
Yet
I nod
to the driver
as I get down.
Somehow no journey
feels complete
without a goodbye,
a handshake,
a nod or slant of eyes

I wonder
what the man's face
was working at
—a nod, shake, slant or bye!
the man lying there
in the red pool, that is!

MOHAN RAMANAN

BARCELONA POEMS

1. GEORGETTE

Gorgeous georgette,
Nose ring,
Diamond ears shining—
A sure temptation
For the Fagins of Barcelona's tube
To perfect their
Rambla pick and
Disappearance into the
Underbelly
Of lust, blood and gore—
Georgette simply stares
And in shock
Collapses

2. ELIZA GISBERT

What haunt have you put together
In this still placid pension?
Light usually dim,
Those that work
Needing frequent recharging—
Figures slither in and out—
And the only brilliance where you sit
Presiding over your Empire—
Eliza Gisbert of Luca 1,
Eliza of the charming smile that

Stops all argument
At Eliza's I shared digs
With Equadorians, Columbians,
And Brazilians—
All in search of their Barcelonian patria
No, they were not drug pushers or footballers
(I knew you would say something like this)

No they were Judges, corpulent Lawyers, delicate Engineers, and
Indigent students finding a safe haven for their lovers
We shared our food—Your humble
Vegetarian fare too—
They ate the spices and crying vowed to invade India
When they left they forgot their keys
And I now am shipping
My heart to them in boxes locked
With their keys left behind

3. BARCELONIAN KEY

Everything in Barcelona
Depends on a key—
Entry to your house,
To a Lift,
To a secret office for secret liaisons—
All depend on a key—
Turn it too hard it breaks—
Twist it gently you gain no entry
But apply the pressure with balance and equanimity
What stores of romance and learning
Are not yours?

4. ROSA

Rosa of the Aristocracy
Of the intellect
With enigmatic smile—Mona Rosa
Tall, lithe, energetic—
What brought you and me together?
Was it my natural meandering towards
Iberian, or was it Catalan passion
Or was it our shared Gaelic love—our reverence for the poet of
Innisfree—
No you preferred the one who spoke of potatoes-
I enthusiastic about the perpetual virginity of the soul,
Yeatsian locutions
You opting for the poet of the soil and of the people
Whatever the reason, You will always remain my Rosa—short for
Rosamonde?
Or was it Rosemary?—I never asked even when we were enjoying
that chocolate cinematic wonder
at the theatre which I thought was a hall of the University
But you are Rosa, a Gonzalez truly come to judgement
If only to humble me with your superior fastidiousness about
The grapes of warmth and companionship,
Calling me to the Castle of Domesticity on the Hill
Dispensing magnanimity of sound and hospitality

ANNE HIGHLANDS TILEY

TWO FANTASIES ON TAGORE

TO PORTRAY THE DRAMA OF THE OPEN AIR

The idles of a raindrop
Wash the spout of the poems of Tagore.
An orphan lost is found
Where the portraitist walks near the Seine.
A footbridge carries her in the jingle of bracelets
To the place of shadows where he sits
On the dust of a comforting tree.
A young girl wonders alone
As if miles from the Sorbonne,
In the countryside where onions are sown
And a foot is scuffed in brushes
Dipping toes in trebling paint
Portraying characters of music
Ringing tones of law and principle and play
For the salvation of the heart
Inclining perspectives of cheek
Toward a lunch of bread and cheese.
A dhal of moist and soft green peas
Rises on a spoon where a hand splashed
The colors of crushed berries
To hear the idles of a raindrop
In the glance of his eyes
Resting on your elbow poised
Above the table where he writes.
There is no bid for a curtain, no applause,
Just whispers of a raindrop in the wash of a spout.
A child laughs with glee in her arms
And molds designer hats above

Kavya Bharati 2009

Gentle folds of sari she adopts.
Whenever she digs onions for the table of her home
There are only a mother and a child
And verse in the portrait eased in a room.

THE REFUGE

She ached for her mother,
Sat cloistered in the alcove of her refuge,
A tense child surrounded by the vow of silence
In a Tertiary hillside, unable to see the peaks
Rising to form the Carpathians and the Alps.

The furnace needs cleaning
and the fumes, the fumes
Nauseate her hungry stomach.
Sweat forms on the ridge of her heavy brow.

In France her mother—she
Was not her mother at all—
Just a woman with a soft cheek.

The furnace needs cleaning
And the fumes, the fumes
Nauseate her stomach.
Sweat forms on the ridge of her heavy brow.

Her mother wore saris and spoke images
With Tagore, who sat for portraits in his India.
She brought home poets, fabled artists,
All strangers to the child.

Anne Highlands Tiley

The furnace needs cleaning
And the fumes, the fumes
Nauseate her hungry stomach.
Sweat forms on the ridge of her heavy brow.

In Manhattan she sat in nearness to the son
Of the matron whose back she washed with astonishment
And reverence, stroked the curving slant of his eyes.
“There was a time I lived in hiding
But you are with me now.”

The furnace needs cleaning
And the fumes, the fumes
Nauseate her hungry stomach.
Sweat forms on the ridge of her heavy brow.

In idle moments she taught children cooking,
In arduous hours analyzed their childhoods,
Finding her tears again and again, still more.

The furnace needs cleaning
And the fumes, the fumes
Nauseate her growling stomach.
Sweat forms on the ridge of her heavy brow.

He had risen a priest, remained a carpenter.
“Hush, hush my darling. Let me build for you
A new house where we can watch the trees in their seasons,
Await the beauty of the spring”

The furnace needs cleaning
And the fumes, the fumes
Taunt her naked nostrils,
But her eyebrows have unfurled.

BIPIN PATSANI

THE LOST WORLD

A lone boatman, sailing
his tiny white boat on the blue sea,
and a small house, a small solitary
house on the beach;
all set in a pentagonal glass case,
was a wedding gift I adoringly kept.

For thirty long years it was there
adorning the shelf my mother so nicely
had made on the mud wall of what used to be
my bedroom at home, falling to utter neglect
in dull dependant hands.

When I visited home last winter,
I found that sweet gift missing,
probably broken and thrown away
as things dear to me became useless
like our old family photo,
its emotional weight diminished by distance.

The aquarium, that would relieve me
of pain and worries on sad summer evenings
with its cast of rainbow chased by gay goldfish,
sat weeping in a dark corner,
carrying cobwebs and dead flies.

The racks of books I so much loved
were removed from sight.
Those old racks were there perhaps
in the kitchen treasuring poor provisions,

Bipin Patsani

while my world of great minds,
my favourite Shakespeare, Flaubert, Zola,
Moravia, Turgnev, Haggards and Whitman,
among many native writers, in miserable piles
of bundles, some of which half eaten by termites
were carelessly tucked into sacks,
lay buried under broken plaster and dust.

Back in the mountains of myths and hornbills,
that I must leave soon, spent off,
unwanted and ebbing I ask myself,
“Where is my boat, my blue sea
And that small sweet home I had left behind
Years back to keep the embers alight?
Where is that blue of my sky?”

Kavya Bharati 2009

EPITAPH

Was unequal
even to the doob grass
let alone the thick ones
growing in the wild.

From childhood
terribly hungered for affection
was sensitive
for no apparent reasons.

Remained that way all life
a child, unenlightened.

Could not learn to break in
even a step
with samsar, the crowd;
could not secure himself
from the scent of marigold
the call of stars
and the tune of the evening flute
that invaded his Being.

(Translated from the Oriya by the poet)

RAMESH PAREKH

Ramesh Parekh is a Gujarati poet. The following is a translation of a poem from his book, *Chha Akshar Nu Naam*.

EXASPERATION OF CHILDHOOD (BALPANANU RUSANU)

No, no, I don't want to put on the clothes!
Take back this shirt...
This chaddi...
I won't put them on...
Do breeze and sunbeams wear clothes?
Why is that nude rivulet not putting on shirt and chaddi?
Look, that tree and its shadow play hide and seek everyday.
Who goes to school?
Do peacock and squirrel read books?
That slothful Neem tree of the street is stupid,
So also how lovely he is!
Butterflies go far and wide
Clouds plunge and bathe in river and pond
Does anyone chide them?
Maa, I'm not your Naniyo,
And nor you my Maa.
I won't talk to you any more now.
My real Maa is a pixie
I'll throw away my shirt, my chaddi and schoolbag...
And you'll see that
My Mother-pixie will ask the tailor to prepare a pair of wings for me,
And that will lend me a stubborn blinded pride.
Now no need to go for study with the ringing of a bell,
But to bathe in the pond at ease,
To be a black thief and

Kavya Bharati 2009

To frighten others by saying 'hooou' at night and
To disappear miraculously.
You will pursue me Maa and ask
'Oh! Where is Naniyo?'
And at that moment I shall flee far and far away
To touch the clouds
And if, while flying, I get tired
I shall have a sound sleep
In the lap of my Mother-pixie.

(Translated from the Gujarati by Rakesh Rao)

Kamal Kr Tanti

At dusk, one day, in the village
The old and the wise
Saw the lifeless corpse of the Old Spirit
In the naked field of the
Plants of rice

Nearby were footprints and hoof marks
Of men and their animals

(Translated from the Assamese by Manjeet Baruah)

Endnotes

¹ In the original, it is Jalkunwari, which could be water goddess/princes/fairy.

² In the original, it is Burha Dangoria. Burha Dangoria in folktales is an aged ghost/spirit who could be benevolent as well as vengeful toward the people.

SAVITA SINGH

Savita Singh has published two collections of poems in Hindi and her English poems have been published in several reputed journals.

IN THE DAYS TO COME

In the days to come
There will be no sleep
But sun blotches within them
Somewhere in there
Will be some bird
Sitting quietly
Lost in her thoughts
Waiting for some tree

In the days to come
We will not be like ourselves
Nor will life be like itself
Its soft shadows will be there
Taking gentle slow steps

Somewhere amidst some chaste sentiment
With its head bowed
Will also be present
Faith in life.

Savita Singh

WOMEN SIT IN MOURNING

All together
They sit in a bundle
Sobbing
Crying mourning women
Cursing all of history
Spreading deserts of darkness before them
They sit recalling
Their great tradition
That upheld their independence
Their self-respect
And sovereignty every where
Their sky-like compassion flowing
Covering the heated earth
Providers, they would disregard
Not a single being

Drowned in memory they sit
Extracting their own blood from within
Soaking the earth
that listens to their wailing silently
stunned with many such tales.

Kavya Bharati 2009

THAT WAS A BUTTERFLY'S PRAYER

Sorrow came moving towards me as an old boat does
Sawing the water slowly

On my palm just then lodged a butterfly
Folding her wings like hands
She sat absorbed in some prayer
I could not but keep my palm still
Having no other way of obliging God

There was sorrow shining even more
And the prayer that of the butterfly's

(Translated from the Hindi by Sukrita Paul Kumar)

MEENAKSHI MUKHERJEE
(1937-2009)

Meenakshi Mukherjee, an outstanding scholar and path-breaking critic passed away on September 16, 2009. Her books, *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), *Realism and Reality* (1985), and *The Perishable Empire* (2000) bear excellent testimony to her prodigious scholarship and a unique ability to write in a remarkable jargon-free language.

Ms. Mukherjee had visited us in 2001 during the seminar, “The West in Indian Imagination” co-sponsored by Sahitya Akademi, Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (IACLALS), and the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation (SCILET). We have very fond memories of that visit. We gratefully acknowledge her thoughtful gesture of donating many books to the SCILET library over a period of time.

Meenakshi Mukherjee’s passing away is a great loss to us. But, we are sure that her writings will continue to inspire students of Indian Literature in English for years to come. That way, she will continue to be with us.

T.R. JOY

CELEBRATING THE SECULAR AESTHETICS: THE
POETIC PROCESS IN A.K. RAMANUJAN

I

Nobody can deny that works of A.K. Ramanujan have made a definite contribution in shaping the course and character of the theory and practice of Indian poetry. There is no doubting the quantum and quality of his works, and the niche he has carved for himself in Indian English poetics. A comprehensive assessment and search of the significance of his works and the path-breaking possibilities they have opened up may take some more time. Here I intend to discuss one such path-breaking insight my research into Ramanujan's poetry has highlighted. This would not only contribute to the overall aesthetic sensibility of post-independence Indian poetry, but also proposes a new and partially Indian possibility of writing, reading and critiquing Indian poetry, especially, Indian poetry in English. I call it Ramanujan's secular aesthetics.

The Oxford English Dictionary provides half a dozen or so entries, with their respective semantic subdivisions and deviations, for the word *secular*¹. In its synoptic clarification on the syntactic and semantic evolution of the word in the western culture and history, the secular-versus-sacred divide comes out prominently: As an adjective, *secular* has a close kinship with the doctrine and system of *secularism*. The Dictionary's version on the issue is this:

The doctrine that morality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all consideration drawn from belief in God or in a future state.²

Ramanujan's poetry does not become propaganda for such an exclusivist western doctrine of secularism. His works tend more towards the Indian variant of the term secular. When *secular* was co-opted into the Indian Constitution and condition, it was imported from the West for all its liberality and socialist ambition. But it is pertinent to know what happened as the word got slowly acculturated and naturalized into the sub-continental reality of 'unity in diversity' or the inevitability of diversity itself. Ramanujan's poetic work would seem to endorse Amartya Sen's perspective on the secular in the Indian context:

The long history of heterodoxy has a bearing not only on the development and survival of democracy in India, it has also richly contributed, I would argue, to the emergence of secularism in India, and even to the form that Indian secularism takes, which is not exactly the same as the way secularism is defined in parts of the West. The tolerance of religious diversity is implicitly reflected in India's having served as a shared home--in the chronology of history--for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs, Baha'is and others.³

Therefore, the term *secular* and its clout could intellectually and aesthetically take on, however unsteadily, the fundamentalist, the conservative and the essentialist hegemonies and ideologies that would try to dislodge or sabotage other native and/or hybridized democratic alternatives. Moreover, it is relevant in the cultural and political context of today, where native / regional literatures, subaltern literatures, Dalit and Women's writings exert their presence and relevance in the subcontinent as elsewhere. It could be argued then that the significance of a secular consciousness informing art and literature is the only inclusive alternative to the hegemonic pan-Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition (in the singular) and/or any such claim

for a mainstream elitism even in other Indian literatures, including Indian Writing in English. It is politically and aesthetically very perceptive of A.K. Ramanujan to point out the illegitimacy of the elitist mainstream domination in the Indian milieu. He is quite blunt in his essay, “Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections”:

The Great Traditions for the elite, and the little Little Traditions for the little little folks, that is, semi- or illiterate, rural, regional people who are competent only in a mother tongue – but basically no difference in kind, only in quality. At its best, it is a form of monism; at its worst, it is a form of cultural imperialism, an upstairs/downstairs view of India.⁴

A secular aesthetic, as envisaged here, is open to cultural and aesthetic heterodoxy in sensibility and practice, dissent and democracy. Of course, a secular aesthetic is not a compromise on or an excuse for literary quality and rigour.

The study of such a secular aesthetic in Ramanujan’s poetry will have to consider the fundamental constituents of his poetic product and process. This would involve extensive and exclusive critical focus on the following aspects of his poetry:

1. The worldview that provides the raw material and source for Ramanujan’s poems
2. The political and ideological charge of his poetry
3. The language / dialect used, which works out as the fuzzy material medium as well as another kind of agency for literature
4. The authorial process of poetic creation and the implied model of aesthetics or imagination or art-view.

However, the focus of this article is on the fourth point: Specifically examining the secular possibilities of A.K. Ramanujan's authorial process and the implied model of aesthetics or imagination or art-view with special reference to his last book of poems, *The Black Hen*. I will try to examine and identify the secular pointers and perspectives of Ramanujan's aesthetics and ideology in his process poems. For brevity, I will specifically focus on five poems from Ramanujan's book: 'The Black Hen', 'Foundlings in the Yukon', 'Fear No Fall', 'Butcher's Tao' and 'A Copper Vat'.

II

It is interesting to note that in all his poetry books, there are poems exploring specifically the creative process as well as questioning the poetic product. The number of such poems exclusively concerned with the concept and process of poetic creation has increased in *The Black Hen*. Whereas all his previous books had four each of such poems, *The Black Hen* has twenty-one. While a close analysis of these twenty-one poems would reveal the creative and aesthetic perspective Ramanujan's poetry tries to project, an examination of the rest can be taken as the poetic practice of his poetic theory. The collection, *The Black Hen* commences with the title poem, a process poem, 'The Black Hen' and ends also with another process poem, 'Fear No Fall'. It is as if the book is designed to focus more on the creative process and the poetic perspective it can represent.

Between 1990 and 1995 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his students at the University of Chicago conducted research on human creativity studying primarily "a group of ninety one exceptional individuals."⁵ The result was published in the book, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996). In a section on "The Writing of a Story" the author's one concern is literary creativity

itself. He examines the actual writing process, from its very creative inception to its final completion in a short story written by the Italian Grazia Livi.⁶ The question before Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was this: “Is there a way to analyze what Livi did, to see more clearly what her mental processes were as she wrote the story?”⁷ The author and his team found it possible to analyze and verify creativity by using the five traditional steps involved in the creative process. Those steps are varying and interfacing periods of (1) preparation, (2) incubation, (3) insight, (4) evaluation and (5) elaboration.⁸ The author also discovers that “the five steps in reality are not exclusive but typically overlap and recur several times before the process is completed.”⁹

Such a psychological model of the creative process can inform and can be verified in, for example, Ramanujan’s process poem, ‘The Black Hen’. The thirteen-line poem can be quoted in its entirety:

It must come as leaves
to a tree
or not at all

yet it comes sometimes
as the black hen
with the red round eye

on the embroidery
stitch by stitch
dropped and found again

and when it’s all there
the black hen stares
with its round red eye

and you’re afraid.¹⁰

Having immersed, consciously or not, in pertinent poetic portents, events and/or images as a preparation, the initial intimations of that poetic germination sinks into a possible creative phase of incubation. When this seemingly unending churning of ideas and images “below the threshold of consciousness,”¹¹ goes on, one of the classical escape routes or consolation could have been Ramanujan’s first stanza.

Maybe due to “unusual connections”¹² in the process of creative incubation, that the first in a series of insights (another component of the creative process) begins to unfold step by step: That is what we see in the second and third stanzas. Still, the word “dropped” in the last line of the third stanza does not miss the psychological unease and probably a discouraging phase of creative blackout that can break or delay the whole venture. Nevertheless, the latter part of the line, “and found again”, leads us to the first line of the fourth stanza of the poem, “and when it’s all there”. This points to the fourth element of evaluation in the creative process. It can be marked by the decisiveness and clarity in the mind of the artist-persona when he decides “it’s all there”. And this substantiates Csikszentmihalyi’s view of evaluation — “... when the person must decide whether the insight is valuable and worth pursuing.”¹³ Then comes another instance of insight, a repeat of the third component of the creative process. When the “the black hen stares / with its round red eye” the poetic process of creation seems complete. The poem ends with an insightful realization that the persona could work out an effective catharsis in the single-line final stanza: “and you’re afraid”.

The fifth and the final component of the process, elaboration belongs to the whole text and the impact of the poem, once Ramanujan decided on his overall narrative design, diction and imagery to finalize the text that it is. This is what Csikszentmihalyi

means when he says that “elaboration consisted in selecting the characters of the story, deciding on a plot, and then translating the emotions she [the writer] had intuited into strings of words.”¹⁴ So the totality of the text of the poem is the evidence and the result of the phase of elaboration.

The above analysis establishes the status of this poem as a process poem, and clarifies the concept of a process poem. But, my present project is to examine and identify the secular pointers and perspectives of Ramanujan’s aesthetics and ideology in his process poems.

The poem ‘The Black Hen’, besides exemplifying Csikszentmihalyi’s five phases of the creative process, reveals the dialectics of the essential ambiguity and anxiety, the tenuous this-worldliness undercutting the conventional sublime emergence of a poetic expression. If the first stanza refers to the spontaneous inspiration of the poetic genius as the Romantics believed (“it must come as leaves / to a tree”), the second and third ones subvert the classical imperative, as it were, of an authentic and organic poetic expression. All the same, Ramanujan’s persona recognizes and leads the poem to the crucial element of the creative mystery, where the fictional and the artistic merge with the real to hold the attention of the reader. The poem’s final line, “and you’re afraid”, shocks the reader into the realization that the creative process and the ultimate poetic product do not exclusively belong to any elite and hegemonic literary tradition or school of practice. The process and its product can be really the result of and interaction between the pragmatic tenuousness and the shamanic intuitiveness in the process of creation. So the poem seems to question the possibility of a definitive aesthetic to legislate and streamline poetic creativity. Ramanujan’s secular anxiety may be trying to recognize and ensure the interaction between

and the integration of the real and the fictional, the simple and the sublime, the incidental and the inspirational in the process of poetic imagination. At the same time, the poem also leads to the self-critical as well as the self-reflexive dimensions of the creative process in the final line: Molly Daniels-Ramanujan in her “A Note on *The Black Hen* and After” points to the same possibility when she observes “a *maker* (poet) looking at what he has created becomes terrified.”¹⁵

The poem that follows ‘The Black Hen’ is ‘Foundlings in the Yukon’. We can read it as an ironic subversion of our conventional certainties about the distinctions and distances between the real and the unreal, the natural and the accidental. The poem can then reinforce the non-hierarchic and non-hegemonic creative perspectives of the title poem in a different setting. It will then work as an instance of a non-process poem becoming a poetic practice of Ramanujan’s poetic theory.

‘Foundlings in the Yukon’ is based on “an actual incident in the Yukon Territory in northern Canada.”¹⁶ These six unbroken grains from the “Pleistocene times” were “picked and planted / ten thousand / years after their time.”¹⁷ Strangely enough,

they took root
within forty-eight hours
and sprouted
a candelabra of eight small leaves.¹⁸

The significance of the following lines in third and fourth stanzas of the poem is ironic (and creative) for Ramanujan’s text. It points to the unpredictability as well as uncertainty of the emergence of new life-forms, which can, in this case, symbolize through the organic route, the emergence of a creative birth or realization as in ‘The Black Hen’.

... these
upstarts drank up sun
and unfurled early
with the crocuses of March
as if long deep
burial had made them hasty

for birth and season, for names,
genes, for passing on:
like the kick
and shift of an intra-uterine
memory....¹⁹

The crucial section is how the “long deep / burial had made them hasty / for birth....” The coming together of burial and birth for a new creative possibility, mocks the school of existential closure of birth, growth and death vis-à-vis the aesthetic formal certainty of a beginning, development and end in an art work or a poetic text. Such a parallel reading of this poem can be justified again towards the end of the poem:

these new aborigines bidding
their time
for the miner’s night-light

to bring them their dawn,
these infants compact with age,
older than the oldest
things alive, having skipped
a million falls
and the registry of tree-rings,
suddenly younger
by an accident of flowering

than all their timely descendants.²⁰

Expressions like, “new aborigines bidding / their time”, “infants compact with age”, “older than the oldest / things alive” and “younger / by an accident of flowering” bring out the paradoxical charge and the metaphoric association of the magical with the mundane in the creative process as in natural birthing or blooming.

If the first process poem, ‘The Black Hen,’ is on the creative process as such, the last one, ‘Fear No Fall,’ is on the creative person. The poem is divided into sections one and two. The first section the longest in two pages is on how “Arunagiri, rich and spoiled”²¹ was transformed into a Tamil saint and poet. The reckless and bohemian life style doomed him and turned him “a peel of many colors / on the garbage heap.”²²

Unhoused, he roamed
through the town, a target
for moralists’ fingers,
a lesson for future generations,
dripping with diseases²³

When “his despair” became “deeper than his wounds,”²⁴ he “threw himself down” from “a cliff”. The legend goes on to say that he did not die rather was miraculously cured of all his diseases. Moreover, he was gifted with the seed of poetry when “the Old Man / of the oldest Novas, gave him his first line / of verse.”²⁵ Thus the outcast and cursed one becomes a saint and a poet, unsettling and breaking all the mainstream orthodoxy about a saint and a poet.

leaving Arunagiri a lifetime
of seeking and finding and losing Him
again and again in a labyrinth

T.R. Joy

of winding words, his songs
twining around trees, ensnaring
passersby, unlocking cages

even for mynahs and parrots.²⁶

This is very much a motif of the *Bhakti School* of poetry, where an unlikely outcast, underdog or stranger grows through misfortune and suffering to the sublime creative position of a saint and a poet. The rebellious sources of such a movement and its democratizing dynamics can support Ramanujan's secular aesthetics. More than that, the very creative process itself (that of one becoming a saint or a poet) turns out to be an act and life of daring and deviation from the mainstream and dominant lore and practice of poetry. So the very transgressive and subversive core of creativity, poetic or otherwise, is foregrounded in the text of the poem.

This centrality of the transgressive element of creativity becomes valid not only for the poetic allegory on an ancient Tamil saint, but also for the contemporary persona of the poem in the second section. The choice and growth in creativity seems to retain its secular and subversive thrust in the symbolic power of the verb "fall" repeated three times and once as a noun in the final three lines of eleven words. This fall in the context of the poem could challenge as well as substantiate the scientifically proposed Systems Model of Creativity by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the book, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*.

According to this view, creativity results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation.²⁷

The author goes on to explain the implications of the model further:

Creativity is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of a creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain. It is important to remember, however, that a domain cannot be changed without the explicit or implicit consent of a field responsible for it.²⁸

The imperative grammatical power of the repeated verb “fall” in the poem, “Fear no Fall” can challenge, at any given time, the dominant conventions of the social and artistic domains as well as the moralist and critical orthodoxies of the field. At one level, Arunagiri does not belong, by culture or cultivation, to the saintly or poetic Domain; he was counted out and condemned by the Field, the “gatekeepers to the domain”²⁹ as implied in Ramanujan’s poem:

a target
for moralists’ fingers,
a lesson for future generations³⁰

The individual in the person of Arunagiri breaks the rule of the Systems Model by transgressing as well as transcending, so to say, the paradigms of the existing Domain and Field. This seems to happen despite Arunagiri’s lack of “access to a domain”³¹ and “access to a field”³², which the Systems Model proposes as normal conditions for the development of a creative personality.³³

Nevertheless, at another level, Arunagiri develops into a saint and a poet through the struggling stages of the creative process as implied in these lines from the poem:

leaving Arunagiri a lifetime
of seeking and finding and losing Him
again and again in a labyrinth
of winding words ...³⁴

As he does so, as “his songs” begin to twine “around trees, ensnaring passersby” the public pays attention, and slowly the Field and the culture at large could not ignore his impact on the Domain. Here the Systems Model of Creativity works when the hegemonic and dominant structures of Domain and Field are forced to concede and accommodate the creative outsider not only because of his creative output, but also because of the grassroots pressure of the admiring public (“passersby”). This indeed is secular and democratising.

The issue of cruelty to animals apart, Ramanujan’s poem, ‘Butcher’s Tao’ can be approached as a flow experience in which the protagonist has focused and optimized his psychic energy in his chosen profession, in this case as a butcher. From that perspective, the bull is the medium for him like the different kinds of media that an artist, a poet, a blacksmith, a potter, or any other professional works on. In the context of Taoism implied in the title, “it is not so much what we do as the way in which to do.”³⁵ Then the way the butcher realises his profession can be an aesthetic performance in itself. This can be justified in the style and structure of the poem.

The butcher in China
looks long at a bull till he sees
the bull and how

the beast is jointed,
then moves his knife
in the spaces

Kavya Bharati 2009

he has learned
by heart with his hand
moving on the bull³⁶

The dispassionate but absorbing concentration and the effortless ease of his action and the dexterous movement of the butcher's knife over the bull, turn out to be an intense artistic process already at the height of insightful focus and elaboration in the second part of the poem. And the bull transforms into various items of utility for the community.

and the bull
is now sirloin,

tenderloin, prime rib,
dogbone, two horns

for weddings or combs,
sandals for the pedestrian

peasant, saddle and rein
for horse, thong and head

for kettledrums to scare away
eclipses from the sun,

ghosts from processions,
or summon cities

to banquets, friends and
enemies to battle,

the blood in the bucket
ready for sprinkling

on children with polio
and village borders.³⁷

The secular interest here is in the metaphoric totality of the butcher's process in the poem. In a way, Ramanujan's poetic text transforms the butcher's process into a flow activity. That is to say, "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. ..." ³⁸ Indirectly, this textual and thematic strategy in 'Butcher's Tao' brings out the aesthetic and poetic qualities of a butcher's work conventionally taken to be mundane and ordinary. The 'Butcher's Tao' becomes a metaphor for the creative process that focuses on a single medium of a bull resulting in a neat selection of a variety. This refusal to accept the elitist and exclusive primacy of poetic process has been a poetic tendency in Ramanujan's poetry. If 'The Black Hen' shows poetry in an artistic process, 'Butcher's Tao' affirms the poetry of any focused and dedicated flow activity. The secular thrust cannot be doubted in the artistic process and the mindset that accord poetic status to both the outcast of an Arunagiri and the Tao-practitioner of a butcher.

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter."³⁹ John Keats discovered the everlasting novelty of art objects, and by association of poetry also by creatively meditating on an art object like a Grecian Urn lost among the ruins of classical Greece. The creative attention on the Urn and the accomplishment of his poem, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' led Keats also to the universal value and truth content of art and poetry in the insightful but elitist Thomistic axiom, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"⁴⁰

Ramanujan seems to decolonize the imperial sublimity of the art view the Grecian Urn represents in his poem, 'A Copper Vat'. As a poem that debates the exclusive aesthetics of the Grecian Urn, 'A Copper Vat' seems to question the poetics based on the canonical primacy and classical upbringing. Juxtaposed with the classical and artistic antiquity of the Grecian Urn, the colonial pedigree of the copper vat makes it only a simple artifact that may accidentally amuse a passerby:

picked three centuries ago
by a Portuguese galleon from
a bath house

in Trivandrum, seen just
in passing in a Boston museum
not even by me ...⁴¹

It is true that the text's initial minimal ironic strokes about the vat can remind an informed reader of the canonical and imperial masterpiece of Keats. But the secular challenge to the poetic theory and process that the Grecian Urn represents comes up in the ironic and debunking details of the text:

Sunlit in a museum room,
patina green on copper red,
a vat

large enough for a refugee
to hide in, snakes of brass
for handles,

mouths in their tails, a gargoyle
for a lid, the knob once his nose
worn smooth

T.R. Joy

by slave girls' hands, the metal
hammered and figured, twined with creeper
and rounded fruit:⁴²

Nobody can miss the unwelcome colonial insinuation in "a vat / large enough for a refugee / to hide in" and "his nose / worn smooth / by slave girls' hands". Besides, the references to snakes for handles, and the vulgarity of "mouths in their tails" do not come anywhere near the personified elegance that introduces Keats' urn:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:⁴³

How can a crude "gargoyle" "shaped like the head of a strange and ugly creature"⁴⁴ match the elaborate carvings of gods and goddesses, men and maidens in the "leaf-fringed legend" that "haunts about" the Grecian Urn in the very first section of Keats' poem?⁴⁵ One of the political possibilities of the above interpretation of Ramanujan's text is pertinent in the context of our present discussion: The Copper Vat can become an alternative aesthetic symbol challenging the Grecian Urn, symbolic of the dominant canons of art and poetry as well as of colonial hegemony.

III

To conclude, if Ramanujan's first poem, 'The Black Hen' in the book, commences by questioning the Romantic imperative of an authentic poetic process, the book ends recognizing part of the romantic aesthetics that allows the identity and freedom of the individual poet in the protagonist of 'Fear No Fall'. At the same

time, in both the poems Ramanujan calls into question the hegemony of any particular school, the dogmatism of a particular tradition of poetic practice as well as the orthodoxy of any literary institutional sanction. In the context of Ramanujan's secular poetic process, the pragmatic as well as postmodernist traces in the poet-persona of 'The Black Hen' complement Arunagiri, the poet protagonist's tendencies of a renegade, a rebel and a *bhakta* (a disciple) in 'Fear No Fall'. The other process-poems in the book too confirm the secular perspective.

Broadly speaking, Ramanujan's secular perspective welcomes other points of view, mainstream or not, as it searches for the ever-elusive core and possibilities of creativity. His work does not seem to support an exclusive or exclusionary literary institution of poetic process and practice, which alone adjudicates the sanctity of the sacred domain, as it were, of literature to save it from the pagan and profane contamination of the non-sacramental, the subaltern, and the folk. Ramanujan tends to celebrate and establish the complex and often complicit sources and resources of creativity and poetry. The sublime and the earthy, the outstanding and the ordinary, the poetic and the prosaic, the tentative and the definitive--all can interface in the catalyzing fertility of an open and inclusive secular imagination.

The spirit of such a secular aesthetic does not privilege great writers and great works. Rather it is open to all literature, without prejudice or partiality. Not great men and great writers alone, on the contrary, sustained stretches of great moments and climaxes in a variety of literary forms and texts.

Exclusive attention to the so-called great individuals is a corruption of reality. We are all great and small, generous and mean, sensitive and crude, critical and irrational, sensible and foolish. To

adore an individual as a great genius and celebrity so definitively, for whatever reason, is anti-secular and very feudal. It would be an insult to the composite and complex nature of human beings capable of multiple identities and potentials.

Ramanujan's poetic process as well as perspective should encourage us to endorse a secular aesthetics. That is to say, we should celebrate not only the great and the classical, but the folk and the contemporary. We should reorient our literary studies and appreciation working out alternative and inclusive pedagogical and critical models, consistent with independent India's secular ethos and aesthetics. Only such a secular aesthetic paradigm will safeguard us against the elitist 'sacramental' aesthetic of exclusivity and the fundamentalist revivalism of an orientalist aesthetic in poetic theory and practice. The increasing assertiveness and visibility of Dalit poetry, women's poetry, subaltern as well as poetry in translation are markers of changing equations and future trends in Indian poetry in English.

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HOSHANG MERCHANT

THE 'VENICE' OF POUND AND MEENA ALEXANDER

Prof. Rosella Mamoli Zorzi in her compilation of Venice poems *Gondola Signore Gondola* (Venice: Supernova Editions, 2007) not only includes the usual Venetian Pound ('Paradise isn't artificial') but also a jewel of a poem by the Indian poet now resident in New York, Meena Alexander. The subject of both the master and the acolyte is the same jewel-box called Venice but most importantly she has learnt her method (the Canto method of random inclusion that then makes a crazy kind of sense) from Pound. (I have always contended that the method of us contemporary Indian poets comes from Anglo-American Modernism rather than from any traditional Indian roots.)

Le Paradis n'est pas art ficial
States of mind are inexplicable to us.
- Pound, Canto lxxvi (76)

Now here the poet takes us from the mind of his French Master Baudelaire through Venice to his (and our) states of mind in Venice (which 'are inexplicable') which really is the poem about Venice that Pound gives us. So Venice becomes an art-object literally in our hands as we read Pound's Venice poem, and it is a metaphor for the aesthetic soul or mind. Art is the lived life (going back like Yeats to Wilde and Pater).

The glory of the shadow of the
likeness of thy handmaid

in Pound's 'Night Litany' is

Yea, the glory of the shadow
of thy Beauty hath walked
Upon the shadow of the waters
In this thy Venice.
And before the holiness
of the shadow of thy handmaid
have I hidden mine eyes,
O God of waters.

Lest we think that Pound hymns the Christian God, he quickly lets us know he is addressing the god in the looping Venetian lagoon who would only be pagan in his lascivious encirclings, his power to entice us and his power to rejuvenate Pound and his tired English Muse.

The ‘pagan’ Meena Alexander (she’s actually baptized Syrian Christian from Kerala, St. Thomas, Jesus’ Apostle having brought the word to Indian shores as early as 2nd century A.D.) hymns a Finite beauty rather than Infinite. Her allusions are real and from the finite world: The medieval pepper merchants of Muziris, Kerala, the original Kerala Jewish Ghetto of Venice (the word ‘ghetto’ was born here, echoes of Shakespeare which every post-colonial Indian child reads) and then a step further into the 5th century Sanskrit of Kalidasa, another Golden world like Venices where dreams his heroine Sakuntala, only this time in ‘a high room by the Academia bridge’ of Meena Alexander’s poem. So the Indian-ness of Meena Alexander is transformed into the aesthetic of High Modernism’s internationalism or cosmopolitanism which then becomes the finite Infinity of her Art (with a capital ‘A’).

and Tullio Romano carved the sirens
as the old custode says: so that since

then no one has been able to carve them
for the jewel box, Santa Maria Dei Miracoh,
Dei Greci, San Giorgio, the place of skulls
in the Carpaccio
and in the front to the right as you enter
are all the gold domes of San Marco
Arechne, che mi porta fortune, go spin on that tent rope
(Canto 76)

So the Great Poet teaches us, not only to write as he writes but teaches us, as he writes, How to read what he writes. Arachna, changed to a spider, weaves like Pound a gauzy tissue of a poem behind which dreams all Venice, all history. Meena Alexander, taking a leaf out of her Master's book, is filled with her exotic Oriental nostalgia (Sakuntala, the spice merchant of Muziriz, near Pattanam and so on) but the method in the madness is classical, Arachna's, if you will, really, Pound's.

So then art has no gender and no nationality and no provenance but is Art itself. Art is *not* about Nature, but about Hamer. Art is about Art! If you fall back upon yourself like Narcissus then very possibly your pool of reflections could be a mirror in your personal library or a paddling-tub in your own backyard. Then cosmopolitanism like a folding accordion in on itself could very easily become parochialism, localism. 'All art is local' said Vlaminc (to quote Pound, again).

What I'm reminding you about is that in Pound's day all roads of empire led to London (like they once led to the proverbial Rome) but Rome itself could be a very insular city full of corruption and internecine jealousy and warfare; full of itself, hence in-word looking with a smug narcissistic, insular self-regard. Pound's Modernism and

Eliot's has been accused of that. The NRI (i.e. non-resident Indian) like Meena Alexander, could plead as she indeed does the burden of third-world womanhood, but she belongs, indeed, to the coterie of a few of the hand-picked, English-educated elite who can fly off to New York and thence to Venice and back. How many of India's toiling Indians can hope to fly? So our activity (Meena's and mine) of writing Indian English poetry about Venice with a homage to Pound is indeed 'the high room' of an elitist activity, narrow, insular, parochial. On the other hand that a Kerala girl like Meena (her father was in government service in the Sudan, she went to school, poor little rich girl in a diplomatic car--see her memoir, *Fault Lines*) and a Surban Parsi boy like myself can write Venetian poetry is the marvel of post-modernistic post-colonialism that gave us God, muffins, Venice, the BBC and that atrocious auntie, the British Council. So the Chinese fan of the poem (to vary the accordion metaphor) opens out again only to snap shut in the face of the ignoramus reader who can't 'make out all the allusions.'

Or the poem is a jewel box or a Chinese box, that is a box-within-a-box, culture-within-a-culture, allusion-within-an-allusion. So that Sakuntala 'in that high room,' re-claimed as a wife once her ring, lost at sea, turned up in a fish's belly, recalls not only the Doge's marriage to the sea but, I submit, also refers to Pound's method which Meena Alexander uses as ring of memory to be able to write her own English poem. Sakuntala in her lofty room at Academia Bridge would also be that 'super-subtle Venetian' Desdemona being strangled by her imagined history—i.e. as 'imagined' by Othello—in Cyprus, or Meena herself, a tourist at a seedy hotel in Venice. Her method is enchanting. Like Pound, and all of us since him, she lives in two times and two places, indeed. With Pound it could be Iowa-London-Venice (he did indeed shuttle between London and Venice before settling down in Venice). With Meena Alexander, it is her

childhood Kerala home where the metaphoric boat (of culture?) drowned in the sea of English education. So she has to resurrect it, 'make it new.' She will go to Venice only to sympathize with the pepper-seller of Muziris, Sakuntala and the Ghetto Jew. For she, and we too, are Jews. 'A poet is always a "jew"'--albeit an elite one. 'Like me he is a part of this earthly theatre/ No one must see his weeping' (Alexander). Pound, that so-called anti-semite, had the sagacity to hold Rothschild banks responsible for the War and the Holocaust. These like, till today, stand censored in the relevant Canto as four thick, black lines: a testimony to Pound's pluck.

Living telescopically and magically in two times and places like Pound and Meena Alexander is the real enchantment of art which makes it transcend time and place. In a favourite Meena Alexander poem of mine she sits in Central Park, New York, by a lake reading Ginsberg dreaming of Mirabai, our Bhakti poet, on the day Ginsberg dies. Ginsberg rows to the island where 'Lady Meera' lives (see his *Indian Journals*) and as he reaches the island, the goal-post, he dies. Meena completes her Ginsberg poem with Meera's help, so to speak.

So as you can see the Indian heirs of Pound are far-ranging though closely following his structural method. And they still face the same conundrums of waking u/s dreaming, home u/s the world which makes for exciting poetry even if without the genius of Pound.

PANKTI DESAI

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE POETRY OF SUJATA BHATT

Born in Ahmedabad, India, then moving to America at the age of twelve and presently living in Germany after her marriage to a German writer, Sujata Bhatt (1956) is bicultural by birth and migration, and tricultural by marriage. Thus three countries, India, America and Germany and their respective languages and cultures have gone into the making of her poetry. Her poems are multicultural, multivocal, multilingual and about multiple identities. She has published five collections of poems: *Brunizem* (1988), *Monkey Shadows* (1991), *The Stinking Rose* (1995), *Point No Point: Selected Poems* (1997) and *Angatora* (2000) which is reprinted in India under the name *My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari*. Her first collection *Brunizem* won her two prestigious prizes: the *Alice Hunt Barlett Prize* and *The Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia)*.

This essay is an attempt to show how Bhatt represents her multicultural ambivalence in her poetic works. She exploits history, society, politics, religion, memory, relations, and multiple languages in order to portray her constant struggle to harmonize the multiple identities resulting from her multicultural background. Multicultural experiences have not made Bhatt insular. The kind of politics of identity and place we usually find in multicultural poets and writers—often termed poets/writers of the Diaspora—is less pronounced in Bhatt. The essay will primarily focus on two of her well-known poems, “Devibhen Pathak” from *Monkey Shadows* (hereafter referred to as *MS*), and “The Multicultural Poem” from *My Mother's Way of Wearing a Sari* (hereafter labelled *MM*).

“Devibhen Pathak” (*MS* 46) presents cultural and historical ambivalence more powerfully than other poems. It centers on two

cultures, four generations, and three languages and thereby voices Bhatt's struggle to harmonize the plurality of her identities. It is apparently about her maternal grandmother Devibhen, but deep down it deals with the poet's multiple selves. Her location in Germany necessarily means a new relationship with her country of origin as well as her adopted country. She tries to understand her grandmother from her new location. Anecdotal memory helps Bhatt to enter into history and harmonize her acquired self and inherited self. Persons and memory are means to present her multiple selves, and to integrate them into a new single whole.

It is a longer poem divided into two parts, about the speaker's grandmother Devibhen and her wish in 1938 to have a piece of gold made into a necklace. Devibhen Pathak, Bhatt's grandmother, a faithful Hindu, insists that this pendant have the form of a Hindu swastika. The image of a gold necklace with the design of the swastika links the four generations of mothers and daughters. The swastika in India is used as a good luck sign, a talisman, and thus the poet's grandmother wants the pendant in the shape of a swastika. She is unaware of the political implications of the sign of the swastika. The fact that swastika can have a very different set of meanings in another country and culture does not strike her. Even when she is warned about the possible interpretation of the image in a political way, she is not impressed:

Now it is 1938.
Devibhen has decisions to make.
.....
about a small lump of gold she inherited,
gold she wanted worked into a necklace...
.....
Something to present to her daughter
when she came of age.
Something for her daughter's daughter's daughter...
.....
it was clearly the sacred swastika (*MS 47-48*)

The goldsmith warns Devibhen Pathak that the swastika is related to Hitler, whose inhuman deeds have made him notorious. Devibhen is adamant. The goldsmith's exclamation on hearing grandmother's decision to make a swastika pendant is given in Gujarati with Romanized script and in English too:

But it is 1938
and the goldsmith reminds her
of the latest news:

(array bhen, tamnay khabar nathi...?)

.....
And in the heart of Devibhen's mind

.....
but the swastika remained sacred,
beloved,
untouched by history.

Who was Hitler? Mahatma Gandhi

was her daily news,
her truth. (MS 48)

This poem is as much about the poet's grandmother as about the way signs function in society. For Devibhen, a Gandhian, the historical frame of reference does not include Hitler or fascism. She refuses to read the sign of the swastika in any other way than she is accustomed to. The poem suggests a sign cannot be reduced to its essence. The context gives meaning to signs and symbols.

The second section of the poem contains the poet's reaction to her grandmother's belief, keeping in mind her own present situation:

She was right
and she was wrong.
Why else do I keep this necklace
in a box? Why else
am I suddenly unable to wear
this yellow gold snake heavy symbol?
I'm unable to believe the swastika
is untouched by history. (*MS* 49)

Her multicultural identity complicates the situation. Her grandmother's simplicity is no longer available to her as an option. Hereafter, the speaker remembers her own childhood: how she, with other children, practiced drawing swastika and other geometrical forms. She loved the swastika most, as it was holy. But her own personal experience with the holy 'swastika' is challenged by her present: her marriage to a German, and her German-born daughter; she worries about her future:

Oh didn't I love the Hindu swastika?
And later, one day didn't I start wishing
I could rescue that shape from history?
.....
Oh my German-born daughter,
arriving during a spell of bright spring weather--
lucky girl
to be born on St Brigid's day...
What will you say? What colours will you
prefer? In what language
will you speak ? (*MS* 50-51)

On the one hand there is the self-sufficient world of grandmother who wants a golden pendent in the shape of a swastika.

The image of the swastika historicizes the poem. It is impossible to separate the swastika from what happened to the Jews in Germany. Grandmother locates herself outside this frame of history while Bhatt, living in Germany cannot ignore the political implications of this image. Within the space of two generations, the image has acquired a completely different significance. This polyphonic poem is a projection of the poet's multiple selves. The poem contains the voices of the grandmother, the goldsmith and the poet. Bhatt has inherited her grandmother's small, self-sufficient world. Simultaneously, Bhatt acquires another world by marrying a German. Now to harmonize these two worlds, both should be brought into dialogue. Bhatt's inherited memory constitutes her present self whereas the grandmother stands as a necessary western component. Both should be brought into a violent confrontation or a meaningful dialogue. The multivocal poem gives an opportunity to establish parallel relations between two worlds. Moreover, it is Bhatt's compulsive need to transcend the acquired world and the inherited world. One can consider the complexity of the symbol 'Swastika' as an example of a conflict of cultures. Nevertheless, the poem does not reject one self in favor of another. What the poet tries to achieve throughout the poem is better understanding between the two cultures, and in the process she becomes aware of her daughter's inheritance. Perhaps her daughter may not share some of her thoughts and feelings. The poet has to confront complex situations of nation and race, having had to cross boundaries of nations, cultures, and historical frames.

Many have discussed Bhatt as a poet of the diaspora. Due to her multicultural background and multilingual poems, she has been included in a diaspora anthology: *Our Feet Walk the Sky* (1993). Sudesh Mishra has also discussed her poems from the perspective of Indian diaspora in an article, "From Sugar to Masala, Writing by the Indian

Diaspora” (Mehrotra 292-93). Cecile Sandten has applied the term ‘South Asian diaspora’ to her poems in an article, “In Her Own Voice: Sujata Bhatt and Aesthetic Articulation of the Diasporic condition”. But she cannot be categorized as a poet of diaspora or exile, even though she deals with multicultural themes. I feel the term ‘diaspora,’ originally used for Jews who were scattered, is a limiting term in the context of her poems, as she crosses several boundaries. Rootlessness, homelessness, alienation, nostalgia, and often-mythologizing the ‘Imaginary Homeland’ mark the literature of diaspora as we find in Rushdie and V.S.Naipaul. In several of these writers, the search for home or house is also a search for identity and roots. But in Sujata Bhatt that yearning for real or imaginary homeland is absent, as she herself says in an interview in which she was asked if she feels nostalgic about India. She replied:

I think what I missed was a certain way of life and also friends and relatives. Today I see India as my country, but a country from which I have been apart. I think I see it fairly objectively. I don’t have any romantic feelings about India. I’m interested in India and I always have been: That’s where I come from...But I wouldn’t want to live permanently over there and it’s not really my home anymore.

(Sandten: Interview, 1)

Nor is it entirely appropriate to describe her as a poet of exile. For Indian English poets, the very term ‘exile’ bears a different connotation. Their exile is not political or a forced one. Neither Rushdie nor Naipaul is a political exile. In the case of Sujata Bhatt, it is the circumstances of her birth and later, marriage, that turned her into an expatriate. She values relationships and has kept her bonds with India alive through frequent visits and constant interactions with members of the family. One cannot describe her as an outsider

to Indian society and culture. At the same time, her location in the West is a fact she has to accept and come to terms with. Her poems show the complex negotiation between the two mental and physical worlds she has to carry within herself. She does not glorify one of them at the expense of the other. She is dispassionate and detached in her dealing with these two worlds. Bruce King calls her “a permanent expatriate,” “a citizen of the world,” “a traveler”:

Bhatt is one of the many people of the modern world who, having moved from country to country and having opportunity to travel to other countries, can not really be said to have a nationality or national identity in contrast to citizenship. After a time you stop being part of a diaspora and become a traveler, a permanent expatriate, a citizen of the world. You carry memories with you, you retain assumptions from youth, but your world is where you live at present. (King 329-330)

But Bruce King does not seem to recognize the complexity of her situation. National identities do not signify permanent and unalterable ‘essences’. Questions of race, caste, or gender can transcend national boundaries. Bhatt’s poetry does not recover India as an ‘essential’ truth. When she talks of India, she is discussing the human predicaments within her knowledge. To deny India in her writing would be to falsify her experience. Multiculturalism in her case is the manner of negotiating her everyday life where different cultures co-exist and interact.

However, one needs to note that ‘multiculturalism’ is not the ‘subject’ of her poetry in the usual sense of the word. In Bhatt’s case, writing itself is a creative engagement where subject does not matter. Her poems go beyond any fixed definition of poetry. The

way Bhatt connects memory, sex, love, religion, history, and science, pairing one with another, shows a new approach towards writing poetry. This kind of approach is perhaps seen for the first time in Indian English poetry. Often such poems simply resist any kind of interpretation. They just reveal, describe and articulate the experience and in that way show the wide range of experience of a modern, rather postmodern, woman. We can say that by writing on such a variety of subjects she only articulates her multiple identities that are formed through several experiences, visits and multiple backgrounds. In Bhatt's case to revel is the most important thing, as she says in "The multicultural poem":

The multicultural poem does not expect
the reader to 'understand' anything.
After all, it is used to being misunderstood.
.....
The multicultural poem is not afraid
to photograph
lotuses.
It is not afraid to live
inside a nightingale.
.....
It makes its own rules
and then it breaks them. (MM 101-102)

That is why we find poems on a number of subjects without any fixed rules or definition of poetry. The revelation and the energy to go beyond, to transcend the barriers of language, region, and culture are conspicuous in her poetry. Here a sense of plurality enables her to move between multiple cultures, multiple spaces, sustain her multiple identities and create multivocal, multilingual lyrics. We cannot reduce her to a single place, culture or identity. Her poems show

how she moves between these multiple locations, which are within her and outside her. This also brings her closer to the idea of a postmodern poet who sees the question of identity as no more the single most significant issue in a complex and unpredictable life.

One can see that the close reading of her poetry reveals that Sujata Bhatt uses history, society, politics, religion, memory, relations, and multiple languages, to portray her constant struggle to harmonize multiple identities. These identities have not made her insular. Such a reading also shows that the kind of politics of identity and place we usually find in multicultural poets and writers—often termed poets/writers of Diaspora—are almost absent in Bhatt. We also find that ‘multiculturalism’ is not the ‘subject’ of her poetry in the usual sense of the word. The act of writing itself is a creative engagement where subject does not matter. Her poems go beyond any fixed definition of poetry. Energy to go beyond, to transcend the barriers of languages, regions, and cultures as well as a sense of plurality enables her to move between multiple cultures and identities. The way in which she connects memory, sex, love religion, history and science points to a new approach toward writing poetry which is perhaps seen for very first time in Indian poetry in English.

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KEYA MAJUMDAR

THE AMBIENCE OF SILENCE AND LIVED REALITY: SHIFTING BOUNDARIES IN THE POETRY OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

Myth and history, landscape and mindscape, as well as a complex wavering between faith and suffering caused by a loss of faith, all interact in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry. All of this is set against the emblematic background of Orissa, and is translated into an authoritative, humanistic voice.

As he saunters around the silent history of Orissa's past embodied in myriad mythical structures, Mahapatra also feels the harsh present day realities of hunger, poverty and socio-politic malfunctions prevalent everywhere in India and the world. His poetry originates from the shifting boundaries of Silence, vociferous in the still voices and scenes of the past, in the choked voices of his inner being, and the lived reality he experiences and suffers through his dual self, enacted within the chiaroscuro shadows of the shifting binaries of light-and-darkness, waiting-and-meeting, and other such multidimensional tropes. Within the poetic vision can be seen the echoes of past traditions as well as the changes in the present.

And I heard someone speak of it there below:
where the bamboos sag like sad-eyed widows in worship
into the stagnant village pools,
in which naked children sleep for ever
among the green coils of the water-lily,
and where a dark-eyed woman climbs the endless stairs
of her abandoned house, the great earth
cowering before her, turning back
the triumph of death with the power
of her faithful silence, outside the bonds of time,

and where the mysterious shadows lurk under the leaves,
dispersing the past over the bends of the Mahanadi.
(*Relationship* 31)

Poetry like this deserves to move effortlessly outside the bonds of time.

Even as the canon of Indian English Poetry is still being decided, Jayanta Mahapatra is widely recognized as one of the most representative and sensitive poetic spirits in India. The very name Jayanta Mahapatra, Winner of the first Poetry award of Sahitya Akademi in 1981, is a name that stirs many unexplored possibilities even now. A physicist-poet, writing outside the boundaries of English Literature Departments, has confessed his unease regarding cut-and-dried academic critical conceptualization of his poetry. Unique in his own poetic voice and vision, though he does show influences of Eliot and Yeats, and also a typical romantic attitude at times, his work nonetheless refuses to be pinned down to any straitjacket of formal critical definition. As he speaks from his heart--nebulous, suggestive, symbolic, ironic, but pure in its essence--he deserves to be judged by sheer response from the heart. So, this paper will read his poetic oeuvre at a glance in its endeavour to fix the abstract with concrete evaluation, as his elusive and exclusive poetry never remains and plays on a single ground of appreciation, rippling always with the energy of dialectics of Selves, Realities, Silences.

I

“As I write my poems, I know, I have no answers. And that there could be answers out there, somewhere.”

—Jayanta Mahapatra

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry emanates from silence that the grand myths of Orissa/India creates. It remains to this day a challenge to overpowering death, with its note of vibrant life. Like a master weaver Mahapatra weaves out dream sequences across the warp of the ancient mythic history, and the woof of his own personal history, as his love and hurt shift spaces to offer variegated shades of his poetic texture.

Orissa possesses rich cultural treasures, but that wealth has turned to poverty, hunger and underdevelopment in every sphere including morality, the space in which he locates himself. Is that not the scenario of India itself, India of the seventies and eighties, and later? The India of his deep concern is the ‘worn-out’ face of Orissa too--only the boundary of perception shifts:

The worn-out face of India
holds the weak eyes of dumb, solitary poets
who die alone,
silenced by the shapelessness of life alive.
(“Possessions” in *Shadow Space*)

The all pervasive corruption and poverty are felt realities for this sensitive poet, as the essential dreamer in him loves to turn back to the glorious past of ‘age-old proud stones’ of ‘vanquished dynasties’; but then, ‘the agony abides’ and calls him back at the ‘doors of silence’. His grandfather’s conversion from Hinduism to Christianity due to acute poverty is a lived reality that he experiences in his poetic self. But, his journey is towards that silence that he wishes to penetrate with emphasized soul search over and over again:

Kavya Bharati 2009

We wish we knew you more.
We wish we knew what it was to be, against dying,
to know the dignity
(“Grandfather” in *Selected Poems*)

His poetry is not the answer really, but a successful probe into the inwardness of suffering, which shifts ground in intricate uncertainties: ‘what did faith matter?/ what Hindu world so ancient and true for you to hold?’ Very few Indian English poets have been able to search so deep with intense honesty through their own painful personal history, to find out the deep meanings and truths of Religion, Culture and Nationality. Even fewer could translate these sharp agonies into perfect history. In the poem ‘The Hour before Dawn’ he is working simultaneously on two boundaries—one of his father’s imminent death, the other of a faith of a return both in poetic emblem and personal experience, of tradition revisited:

The silent world floats beside me;
tomorrow maybe I’ll hear my father is dead,
but he might bear the face of my son.

Sitting on the shifting boundaries of past and present, he is looking at the future too. As the silent richness of past glory is weighed against the cruel, lived reality of hopeless suffering and decadence prevalent in the present state of affairs, the poet shifts ground with uncanny efficiency from bare concrete realities to shadowy truths of the myths and vice versa. Poetry comes out of the fissures of these two-fold poetic experiences:

Antlered in sickness and disease
in the past of uncomprehended totems.

as, very evidently,

Keya Majumdar

Today the darkness of our own shadows
slips over the uncared for cemeteries by the river.

But, doubtless, the poet knows how and where to pick up the threads
of the continuum,

Someone keeps walking down still
across the ravenous dust
between the graves
(“Living in Orissa” in *Shadow Space*)

The man who suffers and the man who creates meet midway staring
into the deep ravines of the fissures that open at the shifting
boundaries between the ‘subjective’ poetic experience and ‘objective’
creative space, between the place where he can locate himself and
the universal space of suffering and loss, from Auschwitz to
Kalahandi:

Thus I approach the boundary between
the voices I make and their dropping echoes
facing those secrets lost in one’s creations,
now to fold slowly, or rise and fall in turn
in that inner kingdom of consciousness
which moves each torture of memory into the flesh.
(“Four Rain Poems”)

He tries to connect to layers of consciousness, through his half-
revealed half-suggested poetic devices, inviting and challenging the
readers to listen to his heart beats, to explore deep into the
undiscovered regions of memory and desire. Small wonder that
readers and critics sometimes have found him ambiguous, difficult,
obscure even, as he holds back more than he communicates with
words, as silence overpowers words:

Crowds beyond my life look up
expecting it to reveal my true identity
(“A Sense of Adventure” in *The False Start*)

Beyond his life then, his poetic sojourn goes on into the lives of others, into the life of a State or a Country, in recognition of a torture or beauty, as they come, through highly imagistic reflections to drive home the point of his honest and sincere participation in the lived realities.

He writes about the consistency of his vision and experience while moving constantly with the shifting boundaries of poetic perceptions [Mahapatra:148]: “In a poem I wrote about fifteen years ago and which was first published in ‘Poetry’, I found myself once again at the border between two separate regions of mind—between what perhaps, I understand and what I did not, using ‘rain’ as a symbol for that substance...”

And the vision persists: “Today the same questions bother me although I see no specific cause or rationale for such things. But such searching moves me, and I am unable to resist it in my poetry. For poetry is ‘Vaak’—and it is a voice forged from those elements which constitute the world both within and without: a voice which carries with it its unusual power of survival.”

So, silence which is transformed into Vaak or Words, and Words into Poetry, becomes the way of survival for him.

That his poetry cannot be bound by any standard critical concept becomes evident when we see his Keatsian adeptness, to live with uncertainties and mysteries, while at the same time touching the hem of Postmodernism too, showing his poetic strategy for semantic indeterminacy, creating a poetic text that wavers between the boundaries of Silence and Words.

II

“As a writer I realize that my poems should go far beyond words.”
—Jayanta Mahapatra

As life starts and ends in silence, so does Poetry. As the poet encounters the silent grief and pains, silent myths and histories sculpted into stones of Konark's Sun Temple, the silent witness of the glories of ancient Orissa, his poetic sensibility appropriates the bits and pieces of the state of speechlessness with the poetic empathy of a constantly changing alignment between dream and reality. The world of poetic apprehension is first made inside the silence, as the poet looks inward in such a situation, but, in a moment he has to change his stance to emerge outward to forge words from that silence, in a crystallized series of images and similes that throw out scintillating meanings, in the form of the apt objective correlatives. The poet's very secret world of dreams, allusions and desires becomes the silent seedbed, from where spring out an astonishing array of words of stylized poetry. The 'silence' of primary poetic conception is measured out by metaphors which might come in hordes or sparsely, contingent on the density of the evocative silence. He concedes as much: "So for me a poem is knit together by an inconceivable silence. Silence which is intangible substance, of which words are but manifestations, words which can build the poem from a silence and to which the poem must eventually return" (Mahapatra:44).

Like Yeats, Mahapatra too believes in establishing an unified totality of poetic experience in his poetry, exhorting apt images to speak out in sensitive understanding of the disturbing silence, integrating his personal experience with the contemporary situation, to present a general symbol acceptable to all. More than what is explicable in his poetry are the implications that tease the background of silence in many innovative ways--showing paths to some yet unexplored realities--

as I try to find a place among the ones
who live on the pure cry on the air,
as it wells the veins of earth, black coal,
going back then
to the trees and to the time of what is.
(“The Time of What Is” in *Shadow Space*)

His unified sensibility fuses together the public myth and reality, search and the end of search, philosophy and urbane contemporaneity to create his own mythic representation: ‘to the time of what is’.

He believes with unequivocal faith that good poetry must elevate itself from the dirt and dust of everyday life it is talking about, to that realm of rarefied silence invisible but tangible with suggestions galore. So, as a poem is born out of one sordid experience of abysmal religious intolerance, that charred to death the Christian father with his two sons, the poem is not the final end-product, since:

Each line of the poem seems to know
So much more than anyone.
(“Shadow Space”)

Now, this ‘so much more’ is the storehouse of silence. This creative indirectness of approach towards the Self, sitting in the throes of agony, both personal and public, enriches the poetic outcome, that which reveals and also that which remains unraveled.

“Roots” in Mahapatra’s poetry has been much discussed, as the poet himself has also emphasized the point many a time, suggesting some silent explorations, while integrating his inner self to the temporal-spatial-cultural-mythic binds of Orissa and India as well. The way he blends the landscapes and his mindscape, the here-and-

now of the place with the silent groping of the mind, to give voice to some unutterable truths, form a shared construct of subconscious mind and conscious poetic efforts:

Yet the ironic thing about the poem
is that it easily says farewell,
shuts itself up in silence,
leaving one alone (“Bare Face”)

But the silence to which his hurt has taken refuge must be explored with all the available poetic devices because, “what poetry cannot is to acknowledge it is mute”. This conflict brings the poet and his poetic agony up close once again to accept the challenge of the silence—to re-consider, to reconfirm the alliance, he has come a long way:

tonight grief and I can stand together,
our voices no more raised in disparate words,
as when we first tried to understand each other.
 (“Bare Face”)

He has this rare ability to speak to us in our situations, and thus elicit our participation, as poetry like this seek trusted interlocutions of the ‘Sahridaya’ reader/critic to eke out meaning from the moments. The ‘understanding’ happens through the pathways of recurring symbols as silence escorts poetry to the realm of intuitive appreciation, to provide coherence to non linear, elliptical, fragmented structures:

In the sneering rain phantoms dance,
A weary man gropes for the door
That has long forgotten how to open.

Kavya Bharati 2009

Just his feet leave faint tracks
on the earth that has only become
a rich growing ground for Japanese chrysanthemums.
(“A Growing Ground” in *Random Descent*)

Here is how his search for ‘unified sensibility’ reaches the point of poetic excellence as the ‘sneering rain’ contributes in making the ground fertile for the new flowering season. For as in poems of “Bare Face” too we come across such vivid glory of the march of silently processing images turned smartly out to drive home the point of renewal:

The dappled face of the river smiles back,
showing the way through somber rain, vain doors--
behind me my people with voices of dew
strum their bones of agony with humble fingers,
as the year’s old fireflies light up the craters of their eyes.
(“In a Time of Winter Rain” in *Bare Face*)

As the ruined craters of the past with their deep agonies go on strumming his felt experience, his poetry transforms the pain into the bright poetic gem of ‘fireflies’—that herald ‘light’ of some sort into the dark, silent grim truths of the past. His poetry of this time tries to reach out to silence that sits on the boundary between myth and meaning, speech and action. Gandhiji’s last words thus get transformed into pure poetry reaching out to silence:

He’ Ram.
In these two words
was the briefest of silences,
a touch of the silence of immensity.
(“Requiem - ix” in *Bare Face*)

Keya Majumdar

The “thoughts that lie too often for tears”, coagulate into powerful similes, which while speaking out the finite truth, leaves much to be explored in its infinite suggestions of originating yet more hopeful perceptions that never say die:

Like a father left with a picture
of his traceless son, perhaps dead,
grey with determination, and infinite skies.
(“Dead River” in *Life Signs*)

And beautiful poetry comes out of the hushed stillness where lived experiences blend in the twilight of remembered past.

Contrary to the general belief that melancholy and pessimism win him over, the powerful urge of renewal and regeneration into positive poetic glories never leaves him. Through the portrayal of the dark gloom of all the socio-cultural as well as historic-religious injustice meted out to his countrymen, from time past to time present, the poet moves on to time future, with the expectant, determined voice, ready to perch on the height of the ascendant glory:

I only want to renew myself
like this old river’s quiet
that has emerged victorious
over a hundred layers of religion
in the airlessness of the dead.
(“The Land That is Not” in *Random Descent*)

Silently flows the mythic river Daya in the lives and civilizations of years gone by; the journey is certainly not over, as the years yet to come look ahead to possibilities, as the river of tradition keeps flowing. Straddling comfortably across the two layers of felt

experiences, one of mythical past and the other of lived present reality, his poetry looks both ways while shifting ground from shadows to substance, silence to words, descent to ascent--as poetry moves with time, emblematically following the course of closure and entrance, the myths of Dodo and Phoenix--because

Our life is always something else.
And all the time we seek an answer to ourselves,
gazing into the flawless crystal of life with the morale
of a child, our look brightening up as we try hard
to fish the fragrance of our birth out of the lyric water.
(“Re-enacting an Old Play” in *Random Descent*)

III

***“The poems, the poetry remain exploratory, as I try to find out
the person within myself, as I try to face this stranger that comes
out of my poetry.”***

---Jayanta Mahapatra

The words he measures with his ‘pain’, are the representations of his sharing of life lived at the grass roots level--lives lived in Orissa, or in Delhi, or in the Bhopal gas tragedy, in Kosovo, or in the West Bank--where widowed mothers stand silently at the door, and the father sells out his teenaged daughter even as ‘a nation goes on insulting itself with its own web’. Moving across the subjectivity of experience and objectivity of expression, he is most successful at this trapeze act of his chosen poetic style, where grim irony and intended pun, spontaneous similes and suggestive metaphors interface

with perfect ease. He teases his feelings allowing quirky, far fetched, sudden images to well up as new coinages sprout directly out of the cauldron of felt emotions, controlled only by the creative acumen. No doubt, the Indian English storehouse of vocabulary has been thus considerably enriched by his numerous remarkable phrases, clauses, diction that speak of Indian ethnicity so convincingly. His sense of belonging is quite strong--to his own racial, cultural, subjective moods, to the indigenoussness and humanistic tradition of the holistic idea of Indianness which, however, sees and works through the events, themes, images of Orissa--to ultimately reach and probe 'into the unknown in me'. Though his feet are firmly grounded in his tradition and culture, his mind takes flight to multidimensional courses of the wind in the stratosphere of human consciousness as ultimate reality. The poetic empathy does not remain limited to Orissa only, as it always shifts ground, turning inward and outward to cover multifarious dimensions of humanity at large, offering a unifying outlook on Indian life as a whole. The world also comes into its orbit as the poet moves alone on the thoroughfare of the universe, constructing Orissa as symbol of local, accidental address, the particulars of which space act as metaphor for any space where human suffering is at large: 'world that dances only to darkness'. It is, however, the absolute humanistic outlook in him, and, the insatiate urge for love that the common reader finds a space to share:

...if the heart doesn't overflow with love,
will the spirits of poetry stir out
of the walls of my bone?
(“Will a Poem of Mine Be the Only Answer?” in *Life Signs*)

He does reach this point focusing on the poetic transformation of silence mythicised in convincing transcendence:

I travel between joy and solitude,
.....
But outside the window
The pink buds of the tall cotton tree have burst.
To each branch light returns,
as though to rejoin me to childhood,
(“Light” in *Random Descent*)

Moving as childhood memories, deeply intense at its root, the truths of these lived and felt realities look back into the past to vivify the memories, as the poet is quite aware of the throbbing moments of the present too. Looking before and after, accosting the corresponding binary urges, he sublimates the experiences of dual poetic involvement. It is difficult to transform the Self that suffers the torments of Time and Space into the Eye of the strictly objective poetic observation, in order to generate path-breaking poetry out of ugly realities like acute hunger.

‘Hunger’ is the well-known poem that foregrounds this beautiful poetic resolution of the conflict between the slain innocence of the teenaged daughter and the immeasurable guilt of the poor fisherman father through abrupt, apt innuendo, and innovative strike of cruelly authentic image. The poet juxtaposes the elemental innocence of the girl, ‘just turned fifteen’, and the ravishing hunger of the family. So, in order to remain alive physically, he sells his soul— “Feel her. I’ll be back soon, your bus leaves at nine”. The long bitter question marks that keep on dangling long after the poem successfully comes to an end with unification of image and feeling:

I felt the hunger there,
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.
(“Hunger” in *The Best of Jayanta Mahapatra*)

are very effectively kept silent, as the poem adroitly plays with that ominously potent silence (the girl and the poet-narrator are silent), through the suggestion of the covert and overt image of flesh-fish, driving home the point with easy almost casual mastery of art. Obviously there are so many kinds of hunger, more than the ones revealed in the poem, to which the poet silently hints. The echo of this poem is reiterated in the poem called 'Mask':

Hunger lends each one a mask,
and it smells of trapped beasts.
(“A Mask” in *Random Descent*)

This is how the unification of diverse or alternate selves of the poet as a creative artist and the poet as a humanist, fuse together on a large scale, playing within and against the disturbing ambiguous feelings and raw felt realities.

Contemporaneity as well as the universality of human suffering, personal guilt and racial memory, individual heartbreaks and collective unconscious of civilizations' unforgettable tortures, absences that haunt and humanity's silent sufferings are moving and mingling in different directions with opposing pulls in his poems. To come to terms with poetic resolutions, as the shifting ground of his silence and lived reality interchange their positions in the dialogue between the Self and the Other.

IV

*Would meaning remain
in merely that a thing exists, on a single plane,
("Relationship")*

From pregnant silence to banal everyday realities, from ambiguous images hunting out the double meanings from 'signs', from the questions that waver and flicker on the brinks of self-realization and self-analysis, we can see his progress of thought from response to resonance. As the poetic self, rooted in tradition, explores and questions the 'other' always in search of the 'Promised Land', truths pour forth as metaphors: 'How can I stop the life I lead within myself?' (*Selected Poems*); 'Which still, stale air sits on an angel's wings?/What holds my rain so its hard to overcome?' (*Selected Poems*). To all such questions where the Self and its Other shift to gain ground, his 'own soul quivers on the ledge of answers' (*Selected Poems*). He is aware of his confrontation with the 'Other', as the all pervading silence variously manifests itself at the queries of the poetic purpose. We become conscious, however, of the fact that this juxtaposition of apprehension and appreciation is the continuous process of his poetic urge, and this dialectical self analysis contributes to make his 'real life':

This poem of mine, which was never an answer,
shook the surrounding darkness like a bell
and quietened, shocked at finding itself
lying about my life. All the poem could do
was to close its eyes and feel the breeze
and the sun in its face.

("One day standing in a corner" in *Random Descent*)

The influence of two religions, Hinduism and Christianity, made him 'grow up in two worlds'. This resulted in duality, which plays a crucial role in the construction and development of his poetic personality. For his readers, though this twilight zone where his Self and its Other are mostly in conflict, it is the most intriguing and productive area of his poetic output. As he comes to terms with his 'inside' and 'outside'-- in other words, settles the score between the Self and its 'Other' in his successful poems--we know that Poetry only exerts experience of 'freedom' for him. As he takes his way off from the 'plagiarized smiles and abstract talks' to find his way where human suffering cries on without tears, without words, his poetry too abandons the luxury of conventional, clichéd, rhetoric, to concentrate on compressed, energetic sparks of live images, picked up from the whirlpool of contextual time and space. No doubt he has brought over an exceptional talent with serious motivation to the difficult craft of writing real life poetry, where he successfully absorbs public events as documents to create powerful poetry. Simultaneously, almost, his Self weaves through its Other where the public and the private constantly change positions, as his socio-political observations bear witness to history, as his inner self looks for suggestive identification both with glory and gloom at the confluence of consciousness, which works through empathy and compassion, search and discovery, waiting to reach the meaningless beyond symbolic metaphors. Through the series of signifiers like rain, doors, ash, darkness, stone, ruins, light etc., the poet reveals the strange possibilities and wishful suggestions of meaning, signified through aesthetics' adept functioning, striking at the root of stark and deep authenticity of subjectivity. As the Self seeks out and answers its challenging Other, as the Other puts across uncomfortable questions in various poetic forms, the poet examines his 'private ritual of discovery', defending his subjectivity through the signification of objectivity of his art, as

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Trapped inside, dreams
build still, tense into the light
(“Bhopal Dawn” in *A Whiteness of Bone*)

His poetry counters whatever distorts the image of man’s dignity,
and integrates the highest forms of thoughts of compassion and
aesthetics with a deep intuition of freedom:

...the road has freed itself
from the pull of the earth and the empty burden
of graves. But its spirit is heavy
with reasons for killing one another.
Something slithers past as I watch,
from the garden someone left behind in my heart.
I try to think of home.
(“The Road” in *Random Descent*)

Silences of various forms with which the poet has long and
longed encounters, by which the poet has been pressurized and,
through which the intolerable and unutterable cruel realities have
been faced in the ‘abysmal heart’, are the layers of catalytic agents
for the practicing poet, in the vast ambience of which his poetry
waits silently. ‘Perhaps it eagerly waits for the world to speak’, because

Something glances at me over my shoulder.
What does it see?
Old clothes, familiar days, bright instincts,
and those intimate little things that count in the end.
Or does it hear those silent footsteps
that remind one of the hushed noises
of a hundred settled birds at dusk?
(“Signs” in *Random Descent*)

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SUDHIR K. ARORA

TWO ORISSAN POETIC PILGRIMS: BIBHU PADHI AND NIRANJAN MOHANTY

There is something in the Orissan soil that makes the people so emotionally involved that anyone who touches it feels that he is connected to it. It is the same soil that changed Chandashoka into Dharmashoka, who spread the message of love in the world through Buddhism. The Orissan landscape has a miraculous charm that turns man's focus toward the inscape where he becomes conscious of innate human nature and feels a bond with humanity. Some Orissan poets have embraced English to spread the native fragrance. Of these, the leading voice is certainly Jayanta Mahapatra. After him there is a long list of Orissan poets writing in English. But I have confined my paper to Bibhu Padhi and Niranjana Mohanty, who have enriched Indian English Poetry through an Orissan idiom that evokes common experiences that extend beyond Orissa to every corner of the globe. Any person who goes through their poetry cannot help but be touched by the universal appeal.

Bibhu Padhi (b. 1951 Cuttack), a teacher by profession (now retired) is a poetic flower on the Orissan plant in the garden of Indian English. With its multicoloured petals--*Going to the Temple*(1988), *A Wound Elsewhere* (1992), *Lines From a Legend* (1993), *Painting the House* (1999), *Games the Heart Must Play* (2003) and the chap book *Living with Lorenzo* (2003), the inward-looking poetic flower in Padhi is in bloom, reaching out toward the cultural and interpersonal realities of life through memory. Niranjana Mohanty (b.1953), also a teacher by profession, has registered himself as one of the most significant Indian English poets. He is a poet who is widely read in India and abroad. Already eight poetic collections, namely, *Silencing the Words* (1977), *Oh This Bloody Game!* (1988), *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha* (1994), *On Touching You and Other Poems* (1999), *Life Times* (1999), *Krishna*

(2003), *Tigers and Other Poems* (2008) and *A House of Rains* (2008) have come out from his pen. Both of these poets are well plugged into the culture of Orissa. Their poetry is read and enjoyed in India and abroad even as their roots are in Orissan culture.

Padhi's roots are so deep in the soil of his birth place that, in spite of his friend's lecturing that Cuttack will remain "The same as before--crowded, filthy, full of flies and mosquitoes" (*Wound* 20), he can never move away. This is the town "encircled by three rivers" and here he feels the "superstitious clouds" of his forefathers. Here the confusions are settled by an elder who quotes from the Gita stating "It is the past deeds, friends, / that define the present, the illusions, / of our fathers who were born with the clouds / of their ancestors sticking around their eyes" (*Wound* 20). Padhi presents the familial atmosphere of his birth place where "children and women / squat on the roadsides, defecating and gossiping and brushing their teeth, while the men / piss and discuss philosophy" (*Wound* 19). Ancestors provide strong roots, creating an emotional attachment to the place for their descendants to inherit and hence, "stay at one place and time" so that they may "share their long line of ancestral company" (*Legend* 61). The poet believes that "Home is where we are, today / this early morning hour. And we wish it / to remain as it is" (*Painting* 63). There have been times when he thinks of leaving it but fails to do so because he is "bound to its wall, damp with / last year's rain, smelling its stale / unmoving air" (*Wound* 42). It is not only the poet who is attached to his home but the home also equally loves its inhabitants, and stares "with white eyes" from every corner. When the dwellers "pretend to sleep" it awakes "the corridor at night" (*Painting* 63). Notwithstanding the poet's brothers' departure to "live in large cities / in rented buildings, government quarters", he remains at home to honour his father who "put all that he had saved into his house / in hope his children wouldn't have to seek / other houses"

(*Wound* 43). It is his father who has made him “stay here, in this house, haunted by malefics / in obdurate conjunction with each other” (*Wound* 43). It is his faith that he thinks that his ancestors are his “well-wishers / during hours of pain and pleasure” and inhabit thin layers “of miraculous air”. He has inherited his ancestors’ “responsibilities toward the innumerable dead” who “arrive and depart annually” (*Painting* 29). Similarly the poet in Mohanty also associates his relationship with the landscape that makes him realise his being, providing him an identity. It is Mohanty who takes inspiration from his ancestors who have now become stars. The dumb light from the stars is light for his guidance. He states: “a dumb light from the stars / guides my ways, my knotted ways” (*Ob* 1). It is his ancestors who know nothing except love and bless him and his family.

Even while living in graves, ancestors think of the well-being of the inheritors. Mark the lines for the love of the ancestors for their inheritors:

We shall read the mysteries
sleeping beneath the graves
of our white-clad ancestors
who know nothing but love,
who only bless us to be happy
and live beyond time’s talon (*Krishna* 69)

Whenever the poet is interrogated on the question of identity, he feels irritated and becomes “red like the heart of a hearth” (*Rains* 97). He connects this heat with his devoutly religious grandmother who used to “dream of thirteen festivals / in twelve months!” (*Rains* 97). He goes back to those “lantern days” when his grandmother sways “a palm-leaf fan” over his “sweat soaked body” (*Rains* 97) to bring him to sleep.

In Orissan culture, elders are given due regard in the family. Grandmothers play an important role in shaping the personality of the children. They tell stories which become helpful in forming the children's personalities. After grandmothers die, they are missed even more when men begin to bear the responsibilities of the family. Both poets--Padhi and Mohanty miss their family members who are no more, but miss grandmothers most because of their impact since childhood. First take Padhi's grandmother, who always used to warn him to take care of his child even when he has become mature. Mark Padhi's grandmother for her concern for the family: "Take care of your child. / You will never get another like him" (*Wound* 66). When she dies, he feels a kind of emptiness. He presents the pathetic picture of her cremation. She is laid on the "bare bamboo bed" and is taken to the cremation place. When he sees the gold ring on her right forefinger, he is reminded of her words. "Take it off / my finger. I'd like you to wear it / it will protect you from possible / enemies, from the sly, slanted look / of the inauspicious stars" (*Wound* 67). He sees the fire burning her in the dark. He returns with his relatives "hand in hand, leaving her there, in the dark, / among the shadows of the banyan trees" (*Wound* 70). Returning from there, he shuts the doors and puts the lights off. He sees everyone sleeping "as though to sleep were / the only way to keep oneself alive." He goes to where she used to lie and now her bed looks larger. Padhi becomes so emotional that he wears the ring on his right finger. The ring is not a simple ring but it "sits like a saviour, full of her / wish, and perhaps is struggling / to make my weak fate stronger" (*Wound* 67).

Now comes Mohanty's granny whose memory has become unforgettable. No doubt she died a long time ago. But to the poet, it is not a thing that happened in the past. It seems to him that it is an event of the present. Mark the feelings of the poet:

We burnt her there, long ago. Now
It has become an event of the past,
But why do I feel that it only happened
A few minutes past? (*Prayers* 140)

When she is dead, she seems to be sleeping and her sleep invites the poet to sleep beside her for repeating the tales. The scene of carrying her dead body to the cremation ground becomes piercing when the poet presents it with the sound of the relatives and villagers who walk past saying: “hari bol, hari bol, / bol hari, hari bol” (*Lines* 21). Now the granny is laid on “the hungry pyre” and he with his father moves round the pyre thrice. The poet’s father weeps “like a child lost in the fair” and in the end, adds fire to the pyre that burns “the face that had waited once for his return. / And she burnt merrily in the rapture / of wood and fire” (*Lines* 22). Then he returns with all the other members “without looking back / without a word” (*Lines* 23). Again and again he recalls the granny in his memory. What the ring is to Padhi, stories are to Mohanty. The poet Mohanty can never forget her stories which become his source of inspiration. Sample the lines for recalling the stories of granny:

My granny swims in my eyes
And her stories of lone-kings
And half-deserted queens
Seem to bear no end. (*Lines* 34)

Rain has entered the lives of the people of Orissa almost like a ritual. It has become a part of their culture and landscape. The phenomenon of rain that occurs on Orissan landscape makes the people look into themselves. Both the poets Padhi and Mohanty

present the various dimensions of this phenomenon. Padhi associates rain with his dream daughter and then it becomes the symbol of love and compassion. “The sky is covered with / clouds of every kind, with / the rains about to fall” (*Games* 78). To him his daughter becomes clouds which are meant for rain. He asks his daughter not to keep her rain with her. He states, “Rain your rain on me / so I know where my rain is. / Daughter: You are my rain” (*Games* 78). When he states that she is his rain, he expects the rain of love and affection from her. It is rain which enlivens memories which dance before his eyes. Mark the lines for associating rain with memories:

The first rains of the year
have started falling on the plains
since yesterday,
and with the rains, memories
of the hills started falling too (*Games* 78)

“The rains about Cuttack are whispering still” (*Temple* 51). When the large drops of spring rain fall on faces, they move the poet within. He guesses that the same rain “must be falling now / at the point where Mahanadi originates / among forests and bounders, seven hundred miles / above us, in Madhya Pradesh, making the water / rise at the right places” (*Wound* 16). The poet creates an original scene when the rain “comes louder than ever.” He sits by the window and from there tries to locate the particular stars which now seem “to be suffering the burden of bewildered space” (*Wound* 16). He misses their joined hands as they are “separated by the clouds and the gathering dark” (*Wound* 16). How emotional he becomes when he fails to locate the star which his son identified with his grandmother! “My eyes strain to retrieve that one star / which, on the western sky, had become / my grandmother to my son, now rain-obsured” (*Wound* 16). Now from personal impressions, he

comes to a general one. The manager of a restaurant urges a truck driver to slow his speed lest water should enter the low-lying floor. Here the landscape is not merely Orissan, it may be anywhere. Mark the line for its simplicity of feelings:

The road is flooded, and while
a truck passes, the manager
of the small restaurant in front of our house
shouts and waves his hands to slow down
its speed, so that the flooding water
may not invade his low-lying floor (*Wound* 23)

The rain now becomes a universal phenomenon as he moves from landscape to inscape when he lies down on his bed. “The rain seems to be everywhere, / at all times, even during / our skillful absences” (*Wound* 23). The steady rainfall riles him so much that he hears “the sound of the blood” on the rooftops and the “dancing feet of children in rain” (*Wound* 36). Even then the rain evokes a sense of loss that he is unable to explain. “Something / remains absent amid / these sounds and movements, something / very near to what couldn’t be said / or carried in the blood” (*Wound* 6). Now come to Mohanty’s impression of Orissan landscape in rains. He links rain to his personal sorrow, to hope, and to the space that helps him in realizing his identity. The poet’s grandmother and her three sons were cremated “year after year / After year, every time in the rains” (*Tiger* 1). The rains also take him to the cholera ward where he lost his “brother and water melon sister.” He likes to place the paper boat in the rain-water and feels that from the ward his brother and sister “would be throwing their boats, and watching their tossing” (*Ob* 36). Rain becomes grief to him when its “arrival makes / the village road muddier / clumsier, dirtier” to the extent that it “clots the throat of rivers” (*Rains* 108) and then it become almost

impossible to “let loose / the paper boats of pain here” (*Rains* 108). Paper boats of pain make anyone feel the intensity of pain that the poet wishes to convey but the flood of feelings so clogs him that he remains incommunicative. Like the paper boats that return again and again because of the blocked way, grief also returns to him as it fails to find out an outlet. While falling, it scratches other woes with its nails and this makes the poet “tremble like banana leaves / in pre-monsoon storm” (*Tiger* 71). But he is not permissive as it makes him believe that somewhere a new sun will brighten the faces. He renews his breath and reaches in the rains “holding a lantern of joy” merely “to be the sound of rain-drops, falling” (*Tiger* 72). Now the dripping drops of rain flush the “clogged drain”, clean “slim backs of naked children” and make the “paddy field green with animated whispers” (*Tiger* 50). Mohanty identifies himself with rain. In the absence of rain, he makes a house of rains and under its roof, he sits in order to hear “the sound of rain-drops falling all night.” As it enters every pore of his body, it makes him believe: “that I exist, / and all that make me myself also exist” (*Rains* 125). His soul becomes so wet with rain that he cannot think of his existence without it. Thus, rain becomes a redeeming factor for both the poets who turn it into ritual as a part of Orissan culture. It provides them a glimpse into their selves, and so becomes a medium for identity exploration.

Time is an expert at playing tricks that make men believe lies as truth. The poet in Padhi has suffered a lot and so he warns his dream children stating “Do you know how time is trying / to trick you once again into / believing a lie as truth, / just as it did with me?” (*Games* 19). No doubt, it plays all the tricks with a man who fondly remembers “all those beautiful things” that first occurred to him. He finds a lone dog better as it not only “whips time by its tail” but also “curls it round in a yawn and throws it out / in a bark” (*Temple* 26). For Mohanty, “Time splinters and burns / like wicks on earthen lamps” (*Tiger* 21). The poet fails to know “who follows

whom” (*Rains* 78) whether the “time or the time chasing, dogging” (*Rains* 78) him like his own shadow. He has made up his mind to defeat its purpose “by slipping into a cave, shadowless (*Rains* 78) as he does not find “anything miraculous.” Though he explores himself and feels delighted in “holding back the flowing waters of time” (*Rains* 10) by riding “on a winged horse / to the incorruptible lost green years” (*Rains* 10), he has a “fear of certain uncertainties” and his biodegradation that will result in “nothing such as ash or silence” (*Rains* 10).

It is time that has created a sense of loss and both the poets peer into space. Padhi starts “looking through the unoccupied spaces” (*Games* 38) of his memory and feels at a loss as someone reminds him “of a presence and words, of absence and the loss of a word. There was a time he felt that “distance didn’t matter,” but today he realizes “distances matter and must be / taken care of” (*Games* 87). Distance has made him wait and while waiting, he recalls dream children to his memory. Mark the poignancy of waiting: “On all these nights / I’ve been waiting for you, / as if waiting was endless / but somehow was true, And then, you might arrive, / shrouded in stories and history / like a dark shadow from the past / lingering over my dreams-- / my dreams of you” (*Games* 21). He knows that “the world will not remember” them and will forget “in the dark tunnel / of time and history” (*Games* 23). He asks: “If you think you remember me / just as I do, give me / one chance, even half a chance / to be with you, be yours at last” (*Games* 23). His wish to speak is “keen during / winter” (*Wound* 57). Though he wishes, his wishes stay with him and “the promised deeds / lie impossible scattered over / the darkness of the previous night.” The adult ways disturb him and hence, he feels that he is “still / a child somewhere” (*Games* 81). He is so obsessed with fear that to him “something always seem to separate us. / Before anything happens, something /

seems to get lost, again and again" (*Temple* 11). Similarly the poet in Mohanty finds "the gap between words" (*Tiger* 3). He sees his father's "cranky bicycle" that occupies a space within him. He loves his childhood but it is now lost. It is he who interrogates himself: "Where did I lose the white petals / of my childhood? What storms / did bruise and maim them? / What lightning could turn them into ashes?" (*Touching* 37). Though he is a poet, he feels "nothing can poetry transform" (*Tiger* 83) except his being. He wishes to become "a nameless bird, someday" (*Tiger* 114). Distance and space affect the poet "somewhere within" and he realizes in him that "something happens, / no one knows about it, no one can fathom it; / yet, somewhere within, something happens" (*Rains* 5).

Padhi fails to express what he means. He feels a kind of vacuity in words which remain only words, not the actual feelings that he experiences. Mark the lines for the inexpressive nature of the words:

Words may not say as much as
we'd like them to, or say more than
we would've wanted them say (*Legend* 10)

Words offer different meanings. Sometimes a word is misunderstood and a meaning different to the poet's is taken. The poet interrogates: "Where does an unsuggestive meaning lead one?" (*Wound* 33). It is the man's self-sufficiency that closes the doors of communication. The need is to communicate through words in spite of their incommunicativeness. He thinks that all human beings are birds that are singing slender songs of "retreat and withdrawal" building up "nests of beliefs and disbeliefs, / ambitions and gross failures" (*Games* 9). Pain and insult are nothing but "a part of the game of words" and these words are the relatives of darkness that take man to the "obscurities of inner space" (*Temple* 61).

Mohanty also feels the same incommunicativeness of words. No doubt he writes but he fails to make out the meaning. He gives an outlet to the pain through words but remains ambiguous. "Sometimes, like pain, something spreads / within. I'm not clear in what I write. / I fail to grasp the meaning of what I chisel" (*Prayers* 74). The poetics of creation is the poetics of human life which remains vague, though vagueness matters as various meanings come out of it. In human life, many questions are still mystery and it is assumed that they will remain mystery. He knows that his English is "half-Orissan, half-Indian" which gives him not only "the flavour of watered rice" but also "the fragrance of plough-shares and soil" (*Prayers* 75). English is an international language but he has not chosen it "to go / beyond the seas, but to meander here / like the light at the day's end" (*Prayers* 75). His roots in the soil are firm and a sense of belongingness is ever felt when he declares that he will remain here "among the jasmine whiteness" of his ancestors. Thus, both Padhi and Mohanty feel the charismatic power as well as emptiness of words but never assert their mastery over them. They realize their failure of inexpressiveness through words in the manner of Prufrock. "It is impossible to say just what I mean."

Both Padhi and Mohanty use 'Symbols' as techniques. What 'Sea' is to Padhi, 'Tiger' is to Mohanty. Take the case of Padhi who uses 'Sea' as symbol. Sea in his poetry becomes a symbol of love, affection, patience, endurance, an outlet for his communication, a companion with whom he shares. He shares with the dream children and asks them to go to the sea that will tell them everything. Mark these lines for the symbol of 'Sea':

Place yourself near the sea
When no one sees.
The sea will tell you everything (*Games* 4)

It is 'Sea' that has its own personality, and hence has its own way of dealing. The poet in Padhi advises the children not to "forget that the sea has / its own way of dealing with everything-- / the things that are yours / and the things which you / dream of possessing" (*Games* 4). He associates himself with the sea so much that he asks the daughter to "hear the sea's sad, distant voice rising through the night" (*Games* 80). In its voice, she will find his own voice "waiting for your company" (*Games* 80). It is the sea that "increases / Now the long thin order of faith" (*Temple* 15).

Similarly Mohanty uses symbols like house, family, journey, absence and tiger. But 'Tiger' becomes a powerful symbol that offers various dimensions of life. In an interview, he states "Tiger is synonymous with destruction. It also stands for life force. 'Tiger' in my poems can be read as hunger, sexuality, death and silence--a meaningful silence. Tiger, an animal when turned into symbol, records the graph of my experiences--the multifaceted dilemma of existence, leading to the certitude of silence" (*Contemporary Vibes* 27). The poet wishes, "Ah, I wish I were a tiger! / Would I had waited on the Yamuna's bank / for one arrival, that would have made / all / other arrivals look like departures!" (*Tiger* 98). But he does not want to be like the man "who changed into tiger / every night to taste blood / and back to himself, once again / just before the dawn" (*Tiger* 116). He wishes for the tiger that will help him to become "a bird, someday / may be a nameless one" (*Tiger* 116). No doubt, the tiger enters him but he does not become the tiger. If tiger is taken to be soul and the poet merely a body, it makes a fresh meaning. Both the tiger and the body remain incomplete without each other. Both are different and this difference makes them what they are. Mark these lines for fresh interpretation: "When the tiger enters me, / I don't become a tiger. / When I enter the tiger / it remains merely itself. / This difference makes us / what we really are! / For both tiger and I

know, / we cannot change / the other of things” (*Tiger* 93). Hence, the poet in Mohanty believes that soul and body are two entities and each gets a meaning in each other. Mark the lines: “This tiger has no meaning, / no identity of its own / without the jungle / or even without me” (*Tiger* 114).

Both the poets Padhi and Mohanty go to the world of memories that remind them of their roots, family, past, loss of dear ones and the unforgettable moments. The poet in Padhi looks “through the unoccupied spaces” of his memory. He peeps through “the pigeon holes” of his heart and mind that remind him of his family and friends. He is lost in “the dark forgetfulness of the past,” remembers “the remembrances of the present” and foresees “the future’s death-smelling / homes of fantasies” (*Games* 53). He looks within, observes the blood moving into the heart of his years and reaches the spaces “where once again while locating the grief in the space of memory. The wound is “always there somewhere, where / words are afraid to go.” He searches the “unexplored spot of the mind” and finds the “hurt stealing into the night from there” (*Wound* 73). He sees the image of Lorenzo in his memory and feels grief over his death. He states: “he is dead and with him has gone / everything except the image of his memory” (*Lorenzo* 14). The poet in Padhi becomes overwhelmed and looks forward to Lorenzo’s appearance “in order to revise your / textual lives, our lives, / once again, rewrite whole lives” (*Lorenzo* 27). Now comes Mohanty. To Mohanty, the pool of memory gets “dirtier / and by night, clumsier and lonelier” (*Rains* 3). He does not know “the art of cleaning in water, sifting rotting roots / of aces, voices, other woes and unknowable fears” (*Rains* 3). Memory takes him to the cholera ward where he lost his brother and sister. This is the place where he “tasted the sour grapes / of griefs and absences” (*Rains* 53). As the “garden in memory sheds / its clairvoyance” (*Rains* 4), he recalls sometimes “his bright eyed sister /

who closed her eyes for ever / in the choler-ward" (*Tiger* 55) and sometimes his dad asking him to teach him "the alphabets of life, their compelling / connections, so that poems / become a bower or a cross / to take away pain and anguish of others" (*Tiger* 13). Hence, both the poets recall their dear ones in memory.

Both the poets dream dreams. Padhi feels that no one has absolute rights over dreams. He feels that his dreams are not his own as "there is a long line / of owners" (*Games* 26). He lives among his absences and is pained at heart as he has not received "so many things" and he can "only dream of" those things. He thinks of his grandfathers who "dreamt of their homes, land, and wives" (*Painting* 36). He gives his dreams in gifts to children "with distended stomachs / listening to speeches on integration / and unity, the country's rich culture" (*Painting* 36). Dreams make Mohanty thirsty and "nights hungry" (*Rains* 110). But there is no one who does not wish to dream. Very frankly he states: "Is there any one / who does not dream, / or who hates dreaming, / or who does not care for dreams?" (*Tiger* 38).

Both the poets do not shut their eyes to the world and its reality. Padhi presents a realistic picture of a "middle-aged rickshaw puller" who "perspires like Marx or Gandhi" and exhibits "the dark magic of his skin" so that it may "become a rupee" (*Temple* 26). No doubt, India got freedom from the British rule. But even today, people are "still dreaming to be free / of the World Bank loans and gifts" (*Wound* 52). When he thinks of the land that has been taken away "by tricksters and their sly agents / without a fee" (*Wound* 53), he feels frustrated and the moment of loss becomes deeper. To this end, Mohanty is more contemporary than Padhi as he minutely observes the present scenario. Mark the lines:

Mohan, my neighbour, the postal clerk,
Slept on the rails, failing to manage

His extended family—four unemployed
Sons, five unmarried daughters (*Rains* 22)

Mohanty has introduced the glaring problems of a society where a man like Mohan fails to run his family. Low salary, suicide, unemployment, population and dowry and the problems that are swallowing men like Mohan day by day. Though man has come out of the “lantern years,” he bears “the power cut at nine” (*Rains* 102). Even in “a jet, dark dawn,” temple bells are heard “like sirens.” Incurable diseases are dancing in hospitals which remain helpless. The poet sees “Death-traps, everywhere” (*Rains* 102). He is much pained when he sees underfed children, wailing widows, beggars and girls being raped. How realistically he paints the contemporary picture!

I don't think I shall be free
From the voices of children, wailings
Of widows in a jet-dark dawn;
From the beggars, lepers, girls being
raped to death; or even from
The lofty devil in me (*Rains* 6)

Padhi talks of humanity and recommends simplicity and innocence in life. These two--simplicity and innocence--are the mantras that help a man to explore not only his own self but also others. Sample the simple attitude of the poet towards life:

Simplicity and innocence bring about total surrender;
Anything so simple is indeed hard to ignore.
And finally, it doesn't move and yet is everywhere--
The unseen force that one must take account of
In order to know oneself and others. (*Wound* 17)

He suggests a golden mean that helps to live life peacefully as it makes man ready to accept life as it is. He illustrates through the example of gravitational force. Anything that goes high ultimately returns. It applies to the man who climbs up in hope while gravity makes him return to his initial place. "Each man who climbed up in the hope / that gravity's strange tricks / would return him to where he came / from, initially" (*Painting* 54). There is no place for rest. If it is there, it is in his own self. The poet feels the silences of "the cave's mineral darkness" where "one begins to rest at the end of whims / and failures of this life, away from the puzzle / that might hold others in loving company" (*Painting* 54). Similarly the poet in Mohanty is human to the core. What he writes, he writes for the sake of humanity. He is so confident of his humanity that he hesitates: "Whatever is past or passing / or yet to pass has to recognize / the fact that I'm human to the core" (*Rains* 72). To be human is not only the theme of this life but also of poetry. "Merely to be human / is the gist, is the theme song / of my life, of my poetry" (*Rains* 90). Padhi's simplicity and innocence and Mohanty's humanity are indeed the mantras that help the people not only of Orissa but also of any place in the world in leading a peaceful, meaningful and satisfactory life.

Love is the living force of the Orissan people who explore it in every domain of life. Love of Orissa, of country, of the family, of the beloved figure in the poetry of the land. Both poets have treated the theme in their own way. The poet in Padhi makes the beloved realize: "You came back through me; / you came back to yourself through me; / you came back to me. / Today I had to go back to you, / against the world's bleakest words" (*Games* 45). He is so possessed with the feeling of love that he is ready to lose everything for the sake of his beloved, as he knows that love lies in giving happiness to others. "Today I am the dispossessed one, / or going

to be, soon, / losing everything to you-- / every name and thing, / including myself” (*Games* 64). He sees himself as the dispossessed one because he knows that his only possession is his beloved. He reflects over death and feels that his life is “a long rumination / in death’s dark kingdom” (*Games* 66). He has been dying for the beloved “learning the precise difference between / dying and death” (*Games* 66). He becomes so sentimental that he associates life and death with his beloved. “If death is what it is / supposed to be, my life / is your life, my death is you” (*Games* 66). He believes in the miraculous power of love that not only shows the right way in the dark but also offers shelter. Sample these lines for his treatment of love:

Love is another matter, but it has its loving moments too.
At a time when everything seems to go wrong everywhere,
It draws the world to itself and offers the much-needed
shelter (*Wound* 18)

Mohanty knows only one language—the language of love. He loves the beloved to the extent that he sculpts her presence on “the rough rocks of absence” (*Tiger* 10). In love, he never believes in losing identity, and plays the game of love in which no side is loser. He claims that “As long as we pursue this game, / heart and soul together, you are yourself / I, myself: no one loses, no one gains” (*Krishna* 38). When the lover meets his beloved, it seems to him that he is meeting himself (*Krishna* 39). Whenever he attempts to utter any word, it becomes her name. To him, earth, fire, river and song appear to be his beloved. “There is no earth, but you; no fire, but you; / there is no river but you, / no song but you” (*Touching* 62). It is love that makes him look into the heart which “knows only, that the unspeakable / tale of an in-within-ness is love” (*Tiger* 78). Love in the poet raises him from the world of selfishness to the feeling of cosmopolitanism. He does not wish to have any power that kills.

He is no emperor like Ashoka, but a pilgrim of love. Mohanty wishes that there might not be any war now and hence, likes to implant “white whispers of Buddha / on these sullen, shrunken fallow fields and beyond” so that the “dead would arise and touch / the pollens of love and light that never fail” (*Tiger* 6).

As Orissa is a land where spiritualism is deep-rooted, its poetry has religious touches. In whatever manner the poets may write, their ultimate faith is in Lord Jagannatha. Both the poets Padhi and Mohanty have their own viewpoints regarding their attitude to god and prayers. Both have some doubts, and so interrogate their beliefs, but their faith resides in the ultimate power. In Orissa, Jagannatha culture dominates. “The gap between men and Divine has been bridged in Jagannatha culture because Jagannatha is a highly humanized Deity...It aims at liberating the poor and down-trodden for a better life, for which he is called *Patitapaban*, and for which he observes Ratha Yatra” (*Orissa Review* 28). Padhi presents the scene of Cuttack at 5 a.m. in the winter. This is the time when “the mists hang heavy over the town” (*Wound* 27). The prayer is in process in the temple but “no one listen.” He doubts and puts this question: “Are the kind, listening gods really there?” (*Wound* 27). He knows that his “own prayers / have never reached the ears of a god / who is eager to listen and act” (*Wound* 47), and hence thinks that he has yet “to learn how to arrange words / in an order acceptable to men or gods” (*Wound* 47). His doubting nature can be traced in these lines: “Will this prayer become a thing-- / this whisper on the edge of words? / Will this be received at all, / or will it be quietly ignored?” (*Legend* 26) He has a staunch faith that one who wishes to go to Puri reaches there “almost without trouble and hardly any tears” (*Temple* 56). The god who “resides here, has the sea’s patience” (*Temple* 56). He does not believe in any pomp and show of prayer and so asks the pilgrim to “keep the priests away, weep like a child. / I’m sure, the

long-lost god / shall appear behind your tears / ready for compromise" (*Temple* 56). R.K. Mohanty writes: "One of the major salient features of culture of Lord Jagannatha is tolerance which is an outstanding human value propagated by culture of Lord Jagannatha" (*Orissa Review* 28).

The poet's longing for loving all and growing tolerant can be traced in the following words of Niranjan Mohanty:

So much so that I grow tolerant
of everything, and love everything,
and I learn to embrace things as they are (*Prayers* 168)

He knows that "endurance is all" (*Prayers* 20) and aspires to be a legend so that he may tell the whole world about the truth that "you exist in all forms, and all other forms / are being born from you" (*Prayers* 29). Prayer is the only means to reach him and hence for him "Every moment... / is a moment of prayer and poetry" (*Prayers* 60). He was wrong in thinking of heaven in the sky but now he knows well that "it lies on the twenty-two steps / of your temple" (*Prayers* 78). He is in love with his Lord whose round eyes have possessed him. He feels pleasure in teasing him because the Lord, when angry, looks glamorous--exactly like his onetime lady-love. It is his mercy that transforms his sadness to joy, and hence he wishes that his "fevered heart may chant the Lord's name and pray" (*Prayers* 85). He is honest and has faith in his lord, so he asks him not to doubt his integrity and solemnity. If he still doubts, he asks him to tear him in order to know his integrity:

Tear me apart Jarasandha-like:
On either part of my tormented trunk
You shall discover your honeyed name (*Prayers* 88)

He loves solitude which is “prayer in itself, desirable / at the moments of dejection, and fruition” (*Ob* 26). Though he never goes to temples, he has firm faith in god and the magic of prayer--prayer from the heart. In an interview he states, “I am spiritual at the core, as a human being. But I am reluctant to go to a temple, always--the rocky way, the distance, the crowd, the rituals...” (*Contemporary Vibes* 27). It is he who advises “pray / for prayer is the only palm / that assuages our agonies, old and new” (*Rains* 33).

Padhi and Mohanty, who have felt the very heart-beats of Orissan culture, have depicted its very image in their poetry. Both the poets have articulated the heart-felt feelings in their own way. No one can be proved superior or inferior at the cost of the other, as they possess their own unique features. The personal feelings of Padhi make him a private poet who delves deeper and deeper, making his small range intense. No doubt he works on his “two inches of ivory,” but makes it so exquisite and appealing that the reader feels one with Padhi. When he reads his poetry, he descends into the depth so profoundly that he is lost in darkness and reaches the unoccupied spaces of memory. Mohanty surprises the reader with his scholarship and his poetic sensibility. He takes the reader to the world of his poetry, where the reader wonders at the varieties of miraculous paintings exhibiting the different shades of the colours of life. These poetic paintings, which cannot be confined to any particular meaning, certainly offer the possibilities of various interpretations. His poetry cannot be studied with one approach, but a plurality of approaches is needed for its proper assessment. He employs the technique of montage to make the reader deeply engaged not only with the heart but also with the mind.

Hence, any attempt to compare these two poets is vacuous. Both share some common poetic characteristics by virtue of the same heritage. Keeping in view the rich Orissan heritage and its values, each of these poetic pilgrims is on a veracious track in the province of Indian English Poetry.

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E.V. RAMAKRISHNAN

A CLARITY OF LONGING

Meena Alexander, *Quickly Changing River: Poems*. Evanston, Illinois: Triquarterly Books, 2008. p.115.

Quickly Changing River is the eighth volume of poems by Meena Alexander. Among her previous volumes, *Illiterate Heart* (2002) and *Raw Silk* (2004) have been received with acclaim. As her web page says, she has “special interest in gender, migration and memory”. These concerns are inextricably mingled in the poems of *Quickly Changing River*, which are elegiac and reflective in tone. They are also acutely sensitive to the violence that threatens everyday living in our times. Her metaphors of loss communicate something of the urgency with which she investigates the contingent and the common in people’s lives. In her poems landscapes take on a human quality as they begin to talk holding on their own. In *Raw Silk* she had documented her moral anxieties in a world contaminated by hatred. She is still preoccupied with some of the same questions, as she crosses continents looking for connections and finds them mostly in recollections that are not always accompanied by tranquility. Like a woman stitching a quilt of several colors she weaves the strands of her travels and encounters into patterns that reveal unexpected configurations, and the meaning she quests after, one gradually becomes aware in the volume, is in the very process of weaving and not in the designs themselves.

Her ancestral land of Kerala is the setting for several of the poems. Her mother calls through ‘the monsoon wind’. The garden of her mother’s place (“where fireflies crawl/ in a garden of jasmine and rain-bitten leaves”) has now lost its lustre. She picks

her way in “through the cracks/ To earth’s sore place, navel of dirt/ Under cover of cold weather trees.” “Dirt” is a word that recurs in these poems to suggest the slimy world of the alluvial earth from which life sprouts, as well as the wormy dark of the underworld where everything is reprocessed into elements. The ambivalence of the word that suggests both life and death, has much to do with the poet’s own relation to her past that is nourishing and crippling alternatively. When the calf is dragged away to the fair to be sold, she crouches in the dirt, staring and staring. The mother cow stands, her eyes black, “borderless, a lake you tried to drown in.” In the poem, “In Kochi, by the Sea”, her mother shields her eyes, against the startling scene of a woman who is traumatized into silence and incoherence by an act of extreme violence: “In the shadow of her clothing in between her feet/ We saw vermilion dots, a trickle, a slow pour.” The trickle soon becomes a quickly changing river, “parts of a city, many houses burning.” The title of the volume implies perception of social deprivation that accumulates in history as cycles of violence and coils of collective guilt.

Maybe, rendering such scenes in words is a way of healing. Memory affords a split-second view of the past and the present, both entangled in each other. It does not always clarify the moment: “And underneath--in memory now--/ I heard a darkness, luminous.” In poems like “Lemon Tree”, “Three Sisters” and “Four Friends” one can see the entanglement between the past and the present as a thick undergrowth through which the words move. The burnt library of Cairo and the vandalized Buddhas of Bamian come into view along with the scrap book pages of childhood. The concern with wreckage is a recurring theme in postcolonial poetry. One remembers the torn landscape of Kolatkar’s *Jejuri* or

the parched scenes of Jayanta Mahapatra's Orissa. What distinguishes Meena Alexander is a larger canvas of perceptions where epiphanies come from the worlds of nature, art and history. In the poem on Monet's water garden she speaks of the need 'to live within the life of things'. She asks: "Can form draw being, call it forth?" This is one of the major strands of her poems in the present volume.

Obviously, this strand of enquiry has an international dimension in the case of Meena Alexander. Her own trajectory involves dislocations and travels across large continents. In moving from Allahabad to Khartoum in Sudan in childhood, spending long years in England and America as a student and finally settling in New York, she has crossed many boundaries and borders. They involved languages and culture, politics and poetics. Her need to address Gandhi or the Pamba river is as real as the urge to quote from Ovid, Marcel Mauss or Joseph Brodsky. She has found a way to make poems from the fragments of her life where mobility is a way of seeing and knowing. In one of her interviews she speaks of her habit of writing poems, sitting in public places. The intensely private is woven into the discourse of the public by placing it in the context of the larger narratives of art, nature or history. In the poem, "Reading Leopardi" she invokes Arabic, Malayalam, Hindi and Italian. The poem remains within the domain of the personal even as it gestures to the larger worlds outside. Nature is not a mere backdrop here but the very alphabet of the language she devises to invoke an experience of creative freedom she wants to convey: "In a lake so deep it could swallow a hill I see stumps of wood afloat,/ Making an altar of a ruin, and slow waves turn the color of infinity." In the last poem of the volume dedicated

to Czeslaw Milosz who died in 2004, she says: “In a miserable century with its corrupt couplings/ You kept note of it all.”

These poems address the moral problems of living in a turbulent century when the search for dignity, freedom and justice, for large sections of world’s populations, are as urgent as they were earlier. The poet does not take an overtly feminist stand, though in poems like “She Speaks: A Schoolteacher from South India” the anguish is audible. In “Hunting for Fish”, the speaker of the poem who is a woman says: “I am a housewife still, I have work to do./ The imagination presses against warm storage spaces,/ Underground chalices for flesh.” Hers is a more inclusive vision where the politics of everyday living and the poetics of transcendence are braided into an intimate tone of mourning, remembering and reflecting. A former slave who has learnt to read is still haunted by the memory of his mother who appears to him in the night waving to him with her cut hands. The woman who desperately waits for her daughter to come from the U.S. remembers how in her younger days people were bought and sold. These are moments that stay with you when you keep this book down. And you are convinced that the poet has mastered the art of gently persuading us to be self-critical and reflective. And all through she sounds true and her concerns look genuine, which is the real test of good poetry.

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

STARTLING SIGHT LINES

E.V. Ramakrishnan. *Terms of Seeing: New and Selected Poems*. New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2006. Rs 200/- ISBN: 81-220-0711-2.

I consider myself a reasonably generous reader of poetry. I like to like books. I seldom put on my nitpicker gaze for my first reading of any book. The result is that I have read several books of verse that I've admired and enjoyed in the past couple of years.

However, EV Ramakrishnan's *Terms of Seeing: New and Selected Poems* belongs to another category altogether. Here is a book that made no demands on my creative hospitality. From the very first poem, it commanded my attention. I was impressed--on occasion, moved--and even after my punctilious second reading, I stayed that way. A rich and resonant volume (published fifteen years after his second poetry collection), this is a welcome addition to the growing polyphony of Indian poetry and to EVR's oeuvre, establishing him as a serious and sophisticated poet--indeed, among the finest writing in the country today.

The book comprises four sections, and interestingly, a substantial part of the book (three quarters, in fact) is devoted to new work. Only nine of the fifty poems have been culled from earlier volumes. So this is a 'new and selected' where *new* is truly the operative word.

What makes the book successful? To my mind, two qualities that I particularly value in poetry: image and immersion. There is a skilful feel for metaphor combined with a capacity for philosophical depth and amplitude. There are 'dexterous' poets and there are 'deep' poets, but seldom do the twain meet. If one had to choose, I'd personally opt for the former, simply because there can be nothing

as grating as gravitas without skill. But when the two qualities actually do come together--as they do in this book--you know you are in the company of an exceptionally mature writer. EVR's poetry is capable of critique and elegy, irony and song, interrogation and wonder.

'Seeing', as the title suggests, is the significant trope in this collection. Time and again, the poet offers us unexpected sight lines, new frames of reference, startling angles of vision, inventive ways of re-mapping--and remaking--the world we live in. His sharply economical poetics makes the visual ingenuity that much more effective.

The title poem is a fine example of how the equation between seer and seen can be subtly reversed in the enchanted world of reverie. The children, who stop on their way back from school by the disused well in the orchard to watch turtles 'moving with a monastic grace.../ ... like much-travelled witch-doctors', suddenly find themselves disconcerted. A curious realignment of light and water and primal reptilian shamanism resets the 'terms of seeing'. Before they know it, they realize that they are more watched than watching. It is the well now that watches the children. 'In the dark cornea of the well,' writes the poet in an exquisitely crafted image, 'the turtles moved like exposed optic nerves'.

Yet another haunting imagistic poem is 'Blank Page', where the dark art of the creative writer is distilled in a few spare lines that reinstate one's faith in haiku-like minimalism (an aesthetic trivialized by hordes of mediocre imitators). In this lunar world of water and light, all things play their part: the moon, the river, the giant tusker emerging 'from the wreckage of the river'. The poet seems aware that his role is less that of doer than observer. He is not word-maker

as much as word-watcher, vigilant witness of the great drama of 'silence and water'.

There are several other unsettling images in this book, poised at junctures that turn the very course of a poem, making it spin into sudden eddies, swirls and cross-currents. A random example in a poem on a 'tamarind tree' is the reference to 'an annual convention of parrots/ on the sea-routes of the sky'. In the same apostrophe, consider this lovely reversal of conventional frames of reference: 'You meet the south-west monsoon/ on equal terms in an uprising of rain'.

The sudden fountain of water from a broken iron pipe, viewed by passengers in an abruptly-stalled train, is evoked as 'a waste of eloquence'. And the last take (a cinematic term that seems apposite in a book about 'seeing') on the subject is fittingly given to a four-year-old child who observes: 'Water is having a bath'.

Then there is the young girl with her pencil, building a laborious and exciting architecture of writing, 'her crawling hand' creating 'a word letter by letter', so 'the fine tip of keenness spends itself/ in the deviant ways of transcribing the banal'. (And that last skilful turn of phrase--'deviant ways of transcribing the banal'--could actually be, you realize, a perfect credo for the poetic project itself.)

What is significant, however, is the fact that EVR's ability to defamiliarise, to dismantle habitual ways of seeing, produces results that are more than just aesthetically satisfying. You realize, as the book unfolds, that his poetics are linked to a deeply internalized politics. This is the book's ultimate triumph. It is not often that one finds political critique working through image rather than statement, through obliquity rather than heightened volume. But here is poetry which

recognizes that old truth: that alternative world orders have to be dreamt before they can be ideated, much less implemented.

‘Falling Figures’ is a poem that probes the frontiers of violence, the extremities of trauma. The images of brutality are graphic and familiar: ‘falling figures across the barbed wire/ of a diagonal line’; ‘a mob with petrol/ bombs...’ moving deeper ‘into the eyes of a man/ frozen in fear, his hands folded’ (the vision of the Gujarat carnage here is unmistakable). But then comes the deep yearning of the final stanza, where the moral concern turns suddenly melodic: ‘And this is when you long/ for the script of the slanted rain on the plains/ to tell you the difference between a prayer/ and a false affidavit’.

Yet another poem starts with the strikingly surreal image of minotaurs leaving ‘the museum walls/ to walk down the street’. It is only as the poem progresses that you realize that the poem is actually a scathing comment on artistic censorship and cultural policing: ‘We have asked painters/ to surrender their easels and palettes./ The ban on the paintbrush and canvas will continue’.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing poems in the book is ‘National Animal’, a ruthless indictment on exploitative, reified ways of ‘seeing’. The ‘masked man’, ‘an enumerator of some kind’, is terrifyingly familiar: ‘He numbers people, animals./ He numbers people as animals.../ His kindness is like nicotine.’ In a searing line, the poet describes the response of the classified, sorted, enumerated animal: ‘The animal is merely hungry, but looks guilty’.

It is EVR’s keen sense of image that also makes his sudden epigrams so effective when they arrive. ‘A country without poets’, he remarks quietly, casually, memorably, in one poem, ‘will have a lot of newspapers’.

But poets grapple with other perils too, and EVR knows this. In 'Looking for a Lost Poem', the poet is uneasily aware of the imperial ambitions underlying his project: 'If the poem is the name of the ailment,/ losing it and not looking for it/ must be a sort of cure./ But it does not work that way.' And there is the close of the poem when the poet, hoping for 'a momentary glimpse of monarchy', finds himself instead 'face to face with the perils/ of saying witty things/ regardless of their truth'.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to EVR's poetry is that it does not mercifully say 'witty things regardless of their truth'. That is what makes you inclined to return to it--not just once, but several times over.

BIRTE HEIDEMANN

MY POEMS RAIN LIKE THE RAYS OF THE MOON

Sanjukta Dasgupta. *First Language*. Kolkata: Das Gupta & Co., 2005.
Sanjukta Dasgupta. *More Light....* Kolkata: Das Gupta & Co., 2008.

The two latest poetry collections from Sanjukta Dasgupta, *First Language* (2005) and *More Light...* (2008), can be read as a poetic unit that is primarily characterised by one salient feature: most of the 50 poems in each book have a binary structure, both in terms of style and content. A parallel reading of these two remarkable collections highlights what Dasgupta describes as the “wide trajectory of macro and micro issues, engagements with the home and the world, expressing uninhibitedly an irrepressible desire to be able to find a home in the world and the world within the precincts of home”. Yet, her poetry does not focus on the search for belonging, on being caught somewhere in-between, but rather it radiates a feeling of being wide-open to, and even dependant on, a constant change of space and place. Dasgupta manages, in a most striking manner, to introduce the reader to different worlds, cultures and languages.

The cover of Dasgupta’s third and penultimate poetry collection, *First Language* (2005), already indicates what the reader will encounter in its poems, as the title words are strung together in alternating Bengali and English. Both languages are connected but simultaneously contrasted with each other. This notion of duality is not only implied in the book’s title and also in its first poem but threads itself through the collection from beginning to end. In the preface, Dasgupta declares that she primarily understands the publication of *First Language* as a response to a certain issue: “One recurrent question that I have had to answer since the publication of my first book *Snapshots* has been--why write poetry in English? An interesting variant of this question has been a more searching query--‘Is it possible to

feel in English?'. In my poem 'First Language' which is also the title of this book, I have tried to answer this question to the best of my ability and having done that, I am now ready to move on."

As she has stated, this poem, which is in fact more precisely entitled "Mother Tongue/First Language (*Bangla/English*)" (7-10), explicitly illustrates the issue of speaking and living with various languages:

First language – English. The Other tongue
Second language – Bengali, the mother tongue
Third language – Hindi, *filmi*, *oops*, the national language

Which is which
Bangla/English
A twin togetherness
No comparatives or superlatives (8)

Here, the speaker of the poem categorises the three languages and thus makes clear distinctions between each of them. However, both the mother tongue, Bangla, and the first language, English, literally go hand-in-hand, as 'twins', having become inseparable in terms of identity formation of the lyric persona. What is most interesting is the fact that the national language, Hindi, is not really included in this linguistic duality. Furthermore, the notion of 'speaking both' is further extended to the notion of 'seeing both': "I became not just bi-lingual / But bifocal too / Always sensitive to the local/global clash" (9). Being both bilingual and bifocal corresponds with the above-mentioned idea of the dialectics that encompasses Dasgupta's two collections of poetry, as the poems included frequently deal with the local and the global and, thus, with being a cosmopolitan:

Was not my mother tongue
By years of nurturing this foster mother
And the one I ripped open to be here
Like Krishna's two loving mothers
Joyously merged and mingled
The language English
The text my own
Bengali? English? Anglo? Cosmo?
Four-in-one?

(You decide!) (10)

The last stanza explicitly implies the notion of fusion and even suggests a linguistic “four-in-one”, including the term “cosmo” which basically incorporates this (poetic) polyphony of voices. As the poem's last line can be read as an invitation for others to decide on the lyric persona's linguistic and thus cultural identity, the idea of being categorised becomes obsolete. Therefore, a thoroughly positive poetic picture, of speaking and thinking in different languages is painted. Usually, someone who is not confined to a language, culture or place is perceived as being rootless. But in this poem, the contrary is the case, to the extent that English is even described as being a “foster mother”. Since the poems that follow all, in their own way, support and further explain this attitude of duality, this poem sets the tone for what the reader can expect not only in this but also in Dasgupta's new collection *More Light....* Hence, this feature literally and metaphorically carries its implied cosmopolitan character across borders, boundaries and spaces.

As the title *More Light...* already indicates, this collection is even more optimistic in tone than the previous one. However, its poems do not euphemise a world struck by terror; they instead critically observe current global political issues. This collection's cover shows

an already weak but still glowing flame that tinges the centre in a warm and golden light. Hence, its cover and title, as well as the first poem, refer to an image that is already illustrated in Dasgupta's poem "In Memoriam" (51) in *First Language*, and which again hints at the interconnection of both poetry collections. This poem remembers the victims of 9/11 by visualising the attack on the World Trade Center as "the crumbling of an iron pillar / A radiant candle unnecessarily blown out" (51). The destruction of New York City's former landmark is depicted as the beginning of a time of terror. Nevertheless, Dasgupta maintains her positive perception of the world and in the preface of *First Language* she explains: "I am a ceaseless dreamer of a world where individual and collective wisdom will be in absolute empathy, where each human being will stretch out an arm of support to another, irrespective of race, gender, class, caste and religion, where power will empower all, thereby celebrating the emergence of a wondrous world-wide level playing field. I am waiting for that dawn with intense passion." It is exactly this feeling of optimism and hope that also concludes her poem "In Memoriam":

I dream of that glorious re-union
Of carefree laughter and smiles
Where there is no such cruel going away
Without time to say goodbye.
No more agonies of hide and seek
In the map-free domain of endless time (51)

Thus, despite this "candle unnecessarily blown out", Dasgupta has consciously chosen the image of a burning candle, shedding 'more light' on the dark side of society. Particularly in *More Light...*, she constantly revisits topics related to terror, trauma, inequality, intolerance and violence but, at the same time, juxtaposes these issues with her vision of a peaceful future. These topics are also dealt with,

for instance, in “Peace” (18-19), “War and Peace” (22-23), “Where there is no Love” (47) and “Freedom Fighter” (75-77).

In her poetic engagement with the dialectics of war and peace, Dasgupta introduces a key issue that, in many respects, threads itself through her newest book of poetry. In the poem “More Light” (9), the first one in the collection of the same name, the lyric persona, in the broadest sense, understands knowledge as the most important “weapon of mass resurrection”:

I prefer the Goddess Saraswati
Armed with books and musical strings
Weapons of mass resurrection
Combating demons of deceit
With the inviolate light of knowledge (9)

The poem’s last stanza directly invites the reader to use knowledge as a means of overcoming the “demons of deceit” and, thereby, make a peaceful future possible, a notion that Dasgupta explicitly relates to the image of light:

Come, create the true and beautiful
Express the good, noble and free
Let more than a thousand words
Blossom in a serpent-free world wired Eden
Come on, sing, read, write and dance
In a swirl of uncompromising light. (9)

In the poems that follow, the idea of knowledge in terms of reading and writing is closely connected to the notion of leaving home and spending time abroad so that knowledge is both literally

and metaphorically associated with the broadening of one's horizon, seeing the world in a different 'light'.

The opportunity for an academic to travel to and live in foreign countries is undoubtedly put forward as being a route to cultural enrichment in several poems highlighting the experience of teaching at universities in the United States. This topic is raised in the poems "Brand Fulbright" (28-29), "Fall semester at Suny, Oswego" (63-64) and "Winter--Suny Oswego November-December 2006" (65-66). In the poem "Brand Fulbright" (28-29), the lyric persona explicitly connects the idea of knowledge with literature and travelling:

I am just an Indian woman academic
In love with words and the world
But the kind of bridge builder Senator Fulbright
Held open for me the door to the magic domain

As a Fulbright enabled traveller
I have discovered many homes in the land
Of my many heroes – Hemingway, Steinbeck,
Alice Walker, Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Mark Twain, Doctorow, Arthur Miller (28)

Moreover, living in the United States has not only created friendships with people all over the country, but even "family ties / And new eyes to see beyond what I saw so long" (29) which thus hints at the above-mentioned broadening of one's horizon. The last stanza further elucidates on the gaining of new perspectives as Dasgupta literally visualises the notion of (cultural) bifocality through the metaphor of glasses:

I now see the world again and again
With my designer brand new glasses
Exclusively made for me by Senator Fulbright. (29)

Since these glasses were given to the lyric 'I' by "Senator Fulbright", the concept of knowledge can once again be linked up to the issue of cosmopolitanism.

In this context, the poet refers to the boundless possibilities offered by computer technology and particularly the World Wide Web which she understands as "a borderless universe" ("Gaze Theory", *More Light...*, 54-55) that allows people to stay in touch with the world without necessarily having to go abroad. The humorous but yet honest 'love poem' "My friend, my PC" (*More Light...*, 70) further underlines this, with its idea of a "map-free domain" already mentioned in "In Memoriam": "The whole world on screen without passports and maps / Sharing is so easy, even a smile / A scanned sent image never frowns at miles" (70). Here, Dasgupta explicitly depicts the World Wide Web as a means of connecting and unifying people across borders.

In contrast to the idea of going abroad, Dasgupta elaborates on the notion of home which she primarily does not understand as place-bound but rather associates it with people, in particular her parents. In *First Language*, which is dedicated to them ("For my best friends who are out of sight but always there..."), the poem "My Best Friends" (54) deals with two tokens of her parents that are "A life-support system unmatched":

Each time I am gored
I hear the tinkling of my mother's bangles

Each time I fall
My father's glasses put me back on track (54)

Here again, we see the image of putting on a pair of glasses in one of Dasgupta's poems. However, in this case, this image is not connected to the idea of seeing the world from a new perspective. The persona is connected with her home, regardless of where she is currently living, when she thinks of these two items that signify her parents and, thus, home.

In *More Light...*, the poem "Home" (30) stands out, not just because of its unequivocal title, but mainly because of its structure, with the notion of home also being depicted visually. The poem is in the shape of a sandglass: in its centre there is only space for one word, which is "Home". Hence, the form simultaneously corresponds with the content of the poem. Once more, home is associated with a close family member, in this case, the persona's mother: "As I lie face hidden in my / Mother's lonely breast / I wish to remain / Here, I am / Home ..." (30). However, time passes. The image of the sandglass is further emphasised by the onomatopoeic ticking of a watch: "At last: alas, late, too late / Ticks my quartz wrist watch / I shut my ears eyes and bury deep / Deep, into my mother's cool kind lap" (30). The sense of security related to childhood is gradually fading away. Only the still vivid memory of that time enables the lyric I to maintain this feeling of home, the ultimate place of shelter.

"My Poems" (*More Light...*, 52-53) sheds light on Dasgupta's intention to write poetry. In addition, this poem also includes the notion of the map-free, boundless universe, as the poet describes the publishing of her poems as a process in which "words reach the world" (53). Again, she draws attention to the aspect of overcoming borders and spaces. It is the moment when one of her poems is sent from her folder into the world that again hints at the duality of the local and the global:

My poems, my poems
Is that a narcissistic jingle
Is it the title of my new book
Is it a folder name
Or the name of countless files
Within a very pale yellow folder
Untouchable, except for
Some pats on the screen--to see but not to hold
Unless emitted through the jaws of the printer. (52)

This is also the moment in which a personal poem might itself become “cosmopolitan” as it connects people and creates “[l]inks in an invisible chain” (53), making it possible to share one’s intimate ideas. This aspect can be further related to the importance of writing in English, the ‘first language’, in order to reach people across the globe:

As the words reach the world
Spinning in wild wonder
Whirling through the planet
Touching a heart
Caressing a mind
Coaxing a nod
A flutter of butterfly wings
Somewhere, anywhere
Links in an invisible chain
That is after all invincible
And then my poems
No longer remain just mine. (53)

In both poetry collections, Dasgupta shows her ability to combine two seemingly opposed aspects, mother tongue and first

language, home and going abroad, war and peace, love and hate, which all serve as paradigms to deconstruct the fixed stereotypical binarisms of today's society. Hence, her poetry is primarily characterised by this dialectical notion, which becomes most obvious in the oxymoronic poem "Strange Attractors" (*First Language*, 11). Despite seemingly contradicting elements, the poem nonetheless underlines their mutual attraction: "All that seem alien, Have similar bonds".

It is this joining together of opposites that makes Dasgupta's poetry so fascinating. Taking up the idea of duality, both collections of poetry are characterised by a lucid and passionate language; they are also humorous and serious, local and global, traditional and cosmopolitan, optimistic and realistic, detailed and far-sighted, elaborated and spontaneous, committed and open-minded, personal and observing others, explanatory and enigmatic. As Dasgupta blends and fuses all these opposites, the binary structures burst open. They are now able to receive and, at the same time, radiate 'more light'. Dasgupta puts this into her own poetic words: "My poems rain like the rays of the moon". Indeed, both collections of poetry are unequivocally illuminating.

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Kavya Bharati 2009

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SUBMISSIONS

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

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