

# KAVYA BHARATI

*a review of Indian Poetry*

Number 22, 2010

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## DARIUS COOPER

### PRANAAMS

*(For Bai, who dared to loosen her hair)*

1

For once  
she had wanted  
to see herself  
in the mirrors,  
hung all over her palace,  
with her hair,  
like her daily awakened passions,  
loose!

But none of the glasses had obliged.

Vision there  
was always calculated.  
It was measured by  
the unnecessary postures  
of pomp, so  
carefully arranged,  
O so carefully arranged, within  
that universe of glass.

She had to break free  
and leap into  
her lord's Blue arms  
without any kind  
of shame  
or remorse.

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But was her lord  
willing to catch her  
by her hair,

suddenly loosened, now,  
from  
the Rana's royal knots?

2  
To marry her Blue lord,  
but not only in her dreams,  
was such an insult.

She became  
blue for you,  
and yet, O Blue One,  
you, who had performed  
so many wondrous miracles,  
why couldn't you have  
even choreographed, one  
for this noble princess?

Instead of wasting  
so many words  
on a vacillating prince  
about dharma  
at Kurekshetra,  
where was your dharma  
towards this Bai,  
ready to lose everything  
with her loose hair?

3

Her Rana  
couldn't hold her  
within his palace  
or even within  
his kingdom's walls.  
Neither  
Could you,  
O Blue One,  
within your entire  
Vrindavaan garden.

When she sang and danced  
her loosened hair  
penetrated  
every corner of the world...  
except yours.

4

With her body, and  
with her mind,  
she confessed  
her undenying loyalty  
to you.

With her songs, and  
with her dances,  
she composed  
her entire sangeet  
for you, and  
to you.

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She didn't transform herself  
a thousand times  
as you did,  
to dance and frolic  
a thousand times  
with your stupid gopees.

How could you have missed out

on the single intentions  
of her love  
in the three times  
that you bent  
to play your hypnotic flute?  
Your pearl strings  
like your  
self-absorbed ego  
hanging so terribly  
askew?

5

Stop being so proud,  
O Blue One,  
of lifting an entire mountain  
with just one finger.  
Real lovers  
lift their beloved's anguishes  
not with just one  
but with all  
their ten fingers.

*Darius Cooper*

She emptied every color  
during Holi  
in order  
to enter your Blue One.  
In the light  
of White spring rain,  
she even darkened herself  
for your Blue.

But your Blueness  
was merely the poison  
of that snake  
whose venom  
you drank,  
unmindful  
of her thirst.

Try dancing,  
not on the snake's hood,  
but within  
the Blue coils  
of an authentic passion  
for a change.  
Then you will gain  
its essence, its  
real Blue essence.

7  
Her eyes  
sought the ends  
of your nails  
as they were pressed

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on the stops  
of your passionate flute.

But she heard your music  
long before you composed it.

That is why  
this silence of yours  
is so brutal  
so brutal,  
particularly  
these empty notes.

8  
In her high notes  
she looked  
everywhere for you.  
Her hair loose  
Wanted  
To tie you up.  
Yes,  
every inch of you.

But you, O blue One,  
constantly betrayed her  
with your low notes.  
You didn't even offer her  
your thousand and oneth reflection  
as you frolicked  
with all those others.



9

Like  
most noted gods of mythology  
what did you know, or  
what did you care  
of what  
a mortal goes through,  
when she loosens her hair  
from every one  
of her world's  
conventions,  
and runs  
with bare feet  
to one  
whose own feet  
so recklessly  
commit themselves  
to shameful liaisons,  
lionized and praised  
in Indian tradition  
as lore.

10

Even rain  
frees itself  
from the clouds, and  
from the season  
that  
creates it.

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Were you,  
O Blue One,  
so lost  
in the moistness  
of your own love  
that you became  
so impervious, and  
so invisible  
to a Bai  
who was prepared  
to face  
the wrath  
of all seasons

while being constant to you?

11  
She heard  
the frogs croak.  
She saw  
the peacocks dance.  
She heard  
the koel  
answer its mate.

And when  
she heard your flute  
in her  
imagination,  
she stopped  
touching  
herself.

*Darius Cooper*

Couldn't you  
have draped her  
in Draupadi's  
yards and yards  
of sari?

12  
Whoever  
gave her your idol  
when she was,  
only a little girl

committed a grievous error,  
O Blue One!

13  
Night  
fell like a leaf  
in  
her forest  
of longing.

She searched for you  
in every corner  
of the cities  
she danced in,  
since  
you had  
a reputation  
for breaking things  
and running away.

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She looked for you  
up and down  
every hill,  
since  
you were known  
for rolling  
and gathering  
no moss.

At night,  
after the day's  
futile endeavours,  
she waited,  
again,  
for  
the next leaf  
to fall.

14  
She moved in you  
a thousand times.  
And you never  
moved in her  
even once.

Of what use,  
what use,  
O Blue One,  
was  
your Vrindavan?

## M. MOHANKUMAR

### DASARATHA'S DISTRESS

You may be proud of your exceptional skill, he said,  
but, beware, it could be a double-edged weapon- like  
exceptional beauty. Consider Dasaratha, for instance,  
he of the House of Ishvaku, young prince, as he was,  
full of the drunkenness of his pride, unequalled  
in the arts of war, expert in *sabdaveda*<sup>1</sup>. Alone,

he goes into the dark forest, growing darker  
with the night, listening for the prowling beasts.  
(Unwise. He shouldn't have gone out, unattended,  
into the night; but he was young and headstrong.)  
He hears a gurgling sound coming from the river-side,  
as he shoots an arrow and kills, not an elephant  
as he thinks it to be, but a hermit-boy, come to fetch  
water for his parents, old and blind.

Shocked, he picks his way  
to the *ashram* and, in a trembling voice, unburdens  
his guilt, and earns a curse. A curse, long-forgotten,  
which, now in his old age, works itself out,  
through his young wife whose charms were to him  
so resistless. (He gave her two boons when one  
was enough) And thus, he banishes his son, Rama,  
so dear to his heart, even as preparations go on  
for his coronation. And dies grief-stricken,  
a reluctant instrument in the hands of Fate,  
making the first move towards Ravana's death..

Look at the way Fate works, he said.  
Do not ask me what would have happened

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had not the young prince miscalculated and  
brought on himself the curse of the aged *rishi*.  
Fate would surely have found some other way  
to bring about Ravana's death at Rama's hands.

### REBIRTH

When I heard the poet, Kamala Suraiya,  
say in an interview, that if she were to be  
born again, she wouldn't like to be  
a human being, to be maligned, shamed  
and distressed, as she had been in this life,  
that she would rather be a happy bird,  
preferably, a king-fisher, of gay plumage,  
hovering over a tranquil lake,

I remembered the words of our young,  
unlettered maid that, in her next birth,  
she would like to be a parrot, tenderly  
brought up by the parents, and making  
a happy home in the hollow of some tree,  
with a loving companion and fledglings.

### DEATH OF A POET

On a flower-bedecked platform  
the dead poet lies, draped in white,  
peace on the face, eyes slightly open.

There is a touch of smile on the lips.  
As though he is watching the whole  
'charade' in mild disdain.

Mourners, bustling VIPs, wreaths  
cameras, police guard, plaintive music--  
for a poet who hated pomp and show,  
and went through life, the way he  
walked down the streets, quietly,  
melting in the crowd, and went it  
alone, embittered, and gambled  
on his house for his books, looking  
for help that never came.

Does anyone remember  
the lines he wrote--that he wished  
his funeral to be quiet and private?

Soon, this long procession will  
wind up at *Shantikavdom*<sup>2</sup>.  
Then the State honours--the police  
presenting arms, firing into the air,  
the bugle sounding the last post.  
And then, as the body lies burning,  
the long eulogies at the cross-roads.

And before the first anniversary,  
a Foundation in the poet's name.  
And later, a Chair, perhaps,  
and a bust at some road junction.

## QUAGMIRE

Rushing, as always, you've fallen this time  
into a quagmire, slipping, perhaps, as you tried  
to leap over it, the way you'd leapt over obstacles  
in the past. The fire in your eyes and the run-away  
impulse, pooh-poohing dangers, had taken you  
to terrible spots. But, always, you emerged unhurt.  
Ever since the day when, an untrained boy,  
you jumped into the swirling waters. But this time...  
Close on your heels, we, too, would've fallen,  
had we not, dithering, stopped on the brink.  
Do not panic. You aren't too deep in the mire;  
nor beyond rescue's limits. Here I stretch  
my hand, warm, as ever. Hold it tight. Here,  
we cling together to pull you back to safety.

## IMMERSION

Down the steps  
of a slow river,  
skirting the temple,  
amidst the flotsam  
of faded flowers,  
sad-faced men,  
waist-deep  
in dark water,  
immersing,  
with shaking hands,  
unbaked pots



*M. Mohankumar*

of washed bones  
and bits of gold.

Close by,  
on the left,  
bare-bodied men  
wading  
and plunging in,  
brazen-faced-  
groping  
for the gold.

On the bank  
knots of men  
and women  
staring on  
vacantly.

**Endnotes:**

1 *Sabdaveda*: knowledge of sound. Dasaratha had the ability to shoot down an object by the sound it makes.

2 Crematorium maintained by Thiruvananthapuram Corporation

## SANDEEP BHATNAGAR

### PRAYERS FOR THE DYING

**Introduction:** It is the aftermath of the great war depicted in the epic *Mahabharat*. It is now time for the winners to celebrate and write their version of history.

(1)

For days the sun has refused to rise or set,  
The sky is suspended in perpetual twilight.  
No birds or breeze to soothe paralysed minds,  
Only the silence of people who  
Have forgotten how to pray.

The sea too is still, no waves break  
Upon the rocks, no cries of seagulls.  
Far off on the horizon, a lone white albatross  
Spreads its wings and prepares to fly away.

(2)

The streets are deserted; an eerie silence fills the air.  
Splinters from smashed windshields and soda  
Water bottles are sprinkled all over.  
Few places are lit, fear skulks in alleyways;  
Broken lamps throw dim shadows, the moon's hid  
Behind dark clouds of smoke: soon the sirens will  
Wail & the curfew will begin.

Rats scurry, bloated with excess;  
Crows and other scavenger birds drag around  
Long pieces of bleeding flesh in their beaks.  
Dogs range the streets in packs:  
Claw & tooth demarcate territories.

*Sandeep Bhatnagar*

Windows of homes are barred and blackened,  
Shops have rough iron shutters.  
There is no noise, other than the scampering  
Of rats & the snarling of dogs engaged in  
Furious duels over who should have what.

It is Sunday, yet no bells ring out  
And no calls for prayer.

O stars that still care enough  
To shine in the dark like beacons of hope  
Teach us to pray for the dead  
And those of us who have  
Yet to complete the process of dying.

#### YUDHISTHRA<sup>1</sup>

I who answered the eternal question  
The spirit of the pool put to me,  
Now feel the creaking of my own spirit,  
Weary of one lie too many  
At this darkest of hours,  
Darkness, un-pierced by the  
Rays of morning sunlight.  
It persists and will  
Continue to persist for  
Eons till the sun collapses, some  
7.9492 million years from now.

How many worlds like ours  
Have been dragged away unwilling

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From their orbits by swollen suns?  
How many suns have collapsed  
Within themselves to nothingness?  
Yet the emptiness of time  
Swirling in a vortex is more  
Full than the emptiness within  
Me: stronger than vacuum,  
Emptyer than a galaxy deserted  
By hope.

Alone, I grope in the darkness  
For my scepter.

## BHISHMA<sup>2</sup>

Making a promise is easy,  
The glory of the spoken word  
Uttered in haste. Forced by fate,  
A lustful father & my own folly,  
I raised two generations of  
Misfits. Found them wives, fought  
Their wars, nursed them in ill health  
Condoned their weaknesses.

Now around me the fires of a million  
Pyres smoulder in the setting sun.  
Flames crackle to cook flesh  
For vermin to feed on.  
All that is left of moments past  
Are ashes blown about by an evil wind.

*Sandeep Bhatnagar*

Tomorrow will be no different,  
The sunset will still be blood red,  
Carrion birds satiated will still circle overhead,  
More from habit than  
In search for a new meal.

### BHIMA<sup>3</sup>

What does one do after he  
Has drunk the blood  
Of his enemies?  
Search out new ones?  
Scorn, hatred and treachery  
Have dried the blood in the  
Gnarled veins of our land.

The dying moon hovers uncertainly  
Above us as twilight tries to set in.  
A twilight from which our  
Land will never emerge.  
The stars still manage to shine  
But they too will soon be snuffed out.  
Darkness will reign.  
Darkness of the unholy night,  
A night from which we will never  
Awaken.

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

ASHWATHAMA<sup>4</sup>

Were it only the darkness  
I would not mind.  
Pure unblemished emptiness  
With the promise of morning light.  
Anything, anything but this  
Eternal twilight where the sun  
Has forgotten how to rise or set

And time has halted in mid-flight.  
Owls shriek, widows wail, winds howl  
And yet the hour refuses to pass.

Emptiness of the setting sun  
Embrace me in your solitude.  
I who have held the destruction  
Of the universe in my hands  
Seek the redemption of the  
Funeral pyre.

So many pyres rage unchecked  
Around me--  
And yet none is mine.

FARMER

Yes, I know it's my sacred duty to die,  
Part of my *karma*.  
But can I not wait till my cow calves?  
Better still, let me till my land,  
For the skies promise a good rain.  
Once the harvesting is done,  
I will follow you.

Yes, indeed I will.  
I have still my loan to repay,  
Else I will lose my land.  
Yes, last year, when the river  
Ran dry (You must have seen it on the TV news!),  
I took a loan  
And now I must repay it.

After that I will follow you  
Wherever you want: Siachen,  
Gilgit, the Rann of Kutch,  
Across the seas, over deserts,  
Wherever,  
Just let me plow my fields till  
the rains begin.

Then, I will follow you.  
Indeed I will!

SCRIBE

Now that we have emptied  
A million wombs,  
Robbed time of her progeny,  
Frozen the moment in eternal twilight,  
Emptied the oceans and filled  
The skies with fearsome cries,  
We must search for the right words,  
So that those who come after us  
Will understand that this was  
The way it was all meant to be.

Trains screech back and forth  
With scarred bodies no one  
Wishes to claim. Never mind,  
Fire rejects no one and  
The rest we can bury elsewhere.

Scatter the ashes  
To the winds, let them carry  
Over fields now fallow, cracked  
By draught, awaiting the rains  
That have to come, just have to come.



## EPILOGUE

No, it doesn't take nature long  
To reclaim all she has lost:  
Creepers will soon cover every  
Cracked and crumbling structure,  
Trees with long probing roots  
Will sprout among the debris of  
Banks, libraries and municipal buildings.  
Brick and stone will return to the earth.

Rains will wash away the shame  
and humiliation of victory.

No, it doesn't take nature long  
To reclaim all that has been lost.  
But can the rains bring hope and replenish  
Our faith? Can we ever learn to forgive  
And forget? Will the victors ever learn to ask  
For forgiveness and the defeated learn to forgive?  
Will we ever learn how to pray for the dead  
And those who have yet to complete  
The process of dying?

*Endnotes*

- 1 Yudhishtira, the eldest of the five Pandavas, was supposed to be the son of Yama, the god of death and *dharma* (the path of righteousness). Yama, in the guise of a water spirit, put certain philosophical questions to Yudhishtira, who answered them correctly and hence brought his brothers back to life. Yudhishtira, however, was compelled to lie during the great war in order to get rid of his guru Dronacharya, who was in command of the opposing army. This untruth led to the death of Donacharya and tarnished Yudhishtira's unblemished record as an apostle of truth.
- 2 Bhishma (or Bhishmapitamaha) was the son of King Santanu and the sacred river Ganga. In order to win the hand of a new wife for his lonely father, he had vowed never to marry, so that the progeny of his stepmother would inherit his father's kingdom. "Bhishma" literally means one who has undertaken a terrible oath. His real name was Devarata. Arguably, this act of renunciation was responsible for the events that lead to the tragic war portrayed in the *Mahabharat*.
- 3 Bhima, the second of the five Pandavas, had vowed to drink the blood of his cousin Dushasana, who had attempted to disrobe his wife Draupadi. During the ensuing war, Bhima managed to fulfill his terrible vow.
- 4 Ashwathama was the son of guru Dronacharya. He was condemned to eternal life by Lord Krishna because he had misused the Brhamastra, the ultimate weapon of destruction.

## SHANTA ACHARYA

### DID YOU KNOW?

A tiger doesn't kill because it cares not for  
its prey's religion, politics, sexuality or skin colour.

The sea does not rise in a tsunami to teach others a lesson.  
A plague kills every one in a village, a fire destroys a town.

It is not a war waged by viruses, nor revenge  
sought by the elements upon a town's inhabitants.

The sky does not send rain and hailstorms, lightning and thunder  
for the fun of frightening creatures, seeing them suffer.

The earth does not shake and crack up because it feels like it.  
The wilderness is present every where without knowing it.

Snakes do not bite because we cast them as evil in the Bible;  
they hiss and attack only when threatened just like any other animal.

A volcano does not erupt because it is angry with its neighbour,  
but when its insides buckle, events it has no control over.

The sun does not fake sickness, nor does the moon take a day off work.  
The stars do not go on a walkabout; the earth does not go on strike.

Butterflies taste with their feet, crocodiles can't stick their tongues out.  
That what we don't know is infinitely more than what we do!

The camel smiles because it knows all the names of Allah.

A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer.  
It sings because it has a song...

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## FIND YOUR LEVEL

The sliver of a stream sliding  
down mountains, gathering  
pace, confidence  
bouncing up boulders  
disappearing into crevices  
crawling beneath fecund foliage  
exploring the landscape of her birth--

The glacier's head where the sun sits smoking  
idly all day long watching the world--

Rehearsing to rock and roll  
over scree, mud, clay, hills and falls  
running faster to keep her spirits up:

*If you wish to go fast you must go alone*  
she hums as she skips along.

A river in full spate later, she surveys  
her tributaries spread across vast plains  
swollen by their siblings' strength,  
as they meet, part and meet again,  
powerful currents moving in symphony.

*If you want to go far travel with others*  
they sing in chorus holding hands.

At the confluence cross-currents coexist,  
the many rivers merge in a mystical marriage  
flowing as one mighty river rich with inheritance.

*Shanta Acharya*

The memory of her mother's song echoes  
in her veins as she flows finally into the sea--

*Fed by earth and sky, buffeted by fire and air,  
learn to overcome loneliness, find your level.*

## HUNGER

The gecko's progress across the ceiling--  
scaly limbs defying gravity,  
eyes fixed on its prize hypnotised--

Is matched by the speckled moth's nervous  
dance on the fluorescent light-bar.

I watch mesmerised waiting for a taxi  
to take me to the Siddhi Vinayak Temple.

The wild life programme on television  
hones in on a cheetah chasing a gazelle,  
the cheetah swiftly walks away with its kill.

The neighbour's dog lunges towards me barking  
as I walk past the entrance to a decrepit car.

Dark, sunken, hungry eyes peer at me  
behind the closed, tinted window screens  
each time the taxi stops at traffic lights;

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Time enough for mother and child to gesture  
for alms, palms rising in unending salaams.  
I hand out ten rupees, in an instant the car gets  
mobbed with myriad hungry eyes.

Across the road a life-sized poster sells dreams,  
an actor gazes fondly into the eyes of his beloved  
their lips barely touching as they clasp each other.

Near the temple an emaciated devotee  
crawls across the tarmac penitent for his sins--  
a caterpillar crossing from leaf to leaf  
declaring eternal hunger for His love and mercy.

I join the evening queue for *darshan*,  
my hands laden with flowers, earthen lamps, offerings.

*It is Divine hunger, this Creation...*

I overhear a conversation about Darwin and evolution,  
the meaning of life and religion, Higgs boson,  
in answer to the question: "*What is maya, illusion?*"

*Shanta Acharya*

## JUST WANTED

*Just wanted to say... I ....*

You interrupted me with a wave  
of your hand, as if to say:

“You don’t have to say it, yet...  
We barely know each other; we’ve only just met.”

Which you did! And I said:  
*What’s wrong with saying it to friends?*

To which you responded incredulously:  
“You say it to all your friends?”

*Yes, I say it to all my friends--*

“You do? Perhaps, you don’t mean it?  
I mean... not in the same way?”

*Of course, I mean it; why else say it !*

“Well, what can I say--  
thought things between us were special.”

*Yes, they are; that’s why I want to say it.*

“Say it as if you mean it.”

*I’ll do my best*, I said flushing my winter  
throat with mulled wine and Xmas cheer--

*Here’s wishing you a very Happy New Year!!*

## INFINITY OF RED

Red lips    blushing cheeks

Desire blazing like autumnal leaves  
red maple    honey    amber    russet    scarlet

Colour of magic    passion    purity  
flowers of the *gulmohur* tree    flame of the forest  
fields of poppies    bouquet of red roses

Crimson ivy    hibiscus    fuchsia    peonies  
pomegranate seeds scattering like rubies  
red cedar    sandalwood    dogwood    magnolia  
cherries    radish    red cabbage    tomatoes    chillies

Red button in the Mandarin's cap  
ruby    garnet    rose quartz    cornelian  
red cap    revolutionist    bohemian  
red tincture    Philosopher's stone    colour of Aries  
Judas' hair    Beefeater man    red lattice phrases

Red herring    Red Sea    Red Indian  
Red Cross    peace    neutrality    blood banks  
children dying of AIDS    HIV    blood diamonds  
red in heraldry    Red Devils    fortitude    endurance  
red light    red flag    danger signal  
red light district    brothel    Cupid    Devil

Red blooded man    anaemic woman  
low haemoglobin    iron    menses  
red rag    bullfight    red cape    Little Red Riding Hood



*Shanta Acharya*

red dragon   red ants   crabs   lobsters   scorpions  
red flags   countries in the red   bound in red tape  
red box of the Chancellor of the Exchequer  
caught red handed   red faced like a monkey

Shades of red in earth   sky   sunrise   sunset  
red planet   Mars   erupting volcano   lava  
smouldering embers   logs of fire in the hearth  
Christmas   gifts wrapped in tinsel red   sprigs of holly  
red berries   red snow   coral reefs on the sea bed  
red squirrel   red kite   red fox   Red Sox  
redbrick   Terracotta Army   Red City   red turbans  
stockings   red suspenders   redneck City traders

Painting the town red   Valentine Day's heart  
campari   port   red wine   tea   beer  
redness of curry   tandoori   cinnamon   turmeric  
mango   papaya   watermelon   strawberries  
*gulab jamun   gajjar halwa   jalebi   amruti*  
red caviar   roasted meat   red Cuban cigars  
fire engine   telephone booths   pillar boxes   London buses  
deities in red quelling demons   deities healing  
colour of mourning   blood of Christ   Communion

Mary in maroon-red and blue   *The Annunciation*  
*sadhus* in saffron robes   *rudraksha* beads  
Marilyn Monroe's red dress in *Niagara*  
Julia Roberts   *Pretty Woman*   red nails and lipstick  
red carpet   red shoes   red Ferraris  
Indian weddings   red Benarasi silk saris  
vermillion on the bride's forehead   red eyes  
red bangles   *sankha*   hennaed hands and feet  
blood on the sheets   red letter day  
love letters written in blood   bruises   wounds

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## INDIAN SUMMER

The vulnerability of a full blown rose raging  
in my body, I awake in a sweat--flushed, shattered.

Is this nature's way of teaching Time's intransigence,  
this body no more a still life portrait, perfect bowl of fruit?

There is nothing comforting about the clock ticking away,  
just the obscenity of the eternally swinging pendulum.

Kicking off the covers, I try to cool down,  
take deep breaths, massage cold cream on face,  
hands, body; magic potion to ward off nightmares.

I wait for the fever to disappear like a dream;  
the Indian summer of my body, warm like freshly baked bread.  
No lover within the covers; only a blood-sucking mosquito, dead.

Picture of dew on rose buds, invisible writing on the wall,  
that you-cannot-trust-anyone-not-even-God feeling  
banishes sleep from every cell in my body--

Age is ultimately the triumph of matter over mind,  
revenge for the idealistic indiscretions of youth.

'*Must change painting*' I make a mental note adding drops  
of *avena sativa* to half a cup of water, stir and drink.

Gazing upon the blasted rose buds I switch off the lights,  
draw the duvet over my head imagining winters in Antarctica,  
Alaska, Canada, the Himalayas, Lapland, Greenland, Siberia...

## MUKESH WILLIAMS

### CINDRELLA LOVE

Tell me a lie and  
You can sleep with me  
In my Cinderella time  
Give me the magical angle  
Crafted by Chiron  
And my fairy godmother  
And fly me beyond  
Venus, Jupiter and Neptune  
Into the bewitching hour  
Of the obsessive dance and  
Without compunctions  
Assure me that you are  
My perfect soul mate,  
As ordained by the love oracle,  
Then armed with transmogrifying ESL skills  
Ensnare my senses,  
My goodness, grace and kindness,  
In a squirrel-fur embrace  
And before you enter my gateway  
Tease my sorority sisters  
With a foot or crush fetish,  
Persecute them as they have persecuted me,  
And at last  
Conclude the panting moment  
In the golden palace of surreal belief.

## WHEN CELESTIAL BODIES MEET AT NIGHT

When celestial bodies meet at night  
After the claims and subterfuge of the day  
In the soft curvature of the moon  
And reflect upon their responsibilities,  
They abandon their uncertainties  
And yearn to unite with those sensations  
They best remember during the act of creation.

Their perfervid selves sizzle with growing appetite,  
Slide upon the smooth skin of fantasy  
And release those olfactory sensations  
Forcing their tongues into strawberry crevices  
Drawing out the dripping nectar of rosehips  
Singeing their souls with flaming entices  
And extracting the sweet ambrosia of spices.

They continue their explorations,  
Exciting each other from the open night  
To the controlled ambience of the apartment,  
Filling the stars with expectations  
Ascending the staircase into an inebriated wine palace  
Removing the constraints and inhibitions,  
Silencing their fears in regal piety.

When celestial bodies meet in breathless effulgence  
They pantomime intense feelings  
Sucking fervently in rushing half circles  
Upon an ache of entering and withdrawing,  
Pouring their last residues in orgasmic gasps  
And arduously preparing a sweet breakfast  
Of strawberry-rosehips jam on white bread roll.

## ORIGINS

We meet our being at night,  
Confront ourselves against the stars,  
Yearn for some lost beauty  
While looking at the full moon and  
Pity ourselves in camouflaged darkness.

We remember an empyrean loss,  
Something that we left behind,  
During our passage through the womb,  
We seek our limitations in the cosmos  
And are frightened that we are alive.

## TRANSMUTING ETERNITIES

I have travelled into the land of the unknown  
Filled with classical myths and skin desserts,  
And both with friends and alone,  
I have drunk the ambrosia to the lees  
And licked my fingers clean  
Of the sap of shredded seas  
I have belched the satisfaction of a well-lived life.

But when shadows race across familiar beaches  
My tongue is tickled by your lucent braces and  
I hear your voice hesitating in Kantian enclosures  
Procrastinating to choose like Penelope the right moment,  
Daring to confront intrigue with a sharper intrigue,  
Collapsing the moment into yet another eternity and  
Surrendering your well-earned rest for another adventure.

## THE POET AND THE PHILOSOPHER

The poet tells you that  
All those stories about perfect orgasm,  
Orgasmic delight or dream orgasm are not true,  
For you have to first believe in sexual purity,  
In the intensity and goodness of sex  
Then rarify the moment,  
Reckon with yourself, and  
Mount the steps of the pulsating universe  
Only to give pleasure to the other,  
Then receive pleasure in all humility,  
Write about it in erotic detail  
For others to understand your special privilege  
And prepare to die in delight.

The philosopher tells you that  
You are chasing a mirage that  
You have inherited for earlier centuries  
By making the body the site of pleasure  
And there is no perfect sex  
Divorced from power  
For it is all a part of sexuality that arrives to you  
Via the Christian pastoral and the 'bare it all' confessional.  
You have placed the highest value on sex  
And then exchanged it for death,  
Something that is worth dying for.  
The philosopher tells you to throw away  
Both sex and sexuality and prepare to live.

## SIX WAYS TO DELUDE THE HEART

My heart usually does not behave like a dog  
But it gets hungry, barks and throws a tantrum.

First:  
My heart calls to the unknown skies  
But always knows where to go.

Second:  
It wanders through the miseries of the day  
But returns to the piety of companionship.

Third:  
My mind meanders on dusty, dismal paths  
But, when tired, sleeps under the shade.

Fourth:  
My disquieting dreams dart pell-mell in the sky  
But always find a path to return to veracity.

Fifth:  
My heart enters the depths of despondency  
But always surfaces to see the light of day.

Sixth:  
My heart is single, alive and residual,  
But still needs culpable stories to beguile.

The Moral:  
Let sleeping hearts lie under the table  
But pacify them with crumbs of simulacra.

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## APRIL SAKURA

We admire the evanescent malice  
Of intense beauty as it emerges companionless  
From the darkness  
Asserting its pretentious grandeur  
In smug silence,

But we think nothing  
Of the fragile loveliness of the sakura  
Escaping the ivory darkness of its branches  
And leafless, burning pink in the sun  
Without clemency.

## WE PRAISE THEE, O SHIVA!

We acknowledge thy trident glory  
We repeat thy convoluted story  
You dance the tandava upon maya  
You are our conduct, our vinaya  
From Mount Kailash to all the oceans  
We worship thee according to our portion  
All the deities, male and female cry aloud  
Invincible, invincible, invincible, O Shiva!

The heavens and the earth are reflected in thy power  
You surround us, comfort us, sustain us every hour  
O Shiva in you we trust,  
Auspicious, kind and gracious lord the first  
The three-eyed ruler with the crescent moon  
Assuage our worries and grant us an abiding boon  
Chandrasekhara, Neelakanth, Kapardin, Gangadhara.  
Do not confound us, O Shiva!



## MANINDER KAUR

### TAKE ME AGAIN

o life!  
take me again  
to that bank  
where heart learnt  
to quiver,  
the world  
of my love  
from where came  
all restlessness,  
where dreams sleep  
where youth deserted  
where sparkle  
signs of devotion,  
my joys and sorrows  
dwell  
embedded in  
those footprints,  
bring that sand  
whose each particle  
shines with love,  
even today  
behind  
pomegranate flowers  
he waits,  
the place  
filled with his light  
beckons me.  
o life!  
take me again  
into that presence...

## BEING LONELY

no greater torment  
in God's earthly hell  
than  
that of being lonely..  
abandoned self, deserted soul  
dead empty heart,  
life  
ruled by delusions,  
an open tomb  
a page torn from a book  
weariness settled in veins  
like molten lead  
every breath shows  
faces of hell and death..  
tears and distress  
in unseeing eyes  
a world  
fraught with perils,  
waiting for  
sublime weather,  
a calm reassuring wind..  
though exhausted  
still  
we can't give up  
o God!  
in your infinite compassion  
have mercy,  
help  
in the journey of  
self to Self.

## DISTANCE

in distance  
there is pain  
whether from  
love or hope  
god or shore,  
at times you continue  
walking  
all life  
still it goes on  
increasing  
wrapping you  
in cold aloofness,  
endless dark path  
with no night  
in sight...  
o heart!  
don't give up!  
His grace  
will change  
the seasons  
from brown to leafy green  
the course of stars  
hues of sky  
and you'll realize  
how near is  
the dawn of dreams...

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## JUST TURN AND LOOK

this night  
this moonlight  
when will it come again!  
listen to the call of heart!  
moonlight sleeps  
on tree branches  
it's lost in your thoughts,  
currents sing soft songs  
wet winds contain  
cold fire,  
like me  
burn in this fire  
change the music of life,  
spring is going  
so is youth,  
sing love tones  
in shadows of sleepy leaves  
while life is,  
caravans of spring call you  
just turn and look...

## ART OF DYING

death will silence  
songs of longing  
withering worries  
dry the flowers  
make one forget  
betrayals and resentment

*Maninder Kaur*

turning  
poison into sweetness  
chains into liberation  
if  
tears, anger, hate  
are left behind,  
body perishes  
soul flies away  
brain dies  
mind continues!  
take along  
compassion  
goodness  
gratitude  
love,  
the true companions!  
when  
transforming time comes  
carry  
wholesome deeds  
pure mind  
composure  
calmness!  
only the silent mind  
takes you  
to a new life of  
love, wisdom, light...

## HOSHANG MERCHANT

### GHALIB CANTO

*(for Meena Alexander)*

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery  
—Wilde

Here, in a season of thorns  
a season of storm  
a season of gibbets  
I remember you, Ghalib  
I see you swinging from the gibbet  
(though flattery saved you)  
Your home now, a coal-depot  
(they blackened their own faces, not yours)  
I see you digging up a fresh grave  
They have buried music deep, so deep

It'll never resurrect  
Give up, Ghalib!

I WILL SING FOR YOU  
(and my friend Meena  
Maddened like you  
Sees your wrists sprouting leaves)  
— of song?....

My mother planted a garden  
If I dig at Ballimaran  
I'll come out at the island of Bombay  
If I dig in Bombay I'll come out at Manhattan  
One Walt Whitman sang there about your  
time, Ghalib  
Then Lorca and Meena  
and me

*Hoshang Merchant*

What is my mother doing this fantasy?  
- and Meena's  
Since the British came the mosque became  
Church  
Since Meena's Aramaic grandpa died  
the Church became your tavern  
(a nun recently made it a brothel)  
And since mother died  
I became homeless  
Like Meena  
But she found a nest in your poem  
And in Lorca's  
And I found a nest in her  
'Seeing Majnun in the desert  
my home I remembered  
Lifting stone, Majnun, his head he remembered...'  
Meena sees garden pebbles as mad whirling constellations  
In my pocket I carry a little dust  
(from Pali Hill)  
and a pocket Ghalib...

POEMS: IN MEMORIAM  
(*Kamala Das*)

1  
The grave is always prepared:  
It awaits its guest  
An ample grave, a capacious place  
'She tired of the struggle  
And then she stretched her legs...'

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

2

I did not enter her Circe's cave:  
The grand-kids would've laughed  
at a fag...!

3

My Father's house has many mansions  
Nalapat  
Shimmers as polished teak  
As memory  
Evanescent as women's whispers  
plotting strategy  
Damning as their consequences

4

Another voice  
Another era  
Over the radio: Suraiya...!  
A voice from our mothers' time  
Let me be her now...

5

Another god  
Another Krishna  
Many gopis But only one Radha  
She rows to an island  
In a monsoon storm  
Krishna awaits her Dark as a cloud; her Death.

6

A poet inhabits a house  
Called Poem



*Hoshang Merchant*

When she dies  
She leaves it to others  
To inhabit

7  
I am fire  
I am water  
To the earth I give my baser parts....  
Husband! I come

8  
The worm  
Works its secret ministry  
In the bed or in these streets....

TO GHANSHYAM, TEACHER  
*(After Rilke)*

--And I see your sobbing face  
What was it you were sobbing out?  
The insults your race felt as they dragged  
Cow-carcasses to cobblers  
to be made into shoes for well-shod feet...  
Carcass-dragger    Corpse-handler  
Were they men or corpses who mouthed this?

Then out of the valley  
Came a trough  
Out of the trough, a plateau  
Beyond the plateau a peak

And behind it the light...  
Who lifts the mountain on a fingertip  
And among the stars hangs an A

Have you counted the constellations  
on a starry night?  
Seen Siva's locks streaming on the Milky Way?  
If there is God, then what about chance?  
Everything is chance--  
--But the Friend bestows upon a friend  
a complete world

I thought to be Maestro  
to make invisible music  
But I wielded a novice's club  
Breaking the easles and the jade

And I see your face  
Your radiant face  
Each thing remains:  
Book, chair, window, lamp  
Each thing hand-made, for nothing is free  
Why throw this all away?

Even your ancestors had dignity:  
Valmiki caught the 'kichaka' bird  
Its mate become Lament  
Out of that lament came the Epic  
Viraaaha and Karuna  
Exile and Pity

Your ancestors may not have had honour  
But he had dignity

*Hoshang Merchant*

And his things: Net, arrow, bird-lime, basket  
Rope-tether, awl, hammer, nail    Sandal  
We are but beasts walking on two's  
Our palms turned up to stars

When temples and pyramids  
Kept time of Time  
Now such temples have to be built  
in our hearts

*let such a person go out to his daily work, where  
greatness is lying in ambush and some day at some turn  
will leap upon him and force him to fight for his life.*

WINTER POEM  
*(for Whabiz)*

My sister is light as a shade  
I am my sister's shadow  
My sister had reduced me to a shade  
How do I trace my winter-shadow?  
My sister is light as a gale  
My sister is strong as a whisper  
My sister, tell me, how do I touch a shade  
Sister, tell me, how do I clutch my shadow?  
I am a swift current in the Colorado  
Death, my Mexico  
Life is Death's sister  
Sister Life, my sister, what have you done to me  
your self?

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## IN MARDIN

Snows are thawing this April  
The Tigris is a woman slowly turning in her bed  
The Spring there will be a great birthing  
after all the killing

## IN IZMIR

The Sea is swollen with wind  
Sails roll on the sea like women with portly gait  
This Wind will breathe life into seed

## IN ANATOLIA

The dervish are turning  
What do they know of men/women, boy/girl  
Their skirts pregnant with revolution

The Sun today is whirling  
In the clouds as it has done ages  
Why is it then we wait for peace to fall  
Like an egg from a hen?

## KURDISTAN

(1)

There is a mountain  
That does not sleep  
There is a river  
That does not reach the sea  
There where wheat grows  
Becoming miracle of bread  
Where the moon looks like bread  
To the hungry children:  
How they wish to eat  
The fruits / girls' lips  
light and air!  
They grow old waiting for love  
for Freedom  
the old men nod their heads  
for Yilmaz Guney  
Three horsemen ride across the fields  
They ride dream-horses  
In their sleep inside Turkey's prison

$$(\ddot{11})$$

A shepherd leaves his new bride  
like a new gold coin  
with his old father  
who keeps her under lock and key

tired of waiting  
she takes a lover  
(Love laughs at locks)

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

The old man shoves her into a pig-sty  
She becomes an animal  
Pining for human love

They clean her up  
To meet her husband  
But when he hears of the animal-love fable  
He abandons her to the gathering snows:  
Only snow will wash her clean--  
Her cry rings to the empty sky  
The moon rises a golden coin over the valley

(iii)

Woman is man's burden  
But he weeps when she dies

(iv)

Love is a golden coin kept  
                                  for tomorrow  
the moon rises in a new sky  
like new bread in a round sky

(v)

Three horsemen  
ride freely  
under a free sky

*Hosbang Merchant*

## JAPANESE AIR

I read Neruda  
by lamplight  
after a summer squall  
Fanning myself with a paper-fan  
The fan's slats fall  
In shadows on the page

All the verses of the Americas  
give off an Oriental fragrance on the air...

## RAIN POEMS

(1) Late Winter Rain in New Mexico

Gentle rain  
turning to soft snow

Squirrel under snowed on rock  
Safe as a Zen monk

My sister in her life's last throes  
Wishing a new spring...

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

(2) Moharram Rain in Hyderabad

'It always rains at Moharram'  
—Murtuza, my Shia friend

How will the bloodstains wash  
After how many rains?

The supplicants have bled for the martyrs  
They have thirsted as at Karbala

Then the rains came  
But so did more bloodshed...  
And more rain.

(3) Winter Rain at Kalakshetra, Madras

My Assam musician  
steps out  
His kurta flapping  
his dhoti wrapped tight at his deer-ankles  
His shoes leaky boats

He flees me fast...  
Fright clouds his eye.



MACEDONIA

A petulant boy  
turned around a horse  
and galloped into history

From Olympus the gods looked down  
on this son of a snake-woman  
and a one-eyed man

At Guagemela Darius took fright  
as Alexander laid into his rank and file  
Was murdered  
Alexander gave him a funeral fit for a king

Persepolis burned  
Cursed Alexander! In creating history  
You wiped out my history

Apollonius of Tyra  
learnt from the sages of Sind:  
If everything is soul / Then the body is also in the Soul

When all were vanquished  
He wept  
There were no more worlds to conquer

Everything vanished  
like the love for a boy  
like water in water

I lave my hands in water / I stir the dust of Alexander

## DOMINIC ALAPAT

### RAIN

Outside, there's been a  
slow drizzle all evening.  
The buildings stand wet  
and washed in the light.

Amidst the usual sounds,  
I've been calm all day.  
From my window, I see  
a train slowly moving.

Even the TVs switched  
on in other homes just  
seem to make quiet sounds.

From time to time there  
are the voices of children  
calling out to each other.

Their long shouts to their  
playmates reach me  
here at home.

I think of old monsoons,  
raincoats and wet birds.

Of adventures when I  
first discovered the still  
beauty of pebbles seen  
through clear water.

## NIGHTS IN WINTER

The memories flood you like  
the cosy warmth of the jackets  
we wore on those cold nights.  
The taste of freedom the holidays  
brought lingers in my mind.  
Almost into winter, I think of our  
never-ending childhood games.  
As though we children were  
climbing a mountain of happiness  
without knowing it. When bicycle-riding  
led to cricket, which led to some  
naughty movie at a friend's place.  
How you stepped out of your house  
and things just happened. Today,  
after a day of hectic work at the office  
I think of myself returning home  
after play with my friends. The ball  
bouncing the last few times for the  
day. The lights of my house that I can  
see ahead. Comics. Dinner. Sleep.

## MY OLD HOME

It is painted green and the ceilings are high. There are two sofas in the drawing room, both blue. Between me and my sister, one is mine, one is hers. From the drawing room window in front, you see the badminton court. You can see far into the green and grey of VJTI hostel. From the back windows, you see Adenwalla Road and the *chor* garden of Five Gardens. In my mind's ear, I hear the rising throttle of a speeding motorcycle at night. There is a *neem* tree in the compound with gently swaying leaves through which you see patches of a clear blue sky. The building is two-storied and was built in British times. It is painted lime-washed yellow and has thick arches and pillars that cast shadows on the verandah. It has a sloping roof with beautiful red tiles. Above these the moon and stars floated high up every night.

*Dominic Alapat*

## ACHES AND PAINS

The morning passed by with  
the bones weeping into the  
pages of a withered book.

Even on a day like this when  
the world has been shunted out,  
some old familiars remain.

It's re-run time for them.  
White walls and sounds of  
the TV make the usual blur  
with a dead variety.

Early afternoon marks  
the end of footsteps and  
opening of doors.

At this time, the soft whirring of the  
air conditioner makes  
for an imaginative music.

I think of seas when they are calm.  
Of fishing nets and graveyards.  
And locals calling out to each other  
without making a noise.

**S.A. PRABHAKAR**

**AN OLD STUDENT**

If you can give  
Why do I need to ask?  
If you can open doors  
Why do I need to knock?  
I sit on the porch  
Of the college chapel  
With no prayer,  
No service is on  
All students have gone  
Home, for vacation.  
The gulmohurs  
Bursting into flames  
As if on cue  
Intone the legend  
Above the library entrance  
“Purificatus non consumptus”  
They do not mind me  
An outsider now  
Without a roll number  
Just stopping by  
With a sigh  
They do not ask me  
Why am I here?  
Sitting with a tear  
Thinking of yesteryear  
When there was someone else near.

## DISTANCES

There is no one to call  
Distances are not constant  
For the old and the young  
Or for the same person  
At eighty and eighteen  
Does the snail  
Look around with envy  
At those who move faster?  
Now getting to the door  
Is like a gruelling uphill trek  
How did walking suddenly  
Become climbing?  
You long for the mobility  
Of ghosts with no feet

## SCHOOL

There's no corporal punishment here  
We only scold  
Clip wings  
Shackle twinkling feet  
Blinker eyes  
Freeze smiles on lips  
Choke songs in the throat  
Pluck mercy from the heart  
Tailor dreams  
Outfit lies  
So that when you step out  
You'll fit in

AADI

Like a boy  
Saving his last toffee  
Taking it out  
Of his pocket  
And putting it back  
Torn between  
The now and the later  
Desire and death  
I kept turning over  
Your unopened inland  
So enticingly blue  
In your delicate hand  
Then put it away  
Heart all aflutter  
Like that of a boy  
Receiving his  
First love letter  
This austere month  
Of the wild urchin wind  
That tugs at the clothes  
And rattles windows and doors  
This letter is all  
I'll have of you  
On a lonely, lonely bed  
The Gulf widow  
Only the sleepless know  
The pain of the owl's cry  
The distress call  
Of the distant star  
The loneliness of the migrant



*S.A. Prabhakar*

Flying through the night  
The delusion of the dog  
Chasing the monsters on wheels...  
My beloved you must be  
Now some hours behind me  
Do you know how cold  
This first December is  
Without you beside me  
As you keep reaching for me  
I keep moving away  
In Time's inexorable spin  
My long night will find you  
Awake, empty and smoking  
Or sleeping the sleep of the slave  
While I watch another day break  
Sunless, misty and childless

## GOPIKRISHNAN KOTTOOR

From THE KARUR POEMS  
(Brahma's Town By the River)

### 1. Karur Morning

Far away, the mirage on the road  
Simmers its water-wings.  
A lone plane in the sky  
Is a fish-arc petering down.  
Near the temple, the town god is quiet,  
You can almost feel Him breathing in  
The perfume of the flowers crowding his face.  
Even the temple beggar comes on slow,  
As if his alms would always wait for him.  
We step out into the wilderness  
Waiting like a tame cat.

The morning dust settles, slowly, like tics  
Upon an animal foot tied for slaughter.

### 2. Breakfast Table, Karur Residency

I can understand the cut roses.  
A face, looking up like ET  
As though it would smell the love upon your lips.  
I mean the yellow one,  
The breasted yellow one, with a little tinge of red  
As though if you just as much  
As whispered to it,  
It would turn around and bleed  
All over the breakfast table.

### 3. Karur Temple

The temple priest has all the time in the world.  
He repeats the *sahasranamah*, slowly,  
*Actually*, a hundred times over  
And his God beside listens  
Like a patient disciple.  
A leader duck, with an awkward gait, quacks his commands  
Leading his suicidal followers to the cement pond.  
Quiet, unobtrusive here,  
History, a concubine left behind in a massacred harem,  
Lies in wait  
To repeat itself.

*Sahasranamah : The Lord's Thousand names*

### 4. Karur, Evening

Over the bullocks passing by, the spinning jennies,  
And the only medical shop for miles,  
Glow the red neon of the Residency.  
The chef in the Chin Chin garden  
Surrounded by his bamboo shoots  
Looking like green widows,  
Is cooking up a slow chicken thigh.  
The music of his stove could even be  
A snake hiss under your chair.

Even the wine shop  
Here is redolent.

## 5. Karur - Amaravati River

The spinning wheels churn on,  
Turning fine thread to maiden  
Cloth flowers.  
By Amaravati, the river that knows it all,  
The sun is a limping king  
On his rounds,  
His crown removed from his balding head,  
Wet in between her flowing breasts.

## 6. Raining in Karur

The distance is a moist green frog,  
Wet all over, from the flowing Amaravati.  
The morning is soaking jasmine  
With rain-work upon the petals.

Cool, the butterflies open their wet wings  
Like pared fruit.  
The lone chameleon hugging its thirst  
Is a dark chocolate  
Oozing its camouflage  
In pouring rain.

## 7. Karur Night

Coffee fragrance from the village end.  
The streets are quiet.  
They are lifelines upon the palms of the dead.  
*Mariamamma*, the town goddess, pleased,  
Is preparing for her turmeric  
Red-breasted festival.  
*Madan* in his shrine  
Thrusts out a red-tongue  
His moon sickle-sword flaying  
His necklace of pearl white skulls.  
Without warning  
The lights go off,  
Like the sudden wrath of the Gods.

*Mariamamma and Madan are Village Gods*

## 8. Karur - The Dead Children

It seemed a silent town,  
Until this morning. Now, the red church of St. Theresa  
Is all filled up. Flowers, the red ones with blushing whites in them  
Webbing the air with a wet perfume,  
They are all over the street.

Women surge at the entrance  
Of the Government hospital, with the fury  
Of the wings of honey bees in heat of sting.  
The crowd parts, and the dead children appear,  
One after the other, *the color of expired vaccines*  
*Dyed blue* upon their pretty faces.

### 9. Karur - The Residency Bar

I think it would be worthwhile,  
And climb the steps to the Bar.  
Bottles have the color of lip stuck girls  
With torn butterfly kisses hanging onto their lips.  
Saddles without horses, and pin silver stirrup shine.  
The mood is Texan. It looks like early nineteenth century  
Where the Good, the Bad and the Ugly  
Meet, cowboy guns twirling on dead fingers,  
And the neigh of the last wild west horse fading,  
To the uphill whistle of a drunk log train.

### 10. Karur - Horizon Over Amaravati Bridge

If Ptolemy came down now  
And saw this river,  
Cattle bones, and skulls of our children,  
The broken limbs of our temple girls  
Begging for alms,  
He would hold a piece of bone to his breast,  
And weep,  
As here, upon a low tongue of darkness,  
The raindrops fall,  
Making sword music on the river's dry lute,  
Bringing home gladiator Rome,  
And a splendor of ancient gold sinking down to sea,  
Simmering the horizon's slit sails.

### 11. Karur - By the Amaravati River

The old broken building down there  
Is part of battling history  
With a ruin of dead soldiers names,  
And the river sighs of dead widows  
Waiting by shut windows for loved ones to return.  
The nearby river,  
Rises with tidal kisses  
From the shore's star-lit feet  
Towards the high night seas.  
Now in this eternal forgetting,  
The moon must not boast,  
That it is the only memory  
Of a beloved's name

In the great blue Alzheimer sky.

### 12. Karur - The Descent

Ask Rome.  
And the gold coins buried in the dark for centuries.  
Ask Ptolemy.  
Ask the Sangam Poets.  
Ask Raja Raja Chozhan, Tippu Sultan,  
or the British, who brought the big Fort down  
And as usual built a memorial for the dead.  
They'll tell you the story of a little dancing girl,  
Tip-toe upon the sane bubbles of history  
And of battleships,  
In a handful of beauty.

## ANJANA BASU

# THE WINDING ROAD

The road winds down from the top of the hill  
Past accumulations of memories that unravelled one by one  
leaving bright strands  
Of knitting that don't always smell of sun  
Old man Parekh who lived in the corner house  
Till he dropped his heart and cracked it  
With an NRI daughter sending dollars  
Flocks and flocks of them to stave away winter  
And in the end failing to keep grief from the door  
The nuns at the convent school  
Growing darker by the year and more closeted  
Frightened to talk in case religion lights a flame  
Their black skirts and veils billow burkha like in the wind  
Round a corner one is another as skirts and veils fly  
Who ran to some locked door somewhere  
Further one  
The confectionery man reduced to local date palm sap  
And Cadbury's drinking chocolate  
Murmuring silken dark cocoa tales that arouse only laughter.  
The strands of the mountain stream are a relief  
They braid and unbraid creating their own mirror life  
Water's stories in the hills stay much the same  
A trickle of hope refreshed in spring  
Drying in the summer days and then a brimful chuckle during  
the rains  
The scamper of children running towards a loved one  
And finding nothing but winter's empty hands  
When the taps run dry and brown before ice gnarls them  
That winter morning they stripped young Gurung of his jeans  
And painted his face ink black



*Anjana Basu*

Then let him go waiting for his blood drips to turn to icicles  
He joined the leavers behind him another set of walls  
Echoing with his mother's cries.

When the street inclines its wings and lands sloping on the plain  
Comes some green moment caused by heat  
Trickling through a one horse town holstered and booted  
Of greedy stores and eyes smuggled goods across the counter  
The knitter weaves strands sharply there  
A cardigan of thorned wire perhaps  
That clings close  
The chafe of changing times  
Not those bright rags and tatters

## POETRY LOGIC

Why would a girl steal a duck in the rain?  
No not a duck but those angry white geese  
That they mistake for swans in Bengal  
The ones called the kings of ducks  
This was a story of a wide eyed girl  
Alone at home in the afternoon rain  
Who saw white geese on broad green plains  
All alone  
Under the heavy thunder clouds  
And on an impulse ran out light fingered  
Later she hid her burning blushes in the clouds  
Where the king duck went was history  
Perhaps it flew up to the clouds raining feathers  
Or, more likely

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

Ended on her lover's table  
Poetry ends before reality begins--the poet picks up his  
Twentieth bottle and drains it in a gulp  
His wife hasn't seen him for two days  
So he writes about beautiful duck stealers--  
Pure moonshine

### MAPS OF DREAMS

floating in the blue  
my stomach suspended  
into a little ball  
a map of the world rolled round and round  
where seas flow and the clouds pass across the skies  
till then level  
with my dreams islands of endless sunshine  
wings wide  
floating blue and green a shadow that streams  
across continents and oceans  
undetectable as dreams are  
so easy the flow the flight  
nothing about being force fed through metal detectors  
or things that beep in the night  
Ports of call drift spin  
Lord Jim and his lost kingdoms  
Gilded with the sunshine of his curls  
A treasure map where clouds stand in for waves  
Sink or swim  
That's your dolphin shadow there in front  
And a lost horizon beyond  
Singing a siren's song

## MANU VARGHESE

### RAW LOVE

Adrift on their boat of dreams,  
they walked in silence, hand in hand,  
down the glistening bank of the river,  
gazing wearily at the morning sun  
and listening impassionately to the  
songs of the birds over the chateaus yonder.

The man clasped her waist  
with warmth and care,  
whispered words of comfort,  
looked into her eyes, and found raw love.  
Burning within her was the fire of passion  
like embers in a fireplace.

They sat on the grassy meadows  
with cows and sheep as innocent sentinels.  
An uninvited zephyr brought an unknown  
wild fragrance from the woods nearby,  
soothened their tumultuous spirits,  
and brought forth an exuberance of hope.

The woman peered into his eyes  
and found hope and strength  
embedded deep in his heart  
like studded emeralds on a bracelet.  
Bubbling with love in her heart,  
she kissed his cold lips with fervent passion.

Noon and evening flew  
and they ushered the night in.

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In the crisp, cold winter air,  
they made love under the moonlit sky  
unperturbed by the chirping of crickets  
until the pangs of ecstasy ebbed away.

### WAR IN IRAQ

(Dedicated to the people who have lost their lives  
during the ongoing Second Gulf War)

As dark war clouds gathered over Iraq,  
they arrived in thousands from the West  
in warplanes, men-of-war, and armored vehicles  
with promises of freedom and democracy  
to dethrone Saddam, pride of Tikrit,  
and to broker peace between Arabs and Kurds.

Under the thick mantle of darkness,  
they camped *en masse* along the Iraq-Kuwait border,  
waiting for the final orders from their commanders.  
As the sounds of boots and metals settled  
and as sandstorms rose up darkening the sky,  
they prepared for a bloody dawn.

As the sun rose above the horizon,  
the coalition forces marched forward  
howling like marauding hungry hyenas  
with war planes, tanks, and armored vehicles  
across the desert like iron scorpions  
raining bullets, missiles, and bombs.

As they plundered and ransacked Basra,  
wailing mothers ran amok in sorrow.  
As they pillaged and destroyed Najaf,  
crying children hid inside damaged houses.  
As they stripped Karbala of its ancient glory,  
they were greeted only by the silence of the debris.

As the coalition forces crawled into Mosul,  
and as they laid siege to Baghdad,  
they saw faces of an oppressed people,  
starving, injured, and orphaned children,  
mothers who lost their sons,  
and wives who lost their husbands.

As death stalks the ancient land of Mesopotamia,  
the homeland of patriarch Abraham,  
the cradle of Babylonian civilization,  
the sacred land of Islamic shrines,  
the smell of blood is in the air,  
and peace seems to be a distant dream

With their leader and his followers gone,  
and with vacuum in the heart of the country  
despair, fear, and chaos rule the streets.  
With the spirit of the people crushed  
and their hopes and dreams shattered,  
order seems to be a distant dream.

As the blood of the dead cries out  
to God from the land of Iraq seeking justice,  
the masters and puppeteers in the West  
have many questions to answer  
for thrusting the innocent into an unjust war,  
a crime against God and humanity.

*Kavya Bharati 2009*

## THE URCHINS OF CALANGUTE

As I breathed deep to inhale  
the fresh, salty air of Calangute,  
the silvery waves of the Arabian Sea  
kissed my feet in romantic fervor.  
On the beach played a group of urchins,  
a group of earthly suntanned bodies  
with cherubic smiles on their faces  
tirelessly building perfect castles in mud.  
Their chatter and chuckles, subdued by  
the musical tunes of the seaside zephyr,  
dissolved quietly in the sunshine.  
Passersby glanced at the muddy castles  
categorically turning their attention to  
scantly clad groups of white women.  
The dark little forms of life,  
moved around their castles in glee  
until their ideas transformed into shapes.  
Then they looked at each other  
baring their stained and broken teeth  
and clapped their hands in joy.

## JENNIFER ANDERSON

### KALPAVRIKSHAM OF KERALA

A Malayali can use every part of the coconut tree.

*Leaves* shade Kalari-payattu martial artists,  
adorn *possession dance* costumes,  
are woven into mats, hats, young leaf shoot salad.

Farmers plant tender *fronds* in fields, marking  
completion of rice sewing work.

*Ribs* are scavenged by pedal fishers for traps,  
by kids to play Nooram Kolly games,  
by Aunties for ekel brooms.

*Coir fibre* cleans teeth and rubs rough skin  
from sunned bodies.

*Trunks* are hacked by anyone who can swing  
an axe--for canoes, posts, rafters, fences.

The *shell* of the coconut can be a ladle,  
thondu to store mustard, a bowl to catch latex from rubber trees.

The *whole coconut* is an offering to the Hindu gods,  
the inside an Eden, filled with tender water for drinking,

*Copra*--for sweet Madakku Saan and burfies,  
shredded coconut cabbage, served steaming with rice.

*Oil*--boiled with young shoots to cure scurvy or aging eyes,  
put in lamps for religious rites, or in bottles to blacken hair.

*Coconut cake* for fertilizer and cattle feed.

*Coconut sap*, collected by *toddy tappers*, fermented,  
for a Kallu social drink,

Leaves, fronds, ribs, fibre, trunks, shell, copra, oil, cake, sap,  
Until there is no tree.

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## HOLY RIVER

*Srirangapattana, Mandya District, Karnataka, India (Kaveri River)*

To my left in the Kaveri  
A bare-chested man, washed clean  
By a holier man, wades the water in his mundu,  
Sprinkling the ashes of his cousin.

To my right, men and women circle in coracles  
Like bamboo and buffalo-hide rides at a fair,  
The pinks, blues, greens, and yellows of women's saris  
Swirling the air in a vein of confetti.

The souls of Yamraj's dead lurk beneath the holy water,  
Mouths wide open to cradle the convex Os between their teeth  
While Men and women from above put their hands out,  
Skimming the water as they play in the dust of ashes.



## ARUN SAGAR

### POPPIES

The way Monet saw them, not fields  
but a red river flowing over the hill,  
soaking the ladies' skirts and almost  
drowning the child who wades chest-deep  
behind his mother, his yellow hat floating.  
It is as if he painted a memory:  
the faces blur, the flowers have no shape  
but the medium through which they appear.  
Perhaps the child was himself,  
watched by the grown-up artist's shade  
as it crouched over a canvas, waiting  
for the light to make the field as vivid  
as the one remembered. What memory  
would be sharpest--the stalks scraping  
his knees, the blue parasol that twirled  
against the sky, always out of reach,  
the one flower so bright it blocked his path?  
For it is one thing, one seed that sinks  
Into the mind and grows to wave  
Its redness at us, hoping we will see it.  
But we never do; and so, decades later,  
he may have started out wishing to capture  
the way pines softened on the horizon,  
or the white house that drew sky and earth  
together, before the poppies flooded in  
and channeled the painting away, just as he  
has pulled this poem away to a field  
now growing brighter and more distinct  
than any I have seen, or can remember.

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## SOME DAYS

Some days never seem to truly waken:  
no sun or rain, little traffic, nothing  
but a silence you feel compelled to keep,  
as if the city was a church  
you visited, with remnants of a congregation  
kneeling in the pews while you wander  
curious through the aisles and Gothic arches,  
admiring the stained glass, reading  
along the way of minor martyrdoms you know  
you won't remember, except on some days.

## UNTITLED

For once, start with the idea  
of space. Keep out the images  
of sand dunes, or snow,  
or the widening pupil of the eye  
that looks into your own.

Can it be done? There's  
always enough space to stray into  
the lyrical: thorn bushes, fallen leaves,  
a crack in the landscape

of someone else's words.

SEPTEMBER

On my Friday walk, the park  
brims with the usual  
bits of life, the cypress groves  
and bougainvillea, autumn

sunlight, knitted quilts  
and picnic baskets. A man reads  
a woman's palm, pigeons flap,  
a pit bull terrier blinks

over its muzzle, things retain  
their constant shapes, before  
they ripple through  
my head and float away,

distort, become  
voluminous, as if  
seen through the surface  
of a pool; and now each step

takes me deeper in September,  
and it slows my legs, laps  
my neck, fills every pore  
and pulls me under, while the sun

blurs through this film of water,  
I open my mouth, inhale.

## WORDS

Words are misbehaving  
tonight. Around tables,  
in bars, before large  
audiences, they are slowly  
taking shape and losing  
substance, meaning  
and not meaning. Lovers  
whisper under wide trees  
and on dark terraces, saying  
too much and not saying  
enough, feeling words  
spiral from their mouths  
like rings of smoke. Everywhere  
the spent ink is fading  
from the sheets, the neon signs  
are making magic syllables  
at shopping malls, words  
are creeping into the night  
at traffic lights, metro stations,  
from billboards, digging down  
into the ground, condensing  
on glass panes, blowing draughts  
across bedrooms, fanning faces,  
tickling feet, gently closing eyes,  
touching bare skin, painfully  
appearing, disappearing.

**CYRIL DABYDEEN**

**DAWN: FOUND POEM**

(after *Barack Obama*)

To the east  
The sky lightens  
Above a black  
Grove of trees  
Deep blue  
Then orange  
And creamy yellow

...

The clouds lose  
Their purple tint  
Slowly,  
Then dissipate  
Leaving  
Behind  
A single star

...

We pull out of camp  
And see a caravan  
Of giraffe--  
Their long necks  
At a common slant  
Almost black before  
The rising red sun

...

Strange markings  
Against  
An ancient sky

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

THE OLD MAN  
— *for Barack Obama/*  
*Dreams from My Father*

In the terrain  
what terrain  
what places  
where we never want to be  
    but will be in--  
places where traditions  
are strong/in Kenya/  
or some other place  
    with origins  
that continue to mould us/  
or offsprings with tremor  
in their veins/if the vocal  
    chords only

Being who we are  
because of memory/  
and what will follow next  
in a Luo tribe only/  
    or being a Kiyuyu  
in a long-lost/or remembered  
place/a hinterland or safari  
    merely

But a real homeland/  
mark my words/with tribes  
running haywire it seems like/  
helter skelter/ Livingstone  
Burton and Rhodes/ where  
    are you/or were meant to be

*Cyril Dabydeen*

because of a voice's rasp/or echo  
over time/with Jefferson  
or Lincoln next/so resonant/  
or just across an African desert/  
          or the Indian Ocean/  
something like it/but believing  
with memory intact/and places  
          once forbidden/  
if in America only  
          where we belong/  
in Hawaii/or just  
          Indonesia--  
bringing bones together/  
because of who first lived here  
          who came before us/  
the Old Man no less/  
in whose vocal chords  
you sing to yourself/  
          of truths that are long ago/  
self-evident/  
          nothing less

## RANU UNIYAL

### AHALYA TO RAM

I was once young and beautiful  
Until I turned a stone and hid my forehead  
On the clumsy grass hallowed and brown  
I stumbled and lost my form and face  
I turned my speech into ashes and withheld my sighs.  
How easy to hurt the woman who was cheated by gods!  
Deceit and pride did anger invite  
Such shame and loss is mine.  
Aged with envy, and unmindful distrust  
He crossed my legs and left me with a curse  
Until the gods intervened  
And I came back to life.

But was it the same husband that I aspired for  
The same house with its cropped up mats?  
No, I choose to be a stone than a mate  
To a man whose eyes believed what he could not see  
Yes, I'd rather be a stone that leaves neither aches nor flutters.  
I carry within a heaviness that has curled with the weight  
Of their angry feet and elsewhere sticks like an old habit  
Without form without face and ashes for speech. *Hey Ram!*  
I am now quite uncomfortable with the knowledge  
Of knowing a curse would soon fall on her who  
Stands beside you in these troubled times.



RADHA TO KRISHNA

Come Krishna and be my self  
Dressed in a woman's attire  
How beautiful it is to see my  
Longing for you as I comb my hair  
In front of the mirror

Come Krishna and be my kohl  
Black and brimming with light  
How wonderful it is to read my  
Ecstasy as it beholds the joy of  
Oneness with you

Come Krishna and be my anklet  
Silver embossed and naughty  
How full of tease the tinkle is  
Knowing it will meet you on the  
Banks of Yamuna shielded by cows

Come Krishna and be my scarf  
Ladled with shades of red and green  
How restless as the wind it flows  
Delighted with fragrance of Jasmine  
Feet rush in haste to travel with you

Come Krishna and search me now  
Not by any name or whisper or song  
How futile it is to call me by any  
Name now that I have lost myself  
Please let me know in case you find me.

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

## BETWEEN US

Sometimes it is there a throat full of sadness  
And the knee-deep silence and then I find  
Somewhere a fistful of smiles which you throw at me

Sometimes it is this a yawning fear restless to follow  
It is the lustful terror that rips my bones and suddenly  
You come out, open your arms and I seize the courage

Sometimes it is difficult for me to stretch my faith  
And the rough flesh makes demands that put me to shame  
Swiftly you pull me inside and I, unable to resist, pray

Sometimes it is they who cast me aside in suffering  
And certainty of pain seers the heart inside out  
And on days such as this you lift me high.

Sometimes it is me--my impoverished spirit craving  
And wanting to hold to on to that everlasting joy  
Everywhere, it is you and suddenly no image is without you.

*Ranu Uniyal*

## I AM GAME

Often it is an embarrassment this irresistible longing  
I stand empty handed, a modern savage with an everlasting  
madness.

They took away all that I could have offered to you  
days dripping with happiness, and nights,  
in proud possession of love.  
Dreams played in plenty and there was no dearth of hope.  
Heart content as always waited not wanting to disturb  
a promise that clutched nothing, but you.

Often have I tried to hide the secret, it gushes out.  
Like a lonely woman, anxious for company  
I often see tilting hands as if a mere touch of lust  
is what I am looking for. So foolish are men  
and so little they know of women. Quickly I trace  
my steps, a modern savage with an everlasting madness.  
Back in its place that worn out sign "Do not disturb".  
I set it free my caged smile and chuckle with relief.

**R. RAJ RAO**

THE CANADA ALBUM  
(In Lieu of Photographs)

EXILE

This much for exile:  
You vow never to badmouth  
Your dark motherland.

BIN LADEN

Immigration men  
Grope you as if you were, boy,  
Bin Laden himself!

NORTH AMERICA

North America  
Is just an island between  
Two mighty oceans.

TEMPERATURE

Forty degrees C  
At home. And forty degrees  
F here. I'm on Mars.

LIFE IN THE FLAT

Pacing the long room,  
I use my footsteps to mark  
The passage of time.

*R. Raj Rao*

FOODISM

In the East we have  
Buddhism. Here there's only,  
Hey, man, Foodism.

BEGGARS

The unwashed beggars  
Think of me as one of them.  
Blame it on my jeans.

PIGEONS

She feeds the pigeons,  
Unconcerned about the bird  
That, weak, gets no grain.

THE COLOUR IN MY LIFE

Yellow phone cards. Pink  
Triangles. Orange train lines.  
Green tea and red wine.

HOPE

When the lights come on  
Another bleak day is gone  
And new hope is born.

## STANLEY MOHANDOSS STEPHEN

### DEPARTURE TERMINAL

Dashing around, the international terminal  
at midnight is a sea of faces,  
high-strung, woeful and wan.  
Obviously, the stage is set  
for the drama of exits and entrances.  
A host of relatives hangs over handrails  
to see a single passenger off.  
“Entry barred for visitors due to security reasons”  
shrieks the airport authority’s note,  
depriving the visitors’  
last-minute proximity with passengers.  
No-thing can deter the attention  
Of the spouse who speaks through her eyes  
to the man who has married her  
only to leave her here.  
The fiancée clings to the groom’s shoulders  
saying ‘do not leave me here for long’.  
The child rolls on the floor  
in temper tantrums,  
its own expression of sadness,  
bribed to silence with chocolates.  
The old ones’ eyes are moistened  
to know their grandchildren  
may not be here to light their funeral pyre.  
In all, it’s gloomy, tear-drenched hours,  
at the departure terminal.  
The final tableau is  
The slow return of silent visitors  
to their homes  
and to their own world of mundane matters.

Why are we so emotional  
while we see our dear ones off?  
If it is so for a departure so temporal  
What of the departure that will be final?

T'Zs

Virtually, I live in three time zones.  
The Delhi clock that fritters away is mine,  
Denver and San Jose--  
my children's racing time zones--  
are the other two.  
My desktop displays  
these distant worlds  
as if they were in close proximity.  
How painful it is  
to live away from one's children,  
all the while longing  
to hear their voices on Sundays  
over expensive long distance calls!  
But how can parents clip their wings  
to keep them forever in their nests,  
securing their own lives?  
My parents let me off,  
so need I let the fledglings  
fend for themselves.  
Yet, honest confession has it,  
to live away from one's offspring,  
as family, dismembered,  
is discomfort and loneliness personified.

PATRIARCHS... ONCE\*

The road is slushy with winter showers,  
the inmates throng the gate to greet me.  
This is the patriarchs' last station,  
where they count their days to the grave.  
These erstwhile heads of families,  
powerful at home and office once,  
now the families' used up bags of bones  
await the hour of eternal silence.  
Their woes are manifold:  
some talk of unkind daughters-in-law,  
others complain of filial treachery.  
While widowers prepare to meet  
their wives in Heaven,  
others grieve inconsolably,  
their forced separation from their wives.  
Mothers have been kept at home,  
for the children consider,  
the old woman,  
a better baby sitter, cook  
or domestic than their old man.  
Ironically, the place witnesses the visits  
of truncated families on festival days,  
surfeiting the old men's insipid palates with sweets,  
waiting to know when their last visit will be.  
*The Old yields place to the New.*  
The young have assumed power,  
a home can't hold two heads, it seems,  
else these old men won't be rotting here.  
These weather-beaten King Lears,  
disconsolate at the dea(r)th of loving Cordelias,  
are more sinned against than sinning.

\*response to the pathetic condition of inmates in a 'Home for the Aged'  
meant exclusively for men.



## R.J. KALPANA

### AN ORDINARY DAY

A yellow butterfly alights on the pink rose  
An explosion of pollen throws up  
A heady fragrance of light.

I half turn to leave when  
The scent of remembrance draws  
Another spring, another promise.

### A MOMENT AT A HILL STATION

My train chugs through a tunnel  
Silence weighs us down till  
Light and children's laughter  
Settle the tracks

Puffing smoke clouds up the narrow gauge  
Bends a turn where workers squat  
Hammers and picks at the ready  
Listening intently to soft sidings

Through pine and silver oaks an autumn breeze  
Draws a tribal down selling cups of hot tea  
I stop her to see boarding school kids  
Bracket her smile

The hills smell of tea and green spices  
They are far away, yet I feel wet moss  
I lean against a gnarled tree to wait  
For a lamp to flicker alive

## IF I MAY

If I may have a summer again  
I would select one when I was nine  
If only we could pick and choose our life  
Like so many toppings from Dominos  
But that summer when images held me captive  
A random kidnapping of wishes  
Canvassed by the painter's eye  
Gaudy beach with its line of hawkers  
Mothers, fathers, lovers, silver hairs  
And just the two of us – you and me  
Desperate to hold the moment in wet sands  
We planned the castles, dungeons, turrets  
Feverishly dug complex secret passages  
Escape route from self involved crowds  
Where children can be seen and heard again  
And need not cower under blanketed darkness  
Awaiting the bogeyman to turn nightmares into reality  
We trade seasonal goods like professionals  
I clasp a rainbow hued mussel in my fist  
Leave you with a roaring ocean in your palm.

## SEPARATION

It's not breakfast in bed,  
Flowers or sprouts, smoothie  
Health drink before gym,

Nor is it bulls and bears,  
An all-day ticker-tape news  
Buy-sell before a shave

R.J. Kalpana

It's the clothes in the wardrobe  
Cheerfully nuzzling *Louis Phillipe* and *Versace*  
Shirts and dresses scented alike,

Now a half empty wardrobe  
Here a dangling button, there a frayed lace  
Lingering smell of moths.

## RAPUNZEL

Don't let your hair down,  
Are you crazy girl?

Men know you are there  
Locked in your ivory tower  
They pause to calculate  
The risks worth your virginity

One man braves the silken snare  
Seeds your body with pleasure  
Till memory screams pain  
And your body snaps shut

He leaves trailing your juices  
Leaving bushes matted with borrowed love  
Your uncoiled tresses trail listlessly  
With new found knowledge

Put up your hair, you crazy girl.  
Or maybe not.

**C.N. SRINATH**

NIAGARA FALLS

I

They say heavens don't fall  
But when Niagara falls  
Everything falls, falls.  
At the feet of Niagara on a Canadian boat--  
It's like Ganga in plaits falling girlish in rainbow ribbons,  
Then roaring down like amazon  
Water--smoke rising as incense from bowels of earth  
While Shiva had winked at the earthlings  
And let Niagara fall.

II

Come, Niagara, stop and have a chat  
Your glory of height is soon a fall  
Don't roar but whisper to me, sojourner from your sister's land--  
waiting for the day when you can ease your limbs  
And flow, flow till the end of the earth like Ganga?  
Better look for your Shiva soon!  
No, fall Niagara, fall on my parched heart, you Maid of Mist  
I am caught in your horseshoe heart.

(September 16, 1990 St. Catherine)

*C.N. Srinath*

## DROP-OUT AT VILLAGE SCHOOL

He remembered his grandfather good at keeping accounts  
when the maths teacher in school under the tamarind tree  
repeated Pythagoras twice.

Alexander and Aristotle crowded in his memory,  
Tigris and Nile did not wet his loin-cloth  
While the local goddess had a menacing sway  
over his tiny frame, ministering to his  
periodical rise and fall of health.

The hills around, river, fruits, cattle of his own village  
all were rural orphans sternly kept outside.  
School and village never mixed, like water and oil.

He had to make a living, or rather, his lonely mother insisted.  
He too loved the freedom and tingling breeze  
while driving cattle.

## POOVAN MURUGESAN

### THE MEANING OF LIFE

During lunch, over a greasy burger  
and the forbidden milkshake  
I contemplate the meaning of life.  
Work and bills with a weekend  
baseball game with the kids,  
an occasional dinner with the wife  
at Steak and Ale and a bonus check  
at Christmas thrown in, it has been  
work and more bills week after week.  
Is there anything else in life?

Then an idea came to me.  
It's a week from September  
and all the summer stuff--  
sleeveless T'shirts, tank tops,  
cutoffs, sandals must go  
on sale and out of the store.

With the afternoon's agenda in place  
I walk back to work proudly  
through the clouds of a vision--a promotion  
to manage at PC Timmy's.

*Poovan Murugesan*

## THE JOY OF A SALE

Eight cases of Dixie Cola  
sitting in a corner in the garage  
for over three months  
may end up in the gutter,  
the bottles in the recycling bin.  
Nobody I know of drinks Dixie Cola.

A high-octane caffeine kick,  
a squeeze of citric after-taste  
and a lack of sugar buzz  
may go well with pork rinds  
but not with a burger.

A fantastic sale at Erin-Mart--  
buy one, get three free--  
wasn't easy to pass up.

## R. HEMA

### THE TABLE

The table is betwixt us;  
An angry 'you' resting your face  
On elbows; you do not see me  
Nor the food cooling on the plate;  
Potato finger chips specially roasted  
Cauliflowers floating in the soup;  
Have I upset you really?  
A few slips of the tongue  
Unintentional as you stepped in.  
I put on this pink sari,  
Jasmines on the plaited hair,  
Smiles too on the eager lips;  
I only watch you in silence  
Lest any more words of mine  
Should sour our relationship.  
Your anger will evaporate.  
Let me lock my fingers in yours,  
Wipe away the sweat on your brows.  
Shall I gently massage your hair  
And sing a lilting melody?  
The table is betwixt us.



## THE DOOR

The door was open.  
Mango leaves festooned the top frame  
Plantain saplings ornamented the sides  
Rangoli designs on the vermillion base.  
I stepped in right foot first  
My anklets clinking in rhythmic chimes  
Toe rings seeming to loose a wee bit;  
Carefully tucking my pendent plait;  
Permeating a perfume of incense sticks;  
Homogeneous chatter of unfamiliar voices;  
Jasmines and turmeric rice strewed;  
Silver zari hung upon the settee.  
Blue conch flowers gleamed like sapphires.  
Kumkum was smeared on my forehead  
At the parting of hair; jumkis swung.  
Clasping the ends of my rustling sari  
I tingled, perspired and discovered myself  
Lone, fluttering; face to face  
With manhood oozing out of every pore;  
Rainbow colours cascaded in the gloaming  
The door was closed.

## ASHA VISWAS

### DEATH

Life is a waiting in a between  
that unites thought and its release.  
Death is a thought without being thought,  
An unuttered word, a slip of tongue.  
It is woven from the threads of traces  
of Truth, a beyond and beneath,  
outside of time, an eraser of self,  
A disappearance of appearance.  
It is a sound that never resounds,  
An absence that cancels presence,  
An infinite circle of come and go.

### EDGES OF LIFE

In this slum of the holy city,  
named after a saint,  
there is a reek of 'beedi' smoke  
mixed with cowdung  
and giggling of girls.  
A teenager exchanges  
obscene instructions  
in human passion,  
while a six year old  
picks discarded cigarette butts.  
Men, too old to be of any use,  
narrate who eloped with whom  
last Sunday night.  
If you feel bored by the banal scene  
come to the Ganges  
and transform the edges of life  
into frames of white space  
till they turn black again.

**BINDU KRISHNAN**

**A CAT OF ONE'S OWN**

Loneliness is a one-eyed cat,  
You said.  
It has been with you for quite some time.  
You are always on the run  
Lest it catches you.  
You laugh so often  
Hoping to frighten it.

Yeah, you guessed right  
I have one too, this one eyed cat  
Black in colour, stays in the corner  
Staring at me all the time  
Under its hypnotic gaze  
I move in slow motion  
Even my blood turns viscous  
Hesitant to flow  
And I don't know how to laugh  
To frighten it away either

If we fall in love with each other  
Both the cats may die,  
You suggest.

No,  
I think chances are more  
That they too may mate  
And have many kittens

Doubt it?  
Just ask your cat where it came from  
It will look back  
Follow its gaze  
And you will find, standing,  
Your love--pale and worn out.

*(Translated from the original Malayalam by the poet)*

## K.G. SANKARA PILLAI

*K.G. Sankara Pillai, a well known Malayalam poet, has three collections of poetry to his credit. He is a recipient of the Awards of the Sahitya Akademi, and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, and many others.*

### QUALITY

What if you change your mind  
When you get a transfer, sir?  
What if you forget everything  
Just like Moithu sir did last year?  
“Memory is a crying woman  
Forgetfulness, a crooked man”  
You used to say that, right?  
And that Dushyantha is not straight

No I can't  
Waste my time  
Can't burn my heart  
Over anymore  
Recalling the “sweet” calls  
Recalling the honey-dripped words  
Realizing the terrible betrayals  
Can't cry in a corner  
Not any more.

Tomorrow  
If you too go away  
And forget everything,  
You may think  
I will  
Jump into the river,  
Hang myself,

*K.G. Sankara Pillai*

Or wither away as a KG teacher  
Watching the blazing future  
From a one-door room

Ha! No such hopes sir  
Today  
We will row the boat  
Together

*(Translated from the original Malayalam by Bindu Krishnan)*

## PREMNARAYAN NATH

*Premnarayan Nath* has published five collections of his Assamese poems. He currently resides in Guwahati working for State Bank of India.

(1)

One day at Auswitch  
Summer descended  
The sky and the earth  
Shifted from their places  
The smoke of clamour darkened people  
One day at Auswitch

None had ever come to weep after all  
The hot rocks turned into engravings  
By their weeping  
People's blood blackened on the petals  
One day at Auswitch  
The diary was penned with tears  
A page of black history  
God was shackled in the concentration camp  
One day at Auswitch

Time turned into a dungeon  
The country into a graveyard  
Tears blood wisdom were sentinels  
One day at Auswitch

The birds forgot to sing upon the trees  
The trees forgot to cause bloom in the fullness of Spring  
The grasses forgot to smear themselves with green  
One day at Auswitch

Savants stooped in shame  
Poets painters  
With wounds counteracts forever  
People grew dumb  
One day at Auswitch

(2)

Yesterday is where I belonged to  
Yesterday I'd been in the ration shop's queue  
Yesterday I was a pedestrian of the pavement  
Yesterday I exchanged with many a mate  
    News reports of misfortunes  
Yesterday the night came drenched in rain  
Yesterday I thought I'd uproot  
    the subterranean lands of darkness  
Yesterday I saw thunder lightning  
    clustered in the clouds  
Yesterday thousands of springs settled  
    On the unsullied bosom of flowers  
Yesterday I saw the soothing charm of an innocent morn  
    The afternoon's inertness after traversing the sun's  
adolescence  
    The speechless evening a grave after the tumult  
Yesterday I opened my wings  
    after a melodic dream  
Yesterday my body was ablaze  
    Incessant burning of hunger  
    Flames blue and red  
Yesterday a new day that came  
    After cremating the sun  
    Merged into my age

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

Yesterday I embraced as my own  
    Dreams brimming in my heart  
    In tears brimming in my heart  
Yesterday I saw the evening inebriated  
Yesterday I saw the saliva of greed spilling out  
From the mouth of an old yellow-toothed tiger  
Yesterday I saw rocks splitting  
From the body of a massive hill  
Yesterday the woes of existence flowed  
As a Ganges of the nether-world  
Yesterday I hadn't any life in me to let the flow on  
And now I languish on the cemetery by the Kolong

(3)

I've disclosed only before you don't leak it out  
If the king comes to know we've had it

The fact keeps flowing with people  
In every mouth stuck to the tongue

The fact traversed with the people  
Walls bridges woods deserts so many

To whatever extent wherever it lies  
The incorporeal fact amid the winds  
The fact is about the king being in the nude  
His splendid look even without clothes

The people keep whispering about the fact  
I've disclosed only before you don't leak it out



(4)

Your heart and mine  
Two halves of a pumpkin  
Let them be red forever

Your affection and mine  
Henna-hued  
Let it conceal under leaves forever

An endearing hen  
Yours and mine  
Let it lay golden eggs forever

Your words and mine  
Akin to reality  
Stay hot in the heat of blood forever

In your hands and mine  
Twenty silver coins  
We keep in the chest forever

Your hopes and mine  
Akin to the sky  
Countless pearls glitter forever

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

(5)

We entreat you to come  
And have your food  
Your last repast

Whether you be  
Light or darkness  
We call you shouting aloud  
At this dead of the night

Yours words just words  
Are kept in a cuddle in our tongues  
The eyes moisten with the dialect of tears

All others are at their places  
None have gone for alternations  
The alert stars have been witnesses  
Touching embracing this life and the next

The earth is your mother  
Whether you be  
Wind or silence  
Come and have your food  
Your last repast.

*(Translated from the original Assamese by Krishna Dulal Barnab)*

## NIMA YUSHIJ

*Nima Yushij also called Nima, was a contemporary Tabarian and Persian poet who started the she'r-no (new poetry) trend in Iran. He is considered the father of modern Persian poetry.*

### PHOENIX ('Coucnous')

Phoenix! Bird of fine song  
Famous in all the world  
Homeless in the cold wind  
on the bamboo tree  
sitting alone  
Other birds sit around in trees  
From far away come a hundred moans  
The phoenix plaits them together  
The moans are lost in space  
The clouds are a dark line on the mountain  
The phoenix builds walls of an imaginary house in the clouds

The sun loses its light on the sea-waves  
And the jackal's cry rises from the sea-shore  
The peasant puts a fire in his house  
And these small flames line night's two huge eyes  
Far away  
People are walking up and down  
The Phoenix rare and hidden  
flies up from his place  
And in the long night he passes through light and darkness  
He sees only one flame

There is no plant or grass  
Light shines on the stone and scatters the stone  
This earth and life are no good

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

The Phoenix's desires are smoke-dark  
Its hope in others' eyes is a raging fire; a white morning  
All the birds eat and sleep well  
But the phoenix rises up

The phoenix that sings well  
rises from fire that now rages like Hell  
He surveys all from atop a hill  
And sits and sits and flaps its wings  
Moans deeply from within his heart  
which the common birds do not understand  
And from sorrow immolates itself  
A strong wind:  
Is the Phoenix burnt?  
It gathers the ashes  
to birth anew its brood.

*(Translated from the original Farsi by Hoshang Merchant)*

## THE ROOSTER

Cocorico the rooster sings  
From the very quiet village  
From a road which is a dry vein  
The song pumps blood into the dead

Through his songs rises the cold morning air  
The grass greens and comes alive  
Through his song he brings the good news of dawn  
Through song he shows the caravan its way

*Nima Yushij*

The rooster treads softly  
sings well  
flaps its wings  
and spreads them

His voice rings like the caravan's bell  
That every caravan wishes to hear  
In this dark road he cries: Cocorico

Who is tired? Who has lost the way?

Because of his good songs  
Winter's cold turned warm  
His song opened secrets  
And the bright day became brighter

Kiss the dust  
Through the morning that comes early  
and the morning which comes late  
The rooster wants to give his life through singing

Cocorico appears  
The blind night escapes  
At dawn's coming  
Night's evil disappears

The horse rider gallops fast  
While at night his horse reared up from fright  
His morning sneeze  
maps a bright day

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

In this age the road appears  
very bright to his sight  
As the day brightens  
He rides his horse in happiness

Cocorico! The heart and mind opens  
The morning comes and so the rooster sings  
Like the prisoner of night entombed in a grave  
The bird escaped from its cage  
In the forest which is deep and long  
Who is tired? Who stops for breath?

*(Translated from the original Farsi by Hoshang Merchant and Piruz Ariyana)*

**Notes:**

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a military man seized power after a coup (1930's) ending the Qajar Dynasty. He was the father of the last Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Intellectuals saw the Pahlavi Dynasty as a dictatorship. The two 'bird'-poems, 'Phoenix' and 'Rooster' are about – (nationalist) awakening and Resurrection. Ironically, the last Shah's party named itself 'Rastakhiz' (Resurrection).

## KUNTALA KUMARI SABAT

*The following poem by Kuntala Kumari Sabat, a well-known Oriya poet (1901-1938) has been anthologized several times.*

### ODE TO NIGHT-JASMINE

Night-Jasmine!

You are blooming secretly in some distant trees,  
Your fragrance comes floating in the breeze,  
Seated at the window, I look at the newly-risen moon,  
Smiling, it rises in the distant sky.  
Am I dreaming, overwhelmed by emotion!  
As if losing my senses,  
I wander in the land of dreams.  
My vast heart-land is filled with vision;  
Eyes half-closed, I see this vast universe  
Overflowing with loveliness.  
Night-Jasmine, do you pour  
Your nectar of fragrance on it?  
Seated at the window  
At the end of an autumnal day  
My mind is filled with emotion of love.  
Overwhelmed by joy, tears roll down my eyes,  
Chords of my heart ring with heavenly music,  
In a moment I think I am in heaven!  
The day passed in hard tiring labour,  
Worries, disease and sorrow made me suffer;  
As the Sun set slowly in the west,  
Singing the glory of the evening,  
Birds returned to their nests,  
Night smeared darkness on the face of the earth.  
Bedecking the blue sky with their faint smiles  
and shining eyes,

Hundreds of stars appeared, appavelled in brightness.  
Smeared with nectar, the moon rose.  
As if nectar was poured on the earth,  
As if the earth-queen forgot her sorrow!  
Separated from the sun,  
The earth had shed silent tears in the dark,  
Her eyes down, her face sad.  
The moon rose, the moon beam kissed the floor.  
Clad in lovely white, the earth smiled.  
Filled with longings of love,  
Night-Jasmine, you blossomed!

Night-Jasmine!  
In the breeze, your faint fragrance comes floating,  
Secretly, my eager heart is filled with longing!  
As if my sorrows vanish in a moment,  
Many dreams fill my mind in this quietness  
I feel as if I reach heaven in a moment!

Night-Jasmine!  
You are tiny, but filled with so much nectar,  
Who can know the pranks of God,  
It is strange and beyond knowledge!  
You are blooming, hidden amidst leaves,  
Yet your fragrance fills my heart with longings.  
Tell me o flower, who is the artisan  
Who has made you!  
What light, what lovely, what sweet fragrance,  
But with ugly leaves, the jungle appears.  
Beside rough leaves, flower you bloom with qualities.  
Remaining hidden, you enthrall  
The world with your fragrance.  
God creates the great, amidst low ones.  
God has created lotus in the mud,



Inside seashell, He has put pearls.  
Lightning shines in black clouds,  
Black cuckoo owns melodious voice.  
Tiny like you, nothing on earth is worthless.  
Night-Jasmine!  
Your shape I see in imagination,  
Thinking of you, I feel joyous.  
Blossoming for a night, you permeate  
The world with fragrance.  
Your short life has noble ends.  
For being a small one,  
Why should I feel helpless?  
Night-Jasmine!  
I am small, I am poor,  
A speck of dust in the world,  
I cannot think of the vast world.  
Though I am small, my birth is not without goal,  
Eternal end is not decreed in my fate,  
I shall bloom for a night  
And fall down in the morn!  
Night-Jasmine!  
Every day I see you  
Falling at the root of the tree,  
Your white petals covered with dew.  
It seems your fair body is  
Made of crystal and coral,  
Filled with enthralling fragrance.  
What tender, what lovely, what charming growth.  
Gathering you with care, I make a garland.  
Thrilled at your loving touch,  
I put you around my neck.  
I show my affection,

Touching you slowly with my lips.  
You are lifeless,  
How can you know my longings?  
How much I love you  
Secretly in my heart?  
Night-Jasmine!  
I tell you everything,  
Are you alive my friend?  
But my heart suffers pangs of much pain.  
On my own I tell you to listen,  
Only you know flower  
Whether you listen or not,  
Whether you know or not my lavish sweet-talk.  
But, telling I get comfort.  
It does not matter if you know or not.  
I shall be telling you day and night,  
And my heart will be at peace.  
I tell you to listen, o flower,  
The pangs of my heart,  
You may not listen,  
But others will listen.

Night-Jasmine!  
At the end of my life, I shall fall,  
Would He not gather me with care and love?  
Before my soul, a lovely flower, is trampled,  
He will gather it and adorn His home with it.  
He will please my heart with lots of love.  
Night-Jasmine!  
Like you, I am tiny, like you short-lived.  
I smile, I give fragrance, I please.  
But, I am short-lived;

You will mingle with dust,  
I will mingle with dust.  
Yet my soul, a flower, will not wither;  
O night-jasmine! So I pass time with hope!  
The end of my life is not death any time,  
I have not blossomed in the bough of life to die.  
There is a lovely garden,  
Where I shall bloom forever,  
And enchant my dearest God  
With nectarous fragrance of eternal and heavenly love.  
Night-Jasmine!  
Your mortal body is so charming.  
I do not know how beautiful  
My soul, a flower, is.  
If you are dear to my eyes,  
I do not believe I shall appear  
Mean to His eyes.  
I shall blossom forever,  
I will die never.

*(Translated from the original Oriya by Mary Mohanty)*

## USHA KISHORE

### KAMALA DAS'S 'COLOMBO POEMS'

Kamala Das is one of the very few Indian poets in English, who has poetised and historicised ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. Das's 'Colombo poems' are a testimony of her allegiance to Sri Lankan Tamils, with whom she believes she shares a Dravidian identity. In the 'Colombo poems' Das highlights certain political, cultural and linguistic aspects of the post 1983 tragedy in Sri Lanka from a Tamil point of view. The 'Colombo poems' elaborate the pain ensuing from the destruction of innocent lives due to the onslaught of racial hatred. To a certain extent, Das traces the early days of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Kamala Das hails from the Nair community in Kerala; historically the Nairs are said to belong to the Dravidian race and were once a military body of landholders, serving as soldiers to the ruling Kshatriyas. In fact, Das's allegiance to the Sri Lankan Tamils is based on ethnicity and language. Das's native tongue of Malayalam is a Dravidian language and is related to Tamil, while the Sri Lankan Tamils are generally considered migrants from Tamil Nadu in South India. However anthropological sources determine that the Tamils in Sri Lanka are not homogeneous. The original Sri Lankan Tamils are considered to have been resident on the island since the 2nd Century BCE, while the ethnic Indian Tamils are considered recent migrants since the 19th and 20th centuries. However, despite these theories of origin, the roots of the so-called Sri Lankan Tamils can also be traced to South India.

In her 'Colombo Poems,' Kamala Das does not differentiate the Tamils based on their origins and their dates of arrival on the island; she just categorises them as Tamils. Within the remit of this paper, I shall adhere to Das's reference to the Tamils and hence denote the Tamils as a homogeneous entity.

Kamala Das presents the ethnic situation of Tamils in Sri Lanka and the ensuing violence in the form of documentary and anecdotal evidence. This can be considered a highly subjective historicisation of the post 1983 conflict. Das's representations of the Sri Lankan Tamil conflict and the innate cultural politics are highly polarised and biased; they are primarily from a Tamil point of view as they only examine the Tamil cause. There is no reference to Tamil militancy, perhaps because the poems were written in the 1980s. Moreover, there has been no subsequent attempt on Das's part to comprehend the Tamil militancy or nationalism within Sri Lanka; neither does Das address the polemic of ethnicity within Sri Lanka. The 'Colombo poems' just address the Tamil issue as one of ethnic Dravidian and Tamil, migrant from South India. Das does not refer to the 'Tamil Tigers' or study the political dynamics within the country. She portrays the Tamils as victims of political oppression, ethnic cleansing and violence. The Sinhalese debates surrounding the ethnic conflict have been totally ignored.

Das has had personal experience of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka as she was resident in Colombo in the early 1980s. During this time, she was accompanying her husband, who was a consultant to the Sri Lankan Government. This personal experience is evidenced in *Authors Speak*<sup>1</sup>, edited by K.Satchidnanadan, in which Das speaks of the killing fields of Colombo and gives anecdotal account of her experience of pretending to be a Pakistani Muslim, in order to escape the inherent hatred for South Indians, that was apparently nurtured by the Sinhalese. She recalls that she had to resort to wearing an Islamic *burkha* to go out of the house and had to greet people with *Inshaallah* and *Salaam-alei-kum*. She was in turn reassured by the locals: "You don't have to worry, we only kill South Indians." (This is an irony of Das's personal life, when you consider her conversion to Islam later.)

The poet refers to her experiences in Sri Lanka in the journal *Indian Literature*<sup>2</sup> in 1993:

*...I had watched people being killed so those poems had to be written...  
A writer is not merely a lyrical poet, but is a chronicler of events that  
happen around her. I was a witness to the event when a neighbour was  
done to death.*

Personal experience of the conflict is highlighted in the poem, "Shopper at Cornell's, Colombo." Here the poet is dressed in slacks and shirt, her hair tied up in a bandana, "concealing her Indianness." But in spite of her "nut brown skin," the poet is identified by the Sinhala salesgirls 'who stab her with a smile':

*Shopping at the Cornells in red slacks and shirt, my hair  
Tied up in a bandana, my Indianness  
Concealed, I merge well with the expatriates,  
Pushing their food laden carts in silence,  
Despite my nut brown skin, but when at last  
I reach the cashier's counter, the salesgirls  
See through my guise, and their cruel mouths bleed  
When they make attempts to stab me with a smile.*<sup>3</sup>

The body language of the salesgirls, in the poem, indicates Sinhalese hostility towards Tamils and South Indians. This short poem is a poignant and personal evidence of ethnic conflict and hostility. The silence of the poet shopper, the attempt of disguise and the covering of the hair all reveal an urgent necessity to hide her Dravidian identity from hostile glances, words and even possible threats to her life. The poem does not reveal any speech between the shopper and the salesgirls, however the silent exchange of glances and the cruel smiles are symbolic of conflict.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to examine the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka<sup>4</sup>. The historical evolution of the conflict is stated in the *Mahavamsa* (Great Chronicle) which is a poem written in Pali dated

between 543 BCE to 361 CE. *Mahavamsa* traces the origin of Sri Lankan Tamils to South India and chronicles the historic conflict between them and the indigeneous Sinhalese. The current conflict is dated back from 1949, during the British Rule and it is widely accepted that the ongoing civil war has been a recurrent phenomenon since 1983. The ongoing civil war is predominantly between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) who demand an independent state or Tamil *Eelam* in the North and East of the island. Kamala Das does not historicise this conflict or the civil war but only lists Sinhalese atrocities against the Tamils. Das's emphasises on her Dravidian identity and empathises with the Tamils. It is well documented that the Sri Lankan Tamils assert their Dravidian descent and demonstrate great pride in their culture and heritage. The Tamil Dravidian identity, culture and heritage form the main themes and motifs in 'The Colombo poems.'

'The Colombo Poems' narrate the story of ethnic cleansing and civil unrest. The destruction of life, the sufferings of Tamils and the omnipresent air of terror are all elaborated in "The Sea at Galle Face Green"<sup>5</sup>. The poem refers to a particular incident of the massacre of Tamils, who were a minority in the southern harbour town of Galle. The poem evokes terror in a list of fearful sensory images. The poem opens with a visual image of arson and death and recalls a once resplendent city, which is personified as a half-burnt corpse:

*Like a half-burnt corpse was  
That once resplendent city  
Its maimed limbs turned towards  
The smoke-stained sky...*

Here, the poet also uses pathetic fallacy by emphasising that:

*Even the small leaves of  
The Katurmuringa  
Stopped their joyous tremor  
While the sea breezes blew.*

The word *katurmuringa* is the Malayalamised version of the Sri Lankan *Kathurumurunga* (*Sesbania grandiflora*), a tree with edible leaves and fruits, used popularly in Sri Lankan and Tamil cooking. This evokes the Sri Lankan atmosphere and alludes to the importance of the Tamil language, albeit in the Malayalam name of the plant that appears as inter-language within the poem. The Tamil-Malayalam link is clearly expressed in this allusion. Here language becomes a symbol of identity and empathy. At the same time, the poetic device of pathetic fallacy effectively portrays the terror felt even in nature. The use of pathetic fallacy once again draws attention to the violence, with nature responding to this unnatural event in the cessation of bird song :

*No birdsong in the trees  
Only the stomp of boots  
Worn by adolescent  
Gunmen ordered to hate.*

Das highlights the crescendo of ethnic violence by referring to the slaughter of innocent children. The poet's bias against the Sinhalese army is clearly illustrated as she speaks of the army of adolescent soldiers, who are ordered to open fire on innocent Tamils. Das expresses her anger against the ethnic conflict and questions why the Tamils were so hated:

*Did the Tamils smell so  
Different, what secret  
Chemistry let them down?  
Was there a faint scent of  
Jasmine in the women's  
Hair?*

These lines signify major questionings of race, identity and language. Again sensual imagery is employed to express difference in ethnicity. The language Tamil thus portrays the identity of the Tamils, who are so-called because of their mother-tongue. The cultural elements of the Tamils are highlighted in the jasmine flowers in the women's hair.



The Tamil tradition of wearing of flowers in the hair and the *bindi* on the forehead are symbolic of Hinduism, which some Tamils observe as a religion. These decorations or cosmetics are also an innate aspect of Tamil culture. It is well known that even Tamil Christians and Muslims wear jasmine flowers on their hair. In the above lines, Das does not objectively reflect on conflict, neither does she rationalise; she only questions the conflict from a polarised view point.

Another major political point is scored by Das as she questions as to why the Tamil children, whose voices rose to sing the Sri Lankan national anthem with the hoisting of the national flag each morning, were gunned down:

*But how did they track  
Down the little ones whose  
Voices rose each morning  
With the National flag...*

The idea of genocide is accentuated by the fact that innocent children were murdered. This elicits sympathy and support for the Tamil cause.

Although Das does not refer to the history of the Tamil-Sinhala conflict, she makes full use of the ancient history of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism and Sri Lankan national symbols in order to present her case for Tamil rights. In the poem “The Sea at Galle Face Green” Das refers to:

*...the National flag  
And its betrayed lion,  
An affectionate beast,  
A king of kings, let down  
By his son.*

At this point, it is necessary to elaborate on the national flag of Sri Lanka<sup>6</sup>, which is said to represent not only the majority Sinhala race but also the minority races. The present day national flag is an improvisation of the civil standard of the last king of Sri Lanka, Sri Wickrama Rajasingha. The civil standard has a passant royal lion with a sword in its right fore paw at the centre, and a bo-leaf (fig leaf) on each of the four corners on a plain border. After the Sri Lankan independence from the British in 1948, the lion flag was adopted as the national flag. The lion in the flag represents the Sinhala race, the sword of the lion represents the sovereignty of the country. The noble eight fold path of Buddhism is signified by the lion's tail. The vertical stripe of orange represents the minority Tamil race and the green vertical stripe, the minority Muslims. The maroon coloured portion of the flag represents the other minor religions. The bo-leaves (fig leaves) at the four corners of the flag represent Buddhism and its influence on the nation. They also stand for the four virtues-Kindness, Friendliness, Happiness and Equanimity. In the poem, Das effectively uses the symbolism of the flag and argues that the flag which is also representative of the Tamil minority now betrays its very symbolism and representation. This poetic device of symbolism is one of subversion and resistance.

As mentioned earlier, the lion referred to in the poem is the lion in the Sri Lankan flag representing the Sinhala race and the country's Buddhist lineage. The lion is one of Buddhism's most potent symbols. The lion in Buddhism is said to have its origins from the Asoka pillar of Saranath, where Buddha first preached. These lions in the Asoka pillars are said to echo Buddha's teachings (also called 'the Lion's Roar') to the four corners of the world. Das's poem speaks of the betrayed lion, which evokes Buddhist symbolism and the Buddhist ideology of non-violence. The poet thus challenges the very ethics of the emblem of the lion and calls it 'the betrayed lion' as she feels

that the Sinhalese violence against the Tamils is not conducive to Buddhist principles. The term betrayed lion reveals the poetic feeling that the Sinhalese people have betrayed their own faith in Buddhism. 'The betrayed lion' can also be read as signifying the historic irony of the nation of Sri Lanka with its Buddhist traditions of non-violence and its current civil war status.

The Sinhalese people practise the Theravada Buddhism<sup>7</sup> along with the Buddhists of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Burma. Sri Lanka has the longest continuous history of Buddhism, with the Sangha (community) having existed in a largely unbroken lineage since its introduction in the 2nd century. In this context, it would be necessary to understand the influx of Buddhism into Sri Lanka. History says that Buddhism was introduced into Sri Lanka in the 2nd century BC by Mahindra the son of the Emperor Asoka, during the reign of Sri Lanka's King Devanampiyatissa. The Indian Emperor Asoka (273 - 232 BCE) converted to Buddhism and made it a popular religion in India and beyond. In the poem "The Sea at Galle Face Green", Kamala Das refers to the king of kings being let down by his son. The term "king of kings" can signify Buddha known as king of kings or it can be a direct reference to King Devanampiyatissa. The poet challenges the descendants of King Devanampiyatissa and alludes that the king's Buddhist principles of non-violence and peace have been betrayed by his descendants. The irony lies in the fact that in the poem, the national symbols, Sinhalese history and the Buddhist religion are all used to project Tamil resistance. At the same time, there arises a subaltern subjectivity that demands answers from the host Sri Lankan community as to the very nature of the conflict that haunts the Buddhist nation. Thus Das makes a subversive use of Sri Lankan history to score a point for the Tamils.

“Smoke in Colombo” and “After July” are other poems that highlight the sufferings of the Tamils at the hands of Sinhalese soldiers. The first poem speaks of the poet’s departure from Colombo, that was filled with the smoke of arson and violence:

*On that last ride home we had the smoke  
Following us, along the silenced  
Streets...*

Poignant visual images haunt the reader. The images of women rocking empty cradles are powerful enough but the comparison of mourning mothers to grieving cows with their milk lingering in udders after the calves are buried are evocative of a Tamil nation in mourning:

*Lingering on as milk lingers on  
In udders after the calves are buried,  
Lingering on as grief lingers on  
Within women rocking emptied cradles...*

Again sensory imagery is used to convey inconsolable grief. The metaphor of the grieving cows also alludes to the Tamil tradition of the worship of cows and the Hindu sanctity attributed to cows. In the same poem, the poet recalls being stopped by Sri Lankan soldiers, but that she confides that she was too fatigued for fear:

*...there was no space  
between us and their guns, but we were  
Too fatigued to feel fear, or resist  
The abrupt moves  
Of an imbecilic will.*

The poetic illustration of military check-posts that search passing cars reflects everyday life even in contemporary Sri Lanka. Here the personal experience becomes the history of the nation at war and also a vision of a futuristic war-torn nation. The narrative itself proclaims its resistance by the combined experiences of the Tamils

and the poet. The “space between the guns” instill terror in the reader, which is accentuated by the description of the soldiers’ attitude as imbecilic and ready to kill. The term “imbecilic will” can also be read as a collective violent psyche, forever threatening the Tamils.

The poem “After July” delineates the atmosphere of fear pervading the streets of Colombo in the 1980s. The terror in the minds of the Tamils results in the cessation of their cultural activities:

*No Tamils in sight, no arangetrams  
Were held in the halls, no flower-seller  
Came again to the door with strings  
Of jasmine to perfume the ladies’ hair.*

Once again, Das refers to the Tamil tradition of wearing jasmine flowers. In the poem, Das says that the flower-seller has stopped calling at Tamil houses and that they were no *arangetrams* or dance performances. The allusion here is to the predominantly Tamil Nadu based dance form of Bharatanatyam which has been neglected due to the ethnic conflict. The dance form also acts as a synecdoche for Tamil culture. Here the poet is also alluding to the Jews in hiding, during the Nazi regime in the lines that the Tamils were holed like rodents. Subsequently, there is a direct reference to Hitler and the Aryanisation of Germany:

*Hitler rose from the dead, he demanded  
Yet another robust Aryan blood, the sinister  
Brew that absolves a man of his sins and  
Gives him the right to kill his former friends.  
The dark Dravidian laid his three year old child  
On his lap...*

Gulam Ahmed<sup>8</sup> interprets the allusion to Hitler as a straight forward analogy in this poem and cross refers to the sales girls in “Shoppers in Cornell’s Colombo” as the incarnations of Hitler. K.Satchidnanandan reads the reference to Hitler as an allusion to the

myth of Rama in the epic Ramayana and the battle between the Aryans (fair) and the “dark Dravidians” under Ravana, the legendary demon king of Sri Lanka.

Despite these readings, one can examine Sri Lankan history and politics and argue that the reference to Hitler and his claims of the superior Aryan race is not merely a figurative analogy. The allusion to Hitler and his Aryan blood can also signify a reference to the Aryan legend of the Sinhala race. K.T. Rajasingham<sup>9</sup> in an article, in the *Asia Times* in 2001, unravels the myths of the Sinhala race, which traces its roots to the days of Mahanama, the Buddhist prelate who compiled the *Mahavamsa* (the Buddhist chronicle dealing with the lineage of the Lord Buddha and the Sinhalese kings of Ceylon). According to Rajasingham, the racial propagation of ethnocentricity within Sri Lanka is based on myths, hearsay and legends, such as:

- (a) The alleged Sinhalese claims that they are descendants of the superior Aryan race as opposed to the Dravidian Tamils.
- (b) The legend that the Sinhala race is said to have originated after the landing of an exiled Aryan prince Vijaya and his 700 followers.
- (c) The idea that is incorporated in the Buddhist chronicles of the imaginary visits of Lord Buddha and his blessings on Sri Lanka during earlier incarnations.

The origin of the ‘Sinhala’ race still remain an unresolved issue<sup>10</sup>. Many Sri Lankan scholars actively dispute the Aryan origins of the Sinhala race. However, Das’s poem can be interpreted as drawing on this legendary Aryan origin of the Sinhalese while referring to Hitler and Aryan blood. This can be further illustrated by Das’s reference to the dark Dravidian as opposed to the fair Aryan in another poem, “A Certain Defect in the Blood” which is a monologue. The protagonist is a Tamil resident of Colombo, who tries to explain

...It was a defect  
In our blood that made us the land’s inferiors,  
A certain muddiness in the usual red,  
Revealing our non Aryan descent.

The Tamil in the poem looks towards a kinder climate in which his children might play happily again. This highlights the issue of Tamil genocide by the Sinhalese and predicts the ensuing Tamil exodus from Sri Lanka. Das ends the poems with the hope that the memories of July 1983 would grow fainter like 'the smoke after a gunshot.' This optimism of the poet is in fact unrealised as the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is an ongoing issue.

In 'The Colombo poems' Das chronicles and historicises the political strife in Sri Lanka, eliciting key postcolonial issues of nation, language, culture and ethnicity. This trend has strong political connotations as the poems are subversive in their reflection of Das's allegiance to the Tamils. The reader is not introduced to Tamil nationalism or militancy but repeatedly exposed to listings of Tamil victimisation by the Sinhalese. Hence, it can be effectively argued that Das's projection of the Sri Lankan conflict is primarily from a Tamil or Dravidian point of view. The poet makes selective and biased use of Sri Lankan history to solicit a case for the Tamil cause. She subverts national and religious symbols for her cause and challenges the very essence of Buddhism.

Das's assertion of her Dravidian identity is comparable to the close links of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu with the Sri Lankan Tamils and the political and linguistic polemic ensuing from this link; the Indian Tamil sympathies for the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka being a well documented fact. Kamala Das's perception of the Tamil cause is solely her affinity to their Dravidian identity. Albeit her references to the Tamil language and culture, Das does not refer to the wider Tamil nationalism in Sri-Lanka or in Tamil Nadu, which is often referred to as the Tamil nation. The Dravidianisation of Das becomes a worthy tool in her representation of the Sri Lankan conflict and her personal allegiance to the Tamil cause.

### Endnotes

1. Cit in M.S. Unnikrishnan, 'The many journeys of Kamala Das' in *The Sunday Tribune - Spectrum*
2. Kamala Das in *Indian Literature* 155(1993): 152.
3. Shopper at Cornells Colombo, *The Best of Kamala Das*, Bodhi Publishing House India, 1991. 133.
4. Online databases - <<http://www.lankalibrary.com/pol2.html>>, <[http://www.ices.lk/sl\\_database/ethnic\\_conflict/ethnic\\_conflict.shtml](http://www.ices.lk/sl_database/ethnic_conflict/ethnic_conflict.shtml)>, <<http://www.infolanka.com/org/srilanka/issues/kumari.html>>, <[http://www.tip.duke.edu/summer\\_programs/international\\_affairs/position\\_paper\\_2005](http://www.tip.duke.edu/summer_programs/international_affairs/position_paper_2005)> [accessed 28 Aug 2007]
5. 'Colombo Poems,' *The Best of Kamala Das*, 129-135.
6. Virtual Library Sri Lanka, <<http://www.lankalibrary.com/pro/flag.html>> [accessed 25 Aug 2007]
7. Online Databases - <<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/lanka-text.html>>, <<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/kariyawasam/wheel402.html>>, <<http://www.lankalibrary.com/bud.html>> [accessed 25 Aug 2007]
8. Gulam Ahmed, 127-128.
9. K.T.Rajasingham, "Sri Lanka: The Untold Story," Asia Times Online (11 Aug 2001), <<http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/CH11Df02.html>> [accessed 25 Aug 2007]
10. Online databases/articles: <<http://www.rootsweb.com/~lkawgw/sinhalarace.html>>, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2003/03/30/fea08.html>>, <<http://www.tamilantion.org/tamileelam/fundamentalism/index.html>> <<http://www.mytholyoke.edu/~rsamaran/Sinhalese.html>> [accessed 25 Aug 2007]



## HOSHANG MERCHANT

### KAMALA SURAIYA'S LAST SIREN SONGS

In 2005 Hyderabad saw the publication of Kamala Suraiya (Das)'s 100 poems translated into Urdu. The last section carried her last 4 poems. My then 80 year old friend Prof. Syed Sirajuddin wrote the Preface, his 85 year old friend Shiv K. Kumar wrote the Introduction. Kumar said the translations were 'better' than the originals! The rapid Left from whom loving Moslems is *de riguer* took up the silly chant. I admonished them: 'Kamala Das has gone blind writing her poems. Have a heart!' Kamala Das died last month. She was interred in an 'ample' grave in a Thiruvananthapuram mosque according to Moslem rites. Her house she donated to the Sahitya Akademi in Kerala. The feminist Jameela Nishat felt bad that Kamala Suraiya wore the veil in her last years. Kamala herself explained it as 'a change' in a poet's life which should always be full of change. Her last love poem, ostensibly written for a 40 year old Moslem, was full of Krishna imagery. Love is the same, called by any other name.

Her nephew N.U. Abhilash, our student, wrote an M.Phil. thesis on his aunt's poetry calling it 'spiritual.' "You have whitewashed me!" she laughed.

He wrote a piece on me for *The Week*. She saw it and invited me to stay with her in Bangalore, one summer. Her grandsons would be there. I did not go. I regret it now. This was before her conversion. We could have discussed Islam. I too had converted in Palestine. But my faith wore off when my Arab love wore off. No ample grave for me! But not so, for Kamala Suraiya. "Growth was definiteness," she says in her last poem. May be both of us were looking for growth. In "The Blind Walk" she writes:

... The city changed too now that he has gone / has it filled  
itself with strangers / I lose my way all the time / he was  
the only landmark I could recognize / ... poets ultimately  
lose their way inside their own minds / ... they go seek their  
past in their future / the sea is full of writers' carcasses / O  
call him from the other country / ... let me sow as seed my  
soul in the fertile soil of his body... (punctuation, mine)

A lot is happening in this passage (so I've helpfully punctuated it to lessen the confusion). Why is Kamala Suraiya the matriarch talking of a 'he'? Who is this 'he'? The key is in the phrase "they (i.e. poets) go seek their past in the future." So the past is Father (God the Father and the Father-God / Husband) and the future is the Future Lover (son-Lover). So Krishna can easily become the Sufi God transcending gender. (God is beyond gender in Sufism). God is Love becomes 'love is god' (a male) for Kamala Suraiya. Certainty is the male-god of the patriarchy. The little girl who got grandmother's love (and Nalapat House in a matrilineal transaction), did not get her father's love and got the name 'Das' (trans. 'slave') from a hand-picked husband; 'hand-picked' for her by father, that is. The sea is full of poets' carcasses: Not only the gay poet Hart Crane's who jumped off the ship at Cuba but also my Syrian Christian woman-student's, who drowned in the rain-swollen Bharata River at Cannanore. So the call is Radha's to a lost Krishna. Not until is Krishna lost than the world is filled with longing (for him). The male god has fulfilled the yearning female soul, at last.

Money and Love. Society and Sex. Transcendence of gender through religion, poetry, memory, death. Male and female mix, merge, mingle, part as in a dream. Grandmother – Father – Kamala the Girl – Grand-daughter – Daughter – Becoming Mother to Son – Grandmother to Grandson. So from male disapproval of father

(for being as dark as he was!) to approval of sons as a mother and grandmother. Macbeth's tragedy was he had no sons. Kamala's that she had no daughters. Nalapat House will go to the Kerala government. No grand-daughter shall rue her grandmother's 'taravad' (ancestral, matrilineal home). Its very earth, its breast, is now torn up by the roots of the (phallic) coconut trees. Vyjayanthimala has no daughters. Courtesans too need daughters to pass on their dance learnt from mothers and grandmothers to their daughters and grand-daughters. Sons are redundant here.

In "Afterwards" Kamala Das seems to say that sons are necessary for 'mothering.' But they "own each hour of their lives" and the mother can only love them 'shyly' and from 'far away.' Adrienne Rich in her essay "Compulsory Sexuality" faults mothering that does not allow 'sons' to grow up, and fosters their dependence by making the oedipal situation exploitative of mother by son. The matrilineal system circumvented woman's dependence by making her owner and queen of her house. This was because we can only be 100% sure of who our mother is; never of who our father was! Before Vasco da Gama, Nair women wore no blouses and had freedom to choose their mates. In such a set-up matrilineality was the only sure way of ensuring a stable childhood for off-springs of such happy but casual matings! Kamala Das's poem to her father calls him the second-most important man in Kerala since da Gama walked the beach at Kappad. She's being ironic. But she was scared shitless of him. (The second scariest creature after Indira Gandhi, she calls him! Why 'Indira'? because she was an avatar of Mahakali for Kamala.) Surely father approved of patriarchy. It gave him power, made him 'modern,' and made him rise in the eyes of his White friends, the Smiths with whom, he saw Laurel-Hardy matinees, little Kamala in tow.

Neurosis is bred by this society in flux. Kamala Das' nostalgia is not for the good old ways but only for the days of love in grandmother's house, whereas now she has to go begging love, like me, from door-to-door. Nostalgia then is a way out of neurosis, conversion to a male god (read: lover) is another. At Nalapat House the fieldhands' "ankles are bruised by thorns / their insider, by memories," just like the poets. The poets' beloved old face is marred by 'pains august toreties' ('Another Birthday'). Like her mentor Emily Dickinson, Kamala Das too can throw in a startlingly learned Latinism in a woman's homely poem.

Like another precursor, H.D., Kamala's poems are replete with the pronoun 'he.' For H.D. it was her astronomer father Dr. Doolittle, first, in New England, then the enormously rakish poet-lover and later poetic mentor Ezra Pound; still later her husband Richard Aldington who threatened a lawsuit were she to give her daughter his name. (The child probably was from a gay artist-lover). Finally she found a lesbian mother-figure, caretaker in Bryh at Seilly Islands. Kamala's return is to her grandmother's house. But in her 'Feminists' Lament she says: "Even Phoolan the Bandit Queen threw down her gun / And settled for weekly orgasms." H.D. wrote under her (mannish) initials. George Eliot we learnt at school was really a woman with a drag-name, as was George Sand. Things were difficult for women writers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They had to become men first before they could be accepted as women-writers. (Gay men write as straight women do!). Kamala in 1950's newly freed India used her husband's name (actually her maternal uncle's, a gay man's as she confessed in *My Own Story*, which the husband called fiction) to be able to write as a woman. My Syrian Christian student, Anna Mookan, writing of H.D. at the turn of this century could identify with that poet's trans-gendered name which enabled her to write at the turn of the last century. (Syrian Christian nuns have

to provide a 'dowry' to the Church before becoming nuns, even today). So Kamala sought some succour from the matriarchy, and cut free whenever it suited her to do so.

In old age in "Afterwards" the central point in her life is her becoming a mother to her son:

Take heart, just a while ago  
Your mother groaned in labour pain  
And slept, and then your first cry rose  
To stun the silence of her dreams!

Lucy Irigaray in *Thinking the Difference* (1996. London: Athlone Press) says motherhood allows women to finally bond with other women as mothers under the patriarchy. So woman can become woman-centred at life's end after being subjugated to man as daughter-wife-lover-mistress.

But for Kamala as for H.D. there can be no great love-poetry in a nation which has no great (woman) lovers. For H.D. the template was Sappho. For Kamala, it is Meera and Akkamahadevi ("we traversed the great forest between Kerala and Karnataka" she says in a poem) and Andal who worshipped the god of the Annamalai Hills. 'Krishna, Krishna, Krishna!' is her plaint like Meera, like M.S. Subbulakshmi singing Meera, like the transgendered Surdas and Kabir singing to Krishna. (The only male in Brindaban was Krishna, all else being but female). So we should not fault Kamala for seeing Krishna in her new young Moslem lover / husband. She had reached 'the other shore' in her devotion to him/Him. Barely a few years before she had become the old Radha who had to hide her face from strangers who would mock her for becoming an old crone from being Krishna's beloved in her youth ("The Cobwebs"). But now resplendent in Layla's veil she calls to Love Himself from the other shore.

### Post-Script

How does Jameela Nishat, a Moslem, Urdu woman-poet who has thrown off the veil, negotiate the patriarchy? (Her poems can be found most recently in *My Life-Giving Ganges* 2008: New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, Trans. Hoshang Merchant) Her poems to her son can be contrasted to Das' "Afterwards" to her son. What Kamala Das says is "Mother is Supreme," "Woman lives to become Mother." Anna Victrix of Lawrence's *Women in Love*. No Manu here who subjected widow-mothers to their sons. But within the Moslem patriarchy Jameela's poet-persona, a mother pained by an adolescent son's flailing out at her with his arms, weeps herself to sleep. But not before telling him that she is "not mud / that can be crushed but an upstanding tree dripping hot, molten tears right as rain." But she takes recourse to oedipally seducing him, inviting him to share her bed under one blanket (which she calls 'a tent') where a sea of centuries of woman's pain has been withstood and subdued.

In a more dominant, strident voice the poets' mother (daughter of a Deoband mullah) sends her philandering Yemenite artist-husband packing!

Please leave!  
Your night-journey  
from dark to dark  
                  is now indeed over;  
My silent hurting, smouldering growing  
Smokes up the house  
Suffocates you  
                  (and my poet-daughter within)

'Talaq! 'Talaq! 'Talaq! Says the wife to her husband and the daughter wins her freedom from all future husbands in order to be free with future lovers.

## AKSHAYA K. RATH

### ETHNO-SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF AGHA SHAHID ALI'S KASHMIRI POETRY

When Irfan Hasan<sup>1</sup> writes to Agha Shahid Ali<sup>2</sup>--“We shall meet again, in Srinagar”--the latter replies in *The Country Without a Post Office* (2000), which has been composed in response to the political agitations and continuous curfews of the 1990s: “When you leave home in the morning, you never know if you’ll return” (3). And when India and Pakistan became nuclear powers, he writes in *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002): “Kashmir, it is feared, may be the flashpoint of a nuclear war” (15). Violence, political or otherwise, becomes the central concern of Agha Shahid Ali in these two collections of poems. Penned in the contexts of political unrest in Kashmir and nuclear set-to, these two collections project ethno-sexual violence in Kashmir. Owing to disruptions caused by political agitations and curfews, in 1990, no mail was delivered for seven months within Kashmir. While this becomes the genesis of *The Country Without a Post Office*, the aftermath of such agitations and curfews provides a backdrop to *Rooms Are Never Finished*. Taking instances from these two collections of poems, this article explores the representation of ethnic, religious and sexual violence in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. The multiple themes and identity categories that Shahid Ali highlights, particularly the diasporic, ethnic, religious and sexual facets of his poetry, receive a spotlight in the ensuing analysis.

#### I

Shahid Ali's poetry alludes to multiple geographical locations: New Delhi, where he was born and where he received his Master's degree in English literature; Kashmir, where he grew up; and several American cities, where he studied, taught and settled. Shahid Ali, apart from writing seven collections of poems,<sup>3</sup> translated Faiz Ahmed Faiz into English, wrote elegies and *ghazals* in praise of Begum

Akhtar,<sup>4</sup> wrote a book of criticism on T.S. Eliot, and historicised the massacre at Karbala. Central to his writing is Kashmir with many of its familiar images such as a maiden, Helen of Troy, a mourners' place, the blessed land, and paradise as well as hell.

Shahid Ali frequently associates himself with the land, and most of his poems pertain to life in Kashmir. No wonder that he looked upon himself as a Kashmiri-American rather than an Indian poet. The word "Kashmir" figures freely in the titles of his poems and books. There are principal poems like "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight", "Muharram in Srinagar, 1992", and "Postcard from Kashmir". In "The Blessed Word: A Prologue," the opening section of *The Country Without a Post Office*, he writes:

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

Such a description would attract a Freudian scholar to examine the origin and nature of Shahid Ali's ethnic neurosis. In a paragraph of merely forty-two-odd words, Kashmir figures eighteen times. Elsewhere in this collection, Kashmir is compared with Helen of Troy as "A terrible beauty is born" (10). Sentences like "Each night put Kashmir in your dreams,' he says" (11) and "I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir" (13) or fragments like "Where Thou art – that – is Home –/Cashmere – / or Calvary – the same! In the Cašmir" (63) appear in *The Country Without a Post Office*. Shahid Ali, however, alludes to a free Kashmir before the invasion of the Moghul King Akbar and hopes: "One day the Kashmiris will pronounce that word [Kashmir] truly for the first time" (5).



That Shahid Ali constantly portrays Kashmir as a disturbed place has a long history and an extensive purpose in mind. The large-scale atrocities, constant subjugation, mass rapes, curfews and torture in army camps are embedded in Shahid Ali's poems so as to show the real image of a place that was once termed "the blessed land" or "paradise on earth." The first poem in *The Country Without a Post Office* is "Farewell." It is dedicated to Patricia O'Neill. It depicts life in Kashmir and human relationship--man to man. It delineates the history of massacre in Kashmir, and depicts the present life in Kashmir valley. The land that was called a paradise once upon a time is now hell for the poet. It not only focuses on the army rule and ongoing catastrophe in terms of curfew, it also depicts what Kashmiri life is like amidst arms:

We can't ask them: *Are you done with the world?*  
In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked  
in each other's reflections. (7-8)

The representation of ethnic violence continues: "But the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in the villages, towns left in cinders, neighbourhoods torched. 'Power is hideous / like a barber's hands.' The rubble of downtown Srinagar stares at me from the *Times*" (4). And such descriptions are not rare in other poems too. The epitaph to "I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight" is from W.B. Yeats: "Now and in time to be, / wherever green is worn, ... / A terrible beauty is born." The first section of the poem begins with the description of a "curfewed" night:

The city from where no news can come  
is now so visible in its curfewed night  
that the worst is precise (10)

This poem is divided into four sections. The first section is about a curfewed night where a boy, naked and tortured, screams: “I know nothing.” The unidentified boy becomes particular, Rizwan, in the second section of the poem. Rizwan, the character introduced, dies in front of the poet in this section. In the third section Kashmiri mothers grieve over the dead and mourners walk by:

.... From windows we hear  
grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall  
on us, like ash. Black on edges of flames,  
it cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods,  
the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers.  
Kashmir is burning... (11)

The first three sections of the poem project the images of “a burning tyre,” “a naked boy screaming,” “emptied Srinagar,” “a gathering of mourners,” “a funeral,” “burning homes,” and “flames.” The central character Rizwan is tortured in an army camp; and after being shot and wounded, he runs away. Rizwan represents several others who have witnessed the terror and became victims of the torture: “...I follow him through blood on the road / and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners / left behind, as they ran from the funeral, / victims of firing...” (11). In the second section of the poem, the poet finds the dying victim and the description follows:

‘Rizwan, it’s you, Rizwan, it’s you,’ I cry out  
As he steps closer, the sleeves of his *phiren* torn.  
‘Each night put Kashmir in your dreams,’ he says,  
Then touches me...  
whispers, ‘I have been cold a long, long time’. (11)

Rizwan asks the poet not to inform his father about the death. The second section ends with the rise of religious conflict in Kashmir where men are seen removing statues from temples. The final section of the poem begins with a solemn assurance to the dying character: “I won’t tell your father you have died, Rizwan,” and the poet promises to return to the land when the large-scale atrocities cease.

The representation of ethnic fissure runs throughout *The Country Without a Post Office*. Ethnic violence in Kashmir is predominant and there are sections where the poet is optimistic about the future too: “If there is a paradise on earth, / It is this, it is this, it is this” (15). The poet is hopeful enough to fight against injustice. There are other poems which include this theme as well. In “A Pastoral,” for instance, the poet writes:

We shall meet again, in Srinagar,  
by the gates of the Villa of Peace,  
our hands blossoming into fists  
till the soldiers return the keys  
and disappear. (23)

In this poem, as the title propounds, fighting against injustice in Kashmir becomes the pastoral duty of the poet. A sense of abrogating ethnic violence would be through fight, and consequently it would lead Kashmir towards independence. Simultaneously however Shahid Ali introduces several other themes as well. Among those include life in Srinagar, the importance of religion and the demanding nature of religious authorities.

Shahid Ali often implants religious elements into his poems and associates Kashmiri freedom struggle with Shia Islam. There are sections in *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished*

where the poet mentions the Prophet and other Sufi and Islamic saints. For him Jesus and other gods and goddesses of Hinduism are historical figures as well. While historicizing the massacre at Karbala, where the Prophet's grandsons were killed in the battle, Shahid Ali documents Zainab's lamentation. He also becomes a "refugee from Belief" owing to the authoritarian nature of religious institutions and religious authorities. In the first *ghazal* anthologised in *The Country Without a Post Office*, the poet tries to withdraw himself from the mosque and wants to lead an independent life free from religious control:

I beg for heaven: Prisons, let open your gates--  
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight. (21)

When read in a sequence, the poems in *The Country Without a Post Office* show a thematic shift from "the blessed land" to "a land of political agitation" to "a land of religious and political control", and finally it leads us to "exile." *Rooms Are Never Finished*, in principle, takes such a turn as well. It begins with a brief description of the war at Karbala; Zainab grieves over the dead body and Zainab's laments are compared with the poet's mother's who moves from hospital to hospital looking for a cure of her brain cancer. Significantly, the predominant representation of the ethnic community--country, nation or Kashmir--becomes "home," "family," "familial relationships," "Kashmir" or "exile" in *Rooms Are Never Finished*. "Violence" still becomes a key word throughout this collection. "To a home at war," writes Shahid Ali in his introductory note to this collection, "my father, siblings, and I brought my mother's body for burial. It was the only thing to do, for she had longed for home throughout her illness" (15). He further adds: "In 1990, Kashmir--the cause of hostility between India and Pakistan...erupted into a full scale uprising for self-determination" (15). While in *The Country Without*

*a Post Office* the poet laments the deaths of friends and fellow-beings in Kashmir, in this collection the poet mourns the deaths of his mother and Begum Akhtar. While in the first collection, the death of Rizwan becomes a microcosm for deaths in Kashmir, the deaths of the mother and of Begum Akhtar stand for loss of house, home and familial relations in the latter. Violence in Kashmir continues simultaneously and we need to understand here that the poetic description goes on to project several things happening at the same time. While on the one hand life moves on merrily in Kashmir for those who are not affected, on the other hand there is violence of several kinds--both external and internal and personal and political--in actuality. The poet's settlement in the West does not detach himself from his homeland and he visits Kashmir every year. While poetry becomes an instrument to fight against injustice in Agha Shahid Ali, it is also important that he projects several aspects of life in Kashmir and America. In "Summers of Translation" he writes:

It was '89, the stones were not far, signs of change  
Everywhere (Kashmir would soon be in literal  
Flames)...  
...                    ...                    ...                    ...  
...                    ...                    ...                    ...  
But when you welcomed me in later summers to Kashmir,  
Every headline read:  
PARADISE ON EARTH BECOMES HELL. (30-31)

The grief of the poet's mother, for she suffered death running from hospital to hospital and from city to city, becomes symbolic of other mothers' grief too. Shahid Ali proceeds to describe all forms of deaths in Kashmir and mourns:

A mother dies. There's a son's execution.  
On Memory's mantle--where summers may truly shine--  
all...is nothing but translation.

It is Muharram again.  
Of God there is no sign.  
Mother,  
you are "the breath drawn after every line". (32)

Moreover, if read as sequence, both the volumes, *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished*, portray a similar theme of oppression--personal and political--centred around Kashmiri life. Shahid Ali's obsession in introducing multiple themes and human figures in such political poems seems to be functioning in a more diverse way than it appears to be.

## II

The criticality of such continuous representation of ethnic and religious violence, addressed in Shahid Ali's poetry goes back to the Moghul King Akbar. After the invasion, writes Shahid Ali, Kashmir has never been free. Alluding to a historical event not only helps centralise the debate concerning the origin of ethnic identity but it also suggests that Shahid Ali may be referring to some other possible intervention, personal or political, embedded with ethnic identity. In "Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir and the Gay Nation" Hoshang Merchant claims: "There are two personal facts about...Ali that should interest anyone who loves his poetry: that he was a Kashmiri and that he was gay. To ignore either fact is to ignore the man and the meaning of his poetry" (2007, 465). Shahid Ali never admitted that he was gay; his homoerotic tendency is sought to be established by Merchant. There is no doubt that Shahid Ali borrows several of his epithets from acclaimed gay poets. He projects his characters as lovers and friends,

depicts romantic friendship in his poems; and most importantly, he succumbs to traditional gay stereotypes such as “mama’s boy.” The few women characters present in his volumes of poetry are his mother, sister, Begum Akhtar and Zainab. Unlike the Urdu *ghazal* form which valorises male-love or ideal friendship, Shahid Ali’s *ghazals* hardly disclose the gender of the person portrayed; the gender of the “you” portrayed in his *ghazals* is considerably neutralised; and wherever he mentions the gender of the person, it is always “he”--the male one. If such a perspective is given prominence while reading his poetry, the gay overtones come to the fore. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra finds ample reasons to justify the absence of women characters in Shahid Ali. Introducing Shahid Ali to the reading public, in *Twelve Modern India Poets* (1992), Mehrotra writes:

Though Ali has made exile his permanent condition, it is not what he writes about. Exile offers him unconditioned and unpeopled space into which...he introduces human figures. The eccentric and occasionally violent men of the family stand aloof from its women.... (139)

While Mehrotra in a discursive way projects the violence present along with self-accepting exile, Shahid Ali’s numerous volumes attempt to show an exiled condition that addresses the audience. The four poems anthologised in the second section of *The Country Without a Post Office* are significantly inflected with ethnic, religious and sexual discourses. This section contains four poems--“A Pastoral,” wherein the “prologue” [a discourse with Irfan Hasan] is presented as a poem; “The Country Without a Post Office,” the title poem; “The Floating Post Office,” wherein the poet does not mourn the loss but expresses hope about the future; and “The Correspondent.” While the first sentence of “A Pastoral” is from Irfan Hasan’s letter--“We shall meet again, in Srinagar”, a phrase Ali quotes in “The Blessed Word: A Prologue” and dedicates it to Irfan Hasan, this

poem is dedicated to Suvir Kaul. Significantly, the “I” and “you” of the prologue intentionally change to “we” and “us”. In “The Blessed Word: A Prologue,” the opening poem, Shahid Ali states that Kashmir becomes a void; in “I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight”, the second poem in the first section, the soldiers kill the lover; however, in “A Pastoral” the lovers unite and plan to chase the soldiers away (quoted earlier). The lovers unite; symbolically the curfew is over. However, that is not the end of their misery. The “closeted” self is not liberated with the independence of a country, nation or state. The end of a curfew or the withdrawal of the forces / soldiers is the beginning of self-exposure, disclosure of the gay self and revelation of his own identity. Suddenly, the poet realises: “Again we’ll enter our last world” (23). What is the “last world” once freedom is achieved? We need to understand that Kashmir is free with the withdrawal of the soldiers. There will be no more curfews, no more wars against injustice that the poet has dreamt so much of. But why does he plot his own death in front of the masque even when Kashmir is free? What “bondage” does he allude to?

It's true, my death, at the masque entrance,  
in the massacre, when the Call to Prayer  
Opened the foodgates'... (23)

There is no more longing for the “blessed” word / land (Kashmir) at the end of the poem. The end of Kashmir’s misery becomes the beginning of his political / personal displacement:

... The glass map of our country,  
still on the wall, will tear us to lace —  
...                      ...                      Their wish  
was we return—forever!—and inherit...  
...that to which we belong, ...  
to get news of our death after the world's. (24)



As imagined by Shahid Ali, Kashmir did not get political freedom in his lifetime; and he never permanently returned to Kashmir. Occasionally he paid a visit to the country (Kashmir?) which becomes the opening line of the title poem: “Again I’ve returned to this country / where a minaret has been entombed” (25). One of the obvious reasons behind drafting *The Country Without a Post Office*, as explained by Shahid Ali, is certainly historical: that owing to the political turmoil no mail was delivered in Kashmir for seven months in 1990. Another reason is obvious too, according to the explicit description in the poems: why did not he receive any letters from his lover?

Phantom heart,

Pray he’s alive. *I have returned in rain*  
*To find him, to learn why he never wrote.*

...                      ...                      ...                      ...  
...                      ...                      ...                      ...

*‘Everything is finished, nothing remains’.*

I must force silence to be a mirror

To see his voice again for directions. (26; emphasis added)

It signifies, in principle, what Shahid Ali has to offer in his volumes of poetry. The freedom struggle of Kashmir, religious / political outrage and other themes portrayed are sidelined to a significant degree. It also indicates that Shahid Ali offers a hideous meaning of his poems wherever he mentions ethnic, religious, and political issues. It becomes clear that Shahid Ali forges the nature of his Kashmiri identity with religious and political elements in his poetry.

In “Ethnicity and Sexuality” Joane Nagel, claiming that ethnicity and sexuality are closely related subjects, argues: “Racial, ethnic and

national boundaries are also sexual boundaries”; and further she summarises her argument: “The borderlands dividing racial, ethnic, and national identities and communities constitute ethno-sexual frontiers, erotic intersections that are heavily patrolled, policed, and protected, yet regularly are penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic ‘others’” (2000, 107). She shows that people forge their sexual identities while cutting across discourses such as race, ethnicity and nationality. However, scholarships in the humanities and the social sciences arbitrate this discourse giving it a single name such as “multiculturalism” or “cultural pluralism” (107).

In the light of Nagel’s idea it seems that the composition of English *ghazals*, the oedipal relationship portrayed, hiding of homosexual love and continuous portrayal of a religious identity in Shahid Ali’s poetry are some of the instances of forging his homosexual identity. In other words, the multiple themes Shahid Ali portrays in his poems are linked to a unified identity category that cannot be directly addressed. The “Kashmir” portrayed in his poems seems to be central to most of his poems. The concoction of English *ghazals* for an English-Speaking audience is an act of linking himself to the Urdu *ghazal* tradition. And further, the religious elements present in most of his poems, often Islamic, also seem to be a way of showing a different identity in a roundabout way. Earlier in the first section we find that Kashmir and Islam figure continuously in his volumes of poetry, but now it seems that the male character introduced--often the love--turns out to be central to several of Shahid Ali’s poems. Among the other characters mentioned in Shahid Ali’s poetry are Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ghalib, Passolini, Oscar Wilde and some other poets and writers whom the author admires and takes inspiration from. The portrayed diasporic, Kashmiri and religious identities may be central to the dwelling in the realm of multiculturalism (in the American West), but it may also be seen as

the forging of an identity category that becomes dominant in Shahid Ali's poetry as well. Mehrotra would just highlight the absence of women in Shahid Ali's poetry, but the issue may be a little bit more serious than the accepted eccentric and violent behaviour (1992, 139).

That the visible, multiple identity categories--race, gender and religion--in Agha Shahid Ali become intentional signifiers of his distinction in the operation of his multiple selves and that Shahid Ali wrote volumes of poetry on homosocial or homoerotic love without labelling himself "queer" are indicators of the construction of a different self--far away from the other multiple selves--integrating the several techniques of portraying multiculturalism. The ethno-sexual self projected, as Mehrotra would explain, sees violence of every kind in life and embraces exile as a permanent condition in the West. If a Bruce King (2001) contests Shahid Ali's poetry labelling his diasporic identity or focusing on the intellectual "exile" portrayed and if a Mehrotra contests his aloofness from women, Agha Shahid Ali's multicultural discourse still remains in the realm of a community that has to regain freedom from all oppressions, and that has to get back the meaning of the lost horizon. For instance, the lover becomes so central a character in the second section of *The Country Without a Post Office* that the poet, despite writing about the issues of political turmoil, notes that he has returned to "this country" to find why the lover did not write back to him. Political violence in Kashmir is mixed here with violence of the self once the curfew is over and the soldiers return. That the forged identity categories seem to be so central in the second section that documenting the interaction between the two subjects, the lover and the poetic persona / poet, becomes very intentional; it is a systematic construction of a discursive and political field.

Foregrounding a technique of forging and hiding, mainly of social and sexual regulation, Shahid Ali primarily concerns himself

with a hidden connection among all the above-mentioned points. Here is what Shahid Ali has to offer in a *ghazal*--“In Real Time” figuring in *Rooms Are Never Finished*:

I’ll do what I must *if I’m bold* in real time.  
A refugee, *I’ll be paroled* in real time.

The one you would choose: *were you lead then by him?*  
*What longing, O Yaar, is controlled in real time?* (68)

In this well-crafted *ghazal*, Shahid Ali writes that the plot of his real identity would be unravelled if he is bold enough in the time to come. Further, he adds:

Now *friend*, the Beloved has *stolen your words*--  
Read slowly, *the plot will unfold* in real time. (69; emphasis added)

If the author is “bold”, he will be released from a metaphorical imprisonment. This *ghazal* is precisely about two kinds of existence “in the real world”. The existence of a different life / world--the “existence untold”--of “longing” or of “funeral love” (the echo of Oscar Wilde; “The Love that dare not speak its name”) will unfold once the author is bold (69). What is then the untold plot depicted in the *ghazal*? Is it an explanation to the self where the closeted self is threatened by law, religion and social discourses in India? Is it the “closeted” queer talking to a heterosexual audience using a coded language and marking the plot of longing that cannot be opened up “in the real time” (and hence he is leading the life of a refugee)? Such hidden points of intersection among identity / existence, society, religion and life / existence, and ethnicity and sexuality are apt instances of framing a coded language to perform the closet.

Ethnicity, religion and sexuality saturate Shahid Ali's writing, even though his critics have positioned him merely as a poet who reveals a diasporic identity and nostalgia for his homeland. An undercurrent of ethno-sexual frontiers marked with violence in his poetry definitely destabilises the way Kashmiri and queer identities function--a subversion that betrays Shahid Ali as an ethnic queer.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Irfan Hasan figures in "The Blessed Word: A Prologue", *The Country Without a Post Office*. The prologue, a prose piece in this collection, is dedicated to him.

<sup>2</sup> Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi in 1949, and grew up in Srinagar, Kashmir. He held a Bachelor's degree from the University of Kashmir and a Master's degree from the University of Delhi. Shahid Ali completed PhD at Pennsylvania State University and received an MFA from the University of Arizona in 1985. He received several writing fellowships and was awarded the Pushcart Prize. He held teaching positions at nine colleges and universities and was also director of the MFA programme in creative writing at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Shahid Ali died of a brain tumour in December 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Shahid Ali's collections include *Bone-Sculpture* (1972), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* (1979), *The Half-inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Walk through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), *The Country Without a Post Office: Poems 1991-1995* (2000) and *Rooms Are Never Finished: Poems* (posthumously published in 2002). He authored *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (1986), translated *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (1992), and edited *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000).

<sup>4</sup> In "Summers of Translation," published in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, Shahid Ali introduces Begum Akhtar as "one of India's great singers, and the greatest *ghazal* singer of all time" (31).

PRIYADARSHI PATNAIK

KOILI POETRY:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE TRANSFORMATION  
OF POETIC FORM

Fifteenth to Sixteenth century AD in Orissa was a period of ferment and experimentation in philosophical concepts and their assimilation, primarily through poetry. Using verse to communicate ideas is not uncommon, but to interpret poetry and transform it into philosophy certainly is. We have at least one extant example of this kind of an effort in the hands of one of the most eminent writers of 16<sup>th</sup> century in Orissa--Jagannatha Dasa. Orissan literature had a popular form (*Koili*) that belonged to the *dutakavya* genre. Jagannatha Dasa took one of them, *Kesaba Koili*, a poem of lament, and interpreted it in philosophical terms in his *Artha Koili* or 'The meaning of the *Koili*.' Apparently, such a method of interpretation might sound strange, but if one looks at the Tantric-Buddhism of Orissa and its influences, one can trace Jagannatha's attempts back to them, especially to their tradition of esoteric writing known as *sandhabhasa*. After Jaganntha, the form was again modified to suit a different purpose. This paper focuses on the way that a poetic form was transformed in an age that was engaged in a quest for *gnana-bhakti* (knowledge mixed with devotion). It points to the way there was an amalgam of disparate philosophies in such a poetic tradition. Finally, it presents translations of both the poems discussed above along with a few early poems (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century) written in the tradition of the Tantric-Buddhists, and fragments of later poems to show how poetic forms performed different roles based on socio-cultural and philosophical contexts.

Orissa was a land of unrest and ferment in the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD. Brahminism dominated the land (not that this dominance was ever reversed) and Oriya as a literary language struggled to flourish. Most scholars of Orissa still wrote in Sanskrit. However, with Sarala Dasa's Oriya *Mahabharata* (14<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> century AD) , a vast and powerful work, the language found a voice, uneven, restless; colloquial and grand in the same breath. If one looks at Utkal (Orissa) of that particular time, one also finds significant traces of Vajrayana Buddhism (Tantric) and *Natha* tradition (which was strongly influenced by Buddhism). So in the *Pancasakha* (the five soul-mates or companions) who wrote in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, one finds the influences of Buddhism, of *Natha* cult as well yoga, both in their writings and practices.

The *Pancasakha* wrote simple verses, but dealt with complex ideas. The ideas needed to be communicated as simply as possible because they were to a certain extent new, welded together through their intense experiments in and experiences of spirituality. One of the most influential and lucid among these writers was Jagannatha Dasa, who wrote the Oriya *Bhagabata* (based on *Bhagabata Mahapurana*) and at the same time wrote a number of works which constituted the amalgam of the various religions and philosophies mentioned above. It was Jagannatha Dasa who wrote *Artha Koili*, the pivotal work around which this study revolves.

But before we proceed, “*Koili*” must be defined. “*Koili*” is the Oriya for the bird ‘cuckoo.’ It also stands for a poetic tradition that can be traced roughly back to the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century in Orissa-- Markanda Dasa's ‘*Keshaba Koili*’, a poem in the *chautisa* form (34 stanzas) where each stanza starts with a consonant and exploits its alliterations. In the poem, Yasodha laments the departure of Lord Krishna to Mathura and in an intense moment of longing addresses



her feeling of sadness and pining to the cuckoo bird with the hope that it would be able to take the message to her son. Such a messenger is not unusual. In Sanskrit we have many such messengers or *dutas* and the form--*dutakavya* (messenger-poem)--has many instances, starting with Kalidasa's *Meghadutam* that uses clouds as the messenger to communicate the protagonist's pining and intense sadness at separation from the object of love. In Oriya literature, this tradition continues till the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, it becomes a very popular tradition. Today we have more than 20 poems of considerable merit written using this form over the ages. Sometimes it is the pining of Sita for Rama (*Kanta Koili*), the longing of Kausalya for her son (*Sri Rama Koili*) or the longing for Yasodhs for Krishna, but in a literal sense, it is not an unbroken tradition. In the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century something happened (*Artha Koili*) which, for a period of at least one hundred years, transformed the form, adapting it for a different purpose altogether. Let us look at some lines of *Kesaba Koili* in order to get a feel of the form:

*Kesaba Koili'*  
(Krishna Cuckoo)

Poet Markanda Dasa

O Cuckoo, Kesaba has gone to Mathura,  
on whose bidding has he gone,  
my son has not come back yet, O Cuckoo. (1)  
O Cuckoo, whom shall I give milk of my breast?  
my son has gone to Mathurapuri, O Cuckoo. (2)  
O Cuckoo, my son has not come back,  
the dense Brundavana looks beautiful no longer, O Cuckoo. (3)  
O Cuckoo, Nanda doesn't enter the house,  
the lovely palace is desolate without Govinda, O Cuckoo. (4)

O Cuckoo, King Nanda made a stone of his heart,  
putting collolium to the eyes placed his son in the chariot,  
O Cuckoo.(5)  
O Cuckoo, how the jewels on the girdle at his waist rang,  
bewitching the maidens of Gopapuri, O Cuckoo! (6)  
O Cuckoo, at night Hari would ask for the moon,  
the mere lift of his eyebrows – Nanda would be at his bidding,  
O Cuckoo. (10)  
O Cuckoo, he would brim with laughter on my lap,  
swaying from side to side moving upon the swing, O Cuckoo. (11)  
O Cuckoo, beautiful the two liquid eyes,  
Cheating and lying he went, crossing the bounds, O Cuckoo (12)  
O Cuckoo, wherever the she-parrot's voice carries,  
You can see Hari floating like a parrot, O Cuckoo. (13)  
O Cuckoo, on his body is smeared sandal wood paste,  
With him plays his brother Balarama, O Cuckoo. (16)  
O Cuckoo, bruising my nipple I gave him milk to drink,  
in my old age I cannot see my son, O Cuckoo. (17)

*Koili* had already established itself as a popular form by the time Jagannatha Dasa used it. One suspects that this popularity was one of the chief reasons for his taking it up. But two important points need to be kept in mind. One, although he took up the *Koili* form, he did not write a poem in the *Koili* tradition. The second point is linked to the first. He wrote a *tika* or commentary on the *Kesaba Koili*--his *Artha Koili* (The Meaning of the *Koili*)--a poem which apparently needed no elucidation. This partly shows the influence of Sanskrit tradition, but in the use of the tradition to something which apparently makes sense at a surface level, he uses a radically different tradition altogether. If one looks at the Sanskrit tradition, the work that requires a *tika* is usually a philosophical work of high merit and difficulty and it is usually cryptic. It is because of this difficulty that one writes a

commentary. In the modern context, one might point out that it is the ambiguity (often) of the text that generates the commentary, which is also an interpretation. In fact if one looks at *Brahma Sutra*, one finds distinctive schools of philosophies based on the same sutra but different *bhasyas* or *tikas* written by Sankara, Ramanujan, Mdhava and others. However, *Kesava Koili* being a straightforward poem, one immediately sees no merit in a commentary upon it. Nor does one see much of precedence in the Sanskritic tradition in the encouragement of elucidation of lucid poetic works. So why does a simple poem need elucidation? – only if its simplicity is deceptive and there is something beneath that cannot be seen to the uninitiated eye.

Jagannatha works with such an assumption and beneath the mother's lament, sees profound spiritual significance. So what inspires him to write in this tradition? If one is to find an inspiration for such a trend, one might have to look closer at home, to a tradition of Buddhist Tantra--Sahajayana--the way it was practised in Orissa, and to an esoteric cult that disguised its texts so as to keep out the uninitiated. Strategies of using such a coded language were known as *sandhabhasa* in the Buddhist tradition. In the region that now constitutes Orissa, between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, certain Buddhist monks wrote such poems in a language that came before Oriya (to which Oriyas, Bengalees and many others lay claim). They were later discovered in Nepal with Sanskrit commentaries (Kar 1989).

Before looking at *sandhabhasa*, it is perhaps necessary to look at a few early poems written in this tradition. The poems below are from a compilation of verses known as *Charyachaya* or *Charyapadas* which were written in a language to which Oriya can trace its origin (as can Bengali and a few other languages) and which was discovered in Nepal in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Luipadanaam*  
(*Ka Tarubara Pancha Bi Dala*)  
Poet Luipa

The body is a tree with five branches<sup>1</sup>.  
The ever restless mind is the seat of kala<sup>2</sup>.  
Strengthen the mind, achieve great bliss.  
Lui says, ask your guru and realize this.  
Why follow the path of samadhi<sup>3</sup>,  
When in sorrow and happiness one must die!  
Avoiding these traps and entanglements  
Trap the bird of *sumyata* in a silken cord  
And draw it to yourself.  
Lui says, he knows this in meditation,  
Sitting on the mounds, *dhama* and *chama*<sup>4</sup>.

The notes at the end of the paper would help elucidate this poem and the ones that follow. But as can be seen above, this poem has only a few metaphors (five branches for the five senses) but otherwise is pretty straightforward.

*Kukuripadanam*  
(*Duli Duhin Pita Dharina Na Jai*)  
Poet Kukuripa

The milk of the tortoise cannot be held in a vessel<sup>5</sup>.  
The crocodile eats tamarind from a tree.  
Be attentive about your household  
O Daughter-in-law<sup>6</sup>!  
The thief stole away the earrings  
At the dead of the night.  
The father-in-law is asleep,

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

The daughter-in-law is awake,  
The ring stolen<sup>7</sup> – where to go, whom to ask?  
As the day breaks she busies herself cooking rice.  
As night falls, she takes leave of her work<sup>8</sup>.  
This is the *charya* Kukuripa sings.  
Twenty listen, at least one understands.

This poem, on the other hand, is more subtle. It distinctively operates at two levels. At the surface level it is about an event in household life. But the last two lines suggest that meaning has to be derived at a deeper level. This is aided by the fact that the events described are puzzling and do not make complete sentence.

*Gunduripadanaam*  
(*Tiadda Chapi Joini De Ankabali*)  
Poet Gunduripa

I will press the three veins,  
Open your thighs.  
Churning your lotus flower with my lingam  
Would give me the ultimate pleasure<sup>9</sup>.  
O *jogini*, I cannot live a moment without you!  
Kissing your lips I will drink the lotus juice.  
Angry, the *jogini*, would not go to bed.  
Yet her breath comes out harsh.  
The mother-in-law has locked the door.  
Rip open the two lips, the solar and the lunar.  
Tells Gunduri, he is a king among the handsome  
Standing naked amidst the beauties of the town.

This poem, the final of the illustrations presented here, is the most significant. It is an erotic poem by its own merit. It is complete without loose ends, and at the same time there is no reference to another level. Here, the concealment is complete.

Most scholars agree that the technique used here is that of *sandhabhasa* (*sandhabhasa*, *sandhibhasa*) or the language of twilight. However there is no agreement as to what exactly this is. One of the popular interpretations of this term is in the sense of a coded or esoteric language. Some others interpret it as a language that connotes something distinctively different from what it says. But if one assumes that it is the language of “twilight” then the associations of twilight come in significantly--indistinct, ambiguous, indeterminate. In that case it cannot have one definite meaning. Alex Wayman, discussing these issues quotes from *Saddharmapundarika*, where Sariputra says:

And having heard this *buddhadharma*, I thought ‘indeed, this is expressed in the manner of twilight; at the tree of enlightenment the Jina reveals the knowledge that is inaccessible to logic, subtle and immaculate. (Wayman 1996: 130)

Chandrakirti defines *sandhabhasa* in the *Pradipaddyotana* as that which reveals the true nature for sentient beings having superior zeal and by the method of ambiguous discourse (Wayman 1996:129). Tson-kha-pa explains that *sandhabhasa* is intended for candidates who aim at the highest *siddhi*, but the words for that goal as ambiguous. (Wayman 1996: 129)

Thus, two things become clear. One, this is a technique where what is said is not necessarily what is meant. Secondly, what is meant is not one definite thing. In fact, it is so subtle that one might experience its meaning, but cannot say it in words or commentaries.

Thus, there is the possibility of layers of meaning, as well as meaning as something that is inexpressible, very akin to the Zen “koan”.

The poems cited above have commentaries attached to them (by later writers) and this is an accepted convention in Tantrik Buddhism where the meaning of the standard symbols, concepts and implements used are explained in terms of their symbolic or metaphysical significance. Hence, although interpretation is necessary at a linguistic and conceptual level, at the highest levels of *siddhi*, one is expected to experience the meaning rather than just interpret or understand.

The most complete of *charya* poems are the ones, in which a second layer of meaning is totally hidden. In other words, the poem looks innocent of deeper layers of meaning (please refer to the third *charya* poem quoted here). The *Kesaba Koili* is such a poem that looks innocent to the eye of deeper layers of meaning. And this is what is taken up by Jagannatha Dasa in quest of a hidden meaning (*artha*) and hence he writes the *Artha Koili*. Thus, the *sandhabhasa* of the *charya* poems seems to have been revived in Jagannatha Dasa’s poem in the sense that he assumes that *Kesaba Koili* to be written in *sandhabhasa*. Secondly, though the poem is placed in a predominantly Vaishnava setting, framed within a discourse between Krishna and Arjuna, it contains disparate elements from different traditions--namely, Tantra, Yoga and Buddhism. We shall now look at a part of *Artha Koili* and then analyze the diverse philosophical traditions embedded in it.

*Artha Koili*

(The meaning of the Koili)

Poet Atibadi Jagannatha Dasa

O Cuckoo, Kesaba has gone to Mathura,  
On whose bidding has he gone,  
My son has not come back yet, O Cuckoo. (1)  
Arjuna Speaks:  
Arjuna said, 'Listen, O Mighty Armed,  
Give me leave to ask you a question,  
What does one understand by Kesaba Koili?'  
– To this question of, O Srihari, give me an answer.

Krishna Speaks:  
Hearing Partha's question, Bhagavan said,  
'You asked a very noble question indeed.  
By Cuckoo, the *jiva* is meant.  
That life force is me, pervading everything.  
The *jiva* came by itself and went by itself,  
Hence the son did not come back and  
Mathura, the body, lay empty.' (1)

O Cuckoo, who shall I give milk of the breast?  
my son has gone to Mathurapuri, O Cuckoo. (2)

Again Arjuna prostrated himself at Krishna's feet,  
'Clear my doubts, O Bhabagrahi.  
Explain to me the discourse about the mother's breast.'  
Srihari said, 'Listen O Arjuna,  
Inside the *pinda* the *jiva* gets great happiness.  
Again it disappears and goes elsewhere.  
It dissolves into ether and enters another pinda,



To relish the nectar of Hari - mother's milk.'  
Hearing this Arjuna was delighted  
And Krishna explained on and on. (2)

O Cuckoo, my son has not come back,  
the dense Brundavana looks beautiful no longer,  
O Cuckoo. (3)

What is the meaning of dense Brundavana?  
Explain this to me, O Bhavagraji.  
Kamalalochana looked at Arjuna's face,  
And said, 'Hear the answer, O son of Pandu,  
By dense Brundavana, jiva is meant,  
Gopa, the body, without jiva is no longer beautiful.  
When abandoned by the ultimate (*parama*)  
The body fell on the ground.  
This is the meaning of the word ga,  
Listen with all your heart, O son of Pandu.' (3)

O Cuckoo, Nanda doesn't enter the house,  
the lovely palace is desolate without Govinda,  
O Cuckoo. (4)

Touching Partha, Bhabagrahi continued,  
'Hear this, what is meant by the house?  
What is the meaning of the ultimate soul?  
I shall explain the views of the Scriptures to you.  
When the harmonious *purusa* abandoned the abode  
For Nanda (the body) existence was meaningless.  
As long as the *jiva* was there, the body was beautiful.  
But the harmonious principle went, never came back.  
Because of this, the empty house looked ugly.' (4)

O Cuckoo, King Nanda made a stone of his heart,  
putting collolium in his eyes placed him in the chariot,  
O Cuckoo. (5)

Arjuna asked, 'O listen Jagannatha,  
From where did Nanda's body emerge?'  
To Arjuna's question, Bhagavan said,  
'By Nanda's body, understand the body.  
When the *jiva* went into space  
The body dried up and it did not come back,  
When the soul separates from the body  
From both the eyes tears drop down.  
By collolium that is meant in the scripture.'  
Again and again Arjuna made salutations. (5)

O Cuckoo, the jewels on the girdle at his waist rang,  
bewitching the maidens of Gopapuri, O Cuckoo. (6)

Hearing Arjuna's question, Kamalalochana said,  
'Hear your answer, O Pandu's son.  
When the *jiva* was playing with the body  
The body-mechanism worked smoothly  
When the *jiva* went off with the ultimate,  
The machinery became silent.  
The body was working efficiently only with the help of  
the *jiva*,  
Hear this carefully, O Subhadra's husband.' (6)

O Cuckoo, at night Hari would ask for the moon  
on lifting eyes Nanda would do his bidding,  
O Cuckoo. (10)

'By night the eye is meant,  
The moon is the abode of all bliss.  
Know as Nanda the ultimate the left eye.  
Hence, when the eye is closed there is darkness.  
Understand the meaning of night thus.  
This is my answer, O brother of Judhisthira'  
Hearing this Arjuna was delighted,  
Keen to hear more, he again starts asking. (10)

O Cuckoo, he would brim with laughter on the lap,  
swing from side to side moving upon the swing,  
O Cuckoo. (11)

'By the swinging bridge, O Partha, the nose is meant.  
The soul waits expectantly to abandon this.  
In the middle of *trikuta* he holds his seat.  
That is referred to as the lap, O Arjuna  
On top of that you can hear the chant Hari bol, ringing.  
Taking the ultimate, *jiva* resides in the *sunya*.  
The nose and eyes frequent the *sunya*,  
And the body would fall without their support.' (11)

O Cuckoo, Beautiful the two liquid eyes,  
Cheating and lying he went, crossing the bounds,  
O Cuckoo. (12)

'Hear the meaning of the letter '*tha*' O Falguna  
I shall explain the ways of the Sastras to you  
Beautiful refers to the *jiva* ultimate  
It never came back finding other support –  
The beautiful body goes in a moment, O Partha.'  
Hearing this Arjuna makes obeisance. (12)

O Cuckoo, wherever the she parrot's voice carries,  
You can see Hari floating like a parrot, O Cuckoo. (13)

Hearing Arjuna's words Kamalochana said,  
'Hear the meaning of the branch of emerald –  
Four branches guard this *jiva*.  
The way the parrot resides within its cage,  
In the body, the ultimate *jiva* resides the same way.'  
Hearing this Arjuna was appeased.  
Gopinatha explained thus the meaning of the letter '*da*'. (13)

O Cuckoo, on his body is smeared sandal wood paste,  
With him plays brother Balarama, O Cuckoo . (16)

'In *trikuti* the swan glides,  
From the cliff of *tribeni* water flows down.  
On coming down it gathers at the bridge.  
The waist, thin, fades in a moment.  
Balarama, the ultimate, plays with the soul.'  
This is your answer, O brother of Judhisthira. (16)

In the fragments sited above the following symbols emerge as significant.

<i>jiva</i> :	self, individual soul
<i>pinda</i> :	the body
cage:	the body trapping the self
<i>purusha</i> :	<i>jiva</i> , self
eye:	moon, <i>ida</i> and <i>pingala</i> , tantric symbolism
swinging bridge:	nose, the swing of breath, <i>ida</i> , <i>pingala</i> , <i>susumna</i>
<i>trikuta</i> :	three, the three veins, the culmination of yogic penance
<i>swan</i> :	breath
<i>sunya</i> :	the Ultimate Principle, <i>Paramatma</i> , void.

The poem above is not strictly in the *chautisa* form. But it attempts an explanation of the esoteric meaning of each consonant. It is not a *dutakavya*, but a commentary on one. It breaks the form, interrupts it, and in the generation of a second layer of meanings, disrupts the meaning at the primary level. Read at the second level, the function of the “cuckoo” becomes problematic. It is no longer a vehicle for communication, nor is it the subject of address. At a philosophical level it attempts to explain the *pinda-brahmanda* theory (the body as the microcosm of the world, containing the world therein) where the body is of vital importance through which, using which, the highest reality can be achieved. Similarly, the Buddhist concept of *sunya* is very significant here. It not only signifies space in this context but also implies the highest principle, the ultimate goal.

In Orissan literary tradition, more *Koili* poems follow. But for some time, at least, there was a transformation of its function. It must be remembered that Jagannatha Dasa’s poem was “not” a *Koili*. But some of the *Koili* poems that followed were no longer *dutakavyas* but mystical poems. It was this text— *Artha Koili* — that problematizes the *Koili* form and creates a need for a transformation. The mystical tradition continued during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and we find at least three more poems in this tradition which addressed metaphysical issues and resolved the form of *Koili* in the context of a transformed tradition where *Koili* (as a form) was no longer concerned with “lament”, but with a “quest.” The function of the bird in these poems was transformed. It was no longer the vehicle, the messenger, a passive transmitter. The cuckoo became a symbol of the darkness and ignorance of the self (*jiva*). It became the subject of address. The poem retained an element of sadness, but this time, the goal was spiritual union or salvation. The cuckoo or the “ignorant dark self” was being given a lesson through which it could follow the path to

self-realization. Interestingly, if self-realization is achieved, the addressed cannot be called a cuckoo any longer. This is so because the bird, through the physical attribute of its dark colour and hiding among the trees, is compared to an ignorant soul. If the soul is transformed, it would turn bright, lose its ignorance--no longer remain a dark cuckoo or *koili*.

The following passages from two such poems of the 17<sup>th</sup> century would perhaps illustrate these points.

*Gnanodaya Koili*  
(The Cuckoo of the Awakening of Knowledge)  
Poet Lokonatha

(Verse 1)  
O Cuckoo, on the top of mount Kalindi,  
The lotus has blossomed.  
Inside the lotus is triveni while  
The swan flies in the sunya.

Some say the swan is at the mouth of mahima  
Plays the swan in at the top of amana.

O Cuckoo, what the mendicants search for  
That which the wise search for and never get  
At the zenith of the thin tube/passage  
The swan plays in the sunya temple.  
Devote you mind at the swan's feet  
And let your sins be destroyed.

*Sisurveda Koili*

Bairagi Dasa

(Verse 9)

O Cuckoo, that earth hides in sunya,  
The syllable aum resides in secret,  
If you can, know it,  
You will be able to make the sun and the moon  
Fetch water for you, O Cuckoo.  
When the windless merges with the wind  
The spirit will reside in the cage, O Cuckoo.

But after a few such poems, namely *Dayasagara Koili* by Trilochana Dasa, *Gnanodaya Koili* by Bairagi Dasa and *Sisurveda Koili* by Lokanath, the tradition faded, along with a weakening of the metaphysical strain in Oriya poetry. *Koili* poetry was written again, but never with any deep philosophical implications. This is the story of *Koili* in the Orissan literary tradition; a story of adaptation, transformation, of radical shift of style and ideas; a story of how literary forms and philosophical orientations are inseparable and can colour one another. It is also the story of how texts influence texts.

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## Notes

- 1.All the translations in this paper are by the author.
- 2 The five senses.
- 3 Time, death, end. The root of the karmic chain.
- 4 In any yogic practice (Tantra or Hathayoga) this is the highest goal. Here its meaning is ambiguous. Is it an ironic expression or does it imply that one must go beyond samadhi?
- 5 Ida and Pingala veins. The sun and the moon. According to yogic practice three veins traverse the entire body via the spinal cord, Ida, pingala and sisumna. The idea is to develop control over Ida and Pingala and to elicit the opening of the subtle middle vein – sisumna – in order to achieve transcendence.
- 6 It is popular in Tantric texts and practices to make use of coded language (sandhabhasa). Since the emphasis is on the initiated or the process of initiation, the poem is supposed to make no sense to the uninitiated. In this sense it comes very close to a



Zen Koan. This strategy persisted in later Orissan tradition. A significant example is Artha Koili (Jagannatha Dasa) which is a philosophical commentary or explanation of Kesaba Koili (Markanda Dasa).

7 All these might refer to lack of control over the senses.

8 Interpretations may vary, but this could refer to the loss of control over one's mind.

9 Again this is a matter of interpretation. During day the mind is restless, at night it is free in sleep.

10 Eroticism and erotic practices made Tantra highly suspect among both religious and philosophical schools of India.

However, without going into its implications, one can point out that very often they were meant symbolically and not literally.

One might read the poem for its erotic content, but one cannot neglect the reference to lotus (female sexuality as well as the highest state of meditative consciousness) or to *Ida* (sun) and *Pingala* (moon). In yoga the consciousness or meditative practice moves through six (according to some, seven) stages. The lowest is *kundalini*, at the base of the loins, and the highest is at the top of the skull, known as sahasrara, represented by a thousand lotus and implying the highest state of consciousness.

## JANE DRAYCOTT

### THE INTERMEDIARY LENS: TOWARDS THE CINEMATIC IN SUDEEP SEN'S *DISTRACTED* *GEOGRAPHIES* AND *PRAYER FLAG*

*The camera is my tool. Through it I give reason to  
everything around me.*

--Andre Kertesz

Praised widely for what Angus Calder in *The Scotsman* has called his 'uncannily easy' control of rhythm and form, Sudeep Sen's distinctive fusion of passion and precision sprang in his first collection *The Lunar Visitations* (1990) apparently ready-formed from a young writer of natural poetic authority. His skill and fluency, together with the richness of his verbal ingenuity and voice, soon earned him distinction in the *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* as a writer of 'considerable technical virtuosity and versatility' and an international reputation as one of the finest of a new generation of Indian writers in English.

But Sen is an artist working in forms beyond the written word also: photographer, film-maker and painter as well as poet, his apprehension of the world is as much that of visual artist as writer. Mario Relich has described poems in the early collection *New York Times* (1993) as 'reminiscent of variations on images from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*', and across the arc of his publications to date Sen's work has become as memorable for its cinematographic energy -- vividly focused, confident, interested in format as well as form-- as for its continuing and subtle verbal play. Increasingly and deservedly, a significant part of Sen's wide international appeal stems from his work's singular blend of passionate and often classical meditation with an entirely contemporary engagement with the dynamics and narrative modes of film and photography.

The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson has memorably said in an interview ‘I don’t take photographs. It is the photograph which has to take me’, and as early as in the 1995 collection *Dali’s Twisted Hands* Sen also envisions such an observant-subjective self, in terms of the mechanism of a camera lens:

One thing that stays constant — the regular  
horizontal of the venetian blinds —  
the intermediary lens through which I  
watch the kaleidoscopic theatre of the sky  
(‘Evening’s After-Light’, 1995)

From the same collection, ‘The Box Office Hit’ describes a factory-worker’s repeated trips to see a ‘fantasy flight’ Bollywood film ten times over, and the space which that ‘dream-like’ world occupies in his daily life:

again next morning to the factory groans,  
every line memorized, even in his dreams,  
just as in the film, as usual.  
(‘The Box Office Hit’, 1995)

Yet in his own work Sen isn’t interested in film as dream, however composed and luminous the view through his intermediary lens might be. From the outset, his is an encounter with what Mario Relich has called ‘visual reality’:

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

Jane Draycott

peeling softly in a huge slow motion.  
But that's only a dream.

Tonight, real flowers are blooming  
in the ancient Japanese moonlight.  
(‘Remembering Hiroshima Tonight’, 1990)

Though this much-anthologised early poem carries all the hallmarks of the film-maker’s eye — the ‘slow motion’ camera note, the continuous present-tense mode — it is still arguably several years before the cinematographer in Sen surfaces fully as an integral aspect of his composition process. Indeed in these highly praised early collections, *The Lunar Visitations*, *Kali in Ottawa Rima* (1992) and *New York Times*, his eye is much less in evidence as a focusing force than his dynamic narrative power. In all three collections he hungrily and passionately explores the art of the past-tense narrative to vivid and memorable effect, playing not only with personal and imaginative narrative but with the whole tradition of story-telling and fable:

There was a river, and a holy one too.  
The Jamuna, with all its celestial allusions  
watered and gorged the earth, flowed on.  
(‘A Pilgrimage to Mathura’, 1990)

A widow lived all by herself in the house,  
An everyday ritual:

Back from work,  
Wash up...  
(‘The Moon Elves’, 1990)

‘Once upon a Time’

...

The blackness in the cloud  
spouted white venom  
as the car sped,

leaking viscid liquid.

(‘Once Upon a Time’, 1990)

But if in these early collections it is primarily the fierce energy of Sen’s narrative explorations that capture the ear, his characteristic intensity of focus, the gathering integrity and authority of the developing observant-subjective ‘I’ is also already evident. As Kwame Dawes, in his valuable introduction to *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins, 1997), writes of *New York Times*: ‘[Sen] is a lone figure, an isolated poet able to immerse himself in the intensity of an image’:

A boy sauntered around the city  
tripping, smoking pot...

Behind the wooden closures

lives were made, and a crippled  
man, supported on wooden stilts,  
begged on one leg. (‘Harlem’, 1993)

There are markers too in these early collections of the highly developed visual-compositional instinct which is to become such a strong feature of later work:

*Jane Draycott*

Through the silhouette of the buildings,  
appears a patch of night sky, and part of  
the moon, pale orange, reflected faintly,  
in the glass and steel canyon  
of downtown, in the city of dreams.  
(‘A Night in Times Square’, 1993)

While the clock on the city tower  
struck the midnight stroke, and the fan  
on the ceiling constantly groaned,

I saw the moon, sliced and  
obscured by clouds,  
through the wrought-iron grille.  
(‘The First Sight: An Invocation’, 1990)

With even the soundtrack in place, this is Sen the scene-maker, the screenwriter who hears and sees in his mind’s ear and eye the full, exact pressure of every compositional detail in the subtle drive towards potential sense and meaning. These cinematically-held scenes stand interestingly as clear antecedents to the later ‘regular // horizontals of the venetian blinds — the intermediary lens through which I // watch the kaleidoscopic theatre of the sky’. In these moments of strongly audio-visual imagining, we significantly also see the embryo of the later cross-art productions which culminate so strikingly in *Prayer Flag* (2003) — a beautifully composed synthesis of Sen’s photographs, poems and audio recordings — and *Rain* (2005) his ‘word-perfect’ collaboration with twenty of India’s leading visual artists, offering all of the visual concentration and pulse of a poetic documentary film.

As early as 1993 we see Sen experimenting with formats to push the scope of his poetry beyond words on the page, first in *Parallel*, a disc and audio recording published by the Scottish Poetry Library (Edinburgh), and then notably in *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* a sequence of poems to accompany the delicately atmospheric etchings of artist Peter Standen, later dramatised with music by David Sylvian for BBC Radio in 1995.

If we can already observe the increasing influence here of Sen's long-term interest in the aesthetics of literary art-books, graphics and audio-visual formats, there is a correlative development during this period in the tightly focused and richly visual language of the poems themselves. In *Mount Vesuvius* and the 1995 collection *Dali's Twisted Hands*, as well as in new work published in 1997 in *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems*, Sen's poetry makes a distinctive and clarifying shift to a dominant present-tense mode and towards a less obviously linear narrative. The field deepens, and Sen's careful lens sharpens more closely on the held moment. It is in *Postmarked India* that Sen produces his key poem 'Single Malt' (which also appears under a variant title 'Macallan') as a kind of working manifesto — sensuous, vividly clear-eyed, closely framed:

The single malt  
explodes

from its husk,  
swirling

in the cranium  
of its own

shell,  
flooding

*Jane Draycott*

the mind  
with images  
  
that alternately  
switches  
  
shutter speed  
and lens,  
  
distilling  
sight,  
  
that whisks  
away  
  
from the mundane,  
what is  
  
absolute  
and essential,  
  
and leaves out  
what is not.            ('Single Malt', 1997)

Images from the distilled, focused world of photography and film occur frequently in this period of Sen's work ('exposed bromides, memory, and friendship'; 'night's / mirrored moments of slow-released light') and establish the terms of the poet's developing engagement with the world of politics, geography and history. He wants us to see exactly what this world is to the eye as well as to the imagination and the intellect —



*Kavya Bharati 2010*

As its back  
faces translucent aqua light of the deep  
sea, green and blue merge with

the brown of the larva...

Here, and  
now, the infant shark muscles itself —  
learning the rules of shifting

maritime trade — and  
the rules with which to rule  
his kinsmen, his kindred

(‘Mermaid Purses’, 1997)

That ‘now’, so reminiscent of the active immediacy of Ted Hughes’ ‘now / And again now, and now, and now’, is the arena in which Sen’s poetic imagination now operates most powerfully, in the 1997 poems and later in his notable 2003 collection *Distracted Geographies: An Archipelago of Intent* :

An avenue  
of arched

light —  
its emerald

glow filtering  
through

the matrix  
of branches,

Jane Draycott

its hypnotic  
marrow —

sucks me into  
its tunnel. (‘Graveyard’, 2003)

This is the eternal present of drama, the continuous composed ‘now’ of screenplay. Sen has an intuitive sense of scene: ‘An envelope arrives unannounced from overseas / containing stark white sheets ...’ (‘A Blank Letter’), ‘In this empty / featureless // apartment, / I stand waiting // for my furniture / to arrive. // The telephone rings — ...’ (‘Baptism’) and in *Distracted Geographies* that cinematic mode finally achieves its most explicit expression. With a marked poetic intensification of sensuousness and visual alertness, Sen delivers a subtly choreographed meditation on the body — desire, loss, illness and sex — in a montage of scenes described in the jacket notes as consciously filmic in its dynamics: ‘scenes shift, dissolve, inter-cut, flashback and fast-forward...’ .

Clumps  
of smoke

simmer  
in the pan,

and slowly  
lift

to caress  
the outline

*Kavya Bharati 2010*

of your  
breasts,  
  
as you cook,  
stirring  
  
the spices  
in carrot,  
  
milk,  
and cream...  
  
recipes  
of hunger  
  
and passion.

(‘Indian Dessert’, 2003)

Indeed the whole of *Distracted Geographies* is characterised by a strongly focused apprehension of texture and colour of the most sensuous sort — ‘the hoar-frost’s // thick, thick — / white... the opulent verdure ...water’s aquamarine glass ... incarnadine and helpless’ (‘Indoors/Outdoors2: Archipelago’) — Ten years on from the relative simplicity of ‘the intermediary lens’ figure at the heart of ‘Evening’s After-Light’, *Distracted Geographies* arrives at a much more sophisticated and intellectually engaging expression of the poet’s enduringly visually-charged encounter with the world:

My sight line  
skated  
  
along the  
damp

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grass-blade  
surface

outside.  
My pupil's

camera lens  
rack-

focused,  
adjusting

its vision,  
trying to

match  
the balanced

laws of physics.            ('Gartincaber, Doune', 2003)

In the same year as the US (and later UK and Indian) publication of *Distracted Geographies*, Sen also produces *Prayer Flag*, a composition of poems and photographs in which his fascination with texture and colour comes richly into life beyond the printed text. The tropes of photography and screen continue to figure as key motifs —

She was only  
an accidental figure  
in the wide screen frame.

Unlike her,  
I was looking skyward,  
through the prayer flag's

translucent cotton... (‘Prayer Flag’, 2003)

A memory now, a still — framed,  
not revealing to the world  
what I had once seen —

the panorama's generosity,  
its wild, stark untouchability.  
(‘Buddha in a Lotus’, 2003)

— but a new and significant development in addition to Sen's own photographs is the glorious accompanying CD, an audio-montage of music, recorded sound, atmospheric wild-track and poetry, including Bengali translations by Aminur Rahman. This is a long way from the straightforward recorded poetry-reading of *Parallel* — this is an entire audio world, a sound-track indeed. Listening with the photographs open in front of you creates a kind of still-frame experience akin to a movie-age magic lantern show — certainly a DVD or web-based version would bring a viewer even closer to the cinematic experience towards which *Prayer Flag's* audio-visual format seems strongly to point.

Tom Alter has written in his 2005 appreciation of *Prayer Flag* that it is ‘an unique object of art that reveals two intrinsically linked artistic sides of Sen's work and talent: words and images. Perfection of musicality, tone and cadence is tuned to produce the finest resonance...’ That Sen has continued to develop and push his art

*Jane Draycott*

beyond the more self-conscious terms of 'Single Malt' is a mark of the imaginative energy and aesthetic craftsmanship which has always distinguished each of his new books. He has described himself in interview as 'equally interested in music, film, theatre, live and performance art': characteristically, the London launch of the latest edition of *Atlas*, his internationalist 'bookzine' of poetry, prose and visual art will be vividly remembered as an evening of song, photography and Sufi dance as well as poetry and prose. At the time of writing, Sen's latest book *Aria* (India: Yeti Books/Monsoon Editions 2009 / UK: Mulfran Press 2010), a brilliantly attentive and musical set of new translations from poets in a dozen different languages, is brought quietly and subtly into focus by accompanying collographs and embosses by artist Frances Kiernan. It will be interesting to see what format Sen's next collection will take — one senses that whatever it is, it is unlikely to consist of merely words on a page.

## ANJUM HASAN

### THE UNRUNG BELL

Saleem Peeradina. *Slow Dance*. Ridgeway Press, p.91. \$15.00 USD.

In the penultimate (and title) poem of this collection, Saleem Peeradina is no longer betting on the long term. For him “this night blooming into day is enough.” As for months, years and decades, these are things on which only “the young can wager, unafraid/ To build on the back of a hunch.” He is ready to give up the idea of the future and “walk/ Free with empty hands” towards another kind of freedom. Except that “Time hangs still like an unrun bell.”

The need to break away and the impossibility of breaking away are themes that recur, appearing in the very first poem, ‘Exhibit A,’ where we are watching a landscape painting into which has drifted a wanderer or recluse. The wanderer tells us that against the grand design of the landscape, he is insignificant; the backdrop is what counts. “We buy this fiction,” says Peeradina, “And make out of it a window on our wall.”

It is, always and everywhere, the human drama that overtakes all else. Could even the recluse, despite his reduced claims on the world, avoid this human drama? Is he not enmeshed in it? The poems in *Slow Dance* seem to say both yes and no. When the world is considered with detachment and irony--held at arm’s length--the poetry that emerges is, curiously, more engaging. When Peeradina pithily captures ‘Mumbai in Thirteen Clicks,’ the result is more satisfying than self-conscious poems such as ‘Tips on Eating With Your Hand,’ which take their task a little too seriously.

Similarly, in the poem ‘To Whom it May Concern,’ the sentiment behind lines like “For the price of a five-star meal/ My mother’s

maid could survive a whole year/ And fund her children's education too" is irreproachable; one just wishes that the poet had found a less bald way of stating the obvious, something he does in the very same poem when he describes "the club with cold leftovers/ Of hunters' trophies staring glassy-eyed/ Over my shoulder as starched uniforms fuss/ Around the lunch table." That "cold leftovers" is particularly good because it brings to mind the whole stale and desiccated atmosphere of a colonial-era club.

On the whole, Peeradina prefers to stick to things as they are. This can sometimes come uncomfortably close to literality; at other times it infuses his poems with a meditative calm as in 'For the Birds' which is just a picture of migratory Arctic cranes breaking their journey to be fed by a woman on a farmhouse. Or 'Windy Day Chime,' with its simple image of a neighbour mowing his lawn. For a poet who prefers the tangible and close at hand, the poem 'Reflections on the Other' comes as a pleasant surprise.

This is a four-part exploration of the self-other dialectic, which does not reach easy conclusions. It begins with reminding us that "the person who is addressed/ as the other does not remember giving/ this proponent the nod" and goes on to ask how this 'proponent' of the idea of the other got to the place "from which no one can budge you/ simultaneously situating the other in an inextricable spot." The swing between the two poles creates a rhythm which is unique for Peeradina's poetry and lifts the poem above mere rhetoric about polarities:

Neither his tongue nor his perception can be bent  
To regard the uniqueness, the singularity  
That is everywhere evident



*Kavya Bharati 2010*

As anything else but unique and singular, to be met  
on its own ground with level eyes,  
outstretched hand. It is this that the one  
experiences as freedom--a gift that once belonged  
to everyone, shared in good faith  
but stealthily appropriated and now owned

By the one who says it is important  
to hear the voice of the other.

This is pretty sharp poetry. It reminds me of Vivek Narayanan's poem 'On the Necessity of Speaking of Caste' (*Pratilipi*, March-June, 2010), written from the opposite end of things, as it were--from the point of view of the 'proponent' who strains unsuccessfully to be free of polarities, which in this case have become

...a betrayal  
a way of merely  
repeating with each  
denial; you cut away  
that plaster cast but your limbs occupied  
the same space  
they did before.

Given the potential of such philosophical adventures, one would have liked Peeradina to go further down this road, but he chooses instead, in a subsequent section of the book, to rework popular ghazals and old Hindi film songs. This is a hit-or-miss endeavour at the best of times.

'Song of Subversion' is based on the lines 'Ranjish hi sahi, dil hi dukhane ke liye aa/ Aa phir se mujhe chhodke jaane ke liye aa.'

Peeradina says his version is meant to “undercut the intent of the original to expose the jaded romanticism of the lines.” Accordingly, he translates the first line as “If your coming is meant only to cause anguish/ Come, trifle with my heart one more time.” Presumably, a faithful translation would read “*Even* if your coming is meant...” Similarly, he translates the second line as “Since your going away is inevitable/ Come only with the intention of leaving,” which again should literally be “Since your going away is inevitable/ Come *if* only with the intention of leaving.”

These attempts at play are interesting but do not serve to make the ghazal new for us in the way that other contemporary reworkings of the form such as Agha Shahid Ali’s do. The ghazal’s tendency to express in abstractions and conundrums does not carry over well in English unless the poet is able to mine this quality for its lyric potential rather than attempting a surface translation of it.

Befitting the idea of renunciation, which is threaded through the collection, the book ends with a poem about death, a set of instructions to those left behind on “the rite stuff.” I’d prefer to end this review on a more uplifting note with the poem ‘Exhibit B’-- about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese painter Ando Hiroshige, whom Peeradina describes as participating in nothing but noticing everything.

The next morning, there he was again, looking. He was  
Everywhere. He missed nothing.

That captures the kind of close attention combined with artistic detachment that the poems in this collection aim for and occasionally achieve.

## CECILE SANDTEN

### EVOKING PLACE AND SPACE OF HERE AND THERE

Shanta Acharya. *Dreams That Spell the Light*. Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2010.

Shanta Acharya has already established herself as a fine poet with a unique *Indian* poetic voice. After her apprenticeship with *Not This, Not That* (1994), her other three books of poetry, *Numbering Our Days' Illusions* (1995), *Looking In, Looking Out* (2005) and *Shringara* (2006) have distinguished her as a notable creative writer, pertaining to the second generation of Asian British poets. Although Acharya has lived in London since 1985, she still retains a strong focus on her home country, India. Yet, her poems move back and forth in time and space between “East” and “West”, clearly encompassing the two (or more) worlds surrounding her. This can be observed very clearly, for instance, in the poem “A Place for All Seasons” (p. 54) in which the poet metaphorically, spatially, and linguistically addresses several environments simultaneously:

Lying on a *dari* of autumn foliage,  
I peer through a *purdah* of latticed leaves

Preparing to capture the moment  
when colour and texture, sunshine and sky  
merge in one split-second and freeze--

Her fifth collection, *Dreams That Spell the Light*, is quite variegated with regard to the above-mentioned topic. ‘Searching for oneself’, or if not this, then, ‘revisiting one’s roots’ are two of the most important themes in contemporary poetry by expatriate Indian-English writers. There are real reasons for approaching these issues,

retreating and re-appropriating them where necessary. In Acharya's case the poet deliberately allies herself with a clichéd image, say of the itinerant wanderer. In *Dreams That Spell the Light*, it appears that Acharya is a 'well-travelled' poet who regards this topic as an important catalyst to her writing. As one follows her journey into her poetry, one may feel as if exploring both, historical regions and places as well as hard-to-reach corners of the poet's inmost being(s). In "Italian Prayer" (p. 11), a poem which is accordingly characterised by the strategy of the anaphora, the speaker visits several important places of art history in Italy, yet always starting in India:

How does one sustain the journey from Konarka to St Peter's,  
from Lingaraja to Santa Maria del Fiore, from the temple  
of Jagannatha to the basilica of San Marco?

In a typical Acharya-two-liner, the speaker puts forward the demand: "Teach me how to find myself in these palaces of art,/ that I may learn to love and suffer with all my heart". In the subsequent eight poems the speaker visits, for instance, "Wazir Khan's mosque" in Lahore, Pakistan, and finds out that by exploring this famous place, well-known for its extensive *faience* tile work, she is "[m]oving from one world into the next;/ I enter paradise on earth, I am blessed" ("Mosque of Wazir Khan", p. 12). The next journey takes the reader to Sabo Quarter of Ibadan, Nigeria, whereas the poem "Bryce Canyon" (p. 14), in which the theme of the itinerant wanderer is most appropriately pointed out in the lines "Travelling through Time's creations,/ nothing mattered; not even the here and now", focuses on the mythical or even magical formations of the strangely shaped rocks of this particular place. "The Trees of Nanjing" (p. 16) obviously reflect the speaker's journey to China:

The trees of Nanjing shelter us from the sun  
providing a canopy, an oriental umbrella, while we wander  
through the flower market chaperoned by our guide. (P. 16)

As this poem is dedicated to “*Bikash Acharya*” it can be assumed that the personal pronoun “we” reflects a mutual travel experience of speaker and relative. The poem “On the Grand Canal” (p. 17) does so, too, with a slightly critical undertone with regard to the strict Chinese one-child policy which additionally favours male children. The speaker of the poem observes a mother with her son who “wave back to us, their expression impossible to decipher./ Could these be the faces that mourn foetal deaths of daughters?” The last stanza of this poem reveals the Chinese context by surprising the reader with a most exotic cuisine:

We move on to the next surprise where dinner  
is soup of snake followed by dove, with turtles’  
legs, stir-fried frogs, snails, crunchy green vegetables.

The poem “The Great Wall of China” (p. 18-19) is again typical of Acharya as she is--except for two stanzas--using two-line stanzas with run-over lines. The tone of voice in this poem, again, is rather critical, and, as another aspect, uses magical or even super-natural elements expressed by personification as the following lines show:

Empty arms are laden with memories  
of sleepless nights hearing the silent screams  
Of skeletons in unidentified graves waiting  
To be laid to rest; daughters disappearing like dreams.

These lines, among others, also demonstrate how Acharya resuscitates language: her method is to introduce new freshness to the overwrought cliché of the itinerant wanderer, by diving deep into natural elements and abstract concepts, using, elaborately and excellently tuned, the strategy of alliteration.

There is a persistence about these run-over lines that do justice to the unending stream of stories and real and imagined journeys that we can imagine expatiating from the persona's thoughts, as demonstrated in the poem "Kandy Perahera" (p. 26). This poem is about the great Buddhist festival in Sri Lanka, thus again addressing the persona's travel experiences:

Newspapers tell the story of *Kandy perahera*,  
hijacking me into a world of myths:

A sacred-tooth relic that travelled to Lanka  
all the way from my homeland, Kalinga,  
to preserve it from a hostile king –

The tooth, symbol of the Sinhalese soul,  
Safe in the sanctum of Kandy's sacred temple.

I too travelled from Kalinga to Colombo  
via London; my soul stripped of all division –  
an ocean churning to let the poison out.

Acharya has set the voyage at the centre of her work, for instance, that of exiled Jews as in the poem "Dispossessed" (p. 30). She takes up this theme in "Return of the Exile" (p. 31), a poem which highlights both the actual return of the exiled persona to her home place and

Jesus' return at the End of Time relating to the Second Coming in the *Qur'an*. In "Kabul: 14th November 2001" (p. 32-3), Acharya concentrates on the hope of a new beginning by using the image of a pregnant woman, as well as on the continuous danger of bombings as put forward from the perspective of a male persona: "In the distance bombs keep shattering/ the silence of the surrounding ruins".

Identity and belonging are the threads we recognise and hold in *Dreams That Spell the Light*: "The full moon rose like an aria in the sky,/ my thoughts, a flock of geese, heave homewards" ("Boxing Day", p. 40), thus equally addressing the longing for home and the necessity to accept what is offered in the here and now, negotiating between a lost India and the winter in England: "I watch the snow scatter the darkness of my soul". The tone of voice in Acharya's poems becomes more conciliatory in a poem such as "Transit of Venus" (p. 45) which, again, revolves around a voyage. In this case it is a journey into the galaxies which implies the idea of no return:

Placed as I am, there is no option,  
no choice to figure out what goes on  
in the universe except what I have been  
    chosen to bring to the party –  
laughter, music, dance, pleasure, poetry...

However, the voyages go on: from Captain Cook's journey to Australia ("Beyond Belief", p. 46), to a mental journey ("The Dream", p. 47), to an internet partner search ("Shaadi.com", p. 48-9), a poem in which Acharya demonstrates her comic capacity by showing the persona's desperate need for a partner who turns out to be like herself: "My ideal partner would be someone like my self –".

Intellectual travels in the sense of searching for one's identity proceed in poems such as "Conversation, with Paulo Coelho on reading *The Alchemist*" (p. 50-1), the search for oneself in "Aspects of Westonbirt Arboretum" (p. 52-3), picturing one of the most spectacular tree collections in the world, which provides one with freedom: "[...] you will be one with the universe, free". The search for home continues, for instance, in "Going Home" (p. 60), a poem dedicated to Doris Lessing, in which the speaker assumingly identifies with Lessing's ability to dream and imagine as well as with her recurring topics, childhood and memories. The metaphorical as well as meta-fictional journey is addressed in "It" (p. 62):

And your journey begins through everything:

Language that is water, air, light, earth  
shining nerves spread out like angel wings;  
sun in water shimmering, the aura of kings,  
earth a mirror for what cannot be seen...

The one but last poem of the collection, "Somewhere, Something" (p. 66), focuses outrightly on the topic of travelling, conjuring the reader to fly free, see the universe with new eyes "not blinded by shadows that light casts". Generally speaking, in Acharya's poems the past is always present, and personal histories are interwoven with collective memories of humankind. By combining these issues with the idea of the search for identity, the moving back and forth in time and space, between "East" and "West", the last poem "The Wishing Tree" (p. 67) ends on the same note the collection started off with: There are two epigraphs, one by T.S. Eliot and the other by Marcel Proust, in which both writers display similar notions of exploring the world. In contrast, the ancient Wishing Tree is set



*Kavya Bharati 2010*

“along foothills of Himalayas”. In spite of this rather local environment that becomes apparent in the context of this poem, Acharya is able to link all her poems to a wide range of cultural, historical and spatial environments, being gifted with the capacity of conjuring up multiple identities. With *Dreams That Spell the Light*, the poet has once again highlighted her versatile linguistic and cultural poetic talent as well as her ability to aesthetically create a mosaic of the imagery of here and there.

## CECILE SANDTEN

### CONFLUENCE

*We Speak in Changing Languages: Indian Women Poets 1990-2007.*  
E V Ramakrishnan and Anju Makhija (eds.) Sahitya Akademi:  
New Delhi, 2009. Rs. 120. p.278.

E V Ramakrishnan's and Anju Makhija's thematically focused anthology on twenty Indian English women poets, who have published between 1990 and 2007, is indeed timely. Given the considerable presence of the work of Indian English women poets over the last two decades coming from, and being primarily based, in India, this anthology particularly highlights India's expanding literary scene in this field. In spite of the fact that only twenty poets are assembled, Shanta Acharya, Deepa Agarwal, Smita Agarwal, Jane Bhandari, Sagari Chhabra, Priya Sarukkai Chabria, Sampurna Chattarji, Mamang Dai, Revathy Gopal, Anjum Hasan, Rachna Joshi, Anjum Katyal, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Marlyn Naronha, Seeme Qasim, Rizio Raj, Mukta Sambrani, Menka Shivdasani, Vijaya Singh, K. Srilata, and Arundhati Subramaniam, of whom each is represented with three to eleven poems, the editors do not claim this to be an exhaustive collection. However, they attempt to acknowledge "the *diversity* of women's voices in contemporary Indian English poetry" (xiii; emphasis C.S.). In addition, they respond to the current developments and shifts in contemporary writing by women: the driving forces in women's writing are no longer the women's movement or the feminist struggle of the 1970s to 90s, as "[t]he poets included here have internalized the lessons of women's movements and are sensitive to social oppressions of all kinds" (xiii). In contrast, Eunice de Souza, an acclaimed Indian English poet and editor of the anthology *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* (1997) is quoted in Arlene K. Zide's anthology *In Their Own Voice: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets* (1993) as follows: "But women's experience and

socialization as a whole is different. So it is expected that what they write will be different” (de Souza in Zide 1993: xix).

Therefore, in *We Speak in Changing Languages*, the title of which already hints at the current shift in focus, it is possible to listen to a diverse range of voices: voices of the community--broader and personal--, individual voices, as well as voices from the city like in “5.46, Andheri Local” (267) or “Madras” (268) by Arundhati Subramaniam. We hear voices from the village like in Mamang Dai’s “Small Towns and the River” (99) and voices from nature. There are both real and surreal voices as well as voices of supposed madness, dislocation, home and abroad or one’s search for identity. Many voices are shaped by intertextuality as they draw on classical Indian myths and poetry. We hear voices that “speak of our [the supposedly male Indian?] world in their voices” (xvii) as well as voices that focus on the borderline between the personal and the political. Some voices speak of the violence against women and some of childhood memories. In addition, voices speak of travel as in the poems “At Po Lin, Hong Kong” (239) by Menka Shivdasani or “Durga in Alberta” (150) by Rachna Joshi. There are also illustrative and experimental voices as the poems by Mukta Sambrani demonstrate. We can listen to voices of the media world as in the poem “Computer” (175) by Rukmini Bhaya Nair which enacts a dysfunctional love relationship. What we find, too, are voices that draw on irony as their means of depicting the everyday world. At times, meta-poetic voices like in “Epitaph” by Menka Shivdasani can be heard as well as voices of self-respect and self-questioning. Besides, very simply, there are voices of love. One recurring motif in many of the poems is the sari used as an apt metaphor for women being entrapped in traditional Indian patriarchal marital structures.

What is most interesting, however, is that only one out of ca. 140 poets of Zide's anthology, in which there are also many poems in English translation, is Shanta Acharya. In addition, Acharya is perhaps the only one NRI included in *We Speak in Changing Languages*. Her fifth poetry collection *Dreams That Spell the Light* is due any moment. The question, therefore, should be allowed whether the literary scene in India, especially when focussing on women poets, has changed dramatically over the past two decades or whether many young poets have entered the ever-growing Anglophone literary scene in India. Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered adequately, as not all bio-notes state the year of birth of the particular writer included in this anthology, nor each writer's place of origin. Anthologisation is, thus, a most difficult task, and one of the common denominators put forward in *We Speak in Changing Languages* is that "most of the poets represented here emerged in the nineties and have already published their first volume of poems" (xiii). In the light of such information, the importance of including and perpetuating Indian English women poets in the mainstream literary scene--the book is published with the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi--can be neither under-estimated nor over-emphasised. Its maintenance is a prerequisite for disabling male elitism in poetry writing in the Indian context. As *We Speak in Changing Languages* demonstrates, poetry by Indian English women writers exposes poetry readers to aspects of Indian English women issues that are authentically rendered cultural representations of women's lives in contemporary India and abroad, as in Shanta Acharya's case, who opens the anthology. This decision is due to the wisely chosen fact that the book is ordered alphabetically. Her poems are both solidly grounded and satisfyingly complete. Her language is never overloaded, yet metaphorically rich. Her words, chosen meticulously, express perfectly well her calm observations, e.g. that of an "Arranged Marriage": "Impossible union with a stranger./ Love will rise like a

phoenix, they said:/ friendship will follow with the children of god./ But first, one has to be turned inside out” (8). As one of the most recurring themes, the personal becomes political within the realm of womanhood which also the poem “Quiet Spaces” by Deepa Agarwal, who indirectly refers to Virginia Woolf’s concept of “A Room of One’s Own”, demonstrates: “[Quiet spaces] [...] shrink out of sight/ like microbes hiding under your skin/ sequester themselves like poems/ ripening out of reach/ [...] remain/ floating, invisible/ and acquire the right shape/ when the time comes/ for you to claim them” (23). Thus, the ‘old’ feminist struggle is addressed, pared with the notion of personal withdrawal from society by being (self-assuredly) a writer.

Most poets, sometimes more personal, then, again, more distanced, turn to their grandmothers or mothers as addressees, either for consolation, or more frequently, in terms of straightforwardly demonstrating the changes that have been taking place in women’s lives in India. This notion can, most fittingly, be found in Sampurna Chattarjee’s “Going Against the Grain”. In this poem cooking is equated with “[...] Another/ unthinking rite, another blind offering/ to the god of *what’s for dinner tonight*./ I wasn’t meant to do this, Ma, it goes against my grain” (83). In this context, the speaker in Deepa Agarwal’s “Forgotten Kaleidoscope” points out: “Old customs die hard. They/ linger like neglected ghosts, and resurrect themselves/ when last expected./ Mummy slips them off,/ those fragile shackles./ She keeps them on a dusty shelf,/ to mourn by themselves” (24-25) in order to address the changes. In her poem “Sarojini Naidu and She”, Smita Agarwal voices the predicaments that Indian women poets have to constantly face. This is put forward in a most repugnant stereotypical mode: “Indian women poets are plump; never thought of as bright” (35). In so doing, she underlines that the anthology is out to fight against “the grain”, in spite of the fact that the editors

do not say so explicitly. Overall, assuming that Eunice de Souza is right in her initially quoted estimation, the very different poets assembled in this anthology represent significant contributions to the ever-growing field of contemporary Anglophone poetry by Indian women writers. Whether readers are looking for youthful excitement, adult observations or mature, wise, joyful or sad life experiences--surreal or real--there is bound to be something within this anthology to appeal. Given the difficulty of the task in hand, the editors have done a sterling job. The anthology has depth and *diversity*, and while faithful to the theme, the poems are distinct and vibrant in tone, texture and content.

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