KAVYA BHARATI

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR
INDIAN LITERATURE IN
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE
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FOREWORD

Kavya Bharati calls itself an "occasional journal". The term is not simply a defence mechanism, useful for excusing ourselves when production is delayed. It also suggests, or conveys, we hope, the slightly relaxed atmosphere and attitude with which we process and present material that comes to us, and keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously.

Nonetheless, for those who like to collect us (and we're grateful that many do), a date is assigned to each issue to keep the chronology clear. So it is that the copy coming to you now is designated "1995", though its release occurs some months after that year has come and gone. Surprisingly, our next issue, *Kavya Bharati* 8, which will bear the imprint "1996", may possibly appear before this calendar year has expired. Meanwhile, we thank our readers for their patience.

Kavya Bharati 9 (1997) will be devoted predominantly (perhaps exclusively) to poetry translation. We have in hand already good English translations of poetry originally written in Oriya, Marathi, Malayalam, Hindi, Telegu and Tamil. And other dependable, skilled translator friends have promised English-language renderings of substantial poetry from Urdu and Punjabi. All this in addition to several essays, already in hand, related to translation theory and problems, and several reviews of published volumes of poetry translated from Indian languages.

Kavya Bharati 9 is still open, and we will welcome other competent translations of poetry from Indian languages--especially, but not only, from languages not mentioned above. *KB* of course still warmly welcomes thoughtful, crafted English-language poetry originals. A few such that we receive in the immediate future may find their way into our next issue. Though we are able to publish only about twenty percent of the material we receive, we are thankful for everyone who makes the attempt.

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Material in John Oliver Perry's essay "Sexual Identity Driving Meena Alexander's Poetic Sublimity" is revised and altered from the author's article "Meena Alexander's Sexual Sublime" in *The Toronto Review*, Volume 14, Number 1, Summer 1995.

KAVYA BHARATI

a review of Indian Poetry

Number 7, 1995

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KAMALA DAS

POEM

And,
On his eighty-sixth birthday
his family let him sleep on
much past the usual hour
Was there at all any need for hurry
None had sent him gifts or flowers
no courier stood waiting for his receipt
There was a drought on his skin
and in his eye the cataract's mist
This was he, once so beloved.
He plunged himself as a blade
Into the recesses of my heart
and, to love was to hurt
that rosy opulent season.
I do not remember the reasons
for that fateful surrender
I can see no logic
in my wayward behavior.
All I remember now is the rain
the pitter patter on my window pane
He had come in from the damp
his hair, his skin, his mouth
dampened with the rain
A monsoon to hold in my arms
a monsoon to breathe in, to devour.
The years have shrunk him to a fossil
a few strands of memory still remain
like the leavings of last night's spaghetti.
where did the hot sun of my desire set?
where did my love words go
as birds, wing-tired, fly at dusk to roost?

FOR CLEO

In Canada
it is autumn time
the maple leaves
red as drying blood
may not last out the week

I grow visible
more visible here than there
the inescapable visibility
of the darker race
peopling a white God's world
How would He have guessed
the traumas of the black?

The sky and the wrinkling sea
peer through veils of grey
I am the loving intruder
in love with Atwood and her land
would even my love seem dark,
dark and therefore a wee bit
sinister?
Only the trees seem glad to see me
as if I were their kith and kin
I take on their characteristics
as the days one after another pass by
while I wear this land as an overcoat
warming my breasts and belly
I begin to look like its trees
my skin dries like the bark of a birch
my hair smells of spruce
There are creatures in the undergrowth
I smell the swamp and the loam

A WIDOW'S LAMENT

Is the soul too
now autumned,
rusted in the awful recollection
of spilt blood,
readying itself for the fall?
This has always been
some one else's world not mine.
My man, my sons, forming the axis
while I, wife and mother
insignificant as a fly
climbed the glass panes of their eyes.
There wasn't a thing
that I could do to make myself grow
to reach their ordained height
although I loved shyly and from afar.
The sons set forth
for other homes, other loves, and
their father died, turning
towards me a frightened eye,
and I did not any longer know
why I ought to rise from the bed at all
or see cold platters of faces
heaped with mushy sympathy
Make of my tears, so long unshed
and of the trembling of nerves unseen
a raiment for your widowed daughter,
a thick veil for her to shelter under
while packs of wolves howl and howl
around the ramparts of her night
which God will put forth a wrinkled hand
to wipe my brow?
I have torn to shreds the tarot cards of my fate,
I walk the highway alone.
He was a sunshade, he was my home,
now I walk naked as a babe.

The birds are hiding
they hoard their melodious cries
in the lockers of silence

Canada's silence is different
from other silences known
It is a gigantic deep-freeze
in which sounds
lie wintering...

Of one thing I am certain
the forest and I,
we have something in common,
we do not speak French.

SALEEM PEERADINA

From
MEDITATIONS ON DESIRE

Note: *Meditations on Desire* takes its cue from the tradition of classical and medieval devotional poetry in India, blends enroute with Urdu romantic lyrics, and finds a kindred voice in Roland Barthes.

The discovery of Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* was felicitous indeed -- after fifty-eight of these meditations were written. Sections 39 and 45 below owe their genesis directly to parts of Barthes' discourse for which acknowledgment is due.

10

For us, the rigor
of artistic distance,
the bitter aesthetic
of denial
is more telling
than the meeting
of mirrors.

11

What the devotee dreads most
is the paralysis
of passion, the rigor mortis
of feeling. So reckless
is the flight
from this contorted mirror,
he runs
into another death.

13

I teach myself to want
nothing, to live
on that ascetic edge
where desire, firmly
under my will,
is perpetual.

14

Not the convergence
of spheres,
nor the snug curvature
of lines interlocking,
but
the contemplation
of the moment
of convergence.

23

Touch breeds
touch... evaporates.
Comes apart as it comes
together. A visitation
reeking
of impermanence
makes every return
futureless.

31

Were it not for
the timely interception
of passing strangers,
this ragged silence
(hunger unassuaged)
would have turned home
bowl empty.

39

To not know
what it is
being inside, engulfed,

Or to know it
as spectacle, cold, cut off
from passion.

I slip into
the propitious wedge
between.

42

Serve me a platter
of questions, a bowl of doubt,
sip of disbelief, gulp
of regret.
Put me to the test --
so I'm fit and ready
to receive
the blow.

45

I have hope
yet I will not act
upon it.

Or else
I have none
yet stubbornly I cling

To illogic, hooked
by the lure
of contradictions.

61

Knock out teeth, stiffen joints,
shrivel fingers, shed hair.
Throw the spine off-balance.

Blur the vision, muddle speech,
impair hearing, clog arteries.
Let flesh hang limp.

Yet this desire --
greater than the wish to draw
air into the lungs -- will still twitch

A muscle, clutch the dust
as it seeks release, linger
like an overripened smell.

PRABHANJAN K. MISHRA

THE NEIGHBOURS (1994)
(For Jatin)

We are the iron men, the brave men.
We do not bypass our sorrows.
We take them head on
chew their splinters
relish the blood
that the tongues and the gums bleed.
We are not straw, not husk, not dust.
We do not grow lilies in our hearts.

Come to dinner tonight when the moon
turns purple and dies in a swoon.
We drink and eat. Our plates
heaped with grief, glasses filled with pain.
We do not run away when the memory
arrests us with its forked prehensile tail.

This meat is my son's flesh. That whisky,
your daughter's blood. We swallow and swig
our respective loss and rancour, celebrate
our death and defeat. We build
tombs with sealed catacombs for we know
that no crypt can contain such pestilence.

The sorrow that we wear as vests
shall live beyond our breaths' span
underneath our festive silks and woolens
all hours. The flesh shall not
swarm with worms which may fly away
as myths of decadence. Our tears
shall change into scrolls of anecdotes
with voluptuous lust to suffer.

FOR FATHER (1993)

He feels uncremated.
In the metaphors of his presence
I live. A plagiarist of his experience.

In insolence and misery,
in incandescent debasement
our souls held hands.

An ache in my poems,
a messiah preaching silence;
my masks taking the mould of his face.

I was his little island of liberty
and he mine. Who was the cause,
who the effect, it was hard to decide.

He never could set himself
where he belonged. He drifted
and called it his freedom.

He lived a vicarious sovereign's life.
Mother was his narrative device,
abstract like a figure of speech.

Mother was his favourite metaphor
He filled all the blanks of his ambiguity
with the motifs of her beautiful absences.

He would dangle his expectations
in others' waters until his own thoughts
happen to tug at them and startle him

from his reverie to soliloquies,
"God, fulfillment is a state of mind,
not a body function".

GOD IS LISTENING

I write this to you.
Not a letter but evidence.

Privacy has to leave our lexicon.

The propriety of every eyebrow
raised at us insists;
this is our play:
we direct it,
play in it as well.

The space between us
is rife with exasperation.
Silence won't help.

Our fingers move
in ghostly hieroglyphs
even after the curtains have been drawn.
Our hands stay awake
seeking the dark's surface.
The vigil may last
till ordinary acts turn into anecdotes.

When we meet
my disturbed senses
look for a haunting aura
that some one might have left
in your interstices.

This swampy evening
opens up windows to let in
a voluptuous breeze
and a wish to die,
making our love absolute.

You make love to me
then isolate me with your razor gaze.
you despair for the moistness
of that wound to heal.

In time's womb:
Sundays are curses.
You hate your body -
its having grown beautiful
in ways too womanly.
You look at all the moss
about and around and pronounce -
this pit needs a fire.
You accede to my walking
beside your body but won't
allow me to inhabit it.
You would announce -
"My heart has enough room for you".

At this instant perhaps
you are calling up my name.
It reaches me reluctantly.
Like one leaking into the other.
Your voice marries my thoughts
in dreams' crevices.

If we live inside the limits of our respective bodies
in what idioms would our bodies live
for each other composing a piece
of melancholy beyond affection's boundary?

I have rowed at low tide too long
close to your quicksands and marshlands
admiring the sprouting bulrushes
waiting for you to let me colonise
your uncharted realms.

Love has turned our bodies into myths.

BIBHU PADHI

LEAVING BEHIND A GOODBYE
(For Nandini)

I don't know why
the hands stopped short of
saying you goodbye.
There were other things
to take notice of --
other promises --
whose renewal was
required and urgent.
Even before I thought of
taking myself away,
I had forgotten myself
the most forgetful way.
Every reminder faded,
every touch dispersed
in the middle of others' shout,
mediocre gossip and cry.
After I came away from you,
every small touch
seems to say "Goodbye."
I don't know if
we shall ever meet again;
but for now I don't know
why that day
my hands failed
to say "Goodbye."

YOGESH G. NAIR

POST MORTEM

Please find,
enclosed herewith,
a draft,
to take care of
pending dowry,
and expenses thereafter,
to burn her & then,
paint the same,
as suicide or accident.
For we understand
that this amount
won't match
your expectations,
at any point of time.

DARIUS COOPER

FOR MY UNBORN CHILD, WITH HISTORY SOUR IN MY MOUTH

My child
You are just a
few inches
inside the woman we both love.

Stay there.

In our native land
history
has suddenly become
caesarian:

An endless pilgrimage
of still-born children,
once
victims of the drought and flood,
today
are snatched out of hacked and mauled wombs.

In the Golden Temple
the terrorist
carries a star of tin,
his idea
of a bloody utopia
folded
like an aborted foetus
within
a blue turban.

What Gandhi once achieved
with folded hands and prayers
unprotected
in Hindustan's wide outdoors,
today's violent fakirs
claim to do
with a sten gun
propping up
their Holy Books.

The gutted factory looms
where Hindus and Muslims
were once yoked
so peacefully together,
now stretch across
a decapitated Bhiwandi.
They cut
into the weeping earth
leaving marks
one sees
only on the necks
of innocents
not lynched properly
the first time.

My child,
remain if you want
for an eternity
inside.

This country of ours
threatens any minute
to leap
from its Cartesian
void.

My child,
it is better
to age and die
inside
a sanctified womb
than emerge
into the
center
of a killed consciousness.

We have grown old and feeble.
And all that you will need,
little one,
as your tiny fist
emerges,
will be
dinosaurs for toys.

BETWEEN THE 39th AND 40TH SECOND ON 42ND STREET

Between the 39th and 40th second on 42nd street
history and legend suddenly decide to meet
for one brief moment,

toss
a blur
of cent silver

in the shivering hourglass of air,
and share
ends
of the same chilly dog

served hot, steaming, and bright
by
the trembling
immigrant from Punjab:

a head here
a tail there

exactly like that dismembered body
of his sixteen year old brother:

a terrorist
tortured and shot by the police?
a villager
ambushed and mutilated by terrorists?

GOODBYES
(For Z)

Goodbye, time's assassin,
waited patiently for us in the cold
for words to run out, for
the finished and voiceless submission.
We only said
we should have never met,
but didn't have the courage
to crumble one handful of earth
over our buried-alive beginning.

So we survived.
Apart from each other,
without meeting,
setting up the illusion everywhere,
inviting further pain,
while our buried beginning
lived with the turning days
as trees spurning leaves and
coming into leaf, as children
who have lost childhood, like heretics
condemned by the inquisition of living,
fading and quickening again; as despair,
as tawdry happiness, and
like memory at last.
As it should be,
as it has always been.

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

So we survived.
Waiting for the
decisive blow of the axe.

NATIVE LAND

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church...
As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity.

I ceased thinking
of the thirteen abandoned children
inside blazing huts still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmother's tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wildflowers in their hair
while they waited for their men,
I didn't care anymore.

I burnt my truth with them,
and buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
"There are limits", but when the days
absolved the butchers, I continue to live
as if nothing happened.

IRFAAN

TIRUMALA

The bus coughs and curses
its chanting load; resists
the temptation to shoot
over the bend.
Among scrubby bust lines of the ghats
devotees turn horny
at their tryst with divinity.
The Vatican of India.
At Tirumala lord Venkateswara
restores parity -- tonsured,
made sexless, the human chain
is released from cage to cage.

THE CRIPPLE

The blissful anticipation of being run over ends
as he makes it across the road.
Legs entwined in a grotesque embrace
drumstick arms furtively propel
grazing worn-out buttocks on flint roads
as he weaves his way in and out,
a doodle.
He squats on the median
staring at the parting line
between those who gallop
and those who crawl.

DEATH BED

Vultures hovered around the large
gasping frame. Some started chanting.
His daughter bothered about her baby
crying outside -- kept out, safe from
escaping spirits. The chant tore
its way into saucer ears boldly
and the old one cried out
(silently, lips unmoving) :

> Why chant now? Who is
> in a hurry? Who's the priest?
> Bastard! He's in a hurry. All
> are in a hurry. If I could move
> my hands, I would throttle that
> sonorous verbiage.

His throat trapping the vocal chords
jumped spasmodically. This had been
on for days. The chanters took turns
and the chants remained strong,
weakening his subconscious resolve -- fighting,
waiting, for voices to fade so that
A thin wail started lamenting.

> Bitch! Bitch! Whore! I am not dead.
> Must be that daughter in-law.
> Hakimulla's daughter but wasn't
> Hakimulla his son... this depth
> ... O... falling... falling...

The hooded vultures seemed to hover
and swoop. He blinked
once and let go; with a grimace.

RECKONING

god
is gaining weight
slowly expanding
filling all minarets idols
and flesh
god gaining weight
decides
to engulf skies
swallow the sun all planets
drink up all oceans

somewhere
a rumbling rises
from graves and
corpses sit up
and
pray.

SHARMISTHA DAS

THIS NOON

This is a kind of wrath which
makes my face blood-stained.
The monarch of the sky from
the azured dais
wants to prove his puissance
upon his foe living
on the earth.
The tent of tender morn tatters,
glory shatters.
It is a time when all
defiled souls burn.
On the road a dog finds
its way
to a tap to quench
its thirst,
a traveller, after struggling
a long way,
finds repose under a
shady tree.
Men, women, naked children
gather on the ghats
of a village pond
to bathe.
The leaves of trees get scorched,
go pale.
The streets are now
deserted banquet halls,
except the voices of icecream sellers,
bangle merchants and crows.

HOSHANG MERCHANT

BIRTH OF POETRY

And so it came to pass
in my young age
when I had no name
that I came to belong to a race
-- the race of poets

The jewel box of the radio
lit in the night
with names of magic stations:
Remember Montevideo?
-- A mountain shone forth
wholly itself; yet an emblem, all mountain

And so poetry was born
As Professor Aguiar droned on
On the AIR about John Wain
and the Bomb
Mother and we sat up all night
to hear Marian Anderson
The voice that comes once in a 100 years
-- that night it had come into our fractious Bombay home

Poetry is the voice
that first makes women out of virgins
and then out of women makes widows
Their men dead of toil or of bullets
And so a million Madonnas
rising out of the sea
as a million Mount Marys
sink back into the sea with their blessings

Men are angels with clapboard wings
And the more they flap them
the less they fly
But the poetry is that they try
so every lazy poet sleeping late everyday
pisses on all the world's workers
And anyone mocking a single martyr
spits on all the world's young idealists

So that when the poppies peep out
of the rocks amid the Iranian grain
Then suddenly it's the Monet print gone bitter
-ly haywire
And instead of a parasol you see a descent
of parachutes
And a Heavenward ascent on a prayer
Heaven's gold key round a 16-year old neck
a bomb belt round the waist

What waste
if Ifti had been killed
reciting that poem against the Pak dictator
Now he has more sense
And wouldn't do it again
Since he has survived
He's always carried a Body Menu
the paraphernalia of poets and prostitutes

O nude boy!
Between your breasts grows the grain of Lebanon
Below your navel curl the grapes of Lebanon
And Narcissus tears through the streets
on a Ford Bronco
Or rides to Tucson, a young Moses
glimpsing a promised land

I saw the moon tonight over Chicago's towers
A second day moon when sisters wish for brothers
My sister has taken up a pen/ she does not weep
She sits beside me at the movies / pitying to see me
weep and weep
Over the fate of celluloid poets Reeling
Over not blood but ink

And Shahid Ali returns each summer
to Kashmir in search of the poem:
a 14-year old Orpheus run into the ground
springing back yearly as a narcissus
And Anais saying all workers and poets will be killed by power
Or, O for a lover who doesn't snore!

Where did Anais' legacy end up?
-- With a young lumberjack
an Orpheus out of the West
Heir to her blood-rhythms; jazz-rhythms
To the Prairie School
and of Duchamp playing champ with buddy
over Beatrice Wood

Ah, Beatrice again!
Dante's and D'Anunzio's and Duchamp's
and Our own Beatrice of our very alley
Ifti telling me at the Pride Parade:
Dante sd/ -- if you don't stand up and be counted
when the time comes
there's Hell to pay
-- A slight misquote, perhaps
amid the drag queens' swishing trains

And the Hyderabad sisters, thoroughbreds
Chicago-reared
reading my poem before the Michigan ocean
Having nothing for comparison
but Gibran's *Prophet*
And I saying: Yes, yes
I, a poet with no capital
except the jam between his toes
The bird that eats will fly away
What bird? What food? What flight!
Tell Monu and Donna, spoilt Midwest intellects
they owe all poets their living Butterfly, butterfly!
Mariposa, farfalla!

Just as I, then a mere kid
owed a living to Purdue's Felix Stefanile, B.A.,
who taught me Neruda
And to Bruce Woodruff who put Dresden's bombers in his *Inferno*
And now my Indian girl-student
follows me up Felix's Sparrow Street
saying: You taught me Donne
And that's my debt to you
So with every new Ananda
I must but be a new Buddha

Why were you making eyes at me, Walt Whitman
from the tomatoes?
Shahid, what witness does your voice bear
to the prairie wind!
Ifti, why did you go mad in your Lakeshore Cage aux Folles
on the fortieth floor
What does elevator-ascension have to do with poetry?
Lie down in darkness Go down, down

Do you have alligators in India?
asked the prairie boy at the Greyhound
-- No, but crocodiles bite just as good
The Whale that languishes at the Aquarium
The porpoise that weeps
And I weep at the Auditorium
My sister listens in the dark
I weep because she is dying
And the wind that moans through the wheat
mows down her garden leaves
The prairie stars shine now over my bed
(I gathered up my long hair in sheaves
the better to write this)

And my sister sleeps
And I hear heartbeats of babies
we did not birth
But to be born after my sister and this poem
are gone

And so it came to pass
in my young age
when I had no name
that I came to belong to a race
-- the race of poets.

Chicago,
Memorial Day Weekend, '95

VIHANG NAIK

WAITING

The shadow stretches
on the veranda, looms large at your door.
The dusk. You look upon the void

perhaps waiting
behind the bars
of your window.

You deny being
yourself. Time shuffles seasons
over the lanes of stone.

The diwali wicks fade
with the rangoli that is made
of peacock's feathered tail.
It is evening
in your gaze. The birds beat
their wings in the thin

sky of your eyes.
Shadows envelop the door.
The echo of a knock hitting against walls.

DARSHAN SINGH MAINI

THE ORDEAL OF PRAYER

Driven to the sanctuary of the Word
In my fallen state,
I mumble the *mul-mantra*,
And screw up the sinews
Of my mutinous heart
To initiate the ordeal of prayer.

As the song of Nanak swells,
And my parch'd throat
Struggles to catch the sound
Of those ambrosial hymns,
A mechnical tongue stumbles,
And enacts a theatre of sorts.

The sinful spirit now seeks,
More than ever, to connect,
But a maverick, unruly mind,
A wanton of habit and thought,
Shoots off into tangents
Of dusty treats and tarts.

The precarious pagoda
Of prayer is soon undone,
And collapses into
A heap of sand and straw:
A monument of my fallen faith
That remains to mock my days!

A SPECTATOR

I've moved from the centre
To the provinces of my soul,
An anchorite in retreat
Before the assaults of fate.

Yes, it's the extremities
That rule my domain today,
These fingers of feather, and frozen toes
Enact a body show like street clowns.

I've become, in sooth,
A spectator of my own ruins,
And the spirit's anchored now
In the deeps of another world.

I ponder the meaning of meaning,
And the chemistry of pain,
But the long and confused hunt
Returns me to the hole again.

Ah, is this universe, then,
A grand but empty show,
As Conrad thought in the end,
Or the Creator's *leela* on wheels?

A HAMPER OF HOPE

Leave, O Lord, a hamper of hope
At my door of a morning in spring,
Cover'd with the dew of faith.

The termites of reason,
And the white ants of doubt
Have eaten through the tree of life.

And I wait each day now
For the bounty of leaf and branch,
And for the green gold of grace.

I'm through, O Lord,
With the needle and the knife,
And with the bromides of beguiling words.

Give me back, then, the Word
Lost en route in byways of thought,
And the song of the holy sun and earth.

O, when shall I walk in truth again,
And hear the squabbling sparrows
Argue the day on our kitchen ledge?

WINTER LEAVES

I see a tall patriarchal tree
Shed its winter leaves
Across the road that winds
Its way out of my life.

Each day I watch then
The choreography of bare branches,
And the hands of God
As the dance of leaf and wind's done.

I count the lingering leaves
That stay to beguile the eye,
And my spirits rise
To meet the ordeal of cease.

Ah, but do I see what I see,
Or, is it yet another
Stroke of the Master's brush,
Another turn of the Great Screw?

POEMS OF PAIN

I've carved these poems of pain
Out of a deep dark wood,
And I've crafted the knife
From my singing bones
Sabl'd by my obscure sins.

And when I move the knife
On that wood I hear a cry
From the depths of my heart;
The keen edge becomes keener,
As I twist it in my soul!

A. V. RAJAGOPALAN

DOWN TO EARTH

Layers of sweaters --
How nice to peel them off.
The hostile cold breeze
That poets seem to love,
Has long since stopped.
The hills are behind me.
The welcome plains
With their sweet salty air
And the hot clement climate.
Wow, what is this
Pleasant ambrosia
Rolling down my face?
Perspiration!

POETRY NEWS

March 1996 brought an event of great significance for Indian literature: the inauguration of a research centre for the work of Kamala Das at Saint Berchman's College in Changanacheri, Kerala. For this research centre enterprising scholars had collected multiple volumes of Kamala Das's English writings in poetry and prose, extensive holdings of her Malayalam short stories, and a wide range of articles and essays in Kamala Das critcism written in both English and Malayalam. What an appropriate way to honour and preserve the work of one of India's most distinguished living writers!

The work in gathering material for this centre of course will continue. The possibility of collecting Kamala Das's paintings-- or at least prints of them-- suggests an additional dimension for a centre of this kind. Those who have begun this attempt deserve commendation, and the thanks of all serious students of Indian literature in this country and all over the world.

Are similar efforts astir in behalf of other important writers in our country? They should be. SCILET, the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, at Madurai would welcome information regarding attempts-- intended or already begun-- to bring together in one place all existing material related to any Indian author of significance and permanent value. There is an urgent need to preserve for future generations not only all the work of each of our most gifted writers, but all the criticism and studies related to each one, and especially letters, memorabilia, correspondence with publishers and other documentary material that would help to trace the career of each such writer.

If a dozen enterprising colleges or other groups could each "adopt" one important writer, as Saint Berchman's college has done for Kamala Das, and make a concerted effort (with that author's approval and help) to collect all material pertinent to the author's career, we would have a good start toward developing some invaluable Indian literature archives. Can someone take up this challenge?

RAJEEV S. PATKE

RESISTANCE THEORY: THE FUTURES OF LITERARY DECOLONIZATION

Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures.* London: Verso, 1992; rpt. for South Asia only, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1993. 358 pp.

G. N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism.* Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992. 147 pp.

Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1993. 444 pp.

The most interesting issues of contemporary relevance raised by the three books under review may be grouped under the notion of Resistance Theory. Such a notion refers to how Resistance theorizes the need to define decolonizing positions past the various histories of coloniality into the prevailing conditions of modern cultural life as these are contextualized by the notions of post-colonialism and neo-colonialism.

A considerable heterogeneity of impulses may be observed at work under the umbrella of Resistance, and the writers may appear at times to be part of the debate in ways that are less explicit than those adopted by the critic and the academic; nevertheless, we may suppose the writer to be just as involved as the intellectual in what Wallace Stevens once called the search for a more severe and harassing proof that the life of theory is the life of poetry.

I might add that when speaking of the different refractions of the word 'colonialism', the prefix 'post-' is a mere marker of time to indicate the period that followed after colonialism (with sixty-six countries attaining political independence between 1945 and 1968); whereas the prefix 'neo-' (a much more contentious notion), marks the recognition that new and more or less covert forms of international dominance prevail currently, representing a

perpetuation, chiefly in economic and cultural guise, of the kind of political dominance that had characterized colonialism.

Resistance Theory so conceived assumes that our prevailing conditions conflate post-coloniality with neo-coloniality; and by 'our' I mean both 'within India' and 'within Asia' and wherever such conflations have applicability. This leads to the further assumption that the lessons of colonialism, and extrapolations from an understanding of its processes, have relevance for our times and for the problem of defining a cultural living-space where the conditions of life could be other than what may be dictated by either post- or neo-colonialism.

Resistance Theory originates in an attitude to the colonial experience or to an historiography of colonial practices (including specific cultural manifestations such as Orientalism) as seen from the perspective of the colonized. Its basis is found "in the rediscovery and repatriation of what had been suppressed in the natives' past by the processes of imperialism" (Said 1993: 253). In terms of the familiar Hegelian description of the Slave's striving for recognition, the aim of Resistance Theory is "to rechart and then occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior Other" (Said 1993: 253).

For Said, three principal topics emerge in decolonizing cultural resistance: (1) the insistence on the right to see the community's history whole (here he cites creole literatures as example, and one may cite analogous drives toward communal self-awareness in Maori or American Indian cultures); (2) resistance as an alternative way of conceiving human history, that is, to make the discourse of Europe and the West "acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories" (e.g., Rushdie, or the contribution of intellectuals - what he calls "the voyage in"); and (3) a pull away from "separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human

liberation" (Said 1993: 259-61). He clearly prefers or favours the last two, and it is not difficult to see why, although that is not the same thing as having conclusive reasons for agreeing with his evaluation of the second in particular, which, as I shall argue later, is perhaps more readily explicable as a generalization from his own ambivalently marginal position vis-à-vis what he likes to call metropolitan culture (i.e., his own institutional location in the USA) and his political commitment (to the Palestine cause).

At its most fundamental level, the political axioms which Resistance Theory rests on, for the individual and for the communal self, are those of freedom (of self-determination) and equality (in status, recognition and respect). So when Resistance Theory strives to redefine a community after colonialism, it works specific and selective variations on the age-old criteria that have served to form (and to separate) communities, as enumerated by the well-known cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz: assumed blood ties, race, language, religion and custom (Geertz 1973: 261-63). Of course, and with tragic inevitability, as history has far too frequently shown, problems result whenever any of these criteria come into mutual tension and conflict (as for instance in Kashmir or the Punjab, or Bosnia).

In terms of world history, the prevalence of the axioms of freedom and equality may be said to constitute historical modernity. They also contribute to what may be described as the secret tension between the confluence, in Europe, of colonialism (and the American war of independence) outside its borders, and the French and Romantic revolutions within. For the colonized, this modernity takes the form of nationalism, and, as argued by Benedict Anderson,

> the very possibility of imagining the nation only arose historically when and where three fundamental cultural conceptions, all of great antiquity, lost their grip on men's minds. The first of these was the idea that a particular script-language offered privileged access to

> ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of that truth. It was this idea that called forth into being the great transcontinental sodalities of Christendom, the Ummah Islam, and the rest. Second was the belief that society was naturally organized around and under high centres - monarchs who were persons apart from other human beings and who ruled by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation. Human loyalities were necessarily hierarchical and centripetal because the ruler, like the sacred script, was a node of access to being and inherent in it. Third was a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical. Combined, these ideas rooted human lives firmly in the very nature of things, giving certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all death, loss, and servitude) and offering, in various ways, redemption from them. (Anderson 1983: 40)

However, it is not the case that those about to be colonized have always or necessarily reacted to the incipience of colonization with resistance, whether in the service of a cause such as nation, or any other similar ideal. Said reminds us of the evidence in support of the kind of view expressed in the late 1960s (by the historian Ronald Robinson) that "imperialism was as much a function of its victims' collaboration ... as it was of European expansionism" (Said 1993: 316).

In this connection it is worth reminding ourselves of the specific, historical circumstance that a considerable part of the upper and middle class elements in late 18th and early 19th century India which had been exposed to the colonizer's civilization, as exemplified by the British presence in India, wanted the colonizers to give Indians greater access to what they readily and almost

enthusiastically conceded to be the superior culture of the colonizer. In brief, they welcomed colonization as a form of access to modernization, seeing no reason to quarrel with the equation of the modern and the western. Not only did they welcome the opportunity for changing themselves, but saw such change as betterment and progress. Thus, in the case of the introduction of English into education in India, it is worth recognizing that the British were giving what at least some Indians had been asking for. That the educational policy adopted towards India was also serviceable in creating a buffer class of administrative *babus* for the British (and led subsequently to indignation at the kind of insular insolence exemplified by Macaulay's *Minute* of 1835 and its cultural *hubris*) cannot gainsay the element of wish-fulfilment in this aspect of linguistic colonization. Just such a corrective is administered to the thesis of Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1990), by Judith M. Brown's review, 'English Education in British India' (1993), and by her corroborating reference to R.E. Frykenberg, 'The Myth of English as a "Colonialist" Imposition Upon India ...' (1988).

The modern post-colonial descendants of this type of the willingly-colonized have been described by Simon During (During 1990: 128) as 'post-colonizers', to distinguish them from their Resistance Theory brethren, the 'post-colonized': while the latter "identify with the culture destroyed by imperialism and its tongue", the former, even "if they do not identify with imperialism, at least cannot jettison the culture and tongues of the imperialist nations". The post-colonizers of today find the call to decolonization either incomprehensible, or unrealistic, undesirable, and regressive as well as obscurantist; just as their spiritual ancestors during the colonial period found their own local and communal cultures, cultural histories and institutional conventions stagnating and moribund. The post-colonized might now be described more accurately, and not just from the Left, as neo-colonizers, symbolically welcoming with eager anticipation the erection of *KFC* bill-boards in the interior of China, and *Coca-Cola* ones in the heart of St. Petersburg, and *IBM* ones in

special townships in Bangalore, all of them auguries of a new age presided over by the blandishments of market-economies and the creation of consumer-societies whose only fetish shall be the commodity. *The Economist* for April 1993 boasts, on its cover, a Chinese dragon, snorting the exclamatory blurb 'Asia Unleashed'. The cover captures, in the perfect ambivalence of its caricature, the tension between an apprehension and its converse, the repressed (or barely concealed) caption: 'Asia Leashed'.

In vehement contrast, the retrospective and prospective vision of Resistance Theory regards colonization not only as a form of enslavement and a loss of independence, but also as a form of historical denaturing and cultural deracination. It seeks to extrapolate from its own reaction to the history of colonialism the resistance it thinks ought to be given to its modern and more complex and irresistibly disguised successor, neo-colonialism. Both sides would see as accurate the view Marx expressed, midway through the 19th century, about what he perceived as 'The Future Results of British Rule in India' (1853), although (and this has its own uncomforting irony), they would take exactly opposite views on how to evaluate the fate to which Marx consigned India (and Asia): "England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating - the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying down of the material foundations of Western society in Asia" (1853, Young 1990: 176n).

From the perspective of a debate about the need or futility of a strategy of decolonization and resistance, subsequent developments have more than confirmed the terms of Marx's formulation: whether it is the Far East speaking of the need to keep up (or revive or invent) 'Asian values' even while rapidly accelerating past fictional notions like 'Third World' and 'Developing' nation into other imaginary spaces called 'Newly Developed' nations (with real names like Taiwan, or South Korea, or Singapore), or if it is so-called 'Socialist Democracies' or 'Non-Aligned' or 'Third World' or 'Not-yet-Industrialized' nations (with nonce-names like India, or Pakistan or Bangla Desh) - the

call remains the same, the two-fold banner unfurled reluctantly and not without apprehension in that imperative/subjunctive mission - destructive of the old (and the Asian); and regenerative of all that is signalled in the combined imperative tone and subjunctive mood of "material foundations" (that is, in terms of the economic structures and industrial societies originally of the West and now, and especially after the collapse of the former USSR and the economic opening-up of China, the universal norm against which the 'Ionescoean' humans and rhinos of the modern world must self-determine themselves).

The Resistance Theorist of today must contend with a widespread and apparently voluntary desire for collective change. He has to offer arguments why this change should not be taken to be what it so convincingly simulates: economic modernization with its goal of material prosperity as *the* index of progress and Utopia. Instead, Resistance Theory must describe this change as an insidious loss of freedom and control, as a subtle change in individual and collective consciousness, as a depletion or loss of individual and collective identity, as distorted vision and perception, as cognition that has been tampered with, unbeknownst.

One of the most powerful and tempting sources of redress for Resistance Theory in these straits has been and continues to be the idea of nation, and the spirit of nationalism which it is meant to foster.

Not every manner of Resistance Theory adherent espouses an uncomplicated nationalism. One of the more contentious forms in which the need for ideas of nationhood is described is that associated with Fredric Jameson. From his self-consciously ex-centric position within the USA (that is, from a position self-consciously close to the current centre of cultural and economic imperialism) Jameson announced that every so-called 'Third World' nation was obliged, in its literature, ceaselessly to work at the task of symbolizing a collective identity for its 'self' in terms of allegories of the nation (Jameson 1986). This claim was duly

taken to task by Aijaz Ahmad in 1987, and the arguments, reprinted in his book, are as compelling as they are pungent.

A whiff of the *ad hominem* may hang about his dismissal of Homi Bhabha's stylized invocation of post-structuralist post-modernity as the "very modern" and "very affluent" debunkings of a "very uprooted kind of intellectual" But beyond the polemic edge, it is not only Bhabha's kind of prophecy (that magic realism shall be the voice of the post-colonial) that Ahmad is firmly sceptical about. It is the very idea of "the Third World", as much as that of "Nation", that Ahmad would have us recognize as fatally nominalist and chimerical. Whether or not one sympathizes with his settled Marxist antipathy to a marriage of post-structuralism and post-modernity, the warnings and animadversions against the so-called Third World Theory are definitely worth taking on board by anyone interested in the viability of the idea of literary decolonization. The problem for Ahmad with Third World as a notion is that it polarizes a vast heterogeneity against a single opposition, that with a First World, so that the colonial encounter becomes the crucial "epochal" experience, and all the internal differences within the nominated Third (which threaten to split and explode the name) get repressed. The Third Worlder is reduced to the role of the First Worlder's Other, both entities the victim of a "positivist reductionism". The ideology underlying Jameson's classification is repugnant to Ahmad because it "divides the world between those who make history and those who are mere objects of it", a binary opposition between "a capitalist First World and a presumably pre- or non-capitalist Third World" which is empirically "ungrounded in any facts" (Ahmad, Chp 3, *passim*).

Ahmad can hardly be denied in the claim that allegory is not specific to Jameson's so-called Third World: he cites numerous examples from recent American literature as evidence to the contrary. But we could remind ourselves that American literature is the first of the post-colonial literatures to decolonize itself. So the frequency with which allegories of a collective experience recur in

it might not seem inconsistent with Jameson's hypothesis at its broadest. Certainly Jameson's "collectivity" is preferable to "nation" if his contention in respect of the role of allegory is to be retained while also granting Ahmad's specific objection, that it cannot be pressed into service merely in order to define a category called the Third World. That part of Jameson's conjecture which is neither a prescription nor a claim but an hypothesis, and which links the urge to connect the personal and the private with the collective and the public (of whatever kind, inclusive of nation) with allegory seems a fruitful possibility for critics to test out, without necessarily privileging examples of this kind.

I do not think that the role of allegory in invented collectivities - inclusive of Benedict Anderson's sense of nations as *Imagined Communities* - is affected by Ahmad's charge that Jameson is reductive. The post-colonial context in which allegory might figure as a literary form is an issue of an imperialism which divides or identifies the divisions of the world into First, Second, Third, not on many and inconsistent principles of differentiation, but as the single form of literary imperialism which establishes relations of power, dependency and empowerment within literary conventions. This literary imperialism finds one of its most powerful manifestations in the conventions of Realism, especially narrative realism. (As art historians like Gombrich have remarked, no other civilization except that of Europe has placed such a primacy on realism in the pictorial arts.) The spread of the novel as the principal mode of narrative through the colonized world has, through the nineteenth century, perpetuated Realism as the dominant mode in narrative. To me, the valuable part of Jameson's conjecture is that one way in which writers could achieve decolonization - which they do by trying to image and imagine nation and other collectivities - is by dismantling or loosening the grip of the literary conventions of Realism. One of the more obvious ways of doing this is by having a more thorough-going recourse to a symbolic vocabulary, and when this is used extensively and systematically in narrative form, we have allegory. Certainly the widespread acclaim with which magic realism,

whether of the Latin American or the Rushdie kind, has been treated has a lot to do with its role as an alternative to realism, as the postmodern appropriation by the once-colonized of Modernist (or ancient and indigenously non-realist) narrative options.

I believe that even if one grants Ahmad that a good part of the structure of suppositions surrounding Jameson's claim for a Third World post-colonial compulsion to allegorize conscious national allegories has to be jettisoned, we are still left with a predisposition worth pursuing: to look in post-colonial literatures for whether and how they symbolize and allegorize their sense of this or that specific collectivity as a form of decolonizing strategy, without necessarily privileging such activity, nor supposing that post-colonial as a description of the political-historical provenance of specific collectivities needs the notion of either nation or Third World attached to it. Stripped of Nation and Third World, and considered as hypothesis and conjecture rather than prescription or claim, there is still something to be said for Jameson's proposal which could guide a heuristic of decolonization.

The widest scope of the argument about individual and collective identity regards colonialism, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism as forms of imperialism or totalitarianism - an attempt, as the phenomenological traditions of Europe and France in particular have taught us to recognize, by the Same to see or convert all forms of the Other into the Same. As Emmanuel Levinas has said: "But how can the same, produced as egoism, enter into relationship with an other, without immediately divesting it of its alterity?" (Levinas 1961/79:38). And there is a whole European tradition of the Left which the adherent to Resistance Theory is often drawn to in order to equip himself from the armoury of a phenomenologically refracted Marxism against totalitarianism in all its guises. That is what links Jameson and Ahmad and a host of other Resistance Theory critics together in a shared vacabulary, which rephrases the imperialism/resistance antithesis from a Marxist perspective.

As Ahmad puts it:

> There appears to be, at the very least, a widespread implication in the ideology of cultural nationalism, as it surfaces in literary theory, that each 'nation' of the 'Third World' has a 'culture' and a 'tradition', and that to speak from within that culture and that tradition is itself an act of anti-imperialist resistance. By contrast, the principal trajectories of Marxism as they have evolved in the imperial formations have sought to struggle - with varying degrees of clarity and success, of course - against both the nation/culture equation, whereby all that is indigenous becomes homogenized into a singular cultural formation which is then presumed to be necessarily superior to the capitalist culture which is identified discretely with the 'West', and the tradition/modernity binary, whereby each can be constructed in a discrete space and one or the other is adopted or discarded. (Ahmad 1992: 9)

His view is based on the claim that

> An obvious consequence of repudiating Marxism was that one sought to make sense of the world of colonies and empires much less in terms of classes, much more in terms of nations and countries and races, and thought of imperialism itself not as a hierarchically structured system of global capitalism but as a *relation*, of governance and occupation, between richer and poorer countries, West and non-West. (Ahmad 1992:41)

Ahmad rejects nationalism not "in the patently post-modernist way of debunking *all* efforts to speak of origins, collectivities, determinate historical projects" but on the "familiar

Marxist ground that nationalism in the present century has frequently suppressed questions of gender and class and has itself been frequently complicit with all kinds of obscurantisms and revanchists positions" (Ahmad 1992:92).

Those objections of Ahmad which derive directly from his Marxism and make him suspect that a preoccupation with the differences created by the idea of nation are often accompanied by and indeed enabled at the cost of a repression of the differences in class and gender seem to be crucially dependent on the assumption that a concern with nation is *bound to* suppress interest in class and gender. What if this is simply not true *always*, or even most of the time, or at least *not necessarily*? What if one can cite examples where nation, gender and class can and do combine, as in *Kanthapura*? Can't one category be treated as a homologous metaphor for the other, as in the poems of Kamala Das? or as in Dalit fiction and poetry? In other words, Ahmad may be entitled to his prejudice against nation, but I see no compelling reason why others should be persuaded in the same direction. Clifford Geertz expressed a view in 1973 for which the last two decades have offered ample confirmation:

> as far as the new states are concerned, Marxist movements, Communist or non-Communist, have almost everywhere been heavily nationalistic in both aim and idiom ... Actually, the same point could be made about religio-political movements - Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or whatever; they too tend to be as localized in fact as they are placeless in principle. (Geertz 1973: 253n)

Said too is wary of Marxist claims and positions, and feels that "European theory and Western Marxism as cultural co-efficients of liberation haven't in the main proved themselves to be reliable allies in the resistance to imperialism". He reminds us that even exemplary intellectuals such as Adorno (or more contentious ones like Habermas) are "stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-

imperialist resistance, oppositional practice in the empire", and that Habermas has conceded that such silences - veritable sins of omission - are "a eurocentrically limited view" (Said 1993: 336).

So nation, without having to be a privileged theme, may, I think, be allowed the role in post-colonial writing that so much Resistance Theory intent on decolonization gives it. And Ahmad notwithstanding, nationalisms continue to be the most commonly offered panacea by most forms of Resistance Theory, and resistance generally applies itself where it discovers the origins of various forms of cultural dependency - in language. The most fundamental level of resistance begins with the question of language. It assumes (what sometimes is not possible or practicable to assume) that the post-colonized (and especially the post-colonial writers) have a choice about the language they speak (and write in): a choice between the colonizer's language and whatever is the 'native' language. In one of the more well-advertised examples of this choice, Ngugi has ostensibly given up English (Ngugi 1992).

The 'false consciousness' foisted by English, the 'borrowed' set of values its culture engenders, the denaturing and deracination it perpetuates - so we are to understand - are all being rejected. However, Ngugi is fully part of the ritual of having his non-English native utterance in Gikuyu read in translation for the benefit of an English-speaking audience. Indeed, Ngugi, like many other African and Caribbean writers (and like many an Asian writer and academic), lives primarily outside his native land, generally in the West, whether in voluntary or involuntary exile. And merely to leap from servility to the Colonizer's ideal to an alternative servility in the cause of this or that kind of pre-colonial essentialism is no solution at all, as Soyinka warned in 1976 in the case of 'negritude'. So "We are left with the paradox that Soyinka himself articulates, that (he has Fanon in mind) adoring the negro is as 'sick' as abominating him" (Said 1993: 276-77).

Here it might be appropriate to digress a little on a warning concerning exiles, a condition which Ahmad analyzes with a biting

exactitude that is antidotal to some of Said's more sentimental idealizations of the intellectual. Said's role models are the type represented by C.L.R. James, George Antonius, Ranajit Guha and S.H. Alatas. Apart from the nice geographical and cultural spread, what this variety exemplifies for Said is its capacity to use the intellectual modes and procedures of the West for anti-imperialist ends. So far so good, but the problem with Said's preferences is that they valorize the role of the intellectual in exile - in fact, they virtually end up valorizing exile itself, as if that were the best, and indeed almost the only condition from which to work out the problems of decolonization. But the kind of marginalization that exile invariably brings is, I think, better able to compensate for its own lack of connectedness and solidarity if it is involuntary and temporary - that is to say contingent - rather than deliberate and willed, as it can appear in Said's own case.

As Ahmad warns, exiles come in many varieties, never to be confused with each other and with the mere expatriate, the migrant and the immigrant, and especially not with the upwardly mobile urban and literate technocrat aspiring to the sort of status which anything like a 'green card' (and the reverse colonization that goes with it) is supposed to bring. In contrast, a Naipaul is a dyspeptic exile from what he tells us in so many words he is glad to be alienated from and disenchanted with. A Rushdie is the ultimate if inadvertant but unrepentant exemplar of our modern Iranian Platos' suspicion that writers are the most naturally suited for exile. A Joyce was a self-exile who needed a distance from a centre that he might more meaningfully orbit around it. The Adornos of the world, as Edward Said and Fredric Jameson would have us believe, are our role models as vocational exiles, who always sustain a tonic and acid marginality from which to warn a complacent centre of its blind spots. And then there are our Edward Saids, who envisage a permanent double-role for themselves in relation to the cultural perspective and geographical location they write from and in relation to the culture they write for or about (here Ahmad would place writers like Rushdie or academic 'intellectuals' more germane to the Indian situation, such as Homi Bhabha or Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak). And finally, of course, there is the vast majority, that quotidian mass of humanity, which is exiled from the possibility of treating itself as exiled because it has to provide that background or base of 'home' from or'against' which exile takes place!

Under the circumstances of multiple exile from which Ngugi lives and writes, for instance, the gesture of resistance that is represented by the renunciation of the colonizer's language is merely a symbolic token of the more comprehensive resistance that the writer is not quite able to offer. That, after all, would involve turning one's back completely on the Western and English-speaking world. Most forms of Resistance Theory stop well short of this extreme, no doubt in recognition of the impossibly anachronistic corner into which resistance would then have painted itself.

The more viable forms of resistance in respect of the 'native' language are to do with the various strategies of retrieving access to the literary traditions and the cultural values seen to be embodied in the various colonized languages - without necessarily abandoning the former colonizer's language, or the access *it* gives to modes of thinking and practice which help the task of retrieval. Thus we have a paradoxical situation where the methods of historical scholarship and comparative study instituted as disciplines (as by Humanism and Orientalism) are then put to service for nationalist causes in a post-colonial world; or where Marxist and post-structuralist modes are used (Ahmad's point against Fanon and Homi Bhabha respectively) as modes of resistance, oblivious to the irony that Marxism and post-structuralism are themselves yet another variety of intellectual and ideological colonization, since they too are of the West, European in origin, and are yet being put to use against forms of imperialism also originating in Europe. Much the same thesis underlies Ahmad's long critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), that it is based on an uneasy and ultimately irreconcilable marriage of a Foucauldian vocabulary and Humanism *à la* Auerbach.

The case for a form of selective cultural nationalism can be found repeatedly championed from within the scene of Indian writing, and Devy's book is the most notable of recent instances, especially in the support it lends to what is more familiar through a novelist like Nemade as Nativism. Of course, Nemade himself has always practised a kind of self-decolonization, which has taken the form of keeping his profession of teacher of English nicely separate from his vocation as novelist in Marathi! Devy's book contains much on the general debility of criticism in India, and on the need for a healthy indigenous critical tradition for our times that I (and I suppose most readers) would sympathize with and applaud. But it is the nativist leaning which subsidizes this exhortation of Devy's that deserves further comment.

Devy's basic argument in respect of this issue is that the kind of essentialism which Orientalism foisted upon the Indologist prioritized the classical and Sanskritized aspects of the Indian traditions, generally at the expense of the later vernacular traditions. These later traditions had much the same relation to Sanskrit that the modern European vernaculars bore to Classical and Medieval Latin. They were populist or popular in origin, practised often by people of lower social caste or strata, and often responsible for instituting new oral traditions. The kind of relationship Devy points to has been spoken of by A.K. Ramanujan thus: "The imperial presence of Sanskrit, with its brahmanical texts ... was a presence against which *bhakti* in Tamil defines itself, though not always defiantly" (Ramanujan 1981:109).

Much the same can be said of all the Bhakti traditions which Devy nominalizes in terms of the *Desi* as opposed to the *Margi*. Most of the conceptualizing and institutionalizing originated in the Sanskrit tradition, which exerted a more or less permanent impression on the possibilities for creativity that grew to self-awareness in the vernaculars, even when these were in part concerned with fostering an active resistance to the older language's elitist and imperial exclusionism by working out their

own new poetics. Ramanujan's reference to the *Vaishnav* technical terms *paratvam* "otherness", and *saulabhyam* "ease of access", is a useful way of conceptualizing this internal linguistic post-colonial relation between the classical and the medieval/renaissance languages/literatures within India. Ramanujan envisages a dialectical process at work in the decolonization represented by creativity within the *bhakti* tradition, as it works out its complex relationship of partial dependence and complementary rejection/independence to its past.

However, it should be noted that the nativism which Devy is so sympathetic to, as also that which he twins it with - the attempt to revive interest in appropriating a more sustaining sense of a national self through repossessing the medieval devotional Indian *bhasha* past (rather than the classical Sanskrit one created for us by an imperial Orientalism) - looks "revanchist" from Ahmad's position. The same scythe that tries to cut the various nationalisms of Ranajit Guha, Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee, is bound to find the Nemade-Devy variety tending inevitably to "parochialism, inverse racism and indigenist obscurantism" (Ahmad 1992: 8). Said too is quite unsympathetic: "Nationality, nationalism, nativism: the progression is, I believe, more and more constraining" (Said 1993: 277, cf. 332 on nativism as a "private refuge"). I am inclined to find their view that all nativisms are a form of narrow-mindedness persuasive. I also concur with the related sentiments expressed by Geertz in relation to Ambedkar's *Thoughts on Linguistic States*, that this "longing not to belong to any other group" (Ambedkar's words for the consequence of nativist sentiments) "gives to the problem variously called tribalism, parochialism, communalism, and so on, a more ominous and deeply threatening quality than most of the other, also very serious and intractable, problems the new states face" (Geertz 1973: 261).

Nevertheless, I would regard Devy's principal contribution to the issue as making a plea, imperative in voice and subjunctive in mood, for a rehabilitation and re-energization of the relatively

neglected vernacular traditions of the Indian literary past. A good part of this project is obviously laudable, and should be the augury for increased activity in the fields of translation and interdisciplinary and comparative research within the literatures and conventions internal to the Sanskrit/vernacular antinomy he posits for India. But how may one reconcile the positive or desirable aspects of the basic position represented by Devy with what it conceals or brings along with it - the danger that Ahmad and Said (as Geertz before them) warn against?

The danger may be put succinctly as that of being tempted to replace one form of falsifying or misleading essentialism by another. The alternative is to avoid all and any essentialism about literary or cultural identity, about whether this or that tradition 'more truly' deserves approbation or promotion. So long as no more than a redressing of an imbalance is being proposed, there is little harm and much good to be achieved by an intensified engagement with retrieving the achievements and values of the Bhakti traditions. But the sympathy shared by Devy's project with all manner of Nativism is better served by Ahmad's warning against the insularity and parochialism which can accompany so-called revivalist projects, which can end up promoting intolerant and hard-edged fundamentalisms (for example, Rushdie *versus* Iran/Islam). Ahmad has a further point to make, which even those not sympathetic to his Marxist orientation may readily concede: "that nationalism in the present century has frequently suppressed questions of gender and class", and, one might add for India, of caste (Ahmad 1992: 38).

It seems to me evident that a predisposition such as Devy's, if taken to its extreme form, sets itself flatly - whether consciously or no - against the recognition that history is a one-way street of no return; that the many forces that shape peoples' destinies and natures are not in any simple way reversible (although some of their effects and consequences might well be undesirable and reversible). Such a frame of mind ends up, or - as in the case of Simon During's discussion - starts by conflating post-coloniality

with nationalism in making both the expressions of "the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images" (During, 1990: 114). That image of 'contamination' is ominous and, I think, in part a mistake if it sets the ex-colonized into eradicating parts of themselves which are now as much a component of their current selves as the 'uncontaminated' components from which they suppose an alternative and 'truer' self is to be artificially and forcibly constructed. I do not mean that one has no choice but to be passive; nor do I doubt that it is both possible and desirable to exercise choice in what is to be encouraged and what is to be discouraged within oneself as part of the project of self-determination.

The point I wish to make is simply this: identity is not, as the existentialist guise of the post-colonial nationalist would strenuously have us believe, entirely or even primarily a matter of choice and will. Guilt or self-hatred notwithstanding, sometimes we cannot help what we are, and a considerable part of what we are is what it is regardless of whether we would wish it so. A lot of energy can be generated and wasted trying to will a change where whatever is the case could or has to be accepted as whatever it happens to be, so that one may as well get on with doing other things beyond reducing identity into a do-it-yourself kit.

According to Ahmad, the failure of decolonization for India lies in our inability, after the idea of nation inherited from our colonial masters has failed to sustain us, to "reorganize the relation between the centre and region", and to "invent more heterogeneous forms of unity that might be commensurate with the complexity of our society" (Ahmad 1992: 74) If imperialism versus nationalism was one historical antinomy, post-colonial India confronts its writers with another: nation (centred on English as the centralizing and internationalizing language) versus region (focused on its host of languages, still dominated by English, its centrality within the nation, its international connections outside, and its access to power both inside and out).

However, Ahmad's claim, repeated throughout *In Theory*, that socialism is the only viable source of resistance that can contend with capitalism, reads weakly for having little to say on how in practice this might be done, either by writers or critics or academics. Sharp and insightful though his analyses are, it is their power to diagnose the contradictions and shortcomings in his admired heroes - Jameson and Edward Said - that come across more powerfully than any positive solutions or alternatives.

Seen in overview, resistance asks for indigenous resources to be recovered or invented. While a project such as Edward Said's two books on Orientalism and Imperialism largely chronicles the forms of dependency and their sometimes covert existence or effects, in other words, while it continues to bear an interest that is minatory and exhortatory, a lot about the achievement represented by those two books is already beginning to look dated, historically in the past of Resistance Theory. The type of position represented by Ahmad and Devy, from within India, invokes a universal and a local form of resistance, respectively. While Ahmad's source for resistance remains constrained by and within a set of Marxist/socialist aspirations that are hardly borne out very convincingly by the recent economic history of Asia or India, Devy's aggressive championing of a revivalist and selective literary nationalism has its own attendant danger of a regressive and parochial insularity. While Said labours a metropolitan/nativist antinomy, Ahmad works on an assumption that Marxism is the only viable form of resistance to the enemy he identifies - much the way Fredric Jameson describes modern imperialism - in terms of multinational capitalism; while Devy, in the much narrower and localized literary context of India, champions the repressed dependent vernacular tradition in his anti-Orientalist Sanskrit/ Prakrit antinomy.

For myself, I cannot find it easy to be persuaded that either, in itself, is an attractive position, or that there is any simple solution to the problem of decolonization. Perhaps the problem is precisely this, that the idea of decolonization is an impossible one

in its purest form, that all resistance is always already complicit in this or that way with that which is to be resisted. It is easy to say that one's head of hair is infested with lice, so one ought to (and one could) delouse oneself. But what is the state of being that would be the state *after* decolonization? Hardly that which was the case *before* colonization took place? And when so much of Asia and India welcomes the economic and material consequences of global imperialism, on what ground shall resistance make its last or lasting stand? In Said's recent Reith lectures, *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), resistance is asked to be content with marginality and self-exile, modelling itself after Adorno, and C.L.R. James, and - dare I say - Said himself (as implied by the third lecture).

Again, the position is hardly an inspiring one. After all, doesn't the book of Adorno's that Said singles out as exemplary, *Minima Moralia*, bear the subtitle: *Reflections from Damaged Life*? Perhaps there is a bitter truth in what Auden concedes in his great elegy on Yeats, that resistance, like poetry, "makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying where executives / Would never want to tamper...".

One may continue to wish critics like Ahmad and Devy positive proof for their belief that resistance is far more actively viable than what Auden believed at the beginning of the Second World War. Robert Frost once said in a poem about fire and ice, that from what he knew about the properties of both, either would suffice to end the world. In converse analogy, let Resistance Theory believe, if it must, that it takes the fire of nationalism, or the ice of internationalism or universalism, to win the war against the acculturations that must be resisted. I am inclined to suspect, nevertheless, that to prefer either extreme leads, in the end, to a situation at once both vicious and bland. At such an *impasse*, the only alternative I can think of is an anticlimactic and unsurprising one: to prefer neither alternative, but to live as a mixture of blues and yellows - now rather green in consequence, relinquishing the idea of returning to any primal blue or resuming some apocalyptic

and yet originary yellow - determined instead not to let one's unique shade of green be mixed and remixed with all the other remaining colours on the palette to the point where all shades of difference are reduced to a universal mud-brown!

A more literary way of putting it may go along with the symbolic vocabulary bequeathed for better or worse by Shakespeare's *Tempest* to all subsequent post-colonials, and adumbrate the available range of choices pretty much as Said does:

> One choice is to do as Ariel does, that is ... when he gains his freedom he returns to his native element, a sort of bourgeois native untroubled by his collaboration with Prospero. A second choice is to do it like Caliban, aware of and accepting his mongrel past but not disabled for future development. A Third choice is to be a Caliban who sheds his current servitude and physical disfigurements in the process of discovering his essential, pre-colonial self. (Said 1993: 258)

It will be obvious that my own preference, so far as the issue permits of volition and choice, is for the second of Said's three options. What remains is for the writers of a similar persuasion to demonstrate that undisabled "future development".

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MEENA ALEXANDER: AN APPRECIATION

Kavya Bharati renews in the following pages a feature included in earlier issues: a section devoted to the work of one significant Indian author.

Meena Alexander, whose writing receives special attention here, has produced distinguished literature in many different genres. Moreover, she is currently living and writing overseas, and has, during her life, been resident or visitor in a variety of other countries. For this reason, she seems exceptionally appropriate to represent the growing number of expatriate Indian authors who are attracting the attention of literary students throughout the world.

The material which follows-- some of Meena Alexander's own recent writing sent specially for this feature, a review of her latest published volume of poetry, an extensive interview with her, an essay based on a series of conversations, and another essay ranging more widely over many aspects of her work-- reveals the challenges, trials and interactions that energise the writing of a gifted Indian artist living "in another land". But it also unfolds instructively many different layers of her talent in their own right, and confirms even further the high regard in which she is increasingly held today.

Finally because the impetus for this feature originated in a creative writing workshop of which she was Director, these pages remind us that by profession, Meena Alexander is also a teacher. Perhaps there are not many Indian writers today who can and do take action to share their craft more constructively, more pointedly, more sympathetically.

What follows here, it is hoped, will better acquaint us with Meena Alexander, teacher, writer, world citizen.

MEENA ALEXANDER

NEW WORLD ARIA

I see a city filled with women. No I must correct that. I see small fires, in garbage cans, by the park benches, twigs smoldering at the edge of doorways shielded by darkness. The fires bristle, then slowly with a great roar, rise into air. Trees by the river glow in the heat and birds hidden in the leaves start to sing. Driven out by the heat the women come running. Hundreds, thousands of them, a mountain of women gathered by the river. River water turns rosy, reflections sliced off tall glass buildings. I hear a sharp voice cry 'Where are the children?' Then louder 'Where are the men?' The mountain starts to quiver. One lifts up her grey skirts, another her torn black sari. Arms and legs poke out, beards, thighs, hairy chests, tiny quivering lips. In that cacophony, as men and children stumble out to safety, I hear a woman singing. She cannot sing very well, but her voice helps us. Someone passes out bits of bread -- no matter that it is hard and mouldy. Another pours out milk. Where did she find that old pitcher, blue at the rim? A third starts slicing apples, the fruit set on a stone. A fourth lean and hard, hair tied with a scarf stares back at me: 'Yes, yes,' she mutters 'the old city must burn.' I think she adds something about learning how to build, but hidden in the overhanging tree, body drenched with sweat, I lose her words. Will I fall, slit arms, legs, split lips into tiny morsels? Be silenced, entirely or speak in odd, unintelligible tongues? My mother's eyes -- she left me so very many years ago and I was forced to fend for myself by the river bank, picking up scraps of food, using leaves to wipe my blood -- flash before me. Spilt into a fiery darkness I sense the voices of a thousand women, no longer strangers to each other, singing.

HOUSE OF MIST

This house is filled with mist.
it pours off branches of the pear tree,
with fruit so large, they seem musumbi
thick misshapen fruit, earth's progeny
fit to tumble into soil they hang like stones,
half way in the sky.
To come here, I have stumbled
through heaven's gate:
Swedish Hill sinking through the clouds
a dead child's grave -- he jumped into the lake
The English memsahib could not lock her palms
heave the tiny thighs from water.

I think I would like to die in this house
mist slipping through the windows
sills wet with it, moistening memory.
The mist has absolutely no regard
for the family at breakfast, four dark heads
bent over a platter of cut fruit
quiet teacup, milk jug edged with blue.

But could I live in this house?
That would be a tough call
something too hard to countenance.
But what if a friend
were to step through the curtained doorway?

I see him now, stooped a little in his middle years
hair brushed with mist,
arms awkward, clumsy with dense fruit.
At his heels and thighs
raw, bristling with light
scores of cicadas --- twanging my name.

MAN WITH A PENCIL

When he drew those massive
hooded women, cheeks, eyes, nose
a city shifted its stones,
windows came ajar, doors flew open.

She saw a child on a swing
braids blowing in the heat,
women chopping baingan in a kitchen
a jamun tree fruit polished, pealing.

When he drew those toes
then circled thighs, arms, eyes
rain came down on the city.
She heard heels snapping,

Umbrellas poking at the sky
cotton sipping water... Chup, chup, chup
the saris went, dainty feet
reaching for the carts, bells jangling

And horses white, dripping
hooves reared in a festival of longing.

MUSE - 2

'Our language is in ruins.
No - not Something,' she whispers to me
'not About or Here.
It's a doing thing that spurns me

'The prams are filled with ash.
These are my syllables.
Can you understand that?'

Furious now, red sari whirling,
she's naked by the Vaigai river.
But no one cares, neither washermen
nor moist buffaloes.

'Creatures of Here and There
we must keep doing
Madurai, Manhattan, who cares?'

When she turns it is bleeding on her:
words, sentences, maps.
Her flesh burns light:

Quick aftermath.

RAW BIRD OF YOUTH
(for Kamala Das)

Kamala, what is happening to me?
I lie in bed, scan newsprint for signs of truth:
the OJ Simpson case, car chase and bloodied glove,
a raucous circus stewing in our throats;
derailment by Signal Mountain, the sun flashing umber
on bodies, dropped into the shell of rock;
India's rationalists scorning the faithful:
shall Ganapati, Lord of the open world,
sip milk from tin spoons?
Is this all life holds?
Last night in the cab, on Fifth, passing the park,
I heard the raw bird of youth its beak caught in phlox,
scent of leaves thickening. Your voice swooping,
settling as you read from 'Morning at Apollo Pier':
'kiss the words to death in my mouth.' As you spoke
the tiles on a city roof flashed indigo.
Now, in this speeding cab as red lights clash,
I taste the sudden rush of lilac, mortality's noise:
Kamala, in this quick wilderness, where will love go?

RUNNING MAN

Late last night a man
in an orange tracksuit
was running over the Parkway by the river

When he got to the middle of the Parkway
he flung out his hands and stood
seized I was sure by recollection.

Such sweetness!
His arms picked out
by light, cars flashing on the bridge.
That lonely figure, knees
bent, body trembling.

JOHN OLIVER PERRY

SEXUAL IDENTITY DRIVING MEENA ALEXANDER'S POETIC SUBLIMITY

In recent writings and interviews Meena Alexander has identified herself as having serious problems in New York City bringing her life together as a Third World immigrant woman writer and mother (and one might add wife and academic). In her two long poems, *Storm* (written in 1987) and *Night-Scene, The Garden* (first performed in April 1988) she says she was "struggling with these questions of meaning and dislocation" brought on by "multiculturalism in America that has sharpened my wits, forced me back to my own post-colonial heritage" ("Language and Shame," 1989). Being forced back, however, does not mean that she rests there nor certainly that her motivations or identifications are mainly as a post-colonial writer. The one most overwhelming fact about post-colonial life in India is surely its multiculturalism, more long-running, wide-reaching and deep-delving than that in America. Thus, wherever they live, multi-lingual, multi-traveled, multi-educated persons like Meena Alexander (and most other Indian intellectuals) inhabit fractured and multiple cultural worlds where each multiplely-cultured, multiplely-divided person struggles for equilibrium or at least equanimity-- for some space to build a creative life.

Avoiding either a post-colonial or an American feminist agenda as "a political program that says I'm marginal," Alexander coyly adds: "I may have a secret one [agenda] I don't talk about." Close reading of her poetry and prose reveals their deriving their power from and secretively supporting a driving sexual energy that demands space, asserts its primacy, yet delicately protects its privacy. Particularly in her reconstructions of familial homes and childhood events in Kerala, death terrors are equal to the sexual desires propelling her, both these being suppressed socially, mainly by her father's family but also by her mother. Sublimated as poetic, such taboo feelings are obscurely, headily, frustratingly

pursued, as if reaching toward an unexpressable but irrepressible sublimity. Obviously in this creative process Alexander associates herself with the ancient traditional Indian esthetic of suggestiveness and its practitioners, producers of religious eroticism from the earliest saint and bhakti poets to Sarojini Naidu. About that derivative "Indian nightingale" Alexander has approvingly written while managing her own very different, diasporic strategies of distantiation and indeterminacy.

In her recent memoir, *Fault Lines* (Feminist Press, New York, 1993), Alexander seeks to exploit some of the still-living traditions of contemporary India as well as those of the West in order to stretch her female imagination and expand a constricting social fabric. But ultimately her goal is to exploit a multitude of relational selves derived from her interactions with the many places in which she has lived. She reports telling a similarly situated diasporic Indian female friend, that in *Fault Lines* she was writing about "being born into a female body, ... living without fixed ground rules, moving about so much...." In her highly autobiographical novel *Nampally Road* (Mercury House, San Francisco, 1991) her heroine speaks of "leaping from one woman's body to another." Among the risks of such a hopping-about life are not merely insecurities, fears, uncertainties, but also grandiosities, evasions and naivetés unavoidable when all stable reference points are rejected.

Rather than a Euro-American type of highly individuated self, Indian sociologists and psychologists speak of a relational or "dividual" self being constructed and operating in tradition-driven Indian families and societies, of Indian values as being highly flexible, very "context sensitive," and of English-using intellectuals having to confront or, more frequently, ignore the "cognitive and emotive dissonances" of at least two different cultures, two languages, of modernization and conservation, of scepticism and belief, and a plethora of other contradictory social forces in this rapidly changing, multicultural land. Though Meena Alexander evolved her own evasive and multiplely hybridized identity-- or

perhaps a set of interchangeable roles or modular identities-- to a large extent abroad, her personal crises still are implicated with those of educated Indians at home or abroad. Her distinctive strategy is to seek through her writing the liberation of her present-living self from all selfhood, ego-activity, even from a definable subjectivity, a centering perspective. This is again a strategy that can readily be characterized as traditionally Indian, though it also derives from twentieth century phenomenology, which she studied for her Ph. D. at Nottingham University.

An older expatriate writer of Indian heritage, V.S.Naipaul, while making creative capital of his rootless post-colonial status, still writes his autobiography in terms of *Finding the Centre*, and his work, including his latest, *A Way in the World*, keeps coming back to Trinidad, Port of Spain, the site of his childhood. A similar world wanderer, Meena Alexander has struggled to *create*, rather than find, spaces where interactions can go on, an imaginative opening, brainpan or womb, for bearing human relationships. Rather than providing a haven for recovery, her childhood and adolescent years were divided culturally and linguistically, between the Sudan, her meteorologist father's working base, and two morally distinct, though Syrian Christian, grandparents' homes in Kerala, as well as among schools stretching from Pune to Khartoum to Nottingham. And then in her teaching career she has shifted from Delhi to Hyderabad to Minneapolis to three institutions in New York City-- Jesuit Fordham, elite Columbia, and precarious, publicly supported Hunter Graduate Center of CUNY, where she is now Professor of English.

In responding to such a life, she sometimes tries imagining her existence like a Symbolist poet, without a locatable meaning, that is, outside any definable social, racial, geographical or even relational space, even though her poetically constructed myths of her Keralan familial roots are repeatedly appealed to. Her search for a space, her gypsy-like, outsider's marginalized existence, has come at last to that extremity! Like Conrad's (or Marlow's) Kurtz, she strives to kick free utterly from earthly bonds. In this respect

she may be aligned with Indian mysticism, though enacting her transcendences again *outside* that tradition of discovering and "realizing" a special mystical Self. Unlike Indian mystics-- and indeed most Christian varieties-- she is not committed to seeking solely or mainly certain intense sensations of light and darkness, silence and sound, leading to sublime-- skeptics might say, stemming from sublimated-- "unearthly" emotions that might be denominated "divine love." In certain respects Alexander's work can be more appropriately seen through its contrastive associations with the ordinary Western European feminist paradigm of seeking sexual liberation within a repressive patriarchal society. Meena Alexander's somewhat embarrassed identification with an exaggerated sexual drive is, however, discordant with Western feminists' rejection of such a demeaning female stereotype. Whatever the necessary and profound qualifications, the feminist strain in her imagination, nevertheless, offers a more promising understanding than the mystical one. Furthermore, given some latitude in analogical extension, the cosmic mystical, as often in Western and Eastern religious literature, painting and sculpture, can be consolidated with the individualistic sexual, forming a single understanding.

In a 1978 Hyderabad interview with Susie Tharu (in *Chandrabhaga* 7, 1982) she explained: "But you see, if you're a slave, you don't even know the limits of your body, because you have no place you can call your own. And if you're a woman, given the words you're given to speak with, it is probably somewhat analogous." More explicitly she proposed: "I am haunted by the feeling that if my life is to be real, I must learn to live in her [my maternal grandmother's] house.... Suffer the imprisonment she suffered. Walls, a husband who was given to her and a God so distant that His rage was the rage of her own father." And then "poets must not be ashamed if they are looked upon by others as possessed [like slaves].... Possessed by and hence exiled from, your most intimate *house*, the body" (70,71). But a year later she was married, soon pregnant and on her way to New York City, where self-definition through matrilineal connections became quite

another, less hopeful, less stable project. Still earlier, in "Exiled by a Dead Script" (1977), she complained, "[If the exile's] body cannot appropriate its given landscape, ... the substantial body dwindles into phantasm."

The treatment of Alexander's repressed sexuality in her earlier life discloses a common ground for reading all her later work. In Chapter 7 of *Fault Lines*, "Khartoum Journal," Alexander divulges a fearsome adolescent thought that was and is clearly attractive: "What if the *x*, the shining symbol I now gave to all that moved me-- the gleaming intricate surfaces of the world, the feelings that welled up from too deep for words to reach-- were to become all that I was, a spirit on the brink of dissolution, nothing, literally nothing." Gender-laden questions in her teenager journal recount "the misery I went through: 'If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me?' 'Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life?' 'God, why teach me to write?'" (102). For "What I could not admit, as my parents wished me to, was that sexuality made for that fault, had caused the Fall of Man appa reverted to, time and again, in his discourses to me" (103). This "fault" is feeling "a crack in the earth [i.e., in both her self and her body] nothing could heal." These self-destructive feelings came from "longing for a young man, a Gujarati ... on the other side of the river" and from despair over another drowned youth; for "The image of women jumping into wells [usually because of pre-marital pregnancy] was constantly with me during my childhood." And later "I knew I could not live without passion; but passion burnt me up. That was the forked twig that held me. In dreams I was the snake struggling in that grip. The snake about to be beaten to death."

Curtly, if suggestively, *Fault Lines* also reports the writer having a "nervous breakdown" in England at age nineteen while writing her Ph. D. thesis: " The intensity of sexual passion forced me back into my bodily self, made me turn against the 'reason' of the world" (139). But the breakdown more directly resulted from "a passionate relationship with a man [that] tormented me.... I could not give myself, as I phrased it then, to him, nor could I turn

away.... All my thoughts of 'the intentional inexistence of the object'-- a good Husserlian phrase-- were swept away in unfulfilled desire." Then her last year in Nottingham she took a Dutch student as lover, later breaking with him when threatened with Dutch domesticity. Of her meeting in Hyderabad an American Urdu and Mughal history scholar, David Lelyveld, and their marriage almost nothing is revealed in *Fault Lines*:

> "I am falling," I said to David when we first met.... "I'll hold you," he said. "I'll be a safety net for you" (146-7).... We were lonely, each of us, deep inside and our meeting made for a sheltering space.... great innocence... a sheer sense of possibility.... Within three weeks we decided to get married (157).

Curiously, exasperatingly to certain critics, such are the extraordinary sexual constraints self-imposed on Alexander's memoir narrative, despite its intended international feminist audience. These very "Indian" "man-woman" constraints are not inevitable, for they are relatively lacking in the autobiographical poetry and "My Story" of the older Kerala writer in English, Kamala Das, who created a more rebellious, almost luridly confessional literary persona caught in a traditionally arranged, sexually strained marriage. Kamala and Meena are friends, as were their mothers, and both surely received similar motherly advice, as the latter reports; namely, that it is "dishonorable to make public what is part of your domestic life" ("Interview," *Center for American Culture Studies Journal*, 6:2 [Spring 1988] 23-27, 24). Both these Kerala women writers rejected that advice, but the resulting tensions of coyness and abandon, of resentments and acceptances of patriarchal oppressions, constitute fundamental forces differentially expressed in their work.

Similar withholding of sexual communications occurs in *Nampally Road* (1991), originally a much longer, perhaps more candid narrative written a dozen years before in Hyderabad, presumably for mainly Indian readers. In the brief published

version, the twenty-five-year-old heroine, Mira, one evening matter-of-factly "took off her sari for him" and they "made love." This merely cited event is totally unexpected since there have been no previous hints of Mira's sexual desire or his. The man in question, however, is a highly esteemed, politically active young man who denigrates her bourgeois individualistic writing and her teaching of Wordsworth to Hyderabad University students, so their love-making never cements a lasting bond nor finds any other place to exist.

In *House of a Thousand Doors* (1986/88), Alexander unhesitatingly, if somewhat obscurely, romanticizes and mysticizes (or perhaps merely mystifies) intense inner passion, as, for a striking example, in "Narcissus Never Knew Her":

> when heat warps the pupil
> twisting the eye's dark
> trick of overture
> so fine, vision is undeceived.

Such high epistemological claims for the power of inner 'heat' to reveal outer truth may be almost conventional after Wordsworth, but when the supportive function of cryptic imagery is abandoned in favor of a kind of post-modernist phenomenological uncertainty, as in many poems throughout this volume, then neither reader nor writer quite knows where the other or anything else is or is going. "Grandmother's Mirror" is a central illustration, ending

> Come to me sister:
>
> my figures cut in a rocking glass
> pitch, then double themselves,
> tragic concupiscence
> that heals nothing.
> Come, if not for what we were
> in childhood,
> ferocious with truth,
> or now, restless, impenitent,

then for a pungent self
still clasped between the two.

The koil without a skin
cries into my water.

Will I fall
to the sounding
of your blood?

In "The Poem's Second Life: Writing and Self-Identity," (*Toronto South Asian Review* [Fall-Winter 1987-88] 6:2, 77-85, 80) Alexander reported that in her first experiences in New York a basic problem (extending her troubles as a single female in the gossipy, socially and sexually constrictive Hyderabad academic community) was "not just how to appear-- saris, ... jeans, ... women's issues...-- but the very fact of appearing, of existing for the eye. To what extent ... was my sense of self-identity invaded by the gaze, the look of a world to which I was Other.... It was what I was and in many ways am, this perpetual reconstruction of identity. [Para.] What might I be to myself in a simpler, clearer time, in my mother's house in Tiruvella... ? Was there a sense in which this question could be anything more than merely nostalgic?" And from this complex questioning grew the two major poems-- *Storm* and *Night-Scene, The Garden.* In both of these experiments with creating an identity no "simpler, clearer" time or self emerges, but a hazy blur of childhood and matrilineal memories. And in her newest poetry, still in process, unpublished, she is attempting once more to join together her two grandmothers' complementary personas in order to find her own "self-identity" (personal communication, January 6, 1996).

On all these occasions she (or her persona, her heroine) is trying in vain to arrive at a notion of reality, a real conceptual as well as social and geographical space, that might give meaning and shape to her life. Whether overtly expressed or not, central to that life is the sexual energy which she feels driving her, making her not

a self but a female power, the Shakti that is Siva in all of life. No distinct Self is produced, no other person issues from this non-spatial womb, because this sexuality is a process, a force, not even an element of a subject or subjective consciousness, much less an essence or being that she can identify as her own real Self.

From early childhood or perhaps early adolescence Meena Alexander, as her writing always indirectly, furtively or symbolically, never indelicately, attests, has felt tyrannized by this sexuality, indubitably hers, yet not recognizably so, at least publicly, socially, only in her dreams and nightmares, in her secret desires and private poetry. For the most part, the tyrannizing forces are seen, unconventionally, to come from the sexual drive itself, though she also sees, of course, the effects on her life and feelings arising from how those sexual impulses are treated by her own imagination and intelligence as well as by oppressive societal forces. Conceiving of herself as in exile even from her own body, she imagines that she internalized the patriarchal sexual values and mores of the shifting, never fully possessed landscape of her intimate Syrian Christian family-- her grandparents, aunts and mother and father-- and of other surrounding societies where she has lived. Such oppressive internalizings are revealed as her foredoomed attempts to shape a space that will house and define her along with, if not partly by, her sexuality.

Especially in her critical explorations of the situations of female writers, from Dorothy Wordsworth to Sarojini Naidu to contemporary Asian American feminists, Alexander understands Indian sexist tyranny in standard Western anti-patriarchal, pro-maternal, if not pro-matriarchal, terms. Elsewhere the rage at the oppressions of women seems mediated by sexually ambivalent mythologies of the "White Goddess" variety, including an acceptance of a complex gender identity based on not merely the creative, life-giving, life-bearing feminine principle but also and more importantly the reductive, seductive, destructive power inescapably raging in women as sexual desire. That is, in Alexander's private ideology, no political distinction can be drawn

between an overbearing matriarchal image of woman as earth goddess and the repressive patriarchal image of woman as almost uncontrollably sex-driven, hence requiring isolation if not physical restraint. Indeed, a central image in *Fault Lines* and *Nampally Road*, as most forcefully in the prior, long, matrilineal poem, *Night-Scene, The Garden*, depicts a mother wanting to kill her daughter, an hyperbole for destroying her daughter's independence, as most Indian women have done and suffered throughout history.

A major justification for such almost anti-feminist attitudes is her reporting that, in fact, her poetic creativity has not been suppressed but rather released by men-- particularly her beloved grandfather Ilya--, by the male-dominated worlds she has inhabited-- especially academe on three continents--, and even by imperialistic colonialism. For all these, undeniably, provided the education, the language-- Indian English-- and the poetry-- romantic, symbolist, modernist, post-modernist-- that she has relied on for her creative self-expression, or, in recent years, for her expressionistic creativity. For she has been abandoning her earlier hopes for discovering a root, rooted or integrative self through her writing and probably in another past, now seen as a nostalgically illusory goal.

Indicating her main focus Alexander titled her first books of tentative poetry *A Bird's Bright Wing,* (1976), *Without Place* (1977) and *I Root My Name* (1977), to suggest her romanticized rootlessness, and the more nearly realized art of *Stone Roots* (1980) continues to bleed that vein. Even earlier, sometime during her Khartoum years of schooling, she wrote a long poem in which she identifies with and idealizes Cleopatra-- of Alexandria. This fabled black queen of Egypt, devotee of non-Western gods and goddesses, including the death-dealing, suckling asp, is seen in the usual exploitative male terms as the ultimate temptress; especially emphasized as problematical are her driving fires of what patriarchal Christianity would call lust. This inner, almost spiritual force is presented in the early work through an obscuring, purifying imagery and a highly elliptical non-narrative mode that, refined and

complicated, Alexander maintains in her current poetry and even in her memoir. It is inevitable, therefore, that her chosen poetic model be the supreme esthete Wallace Stevens, whose word-and-thought-created "world was no place." Her first book of mature poetry was thus appropriately titled *House of a Thousand Doors*.

Contrary to a more positively feminist doctrine, Alexander's narrating or lyrical persona continually struggles against being identified "in a male-dominated society" by her sexuality, by her mere flesh and the passions raging, storming within that sheer force of nature, of divine power. Yet it is precisely those sexual energies that, enigmatically, cryptically, she cites as driving her to poetry and, in at least a paradoxical way, they drive the poetry itself. Explorations of her complex psychosexual motivations occur throughout her recent poetry, but a key passage in *Storm* provides an initial instance:

> A child stirs in her seat
> loosens her knees,
> her sides shift
> in the lap of sleep
>
> the realm of dream
> repairs
> as if a woman
> glimpsed through a doorway
> whose name is never voiced
>
> took green silk
> in her palm
> threaded it
> to a sharp needle,
> drew the torn pleats together:
>
> a simple motion
> filled with grace,
> rhythmic repetition
> in a time of torment.

To this should be added a passage from section 4, clearly marked as "The Storm" of *Storm*:

> Desire thrusting and breaking
> at raw faces,
> the ocean daring its burden
> of waves, the rage of spent foam
> against the young swimmer
> whose tired limbs
> float loose and senseless
>
> till bread and bowl and table,
> straight-backed chair
> and four-poster bed
> held firm by a mother's
> outstretched hands
> latch and take root again
> and the house resurrects itself.
>
> O the bloodshot eye
> pearly lids
> twitching,
> trapped in sunlight
>
> I am dashed
> against sharp rocks
> she cries
>
> these bits of old teak furniture,
> my arms are stuffed into a meat-safe,
> my thighs locked to the refrigerator.
> Where is the bridegroom to rescue me? (19-20)

A central dynamic in Alexander's poems involves, indeed, as a misinformed Marxist critic, Sukrita Mukerji rightly claims, this kind of "imaginative return to the actual place where she lived"--though "the actual place" is, in fact, not one, but multiple, thousand-doored, ultimately a set of sites scattered over four continents. Only her school vacations were spent in the sexually repressive paternal grandparents' house in Kozhencheri, the site of

Storm. *Night-Scene, the Garden* is set at a later age in the home of the maternal grandfather Kuruvilla (her beloved, but fiercely dictatorial "Ilya") in Tiruvella (the maternal grandmother, a political activist for Gandhi, died when Meena's mother was sixteen). Another Keralan place of importance to the child and the poet's imagination is that of the Virgin Goddess, Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin). The poetic resurrection of this living space, under a mother's controlling auspices in the just-quoted passage, is conceived as offering the means for fuller self-expression, self-discovery. Once more, with a Stevens-like Romantic idealization, poetry, imagination, the mind, is set to save the world by making it, sensing it in words-- and to that extent transcending phenomenal reality for another potentially sublime realm.

Yet the poetically reconstituted Kerala world remembered and relived in so many poems, also functioned, the above passage makes clear, as a powerful means of oppression, rather explicitly sexual in this case. Insofar as such a space substitutes for or rather helps substantiate the actual physical female body with its inner storms and external stresses, then this scene draws aside the curtain of propriety even in the very sanctuary of a dominating feudal grandfather. To compound the complexity, though that powerful man died when Meena was eleven, "I loved him more than I have ever loved anyone in my life..." (*Fault Lines*). He was the one elder who, she feels, most supported her intellectual and creative aspirations, rather than her own mother, father or paternal grandmother. It is that last woman-- an embodied icon of repressed Indian femininity who never left her husband's home-- whom the poet has spent most of her life trying to escape, raising rootlessness to high art.

Although later she tried theorizing in a fashionably critical Stevens-like way about how words "consume the place" for experiencing Tagore's "true self,"[1] it is clear in *Night-Scene* that sexual passion, sublimated, comprises her creative energy. Indeed,

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[1]. See her 1987 Brown University talk reprinted as "Outcaste Power: Ritual Displacement and Virile Maternity in

it must have been a kind of raging passion that moved her to give birth to both this and the earlier *Storm* (composed of 25 and 32 pages respectively) within a very few months. Two brief passages from *Night-Scene* are indicative; first, the closing of the original version:

> Come ferocious alphabets of flesh
> Splinter and raze my page
>
> That out of the dumb
> and bleeding part of me
>
> I may claim
> my heritage.
>
> The green tree
> battened on despair
> cast free
>
> The green roots kindled
> to cacophony

Another such passage occurs at the end of Section 7, entitled "Night-Scene" (after all, Alexander does clearly signal her

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Indian Women Writers," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (xxiv:1) 1989, 12-29: "The disjunction between the feminine, the lovely, iconic, traditionally sanctioned image of woman, and that other more ferocious, more disruptive power without which one could not write, sometimes threatens to tear apart the constructed fabric of the work.... I mean that for a woman writer who is struggling with colonialism, the effort to cut through that subtle, often infinitely pernicious fabric, is part and parcel of the reaching out for form, and for a form that does not buy into the previously sanctioned ideologies of poetry, or prose"(16). Here Alexander rushes into Stevens' "No Place" and "questions of a lasting freedom, of a sublime transcendence," rather than name "the ferocious, disruptive power" as it is evoked in *Night-Scene.*

emphases). In the previous section "my mad aunt Chinna" develops "her nightly fascination with [mud and] raced, clothes streaming/ from her sides, mud in her hair ... all in public down the village street." Aunt Chinna passed on to her niece this prohibited obsession with mud, for on "the night [Meena] turned seven ... Her hair all cracked with mud/ hot and dried/ she fetched it [mud to eat] from the cobra's hole/ in a little silver spoon." The significance of the ceremony attaching the person to the land as well as to the forbidden, the animal-sexual-natural being, becomes clear when Aunt Chinna advises, "Touch her tongue,/ no, not with gold/ as is our practice// "Take earth, dark mud/ in both your palms/ annoint her tongue/ her tiny limbs." And Aunt Chinna had instructed the child directly: "Kneel/ kneel she sang to me,/ before they bind/ your mouth with cords// She broke into her babble." So that in the finale of "Night-Scene"

> Just seven years old
> I knelt
> beside the well.
> I heard the waters pour
> under the skin of earth
>
> With my teeth
> I took the stalks of grass,
> the tiny creatures
> whimpering there,
> moist jots of dirt
> sharp pebbles
>
> And weeping, weeping
> in my tumult
> I swallowed hard.
>
> Out of that fire
> that sweet hell in me
> the poet rose

Arms clasped
to a rockface
under the well

Where secret
waters roar.

In the following section, "No Man's Land," "no woman's either/ I stand in the middle of my life." There Alexander makes clear her rejection of any rigid feminist bias against male power (neither sex has ultimate power) or against rational male achievements for humankind. A cowherd "Stoned a cobra to death," having lured it out with burning nettles, but the child saw, again with Aunt Chinna's and perhaps Hinduism's guidance, that the snake is a "lordly creature," as in D. H. Lawrence's famous poem. For the child Meena, "The eyes were agate/ so worshipful in that light," while "A mile away/ in a whitewashed church/ the parents/ cover their eyes/ and sing the Holy Qurbana." As the child watches, "anthems that Sunday" tell of

Christ our Lord, He who rolled back the
stone and stood before her in His penury.
My flesh is yours He whispered to her face,
Mary Magdalena touch me not. The tail beat

And beat and beat as voices bruised
in prayers cast the tiger into our midst...

Christ the tiger is also the naga, the snake god, an accompaniment for and form of Siva, the lingam, omnipotent sexual symbol.

Close attention to equally overt clues in Meena Alexander's most recent book of poetry, *River and Bridge* (Rupa, 1995) will bring out of seclusion the still shy sexuality that she recognizes is continually empowering her creativity, neither iconically feminine/female nor distinctly post-colonial/racial. Without denying the strength of her Syrian Christian heritage, Alexander's poetry as well as her prose predicates a distinctly

non-dualistic sense of herself as sheer energy and perhaps, by extension, others of her sex and, indeed, the entire human species may be similarly understood. Her rejection of Christian and Cartesian dualisms of mind and body is part of her adopted English Romantic heritage, with a phenomenological assist from Heidegger, but it also stems from the Hindu culture pervading her Indian background: the divine androgynous Siva as Destroyer and Preserver (as in Shelley's orientalized West Wind); the ur-goddess Shakti and/or Durga-Kali as frighteningly powerful female forces underlying and within all things, just as Siva is-- or whatever god's name, shape, identity may be invoked for this world that is and is not, that we are of and not. Drawing on these and many other multicultural resources for a lyrical novel that will soon be published, for an expanded American version of *River and Bridge* with a number of more America-situated poems earlier deleted, and for a new collection of poems with essays also due out this year, Meena Alexander's astoundingly productive creative energy predictably continues to flow from that conflicted, partly sublimated, partly exploited sexuality that has been inspiring and driving her work from earliest adolescence to this lushly flowering maturity.

LAKSHMI KANNAN

THE WEIGHT OF A CIVILIZATION

Meena Alexander, *River and Bridge*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1995. Rs.95.

Having read Meena Alexander's works with a sustained interest over the years, it is not easy to read *River and Bridge* as just another collection of poems. She is one of those writers who leaves behind memories of her oeuvre which impinge on our consciousness when it does not come positively flooding back in between the lines of her new books. There is a certain restlessness in the literary persona, and a nervous energy in her poems that one can relate to, always with the feeling of having "known" the poet through her other books.

> I have come to the Hudson's edge to begin my life
> to be born again, to seep as water might
> in a landscape of mist, burnished trees,
> a bridge that seizes crossing.

writes the poet in the poem that lends the title to the book, "River and Bridge". Having said that, she links Homer with Vyasa as two thinkers who knew that the river and the bridge summon those who can sense the embattled forces of their lives, that is those who, like Alexander, feel that "birth is always bloody." "River and Bridge" is a poem from "Blood Line", one of the four sections, the others being "News of the World", "Mandala" and "San Andreas Fault"

It is this brooding spirit which carries with it a mnemonic cargo of a life lived with an acute awareness of the complexity of one's birth that hovers over all the poems, spilling over the four sections mentioned, dissolving, mixing and unmixing as the poetry flows along. At the core of the writing is the dialectics so characteristic of any earnest poetry-- a wish to express what is countered by an equally strong pull to hold back, to leave unshared. Reticence as against writing for publishing, two proverbial but not uncompanionable enemies, or rather two seemingly different forces that invariably meet at a point. When they condense as a word.

Alexander will not throw away the weight of her cultural inheritance. Naturally, that is a lot, a lot, to throw away. Whoever would? It involves "Scraping it all back," she writes, in the very first line of the first poem "Relocation." From then on the poem reaches you whole.

Three poems later the poet scrapes them off her face in "Brown Skin, What Mask?"

> Babel's township seeps into Central Park
> I hunch on a stone bench scraping nightingale bulbuls
>
> cuckoo-koels, rose-gulabs off my face

in order to 'make up' as a hyphenated thing:

> Shall I bruise my skin, burn up into
> She Who Is No Colour

she asks, disconcertingly. This is cultural contextualising at its unflinching best. The honesty of it hits you between the eyes, as indeed it should. And so it all comes flooding back, the beautifully written memoir *Fault Lines* (Penguin, 1993). It comes fluttering out of the pages of Chapter 8, titled "Language and Shame", disembodied as it floats over this poem, as it floats over the poems by the Meena Alexanders of the world whenever they care to take in what they see shimmering in the private mirrors of their lives. The poem (like the chapter mentioned) is a brilliant piece where reticence, a shyness of being, is treated, objectified, fictionalised and then presented to the reader so that he/she can now find it easy to understand the layered persona. So that the reader is not frightened now.

Whether the poet is in Tiruvella or Meerut or Baghdad or Manhattan or London, she is aware of this one constant-- her changeable, protean but core self. The indestructible self which goes back to not just a lineage, but a sharp, distinct sense of place, the smell of the earth on which she romped around and played with Ilya, the unforgettable maternal grandfather whose end brings a lump in our throat. A wet mound of earth clings to her wherever she goes in the world:

Hand over hand
past the balconies of childhood
("Sweet Water" : Mandala)

More importantly, it is a clump of earth she so amazingly keeps moist. At all times.

In fact, most of the preceding poems haul you over inevitably to the section "Blood Line" because that is what many of Alexander's poems and writings are all about. To be forever born and re-born, to return to a center despite the centrifugal force of her diverse themes. In the poem "Blood Line" written for her daughter:

She is my mother's
mother who cries in me,
my line of blood
our perpetuity.

It is a lineage that is so tangibly felt that it perhaps makes her feel a stranger, anywhere:

Ten years later still a stranger here
("Palpable Elysium" : Blood Line)

She feels grafted "to local root." The images could not have been more telling.

Alexander also has the nerve to decontextualise herself, no matter what the geographical setting is.

It comes in flight
towards me
.....
.....
Language so fine
it cannot hold the light
for long

she writes in a poem strangely titled "Lost Language." Strange because she has not really 'lost' it, for how can she? Nor is she lost to Malayalam. It is in her skin, her blood, her eyes, her system. It is all hers. And it is for keeps. Because, perhaps more than any other

Indian writer writing in English today, Alexander is acutely aware of one reality and she uses it as an epigraph for *Fault Lines* :

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.
>
> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*

Fault lines can go wilfully, crazily over a surface, mapping their own routes. While dwelling upon time in the poem appropriately titled "Mandala" in the section of the same name, she declares

> Ourselves a crooked hieroglyph,
> two wings snapped into a sail

The Tibetan Mandala, as we know, is composed of different shades of sands. Sand that pours itself out in an hour glass. Imprints etched on the sands of time. Not only a time that is vast, expansive, but one that is, for the author, resonant with echoes from a seamless, flowing time. "Mandala" evokes time, rippling back to the sharp line in an earlier poem where she marks a measure of time as "the bitten end of our century".

> ("Estrangement becomes the Mark of the Eagle":
> News of the World)

Hudson's edge. Alexander can see, and smell an incense tree nearby. Don't ask how.

R. RAJA GOVINDASAMY

IN CONVERSATION:
AN INTERVIEW WITH MEENA ALEXANDER

(This interview was conducted by Professor R. Raja Govindasamy, lecturer in English at Thiagarajar College of Arts and Science, Madurai, in the context of a programme given by Meena Alexander in which she discussed her recently-published memoir, *Fault Lines*, and other aspects of her career of teaching and writing in India and overseas.)

Raja Govindasamy : Meena, you are widely read and you have travelled widely. You are also a recognised poet in English. I would like to know how from Kerala to North Africa, further on to England, back to India and then to America, you were able to shape your personality and your poetic career.

Meena Alexander : Oh, What a difficult question! I believe you know that for many years, when I was a young writer, I used to think that in order to write a poem one should have lived in one place for a very very long time, because to me there is always an attachment to the details of the particular places. But my life has been such that I have always moved between places. So, I think in the poetry I try to make a balance. Often it is a precarious balance between the details of observation of sensory attachment to place, and the kinds of emotions that well up within us which are the material also of poetry.

RG : You have mentioned that your poems are "tied to places". Could you specify one or two places which became raw material for your poetry?

MA : I spent a considerable length of my childhood in Kerala. The scenes in Kerala in my grandfather's house, the paddy fields, the trees, all I think have made a very deep impression on me. Somehow you know these things are not measured just in terms of calendar days or years because one can live in a place and not always have that connection.

RG : Did you as a child feel that you would at some point of time be able to use these impressions as experiences to be recorded in poetry?

MA : No, I do not think so. Mercifully I think we are freed of such a consciousness as children. I think it comes later.

RG : At which age did you get to feel that this could be part of your poetic output?

MA : Well, you know, it is funny because when I first started to write poems, I was ten or eleven or twelve. There was often a slavish kind of imitation, in the manner of many young people writing poems, of early things I had read. And then I understood as I was growing up a few more years that to make a poem you have to put in your own experience. So if I write about mango leaves, that could be fine in English, as opposed to Malayalam, because I do not write in Malayalam. So I think that what took place was a species of translation of a landscape into a language that was a little bit at an angle to it: because you see English is not an Indian language, yet it has also become an Indian language.

RG : In spite of the fact that you were coming back to Kerala every year while a student abroad, and that you were so much attached to the family in Kerala, how is it that you did not start writing poems in Malayalam but turned to English directly?

MA : Well, you see the fact of my upbringing was that English was the language in which I really developed my literacy. I speak Malayalam, but I do not have the fluency in Malayalam to write in it, and I think that as writers we use whatever language we have.

RG : Now that you are settled in the United States both as a writer and as a Professor of Creative Writing, how do you find yourself in that circle, that is, in a country, which is more globalised, a country which has its own impact on all other countries in a general sense? In your role as a poet, would you say

that you also play the global role in trying to bring your ethnicity into an international culture, in trying to bring a lot of things that others who live in America do not know? Would you say that ethnicity does play a role in artistic manifestations like what you are trying to do in America?

MA : Well, you have asked a very big question. I will try to give a small answer. I think ethnicity is very important, and just as a flip back of the earlier part of your question, I think the world is changing very rapidly in terms of science, technology and globalisation. The fact that you can take a telephone and talk to somebody who is on the other side of the world, or send a fax or receive E-mail or electronic messages is fine indeed. I think there is a very important way in which Art allows one to try and make sense of this rapidly shifting world. I think there is a certain exhilaration in it.

But there is also a certain disturbance, and I think it is the function of a writer as well as of other artists to try and give voice to that fact in some way. I think that the fact of ethnicity is very important because the United States is now struggling towards the notion of a multi-cultural society. It is a very embattled idea. I think in India for centuries this idea has existed. It is being contested by sectarian violence but there is still that idea available to many, many people in India. I think that there is something the United States can learn in this fashion. Now, as to what one does, you know, I try not to be too conscious about it because I write what comes to me. I think it is up to the readers, in a sense, to place it in a context. But I think you are right all these elements do flow into my work.

RG : You have said that poetry brings us news of the world. You have also written a poem on this particular theme. Could you elaborate this idea?

MA : Well, you know, I mean one is surrounded by newspapers, radio broadcasts and documentaries, all of which purport to give us, as indeed they do, news of the world. The news

is often found to be factual details of events that occur, and underlying that there is a human sensibility which also brings perhaps a quieter news. And so I think of the knowledge that poetry brings as something that should be intergrated into our ordinary life. Perhaps it isn't given enough place.

RG : In your memoir *Fault Lines* you have mentioned the complexity of your being an Asian-American writer. Let me quote your statement: "Didn't Baldwin say somewhere that being a Negro was the gate he had to unlock before he could write about anything else? I think being an Asian American must be like that. Through that bodily gate the alphabets pour in. This is our life in letters." Would you tell me about this particular experience that goes into your writing?

MA : Well, I think, it relates to what you were asking me earlier about ethnicity, and of course when one talks about the body there is also femaleness. I think that my experience in America on the one hand has been an enormously enriching one. I have learnt from the multitude of cultural events that have taken place, including meetings with African and American writers and Latino writers. It is almost like a crossroad of the world.

But at the same time there is always that issue of being racially marked as 'other', you know, of not being part of the main stream. And in a sense I think the country is going through an enormous change, because by the year 2000 the majority will be the so-called minority. So, the country is changing but the power structure is quite different, because immigrants from the Third World countries are only gradually making their way in. And I think you know that those lines by Baldwin spoke to me very directly because as an African-American he had tried to deal with these issues.

RG : Is this a conscious struggle to be fully united with the American mainstream at some time in future?

MA : Well, I wouldn't put it that way. I do not think the point is to be united with the mainstream. I think the point is to have a space in which one's cultural values can flourish, so that rather than the idea of assimilating into a mainstream, there is more the idea of the play of multiplicity, much more a sort of secularism that we have in India, for instance.

RG : You have also mentioned in your memoir that you were torn between domesticity and intelligence. You have said, "The fault lay in the tension I felt between the claims of my intelligence-- what my father had taught me to honour, what allowed me to live my life-- and the requirements of a femininity my mother had been born and bred to." I want to know how you were able to overcome this tension. How do your identity as a writer and your role as a member of the family go together? How does each one enrich the other?

MA : Well, actually it is a very good question. Let me go backwards. You know, when I was growing up, I was taught that women had a certain role in the house in a very traditional Indian way. But at the same time my father always encouraged me to use my mind and taught me that women also have a place in the world. But I think, you know, being married and having very young children many years ago, I found it emotionally a great struggle to try to put these two things together. I mean I had them both in my mind, in my background, but it was not always easy to find a balance. Just very simply, how do you take care of your young child when you want to write a poem? And these things have to edge their way against each other. At the same time I think the experience of domesticity has deeply enriched and nourished my writing. I think it is very often the case that we write from these areas of life which both enrich and present difficulties at the same time. You know that there is a kind of tension that always leads to a kind of activity.

RG : In another place in the memoir you have mentioned "linguistic decolonisation" -- some method by which you make sure of the Indianness or the special identity with which you want

to convey something, even while you use the English idiom. So you had to do something before you began to write?

MA : Well in a sense what one had to do was to try and make the language fluid enough.

RG : Is this what you meant by "linguistic decolonisation"?

MA : It is part of what I meant, because you know English came as a language of colonialism to India. But in fact it has also been assimilated into the Indian context. I think when you write in a language, particularly poetry, there is a great intimacy that has to occur in the language for the psyche of the writer. I think that I have to sort of open up the language as I found it, so that some of the rhythms that came to me are not English rhythms, necessarily. They might come from Malayalam, I don't know. Those had to be able to permeate the language. And so I think that there is always this play between the intimate experience of the writer who perhaps dreams in different languages but writes in English. Take African writers, Wole Soyinka for instance. How do you work with an African language and write in English? You have to change what English was thought to be. I mean each writer from the Third World who writes in English makes something else of the language.

RG : This is part of the difficulty in a poetic process.

MA : And part of the challenge, I think, and the excitement of it also.

RG : Meena, you are living in America at the time when that country has selected Rita Dove as its "Poet Laureate", and she had mentioned that the selection of a Black American woman is an indication that poets come in all colours and all genders -- that is what she stated in an interview. And the fact that she happens to be the youngest ever Poet Laureate also prompted her to say that it meant people wanted more of energy in poetic writing. How do you place yourself in this context as a young woman poet living in

America? How much contribution do you think you make to English poetry in America?

MA : Rita Dove is a very fine poet. She really is. I think it is a wonderful thing for all of us that she has been made the Poet Laureate. I think that in America, though audience for poetry is small, it is very vigorous and you know all these labels that we attach to ourselves, like Asian-American, or woman poet, or Third World poet, are all fine, but they also have to fall away. You know that sometimes when I go to a gathering I am invited as an Indian poet, sometimes as a woman poet, sometimes for a multicultural reading. All these labels exist but I think beneath them there is something in the impulse of a poet which adds, one hopes, to the larger scope of knowledge. And it is a knowledge which is deeply rooted in the particular, so that unlike what one thinks of as scientific knowledge, which is abstracted, the knowledge that enters a poem is deeply particular. I suppose that is its value.

RG : You have the community of Indians around you. I would like to know how much of your poetry relates to the community of Indians among whom you live? And I would also like to know along with this what is your target audience?

MA : I am always grateful when someone reads a poem. So I do not think of having a target audience in that way, because writing a poem is a private act-- though of course when once it is published, it belongs to anyone who cares to read it. I receive letters from young Indians, often students who have read something. I am always touched that something I have written made sense to someone who may be 18, or 19 or 20 who is growing up in America, who may feel something of this tension between the sense of coming from the Indian background and yet living in North America. Of course I know there are also wonderful readers who are all of different ages and different backgrounds. One is always glad. You know I think there is a way in which a reader always makes a poem a little bit different from what the poet might have had in mind. But that is all to the good, I think.

RG : Going from the community of Indians to the technological age in which we find ourselves at the moment, I would like to quote Cleanth Brooks who said in his lecture, "Literature in a Technological Age", that literature, or the humanities, is a complement to this technological age. Nobody can dismiss it as irrelevant or unimportant. And he goes to the extent of saying that poetry is needed to convey meaning and wisdom to our people, because of which they could feel more enriched. Otherwise they would have only practicality and application because of science and technology. What would you say about the importance of poetry, the relevance of poetry to our civilisation?

MA : I think that particularly in an age, where everything goes so fast --information, events, what is considered newsworthy-- I think, poetry is so important because it gives us meditative poise, even if it is only for a few minutes. The very small private acts of just walking down and looking at a tree or picking up the vegetables to inspect them before buying them, as well as of course the deeper emotions that well up within us, must find a place, a repository, in a world that is becoming increasingly functional, and I think of it really as the privilege of poetry to help make that place. You know, Joseph Brodsky, when he was Poet Laureate, had this wonderful idea that poems should be sold in the supermarket. Unfortunately I don't think it has come to pass. But I think it is a magnificent idea. In fact quite close to where I live on the upper West Side of New York City, you know, there are people laying out things on the pavement to sell old books and magazines. And there is one gentleman, he is an African-American, he sits there next to the subway entrance, with his poems laid out, and he will sell them for a few cents, and he will also recite the poem for you. This is nice! It is on the street, and it is also poetry.

RG : In other words poetry does have a relevance any time and any place, both for the poet as well as the reader. So we need to promote the idea, as Brodsky was saying, that poetry has to be sold in the supermarket or the poet has to consciously sell it, by which I mean, that he has to take it to the reader.

MA : I think you are right. It is difficult to do this, because I think most poets are also private people, and the art is nourished by privacy. But of course I think poets also learn so much from reading their works and sharing them. And I often participate in poetry readings in New York and other parts of the country, and there is an audience that reads poems and people come to talk to you and ask you questions about what you have read. Certainly much more could be done in that direction.

RG : In many of your poems one can easily identify your social concern. Your humanism encompasses men, women, war, civil and political liberties. What drew you to this concern?

MA : I think that this ideal of social justice is something that is very very important. My mother's father was a Gandhian and was quite active in the Nationalist movement. He was a great influence on me when I was a young child and so I was brought up with this idea that the creation of a new nation, India, was so bound up with that struggle for social justice. So it seems to me that part of the task of a poem is to illuminate that struggle, not to speak of it in an obvious way, because that would become mere rhetoric. But we try and make some connection, however tenuous, between the truth of our experience (because if you cannot speak about that how can you write a poem?) and the ideal of justice. One does try for that often in an elliptical way.

RG : Let me go to one or two specific poems now. For example, there is "Stone Roots", in which you are trying to say that you could be lost in a place, that you would not want to go out in the streets of Nampally because you could get lost. But the image in the last line is that "Trees understand the under / water base of stone / the gravity of exile". Although you have been moving from place to place feeling comfortable wherever you have lived, your mind always turned to Kerala and the Kozhenchery House or the Tiruvella House as we gather from your memoir. Why do you, or the speaker in the poem, who I think represents you in this case, feel lost? What exactly bothers you, what is your preoccupation in this particular poem?

MA : It is a difficult question. As you were asking this question, I was watching a butterfly. You see the pretty yellow thing just fluttering like this and it probably doesn't have a sense of being lost. I do not have a very good sense of spatial direction. If you say "go out and turn right" I might turn left. I mean, not consciously but without knowing. But in a deeper way I think there is always a confusion that is attached to a separation from home, whatever home is, and for me I think the landscape of Kerala and this house provided that home emotionally. So that on the one hand I think I tried to look at the shift and the multiplicity and the constant change of the world, as I have been travelling from one place to another, as something that gives me access. At the same time, there is this need always to return, sometimes to a place that is constructed in the mind, I mean the shelter. Shelters are actual but also become part of what mind makes up, almost imaginary homelands, if you wish.

RG : Do I then infer that "Stone Roots" is a sort of image to which you want to cling so that you could feel very secure?

MA : I do not know if I want to cling to it.

RG : Or is it a spring board then?

MA : Maybe something like that. Because I was very struck by the way in which trees become fossils, changing into stones. So how these different elements work into each other through time has always fascinated me. And also I had the idea of a gravity of exile. The gravity is the seriousness, but also it is a part of the condition, if you wish. I mean, you find that in Mira Bai, you see, in a different way. One is always going towards seeking.

RG : I would like you to read a stanza of the poem "City Street", because there is a very interesting comparison in it. Could you please read it?

MA : Yes, it is a very curious poem, very interesting in a lighter vein, though of course it has a serious message.

It is as if I had died
as if we all had died.

Not of hunger or thirst,
just turned

The sheer fact of the matter
gives us pause

As a burnt dosa on a griddle
as idlis wasting in steam.

And having gone
cried out for resurrection.

RG : It is of course very interesting because of the reference to Dosas and Idlis. But then there is a message behind it. How did you choose these two images and then weave them into a poem in which you seem to convey a message?

MA : Well, you know I enjoy Idlis and Dosas. I am sure you do too. But also it is a very domestic image and the poem as a whole I think is perhaps an abstract philosophical poem. It is about turning from life into death. But not literal death-- a kind of metaphorical death through which we seek a resurrection. The Idlis and Dosas came to me because I know that if you add too much water to the Idli mix, it will just waste away. So it is also an idea of making something which is quite fragile, and when you cook something of course you intend that other people can eat it. When you write a poem also, you know there will be other people to read it.

Also the poem is about hunger and it is about thirst and it is about the possibility of quenching the thirst and nourishing those who are hungry. So it is a rather complex poem.

RG : I think the images are well placed in that context.

LATHA RENGACHARI AND E. MANICKAM

MOVEMENT IN TIME AND PLACE: THE WORK OF MEENA ALEXANDER

(The following essay is based, in part, on a series of conversations with Meena Alexander during a Workshop for which she was Writer in Residence)

A study of Meena Alexander's work is a study of multiple and contrasting influences, and of her considerable success in controlling their interplay and bringing them into some kind of apparent resolution. Born in India, brought up in Africa, having spent early student life in England, and filling first teaching assignments back in India before finally settling in the United States, Meena Alexander brings to her writing an almost unique range of experiences. Her poetry and fiction are born out of this multiplicity, and are the product of the tension resulting from the variety of environments in which she has lived and about which she writes.

In her writing, powerful images and memories which she brings from India interweave themselves with evocative pictures of the Hudson River, the roaring subways and the raucous bus traffic of New York City. She moves back and forth in her writing between these disparate places using, seemingly at random, material offered by this or that fragment of her experience. The tension arising out of this variety, and the pressure of the present combine to mould her expression. The landscapes of her writing are often the product of both memory and imagination, the imagination feeding off her memories whereby poems written in New York are often of little south Indian hamlets amid green paddy fields. She cites, for example, a poem of hers entitled "Passion", inspired in part by standing in a window and looking out on a Manhattan street, but seeing instead a very different landscape-- a country road, a small house in Kerala. In other words, she finds it very difficult to draw a firm distinction between memory and imagination. Imagination can even invent memories, and thus the lines are blurred even further.

How does she call up memories and imagination when she is in the midst of surroundings that seem inhospitable for writing? She believes that one need not have a beautiful setting for writing a poem, and that it is the writer's task today to use immediate surroundings, whatever they are, as they are a part of everyday life. She refers to the "mysteriousness" of being able to write two lines of a poem while sitting in a jolting bus, or in the transit lounge of an airport. If such an environment in urban life might seem inappropriate for poetry writing, at the same time its very harshness provides an energy which may push a poem into being.

But the "mysteriousness" of being able to create poetry in such surroundings is not something automatic. It is, Meena Alexander suggests, the result of a kind of discipline, an activity of consciousness, a kind of tension that one brings to the world in order to write a poem. The poem, of course, is not always guaranteed just because this discipline or attentiveness is present. But without it, poetry would be cut off from its deeper roots, and one would be left with only the surfaces of the world. So a deliberate act of the mind, whereby an education or instruction or informing is imposed on the world around us, is somehow involved in the creative process.

Something like this kind of discipline Meena Alexander has put into her novel, *Nampally Road*, which is set in Hyderabad but written partly in Chile, partly in Hyderabad itself, and reworked in New York. Just as she keeps moving, the life of her novels as well as of her poems involves a back-and-forth also. She is pleased when readers tell her that this particular novel is like a map of Hyderabad, by which "you can go from this cafe, into the street, down these steps, look at these public gardens"-- even though most of the novel she reworked while she was living on the other side of the world. Yet, she insists, *Nampally Road* depends very little upon memory. It is rooted deliberately to the present. It tells the story of disturbances, of violation, and of the possibility of healing. It is her attempt to bring present sense out of a collage of experiences from her life, while this particular location is used to give the symbolism.

Is fiction, then, the most useful genre to bring about this healing when there is disturbance, violation? Meena Alexander suggests that the kind of "muscular action" involved in the presentation of such disturbances is perhaps better suited to a novel than to a poem. In poems, one "cuts the moods very differently, and highlights the processes of the mind of the writer, whereas in a novel there is a scene outside, a kind of theatre that enters into the writing".

Meena Alexander cites the fact that she came late to fiction, after some years of writing poetry, a fact which she claims is unusual for a writer. But, although she knows she cannot stop writing poetry, she feels a great sense of energy and excitement from her fiction writing-- a feeling demonstrated by the fact that she started and substantially finished her second novel within a year or two after *Nampally Road* was first published. Unlike *Nampally Road*, however, her second novel is set both in New York and in India. It moves back and forth, just as some of her writings in other genres.

Meena Alexander of course was born into a family with deep roots in the state of Kerala, and in the Malayalam that is spoken and written there. A statement in her memoirs, *Fault Lines*, seems to suggest that the English language is another kind of environment or surrounding for her, a kind of "pale skin" covering up her flesh. In one sense, she feels, the English language might be regarded as a language of empowerment, compensating somewhat for the fact that she, as a woman attempting to write, was less privileged than a man. For a woman, writing in English was sometimes a convenience in the struggle surreptitiously to gain power and authority to write. But at the same time, English was a language separated from her mother tongue, Malayalam. And while the use of English did give her a certain sense of authority and accomplishment, there have been times when she has felt a definite tension between her writing and her linguistic roots.

In a sense, therefore, she faced in her early writing a task that was doubly difficult-- difficult for her as a woman surrounded predominantly by male writers, difficult also as one writing in a language that was not her mother tongue. But, she claims, her first attempts to cross this double barrier generated a creative tension, and posed challenges that she was compelled to respond to artistically. For her, therefore, the use of a language that was not her mother tongue has never remained an inhibition.

Moreover, she points out, the English which she learned in school and in which she began to write was basically a colonial language. Now, she asserts, the "cadences, rhythms, words, sounds and noises" of Malayalam and other Indian languages have transformed colonial English and made it a different, enriched form of expression. "English can only be energised," she feels, "by the interplay with Indian languages". This fact gives an excellent advantage to local writers: "In India, we do not live in one language, but in many.... children grow up with two or three languages, and there is no reason why English cannot bend and change and be supple enough to accomodate them". This belief helps to explain Meena Alexander's observation that there are many, many Indian writers flourishing in English medium today, and her expectation that we will continue to get writing in English of great vitality, not only from Indians, but from other parts of the world where it is not the mother tongue.

With her keen appreciation of literature from all parts of the world, Meena Alexander believes that University English courses should be overhauled to include literatures from the Third World, and translations from regional languages, alongside the traditionally canonised literature of Britain and the United States. Recalling how her study of Wordsworth, the "Lake District", and such flowers as "Daffodils" created a gap that she had to leap across when she first studied this poet, she supports the claim that students should be able to read literatures that are produced close to home. These are the literatures with which students have a real connection, and "literature must be a part of

our life, not something cleft from it". But, she feels, different literatures can be studied simultaneously, side by side. There is no need to consider them in any kind of hierarchy: they should each be regarded equally as part of the "great feast". There is no reason why students cannot take up a course in Indian literature in English or in Malayalam or in Tamil, and read Shakespearean or Jacobean tragedy at the same time. To do so might mean that they would read Shakespeare a little differently, and perhaps even better.

Marked by evocative images and symbols of the multiplicity of her experiences, Meena Alexander's poetry and fiction are themselves part of the "great feast" of twentieth century literature in English. Her work underscores the increasingly obvious fact that the so-called Third World migrant writer is one of the richest gifts with which our age of multiculturalism has blessed us.

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