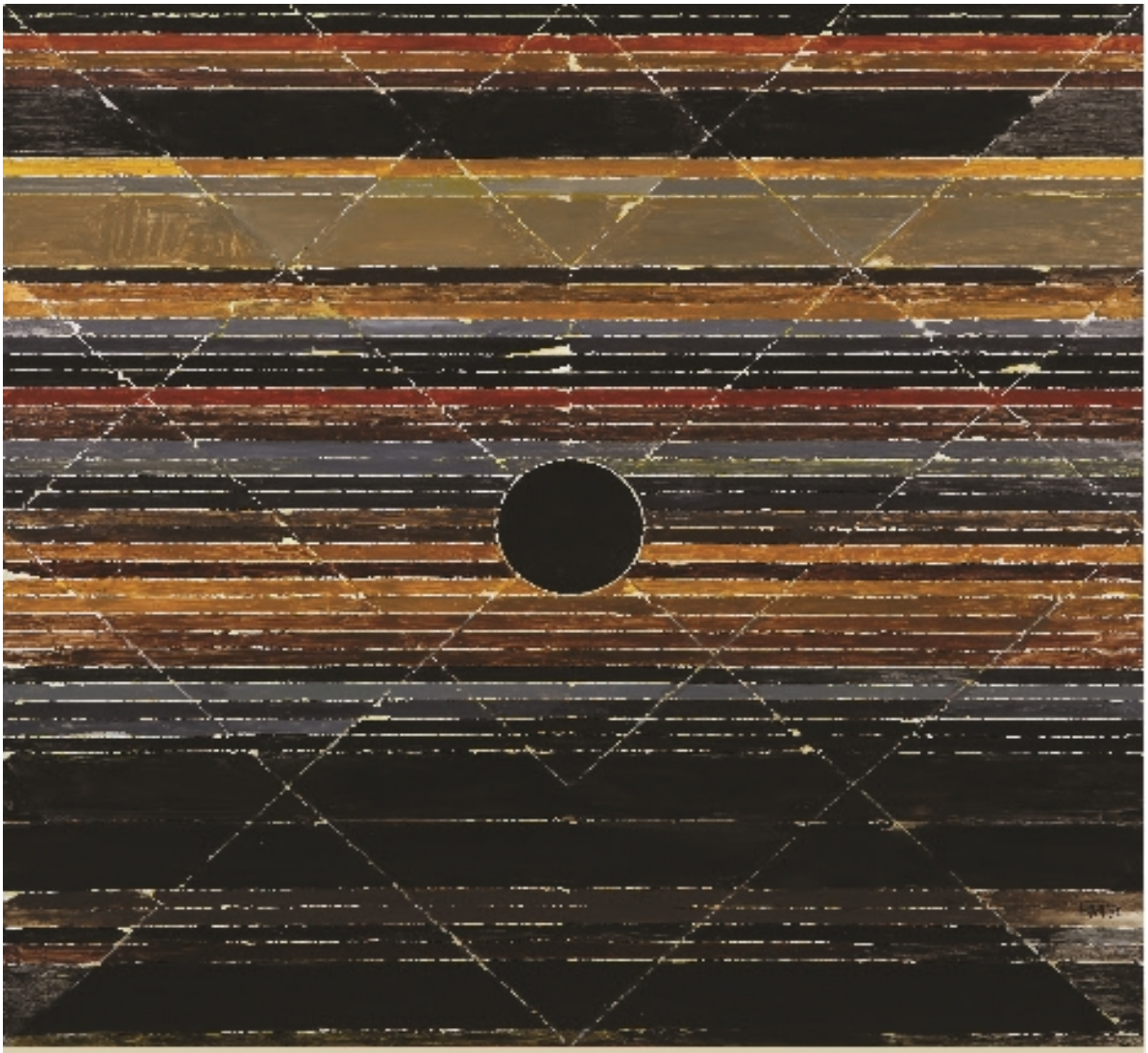
Issue 7



culture matters

Guftugu

Cover image © Syed Haider Raza, ‘Beej’, 1990

About Us

Culture matters. And it has to matter in India, with its diverse languages, dialects, regions and communities; its rich range of voices from the mainstream and the peripheries.

This was the starting point for *Guftugu* (www.guftugu.in), a quarterly e-journal of poetry, prose, conversations, images and videos which the Indian Writers' Forum runs as one of its programmes. The aim of the journal is to publish, with universal access online, the best works by Indian cultural practitioners in a place where they need not fear intimidation or irrational censorship, or be excluded by the profit demands of the marketplace. Such an inclusive platform sparks lively dialogue on literary and artistic issues that demand discussion and debate.

The guiding spirit of the journal is that culture must have many narratives from many different voices – from the established to the marginal, from the conventional to the deeply experimental.

To sum up our vision:

Whatever our language, genre or medium, we will freely use our imagination to produce what we see as meaningful for our times. We insist on our freedom to speak and debate without hindrance, both to each other and to our readers and audience. Together, but in different voices, we will interpret and reinterpret the past, our common legacy of contesting narratives; and debate on the present through our creative work.

Past issues of *Guftugu* can be downloaded as PDFs.

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Our Team

Consulting Editors

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Githa Hariharan

Editorial Collective

Aman Kumar

Ilina Acharya

Kitdor W. Kharbuli

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Sneha Chowdhury

Souradeep Roy

Sruti M.D.

Tilak Tewari

Site

Shweta Jain

Design, Art and Layout

Shoili Kanungo

Contributing Editors

Gulammohammed Sheikh

N.S. Madhavan

Orijit Sen

Shohini Ghosh

Shubha Mudgal

Contributions: *Guftugu* welcomes contributions from writers, academics, artists, cartoonists, film makers, performing artists and scientists. Please email us at guftuguejournal@gmail.com or indianwritersforum@gmail.com with your ideas and / or work, and we will get back to you.

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Against Standardising Art

Guftugu provides space for visual art as much as it does to literature and the discussion and debate of ideas. Why? To put it simply, every work of art, whatever its theme, is unique. This uniqueness – which may not necessarily proclaim itself as oppositional or progressive — opposes 'standardisation' and 'totalisation'. Not even the highest bidder can appropriate it other than as an object that may fetch a price.

The mission of modern art was supposed to be to bear witness to the fact of the unpresentable. The singularity of appearing then must be a negative presentation: Barnett Newman's monochrome canvas cleaved by a lightning flash. (Or, in poetry, the naked speech of Paul Celan or Primo Levi.) Installations that play on the indiscernibility between works of art and objects of commerce can be, as Jacques Rancière says, 'a nihilist accomplishment of aesthetic utopia'. What happens in the new art – museum installations, spatialised music, contemporary dance or 'movement art' – is a de-specification of instruments, materials and apparatuses specific to different arts. Here we find that aesthetics is not the name of a discipline, but the name of a specific regime for the identification of art. Art moves from subjects to gestures and is political not only because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world, nor only because of the manner in which it might represent society's structures or social groups, their identities and conflicts. It is political because of the type of space and time it institutes and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space.

Aesthetics does not cover up ugly truths, it is a conscious attention, concern and value applied to surfaces shapes, arrangements, techniques, movements, dynamics, suspensions, densities, repetitions and their expressive powers as opposed to a limited focus only on content, utility, expediency and practicality. Defence of aesthetics is the defence of imagination, pleasure, sensual and intellectual freedom, curiosity, play, experimentation, essay, openness. Art is not necessarily about harmony and wholeness, but can be an awareness of discord, dissonance, or 'dissensus' (as opposed to 'consensus'). It opposes the capitalist world view by resisting utilitarian co-option: the shape of a poem, cadences, surprises, sounds and spaces cannot be commodified nor taken as booty. Art is anathema to oppressors as it always generates new ideas, forms, desires, possibilities, energies and love of existing in the world.

Art opposes all forms of regimentation and invests the quotidian with layers of meaning. The autonomy of art that the avant-garde defends is a refusal to compromise with the practices of power and the aestheticisation of life in the capitalist world. Avant-garde art is the inscription of the unresolved contradictions between the aesthetic promise and the realities of oppression in the world. It breaks down the obvious orders and unsettles traditional patterns in an attempt to redefine the sensible. It resists simple interpretations. It is informed by the products and practices of every day, but also differs from them in significant ways. It is difficult to question its meanings as it questions the very process of assigning meanings. The aesthetic regime disrupts the boundaries between and redistributes the sense created by other practices. Any profane object could get into the realm of artistic experience and any artistic production could become part of the framing of a new collective life. Art interrogates the hierarchical organisation of the

community and creates experiences that disrupt the results of domination in everyday life. Art contributes to resistance by reconfiguring the realm of appearances and reframing the way problems have been posed. It contests the way capacities, voices and roles have been apportioned in the existing order. Artistic practices redefine what can be seen and said (as defined by the hegemonic forces that constitute and embody the State) and the implicit estimations placed on the members of communities. Art operates upon the aesthetic dimensions of the political as politics itself is a struggle over what can be seen and heard. It denies the rigid identities stamped upon us by the police order and provokes counter-histories that would offer new forms of experience and exchange between art and life. As Nancy Adajania points out, net art, video art, installations, intermedia art and conceptual art are all trying to fight the commodification of art sought by global capital, as also the custom-made and predictable art of the establishment, and create solidarities and environments conducive to redefining the role of art in history by retrieving the expressive and performative aspects of culture so far excluded from art. And this precisely is the context that compels us to present contemporary art as part of our undeclared anti-totalising project.

K. Satchidanandan

April 2017

Selected Works

Sayed Haider Raza (1922-2016)

Untitled, gouache on paper, 22 x 29 cm, 1948

Haut de Cagnes, gouache on paper, 69 x 72 cm, 1951

Village Church and Bindu, drawing on paper, 76 x 56 cm, 2010

Chapelle, unknown medium, 55 x 46 cm, 1958

Vieilles maisons – Rue de Bercy [Old Houses – Bercy Street], gouache on paper, 65 x 50 cm, 1960

Gorbio, unknown medium, 120 x 200 cm, 1962

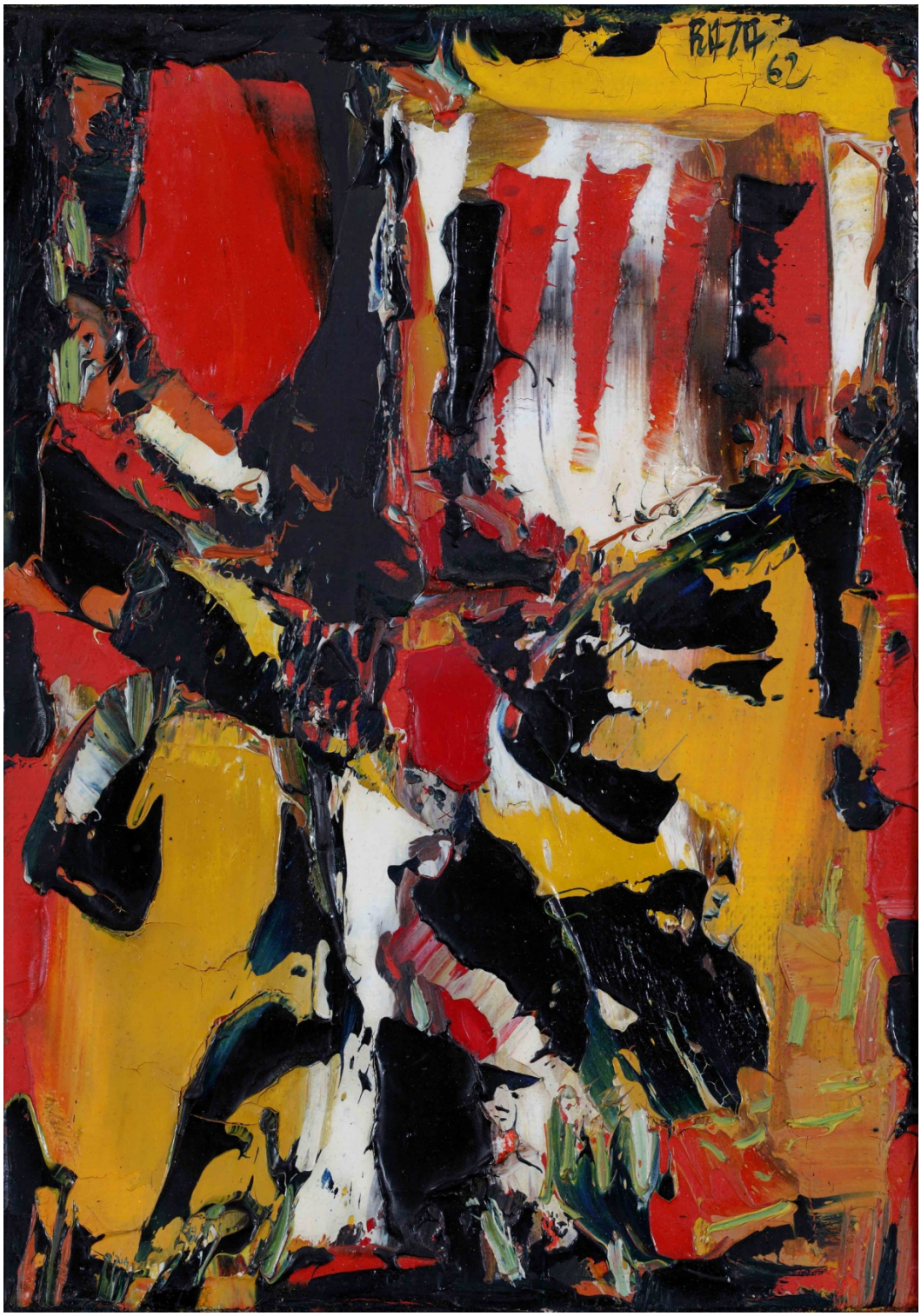
Forêt noir [Black forest], oil on canvas, 30 x 60 cm, 1961

detail

Soleil sur la neige [Sun on the snow], oil on wood, 29 x 15 cm, 1961

Eglise [Church], oil on canvas, 130 x 81 cm, 1962

White landscape, oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm, 1962



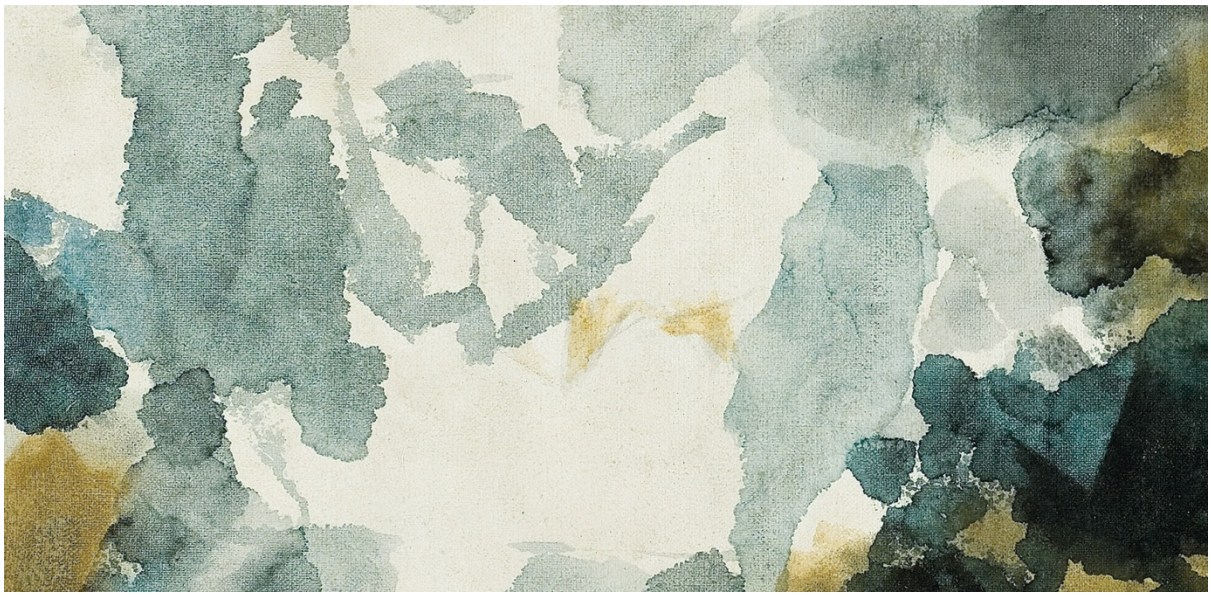
Rêve en plein air [Open-air dream], oil on canvas, 22 x 16 cm, 1962

Basali landscape, oil on plywood, 42 x 38 cm, 1965

detail

Cascade, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 52 cm, 1965

January 24, acrylic on canvas, 130 x 137 cm, 1966



detail

Narmada I (Le Fleuve) [The River], oil on canvas, 116 x 73 cm, 1966

Narmada II (Le Fleuve), oil on canvas, 88 x 117 cm, 1966

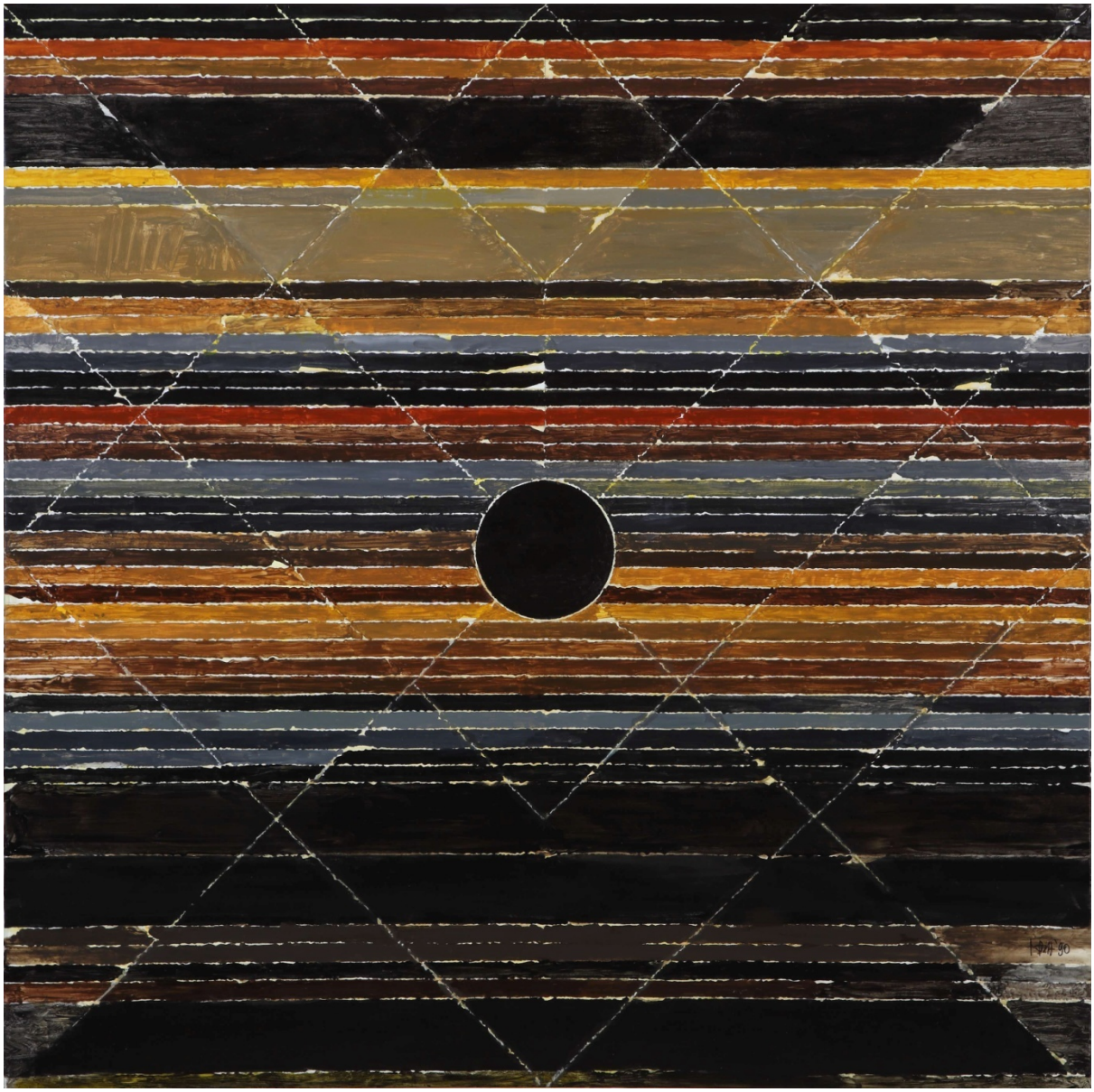
detail

Rivage [Shore], oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm, 1966

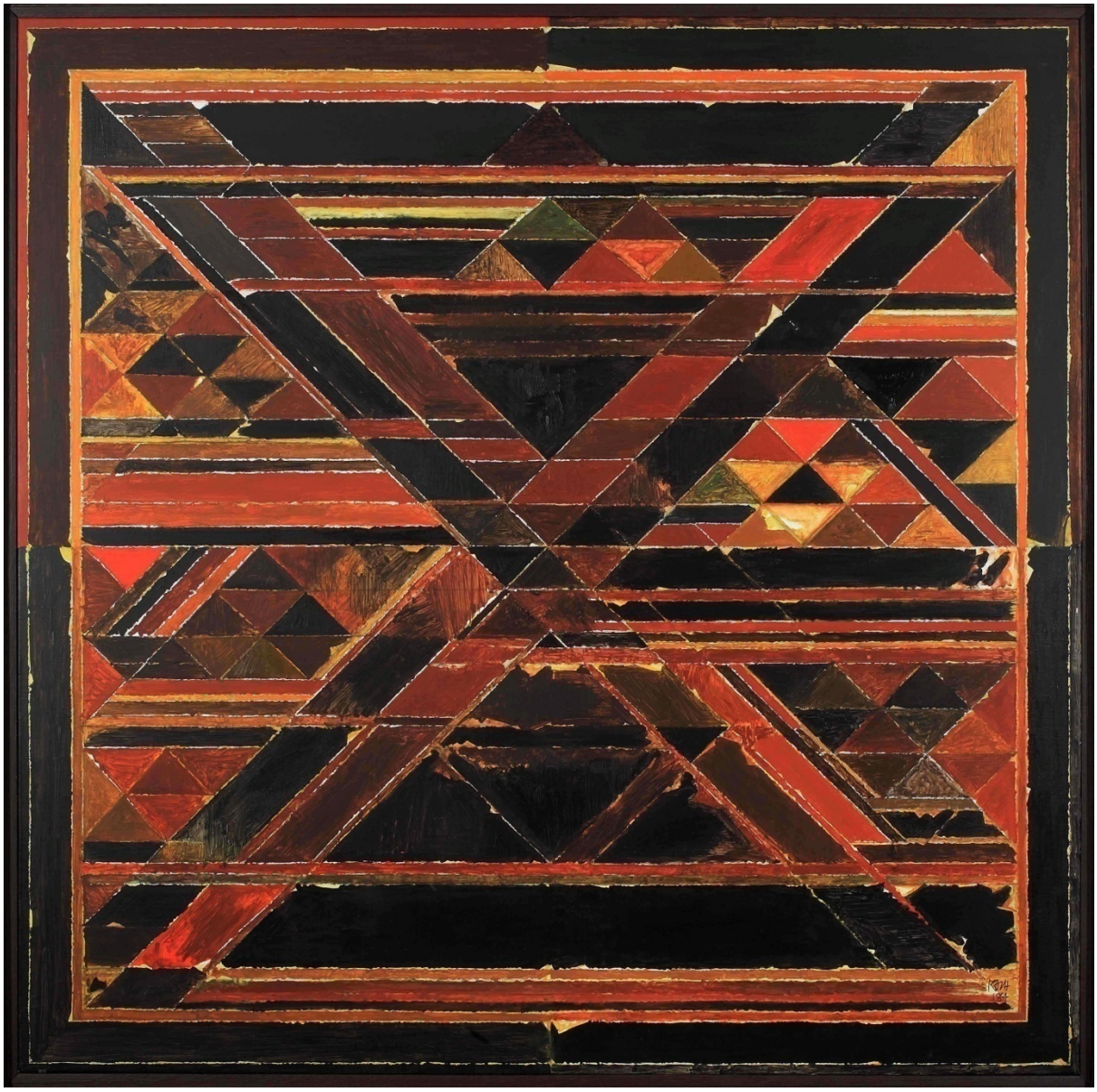
La pluie [The rain], oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, 1969

detail

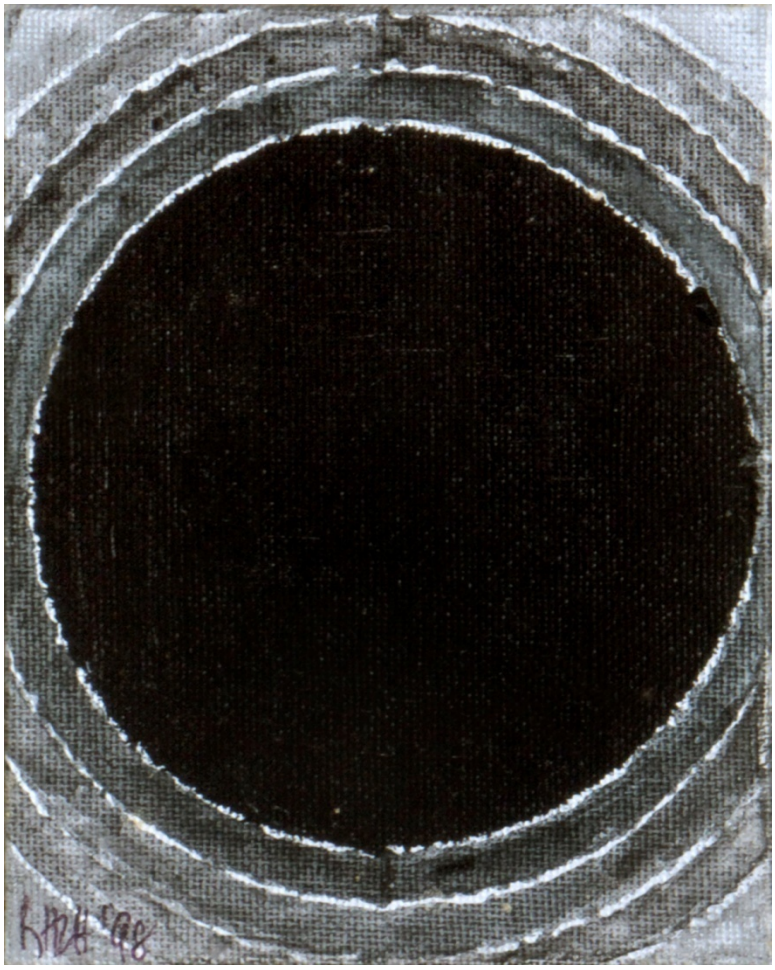
Les Rochers [The Rocks], oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm, 1969



Beej, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm, 1990



En Counter, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, 1984



Bindu, acrylic on canvas, 22 x 14 cm, 1998

Shanti Bindu (The Inaudible Sound), acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm, 1996

Reflections, oil on canvas, 75 x 90 cm, 1962

Photograph courtesy Sanjiv Choube

Images of artworks © the Raza Foundation; photograph © Sanjiv Choube.
Sayed Haider Raza (1922–2016) was one of modern India's greatest painters and abstractionists. He was born in Babaria, Madhya Pradesh and spent most of his life in Paris, before returning to Delhi in 2010.

‘Did colours ever know that prayer lived in them?’

Noted poet and critic Ashok Vajpeyi and artist Saba Hasan discuss the late Syed Haider Raza’s life and work.

See here for selected works by Raza.

Two Poems

Sukrita Paul Kumar, Ashwani Kumar

Shoili Kanungo, ‘Concrete Man’

Aleppo, Syria

Inside Al-Madina Souq
The market that once glittered
With silver coins and golden gifts,
Chocolates and popcorn
Lingerie and skirts
lay toppled from
somersaulting shopping trolleys
caught between
cannons and rocket warfare

Mounds of dried tears
stuck in hollowed eyes
gape into the stony void
of the tomb
Rosy cheeks by the hundred,

Split by bombs and explosives,
Wrapped in dust and scum
Plead for the kiss of the lover,
the lap of the mother

In the web of cracks
On the walls of the
Citadel of Aleppo, the piercing
Screams of children vibrate
Into the alleys, like lightning
up and down
And sideways, with no relief
In sight

Simply Urbicide
said someone…

And the Great Mosque
Is chock-a-block with the paralysed prayers
Of rebels
and soldiers

The rest are crowds of
left-over
women, men and children
fleeing with their prayers
rolled up in their sleeves
babies and bags on their backs

they float
    and don't come ashore
they walk, they run
    and don't arrive
they alight a plane
    and don't land
they are embalmed
    and remain entombed

they are refugees
    forever afloat
    outside their homes
    far away from Aleppo
    where their passports and
identity cards burn in bonfires

— Sukrita Paul Kumar

Something is Rotten in the State of Denmark

Act I, Scene IV

(Enter the ghost)

"Who is there?
Horatio, speak to me,"
thunders the cloud-dark-son of King Yayati.
Slithering in moonbeams,
the dark, hoary night suddenly splits into a hiss:
"I am murdered,
most foul and unnatural murder,
avenge me, Son."

(Exit the ghost)

Act II, Scene III

Skulls in hand,
pimps, prostitutes, gravediggers and thieves
march with irregular armies of cows, goats and buffaloes,
mourning the death of their eunuch King.
Lips painted with hebenon,
Queen-mother
sleeps with the war-bleached body of the Aswamedha horse
to celebrate the victory of lecherous Pythagoras
across strange territories.

……

Listen Horatio! Now you know
why I am a pagan lacking the courage to take revenge and chant AZADI.
I must reveal the secret.
Wearing the body of my father,
Uncle Indra — adulterate beast with a thousand wicked eyes,
sneaked into the horse's body
and mated with his conquered booty,
till all the clocks in Denmark fell silent, quartz again.

……

Her secret desires fulfilled,
she felt Infuriated,

and killed the horse with the ritual knife at first stroke of daybreak,
threw the slaughtered parts in the holy fire,
sniffed the Vedic scent of smoking fat,
spit out old banished Gods in disgust,
and freed herself from the sin.
O, horrible! O, horrible! O, horrible!

Act V, Scene unknown

(Enter the ghost)

Who is there?
Horatio, answer me.
I see the shadow of a dead horse enter me;
I become like my father — cursed in blood.
My revenge on the smiling damned villain has robbed me of my soul —
'blood will have blood', only.
I must die now.
Horatio, I am neither a good nor bad Hamlet.
Prostrate from ancient fatigue,
the four-legged shadow of the ghost neighs out:
The Truth! The Truth!

(Exit the ghost. Curtains)

— Ashwani Kumar

Shoili Kanungo, ‘Circus’

A shorter version of ‘Something is Rotten in the State of Denmark’ was published in the brochure of the Mumbai NCP Literature Live Fest 2016. Author’s note: In this fantasy poem, Hamlet *is adapted to the mythical tale of King Yayati, the puranic king who exchanged his old age with Puru his son and enjoyed life’s pleasures with his consort queen. Indra is Hamlet’s uncle Claudius and the aswamedha yajna, a symbolic ritual horse sacrifice performed by the royal queens of ancient Indian kings to mark the limits of their universal empire.*

The poem signifies a protest against the rising furies of Intolerance, Xenophobia, Racism and Sexism in India.

Two Poems

Susmit Panda

Black Christ

Based on a cashier's escapade: of questioning a girl for choosing to buy a black doll since it 'didn't look like her'.

This time the magi hardly delayed;
they swarmed in with
their glamour and their gifts!

This time an angel,
wearing the bona fide badge of Heaven,
inaugurated my advent!

This time a star…!

This time a white pigeon…!

For black should not be
the colour of a god: I was
a god then; I am
a god now – this time,
utterly spared!

I sit beside
a heap of hay, stroking a lamb;
I pore over the white
interface of my hands, my arms,
white, bright, Hepburn,
sui generis, while a snapshot or two
flashes across my eyes…

Apart from my burnt skin
that reeked of melanin, the
burnt atmosphere of the cell spilling
with spiders, patches of piss,
vaginal slush…

Nobody
brought me nothing; the only things
that shone against the backdrop
of black were a tyrant's sword
and a bat's peepers!

What followed,
a gruesome itinerary: each
brief flash of lightning
leaked
the awful atlas of my integument;
each pellet of rain fell on me
like a gob of spit; overhead
a mob of hoods, wiggling, giggling…
Their eyes meant malice;
their jaws,
coruscating with supernovas of white,
dribbled strands of spit,
phlegm,
cytotoxins…

For black should not be
the colour of a god: I was
a god then; I am
a god now – this time,
utterly spared!

Sayed Haider Raza, ‘La colline’ [The hill], acrylic on canvas, 35x24cm, 1971

Miniature

Based on a recent report of a farmer from Tamil Nadu demanding immediate drought-relief funds from the federal government. He protested by holding a white mouse in his mouth.

1.

Faces smoke up
from the face of fissures;
hard the earth,
hard the air,
hard the pellets of breath…
In a corner
a small white mouse wearing
velvet grass…

2.

Wasn't I born for a genius?
Wasn't I born for a star
to be hung aloft like a sleepless Eremite?
Wasn't I born to
cerebrate on the peak of a petri dish?
Wasn't I born to squeak along
a troop of test-tubes?
Wasn't I born to swim in strains
for findings of a fillenium?
Wasn't I born to
mull over
the clatter of genes, the matter of genomes,
the patter of chromosomes?
Wasn't I born to
gnaw on the saccharine edge of
litmus?
Wasn't I born for a mensch?
To nibble nosh from his hands?
To punch holes across his apron
sullied with chemicals?

NO!

3.

Why do you grouse?
Hunger ain't a big thing!

Hunger is a small white mouse
cupped in quietus
on the lips of a simpleton pitched
like a lanky Yggdrasil
outside a shack full of
suckers…

4.

Why should the Soul
perish due to so paltry a thing
as this?

But since it somehow has

the Body,
raised on the funds
of another grit,
has plucked the Soul,
a small white mouse,
like a dollop of dead snow,
that is it!

Fictionalising the Absent Archive: Performing *Lady Anandi*

Anuja Ghosalkar

Lady Anandi is a performance about my great grandfather, Madhavrao Tipnis, who was a female impersonator in Marathi theatre in the late nineteenth century. The impetus to create this performance came while I was reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* for a dramatised version of the novel. Woolf writes, 'To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. And undoubtedly, I thought, looking at the shelf where there are no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned.'[1] As I was grappling with this text, I questioned my place in the theatre, the lines I was told to speak, the characters I was made to play, and the reactions I received when I decided to be a full-time theatre actor at the age of 34. A hard, honest look at these questions revealed that I did not have any agency as an artist. I wanted to create a production that allowed me the freedom to explore; to speak lines that resonated with me; to experiment with forms that questioned the boundaries between performance and research, actor and audience, a finished text and a work in progress.

Personal archives and oral histories have always intrigued me. Prior to my work on *Lady Anandi*, I completed an oral history project on my grandfather, Ram Tipnis. He was the oldest living make-up artist in India. This time I chose to tell the story of his father, Madhavrao Tipnis. The premise was simple. There would be two actors separated by a hundred years. One would play

a lady convincingly, and I would play a character struggling to be a woman on stage. I began searching for archival material on him. I looked online; there was nothing. In theatre-history books he was a mere footnote. My excavation was drawing dust. It was becoming apparent to me that he was absent from theatre history. I looked at family albums. One aunt had three photos, the others a few more. In the few stories I had heard of him while growing up, he seemed like a hero who played both male and female characters with ease, received critical acclaim, drank five litres of milk a day, and loved wrestling. Could these stories feed my nascent imagination? Or was he an apparition? If not, why was he missing from the archives? Since he had died several years before I was born, I had no memory of him. My extended family remembered him as a 'good man'. How could I negotiate this amnesia? How can we remember the dead when there is little or no record of the deceased person?

Eventually I found twenty-odd photos of him. With that, I began to identify the plays he had performed in – *Baaykanche Band*, *Kichakvadh*,

Bhaubandaki, *Shah Shivaji*, *Sangeet Chandragrahan*, *Manjirao*. I found a few scripts in dusty libraries, and one, quite surprisingly, on the website of the Indian Institute of Science. I started sketching his character through the parts he had portrayed. I also read autobiographies of other female impersonators. I began to imagine his character by imagining Madhavrao the person. In the absence of memory that could recreate the life of my great-grandfather, I turned to fiction. Using anecdotes, photos, documents, interviews and reviews, I constructed a performance titled *Lady Anandi*.

The title is a reference to Anandibai Peshwa, a historical character played by Madhavrao in *Bhaubandaki* (1909) written by Khrushnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar. Anandibai was infamous for instigating her husband Raghunathrao to murder his younger brother, Narayanrao, in order to usurp the throne. Anandibai intrigued me. She was a lettered woman with a dark thirst for power. She changed an alphabet in a letter, */dh cha ma/* from catch to kill, which led to the death of Narayanrao.

I began writing scenes based on the little information available to me. I did not write the scenes chronologically, but as and when I found enough material on Madhavrao Tipnis. The performance had three characters:

Character 1: A male actor in his 60s. He plays Madhavrao and Lady Anandi.

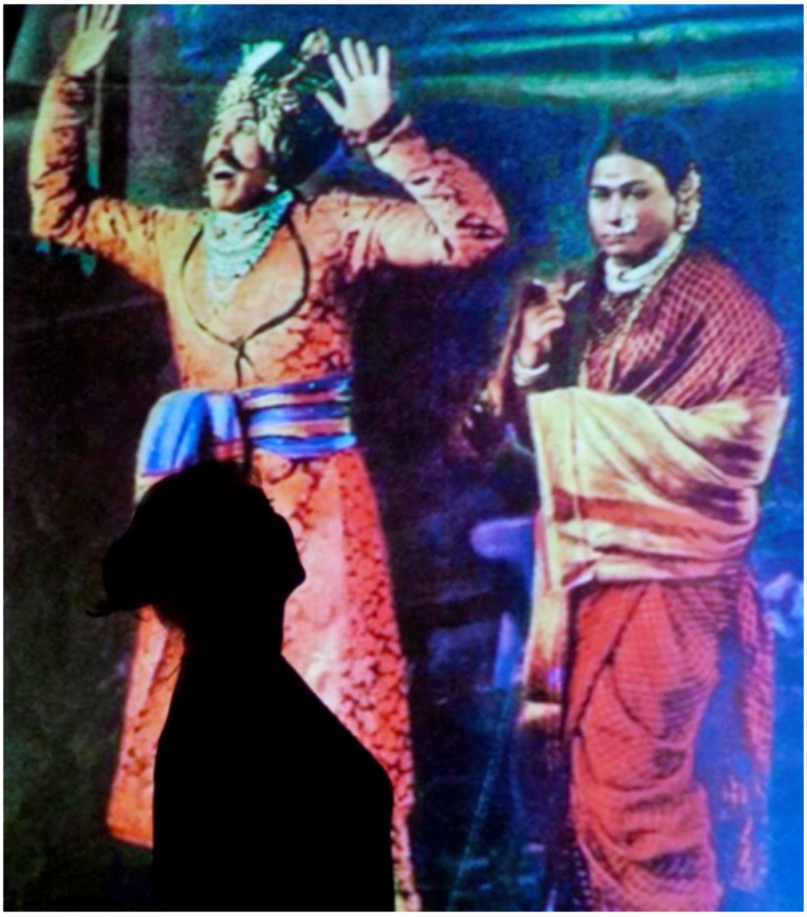
Character 2: A female actor in her late 30s. She plays Lady F – the narrator.

Character 3: Any capable female actor. She plays Indumati – the fan, Yeshwant – the older brother, and Malati – wife of Madhavrao.

I worked with three actors to play the characters described above. It was unfolding like a play with a conventional structure. The actors were learning their lines; I was the writer and director, telling my actors where to stand, how to walk, replicating the process that I had long been part of. But it was this process which itself made me question my agency as an artist. More importantly, while watching the play unfold, I felt there was a missing element — a voice and a body that drew the audience's attention to the fact that *Lady Anandi* was an attempt to fill an absence in the archive.

An archival absence is not an accident. The act of reclaiming this absence is also deliberate. *Lady Anandi* is an act of remembering. Rivka Syd Eisner says, 'Performing memory is more about bearing witness. Bearing witness, however, does not just entail carrying memory. Bearing the past is allowing it to enter into bodily consciousness and continuing social experience, so that living with memory means giving residence to pieces of the past that in turn, even in their painfulness, sustain and charge one's own being.'[2] I needed an element where 'bodily consciousness' and 'giving residence' to the past could come to bear on the performance. It was clear I had to be part of the performance not just as the writer or director but also as an actor. I had to embody Lady Anandi. The past would then be mediated through me. I had to make this apparent to the audience. Thus, *Lady Anandi* became a solo show, where one actor plays all the characters. One review described this choice in this way: 'This idea of how gender is performed becomes stronger when there is only one person acting, because now that one person is everybody – a woman, a man, a man playing a woman, a young girl, a married woman, an admirer, and a young girl in love with a man who acts as a woman.'[3]

The author as Kichak in front of an archival image of Madhavrao Tipnis, in *Kichakvadh*



The author in front of an archival image of Madhavrao Tipnis as Anandibai in the play *Bhaubandaki*

Constructing *Lady Anandi* as a solo was the first decision in experimenting with the form of the performance. It was followed by a more radical choice – to read the fictional parts of the performance aloud; memorise the research; and recount it like a story. The act of reading the play could be compared to finding archival documents, only these were fictitious. And recounting research by rote would add to its 'authenticity'. This enabled me to push the form of my performance. The act of reading the scenes upset the status quo. A theatre critic implored me to 'memorise all those lines'. He had forgotten that I already knew those lines as the writer of that text. I realised that *Lady Anandi* further blurred the boundary between a 'reading' and a 'performance'. Can one really claim that reading is not a performative act? Convention dictates the artifice of remembering lines over using them as a device to make the process apparent. This choice of holding the pages of the text was vital to underlining the fact that fiction was filling in the gaps of history, that imagination was replacing memory.

While the performance was designed as a solo, the LCD projector played an integral character in it. I used it to project images on the screen and on my body. When there were no images, I performed in front of the haunting white light of the projector, casting a sharp and constant shadow on the screen, or curtain, or cyclorama behind me. I continually intersected the projector light. This was first a simple device to avoid using theatre lights, but, as the show developed, the stark white light, softened to a yellow one, with the texture of faded pages of history. Each research section was accompanied by an archival photo. And each fictional scene was played out in the yellow projector light – historical research needed photographic evidence but fiction only needed some light and shadow.

Archival photographs formed the core of my performance. In the absence of written documents the images were evidence, of a past of which I had no recollection since I was then unborn. The non-linear narrative of *Lady Anandi* unfolds through these images. Instead of merely re-enacting these photos, I tried to enter them, projecting them onto my body. It was designed in such a way that 'the performance was not meant to imitate aspects of the photos, but rather to act as the embodied condensations of complex social attitudes. This form of gesture distils social structures and power relations in a simple pose or condensed scene rather than in a naturalistic imitation of a past occurrence or the impression of history coming alive before-your-very-eyes. With a few stark gestures and movements, I hoped to invoke something of the personal and political complexities bound up in the photographs.'[4]

It was used to draw the audience's attention to my living body, which was in front of them in the present moment, and to develop a relationship of this present body with my great-grandfather's, which was frozen in time. It was also intended to juxtapose an archival image, with all its beauty and historicity, with my body which held its own narratives and was an archive of those experiences and struggles. The audience was presented with the photographic memory of a performance in 1909, and the memory of the current performance was also in the mind of the audience. How would they remember *Lady Anandi* after watching my

reenactment? Where does my body end and the photograph begin? Could my body unravel mysteries of my ancestors if you cut deep into my skin? To quote Eisner again, 'First: that memory may embed itself within bodies like pieces of glass pressed into the palms and hearts of the tellers and listeners, and secondly then: that these lovingly painful 'cuts' are both wounding and life-giving.'[5]

Another critical, life-giving element in *Lady Anandi* was its audience. I began presenting *Lady Anandi* as a work-in-progress, exposing its jagged edges and rawness. In the past, through the theatre-making process I had felt that a performance could be rehearsed several times, but it was only with an audience that its impact became obvious. Otherwise it was like going scuba-diving in a swimming pool – the ocean was missing. In the absence of a director, my audience became the outside eye. There was an in-depth discussion at the end of each show. They questioned every choice, reiterated some decisions, but were overwhelmingly supportive on the whole. One audience member responded saying, 'I loved that the play was showcased as a work in progress, and was thus fragmented enough to allow the audience to somehow fill those spaces themselves.'[6] It was the openness of the audience that allowed such an audacious

experiment to be carried forward, to 30 shows across India till date. Another reason for the audience's response was that it wasn't just a transaction between the viewer and the performer. The first few shows were non-ticketed but the engagement was intense. It reiterated a belief I have held dear. As performers, if we make our vulnerabilities transparent the audience will accept you, even lift you up, like a buoyant wave in the ocean.

What is a performer without her audience? The writer without her reader? The singer without her listener? As Roland Barthes says, 'The reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted.'[7] This man or woman 'without history' as it were, held the key to making new histories, constituting fresh narratives, filling absent spaces with stories, people, images. It was through and in dialogue with that reader, viewer, listener, that a personal story, even a history, could come alive.

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1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Chapter 3.

2. Rivka Syd Eisner, 'Remembering Toward Loss: Performing *And so there are pieces*'. Della Pollock, editor. *Remembering: Oral History Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 124.

3. Review of *Lady Anandi* on July 4 2016 in *The Ladies Finger.*

4. RSE, 116.

5. RSE, 106.

6. Minal Sukumar, an audience member after a show at St Joseph's College, Bangalore. She responded to one of the first shows of *Lady Anandi* in February 2016. The entire note is published on the social media page of Drama Queen, the performance company that produced *Lady Anandi*.

7. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author'. *Critical Essays.* Translated by Richard Howard. 1972.

You Expert Woman, You

K. Srilata

Amadeo Modigliani, 'Woman in Profile' / Metropolitan Museum

It wasn't as though the expert woman was unkind. And yet, what she said was delivered like an insult. It was the tone she used with Ma. Tyrex, who was familiar with all manner of insults, was a mistress of tone. She could smell them coming her way, the subtle ones and the not so subtle

ones: the Sister Priscilla insult (ten sharp raps on her knuckles with a cane), the neighbour aunty Shantainsult (an over-bright smile which had *I am broad-minded* plastered all over it), the dadainsult (*Do I really have a daughter?*), the Liz insult (*but this is soopereasy, Tyrex, I didn't even have to study it!).* Every day, she waited for these insults to descend on her thin, small body, on her baby soul, and every day, she looked as though she didn't give a damn. *So what? So what? So what?*

And yet this woman and her questions, her over-soft, deadly serious voice…They couldn't not give a damn – she and Ma. She was an 'expert', Ma had explained to her beforehand. She would run some simple tests on Tyrex and then…And then what? And then, well, all would be well. *But what's the matter with me, Ma?* was the question that stuck in Tyrex's throat. That question had been stuck down there ever since St Patrick's had booted them out with a TC, the full form of which was Transfer Certificate or *We don't want children like you.* 'We can't teach children like her, Mrs Mukherjee. It is best you find another place for her. We are sorry, Mrs Mukherjee. She doesn't seem to want to learn. There may be other schools willing to take her.'

A week before, at the school annual day event, Liz had been awarded the Merit prize. All sorts of kids had got all sorts of prizes or, at the very least, certificates, and Tyrex had clapped for each one of them. It was the thing to do after all. But no one had clapped for her when she had got her certificate.

Tell me about the day she was born, Mrs Mukherjee?

She was a preemie. Tiny enough to fit in my palm.

Ma smiles at me. We are in this together.

It was a day like any other. Except for the rains. Oh, how it rained! It was a struggle to get to the hospital…

And the labour pains? Were they very intense? Did they last long?

Yes. Yes, they did.

So I was always trouble.

And then?

They had to suction her out.

Was there, for instance, a lack of oxygen at any point in the process?

No. At least they didn't say so.

Mrs Mukherjee, did she cry when she was born?

O yes! O yes!

At once?

Yes, O yes!

Now, think carefully. Did she latch on at once?

I beg your pardon?

Did she latch on, you know, did she feed properly, at birth?

Yes. Yes, she did. Tyrex, I mean Rekha, was a real hungry baby. She…

Did she roll over, crawl, sit up, all at the right time?

Mmmm…

Did I, Ma?

Yes, I suppose she did. I can't remember now. She seemed okay. She was a lovely…

Try and remember, Mrs Mukherjee.

Well, I remember my mother saying she was late turning over. Other than that, she was perf…

Go ahead, say it, Ma. Other than that, she was perfect. A perfect baby. I was a perfect baby. A lovely baby. Hear that, you expert woman, you?

When did she start to walk?

One year and two months. Is that late? It is, isn't it?

When did she start to talk?

She was late talking.

It's alright, Ma. Don't give up the fight.

She was two when she spoke her first words. My mother was worried.

That is an indication, Mrs Mukherjee.

Of what? Of what?

Have you and your husband ever struggled with any learning disabilities? Any dyslexia in the family?

No. No, we haven't. Struggled I mean. We were alright, I suppose, my husband and I. He is a writer, in fact, and I…

Does she have friends?

Yes. Yes. There's a boy next door – Ranjit – She is…they are best friends. They grew up together. Even went to school…

How about pencil grip?

Tyrex…Rekha was amazing in every way. But she never could manage to hold the pencil the right way. I tried everything. Everything.

Fine motor control issues there, certainly.

She has great conceptual clarity. Always had. She is a bright kid.

She struggled in school, didn't she?

Yes…Yes. I am afraid she did.

I was awarded a transfer certificate. The other kids, they got other sorts of certificates. Ma's eyes that day were puffy and red.

The expert woman looks at me.

'Come here, child,' she says. I go to her, wishing I was a bird, wishing I could fly out the window.

The expert woman hands me a pencil. Let us see you holding this, she says. I do as I am told. It is a Flora pencil with pretty pink flowers on them. I hate Flora pencils. In fact, I hate all pencils.

'Not like that,'she says. 'Like this, see?'

I do as I am told.

'Write your name,'she says.

I write R…e…k…h…a. I can do that. I can write my name, expert woman, you. I am not dumb. My fingers have slipped back to the former position. The wrong position. The expert woman takes my hand in hers and again positions the fingers correctly.

‘Like this, child.’

She looks at Ma who is looking worried, and whips out a pad.

‘Make an appointment with the OT. – Geetha. She deals with fine motor control issues. It may help.’

What’s OT?

‘Will she be alright, ma’am?’ I have never heard my mother call anyone ‘ma’am’ before. No, actually, I have. Just that one time in the principal’s office at St Patrick’s. (*Please ma’am. Won’t you reconsider? Just give my daughter one more chance.)*

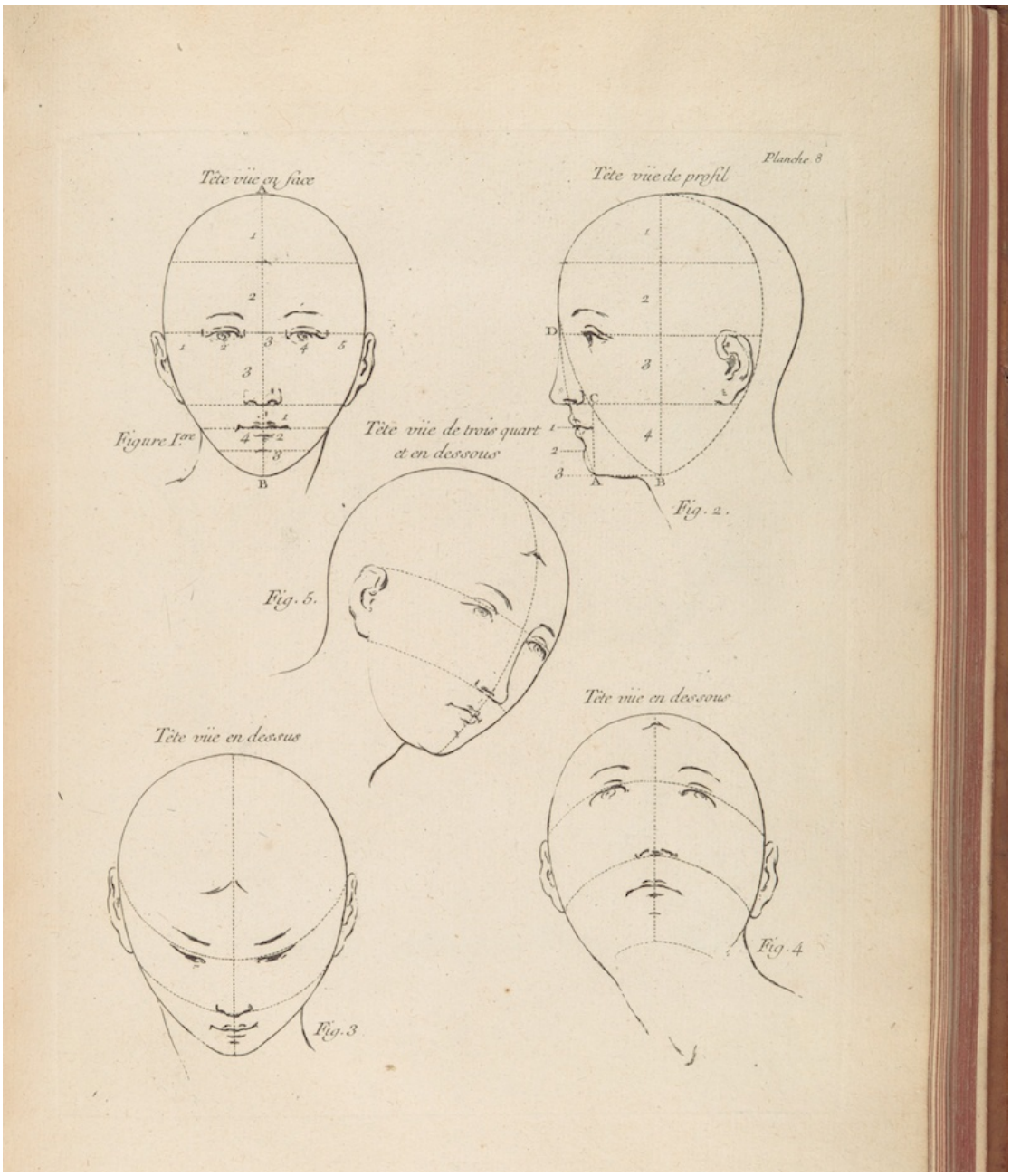
‘That depends, Mrs Mukherjee. That depends. On her. On you. Child, you must work very very hard. Alright? Do whatever the OT tells you to do.’

I nod. If I do what the OT tells me to do, will I turn into Liz? Will they give me the merit prize? I want to ask. But this question too sticks in my throat.

On the way home, Ma treats me and herself to an ice cream. I am not sure why though. There is no reason to celebrate. ‘OT’ did not sound like a happy or kind word.

Ma is a messy eater. She has blobs of ice cream all over her kurta.

‘Fine motor control issues,’ she murmurs, unhappy-silly-drunk on ice cream, ‘And who doesn’t have them.’ A chocolate blob rivulet runs down the corners of her mouth. And me, I am a bird who has flown out the window of the Expert Woman’s room.



Metropolitan Museum

Crossings: Five Works
Ranbir Kaleka

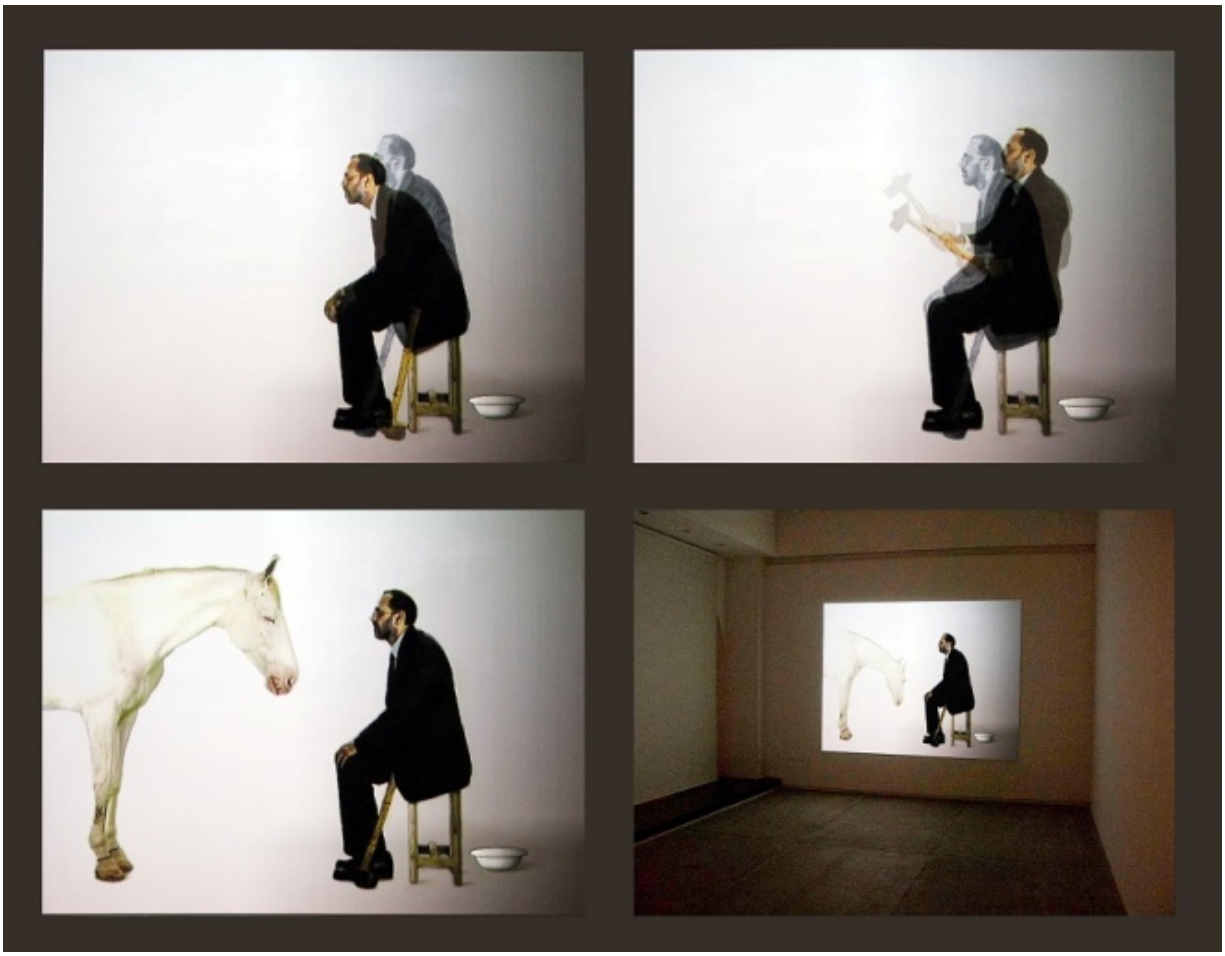
‘Crossings’, 2005, 190 x 250 cm, 4-channel video projection on painting (video still), 15’ loop with stereo sound

For more on this work see here.

Crossings is an epic, with four screens spread over four oil paintings upon which four video images play out. The oils themselves comprise isolated individuals, singly, together or in line. These might be refugees or simply bystanders, contemporary figures who come from ‘somewhere else’, surrounded by spaces they don’t know, able to survive only through projecting upon what is around them their memories of the past. Images swirl round them like birds…

In full display here is the key grammar of Kaleka’s work, an oil painting that becomes a moving image, blank spaces that become suffused with projectiles drawn from memory. It is intended, says Kaleka, to be a ‘painting living within time and time living within the painting’, a ‘play between stylisation and verisimilitude’.

— Ashish Rajadhyaksha



'Cul-de-Sac in Taxila' (edition 3 of 3), 2010, 70 x 94 cm, video on oil & acrylic painting (4 still panels), 3' 55" loop with sound

For the artist's description see here.

'Forest', 2009, 340 x 600 cm (variable), video projection on painting (video still), 16' loop with sound

For the artist's description see here.

‘House of Opaque Water’, 2013, 222 × 1097 cm

For more on this work see here.

‘Man with Cockerel’, 2004, two-channel video, 29” loop

A bald man with a placid, Buddha-like face, clutching and letting go then clutching and letting go a plumed fowl: this rhythmically repeated, soft-grey image offers a tantalising grasp of desire, an allegory on dispossession. Kaleka’s subject-matter is representational and yet, by the form and brevity of its videoed avatar, by a trick of durational fallacy, by sheer transience, it erases its signified meaning.

The imaged body – at the brink of dissolution and disappearance – reads like an index of mortality. Its quotidian identity is subordinated to a fragile sense of being where no assertion, no action is necessary except that which trusts in a minimal continuum of survival. The language of representation enters the liminal zone and the encounter, sanguine, serene, evanescent, resembles a haiku where the hypothesis offered about a lived life needs no backing of proof.

— Geeta Kapur

The text by Ashish Rajadhyaksha is from his curatorial essay for the exhibition 'तह-सतह : A Very Deep Surface, Mani Kaul and Ranbir Singh Kaleka: Between Film and Video'.

The text by Geeta Kapur is from 'Inside the Black Box: images Caught in a Beam', a talk on video- and light-based installations given at the Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of Arts and Aesthetics on November 10, 2005.

Poems by Kanji Patel
Translated by Rupalee Burke

Image courtesy Adivasi Academy

મારા ભાગનું દૂધ

ઝાંઝર ખનખન બાજે મારાં

ડુંગર આડા

નદીઓ આડી

આડી સડકો

આવશે ક્યારે અજવાળાં?

ઓ મા,

આ ભૂખ કેમની જીરવું?

ઉઘાડું ડલિ તપીને તાવડો થયું

કાળું તે કેવું?
સૂરજ બધું કાળું કરે છે
આડાં ડુંગર, નદી ને સડક
કાળાંને ઓર કાળા કરે છે

વળી બાજે મારાં ઝાંઝર
એને છેતરે છે કોણ?
વળીવળીને કાળો રંગ છેતરાય છે
બાપ મજૂરીમાં મર્યો
મા, તું જીવે તો છેને?
નથી જોઈતાં સોનાં રૂપાં ને ઢીંગલા
જોઈએ ખોબો ધાન
ને ચપટીક માન
મા, એ મળશે મને?

પી, આ બકરીનું દૂધ
લવારાના ભાગનું
દૂધ મારાથી પવિાય?
મા, હું નાની હતી
ત્યારે મારું દૂધ, મારા ભાગનું દૂધ
તે આપેલું મને
એ કોઈ બીજું પી ગયું હોત તો?

My Share of Milk

Softly my anklets tinkle,
Intersecting mountains,
And rivers,
And roads.
When will there be light?
O mother,
How do I beat my hunger?
My bare body scorched, a griddle blackened,
Blackened as always.
The sun turns everything black.

The mountains, rivers and roads in between
Make the black blacker still.

Again the sound of my anklets.
Who is that traitor of anklets
Who betrays the colour black again and again?
Father died of labour.
Mother: I hope you are still alive?
I do not care for gold, silver or paper money
All I want is a palmful of grain
With a pinch of dignity.
Mother, will these be mine?

Here, drink this goat's milk.
How can I drink
The kid's share of milk?
Mother, when I was small
You gave me my milk.
What if somebody had taken away
The milk meant for me?

દોરા

એક રોટલામાંથી

અડધી ફાડ આલી દીધી હતી

અડધી ફાડ બચેલી

એ ય જઉ જઉ કરી રહી

*

કાગળિયાંમાં
આપણા માટે સ્વર્ગ લખ્યું છે
આપણે સ્વર્ગમાં જઈએ તો જ
કાગળિયાંના લખનારને
ધરતી મળે ને?

*

બે હતી
એમાંથી એક રહી
એક આંખ ફૂટતા વાર લાગે?

*

આટલું માગીએ
રમતાં રમતાં ખરવું
વાતે વેદ કરવા
ગાતાં ગાતાં બલથિવું

*

લખજો
આંકડા માંડજો
ઓળખજો આટલું
ભીત કાળી છે
રોશે ધોળી ભીતોવાળા

*

મગરા પર
ડગરા ફરતે જનજનાવર ટોળે વળ્યાં
દુનયિા પૂછે,
તારો બાહ અહીં રહેતો હતો
એનો પુરાવો આપ
ઝાડપાન પર નામ તો હશે ને તારા બાહનું?
પણ ઝાડપાન તો ગયાં
હવે પથરે ચોટી રહેવું હોય તો રહે
થોડી વેળા
પછી એ ય જશે?

*

બોલી ને લપિવિાદે ચડ્યાં
મૂળયિાં જોયાં

પાંખો પલાણી
પૈડાં જોડ્યાં
હવા પર ધરતી પર
મન પર કાગળ પર
દુનિયા ખૂટી ગઈ

*

દેવ ગયો
રાજા ગયો
માણસ ગયો
લખનારો ગયો
કથા ગઈ
વાણી ગઈ
બધાં એક પછી એક જવા બેઠાં છે

*

તારા ગયા
ચંદરમા ગૂલ થયો
સૂરજ શોષાયો
આકાશ સુકાયું
એક મુઠ્ઠી હોજરી અડીખમ

*

પગ તળે ધરતી જ હતી
ચાલતાં ચાલતાં વચ્ચે નદી આવી
કેટલાંક પેલી મેર રહી ગયાં
કેટલાંક આ મેર
સામસામા કાંઠે રહીને રોવા લાગ્યાં

*

નંદિર તૂટી
જાગીને જોયું તો
જીભ ગઈ

*

પોકાર ઊઠે
ગગન ગાજે
ધરતીથી વેગળે
ઊચ્ચારે છે કોઈ નવો કરાર

*

કાળી વાટ પડી
જંગલ વચ્ચે
ગામ ને ખેતર
બે ફાડચિ
હળ અહી
બળદ તહી
ગળું અહી
બોલ તહી નહી

Threads

Gave away one half
Of the rotla;
The remaining half is equally
Impatient to depart.

*

Heaven is written for us
On paper.
Only if we go to heaven
Will the writers of papers
Inherit the Earth.

*

There were two.
One remained.
Does it take long for an eye to be lost?

*

This much we ask
To cease to be while at play

To know through intimate conversation
How to sing the way to our sacrifice.

*

Do write.
Do calculate.
Realize this much:
The wall is black,
Let those who own white walls weep.

*

On the mountain
Round the rocks, creatures flocked.
The world asks,
Did your father live here?
Wouldn't his name be written on trees and leaves?
But the trees and leaves are gone.
You can stay on the boulders if you like.
But after a while
Will they too be gone?

*

Spoken and written words done.
Traced origins,
Geared wings to fly,
Attached wheels
To air, to the earth,
To mind, to paper.
The world was exhausted.

*

All set to depart turn by turn:
Deity gone
King gone
Man gone
Writer gone
Story gone
Speech gone.

*

Stars disappeared,
Moon vanished,
Sun emaciated,
Sky parched.
That fistful of belly remains unaffected.

*

There was only the Earth under walking feet,
A river in between.
Some remained on that side
Some on this
Standing on this bank and the other
Facing each other
They began to cry.

*

Sleep was disturbed.
It woke up and saw
The tongue was lost.

*

Cries rise,
The sky resounds.
Far from the earth
Someone utters the new testament.

*

Black track laid
Across the forest,
Village and field
Two halves.
Plough here,
Bullocks there.
Throat here,
Words not there.

A Woman Translator of/ in a Male Tradition

Vanamala Viswanatha

Sayed Haider Raza, 'La Terre' [Earth/ The Ground], oil on panel, 50 x 175 cm, 1971

Feminist translation theory has raised several questions about 'gender in translation' – also the title of a seminal book on the theme by Sherry Simon. For instance, Suzanna Jill Levine, a leading translator of Latin American literature, asks: 'What does it mean to be a woman translator in and of a male tradition?' The very choice of text, if it is misogynistic, could pose an ethical dilemma for the feminist translator. Carol Maier argues that 'the translator's quest is not to silence but to give voice, to make available texts that raise difficult questions and open perspectives. They must become independent, 'resisting' interpreters who do not only let antagonistic works speak… but also speak with them and place them in a larger context by discussing them and the process of their translation.' Maier underscores the need for translators to assert their agency and document their process of translation. The agency of the translator is very much defined by the immediate context of the chosen text, the languages in question, the publishers, and the readership. Here is my account of how I confronted some important issues in the context of translating a medieval Kannada classic into English, 'The Life of Harishchandra', published in the Murty Classical Library of India (MCLI) Series, Harvard University Press, 2017.

Choice of Text

In July 2010, reading the MCLI guidelines for proposal writing, I found that the team preferred that the selected text be translated into contemporary prose rather than verse. This was reassuring for me as I had also largely worked only with prose until then. I thought that the text had to have a story-line strong enough to make up for the absence of poetry in the translation. While revered Kannada poets Pampa and Kumaravyasa, who have written their versions of the Mahabharata, occupy the top ranks in Kannada literary history of over 15 centuries, their texts focus on the conflict between the sons of two brothers, and the ensuing dynastic war at Kurukshetra. But I wanted to select a narrative that talked about things other than war; themes other than male prowess, ego, valour, and empire building. I was looking for a story that would

deal with values that mattered to ordinary people. The Harishchandra narrative fitted the bill all the way. Though it is the story of King Harishchandra, it is a saga of his spiritual growth. The purpose of the text is described by the poet himself: 'Raghavanka… has narrated this story in the poetic mode, not for personal gain, but just so that people can recite this paean to king Harishchandra and live a good life.'(C 14: V 33) The larger social purpose that inspired the work inspired me as well. Also, I'd fallen in love with the sound of Raghavanka's poetry even before reading him fully: some of the verses of the text I had learnt in the Gamaka (reading poetry using ragas from Karnatak music) class in my younger days had stayed with me. Besides, the vulnerability of an emperor who, despite being exiled and dispossessed, staunchly fights for the value of truthfulness, makes for karuna rasa—far more appealing than vira rasa that valorises kingship and conquest. Also, this truth tale from days of yore seemed like a potent counter-discourse in this era of post-truth, which has called into question all our certitudes and convictions, pointing to the relativity of truth claims. It is another matter that the text, through its interrogation of Harishchandra by the holatis ('low-born' women), undermines the edifice of Harishchandra's truth by exposing its moorings in caste oppression. Though Raghavanka is not considered an equal to Pampa or Kumaravyasa in Kannada literary culture, I still chose him for all these reasons.

I was also convinced that Raghavanka's progressive text would speak eloquently to us in India today. The issue of untouchability is at the heart of this text. The text traces a shift in perspective from seeing caste as a feature attached to one by birth, to understanding caste as an aspect that emerges from one's words and deeds. By declaring, 'A sage who lies is a holeya ('low' caste man); a holeya who does not lie is a noble sage.' (C14: V10), the text equates godliness with truthfulness. Untouchability, which also figures symbolically in other Harishchandra narratives, moves centre-stage in Raghavanka's text when he invents the characters of the two dark and lovely holatis, giving them the space of an entire chapter. (See excerpts from the chapter) When the king refuses to marry the holatis because it would amount to breaking the injunction of endogamy that defines caste purity, they interrogate the king's sense of caste superiority. The text stages this radical critique of varna, or social order, through the anamika (holati) women when they speak to power, raising their voice against discrimination on the basis of touch. As the king has no answers to their 'irrational' questions, he does what power does best–silences them with violence. But as Amartya Sen reminds us in 'The Argumentative Indian', the questions of the defeated never really and simply die. They always come back to haunt us.

Alongside this liberal reading of the text, there have also been deconstructive critiques – 'reading from below' which uncovers the dark truths of caste oppression, patriarchal domination and gender violence, as well as feudal and state control that the text rewrites in the name of truth and benign kingship. The text thus speaks to the burning issues of power, caste, and gender not only of its time, but also to, and equally of, contemporary India. And it was important for me that we created a space in which the Kannada voices of these local holati women could prevail and reverberate in and through global English.

Choice of Form and Style

As this is the first full-length kavya text to be translated from Kannada, it was not easy to find models to emulate. Once I had got critical feedback on my sample draft from my discerning editor David Shulman and a range of sensitive readers, I evolved a formal, high style in an elevated register to embody the gravitas of the original text. In keeping with the guidelines, the first draft was done entirely in prose. As I read the draft again, the intense poetry of the original verses haunted me. I tried rewriting just the first nine stanzas of Chapter One in verse and asked Sheldon Pollock, who had taken charge of the MS by then, how that sounded. As his response was positive, I re-translated another hundred odd stanzas in verse to highlight their unique poetic quality of being highly emotive or intensely lyrical or intricately patterned. And in the final version, nearly 20 percent of the text is in verse. I carried out a similar exercise with the dramatic pieces. This highly theatrical text is full of witty conversations and sharp repartee. So I laid out these lines in the form of dialogues. The narrative content of the story was best told in taut prose that maintained the poetic quality of the text. So my attempt has been to recreate the poetry of Raghavanka with all its vitality and virtuosity using three important modes–verse, prose, and dialogue. The poetry of the text sought its own medium; we can only take credit for humbly listening to the demands of an articulate text.

Choice of Diction

The stereotype of a translator of classical texts is the figure of a male translator who 'apprehends' a foreign classic and brings it over to his native milieu in order to enrich his literary culture. And I just did not fit the bill here. I am a woman; a non-native speaker of English; I was not 'bringing in' but 'sending out' a text in my second language Kannada (Tamil is my first) to my 'third language' English. I am not sure whether Kannada was enriched in the process, or English. Of the ten books (13 volumes) published in the MCLI series so far, eight are translated by male translators while two are by women – Indira V. Peterson and myself. Almost all of the translators are from the west or have lived there; I am the only India-based translator. Where, then, is the advantage?

There was one advantage. I discovered that the Kannada shatpadi would ring in my inner ear as I translated it. I would try to recreate the rhythms and cadences of that style in English. This is how it worked. One of the most useful suggestions from the editorial board was to prune the text for verbiage while revising. So there I was, happily pruning words that were repeated. In the holati episode, I found verses where certain phrases were repeated. For example, the phrase 'what use is…' is repeated five times in C7:V8. So in one of the versions, in the interest of economy, I retained the phrase just once and deleted the other four so that it read as follows:

> The maidens said,
> 'What use is an elephant to one who is poor?
> Ghee when one is thirsty?
> Ravishing Rambha when one is writhing in pain?
> The kingdom of earth when one is dying?
> Jewels and applause when one is burning from a sun stroke?
> Tell us, lord of the earth.'

Compare this version with the final one given in the excerpt to see the difference in impact.

Re-reading the manuscript just before it went into print, I realised I could no longer hear the insistent and querulous questioning in the holatis' speech in Kannada. Therefore, the power of compression had to give way to the power of reiteration. Clearly, auditory imagination can be an enormous advantage for a translator in recreating the sound-sense dynamic of the original in the translation of classics, especially from predominantly oral traditions.

Situated in a post-colonial relationship with English, it was important to resist the predatory moves of that hegemonic language. So my attempt has been to bend English to make it a fit vehicle for the expressive intent of each of the 728 shatpadis in the Kannada text. Here again, my deep engagement with the Kannada text showed me how to shape the English text. More visibly, I have retained several Kannada words untranslated in the English text for various purposes: to celebrate local colour, to translate puns, to quicken emotive response, to avoid the risk of naming in English what does not have adequate equivalents for various cultural nuances such as holati, holeya, chandala, or anamika, and to point to the various aspects of word play in the text. But the structure and style, the sound and sense of each of the stanzas, has been determined by my sense (gleaned through the five senses) of the Kannada original.

Perhaps it is time for a different kind of translation practice which expands and extends English to take in the foreign. Walter Benjamin argued that translators translating foreign texts into their language tend to preserve their own language instead of allowing their language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Perhaps it is time for the post-colonial subject residing in vernacular spaces to speak up in her second or third language 'English', stretching English to make it speak the poetry of the original language. Perhaps it can as well be done by translators who come from different historical and cultural configurations, located at complex intersections of gender and caste, language and sensibility, nation and ethnicity. This would mean reading and listening to a translator very different from the stereotypical figure of the western/ westernised, English-speaking and male translator of Indian classics. It may also mean travelling beyond the definition of Indian classics as texts written by dead, male, upper caste writers to include folk/ oral epics and women's texts.

Chapter 7

Synopsis

When the vile Vishvamitra, in his ire against the high-born King Harishchandra, creates two holatis and sends them to entice him, they demand that the king either give them his royal umbrella or marry them.*

Vishvamitra sighted the wild boar 1
and his wrath exploded:
his prayers receding, austerities retreating,
meditation meandering, senses fleeing,
kindness departing, moral sense vanishing,
joy evaporating, and his rage at past events returning,
he thundered, "The king has fallen into my hands;
it is now only between us.[1]
Until I destroy him, I shall not cease."
From this crashing roar, emerged two maidens.

---

* Low-caste women.

Severe anger, sworn hatred, and needless rivalry are 2
sacrilegious in a sage. As creatures born out of such base passions, the two maidens turned into *holatis* and came up to the sage asking, "What is your command?" The mighty sage, known for his bad counsel, then directed the maidens to seduce Harishchandra: "King Harishchandra has transgressed into our holy grove. Seduce him with your irresistible charms."

Were they 4
daughters of the dark night
come to meet the rising day?
Water nymphs darkened by venom
from the ocean churned by gods and demons,
assuming human form?
Statues of dark blue crystal,
sculpted by lotus-born Brahma,
springing to life?
The dark beauties accosted the lord of the earth.

The fetching *anāmikas* washed away 6
the king's melancholy with their mellifluous music—
rhythmic *gati*, keeping beat with percussive *jati*,
embellished by lively *tiruvu, mārgavaṇe,* and *vahani gamakas,**
sung in soothing lower, middle, and upper octaves.
Sāḷaṅga melody came alive, the lyric rendered with finesse,
in their pure, mixed, and composite tunes,
complete with tremulous *kampita*.
Their song was rendered the more enticing by their seductive dancing—
cāḷeya, taraharike, bāgu, and *ḍokkara*—
an alluring display of dexterous steps,
enchanting stances, mesmerizing pirouettes,
liquid movements of vivacious cheeks, eyes, and lips,
their ravishing breasts, and their sinuous figures.

* Expansive elaborations of musical notes.

Exhausted after chasing the boar, terrified he had strayed into the woods of the monstrous sage, worried that he had ignored the advice of his guru, Vasishtha—a veritable three-eyed Shiva—and disturbed by the nightmare he had had, Harishchandra gave himself up to the moment, overcome by their mellifluous music. His heart brimming over, the king gave away all his jewels to the two uncrowned queens of music. 7

In response, the maidens said, "What use is an elephant when one is poor? What use is ghee when one is thirsty? What use is ravishing Rambha when one is writhing in pain? What use is the kingdom of earth when one is dying? What use are jewels and applause when we are suffering from a sunstroke? Tell us, lord of the earth. 8

"If you gifted a coracle to a drowning man, 9
gold jewelry to a poor man, and ambrosia to a sick man,
imagine how overjoyed they would be.
Likewise, as the searing sun strikes down mercilessly,
roasting us alive; our tongues parched,
we are fatigued and fainting;
give us your white royal umbrella
and save our lives, Your Majesty."

"If the royal umbrella is given 12
as reward for our enchanting music, it is an act of sacrifice;
if it is given since we ask for it, it is an act of charity;
given from your imperial status, it is a privilege granted;
given in the name of Kaushika, it is an offering;
given in recognition of our beauty, a customer's etiquette;
given in appreciation of our soothing ways, it is intimacy;
given without hesitation, fame will be yours;
given out of kindness, grace will be yours."

"This royal umbrella is akin to 14
a wife, who cannot be given away to others;
a father come down through heritage;
a mother providing shade;
the great god worshiped in the coronation ceremony;
the four-limbed army striking terror in the hearts of foes.
Knowing this, you ask for it; won't you be called fools by
all the three worlds?"

Then the unnamable maidens pleaded lovingly, with folded 15
hands, "Hearing of your generosity, we came hoping you would grant us our wish. We beg you not to reject our wish; don't let us fret and agonize. Spare us this mental anguish. If you cannot part with the umbrella, at least marry us; then we will be appeased, lord of the earth."

Enraged, the king roared: "To the great kings of the Sun 16
dynasty, who were born when this earth was born, there are no peers in lineage, prestige, or power who can offer their daughters in marriage. When this is so, mere *holatis* like you dare come along, saying you want to be my wives. What audacity, indeed! Do we attribute this to the spirit of the times? Or to the genius of the place, the ground you are standing on?"

The maidens: 17
"What is so pure about the flesh of the udders that yield
holy milk?
What is so pure about the bee that makes such sweet
honey?
What is so pure about the deer's bowels that yield fragrant
musk?
Are they all not sacred enough to be used in worship?
Are there any failings impossible to overcome in the
company of the virtuous?
When you have such beauty and such youthfulness before
you,
why talk of caste or clan, Your Majesty?"

Harishchandra: "Why indeed! 18
Though gutter water may be filtered, is it fit for bathing?
Though a dog may have milk, is it fit for consumption?
Though a flower may grow in a haunted burial ground, is it
fit for adorning the hair?
When you are born *holatis*, who would want to enjoy your
youthful exuberance, beautiful figure, or bright mind?
Shiva, Shiva... the very thought is defiling!"

The maidens: 19
"The ears that enjoyed every note of our music are not
defiled;
the eyes that feasted on our shapely form are not defiled;
the mouth that acclaimed our art is not defiled;
the nose that smelled the fragrance of our bodies
wafted by the gentle wind is not defiled.
How is it that only our touch is defiling?
How is it that, among the five composite senses,
one is superior and the other four inferior?"

The king: 20
"The organs of sight perceive, the organs of hearing listen,
and the organs of smell sense from a distance, without
touching.
Should this kind of unrefined talk merit a simile,
it is like the embers that sear the skin only if you touch
them,
not when you hear the word, nor when you see or smell
them.
Stop this foul-mouthed talk and be off.

"What do you gain by following me? There are enough 24
*holeyas** already in our employ. Join them, by all means."

"No, we will not give up. We will go around the earth proclaiming that the king, after tempting and wooing us, has spurned us; that he has turned a deaf ear to all our pleas. We will do everything to bring you into disrepute." His ire rising and teeth gnashing, he thundered, "Break their teeth; tear their tongues; give them a sound thrashing."

In a rage, he seized a whip even as his minister tried to 25
restrain him, and thrashed them both, skinning their backs, breaking their teeth, lacerating their mouths, dragging them by the hair, and beating their bodies to a pulp. Chasing them wherever they ran, he whipped them until they bled and their skin turned a pallid white. The two wenches, weeping and wailing, made their way painfully to the sage.

* Men of the lower castes.

I Heard their Stories from the Clouds

Rollie Mukherjee

And I say with all respect to our Constitution that it just does not matter what your Constitution says; if the people of Kashmir do not want it, it will not go there. Because what is the alternative? The alternative is compulsion and coercion – presuming, of course, that the people of Kashmir do not want it. Are we going to coerce and compel them and thereby justify the very charges that are brought by some misguided people outside this country against us?

… Do not think you are dealing with a part of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or Gujarat. You are dealing with an area, historically and geographically and in all manner of things, with a certain background. If we bring our local ideas and local prejudices everywhere, we will never consolidate. We have to be men of vision and there has to be a broadminded acceptance of facts in order to integrate really. And real integration comes of the mind and the heart, and not of some clause which you may impose on other people.

— Jawaharlal Nehru, speech to the Lok Sabha, 26 June 1952

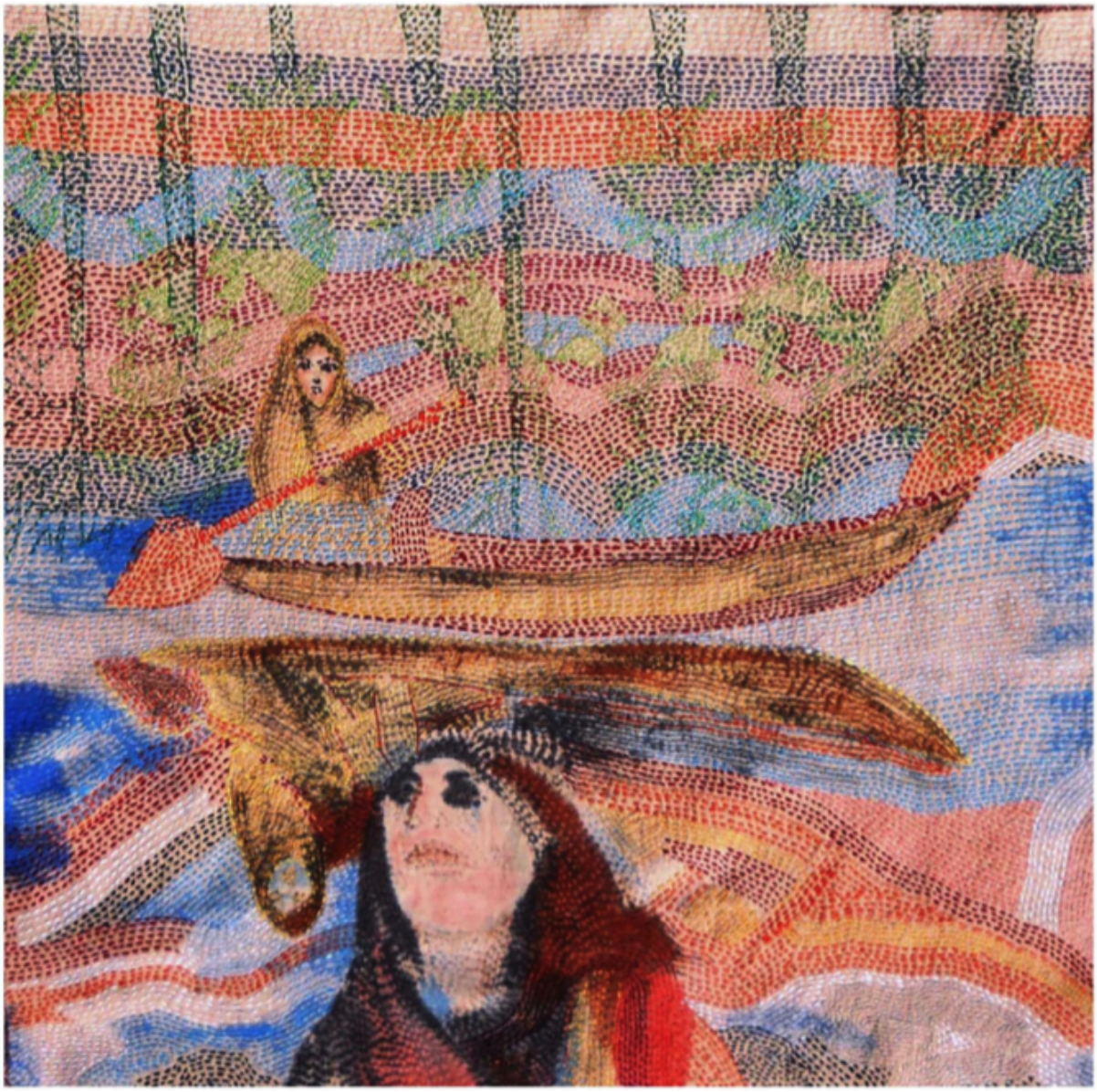
'Inscribed', mixed media on paper, 28.5 x 21", 2013

..... in the Lake the arms of temples and mosques are
Locked ..... in each other's reflections .....

'Reflections', mixed media on paper, 18 x 12", 2015

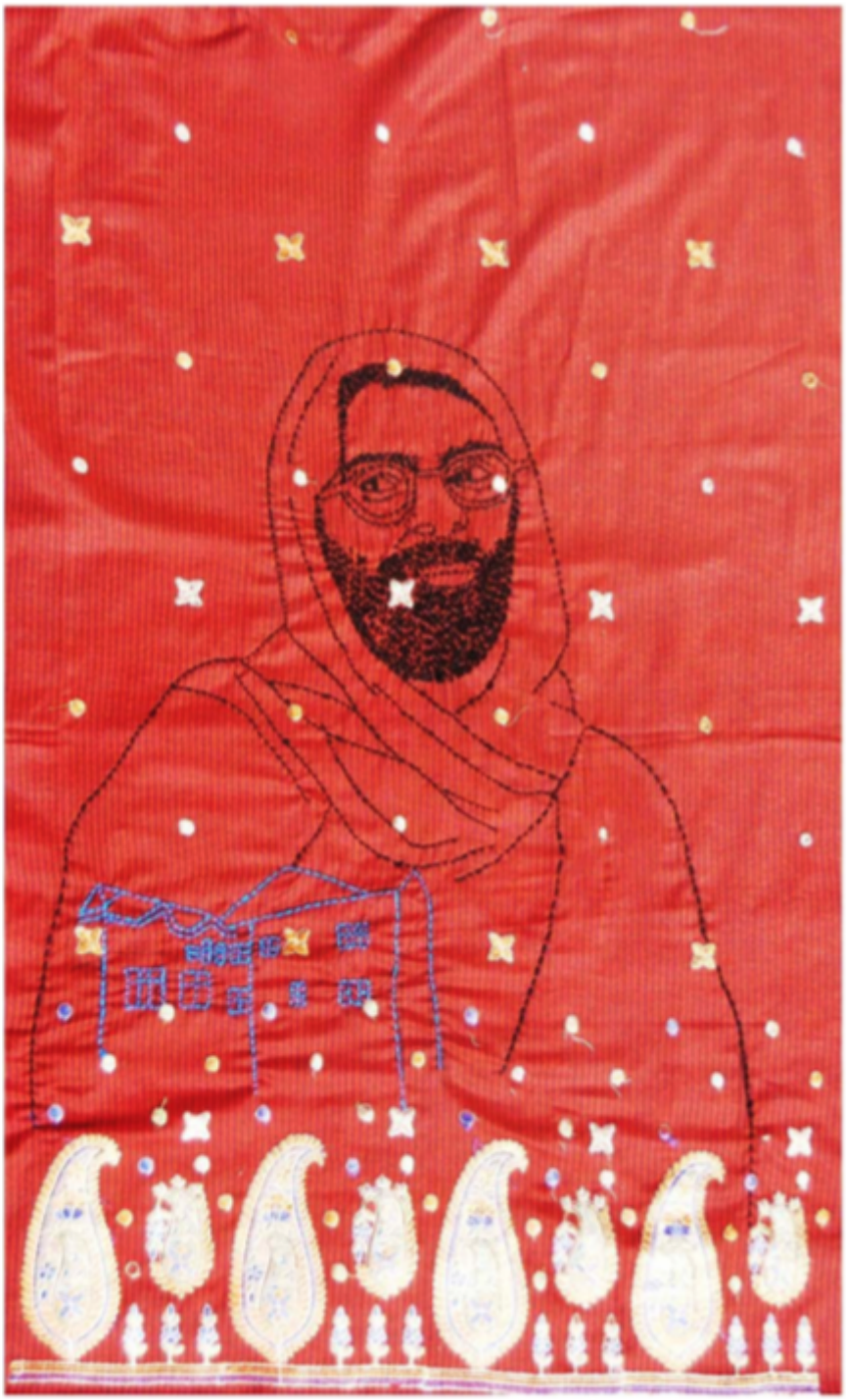
‘Farewell’, mixed media on paper, 28.5 x 21”, 2014

‘Resilience’, mixed media on paper, 28.5 x 21”, 2013



‘Lament’, mixed media on cloth, 35 x 42”, 2014

‘Falling threads’, embroidery on cloth, 38 x 42”, 2014-15



‘Martyr’, embroidery on cloth, 36 x 46”, 2014-15

‘The last letter’, mixed media on paper, 19 x 14”, 2014

‘Drifting’, mixed media on paper, 43 x 29.5”, 2015

‘Shadows’, mixed media on paper, 28.5 x 21.5”, 2013

‘I heard their stories from the clouds’, mixed media on paper, 28.5 x 39”, 2014

‘Shadows beyond the ghost town’, watercolour on paper, 15 x 12”, 2014

‘Unframed “histories”’, watercolour on paper, 29.5 x 21.5”, 2013

Farooq paused, drank some water, and pushed a bell. A servant brought tea, local bread and harisa, a lamb delicacy cooked slowly in copper pots with cardamom, cinnamon and saffron till it becomes paste-like. ‘My uncle lived on the other side of the bridge. I planned to leave the procession on reaching his house. The protesters were angry, shouting fiery slogans at the top of their voices,’ he said. CRPF men stood on the bridge. Protesters shouted slogans for freedom. Amidst the sloganeering, Farooq heard a burst of gunfire. Bullets tore the procession apart; people shouted, fell, and shouted again. He jumped onto a footpath and lay flat on the ground. ‘Bullets whizzed past my ears. The bridge was covered with bodies and blood. CRPF men continued firing. I saw more people falling, closed my eyes, and pretended to be dead.’

Farooq curled himself up in the chair, leaving his slippers on the carpet. I was not eating any more; Farooq had left his tea. Memory drowned out the smell of harisa; the elegant carpets and ornate furniture faded away. Farooq was not here in his drawing room talking to me. He was on the bridge pretending to be dead. He heard wails and a gunshot every few seconds. Paramilitary men walked around the bridge. He saw an officer walking from body to body, checking whether anyone was alive. ‘I lay still and from the corner of my eye saw him firing more bullets every time he found a sign of life in an injured man.’ Farooq waited for the soldiers to leave. It was getting harder to pretend to be dead. Where he lay, someone had dropped a kangri, the firepot Kashmiris carry around in winter. Embers of charcoal from the firepot were scattered on the sidewalk. His cheek was burning from their heat. Slowly he turned his face to avoid the burn. The murderous officer saw him turn. ‘This bastard is alive,’ Farooq heard him shout. The officer ran towards him, kicked him, and a volley of bullets pierced his body. He lost consciousness.

A police truck came. The bodies were put in the truck; the police put Farooq in too. The truck moved to the police control room–it was to become the site where Kashmiris would go to collect the bodies of their kin in the days to come. Inside the truck, Farooq regained consciousness and lay still. The truck stopped at the police station two miles from Gawakadal. As the policemen at the hospital began taking out the bodies, he cried out, 'I am alive!' The policemen, all Kashmiris, hugged him. They were carrying him away when a teenager, whose clothes and face were drenched in blood, jumped out of the pile of bodies. The boy ran his hands on his body and cried, 'I got no bullets. I got no bullets. I am alive.' He stood still for a moment and suddenly ran out of the police control room building.

— *from* Curfewed Night *by Basharat Peer*

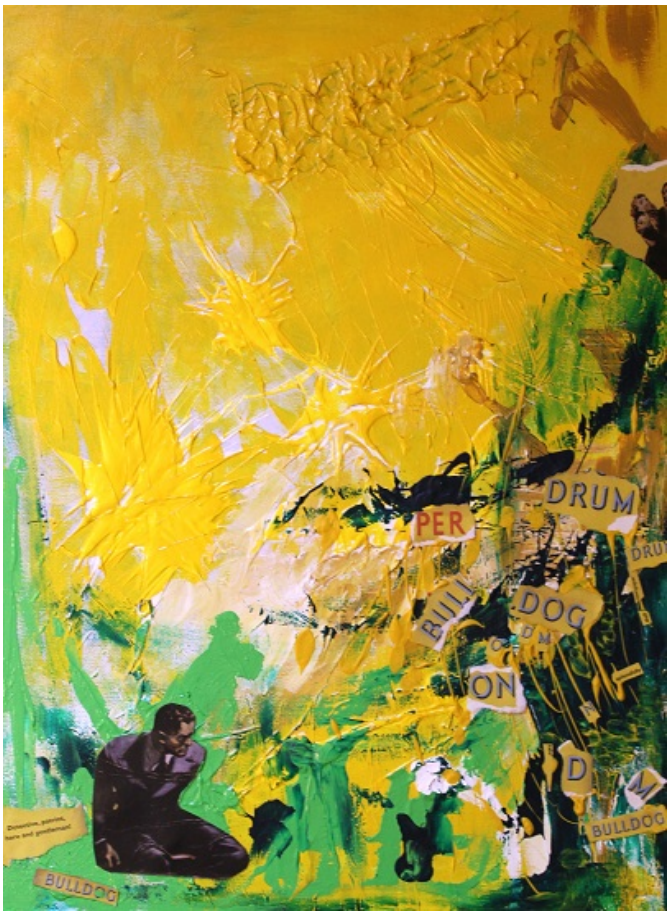
Untitled, watercolour on paper, 43.5 x 29.5", 2011

These artworks were part of an exhibition titled 'to stories rumoured in branches', held at the Conflictorium, Ahmedabad, in June 2016.

Curfewed Night is published by Random House India, 2009; excerpted here with the author's permission.

In Bad Taste

Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee



Shoili Kanungo, 'Thwarted Quest'

For the late Rohith Vemula

A dalit boy committed suicide. Five
Months later, a Tahsildar
Declared him dalit. Those under
The shadow of foul play, driving the boy
To his death, hurling his shadow
Into the stars, disputed his birth. Death
Has a surname law can't alter. The boy did not
Die, the way fire does. He left
His smoky heart billowing out of his pyre,
Folded in a suicide note. Unmoved by
Death, tricksters put his birth on hold, ordered an
Autopsy on his name, scripting a drama
In bad taste. Time, a puppet in the hands of
Law, finally spoke, tongue blindfolded,
The boy's a dalit. You can't make one law tell a lie
Over another, you can't alter a man's
Caste, if you can't alter his fate. But his
Fate may alter your edifice.

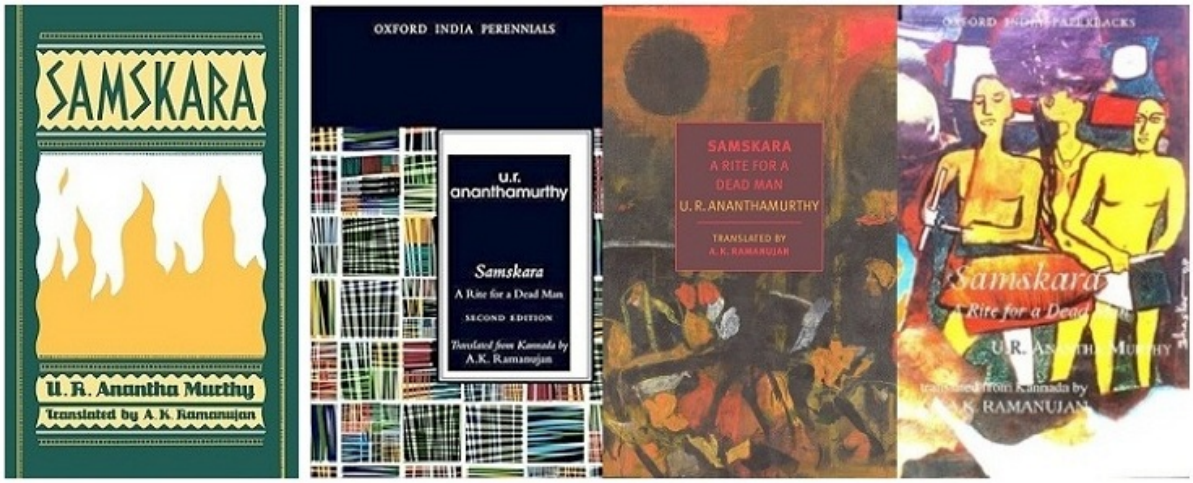
Reading and Translating U.R. Ananthamurthy

Chandan Gowda in conversation with K. Satchidanandan

Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

K. Satchidanandan (KS): U.R. Ananthamurthy's demise is a loss on many counts. As a modern writer, he raised several existential and ethical questions through his creative work. He was a unique thinker who tried to understand the relationship between tradition and modernity in India from different angles. He was also an activist who fought insular interpretations of religion, fought for the preservation of the environment and promoted mother-tongue culture; and a radical visionary / teacher who tried his best to transform institutions of education and culture in the country. Which of these dimensions of his personality do you find the most fascinating, significant, and lasting?

Chandan Gowda (CG): All the dimensions you identify are valuable. His versatile public persona is especially rare at a time when intellectuals and activists seem content to focus on a specific line of work. In retrospect, most of his writerly and, more generally, political concerns belong to a modern individual wanting to come to terms – in matters of aesthetics and normative thought – with a complex, elusive phenomenon called Indian civilisation. These efforts will have an enduring appeal to modern Indians who share a passion to feel grounded within their cultural milieu.



KS: It may not be too wrong to say that it was A.K. Ramanujan's translation of the novel *Samskara* that brought Ananthamurthy's work to the attention of the larger Indian and international readership to begin with. Where do you place *Samskara* in the tradition of Kannada fiction? Was it the first major fictional work in the Navya movement? What was the specific nature of Navya in Kannada literature and what were the major elements in the Navya writer's critique of the earlier Navodaya movement?

CG: *Samskara* is the first major novel in the Navya phase. The other major Navya writers in its early phase, K. Sadashiva, Lankesh, and Tejasvi, had only published important short stories by then. In the 1950s, the lyricism and the political idealism of the Navodaya writers seemed romantic and even naïve to the Navya writers who wrote in the difficult aftermath of India's independence, and during the Cold War hostilities in the world. The quest of the Navya writers for newness took the shape of experimenting with form and offering attention to new moral and political questions. In contrast with their Navodaya predecessors, these stances usually involved a break with – and an indifference to – classical Kannada literature.

KS: How was *Samskara* perceived and received by the Kannada readers when it was first published? Did it, for example, upset the conservatives, especially the brahmins, as it dramatically brought out the inner contradictions of that community, say through the figures of Naranappa and Praneshacharya? Was it seen as an 'existentialist' work as many modern novels were seen in the 1960s in Indian languages? What is your take on the essential questions raised by the novel, of tradition and modernity, of the sacred and the profane, of instincts and taboos, of ritual and rebellion?

CG: URA wrote his first novel *Samskara* in 1965, while doing his doctoral research in English literature at the University of Birmingham. He had published a book of critically acclaimed short stories by then. *Samskara*, whose ruthless portrayal of the decadent aspects of brahmin society invited instant attention in Karnataka, remains his most widely discussed work. The secure self of Praneshacharya, an austere, self-denying scholar, and arbiter of orthodox morality, is destabilised with the death of an unorthodox fellow-brahmin. Did the rebellious deeds of the dead brahmin make him ineligible for traditional funeral rites? Finding an answer to this question lands Praneshacharya in radical self-doubt and takes him on the path of self-awakening through his encounters in the world outside the confined milieu of his brahmin agrahara.

Samskara affirms the necessity of a quest for truth outside existing moral frames, the value of individual skepticism in the face of community orthodoxy, the sensual pleasures of the body, among others. Lohia's views on caste equality, D.H. Lawrence's celebration of the instinctual life and distrust of the life-negating attitude of Christian morality, Jiddu Krishnamurti's insistence that the quest for truth be freed from existing knowledge, French existentialist concerns: all of these appear to have mattered for this novel which broke from the Kannada literary ethos of the time.

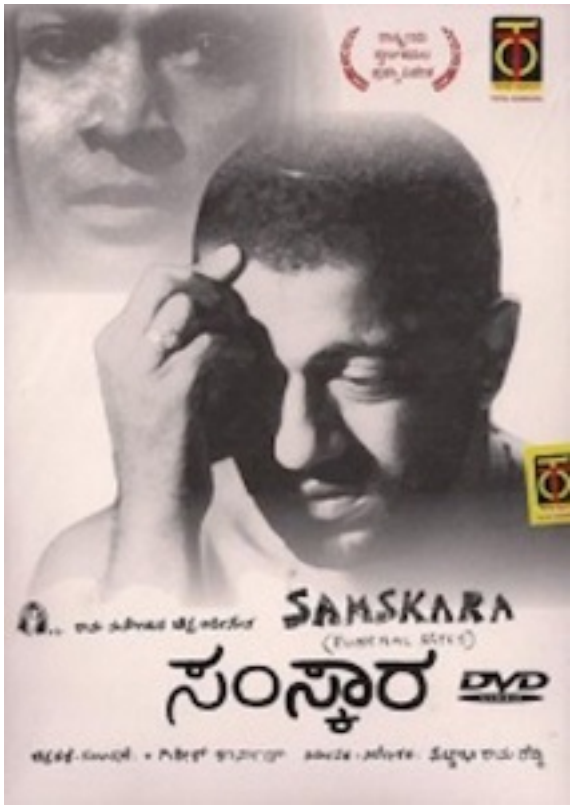


Image Courtesy: alchetron.com

The novel did upset conservative minds when it appeared. URA recalled Masti Venkatesh Iyengar, the writer, telling him that he had been unduly harsh on the brahmins. The film adaptation of *Samskara* in 1970 was briefly banned in anticipation of a hostile response by conservative brahmins.

KS: I have come across contradictory views on Ramanujan's translation of *Samskara*: many believe it to be an ideal English version, but some think A.K. Ramanujan has failed in translating the culture that informs the text and the linguistic nuances specific to the Kannada language. How do you look at this famous translation? Do you think that Indian language translations can do greater justice to such works deeply located in regional culture? I myself have found the Malayalam version of the novel far better and more nuanced than the English version, may be partly because of the cultural and linguistic linkages between Kannada and Malayalam.

CG: A.K. Ramanujan's translation of *Samskara* reduces the intensity of the original. His modernist preference for a minimalism in expressiveness is probably responsible here. And, I agree that he has not always exercised care in conveying the nuances in the original. To

take a stark example: towards the end of the novel, Putta, who befriends Praneshacharya, goes inside the house of a 'Poojari' in search of alcohol. Ramanujan translates the word, 'Poojari', a local caste that brews liquor, as 'Shaman!' 'Poojari' can also mean a priest in Kannada, but 'Shaman' is simply a weird choice. Again, Ramanujan translates the title of the classical text, *Kamasutra* – which surely didn't need to be translated – as *The Love Manual*. There are numerous instances like these. It might be a stretch, however, to say Ramanujan 'has failed in translating the culture that informs the text.'

Semantic equivalents are more easily found across Indian languages than in non-Indian languages. As are rules of syntax. Lastly, and perhaps obviously, the narrative predicaments in Indian language fictional works are recognised and felt more readily across Indian languages than with the others. Factors like these place translators of fiction from one Indian language to another at a great advantage.

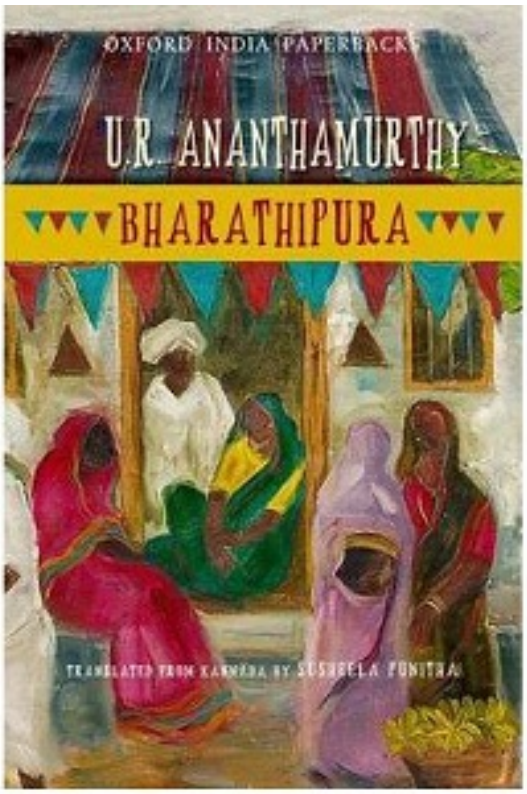


Image Courtesy: amazon.in

KS: What about *Bharathipura*? Some of us find it hard to relate to it as for a Malayali its present is his / her past and yet we empathise with it from a distance. Did its take on untouchability and the anti-brahmin stance anger the spokespersons of the status quo?

CG: *Bharathipura* didn't evoke the same interest or curiosity as *Samskara*. While it had its admirers, many critics dismissed it as a novel of ideas and as 'a dissertation novel.' It is an important novel in URA's oeuvre as it departs from *Samskara*'s critical view of traditional orthodoxy as a stultifying force in an individual quest for self-realisation. *Bharathipura*, on the other hand, was skeptical towards the modern imagination of caste equality and of the rational reform of superstition. The protagonist Jagannatha's efforts at undermining the practices of untouchability and local beliefs in God, which are rooted in modern ideas of liberal equality and rationalism, are constantly frustrated. Indeed, he becomes contemptuous of the Dalits when they do not share his understanding of their problem. The novel's suggestion that the grounds of a modern reformer's critique ought to have been

fashioned from sources internal to local tradition was to resurface in many of URA's subsequent writings.

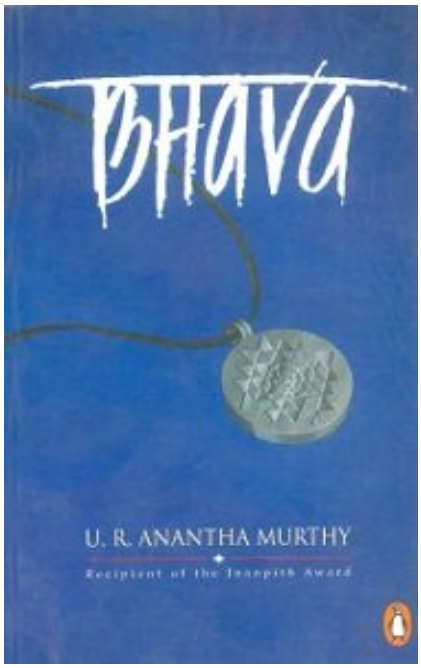


Image Courtesy: Goodreads

KS: Do you think in novels like *Bhava* and *Divya*, Ananthamurthy takes a step backward in his attitude to tradition?

CG: I don't think so. In *Bhava*, for instance, tradition is less a source of oppressive morality and more a source for self-understanding. And, the issue of modernity is set aside altogether. But his last two short stories, 'Unfathomable Relations' (2009) and 'Pacche Resort' (2010), offer a bleak view of the world. In the former story, Indian art and Ayurveda are entangled with the global arms trade and surveillance networks. And, in the latter story, religious orthodoxy appears anemic in relation to the demonic power of business interests and their instrumental ethics.

In his non-fiction, in dozens of speeches and newspaper op-eds written during this period, URA's democratic commitments are steady.

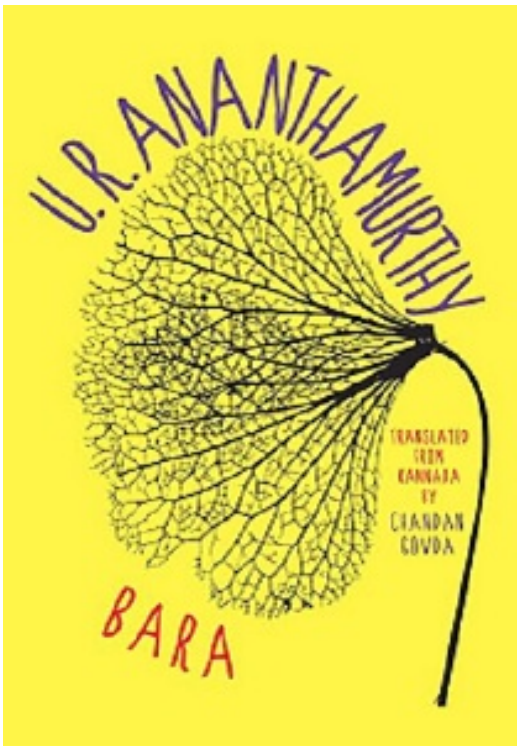


Image Courtesy: The Huffington Post

KS: What prompted you to translate *Bara* in the first place? What are its special charms and difficulties?

CG: I had only watched M.S. Sathyu's film adaptation of *Bara* [1], when URA invited me to translate the story. He felt it hadn't got adequate critical attention. On reading the story, I felt that *Bara* powerfully anticipated contemporary discussions of India's political modernity. It conveyed that different modes of authority co-exist here, that political processes are hard to grasp through secular analyses, and that liberal and Marxist normative thought might ill serve the well-meaning modern activist in India.

Image Courtesy: WebMail India

As an allegory of modern Indian politics, *Bara* works with an epic intent. It has great moral seriousness and great drama. URA's care towards details is also fascinating.

KS: How did you work through the dialectal, semantic, and semiotic specificities of the original text?

CG: Although set in North Karnataka, *Bara* does not bring in the very distinct Kannada found in that region. The translation, I felt, had to sound like the original. I would read aloud the translated sentences and check if they sounded like the original in their semantic proximity and syntactical effects. I had read out the translation to URA over an afternoon.

I have italicised the English phrases / sentences and Indian metaphysical concepts found in conversations for various reasons. The IAS officer, for example, often resorts to English words like 'demoralized' 'manipulate' and 'exaggerate', alerting us, thereby, to the frequent incidence of English in the speech of the educated classes. On the other hand, the local political fixer's use of phrases / sentences like 'the most innocent and incorruptible leader of this district,' 'famous leftist theoretician,' 'progressive bourgeois,' and 'Please don't think Bhimoji is a frog in the well' work as markers of social class. He uses them to show off his English and claim company with the high status IAS officer. Besides, we also realise how stock ideological phrases circulate in political discourses in the country. Lastly, the member of the cow protection group uses words like 'dharma' and 'punya', which were best left untranslated and retained in italics as they convey the metaphysical distinctness of a local worldview. If I had translated those concepts as 'religion' and 'spiritual merit,' respectively, that would have thinned out the distinctness of the local conceptual universes.

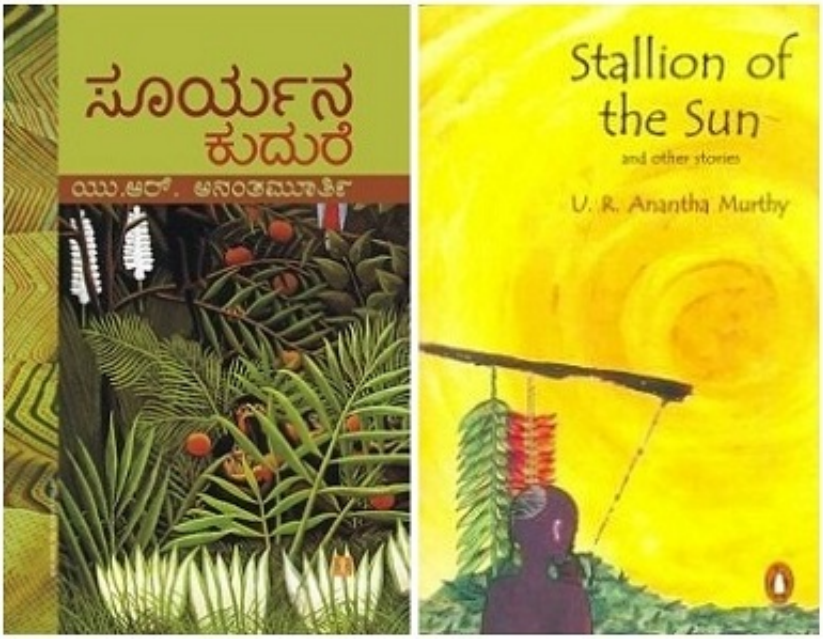


Image Courtesy: flixcart.com

KS: What is it that distinguishes Ananthamurthy's short stories – like 'Sooryana Kudure' (Stallion of the Sun) or 'Mouni' (The Silent One) – from those of other Kannada modernists?

CG: A keen awareness of the dominance of systems of modern knowledge over non-modern ones marks 'Sooryana Kudure'. A sense of pathos and melancholy also inform the encounter of the modern narrator with the priest's astrological imagination in that story.

In ‘Mouni’, the areca nut grower chooses to protest silently when he suffers losses due to the erratic workings of the local areca trade. The vulnerabilities created by the modern market are an acute concern.

The inequalities of knowledge and the destruction of community autonomy in the modern world were URA’s moral and intellectual preoccupations for much of his life.

The other chief modernist Kannada writers, P. Lankesh and K.P. Purnachandra Tejasvi, do not share URA’s anxiety towards modernity’s destructive potential or his pathos for disappearing philosophical resources found in Indian traditions. Tejasvi, for instance, celebrates the creativity, intelligence, and practical wisdom of the non-lettered, ordinary people in modern society without anxiety towards the future.

KS: What do you think was the central occupation of his intellectual life? I have gone through his essays in Rujuvathu as also his *Hindutva or Hind Swaraj* with a lot of excitement. I have, like many other readers, might have plenty of disagreements with some of his positions, but he is always engaging, and invites the reader for an argument. How were his essays received in Kannada? He was undoubtedly a very significant Indian public intellectual of our time; but I feel uneasy when I look at the disturbing responses from the Kannada public and some of the writers to his liberal-progressive political stand. How do you look at his oeuvre as a whole and the regional and national response to it?

CG: Being a ‘critical insider’, who engages with a society’s cultural conversations (or, tradition), mattered greatly to him. Bhakti and Sufi poets and saints and more recent figures like Gandhi, for URA, were critical insiders. (Being a critical insider did not mean an avoidance of non-Indian thought.[2])

Several volumes of URA’s cultural essays and speeches show that he thought in civilisational terms. The importance of bhasha literatures for our intellectual life, the meaning of being an Indian writer, the necessity of understanding Indian society outside Western epistemic frames, among others, preoccupied him. He was a passionate voice on these matters in the Indian intellectual community.

In the last decade of his life, URA responded to a range of major issues in his op-ed articles in Kannada newspapers, which have been collected in eight volumes. These essays reflect an exemplary commitment to come to grips with public issues in a grounded democratic spirit.

While the communal forces found his critical remarks on Modi a convenient point of mobilisation, and disliked his views on the relevance of affirmative action and on how Hindutva distorted Hindu religion, URA’s attempts to offer persuasive arguments on key issues – for example, the necessity of common schools, the importance of Indian languages for education, the tragic costs of ‘development’ – nourished the critical intellectual spirit in the Kannada public.

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1. The film was made in Kannada (*Bara*, 1982) and in Hindi (*Sookha*, 1983).

2. For a discussion of how URA dealt with the issue of external cultural influence, see my essay, ‘A Writer’s Horizon’, (Seminar, No. 666, 2015).

Posters of Protest

Orijit Sen in conversation with Sneha Chowdhury

Images Courtesy: Orijit Sen

Sneha Chowdhury (SC): Of late, one recurring feature of your social media posts has been the poster. You've posted several striking and memorable posters in response to social issues – the most recent being your poster-cum-banner for the #NotInMyName protest meets held across the country. Are social media posters different from regular posters?

Orijit Sen (OS): Technically, a poster is a printed object. Regular posters are printed and put up on walls in public spaces. In that sense, the term 'poster' is a misnomer for the stuff I have been recently sharing on social media. They are not printed first and put up in public spaces. The printed poster has certain physical limitations when compared to the social media poster. It always takes more time to print or reproduce a poster and circulate hard copies across spaces, whereas social media posters are always shared within seconds of posting them. Any social media poster, then, inadvertently becomes a new medium. However, social media platforms also simulate public spaces in many ways. On the one hand, in public spaces, we see impatient pedestrians *strolling* and consuming images and texts put up on walls; on social media, on the other hand, we see impatient users *scrolling*up and down their timeline, consuming images and texts from their virtual walls.

SC: What factors contribute to, or affect, the making of such posters?

OS: I think one needs to be mindful of several factors, the most important factor being the nature of the image. The poster has to carry a strong image. One also has to be mindful of certain limitations: the impatience of users, the fact that there is already a deluge of images and texts on social media which are consumed by the users on a daily basis. Therefore, the image has to be very striking and catchy; something that instantly grabs their attention. The subject has to be topical – something immediately relevant. And finally, the image has to be

accompanied by a caption. I ensure that the image and the caption are not self-explanatory, but the two put together carry forward the social message at large.

Image Courtesy: Orijit Sen

SC: The banner for the #NotInMyName protest meet went viral within seconds of your posting it on the event page. How did you come up with this poster?

OS: Rahul Roy, one of the organisers of the protest meet at Delhi, called me at 7pm one evening, and asked me to prepare a poster for the event. At 9:30pm, the same day, I saw that the event page was already up but there was no image or poster to go with it. So I put everything else on hold and started working on the poster. Within the next couple of hours, the image was ready.

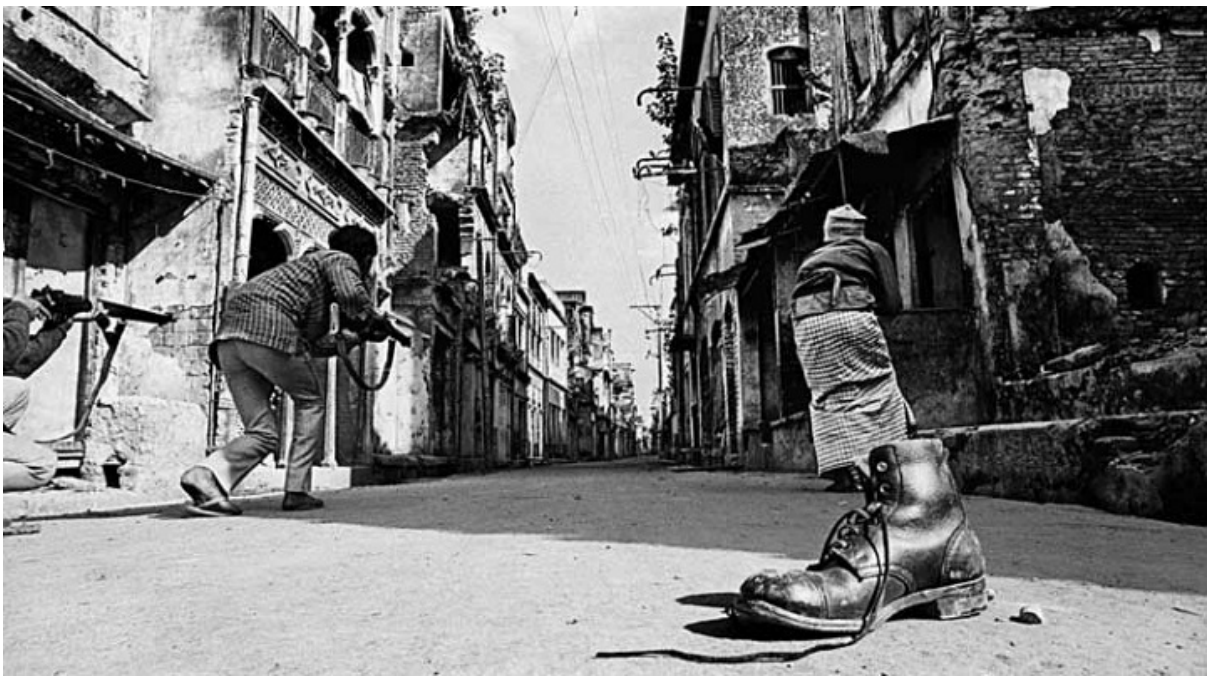

Photo by Kishor Parekh / Image Courtesy: The Indian Express

While making the poster, I kept wondering what would make a strong image. I wanted it to be an image that directly referred to the gruesome act of lynching without being too literal. I was reminded of some images by Kishor Parekh from his *Bangladesh* series. One of them is particularly striking – it is an image of a boot on an empty street. That's how I decided to use a chappal in the poster. The chappal – a mundane, quotidian object – spoke to me. It made me think of its wearer. A dead body would not have created as strong an impact as a remnant of that dead body, like the abandoned boot, the abandoned chappal.

SC: Are you also trying to counter the proliferation of violent images – especially photographs shared via WhatsApp and Facebook – through these posters?

OS: Nowadays, we are being constantly bombarded with graphic images. Most of these violent images are photographs which are circulated widely via social media. But the truth-claim of photographs is often undermined by these images because sometimes they are photo-shopped. As a graphic artist, I don't need to compete with that kind of documentary evidence. Graphic imagery needs to induce reflection, and a poster can be the right medium for that. The poster should make you reflect, think about the nature of violence, think about the victims; not just see, consume and go past it.

Image Courtesy: Orijit Sen

SC: Another poster that was particularly striking was the 'Modi Antoinette' poster – Modi's face superimposed on Marie Antoinette's. What made you compare Narendra Modi to Marie Antoinette?

OS: I made the poster in the wake of de-monetisation earlier this year. I was aghast by the hubris behind de-monetisation. I was struck by Modi's sheer power and arrogance, to say nothing of his uncaring attitude towards the poor. I was thinking about all of this and suddenly the image of Marie Antoinette came to me. Both Marie and Modi seem to be so drunk with power that they don't care about their subjects at all. Everything that Marie Antoinette wore symbolised arrogance – her wig, her costume, everything. But her image in the poster is also an index for the time to come. We must remember that her reign was soon to be followed by the French Revolution. I wanted the poster to be a subtle reminder of the fact that an arrogant approach to ruling can eventually lead to one's downfall.

Images Courtesy: Orijit Sen

SC: How did you come up with the 'Azadi' and 'Ramjas College' posters?

OS: I have been playing around with the metro-language for a while now. I feel that the voice one hears in the announcements is the voice of the State talking to its citizens, telling them what to do and what not to do. But what's interesting and ironic at the same time is how neutral and detached the voice is. The voice is so detached that it's almost ominous. There's something particularly ominous in the monotonous ring of 'Walking on metro tracks is a punishable offence' – it always makes me wonder what punishment I am going to get. Again, I made the two posters after the Ramjas College incident. I knew that the metro station imagery would be familiar to many students who travel by the metro on a daily basis, and they would easily relate to it.

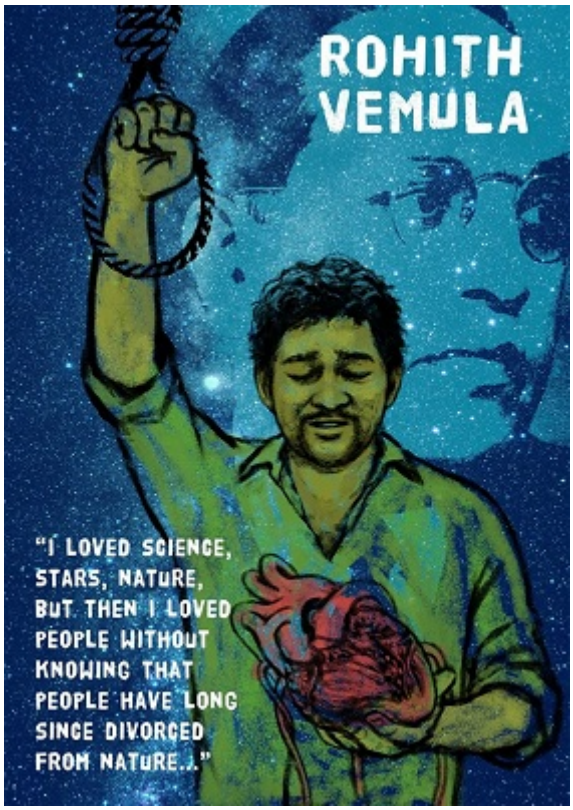

Image Courtesy: Orijit Sen

SC: Finally, I'd like you to talk about one poster which will be etched in our memories for a long time – the Rohith Vemula poster.

OS: After Rohith's death, I would often hear people say that there's no point in killing oneself when one can stay alive and fight for a change. I feel only those who do not have to experience the atrocities and the oppression that a dalit person faces on a daily basis, can use that logic to make a case against suicide. I had to counter this notion – the notion that he was a loser. So while making the poster, I was constantly reminded of his poignant suicide note. Despite being a suicide note, the letter expressed a deep commitment to life. It was not written by a person who had given up on life. To me, it was a letter written by a visionary. Hence, I wanted to create an image that depicted this contradiction. For example, the clenched fist passing through the noose is one image that captures this contradiction. I wanted to show that a person's ideas and beliefs do not die with the passing away of that person.

The Orbit of Confusion

Salma

Translated by N Kalyan Raman

Fernand Léger, 'Three Women by a Garden', Oil on Canvas / Image Courtesy: Digital Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Dear Amma,

I am writing this letter to you, a woman who cannot read or write a single word, not just because I wish to, but also because I intend this to be an outlet for my growing anger towards you. This letter certainly won't reach your hands, nor will I send it to you in the first place. If a third person were to read it out to you because you cannot read it yourself, you might feel tremendously hurt and humiliated. It might also plunge you in endless agony. Since you are already suffering from heart disease and other complaints, this letter might, by adding to your stress, eventually kill you. I certainly don't want to make that mistake knowingly. Amma, you don't know how much I loved you, love you and want to love you. It's surely not a love that can be captured in words.

First, I want to make one thing clear to you.

I am not, as you imagine, someone who has no love for you. I know that's what you think, and it's kept me awake many a night. How sad that a mother can believe that of her own daughter! Nevertheless, I am beginning to think that it may well be true. For the past few days, I've been wracked by fear that my love for you might be fading fast. A dreadful feeling that I might have actually started hating you, haunts me like a nightmare. Why did I think of writing this letter to an illiterate like you? During this stressful time, when I can't share my sense of hurt and anger with anyone else or even communicate them directly to you, I am writing this letter only as a means of coping with my emotions, certainly not to send it to you.

This letter is just like the one Kafka wrote to his father. There can always be many reasons for a father and son to be at loggerheads. So much is common knowledge. But a daughter is totally incapable of opposing her mother. This is true of all daughters and the reason is not

such a secret. Girl children find it hard to hate a mother who is already being humiliated by their father. For them, it's simply unthinkable. Growing up in the constant company of their mothers, daughters see how oppressive the domestic spaces to which a mother is confined can become; they see their mothers wander listlessly, weep in despair, shrink from humiliation, and impound themselves within those spaces. Sometimes, daughters also witness the strange sight of their mothers marvelling at and admiring themselves. So I believed that daughters could not ever, at any time and in any situation, hate their mothers – till you turned Sharmila out of our house.

You don't know how I used to agonise whenever my father abused you and beat you up. His behaviour had given me all the motivation as well as the need to turn into a killer. I know that all the daily services you performed for him – by services, I don't just mean cooking meals, washing clothes and cleaning the house, but personal ministrations, such as removing the stalk from betel leaves and preparing them for his consumption; washing his sandals and keeping them in the right place for him to wear the next day; cleaning and wiping his spectacles; keeping a small mirror, razor, soap and a mug of water ready on the front pyol for him to sit there and shave his face and beard. The list is very long. I also know that you performed these services not only because you were frightened of displeasing him, but also because you wanted to teach me something through them. My activities and behaviour, as also my tendency to contradict everyone around me might have been reason enough for teaching me through your own example how a girl should behave with her husband. And so you wanted to instruct me in the art of being a good wife.

I couldn't be angry with you even if I wanted to. All I could feel was pity. I knew that the problem with you was simply the way you were brought up. You belonged to a family setup that always followed and lived by the rule that a woman should obey her husband and family, perform all kinds of services and never talk back to anyone. So you could have been offended by the anger and resistance I displayed at times against my husband and brothers. That's why, considering the way you were brought up, I tried to reconcile myself to your behaviour.

Moreover, it was this society that had forced you to become the third wife of a man who was twice your age. I never hated you for wanting to live by the rules of this wretched society. I also imagined I could never hate you. But now, I am haunted by the fear that it could happen any day now. I started feeling this way only after you sent Sharmila away. Whenever I felt intensely angry with you, I would always remember how you toiled every day from morning to evening in our dingy, dark kitchen, starting from the moment you packed the stove with coal at the crack of dawn to heat water in a cauldron. My rancour would instantly melt away. I would also remember those feasts hosted by Aththa for the holy men who helped him to proclaim the intensity and pride of his faith, for which you had to work from morning to night in the kitchen, struggling with damp firewood, to prepare mountainous piles of idiyappams, mutton kurma and parathas. My compassion for you would flow like a wellspring.

You have spoken to me many times about your childhood years. Whenever I heard your stories, I used to cry for days. I was always aware that you indulged me a lot because you didn't want me to suffer the terrible childhood that was your lot. Amma, you have told me how, since you were the first-born daughter in a household of thirteen children, your schoolbag was snatched from your hands and thrown away; about your mother, who, after every childbirth, handed over the responsibility of bringing up the child to you, ignoring the fact that you were a child yourself, and became pregnant again very soon thereafter; about your father who proclaimed that birthing children was a boon from Allah and prevention or abortion of pregnancy was a sin.

You spoke also of roaming the streets carrying your siblings in your arms and on your hip, scarcely aware that you had been denied the very childhood that you were describing to me. You had no particular reason to tell me those stories, nor would you have intended to evoke my sympathy. Even on other occasions, when you meant to tell me something else altogether, anecdotes about your childhood tumbled out involuntarily from your memory.

You reminisced often about your past in the form of funny, interesting and playful stories. You had entertained each child with specific tricks to get that child to eat her food. Each child liked to play certain games. It was hard on you when some of the children came down with fever. At other times, they would fall down and come to you with bruises on their feet, arms and head, making your life even more difficult. Amid all this hectic activity, you had also learnt how to cook. Whenever children from your house fought with children in the neighbourhood, you had to go and appease the families of those children. You had to overcome so many hurdles before you could drop your siblings at school every day. You also had to bribe them with toffees before leaving them at school. You had to cook food for the family along with all these chores… You invariably ended these reminiscences by complaining that none of them paid you any heed these days.

I am not qualified to feel sad that you had no proper childhood. My own was slightly better than yours; that was all. Otherwise, it was by no means enjoyable. What you wanted to give me was a pleasant childhood. But in this society, a mother cannot give her child whatever she wants; only society has that power. I know this. You know it too.

Amma, how beautiful you are. Once, when you were cleaning fish, you called out my name and said, 'Look!' You wanted to show me a fingerling that was lodged inside the belly of a big snakehead. I looked at it, wide-eyed with wonder, and I still remember your face before me. Under brows that were truly shaped like archer's bows, your wide, big, beautiful brown eyes. Oval face. Red lips. Amma, I would like to remember that face, childlike and beautiful, till the day I die.

It was your beauty that led me, many years later as a young woman, to compare myself with you and feel dejected before the mirror. I was neither as beautiful nor as fair as you. I grew up in a society which held that beauty and a fair complexion were essential for a girl. I had a slightly broad, square-jawed face, just like my father. Not a pretty face, by any account. Even a donkey looks beautiful in the prime of youth; I presented a fair appearance in a similar way. I knew that I wouldn't be as beautiful as you when I grew up. You knew it too. You even felt bad about it. That was why, whenever I came in from the street into the house, you would tell me, 'See how dark your face is. Wash it with soap and put on some face powder. Skin colour is important for a girlchild.'

Before she turned eleven, every girl child in our community had her ears and nose pierced in a grand ceremony, followed by a feast and ceremonial gifts from her grandmother. When such a function was being arranged for me, you were very firm that your daughter shouldn't get her nose pierced. Though all the girls in our village had had their noses pierced and worn nose studs and rings over many generations, you were adamant. Seeing all my girl-friends wearing nose-studs, I too was very keen to get my nose pierced. I lost my chance to wear a nose-ring only because you didn't want me to. I harboured feelings of regret and rancour against you for many years. Whenever harsh and derisive comments were made about me for going around with a bare nose and allowing it to grow too hard for piercing, and about you for forcing it on me, I used to feel depressed.

But you never bothered about it. Years later, when I was grown up and mature enough to think for myself, you disclosed the reason to me. The face of a woman wearing a nose-stud is endowed with a special beauty; when it is removed after the death of her husband, the

vacant spot robs the face of all lustre and the ornament that can never be worn again reminds her that she is a widow forever. I see that the nose-ring that I've never worn till today was shunned for a sound reason and I wish to thank you for it.

When our neighbour Farida's husband died a few days ago, her face without the nose-stud made me realise the harshness of her loss and I felt relieved that it would never happen to me. You didn't burden me with the prospect of that vacant spot I would have had to wear if I lost my husband.

Do you remember, Amma, how crushed I felt and wept inconsolably whenever you were subjected to Aththa's violent abuse? The countless number of mud utensils he smashed in his anger had been part of the dowry brought by his first wife. Those violent moments have played a part in determining how Annan treated his wife when he was angry as well as my decision never to marry. Every time Aththa broke a mudpot in his anger and walked away, it was left to you to search every nook and corner in the house for any stray broken bits and clean up the debris.

You were very particular about cooking Aththa's favourite dishes and preferred delicacies only when he was in the village. You wouldn't cook the sardines he disliked even if you and your children had a craving for them. Even if a procession of street hawkers passed our doorstep carrying basket after basket of sardines and we children begged you, you wouldn't buy some and cook them for us. Your entire life, you did only what pleased your husband.

You will certainly remember this. One day, I mentioned you and Father as the reason for my decision never to marry. You scolded me harshly. What do you know about the relationship between us, you snapped at me. It was definitely something you said only to appease me. Neither of us was confused or sceptical about what I had said. But I did notice that you tried to conduct yourself very discreetly after that day.

If there was any situation that would make Aththa scold you, you took all necessary precautions to avoid it. For example, when Aththa entered the house, you were not expected to be praying or watching television. If it happened, you were roundly abused. This was a regular occurrence and you had become used to it.

After the day I declined marriage forever, you avoided such situations with utmost care. I have no doubt that even Aththa would have been surprised by your behaviour in the days that followed. When he returned home, you were waiting for him at the doorstep. It was a drama enacted to remove all the distrust, hostility and suspicion that I had developed about the marital relationship. You didn't know that this drama put me off marriage even more.

Do you know why I am writing this letter to you? I am writing it because I am worried that my anger might turn into hatred, and my boundless love for you might begin to fade.

If my hatred grew or my love faded, I wouldn't even want to be alive, do you know that?

Though I have many questions to ask you, I stop myself from asking them because I am afraid that they might wound you.

I must have been ten at the time. A city-bred, educated woman of your age had arrived recently in our neighbour's home as daughter-in-law. Feeling bored in the evenings, she made it a habit to come and sit in our house. I could see that her visits made you really nervous. She was not nearly as beautiful as you. I would always compare both of you and feel happy about it. But I never failed to notice that you were uncomfortable with the English words she let drop now and then, the colours of the polish she used on her long nails and the well-starched and ironed-stiff cotton saris she wore.

Do you know something? Whenever she was there, you would pick up some weekly magazine and pretend to read it (though you merely gawked at the pictures,) and it made me want to wreak vengeance on this society. May this society, which didn't even manage to provide you basic education, I swore, go utterly to ruin.

Your nervousness seemed to confess that lack of access to all such things in your village life was somehow your fault. Since she didn't even seem to notice your discomfort, I wanted to stop her from coming to our house. But as a girl, I had no authority to stop her for no reason. I knew that you protected me by not letting even the shadow of Aththa's aversion for girl children fall on me. I also knew that he never wanted to give me anything that he gave freely to his male children. But you didn't know that I knew. You believed that you had somehow compensated for that discrimination with your love. I also realised that I couldn't separate my father from a society which believed that only male children were valuable as heirs.

Though I can't say exactly when I began to lose my conviction that girl children would never have a conflict with their mothers, I think it has to be the day you yelled at Sharmila for no apparent reason.

She didn't know that you always wanted the men of the household to eat first (being your daughter, I was the sole exception.) One day, when she stumbled upon me eating before Aththa and my brothers, she had her meal along with me because she was feeling hungry. It made you really furious. For all that, her family was not of a lower status than ours. She was a girl like me, somewhat close to my age. All the privileges you granted me in our house, she also enjoyed in hers. She might have enjoyed a few more, but not less. You knew this. Even so, I realised that as a mother-in-law, you would have expected her to behave like a daughter-in-law in our house. But the way you treated her and your hostility over a trivial issue – in my view, it *was* a trivial issue– was something new in you I had never encountered before. When I saw for the first time that there was another side to you that was harsh and ruthless, I was frightened.

Once, when Ansari's mother failed to give me a share of the biriyani they had cooked for a feast in my in-laws' house, your anger knew no limits. I am reminded of it right now. My mother-in-law had not done it deliberately. Since the number of guests on that day had gone up unexpectedly, there wasn't enough biriyani left for the women of the household. But you saw it as a serious lapse and called my mother-in-law a low and despicable woman in front of my husband. You had converted what I had casually shared with you into a grave problem. You should have seen the contempt on Ansari's face when he looked at me that day. I cringed horribly from the shame and humiliation. Since I had observed your gentle ways and how abominably my father treated you, I was indeed surprised at your conduct on that day. I also kept trying to see and understand it from a different perspective. Even so, every now and then, I would unavoidably compare you with my mother-in-law and feel bad about it. Since it wasn't such a happy comparison, it often made me feel weary and dejected.

You were the one who forced me to compare my mother with my mother-in-law. Do you know how terrible I felt because of that?

Though Ansari tried his best to be a good husband, his drinking habit had created a rift between us. You had abused your own son-in-law indiscriminately at the time. Even if you didn't say anything to him directly, you never refrained from making unsavoury remarks obliquely, but within his earshot. I knew that the underlying motive for your behaviour was your apprehension about your daughter's future. Even so, I never reduced Ansari's image to that of an evil man or someone who never loved me just because of his drinking habit. His

love for me was immeasurable. He had never stopped doing things that would bring me joy. With or without his mother's knowledge, he would lovingly buy me many gifts. Whenever my sister-in-law tried to intervene or say something nasty, there were no comments at all from my mother-in-law. 'We were also like them at that age.' I was quite surprised that an illiterate village woman like her displayed such a wise attitude.

At that time, you had yet to attain the status of mother-in-law. So, there was no occasion to compare you with her. But today, I've become a seasoned expert in making comparisons.

It was the day of Deepavali festival. When Ansari came home that night after a feast hosted by some of his Hindu friendswhere he had downed a few drinks, you had wailed loudly in the courtyard for all to hear that your daughter's life was ruined. Poor Ansari felt humiliated. It was yesterday's incident which reminded me of that day.

You know how weak your son, my brother, is when it comes to liquor. He had developed relations with some women labourers who came to work in his plantation,but you concealed those liaisons and arranged a marriage for him. You know those liaisons continue to this day. Nevertheless, whenever Sharmila had a row with Annan on that front, you would say, 'Yes. He is a man and so he will keep straying. Don't make such a song-and-dance about it,' and find fault with your daughter-in-law in the matter.

I tried to understand your stance as a mother's reluctance to admit her son's shortcomings before a third person. I believed that it would dull the intensity of my rancour. Whenever I feel bitterness or hatred towards you, the only thing that can get me out of it is a memory of the childhood that you wanted to give me.

Dear Amma, do you remember how you tried in so many ways to sow bitterness in Annan about his wife by complaining about the thinness of her sari, about her leaving her head uncovered, about how she stood before the shop assistant boys and talked to them with powder and lipstick on her face. You formed a critical opinion on every little thing she did and managed in just one or two words to implant them in your son's head, almost as if in passing. Where did you learn to be so clever? I have never seen you try out any of these smart moves with Aththa. Were they hiding inside your head all these years? Though they surprise me every time, I look forward to them always.

If you had shown even a little of this smartness while dealing with your husband, I would have been the first person to feel happy. But it was never to be.

My dislike or loveless attitude towards youis gradually taking on an ashen veneer, in the same way spoilt food items are covered by ash-coloured fungi.

Many were the times I watched helplessly as you moved past all the betrayals your husband heaped on you, with only a faint tinge of bitterness. I had expected at least some difference between the way you handled his oppressive behaviour, threats and insults and the way you moved on from his betrayals.

There was never any loving intimacy between you and Aththa. My brothers and I had always seen you act servile under his domination. And for that reason, we always felt reinforced in our anger towards Aththa and love for you. Like you, we too had believed that a day would come when he would be more kind and patient with you. But even after our childhood and youth were over, that day never arrived.

We wished you would show your opposition to him in some manner, but it never happened. We expected you to express something like outrage or resistance. We were surprised that we couldn't see such emotions in you as come easily even to an average woman. We wondered about this for many years, with a sense of pity and regret for your plight.

But we didn't know then that you had indeed expressed your anger and retaliated against your husband. If we had known it then, what would your sons have thought about it and how would they have behaved with you? As for me, I would have been very happy.

It is true that after a long lull, an incident today made me angry with you. I wouldn't say that this anger was born in a day. I understand it as something that was formed within me, in small, subtle ways, through a series of incidents on many different days.

Sharmila did all the household chores like an ox. You have yourself said 'like an ox' to me several times. There was only one problem though: she kept the house and kitchen as shabby and cluttered as a junk shop. She didn't know how to tidy up the spot there and then. I never considered it a major problem. I worked like that myself, and my mother-in-law would aim barbs at me now and then about this lapse. But it was a gigantic problem for you. Whenever a visitor dropped in, you made it a point to lead them straight to the kitchen, point to its disorderly state and draw a comparison with yourself.

Do you know how such behaviour increased my distaste for you?

How did you have the heart to turn incidents in our house into exhibits for display to outsiders? I really couldn't understand it. Why should the affairs in our kitchen circulate through the whole village?

I do understand that these humiliations you heaped on Sharmila as a mother-in-law were the result of the deep flaws in our family-centred social structure. I thought that there was nothing major in it for me to worry about.

But I would never want to intervene in such situations. If I was supportive of one person, I would incur the displeasure of the other. Unfortunately, since the other person who was going to be hurt was you on most occasions, I chose to remain silent.

One day, Ansari and I had come by on a visit to our house. You had bought a lot of river fish because I liked to eat it. Pilchard was a particular favourite. You sent Sharmila to the backyard to clean the fish. There you had fixed a stone slab on the ground with a water tap above, especially for rubbing and cleaning fish. Before Sharmila came to live in our house, you, Saramma and I would sit in the shade of the neem tree and clean the fish. On that day, because Saramma hadn't come in to work, you asked Sharmila to do the job. Wearing a sour expression on her face, Sharmila turned abruptly and walked to the yard.

I, too, wanted to go with her to clean the fish. But I stayed put because I didn't want to upset you. Sharmila's scowling face made you really furious. You got up suddenly, walked to the garden and stood before Sharmila. 'Do you know who I am, the life I've lived and the status I enjoy? How dare you scowl at me?' You growled at her and came back.

I heard it too. I felt very bad. It was then that you heard Sharmila muttering something in reply and it fell on my ears too. Just one phrase: 'Oh yes, it's true that I don't really know your worth.' Since I didn't understand the subtext of this statement, I sat there feeling somewhat sad at the unpleasant exchange. But you were furious and shaken. I could see it in that moment.

Somehow I felt that the exchange between you and Sharmila was conducted in a language only the two of you could understand. In the days that followed, you began to employ all the tactics typical of a mother-in-law. I felt increasingly worried as I witnessed the escalating harshness of your manoeuvres.

You included Annan, who was already disenchanted with his wife, in your war game. I wondered if you would have been so angry and full of hatred if Aththa had been alive.

If he were still alive, your entire attention would have been forced to revolve around him. All your waking hours would have been consumed by the effort to manage him and cope with his moods and demands. You wouldn't have had an occasion or even a minute to complain about what your daughter-in-law was doing or not doing. Or, as you once said, the love and affection between you might have helped you both to guide and discipline each other in old age. Even now, the only entity I want to spit on and wreak vengeance on is this society itself.

How can you expect an old man who is twice your age to live with you till the end of your days? How is it even possible? Why shouldn't we spit on a society that doesn't even give a chance for that possibility to exist?

I was worried that the pressures you had to endure and the anger and contempt poured on you over a lifetime would turn you into an eccentric person. It's a worry that torments me even today.

Your weak muscles and creaking, swollen knee that glints like a waxed apple do not permit me to chastise you. I know how feeble your body and mind have become over the years. I witnessed their decline as I was growing up. I have seen you walk into a wide swathe of paddy and briskly turn the grain over with your feet. It is not such an easy thing to do. My brother and I have seen you spin around, moving your feet effortlessly under a stack of paddy that was two feet high, and stir up the grain. We tried to do the same with our little feet and failed.

I have to accept that you have become weak before your time, like ten-year-old girls attaining puberty these days. In our time, we had to wait till 13 or 14. Strangely, our women feel happy about girls attaining puberty at the age of ten because it's easy to get them married off early.

You, too, must accept premature ageing in the same spirit. One day last week, you went to attend a wedding in our locality. After a daughter-in-law came to our house, you go out rarely.

If anyone told you, 'Now that there is a daughter-in-law in the house, you can leave her in charge of the house and visit a few places,' you would say, 'it's now that I feel like my feet are in chains. My daughter-in-law is not at all responsible; so I am taking care of everything in the house, including her.' You made a big fuss, as if someone picked up a household lying by the roadside and placed it on your shoulders. You had such a put-upon expression on your face.

When I saw your bluster that day, I was very annoyed. You acted as though your house was as big as Buckingham Palace and there were a thousand things in it you had to look after. All your words and actions seemed to turn on your fear that Sharmila should not take away any of the invaluable treasures piled up in there. Fortunately, I don't recall my own mother-in-law monitoring me in this absurd manner.

When you came back the other day from a betrothal ceremony in the neighbourhood, you had an impassive expression on your face for a long time. You looked totally lifeless. You appeared exhausted from your thoughts running helter-skelter in all directions. After a long period of silence, you said: 'Do you remember that educated daughter-in-law from our neighbour's house? She was at this betrothal ceremony today.'

No one in the village, including me, had seen her in a long time. You said, 'She is still as fresh and good-looking as she was in those days. There was not a strand of grey hair on her head as she entered, walking on sandals with slightly high heels.' From the way you stressed on

those *slightly* high heels, you meant that she was no longer suffering from chronic knee pain and I should not think that she was wearing *really* high heels.

Though losing one's youth is an experience common to everyone, the recognition that someone of your own age was in better shape than you were, certainly made you feel dejected. I thought that the sense of regret you brought back from that encounter was excessive as well as unnecessary. But I couldn't impose my opinion on you; I wouldn't want to, either.

You always wanted our house to be full of women from the neighbouring houses. You couldn't bear to be alone in that house. I didn't like your serving tea to women from all over the village, but you made Sharmila work to do this all the time. Usually, making tea for everyone in the house was Saramma's job. But you deliberately changed that after your daughter-in-law joined the household. It was a clever move because now you were able to show the visitors that you could command your daughter-in-law to do your bidding.

You ordered her to make tea separately for each of your guests. An unexpected outcome of this charade was that a few of your guests ended up telling you things that hurt you to the quick.

'Your daughter-in-law is very beautiful, just like you. And she treats her mother-in-law as respectfully as you did when you were young.' They never said such things about me, your daughter. If they did, you would be over the moon. But when they had words of praise for your daughter-in-law, it seemed to fill you with bitterness and rage. I couldn't help wondering why. When you were grieving already that you had aged too soon, their words could only aggravate you further.

While you were still brooding that you had already lost one-half of your son's complete affection, your hostility towards the young woman who was entitled to receive the other half too was so intense that it could not be gauged or understood by my tiny heart and brain.

One day you had gone to visit your cousin Said, who had returned from the Haj a few days earlier. When you came home, you left the gifts he had sent with you for the family – a box of dates, zam zam holy water, prayer mat, cap, chanting bell and two black burqas – on the sofa and went away to wash up before the next prayer.

I was at my in-laws' that evening. By the time I visited our house the next day, a lot had happened in relation to the burqas. After seeing those two burqas, Annan had asked Sharmila to pick one for herself. Though both burqas were equally attractive, embedded with white and pale blue gemstones, one had extra work done around the neck, with plenty of embedded ornamental stones like a necklace. Like most women, Sharmila selected that one for herself.

Annan wasn't aware of the difference between the two burqas. Both were just burqas as far as he was concerned. I learnt later from Sharmila that the way you behaved and the harsh words you spoke after Annan left were simply beyond belief.

You had two issues. One, Annan had given her the right to choose; two, instead of leaving the better one for me, her sister-in-law, she had chosen it for herself.

Both were unacceptable to you, and you shouted at her for a long time. How can a burqa be good or bad? They are all the same, aren't they? My only fear is that such petty issues should not end up destroying the intimacy between us.

I wandered for a long time in the indeterminate zone between loving you and hating you.

My problem is that I am able to infer the objective behind whatever you do. Once I've understood your calculations, I begin to wonder whether I can thwart your objective by performing other calculations to counter yours.

If you come to know that I have so many grievances against you, what would you think and how would you react? Will you be angry with me? Now and then, I do think along those lines. Though I certainly don't intend to send this letter to you, what if you come to know or find out by chance that my complaints and grouses against you are so endless and so accurate? I wonder if you will hate me or get angry with me. Certainly not. You might perhaps feel intolerably sad but you won't rage at me.

Nor will you stop rubbing oil into my scalp once a week and stubbornly persuading me to eat regularly. Engaging yourself in activities that sustain me is an integral part of your life.

But you never had any expectation of developing the same kind of relationship with your sons.

For many years now, I have wanted to embrace and kiss you to express my love. Even though there have been many opportunities for realising that wish, I have let them pass because I am too shy.

In our culture, we are not accustomed to embracing anyone except the husband to express our love. So I have never done this with you.

But I have embraced your mother and cried often as she lay unconscious in her final days. I have smelled the special odour of the elderly on her. But when I realise I have never once put my arms around you and held you, I feel ashamed.

I worry that there may not be any opportunities to do that in the future too, because I am afraid that my anger could come in the way.

I have silently witnessed the occasions when minor lapses like a lack of salt in the food, forgetting to bring back the salted pickle drying on the terrace before the rain, and less tamarind in the kuzhambu were turned into the equivalent of heinous murders.

Even if a coffee tumbler was left unwashed on the kitchen counter, your mental state would convert it into a horrible crime. Amma, I simply couldn't bear to witness your torment and agony.

This way of living has given you the neurosis of converting even trivial issues into gigantic problems. How to find a remedy for it is my main worry.

I know that it wouldn't be fair to fault you alone for this situation or to become angry with you. That's why I have changed myself and converted my anger to grievance against you.

I have seen you at work in the kitchen. You functioned in such a fine, elegant, smooth, subtle, measured and harmonious way, like a machine. Machines never grimace at anyone. Beyond everything, I also detected a certain pride in your face.

Countless years, making countless dosais, biriyanis, kurumas, idiyappams, idlis, parathas, chips, curries – even after having cooked so much, you exuded a relaxed sense ofsatisfaction. You could spend any number of hours toiling in the kitchen just for a few words of praise from someone.

While you never expected me to be as skilled and adept as you, it is so unfair that you expect it from your daughter-in-law and feel disappointed. It's such a ridiculous expectation.

You saw Sharmila only as a thoughtless woman from a shabby family and found fault with her all the time. For some reason, she didn't seem to be very angry with you. She was truly

thoughtless, perhaps. All she did was mutter to herself as usual. In her place, I wouldn't have let you get away with it. My mother-in-law is much more reasonable than you. Unlike you, she didn't have to bring up ten younger siblings during her childhood. Unlike you, she had not been harassed and tormented by her husband throughout her life. This could also be the reason why she is far more amenable. By comparing both lives and balancing the arithmetic on both sides, I try to tone down my anger.

At some point that I cannot reckon precisely, your petty rage and the nature of your hatred morphed into a desire to drive her away.

Was it from the time she said those words on that day while cleaning the fish? I couldn't say. But you were adamant that she had to be thrown out of our house.

Although I sensed that there must have been something in those words that only you and she were privy to, I did not wish to speculate further.

But you were the prime mover. Sharmila was eventually driven out of our house as you wished.

Although Sharmila was thrown out for many reasons in addition to your intense hostility, only one reason was made public. It was broadcast all over the village that she could never have children. But only you knew the real reason why you had thrown her out. Your son was a naive man. You made him believe that missing or highly irregular monthly periods indicated the woman's barrenness. You told him that there were a few tests and treatments available for her condition and that she could get them done at her parents' home. Sharmila was sent away on such a pretext.

You could tell that story to the village, but you couldn't spin even a line of that yarn to me. How inconvenient it must be for you, I wonder. The house is filled with a vacuum that you created with your stories. That house in which you are living alone now brings you relief at the same time as it makes me acutely uncomfortable. I am not crazy to be part of that empty space. There is little I can do other than going away from there, firmly suppressing my anger and grievance against you.

One day, both of us were sitting on the platform in the kitchen and talking about village affairs.

Your face was red and shiny like a ripe pomegranate. Fat jowls hanging down on both sides of your face marred the elegance of your features.

You asked Sharmila: 'Have they settled on a bride for your brother?' I had also heard the news from my mother-in-law. An urgent denial from Sharmila, accompanied by a vigorous shake of the head, and the words: 'Oh, that! I believe they are talking to the other party, but nothing has been finalised as yet.'

This set off a fury in you like I had never seen before. 'Shut your mouth. I am their sambandi. How can your mother-in-law finalise anything secretly without consulting me? But you don't treat your mother-in-law with any sense of decorum or respect. Can I expect such things from you? Do I even need to? I'll ask around in the village and find out.

'It's my bad luck. I care nothing for your lot. Go away.'

I certainly didn't relish the power you sought to wield as their sambandi and the way you talked to her, as if your daughter-in-law's family didn't have the right to keep a private matter to themselves.

Enough, Amma. Through all these incidents I had to recall to write this letter, I have reached an orbit of confusion in my mind. I have investigated and discovered a few solid reasons for

being angry with you or hating you. Those reasons can make me terribly anxious or fearful. I am afraid that this state of mind might do me serious harm. I am selfishly concerned that I must not lose your affection. It is out of this fear and anxiety that I choose to end this letter. If I don't do it now, I am afraid this unsent letter might stray from the endless grievances I've nursed against you and travel in a totally different direction. That direction could be one of anger, I tell myself.

I know that you might have serious complaints against me. I've challenged everything you've done, especially your treatment of Sharmila, but you have cleverly avoided betraying your feelings to me. Not inclined to respond to any of my questions, you turn your face away and wear an expression of contemptuous silence. Your silence can be truly distressing to me.

You know how irresponsibly I have often behaved at home. You would even say that I behaved 'like a young lad'. Your remark would always be tinged with a mix of pride and anxiety.

I have never picked up a household utensil without dropping it, and I have never handled any beverage without spilling it.

Earlier, you never got angry about my clumsiness, but when you did later, I was able to face it. (I know that when I argued in support of Sharmila and because I criticised some of your actions, you tried to find fault with me.)

I am not uncertain about whether Sharmila will come back or not. I know that the doors have been shut against her return. If her periods don't become regular through treatment, there is no chance of her coming back. You are not a fool to allow something you don't want to happen. Yes, I realised recently that you are not as naive or foolish as I had thought.

There is only one problem, and I do think of it as a challenge.

Amma, I find myself at a point that can bring me the biggest sorrow of my life. I must not begin to hate you. The anger I have nursed against you must dissolve like the mists of snow.

These days, the confusion, hate, fear, despair, doubt, humiliation and anger roiling in my mind have enclosed me like a giant web revolving around me. Like a madwoman, I've been trapped by all kinds of anxieties. Your actions have demolished all the fortifications I had erected around myself.

In my mind I line up all the reasons – excuses, really – I have tried to invent to justify every action of yours and to appease myself. Being truly farcical, they laugh derisively at me. Where would I fit those calculations designed just to deceive myself?

In the truths that grate on my mind, I experience, even today, many moments when I plunge into melancholy.

Like our doubts, our depressions are also profound. Moving past them is like going up a one-way street. I encounter mine, nearly always, in a helpless state. Like a nightmare stuck fast with glue in the depths of my mind, it refuses to leave me.

As usual, our family got together for the annual Ramzan feast. On our long dining table (which had come to us as part of Sharmila's dowry), an assortment of dishes including mutton biriyani, fried chicken, sweet chutney and yoghurt khichdi were arranged in rows. Before we took our seats at the table, I reminded myself that Sharmila had been present at the Ramzan feast for the last two years. Though she would have liked to be with her family for Ramzan, Annan did not allow her to go. She could leave only after the feast in our house.

It wasn't a condition born out of love. I know that you wanted her to help you with the household work; she knew it too.

This time, I was deeply embarrassed by her absence; the food refused to go down my throat.

No one else seemed to remember that a person called Sharmila had been present here earlier, or be troubled by her absence. I wasn't surprised, nor had I expected anyone to remember her. But it made me very sad.

That a person who was with us once is unfortunately not there today can make us very sad, but the fact that it didn't trouble you at all filled me with loathing and contempt.

I would never think lightly of the pain caused by someone's absence. It could perhaps be just my problem. That I tend to think of it as others' problem as well must be due to my ignorance. But how could I think of you and my brother as outsiders? That man had chased away his wife who had lived with him in the same house for four years and was oblivious to her absence now. When I saw him, it brought my blood close to boiling point.

After throwing out someone who was an obedient maid helping with household responsibilities, you limp around carrying that burden along with your chronic knee-pain without appearing to be aggrieved or perturbed. I feel really annoyed when I see you like that.

Dear mother, I am unable to understand what strange calculation must have prompted your decision to throw Sharmila out of our house. But I have absolutely no doubt that your decision was wrong.

These days, I remember Aththa quite often. I can't help feeling that had he been alive, he might have scolded you and Annan and stopped you from sending Sharmila away. Since he always had to do something to neutralise anything you did, I believe he wouldn't have allowed it to happen. You have created an opportunity for me to remember my father, a man I never liked very much. That the opportunity has been created because of you is very unfortunate for me.

I couldn't eat the Ramzan feast that day. The food wouldn't go down my throat. But you didn't know that. Since I sat down to eat with Ansari, you avoided being in the presence of your son-in-law. So you didn't know that I hadn't eaten properly.

Since Sharmila's family didn't bother about all your efforts to show your authority as their sambandi, you were compelled to demonstrate your authority as mother-in-law and act in that horrible way.

The rancour you had accumulated over the years like an ant gathering food bit by bit exploded one day. The words Sharmila aimed at you on that day pushed you to the limits of your anger. Though I couldn't really understand or guess the meaning of those words, I couldn't accept them either, whatever they might have meant.

You can't count on me for the support you need for the triumph you want so badly. You can celebrate Sharmila's ouster as the fulfilment of your wish, but it is very far from being a triumph. I would never want to accept a triumph forged on the defeat and pain of others. Just as I didn't accept the triumph of Aththa who tried to establish it by wielding power over you, I won't accept this either.

Dear Amma. You ensured that Sharmila too was subjected to the oppression you suffered in your own life. Since you are conscious of the violence that was your lot and know how it tastes, you should swallow and digest it completely. Don't ever think of giving it to anybody

else. What you want to give is not a gift. The anger you faced, the violence unleashed on you, and the extreme neglect, must have pained you. How would it be fair if you wanted to give the same pain to someone else as a gift?

Simple people like us would like to share whatever comes our way (except material things, perhaps) with others. Love, anger, power, rejection – we want to share much of what we have received with others. That's how I would like to understand all your actions.

I wonder if you have ever thought about the grief you've visited on your son, whom you claim to love more than your life. It is true that he doesn't have much love or concern for his wife, but you have never tried to ensure that he has a binding commitment in life.

Do you realise that you are behaving in a way that suits his irresponsible nature? You can't be unaware that the void you've created in his life will provoke him to even greater self-destruction, and lead him deeper into the slough of irresponsibility. Even more serious, I can't believe that hostilities and triumphs have become so important to you.

These days, you keep the anger that you cannot unleash on anyone entirely to yourself and nurse it inside you. One day, when I chanced on you fuming and muttering in our dingy kitchen, I was so deeply hurt that I broke down and wept.

When I unexpectedly ran into Sharmila last night, I was taken aback. I had gone to a nursing home to seek treatment for my fever; she too had come there with her ailing mother. When I moved closer with the intention of accosting her, she turned her face away as if to reject my gesture. I saw in her mother's eyes an expression of irrevocable hatred aimed at me.

They looked at me as though I was the culprit. When I thought about it, I had to accept that it might seem that way from their point of view.

They entered the doctor's chamber ahead of me and were about to leave the nursing home after their consultation. I wanted to follow them out but I hesitated for a few seconds. With a slight nod of her head, Sharmila invited me to follow them. I half-ran to catch up with them and stood directly before them. By then, we had moved from the nursing home entrance onto the street.

Since it was eight in the evening, the street was dark. When I asked Sharmila, 'How are you?' it must have sounded like a sham greeting to her. She stood there, staring at my face. I could see the confusion and tension that hung between Sharmila and her mother, over which of them should respond to my greeting.

Sharmila spoke first: 'So, is your mother happy now? Ask her to sleep with her son, just as she slept with your uncle.'

Those words that came leaping out of her mouth hit me and knocked me down. When Sharmila and her mother walked on without looking back, I squatted in the middle of the street. I needed a few minutes to realise that more than the anger in her words, it was what she said that had knocked me down.

Amma, your loving daughter who has been distressed by her anger towards you wants, this day, this minute, to shower boundless affection on you. After getting rid of all my anger, I would like to take you in my arms and kiss you lovingly, passionately.

The affair that Sharmila used to insult you, that troubled you so much and prompted you to hide it from me, that you believed would make your children hate you if they came to know about it, for that one thing, because you had hit back at my father, because you had tried in your own small way to live your life in a society that had degraded your life, and above all,

because you believe that you had done something wrong, I want to put my arms around you and fold you in a passionate embrace.

I have just one reason for embracing you despite all my complaints. Here I come, Amma, to hug you and kiss you. Before I do that, I am going to tear up this letter that I was never going to send to you.

Read the Tamil original, Kuzhappathin Sutrupathai*, here.*

Contributors

1. **Sayed Haider Raza (1922–2016)** was one of modern India's greatest painters and abstractionists. He was born in Babaria, Madhya Pradesh and spent most of his life in Paris, before returning to Delhi in 2010.

2. **Ashok Vajpeyi** is a popular Hindi poet, essayist and critic. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1994 for his poetry collection Kahin Nahin Wahin. He returned the award in 2015 as a gesture of protest against increasing intolerance in the country.

3. **Saba Hasan** is a multidisciplinary artist. She has worked on book installations, photographs, paintings, videos and sound since 1998. She has an M.A. in cultural anthropology with certification in art/ art history from the Ecole d'Arts Visuels, Lausanne, and Cambridge University. Her work was showcased at the 55th Venice Biennale at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, as part of the Imago Mundi Collection (2013). She received the Raza National Award for painting in 2005 and international fellowships for the 'Book of Disquiet' from Syracuse University, New York; the French Cultural Ministry, Paris (2006); the George Keyt Foundation (2002) and the Oscar Kokoschka Academy, Salzburg (2010).

4. **Sukrita Paul Kumar** is a well-known poet, translator and educator. She held the Aruna Asaf Ali Chair at Delhi University till recently, and has been a fellow of the International Writing Programme in Iowa, USA, the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, and the Hong Kong Baptist University. She is an honorary faculty member of the Durrell Centre at Corfu, Greece. Her books include Dream Catcher, Untitled, Poems Come Home (with Hindustani translations of her poems by Gulzar), Narrating Partition, Conversations on Modernism and The New Story.

5. **Ashwani Kumar** is a poet and professor of development studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and a senior fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research. He is author of the acclaimed non-fiction work Community Warriors (Anthem Press, 2008). His poems have appeared in Indian Literature, Muse India, Post-Colonial Text, International Gallerie and the Dhauli Review, among other publications. He has published two volumes of poetry, My Grandfather's Imaginary Typewriter (Yeti Books, 2014) and Banaras and the Other (Poetrywala, 2017).

6. **Susmit Panda** was born in 1996. He began composing poetry at the age of fifteen. Since then he's been trotting out poems recklessly and his first book, titled 50 Arteries, was published in 2016.

7. **Anuja Ghosalkar** is an actor, writer and director based in Bangalore. Drama Queen, her documentary theatre company focuses on oral histories, personal narratives and archival material to extend the idea of theatre that unsettles the status quo.

8. **K. Srilata** is a poet, fiction writer, and professor of English at IIT Madras. Her collections of poems include Bookmarking the Oasis, Writing Octopus, Arriving Shortly and Seablue Child. She co-edited the anthology Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry. Her novel Table for Four, longlisted in 2009 for the Man Asian literary prize, was published by Penguin.

9. **Ranbir Kaleka's** work reflects a view of the world that is highly internalised and appears to place much reliance on the juxtaposition of improbabilities. In iterations of figurative painting and sculpture the relationship with the metaphysical and surrealist imagination is oblique rather than direct; he incorporates personal experience with wider and more general issues. A later body of work sees him as a painter of expressionist fabulism. The artist's movement into video art, in which he projected video onto a painted canvas, has been an essential endeavour in his further exploration of the 'psychological event', one which can take place only outside the physical confines of the frame of the painting, through the use of light to create the image and the subsequent aura of the image. Kaleka has also created and exhibited constructed photographs, sculptures and installations. The artist's work has been widely exhibited in India and abroad.

10**. Kanji Patel's** published works include novellas, short stories and poetry. He is editor of Vahi, a journal of poetry, ritual, and the multilingual expression of society. He has also edited the Gujarat volume of the People's Linguistic Survey of India (Orient BlackSwan, 2016) led by Ganesh Devy.

11. **Rupalee Burke** heads the English department in a college in Ahmedabad and uses her writing/ translation/ editing/ research skills for cultural activism. Her translations of works by writers of the Dalit, Adivasi, and denotified nomadic communities have been published as anthologies, and in journals such as Indian Literature and Muse India.

12. **Vanamala Viswanatha**, an award-winning translator, has translated into English important modern Kannada writers such as Vaidehi, Anantamurthy, Lankesh, and Sara Aboobacker. Vanamala, who has also served as honorary director of the Centre for Translation, Sahitya Akademi, and member of the National Translation Mission, has taught English language and literature in several premier institutions in Bengaluru.

13. **Rollie Mukherjee** is an artist and critic based in Baroda. She studied at Visva Bharathi, Shantiniketan, and the Maharaja Sayyaji Rao University in Baroda. Her work has been exhibited in numerous solo and group shows in India and abroad.

14. **Manash Bhattacharjee's** poems have appeared in The London Magazine, the New Welsh Review, The Fortnightly Review, the Elohi Gadugi Journal, Mudlark, Metamorphoses, Modern Poetry in Translation, The Postcolonialist, and The Indian Quarterly. His first collection of poetry, Ghalib's Tomb and Other Poems (2013) was published by The London Magazine. He teaches at the School of Culture and Creative Expressions in the Ambedkar University, New Delhi.

15. **Chandan Gowda** teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. He has recently translated UR Ananthamurthy's story, Bara (Oxford Univ Press, 2016) and edited, The Post Office of Abachooru, a book of short stories of the Kannada writer, Purnachandra Tejasvi (forthcoming, HarperCollins, 2018). A Life in the World, a book of autobiographical interviews he did with UR Ananthamurthy will be published later this year (HarperCollins, 2017). He has also edited Theatres of Democracy: Selected Essays of Shiv Visvanathan (Harper Collins, 2016). He is presently completing a book on the cultural politics of development in old Mysore state and a fictional work on the legendary engineer, Sir M Visvesvaraya.

16. **K. Satchidanandan** is a widely translated Malayalam poet and a bilingual writer, translator and editor. His most recent works available in English are While I Write and

Misplaced Objects and Other Poems. For more on the author and his work see satchidanandan.com.

17. **Orijit Sen** is a graphic artist, cartoonist, muralist and designer. He is author of the graphic novel River of Stories as well as many other works of graphic fiction and non-fiction. He is one of the founders of People Tree, a collaborative studio and store for artists, designers and craftspeople. Sen is also Mario Miranda Chair Visiting Professor at Goa University.

18. **Salma** is a well-known name to readers of contemporary Tamil literature. With two volumes of poetry – Oru Maalaiyum Innoru Maalaiyum and Pacchai Devadai – and a novel – Irandaam Jaamangalin Kadhai – all of which have been translated to several languages, Salma has made her mark as a distinctive literary voice. Lakshmi Holmstrom's English translation of her novel, entitled The Hour Past Midnight, was recently shortlisted for the Crossword Book Prize. Salma's poetry and fiction have carved an undeniable place in the Tamil literary terrain for the articulation of desire and sexuality as well as the emotions that animate the domestic space every day, subjects that are often considered beneath literary consideration.

19. **N Kalyan Raman** is a Chennai-based translator of contemporary Tamil fiction and poetry into English. He has published nine volumes of Tamil fiction in translation, with two more books forthcoming in the near future. He has also translated over 200 poems by leading contemporary Tamil poets, published in journals and anthologies in India and abroad. He also regularly contributes essays, reviews and articles on literature, culture and public policy. In February 2017, he received the prestigious Pudumaipithan award for the year 2015, given by Vilakku, for his contribution to Tamil literature through his translations.

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