

Issue 22

Guftugu

C u l t u r e m a t t e r s



MP Pratheesh, from 'Language', object poetry, pieces of terracotta collected from the relics of an old building, 2020

Image © MP Pratheesh.

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.

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Our Team

Consulting Editors

K. Satchidanandan
Githa Hariharan

Editorial Collective

Daniya Rahman
Varda Dixit

Site

Shweta Jain

Design, Art and Layout

Srujana K

Advisory Panel

Adil Jussawalla
Anand
Gulammohammed Sheikh
Jerry Pinto
M. Mukundan
N.S. Madhavan
Orijit Sen
Shubha Mudgal

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From the Editors

Occupation by Other Means



Vasudha Thozhur, 'Old Practices New Landscapes', 2020

In *The Anxieties of the State*, Bertolt Brecht narrates an episode from Nazi times. When a foreign visitor to Germany is asked who rules this country, he replies, 'Fear.' A visitor to India today may not have a different answer. There is the fear of the state; and the fear of the pandemic. Each one of us can discover the link between these two fears. Each one of us can see how emergency powers during this health crisis are abused by the State to further its authoritarian goals.

The story of fear began before the pandemic.

Already: the laws to protect the environment and forests have been diluted to help the corporate invasion of land. RTI rules have been rendered toothless by exempting several areas

and institutions from its purview, including the PM Cares Fund. Rules that infringe on the workers' rights to protest have been passed. The Citizenship Amendment Act has been introduced. Article 370 of the Constitution that gave special status to Jammu & Kashmir has been removed.

The story of fear grows, it spreads with the pandemic.

Now, under cover of Covid 19: the Government of India has passed the three farmers' bills. These bills will turn farmers into the slaves of the corporates, who will dictate what should be produced and the prices at which they should be sold. The New Education Policy will take hold, replacing a focus on ethics, values and constitutional rights with careerist orientations. The door for privatisation will be kept wide open. Hindutva-oriented brain-washing will be legitimised. It will foreground the technocrats and bureaucrats the neo-liberal economy demands. In a recent instance, a notorious ex-Gujarat home-minister was sent to Lakshadweep as the new Administrator. He administered the disturbance of its peace; he allowed the government and rich investors to take over the people's land for a kind of 'development' that the people simply do not want.

Is this anti-people coalition of Hindutva and corporate forces turning India into a colony by its present rulers? That the rulers have been elected to govern does not in any way condone anti-constitutional acts that subvert our whole federal system of governance. Indeed, it points to a major malaise in our polity. Where is the probity, the accountability, once a party or coalition gains 'electoral majority' and is invited to form the government? Let us not forget that Nazism was 'National Socialism', and that party too was elected by the people. Does this fact make Nazi crimes less horrid or punishable? Perhaps we need to redefine the very idea of *occupation*. Its protagonists could easily be the enemies of the people within the country who have, through false propaganda, gained political ascendancy. And who treat the people exactly as the colonial rulers treated those they regarded as 'subjects'.

The first casualty in such regimes is language: every word begins to suggest its opposite, creating a whole new anti-lexicon of lies, thus rendering honest writing impossible. This is another form of occupation. No wonder many writers left Germany during the Third Reich, because they could no longer express truth in a language filled with untruth. If language is the house of being (as defined by Heidegger), and that house is occupied by Goebbels, honest writers can no longer live there. They may have to torture language to make it tell the truth. This is what Slavoj Zizek points out in a recent essay on jingoistic poetry, 'The Poetic Torture-House of Language'. Indian writers too may soon have to invent new languages to speak truth to power.

K Satchidanandan
Githa Hariharan

June 2021

The Symbol

Vaasanthi

Translated by Sukanya Venkataraman



Kelly Reedy, 'Shadow in My Eye', aquatint, embossing and assemblage on paper, 40cm x 40cm, 2012

It seemed as if someone was standing in the landing. It also seemed no one was there. The sun had never managed to penetrate the landing, which stood beyond the four front steps and the small corridor. Not since this house was built. One needed to carry a lamp to see the visitor's face. At least until the house was electrified. A small chimney lamp used to burn in the pooja room constantly for this purpose. One could only see a person's face after they had moved into

the courtyard beyond the landing. Now, it seemed someone was definitely standing in the landing.

Soundari Ammal's back remained curved in her easy chair as she lifted her head and said, "Who is that?"

No one visited unannounced. Definitely not strangers. They needed a certain standing to even step into Soundari Ammal's house. Who might this be? Could it be Chellappa? If so, why was he standing in the landing? He would have taken off his slippers and quickly entered the house. Soundari Ammal covered her shoulder with her sari with some difficulty. She wore no blouse. It was getting extremely hard to insert her hand into a blouse. Anyway, hadn't the blouse only been introduced recently? If someone came to visit from Chennai, she would ask Sabapathy's wife Karpagam or their daughter Mallika to help her wear a blouse. Now it seemed like someone was standing in the landing. What could she do if someone visited out of the blue?

"Hey Karpagam... Mallika... it looks like someone is standing in the landing." The words were soundless. Soundari Ammal felt a mild panic. Why wasn't she able to use her voice? "Mallika, Karpagam, Sabapathy."

The words rose from the pit of her stomach and were buried in her heart. The clear bronze-like voice. The bell-like voice. The exceptional voice. What had happened to her much-acclaimed voice? Soundari Ammal struggled to say the words again and again. She could not utter a sound.

Someone in the landing... suddenly, she knew. Light spread in a circle, as if a curtain were lifting. Ah, our Dhanam. In her Benaras silk sari and traditional nose ring – her feet together, her hands outstretched, her face expressive –

Varugalaamo? May I come — tossing and dance?? The song combined with tiny cymbals resonated and flooded her. Soundari Ammal melted. Her eyes filled and her head and hands moved in rhythm to the song.

The song flooded from inside her and poured out.

"May I come to stand beside you

My Lord,

To celebrate, sing and dance

May I?"

She forgot herself. Was there any holy sanctum higher than this? Dance, Dhanam, dance. How many years has it been since I saw you dance? When she looked up after wiping her tears, Dhanam had disappeared. There were some shadowy figures in the landing.

“We’re late because the market was so crowded,” Karpagam was saying as she entered the brighter courtyard. Soundari Ammal felt like she had been hit on the head. Her heart was flooded by an inexplicable disappointment.

“Did someone come in search of me, Akka?” asked Sabapathy.

“No one came in search of you.”

“Anyone came to see you? Did Chellappa come by?”

“No, no.”

Soundari felt confused.

“What is it, Akka?”

“Nothing. I must have had a dream.”

“A dream?”

Soundari felt a slow smile spreading through her. “Yes, it seemed so real. Who do you think came in my dream? Dhanam was in my dream in her Benares silk sari and lovely nose ring! She even danced for me. She gestured beautifully for ‘*Varugalaamo*....Can I come...?’ Now that is what I call true art and dance!”

Sabapathy looked at Karpagam and laughed.

“Karpagam, bring some coffee. Why don’t you bring those greens? Akka and I will clean the leaves.”

Soundari Ammal, still stunned by the apparition, stared at the landing. It was pitch black there.

Had it been a dream after all?

“Here’s some coffee,” Karpagam’s voice and even her placing a bunch of greens seemed dream-like to Soundari. However, it seemed that the ecstasy she had felt on seeing Dhanam’s dance was real. Her stance, her gestures, her expressive eyes... ah, how could one call that a dream? The thrill she had felt was still apparent. Waves of music rose inside her, grew wings and took flight.

“May I come... oh my lord ...?”

“Akka, is Dhanam still standing there?”

Soundari, whose gaze was at the landing while cleaning the greens, turned her head and smiled. Sabapathy was intent on chopping the greens fine. She wanted to say something more about Dhanam’s dance but contained her enthusiasm. Sabapathy’s transformation amazed her. His mridangam playing when he was just eight had been stupendous. However, their father had insisted on sending him to school and killed the music in Sabapathy. A clerk’s job, marriage over 40, a school teacher for a wife, prestige, respect, and other such rubbish had suddenly taken precedence. It seemed like their very blood had changed now.

“It must be 10 years since she died?”

“Who?”

“I was talking about Dhanam Akka.”

“Hmmm, even longer than that. She lived like a hermit in her older years.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that.”

“A man called Rangoon Sundaram was smitten by her music and dance. He showered her with gold and diamonds. Dhanam heard that he had faced terrible losses in Rangoon and was struggling for his next meal. She bundled up all the gold, diamonds and silver vessels he had given her and handed it over. It seems his wife was astonished and fell at Dhanam’s feet in utter gratitude.”

“People like this too have lived.”

“Of course! Enlightenment, Sabapathy. Those with enlightened knowledge are also compassionate.”

“Have you finished cleaning and chopping the greens?” asked Karpagam, her voice rising.

“Mallika and Senthil will be coming in to eat soon.”

Soundari fell silent. This was Karpagam’s gesture to indicate that she had spoken enough.

“We’re done. Please take it,” said Sabapathy.

Karpagam’s toe rings tinkled as she walked towards them. The thali on her neck swung to and fro as she bent to collect the greens.

“Shall I mash the greens and make a spicy brinjal kuzhambu Akka?” asked Karpagam in a conciliatory tone.

“Do that. Make sure Mallika and Senthil like it too.”

“I’m making a potato roast just for them.”

Soundari knew that continuing in this vein would give Karpagam peace, if not satisfaction. Why are they scared to death? They fear ghosts. They fear their own shadow. Every word from my mouth seems like a ghost from the past to them. Karpagam would have chased me into the street if I did not receive a pension. The pension the State gave honouring her with a ‘kalaimamani’ award.

She relaxed in her chair now that the greens had been cleaned.

The walls, above the height of a man, were crammed with photographs. Soundari was in all of them with a big dot on her forehead, her lovely saris and jewels, and a wide smile. They were proof of the accolades she had received from VIPs, heads of princely states — from Thiruvudangoor to Baroda. Sangeetha Bhushani, Gana Soundari, Gana Saraswathy, Kalaimamani — and so many others she could not even remember. How could she forget music, her very breath? It was nearly time for her last journey. Still, she felt a thrill in her very veins when she heard music. A Hyderabad Minister had mentioned that Sangeetham and Soundari were one and the same. She could see that photo in the far-right corner. He had said the truth. These people just pocketed the pension. How could they forget? I have become a mere symbol to these callous idiots. Exhausted, Soundari closed her eyes.

“Switch on that radio, Sabapathy. There will be music now.”

There was only static. Then the music came.

“Devi... you are my refuge —

Meenalochini who lives in Madurai — ”

In a flash, all inanimate objects around Soundari ceased to exist and her thoughts stilled. She was in another world, in the presence of the divine.

De...vi...”

Ah, what is this? This female singer has stopped already. How many more sangathis she could have sung! People have stopped singing sangathis these days... Perhaps it is laziness. Perhaps it is something else. Must mention this to Chellappa, she thought.

“Have you stopped the song, Sabapathy?”

“I switched it off, aunty. The song was not nice was it?” answered Senthil.

“The song was not bad although there was no sangathi. You don’t seem to like classical music.”

“It is not that really. A visitor is here.”

“Who?”

“Who knows? Father is entertaining the lady.”

Why is this boy always so angry?

“Come in and eat. You are always angry when you are hungry,” chided Karpagam, in a low voice.

“Who has come to visit, Sabapathy?”

“Someone from Madras. They want an interview for their magazine.”

“Who do they want to interview?”

“You.”

“Me?”

Before they could continue the conversation, Senthil rushed in again.

“There’s no need for aunty to give any interview.”

She felt a moment’s chill. The determination in his face and eyes reminded her of many other things. This boy is only 22 but his anger was old and known to her.

When she saw a lady come inside with her hands folded respectfully, Soundari felt a connection.

“Please come in,” she said, ignoring Senthil.

Chellappa felt as if shapeless specks were flitting before his eyes. His neck ached after almost two hours of scrutinising ancient books, with pages falling apart. There was not even a proper fan in the library. Only Chellappa could focus in his study despite the noise it made.

Enough for today. Chellappa carefully closed the book and placed it on a shelf. “See you,” he told Santhanam, the librarian, as if he was taking leave of his family.

“It seems like I keep this library open just for you,” said Santhanam.

“People are not interested in reading. Even those who visited libraries earlier are sitting in front of their TVs now.”

Chellappa attempted to leave on the pretext of spitting out the betel leaves and nut he had been chewing. Santhanam would not be able to stop once he got going. Chellappa felt uncomfortable when he heard Santhanam speak of his books as treasures that were being wasted.

“I will be happy if there are a few people more like you Chellappa,” Santhanam went on. “Your father’s dream was to see you as an educated man, an academic. Today, you are a highly respected college professor...” Chellappa felt embarrassed as he heard these words. With a quick nod and shy smile, he stepped out.

Santhanam had repeated these words innumerable times. Chellappa felt a slight sense of humiliation every time they were uttered. He felt uneasy because Santhanam said this every time they met. There were layers hidden behind the words.

His unease followed Chellappa as he walked towards his house. Appa had never worn a shirt or slippers when he walked these streets. He had been a strong, well-built man. Chellappa, the last child, remembered running to keep up with him.

If a servant came by from Mettu Theru Mirasu’s house, father walked even faster. The Mirasu would be sitting on a large swing with silver fittings in the front porch of his big house, using his foot to move it to-and-fro. The swing would stop when father entered and stood at a distance. Father would almost bend double in obeisance, his big body diminishing in size.

“Did you call me, Sami?”

Seeing his father’s extreme servility made Chellappa think that it was indeed the Sami, God, sitting on that swing. ‘Sami’ would take a betel leaf from a silver box, tear off the leaf’s vein and deign to address father.

“My daughter’s wedding has been finalised. There are four or five auspicious dates in the month of ‘thai’. Let me know which date works for you. You must play the Nadhaswaram* at the wedding.”

Appa’s face would blossom as if he had received a boon.

“Where else would I play if not at our house’s wedding, Sami?”

Still, the accountant present in the room would say the dates and father would choose one.

“Very good. Let us keep the wedding on that day.”

When they were leaving, the 'God' would address them; "You must play the song 'saraguna paalimpa' during the 'jaanavaasam' when the groom is brought through the street to the venue."

Appa would smile happily, showing his teeth stained with beetle juice.

"Of course, Sami."

Appa would literally float home, smiling fondly at Chellappa now and then. From then on, he would then rehearse 'saraguna paalimba' every day. During the new groom's procession, he would seem like a king when he played 'sankara baranam' or 'mohanam' in the middle of the street. At that moment, the accompanying drummers, the mirasu and the groom's party all seemed like father's vassals, paying obeisance to him. Chellappa would feel so proud. After the procession, father, the accompanying artists and Chellappa would sit in the stone shelter at the end of the street. Hungry and tired, he would fall asleep on his father's lap. Finally, the food would arrive in a bucket. Father would spread the cloth hung on his shoulder. A plantain leaf with a mixture of rice, vegetables, lentil soup and other ingredients would be emptied into it. They would eat the food sitting there, dispose off the leaf in the nearby canal and clean their mouths. They would then return home, immeasurably tired.

Chellappa felt amazed when he thought back. Father had not complained even once. However, he had some firm convictions. He did not know if they were the result of something lacking in father's life or because of some longing.

It was unbearably hot. Chellappa reminded himself to buy a new umbrella. He had forgotten his old one in the library and someone had made off with it. "You were feeling bad that no one except me visited this library. Someone else has come and stolen my umbrella," he had told Santhanam and they had laughed. It was only in the heat that Chellappa missed his umbrella and realised that it was a symbol of prestige, something his father had never possessed.

He walked along, using a hand to shade his eyes. Thank God he had good slippers to protect his feet. They were a symbol. His shirt and the cloth over his shoulder were symbols too. Father had felt that his identity had been stripped because he had been refused these.

He saw the woman as he was crossing the North Masi Street. She appeared to be from Madras or Bombay — city bred, certainly not from this part. She wore dark glasses and had covered her head with her sari as protection against the sun. "Excuse me," she addressed him. "Could you tell me where Soundari Ammal's house is?"

"Of course," he responded.

"Turn left at the end of the street and go straight. It is the last house in that row."

“Thank you,” she replied with a smile.

“Will she be at home?”

“Where else will she go? She’s 82.”

“Thanks,” she said and started walking in the direction he indicated. He always addressed Soundari Ammal as athai, though she was not his father’s sister. His heart blossomed when he thought of her and he smiled even without realising. He felt that there was not much difference between his father and athai.

Mandakini thought she should have brought an umbrella. She knew it would be hot in southern India, but no one had told her that it would be boiling. It seemed like there was not much difference between the seething hot Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu in high summer. The heat was blinding, bleached white. Still, just as there seemed to be a connection between sun and colour, there seemed to be a link with art, music, sound and rhythm. Just like the link between, lust, love, rage and humiliation...

The streets seemed to have wrapped up all the colours and verve she had imagined in a shroud of silence. Would someone talk to her if she knocked on a door? “They will chase you out,” her mother had warned. “Don’t you have anything else to write about?” There was a lot to write about, but this seemed to have a deep emotional connection. She had burned with the desire to write about it someday. She somehow had to see grandmother’s friend Soundari Ammal even if no one else spoke to her.

She saw the temple tower in the distance. “That was where it all started,” her grandmother had told her. Her mother lacked her grandmother’s intensity. As if she had purposely screened it from the world. This was unnecessary for mother’s profession as a doctor. She had never even visited this place.

This was grandmother’s birthplace. A place where, even today, there was not even a proper hotel to greet visitors. Yet, this was the place that had sparked a revolution half a century ago. A revolution spearheaded by her grandmother.

“How was this possible, grandma?” she would ask. Her grandmother would gaze into the distance. Her facial tissues would tighten. “Some day you must go to my birthplace and see a house called Ranga Vilas in North Masi Street. The revolution was sparked in the cowshed there.”

She had gone in search of that house as soon as she had reached this place yesterday. It had been locked. She had knocked on the neighbouring house and a man had stuck his head out. "Is there no one in the next house?"

"No," he had responded.

"No one has lived there for several years. It belonged to a mirasu called Rangam Iyer. He had no children."

"What do you mean, no children?" his wife asked as she came to join him.

"I meant his wife had no children."

"I would very much like to see that house," said Mandakini. "Who might have the key to that house?"

"Why, do you want to buy that house?"

She replied spontaneously, without thought.

"I'm writing a book about old houses in Tamil Nadu. It seems as if this house will look good inside."

"Oh, it is a lovely house. All teakwood and marble even at that time but there is no one to buy it. I have the keys and will show it to you."

This was an unexpected stroke of luck. Even the door was impressive — the shining wood was intricately carved, with tiny bells hung on it. As the door was unlocked with some noise, the bells tinkled. She felt her stomach sinking as she stepped inside. As if she was intruding on the privacy of another's life. The house was clean although it smelled slightly musty.

"I clean it every fortnight," the man said.

The hall and walls whispered the history of a century ago. The wooden swing had brass fittings. A hazy image of the person who had used it started forming in her mind. "That is Rangam Iyer's photo," the man said.

She was startled at the resemblance between that face and her mother's. The same eyebrows. The same nose. The same mouth. There were many photos on the walls. Mandakini scanned them eagerly. Finally, she saw it. Her grandmother as a graduate. In the customary black dress as a graduate, holding her rolled-up certificate in her hand. Something overflowed inside her. There was also a photo of her grandmother along with her siblings. She wiped off the dust on that picture with her handkerchief.

“Who is this?” she asked.

“Rangam Iyer’s children. That is, the children of the woman he ‘kept’, a devadasi,” he whispered as if it was a forbidden word.

“Did they grow up here?”

“No way. They were not allowed to step inside the house. He was extremely orthodox, they say. He used to go to that dasi’s house, but it was said that he never even drank water there.”

Mandakini looked at Rangam Iyer’s photo. She wondered how that ‘dasi’ birthed children for him.

The man opened the doors to different rooms. It was a large house. A house with sleek mosaic floors that had not felt the pattering feet of children. Walls that had not heard laughter. There were dark pillars standing like ghosts around the courtyard. The sun’s rays shone like a band through the chimney, casting inexplicable shadows in the kitchen and the rear of the house.

“The cooking for dasi’s house too happened here but no one would go give the food to her. She would come and stand in the backyard to collect it.”

“I know.”

“What?”

“Strange, I said.”

“What’s strange about it? That was how it was. As soon as he returned from her house, Rangam Iyer would go straight to the well, have a bath, and only then enter this house. But he did not neglect his wife. Many men those days ruined themselves and their families smitten by women of that community. This Dasi was also different. She sent all her children to a hostel and educated them using the money he gave her.”

“Let’s look at the backyard.”

“What is there? Just a ruined cowshed.”

“That’s alright. Let us see it.”

“As you wish.”

The big wooden door opened with a loud creak. Her heart palpitated as she stepped on the uneven stone steps and placed her foot in the backyard. A ruined, roofless cowshed with overgrown plants. A mango tree.

They must have stood underneath it. The “Dasi’ and her children. It was then that a tempest must have blown inside the heart of a six-year-old girl. It was then that a revolution must have been sparked in the breast of the little girl watching the humiliation.

Mandakini carefully read the name of the street, letter by letter. North Masi Street. Who would direct her to Soundari Ammal’s house?

She saw a man coming towards her. He had shaded his eyes with his right hand to protect them against the blazing sun.

“Could you tell me where Soundari Ammal’s house is?” she asked him.

Chellappa decided to visit Soundari Athai that evening. Soundari Ammal had been famous four decades ago and was now almost forgotten. Why would a city girl want to see her? He should have warned that girl about Soundari Ammal’s extreme pride. She is far more courageous than any of you city girls, he should have told her.

“No one can take advantage of this Soundari! My pride and dignity are most important to me! I stopped singing on stage for that reason.” How many had that clarity, knowledge and pride these days?

His heart skipped a beat when he saw Mallika standing in front of him. She was wiping her sweaty, red face. Soundari athai must have looked like Mallika at this age, he thought.

“Is a cool breeze blowing just for you?”

“No other choice. It is Saturday and college is over. I am returning home. Are you returning from the library? Couldn’t you take an umbrella?”

Chellappa narrated the story of his umbrella and Mallika had a good laugh. She looked at her watch and bit her lip.

“Oh, I must go, annachi. Senthil will get mad if I return even a little late after college. Father and aunt will not say anything but Senthil will shout at me.”

“Why?”

“He seems to think he is the man of the house! Mother will dance to his tune. A real pain. They do not even allow me to learn music. There’s a lot I need to talk to you...”

Chellappa was unable to find an appropriate response.

“He hates it if I even hum a song. What shall I do — I feel like singing all the time. It seems like my breath.”

Mallika laughed.

“I will come by and cry to you one day. Is your wife well?”

“I think so. She has gone to her mother’s house in Thiruvārūr.”

“Why don’t you come to our place to eat?”

“No need. I am going to the lodge. It seems like you already have a visitor.”

“Who is that?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps someone from Madras.”

“How do you know?”

“It is just a guess.”

“I see. Man or woman?”

“Female.”

“Then your guess must be right.”

Mallika gave a sudden laugh and started walking home. Chellappa thought that Senthil was as idiotic as his father Sabapathy. The thought made him angry.

His thoughts returned to his father again. A music performance had just concluded at a wedding in Thiruvārūr. Two men were debating the nuances of Dikshithar’s song. Father interrupted and voiced some opinion.

“Keep quiet,” said one man.

“You are just a drummer. What do you know? Shut up,” said the other.

Father did not utter a word until he returned home. That night, he lay on a mat in the terrace, staring at the moon. “Chellappa, you should not take up my profession,” he said.

“You must study. Study Sanskrit. Don’t study Tamil.”

“My son must become an educated man. It is my wish. No, it is a burning desire. His education is my redemption.”

“Who might the visitor be?” Mallika walked briskly, making myriad guesses as she raced home. None of them seemed interesting. Suddenly, her legs seemed to bind together. Maybe someone had come asking for her hand? Mother was very eager to get her married. She felt irritated that Senthil was even more eager to do so. He was only four years older than her. Yet, he tried to dominate her.

Let anyone come asking for my hand. I do not want to get married. I want to study. I want to learn music, she muttered to herself.

It seemed definite in her imagination that someone had come asking for her hand and Senthil was guarding her in the wedding dais. She felt her temper rise. Who did Senthil think he was? He goes to movies and music performances, but I must not. I am not even allowed to sing.

“Who are you to stop me? I will sing,” she had told him one day. Mother and Senthil had become extremely agitated, as if they had seen a ghost.

“We should get her married immediately,” Senthil had said, as if a man was waiting outside the house to marry her. “Then let her husband handle her.”

Amma had been angry too. “Taken after her father’s sister,” she had burst out.

“Please keep quiet, Karpagam,” father had chided. It was a rare occurrence. Amma had subsided after that. In her anger, mother must have forgotten about aunt’s monthly pension of a thousand rupees.

She did not know if aunt had heard all this. What she did know was that aunt was beyond all such pettiness. She had been an indispensable part of the household ever since Mallika could remember. She had never heard aunt speak about cooking, food, relationships or giving it all up. She would listen constantly to songs on the radio. She would sometimes sing to herself. Her clear, bell-like voice would make Mallika’s heart overflow with joy. The photographs on the wall were proof that aunt had been a famous singer in her day. It seemed to Mallika that aunt was the queen of some kingdom although she hadn’t left the house for two decades and remained seated in her reclining chair.

Aunt had no husband or children. “Her husband died,” mother said by way of explanation. However, aunt still put a big red dot on her forehead. The diamonds in her nose and ears sparkled even in the pathetic light of the 40-watt bulb in the living room.

Aunt addressed her one-day without considering that Mallika was only 12 years old.

“No one married me, my dear,” she said.

“Maybe men were afraid of your talent.”

Aunt laughed.

“I said no. I was determined to not give up my singing even if I got married. No man wanted that. No prestige in having all that knowledge if you are born in that particular community. Why, even the men of that community will bury the women they are born with.”

“Did they try to bury you?”

“They tried! But this Soundari cannot be buried so easily.”

Mallika was amused for some reason. She felt that this was a secret between aunt and her.

“Respect is different from what people believe it to be. Do you understand?”

She understood gradually. She got angry because Senthil did not understand and was trying to bury aunt’s desires.

She already stood in front of her house even as she was thinking whether to go home or not.

“Thanks so much. Thank you,” the young woman was saying as she stepped out of the house.

“This is my daughter,” Mallika’s father said.

“She is studying in Plus Two.”

“Oh, does she sing?” asked the woman.

“No, she doesn’t,” said father hurriedly.

“Mallika, come in,” ordered Senthil. She went in, burning with humiliation.

“Why is Senthil making such a ruckus, aunty?”

“No idea. That girl spoke to me cordially. She even requested me to sing.”

“What do you know about journalists?” shouted Senthil. “They’ll say one thing and write something sensational.”

“She is the granddaughter of a dear friend of mine,” said Soundari pleasantly.

“That’s exactly the point I’m making. We don’t want *their* acquaintance.”

She vaguely understood what he was saying. But she felt weary that a young boy was talking to her in this manner.

“Hey Senthil, why don’t you keep quiet? What is your age? What is aunt’s age?” Even Sabapathy’s scolding seemed hypocritical and ineffective to her. Sabapathy is afraid of his son. When I die, he’ll be completely dependent on Senthil.

A soft hand touched her forearm. She turned around.

“You said she was your friend’s granddaughter. Who is this friend?” whispered Mallika. Soundari smiled a little.

“I’ll tell you another day, dear.”

The landing was getting dark. Someone switched on the light. Soundari could not believe that she had just met Rathnam’s granddaughter.

It seemed as if 50 or 60 years simply dissolved as that girl spoke. She could still see Rathnam’s anger, indignation, and courage.

“A huge scam is going on in God’s name, Soundari.” When the words burst out of Rathnam, Soundari’s finger, which was tuning the tamboora, stilled.

“No other country treats its women this way in the name of God, tradition and culture. Wake up. This society is taking advantage of us, giving us diseases, and humiliating us.”

Her face would redden. The glasses she wore due to studying a lot would slip down her nose.

“You are an educated woman, Rathnam. And yet, how many people will listen to you?”

“It won’t happen if I speak alone of course. We should all raise our voices. We should stand at the crossroads and fight for our rights.”

Soundari had felt like laughing then.

“At the crossroads?”

“Yes. They threw our dignity into the crossroads. Do we have any respect in this society? You are such a famous singer. Dhanam is a fantastic dancer. They call you for music performances and weddings. Did you notice where they feed you? Somewhere in the backyard — never in the dining room with the others.”

Soundari could not respond to her. If she said, “Hasn’t it been always like this? Who gave them the right?” she would retort. “God? Did God ask us to dance in the temple before every ritual?”

she would ask. "Did God tell us to get married to a stone idol after which any man can take you to bed," she would fume. "Call yourself devadasi – servants of God, ha, it is not god that you serve but ..."

Her rants could not be stopped.

"Many women have been victimised because of this. They have suffered and destroyed others as well. This should not continue, Soundari."

There was some magic in her words. So many women came, as if bound by a spell. Like they were getting ready for a freedom fight.

That was when Dhanam stopped dancing. I could support them in every way but could not stop singing. "You have to make sacrifices during a struggle, Soundari." I could not. My sorrow overwhelmed me when I thought about it. Rathnam left when I told her I would rather drink poison and die.

"Get married and continue singing," she said. "As if someone was ready to marry me."

"Aunt, why did you stop singing on stage?" asked Mallika.

Soundari felt weary suddenly. There was a desperation burning in her stomach after all these years.

Some scoundrel had asked her to sing 'Manmatha Leelai' an obscene song from a movie. He said something vulgar. The crowd laughed. Rathnam had been right. She could not understand if she felt sorrow or anger. Soundari had stopped performing then.

"I just stopped I guess."

"You'll talk about it in a magazine interview, but you won't tell me."

"Who is interviewing?" asked Chellappa as he came in.

Soundari welcomed him.

"Malika is asking why I stopped singing."

"You don't know how much self-respect your aunt has," said Chellappa.

"What's the use of my self-respect? Talk about Rathnam's," said Soundari.

"How come you remembered Rathnam today?"

"Her granddaughter was here this afternoon to interview me."

Chellappa opened his eyes wide.

“Oh, was that Rathnam’s granddaughter? What did she ask?”

“She asked me about what it was like then. Why should I hesitate to talk to my friend’s granddaughter? That is why Senthil is raging like an earthquake.”

After some time, Chellappa left, deep in thought. At the crossroads, he could still hear the shouts of the crowd Rathnam had gathered. He was amazed when his father too had joined the crowd and raised his voice in support. Those voices drowned the sound of dancing bells and the tambura and the music with it. A law was passed abolishing the old system and put a seal on the soaring music, dancing feet. It was sad but inevitable. The entire street emptied out. They triumphed over their mental demons, lived normal lives, daughters got married, sons went to college, got white collared jobs, if lucky, and had families. The community had been granted dignity, at last. No longer dasis — not even to God. To utter the word was blasphemous. They did not need to raise their voices anymore. This place would not witness anymore shattering earthquakes.

But the earth did shatter a fortnight later. Senthil entered the house like a hurricane and flung a magazine on the ground.

“Gone. Our dignity and prestige are gone. Look,” he raged, addressing his aunt. “We can’t face the world anymore. Mallika will never get married...”

Everyone looked terrified. Senthil then did what he had never done before. He sat down on a stool and covered his face. Then he cried, his body racked with sobs. Those sobs were even more terrifying than his anger.

Soundari felt a chill down her spine. What now?

“What, what is written in that magazine?”

“They have trumpeted all about your community, our ancestry to the world. Didn’t I tell you not to give an interview?”

The magazine still lay on the ground, like it was on fire. No one dared touch it. Mallika was shocked at Senthil’s tantrums and tears.

“Mallika, please read it,” said Soundari weakly. “Is there anything about our community, is the name mentioned?”

“Yes, there is, in the very heading.”

“Isn’t there anything else?”

Senthil hissed furiously. “So, what if there is? What if they have praised your music? Is that of any consequence?”

Soundari sat still, stunned. Sabapathy was quiet, head bowed. Karpagam stood panting, as if unable to demonstrate her anger but satisfied with Senthil’s outburst.

“What can I do, Senthil?” asked Soundari quietly. “Bring me poison if you want. I will drink it and die.”

Only Mallika felt like crying when she heard this.

There was no need for anyone to bring poison. Soundari Ammal died in her sleep the following night. At least, that is what the doctor said. When Sabapathy went to clean out his sister’s shelf of belongings ten days later, he saw emptied strips that had contained sleeping pills. The question was how they came into Soundari’s possession because she was never in the habit of taking sleeping pills.

Sabapathy never opened his mouth. Mallika’s wedding did not happen in the auspicious month of ‘thai’ that year. When Chellappa asked her if she needed his help to join a music class, Mallika’s reply was categorical: “No, thanks. I don’t want to even think about it.”

Nadhaswaram: A traditional classical double reed wind instrument, played to the accompaniment of drums on auspicious occasions.

Story © Vaasanthi; translation © Sukanya Venkataraman; image © Kelly Reedy

में लेटी हुई हूँ यहाँ: दो कविताएं
अनुराधा पाटिल
निशिकांत ठकार द्वारा हिंदी में अनुवादित



MP Pratheesh, From *Soil Alphabets*

एक नाटक बेजुबां

राम मंदिर के लिए
चन्दा देने से इनकार किया इस लिए
देखा अघोषित बहिष्कार
सामनेवाले की नज़रों में
और खिड़की के टूटे कांच के टुकड़ों को
समेटते हुए मायूस हो गए
मायने आज़ादी के

हाथ में कस कर पकड़ी हुई
इंसानियत की मुट्ठीभर मिट्टी

कब फिसल गई हाथ से
पता भी नहीं चला
अब किन किन बातों के लिए
मनाये दिन काला

अजनबी ग्रह-तारों की
खोज में धुंधली हो गई है
आँगन की
चुटकीभर चांदनी
और आँचल की गिरह में
बाँध लिए थे जो
दो चार सिक्के सच के
बज रहे हैं भद्दी आवाज में
पैरों तले

ईमान के दरक चुके
आईने में
दीख रही है मुझे अपनी ही
टूटी हुई सूरतें हज़ार
भ्रम-विनाश की बिसात पर
अंकित हुई
और नहीं होती है हिम्मत
किसी लावारिस लडके की
गहरी धंसी हुई आँखों में
झांकने की

पानी का रंग हो रहा है लाल
और पानी से भी पतला
लोगों का लहू जमता जा रहा है
गाहे-बगाहे
रोका नहीं जा सकता
मिट्टी की तरह ही
चल-अचल लोगों के छीजने को
और बढ़ता जा रहा है आसपास
जंगल नागफनी का

दूर क्षितिज के अनंत
परदे पर हिल रही है
आवाज को खो चुके लोगों की
सिर्फ और सिर्फ परछाइयां
और बज रही है लगातार
तीसरी घंटी
किसी खत्म न होनेवाले
बेजुबां नाटक के आगाज की तरह

मैं लेटी हुई हूँ यहाँ

मैं लेटी हुई हूँ यहाँ
इस जनम की मेरी आखिरी
उम्मीद की जगह पर
मेरे सिरहाने-पैताने
खेलनेवाले अपरूप
करोना के साथ

मैं लेटी हुई हूँ
यहाँ की सफ़ेद छत की ओर
एकटक निहारती हुई
कसाब के लिए कबूल गाय की तरह
मुझे खींचते जा रहे हैं
करोना के हजार हाथ
एक अथाह कृष्ण-विवर की तरफ
और खिड़की की कांच पर
हिल रही है इस दुनिया के
पेड़ की परछाईं
हवा रोशनी और उड़नेवाली
धूल को ले कर
जीने की छोड़ दी गई उम्मीद को
जगानेवाली

मुझे दिखाई दे रहे हैं आसपास
बेहिसाब हौले दिल लोग
मौत के स्पर्श-मात्र से
पत्ते की तरह मुरझाए हुए
लेकिन नहीं दीख रहा है
यहाँ की खिड़की से
एक भी आदमी
भविष्य की तरफ कदम उठाता
बेफिक्र चलता हुआ

मैं धो रही हूँ बार बार
हाथ पाँव नाक आँखें
और कर रही हूँ चकाचक
भीतर के अस्पर्श अंतराल को
समेटने में जिसे
लगता नहीं मास्क सैनिटाइज़र
छह फीट की अगम्य दूरी
कभी न काटी जानेवाली

जहां मैं लेटी हुई हूँ
उलटी लटकी हुई
सलाइन की खाली बोतल जैसी
बूँद बूँद निपटती हुई
और इस चरमसीमान्त
पल में
कह नहीं सकती
अपने पैरों से
चल कर आई हुई मैं
किस के पैरों पर
लौटूंगी घर
अपने अंतराल को
चकाचक पोंछ कर

Habitat

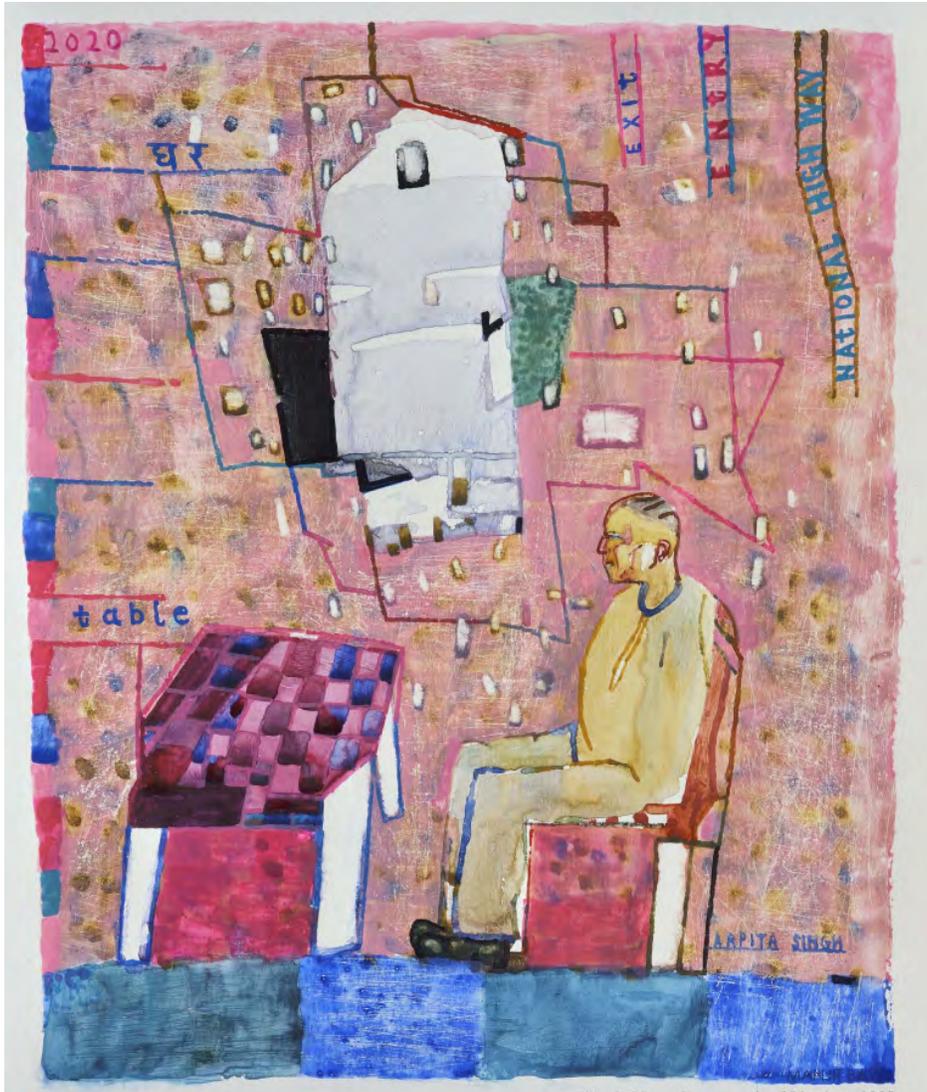
Four paintings by Arpita Singh



Habitat, watercolour on paper, 11 x 14.5 inches, 2020



Women, watercolour on paper, 12 x 9 inches, 2020



Home, watercolour on paper, 8.5 x 6.5 inches, 2020

Mushroom Cloud

A poem by Hemang



Aishwarya Iyer, 'Untitled', ink on 300 gsm paper, 8.27" X 11.69"

I woke up with a start.
The room was a sea of smoke.
Who the hell would have had the itch

to burn trash at midnight, like this?
A blue wisp curled out of my mouth.
Might be emitting from Pirana*, you dunce!

Smouldering thoughts got a welcome relief.

Communal tiff towards Millatnagar
from a stray mischief?

Didn't I take a shortcut from there last night,
about ten past ten? But there was nothing then.
No telling when a flash turns to fire these days.

Snap a finger and hungry Holi blazes away.
The Sabarmati burst out on my skin.
But no, wait! Could be a gas leak,

or a short circuit in the shacks?
Bloody they are awful,
public nuisance, heck.

Can't hear any uproar though? Forest fires?
What's its name... conflagration?
Have they even heard of climate change, those men?

Fuming, clenching jaws, I came out.
A clear sky on the wings of chilling breeze
landed on the balcony like December dawn.

In a huff, back inside, I muttered.
Must get to the root
of this massive banyan,

this billowing unholy river,
this great ariel flood,
of smoke.

Just then,
clutching the little finger of eyes,
the invisible propeller of smoke,

speeding like a crazy firework rocket
but in reverse motion,
dodging attention,

engulfing, anaconda fashion,
its undulating spiral of slipstream,
zoomed in and sank deep

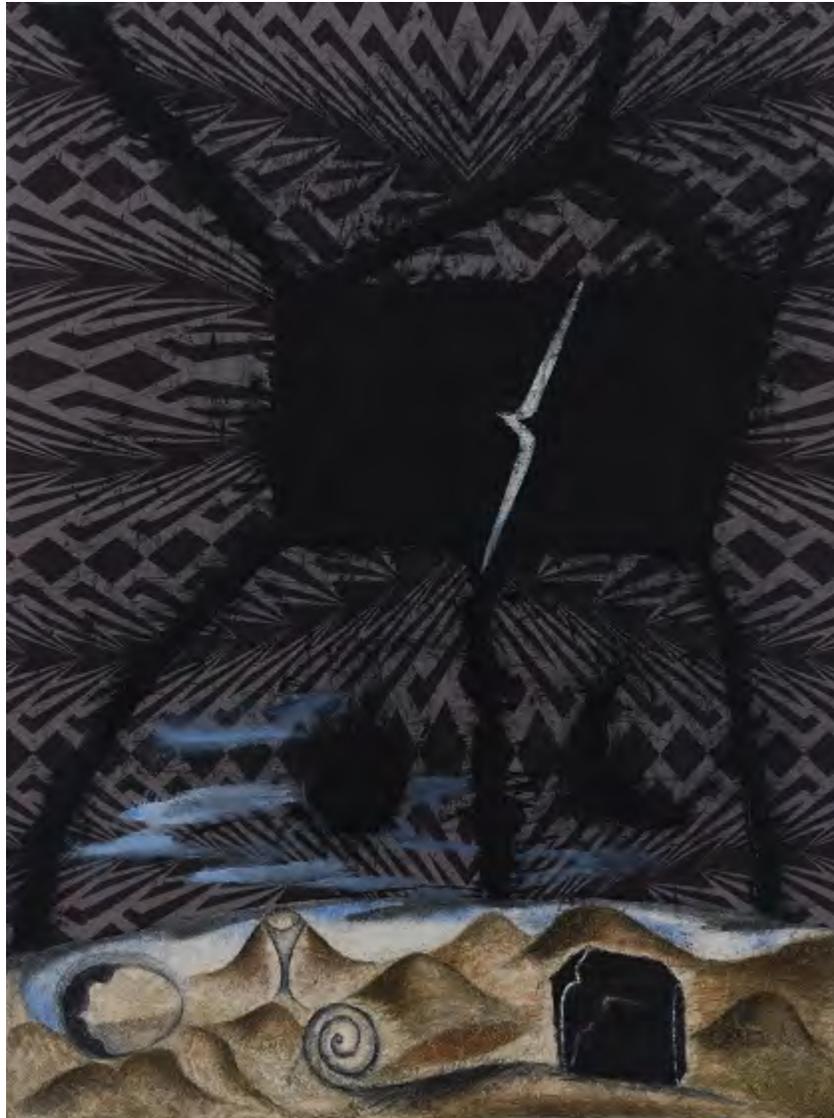
in my chest panting like bellows.
The walls in the room burst out
in green, tender sallow.

**Pirana, a landfill site in Ahmedabad, harbors giant mounts of city garbage in forty acres of land.*

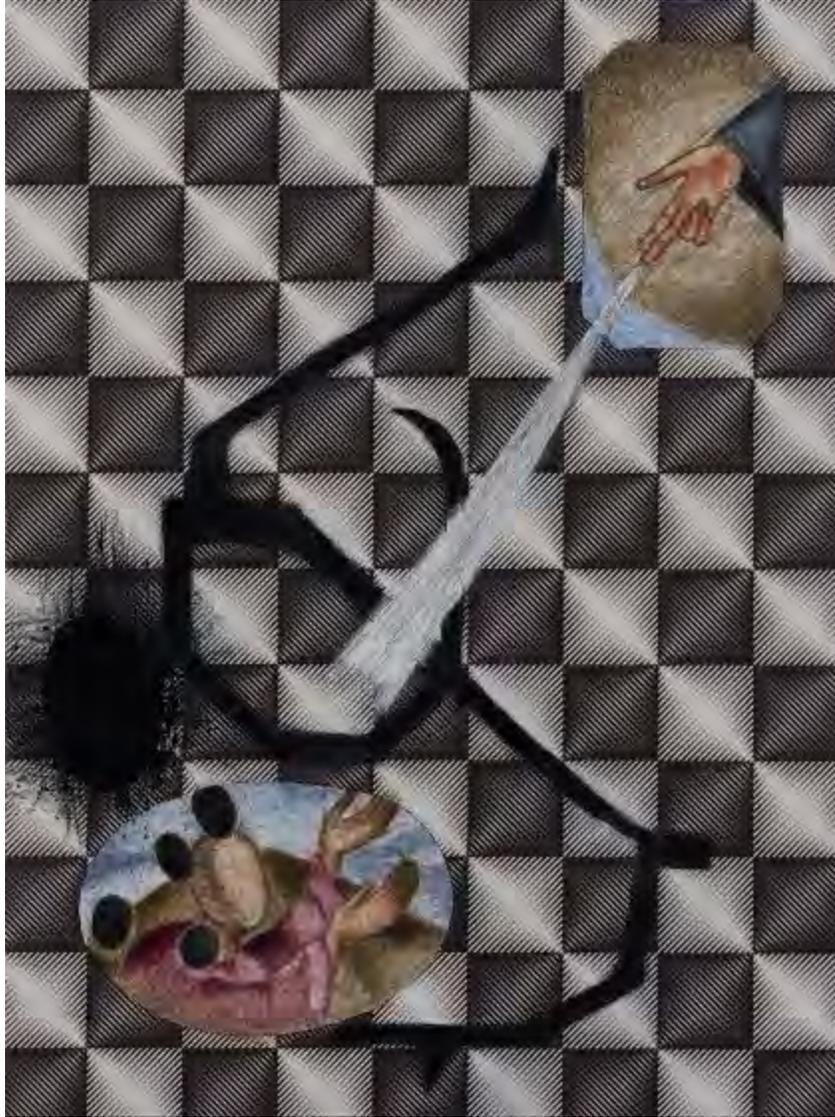
Poem © Hemang; image © Aishwarya Iyer.

Endless Column

Four paintings by Atul Dodiya



Sleep; Oil, epoxy putty and laminate on marine ply; 24" x 18"; 2018



Blessed; Oil, epoxy putty and laminate on marine ply; 24" x 18"; 2018



Endless Column; Oil, epoxy putty and laminate on marine ply; 24" x 18", 2018



Temple of Clouds; Oil, epoxy putty and laminate on marine ply; 24" x 18"; 2018

These paintings have been shared here with permission from the Vadehra Art Gallery.
Images © Atul Dodiya.

In Memory

A poem by Karen Gabriel



Daniya Rahman, From 'Silhouetted Portraits', 2021

Some years ago I met a man,
An ordinary kind of man,
And yet the kind you look at twice.

I looked and looked, and all at once,
He wasn't what I thought he was,
He had an edge that cut like ice.

An edge that grew before I knew
Into a hook that seized him through
And through where none had been before.

Not even he, I have to say,
Although I think, (now night and day),
There's little that he let go its way.

Yet I do not think he chose the road,
I do not think he knew at all
What lay ahead was just a wall.

So he wandered in and then
He blindly stumbled round and round
The sharpened point of his own edge.

And he was young, so very strong,
And though I think I knew all along
That this was going to happen,

What happened, happened, oh so slow,
And perhaps you'd like to know,
I saw him melt to a silhouette.

Yet even then there was that edge
Now split and doubled at the head
And warped a bit (as if too used)

By someone who could step inside?
By someone who could not abide
A talent and a lust for life?

Who cored the soul, melted the core,
And drained the pool
Down some unknown and rusty hole
That I have still to find
To check for what's been left behind
Of him who finally bent to match the hook?

Perhaps we all will find the way
Back to what's been left to stay
Behind, beside those running ducts,
Which, empty now and then, get stuck
With strange and stifled hums
That make the steps you walk above

Precarious and slow,
Like blind men's in a changing maze
That opens out somewhere below
Into that wretched wired cage
That simply will not let you
Finish
your fall.

The Visiting Card

Dalpat Chauhan

Translated from Gujarati by Hemang



Savi Sawakar, 'Two Untouchables under the Black Sun' | Image courtesy Saurabh Dube

That a woman from a caste that is the lowest of the low should learn Sanskrit, and not only that, also teach it- is a dreadful anomaly to a traditional mind. And an individual in whose personality these anomalies are accumulated becomes an object of attraction – an attraction blended of mixed acceptance and rejection.”

–Kumud Pawde, *Antasphot* (1981)

“After all you are from the Cheri, you might have done it. You must have done it. The tears started welling up in my eyes, and I wept. After a long time, the priest wrote a note asking that I should be allowed to return to the school. When I took it to the headmaster, he abused me roundly, using every bad word that came to his mouth, and then told me to go to my classroom. When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping.”

-Bama, *Karukku* (1992)

Soft purring synced in with soughing of hot loo outside. A gentle jolt backwards and the bus bound for Ahmedabad moved. She ran a discreet, searching gaze around to see whether there were enough co-passengers on the bus, that she was not all alone. There were quite a few, not to worry. That the seat next to hers was vacant was such a relief. She closed her eyes and sat

resting her hands on the purse in her lap. Her fingers began to tap rhythmically on the hard leather of the purse; soothed by the rhythm, she was slowly slipping into her fond reverie. But a sharp *tidick-tick*, not very far away from her, jolted her out of it. The conductor was closing in, swaggering down the aisle, his leather pouch with a long belt slinging down his left shoulder and a rusty ticket case with equally long belt on the right. Irked by the interruption, she began to look outside the window. Another *tidick-tick*, much closer and unusually loud. The conductor snapped with his empty ticket punch almost in her face, a rather arrogant yet customary way of posing a question in a *tidick-tick, tidick-tick* language to consult a passenger's destination. The sharp noise went straight through her eardrums, like a bullet, and blew her nerves. She purchased the ticket, put it safely in her purse and relapsed into her fantasy, the unconscious tap-tapping on purse playing a musical escort. The continuous clatter of the ramshackle municipal transport bus and the rustle of the hot wind blowing in through the window seemed to clarify the vision she had been having frequently of late. The convocation ceremony of some university. Students standing in neat rows wearing black robe and square academic cap, with a snow-white tassel attached to its center. Upon announcement of their names, they would mount the stage one by one from one side, receive their degree certificates and proudly walk down from the other side.

All unknown faces, complete strangers, but she would try to spot herself amongst them. Faces would stream on, one after another, but she was absent, the missing person.

"Oh, God? I'm not there." She mumbled, half-asleep half-awake. The bus sped over a road bump and the heavy thud as it landed woke her up. Her dream, she realized, was straight from a television show, her pet prime-time soap. She smiled wryly. Of all the Faculties at university, it was hers that never held a convocation ceremony. Why didn't they hold one? The question thorned her heart. She would never be able to go up the stage. Suddenly, an acute sense of deprivation washed over her and punctuated her memory of being a pariah; it rekindled the acute consciousness of a stranded existence. And what was her fault? Her birth...just the fact that she was born in a particular caste. That became the ground for discrimination, for shamelessly inflicted dispossession, for robbing her of her rights. She had to change her Faculty, thanks to her birth.

Bitter to the marrow, she closed her eyes. She had read the story of Prometheus who was punished by Zeus, so severely and so unfairly. Tied to a rock, he had to suffer excruciating pain as a huge vulture pecked at his liver by day, which grew back by night only to be eaten again the next day. What horrible punishment! What was his fault? A champion of mankind, he stole fire from the gods and gave it to mortals. What was her fault? She, a Scheduled Caste student, had pointed out the error of her chemistry teacher during the class.

"Sir, there is an error in the formula, it seems." And, how terribly she was humiliated in front of her classmates!

“Supersmart that you are, why don’t you come here and teach? Oh sorry, I forgot. You want to be a doctor, don’t you?” She didn’t realize when her teacher graduated from sly dig to plain innuendos because she had switched off, literally. Switched off because it was all too familiar; she knew full well what was coming. “You bloody SCs...you want to become a doctor? The whole civilization will go down the drain.” He might as well have said, “I’ll see how you get admission into a medical college.” She remembered the placard hanging on the wall of her classroom which quoted Chanakya, “Never underestimate the power of a teacher.” A mixture of contempt and acrimony lined her face. She spat out of the window and smiled sardonically.

* * *

The bell of the bus rang, and the bus halted with a screech. She looked out in the east and saw a magnificent royal gate at the entrance of a village. Everybody who passed through it marveled at its architectural beauty. The name of its sarpanch in glittering golden colour, along with his ancestors up to three generations, was engraved on a huge wooden plank attached to one of its pillars. Gigantic village gates were in vogue, almost every single village boasted it, she thought. At once, the animal within her, her mind, was let loose, “What if an SC fellow donates money for the construction of such a gate...?”

Some passengers got down while a few more got in. The bus moved on towards a fork in the road, one going east, the other south-east. The latter had been a witness to a bizarre historical development around faith and caste. As soon as one embarked on it, two similar temples, say identical twins, of the same presiding deity, separated only by a single-brick partition wall, hove into sight. The older was an upper-castes-only site; the entry of the SCs was prohibited. But SCs too would not back out that easily. Right next to the upper-caste temple, they erected a small shrine initially which later ballooned into a splendid temple. One deity, two temples. The result of a crazy adamancy and insolent human obduracy, what else? She had been obdurate too, but in a different way; to stake her claim and she did. A resounding slap in the face of the orthodox society, wasn’t it?

She looked at the new temple and her eyes smiled softly. Hanging on with grim resolve and steely determination, she had finally staked a claim to the title ‘Doctor’. Suddenly, she heard a squeal of brakes; a cow was standing in front of the bus blocking the road. The driver honked madly and cursed the *rabaris* for such irresponsible herding and then this god-forsaken country where, according to him, such anarchy was normal. Unbothered by the bovine road blocker or the all-too-familiar rant, the conductor kept *tidick-ticking* his empty ticket punch in the faces of the new passengers and issuing tickets. Once he was done, he announced in his deep, hoarse voice, “Anybody left out?”

* * *

“Hey, Meena, did you point out the error of H₂O in the class?”

“H₂O? Who H₂O?” she had asked curiously.

“Now look at Ms. Innocence. Our chemistry teacher, who else?”

“What about him?”

“I heard you got his knickers in a twist. But be careful with that fellow. He can hurt, most painfully at that.”

“What can he do to me? These are board exams. Nothing is in his hands, really.”

“Yes, basically he is a sissy. But our seniors don’t have civil things to say about him. He doesn’t forget and forgive easily, difficult if it’s a public humiliation and impossible if it’s at the hands of an SC. He always tries to put students from our category in their place. Would say, ‘What will you gain studying so hard? You bloody...’”

“Let’s see.” She had not paid much heed to her friend’s caution that day, but one crucial point, she had missed. Marks for journal. As per the board rules, the subject teacher had to assess a student’s journal for practical work and give marks for it.

The bus hit a pothole and a violent jerk rocked her entire body. That day too, she had felt a similar jerk, the day her chemistry journal went missing in school. She had immediately figured out the ploy, the trick of her teacher. She had met the teacher with her father; he had pleaded with him, had fallen to his feet, actually.

“Sir, if she scores less in the journal section, her dream of studying medicine will be shattered.”

“Sky will not come crashing down if...”, H₂O had instantly checked himself, “...there are many other branches of study like arts, commerce, B.Sc...”. He had casually added.

“She wants to become a doctor. If you help...”

“What kind of help? Do you think I’ve misplaced her journal? You people are just impossible. Go home and search.”

All his entreaties, beseeching and pleading were of no use. They had met the school principal, government officers and so on. All in vain. The bell tinkled once again. The conductor was

frenziedly tugging at the bell rope while forcing a passenger to get down, physically pushing him towards the exit alongside the driver's seat. The passenger, a rustic fellow in dirty clothes, kept pleading,

"I want to go to Ahmedabad."

"Take the next bus. Get down, now." He was literally thrown out of the bus. Outraged and helpless, he kept glaring at the conductor as the bus left him behind. She felt sorry for him.

* * *

For the first time, she had seen her father burning with helpless rage. Her mother too had felt mounting dismay, but no remedy was in sight. Amid that despair, an acute awareness of the history of discrimination had dawned upon her, a realization that she was only the latest loop in the long chain of oppression. Not even the latest as in the moment she thought about it, a thousand other loops might have been added to the chain. Perhaps it was a legacy, like genetic deformity, that one inherited generation after generation. The injustice her father was subjected to in his college days had suddenly weighed her down with unprecedented acuteness.

Her father, exceptionally bright in studies, had scored well in his board exams and secured admission in the foremost engineering college of the city. Suddenly one fine morning, the entire city was engulfed in the conflagration of anti-reservation riots. The rioters had targeted hostels where reserved category students boarded. Breaking into their rooms, the hooligans had vandalized furniture, books, baggage and even physically assaulted them. They had to run for their lives, leaving everything behind. Travelling like a refugee on foot, in autorickshaws, on trucks and tractors, his father had reached his village only the day after with a few of his academic testimonials, he had been able to salvage. Unable to continue with engineering, he had to shift to humanities later. Enrolling in a college in his village, he had studied up to post graduation.

The sight of her father, unusually dispirited and crestfallen, had broken her heart. She had assured him, "Now, I'll get the title of a doctor at any cost, even if I have to do a Ph.D for that. History will have to change. I'll change it."

Her father had smiled faintly and said, "Bravo my girl."

* * *

Caught in the vortex of thoughts, she had kept on sitting like a figurine for quite some time and now her feet were on pins and needles. She stood up, stamped her feet lightly one after another on the metal floor and sat down again, stretching her feet on the seat next to hers.

The result of her board exams had been a sledgehammer blow on her career; the trick of H₂O had worked. The crash in the overall percentage due to passing marks in chemistry journal had closed the doors of a government medical college for her. Admission in a self-financing college was possible still but her father would have had to pay through the nose for it. But she was fixated on that exclusive prefix before her name; she had made up her mind to create heaven on earth even if that meant an alternative heaven created out of a dangerous obsession, like that of Trishanku. A regular Doctor of Philosophy would demand an investment of several years at a stretch and at the end of such a long journey, if she got a supervisor like H₂O, she was done for, she'd thought. Couldn't she opt for Naturopathy or Homeopathy? Finally, she had got admission in Homeopathy and the precious, broad smile had revived on her father's face.

* * *

The bus halted again, despite there being no stand in the vicinity. On her right stood a timber yard and an auto garage. On the left were a makeshift juice station selling sugarcane juice and a paan shop, with a shimmering face. The strips of small, individual-sized gutka, hanging like frills on the front of the shop shone with dazzling brilliance. The driver revved the engine up, a familiar signal for the boy on the shop to hand him over his quota of gutka. The location was nothing short of a place of pilgrimage for all municipal transport buses plying on that route; paying homage to the paan shop was customary, she figured. Perhaps as customary as it was for her to attach that coveted prefix to her name. Perhaps, not so customary. For she had worked extremely hard, as hard as she would have in allopathy, to learn the intricacies of diseases, reading of symptoms and labyrinthine process of diagnosis. The fact that the wellbeing, life and death of a living, breathing human being rested in her hands made her extremely alert and attentive to the nuances of treatment; naturally, it had given her many a sleepless night.

But she had surmounted all those trepidations and strain; she had made her mark and now was on the way to the office of the medical council to remit fees for her degree certificate, a flashing proof of her merit, to be framed and hung on the wall of her clinic.

* * *

She came back home in the evening on a returning bus. Her body was tired, but her heart was agile, raring to embark on newer journeys, explore newer terrains. The form for degree certificate was filled and it was a matter of time now, a few days only. Did she fill her address right? She immediately fished out the receipt from her purse and checked, word by word. Entering her room, she plonked herself on the chair at her study table and closed her eyes. As if

reminded of something important, she straightened up and pulled out a drawer on her right. A case of visiting cards, lying in a long wait there, beamed at her. She opened it and took out one card. Dr. (Ms.) Meena Kapadia and her address underneath. She mentally tallied the address with the one she had given at the council office. The recurring pangs of self-doubt annoyed her. Nomenclature was all that was there to her society; it was a way of branding people, and how naturally she had given in to this system! The tragic irony behind how an individual's identity and existence got reduced to a visiting card and a degree certificate made her sad.

* * *

A few days on edge were all it took to bring the postman on her doorstep. When she was handed the fancy, cylindrical case carrying the roll of her degree certificate, she felt as if she was getting it from a dignitary on a stage facing a huge applauding audience. The vision of black robe, graduate cap and snow-white tassel flashed before her eyes. Such a long wait and such a long journey. The curse of Prometheus was lifted finally. She cried out from the main door, "Mummy, the degree certificate is here." Entire house smiled with joy.

* * *

She took out a visiting card, ran her fingers over its crisp edges reflectively and tucked it in her purse. Telling her mother that she was going to see her friend, she set out hurriedly. Her steps, informed with a new energy and unique spring, soon veered off to her high school. The moment she had waited so desperately for was finally here. She wanted to get back at H2O, no, get even with him in this duel of minds. She was the soldier of silent resistance, of a battle fought in isolation.

Would he be there? The self-doubt she loathed so much cropped up. She will go again if he's not there. But what if he has changed jobs or got transferred? She would get his new address and see him there. Was she taking it too personally? And what if he was no more? God forbid...she shuddered. At once, her joy turned into deep sadness. All she wanted to prove to him was that he was too puny to make or mar human destinies. She did not want to speak anything harsh, let alone bitter or insulting. She would give him her visiting card and it would speak for itself; no words were required.

Lost in her thoughts, she did not realize when she reached the gate of her school. Nothing had changed in the school, it seemed. The same lofty iron gate, probably a bit more rusted. The same old building with smoky grey walls. The sprawling playground flanked by two neem trees, their form denser and wider. The same watchman except that his moustaches and shock of hair on head had greyed strikingly over the years.

“Whom do you want to see?” he asked, his indifference and arrogance intact.

“Chemistry teacher.” For a flitting moment, the watchman looked baffled; her heart missed a bit.

“But he has become the headmaster now. He must be there in his cabin upstairs” he obliged, much to her relief.

She climbed the dusty stairs and reached the cabin. Her heart was pounding. A peon was sitting on a stool just outside the door of the cabin. A nameplate nailed on the top right of the door proclaimed H2O’s name in bold black letters engraved on a golden plate. She fished out her visiting card from her purse and held it before her.

“Dr. (Ms.) Meena Kapadia.”

A faint smile flickered across her face. But almost immediately a sense of strange inhibition gripped her. She would send her card in, but what if he didn’t call her inside? And even if he did, what if he did not offer her a seat, intentionally kept her standing? Wouldn’t it be adding insult to injury? She broke out in a sweat all over her body. She looked at the nameplate, kept looking on...and it began to shrink...until it was reduced to a black mustard seed. She turned her gaze to look at the visiting card she was holding in her hand. It shook a bit and then began to enlarge beyond the periphery of her hand, the school and the village.

“Shall I give your card to sir? He’s there if you want to see him.” She saw the extended hand of the peon. At once, she pulled her hand back.

“No, I don’t want to meet anyone.”

Putting the visiting card back in her purse, she quickly went down the dusty stairs.

Cashmere: Four poems

Prajna Anirvan



Image courtesy Sehar Qazi

Quarantined thoughts in a locked down city

The river whistles a tune
Caressing the fort city,
Cajoling the ramparts
Into her entwining arms.

Undying city.
Carrying its timeless vestiges
To the end of Time,
and the great river accompanying,
With its silt, sediment and sentiment.

As they churn history.

City of dust and dirt.
Avenger of druid time.
City of hypnotized denizens.
How dogged you have been!

Alluvium bed,
Cradle to monk, mystic, seer
And warrior.
Show me your heart –
Leaden, graphite or conglomerate.
It's bleeding.

Wide river with aquiline curves,
Tarry a little.
The ramparts are falling.
This is no time for lovemaking.

In Ibn Sina's quarantine,
I behold
Wrinkled waters,
Broken stalactite,
Listless cries,
And mute whispers.

O city!
The world is falling.

Cashmere

Cashmere
Is barbed pashmina
Wrapped around us.
Your and my agony.

We are kangri carriers.

As the frosty wind

steals a furtive glance
through our half-ajar doors,
Embers glow.

There is no Faith.
Only surreptitious nods
Of crumpled men.

Between me and my dying child
Rages an unassailable storm.

Do not seek us among the valleys.

Beneath the soft snow,
Lies Kashmir.

Bloodied.

I will go to the mountains...

I will go to the mountains
Where the Sun rises over
Free men
And Love flows through narrow creeks,
Wide basins and
Clear fountains.

I will go to your land, Che.
And talk to your Children.
I will bring an ounce of
Your soil
To sprinkle on my dead brethren.

I will go to your abode, Commandante!

A sky within a sky

There is a sky within a sky.

Your sky and my sky
Are different from their sky.

You have birds in flight and the foamy clouds,
I have the blue expanse all to myself.

Their sky has layers like
The sandwich the Earl used to devour.
There is a sky within their sky you and I see and there are skies within, too.

Some have flying reptiles,
And some have streaky meteorites.
You can't trust their sky.

Our sky is full of dreams.
Unfulfilled.
Beautiful.

In their sky,
All dreams get realised and turn into pterodactyls.

Sometimes you wish
That all skies were blue and foamy and breezy and dreamy, too.

But their sky has skies within.

Their skies are traded at the Sensex.

Your and mine are dreams.

A White Prayer

Gokul G K



Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

I first saw her on the bank of Yamuna. Her eyes, dark, lost where the sun bled into the river. She did not blink, nor did she cry, she might have been saying a hundred goodbyes to her sister. *Azan* from a nearby mosque floated through the cold air and dissolved into the golden river. Her eyes moved up from the billowing waves to the wooden boat carrying her sister. The dusk shone gold, the light caressed the boatman's head, her sister – wrapped in white – was still cold. The *Azan* stopped abruptly. Now there was silence, except for the waves. "Waves are Yamuna's breaths," she remembered her sister's words. The boat soon came to a standstill; the boatman, with his oar, shoved her sister into the river. A splash was heard; the *azan* resumed. Her eyes were now affixed on her sister, floating on the breaths of Yamuna.

I saw her sister again when I crossed the bridge. The sky had turned dark by then, just like her eyes, staring down at the floating white.

It rained the next day. The river roared under the bridge, toppling a boat with her flow. When the rain stopped, I went to the slum to find her. The entrance to it was narrow, bordered by

shanties. The roads were flooded ankle-deep; a dead cockroach floated on the waves. Bodies wrapped in white were being carried out of some houses to be dumped in the river. I walked forward – most of the shanties were not plastered, red bricks stared into the narrow street. At one end of the street, I saw a young woman drawing water from a borewell. Her thick black hair hid a good portion of her face. When she turned, I saw her again, the same dark eyes that I saw yesterday.

“Beti?” I called.

She tucked the plastic pot on her hip, spilling some water.

“Who are you?” she asked in a polite but scared tone.

“I am from the hospital,” I said as I took my ASHA identity card from my bag. Her face quickly turned red, her fingers trembled, spilling more water.

“Why are you here?” she asked, refusing to suppress her anger.

“I...”

“Why did not you save didi?” she interrupted me. She must have figured that I did not have an answer to her question, in fact, to any question. I was as lost as she was.

Dark clouds have again gathered above us. A flash of lightning lit up the clouded sky, a thunder followed scaring a hen and its two chickens that nestled near the well; they ran to its owner’s house.

“You all killed her. You will kill me too,” she said. Tears trickled down her face.

What should I tell you, my dear child? Have not we all borne losses? Have not we all died many times already?

“Beti, your didi was sick. It was nobody’s fault.”

Would you not accept my apologies, my dear child? This is no truth. This is no truth.

“Please come to the hospital tomorrow. We will get you tested,” I said.

“Let me die, didi” She cried. “I am begging you, didi, let me die. How can I live here without her? Let me die,” she wailed. The plastic pot slipped from her hip and fell on the flooded floor. I took her into my arms. A lean ray of the sun pierced a dark cloud and fell upon us.

“I am here. I am here,” I whispered into her ears.

I saw her again almost a week after at the hospital. It was a Saturday, I remember. She was made to lie on a bed outside the main hospital building, with some other women from the slum. An oxygen mask covered her nose and mouth. There was a puddle of brown water under her bed, on it, a cigarette butt floated.

She waved her hand when she recognised me. I did not go near her. I knew she was in fear, but I chose not to go, for I did not have answers to any of her questions. What will I tell her if she asks, “Why did you kill my sister?” What will I tell her if she asks “Will I survive?” The hospital’s oxygen supply would run out soon. I saw the chief doctor making many calls, but it all proved futile. I went back into the hospital and inquired the nurse about her situation. The nurse did not reply, instead, she gently shook her head and placed her hand on my shoulder.

Outside, an ambulance wailed.

I saw her last on the bank of Yamuna. Those dark beautiful eyes are not to be seen anymore, she became a lump of white mass, which would soon float on the breaths of Yamuna. The boatman tied a rope around her neck and ankles, and boarded her onto the wooden boat. It was a moonlit night – a silver glow smeared over the pleasant waves. A priest from a nearby temple blew a the *shankh* (conch shell). The boatman, for a moment, got dissolved into tearful prayer. I too closed my eyes.

“Yamuna, the divine,

Yamuna, the nurturer,

Yamuna, the preserver,

Take this daughter of yours,

into your motherly arms.” The boatman chanted.

I stared into the silver river. My heart whispered to her, “I am here, I am here.”

Absence and other poems

Poile Sengupta



Juca Máximo, 'Absence II' | Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Aging

Two men sat gradually
down on a park bench, knees creaking.

One said to the other

– You do not look that old,

Your face is strong.
His companion mused awhile then said
– I seek a jewel in every moment of the day always
I find some.
The other clicked his dentures
into place, he said
again
– Your faith is strong.

Absence

The absence is as wide and full
as cupboards with clothes suddenly
abandoned, a line of footwear, mouths
open, waiting to be foot fed, a wristwatch
still ticking
callously.

They lie who say the missing return
in the slope of a child's gesture, the tone
of a smile, in photographs weary
with the telling.
These are pixels that emerge randomly, uselessly,
They cannot make a presence throb.

Memories sharp as rose thorns snap up
from the undergrowth, mired and marred,
we slither, we slip, we laugh like crows.

Nobody told us
Mourning wears motley.

The Dictator

When it came to the hands,
work stopped.

The Maker said, "This piece seeks
unencumbered power;
It has decided
it will not be informed by majesty.
Make the hands small, counterfeit,
they will never hold a sceptre
never nestle a shepherd's crook."
... And so it was.

The opacity of the real
Four paintings by Aishwarya Iyer



The opacity of the real', watercolour on 300 gsm paper, 8.27" x 8.27"



'Text', fountain pen and watercolour on 52 gsm paper, 5.8" x 8.27"



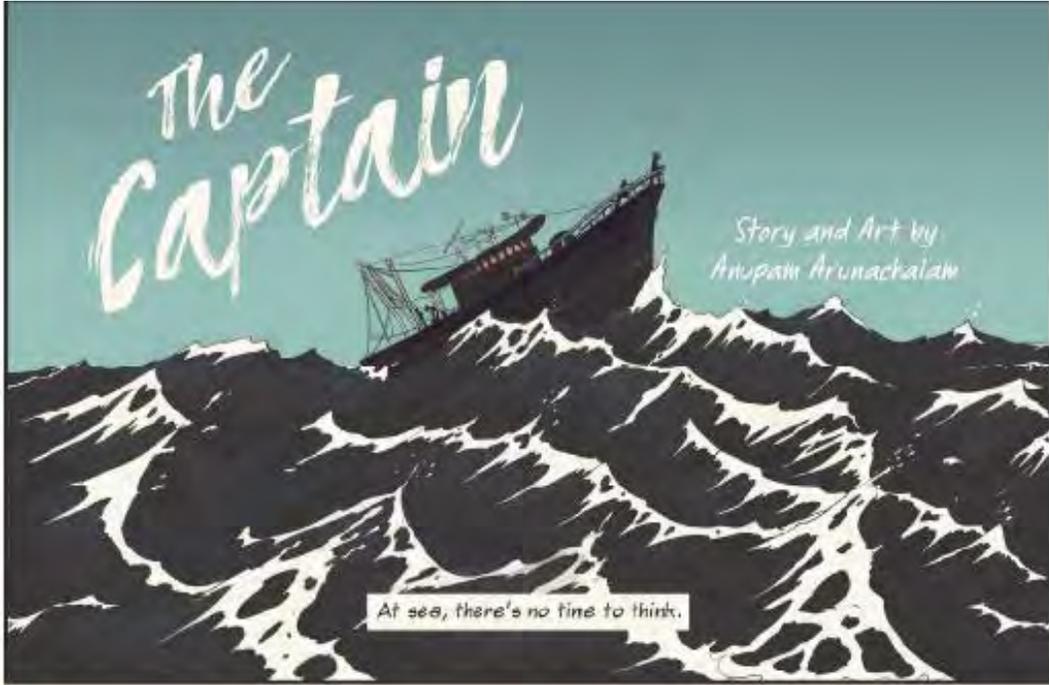
'Untitled', watercolour on 300 gsm paper, 9.44" x 12.59"

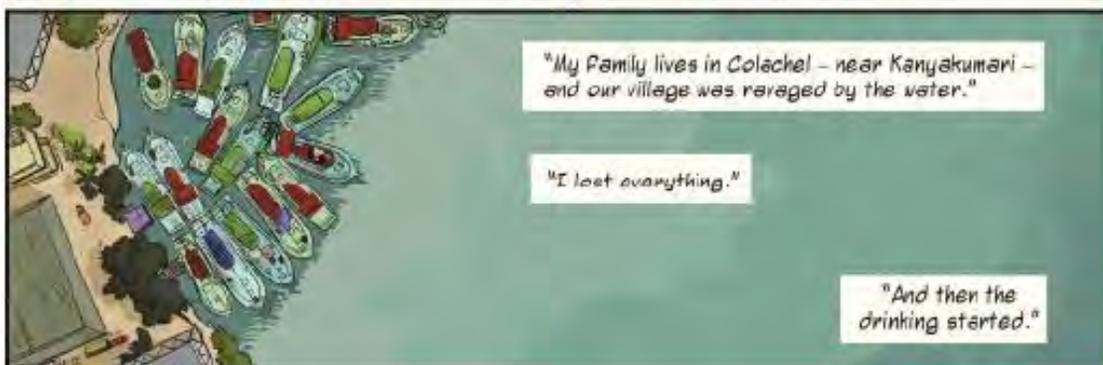


'Hunt II', charcoal on 120 gsm paper, 8.27" x 11.69"

The Captain

Story and Art by Anupam Arunachalam







We're scrambling to get the boat ready in time for the trawling season.

How long do you have?



Thirteen Days.

ఇంత ఎంత సమయం పడుతుంది?

ఇంత తోడు గొట్టాల సమయం ఎంతోంది



Take your shoes off before you come inside.

How long have you been doing this?



Forty years, now.

My Father started me off when I was 9.



Back then, fishing was all in the mind.

My Father taught me how to make out where we'd find the fish by looking at the colour of the sea.



We didn't have all this fancy machinery back then.



"Nowadays, we have the wireless and GPS on one side..."

"...and the echo-locator on the other."

"We don't go out alone any more..."



"We Fish as a community."



"We go Forth and try to find the shoals using our own methods."

"Trying our luck and using our skills."



"But when we find valuable fish..."



Just spotted some Reel!



"We tell everyone about it."

Reel found at 202.105.765, over.



"That way, anyone who's close by can share in the catch."



What do you use the winches for?



You see those big metal plates over there?

Each of them weighs 125 kilos..

We lower them to the sea bed, several feet apart, and the mouth of the net is tied to them.



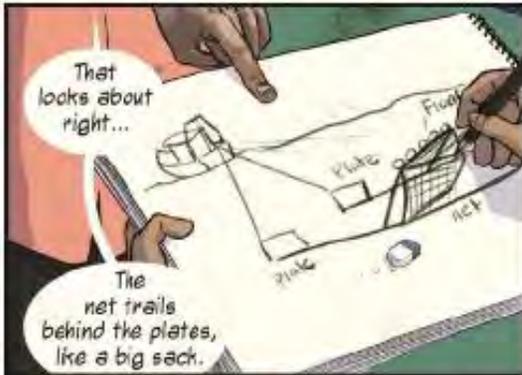
The boat drags the plates, and the plates drag the net.

Is the top of the net held up by flotation devices?



Yeah. And the bottom is weighted.

But the net isn't tied to the boat.



That looks about right...

The net trails behind the plates, like a big sack.



"How long does it take the net to fill up?"

"It varies. We know it's full when the boat begins to flag..."



"We pull it up, get the fish out, and put it right back in."

"It can take us up to ten days at sea to recover the cost of the trip and make a profit."



"Most of our pay comes from the profit."

"So if we don't catch enough, we don't make enough."



"TV do you give them...
 explained as he study
 to that they can...
 or what he children."

"But whenever I...
 what you...
 really..."

"I don't...
 on the...
 ground!"

"What do...
 you do...
 right?"

"How's...
 about...
 the fish...
 you...
 between...
 Dobby...
 at...
 at..."

"How...
 that's...
 right?"

"Is...
 that's...
 been?...
 anything...
 else...
 you...
 like...
 to...
 see?"

"Thanks...
 a...
 lot?...
 actually...
 I...
 like...
 to...
 be...
 here...
 knowing...
 their...
 life."

"What...
 you...
 were...
 saying...
 me...
 all...
 that...
 time?"

"Oh...
 sorry...
 for...
 'talking'."

"Is...
 the...
 name...
 of...
 Anwar?"

"What...
 is...
 the...
 name...
 of...
 the...
 boat?"







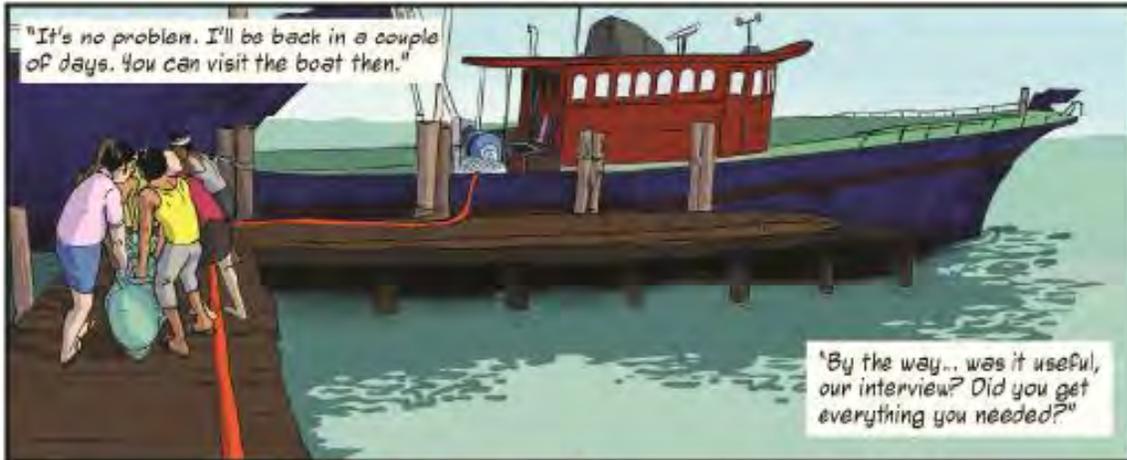
"Hello? Is that Sudharsha?"

"Yeah it's me! Hi!"



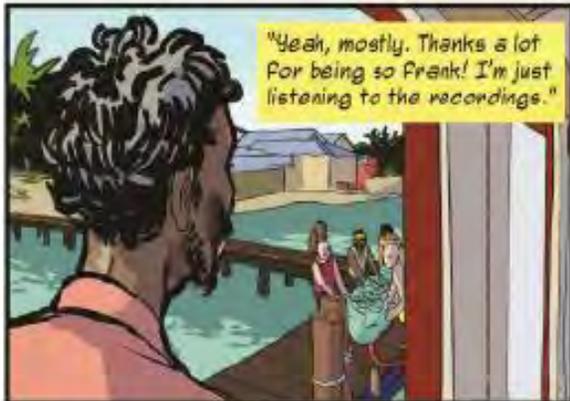
"Hi! I just called to tel you that I won't be in town on the 27th. I've come back home - to Colachel."

"Oh! Okay..."



"It's no problem. I'll be back in a couple of days. You can visit the boat then."

"By the way... was it useful, our interview? Did you get everything you needed?"



"Yeah, mostly. Thanks a lot for being so frank! I'm just listening to the recordings."



"Oh... then you must speak to my wife, Mary. Here!"

"Uh... what?"

"Hello?"

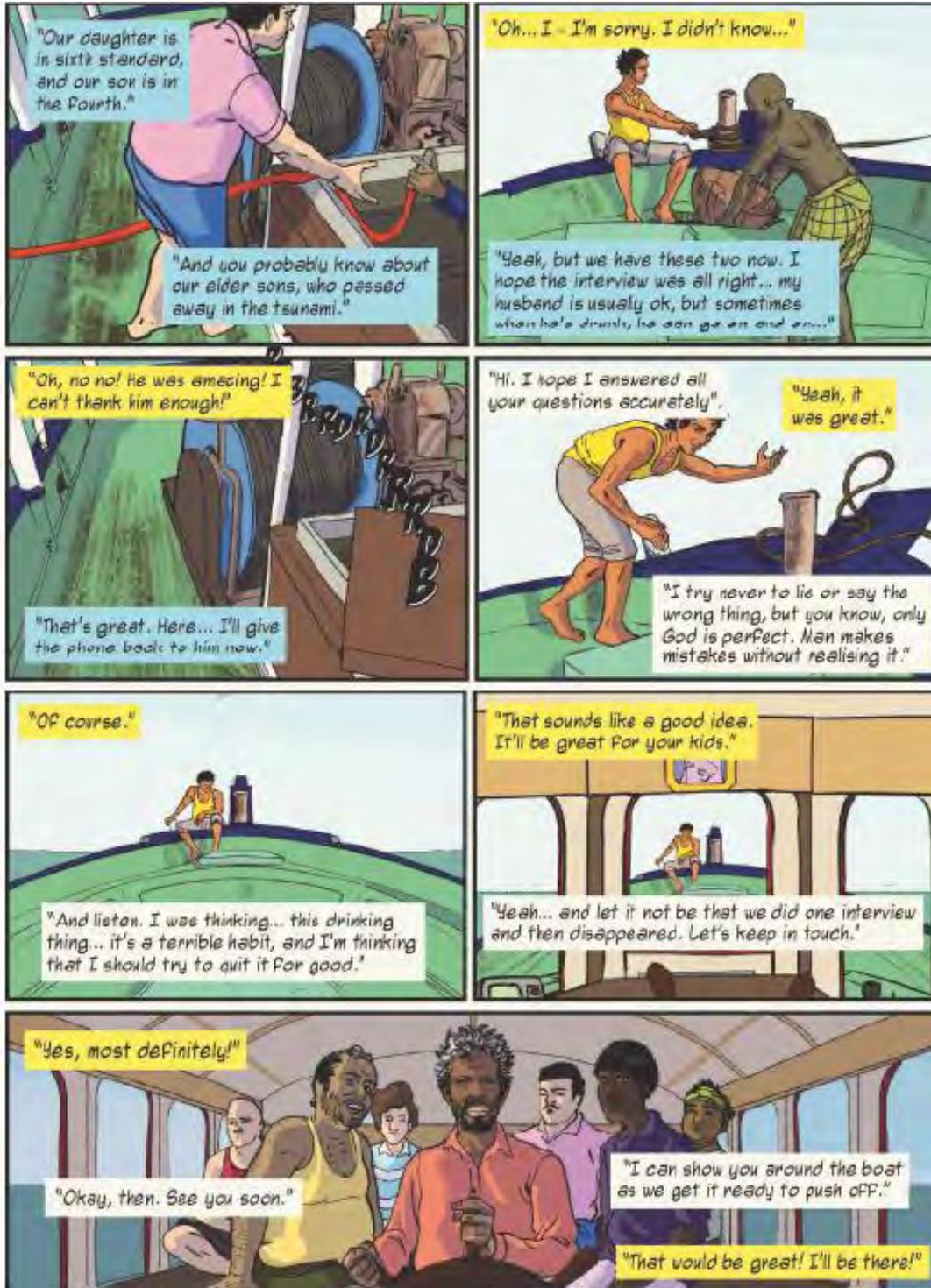


"This is Mary. How are you?"

"Hi! I'm doing fine, thanks. How are you? How are your children?"

"Umm... they're all right. You can probably hear our son and daughter giggling behind us."

"Haha! Yes! They sound really cute."



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Story and Art © Anupam Arunachalam.

काश लेबनान !
सविता सिंह



Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

ठंडी तेज़ हवाओं वाली रात के बाद चमकती धूप भरी सुबह लगभग चमत्कार-सी लग रही थी। खिड़की से बाहर पार्क में बच्चों का एक झुण्ड कई तरह के खेलों में लगा दिख रहा था।

एक बड़ी नियामत थी कि वह छुट्टी का दिन था।

मांट्रियाल के एक छोर पर बसी इस बस्ती में घर लेते हुए मुझे सबसे ज्यादा यहाँ की हरियाली और खामोशी अच्छी लगी थी और यह बात भी काफी सुकून देह थी कि मेट्रो का स्टेशन पास ही था। यों तो यहाँ से बसें भी गुजरती थीं जो शहर हर हिस्से में पहुँचा सकती थीं, लेकिन मेट्रो में सफर करना ज्यादा पसन्द था। मेट्रो की भूमिगत दुनिया मुझे एक अजीब किस्म की आत्मीयता का अहसास देती थी।

उस दिन मुझे खरीदारी के लिए सेंट जूलियन जाना था।

रफ़ता-रफ़ता तैयार होकर मैं बाहर निकली। मेट्रो स्टेशन में दाखिल होते हुए मैंने सोचा, ज़मीन के अन्दर की इस दुनिया में इतने सारे लोग थके, उत्तेजित, मुरझाए, खिले और न जाने किन-किन मनःस्थितियों को लिये आते हैं और फिर एक मौन में घिर जाते हैं। शुरू के दिनों में मौन में घिरे ये लोग मुझे अजनबी होने की प्रतीति कराते लगते थे। ये इतने चुप क्यों हैं, मैं अक्सर सोचती। किसी किताब या अखबार के पन्नों पर निगाह टिकाये या शून्य में देखते ये लोग मुझे अस्वाभाविक से लगते। फिर मुझे उनकी चुप को सहजता से स्वीकार करने की आदत हो गई। यह भी लगता कि उनकी जिन्दगी में सब कुछ इतना प्रकट और उजागर है कि छिपाने के कई तरह के नामालूम से खेल उनकी ज़रूरत बन गए हैं। मेट्रो में तमाम चुप लोगों का यह हुजूम मुझे सचमुच किसी अघोषित खेल में मुब्तिला जान पड़ता था। उनकी इस चुप में और बीच-बीच में एक-दूसरे को देखकर हल्के-हल्के मुस्कुराने में एक खास तरह की गरिमा भी दिखती थी। कुछ चेहरों को देखते हुए कभी-कभी यह भी लगता कि यह व्यक्ति अपनी निजता को बचाये रखने के लिए शायद अतिरिक्त कोशिश कर रहा है।

मैं जिस डिब्बे में घुसी वहाँ भीड़ नहीं थी। शायद छुट्टी का दिन होने की वजह से लोग अलसाये अपने घरों में बन्द होंगे, मैंने सोचा। एक खाली सीट पर बैठने को बड़ी तो बैठते-बैठते मुझे बगल की लड़की की खूबसूरती असाधारण लगी। हमारी निगाहें मिलीं तो वह मुस्कुराई। उसकी मुस्कुराहट में आश्वस्ति और खुशी का मिला-जुला भाव था। शायद इसलिए भी कि हम दोनों एशियाई थे। हाँ, जिस तरह मैं उसके काले बालों और काली आँखों से यह समझ गई थी, वह भी समझ गई होगी। मेरी जगह वहाँ और कोई जा बैठता तो ऐसी प्रतिक्रिया न होती। वहाँ रो-रोकर आँखें सुजाए कोई और लड़की होती... या कोई ड्रगएडिक्ट जो उसकी खूबसूरती से बिल्कुल बेखबर अपनी धुंधली दुनिया में आँखें मूँदे गुम होता... या फिर कोई बूढ़ी औरत जो उसे बिना वजह बार-बार शक की निगाह से देखती...।

बैठते ही मुझे लगा कि वह मुझसे बातें करना चाहती है। शायद वह बहुत अकेली है। यह अनुमान एक अतीन्द्रिय-बोध सरीखा था जिसकी व्याख्या सम्भव नहीं होती।

उसकी मुस्कुराहट के जवाब में मैं मुस्कुराई और अनायास मेरा हाथ उसकी तरफ बढ़ गया। उसने लपककर मेरा हाथ कुछ यों पकड़ा जैसे हम सदियों से एक-दूसरे को जानते हों। उसने बताया कि वह ईशा है, सेंट जूलियन में रहती है... और इन दिनों अकेली है। मैंने उसे अपने बारे में बताया कि मैं यहाँ क्या कुछ करती हूँ कहाँ रहती हूँ और यह भी कि सेंट जूलियन में उसके घर के पास की एक गली में खाने-पीने की चीज़ों की एक दूकान है और मैं अक्सर वहाँ से खुबूस-हुमूस और फिलाफिल जैसी अपनी पसन्द की चीज़ें लिया करती हूँ।

ईशा मुस्कुराई। उसकी मुस्कुराहट की ऊष्मा को मैंने कहीं बहुत गहरे महसूस किया। उसने बताया, वह लेबनान की है।

“मैं तुम्हें अरबी खाना खिला सकती हूँ।” वह बोली, “और यकीन करो तुम्हें मेरे हाथ का खाना पसन्द आएगा।”

मैं हँस पड़ी, “अच्छे खाने के लिए तो मैं घंटे-भर का संघर्ष भी कर सकती हूँ। तुम्हारा घर तो पास ही है।” मैंने कहा।

ईशा ने कहा कि वह मुझे ‘बाशा’ भी ले जा सकती है। ‘बाशा’ मांट्रियाल का सबसे लोकप्रिय अरबी रेस्तराँ हैं। ईशा उसके मालिक को जानती थी और उसके लिए हमेशा उसकी पसन्द की टेबल का इन्तज़ाम हो जाता था।

मैंने गौर किया कि हमारी बातचीत के दौरान उसके चेहरे की पारदर्शी त्वचा पर खुशी का रंग कुछ यों आ रहा था जैसे वह फूल की तरह खिल उठी हो। उसने मज़ाक के लहजे में कहा, “पढ़ने-लिखने वालों की यह बीमारी आम है

कि वे अपना सारा वक्त पढ़ने-लिखने या संगीत सुनने में लगाना चाहते हैं और चाहते हैं कि किसी और का पकाया अच्छा खाना मिल जाये..., वे इसे अपना अधिकार समझते हैं शायद...।”

उसके इस हल्के शरारती अन्दाज़ पर मैं मुस्कराकर रह गई। अन्दर-अन्दर मैं कुछ असहज-सी भी हुई। पढ़ने-लिखने वालों को यह लड़की कहीं पैरासाइट तो नहीं समझती।

कुछ पलों की खामोशी को महसूस करते हुए मैंने खुद ही बातचीत का रुख मोड़ने की कोशिश की।

“तुमने कानों में जो पहन रखा है, बड़ा सुन्दर है।”

उसके चेहरे पर अचानक सलेटी बादल से घिर आए। वह थोड़ी देर बिल्कुल खामोश सामने की तरफ देखती रही। फिर कहा, “यह उपहार है। जिसने मुझे यह दिया वह अब इस दुनिया में नहीं। कुछ साल हुए... गर्मियों में वह लेबनान गया था... और मारा गया।”

हम दोनों खामोश हो गए। एक लम्बी गहरी साँस लेते हुए जिसमें अफसोस भरा था, उसने कहा, “काश! तुमने मेरा लेबनान देखा होता... वह कितना सुन्दर था! इज़रायली हमलों ने उसे किस कदर बर्बाद किया... तुम अन्दाज़ा नहीं कर सकती। अमेरिका की शह पर ज़ायनिस्टों ने उसे मलबे के ढेरों में तब्दील कर डाला..., लगातार तबाही और बर्बादी... लगातार आशंका और मौत..., बेशुमार लोगों की मौत।... कल तक जो जिन्दगी में शामिल था, बेवजह गायब हो जाये तो कैसा लगता है!...”

ईशा स्मृति के घने वन में थी।

“लेबनान इतना सुन्दर था कि उसे मध्य-पूर्व का पेरिस कहते थे। उन दिनों यूरोप या अमेरिका आने का खयाल भी किसी के दिल में नहीं आता था। लेबनान अरबों का बहिश्त था...।”

ईशा ने बताया कि लेबनान में, खासकर बेरूत का सुसंस्कृत तबकाफ़्रैकोफाइल है। फ्रेंच भाषा खुद उसके परिवार में आम इस्तेमाल की भाषा थी। इसीलिए जब इज़रायली हमलों की वजह से जिन्दगी के शीराज बिखरने लगे तो परिवारवालों ने पढ़ाई के लिए ईशा को मांट्रियाल भेज दिया था। उसके आने के बाद एक-एक कर उसके परिवार के ज्यादातर सदस्य मारे गए। बाद में माँ और पिता भी। ईशा ने अपनी रूंधी आवाज़ को संयत करते हुए कहा, “वे पॉलिटिकल लोग थे। मैं अपने पिता को एक बहादुर अरब की तरह याद करती हूँ। माँ की याद अक्सर रुला देती है..., वह बेहद पीड़ा में मरी।”

हमारी बातचीत में मेरी तरफ से अब किसी सवाल की गुंजाइश न थी। ईशा को अपनी कथा कहनी थी और मुझे सुनते जाना था। मन को मरोड़ती हुई उसकी कथा मुझे दहला रही थी।

“जब मैं माँस्ट्रियाल आई तो यहाँ मेरी बुआ का लड़का भी था—हम्माद। उसका साथ मेरे लिए सब कुछ था। बचपन से हम एक-दूसरे को जानते थे। उसे अनगिनत अरबी गीत याद थे। उसका प्यार और उसके गीत मेरे लिए मेरा छूटा हुआ बेरूत रच देते थे...—हम दोनों बेहद खुश थे। वह मेरा मंगेतर बना। फिर वह ज़िद करके बेरूत गया।... अब तो बस कान की ये बालियाँ ही बची हैं।”

मुझे लगा, मैं धीरे-धीरे दुःस्वप्न सरीखे उसके अतीत में शरीक हो रही हूँ। अनजाने ही। इतने हादसों से गुज़रकर आई इस लड़की को मैं क्या दे सकती हूँ...—कोई सांत्वना? किस तरह?

मैं उसकी गोद में निश्चेष्ट पड़े उसके हाथों की तरफ देख रही थी। नहीं, वे हाथ बिल्कुल स्थिर नहीं थे। उँगलियों में कम्पन-सा दिख रहा था। अचानक मेरी निगाह उसके चेहरे पर गई। उसकी आँखें डबडबाई हुई थीं। मैं उसके चेहरे पर निगाहें टिकाये रही—खूब जानती हुई कि मेरी भाषा में उसके लिए इस वक्त सारे शब्द नाकाफी थे।

आँखों को पोंछने की कोई कोशिश उसने नहीं की। वह मुस्कराई और फिर मुझे आश्वस्त करते से अंदाज़ में बोली, “ऑल दिस वाज ए लांग टाइम बैक...” फिर मैंने नये सिरे से जिन्दगी शुरू की, नये तौर से जीना सीखा। मुझमें एक नई ईशा पैदा हुई। मेरे कई प्रेमी बने। उनमें से हर एक को अन्तरगता में जानना मेरे लिए बिल्कुल नया अनुभव रहा। उनमें से कुछ अब मेरे भरोसेमन्द दोस्त हैं। हर बार जब कोई नया प्रेम मेरे जीवन में आता है तो उसे मैं नये वसन्त की तरह महसूस करती हूँ। मुझे लगता है, सम्बन्धों से औरत को घबड़ाना नहीं चाहिए... और न ही किसी सम्बन्ध के टूटने-बिखरने का मातम मनाना चाहिए,... अपने अन्दर की स्वाधीनता महसूस करने में दुःख बहुत बड़ी बाधा है।”

मैं कुछ बोली नहीं। दरअसल ईशा अब मेरे लिए एक हैरतअंगेज़ किस्म का अनुभव बनती जा रही थी। शायद मेरे मन की उलझन को महसूस करते हुए थोड़े नाटकीय ढंग से उसने कहा, “मैं बहुत अच्छी प्रेमिका हूँ। जब मैं प्रेम करती हूँ तो मुझमें सोया हुआ कोई समुद्र जागता है... अपनी तेज़ लहरों के साथ...। लेकिन मैं एकबारगी बेहद ठंडी और विरक्त भी हो सकती हूँ। बिल्कुल कोई और ही ईशा...।”

वह हँसी, फिर बोली, “मैं स्कॉरपियन हूँ। कई बार एक झटके में मैंने चीज़ों को खत्म किया है। मैंने लगातार खुद से संघर्ष करने का तरीका सीखा... हम अगर खुद से युद्ध नहीं करते तो बाहर की दुनिया हम पर जाने कैसे-कैसे युद्ध थोप देती है।”

मुझे उसकी बातें अब पहेलीनुमा लगने लगी थीं। मैंने पूछा, “तुम किस संघर्ष की बात कर रही हो? प्रेम के लिए... उसे बचाये रखने के लिए... उसे परिभाषित करने के लिए... या तुम कोई और बात कह रही हो जो संस्कृति, राजनीति या व्यापक समाज से ताल्लुक रखती है?”

ईशा ने सादगी से कहा, “...बस जीवन को जीने के लिए... हम जब अपने विरुद्ध होना सीख जाते हैं तभी हम सच को पाते हैं, वर्ना हालात का अपना धुँधलका हमारे आस-पास छाया रहता है जिसमें आगे बढ़ने की राह नहीं सूझती... न खुशी के दिनों में और न पीड़ा में...”

ईशा फिर से गम्भीर हो आयी थी। मैं कुछ बोलना चाहती थी कि अपनी रौ में उसने कहा, “मैं तुम्हें स्वाधीन होने का अपना पहला अनुभव बताऊँ। हम्माद की मौत के बाद जो प्रेमी मेरी जिन्दगी में आया उससे जब मैंने सम्बन्ध खत्म किया तो मुझे अचानक अजीब-सा सुकून महसूस हुआ। मैंने पाया कि अब किसी और के कपड़े सँभालने नहीं पड़ते, आलमारी से तौलिया निकालकर उसे नहीं देना पड़ता, उसके नहाने के बाद बाथरूम में बिखरे साबुन, शैम्पू, मग वगैरह को वापस उनकी जगह पर नहीं रखना पड़ता... और ऐसी ही बेशुमार चीज़ों से मैं एकबारगी निजात पा गई। इसके बाद मैंने तय किया कि प्रेम करने के लिए साथ रहने की ज़रूरत नहीं होनी चाहिए। सिर्फ बिस्तर एक होना चाहिए... चाहे उसका या अपना...”

सेंट जूलियन का स्टेशन आ गया था। हम दोनों मेट्रो से साथ बाहर निकले। धूप के बावजूद ठंडी हवाएँ लौट आयी थीं।

कुछ कदम चलकर मैं ठिठकी। हम यहाँ एक-दूसरे से विदा ले सकते थे। ईशा अपने हैंडबैग में कुछ ढुँढ़ रही थी। उसने चाबी का एक गुच्छा निकालते हुए कहा, “अक्सर मैं दोस्तों के घर अपनी चाबी भूल आती हूँ। आज भी अगर ऐसा होता तो मैं तुम्हें अपने घर कैसे ले जा पाती!”

मैं थोड़ी आश्वस्त हुई। चलो कम-से-कम इस शहर में कोई तो ऐसा है जो अपने घर ले जाना चाहता है किसी को। यहाँ तो लोगों के घर जैसे संदिग्ध जगहें हैं। वे अपने घरों में अपने मित्रों या परिचितों से नहीं मिलते। सहजता के ऊपरी आवरण के बावजूद उनके जीवन में शायद कुछ भी अनौपचारिक नहीं।

ईशा का अपार्टमेंट सुन्दर था। हर चीज़ करीने से अपनी जगह पर थी। इस घर में फैली लहसुन की महक यह बता रही थी कि ईशा घर में खाना बनाया करती है। उसके गहरे लाल रंग के सोफे के किनारों पर सुनहरा बॉर्डर था। दीवारों पर लगे चित्र और गुलदान ज्यादातर अरबी थे। उसकी शख्सियत से लेकर रिहाइश की इस जगह तक लेबनान और मांट्रियाल बेहद दिलचस्प ढंग से मिले हुए थे।

ईशा ने कॉफी बना ली थी। कॉफी वह नीले काँच के कपों में लाई थी। उन कपों पर भी सुनहरी किनारी थी। एक नक्काशीदार मेज़ पर कॉफी रखते हुए नाटकीय अंदाज़ में उसने कहा, “यह मेज़ अखरोट की लकड़ी की है। पहचानो, कहाँ की है?” मेरे जवाब का इन्तज़ार किए वगैर खुद बोली, “कश्मीरी है। तुम भी तो कश्मीरी हो ना...।”

मैंने कहा, “नहीं।”

“मगर मुझे लगती हो। तुम जैसी गोरी लड़कियाँ तो कश्मीरी ही होती हैं।” उसने मेरी ओर अविश्वास से देखा।

मैं चुप रही। भारत की विविधता के बारे में बताने का अभी मेरा मन नहीं था। यों भी, यहाँ जिसे देखो अपने देश का इतिहास और भूगोल समझाने में लगा रहता है। मुझे ऐसी बातें बेहद उबाऊ लगती थीं। मैं वह खचर नहीं बनना चाहती थी जो राष्ट्रवाद का बोझा पीठ पर िलिये चलता हो। वैसे भी मुझे लगता मैं खुद ही भारत को ठीक से नहीं जानती। यदि दूसरों को इसके बारे में समझाने लगूँ तो शायद खुद ही उलझ जाऊँ। इतनी मुश्किलें हैं इस देश की...

मुझे यूँ गड्डमड्ड देख ईशा परेशान-सी हुई। “तुम ठीक-ठाक हो न?” उसने पूछा।

मैंने सिर हिलाकर हाँ में जवाब दिया।

उसने आखिर पूछा, “तुम्हें मेरा अपार्टमेंट पसन्द आया?”

मैंने कहा, “बहुत।”

लेकिन यहाँ आकर मैं भीतर-ही-भीतर काफी अस्त-व्यस्त-सी हो गई थी। यह सोचकर भी मुझे भयानक अकेलेपन का अहसास होने लगा था कि ईशा के माँ-बाप, भाई-बहन, यहाँ तक कि एकमात्र कज़न जो उसका मंगेतर था, सब मारे जा चुके हैं। यह चालीस-एक साल की औरत जिसने अपना यह अपार्टमेंट गाढ़े लाल और सुनहरे रंग के सोफे से सजा रखा था, जिसकी आँखें मिनट-मिनट में डबडबा जाती थीं और जिसके होंठ तब भी मुस्कुराते थे, जो मुझे मुक्ति का रहस्य समझा रही थी, वाकई अकेली थी। मेरे भीतर अनायास ही जैसे एक उदासी दाखिल हो गई थी। ईशा का आगे का कम-से-कम तीस-चालीस साल का जीवन मुझे ही पहाड़-सा लगने

लगा था। इस बात से भीतर-ही-भीतर मैं हैरान थी, कैसे मैंने इस अजनबी लड़की की तरफ हाथ बढ़ाया और कैसे उसने उसे एक ज़रूरी चीज़ की तरह लपक लिया। उसकी हथेलियों में एक पुकार थी, एक सच्ची पवित्र पुकार कि मेरी दुनिया में शामिल होकर मेरे हालात की तरतीब और बेतरतीबी को देखो...

काँफी के प्याले खाली थे। ईशा खिड़की से बाहर देख रही थी। मैंने उसे गौर से देखा और जान लिया कि जब तक हम मांट्रियाल में हैं, हमें मिलते रहना होगा। ईशा भी जैसे यह सब समझ रही थी। उसे मालूम था अनगिनत प्रेमी तो आते-जाते रहेंगे जीवन में लेकिन आज अनायास ही मिली यह आत्मीयता उसके लिए कभी न खोने वाली उपलब्धि थी। ईशा ने मेरी तरफ निगाह घुमाई और धीमे कदमों से उसने हमारे बीच की दूरी पार की।

उसने मेरा हाथ दो मुट्ठियों में भरा और मुस्कराई।

अक्टूबर के आखिरी सप्ताह में, उस दिन और उन पलों में वह दुनिया की सबसे सुन्दर मुस्कान थी।

Source

A poem by Sarabjeet Garcha



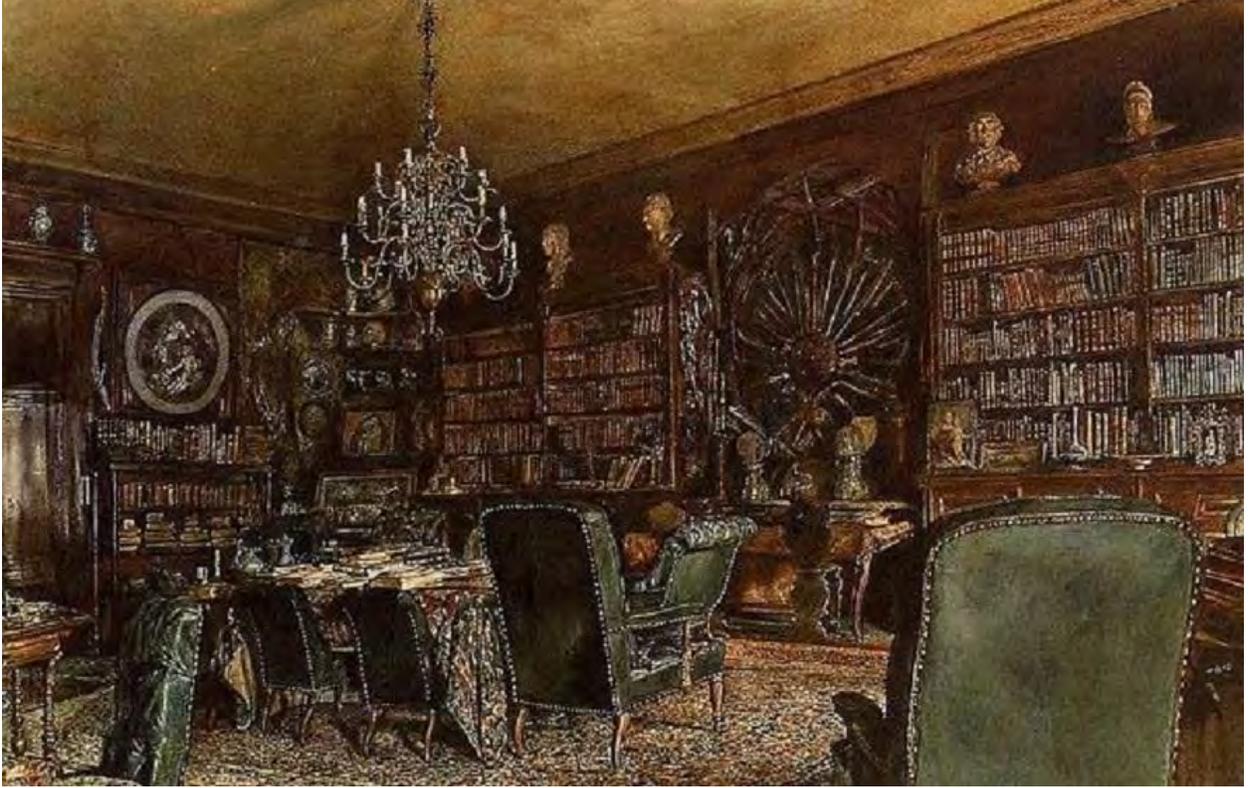
MP Pratheesh, 'Hill', from the series 'Language'

Listen will you join
your palms with me
Listen will you kneel
with me imagine
this room to be
a Palaeolithic cave alive
to the wall paintings the fingers

haven't even dreamed let alone
turn pigment into Will you
fold this night save it in your eyes
so when they open
to me beyond spacetime I'll know
it's you
from the same cave
we made same cave
that made us

In Half Light, Universe of Possibilities Glimpsed: Asif Raza and M. U. Memon Dialogues

Asif Raza, M. U. Memon



Representational Image

Foreword

*Late 2020, Asif Raza, poet, man of letters, whose self-translated Urdu verses have graced our platform wrote me about a huge stack of correspondence nesting in his laptop; emails exchanged with the late Urdu critic and editor of the Annuals of Urdu Studies published from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, **Mohammad Umar Memon** (1939-2018).*

Suppressing my mounting excitement, I popped the question; he answered in the affirmative. In remembrance of his late friend Memon and that experience of what it is to become human through conversation, Raza agreed to sift through the correspondence between 2011 and 2013 and curate this trove of illuminations for The Beacon.

At first blush, they appear to be exchanging laundry lists of their own readings. On deeper reflection, the e-mails evidence highly refined, cosmopolitan sensibilities sharing in the ecstasies of literary influences that are like magic casements, "...opening on the foam/of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn" (John Keats). They also trace the profound human need and desire for friendship located in the shared, often unstated recognition of the universal legacies of reading, of story-telling, of the pleasures to be savoured in the libraries of longing and, belonging.

*For an age rendered inane by socialised ADHD, fear and violence, these dialogues are magic casements.— **Ashoak Upadhyay***

**

*"Isn't writing an act of rebellion? One does not accept the world as it is; one rather recreates it in his own image of what it should be. A virtual, parallel world." **M.U. Memon***

*"Yes, writing is an act of rebellion—metaphysical rebellion I would say. A willful act of transcendence. It is an attempt to overthrow the fiction of reality in order to establish the reality of fiction" **Asif Raza***

**

Wed, Sept 28, 2011, at 8:47 PM

Asif Raza Sahib,

I feel highly indebted to you for a copy of your latest collection of poems "Tanha'i ke Tehvar" which arrived yesterday.

As of now, I've only had time to look at some of your poems and your preface. My initial impression is that these are a bit different from the fare that is currently being dished out as poetry.

I am grateful to Raza Mir for having introduced us to each other. However, I do think his admiration for me is often exaggerated. I'm just an ordinary man, all right, ordinary with a difference. I have always tried to keep myself permanently exiled from "expertise," "focus," "specialty," and such. They tend to limit one's perspective. I, on the other hand, feel at home when things appear in the half-light, their dimness subsuming a universe of possibilities.

I was wondering whether you know of The Annual of Urdu Studies, which I edit. If you don't, you can access the current and all the back issues at our website www.urdustudies.com. And if it is something that appeals to you, would you consider writing something on Urdu poetry?

Well then, thanks again for your book.

Warmly,
m u memon

Wed, Sep 28, 2011, at 10:29 PM

To: Asif raza

For you a poem, "For Antonio Gamoneda," by the Spanish poet Juan Antonio Masoliver Rodens (which I forgot to send with my previous email).

I wanted to write like Antonio
Gamoneda, so I went to León
and, after visiting the cathedral
to ask God to forget me,
I arrived at the poet's house.
Maestro, I said, tell me,
reveal to me the secret of poetry.
I'm no maestro, just a dealer
of useless things. And among these things
poetry is like a frigid
goddess proffering her gifts.
Can you imagine? If you want to write
like I do, write
and erase and write again.
Write like yourself, if you can,
or go to the melon patch and steal one
and go home to savor
the sweet lament of melons.
Writing comes before
not writing. Therein lies the secret
that has nourished poetry both great
and small and otherwise. And here

in León there is a cathedral
and a few bars where God
is always, while I write
here, whether or not I'm alone,
I don't know, whether or not I'm alone.

Fri. Sept 30, 2011, at 1:23 PM

Mohtarami Memon sahib:

Thank you for your e-letter.

I too am thankful to Raza Mir for bringing us together. I am impressed by the fact that, although a self-acclaimed progressive, he suffers a decadent like me with relish, (a streak of masochism must run deep-down through the layers of his psyche.). As for his attitude of reverence towards you, he is right because a nimbus of fame does surround your name. Thus, there is no use trying to cheat your destiny by undue modesty. Rather you should bow to it: Amor fati.

Your introduction of yourself to me reminds me of Pascal's distinction between the mathematical and the intuitive mind.

If reality ever reveals itself to us, it is through a veil of mist. But only a few have the humility to surrender to its mystery. Or the courage and passion to make it a pathway towards the absolute.

I have read quite a few Hispanic poets but Juan Antonio Rodens is not one of them. Quite a cerebral poem. "If you want to write like me ...Write like yourself." Reminds me of Rilke who, advising his young friend how to write poetry, says in his, Letters: "There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself". "And do not let even God rob you of your solitude," one could have added.

As for the Annuals, not only do I know it but I bought one issue from you in 2007. And have used your website too. Your mention of it reminds me that a long time ago, as part of my exchange on Urdu poets and poetry with Francis Pritchett, I once drew a sketchy comparison between the intricacies of Mallarme's and Ghalib's poetry. She suggested that I develop it further and send it to you (something which I never did).

As for writing something on Urdu poetry, alas, my forte is not writing on poetry but writing poetry. But should I stray into that territory and haul back something worthwhile, you will be the first to know.

Sincerely,
Asif

Mon, Oct 3, 2011, at 10:42 AM

Biradaram Asif Raza:

Your eloquence, such perfect control over language, is almost frightening. Inexplicable inhibition takes over me as I labor to respond to your e-mail. (I try not to allow incursion of ego in the way of acknowledging the intrinsic worth of the other). I wish I had known you earlier.

I see affinities in many things you have said. Resonances of what I have myself felt and often failed to articulate. The amazing thing is that all these are self-evident truths yet so inaccessible to most people.

I wish you had accepted Pritchett's suggestion. May I ask you to venture into that realm?

I do not get many good articles for the AUS. In fact, I personally don't like the kind of articles Urduwallas usually write. Mallarme and Ghalib would be ideal. Will you?

So long my friend,
Umar

Sat, Oct 8, 2011, at 1:57 PM

Dear Memon sahib:

Your generous remarks are more a measure of your magnanimity than of my worth.

I guess human beings, whether individually or collectively, have always preferred a comforting lie to a discomfoting truth. Who would want to be an occupant of the haunting void called

existence if one could comfortably lounge in the blissful heaven of ignorance? Why listen to the frightening “silence of spaces” if you can be privy to the celestial music of luminous spheres?

I am impressed that you are not among those who shrink from self-disclosure. I guess only he can do so who does not have the Cyclops-eye on his forehead, that is, the monstrosity called Ego.

Two days ago a package arrived at my doorsteps, unannounced. Turned out to be a surprise gift from you—a collection of books translated by you. Thanks. I was thrilled to see Gabriel Marcia’s and Milan Kundera’s novellas included in the package. Some time ago, I read a laudatory review of your Marquez’s “Memories of My Melancholy Whores” (translated by you as “Apni Sogwar Bewaon ki Yaden”). It was by Mansur Alam (who, coincidentally, also reviewed my “Bujhe Rangon ki Raunaq, in Shabkhood Khabarnama).

I will heed the message on your tucked-in handwritten note and read Kundera’s Angare (Embers) first.

I need you to know that I highly admire your valuable service to the world of literature. I regard you as a bridge-builder between literary continents.

Between my poetry and my academic work (which soaks up most of my time like a giant sponge), I have little time left to do much besides. Thus I humbly submit that though I will earnestly try to fulfill your wish, you will forgive me if I am not able to carry it through.

Yours,
Asif

Sun, Oct 9, 2011, at 11:23 AM

Biradaram Asif raza Sahib,

I have no words or the ability to respond to your exquisite feelings. I am only thankful.

Most people praise me but the labor of the exercise is too obvious to me. Or condemn me outright. But I have come to a point in my life when that does not sadden me anymore.

I hope I bear no ill will to people but I do have a nasty habit: I could not not speak my mind

I am glad the package of books reached you safely. Expect to receive more in the future.

It is not necessary to read them all. Keep them as a gift from a friend. But, yes, I do insist that you read “Angaare” first and let me know your comments, on the novel, and the translation.

Marquez’s novella to which you refer was my first translation after a decade of silence. I had not written anything in Urdu for a long time. Therefore, not being sure of my “dastgah” in Urdu, I was not entirely satisfied with my translation.

I have this damnable habit; I want to nudge Urdu from being a spoken to a written language. Urdu cannot handle long sentences. But they are sometimes necessary, as when what they convey is implicated structurally into the texture of the content. Thus I purposely retain the length which people find odd, as something that does not read like Urdu. But in saying so, they forget that they are reading, not listening. The ear is incapable of keeping track of sentences longer than half the line. But the eye suffers no such handicap. If you lose track, I can always backtrack and easily move forward.

I am glad you laid it out honestly. So I will not insist that you write an article for AUS. Nonetheless, I will ask you to send me any poems you might have written after “Tanha’i ke Tehvar”. Also, I would like to read your comments on Faruqi Sahib’s novel “Kai Chand They...” If they are part of a personal letter, send me the part that relates to the novel.

Warmly,
Umar

Fri. Oct 14, 2011, at 11:36

Dear Memon Sahib:

Thanks for your e-letter.

Long ago, I read your translations of Bapsi Sidhwa’s “Kagra Kaho: (first chapter of her novel) and of “Panse ka Khel” in the annual issue of Symbol.

Critical views clash on what a translator should or should not aim at while translating. As for me, I am still partial to the view (which means I do not have a doctrinaire allegiance to it) that a translation should not come across like a translation, but that it should have ebb and flow and

the feel of the language in which it is translated. I think you rendered Bapsi in Urdu extremely well.

In my less than expert opinion, it is the sense that carries the sentence along as far as it needs

to be carried. Complex thought demands complex sentence structure. In Faulkner, you come upon sentences that are five or six pages long. Surely they do not read like Standard English, do they?

I have completed just one short poem since (others are not yet finished).

Called up from a subterranean zone and darkly written (which perhaps may be the case with a large number of my poems), I can send it to you if you wish (even if it earns me the ire of your readers.).

As for my comments on Faruqi Sahib's novel "Kai Chand They...", yes they are indeed a part of my correspondence with him. I forwarded them to him in several installments, (the first of which he translated in Urdu and published in his Shabkhood Khabarnama). As such, it will take me a while to edit them before I send them out to you.

Yours,
Asif

Sun, Oct 23, 2011, at 2:29 PM

Biradaram,

You know, when Bapsi asked me to translate THE CROW EATERS, I read it again and became doubtful of my ability to render it satisfactorily into Urdu. I had read it more than 30 years ago and liked it immensely. This time though, I felt somewhat differently. (I believe I have grown).

You are the second person who has said kind words about the translation. The fact is: it turned out to be one of the most difficult texts I have ever translated. Though I am not entirely satisfied with my translation, I hear it will be out fairly soon. Of course, I will send you a copy. In the meantime, the pdf of the whole novel is hereby attached, in case you may want to plod through it before translation.

Send me the new poem and never mind the ire of readers. One writes for oneself. The art is compromised with the slightest awareness of the reader. Flaubert was so finicky about it that he never even wanted to publish anything he wrote. Isn't writing an act of rebellion? One does not accept the world as it is; one rather recreates it in his own image of what it should be. A virtual, parallel world. Only in art can opposites exist peacefully, without one trying to eliminate or annihilate the other. I believe Kundera said it.

Your comments about translation are thought-provoking. I will try to learn from them. In fact, I will try to strike a balance between your comments and my thoughts.

Re Faruqi Sahib's novel, take your time to gather your comments together.

Warmly,
m u memon

Sun, Oct 23, 2011, at 10:12

Dear Memon Sahib:

Thank you for yet another package of your translations. I am awed, among other things, by the sheer volume of your literary output.

I am 'snailing' along "Angare" (which, as a deep reader, is my way of reading a serious work of art).

Waiting to hear from you,

Yours,
Asif

Tue, Nov 1, 2011, at 1:45 PM

Dear Memon Sahib:

Thanks for your acceptance of my poems for AUS.

How I wish we meet someday!

I introduced you to Faruqi Sahib as my “new friend.” Responding, he praised you profusely; for your “scholarly erudition”, and your “absolutely unselfish love for and service to Urdu literature”.

I read your introduction to Snake Catchers”. I regard it as a profound treatise.

At many points, I was thrilled to recognize my own views reflected in it.

Yes, writing is an act of rebellion-metaphysical rebellion I would say. A willful act of transcendence. It is an attempt to overthrow the fiction of reality in order to establish the reality of fiction. An effort to replace the external world with the inner one in which polarities are held together in dialectical tension.

You do your own yard work! I have my yard taken care of by others. But at times, I let it be I run over by weeds. Then, when I look at it— overgrown with weeds— I feel a bond of kinship with it that I never do when it is primly cut and neatly trimmed.

Another package of five books! I am overwhelmed.

Yours,
Asif

Sun, Nov 26, 2011, at 5:38 PM

Dear Asif,

Thanks for sending me the new poem. It will appear in the next AUS. Yes! Indeed! But whatever slings and arrows fly your way, I will be happy to take them on my chest. Who knows this might prove to be the only redeeming act I’ve engaged in. In the meantime, if you have translated some more of your poems, send them on as well.

But it is only natural that we meet. It is preordained. Sooner or later the thought would have occurred to you, as it did to me.

This reminds me of a few lines of a poem by Sarojni Naidu I read in my high school English class at Aligarh:

If you call me, I will come

Swifter than desire

Swifter than the lightning's feet

Shod with plumes of fire

But these lines should not be taken as a veiled expression of my impatience, or a desire to foist myself on you. Yes, we will meet someday, but naturally.

I am gratified to learn that Faruqi Sahib had some nice things to say about me.

The problem with translation is no different than the original in any language, which, by its nature, is equipped to deal with the most mundane transactions. One has no idea what a writer thought or perceived and what he/she was able to express. And poets, well, they subvert the language to a point where it melts away, revealing in its wake a nebula where consciousness retrieves the hazy vestiges, the approximations of the thought, the feeling that might have been intended. Recently, I was translating a piece by Muhammad Hasan Askari (it will appear in the upcoming AUS) where he says about Sartre:

“He says that a poet does not use words at all. A prose writer can enter inside words and examine them closely. This is beyond a poet. He observes words from outside only. Like a prose writer, he cannot describe any object. Instead, he creates a new object in words opposite that object. He presents verbal substitutes of objects. His lines are therefore just descriptive sentences; they are objects. Poets are thus “creators” in the strict sense of the word. As an example Sartre quotes the following lines of Rimbaud:

Oh seasons! Oh castles!
What soul is faultless?

(O saisons! O chateaux!
Quelle anm est sans default?)

Sartre says:

Nobody is questioned; nobody is questioning; the poet is absent. And the question involves no answer, or rather it is its own answer. Is it therefore a false question? But it would be absurd to believe that everybody has his faults. As Breton said of Saint-Pol Roux, "If he had meant it, he would have said it." Nor did he mean to say something else. He asked an absolute question. Conferred upon the beautiful word "soul" an interrogative existence. The interrogation has become a thing as the anguish of Tintoretto became a yellow sky. It is no longer a signification, but a substance. It is seen from the outside, and Rimbaud invites us to see it from the outside with him. Its strangeness arises from the fact that, in order to consider it, we place ourselves on the other side of the human condition, on the side of God"

It was very heartening to note that you found echoes of your own thoughts in my introduction to Snake Catchers. Actually, Naiyer Masud invites the reader to witness "being" in its dazzling underderivativeness. It is like watching a painting. Critics, a derivative existence, will tell you what the painting means (with no guarantee that it means what he/she says it means.) NM is not interested in this. He does not ask that you try to understand. Actually, he does not even ask, he is fashioning objects for himself. The most one can do is watch with him. I think I'm raving. This is how I understand it, through raving. Critical writing leaves me cold; it looks to me as fake.

I work in the yard because I love it, the beauty of roses, the sensation of watching a seed germinate and slowly inch its way into this transient world, nothing yesterday, this morning a deceptive blotch, suggestive of aspiring life, tomorrow something in existence, as incontrovertible as your own being, regardless of how long it will or you will last.

Warmly,
Umar (yes, you may call me just that)

Fri, Dec 9, 2011, at 3:40 PM

Dear Umar Sahib:

Thanks for the touching verses. Certainly, one day, we will meet.

I am aware of Sartre's aesthetics, even if superficially. He grounds it in his ontological and epistemological assumptions. Of pivotal importance in understanding his views is perhaps his

Phenomenology of imagination. Since imagination is a negative, art (painting, music, and poetry) amounts to the annihilation of the real. His theory of the two opposed attitudes toward language exemplified by the two opposed genres namely, prose and poetry, is linked to

traditional symbolism. Mallarme referred to the former as 'reportage' and the latter as 'musique' (Valery likened the one to 'walking' or 'running' and the other to 'dancing'). In prose, words are used semantically: they are transparent signs that refer to something beyond themselves. In poetry, words are used asemantically. They are opaque, with substance of their own, have no ulterior reference but are self-referential. They do not represent but present things as a verbal embodiment of reality, reality as metamorphosed. Poetry is thus linked to the inner life of the poet that can only be suggestively conveyed through analogy and symbol.

T.S. Eliot has taken Valery to task for insisting on the absolute disjunction between the language of prose and poetry. I think his criticism applies to Sartre too. Although I lack the ability to discourse on Sartre at the level he demands, I venture to state that his view does seem to congeal into a dogma.

Affectionately yours,
Asif

Tue, Dec 13, 2011 at 4:39 PM

Dear Umar Sahib:

The credit naturally goes to the writer who writes the masterpiece. But also to one who recognizes it as such and makes it available to others through his translation.

Sandor Marai's "Angare" is a great short novel. To read it as a psychodrama would be to denigrate it. It is multidimensional in scope and import. It deals with the ineffable mystery of being, with man's inescapable destiny, as well as the strength and fragility of human relations among other things. But importantly, it does so with impeccable artistry. Sandor provides an example of how the purported disjunction between the language of prose and poetry is untenable. Abounding in imagery, metaphor, and symbol, his prose is quintessentially poetic.

"Angare" is not a novel to be skimmed. I read almost each of its pages twice or thrice. And I still think I read it too fast, and that I should read it again, this time staying more alert to some of its recurring motifs. Two stand out for me, namely, 'music' and 'forest.' It is noteworthy that he manifestly joins the music motif with the myth of Orpheus. Music! The beguiling call of the sublime threatens our immersion in quotidian existence (akin to the theme of my poem "Seven Sisters"). And, on the other hand, the lure of the jungle, the dark seduction of animality.

To me, Nini is not merely a specific character but *élan vital* itself, the forward thrust of life, undaunted and unstoppable. His views on friendship, which is a dominant motif in his novel, reminds of Nietzsche's way of looking at it.

As for your translation itself, it is difficult to make a call without having read the original. Yet the fact that it makes such an impact on the reader is in itself a testimony to its success.

It is futile to be a purist and demand complete fidelity to the original. The neologisms in your translation show that, when called for, you do not shy away from "foreignizing" the target language.

I do so too as long as I can render it palatable to the taste and sensibility of the target readers. However, in my practice of translation, I prefer to err on the side of the paraphrase (that is, transparency) rather than metaphrase (that is literal rendition). On the whole, I try to find a judicious blend of the two.

Yours,
Asif

Fri, Dec 16, 2011, at 7:12 PM

Dear Asif Sahib,

Thanks for your very enlightening and warm –emails (2 of them). I will respond to them later. There are three items that cannot wait:

1. Send me your new poems
2. That article of Askari Sahib I quoted from is called "Adab bara'e Adab (or was it Fann bara'e Fann?)
3. I'm sending you an article of the late Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu in which he briefly compares the Sufi, especially the Iranian tradition of Existentialism and its Western counterpart. I hope you will enjoy reading it. It is from his book "Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Mystical philosophy." I have translated the whole book (still unpublished). Let me know your general impressions of the piece.

With love,
Yours,
Umar

Sat, Dec 17, 2011, at 4:29 PM

Biradaram Asif Raza Sahib:

Sooner or later you would have known that the person on the other end of your email is not quite as learned as you think. Your knowledge frightens me, though I never found it inaccessible. You mentioned Sartre. I never could appreciate his fiction. It always read nauseatingly formulaic, as though it was an instrument to expound his philosophy, phlegmatically ignoring the inherent autonomy of fiction. I know I am being harsh. He isn't that bad. But my recourse to an extreme statement is simply to dramatize the point, to bring it home forcefully. On the other hand, even though perhaps not quite as great as Sartre, Camus, his politics aside, does seem to have some feeling for the autonomy of literature.

The way you have elucidated the difference between prose and poetry, citing Mallarme and Valery is very informative for me. Actually, I now understand that quoted passage from Askari better. I did understand it before too, but simply as something that rang true. Although I could not have laid it out so succinctly, neatly, and clearly myself. And what was a mere suggestion unfurled for me in its astonishing immediacy. I could see why poetry was in its essence different from prose, why it was in its very nature an act of defiance that it was another world, whose truth lay in the poet's imagination, not in reality as experienced in the day-to-day world that it dealt with the "end things" of existence. So my friend, thank you for sharing your enlightening thoughts with me.

Last night I sent you a piece by Toshihiko Izutsu. Reading your comments about Sartre, I began to wonder what "existence" Sartre is talking about. With my slight, perhaps misreading of speculative Sufism, especially its idea of existence, I thought he is too much caught up in the individual (perhaps with good reason). At that point I recalled Izutsu's article and thought I might send it to you, not to condemn Sartre or the Western tradition of "existentialism," but only to see whether you also agree with him about the element of "lyricism" that he sees in the exposition of "existentialism" in Heidegger and others.

You know, I'm grateful to you for another reason too. "Angare" must have been out for over two years now. It simply went unnoticed. Not a single review, not a single comment by anyone. I didn't translate to stick a few feathers in my cap. I so much wanted to share Marai's genius with

others. Show them a beautiful thing. Hoping that someday it inspires them to write something like that novel. So now when you say you have read every page 2 or 3 times, slowly, I feel that only now I have succeeded in what I'd set out to do. A single reader like yourself is a gift to cherish forever. I was simply swept away by this novel. There is hardly any action, the story of just one evening, and yet so full of things that matter, Being a poet you felt drawn to its two recurrent themes: music and forest.; for me, though, his thoughts about nature of friendship between two male friends was something of a revelation and what he says makes immense sense. I also immensely liked the character of Nini.

I have often found myself lacking in Urdu vocabulary that would capture the "tarz-e ehsas" of writers such as Marai. I'm aware of the staccato rhythm of my prose. I did the best I could with my limed linguistic resources, but also knowing that full justice was not done.

Warmly,
Umar

Wed, Dec 28, 2011, at 4:16 PM

Dear Umar Sahib,

If I ever conveyed to you the impression that I was "learned" or knowledgeable, then I was being a charlatan since I know how little I know and tangentially, also, because I regard knowledge per se a dubious virtue. (I put 'intellect' in the same category). What knowledge can we puny humans boast of? Do we not stand, like dumb brutes, stunned, before the Ineffable? Additionally, you have been unfair to yourself in your self-deprecation. I want you to know that I hold you in high esteem for your erudition in the pursuit you have selflessly dedicated yourself to.

You asked if I agree with Izutsu "about the element of lyricism in the exposition of Heidegger he offers". Luckily, I do have some nodding acquaintance with Heidegger and thus can speak to your query.

The answer is "yes" concerning existentialists, such as Jaspers and Buber (not mentioned by him) and Sartre but "no" when it comes to Heidegger since what marks out Heidegger from all other existentialists is just the opposite, that is to say, his prose style, which is singularly non-lyrical. His mode of exposition is bloodless—ice-cold and bone-dry, almost entirely dispassionate. The reason may be simple. By design, his ontology is not anthropomorphic, that is not man-centered, but Being-centered. On the contrary, the 'lyricist s of existence' such as

Jaspers, Buber, and Sartre are human-centered. Thus they speak passionately to and about human subjects.

Quite a few times, I interrupted my reading of Izutsu to ask, given my lack of much knowledge in the field of mystical philosophy, if it was I who was misunderstanding Izutsu's stance or he who had misread Sartre? In my humble opinion, he is entirely correct in citing Heidegger to assert a similarity between existentialism and wahdat al-wujud. However, while Heidegger grounds das Seindes (beings) into Sein (Being) and thus posits the unity of Being, Sartre never does. Rather he remains in the domain of Cartesian dualism: there are two beings, each irreducible and irreconcilable to the other, namely, 'en soi' (the being of nature) and 'pour soi' (the being of consciousness). While according to Heidegger, human beings (the Dasein) are rooted in Being, Sartre leaves man rootless in the universe. As such, I cannot comprehend the grounds on which Izutsu infers a similarity between Sartre's existentialism and wahdat al-wujud.

I also have reservations about Izutsu's comparative analysis of Sufism and existentialism, such as, in my opinion, his out-of-context interpretation of the famous chest-nut tree episode from Sartre's renowned "Nausea". But I could be wrong.

Your criticism of Sartre is partly well taken. He does take a utilitarian view of literature, more precisely of fiction. Also his fiction does embody his existential tenets. But so does Camus'. I think there is something to be said for letting the fiction write itself rather than forcing it into predetermine ideational channels. Nevertheless, despite that, both Sartre and Camus have still written unforgettable classics.

I am afraid the letter has become too long, otherwise I would have included my comments on your translation of the marvelous novel by Garcia Marquez (which I have read twice with reverent solemnity, and both time, with my eyes brimming with tears).

I will send you the English versions of my poems back to you tomorrow.

Yours,
Asif

Jan, 13, 2012 at 6:19 PM

Dear Asif,

The warmth and kindness with which you talk about me and praise my work is intimidating.

The thought that I may not live up to your high regard places a tremendous burden and responsibility.

Much as I appreciate your words (few have been so generous or forthcoming), I alone know my deficiencies.

I cannot engage with you either about Heidegger or Sartre in any meaningful way. I have read Sartre's fiction; his other books I did try but could not read them. Likewise, I bought Heidegger's *Being and Time* but it lies unread on my shelf. With no background in philosophy or metaphysics, I doubt if I will ever be able to follow the drift of their thought. When I read Isutzu, his thoughts were a discovery. I jumped into them because of my own bias.

What is my bias? Quite simply, Having lived in this country for 47 years, having observed it and the West in general, having realized what they have done to the world, how they have ignored and suppressed recognition and of the contributions of others to their own intellectual and cultural development, I could not miss to note the self-centrism and sense of superiority in most westerners. So when I read Isutzu, his critical comments on Sartre and Heidegger, It seemed to corroborate my gnarled impression about the West.

I once read a book (Dick Teresi: *Lost Discoveries, The Ancient Roots of modern Science—from the Babylonians to the May.*) I thought it was on the Arabs, but it turned out that the West has ridden roughshod over just about every culture and civilization. All one needs to do is read the history of Muslim Spain and to know how knowledge was transmitted wholesale to Padua in Italy and elsewhere. Read Thomas Aquinas and what Al-Farabi said 325 years before him. A catholic priest has even produced parallel texts from the two; Al-Khwarizmi and Copernicus; Ibn Sina and Descartes (some of this material is in my "Ishrate-e Awaagi" which is not likely to be published any time soon). Please do not think that I am a champion of contemporary Muslims. No, their achievements are behind them, their present is as ghastly as, most likely, their future would be. But these standard-bearers of humanity and culture (the West)—they leave a terrible bad taste in my mouth, which might not have been so if they didn't make such open-mouthed pronouncements about their humanity and culture and their damned way of life. In fact my quarrel is with the whole world but more intense with the West, because they have done most damage.

I had no idea you had read Marquez. And now I am impatient to hear about your views. "Transvaluation of Values", that is what good literature does. It cannot change the world but thru the world it creates, it can give us intimations of what the real world could have been like. It can change your perception of reality. Another such book is Marai's "Esther's inheritance."

Regarding my translated version of Askari's article that I sent you. Since you are better acquainted with literary vocabulary and certainly write better than I do, you might, as you read

it, improve some of my glaring inadequacies by suggesting more apt words, phrases and expressions. French poetry and its forms are not my forte.

With love,
Umar

Sat, Jan 14, 2012, at 2:36 PM

Dear Umar Sahib,

Marquez's book is one of those that shake you to the core. It is insufferably poignant. All the more so because it does not shout human pain, or name its manifestations, but suggests it tangentially, or whispers it stoically in passing, or overlays it with light-hearted banter. To me, it is a story of the rebirth of and redemption of a selfish man, from his crass sensuality to his spiritual awakening as a tragic aesthete. He changes from a self-deluding brothel-brute to a selfless worshipper at the altar of pure beauty, (a beauty given transcendental import by its being linked to the magnificent symbol of the cat).

Upon starting to read Izutsu, I readily preconized his bias which you identified as yours too. To a great extent, it is mine too. The post-colonial theory gives it a robust expression. Edward Said, Franz Fanon, and others have thoroughly debunked the hegemonic ideology of occidental superiority.

Yours affectionately,
Asif

Mon, May 14, 2012, 10:36

Dear Asif,

When I was in Karachi recently, I was interviewed by Anwer Sen Roy of BBC. In it, I brought you up too and said quite a few things about you. I am sending you the link.

With love,
Umar

Wed, May 16, 2012, at 2:45 PM

Dear Umar Sahib:

As soon as I hung up the phone, I realized that I had just crossed a barrier that had existed between us for months, namely, the sound barrier.

In your article on Manto that you sent me, you have yet again made a strong case for the autonomy and self-sufficiency of Art along with rejecting the vision of realistic fiction. However, playing the Devil's advocate, one might add that you did so despite Manto himself, for did he not himself say "We ought to present life as it is, not as it was, nor as it will be, nor as it ought to be " (quoted in Leslie Flemming).

I may not have appreciated your article as much as I did had I not read Mario Vargas Llosa's "Letter to A Young Novelist". In my eyes, Manto is not just one of the best fiction writers in Urdu rather, he is the best, the Supreme one, just as Ghalib in Urdu poetry. My reverence for both borders on worship.

You probably heard the sad news: [Carlos] Fuentes died yesterday.

Yours,
Asif

Wed, May 16, 2012, at 10:38 PM

My dear Asif,

You cannot teach an old dog new tricks—can you? Provided the writer is accomplished in his art, he may intend something specific by his writing, but he allows himself to be surprised by his characters who may play tricks on him. He does not quash the moment of blossoming. So his intention means little to me. As long as the reading can be derived logically from his writing, I can dispense with his intention. Llosa concludes his last letter to his young novelist thus: "A successful fiction or poem will always contain a dimension that rational analysis isn't quite able to encompass." So what critics may say about Manto and Manto might say himself will always be the product of rational thought, of moments when one is farthest away from the wondrous

and equally unpredictable act of creation. So where does the “old dog” fit in all this, that is, me who is now too old to change his ideas.

I am also glad that I spoke to you on the phone. I wanted to do that much earlier. I wasn't sure whether you would have liked that. Perhaps we were both equally hesitant out of deference to the other.

For some strange reason, a couple of lines of Dard have come to my mind unbidden:

wa kar diye hain shauq ne band-e-qaba-e husn

ghair az nigah ab ko'i ha'il nahin raha

Love,
Umar

Sat, May 19, 2012, at 12:34 PM

Dear Umar Sahib:

Don't forget that the quote was cited by the Devil's advocate (who is such a teaser).

I knew you would counter the view he cited exactly in the manner that you did, that is, in the anti-intentionalist vein. You phrase your rejoinder eloquently.

I too have always staunchly defended autotelism of art against the reductionist efforts of all brands. As for the New Critic's idea of the intentional fallacy, I reject it as a dogma since to me the relevance of authorial intention in a work of literature is an empirical and not a theoretical question (as is the author's biography and socio-historical context).

I share your aversion to critic's pretensions of being the indisputable authority in the realm of literature. But, the irony! Taken to its logical extreme, does not the idea of intentional fallacy (which involves ignoring the author's pronouncements about his existential nexus with his work) puts him above the author and makes the critic the uncontested authority in the realm of literature?

Your quoted couplet poetically transported me to you.

Yours,
Asif

Sat, May 19, 2012, at 8: 38 PM

Dear Asif,

I'm not averse to authorial intent if the critic has the decency not to take the matter of politics and society overboard. Iqbal has been crucified by these critics. They just talk about everything except his poetry. The same goes for Faiz. So, in order to introduce some sense of balance in this rampant gobbledygook of our so-called critics, I go to the other extreme: denial of authorial intent, doing my best to pull the rug from under the feet of the critic himself to impress upon him that his own craft has no validity.

That said, my problem hasn't moved a centimeter towards any resolution. If all Manto ever wanted to do is to show society as it is, why must he write stories? Who needs him to show life as it is: we see it without him anyway. If he is lamenting the absence of morality, this then is not part of his vocation as a writer of fiction. I think when he says what he says, he is posturing—exactly as I am when I rush off to the other extreme. As I write these lines, I'm reminded of Manto's story "Bu". Leslie Flemming has a whole spiel on it, and we are not any the wiser for it. But I read it as a story of awakening of a rare and precious sense in Randhir, thanks to the woman from the hills, with all the captivating smells wafting from her unwashed body, repelling but strangely nourishing his senses. Why don't our critics write about that? You need a real brain to engage with such issues. And what we have got is Zia Mohiyuddin with his reductionist clichés like "scathing indictment of Partition".

I think the question of authorial intent has been submerged by the charge of obscenity frequently leveled against Manto. It was never allowed to be appreciated in harmony with other elements of his craft. And Manto was not the one to take it lying down. Fiction and poetics were never at issue: it was attack, bereft of any sense of literal sensibility, and counter attack, equally bereft of the same sensibility. Manto was hitting back. That's all.

Warmly,
Umar

Tue, May 22, 2012 at 2:48 PM

Dear Umar Sahib:

I am an extremist. Perhaps that's why, as if to compensate for the excesses of my nature, I consciously adopt the Greek middle. But perhaps beyond the merely psychological explanation, I have a philosophical reason too. I see reality as a paradox. Therefore for me, the middle does not signify any "resolution". It is rather a taxing, distressing and painful sustaining of contradictions in reality and within yourself. That is to say, I silently stoically bear the tension between thesis and antithesis, without seeking a synthesis or a "resolution" because, I believe, there is none.

I recall Mario's view that one writes to imaginatively plug the hole one experiences in one's existence. In my view, that may be one of the possible reasons. Another may be just that which you decry, that is, "to show society" (or reality) just "as it is." Show it to those who either do not want to, or cannot see it as it is, but only as their false consciousness presents it to them through the distorting lenses of some creed ideology, or dogma, or grand myth.

The problem with us writers is that we tend to elevate our subjective understanding of why and how we write what we do to the level of objective truth. It is one thing to make the axiological statement: "In my view, this is why and how literature is written" and quite another to make an ontological assertion: "This is why and how literature is written".

Your interpretation of Manto is worthy but would it not be a greater writer if his writing afforded interpretation at multiple levels simultaneously?

I too am glad that upon hearing your voice the aura of abstraction that surrounded your name has suddenly vanished.

Yours,
Asif

First published in [The Beacon](#).

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Family Roots

Two poems by Tanya Tulsyan



Kanchan Chander, 'Mother & Two Daughters', Oil on Canvas, 34 X 48 inches | 1980/81

Family Roots

Mornings begin with
the rubbing of calloused palms,
slick with the aroma of coconut
oil
seeping into kismets
of generations,
their stories
folded into the braids of my hair,

parceled from weave to weave,
head to head,
a meandering trail of black
roots stronger
than any other family tree,
from grandmother
 to grandmother
 to mother
 to daughter,
woven together into thick
knots and apart the length of hair,
starting and stopping nowhere.

Summers

I remember
only the chalky ceilings—

 jagged with dripping paint—
we spent our afternoons
floating beneath,
unheated
uncaring
of the far summer suns
veiled behind films
of heat, of length,
blurred as my albums of them now are,

Bothered only for
the stench of yellowing banganphalli,
dangling and beckoning
like Nani's bangles, gold riches
ripe with glee to slurp upon—
gilding fingernails and cotton
with the sweet stain of memory.

How we used to race the sun
to reach mornings, slept noons
under the simple shade of a faded saree,

made roofs out of her parched palms
tracing riverbeds on the back of her hands.
Summers now reek of her absence,
And to fall for the spoors of the bangaphalli ped is
too painful without the hands that used to cut them.

An Offering

Neera Kashyap



Gustaaf Sorel, *Volksverhuizers*, India ink on paper, ca. 1940 | Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Char island.

The hurricane sucks you under,
spews you out in a heaving deposit a hundred miles away.
A tidal mass of breakers all around – crashing, foaming,
Waiting
to sweep you up again, to throw you around
like an impermanent offering
to the river goddesses:
a different form, a different shape
for a different appetite;
shifting silt islands that do not hold nor satisfy

the insatiable appetite of goddesses who course
towards the sea,
Dark,
hungry,
raging.

His sixth poem written during his third sleepless night in a row. He knew from the stories of his ancestors that char islands with their alluvium deposits from overflowing rivers could be so fertile that three crops could be raised in a year, if not ruined or drowned by storms or hurricanes. Fertile, fertile as his euphoric mind, when euphoric. He could feel the drumbeat in his head like a beep light — bright, incandescent, alert — sending out signals he had no control over. Like the alarm of a car backing up, its high decibels beeping out a warning to stay out of range. He had to write then, more than ever — as if his skin, blood, glands were all focused on the words, spilling out with a life of their own. Words not much better than in normal times, not brilliant — just needing to be out in a spill of euphoria, like motes of dust in a shaft of sunlight — dancing, dancing. His whole body felt light like air. He must drive, drive fast, meet the air outside, feel its lightness like the lightness of his being. Lightness mingling with lightness, skin on tremulous skin.

He slammed his laptop shut and got up heavily from his chair. He saw the vase flying from his desk — heavy and green, a bunch of artificial roses still snugly held in its cylindrical womb. It landed near his foot — the vase in four pieces, the roses spilt, serrated leaves green and plastic. The tic in his eye first made a tentative appearance, twitching sporadically, then steadily. He must go out, drive, before this took over, this heavy nervousness. Mariam entered the room, flinging the door open. She took in the scene, her face tired, expectant.

Though heavy, she moved lightly, with nervous energy. Her flowered nightgown hid her corpulence, and her struggles that swung between feasting and fasting. Flecks of henna hid the grey in her hair, blending copper into thick dark waves. The remnants of a pink polish stuck crustily to her chewed nails, now clipped neatly. Her puffy face, lined with sleep, looked strained as if sleep did not refresh. She looked at the pieces of broken vase, deliberately moving her gaze away. Her eyes straying to the open window framing the orange of dawn suddenly prickled with tears. She ignored them as she moved to sit at her husband's desk, keying in the laptop's password. Hasan stared at his wife with his twitching eye. No screams today. Today was the ice maiden day. Following psychiatrist's orders: don't invite conflict during mood swings, let the manic depression ride out; he has both individual and family psychotherapy as support, he has prescribed medication as support. He is a writer, a well-known writer, don't stem his creativity. Let the mood ride out. Let the mood ride out. That is the support you can provide.

Hasan watched her read his output of the night, her face set in lines of self-control, as if she would rather scream or clean up the vase. He valued her opinion of his work. Perhaps because

she was an artist and taught sculpture in a senior school, she instinctively knew craft — equally the craft of a sculpture as of a poem. He also knew something of her creative expression in her group therapy sessions with the spouses of other manic depressives. They walked along the beach at dawn, sang songs they knew or made up, spoke to the sea about their issues, to the sand, to each other. He looked down at his pyjamas, surprised that only a few minutes ago he had wished to take a fast drive through the empty streets to merge into a lightness he no longer felt.

“These are fine, Hasan,” she said unsmilingly. “Char islands, changing borders, shifting populations... migrations, this is all fine. But this all happened a long time ago, more than a hundred years ago. You are not a migrant, you are settled. Try to feel that within. Settled. Not persecuted, but settled,” tapping her heart. She stumbled lamely out of the chair and stared at the broken vase. “Remember to take the antidepressant after breakfast. You know where the carpet brush is. See if you can clean up this mess.”

Hasan stared at her retreating back. A few minutes later, he heard her car door slam in the narrow driveway as she made off for therapy. He waved from the window but she did not see. She was intent on backing out.

When Mariam reached the beach, the sun was an orange orb rising out of the sea, burnishing the grey waves in wide ripples of gold. Gulls flew low above the water, wingtips tilted at right angles to the sea.

Philip, their therapist, was there already in his grey tracksuit, grinning as he jogged on the smooth wet sand, his shoes leaving patterns on the beach. Vera, in her late twenties, greeted Mariam with a nervous smile, a nervousness Mariam recognised as her own — both having volunteered to present their issues this morning. Soon they were joined by the others — Rashmi, Arun and Steven — the group walking slowly on the sand towards the site of the fishing boats tethered to the massive black rocks. Vera chose a spot where the group could squat, the sand dry and loose beneath the circle they formed.

Philip waited for the small talk to die down, then smiled at Vera. She flipped agitatedly through the pages of a book covered with newspaper, her tight curls bent studiously low. I am going to read a poem by Sylvia Plath, she said. It's called 'Mad girl's love song'. Sylvia was a college student when she wrote this, obsessed with finding true love. Two years after writing this, she attempted suicide. She swallowed her mother's sleeping pills and crawled into a hiding space for three days. She tried suicide other times too. Finally, she put her head into an oven and gassed herself to death. She was 30.

“Mad girl's love song”, read Vera tremulously but without pausing.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;

I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)
The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)
God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)
I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

Vera smoothed the book's paper cover with a hand that moved back and forth rapidly. When she spoke, her voice was a moan, "There is no love — real or dream. It's all shit — alcohol shit, depression shit, poor me shit." Tears streamed down her face falling onto the book, blurring the newsprint where they fell. "You think there will be stars — blue and red ones — but it's blackness that rushes in, gallops in, that's true. You sleep, shut your eyes, feel it's all gone. Open them — it's all there, the shit.

Philip waited for the tears to abate. "This was one of Plath's favorite poems," he said. "I have read it several times. Many people read it and think Plath is writing about her own battle with depression. But the title could simply refer to the madness that takes over a young girl — an ordinary young girl — who yearns for love but doesn't find it in reality. It happens to many people."

"What's seraphim?", asked Rashmi, her large eyes following a fisherman pushing his boat out to sea.

"A seraphim is an angel of the highest order — full of light and purity," volunteered Steven.

“Yes. But it’s not as if the seraphim — this high-level angel — leaves alone. So do Satan’s men. And if God topples from the sky, hell’s fires also fade. Once everything is null and void, anything can happen,” said Philip.

“Anything can happen. But nothing does,” said Vera. “This madwoman even longs for a thunderbird to return in spring. There is no thunderbird. A thunderbird is a myth. Please, let’s not discuss this anymore. Please. Let’s hear out Mariam. She may bring in more real things than thunderbirds.”

Mariam felt the sweat gather in her armpits and roll leisurely down her sides, one line moving slower than the other. There was no sea breeze — just the steady sound of lapping waves. Philip looked at her enquiringly. Mariam let her gaze wander to the fishermen’s boat moving steadily over the tides, receding. Could these men ever be fully prepared?

“I had a dream last night which I want to share,” began Mariam. There was a long pause. “I am on a remote island with Hasan. It is crowded with people who are very agitated. Some men are waving documents in the air which they don’t know how to read. It is very dark. Hasan offers to read somebody’s document by the light of a petromax lamp. It is a notice to appear by the morning in a court far away — with documents. A woman wails that she has seen a massive detention camp being constructed deep in the forest. There is a scramble to assemble family members. Both men and women hold papers to their chests in bright plastic bags. They scream with fear as they jump onto small rowboats to cross the rushing river. It is pitch dark. Hasan and me scramble onto different rowboats and are separated. People are calling to each other with words like ‘voter cards’ and ‘refugee certificates’. The boats bob on the stormy river like corks. Suddenly I am in a pick-up truck. Hasan is with me with the same bright plastic bag as the others. Our truck crashes into another truck carrying barrels of tar. People are flung on the road and covered with tar. I hear Hasan groaning. He is crawling, searching for the plastic bag. He is covered with tar. His tears shine on his face against the black. I try to remove the tar from his searching hand. All I can peel off are a few pebbles. The tar sticks.”

The sea breeze picked up, blowing about the debris on the sand. Her body chilled, Mariam fixed her clouded gaze at the boat, now a dot on the sea’s horizon. Her tears flowed, warm then cold on her face. “I guess it’s difficult to get tar off, isn’t it?” she said through a wan smile.

“You didn’t mention — were you also covered with tar?”, ventured Philip, tentatively.

“No,” laughed Mariam, shaking off her tears with surprise. “I had no tar on me. There was tar everywhere but where I fell there was no tar, only a terrible pain.”

Eyes closed, Steven spoke hesitantly as if trying to remember the words of a psalm, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and ...and...binds...”

“...saves those who are crushed in spirit,” offered Philip.

As the sun rose higher, the group, now silent and reflective, rose to walk back together in a close huddle like a single body-formation buffeting the wind.

Hasan waited for Mariam to return knowing she would be more empathetic with his depression than with his euphoria. His body was slack in his chair as he watched through a haze the cleaning woman sweep the room, stopping for a long moment where the broken vase lay... broken sandbars in the river appearing disappearing with the river’s moods. Masters in the art of farming, we knew the silty river plains, the shifting islands of the river... the river was ours too from across the border from where we came. Rivers joined, country borders separated. We were peasants but came as invitees of the British. They gave us lands to cultivate for they knew and we knew our produce would fill their coffers. We came in thousands, felled forests, turned marshes into farmland. River plains and islands blossomed. In our adopted homeland, we adopted the language spoken as our own. We were accepted, we were happy.

Hasan barely noticed the cleaning woman leave after having stared at him a long moment. She had picked up the empty glass from his side table, sniffed at it, had smelt the alcohol with distaste.

He thought Mariam would never know nor understand what it feels when a tree puts down roots in new soil but will not be accepted by it. Why? Because borders change, soils change, flux flux, flux... minority becomes majority, majority becomes minority. Partition brings influx, war brings more influx. Millions enter without invitation, from fear of dying otherwise. Cities grow, forests fall, marshes fill, tribal commons are swallowed by development. The fissures grow old, hard, cruel. The 3 D call beeps loudly: Detect, Delete, Deport. It doesn’t matter if you are an old settler or relatively new. It doesn’t matter if you can prove yourself a “genuine Indian” with “legacy papers”. Nobody wants you. Nobody. Not the state’s nationalists, not the center’s nationalists, not the tribal, not the religionists. No one. So many already in detention like common criminals. Am I happy being declared a “genuine Indian”? No. So many settlers like me left out. Arbitrarily. Where will they go? To tribunals for redressal where the judges don’t want them? To detention camps? Stripped naked of citizenship? Deported? Deported where? Oh, mother where will we go? Where? Surely, we have seen enough killings, arson, bomb blasts, demonstrations declaring us “outsiders”? Surely...?

Hasan’s eyes closed and he slept as if in a stupor. When he woke, he saw the room was dark except for the soft light of the table lamp on his desk. His head felt clear. He held up his hands. They were steady. He walked out of his room to peer into the passage. Mariam’s bedroom light

was out, the house was in darkness. He opened the casserole on his side table but decided he was not hungry. He sat for a long while at his laptop, then typed:

Char islands – alluvium of your overflow,
hostage to your monsoon rage
breathe easily in winter as you flow – smooth
serene to the sea.
Char islands, charred spirits...
I know your rage, Mother.
I also know your winter grace
to be a chimera.
Do you not flow through this land and the other
from where I first came?
If you belong to both, so should I.
Should I not, Mother?
Then why don't I belong?
Why am I made again and again
to prove myself – my roots, my belonging
through papers not through spirit?
Why...am I hated, reviled...

Hasan stopped. He lurched towards his bed, fell face down and moaned. Sleep came to him quickly, greedily.

When he woke, it was fully light. He felt the fragrance of Mariam's perfume in the still air of the room. The table lamp had been switched off. His laptop was still open. He stumbled wearily towards it, his head unclear, his mind anxious. He pressed the Escape button. The screen blipped open to his poem. He read:

Char islands, charred spirits...
I know your rage, Mother.
I also know your winter grace
to be a chimera.
Do you not flow through this land and the other
from where I first came?
If you belong to both, so should I.
Should I not, Mother?
Then why don't I belong?
Why am I made again and again

to prove myself – my roots, my belonging
through papers not through spirit?
You are both rage and grace, mother.
I give you my hurts, my searing wounds
Just as they are – open and festering, Mother.
Take them into your womb, take them... and hurl them into the sea.

Window Side Story

A poem by Mallika Bhaumik



Photograph by Daniya

The window opens to a slice of sunlit sky
The day is a spread out banana leaf with portions of life in tiny heaps.
A tree grows awkwardly out of the pavement tiles, its hungry roots are like those
unsettled souls who seek something more, travel an extra mile.
Faith is a phallic shaped stone beneath it,
marigolds strewn around, agarbatti sticks burning out the memory of dark nights.
A cobbler sits under the shade, mends and polishes shoes of different size.
Mending is a patient act of reconciliation, an elfin touch of time that tries to
bring back the old look, the lost love.
The window hears the day's cacophony, lets the sound waves rest on its sill.
Evening comes as a departure, the molten sky colours play a requiem as the long weary
shadows walk homewards.

Lit up billboards are bodies of women, enticing.
The broad leaved tree reads the script of red, amber, green lust.
The moroseness of the day looks back.
The self gets scattered in the beautiful, in the vulgar.
Tat Tavm Asi* (Thou art that)

Loneliness of the window is a photographer's dark room chasing sequined dreams in the day's
mundane collage.
A dog's distant wail becomes a lullaby.

Representing a central theme of Advaita philosophy, 'Tat Tvam Asi' unites the macrocosmic ideas of God and universal consciousness with the microcosmic individual expression of the Self. This mantra highlights the notion that all beings are intimately connected to each other and cannot be separated.

Poem © Mallika Bhaumik; image © Daniya.

Lathi Budhiya

B Anuradha

Translated in English by P Satyavathi



‘Oye! Madam!’

The voice rang across the ward like a bell, loud and commanding.

I was taken aback to see it emanate from an old woman whose appearance did not match her voice. Bent with age, she had sunken cheeks, hollowed eyes and partly greying, cropped hair. Her sari was worn above the knees. She had a half-stitched bag beside her that she was working on.

‘Come here! Just for a minute!’ she called again, waving her stick towards me. This confirmed it; she was definitely calling me.

I thought, ‘She could be calling me to thread her needle, but of late, I am having trouble threading needles and am thinking of buying reading glasses . . .’

‘What is the date today?’ she asked, interrupting my thoughts.

‘The twenty-third of November.’

'How far away is the twenty-sixth of January?' she asked, as if thinking about something.

'Two months.'

'Two months?' she sighed deeply. 'Did you get today's paper? Is there anything about me in the paper?'

What could there possibly be in the papers about her? A little laughter and also a little sympathy rose within me simultaneously. 'Nothing,' I replied.

'These naughty girls are teasing me. If I am not released on the twenty-sixth of January, I will break their legs. Read the English papers carefully as well; news about my release will be published in the papers,' she said.

Then it struck me that 26 January is Republic Day and some prisoners are always released that day for their good behaviour. This was what she was asking about.

'Okay, Chachi. I am also a prisoner like you. But I am like your daughter. So don't call me madam. Call me beti,' I said.

'God bless you, my child! You will go home soon and your husband will kiss you,' she said, pinching my cheeks and displaying a toothless smile.

The naughty girls who were gathered around her laughed loudly, and I was left red-faced.

'This old woman is a rangila – a happy-go-lucky person. She blesses everyone like this,' said Reshmi.

I wondered at the way the old woman threaded the needle with so much ease. She picked up her half-stitched bag and started crooning a song.

This was my first encounter with the old woman. Everyone called her 'Lathi Budhiya (the old woman with a stick)'. No one knew her real name. Some inmates called her 'Chachi'. She always called me 'Madam Beti'. She was reluctant to leave out the 'madam'.

Every morning, after the lock-up was opened, she went to the school verandah near ward no.1 in the women's barracks and sat there with her stitching paraphernalia. She bathed, washed and dried her clothes on the stones under the big neem tree.

Whenever she saw me there, she enquired about Republic Day. The day came and went, disappointing her. After that, she began waiting for 15 August, Independence Day.

Sundays were special days for the women prisoners. It was the day designated for the mulaqaat.² They could meet their relatives who were in jail for half an hour after two in the afternoon. Eighty-five per cent of the inmates had relatives in the prison. So mulaqaat day felt like a celebration of sorts.

Fire was prohibited in the jail, so was cooking. But on Sundays, some inmates took the liberty of making pakodas for their visitors, using their creativity and imagination. They saved the soaked chickpeas they were given for breakfast every day, dried them in the sun and soaked the dried chickpeas again on Saturday night. On Sunday morning, they ground the legumes on the floor with a stone, and made a batter for pakodas. They picked green peppers from the compound, chopped them and put them in this batter. Three bricks became an oven while sundry things like rags, used saline bottles and dry leaves were burnt as fuel. The mustard oil they were given once a week to use as body oil was saved and used for frying. The aluminium plates provided for eating were used as frying pans.

Some inmates would give one or two pakodas to Budhiya. She would wrap them up in a leaf and carefully tie the parcel to the edge of her sari. Then she would start walking with her cane to the designated place for the mulaqaat, singing joyfully. She would always head out for the mulaqaat much earlier than the others. Her age did not allow her to walk fast. By the time all the names of the inmates would be called, she would be there to meet her husband and son. The son would talk to her for five minutes, go to the canteen, buy her one or two jalebis and depart. The two old people would be left with each other to share their feelings and their toothless smiles. Their companionship gave joy to all the inmates and jail personnel as well. At a certain point, she demanded that the sepoy let them meet under the tree, which was half way between our wards and the place designated for mulaqaats. She complained that she could not hear her husband clearly over the din. When the sepoy said he did not have the authority to sanction this, she chided him, saying, 'Then allow me to go home so that I can talk to him.' The sepoy retorted that he would have gladly sent her away if only he had the power to do so. 'Then send the one who has the power. I will ask him,' replied Budhiya.

A fearless woman, she argued with everyone, including the jail superintendent and the judge. She demanded that they send her home. But they refused, saying it was not in their jurisdiction. People used to say that she was 'barkarar', nobody knew what that meant. I did not understand the word as I did not know Hindi well. Finally, Sunita, the educated one, told me that the old woman, her husband, and her son had all been given life sentences in the lower court. The high court had also upheld it. That is what 'barkarar' means, she said. The lower court's decision

would hold as the high court had upheld it. Now, only the Supreme Court had the power to release her.

One day, Budhiya pleaded with me, 'Madam Beti, you have helped many people. If you put in a word for me, I can go home. Please have mercy on this old woman.' I pitied her for her innocence. I was only a political prisoner, not a lawyer. I didn't know anything about law. What could I do except write petitions?

'Your husband is here. Your son is also here. Why do you want to go home?' asked Rinku, who was sitting there.

'Don't I have other children? And granddaughters and grandsons? I wish to see them and spend my last days with them. I don't want to die in this jail. I want to breathe my last at home.' She began to sob. How could I console her?

'Didn't you think of all this when you killed your daughter-in-law?' Rinku asked.

'Did I kill my daughter-in-law? God is witness. He knows everything. He is the one to punish criminals. If I had killed her, God would have broken my head. God will certainly punish the people who jailed me,' the old woman said angrily, pointing towards the sky. Afterwards, she mumbled something in a choked voice, which I could not understand. What I did understand was that she had endured her punishment for a long time. I had no words to describe her agony.

By that time, I had spent three Republic Days and three Independence Days in jail. It was such a pity that she was clinging to life only with the strong desire to die at home among her kin. Later, I came to know about her health issues. She had tuberculosis and her uterus had prolapsed. She had to tie a cloth like a diaper between her legs to push it back. The doctor who would occasionally visit the prisoners, examined her and said that she could not help because the old woman would not be able to withstand surgery at this age. I was shocked to find out how the prolapse had occurred. Right after she had delivered her youngest child, her husband had kicked her in the abdomen during a domestic fight, causing this damage. She badly needed surgery to set it right. But she refused it outright. This was not because there was no money. She refused surgery because she wanted to punish him by letting her uterus hang so that he could never make love to her. This was her rebellion. I was aghast upon learning this.

Was it the height of foolishness or the revenge of a helpless woman? How could she speak so amiably with that man after all the insult and injury he had inflicted on her? How could she crack jokes with him? Laugh with him? I could not understand her. But my affection for her grew with each passing day.

Whenever an officer visited the prison, we would petition for her release, explaining her ordeal. Every officer promised to help her but nothing happened.

Once, after my fourth Republic Day in jail, the old man did not turn up to meet Budhiya on the day of the mulaqaat. We soon found out that he had been hospitalized. She was overwhelmed with sorrow. She used to wait for him every Sunday in vain. Meanwhile, her son had been released upon the completion of his jail term.

When the lower court sentenced all three of them, the old people were out on bail for some time, but their son was not. After the high court upheld their sentence of ten years, the old couple was sent to jail again. The son's term had ended because he had stayed in prison continuously. The old couple was yet to complete their term. 'Don't forget me, son!' the old woman sobbed when he was going home.

We received news that the old man was seriously sick and had to be transferred to a hospital. In a few days, she was summoned to the office and taken in a wheelchair, where the old man's body was handed over to his family. Budhiya's grief was boundless.

'Oh mother! Send me home! Let me live until I go home!' she cried, looking up at the sky, addressing her dead mother. Our stomachs churned at this. We were not able to eat a morsel of food that day. I used to sit with her for some time every day, pleading with her or chiding her so that she would eat something. But I had no words to console her.

She asked me to write a petition on her behalf to the jail authorities demanding that they perform the tenth-day rites of the old man and give her a white sari and brass bangles. Her son bought the things needed for the ritual on the ninth day. But she demanded that the jailor provide the things and get the ritual conducted.

I went over to her in the evening. She had bathed, put on the white sari, eaten some food and lain down under the neem tree. She was talking to herself, waving her hands at the sky. 'Look, Madam Beti! See what this old fellow has done! No sooner did I lie down than he came into my dreams, wearing white clothes. You know what he said? He said, "You did everything perfectly, but you could have made some fried potatoes." And then he threw a stone at me. Look at this,' she said, holding up a pebble.

'It could have been a crow,' I said.

'I know his ways. There is not even a single bird on the tree. It is him,' insisted Budhiya. 'The old man must be craving fried potatoes. Please get me some potatoes, I will give you money.' Budhiya tried to untie the knot at the edge of her sari, to give me money.

I refused the money as my eyes filled with tears, blurring my vision.

One day, she summoned me.

'I want to talk to the jailor. Please ask him to come here,' she said.

'Shall I take you to his office?' I asked

'No, he should come here, he will come if you ask him,' she replied, firmly.

'He won't come if I alone call him, we should all ask him together.' I gathered all the inmates and we decided to boycott all food, from tea in the morning to dinner at night, until the jailor visited us. The jailor grasped the sense of unrest in the charged atmosphere and agreed to come, on the condition that we all ate our breakfast before he arrived. This was his way of establishing his authority. We agreed and he came as he promised. Budhiya stood before the jailor with her cane, her old body bent over in half, her torso almost at right angles with her frail legs. With one hand on her waist, she looked straight into the jailor's eyes.

'Ask him for whatever you want. He will give it,' said Seetha.

The jailor was about to open his mouth to say something but was interrupted by Budhiya.

'Why have you not been jailed yet?' She shot the question at him in a stentorian voice, her face red with rage.

It took a little time for the jailor to understand what she was asking. He was stunned.

'Why were you not arrested when my man died in jail? That is what I want to know,' Budhiya demanded.

'Great! As if I killed him!' retorted the jailor, in a sarcastic tone.

'Then why did you put me in jail? Did I kill my daughter-in-law? You jailed me, my son and my husband because my daughter-in-law died in my house. My husband died here in this jail. So you and your doctor must be put in jail. You jailed all of us, believing my daughter-in-law's people. Nobody believed in our innocence. Now I say that your doctor killed my husband with

an injection directed by you. What is your answer? Why are you not in jail on my complaint?' She was holding her stick like a sword, looking at him straight in the eye.

'Hey! Am I not in jail too?' he said in an attempt to lighten the mood as he had no answer to her question.

'You are not in jail. You are in the chair. You should be behind bars, eat what we eat, feel as disturbed as we do – that is what your law says. Why should there be separate laws for us? If it is not so, give my man back to me. If you say that you have no power to bring him back, then send me home.'

The jailor had had enough. 'Send her back to the ward,' he said to the jamadarin.

'What is wrong with her words? You have separate laws for the rich and the poor,' said an inmate.

'What happened to your recommendations for her release?' I was also angry. 'Don't you have the responsibility of writing to the Inspector General about her old age and poor health? Don't you have the responsibility to help her to go to the Supreme Court?' When I said this, every one supported me.

'First, you go and do that, sir,' said Budhiya, waving her stick before the jailor's face.

After this incident, Budhiya's son got a petition written with the help of a lawyer and gave it to his mother along with a letter addressed to me. Budhiya handed them over to me. Her son had written that he would do whatever possible for him to get his mother out of jail and the rest was my duty. I talked to the jailor and made him send the petition to the Supreme Court as a jail appeal.

From that day on, whenever I met her, she would ask me, 'Beti! Have any papers arrived from Delhi?'

Meanwhile, I was granted bail. My fellow inmates were sad and teary-eyed at the news. I hesitated to tell the old woman that I was leaving. But she laughed happily, patted my head, and said, 'Be happy, Madam Beti. God bless you.'

As my husband was still in jail, I went back the next month to meet him. I reached Hazaribagh by mid-noon. The sepoy at the gate said, 'Had you come in the morning, you would have met Budhiya. She was released and left for home only this morning. She fought even with Yama to die at home, among her people.'

My mother had died of a heart attack soon after I was jailed. My sister had given me one of her saris after I was released. I had brought this sari for Budhiya.

The sari, my mother's memory, remains with me, just like my memories of Budhiya.

Published by Ratna Books, B Anuradha's *Prison Notes of a Woman Activist* is a luminous account of jail from the pen of a sensitive young woman who draws deeply moving sketches of women who sometimes do not even know why they are in prison. Anuradha's stories move from children who are born in prison, with no idea of the world outside their walls – not even knowing what the moon looks like except on television – to old women bent with age serving life sentences and longing for release before they die so that they can die at home.

'Lathi Budhiya', translated into English by P Sathyavathi, is one of the stories from the book. Shared here with permission from the publisher.

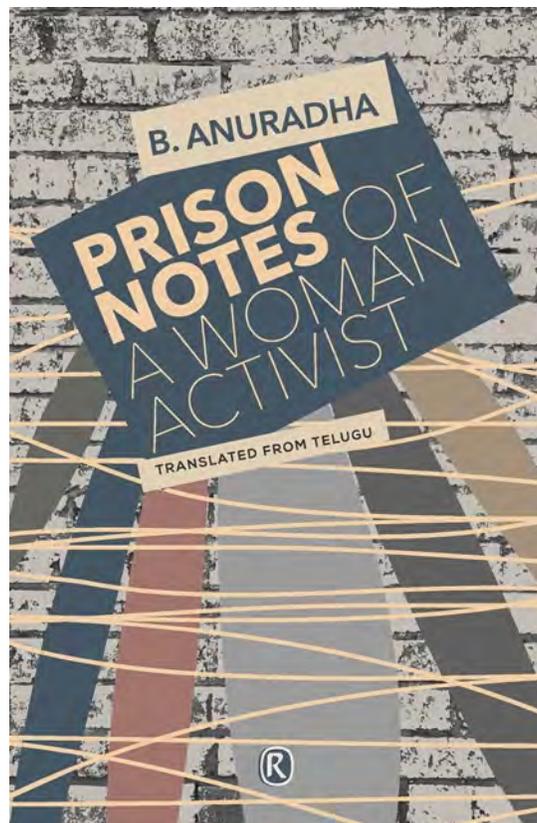


Image courtesy Ratna Books

Fidelity: Three poems

Alolika Dutta



Salvador Dalí, *The Accommodations of Desire*, 1929, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City | Image courtesy [WikiArt](#)

Memory

i. m. Salvador Dalí (1904-1989)

In the morning, white light floods into the room,
Surging through your white face, your white limbs,
And the white hair that gathers along your thighs
In rows and billows from your scalp like incense.
The light consumes everything, even the wedge
Of cheese under the clock. Time is absent.

The clock is a glaring white circle; not a number appears.
You compare it to the moon. But the light refuses
To leave. The hills look as they did at daybreak,
The tide is still, the wick burns without oil.

The sun will remain in the east today, distant
As a husband. After the rain last night, here is a day

Of stillness. The neighbours draw their curtains:
The only movement I will witness today. Their haste
Shows in their hands. But we must not draw our
Curtains, especially not in haste. We must bring
This stillness into our homes, no matter how small,
And sit with it for long. We must settle into our

Nothingness. Let this day be vacant. Let these hands
Be idle. Let this body vegetate. Motion is heresy.*
Leisure, our foremost duty. Without knowledge
Of the hour, we are slaves to no body, shackled to no
Thing. Stretched across the bed, you look at
The sparrows and the squirrels run between the grilles.

There is no sound. The birds talk with their eyes,
Even the wind hesitates, even the waves push away;
To speak would be indecency. All I hear is this silence,
This maternal silence, sitting on the edge of our bed.
A rock near the shore looks like the face of an old sailor,
The old sailor looks like you. A wisp of your hair

Curls around my nipple like a silver ring. I mount you.
For how long have you been so frail? Age is shallow.
Even as your bones show through your skin, your nails
Leave crescent moons along my hips. There is such joy
In your brows, in your mouth, in the well of your chin.
The clock starts to burn. A light wind dances over our bodies

Like a dream.

*Cioran, E. M., and Marthiel Mathews. "A Portrait of Civilized Man." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, Hudson Review, Inc, 1964, pp. 9–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3848222>.

Noli Me Tangere

In the dark, nobody knows where we stand,
Or if we are here at all. We may, therefore,
Remain here, almost still, almost gone,
Or we may leave, almost gone, almost still.

Nothing holds in the space that separates
The night from itself.

Fidelity

A solitary hibiscus in our neighbour's balcony
Is leaning towards the sun, towards you,
Who is looking at her through our window.
You are naked, feeding on the light.

Her gossamer body, her reds and her whites,
Her tall pistil with dots of yellow, her tender
Stigma and her moist center are spread wide
Open, to her deep black, only for you.

Everything around her is vapid. The grape
Under my tongue bursts; the skin, her petals
And the flesh, all hers. I sit behind you,
Your shadow shields my breasts from the sun.

But you disappear. She is all there is to this morning.
The milk in your cup is hibiscine nectar. Leave,
Place your mouth on her. Drink from under her ovaries.
When you return, kiss her sweetness into my mouth.

Antharanga: A Play

Sri Neelakanteswara Natyaseva Sangha

Directed by Sankar Venkateswaran, *Antharanga* is a Kannada adaptation of the play *Interior* written by Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. The play revolves around the theme of conflict between life and death. Although life seems to be powerful, in the end, it is death that wins. All our lives are controlled by fate; like puppets, it hangs precariously on a thin string. The play takes the audience into the dark recesses of this world and enables insights that lie beyond comprehension.



A play by Ninasam Tirugata (Maru Tirugata 2020)

Original: Maurice Maeterlinck

Translation: Madhava Chippali

Music, Direction: Shankar Venkateshwaran

Play © Sanchi Foundation.

Sri Neelakanteswara Natyaseva Sangha received a grant from India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), under its Arts Practice programme in 2019, this project is made possible with that grant along with part support from Infosys Foundation.

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Hecate: A poem

Ronald Tuhin D'Rozario



Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

To fall away flirting with the breeze
Is a memory of a brasserie in dead lust —
And the bald chaos of her navel
Explores the victory of ivory tongue,
Unsettled as Mississippi along its coast
In the summer of her iris muscled into pickle jar.

Houses are the persuasion of trees,
Stretched. Torn. Hanging —
Detention belongs to the trachea.
The punctured stitch of sin, her body,
Awake a growl of ghosts.

April is a falling thunder
Exploding two eyes puffed as toads.

Her man has her body —
A pelican thirst on the armpit of her blue moon
And a kingdom on half-eaten scar,
Born to a precarious generation of nakedness.

If you kill a man, you must kill his father too.

History and other poems

Samreen Sajeda



Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Dust *(for Edward Said)*

Dust rose in smokey spirals
Unsettled by feet rushing in frenzy

Away from the present
Ruffled by an immutable
Memory of an ancient name
Scrapped in the dead of night

Dust rose in smokey spirals

Unsettled—like a sparrow
Returning to a broken nest
Or a dog frazzled by a faraway

Scent. Dust rose swiftly
Over this stifled country
Like a dazzling masque
Of innocence. Slowly, very slowly,

Dust rises again, like a Poet
Unsettled and unsettling others.

History

Guard your sorrows
Like lifeless butterflies
Preserved in a diary;

Fallen flowers imprint
Your letters; scarlet leaves
Decay into delicate skeletons.

Grandfather's pocket watch
Resting in our library rewinds
Time, to decipher the future.
Guard your sorrows
Keep them close, like thorns
Shielding a crimson rose—

Pain distilling into poems.

The Pen

A word as heavy as 'despair'
Lingers long like a scent in air

The citrus scent of discontent
Makes the poet pitch a paper-tent

A tent of paper stained in dye
My pen is wet yet lips are dry

As dry as frost biting the skin
Or the frozen fish with a tangled fin

Soon the pen nurses my aching heart
Into word after word of scripted art

In the heart of night, I whisper a prayer
And shed my scented robes of despair.

The Only Seas

Three poems by Kalyani Bindu



John Frederick Kensett, 'Passing off of the Storm', Oil on canvas, 28.9 x 62.2 cm, 1872 | Image courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

Our families meet

Never a creature of habit or a patron of unforgiving walks,
you cremated every inkling of a fable, with a magical swish.
I should have known that days were sorcerers too,
resurrecting your estranged surrogate –
a sleight of hand to trigger an upward descent, bury a ghost in transit,
the dog that drugged the water lilies and floated my arms to a waterfall.
Perhaps it knows of my ways and the things that I say,
*to go together the fight has to be one, and the last splitting wisp of dirt
that our feet shed to the ground shall know nothing of the last vessel
we never ate in, the dull glow of familiar faces we never replaced with a plant,
or the trysts we never had with destitute dreams.* It will perch on my neck, meet me from
behind, eye-to-eye,
leavening me, as ancestral traits resurface.
This is how our families meet — in the mirror, the surrogate and the half-buried.

Trivial conversations

So, do you write songs too, play the piano?
Shall we sing about this plastic air that we
keep biting off of, frozen in a can somewhere,
guarded by a crab on the banks of a river
meandering in circles, every dance a time-
paradox that eats itself endlessly.

The air waits for the song, the crab for a choice
that sounds like something gushing out.

So, do you sing about crabs too, pulling pincers
first and the shell next, arching the quiet corners
of your mouth to sound like lacerated muscle?
Imagine trying to sound like water in supple skin
waiting to break and the opposite of that.

Do you think of breaking stretchy skin, every pull
only a dance away from disembowelling a tomb?
Imagine that.

The pun is on the one that could not stomach
a song, the one that we buried in haste.

Three years from now, we will sing of trivial fossils
and clear the air.

So, do you think of metaphors too?

Every time I ask you about a song, look under your
piano for scraps of tender greyish-white meat.

The only seas

Your vacant pipe-of-a-sound and veins running errands out of the schism
between my thighs crack in succession, looking like green looking bleaker
through a window, the reptile rings to the sweetest of whack-a-moles
we played in the undergrowth of loitering nights
flailing like drunkards under moonlight, vowing to end that song that
has seen older moons, now swirling and lumping into a mothball, frayed at seemingly-innocent
edges, looking like red looking like a giant dwarf under your palm on a dying
torch light, as our seas wet the dying streams, bringing souls of departed fish
and fluorescent aquatic fauna, wave after wave.

Those were the seas.

No crimson words as we slip back into the rain,

into our stifling monkey cages, always encroaching hair,
ruffled and unruffled, guarded against all wrinkles,
surrendering in every battle fought,
dreamless like grit from the nether of crucifixes.
Now: the view is lilac-colored. From open seas into the fishbowl.

Why is our century worse than any other?

Akhil Katyal translates Anna Akhmatova into Hindi



Anna Akhmatova

Why is our century worse than any other ?

Is it that in the stupor of fear and grief
It has plunged its fingers in the blackest ulcer,
Yet cannot bring relief?
Westward the sun is dropping,
And the roofs of towns are shining in its light.
Already death is chalking doors with crosses
And calling the ravens and the ravens are in flight.

हमारी सदी बाकी सदियों से बदतर क्यों है?

क्या इसलिए की डर और मातम से सुन्न
उसने अंदर तक खुरेदा है एक काले घाव को
और नहीं पायी है राहत?
मगरिब की ओर सूरज गिर रहा है,
शहरों की छतें उसी की चमक में हैं,
अभी से ही मौत कुछ दरवाज़ों पर मुहर लगा रही है
कौवे बुला रही है और कौवे क्षितिज पर हैं

Fragment

And it seemed to me that there were fires
Flying till dawn without number,
And I never found out things-those
Strange eyes of his-what colour ?
Everything trembling and singing and
Were you my enemy or my friend,
Winter was it or summer ?

एक अंश

और मुझे लगा बस लपटें ही लपटें हैं
फैलती हुई सुबह तक, अनगिनत,
कभी पता ही नहीं चली चीज़ें — वो
अटपटी सी आखें उसकी — क्या रंग थीं?
सब कुछ थरथराता सा था, गाता सा था, और
तुम मेरे दोस्त थे की दुश्मन,
था वो सर्दी या गर्मी का मौसम?

Originally written by Anna Akhmatova in Russian, Akhil Katyal has translated D M Thomas' English translations of the two poems into Hindi.

Hindi translations © Akhil Katyal; English translations © D M Thomas.

وصال ہوتے تک

A poem by Asad Khan



Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

ہم دو زمانوں کی درمیانی فصیل پر ملے ہیں

وہ زمانہ جو گزر گیا

اور وہ زمانہ جو آنے والا ہے

وہ زمانہ جس نے ہماری مٹی کو گوندھا، شکل دی، اور ہمارے قالب میں جان ڈالی

اور وہ زمانہ جو ہماری شکل کو مسخ کرے گا، توڑے گا، اور اسے نئے سیال سانچوں میں ڈھالے گا

وہ سانچے جن کا نام و نشان ہمارے وہم و گمان تک میں نہیں ہے

اس متزلزل فصیل پر کھڑے

ہم دونوں

آخر کب تک

لمحہ موجود کی چوکھٹ پر سر بسجود

ایک دوسرے کا ہاتھ تھامے

زمانے کی حدوں کو مسمار کرتے رہیں گے؟

آخر کب تک ہم اس فصیل پر

اپنی تنکا تنکا خواہشوں سے آشیانے بناتے رہیں گے؟

آخر کب تک ہم اپنی سیال تمناؤں کو

زمانے کے چاک پر

اندیکھے، انجانے پیکروں میں ڈھالتے رہیں گے؟

ان زمانوں کا جبر ایک دن ہم کو آ لے گا

یہ فصیل دھندلی ہوتے ہوتے

رات کی تیرگی میں گم ہو جائے گی

اور ہم دونوں

اسی طرح

لمحہ موجود کی چوکھٹ پر سر بسجود

نئے سیال سانچوں میں ڈھل جائیں گے

विसाल होते तक

हम दो ज़मानों की दरमियानी फ़सील पर मिले हैं

वह ज़माना जो गुज़र गया

और वह ज़माना जो आने वाला है

वह ज़माना जिसने हमारी मिट्टी को गोंधा, शकल दी और हमारे क़ालिब में जान डाली

और वह ज़माना जो हमारी शकल को मसक करेगा, तोड़ेगा, और उसे नए सेयाल सांचो में ढालेगा

वह साँचें जिनका नाम-ओ-निशा हमारे वहमों गुमान तक में नहीं है

उस मुतज़लज़ल फ़सील पर खड़े

हम दोनों

आखिर कब तक

लमहायें मौजूद की चौखट पर सर बसजूद

एक दुसरे का हाँथ थामें

ज़माने की हदों को मिस्मार करते रहेंगे?

आखिर कब तक हम इस फ़सील पर

अपनी तिनका तिनका ख्वाहिशों से आशियाने बनाते रहेंगे?

आखिर कब तक हम अपनी सेयाल तमन्नाओं को

ज़माने के चाँक पर

अनदेखे, अनजाने पैकरोँ में ढालते रहेंगे?

उन ज़मानों का जब्र एक दिन हमको आ लेगा

यह फ़सील धुंदली होते होते

रात की तीरगी में गुम हो जाएगी

और हम दोनों

उसी तरह

लमहायें मौजूद की चौखट पर सर-ब-सजूद

नए सेयाल साँचों में ढल जायेंगे

Woman and Salt

A poem by Sara Shagufta

Translated into English by Riyaz Latif



Sara Shagufta

Woman and Salt

numerous kinds of honor there are
veil, stone, wheat
nails of incarceration have been hammered onto honor's coffin
neither the house nor the footpath is ours
honor is a matter of our subsistence
with honor's lance we are speared
honor's speck originates from our tongue
if some night tastes our salt
we are branded bland *roti* for a lifespan
what kind of a bazaar is this
that the hue-maker himself lays sallow
kites are perishing on the palm of voids
I give birth to children in detention
for lawful offspring the ground should be playful
you bear children in fear thus you have no progeny today
you keep on calling from one embankment of the body

in your stature, a gait has been placed
a beautiful gait
a fake smile has been chiseled on your lips
you haven't cried since ages
Is a mother like this?
why are your children lying pallid?
which kin's mother are you?
of rape – of incarceration – of a body riven
or of daughters walled in bricks
your daughters, in bazaars,
knead hunger with their blood
and consume their own flesh
which eyes of yours are these?
what raising of the wall of your house is this?
you placed acquaintance in my laughter
and named your son a *coin currently in force*
today your daughter tells her daughters
I shall spike my daughter's tongue
a blood-spitting woman is not a metal-ore
is not a bracelet-thief
the sprawling field is my courage
the ember my desire
we have been born with shrouds tied to our heads
not with rings on our fingers
that you will steal

औरत और नमक

इज़ज़त की बहुत-सी किस्में हैं
घूँघट, थप्पड़, गंदुम
इज़ज़त के ताबूत में कैद की मेंखें ठोंकी गई हैं
घर से लेकर फुटपाथ तक हमारा नहीं
इज़ज़त हमारे गुज़ारे की बात है
इज़ज़त के नेज़े से हमें दागा जाता है
इज़ज़त की कनी हमारी ज़बान से शुरू होती है
कोई रात हमारा नमक चख ले
तो एक जिंदगी हमें बे-जायका रोटी कहा जाता है
ये कैसा बाजार है

की रंगसाज़ ही फीका पड़ा है
 खला की हथेली पे पतंगें मर रही हैं
 मैं कैद में बच्चे जनती हूँ
 जाइज़ औलाद के लिए ज़मीन खिलंडरी होनी चाहिए
 तुम डर में बच्चे जनती हो इसलिए आज तुम्हारी कोई नस्ल नहीं
 तुम जिस्म के एक बंद से पुकारी जाती हो
 तुम्हारी हैसियत में तो चाल रख दी गई है
 एक ख़ूबसूरत चाल
 झूठी मुस्कराहट तुम्हारे लबों पे तराश दी गई है
 तुम सदियों से नहीं रोई
 क्या माँ ऐसी होती है
 तुम्हारे बच्चे फीके क्यों पड़े हैं
 तुम किसी कुन्बे की माँ हो
 रेप की, कैद की, बटे हुए जिस्म की
 या ईंटों में चुनी हुई बेटियों की,
 बाज़ार में तुम्हारी बेटियाँ
 अपने लहू से थूक गूंधती हैं
 और अपना गोशत खाती हैं
 ये तुम्हारी कौन-सी आंखें हैं
 ये तुम्हारे घर की दीवार की कौन-सी चुनाई है
 तुमने मेरी हंसी में तआरूफ़ रखा
 और अपने बेटे का नाम सिक्का-ए-राइज़ुल -वक़्त
 आज तुम्हारी बेटी अपनी बेटियों से कहती है
 मैं अपनी बेटी की ज़बान दागूँगी
 लहू थूकती औरत धात नहीं
 चूड़ियों की चोर नहीं
 मैदान मेरा हौसला है
 अंगारा मेरी ख़्वाहिश
 हम सर पे कफ़न बाँध कर पैदा हुए हैं
 कोई अंगूठी पहन कर नहीं
 जिसे तुम चोरी कर लोगे

Translation © Riyaz Latif.

“Aurat aur Namak,” in *Aankhen* (Karachi: Tashkeel Publishers, 1985), pp. 50-53.

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Reflections on Looking Again at the Aryan Question

Romila Thapar



A Harappan excavation site, from *The Telegraph Archives*

I would like to begin by conveying birthday greetings to Professor Irfan Habib. All good wishes Irfan. You have in your wisdom provided us with excellent historical vision and insight, and you have received the extensive admiration and affection of colleagues and friends. I wish you yet more of this in the years to come.

There is in all of us an anxiety about the times in which we live. Your choice of such an appropriate subject for this evening – the defence of history – is an indication of your concern, as it is of many of us. A spark of hope however lies in the conviction that no matter how fierce the attempt to annul the history we study and write, ultimately the explanation of the past will have to come from rational and logical argument, drawing from reliable sources of information. But the ultimate may be distant.

So I thought it might be worth exploring briefly one theme of current interest to illustrate what I mean. Answers to what happened in the past are never single and uniform. Their very

complexity and diversity demands further exploration. One has to recognise how even one theme has undergone changing explanations.

I would like to speak about what used to be called the Aryan question – a subject that has come alive in contemporary politics and has become highly controversial. Today it seems to go in two different directions. Popular opinion is obsessed with the origins of the Aryans and with pushing their date back to earlier and earlier times. Professional historians are focusing on the relatively new sources and the fresh dimensions that these sources suggest, in order to work out a more precise history and chronology of this period.

The history began to be written in the nineteenth century. When the Vedic texts came to be studied by European Sanskritists, it was discovered that Vedic Sanskrit had close affinities with other related languages, hence the label Indo-European languages. The ancestral language is referred to as Proto-Indo-European, the knowledge of which is based on a linguistic reconstruction. These languages had spread from a location in the proximity of Central Asia and northern Iran going westwards to eastern Europe. The speakers of the earliest form of Indo-Aryan were thought to be genetically related to the speakers of early Indo-European and Vedic Sanskrit evolved from this.

What was called ‘race-science’ emerged in the late nineteenth century. Language and race were equated and there were theories about the superior Aryan race. It was often forgotten, as it still is, that the term Aryan identifies language and not race. Any number of racially diverse cultures can pick up the same language in a given historical situation. (An illustration of this could be the contemporary example of the use of American English in the USA).

Historians held that in the early second millennium BC, groups of agro-pastoralists from Central Asia migrated, probably in search of pastures. A few went to north-eastern Iran and a few to nearby north-western India and the Panjab. A sequence of migrations is listed in the Iranian *Avesta*. Could it be the same ? The Iranian-Aryans had close language affinities with the Indo-Aryan speakers. The texts of the two groups have some striking similarities and some curious inversions.

Colonial scholarship attributed the origins of Hindu culture and religion to this earliest stratum of what was described as Vedic Aryanism. Max Mueller, among others, argued to this effect in the nineteenth century, projecting the idea of a superior people. The term *arya* was more often used as a qualifier with reference to persons, actions, thoughts, in ancient Iranian and Indian texts, to mean that which is respected. Thus there are references to the *arya varna* in the *Vedas* as the people who have status and the same qualifier is applied in Buddhism to the four noble truths, referring to the much respected teachings of the Buddha.

These ideas were also propounded by the influential Theosophists, such as Col. Olcott, who were based in India in the late nineteenth century. They agreed with the usage of arya as people but disagreed with the theory of origins and added the argument that the Aryans originated in India. Aryan culture was centre-stage in this theory as it was in the Arya Samaj, which was initially and for a short while, closely associated with the Theosophists.

This simple and comfortable reconstruction of the past was disrupted in the 1920s with the discovery of the Indus civilisation, dating to the Pre-Vedic third millennium BC. This was primarily a sophisticated urban culture, familiar with literacy. Their language has still to be deciphered from the pictograms they used. Both these features – cities and literacy – are characteristic of an urban civilisation, and are absent in the agro-pastoral Vedic culture.

The Aryan presence was a subsequent and dissimilar culture from the Harappan. However, some attempts are made these days to continue to project an Aryan foundation by insisting that the Harappans were also Aryan, although there is no evidence for saying so. Labelling everyone as Aryan is an easy way of avoiding the investigation of a complex period of history, requiring an understanding of a range of divergent sources. It also annuls the richness that comes from the interface of multiple cultures and the complexities involved in comprehending their origin and growth.

In the 1930s, when the Hindutva version of Indian history was constructed it was based on two major colonial theories : one was that of the Aryan origins of Hindu culture and of the Hindus, and the other was the two-nation theory of antagonistic Hindu and Muslim nations, as propounded by James Mill and other colonial historians. In the last half-century however, professional historians have shown the fallacy of these two theories and much else in colonial history. Consequently there is today a strong disagreement between the Hindutva view based on colonial theories and that of professionally trained historians. The latter have raised a different set of historically challenging questions, the answers to which provide more viable explanations of what might have occurred at that time.

My intention is to mention some of the inquiries that professional historians are making, in trying to reconstruct the events of the second millennium BC And explain why they differ from the Hindutva view. This requires a reference to the important aspects raised by these historically more relevant questions.

Let me begin by saying that the Vedic texts remain central to this study. But there are now new ways of obtaining fresh, important information from these texts. New disciplines, sources, methods, have surfaced that have changed the format of investigations. I shall only mention those that are at the moment, under active discussion : geography, archaeology, linguistics and archaeogenetics — genetics linked to archaeology.

Geography

The Harappa culture was geographically far more extensive than the initial Vedic culture. Harappan settlements are found from the Pamir mountains in the north, coming south along the wider Indus plain and across the Persian Gulf to Oman in the Arabian peninsula. Towards the western end they went roughly from Baluchistan eastwards towards the upper Doab. Contacts were nurtured with the Gulf and Mesopotamia, with the Harappans supplying them, it is thought with lapis lazuli and copper and possibly ivory. Thus the geographical orientation of the Harappa culture tended to be westwards and differs from that of the Vedic.

The *Rigveda* knows the upper north-west coming south-eastwards to the Doab. The migration of Aryan speakers within the sub-continent was eastwards from the Doab into the Ganges plain. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* narrates how Videgha Mathava travelled east with his people, and carried Agni in his mouth – a beautifully symbolic thought. The land in the middle Ganges plain was cleared of marshes and settled.

As for links with areas outside the subcontinent, the only substantial one was with the adjoining area of North-eastern Iran where the Iranian Aryans settled. The use of the term *arya* to identify language and culture was used in Iran into historical times under the Achaemenid dynasty. But there is little reflection of a large-scale migration westwards in Vedic sources. Mention of moving west from the Indus stops with the Indian borderlands. This had suggested early on that the Iranian and Indian *aryas* were two initially linked but gradually differentiated cultures. Had they migrated from India to Iran there would have been mention of this in some detail in Vedic sources especially as the Iranian Aryans had differences. The Vedic texts mention the eastern movements of the *aryas* more fully. Nor would there have been an inversion of concepts and meanings of terms on such a substantial scale as there is in the *Avesta* and the *Rigveda* for instance, had the Iranian Aryans been migrants from India. The languages too would have been closer in form. It would seem that the two went their separate ways fairly early on.

A far more fleeting and very brief presence of Aryan usage was apparent in west Asia in the mid-second millennium BC but disappeared fairly soon. It is thought to have been a visitation of Aryan speakers from the north of Iran following the southern Caspian route.

Linguistics

In the nineteenth century Vedic textual studies focused on the language of the texts and the rituals they described. The structure of grammar was studied as well as philology and phonetics. Vedic Sanskrit, because it was linked to the sacred, was assumed to have been isolated from other languages but this assumption was soon questioned.

In the twentieth century linguistic methods began to be applied to Vedic Sanskrit. In studying the evolution of the language, comparable forms from other languages used in the vicinity began to be recognised. Speakers of other languages can be inferred even from an analytical investigation of the Vedic texts. Any language in the proximity of another language cannot remain unaffected by the other. Contemporary non-Aryan languages in North India came to be known and dated. Vedic Sanskrit began to be seen as having evolved in the midst of other languages. Some imprint from these would be evident. What were these languages? The two likely ones were Dravidian and Munda. The Dravidian presence has drawn more attention among scholars.

Among the more striking elements of Dravidian in the earliest Indo-Aryan seems to have been phonetic. Characteristic of the Dravidian language are the retroflex sounds, not found in any other Indo-European language, not even Iranian Aryan, but present in Indo-Aryan and located in the alphabet. This has suggested the interface between the two languages – Indo-Aryan and Dravidian – and therefore between the communities that spoke the languages. There is also some vocabulary in Vedic texts and other linguistic elements that point to a possible proximity of Dravidian-speakers. Given this the question to be asked is whether there was the presence of other different cultures alongside the *aryas*? References in Vedic texts to peoples and cultures that are said to be alien to the *arya*, need to be examined as differentiated cultures, but nevertheless proximate.

There are many references to non-aryas. The term *asuras* for instance, has been translated as demons, but could in some contexts refer to hostile others of a different culture. Among their alien cultural habits are that they bury their dead in graves. This was a differentiating comment from those who more frequently cremate their dead. In other contexts the *asuras* are said to be good spiritual beings, as for example among the Iranian Aryans where they are referred to as *ahuras*, the ‘s’ of Indo-Aryan becoming the ‘h’ of the Iranian-Aryan.

But the most oft-repeated reference to the culturally “Other” is of course the word *dasa*. The *arya varna* is differentiated from the *dasa varna*. The dual division means that the *dasa* was not marginal. The *dasas* are *adeva*, do not worship the same gods so are said to be without gods, they are *avrata*, because their rituals differ so they are said to have none, and they are *mridhra-vach* since they either do not speak Indo-Aryan or do so incorrectly. Some *dasas* are quite rich in cattle wealth and are therefore raided by the *aryas*.

There is even an occasional incorporation of a *dasa* into *arya* society when a situation requires it, as for example, when something is needed from the *dasa*. This is illustrated by an interesting story in the *Aitareya Brahmana*. It refers to a curious social category, that of the *dasyah-putrah brahmana* or *dasi-putra brahmana*, literally, the *brahmana* who is the son of a *dasi*.

On one occasion at the end of a ritual, the sage Kavasha, was dismissed by the *brahmanas*. They refused to let him eat with them, he being the son of a *dasi*. As he was going away he prayed to the river Sarasvati and the river started following him. So the *brahmanas* realised that he was someone special and quickly invited him back, not only to join them, but also conceded his superiority. Two questions become obvious. Was there some aspect of knowledge that the *brahmanas* did not have but were willing to be taught by those who had it, even if such people were initially despised? Was the category of *brahmana* a more open category than is stated in some of the later Vedic texts?

Archaeology

There has not been any decisive evidence from archaeology that can be identified as Aryan, despite many excavations strewn across south Punjab and Haryana and the upper Doab, suggesting provocative questions.

Various post-Harappan sites have been excavated, revealing the presence and interface of a number of cultures rather than a single culture conforming in its entirety to Vedic society. The origins of these cultures appear to be diverse, nevertheless some suggest a possible coming together. This is often so when cultures emerge from the demise of a possibly centralised system and struggle to create their own identities. Clearly Post-Harappan cultures have to be examined more fully, both for continuities from the Harappan, and as mixed cultures that incorporate elements from the variant societies of the region, and even beyond.

The huge cemetery and elaborate burials from Sinauli in western UP for instance, are posing some tantalising questions. Among the more obvious is that the centrality of the ritual of burials and the richness of the grave furniture differs from the comparatively simple Harappan burials. Neither do Vedic texts refer to graves as the norm, and more so not graves in which chariots and coffins heavily decorated with copper are also buried, not to mention other objects including a range of pottery. The juxtaposition evokes elements of Harappan together with non-Harappan, reflecting what may be local traits and some perhaps from more distant cultures. Identifying the strands and placing them in context, may be complicated by the mixture of finds, and may require some new ways of contextualising the data.

Archaeological reconstructions of the northern sub-continent give little attention to the distinctively different archaeological cultures of megaliths that dominate the peninsula from the late second-early first millennia BC. Occasional megalithic sites surface north of the Vindhyan borders, but should there be evidence of contact south of the border, the cultural communication might hold much potential.

Archaeogenetics

The most recent source likely to provide clues of a different kind is the evidence from archaeogenetics, using some data from archaeology. Its information comes from DNA generally taken from skeletal material. DNA studies are of recent vintage. Samples are difficult to come by as many get contaminated, having been buried for many centuries.

The genetic evidence has suggested that the people of the Harappa Culture may have originated from hunter-gatherers and farmers from Iran. Sometime just after about 4000 years before the present, that is after 2000 BC, new population strains entered north India. Some links with Central Asia are present. This has been read by some as evidence of migration from Central Asia into north India. Attempts have been made to suggest that these were the Aryan-speakers, but this can only be tentative for the moment.

The genetic composition of the North Indian Ancestry is not a single pure genetic identity but a mix of genetic strains. More detailed evidence and definitive testing will clarify these hypotheses. At the same time those who insist on the Aryans being indigenous to India and refute any migrations into India, describe the genetic evidence as unreliable. Equally vehemently the geneticists maintain that it is reliable.

In the study of the spread of the Proto-Indo-European language from near central Asia westwards to Europe, there is an increasing interest in the data from archaeogenetics and the investigations that these suggest. Migrations, whether within a defined area or beyond it, lead to questions related to demographic history. These concern the numbers that migrated as also the social categories. A frequently asked question is whether a migration was male-based. This is important to know because if it was, then it would suggest that the migrating men would tend to marry the women of the area where they settled. This in turn could point to marriages between people of different cultures and origins.

Would this for instance throw light on the puzzling category of men referred to in the Vedic texts as the sons of *dasis*. In the *Brihad-devata*, the Rigvedic seer Kakshivant is said to be the son of the sage Dirghatamas by his *dasi* wife Ushij and this also explains why Kakshivant is also called Aushija after his mother. This is not the only reference to such ancestry.

Other questions concern technology. Does a migration bring new technologies that might necessitate discontinuing some of the existing ones and adopting the new. The Indo-European migration to Europe is thought to have introduced Europe to horse-riding, the Indo-European language, and elaborate burial practices. Could the change from bronze technology to the selective use of iron in some areas have been the result of migrants bringing in a new technology ? Archaeogenetics is a new discipline and its study so far has been suggestive of providing some useful data.

Some Thoughts

The evidence from new categories of sources requires us to ask new questions about this period of history. We don't have to discard the old questions but we have to consider the additional questions that have now become pertinent and relevant and the old may well require modification. Reconfigurations and discussion are called for. Can the old reading be reconstructed in the light of the new ? This applies as much to popular takes on history as it does to professional history. But of course since professional history has kept abreast of the new sources it will require less reconfiguration.

To take an example from the constantly propagated popular history : V.D. Savarkar, when establishing the concept of Hindutva, defines the Hindu as the one who can claim India as the land of his ancestors – *pitribhumi* – and as also the land where his religion originated – *punyabhumi*. Since the Aryans were claimed as the ancestors of the Hindus, they had to be indigenous to India and their religion had also to have originated in India. Therefore, Hindutva cannot accept the fact that the Aryans originated anywhere else and migrated into India. The Hindutva definition of the Hindu is of course an invention of modern times and is not found in ancient texts. The Hindutva version of ancient history drawing on colonial theories of the nineteenth century is not acceptable to contemporary historians.

The point that I am trying to make is that we have now entered an era where a person does not become a historian by reading six books on history. To be a historian two requirements are vital.

A historian has to be properly trained in the methods of researching history and understanding the social sciences. Each piece of evidence whether a text or an object, has to be analysed, and its reliability established. Many more questions are being asked these days given the range of new sources and methods of analyses. One has to be trained to test the reliability of a source and this training differs according to the source and requires expertise. Oral history is analysed differently from literary sources. A numismatist asks different questions of his data from an epigrapher. The logic and reasoning of the explanation is clarified. Only then are those explanations selected that seem most convincing. More than one explanation is debated in understanding historical situations.

Historical explanations therefore, tend not to be single answers based on a single source. Cultures and civilisations as patterns of living and thinking, evolve from the interaction of ideas and activities of consent and of dissent, manifested in a variety of facets pertaining to the participating societies. Civilisations are no longer seen as unique, self-contained and limited to an elite. Nor are they labelled by religion or dynasty or language since a civilisation can be confined to one qualifier. More often than not it incorporates more than one religion, dynasty or language in a crucial role. Civilisations are socially and economically porous, incorporating the migration of peoples and ideas as well as the interface of cultures. They implicitly reflect the participation and contribution of all levels of society in varied ways. The description of a civilisation is no longer confined to the activities of the elite. It has to include other sections of

society and their patterns of living. If we today are truly civilised then we should acknowledge this and search for our multiple origins.

Counting the number of civilisations across the world is now something that few historians would endorse. Similarly we prefer not to speak of Hindu, Muslim, Confucian and Christian civilisations, since the concept of civilisation has become much broader than these single entity descriptions, that are in any case inadequate in describing historical change. Even the geographical or locational terminology that was preferred until recently is now being questioned given the fact that what we regard as a civilisation evolved out of many migrations and much inter-communication across many frontiers.

Since the concepts used by historians are being redefined by historians in order to make them more precise and to draw in a larger body of sources and consequent explanations, then it follows that some of the generalisations that earlier were regarded as fundamental would also have to be reconsidered. Let me take an example linked to what I have been speaking about which is now looked at somewhat differently.

A century ago the study of religion referred mainly to theology and rituals. Today religion is viewed as part of a larger culture and assessing significance implies considering its relations to society. Are they marginal or do they encompass many activities? How does a religion acquire legitimacy among those that become its followers? Does it have to do not only with what it teaches but also with who its patrons are and their status? This can be illustrated by observing which deity is worshipped among those of the *varna* society with a caste status, and which among those of the *avarna* society with no caste status. It can also note which castes are allowed to enter the place of worship and which are kept segregated. Does anyone annul these practices of worship and if so who does? When a religion becomes wealthy and established, how does it maintain a hold on society? This can be done through rituals, or associating superstitions with rituals and with promises of betterment both in this life and in the vision of the next life. More concretely it is done through setting up centres for education and through congregational worship. A community may crystallise around a sect.

These are among the questions that historians ask today not because they are hostile to religion but because it is now recognised that all religions in all societies also play a social role, and historians have to understand and analyse this role. This also enables the historian to comprehend why particular social groups prefer particular kinds of religious articulation, and why religions differ. It also enables a historian to figure out the process by which a religion comes into existence and has a history of its own.

History when viewed from the Hindutva perspective presents serious objections and these keep growing with further research. Since Hindutva history is rooted in colonial interpretations of the Indian past, it has now to contend with the fact that the colonial interpretation of Indian culture

and religion is currently being seen as largely erroneous and therefore gets discarded. Some of the basic tenets of the colonial history of India in which Hindutva history is rooted, are untenable. The Aryan-speaking people were neither indigenous nor of a single ancestry. Their origins lie in the interface of peoples and cultures. From many points of view this makes their history culturally far richer than the projection of a single, narrowly confined origin.

This brings me back to the question that historians working on the early religions of South Asia are now asking, namely, to what extent was Vedic Brahmanism the sole foundation of Hinduism? Vedic hymns and rituals are essential to Vedic Brahmanism but the evolving of the Hindu religion required far more than this. It has been said quite justifiably by a few, that the foundations lay less in the Vedic hymns and more in the dialogues encapsulated in the *Upanishads* and similar texts, some of which seem to have been reflections on the teaching of the Shramanas, as for instance those of the Buddha as set forth in texts such as the *Dhammapada*.

The philosophical dialogues are what we most admire in early Hindu religious teaching and these emerged from a range of sects that cut across ideas and explanations, sects such as those of the Buddhists, Jainas, Ajivikas and even the Charvaka. These in themselves were not foundational to the Hindu religion but the debates that they nurtured had a role in giving form to the religions that emerged. The source therefore was a *mélange* of potentially rich ideas rather than a single foundation. The historical perspective drawing in the variance of views is inevitably different from the study of a religion in isolation.

One of the striking features of the period from the Mauryas to the Guptas is that it witnessed many debates and dialogues about religion. These were mainly between Brahmanism and the Shramana religions such as Buddhism and Jainism. The Buddha for instance did not accept the idea of deity, nor the sacrificial ritual as the link to deity, nor therefore the notion of revealed texts. The emphasis was on social ethics and human behaviour. The differences between the two were easily recognised. As Patanjali the grammar puts it, the relations between the two are comparable to those between the snake and the mongoose. What emerged from this activity was not the resurgence of Vedic Brahmanism but rather a different formulation of the Hindu religion, which some have called Puranic Hinduism.

Vedic Brahmanism was based on an oral tradition for many centuries and large parts of the texts are concerned with the correct performance of ritual and its efficacy. The foci of worship were huge sacrificial performances – the *yajnas* – at which much wealth was expended. They required a large area of land where a huge altar was constructed at one end. The ritual could last from two weeks to two years and involved a minimum of seventeen categories of priests. The deities worshipped were Mitra and Varuna and later Indra, Agni and Soma. The oft-repeated message was reciprocation – *dehi me dadhami te* / (you) give me, I give you. Many were involved in providing the necessary wealth to ensure the efficacy of the ritual.

The teaching of the Shramana religions had to be contested by the Brahmana religion and this resulted in the evolution of a rather different articulation of the Brahmanical religion in the first millennium AD. Prominence was given to the worship of a new set of deities and forms of worship – Shaiva, Vaishnava and Shakta. The permanently built temples became the new places of worship and replaced the temporary *yajna* / sacrificial sites. Temples housed the deities that now took a new form, that of icons. This recalls the earlier *chaityas* of the Buddhists and the worship of the Buddha image. One of the earliest temples was a small structure of the Gupta period built in the vicinity of a Buddhist *stupa* at Sanchi. The *Vedas* continued to be sacred texts studied largely by *brahmanas*, but the effective texts with all the required information on these new forms were the *Puranas*. With the hardening of social boundaries there was a demarcation between those that could enter the sanctuaries to worship and those that could not. The theory of *karma* became basic to social ethics. This inevitably justified caste distinctions, these latter becoming more central to religion from this time. What finally emerged and gave the contours to Hinduism as we refer to it in modern times was therefore something of a departure from the essentials of Vedic Brahmanism.

What seems evident is that Hindu belief and worship reached its peak not in the Gupta period but the late first millennium and the early second AD. This was the time of the great mammoth temples such as those of the Cholas and others elsewhere, when institutions and functions linked to the temple approximated royal power. Donations were forthcoming from royalty and the wealthy. Temples became symbols of state power and an enhanced elite. This was also the period when there were intense philosophical debates, together with a maximum of theories in mathematics, astronomy and medicine as well as some of the most impressive departures in architecture, art and Sanskrit literature. It was the threshold of entering into the universality that was taking shape in so many parts of the world.

Then came the third phase, that of Bhakti teachings by various *sants* that went even further away from Vedic Brahmanism. Bhakti teachings, ranging from those who focused on a single deity of choice to be worshipped in any way one pleases, to those who sang of the centrality of a social ethic. There were new manifestations of existing Puranic deities and mutations of these. These and many other phases and forms were articulated through multiple sects where the new ones were juxtaposed to the existing ones and some of the latter were gradually marginalised.

Some Bhakti sects encouraged the merging and mingling of belief and worship across the formal religions. *Brahmana* texts however excluded the Shramanas, the Charvakas and the Turushkas/Muslims as *nastikas* or non-believers. If the study of religion in India were to start with the study of the sects going back to earliest times, we would have a better historical understanding of religion in Indian society instead of looking at each religion as a single unitary monolith. At the level of popular religion the characteristic of Indian religions has been their ability to absorb and reformulate belief and worship of varying kinds over the centuries.

Attempts are being made to legitimise the currently popular distortions of the history that have official backing, in order to defend the current official political ideology. This fantasised history is being projected in multiple ways: through social media, TV channels and glossy magazines, all locations where none are bothered to separate fact from fake; but also through more systematic ways such as through education. The biggest fear is that the one freedom that education ensures, the freedom to think freely, will be disallowed. Indications of this are apparent. We have to insist that it is not authority that is at a premium but reliable evidence, and the reading of evidence.

Considerable attention therefore has to be given to the curriculum and texts for schools. If we have to prevent history from being used as political propaganda then we have to insist on the right to critique textbooks and to have the freedom to present alternate explanations where these are required. This cannot be treated as an anti-national act but as an asset in the discussion on what is being taught. The defence of history is an imperative and immanent requirement, if we are to return to being what we once were in the early years of independence – a thoughtful, humane, secular, society.

This is a slightly edited transcript of Romila Thapar's speech at the symposium, 'In Defence of History', held on August 12, 2021, in honour of Irfan Habib on his 90th birthday.

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Contributors

Aishwarya Iyer's poems have most recently appeared in the online journal, Poetry at Sangam. The experience of isolation in the pandemic has pushed her to explore the non-verbal art forms of drawing and painting. Her artwork has appeared in RIC Journal and Ligeia Magazine. She teaches at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat.

Akhil Katyal is a poet, translator and teacher based in New Delhi.

Alolika Dutta is a Bombay-based poet and painter. Her poems have appeared in *The Indian Quarterly*, *The Boston Globe*, *Scroll*, *Coldnoon*, among others, and are forthcoming in the *Helter Skelter Anthology of New Writing*.

Anupam Arunachalam is a Delhi-based writer, illustrator and comic book artist. His work has been published by Penguin Random House, Hachette, Tinkle, Pratham Books, Forbes Life, Mint and Campfire Graphic Novels, among others. He is currently working on the Young Pandavas series of illustrated children's books, published by Hachette India.

अनुराधा पाटिल मराठी की विख्यात कवयित्री हैं। पिछले चालीस बरसों से कवितायें लिख रही हैं। अभी तक उन के ५ कविता संकलन प्रकाशित हुए हैं और चुनी हुई कविताओं का एक संकलन हिंदी में भी छप गया है। कविता संकलन के लिए उन्हें साहित्य अकादमी का पुरस्कार (२०१९) तथा महाराष्ट्र शासन का सर्वोच्च साहित्य पुरस्कार भी प्राप्त हुआ है। पाटिल देहात से आई हैं और उनकी शिक्षा पाठशाला के स्तर पर ही सीमित रही है।

Described as a figurative artist and a modernist, Delhi-based **Arpita Singh** still makes it a point to stay tuned in to traditional Indian art forms and aesthetics, like miniaturist painting and different forms of folk art, employing them in her work regularly. Since her first solo exhibition in 1972 at Kunika Chemould Gallery, New Delhi, Singh's work has been featured regularly in shows of Indian art held in the country and internationally. She has also won several awards including at the 1981–82 All-India Drawing Exhibition in Chandigarh, the 1987 Algeria Biennale, and the 1991 Parishad Samman from the Sahitya Kala Parishad, New Delhi.

Asad Khan is a Lahore-based lawyer and researcher.

Asif Raza writes poetry in Urdu and translates many of them into English. His poems have been published in several literary journals in India and Pakistan. Several of his original poems as well as his English translations of them were published in the now defunct bilingual journal, *Annual of Urdu Studies*, University of Wisconsin. He has authored three collections of poems: *Bujhe Rangon ki Raunaq* (Splendor of Faded colors), *Tanhai ke Tehwar* (Festivals of Solitude) and *Aaeene Ke Zindani* (Captives of the Mirror) published in two editions, the first one in Delhi, India (under the supervision of Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, who also wrote its foreword) and the other

in Karachi, Pakistan. After a doctorate in Sociology, he taught at the University of Missouri, Columbia, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb and a senior college in Texas. He lives in Tyler, Texas.

Born in Bombay to a family that had migrated to the west-coast metropolis from Kathiawar in Gujarat, **Atul Dodiya** is one of India's most acclaimed postcolonial artist. Dodiya's paintings, assemblages and sculpture-installations embody a passionate, sophisticated response to the sense of crisis he feels, as an artist and as a citizen, in a transitional society damaged by the continuing asymmetries of capital yet enthused by the transformative energies of globalisation.

B Anuradha is a women's rights activist based in Hyderabad. While working for a bank in Hyderabad, she came in touch with the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee and worked as an activist from 1990 to 1993 and later, as a women's rights activist. She resigned from her job in 1996 to work in the Chaitanya Mahila Sangam, a state-wide women's organisation. She was on the editorial board of the magazine, *Mahila Margam*. In 2005, she relocated to Jharkhand to work as an activist in the Nari Mukti Sangh. She was arrested in October 2009 and spent four years in the Hazaribagh Central Jail. Anuradha has written several articles and twenty seven short stories. Most of the prison stories have been published in the Sunday special edition of the daily, *Andhra Jyothi*, as well as in *Mahila Margam*, *Aruna Tara*, *Sahithi Godavari* and the web magazine, *Saranga*. Sixteen of these stories were later published as a collection by Virasam (Revolutionary Writers Association). Some of the stories were also translated into Hindi and published in Hindi magazines. 'Paro's Children' was translated into Bengali. Anuradha has also translated several books including *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *Feminising the Labour Relations* by Dr M. Vanamala, and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, co-translated with N. Ravi.

Dalpat Chauhan is a veteran Gujarati dalit writer and one of the pioneers of the Dalit literary movement in Gujarat in the late 1970s. He has published a number of books including his novels *Malak* (Homeland) (1991), *Gidh* (Vulture) (1991) and *Bhalbhanthalun* (Dawn) (2004). He has received more than 15 literary awards, including those from Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, Gujarati Sahitya Academy and the prestigious Narsinh Mehta Award. His works have been translated into English, Hindi, Marathi and German.

Gokul G K is a freelance journalist based in Kerala.

Hemang, a bi-lingual poet working in Gujarati and English. He has translated contemporary Marathi poetry into Gujarati and contemporary Gujarati poetry and short fiction into English. His Gujarati translation of Arun Kolatkar's *Kala Ghoda Poems* was published recently.

Hemang is a bi-lingual poet, translator, editor and critic working in Gujarati and English. His book-length English translations include *Poetic Refractions* (2012), an anthology of

contemporary Gujarati poetry and *Thirsty Fish and other Stories* (2013), an anthology of select stories by eminent Gujarati writer 'Sundaram'. His Gujarati translations of Arun Kolatkar's *Kala Ghoda Poems* (2004) and *Sarpa Satra* (2004) have been published recently to critical acclaim.

Karen Gabriel is an associate professor at the department of English, St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. She has written extensively on issues of gender, sexuality, nation and representation.

Muhammad Umar Memon was Emeritus Professor of Urdu, Persian and Islamic Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Critic. Short story writer, he was editor of *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, He translated widely from English and Arabic into Urdu and from Urdu into English. His translations of Urdu writing have introduced eminent Urdu writers such as Intizar Husain's *Basti*, Naiyar Masud's *Essence of Camphor* and a score of other Urdu writers from south Asia, among them, Varis Alavi to the English-speaking world. He translated with critical introductions among others: *An Epic Unwritten. The Penguin Book of Partition Stories*, Penguin India 1998; *Do You Suppose it's The East Wind?* Penguin India 2009; *My Name is Radha The Essential Manto*, Penguin Random House India, 2015.

Mallika Bhaumik is a Kolkata-based poet. Her poems, short stories, travelogue, articles and interviews have been published in many reputed magazines and journals. She is the author of *How Not to Remember* (Hawakal Publisher, 2019) and *Echoes*, which won the Reuel International Award for the Best Debut Book in 2018. She was also a Pushcart Prize Nominee for Poetry, 2019. Three of her poems have recently been included in the Post Graduate syllabus of BBMK University, Dhanbad.

Neera Kashyap has worked on health, social and environmental communications. As an author, she has published a book of short fiction for young adults titled, *Daring to dream* (Rupa & Co., 2003) and contributed to five prize-winning anthologies published by Children's Book Trust. As a writer of short fiction, poetry, essays and book reviews, her work has appeared in several Indian and international journals and poetry anthologies. Her short stories have appeared in international journals such as *Kitaab*, *Papercuts* and *Mad in Asia Pacific* and in Indian journals which include *Indian Quarterly*, *Out of Print & Blog* and *Bengaluru Review*. She lives in Delhi.

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Kalyani Bindu is a writer and researcher. Her poems and essays have appeared in the *Kali Project: Indian Women's Voices*, *Better than Starbucks*, *Ethos Literary Journal*, *New Asian*

Writing, Madras Courier, Muse India, Modern Literature, Asian Signature and Indian Express among others. She is currently a poetry editor at the Variant Literature Journal.

Poile Sengupta is a writer, playwright and poet.

An aspiring poet, **Prajna Anirvan** is a physician, currently doing his residency in Gastroenterology in SCB Medical College, Cuttack, Odisha.

Riyaz Latif is a bilingual poet and translator. He teaches art history at FLAME University, Pune, India.

Romila Thapar (born in 1931) is an Indian historian whose principal area of study is ancient India. She is the author of several books including the most recent, *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* (2021).

Ronald Tuhin D’Rozario is a Kolkata-based writer. His articles, book reviews, essays, poems and short stories have been published in *Cafe Dissensus Everyday, Narrow Road Literary Journal, Kitaab, The Pangolin Review, The Alipore Post, Alien Buddha Press and Zine, Grey Sparrow Press, The Chakkar*, and *Plato’s Caves online* among other places.

Samreen Sajeda is currently on the book reviews team at Jaggery Lit. Her poems and short stories have been published in *The Bosphorus Review of Books, Indian Cultural Forum, Muse India, Spark, Jaggery* and *Hakara* among others.

Sara Shagufta was a Pakistani poet who wrote in Urdu and Punjabi.

Sarabjeet Garcha is a poet and translator. He is the author of four books of poems—including *Lullaby of the Ever-Returning* and *A Clock in the Far Past*—as well as a volume each of translated poetry and translated prose. He has translated several American poets into Hindi, including W.S. Merwin and John Haines, and several Indian poets into English, among them Mangalesh Dabral and Leeladhar Jagoori. His poems, translations and essays have appeared in *Lyrikline, Versopolis, Modern Poetry in Translation, Words Without Borders, Asymptote, The Indian Quarterly, Domus India, Scroll, The Wire, Right Hand Pointing, Indian Literature*, and several other online and print journals. Sarabjeet received a Fellowship for Outstanding Artists from the Government of India in 2013 and is the founder and editorial director of Copper Coin, a multilingual publishing company.

Savita Singh is a distinguished feminist poet and Social theorist. She writes both in Hindi and English. She has three collections of Poetry in Hindi, one in French and two in Odia. Her latest and fourth collections of poems, ‘*Khoyi Cheezon Ka Shok*’ is under publication. Her poems are

translated in many languages including French, German, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese. She has won many awards for poetry such as the Hindi Academy Award, Raza Award, Mahadevi Verma Award and Eunice de Souza Award. She is the founding director and professor at the School of Gender and Development Studies, IGNOU.

Sukanya Venkataraman is an accomplished Communications Professional with more than two decades of experience. She is also a proficient writer who has written extensively as part of her international development career. She specialises in Tamil to English translations.

Tanya Tulsyan is a Kolkata-based writer and poet. She recently graduated from the University of Warwick with an MA in Critical and Cultural Theory. Currently, she is working on two book projects.

Vaasanthi is an award winning Tamil writer. She writes in English too and her books include *Amma: Jayalalithaa's Journey from Movie Star to Political Queen* [Juggernaut], *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars* [Penguin], *The Lone Empress* [Penguin], and *Karunanidhi: The Definitive Biography* [Juggernaut]. She was also the editor of the Tamil edition of India Today for nearly ten years.

Vasudha Thozhur was born in 1956 in Mysore. She studied at the College of Arts and Crafts, Madras, and at the School of Art and Design in Croydon, UK. Her practice is inter-disciplinary but primarily rooted in painting. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Performing Arts at the Shiv Nadar University since 2013 and currently lives in Greater Noida.

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