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KUNAPIPI
Journal of Post-Colonial Writing

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Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Word for Windows, Wordperfect or Macwrite saved for PC on PC formatted disc) and should be accompanied by a hard copy, please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

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Front cover: ‘Mughal’ 1996, by Sarbjit Natt (born 1962) Textile dyes and pigments on silk (168.5x110 cm)


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Back cover: Background: ‘Humanity Overcoming War’ 1925, by Francis Derwent Wood.

Serravezza Marble (2.9x2.1x1.4 m)

All from the collections of Bradford Art Galleries and Museums.

Finally we would like to thank Sarah Graves for all her help with the manuscript. We have done our best to ensure that we have included all the people and publishers who should be thanked. If we have inadvertently left anyone out we apologize.

*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal Myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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In the foreword to his novel *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao drew attention to some of the stylistic and formal problems he had had to grapple with as an Indian writing in English. How, for example, should he set about conveying in 'a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own'? and delineating in 'the language of [one’s] intellectual make-up' the emotional and psychological life that is a main concern of the novel? The guiding principle, it seemed to Rao in 1938, had to consist in the reinvention of English as a vehicle for translating or transcreating from indigenous narratives (see Sujit Mukherjee in this issue), like the *sthala-purana*; and for rendering in new and distinctive forms the experiences and voices of people who, living on the subcontinent, had nevertheless 'grown to look at the large world' as part of themselves.

It will generally be agreed that the creative potential Raja Rao saw in the once 'alien' language has been richly realized in this last half century. A striking instance, to quote from Nayantara Sahgal's address given at the Honorary Degree ceremony at Leeds in July 1997, is that English is spoken more widely, 'though more idiosyncratically', in post-Independence India than it ever was under British rule. It is also constitutionally recognized as one of India’s national languages. Of particular significance here, however, is the presence of a robust and burgeoning South Asian literature in English; and the increasingly prominent role English is called upon to play in translation from the diverse literatures in the regional languages and from established literary traditions.

On the fiftieth anniversary of Pakistan and Indian Independence, this issue of *Kunapipi* celebrates, albeit in a modest way, the subcontinent’s cultural vitality and creativity. Combining fiction, poetry, essays, criticism, works in translation and in English, its contents tell of the tragic lessons of history along with the small defeats and consolations of everyday existence; the pervasiveness of social injustice and cruelty as well as the ordinary person's courage in the fight for freedom and agency; the undimmed vigour of older traditions and continuing innovation with different forms and ways of speaking; memories of the old homeland amid the realities of life in the new.

My special thanks are to the contributors who have made this issue possible – people I have known and worked with and read over the years as well as new friends; to Glenda Pattenden for shrewd advice and sharp-eyed editing; and to Anna Rutherford and *Kunapipi* for the space to work in.

Shirley Chew
Faiz Ahmed Faiz

THE DAWN OF FREEDOM (PAKISTAN 1947)
TRANSLATED FROM URDU BY SHOAIB HASHMI

This leprous brightness, this dawn which reeks of night
This is not the one – the long awaited morn
This is not the shining light which beckoned
Beckoned men ever onwards, to go on
Seeking
The final starry destination in the heavens
The final edge where ends the endless night
The final rest for the anguished heart

When first we set out, urged on by young blood
What temptations were there by the wayside
From the restless abode of love and beauty
The beckoning gestures of hands, the call of young bodies

And above all else, the call of beauteous dawn

The call of beauty, shining like a light
A dull tired pain vying with a hidden need

They say there has already been the separation of darkness and light
And that the journey has already come to an end
They say the system of the world is changed
And that separation is no more, and togetherness is all

And the heart still aches, and the eye still seeks and will not be still
And this togetherness, it will not suffice

Dawn’s maiden, it seems, has been and gone
And the lover waiting by the wayside knew not her coming, nor her going

And the dark weight of night is not lifted yet
And the heart and the eye have not found their rest
Let us press on for the culmination is not yet.
As a child I spent my holidays in my grandfather’s house in Calcutta and it was there that I began to read. My grandfather’s house was a chaotic and noisy place, populated by a large number of uncles, aunts, cousins and dependants, some of them bizarre, some merely eccentric, but almost all excitable in the extreme. Yet I learnt much more about reading in this house than I ever did at school.

The walls of my grandfather’s house were lined with rows of books, neatly stacked in glass-fronted bookcases. The bookcases were prominently displayed in a large hall that served, among innumerable other functions, those of playground, sitting-room and hallway. The bookcases towered above us, looking down, eavesdropping on every conversation, keeping track of family gossip, glowering upon quarrelling children. Very rarely were the bookcases stirred out of their silent vigil: I was perhaps the only person in the house who raided them regularly, and I was in Calcutta for no more than a couple of months every year. When the bookcases were disturbed in my absence, it was usually not for their contents but because some special occasion required their cleaning. If the impending event happened to concern a weighty matter, like a delicate marital negotiation, the bookcases got a very thorough scrubbing indeed. And well they deserved it, for at such times they were important props in the little plays that were enacted in their presence. They let the visitor know that this was a house in which books were valued; in other words, that we were cultivated people. This is always important in Calcutta, for Calcutta is an oddly bookish city.

Were we indeed cultivated people? I wonder. On the whole I don’t think so. In my memory my grandfather’s house is always full of aunts, uncles, cousins. I am astonished sometimes when I think of how many people it housed, fed, entertained, educated. But my uncles were busy, practical, and, on the whole, successful professionals, with little time to spend on books.
Only one of my uncles was a real reader. He was a shy and rather retiring man; not the kind of person who takes it upon himself to educate his siblings or improve his relatives' taste. The books in the bookcase were almost all his. He was too quiet a man to carry much weight in family matters, and his views never counted for much when the elders sought each other's council. Yet, despite the fullness of the house and the fierce competition for space, it was taken for granted that his bookcases would occupy the place of honour in the hall. Eventually, tiring of his noisy relatives, my book-loving uncle decided to move to a house of his own, in a distant and uncharacteristically quiet part of the city. But oddly enough the bookcases stayed; by this time the family was so attached to them that they were less dispensable than my uncle.

In the years that followed, the house passed into the hands of a branch of the family that was definitely very far from bookish. Yet their attachment to the bookcases seemed to increase inversely to their love of reading. I had been engaged in a secret pillaging of the bookcase for a very long time. Under the new regime my depredation came to a sudden halt; at the slightest squeak of a hinge, hordes of cousins would materialize suddenly around my ankles, snapping dire threats. It served no purpose to tell them that the books were being consumed by maggots and mildew; that books rotted when they were not read. Arguments such as these interested them not at all. As far as they were concerned, the bookcases and their contents were a species of property and subject to the same laws.

This attitude made me impatient, even contemptuous at the time. Books were meant to be read, I thought, by people who valued and understood them. I felt not the slightest remorse for my long years of thievery. It seemed to me a terrible waste, an injustice that non-readers would succeed in appropriating my uncle's library. Today I am not so sure. Perhaps those cousins were teaching me a lesson that was important on its own terms: they were teaching me respect, they were teaching me to value the printed word. Would anyone who had not learnt these lessons well be foolhardy enough to imagine that a living could be made from words? I doubt it.

In another way they were also teaching me what a book is, a proper book that is, not just printed paper gathered between covers. However much I may have chafed against the regime that stood between me and the bookcases, I have not forgotten those lessons. For me, to this day, a book, a proper book, is and always will be the kind of book that was on those bookshelves.

And what exactly was this kind of book?

Although no one had ever articulated any guidelines about them, so far as I know, there were in fact some fairly strict rules about the books that were allowed on to those shelves. Textbooks and schoolbooks were never allowed; nor were books of a technical or professional nature — nothing to
do with engineering, or medicine or law, or indeed any of the callings
that afforded my uncles their livings. In fact the great majority of the
books was of a single kind; they were novels. There was some poetry,
too, but novels were definitely the mainstay. There were a few works of
anthropology and psychology, books that had in some way filtered into
the literary consciousness of the time: The Golden Bough, the Collected
Works of Sigmund Freud, Marx and Engels’ Manifesto, Havelock Ellis
and Malinowski on sexual behaviour, and so on.

But without a doubt it was the novel that weighed most heavily on the
floors of my grandfather’s house. To this day I am unable to place a
textbook or a computer manual upon a bookshelf without a twinge of
embarrassment.

This is how Nirad Chaudhuri, that erstwhile Calcuttan, accounts for
the position that novels occupy in Bengali cultural life:

It has to be pointed out that in the latter half of the nineteenth century Bengali life
and Bengali literature had become very closely connected and literature was
bringing into the life of educated Bengalis something which they could not get
from any other source. Whether in the cities and towns or in the villages, where
the Bengali gentry still had the permanent base of their life, it was the mainstay of
their life of feeling, sentiment and passion. Both emotional capacity and idealism
were sustained by it ... when my sister was married in 1916, a college friend of
mine presented her with fifteen of the latest novels by the foremost writers and
my sister certainly did not prize them less than her far more costly clothes
and jewellery. In fact, sales of fiction and poetry as wedding presents were a sure
standby of their publishers.¹

About a quarter of the novels in my uncle’s bookcases were in Bengali—a
representative selection of the mainstream tradition of Bengali fiction in
the twentieth century. Prominent among these were the works of Bankim
Chandra, Sarat Chandra, Tagore, Bibhuti Bhushan and so on. The rest
were in English. But, of these, only a small proportion consisted of books
that had been originally written in English. The others were translations
from a number of other languages, most of them European: Russian had
pride of place, followed by French, Italian, German and Danish. The
great masterpieces of the nineteenth century were dutifully represented:
the novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev, of Victor Hugo,
Flaubert, Stendahl, Maupassant and so on. But these were the dustiest
books of all, placed on shelves that were lofty but remote.

The books that were prominently displayed were an oddly disparate
lot, or so they seem today. Some of those titles can still be seen on
bookshelves everywhere: Joyce, Faulkner and so on. But many others
have long since been forgotten. Marie Corelli and Grazia Deledda, for
instance, names so little known today that they have become a kind of
secret incantation for me, a password that allows entry into the
brotherhood of remembered bookcases. Knut Hamsun too was once a
part of this incantation but, unlike the others, his reputation has since
had an immense revival – and with good reason.

Other names from those shelves have become, in this age of resurgent capitalism, symbols of a certain kind of embarrassment or unease – the social realists, for example. But on my uncle’s shelves they stood tall and proud, Russians and Americans alike: Maxim Gorky, Mikhail Sholokov, John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair. There were many others, too, whose places next to each other seem hard to account for at first glance: Henryk Sienkiewicz (of Quo Vadis), Maurice Maeterlinck, Henri Bergson. Recently, looking through the mildewed remnants of those shelves, I came upon what must have been the last addition to that collection. It was Ivo Andric’s Bridge Over the Drina, published in the 1960s.

For a long time I was at a loss to account for my uncle’s odd assortment of books. I knew their eclecticism couldn’t really be ascribed to personal idiosyncrasies of taste. My uncle was a keen reader but he was not, I suspect, the kind of person who allows his own taste to steer him through libraries and bookshops. On the contrary he was a reader of the kind whose taste is guided largely by prevalent opinion. This uncle, I might add, was a writer himself in a modest way. He wrote plays in an epic vein with characters borrowed from the Sanskrit classics. He never left India and indeed rarely ventured out of his home state of West Bengal.

The principles that guided my uncle’s taste would have been much clearer to me had I ever had an interest in trivia. To the quiz-show adept, the link between Grazia Deledda, Gorky, Hamsun, Sholokov, Sienkiewicz and Andric will be clear at once: it is the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Writing about the Calcutta of the 1920s and 1930s, Nirad Chaudhuri notes: 'To be up to date about literary fashions was a greater craze among us than to be up to date in clothes is with society women, and this desire became keener with the introduction of the Nobel Prize for literature. Not to be able to show at least one book by a Nobel Laureate was regarded almost as being illiterate.'

But of course the Nobel Prize was itself both symptom and catalyst of a wider condition: the emergence of a notion of a universal ‘literature’, a form of artistic expression that embodies differences in place and culture, emotion and aspiration, but in such a way as to render them communicable. This idea may well have had its birth in Europe but I suspect it met with a much more enthusiastic reception outside. I spent a couple of years studying in England in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I don’t remember ever coming across a bookshelf like my uncle’s: one that had been largely formed by this vision of literature, by a deliberate search for books from a wide array of other countries.

I have however come across many such elsewhere, most memorably, in Burma, in the house of Mya Than Tint, who is perhaps the most eminent novelist writing in Burmese today. Mya Than Tint is an amazing man. He has spent more than a decade as a political prisoner. For part of that time
he was incarcerated in the British-founded penal colony of Coco Island, an infamous outcrop of rock where prisoners had to forage to survive. On his release he began to publish sketches and stories that won him a wide readership and great popular esteem in Burma. These wonderfully warm and vivid pieces have recently been translated and published under the title *Tales of Everyday People*.

When I went to meet Mya Than Tint at his home in Rangoon, the first thing he said to me was, 'I've seen your name somewhere.' I was taken aback. Such is the ferocity of Burma's censorship regime that it seemed hardly possible he could have come across my books or articles in Rangoon.

'Wait a minute', Mya Than Tint said. He went to his study, fetched a tattered old copy of *Granta* and pointed to my name on the contents page.

'Where did you get it?' I asked, open-mouthed. He explained, smiling, that he had kept his library going by befriending the ragpickers and paper-traders who sift through the rubbish discarded by diplomats.

Looking through Mya Than Tint's bookshelves, I soon discovered that this determined refusal to be beaten into parochialism had its genesis in a bookcase that was startlingly similar to my uncle's. Knut Hamsun, Maxim Gorky, Sholokov - all those once familiar names came echoing back to me from Calcutta, as we sat talking in that bright, cool room in Rangoon.

I also once had occasion to meet the Indonesian novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, another writer of astonishing fortitude and courage. Of the same generation as Mya Than Tint, Pramoedya has lived through similar experiences of imprisonment and persecution. Unlike Mya Than Tint, however, Pramoedya works in a language that has only recently become a vehicle of literary expression, Bahasa Indonesia. Pramoedya is thus widely thought of as the founding figure in a national literary tradition.

At some point I asked what his principal literary influences were. I do not know what I had expected to hear but it was not the answer I got. I should not have been surprised however. The names were familiar ones: Maxim Gorky and John Steinbeck.

Over the last few years, unbeknown to itself, the world has caught up with Mya Than Tint and Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Today the habits of reading that they and others like them pioneered are mandatory among readers everywhere. Wherever I go today, the names that I see on serious bookshelves are always the same, no matter the script in which they are spelt: Garcia Marquez, Vargas Llosa, Nadine Gordimer, Michael Ondaatje, Marguerite Yourcenar, Gunter Grass, Salman Rushdie. That this is ever more the case is understandable: literary currents are now instantly transmitted around the world and instantly absorbed, like everything else. To mention this is to cite a jaded commonplace.

But the truth is that fiction has been thoroughly international for more than a century. In India, Burma, Egypt, Indonesia, and elsewhere, this
has long been self-evident. Yet curiously this truth has nowhere been more stoutly denied than in those places where the novel has its deepest roots: indeed it could be said that this denial is the condition that made the novel possible.

The novel as a form has been vigorously international from the start: we know that Spanish, English, French and Russian novelists have read each other’s work avidly since the eighteenth century. And yet, the paradox of the novel as a form is that it is founded upon a myth of parochialism, in the exact sense of a parish – a place named and charted, a definite location. A novel, in other words, must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves. Location is thus intrinsic to a novel: we are at a loss to imagine its absence whether that place be Mrs Gaskell’s Cranford or Joyce’s Dublin. A poem can create its setting and atmosphere out of verbal texture alone – not so, a novel.

We carry these assumptions with us in much the same way that we assume the presence of actors and lights in a play. They are both so commonplace and so deeply rooted that we are pre-empted from reflecting on how very strange they actually are. Consider that the conceptions of location that made the novel possible came into being at exactly the time when the world was beginning to experience the greatest dislocation it has ever known. When we read Middlemarch or Madame Bovary, we have not the faintest inkling that the lives depicted in them are made possible by global empires (consider the contrast with that seminal work of Portuguese literature, Camoens’s Lusiads). Consider that when we read Hawthorne we have to look very carefully between the lines to see that the New England ports he writes about are sustained by a far-flung network of trade. Consider that nowhere are the literary conventions of location more powerful than in the literature of the USA: itself the product of several epic dislocations.

How sharply this contrasts with traditions of fiction that predate the novel! It is true, for example, that the city of Baghdad provides a notional location for The Thousand and One Nights. But the Baghdad of the Scheherezade is more a talisman, an incantation, than a setting. The stories could happen anywhere so long as our minds have room for an enchanted city.

Or think of that amazing collection of stories known as the Panchatantra or Five Chapters. These stories, too, have no settings to speak of, except the notion of a forest. Yet it is reckoned by some to be second only to the Bible in the extent of its global diffusion. Compiled in India early in the first millennium, the Panchatantra passed into Arabic through a sixth-century Persian translation, engendering some of the best known of Middle Eastern fables, including parts of The Thousand and One Nights. The stories were handed on to the Slavic languages through
Greek, then from Hebrew to Latin, a version in the latter appearing in 1270. Through Latin they passed into German and Italian. From the Italian version came the famous Elizabethan rendition of Sir Henry North, *The Morall Philosophy of Dony* (1570). These stories left their mark on collections as different as those of La Fontaine and the Grimm brothers, and today they are inseparably part of a global heritage.\(^3\)

Equally, the stories called the *Jatakas*, originally compiled in India, came to be diffused throughout southern and eastern Asia and even further with the spread of Buddhism. The story, both in its epic form as well as its shorter version, was vital in the creation of the remarkable cultural authority that India enjoyed in the Asia of the middle ages. Not until the advent of Hollywood was narrative again to play so important a part in the diffusion of a civilization.

Everywhere these stories went they were freely and fluently adapted to local circumstances. Indeed in a sense the whole point of the stories was their translatability – the dispensable and inessential nature of their locations. What held them together and gave them their appeal was not where they happened but how – the narrative, in other words. Or, to take another example, consider that European narrative tradition that was perhaps the immediate precursor of the novel: the story of Tristan and Isolde. By the late middle ages this Celtic narrative, which appears to have had its origins in Cornwall and Brittany, had been translated and adapted into several major European languages. Everywhere it went, the story of Tristan and Isolde was immediately adapted to new locations and new settings. The questions of its origins and its original locations are at best matters of pedantic interest.

In these ways of storytelling, it is the story that gives places their meaning. That is why Homer leaps at us from signs on the New York turnpike, from exits marked Ithaca and Troy; that is why the Ayodhya of the Ramayana lends its name equally to a street in Benares and a town in Thailand.

This style of fictional narrative is not extinct; far from it. It lives very vividly in the spirit that animates popular cinema in India and many other places. In a Hindi film, as in a kung-fu movie, the details that constitute the setting are profoundly unimportant, incidental almost. In Hindi films, the setting of a single song can take us through a number of changes of costume, each in a different location. These films, I need hardly point out, command huge audiences on several continents and may well be the most widely circulated cultural artifacts the world has ever known. When Indonesian streets and villages suddenly empty at four o’clock in the afternoon, it is not because of Maxim Gorky or John Steinbeck: it is because of the timing of a daily broadcast of a Hindi film.

Such is the continued vitality of this style of narrative that it eventually succeeded in weaning my uncle from his bookcases. Towards the end of his life, my book-loving uncle abandoned all his old friends, Gorky and
Sholokov and Hamsun, and became a complete devotee of Bombay films. He would see dozens of Hindi films; sometimes we went together, on lazy afternoons. On the way home he would stop to buy fan magazines. Through much of his life he’d been a forbidding, distant man, an intellectual in the classic, Western sense. In his last years he was utterly transformed, was warm, loving, thoughtful. His brothers and sisters scarcely recognized him.

Once, when we were watching a film together, he whispered in my ear that the star, then Bombay’s reigning female deity, had recently contracted a severe infestation of lice.

‘How do you know?’ I asked.

‘I read an interview with her hairdresser,’ he said. ‘In Stardust.’ This was the man who’d handed me a copy of And Quiet Flows the Don when I was not quite twelve.

My uncle’s journey is evidence that matters are not yet decided between different ways of telling stories: that if Literature, led by a flagship called the Novel, has declared victory, the other side, if there is one, has not necessarily conceded defeat. But what exactly is at stake here? What is being contested? Or to narrow the question: what is the difference between the ways in which place and location are thought of by novelists and storytellers of other kinds?

The contrast is best seen, I think, where it is most apparent, that is, in situations outside Europe and the Americas, where the novel is a relatively recent import. As an example, I would like to examine for a moment, a novel from my own part of the world – that is, Bengal. This novel is called Rajmohun’s Wife and it was written in the early 1860s by the writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

Bankim played no small part in the extraordinary efflorescence of Bengali literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. He wrote several major novels in Bengali, all of which were quickly translated into other Indian languages. He was perhaps the first truly ‘Indian’ writer of modern times in the sense that his literary influence extended throughout the subcontinent. Nirad Chaudhuri describes him as ‘the creator of Bengali fiction and ... the greatest novelist in the Bengali language’. Bankim is also widely regarded as one of the intellectual progenitors of Indian nationalism.

Bankim was nothing if not a pioneer and he self-consciously set himself the task of bringing the Bengali novel into being by attacking what he called ‘the Sanskrit School’. It is hard today, looking back from a point of time when the novel sails as Literature’s flagship, to imagine what it meant to champion such a form in nineteenth-century India. The traditions of fiction that Bankim was seeking to displace were powerful enough to awe its critics into silence. They still are: what modern writer for example, could ever hope to achieve the success of the Panchatantra? It required true courage to seek to replace this style of narrative with a
form so artificial and arbitrary as the novel: the endeavour must have
seemed hopeless at the time. Nor did the so-called Sanskrit School lack
defendants. Bankim, and many others who took on the task of
domesticating the novel, were immediately derided as monkey-like
imitators of the West.

Bankim responded by calling for a full-scale insurrection. Imitation, he
wrote, was the law of progress; no civilization was self-contained or self-
generated, none could advance without borrowing:

Those who are familiar with the present writers in Bengali, will readily admit that
they all, good and bad alike, may be classed under two heads, the Sanskrit and
the English schools. The former represents Sanskrit scholarship and the ancient
literature of the country; the latter is the fruit of Western knowledge and ideas. By
far the greater number of Bengali writers belong to the Sanskrit school; but by far
the greater number of good writers belong to the other ... It may be said that there
is not at the present day anything like an indigenous school of writers, owing
nothing either to Sanskrit writers or to those of Europe.

How poignantly ironic this passage seems a hundred years later, after
generations of expatriate Indians, working mainly in England, have
striven so hard to unlearn the lessons taught by Bankim and his
successors in India. So successfully were novelistic conventions
domesticated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that
many Indian readers now think of them as somehow local, homegrown,
comforting in their naturalistic simplicity, while the work of such writers
as G.V. Desani, Zulfikar Ghose, Salman Rushdie, Aadam Zameenazd,
Shashi Tharoor and others appears, by the same token, stylized and
experimental.

Yet Bankim’s opinions about the distinctiveness of Indian literature
were much more extreme than those of his apocryphal Sanskrit School. In
1882 Bankim found himself embroiled in a very interesting controversy
with a Protestant missionary, W. Hastie. The exchange began after Hastie
had published a couple of letters in a Calcutta newspaper, The
Statesman. I cannot resist quoting from one of these:

Notwithstanding all that has been written about the myriatheistic idolatry of India,
no pen has yet adequately depicted the hideousness and grossness of the
monstrous system. It has been well described by one who knew it as ‘Satan’s
masterpiece ... the most stupendous fortress and citadel of ancient error and
idolatry now in the world’ ... With much that was noble and healthy in its early
stages, the Sanskrit literature became infected by a moral leprosy which gradually
spread like a corrupting disease through almost all its fibres and organs. The great
Sanskrit scholars of Bengal know too well what I mean ... Only to think that this
has been the principal pabulum of the spiritual life of the Hindus for about a
thousand years, and the loudly boasted lore of their semi-deified priests! Need we
seek elsewhere for the foul disease that has been preying upon the vitals of the
national life, and reducing the people to what they are? ‘Shew me your gods,’
cried an ancient Greek apologist, ‘and I will show you your men.’ The Hindu is
just what his idol gods have made him. His own idolatry, and not foreign
conquerors has been the curse of this history. No people was ever degraded except by itself, and this is most literally so with the Hindus.\(^4\)

Bankim responded by advising Mr Hastie to obtain some knowledge of Sanskrit scriptures in the original ... [for] no translation from the Sanskrit into a European language can truly or even approximately represent the original ... The English or the German language can possess no words or expressions to denote ideas or conceptions which have never entered into a Teutonic brain ... A people so thoroughly unconnected with England or Germany as the old Sanskrit-speaking people of India, and developing a civilization and a literature peculiarly their own, had necessarily a vast store of ideas and conceptions utterly foreign to the Englishman or the German, just as the Englishman or the German boasts a still vaster number of ideas utterly foreign to the Hindu ... [Mr Hastie’s position] is the logical outcome of that monstrous claim to omniscience, which certain Europeans ... put forward for themselves ... Yet nothing is a more common subject of merriment among the natives of India than the Europeans’ ignorance of all that relates to India ... A navvy who had strayed in the country ... asked for some food from a native ... The native gave him a coconut. The hungry sailor ... bit the husk, chewed it ... and flung the fruit at the head of the unhappy donor ... The sailor carried away with him an opinion of Indian fruits parallel to that of Mr Hastie and others, who merely bite at the husk of Sanskrit learning, but do not know their way to the kernel within.

He added, ‘I cheerfully admit the intellectual superiority of Europe. I deny, however ... that intellectual superiority can enable the blind to see or the deaf to hear.’

By the time he wrote the passages I have quoted above, Bankim was already an acclaimed novelist and a major figure in the Bengali literary world. But Bankim’s experiments with the novel had begun some twenty years before and his earliest efforts at novel-writing were conducted in English. *Rajmohun’s Wife* is the first known fictional work written by Bankim and it was written in the early 1860s.

It will be evident from the above passages, abbreviated though they are, that Bankim wrote excellent English: his essays and letters are written in a style that is supple, light-handed and effective. The style of *Rajmohun’s Wife* on the other hand is deliberate, uncertain and often ponderous. What intrigues me most about this book, however, are the long passages of description that preface several of the chapters, bookending, as it were, some extremely melodramatic scenes.

Here are a few examples. First, the house of Mathur Ghose:

From the far-off paddy fields you could descry through the intervening foliage, its high palisades and blackened walls. On a nearer view might be seen pieces of plaster of a venerable antiquity prepared to bid farewell to their old and weather-beaten tenement ... A mazy suite of dark and damp apartments led from a corner of this part of the building to the inner *mahal*, another quadrangle, on all four sides of which towered double-storied verandahs as before ... The walls of all the chambers above and below were well striped with numerous streaks of red, white, black, green, all colours of the rainbow, caused by the spittles of such as had found their mouths too much encumbered with *paan*, or by some improvident woman servant who had broken the *gola-handi* while it was full of
its muddy contents ... Numerous sketches in charcoal, which showed, we fear, nothing of the conception of (Michael)Angelo or the tinting of Guido (Reni), attested the art or idleness of the wicked boys and ingenious girls who had contrived to while away hungry hours by essays in the arts of designing and of defacing wall ... A thick and massive door led to the 'godown' as the mahal was called by the males directly from outside ... (Rajmohun's Wife, pp. 52-3)

And next, a kitchen scene:

Madhav therefore immediately hurried into the inner apartments where he found it no very easy task to make himself heard in that busy hour of zenana life. There was a servant woman, black, rotund, and eloquent, demanding the transmission to her hand of sundry articles of domestic use, without however making it at all intelligible to whom her demands were addressed. There was another who boasted similar blessed corporal dimensions, but who thought it beneath her dignity to shelter them from view; and was busily employed broomstick in hand, in demolishing the little mountain of the skins and stems of sundry culinary vegetables which decorated the floors, and against which the half-naked dame never aimed a blow but coupled it with a curse on those whose duty it had been to prepare the said vegetables for dressing. (Rajmohun's Wife, p. 17)

The questions that strike me when I read these lengthy and laboured descriptions are: what are they for? who are they intended for? why did he bother to write them? Bankim must have known that his book was very unlikely to be read by anyone who did not know what the average Bengali landowner's house looked like – since by far the largest part of the literate population of Calcutta at that time consisted of landowners and their families. Similarly, anyone who had visited the Bengal of his time, for no matter how brief a period, would almost inevitably have been familiar with the other sights he describes: fisherman at work, cranes fishing, and so on.

Why then did Bankim go the trouble of writing these passages? Did he think his book might be read by someone who was entirely unfamiliar with Bengal? The question is a natural and inevitable one, but I do not think it leads anywhere. For the fact of the matter is that I don't think Bankim was writing for anyone but himself. I suspect that Bankim never really intended to publish Rajmohun's Wife: the novel has the most cursory of endings as though he'd written it as an exercise and then thrown it aside once it had served its purpose. The book was not actually published until a decade or so after he'd stopped working on it. For Bankim, Rajmohun's Wife was clearly a rehearsal, a preparation for something else.

It is here, I think, that the answers lie. The passages of description in the book are not in fact intended to describe. Their only function is that they are there at all. They are Bankim's attempt to lay claim to the rhetoric of location, of place; to mount a springboard that would allow him to vault the gap between two entirely difference conventions of narrative.

It is for a related reason, I think, that Bankim conducted his rehearsal in
English rather than Bengali. To write about one's surroundings is anything but natural; to even perceive one's immediate environment one must somehow distance oneself from it; to describe it one must assume a certain posture, a form of address. In other words, to locate oneself through prose, one must begin with an act of dislocation. It was this perhaps that English provided for Bankim, a kind of disconnected soapbox on which he could test a certain form of address before trying it out in Bengali.

This still leaves a question. Every form of address assumes a listener, a silent participant. Who was the listener in Bankim's mind when he was working on *Rajmohan's Wife*? The answer, I think, is the bookcase. It is the very vastness and cosmopolitanism of the fictional bookcase that requires novelists to locate themselves in relation to it, and demands of their work that it should set up signposts to establish their location.

This then is the peculiar paradox of the novel: those of us who love novels often read them because of the eloquence with which they communicate a 'sense of place'. Yet the truth is that it is the very loss of a lived sense of place that makes its fictional representation possible.

NOTES

2. ibid., p. 154.
The wolf, who had gone about in sheep’s clothing and had narrowly escaped being slaughtered like a sheep, thought and thought and thought about it. It was obvious to her that if everyone were a sheep, there would have been no problem. And eventually she concluded she had been saved for a purpose and that her mission in life was to convert other creatures, to bring them all into the fold, so to speak.

She leaped over the fence and set off through the countryside. The first creature she met was a rabbit. ‘Repent!’ she cried out. ‘Why?’ asked the rabbit. ‘Repent because you’re not a sheep. It’s best to be a sheep.’ ‘But I’m a rabbit,’ protested the rabbit. ‘Precisely,’ replied the wolf. ‘If you don’t repent, you’ll come to a bad end.’ ‘All right,’ agreed the rabbit. ‘What do I have to do?’ ‘You have to eat grass,’ the wolf told him firmly. ‘That’s easy,’ said the rabbit. ‘And you have to baa like a lamb,’ the wolf added. The rabbit didn’t mind; and the wolf went on and left the rabbit practising baaing.

Next the wolf came across a large cow. ‘You have to be a sheep,’ the wolf informed her. ‘I’m a bit large for a sheep,’ the cow said modestly. ‘No creature is excluded because of their size,’ the wolf replied. ‘All creatures, great or small, must turn into sheep. Then we shall have peace and goodwill.’ ‘Well, but I don’t think I’d be much good at it.’ The cow was diffident. ‘You have to try,’ the wolf spoke earnestly. Then she went on her way with the cow’s promise to keep on trying.

‘It’s easy to convert creatures,’ she said to herself. ‘They all think exactly as I do, and want very much to turn into sheep. Soon we shall have peace on earth and endless goodwill. Why didn’t anyone think of it before? No matter. It’s clear now that this is my destiny.’ Such thoughts made her feel so optimistic and so cheerful that when she came upon a company of wolves, she quite forgot that she was dressed in sheepskin. She greeted them gaily. ‘Sisters and brothers, I have come to convert you to the Way of Sheep.’ ‘We are not your sisters or your brothers. We are wolves and you are a sheep. Wolves eat sheep.’ ‘But I’m a wolf too!’ the wolf cried out in spite of herself. ‘You can’t eat me.’ And she ripped off her sheep’s clothing. The wolves were puzzled. ‘Look here,’ they said, ‘are you or aren’t you a true sheep?’ ‘I am a sheep,’ the wolf told them. ‘I’m just like you. I’m a sheep disguised in wolf’s clothing.’ ‘Well, that’s
all right then. We’re wolves disguised in wolves’ clothing. We’re going to eat you up.’ And that’s what they did. They ate her up completely except for her skin.

When the rabbit and the cow, who had been watching from a distance, approached the spot and found her sheepskin and her wolf skin, they shook their heads sadly. She had meant no harm. On the contrary, her intentions had been good, indeed saintly. She had in her way achieved martyrdom. But had she been a sheepish wolf, or a sheep who had found that everyone’s a wolf underneath the skin? What was the message? Wherein lay the truth? And what should they believe?
'Bhaijan, let me tell you about an incident in 1919 when there were agitations against the Rowlatt Acts throughout Punjab ... I am talking about Amritsar ... Under the defence of Indictment Act, Sir Michael had prevented Mahatma Gandhi from entering Punjab ... Gandhiji was on his way, when he was stopped at the border of Palwal, arrested and sent back to Bombay ... I think, Bhaijan, if the British had not committed that blunder, the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh would not have left such bloody marks on the dark pages of their history ... There was a lot of respect for Gandhiji in the heart of every Muslim, every Hindu, every Sikh ... When the news of his arrest reached Lahore, all business came to a halt ... News spread from Lahore to Amritsar, and there was a spontaneous hartal in the town ... It is said that, by the evening of ninth April, the Deputy Commissioner had received orders to expel Dr Satyapal and Dr Kitchlew; he was not willing to carry out the orders, since, according to him, there was no danger of a violent agitation in Amritsar; there had been a demonstration, but no one had dared to act without the permission of the organisers ... But, Bhaijan, that Sir Michael was such a perverse man ... He refused to take the Deputy Commissioner's advice; he was obsessed by the fear that the leaders of Punjab were waiting for a signal from Mahatma Gandhi to overthrow British rule in Punjab, and in fact that was the real intention behind the hartals and the processions ... The news of Dr Satyapal and Dr Kitchlew's expulsion spread through the city like wild-fire ... There was apprehension in every heart; everyone was afraid that some great calamity was about to take place ... But, Bhaijan, the excitement was great; the shops were shut; the city was like a graveyard, a graveyard whose silence was ominous. When the people heard the news of Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal's arrest, thousands of them decided to go in a procession to meet the Deputy Commissioner Bahadur and plead with him to withdraw the orders expelling their beloved leaders. Unfortunately, Bhaijan, those were not the days when petitions were heard ... Sir Michael was like a Pharaoh, instead of listening to their plea, he declared their gathering illegal ... Amritsar, that Amritsar which was once the centre of the agitation for freedom, whose
body carried the wounds of the martyrdom at Jallianwala Bagh, is in a bad shape today ... Were the British also responsible for what happened in that holy city five years ago ...? Perhaps, but to tell you the truth, Bhaijan, I can only see our own hand in the blood that was spilt then ... Anyway, Deputy Commissioner Sahib’s bungalow was in the Civil Lines, an exclusive part of the city where every big officer and every big toady used to live ... If you’ve been to Amritsar, you would remember the bridge which connects the city with the Civil Lines; you have to cross it to reach the cool and shady streets where the rulers had built a paradise on earth for themselves ... When the crowd reached Hall Gate, it realised that the bridge was guarded by the British mounted police ... But the crowd continued to surge forward ... Bhaijan, I was in that crowd; I can’t tell you how agitated everyone was, but no one was armed, no one carried even an ordinary stick ... Actually, the people had joined the procession only to appeal to the city administration to release Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal unconditionally ... The people continued to move towards the bridge and when they had almost reached it, the British mounted police opened fire ... There was a stampede ... There were only a few white men, and thousands of people in the procession ... But, Bhaijan, bullets have a terror of their own ... And, my God, what panic there was; only a few were wounded by the bullets, but many were injured in the stampede. There was a gutter on the right; I was pushed into it ... When the firing stopped, I raised my head; I saw that the crowd had scattered ... The injured were lying in the street and the horsemen on the bridge were laughing ... Bhaijan, I can’t describe what I felt at that time; I was completely bewildered ... I didn’t know what was happening when I was pushed into the gutter; it was only after I came out of the gutter that I realised the full extent of the tragedy ... I heard shouting in the distance, screams, the roar of an enraged crowd ... I pulled myself out of the gutter and walked around the Zahira Pir Ka Takia towards Hall Gate ... There I saw thirty or forty angry young men throwing stones at the clock on Hall Gate ... The glass of the clock shattered and fell on the street ... One young man urged the others: “Let’s go and smash the Queen’s statue ...” Another shouted: “No ... Let’s burn the Kotwali ...” The third young man added: “Let’s also burn the banks ...” The fourth one, however, stopped them, “Wait ... All that’s useless ... Let’s go to the bridge and kill the white men ...” I recognised the fourth young man ... He was Thaila Kanjar. His real name was Mohammed Tufail, but he was popularly known as Thaila Kanjar because he was the son of a tawaif ... He was a hooligan; he had become a drunkard and a gambler at a very young age ... His two sisters, Shamshad and Almas, were beautiful and enchanting tawaifs in their time; Shamshad had a rich and sensual voice; wealthy men used to come from far to hear her sing ... Both sisters were fed up with their brother’s desolate life; it was well known in the city that both the sisters had almost disowned their brother, but even then he
always managed to extort enough from them for his own needs ... He was a happy-go-lucky fellow; he ate well, drank a lot. There was a delicacy and a grace about him. He was full of fun and good humour, but he always kept his distance from tricksters and fools. Tall, well-built and strong, he was very handsome ... The young men were so agitated that they didn’t listen to him and started towards the statue of the Queen. He called to them once more: “I tell you, don’t waste your energies ... follow me ... Let’s kill those white men who injured and murdered innocent people ... I swear by God that together we can wring their necks ... Come on ...!” Some of the young men had already reached the Queen’s statue, but others who had held back, stopped, and when Thaila turned and ran toward the bridge, they began to follow him ... I thought it was foolish to lead the young men into the jaws of death ... I was cowering behind the fountain; I shouted at Thaila from there: “Don’t go yaar ... Why do you want to get yourself and these wretches killed ...?” Thaila laughed mockingly and replied: “Thaila only wants to prove that he’s not afraid of bullets ...!” Then he turned to the young men following him: “If you are afraid, turn back ...!” How could they have retreated under those circumstances, especially when one young man had decided to stake his life and attack ...? When Thaila charged forward, the young men following him didn’t lag behind ... The distance between the Hall Gate and the bridge wasn’t great ... perhaps no more than sixty or seventy yards ... Thaila was ahead of everyone ... There were two horsemen about fifteen or twenty steps away from the parapet of the bridge ... Suddenly, Thaila began to shout slogans ... As soon as he reached the bridge, there was firing from the other side ... I shut my eyes instinctively; I don’t know why, but I was sure that he had fallen. Fearing the worst when I opened my eyes, I saw that he was still running ... but he was looking back ... As soon as the firing had begun, the other young men had fled; he was calling out to them: “Don’t run away ... follow me ...!” While he was still looking in my direction, there was another round of firing ... He clutched his back and turned around to face the white men ... His back was towards me; I saw that his white cotton shirt was splattered with blood ... He charged forward like a wounded lion and leapt at the first white horseman ... There was more firing ... I don’t know what happened in the scuffle, but the saddle of one horse was empty; one white man was on the ground, and Thaila was sitting astride on his chest ... At first, the other horseman was bewildered by Thaila’s speed, but he soon regained control over his wildly-rearing horse, and began firing rapidly ... I don’t know what happened after that ... I was still crouched behind the fountain ... I fainted ... Bhaijan, when I regained consciousness, I found myself in my own house ... A few of my acquaintances had carried me back from the fountain ... They told me that the news of the firing had so enraged the people of the city that they had set fire to the Town Hall and three banks, and had killed five or six
white men ... There had also been a lot of looting ... The British officers were not worried about the arson and the looting ... The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh was in revenge for the five or six men killed ... The Deputy Commissioner Sahib handed over the law and order of the city to General Dyer ... On April twelfth, General Sahib ordered his troops to march through the bazaars of the city and arrest dozens of innocent people ... On April thirteenth, nearly twenty-five thousand people gathered at Jallianwala Bagh to celebrate Baisakhi ... General Dyer reached the place with Sikh and Gurkha soldiers, and ordered them to fire at random on unarmed people ... It hadn’t been possible to make a proper estimate of the wounded and the dead immediately after the event, but a later inquiry revealed that about a thousand people had died and more than three thousand had been injured ... But I was talking about Thaila Kanjar ... Bhaijan, I have already told you what I saw with my own eyes ... Only God is without any faults; poor dead Thaila had committed many sins; he was the son of a prostitute, but he was generous and courageous ... I can confidently tell you that Thaila was hit by the very first bullet fired by that white swine; but in his excitement, he didn’t even notice the warm blood flowing down his chest; as soon as he heard the first shot, he turned around to encourage the young men who were running away ... The second bullet hit his back and the third his chest ... I didn’t see it myself, but I heard that his hands had gripped the white man’s neck so tightly that it had been difficult to separate the two corpses ... The white man had already been dispatched to hell ... The next day, Thaila’s body, riddled with bullets, was handed over to his family for burial ... I think by the time the second horseman had emptied his pistol into Thaila’s body, his soul had already left its earthly prison; that satanic bastard had used Thaila’s body as target practice ... I was told that when the body was carried through the neighbourhood, there was an outcry ... He wasn’t much liked in his community, but when the people saw his body riddled with bullets, they began to wail; his sisters, Shamshad and Almas fainted; and when his coffin was lifted, the wailing of his sisters was so heartrending that everyone wept tears of blood ... Bhaijan, I have read somewhere that during the French Revolution the first bullet had hit a prostitute ... Thaila, that is Mohammed Tufail, was the son of a prostitute. No one has bothered to find out if the bullet which hit Thaila during the freedom struggle was the first bullet or the tenth or the fiftieth, perhaps because the poor boy had no social status; I am sure that Thaila’s name is not even listed amongst those killed in Punjab during those bloody days; but then, who knows if a list of martyrs was ever made ... They were terrifying days; the army was in control of the government; that demon, called Martial Law, roamed the streets hungrily, searching every corner for its prey ... During those awful days, poor Thaila was given a hurried burial by his friends, as if his death was a sign of guilt which they were keen to erase ... Well, Bhaijan, that’s all;
Thaila was dead, Thaila was buried and ... and ...

For the first time, my fellow-traveller stopped in mid-sentence and then fell silent.

The train rattled on – I felt as if the wheels on the tracks had begun to chant: 'Thaila was dead, Thaila was buried ... Thaila was dead, Thaila was buried ...' As if there had been no time-lag between his death and burial; as if the moment he died, he was buried; the rattling of the wheels was so profoundly mingled with those words that I had to force my mind to break free of their hypnotic rhythm.

I said to my fellow-traveller: 'You were going to say something more!'

Startled, he looked at me: 'Yes ... There is a painful part of the story left to be told.'

I asked: 'What?'

He began: 'I have already mentioned that Thaila had two beautiful sisters, Shamshad and Almas ... Shamshad was tall, sharp-featured, dreamy-eyed ... she sang the thumri exquisitely; it is said that she had been trained by Khan Sahib Fateh Ali Khan ... Almas didn’t have a good voice, but she was incomparably beautiful; when she danced every part of her body danced; every gesture she made inflicted a wound; her eyes had that magic which could cast a spell on everyone ...'

My fellow-traveller spent more time in praising the beauty and grace of Thaila’s sisters than was necessary, but I didn’t think it was courteous to interrupt him.

After a long digression, he returned to the painful part of his narrative: 'The story, Bhaijan, is that soon after the tragedy, some self-seeking toady told a white officer about the beauty of the two sisters ... Amongst the five or six of the British killed, there was also a woman ... What was the name of that bitch ... Yes, Miss Sherwood ... So, the white officers decided to send for the two sisters and ... and enjoy themselves to their heart’s content ... You understand, don’t you, Bhaijan ...?'

I replied: 'Yes!'

My fellow-traveller sighed: 'When it comes to death and grief, even dancing girls and prostitutes are mothers and sisters ... Bhaijan, I think this country has no sense of shame or dignity ... When the Thanedar of the district got orders from above, he obeyed them at once ... He went himself to inform Shamshad and Almas that the Sahiblog had sent for them, and wanted to hear them sing and dance ... Their brother’s grave was still fresh, that poor boy had been in Allah’s house only two days when ... when the sisters were ordered to perform for the officers ... Can there be a greater example of injustice? ... I think it’ll be difficult to find anything more callous than that ... It never occurred to those who sent for them that even tawaifs have a sense of honour ... Do you think they do ...? Of course they do ...' He said, answering the question addressed to me himself.

I replied: 'Yes, of course they do!'
'Yes ... After all Thaila was their brother; he hadn’t been killed in a fight in some gambling house; he hadn’t died in a drunken brawl ... He had sacrificed his life bravely for his country’s freedom ... He was the son of a tawaif, but that tawaif was also a mother ... Shamshad and Almas were her daughters ... They were dancing-girls, but they were also Thaila’s sisters ... They had fainted when they saw Thaila’s body; when his coffin was lifted, they wailed so bitterly that everyone wept tears of blood ...'

I asked: ‘Did they go?’

After a pause, my fellow-traveller replied sadly: ‘Yes ... yes, they went gorgeously dressed ...’ Suddenly his voiced acquired a sharpness: ‘They went all perfumed and bejewelled ... to meet those who had sent for them ... Both the sisters looked stunningly beautiful ... Dressed resplendently, they looked like fairies from paradise ... Liquor flowed, they sang and danced ... It is said that at two at night when a senior officer gave a signal, people left ...’ My fellow-traveller was silent for a while, then he stood up, leaned out of the window to watch the trees and the electric poles rush past ...

The wheels of the train set-up a metallic beat as they repeated his last words: ‘People left ... people left ...’

I forced my mind away from the metallic rhythm of the train and asked him: ‘What happened after that?’

Turning away from the trees and the electric poles rushing past, he said firmly: ‘They ripped off their glittering dresses, and stark naked, they said, “Look at us ... We are Thaila’s sisters ... Sisters of the martyr whose handsome body you riddled with your bullets only because he loved his country with all his soul ... We are his beautiful sisters ... Come, pierce our perfumed bodies with the hot irons of your lust ... But before you do that, let us spit on your faces once” ...’ Then he fell silent and it seemed as if he had come to the end of his story and had nothing more to add.

But I persisted: ‘What happened after that?’

His eyes filled with tears: ‘They shot them ...’

I was silent.

By then the train had pulled into the station. When it stopped, he called a coolie and asked him to carry his luggage. As he was about to leave, I said: ‘I suspect you invented the end of the story.’

Startled, he looked at me: ‘How did you guess?’

I said: ‘Your voice was firm, but full of anguish ...’

My fellow-traveller swallowed hard and said: ‘Yes ... Those damn ...’ He stopped himself from cursing them: ‘They blackened the name of their martyred brother ...’ Then he stepped down onto the platform.
Manto's first set of stories about Partition, like 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Thanda Gosht' or 'Siyah Hashye', written soon after 1947, are vituperative, slanderous and bitterly ironic. They are terrifying chronicles of the damned who locate themselves in madness and crime, and promise nothing less than an endless and repeated cycle of random and capricious violence in which anyone can become a beast and everyone can be destroyed. Manto uses them to bear shocked witness to an obscene world in which people become, for no reason at all, predators or victims; a world in which they either decide to participate gleefully in murder or find themselves unable to do anything but scream with pain when they are stabbed or burnt or raped. Manto makes no attempt to offer any historical explanations for the hatred and the carnage. He blames no one, but he also forgives no one. Without sentimentality or illusions, without pious postures or ideological blinkers, he describes a perverse and corrupt time in which the sustaining norms of a society as it had existed are erased, and no moral or political reason is available.

Manto wrote a second set of stories about Partition between 1951 and 1955. Unfortunately, these stories are neither as well known and documented, nor as systematically analysed as the previous ones. They are, however, significant stories because, together with the earlier ones, they create, out of the events that make up the history of our independence movement, an ironic mythos of defeat, humiliation and ruin. If the first set of stories are fragmentary, spasmodic and unremittingly violent, the second are more complex in their employment, and more concerned with the deep structural relationship between the carnage of Partition and human actions in the past. While rage and hopelessness still mark the second set of stories, and fear and violence still bracket the beginning and the end of each one of them, the past is more intricately braided into the texture of the main narratives than previously, and the incidents are more symbolically charged. They should, perhaps, be classified as historical tales which seek to give a 'retrospective intelligibility' to the terror of Partition. Each of them tries to locate, at every instance and right down the chronological line from
1947 back to the beginnings of the nationalist struggle, the breaks and fissures in our social, political and religious selves which always enabled the monstrous to slip into our living spaces.

If the first set of Manto’s stories about Partition are derisive tales of a degenerate society, the second are both parables of lost reason and demonic parodies of the conventional history of the national movement. The triumphant romance of nationalism, in official Indian and Pakistani historiography, ends with the victory of a sovereign people (even if they are themselves divided by religion) over an illegitimate colonial power, as well as with the establishment of law governed societies. For Manto, however, 1947 is not a celebrative, epiphanic moment. It is, rather, the culmination of a regular and repeated series of actions – I should like to call them ‘bloody tracks’ – which invariably disfigure all the geographical and temporal sites of the nationalist struggle. (I am fully conscious of the melodramatic wildness of the phrase, as well as its dark opposition to the calmer and wonder-filled notion of ‘pilgrim tracks’ in the Gandhian discourse on nationalism which led towards the ethically good). As he looks back, after Partition, over the years during which the nationalist struggle was waged, he finds countless examples of characters, ideas and actions which always end in vileness, stupidity and cruelty. Indeed, for him, the ‘teleological drive’ of the entire nationalist past is towards the carnage of Partition. Unlike other writers who saw the violence as an aberration in the peaceful and tolerant rhythms of our social and religious life, and so turned to the past for consolation and retrieval of values, Manto refuses to believe that the past was another kind of place and another kind of time. Partition, he is convinced, is not an unfortunate rupture in historical time but a continuation of it. Each of the bloody tracks backwards into time makes him realize that violence is the characteristic of every chronological segment of the history of India from the beginning of the century to 1947; the nasty, the intolerant, the vengeful are always there at every moment; the ‘doctrine of frightfulness’ is not only an aspect of colonial rule, but is a structural part of the struggle against it. The Gandhian intervention at each instance is merely a temporary and precarious recovery of the ground for virtue, clarity, will and peace. Manto, makes it clear that the ‘punctuated equilibrium’, which Gandhian politics occasionally succeeds in achieving, is inevitably swept aside and rejected as a sign of weakness, hypocrisy and naivété. Violence always takes over every significant segment of the nationalist past and transforms India before 1947 into a place which is as strange, pernicious and foul as the present – a place where one can see nothing more than a dance of grotesque masks.

The story, ‘1919 Ke Ek Baat’, was written in 1951 and published in a volume entitled Yazid. The title of the story demands some attention. The casual inconsequentiality of the phrase ‘Ek Baat’ deliberately confronts
our presuppositions about the events of 1919 which, officially sanctioned
nationalist historiography assures us, foredoomed the British empire. In
all the official and popular historical versions, 1919 is a sinister year which
finally revealed to everyone that Britain’s claim to being an enlightened
culture was a sham and that its real intention in India was to continue to
inflict ‘racial hatred’ on its people. By keeping the date 1919 in the title
agnostically unqualified by modifiers, Manto makes it clear that he has
neither chosen the date arbitrarily nor has any interest in displacing our
commonly shared assumptions about what the date signifies in the
history of British colonialism. Indeed, Manto affirms unambiguously that,
for him, 1919 signifies the loss of the legitimacy of the British rule, by
making the narrator say at the very beginning that, had Sir Michael
O’Dwyer not lost his head, 1919 would never have become a ‘blood-
stained’ moment in the history of colonial India. But, the incongruity in
the title between the story as being nothing more than an account of a
randomly selected incident and the momentousness of the historical
events which encircle it, makes one suspect that, while Manto may not be
concerned with redrawing the ‘map of truth’ of the year 1919, he is
interested in offering an impertinent, even scandalous, reading of a well
known temporal segment of the nationalist discourse.

Further, when considered along with the date in which the story is told
in the text (which is the same as the year in which it was published, i.e.,
1951), the title indicates that Manto is deliberately structuring an entirely
fictional event, a ‘feigned plot’, which pretends to be an authentic eye-

witness account of happenings in real time, within two different
conjunctions of historical facts. The first frame is, of course, provided by
Partition and the entire inventory of dates, names, murders and slogans
that gives it its factuality. The crazed presence of Partition, Manto seems
to insist, intrudes into any interpretative account of our nationalist
history.

The second frame is constructed out of a densely vectored series of
events in 1919, like the Rowlatt Acts and the violent protests against them
from Bombay and Ahmedabad to Delhi, Lahore and Amritsar, General
Dyer’s arrogance and his callous massacre, Gandhian satyagraha and its
sad failure to prevent enthusiastic mobs from doing ‘heinous deeds’
(Gandhi’s characterization of mob violence in a letter to J.L. Maffey,
Collector of Ahmedabad, on 14 April, 1919, but without any knowledge of
the shootings at Jallianwala Bagh the previous day). It is evident that Manto’s intention is to persuade us to read the ‘odd’
incident described in his story within the spaces created by those two sets
of historical facticities. He invites us, I think, not only to puzzle out the
meaning of the bizarre fictional incident narrated by the storyteller
without asking about its truthfulness, but also to recognise that there is a
profound link between the two historical dates that frame the incident.
From his position as a cultural and existential exile in Lahore in 1951, he
wants to suggest that, while 1919 doesn’t cause or predict in any mechanical way the horrors of Partition, it contains, what Paul Ricoeur calls, the initial conditions that make them possible; 1919 is merely a part of the sequentiality of events that lead up to 1947. To use Ricoeur again, one could argue that Manto thinks that once 1947 has happened, one can retrospectively find in the fragmentary and disconnected incidents of 1919 - among other historically significant dates in the nationalist history explored in other stories – a narrative which could be said to prefigure the brutality of Partition. (Often in history, Ricoeur says, ‘Action is not the cause of result – the result is part of the action.’10) In making such a connection between 1919 and 1947, Manto seems to indicate that his real purpose in recording an incidental story is to pass a ‘teleological judgement’, not on the British and their indefensible colonial adventure, but on us as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. 1919, as he reads the year from his perspective as a reluctant and confused migrant to Pakistan in 1951, seems to be a part of a chronicle which foretells our doom as a civilization. It is as if Manto is on a historical quest backward in time from 1951, and what he finds on his journey back to 1919 is one of the many ‘bloody tracks’ in our national past.

The story is told five years after Partition by an unnamed narrator to an unidentified listener on a train which moves across unmarked political and geographical space. Given that the story is, as the narrator repeatedly and insistently reminds the listener, being told a few years after Partition, the lack of geographical markers and of national demarcations is as significant as the definite time which frames the entire text. Both the narrator and the listener speak quite specifically about the fate of Amritsar between 1919 and 1951, but Manto’s text itself quite deliberately obliterates the cartographic spaces across which the travellers themselves are moving. What is important here is not the fact of liminality, which is common to all journeys, but the erasure of political boundaries. Fernand Braudel insists that a civilization is as much a ‘cultural area’, or a set of achievements and activities within identifiable spaces, as it is an understanding about the modes of living on earth which have slowly accumulated over long durations of time.11 Manto’s travellers, who don’t have religious, national or cultural identities, move across a blank geographical space. Given that the journey is being undertaken after 1947 when so much religious and cultural pride was being attached to boundaries, I suspect that, by obliterating all signs of territorial demarcations, Manto wants us to understand that maps don’t bestow virtue; that sharply defined religious enclaves don’t ensure the sanctity of moral practices within them, and that the separation of communities from each other doesn’t legitimize their cultures. He also wants to render it impossible for any group to make self-righteous claims about its own innocence of intentions or to pretend that its own acts of violence were
merely acts of retaliatory revenge. In 1947 it was very clear that many people, irrespective of their claims to a particular nationality, had behaved both foolishly and pitilessly. What they had succeeded in creating were not cultural spaces, but their own kingdoms of death, their own areas of moral void, where there were no distinctions between the religious and the vile, the killers and the victims; their actions had not only dehumanized them, but had also contaminated and humiliated everyone. It is quite appropriate, therefore, that in Manto’s fable the travellers start out, like millions of refugees and migrants during Partition, from somewhere and are carried forward by the sheer momentum of circumstances towards nowhere; their journey itself has neither a locality, nor a purpose, nor a meaning.

Before trying to make sense of the dismal tale by the narrator, it is worth recalling that the story itself is being written by Manto. In 1951, he is in Lahore. If the narrator is a battered refugee in search of a home, Manto is an anguished migrant who has found a destination but who knows that his days of melancholy will never end. He had lived in Lahore once. But his memories, his companions and his writings belong to other cities – cities which are now in another country. He knows that the cities where he had forged his identity as a writer and a person have become inaccessible and changed in unrecognizable ways. The place he now resides, Lahore, is not home; it is merely a place which he has been forced by circumstances to escape to. So is Pakistan, which for him is nothing more than a new name for an old geographical space. Unfortunately, Lahore is incapable of offering him either consolation or hope. The longer he lives there, the more he realizes, as his stories like ‘Shaheed Saz’, ‘Dekh Kabira Roya’, ‘Savera’, ‘Jo Kal Aankh Meri Khuli’, and ‘Mere Sahib’ also reveal, that it is a city where the dementia of the past is magnified by the miasmic corruption of the present, and where everything promises to add in more extravagant ways to life’s misery in the future. Unlike Intizar Husain, for whom migrancy and exile are the conditions which define a Muslim, and so enable each believer to regard his particular migration as a secular variation of the grand and sacred narrative about hijrat, Manto is far too horrified by the actual sufferings of the migrants themselves, be they Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, to see in their journeys into exile anything more than an endless repetition of the days of solitude, exhaustion and waste that they have already endured. If, as Salman Rushdie says, ‘exile is a soulless country’, Manto knows from his own personal experiences that the cartographers of that sad place are cynics and bigots, fools and brutes, merciless killers and rapists, and that its boundaries are drawn by smoke, massacres, ash, rubble and the shattered skulls of children. All he can now do, as a migrant, an exile and a refugee in Lahore in 1951, is ‘To meditate amongst decay, and stand / A ruin amidst ruins.’
I should, perhaps, notice here the first words of the narrator with which the story opens: ‘Yeh 1919 ke baat hai Bhaijan ...’ (In 1919, it so happened bhaijan ...). Of course, every traditional afsana or dastan begins in a similar manner. On the one hand, therefore, the narrator seems to be following the conventional formula for hooking a listener by beginning abruptly and arbitrarily so as to arouse his curiosity. What is significant, however, in the political context of the narrative, is not the acknowledgement of the traditional forms of storytelling, but the fact that the narrator begins to speak, as the train moves across blank spaces, at a particular moment of our history when our assumptions about our sense of ourselves had been shattered, and the presence of other human beings had become suspect and dangerous.

There is no cause for the narrator to speak; no one has asked him a question and no one has invited him to give an answer or an explanation. Indeed, as we know from the other stories about Partition, it would have been safer for him to remain silent. Yet, he does begin to speak, cautiously at first, then in broken and disconnected sentences as he begins to feel safe. He gives bits and pieces of information about himself and makes fragmentary historical references. His sentences still trail away into silence and all that remains between each sentence fragment is the relentless fury of the iron wheels of the train on iron rails. He picks up his sentences again as if trying to overcome his own internal doubts and fears. It is obvious that it is an effort for him to fill the silence between the people in the compartment with his words and his story. But slowly his voice overcomes the empty space, the mistrust and the dread that separate him from his fellow passengers.

His opening words are the first tentative moves to restore the realm of human speech which had, till recently, become the site of screams and rage, of cries of supplication and pain, and of hysterical slogans filled with hate and curses (Manto had recorded the ruin of language a few years earlier in the strange fragments about Partition published under the title ‘Siyah Hashye’). As the narrator emerges into language and begins to discover the elementary structures of stories, he acquires a sense of himself and the listeners as human presences who are similar in kind. Language, which had earlier transformed people into phantoms, once again begins to fulfil, however tentatively and momentarily, its primary function of establishing a human community. Yet, since Manto’s text tells a story of doom, language at the end crumbles back into silence and all that remains once again is the hallucinatory clatter of iron wheels on iron rails.

Further, the narrator addresses the listener, without first asking him about his religion and national identity or revealing his own, as bhaijan (literally, brother). He does so, not only at the beginning, but with a certain insistence, throughout his story. The narrator’s use of the word bhaijan is deliberate, since in another context he uses the more familiar
and colloquial word *yaar* (friend) to address another person in the story. Of course, the narrator is making use of the strategy which storytellers often employ to intercalate the listener into the narrative. Given however, the fact that 1947 also represents the culmination of a long sequence of efforts to dismember a cohesive society and the sense of kinship between people of different religions, the narrator’s attempt to establish brotherhood with the listener should be read as a gesture of gathering and of community making. Since the listener quietly accepts the narrator’s call to brotherhood as a proper rite of address, the word *bhaijan* seeks to re-establish the ‘grace of companionship’ (Hannah Arendt’s phrase) destroyed by Partition. At the end of the tale, however, this act of communion turns out to be misleading and false. The listener not only suspects the veracity of the narrator’s tale, but also fails to find in it anything which would console him for all the dislocation he has suffered or offer him hope for a different future. Unsure about the meaning of the story he has heard, all that remains for him is derision and bewilderment.

Contrary to the deliberate manner in which the geo-political space is left unmapped, the chronological sequence in the story is carefully crafted. While the story itself is narrated in 1951, it has two temporal locations—few days in 1919 and 1947. Given the fact that the story is really a meditation on Partition and the reasons for the violence which accompanied it, Manto’s main concern is with showing that, though the massacres of 1919 and 1947 occurred in radically different political circumstances, and had different victims and killers, their ethical causes and consequences were similar—as they always are in every condition which people use force to achieve the ends they desire. The use of mindless power, both in 1919 and 1947, converted living things into corpses as ruthlessly as it transformed those who employed it into grotesques (I am using here Simone Weil’s formulation). In Manto’s understanding, 1919 haunts 1947 as its malignant shadow.

Unlike Manto, however, the narrator of the tale is blind to the relationship between the incidents of 1919 which preoccupy his fascination and the violence of Partition. The listener, too, is spellbound by the narrator’s story and his own dreams of violent revenge and therefore, unable to see the bloody tracks that lead from the stupidity of mob violence in the streets of Amritsar in 1919 to the massacres of 1947. Both the narrator and the listener are so deeply entrapped in their own dark fantasies of suffering and retaliatory justice that they neither offer an explanation for the horrors they have witnessed nor find a vision of more hopeful future. The scepticism of the listener, however, which calls to question many of the interpretations of the narrator’s tale, enables us to break the hypnotic control of the storyteller and his tale, and thereby makes it possible for us to pass a reflective judgement both on the fictional and the historical events described.
In order to reveal that the ethical presuppositions regarding violence which govern the events of 1919 and 1947 are the same, Manto employs a complex narrative strategy. He tells two stories simultaneously which demand to be read against each other – the enigmatic story told by the narrator and the nationalist story. Both begin with the Rowlatt satyagraha and Jallianwala Bagh, and end with freedom and the holocaust of Partition. The first is, of course, the fictional incident which the narrator describes to the listener. It demands that we pay attention to the sequence of events and the chronological order in which they occur because, like the listener, we have no knowledge of them prior to their being narrated. The events, which the narrator is so passionately concerned with, happen in Amritsar over four days – from 9 April to 12 April, 1919. The dates are important because they show that Manto’s primary interest is not with the reprehensible slaughter by General Dyer at Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April, but with the protesters against the Rowlatt Act and their actions a few days before.

The second story, which is familiar both to the narrator and the listener, though each of them has his own way of understanding it, is inscribed within the narrator’s story. The narrator assumes that, since the listener’s experiences in the past are similar to his own, he also shares with him an elementary knowledge of the facts that make up the history of the nationalist movement from 1919 to 1947. He, therefore, tells the second story with the help of bits and pieces of information, marking only important dates and names, scattered at random throughout his own narration of the fictional tale. The problem for the listener, however, is that since the nationalist story is inextricably woven into the fictional tale, the reliability of the narrator’s version of the events is suspect. Manto, I think, wants the listener, and by extension the reader, to continuously check each of the references the narrator makes against known and verifiable facts, in the same way as he wants the listener to resist the temptation of accepting the fictional tale by the narrator as being truthful. It is by following the intricate manner in which the two stories are woven into each other that Manto’s intentions become clear. The careful way in which important dates are noted suggests that, at the heart of Manto’s text, there is neither euphoria over the freedom of India nor anger over the brutality of Jallianwala Bagh, but condemnation certainly of the barbarity of Partition in 1947 and the stupidity of violent street politics in 1919.

The first fragmentary sentence by the narrator (‘It happened in 1919...’) is intentionally ambiguous. By placing the actual year 1919 and all that we (along with the listener) are presumed to know about it within a fictional frame, the narrator not only brings to our attention both the historical narrative and the invented story, but also makes us wonder about the epistemological relation between the two. The narrator’s strategy is clever and tantalizing. We don’t know if we are being invited to suspend
disbelief and enter a fictional realm which uses historical references primarily to achieve the effect of reality, or if we are being asked to think about the manner in which the events of 1919 are a part of the structure of the fictional narrative and constitute the meaning of the text.

Immediately after the curious opening statement whose intention is not clearly graspable, the narrator drops the fictive narrative. Unselfconsciously, he slips into a long and rambling account of the nationalist movement from March-April 1919 to 1947, cobbled out of factual information, memories of actual events witnessed, and personal opinions regarding their importance in the last few decades of the colonial period. Our initial response to all that he has to say in quick succession about Gandhi, Dr Satyapal, Dr Kitchlew, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, General Dyer, the Rowlatt Acts, or the great communal killings of 1947, is that he is only going over a history that we already know - that he is merely offering, like a dull story-teller on a long train journey, a meandering entry into the fictional world that he actually wants to reveal to us. We give - along with the listener - our lazy consent to the truthfulness of his account because, at first glance, it doesn’t seem to be different from the standard inventory of names and places which mark the years between 1919 and 1947 in all the familiar romances about our nationalist history in approved text-books.

It is not surprising that the first factual detail the narrator gives us is the arrogant stupidity of Sir Michael O'Dwyer and his decision to arrest Gandhi under the Defence of India Act. He reiterates the popular belief that O'Dwyer's act led to the massacres at Jallianwalla Bagh and to the eventual downfall of the British empire. In doing so, the narrator makes O'Dwyer the familiar villain of any nationalist romance. Since a nationalist romance is self-justificatory, and like the mythical figure of ouroboros, it 'reconstitutes itself by swallowing its own tail', we don't pay much critical attention to the perfunctory reference to O'Dwyer and the exemplary interpretation of the entire incident by the narrator. We accept the narrator's version as a part of a teleologically driven history, in which the inevitable victory at the end condemns the British as the enemies of freedom and offers consolation to those who had endured pain in order to obtain it. As in any nationalist fable, we are neither tempted to pay sufficient attention to the facts which are being offered, nor to consider the manner in which they are being interpreted, nor to judge the end to which they are being presented. We are lulled by the fact that the ritual invocation of the perfidy of O'Dwyer has been uttered, and the suffering of those who had struggled against him and his kind has been vindicated.

The moment, however, we remember that the story is being told in 1951 by a narrator who sees himself as an aimless and bitter wanderer after Partition, then the references to 1919, O'Dwyer and others cease to be a part of a triumphant nationalist fable about reprehensible colonialists
and innocent Indians. Instead of being intelligible and followable as a simple tale of victory of good over evil, it becomes entangled in a complex network of political ideas, moral problems and actual historical actions which demand ‘hermeneutic alertness’. We are forced to look for answers to questions about the colonial period and the freedom movement which are comprehensible both within the actual historical context as well as the fictional narrative. We wonder, for example, who the narrator is? What is his national or religious identity? Whose national narrative is he concerned with when he talks about the end of the British empire and freedom? In what historical context are we being required to interpret the events of 1919? What do the narrator, the listener and Manto think about the right of a people to resist laws framed by a foreign power? What means do they think are ethically permissible to resist such laws? Who were, according to them, responsible for the great religious killings of Partition?

Thus, the chronology of the fictional narrative dislocates all that O’Dwyer and 1919 signify in the history of colonial India. Read in this manner, the opening fragment, instead of being a part of the banal repetition of the nationalist’s history which is already known and exists before Manto’s story, becomes a part of the new scandalous history of the independence movement and Partition which Manto really wants to tell. Manto’s subversive narrative doesn’t end with freedom in 1947, but crumbles into fear and silence. It shows that for him there is no ethical difference between the degenerate logic of the colonial administration, the blind fury of the mobs of 1919 and the murderous fanatics of 1947 – they are all a part of the same awful history of massacres.

Wedge in between the two fragmentary sentences about the ‘agitation’ (Manto uses the English word) in Punjab against the Rowlatt Acts, and the ban on Gandhi’s entry into the state, is a reference to Amritsar. The narrator, suddenly and without any demand for clarification by the listener, interrupts his opening sentence to specify that his concern is not with what happened in Punjab as a whole but only with events in Amritsar. The narrative placement of Amritsar in the fissure between two broken sentences which together claim that the decline of the British empire began in April 1919 is worth noticing. In the fictional narrative, if April 1919 is identified as the chronological origin of the challenge to colonialism, Amritsar is the place on the political map of India where the legitimacy of a foreign law is radically questioned for the first time. Both the narrator and the listener accept this interpretation in an unproblematic way. In doing so, they give their unquestioning acquiescence to the version of the nationalist romance in which Amritsar is only recalled as a place where, first, Sir Michael O’Dwyer misread the mood of the crowd which had rallied round a procession on Ramnaumi day on April 9; and then, General Dyer shot down unarmed citizens who had gathered peacefully in an open field to celebrate Baisakhi on 13 April.
For them, Amritsar is simultaneously a place where Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had agitated together against a foreign power and where the British had added another ‘bloody page’ to their dark history of colonialism. The moment, however, we recall Manto’s narrative strategy, this simple structuring of the conflict of 1919 turns out to be naive and seriously flawed. Manto makes it impossible for us to forget our own complicity in the violence that swept across the Indian subcontinent between 1919 and 1951.

Thus, Manto temporarily suspends the flow of the narrative in order to focus our attention on Amritsar. The city itself is bracketed by references to two contrary tendencies that invariably marked the freedom movement – the passion of the mobs which led to widespread violence, and Gandhian satyagraha with its ethical commitment to peaceful means and self-sacrifice. Amritsar was as much a site of contestation between the two modes of political action as any other city in the country. The nationalist romance, as we know, ignores the former and is content to repeat the latter as a ritualistic mantra without elaborating on how it actually worked in practice. Since Manto is looking for reasons why we, as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, failed to adhere to the most elementary principles of our religious thought and killed each other with the ferocity of beasts, it is not surprising that he chooses as a narrator an ordinary man, who is ambivalent towards the moral implications of the action that must be undertaken to achieve freedom. The narrator, as the rest of the story makes clear, is respectful towards Gandhi and yet fascinated by the politics of violent revenge; he wants to believe that the protesters in Amritsar were peaceful, but longs to justify those who fought the British in the streets. It is this ambiguity of response that makes the story he has to tell worth listening to, because it gives an insight into some of the reasons for our descent into communal frenzy and murderousness in the 1940s.

Further, Amritsar of 1919 is framed by the narrator within two distinct experiential moments in the history of the city. Both these moments lie outside the fictional narrative. The first experience that frames Amritsar and which, of course, Manto shares with the narrator, is the traumatic one of Partition and the communal carnage that followed. Amritsar of 1951 is represented as a city of death and sorrow – a city of where life is nasty, brutish and uncertain. The narrator, like Manto, sees himself as an exile from it and knows that it is impossible for him to ever return to it.

The second moment in the communal history of Amritsar is about life in a society of rich heterogeneity. Manto, himself, I suspect, is more antagonistic towards Amritsar before 1919. His general cynicism would never have permitted him to see any place as an example of an ideal community – though he may have permitted himself to concede to the narrator that, in contrast to what Amritsar did become, it wasn’t really such a bad place to live in for anyone.
For the narrator, however, Amritsar before 1919 is a model of a desired community. He speaks of it nostalgically as a place where Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were aware of their different traditions and yet had an inward regard for each other as members who shared similar conditions of living, being and suffering – where they felt no sense of estrangement from each other and couldn't imagine any cause for it in the future. Such an acknowledgement of Amritsar as a place of communal peace is significant since it is made in 1951 by a narrator who has been a witness to religious killings. Speaking out of his own intense sense of bewilderment, the narrator is quite deliberately constructing a communal history of the city in such a way as to call into question the basic assertions of the proponents of the two-nation theory, who claimed that for historical reasons it was both impossible for the Hindus and the Muslims to find civic spaces where they could live together and to make a common political cause against the British. It is quite obvious, however, that for the narrator the notion that the two communities were irreconcilably different is an illusion. That is why in his very next narrative move, he confidently asserts that none among the communities showed any hesitation either in acknowledging Gandhi as a Mahatma or in accepting the leadership of Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal.

If, as the narrator insists, the enmity between the Hindus and the Muslims was neither natural nor culturally fated, then why did Partition occur? It is the search for an answer to that question which makes the reference to Gandhi's role in the protests against the Rowlatt Acts, and the priority he is accorded in the chronology of the story, worth considering in detail. Perhaps the first thing one needs to comment upon is that the respectful invocation of Gandhi is by a man who has suffered Partition. In a story about the politics of debasement and hate, Gandhi remains for the narrator, even years later, a Mahatma, a figure of *humanitas*, a man who is recognized as an example of virtue by everyone because he understands that freedom and equality require nothing more than the capacity to be responsible towards oneself and attentive towards others. After Partition, the narrator refers to Gandhi in an attempt to recover out of the ruins some shards of dignity. Yet, as the story unfolds, we realize that since the story the narrator really wants to tell us is about the failure of just vengeance, the presence of Gandhi is meant to be seen as a sign of our civilizational failure which is so profound that nothing can save us.

The second noticeable thing about the Gandhian movement in the text is that its emphasis on clarity of thought, elegance of rational conduct and dignity of co-operative living, is negated by the melodrama of the fictional narrative which follows it with its celebration of mass enthusiasm, casual bravado, and dangerous voluptuousness. For the narrator and the listener, Gandhi is, in spite of their professed admiration for him, ethically and politically incomprehensible; a shadowy presence who
disappears once the momentum of a story about a desperate 'martyrdom', with an aura of scandalous eroticism, picks up.

Historically, in 1919, Gandhi was so appalled by the mindless violence of the protests against the Rowlatt Acts in Lahore, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Gujranwalla, etc., that he broke down in public in Ahmedabad on 14 April and undertook a three day penitential fast to atone for the acts of his followers. Significantly enough, though his fast began on 14 April, he had no knowledge of the shootings at Jallianwalla Bagh the day before. Further, from March to May, 1919, he issued a series of twenty-one ‘Satyagraha Pamphlets’ in which he repeatedly reminded people that a satyagraha did not admit of violence. He urged Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to desist, even under the gravest provocation, from acts of pillage, incendiarism, extortion, murder and rape. Searching for ways of enabling people to realize that they had the right to define themselves as autonomous individuals who could be free only if they made the ethical a part of their political actions, he urged them to take vows of self-suffering and humiliation, prayer and self-discipline, abhayadan (the assurance of safety to the innocent as a sacred duty) and religious tolerance. Only then, he was convinced, could we see ourselves and each other as members of a community instead of brutes in a crowd and participants in a duragraha. A satyagraha vow was a deliberate, self-critical and thoughtful act which could not be made without a profound awareness of the presence of the other and of his right to be different. It not only restored to each one the right to choose responsibly for himself, it also laid down a minimum moral programme for everyone which was achievable in daily practice.

Since Manto’s fictional story is not about nostalgically recovering the past, but about the inconsolable grief over our collective descent into Hobbesian jungles, it is not surprising that the narrator quickly forgets Gandhi. As the narrator continues with his tale, we realize that for Manto the presence of Gandhi is only a temporary stay against insanity. The narrator, oblivious of everything he had said in his historical preamble to the story, begins to gleefully describe the street politics of Amritsar before 13 April which he had witnessed. In his version, Amritsar becomes a city of labyrinths, rumours and desperate actions. Crowds surge through its streets looking for victims so that they can exorcise their own sense of humiliation and defeat. For the narrator, the marauding crowds, which he reads in terms of popular images borrowed from the French Revolution, are signs of the resurgence of vitality, a return of courage. He fails to understand, despite his horrified sense of Partition, that mob actions are always random, unpredictable and callous, that they have the terrifying fluidity of nightmares. Unlike the disciplined ethicality of the responses of the satyagrahis, the behaviour of mobs is invariably foolish and cruel because those who are swept away by frenzy have neither the time for thought nor the patience for justice. According to Manto’s text
and the available historical records, the furious excitement of the mobs in Amritsar soon after the arrest of Gandhi and the expulsion of Dr Satyapal and Dr Kitchlew, was archetypal. Convinced of their own righteousness, and charged with a sense of grievance and shame, they roamed the city streets in search of a *pharmakos*, a sacrificial victim whose murder would give them a sense of power. Given that the preferred victims of lynch mobs during riots are often women, it is not surprising that Miss Sherwood became their most famous victim. The attack on her was used by the British to legitimize all their mythic fears of vicious Indian hordes and redeem their own retaliatory brutality a few days later at Jallianwala Bagh. While Gandhi saw the ill-willed animosity towards Miss Sherwood as a sign of the ‘mental lawlessness’ of the weak, there were some, like the narrator, who regarded it as a necessary act of murder in any struggle for political redemption. What startles one about the narrator’s confession is not merely the fact that he has forgotten his earlier expressions of admiration for Gandhi – a moral amnesia he shares with many – but the specific context of his own tale in which he recalls Miss Sherwood and the gratuitous violence of his tone.

According to the actual historical accounts, Miss Sherwood was a doctor who had worked for fifteen years for the Zenana Missionary Society in Amritsar. On 10 April, after hearing about the riots in the city, she had gone on her bicycle to the five schools under her charge so as to send the six hundred or so Hindu and Muslim girls home. It was during her rounds that she was attacked by the mob. She was beaten mercilessly by young men who shouted slogans in favour of Gandhi and freedom (a fact not recorded by the narrator). Later, she was carried into the house of a Hindu shopkeeper, where her wounds were washed and she was protected from further attacks by people who came back to kill her.

The narrator’s reference to Miss Sherwood comes, not at the point where it ought to have in the historical chronology of events, but at a moment of crisis in the fictional story when political violence, racial contempt, verbal derision and coarse eroticism become indistinguishable aspects of each other. There is a long and difficult sense of emptiness after the narrator finishes describing the story of Thaila, the protagonist, who attacks and is shot dead by some British soldiers in the streets of Amritsar on 10 April, 1919. For the narrator, it is a tale of unacknowledged martyrdom in the cause of freedom. For a more objective critic of the story, however, it is a predictable adolescent romance, full of bravado and enthusiasm but of little political significance. In the embarrassed silence that follows the crisis of the story, the listener feels as if the wheels are repeating, with dull mechanical regularity, the last phases of the narrator, ‘Thaila is dead, Thaila is buried ... Thaila is dead, Thaila is buried ...’ These fragmentary phrases, echoed by the clatter of wheels, seem to reduce the story of Thaila to a mundane and inconsequential incident. Ironically, the narrator fails to see that there is a
disturbing gap between his own expressed admiration for Gandhi and his agony over the death of Thaila, and that there are two political possibilities indicated within his own narrative. Thaila’s spontaneous decision to kill a British soldier may be full of exultation and energy, but it can’t be read as an act which is either personally redemptive or nationally desirable. He is a drunkard, a braggart, a gambler and a bully. There is nothing in the story to indicate that he is a man concerned with national questions. He acts merely on the impulse of the moment. It is, therefore, surprising to find that Leslie Fleming, in her study of Manto, is oblivious to Manto’s ironic rage and applauds Thaila as a political activist and bemoans his fate. To do so is not only sentimental, but is, in Gandhian terms, an abdication of ethical and political will to the whims of a hooligan. If Thaila has political legitimacy, then so has Dyer; both are mirror images of each other, for the will to power of one is countered by the will to destruction of the other. Thaila doesn’t have the intelligence to ask if freedom is worth having at the cost of such murders; Dyer lacks the moral grace to consider if the Empire is worth saving. In Manto’s demonology of the nationalist movement, they are both nasty examples of what William Blake identifies as that grotesque condition when ‘the soul drinks murder and revenge applauds its own holiness’.

There is a further slippage between Gandhian ethicality and politics, and the narrator’s unreflecting modes of thought and action. The narrator tells the listener in grave tones that the most tragic aspect of his tale is yet to follow. Immediately afterwards, however, he forgets his rage over Thaila’s death. Instead, he begins to describe in sensuous details, the mujra Thaila’s sisters used to perform for the entertainment of their customers in Amritsar. The listener feels uncomfortable as the narrator loses himself in his recollections of the night world of a sexual epicure. The narrator, however, is incapable of noting that there is little difference between his desire to ‘colonise’ and ‘raid’ the bodies of the dancing girls for his own delight and the coercive politics of the Empire. It is beyond his capacities to acknowledge, what moral politicians from Gandhi to Simone Weil have consistently pointed out, that the voluptuary and the colonizer are the same; and that both are so intoxicated by their power to possess and defile their victims that they themselves become grotesques.

After a while, the narrator emerges from his sexual fantasia and resumes his story. He describes how, soon after Thaila’s death, some British soldiers heard about his sisters and demanded that they dance for them. He bitterly condemns those Indians who told the British soldiers about Thaila’s sisters as ‘toadies’ who, like all collaborators, always put themselves ‘voluntarily at the service of vile power’ in order to increase the pain of the defeated. It is during the description of this lurid incident that he suddenly recalls the historically factual attack on Miss Sherwood and inscribes it into his fictional narrative. It is, perhaps, worth noting here that, in the larger framework of Manto’s text, such attacks as the one
on Miss Sherwood were for Gandhi a violation of *abhayadan*, which was not only an important duty of a satyagrahi, but was also the ‘first requisite of religion’.

The narrator, who has already forgotten Gandhi, unexpectedly bursts into rage, and in an act of compensatory retaliation calls her a *chudel* (a bitch). His verbal assault is, of course, a sign that he is still so deeply marked by his memories of social defilement that he hopes to recover for himself some sense of pride. The irony is that while he curses Miss Sherwood and is touched by the fate of Thaila’s sisters, he fails to see that the entrapment of the dancing girls is not only similar to the predatory attack on the English woman but is also one of its causes. What is shocking, however, is that he forgets that, between 1947 and 1951, enraged mobs of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had applauded public acts of sexual debauchery and had justified them as fair compensation for their political and religious humiliation at the hands of each other. To take only one example out of many, Kamalabehn Patel recalls that ‘200 women were made to dance naked for the whole night’ in the central hall of the Durbar Sahib in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and that many people had ‘enjoyed the unholy show’.

While the narrator effaces an obscene present, his memories are still haunted by a past in which nostalgia and pain, loss and desire are strangely mingled. When he resumes his story, at first he offers a fairly conventional comment about the inability of people to believe that even dancing girls can have feelings. Then, he adds, with seeming innocuousness and without any challenge by the listener, that ‘this country has no sense of self-respect’. The statement becomes treacherous, however, the moment we recall that it is being made in 1951 by a narrator who doesn’t know where he belongs. In the absence of the name of the nation, we wonder if the country he refers to is India or Pakistan? We also wonder if he is so profoundly lost in the shadowlands of memories that he unselfconsciously assumes that, as in the past, the two new countries shall continue to share the same civilizational space and a common history – and hence, of course, be equally involved in the present shame? The ambiguity of the narrator and the listener towards the formation of the two nations is bewildering. Indeed considering that one reason for the violence of those days was to ensure that the demarcation between the two countries was deeply and ineradicably engraved in the minds of the people, the forgetfulness of the narrator and the listener adds to the phantasmagoria of the story and of the times.

The narrator’s tale has two different, but equally scandalous endings. The ending of the first version satisfies the narrator’s offended pride, while the ending of the second corresponds to his sense that the times are utterly depraved. What he doesn’t realize is that ethically there is no difference between melodramas of retaliatory violence or base surrender; that both are without meaning, without purpose and without end; that as Blake says, ‘The beast and the whore rule without controls’.
For Manto, the writer, contemplating Partition from Lahore in 1951, there is a physical, moral and political logic which links the profane desires of the narrator, the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh, the prurient delights of the British soldiers and the fatal fraternities of mobs from 1919 to 1947. Together, they form a random anthology of incidents in an awful and inexorable tragedy of a degenerate society. All he can do, as he records these tales, is to lament — and lamentation, as we know from religious and psychological sources, is that state of inconsolable sorrow in which one feels that nothing more purposeful will ever offer itself again.

NOTES

2. ibid., p.157.
6. The Congress report on Jallianwalla Bagh concludes that O’Dwyer ‘invariably appealed to passion and ignorance rather than to reason’ (p.7). It adds that ‘he invited violence from the people so that he could crush them’ (p.23). The report also records a meeting between Raizada Bhagat Ram and O’Dwyer which gives some indication of the latter’s frame of mind during the Rowlatt satyagraha. Bhagat Ram told O’Dwyer that the meetings had been peaceful and added, ‘To my mind it was due to the soul force of Mr. Gandhi.’ Hearing that, O’Dwyer raised his fist and said, ‘Raizada Sahib, remember, there is another force greater than Gandhi’s Soul-force’ (p.44). *Punjab Disturbances*. Vol. 1. The official British report also condemned Dyer’s acts as ‘inhuman and un-British’ (p.xxi), but added that ‘he acted honestly in the belief that what he was doing was right’ (p.xxii). The Indian members of the British Commission refused to endorse these views. *Punjab Disturbances: 1919-20*, vol. 2, 1920; (New Delhi: Deep Publications, 1976).
12. In the stories about Partition by Manto and others speech can often lead to betrayal and death (as in numerous accounts of the Jewish holocaust — and incidentally, in spy-fiction). This is, of course, contrary to the assumption of saner societies in which speech enables the world to come into being and ensures the on-goingness of life.
15. It is perhaps worth recording that, while there are countless stories in which hypnotic or mesmeric control leads to brutal death (e.g. Poe or Dickens), tales of enchantment can also result in redemptive release from irrational fears or social rage (e.g. The Arabian Nights at one end and Freud at the other).


17. Ibid., p.10.

18. The Hunter Commission report also records that in Punjab in 1919 Gandhi was respected as a rishi by the Hindus and as a wali by the Muslims. Punjab Disturbances, vol. 2, p.36.


22. General Dyer, for instance, told the Hunter Commission, ‘I felt women had been beaten. We look upon women as sacred’. He added, that the street where Miss Sherwood had been beaten ‘ought to be looked upon as sacred’. Punjab Disturbances, vol. 2, p.61.


Sanjukta Dasgupta

TO AVANTISUNDARI

(9th century poet, learned wife of scholar-dramatist Rajshekhar, she wrote poetry in Prakrit as Sanskrit was used by the upper class men for religious and courtly purposes.)

Quill rather than pestle
Lured you, Avantisundari.
Was Rajshekhar your muse
Or you his?
Your Prakrit lines reverberate
Through time, alas Sanskrit!

Glorious, timeless fragments
Survive like desert flowers
No simoon can dry.
Your footsteps unseen
Provoke, tantalize.

Till a sister ten centuries young
Continues what you, incomparable Avantisundari,
Began.

TRAPPED

‘Don’t’ is a wrought-iron gate
That I cannot open;
Within my mother holds me in a fierce embrace
For I am carrion to the slit-eyed hyenas.

‘Don’t’ is my lodestar,
My passport, my credit card, my social security.
Because I don’t,
I am so charming, simple, full of grace.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci?
Harridan, hag, witch, Circe, Medusa,
Medea, Helen, Cleopatra, Ophelia,
Kali, Durga, Draupadi, Menaka –
I have them all in me –
Yet I am lost and trapped  
Myths and masks suffocate  
I long for air and life.  
Am I so formidable *mon semblable, mon frère*?

'Don't', 'Don't' jangles the gate  
As I shake its bars,  
The inscrutable without  
Echoes 'Don't', 'Don't', alas.

Cloistered, claustrophobic  
I cohabit with 'Don't'  
For I cannot say  
'I won't.'

**RED ANTS**

So perfect and awesome  
Under my magnifying glass,  
Such an infinitesimal speck  
Otherwise; what will and instinct  
Propels the silent files  
Of red power  
Up the window frame  
Or along the kitchen table.

Friendship with the red ant  
is absurd; stinging body contact  
Urges anger and violence.  
With cruel fingers I crush  
An adventurer on my arm.  
Power and pride fill me  
As I stamp and rub a procession  
Out of life.

Ants are without names  
Fancy or functional, unlike us.  
They know what they want  
We do not.  
They are always together  
We stand alone.  
Miners with no headlamps  
We falter and fall.
Trained in a rare academy,
Disciplined mobile queues,
Each red speck
Marching, as if remote-controlled.
Till one red ant wanders off,
Jonathan Livingstone Ant steals up my arm,
My neck and bites my eye
For seeing him so small.

SOMETIMES

Sometimes I grow this way:
Taller than every tree
My face in the clouds
Blue sky as blue sea
I feel so green yet grown.

Sometimes I creep this way:
My belly grazing ground
My nose and mouth dirt-filled
Eyes blinded by what I saw
I feel so weak and run down.

Sometimes I die this way:
A little every time
My heart stops a moment
As in swishing silk I walk past
A sleeping pavement boy.
This excerpt from the last part of a short novel by Mahasweta Devi is concerned with Molina Mishra’s sense of self-betrayal, faced as she is with her failure to lead a meaningful life. A middle class Bengali, a Hindu widow, an old woman of 70, she has seemed to family and friends an exemplary figure. She has lived a life of utmost simplicity, even austerity, denying herself the comforts now common among India’s urban middle class while enabling her three daughters to be well educated and well married. She has spent her resources on a school for girls, and on helping abandoned and destitute women. Above all, she has remained faithful to the memory of her husband, Bejoy Mishra, a revolutionary communist of the 1930s who died as long ago as 1940 while she was still only 22. She could have remarried as there were men who loved her and her father would have had no objection. Yet she refused their offers, endured the loneliness and difficulties of life, remaining loyal to old communists who did not change their views or lifestyles amid the new politics of post-independent India. Her life, as seen by others and herself therefore, is that of a sati, that idealized image of the chaste wife who tries to uphold the kind of devotion shown by the mythic goddess, Sati, who was prepared to immolate herself by fire when her husband, the great god Shiva, was insulted by her father.

Satihood, the state of being a sati, should not be confused with ‘suttee’, the term used by the British to describe the practice, restricted to some among the highest castes, of forcibly burning widows along with their dead husbands. Accordingly, Molina has been a lifelong sati who has not burnt on the funeral pyre but inwardly and at her own hands. On the surface, she is meticulous in observing the anniversary of her husband’s death. Indeed the man and his career are now, in the late 1980s, exciting media interest since his stories, posthumously published, have been turned into a very successful film. As Mahasweta Devi skilfully unravels Molina’s true feelings, which have been covered over by her correct behaviour, we find here one variation on the theme of the true self breaking out of the shell of prescribed female ways of living. Whereas in Mother of 1084, published some fifteen years earlier in 1974, Sujata the central character is unaware of the existence of exploitation and oppression within political life, Molina in Sati is quite knowledgeable
about political and social realities. On account of her husband and his friends, she has seen many changes within and outside the communist movement, and is aware of the many injustices in Indian society; such as caste discrimination, domestic violence, economic hardship. Molina’s conformist role has not been imposed upon her; it is a role she has chosen. In Gayatri Spivak terms, Molina exemplifies that ‘internalised gendering’,¹ which is women’s complicity with feudal and patriarchal norms. Molina could have remarried – she was only 22 when her husband died – and there were men anxious to marry her. She could have disregarded her mother-in-law’s rudeness and screaming abuse, and asked her, an uninvited guest, to leave. Molina did continue with her education after her husband died, she did train as a teacher, starting her own school and helping destitute women. On one level she is more liberated than Sujata and yet she is chained to traditional precepts of how a loyal wife should continue to show devotion and respect to a dead husband’s memory. She defends her granddaughter who decides to separate from a possessive husband who will not let his wife follow a career; she is critical of her daughters’ claims to be liberated – one is a successful academic while adhering to conventional practices and values, such as dowries and wifely obedience. Yet she cannot bring herself to break loose from her own seemingly uncritical regard for her husband until she realizes that the physical ailments she has made light of, and a lifetime of denial, have brought her to the brink of death.

Mahasweta Devi (born in 1926) ranks among the great writers of modern India. Since her first novel, Jhansi Rani (1956) based on Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi who joined the 1857 Rebellion against the British, she has written more than a hundred works of fiction, some plays and books for children. She writes in Bengali, has been translated widely into the Indian regional languages but, so far, has had only a handful of stories and one novel translated into English. In 1997 she received the Jnanpith Award, India’s highest literary prize, for her writings, which were described in the citation as ‘important annals of the human struggle against injustice’, and her ‘admiration for those who raise their voice in protest’. Her fiction centres on tribal men and women who are denied the most basic of human rights, on bonded labourers, sharecroppers, landless workers and revolutionary activists from these classes or outside who fight for social change and justice. She chooses also for her characters historic figures like Lakshmibai, and Birsa Munda, the tribal leader who fought the British at the turn of the century. She sets her stories during actual movements of resistance, such as the sharecroppers’ uprising known as the Tebhaga Movement in districts of East and West Bengal in 1946-1947, and the Naxalite Movement of rural and urban guerrilla struggle of the late 1960s and early 1970s. She says in an interview she gave in 1983: ‘Once I became a professional writer, I felt increasingly that a writer should document his own time and history. The socio-economic
history of human development has always fascinated me.'2 The Naxalite Movement, in particular, has inspired some of her best works such as *Mother of 1084* and *Agnigarbha* (1978), a collection of three long stories of which ‘Draupadi’ translated by Spivak is the most generally known internationally.3 Mahasweta Devi, in her introduction to *Agnigarbha*, provides some insight into her own writing: ‘A responsible writer, standing at a turning point in history, has to take a stand in defence of the exploited. Otherwise history would never forgive him. ... Hence I go on writing to the best of my abilities about the people, so that I can face myself without any sense of guilt or shame. For a writer faces his judgment in his lifetime and remains answerable.’4

Mahasweta Devi’s writings about Indian tribal people have proceeded along with her active involvement in their struggles to obtain justice – seeking redress for the wrongs done to them, trying to stop further encroachment on their lands, campaigning for the various laws and constitutional provisions to be actually implemented. At times, she adopts a documentary style providing detailed information about wages, about state affirmative policies ostensibly laid down to help the disadvantaged but often ignored. In domestic narratives, like *Sati*, she is precise about dates, the ages of characters, and their spatial and social locations. However, such journalistic reportage is only part of her craft. Her social realism is not a simplistic, quasi-didactic exposé of some particular unlawful act or social ill. She creates characters that combine the specificities of their class, caste, gender and ethnic culture with individual personalities whose perceptions and actions transcend the typical, and produce resolutions of conflict which are not always victorious. If one borrows Lukács’s categories of critical realism and socialist realism,5 Mahasweta Devi’s writing reveals qualities from both categories. There is an authenticity of knowledge used with the irony and detachment of the critical realist as well as a perspective derived from the forces that are working for a just social order which she knows from the inside, for she is not neutral in the conflicts she portrays and is actively involved in tribal welfare and civil liberties. Her social vision, while it is not a socialist programme of any particular left-wing political party, looks to a future in which those who have been marginalized and oppressed will overthrow the forces and agencies that have kept them subordinate.

Mahasweta Devi’s characters are described as ‘subaltern’ by those who follow the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography initiated by Ranajit Guha.6 Subalterns are the dispossessed – peasants, bonded labourers, tribals – who become insurgents and whose insurgency forms the central thrust in changing consciousness through the transition from colonialism to independence. In an exploration of Mahasweta Devi’s story, Alakananda Bagchi finds the voice of Tudu, a tribal hero in the Naxalite uprising, to be that of the subaltern in contemporary India’s many nationalisms.7 Mahasweta Devi herself, in her acceptance speech of
the Jnanpith Award on 28 March 1997, said:

And tribals are not the only marginalised people in the country. Such people, their life and their constant struggles for a better existence, their aspirations and anxieties, their victories as well as their defeats, are the subject-matter of my writings, and will continue to remain so.

Are middle class women, like Sujata in *Mother of 1084* and Molina in *Sati*, to be placed with the subalterns of history? Sujata, in particular, high caste, well educated, married to an affluent man, and with her own job in a bank, does not resemble the tribal and Dalit subaltern, except in her gendered subordination enforced by her husband, and in her political illiteracy which keeps her ignorant of what her son was fighting for, an ignorance she gradually relinquishes during her meetings with those who were more closely connected to the son’s life. Molina may be viewed as a quasi-subaltern on account of the treatment she suffers at her mother-in-law’s hands as well as her husband’s male domination over her sexually and his demand that she should stop writing. However, Mahasweta Devi is an important writer precisely because she can widen her fictional canvas to portray not merely the subaltern but the oppositional class—the large and subdivided Indian bourgeoisie. Molina, unlike Sujata, comes from a lower rung of the middle class in respect of her caste origin as well as her father’s business background. She differs from Sujata in her greater political understanding and has no illusions about her husband’s treatment of her. Yet she remains tied to her internalized ideal of the loyal wife and chaste widow. Both she and Sujata, along with other middle class women portrayed in Mahasweta’s Devi’s city novels, must release themselves from their false values, transform their consciousness and make their subjectivity and behaviour cohere, to find individual fulfilment through a life of political awareness and action. That such a path may be difficult to achieve—and for both Sujata and Molina, the decisive moment comes when they are very ill—runs true to Mahasweta’s unflinching depiction of the real world where the road to human betterment is full of stumbling blocks.

From *Sati*

*Molina Mishra*, waiting for a major operation for cancer, is given a tape-recorder by her granddaughter, Ama, so that she may record stories for Ama’s child while lying on a hospital bed. What follows is a dramatic monologue, with Molina trying to explain her life to Ama. The narrative begins after she has recounted details of her brief married life of only four years in which she had three daughters, one born after the death of her husband, Bejoy Mishra, who contracted tuberculosis in a colonial jail in 1940. Molina was then only 22, and now, an old woman of 70, she must attempt to make Ama understand the contradiction between her
seemingly exemplary life as Bejoy's widow, a modern sati, and her own sense of waste, especially of her literary talent. While she has kept Bejoy's memory honoured as a revolutionary martyr, and enabled his reputation as a writer to become nationally known through getting his stories published after his death and made into films, she has also not forgotten his treatment of her, behaviour typical of patriarchal society and arising from personal jealousy. The monologue is both a confession and a balance evaluation of a life dutiful and moral on one level and futile on another.

Translating Mahasweta Devi's style is difficult. She combines literary diction with the demotic. She moves from the ironic to the lyrical. Above all, she creates intellectual and emotional depth through brevity and terseness, and in English translations some of that economy is lost.

He was then in jail. I had two infants in my arms and scarcely any time for work. His friends began to insist that I write. I said, writing for the school paper was one thing but to write stories? Sitesh said I could do everything but that I did not know this was the case myself.

I wrote 'Earth'. Sitesh had told me that peasants evicted from their land would take a handful of their old soil for their new place. In my story the evicted peasant was caught by the landlord’s men and killed while stealing a bit of earth. He was a Muslim. His son picked up a bit of the soil from his father’s grave for the foundation of the new home.

How could I have known that my story would receive such praise. Sitesh bought several copies of Prabhat. Then I wrote 'Dwiragaman' (the ceremony which takes place when the young bride goes to her husband’s house for the second time), about a girl who, married as a child, was making her return now that she was older. The mother-in-law took the fish, the utensils and household goods that the bride’s family had given but refused to let the girl come in. The husband was going to be married again. If the girl wished to remain as a co-wife, she could. It was what happened to Shyama Aunty who used to teach us. That story, too, was published.

Bejoy had been given a week’s parole for medical treatment. My stories had come out and were praised by Dayal Sahani in Pradeep. He had been able to get the very smell of the village and see in vivid colour the humiliations endured by the women of India.

Bejoy's angry expression is engraved on my heart. I can’t remember any other Bejoy. Mother-in-law screams, 'You’re dying in jail and your wife behaves like a slut.' And Bejoy is tearing up my stories and shouting, 'Who encouraged you to write? Why did you publish them? Did you get my permission? No, Molina, there can’t be two writers in the same house.'
Ramlaldada, Banibabu, Mohitbabu, Sitesh, Ajit, Father, Nandababu, Ranajit were all there.

I was burning inside, reduced to ashes.

I said, ‘You’ve been let out for medical treatment. Don’t get so excited. You hadn’t left any stories so Ranajit – Don’t worry. I shan’t write ever again. You’ll remain the only writer.’

Bejoy, it was Bejoy who tore my stories up. I did not obey my husband’s order like a sati and destroy my own stories.

That was the day I was really defeated by Bejoy. Hurt, and my pride wounded, I forsook Bejoy in my heart.

And that was the very time that there was the possibility of my becoming pregnant again.

Later Mother-in-law would scream and ask, why I could not let a consumptive husband alone, how I could remain full of life while sucking her son dry. And I did become pregnant. Ama, no one knows even today that when I discovered I was going to have Bijoyini, I wanted to kill myself. I left the house and went to Chaudhuri Pond. It was Sitesh who brought me back. I said that never again would I bear Bejoy’s child. Sitesh reminded me the child to be born had committed no wrong and I must not commit suicide because of Bejoy. That was not the right path. I must live and find another way. There was another road to life.

And Sitesh? He had been right from the start. No, Ama, I didn’t choose such a hard existence just to show Bejoy. It was duty, my sense of what ought to be done. No matter how insufferable his mother was, who would have looked after her? And my three daughters?

I passed my Intermediate, got a job in a new school in our area, did my Teacher’s Training, was promoted to a higher grade. Was I going to organize my personal life in a different way?

After Sitesh went away that dream faded for ever. And I chose to hide myself behind a thousand and one rules. Wasted, a life wasted.

I thought of my daughters’ future. They were able to go through school, college, university. Father died in 1968. He was able to see two of them married. Their marriages were arranged by Ajit and the others. Mother-in-law, who had not parted with one of her jewels to pay for her son’s treatment, gave whatever she had to her two older granddaughters. Bijoyini chose her own husband. Father lived to see you and your brother.

After Sitesh had left, Mother-in-law realized that she could no longer hurt me. She survived father by another ten years. I did not exchange more than ten words with her.

Ama, you will wonder why I chose to lead such a bleak existence if I didn’t want society’s approval? Because I had no interest in myself. Now, when I look back, I can see the needless self-destruction. But gradually I’ve wanted that at least you should know the way I saw things. So I’ve filled three exercise books jotting down my experiences.
And getting your grandfather’s books published? That same sense of duty.

Not a single day did I recognize any duty to myself. Not for a long time. Now, knowing that it might be cancer, I’ve found myself again. I thought my past had defeated me. I couldn’t seem to be able to forget it. I didn’t want anyone to find out why I’d destroyed myself bit by bit.

I was somebody’s obedient and virtuous wife whose entire life had been to walk in the shadow of her husband’s idealized image. I was no sati like Roop Kanwar. I kept on burning throughout my life. That’s what will be remembered. Indeed, that’s the explanation I gave myself.

Today I’ve realized that the past did not defeat me. I want to live. I want to let people know that I’m not really the way they see me. Why do I want to tell them? Because I now know how terrible are the sati’s cremation fires that are kept suppressed.

Shyama Aunty was not to blame. She was only fifteen when her husband refused to accept her as his wife. She was uneducated and her family was not the kind to help her stand on her own feet and build a new life. She could barely remember the husband, but had to go on wearing her iron bangle and put vermillion in her parting as a married woman, until one day she was told that now she was a widow. She was no better than an unpaid domestic help in her family and went on slaving for them until she died. She would tell me that, had she gone out to work as a servant, she would at least have got paid and might have the money to go on a pilgrimage. Shyama Aunty became a sati burning on her pyre throughout her life.

When I started my own school I saw many like her – daughters, wives, mothers.

You can prevent the burning at the pyre of satis. But what of women like me who, out of wounded pride, or to maintain their husband’s image, sacrifice their writing, acting, music, everything, to live in silence as faithful devotees. There are many such wives who have martyred themselves as satis.

Those women with children, who are abandoned by their husbands, who cannot earn a living, who get no help from their families or society, are forced to live like satis. They are alive yet burn. Such satis are countless.

Even educated people, known for their liberal attitudes, cherish the old culture of sati. Those who have praised me would not have liked me, had they known the whole truth. They would say that I was destroying Bejoy Mishra’s image.

No, Ama, because you know what kind of a man he was, you mustn’t belittle his creative work. Creativity shouldn’t be judged according to a person’s character. I’ve seen it in my life amongst all kinds of people. Just because one works for the Communist party or is a sympathizer, one
does not get rid of the traditional teachings about women: that women alone should be subjugated, that they should be punished for any wrong done. Society makes women bear the blame.

Also, the whole sati business continues to dominate women’s minds even today. Women themselves are the cruelest towards other women. Your educated acquaintances, colleagues, mothers, aunts, would all have been more pleased with you, had you decided to remain with your husband, just as Indian women are shown in films.

Ama, this what I’ve written. I don’t know what the doctors will discover. I want to live, I want to work ...

NOTES


6. See Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, pp. 197-268, for analysis of ‘Stanyadayini’ (Breast Giver) and ‘Draupadi’.
Yasmien Abbasi suggested a final, vital ingredient). A few weeks after her fortieth birthday (unremembered, unsung), Shireen underwent a brief crisis and then received an unexpected gift. This is how it happened.

Jamil, her husband – one of those dedicated bankers who spent his life between his office, his associates, his business trips and his bed – announced to her one Sunday from the shallows of early morning sleep that he had important people visiting from abroad and others to whom he desperately owed a seasonal invitation. In short, she had to cater for more than a dozen guests at less than a week’s notice. The dinner, Shireen grumbled silently as she lowered herself deeper into the depths of Capricornian gloom, was to be next Saturday; and she knew she would have to excel herself, for even her best was never good enough for Jamil’s Libran discernment.

And so it had always been. In this impossibly difficult city of London where even a powerfully-situated husband did not guarantee a work permit or a job for a doctor with a Third World (read by the British as third class) degree and experience, her medical expertise – so many years, and so much of her widowed mother’s savings spent on it – had been displaced to an ongoing culinary struggle to keep her husband tied to her table, with sundry colleagues (for deals meant more to him than domestic life) in tow.

Such was life. Take Timur – now seven, and growing away from his mother – to school; do the shopping at Safeway and Marks & Spencers on Edgware Road; go to Marylebone library for some Han Suyin books in which other Asian lands far from her own were reflected in a doctor’s eyes; come home and desultorily clean up. (She’d dispensed with the idea of an au pair a while ago, for she needed something besides shopping to fill up the time that reminded her of the globe of her days which was filling up with sand, taking her further and further away from any chance of regaining her fine hospital job in Karachi. Or, indeed, of adding to her qualifications the required British degrees; Jamil had always found some excuse saying Timur was too little and medical training here expensive. And then he didn’t know how long this English stay, sojourn for her and idyll for him, was going to last. If Shireen asked him for what
she called a time-table – ‘How long will we be here, when will we go back? My job isn’t going to wait forever, you know’; he’d respond, ‘Don’t be silly, you have to understand the New Economics; professionals like us don’t have front doors in one place any more.’ She didn’t know whether to be insulted at his negation of her profession, or flattered by his inclusion of her in his bracket. And now a Malaysian woman, who’d soon become more of a confidante than a cleaner, came in once a week to do what Jamil called the heavy jobs.)

Then she’d cook for Jamil and his guests as well, for this, too, she insisted upon. But lately he’d often suggest they order food from one of the fancy Pakistani lady caterers who were proliferating in London, because once she’d said in irritation that she wasn’t brought up to cook for armies when he’d sprung a dinner for six on her. And now he thought her home cooking wasn’t quite fancy enough for his guests though he thrived on it himself. But she wasn’t going to subscribe to his theory of two weights and two measures – more than good enough for him but not for outsiders – and refused even to consider food from elsewhere. This, he claimed in contradiction to his earlier protests about her elitist disdain for polite feminine values, was due to what he called her elemsee upbringing ... And once she’d seen a poster for an orchestra called LMC and wondered aloud why an orchestra would name itself Lower Middle Class until her friend Yasmien with whom she walking down High Street Kensington shoved her in the ribs and said silly, that’s a typically Pakistani term, LMC stands for the London Musician’s Collective ... one did still laugh with one’s friends sometimes, usually, though, when Jamil wasn’t here. And that was more and more often. Then she’d follow her daily routine with the addition of a visit or a walk with one of her two close friends, and come home and still persist in cooking, against modern dietary prescriptions, the dishes she loved like spinach with meat or potatoes, oil-rich courgettes and aubergines, rich buttery breads and dry, fragrant pea-speckled rice tinted yellow. Since that was the role she’d been allotted by life’s scene-shifters, she’d be a housewife with all the perfectionism of her medical training. But all too often she couldn’t eat alone, and her friends were occupied with their matrimonial tasks, so she’d freeze the food for some day when it rained or snowed. Then, in her favourite armchair, late into the night, she’d read and reread the stories of Han Suyin’s life among the women of China and Malaya.

Now, this party. This time most of the expected guests would be associates or prospective clients from Asia-Pacific and the Americas. Monday today; Jamil had gone off to Brussels earlier this morning, flying from the City Airport which he found most convenient for flights to Europe (but all too often it was to the Asia-Pacific region he went, for that, he said, was where the economy was booming, and other Asians, too, should make sure of their slice of the cake). Though Shireen dreaded
his guests, with their wives who looked suspiciously at the clothes she’d had sent to her from Pakistan and snooped around her fixtures and fittings, she was determined to prepare something really special, and outdo those society hostesses whose homes he dragged her to every sixth week or so when he was here. She’d already run through her repertoire of homely fare; after all, as a medical student and then a practitioner, she’d hardly had time to acquire the skills of her family’s women; some passive knowledge, some pragmatic tips and some inherited skills had so far sufficed. But now, with the frustrated and frustrating perfectionism that constantly chilled her bones, she wanted to cross the final boundary and cook one of the feasts she’d heard her grandmother describe with such chop-licking ecstasy.

Sweet rice. A delicacy remembered from the day she’d kept all her Ramzan fasts for the first time. Not the insipid sweet yellow stuff speckled with shaved nuts, but something lush and golden orange, laden with succulent pieces of chicken and ripe with the subtle and suggestive perfume of fruit. Grandmother had made it for her and named it – or so, in her eight year old’s arrogance, she’d imagined – after her. Shireen pulao. Sweet rice.

Shireen’s father was from Multan, but her mother’s parents – as they’d loved to remind her – had come from some small town in what were now the United Provinces in Northern India. They’d settled in Lahore many years before Partition, but retained the gentle gestures, the sweet tongues and the richly aromatic cooking of another era, another land. After 1947 the landholdings which had given them a small revenue and some claim to feudal graces had vanished; and unlike many others, they’d never applied for recompense, which would have been a futile endeavour, as those who complained of properties lost were so many and there just didn’t seem to be enough to go around. Her grandfather had lived all his life on his physician’s earnings, and her father, too, was a doctor; simple people who’d fallen in a world that continued to respect material manifestations of heritage, but hardly elemsee as Jamil put it. That term, she thought in catty moods, suited him better; and what was worse, his mentality of shopkeepers with new money. But that was the way things were these days in Pakistan ...

Enough reminiscing for now, she thought as she turned the corner from Seymour Place into York Street, which led her home. (Above her, the inverted grey tin bowl of sky.) Grandmother was no longer there, and Mother had probably long since forgotten a recipe of such absurdly luxurious pretensions. Now where could she find it? Hardly any chance of recovering it from the exercise books filled up with recipes her mother had copied out in her arthritic hand, or Shireen had painstakingly translated or transcribed – her Urdu, so fluent when she was younger, had grown almost rusty from years of disuse. (Medical textbooks in Urdu? Don’t make me laugh. They’re written in untranslatable
gibberish.) Then there were the volumes of Madhur Jaffrey cookbooks that Jamil had bought for her, probably as a burdensome hint – they’d been placed on a corridor shelf and proudly forgotten; though friends had told her the recipes were authentic, timesaving and good, her vanity, the vanity of a good daughter, rich in the dowry of a thousand recipes tested and proved, forbade her from turning to them. Once upstairs, in the comfortable sitting room of her flat, feet tucked up beneath her in a favourite pudgy armchair, she swallowed her lumpy, irksome pride; a pile of discarded notebooks beside her, she inspected Jaffrey’s tomes as if in search of some obscure remedy in a respected encyclopaedia. But to no avail. What should she do? Her goat-like determination refused to allow her to give up.

Sweet rice. It would have been a gesture so grand, so uncharacteristically flamboyant, a celebration of her home, and above all a defiant signature (named after her, the sweet rice, the indulgent grandmother had deceitfully said, the indulged child had gullibly believed). What have I ever signed with a flourish? Shireen said to herself, do I even remember my signature? And this son of mine is his father’s child, an English child, who prefers dubiously prepared hamburgers and chips fried in the greasy remains of god knows what forbidden animal to his mother’s wholesome cooking, give him a fresh, sweet lassi and he asks for an artificially flavoured yoghurt ...

Then a picture teased her visual memory. She went to the hall cupboard – in use this season, as their coats and winter things were stored there – and retrieved a chest in which some ancient objects of sentimental value (don’t look back and above all don’t smell or sniff, it only takes you to places surrendered) were stored. She knelt there on the carpet, rummaging, foraging. A red scarf. Two saris. And the bundle of books. They tumbled out – first those novels of A. R. Khatun that delighted her between the ages of twelve and fifteen. (‘Chaste, pragmatic romances’, as a Frontier Post columnist, Shahnaz Aijazuddin – who’d recently written about the creative apathy of Western-educated Pakistani women, too – had described them, in a fulsome tone that amazed her because, as a teenager, she’d finally, regretfully relegated them to a corner, submitting to the senior schoolchild’s unwritten law of Westernization which decreed that anything local or ethnic, except the odd piece of mystic music, was suspect, unworthy, elemsee, while English was chic and desirable.) Then, some romances of Islam and of colonialism and the ‘57 uprising by Abdul Halim Sharar, whom the Urdu scholars of today considered as dated as Rider Haggard. Here, now. The classic book of recipes she’d been searching for. She’d taken the bundle of books from her grandmother’s cupboard when the old lady died, aged eighty-three; a sentimental gesture, followed by the contradictory, even furtive, action of hiding them, once she’d carted them to London, under piles of gauzy unusable garments behind her husband’s sports gear and
her son's array of sundry school things. A moth-eaten, mildewed book. The Urdu script was old-fashionedly pure and clear, faint now with time but still legible. On the frontispiece, under the title, the year of publication – 1911. Naimathkhana, the book was called ... the traditional larder. She had never, when she took it away, imagined she'd have use for it in these labour-saving days and even the name, weights and terms in it, as she browsed, were archaic. But after a false and disappointing start, since it wasn't included in the book's list of contents, and she couldn't locate a familiar heading, the recipe appeared. On page 89. Orange rice, the author had called it. Chicken or lamb, rice, clarified butter, onions, coriander, garlic, salt, cummin, black pepper, cloves, cardamom and sugar. And then, for the remembered fragrance (heady, like playing the circle game with your favourite boy cousin in the sun), she had to turn to recipe number 249, on page 192. A sauce of orange peel, almonds, pistachoes, cardamoms, water and – for the final, special, touch – crystallized rock sugar. All ingredients so easy to find nowadays, in this city with no cuisine of its own to boast of; which had, in its usual grudging and offhand way, taken to guzzling the delicacies of its erstwhile empire and was even developing an increasingly discerning palate for them. Little Asias of restaurants and eating places had taken over the city - the revenge of the spice islands, as she and Yasmien jokingly said when they chose places to shop and eat. The rock sugar, perhaps, would be difficult to locate – but Drummond Street, for a sturdy walker like her (she walked for hours in post-autumnal, leaf-bare Regents Park sometimes) was only a short walk away, though she hated its dinginess and its stalely spicy smells. And if not, then Harrods or Fortnums would be sure to stock it ... In the end, she'd have gone even beyond the remembered delight to create something new, something lavish and wonderful, a festive concoction that bore her name ... Later, though. For now she had found a companion. (Jamil always said, when he saw the increasing pile, in her usually orderly surroundings, of medical digests and newspapers, imported Heralds, Shes, and frontier Posts, free handouts, Big Issues, and mail order catalogues she saved because there was always something she wanted to read again, that Shireen would even find something to devour with her eyes on the back of a cereal pack, an airline ticket or a postage stamp. It was a joke she was sure he'd picked up from one of the American men's magazines that were his only leisure reading, or from an inflight journal, this tasteless description of the kind of passionate, indefatigable reader she was). The book would keep her engrossed, amused, transported, for hours.
When she reached the last of the recipes (homesickness sometimes is closer than anything to happiness), she still had half an hour before it was time to pick up Timur, who she'd remembered had football practice after classes today, from his school near Marble Arch. She discovered an index of recipes at the end of the book; no point now regretting that she
hadn’t located it earlier, for half the fun of finding the recipe for sweet rice had been the search for it. Beyond the index was a list of books published by the same house. She realized that they were all by the author of this book, whom she’s imagined as a semi-literate bourgeoisie, a turn-of-the-century housewife. Her ignorance astonished her, for this woman, Muhammadi Begum, had been the editor of the first influential Urdu journal for women, which her husband had founded in Lahore in 1898. She had written at least a dozen books in the span of just ten years. Some were guides to housekeeping and good manners, but the titles of others, with the short, pithy blurbs below, made her long for a grand library. A book for children: a young girl seeks a magical fountain, tree and bird to free her brothers from captivity; they have turned to stone. (Will Jamil, too, free his limbs one day, from their pervasive torpor?) A tale for adolescents: a poor but highly learned young girl works day and night, setting up a school for girls, using her intelligence and wits to pay for her brother’s schooling and her mother’s recovery from mental illness. (And here what do I do but complain?) Two novels for adults: one about the evils of forcing an educated young woman – interested in the study of medicine and the art of herbalism – to marry her incompetent, dissipated cousin, and driving her to despair and death. (And what have I done? Jamil was not my cousin, but I didn’t love him, and settled for a marriage of convenience because my work didn’t give me time and I was afraid and over thirty). A biography: of a role-model, an impoverished widow who’d become the principal of a vernacular girls’ school in colonial Lahore, well over a century ago.

Muhammadi Begum. Who was she then, this master cook who’d stirred the ingredients of romance and realism into platters of parables that had nurtured generations of women, secluded or newly emergent from the confines of four walls and veils, adding a special prescription for those women who, almost a century later, were doctors and lawyers and opposition leaders and even prime ministers? Dead – so the prefaces, written by her stepdaughter and stepdaughter-in-law told Shireen – in 1908, at the age of thirty (and I am already forty, and still alive, and have abandoned my years of useful training and service to languish and moan in a luxurious central London flat), finding time to leave behind this keepsake of herself, this cookery book, the only work for which she was remembered, by a multitude of women who continued to share her bounty (and sharing bread is the closest form of love), taken from this naimatkhana she left behind her.

Naimatkhana. Simply translated, a larder or storehouse. Literally, a house or chamber of bounty. And it was from this chamber of bounty or blessings that Shireen would draw sustenance. She would share what she had, give unstintingly, take what was offered, laid out on the dastarkhan, the fresh white banqueting tablecloth of life. All the way to Timur’s school, she pondered, she brooded. Yes, the dish that bore her own
name, that she would prepare; but she’d do much more. She’d go to the India Office library and excavate, reclaim whichever of Muhammadi Begum’s writings she could find; she’d spend her remaining fallow years in this foreign country recreating a forgotten time from her own past, giving back to this amazing woman – of whom no photograph existed since, as a traditional Muslim woman, she had never forsaken her purdah – her purloined history.

On her way home, holding Timur’s unwilling hand in the bus (like his father, the child didn’t like to walk), Shireen paid little attention to the child’s customary pampered nonsense. Muhammadi Begum’s husband Mumtaz Ali had encouraged her endeavours – a radical religious scholar, Mumtaz Ali was a fighter for the rights of women to choose their own destinies, to emerge into the light of education and the dignity of unveiling, to marry and to divorce whom they chose, to walk and work in the world as men’s equals. Recognizing her superior talent, he had set up a press for his youthful bride, published her books, and kept them and her memory alive for many, many years after her death ... (and will Jamil think of me when I go? Or has living abroad pushed him back into some realm of the colonized, the spineless, who fear the vocal freedom of their equals and partners as the ruler fears the mocking songs of his subjects? Does this city allow freedom only to those that fill its treasuries with borrowed or stolen pounds? Who will support me if I spend years researching the life of a woman whose potent writings are probably interred, by a trick of history and idle conservation, in the mildewed and mite-infested coffers of empire?)

Shireen had decided. When she’d finally settled Timur in front of one his interminable Mario games – a special favour, on a weekday – she picked up the phone and dialled Yasmien’s number. Yasmien’s machine switched itself on. Resignedly, Shireen said: ‘Call me when you can, it’s nothing important – Well, actually, I wondered if you and your husband are free on Saturday, for dinner ...’

‘My husband’s not here,’ Yasmien’s voice interrupted her, ‘and I’m free all week. Sorry about the machine. I was avoiding Tehmina, you know how long she goes on ...’

‘Listen, I’m thinking of compiling a recipe book. You know, based on those recipes from our grandmothers’ time? I’m thinking of calling it Sweet Rice.’

Half an hour later (or maybe two hours, for she hadn’t looked at her watch when she called Yasmien, and they’d traversed a century and more in their conversation), she had a collaborator, a fellow conspirator. Yasmien knew of someone who knew a publisher in Pakistan, who may be interested in assisting Shireen in her project of writing about her new heroine’s life. With the fashionable status of Asian food in Britain, they’d have no major problem in finding an outlet here for Sweet Rice. The fancy Pakistani lady caterers, once they’d wept their kohl in streams
down their faces, would throng to the spectacular launch, and afterwards claim that the recipes they’d copy originated in their mothers’ kitchen. And Yasmien had suggested a subtitle, and a vital ingredient for their Bountiful Feast: there’d be lots of bright illustrations, and between the recipes, to refresh the palate like cool sweet water, they’d serve whatever stories they could uncover of the life of Muhammadi Begum, and as condiments they could recount their own experiences of living and cooking at home and in alien lands.
Photographs

SHAMA FUTEHALLY

Half brown, half leucoderma-pink, her fingers scrabbled and pulled at the edge of the paper. The two thick black sheets refused to part. Revengefully, during the years when they lay on the bare floor of the cupboard, they had secreted from themselves dark thick runnels of photograph-gum, and now they clung obstinately, edge to edge. Inside there could be precious photographs, the best photographs, photographs which held the key to some blissful day otherwise sealed from her memory forever... her fingers began to press jerkily all over the paper, trying to find a spot where the two pages had separated.

Beside her on the thick bedspread lay three or four albums in maroon and brown leather covers, their pages held by ancient thread. Two days ago she had taken one out, without hope. And slowly, incredulously, she had become like one possessed. She found herself going to the photographs as to a love-letter. When she got out of bed at six in the morning, and again at four in the afternoon, she reached mechanically for the albums on the bureau. When not looking at the pictures, she was rocking her chair or walking to the window, over-excited. It went on till the last strained efforts to see properly under the weak bulb at night.

Now her fingers moved back to the edge of the sheet and prepared to tear, come what might. There was a crackle, then a desperate ripping. Part of a photo was torn too. But there they were, seven or eight small sepia squares, little brown jewels. She closed the album quickly, trembling with relief.

The rocking-chair had to be placed by the window. Several times that afternoon she had pulled at it, but a curved leg was caught between the two trunks that jutted out from under her bed. Now she prepared to go the whole way. With deliberate slowness she dragged her large metal spittoon to the wall. She prepared to bend, to counter the faintness and nausea that came from bending. She bent, and resignedly, without effort, pushed at a trunk. The chair was freed, and she rested her head in her hands.

It was not that she had never seen the photos before. They had, after all, always been there. But all at once they had done something new; suddenly, without warning, they had set her little dark room aflame. She was aflame, and in some underground way this new flaming self joined her young self, as if the intervening years had never existed.
She used always to start with the one in the top left-hand corner, trying to resist the temptation to glance rapidly at them all. Only when she had stayed long and still with it, allowed it to return as it wanted, allowed its memories to lap about her, did she move on to the next. There it was, the little thing, loyal as a child. Without asking for reward it lifted up to her her young self and her young sister. They stood on their verandah, and not a hair had changed.

The balustrades had always been thick. You could spread your palm flat on them, or you could fold your parasol, clasp the neat roll of delicious papery silk, and place it on the broad wood. At once it seemed absurd to her that she no longer expected to see a wooden balustrade. Her fingers had become used to hollow-sounding iron railings. The thought made her head swim a little, and to escape it she went on to the next photo.

He was dressed for the office. They were on a stone bench. The old Ford must be waiting somewhere. And they must have finished, all of them, their wonderful breakfast. And they must have moved out to the garden before their magnificent peon carried all the files to the Ford. What a peon he was, she thought, feeling the tears appear. This was the stone bench under the lichee trees (she could not have told why she was sure). At once the smell of it came to her, the cold early morning smell of that bench. She raised her head, bewildered, and gazed uncertainly across her little cramped room. When it became hot they would move to the verandah which looked across the flowerbeds. Those North Indian flowerbeds. Soft droopy pansies of pink and pinky-white and purple. Little snowy-white sparks of daisies, tufts of carnations, little bobbing bunches of phlox all together – huge unbelievable beds! She would watch and watch, not knowing whether she felt pleasure or pain. Abdul would bring coffee in a silver service. Sometimes her sister poured. She would sit on the horsehair sofa. Hard, prickly it was, with the stuffing coming out. You could feel the prickly horsehair, as you poked your finger into a hole at one end. Particular though she was, she felt a loyalty to that hole, and had never mended it. As the morning grew heavier and lazier, she would put her feet up and rest her head on ...

Thuddum! Her door was flung open. The servant-boy was bringing her tea. A large plastic cup and two biscuits reposed on his tin tray. She stared at him, wounded.

‘Don’t bang the door!’ she cried out.

The boy looked at her wondering, his bony knees showing below his khaki shorts. Then his mouth set in a sulky line. With a defiant gesture he moved the cane stool forward and set the tray down on it. As it was, this was Sunday evening and he was missing the TV film because of this old woman. Then she shouted at him for nothing. He would tell his memsaab, he thought for the twentieth time. Never had he worked for such people.
The old lady was glaring at him furiously. ‘Don’t spill the tea,’ she said viciously. ‘And don’t bang the door when you go out.’

He went. She stared after him, unwilling to let him go. Her mouth trembled as she bent down to pick up her cup. A sticky film had formed on the surface.

She would tell her daughter-in-law. It had begun, again it had begun churning inside her, all that she would tell her daughter-in-law. You keep this bony boy for me and he doesn’t even know how to serve tea. If you go out all the time, if I’m left alone day in and day out with him, I beg of you one favour. Just one little favour. Teach him at least how to serve tea.

Tears of anger began to gather in her eyes. She picked up a biscuit and leaned back, chewing laboriously. A biscuit-coloured liquid began to dribble down her chin. If it hadn’t been for his banging how much she would have enjoyed her tea. It was years since she had forgotten her tea-time and had the pleasure of being suddenly reminded. From beneath the cushion of her rocking-chair she drew out a large grey handkerchief, man-sized, and, fingers shaking violently now, wiped her mouth. Tea in dirty cups. Doors banged. Her clock not repaired. Rude servants. She knew what her daughter-in-law would say if she complained. ‘I’ll try and explain to him nicely,’ she would say, implying — ever so gently — that in this generation they were not cruel to servants.

Not cruel to servants. Hadn’t Abdul stayed with her for nearly thirty years? How he stood at the door, smart and white-clad, when they came back from tour. There was a photograph. Never would he serve the bread without delicately, lovingly, picking open the napkin. Cruel to servants. When his wife was dying, she herself had gone all the way to his village to see her, sitting conscious of her responsibility in the bullock-cart, holding an envelope of money and a newspaper parcel of fruit. All Abdul’s relatives said they had never seen such a Collector’s wife. He had fallen at her feet and said, ‘Memsaab, you are my father and mother. By your grace we are alive.’ Beautiful his face was, shining with love and faith. She had wanted to stroke his middle-aged head. The photograph had brought the moment back to her like a phrase of music which now stuck in her head. Abdul’s unshaven face and the feel of the dried cowdung under her feet. The little hut crowded with his embarrassed relatives, momentarily forgetting the dying woman in the excitement of seeing the Collector’s wife. When she saw the photograph, the memory had given her something like a brief happiness. But almost immediately it was spoilt, because never, after all, could all this be seen by her daughter-in-law. Never could she brandish this before Urmila. (For Rafiq had married a Hindu girl, not that she had said a word about it. She had behaved as her husband would have wished, and said not a word.)

It was one thing to be a Hindu girl. It was another to be always wearing a tika which was so much larger and redder than necessary. And then flinging a jute bag over one shoulder and rushing to the college, as if it
were the only college in the world. Nothing she did, nothing she said, could shake the confidence of Urmila and her tika and her jute bag. Would Urmila ever know – would she care to know – what it was to be a Collector’s wife, one who was praised by all her staff? To have the Ford waiting punctually in the porch at ten, and a thousand things to attend to? And then, she had never liked to mention it, but so many dinners with the District Commissioner. Such friendly dinners. Would Urmila ever know, she thought helplessly, how Mr Butterworth used to ask her husband’s advice?

There was the Ford, with luggage tied at the back with ropes. Her husband was at the wheel, part of his head torn off. Perhaps they were going on tour. In her present mood it seemed to her that such a Ford was the only kind of car which should exist. It was large, it was gracious, there was always a sense of spaces beyond it waiting to be driven through. That was one thing which terrified her about these photographs – the memory of the spaces. From a picture of a wide verandah, a huge colonnade, an endless lawn, she would deliberately jerk her head up and stare around her crowded little room, as if to make sure she could bear it.

Her trunks, her cane stool, her dusty bureau, the pile of newspapers collected in case they were ever needed, were now silhouettes in the deepening light. She looked with exhaustion at the lamp on the bureau, its dusty shade hanging askew. She would have to switch it on. It was all of ten feet from her rocking-chair. Beside the lamp stood her clock, the hands eternally at 5.45.

There came a little knock on the door. Urmila’s knock. She felt a faint relief, thinking of the light. Now Urmila could switch it on. Urmila came in with her visiting face, which was like that of someone testing the water before taking a plunge. But today she was ready for it. With the memory of Abdul fresh in her mind, with the memory of the Commissioner’s dinners, she was ready. Her daughter-in-law went mechanically to the lamp and switched it on. The old lady saw that she was wearing another one of those villagy saris which, as she had once mentioned without proffering an opinion, used to be worn in the old days only by cleaning women. Urmila sat down at the edge of the bed and did not pick up the paper.

‘Well?’ she said in her Bombay Hindi; it was no use trying to call it Urdu. ‘How are you?’

There were so many answers. How do you expect me to be, alone for so many hours. I’m feeling ill because the tea was cold again. I am trying to recover my senses, after your boy banged the door.

But today she felt no need for all this. Because of Abdul and the Commissioner’s dinner, she felt like making an effort.

‘Today I had a bonus,’ she said, using the English word ‘bonus’ to indicate good humour. ‘I found some photographs of the days when your father-in-law was Collector of Lucknow.’
The younger woman leaned forward, her face softening.

'Do you want to see them?'

'Of course.'

'Look then. There is the verandah of the Collector's house. Can you tell which one is me?'

'This one, of course,' Urmila smiled. 'What beautiful old houses they were, Amma. And are these embroidered skirts like the ones you have in your cupboard?'

'The same. This one was embroidered for me by my sister. In those days we used to work on a single skirt for months.'

Urmila was clearly determined to be impressed. Not only that, she was haltingly using Urdu words. 'I know,' she said. 'We just don't have that kind of patience nowadays.'

The old lady was uncomfortable with happiness. This was better than anything that had happened for days. And the unaccustomed pleasure, the triumph of it, caused her to make a too rapid mistake.

'We had a lot of qualities which you don't have today,' she said, in a voice which proclaimed it a joke.

And then all was over. Now she heard her own remark, how it pointed back to so much which had gone before. Appalled, she saw Urmila's face changing. Her daughter-in-law was still staring at the photographs but not in the same way. Her hand came under her chin in a familiar patient gesture. Her back was a little bowed, it seemed to be loaded, with the unsaid.

Now she would go away, wiping her forehead with her sari and asking a little abruptly what her mother-in-law wanted to have cooked the next day. Very likely Rafiq would not pay her an evening visit. It seemed to her, although she never allowed herself to think it clearly, that when Urmila was angry with her, he did not. Otherwise he would barge in without knocking, throw himself onto the bed, fling his feet unabashed into her lap, and say, 'Badi-bee! How is my badi-bee?' These visits were becoming rare, because there was hardly a day now when Urmila was not angry with her. Before she found the photographs her main occupation was to wonder whether Rafiq would come.

Now Urmila was pushing the album away and getting up to go. 'Amma,' she said, strained and edgy, 'is it all right if we cook tomato curry for you tomorrow?'

The old lady nodded meekly.

'And about your clock,' Urmila went on mercilessly, 'I reminded Rafiq again this morning but he forgot.'

She dared not feel resentment. She was nervous on the subject of the dock anyway, remembering the scene she had made about it. She tried not to make scenes, she tried. But she hadn’t been able to bear it when Urmila asked why it mattered to her if the clock was out of order. How does it make a difference to you, said the busy lecturer's voice, not
unkindly, what the time is?

What could she answer? It didn’t matter but it was the only thing that mattered. If she need never know the time she may as well be ... At eleven she gave herself a stick of toffee from the tin in the cupboard. At two she would lie down for her rest. At four she would get up, however hard it was. She would manage to wash her face and hands, try to smooth the creases in her sari, and sit in the rocking-chair to wait for her tea. If she never knew the time, what would she do all day?

Now Urmila was at the door. She said something which she always said only from the door.

‘We have to go out today, Amma. But of course the boy will be here. Keep him as long as you like. Bye-bye.’

The door clicked gently. She was left in the dusky room with the shapes of her cane stool, her newspapers, her bureau, looming around her in the dark. She no longer wanted to see the photographs. Rafiq would not poke his head in the door to say good-bye. She remained in her rocking-chair and took refuge in the rocking.

She rocked and rocked. The thought of having to stop, of having to get off the chair and to undress, to face life again, loomed before her like one of the dark shapes in her room. She stopped rocking only when she was too exhausted to push her feet against the floor any more. As the rocking became gentler, and stopped, she completely still. Slowly, she pushed herself off the chair, trying to pretend it was no movement at all. Then the unending business of getting herself to the bathroom, removing and cleaning her false teeth, dabbing at her face with water and a little soap. But it was something to do, it was a little protection, and when she was finally on her bed, the misery was naked all around her in the dark.

At two in the morning she was still restless. It was churning away, Urmila and the clock. Urmila came to her in the Collector’s house and said, here is your clock, Amma. You can’t do without it. Behind her Abdul waited respectfully. And her husband, her husband was smiling at her over the newspaper. She was in her four-poster bed, staring at the beams high on the ceiling. She wanted to see them properly. She propelled herself out of bed and moved jerkily to the light switch. As the dusty yellow light filled the room, she recoiled in terror. Familiar and yet unknown, the trunks, the dirty bureau, the pile of newspapers seemed like a nightmare. Where was her room? Was it 5.45? What was the time, for God’s sake, where was she and what was the time?

The photographs would solve everything. She moved blindly towards the albums. Her foot caught against the curved leg of her rocking-chair. She tottered, she was falling. Abdul came running. He was holding her. He was shouting, memsaab, memsaab. What has happened? O what pain. Was Rafiq being born? Please, she would die. Her husband was stroking her forehead. If she whimpered her husband would come. A knife was going through her, Abdul’s meat-knife. Then it ended.
SHASHI DESHPANDE

Where do we belong? The ‘Problem’ of English in India

‘Where do we belong?’ is not a question that necessarily troubles a writer greatly; it is enough to know that the writing comes out of oneself. But for a writer living in India and writing in English, the matter is not so simple. One has to recognize the fact that there are various problems and dilemmas entangled in this issue which need to be understood and explored. Let me begin with a personal declaration: I was born in this country, educated here, I have lived all my life here, I know no other life, my writing comes out of this life, out of a deep involvement with the society I am a part of. Why then am I different from a writer who writes, say, in Hindi? Obviously, it is the language that sets me apart from the Hindi writer.

Does this mean that a language can alienate a text from a culture? There seems to be a possibility that it does. Why else would a publisher’s blurb describe a novel in English as ‘displaying a profoundly Indian sensibility’? Or why else would a reviewer speak of my latest novel as having a ‘context that is comfortably Indian’?

The reason lies, not in the short and troubled history of Indian literature in English, but in the English language itself. The hostility English often seems to attract has less to do with the fact that it is the language of our ex-rulers and colonizers than that it has become the language of a certain class of Indians, that is, the privileged, the elite, the ambitious. More important in the context of literature, it is not the emotive language of most readers. Generally, English does not get under the skin as our own languages do. This is perhaps why English writing can never get the kind of response that writing in the indigenous languages does. English creates a space between the user and the reader/listener, it rules out that special kind of intimacy possible only with the language one has learnt as an infant. I see the very intimate connection between a language and a people in the response of indigenous language writers to their society, its issues and concerns. I rarely find English language writers taking up issues in this way. And when they do, I wonder if they have the same sense of frustration and futility I have when, deeply disturbed about something, I write about it and know that my polite little piece will reach out to only a few English-speaking readers—most of whom will be thinking the way I do, anyway.
This feeling is at its strongest when I write about women’s issues and know that the language keeps out that mass of women whom I really want to involve.

English differs from the other Indian languages in this, too, that it was not born upon this soil, it has not grown through having been used daily by all classes of people, it has not developed layers, like a pearl, through years of association with the history and culture of a particular people. A language, which does all this, encodes a whole culture, and there is, as the writer Shama Futehally says, ‘a shared suggestion between reader and writer’. Each detail does not have to be spelled out or explained. This does not happen in English, which is why footnotes, parentheses, glossaries, are often necessary. A related point is that those of us who write in English are, in a sense, translators, even if not conscious ones. I became aware of what this involves when I was translating a piece in Kannada from my father’s autobiography. A certain phrase halted me in my tracks. How should I translate it? Since a word is embedded in the culture of the people who speak it, it always carries a load of more than what it literally means and says. How do you transfer all this into a language that is alien to that culture? How do you get in all the connections and associations the word or phrase carries? I realized then that we have to resort to some of the negotiations between languages that translators do. Do we lose out in this process? What would I, as a creative writer, have done with the phrase in my own writing if it had been necessary? Would I have omitted it? Simplified it? Or would I have circumvented the problem by using some other word, losing thereby many of the nuances of the original? Either way, some kind of self-censorship would have been at work.

I realized then that certain concepts are untranslatable; and if translated into a language which has no room for them, they become exoticised. This exoticisation has been, and still is, part of the outcome of English writing in India. It is the method used by writers who attempt to ‘showcase’ our culture for the world. Differences then become oddities, people and their habits become ‘quaint’. It is as if, writing in English, writers cross a line and become outsiders, looking from out there at the people they are writing about. Writing in English also means using a language which most, or at least many, of one’s characters do not speak. An unpleasant consequence of this is that the non-English-speaking character becomes, through the use of an oddly spoken English, comical and is thus denied a certain dignity which would be hers/his but for the language.

However, since for many of us English is no more (and no less) than the medium through which we express ourselves, we cope with these problems in our own way, not letting them obtrude upon the purpose of our writing. What we want to say is far more important. To speak of my own experience, the language has never presented me with a major
hurdle and I rarely find myself struggling to ‘English’ things, since I am more concerned with the interior landscape. But then again, since my writing is so involved with women’s lives, the challenges are greater, because English has no place in most Indian women’s lives, in the details of their daily living.

In recent years, however, I have begun to realize that the biggest problem is that, often knowing no Indian language but English, we have no access to our indigenous literary tradition – not at first hand, anyway. For a writer this is a great loss. The handicap, as I see it, is not that we are distanced from our culture – for we are as much part of it as anyone writing in the other Indian languages, we are always writing out of this culture – but that we are distanced from the literature of our country. Not to be able to read the literature that is part of one’s life, history and culture is a major disadvantage. The time when it was possible to gain access to our literary heritage without reading is long past; kathas, puranas, kirtans, folk plays, story-telling – these are no longer part of an educated urban person’s life. The present generation of English-educated urban Indians is in fact often twice removed from their indigenous language, for the parents are generally English-educated also. Our myths and stories can reach them, if at all, only through English translations. It is like getting the Mahabharata exclusively through Peter Brook.

Despite all these problems, however, the truth remains that we are part of the same literary tradition as the indigenous language writers. It is possible to see this truth through negatives, by considering the various labels that are pinned upon English writers here. ‘Indo-English’ sounds to me as bizarre as, say, ‘Indo-Kannada’, or ‘Indo-Hindi’. ‘Commonwealth’ refers to something that has really no existence. ‘Post-colonial’ confers a significance on a specific and narrow period of our history, whereas I consider myself a product of so much more. ‘Third World’ is an insulting marginalization. The fact is that our writing, even if it happens to be in English, was not born simply out of contact with the colonial powers; it is part of the same stream all our literature belongs to, the source of which goes even beyond the first great invasion of this country.

Yet there is a snag. There is no single entity called Indian literature; we have many different literatures, each with its own language, identity, history and, most important since the constituting of the linguistic states, with its own regional parameters. Where does English belong in this structure? A research scholar recently asked me, how, as a regional writer, I differentiate myself from an Indian writer like, say, Anita Desai? The answer is clear: we are always both. Regional is not opposed to national, it is part of it. The two are not mutually exclusive. Anita Desai has herself raised this point in a paper she read at a conference in Sweden, the theme of which was ‘A Sense of Place’. Answering a reviewer’s criticism that her writing lacks regional identity, she admits
that, unlike R.K. Narayan or Mulk Raj Anand, she cannot lay claim to one particular region. Yet, she says, ‘I refuse to be dismissed from the company of “regional writers” on the basis of mere facts.’ I Writers can, in her view, create their own territory, mark out their own spaces – and often do. In effect, all our homelands are imaginary; we create or recreate them in our minds.

Nevertheless, English has to struggle to find a place for itself. Linguistic states, linguistic chauvinism, political patronage and political pressures are responsible for creating such a situation. A rigid drawing of boundaries, defensiveness and paranoia seem to have taken over so that each state admits only its ‘own’ language as having any right to exist within its boundaries. English is, of course, the main threat. It is a foreign language, the language of the elite. Moreover, political correctness seems to demand a certain stand, so that, even in the literary world, one hears that a literature should be in the language of the people; or that great writing can only be achieved in the mother tongue; or that there are two writing cultures – English and the regional languages – and the future of Indian literature lies in the latter. There are also writers who claim that they could have written in English but have refrained from doing so, making a virtue out of this. As if any part of writing is a matter of choice, and not, as Martin Amis rightly says, one of recognition. My question is: can the use of a particular language condemn a whole body of literature?

I believe that there is something such as the language of one’s creativity and, for some of us, this happens to be, for reasons beyond our control, English. Most writers in English are as rooted in their regional identities as those who write in other Indian languages. Jayanta Mahapatra is from Orissa, Kamala Das from Kerala, Githa Hariharan from Tamil Nadu, and I belong to Karnataka and Maharashtra – these identities are unmistakable; and it is out of these identities that we write. Writing is but a part of the amalgamation we call Indian literature. To say that English writing is better or worse than Indian literature is as absurd as saying that Bengali literature, for example, is better than Indian literature. It is also wrong to set a literature that is barely a century old against those that are centuries older.

That said, we have also to note that there is the tendency, as Aijaz Ahmed puts it, to ‘view the product of the English writing intelligentsia of the cosmopolitan cities as the central documents of India’s national literature’. Which makes English writing national and, all else, regional. Two things make this argument possible: one, in the international arena, English writing is visible and therefore recognized. And two, the English media in our country, being more powerful and with a much wider reach, successfully projects English writing as if it is the only writing we have. In recent times, English writing has received such an excess of attention that it has attained a spurious importance, quite disproportionate at times to its merit and volume. A recent review of
Rohinton Mistry’s ‘A Fine Balance’ in *Time* referred to the author as a contender for the title of the Great Indian Novelist. The other contenders were obviously those who also wrote in English. To the reviewer, Pico Iyer, who has no access to the literature of other Indian languages, this assumption seems inevitable. What is more disturbing is that even Indians in India make such sweeping and startling statements. Some time back, there was a full-page newspaper article on two forthcoming novels in English, one of which was described as ‘the greatest Indian novel of the century’! It made me wonder whether the writer of this article knew that there are other languages, other literatures in this country!

The truth is that, however exciting and lively the scene in English writing has become in the last decade or so, if we look at it dispassionately, we will find that most of the excitement is media-generated and exaggerated. The point is that the belief that English writing and the English writer are so wonderful exists only in English. I wonder what writers in the other Indian languages think of this; or if they care at all. It sometimes appears that at no time in our history are lines so strongly drawn between the different languages. Each language is so secure in its own idea of its own significance and worth that it smacks of smugness. In fact, a frog in a pond attitude informs all our literatures. The late Shri Umashankar Joshi called this malaise, ‘literary narcissism’; and added, ‘One has to look at one’s neighbours’ face in order to fathom one’s own deeply.’ Indeed one does!

To me, the most unfortunate thing that has happened in recent years is that English writing, which was poised for a take-off into adulthood, has suddenly started moving away from its moorings and is becoming a part of a body of international writing. The emergence of ‘third world writing’, and the enormous significance bestowed upon it by Western critics, has had a great impact on the writing in our country; almost, I would say, has changed its direction. The fact that this ‘third world writing’ is supposed to ‘give appropriate form to the national experience’ (Aijaz Ahmed) has meant that novels concerned with the nation, national issues and nationalism are those taken seriously. Since the international critic’s stamp of approval is reserved for such books, it has also meant the marginalization of all writing that does not lie within this format. As feminist critics have pointed out, women’s writing and women authors have generally been ignored as a result of this process of canon formation. Recently, I was asked to respond in a newspaper column to Rushdie’s contention that there are no significant women writers in India. I had to first ask myself the question, ‘What does Rushdie consider significant?’ The answer obviously was: the issues his books touch upon, the themes he takes up. If women do not address themselves directly to these issues, they become insignificant. Rushdie is, perhaps, not aware that women’s writing in India, in English and indigenous languages, is bursting with excitement and energy.
When we have theories which make some writing major and significant, it is inevitable that the rest sinks to being minor and insignificant. To categorize themes also as major and minor creates a kind of pressure on writers, specially younger writers, to take up 'major' issues. The unhappy prevalence of this was brought home when I read an article on the judging of a Commonwealth prize. One of judges admits that a certain (Australian) novel had an edge over its rivals because of its concern with the post-colonial issue of national identity and national history.

In India, this is a post-Rushdie phenomenon. It is inevitable that genius, originality and, above all, success should spawn imitators. Rushdie's non-fictional writing, his statements on his own works, the force of his arguments, the brilliance of his language – all have been as influential as his creative writing. Rushdie sets himself up as an Indian writer in opposition to Western critics, which makes his impact on us that much greater. But Rushdie's situation, his position and his genius are unique; to use his work as the touchstone for all writing in this country seems wrong. A recent article on the new authors of the Indian diaspora in the United States praises them for 'side-stepping the frayed clichés of Indo-Anglian writing'. Apart from wondering what these 'frayed clichés' are, I ask why English writing in India has to be set in the context of this diasporic writing? Is this an offshoot of Rushdie's theory that the central or defining figure of this century is the migrant? One could refute this with Rushdie's own statement that 'literature is self-validating' – it does not matter who writes it or from where.

One cannot say of Indians who live abroad and write about India that they are appropriating a history that is not their own. Nevertheless, some differences do exist. To Indians living in the West, India is, unavoidably, seen as 'India-as- opposed-to-the-West'. Rushdie has spoken of writers who as outsiders have advantages insiders do not have. But are not all writers insiders and outsiders at the same time? A (good) writer begins with an inside-the-experience involvement, yet steps outside of it at the moment of writing. Moreover, it is not only the writer living abroad who creates imaginary homelands, or 'Indias of the mind'. None of us can approximate to an absolute reality; we all create our own.

A major difference, as I see it, is that it is not so much the national identity that matters to those of us who live in India, but our regional, linguistic, religious, caste and gender identities. Our Indian identity becomes important only when we leave, only then do we need to produce our passports. Urban living, corruption (both within the individual and society), the breakdown of the old family system, women's struggle to improve their lives, the new relationship between the sexes, the rapid erosion of certain traditional values and beliefs – these are the concerns for most of us living here.

This is not, let's make it clear, a disparagement of writing from abroad.
The point I’m trying to make concerns criticism. How many of our critics are able to see without their colonial blinkers? We seem to have become incapable of making our own valuations or judgements. So overcome are we by the success of some novels, every writer who writes in the same manner immediately becomes a contender for the Booker Prize. To write a book in which, as Shama Futehally puts it, ‘language is exhibited without purpose’, is to be certain of getting a positive critical response. Our English newspapers wait with bated breath for the announcement of the Booker. Post-colonial, my foot! We seem to have got ourselves entangled in the Empire-strikes-back net and are unable to get out.

The main problem is the lack of powerful critical voices in our country, voices that speak with authority, knowledge, a sensitivity to our concerns, and are not overawed by the critical noises from the West. Jacqueline Rose has pointed out that

> What matters is not the boundary between living and dead writers, but the distinction between those writers who live through the responses they give rise to and those who – for want of such attention – fall into oblivion.

And it is the critics who keep writers alive or relegate them, through inattention, to oblivion. More important, it is the task of critics and scholars to separate the chaff from the grain, and to create, not a hierarchy of writing, but a meaningful mosaic. To maintain a healthy literature, writing and criticism must go hand in hand. And what do we have here? We have a plethora of magazines and Sunday papers that review books. But who are the reviewers? Most often, one of the newspaper staff. An English Literature degree is enough to qualify for the job. If the author is a woman, a female journalist fits the bill perfectly. Post-Shobha De, a flippant, wise-cracking style has been perfected and is used indiscriminately for all books. A book is read and reviewed wholly without any references, as if it stands entirely on its own, belonging nowhere. The fact that many reviewers (journalists) are often only English knowing urbanites makes for an unforgivable ignorance about some fundamentals. I have to agree with the poet Vijay Nambisan who says that the problem is one of cultural divide and the divide is not necessarily transnational.

The failure of criticism seems to be the biggest drawback facing English writing today. I see, in the number of writers commenting on this state of affairs, an increasing disquiet about the abysmal standards of criticism, and a sense of angry impotence. How does one respond to the kind of criticism we have to encounter? What do we do when ridicule and destructive judgement are all that the reviewers seem to be capable of? Ignorant and illiterate reviews have made me rethink my stand that authors should not review books. I now agree with the opinion that authors, in fact, make good critics, for this reason above all, that they know what the writing of a book means. Some of the best reviewers I
have read in India are poets and novelists – Keki Daruwala, Vijay Nambisan and Shama Futehally, to mention just three. Unfortunately, for various reasons, very few writers venture into reviewing. Therefore, what we have as a counterpoint to the hack reviewers are scholars and academics, who, it seems, only write for each other because their writing is often incomprehensible to the common reader. The result is a very wide gap between popular reviewing and serious criticism; there is nothing in the space between the two. The role of the critic in offering reasoned and balanced criticism has become even more vital today when money is playing an increasingly important role in literature. The market seems to be dictating trends, creating ‘great novels’ and celebrity writers – and possibly influencing writers as well? Is it the dictates of the market that is making poetry less visible on the literary scene today, that is making more poets turn to fiction? I am troubled by this fact, for it should not be forgotten that it was the poets who made waves in English writing in this country, the poets who found their own voice and evolved their own language first. Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Gauri Deshpande – these were the writers I felt a kinship with, not the novelists. But today the poets seem to be generally neglected by scholars, critics, students and publishers.

What we need at present are critics who can put our writing in the right context – which is here. It is certainly not wrong for a critic to use literature written and published outside the country as a reference point, but to make it the only reference point is ridiculous. To make all the writing in our own country (except that written in English) invisible is absurd. To think that we have a one-way traffic with literature existing outside of India (which for us still means only the West) fills me with despair. I realized how fruitful it is to link any writing to our own when, in the course of writing about a book published in the States, a volume of letters between mothers and daughters (Between Ourselves), I came across a Marathi magazine which carried a series of articles by eminent women on their relationships with their mothers or daughters. To put these two together, to read them along with Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘A Very Easy Death’ made it an exercise in understanding for me, and, I hope, for the readers of my article as well.

For such an exercise we need bilingual readers/writers. Unfortunately there are not many people who can grasp two literatures with ease. Writers of the earlier generation were educated in their own mother tongue, rooted in it; only later did they go on to learn English and were enormously enriched by it; both scholarship and creativity benefited. I know there are many Kannada writers who have this facility, though it seems to be rare among English writers or students today. To hear of a student working on a writer who boasts of two published novels, whose only claim to this attention is the fact that she/he is a high-profile writer, brings home to me the poverty of refusing to look beyond
English language writers.

Of course it is possible, and this is being done, to put English in the context of translated works. But there are problems. There are too few translated works; the choice of books for translation is often arbitrary, haphazard, individualistic and, at times, political. Translated books, because of their greater visibility, may attain a position they don’t really have in their rightful context. For there is the problem that scholars now seem to be addressing themselves to the politics of language so that the value of a book and its author increases when it is translated into English.

Bilingualism is perhaps the only answer. This is neither an unknown nor an uncommon phenomenon in our country. It is this which will help critics and scholars to place Indian writing in English where it belongs. It is in this direction that our writing needs to go, not the way of the Booker. Globalization does not mean an erasing of regional differences in the name of ‘national issues’. Critics need to understand this.

I believe that the strongest link is between a writer and a reader; that between the two there is a creative partnership. Critics can be a part of this relationship, they can enrich the response of the reader, give the reader a sniff at the bottle. To quote an Australian writer and critic, Marion Halligan:

Books generate reviews, articles, debates, more books: we are all questioning, arguing, disagreeing, learning. None of us works in a vacuum. Even the fiction writer, sitting in solitude to make narratives out of her imagination, indeed most particularly the fiction writer, is busy discussing who we are now. But unless the critics are listening and replying, the conversation will turn into a monologue and all the liveliness and stimulation of crosstalk will be lost.

We need this cross-talk between all the literatures in our country and we need critics who will make this possible – critics who are listening and replying. It is through a healthy and lively conversation between writer and reader that a literature grows. There is nothing wrong with being influenced by other writers, ideas and movements, whether Indian or not. Cross-fertilization is a very healthy thing. But if a literature born in this country, out of this society, remains distanced and estranged from its sister literatures, if there is no dialogue or exchange of ideas between them, then something is wrong somewhere. Our writing comes out of this society, the emotional bonds are here. If it remains linked to its source, it will grow in strength and vitality. If it tries to delink itself, if critics help it to do that, it will become an exotic hothouse plant. No amount of critical boosting will be able to keep it alive for too long. We are a country in which an audience of thousands will sit spellbound all night in a small town listening to a Kavi Sammelan (a poets’ meet); masses wait all year for the Sawai Gandharva music festival in Pune and give the artists their concentrated attention until the dawn; no celebrity status, national or international, can compensate for or equal this response. This is the umbilical cord through which life flows.
My concern is not so much about writers losing their way. I am convinced from my own experience that English does not distance us from our creative source, that a language cannot by itself create a space between a text and the culture it belongs to. I know that writing, being an intuitive, individualistic and often unconscious process, can withstand pressures to conform. And therefore, even if some writers follow market trends, there will be others who will continue to listen to the voice inside, to follow their own genius. It is critics who need to widen their understanding, to learn to contextualise correctly, to shake off the vestiges of colonialism that makes them ignore the distinctiveness of our writing. In other words, we need to see ourselves with our own eyes.

NOTES

The next time Gopu was late, I was ready. I had spent days cleaning up the house - throwing things away, repacking Mangala-Jameela’s fragile legacy of distant landscapes, other frayed mementos I considered valuable, putting everything in order. Just in case, I said to myself.

It is too late for me to try and leave my sentences unfinished, so I must try to clarify that. Am I, I asked myself over and over again, Mani’s teacher and guardian? Let me relegate the opportunities of son, husband, father, to their rightful place in the past; let them slip through my fingers into my dreams. But at the risk of repeating myself, (a risk that seems part of both old age and solitude), am I a teacher, a valuable member of the community?

Of course, something happened before that. I have to constantly be on the alert, edit, correct my memory which jumps from one event to the other like a restless pupil, if I am to make a coherent narrative. It was at this time, when I was opening and closing cupboards, disembowelling trunks, that Mani discovered one of my darkest memories. My hours with Mani were now my only respite from the clutter that surrounded me; from the hugger-mugger that precedes a long-deferred journey.

Mani, I asked him one morning as I pulled fresh sheets of paper out of my drawer: Do you remember the firefly I described to you? Can you draw him for me?

Mani nodded and took the paper eagerly from my hands. He set the sheet before him, looked into its blankness for a moment; sitting so still, so unblinking, that I held my breath. Then having unleashed something - a figure, a remembrance – he began to draw.

I looked over his shoulder and saw the unmistakable outline of a firefly taking shape. But this one had recognizably human features: a broad fleshy nose, ripe thick lips. He drew in a pair of magnificently luminous eyes. But they did not, to my surprise, glow with fire; they were limpid, glittering-wet. And the tail: Mani’s hand traced one precise arc of light, then shaded it in so it was diffused; visible only through a layer of fine mesh.

I reached for the drawing but he would not let me have it yet. He pushed my hand away gently as if to say, Wait, there’s more. The image does not live in empty space.
I held back. With quick strokes he sketched a well below the firefly, so that it seemed to be in danger of imminent descent. The well was deep; its walls solid and menacing. I could imagine a bitter secret settled in its hidden waters.

Mani paused for a critical survey of his handiwork. His hand returned to the drawing for a swift finishing touch. A great monstrous hand now grew out of the well’s mouth; its thick, airless fist held the firefly in its firm grasp. The creature’s lips, wings, arc of light, all were now hidden. Only the eyes were visible. As he looked at these eyes that had suddenly turned vacuous, I heard a strange cry from Mani, an eerie, high-pitched exorcism. At the same instant my hand flew to cover my mouth, which had stretched wide open in imitation.

Mani’s drawing flashed before me later that night as I confronted the last bit of evidence I was packing – a photograph of my father in his youth. Before I put it away into Mangala’s tin trunk, I looked at it once again.

I looked at his solid, homely nose, the wavy hair, the full, generous mouth; at every feature I had seen and loved a hundred times before.

But I also saw and heard something else, something new: his eyes, piercing and penetrating as in real life, glinted at me and taunted me like the crow. Behind this magnetic spectre grew a long line of crows, progressively decrepit and prostrate as my eye went further and further back. Then the chain of forefathers disappeared and I heard, for a horrible, deafening moment, a band of crows swooping down into a valley ringed with hills, their caws amplified into a mocking, resounding laughter.

From this distance, I can make a confession. It was not a simple case of either-or; a smile or a taunt. The photograph, stubbornly one-dimensional, could not fit in all of him at the same time.

As I looked, I saw his other face: firm, uncompromising as ever. I drew a tentative fingertip across the lips that had rarely remained shut; that even now I expected would suddenly strike terror in my heart with its quick, harsh words. The lush eyebrows moved up a fraction as my finger re-drew their mocking shape. And below them were those magnetic eyes which I had as a child thought impossible to soften; which I had thought incapable of tears.

As I gazed at the eagle eyes, always watchful, never missing a thing, I felt my own tenderness begin to flow. The eagle eyes blurred, misted over; when it cleared I saw that his face had settled into a bewildered sadness. This face was vulnerable to old age, no longer a stranger to doubt; no longer invincible. It seemed to echo my weak-hearted question: Am I redundant? with an equally hesitant query – Was it all futile?

I was now travelling ahead with him to the end, well past the confident days of irrepressible quotations, explanations, lectures. I heard him in the front porch again, the last time I saw him alive.
He sat, as of old, flanked by the crumbling pillars, Ganesan and Ganapati. But his bare shoulders, once so firm and fleshy, sagged; bone and wrinkle clearly evident. Now and then, his lifelong posture gave way in an unguarded moment; his back stooped, unwilling to bear its burden. I saw him rally briefly – my sudden visit to Nageswaram must have called to mind more garrulous days – and he looked around, casting about for an opening.

Ganapati and Ganesan loyally prompted him. You were saying, saar, croaked Ganapati out of the barrel of his flesh. Something about ayurveda’s sister-science?

Ah, yes, said my father, his face brightening for a moment. I am going to spend the rest of my life studying the healing art of unani – very very closely. My old friend, the hakim, tells me unani not only helps a person overcome present disturbances, but also gives him the power to resist new, further disturbances. There is room in ayurveda – and at the word my father suddenly remembered one of the numerous blows recently received.

Don’t talk to me about ayurveda, he snapped at Ganapati. Didn’t I tell you about the money-spinning ayurvedic pills flooding the market? Ayurvedic market – he said once again as if he couldn’t believe such a conjunction of words possible. Ayurveda! These fools wouldn’t be able to tell apart an ayur or a veda from their arses.

Ganapati shrugged covertly at Ganesan as if to signal: Your turn now. Ganesan frowned in search of a more suitable topic of discourse. Ah, he then began, his forehead cleared briefly of its perpetual furrows: There’s a meeting next week. The brahmin association of Nageswaram is meeting to plan its course of action.

My father remained bitterly silent, unwilling to rise to the bait. He continued to chew his thick lower lip, playing deaf.

I was wondering, doctor, said Ganesan, a little louder this time. I got a circular to say that we should all go. With all these other people all over the place, you know (he coughed delicately), we brahmins must keep together. Otherwise what’s the use of independence?

My father stirred restlessly. I saw the shadow of a freshly fought struggle flit briefly across his face. Then he spat out the shortest, most precise diagnosis he ever made in his life.

Where is our new republic? he demanded. We live in a divided house and you talk of a bigger, bloodier share. Go if you want – go spread some more of the poison that is choking all of us.

He laid a threatening arm on Ganesan’s bony shoulder. But his voice was husky when he spoke again: Who murdered Gandhi? Who is murdering his child?

As these questions echoed in my head, their passionately interrogative quality diluted in my memory and rendered more plaintive, I was looking again into the deep well behind the old house in Nageswaram. I saw, not
my father’s body that they fished out of the well before I got the telegram in Elipettai, but a dark deposit at the very bottom. Between this murky substance and me the distance seemed to shrink; only a few inches of water remained.

It didn’t happen exactly that way either. Memories, particularly moments of love and pain, come back again and again, but in fragments; from a subtly different vantage point each time. All I can attempt, as I have said before, is the semblance of a whole; a testimony of sorts.

The memory of that bewilderment which seeped into the familiar, dearly-loved features; that worked so fast that it seemed to conquer the face overnight, reduce its varied, rich range of expressions to one unchanging question mark: this is the photograph that placed itself firmly before me those last days in Elipettai, as I sorted out, discarded, packed.

I lie now in a whitewashed room, the pale bare walls reflecting the relentless glare of sunlight. There are no hiding places here; no cracks, crevices, dark shadows, shady peepal by the window. No ghost has easy entry into this functional sick room for an elderly man, a quiet patient entirely preoccupied with his own thoughts.

But this new room - which I did not seek, which was not part of my plan - is also a blessing. When the sea breeze sets in late in the afternoon, my mind is alert again. The body given over to the care of others is no longer the sole figure onstage; no longer audible. In this period of remission, I am free to continue with my narrative. I can confess to ragged edges, loose ends, the inability to cloak the incomplete self. I can admit to a lifelong greed for something vital: love, meaning, a few other scarce commodities. Then, in my unexpected exile, rooms and houses fall into place; and ghosts. They grow in visibility till their radiance assures me that my malady is not hopeless or permanent.

But let me get back to the time I was speaking of; the point when I began to feel the need to stretch the canvas I shared with Mani. His face now accommodated more than one look. In addition to his quiet but absorbed response to my stories, he had allowed himself one more role - a more active one, which engaged him in his own creation of myth and symbol on paper. It was time to prepare Mani for a wider world than my room.

So in the course of our more advanced lessons the cast increased; we travelled beyond individual frailties, beyond the dangers of PG and Elipettai. With my father behind us and Gopu before, we were on our way to a forest that we had heard was once very beautiful; a kind of show-piece of the ancient world. But by the time we got there, by the time we got an aerial view so to speak, it was definitely a bruised, raggedy landscape; so that it was with deep sadness (but without my father’s rage or bitterness, I hope), that I let Mani hear about Scorpion and his kind; about the sting in the scorpion’s tail.
THE STING IN THE SCORPION’S TAIL

We are looking, Grey Mouse told Blue Bottle, at a forest that was shaped like a heart. Quite naturally it was called Heart Forest. Not only because of obvious reasons of shape, but also because it needed, like any live heart, all kinds of veins, arteries, capillaries, for the entire contraption to work.

(Grey paused, distracted by this digression that brought before him images of blood; bleeding hearts, broken hearts. Luckily he remembered Blue Bottle was waiting; and that the lesson was for his benefit.)

Grey said to Blue bottle: Anyway – we are looking at Heart Forest on a very special day; actually night; in fact close to midnight. At the stroke of midnight, there was one long moment of utter stillness. Then as on a signal, a flock of large, chalky birds took off, a little clumsy from lack of exercise, into the darkness above. They circled the forest sky, once, twice, in a grim silence broken only by the flapping of their wings. Their sharp white beaks were shut because they held on firmly to numerous little souvenirs. The creatures below, straining their eyes to see the white-beaked ones go, saw the glitter on a beak or two; a last glimpse of a stolen jewel.

The creatures heard the beating of wings above and their hearts were full. No one said a word yet. They were afraid that if they did, they might wake up: they had dreamt of this moment for so long. Then as the flapping sound grew fainter and they could see the night sky again, the natives of Heart Forest came to life. They looked at each other and at the large, wild, ravaged forest around them. The white-beaked ones had gone at last; now where were they to begin?

They trooped to a huge banyan tree in the centre of the forest, and gathered round the sparkle of light on one of its myriad hanging roots. Aware of a million eager eyes on him, the sparkle of light – Old Glow-Worm – joined them on the ground beneath the tree. In the depths of the night, in the heart of Heart Forest, thousands and thousands of insects of all sizes and shapes surrounded Old Glow-Worm, pressing closer to him in their eagerness.

Come closer, he urged, as everyone pushed and jostled in a friendly, sweaty way, saying, Make room, make room!

What next, Old Glow? a few of the grandfather-insects shouted.

Shhh, said others.

Glow waited till they were silent. Meanwhile they looked at him, at the amazing number of finely-cut mirrors that glistened on his body. The Heart Foresters had in fact given Glow an appropriate title: Diamond. The little ones had affectionately simplified this to Old Man Mirror.

Old Man Mirror shone in the dark like a skilfully cut diamond; he was made up of a hundred intricate facets. Each of these mirror-bits threw
back a different kind of reflection, so that it was often difficult to understand Diamond; to see him whole; to sum him up in a few words.

First thing, said Diamond, breaking the silence with his soft and whispery but surprisingly effective voice. Every one of us is entitled to a light of his own.

Everyone! exclaimed a fat firefly, unable to control himself. Even Dung Beetle?

Yes, said Diamond firmly.

But where were they to get the lights? It seemed to them that the white-beaked ones had been around forever. And they had always been vigilant, ready to swoop down from their heights – so that over the years, the Heart Foresters had got used to crawling around in the dark, safe undergrowth.

Diamond knew words were not enough at this point. So in reply to this question, he went up to a winged creature in the front row. He gently slipped off the tight, striped band that bound his back. He stroked the raw, sore flesh that had been deprived of air for so long. Like magic, or a prophecy come true at last, the flesh slowly began to heal; acquire a dull glow.

The word spread as rapidly as a forest fire. Stripping, stroking, healing, glowing: this went on in all parts of the forest. Everywhere the insects helped each other shed their old striped uniforms; hope filled the hearts of the humblest of worms.

The forest was no longer dark. So soon after the white-beaked ones had taken their belated, graceless leave, the night sparkled with reborn glows of a thousand colours and shades. The glow grew in different parts of different insects – the back, the front; the eyes, the wings.

Diamond and his helpers did not rest for a moment. Diamond kept a special watch on the dung beetles and earthworms. He took his little band of silkworms with him wherever he went. They tried out the ideas they saw in his reflections, even if a few seemed absurd. They wove fine and intricate sheets of silk as they recorded the innumerable types of insects in the forest; and the incredible range of glows and colours they seemed to produce.

Old Firefly sat on the banyan tree (now illuminated all along its airy roots). He looked around and sighed with deep content.

Ahh, he said to his old cronies perched near him, look at our beautiful forest! We have begun to rebuild it. It will grow again – every inch of it.

And indeed it was a wonderful sight.

Heart Forest had always been well-known for its living, breathing, growing ocean of heads and wings. (This was something the white-beaked ones had particularly despised and feared.) But tonight Heart Forest seemed to have outdone itself. From the banyan tree as far as the eye could see, the night was ablaze with a rich, multitudinous range of colours. The whole spectacular cast was there: horseflies, bees, wasps,
hornets, earthworms, silkworms, beetles, fireflies, ladybugs, spiders, earwigs, moths, ants, termites, on and on. And as the insects reclaimed the forest, the colours mingled so that new shades were being born under their very eyes; colours without a name, colours alive and growing. And Heart Forest did not do all this in its earlier cowed silence, but in a friendly cacophony of chirping and buzzing, and an incessant whirring of tongues.

Diamond paused for a minute in the midst of his long hours of travel. His eyes filled with tears of joy, and sorrow as well. He saw, side by side with the hope and light, the stretches of dried-up forest, arid deserts; burnt clearings, chopped logs lying like corpses. He turned away wearily to the other side of the forest, towards its life-giving river. Diamond stiffened. He saw what he had feared: Scorpion and his brood, fattened years by the white-beaked ones, had crawled out of their holes into the open.

Come, said Diamond to his travelling party of silkworms, dung beetles and earthworms. Our task is not yet done.

A long, winding procession of pin-point lights flowed in a glittering ribbon across the forest night. It lit up every foot of earth on the way; it protected the humblest bug. As the ribbon moved forward, little insects with newly acquired glows silently fell into place at its tail end.

But when they got to the river, they saw that they were just a little too late. Scorpion had been working – even in his exile underground. His brood, mere eggs earlier, had hatched and been fed; and they had grown their share of poisonous stings.

Scorpion and his kind waved their evil tails and stung anyone who didn’t appreciate the taste of their poison. They were so depraved that they even stung their own kind sometimes; so anxious were they to keep in practice.

Diamond and his followers spread themselves on the two sides of the river bank, two protective semi-circles. They saw the river choked with wings, stings, mutilated meat. The water no longer flowed; it was a stagnant pool of rust-coloured blood; a big spreading stain of rotting bodies.

They limped back to the banyan. Rebuilding the forest was going to be even more difficult than they had thought, especially with Scorpion on the loose. (When Old Firefly saw the number of descendants Scorpion had sired, he spluttered with rage; his glow grew weaker as did his heart; he knew there was very little left to live for.)

But Diamond did not give up. Tears poured down his face; he saw bleeding and broken hearts wherever he looked, but there was no question of giving up. He called them all round the banyan again. We will go on, he told them. We will go on, but this time we will convert the Scorpion followers first.

These scorpion followers – what were they like? Not all of them could
sting and kill like their masters. But still it was impossible to live with
them; or convert them. To begin with, they were deaf. The rumour was
that Scorpion poured a little of his poison into their ears once a month,
which blocked up their ears and twisted their faces with the bitterness of
hatred. And they began their training young: the baby scorpions were
protected under the sting till they were full-grown, so that their earliest
view of the world, their mother’s milk, was clouded with poison.

What did Scorpion and his followers want? They claimed the
astonishing variety of insects in Heart Forest was unnatural; that the
different colours of their new glow hurt their eyes; that the forest had
lived in perpetual darkness in its golden age a million years ago.

What do you suggest then, asked Diamond, gentle as ever. (Some,
especially the young wasps, said: Maddeningly gentle.)

The river is a natural divider, hissed Scorpion. Wings separate, worms
separate. Front-glows there, back-glows here. And side-glows and nose-
glows and toe-glows – well, we’ll think of some place for them ... (And
the poison churned in him with excitement, thinking of the chaos to
follow – the stings and the corpses and the river of blood.)

The silkworms and wasps chased Scorpion and his kind back to their
hiding holes, but everyone knew this was only a brief remission; Scorpion
was now a fact of life.

But what they did not know was what would happen the next night.
The next night, a back-glow, driven mad by an extra-large dose of
scorpion-poison, threw a large rock right at the heart of Diamond.

They watched, horrified, as a thousand glittering shards of mirror fell
off the banyan tree and flew in different directions to all the corners of
the forest. (From then on, Diamond was rarely seen whole; always as one
incomplete reflection.)

Diamond was gone; only the broken pieces of mirror remained. The
river no longer flowed since it was choked again. Soon it congealed – as if
it could never forget that it had been used to divide the forest.

So, said Grey to Blue Bottle, it is impossible to forget any part of Heart
Forest; any part of its sufferings; or be a citizen of one strip, this side of
the river or that.

And that, continued Grey, is only part of the lesson. The real lesson is
a danger that is now always there, almost as much of a fixture as the
crow. (Grey wiped an eye surreptitiously with his paw.) Blue, he
concluded gently, while we evade, trick and outmanoeuvre the likes of
Spider, Bandicoot and Crow, we should not forget Heart Forest’s special
inheritance of enemies: the descendants of Scorpion and his kind.
Krishna Bose

DONATION

TRANSLATED FROM BENGALI BY SANJUKTA DASGUPTA

Everyone gave her something at last.
Some gave shiny, tinkling silver coins.
Someone gave an expensive urbane soap
Some, due to her height, proposed buying
Her a colourful frock.

That girl, smooth skinned, dark, intense adolescent
Came from the Santhal locality, alone,
To act as entertaining puppet?
You, colourful tourist youth
For so called holidaying, you came to the forest.
Flirting and sleeping with you
She learnt at a tender age,
She learnt to trade young flesh for salt and rice
And return home, home a broken thatch
And mud walls, a strange shelter.

Everyone of you gave her something at last
Only books, slate, pencil and
An alphabet text had you bought for her –

KRISHNA BOSE has been writing poetry for over two decades and has published seven collections of poems. A candid and committed supporter of the rights of women, Krishna Bose not only laments women’s marginalization in a patriarchal society but suggests ways in which women might emancipate and empower themselves. Blending myth and contemporary concerns, her poetry has experimented successfully with various forms and techniques, including the prose poem. Krishna Bose teaches Bengali literature in Kanchrapara College, West Bengal. She lives in Calcutta with her husband and daughter.
HYMN TO THE GODDESS

From the beauty parlour emerged the attractive fertile idol, having erased the rural sindoor from her hair-parting. Some crack jokes, some praise you, all hover around you like clever songs applauding your elusive beauty, evil proposals are poured into the roots of your intense ear. Remembering the ancient image some cry uncontrollably; observing all this from far and near, from within and without, I feel like bursting out in laughter. Your ancient image in sankha and sindoor is not your true image; today’s sensational, modern, sleeveless presence is not your real nature; sometimes a slave since birth or sometimes a desirable doll, who has made you? No great artist named God, such a great artist can never perform such mean jobs. Man has made you, man, man ... whose height is never more than a little over six feet at the most. Once, now, for the final time, construct your clay image, ignite the lamp of talent from within yourself, look at your ten-armed beauty, Asur-annihilator. Look, at your clay feet lies the benumbed, masculine earth, drunken with the alcoholic haze of dominance. Who spat on you, who praised you, do you care for these any more? Grow out of the small, dull space dictated by others, hold ten weapons in ten arms, stand firmly with your two feet on lion power, let us look at you, Woman.

Goddess – the ten armed image of the Goddess Durga poised on the back of a lion, killing Asur, the evil power, with a trident.

Sindoor – vermillion powder applied on hair parting by married Hindu women.

Sanka – bangles made of conch shell customarily worn by married Hindu women.

This essay, a revised version of an address presented to the Asian Literature in Translation Conference at Birmingham in May 1997, is in two parts. The first part, borrowing extensively from P. Lal, explores ‘transcreation’ as a mode of translation; the second surveys the growing importance of translation – in particular, translating from Indian languages into English – in Indian publishing.

The word ‘transcreation’ does not appear in the *Longman Modern English Dictionary* nor in the much larger *Living Webster Encyclopaedia Dictionary*. Yet the word has often been used in a particular context, though not perhaps with precise meaning, by Indian producers and consumers of English for at least the last fifty years. Recognition of its usage first appeared in the fifth edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary* (1996), in the supplement it carries of over one thousand ‘English words that are used differently in the Indian context’. ‘Transcreation’ figures in this list though it does not in the main body of the dictionary, and it is explained as an uncountable noun standing for ‘creative translation seen as producing a new version of the original work’. While the word has not yet found wide currency as a substitute for ‘translation’, one Indian at least, in his several roles as poet, publisher, teacher and translator, has for many years been using ‘transcreation’ in the sense that has now been authorized by the *Advanced Learners’ Dictionary*.

This man is Purushottam Lal, more commonly known as P. Lal of the Writers Workshop of Calcutta, a one-man publishing venture which, as its founder, he has directed and sustained since 1958. Lal’s own practice as a translator, and the support he has given as a publisher to the efforts of others, has made available in English an unparalleled range of poetry and fiction from various Indian languages drawn from across several centuries. As of December 1996, over two hundred such titles have been published from Calcutta by the Writers Workshop. Among them is A.K. Ramanujan’s translation, *Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1965); and his transcreation with M.G. Krishnamurthi, *Some Kannada Poems* (1967).

At least 22 titles in English translation can be attributed to Lal himself. They include, from Sanskrit, *The Golden Womb of the Sun* (1965), a
collection of Rig-vedic hymns, and *The Farce of the Drunken Monk* (new edition, 1996), a play by Mahendravarman; *The Dhammapada* (1967) from Pali; two volumes of poetry from Bangla; five works of fiction from Hindi, three of them drawn from Munshi Premchand; *The Japji* (1967) from Panjabi; *Ghalib's Love Poems* (1971) from Urdu. Together with this very considerable output, P. Lal has been rendering Vedavyasa's *Mahabharata* into English, shloka by shloka, for many years. This grand project consists of slim fascicules, each with its own introduction and notes. About 160 of them have appeared so far.

I unload these bibliographical details not just to impress readers with the stature of P. Lal but also to indicate the extent of his achievements in this field. Alongside his transcreational practice, he has also written about the process of translation itself. These writings, now available in *Transcreation* (1997), consist of prefaces, introductions and essays written over the period 1964 to 1983. We can take a look at some of these items to see whether P. Lal has given us any theory or outline of a tradition of Indo-English translation (that is, from Indian languages into English).

Arranged in chronological order of publication, and occasionally revised, these essays give us an evolving but not always coherent idea of transcreating. The earliest item, 'On Transcreating "Shakuntala"', originally appeared in *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation* (1964), and includes an introduction to Sanskrit drama in general, as well as a preface to each of the six Sanskrit plays. It is in this essay also that Lal declares his position clearly:

Here begins the transcreator's first headache. Translation is often easy, *traduttore traduttori* notwithstanding, and literal translation absurdly so; but perplexing problems arise when a perfectly orderly set of conventions and values of one way of life has to be made perfectly orderly and comprehensible to readers accustomed to values often slightly, and sometimes totally, different. (p. 34)

It is this shifting of ground, this crossing over from one culture to another in time as well as in space, which establishes Lal's preference for transcreation over translation. After citing several examples from Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* of shifts between emphasis and situation, mood and morality, melodrama and representation, he comments: 'Faced by such a variety of material, the translator must edit, reconcile and transmute; his job in many ways becomes largely a matter of transcreation' (p. 37).

The last and also shortest piece in the book is the preface to the collection *Sanskrit Love Lyrics*, first published in 1966. The material is drawn from an eleventh century anthology, the *Subhashita-ratnakosha* compiled by one Vidyakara. Somewhat elusively P. Lal states, 'I have called my versions *translations* rather than *transcreations*', but qualifies the statement with 'I have departed (from the original) when I felt the tone demanded transcreation' (pp. 99-100). Within the brief span of this
preface he has not dwelt upon the difference, if any, between these two modes but is obviously treading some middle ground between them. In general, transcreation involves some departure from the original, as he indicates in his preface to his translation of the _Japji_ (1970).

In 1970, at a seminar on Australian and Indian Literature in Delhi organized by the Indian Council for cultural relations, P. Lal presented a paper entitled ‘Search for Values in Literature’ which reappears here as ‘Myth, Literature and Translation’. This essay deals almost entirely with the translation of ancient Indian literary texts into English, and we may hazard the thought that it is from his experience of grappling with such material that Lal came to prefer ‘transcreation’ as a more appropriate term for the process. He reminds us that ‘translators, sometimes consciously and often unconsciously, mould their versions to the aesthetic and moral taste of their age’ (p. 16), and suggests that therein lies the ‘creativity’ of the transcreator.

However, Lal also cautions us about the perils of such ‘moulding’ with examples drawn from Edward Fitzgerald and Romesh Chandra Dutt. Fitzgerald (1809-93) became famous for his version of the _Rubaiyat_ of Omar Khayyam, drawn from Persian sources.

Here with loaf of Bread beneath the Bough
A flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
And Wilderness is Paradise now.

In that famous quatrain (as quoted by Lal), Fitzgerald has replaced Omar’s comely youth with, in Lal’s description, ‘a shy girl in Somarkand silk singing to a languidly reclining lover’. In doing so, Fitzgerald acceded to the mores of Victorian England, unlikely to have tolerated the presence of a young boy in such circumstances.

The other example is less known but more weighty. R.C. Dutt (1848-1909) had abridged and retold the _Mahabharata_ story in iambic hexameter for publication from England in an Everyman Library edition in 1897. While re-presenting the most sensational scene of Sabha-parva, Dutt has wicked and lustful Duryodhan invite proud and peerless Draupadi to sit upon his ‘knee’. The original uses the word _uru_, which can only mean thigh, but, with late nineteenth-century English-language readers in mind (and not necessarily only in England), Dutt has made the change. P. Lal comments: ‘It is amusing to picture the discomfort of any male if a lady of Draupadi’s ample proportions sat upon his knee’ (pp. 17-18).

So far P. Lal has been applying the term ‘transcreation’ to a more relaxed and free-wheeling process than translation, and mainly in the context of translating older texts. Therefore he takes us by surprise when, having translated Rabindranath Tagore’s posthumous volume of poems, _Sesh-lekha_ (Last Poems), he proclaims:

A word about these ‘transcreations’. They are faithful to an extreme. The line-
structures, stanza-patterns and, wherever possible, even the inversions have been retained. No attempt has been made to interpret. (p. 87)

Although the term ‘transcreation’ has been furnished here with inverted commas, it is not distinguished from translation. Similarly interchangeable is Lal’s use of these terms in what he wrote after translating some stories by another modern master, Munshi Premchand:

> It pleases us to think that these translations, a labour of love and loving-care, are as close to the original as one can possibly get ... If for no other reason, these new versions should interest anyone involved in the art and craft of translation (and transcreation) simply because no efforts were spared ... to produce an exact and elegant English rendering of Premchand. (p. 71)

Opinions may differ on the elegance of this rendering, but exactness can be tested by whoever can read the original.

For the last but not final clue – it was offered fourteen years ago – to the mystery or muddle, we may look at those two companion volumes *The Mahabharata of Vyasa* (1980) and *The Ramayana of Valmiki* (1983), published by Vikas Publishing House of New Delhi. The cover of both volumes announces in gilded letters, ‘Condensed from the Sanskrit and Transcreated into English by P. Lal’. With this, yet another dimension – that of condensation – has crept into the concept of ‘transcreation’ as upheld by P. Lal. Parts of the introductions he wrote for these two books have been reproduced in *Transcreation*. An important element is added to the concept when he says, ‘with very rare exceptions, one is always translating only for one’s contemporaries. Creative writing may be done for a hundred years hence; not translation’ (p. 47). Our case for transcreation – particularly in the Indo-English field – as an Indian mode of translation must rest there for the time being.

Of the many, often contrary, roles played by translation in India, let us take note of three. First, the role of Sanskrit. In post-colonial terminology, Sanskrit would probably be regarded as a ‘master language’, comparable to the role English assumed in the nineteenth century, with translators into English seen as interventionists assuming power over Indian language writers. Pre-colonial India however recognized no such relationship and, rather than master or mistress, Sanskrit’s role was that of a mother giving birth to many literary works in other Indian languages. That is, the general bent of translation was from Sanskrit rather than into Sanskrit, and the translators or transcreators assumed no political superiority over the original authors.

Second, the role of Persian. Again, in currently fashionable terms, it was the ruler’s language, an empowering medium. But it never became the ruling language. Indeed, long before Persian became the court language of Mughal India, it had served as the language of transmission and dispersal of Indian material abroad. In Mughal India, during the
reign of Akbar, the historian Badauni laboured for four years over rendering the Ramayana into Persian, while Prince Dara Shukoh, eldest son of Shah Jahan, commissioned the translation of the Upanishads and other Sanskrit texts into Persian. Persian ceased to be an official language of India in 1837, yet, as asserted by Ashok Vajpeyi, about two thousand books in Persian were produced in India during the nineteenth century – a larger number than the books produced in Persia in the same century. Many of these Indian works were translations into Persian of Indian classics.

Finally, the role of English, especially in the context of Indian literature translated into English. When the English language came to India and, from the eighteenth century onwards, gave clear indications of wanting to stay on, one obvious signal was through acts of translation. Starting with Sir William Jones’s translation of Sacoontala, published in 1789 from Calcutta, nearly all major literary works in Sanskrit and Old Tamil, Pali and the Prakits, have been translated into English. The late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century translations were done mostly by British scholars of Indology, a few by Americans; from the late nineteenth century onwards, Indians joined the enterprise in growing numbers. Also growing in numbers were translations of literary texts from recent times, coming right down to contemporary authors. As a result, today we have a sizeable quantity of Indian literature of every age in English translation, waiting to be read and written about, reviewed and reworked, studied and taught.

During these past fifty years, Indian literature in English translation has been published under various premises. Let us divide them broadly, for convenience, into public undertakings and private enterprise. Among public undertakings, the two largest publication programmes are run by the Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters) and the National Book Trust, both fully funded by the Government of India and with headquarters in Delhi.

The Sahitya Akademi was established in 1954. Commissioning translations and getting these published has been one of its functions from the outset. It began by translating major texts of Indian literature into other Indian languages. To this was added the translation of the classics of world literature into Indian languages. Considering that the Akademi now recognizes as many as 22 languages as fit vehicles of Indian literature, it has set itself an impossible task. If, to begin with, only 22 titles were selected for translation, each would have to be translated into 21 other languages, thus producing 462 translated books. So far as I know, this has never happened with any single title.

More immediately relevant is the fact that English is a language not only recognized by the Akademi but also used by it extensively. For example, one of its periodicals, known outside the country as well as inside, is Indian Literature. It is in English and every issue carries poetry
and fiction, sometimes criticism, translated from Indian languages into English. The book-length translation programme was reserved at first for the more unambiguously Indian languages, but English found a place here from the early 1960s onwards. Among the earliest translations into English of modern Indian writing were The Puppet's Tale (1968) from Bangla by Manik Bandopadhyay and Wild Bapu of Garambi (1968) from Marathi by Shridhar Pendse. Other English translations have followed, the latest being the novel Gora by Rabindranath Tagore.

The other state-owned organization, the National Book Trust, was set up in 1957 mainly for the purpose of promoting book consciousness in the country. This may seem an odd objective for a largely illiterate country. But our population numbers being what they are, even low literacy can demand a high volume of book production, distribution and sales. Besides organizing various book-related activities, the Trust runs at least ten different publishing programmes. One of them, inaugurated in 1970, is called 'Aadan-Pradaan' (which literally means give-and-take). In it, a modern Indian literary work, generally of fiction, is selected for translation into eleven other Indian languages. As a result it is possible now to read Premchand in Kannada, Basheer in Asamiya, Pannalal Patel in Bangla, and so on. And it need not be emphasized that competent translation from one Indian language into another can make one forget that one is reading a translated text.

For many years, English was kept out of the Aadan-Pradaan programme, though the Trust published books in this language in their other programmes. Very recently it was decided to include English, perhaps in recognition of the fact that, even inside India, there is a growing number of those who read English but not any Indian language. Some English translations have been commissioned but have not yet emerged in print.

The first book to be printed in India appeared in 1554, its author was St. Francis Xavier, its language Portuguese, and the site of this event Goa. Regular printing of books in an Indian language (in this case Bangla) did not begin until 1800 when three Christian missionaries of the Baptist Mission started a printing press at Serampore near Calcutta. Their intention was to print translations of the Bible in the different languages of India. This enterprise introduced a literary mode that was to affect every aspect of our cultural life thereafter. As Sisirkumar Das has confirmed: 'The most important event that revolutionized literary production by changing the relationship between the author and the audience and the nature of the transmission of texts was the advent of the printing press.'

We need not go into details of that revolution here but we may note that India had to wait for nearly another one hundred years before the publishing of books, any books, became a matter of commercial enterprise. Within the even more limited realm of the publication of
Indian literature in English translation (what I have called Indo-English literature elsewhere), quite often it was the author or the translator who financed the publication—later, the printer or the bookseller who obliged. This situation would largely prevail until the middle of the twentieth century.

Early in this century, an unexpected incentive to translate one’s own work into English (or nudge one’s friends to do so) arose out of the Nobel Prize for Literature of 1913. That year this award was given to a Bengali poet who had earlier published a collection of poems in Bangla entitled *Gitanjali* and subsequently used the same title for a quite different collection of his poems which he had translated into English.

By the time Indo-English publishing turned commercial, it was established that single and complete novels in translation sold better than collections of verse or shorter fiction. While novels have topped the list, poems and short stories have more often than not appeared in anthologies.

Among single and complete novels, the earliest to be translated were Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Durgeshnandini: Or, the Chieftain’s Daughter*, translated by Charuchandra Mukherjee (Calcutta, 1880) and *Kapalkundala: A Tale of Bengali Life*, translated by A.A.D. Davies (London, 1885); O. Chandu Menon’s *Indulekha*, translated by W. Dumergue (Madras, 1890); Romesh Chandra Dutta’s *Shivaji: Or, the Morning of Marhatta Life*, translated by K.M. Jhaveri (Ahmedabad, 1899). Among the most recent are Rajendra Yadav’s *Strangers on the Roof* from Hindi (Penguin India, 1994); U.R. Anantha Murthy’s *Bharatipura* from Kannada (Macmillan India, 1996); Quratullain Haidar’s *Aag ka Dariya* from Urdu (forthcoming, Kali for Women).

Finally, a word in praise of those brave publishers who have ventured to put good money into better Indian literature in best English translation. Practically every English-language publisher in India, from Asia Publishing House of old to Roli Books today, has published one or two or ten such titles. But this they have done, and still do, as a minor stream or creek of their main-wave publishing. It is only during the last twenty years that projects large and small have been planned and implemented to put into print English translation of Indian writing on a scale and of a quality not seen before.

The most remarkable of such projects is the one which produced the two-volume anthology, *Women Writing in India* (1991 and 1993), compiled and edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. No Indian publisher quite gauged the importance of this project, and thus failed to make a deal while it was in progress and the manuscripts were in the making. Much to the credit of the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, it published the work, and only off the rebound has OUP India produced an Indian edition from Delhi. Starting off on their own, the two intrepid editors managed to involve about 150 persons all over India in
the task of finding out about likely texts, locating them, getting them translated into English, providing biographical information about the authors, and so on. Nearly all such work was done on a goodwill basis—which is not the least remarkable factor contributing to the success of the project. Those who may plan similar projects would do well to note some observations about translation made by the editors in their preface:

We have tried ... in the translations (not always successfully) to strain against ... reductive and stereotypical homogenization ... We preferred translations that did not domesticate the work either into a pan-Indian or into a 'universalist' mode, but demanded of the reader too a translation of herself into another sociohistorical ethics. We have taken pains ... to preserve the regional grain of the work. (p. xiii)

The second notable project of our time is not yet old enough to be likened to a banyan tree but has already grown roots and branches like one. The mother-trunk is simply called Katha and its growth has been directed so far by Geeta Dharmarajan. This tirelessly active but non-profit-making organization was started in 1988 and functions on two frontiers. One, known as Kalpa-vriksham, acts as a centre for sustainable learning; the other, known as Katha-vilasam, performs as a story research and resource centre. The latter relates to our concerns in this paper because it fosters and applauds good translation, especially of short stories, both from Indian languages into English and from one Indian language into another. It gives annual awards to authors, as well as their translators, based on a formal competition and each year the prize-winning stories in English translation are collected and published. Six such collections, known as Katha Prize Stories, have been published so far.

One other project we ought to notice is a combination of private vision and commercial effort. Under the series title of 'Modern Indian Novels in Translation', Macmillan India have planned to publish, within five years, 50 to 60 translations of fiction written after 1947 from eleven Indian languages. Eleven titles were released during 1996, one each from Bangla, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada and Punjabi, two each from Malayalam, Oriya and Tamil. Each title is furnished with an introduction by a critic in that language, and with footnotes glossing and otherwise explaining cultural facts and fictions that the English reader (or even the reader in English) is presumed not to know. Consciously designed and elegantly printed, these translations vary in printed extent from 70 to 200 pages while the prices range from 50 to 140 rupees. Given the production costs, these prices are sensationally low, even for India. This has been made possible by funds from the MR. AR. Educational Society of Madras. No better friend of translation can be found in the country today.

To conclude, Indian translators into English have never had it so good. They used to be a neglected, even pitied lot, often not even named in the
published work, just as often not paid. All that has changed now. The translator duly gets acknowledged on the title-page, sometimes even on the cover-front, while the half-title page of the back-cover blurb carries some useful bio-data. However, in their new-found zeal, the translator may sometimes forget that translation has been practised in India for many centuries before the advent of English, hence ‘translation’ does not automatically mean ‘translation into English’. Some such mistake in identification seems to prevail at many of our seminars and other formal discussions of the subject, along with much mouthing of problems and solutions in translation that have little to do with our situation. The obvious remedy for such amnesia would be purposeful study and practice of translation from one Indian language to another in order to arrive in due course at some understanding – if not a full-fledged eight-armed theory – of how the process works on our linguistic soil. Maybe we should devote the next fifty years to such cultivation.

NOTES

1. Subsequently, these would be enlarged to make The Interior Landscape (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), and Speaking of Shiva (Harmondsworth: 1973).
Moymmadali Ikkakka had been like all of us once. He used to go regularly to the mosque to pray and to Alassan Mollakka’s religious school, carrying the slate he used for learning the Arabic script. I had seen the slate hanging on a nail in the house. The prayer hall was next door to us. You could hear the roar of the children’s voices as they sat with their legs stretched out and recited. But you could not quite make out what they chanted. ‘No dot for aliph, dot below for bakku, dot above for takku,’ was how they recited the alphabet in a sing-song fashion.

Ikkakka liked to dig in the compound when he came back from his lessons. He loved the rainy season.

One night, during the monsoon in May, it thundered. Next day, the yard seemed to be full of white chickens. They were clustered as thick as plants in the yard and you could hardly walk. They had not been there the day before and now the yard was crowded with them.

They were mushrooms. Mushrooms are white. There are two kinds. The poisonous ones are pretty to look at. They are like toy umbrellas that the earth holds over itself. There are little circular designs between the open petals, like the ones drawn on the toy wheels you spin in your hand.

Ummoo was happy because she could have curried mushrooms, which were delicious. She knew the difference between good mushrooms and poisonous ones. The good ones did not open out. They stood up straight like jasmine buds. The poisonous ones opened out and became flat. The two kinds were as different as open and closed white umbrellas.

There was an enormous mushroom in the bamboo thicket. Ummoo and Ikkakka found it together. It looked so beautiful, smiling among the bamboo fronds like a freshly opened jasmine flower. It seemed to coax you to pluck it. Ikkakka did not stop to think. He jumped into the bamboo thicket. When he opened his hand, it was filled with white petals. The mushroom had crumbled. His hand felt cool and smooth.

And Ikkakka was overcome by greed.

He put the mushroom in his mouth.

Ummoo watched him.

Next day, Ikkakka threw up. Mariam Ammayi was not too worried. She boiled some water with caraway seeds and gave it to him. But he...
continued to throw up. And then he vomited blood. It was then that Ummoo told Mariam Ammayi that Ikkakka had eaten a mushroom.

Moothappa ran to the Panathil mosque and brought Kunharu Musaliyar. Musaliyar chanted a mantram and tied a sacred thread on Ikkakka’s arm. Ammayi vowed she would offer a mushroom made of silver to the mosque in Nagore. Ikkakka’s face looked pale and tired when he stopped throwing up. His lips hung slack and no one could follow him when he spoke. His speech was slurred and the words meaningless.

Moymmadali Ikkakka’s lips twisted. He frothed at the mouth. Raman Vaidyar of Anjappura gave him a prescription, but it did not do him any good. Ikkakka tore his clothes. He hooted like a crow-pheasant, jakkaram, jakkaram.

Moothappa brought a Panikker, an astrologer, from somewhere south of the village to perform a pooja and find out what was wrong. The Panikker sat cross-legged and prayed. Then he set out cowries and made calculations, adding and subtracting figures.

He discovered that the spirits had coveted the mushroom that Moymmadali Ikkakka had eaten. The spirits had tried to snatch it from Ikkakka, but he had already eaten it. There were three spirits. They got into Ikkakka’s throat. When they came down to his stomach, Ikkakka began to throw up. The medicines and mantrams made the spirits restless. So they climbed into his head.

Ummoo had heard Moothappa ask the Panikker, ‘Can’t you drive the spirits out of him?’ When Ummoo told me this, I said, ‘Moothappa is such a big man. Surely he can chase the spirits away?’

Ummoo began to laugh. Her dimples grew deeper when she laughed and her eyes narrowed. Why did Ummoo tease me all the time?

‘You’re a stupid boy.’
‘I’m not.’
‘Will you tell Umma if I tell you?’
‘No.’
‘Promise?’
‘Promise.’

If you wanted Ummoo to tell you something, you always had to make a promise. She told me that the Panikker had performed a homam to drive the spirits away. He drew a sacred design on the floor of the outhouse, sprinkled rice flour and turmeric over it and made a pit for the sacred fire. Chethi flowers were brought for him. He had a bath, prayed and chanted mantrams. Moymmadali Ikkakka sat obediently in front of him, cross-legged. He began to tremble violently. The sound of mantrams echoed through the air. Panikker threw the chethi flowers he had used for the pooja into the fire. Ikkakka began to tear at his clothes.

‘The spirits are restless. They want a refuge.’
‘Will he be cured?’ asked Moothappa.
'Yes.'
Mariam Ammayi’s eyes lit up with a smile. ‘He must get well, even if we have to sell the compound on the southern side to pay for it.’
‘Yes,’ said Moothappa, ‘he must get well.’
When the Panikker arrived next morning, the whole household was happy. Milk and bananas had been brought for him from Karuppan’s house.

But Panikker’s face was ashen pale. He took out his bag and stood waiting, umbrella and stick in hand, his eyes on the ground. He said softly, ‘I can’t do it.’
‘What do you mean, Panikker?’
‘He’ll never be cured. If I cure him, I will die.’
Moothappa was aghast. So was Mariam Ammayi. Ummoo cried.
Panikker had not slept all night. Whenever his eyes began to close, three tuskers in rut had appeared before him. They had long tusks, with ends like scimitars. They had lurched at him, their tusks aimed at his body. Panikker had joined his palms in an entreatning gesture.
‘Please, I did not do anything.’
‘Don’t stand here any longer.’
‘All right.’
The spirits had created the tuskers through their magical powers.
Mariam Ammayi asked, ‘Can’t you use your powers against them, Panikker?’
‘No, child. They’re very strong.’
‘What will we do now?’
Panikker turned up his palms in despair. Everyone began to wail.
Moothappa looked numbly at Panikker.

Panikker said, ‘The spirits will inhabit his body for fourteen years.’
‘Who said so?’
‘The voices of the spirits.’
‘Will they go away after fourteen years?’
‘I don’t know child. They may go away, or …’
‘Or?’
‘The child will die.’
Panikker walked away slowly. Moothappa did not have the energy to follow him. He sat on the embankment and watched till Panikker climbed the stile at the end of the field and was lost to view.

As Ummoo told me this, we heard Ammayi’s voice,
‘Ummoo, it’s afternoon. Where has the girl disappeared?’

*   *   *

Thousands of black knots lie tangled inside my head. Blood froths in me. My nerves grow taut. I will break now, into pieces. Umma is not aware of all this.
The smile that is Umma waits for me. Umma is like the tendril of a jasmine plant. Her teeth are jasmine flowers. Umma is in a fix, and she is
Waiting for their chance, they walked forwards and
were not the only enemies. Holocaust Armies and Infarex Troops were
only then did I recognize all my enemies. I had been betrayed. They
my eyes and nose fixed on the target. I turned right and let I slashed,

your eyes wide open.

Watch this last fight with
the house. Sit here. Put your arms around me. I placed her behind me
right hand. I lifted her up. She was a tower. I placed her behind me
my horse round and slid down. Liumma hung onto my
horses. I needed to look after not only myself but my beloved Liumma as
well. Liumma, I needed to look after my beloved Liumma.
I jumped at me with
right more. And they were unperceivd. They jumped at me with

right, and my enemy's head

... and legs. Kick, horse.

Liumma, I slashed my sword. I slashed out, fortunately. The sword flew
right with the shield. I slashed my sword. I balanced the horse on its
head. I raised forward. I bent over. The reins tightened in my hand. I hit

... with a kick at his stomach. I jumped on it. I turned a kick at his stomach. The horse

opened its mouth and said. The horse

... exploded inside my head.

Liumma, she became the sound of weeping.

between her feet. Liumma is the earth.

No, you fool, no. Heaven is not under Liumma, feet. Kiss the ground
where Heaven is. It is somewhere in the sky. I pointed to the sky.
I remembered what

whore, little one...

Clouds, surrounded Liumma, swirling with sky, surrounded Liumma.
Their homes are hatchets. Their homes are hatchets. Their homes are hatchets. Their homes are hatchets.
They are coming in from all sides. Liumma is caught in
Terror, and the fear. The sky twinkles. Give me my legs, Mr. Terror.
I'm nearly there, God. Look after my Liumma. God, take care.
Give my

Liumma, I'm nearly there. God, look after my Liumma. God, take care. Give my
not exist without Liumma. Nor could Liumma exist without me.
They were not human. If we did not kill them, they would kill Liumma.
I

know, why Liumma was singing me to go to her quickly. Only then

.
back, dodged and disappeared.

Dhum, I heard a sound and turned around. Umma was slipping off the horse. She wept.

I saw a noose come flying through the air. It looked like a huge ring in the wind. I blocked it with my shield and moved my neck away. The noose fell on the horse’s neck. Ammayi caught the rope and pulled hard. The reins slipped from my hands. The horse neighed and galloped away. I fell down and rolled over the ground.

Ammayi and Thatha caught my horse and tied it up. They knocked the sword from my hand. And my shield. Two pairs of hands pulled the rope tight around me. Where was my sword? And my horse?

Treacherous enemies, let me go. If you don’t let me go, I’ll not think of you as my Ammayi and my Thatha. I’ll kill you. Ahmed will kill both of you.

Ammayi heard me. She was afraid. Her grip on me loosened, she let go. But Thatha would not let me go. She held me tight. I could not move. Thatha’s hands were so strong. Like steel wires. If only I could move ...

Ammayi wept bitterly. She searched for something on the ground. She bent down. Perhaps she was looking for my sword. When she straightened up, a chain dangled from her hand. An iron chain. The chain Moymmadali Ikkakka had been tied up with.

Ammayi would not listen to anything I said. I got up from the ground and looked at Umma’s face. Umma looked numb.

Umma, let’s go away from here. Let’s not stay here any more.

I heard sounds in the east and west. Sounds came roaring from all directions. Roaring and sobbing. The sobbing called to me. It came rolling towards me. It entered the outhouse. The sobbing was Umma.

Umma is beautiful. Umma is a white plant swaying in the breeze. A tear-plant. All its leaves are tears. The drop-shaped leaves tremble in the wind. They wave at me, they call me – mone, mone, little one ...

I’m coming. Let me take off this chain they’ve tied on my feet. Umma, I want to lie pressed to your breast. I want sleep on your breast. I want to sleep soundly.
She did not say anything, but he always knew when she had drifted away from him. He shook her by her shoulder, ‘Are you angry?’ She let herself be shaken like a wax doll. The same thing used to happen when they made love, her body would become malleable, and she would let him do what he liked with her, yield completely to him. Even when she sobbed, it seemed as if she had emerged, wrapped in sorrow and joy, from a third body which existed in some boundless present on which the future had cast no shadow. Perhaps that’s where the thistle of ill-omen had begun to grow – can one simply refuse to look into the future? ‘We should find out about the future,’ she insisted, ‘find out what’s going to happen.’ He folded her in his arms. Wondered what she saw in the dark which was invisible to him. ‘You say there is nothing. Are you sure there is nothing, are you sure that nothing will happen?’ She pushed him from her. Turned away from him in rage; became hard like stone. She felt hot when he touched her. ‘Your hands are always feverish,’ he said. Unmoved, she continued to look away. He realized that he could do nothing at such moments. Over the last seven months he had known all the different seasons of her soul, but the coldest, the most chilling was the one in which he found himself sitting holding her hand while she drifted somewhere far away from him.

When they met the following day it was like a new morning after rain and storm. Her face began to glow the moment they stepped out of the hostel. She took off her scarf and her hair scattered over her shoulders. Away from the city, in the direction of the setting sun, there was a bend in the river where they sat on their usual bench on the embankment which was always vacant. There was a skating rink across from it where delirious music and the excited shouts of children could be heard mingled together. Most often they sat there before returning home. After a stormy day, it was a quiet, clean and dry place where the threads of things left half said could be picked up again. But she was silent. She watched some women, who were busy gossiping, as they strolled along pushing the prams in which their children were asleep. A man, smoking a pipe, ambled past them. Blue smoke from his pipe swayed in the light of the setting sun like a snake and then disappeared. She watched till the man
was out of sight, and then she turned towards him and smiled. A small
tremor ran through her hand as if all that was good had just passed in
front of them in the form of gossiping women, sleeping children and a
man smoking a pipe.
‘Isn’t this like a hallucination?’
‘What is like a hallucination?’
‘This feeling that all that is faithful merely touches us and then passes
by?’
‘Yes, that’s true,’ he said, as he laughed. ‘I must find out why you
always distrust me. Is there a cure for distrust?’
‘If my parents were alive, I could have asked them. If they had told
me not to meet you, it would have been a comfort to know that they had
decided for me. Even if they hadn’t, at least I would have known they
supported me – now there is nothing.’
‘Why does this absence cause you so much anxiety; why does it
Torment you so much, oppress you so much?’
‘It’s a question of trust,’ she said, as she gazed into the darkness of
her heart. ‘We’ll somehow have to find out if what we are doing is right.’
‘Who will tell us that?’ he asked irritably. ‘Who will you go to see in
order to find out?’
She brushed his unshaven cheek with her lips and whispered, ‘I know
where to go. Will you come with me?’
‘Again the same madness.’ As he turned his face away, her bruised lips
left a thrilling damp stain on his cheek. ‘I won’t go anywhere,’ he
moaned sorrowfully. ‘I don’t want to go anywhere.’ He repeated himself
like a rotating tyre stuck in mud.
‘Why not?’
‘I have already told you but you refuse to listen.’
‘Tell me again. I can’t remember what I haven’t heard, can I?’
‘I don’t believe in such things. If you are so keen, go yourself. I won’t
g0.’

The finality of ‘I won’t go’ made her refrain from urging him any
further. She never begged, she only backed off a little. ‘Whom do you
trust?’

He wanted to say, I trust no one. When I met you, I didn’t think that
our meeting was such an unfortunate accident that we needed the
approval of others. Do you know that whatever I have belongs to you;
whatever I am is a result of you. In this dark city, every heart-beat of
mine glows in your body – I can see nothing beyond that. After I leave
you at the hostel, I find the presence of my self very oppressive. I take
my clothes off as quickly as possible so that I can get rid of my self. I try
to forget my self till you remind me of my presence the next day … Is
that such a sin that I must cleanse myself before someone else?

But he didn’t say anything to her. To have said anything would have
meant acknowledging her suspicions, drawing them into the circle of sin.
His words would have so terrified her that she could have done anything. She was like a somnambulist, who instinctively turns away from the edge of the roof, but falls when startled awake by someone's warning. There were no guarantees with her. Therefore, at moments like this he preferred to stay silent. He did, of course, talk to himself in the hope that at some future time she would find out what he was actually feeling now. Immediately, however, it occurred to him that his thoughts were a bad omen – black magic – and he wanted to forget them.

'Alone?' She looked at him with tears in her eyes. 'All right, I'll go alone. There is no need for you to come with me.'

She got up from the bench. Tied a scarf around her hair. Dusted her clothes and looked at the bench to see that she had not left anything behind – apart from himself, still sitting there. His presence did not concern her. She climbed down the embankment to the street. Started walking. She did not look back to see the city lights sparkling on the surface of the river whose banks were lost in the evening shadows.

He sat rooted at the same spot for a few moments, and then ran after her anxiously. He caught her hand which was still burning hot. He was afraid that she would pull it away with a jerk. She didn't do that, but neither did she respond in any way. Her hand lay in his like a soft and limp glove. There were no women, or children, or shops, or bars on the street. They seemed to pass from one end of the town to the other through a tunnel, only to find themselves at her hostel where the lights were still burning on every floor. Had it been daytime, he would have overcome his anger and gone in with her, but at that dead hour of night, all he could do was to leave her there and turn back. She stopped at the porch. 'You can go now,' she said, without looking at him, as if she was addressing the night.

'Shall we meet tomorrow?'

'Why on me?' He was grateful that in the darkness of the porch she couldn't see his face.

He started walking towards his house. He lived in the old city across the bridge. The bridge had been built a long time ago. It was said that the Emperor had mixed the yolk of thousands of eggs in mortar to build it. That is why it was still in as good a shape as on the day, three hundred years ago when the Empress had driven across it in her horse-carriage for the first time ... One day as they were walking across it and going towards his house, she had told him that on moonlight nights when the city was silent, one could still hear the sound of carriage wheels on the bridge. Before marriage, the Emperor, instead of telling the Empress that he loved her, had said that he was tired of crossing bridges alone and that from that day onwards he only wanted to cross the bridges he came to in his journeys with her. Do you know what the Empress replied? She said, bridges are meant for crossing rivers, not for building homes ... The
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Emperor didn’t understand what she wanted to tell him. Years later, the Empress jumped from that bridge into the river which still flows under it.

2

The next day, when she reached the tram-station, he was already there waiting for her. Even though it was not winter yet, he was shivering. It was difficult to tell if he was shivering because it was cold or because he was nervous. The sun was hidden behind the clouds. The morning rain had washed the tram-lines clean and they were gleaming. After last night’s conversation both were so self-conscious that the arrival of the tram was a relief. Without saying anything to each other, they quickly boarded it.

There were very few people inside, and even they were sitting crouched in their raincoats. All of them sat with their feet raised a little above the floor so as not to touch the mud left behind by the previous passengers. Instead of looking at each other, the two of them sat and stared out of the window even though there was nothing to see outside. The windows of the tram were covered with such thick layers of dust that the trees on the footpaths, the lamp-posts and the people walking on the streets seemed to slip by like dirty smudges on some old film. A few passengers got off at every stop. Whenever the conductor pulled the bell-rope, the tram hiccuped and dragged itself forward.

When the conductor came, she quickly took some money out of her purse and bought two tickets. After he had gone, she did not shut the bag. Instead, she took out a hair-brush and began to brush her hair. She turned to look at her face in the glass window, out of habit at first, and when she could see it clearly, with some anxiety, for she saw him there staring at her instead of sitting beside her. When she smiled, his reflection smiled back. But the moment she turned away from the window and looked at him, he wasn’t smiling. He was sitting quietly. Suddenly nervous, she squeezed his hand so hard that he winced and pulled it away. Her nails scratched his hand so deeply that they left small trails of blood on it. She quickly pulled a handkerchief from her bag and wiped away the blood ... Both of them started laughing and, pushing the previous night aside, moved close to each other. She put her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes.

He looked out of the window. Her warm breath caressed his cheek. Nothing will happen, he thought, we’ll go and return by the evening. There were two tickets for The Magic Flute in his pocket, which he had bought many days ago. He wanted to surprise her. It was the opera they had seen together exactly seven months ago, when they had hardly known each other. Now it seemed as if that was years ago. He had reached the auditorium well ahead of time so that he could get a ticket with ease. But when he got there, the advance-booking counter had
closed and the queue had begun to disperse. He had stood around despondently. He had waited for that day for a long time and was not yet convinced that he would have to return home disappointed. He had found his tie and black coat, which he wore only when he had to go to a concert, a bit amusing. Irritated, he had been reading the list of future performances on the board outside so that people would not think that he was merely hanging around, when he heard a soft voice behind him ask, 'Do you need a ticket, I have an extra one ...' When he turned around, he saw her. She seemed tall in her black dress and rather young. After they had got to know each other, he realized that she was shorter and older than he had taken her to be. There were two tickets in her fist which were clutched so tightly that it had been difficult to separate them for some time. It was only later, when they had sat down next to each other, that he realized he had forgotten to pay her for the tickets, but by then it was already too late.

Her hand was warm and soft. She seemed to have a fever. As he gazed at the misty and rain-washed city through the tram window, he wondered if all her actions were not performed in some feverish delirium, so that she heard the sound of each approaching event in the throbbing of her veins, in the pulsating flow of her blood, in the pounding of her heart.

One day, after they had got to know each other, he had asked her, 'That night when we met at the Mozart opera, who had you bought that other ticket for?'

'For you,' she had replied with a laugh.

'No, tell me truthfully, who were you waiting for?'

She was silent for a while. She had neither laughed nor said anything. 'There is nothing to tell ... I won’t tell you because you won’t believe me.'

Suddenly anxious, he had said, 'Don’t make excuses ... You don’t want to tell me who you were waiting for ...'

'For you ...' she had said.

'But we didn’t even know each other.'

'That’s why I didn’t want to tell you. Such things happen to me often. I feel as if something is about to happen, like a signal from a distance. I see it only once, but I know it is asking me to be ready. That day I was the first in the queue to buy tickets. When a voice from the ticket-window asked, “How many?” I replied, “Two”. After I had bought them, I wondered who the second ticket was for. It was then that I saw you.'

They had reached the terminal. The tram didn’t go any further. It returned from there, went back to the city which was lost in the afternoon haze. They got off the tram but for a while he was confused about where they were ... All he could do was to follow the girl, who was walking very fast. After walking some distance, the girl left the main road and turned into small lane. It was then he remembered that he had been
there before.

It was a narrow lane. The houses on both sides seemed to lean into each other. The sky above, masked by smoke and mist, was like a dirty rag spread over the houses. She stopped at every turning and waited for him to catch up with her. Every now and then they came upon the ruins of some old houses. Their broken walls, their swaying rods of iron, seemed like the skeletons of forgotten corpses. She avoided the rubble with such confidence that it seem as if she was walking, not through some strange part of the town, but towards her own home. But suddenly her steps faltered. She stood uncertainly before a door, and when he caught up with her, she looked at him as if she was terrified of losing the very thing which she longed to possess. But before doubt could take root, she crushed it under her feet and knocked at the door. Instead of waiting for an answer, she took him by his hand and pushed him against the door. It began to open by itself with a strange low whine. It would perhaps have continued to whine for a long time had she not suddenly shut it with a bang.

The first thing he noticed was the dirt in the house. It leapt out at him from every corner. It had the sharp smell of old, damp and moth-eaten clothes which have been locked in a trunk for a long time, or of unwashed, lice-infested hair. Strangely enough, instead of being repulsive, the house seemed to invite him in, urging him to cut himself off from everything and walk in, calling to him like a wild forest which offers shelter from the harsh glare and deception of the world to anyone who seeks it. If she had not impatiently signalled to him to enter, he would have forgotten why he was there.

Did he know? He didn’t know that desire would make him walk through twisting and turning lanes and bring him here. The courtyard was surrounded by dimly-lit jute curtains. In the middle of the courtyard there was a low table, dark as ebony. There were two candles burning at each end of the table.

‘Come closer,’ a voice called from a distance. When he approached the table, he saw a pale white face framed by long hair on the other side staring at him. He realized that the girl was not beside him.

‘She’ll be back soon,’ the woman said, as if she had guessed his fear. ‘Please sit. Not there, but here beside me .’ Then she pushed the red velvet-covered stool, which was on the left of the table, towards him. When he sat down, she said in a strangely high-pitched voice, ‘You are different from what I had imagined.’ He continued to sit with his head bowed.

‘Were you afraid of coming here?’

He raised his head. In the pale light of the candle, her face seemed to be carved of marble.

‘I didn’t know what to expect?’ he replied.

‘I am glad that you came,’ she said gently. ‘Do you know where one’s
longest journey begins? With one’s first step!’ She laughed for the first time – softly, without kindness or sarcasm. Full of knowledge and trust.

‘Look at me,’ she said, and when he gathered the courage to look at her, he felt that he had never seen a face which was wiser or more beautiful. He leaned forward a little so that he could see the other side of her face which was hidden in the shadows cast by the candles. Suddenly he saw the girl emerge from one of the dark walls in the back. Joy surged through him as she sat down on a cushion across from him. Unable to restrain himself, he leaned forward to whisper something to her, when he felt someone gently touch him. The woman had placed her hand on his head. It was still and cold like death, covering his inner being like a black lid.

‘Do you love this man?’ The woman’s eyes were fixed on the girl. The girl nodded. The woman then turned to look at him. ‘And you?’ She waited for a reply for some time and then sighed deeply. He was still wondering what he should say, when he suddenly realized that the girl’s hand, which had crept under the table like a thief, was clutching his fingers, and anxiously urging him to reply. He wondered if there was a word between yes and no which could express his feelings? ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘What is your name?’

‘Name?’ The moment it escaped his lips, the woman caught it in her hands like a flying kite – imprisoned it in her five fingers which were glittering with rings. It was then that he felt a slight tremor in his soul. The hand, which had felt like death on his head a few moments ago, was now encircled with diamonds and mocking him. The woman wrote out their names on two pieces of paper. She did not ask the girl her name because she already knew it. Then she crumpled the two pieces of paper, shook them in her cupped hand and dropped them on the table ... For some time their names lay trapped in those crumpled pieces of paper. Then she picked them up with her bejewelled hand and held them to the flame of the candle till they slowly unfolded. In the light of the sparkling diamonds, their two names glowed on the charred remains of paper. She stared at them for a while, and then suddenly clapped her soot-covered hands and watched grey flakes of ash slowly fall on the table ... She shook her head, as if she had seen a vision of something fated, something which had been ordained before the two of them had been born. She shook her head sadly, once, twice, thrice, like a pendulum wildly oscillating on its axis, or like an epileptic patient. She stopped only when the girl placed her head on the woman’s hand lying on the table. When the woman opened her eyes, they were as calm and peaceful as they had been in the beginning.

She began to caress the girl’s hair with her white marbled hands. ‘Silly girl, you should be happy ... You have been saved from a grave misfortune. And he too ... this man who has come with you.’
She lifted her head from the table and looked at the woman with defeated eyes, 'What misfortune? Won't we live together?'

The woman was silent. For the first time a trace of anguish passed over the remote sadness of her face, as if she wanted to banish the shadows that had emerged from the walls of darkness and were standing around her. 'I can't describe what I have seen, I can only show it to you. Would you like to see it?'

The girl's hand, which was still grasping his under the table, trembled a little and then was steady ... Perhaps that was when they should have left the place because, at that moment, what was hidden, and at stake, was not only the future of their love but the seduction of seeking to attain it. Perhaps that was what the woman also wanted them to do, but she could neither tell them to do so nor prevent them from finding out. She could not help them in the region which she had opened up before them. In fact, she was herself only an observer of the vision she wanted to show them.

The woman withdrew the hand on which the girl's head had been resting. The woman's hand, which now lay on the table, seemed like the hood of a snake glittering with diamonds. Slowly she slid her hand across the table till it lay before the girl's eyes, which were still, like the eyes of a fish under the surface of water watching the sun glowing in the sky. 'Is this what you wanted to see?'

He did not remember what happened after that even though he had often tried to do so. He heard the girl's scream, sharper and brighter than the edge of a knife. The candles flickered and were then extinguished, and ghostly shadows jumped off the walls and surrounded the woman. After that, he saw nothing except that scream which continued to flash in the darkness. 'Now that you know, decide.'

He felt like jumping up and strangling the woman. Instead, he dragged the girl by her hand and hugged her. 'Let's get out of here.' This time she did not resist. She allowed herself to be dragged away like a log of wood, but when they emerged from behind the jute curtains, she stopped, hesitated at the threshold of the door. She pulled him towards her and kissed him, kissed him in a frenzy - her tongue sought his as if she was in search of something in a deep and dark well.

It must have been a coincidence that they returned to the city in the same tram they had taken to the woman's house. The ticket conductor smiled when he saw them. He recognized them as the couple who had got off at the terminal in the afternoon.
Everything was as it had been before. They occupied the seat they had earlier and which had perhaps remained vacant. The only difference was they were now sitting a bit apart, and the misty afternoon had given way after the rain to a bright evening light in which the roofs and the towers of the city seemed to glow with beauty. No one could have guessed that they had recently emerged from the shadows of a candle-lit room and the darkness of an old house.

Before they reached her hostel, the girl looked at him for the first time, touched his hand, gave him his tram ticket, and said, 'Never try to see me again. Forget all that happened today.'

When the tram reached her station, she collected her bag, adjusted her scarf and got off. She walked along the tram-lines for some distance, then turned into a brick building which was her hostel and where she had a room on the third floor.

When the tram reached the other terminal, he gave the conductor his ticket which still carried the warmth of her hand. After he got off the tram, he slowly walked towards the bridge which he used to cross every evening on his way back home after dropping her at her hostel. It was an ancient bridge and the red light of the setting sun was sparkling over the river that ran under it ... Absent-mindedly, he put his hand in the pocket and discovered that he still had the two tickets for the opera that evening. He felt that they belonged to another world. He started walking again, but stopped when he reached the end of the bridge. He watched the river, which was now partly lit by the setting sun and partly covered by the evening shadows, flowing peacefully under the bridge. Then, suddenly, in the confusion of light and shadow, he saw a face floating on the surface of the water, staring at him, gazing up at the place where he was standing, and he couldn’t decide if it was the face of the Empress who had drowned at that same spot under the bridge three hundred years ago or of the woman he had seen in candlelight three hours past and who had saved them from drowning.
A long time ago you once came over to our house. Shy youth, wearing a shirt over pajamas, you sat on our low divan talking to my father - inevitably about mathematics.

I was then twelve or thirteen. My hair was done in two plaits on either side. As I was growing rather rapidly, I used to wear a cheap bra under my cotton printed frock bought from the hawkers' stalls of Deshapriya Park. If my eyes met those of a young man's, I would instantly lower mine.

My mother had sliced some mangoes for you. The plate of mangoes in one hand, a glass of water in the other, I was entering the drawing room with shy, faltering steps. As I tried to shoulder away the door's heavy curtain, water spilled onto the plate of mangoes.

I returned to the kitchen. Carefully transferring the mango slices to another plate, my mother said, 'You just can't do any job properly, can you? Leave it, I'll take it myself.'

I went to the bedroom and had a good cry, my face buried in the pillow. Not from my mother's scolding, from the pain of not being able to reach you the mango plate properly.

Since then I haven't been able to do any job properly.
HISTORICAL

No: one can't satisfy everyone.
Look at Ram of Ayodhya,
Such a famous hero
In order to satisfy everyone
What a huge price he had to pay.

Not a filmstar
But a regular lifestar
His fans flourish even after so many centuries,
His name is uttered in goodwill greetings,
In songs that are sung
After yawns,
Also to deride others,
No exaggeration is it to call him star of India's almost-history.
In order to do his father proud,
And in order to please his father's formidable matted-hair pals
He subdued their class enemies, the ritual-hindering Rakshaks.
(Hopefully this modern definition will be pleasing to some).
In order to scrub the paternal family's plaque of fame
Till it might shine like a mirror
He won a girl-bride by breaking a double sized bow
Of another aristocratic family
(class-friendly).

Then in order to please his stepmother
(Victimized by harem politics)
Abandoning his kingdom he roamed the forests for fourteen years,
No relief in escapism either,
In order to please his child-wife
Rushed after an illusory animal
Lost his wife
(ancient kidnapping)
By rescuing his captive wife
He of course raised his shirt-collar –
But for that he endured problems galore –
A bridge had to be built over the sea,
He had to tame teams of monkeys,
In order to earn Sugrib’s support
He had to make Bali his enemy
Et cetera, et cetera,
Politics, diplomacy, violent warfare.

Then again in order to appease
The male chauvinistic urges of a patriarchal society and self,
Even after regaining such a beloved wife
He made her go through the raging flames.
Even then he had no peace.
At last
For the entertainment
Of the treacherous masses.
On a false pretext
He turned his pregnant wife
Out of the house.

Ram – mythic king in the ancient Indian epic Ramayana. Ram is revered as God by sections of the Hindu community.

Sugrib and Bali – mythic rival monkey kings in the Ramayana.
Managing the Crisis: *Bharateeyudu* and the Ambivalence of being ‘Indian’

In the spectacular spaces carved out by recent South Indian commercial cinema, we are beginning to notice a certain proliferation of popular idioms dealing with political questions, a phenomenon that demands to be seen as part of attempts in different realms to ‘manage’ the crises of our times. One of the commonest names for the interconnected processes that are transforming our society, the name that at least for some is also a signifier for contemporary crises, is liberalization. We would like to suggest that the term is popularly used not only to refer to the actual economic changes being wrought in India, but also to index something more diffuse: the new ways of life which are emerging and the elaborate discursive procedures that endorse and perpetuate them.

It is perhaps because of their direct and innovative engagement with the present that the films of Shankar and Maniratnam have acquired a following that goes beyond the traditional ‘class’ audience, coming to include many of the average moviegoers (the ‘mass’ audience) that throng to the films of Chiranjeevi and Rajnikant. 1 Clearly, Maniratnam’s *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995), and Shankar’s *Kaadalan/Premikudu* (1994) and now *Indian/Bharateeyudu* (1996) all attempt to articulate contemporary anxieties in the realm of the popular in ways that have successfully appealed to heterogeneous audiences. However, we would not want to argue that these two filmmakers deploy the same sort of cinematic idiom or occupy the same ideological spaces, although one finds in Shankar’s films a constant intertextual polemic with Maniratnam. 3 As we have suggested elsewhere, the former come as it were into the techno-aesthetic space created by the Maniratnam films but extend their signifying range in unpredictable directions. 4 Similarly, in Shankar’s *Premikudu* or *Bharateeyudu* we do not find the sort of relentless celebration of the new middle class that we have come to expect in Maniratnam’s films. Instead, although the former do represent ‘liberalized’ spaces, they employ modes of representation that ironize, and dislodge the iconicity of such spaces, as in *Premikudu*, or render our responses to them ambivalent, as *Bharateeyudu* does.

*Bharateeyudu* has none of the consumerist euphoria and gaiety of
and, in spite of the elaborately choreographed song sequences, the dominant note is sombre, even menacing. It is possible to read the film as an apologia for liberalization, or rather as an argument for the need to achieve that state. But to do so, we think, is to miss the point altogether. *Bharateeyudu*, in our opinion, demonstrates unequivocally that something is indeed wrong with our liberalized or liberalizing present, that the situation requires re-evaluation and intervention. In its response to liberalization, the film seems to mobilize and re-focus contemporary anxieties about the transformatory processes in which we are all participating. This paper attempts to investigate the construction of commonsense in the film and its architecture of consent/implication.

Starring Kamalahasan in two roles, father Senapati and son ‘Chandu’—Chandra Bose, named after his father’s commander-in-chief in the Indian National Army (INA), the film also has three significant female figures: Amritavalli, freedom fighter and Chandu’s mother, played by Sukanya; and Ishwarya and Swapna, the two women interested in Chandu, played by well-known Hindi stars Manisha Koirala and Urmila Matondkar respectively.

*Bharateeyudu* revolves around the conflict between Senapati and Chandu, although the fact that they are related is not revealed to us until after the intermission, in the second of the film’s two long flashback sequences. The sequence in which we realize the protagonists are father and son is also the sequence which suggests to us that they are in conflict. Senapati catches Chandu trying to get his sister to forge their father’s signature on a cheque. Chandu says he needs the money to bribe his way to a job, and is admonished by his father: ‘You should have studied harder and obtained better marks.’ Senapati also rejects Chandu’s suggestion that he should use the freedom fighter’s quota to get the latter a seat in a medical or engineering college: ‘That is meant for poor freedom fighters’ children.’ He advises his son to give up his dream of getting a city job and become a farmer too, but Chandu wants to be ‘modern’, and not ‘remain in the 1940s’ like his father who, he declares, belongs in a museum. So Chandu leaves home for the city, and becomes a tout in the Regional Transport Office, later bribing his way to the job of a brake inspector.

Bribery or ‘corruption’ is the central theme of the film. Its pervasiveness in our present is what, according to Senapati, is destroying the nation. After he has lost his only daughter because of his refusal to pay bribes to a doctor, a police officer and a Village Administrative Officer, he decides to uproot ‘the weed of corruption’ by deploying the skills he learned during his INA days. Not all his victims, however, are those who have personally harmed him. Indeed, the film opens with the killing of a municipal commissioner with whom Senapati has no direct link, and who mistakes the old man for a courier he was expecting with a bribe.

For a film which characterizes the present as degenerate, the past
necessarily stands as a point of contrast. Interestingly, it is only the pre-independence past which provides this contrast: the first long flashback, in black and white to create the effect of verisimilitude, narrates the heroic actions of Amritavalli and Senapati during the freedom struggle. The woman is seen as engaging in two major acts of defiance – refusing to salute the British flag, and leading a group of women who are burning foreign cloth. Senapati, on the other hand, is shown killing both the British officer who beats Amritavalli for not saluting the flag, and the other officer who orders the disrobing of the swadeshi women who are consequently driven to suicide. The image of ritualistic killing dominates the nationalist struggle flashback as much as it does the real-time story of the film.

Rewriting Nationalist History

Part of the project of the film, we suggest, is to rewrite the story of nationalist struggle in such a way as to condemn the present as well as indicate what it will take to transform it. In this rewriting, the iconic figures of Gandhi and Nehru are replaced by Subhas Chandra Bose. Bose is in fact the only nationalist leader prominently shown in the flashback, in documentary footage into which the film’s Senapati is inserted. While Gandhi is completely absent, Nehru appears only fleetingly, again in news footage and in a corner of the frame, his voice uttering the famous speech: ‘At the stroke of the midnight hour …’ Except for two brief shots of Congress activists just before the fragment of the Nehru speech, the only other freedom fighters shown in the flashback are those seen going off to join the INA and then later taking part in INA activities. Sacrifice and heroism thus appear as the supreme qualities of Bose’s followers, who end up being marginalized in the actual transfer of power.

The film does acknowledge, however, that the freedom struggle was not simply a single unified movement. Amritavalli asks the CBI officer Krishnaswami who comes to Senapati’s house posing as a freedom fighter: ‘Which freedom struggle were you part of? Salt satyagraha? Non-cooperation? Extremist? Terrorist? Were you in the Bose group?’ Bharateeyudu selects Bose and the INA over the official Gandhian nationalism, possibly to suggest that Gandhi and Nehru, figures popularly identified with the post-Independence nation-state, are indeed a part of the problem. What they have left behind is a decaying nation which has failed to live up to the glorious sacrifices of the freedom fighters. The INA, on the other hand, is seen as representing a more uncompromising nationalism, one that deals with problems through direct solutions, imaged as fearless, violent struggle and instant justice. But these solutions have not become part of the dominant image, as we have it, of nationalism.

Given this reading of the nationalist struggle, the part played by Amritavalli is significant. Senapati’s wife, it has been noted, is the filmic
character most closely identified with the uncompromising resistance of the freedom fighters. Even so, and although in later life Amritavalli stands by her husband when he takes up his struggle against corruption, the film does not endow her with the moral stature of Senapati or his moral strength. Her devotion to Chandu, her 'motherly instinct', comes in the way of her commitment to her husband's cause: when her daughter is dying of burns, she tries to bribe with jewellery the doctor who has refused to treat the girl; when Chandu is being pursued by his avenging father, she tries to save him by tacitly declining to tell Senapati of his whereabouts.

Amritavalli seems to represent a 'soft' nationalism, figured in the film perhaps by the absent Gandhi. Her love for her children overshadows her nationalism in the present. Unlike her commitment to the nationalist struggle in the past, her present response is remarkably apolitical, the family being shown as more important for her than the nation. Although this invites the chiding of her husband towards the end of the film, this is precisely what is intended to endear her to us—her attempt to be a good mother. Senapati, on the other hand, is not merely a father. His repoliticization into heroic, violent and terroristic action is counterpointed by Amritavalli's gradual depoliticization into motherhood. Her image, we argue, represents a gendering as female both aspects of the dominant strand of the nationalist struggle—Gandhian non-violence, as well as the maternalistic welfare-state Nehruvian socialism which has failed because it is not tough enough on its citizens. Towards the end of the film, when Senapati is arrested for murder and is being taken away by the police, another old man from the crowd calls out: 'Why are you arresting this old man? He's been doing what the government couldn't do in fifty years.'

In short, 1947 is indicated as the crucial cut-off point, that seemingly glorious moment of our history which is really the beginning of our downfall. In this narrative, it is fitting that Nehru is presented as presiding over the inaugural moment of nationalism gone wrong, whose future is imaged as coming to fruition in our corrupt post-colonial present.

**Everyday Corruption**

It is as if all the misery of the present can be condensed into this one theme of corruption. Those who are corrupt, according to the film, are government officials, employees of the state. Curiously, there is a marked absence of politicians and elected representatives, all the more remarkable for a film made at the height of public prosecution of major Indian political figures on the charge of corruption. 'Corruption' is produced in Bharateeyudu as self-explanatory, self-evident, as the truth about our predicament. Corruption, the film seems to say, is something one finds in everyday interactions, and not necessarily in high places: Senapati's targets are middle- or low-level government officials (the Corporation
Commissioner; the Village Administrative Officer; the police sub-inspector; the doctor, later a Dean in Nizam’s Hospital; the treasury official; the traffic policeman. Corruption is presented as a problem for all sections, but more so for the poor. Senapati asks the VAO who demands a bribe: ‘I can pay because I have the money, but what about the poor?’

Poverty figures briefly but prominently, symbolized by the old woman whose cobbler husband is killed in a police firing even as he sews Senapati’s belt. But the film is not about poverty or the problems of the poor. The state could adequately take care of the poor who have been subjected to unjust or undue hardship, if only the servants of the state would do their duty without expecting ‘extra’ for it. The primary cause of the poor’s suffering, then, turns out to be the corruption among government employees, from the attender to the treasury officer.

The way the film piles image upon image of petty acts of bribery appears to mimic, and reinforce, the anecdotal mode in which middle class grievances are strung together and presented as social analysis. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the film depicts low-level corruption: it helps produce the frisson of recognition, it is seen to touch everybody’s life; everyone in the audience can come up with illustrations to endorse the film’s representations. The personal narratives of corruption that the film invokes are reminiscent of the anecdotes which were mobilized during the anti-Mandai agitation to decry the ‘evils’ of reservations. 12 Mandai is indeed a tacit reference point in the film, as we shall elaborate later. How the film secures our consent for the analysis it shapes is directly related to how we are enabled to disavow corruption, to turn it into a phenomenon that we are part of and also distanced from at the same time. This disavowal is accomplished through complex structures of identification.

There are the victim figures we sympathize with, even the ones who are compelled to give bribes, like the cobbler’s wife, or Chandu in the first part of the film. The taking of bribes is seen as far more serious, earning from Senapati the penalty of death. Sometimes, as in the case of the corporation commissioner killed by Senapati in the opening scenes of the film, the giver of the bribe is not even shown. Although after Senapati’s appearance on TV, some officials attempt to make reparation, no bribe-giver is ever shown as repentant, suggesting that the giving is performed under duress and that the giver is not part of the same market economy as his or her exploiters. 13 The character of Chandu is in some ways an exception; initially the audience is on his side, when he is shown as a victim of the system, forced to give bribes to survive. He begins to slip in our estimation only when the link between consumerism and corruption is made evident.

Morality as Politics
Our initial identification is with Chandu, presented as a genial and
hapless young man, desiring the life of the modern that his father’s austerity denies him. His ‘corruption’ is shown for the most part not as a way of life held up for admiration but as street-smartness, as a way of negotiating the modern. Then there is Senapati himself, the harmless-looking old man with a militant past, roused to action by the corruption of our times. Senapati offers a moral analysis of our contemporary predicament, not a political one. While the film depicts the past almost entirely in conventional political terms, the present is shown as both apolitical and immoral. Senapati, however, is the supremely moral subject, and therefore in the film’s terms the supremely political subject too. When he appears on cable TV to harangue the nation and execute the corrupt doctor, he is literally clothed as a political subject – he wears his INA uniform with a round pin on the chest carrying the colours of the Indian flag. The film seems to suggest that Senapati’s everyday dhoti and kurta is actually a disguise, just like the western-style suit which he wears in the last sequence. His most natural dress is the INA uniform (the dress that shows us who he ‘really’ is), which he wears when he offers his diagnosis of what is wrong with the nation. The clothing, then, enables the moral diagnosis to be presented as a political one, just as Senapati’s actions, arising out of moral indignation, are politicized by the film, seen as making for change.

The production of Senapati as authentic political subject thus validates his analysis of corruption as a political statement, not a moral one, so that in the film the ethical appears as the political. The persuasive force of this analysis stems from corruption’s availability as a commonsense critique of the present, a critique that appears to span various ideological differences. This consensus is related in turn to a wide acceptance of what constitutes the liberal state and what kind of regulation of civic life it should provide. The nationalist citizen, the citizen endowed with rights, is presented in this film as a militant citizen-subject, in short, a vigilant/vigilante citizen attempting single-handedly to enforce good governance. Played by Nedumudi Venu, the CBI officer Krishnaswami, who bonds with Senapati even as he pursues him, says he would himself ask for Senapati’s autograph if he did not have to do his duty by arresting him for murder. Our sympathy is continually elicited for the good policeman – if he had been of an older generation, he could indeed have been Senapati himself.14

Portraying as corrupt all the organs of the state, repressive as well as welfare apparatuses; the elimination of corrupt officials; and Senapati’s broadcast to the nation on cable TV in which corruption is blamed for the country’s backwardness – these events set the stage for the final confrontation between Senapati and his son. Chandu has issued, in return for a bribe, a fitness certificate to a decrepit bus which later falls apart, leading to the death of forty schoolchildren. Chandu tries to bribe his way out, pleading with the police officer investigating the case and
the government doctor involved in the autopsies that they ought to help each other, since they are all government servants. Caught redhanded by his father at trying to inject alcohol into the dead bus driver’s body so as to falsify the post-mortem report, Chandu appeals to paternal love. Spurning this as an emotional bribe, Senapati tries to kill his son with the same knife from his INA belt which he has used on the other government officials. Chandu escapes, but is ultimately tracked down by the ‘meticulous old terrorist’ (Krishnaswami’s words) and killed after a breathtaking chase.

Split Hero
When did we last see a 75-year-old hero? How are our sympathies finally secured for Senapati? As audience, our interest is made to swing away from Chandu to his father. We suggest here some of the ways in which this is managed. The narrative crucially hinges on the confrontation between father and son and on what the two characters represent. Senapati and Chandu stand not for ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ but for two related though very different perspectives on the present. Significantly, they are presented as rival heroic figures up to a point, and are in fact introduced as individuals unrelated to each other. Both are displayed to the audience as ‘heroic’, albeit in different ways. Generally, in Indian popular cinema, dual roles complement each other and the tensions generated between the two are usually resolved by the film’s ending, which shows the two joining hands to defeat the common enemy. *Bharateeyudu* plays with the audience’s expectations, allowing us to assume until almost the very end that father and son will be reconciled, that Chandu will mend his ways.

The younger ‘hero’ is presented to us as a ‘common man’, a victim of the corrupt system who has nonetheless gained a place for himself within it. Chandu earns our admiration and sympathy for his ability to succeed in a system where all the odds are against him. He is shown to us literally on the streets, struggling to survive as a tout. His predicament is partly due to his father’s refusal to help him (ignoring a cardinal rule of paternal responsibility). Chandu also demeans himself, doing menial jobs because of his love for Ishwarya. He wants to bribe his way into a brake inspector’s job because he does not want to marry the girl while he is only a ‘broker’. Interestingly, the choice for him is not between honesty and corruption but between being a broker for the corrupt machinery of the government and becoming a part of that machinery. We are not induced to condemn him, initially. He is presented as comic but not foolish; we laugh at his troubles which actually make him more lovable. And like the conventional hero, Chandu is macho, to the extent that there is a ‘surplus heroine’ trying hard to engage his attention. This other heroine’s main function is to enhance the attractiveness of the younger hero.
The film presents us with two narratives that run parallel to each other, each centred around one of the heroes. The editing ensures that both share reel-time almost equally, with rapidly alternating sequences that feature each of them in turn. Chandu’s narrative is about the naturalness of corruption, of its regretted but inevitable place in our daily life; here corruption is dramatized for us in a series of comic episodes involving not only Chandu but also the minor characters Subbiah (Chandu’s sidekick) and Pandireswara Rao (who works in the transport office). ‘What is government?’ Subbiah asks rhetorically of a young man he is trying to induce to part with a bribe for a driving licence, ‘Putting amounts in envelopes is government.’ Senapati’s narrative, on the other hand, depicts corruption as the supreme evil, diagnosing it as the ‘cancer’ eating away our body politic. Described thus, it can only be fought by the direst of means. The forcefulness of the film lies in its ability to allow its audience to appreciate and inhabit both narratives simultaneously, until certain events jolt it into accepting one over the other.

Even as Chandu romances, dances and fights his way into our hearts, Senapati’s narrative grows progressively more central to the film. The old man is shown performing crucial tasks which are generally set aside for a younger hero, involving as they do both strength and swiftness. Each one of Senapati’s killings is graphically depicted, but there is a striking economy of violence in his actions. Unlike the lengthy, conventional fight scene between Chandu and the man who steals Ishwarya’s animals, Senapati’s murders are quickly and efficiently performed – the deft use of his fingers and a couple of thrusts with his knife is all a killing takes. Like the traditional hero, Senapati is shown outwitting the police who, incidentally, are depicted – in contrast to the police in other popular films – as extremely efficient and non-violent in their methods. He shares the audience’s knowledge of events which he does not witness. For instance, he knows intuitively where Chandu has hidden his mother; changes the colour of his van when we learn that the police are looking for him; and knows that the CBI officials have a videotape of his final escape.

The process of constructing Senapati as the real ‘Indian’ continues throughout the film. The long flashbacks contribute to locating him in the nationalist movement, the archetypal source of the heroism of the modern Indian, as well as creating his credentials as the wronged, revenge-seeking hero. Chandu, on the other hand, is increasingly seen as marked by an emptiness: not only does he have no claim on the national movement, he also crosses over to the other side, returning to the village briefly only to blame his sister’s death not upon the local doctor but his father’s uncompromising stand on corruption.

The televised murder of the doctor who refused to extend medical assistance to Senapati’s daughter is followed by the old man’s incorporation into the public iconography of heroism. An enormous hoarding of his figure appears at a busy intersection, and we are shown
instances of ‘ordinary’ people using intimidation of various kinds against corrupt government servants. Simultaneously, Chandu’s hero-value is diminished for us when, after the bus accident for which he is responsible, he bribes his way to falsifying the police and medical reports. It is at this point that we finally abandon Chandu to his fate. His realization that his father will not spare his life coincides with our realization, which is as shocked as Chandu’s is, that the young man is not a true hero after all. Not only will he die, but his death will not be tragic. Till the end of the film, Senapati and Chandu retain their mutually opposed beliefs, but what changes is the audience’s estimate of each. While Chandu is willing to sacrifice his father to save himself, Senapati is prepared to sacrifice his son in order to save the nation. In this way, the complementary dual hero of popular cinema becomes in Bharateeyudu the split hero.

Both characters make a claim for hero status, since both share qualities generally identifiable with the hero. Contrary to our expectations, however, it is the older man who wins out in the end. Part of the film’s appeal lies precisely in this unusual movement of the narrative. The enormous technical and financial investment in Senapati’s make-up (or Kamalahasan’s disguise) has found its place on the film’s posters as one of its highlights, and has indeed been received as such by cross-sections of the audience. Because of the fact that the undisguised hero also plays a major role in the film, the Senapati make-up constantly draws attention to itself, eliciting audience questions, such as ‘Who is he? What does he really look like?’ Senapati is admired not only because of what he stands for but because Kamalahasan, as the old man, puts on show his ability to play roles with a ‘difference’. The film, then, produces as ‘real’ an embodied person who does not exist outside the cinematic frame, unlike the star-body of the young Kamalahasan. For this production of the real, and the real as the truly Indian, the film sometimes has to take recourse to startling devices, such as the little episode of the traffic constable. In this episode, two young African men, characters unusual to Indian popular cinema, are used to counterpoint and thereby affirm Senapati’s identity. Stopped on their two-wheeler by the bribe-seeking cop, they are thrilled when Senapati knocks him out. They call out to Senapati, in English: ‘Hey, old man! By the way, who are you?’ ‘Me?’ comes the reply, also in English, and with a self-deprecating smile, ‘I am an Indian.’

Caste Narratives

The scene with the traffic policeman is also important in the film for its underscoring of the anti-Mandal theme. It is worth stressing at this point that the film is read by us with the help of interpretive structures which have been formed through our understanding of present-day politics, in India at large and in Andhra Pradesh in particular. As has been argued elsewhere, incidentally in relation to another film of Shankar’s, one
cannot measure the validity of a reading by its 'faithfulness' to some self-contained text of the film, but rather by whether it is able to throw light on aspects of contemporary politics. One often hears today, in the context of film interpretation, an old accusation that used to have some currency in literary critical circles – that charge of 'over-reading', presumably referring to the valorization of elements in a film that appear incidental to the narrative. It is not unlikely that the same charge might be levelled against our reading of the anti-Mandai elements in Bharateeyudu. We argue that these elements form a crucial subtext in the film, although they cannot be read in a unilinear fashion; that is, Bharateeyudu cannot be described in any simple sense as anti-Mandal. What the presence of the anti-Mandai elements demonstrate, however, is that any film claiming to deal with the contemporary period cannot but allude to Mandal, however obscure or tangential such allusions may be. They form a subtle undertow to the main narrative, which compels us to read them in a particular way so as to endorse the logic of that narrative, whereas the same set of allusions in a different plotting might yield, as in Shankar's Kaadalan, an altogether different reading.

Bharateeyudu's narrative of everyday corruption, we argue, is both necessarily and inconsistently related to the moment represented by the anti-Mandai agitation. The event and its fallout (the analyses of the anguish of upper caste youth, the foregrounding of the reservations issue, the invocation of 'merit') are now so much part of the history of the present that anti-Mandai allusions are routinely available in the structuring of our commonsense to be put to a variety of uses. Take the traffic policeman scene, for example. Senapati wanders through, his attention drawn by the policeman's action against a pair of young office-workers on a motorbike. The driver of the bike wants to know why he is not allowed to move on, since all his papers are in order. The policeman, after asking for a bribe of Rs.150, starts to shout at the unwilling motorcyclist. Senapati stands next to the young office-goer, listening. He asks the young man to take off his shoe, picks it up, puts it on the seat of the traffic policeman’s motorbike, and tells the policeman he must clean the office-goer's shoe first and then take the money. In this fleeting gesture, which in many ways is more violent than the blow with which Senapati later knocks out the policeman, an entire caste hierarchy is etched - one which inscribes the victimized office-goer as upper caste/class and the bribe-seeking policeman as lower caste/class. The meritorious, the scene suggests, should be exempt at least from polishing their own shoes. In our post-Mandal present, this symbolism requires no further interpretation. What the image of the shoe does economically is to yoke together the corrupt and non-meritorious with the inefficient 'quota' officer, suggesting that both kinds of public servant are merely self-seeking, and therefore do not have the interests of the nation at heart.
Another sequence thematizes a popular anti-Mandal image – that of the good dalit in his place, the deserving lower caste poor person, contrasted implicitly with the corrupt traffic policeman. A cobbler by the roadside is hard at work, sewing Senapati’s belt which doubles as a knife-sheath. A demonstration is taking place nearby, with young men holding aloft placards which read, in English, ‘Revolution’, ‘Stop Corruption!’ and so on. The police open fire on the crowd; a young protester is shot in the leg, and the bullet passes right through him and hits the cobbler, killing him instantly. When the government announces compensation of Rs.10,000 to the families of those killed in the incident, the cobbler’s wife puts in an application. We follow her travails as one treasury official after another demands a bribe from her. After using up her savings for the smaller bribes, the cobbler’s wife is finally shown helpless before the officer who demands a cut for passing on her cheque. When she starts abusing him, he has her evicted from his office. In the crowd outside is Senapati who – in the sequence that follows – seeks out and kills the treasury officer. The cobbler, who earned what liberal discourse would call an honest living, who did not aspire to a station above his own, merited, the film implies, Senapati’s espousal of his cause.

Yet another deployment of a distinctly anti-Mandal image is that of the middle class, upper caste person doing menial tasks. As part of his effort to get the brake inspector job, Chandu does various small chores in Swapna’s house – running errands, threading her petticoat string – which, although presented as comic, somehow unmans him, calling forth the audience’s sympathy. These menial tasks are also seen as a direct outcome of corruption. Once again we see the convergence of the anti-Mandal and the corruption narrative: it is implied that because Chandu is an upper caste person he doesn’t qualify for reservations, and that this is an important reason he has to resort to corrupt means to obtain a government job. Swapna, the patron’s daughter, represents the link between greed and consumerism that the film portrays as the main cause of corruption. Surrounded as she is by the consumer goods (cameras, CD decks, luxury cars) her father, a government servant, has illegitimately managed to acquire, Swapna’s desire for a relationship with Chandu never has a chance, notwithstanding her beauty and intelligence. Chandu, on the other hand, desires to marry Ishwarya, a Blue Cross member obsessed with animals, marked by her clothing and concerns as upper caste-class. While her obsession is gently ridiculed in the film, it functions as an index of her caste-class superiority (and therefore of Chandu’s desire for her), most vividly in the sequence involving the ox-cart driver Mallesham whom she berates for ill-treating his animal. Although Ishwarya embodies Chandu’s aspirations to be successful and modern, she is not shown surrounded by consumer durables. Presented to us as naive, pure and innocent, she stands apart from the world of the everyday and above the corrupt system that Swapna and Chandu both
The depiction of Chandu as seeking a government job by any means because of his ambition to marry Ishwarya, and not necessarily because of his desire for consumer goods, helps the audience to see him as vulnerable and likeable for the better part of the film.

**The Eastern-Modern**

We have tried to show how the narrative structure of *Bharateeyudu* produces an ambivalence towards the dominant model of modernity/nationhood that India has emulated in the post-Independence years. The ambivalence is accompanied, we contend, by a gesturing towards another model, that of the ‘Asian tigers’. This model might well be called the ‘eastern-modern’. The gesturing is endorsed by the rewriting of nationalist history which we have already described. The film represents the INA, with its ‘eastern’ connections, taking centre stage in the story of the freedom struggle; the first nationalist leader shown in flashback is Subhas Chandra Bose, and it is the INA’s confrontation with British troops near Kohima which, in the cinematic narrative, directly precedes and is therefore imaged as leading to the acquisition of Independence. Independence, however, becomes in the film a promise betrayed, resulting in the degenerate present in which both Nehruvian welfarism and western modernity are implicated. While the first has led to the proliferation of inefficient and corrupt government servants, the second has been responsible for the creation of consumerist desire on which corruption is seen to feed (Chandu promises as bribe a colour TV set to the police inspector and a ‘laser disc’ to the government doctor). The film’s narrative onslaught on this state of affairs does not, curiously enough, manifest itself in an argument for doing away with the welfarist state or in an attempt to propagate a Gandhian critique of western lifestyles. Instead, *Bharateeyudu* seems to clamour, as a number of popular films of the 1980s have been doing, for ‘clean governance’ and an ‘efficient’ state. In doing so, the film articulates the unease with liberalization shared by various groups in India, despite the general consensus within the mainstream political parties that globalization and liberalization are inevitable. The unease about liberalization raises questions in the film about the particular model of the ‘modern’ that India could adopt. Unlike the ‘tiny island states’ around us, we have failed to progress, says Senapati in his TV address. It is corruption that is responsible for our ‘backwardness’, according to him, and it is the state machinery that harbours corruption. The rest of the east, however, is quite different: their states are so well-regulated as to be the least corrupt in the world.

A series of references to this ‘east’ marks the filmic text: the INA headquarters, where Senapati’s valour is recognized by Subhas Chandra Bose, who pins a medal on him, was in East Asia, as the film reminds us the ‘east’ is also the ‘origin’ of the march on British forces in India which
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leads in the filmic narrative to the final confrontation with the colonizers; in the cable TV sequence, we hear the dialogue between the doctor and Senapati about the reasons for the prosperity of the small islands of Asia, and later the police are told, as an explanation why the telecast could not be stopped, that the video-cassette was sent to Singapore and telecast from the Philippines. The final scene of the film shows us a phone booth against a background of skyscrapers. Senapati, who has escaped from the airport conflagration caused by his pursuit and killing of Chandu, and is now dressed for the first time in a western-style suit, speaks to the CBI officer in India. 'So you’re alive,’ says Krishnaswami. 'Where are you?' A glimpse of a banner in Chinese or Japanese indicates that it is from East Asia that Senapati is keeping watch over India, where he will return whenever he is needed.

A standard explanation for the economic success of the Asian tigers has suggested that they combine ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ in equal measure. The uniqueness of Bharateeyudu lies in its refusal of this explanation, indeed in its attempt to unsettle the very terms of the discussion. A strategy employed by the film to re-figure the tradition-modernity relationship is to disorganize, as Shankar’s earlier film Kaadalan does, the binary rural-urban created, although in different ways, by both commercial and parallel cinema in post-Independence India. Senapati the old farmer is the person in the film most at ease with modern gadgets – he is shown driving a variety of vehicles; using a spray-can to paint the old van he buys; speaking into a cordless phone. As part of the suturing which enables us to accept Senapati over Chandu, no distance is shown between the old man and the products of new technology. Senapati inhabits the space occupied by these objects in such a way that they are naturalized, seen in use, not fetishized as in the Melbourne song sequence which features Chandu’s displaced desires. Senapati is completely in command at the private TV station as well, operating the machinery single-handedly without any fumbling. After the telecast killing in which he wears his INA uniform, as part of the public celebration of his actions we have a brief catwalk shot of a row of fashionable young men on the street dressed in INA outfits, except that they are not khaki but blue, mauve, and pistachio green. We hear in voiceover a girl exclaiming that all these young fellows ‘look like Bose’. Given its heterogeneous structure of address, the film can effortlessly incorporate a historical figure into a fashion statement. The effect is to suggest that the support for Senapati’s diagnosis and remedy is truly popular, shown by the film as cutting across class-caste, including the ‘modern’ youth, the meritorious students who put up the cutout of Senapati, the cobbler’s wife, and the poor peasant who threatens a government official seeking a bribe from him. The resonance of Bharateeyudu, we have argued, lies in its ambivalence towards consumerism, often imaged as greed for ‘western’ commodities. This
greed is identified in the film as the chief cause of corruption, the malady of our present. Corruption, implies the narrative, comes from selfishness, from not being nationalist, from an unbridled craving for the modern. Only by putting the nation first can Indians break the link between consumerism and corruption; only by ceasing to fetishize the products of western technology can one learn how to make them one’s own. In this attempt to become modern, not by capitulating to the ‘West’ but by retaining a strong sense of sovereignty, East Asia plays a prominent role in Bharateeyudu. The last sequence in the film – Senapati calling the cops from East Asia – suggests that this notion of nationalism, of Indianess, is perhaps best preserved not on Indian soil but by the expatriate. Where Bharateeyudu differs from contemporary Hindi films which invoke the Non-Resident Indian is in placing this figure not in the West but in East Asia. Reinscribed in the film as a primary site of anti-colonial struggle, the region implicitly becomes an image of the (modern but non-western) future. That the film should signify a possible Indian future in terms of someone else’s present, and that this tale of corruption and consumerism should invoke such popular acclaim, points, as we have argued, to the widespread anxiety about liberalization, the sense of losing control, that characterize our time.26

NOTES

We would like to thank Rekha Pappu, K. Murali, R. Srivatsan and Vivek Dhareshwar for their provocative comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1. This is a distinction made by popular film magazines and regular moviegoers. A ‘class’ film is distinguished from a ‘mass’ film by its supposed seriousness and ‘higher’ aesthetic quality. Chiranjeevi is a Telugu star and Rajnikant a Tamil one.

2. Earlier films by these directors were usually made in Tamil and dubbed into Telugu. Now they are being dubbed simultaneously into Telugu and Hindi, with some sequences re-shot to provide the local linguistic context. These dubbed films circulate in different political-cultural spaces from the ‘original’ Tamil versions. Our response to Bharateeyudu is to the Telugu version, which played to full houses for over sixty days in fifty theatres all over Andhra Pradesh state, and went on to become one of the biggest hits of the year.

3. This polemic can be seen operating at different levels of the filmic text. There is, for example, the comic scene at the racetrack when Chandu’s sidekick Subbiah is trying to provoke his béte-noir Pandireswara Rao. The latter is in the stands with his young son, who is dark, short and plump as his father is. When Subbiah asks for the name of the boy, the father says, beaming: ‘Arvind Swamy’. The reference is to Maniratnam’s tall, fair hero of the same name, the star of Roja and Bombay.


5. Direction, screenplay and story by Shankar. The Tamil version is called Indian
The Indian National Army was first formed in Singapore in September 1942 by Mohan Singh, an Indian officer of the British Army who had decided to go to the Japanese for help in freeing India from colonial rule. The INA’s recruits were Indian prisoners of war of the Japanese army which had just then occupied Singapore. Owing to serious differences which broke out between INA leaders and the Japanese, the former were arrested. In 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose was brought to Singapore with the help of the Germans and Japanese, and after setting up the Provisional Government of Free India he began to reorganize the INA. Civilians, including women, were recruited for the INA from India as well. One battalion of the INA accompanied the Japanese army to the Indo-Burma frontier and took part in the Imphal campaign. The Japanese retreat and eventual surrender, however, put paid to the military hopes of the INA as well. The INA had its origins in part in the revolutionary terrorist movement (begun in different parts of India and the Indian diaspora in the early part of the century and reorganized in the 1920s and early 1930s) which engaged in direct and violent action against British targets, somewhat to the discomfort of the Indian National Congress to which many of the terrorists also owed allegiance.

The reality effect is achieved by the merging of documentary footage with filmic narrative, sometimes by superimposing images on existing footage, as for example in the sequence in which the ‘real’ Bose pins a medal on the chest of the filmic character Senapati.

In order to juxtapose the different strands of the national movement, several campaigns from different decades are compressed together in the filmic narrative.

In our reading of the place of Bose in the history of nationalism, one of the books we found most useful is Bidyut Chakrabartty’s *Subhas Chandra Bose and Middle-Class Radicalism, A Study in Indian Nationalism 1928-1940* (Delhi: OUP, 1990). For a general history of Indian nationalism, see Bipan Chandra, et. al., *India’s Struggle for Independence* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989).

Subhas Chandra Bose has never featured in a major way in nationalist iconography. He has certainly never been seen as equal to Gandhi and Nehru, although *Bharateeyudu’s* narrative structure seeks to position him, from the perspective of the present, as more significant than either of them.

A little joke is tucked into the filmic narrative as if to mark the absence of the real Gandhi. The only time we see a reference to this name is when we see a nameplate of Swapna’s father. The name of this corrupt government official, a transport supervisor, is M. Gandhi Krishna.

A reference to the 1990 announcement of the implementation of reservations (sometimes dismissively called quotas) in public sector jobs and educational institutions for the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). The announcement was followed by a major agitation, predominantly urban, by upper caste youth, leading to the fall of the central government.

The film, while it seems to celebrate consumerism in the first two song sequences, for example, simultaneously also appears to suggest that the desire for consumer goods is closely linked to corruption.

When Krishnaswami brings home-cooked food for the old man who is in custody, Senapati asks whether he has ‘changed his “route”’. ‘No’, replies the policeman ‘My route is the same as yours.’

The presentation of a near-totalitarian justice might indeed be read as ‘fascist’, as the star Kamalahasan himself does in accounting for the appeal of the film (Interview with Khalid Mohamed, *Filmfare*, July 1996), but we feel that this description forecloses any attempt to analyse the ambivalent politics of the film. Most heroic figures in popular cinema can be read with equal certitude as
fascist. If we accept this kind of reading, we run the risk of fitting the ‘mass appeal’ of popular films and their complicated structuring of consent into an overly simple analytical frame.


17. This is due, we feel, to the heterogeneous structure of address of popular cinema. Meaning is not necessarily produced by an individual auteur (director/scriptwriter), but rather by the response of audiences formed by a variety of political questions that carry different valencies for each segment of spectators. Hence, as we implied earlier, the Tamil and Telugu versions of the film are viewed in signifying spaces that are quite different from each other.

18. The film also mobilizes the signifier of complexion in the representation of caste-class difference. Even without such a deployment, our argument is that the gesture of the shoe produces an entire structure of allusions which performs the function we have described: that of etching caste-class identity for the viewer.

19. One of the methods of agitation adopted by anti-Mandalites was to polish shoes in public places, implying that they would be reduced to taking up menial jobs such as these (associated with the lower castes), if reservations were extended to backward castes.

20. The Senapati cutout that is put up at an intersection after his entry into the public imagination has a legend underneath which tells us who has erected it: ‘Students who have got seats without giving donations’. Also, in the second flashback, Ambedkar’s photo figures prominently on the wall, his image looming large between the faces of Senapati and the sub-inspector who is asking for a bribe. This apparent discrediting by association of Ambedkar could also be seen as part of the film’s general discrediting of nationalist leaders other than Subhas Chandra Bose.

21. In the wake of Senapati’s televised killing of the doctor, an official from the treasury brings to the cobbler’s wife the money the government owes her. As he leaves, she says, referring to Senapati: ‘Who is that man? If he stands for election, my vote is for him.’ In Senapati, we find the authoritarian (male) figure who proclaims his intention to root out corruption – shades of Seshan – and is solicited by the public to seek electoral office. ‘Fear is my weapon,’ says Senapati in voiceover when he decides to avenge his daughter’s death and crusade against corruption, ‘fear of punishment, fear of death.’ Fear and the violence which produces it are presented in Bharateeyudu as the sole guarantors of both stability and civic responsibility. T.N.Seshan was until his retirement in 1996 the Chief Election Commissioner, known for his pursuit of violators of the election code.

22. In a strategy of displacement, however, a fantasy song-sequence with Chantu and Ishwarya set in Australia likens the woman to a cellular phone, declares her voice to be ‘as though ... digitally cut’, and wonders if Brahma the creator used a computer to produce her.

23. A half-page newspaper advertisement appeared in Andhra Jyothi (June 30, 1996) stating that the film Bharateeyudu is dedicated to the freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose on the occasion of his hundredth birthday. The ad has a tricolor map of India on which is partly superimposed a black-and-white sketch of Bose and a coloured painting of the character Senapati in INA uniform. In the lower right-hand corner are photographs of the producer A.M. Ratnam, the director Shankar, and the music-composer A.R. Rahman.

24. Although we are shown the televised killing as though it is taking place in real time, the audience realizes later that there is a time-gap between Senapati’s production of the event and its telecast.

25. The empowerment of the ‘ordinary man’ by Senapati’s actions is plotted even
into the comedy track of the film. Chandu’s sidekick Subbiah threatens his bête noire Pandireshwara Rao into issuing him a driver’s licence without the usual bribe.

26. We as authors of this paper do not share the diagnosis of the present offered by the film, and find Senapati’s resolution politically problematic. However, we would like to distance ourselves from simplistic readings which see in the film only an apologia for liberalization.
A brief but fierce deluge following the dust storm the night before had brought respite from the June heat – 116 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade the day before. Otherwise the consternation caused by the letter from America, with the added irritant of tempers and nerves frayed by unbridled temperatures, would have plunged not only Zareen and Cyrus but the entire family into despair and foreboding.

As it was, holding the letter in her inert fingers, the obscene photograph having already fluttered to the bedroom floor, Zareen found it hard to breathe. That Feroza should have chosen to send this photograph, of a man with his legs bared almost to his balls, was significant. Surely she must be aware of the assault on their parental sensibility. A subliminal cloud of nebulous conjectures and a terrible fear entered Zareen’s mind. She grasped the basic premise – that Feroza was preparing Cyrus and herself for a change – but a change of this magnitude? She was confronting the ‘unknown’, and she felt helpless in the face of it.

Once she had scanned the first few lines of the letter, her vision became so acute, so superbly lucid, that she felt able to absorb all the crowded lettering on the typed sheet without once needing to move her eyes. And then the sentences ballooned up disembodied, the words individually magnified, until they popped before her blurring sight. She felt a dizzying rush of blood to her head and was as close to fainting as she’d ever be.

After a while Zareen became conscious of the servants chattering in the kitchen, the cook laying the table for lunch, and as the initial shock wore off slightly, the news, with its tumult of ramifications, settled deeper into her sinking heart.

Feeling drained of strength and feeling each one of her forty years – she had crossed the distressing threshold the week before – Zareen hobbled over to the phone at her desk. With wildly wandering fingers she dialled part way through her mother’s number and then, thinking of the effect the news would have on Khutlibai, instead dialled her husband’s office. She heard three rings and then Cyrus’s preoccupied, ‘Hello.’

A wave of relief swept over Zareen at the thought of transmitting her anguish, and she began to cry.

‘What’s the matter?’ Cyrus’s panicked voice repeated the question,
Feroza: she said haltingly, sniffing between her sobs.

‘Feroza?’ Cyrus shouted, ‘What’s happened to Feroza?’

Zareen blew her nose, swallowed, and with a supreme effort of will, suspended her weeping to gasp, ‘She wants to marry a non.’

Cyrus found his wife huddled on their bed beneath the slowly rotating blades of the ceiling fan, her attractive eyes swollen, her elegant nose red. He gave her a commiserating hug and, pressing her beautiful head against his incipient paunch, scanned the letter silently. His eyes automatically focused on the significant sentences, the casual note their daughter had adopted stabbing his heart and guts like so many daggers.

Feroza wrote that she had met a wonderful boy at the University. Like he was also very shy. She had agreed to marry him. She knew they would be very upset, particularly her grandmothers, at the thought of her marrying a non-Parsee. His parents were Jews. The religious differences did not matter so much in America. They had decided to resolve the issue by becoming Unitarians. ‘Please, don’t be angry, and please try to make both my grannies understand. I love you all so much. I won’t be able to bear it if you don’t accept David.’

Zareen suddenly reached down, causing Cyrus’s reflexes to jump at the thought that his wife had fainted, and retrieved the photograph with the tips of her manicured nails as if the image was contaminated by disease. She showed it to Cyrus.

Zareen’s anxious eyes had already detected a sinister cast in her potential son-in-law’s blue eyes, a profile that struck her as actorishly handsome, phoney, and insincere, and frivolous gold-streaked, longish hair. But what upset Cyrus most were the pair over-developed and hairy thighs, which to his fearful eyes appeared to bulge as obscenely as a goat’s as they burst from a pair of frayed and patched denim shorts.

‘You’d better go at once,’ Cyrus said. ‘He can’t even afford a decent pair of pants! The bounder’s a fortune hunter. God knows what he’s already been up to.’

The last, an allusion to the imagined assault by those hairy thighs on the citadel of their daughter’s virtue, was not lost on Zareen. The furrow between her brows deepened and she withdrew into complete silence.

Ten days later, silently mouthing prayers, Zareen was on the Pan Am flight bound for Denver, Colorado.

The young Pakistani student sitting next to Zareen, awed by her handsome profile, the gust of exotic perfume, and the glitter of diamonds on her fingers, made a few desultory attempts at conversation. Finding her distracted and monosyllabic, he leafed through the flight magazine and, fidgeting forlornly in his seat, resigned himself to sleep.

After she had completed the twenty-one Yathas and five Ashem
Vahoos prescribed for such long and dangerous voyages, Zareen relaxed her grip on the crocodile-skin handbag on her lap. It contained two thousand dollars in traveller’s checks and five hundred in cash. Just before they left for the airport Cyrus had given her a slim envelope with a bank draft for ten thousand dollars. He had facetiously labelled it ‘bribe money’. She could at her discretion offer it, or part of it, to the handsome, hairy scoundrel to leave their daughter alone.

Alternately smiling, shaking her head, and making mulish faces, Zareen conversed astutely with her imagined adversary. Six hours after the Boeing had taken off from Karachi, her mind was still reeling from the murmur of last-minute advice and instruction imparted to her at the airport. She tried to remember all that Cyrus had said, all that Khutlibai—after she had fainted and been revived that day—had said, and everything that had happened at the clamorous rounds of daily family conferences once news of the letter had spread.

Behram and Jeroo had driven down from Rawalpindi, and Zareen felt enormously grateful at the way her relatives and close friends had rallied about, thankful for the stratagems the community had pondered and debated and for all their well-meant and useful advice.

For the subject was much larger than just Feroza’s marriage to an American. Mixed marriages concerned the entire Parsee community and affected its very survival. God knew, they were few enough. Only a hundred and twenty thousand in the whole world. And considering the low birth rate and the rate at which the youngsters were marrying outside the community—and given their rigid non-conversion laws and the zealous guardians of those laws—Parsees were a gravely endangered species.

There had been acrimonious arguments between the elders and the youngsters, who had grown considerably in the four years Feroza had been away, at the first hastily summoned family conference in Zareen’s sitting room.

While the air conditioner struggled to cool the horde—and grappled with the fluctuating voltage—the youngsters, candid in their innocence, wondered aloud why the news should strike their elders as such a calamity. They politely informed their parents that times had changed. They urged their uncles and aunts to enlarge their narrow minds and do the community a favour by pressing the stuffy old trustees in the Zoroastrian Anjuman in Karachi and Bombay to move with the times; times that were already sending them to study in the New World, to mingle with strangers in strange lands where mixed marriages were inevitable.

Jeroo and Behram’s daughter Bunny, who was by now a pert fifteen-year-old with light brown eyes and a dark ponytail she tossed frequently, said, ‘For God’s sake! You’re carrying on as if Feroza’s dead! She’s only getting married, for God’s sake!’
This outrage, coming after the insultingly patronizing tone adopted by the rest of the adolescents, was the last straw. The aunts, uncles, parents, and grandparents moulded their mournful features into pursed mouths and stern stares, and Jeroo, sensing the mood and consensus of the assembly, quickly quelled her daughter’s rebellion by yelling, ‘Don’t you dare talk like that! One more peep out of you, and I’ll slap your face!’

Across the room on a sofa, Bunny’s round-shouldered and self-effacing brother Dara, now seventeen years old and in his last year at school, sat back between two uncles and disappeared from view. All the other smirking, smug, and defiant little adolescents who had concurred with the girl’s sentiments and wiggled eagerly forward to sit on the edge of their seats, now opened their nervous eyes wide and looked at the forbidding presences uncertainly.

‘Apologize at once,’ Jeroo said. ‘You have no consideration for poor Zareen auntie’s feelings!’

The teenagers squeezed back in their seats and, safely tucked into the communal pack looking away from their cousin to the waxed parquet floor covered with Persian rugs, wisely withdrew their allegiance.

Bunny brushed her flushed cheeks with her fingers and without raising her bowed head, meekly said, ‘I’m sorry.’

This promptly fetched her Freny auntie and Rohinton uncle to their feet. Rohinton stepped up to the girl with stately deliberation and stroked her bowed head, while Freny lowered her bulk to share the cushioned stool with Bunny. Putting a placating arm round the tearful girl, Freny held her close and said, ‘Now, that’s my girl!’

After which, feeling called upon to reinforce community values, which were always in the process of being instilled, Freny dutifully said, ‘I’m sure your mother didn’t mean to sound so harsh. It’s just that we are so concerned for you. You know Parsee girls are not allowed into the fire temple once they marry out. You know what happened to Perin Powri.’

Perin Powri was the latest casualty. Having defied her family to marry a Muslim, she had died of hepatitis four years later. Although she had contracted the disease through an infected blood transfusion during surgery, many Parsees perceived the hidden hand of Divine displeasure. Honouring her last wishes, Perin’s family had flown her body to Karachi to be disposed of in the dokhma, or, as the British had dubbed it, the Tower of Silence.

Since the Parsees consider earth, water, and fire holy, they do not bury, drown, or burn polluted corpses. Instead, as a last act of charity, they leave the body exposed to the sun and the birds of prey, mainly vultures, in these open-roofed circular structures. In cities like Lahore, where there are too few Parsee to attract the vultures, the community buries its dead.

Perin Powri’s body was denied accommodation in the Karachi dokhma, and the priests refused to perform the last rites. Without the uthamna ceremony, the soul can not ascend to the crucial Chinwad Bridge, which,
depending on the person's deeds, either expands to ease the soul's passage to heaven, or contracts to plunge it into hell. Without the ceremony, the poor soul remains horribly trapped in limbo. Perin Powri's body was eventually buried in a Muslim graveyard, and the poor woman's appalling fate was dangled as an example of the evil consequence of such an alliance each time the occasion arose.

The refrain was then taken up by other aunts, who were as well trained as circus horses, and the names of other transgressors were recited, with each offence illuminating a new and tragic facet of the ill-considered unions. The litany followed an established order, and the names of the earliest miscreants were arrived at last.

'You know how Roda Kapakia wept when she was not allowed into the room with her grandmother's body,' continued Freny in solemn tones, naming another misguided woman, who had married a Christian. 'She was made to sit outside on a bench like a leper! Would you like that to happen to you when your grandmother dies?'

Thus alerted, Khutlibai jumped to her role with alacrity. Sitting across the room on a sofa, on which she had been swaying as if silently praying, she at once hid the lower half of her face in the edge of her sari and, looking at Bunny through foxy and brimming eyes, pleaded, 'No, no, don't do that! If you don't attend my last rites, my child, my sorrowful soul will find no peace, and it will haunt this world till the Day of Judgment'. And, being Feroza's grandmother as well, she pleaded, 'One child is on the verge of forsaking us. Promise me you won't break this old heart also.'

Khutlibai had contrived to make her vigorous person look so crumpled and close to death while she spoke that all the relatives once more glared at the disgraced girl.

Bunny, suspecting her grandmother had adroitly removed her dentures, gaped askance at her collapsed mouth and hurriedly said, 'Please don't worry, Granny, I'll never break your heart.'

But a distantly related aunt from the Parsee Colony, respected for her forthright and abrasive manner and known as 'Oxford aunt' (her husband had spent a year in Oxford learning to repair truck and tractor engines), was conscious that in all this talk to benefit the girls, the boys had been neglected. Inhaling mightily to fill out her chest she burst forth to say, 'What do you expect our girls to do? Our boys go abroad to study and end up marrying white mudums. You can't expect our girls to remain virgins all their lives!'

The aunts and uncles at once shifted their severe countenances to stare at the five boys scattered about the room until they squirmed in their seats.

Acutely conscious of her gangling thirteen-year-old grandson's discomfort, the discerning Soonamai stroked the boy's bony thigh and, in her quiet way, said, 'You won't marry a parjat will you? You must marry
a nice little Parsee girl of your own choice. And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Marry the girl you like.’

His buck teeth fanning out like white daisy petals, the excruciatingly slender adolescent gulped and tried to look as innocent, obedient, and accommodating as he could, while Soonamai continued to stroke his thigh with her soft, wrinkled hands.

The remaining boys scattered about the crowded room were coerced by similarly affecting dialogues to adopt corresponding attitudes. They dared not do otherwise under the scrutiny of their uncles, whose knowing eyes bored piercingly into theirs, as they displayed by their upright deportment and righteous countenances the resolute mettle that would keep them from marrying white mudums and from other equally alluring and infernal temptations.

These performances for the edification of the youngsters were staged with such regularity that the behaviour of both the young and the old was almost automatic, entailing no untoward effort.

Their parts played out satisfactorily, the children were summarily dismissed, together with the white-liveried and crisply turbaned new servant, who was passing the drinks and hors-d’oeuvres. Now the formidable think tank of uncles, aunts, parents, and friends, talking vociferously, settled down to the solemn business of thrashing out a strategy.

All options were considered, angles analysed, opinions aired. ‘If this David fellow says this, you say that! If Feroza says that, you say this!’

Zareen was alternately instructed, ‘Be firm. Exercise your authority as her mother!’ and ‘If you can’t knock him out with sugar, slug him with honey.’

They further confused her by directing, ‘Don’t melt if she cries. If Feroza throws a tantrum, throw one twice as fierce!’ and ‘But be careful; if you’re too harsh, she’ll rebel. Once she becomes naffat, she won’t care if you or I approve or disapprove.’

The Pakistani student in the seat next to Zareen’s covertly eyed her from time to time. Intimidated by the range and ferocity of her grimaces, he quietly ate his dinner and, once again contorting his body to accommodate it to his narrow seat, fell fitfully asleep. Clutching her handbag beneath her sari, Zareen dozed on and off.
Finally, Room Number 12, the last in the row of private wards, and Dr. Mehta’s favourite.

The patient sat up in bed. ‘May I borrow your spirit, doctor?’
‘I beg your pardon?’
‘What I mean is – may I borrow some doctors’ spirit from you?’
Dr. Mehta couldn’t help laughing. ‘What d’you need it for?’
‘Oh, just as a cleaning fluid. See this record of mine?’ He reached out a hand and lifted a worn-out LP from the bedside table. ‘It’s got a lot of dust in its grooves. I’m trying to clean it up.’

_Song Without End_ – read the doctor on the sleeve of the record.

‘In fact,’ confessed the patient gleefully, ‘I even went down to Civil Lines, looking for some record cleaning solution and a new needle for my old stereo. Couldn’t find either. Obsolete gadgetry, I was told.’

Dr. Mehta’s face grew stern. ‘You left the hospital?’
‘Yes. In defiance of all your commands.’ The patient grinned.
‘Damn you, Narendra! Who gave you permission to leave this ward and go hobnobbing about the town?’ demanded Dr. Mehta, wrathful.

The patient knew just how far he could stretch the bonds of old friendship. ‘I don’t need anyone’s permission once I’ve set my heart on something.’

All the interns were having trouble keeping a straight face. These little exchanges every morning and evening enlivened the rounds. But Dr. Mehta was not amused.
‘I see,’ he said drily. ‘And how exactly did you go on this ... excursion?’
‘I walked.’
‘Walked! And however did you negotiate the traffic? You aren’t even steady on your feet yet.’
‘Easy. I had my stick. I even thought of fixing a large L on my back.’
Here everyone burst out laughing, Dr. Mehta too. And when the merriment subsided, Dr. Mehta marshalled all the severity at his command. ‘You’re not to repeat this sort of thing!’
‘Why not?’

And the doctor answered with his patent cardiologists’ quip: ‘The heart has its reasons.’ Then he said more earnestly, ‘Look, Narendra. You’re on the wrong side of sixty. The finest case of Mitral Stenosis in recent
months. I’m not too happy with that last valvotomy we did on you. Looks like the enlargement of the diameter isn’t all it should be. I’ve been wondering whether ... Anyway, I’ll let you know what we’ve decided in a day or two. Meanwhile, do curb your excesses. Listen to your music, read your books, but just take it easy.’

’Hish! You’re like a nagging wife, Mehta,’ protested the patient.

And as the doctor turned to go the patient called after him, ’Don’t forget the spirit, Mehta!’

’I shan’t,’ called back the doctor. The juniors knew that their chief always left this particular ward cheered.

The next morning Dr. Mehta found the patient tinkering with an ancient contraption on the table.

’What’s this?’ he asked. ’Why, an old turntable record player! Battery operated?’

’That’s right,’ said the patient. ’I sent for it – and a batch of my old records.’

’Ah,’ remembered the doctor, rummaging in his pocket. ’That’s the spirit, man.’ He handed over the bottle of spirit.

’Thanks,’ said the patient. ’Now I can get the old things turning smoothly again.’

’But what an old ruin!’ exclaimed Dr. Mehta, examining the record player. ’I had one of these about thirty years ago. D’you mean to say it actually works?’

’Occasionally. Let me get my records polished and I’ll play them for you. Do you have any time to spare today?’

The doctor reflected. ’I can manage a quarter of an hour, maybe.’

’Good, I’ll have my Mozarts all cleaned up in an hour.’

’See you at one-thirty then,’ said Dr. Mehta. There was something disturbing that he had to break to this patient. Tactfully. Nothing like doing it gently, with a bit of music playing.

’And how about a glass of juice out of the old flask, Mehta?’ offered the patient when the doctor appeared at 1.30. ’It isn’t infected.’

’I hope it is,’ smiled Dr. Mehta.

’Eh?’ The patient looked puzzled.

’With your special vitality virus,’ complimented the doctor, settling down. ’What’s this now?’

The patient selected a record out of the dozen strewn on his bed. ’This, my dear Mehta, is the Turkish Concerto.’

’Oh, oh!’ mocked the doctor affectionately.

The old turntable creaked into motion. It swung its shining black weight in unsteady, wobbling circuits and a breath of music fluttered into the room. Little trinkets of melody went reeling on the floor. Whimsical phrases of tune somersaulted up to the windows. The patient closed his eyes, enthralled. And when the disc swirled to a final stop, he opened his eyes and said slowly, ’D’you know, Mehta, I once went all the way to
Vienna to stand by this man’s grave for a moment. Yes. It was in a remote cemetery called the Beidermeyer cemetery of St Marx. A slow-flaming Austrian autumn, all the leaves glinting in a slanting gold drizzle, a lotion of sun tipped over the boughs. The air like a fine membrane, cracking like unfolding cellophane as one walked through it, looking for that grave. A large, lonely cemetery, entirely baroque, with cherubs and angels leaning over mildewed crosses – cast iron benches – shaded avenues smoking in a sifted dust of light. And that particular grave – a pillar with his name on it – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – in a small bed of flowers. And all round it, under the branches, such an inlay of faint sparkles on the ground. I thought I had to say something to him but I felt such a fool. So all I said was: I’ve known your music for years. I’ve loved it. Thank you. I even visited his home. 5 Domgasse was the address; and the name of the house, Figarohaus. A house with an ordinary enough approach through two arching doors up a narrow stone staircase and then a polished door with that name again. Into a beautiful inner lobby with pink frescoed walls. And in large glass cases his work, scribbled on yellowed sheets in his own hand. A small, slanting, elemental code. It was funny, coming straight from the grave of an absent man to the physical presence of his work. I thought: Here’s the music he composed, and there lies the hand that wrote it all – decomposed ...

It was at this instant that Mehta thought fit to pull his patient’s leg with a teasing interruption.

‘Good God!’ he breathed in gentle malice. ‘But what a wretched poet you are!’

The patient looked immediately abashed. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘No poet – but I do get carried away at times. Did you like this piece? It’s my favourite.’

‘Very much indeed,’ said the doctor. ‘But I do wish you’d change this old record player of yours. Get a better music system, a CD player, maybe.’

His companion was incensed. ‘Whatever for?’ he demanded. ‘I’ve been getting this one repaired for years whenever it breaks down. It isn’t going to change the notation, is it?’

‘No, but a superior music system shall make the same notation shine through better. Like a healthy body ...’

‘Rubbish!’ dismissed the patient. ‘I can’t discard my obsolete old frame, can I? I keep getting my valves repaired and the old heart keeps pumping pretty well.’

The doctor was amused. ‘That’s what I am, am I? A mechanic?’

‘Exactly. But the other day I tried cleaning up Song Without End – that was a film about Liszt – with a nasty acid powder recommended to me by a friend. It ruined it, erased the music entirely. Makes you humble, doctor, to remember how all that magic is contained by a physical object after all. And when it’s damaged ...’
‘But other cassettes continue playing the same music, you know.’
‘That’s some comfort. And the notation’s all written down somewhere.’
‘In our genes, who knows!’
The patient took a long quaff of juice and pulled the doctor’s leg. ‘You and your wretched medical textbook mind, Mehta!’
And the doctor laughed, enjoying himself, and retorted, ‘You and your wretched decadent European mind, Narendra! What’re you doing here anyway? In India’s sprawling cow belt?’
‘Nonsense, it was a cow belt when the Aryans came down and spoke to sun and rain and wind. It remains a cow belt still. Rather more reliably pastoral. Along with the cows and buffaloes in the streets, the men and women look bovine too!’
The doctor held his sides and roared with laughter.
‘No, honest.’ The patient wiped away the tears of merriment from his glasses. ‘I feel quite at home. Quite an Orpheus, in fact.’
‘Good. Strum your lyre while Rome burns, man. What was that fellow’s name now? Orpheus, wasn’t it?’
‘Your ignorance, Mehta, is quite shockingly abysmal! That was Nero. Cardiological theory has undermined your cultural quality. Well, well, well. Look at me. A retired teacher. Financially low class, culturally high class. On the whole I flatter myself. I insist it’s better than being financially high class and culturally low class.’
Never in this hospital had Dr. Mehta laughed with a patient more. ‘What a snob you are, Narendra!’ he exclaimed.
‘Oh, absolutely. Not that I’m above middle class and middle brow conversation, Mehta. Drink up now. What’s it to be? Politics? Films? Are you for Bikram Singh or against him and his party?’
‘He’s dicey.’
‘So what? He’s a fine candidate. Not distinguished for any excellence but not remarkable for any vice, which, you’ll grant, is the right chemistry now for a tolerable candidate.’
Suddenly Dr. Mehta looked at his watch. ‘Good heavens!’ he cried. ‘It’s past 2.30! I must be off. Thanks for the juice. Oh yes, before I go – we’ve decided to operate on Friday – 8 a.m. Let’s try giving you a synthetic valve this time. It’s your third operation, you know, so ...’
The patient had tensed. Dr. Mehta rose to his feet and said softly in an altered tone, ‘Not to worry, Narendra. Leave this third operation to me. I’ll see you through. We’ll have you – how d’you put it? – fit as a fiddle.’
He gave the patient’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. For a long moment neither spoke. Then, the old roguish grin returned and the patient asked playfully, ‘Are fiddles fit, Mehta?’
And Dr. Mehta grinned back, relieved, and asked, ‘Medically or musically?’
They laughed. The patient shrugged. ‘Who cares’, he whispered. ‘Not
I. Operations are your line. Opera’s mine.’

‘Both, my dear man, need a theatre!’ remarked Dr. Mehta. At the door
he paused, embarrassed by his own emotion. ‘Remember what I said,
Narendra. Friday. 8 a.m.. I’ll see you through with this.’

It happened that night. They tried hard at the hospital to keep the
news from him but such things cannot be hidden. The hospital went into
depth mourning for a day. It was in silence that he learnt that Dr. Mehta
had died of a sudden heart failure.

It was in silence too that he received the news that he was now to be
operated on by the young Dr Venkat Rao, no less a surgeon nor a man.

And it was in silence that he was wheeled on his hospital trolley to the
Pre-Operation room, seven o’clock on Friday morning. All he heard,
lying on his back, was the trundle of the wheels on the uneven floor.
‘Tumbrils!’ he thought absurdly, and stopped in amazement as a little
click sounded in the interiors of his brain and a familiar voice scoffed,
‘Tumbrils! This wretched, decadent European mind of yours!’ It was of
course his own mind, he told himself, playing out its accustomed circuits
of preserved tones.

The solemn light came on. The masked faces gathered round him in a
gentle, radiant hush. The anaesthesia awoke him slowly into sleep and
his far-flung mind resumed its several secret lives.

That was when they heard him quarrelling in a broken mutter. ‘What
an astonishing old joker, really. Well, thanks very much for the pleasure
... of your company, Mehta.’

They did their best but he hadn’t a chance. The scribble of the electro-
cardiographic tracing on the cardiac monitor scripted the draft of his
living continuity like the score of a wayward composer. He slipped away,
still under anaesthesia, out of the dark, damaged grooves of his own
recorded being and beyond their repair or recall.

None of them ever knew who it was who performed that operation. Or
whether the patient recognized his surgeon. Or another like him who
helped him across. Or when the operation ended and the audition began.
They laid down their instruments and stood speechless in mute,
orchestrated unison. The lit up theatre stayed still as theatres do, just for
an instant, before the ovation explodes.
The squirrels have been chasing each other all morning — there are two of them. I can hear their claws clattering up and down the trees — their tails swollen but ragged — they do not lose their balance although they leave so much broken. And they have driven away the crows.

The lean saplings whip and whip the blueness while the squirrels leap from branch to branch to grass — the cracked wood echoing its own rage. And then the grass: grass where bees burn sucking in, sucking in whatever they can find in this sun — unbearable — the bees look angry in my stare. Or is it simply determination? A black and yellow concentration against green thorns.

But it is the squirrels who throw their wired energy around me: my ears stung, my skin itchy from their agitation, so I cannot sink into a book, I cannot disappear into a story that should hold me.

I don’t know if it is lust or anger that makes the squirrels fling their bodies against the trees like that — their spines so resilient. Snake-like snapings, and then they turn to give me monkey-like stares.
I don’t know if it is always the same squirrel
doing the chasing – or do they switch
positions – doing something to each other
so the one who was chased and caught
feels compelled to turn around
and begin the chase again.
It is getting hot.
Too hot for such movement.
But it is good for anger,
good for raging lust. The sky is naked,
it is a nude in its eloquence.

Even the air feels stunned
from the constant noise of whipping.
How the leaves slap the wind:
they are reckless, careless,
they don’t believe they could ever be torn.

Even when the squirrels are hidden
behind the leaves, they are not quiet
but high-pitched – clickings, a rasping,
a scraping against –
a scraping into –
bones – bones –

But I cannot see what they do.
I don’t know if they scratch each other
or if it’s only the fruit they bite into.

Is this the garden you dream of?
IS THIS THE GARDEN YOU’RE STUCK IN?
MEETING THE ARTIST IN DURBAN

My name is Philomen. I am self-taught –
This is red-ivory, here, a kudo –
People think I am crazy because I get my wood out of the river –
I don’t chop down trees. I sit by the river for many hours watching for wood. I fish for wood. This piece, this kudo took three days to finish.
Oh I can find many branches – tambouti red-ivory – the Zulu woman bends like that – very low down she goes with the wood. I am self-taught.
I go outside – I stay in the bush – I watch the birds. I watch kudo – I plant new trees. People think I am crazy because I spend all day looking for wood in the river. I don’t chop trees. No, my father did not teach me this. I am self-taught.
I taught myself English also – when I speak with you I learn more English. There is a lot of fighting – my people they beat their women – that is why I carved a woman bent down – but she is big very big, you see how she looks through her legs.
My memories of being taught to read are painful, letters of the alphabet had a will of their own and never came together in any predictable way. Lines were different, one could make up stories as one went along, bending each line to one’s will. Growing up in a house where the word was paramount may perhaps explain the escape into a parallel realm. The tactile pleasure of moving a line across an alabaster surface – the physicality of colour.

There were surfaces to draw on and to colour, since the beginning of memory. My mother, who taught me to read, was the provider of the colour pencils and chalks; and, later on, the paintbox, a standard birthday request. There were paintings on walls, and pictures in books to look at; dearly familiar, long before words revealed their meanings. My father, who was often absent, I believed to be the author of all the paintings on the walls. I never knew the reason my aunt squealed with laughter when, at age 6, I solemnly told her that my father had painted all the pictures in the books that lined the living room shelves. The realization that poetry was his gift came when I turned 8, and he went to prison for five years. Each poem from prison, received by letter post, was passed around like a talisman; and when published, fetched twenty rupees, which happily translated into new shoes for my sister and myself, a visit to the cinema, storybooks and the dreaded vitamin supplement, dedicatedly thrust down our throats by our harassed mother. That poetry was important to so many people, and elicited strong responses, was evident. But one also learnt as a child that deeply felt emotions, in response to external events, could somehow find form and a voice of consequence.

Some time later, coming back to painting after an interruption of several years spent as a young mother, I tried clumsily to voice the pain, caused by the blood-shed in the struggle for Bangladesh, in a series of paintings called ironically ‘Sohni Dharti’ (Beautiful Land). Only two of the works in the series have survived, both in public collections, the Punjab Arts Council Lahore, and the National Gallery in Islamabad. Encountering them now, they seem crude as a record of a trauma of great magnitude, but they were an attempt to be truthful to my time. And perhaps the attempt itself is part of one’s inherited baggage, like the colour of one’s eyes, inability to sing in tune, a passion for green chillies, and a weakness
for giggling in the face of pomposity.

Once the decision to study at the National College of Arts in Lahore had been made at the age of 17, I was inclined to study design, not being convinced that I had either the talent or the passion to be a painter. But, going to the Bath Academy of Art at Corsham in 1962 or, more specifically, to Howard Hodgkin’s painting class changed that. He had the reputation of being a caustic tyrant in the classroom and students quailed before his piercing eyes. But I found him to be soft-spoken, almost diffident in the way he gently steered one through exercises in traditional painting methods. His seminars were brimful of provocative ideas and drove me to sit in the library, night after night, trying to encompass the myriads of references which emanated in all directions in his two-hour sessions. The dazzle of colour in Bonnard’s bathtub nudes and the sensuality of Rajpur paintings were part of the mosaic experienced in Howard’s classes. As one lost one’s fear of his presence, one saw a glimmer of the possibility of saying things in paint. Adrian Heath was another influence at Corsham, witty, kind, with an insistence on the strength of composition emerging from the centre of the space one encountered. The intimidation of scale was experienced and overcome in his studio. The three years at Corsham, eight miles from Bath, were kaleidoscopic in influences, experiences, friendships and the shaping of some sort of vision, occasionally through a camera lens, moving and still, and on a canvas.

Much before that, years before, at home in Lahore, there were always painters coming and going out of the house. Moyene Najmi, Shemza, Ali Imam, Safdar, Shakir Ali — all ‘uncles’ whose work and persons were taken for granted. Only Chughtai was the elusive hermit, reputed never to come out of his studio in Ravi Road — but there are vague recollections of his being somewhere in one’s childhood. The others were all noisy, flamboyant, who came at odd times, drinking, eating, arguing. Except Zainul Abedeen, who would visit from Dhaka, gentle, unobtrusive house guest. He would entertain us by making deft sketches with an instantly produced reed pen. It became apparent in time that what all the painters painted was ‘still life’ and ‘landscape’ and ‘nudes’, never real life.

Later, as a teacher at the National College of Arts, I was confronted with issues, such as the imposition of colonial genres, and the struggles of multiple visions and choices. Shakir Ali — painter, teacher, Principal — was a benign presence, but it was my contemporaries in the 1970s and my students who were in continual disturbing dialogue.

Then television became my new medium, and painting took a back seat as performance in satire became a preoccupation. Shoaib, my husband, wrote the shows, our small group rehearsed, bantered and ad-libbed our way through the absurdity of life as we lived it. Pakistan was always ground for the humour we put across for an audience which was alluringly large and receptive. The public response after each week’s
show was phenomenal; the feedback, stimulating, provocative, lively.

All came to a halt in 1977, with General Ziaul Haq’s martial rule. Television was contra-indicated in no uncertain terms for the likes of us. It was back to the personal format of camera, paper, canvas, paint and a minuscule audience.

I suppose it has been described before as the best of times and the worst. Friends turned informers while the timid withstood the worst with poetic valour. One witnessed the insidious way of dictatorship, when life went on as usual with its relentless comforts and reassurances. As tongues froze and hearts disintegrated, small gestures of loyalty held one entranced, with faith and promise of the future.

So painting became both a refuge and an act of defiance. The medium struggled to become a message, as one worked around the images that permeated one’s being. I took journeys around Pakistan, with a camera, on an ostensible quest to record women and children. Tribal areas, the lakes of Sind, the boat people, dusty villages on the edge of the desert, streets, apertures, tents. It was as though one was re-establishing one’s sanity, in an increasingly insane environment of public floggings and hangings. This was not the world I knew, there was no explaining the brutality and its acceptance. Photography became a deliberation about the other realities that had always existed. I spent hours, days, nights in the darkroom, juggling with image, texture, tone – piecing together messages which spoke with persistence and, hopefully, with truth.

My children’s photo exhibition in Islamabad in 1980 had a poem specially written by Faiz for the brochure. Now in self-exile in Beirut, his poems came in letters, awaited eagerly, recited, memorised, published by friends – sung also, at private gatherings, recorded, passed around, talismanic once again. A strange transposition, he was the one who was ‘free’ in the confines of Beirut; at home, all were in custody.

In March, 1981, Shoaib was arrested, 30 years to the day to Faiz’s arrest in 1951. My daughter Mira was, not strangely, exactly my age, in the surrealist re-run. It was a short stint, a couple of months, unlike my father’s – but the cycle imposed itself on the canvas. I spent a summer in Beirut, with the children visiting their grandparents, and witnessed the intricate complexity of the civil war, the Palestinian struggle, the daily bombings, street battles, and the manifold ways of survival – all appeared in the work of the next few years. The Shatila and Sabra refugee-camp massacres began a series of works which borrowed imagery from many sources, including news photos of the camps; but, back home, other images appeared – birth and rebirth, the tree, leaves withering, dying, reappearing, insisting on hope in the face of grief.

For years, I had resisted having a solo exhibition of my paintings – convinced that I had nothing to say of great significance. Once, bantering with the senior painter Khalid Iqbal who had also foregone the chance of a solo show, I had promised him I would show my work ‘when I am 40’.
Forty was now here, and the work struggled in its many mediums and messages – in crayon, collage, ink, water-colour, oil on canvas, the motif of leaves ‘runs through like a frieze, a placement suggestive of its symbolism of life, resistance, non-acceptance and rebellion’.

The donning of the chaadar as a matter of policy by women ‘representatives’ in parliament, at a time when the legal status of women was being eroded, underlined the hypocrisy of state edicts. The female body, so dangerous, so challenging, – smothered and silenced, it took on fresh meanings of vulnerability and tenacity.

The nudes in my work were either odes to the poetry and celebration of life or defiant witnesses flouting restraint. The image, although emblematic, was always lyrical, a counterfoil to the culture of violence. Press-clippings of police action against women and political workers were laid onto the paper in layers, with washes of water-colour and gouache, subduing their intensity, making the images go quietly into undertones.

The paintings were small, reflecting the desire to be deciphered close-to. They were also easy to move in a hurry, in case of a raid on the Gallery, which was a familiar occurrence. Together with two other artists, I had the dubious distinction of having my work removed a few hours before the opening of the National Exhibition in 1980. The work of one of the two artists was labelled ‘obscene’; the other, like mine, was ‘subversive’.

I was surprised, since I thought the message (in this case, a comment on Bhutto’s execution) was intelligently camouflaged and the references obscure. I had used cuttings from ads for Punjabi movies but the inclusion of a noose in one of the cuttings must have rung the right bells. The painting was titled ‘Carnival-I’; and its partner, ‘Carnival-II’, although not carrying an equally offensive message, was also taken down for good measure. A polite query on my behalf to the Minister of Culture (who, incidentally, had shared a prison cell with my father many years earlier) was received with an equally polite but blank look. Obviously, the right bureaucrat had ensured a ‘trouble free’ national artistic event. The paintings were never put back on exhibition.

Accompanying the image of the female form, other symbols and metaphors appeared. The political and social bleakness created a desire for escape on every level. Suddenly, windows and doors, marking outward passages and inward access, appeared. My visits abroad to Britain, India, Norway, Sweden and France were intermissions, and brought personal solace, tender friendships and precious courage. Artists separated by space and time seemed close of kin – Edward Munch in Norway, Kitaj in England, Tapies in Spain, and, closer to home, Subramanyan, Arpita Singh, Naline Maline, Vivan Sundaram and Dilloo Mukurjee in India.

There was the personal loss of Faiz’s going in 1984. Unmanageable in its vastness and meaning. Painting slowed down as images altered once again. There were now storm clouds, glimpsed through window-panes,
and hands as emblems of wandering thoughts and gentle despair. But then a phrase remembered from Ghalib, and requested by Faiz – *Daste-Teh-Sang* (Hand Under a Stone) – altered the significance of hands. A sign of commitment now, they were eager, strong, loving in their steadfastness.

Almost prophetically, ‘Lilies of the Field’ became a new series in 1988 - vivid, alive, colourful in a sea of dark textures contrasting with flashes of white light. The format widened, the works were large and buoyant; suddenly, inexplicably, the Dictator died.

Nights were blissful with sleep; technicolour dreams of open yellow mustard-fields and purple fruits on viridian trees. There almost was no reason to paint again.

In 1989, a year away from home at the Rhodes Island School of Design brought another kind of introspection. It was a year of intense concentration, loneliness, intellectual stimulation and self-discovery. Printmaking, painting, writing came together. The layered reality of the earlier work was giving away to a more overt way of using the medium. Re-discovering charcoal, and handling pure pigment in a tactile way, unhindered by an intermediary medium, seemed to be both direct and suggestive of subterranean emotions. These works now had to do with nostalgia, the distancing from one’s roots. For the first time, landscape appeared in my work. It becomes a metaphor, revealing an expanse of memory, emotion, and the possibility of symbolising both the inner and the outer. A series of prints and charcoal works, entitled ‘Inner landscape’, revised the visual device of the window. The window was now a formal divide for spatial order and a proscenium for the ongoing drama. The social, political and personal turbulences one had witnessed were being recalled to envelope and to disturb.

Other events, international and national, crowded in upon the senses. The Gulf War, and the reported instances of violence against women, made one’s response inevitable. The series – ‘Sisters of the Third World’, ‘I wonder why the caged bird sings’ and ‘A poem for Zainab’ – investigated contradiction yet were celebratory. Explaining human motives in never ending cycles of despair and pain as well as the joys of desire and fulfilment, made up some of the underlying themes in these works.

Working on hand-made rag paper, which is heavy in weight and texture, sent me back to collage, experimenting with papers of delicate substance. A visit to Dhaka led to the discovery of paper made from water hyacinths by women. Fragile, skin-like, the paper demanded attention, tearing to reveal the body of work beneath it. A dialogue established itself between the different layers used. As I worked with photo-transfers, rubbing pigment into the tough rag-paper beneath, the layers on top alternately wrinkled and tightened, behaving like human skin. Pen, ink, graphite, conté and charcoal came together in these works.
which were sensuous in their mixture of mediums. The colour palette also succumbed to the desire for the organic; soaking the rag-paper in tea-wash seemed to add age to it, and using powdered sienna, terraverte, indigo and rose-madder mellowed the message.

The message itself now wanders between the maze of experiences and possibilities, searching for appropriate marks and gestures. Sometimes intimate, occasionally passionate, the desire still persists – to articulate a response to one’s time, and voice it in an idiom which attempts to be at ease with one’s temperament and sensibility.
Confessions of an Indolent Curator

My transition from the world of literature to that of art should have been a seamless one. After all, both disciplines are part of the Humanities. The seductive composition of language, paint or sculpture can distil even the most appalling of horrors. Both deal, in various ways, with the human condition.

However, the imperatives of material culture, can seem in reality very different from the world of words. Value often resides not just in the content but also in the medium, which can be costly and rare. The value of a book is not reduced by infinite replication whereas a work of visual art is diminished in reproduction. To that extent, literature seems a somewhat purer and, paradoxically, less elitist discipline.

I was seemingly abandoning a discipline to which I had hitherto devoted most of my life. I say ‘seemingly abandoned’ because, of course, a literary training stays with one. It provides a critical apparatus which informs a surprisingly wide range of activities, whatever the sphere. It certainly influences the manner in which I analyse a work of art or create an exhibition. 1986 marked my entrance as a curator into Bradford Art Galleries and Museums. It was a gamble on both sides. Bradford had appointed a young woman with almost no art historical background, apart from an in-depth knowledge of the writings of Ananda Coomeraswamy.

I had fondly imagined that working in an art gallery would be both civilized and stylish. People sipping Earl Grey tea but dressed in clothes with just the right touch of insouciance – after all an involvement in the arts would surely be demonstrated in sartorial imaginativeness. This pleasing prospect appealed to the indolent, superficial side of me, sadly an integral part of my make-up. Unfortunately, by 1986, art galleries in Britain had entered a period of searing self-doubt. They were under strong pressure to widen their constituency and reach out to the disenfranchised. The race riots of 1981 in Bristol, Liverpool and Brixton had seriously shaken the status quo. Curiously, Bradford with one of the highest Asian populations in the country appeared unaffected by this. Its own riots came much later, like a bolt from the blue, in 1995. The 1981 riots, however, prompted Bradford to create my post. The brief was specific. I had to research, collect and exhibit material that reflected the cultures of the South Asian communities of Britain as manifested through
tradition as well as contemporary practice.

Inner-city Bradford is mainly inhabited by the South Asian community. There has been a very noticeable ‘white flight’. The dominant group is Pakistani, mainly of Mirpuri origin. However, the much smaller Hindu and Sikh communities have a clear, some might say forceful, idea of their own rights. The potential for confrontation lay close to the surface. I had to tread a fine and careful line. I had a small advantage in being a South Indian Hindu. The Asian population of Bradford is almost exclusively from the North of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent with smaller groups from Gujarat and Bangladesh. The former were merely puzzled by my obscure geographic origins. Most Northerners conflate the South with the area of Madras. The Sikhs often mused with cheerful good humour about what they considered to be Hinduism’s chaotic world-view. They always courteously excluded me and, through me, all South Indians from this chaos.

It was difficult to be sure-footed all the time. Continual diplomacy was not only bland but also exhausting. Humour was an effective leaven and I used it as frequently as I dared.

The past eleven years have whirled by in a rush of dizzyingly varied exhibitions on Islamic calligraphy, Indian jewellery, manuscript paintings from the Ramayana, Sikh art, contemporary feminist art from Pakistan and saris from India. There has even been an exhibition on death and the afterlife as depicted in art. The Asian communities took a lively and critical interest in all the exhibitions. To my surprise, and slight alarm, so did other galleries in the country. The exhibitions travelled widely and the publications sold well. Any inclination to even occasionally indulge my natural indolence was fast receding. Bradford was now viewed as an important source of non-British exhibitions. A reputation to maintain inevitably means continuing hard work.

The audience response to the temporary exhibitions served as valuable case-studies. This firmly shaped another, less visible, side of my work: building up a collection. This now falls into four loose groupings: ritual silver and gold artefacts, calligraphy from the Muslim world, textiles and costumes from the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and, overarching all this, contemporary Fine and Decorative arts. Indeed, contemporary art makes frequent inroads into the other three areas, since they too have a modern thrust. While they give it context, it gives them relevance. Contemporary art also operates as a sharp brake on any temptation to retreat into nostalgia.

The primary focus of this collection is artists of South Asian descent, living and working in Britain. This, however, poses a problem about the nature of definitions. The race riots of 1981 had radicalized the thinking of a number of artists of non-British origin, particularly those of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean descent. Their work, for the first time, was treated almost as a movement with concerns unique to their state of being non-
European. Most of these artists were either second-generation British or fairly new arrivals to Britain – Sutapa Biswas, Chila Kumari Burman, Said Adrus, Nina Edge, Sunil Gupta, Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce were among those whose works encapsulated an emergent, questioning identity. The articulation of a distinct identity, however, carries the inevitable danger of being viewed as marginal with the threat of exclusion from the British mainstream. The nuances of this art are as important as its overt statements, capturing, as it does, a multiracial society in a period of transition and flux. I was anxious that artists of dual heritage should be presented in a manner that acknowledged their subcontinental heritage as well as their integral role within the British mainstream. The new acquisitions initially went under the ‘ghastly name’ of ethnic collections; I expunged all traces of this word as rapidly as I decently could. When a permanent display became imminent, it was decided that the most appropriate term was ‘transcultural’. This had a fluid quality, allowing us to oscillate between East and West, and cross-reference different cultures.

I discovered within me a secret addiction to buying. The rich cornucopia of gold, silver, glass, ceramics, textiles, even the questing, uncomfortable satirical edge of contemporary art, held me completely in its voluptuous thrall. I began to plot, with fiendish cunning, to finance this addiction in a variety of ways. Funding bodies that supported acquisitions were approached with relentless regularity. Temporary exhibitions were toured to generate further income. It soon became obvious that the transcultural collection needed to go on permanent display. Regular consultation with the communities has been a feature of our operations since 1986. While the diverse range of temporary exhibitions was welcomed, there was an increasing demand for something less transient. It was felt that for the minority communities to have any form of serious re-engagement with their material culture, a permanent showcase was necessary. The largest area within the imposing Cartwright Hall Art Gallery was identified as a dedicated space for the rapidly expanding collection.

Adapting a gallery is an expensive business, however, and the advent of the National Lottery was fortuitous. Three lottery grants and other awards from private foundations enabled us to refurbish the gallery to a high standard, as well as commission a large number of paintings, sculpture, prints, ceramics, glass and even some gold. However, it was not all plain sailing. One of the lottery grants was for a magnificent stainless steel sculpture by the internationally acclaimed artist, Anish Kapoor. _Turning the world inside out_ is a profound sculptural exploration of chaos, creation and regeneration. Sited in the very heart of Cartwright Hall, in the marble, stone and glass sculpture court, it is one of Bradford’s most lucid statements on transculturalism. It has only one other companion in this majestic space, a 12-ton marble narrative entitled _Humanity Overcoming War_, completed in 1925 by Francis Derwent
Wood as a commemoration of the Great War.

The lottery award was supplemented by two grants from the National Art Collections Fund and the Henry Moore Foundation. When the lottery award was announced, one of the tabloids, the *Daily Mail*, decided to run it as a story – a hostile one. This was consistent with news coverage of most lottery grants to contemporary art, particularly single awards. The local Bradford paper decided to give the story a longer lease and made it front-page news. In typical tabloid style, the headlines were inflammatory, the slant of the main item condemnatory. A local commercial radio station picked up this item and invited people to phone in. Predictably, since the coverage repeatedly stressed Bradford’s state of deprivation in matters of health and education, the response was hostile. The press never once mentioned that Bradford itself had not contributed a single penny towards the acquisition of the sculpture nor the fact that the award had come from a pot of money reserved exclusively for the arts. Neither members of the ‘outraged’ public nor the journalists concerned had actually seen the sculpture. Those who had other opinions were not encouraged to speak. The radio station did eventually give myself and one of the Councillors the right of reply. A number of the Asian ‘community leaders’ also stated categorically that the press had both misrepresented and misled them, and two of them wrote in to complain. In all fairness, some among the journalists from the local paper appeared genuinely aghast at its hysterical bias and the sabotage of their own neutral coverage of the event. The debate over the sculpture continues to erupt periodically in the local press, and I am now resigned to its having a life of its own beyond my control.

This episode, however, brought home to me how fragile my delicately poised world of humorous confrontation, diplomacy, research, acquisitions and exhibitions really was, and how powerful a force for casual evil or good the media can be. There are ironies. Like most of Kapoor’s work, the sculpture is breathtakingly beautiful. Its silvery surface reflects the black and white marble floor at Cartwright. Poised on an incredibly narrow base, it belies its own weight and suggests the lightness of a soap bubble. Visitors are drawn to it like a magnet and it now has a considerable following. Perhaps one should also remember that its unlikely companion, Derwent Wood’s *Humanity Overcoming War*, viewed by the local press these days as ‘proper sculpture’, attracted considerable calumny for the ferocity of its figures when it was first installed.

The transcultural gallery and *Turning the world inside out* were launched together in June 1997. More than a 1,000 people attended the launch, a wide multiracial cross-section of society from Yorkshire and beyond. It is tempting to think that perhaps the silent majority, that commentators claim is an increasing phenomenon within Britain in recent years, voted with their feet.
Kishwar Naheed and her Poetry
COMMENTARY AND TRANSLATION FROM URDU BY SHOAIB HASHMI

Perhaps Kishwar Naheed can best be introduced by repeating two things her friends have had to say about her. Some time ago, a friend and fellow poet Zahid Dar touched a chord in Kishwar’s many, many friends and admirers when he called her ‘The Phoolan Devi of poetry’! Phoolan Devi is of course the noted ‘Bandit Queen’ of India who led a troop of actual bandits for many years and still stands accused of many crimes. Yet she has so caught the imagination of the people that she has gained a public pardon for her alleged crimes and been elected member of parliament.

Later on when some of the friends, including Zahid, got together to offer Kishwar written tributes, they called the volume ‘Naye Zamanay Ki Birhan’. That needs some explaining. ‘Birhan’ is an Urdu/Hindi word meaning a lamenting woman; but, with frequent use in poetry, it has taken on the more serious and more profound sense of a Cassandra and a Niobe rolled into one. And so the title of the book refers to her as ‘Niobe for a New Age’.

The first tribute recognizes her energy, dynamism and great effectiveness as one of the leading activists for every good cause, in particular the cause of women; the second recognizes the role she has assumed as the most significant poetic voice in the struggle of Pakistani women for their rights, a struggle which reached monumental proportions during the years of dictatorship and came to symbolize the larger national struggle against the imposed tyranny.

The three poems I have selected for translation – on pure instinct, I might add – seem, without design, to mirror the three major aspects of Kishwar’s poetry. ‘The Palace of Wax’ is a sort of prologue, with its very delicate and very understated image of the oriental woman and her centuries-old legacy of meek acceptance. ‘The Land of the Burning Sun’ is Kishwar the oriental woman woken from her sleep, it is Kishwar the activist, the protester, the anti-colonial, the feminist whose meek acceptance has been transformed into awareness and pride and a passion. And the third, ‘The Prayer of the Unborn’, is just the sort of poem that defines Kishwar’s place right at the forefront of the movement – for her poetry is very much the poetry of protest and of lament, and yet the protest has come to encompass all the issues which are the concern of thinking people today. And it always, always leads to a soaring hope!
Before I was betrothed
my mother would cry out in her sleep
and that would wake me
and I would wake her too and ask her what ailed her
and she would stare out with empty eyes

She could never remember her dreams

And then one night she did not cry out
and she held me to her in her fear
and when I asked her
she opened her eyes and said a silent prayer
'I dreamt that you were drowning
and I plunged into the rushing waters to save you'.

And that night lightning struck
and my cow and my fiancé were burnt.

Then one night she was asleep and I was still awake and I saw
she was opening and clenching her fist over and over
and it seemed she wished to grasp something
then tired of trying
then gathered up her courage and tried again

So I woke her
but she did not tell me her dream
and that was when I lost my sleep too

And then I came to live in another house
and my mother and I both cry out in our sleep
and if someone asks, we tell them,
'We cannot remember our dreams!'
THE LAND OF THE BURNING SUN

My land is the land of the burning sun
perhaps that is why my hands are so warm
and my feet are so blistered
and my being is so covered with sores

My land is the land of the burning sun
and that is why the roof of my home melted and fell
and the walls are so hot that they singe everything they touch

My land is the land of the burning sun
is that why my children always thirst?
and why I am always kept uncovered?

My land is the land of the burning sun
perhaps that is why we never know of the gathering of the clouds
nor of the passing of the deluge
for my fields are ever laid waste
now by the money-lenders, now by wild beasts and now by calamities
and sometimes also by self-proclaimed masters

Do not teach me to hate my own land of the burning sun
for the same sun dries my washing in my courtyard
and bears me a harvest of gold in the field

Let me quench my thirst at the rivers
and rest in the shade of the shady trees
let me make a garment of the soil and a covering of the dust

I do not like the lengthening shadows of the evening
for I have seen the glory of the rising sun
as it comes to spread its bounties across my land

And the sun is mine
and yours too
but in different ways
For I walk hand in hand with the burning sun.
THE PRAYER OF THE UNBORN

Even before I am born – hear my voice

There are those who dip the rose in the saffron hue of bitterness
and imprison the truth in the false tablets of stone

Do not let them see me

And before I am born – will you give me this assurance
My ears will not be filled with words of a heathen faith
my mother will not go in shame for having borne a daughter
and the walls that men raise will be my home and not my prison
and my being and swaddling cloth
will not be used to write the saga of homelessness and want

And before I am born – will you seek for me
the sweet water – for which my forefathers toiled with the sweat of
their brow
and green grass – fragrant with the fragrance of my soil
and shady trees – whose shade will be the doorway of my peace
and blue skies – whose infinite expanse will be my refuge
and the birds – whose very being will be my contentment

And before I am born – will you forgive me
all the sins which in this blighted forest
they will commit in my name and in the name of my time
wherein they will call my words and my thoughts
the affliction of age
and which they will commit
to fill out their empty days

And before I am born – will you teach me
to recall the verdant gold of the paddy fields
so I will not earn my bread in shame
... teach me to remember
how to use my lips only to articulate
the truth within me
... teach me how to feel
the ties which tie myself to my fellow men
... teach me so to smile
that the radiance will banish forever the darkness of the night

Hear me – for I am unborn yet
There are those who think themselves gods
in their own tyranny and greed ...

Do not let them near me
but gather up some tatter from some tattered being
and make of it my mantle

And before I am born – will you make me a promise
you will not take me to the water
which floods the dwellings and does not water the fields
you will not show me the sunlight
which nourishes the harvests of hunger
you will keep me from the elders who trade even in their prayers
you will not give me a home in the town
where people walk like skulking thieves in their own city

And before I am born – will you promise me
that I will not be born an old man
that you will not rob me of the innocence of my childhood.
The word ‘Dalit’ is from the Marathi, literally ‘crushed’ or ‘ground down’; it is the name that the former ‘Untouchables’ have preferred to the more patronizing name that Gandhi gave them, Harijan or people of God. ‘Baama’ is the pen-name of a Tamil Dalit woman, from a Roman Catholic family. She has published three main works: an autobiography, Karukku (Blades), 1992; a novel, Sangati (Happenings), 1994; and a collection of short stories, Kisumbukkaaran (Mischief-maker), 1996. Karukku traces Baama’s life-story as a Catholic Christian growing up in a small village in Tamil Nadu, becoming educated, entering a convent, and leaving it seven years later, disillusioned by the persistence of caste oppression and discrimination within the church and its institutions.

The place of autobiographies in the development of modern writing by Indian women has been well charted. Tharu and Lalita in their monumental Women Writing in India, point out that many of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century autobiographical texts ‘are a personal testimony of the new sense of worth these women experience as “individuals”, whose specific lives were of interest and importance’. There is an interesting parallel here with the beginnings of self-consciously styled Dalit women’s writing and, indeed, with the beginnings of Dalit writing as a whole. ‘Dalits, who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must needs shout out their selfhood, their “I”, when they rise up.’

Tharu and Lalita also point to the tension in modern autobiographical writing, between the ‘life scripts that cultures provide at particular junctures in their history’, and the details of individual life which both internalize these blue-prints and struggle against them. Such a tension, in fact, is a starting point for fictional writing; for novels of quest and self-discovery. In the case of Karukku, though, the self-exploration as woman and as Dalit takes place within the most prescriptive of life scripts. Baama, framed within the tight parameters of caste, chooses to add the tight prescriptions of religious life when she becomes a Catholic nun. From this position, painfully, she works out her choices, leaving the convent, disillusioned, after seven years.

Karukku means palmyra leaves with serrated edges. Baama explains
the image in her introduction:

Between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life there are many connections. I used to pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent to gather firewood, and scratch and tear my skin as I played with them. All the same, they became the embryo (karu) and symbol that grew into this book ... Dalits seeking to create a new world based on Justice, Equality and Love are themselves as karukku, challenging their oppressors on all sides. (p.ix)

By a felicitous pun, the word karukku, containing the word karu, embryo, also means freshness, newness.

'Baama', as I pointed out earlier, is a pen-name. Many Tamil authors, both men and women, use the convention of writing under a pseudonym. In this case, though, this convention adds to the work's strange paradox of reticence and familiarity. It reads like an autobiographical novel, or a fictionalized autobiography. The events of Baama’s life are not arranged according to a simple, linear or chronological order, as with most autobiographies, but are reflected upon in different ways, repeated from different perspectives, grouped under different themes, for example, Work, Games and Recreation, Education, Belief, etc. Thus the early part of the book is also rich in descriptive and ethnographic detail, retrieved with affection and pride, piecing together a Dalit life-style.

The argument of the book is to do with the arc of the narrator's spiritual development: the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic, and her gradual realization of herself as a Dalit. Such a double perspective makes it possible for her to understand the deep rift between belief and practice. We are given a very full picture of the way in which the Church ordered and influenced the lives of the Paraya Catholics. Every aspect of the child’s life is imbued with the Christian religion. The day is ordered by religious ritual. The year is punctuated by religious processions and festivals, which become part of the natural yearly cycle of crops and seasons. But, parallel to this, religious life is a socio-political self-education that takes off from the revelatory moment when she first understands what untouchability means.

Baama joins a religious order, in spite of her own fears and misgivings, and the active discouragement of her friends and family. She does so in the stubborn hope that she will have a chance to change things, to redress the balance from humble acceptance of oppression to staking a claim for justice. But she realizes more and more the lack of space within the order for her to achieve this as a teaching nun.

She sees an important change, however, if not in the Church’s practice, yet in the increased awareness among Dalits, of what has been happening:

They have understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. They are
filled with a new strength to reclaim that likeness which has been repressed, ruined and obliterated, and to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion. (p.89)

Clearly she understands that her own experience is part of a larger movement among Dalits. Yet, it is interesting that she appears to come to this awareness of her own accord. She does not, for example, seem to have access to liberation theologians (as does Vidivelli, in a parallel autobiography). She refers neither to Ambedkar nor to Periyaar, who not only attacked the caste system, but whose remarkable speeches and writings against the oppression of women were published in 1942 under the title Pen yeen adimaiyaanal? (Why did woman become enslaved?). Nor indeed does Baama – again, unlike Vidivelli – make a connection between caste and gender oppressions. Not in Karukku at any rate; she does so, abundantly, in Sangati and elsewhere. Karukku is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic church and its institutions, and presents Baama’s life as a process of lonely self-discovery. Baama leaves her religious order to return to her village, where life may be insecure, but where she does not feel alienated or compromised. The tension throughout Karukku is between the self and the community: the narrator leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as Dalit woman). Sangati takes up the story of that new community.

Dalit writing – as the writers themselves have chosen to call it – has been seen in Tamil only in the past decade, and later than in Marathi and Kannada. It has gone hand in hand with political activism, and with critical and ideological debate, spurred on by such events as the Ambedkar centenary of 1994, and the furore following the Mandal Commission report (submitted in 1980, but discussed nearly 10 years later), recommending more reserved places for the so-called Other Backward Castes in Government Services. The notion of ‘Hindutva’, which has gained currency since 1990 or so, and which assumes a seamless Hinduism to which all Indians other than Muslims, Christians and Sikhs conform, has called out a strong Dalit critique.

The Tamil equivalent of the Marathi ‘Dalit’ is taazhtapattor, used in this specific sense by Bharati Dasan in the 1930s, when he was working for the Self Respect movement. He uses it in the poem Taazhtapattor samattuvapaattu, ‘Song for the equality of the oppressed’. Indeed the new Tamil Dalit writing constantly refers to the anti-caste, anti-religious speeches of E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyaar), founder of this movement. All the same, although the Tamil words taazhtapattor or odukkappattor are used in much of the literature by both writers and critics, it is significant that the preferred term is Dalit, implying militancy, an alliance with other repressed groups, and a nation-wide – or even universal – identity. (‘Who are Dalits? All those who are oppressed: all hill peoples, neo-Buddhists, labourers, destitute farmers, women, and all
those who have been exploited politically, economically, or in the name of religion are Dalits’, from the 1972 Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers.8

More recently, Raj Gautaman has pointed to the different functions of Tamil Dalit writing, and the different local and global readerships it addresses. First, he says, it is the function of Dalit writing to awaken in every reader, a consciousness of the oppressed Dalit, and to share in the Dalit experience as if it were their own. (Karukku, he says, is a singular example of a piece of writing which achieves this.) At the same time, according to Gautaman, the new Dalit writing must be a Tamil as well as an Indian version of a world-wide literature of the oppressed; its politics must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice and equality.9

I think that it would also be true to say that, while much of the Tamil Dalit writing does indeed function as Gautaman claims, centrally concerned to raise awareness of the Dalit experience, Baama’s work (like that of Vidivelli, Imayam and Marku) explores a changing Dalit identity. There is, in this writing, a very powerful sense of the self and the community as Dalit, which rejects outright, on the one hand, the notion of varnasrama (the justification of a ritually stratified society); and, on the other, refuses to ‘sanskritize’, to appraise Dalit life-style according to mainstream Hindu values. But there is also a powerful sense of engagement with history, of change, of changing notions of identity and belonging. Baama captures a moment that contains a paradox: she seeks an identity, but seeks a change which means an end to that identity.

I must conclude by commenting briefly on Baama’s use of language. Baama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial regularly, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upperclass, uppercaste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading. Karukku also, by using an informal speech style which addresses the reader intimately, shares with the reader the author’s predicament as Dalit and Christian directly, demystifying the theological argument, and making her choice a matter of conscience.

As well as this subversion of received Tamil, all Dalit writing is marked by certain other characteristics. It reclaims and remains close to an oral tradition made up of work-chants, folk-songs, songs sung at rites of passage, as well as proverbs – and some of this tradition belongs particularly to the women’s domain. Karukku, very interestingly, also tells a story of Tamil Dalit Catholicism in the vocabulary that it uses, particularly in the central chapter which describes her spiritual journey from childhood faith to her return home after departing from the convent. There is often a layering of meaning in certain words, for example, where a Tamilised Sanskrit word is given a new Catholic
meaning, as when Tamil mantiram (sacred utterance, but also popularly, magic charm or spell) from Sanskrit mantra becomes ‘catechism’ in Catholic use. Hence, often, there is a spin or a turnaround of meaning; a freshness in some of the coinages, and different routes and slippages in the way Catholicism has been naturalized (and sometimes not) into the Tamil of the text.

Baama’s work is not only breaking a mainstream aesthetic but proposing a new one which is integral to her politics. What is demanded of the translator and reader is, in Gayatri Spivak’s terms, a ‘surrender to the special call of the text’.10 Baama is writing in order to change hearts and minds. And as a translator of her work, I am asked for nothing less than an imaginative entry into that different world of experience and its political struggle, and to re-inscribe that imaginatively.

From KARUKKU
Chapter 2

When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is.

I was walking home from school one day, an old bag hanging from my shoulder. It was actually possible to walk the distance in ten minutes. But usually it would take me thirty minutes at the very least to reach home. It would take me from half an hour to an hour to dawdle along, watching all the fun and games that were going on, all the entertaining novelties and oddities in the streets, the shops and the bazaar.

The performing monkey; the snake which the snake-charmer kept in its box and displayed from time to time; the cyclist who had not got off his bike for three days, and who kept pedalling as hard as he could from break of day; the rupee notes that were pinned on to his shirt to spur him on; the spinning wheels; the Maariyaata temple, the huge bell hanging there; the pongal offerings being cooked in front of the temple; the dried-fish stall by the statue of Gandhi; the sweet stall, the stall selling fried snacks, and all the other shops next to each other; the street light always demonstrating how it could change from blue to violet; the narikkuravan hunter-gypsy with his wild lemur in cages, selling needles, clay beads and instruments for cleaning out the ears – O, I could go on and on. Each thing would pull me to a stand-still and not allow me to go any further.

At times, people from various political parties would arrive, put up a stage and harangue us through their mikes. Then there might be a street play, or a puppet show, or a ‘no magic, no miracle’ stunt performance. All these would happen from time to time. But almost certainly there would be some entertainment or other going on.

Even otherwise, there were the coffee clubs in the bazaar: the way each waiter cooled the coffee, lifting a tumbler high up and pouring its contents into a tumbler held in his other hand. Or the way some people
sat in front of the shops chopping up palm fruit, their eyes turned elsewhere so that they would not smart. Or the almond tree growing there and its fruit which was occasionally blown down by the wind. All these sights taken together would tether my legs and stop me from going home.

And then, according to the season, there would be mango, cucumber, sugar-cane, sweet-potato, palm-shoots, gram, palm-syrup and palm-fruit, guavas and jack-fruit. Every day I would see people selling sweet and savoury fried snacks, payasam, halva, boiled tamarind seeds and iced lollies.

Gazing at all this, one day, I crossed the street of the Pallas and came to my street, the street of the Parayas, that is, my bag slung over my shoulder. At the opposite corner, though, a threshing floor had been set up, and the Naicker was watching over the proceedings, seated on a piece of sacking spread over a stone ledge. Our people were hard at work, driving cattle in pairs, round and round, to tread out the grain from the straw. The animals were muzzled so that they wouldn't help themselves from the straw. I stood for awhile there, watching the fun.

Just then, an elder of our street came along from the direction of the bazaar. The manner in which he was walking along made me want to double up. I wanted to shriek with laughter at the sight of such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion. I guessed there was something like vadai or green banana bhajji in the packet, because the wrapping paper was stained with oil. He came along, holding out the packet by its string, without touching it I stood there thinking to myself, if he holds it like that, won't the package come undone, and the vadais fall out?

The elder went straight up to the Naicker, bowed low and extended the packet towards him, cupping the hand that held the string with his other hand. Naicker opened the parcel and began to eat the vadais.

After I had watched all this, at last I went home. My elder brother was there. I told him the story in all its comic detail. I fell about with laughter at the memory of a big man, and an elder at that, making such a game out of carrying the parcel. But Annan was not amused. Annan told me the man wasn't being funny when he carried the package like that. He said everybody believed that Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Paraya lads. If they do, they would be polluted. That's why he had to carry the package by its string.

When I heard this, I didn't want to laugh any more, and I felt terribly sad. How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in a banana leaf, and then parcelled in paper? I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched vadais myself, straightaway. Why should we have to fetch and carry for these people, I wondered. Such an important elder of ours goes off meekly to the shops to fetch snacks and hands them over reverently, bowing and shrinking,
to this fellow who just sits there and stuffs them into his mouth. The thought of it infuriated me. How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? Because they had scraped four coins together, did that mean they must lose all human feelings? What did it mean when they called us 'Paraya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that.

Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding. It was shameful to see them do this. Even the way they were given their drinking water was disquieting to watch. The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paati and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. My other Paati was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and then bring home the leftover rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods.

It was a long time before I realized that Paati was bringing home the unwanted food that the Naickers were ready to throw away. One day I went with Paati to the Naicker house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Paati placed the vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paati's vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Paati's; it would be polluted. Sometime later, I said to Paati she should not lay herself open to such behaviour; it was ugly to see. What Paati said to me in return was this: These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower caste? Can we change this?

My elder brother, who was studying at a university, came home for the holidays. He would often go to the library in our neighbouring town in order to borrow books. He was on his way home one day, walking along the banks of the irrigation tank. One of the Naicker men came up behind him. He thought my Annan looked unfamiliar, and so he asked, 'Who are you, appa, what's your name?' Annan told him his name. Immediately the other man asked, 'Thambi, on which street do you live?' The point of this was that, if he knew on which street we lived, he would know our caste too. Annan's reply was sharp, like a slap in the face, 'I am a Paraya from the Cheri street.' Then he stalked off, as fast as he
could. Naicker was furious. He felt he had been shown up. He asked someone else there, 'Who is this fellow? Look at the way he talks.' This other man explained who Annan was, by mentioning our Paati, 'O, this is our Rakamma's grandson.'

The next day, when Paati went to work, the Naicker spoke to her angrily. 'How dared your grandson talk to me so arrogantly?' Paati managed to handle it by saying, 'See, Ayya, he's an educated lad; these college boys will talk like that.'

Apparently it was just the same at the library. They would look at the Paraya lads from the Cheri street in a certain way, with a certain contempt. Once, when Annan was signing out his books, he added his title, M.A., on a sudden impulse. Immediately the attendant brought him a stool to sit on, and what's more, began addressing him as 'Sir'.

Annan told me all these things. And he added, 'Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn.' The words that Annan spoke to me that day made a very deep impression on me. And I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan had urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi.

But it was the same story at school, though. They always spoke in a bad way about people of our caste. If ever anything bad happened, they would say immediately, and without hesitation, 'It must be one of the Cheri-children who did it.' About three-quarters of the children in the school were Pallar and Parayar. All the same, the priests had built the school in the Nadar street. The church too was in the same street, so was the priests' house.

Everyone seemed to think Harijan children are contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use them for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher's house; we watered the plants; we did all the chores that were needed about the school.

Then I was in the seventh class. Every day, after school, I would play with the other children of our street before going home in the evening. There were two or three children who were related to me, and other boys and girls who always played together as a group.

One day, we were playing on the big neem tree in front of the school, hanging like bats, upside down from its branches. After a while, we started on another game - running right up the coconut palm and touching its tip. The coconut palm grew slantwise, at a convenient angle. If you came running along from a distance, at top speed, you could reach right to its tip and touch the coconut growing there. Spurred on by the excitement of the first few who managed to touch the coconut, those who
came later, grabbed it and gave it a twist before climbing down. By the time I got there and touched it, the coconut fell down straightaway, dropping with a thud. It wasn’t even a fully ripened coconut, just a green one, without so much as water in it. All the children were frightened and ready to scatter. Everyone said that it was I who had plucked it down. Then we just left it there and ran home.

The next morning at assembly, the headmaster called me out by name. ‘You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya,’ he said. ‘You climbed the coconut tree yesterday after everybody else had gone home, and you stole a coconut. We cannot allow you inside this school. Stand outside.’ I was in agony because I had been shamed and insulted in front of all the children.

The headmaster was of the Chaaliyar caste. At that time, there was a battle going on between the Chaaliyar people and us, about the cemetery. All the children eyed me in a strange way and walked off to their classes. I was in such shock and pain, I didn’t know what to do. Then a teacher who lived along our street came by and advised me to go to the priest, tell him everything, and bring a letter from him to the headmaster. I went to the priest and told him the whole story in detail, and begged him to give me permission to go back to school. The priest’s first response was to say, ‘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.

NOTES

1. Baama, Karukku (Blades) (Madurai: Ideas, 1992). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Baama, Sangati (Happenings) (Madurai: Ideas, 1994).
RUKHSANA AHMAD

After Life

The door bell chimed a little impatiently the second time just as Chandra stumbled to it and started fumbling with the long column of locks. Her face fell at the sight of Ba’drek. He stood in the hushed hallway, swaying a little, his posture laced with alcoholic defiance, his face a grotesque mask of self-conscious guilt.

‘Sorry, my dear!’ he whispered theatrically. ‘I thought you didn’t hear it the first time.’

‘I must’ve been asleep ...!’ Chandra pushed tired fingers through her dark curls with a sigh but she dutifully faced his kiss, a pungent barb of expensive after-shave, whisky and Havana cigars.

‘I thought I’d made a mistake about tonight! Stop that groping, darling, I haven’t even eaten yet!’ she pouted, with exemplary patience.

‘Wallah! Just like my wife!’ he protested. ‘It’s nearly two in the morning! You should have eaten! Amazing how a woman in London can use the same wicked tactics as a woman in Bahrain!’

Chandra held back a sharp retort and summoned the shreds of a smile instead to lighten her muttered reproach, ‘Comes with the packaging perhaps? So, you’re not telling me where you were? Hum?’

But Ba’drek was no longer listening. He had flung his cashmere overcoat and gloves on the floor and followed them. There he sat unwrapping a small package painstakingly, as if in slow motion, all his attention concentrated on the moment and the task. She stopped short, her heart missed a beat. Perhaps he had bought her a very expensive gift to make up for his appalling time-keeping.

‘You’ll never believe this!’ He spoke in a low voice tense with excitement. Chandra stood still, watching. The last layer of brown paper came off: but there was no velvet case – only an ordinary looking jam jar – probably some special halvah from Bahrain. She was in no mood to humour the nostalgia it would prompt. Besides, she hated Middle Eastern sweets, invariably fattening! Feeling resentful at his disregard for her ruined evening, she turned towards the kitchen to find some food.

‘Chandra, Chandi my love,’ he was huskily persuasive now. ‘Come here for a moment. Just come and see this!’

‘Coming,’ once again she tried to contain and conceal her irritation.

‘I’ve paid almost three million pounds for this! Show some interest in it, woman!’

‘What is it?’ she complied immediately this time, but he was intent
upon the jar and said nothing. His voice was deep and sombre as a gong when he finally looked up and spoke, ‘Einstein’s eyes. Preserved in Formaldehyde!’

‘What!’ she laughed in spite of herself. ‘You can’t be serious!’

‘I am serious! Look at them!’ Ba’drek’s voice held awe. ‘Isn’t it incredible? The man of the century! The prophet of the future! Science! I have it all here in my grasp – in this little jam jar.’

She took the bottle from his hands and held it up to the light, aghast. True enough, there was a pair of human eyes floating in clear liquid inside it. She gazed at them and they stared back, sober and wise.

‘Where in God’s name did you get them?’ she cried, bewildered. Inwardly, she felt ... horrified ... and repulsed and ... more than a little ... shocked.

‘I bought them – at an auction. Paid a lot of money for them: 4.8 million dollars, to be exact.’

‘But why? Why did you want them? Why should anyone want them?’ she felt bemused.

‘It’s a collector’s item, darling! An investment. They’re the eyes of a great man, a genius. A success. They’re lucky ... a talisman.’

Chandra was stunned, ‘What a bizarre idea, Ba’drek. Who was selling them?’

‘His ophthalmologist. He removed them at the autopsy – for scientific research. They’re bound to be incredibly lucky. They certainly were for him,’ he said, as he rose to undress. ‘I mean, not only for Einstein but also for this ophthalmologist.’

Chandra said nothing. She was overwhelmed by it all. She’d always known that Ba’drek was extremely wealthy. ‘He’s loaded!’ Shekhar had said when he introduced them at the Club’s New Year’s Eve party a couple of months ago, but somehow she had not guessed how seriously rich he was. True, earlier that summer he had bought a bottle of wine at Sotheby’s in an auction at a price which had surprised them all. To his own utter embarrassment, he had made the Thames news headlines with that. Even so, at thirty-three thousand pounds the wine represented for her an imaginable sum of money. But that he should spend three million pounds – at a go – just like that! For this, so-called collector’s item ... amazed her! The wealth gap between them was much much wider than she’d ever imagined.

‘Be careful with it,’ he crooked his finger at her as she sat musing. Even in his inebriated state he noticed the faraway look in her eyes. ‘That would make an expensive smash, my dear! Anyway, why so quiet? What are you dreaming of? Einstein?’

Chandra shuddered and put the bottle down carefully on the coffee table. ‘No; oh, no. I’d be no match for him. I was hopeless at Science. To be honest, I never understood that Relativity business.’ She glanced apologetically at the eyes which now looked much less real. One of them had carelessly floated above the other in a silent gesture of disembodied
protest.

'Not many people do,' Ba'drek comforted her. 'Anyway, you don't want to fill your pretty little head with all that scientific nonsense! Come to bed, now? Hum? You're not still angry with me, are you?' he almost cajoled.

'In a moment. I'll get a hot drink first ... can't eat, after all this.' She felt guilty thinking about food with those eyes in the room. There was no way she could get into bed with Ba'drek and ... and let him 'make love' to her ... not with those eyes on the table. Surely, it would be wrong! They had a presence, somehow.

'Are we going to leave them out here?' she could not help asking him, feeling as anxious about being watched as about the risk of theft.

'For tonight, yes. Tomorrow I'll take them to the Bank. They've been in a vault, all these years!' With that he turned over on his side and dropped off to sleep with the predictable and admirable speed of someone who has had one too many.

Still stunned at the price of those eyes, Chandra sat down to look at them again, her heart unwilling to believe that they really were Einstein's. She imagined the auctioneer's sharp tone, professional, querulous: 'Ladies and gentlemen, do I hear one point four million ... ?' wondering what the introductory line had been, what the opening bid might have been, wondering if the auction had been terribly exclusive? Questions chased each other, racing through her mind, but the eyes told her nothing. Morbid or gruesome though the idea of buying them might seem, they had obviously been in demand. Ba'drek was not reckless or foolish with money. He must be certain of a spiralling increase in their future value.

She remembered protesting at that last auction, 'So much money just for a bottle of wine! Can anyone bear to drink wine at that price? Will you drink it, Ba'drek?'

'You don't drink it!' he had admonished patronizingly. 'That would be sacrilege! I'll present it to an important business contact ... it will pay for itself, and more. And he might do the same. Unless he's a real hoarder, then he'll keep it, I suppose! If he's not, he'll sell it again ...'

'I see. I'm just curious about this world of collector's items ... !' Chandra had glanced round the gracious Mayfair drawing room dotted with exclusive curios: gold-plated replicas of the horses from St. Mark's, numbered prints in gilt frames, fine crystal, rare pieces of china. He only ever bought limited editions - always at shocking prices. It was hard to explain to him her horror at the gaping chasm between those prices and prices in the world she had come from - just across the river near Battersea Park.

She sat now shivering a little, staring at the jam jar whilst he snored in the background. Sleep had deserted her. It struck her with uncanny force that night how frighteningly poor she was in comparison with him! In the last few weeks, besides paying her generously for her services as a classy
escort, he’d bought her some very expensive pieces of jewellery. The kind of jewellery she knew she would like to hoard – at least as long as she could. But, even so! The injustice of the difference in their wealth and status was unbearable as it stared her in the face – in the form of a price tag.

This jam jar with its precious cargo will sit in a vault for many years, a useless collector’s item. What a useful choice of words! It dehumanized the eyes, turned them into an object, made them less scary, less real. One could pretend they were inert and soulless, like the dried cheetah skins in her uncle’s house. Why had he paid a fortune for them? Only to possess them? Or was it to multiply his wealth? Three million pounds was an unimaginable amount of money. Truly a fortune! A fortune that could enable her to give up this ... awful ... escort ... no, prostitution ... business which she’d been trapped in for countless years.

Abruptly, Chandra stopped thinking. She rose, gathered her belongings and got her coat. Mechanically she put her car keys into her pocket, picked up the jam jar and slipped it into her handbag; then, glancing at Ba’drek, as if to bid him farewell, she left his flat, not as she usually did around midday, but in the middle of the night, like a thief. She whispered something to the night porter about her mother being seriously ill. He smiled at her politely, certain that her hasty midnight departure signified a lover’s tiff, but he said nothing. She was one of three of Ba’drek’s favourites.

In a panic Chandra rushed to her car and drove as fast as she dared, dreaming all the while of a comfortable future secured by a fabulous fortune. The fairy lights on Chelsea Bridge twinkled with promise against the fading night. ‘London is so much more beautiful in the small hours of the morning,’ she thought, and then, ‘God! Minnie won’t be pleased to see me at this time. What if she has a client with her? But there’s nothing for it now. I’ve got to do what I set out to do!’

The row of flats facing Battersea Park frowned at her in silent censure as she drove into the forecourt, brakes screeching. Minnie answered the door quickly enough but stared at her friend in open dismay. ‘Have you been drinking?’ she asked, after a brief silence. Chandra’s denial did not convince her; and her story even less so. Her eyes large and incredulous, she shook her head and kept repeating, ‘But how could you do that, Chandi, my love? Even if they are Einstein’s bloody eyes, you’ll never be able to sell them, or do anything with them! Take them back. For fuck’s sake, go back before he wakes up. He’ll call the police, won’t he? You’ll hate yourself for this tomorrow, you know!’

The more Minnie begged her to return them, the more irritated Chandra felt at her friend’s lack of gumption. ‘You’re scared, Minnie! Confess! You’re gutless, aren’t you?’ she taunted. ‘You don’t want to be an accessory or whatever it is!’

‘No. That’s right ... I don’t.’
Seething with anger Chandra stamped out of Minnie’s flat. Raging over the injustices of the world and mad at herself for not having thought through how she would dispose of this easy loot to set herself up for retirement at thirty-five, she drove without purpose or direction for a long while before realizing how hungry she was. Then, spotting an all-night hamburger bar, she went in to buy herself a burger and fries. The young Sri Lankan assistant stared at her curiously as she sat down at a table, feigning indifference.

‘What would he say if I asked him to help me?’ Chandra wondered, munching her chicken burger between sips of coffee. ‘No one else will!’ Her brother in Birmingham would be horrified at the thought of dealing with a fence and she would be too easily identified.

Synthetic though it was, the food helped to clarify things. Minnie was right: no one would collaborate with her in a theft like this, and there was no way she could pull it off on her own! Feeling thwarted, she opened her bag to find her cigarettes. The jam jar gaped at her, making her start. Quickly she snapped her handbag shut, as if to prevent a bottled genie escape. In a flash, she saw the obscenity of it all. Dead eyes! They weren’t going anywhere!

She pulled out the bottle furtively and stared into the dark pupils. Fifty years of Formaldehyde had not snuffed out the fulsome glow of life in the iris, and that glitter of ... something else. An extraordinary expression! Was it intelligence, or knowledge, or a vision? She’d never seen anything like it before. They must be alive.

Whoever had heard of eyes that went on living on their own like this? A chilly draught crept in underneath the door frame, making her tremble. Gravely, the eyes accused her ... of ... something. Murder perhaps? She had dehumanized them too, tried to quantify their value as a material investment. For the first time that night, she was struck by the human cost of her macabre merchandise.

The remains of a great man! Had the world cared so little for him? Had there not been any loved ones looking out for him, to save him from the vultures? His eyes stolen from his corpse, bought at an auction, and then ... to be stolen ... by a ... a tart! Tears of shame stung her eyelids. The windows to his soul – what if his soul could still reach through and watch everything that was going on? What if they’d recorded her theft like a surveillance camera? She felt mortified.

‘A whore, yes, but a thief, never! I must return them,’ she thought, ‘to Ba’drek’s flat before he wakes up ... and then ... then, I’ll go home ... to sleep and recover from my ... er ... transgression!’

Outside the all-night cafe Chandra paused to inhale deep jugfuls of fresh air to invigorate herself. Before getting into her car she glanced at that old pair of eyes once again. She could have sworn they twinkled at her in the semi-darkness.
Amitav Ghosh in interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell

Neluka Silva: Amitav Ghosh, you are a novelist and you also write journalistic pieces on travel. In what ways are your travel writing and fiction linked?

Amitav Ghosh: It's hard to say. I don't think of my journalistic writing as 'travel writing' as such; for me, travelling is always in some way connected with my fictional work. It's a very close link, I would say.

NS: Could you talk a little about the personal experiences that you feel have been most important to your writing?

AG: The most important thing, I suppose, is my childhood which was spent in various parts of the subcontinent ... I suppose the thing that's been most important is Calcutta; it's a kind of constant that runs through all my books. Calcutta has been in some way the centre of my imaginative world.

NS: Your work has been readily incorporated into 'postcolonial' literature, alongside the textual 'interminglings' of such writers as Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri. How do you feel about being regarded as a postcolonial writer? Is the term restrictive?

AG: I must say, I have no truck with this term at all. It's a term one's begun to hear in the last five or six years, and I don't know a single Indian writer of my acquaintance who doesn't detest it. It completely misrepresents the focus of the work that I do. In some really important ways, colonialism is not what interests me. What is postcolonial? When I look at the work of critics, such as Homi Bhabha, I think they have somehow invented this world which is just a set of representations of representations. They've retreated into a world of magic mirrors and I don't think anyone can write from that sort of position.

Alex Tickell: So, in a way, this kind of theorizing is self-generating?

AG: Yes, I think that it's just that. Mind you, commentators such as Bhabha have probably done something very interesting and important, which is that they've somehow 'made' writers. When I began writing, it was very difficult if one were an Indian writing in English. One always felt, and still feels, incredibly marginalized — under attack really; and people like Bhabha somehow took that position and made it an acceptable one. So there is something to be said ... but the content of what they are saying, in terms of my work, is neither here nor there.
NS: Do you characterize your work in any particular way?
AG: No, it’s not for me to characterize my work. I mean, how does one do that? It’s not something that’s occurred to me, frankly.

AT: One of the defining aspects of the South Asian novel before 1947 seems to be a need to speak for certain indigenous groups on a national or cultural level. Would it be fair to say that your work speaks for an alternative, ‘transcultural’ South Asia which falls outside these groupings?
AG: No, I’m not interested in speaking for anyone or creating a kind of political vision which will supplant other political visions. I mean, there are things in politics that I don’t like. Obviously I hate these fundamentalists, I hate extreme nationalism ... and I suppose that emerges from my work ... but I don’t see myself as political. I would go even further and say that I don’t think it’s particularly interesting to write about politics.

AT: You gesture towards writers such as Conrad and Shelley in the titles of your works, and obviously there’s the literary background of Calcutta as well. Who would you say your main literary influences are?
AG: Tagore is an obvious literary influence; but I would also say that Satyajit Ray, more than anyone else, has in some important respect formed my way of looking at things.

AT: Are there any specific films which really stand out?
AG: Well, it’s also his books which we used to read as kids. So many interests of mine come from Ray, like my interest in science-fiction, my interest in history, all of that is a part of our common culture, I suppose. His films had a profound effect on me. I think they formed my way of looking at things. You asked me what films – Pather Panchali, but also others, such as The Philosopher’s Stone. There are aspects of his work which are not as realistic as Pather Panchali – his children’s films, they are really wonderful.

AT: I’d like to ask you about your interest in history. In the majority of your writings you seem to engage not so much with history as with the alternative cultural connections and narratives excluded by the writing of history in the West. Do you see the transcultural world of, say, medieval Indo-Arabic trade in In an Antique Land, as a phenomenon which challenges notions of ‘purity’ or political enclosure?
AG: Yes, I mean it’s not just history in the West, it’s also the way history is thought of in India. But, yes, that’s exactly the way that I saw medieval history, especially the history of Egypt. But within Judaism, within Islam, there have developed so many exclusionist ideologies.

AT: So that’s what you’re addressing as well?
AG: Absolutely ... you know, I feel very proud of *In an Antique Land* because to write, in the same book about Jews, Muslims and Hindus, and to find a point of entry which wouldn’t automatically antagonize anyone is not an easy thing. The book is very popular in Egypt as well as Israel.

NS: The sense of history in your work is also intensely personal, such as the narrator’s family history in *The Shadow Lines*, and the use of family connections and personal letters in *In an Antique Land*. Is this ‘domestic vision’ a deliberate subversion of the ‘grand historical narrative’, or is it simply the space in which we can make our own connections most readily?

AG: I would say it’s the latter. I do think if you are Indian or Asian, and this is not necessarily to essentialize, that you think in terms of families. Narratives, when they come into my head, come as families, and that’s why *The Calcutta Chromosome* was very important to me because it wasn’t about families; it was about people who were completely disconnected, and I think that aspect of it is sometimes unsettling.

AT: *Your article, ‘The Slave of MS. H.6’, which was incorporated into *In an Antique Land*, was published in Subaltern Studies in 1992. How do you see yourself in terms of the Subaltern Studies project?*

AG: The *Subaltern Studies* people are old friends of mine. They are people I went to school and college with, and in that sense, I suppose, there’s been a shared point of view for a long time, one which goes beyond the *Subaltern Studies* project. I felt very happy they printed that piece. I was very proud to be included. I think, in a sense, they and I came out of a similar moment in the intellectual life of India and that’s really been the connection. The interesting thing is that, in India, historians aren’t really historians and writers aren’t really writers, there’s a kind of fuzziness about these things. Take Partha Chatterjee – who’s one of the main figures in *Subaltern Studies* – he’s a wonderful dramatist, and a very good actor.

AT: *This brings me on to my next question. Do you think that the way in which you incorporate formerly quite ‘empiricist’ disciplines, such as anthropology, into your work is an expression of this ‘fuzziness of borders’?*

AG: Absolutely, that’s very well put; and I certainly see no disconnection between my writing and other kinds of work. I don’t think of writing as something which is opposed to other forms of knowledge, other ways of knowing.

AT: *Or that other ways of knowing are not necessarily ‘creative’ as well?*

AG: Exactly.

NS: *Your early work is permeated with images of rioting and mob violence, the possibility of which you describe as, I quote, ‘the fear of the*
war between oneself and one's image in the mirror'. Do you still see this type of violence as typically South Asian?

AG: I think it's something specific to South Asia, the way in which that kind of violence lives in our imaginations and lives in our minds is very much a South Asian thing. I'm very struck, for example, when I read articles about 1983 in Colombo, or similarly about Karachi today, by how similar these forms of violence are, even though they take place in different places. I think that this particular kind of upheaval, the communal riot, is something that really is quite distinctive of South Asia. I don't know of any other place where it is such an endemic form of social violence.

AT: I was struck by the fact that you made that comment before Bosnia, and before Rwanda. Wouldn't you say that—very sadly—people seem able to turn the streets into this kind of chaos in other places just as readily?

AG: No, Bosnia is a completely different example. Bosnia was three proto-nations fighting each other with proto-armies. It's not a riot in the Indian sense where, basically, the streets suddenly erupt—and then the violence completely dissolves.

AT: So it's the generation of the riot itself that is specific?

AG: Exactly; one thing that's very striking is that, since 1947, the governments of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have all been uniformly opposed to this form of rioting. They've done everything in their power to stop it. The human rights groups are always talking about how the State's sponsoring the riot—there are elements of the State which co-operate with the rioters, of course, but I think, on the whole, all these states feel very threatened by rioting. It only makes sense that the State will object to, or feel that it is in some way threatened by, this kind of social violence, over which it has no control.

NS: In fact this is quite interesting because, in The Shadow Lines, mob-violence cuts across national boundaries, and the national papers suppress the information—it's almost as though the riot didn't happen. Although we talk of national boundaries, mob-violence transcends the ethno-religious boundaries that the State is trying to maintain—as if it is some kind of common bond.

AG: That's exactly the thing. That's exactly right. You know, in Bosnia and Rwanda the whole thing is directed by elements of the State, the relationship between the State and the rioters is of a completely different kind over there. I don't see it as similar at all in that sense.

AT: In In an Antique Land, you make a connection between the appropriation of the Geniza documents by European orientalists and the later national demarcation of Palestine. Do you always see history as
Amitav Ghosh in interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell

complicit in the nationalist or communalist project?

AG: I think it is, actually. I wouldn’t have believed this before I wrote *In an Antique Land*, but once you see the ways in which history has become really a kind of battleground in the Middle East – well, not even a battleground; no-one even disputes the boundaries. Egypt is not interested in the Geniza documents and Western Jews see the fact of Egyptian Jewry as an aberration, an anomaly. Jewish history is profoundly tragic because it’s a history that has been completely invented within the German academy in the nineteenth century. It comes out of German scholasticism, and out of a pressure to systematize history; it’s essentially a Christianizing impulse. More than two-thirds of the Geniza consists of magical documents and amulets, and none of that is ever dealt with. I think it’s just regarded as non-Jewish. Similarly, all the Sufi stuff is traced back to a kind of proto-Jewish mysticism. I mean, the very fact of that interchange with Islam is completely disregarded. Increasingly, there are scholars working on this stuff. But Israel conceives of itself in such a Europeanizing way basically that model of German scholasticism has become what Judaism is today. You can just see today the erasure of what existed in the Middle Ages – of what that period represented.

AT: I suppose an analogous sort of thing would be the creation of Pakistan, and the massive conflict over history which came about because of the ‘Two-nation’ theory, and the negotiations over what shape the subcontinent would take after Independence.

AG: Exactly, but Indian knowledge, as such, was formed in a different way by the European academy. Today it would be hard for anybody in the subcontinent to talk about ‘Two thousand years of Pakistan’, or ‘Two thousand years of the Two-nations’ – nobody would take them that seriously. If you look at journalistic discourse about the Middle East, it’s always ‘Four thousand years of enmity’, and where does that ‘four thousand’ come from? Even Judaism doesn’t go back four thousand years, far less Islam and Christianity.

NS: Although the historical narrative in your work depends on the written archive, there is a great sensitivity towards the nuances and complexities of spoken language, for instance, in *The Circle of Reason*. There you describe Aloo’s speech as ‘all stirred together, Hindi swallowing Bengali, tongues unravelled and woven together’. Would you like to say more about this interweaving?

AG: I am bilingual, but I also have several other languages – so language is something that is very much in my mind. Just the texture of our speech is so intermixed that it’s something you can’t help noticing and being interested in.

AT: My last questions concern your latest work, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and develop on some of the things we’ve already talked
about. The erosion of boundaries between genres seems to be a predominant feature of contemporary fiction, and, in The Calcutta Chromosome, the unfolding process of Ross’s research becomes a kind of sub-narrative within the text. Could you say a little about your adaptation of research method into fictional form?

AG: I did some research for the book. Basically it meant reading Ross’s laboratory notes and his diaries and that kind of thing, which really wasn’t much. With this one I really felt I was writing fiction, I didn’t care what happened. At the same time, it was very interesting to read Ross, as most of the connections (he made) came from his servants, his household.

AT: In your novel the malaria parasite, as it mutates and passes from person to person, could be seen as a symbol of storytelling itself, perhaps most of all the digressive, ever-changing oral narratives of the South Asian tradition. Are you consciously drawing upon these forms in your writing?

AG: Yes and no. There was a time when I used to think to myself, ‘How can I tell the story in an oral form?’ But to tell you the truth, more and more the sort of voice that I find really useful comes to me from prewar and postwar Bengali writing. In The Calcutta Chromosome, in the long section where Phulboni the writer goes into the countryside, and has that odd experience - there I was writing quite self-consciously in the Bengali mode of the 1930s and 1940s. I told myself, ‘Wouldn’t it be fun to deploy that apparatus.’ It was really fun to do, and I was just hearing it in my head, in Bengali. To come back to the question of the oral thing, we always think of Indian narratives as oral, but I don’t know what that means for me or any other Indian writer, because people of our background very rarely hear stories told in the way that, say, religious stories are told. Most of the time we encounter them through written texts of some kind. What is really interesting is that the voice Bengali fiction adopts is a very intimate form of address. It’s a really wonderful thing that you find in, say, the work of Thackeray; a very intimate form of address in which you draw your reader in. The texture of that prose has a kind of warmth which is very different from what you get in English. Whenever I get stuck with anything I find myself listening for that voice, saying to myself, ‘If I were saying this in Bengali, how would I say it?’ On one level you could say that it’s almost a transposition of the spoken voice in fiction.

AT: That’s really interesting because, in contemporary European fiction, the relationship between writer and reader seems to involve an intrinsic degree of trickery, of double-bluffing, whereas ... would it be right to say that what you’re trying to do is produce a sense of rhetorical ‘communion’ between writer and reader?
AG: Exactly that. I must say one of the reasons why I find it hard to read so much contemporary fiction is that the relationship between writer and public has become, especially in postmodern writing, very, very distanced. Postmodern writers seek to create this kind of hard-edged text, which is incredibly self-referential, which focuses on itself, and the whole effort creates a very glittering crystalline edge which keeps the reader out. I have done that myself, I suppose, but now I find myself listening for that other form of address, that intimacy which writing creates. That form of communion which one used to discover in novels.

NS and AT: Thank you.
As a child growing up in Kerala where her grandmother ran a pickle factory, Arundhati Roy dreamt of being a writer but, out of the need to earn a living, she went on to pursue a degree in architecture. A truly free spirit, she did a number of jobs, including selling cakes on beaches in Goa, before marrying a filmmaker and turning to acting and script-writing.

After spending five years on her first novel, Roy showed it to an editor who sent it to a literary agent who in turn managed to secure for it an advance of £150,000 off a very excited Harper Collins. Deals were tied up across the world and the advance reached £1m, a record which shot Roy into limelight and led critics to declare, months before the Booker shortlist was announced, that *The God of Small Things* would be the 1997 winner.

On meeting Roy a couple of weeks before her grand Booker finale, I inevitably brought up the B-word, and asked if she was nervous at the thought of the big night. She simply shrugged her beautiful shoulders, blushed slightly, fluttered her eyelashes and admitted: ‘Oh, I guess.’ That’s it? An endearingly modest response perhaps, but hardly what was expected of a writer of whom A.S. Byatt complained: ‘She just writes too many words.’

Persevering, I asked what she planned to put into her acceptance speech, should she win the prize, and discovered that she hadn’t in fact prepared one: ‘I don’t know why, I can’t bring myself to believe that I’ll actually win it.’ Such an attitude is undoubtedly touching; it also suggests a certain amount of self-confidence. Indeed, Roy serenely informed me that she had not even read any of the other works on the shortlist. This seems like a rather egotistical statement but Roy claims that ‘they’re just not available in India, and I only just came from there. It’s not on principle at all.’

Faced with Roy’s ever so peaceful beauty, I suddenly felt like a very unbalanced and over-excited Westerner. All things considered then, it was probably bad etiquette to ask this self-possessed woman what she would do with the £21,000 prize money if she were to win. An elegant eyebrow was slightly raised and I got a look that put me in my place: ‘Money is a very difficult question. I mean, I’ve made so much money from this book, I don’t know what to do with it. I want to do something with it but I don’t know what. You have to be mature about it you know, it’s not just a joke.’

But surely she must have been just a little bit pleased over the record
advance she got for the book? 'I don’t know what’s record about it. The thing to remember about it is that it was really publishers at work. It’s not one person saying, ‘I’ll give you a million dollars,” y’know. And what’s a more important thing, that the book vaulted across all these cultural barriers.’ Yes, even I could see that that must make her very proud: ‘No, it’s not pride, it’s being touched. It’s really touching to see that something can connect across the world.’

Roy may have won fans across the globe but support is not undivided in her own country. In her home state of Kerala, a local man has started court proceedings against her on the grounds of obscenity in view of her inclusion of sexual relations between a Christian woman and an Untouchable. Even in the face of this less pleasant attention, Roy remains unruffled. She puts the proceedings down to jealousy over her success and is confident that, if she plays it cool, things will all blow over. The court system, she says, is such that her time will be taken up, for months or even years, but the worst possible outcome to this inconvenience is that the court will tell her to remove chapters from the book. She will then refuse to do so and The God of Small Things will not be published in India.

Her view, it seems, is that it will be more India’s loss than hers. Roy, as her writing shows, does not hesitate to voice her criticisms of India. In her novel, set in the 1960s, she portrays several female characters whose lives are severely constrained: one woman marries a drunkard to escape her claustrophobic family, another is regularly beaten by her husband. I asked Roy whether things have improved now: ‘Not really. The kind of things that happened to my women characters, the level of helplessness, is still there. But India embraces several centuries. You have a woman like me who lives a completely new life (but I have had to fight for it) and then there are women living in medieval times. There is no one woman where you can say, “this is representative of the country”’.

In spite of her willingness to speak her mind, Roy is devoted to India, so I asked her about the ‘50 Years of Independence’ celebrations in her country. Apparently, nothing much happened there: ‘We refer to 1997 as the BBC Festival. In India there has been so much political chaos and there are so many other things to worry about. Besides, we feel a little older than 50. People treat India as such an old country and yet they talk about it being 50. It’s really the West latching onto something and getting excited. I don’t really know much about it but people keep asking me to write on the subject, but I have said no.’

Roy is an enigmatic and even mysterious woman but one thing that shone through was her love for her book. During the five years she spent writing it, she became very involved with her characters and felt, on completion of The God of Small Things, ‘as if I was leading them out into the world, abandoning them’. Understandably, while she was writing it, the novel was a very important part of her life: ‘My friends used to tease
me and say it was like my bomb shelter.'

It came as a shock then when she declared that she didn't know if she would ever write another book: 'Well, it isn't something you can control completely. Somehow there is something you have to respect and it sometimes works and it sometimes doesn't. It's not like having a nine to five job where you can think, "I'll do this and then I'll do that". It's not like that. So I fear it in a way.' I'm sure though it's a fear the formidable Arundhati Roy will overcome.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RUKHSANA AHMAD is a writer, playwright and translator. Her plays have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and have toured nationally; her short stories have appeared in various collections; and her first novel, *The Hope Chest*, was published by Virago in 1997. *We Sinful Women* (1991), her collection of feminist Urdu poetry in translation, is widely known in Britain.

RANJANA ASH is a freelance writer and lecturer on South Asian literatures and on women writing in diaspora. She was an Associate Fellow of the Centre for Research on Asian Migration at the University of Warwick in 1990-1994; and an editor/consultant for the Heinemann Asian Writers Series until 1995.

ALOK BHALLA received his PhD from Kent State University and teaches at CIEFL, Hyderabad. As editor, his publications include *Stories about the Partition of India* (3 vols.); *Writings from the Indian Subcontinent* (6 vols.); *Indian Responses to Colonialism in the 19th Century* (with Sudbit Chandra); and *Images of Rural India in the 20th Century* (with Peter Brooke). He has translated *Dark Dispatches* by Nirmal Verma; *Leaves and Other Stories* by Intizar Hussain; and *The Sea and Other Stories* by Ravi Kumar. He has also published on the Gothic Novel and the Vampire Tale, and the social history of 19th-century England.

SUJATA BHATT was born in Ahmedabad and currently lives in Bremen, Germany. She has studied and worked in the United States; and in 1992, was the Lansdowne Visiting Writer at the University of Victoria, B.C., Canada. A poet and translator, she has published three books of poems: *Brunizem* (1988) which received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) and the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award; *Monkey Shadows* (1991), a Poetry Book Recommendation; *The Stinking Rose* (1995); and *Point no Point: Selected Poems* (1997). Her translations of Gujarati poetry into English are included in the *Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets*.

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA is a poet, critic and translator. Among her many publications are *Snapshots*, a collection of poems in English which appeared in 1996; and *The Novels of Huxley and Hemingway: A Study in Two Planes of Reality*, a critical study. She teaches English and American literature in the Postgraduate Faculty of Calcutta University.

SHASHI DESHPANDE was born in Dharwad, and educated at Bombay and Bangalore. Beginning as a journalist, she started to publish fiction in the 1970s. Besides five collections of short stories and four books for children, she is the author of seven novels including *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), both of which have received major awards; *That Long Silence* (1988), which received the Sahitya Akademi award; *The Binding Vine* (1993); and, most recently, *A Matter of Time* (1997). Her work has been translated into a number of Indian and foreign languages.

Purush Kar.

SHAMA FUTEHALY was born in Bombay, and studied English at the Universities of Bombay and Leeds. Her publications include a novel, *Tara Lane* (1993); *In the Dark of the Heart* (1994), translations of Meerabai; short stories appearing in *The Book Review* (Delhi) and collections such as *The Inner Courtyard* (Virago) and *In Other Words* (Kali for Women). She has recently completed a second novel. Currently she is teaching at the National School of Drama in New Delhi.
AMITAV GHOSH was born in Calcutta and currently lives in New York. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Egypt and has taught in various Indian and American universities. His essays and travel writing have been widely published in journals and magazines, including *Granta, New Republic* and *New Yorker*. His major works are his novels: *The Circle of Reason* (1986), awarded the Prix Medicis Etranger; *The Shadow Lines* (1988), which won several important prizes in India; *In an Antique Land* (1992); and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) which received the Arthur C. Clarke Award for 1997.


SALIMA HASHMI studied Fine Art at the National College of Art in Lahore, at Corsham, UK, and Rhode Island College of Design, USA. She is currently the Principal of the National College of Arts in Lahore. She has exhibited widely in India, the USA, England, as well as Pakistan; and her work is represented in a number of private and public collections around the world, including Lahore National Art Gallery; the National Gallery, Pakistan; and Bradford Art Galleries and Museums.

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