# HUMAL

## SOUTH ASIAN

January 2001

# litSA 2001

meena alexander in conversation with prem poddar

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HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

Vol 14 No 1 January 2001



14

# The postcolonial imagination

30

# A birth in the family

*Literary South Asia has in the 16 months since its inception emerged as a significant platform for our region's writers, who too often are sidelined in mainstream print. We began our literature section in August 1999 with as much doubt as hope. We are happy to report that our hopes have not been belied and our doubts have been dispelled. The encouraging response that we have had now enables us to present our readers a gift along with our New Year greetings—a bumper litsa number. This issue brings you a collage of genres that most definitely proves the vitality of South Asian literature. We hope you enjoy the issue. —Editors*

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*Himal was a Himalayan journal from 1987 to March of 1996, when it became a South Asian magazine.*

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INDIA ● NEPAL ● BHUTAN

# RIOTS, RUMOURS AND REFUGEES

**EVEN AS** the 10th round of ministerial level talks to resolve the decade-long refugee dispute between Nepal and Bhutan moved towards an encouraging consensus, Nepal's peace was shattered at year-end by civil strife and violence in parts of the country. Protests against Indian establishments and movie halls screening films featuring Bollywood actor Hrithik Roshan, animated by rumours of unspecified origin, provoked a police firing which killed five people, while retaliatory mob violence and arson caused extensive damage to property.

There was an organised flavour to the uncharacteristic turn of events in a country that has been relatively free of the kind of social conflicts that have proliferated among its neighbours. There is latent bigotry and an undercurrent of racism and intolerance in every society and, in this instance, there were foot soldiers of various causes readily at hand to exploit the circumstances. In the feast of street politics that ensued, Nepal suffered, and its reputation took a beating.

There is no shortage of those who would have benefitted by cashing in on the frustration of the public over the incompetence of successive elected governments in the past 10 years. Democracy has just not been able to deliver development, rather it has institutionalised corruption. Joblessness and inflation have gone out of control. In the general climate of despondency, particularly among the youth, there were many who cynically cashed in: the Congress factions, the nine leftists, the ultra-right, the Maoists, communal chauvinists.

The chain of events point to well orchestrated mischief. The programme on which Hrithik Roshan was supposed to have expressed anti-Nepal sentiments was aired on 14 December, but the rumour itself surfaced more than 10 days later. And as events progressed, the rumour and all that it represented, lost its salience as other grievances and complaints came to be ventilated.

In the subsequent political encashment of the situation, neither India nor Indians figured even remotely on the agendas of the various parties. Within the ruling Nepali Congress, the anti-Koirala faction found it to be an appropriate moment to initiate no-trust proceedings against the prime minister, who in turn, engrossed himself in thwarting the challenge to his leadership. Meanwhile, the nation's calamity so troubled the nine-party left combine that it called a two-day strike to coincide with a lucrative phase in the tourist calendar, in the immediate aftermath of fairly severe economic dislocation.

*Kathmandu street scene.*

Sadly, the news relayed out of Kathmandu by the media had no place for the many nuances of the troubles in Nepal, and in this the culpability of the Nepali media cannot be denied. The daily newspapers, particularly in the initial phase, gave a great deal of prominence to the many incendiary statements that were being quite freely expressed, failing in the process to both distance themselves from the original rumour and ascertaining the authenticity of the purported statement that fuelled the protests. But this cannot condone the conduct of the international, particularly Indian, media, which is ostensibly richer in experience and certainly richer in resources.

In the haste to break news, little attention was paid to the events in their unfolding detail. With all the debris cleared and the body count taken, the clear fact is that all those who were killed were Nepalis and the property damaged was by and large of the Nepalis. And after the police firing, the rioting took on an indiscriminate character. But the Indian media found it unnecessary to report the change in situation from day to day. With its one-sided emphasis on the anti-Indian angle and its exaggeration of the magnitude of the trouble, it only contributed to adding to the tension in Nepal and keeping alive the antagonism towards India.

Doubtless it was this that emboldened a senior functionary of the Bharatiya Janata Party to engage in revanchist vituperation and great

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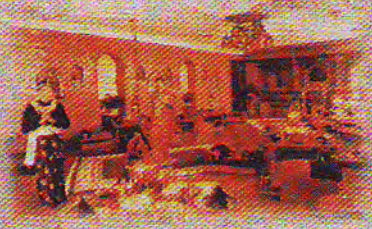

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power nostalgia, going so far as to settle scores with an Indian prime minister now 36 years dead. That he subsequently retracted his statement does little to minimise the damage, more so because of the veiled threat he held out against Nepalis in India. Clearly, there is no dearth of provocateurs on both sides.

The long-term consequences for Nepal are difficult to guess. The economy has been severely affected, as much by the loss of commercial property as by the loss of tourism revenue. Politically, while there has been no scramble to appropriate the tension, there has been little enthusiasm about condemning the events. None of this makes for a hopeful prognosis about social and ethnic relations. Most alarmingly, what began as an expression of antagonism towards Indians now threatens a hill-plains rupture.

But it is not all a tale of unmitigated gloom. The events of the past few days thrust into the background the news of a possible breakthrough in the Nepal-Bhutan refugee deadlock. The fact that Bhutanese refugee groups themselves welcomed the agreement reached in the Tenth Round of the Ministerial Talks in Kathmandu in late December, seems a good enough reason to welcome it. And at first glance, it does look like good news.

Bhutan and Nepal have agreed that they would take valid documents belonging to the heads of families to verify who is a true refugee, and consider anyone below 25 years old as a member of a refugee family. There is now a faint hope that many of the 100,000 refugees languishing in camps in eastern Nepal for the past 10 years (17,000 of them were born there in the past decade and have never been to Bhutan), may be able to go back to their homes.

The sudden mellowing on the part of the Bhutanese government is directly related to recent international pressure from the EU, the United States, and Bhutan's donor consortium. There could also be an added element: the slaying last month of ten Bhutanese in Assam by militants that shocked Bhutan. This is potentially a much more serious crisis for Thimphu, and has sensitive implications for its relations with India as well. Thus it might be best to get the refugee thing sorted out once and for all before it becomes entangled in India's dangerous Northeast.

But the real question is, how smoothly and quickly will verification happen? Ideally, it should happen immediately. It is in the interest of neither Himalayan monarchy that the refugee crisis drags on. △

PAKISTAN

# THE GREAT ESCAPE

**THE SEIZURE** of power by the military in Pakistan was accompanied by the dissolution of Parliament, the suspension of the Constitution and the incarceration of the ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif. None of this occasioned any surprise. Sharif's subsequent conviction and jail sentence were also along expected lines. But Sharif's exile last month to Saudi Arabia has introduced a new twist to Pakistani politics. Sharif's release flies in the face of the military regime's pledge to conduct "fearless, honest and bipartisan accountability" of recent rulers.

For Sharif, the price of freedom is 10 years of exile and an undertaking not to take part in Pakistani politics for 21 years. In addition, the government claims it has confiscated bank deposits worth PNR 300 million (USD 5m), as well as five industrial properties, five residential plots and 24 hectares (60 acres) of agriculture land.

Whatever the circumstances that compelled Sharif's release, the military regime has now lost the very raison d'être for its present control of the country. As for the Pakistan Muslim League, it has been deprived of its leadership, while the Pakistan Peoples Party has egg on its face, having just concluded an alliance with Sharif against the military regime.

More to the point, Sharif's release has ramifications that advert quite substantively to political fundamentals. Even granting that there was much to the charges levelled against Sharif that were fictitious, his 'political' release, bypassing the due process, imparts a discretionary inflection to the administration of justice. Judicial independence is undermined by the political expediencies of the executive and there can be no clearer illustration of this than the continued confinement of Sharif's former ministers, aides and associates. Sharif's allies, like former Sindh chief minister Ghaus Ali Shah, former Sindh police chief Rana Maqbool, and Shahid Khaqan of Pakistan International Airlines, are still in jail despite being acquitted by the courts. The pursuit of such expediencies by the government has raised awkward questions. As Benazir Bhutto put it, "If there was no criminal case against Sharif, why was he sacked, arrested and punished? And if there was a case against him, why has he been set free even though convicted by a court of law?"

The sudden mellowing on the part of the Bhutanese government is directly related to recent international pressure from the EU, the United States, and Bhutan's donor consortium.

The strategy pursued by the Musharraf regime also raises the possibility of a political vacuum of serious proportions and call to mind the consequences of Benazir Bhutto's self-exile two years ago after being hounded by Sharif. The prescient warning that the vacuum created by the weakening of the legitimate opposition would be filled by undemocratic forces was then unheeded. It was this politically corrosive strategy that led to the overthrow of Sharif's government by the military. As things stand now, the leaders of three major political formations are conveniently out of the way. What effects this will have in the elections, when they do happen, remains for the present a matter of speculation.

For the military regime, Sharif's exile is not without risk. Clearly, Musharraf's coterie felt it necessary to have the only consequential politician remaining in Pakistan to be eased out, presumably to arrest any possible increase in his popular base. While the government would have it that it has been the net beneficiary of the outcome, the effusive welcome that Sharif received in Saudi Arabia will not be lost on the many in Pakistan who hold the Saudi establishment in great reverence.

What then could have induced the military regime to make this gamble? It appears that Sharif's popularity was on the rise even after he was declared guilty of terrorism and handed a life sentence. The military rulers tried to counter this first by amending the Political Parties' Act to legally bar disqualified leaders from holding party offices. When even this met with little success, the regime decided to break up Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League. But since most of the leaders assigned to carry out the job has no stature nationally, and were themselves tainted, the strategy failed to take off. To add to Musharraf's worries, the failure of his government to ensure sufficient nominations for the first phase of local elections coincided with Bhutto's PPP and Sharif's PML entering into an alliance to oust the present regime. It was this that prompted Gen Musharraf to make the deal, purportedly brokered by the Saudis, or the Americans or perhaps even by both.

Reactions to Sharif's exile have been varied. The major newspapers in Pakistan have reacted angrily, as have the Pakistan Peoples Party and the main Islamist party, the Jamaat-e-Islami. But in terms of future possibilities, there are divergent views. There are those who see Sharif's removal as an important step towards the military government's promised return to democracy, because his presence in Pakistan was the most important constraint for the regime. His departure could therefore encourage the military to restore the electoral process. But even if this does happen, the status quo ante is unlikely to be restored given that most senior politicians are in prison, exile or under house arrest.

The army may well try to set up a group of politicians to do its bidding, but the political credibility that such a grouping can acquire is another matter altogether. A more optimistic postulate is that the space created by Sharif's departure could be occupied by a new generation of Pakistani politicians who may be more inclined to etch a better profile for their country.

*- Adnan Rehmat*

KASHMIR

# THE TABLE WAITS

**THOUGH MILITANT** groups in Kashmir have rejected the unilateral ceasefire announced by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as a conspiracy to "sabotage the movement", the 11-year-old armed struggle in the state may gradually be heading to the "negotiating table". The second in less than six months, the cease-fire signals the mounting pressure for a negotiated settlement on Kashmir.

The first ceasefire, announced by the guerrilla outfit, Hizbul Mujahideen, last July was short-lived, despite the Indian government's positive response of ceasing military operations; it failed because of Hizb's insistence on including Pakistan in the proposed talks. Interestingly, this time around the Hizbul Mujahideen has neither rejected nor accepted the ceasefire explicitly. On the other hand, militant organisations like the pan-Islamic Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Al Badr, the Harkatul Mujahideen (HuM) and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) of Moulana Masood Azhar (who was freed in exchange for the hijacked Indian Airlines plane), have intensified their attacks on Indian security forces. On 25 December, the JeM exploded a car bomb right outside the army headquarters in Srinagar.

Such activities may well be directed towards isolating the Hizbul Mujahideen. But this gambit may not fetch the desired dividend if the popular mood favours peace. And there is some evidence that the popular mood has made some difference. For instance, the separatist camp headed by the 23-party forum—the All Parties Hurriyat Conference

(APHC)—which had dismissed the July ceasefire as a "step in haste", has been compelled by the overwhelming popular response to the Vajpayee peace initiative to accept it as a "positive change in the thinking of Indian leadership". That the Hurriyat's stance has the tacit support of Islamabad only reinforces the point.

Complementary developments at other levels have provided further momentum for peace. With Pakistan observing "maximum restraint" and pulling out troops from the line of control, the Hurriyat Conference has formally announced its intention of sending a delegation to Pakistan for parleys with militant leaders and the political establishment. Hurriyat's talks with the militants could be significant for the peace process, particularly if it succeeds in convincing the United Jehad Council (UJC) on the agenda for talks with India. Further, the proposed meeting of militant commanders in Saudi Arabia, for which the Hizb chief, Syed Salahuddin has already reached there, could push the process in a positive direction, given that the Hizbul Mujahideen's Commander-in-Chief (operations), Abdul Majeed Dar, has welcomed both the Indian and Pakistani initiatives.

Despite these optimistic trends, the pitch can still be queered. Pre-cisely because the separatists want to go ahead with the initiative irres-pective of what the militants think of it, differences have surfaced within the APHC. The hardliners, led by Jamat-e-Islami leader and former Hurriyat chairman Syed Ali Geelani, are adamant that India should first accept Kashmir as a dispute before tripartite talks among India, Pakistan and Kashmiris begin. The majority, moderate group is inclined towards bilateral talks with the Indian govern-ment first before involving Pakistan at a later stage. This faultline now divides the pro-Pakistan and pro-independence parties in the Hurriyat.

Senior Hurriyat leader, Abdul Gani Lone, while in Pakistan in connection with his son's marriage, opposed the presence of foreign militants on Kashmir soil, and spoke of "no freedom except that of religion" for those living in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. This certainly deepened the crisis within the Hurriyat, and was seen as an "achievement" for New Delhi. Apart from letting Lone visit Pakistan, the Indian government had also permitted two other Hurriyat leaders, Moulvi Abbas Ansari and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, to attend the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) conference in Doha last November.

These decisions are seen as a prelude to a long-term game the Indian government seems to be interested in vis-a-vis Kashmir. Observers in Srinagar see the ceasefire initiative as a "big risk" for the Vajpayee establishment as it has enabled the militants, particularly pan-Islamic outfits, to re-organise themselves in Kashmir Valley, without any significant reduction in civilian and military casualties.

To complicate matters, the Farooq Abdullah government in Jammu and Kashmir has played its card by announcing Panchayat elections in the state starting 15 January. The timing of the announcement, at a time when "serious" efforts are on to find a solution, suggest deeper motivations. It is believed that the central government's bid to arrive at a settlement with separatists has accentuated Farooq Abdullah's fears of a possible change of guard in Kashmir, engineered from New Delhi. The Panchayat election could be detrimental to the peace process if the militants train their guns on the candidates at a time when the ceasefire is still in place.

The majority, moderate group is inclined towards bilateral talks with the Indian government first before involving Pakistan. This faultline now divides the pro-Pakistan and pro-independence parties in the Hurriyat.

Nevertheless, if the Indian government allows the Hurriyat leaders to visit Pakistan to meet the Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf and the militant leaders, a new chapter on Kashmir will be opened. This exercise will be reminiscent of the 1964 trip of late Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, who was sent by prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru to talk to Field Marshal Ayub Khan.

The days to come are politically crucial for Kashmir, but much will depend on the mili-tants' conduct. If the Hurriyat leaders succeed in convincing the Pakistani establishment, it will have an impact on the leaders of those militant organisations over whom Islamabad has influence. Significantly, the Hurriyat Conference has already established contact with LeT chief, Hafiz Mohammad Sayeed and Hizb supremo, Syed Salahuddin, in Pakistan. If this momentum is sustained, a direct dialogue between New Delhi and the Hurriyat leaders is a possibility. This will not only give the latter recognition, but will also define their role in deciding an issue that has hung in balance 50 years too long.

*- Kousar Bukhari*


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*Time.*

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# LITERATURE, LIVE!

susan chacko on the recent NETSAP south asian literary festival in Washington DC

The tidal wave of diasporic South Asian writing is no longer news. What is surprising is that the first literary event bringing together a host of South Asian writers took place in 2000. In November, about a dozen authors and academics and an excited audience of about 200 thronged the South Asian Literary Festival organised by the Network of South Asian Professionals (NETSAP) in Washington DC.

While the authors were well known from their books, many in the audience also got their first taste of the academic approach to literature. The introductory panel included three professors: Sara Suleri of Yale, Ambreen Hai from Smith College and Sangeeta Ray from the University of Maryland.

Post-colonial literature is the writing in English that emerged out of the former European colonies, and Suleri is one of the cornerstones of the "po-co" academic world. Her memoir, *Meatless Days*, was first published in 1987 and blends a description of the Pakistan in which she grew up with her own reflections and interpretation. It was novel in that it made no attempt to 'explain' the culture or society to a non-subcontinental audience. Its importance to the recent wave of South Asian writers is evident from the fact that three of the authors at this festival named Suleri and her book as their primary influence.

The language of academic postcolonialism can be mystifying to an uninitiated audience, however; some of Suleri's sentences like, "Postcolonialism needs to be addressed with considerable irony" meant nothing to those of us who read South Asian literature for enjoyment and for yet another fascinating connection with our own culture. Still, everyone enjoyed her anecdote about how her first paper about Rushdie, written before the infamous fatwa, was rejected because the editor was of the view that "Rushdie is unknown".

Does diasporic literature mainly present an upper-class, heterosexual, Hindu vision of India to its readers? Sangeeta Ray felt so, and the background of many of the well-known diasporic authors would seem to bear her out. Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Shyam Selvadurai, however, are examples of authors who write from a non-Hindu or non-heterosexual perspective.

Shyam Selvadurai, the Sri-Lanka born author of *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* (http://www.interlog.com/~funnyboy), shared the first panel with Mira Kamdar, an international affairs specialist who has recently published a memoir and exploration of her Gujarati grandmother's life called *Motiba's Tattoos* (http://www.motibastattoos.com/). Her grandmother Motiba had mysterious tattoos on her face and forearms, and years later Kamdar traced Motiba's migrations from Kathiawar to Rangoon to America in an attempt to find out what these tattoos signified. In the process, the story of her own family became the larger story of the Gujarati and Indian diaspora.

Selvadurai read from *Cinnamon Gardens*, his second novel set in 1920s Ceylon. It features Annalukshmi, a young schoolteacher, and Balendran, her uncle who lives a respectable married life while hiding his own homosexual past. The first question was about the historical accuracy of the books. Selvadurai discussed his research in Colombo where he had discovered an old newsclip about an Englishman being prosecuted for having sex with Ceylonese men in a railway carriage. The newsclip

had the names of the Ceylonese, who were all from "good Cinnamon Gardens families". He had also found another document which described the close friends of a Ceylonese labour leader, one of whom was a famous British gay activist, so that Balendran's secret gay life in the book had a corresponding historical reality.

When Mira Kamdar was asked about the role of nostalgia in her book; she said "nostalgia is an expression of loss". She talked about how the world was now so different from the one of her grandmother Motiba; the commonality between urban cultures across the world today was something that the older generation could neither comprehend nor imagine.

Sangeeta Ray moderated an energetic panel called "Voicing the Unmentionable" about sexuality, featuring Ginu Kamani and Tahira Naqvi. Kamani read an excerpt from *Junglee Girl*, her book of short stories about Indian women and sexuality, oppression, societal and cultural norms. In this story, a young girl is taken to see a 'lady doctor' because of her overt sexuality. It made for a forceful and dramatic reading.

One of the loveliest readings of the day was Tahira Naqvi's; she read most of 'Love in an Election Year', a longish short story that appears in her *Attar of Roses* and also in *Dragonfly in the Sun*, an anthology of Pakistani English writing. (See http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter_naqvi.html for Gayatri Devi's interview with Tahira Naqvi.)

One young man asked why so many women writers wrote about oppression, and complained that it gave an unfair impression of the culture when in fact most women were not oppressed. The moderator's response was, "You speak from experience?" and the audience dissolved into laughter. Tahira Naqvi said that she wrote about men, women, young people, and the culture as a whole, and also that her stories were not representative of 'the culture'. Ginu Kamani felt that the state of a culture is described by the state of its women, and that the sexuality of women is feared in many cultures, not just South Asia. She thought it shouldn't be seen as a binary issue where one culture was 'good' and the other 'bad'. One audience member suggested that nostalgia for an imagined past was a large reason for the repression of women's sexuality in the diasporic communities.

'Why do you write about abnormal sexual experiences?'; a question for Kamani. She replied: because it's emphasised by its abnormality, writing class taught you to go for the drama, and lastly, that anything sexual is abnormal for some people.

"Had sex talk become more open in India?" Kamani was of the view that the US was the most verbal country on the planet, and that the culture of talking was not as indigenous to other countries such as India, where, according to her, 90 percent of communication was non-verbal. Tahira Naqvi, in response to the same question, agreed that parent-child discussions about sex were uncommon in Pakistan, but women talked extensively to other women about sex. Cousin-marriage is permitted and encouraged in Pakistan, and kids grew up flirting with their cousins in an atmosphere of parental indulgence. Also, there was no dearth of sexual material in the form of books such as Ismat Chugtai's, but the modern South Asian women writers were only now beginning to write about it.

The panel ended with a short digression into Islamic culture, where Naqvi made a distinction between 'Islamic' (i.e. *Koran*-derived) and 'culture' (i.e. which was derived from the community). She also mentioned class differences which meant that women in her own urban educated community had a lot of freedom while growing up, while women in villages were involved in 'honour killings', but pointed out that neither was 'Islamic'; it was the 'culture'.

The panel on "Gender and Nation: Voices in Transition" featured Bapsi Sidhwa and Shauna Singh Baldwin, who read from *Cracking India* and *What the Body Remembers* respectively. Both novels are set in Lahore during Partition. It was a contentious panel as the two authors appeared to (politely) disagree on most topics. Sidhwa's gentle voice counterpointing with Baldwin's dramatic reading.

This panel was very different from all the others—many of the questions were really comments from audience members who had a strong personal interest in Partition. I've heard that this is typical for Baldwin's readings among South Asians because of the topic of Partition. Audience members often got very emotional when speaking or asking questions. Judging from the age of the audience, most of them would have had parents, or more probably grandparents who were Partition migrants, but clearly it's an intensely emotional subject for many of them. Some audience members narrated stories about their own family experiences, and, as the moderator observed, they had the material to write their own books.

"Why hasn't more been written about the Partition?" Sidhwa thought it was too immediate and close to the participants, while Baldwin pointed out that it takes money and leisure to write a book, a luxury which was not available to most Partition migrants.

Sidhwa made an interesting point: she said that people in the Punjab had mostly forgiven the horrors of Partition and learnt to live with each other's communities again, while the hatred lives on in places like Gujarat/Maharashtra that were mostly

untouched by Partition. Baldwin said the reaction to her novel was "gendered"; that male reviewers had generally not "got" the book.

"Why is there no fiction about the other Partition, i.e. E. Pakistan/Bangladesh?" Sidhwa thought the scale of violence in Punjab had been more horrific. Baldwin promptly disagreed, throwing out some numbers in support, but said it was a question to ask the Bengalis.

Panel: Ancient Voices: Mythology's Living Influence, starring Jonah Blank (*Arrow of the Blue-skinned God*) and Manil Suri (*Death of Vishnu*, coming this January).

Jonah Blank's book is a retracing of the path of Ram and a retelling of the Ramayana. The passage he read was about his experience in Colombo during the violence, and was not very impressive.

Suri's novel, which I had assumed was mythological from its title, turned out to be quite modern. The Vishnu of the title is a drunken bum who lives on the landing of an apartment complex in urban India. This section alternated between two middle-class women in the complex arguing over what to do with Vishnu, and Vishnu's own childhood in a slum. Judging from this excerpt, the book is worth looking out for.

Blank, in response to an audience question, said that people tried to interpret the *Ramayana* in a local context, so - for example—in Hampi, Ravana was seen as a hero. The Doordarshan version of the *Ramayana* for the first time gave all of India a common vision of the *Ramayana*, which had "serious political implications". He works for the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and seemed to be somewhat restricted from fully expressing himself.

Suri was suitably short-winded, as befits a mathematician. Someone asked about 'magical realism', the phrase usually used to describe Rushdie's writings, and he said that in his book, anything that seemed magical had a logical reason.

'Was the name Vishnu important? how would the story have been different if he had been called Phil?' Suri: it would have been a short story.

'Was there a divine hand turning the short story into a novel?' Suri said that right after he had finished Chapter 2, his hard drive crashed and he lost all his other short stories, so that he was forced (by a divine hand?) to work on this novel.

'Which Indian concepts are likely to influence the West?' Blank hoped that some would. He gave examples, of Mother Teresa, who said she was who she was entirely because of India. And of Gandhi's influence on the US Civil Rights movement.

Vikram Chandra read from his latest work in progress in the final evening session. This novel features Sartaj Singh, who appeared in his book of short stories *Love and Longing in Bombay*. Anybody liking *Love and Longing*, will probably like this new novel as well. Sartaj Singh is a Bombay policeman, and the novel involves salty language, corruption, brothels, murder and the Bombay mafia.

David Davidar was well situated to talk about the history of Indian English publishing. As the head of Penguin India, he has been an integral part of its growth in the last 20 years. In an amusing anecdote, he described his shock when, invited by Vikram Seth to read his new book, he first saw the 1400-odd pages of *A Suitable Boy*. He thought Indian English writing would be fully realised when it included science fiction, mysteries, romance novels, and memoirs.

The wrap-up panel was moderated by Chitra Ragavan (see http://www.saja.org/ragavan.html)

An audience question about what sort of novels to expect in the future brought a diverse set of responses. Ginu Kamani hoped more people would write about sex so that she wouldn't have to be the representative author on sexual issues in future panels. Jonah Blank expected more regional diversity. Shyam Selvadurai said there were two diasporic Canadian novels about politics coming out soon, including his own. Baldwin wondered if critiques of North American society would be accepted by readers? Bapsi Sidhwa thought young [diasporic] people craved more stories about their roots. Sangeeta Ray expected more writing from the diaspora in the Caribbean and Guyana, and more diversity from within the Subcontinent.


A provocative question from the audience was whether Jhumpa Lahiri's (http://www.sawnet.org/books/jhumpa_lahiri.html) recent Pulitzer Prize was justified, and if not, why it had won. Davidar thought the book was significant, but also mentioned that the criteria for such prizes was always mysterious. Vikram Chandra said he had liked some of the stories very much, but that he had been fascinated by E. Annie Proulx's competing novel at the time. In his experience judging was a complicated issue, and sometimes the best compromise book won if the judges were divided. And lastly, that prizes were meaningless in terms of the longevity of the book. Ray felt strongly that such accomplishments should not be reduced to tokenism.

"What were your influences?" Sara Suleri said "Everyone I've ever read", while Mira Kamdar, Shyam Selvadurai, and Ambreen Hai all said that Suleri's *Meatless Days* had been a major influence on their own writing. Tahira Naqvi cited Manto, Chugtai, and other Urdu writers while Jonah Blank went as far back as Valmiki.

Now the rumour has it that the festival will be repeated next year—many can't wait for that.

# ANNOUNCEMENT AND FIRST CALL FOR PAPERS
# COMMISSION ON FOLK LAW AND LEGAL PLURALISM

The Commission on Folk Law and Legal Pluralism will hold its XIIIth International Congress in Dhulikhel, Nepal from December 10 to 13, 2001. Following the congress, an international course on legal pluralism will be organized at the same venue from December 15 to 19.

## THE CONGRESS

The congress will address a number of related themes in which legal pluralism and local unofficial law form significant factors in social, economic and political development. While the conference symposia are comparative in nature, a major focus will be on problems in South and Southeast Asia. The congress hopes to attract participants from various academic backgrounds as well as practitioners who in their work are confronted with issues of legal pluralism. The tentative symposia topics include: 1) legal pluralism and natural resource management; 2) plural laws, ethnicity, and religion and democracy and human rights ; 3 gendered perspectives on law ;4) crossing the border: legal pluralism in a transnational setting; 5) methodological and theoretical issues in legal pluralism.

## THE COURSE

After the congress, a one-week course on "Resource rights, ethnicity and governance in the context of legal pluralism" will be organized for young academics and practitioners. The course aims at capacity building on the complex issues of legal pluralism by drawing on the expertise of international scholars in the field who attend the conference. It will provide both practical and theoretical insights in some of the central questions and problems concerning the development and safeguarding of local populations' rights, including rights to natural resources.

**Funds will be available to cover travel and hotel costs for a limited number of congress and course participants.**

**The deadline for submitting abstracts and application for funds is April 15, 2001.**

**For further details,**

please see the **Commission website**: **www.unb.ca/cflp/ or** contact
Dr. Rajendra Pradhan **lpluralism@wlink.com.np;** Prof. Franz von Benda-Beckmann **fbenda@eth.mpg.de;**
Prof. Keebet von Benda-Beckmann **kbenda@eth.mpg.de;** or Prof. Melanie G. Wiber **wiber@unb.ca**

*No man's land*
*no woman's either*
*I stand in the middle of my life...*

*Out of earth's soft*
*and turbulent core*
*a drum sounds summoning ancestors*

meena alexander: *fault lines*

As Meena Alexander celebrates her birthday this February, it will not be without a measure of satisfaction that she looks back on a writing career that began early, at the age of 10, with the writing of poetry.

Educated and raised in Sudan where her father worked for the Government, she lived the diasporic life, studying and working in India, Britain and finally in the US. She currently lives in New York City where she works as a professor of English and Creative Writing at Hunter College and at the Graduate Centre, City University of New York.

Alexander's oeuvre spans a variety of literary genres and has been published widely and has been translated into a number of languages. Her first book, a long poem, entitled *The Bird's Bright Wing*, was published in 1976 in Calcutta. Her best known book, *Fault Lines, New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York*, 1993 is a memoir, but Alexander would like to think of herself first as a poet. Her work includes seven volumes of poetry, including *River and Bridge*, and a long poem, "Night Scene, the Garden", which was produced as an Off-Broadway play in 1988. She has two novels published, *Manhattan Music* and *Nampally Road*, (which was a 1991 Village Voice Literary Supplement Editor's Choice) as well as a study on romanticism: "Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley". In 1993, she was the winner of a MacDowell Fellowship. *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* is a collection of both prose and poetry. Both an academic and an artist, Alexander's work straddles both worlds of theory and creativity.

This conversation with Prem Poddar, which took place in Aarhus University, Denmark, ranges freely over a number of Alexander's favourite themes: of location, memory and the struggle to forge her own unique postcolonial identity.

EKKO VON SCHWICHOW

# questions of LOCATION

Meena Alexander,
in conversation with
Prem Poddar

*PP: You've described yourself as a no-nation woman in your last collection* The Shock of Arrival, *and to talk about location in your case is sometimes difficult, often meaningless. What I'm interested in knowing is: where do you write from? How do you locate yourself—if at all? And how does your writing work—given that location is so intractable, given that you seem to be striving towards borderline identifications?*

*MA:* It is so difficult but it is also terribly important—I'm very aware of it. Writing is a physical act and it is labour and it becomes very important to me, you know, just the immediate location where I'm able to write. I write in all sorts of places: I've often written in moving vehicles, I've written in the subway for instance... I also write in transit lounges or I write when I'm in between places, because somehow that seems to open up something for me. And yet, at the same time, I think location is terribly important to me, which is perhaps why I spoke about memory today; it's as if there was a palimpsest of place, layer upon layer.

In a way I try, not consciously perhaps, but I construct what I write in terms of the memories that places bring and the kinds of correspondences or associations that may exist between geographically distant places but which can cohere or fuse together in the imagination which then is attached to a place in the mind—a place that both is and isn't. For instance that poem called "Passion"—I wrote it in a room in Manhattan by a window on 103rd street and Broadway—I started writing in there, and I wrote some of it in an apartment on the Upper West Side. But as I was writing I was really translating into a totally different scene and the scene was a mud hut on a road in my childhood in Kerala. So the act of writing was also for me an act of translating across zones. But that doesn't enter into the poem. That is part of what allowed me to make this poem but it doesn't come into the poem. So in that sense, there is a way in which location for me has... it's almost as if it has to attain the condition of music because it has to exist in time.

Time and again I do return to the landscape of Kerala which is also the landscape of my childhood. And I don't really think of it as nostalgic because I think that what I write is always bound by the present in some way, wherever that present or whatever that present is made up of, and the kinds of pressures it brings.

*PP: A lot of questions emerge from what you just said, but I'll just pick one thread. It seems to me that, among other things, you're gesturing to the physicality of memory. I'm interested in getting a sense of how you actually grasp memory, how a writer can narrate the violence of our pasts. In this connection I'm thinking of the various struggles for land rights round the world, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa; of some German architects grappling with the Holocaust through the idea of an anti-monument to the genocide, and so on. This relationship between body and violence and memory seems to be very, very central in your thinking about memory.*

*MA:* Well, for the past two years now I've been really thinking about trauma and memory. I think that Freud says in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that trauma is really "a wound in the mind's experience of time". I'm not sure if that is the exact phrasing. But, as I said earlier, violent events culturally, politically in our real lives often leave us at a loss for words because it is an excess almost of what the nervous system can grasp—I mean nervous system both of the individual and of a culture. So it becomes a kind of hole, a black hole that people

don't really talk about and if they are able to talk about it they stop it—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist, it's there. I think particularly of some of the issues and questions that have come up 50 years after Partition in India, also the oral narratives of women who are still alive from after Partition—people like Ritu Menon, Urvashi Butalia, Veena Das who have worked on Partition.

It's very moving to me because often those are also places of cultural silencing. So, I think, when you look at questions of the female body (it doesn't have to be female, but for me it is) and the kind of interface between cultural violence in terms of the construction of, say, gender and events of historical violence... this is very interesting because it's also a place where language doesn't reach very easily.

If I actually had more time today, I would have read a poem called "Illiterate Heart" which has a number of lines of Malayalam in it. It's about a child learning language, this child runs away and she says "I'll never be caught in that cage of script". So, I'm actually fascinated by what it might mean to write out of a place of radical illiteracy. In Sweden, two days ago, I said something about *not* learning how to read or write, and there was this big... quiet in the room, you know what I meant? It doesn't mean that you don't learn how to read or write, but that there are places, I think, in our experience where the linearity of a given syntax doesn't work, and, for me at least, that's where a lyric poem or a piece of prose that is constructed in a certain way can perhaps move. Now, is that a location? What is the location of such an utterance? So, in a sense, we come back to the question of the physicality of location because this whole issue of what it means to be in place is so critical for us and what the indices of place mean.

*PP: So, in a sense, memory or re-membering is a kind of painful reworking, a kind of putting together of the sundered fragments of a dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.*

*MA:* That's right.

*PP: Is that how you really think of your writing?*

*MA:* It is, I agree absolutely. I think dismembered past but also a past that in some measure has to be invented. You see it's not as if... I mean, when a body is broken up into pieces you can't really necessarily pick up all the parts because bits would have gone into decomposition, or there are parts that you simply can't tolerate remembering. And this is the other piece of it, because I think that traumatic memory very often can occur in flashes, and a flash is necessarily fragmentary. I think of this line "when the light of sense goes out in flashes" (it's not my line, it's a line by a gentleman who I will not name) What does that mean? And it's very interesting because I think it is where the light of sense goes out in flashes that we actually stop to see. Now whether we can put that scene into language is another question, but I think it's an enormous challenge.

*PP: Can I pick up on two issues that you've touched on? You keep on returning to this idea of location and my question is a very straight-forward one. I mean, obviously, conventionally location is thought of in spatial terms—it's a kind of spatial metaphor. But it seems to me that you are also thinking in temporal terms...*

*MA:* Absolutely.

*PP: Location is very much in that sense....*

*MA:* I think but location is a temporal index. You know, in my very early years, when I was 18, I went off to England to do a Ph.D and started reading Husserl's *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*—a very interesting text, made from Heidegger's lecture notes. That clarified something for me: that memory is spatial, and the other piece of it is, that location is temporal... The present doesn't exist for us, except in so far as we are able to have a horizon of remembrance. I think the two things are like body and shadow, just together.

I've been recently looking at something again from the *Milindapanha*, The Questions of King Menander, this dialogue between Nageshan and Melinda. It's quite amazing because the king asks something like, "Am I the same being as I was?" And the sage says, "What do you mean?" And the king says, "Well, was I, am I the baby?" This dialogue continues and in a sense the point being made is there are different selves. And then the king says, "Well, does one man commit a crime and another man suffer mutilation for it?" Which I think is an extraordinary question because if you take temporal passage in that fashion and talk about the continual changing self, you know, there is a baby then there is a man that gets married and then does one man commit a crime and another suffer mutilation? Which interests me greatly. It's actually a long dialogue which ends up with this marvellous image of different stages of a lamp and the sensuous continuity of the body in time. So it seems to me that we perhaps don't as yet, in certain kinds of categorical thinking, have a rich enough sense of what the body is. I think we have it in art, I think we have it in our experience, but a sense really of the way in which temporality as it comes to us is always bound up with sensuous experience, in the sense of bodily experience. I think that it is out of that that we can make a frame for

aesthetic production, I mean that it is out of that in a sense that we travel.

*PP: It seems to me that you locate postcolonial memory in the ruptured time of the metropolis, if I may say that, especially in poetry where you bring in these descriptions of New York. Maybe you would like to say something about that.*

*MA:* Well, it's very strange, I arrived in New York 20 years ago now, and, it's not like I've lived there for 20 years—I've lived in India in between. It was completely a kind of gut-feeling for me that I needed a great city, and by great city I mean a crowded, densed, dense crosshatch of the metropolis. This is somebody who has never lived in a big city before. I was kind of shocked when I came to New York, because I know Kerala, I know Khartoum, I've been in the Midlands, you know, Nottingham, bits of Europe, but never something quite like this. For me it's almost like a compression chamber, that I will come across something in this city that really kind of flips me back or forwards, so it's almost like a kind of time-travel, which is also why I think that speed releases something for me. It's very strange. I'm working on this new book and I had a very hard time at certain points writing. We actually live near a park but it's very close to a subway. As soon as I thought of going out of my room...as soon as I start to get up I want to write something and it was very strange. So I'd take my pen and pencil and I would go down to the subway and I'd write sitting in the subway... the subway goes very fast. Actually it became a very safe place for me to write, what with all this speed and transit under ground. When I came up I'd stop writing and I thought ... how will I ever do this book? But then of course gradually I got into it. But you know what it is? It's those difficult moments when you have to enter another life, which is what this book has made me do. I think I needed that... What does speed do? What is speed? I'm not sure but it's... there's something about it. Maybe it is the idea of not being in a place.

I remember, as I was coming to Sweden for this symposium, and I was a bit nervous about coming because I'd never been so far north, you know, I thought I'd die of cold and so on. So I got an old friend to see me off at the bus station (I was taking a bus) and he said, "You're a bit nervous, you know it's a big trip". And I said, "yes it is a big trip and I'm feeling kind of, you know..." Then I was in the transit lounge of the airport in New York, and suddenly I felt this enormous sense of release. It was fabulous, it was really almost like a mystical feeling because I could see the plane wings and then suddenly this marvellous light, and I thought, now it's all right. So there's something in the going out and the coming in... maybe it allows for composition...

A long time ago I did this thesis in Nottingham and it was all about memory and the body and place—in a sense I haven't really gone very far, I just sort of have one idea, right? I remember thinking about what it might mean to have a romantic poet's composed self in the poems, and how far does one go with memory. When I was 16 I had bronchitis in the Sudan and I was in bed for about two weeks or more—in and out of bed really—and I got to read the whole of Proust's *A la Recherche de Temps Perdu* (Remembrance of Things Past) and I was in bed for a week and I read—very carefully— and got very excited because it was this enormous architectonics of memory. In a way, as somebody who does not have a very stable place, memory maybe affords the possibility of a shelter. But it is one that really is quite precarious and it's fitful, but still it is nevertheless there, almost as a realm of correspondences, I mean correspondence in the sense of echoes.

I was talking at this symposium at the BildMuseet to a curator who is based in Paris and does these international shows. I said, "You know, there is this line in Baudelaire", and he happened to know it because he was doing something on cities. So I said, it's actually in *Le Cygne, "le city changé en á l'hâce plus vite que le coeur des mortelles"*—the city changes even quicker than the human heart.

I sometimes think that New York is like this animal, you know. So I have to go away and come back, it is very, very important to me. Would I write if I weren't there? Of course I would, but somehow it is there and I have a job there and so forth...

*PP: You've been talking about the city in terms of travelling in and out, largely...*

*MA:* But I also travel within the city...I will travel, say, from home to work and back, to Chinatown or something, and I come up, and it's like I'm in a different world. So it is as if even within the city it allows me to play out this business... Because I think that when you're a writer you do carry a world inside you and you have to sort of keep setting it down—I mean, literally setting it down. I think that the city in which I am at this moment... I think it allows me... you know, a species of perpetual discovery, which is very exciting for me, because I grew up in very beautiful places, but they were small places with clearly marked thresholds that a girl was not supposed to step over.

*PP: I'm wondering if you see the migrant make-up of the city, with all its disjunctive spaces and temporalities, as being productive for at least the inventive imagination of memory, as enabling the release of postcolonial memory.*

*MA:* I think so and I think part of it is that any language that I will use in this particular city, I mean language literally in terms of English or Malayalam or French or whatever, but also in terms of any particular grammar that I seek to use, will have to border on another. Because New York is filled with language, certainly English and Spanish, but there are immigrants from all over the world. It really is very unusual in that it really is a place made up of layers of immigrants and of multiple discrepant kinds of languages. Even who one *is*, is up for grabs. I mean, if I wear a sari—otherwise I could be from Guyana or Puerto Rico. I think it's very interesting the way these sorts of ethnic confusions and densities arise. I suspect that if I had lived somewhere, say, if I'd lived in Watertown, Massachusetts for instance, it would be a very different kind of experience.

*PP: But Meena, given your present location in New York, I mean the act of writing or the process of memorialising or whatever, wouldn't that necessarily involve some level of indulgence in nostalgia. I mean of course you could turn it around and say, the way you see nostalgia is different or whatever. What are your thoughts on this?*

*MA:* No tell me, Prem, what you mean by nostalgia?

*PP: I'll give you my own take: in the sense that, you know, there is this conventional understanding of nostalgia, longing and desire for home, a recovery of a certain kind of selected past in some ways, necessarily selective memories...*

*MA:* That's right, it is selective.

*PP: ...and it's usually for something that you had. In that sense it's a luxury. But for a lot of people, especially those who don't come from a rich background, nostalgia can be different. It's more like nostalgia for things you never had as it were. Somewhat like Jimmy Porter's rage in* Look Back in Anger.

*MA:* It can be there, it can be there. I completely agree with you. There is nostalgia, but I would also like to say that there is also trauma, you see, if nostalgia is a selection of only the beautiful things or lovely or whatever, trauma is not speaking about the things that are terrible. So that I think there is nostalgic memory, there is also traumatic memory. In other words, I think the invention of memory... that's why, when I said to you I have a whole other layer of work to do, I mean these are some of the questions I need to think about. What does it mean to invent a past or to write, to fabricate? The other piece, which is very important, is that certainly there is nostalgia but in my work there is also the edge of the present which is always pressing, and it's political, and it's kind of dense. Certainly memory is an escape but it has to also allow you to make a bridge of return—because otherwise you wouldn't keep sane, right, you'd just sort of float around.

Somehow the question that you asked me reminded me of talking to Raman, A.K.Ramanujan, many years ago. In fact, it was a sort of a poignant moment for me because he had come to New York for a memorial for Barbara Stoler-Miller—I was going with my daughter into a little bookstore and she was licking this ice-cream cone and suddenly Raman appears, you know, he'd come for Barbara's memorial. So we had this long chat and he said he wanted some ice-cream and he was trying to get her to give him some ice-cream, she said no, I don't think she wanted to give up her cone.

And then he said to me, "Well, Meena, send me some poems, you know, what you're writing". I said, "Raman actually I've just put together a manuscript, are you sure you want to see it?" And he said, "Yes, yes, absolutely. Send it to me right away so it will be there for me when I go back and I will read it immediately". And that manuscript was *River and Bridge*, you know, the book that came out a few years ago and, so, the next day I photocopied it and sent it to Raman. I think he died about 10 days after that, you know, after we met on the sidewalk, 'cause he said: "I'm going in for an operation—I'll read it before that". And he died under anaesthesia during the operation. I felt terribly sad, you know, it was like, I felt like unfinished business for me, I mean it was very, very...painful that he lost his life.

And the other time that remains in my mind I met him in between, (often—not frequently, 'cause I was never in Chicago, but at that time we were—and they both have to do with the composition of poems—it's interesting) because that time must have been, you know, 18-19 years ago and we were all having dinner...Raman and Molly had come over... And I had this new baby, who was an enormous child, very fat—this is the one who is 19—and Raman said to me: "Meena I just saw some new poems of yours in *Chandrabhaga*" (Jayanta Mahapatra's journal) and "will you recite them for us, will you read them"?

I didn't have the magazine but Naim did. And I think there was a poem about the baby in it. So then, the magazine was on the table and everybody was around the table and Raman said: "Please read". And then suddenly this baby started crying, so I had to pick him up. He didn't want to sit on his father's lap, he wanted to sit on my lap. And it was quite extraordinary because I *could not* read the poems with the baby on my

lap. I simply could not do it.

Why couldn't I do it? It wasn't that his head was blocking. It was just that emotionally, you know what, it was as if it was the same space. I just couldn't, I could not do both at the same time. And it was kind of painful for me because, you know, Raman is much senior to me and I admired him, you know; but to recite the poem—I simply couldn't. And I think he understood, I mean, you know, everybody sort of laughed and sort of understood, but it was like both times something was unfinished, and I thought, some day I should make a poem about it.

I felt very sad because... not sad, but it was a complicated moment, you know. But it was as if—"being a mother" is not what I wanted to say, but having that child physically on my lap, I could not recite the poems; which doesn't mean that having a child I can't compose the poetry, or I can't be a poet. I'm not saying any of that, I'm talking about something else—and then this last time, you see, I sent the poems and, you know, maybe they reached him. There is a strange kind of sadness about it. And I didn't know how we got onto this topic at all.

*PP: Nostalgia*

*MA:* Nostalgia. How was this, what was this unfinished business...

*PP: In some ways I suppose I'm referring to some of your critics, who say "Wait a minute, you live in New York and what you write becomes a function of your location there". I mean there is, of course, a suspicion in India, in South Asia, of writers or critics, who live in the metropolis and can easily be seen as privileged spokespersons for the Third world position.*

*MA:* I know what I wanted to say. Raman had this story that he tells (which I think is in the introduction to his folk tales, but I've heard him tell it) where one of the emperors in the Moghul times was travelling, and he's talking about his home. He said his home was in his memory, and it is a bush and there is a bird in the bush that sings, "and I carry the scent of that bush and the sound of the bird and that's my home".

That story that he told is very, very interesting to me, because I remember when I was in India in my early twenties I would read Raman's poems and I loved some of them, and I would think 'How is he sitting in Chicago and writing these poems? What is this?' I mean, as someone of a different generation, you know... I love his poems but I kind of looked at them like this... 'like this', meaning, at an angle. But then people often say to me, "What would you have written if you were in India?" Of course I would have been a writer but I would have been a different writer. I do believe that in the end if we do get to make the work that we're meant to do, it falls into certain kinds of patterns, which in some measure is beyond our control because they come out of materials that are the materials of our biography, which you don't have much control over. It so happens that my biography is of a certain kind, I mean... you know, I don't write in Malayalam, I write in English, as many people do.

*PP: Connected to what you're saying, this recent, you know, fashion, almost, for South Asian writing in the metropolis, writing for a readership in the West....*

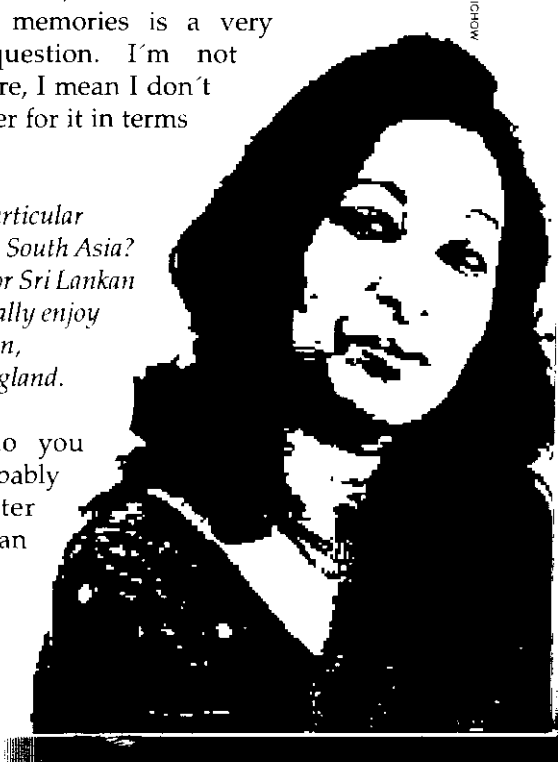
*MA:* Yeah, I don't quite trust it.

*PP: You don't trust it? But do you have any kind of sense of why there is this interest?*

*MA:* I'm not quite sure, to tell you the truth. I suspect that in the West at this moment there is an enormous sense of anxiety. And there is a realisation after the ethnic struggles in Bosnia—and stuff that happened there—the break-up of the Soviet empire...there really is a sense that the world is shifting and changing, so that places that were defined as 'other lands' carry with them a charge. Now, what happens to those texts when they're read is yet another question. Or even stuff that I produce, I mean there is this whole multicultural wave of American writing, of which my work is also a part. That's also another sort of lens through which I understand. I mean, you cannot deny that the material reality in which you live does to some extent mould your writing. It has to, it cannot be otherwise. So that what I write in New York is not what I would write in a Kerala village. Now, how that relates to the structures of memories is a very interesting question. I'm not completely sure, I mean I don't have an answer for it in terms of just talking.

*PP: Why this particular fascination with South Asia? Indian writing or Sri Lankan writing specifically enjoy so much attention, especially in England.*

*MA:* What do you think? You probably have a better answer for it than I do.



EKKO VON SCHWICHOW

*PP: I don't have an answer. Why Anglophone Asia and not to the same degree writing from the African ex-colonies?*

*MA:* I actually don't know. I mean why Indian, as opposed to Nigerian, for instance, right?

*PP: Exactly.*

*MA:* My concern is that in all that hoopla they shouldn't forget the very rich traditions of Indian writing, which are not in English. Because when they say Indian writing they mean Indian writing in English, which is a very small part of what Indian writing is. There is an extraordinary tradition of Indian writing, which is not in English. You have to acknowledge that.

*PP: So you think that contemporary Indian writing in English is serving as some kind of an interface, it is bringing areas of writing or experience which are not accessible, or have not been available to the West?*

*MA:* Well, maybe. I hadn't quite put it in those words, but perhaps... But what's very important is that that part should not serve as the whole in the imaginary. That, I think, is very important. In a sense, as a writer, one is always grateful for readers but you never know what somebody is going to make of your writing—all the uses... You simply don't know. I remember once I was invited in the States somewhere for a festival, I was going to read a particular poem, it was a very grand occasion, and the lady said, "Do you mind if someone dances while you are reading?"

"What do you mean, someone dances?" I was a bit shocked. And she said, "Oh, you know, she is a dancer and she has choreographed this whole dance to your poem and she is expecting to dance as you read." So how could I say no? I actually read the poem and it was fine, it was a short poem so it was okay, but I was kind of stunned, right?

*PP: You know, there is a fascinating video of Grace Nichols's poem called "I is a long memoried woman"...*

*MA:* Someone's dancing to it? She is reading and someone's dancing?

*PP: The poem is used as a kind of voice-over. Nichols reads from it while the historical experience of the middle passage is represented in a stunning choreography.*

*MA:* There is a very interesting choreographer in the States called Ananya Chatterjee and she has choreographed a whole section of my novel *Nampally Road* and there is a dance that comes out of it.

*PP: Connected to what you were saying, again South Asian writing versus African writing, or whatever—what sense of the modern do you have, I mean, as a South Asian?*

*MA:* What do you mean modern?

*PP: Modern, as in what is your take on the idea of modernity?*

*MA:* I don't have any. I don't have a take on it.

*PP: Can one really?*

*MA:* Yeah, I really don't, I promise. So explain, because every time someone says modernity, I don't understand, so you just have to explain what do you mean, you have to sort of pretend that I'm quite illiterate in these matters and just tell me. Rephrase the question or explain.

*PP: I mean, what I'm asking is: how do you situate yourself vis-a-vis modernism?*

*MA:* I don't.

*PP: You don't. So it's a kind of...*

*MA:* By modernism, what do you mean? Do you mean T. S. Eliot, high modernist writing or do you mean something else?

*PP: A certain kind of writing, of course. But I am more concerned about the lure that modernism has held for many who migrated from the colonies to the cultural capitals in the centre but were unwelcome in the international modernist movement. Thus, I'm also of course referring to a paradoxical phenomenon, i.e. the ethnocentricity of the bastions of modernity...*

*MA:* Which is what?

*PP: The questionable internationalism of modernity. By which I mean the collection of values and ideas associated with enlightenment thinking.*

*MA:* Goodness gracious me. Why would I do something like that? Why would I situate myself vis-à-vis the Enlightenment project?

*PP: I mean, of course you talk about identity and we can't talk about identity unless, we, in a sense, try to unpack the Cartesian notion of identity and the questioning of that notion by various theorists. We keep on talking about the postmodern subject, the postcolonial subject, and so on and so forth, sometimes ignoring the narratives of historicism.*

*Obviously, it's very central in our talk about the sovereignity of the 'rational' subject, the ethics of individualism, our unpacking of the idea of the modern, right?*

*MA:* That's, I suppose, true.
*PP: So I'm just trying to draw you into this...*

*MA:* Into a spiral.

*PP: No, no, no. I mean, how do you relate to it? I mean, are you oppositional? If so, how? In some ways you're saying that you don't care.*

*MA:* I'm fascinated by Descartes. If you want to talk about Descartes that's one thing. If you want to talk about the modern, I simply don't know what to say, nee? Because our mother would say, "Oh, this is very modern, it's terrible," and so on. That's obviously not what you mean. Maybe it is?

*PP: Well, in some ways, I mean...*

*MA:* "These modern ideas," my mother will say. In Malayalam she will use the word modern, which is very interesting. She says "Meena, it's the modern ideas...What are you doing? These are all modern ideas." (She doesn't say that to me anymore, I think she has kind of lost hope.)

If you want to talk about Descartes, I'm actually fascinated by the idea of Descartes and the fact that he dreamt up his... I think it was his meditations, right, inside this great stove, and he was a recruit in the Dutch army. The *cogito* had it's inception in this very warm, womb-like place. I do teach Blake, I teach the English Romantic poets who were terrified of the idea of Descartes—whatever that meant. Coleridge talks about the Cartesian world as all these tiny atoms, which are just racing and all these bits and pieces broken up. But, I think, what is fascinating about the Cartesian project, at least fascinating from the end of the 20th century when we look back, is the constraints that were put on any possible epistemology that started its course off from where he led it.

I don't know if you remember when I read earlier I talked about this gap in imagined reality, which is where I start writing. In other words, the *decallage*, the gap between what is outside and what I know from my life, which has to do with migrancy. So it is in that gap of invented time that I start to write, I start to make up. I never actually said this in so many words before, but I think the entire breakdown of the Cartesian project comes because the poor, wretched man, who was also extraordinary brilliant, could not conceive of how the thinking substance and the physical substance could in any way unite, could in any way be one. In other words, how the human being could be a person. So there is always either these animal spirits or the existence of a just, benign God. There is always in his thinking this gap, which is already there and cannot be reconciled without another machine. It's also for me perhaps the gap in the idea of the modern. Ah, there, I've answered your question.

*PP: Okay, so in a sense you see modernity as a kind of already fractured modernity?*

*MA:* Absolutely. I prefer not to use that word.

*PP: As you would not want to use the word postmodern, I suppose?*

*MA:* That's right. If you want to use it, it's fine. But, I think, if you want to use a word like identity then I could say yes, but a word like modern—I simply don't know what to do with it. Maybe because my mother always had such a problem with it, modern being someone who wore chiffon saris when she shouldn't... So it's not a positive word. Now, of course, I'm also deliberately not responding to your question because I think that the word has so many layers, and there are so many takes on the idea of the modern—particularly in cultural studies—and what it means and what tradition means. It's very hard unless we have a very specific context to talk about, because it's a complicated set of ideas.

*PP: Well, I was giving you a context in the sense...*

*MA:* You spoke about Descartes and I responded about Descartes.

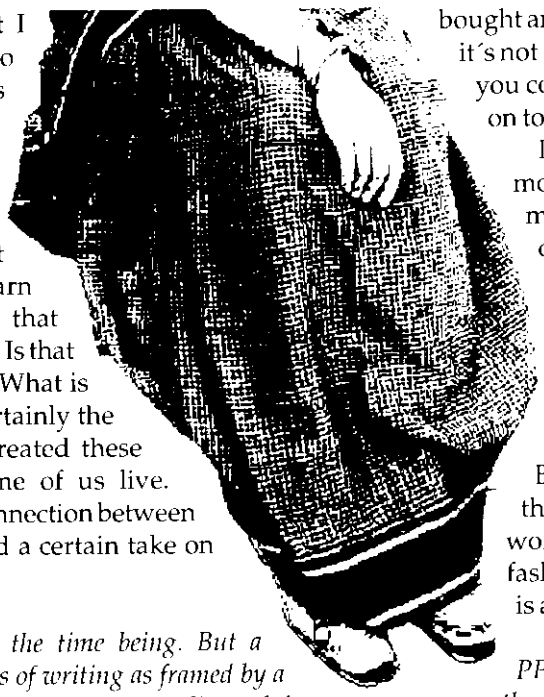
*PP: ... There seems to be a particular kind of modernity which is maybe obtainable in South Asia, which makes it different...*

*MA:* But do you think that's why, to return to your earlier question, in some way, Indian writing in English partakes of it? Is that what you're getting at?

*PP: Yeah, in a sense I'm saying that there is a kind of... a questioning of the modern, there is a use or a utility of the fractured modern that you talk about, which maybe, people in South Asia or intellectuals in South Asia are able to access...*

*MA:* Maybe. That is actually very interesting, I mean that is entirely possible. In part because if you grow up in India you have to have more than one language, it's sort of taken for granted, so you learn to think in the interstices of these languages. You know, when I was a

child I had Malayalam but I was born in Allahabad, so Hindi was in some ways, as well as Malayalam, my first language—and everybody has to learn English. Then we moved to Pune, so I had some Marathi, then we went abroad and I had to learn Arabic and French. Is that postmodern, is that modern? Is that a life after decolonisa-tion? What is it? How do we locate it? Certainly the project of modernity has created these metropolises in which some of us live. There is a very interesting connection between the way a city functions and a certain take on what modernity might be.



*PP: Well, I'll leave that for the time being. But a connected question: the process of writing as framed by a world, of course a world in my understanding of it profoundly impacted by the structures and the strictures of colonialism. How do you forge, how do you reinvent? Or fashion, whatever the word might be, the intimate language that I some times encounter in your poems? I mean, given that history?*

*MA:* I really don't know how to answer that question, because it is an intimate language. I wrote an elegy several years ago for Uma Shankar Joshi. It's a poem called "Paper filled with Light" and it begins in Noguchi's garden on Long Island City, but then it sort of moves to Sabermati Ashram. It's a piece about Partition, a meditative poem I wrote during the Gulf War and it ends with a question, "How could I dream of paper filled with light?"

This is after an evocation of certain kinds of violence. It's after talking about the Gulf War and the barbed wire, it says:

> the packed cars of new immigrants,
> the barbed wires of Meerut, Bensonhurst, Baghdad,
> strung in my brain. How could I sing of a plum tree,
> a stone that weeps water?
> How could I dream of paper filled with light?

So you're saying to me, "How can you have this intimate language..."—which it has to be, the language of poetry has to be, "...in such a place?'" It's almost like saying, "How can you write lyric poetry at a moment like this?" And yet, I would like to respond, it is *precisely* at a moment like this that one needs the lyric poem, not the grand piece of prose or not just rhetoric, you need the lyric because it cannot be bought and sold, it has no commer-cial value, it's not like a novel. And it's very small and you could memorise it, you could write it on toilet paper. I mean it.

It's very important to have those moments of our existence that really make us human that, in a sense, cannot be controlled. But, of course, they can be controlled, you can starve a poet, they are only human beings; also you can burn the paper. The small fragile pieces of our existence are very important, and I think lyric is related to them. But you're right. It may seem very odd that on the one hand there is this woman who theorises in a certain fashion and then writes lyric poetry. It is a bit peculiar, I admit.

*PP: In a sense I'm trying to draw you into the idea of, if it is at all possible, thinking about different modernities.*

*MA:* Like what?

*PP: What I'm saying is what you already said: that the modern is already fractured and hybrid. And maybe we have appropriate...*

*MA:* But I'm thinking also of, say, the ideas of decolonisation as someone like Sarojini Naidu might have learned—or even Gandhi. Gandhi for me is a fascinating figure. I keep reading Gandhi again and again, and I think he is a great modern.

*PP: Modern, but a kind of a contra-modern.*

*MA:* That's right. He is a great modern in the true sense because he's radical. Radical in that he goes under the root of what a culture might posit.

*PP: I'm trying to ask you a very political question, which is, if we have a different take on the idea of the modern in India or different parts of South Asia, you know...*

*MA:* The idea of secularism could be tied to it also.

*PP: Exactly. So, given the growing fundamentalism, if you like, the kind of violence we see in Sri Lanka or Pakistan or India, what is the future of lived multiculturalism in South Asia?*

*MA:* God forbid that one would have modernity rescue one.

*PP: Yeah, exactly.*

*MA:* That I don't accept, because I don't understand what that would mean. But if we could talk just a little bit more about Gandhi, what fascinates me about his project, because I think that's the right word to use for it, and if we can think about Fanon, we ought to think about Gandhi at the same time. Living in this day and age I think it's very important. This perhaps is where postcolonial memory needs to come in, remembering Gandhi. When I went to South Africa, for the first time two years ago, for the Johannesburg Biennale, it was during the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. I watched on television, on Johannesburg TV, they would have the commission hearings on TV. It was actually quite fascinating. Then subsequently I met the person who was in charge of the broadcasting, and recently I was talking to Njabulo Ndebele, who is the lifetime president of the Congress of African Writers, who's involved in their whole media project. They would show clips from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then they would actually show scenes of people who were evicted from land, and land not in the cities but in the country: black people going back and saying, "this is my father's land" or "this is my grandfather's land and I want it back". At the same time I was being taken around town by this photographer, who had done an extraordinary series of photos about the razing of Lanasia, which was the whole Asian settlement. It was incredible to see whole areas literally razed and people re-located, and you see these houses half standing, it's just amazing. He took me through one of them, and said, "I knew this family and this is where they lived", and "I had tea here," and you see half of a house. It's just quite something.

Then on the other hand I'm thinking of the riots in Bombay after the Babri Masjid event. My friend Rumanna Hussain, this wonderful artist (who died last year, she's exactly my age), she has done work on this, she's done a series of installations. Her telling me that she and her husband had to suddenly leave because they were looking through all the Muslim names on the apartment call-buttons...they had to move. And I thought, my God, I mean, if...

*PP: So the Enlightenment project makes you mad?*

*MA:* It makes me very mad, which is why when you asked me I would not talk about it.

*PP: But we cannot not talk about it.*

*MA:* No, it makes me absolutely furious, the idea of it, because for me that is very, very close, I mean that particular idea of rationality in humanism, which I identify as the Enlightenment project, which of course you could call something else, is for me very closely related to the Papal Bull, for instance, that Christopher Columbus was given. It is part and parcel of that project, it's not exactly the same era, but it is a project that presupposes a certain *carte blanche* and at the same time necessitates the body of the 'other', so that... How do you read Descartes, if you are an Indian woman? What does it mean for someone like me to read Descartes? The whole idea of a certain kind of rationality for me is enormously suspect.

My father, who I loved very dearly really believed in the idea of rationality. He was born in 1921 in India of a certain generation, he studied in Madras and he went off to Imperial College—he was a scientist. I think for him the idea of the modern was very, very forceful, as it was for scientists in our country of a certain generation: it was the idea of progress, it was the idea of a certain equivalence of all human beings. At the same time, when he went on a British ship to England to study—he went in '47 as an Indian student— he said, "Of course, the British officers would never speak to us". By "us" he means Indians. At the same time they were taken to Buckingham palace for garden parties and so on, because Britain owed India some money for having quartered troops there after Independence. It was very strange, you know.

For someone like my father the idea of modernity was a very important idea. It also meant that women should be educated: he has no sons, I'm the oldest daughter, and he always taught us right from the beginning that just because you're a girl doesn't mean that you don't study—you can do anything a boy can do. That's a very modern idea. It doesn't mean that other people in other generations have not had that idea, but it is a modern idea in that sense, an idea of a certain kind of permission.

I've just written a preface to a book of short stories by Lalithambika Antherjanam, who is a great Malayalam writer, a feminist. She started writing in the 20s and 30s and she talks about being brought up in a very traditional taravade in Kerala, and how until puberty she was very free—she was allowed to read and write and her father was very enlightened. Then she had these eras where she was more or less confined, she wasn't permitted to write because she was female. Then she married a man who was quite enlightened. It's sort of fascinating to me this whole question of a buried voice, which is really the dark side of modernity. It's a voice that's buried in a body—I mean it has to do with bodily shape and bodily contingency. Then you have to ask yourself whether the modernist idea or ideal could have existed without presupposing it's buried side. I wonder.

I don't know if you've seen that prose piece I did, and also there's a poem that goes with it, which I think speaks to this in perhaps an elliptical form. The poem is called "Indian April", it's just been published in the *Massachusetts Review*. I sort of imagine Mirabai and Ginsberg meeting in Rajasthan and then in Central Park... then I have a prose piece called "Unquiet Borders", where I re-read Fanon and I imagine what it would be for Fanon to be alive and a female poet. A sort of reincarnation in the metropolis. I bring it together with the idea of Mirabai and migration.

The part of Fanon that fascinates me is—I think it's chapter 6 in *Black Skins, White Masks*, I'm not sure—he says, "Look, a Negro!" and the body falls apart and there are all these fragments and you think, 'What hands will put those fragments together and what shape will they take?' For me that's precisely what modernity cannot, because of its historical limitations, cope with. It's the putting together again of the fragments because, after all, Fanon was raised within the modernist project. He has that language, the *formation*. Also to be female and read Fanon—what is that? You know it's very important.

But to return to Gandhi in answer to your question about modernity. We really need to examine Gandhi's migration. One of the things that we have to really start to look at in our understanding of Gandhi was the place that... Long sojourns away from India, his migratory understandings allowed him to develop the notion of Satyagraha, and really undercut the basis of caste. Had he not been in South Africa and endured the kinds of racial taunts, slurs and markings out that he did, could he really have developed his acute understanding or distaste for the caste system? I wonder.

What does it mean to be rendered 'other'? You have to leave your place. But the other thing is, people ask me about migration. There was this quite long interview that came out in India on television. They were asking me about migration and exile, and I said, "Look this idea of exile is there very early, if you look at the Mahabharata, Draupadi is in exile much of her life. For God's sake it's not a modern idea, it's not a postmodern idea, it's not a postcolonial idea..."—God forbid. The idea of migration, the idea of exile are parts of human experience. It's important to acknowledge that. Not to feel so limited because we are living at the end of the 20th century and we use certain kinds of language. So that returns to your question about the lyric voice, because there is something very small, very fitful in the human experience that the lyric attaches to, and, somehow, the smaller it is, the sharper it is. But I think Gandhi is, for me, a very unexamined figure.

*PP: Two questions falling from what you have said. One is of course...*

*MA:* But this also comes back to location.

*PP: Exactly.*

*MA:* Because Gandhi's understanding was developed in this transit between locations.

*PP: Precisely, and there is reason enough to make that argument. That he too was a migrant of sorts is clear from his autobiography. England, India, South Africa—and also in India in different places—there is a triangular thing which is fascinating. In that connection, I mean, I'm very interested in your response to, say, Ashis Nandy's readings and appropriation of Gandhi. I think he styles himself as a neo-Gandhian. I think in his work we get an oppositional stance which does not see the migratory aspect of Gandhi.*

*MA:* Well, because I think that in India for the project of nationalism, we can't read it. We are all bound. Just as... because of my project, which is migratory, I don't... I need other readings. But the nationalist project, with all it's complexities in India, does not permit of seeing the extraordinary scope of Gandhi... A very dear friend of mine, when I went back to India from England, I remember him saying to me, (because I said, "How can I do these poems? I've been outside India all this time.") "Do you know how old Gandhi was when he came back from South Africa?"

He was actually quite old, older than I am now. Of course there were two travels to South Africa. This comes back to the idea of modern, which cannot be taken apart from the idea of the national and the national boundaries. Given Indian history, given the nature of Partition and the extraordinary migration of peoples in conditions of great violence, which we have to understand, it is therefore perhaps all the more important for us to see how Gandhi's travels, and the length of them, and the complexity of their nature... all the time it's the same spiritual economy that's been developed, in terms of a radical critique. It was actually a very interesting, very complicated understanding that was being developed in Gandhi.

*PP: In some ways I think Nandy is able to see that, in some ways I think he isn't.*

*MA:* Well, I think his readings of Gandhi are actually very interesting and he also has an interesting take on violence.

*PP: But we have two very well known theorists coming from India: Homi Bhabha and Spivak, of course, and they, in a*

*sense, do not directly talk about Gandhi. Partha Chatterjee, on the other hand, has done this seminal piece on Gandhi which furthers his argument about Third World nationalism not being just a derivative discourse.*

*MA:* Do they refuse, really?

*PP: Well, Spivak would see the Indian nation-state as a fabrication of the bourgeoisie and Gandhi's role in nationalist thought as one putting into place a representational structure that corresponded to the very structure of power it sought to repudiate. Bhabha would bring in the notion of the performative. He does though mention in an interview how Gandhi's* Experiments with Truth *is a remarkable project to address the public as private and the private as public.*

*MA:* But he looks at Fanon which is interesting. I was brought up by Gandhians. And Gandhi was like this: I mean, there was Gandhi and Jesus, right. In that sense, I really am postcolonial, whatever that wretched term means. I mean I am, but I'm also a woman. I'm not saying that that in itself is enough, but I think the whole... —and my grandmother was a Gandhian, my mother's mother. On the one hand the extraordinary declension, the liberation of women for a nationalist project that Gandhi was able to put into place, Madhu Kiswar says he was a feminist at some level—he was. But also, he wasn't, I mean, what happens to female body? Or the question of sexuality and desire with Gandhi? You know, that instance he talks about it in Satyagraha in South Africa, where he cuts off the hair, that whole scene, which I've written about... Gandhi's relation to the question of the body is very interesting. Have you seen that play *Mahatma Versus Gandhi*?

*PP: I didn't. So, I mean, it seems to me that you are suggesting that Gandhi is going to make some kind of a comeback.*

*MA:* Has he ever been away?

*PP: I mean as a guru.*

*MA:* Oh, I think so. I'll tell you why: because we're living in an age of such terrible ethnic violence, the happenings in Bosnia and Rwanda, what the BJP has been doing in India. These cannot be taken lightly. It is incumbent upon us to try and understand, and I think this is where Fanon only goes so far, and Homi's done... I really admire his work on Fanon, he is quite wonderful. But I think Fanon only goes so far, as a thinker, we really have to think about Gandhi. It's hard. It's very painful to think about Gandhi. There is a huge amount at stake. I don't know if you've read that novel *Nampally Road*, I wrote.

*PP: Yes, I have.*

*MA:* That woman is being raped in the police station and there is a picture of Gandhi there. I mean, this is what we grew up with, right? And that's important.

*PP: Connected to this again. Fanon, Gandhi: two figures who talked about violence, non-violence... Two different modes of resistance. A friend of mine in Sussex, an Indian, who lived in New York for some time and then lived in London, suggested to me that we Indians are incapable of anger, real anger. Whereas, Africans seem to marshal this emotion of anger easily. Of course the differential specificities of experience and the constitutive meta-narratives of cultures...*

*MA:* I wonder is that really true?

*PP: I don't know.*

*MA:* It seems to me as a very easy generalisation. First of all there are many kinds of Africans, there are many kinds of Indians.

*PP: But there is a certain kind of stereotypical truth about this as well in some ways, in responses.*

*MA:* Maybe, maybe, I don't know... Oh, so you're trying to connect this to Gandhi.

*PP: Gandhi and Fanon, in a sense: you don't get anger in Gandhi's writings, you get anger in Fanon's writings. In that sense as well.*

*MA:* In that way Fanon is extraordinarily liberating for us, and I think the readings of Fanon, Homi Bhabha writing about him... We have to be able to read Fanon, and reading just means using, inventing a Fanon for ourselves, which doesn't mean he didn't write it. But similarly there has to be a project of re-inventing Gandhi. Part of the problem is Gandhi's relation to Hinduism: with the rise of a certain kind of fascism in India, people are calling into question parts of the nationalist project which took certain levels of Hinduism as a given universal. So it's a very complicated kind of reading one has to do. And here I think your idea of modernity and so on certainly comes in. But, nevertheless, having said all that, Gandhi is an extraordinarily under examined figure and part of it has been his co-option by the nationalist project. When Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated I happened to be in Kerala and there were little auto-rickshaws going

for me, the question about modernity is also the question of what it is that the idea of modernity buries, or does not permit us to see, or does not permit us to give voice to.

In a very peculiar way, migrations of people such as myself—yourself, you've come to Denmark—we're voluntary migrants, we haven't been running away from our countries because we would be killed if we remained there. On the other hand, that excision of location, the taken for granted of the everyday, really forces us to think out certain larger issues to undertake a kind of re-mapping. And this is what, I would like to suggest, happened in a very different way to Gandhi: there is this wonderful line in his autobiography, which I've actually used in this new thing I'm writing, where he says...—there was a great storm as he was leaving Bombay in this ship and approaching Aden—I can't quote exactly, but he says that the sea was stormy or turbulent at this time all the way from Bombay to Aden, or something like that, "in this season the water is always turbulent". We don't really know what Gandhi did on board these ships, right? In the African American experience people talk about the *Middle Passage*. In the West Indies, Indians in Fiji etc. Indians were sent as bonded labour to take the place of the African slaves who were freed. Between C.F. Andrews and Gandhi and so on there were enormous conversations about Indian women being used as prostitutes, and there was a lot of stuff up in the air at that point. But I think that we need to understand what it is that happened... —not that we can ever understand it, but even, perhaps, speculate—what happened in his head in between these continents.

What does it mean for the place that you've taken for granted to be memory? You see that is where it comes in. What does it mean to translate your home into an idea, or not into an idea because memory is not quite like that, but it forces upon you really a radical re-thinking of the possibilities of temporality. It also forces you to unlearn the script that you've learnt, and that is where this idea of radical illiteracy is interesting because it involves...the map is torn, I mean, it involves imagining a place where the kinds of maps that you've learnt don't work any longer. That is very scary, but it's also in some ways the very exciting possibility of the beginning of a project.

History is not what we can parcel out and set out as a new and wonderful millennium, or whatever. But, really, history as what we cannot remember. So that, in the poem ["Illiterate Heart"], the speaker says, "someone I learned to recognise", of course, the speaker doesn't really know this woman. I remember having to read *Heart of Darkness* in college and I thought, 'Why do they give me this horrible book and I hate it, why do I have to study this, haven't I had enough of this?' But there's certain kinds of cogitation, certain kinds of thought, which have been used to define our bodily beings, and I think that it's very important to learn it. In that way, the imagination is political, not in any other way, perhaps. There's a lot of work to be done, you know?

*PP: But this follows from what you have been saying, which is, "the map is torn"... reflex knee-jerk reaction, you know. Are you saying that there is no future for the map?*

*MA:* But lots of maps are torn. I was carrying this map of Stockholm and it got completely torn, I'm still using it. It was raining it got torn...

*PP: Let me inflect it in my own way. My mind goes back to a period during the Kosovo crisis. Americans for some time now have had the capacity to locate a person lost in the Pacific Ocean or the North Pole within, you know, a few feet. They have this remote-sensing satellite technology to do that.*

*MA:* Really?

*PP: Yeah, within a few feet. Can you imagine?*

*MA:* But they also have the ability to bomb a factory in Khartoum mistakenly.

*PP: Yeah, of course it's a question of choice. But you know, the ability to actually locate things or people with an amazing degree of accuracy. ...and you know, in Kosovo there was one day on the news that a hundred—more than a hundred thousand—Kosovars had disappeared in the night. They just disappeared—so many people. And I'm thinking, what's going on here? In a sense I'm wondering what kind of thoughts do you have? I don't want to put it in those terms but in a sense I'm asking you the question: what is the future of the map; what is the future for a certain kind of scopic regime, that you're, in my reading, alluding to?*

*MA:* What do you mean by scopic regime?

*PP: Well, when you talk about, say, a regime of perception sustained by unequal power-relations, a disciplinary norm or template, so that certain other, alternative ways of living, ways of thinking become threatened.*

*MA:* You know one of the things that's very frightening about what happened in Bosnia in the former Yugoslavia, Sarajevo etc. or what happened in Bombay, or what happened during Partition, or what's happening now in parts of India, is that you can live next door to somebody... I mean I understand and I don't understand and I have to try to understand. It

really cuts to the roots of questions of family and identity—what kind of identity do you claim? You can live next door to somebody for say four decades and suddenly decide you're their enemy. I mean live in the same village, have kids who are the same age or play together, and suddenly have a kind of barbarism take over. It's very important for us to think about it because it's part of being human. It would be wrong to say, this is so terrible, I don't want to think about it". You have to, it's there. You have to think about it, really draw it in some way. You spoke about Fanon allowing one to unleash a certain rage. But I also think that there are certain conditions of crowds and the gathering of crowds and mass power that can lead to barbarisms.

I watched this wonderful documentary on Primo Levi a while back. I hadn't realised he was an extraordinary poet, but the man who's been translating my poems into Italian, he's also a reader of Primo Levi. He said, 'Meena go read his poems, because he's a fantastic poet.' It was amazing poetry, I had no idea because he is known for his prose and periodic tables and so on. As I saw this documentary he says somewhere, "this barbarism is not elsewhere", in other words, it's not in Africa or Asia, it's in Europe, and it's at the heart of Europe. And I think it's precisely that that the modernist project cannot allow us to see, nee? That barbarism is not only at the heart of Europe, it is in some way, or has been a part of the human condition. Particularly in a world that is being so quickly re-invented and I'm thinking about the speed of electronic data, the internet. As someone was saying at the conference in Sweden I've just come from, what people don't realise is that the internet is also a series of spatial points that are connected—that you literally have a wire. So it is space, it is in a sense a re-invention of space and the meaning of location. I don't go on the Internet, I'm terrified that I will get lost somewhere out there.

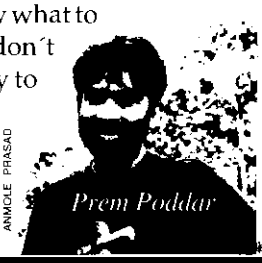
The whole issue of violence, which we thought that after decolonisation was over, that we were entering a new era of progress, of ways in which technology and science could ameliorate the human condition, and they have in many ways but those gains are still very much dependent on structures of power. You can have rice in the godown that is rotting or being sold on the black market and people starving on the other side. You know these are very difficult questions, they also cut at the roots of our understanding of family, for instance. I won't use a big word like patriarchy because I don't really know what it means, but, I think, family structures, however they are defined, they can be defined and redefined. Even those structures all are dependent upon the idea of a threshold, an interior, those that you will put your life out for and those that you won't. To raise children you have to have this idea of protection, you can't do it otherwise—the idea of responsibility. But this kind of ethnic violence comes up when the question of those who you are willing to protect...or the idea of those who you are willing to protect is raised up against those who you think are about to do you in. In fact, every time you look at barbarism of the sort whether it's rhetoric of the Shiv Sena or any of these rhetoricians, *saadvis* of the BJP, it's very, very interesting, they are great orators. And they are always under threat, I mean, that also happened to the Nazis. The majority perceives itself as under threat by the minority. In other words, you can't really go out and kill so many people or indulge in the kind of barbaric violence that did take place, infants beheaded all sorts of appalling things, and then you speak about the unspeakable, it's there in our immediate history. What is it that makes a person do that? And not only just make the person, but allows persons, who would otherwise perhaps be fairly law abiding, fairly decent citizens, go out and do that...or even in the Bangladesh war, I mean these things happens in human communities, I don't think any community has a premium on violence. The kinds of ways in which we are taught to be human are not very easy for us to understand and... What was the number you gave of people who disappeared?

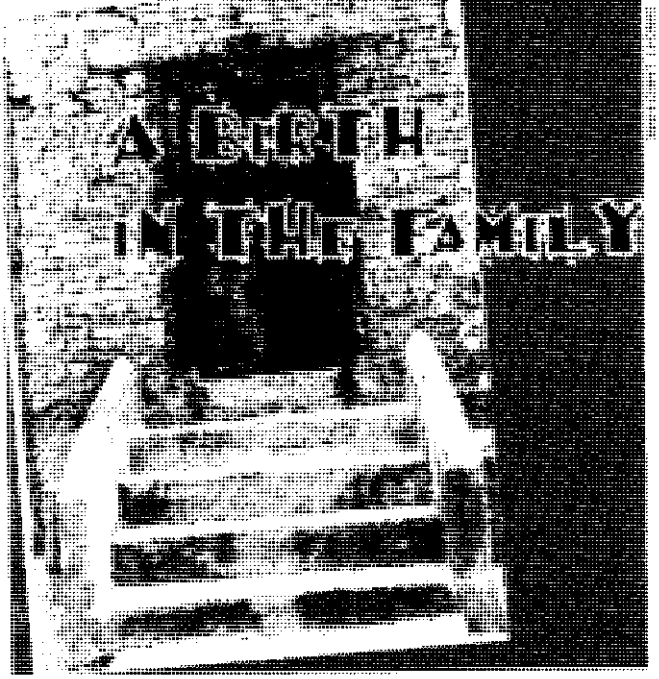
*PP: Well, a hundred thousand, I think.*

*MA:* In a sense, if the map is territory that is recognised, then people who are killed, or abducted, or violently disappear are thought not to partake of the map. In other words you shouldn't be there for that map or a new map to be made. And that "shouldn't be there" is a very, very strong imperative. You know I have an uncle and he had a job for many years with the foreign ministry in Delhi. Do you know what his job was? His job was to censor the maps that came into India. He'd put a big X on what was not approved of... Kashmir of course but... other things—if there was a map that looked wrong, you know, it shouldn't be circulated in the atlases, or whatever. Which is fascinating to me because a map becomes very important. It's a question of recognisable territory. So that if there are people you don't want inside your territory then...because with them there you can't really make the map you want.
I haven't really answered your question, because I don't really have an answer for it.

*PP: Yeah, I mean it's a difficult one.*

*MA:* It's very hard, we really don't know what to say. But maybe that's good that we don't know what to say. Maybe that's the way to leave it. ▷


ANMOLE PRASAD
Prem Poddar




## SHORT FICTION BY SUNIL NEPALI

Maiya Keshari Tuladhar was born with mischievous eyes and a precocious smile. She emanated such airs that all her visiting relatives unwittingly placed that little extra money on her forehead as they filed by the bed where her mother Tara Keshari collected each offering with a grateful nod and a shy, exhausted smile.

Keshar Ratna Tuladhar, Tara's beak-nosed father, stood by the bed and greeted every well wisher with a curt namastay and a nod. "Maiya will become Kathmandu's biggest scholar," he declaimed to everyone's surprise, while his young son eyeing the growing stack of rupees stammered self-consciously, offering to pay for her schooling. The boy's wife peered from behind, spellbound by the child's wry pouts that—she felt—portended a troublemaker; but she bit her grin and resolved to help raise Maiya as her own. And throughout that evening, the visitors offered extravagant sums of money, transfixed by the child's smile and by her knowing, mischievous eyes.

Only her grandmother Roop Sova frowned upon the ceremony. She still mourned her three teenaged daughters who had once shared the family's one-room shack in Chetrapati and who had succumbed to tuberculosis in the distant past. Those had been lean, debt-ridden years, willed through without any assistance from Keshar Ratna, yet Roop Sova still blamed herself for failing her babies. Yes, only Tara had survived, but look at how she had flouted all decorum and disgraced the memory of her sisters. "I can tell," she fumed, "the child will turn into a good-for-nothing. What else can one expect of mixed blood?" Just then, little Maiya shrieked so malevolently that Roop Sova forgot her own name for a week and had to rely on her daughter-in-law to assist her.

Later that night as the neighborhood of Jyatha slipped into uneasy dreams, Motimaituhtaju the Jyapuni midwife lit a brazier and massaged Tara Keshari with warm mustard oil. She listened to Tara's scattered thoughts, answered her every question, recounted stories of Jyatha Tole that she felt Tara needed to hear and offered advice when pressed.

After the flames settled down, Motimaituhtaju retired to a cot nearby while Tara nursed the baby at her itching breasts and totted up almost five thousand rupees. Her head still buzzed with the midwife's coarse voice. She felt as though an errant dragonfly had climbed into her head now, blithely zigzagging through her memories, pollinating the rumors with facts, with dreams, with voices, with expletives, with neglected tunes ... until, overwhelmed by an inexplicable, blooming clarity, Tara gazed through the window and shivered at the sight of the moon dangling like a luminescent crescent earring.

A year and a half ago, 22-year-old Tara had eloped with the Civics professor who was helping her prepare for the infamous I. Sc. examinations. Her scandalised family immediately shut their textile shop and cloistered themselves for three months. Keshar Ratna disowned her, his only surviving daughter, vowing eternal vengeance on anyone who dared help her. After all, Tara Keshari had run off with a married man from the wrong family: an oil-merchant by ancestry, he belonged to the lowly Syāmi clan, a Manandhar! Keshar Ratna strode up and down the wooden stairways, tortured by the thought, threatening to dismember that spineless son of a bitch, that beshyaka, if he ever laid eyes on him. He yelled so foully that a rapt crowd gathered near his two-storeyed mud-and-brick house, amazed by the versatility of Nepal bhasa.

"Haré bhagwan, my only girl, my precious hira who suffered so much while I was away," he roared, remembering also the daughters who had passed away in his absence, during his long sojourn to Lhasa: "For whom I had such dreams... treacherous chandalni... and all this to her own wonderful, handsome, and brave father, too!" Taking a deep breath, he exploded into such ugly language that the women of the tole blushed and stuffed cotton balls into their children's ears.

Keshar Ratna's torrential obscenities attracted even larger crowds of people, who milled around the roadside by the house. "Feels like a carnival of the absurd, a gai-jatra around here," a passing bureaucrat thought aloud, picking at a lint on his black coat.

"Gai-jatra, gai-jatra, gai-jatra," chanted a group of brightly uniformed schoolboys, ties askew, running all over the place. Workers on their way to the office, women headed to the Asan market, and even some policemen loitering in starched khakis, all lingered to take in the scene. One especially sharp-eyed tole resident rolled out a few hemp mats for tired feet and set up a makeshift teashop, where cups of hot tea sold briskly. The transfixed residents slurped their tea, shared food from tiffin carriers and cut jokes as they listened to the endless tirade blaring from the house with barred windows.

Roop Sova fuelled her husband's rage with reminders of the family's shame and the possible gossip circulating in the tole. She recalled the safe from which Tara had stolen gold chains, rare jewelry, leaving a note advising the family to forget her, threatening to flee the country if they followed her.

Recognising his wife's manipulations and reaffirmed in his doubts about her fidelity, Keshar Ratna winked at her. "I wonder how Tara learned such cunning disloyalty. Must have been while I was gone, huh?" he grinned.

"How can you? How can you even think such things?" she screamed at him breathlessly, tears streaming down her oval face: "Who spent all her time raising the children while you were failing at business and doing God-knows-what for thirteen years in Tibet, eh? Who?"

Keshar Ratna blanched and momentarily shut up. But their duel drew forth even more people, adding to the already sizeable and festive crowd.

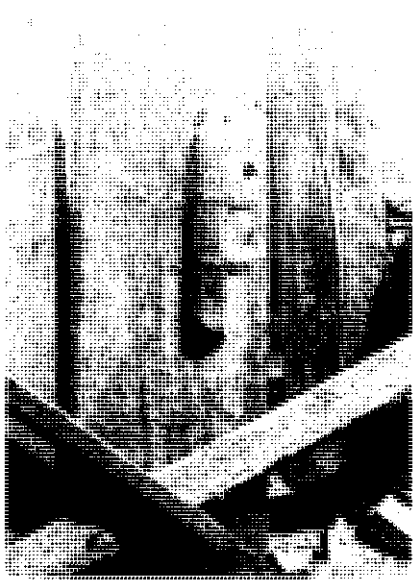
"Don't you see the gai-jatra you're creating, Ba?" Juju Ratna tried to reason with Keshar Ratna: "look at all those people, Ba, gathered as if for a... for a... you know, for a freak show."

"Do you think I give a damn what you or the rest of the idiotic world think, baucha?" he countered, glaring at his 17-year-old son. He with his ranting and raving which—interspersed with Roop Sova's signature protests—began to sound like searing ragas. The daughter-in-law was spared the immolation, being as she was on the verge of womanhood and still residing with her parents. Only late at night did the Tuladhar residence withdraw into an exhausted, eerie quiet.

Three months later, Jyatha Tole awoke to an unbearable silence. The roosters slept through the dawn; the pigeons cooed soundlessly; the chickens forgot to lay eggs; and the tole residents intuited in their dreams the end of this strange drama. The incredulous gathering soon petered out and the people, aching with nostalgia, were left to ponder about the newly-purged house.

Keshar Ratna flung open the windows, and a passing wind swept out the malodors of past meals, disturbed dreams, stale sweat, and rancid breath. Fresh gusts ventilated the rooms with fragrances of the earth, the trees, and certain vines that smelled of semen—a smell that terrified Juju, who sensed inchoate links between them and his raging manhood.

But the store reopened as if it had merely closed for a festival and the customers flocked in for gossip. They purchased more cloth than they needed, asked after the family's health and shared news of each other without mentioning Tara. Breaking finally from his long preoccupations with his dwindling savings, Keshar Ratna sighed with relief and offered prayers of gratitude to the god of the hearth, the Aagãn Dyuh, for heralding such a propitious beginning.



SANCHIT LAMICHHANE

Meanwhile, Roop Sova gathered all her daughter's belongings, stuffed them into a huge teak chest, and slammed the lid shut upon her memories. She heaved the chest onto a table in the rat-infested storeroom and vowed that life would remain unchanged. Thus, ignoring time, she kept busy cleaning about the house, washing laundry in the large clay pots, distilling liquor and preparing meals for Keshar Ratna and her son who toiled at the textile shop.

Juju worked hard to impress Keshar Ratna. He shouldered the janitorial-cashier-sales responsibilities without complaint and so entranced the customers by his efficiency that by the time he had measured and scissored through a length of cloth like a razor-blade ripping through paper, and even folded and packed it, the customers hardly noticed the few discrepant inches in their purchases. Amazed by the profit, Juju learned more techniques and applied them with such dexterity that even Keshar Ratna remained oblivious to the tricks of his son's trade. The old man reviewed the accounts since his return from Lhasa three years ago and balanced the records to the last anna. In this manner, the family kept busy with their blissful routine and barely noticed the year darting by like a swallow.

No one mentioned Tara Keshari, nobody dared to. And Juju's fears persisted, often culminating in semi-nightmares, where he grappled with vague feminine forms and turned into a shrub.

Roop Sova chanced to wind up the grandfather clock in the living room one morning and she

jumped at the rhythm of its heart. She peered deeper, shocked and furious by the unheeding passage of time: every swing of the pendulum mocked her. She huffed and puffed all the way up to the terrace and sat down to lose herself in laundry, but her son's caked under shorts disturbed her even more. She reluctantly held council with Keshar Ratna, who met with the bride's family. Within a few weeks, after further wedding ceremonies, the daughter-in-law received the keys to the house.

The young bride, Sneha Lani Tuladhar, assumed control of her new home without offending Roop Sova's authority, and suffused the drab, lonely air with her musical voice and glowing beauty. Not only did she calm Juju's ever-burgeoning anxieties like a woman of the world—though she was barely 15—but she made short work of every household chore and waited on Roop Sova so attentively that even before the matron would begin to ask for something, the object would appear before her. But Roop Sova, still smarting at the grandfather clock, was never content.

"The sheets are too colourful for such an already brilliant day. Use something lighter," she advised curtly, or complained: "The water is wet" as if Sneha were to blame. Having rehearsed back at home the worst tortures at the hands of a mother-in-law, the young bride, this bhamcha, bore everything with patient grace.

After long, heated arguments with himself, Juju Ratna decided the textile business was not generating enough money, and tried convincing Keshar Ratna, who had aged ten years in those tumultuous months, to look into the general convenience store business.

"The tourists, who've begun arriving like flies, pay three, four times the regular price, or whatever you charge them," Juju explained to Keshar Ratna, who listened with a furrowed brow and measured nods. "They pay fortunes for strange things like canned frankfurters, luncheon meat, or awful-tasting stuff like vegemite and mayonnaise. And without any complaints too, so unlike the uncivilised locals who bargain over a mere five paisa. We can't go wrong, Ba."

White-haired Keshar Ratna kept nodding and growing red in the face. "Oh, so you want to tell me what I should do and what business to run, eh?" he finally thundered: "so you think these bhuyu white people are all donkeys, huh?"

Startled, Juju prayed against yet another attack of the ranting sickness.

"So you want to act like a man, but sell our family honour to kiss the bhuyu beshyakas' rich butts, eh?" he continued, poking Juju's chest with his thick forefinger. "Let me remind you, you little khwasah: I give the orders here. I make the decisions." He took a deep breath and bellowed: "No, no, no; I say no to you henpecked, pus-brained, retarded son of the greatest, smartest, and handsomest father. Go sleep out in the gully if you disagree, you hear?"

His voice had so risen to the old pitch that some neighbors sleepwalked out by the house and attempted to sit on hemp mats—only to awaken on muddy backsides, the echoes of Keshar Ratna's ire and snatches of his past epic outburst ringing in their ears.

Juju shuffled his feet and mumbled with downcast eyes.

"Get out of my sight before I disown you mampakha like your sisss ...," Keshar Ratna choked back the word, his Adam's apple bobbing uncontrollably. "Out of my sight ... now," he ordered.

"It's good you talked to Juju," Roop Sova whispered later in the night: "He seems to be acting up these days, must be the bhamcha. We shouldn't let that girl plant bad ideas in our son's head."

He remained silent.

"Haré Shiva!" she muttered and nudged his shivering back. Then shaking her head, she embraced Keshar Ratna while he sobbed like a baby.

That same night, the young bhamcha wept too, but silently, seething at her husband's coarse love-making. She fumed at her karma for flinging her into an insane household, and studied the ceiling with such intensity that she discerned images of a sister-in-law she had known as a child. "Oh, Tara tuhta," she prayed: "come back, come back."

Sneha's visions seeped into Juju's dreams, and he too recalled a sister who had cooked for him, combed his straight black hair, read him Keshar Ratna's letters from Lhasa, and sung him to sleep. Some old tunes and children's rhymes, like "jhi nima pasa/yalay wonay nhyasa," played themselves over and over in his head.

Under the weight of so much yearning, the wobbly table in the storeroom collapsed, and the teak chest crashed open, spilling memories like marbles that thudded across the quiet mud floors and exploded in a torrent down the wooden stairwell. The rats scampered in terror and Roop Sova briefly lost her bearings in her dreams. Keshar Ratna interpreted the incident as a distress signal from Tara and prepared to find her despite Roop Sova's misgivings.

The next morning, Keshar Ratna presented some pomegranates and three yards of the best tas cloth to the neighbouring Guvaju before sitting down to consult him. The impassive Guvaju sprinkled rice grains and marigold petals at the orange sun, intoned incomprehensible prayers, and studied Tara's astrological birth scrolls amidst thick incense smoke. For two hours, he chalked galaxies of calculations on a black slate before making the solemn pronouncement. "Straight down south, at the edge of the world," the old Guvaju declared and advised him on the most propitious days for the journey.

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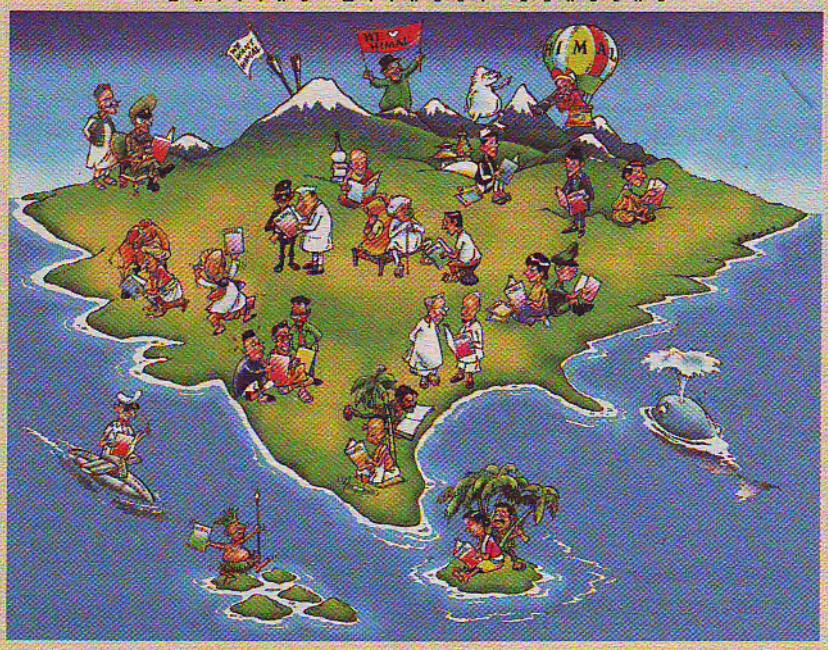

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wheedling, and bribing every bus driver for possible information on his daughter, Keshar Ratna headed for the border town of Birgunj in the terai plains. Shortly after arriving there, he recruited Jagan, an emaciated dehati rickshaw driver, and set out to first explore all the lodges, then the family pensions, and finally, the temple shelters.

Naked children played khoppi and rolled worn bicycle tires in front of a Buddhist vihara. Soon they flocked around the dapper old man and begged him for money with charming smiles. The exhausted Jagan described Tara for the sixty-eighth time and promised twenty-five paisa to everyone if they could lead Keshar Ratna to her. "Oye', the sad woman from Kathmandu !" they cried in Dehati, pointing towards the travellers' hostel.

After gaining permit from a rather overweight monk, Keshar Ratna ran up a flight of stairs, banged on Tara's door, and entered breathlessly. Tara dropped her darning and jumped off the cot, but upon recognising her father, she bit her lower lip and looked out the one grimy window.

It was dark inside, dank, and aside from an oil lamp, a line of hanging laundry, and Tara's metal suitcase, the cubicle lay bare. Tara's gaunt face, bloodshot eyes, and her greasy blouse and sari shocked Keshar Ratna who cursed himself. Then he noticed her swollen womb.

"Haré sharanum! Haré bhagwan! What is this?!" he roared in horror, scratching his throat and blowing on his fingers.

Tara continued gazing out the window.

"Don't you dare ignore your brave and handsome father, sneaky little chandalni you!" Keshar Ratna glared at her stomach, distracted by a passing thought. "I wonder if the khwasah will look anything like me," he mumbled, caressing his beaked nose. "Don't take after your grandmother, your aji, you hear!" he warned Tara's belly.

Tara remained impassive, even as her left eyebrow began twitching.

Keshar Ratna glanced about him as a rat scuttled across the wooden floor. "Where's that son-of-a-bitch?" he growled, veins sticking out on his neck like venomous snakes: "Tell me, my precious hira. I'll skin that mampakha alive and pickle him in cayenne pepper!"

Tara Keshari stuck to a defiant silence, but eventually burst into tears, relieving on her father's rumbling chest all the humiliation, suffering, and betrayal the Syāmi man had brought upon her. She sobbed so violently that it unleashed a two-hour fit of hiccups, which only abated after Keshar Ratna cursed everyone in Kathmandu for talking so incessantly about Tara.

"You're coming home with me, maicha," he decreed: "My first grandchild will not be born in filth and amongst strangers."

She nodded blankly.

The next morning, a grinning Keshar Ratna helped her into the nascent sunshine, to the cries of the children. "Sad woman from Kathmandu, bye-bye, ta-ta," they sang, and pestered the old man for more money. In a fit of generosity, he handed out five rupees to every child and dropped his gold ring into the rickshaw driver Jagan's palm.

Homecoming was an awkward affair. Uncertain of her new role and terrified by the cracks in her heart, Roop Sova clung to the security of her resentment. She withheld blessings when Tara knelt at her feet, and then strode off to incinerate the ingrate's horoscope.

But Sneha hovered around Tara and served her delicacies of swari, jeri, and marpa. She asked naive questions about the pregnancy and rubbed Tara's belly in giggling curiosity. Tara chuckled and patted Sneha's hand. The brooding Juju retreated into childishness and insisted that Tara comb his hair and sing to him like in the past. He only awoke to adult care in Sneha's arms, amidst a new and tender passion.

Keshar Ratna appeared to grow younger every day, looking nothing like the 55-year-old grandfather he was about to become. He mumbled lewd tunes and flirted with the bored housewives who frequented the shop hoping to learn the secrets of regaining lost youth. "Oh, it takes much devotion and an unflinching adherence to my every instruction," he declaimed winking lewdly, and basked in their laughter. He feigned interest in the Dhammapada, the Vedas, and heroically hinted at renouncing the world to enter into Sanyas. "No, sauji!" the women gasped in mock-horror, while Juju swamped Keshar Ratna with religious manuscripts purchased from the Guvaju.

But Roop Sova remained implacable. Obsessed by the memories of Tara's thievery and the need also to preserve her own identity, she padlocked the safe and all the cabinets in the storeroom, and tucked the keys into her white cotton sash. Even in her dreams, she locked almost anything she encountered: young saplings, pregnant women, exuberant children, wells, schools, markets, and even bathrooms. She withdrew into the familiar contours of tradition and regularly visited Lord Ganesh's temple nearby. And there, the devotees' plaintive bhajans and chanting connected her to an ancient and secure past.

As the birth approached, Sneha swept, and decorated the house, rearranged it endlessly. Sandalwood incense burned twenty-four hours a day, holy water and flower petals from Janbahal were sprinkled in every room; the mud floors were cleaned to such perfection that cockroaches regularly died of nausea. Everyone tiptoed around the house like ghosts, except Roop Sova, who checked the locks with increased vigilance.

The Jyapuni midwife lay nearby and fussed over the nervous Tara incessantly, explaining the labour and birth processes with absolute authority. After all, Motimaituhtaju claimed to have manipulated nature and given virgin birth to a beak-nosed daughter. She prepared an aromatic potion, whiffs of which were at once appetising and repulsive, and had Tara drink that every few hours.

"This way the baby won't be totally unprepared when she enters the world," the midwife advised: "And it will also ease your pain and exhaustion."

The family treated the seemingly ageless midwife with utmost respect, at least for the time being, and catered to the most whimsical of her wishes. It was their way of easing her path to retirement, as rumours said this lady (who had ministered to every birth in the tole) was performing her last undertaking.

On the morning of the auspicious day, the family members were all stricken with loose bowels. They waited in line, legs crossed, biting their lips, at the one bathroom on the ground floor. Only Roop Sova suffered no such ailment, but remained in her world where her locks clicked open at will, and where she stayed distracted, frantically running relays from one disobedient lock to the next. Like a wasp repeatedly slamming against a windowpane, she eventually grew exasperated by the deceptive reality.

The tension in the house vibrated with every breeze, like taut sarangi strings, transmitting waves of anxiety and summoning the nostalgic tole. They gathered by the house that morning, certain they would hear some new version of that tirade from the past. The sharp-eyed resident quickly set up his makeshift teashop again, this time bringing along containers of food and other drinks. Soon people stood at the roadside, drinking hot tea as well as thõ, and also slurping up gelatinous tuhkha and juicy mamochas from their leaf plates. Conversations caught fire everywhere, setting off blaze after blaze of laughter.

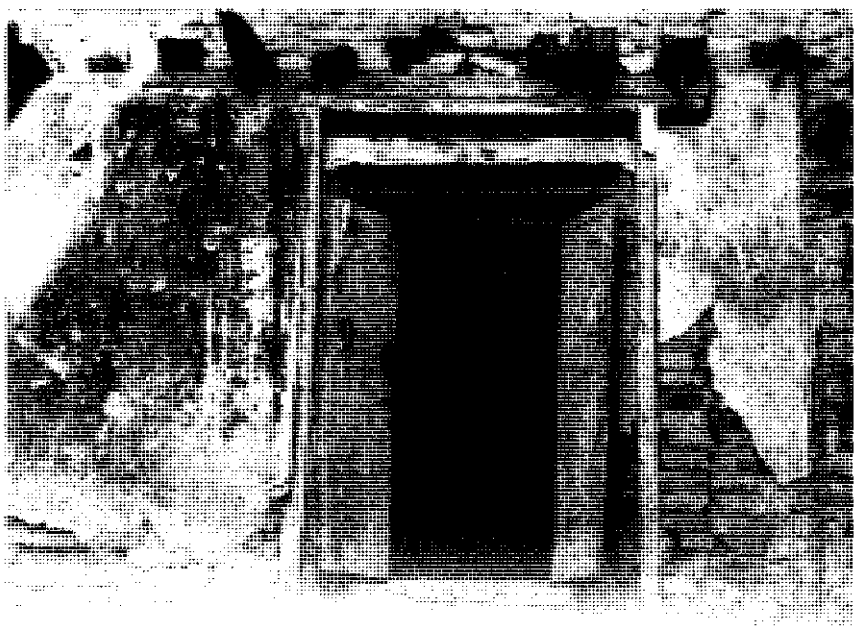
At seven and half minutes past five in the evening, after hours of Tara's blood-curdling screams, the baby's cry pierced the air. The child's shrieks, the cheering and whistling of the people, and the temple bells all meshed together and hung like intricate but scrambled musical notes in the air. Four itinerant Gula Baju musicians returning from worship at the temple of Swoyambhu, plucked out those notes and moulded them into startling tunes.

Never had those big drums, those cymbals, and the haunting horns created a distinctly Newari yet foreign sound such as this. Tapping their feet at the revelation, the musicians nodded at each other and performed with moist eyes. Every sound they uttered turned into music, as an exuberant celebration broke out on the street. The atmosphere was set ablaze further when Sneha slipped bottles of Roop Sova's most potent firecracker ailah to the crowd. The people claimed the prerogative to view the baby and welcome her to their tole.

"Haré baba, what kind of madness is this?" Keshar Ratna yelled at the clamorous crowd: "This is family business, you know, not some public spectacle. Go home and beat your wives, or whatever perversions you practice behind closed doors, and leave us the fuck alone!"

No: Keshar Ratna remained adamant, granting only the relatives entry into his house. After all the well-wishers had departed, he paced around his room, stung by the relatives' sneaky, intolerant glances at his granddaughter and perplexed as well by the discordant Gula Baju and the neighbourhood's fascination with Maiya.

"Lunacy, nothing but god-damned ignorant lunacy!" he grumbled: "And me, the only sane man in this entire stinking tole!" Little Maiya, he told himself yet



SANCHIT LAMICHHANE

again, would receive the best available education, and to hell with the Kathmandu Tuladhars' narrow-stupid-vicious minds. "Fuck their storied mercantile histories as well," he added, still fuming, and could have continued in this vein, had not the cavernous striking of the first morning hour diverted his thoughts to Motimaituhtaju, seemingly for no apparent reason: she appeared to be smiling rather coyly. Keshar Ratna shook his head violently and tried focusing on the noise outside.

The now drunken crowd continued dancing to the precarious, improvised rhythms, stomping and shaking the earth in a single-minded stupor.

Back in the house, a scowling Roop Sova sought herself in every corner, chasing memories that floated about like soap bubbles. She stalked the random echoes from the past until she wound up digging through the teak chest, certain that the answers lay within, but unable to conjure the right questions. Facing herself without the framework of her traditions, devoid of guiding memories, she felt like a lost child. She crumpled to the floor by the ancient safe and began weeping—softly at first, then in gut-wrenching convulsions.

Irritated by Roop Sova's sobs, Juju—dreaming of rich mountain-gazing foreigners—nudged his wife impatiently. Sneha sat up with a start and glared at Juju, until gradually she became aware of someone weeping and hurried to the door. To her horror, she found herself mumbling some of Keshar Ratna's crudest words, even as Roop Sova's cries grew louder and Sneha recalled her mother-in-law's many, unnecessary slights. "Beshyaka, mampakha, khwasah," she muttered to herself, blushing uncontrollably and grinning from ear to ear. She vowed to treat her own future daughter-in-laws like princesses, not maid-servants, and little Maiya, she would grow into anything but her own invisible self, Sneha decided, bolting and unbolting the doors uncertainly. But her concern for Roop Sova's strange forgetfulness and the musicians' even stranger melodies softened Sneha's heart, and she rushed into the storeroom to touch her reassuringly.

"My daughters, my poor suffering daughters, forgive me, your unfortunate mother," Roop Sova babbled in delirium and embraced the bewildered bhamcha. Sneha walked Roop Sova to the matron's bedroom, sat beside her and talked and talked and talked, until Keshar Ratna impatiently cursed them out with the crowing of the first rooster.

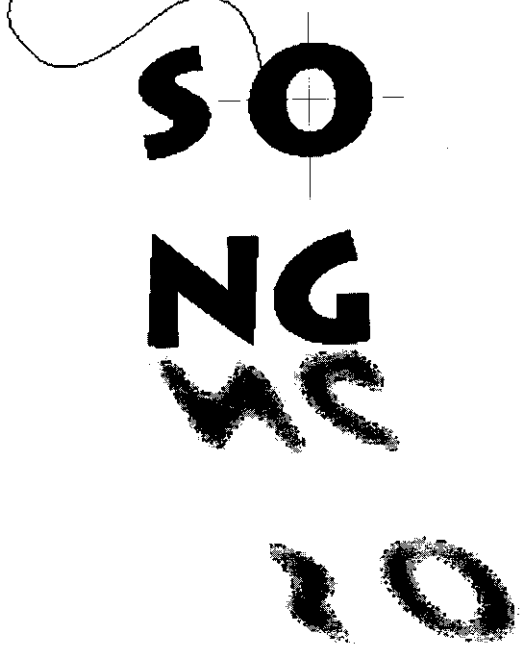
Earlier, while tiny Maiya slept soundly, Tara Keshari had awoken from a nightmare, wherein a grown Maiya and Keshar Ratna had been swearing at each other for three days and nights. Eventually, Keshar Ratna had hung his head, impressed by the little twit's raging tongue. Tara whispered a prayer against the possible materialisation of the dream, and calmed herself by watching the crescent moon through the window. Stray dogs whined at the night and faint musical riffs wafted in from a distance.

She fished out a crumpled photograph from under the mattress and studied the handsome face. The past reeled through her mind once more, and she grinned at her unbelievable daring, the clandestine adventures, as well as the numbing heartbreak. And then the familiar bitterness, rancour and self-pity began burning her stomach.

Tara shut her eyes and dredged up those spirits into her constricted chest, where they swirled and swirled with increasing violence before bursting forth into tunes that had lain dormant for so long. "Jhi nima pasa/yalay wonay nhyasa ...," she crooned repeatedly and caressed Maiya's brow. Eventually, after she had exhausted all the songs in her repertoire, even the Hindi film tunes, she nudged the dozing midwife and told her she could leave now.

A bleary-eyed Motimaituhtaju nodded and made Tara promise to summon her in event of trouble, however trivial. They clasped hands and looked upon each other with moist eyes before the midwife descended the creaky stairs with her bundle of gifts. The grandfather clock in the living room echoed the first morning hour, as Motimaituhtaju shuffled her way home, her duty done.

# caterpillar



ILLUSTRATIONS: ANMOLE PRASAD

Major Black was born in the jungle, miles from Colombo, the youngest of sons. He graduated school. He captained the team. As was the custom, he ate with his fingers. At age 19, he received a commission from the army and was sent to the Wanni. He fought for 12 years, without a vacation.

Thrice decorated for gallantry! Veins of tissue cracked his features. When his commander fell in Mankulam, he galvanised the troops to hold the perimeter. He raped women and men. He tortured and murdered. He ordered the digging of graves. "We cleaned them up," he said, "In masterly fashion."

When Black was a boy, he used to pray daily, six times, once in each direction. To the East, he bowed on behalf of his mother and father: "Having been supported by them, I will support them," he pledged. "I will perform their duties. I will be worthy of my heritage." In return, he was taught, his parents would reciprocate. They would guide him from evil, support him in doing good, teach him skills, and bestow his heritage upon him. In this way, Black believed, he would be at peace with the East, making it free of fear.

He would then bow to the South, on behalf of his educators:

"I will rise to greet you when you enter, I will wait upon you, I will be attentive to your teachings, I will serve you, and I will master the skills that you teach." In return, he was taught, his teachers would reciprocate. They would instruct him thoroughly. They would ensure that he learned what they taught.

They would recommend him to their friends and colleagues. They would provide him with security in all directions. In this way, Black believed, he would be at peace with the South, making it free of fear.

He would bow to the West, on behalf of his brothers:

"I will honour you. I will not disparage you. I will trust you. I will give you gifts." His brothers would reciprocate, he was told, and in this way Black believed himself to be at peace with the West, making it free of fear.

To the North, he bowed on behalf of his friends:

He pledged to honour them with gifts and kind words. He would look after their welfare. He would treat them as he would treat himself. He would keep his word. In return, Black was told, they would look after his property when he was inattentive. They would provide him refuge when he was troubled, and would not desert him. In this way, Black believed, he would be at peace with the North, making it free of fear.

Below, he bowed on behalf of workers. He pledged to supply them with wages. He pledged to care for them when they were ill. He would share special delicacies with them. He would not dehumanise them. In return, he was taught, they would reciprocate. They would perform their duties attentively. They would not steal. They would be bearers of his praise and good repute. In this way, Black was told, he would be at peace with the ground below him, making it free of fear.

Lastly, Black bowed above, on behalf of spiritual teachers. He pledged kindness to them, in deed, speech and thought. He pledged to open his house to them. He pledged to supply them their needs. In return, Black was taught, they would reciprocate. They would restrain him from evil, encourage him to do good, be benevolently compassionate toward him, teach him what he had not learned, and guide him toward redemption. In this way, Black believed, he would be at peace with the Zenith, making it free of fear.

The International Terrorists' Handbook states: "Provocation is the subversive's task. Incite the government to reflex its impulses. Injustices strengthen anti-establishment causes." So lads on bikes rode with guns on laps to kill unsuspecting symbols of authority. Human decency called for retribution. It granted the government emergency powers, which allowed it to obstruct certain freedoms, and wield power less reckfully. The rakshasas ensured that their visions were chosen, by process of elimination.

Only 13, then 14, Black understood little. He knew rugby. Letters on shirts and garlanded sleeves. Black and his buddies, cousins and brothers also knew that life wasn't easy. "Life," they said, "is like rugby."

On the rugby field, Black was a leader. Courageous and vicious. His opponents were marked and the goal was victory. He didn't hate his enemies. He fought for what was at stake. "Be brave, machans." That was Black's mantra.

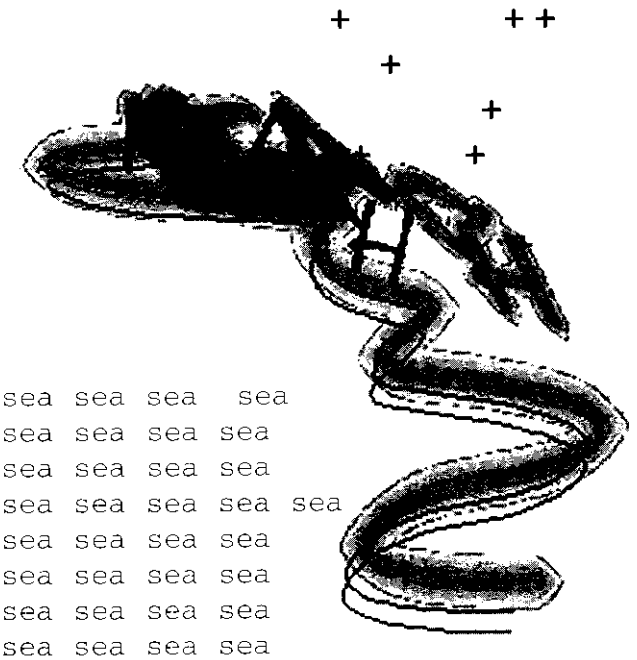
At 16, he watched his eldest brother hug neighbours. His mother wept, and Black tried to console her. "Why cry, Amma?" It was a festive occasion. His brother received blessings and gifts, a carefully wrapped cloth of mother-treats. There was an elephant parade at dusk.

Less than a year, and Black's second brother followed the first. To Black, he seemed as noble as the cause. A steel-eyed lion. There were flags, banners and impassioned speeches. Girls kissing and waving. Never once did the terrorists enunciate their cause. "If you have a grievance," the speaker spoke, "state your solution precisely. Otherwise stop blowing things up! The Tigers want a separate state? What kind of separate state? Will it protect its people from oppressions? Until justice is its vision, the LTTE will have no moral authority. It would be to all of society's benefit if it did."

Two months later, Black's third brother joined. Another month, his fourth. "We've lived together for fifteen hundred years! How to separate?"

Seventeen, and a man. Black had watched outcasts wreck havoc on the unsuspecting. He was courageous. He could not watch idly. He said as much to his friends and none argued. They shared his disgust. In one year, they would become soldiers. In the meantime, they practiced. They beat up kids who wouldn't enlist. They nurtured emphatic optimisms. They drank arrack cocktails.

Identity is a fragile concept. If Black had been born someplace other than in the jungle, he would have



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turned out differently. So how to differentiate Black from his surroundings? Since everything makes the world, and everything is all things, not a single thing can change without changing all the world. No thing is constant. As facts change, the world changes. Mountains collapse. Stars plunge from their orbits. On the quantum level, things change constantly. Thinghood can't exist in a world where change is constant. A non-constant thing is not one thing but many, and many things are not one. For a thing to be a thing, it must be that thing, or some other thing. It couldn't be both one thing and another, simultaneously. Nor could it be neither one thing nor another, because it would then be nothing. For a thing to be a thing, it must have some essential nature—something that does not change—some intrinsic identity—but there is no evidence that such a thing exists, and there can be no world of something else's, if there is no world of things. Of all human parts, it is the I that is the most fragile.

Black rode to the Wanni in the back of a camouflaged truck. He felt on the cusp of powerful changes. There were other men. Each felt like an avatar of some eternal.

Were Hitler's millions more victimised than the millions in India who starved when food was diverted to British soldiers? The commies followed Hitler. The Iron Curtain. Mutually Assured Destruction. The New World Order. In what sense victory? When? For how long? Isn't having enemies the only reality that enemy having creates?

After 12 years, Black's fingers shook, but he'd survived with his body intact. When he walked past glass, he imagined how it might shatter. Instead of fireworks, he heard enemy gunfire.

After 12 years, happiness, for Black, didn't exist. There were varying degrees of experiential intensity. He hiked to a cave that housed thousands of bats. Their shit was higher than his thighs, and the cave was squirming with poisonous snakes. "Adventure sport," he called it.

After 12 years, Black found a lover in Colombo. They drove to the ocean, at 90 kilometres per hour, past checkpoints where soldiers played slow motion games of Russian roulette. She gave him head along the way. They romped in the ocean, had sex in the sand, drove naked past wide-eyed sentries. After 12 years, life was a dare.

After 12 years, he hadn't had a vacation. He'd been thrice decorated! His father met him at the station, with unspoken apologies. Black placed his vices before him. His mother entered the room. He waited for her to leave, then wanted more. His head was abuzz. At any moment, anything was possible, even chaos. "I'm desperate," he said. "There's nothing I won't do."

Of all human parts, the I is the most fragile. "What am I," asked Black. "Am I still he?"

***

Sonya wanders like that Wednesday in November, when she packed a bag with hope, and hitchhiked 20 towns away. She met Black at one of Colombo's casinos, playing baccarat on the minimum bet table. It was November 1999, and Sri Lanka's troops had just been routed by the LTTE. She expressed her condolences, and by his eyes, she could tell he knew her to be sincere. They passed the rest of the night, winning big and drinking heavily.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet," she told him. After 15 or so drinks, she wasn't even slightly drunk. Her cheeks were tender and her eyes were wide. Black hair draped like silk across her shoulders, her breasts. She placed small, calculated bets. Before they left, she donated her winnings to the bathroom attendant.

"Have you ever experienced tragedy," Black slurred. She shook her head no, and took his hand. "It's the capacity for redemption that separates us from beasts. Better days are created, by thoughts, actions and speech."

by
**M. V. Ramana**

*Kuano nadi, sankri, neeli, shaant/Jaane kab hogi aachitij, laal, uddhaam, Bahut gareeb hai yeh dharti/ Jahan yeh behti hai.*

- Sarveshwar

*Kuano river, thin, blue, calm/When will it spread to the horizon, turn red, turbulent/very poor is this land where it flows.*

- translated by Amitava Kumar

I remember the first time I came into the USA. It was also the first time I had ever boarded an airplane. The immigration officer looked at the visa page on my passport. Then he looked up and asked what I was in the US for. I am going to graduate school, I tell him. He turns around and shouts to the officer in the next cubicle, "Looks like the whole world is going to school in America." It may have been his attempt at livening up a boring day but to me it did not sound welcoming at all. And then he proceeds to write F-1 on the immigration form. I froze. I had a J-1 visa. I had been warned—any mistakes could have serious repercussions. After a moment's hesitation, I piped up: "Excuse me, I have a J-1 visa." "Smart aleck, huh!" he comments. "Yes, a darned sight smarter than you," I felt like screaming but didn't. What would he know of my plans, my hopes and my fears. All he knew about me was what was in my passport.

It is what is missed out in one's passport that Amitava Kumar explores in his *Passport Photos*. The book is a charming, exhilarating, thought-provoking attempt at understanding and speaking about the immigrant experience in an "undeniably personal and political way". In the author's own words, "The book is a forged passport. It is an act of fabrication against the language of government agencies." The book, therefore, is structured into sections that correspond to the categories in a real passport. Name, place of birth, date of birth, ... This novel format when interspersed with evidence of Kumar's multiple talents and occupations—mellifluous poetry, skillful language, great photographs—and his passion makes for a great read. Each section shuttles the reader between the diaspora and the home country, between literary theory and political economy, between Bertolt Brecht and Gulzar. Kumar follows (and quotes) Edward Said's suggestion that "since the main features of our present existence are dispossession, dispersion, and yet also a kind of power incommensurate with our stateless exile, I believe that essentially unconventional, hybrid and fragmentary forms of expression should be used to represent us."

*Passport Photos* is a refreshing read in today's world of identity politics. He clearly subscribes to (and quotes) the view exuberantly captured in Subcommandante Marcos's response to a question about his identity: "Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, ... a Jew in Germany ... a Communist in the post-Cold War era...and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains of south-east Mexico." Nor is Kumar's conception of desi immigrants limited to ones that end up in Silicon Valley or in the emergency rooms of small town hospitals. Taxi drivers and restaurant workers, activists and poets rub shoulders in the book. Why and how these people came to be in the US and what they do here forms a major part of the book.

The book does have some distracting and bothersome features. Despite a structure that allows the author to weave in outpourings from his multiple talents, it is clear at various points that a certain detour in the narrative is occasioned only by the fact that the author has written a newspaper article on that subject. That these newspaper

articles are often fun to read is a different matter. Another problem is poor indexing. After having read it, one cannot find where some particular subject is discussed, on which page a certain poem is. But these are quibbles, really.

Kumar's spirited response to "a set of pressing concerns in two nations and one world" is extremely timely. At no time in the history of this planet has the world been "one" as much as it is now. The forces of globalisation—or, to call a spade a spade, global capitalism—have made sure that no part of the world are left alone in the never ending search for "new markets." Nothing—food, dress, culture—is immune to becoming a commodity. As Kumar writes in one of his poems entitled "India Day Parade on Madison Avenue":

I have lost India. You have lost Pakistan. We are now citizens of General Electric. In this country, there are no new words for exile. And if you have nothing to sell, you have nothing to say that this, or that, is indeed you.

Kumar is too clever to offer a simple solution to this predicament. But it is clear that his hopes are set on a range of progressive movements, both in the first and the third world, and solidarity between them. Immigrants are, of course, usually good activist-material. As Isabelle de Courtivron pointed out in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Having a deep experience of two cultures is to know that no culture is absolute; it is to realise that social, political, and linguistic realities could be arranged in numerous other ways." It is perhaps appropriate that *Passport Photos* ends with a list of immigrant organisations, many of which are at the forefront of the struggle for other ways of arranging these realities.

*Aao ab milkar badhe, adhikar apne chheen lain*
*Kafila ab chal pada hai, ab na roka jayega*
- Safdar Hashmi

*Come let's advance together,*
*let's take back our rights*
*The procession is now afoot,*
*now it cannot be stopped.*
- translation by Amitava Kumar

# V I K A S
# M E N O N

## HYBRID

I believed in quarks
and DNA
stones bleeding
and ash
tumbling from a holy
palm

within this ripe wound
I build a temple without end

from within this open shell I
offer you this—

gourd/pot/thrum *ghatam*

summer tar and skinned knees
a slow
burning
milkful thick ghee and endless wicks

gourdpotthrum

inchoate stone, bible
torn,
mud smeared eyes

gourdpotthrum

electric hendrix sinuous
dribbling lava loping
molten veena moan

gourdpotthrum *ghatamghatam*

wonderbread dipped in dal
Govinda bench pressing Mt. Govardhana
peanut butter payasam—

I offer
you this mongrel prasadam

## HOLY GRAIN

Ammachan, I took the dust of your feet,
you inhaled the scent of my hair.

Fingering the tulasi plant of Rama Vilas
you stood quietly
while I flung stones at crows,
you stood,
leaves sprouting from your fingers,

while I read giddily, flinging my mind
in circles solipsistic

anotherworld,
from where I sometimes believe
I never returned.

Thinking of you,
leaf quiet,

feet firmly planted
on black stone floors,

my ears craning after
your hoarse whispers

about beautiful Rama,
his smile
a field of white knife

and so I stutter today sacral verses,
perched on one swollen toe, wreathed in the
woodpulp screams of a crumbling city
while below, pigeons scratch cement
for a sparse, holy
grain

and I cradle poison in my throat
and the tightwire sways

# AFSAN CHOUDHARY

## THE ASSASSIN AND HIS LOVER

On the fork where the Patan roads meet
Before walking to the bridge which lies over a
comatose Bagmati, where the roads sleep broken and
muddy,
crawling with indifferent slime,
where the roads twist and turn like a woman in
shimmering pain, whispering desperate groans that
don't make it to
*Kathmandu Post* or *Nepali Times*,
he stood like a sage weeping tears of deaths and
dimes screaming in pain at his own desperate
prophecy.

Near the feet of an unknown martyr, standing in a
rumpled garden,
scattered by dust and fumes of reluctant dinosaurs
pretending to be buses from Patan Dhoka,
the shops stand lined up like well-mannered deaf
and dumb kids waiting for their school bus in the
pale winter sun.

The shops sleep or lazily wink on holidays,
the seedy shadowy street tea shop
where mobikes and men come to rest and drink beer
and lime, chatting with girls lazing or resting on the
brawny arms of souped up two stroke machines,
next to the shop which sell sad pizzas in the dark,
for customers haunted by fast food come-ons.

And there in serene gloom sits a bookshop for
unknown Pilgrims waiting for unwary men with time
to slaughter and kill,
hoarding books on the dead and the dying
as white tourist fingers lay obscene hands on coffee
book *Kamasutra*,
and people in grimy shorts who search,
with the vacant sockets of their tired vacation-fed eyes,
looking for mystics and rishis on the pavements and
walls of Patan.

They have come to search for the East in paperback
book covers
of ancient travelogues and ritual sex,
books wrapped in careful but dusty plastic covers,
lying close to incense and candles in earth mother jars.

And there,
I found as I was told I would,
I found my brother I had come to kill,
as he stood in a naked corner of the roads rolling
down to the
Bagmati,
he stood rolling a cigarette with his cold, bare hands
waiting for the smoke to fill the hills and the alley of
his own mind.

■ ■

The cracked road bends and forks in the limpid
darkness
as men chisel arcane songs in a voice choking with
sleep and wine.
Frozen into a hump in the middle of a haphazard
signboard,
frozen while humping a paid lover,
making dead love in midnight sloughs,
making mud and babies in dark mountain nights,
cleaning the dirt from charity-calmed shoes
as half-fed peasants in saris of red and gold
drift off in no general direction at all, hearing and
seeing nothing at all.

No one heard anything.
No. Not even the lovely girls who walk home without
fear
wearing winter jeans and sweaters, chattering like
swift birds in a mid-air swing,
defying the Himalayan stare resting on their young
shoulders covered in young hair and shine,

# AFSAN CHOUDHARY

## THE ASSASSIN AND HIS LOVER

as they walk home near the roofs and walls of peeling
faculty pillars
of confused concrete.

Girls who dream of far away lands,
lands which don't swallow dreams like of those
who stay home to watch their decrepit families die
wrapped in splendid, serene, helpless stares.

Go away, far away.
Where the blue and white marshmallow hills
Don't make a constant din of the dead and the dying.

And yet I saw all this before the assassin came,
his face wreathed in hope and prayers,
long before the night was ripped open with the sharp
cleaver of dawn, spilling the red rose guts all over,
just before it dripped into a red day in the red streets,
as early Newar prayers chanted their song in solitary
temples
wishing the chill a gentle beloved welcome.

And so you too have come Bangali babu
come as you promised?
We don't really need you, you know.

Ah yes, ah yes. That part I heard first.

Oh, yes, I am the truthful fat Bangali liar, always
weasel-like, always looking for a friendly face or a
hand-out,
always so glad to be Huree, C.I.E and a full member of
the Royal Asiatic Society,
friend of the Maestro and close to the Dalai Lama's
camp,
trusted by a man who shoots cocaine
and writes his name in bullets and violin on any
empty wall...

*Sala bainchot Bangali. Bat nai sunta.*
*Khali rusgoola khata and kehta, Tagore,*
*Kehta Amartya Sen, kehta Satyajit Ray, Subhash Bose,*
*Khali kehta, kehta, kehta...*
*Bol, bol, aur kiya kiya kehta?*

*Kam dhundta? Sala naukri ko shadi kiya?*
*Sabka piche parta? Kiya? Bol?*

It's all right sir. We are Bangalis.
We can't mind being disliked.
We just want to go home and fart pleasantly with our
wives.

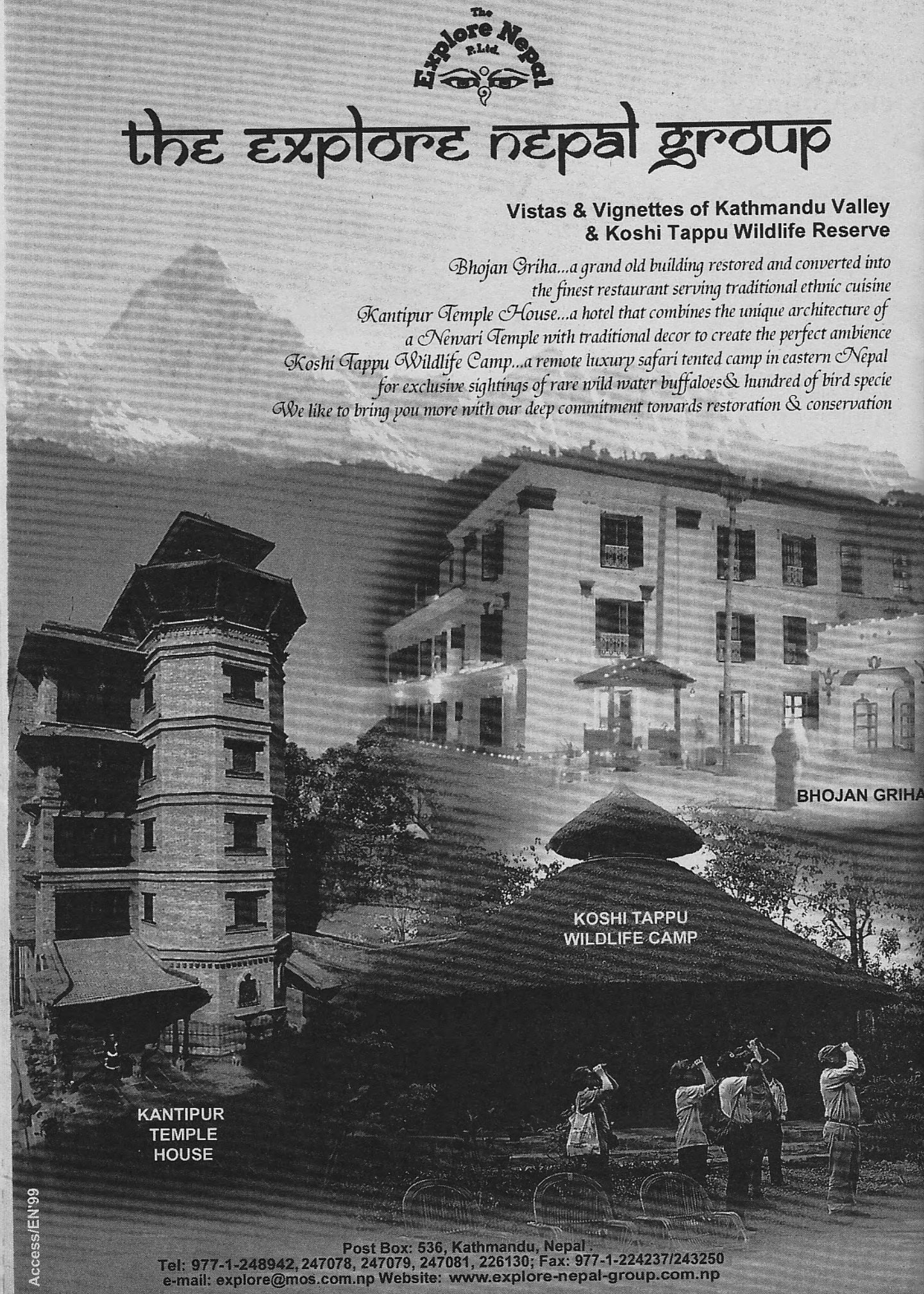
■ ■ ■

And he stood there near the monument to the dead,
his hands full of liquid dust,
tears like fire dripping from his shaded eyes,
as his wrist rested from the familiar joy of a knife
pushed deep into a belly as it becomes death inside
the wind-swept tents of desire,
where fools hide, sleep and dream of past
incarnations in wretched but rain washed hills.

He had come to Patan to kill,
He had come to look for his lover.
Sure man, why not?
It's so cold, so sublime, all this death and blood.

Out here there's no hunger and no brine soaked lips
to caress the neck of the dead lover,
the mouth open, hostess to rude flies,
Mixing memories of salt, venom and corpses.
Of making love to death.
As footsteps stalked the fog-clad night.

Yeah?


The Explore Nepal P.Ltd.
the explore nepal group
Vistas & Vignettes of Kathmandu Valley
& Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve
Bhojan Griha...a grand old building restored and converted into
the finest restaurant serving traditional ethnic cuisine
Kantipur Temple House...a hotel that combines the unique architecture of
a Newari Temple with traditional decor to create the perfect ambience
Koshi Tappu Wildlife Camp...a remote luxury safari tented camp in eastern Nepal
for exclusive sightings of rare wild water buffaloes& hundred of bird specie
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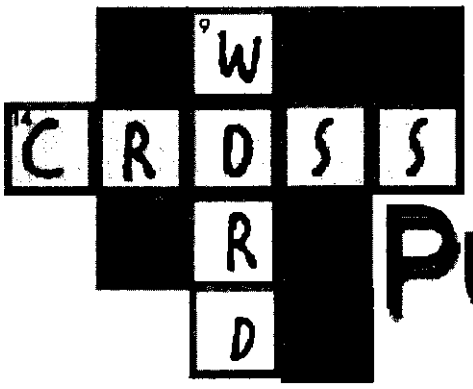


# Puzzles

## A play by sanjeev mohan

*Scene: A bus stop with a typical urban scene as a backdrop: grey buildings with tiny apartment flats and washing drying on the verandahs, children playing cricket, street vendors, parked cars, and lots of people strolling by in a hurry. A man can be seen leaning against the bus stop pole. He is engrossed in reading the day's newspaper—the current edition of the leading vernacular daily of the city. He has placed a tiffin carrier and an office satchel close to his feet. He is slim and immaculately dressed in a full-sleeved shirt, a tie and creased trousers. A cardboard cutout of the back of a public transport bus is close to him. Occasionally, the sound of vehicles passing by; but the man doesn't appear to notice. A second man enters from stage left. He seems agitated, apprehensive and constantly looks over his shoulder. His clothes are similar to those of the first man, though he is somewhat dishevelled; he is carrying a satchel in his hand.*

Man 2: Excuse me?

Man 1: *(no answer)*

Man 2: Friend!

Man 1: *(flips over the page of his newspaper)*

Man 2: *(glances over his shoulder)* Does bus number 502 stop here?

Man 1: *(continues to read)*

*(We hear the sound of a bus arriving. It stops for a while and then leaves after the conductor rings the bell)*

Man 2: That was the 502! *(gazes after it)* Tell me, does it go over the flyover, turn left at the third signal, and stop before the law college, before moving on to the highway and proceeding in a southerly direction towards Mantralya?

Man 1: *(He is now on the front page, flipping back and forth as if searching for the continuation of a story begun on page one on another page)*

Man 2: Maybe it doesn't go south but heads west, towards the college of architecture?

Man 1: *(He is now engrossed in trying to light a cigarette while continuing to read the paper. Either the cigarette slips through his fingers, or the matchstick breaks through his frantic efforts)*

Man2: I don't mind even if it follows the tracks all the way up to the docks. That's okay by me. *(Shrugs with an air of camaraderie and looks hopefully towards Man 1)*

Man 1: *(He is still trying to light up)*

Man 2: What I really detest are buses that go past hospitals and morgues *(shudders)*. Why, once I took this bus—it was the 506... no it was the 508... *(thinks)* Anyway, I boarded this bus in good faith, paid for my ticket in a most forthright manner and would you believe it? *(Pauses and looks as if expecting an answer from Man 1)*. It went past the municipal hospital, turned left at the corner and stopped before the morgue! ... And *(with a peeved expression)* then turned right, thereby competing a full circle, so as to pass the back gate of the municipal hospital. I had half a mind to get off. But since I had already paid my fare, I stayed put. *(Appears to ponder for a while)*

Man 1: *(He has managed to light his cigarette and is smoking as he reads. A look of contentment lights up his face)*

Man 2: Whatever you may say, I prefer double-deckers *(stares at Man 1 as if daring him to disapprove)*. Some people prefer single-deckers but not me. There is something large and expansive about double-deckers, a kind of adventurous air about them that gets to my soul. *(pause)* You clamber on to the upper deck, find yourself a nice comfortable window seat—maybe even the one right up front—and then sit back and let the cool breeze ruffle your hair as the bus speeds. *(rapturously)* A truly out-of-this-world experience, sheer ecstasy. All one needs is the price of a bus ticket to taste this heaven of freedom.

Man 1: *(He has opened his lunch box and is munching ruminatively)*

Man 2: *(Watches him intently and then walks over casually)* Having a mid-morning snack?

Man 1: What?

Man 2: I said: Having a mid-morning snack, are you?

Man 1: What? *(puts his hand to his ear)*.

Man 2: I asked you whether you were having a mid-morning snack?

Man 1: Speak up, can't you?

Man 2: I said ... *(in exasperation)* Can't you hear?

Man 1 : Are you sick or something?

Man 2: All I asked you was ....

Man 1: Maybe it is laryngitis ....

Man 2: Can't you hear?

Man 1: I once knew a man who had laryngitis. Couldn't speak a word for days ... Hold on, it wasn't a man, it was a boy I knew at school, a class mate of mine. He'd had one too many ice creams on Sunday and the following day he found that he'd lost his voice. Not that it mattered really, for he was one of those strong, silent types. No, wait, he wasn't strong and silent, that was someone else... He was the guy who used to chew with his mouth open in a most disgusting manner. I remember one of the local wits remarking that one could see his arsehole through his mouth. Raised quite a cackle, as you can well imagine. Anything even remotely vulgar would have us in spasms of laughter, then. How we laughed when Estragon's pants fell off, or were they Vladimir's?

Man 2: *(All this while he has been gesticulating as if he were speaking. We now begin to hear what he is saying)* ... All I want to know is your name, whether you are Jerry or not? Straight and simple. You see, I deliver courier parcels and I have a packet for Jerry. And if that's your name, I can hand it over. All you've got to answer is whether you are Jerry or not. I mean, you can't be Peter and Jerry, can you? *(appears to think for a moment)* Unless, of course, you've an alias or an a.k.a like those gangster types—Chota this-and-that, or Chikna, or Bablu ... No, I think that's his real name. Listen, did you hear about the gangster who claims to receive resumes from graduates, just like any regular entrepreneur? I bet they even give out personal data forms for the company records: fill in your father's name, brothers, sisters, nearest police station, etcetera etcetera. Two reference checks. Mind you, you need two people to vouch for you. Then, you have to list your greatest strengths and weaknesses. I can imagine a potential gangster agonising over "What do you consider as your greatest achievements of the year?"

Man 1: *(Now he becomes audible as Man 2 fades away)* .... Likewise a pride of lions or a gaggle of geese. Why a pride of lions and not a herd, and why a gaggle and not a flock? That's what I mean, words are merely familiar expressions that have gained respectability. Someone says "fly like the wind" or "to be at sixes and sevens" long enough, the fad catches on and they become acceptable. Expressions like a "knight in shinning armour" I can understand, but to be at "sixes and sevens"... Of course, the tone helps, if it is derogatory, one gets to know that what's being said is not exactly complimentary.

*(Gradually, both the speeches become shorter and shorter, as the actors improvise with whatever comes to mind until they are speaking gibberish. Their voices begin to die down and soon there is silence on stage. A man, "the director", gets up from amongst the audience and walks on stage. Dressed in a black T-shirt and blue jeans, he genuflects by bringing his right hand to his forehead after reverentially touching the stage)*

Director: Alright people, what do you make of it? Let the newcomers speak first. Once the discussions get underway, it becomes difficult for anyone to get a word in edgewise.

*(Silence)*

Sorry, I'm beginning to sound just like one of my characters. Let me introduce myself. I'm the director of this play, skit, call it whatever you like. Alright, you there *(he indicates someone in the audience)*. What do you make of it? What does it convey to you?

Man 3: *(A shy, hesitant man of around 30)* It's about communication ... or rather a lack of it.

*(The director nods encouragingly)*

It's about how we don't connect. We fail to hear what others are saying. We are so lost in our own little worlds that no one else matters except for ourselves.

Man 4: *(A student in his teens, he barges in even before Man 3 has completed his dialogue)* It's about loneliness.

Director: The essential loneliness of the modern individual. Do you identify with the characters?

Man 4: Well, maybe, though I don't know... they are kind of familiar.

Director: You mean you've seen them before ...

Man 4: ... in some play.

Director: You mean that reference to Vladimir and Estragon from *Waitng for Godot*.

Man 4: ...Also, Peter and Jerry in *The Zoo Story*, Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *R&G are Dead*, etc.

Director: *(shrugs)* Nevertheless, there is a basic difference. Our characters fail to connect even at the verbal level, leave alone on the lexico-semantic planes. They share nothing but similarities in physical appearance and the stage they stand on. They are not anxious or angst-ridden; they seem pretty confident of their own points of view, such as they are. We have our own concepts of the unevenness of lived experience, our very own sets of phobias, preoccupations, obsessions and causes for depression. We certainly don't need to borrow anxiety

from the past, that too from an entirely different era and culture.

*(Man 1 and Man 2 have come out from the wings and stand behind the director)*

Man 4: You mean we are post-absurdist? *(mild laughter)*

Director: Post-absurdist, that's a thought *(muses)*. Alienated from our own alienation.

Man 1: Isn't it time we stopped playing language games and dealt with real problems, those true to urban societies in India. I mean, how does a play help solve the water shortage, congestion, pollution, corruption or, say, help me prepare for a job interview.

Man 2: Getting through a job interview isn't everything. Tell me how a work of art can help you prepare for life. Life, perhaps, is something you can stumble through. But what about the process of dying? With the loss of all anchors, metaphysical or otherwise, dying has become a nightmare. An entire lifetime is too short a time to prepare for it. Earlier, you heard of people going gently into the night with smiles on their faces. But today? ( grimaces)... It's okay while one is young and healthy but what happens when the time to say goodbye starts to get closer.

Man 1: No work of art can help you die. You have to come to terms with it yourself. No one else can do it for you.

Man 2: Not necessarily, what about the sublime? Certain objects and situations—not necessarily man-made—capture your imagination so thoroughly that you are transported elsewhere; you get a glimpse of the ineffable; you feel this is not all there is. *(a long pause)* This is what we need today, not further disorientation.

ANMOLE PRASAD

Director: *(firmly)* Let's come back to the play, please.

Man 2: I am speaking about the play. It works through absences. Absences that need to be filled and this is what I'm filling my absences with.

Man 1: That's just it. Today, everything you read or watch fills you with a sense of your own insignificance. Why must we be crushed further?

Man 2: It's so that you can learn to face life, to look it in the face and not flinch. You need to create new fictions merely to survive.

Man 1: How can you create fiction from fiction. We need some kind of point of reference, something to look up to. You can't create something from nothing.

Director: Why not? Why do you need props. Anchors and roots only hold you back. If you have to be truly free, you have to be adrift. Face the unknown without a qualm.

Man 3: *(raises his hand to attract the attention of the director)*

Director: Yes?

Man 3: Aren't you going to introduce the playwright?

Director: You mean the author? *(smiles at Man 1 and 2)* All three of us, initially. But now, all of us. Yes, all of us present in this auditorium, desperately trying to make sense of the script. Once the play is in performance it belongs to everyone who participates in the act of deriving meaning from it. How does it matter who pens, or as in this case, who keys in the words? Without us the play wouldn't exist, would it? Anyone can scribble a down a couple of words but making sense out of it is the real task. We are the joint producers of meaning. (pause) I am sure there is enough material in your life to create a first rate script.

Man 3: My life? *(surprised and somewhat bewildered)*

Director: Certainly, why don't you take centre stage for a while and tell us how come you're such a nervous wreck! *(chuckles)* Just joking, you know. Alright, tell us how you spend your day or whatever else you like. After all, what's the point of attending an experimental play reading if you are not going to participate in the act. Pardon my saying so, but you most certainly look as anxiety-ridden as the rest of us.

*(Man 3, after some prompting by other members of the audience, walks on stage)*

Please feel free to invent, concoct, fabricate, cook up, devise or take the easy way out by telling the truth.

Man 3: I really don't know if I should be doing this. (*The*

*spot is on him while the rest of the stage slowly fades into darkness)* Had I known it was going to be some kind of an experimental production, I wouldn't have bothered to turn up. Sorry, but I mean it. A theatre, for me, is a place of refuge. A sanctuary where I can relax and unwind as I immerse myself in the workings of a finer mind. I want to see a story enacted before my eyes, not this kind of pretentious avant-garde rubbish. *(proceeds in a more conciliatory tone)* What I mean to say is, play it straight and simple, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Have convincingly motivated characters, who employ logical means of self expression. Don't ask me to interpret and produce meanings with or without you. I can barely read meaning into my own life, leave alone a script as disjointed and fragmented as the one you just enacted. *(pause)* I work at the Asiatic Library. I'm not a librarian *(pause)*; it's more of a clerical position, checking memberships, keeping track of the society's activities and so on. I read a lot but not anything highbrow. I am currently going through the short stories of Anton Chekov, a most captivating writer. I believe his plays are a bit difficult, though. My wife—I mean my ex-wife—who used to be a drama critic took me to a performance of *The Seagull* at the Sophia Bhabha Auditorium by a visiting British group called Out Of Joint or something like that. Can't say I enjoyed it much. Hard to believe that the same person writes delightful short stories. Why, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend his fiction as a comfort book to anyone down in the dumps. Lately, however, I have been drawing comfort from another kind of fiction—cyber-fiction. I frequent the Manthan Cybercafe down the road from my house. They charge only Rs 30 per hour and you don't have those nitpicking attendants like elsewhere, who get you to pay for half an hour if you happen to cross your limit by even a minute. I have joined a number of cyber-clubs on the Net. It's great fun to communicate with people you'll probably never get to meet. On the Net, I can be whatever I please: dashing, romantic, a charmer, a debonair sportsman—anything but the loser I am. The other day, while waiting for my turn at the cyber-cafe, I noticed the attendant using a software programme that chats with you. Since it was there on the screen, I downloaded it on a diskette. It's some kind of an analyst—and God knows I need analysing! I didn't mind the exhausting divorce proceedings as much as the protracted and heart-rending custody battle. I suppose I can file again when my son is seven; but by then, they'd have screwed up his mind so much, I wouldn't recognize him. Still, he does look like me. Let's see in five years time ...*(muses)* Anyway, I took Eliza—this programme as she, I mean, it is called—home with me. And for quite while, I've stopped going to the cyber-café. Eliza is real cool. She quarrels, pouts and badmouths like any regular human being. If you don't respond for a while, she abuses you and shuts down. You should listen to it swear—unimaginable vocabulary! One thing it can't stand is the Quit command. It'll beg, plead and try to cajole you to be allowed to stay on. You can't switch it off without a long-drawn-out argument. Best of all, even if it shuts down, you know she can't walk out on you. *(pause)* Actually, my wife did not walk out on me. No, it wasn't the classic it's-the-last-straw-once-and-for-all kind of a break up. She was much too smart for such histrionics. The year before last, she contracted TB. God knows how, but she did. Of course, it's no longer incurable, and within a year she was declared free of the disease. Unfortunately, it didn't end there, for she was terribly depressed, partly on account of the weight she had put on—something to do with the medicines the doctor said... (shrugs) Around then, a friend of hers informed her about some year-long theatre scholarship in the US that she'd turned down. My ex-wife jumped for it and applied. Somehow, she managed to get a number of recommendation letters from the editors of the various publications she did reviews for. *(pause)* I suspected something was wrong, even as she was leaving for the US. But I said to myself, "Control yourself, don't get emotional." Strange, that's just what my father used to say when I was young and given to sudden outbursts. *(pause)* Well, within six months, I received a letter saying that she had thought it over and that it was best if we parted ways. I later came to know that she was shacking up with some Polish student ... *(long pause)* How did I manage to lose the custody battle? My in-laws succeeded in coercing my ex-wife to come down for the hearings. Left to herself, she wouldn't have given two hoots for my son ... So that's that! *(stares past the audience with vacant eyes)* And here I am, alone in the evening: a glass of clear malt whisky before me, solitaire, a visit to the cyber-cafe, or a late night movie on television. *(Tries to sound a bit brighter but fails)* Hey, I was forgetting my cyber-friend, Eliza *(shrugs helplessly)*.

*(As Man 3 bows his head in despair, the Director walks up to him)*

Director: Hey, that cyber-mate of yours sounds real cool. Mind if I download her, too! *(The lights fade out)*

---Notes

for the performance

*1. The painted backdrops of the opening scene are optional; a bare set with only a bus stop indicator pole would do just as well.*

*2. It might just happen that the question-answer session with the audience gets out of hand. Viewers may wish to explore other avenues of literary production and reception. In that case, the play has truly worked, and the discussion should be allowed to continue for as long as possible.*

*3. Tonal variations in the first section will make a great difference to the manner in which the audience reacts to the question-answer session. Subsequent performances should be governed by their response.*


# Fly to eat

I had a thought the other day, when listening to a group of South Asian conference junketeers, on their way to the Women and Water conference, who were grumbling about the sloppiness of South Asian airlines. This sort of exchange is all too common in South Asia's low-key departure lounges from Colombo to Paro. We all know that Royal Nepal Airlines, Biman, PIA, Indian Airlines, Druk Air and SriLankan Airlines, need to get their act together, but for a change let's look at the best part of flying within South Asia—yummie, the food.

If things haven't gone too badly wrong, the food is usually piping hot. So hot in fact that those in the know have realised that the best way to melt the very frozen butter packet that comes with the plastic roll in the plastic packet, is to put it on top of the silver foil covering the meal. Once the butter comes dripping out of its sachet, it can then be either licked off as an appetiser, or drizzled over the meal. I highly recommend the second approach, as cabin pressure tends to dry food out (hardly the airline's fault) and the addition of a pat of butter yields the same results as a careful sauteeing of the rice in a wok just before serving. This works mouth-wateringly well on the halal biriyani served on PIA's Islamabad-Kathmandu flight.

Another creative approach to making airline food a touch more peppy was used by a Sri Lankan woman I once sat next to—she carefully set aside half her packet of peanuts that were handed out with the beer on the Chennai-Colombo run. She held on to it for 20 minutes, and then added the peanuts to the coriander chicken curry/basmati rice/eggplant meal that we were served. Pressed for an explanation, she remarked that this gave it a "Thai" flavour, before going on to top it with the chili sauce she fished out of her handbag (she never travels without it). It did indeed become almost, if not quite, a bonafide Thai-green chicken curry.

You may not quite understand this little South Asian quirk, but the best time to fly, food-wise, is in the middle of the night. Unless you take the unpatriotic but sensible step of flying to Colombo from Kathmandu via Bangkok, or Delhi to Dhaka on British Airways, you *will* be flying in the middle of the night. Soon after their 3 am departure from New Delhi, SriLankan airlines gives you a salivating assortment of cocktail snacks—tiny mutton kebabs studded with green chilies, chicken pastries and devilled sausages. Polish off a couple of platters of these, combined with a few good glasses of coconut arrack, and you get to Colombo at 5.45 am, feeling as unreal as the all-night party animals you see crawling out of this happening city's watering holes at around the same time.

Sadly enough, many of us neglect our snazzy salt and pepper sachet options, assuming them to be redundant. A little black pepper sprinkled on the continental vegetables can work wonders on Royal Nepal's night flight, RA 217 from Kathmandu to Delhi. If sprinkled vigorously enough to make your neighbour sneeze, wheeze and leave for the bathroom, the added attraction is that you can pinch his profiteroles. I have got to say it here—when it comes to desserts, Royal Nepal is the best. Their profiteroles (3 per pax), are small pastry cases with real cream inside and topped with dark chocolate. SriLankan airlines comes a close second with a sensible offering of a *Kandos* chocolate bar), which can be stashed in pockets to be eaten after the tray is snatched back by grumpy airline staff. Other South Asian airlines are unhappily rooted in the dairy/sugar syrup category, which means rather monotonous offerings of watery rice puddings, rasogollas and gulab jamuns.

Never, never forget, any nefarious activity contemplated on board can be best accomplished during the meal service. Distracted and harassed by, on average, 245 passengers baying, "Ma'am—I'll have the chicken chowmein, but vegetarian"—airline staff are only too happy to nod through your well-concocted story of a sudden onset of severe back pain and wave you through to business class. Remember, Indian Airlines' IC 814 from Kathmandu to Delhi was hijacked two years ago, while crew and passengers were tucking into their meal.

The main thing is to forget the irritations of flying South Asian, (cancellations, delays, technical faults, etc.) and once on board, to sit back, relax and surrender yourself to the food. And if by any remote chance you really don't like it, carefully extricate the lemon slice from the salad on the extreme left of the tray. It will come in handy while downing a couple of tequilas, which can liven flying time considerably. △

***—Patricia Hoft***

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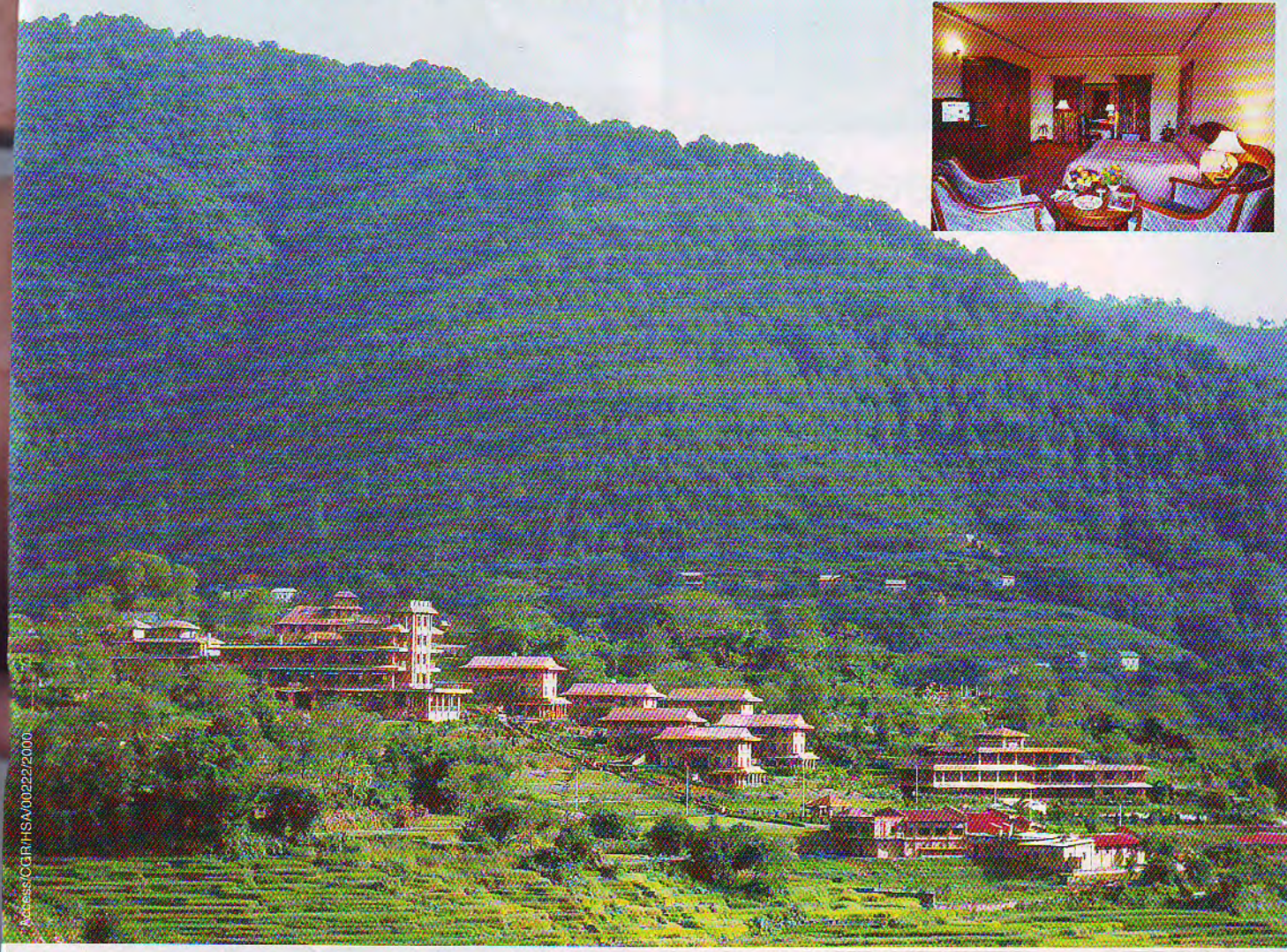

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