

# South Asian Ensemble

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**Editors** Gurdev Chauhan and Rajesh Sharma

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### **South Asian Ensemble Inc.**

276 Dundas Street (East) Trenton

ON. Canada K8V 1M2

Ph. 647-866-2630

[www.southasianensemble.com](http://www.southasianensemble.com)

[gurdevchauhan01@gmail.com](mailto:gurdevchauhan01@gmail.com)

[editor.sae@gmail.com](mailto:editor.sae@gmail.com)

## **India Office**

23, Sahib Enclave, Near Urban Estate-1

Patiala - 147002 (Punjab)

Cell +91-7837960942, Landline +91-0175-2281777

E-mail: [sharajesh@gmail.com](mailto:sharajesh@gmail.com)

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## Editor's note

The book is, after language, the greatest of inventions. You are almost tempted to imagine Prometheus arriving in a river valley, with a flaming torch in one hand and a book in the other, to teach slumbering shepherds the arts of reading and writing. The rebellious god's graver offence must have been that he stole the other fire from high heavens and brought it to earth, to warm and light up mortal lives.

Illuminated, mortality would glow and burn with splendor, and take measure of the gods. So Prometheus had to be punished – he had gifted, in the alchemy of his transgression, the glory of tragic awareness to humankind. The gods felt smaller. Jealous.

There are some who cannot imagine life without books. There are others who cannot think of life with books. The second tribe, obviously, outnumber the first, yet it is the first who live richer lives – if only because they can live more life and can live many lives. Reading frees. You can be more than you are. You can be many.

As I scribble these lines in a notebook – I nowadays find longhand writing kinder to reflection – on this sunny and windy winter Saturday morning, the New Delhi World Book Fair is being inaugurated. The fair will take place, probably spectacularly, while all around bookstores continue to fall to emptiness before vanishing, or their spaces are usurped by more profitable businesses. Last week I returned from Delhi, carrying home more disappointment than books. I had searched three of the surviving bookstores but found only one book to buy. This shopkeeper sold books by weight – one kilo for two hundred

rupees. I have seen less indifference in fruit sellers – many pat and fondle their apples and oranges before seeing them off. The book I chose, hardcover and neatly sealed in a transparent sheet, cost me only seventy rupees. I don't know if I should be happy over my lot. Probably, I should be saddened. But I am told that more people are today reading books than ever before.

Perhaps bookshops have never relied for survival on the individual reader but on networks of libraries. Yet libraries are what no policy maker, no government in India in many decades has been willing to even look at. I remember once seeing a union railway minister enter the library of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study: the moment he reached before the first shelf of books, something repulsed him so violently that he did not pause for a while even but took an instantaneous U-turn, and walked out into the lobby, followed by his train.

You often wonder how much might change for the better if you had a library in each neighborhood and every village. Today's gods – with red beacons on their vehicles for quotation marks – probably do not want them down there to be reading and thinking and imagining and understanding beyond a point.

I wish these small-minded gods knew that human resources also need to be nourished on the other fire, that books and libraries alone provide that nourishment, and that nations live and grow only when they are amply fed.

*Rajesh Sharma*

## Something...daring

“You're two hours late, Leila.”

“Used vacation time this morning.”

“Something special?”

“Something. . . daring.”

“Your father called.”

Using the office phone, she dialed her father's cell.

“That job must be keeping you busy. You don't answer your phone anymore? Always voice mail, voice mail, voice mail. Been calling you all morning. Why don't you pick up?”

“Sorry dad, busy morning. Lots of meetings.”

She hated lying to him again. But she had no choice. And about her own marriage, no less. The one that happened in the morning. No one went off and married first thing Monday morning at City Hall and then went to work. She did. She and Kamaljit Singh did. They eloped. She smiled thinking about it.

“Mommy has something extra special planned for you tonight. She found the perfect match for you, good husband material. His family is coming tonight for the interview. It's a great arrangement, and she's certain. Pick up samosas and snacks at grocery. Maybe go now before they run out. Two dozen. It would save us some time.”

February, Valentine's Day, large pink and red hearts danced in the storefronts on her way to the Indian grocer. She walked slowly in frigid air, her eyeballs hurt in the single digit temperatures, but she hardly paid attention. Elated, she recalled

the beautiful marriage ceremony between her and Kamal this morning with two strangers as witnesses. She fingered the red thread around her left wrist. She married Kamaljit Singh without the bridal red gharara, but she wore a red hijab for the occasion. The clerk said two versions of the wedding prayers—Muslim and Sikh. They promised themselves to each other twice. Kamal wore a red turban with a gold fifty and a matching red tie, and they both signed the marriage certificate.

“Finally done. You’re my own BB. I want the whole world to know!” Kamal said, using his pet name for her. He tied the red gana—a red thread with a few seed pearls and a silken bundle with a pinch of sugar in it—to her left wrist, while she tied an unadorned red gana to his right wrist next to his kara.

In the hallway, he produced a small box. “Our personal celebration,” he said. In the box, a pair of golden laddoos, doughy ball-shaped sweets sprinkled with powdered sugar that they fed each other. Powdered sugar flecked his beard. She wiped it with her hand; smiling, she offered him her own surprise: she dug out of her large work purse that Kamal always referred to as her “truck,” mini cellophane-wrapped plates bedecked with red ribbons. In the plates sat four fat, fresh Medjool dates, which they also fed each other, satisfied that they began their married life with a taste of sweetness. Afterward, she stuffed the hijab into her bag, and they kissed at City Hall before going to their respective jobs.

The Indian grocer counted two dozen samosa, piping hot golden triangles, into an aluminum pan. She paid for them and several bags of spicy dried, spicy roasted chickpeas.

On the drive home, the samosas filled the car with a savory aroma. She put her hijab back on and practiced ways to tell her parents that she married the man she loved and not some stranger in an arrangement. She imagined her parents’ humilia-

tion, telling this boy’s family she was no longer available. She imagined all the ways to tell them Kamal isn’t Muslim. She imagined Kamal, unable to contain himself, telling his parents right away. She sucked in her breath, and excitement electrified her: the deed was done. She was now legally Leila Khan Singh. She imagined both families disowning them. Her unMuslim name, Leila thought, perhaps attested to her parents’ own sense of something daring.

Red balloons tied to the mail box fluttered in a breeze. She grew worried, nervous, about this now impossible interview. She collected the samosas and snacks from the backseat and wondered if her parents would disown her this evening.

Her father opened the door before she inserted her key.

“There’s my flower now,” he said, smiling, taking the samosas and snacks from her. “Come, beta,” he said. “She’s here, Zoha,” he called to her mother, his voice enthusiastic.

Punjabi music of her parent’s homeland played. Had they already agreed to an arrangement without consulting her? Turbaned men and women wearing salwar kameezes chatted with her family in the dining room. Her new husband Kamal, wearing the same red turban from this morning’s ceremony, rushed toward her, his face beaming joy and light.

“When I told my parents this morning, they decided to talk to yours right away to make the arrangement. We’re all Punjabis. It’s all good.”

## John Brandi

### Keyhole wanderings

#### *Notes on the act of journaling*

I am sitting at home in the North American Rockies, sunrise clear and strong at 2100 meters—my coffee strong, too. Slowly I flip through my latest journal. This morning I filled the last page with a 3 a.m. sketch of the Perseid meteor showers. Under flashing meteorites and penciled comet dust are roughly-scrawled words: “luminous plankton zigzagging through fathoms of ultramarine.” Pages like this, ones that might hold the kernel of a poem or a painting, I tag with sticky notes for future reference. My scrawls—some mundane, some investigative, some with free-flight Dionysian yowls—are seismographic notations, a record of the mind moving, of a life being lived, of one’s existence on a planet spinning through space.

Fragments, flakes, shivers, sharp edges. Cold moss, a smooth necktie, a fizzing star, a rough agate waiting to be polished. Clank of a pail, crescendo of laughter, the shine of a farmer’s knuckles at rest on his knees. Each nibble of the eye becomes ink slipping from fingers onto the page. Some entries into the journal may contain “facts,” but each fact is full of flimsy contradictions. Reality can’t be caught with the net of reason. The odd particles that sift through the net are what interest me: the irrational, the uncensored, the offbeat. A poet’s vision is wrapped in mystery, dense with chance configurations. The eye sees, the sensory buds extend, the crazy genius who lives in the psyche raises an obedient antenna to record what is absent in what is

present. Each scrawl on the page is like a star trail, a reverberation, a patter—what Federico García Lorca called “Morse code of the heart.”

The journal has fed me since boyhood—a place where I can spy through the cracks, reach out of the box, saw my body in two, vanish behind the curtain, regain composure, open the drapes again, and bow to the crowd. The bloodstream is at work on every page, filling it with the tangled circuitry of inner movies, the particulars of dreams, the “holy contour of life” (as Jack Kerouac called it) coiling around us. The physical act of writing is a dance. It is not just the hand that moves; the entire body is in motion. What a delight, to draw ink across the page, mind suspended like a rainbow, head going outside in, or inside out, deep into details. I run my fingers over this weathered brow, and without hesitation realize it’s a prickly roadmap creased with wrinkles. For fifty years I’ve enjoyed every fearsome, bliss-bestowing unexpected turn: the rigged-together Himalayan flights, slogs through Rajasthan deserts, tipsy ferries battling the savage whirlpools of Komodo, dizzy bus rides over the Andes. All the emotional bumps, grinds, broken axles, loose wires, symbolic dead ends. Got to write them down!

There’s no perfection about these personal chronicles. My only criteria: that the pages be unlined and the books be able to fit whatever daypack I’m toting. The journals don’t pretend to replicate those precious “artists’ books” exhibited in galleries—a genre so cleverly executed that white gloves are required to peruse them. Too overcooked for me! I prefer uncooked pages scribbled and spilted with color, glued with torn bits of street posters or faded correspondence. Ones alive with inner music, risqué keyhole wanderings, dreams scrawled in sleep, on-the-spot details written while scrambling a Rocky Mountain peak or wiping my brow in the heatwaves of Death Valley. Give me shreds,

tatters, working notations so raw they bleed. Unfinished stammers. Smears, blips, squiggles. Dangling nerve endings, molecules reconfiguring into slow works of art, stepping stones towards a distant shore. Recipes for a Sunday meal, blueprints for a garden. Addresses, book titles, movies to see. Songs to hear, random quotes.

The journal is an unabashed launch pad to whatever smoky shape awaits beyond terra incognita. Pages that reveal themselves as do Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures. Pages that defy the trample of the electronic age. Luminous as a wound, dark as a catacomb, scratched and pecked, they represent the last of the holograph: hand moving in accord with eye, the flit of a butterfly, wind through pine, puff of a nightgown tossed on the bed.

These are just a few thoughts as I finish my coffee and close out my morning reflections, sans the gadgetry of screen and touch pad, electrical morass, the cloud, the drop box. I wonder, having placed so many of my journals in a university archive rather than let the funeral party divvy them up into dumpsters, will some future digital-age timekeeper, historian, young damselfly at work on a thesis, give a look? Might they open these pages, see into a life, discover a few petty crimes, favorite sex positions, hidden pistol, up-from-the-gene-pool thoughts? Maybe so. A savvy investigator could decode the psychic seismograph, enjoy the tangles, find the headwaters, and discover the very *Source* of a poem: what Antonin Artaud called "electric nerve flames of everlasting phosphorescence."

John Brandi  
13.viii.15

## Justification

I strode over  
fallen branches  
victims of last night's  
merciless wind  
listened to music in tune  
with endless perfection  
then the chirp of the bird  
raised my head  
saw it, a chickadee  
on the tree limb

justification  
this day  
alive that I was

## Echo

She opened her window.  
Powerful feminine  
exhilarating gesture  
that shook me

memory rekindled  
paradisical kisses and

I dreamed of capturing

the echo of a raindrop  
falling through fog  
into the plaza fountain

greetings, oh life, here I am

splash!

### **Reaction**

I was standing under the awning  
sweltering heat had  
my heartbeat going  
when the girl from  
the next door flower shop  
came out and gave me  
the freshest rose  
just taken out of  
the flower cooler

coolest kiss  
that imperceptibly  
I felt on my cheek

### **Schoolyard**

That was the morning  
I searched for the key  
not to open a door

but the heart of that boyish girl

who hit me in the schoolyard  
when I turned down  
her promiscuous advances

but the key eluded me  
and finally I gave in and  
let her kiss my cheek for  
the first time

secret I incised on the trunk  
of the tree I leaned her before  
I explored her body

soon after manhood appeared

### **Wonder**

He would often stop  
at the edge of the sidewalk  
and talk to the leafless tree.

One would wonder why this  
was important to him, yet,  
no-one dared to ask him because  
no-one knew what the tree's  
answer would be  
but that imperceptible shiver  
along the spine as when

the north wind lashed his face  
and harassed the leaves of his heart

and you stood before your  
fireplace sipping your seven  
star Metaxa cognac while  
he stopped on the sidewalk  
and talked to the leafless tree  
as if asking for directions

### **Amorphous**

Before I entered the uterus  
I was there  
smoke of a fire slowly extinguishing  
wind hitting your blue window  
crack of your being, a tight grip

song of the funeral procession  
before I took the shape of life  
before I choose my name

I was there  
scent of a colorful rose  
the bird's first flutter  
before I entered the trap of flesh  
the softest wave of the sea I was

lone eagle on rocky promontory  
from high up watching over you  
before I was born I was

the shapeless freedom  
companion of the infinite  
a simple sigh destined  
to scar your lips

there I was  
the joyous chime of a bell  
there I was  
the indeterminable

### **Phone call**

Your abrupt voice  
echoed on the other side  
of the telephone line  
rekindled our last conversation

I remember we had met  
in autumn  
brown leaves over  
the lone grave site and  
I was disturbed with  
the red carnation of my lapel

I didn't expect your call  
obviously hesitant  
your voice and your laughter  
roared through the dead line  
cold sweat over my body

strange, I didn't expect you  
to call so soon: it was just the day  
before yesterday when we buried you

## Double

Certainly it wasn't I who  
last night jogged amid  
the suburb houses  
with my shirt unbuttoned  
like forgotten piety  
with my heart encompassed  
by the auspices  
of the orange dusk  
a dream forgetful of its origin  
it wasn't I but my double  
who in his bag had hidden  
old picture of two stars  
swimming in a crystal pond  
twin faces, one mirror's glance  
and further on: a single drop  
you stood coaching me  
to hide in your arms  
my tiredness to release though  
I tightly held the little master key  
ready to place it in the hole and  
open the world like a bloomed rose

## Blood

Most people never understood that  
whether the sun rises  
from behind the mountain or  
is shot out of the pistol's barrel,  
it always burns you.  
For this so many of our dreams  
remained unrealized,  
inexplicably happiness was laid  
in the display window  
of the department store and  
loneliness was again eulogized  
in the church and as the years went by  
him, the one with the severed arm,  
kept on writing on other people's discolored  
walls, truth always decorates the cement,  
with fiery red letters: "blood-blood."

## Secret

The great happiness  
we wished to find  
in the mysticism  
of the olive grove

there, in the moist autumn fragrance  
canticle of sounds that flew  
into ears unaccustomed to beauty

there, in the night breeze  
where the meaning of duty  
was freely served

there, in the mind's serenity  
we had for years longed though  
totally unconcerned we wasted  
in the wrong throw of dice

there, happiness was hidden  
we couldn't understand  
it was us who buried it there,

memory loss rekindled and  
our symbols became  
the other man's dagger.

### **Initiation**

Dreamy image  
borderless  
of a cypress in meditation  
feathery touch  
of fingers and breaths  
heavenly sounds  
experienced

and in your eyes  
I want to discover  
in your teardrop

inconceivable  
the cryptic  
initiation of time

### **Heroes**

And we were so young and untested  
like silent voices of crisp peaches  
like freshened summer songs  
like the touch of a rose at dawn  
and they armed us and took us  
to the borders and bestowed death  
unto our scopes with the accuracy  
of surgeon and what could we do  
with such instruments and with targets  
standing at the edge of the plain  
laughing and scolding us?  
We started shooting against  
anything moving with such a strange joy  
that even now after all these years  
I can not explain

And later they called us heroes

### **Sunrise**

Suddenly a sunrise  
perhaps it was a new day

full of vigor and stamina and

all comrades woke staring  
at each other, counting bodies  
that moved instead of the

motionless, let them be cursed  
and let them keep away from us  
but when the sergeant came in

and called all our names  
it wasn't strange that we all answered  
except the dead ones in the other hutment

in gray sacks like rotten  
potatoes no one wanted to deal with  
and the sun still stood up  
in the horizon like a mother  
counting her children one by one  
then hiding her eyes from

this spectacle until a moment  
of silence was called for  
the ones who could no longer breathe.

Guy Sinsler

### **At the fall of the day**

Alone in the field, I follow the drone from eye level down,  
down, its brain sugar-drained, its body age-weighted down,  
down, until one inch from dank loam where it makes a brave  
but faint half-flutter before stumbling to ground, there to moan  
by my clayed feet, unto death.

Absent its spirit, I sit, stare, and admit this moan's echo,  
that dull, distant knell of vespers, everyman's last post which  
layers a brutish numbness over all those whose spirits waft  
into the hanging mist, and all who bear witness to this:  
then comes a comforting gift, a corporal<sup>1</sup> of snow, blessed.

### **A Pennsylvania State stare**

"What are you thinking about?" I ask, while  
staring at her, staring at the tiny heifer curled up

on a cockcrow's dewy meadow; heifer's slender  
legs tucked under a pristine Black Angus sheen

its naïve eyes wet licorice, bulging, mesmerized  
by the interstate cattle trucks rattling on by, by  
the hour; its soft calf ears honed to the groaning.

## Aries

As crocus styles pierce my snow-blanced skin  
they release through me the seraphim, the cherubim

they tincture brain and awaken my reptile tongue  
and deliver to my hand that giant cat's eye glint

and more; what slept in me before, now with vigour  
gorges. Do not talk to me of discipline, while such

fresh sunburst in me forges: for, I am the Ram.

## Two Tanka

The dusk dappled brook  
gracing this summer moraine  
a brushless art  
and that pink newt on the rock  
does it also ascribe god?

...

Athens Cathedral  
from under the rummage pile  
a Cavafy oeuvre<sup>2</sup>  
offering a buck, I lift  
a flame to his cold candle

## Haiku

This peal of lauds  
lifting the daybreak dew  
the dutiful

## Ouroboros

To stare at the moon  
is to open the eyes

To stare through the moon  
is to open the heart

To stare through the heart  
is to open the soul

To stare through the soul  
is to open the path

To stare through the path  
is to lip the tail<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A Christian altar covering of pure white linen.

<sup>2</sup>C. F. Cavafy, "The poet of the candles." *The Complete Poems of C. F. Cavafy*. Translated by Rae Dalven. Harcourt Brace & Co., 1989.

<sup>3</sup>I have deliberately replaced the 1st letter of Ouroboros with

the Japanese Zen Buddhist ink brush symbol (enso) which is readily available from the internet. I pasted into the poem title because of its meanings (the universe, the void). It is also a symbol of the moon (enlightenment). Finally, many renditions of the mythological ouroboros, are circular, and the “cycle” image common to both the ouroboros and the enso was what I was trying to get at with the poem.

Ashutosh Dubey

*Translations from Hindi by Gurdev Chauhan*

### **Some Day**

A very old bunch of keys  
will be tried on this rusted lock  
that is me

I will be opened like  
a cupboard shut for long  
to look for what was never there

What will be found  
will just be useless for the searchers  
The key that opens me  
would tell more about itself than about me

I am a rusted lock fitted on immense despair  
I will be opened with a barren hope  
Amid confusion, the drawer's contents  
will be scattered away  
Maybe the drawer would just be turned upside down

Do anything  
peep in, rummage through the cupboard  
feel upset, and then close it again

I will keep alive in the dark of waiting  
A soft voice will open me some day

### **A Prayer for my enemies**

My heart goes out to those who are sans hostilities  
How lonely they are  
who have no enemies

We remember their flaws  
they remember ours  
Rejecting their achievements  
we keep a constant eye on them  
A moment comes  
when we and our enemies take residence  
in each other's mind

Devising ways to counter them  
we think so much about them that  
if for any reason they are no longer enemies  
we would find it difficult  
to deal with the emptiness that befalls us  
- until the void replaces our enemies

Wherever our enemies are  
may they live long and flourish  
and remain hostile to us  
for keeping us engaged  
so that we may keep looking

for our friends against them  
until the new friends too start betraying signs  
of becoming our new enemies  
So that we may never fall short of them  
so that the business of our worlds  
may go smoothly on

### **Narco Test**

Unconsciousness is conducive to truth

Take away all weapons of the brain  
Make the person comatose  
because the truth and the wakefulness  
are inimical to each other

Beware of becoming unconscious yourself  
Keep alert  
Attend to the slightest quivering of sound  
remain watchful to the smallest pauses

Keep asking the same question over and over again  
each time, in a different way  
Speak a little louder  
and again louder still  
Beat about the bush for a while  
and then all of a sudden ask  
what you want to ask actually

The ghost of truth would totter  
between you and him  
Maybe you won't be able to see it  
but whatever words would come stumbling  
out of his slurred speech  
be alert to get them arrested

Take under custody whatever mutilated  
form of truth you might lay your hands on

Let it be kept safe in some mortuary  
later in the court  
you will have to present it alive

## Complaints

We and the world have many complaints  
against each other

Our hard struggle to hide them  
keep us alive  
Such effort hides in our smile and  
is seen lurking for a while  
in the corner of our eyes

With a hurt pride  
they keep standing behind  
a translucent curtain of voice  
they are just felt and they don't go anywhere

Troubled by our complaints  
God, who was designed by our fear and desires  
seeks shelter in our forgiveness

Some of us feed on their fuel all our life  
some are structured solely by them

We always had complaints against our parents  
and most of all against our friends  
Neither brothers and sisters were excepted  
It was quite normal to harbour grudges  
against our teachers and officers  
Lost in the same tune were  
the lovers and beloveds  
Relationship of husband and wife  
was just built on them

Most complaints we had  
against our own selves  
Because it was so difficult to make them  
against our own selves  
that in the moment of doing so  
we didn't know from where  
so many arguments arose  
in our defence  
And in no time, we are torn into halves  
and the complaints stay put  
as a matter of rule  
in both our halves

## Emergency

Fed up with the swallowing  
of moths and insects of the home  
sensing the sky as roof of the home  
at whom is this lizard aiming its gaze?

The stars are trembling  
the Moon is scared  
the frightened Sun  
is bolting towards the west

Somewhat oblique is the shadow that drops on the earth  
of this monstrous lizard  
walking backwards in the sky

There is emergency in the sky  
There is the shadow of emergency on the earth

## Rabbi Shergill

*In conversation with Sakoon N Singh*

*Tried to learn slavery a million times  
But the heart remains a rebel.  
(Eho Hamara Jeevna, from III)*

**Rabbi Shergill** (Gurpreet Singh Shergill) (b.1973) had his education and upbringing in New Delhi, where his family relocated after Partition. Born to an academic mother and agriculturist father, the two influences have had a lasting impact on his bearings as an artist. His music forges connections as much with the literary heritage of Punjab – from Gurbani and Sufiana to the contemporary poets - as with the folk idiom. His use of an archaic Punjabi idiom reveals a palpable nostalgia for cultural references that are no longer tactile but are still alive in the collective imagination of the community. This can be seen in conjunction with the fact that he is a Delhi-based Punjabi musician, a space that offers a unique vantage point to his music. It not only makes him more self-conscious about Punjabi music but also affords an opportunity to forge a more cosmopolitan response to events of national importance. Another influence on his music is the western rock, which he unconventionally, delightfully and almost seamlessly fuses with Punjabi poetry. Rabbi's compositions rise on a foundation of social commitment and embody an impassioned call for ethical activism. He writes the songs he sets to music, which makes him a composite artist. The songs have a special flavour that blends philosophical enquiry with a colloquial, intimate register.

His first album *Rabbi* (2005) was a runaway success, and was followed by *Avengi Ja Nahin* (2008). For the third album *III*

(2012), which earned great critical acclaim, he worked with Gustavo Celis, the Grammy award-winning mix engineer.

He has also contributed to Hindi film music. Recently, he released the track “Tu Milen”, based on the radical Punjabi poet Lal Singh Dil’s poetry.

*SNS: Rabbi Shergill, share something about your early influences – literary and musical – that you feel shaped your sensibility as an artist.*

**RS:** Very early on it was Jagjit Singh’s *Birha Tu Sultan* album. My eldest sister had that vinyl record on a loop. Then it was a potpourri of yearly Grammys compilation video tapes, Hindi film music, Dilbagh Singh-Gulbagh Singh’s *kirtan*. I grew up on 80s pop. I remember Huey Lewis & The News, Bananarama, Mr. Mister, Madonna or whatever my sister/s brought in to play on the stereo. Then in 1988 I had my first real musical crush - Bruce Springsteen. And there were U2, Sting, Led Zeppelin, Hendrix, the whole 80s rock pantheon. Too numerous to enumerate. At the same time I was reading Shiv, Hemingway, Tolstoy... I remember wanting to live in Paris, Spain just like Hemingway, to have that intense love affair just like him. Then there were the Vivekanand volumes and Guru Gobind Singh.

*SNS: In a way, to embrace the calling of art inevitably comes with its share of struggle. One is the struggle of an artist with him/herself, which is really the struggle to overcome self-doubt, and that is perennial. Then there is a struggle to convince your closest people that this indeed is your path. And there is also the struggle with the world at large to convince them of your vision which is vulnerable to disruption and distortion. I see that you practice affirmation to go on this arduous journey through songs like*

*“Ganga” and also, for that matter, the very resolute “Eho Hamara Jeevna.”*

**RS:** Well, I live in India where I see real struggle daily. My struggle doesn’t compare. As for self-doubt, it’s a constant companion, no two ways about it. But every now and then a flash of defiance, inspiration, perhaps even love comes barging in through the doors despite the heavy locks I put on them. “Ganga” came out of love. That green river speaks to whoever’s got a moment to spare. That song just crashed into my heart. “Eho...” happened in a very turbulent phase in my life. My songs are sometimes my medicine. They keep me sane.

*SNS: Every artist responds to his cultural milieu. For example, in your reinterpretation of “Jugni”, which is a montage of the original folk, your vocals and some audio news clips, you weave in social concern, which is a very important element in your music. The attempt to make Jugni contemporary, with the itinerant everywoman landing in Punjab with its postcolonial reality – from young educated boys emigrating (“...jithhe padhe likhe beqaar vech zameena javan baar” – then venturing into other corners of India (“...jithhon kadeya si angrez” – from where we threw out the Englishman), to broaching the Kashmir issue. For that matter even your reinterpretation of “Pagdi Sambhal Jatta.” This fine enmeshing of past folk echoes and present concerns is fascinating – a reinterpretation that every culture so needs. What special challenge does this call for?*

**RS:** It calls more for ambition than challenge, I suppose. You need to have ambition to attempt material with a big sweep, and that automatically implies some sort of preparation. There’s so much epic material out there now, should you want to reference it. And that in some ways is such a huge advantage when you compare it to what Dylan, Springsteen must’ve had to deal with.

*SNS: Your ever popular “Bullah” is a more straightforward rendition of the 18<sup>th</sup> century kafi. What kind of relationship do you feel with the Sufiana kalam, considering that even when you are not deriving directly from this pool your orientation as an artist seems influenced by these philosophical underpinnings? Coming back to “Bullah,” what do you think specifically were the reasons for this particular track, so historically distant in time yet evoking such resonance the masses today? Do you think it is liberation that stems out of defying preconceived definitions of selfhood?*

**RS:** I think I relate more to texture of the words in a poem than to any esoteric characteristic/s. “Bullah Ki Jana” is written in pretty much my own dialect and I relate to it more as a sage advice from a village elder than an literary landmark. I think, there are always some mental pathways unique to a given culture. Ours is this constant suggestion to seek the substratum of all matter. And whenever it’s presented to us in an authentic manner, it has an echo. Perhaps that’s what happened with Bullah. We did defy some preconceived notions. Were they of selfhood? I don’t know. Some defiance was indeed there, though.

*SNS: Your location as a Punjabi artist in Delhi gives you a different vantage point. Has it influenced the quality of your engagement with issues of national importance? The track that comes to my mind is the brilliant “Bilqis - Jinhe Naaz Hai” – set in a Mumbai chawl and sung in Hindi. Particularly, the tragedy of Navleen Kumar, the social activist is brought out poignantly and powerfully when you recreate the violence of the fatal nineteen blows through repetition. You don’t seem to give up till the goriness of the violence is registered.*

**RS:** It must have. Delhi’s a very big town. With more to think about than if I was in my village. But I think genuine artistic curiosity would still find depths to plumb, maybe in other dimensions. History is replete with people who lived in small physi-

cal confines and still had an impossibly wide intellectual horizon. When Navleen Kumar incident happened, I was living alone in Mumbai. And when you’re alone it’s not so easy to flip the channels in your head. You have to live them, see them off. I did indeed want to bring out the brutality of that murder into people’s comfort zones.

*SNS: By virtue of the fact that the identity of a Sikh male is very visual, the turban stands out as a symbol, do you think there is somewhere also an onus on you to explain the Sikh identity through your music? Your generation has also lived through the most contentious times as far as the questions of Sikh identity are concerned and also because your music is intended for a more national audience than of other Punjabi artistes. Do you also see yourself in the role of a Sikh balladeer/chronicler, especially through “Pagri Sambhal Jatta,” because the originally nationalistic composition is reinterpreted by you like a nugget on Sikh history. Are you also critical of the present developments within Sikhism as registered in your pithy “...asan manniya jo akhiya si guru, par ajj kite phasiyai jo kade hoia si shuru” - We went by the Guru’s word but somewhere what had begun so well has lately stalled.*

**RS:** I did have a chip on my shoulder initially with regard to explaining Sikhism but it’s gotten lighter over the years. The older you grow, the more you learn. Usually religions have hidden dimensions that you only see with time. You start seeing instances of co-linearity which you didn’t earlier. You learn that religions give birth to religions and that earth gives birth to everything. As for things having veered off from the original, I think that can be said for just about anything. You learn you love others too. I learnt I loved Patanjali as much as anyone else. I learnt I loved my jungle-dwelling, nomadic ancestors as much as the recent ones.

*SNS: And as a position reversal, what kind of relationship do you*

*see yourself in with the land of Punjab? Is it a land of belonging? Is it a land you lost and found? Is it a fountainhead of inspiration, or is it the land you silently loathe?*

**RS:** Punjab is some sort of projection of my mind – of an intellectual, spiritual, cultural origin that is too fragile to survive the hurly-burly of reality. The Punjab of my mind can't reconcile with the Punjab of reality. It's like a library of incredible wisdom but housed in a stinking building.

**SNS:** *But the most wonderful part of your music is also the one that gives voice to the contemporary, quotidian Punjabi experience. You sing of a very contemporary transnational man in "Tere Bin" whose identity has become fluid because he has been all over the place – to the US, to Russia, to Malaysia – "...main saare ghum ke vekhya - Amrika, Roos, Malaysia" (though as an aside, looks like you've put Russia there only for lyrical purposes) and not found one like his lady love. Just like this clutch of four friends in "Gill te Guitar," who are regular college boys – two of whom feel their luck is rotten because they tried and no girl agreed ("...assin firde rahe par na manni koi kudi"), or for that matter the girl who is setting her luggage in a train and is besotted by a virtual stranger in "Zero Dubidha." While it derives from cultural experience, one purpose of literature is also to create an idiom, rhythm and cadence for its reference group. Are you conscious of this endeavour?*

**RS:** I haven't deliberately tried to be quotidian but I do think there's magic happening right here, right now, and someone needs to write about it.

**SNS:** *Tell something about Western influences on your music, especially the rock elements you integrate in your style. Very few musicians have attempted to do this (let alone the operatic element in "Tu Hi" from III) in Indian Punjab even though rap and*

*hip-hop influence is pervasive. What do you think is the reason? Do you follow any of the new mainstream Punjabi artists?*

**RS:** I'm basically a rocker. Some days I'm playing air guitar to classic rock, on others it's 80s pop. These days I find the only music that doesn't sound like it's a computer programme is country. Rock I feel has a much better track record of socially conscious lyrics than hip-hop and rap. Maybe that's why I gravitated towards it. But hip-hop has greater rhythmic flexibility, that's why you'll find a lot of world music melding with it seamlessly. As for the latest in Punjabi pop, I don't sit with the PTC on 24x7 but I do somewhat keep in touch.

**SNS:** *I want to ask you a broader question about the special challenge of balancing aesthetics with social consciousness and awareness in art. There is always a danger of sacrificing one for the other. Either slipping into the decadence of sheer aesthetics or becoming a propagandist. In the video of "Tu Milen" by the end the meaning of the song gets much more charged, and it becomes more than a serenading love ballad. With the introduction of images of poor labourers looking vacantly into the frame, the longing for social change somewhere outdoes the longing for love. I felt that not many artists would have the courage to make that choice today. Very reminiscent of Faiz when he proclaims "Aur bhi dukhb hain zamane main mohabbat ke siva" – there are sorrows other than those of love. How do you stay conscious of keeping this balance?*

**RS:** "Tun Milen," right from its incipience was suffused with the spirit of Lal Singh Dil's socially conscious and lovelorn poetry. The chorus is exactly about the impossibility of romantic satisfaction in a hard life.

**SNS:** *You said somewhere that you take yourself very seriously as a man of letters. Anyone who looks at your poetry will have no doubt about your credentials as a litterateur. Your poetry exudes*

*the refinement of having been in an engaged dialogue with poets across the spectrum and yet retaining the cadence and innocence of a song. In this you are unique and composite as an artist. Could you explain this literary process and tell us how and when it gets conjoined with your musical intervention?*

**RS:** Well, my disaffections drive me to seek mitigations which I usually find in poetry. Every now and then I discover some incredible poet, litterateur hiding in plain sight and this takes me over completely. I agree with Nikola Tesla that the sum total of all minds in the universe is one. Great poetry reveals you to yourself. I always leave my guitar amp on. While watching TV, reading, writing, everything....So there's always something brewing.

*SNS: This image of the guitar reminds me that you somewhere quoted Miles Davis and said you never played a false note. One can see you have resisted the dictates of the unabashed commercial music industry and followed your own calling in many ways. There is no chaff, there is only grain. However, somewhere you have not been as prolific – is this the price you have paid? Do you think you could have produced more music by somewhere giving in to the dictates of the industry? Maybe more chaff would have meant more grain in the long run.*

**RS:** Miles existed in a musical ecosystem, a musical milieu. There were peers, an audience, a management, marketers, a certain label. I and other indie artists in India exist without any of those. So every now and then, that part of the business has to be dealt with. And considering the kind of material I want to put out there, it takes time. For instance, there's no real filmmaking community in Delhi nor are there any real managers. And those are integral to modern music making. Just a small example. I'd like to make more music, just give me good back-end guys.

*SNS: I want to ask you a question about your communication in an industry which does not empathise with your points of reference. When you are dealing with people from the industry for the execution of a project, how much of your vision is “lost in translation”? For example, I always feel that the videos for some of your songs show a very deliberate attempt to “translate” your vision into a visual language. Sometimes, they succeed but sometimes they fail. And it is sometimes injurious because there is an extra layer of meaning that is imparted to the song through the video. For example: The video for “Ganga” was rather “literal” visualisation of a complex idea. Further, the fact that you are thinking in metaphors and using echoes from a culture does not particularly help the cause. Similarly, the video for “Avengi Ja Nah,” – which to my mind is a beautiful love ballad – was done with rather candy romance visuals not compatible with the spirit of your music. Don't mind my saying this but you yourself look marginalised in these videos. What do you feel?*

**RS:** That is an accurate observation. Sadly, there's no great filmmaking happening where I live or perhaps I should get out more. The thing is my music is just so fringe in its conception and so mass in its expectation that it'll take an evolved filmmaker to do it justice.

*SNS: Love in your music is broken/ incomplete. It is the desperate appeal of the lover a la Donne to “...puthbian siddiyan chhad” – stop beating around the bush and come to the point – or the clandestine, forbidden attempt of the lover of “Karachi Valiye” who attempts to “...layi ek sann kude” – break into the beloved's house like a thief (even worse, she is from Karachi), or the surefooted smugness of a lover who is certain in his belief that eventually the lady will come around in “Main Boliya” because it is inevitable that “...tainu chadega bukhaar” – you will be lovesick – or the pain of the man who never gets to know the true feelings of his*

*lady love because she remains silent at a very crucial moment and “... tere bin mainu eh raaz kise hor nabiyo dassna” – who but you will reveal the secret. I can give more examples. Will true love ever find fruition in your music?*

**RS:** Well the thing with “true love” is that beyond a point it transcends physicality. It crosses over into the abstract and at that point we’re just sifting semantics.

*SNS: One fascinating area for me to see is your affinity with contemporary Punjabi literature. You have sung Batalvi’s “Ik Kudi,” and Lal Singh Dil’s “Tu Milen”. Any other Punjabi writer and poet you are fascinated with and are thinking of plumbing for your music?*

**RS:** Hmmm ... could be. I really like Harbhajan Singh, some Pash, even some things by my mom. Let’s see.

*SNS: Finally, share something about your upcoming projects. What do we look forward to?*

**RS:** I’m just putting the finishing touches to my studio. Hopefully, there’ll be plenty more new songs now.

*SNS: Look forward to that. Thank you very much Rabbi Shergill for this exchange.*

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## A complaint

We played.  
We played madly.  
We sought each other out  
like winners.

It’s like being watched by a cunning  
banker  
who doles out affection  
in small measures  
lest it may spill ...  
It’s like taking out a purse  
with a hole in it  
and not mending it  
quickly enough  
and forgetting to tell that banker  
he was not created by man;  
He was created out of the dregs  
that society relegated to naught.

We sought each other for comfort  
and we did not reach the finish.

## Fumigated

The love that we shared  
had the aroma of fruits,  
spices and condiments

selected from the best vendors.  
The love grew stale ...  
I think after some time  
it had the aroma of juice  
extracted from these,  
appetizing food.  
When it was left untouched  
for a little longer,  
the aroma spread in the room  
like a fumigant  
throwing out every sign  
of shared love.

### **Remains**

It will hurt you if I say, it's over,  
our love has run its course.  
It will break your heart, I know,  
bidding farewell.  
Let us say,  
love remains  
as a remembrance  
even after departure.

### **The son abroad**

Father,  
you had fretted and fetched  
a world of comforts

for me when I was a child.  
Father,  
now that I tower  
above you in height,  
do I hide my stature  
inside a dummy crocodile  
amusing children in a park  
for a dollar an hour abroad.

You may squirm at the thought  
that you had brought me up  
with love and care  
and sowed dreams of a bungalow  
in my sleepy head.  
While here I sell dreams  
of a different kind,  
housed in a model crocodile,  
chasing and being chased  
by an amused crowd,  
earning a living for you and me.

Hope this irregularity  
will not shock you out of love,  
the regard you hold for my sincerity.  
hope I have not perforated  
your crystal ball  
by this banal truth of materiality.

## Friendship calling

He called up in the middle of the night  
to tell me the truth.  
He called up saying  
I need a friend to talk to.

In the morning when sleep is heaviest  
I dreamed of him.  
I called back to ask  
if everything was all right with him.

## The closed door

The music flows through the wire  
into my ear drums like rock,  
rap or pop, every time shaking  
every nerve in my body  
alarming my parents with  
'What's wrong with him' exclaims.

The knock at the closed door  
awakens the neighbours  
clicking tongues disapprovingly  
with chaotic comments on manners,  
shaking my parents' confidence  
in how they have raised me up.

## On the world wide web

A candid picture  
captured in a click,  
cascades through the cursor  
for a cursory glance

Only to disappear  
in the catch of a second,  
submerged under other posts  
on the World Wide Web.  
There are links  
to the ever present,  
to the fleeting moment  
a young man just fancied

Frozen in a picture  
while there are links  
to the fluid lives long-gone  
on the World Wide Web.

There are links  
to the visions,  
to the dreams of everyone,  
plans for tomorrow

And there are links  
to one's failures,  
haphazard actions  
that ruin our present.

## Mesmeric beauty

Beauty that forges  
love, creates a sphere  
of faith and abounds  
in happiness,  
does not share  
its edict with many.  
it's as if a gluey balm  
has overwhelmed  
your reason  
and your discriminatory habits.  
you love the world  
with all its anomalies  
and smile an inward  
beam of appreciation.

Mesmeric beauty  
often betrays love  
by clinging to you like a serpent  
whispering jealous thoughts,  
making you restless,  
resentful and ruminative.  
Her beauty often claims your life  
like a sucker that fills its sap  
with yours.  
It is a beauty that unites  
not two in union,  
but more than much admiration  
from lovers; all agog  
to embrace, to possess,  
to relinquish all else,  
to fight for and spend sleepless nights.

## Prerna Bakshi

### An Ode to Mohali

With a gleeful expression,  
chest swelling with pride,  
arms stretched out wide, he says  
*Look how beautiful is Mohali. Not like Delhi.*  
*Here, we have no slums.*  
It was hard to tell if he was happy because  
he thought there was no poverty  
or because there were no poor people  
left to remind him of it.

When a door is shut  
even the all-pervading breeze,  
stays out.  
Until it storms,  
then you notice.

He says, *look around, here greenery and gardens*  
*is all that you see.*  
I nod. Apparently, in Mohali, the magical city,  
trees plant themselves,  
flowers water and tend themselves too.  
It's a paradise with a banner  
hanging outside: *No poor people please!*  
While he goes on to sing songs of admiration,  
I hear closely, the city  
screams of gentrification.

## Democracy

In a distance, a group of stray dogs  
fight over a dead crow.

A herd of cows and pigs  
fight over territory.

As rival political camps take out their procession  
by driving through the very contested territory,  
over the dead crow,  
*lathi* charging, dispersing the hungry stray beings,  
as the rich from the rooftops  
of their bungalows,  
look on,

unperturbed.

## You never asked

Between the yearly  
anniversary congratulatory calls, and  
the common everyday talks,  
for years,  
this daughter has longed to hear  
those three words:  
*Are you happy?*

Waiting, someone would ask,  
hoping, someone would care,  
but people have long assumed  
she is happy,  
until the time  
she would finally  
take the plunge,  
leaving everything behind,  
would bid her final goodbye,  
out of nowhere then,  
in no time,  
hordes of people  
would show up,  
with concern in their eyes, would  
ask with a heavy sigh:

*Was she not happy enough?*

BhawnaVij Arora

**Writing: The abecedarian way**

Writing unclogs my choking heart  
If I don't exhale it  
I'll die of over-thoughts  
Bubbling in my veins  
Warmed, animated.  
The stroke of the pen  
Saves me  
As words gush out  
Uninterrupted.

Legions of words fight  
To pull up the heads  
Like a million sperm cells,  
But only hundred or so  
Reach the eggs  
To birth this babbling brainchild –  
My Creation.

It perturbs me  
If I ditch it  
In the junk pile among aphids and termites  
Of the solitary cabinets  
Sans sunlight.

So what? If I lack the maturity  
The dexterity, the tacit image clarity?  
At least I can write, speak and admire  
And carry the air and affectations

Of this borrowed English attire.

So what if I write the chic confessional  
Berate and belie the poet professional  
I let my emotions loose  
And glow  
With its little effervescence.

**I swim in two rivers**

I swim in two rivers  
 The Ganges and the Charles  
 Two different cultures  
 Traditional and independent  
 Two different kinds of food  
 Dosa and Pizza  
 I walk into a room  
 What do people think  
 Am I Indian because of my face?  
 Or American because of my Celtics cap?  
 Am I supposed to be good at science and bad at basketball?  
 I want to be good at both  
 Is curry supposed to be my favorite food and not pizza?  
 Can I like both?  
 If I celebrate Diwali, am I not supposed to celebrate Christmas?  
 I like spicy and bland - McChicken Tikka is me  
 When I walk into a room what do you think of me?

**1984***Translation from Hindi by Nida Sajid*

I can start a scholarly discussion on George Orwell's novel with this title, but I have decided to tell you a different story today – the story of a diary. Soaked in the frosty morning dew of winter, I found this diary on the bus stop of X district in 1985. There was still time for the bus with neither tea nor newspapers in sight. With nothing else to do, I picked up the diary and started flipping through its pages. Many dreams and thoughts were wrapped within the beautiful binding of this journal. Since I was still reflecting on my own dream from last night, I tore a blank page from the diary and, after wiping the dew and the dust off its cover, kept it in my bag.

It was a bitterly cold morning. A thick fog had enveloped all life. The dimly lit bulbs on street lamp posts were trying to infiltrate the insidious smog with their muted light. But one could plainly see they were fighting a lost battle. Two newborn puppies, huddled together, were shivering and wailing. Birds were slowly overcoming their morning stupor with the flapping of wings. Their cooing was faintly audible from the nearby banyan tree.

I was misinformed that the bus arrived at five forty in the morning. It was already six forty. And I had reached the bus stop at five twenty! I was rather nervous about missing the bus. How could I reach the interview at ten if I failed to catch the first bus of the day? The next bus was a few hours, later at around nine a.m. I was irritated with the man who had told me the bus was at five forty. Mother would have easily made four paranthas by six forty. I could have saved five rupees. Not to mention I

could have avoided freezing to death.

The day finally dawned at the nearby tea stall with the dusting of the stove. In the anticipation of getting a hot cup of tea, my mind began to work again. Because of this sudden excitement, I took the diary out of my bag and started rummaging through it.

I could clearly read the full name of the Y person who had written the diary. According to the address, he was a resident of a neighboring district which had been recently enlisted as a city. The diary must have fallen out of his bag while either getting on or off the bus.

The first page also indicated that the diary was a gift to Y from a Z gentleman. As I flipped through it, I saw that some of the pages were overcrowded with names and addresses. Dozens of names overflowed to the margins – everything from Safdarjung to Mohan dacoit was inscribed in it. There were also private and official phone numbers of a few high-ranking officials. I felt it was my sheer luck to have found this diary. So much information was in front of me. Turning back to the first page, I read the owner's full name again. I could not help wondering about the character of that man.

On the page for January 5, there was a verse by Faiz Ahmed Faiz – 'The wounds of razed gardens, the songs slain before they could escape the heart/ For each droplet, for each bud, we will seek reparation.' On the page for January 7, I could see the birth dates of Edison, Marconi, Churchill, and Hitler. Right beneath them, the following date – 6 August 1945. This was the day America had dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. At the bottom of the page, I read, 'Money spent on paan today – 80 paise.'

On the January 8 page, I read the following pledge written in bold letters - 'I WILL NOT EAT PAAN EVER AGAIN.' The writer had marked these words more than a few times with

his pen. That's why they seemed to stand out on the page like an advertisement.

On the page for January 10, I saw a list of income and expenditure for the month of December 1983. In the column for income, there were only two entries – one from the mother and the other from the sister-in-law. But the description of expenditure spilled over into the page for January 11. The detailed description of expenses again outlined the character of Mr. Y. Along with other things, there was an entry for a full strip of sleeping pills and the cost for three issues of *Employment News*. He had visited the party headquarters twice that month and paid one rupee for party membership. The calculations showed that he had bought a razor blade and soap. Some money was also spent on buying toffees. In the end, it was evident that the expenses had exceeded the stipend by ten rupees. The entries for soap, razor, and toffees were highlighted. I thought this could be an indication of debt. The account was perfectly balanced once the expenses for these three items were deducted from the list.

The diary became increasingly interesting. The stove at the tea shop had also started to burn brightly. I moved closer to the shop and sat down on a rickety wooden bench. I could feel the slow warmth of the stove's flame seep into my bones. I started to feel calm and relaxed. To be completely honest, the real reason for the change in my mood was the diary. Many pages were still blank. The cost of tea, razor, or toffees was scribbled hither and thither. Their rhythm was interrupted once in a while by the address of some influential and important person.

The page for March 8 was covered with beautiful words and handwriting. That was why my eyes had trouble adjusting to the following lines – 'My Bhabhi thinks I am stingy and heartless. During last year's Dusshera holidays, she had asked me for a bottle of perfume. The damned thing! I could not buy it. How

could I tell her I had no money? I have been thinking for so long about getting a nice toy for my niece, Rinki. I had seen such beautiful dolls from Japan in M.P. sahib's living room. There is no way one can find anything even close to them in India. Must be over a hundred rupees each. I might find something similar in a small shop. But they will still cost thirty/forty rupees. Rinki would have been so happy to get one of them.' The entry continued – 'Rinki's eyes are so beautiful. Bhabhi's eyes must have been equally beautiful. When she had come into our lives as a newly-wed, she was so good-looking with eyes as clear and sparkling as a lake. Had she received love from Ma and Bhaiya, she would be beautiful even today.'

The following pages were empty. The pages for March 14 and 15 were filled up with only one name, written over and over again – 'Anita.' It was repeated alternatively in English, Hindi, and Urdu. It looked as if Mr. Y was still learning the Urdu alphabet. That was why he had made the error of replacing dental 't' with retroflex 'ṭ' in Anita. In one place, this gentleman had written 'Anita' 'Anita' all around his own name and made a pretty vista out of their names. There was also an amateurish sketch of a butterfly and a flower. Then there were some lines drawn into circles and two deep diagonal ones crossing everything on the page.

On the next page, there was some writing in the hand of a child – 'ka' for 'kabootar.'

The subsequent pages were filled up with general knowledge Q & A – who climbed Mount Everest for the first time, or who was the first person to walk on the moon. Jet plane, paper, printing, electricity, wireless – there was detailed information on inventions, discoveries, and achievements of scientists and physicists like Rutherford and Chadwick. There was also a short commentary on the French Revolution. I found something very intriguing while reading it – 'Horace Walpole had written some-

where that Marie Antoinette, whether sitting or standing, was an embodiment of beauty. And when she walked, she was the very picture of poise and grace. Was Marie Antoinette more elegant than Indira Gandhi?' After a few more sentences, there was a question – 'Did the making of the palace of Versailles cost more than the Asiad village?'

I had written the exam for Deputy Collectorship last year. Somehow, I had really enjoyed reading about the French revolution. Monsieur Y's commentary delighted my heart. A smile slowly spread on my face. When I looked up, the tea was ready to be served. I ordered a cup and inquired about the bus. The chai-walla told me that a nearby bridge had collapsed. There was a massive traffic jam. Laborers had been working round the clock to fix the problem. After all, Minister sahib was planning to travel this way around eight in the morning. No matter what happened, the road would be mended. My heartbeat had almost stopped on hearing about the fallen bridge and the broken road, but the moment I came to know about the Minister's visit, I was relieved. Even if I started at 8 a.m., I would reach more or less in time for the interview. It took around two and a half hours to reach. I would have to request Vidhayak ji in the evening to make a phone call, that's all. The decision would not be ready by then.

Slowly sipping my tea, I dived into the diary again. The jungle of facts and information was spread far and wide. It looked like this gentleman was also preparing for some competitive exam. The diary seemed to be proof of the fact that he had turned his days and nights into a general knowledge quiz.

However, towards the end of July, the pages came alive with ghazals and songs. On the page for July 29, there were four lines from a poem by Arsi Prasad Singh that I had read in eighth standard – 'What is life? A waterfall, and pleasure its flow. Shifting from the banks of joy to sorrow, willful remains its course.'

After the verse, the following statement – ‘Today, exactly fifteen years ago, Neil Armstrong had set foot on the moon.’ And then, right beneath both – ‘Aryavarta - 70 paise, Calmpose - 20 paise.’

In the pages that followed, excerpts from the poetry of Pant, Prasad, Sahir were scattered all over. On August 14, there was a nazm, titled ‘Awara’ by Majaz. It filled three full pages, and ended on August 16. I immersed myself in it and was overwhelmed by the power of its imagery. There was a line – ‘I feel like scratching away these dead stars and moon from the sky.’ Mr. Y had underlined these words. I don’t know what got into me, but I also pulled out my pen and bordered his effort even further.

After meandering through the flowering valley of poetry and ghazals, the diary resumed its job of recording Mr. Y’s life on August 31 – ‘I saw Anita again. Her hair is so dark and beautiful. And the radiance of her face! Bhabhi informed me today her parents are looking for a good match to get her married. Will Anita be truly happy after marriage? Last Thursday, she had deliberately dropped a flower near me. Was that gesture only my imagination? I know she had really liked the biography of Charles Dickens I had written for the college magazine. I wonder if she has also read the letter Maria Beadnell’s wrote to Dickens in their old age. Anita – Maria Beadnell – Dickens – Ellen Ternan.’ Mr. Y had written these names together and then crossed them out.

There was an ocean of emptiness and blank pages after this entry. On October 2, there was a failed attempt to draw a sketch of a man. The neck longer than usual and the ears too small. The eyes were drawn properly, but the lower jaw was so small in comparison to the forehead so that the entire face looked lopsided and asymmetrical. It seemed Mr. Y was aware of the shortcomings of his drawing. That was why he had inscribed

under the sketch – ‘Shaheed-e Azam Bhagat Singh.’ Just the way children write the name of the thing next to its drawing, this gentleman had done the same realizing his sketch was unrecognizable.

After that, there was a list of all the things required for gunpowder and the method for making it. And on the very next page, written obviously for a child were two silly limericks.

The diary returned to Mr. Y’s life again on October 20 – ‘I participated in the Kisan rally today. Also read a booklet of the farmers’ national committee. The discussion of political and social conditions is commendable. Even the commentary on international state of affairs is very satisfactory. But I will have to contemplate more on their political strategy. What is the advantage of getting landless farmers to form a union? A government that nationalized banks can also nationalize agriculture. If the government takes over agriculture, will it not destroy the unionization of farmers? Also, why will educated young men support such an organization? Is it not a fact that landless farmers can earn their wages elsewhere? Nobody drives them away from factories and mills. But no one wants to give jobs to the educated unemployed youth. They say our bodies are not used to hard physical labor. If you try to argue and take too much of their time, they try to get rid of you by ordering a tea or a paan. Nobody is ready to talk about the condition of the unemployed in this country. People need to understand and address this problem. Then only will there be a revolution!’

‘Huun phat phat swahaa’ was scribbled on the next page. And then, under the title of ‘vashikaran mantra’, there were four Sanskrit shlokas. These were followed by a list of steps and of ingredients required for the worship of Shakti.

The page for October 31 left me speechless. Y had cut a picture of Indira Gandhi’s bodyguard, Beant Singh, out of some newspaper and pasted it. Not a word was written anywhere. On

the next page, Anita's name was scribbled all over again and, after that, there was a list of expenses. At the bottom corner, I could see the words 'Potassium Cyanide' written in English and circled a few times.

The page for November 5 carried these lines – 'Why didn't India witness communal riots against Brahmins after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi? Godse, after all, was a Brahmin. But the Sikhs are being slaughtered everywhere in Beant Singh's name. Will these murders not haunt Indira Gandhi's entire life and legacy? They definitely will.'

After some space, Y had quickly summarized his day – 'Bhabhi was again beaten up badly. I could not go to the party meeting. I did not get to see Anita either. Rinki kept crying all day.'

The entry for November 8, however, was written in great detail – 'My mental state is not normal these days. My mind has been flooded with worthless thoughts for months. I have even been thrown out of the party by its members. They think my place is either Ranchi or Agra mental hospital. In their eyes, I am a lost soul – confused, obstinate and too radical. They say anarchist ideas are dangerous for the party. Alright, I will go to Ranchi. I have heard there is a famous scientist in that asylum. I know I am completely mad. But if I left for Ranchi, who would take care of Rinki, Bhabhi and Anita? Who would save Bhabhi from getting beaten up by Ma and Bhaiya? In a way, it is good I was kicked out of the party. They say I need to read more. How the hell do I afford it? I do not even have the money to buy a shaving blade. How can I buy books?'

The page was filled with other similar rants and tirades. Uncomfortable, I skipped to November 10.

It was again a day of reflection in Y's life – 'I saw posters of P.Y.F. in the streets today. Marxism is the enemy of all humanity. Warning us against the killers of innocent Afghans, P.Y.F

perhaps stands for Protest Youth Federation. Even some communists have told me that the Soviet Union is up to no good in Afghanistan. Why is the Soviet Union interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan? America is asking the same. When my brother beats up his wife and I try to stop him, my mother says it is their personal matter. Things happen between husband and wife. Bhaiya also says it is none of my business. Even Pitaji has started to caution me. My brother has gone so far as to suggest that I have inappropriate feelings for his wife. It seems everyone in the family has honorable feelings towards Bhabhi except me. I do think I will fit in better at the Ranchi asylum. The party members thought so. Now my family is sick of me. Even I am weary of my own existence.'

Family matters got grimmer as they spilled into November 12 – 'There was way too much shouting and screaming at home today. Ma has discovered that Bhabhi is pregnant again. Right in the morning, she woke up the entire house with her hollering and called Bhabhi a bitch for having babies every year. Such vile and revolting abuses. I feel like punching my own mother's face. But this is Bhaiya's private matter. I cannot even open my mouth. Along with mother's curses, my brother started to shower slaps on his wife. Bhabhi's only crime was that she did not agree to an abortion. She kept repeating it was too late. The child has life now. Maybe even a face. Mother was yelling that Bhabhi should thank God that Sanjay Gandhi died in an air crash. Otherwise, he would have become the Prime Minister. He would have made it a law to hang anyone who had one more child. My esteemed father is no less vicious. He quietly added that China had already enforced such a law.'

'What has happened to my brother? Until exactly five years ago, he used to write poetry. How can he beat up his wife so heartlessly? A woman who looks even more innocent than Mother Mary. Seeing her mother getting beaten up, Rinki came

running to me. Trembling in fear, she hid in a corner behind me. I could see Bhabhi's pain in her eyes. How long do I keep quiet and not interfere? Their private life keeps me awake at night. I cannot afford sleeping pills daily. On the page for November 15, I found the following words – 'Vinoba Bhave died exactly two years ago on this date. To be precise, he voluntarily let go of life. How is it that people killed Gandhi within months of getting freedom, but kept Vinoba alive until 1982? There has to be a reason. I will look into it.'

There were was a poem each for November 16 and 17. One was a nazm by Firaq that was familiar to me – 'Death sang a song that night/ And life danced to its tune.' On the page for November 18, there were brief definitions of concepts and theories related to life, existence, being, and soul. Beneath them, in bold letters – 'DO NOT RUN AWAY, CHANGE THE WORLD.' These words were boldly underlined, in red ink.

There was an ocean of empty pages again until I reached December 10 – 'There will be elections in the country. My name is not on the voters' list. Even if I want, I cannot vote for anyone. The Prime Minister has transformed the entire nation into a Gestapo chamber. Ma, Babuji, and Bhai sahib will support Prime Minister's party. Bhabhi, Rinki, and I will oppose it. But neither one of us will reach the polling booth. We do not have the right to vote, but we will still revolt.'

I saw a crowd gathering around the bus stop. A truck crossed, bringing everyone to life. The bridge must have been fixed. Within minutes, the sound of cars and their horns surrounded us. The bus can arrive any moment now. There were still some pages left in the diary. I did not want to stop reading. But I did. Stroking its cover with affection, I slipped the diary into my bag, looked down the road, and saw a bus in the distance. It was most likely my bus. I began to wait in anticipation.

## The Queen of Hearts

### *Of Mumtaz Mania*

She had everything a man ever wanted in a woman. Her beauty, innocence, grace, style, and a naughty impish smile made many a heart miss a beat. When she smiled, the world smiled with her. When she cried, the world seemed a cruel place, dark and dismal. Her talent was unexampled, her glamour ensnaring, her charm mesmerizing, and her grace unparalleled – and remain so even to this day.

When Mumtaz arrived on the silver screen she immediately catapulted to stardom. She ruled the tinsel world, and ruled like none other. Among the most glorious and prominent Indian film icons of all times, Mumtaz is the brightest star.

Born on July 31, 1947 into a humble Irani home in Bombay, Mumtaz made her debut as an extra in films as early as 1960s. She did small roles in big films (*Mujhe Jeene Do*) and big roles in some small films (*Samson, Boxer, Tarzan* and *King Kong*). She was the leading lady in 16 action films opposite the wrestler actor Dara Singh, who trusted her talent enough to give her a break as the female lead, so from a group dancer or extra she now became the love interest of *Rustam-e-Hind* Dara Singh. She was soon labelled a 'stunt film heroine'. Any other actress in her place, howsoever talented, would have sunk without a whimper in the abyss of the film world, or would have been typecast forever as a wrestler's arm candy, but not Mumtaz. Nothing could keep her down. Within a span of six months her unmistakable talent, spunk and beauty catapulted her to the so called 'big films' opposite Rajesh Khanna, the first real superstar of Indian cinema in a trio of films – *Do Raste, Bandhan* and *Sachcha*

*Jhoota* – which released in 1969 and did a roaring business, turning out to be record grossers.

This was just the beginning; the lady with this hat trick had set out on her journey to stardom in the true sense of the word. The three films established her in the top slot. Her talent was recognized and rewarded the very next year with *Khilona* in 1970 where she acted opposite an actor par excellence Sanjiv Kumar and won the best actress Filmfare award. The film also won the best movie of the year award, and Mumtaz's performance as first a nautch girl and then as a mad man's nurse got her the national award too, establishing her indisputable acting credibility.

Over the next 12 years Mumtaz acted in more than 100 films and became an icon for all. She was a role model, for girls and women alike. Men were smitten with her, for them she was the ultimate diva, the woman of their dreams with a cheeky glint in the eyes, a very sexy pout, and a graceful voluptuous body that had the right balance of a nice as well as a hot woman at the same time. She put a man's heart aflutter with desire and came across as the kind of a woman he would just love to take home to mama. For a woman who had started as a child artiste in *Sone ki Chidiya* in 1958, it was a huge achievement so that all stars worth their name were now eager to work with her, and they did in the years that followed. For her it was only a matter of time. She had now become a huge star, and in the course of time she would impact the history of Indian cinema, changing its face forever. She emoted, acted, danced and teased, delivering her dialogues with perfect accuracy and impeccable pronunciation and fluency in Urdu and Hindi. Her personality oozed oomph and beauty, her niceness and her hotness quotient synergized wonderfully to make her the reigning queen of Bollywood. The era clearly belonged to her! She worked opposite all major male stars, such as Rajendra Kumar, Dilip Kumar, Rajesh Khanna,

Dev Anand, Dharmendra, Shashi Kapoor, Sanjiv Kumar, Feroz Khan, Sanjay Khan, Jeetendra, Manoj Kumar, Biswajeet, and others.

Mumtaz's versatility is too well known to be mentioned. The lady way back in 70s carried off golden locks as a blonde in *Apna Desh* with remarkable ease and finesse. This is the stuff a Bollywood diva is made of. In June 2008 she was honoured for her achievements in and contribution to Indian cinema by International Film Academy in Bangkok (IIFA). She was also the winner of the BFJA award for best supporting actress which is no surprise. Her 'sidey' roles were a misnomer. Her performances as the second lead in *Mere Humdum Mere Dost*, *Patthar ke Sanam* and *Mere Sanam* remain unforgettable along with actresses like Waheeda Rehman, Asha Parekh and Sharmila Tagore. It was clear that she was soon to be an arch rival of all those she played second fiddle to. Her spunk when she says, '*Sadke jaun gale to lag ja zalim,*' '*Qurban jaun ye kafir kaun si duniya ke aakhir rehne wale hain,*' and similar remarks dropped spontaneously with a naughty pair of gleaming eyes like sparkling champagne made the audience chuckle and melted many a heart. For a bit role player to an action hero's arm candy, from a vamp to a comedian's love interest and from second lead to the lead female star working opposite all the top heroes of the times, Mumtaz had indeed travelled a long way, all on her own merit and very fast too, all in 6 months. Unbelievable? So was she! The lady's innate *joie de vivre*, bubbling oomph, sun-kissed smiles and sherry eyes remain with her audience forever. Her insouciance was much too infectious and soon the Mumtaz mania became an epidemic as the contagion spread. In her career she played all roles imaginable, from a village damsel to a foreigner, from a *tawaif* to a stereotyped Indian wife, from a blind destitute girl to a princess, from a guest appearance to a double role. You name it she has done it.

Her sensitive and emotional performances were commendable too. The audience carried home in their heart a blind *ektara*-playing Neelu in *Jheel ke Uss Paar*, who appeared from a hazy mist almost like a fallen angel in search of her wings, not from the earth at all, desperately searching with blank eyes for a way back home to heaven, to go back to the place she belonged to and craved for: ‘*Jo iss paar nahin koyi kya jane woh uss paar ho, parbat ke peeche aek sundar sapnon ka sansar ho, aayi ho bahaaron pe bahaar.*’ Or waiting for her redeemer: ‘*Shayad koyi pardesi aa jaye soone des mein, mil jaye bhagwan mujhko aadmi ke bhes mein, kya ho jaye kya hai aetbar.*’ The audience believed every word she uttered as she sang the song of hope, of a better tomorrow and of a better world of love and colours. The viewer believed in her, in her world, she made it so credible, so plausible. Her agile expressions translated the pain and the despair for the audience that Khanna felt as he sang ‘*khizan ke phool pe aati kabhi bahaar nahin.*’ It was Mumtaz that the camera showed up close and fell in love with in the entire song though she too was just a listener like the audience but she caught and reflected each and every shade of the dilemma and speck of sorrow the song spoke of.

Mumtaz’s simmering sensuality in songs like ‘*Yeh hai reshmi zulfon ka andhera na ghabrayiye,*’ ‘*Ae dushman-e-jan chal diye kaban,*’ and ‘*Zindagi ittefaq hai kal bhi ittefaq thi aaj bhi ittefaq hai*’ where she breaks into a carefree jig of total abandonment throwing her heels away and dancing between Feroz Khan and Dharmendra remains unmatched to this day. All this is in stark contrast to her subservient Hindu woman’s portrayal in *Tere Mere Sapne*, *Khilona*, *Prem Kahani* and *Aapki Kasam*. Who can forget the *ganna* (sugarcane) chewing, spitfire bubbly village lass in *Ram aur Shyam* opposite a thespian like Dilip Kumar in 1967? The lady yet made a very impressive mark of her talent. She was thereafter anointed the box office queen though the

film was an out and out Dilip Kumar film with his double role. She proved her *métier* in *Aaina* too as an all sacrificing elder sister, a film that later inspired Rekha’s *Jeevandhara*. The spunky lady soon doled out hits like *Humraz*, *Brahmachari*, *Aek Nari Aek Brahmachari*, *Mela*, *Dushman*, *Tangewala*, *Apradh*, *Roop tera Mastana*, *Loafer*, *Roti*, *Chor Machaye Shor*, *Nagin* and many more. Her unforgettable songs are far too many to be counted but to mention some randomly, there are immortal songs like – *Aajkal tere mere pyar ke charche har jahan mein*, *Bindiya chamkegi*, *Chhup gaye sare nazare oye kya bat ho gayi, agar dilbur ki ruswayi hume manzoor ho jaye*, *Jai jai shiv shanker*, *Koyi sehri babu*, *chal chalein ae dil karein chal kar kisika intezaar*, *Balma sipahiya hai re teri dambuk se dar lage*, *dekho dekho dekho baiyscope dekho*, *phool aabista phenko*, *prem kahani mein aek ladka hota hai*, *aek ladki hoti hai*. They remain the favourites of all radio channels. Mumtaz was voted the second most popular beauty even recently in a poll conducted as part of the celebrations of 100 years of Indian cinema, in association with the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA), in 2012. In 1996, she received the Filmfare Lifetime Achievement Award.

Mumtaz’s dancing prowess needs no elaboration. Her *mujra* with which the film *Khilona* opens is fresh in the memory of her fans – *Agar dilbur ki ruswai hume manzoor ho jaye*. Her portrayal of *Phoolmati* the *Baiyscope wali* in *Dushman* had dance numbers dotted with odd jumps, claps and shakes, with the *tedha theka* or the beat (*Dilli ki qutub Minar dekho*, *ghode pe baanka sawaar dekho*, *Ye Agre ka hai Tajmahal ghar baithe sara sansar dekho*). The lady made an indelible mark here too and sure knew how to use her back most aesthetically (Madhuri Dixit may eat her heart). Her famous *Bindiya Chamkegi* depicted the *chhed chhaad* of a young girl in love at the prime of her youth trying to seek some attention from her lover using everything she has got, charm, wit as well as her bangles, *bindiya*, *payals* and *gajra*

dressed in a flaming orange sari. The *matak* of her gait remains unsurpassed in the dance that followed. The song may show a GF smitten but nevertheless conveys the message of gender equality gently but clearly and most gracefully when she utters with a lovelorn gaze, *Maine tujhse muhabbat ki hai ghulami nahin ki balma, dil kisika tute chabe koyi mujhse roothe main to chhedungi main to kbelungi, mahi rus jaye te rus jaye, Main na baithungi doli mein keh dunggi babul se main na jaungi...* The hint is loud and clear – a wife is to be treated at par, she has a mind of her own, and should better be allowed to do her own thing. Whosoever wrote or sang the song, it was Mumtaz who rendered it on screen and made it eternal. As Meena in *Mere Humdum Mere Dost* she danced in an azure blue tight chudidhar kurta on a ghazal that was composed like a Qawwali (to complicate matters further for the dancer) – *Allah yeh ada kaisi hai in haseenon mein, ruthein pal mein na manein mabeenon mein.* Mumtaz's lithe and lissome feline body, her spirit of life, and her measured, graceful rhythmic steps were to be seen to be believed. Not only that, this dance also required a certain amount of physical fitness on the part of the dancer to do the jumps, squats and the like. Can any woman dance so very spectacularly and gracefully on a ghazal? Well, seeing is believing, moreover she was no other woman, she was Mumtaz – the darling of the country. She had surpassed herself already so early in her career and as the other numbers that she did, she made this one too a priceless gem in the many unforgettable, artistic and one of a kind dances of the Indian cine-world. In the same film her dance in the hotel in a body-hugging red gown – *Hume ko ho gaya hai pyar tumhe ho na ho* – required not only a passionate and expert dancer but also a fine actress. She did an extremely impressive job again both as a seductive dancer as well as a talented actress apparently luring Dharmendra yet driving him towards a safe escape signalling to him all the while about the lurking threat to his life. It was

Mumtaz who did it to perfection and made it go down as one more in the history of the best dances ever on the Indian screen.

Mumtaz as a film star gave the choreographers, designers, makeup artistes and hair stylists a thrill as well as a challenge. She allowed them a free hand to vent their creativity and the urge to experiment. She was so ahead of her times that many of the styles she sported in her outfits, make-up and hairstyles went a long way in establishing her firmly as a fashionista way back in the 70s. Her sarees, chudidars, shararas, blouses, gowns, make-up and hairstyles rang in a new fashion era. The tomato-red gown with bold golden embroidery she wore in *Mere Humdum Mere Dost* has become a style statement copied by today's top heroines on the red carpet in Cannes and other events. Her orange *sharara* in *Loafer*, yellow lacy *chudidhar kurta* in *Do Raste*, her trousers and flayers in *Apradh* and the orange dress in *Patthar ke Sanam*, her saffron sari draped in an unusual layered style in *Brahmachari* in the song *Aajkal tere mere..* have been recently imitated by Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra. Mumtaz constantly surprised her female fans, with her novel make-up and hair dos, who were just too delighted and thrilled to follow suit. The professional beauty artistes put all styles inspired by this diva to good use while dressing up the brides in the 70s. Her bubbling ponytail, her beehive updo with a rose, her long bob, her pouf with a side plait, her sidelocks framing the face, and her double buns became a rage. Her bold eye makeup styles started a trend that is followed even now. Her winged eyeliner in black and white in films like *Do Raste* is something Kareena Kapoor sells in 2015 for a well-known cosmetic brand. Mumtaz brought saris into fashion and made them fascinating. She pioneered an era of colours and made them flamboyant and magnificent. She explored that conscious distinctive styling film stars are now known for, playing a pivotal role in influencing fashion for over a decade. Thanks to her, flair and fashion dominated the two

decades of 1960s and 70s as Bollywood in India is almost followed like religion, and has a larger than life presence everywhere. She made women with curves acceptable, beautiful, sexy and desirable. The lady even made *lungi* come into vogue after her films *Roti* and *Dushman*. Women wore it everywhere, to markets, college and office with a fashionable short top.

Apart from all her talent there is a feminine happy grace and joy Mumtaz is most loved and remembered for. Her sparkling wit, dazzling smile and melodious laughter are what people carried home with them from the theatres. Little wonder Manoj Kumar sang to her – *Sitam ye adaon ki raanaiyan hain, qayamat hai kya teri angdaiyan hain, bahaare-chaman ho ghata ho dhanak ho, ye sab teri soorat ki parchhayiyan hain, ke tan se udta gulal kaban... tauba yeh matwali chal....* There has never been another Mumtaz, there can never be!

Navdeep Kaur

## Evil, up close

*Reading Manto with Badiou*

Saadat Hasan Manto wrote during an era of modern Indian history that was fraught with communal tensions. His partition fiction portrays a vivid picture of the cold-bloodedness which took the form of violent murders, brutal rapes and psychological mutilations at an unimaginable scale. Manto's writings reveal the suffering of individuals "bewildered by the chaos and confusion attending the dawn of a long-awaited freedom" (Jalal 141). Historians and writers have made several attempts to ascertain the nature of violence unleashed during Partition. Ishtiaq Ahmed, a noted historian and author of *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed* thinks that the violence was an attempt to get rid of unwanted minorities from the Eastern and the Western Punjab. Ahmed further argues that it was the religious differences as manipulated by the divisive forces which led to such unfortunate and traumatic events in the recent history of the subcontinent. He thus relies on the theory of ethnic cleansing to explain this specific form violence. Krishna Sobti, the well-known novelist, says in an interview with Alok Bhalla that the traumatic experience of the partition was an encounter between man and reality, a collision between a political agenda and the long tradition of pluralism. She believes that the partition violence was a result of communal fissures that started to emerge during 1944-45. In her view, the religious revivalist movements like the Arya Samaj sharpened the tensions, with the vernacular press particularly contributing to assertions of separate communal identities. Ayesha Jalal, however, is of the view that it was the human instinct for bestiality and depravity which was ultimately re-

sponsible for the unpardonable horrors of partition. The perpetrators of violence were not habitual killers; circumstances turned them into murderers. They were the products of a great mishap (144).

This essay looks at the violence of partition from a contemporary philosophical perspective. It uses the idea of the Evil as proposed by Alain Badiou in his work *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* to analyze the partition violence as it is represented in Manto's fiction.

The ethic of truths holds a central position in Alain Badiou's philosophical thought. A truth procedure can begin only with some sort of break with the ordinary situation, what Badiou calls an event. It is necessarily unforeseeable because it does not fall under the law of prevailing possibilities. At the same time, it induces the appearance of a subject. Every human being is not always a subject, yet some human beings do become subjects: those do who act in fidelity to the possibilities unleashed by the event. For Badiou, Evil is a possible dimension of the truth procedure.

Badiou posits certain general principles of Evil. Evil arises as a possible effect of the Good itself. Evil is a category not of the human animal, but of the subject. There is Evil only to the extent that man is capable of becoming the Immortal he is. Evil must be distinguished from the violence that the human animal employs to persevere in its being, to pursue its interests – a violence that is beneath Good and Evil. The ethic of truths – as the principle of consistency of fidelity to a fidelity – tries to ward off the Evil that every singular truth makes possible (*Ethics* 67).

The idea of Evil, for Badiou, depends upon the three major dimensions of a truth-procedure – the event, the fidelity, and the truth. The event is both situated – it is the event of a particular situation – and supplementary, in the sense that it is absolutely detached from, or unrelated to, all the rules of the

situation. There is the void of the situation around which is organized the plenitude of that situation. The event names this void of the situation. Thus, the fundamental ontological characteristic of an event is to inscribe, or to name, the situated void of that for which it is an event. The fidelity is an immanent and continuing break but it is never inevitable or necessary. The truth is the multiple, internal to the situation, constructed, bit by bit, gathered together and produced by the fidelity. Consequently, Evil has three names: *simulacrum* – to believe that an event convokes not the void of the situation, but its plenitude; *betrayal* – to fail to live up to fidelity; and *disaster* – to identify a truth with total power (*Ethics* 71).

Evil is the process of a simulacrum of truth and it takes the form of terror directed at everyone. All the formal traits of a truth are at work in the simulacrum. There is a nomination of the event, a radical break in a situation, the obligation of a specific fidelity, and the promotion of the simulacrum of the subject but without the advent of any Immortal. In a truth process, the event calls forth and names the central void of the situation for which this event is an event but in a simulacrum of truth, a radical break in a situation convokes not the void of the earlier situation but its plenitude.

Betrayal is the second name, after simulacrum, of the Evil made possible by a truth-procedure. A truth-process, initiated by an event, extends to infinity. It is untouched by crisis. What can go into crisis is the 'some-one' who enters into the composition of the subject induced by the truth-process. The confusion between ordinary interest and disinterested-interest, between human animal and subject, between mortal and Immortal is the cause of this crisis. The subject is confronted with a pure choice between the subjective continuation of fidelity proposed by the ethic of truths, and the logic of the perseverance in being, of the mere mortal he or she is. This subject is then ex-

posed to the temptation to betray a truth. “So it is that the defeat of the ethic of a truth, at the undecidable point of a crisis, presents itself as betrayal” (*Ethics* 80).

Evil in the sense of disaster is the identification of truth with total power. Every truth is concerned with the elements of the situation; its process is nothing other than their examination from the perspective of the event. The power of a truth, directed at opinions, forces the pragmatic naming (the language of the objective situation) to bend and change shape upon contact with the subject-language. The total power of truth would imply “the ability to name and evaluate *all* the elements of the objective situation from the perspective of the truth-process” (*Ethics* 83). But every attempt to impose the total power of a truth ruins that truth’s very foundation because every absolutization of the power of a truth could organize itself as a form of Evil. This Evil destroys the situation and at the same time interrupts the truth-process in whose name it proceeds, since it fails to preserve, within the composition of its subject, the duality of interests (disinterested-interest and interest pure and simple). Badiou calls this figure of Evil a disaster, a disaster of the truth induced by the absolutization of its power. It is the desire for “Everything-to-be-said” (*Infinite Thought* 50).

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In the light of Badiou’s insights into the nature of Evil as adumbrated above, I shall now attempt to critically analyse Manto’s two stories on partition, “Sharifan” and “The Will of Gurmukh Singh”. I argue that the image of violent human animals in Manto’s fictional narratives presents varied forms taken by the “subject” of either a truth-process or a simulacrum of truth. In fact, the representation of beastly violence in Manto’s partition stories signify varied forms of Evil – the process of simulacrum of truth or betrayal – as described by Badiou.

In the story “Sharifan”, which turns around the commu-

nal riots, Manto confronts the manifestation of Evil through his protagonist who participates in wreaking violence upon others because he is driven by a simulacrum of truth. Qasim – the protagonist – decides to avenge the brutal killing of his daughter in the riots during partition. Wounded by a bullet in his right calf, he enters his house where he sees the corpse of his wife. He is about to pick up an axe and go out when he suddenly remembers his daughter, Sharifan. He begins to look for her in the house. In the verandah, he sees her dead body – “naked, absolutely naked. Fair complexioned, taut and nubile; the small pert breasts were raised towards the ceiling” (Manto 215). He is shaken to the core of his being. A scream emerges from deep within him, but he purses his lips so tightly that it cannot escape. He throws some clothes on the dead girl’s body and leaves the verandah. “When he came out, he did not see his wife’s dead body; it is entirely possible that it was not visible to him because his eyes were filled with the naked corpse of Sharifan” (Manto 215). Even the searing pain caused by the bullet in his leg vanishes. The shock of his wife’s death has disappeared after he has seen his daughter’s naked corpse. Only one picture repeatedly appears before his eyes - of Sharifan, naked Sharifan and it pierces his eyes like a spear and creates a fissure in his soul (Manto 216).

In this short story, the sight of a naked dead body of his daughter constitutes what Badiou terms as ‘the semblance to an event’. Here the ‘event’ refers to something that convokes a human animal to become a subject or rather, to enter into the composing of a subject. It compels the newly composed subject to invent a new way of being and act in the situation. The sight of Sharifan’s naked dead body causes a radical break in the situation. It turns Qasim into “a stream of molten lava” (Manto 216).

Partition had aggravated the distrust already lurking between various communities. Qasim does not know his daughter’s killer but he directs his anger at the potential enemies

of his religion – Hindus and Sikhs. He reaches a chowk and strikes down a tall Sikh, who then falls like a “tree uprooted in a fierce storm” (Manto 216). He also kills three other men who have raised the slogans of “Har Har Mahadev!” Qasim decides to avenge the death of his daughter through the elimination of people belonging to other religions. In fact, the ‘event’ supposed to bring into being and name the void of the earlier situation, instead names its plenitude through the victims of his rage, the men who just happen to be Hindus and Sikhs. The radical break provoked by the event is faithful only to the alleged religious substance of a people; and it is addressed only to those of one’s own religion. As the radical break convokes not the void but the plenitude of the situation, hence we are here dealing with, what Badiou terms, a simulacrum of truth.

The radical break with the earlier situation is followed by the obligation of fidelity. Qasim is faithful to the simulacrum of event. He feels disappointed after killing the Sikhs and Hindus. He is about to give up his struggle and his life but his fidelity to the simulacrum does not let him give up. “But, all of a sudden, the image of Sharifan – naked Sharifan – entered into his eyes like molten lead and turned his whole being into a pile of burning gunpowder. He got up to his feet, picked up the axe and once again began to sweep through the street like a stream of molten lava” (Manto 216). He enters an alley but it has only Muslim houses. So thwarted, he turns the stream of his lava in another direction. He spews the mother-sister profanities. Suddenly, he begins to scream daughter-related obscenities and in one single breath spits out all the curses he knew related to daughters. Qasim’s fidelity to the semblance of an event makes him indulge in the senseless and undeserved slaughter of persons belonging to ‘enemy’ communities.

Qasim walks towards a house whose doorway has something written over it in Hindi. The door is locked from inside.

He begins to strike it with his axe and the door breaks into pieces. He enters the house, forcing out the choicest profanities from his parched throat. A door opens and a girl appears, a ‘Hindu’ girl who is barely fourteen or fifteen years old. He looks at the girl with blood-shot eyes, drops the axe from his hand and pounces upon the girl like a falcon and begins to tear her clothes with both hands like a mad man. He remains busy doing this for about half an hour. The girl offers no resistance because she becomes unconscious as soon as she falls on the floor. When Qasim opens his eyes, he sees the dead body of a girl – “naked, absolutely naked. Fair complexioned, taut and nubile; the small pert breasts were raised towards the ceiling . . . Qasim’s eyes closed tightly on their own; he covered his face with both his hands; the hot sweat turned into a sheet of ice and the lava coursing through his veins hardened into a rock” (Manto 217). This was a sight similar to the one he had witnessed at his own house – the sight that had convoked him into the composing of a subject.

In this story, we are dealing with a simulacrum of truth. All the formal traits of a truth are at work: the semblance of an event, a radical break, the obligation of fidelity, the promotion of a simulacrum of the subject – but without the advent of any Immortal – above the human animality of others. The semblance of event is the sight of the naked body of the dead girl but the void of the situation makes its return under the name of Hindus and Sikhs. It is not every non-Muslim but only the Hindus and the Sikhs. Every fidelity to an authentic event names the adversaries of its perseverance. Similarly, the simulacrum of truth here names Hindus and Sikhs as the adversaries. It is notable that the violence perpetrated by Qasim is not for self-defence or to pursue his own interests. He directs his vengeance against a Hindu girl who resembles his own daughter. His revenge is totally misdirected as this girl could not have been, in any way, the cause of his daughter’s death. As Badiou argues, in the ethic of truth,

every 'some-one' who enters the composing of a subject may fight against the judgements and opinions he exchanges with others but one is not against any person. By contrast, the subject who is faithful to a simulacrum strives to strike the physical being of its adversaries. So Qasim's fidelity to the simulacrum designates as enemies the particular identities of Hindus and Sikhs. The exercise of the fidelity to the simulacrum is necessarily the exercise of terror, the terror finally unleashed by Qasim against a young, innocent, helpless Hindu girl. Qasim is, thus, not a subject but a simulacrum of subject. The event – the sight of the naked body of his dead daughter – fails to convoke the advent of an "Immortal" that Qasim is capable of becoming. His energies are directed against the enemy – ultimately a Hindu girl. She is the worst victim of Qasim's rage; he brutalizes her body to settle scores with the 'enemy' community.

The reading of the story "Sharifan" shows that the communal violence directed against people in the name of religion during the partition of India was a process of Evil as a simulacrum of truth as described by Badiou. The failure of the subject to become the 'Immortal' that he is capable of becoming leads to the senseless violence that accompanied the partition. The 'some-ones' who were able to participate in this horrifying killing as if accomplishing a duty were the subjects of a simulacrum of truth.

The story "The Will of Gurmukh Singh" exemplifies that Evil may be a betrayal of the truth process. The story is structured around an incident in the violent upheaval during partition, in which a Sikh man could have prevented the burning down of a retired Muslim judge's house but he failed in a moment of crisis. The story is situated in the charged atmosphere of the partition in the city of Amritsar where isolated incidents of stabbing have developed into full-scale communal violence. These are not the first communal riots in the city and are seen by many residents as a manifestation of temporarily inflamed po-

litical passions, bound to cool down before long. But that does not happen as the riots not only continue but grow in intensity. Muslims living in Hindu dominated areas begin to leave for safer places while Hindus in Muslim majority areas also follow suit.

Mian Abdul Hai, a retired Muslim judge, along with his two children – Basharat, a boy of eleven and Sughra, a girl of seventeen – live in a Hindu locality. The story sketches scenes of brutal chaos in the city as witnessed by the children from the top of their three-storey house. It is a frightening view with fires raging everywhere and the slogans of "Allahoo Akbar" and "Har Har Mahadev" rending the air with terrifying frequency. Sughra suggests that they should move to Sharifpura, a Muslim locality, where many of the other Muslim residents have already moved. Mian Sahib is not worried. He is optimistic that everything will return to normalcy soon. One day he suffers a stroke and is laid up. His children cannot call a doctor because the nearby dispensary and clinic are closed. It is the month of Ramdan and the festival of Id is a day away. In the evening, there is a knock on the door that frightens the two children. The visitor is Gurmukh Singh's son, Santokh. Mian Sahib has once acquitted Gurmukh Singh in a false lawsuit. Since then every year at the time of Id, Gurmukh Singh has been coming all the way from his village with a bag of "sawwaiyan" to thank the judge who has now retired (Manto 247). Gurmukh Singh believes that the judge did him a great favour and even his hundred generations may not be able to repay the debt. Santokh Singh has come to deliver the gift to fulfill his father's last wish. While going back from the judge's house, four men with turbans and faces covered move towards him. They inquire whether he has completed his assignment so that they can proceed with theirs. He replies that they may if they like and walks away. The four men are holding burning torches and are carrying cans of kerosene oil and some explosives. Their assignment is, obviously, to burn down the judge's house.

Santokh Singh appears, in the first instance, to be a brave man who has come to fulfill his father's last wish amidst the chaos of communal riots. The last thing that his dying father has said to him was, "For the last ten years, on the occasion of Id, I have always taken 'sawwaiyaan, to Judge Sahib; after I am gone, you will have to perform this duty'" (Manto 248). The frequent occurrences of murder and arson, the streets littered with corpses, the deadly silence shattered only by deafening explosions and the stench of death in the air cannot deter him from performing his duty. It is clear that Santokh Singh, initiated by an event, has entered the composing of a subject; otherwise, he would not have risked his own life to fulfill the wish of a dead man. But he enters a crisis after his encounter with the four men who want to set the judge's house on fire. There arises a conflict between his ordinary interest, that is, his perseverance of being and the disinterested-interest, his desire to fulfil his duty. His duty as per his father's last wish is not only to deliver the gift to the judge on every Id but also to protect the judge and his family from any potential harm. He faces a choice between fidelity to the truth-process and perseverance of the self. He is dazed by the meaningless violence taking place around him, and the possibility of it happening to him in case he defies the four men. We could say that he is finally exposed to the temptation to betray the truth-process. He does feel sorry when he comes to know that the judge has been bed-ridden for some time. On hearing of the judge's illness, he says, "Had Sardarji been alive, it would have grieved him deeply. He never forgot Judge Sahib's kindness until his last breath. He used to say that Judge Sahib is not a man but a god. May God keep him alive!" (Manto 248). Thus, Santokh Singh, who had earlier entered the composing of a subject, is now tempted to betray the truth-process when he senses a threat to his physical well-being in case he continues with his subjective fidelity. His refusal to let the men burn down the Muslim judge's

house would have interfered with his ordinary interest. It might have cost him his life – the life that he had earlier risked to deliver the bag of "sawwayian" to the judge. His failure to live up to the fidelity of the truth process allows us to fathom Evil as betrayal. It is a refusal of the call to be the Immortal that he is capable of becoming. But he has convinced himself that the Immortal in question never existed. He is obliged to accept that he was lost in error when he decided to fulfill his father's last wish. Consequently, he refuses to intervene and protect the judge and his family at the cost of his own life. He, thus, becomes the enemy of that truth-process as the subject of which he has been composed recently. There arises a conflict between the subject and the human animal, and in his case, the winner is the human animal who lets the arsonists to burn down the judge's house. The human animal here designates, in Badiou's terminology, the physical entity, the human being who is not the subject of a truth-process.

According to Badiou, Evil becomes an actual possibility only because of the sole recognizable Good - a truth-process. The present paper has tried to understand the violence of partition via a close reading of Manto's two fictional narratives as various manifestations of Evil. A critical examination of the above-mentioned stories reveals Evil in the form of either simulacrum or betrayal. In this paper, each narrative is found to be offering a certain image of Evil. Each of the aforesaid instances of violence highlights the Evil made possible by a truth-process. One can say that Manto's partition fiction is an attempt to underline the diverse forms of Evil that wreaked violence during the partition.

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## The Dalit Discourse

If we define a discourse as a specific articulation of a specific perception of a specific existential experience, we emphasize not the dialectical relationship of the Subject or the Being and the Subject or the Other. In the constitution of a discourse, a certain universe of signification is created which is not a simple reporting of an event or even an analytical presentation of a given empirical reality.

As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in the Introduction to African poetry, it is an affirmation of the reversal of the roles. Language, the medium of articulation, the instrument of passing judgments, the Logos of power and authority, was always employed in the service of constituting a White discourse, a European discourse of the coloniser where the Blacks were subjected to its perception and projection. There were no doubt very sympathetic, even glorifying descriptions of the Other, but they were always paternalistic. When the Blacks, the Dalits, in the process of the assertion of their beings, reverse the order of this universe of reflection, when those who were the Objects for centuries, suddenly refuse to be subjected to the Others' gaze, and begin to constitute their own discourses, there is necessarily a tumultuous upheaval in the order of things, the things of this empirical world. The Blacks, the Dalits, the oppressed, transform the Object into Subject, and those who were used to the comfort of the all powerful, invincible, sacred position of the Subject, suddenly find themselves subjected of those who earlier dared not look at them, and the Logos, the inalienable Word changes hands.

This reversal, however, is not a phenomenon in the sociological universe. After all, an artist that a literary writer is

supposed to be is not engaged in writing a political or a sociological pamphlet. Neither the artists of yonder days, in times past, who belonged to the higher echelons of society, perceived this empirical world in the juxtapositions of black and white, nor will the Dalit artists fall in the cheap presentations of ordinary politicians. There is another perception, a perception followed by a reflection of the individual who now acts as a Subject, as a Being with the assertive courage to look at the Other. But the most important ingredient of this new emerging conceptual construct is that the fundamental relationship between the Being and the Other remains dialectical within a highly complex structure of political, social and psychic intrigues.

On the one hand, the contradictions inherent within a society are the basis of the being of its socio-economic structure; on the other, the hierarchy of the contradictions at a given moment in history, as it has all along been the historical paradigm, leads to the inevitable change or what may be called the historical progression. The literary artist realizes the complexity of these contradictions and instead of providing ready-made popular solutions, a Maupassant, a Manto, transcends the thresholds of social classes, and perceives the human condition as a highly complex conceptual construct. His discourse thus creates a new universe where even when the roles of the subject and the object, the being and the other are reversed, their dialectical interaction is not ignored. The author, dalit or otherwise, is after all not the creator of this universe, and his creation, the characters in his writing are not just his puppets, for even the perceived reality remains well grounded in its anthropological parameters. There is as such a revolution, a reversal of roles, a transformation of perception, but there is also a continuity in the creative process that inflects historical progression without creating a new universe of alienation.

This proposition leads us to the concept of the 'author'.

We have here two opposing theoretical paradigms, the idealist Hegelian paradigm and the materialist structuralist paradigm. The Hegelian conceptualization is realized in an ideal universe where the author is a transcendental being who is able to negotiate through the imaginary contradictions to constitute a perfect social and political structure. Early structuralism under the influence of social sciences went to the other extreme and proposed the complete decentralization, almost negation of the author, the subject. It was hailed as the Copernican revolution. Social sciences dealt with the so-called empirical reality in complete objectivity. Social science is 'scientific,' that is objective, verifiable, of the order of collectivity. There are no personal relations between the object being analyzed and the social scientist. The individuals do not matter, every action of a being is predictable once we know the socio-economic and cultural conditions which determine his behavior. An individual is historically situated. His progression is determined by the contradictions inherent in the social structure. It may seem strange but this proposition is not very different from the religious determinism which also considers factors – earlier lives, birth, race, gender as the basic givens. In both cases, the individual simply does not exist.

The author of a literary discourse negotiates between these two extremes. He cannot ignore the socio-economic-political factors which may be responsible for a given event, for example the death of a person. All the same, his poem on death is neither a doctor's report on the mechanism of the cessation of life, nor a sociologist's account of all the rites and ceremonies which accompany it, nor a monograph on the economic and political conditions which are certainly to a large extent responsible for this event. The point of departure of the literary discourse is the existential relation between the dying person and the author. This intense personal experience is then constituted

as a conceptual construct in the domain of *imaginaire* where the author reflects not only on the socio-economic conditions but also on the very nature of death, personal anguish and anxiety, the cruelty of time, and tension. In this domain of the *imaginaire*, the domain of creativity par excellence, there is a certain condensation, a certain displacement of chronological time, the dialectical relation between intellect and existence. Unless we recognize this characteristic of the literary discourse, we cannot appreciate the creative process. In postmodern studies, it is fashionable to use literary discourses to make political or historical statements. It is based on a misunderstanding of the very nature of literary creativity. No one can deny the ideological context of a literary text, but for the literary writer it is only a point of departure, the ultimate concern is human existence, *condition humaine*, in its extreme complexity. It is because of this concern that even when the literary text is historically situated, the literary discourse transcends the given historicity to arrive at a universality that we can appreciate across cultures, across races and across times. As Jean-Paul Sartre once said, the importance of the struggle of the Vietnamese is not that they are fighting for the freedom of Vietnam against American imperialism; their struggle is important because they are fighting our struggle, the struggle for the freedom of all humanity. The issue at stake is the human existence, its existential perception, and its conceptual expression. It is only in this existential context that one can envisage the Dalit discourse which is not only a Dalit discourse but a discourse of human existence, of all human existence.

What is really aimed at then is a new perception, a new light that transforms the shape of things and minds. The sunset and the sunrise are two different lights. Under their impact, the forms either become fuzzy and dim or bright and sharp. That the Light of the Dalit discourse is transforming the shape of things is in no doubt, but the articulation of these changing forms

requires a sustained effort and intense dialectical interaction of intellect and existence. Only this interaction will be able to constitute an enunciative field where every proposition will generate significations for the new order. The historical progression has always had two speeds, of the revolutionary upheavals and of the slowly emerging constituting process. As such, when we go from one threshold to another, there is both break and continuity. The sunset and the sunrise are two poles of the same phenomenon. The understanding of this movement may not be manifest at the level of the text, saturated with sociological or political details but it is certainly immanent to the discourse of this text, in the invisible domain of creativity where the human condition is the ultimate objective. It is hoped that the Dalit discourse and the creators of this discourse will not fail in this stupendous task that is awaited by all humanity, the Indian, and of the world at large.

*(Revised version of a paper presented at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla in 2002...HSG.)*

M. L. Raina

## Living with what endures

### *Reading the classics*

Let me begin by springing a surprise. When we think of a classic, we begin to imagine a book that overawes us by its antiquity or its aura, that makes us wonder at its power to move us and hold us in thrall. Or, if it is a religious text, by the way it appeals to our faith in the scripture. In all theological debates, we appeal to the wisdom of our scriptures to anchor us in our daily lives. We accept the scripture not only as holy, but also as possessing a revelatory character. Islam believes in the revelatory character of its holy book The Quran, just as Hinduism's sacred texts are derived from the traditions of *shruti*, heard or revealed. We do not question their historical provenance or contemporary relevance. But we accept them just they are, beyond interpretation. These texts are not classics in the accepted sense of the term, but plain sacred, and do not need exposition from time to time. All commentaries on the sacred texts are focussed on what they mean inherently and not on what we think they mean from our varying historical vantage points. The sacred texts are *sui generis*. They do not admit of any revisionary questioning of their sacredness.

The classics are a different matter, and what we are about to discuss in this seminar are literary classics, come down to us from earlier historical periods. They are books or works of art that are creations of human effort and are, therefore, subject to historical re-readings. They vary from one culture to another and answer to our varying appetite for meaning. That is why there is no fixed definition of a classic, nor is there an iron-clad rule of thumb which allows us to spot one from the plethora of works produced in our societies.

The appellation 'classic' was not an honorific. I have it on the authority of no less a scholar than the German philologist Ernst Robert Curtius, that in ancient Rome, a classic was simply a person who paid his taxes or, as Frank Kermode, putting an ironic gloss on it, calls him – one who is in the super tax class. Curtius in his magisterial work *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1963) quotes the authority of one Aulus Gellius on this point and leaves it at that. "The thing to do is to follow the usage of a model author, some one of the orators or poets, who at least belongs to the other band, a first-class tax-paying author, not a proletarian." Such citizens, according to Curtius, were simply called *classici*. But it does not stop Curtius himself from devoting a whole chapter in his book (247-72) to the topic of classicism and reverting to the subject in a later volume, *Essays on European Literature*, in 1973. Though he is an admirer of Goethe, he does not grant him the status of a classic. For him "those who love antiquity in all its period and styles...are precisely those who feel the ancientness of its major works." To Curtius then as to his mentor Aulus Gellius "the classical writers are always ancients. They can be acknowledged as models. But they can also be rejected and superseded." It is in this sense that he regards Virgil as a classic. As he says in the later book, Virgil is the most official of poets, for it was his poetic task to trace the eternity of Rome...from its primitive origins...to the highest realization of its power(5). Curtius, through these observations, makes an important critical point. He links the classical status of Virgil and his task to what we in today's parlance would call nation building. But it is interesting to note that though Virgil has been designated as a classic, he too has to be seen in terms of earlier classics, in this case the Greek ones. I think Eliot had something like this in mind when he saw a new writer as a continuation and development from the tradition of older writers. In this respect Eliot does seem to echo Curtius as to his sense

of the classic, though he makes specific assumptions about it in a major essay "What is a Classic" to which I shall make a reference later in this presentation. For Curtius, a classic is a matter of style and of the deployment of literary language. It is also dependent upon genres and authors. There are then classic genres and classic authors, and the two are related. For instance, the classical epic genre is closely related to the high style of language and the hoary antiquity of the writer of the epic. In this way Curtius connects the stylistic with the national ethos as well as a heightened form of linguistic economy. Concentrating chiefly on Latin writers he shows how Virgil epitomizes the classical ideal and how styles undergo changes in the works of lesser Latin writers, but Virgil remains the prevailing classic. Sainte-Bueve in the nineteenth century adheres to the ideals of the classic in the manner described by Curtius. The essay "What is a Classic" more or less sees a close relationship between the classic writer and the classical age.

It was T.S. Eliot in the 20th century who adumbrated the principal quality of the classic and called it maturity. In a 1944 lecture to the Virgil society, "What is a Classic" he said, "We feel if the classic is a worthy ideal, it must be capable of exhibiting an amplitude, a catholicity...which are fully present in the medieval mind of Dante (*On Poetry and Poets* 60). Along with these, he also prescribes what he calls "maturity of mind, maturity of manners, maturity of language and perfection of the common style" as an indication of the classic presence (59). Like Curtius, Eliot also thought of Virgil as an ideal classic because, as he put it in this lecture, he represented the pinnacle of Roman cultural health. Eliot thought Virgil could be regarded as a classic because he appeared at a time when all the attributes he had listed above came to perfection in his poetry. As with Curtius, Eliot's Virgil scores through his antiquity. So, according to Eliot, Virgil is a pivot of classical achievement and, as Steiner says in

the context of literary masters, as a cultural father figure in general, Virgil speaks to those who follow after him. His work remains the classical bench mark. And Steiner acknowledges the fact that Virgil is master, as even Dante testifies by invoking him several times in *Divine Comedy*.

Though Curtius and Eliot had much to share about the superiority of the classical text, it was Frank Kermode who gives an elaborate analysis of the classic. In his T.S. Eliot Lectures delivered at the University of Kent in 1974, he broadens the scope of the classic text and links it with the idea of the Empire. Virgil is closely connected to the Holy Roman Empire and his poetry celebrates it. As Kermode puts it in the very first chapter of his book *The Classic* (1974), "The action of grace of the ancient Roman Empire is revealed as a type of The Holy Roman Empire and the Church; and the symbol of that action is Virgil" (27-28). He goes on to say, "The Empire is the paradigm of the classic: a perpetuity, a transcendent entity, however remote its provinces, however extraordinary its temporal vicissitudes" (28). Since Kermode links the religious and the literary aspects of the Empire, Virgil being the absolute classic, Kermode accepts the fact of variations not only in the same language group, but also across different languages and cultures. Unlike Eliot who is fixated on Virgil and Latin as the absolute pinnacle of the classical ideal, and unlike E.D. Hirsch whose book *Validity in Interpretation* pleads for the recognition of essence in any interpretation, Kermode details for us the ubiquity and persistence of not only variations within the same language group, but also across cultures and languages. He speaks of the classic's openness to accommodation within cultures other than the one in which the classic is established. Speaking of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns with which history is replete, Kermode says, "But we do not want a quarrel; we want a just estimation of the permanent relations between the enduring and the transient,

the essence and the disposition. That, at bottom, is the problem of the classic” (44). The enduring and the transient – that about all sums up for me what I consider to be the *raison d’être* of the debate about the classic. But by *enduring* I do not mean fixed like a stone tablet, but something that stays in place in spite of the change of fortune of books, authors and literary histories. Here I enter a thorny thicket of deconstruction and Derridean relativism, as also of the vulgar Marxist historicism that would deny any permanent value to the texts designated as classics. But my own experience of reading and teaching over the years, as also of others like me, has convinced me that some texts are inherently designed to endure while others are not.

In this context I would like to call upon that classicist miniaturist of our time, Italo Calvino who reads classics not as die-hard scholars like Kermode or austere practitioners like Eliot do. He reads classics from a reader’s point of view. But before I invoke Calvino, I should like to make an important point. Whatever their views, Curtius, Eliot, Kermode as also Sainte-Bueve are agreed on the fact that classics must be rated hierarchically superior. That classical writers are what another great German scholar and critic Eric Auerbach calls the *figura* – “model, copy, figment, dream image.” With this observation I don’t see why we should disagree. That we are discussing classics here implies that we give them a position that their successors don’t enjoy. Taking a cue from Auerbach, I would like to suggest the nature of the classics has been established by a consensus among what Stanley Fish would later call the interpretative community. Of course, this has been disputed by those engaged in the debate on canon formation. I do not suggest that only classics matter. Eliot too, in his essay cited above, said that when he referred to Virgil and Dante.

Here I would invoke Marx and Engels, who thought of Greek classics as the ultimate in perfection, or as Yeats put it

“perfection of art” as against “the perfection of life.” Marx’s dismissal of tendentious literature that has a palpable design upon us has been a stumbling block to the Leninist-Stalinist dogmas of ‘socialist realism’. The discrimination between classical writers such as Homer and contemporary writers such as Zola is fundamental to even a critic like Lukacs. The place of Shakespeare, Goethe and Balzac in Marx and Engel’s pantheon is reaffirmed in Trotsky’s seminal work of 1924 called *Literature and Revolution*. As S.S. Praver says in his book *Karl Marx and World Literature*, Marx distrusted programmatic writing and admired writers who rose above their avowed ideologies and offered a comprehensive world view, a *sine qua non* of a classic. No wonder that many influential modern eclectic critics such as Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling drew heavily on Marx in their own readings of Jane Austen and Henry James.

Marx believed that there was something in his chosen classics such as Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Goethe which made them relevant for all times. That something I would like to call the power of endurance. And here I think Italo Calvino seems appropriate. As I said earlier, Calvino approaches a classic not as a scholar but as a reader and writer, as is clear from his listing of one of the criteria among around 14 in his scintillating essay, “Why Read the Classics”: “The classics are the books that come down to us bearing the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through”(128).

The endurance of a classic in a later reading of it can take many forms, linguistic, thematic and stylistic, depending upon who is reading it or, as is the case, adapting it. Classics are not only read meaningfully by later readers but are adapted by successive writers to drive home a contemporary point. In other words, classics stay contemporary even when their temporal provenance is distant from our own time. A good example is Joyce’s

*Ulysses*, a revolutionary novel that robes itself in the periodic garb of a Homeric journey but is also rooted in the minutiae of an ordinary summer day in contemporary Dublin. One could build a whole case about the endurance of its classic motifs, given the multi-layered suggestiveness of both its themes and styles. But that is a matter for another day.

Finally, I should like to illustrate how Greek classics, Shakespeare and modern masters such as W.H. Auden have endured in the writings of their successors. They were not mere imitators but saw in their predecessors a resonance in what they were themselves doing. Just as Virgil's *Aeneid* resonates with the Homeric epic journey and *Hamlet* resonates in Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, similarly many modern works resonate with classical echoes and figurations.

In *Antigone* the main conflicts are between an individual and the state; between the living and the dead; between men and women; between age and youth; between men and the gods. In lines 440-80 these conflicts are cumulatively presented. Who will deny that what Sophocles is presenting is a panorama that would make us see in the play our own moral and social concerns. That many modern dramatists have re-worked the Antigone theme indicates the relevance and answerability of this great play for our times. It proclaims its modernity in the sense that it brings out the ruptures of its own time in such a way that echoes the imbroglios of our times as well. This is why this play has been rewritten through history, and has found admirers and adapters among liberal, feminist, and resistance fighters, among others.

Bertolt Brecht's adaptation is a vivid example. He removes the conflict between the divine and the secular law and concentrates his focus on the Nazi terror. He gives more space to the chorus who talk of the devastation wrought by Hitler, and addresses Creon as Fuhrer. Brecht's Marxism would make

him sympathetic to the chorus's hymn to man. For him the play takes on an avowedly political character. It is all about Hitler's war and expansionism. The Argives fight back (as in Stalingrad) and defeat Hitler. Haemon and Antigone become figures of warning and the play becomes a refusal of Nazism. This interpretation differs markedly from Jean Anouilh's version. War is still the defining theme of his version, but unlike other versions, Creon is held up as a symbol of order. Earlier on in the version of the play by Holderlin, the context and the presentation represent the balance of power theme that Hegel, the finest interpreter of the play, sees in Sophocles' play. In this sense Sophocles becomes our contemporary just as Shakespeare in Jan Kott's interpretation is our contemporary insofar as Hamlet and Lear are faced with the same dilemmas we are faced with today. As Ruth Padel suggests, in her sympathetic review of Steiners's survey of the Antigone legend: "Whenever the society suffers, Antigone lives again." And this is true most unequivocally of classics more than of any other works of art.

The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky inherits the St. Petersburg classicism but adds to it what he calls in his influential essay on Frost the dimension of contemplation – a quality he finds in the poetry of his mentor W.H. Auden. Contemplation produces a style which is more than writing or speaking like Auden. It is a cachet, a trademark recognisable from a few lines quoted anonymously.

Speaking of Brodsky always brings to mind the methods and attitudes of Auden. Brodsky imbibes the elder poet's penchant for scientific terminology as well as his discreet later aestheticism. Auden's dry wit finds an echo in his poem "Homage to Gerolamo Marcello." An epigrammatic terseness, like Auden's, holds the poem together. "When a man is alone/ he's in the future – since it can manage/ without the supersonic stuff,/ streamlined bodies, an executed tyrant/ crumbling statues": Like

Auden, Brodsky experimented with the available metrical forms and created silent rhymes to discipline any waywardness that even discreet aestheticism can sometime engender. Poems like “Nativity,” “Postcard from Lisbon,” “Raw Life,” “Portrait of a Tragedy” use these devices to remarkable effect. In his most Auden-like poem “A Song” a lightness typical of Auden is felt everywhere, even when he deliberately puts his own patina on it. “I wish you were here, dear, I wish you were here/ I wish I knew no astronomy/ when stars appear/ when the moon skims the water/ that sighs and shifts in its slumber/ I wish it were still a quarter to dial your number.” I would like to call this poem *Auden Redivivus*.

In his collection of essays *On Grief and Reason*, Brodsky stakes out his cultural patrimony, ranging from Horace (“Letter to Horace”) to Hardy and Rilke. The last poems are the most Audenesque. Unlike Rilke whose ambition was “to store up honey in the great golden hives of the invisible,” Brodsky’s poetry keeps reminding us, as does Auden’s, that it is possible that poetic language and its aesthetics, although they express abiding and truths, need not look thin and foolish when placed beside the flesh-and-blood preoccupations of everyday life. In this enterprise, as Auden says of another great classic writer, Sigmund Freud, the classic becomes a climate of opinion, the air we breathe.

*\*Delivered as a plenary lecture in a seminar, in 2015, on Revisiting Classics held at the University of Kashmir.*

### *The Mahabharata: An Oral Tradition*

*Translation from Hindi by Girija Sharma*

*The Mahabharata*—an epoch-making event of the ancient Indian history! A great war which in its magnificent sweep deeply impacted the Indian way of life, literature, art, philosophy, and a whole cultural tradition, its impact being so expansive that even though it was narrated thousands of years ago by Ugrashrava in the *ashram* of Shaunaka, the scholar *kulpati* of *Naimisharanya*, scholars have again come together today, to deliberate on the *Mahabharata* in Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts. Ugrashava had heard its description from Vaishpayan during Janmejaya’s *Nagyajna*. We are fascinated by that principle of continuity which links this session of deliberation of folk treasure with Shaunaka’s period. There exists no breach between today and yesterday/tomorrow. Today has arisen out of yesterday and tomorrow is emerging out of today.

The interaction between life and literature is continuous and uninterrupted. An event takes place in life, generating a dialogue between people, and whatever happens is re-lived in personal and collective narratives. An incident turns into news, the news develops into an anecdote, an anecdote becomes a story, and the story assumes the form of a legend. The moment of an event dissolves into hours, which in turn become days and nights. Days and nights become fortnights, fortnights turn into months, and months lengthen into years. Finally, years become epochs. Where have they vanished? Did they melt into the subconscious of ages? A tiny loop of memory dissolves into a larger one, and a saga becomes a scripture, and a scripture becomes a component of collective consciousness in the form of myths. The saga of the

*Mahabharata* is a part of this consciousness.

The conclusion of folklorists is that human mind is an epitome of the eras gone by. Its consciousness encompasses epochs. Heredity has not only endowed man with a body-shape but also the principle of genetic continuity that has bestowed on him mind and consciousness. This consciousness sees its reflection in the environment in the way we see our image in clear water—or in the way an echo of our voice is heard in total solitude.

This reflection of our consciousness in the surroundings constitutes our psychological milieu. How a person spins the web of his psychological milieu through indigenous/ethnic memory is illustrated in the naming ceremonies of children. Native life repeatedly recreates the saga of the *Mahabharata* as names are assigned to children. One man is Arjun Singh and another Karn Singh. Someone is Bheem Rao, another is Parthavsarathi. Someone is called Bhisham Sahni and another one Drona Kohli. One person is Vidur, another Sanjay. One is Yudhishtir Lal, another Sahdev Singh. In many a village and locality there live Kunti, Subhadra, Krishna, Draupadi, and Uttara. Brahmos itself indicates Brahmastra (the unfailing divine weapon, Brahma's gift).

Let us look at the *Mahabharata* as an elemental part of our language. The epic of the *Mahabharata* has been absorbed, by becoming the essence of expression, in the language we speak. The word 'Mahabharata' itself indicates a war, a conflict, a fight. When a conversation is inordinately prolonged, the metaphor of 'Drapadi's covering apparel' (Draupadi's *cheer*) is used. When a man is powerfully swayed by selfishness and blinded by an unwarranted attachment or self-love, he is termed as the unseeing and unreflecting Dhritarashtra in spite of having eyes. The eye of the sparrow means the perfect aim. And *Gandiva* (Arjuna's bow) symbolizes unconquerable valour. A valiant person, also a

voracious eater, is Bheem. Raja Karna is ever watchful. A friend who demoralizes is called Shalya and a conceited person is Duryodhana. An unflinching and hard vow is *Bheeshma Pratigya* and the root cause of killings is Draupadi. The reversal of fortunes is suggested through the couplet "*Bheelan looti gopika, vahi Arjun vahi baan,*" meaning when fortunes reverse even the best can taste defeat (Arjuna could not protect the *gopikas* and was defeated by the *Bheels* in spite of being the same person with the same arrows). The cry of Draupadi is evocative of pathos as she invokes Lord Krishna, "*Bina kaaj aaj laaj gayi meri, dukh haro Dwarka Nath, sharan main teri,*" meaning "I lost my honour without any reason, O Lord of Dwarka, I am at your mercy".

Another way in which the psychological milieu and a tale are recreated is through local traditions. The epic of the *Mahabharata* has been assimilated in everyday life. Different regions have re-scripted the epic tale through the naming of pools, valleys, rivers, banks, trees, ponds and mountains. Karnal is Karna's abode with the Karna Lake in its vicinity. Gurgaon is Gurugram, given to Dronacharya as 'guru-dakshina'. Safeedon is the region where serpents are overpowered. Here, Janmejey had performed the snake-sacrifice. Karal is a place of pilgrimage, where after the war the rites of offerings for the dead (*pindaan*) were performed. In the village of Babel, the bank of Jamuna is Vidurghat. In many a region, we have the 'Baan-Ganga', 'Yaksha Sarovar' and 'Lakhamandal' or 'Lakshagriha'. In Panjab we have the 'Kund'; and there is 'Yaksha Sarovar' in Seekgaon. In Mathura region, the village Madodari is called Matyagantha's village; Krishna Gangaghat is Vyasa's ashram; and at Parasoli is Parashar's ashram. In Shantanukund at Mathura, Shantanu had performed rituals to be granted his wish for a child. Kamavana is the place where the Pandavas lived incognito for years.

Folk imagination has not only scripted the *Mahabharata* on the earth but using the script of the stars has rewritten it in

the skies as well. Meehanarika (the Milky Way) is commonly referred to as the pathway of an elephant. When the ritual of the Elephant Worship was performed in Hastinapur, the Kauravas got made an elephant of gold that was worshipped by their mother Gandhari. However, when Kunti came to perform the *puja*, holding a bedecked tray, Duryodhana refused to let her make the offering to the elephant. Hurt by his mother's humiliation, Arjuna went to Indra and requested him to send his great elephant Airavat so that his mother could pray. Arjuna created a trail to heaven with his arrows. Hence the Milky Way is the elephant's corridor.

Verrier Elwin in his book *Myths of India* has referred to an image in a tribal folk tale of Orissa. The lightening in the sky, says the tale, is Bhimsen's wife, who clamours restlessly to go to her mother's place. The thunder is supposedly Bhimsen's blows.

A brave man who sacrifices his life for the sake of justice and morality gains the right to be worshipped by the people. The five Pandavas and the God Absolute (Narayan) occupy the celestial tier of folk imagination. As divine deities, they wandered in the fourteen worlds and nine parts of the known world: "*va Konti ke paancho panda, chaudah bhuvan phire nau khande.*" Krishna and Arjuna are the avatars (reincarnation) of the Man-God (Nar-Narayan). Yudhishtira is the son or the reincarnation of Dharma itself. Karna is the offspring of the Sun God. Bheema is the son of Air element, and Arjuna the son of Indra. This marks the apotheosis of the human mind. The simple, natural narrative of folk disposition tends towards the celestial and at the same gives birth to it.

In the Braj folk tradition, during the solemnization of the Navratri festival, the folk tale of Achal Kumari and the Pandavas is sung, wherein Draupadi, who is born out of the 'havan kund' (the sacred fire receptacle), is the primordial Bhawani of Nagarkot. She cannot be destroyed by fire, being

the primary deity (Aadi Bhawani) of Nagarkot. Shyamji of Khatu is worshipped far and wide. He is Ghatotkacha's son and Bheema's grandson. Barbareek, also Murdanav's daughter's son, an expert archer and a liberal donor, had told Arjuna that he would fight on the side of those who lose the war. Krishna asked him to offer his head as sacrifice. Barbareek, while making the offering of his head, expressed a desire to be witness to the outcome of war. Krishna sprinkled the nectar of immortality on the head and placed it on a high mound. He gave him the boon that he would be worshipped in the epoch of Kaliyuga. There is a custom in the weddings—*barmania*, in which an earthen pot is hung across the 'chhonkar' tree, which the elders term as a witness to the wedding—this is *babravahan*. Similarly, in the month of *kwar*, children often sing the songs of *Tesu*. In fact, *Tesu* is the head of a warrior—fastened to three vertical bamboo twigs. This is Babaravana, the witness to the war.

The *Mahabharata* can be understood as a cultural code of the life of the masses. In the flow of oral tradition, it assumes myriad forms. In the land of Braj, a ballad called *naval* is sung during the month of *Savana* (rain). Common belief is that it frees one from fear of snakes. The *Vayatri* community sing these traditional folk songs also to suppress the effect of the snake poison. Naval Dei is Vasim's daughter and chooses to marry Parikshit. She comes forward to save the Naga snakes during the Janmejaya Naga Yajna. In Braj, hundreds of tales of the Naga serpents are popular, on the basis of which emerges a comprehensive picture of the *Naga Sanskriti*. A tale is re-born and transformed as many times as it is told or sung. The folklorists call it the folkloric process. In the folkloric process, on the one hand a tale gets older; on the other, additions to it are made. Similarly, a folk tale transforms into a mythological tale while a mythic tale is reborn as a folk tale.

If we study the *Mahabharata* from a fundamentally popu-

lar viewpoint, it emerges that its story-base and milieu are no different from those of the folk tales. The folktales belong to all the three worlds and any hero of the tale can venture untrammelled—all the way from the nethermost world to the *Nagalok* (the abode of the snakes), to the Heavens, and to the abode of Brahma himself. In the same way, Bheema roams unhindered in different *lokas* and Arjuna walks into the heavenly world and shares the celestial throne with Indra himself. Just as gods, demons, demi-gods, *nagas*, celestial musicians, nymphs, Narada and Durvasa all exist in the *Mahabharata*, similar characters dwell in folk tales. They have similar story-stereotypes/bases and similar elements such as a son being born out of an earthen pitcher or a fire pit, the characters becoming suddenly invisible, or making a sudden appearance from nowhere. Curses, boons, oracles, and the invocation of the gods through incantations operate similarly in myths and folk tales.

The *Mahabharata* has played an integral role in the domain of folk tales in India. While flowing in the stream of oral tradition, many a tale has been transformed on reaching different regions. The folklorists have categorized these tales, prevalent in different regions, into different circles (*chakras*)—such as *Gorakh chakra*, *Vikram chakra*, *Rasalu chakra*, *Sarva chakra* et al. There is a *Pandava chakra* as well that deals with heroes such as Bhim, Arjun, Yudhishtir, Brajvahan and Parikshit who avert many a disaster in the lives of people. For instance, here is a story that goes somewhat like this:

Once upon a time, there came a prince to a town and took shelter in the abode of an old woman. At night he found the old woman crying inconsolably. The prince asked her: “Mother, why are you crying?” The old woman told him about the demon who wanted his daily ration of human flesh. She told him that the demon would come the next day and gobble up her son. The prince was stirred by the urge to help the people:

“Mother, you sleep peacefully. Tomorrow your son will not visit the demon. I will visit him and from day after no one will go to him.” This tale appears with some variation in the first chapter of the *Mahabharata*. There the name of the demon is Bak and it is Bhim who slays him after Kunti inspires him to do so.

The *Mahabharata* is an epic about the struggle against injustice. When was there no shadow of terror in folk life? When was man not troubled by devilish forces? When did the phantasmal forces not deceive and trick him? The defenceless come face to face with the reality of human rights and social justice on a daily basis. Inherent in the *Mahabharata* is the ultimate weapon of the unarmed (*brahmastra*) and the belief that the Lord himself, along with the five *Pandavas*, is on his chariot. He knows the eternal truth that has stood the test of time—that the forces of injustice, brutality, deception and exploitation have always suffered defeat. The chariot representing the life of the folk, led by the brave Arjuna will always be carried forward because it is steered by Lord Krishna.

The *Mahabharata* is a war-narrative. Man fears war but war is the bitter truth of life. War is not a horror that comes from without—it is born within man’s mind. Man’s reason always denounces war. When the famous Hindi poet Dharamvir Bharati wrote *Andha Yug (The Blind Age)* against the backdrop of the Second World War, he also termed the *Mahabharata* as the war of the blind:

The throne of the war lay adorned amidst the blind  
The defeat was of reason alone on both the sides  
The victory was of blindness on both the sides.

Certainly, logic *per se* is important in human life. The psychologists, however, attribute the pace of life to its spontane-

ity. At the level of basic instincts, there is not much difference between man and animal. The ants stockpile things and so do bees, and human beings. Greed and desire lead to the loss of ability to distinguish the good from the bad. The power of the market is at a decisive point in the world. However, the market itself is in the grip of desire and greed. All of us are aware that in the name of development this avarice is polluting the entire environment. Where is man's reason? Is it true that now there shall be no war? If there is not going to be a war, then where is the *raison d'être* for the race for nuclear weapons?

Vinod Kumar

### V. S. Naipaul's subcontinent of darkness

*An Area of Darkness* is V. S. Naipaul's first non-fiction book about India and is part of a trilogy that also includes *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). Naipaul was born in Trinidad; India is the land of his ancestors. India was an imaginary land for him because until 1962 he had never visited the country. He had heard about India from his parents and learnt about it from books. He had his experience of the Indian life and of Hinduism at his home in Trinidad, while with the passage of time many things had already changed in India. His family in Trinidad was rooted in old Indian customs and traditions which were, however, already changing in India. Hence, he found a very different India during his first visit in 1962. This was a period of crisis, particularly on account of the Chinese aggression.

Naipaul thus visited India after about one and half decade of the independence of India. The Congress led by Gandhi and Nehru had promised a bright future for Indian people. Nehru had initiated modernization and development. People had many hopes from the newly formed nation-state. However, when Naipaul visits the country in 1962, he is disillusioned to see the poor living conditions of the people. This book is thus the result of his bitter reaction to the India that had emerged after independence.

The title of the book significantly suggests a negative image of India. It also suggests an extreme reaction against the glorification of India by Sri Aurobindo, Jawaharlal Nehru and others. There is a sharp contrast between the two "discoveries" of India. For Nehru, India is a great country with a rich cultural history marked by unity in diversity. For Naipaul, "India is the poor-

est country in the world” (41) and he claims to be making an attempt to expose the dark socio-cultural and political life of Indians.

The book opens with a “Prelude” in which Naipaul hits out at the Indian bureaucracy. He recalls that he brought two bottles of wine with him to India but these were taken away by the excise officials in Bombay. He had to run here and there for a liquor license in order to get the bottles back. As a victim of the officialdom, he notes: “I was exhausted, sweating, and when I opened my mouth to speak I found I was on the verge of tears” (11). He also deplors the poverty and malnourishment of children. The truth about India was, thus, a slow discovery for Naipaul: “feature by feature, the East, known only from books, continued to reveal itself” (3). Naipaul’s first experience of India was rather thus unpleasant. Naipaul was told that he had been “reading wrong books [about India]” (15-16). As a result, Naipaul also condemns the books about India which, according to him, do not give the right picture. Hence, he undertakes the task of giving the right picture of India. He claims the authority to do this on the basis of his dual position as an insider as well as outsider. However, Purabi Panwar writes that “the impressions of [Naipaul’s] first visit as recorded in *An Area of Darkness* are journalistic and lack depth in some areas of observation. . .” (100).

Naipaul does not ‘directly’ belong to India but his ancestors did, and through them he remains attached to it. His family and the other Indians in Trinidad have preserved their Indian culture by keeping alive the traditions and customs of their Indian home. It can be noted that his family idolized the old traditional Indian life. They were not connected with the changing Indian life. As a result, Naipaul was also not familiar with the actual conditions in India. This undermines his authority as a writer on India.

Naipaul distances himself consciously from those “attitudes” which his grandparents had towards India. He writes that he is not obsessed with India as his grandparents were: “I have

travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness, something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine” (24).

Naipaul states that he has “no belief”, that he dislikes religious rituals, and that he refused to go through the *Janaywa* (thread ceremony of the newborn) with some of his cousins in his childhood (29). But it is sufficiently clear from the book that his Hindu upbringing left a deep impression on him. The following is an interesting incident from his days in school: “At one stage a beaker and a length of tube were passed from boy to boy, so that we might suck and observe the effects. I let the beaker pass me. I thought I hadn’t been seen, but an Indian boy in the row behind . . . whispered ‘Real Brahmin’. His tone was approving”. (29) It is to be noted that he does not mention any reason for not touching the tube. As an adult he later records his displeasure that “in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial design” which his family had always used in Trinidad (31). Indeed, Naipaul is aware of his inner duality: “I had been born an unbeliever. Yet the thought of the decay of the old customs and reverences saddened me. . .” (31). His sorrow over the death of his friend Ramon in London and his desire to have the dead body cremated according to Hindu rites shows his predilections. Thus, Sudha Rai sees him as “essentially Hindu”: “. . . [O]n the basis of his conscious statements, a strong and fascinating case can be made out for Naipaul’s Hindu self, purely on the basis of Naipaul’s unconscious response to certain experiences in India. The psycho-social Hindu self formed in childhood dies hard”. (15-16)

However, Naipaul is upset by the rigid caste-system in India. He describes it as a “brutal division of labour” (29) which has outlived whatever justification it might have had once upon a time:

Caste, sanctioned by the *Gita* with almost propagandist fervor, might be seen as part of the older Indian pragmatism, the ‘life’ of classical India. It has

decayed and ossified with the society, and its corollary, function, has become all . . . Every man is an island; each man to his function, his private contract with God. . . . This is caste. In the beginning a no doubt useful division of labour in a rural society, it has now divorced function from social obligation, position from duties. (79-80)

In spite of this, Naipaul has strong views on reservation of jobs for the disadvantaged sections of society. He writes that “[r]eserving jobs for untouchables helps nobody. It places responsibility in the hands of the unqualified. . . .” (82). Purabi Panwar observes that in the context of the sixties, this statement by Naipaul shows his brahmanical way of thinking that would be considered offensive today (109).

Naipaul admits that during his childhood India was an area of imagination. As a result of his readings on India, he became a nationalist. But he is not happy with the direction India has taken after independence. He identifies himself strongly with the traditional Hindu values, not with the Nehruvian project of modern nation-building. Even the new migrants to Trinidad were not committed to their Indian connection but were busy in making money, according to Naipaul. As the gap widened between the old and the new migrants, Naipaul decided to leave Trinidad to settle down in London.

Naipaul states that he visits India in search of his identity, but he is lost in the huge crowds of Bombay and Delhi. He can neither identify with the life and culture in India nor can reject it. He finds that India has lost its own identity. He believes that one’s identity is related to one’s culture and civilization, and the Indians are deserting both their culture and civilization. So it has become difficult for him to identify himself with India of 1960s after his visit in the country. Comparing the experiences of acknowledgment of his identity in Trinidad and in India, he states that

. . . in Trinidad to be an Indian was to be distinctive. To be anything there was distinctive; difference was each man’s attribute . . . . now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. (39)

Chapter by chapter, Naipaul then proceeds to show what, in his view, has gone wrong with India. He talks about poverty as an essential feature of India and counters the romantic view of India as a golden sparrow. He writes: “This is poverty, our special poverty, and how sad it is! Poverty not as an urge to anger or improving action, but poverty as an urge to inexhaustible source of tears, and exercise of the purest sensibility”. (41) He notices begging children, children with swollen bellies, pavement sleepers, narrow broken lanes with green slime in the gutters, mud houses and children defecating on the roadside and dogs waiting to eat the excrement (41-42). Thus, he paints an ugly picture of India rotting with endless problems. His picture is very opposite of the mystical, spiritual, and modern representations of India.

Sharing his own experience, Naipaul states that “[i]n all the striking detail of India there was nothing which I could link with my own experience of India in a small town in Trinidad” (149). It means he has a pre-defined idea of India which he formed while living in Trinidad. He loves that traditional and essential Hindu India of his imagination, but during his visit to India he does not find the same India in reality.

Writing about hypocrisy, Naipaul notes that the *Gita* teaches the lesson of doing one’s duty but there is a wide gap between theory and practice. A clerk will not offer you a glass of water even if you faint and a student of architecture considers it a degradation to make drawings. He also tells the story of Ramnath, a stenographer, who does not co-operate with his boss because he

feels degraded if he does the work of a typist in the office. In a similar vein, he comments on the Indians' attitude to western lifestyle. Many Indians try to look and behave like the English people. He calls such mimicry "fantasy" and adds that "this is mimicry not of England, a real country, but of the fairy-tale land of Anglo-India, of clubs and sahibs and syces and bearers" (56).

Naipaul goes on to expose the dual personalities of Indians. Talking about an incident in a Bombay hotel, he states that three sweepers were cleaning the floor of the hotel, but it remained as dirty as before. The walls were freshly and dirtily splashed; the bathrooms and lavatories were foul; but it is strange, according to him, that you could not complain that the hotel was dirty; no Indian would agree with you. He adds that 'you look fat and fresh today' is a compliment in Punjab; and in every Uttar Pradesh town you might see a very fat rich man sitting in a cycle-rickshaw being pulled by a poor and thin man. The cow is supposed to be a holy animal but a number of cows which die in road accidents daily; tree-planting week is celebrated every year but seventy per cent of the trees planted die due to lack of attention; and smallpox eradication week is celebrated but many refuse to be vaccinated due to religious superstitions and the vaccination certificates can be bought for a small amount of money (75-80). Naipaul states that real action is only symbolic in India; labels alone are important.

Naipaul then turns to Mahatma Gandhi. He states that Gandhi was able to see India directly because of his experiences of foreign as well as Indian life. He had seen one India in South Africa and the other after his return from there. The contrast helped him in analyzing Indian life. From his experiences and reading, Gandhi emerged as a colonial blend of East and West, Hindu and Christian. This made his vision direct and revolutionary (74). Although Gandhi was able to see all the rot and perversion yet India remains the same for him, and "this is measure of his failure" (74). Further comparing Gandhi and Nehru,

Naipaul comments that while Gandhi failed to solve the problems of India, Nehru lost himself in a romantic idea of India.

Turning to government policies, Naipaul points out that every policy is labelled. They proclaim nothing more than good intentions. He states that copies of *Family Planning News* have little useful news but the pictures of charming ladies; the traffic lights are shown as part of the modern city but ministers never halt at these lights; the sweetshops are required to have glass cases but they are generally kept empty besides the heaps of exposed sweets; and there is a fine new theatre in Chandigarh, but no one to write plays (81). He also criticizes the land reforms, reservation policy in government jobs, and the Gandhian theories which, according to him, have failed as Gandhi's occasional latrine-cleaning could not stop the degradation of the sweepers. Similarly, his occasional spinning could not dignify labor. Talking about the hypocrisy with which Indians treat Gandhi, Naipaul writes that "India undid him. He became a Mahatma. He was to be revered for what he was; his message was irrelevant. He roused India to all her 'formless spirituality'" (82).

Naipaul stays in Delhi as a paying guest in the house of Mrs. Mahindra, a contractor's young wife and mother of two children. Naipaul comments that Indians have a very romantic idea of the West. Mrs. Mahindra always seeks advice from Naipaul in every matter because he is a foreigner. He also notices the heat and pollution of Delhi, as well as the filthy official environment. He states that no government official pays attention to your request (95). He thus exposes the bureaucratic apathy in the capital of India.

In the second part of the book, Naipaul writes about his visit to Kashmir. He feels relaxed at Mr. Butt's hotel named "A Doll's House", situated on the Dal Lake. Here India is reduced to Mr. Butt, the owner of the hotel, Aziz the head servant, the cook and the odd-job boy. He feels good in this calm environment; he reads, writes and talks with the guests. Commenting

on Naipaul's experience in Kashmir, Richard Chronin observes that "it is not only the temperature but diminutiveness of Kashmir that is healing. It is in the weeks that he spends there that Naipaul's experience of India is at its most benign" (106). Naipaul likes Aziz more than others and wants to befriend him (195). While travelling in a bus, he feels happy to see a Hindu family and their Hindu way of serving the food.

In the first chapter "Fantasy and Ruins" (199-233) of the third part of the book, Naipaul distinguishes between the colonial India and Trinidad:

Trinidad was a British colony; but every child knew that we were only a dot on the map of the world, and it was therefore important to be British: that at least anchored us within a wider system. It was a system which we did not feel to be oppressive; and though British, in institutions and education as well as in political fact we were in the New World, our population was greatly mixed, English people were few and kept themselves to themselves, and England was as a result only one of the countries of which we were aware. (200-01)

On the other side, in India, the English have left the country but there is longing for Englishness; he cites the example of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian* (1951), which is dedicated to the memory of British Empire in India. Colonial rule has become fantasy in independent India, according to Naipaul. He writes that "[t]o be in India [is] to be larger than life" (214). He, however, rejects this colonial fantasy and wants the Indians to identify with their traditional culture and civilization.

Commenting on modern Indians, Naipaul argues that they are unable to look their country directly; they have no sense of history; and they cannot face the ruins of their civilization. Ancient India was great, according to him, while the overall current condition of India is not good. He believes in the

greatness of ancient India as other Hindu nationalists do. He states that the old Indian civilization was great, which has now decayed and he exhorts his readers to re-create "this idyllic ancient India" (216). His descriptions of ancient and present India bear the stamp of a cultural-national ideology of Hinduism.

Naipaul suggests that the British rule did not cripple Indians so much as they did themselves. He argues that although the British dominated the country for a long time yet the idea of nationalism was given by them. It is Europe that revealed the Indians' past to them and they made it part of their nationalism (221). He adds:

The British refused to be absorbed into India; they did not proclaim, like the Mogul, that if there was paradise on earth, it was this, and it was this, and it was this. While dominating India they expressed their contempt for it, and projected England; and Indians were forced into nationalism which in the beginning was like mimicry of the British. To look at themselves, to measure themselves against the new, positive standards of the conqueror, Indians had to step out of themselves. (226-27)

Thus, for him, it was the British rule through which the Hindu India realized its spirit, gained consciousness and formed nationalism. He describes the ancient India as great and the present India as static and frozen (233).

In the chapter "The Village of the Dubes" (274-86), Naipaul writes about the village of his ancestors in Uttar Pradesh. He is well received in the village by Ramchandra, the village head, and his wife. Ramchandra shows his obligations to the grandson of the man who had given money to the village to buy land to build shrines. Ramchandra is a poor man; he expects some money from Naipaul to pursue a law suit. On the other side, the author is emotionally exhausted after one year in India; he feels boredom, irritation and embarrassment, and he rejects

Ramchandra's demand. He decides to return immediately. He states:

India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into a land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child, into which, for all that I walked on Indian earth, I knew I could not penetrate. (274)

It is notable that he was keen to visit the India of his imagination, which he had visualized on the basis of stories and fiction. He was thus unable to experience the real India with an open mind. He was also disillusioned because he had conceived a romantic and mystical idea of India. He even writes that he "had learn[t] [his] separateness from India, and was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors" (274). It is also not possible for him to detach himself from India, nor does he do so. The book is a testimony to his attachment with India; indeed, he visits the country frequently in later years.

In the last section of the book, "Flight" (287-90), Naipaul regrets his visit to India: "India had ended only twenty-four hours before. It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (289). But it can be observed from his discourse that he sees himself very much an Indian, even a Brahmin, who is worried about India and Hinduism, and who wants to improve the life of Indians.

There is a continuity among *An Area of Darkness, India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. In the later books, Naipaul attempts to diagnose the ills affecting India through a reading of history. And it is here, in his understanding of history that his ideological leanings stand fully disclosed. He imagines an organic Hindu India which he believes must have existed in the past. The wholeness of that pure civilization has been impaired; or as the title of one of the books says,

that civilization has been wounded. It is significant that he holds the Muslims and the British responsible for damaging the old Indian civilization.

On the whole, Naipaul emerges in these books as an ardent advocate of cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism has been the official ideology of the Hindu right-wing political groups in India, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party. One can say that in Naipaul's case, a personal quest for identity takes the shape of a divisive and exclusive ethnocentric and fundamentalist religious politics. But it would not be wrong to see Naipaul's politics foreshadowed in Sri Aurobindo's valorization of ancient Indian culture (though in the specific context of the anti-colonial struggle) as much as in Jawaharlal Nehru's underlying belief in a buried Indian glory that was waiting to be "discovered". Something of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's cynicism also forms part of Naipaul's outlook. In a way, then, Naipaul's work is the culmination of a process that goes back to the ideological world of Sri Aurobindo, Jawaharlal Nehru and Nirad C. Chaudhuri.

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## Subhash Chandra

### Two Sons

“Ankush Babu, I want to say something.” he said in a faltering voice and bent his head.

He was the gentlest persons I had ever known. When he raised his face, there was a pleading, distressed expression on it and my heart went out to him.

“Yes, Dipen Da.”

Though they had recently shifted into the back portion of the first floor where we – my mother, my two younger brothers and I lived — Dipendra Bhattacharya’s warm and sweet nature endeared him to all of us and we had begun to feel close to him. He worked as an artist with the Canadian High Commission.

“Actually, I don’t know... how to... put it,” he said and went red in the face.

One look at his face and my mother — she distrusted strangers — had pronounced him a ‘*bhala aadmi*’. He remained alone for a month, as his wife was with her parents in Calcutta. My mother insisted on his eating with us.

“What is it, Dipen Da? I will do anything for you.”

“Actually, she has fallen into the trap of a Tantric now... You know they are frauds.”

The wooden partition, dividing the two portions was too close to our door and did not reach up to the ceiling. Most of the conversations between his wife and him were audible to us. She nagged him constantly over trifles: coming late from office, neglecting her, not writing to her parents regularly, and if nothing else forgetting to bring something which she had told him about at the time of his leaving for office and her tirades went on uninterruptedly for a long time.

Dipen Da listened calmly to his wife’s scolding and — I would imagine, with his characteristic winsome smile. At the end he would say something placatory like, ‘Sorry, *Khuki* (girl). I’m late. You’re looking painfully pretty... so enticing!’

He was not exaggerating. When she arrived from Calcutta and came over to give us a plateful of *Shondesh* she had brought along, I was bowled over by her striking features and luscious feminine figure. After that first encounter during which our eyes locked fleetingly, I was afraid to look at her for fear of felonious desire raising its hood. But sometimes despite myself my gaze would take her in.

‘I am not taken in by your silly compliments. And don’t call me *Khuki*. I am a woman now.’

“Yes, and they’re dangerous too.” I added.

“I’m afraid she might do something that could land us in trouble.”

“Like?”

“Didn’t you read a few days back in the papers about a childless woman who stole a child from the Nursery of Safdarjang Hospital? She sacrificed it to some obscure goddess, as per the instructions of a Tantric. She and the Tantric were arrested for the heinous crime.”

And then he was quiet a long time. There was something on his mind which he was finding difficult to speak out.

I encouraged him, “Don’t hesitate, Dipen Da. I will not step back if you want me to do anything.” I did not have the foggiest idea of what was in the offing.

“We’ve been married for nine years and she is crazy for a child.”

Though we knew much of their family life because of the flimsy partition, I became all attention.

“We’ve been to all kinds of specialists and tried all systems of medicine — allopathic, Ayurveda, Unani, Homoeopathic and Tibetan. She does *puja* and prayers daily, fasts once a week, and

feeds dough to a cow thrice a week. All this as per the advice of a number of Pundits and *Sadhus* she has visited over the years.”

He continued, “Whenever anyone talked about a *Sadhu* or *Fakir* who could help, she dragged me to him. One of them misbehaved with her, when I was waiting outside his room. He touched her inappropriately under the guise of blessing her and she rushed out flustered and angry. But that did not deter her from approaching more of them. And now this Tantric she has been going to.”

“You have to stop her at any cost, Dipen Da,” I said.

He laughed ruefully. “You don’t know the torment of a childless woman.”

“What about adopting a child?”

“She is dead against it. She comes from a high caste Brahmin family. *How do I know the child is not low class? He may be suffering from some deadly disease.* And when I tell her, so many couples are happy, having adopted a child, she becomes strident, *I cannot bring up anybody else’s child!*”

A sense of foreboding was building inside me.

“Ankush Babu, I request you to give us a child,” he blurted out fast, words tripping on each other’s heels.

The roof crashed on my head. I almost shouted, “What do you mean?”

His deer-like eyes, vulnerable and pleading were expectantly gazing at me.

“Yes, Ankush Babu, you can gift us joy and save a suffering woman. Each day is agony to her. Lately, I’ve seen something alarming in her. She looks at children with frightening hatred.

“Dipen Da, I can’t even think of such a thing in relation to any woman, least of all her. And here you...” I said and trailed off. I could not trust my voice to fully conceal the erotic smell I was filled with.

“Ankush Babu, I know you’re a fine young gentleman. She is very pretty and any young man in your place would have made passes at her. Anyway, you don’t need any character certificate from me. I’m sitting before you as a supplicant. I implore you for this favour. You can do it without sully your character or your soul.”

After a long pause, I managed to say “Give me time,” though anticipated ecstasy and fright were plaited inside me.

“I understand,” he said and got up.

#

I spent sleepless nights next week. I lay awake, tossing and turning, conflicting feelings jostling inside me. One moment I would be gripped by all-encompassing libido and feel my body getting taut and the next I would consider it a sin.

One day, when I had finished eating and was at my table ostensibly reading a book, mother came into the room. She came straight to the point and said, “Beta, never commit a sin knowingly. Time does not kill it....It robs you of peace of mind, sometimes for life. This is an inexorable law of life.”

Without waiting for my response, she went out of the room.

After mother’s warning, I decided to say ‘no’ to Dipen Da. The decision held for three days. But on the fourth, I began to invent arguments in favour of it. What was sin after all? Didn’t the context decide whether an action is a sin or not? I had heard our family Guru tell mother, a lie told to save someone’s life is better than truth.

Dipen Da’s face lit up. “I’ve no words to thank you, Ankush Babu. I always knew you would say yes.”

#

We met in Connaught Place at United Coffee House to discuss the details. He made me wise to some of the intimate actions during their love-making. She switches off lights, and

still asks me to shut my eyes and does the same herself. So, nothing to worry.

But there is a glitch, Dipen Da. “She hates me.”

“What makes you think so?”

“She stiffens the moment we run into each other. Her face becomes stern. There is a reason for it. One day I was moving from our bedroom to the drawing room, with only a towel around my waist and she happened to come out.”

Dipen Da laughed. It could be the other way round. She might be attracted by your shapely and muscular body. He did not elaborate.

After three months Dipen da told me he had taken voluntary retirement and they were going to Calcutta, where he had his ancestral house. He had often talked about opening a school there to teach small children the art of painting.

#

Over the years, I married a girl I had known at college. She was working as Public Relations Officer with a foreign Airline. In the second year of our marriage, we were blessed with a son. His arrival filled our lives with boundless joy. My mother died three years after the birth of our son.

Once, my father’s cousin, living in Nagpur, visited us for a few days. He was in his seventies, but quite agile and perfectly healthy because he was a yoga expert. One day he and I were sitting facing each other and discussing the political scenario in the country. Suddenly, he seized my right hand and started reading it. Frankly I am dead against astrology, palmistry, numerology, all of which I consider absolute humbug.

“You have two sons,” he said with finality.

I got a jolt and said, “How can it be? We have decided not go in for another child.”

“I don’t know all that. It is here in the lines,” he said poking his index finger into my palm.

He went on to talk about other things from my past and

future. But I paid no attention to him. He went away after a week. And life went on in its grooves.

After some years, we had surprise visitors – Dipen Da and a handsome boy of about sixteen. I was disconcerted to find Shobhon was my replica. I felt uneasy, lest my wife notice it. Our son had got the features of my wife. The two boys took to each other immediately and during their four days’ stay with us, Shobhon treated our son as his younger brother. He solved his Maths problems and advised him to pursue advanced Economics in higher classes as it has huge scope,

Dipen Da remained downcast throughout the stay. On the third day, Dipen Da and I went out for evening walk and sat on a bench in the park. He told me that his wife knew what had happened. .

But after the birth of the child her life changed. She started doing *puja* for hours on end, fasting almost every day. Except for the time she was with the child, she remained morose. She had fallen into depression. Her health deteriorated rapidly, but she refused to accompany me to a doctor.

“This will purify me,” she would say. “I have committed a grievous sin.”

“In a year’s time, she died. Actually, she killed herself before my eyes.”

Dipen Da had the same pleading, distressed expression in his eyes as when he had made the unusual, hesitant request.

“My own health has not been good,” he said. “I don’t know how long I would last.”

Again a sense of premonition had built up inside me. I guessed the purpose of his visit. But unlike the earlier time, I was not forthcoming. I did not respond to his statement. Dipen Da went back to Calcutta with ‘his’ son, Shobhon.

## Natalia Suri

### Kusum Bai

“Why the hell can’t I wear a salwar suit?” I kept repeating the question under my breath, while Kusum Bai’s strong body odor engulfed me as she stood close. Her sweat flowed down her narrow temples, into the visible crevasses of her bosom and back, down her saree blouse. It left dark patches on her yellow satin saree.

Her nose wrinkled with concentration, and her tongue, sandwiched between protruding teeth, slid out more and more. She pushed in the bundle of pleats at my waist, sliding her hand behind my petticoat till I felt a tingle and shuddered, wanting her to remove her hand.

And then she looked up and smiled. Her eyes were framed by the wrinkles of her face. Kusum Bai’s nearly vanished eyebrows rose as though asking if I was feeling comfortable. I just nodded my head; after all, we both never spoke the same language.

I looked out from the open balcony door at the March sky. It was hot and humid. I missed the touch of the cool spring air brushing my face. If I were in Amritsar, the smell of fresh ripe wheat would have wafted into my room through open windows from the nearby fields. But here in Belgaum, tall coconut trees shaded the house, their branches bending as though they were hunching to sneak a peep through my open door and windows.

Just then I felt a pull at my stomach. Kusum bai was behind me, pulling the red silk saree near my hips, pleating the fall end again and again.

A film of sweat covered my body. I saw the contours of

dark moons which had formed under my arm pits. I could smell my own body odor, as Kusum Bai finished draping the saree on me.

I felt it was torture and I was being punished. My mother-in-law knew that Sikh girls like me would never be comfortable in a saree. I remembered the day of my wedding, when we had to go to the Gurudwara, after finishing her customs of Maharashtrian marriage. In front of everyone she stopped me. I wore a salwar suit which usually Sikh girls wear for their marriage.

“I only want you to wear a saree,” she said. “It is very important. Our brides never wear suits.”

The parlor woman had then draped me in a saree. The weight of silk threads was so heavy, I felt shackled. I couldn’t walk properly and nearly tripped in the Gurudwara, but Venkatesh held my hand. I remember the reassurance in his eyes. His love helped me to wear that heavy silk saree for three hours that day. I remember his touch, the warmth of his hand.

Before my marriage I had worn everything except a saree, though my mother was very insistent that I wear one. But the unending piece of five and a half yards had always appeared like a bed cover to me.

\*

A few minutes ago, before Kusum Bai came to my room to drape the saree, I had seen my mother in law from the balcony. She was in the front courtyard, drawing parallel and intersecting white lines.

When I first came to this house a few days ago I thought these lines were some floor design. Unknowingly, I had stepped on them, and my mother-in-law had been very upset.

She had said, in an octave higher than her usual voice in English, “We Brahmins make this every morning to welcome goddess Lakshmi in our house.” Her kajal-stroked eyes had wid-

ened. How much she would have desired a South Indian Brahmin daughter-in-law rather than a Sikh girl from Amritsar. Narrowing her eyes she said, "But I am sure it is very difficult for North Indians to understand this."

I thought of the day she had made dosas in coconut oil, knowing I wouldn't have a taste for the oil. Purposely she had put two on my plate, remarking, "This is the food I have prepared for the pooja, you can't waste it." Then with pursed lips, in front of everyone before us, she said, "Your parents must have always fed you chicken. You North Indians must be used to eating flesh. How callous!"

I had forced the dosas down my mouth with gulps of water, as though it was not food but medicine.

I looked at the photo of my husband Venkatesh with me, on the wall in front. We had met in college in Delhi. We were in love for three years and tied the knot in the fourth year, just after college. Forced, I guess, his parents had agreed to their only son marrying me. They did not make any arrangements for the marriage, nor did they invite any of the relatives. They stood in one corner as though they were uninvited guests, who had entered the wrong marriage venue by mistake.

\*

I heard the approaching clink of bangles. It had to be my mother-in-law. Apart from Kusum bai, my mother in law and me, there wasn't any other woman in the house.

I heard the bedroom door open and saw my mother-in-law standing at the threshold. She never came inside. She was wearing a green silk saree, which shone under the bulb of the bedroom. Gold jewelry covered her neck and waist. It surprised me that she could wear such stuff when the temperature was forty degrees.

She said something to Kusum Bai, indicating something with her finger. Kusum Bai left, but I couldn't understand a

word of what she spoke. Her tone wasn't soft.

Still at the threshold, she said, "Manvinder, please wear the nose ring." She handed it to Kusum Bai to give it to me. "For us Kannadigas it is very important." My name from her mouth sounded as if the M was stretched for it to never end.

"But, mummy" I said, "I think Maharashtra women wear this."

"Here in Belgaum, it is everything that is Maharashtra and Karnataka," she said moving her hands in the air. "It is at the border where the two states meet, and your father in law in a Kannadiga and I'm a Maharashtraian."

Kusum Bai placed the nose ring on my palm. It looked like a very big question mark made of pearls with a red ruby in the centre.

I stared at it. The only thought that crossed my mind was - I hope under this weight my nose doesn't break. And I looked up at the pink wall in front. "Wasn't this heavy silk saree enough," I muttered, "that God has sent me this?"

"But I don't have a hole in my nose," I remarked at once. "I knew that," my mother-in-law said, lines creasing her chocolate skin. "But according to our belief the piercing of the nose is very important." Then she turned her gaze from me to the balcony in front, ignoring my presence and whispered loud enough for me to hear, "The piercing of the nose gives more male children." Then she turned to leave, talking to herself in the passage loudly, perhaps to tell me, "This horrible Punjabi girl took away my son, I don't know how many grandchildren she will bear?"

However, she had not left, and she turned back to look at me. "Please don't leave your hair unbound," she said. "I will send Kusum Bai, with jasmine flowers and oil. She will make a hair bun for you." I saw the finger rise again. This time it was pointing towards me. "I want those jasmine flowers around your hair. It is our custom." For a few seconds I felt like a school kid

in front of the teacher.

I puffed air out of my mouth, relieved to see my mother-in-law leave. I chewed my lower lip, and random memories from childhood began to appear. The princess I played as a little girl with my friends, waiting for the prince to come. I smirked at the thought and sat on the bed. How different reality is. I never knew that with the prince would come so much else.

I looked down at my saree. I had dropped the fall of the saree down, and the cold draft from the fan calmed my sweating skin. Just then I saw my saree blouse. How tight it was, as if it was made to choke me. The hook and the eye hole of the blouse where meeting each other like the shaking fingers of two hands from a distance... and my wicked thick flesh within was pulling them apart. It had become difficult to breathe. I looked at the watch. There were still three hours before I removed this saree.

My eyes swept to our wedding photo on the wall in front. Venkatesh had earlier said he would be back this morning from Bangalore. Then he had messaged that the train was delayed. He would be able to come only by the evening.

“I wish Venkatesh was here,” I muttered under my breath. My eyes moved from one corner of the room to the other until they rested on Kusum Bai.

She had walked into my room, holding flowers and the blue bottle of coconut oil. She gingerly closed the door behind her, as though she was on a secret mission.

She turned and extended her hands standing near the door, showing me the things in her hand. There was a smile on her face, as though combing my hair was going to give her some unspeakable satisfaction.

Standing behind me, she ran her fingers through my hair, and in the reflection in the dressing table mirror I saw her parting my hair. And then she overturned the bottle of coconut oil as though it was water. The scent filled my nose.

In seconds I felt oiliness submerging my face, stickiness spreading on my skin.

She parted my hair, then pulled them behind to make a bun. She circled the bun with a garland of jasmine flowers.

After that Kusum Bai stood facing me, signaling in the air that I should go downstairs. I had pressed the pleats under my feet, so as I took my first step, I almost tripped. I felt the pull at my waist but the saree didn't open.

At once Kusum Bai held me. I felt the fall of the saree sweeping the floor behind me. It was an eerie feeling. How could your clothes broom the floor? I thought. Then she held up the fall, circling it around my hips, gesturing that I should hold it wrapped around the hips.

“If I am going to hold this piece, how am I going to walk freely?” I asked, knowing she would never understand my words. It was as if we were from two different planets.

At the end of passage, I reached the flight of steps and looked down. It seemed like a sinuous unending curve with a steep fall.

I looked around and saw no one. At once I raised the end of saree above the floor with both hands as though it were a long skirt. I crumpled it into a little bundle around my waist and began descending the stairs. I saw the red nail polish on my toes against my fair skin. Kusum Bai trailed behind me.

Reaching the end of the staircase, I threw the saree down, but it flared around my feet as if air had been blown into it. The next moment Kusum Bai was near my feet rearranging the pleats, pressing them, pushing the creases out. Just then mother-in-law hollered for Kusum Bai, and then called out my name.

Kusum Bai ran towards my mother-in-law in the front room. I followed, struggling with every step. I felt like an Egyptian mummy draped in bandages, hands and feet strapped.

When I reached the pooja room, mother-in-law gaped at

me from head to toe, her eyes x-raying my parts. She didn't utter a word, but her silence said everything.

I noticed the arrangements she had made on the floor, the white bedcover spread to sit, the flowers decorating the photograph of Goddess Lakshmi, trays of fruits. "You have to sit on the floor."

I wanted to use the loo. But how could I in the saree? It would be better if Kusum bai came along, I thought, but she was busy re-arranging the flowers near the photograph. I turned towards the loo, and surreptitiously signaled to her with my eyes, asking her to follow me.

She sneaked away after me as soon as mother in law left for the kitchen. In the loo I asked, using my hands, how to sit on the Indian flush. She lifted her own saree as though giving me a live demonstration, and then she took the end of the fall and stood behind the flush holding it high for me, as I squatted.

When I stepped out, I saw mother-in-law standing there. I felt like a child caught cheating in the exam.

"What were you doing with Kusum Bai in the loo?"

"Nothing, I was showing her..." I stammered. All thoughts had vanished from my mind. I was blank. But then suddenly I conjured something up, "There was a dead lizard in the bathroom. I was showing her that."

"Oh really!" she exclaimed, "Let me see where it is."

"We flushed it down," I said pointing inside the toilet. "It is such a sacred day today."

"I never knew a dead lizard could go down a flush so easily," she said.

We walked back to the pooja room. She pointed to the arrangements and said, "Sit down for the pooja on the floor."

I crossed my legs to sit. I felt a strong pull on my waist. I wondered if the saree had opened.

After the pooja when everyone stood up I was still sit-

ting, Kusum Bai was busy collecting the fruits. Seeing my mother-in-law go out of the room, I made an effort to get up, with my weight resting on my hands.

Kusum Bai ran to hold my hand. Just as I stood up I saw the pleats opening. My breath stopped for a second. What if my mother-in-law came in?

I heard the clink of bangles. I sensed the contours of mother-in-law in the passage. Kusum Bai at once began pleating the saree. Faster than her hands could move, her eyes moved to the door and back to my saree.

And just as my mother-in-law entered the room, Kusum Bai pulled her hand away. The saree seemed perfect.

She said, "Kusum Bai," as though to startle her. I stood motionless, and then she looked at me and said, "The day after we will go, with all relatives, to the temple. I will send you a pink silk saree to wear."

She left the room, but as always there was something still left to say. At the door, she turned, and said, "Kusum Bai is going for a month to her village today evening."

## Sumneet Kaur

### I am not an alien

Of course, I am a foreigner, and also a stranger; yet I am not too distant, nor so removed to not decipher and relive the anguish that my grandmother endured. My grandmother lived in India because she did not want to adopt my native country. “It was them who turned my *mulk* into a glorious mausoleum!” she used to say whenever she referred to the incidents of the *batwara* of her once *Sone ki Chidiya*. She would never believe that these unapprised communities, which parted, had been taught to hate each other by their ancestors long buried and forgotten. The whites were just a little smarter. They merely tumbled the first domino of the communal hatred. They exploited the vices accredited to the two opposing and incongruent value-systems, cultures, and castes. And, there had been invaders, wanderers, intruders, and Emperors all over India earlier too, besides . . . I sighed lugubriously. I didn’t have the heart to eulogize the host country of my parents. Whenever we came to India, every night my grandma would recount those chronicles of her younger days. I listened to the narrations of her motherland but she never let me forget that her country was not mine. Though grandma cherished my presence by her side on the woven cot, yet she never shared with me her sense of belonging with her *mulk*.

We visited grandmother’s house every year since I turned three. I don’t remember the earliest visits when I had to be cosseted from the sun, the cold, the grime, the refuse, the milk, the milk products, the water etc; the list was never-ending. I was an anxious, petrified child. My grandma was unlike the grandmas in our neighbourhood, though there were not many. She was neither light nor too furrowed. Her face wasn’t as creased as Mrs.

Gurney’s. I could sense the fragrance of Mrs. Gurney’s fingers in her chocolate donuts but missed my grandma’s in *saagh*, *lassi*, and *makki ki roti*. During our subsequent visits, I observed my grandmother’s wrinkles were growing deeper. But her skin continued to be wheatish. Clad in white khaddar, she was forever hushed, reciting scriptures. A secret and hollow silence permeated between her and my father. Whenever she passed by me or my mother she placed her hand on our heads and blessed us. I missed Mrs. Gurney; but there was something uncanny about the touch of my biological grandmother. The plan for a holiday to India brought me the memories of my grandmother’s patting, her melancholic yet valorous eyes, her pleasurable and comforting grin to my mother, and the quietness towards my father. Neither could I appreciate her nor identify with her, until I started spending the nights in her room, sharing her cot and understanding her narrations. These stories allowed me to steal a solicitous look into her past, though partially. I was mesmerized to learn of many lands, ages and people I had never seen or heard of from my parents. The pictures, images, reflections, and silhouettes whirled in my mind; and ushered me into an epoch where I tried to resurrect the past from a distance — the distance I was trying to cover. Grandma did not talk much about her childhood but the *batwara*, as she always called it, was her preferred theme.

The volume of tears amplified with the catastrophic misfortune every night. But this memoir ... this one was dear to her and I have grown up with the narrative in my mind and blood. I remember my grandmother had met the courageous woman at the refugee camp which had been set up on the Grand Trunk Road by the Red Cross Committee. Every day she used to go to the camp to assist the afflicted. The smoldering muhallas, basties, villages, cities and *mulk*, she said, had brought the displaced to

this camp. The weird silence of death—pregnant with screams and heart-rending shouts—pervaded the atmosphere.

One day my grandmother saw a woman, with disheveled hair, frayed clothes and spots of blood on the face. She was surrounded by an unknown swarm of fellow refugees whose eyes were dry now. A multitude of innocent victims stood around her—terrified and flabbergasted. Not many shattered selves were aware of what had happened with another devastated being. Nobody knew which trauma of the body or the soul had empowered this one. And a few who were acquainted with the facts, felt ashamed of sharing the incident and the grief. An adolescent boy, more horrified than the woman sitting on the red earth, came to my grandma and told her that the unkempt woman had murdered her husband. My grandma looked at the one of her tribe. Could a woman . . .? The thought was maddening. “Did she kill him or had somebody murdered her husband?” my grandmother asked the boy. “She did it herself,” he said and quietly moved away. The boy, who used to mock at the culprit, did not raise his eyelids even once to look at my grandma.

My grandmother didn’t ask anyone any question since she never wanted anyone to censure the woman. She advanced a little, assisted the woman to stand on her shaking legs, took her to the flimsy camp, gave her a glass of water, and just gazed at her. She knew that the woman would verbalize the act. She lingered around and stayed near the woman uncomplainingly. She did not have to wait for long. The other fingers began to clutch the glass tightly.

The woman began, “He was an animal. He used me from the day I was given to him—forcibly. Nobody listened to me. No one let me complete my degree in Lahore College. I would have got a job in the same college. I was brilliant and a favourite

with Mr. David and Madam Elizabeth. I loved literature and was impressed by the way our British teachers gave us a new vision, a new direction and a new perceptive. Not a soul believed in me. Not even my parents. My mother constantly told me that I was a woman, a fragile being who was to be protected and sheltered. And, when the riots broke out on our side, my parents thought I would safely reach the new country with him. I was displaced—displaced from my roots, and set on the new routes. The new routes—unfamiliar, convoluted, shadowy, bloodthirsty—led to a new, foreign destination. Since that day he used me like a steel pitcher which he knew would not crack or break even after extensive use and misuse. I suffered everything. But here. . . .” Here she swallowed her saliva. She paused for a few minutes, renewed her courage, and continued, “Here there are no concrete walls to strangle the screams of pleasure and the squeaks of pain. We are protected by flimsy cloth walls. I wish I had gagged my mouth whenever he thrust himself inside me. My tongue sometimes bled when I kept it between my teeth to stop the pain from finding a sound. And he rejoiced in my pain.”

Both women were quiet for a while. She looked at my grandmother for the first time. Grandmother felt that the ashen purity of her clothes had distressed the woman, and she instantaneously turned her face away. The shroud covering the man in her life was also white. All white. Could the whiteness of the shroud make him pure now? Would the white, which would perhaps cling to her body from today, cleanse her of the deed? She must have wondered, my grandmother thought. Perhaps the woman wanted to ask many questions, but she did not. Grandma’s presence, fortitude, serenity and composure reassured her with some hope of salvation. The woman looked into grandma’s eyes once again and continued, “When I used to go

out of this temporary *home* to procure the packets of meager food, neighbours gawked at me and smirked. They gazed at my body under my un-torn *khaddar*. They seemed to enjoy the curves of my figure because of the one who owned it now and forever. I had become a whore in my own eyes. They were greedy and famished wolves who could feast on anything, even a carcass. And I was no more than a cadaver. Their gaze hit me—it embarrassed me, hurt me, wounded me.” Silence wound around her neck—again. Grandma could see the dribble travelling downward from her throat. After a while, the woman uncurled herself and wiped the drops. Then she said, “Today I am independent. I am free. I am no longer the spider fixed and sprawling on a pin on the wall. I have crept out of the sinister and the dreary fissure I have inhabited for all these months.” The weight lightened. Grandma’s ‘courageous woman’ lifted her head. She was geared up to face anything now. Grandma knew that the moist eyes would soon be dry.

In India, I enthusiastically looked forward to the darkness that would descend and give me yet another chance to unravel grandma’s intriguing life. The loss of home, neighbourhood, society, and ideology, and the formation of religious identities was not incomprehensible to me. The trauma of the bodies and souls was not unfathomable. The descriptions of the holocaust were not inconceivable. The *katha* of pillage, of carnage and mayhem, of extermination, of abductions and rapes was not immeasurable. However, I sometimes wonder why there was no picture of my grandfather in this home and in our house far away . . . and even in those black and white albums that have survived the times. Was my grandma the courageous . . . . No! I could not inquire, though I am not an alien.

### *Jacques Lacan: Past and Present – A Dialogue*

By Alain Badiou and Elisabeth Roudinesco

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Personality – one’s sense of self, its constitution, expression, concrete forms and dynamics of change – has been and continues to be an enigma with no lasting answers in sight. Thinkers, philosophers and artists have been contemplating on the complexities of personality – the dialectic of the ‘internal/interior’ and ‘external/exterior’ – for ages. And there is *still* a lot to be done in the near future, especially in the wake of the developments in cognitive sciences, brain sciences and quantum biology. Psychoanalysis came on the scene to find an answer to this enigma only. It emerged during the last decades of the nineteenth century via the courageous and creative contributions of Sigmund Freud who, as Badiou rightly acknowledges, was “considered to be one of the milestones leading to the human sciences” (4). His remarkable topographical and structural models of the human mind were among the first systematic attempts to thoroughly delineate the complicated structures of human psyche and its logic of growth outside of the traditional frameworks of understanding. Later, it was Jacques-Marie Emile Lacan whose well-known ‘return to Freud’ reinvigorated the field of psychoanalysis in France, and endeavored to rescue it from such mainstream appropriations as ego psychology by making philosophy once again central to the psychoanalytic discourse – as had been the case with Freud. Lacan’s reconstruction of Freud started a theoretical revo-

lution during the late 1960s around which developed a network of institutions, disciples and enemies. Together with his theory of the three registers, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (RSI), he has bequeathed to us a rich repertoire of psychoanalytic concepts which have found applications in a diverse range of disciplines: exemplary being literary criticism and film studies. And his work has lately been getting renewed critical attention as two of the most illustrious philosophers of our times, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, acknowledge their deep theoretical allegiance to his thought.

The present book, crisp and clear, is about the enduring legacy of this celebrated French psychoanalyst. It is composed in the form of a dialogue between the two distinguished scholars, the historian of psychoanalysis Elizabeth Roudinesco and the philosopher Alain Badiou, both of whom claim to have learnt a great deal from the *mâitre* (master and thinker in French). Engaged in a sustained theoretical endeavor to resuscitate the idea of communism, Badiou is a classical-style philosopher with a background in militant Maoism. He uses Lacan's conceptual insights in his philosophical framework. His most recent work, again in the form of a long interview, is the book *Philosophy and the Idea of Communism*. Roudinesco, on the other hand, has been actively participating in public debates regarding psychoanalysis and its relation to the family, the state and the "contemporary forms of behaviorism and psychotherapy" in France (viii). Being a professional psychoanalyst and one time member of the French Communist Party (PCF), she has written a definitive biography of Jacques Lacan in addition to her grand two-volume history of psychoanalysis in France, and a book of portraits of French thinkers titled *Philosophy in Turbulent Times*. Her latest work, *Lacan: In Spite of Everything*, is a book on the later Lacan (1970s onwards).

Dwelling on the theme of the future of psychoanalysis,

its Lacanian legacy and the urgent need to salvage its positive contributions against the rise of biological fundamentalism, psychopharmacology and scientism, this particular portrait is "drawn with two hands and from two perspectives" (x). The argument is relatively simple, free flowing and marked by lucid observations on the idiosyncratic greatness of Lacan. The dialogue is divided into two sections, "One Master, Two Encounters" and "Thinking Disorder". The titles themselves reveal the focus of each section. The first is about the unfolding of unique trajectories of the two encounters as represented by the lives of Badiou and Roudinesco. Whereas Badiou's encounter with Lacan in 1969 crystallized only after the turmoil of the events of 1968, it was the "structuralist caesura," as Roudinesco recalls, initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, which finally precipitated her initiation into psychoanalysis despite her initial dislike for it (6). Afterwards, both came to treat Lacan as their main philosophical reference which helped them in articulating their respective theoretical interventions in philosophy and psychoanalysis. Badiou, in fact, started incorporating Lacan's insights right from one of his very early books *Theory of the Subject*.

After sharing the personal context of their encounters with Lacan, the discussion moves on to trace the politico-intellectual environment in which those encounters were situated. The leitmotif of Lacan's oeuvre, for both the participants, is his resurrection of the category of the 'subject'. The two philosophical currents which were dominant prior to the coming of Lacan were phenomenology and existentialism. In both these approaches, the subject was, as Badiou writes, "folded... back onto a philosophy of consciousness" (7). The subject was consequently defined in terms of internal feelings, experiences, emotions and intentional relationship with the world. In other words, there was no difference between the subject and the reflexive-ego/con-

sciousness; the two got conflated. As a result, the subject as a self (reflexive-ego) was thought to be “rooted in lived experience, immediate and primitive” (7). Lacan was hesitant to make this so called reflexivity the core of all experience. “[F]rom his analytic perspective,” according to Badiou, “the subject hinges on an irreflexive and in certain ways transindividual structure: the unconscious...” (8). The subject is never one with itself at any moment of time; it is always dislocated. The basic problem with phenomenology and existentialism was their emphasis on the ‘interiority’ of the subject which, in turn, invoked a reference to some form of *presumed* ‘primordial transparency’ internal to the subject and determining its formation in an autonomous manner. Against this Lacan welcomed the structuralist critique (for example, Althusser’s ‘theoretical antihumanism’ and Michel Foucault’s ‘death of Man’) of the traditional liberal humanist subject, and its phenomenological and existential avatars. Though he accepted their basic understanding that the subject is “subjugated to a signifying chain..., divided, unbeknownst to itself, split, exposed to radical alterity,” he was nonetheless hardly ready to throw the baby with the bath water (9). Actually, it was Lacan’s dogged defense of the category of the subject that became a turning point not only in his own journey but for many like Badiou himself because it allowed them, as he notes, to “align with the theoretical antihumanism of the period while remaining faithful to [his] Sartrean youth and to the notion of the subject” (9). The notion of the subject, Lacan said, remains an ineluctable unifying knot which acts as a ‘cohering’ pivot to the *constitutive tourbillon* of human subjectivity, and as such cannot be sacrificed.

Roudinesco, in response to Badiou, adds that it was Lacan who simply forced philosophers to take into account the insights of psychoanalysis and brought philosophy into the interiors of the psychoanalytic discourse, primarily under the influ-

ence of the Russian émigré Alexander Kojève - whose famous lecture course on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* shaped an entire generation of French philosophers and artists. Lacan seriously felt that psychoanalysts “lacked intellectual credentials” (10). This happened at the moment when psychoanalysis, as she observes, was “stuck between psychology and medicine” (10). Psychology as a discipline always pushed philosophy to the margins, concentrating more on those aspects of human behavior which were empirically measurable and observable, while psychiatry, in France, was more open to philosophy because it dealt with all forms of human behavior with greater emphasis on its abnormal aspects. This gave Lacan the chance to bring the two together in a creative synthesis because he was primarily a psychiatrist.

What makes the dialogue incredibly impressive is the contrast, which Roudinesco paints, between the personalities, interests and backgrounds of Freud and Lacan. They were poles apart. Freud came from a typical nineteenth-century bourgeois world, had sophisticated cultural and literary tastes matching with those of the literati of the day, and was literally “deaf to the avant-gardes” (42). He wrote an exquisitely organized and rigorous prose with a passionate commitment to clarity and transparency. His amazingly large body of writing, including letters that run into thousands, show flawless fluency and grace. Lacan, “the ventriloquist of the unconscious,” on the other hand, was fascinated by the innovations of the avant-gardists, thrived on the tradition of the French moralists, and loved coming up with sharp formulations and crisp maxims (41). For instance, “there is no sexual relationship,” “the non-dupes err,” and “there where it thinks, I am not,” etc. His lectures were executed in the form of artistic performance. Listening to him gave the audience a chance to experience the “unconscious hard at work” (41). Writing, for him, was a serious horror. So, it fell to a thoroughgoing Parisian

to revolutionize the field of psychoanalysis by making a return to the sophisticated Viennese. This return was never simply a question of consecrating the founder and valorizing his theories. It rather meant thinking alongside the *maître* in order to bring forth what has got lost *between* the lines.

Freud, as a psychoanalyst, was rooted in the liberal enlightenment tradition. He treated the human subject as a rational and autonomous being, with a transparent self which he/she is capable of cultivating himself/herself by making reasoned and self-conscious choices. But, during his clinical experience, Freud came across distorted behavior patterns which were inexplicable according to the available methods of inquiry, which led him to examine the processes that shape the human psyche during early stages of life. He delved into the hitherto hidden dimensions (generally repressed desires and instincts) of human behavior, action and motivation. From Lacan's perspective, the problem with Freud was his belief in the idea of a normal mental condition and a certain core (composed of inherent psycho-biological forces) of the human self to which the course of treatment should lead. Lacan, however, envisaged the cure not as a recovery procedure to some supposed ideal of normalcy, but rather as the retrieval of "the capacities of the subject," by modifying that which was "experienced as fate" (16).

In addition to Lacan's fundamental rethinking of some of the basic Freudian notions of the death drive, transference and repetition, the two quintessential contributions made by him were: (a) emphasis on psychosis, and (b) treating the unconscious as completely dependent on language. Therein resides, I think, Lacan's greatness and radicalization of psychoanalysis. He did not reject Freud; he only followed the logic of Freud's insights and juxtaposed them with contemporary developments in existential philosophy, structural linguistics and anthropology. Lacan was enthralled by the dynamics of psychosis (chiefly para-

noia – in fact, his doctoral dissertation was on a psychotic woman named 'Aimee') because, for him, it alluded to a fundamental form of madness which amounted to a dissolution of reality, of the symbolic universe and a surging up of a radical strangeness, a structural *cut* located at the heart of subject. Paranoia, according to Lacan, also referred to an alternative structure of signification having its own systematic logic. William Shakespeare's plays are famous for the central role madmen play in them and their characteristic disposition to utter 'the truth'. Lacan was deeply enamored of this relationship between madness and truth. The challenge, though, was to meticulously extrapolate the intricate rhythms of this 'constitutive madness' which shares an unusual relationship with truth. Is there a logic to it? Can it be made comprehensible? It was this which enabled Lacan to conceive of existence itself as a tragedy. This could perhaps be the reason he concentrated more on *Oedipus at Colonus* than on *Oedipus Rex*, which was Freud's favourite. Furthermore, it clearly allows us to understand why "the sense of tragic is different for Freud and Lacan" (36). Lacan's bold statement that "the unconscious is structured like language" dropped like a bombshell on the intellectual atmosphere of the times. It skyrocketed his popularity beyond his coterie of disciples. This not only allowed Lacan to save Freud's notion of the 'unconscious' from the strong charges of elusiveness, imprecision and biologism but also made it more comprehensive and scientific. While the Freudian unconscious – highly individualized, disorganized, chaotic, and bubbling up with an infinite variety of desires and instincts – had come to be associated with some dark, remote and unknown corners of human psyche, the Lacanian one was rooted in language, making it completely intersubjective, transindividual and social in character. Situating the unconscious outside the human had far-reaching implications for both psychoanalysis and philosophy.

We can see that Lacan, in a sense, betrayed Freud in order to remain true to his legacy as a radical thinker of human psyche and its enigmas. This painfully sincere betrayal is indeed the most transparent sign of the fidelity to truth apropos the 'non-thought' of a thought, as Heidegger would have put it. And "the fundamental ethical trial," as Badiou states, "that someone in the position of a master will one day have to endure is betrayal" (32). Lacan became aware of this inevitable predicament during the last years of his life.

Moving on, the focus shifts to the political import of Lacan's thought. Does he have anything substantial to tell us today, in the midst of global capitalist crisis, new forms racism, ecological catastrophe and resurgent religious fundamentalism? Does his thought enable the articulation of some kind of emancipatory politics? The question is extremely significant. Both Badiou and Roudinesco acknowledge a "constitutive ambiguity" which runs through Lacan's thinking (26). He may come up with an extreme radical posture when he takes psychoanalysis beyond its clinical dimension, making it a practice which has huge implications for social life. It allows the subject to confront the *constitutive* Real/Impossible kernel of his/her being and, thereby, opens up a possibility of continuous reinvention of oneself. In the same vein, according to Badiou, we can transpose this understanding onto the collective with its radical possibilities of becoming blocked by the existing politico-economic and cultural structures of the liberal-capitalist machinery. Moreover, Lacan vehemently condemns the "adaptive vision of psychoanalysis, which would be content with training the human animal to conform to its social environment, transforming it into animal subjected to dominant values..." (21). Psychoanalysis, for him, has a real explanatory efficacy with reference to contemporary cultural production and practices. Simultaneously, he is fully aware of the negative impacts of 'determinism' and 'religious fanati-

cism' on critical thinking. Therefore, psychoanalysis needs to be approached as a radical rethinking of the *status quo*, both at the individual and the social level. Not only does it need to respect the singularity of the situation and the subject, but it also needs to consider the transindividual and the universal dimension of the subject in its absolute singularity. It must act as a "vector of emancipation" (21).

At other times, however, Lacan could be extremely conservative; for example, when he criticized the events of May 1968 and pronounced that "what you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master" (21). When it comes to the conservative aspect of his thinking, Roudinesco is firm and merciless. She rarely seems as optimistic as Badiou sometimes covertly poses to be. Her reference point in this case is Lacan's real life facts rather than his theories. Lacan came from a typical Catholic background and was never in awe of the great political revolutions, though he saw himself as the "Lenin of psychoanalysis..." and indeed Mao's personality enchanted him (20). He eagerly helped his students and disciples, was always open to those who wanted to know, learn and study psychoanalysis, and this gesture of his "helped some his patients and the students from my generation avoid falling into extremism" (23). Even though he came from a conservative background, Lacan nevertheless willingly accepted homosexuals in his psychoanalytic practice and never differentiated between the two sexes on the basis of biological differences. Curious about knowing everything that was happening in the political, religious and cultural life of France, he welcomed pupils coming from varied socio-cultural and ideological backgrounds. Yet he never took public positions on any of the urgent political issues of his times ever, unlike Jean-Paul Sartre who led a stunningly active public life.

Roudinesco questions Lacan's portrayal as a totalitarian and authoritarian teacher because, according to her, "he [Lacan]

never respected his epigones... [and] valorized those who resisted his seduction” despite the fact he appreciated submission to the *maître* (25). Rather, she observes, “he was more a constitutional monarch, [who greatly] identified... with the English political model” (24). Moreover, she argues that she has deep “reservations about attempts to give a political signification to Lacan’s radicality,” including all those self-styled Lacanian Maoists, making a quip at Badiou, who claim to have found something absolutely radical in him (25). Badiou corroborates Roudinesco when he says that we need to admit the relatively conservative aspects of Lacan’s thinking, and there are many. Lacan, a self-styled radical, simply did not believe in a generalized social revolution, a *Grand Soir*. Despite being a “lucid conservative,” a perceptively nuanced categorization employed by the two to describe him, he would not have succumbed to the temptation of passive resignation in the face of how things stand in the contemporary world (30). And if he were alive, he would have told us: ‘Do not give up your desire’. This, for Badiou, remains the cornerstone of Lacanian wager against the prevailing inanities of the neoliberal-capitalist social reality in which we live. Furthermore, “no contemporary philosophy,” he pointedly adds, “can be considered important if it has not measured itself, at one point or another on its path, against the Lacanian interpretation of philosophy” (46). As a result, Lacan has, according to Badiou, many radical things to teach us and remains a thinker for our times.

Something that is of great interest, and which emerges in the second section of the dialogue, is the interlocutors’ take on the late Lacan, particularly his self-designation as an anti-philosopher, his tendency to adopt mathematical formalization as an explanatory tool, and his obsession with topology, mathematics and the Borromean knots. This is also what distinguishes Lacan from Freud, his selective appropriation of the models of the formal sciences. Roudinesco is highly critical of this late Lacan. The forms of extreme formalization, adopted by Lacan during

the latter half of his life, she informs, have only “consisted in dissolving the time of analytic sessions in the name of cruel and brutal formalism... that tends to dehumanize the cure” (51). These experiments have rarely offered anything constructive to analytic practice. Badiou, however, does not share Roudinesco’s reproach. For him, Lacan’s appropriation should be understood in terms of his ideals of scientific and formal objectivity, and his earnest attempt to develop a structural matrix of the ‘chaos’ which architects subjective experience along with “the affirmation of the irreducibility of the desiring subject. Badiou fittingly defines Lacan’s thinking as a “methodical thought of the subjective disorder” (60).

Psychoanalysis, for Lacan, is a science and, consequently, it is concerned with truth in its existential dimension. It acknowledges the bitter truth that the human subjectivity is irreducible to biology, brute naturality or the production of chemical substances in one’s brain. The legacy of Lacanian psychoanalysis lies in its consistent critique of all kinds of “psychologization of the subject” (51). It thereby imparts the subject minimal autonomy notwithstanding its ‘rootedness’ within the complex structures of socio-cultural and politico-economic matrix of human practices and language. The pinnacle of this undertaking was reached when Lacan fiercely proclaimed, against prevailing dogma, that the drama of the human subject is actually taking place outside of the human subject, not in some ungraspable interior space. Everything is on the surface, in the gaps and silences of the language, in the friction between the gestures and in the discordant layers and folds of the surface. The twenty-first century, according to both the participants, can learn a lot from the contributions of Lacanian psychoanalysis, primarily with regard to the nefarious rise of the capitalist economy of desire/drive, novel forms of hedonistic pleasures and an equally vicious logic of medicalization of life.

## Prabhleen Toor

### *Tawny Glows: Free-Form Tanka and Ekphrastic Verses*

Verses by Jaspreet Mander

Digital Art by Mandeep Singh Manu

Self-Published (2015)

*Tawny Glows: Free Form Tanka and Ekphrastic Verses* is a book of deceptively simple verses that chart difficult waters, grappling with love, loss, and nostalgia and working their way through the intricacies of free-form tanka and ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis – generally considered to be a rhetorical device in which one medium of art tries to relate to another medium by defining, describing or responding to its essence and form – has been employed here to enhance Mandeep Singh Manu’s digital art. The paintings that appear to be hyper-realistic portraits from far away take on a life of their own through the poet’s treatment. Once the connection between a poem and a painting is recognised, the emotional and intellectual engagement with the literary text is extended to new dimensions. The ekphrastic verses in the book transcend mere description: they stand as transformative critical statements and offer an original gloss on the art works they address.

Attentive readers will be rewarded by the quiet intelligence and subtle ways of seeing. A subjective appraisal of life’s equivocations has been crafted in the form of finely textured poems woven into the fabric of free-form tanka – a genre of classical Japanese poetry. The Japanese tanka is a thirty-one-syllable poem, traditionally written in a single unbroken line. It translates as a “short song” and is better known in its five-line 5/7/5/7/7 syllable count form. One of the oldest Japanese forms,

tanka became the preferred verse form not only in the imperial court, where Japanese nobles competed in tanka contests, but also for women and men engaged in courtship. The form gives Mander’s verses a tensile strength that helps her move to and from each subject in a fluid yet logical manner. Tanka’s economy and suitability for emotional expression makes it resemble the sonnet in many ways, certainly in terms of treatment of subject. Like the sonnet, the tanka employs a turn, known as a pivotal image, which marks the transition from the examination of an image to the examination of the personal response.

The sturdy union of imagery (through tanka) and rhetoric (through ekphrasis) here creates poems whose emotional warmth and logical clarity lure the reader along. Perhaps the fullest flowering of this aspect of her craft comes in images like “mother of pearl”, “Mother Mysterium”, “zones transcendent”, “souls unscroll”, “soul mirror” and “harmonies higher”. For all the beauty of its prosody, *Tawny Glows* is not mere entertainment but something deeper and sublime. Where Mander reflects on the indelibility of childhood experience and the intrusion of the past into the present, the imagery is on dazzling display:

In the expanses of your being  
I run athrill, amirth  
skimming marbles, bouncing braids with  
winds of freedom  
wings of laughters

---

White sheets on string beds  
out on the family terrace  
grandma, aunt, mom and I slept  
nurtured by Great Bear and  
the lone north star

---

In the foreground of your being  
I ran up and down  
skipping steps, perky pigtailed  
delight exuding from every pore  
dappled sun on the expanse

Not only does she ruminate on the borders standing between the present and the past, one consciousness and another, or absence and presence, she also amplifies the natural world and its hidden wonders. The sights and sounds of the natural world sparkle and echo through her verses.

The red wood logs  
in our courtyard soak up  
winter bites, summer scorches  
strengthening their quietude  
all the while

---

Amaltas and laburnum  
- the kindred souls - spread  
yellow delicacies all around  
defying heat, humidity  
subtly with steely grit

What is most compelling Mander's dynamic consideration of spirituality, truth, religion - dense subjects woven into verses with unexpected brevity. In her quest to see beyond the visible, she lends a delightful and surreal quality to her verses.

*Tawny Glows* is a book of intricate operations on several levels, from conception to line, from diction to effect. The poems often reveal their fullness through sustained engagement. The candour of treatment on the poet's part reveals the strength of her ability to let sensuous imagery traverse new borders of

inquiry in a way that feels natural. She has painted her canvas of poetry with the complementarily mingling hues of tanka and ekphrasis to create a soul-stirring concoction. The book, from its cover, design, digital art to its verses and the title itself, irradiates with a soulful sparkle - a tawny glow - reminiscent of fireflies in the dark woods.

## Rupinder Kaur

### *Blood Flowers: Selected Poems of Harbhajan Singh Hundal*

Edited and Translated by Rajesh Sharma and Alpna Saini

SAE Inc., 2015

Pages ix+ 122

Price \$ 8

*"I will not be the drum but the flute of revolution."*

*Blood Flowers* is a translation, with introductory essays, of the Punjabi poet and writer Harbhajan Singh Hundal's selected poems. Hundal is an established poet who has also written biographies, memoirs, travelogues and critical essays. He is, moreover, famous for his translations into Punjabi of some of the greatest world poets, including Neruda, Lorca, Brecht, Mayakovsky, Hikmet, and Darwish.

Rajesh Sharma and Alpna Saini have dealt sensitively with Hundal's poems, evoking the spirit of commitment which is central to his vision as a poet. They have chosen fifty one poems from the poet's published and unpublished work. Two essays on poetry penned by Hundal himself have also been rendered into English. Every poem selected by the translators appears to be carrying the essence of the poets' oeuvre.

Translation entails many difficulties, the most notable being the challenge of preserving the meaning and spirit of the work along with its zeal and poetic quality. The translators deserve to be complimented for having ably tackled such challenges.

In his Foreword, Badri Raina compares Hundal with the great world poets whose poetry he has translated into Punjabi and remarks that, like them, he too possesses a deeply committed and intensely creative mind. In his perceptive and pithy

introduction to Hundal the man and the poet, Sharma aptly describes him as a poet of "achieved, not received utterance." Casting light on various aspects of his poetry including the themes and the rich yet simple imagery, Sharma comments on the power of the poets; they helped Punjab survive "the vicissitudes of history and the depredations of politics." And he concludes wondering: "What more can one ask of poetry?"

Alpna Saini in her essay highlights Hundal's bond with humanity and life. She argues that Hundal's poetry is born out of fellow-feeling, a sense of community with the people; its strength lies essentially in his adherence to justice and truth. Jaswinder Singh Saini's essay, translated by Rajesh Sharma, describes Hundal as a poet constantly engaged in an unequal battle between ideology and art.

Hundal's brief biographical note in the book records that "he has been in the forefront of people's struggles and during the Emergency." Right from the partition to 80s and on to the contemporary times in the history of Punjab, Hundal has written from a position of a lucid apprehension of the human predicament and has speculated imaginatively on the vocation of the poet and the nature of poetry. His poetry is sometimes defiant and radical, sometimes nostalgic and emotionally brimming – qualities which make it poignant and appealing. His most enduring preoccupation is with the obligation of the poet, who must possess an unwavering faith in the freedom to speak and who should never be daunted by anything. Hundal's assertion is: "Silence is immoral/Like Pimping/ like killing yourself." He is ever sure of the power of poetry: "Who can banish poetry?" And this is endorsed by his statement: "Poetry does not die, the baton may well break." Several of his poems reflect his confidence in the poet's power: "Words cannot be murdered," he says. His lament for the lost Punjab, in the pre- as well as post-partition phase, can be seen in poems like "Where is my Punjab?" and the title

poem “Blood Flowers”. His concern for India’s condition and the mask of prosperity it is made to wear over a really shrivelled face is evident in “The Mask”. His heartfelt regret at the bloodshed and destruction caused by war can be seen in poems like “The Vietnam war” and “The Decisive Moment”.

Good poetry is a rhythmic expression of our imagined as well as real and intense perceptions of the world. This is exactly what Hundal’s poetry is. He is a visionary, a revolutionary, a representative of humanity who personifies Shakespeare’s description: “The poet’s eye in a fine frenzy rolling/ Doth glance from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven.” Of course, for him heaven on earth remains always elusive. He questions in “On the Pathway of Waiting”: “Lover’s of life! I ask you- / Will the parapets of my hope remain ever forsaken?/ Will the massacre of love never cease?/ Will the ghosts of expectation always haunt us?” And yet he says in “Poem”: “Yet sometimes my heart says:/ Be Brave, have courage./ Why be disheartened?”

In his essay “My Engagement with Poetry” Hundal remarks that a poet must never lose sight of the problems faced by people. The poet’s vision must remain unclouded by frivolous experimentation it must be constructive and purposeful. The essay revisits his evolution as a poet, the shaping influences on his mind, and his view that times change, that challenges are to be faced, and that writers need to keep pace with the challenges in order to survive and not fade away. One is reminded of Dickens’s profound concern for humanity expressed in his denunciation of politically inspired acts that do not take into account the suffering of the common man. This is particularly evident in the poems about the Indo-China and Indo-Pak wars. His detention in 1975-1977 during Emergency also inspired him to write, exemplifying his belief that poetry is often born out of conflict and the poet is obliged to bring hope to “despairing hearts.” In fact, poetry loses substance when it fails to reflect the world.

Hundal is of the opinion that poetry can be written in one’s mother tongue alone; in other languages it can only be translated. However, *Blood Flowers* belies this notion and proves, on the contrary, that translations can be flawless renditions of the original. As Harjeet Singh Gill remarks, the translators have been able to perform their task with “astonishing exactitude.” The translations carry the resonance and reverberation of Punjabi sensibility.

Emerson’s words – “a terrible simplicity” – chosen to stand as the epigraph to the book best capture the essence of Hundal poetry. It is with simplicity and grace that the most terrible and basic truths of life have been rendered in his poems. And it is through translations like *Blood Flowers* only that many readers who cannot read Punjabi shall have a chance to discover this wonderful poet who possesses what Badri Raina calls an “authentic and un-self-regarding poetic voice.”

## Manpreet Singh

### *Dozakhnama: Conversations in Hell*

By Rabisankar Bal

Translated from Bengali by Arunav Sinha

Random House India (2012)

Pages 544

Written in Bengali by Rabisankar Bal, *Dozakhnama* has been translated into English by Arunav Sinha. Bal is a journalist by profession and has fifteen novels, five short story collections, a volume of literary essays and a volume of poetry to his credit. *Dozakhnama* has won the Bankimchandra Smriti Puraskar.

It is not very often that you come across a story about stories, about story-tellers, and about story-telling. And when you do chance to meet such a story, the experience may not be leave you astonished and perturbed. *Dozakhnama* is a journey back into a past the reality which has been veiled by 'history', its truths suppressed, altered and remolded. The book tears open the wounds of the past.

The story begins with an unknown narrator, a journalist by profession, who is out there in the streets of Lucknow looking for something to write about the lives of prostitutes. He stumbles upon a manuscript which its possessor believes is the only novel ever written by Saadat Hassan Manto. The manuscript is in Urdu and the narrator does not know the language at all. The narrator craves to possess the manuscript and translate it, driven by the magic of unfamiliar words on papers become so fragile with time that they turn into dust the moment you touch them. In order to learn the language he finds a tutor, Tabassum. After a futile effort to learn Urdu, the narrator asks Tabassum

to read the manuscript for him so that he can write it in his own language. And here begins the tale of several tales.

The manuscript is a conversation between Manto and Ghalib. Both are dead, and are lying in their graves. They talk about their lives, hardships, struggles with the system, loyalty to the pen and to the literary art. In their conversation they take the readers to a magical journey into the past.

The first thing that strikes about the novel is its narrative structure. The way stories are linked with each other, the way one story leads to another, and the way they all inter-volve and evolve. A story is seen giving birth to another story and so on:

*...daastaan has a mind of its own, I cannot control it. Huzoor, my uncle used to say, stories are unpredictable. You may have chosen a particular direction for it, but soon you'll discover the dastaan taking you down a completely different path. (40)*

We come across characters whose very existence depends upon stories. Who live in their stories; some live to tell stories, some live to listen to them.

The novel moves in two historical periods. It takes you into the blood-splattered streets of Delhi in the 1850s during the uprising against the British and into the communal massacres of the partition in 1947. The two great writers, who witnessed these two unfortunate events, recount their firsthand experiences. At the same time, the novel unfolds as a double biography – of Ghalib and Manto. At the most significant level, however, the book is a complex, seemingly wandering conversation and meditation on the art of writing. It explores what this great art demands. Both Ghalib and Manto rebelled against their worlds and times, and had to pay for it. The demands of the art are extreme: "Life becomes hell for those whom Allah commands to write stories." One is reminded of Dostoevsky, Flaubert and Kafka.

## Contributors

**Aaratti Kaul Dhar** is a writer and teacher based in Delhi.

**Anuradha Bhattacharyya** teaches English in Post-graduate Government College, Chandigarh. She has published novels, two collections of poetry and a book of critical prose.

**Ashutosh Dubey** is a Hindi poet, with three poetry collections: *Chor Darwaze Se*, *Yakeen Ki Aietein*, and *Asambhav Saransh*. His poetry has been translated into English, German and several Indian languages. He is the recipient of Makhan Lal Chaturvedi Award for Poetry in Hindi.

**Bhavna Vij Arora** is a research scholar in GGSIP University, New Delhi.

**Dharamjeet Singh** has a PhD on new media. He teaches in Thapar University, Patiala.

**Guy Sinsler** began, after 10 years in the army, a peripatetic career in publishing educational materials, international product marketing and freelance writing. He was in foreign service for three years in Germany (NATO) and for five years with the Canadian Embassy in Japan. Tagged “imagist/humorist” by lyric poet Marianne Bluger, Sinsler’s work has appeared in numerous journals/anthologies in USA, Canada, Japan, England, Australia, Romania and India. He has been awarded Diane Brebner Poetry Prize, Carleton University Poetry Prize, AHA Books Tanka Sequence Prize (USA), Keji Aso Senryu Prize (USA), Hekinan Haiku Special Prize (Japan), and IODE Ontario Short Story Prize, CBC Ottawa Radio Documentary Award, and Alberta Culture Radio Drama Prize.

**Girija Sharma** is Professor of English at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

**Harjeet Singh Gill**, a world-renowned anthropological linguist and semiologist, is Professor Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University

**John Brandi** is a poet and painter. He is among the greatest writers of haiku today. He has also been in the forefront in the struggle for land rights and civil liberties for the Andean farmers, a protestor against the American war in Vietnam and the founder of Tooth of Time Books which published the first books of aspiring poets. He is a recipient of National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship and many other awards. Currently he is teaching creative writing in New Mexico (USA).

**M. L. Raina**, a former Professor of English, Panjab University, is an eminent critic, teacher and literary reviewer.

**Manolis** was born in 1947 in a small village Kolibari on the Greek island of Crete and obtained a Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science at the Panteion Supreme School of Athens. After moving to Vancouver in 1973 he wrote three novels, several collections of poetry, short stories and articles in Greek and English. In 2006 he founded Libros Libertad, an independent publishing company in Surrey, BC, Canada. His latest work is the publication of an extraordinary 500-year old poetry book, *Erotokritos*, in a unique form. He handwrote the entire book at the age of eleven and is now selling the handwritten facsimile for \$5000 a copy. Manolis lives in White Rock, BC, Canada.

**Manpreet Singh** teaches in Thapar Polytechnique, Patiala. He is working towards a PhD thesis on Milan Kundera.

**Natalia Suri** teaches Spanish at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. Her work has been published in *Earthen Lamp Journal*, *Samvada*, and other journals and magazines.

**Navdeep Kaur** is writing a PhD thesis on Manto. She teaches in Panjab University College, Sikhwala, Muktsar, Punjab.

**Nida Sajid** is a scholar of South Asian Studies with a PhD in Comparative Literature from Western University, Canada. She has taught Hindi language and literature at Rutgers University, USA and University of Toronto, Canada.

**Prabhleen Toor** teaches in Khalsa College for Women, Ludhiana.

She is working on her PhD thesis and also a book of poetry.

**Prem Kumar Mani** is a writer, journalist, and activist based in Bihar. He spent many years studying Buddhism and its meaning for the Dalit Movement and Indian society. He has published many collections of short stories and essays.

**Prerna Bakshi** is a sociolinguist, research scholar and writer, currently based in Macao. Her poetry has been published in *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Red Fez*, *Muse India*, *Postcolonial Text*, *Theory in Action* (The Journal of Transformative Studies Institute), *Hysteria*, and *Grey Sparrow Journal*.

**Rosalia Scalia** writes fiction and non-fiction. She is currently working on a novel. She teaches creative writing and lives in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.

**Rupinder Kaur** is a Professor of English at Punjabi University. She wrote her PhD thesis on Robert Browning.

**Saahil** goes to Perce Model School, Boston.

**Subhash Chandra** is a short story writer, and literary and cultural critic. He has been awarded Shastri Indo-Canadian Fellowship.

**Sumneet Kaur** teaches in the Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University.

**Vinod Kumar** has a PhD on India as a changing ideological formation. He teaches in A. S. College, Khanna.