

CONTENTS

<i>Editorial</i>	1
<i>Articles</i>	
A Humanist Message in Three Episodes and One Inconvenient Fact PETER RONALD deSOUZA	2
Inventing the Gods: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Ethical Imagination FRANK STEWART	7
'The World Is What It Is': Literature and Social Change HARISH TRIVEDI	11
The Poetics and Stylistics of Nirmal Verma: From the Grammar of Indefiniteness to the Subversion of Gender Oppositions ANNIE MONTAUT	15
Literature, Society and the Creative Public Sphere: Towards a New Art of Cross-Fertilization ANANTA KUMAR GIRI	30
Exclusionary Practices: The Marginalisation of Women in State and Public Policies TIPLUT NONGBRI	38
The Anti-Essentialism of Saidian Thought MANINDER PAL KAUR SIDHU	48
<i>Book Reviews</i>	
<i>The Inner Mirror: Kannada Writings on Society and Culture,</i> compiled and edited by A.R. Vasavi V.B. THARAKESHWAR	53
G.D. Gulati, <i>Central Asia under the Mongols</i> LAURA YEREKESHEVA	54
Gangeya Mukherji, <i>An Alternative Idea of India:</i> <i>Tagore and Vivekananda</i> MALASHRI LAL	58
Aravind Adiga, <i>The Last Man in Tower</i> NEELIMA KANWAR	60
Vihang A. Naik, <i>Poetry Manifesto (New & Selected Poems)</i> MANJU JAIDKA	61

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Editorial

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"

The current issue of *Summerhill: IAS Review* has articles that deal with concerns that are in many ways central to a liberal society built upon a spirit of freedom to choose alternatives. Exercising the right choice is very often an ethical dilemma. Gandhi offered a guide to the perplexed: 'I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.'

The lead article by Peter deSouza argues for the rejection of a culture of abandoning one's principles 'when the price is right.' He gives three episodes of ethical firmness that became the turning points of contemporary history: Gandhi's last fast undertaken to bring about fraternization between Hindus and Muslims in the aftermath of partition violence; Nelson Mandela's release from a long incarceration when he showed no trace of bitterness against the apartheid regime which had locked him up in prison for a good part of his life, Aung San Suu Kyi's refusal to go to England to see her husband who was terminally ill, fearing that she might not be allowed to return to her country to continue her pro-democracy movement. Humanism after all is not a passive devotion to human interests but an active intervention in the social domain.

Frank Stewart in his paper maintains that there are times when, if one has to reclaim one's humanity, one

has to dethrone the false gods of one's own creation. Most certainly what needs to be repudiated is nationalism, the way Tagore did. What one really needs is ethical imagination.

Harish Trivedi reflects on literature, society and the human condition citing Martin Carter, V. S. Naipaul, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden. Does poetry, or for that matter literature, makes things happen? The response to such a question depends not on one's access to empirical realities but with the way one chooses to conceptualise the world. The question relates to the central ideas of literature and social change. Poetry, which often follows no teleological destination, provides its own justification. Literature and society is also the theme of Ananta Kumar Giri's paper which discusses the role of literature in creating the public sphere. Annie Montaut in her paper takes a look at the poetics and stylistics of Nirmal Verma, reading his fiction against the grain of postmodernist market hegemony.

On a different note Tiplut Nongbri writes about the marginalisation of women in India's Northeast, urging a greater sensitivity towards the conditions of those living on the margins of the homogenising space of a centralised nation-state.

Our postcolonial globalized world is no longer framed by explicit binaries such as the 'colonizer' and the 'colonized' but by nebulous sets of contrasts. It is in this context that Maninder Pal Kaur Sidhu finds that it is the anti-essentialism of the thought of Edward Said that marks him out for his universalism.

I hope the readers will enjoy the range of topics offered in this issue of *Summerhill* as much as I have enjoyed putting the articles together.

SATISH C. AIKANT

A Humanist Message in Three Episodes and One Inconvenient Fact

PETER RONALD deSOUZA

At the outset let me say how honoured I am by the request to address the Indian Humanist Union, a full member of the International Humanist Union, on its 50th Anniversary. It is a singular privilege and a big responsibility. I do know that supernatural help has no place in a platform of the Humanist Union, but I would request you today for a temporary dispensation. Please allow me to invoke help from all quarters because the challenging task before me is to give a lecture that is appropriate for the 50th Anniversary of the Indian Humanist Union (IHU), and to speak in celebration of an idea, a movement, and an institution, requires such assistance. Such an anniversary lecture requires one to speak to a history, stretching from the Italian Renaissance, through the intellectual debates of the 18th and 19th centuries, to the three Humanist Manifestoes of 1933, 1973, and 2003. It requires one to speak to a philosophy of rationalism, empiricism and an ethical credo that is rooted in, and stems from, human need and interest, and finally to speak to a politics, committed to an open and participatory democracy which is regarded as the only system consistent with these Humanist goals. This task is a little daunting. A little supernatural help would do nicely!

Let me use an outflanking strategy to present my argument. Rather than analytically engage with the 17 aspects of the Humanist manifesto of 1973, which by itself is a powerful normative agenda, or even the 6 primary beliefs of the 2003 Humanist Manifesto, although it is tempting to do so since each of them is relevant to our times, let me begin the discussion by inviting you to reflect on something that occurred just a few weeks ago.

Please recall the recent episode of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. At the ceremony the Chair that was to be occupied by the 2010 laureate Liu Xiabo was kept vacant. Neither he, nor his wife, nor his friends, were permitted by the Chinese state to attend. For a risen China, wooed and

courted by the world, to feel troubled by a mere intellectual, one of the authors of Charter 08 committed to democracy and human rights, such that it blocks all persons, close to and sharing an elective affinity with Liu Xiabo, from attending the award ceremony and more so using its monetary muscle to get countries to boycott the event – 17 fell in line – is really sad but not unexpected. But China's behavior is not what I want you to reflect upon. What I do, however, want to draw your attention to is the unwillingness of the Philippines to go to the award ceremony. Till the evening before the event it was unclear whether they would attend. But their attendance or not is immaterial to our analysis. What is germane to our reflection is the arguments given by the Philippines for their hesitation.

The President of the Philippines, Benigno Simeon Aquino III, whose reforms 7 out of 10 people supported at the time, implying high levels of regime legitimacy according to the newspapers, defended the Philippine government's initial decision to be absent from the Nobel ceremony on the grounds that it was for the 'protection of the interests of Filipinos'. When pressed by a newsman for justification he said, 'I put the Filipino first. If that is a sin, I will commit that sin over and over again.'¹ You will argue that this is realpolitik and for me to demand an ethical foreign policy from a popular head of state is just unrealistic. Political leaders do not act ethically but only tactically. If this is the law of politics then let me complicate the argument and remind you of an 'inconvenient fact'. President Aquino's father Senator Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino was a staunch defender of Human Rights and a fierce critic of the authoritarian Marcos. His political life was a struggle for these beliefs. He was shot dead on August 21, 1983 as he stepped off the plane in Manila International Airport when he returned to his country despite advice from his friends who warned him that it was unsafe. He ignored their

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advice because he felt that he was needed in the deteriorating political situation in the Philippines. His death sparked off a huge protest movement against Marcos producing the political phenomenon of 'people's power' which returned the Philippines to democracy. And yet the martyred Senator's son, who one would expect would be deeply committed to the values of freedom and human rights for which his father gave his life, is now hesitant to celebrate an award to a person leading a similar movement for freedom and democratic rights.

What is the nature of the 'Filipino First' that President Aquino based his decision on when he initially instructed the Philippine Ambassador in Oslo to stay away from the award ceremony? Fear of standing up against an authoritarian regime? It is this pragmatism, a politics which sees everything in terms of supporting the winning not the principled side, a politics that allows a coalition *dharma* to acquire a pre-eminence over the key norms of a decent society when it caves in to the brinkmanship of its allies such as the Trinamool Congress, that the IHU must strive to challenge. The story that I have just narrated may seem trivial but to me it is symptomatic of a wider malaise to which all of us are not immune and hence we need to explore it more deeply since in the folds of the story lie lessons for us in India today. When will we draw the line? Where will we draw the Laxman Rekha? When will we reject the culture, which has come to define our public life, of abandoning our principles if the 'price is right'? Is this a genuine politics of ethical trade-off or is it politics of pragmatic opportunistic compromise? This is not a sanctimonious lament. I see it as an analytic challenge to the 'free thinkers' of the IHU. What did the son of a martyred senator, who fired the imagination of the Filipino people by his life in struggle for Human Rights and his death in defense of them, mean when he defended his action of not attending the award ceremony by saying 'I put the Filipino first'. Why was the 'Filipino first' of the father a different first? What is the rational calculus that produced in the son a decision that looks like a betrayal of his father's death? Assuming that he is being honest, what ethical trade-offs does power produce which the father did not have to do? Is there a clue in Yudhishthira's ambivalence when he informed Drona 'Ashwathama hatho nara wa kunjaro wa'? What is our *dharma* that we must follow in different situations, consistent or contingent, universal or context (as in time-space) determined? But let me leave this line of interrogation here and go to the three episodes that I want to talk about. The Philippine story is not one of them. I have narrated it here to introduce a contrast between it and the three episodes.

My chosen three episodes, in fact, tell the opposite story of ethical firmness, of political statespersons changing their world by their ethical resoluteness and not succumbing to the dynamics and 'reality' of the world. These are accounts not of ethical compromise but of ethical steadfastness. A Humanist Union must, in the best traditions of free and skeptical inquiry, work out the different political trajectories that this difference between 'ethical firmness' and 'ethical compromise' produces. This is its task. Should one be consistently resolute in the face of a fluid world with shifting frames of reference or should one be malleable and change one's position in a dynamic world? Is the other side of firmness, stubbornness, and the other side of flexibility, opportunism? On such fine and clear distinctions, and on such intellectual display of public reason is a decent society built.

The first episode, which I will present in chronological sequence, refers to Gandhiji's last fast. Let me here narrate it in D.G.Tendulkar's words recalling Gandhiji's words. It is a story that needs to be told and re-told in every 'gaon' and 'mohalla' so that we can reflect on its significance for us today:

When on September 9th I returned to Delhi from Calcutta, it was to proceed to the West Punjab. But, that was not to be. Gay Delhi looked a city of the dead. As I alighted from the train, I observed a gloom on every face I saw. Even the Sardar whom humor and the joy that humor gives, never desert, was no exception, this time. The cause of it I did not know. The Sardar was on the platform to receive me. He lost no time in giving me the sad news of the disturbances that had taken place in the metropolis of the Indian Union. At once I realized that I had to be in Delhi and 'do or die'.... I yearn for heart friendship between the Hindus and the Sikhs and the Mussalmans. It subsisted between them only the other day. Today it is non-existent...

He then decided to fast on January 13th. The period was indefinite. It would end only when he was satisfied that there was a genuine 'reunion of hearts of all communities'... He begged all his friends not to dissuade him. He requested them not to tell him that things had been set right while the process was incomplete. He asked people to turn the searchlight within. A Central Peace Committee of 130 members representing all communities was formed and worked hard and honestly to fulfill Gandhiji's conditions. Peace returned on January 18th at 12:45 p.m. Gandhiji broke his fast. Again it is worth quoting at length from Tendulkar to convey the emotion of that moment, to convey not an extraordinary life (that it was) but the firmness of ethical purpose, a resoluteness that showed both the spirit behind the act but also the outcome produced by it. A metropolis gone mad returned to sanity. Collective action of a humanist kind replaced

collective action of the barbaric kind. I quote from Gandhiji's response:

Mr Gupta, speaking next, described touching scenes of fraternization between Hindus and the Muslims which he had witnessed when a procession of about 150 Muslims was taken out that morning in Sabzi Mandi and was received with ovation and offered fruit and refreshments by the Hindu inhabitants of that locality.

Gandhi said in reply that what they had told him had touched him deeply. Indeed, they had given him all that he asked for. But if their words meant that they held themselves responsible for the communal peace in Delhi only and what happened in other places was no concern of theirs, then their guarantee was worth nothing and he would feel that they too would one day realize that it was a great blunder on his part to have given up his fast. ... If they were sincere in their professions, surely, they could not be indifferent to outbreaks of madness in places other than Delhi.... If they could not make the whole of India realize that Hindus, Sikhs and Mussalmans were all brothers, it would bode ill for the future of both the dominions. What would happen to Hindustan if they quarreled with one another? Here Gandhi broke down with overwhelming emotion.

What were the elements of that 'overwhelming emotion'? There is something sacred about that moment, his deep yearning for as he said heart friendship – only Gandhi could coin such a term 'heart friendship' - for which he was prepared to die. The Humanist Union has to decode what this 'heart friendship' consists in, how it is brought about, who can subvert it and when, and who can nurture it and how? Gandhiji's fasts are full of moral learning. This last fast is about fraternity within communities in India and also Pakistan. That is its main message. But attached to it is a smaller story that can often be overlooked and missed in the backflow of the grander account.

The Government of India, owing to the dispute in Kashmir, had been withholding from the Government of Pakistan fifty-five crores of rupees which they had previously agreed to hand over to them as part of the division of assets of the whole of India. On the night of January 15, India decided to implement immediately the financial agreement with Pakistan 'to remove the one cause of suspicion and friction.

Gandhiji's last fast was also to put moral pressure on his own government. No tactical reasoning for him. He could not in all justice give confidence to his Pakistani friends if he accepted the Government of India's withholding of assets that were due. The refugees were enraged and shouted slogans outside Birla house, 'blood for blood', 'we want revenge', 'let Gandhi die'. But principle prevailed. And peace returned. In the face of the anger and distress of the refugees, the pain they had suffered

because of partition, was Gandhiji's resoluteness, that the 55 crores due to them be given to Pakistan, a stubbornness difficult to justify, or was it in fact prompted by some higher principle of honesty and trust, that is at the core of our aspiration to build a decent future? As a person did Gandhi represent an ethical position that was not utilitarian? To get some light on these very complex and key questions let me now turn to the second episode.

On February 11, 1990 Nelson Mandela (affectionately called by his people Madiba) was released from Robben Island. He had spent 26 years in jail a majority of which was in solitary confinement. His daughter was born when he was in jail. His youth had been spent behind bars all because he believed in a democratic and free South Africa. Such a story of struggle against tyranny is not unusual and while I want to salute it, it is not from such heroism and courage that I want to draw my humanist lesson. Of course let me in no way, not even by hint, diminish the huge sacrifice and extraordinary commitment to freedom from apartheid that Madiba's life signifies. Even to mistakenly give that impression of diminishing the sacrifice would be perverse. But what I want to focus on here, and draw a humanist lesson from, is his first speech after his release. Through this one can get a sense of the man, the humanism that motivated him as it did Gandhi when we recall his last fast. In his biography *Long Walk to Freedom* he movingly talks about the approaching moment when he would be free. Again I will have to rely on the long quote to ensure that by paraphrasing it I would not sanitize it:

I did not dwell on the prospect of my release, but on all the many things I had to do before then. As so happens in life, the momentousness of an occasion is lost in the welter of a thousand details. There were numerous matters that had to be discussed and resolved with very little time to do so. A number of comrades from the reception committee, including Cyril Ramaphosa and Trevor Manuel, were in the house bright and early. I wanted initially to address the people of Paarl, who had been very kind to me during my incarceration, but the reception committee was adamant that that would not be a good idea: it would look curious if I gave my first speech to the prosperous white burghers of Paarl. Instead, as planned, I would speak first to the people of Cape Town at the Grande Parade in Cape Town.

First speech to the 'white Burghers' of Paarl by a black man who had been incarcerated by the apartheid regime, by a man who had entered prison a young man and was leaving it decades later without bitterness against the race that had supported the regime that had deprived him of his youth by putting him there. His people were in the townships. Their people were in the town hall. His people denied the public sphere, theirs in sole possession of it.

His people the victims of countless brutalities, theirs the perpetrators of it. And yet no bitterness. Not even a tinge of the desire for revenge. What did he want to do instead? Give his first speech to the white Burghers of Paarl. Was this just simplicity, a softness of the head come from many years in jail or was there an ethical frame of a higher order which would become apparent soon. It did. It was for solidarity between black and white. I quote from his first speech:

We call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa. The freedom movement is a political home for you too... Our march to freedom is irreversible. We must not allow fear to stand in our way. Universal suffrage on a common voter's roll in a united democratic and non-racial South Africa is the only way to peace and racial harmony. In conclusion I wish to quote my own words during my trial in 1964. They are as true today as they were then: "I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

This was his first public speech. Was this tactical reasoning or ethical resoluteness? Was this the big gesture that brought peace to South Africa that separated order from the impending chaos? In this first speech Madiba spoke of peace and racial harmony to the restless crowd who were perhaps yearning for revenge, longing for black majoritarianism. But Mandela's commitment to humanism ended that political possibility. He along with Bishop Desmond Tutu preached reconciliation and gave us a new instrument for healing the deep rift in a society torn apart by conflict, the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'. It was this commitment to humanism that helped pull South Africa from the violence that threatened to engulf it, gave it a moral goal of reconciliation which would allow it to 'heal the wounds'. Quite an extraordinary act to cast aside his private suffering and speak and work for a higher morality of healing. The world needs such moral leadership again, not of the sanctimonious kind which only blames but of the uplifting kind which heals.

This brings me to the third episode for our Humanist reflections. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi spent 15 years under house arrest. She went to look after her mother in 1988 and entered politics by forming the National League for Democracy (NLD) after the brutal killing of 5000 demonstrators by the military regime on 8 August 1988. Since then she has become the symbol of resistance against the military dictatorship and was placed under house arrest. During this incarceration, and this is the

tragic part, her husband who was living in England was diagnosed with a terminal case of prostate cancer. The regime offered to release her and allow her to go to England to see him. But she refused fearing that if she left her country she would not be allowed to return. In this difficult dilemma, having to choose between her personal desire and her public duty, between the man she loved and the country she loved, she chose to stay back in Burma. Michael Aris passed away in 1999. She had last met him in 1988. On the day she left Michael noted:

It was a quiet evening in Oxford, like many others, the last day in March 1988. Our sons were in bed and we were reading when the telephone rang. She picked up the phone to learn that her mother suffered a severe stroke. She put the phone down and started to pack. I had a premonition that our lives would change forever.²

William Hoge writes in the New York Times of 30 March 1999 that according to close friends Mr Aris was unflinchingly supportive of his wife's decision and never once complained that she should abandon the mission and come home. On what basis did she make her choice, first to look after her mother and then to look after her country. From the deep recesses of her soul, in a moment of great loneliness – a husband terminally ill, a nation in need of her – she chose to do her public duty. We need to debate whether it was a higher duty but we can certainly agree that it was a painful choice. And the family she loved so dearly had to bear the price of her commitment to a better world for her people. On 13 November 2010 she was released.

I began by indicating that I would adopt an outflanking strategy to reflect on the idea, the movement and the institution of the Indian Humanist Movement. I did not engage philosophically with the 17 aspects or the 6 primary beliefs. This is a task that needs to be done. Instead I have given three episodes and one inconvenient fact. Each has been accompanied by some questions to invite reflection on the choice between 'ethical firmness' and 'ethical compromise', a choice that we all make often in our lives. Each option produces a trail of consequences which these episodes so poignantly illustrate. Where will we place ourselves? In a fluid world we can pretend that the distinction is hard to make, that there is a grey area and a fuzzy boundary, and use that fuzziness to avoid taking a stand. That, I believe, is an abdication. It is easy to abdicate. Is that not the reason for our personal and national drift? Is that not why India today has every institution in the moral dock, from the judiciary, press, bureaucracy, academia, political parties to even our lowly panchayats. And yet I have given you instances when, in

more difficult situations, the bloodletting of partition, the ending of apartheid, and the tyranny of the military dictatorship, three extraordinary people made difficult and personally costly choices. Ethical resoluteness triumphed over ethical compromise.

One last reflection. The humanist message can be read in the big events and also in the little stories. Gandhiji's fast against the madness that had gripped the nation, Mandela's speech on reconciliation and Aung San Suu Kyi's protest against the military dictatorship are the big episodes and offer big lessons for our humanist reflections. But do not ignore the small story, fifty five crore rupees to be given to Pakistan that was withheld unjustly, the proposed first speech to the Burghers of Paarl, the acceptance that she would never see her husband again, these too have a humanist message. We need to examine, them with all the tools at our command.

What was the basis for their choices? How did they decide what costs they were willing to bear which were worthwhile? And years later, when they looked back, how did they see these choices? We need to probe the inner world of these three persons because it is in this inner world where the decisions are made and where the sense of what is worthwhile is so carefully crafted. From this depth of understanding will come a humanism for our times. Through it will emerge the moral resources we need to build another possible world.

Notes

1. www.gmanews.tv/story/208199/aquino-no-need-to-justify-PHL-absence-atnobel-rites. 13/12/2010.
2. Aung San Suu Kyi: *Freedom From Fear, and Other Writings*. Edited with an introduction by Michael Aris, (New York and London: Penguin Books), 1991, p. xvii.

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Inventing the Gods: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Ethical Imagination

FRANK STEWART

I

The Los Angeles-based poet Chris Abani, a Nigerian by birth, tells a story about his father's people. "The Igbo," Abani says, "used to say that they built their own gods":

They would come together as a community, and they would express a wish. And their wish would then be brought to a priest, who would find a ritual object, and the appropriate sacrifices would be made, and the shrine would be built for the god. But if the god became unruly and began to ask for human sacrifice, the Igbo would destroy the god. They would knock down the shrine, and they would stop saying the God's name. This is how they came to reclaim their humanity.¹

"Every day," Abani adds, "all of us here, we're building gods that have gone rampant, and it's time we started knocking them down and forgetting their names. . . . All it requires is to recognize among us—every day, the few of us that can see—that we are surrounded by people like those in my story."

Abani's story is a parable for our present situation, of course—the worship of false and harmful gods of our own making. And as in Abani's parable, our task as world citizens is to try to frame our wishes so that they make us fully human in the present, produce the framework for an ethical covenant with the future, and ensure a degree of self-reflexive vigilance, so that we can recognize when our wishes cause harm.

Who and what are the gods we have given our loyalty to? Which of them have required blood sacrifice, and which must be knocked down and forgotten? "All it requires is to recognize them," Abani says, but of course that is the difficult, urgent, and terrifying point. Unless our wishes are wise, again and again we will treat like gods our misguided desires and nightmares.

The intention of this brief essay is to nominate certain false gods for extinction, and to underline the importance of the ethical imagination as a means and methodology

for framing the wishes that will create a more humane, less bloodthirsty world.

I am not speaking here of the gods of any particular religion. Abani's story is a parable, as is my meditation on it; he speaks of gods with a thousand faces. Particular gods will do to make a point, but the universality of the issue transcends the particular. I wish to assert early on that one of the necessities in formulating the wishes of our better natures is that we keep in mind the distinction between the literal and the parabolic, the doxological and the metaphorical. The gods we need to repudiate have been fashioned by ourselves, they are idols with faces of stone (or gold, etc.) and with incantatory voices that are all too human. Their high priests speak in the tongues of the gods, but they echo voices that are already familiar to our souls, or else we would not so readily understand and respond to them. As the authority of the gods in Abani's parable expand in power, they make anything possible, including the rite of human sacrifice. In the case of such gods, their demands are believed to be good because they are godly, rather than godly because they are good.

My first nomination for extinction are the god of nationalism and its near twin, patriotism. No gods were more responsible for the atrocities of the last century. Neither religious fervor nor political ideology (though these demons are surely implicated) was ever as unruly and lethal. In his 2008 essay "What Have We Learned, If Anything?" historian Tony Judt points out that, despite being on ideologically opposing sides, the most efficient killers of World War Two were the nation-worship of Hitler's Germany and the Father-worship of Stalin's Soviet Federation. National Socialism convinced Germans to draw sharp distinctions between the nation's true (Aryan) citizens—who had rights and legal protections—and non-citizens, to whom these were denied and to whom anything could be done.² Within

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the geographically sprawling USSR, Stalinism, for its part, identified nationalism other than that which carried official sanction with treason, and the punishment was deportation, starvation, and execution by the millions; in the end, not even the surrender of one's will to the Patria, Papa Stalin, could defer death.

One of the problems that accompany nationalism, Judt points out, is that it is almost always based upon a false narrative, and is therefore threatened by facts and authentic memory; national unity is constantly on the offense against alternative histories, deviating voices, and inappropriate questions. When a nation's unity is based on grievances or shame—that is, on narratives of victimization or (often unspoken) victimizing—the nation's official historical narrative is most rigid and rote; being vulnerable to empirical truth, it is acutely watchful for, and deals severely with, the appearance of any form of imagination: a subversion (Latin: "a turn from below") which gives rise to forbidden wishes.

Thus it is not only facts and empirical truths that are dangerous to the gods of nationhood and patria, but also memory, wishes, and dreams. "Nations are necessarily exercises in remembrance and forgetting," Saumya Gupta writes in a recent essay on Indian nationhood. "They remember through ritual commemoration and forget through collective amnesia."³ Nations attempt to solidify their official narratives with public memorials; the deaths of particular individuals or groups become the public property of the living, who are free to interpret in marble and stone the meaning of their deaths. Memorials reduce the deaths of many to numbers, and can become "an instrument in the international competition for martyrdom," writes historian Timothy Snyder. Such memorials allow a nationalist "to hug himself with one arm and strike his neighbor with the other."⁴

In his 1917 collection of essays, *Nationalism*, Tagore imagined India as a civilization that, before its independence, had been wise enough to live without memorials. "Our history has not been of the rise and fall of kingdoms, of fights for political supremacy," he wrote. "In our country, records of these days have been despised and forgotten. For they in no way represent the true history of our people. Our history is that of our social life and attainment of spiritual ideals." Tagore was writing this as Western nations were entangling India in the mechanized butchery of The Great War. He was expressing a wish— assuming that Asian cultures in general were wiser and more civilized than the West.⁵

When Tagore visited Japan in 1916, however, he reported witnessing an Asian nation's transformation from an ancient land of high moral ideals—as he described Japan—into a Westernized nation-state; that is, militaristic, authoritarian, and hungry for an empire.

By the time the war in Europe subsided, there were 35 million casualties and 17 million deaths, many of those who died were Punjabis fighting for the Commonwealth. "When this organization of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity," Tagore wrote angrily. "When it is turned into a perfect organization of power, then there are few crimes which it is unable to perpetrate. Because success is the object and justification of a machine, while goodness only is the end and purpose of man."

We might amend Tagore's judgment only by noting that for Japan, as for the West, nationalism was ultimately sustained among the populace by an appeal to higher organization of power—the Nation's identification not with its machines but with its Gods. And as we know, through Abani's parable, gods and demi-gods are shape-shifters, like Ravana, with his ten heads, some of them smiling, some pandering, and some devouring. The issue for Japan was not merely "The West" but "The Gods."

II

In 2010, in far-off Honolulu, a man dressed in everyday clothes walked out onto a nearly bare stage and began to speak:

*Tataschanudinamalpala haras
vavachchedada-dharama-arth-ayorjagatas-samakshayo
bhavishyati.*

...And then in the future
day by day
there will be a decline
in prosperity and dharma
and the whole earth shall slowly perish.

Tatascharth evabhijan hetu.

The one who has wealth
shall rule.

Kapatavesha dharanameva mahatva hetu.

The one who wears
a false mask
shall be honoured.

*Evam chati lubdhak raja
sahaas-shailanam-antaradroneeh praja samsriyashyanti.*

The one who is greedy
shall be king.

And weary of misrule

the people
shall hide in dark caves
and wait
for their days of misery
to end.

Hide
in real caves
or in the caverns of their souls.

This is, of course, the prologue to *Andha Yug*, the great post-Partition play (1953) by Dharamvir Bharati, translated into English by Alok Bhalla.⁶ On that evening in 2010, the play's major scenes were performed—actually, they were read aloud with minimal acting—by a cast of Chinese, Japanese, Native Hawaiian, and Filipino Americans (in addition to Alok Bhalla himself) before an audience of Americans. The performance was riveting, even though those who saw it had the most minimal knowledge of the *Mahabharata*, or even of the history of Partition. In this instance, the details were not essential. The gods were recognizable and familiar enough, the individuals displayed familiar enough human passions—evil, vengeance, virtue. The play required no period costumes or stagecraft.

In his *Andha Yug: Path aur Pradarshan* (*Andha Yug: Text and Performance*) Jaidev Taneja is correct that the play is of course most dense and meaningful to a South Asian audience; but it is clear that wherever it is seen there will be local meanings which are profound for the very reason that they are so familiar. As Taneja writes:

Degeneration, blindness toward values, the absence of principles, selfishness, the lust for power, characterless-ness, barbarity, skepticism, and resentfulness may belong to the time of the *Mahabharata*, the First and Second World Wars, or at a national level, the period following the achievement of independence, around 1950-51—it does not make any difference. In any country or time, the disfigurement of minds and souls, misdirection, dysfunction, and disaster are what give birth to an age of blindness."⁷

To have *Andha Yug* on a stage in Honolulu is remarkable though not implausible given our era of rapid globalization. As a result of globalization, there may well arise a number of evils, but hopefully a new cosmopolitanism may be created, presaged by what Ashis Nandy calls "a new politics of knowledge and politics of cultures." Indeed, there is potential for a new form of cosmopolitanism which will not impinge upon local interpretations of culture, and instead will simultaneously encourage "self-reflexivity and self-criticism": in Nandy's phrase, we might hope for "a pluricultural universe where each culture can hope to live in dignity with its own distinctiveness."⁸ Ulrich Beck has

correctly pointed out that such a wish will be difficult to conceptualize and bring into being. There is already a strenuous reaction against the crossing of boundaries and borders. In particular, Beck suggests that a basic feature of *globophobia*—the resistance to a new relationship among cultures, peoples, and individuals—is the "metaphysical essentialism of the 'nation'."⁹

In his 1882 essay "What is a Nation?" Ernest Renan, observed that modern nations are created by force and coercion; their man made borders along with their definitions of citizenship are continually contested.¹⁰ While "nation" implies an essential unity or homogeneity, Renan wrote, shifting borders create a citizenry with diverse identities which compete with national identity; indeed, while national identity implies or demands commonality, it may also proscribe many diverse identities.

Renan cites the hazards of having a common language or religion as the test of citizenship or national identity and loyalty. "This exclusive concern with language, like an excessive preoccupation with race, has its dangers and its drawbacks," he writes; "nothing could be worse for the mind; nothing could be more disturbing for civilization."

If we have learned anything from the twentieth century it is that the old nationalism does not work, neither externally in the realm of international relations nor internally when it is used to determine full citizenship of people within a nation's borders. As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, one high function of literature is to show us when our false gods have become unruly, and to imagine an appropriate wish upon which to build new codes of moral conduct as a covenant with the future. Whether there can be a new cosmopolitanism and a transnationalism depends partly on the globalization of the wish we are charged with making. Today, unfortunately, writers concerned with such issues are outsiders among many literary scholars in the West. The Australian ethical philosopher Raimond Gaita, in his 2008 essay "The Pedagogical Power of Love" recounts a conversation he had with a fellow professor. He writes:

Over the last few weeks I've been thinking—brooding actually—about a remark attributed to a professor of English at one of the universities in Melbourne. "Now that I've disposed of the illusion that there are great books," he told his students, "it remains only for me to dispose of the illusion that there are good ones." "Surely he was being provocative," I suggested to my informant. "No, he was quite serious," was the reply.¹¹

Yet it should be clear that literature can help us make distinctions between psychic health and destructive illusions; great books are those that can make a difference by fostering what Ari Sitas terms an "internationalization of affect."¹²

III

Chris Abani tells a story about his mother, who was English. She met Abani's father at Oxford, where they married before moving back to Nigeria in the 1950s. This was during Nigeria's struggle for independence from Britain. Abani was born in Afikpo, grew up in the 1980s, and so was old enough to be among the students who were protesting the military dictatorship that later came to power. He was imprisoned in 1985 for having written his first novel, a political thriller, at the age sixteen, and was placed on death row for a time.

The part of Abani's story I want to retell involves the run up to the Nigerian-Biafran civil war. In July and September of 1966, large-scale massacres of Igbo occurred, primarily of those living in the north. Perhaps 30,000 were killed, many of them beheaded. The southern part of the country tried to break away and form an independent country, the Republic of Biafra. The Nigerian Armed Forces attacked, and by 1968 had created a blockade around the Biafran south, which led to the humanitarian disaster that we remember from the images broadcast around the world of starving infants. By the time the Biafran independence movement was defeated, in 1970, perhaps three million people had died, most from hunger and disease.

Caught in the Biafran violence, Abani's mother—this small, white woman—attempted to escape the country with her five mixed-race little children. Abani says:

It takes her one year, through refugee camp after refugee camp, to make her way to an airstrip where we can fly out of the country. At every single refugee camp, she has to face off soldiers who want to take my elder brother, Mark, who was nine, and make him a boy soldier. Can you imagine this five-foot-two woman, standing up to men with guns who want to kill us? All through that one year, my mother never cried one time, not once. But when we were in Lisbon, in the airport, about to fly to England, a woman saw my mother, wearing this dress that had been washed so many times it was basically see-through, with five really hungry-looking kids. The woman came over and asked her what had happened. And she told the woman. And so this woman emptied out her suitcase and gave all of her clothes to my mother, and to us—and also the toys of her kids—who didn't like that very much. But that was the only time she cried. And I remember years later, I was writing about my mother, and I asked her, "Why did you cry then?" And she said, "You know, you can steel your heart against any kind of trouble, any kind of horror. But the simple act of kindness from a complete stranger will unstitch you."¹³

"All utopias and visions of the future are a language," Nandy writes. "Whether majestic, tame, or down-to-earth, they are an attempt to communicate with the present in terms of the myths and allegories of the future."¹⁴ I am reminded that Iris Murdoch observed,

"words themselves do not contain wisdom. Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom."¹⁵

We can claim the same thing for stories: we never know when the wishes in our stories might be heard by particular individuals at critical times. So we must keep telling them, even if the world seems deaf.

Notes

- * An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference "Historical Legacy and Contemporary Writing in the Commonwealth," at the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, held on October 8-10, 2010.
1. Abani Chris on the Power of Story. www.ted.com/talks/chris_abani_muses_on_humanity.html.
 2. Tony Judith, "What we Have Learned, If Anything." *New York Review of Books*, Volume 55, Number 7 (May 1, 2008).
 3. Saumya Gupta, "The 'daily' reality of Partition: Politics in Newsprint in 1940s Kanpur." In Ravikant and Tarun K. Saint, eds., *Translating Partition*, Katha: New Delhi, 2001.
 4. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. NY: Basic Books, 2010.
 5. Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*. NY: Macmillan, 1917; rpt. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Sisir Kumar Das. Vol. Two: Plays, Stories, Essays. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996.
 6. Dharamvir Bharati, *Andha Yug*, trans. Alok Bhalla. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press and Manoa: *A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, 2010.
 7. Jaidev Taneja, *Andha yug: path aur pradarshan* (Andha Yug: Text and Performance). New Delhi: National School of Drama, 1998.
 8. Ashis Nandy, "Defining a New Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Dialogue of Asian Civilisations." First published as "Defining a New Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Dialogue of Asian Civilisations", in Kuan-Hsing Chen, ed., *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1998.
 9. Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies." *Theory, Culture & Society*. Volume 19, Numbers 1-2 (2002).
 10. Ernest Renan, Lecture delivered at the Sorbonne, 11 March 1882. "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" *The Social Contract* Volume 16, Number 3 (Spring 2006).
 11. Raimond Gaita, "The Pedagogical Power of Love." Keynote Address, Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, 4 May 2001.
 12. Ari Sitas, "Beyond the Mandela Decade: Reconciliation or Polarization?" *Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Foundation Day Lecture 2010*. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. New Delhi: Teen Murti House, 2010.
 13. Abani. *Op cit*.
 14. Ashis Nandy, "Towards a Third World Utopia," in *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004. Quoted in "Affective Cosmopolitanism: Ashis Nandy's Utopia" by Pramod K. Nayar, *Working Papers/eSocial Sciences*, 2008-2010.
 15. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1992.

'The World Is What It Is': Literature and Social Change

HARISH TRIVEDI

In this brief paper, I propose to explore and arbitrate between two directly opposed view-points on what literature can or cannot do by way of transforming society and the human condition. I discuss in particular two writers from the Third World and more specifically the Caribbean, Martin Carter and V.S. Naipaul, and two from mainstream Anglo-American literature, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden.

I. Dreaming of Change: Martin Carter, Poet-Politician

It was the poet-politician from British Guyana, Martin Carter (1927-97), who wrote the simple inspirational line which served as the rubric of the conference: 'I dream to change the world' where this paper was presented. It comes from a poem of the same title and occurs at the culmination of a short passage suggesting a personal loyalty as the context of this stirring political declaration:

... if you see me
looking at your hands
listening when you speak
marching in your ranks
you must know
I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world.¹

As Carter's poetic fame remains confined to Guyana and to the West Indies, it may be useful to recover and recapitulate briefly the main facts of his life and works, and thus the fuller biographical and political context in which this statement is embedded.²

Carter grew up under colonial rule, served as a civil servant while he also joined the People's Progressive Party (PPP), and it was in the party journal *Thunder* that his first poems were published in 1950. He is now regarded primarily as a poet though there was certainly

a period in his life when he seemed primarily to be an activist for freedom and a politician. After the PPP won the first general elections in Guyana in 1953, the British rulers reasserted their control and Carter was arrested then and again in 1954. His volume, *Poems of Resistance* (1954), bears witness not only to his courageous role in the political turmoil of the times but also, paradoxically, to how his participation in politics helped him gain attention as a poet; he was, as the critic Paul Singh put it, 'jailed into poetic prominence.' In any case, this was the beginning of his reputation as 'the poet of revolution' in the Caribbean, a radical writer whose 'revolutionary voice' may subsequently have been muted but who nevertheless retained 'his fiery sense of engagement.'³

In the years of political uncertainty that followed, Carter worked for the major sugar-producing company Booker (which later instituted the fiction prize), and when the multiracial PPP split into two in 1955, with the East Indian population of the country by and large rallying around the PPP and the population of African descent breaking away to form the People's National Congress (PNC), Carter identified with the PNP though he was himself of mixed European, East Indian and African descent. In a poem written later, Carter celebrated the racial identification that he now proclaimed: 'I come from the Nigger yard of yesterday.' This is probably the poem he is best known by, a poem even more quintessentially identified with him than the one in which he says: 'I dream to change the world...'

In the evolving political scenario of Guyana, the PPP won the elections in 1961 whereupon Carter joined in vigorous political action against the government. When his own party the PNC won the next election in 1966, Carter served initially as a delegate to the United Nations and then as the Minister of Information for much of the term of the government, from 1967 to 1971. Though power did not corrupt him personally, it certainly left

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him highly disillusioned with how it does corrupt most people including those who were robustly idealistic when they had not yet to come to power. In 1978 he resigned from the PNC to join the Working People's Alliance (WPA), a socialist party now formed to fight the corrupt authoritarianism of the PNC! He was beaten up while some of the leaders of the WPA were murdered. He seemed to have grown thoroughly disenchanted and spent the last two decades of his life away from active politics, with stints as a lecturer or writer-in-residence at various universities.

It has seemed worthwhile narrating Carter's career in some detail for his would appear to be an exemplary and in fact a salutary life, so far as the juxtaposition, interrelation and the uneasy mixture of poetry and politics is concerned. He himself had indeed dreamed to change the world, and he had more than dreamed for he had actively striven to turn those dreams into reality. But just when his dream seemed to be half-way to realization and when his wish and desire to change the world was endowed with the authority and the power to do so, he found the ideal too illusory for attainment. His disillusionment and consequent turning away from politics to a life, and poetry, of relative quietude and reticence marks not his disillusionment alone, for a number of other poets from all parts of the world seem to have trodden the same path and to have arrived at the same sad awakening.

II. 'For Poetry Makes Nothing Happen': Yeats and Auden

Locally, among those who continue to read Carter and acclaim him as Guyana's greatest poet, he is sometimes compared with more widely known poets who also represented in their life and works a mixture of poetry and politics. Among the most prominent of these are W.B. Yeats and Pablo Neruda. The comparison with Yeats is evoked in some detail for example by Al Craighton in his review of a special issue of a journal focused on Martin Carter.⁵ After citing a passage from a biography of Yeats, Craighton comments: 'Substitute Guyana for Ireland and that could well be a comment on Carter.' This is a little facile, of course, but one appreciates the general intent behind the comment.

As is well known, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), one of the greatest poets of all time in the English language, was a supporter of the Irish nationalist literary and cultural movement though with conspicuously less fervour than several of his close associates such as Maud Gonne or Lady Gregory. When Ireland attained independence, he was nominated to the Senate in 1922

and re-nominated in 1925; he retired because of ill-health in 1928. When he was awarded the Nobel prize in 1923, the citation said it was partly because his poetry 'in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.'⁶ And yet, even while a senator, Yeats openly criticised several policies and actions of the new government such as those relating to Roman Catholicism.

When Yeats died in 1939, W. H. Auden wrote an elegy for him, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats, September 1939,' which is in its own right a major English poem of the twentieth century. And perhaps the most often cited single line from this poem, often quoted entirely oblivious of the context, is: 'Poetry makes nothing happen.' To provide again a personal-political context for this apparently aphoristic statement, here is a fuller extract from this long poem:

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all;
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself; Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.
Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.⁷

What Auden seems to be saying is that politics may make poetry happen, for it may provoke or 'hurt' a person into writing poetry, but poetry cannot make politics happen. When poetry has 'happened' or come into being, it continues to exist in an autonomous state, where its continued existence or survival may be thought to be a happening in itself. Thus, poetry happens and survives by itself, in isolation, in the remote and inviolable 'valley of its making;' but beyond such 'making' of itself, it can 'make' hardly anything else happen. However, its own making is, apparently metaphorically, also 'a way of happening.' The death of Yeats, in Auden's view, distinguishes Yeats the Irish nationalist from Yeats the poet. As he can no more make poetry happen, Yeats is now an empty Irish vessel.

Auden (1907-1973) was, of course, himself a political poet. He arose as a poet in the 1930s, perhaps the most political single decade in the whole history of English literature, an 'engaged' decade which witnessed a strong impact of the Soviet revolution on English literature and

in which the very term 'politics' acquired an inescapable Leftist connotation. Auden soon came to be regarded as the representative poetic voice of this period of English poetry which was to be called 'the Auden Era.' But already by the end of the decade, especially after his short seven-week foray into the Spanish Civil War in 1936, which was his first and only real brush with the actual playing out of politics, Auden realized how naive and ineffectual poetry seemed to be before the brute complexity and intractability of politics. Written in 1939, his obituary to Yeats is an acute reflection of his disillusionment. Poetry makes nothing happen, except itself – though that is in itself a blessing and a consolation, of course.

III. 'The World Is What It Is': V.S. Naipaul

As with all parts of the world, the Caribbean too abounds in a variety of literary voices. Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) of all its writers, V. S. Naipaul (1932-), takes a less upbeat and sombre view of the world, in which a radical or romantic vision or even individual human agency counts for less in the shaping of the world than larger historical forces, such as the long and exploitative domination of the colonies by European powers. His mid-career novel *A Bend in the River* (1979), which many regard as among his finest works, in fact begins with what may be considered an utterly non-euphoric and even chilling statement: 'The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.'

As a rule with Naipaul, what he seems to say and what he actually says are two different things, for the latter is often more complex and layered. Here too, the opening phrase, 'The world is what it is,' may seem to be a fatalistic or cynical statement, imbued with a sense of resignation that devalues human agency, and the frame syntax of what follows seems to reinforce precisely this sense: 'men who are nothing... have no place in it.' But all this is seriously qualified if not up-ended by the parenthetical phrase which specifies that men who are nothing are those who have meekly and without resistance submitted to their own marginalization and disempowerment; they are men 'who allow themselves to become nothing.'

This striking opening sentence thus turns out to be not a denial of human agency but an affirmation of it, a statement not of resignation but instead of resistance and opposition. The world will do what it can to turn some men into nothing, but only those men will become nothing who let themselves be turned into nothing – and, by implication, not the others who can put up a successful resistance to the world, men who can, to evoke the title

of another book of Naipaul's, make their way in the world. Throughout his writing career, Naipaul has depicted the wretched of the world with unremitting realism, registering acutely the debilitating physical and psychological effect on them of colonial and racial oppression. This is in contrast to a pious or falsely buoyant view of the Third World which is often not only unrealistic but indeed patronising.

As the novel unfolds, a dialogic polyphony of voices begins to be heard which further complicates what one may have initially taken to be the import of the title and the opening phrase of this novel. A specially privileged character named Indar, modelled in some details on Naipaul's own life such as his education in Britain, and keen to 'make his own way in the world' (French 385), at one point delivers an impassioned speech to the hero of the novel, Salim:

I'm a lucky man. I carry the world within me. You see, Salim, in this world beggars are the only people who can be choosers....The world is a rich place. It all depends on what you choose in it. You can be sentimental and choose the idea of your own defeat....We've been clinging to the idea of defeat and forgetting that we are men like everybody else....I'm tired of being on the losing side....I know exactly who I am and where I stand in the world. But now I want to win and win and win. (Qtd. in French 385)

Contrary to appearances, this is not so different after all from Carter's heart-felt cry for radical transformation. If anything, Carter's was a 'dream' while Indar's hard-headed project looks rather more implementable. There are in literature many ways of perceiving the world and registering the fact that it is, inevitably, always changing and amenable to change. Different writers may stand at different political angles to the world and these may bear simple sloganistic labels, but the expression in literature of even a simple political position is made infinitely more complex and rich through the mere fact that literature is not a slogan on the wall. On the other hand, literature can only talk about change and depict change but not be the change. It is in this complex sense that poetry makes nothing happen, that the world is what it is, and yet one can dream to change the world, and poetry can be that dream. As Yeats said (or, more accurately speaking, cited, as an epigraph), 'In dreams begin responsibilities.'⁸

Notes

* Paper presented at the 30th Annual West Indian Literature Conference on 'I Dream to Change the World: Literature and Social Transformation,' held at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, 13-15 October 2011.

1. Text as quoted in the *Trinidad Express*, 15 October 2011. It is a

- measure of both Carter's current obscurity and the metropolitan bias against literatures of the Third World that the full text of the poem is difficult to find even on the net. Incidentally, Carter is not among the twenty-five Caribbean authors included in *The Arnold Anthology of Post-colonial Literatures*, ed. John Thieme (London: Arnold, 1996), 936 pp.
2. This summary narrative of Martin Carter's life and works is based mainly on <http://www.jrank.org/api/search/v1?css=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.jrank.org%2Fjrankweb%2Fresources%2Fcss%2Fsearch.css&css&s=0&1=10&ci=1328&q=martin+carter>; accessed 10 September 2011.
 3. <http://www.martincarter.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 16 September 2011.
 4. Al Craighton, 'The Mob at the Door: A "Biography" of Martin Carter,' in 2001Guyanaundersiege.com, accessed 16 September 2011.
 6. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1923/. Accessed 10 September 2011.
 7. 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats, d. Jan. 1939,' in *W. H. Auden: A Selection by the Author*, the Penguin Poets series. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958, pp. 66-67.
 8. Epigraph to W. B. Yeats, *Responsibilities* (1916); cited from 'An old play.'

The Poetics and Stylistics of Nirmal Verma: From the Grammar of Indefiniteness to the Subversion of Gender Oppositions

ANNIE MONTAUT

Nirmal Verma, who spent his youth in Shimla and the Summer Hill, before later becoming a fellow of the IAS, has explained in numerous essays the specific function and intrinsic quality of art and, especially, literature, in particular Indian literature¹. His theories have in the past repeatedly been discarded as an artificial desire to invent roots for himself in the Indian tradition in order to legitimate a novelistic style that is largely made up of foreign influences.² The view that Nirmal Verma's novelistic art is an adaptation of European technics and notions is indeed quite widespread in the Indian literary establishment.³ These numerous evaluations leave behind the impression that Verma is a Hindi writer who writes in Hindi about Western (English) themes, structuring contents and characters according to Western literary principles,⁴ particularly the new novel, where "characters often do not have names, and their motivations and feelings remain shadowy".⁵

The reputation of the author now (he was awarded the Jnanpith distinction in 1999) has certainly made the judgments about his work less critical and has even led to some sort of admiration for his ideology of art, making him into a kind of Sartre or 'maître à penser' of his generation. Yet, such enthusiasm is often of dubious origin as the wish to reinforce a Hindu perspective is an important motif for some of his supporters. However, reasoned comparisons of the theoretical essays and the text of his novels have been rare and restricted to two recent papers, both from 2000 (Prasenjit Gupta and Annie Montaut). The latter is mainly devoted to matters of form and, like the former, deals with the contents and narrative structure of the text rather than with its style in the phrastic meaning of the term. What will be at stake here, as is has been in these two papers, is the resolution of the implicit or explicit contradiction between the essays as a purely Hindu worldview and Verma's fiction as a

Western form invested on westernized figures and westernized intrigues or, to phrase it more adequately in a western guise: the absence of a proper story.

A sample of a theoretical program within the narrative offers even more insight since it is both, implicitly, a philosophical/theoretical program and a practical illustration of that program involving the material (here scriptural) devices implicated in the concrete realization of the artist's program. Such a sample can be found in *Ek cithrā sukh* (further on ECS, *A Rag called Happiness* in English translation).

I will therefore start with an explanation of the content and formal explanation of this short sample, then develop its main formal devices by analyzing some crucial extracts of the novels, eventually relating the results of the analyses to the "philosophical" background displayed in Nirmal's essays.

1. Still life: a lesson in 'gazing'

In the novel mentioned above, the episode of the lesson of how to see is introduced by a project, if not a full fledged program, of being a writer: "I will remember, I will write it in my dairy". This is followed by an outline of a scene observed from the room on the *barsati*: "Bitti was hanging the clothes (...) and I."⁶ It is quite striking how the three dots (quite frequent in Nirmal Verma's fictional writing) link both first the observed scene to the "I", and then the "I" to his favorite game (*khel*) which triggers the memory of the drawing lesson. This punctuation also has another effect: it makes the word to stand in isolation, like an island suspended between two silences, cut off from what precedes and what follows, while at the same time connected to the neighboring sequences as an iconic announcement of what will follow. Knowing that the whole structure of the novel is made

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to disclose, within the main protagonist, the inner “I” (*maiN*) who observes the events in the third person (“he”, *vah*) and is transformed into a writer by writing from memory and by reliving the events, having left the deserted scene at the end of the novel in a Proustian structure,⁷ we cannot overestimate the impact of this short piece of poetics within the overall economy of the novel. Such a meta-narrative injunction to (see) describes the writer’s stance in a novel aimed, among other goals, at describing the genesis of the writer. Let us first re-read the passage, which carries on with the third person right after the quote mentioned above, and right before taking us into the (lesson)⁸:

vah apne bistar par letā thā. Kitnī bār vah yah khel apne se kheltā thā, jaise vah duniyā se kahī bāhar se dekh rahā hai, shām, chhat, bittī aur dairī – ab unhē nahī jāntā. Vah unhē pahlī bār dekh rahā hai. Uske Drāing māstar klās men kahte the –

he was lying on his bed. How many times had not he played this game with himself, as if he was looking at the world from outside, evening, roof-top, Bitti and Dairy – now he does not know them. He is looking at them for the first time. His drawing master used to say in the classroom —

dekho, yah seb hai, yah seb tebul par rahtā hai. Ise dhyān se dekho. Sīdhī ākhō se — ek sunn nigāh sūī kī nok-sī seb par bīdh jātī Vah dhīre-dhīre havā mē ghulne lagtā, gāyab ho jātā. Phir, phir, acānak patā caltā – seb vahī hai, mez par, jaise-kā taisā – sirf vah alag ho gayā hai, kamre se, dūsre larkō se, mez aur kursiyō se – aur pahlī bār seb ko nāī nigāhō se dekh rahā hai. Nāgā, sābut, sampūrṇ... itnā sampūrṇ ki vah bhaybhīt-sā ho jātā, bhaybhīt bhī nahī – sirf ek ajīb-sā vismay pakar letā, jaise kisīne uskī ānkhon se pattī khol dī hai (p. 19).

look, this is an apple, this apple is on the table. Look at it with attention. With right eyes – an empty look pierced the apple like the head of a needle. It/he began to slowly dissolve in the air, disappeared. Then, then, suddenly became aware – the apple is exactly there, such as itself – only he/it has got separated, from the room, from the other children, from the table and the chairs – and for the first time looks at the apple with new eyes (a new look). Naked, entire, complete... In such a wholeness (completion) that he became kind of frightened, not even frightened – only a somewhat strange wonder seized (him), as if someone had lifted a bandage from his eyes.

What strikes the reader about the formal structure of this short passage, of the whole writing process, is the density of specific stylistic devices making it a microcosm: the shifting reference in the pronominal system, the repetitions, the use of the so-called short (truncated) imperfect sometimes called indefinite or poetic imperfect, the very peculiar system of punctuation, the linking of (independent) clauses or sentences with dashes rather than with commas or full stops, an abundance of markers

of indefiniteness (comparisons, the approximation suffix –*sā*, rectifications such as “frightening, not even frightening”), a number of formal devices which all contribute to create the position of standing aloof (*dunyā se bāhar, alag*) and the empathy described in this fragment as the correct attitude to look at things in order to write about them/describe them.⁹ It is significant that the passage occurs in the novel immediately after the decision to transform the experienced feeling into a written experience through the use of diary which is given to the boy by his dead mother as a tool for precisely seeing and remembering and thereby transcending death. It is therefore all the more obvious that the right vision, which makes remembering possible and allows a memory to be written, has to do with life and death, as art generally has in Nirmal’s perception.

Along with the formal structures of this paragraph, which are in a way seminal throughout Nirmal’s writing, some highly loaded words deserve a more detailed comment, in order to locate the whole (lesson) in the global body of the author’s philosophical/aesthetical statements mentioned in the introduction (before coming back to it in conclusion). Among these are *dhyān* and *sīdhī*. *dhyān*, which literally means (attention), is also the word used from medieval times till today to indicate the concentration a devotee seeks in order to meditate on a deity and reach a further state of union with the divine. As for *sīdhī*, a feminine adjective, it literally means (straight, right) but is also related to the yogic powers (cf. the noun *siddha*, which indicates an utterly accomplished person or some sort of saint endowed with spiritual powers) or the inner realization of the self and of true knowledge.¹⁰ This makes it obvious that the type of perception involved in the lesson appeal to a specific way of looking, whether it is named *nigāh*, *ākh* or *dekh* in Hindi. Perhaps we can relate it to the ritualized *darshan*, but the text makes no use of the word *darshan*, neither in this passage nor elsewhere, as it avoids direct explicit analogies with the religious or philosophical vocabularies. Attempting to get at the sacred is not done through of ready-made categories in the novel but is the result of the very immanent acts and words as they get transcended into their bare intrinsic self. That is also hinted at in the frequent use of the word *sunn* (empty, dumb) and is further emphasized by the use of words with a rich alliteration such as *sūī* the needle, *sī* the approximative suffix, or *seb* the apple.

What is of special interest is of course the effect of this intense, absolute gaze, literally piercing (*bhūd*) the apple to reach at its inner nature: the apple begins to dissolve in the emptiness, while the pronoun which replaces it (*vah*) is also the form used for the boy, making both viewer

and viewed interchangeable for a moment in a first reading. Once dissolved, the apple suddenly appears in its absolute wholeness, which is paradigmatically equivalent to its nakedness, its integrity and firmness, while again the ambiguity of the pronoun *vah* temporarily connects the viewed object and the viewer. A special gaze is thus required for the object to appear in its very self and in its own being (i.e.: undistorted by the observer), and this specific perception can only come about when someone is himself detached (*alag*) from all the present contingencies (other pupils, table and chairs). The viewer looks from nowhere or from outside the world (free from worldly contingencies), and thus perceives the object for the first time because he has freed his vision from the attachments that are socially or psychologically or historically conditioned, like a “blindfold” (*pattī*) before one’s eyes. This kind of perception is also described as almost frightening; an emotion that is immediately corrected into another fundamental aesthetic emotion: amazement.¹¹ The seeing for the first time, “playing” as if one is not aware of what has previously been seen in the observed scene is then a “game” which is as childish as it is philosophical.

As for the object that is put before the pupils to observe, the apple, it too belongs to the well known tradition in the training of western still-life painters¹², but this tradition is here renewed (nativized?) by the words that are used to describe it. The apple, while disclosing its pure object-ness in a literally wonderful way, becomes part of a process. This process, the perception that unites the perceived object and the perceiver through the act of perception itself, is a classic reference in the theory of meaning and grammar as well as in the theory of aesthetics in Sanskrit. Besides, the way the object has to be perceived echoes the pictorial perception of Raza (2002, 2004) in his theory of *bindu*, the focal point, which amounts to reaching the inner spiritual truth of an object once the ocular, superficial perception is transcended by the artist’s concentration (*dhyān*). In Nirmal Verma’s novel, this happens once things are perceived correctly. Then the ‘still life’ is subtly distorted into a vibrating life, things becoming living entities and active participants, again a subdued reference to the classical vision of the cosmic world in Indian philosophy.¹³ Further on in *Ek Cithrā Sukh*, after the suicide of an important character in one of the last chapters, when the boy is already becoming an adult and a writer, and when the fusion of his “I” and his “he”.¹⁴ allows a “you” to appear in the shifting process of (de)identification, objects are also described as active entities endowed with a consciousness of their own, a crucial feature for this world of inter-relatedness to connect “I”, “he” “it”, the self, the other, the world.

vahā ab koī nahī thā. Koī nahī thā. Sirf vah thā, jo ab māī hū...

Durghatnā kī bhī ek ātmā hotī hai. Yah māīne dekhā thā. Dekhā thā, māī thīk kahtā hū, kyōki uskī gandh āpas kī cīzō ko bhī patā cal jātī hai aur ve apnī-apnī jagah se uthkar tumhē gher letī hāī... aur tum unhē hakkī-bakkī nigāhō se aise dekh rahe ho jaise unhē pahle kabhī nahī dekhā (p. 140)

Now there was nobody there. Nobody was there. He only was there, who is now I...

Catastrophies have their own soul. This I have seen. I have seen, I say it, because even the things around become aware of their smell and get up from their place to circle around you... And you look at them with dumbfounded eyes as if you had never seen them before

2. The central episode of ECS: approximation and comparison

The scene of the Allahabad fair takes place at the beginning of the last third of the novel (pp. 98-100) and features just one reminiscence among many others, but this small piece gives the book its title. There is also another reason to consider this scene as vital in the global economy of the novel (and use it to observe its stylistic texture): it explicitly raises the question of rebirth, being cut off from family and social support, and, concerning its form, it mixes short dialogues with (poetical) sequences that are equally short, which reflect a perception that is strongly reminiscent of the one depicted just before the lesson in perception.

The boy, who has already been staying with his cousin Bitti for a few months in her *barsati* at Nizamuddin, sometimes feverish and sometimes better, observing Bitti’s friends in their theatrical activities as amateurs, spends his time reading a book about a missionary and a panther. He wanders around in the neighborhood and remembers his days in Allahabad, his home town that he left because of a persistent fever. Among the memories that continue to recur, is that of his mother’s death in the hospital in Allahabad, that of the fair with his cousin, Bitti when both visited the strange spectacle of a dwarf who was stripped of all his clothes except a few rags as a result of his walking and running in the cold wind of the fan in the circus tent. This spectacle was shown to them as an answer to a question asked by Bitti: “what is happiness like?”. Right after that, just before leaving the fair ground, they step in for the last round on the giant wheel and are forgotten by the manager, who has not seen them when he stops the machine.

koī unhē nahī dekh saktā? ve adrishya hāī...ve kahī ūpar hāī, havā aur

andhere mē, ek dūstre ke andhere mē jakṛe hue, shahar kī roshniyō, gharō, aur ādmiyō ke ūpar jahā kabhī ve rahte the, bahut pahle, kisī dūstre janm mē [...] vah bīc andhere mē baiThā thā, na nīce, na ūpar, samūcī duniyā se kaṭā huā

- Bittī, kyā tū kartī... tum karte ho?

- mujhe patā nahī... lekin aisā samay zarūr rahā hogā jab hamē koī nahī jāntā hogā, merī matlab hai...

Nobody can see them? They are invisible... They are somewhere above, in the wind and the dark, frozen in each other's darkness, above the lights of the city, the houses, the men, where they have once lived, long ago, in some other life (...). He was sitting in the middle, in the darkness, neither below nor above, cut off from the whole world.

- Bittī, do you believe in previous birth?

- No, I don't... Do you?

- I don't know... but there must surely be a moment when nobody knows you, I mean...

A long (one page) dialogue follows, on the question whether people who are reborn in one single life can change identity and life in this rebirth, in order to "leave/quit themselves". Then the boy asks her cousin what she would like to do later and she answers she would like to be like the dwarf – "clad with rags (*cithre*)!" exclaims the boy, and his cousin answers – "they were not rags, they were happiness".

The description following the dialogue belongs to the often mentioned poetic suggestiveness of Nirmal's style and particularly this "controlled epiphany, impressionistic evocation of setting (...) virtually impossible to emulate.¹⁵ Let us try to analyze first how the "evocation of setting" is produced at the phrastic level at least, since it is the level most commonly ignored when commenting on Nirmal's poetic virtuosity. Part of it occurs before the dialogue sequence, part of it between the two main dialogued sequences. In the first setting of the frame (the first lines quoted above), "high" in the sky (*ūpar*), one expression is repeated three times: *andhere mē* "in the dark". The third occurrence, which at the first reading seems to occur as a precision (*bīc andhere mē*), in fact opens on a more precise indication of the location that apparently contradicts the very first setting ("*ūpar*"), since it is now specified as being "neither low nor high". The notion of "middle" (*bīc*) then appears as a trigger for the creation of an inter-space, both high and not high, a space where contradictions are suspended since it is itself transcending the differential categories ("*na...na*") in a distinctly advaitin formulation (*neti...neti*). It is from this

position that the required detachment ("cut off from the whole world") is obtained, along with the "invisibility": the two kids in the empty space are *adrishya* "invisible", and what they can still see (city, houses, men) appears to them as belonging to a previous life, while at the same time the outside darkness changes into a shared inner darkness (*ek dūstre ke andhere mē*), transforming and balancing the outside and the inside. Repetitions are not just a pattern that is used to musicalize the narrative, they induce a subtle twisting of notional categories which is further developed in the second attempt of "setting the frame", half way through the dialogue:

use kuch samajh mē nahī āyā, kintu us rāt bīc havā mē bait, he hue use sab kuch sac lagā thā, asamabhav lekin sac, candnī rāt mē peṛō ke nīce ek khel jaisā, jismē jo dikhāī detā hai, vah nahī hai, jo sacmuc mē hai vah dikhāī nahī detā.

he did not understand anything, but sitting in the air of that night he felt as if everything was true, impossible but true, like a play under the trees in the silvery (moon-lighted) night, in which what is visible does not exist, what does exist is not visible.

Again the in-between position, this time, in-between the air, is used to create the place where intellectual incomprehension changes into the feeling (*lagā*) of truth, a realization comparable to the wonder at the dissolved apple. This feeling, involving only un-referential pronouns (*kuch nahī, sab kuch, jo* "nothing, everything, which"), hence relying on a basis of indefiniteness, amounts to shifting and opposing the categories of the visible and the truth (words each repeated several times), so as to convey a deliberate turning of the focalized viewpoint, just like the boy's usual game (as if he did not know, as if he had never seen). The comparative expression *ek khel jaisā*, "as in a game", emphasizes the other devices for approximation (*aisā lagā*), building the scenario of a game which is not really a game, and more generally posits blurred categories in order to dissolve the very notion of clear-cut categories and to suggest the inter-space as the only point from which to observe truth. It has long been observed that Nirmal Verma makes a profuse use of such expressions as "X ko or *aisā lagā (jaisā)*", "X felt like / as if", "had the impression that", or "it was like". The psychological interpretation of hesitation, indeterminacy, while focalizing on the inner subjectivity, is a secondary effect of the high frequency of similar expressions, which mainly create the space for an adjacent category or notion. Whether it is a metaphor or a comparison (introduced by *lagā* or *māno*) or a comparative clause, all these devices present the referent as double (one signified for two signifiers), inaccessible by means of a single clear-cut wording, requiring to be

hinted at (suggested) by other representations, questioning therefore its sheer referentiality and direct intelligibility. In a distinct yet similar way, the approximation affix *-sā*, originally a contraction of *jaisā* (< Sk *sadrishya* “looking as > resembling” < verbal root DRSH/DARSH), which in Hindi can be suffixed to nouns, adjectives, participles, with an attenuative or approximate meaning (Montaut 2004b: 254-6), transforms a notional category into a wider and vaguer one with blurred contours, that is, a notion which is not precisely categorizable.

This is a kind of re-birth within this birth which opens the way to a different, clairvoyant life, linked to the quality of being invisible and unknown to the others, detached, beyond the secure parameters of measure, society, time and space (*ghar chorṅkar* “having left home”).

And then right after this piece of dialogue already set in such a specifically “evocating” frame, occurs a short piece of poetic description:

vah bhaybhīt-sā hāsne lagā (...) [Bitti] *kā svar itnā halkā thā ki andhere mē jān parā, jaise vah kisī soāpn kā chilkā hai, jo uske hāth rah gayā hai... tārō kī pīlī chāh mē kāmptā huā – use nice kī taraf khīctā huā, jāhā Illāhābād ke itne vars bekār tukrō kī tarah havā mē ur rahe the...*

kind of frightened, he started laughing (...). Bitti’s voice was so light that it seemed in the darkness as some peeling of a dream which had remained in his hand... shivering in the yellow / pale shadow of the stars – pulling him down, where all the many Allahabad years were flying in the air like useless bits and pieces...

How this the poetic dimension obtained here? No particularly poetic word except the vagueness of the “dream” in its Sanskrit equivalent (*soāpn*), no great metaphor, no elaborate phraseology or metaphor. But this single sentence, further de-articulated by the punctuation (suspensive marks, dashes), is right from the beginning framed /lit on the background created by the boy’s state of mind: *bhaybhīt-sā*, the very word associated with the feeling of wonder, which creates an expectation for what follows. What follows is in the dialogue Bitti’s answer regarding “happiness” and rags, and the way it is reverberated in the narrative by the boy’s reaction. This single sentence, describing the boy’s emotions at his cousin’s answer, is both a comment on the last, crucial words, as well as a projection of this truth onto the boy’s relationship with the world outside and the narrator’s writing. We remain in the repeated location of “in the dark” with the recurring use of comparative clause (*jān parā jaise* “looked like”) and nominal expressions (*kī tarah* “like”). The voice, made the outer shell of some dream, then made immaterial, further recovers materiality when described as shivering or trembling in the boy’s hand,

and this trembling is in a way taken from the twinkling light of stars by means of a chiasm. The whole scene becomes strange (a suggestion of the metaphysical / aesthetical wonder) because words are slightly displaced, either by a trope or by an apparent inadequacy (*chilkā* “peeling”, *chāh* “shadow”): the selection of the improper word is a well-known impressionist device (the French symbolist poet Verlaine claimed it, along with unbalanced prosody), and this “*anaucitya*” so to speak, is handled by Nirmal Verma with great mastery. A dream has no *chilkā*, but the *chilkā* makes it physically sensible that the boy is left with a *shes*, a remaining (?), a left over in both psycho-analytical and physical (the echo, *dhvani* of the voice) meanings. Similarly the “pieces” (*tukrā*) are deliberately presented as a bizar metaphor for years, by means of the most undefined segmentable object and a very banal word which has practically no meaning except that of ‘broken object’. The very notion of brokenness, unconnectedness, uselessness is what matters here to re-create and give fresh life to the worn out metaphor of “gone with the wind”. To distort it too, since they are not exactly gone with the wind and forgotten, they are half forgotten half part of the surrounding wind, as is the contingent pieces of the past for the detached person.

Last but not least, as far as formal devices are concerned, the punctuation of this sentence prevents the reader from operating hierarchies in the syntactic levels and clauses; on the contrary, flat pauses, which oppose the logical demarcations between clauses and especially the lowering tone of end marks, create here not only a rhythm but also a melodic line with almost no peaks and mainly silences (...), a silent breathing, a space for internal echoes to reverberate. Assuming that standard punctuation in a written text is a marker of logical junctures and helps in interpreting logical dependencies, we are dealing here with a process of de-intellectualization, allowing for a parallel reading with a non-logical interpretation, a relation of equivalence and not of dependence and hierarchy which best suits the register of feelings than that of intellect.

3. The incipit of *Lāl Tīn kī chat* (now on LTC, *The Red Tin Roof*): the “atonal” punctuation and the de-temporalized imperfect

The one and a half page incipit of LTC is particular in many respects: the formal division of the book makes it an incipit of the first section (“In one breathe”, *ek sās mē*) rather than of the whole novel, before chapter one among the seven which make this first section, none of them bearing a title. But section two (“Above the town”, *shahar se ūpar*) has no title (it consists in seven chapters, with,

again, no title), and section three (“Beyond consolation”, *tasallī se pare*), has only one chapter¹⁶. Yet this incipit bears the title of the novel itself, *Lāl Tīn kī chat*. Another peculiarity is the use of the tenses and punctuation: 16 dashes (among which 6 in the first six lines), 3 suspensive marks, 1 question mark, 1 exclamation mark, for only 24 full stops. An opening in the imperfect is in no way strange for a novel, nor is the interruption of such a static and descriptive frame or background by an event in the preterit (simple past), which also appear in the novel: such preterit forms occur in paragraphs 4, 6, 8, 10, 11. The dominance of the imperfect, however, has two particularities, both related to the Hindi language itself. The first one is not stylistically marked since it is the regular habitual and progressive imperfects which are formed with the imperfect of the verb can be used as an auxiliary (*thā, the, thī, thī* are gender and number variations). If such a form itself is unmarked, combined with the massive use of the copula or existential verb (with the same form), as is the case right from the first sentence (*sab taiyār thā* “everything was ready”), the result is a particular emphasis on the static aspect. Both copula and auxiliary polarize each other, and both are polarized also by the same auxiliary *thā* used with a past participle to denote a resultant state: *mūh khulā thā* “his mouth was open”.

The second peculiarity, this one stylistically marked and occurring almost only in written texts, is the alternative form of the imperfect, without copula: *phail jātī* “expanded, extended” (instead of *phail jātī thā*), *lagtā* “seemed” (instead of *lagtā thā*). Some authors use it less (Alka Saraogi for instance) than others, but none use it more than Nirmal Verma does. Given the craftsmanship and controlled mastery of his writing, this is very likely to have some meaning.

This tense is identical in form to the present (rather unaccomplished) participle, except in the feminine plural.¹⁷ This adjective-like form (nominal category) has often been considered to convey more of a habitual sense than the regular “general” or “habitual” imperfect.¹⁸ However its occurrence in the incipit (p. 8), quite representative of the other occurrences throughout the novel, does not denote particularly habitual processes or states.¹⁹ Its first occurrence in the fifth paragraph (*havā caltī*) is chained directly on actualized imperfects (*leṭar-bāks laṭak rahā thā* “the letter box was hanging/dangling”, *jaise ... jhūl rahā ho* “as if ... was swinging”), which describe the actual situation at a specific moment – the time of departure. The short imperfect then describes a process that may be repeated (“every time when the wind was blowing”, “at each wind blow”) but within the short span of this specific sequence when everything is getting ready

for departure. During this limited duration the door may be repeatedly flapping in the wind (*to vah hilne lagtā*), but not more repeatedly than the previous long imperfects in the above context, and the light sound it diffuses (*ek dhīmī-sī āvāz phail jātī*) inducing the pony to look around with its tired watery eyes (*apnī thakī dabdabāī ānkhoō se dekhne lagtā*), all in the short form of the imperfect, is definitely not connected with a specifically habitual notion.²⁰

However, this flapping in the wind introduces a future leitmotiv of the novel and is then the beginning of an indistinct series. Moreover, this initial occurrence, within the syntactic diptych of temporal-dependent and main clause, one clause being located only in relation with the other, therefore none being externally stabilized, marks the process, even if not really habitual, but de-temporalized in a way. The serialization and the de-temporalization converge here to extract the process out of the actualized temporal frame of the narration. Hence its effect of “vagueness”, blurred contours, and poetic impressionism, which is consistent with the formal nature of this tense (a participle, more nominal than verbal). It is consistent, too, with the other participles in collocation with the various imperfects of the text. The first paragraph contains a number of nominal and participle clauses, very loosely related to the main verb, and indeed presented as independent clauses (*Sab taiyār thā. Bistar, potliyā – ek sūtke* The hold-all, bundles — a suitcase),²¹ or clauses hanging in a sort of syntactic vacuum due to the dashes (*tattū ko rās thāme* – “holding the reins of a pony”). All such devices converge in producing an interruption of the narrative sequence, introducing a kind of pause, on a flat, atone melodic level, detached from the running course of events. The first chapter (p. 16) gives a more canonical illustration of the use of both imperfects, since the short form occurs there for marking habits. But, similarly, such habits are more habitual than the ones marked by the long form. Both kids Kaya and Chote wait for their father to come at night and kiss them in their bed. The whole page describes his coming and their state of mind. The first paragraph contains two sequences in the short form, each chained on a previous long form. The first centers on the actions performed by the father, the second on Kaya’s expectations and fears. In between long forms occur, although the temporal frame is exactly the same, because the viewpoint shifts towards the inner state of the children. This subtle shift (here in the viewpoint, elsewhere in the scenario described, in the focus, the topic, the character or the actions presented in the foreground) is enough to break the continuity created by the short form as an indistinct, quasi nominal, static, theater of blurred events. The short form creates this

absolute absence of saliency so specific of Nirmal's gift for representing an impressionistic shadowy suggested world.²²

One of the most representative poetic passages of the novel, when Kaya comes back at night to her uncle's house and finds the veranda lit like a magic ship, also exhibits a similar mix of nominal clauses, dashes, and short imperfects (along with comparative structures such as mentioned above):

vah zine ke pās āī, to pāv thithak gae. Sab kamroō kī battiyā jal rahī thī.

Kāyā ko ek bahut purānī kitāb kī foto yād ho āī – andhere pānī se kharā jahāz. Navambar kī rātō mē, jab havā sāf hotī.²³ vah makān sacmuc jahāz lagtā thā. Lambā galiyārā dek-sā dikhai detā – vahā hameshā ek mez aur kuch ārām-kursiyā parī rahī thī. Garmī ke dinō mē vahā cācā ke mitr tāsh khelte the, khānā-pīnā bhī vahā hotā thā. Lekin sitambar ke mahīne mē ve shahrō kī taraf cal dete. Galiyārā ujār par jātā. Mez, kursiyā, phūlō ke gamle bītī huī garmiyō ke khandahar-se dikhai dete. Cācā jab kabhī bāhar na jāte, to der shām tak vahā baithe rahte. Bilkul akele. Mez par ek botal, ek gilās, pānī kā ek jag... aur sāmne Sājaulī ki battiyā... jo do pahārō ke bīc jagmagātī rahī. (p. 135)

She went near the stairs, and then felt her legs freeze. All the lights in the rooms were lit.

Kaya remembered a picture in a very ancient book – a ship standing in the dark sea. In the nights of November, when the air was pure, the house really resembled a ship. The long veranda looked like a deck – there were always a few chairs and a table there. In summer, Uncle's friends used to play cards there, eating and drinking was also served there. But in September they used to leave for the city. The veranda suddenly became deserted. Table, chairs, flower-pots looked like the remnants of the gone summer. Whenever Uncle did not go out, he used to sit there late in the evening. Absolutely alone. A bottle on the table, a glass, a jug of water... and the lights of Sanjauli in front... Which glimmered (were glimmering) between two mountains.²⁴

The entire end of the sequence is in the short imperfect, as is the evocation of the veranda like a deck in November in the beginning (after its initial location in the long imperfect). In between is the evocation, similarly habitual in a similarly vague past, during summer. The short forms occur right at the time of the exodus of friends down to the city. They are maintained although the topic shifts from the house to its owner and resident and to the landscape far away: what unites the whole sequence is the atmosphere of solitude, emptiness and gravity, the magic beauty of this deserted deck, which makes the house look like a ship in the ocean at night, aloof and luminous (whereas the summer playful atmosphere,

although made of serial enumerations of actions and habits, does not fit in the mental frame suggested by the opening comparison).

Such a technique of suspension – which delocalizes the sequence from the temporal frame—is not purely a play of form used to subvert the classical orientation of the narrative time, from a “before” to an “after” by means of articulated steps. What is at stake here is this particular space out of, or beyond the rational and phenomenological points of reference which build the ordinary time-space frame. The goal in Nirmal's fiction as in Indian classical philosophy, of being a writer, an artist, a “seer” (*rishi*), is to reach this literally extraordinary time-space which is outside time-space while proceeding from time-space, echoing Nirmal Verma's obsessive longing for immanent transcendence²⁵.

The same novel (LTC) contains some passages which almost theorize this kind of longing or at least attach this perception to characters (the protagonist Kaya for instance) who describe such feelings as true knowledge and understanding. One of these occurs just after the death of the dog Ginny, run over by a train in a tunnel under the eyes of both Kaya and her mysterious cousin Lama. The sequence is described in a combination of simple past (narrative preterits) and progressive imperfect, before it suddenly shifts to the short imperfect in describing the running dog toward the tunnel: “she did not look aside, as if she had found (present perfect) this mysterious treasure she was looking for (progressive imperfect). *Vah na udhar dekhtī na idhar, jaise vah jo chipā khazānā dhūndh rahī thī use mil gayā ho* (49).²⁶ That is already a quite unusual use of the short imperfect, since the dog is obviously not described in a routine activity but only during this single and last run towards the tunnel. And suddenly after this very unusual tense pattern, the narrative shifts to the present: a present uttered by an untemporal (or untemporalized) Kaya, since she is the Kaya remembering for ever the event. *Yah main dekh saktī hū, yād kar saktī hūn, duhārā saktī hūn. Ginnī nīce utartī huī rail kī patriyō ke āge*, etc.: “This I can see, I can remember, I can repeat. Ginny going down in front of the rails” (50).²⁷ Then again the narration uses the regular pattern for the imperfect (*aur main kharī thī* “and I was standing”), with an “I” that is dissociated in a way, since the girl listens to her own shriek as if it was not hers (*mujhe kāfī hairānī huī ki māī khud bāhar se apnī cīkh sun rahī hūn khud apne ko apne mē bhendte hue*: “I was quite amazed [discovering] that I was myself hearing my own scream from outside, tearing myself in myself”).²⁸ A very long sequence follows, with nominal expansions, describing the sudden silence after the disappearing of the roaring smoking train, after which nothing was left (*kuch bhī sheṣ, nahī rahā*), only “a speedless

speed/ a motionless move/ goalless goal, where there is no time, no death, no night, no day, only a life running between the rails, a ball of wool" (*ek gatihīn gati, jahā na samay hai, na mrityu, na rāt na din, sirf patriyō ke bīc bhāgtī huī ek jān, ūn kā golā...* (51)).²⁹ Then again, after this speedless speed, directionless direction, leading to emptiness, transcending both the categories of oriented space and time (no day nor night, no time) and death, the description goes on in the present: *jo smriti nahī hai, vah smriti banne se pahle kī smriti hai, jo mere lie ek bahut purānī rāt ka svapn ban gayā*, "which is not memory, it is memory before memory is born, which became for me the dream of a very ancient night".³⁰

This memory which is beyond memory since it is before the making of memory, building for the girl a primeval night beyond the very concept of beginning, before any process, before temporality itself which transforms the things experienced into the memory of them, introduces a distinctly non narrative dimension in the text. If the first occurrence of the present may be explained by the grammar of comparison, this is not the case in the second clause, which is not relative but independent (*vah smriti banne se pahle kī smriti hai*). The relative clauses that follow this equation (*na...na*: beyond time and death), although they seem to link up with the narration in the long imperfect ("where I came back often and often, sat down, waiting": *jahā māī bār-bār laut, ātī thī, baiṭh jātā thī, pratīkṣā kartī huī*), in fact evoke a Kaya born after this traumatic experience and out of its transcendence in the *na... na* space of "beyond". Immediately after the sequence of these two regular imperfects (habitual in the strong meaning since the routine is a life long one for Kaya), short imperfects occur, disclosing the content of the repeated drama, demarcated by a simple comma from the preceding sequence: "the mouth of tunnel remained open, first came the smoke then the noise of the wheels, then the anxious call coming from behind the bushes, Ginny, Ginny, Ginny... which slowly changed into a dying whisper (*surang kā munh khulā rahtā, pahle dhuā ātā, phir pahiyon kā shor, phir jhariyō ke pīche se ātā huā becaīn kātar bulāvā, Ginnī, Ginnī... jo dhīre-dhīre martī huī phusphusāhat mē badal jātā*.)

This rewriting, rehearsing or repeating the whole episode in a de-temporalized way echoes the initial present: *māī dekh saktī hū, yād kar saktī hū*, "I can see, I can remember", in a quasi-performative way since this particular remembering which is beyond memory amounts to the very act of writing this precise sequence commented above. Performing the process of remembering is describing the "remembered" event in the way it is described by the de-temporalized and de-localized Kaya. Ordinary (psychological) memory indeed

requires a sequence, a first occurrence of the event, and a second 'visit' of the event. A thing happens, and then is revisited, within the oriented sequence of time. In contrast with this view, there is no first occurrence of the event here that could be a beginning for the process of memory. This is why memory is said to be before the making of memory. This is also why the clause is in the present, obviously not a narrative present nor a general present. If there is a name for such a tense in Nirmal, it would be the present of eternity, or the absolute present, as he himself repeatedly names it in his essays on culture and art (*cirantan vartamān*).

Memory, therefore writing (since Kaya, like Munnu, is, at times, speaking in the first person and in the present of discourse when she becomes a philosopher), is transforming the event which previously 'happened' within an ordered sequence with a before and an after, into a non event, a never happened because it was always already there. In other words, the contingent accident is converted into absolute truth and eternity. It gives the impression of a "presentification" of facts in the mode of the absolute. So that we could call this type of short imperfect the imperfect of eternity or of pure present (*cirantam* in Nirmal's terms).³¹

Interestingly, the next paragraph after the remembering of the "accident" leads to another conclusion of this metaphysical (or physiologica?) experience: "then it seemed to me that on that afternoon I had seen Lama for the first time" (*tab mujhe lagā jaise us dupahar ko māīne pahlī bār Lāmā ko dekhā hai*).³² And this vision of a familiar person "as if" it was the first time she was seen, as if we had never seen her, of course echoes the lesson of seeing described in the beginning or the paper.

4. The background: cognitive frame in Nirmal Verma's essays

A writer who writes a narrative but discards the chaining of events as meaningless in front of the primeval memory, memory before memory, time which allows no day no night, equated to non-time, in the same way as motion can be equated to motionlessness (*gatihīn gati*), looking till the point of evanescence of the object seen in the seer, is discovering the "I" up to the point where it stops being "I" and identifies with "he". He cuts himself off from the world and becomes a nonseparate part of the whole world. This clearly sounds like a series of unsolvable paradoxes, proceeding from an unsustainable stand if looked at from the "western" rational and logical framework.³³ And clearly not from the traditional "Indian" viewpoint. What is this viewpoint like, according to Nirmal Verma?

Let us start with the first paradoxes, dealing with time. The contemporaneity (*samkālintā*) of past within present, says Nirmal, is an intrinsic part of traditional cultures, and has been particularly preserved in the Indian ethos.³⁴ Those societies which are traditional in nature have absolutely no need for the past. My feeling of being part (*ansh*) of the Indian culture does not only rely on being linked with a piece of ground which is called India, but rather derives from the fact that I live in a time (*samay*) which is eternally contemporaneous to me³⁵: whereas cultural identity has been “given” to the West with historical conscience, as the realization of culture as a collective historical culture objectivable in churches, museums, dates, etc.. This uneasiness to separate past from present and future is in fact a typical manifestation of what some call a mythical mentality (*mithakīya bodh*). In another essay devoted to the relation of “time, myth and reality”, Nirmal criticizes this vision of a time oriented and progressing from past to future, which values change, and substitutes a natural process like a never ending wheel (*cakrākār, anavarat silsilā*) “which past and future are both intertwined with the eternal/never-ending present.

This does not mean that the distinct categories of time do not exist but they do not move from a beginning to an end, their motion takes both within a smooth global vision – a motion (*gati*) that we can call a pause (*virām*), where there remains no longer any difference between motion (*gati*) and motionlessness (*gatihīntā*). This ‘eternal present’ is not something like a playful dream, nor is its consciousness limited to prehistoric populations (*adimanus, ya*). This consciousness of time has always been present in man (as the consciousness of nature: *prakriti kā bodh*), but historical time (*aithihāsik samay*) tries to suppress (*dabne*) and crush (*kucalne, bodh*), although it never completely succeeded in crushing it. Man always kept it alive as a dream and memory buried in his intimate self, where distinctions of time, melt in the mystery and miracle of death and rebirth”, (SH: 191-1); and this echoes what Freud has called the suppressed impressions (*dabe hue prabhāv*) hidden in the layers of subconsciousness.³⁶ It also reminds Nirmal Verma of the concept of memory in Proust, where the flow of events condensed into a never ending present (*nirantar vartamān*) where there is no beginning and no end. Such a conception of time can be called the time consciousness of nature, that is especially strong in Hindu myth but in no way the exclusive property of Indian culture. It is now the role of art in mythless societies to fulfill this part, *kalā mithak kī bhūmikā kamobesh adā kar saktī hai* (SH: 192).

These reflections can help as the philosophical background for the conceptions alluded to in the novel

in the form of some formulations like “*gatihīn gati*” or the negative definition of “memory before memory”. They make evocations of prehistoric, primeval times intelligible in the context of locating past in relation to present (Kaya’s meditation). They also confirm that the classical framework of space-time so indispensable for a rational thinking no longer holds true, nor does the very notion of category (*shreṇī*), distinction (*bhed*) and limit (*sīmā*), the latter two obviously constitutive of the first.³⁷

Moreover, if we try to understand this feeling of “being part (*ansh*) of the Indian culture”, and read for instance the essays on colonization and postcolonization entitled *Dhalān se utarte hue* (Going down the Slope), we find a clear opposition between a Western(ized) objective rational concept of culture and an Indian subjective empathic conception, which resisted to some extent the imposition of rational objectivity with British cultural domination over India. First starting with the classical metaphor of the body as a window that opens for the soul on the knowable world in western philosophy, Nirmal brings against it the Indian viewpoint, where the world is not seen through a window, but rather the window is the world, as well as the soul. This means that the visible object (world) is not distinct from the viewer (the soul) and the instrument (window). “The difference between body and soul is as artificial in the Indian tradition as is the contradiction (*antarvirodh*) between outside and inside. What our ancestors had seen from the window centuries ago – trees, rivers, a vast unchanging landscape of animals and men, is the same that I see, and I discover that I am not simply a spectator (*darshak*) of this surroundings (*paridrishya*), rather am I in the middle of them (*unke bīc*), an indifferently part (*abhinn āsh*) of them. There was a feeling of union (*sanlagatā kā bhāv*) which naturally conjoined me to the time and the world (*kāl aur vishv ke sāth*). What matters is that this inner relation (*andrūnī sambandh*) between the various components of the external surroundings is as important as the feeling of oneness / onesoulness (*ekātmā kī bhāvnā*) between the viewer (*dristā*) and the viewed (*drishya*). The person who sees and the object which is seen, their mutual relation (...) is a better key of alacrity (*sphurtidāyak*) and empathy or sympathy (*ātmīyatā*) than the separation of viewer, viewed, man and landscape into distinct fragments as does European culture (*alag-alag khandō mē vibhājīt karke*) (DH, p. 72). This is this whole mental state which has been challenged by the British colonization.

With this kind of background we can now accept as “natural” (*sahaj*) the lesson of seeing commented in section 1.³⁸ The dissolution of the object viewed (apple), allowing for a possible ambiguity (*vah*) of viewer and

viewed, points to this *ekātmatā* which is more philosophically expounded in the essays, and echoes classical texts on knowledge and language (from Bhartrhari to Abhinavagupta).

Such perceptions result in a very particular conception, too, of the self and the other. To start with, the self in the traditional Indian mental framework is both ego (*aham*) and its wider form the self (*ātman*), and since this wider form (*brihattar rūp*) is an all-encompassing form, including nature, animals, human beings, trees and rivers, history and society,³⁹ there can be no conflict between self and other: “the other is not in a relation of opposition (*virodh*) with the Indian self, the others are part of its “I”, of its existence” (*uske astitva, uske ‘māi’ mē shāmil hāi*)” (Dh p. 74). The world resulting from this assumingly ‘Indian’ tradition is indeed a world of inter-relation where everything is linked to and intertwined with the whole universe, is part of it, is in a way it and radically differs from the assumingly western world such as shown in the modern western novel dynamic motion but no orientation and no center.⁴⁰

This world-view is inseparable from a state of detachment, again a word and concept loosely related by the West to the traditional Indian way of life and thought, most commonly with the sadhus who are its popular embodiment. Characterizing this state, Nirmal uses two words, both traditionally specialized in the description of such modes of life (or rather stages of life, namely the last two ashramas, the eremitic *vanaspratha* and the ultimate detachment) aiming at the most desired achievement, *mokṣa* (*mukti*),⁴¹ the freeing of the self from worldly boundaries, and from the very consciousness of such boundaries. The words used by Nirmal are *nirvāiyaktik*, detached, and *taṣasth*, indifferent, along with their nominal derivation *nirvāiyaktitva*, *taṣasthtā*. The first word is derived from *vyakti*, individual, singular person. In Nirmal’s world, *vyakti* belongs to the world of separate entities (monadic beings) and therefore is the opposite of *manuṣya*, man, human being. *Vyakti* looks towards *aham* (ego), whereas *manuṣya* looks towards *ātman*,⁴² and *manuṣyatā* “humanness” only, enables one to reach *sampūrṇtā*, with the feeling of wholeness or holism. Achieving the *nirvāiyaktik* state, literally disindividualized, means transcending the boundaries of *vyakti* (egocentered), leaving the worldly distinctive limits and social structures responsible for distinctive differences and categories. It means reaching the world of connectedness where *manuṣya*, humanity in a holistic sense (see below) is available. From this viewpoint, the creator, creation and creature are no longer distinct entities, in the same way as the viewer, viewed thing and process of vision are fused in oneness.⁴³ There is no longer

a contradiction between the cutting off from the world as in the episode of Allahabad fair or of the drawing lesson, and getting united to the whole universe, a seemingly paradoxical path which is in fact deeply rooted in the high and low Indian traditions of saintliness since the medieval *bhakti* traditions. Similarly, *taṣasthtā*, often translated by “indifference”, impartiality, is derived from the word *taṣ*, shore, bank of a river or seacoast, and being *taṣasth* means standing on the bank of the river, being on the shore, between earth and sea, on the limit therefore neither in this nor that part of a divided space, connected with both. That is how in Nirmal (as well as in the many various implicit traditions nourishing his world-view, detachment becomes equal to non-separateness and connectedness.⁴⁴ This process is obviously made more difficult to grasp in a translated language, such concepts as *aham/ātman*, *vyakti/manuṣya*, *nirvāiyaktik*, *sampūrṇ*, *akhaṇḍit*, being ill-rendered by English equivalents such as “I” or “ego”, “self” or “soul”, individual/man or human, detached, complete or holistic. As rightly pointed by Nirmal Verma in *Bhārat and Europe* (2000: 72-3), after Coomaraswamy whom he often quotes, such “seminal concepts” are “untranslatable”, and their English translation has often been the cause of deep misunderstandings.

Nirmal precisely defines such an opposition (*vyakti / manuṣya, ikāi / sampūrṇtā*) in relation with the two mental attitudes he associates to respectively the Western novel and specially Saul Bellow on one side, and Indian literature on the other side. If we turn our back to the individualistic mentality of the Western new novel, he says, “we will suddenly feel as if we leave the world of units and arrive into the world of relations. Here all living creatures and animate beings are intertwined, inter-related, and not only those animate beings who breath but also the objects which externally/superficially seem to be inanimate. In this intertwined world, the things are linked with the men, the men with the trees, the trees with the animals, the animals with the flora /vegetation, the flora with the sky, with the rain, with the air. A creation which is living, animate, breathing at every second, vibrating – a creation complete within itself, within which humanity too exists, but the important fact is that humanity is not in the center, is not superior to everything, the measure of everything; it is only related and in its relation(hood) it is not the autonomous unit which the individual has been considered to be till now, on the contrary, it is complete in exactly the same way as the other living beings are complete in their relations, and in the same way as man is not the support of creation, similarly the individual is not the support of man; we leave the world of ends and means and enter the world of holism”.⁴⁵

If Nirmal assigns such a potential to literature, and more generally to art, as opposed to the philosopher or the mystic, it is because art in a modern society may assume a function similar to that of myth in a traditional society. This is especially true for the conception of time and motion, so different in the non modern and in the modern mentalities (*cf. supra*). Contemplating the stone sculptures in Elephanta, Nirmal says: “in art there is this immobile speed (*sthir āveg*) where we live in a single time/together, simultaneously, in time and past, life and death, history and eternity (...). It is as if Shiv had centered on his face the male power and the beauty of Shakti, both (centered) on a peaceful, detached, fixed point – in an extraordinary fusion⁴⁶— which is not simply a halt, but it is such an invisible point (*bindu*) where all motions stop moving”⁴⁷. As the mythic view-point, the aesthetic view-point for Nirmal is connected with the wish for worldly life and desire, made as much precious as the abstract path of the philosopher or the mystic. Hence his protagonists, very much human, suffering and soothing their pain by the discovery of contemplation, but never totally relinquishing the world of humanity, pain and happiness, memory, events and forms (ie: the world of *maya*). This passion of life (*āveg*) is simply transcended, by decantation through the fixed gaze of contemplation, into its stable, ultimate or focal, point (*atal bindu*).

Now, the last question is how much Indian is this world-view, and symmetrically how much Western is the opposite one (the world of segmentation, units, distinctive categories, logical oppositions, positive orientation, history, etc.). In other words, how solid is the opposition East/West, terms that Nirmal keeps using as commodities although he repeatedly suggests that the holistic view may not be a unique property of India (DH. p.24). It is obvious that “Western” values have to a considerable degree been integrated in the Indian way of looking – leading to a kind of schizophrenic stand, which the author illustrates in a striking way when describing his visit to Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal: on one side the tribal art displaying myth-like creations, on the other the avant-gardist wing displaying modernity quite similar to western contemporary art. A tentative answer to this last question will serve as a conclusion for this stylistic study.

Conclusion: a genderly ambivalent “orientalism”

Now coming back to the type of negative statements quoted in the introduction, we may see something else than existential doubt and westernization behind the “vagueness” and shallowness of the characters. Superficially, this disregard for strongly marked figures

and rich individualities against an equally rich and significant social landscape, echoes the Western Nouveau Roman or New Wave style, as well as the Indian *Nai Kahānī*, which has been blamed for its westernization. Yet, the specific contextualization of these fuzzy contours disclosed above changes the meaning of this “vagueness” obtained from the low characterization (lack of name, motivations, feelings) of the characters.

“The effect of all this vagueness is a langorous passivity”, says *The Weekly Publisher Review* (1991). And this term is rightly emphasized by Prasenjit Gupta (2002) in his introduction: “this langorous passivity sounds orientalist in its overtones”. However, the way Gupta himself develops “orientalist”, by emphasizing the “restraint” as a “manifestation of some essential Indianness”,⁴⁸ may surprise the reader familiar with Said’s notion of “orientalist”, but the end of the quote he uses to illustrate this essential indianness makes it clearer: “Restraint is the keynote of Verma’s fiction, reflecting the paradoxical nature of the Indian character: emotional and often volatile, yet diffident to the point of repression”.⁴⁹ Diffidence, emotionality, volatility (unreliability) indeed fit the conventional stereotype of the oriental nature.

What is generally assumed under the tag (*ōriental*), along with a (langorous passivity), is indeed the feminine, or childish, or both, component in a male subject, therefore weak, self-contradictory, unreliable, deceptive, illogic, unfit for manly pursuits and unaware or not interested in the principle of reality, displaying no ability for mastery and no interest in it. This negative image, strongly present in the nineteenth century colonial discourse, but also internalized in the native reactions to it, relates in fact to a simplified polar opposition. The masculine principle, polarized as superior, is identified with colonial domination, and its (other) with the subjugated weaker principle (female principle, or eventually child world). This construction is in no way specific to the Indian scenery, as Ashish Nandy strongly demonstrates: from times immemorial, the drive for mastery over men proceeds from (a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the nonhuman and the subhuman, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical, and the modern or progressive over the traditional or the savage) (Nandy 1998: VI). What may be more specifically Indian is the complex reference in both colonial and colonized discourse and in the post-colonial reactions to the various layers of the Hindu scriptures and traditions. Kshatriyahood has for instance served as an image of masculinity to be contrasted with the general “regression” and weakness of nineteenth century India.⁵⁰ The wish to regain male strength in some

of the nineteenth century reformist models is a clear evidence of this internalization of the (oriental) stereotype as well as the opposite attempt to acquire a suitable image according to western values, that is, a more (manly) image: this whole process of redefining Indianness is based on “the perception that the loss of masculinity and cultural regression of the Hindus was due to the loss of the original Aryan qualities which they shared with the Westerners” (Nandy 1998: 25), which amounts to acknowledge the superiority of the (Western) model.⁵¹ This model ranks first manhood on the hierarchy then womanhood and last effemination in man (*klībatva*).

But the more interesting (and the really specifically (Indian)) reaction to the colonial construction at that time is the Gandhian model. As noted by almost all observers –Nandy quotes mainly Lannoy but others too – Gandhi had in his physical aspect and use of images or symbols a strikingly childlike appearance. His emphasis on passive disobedience too is more on the child/woman side than on the man’s side of the colonial polar opposition mentioned above. Instead of opposing the colonial image by asserting the manly values in Indian culture, he subverts it in a double way: within the polar opposition woman/man, he grants superiority to womanhood (*nāritva*) on manhood (*puruṣatva*), adding a third term at the bottom of the hierarchy, which is *kāpuruṣatva*, the lack of masculinity or cowardice. The second and for our purpose the more interesting subversion is the second model, which makes both *puruṣatva* and *nāritva* (equal on the hierarchy) inferior to androgyny, the ability to transcend the man/woman dichotomy. This construction, being borrowed from the great and little traditions of saintliness in India, was really fit to the requirements of Indians in the early twentieth century, hence its strength (Nandy 1998: 52).⁵²

This is the model that we find subtly enacted in Nirmal’s protagonists and main characters, none of them belonging to the clear-cut categories of adulthood,⁵³ all of them diffusing this oft noticed (passivity). It is a striking evidence that both Gandhi and Nirmal in his essays display a very similar world-view in their non modernity: for Gandhi too, time is an all embracing present rather than a succession of clearly oriented events, memory is a collective memory grounded on a diffuse feeling of belonging, rather than on a clearly preserved collection of facts and things “of the past”. For him too, myth is indistinct from or superior to historical chronology, “circuminventing, Nandy comments, the unilinear pathway from primitivism to modernity, and from political immaturity to political adulthood”. For him too, a certain vagueness, as opposed to the clear objectivity of rationality, characterizes the belonging to a traditional culture, Indian in fact.⁵⁴

Although coined in distinctively Indian words and notions, the general concepts of what is better called non-modernity than pre-modernity are certainly not exclusively Indian nor even Eastern. As Said has shown, this (other) which the colonial discourse has constructed into the image of the non-west has once been part of the medieval European consciousness. Although it is far more present and still vivacious in India than in Europe in spite of the internalization of the Western model of modernity there, it may not have completely been uprooted in Europe itself, and this is why reading and translating Nirmal to-day in Europe is also maintaining alive this part of our non modern selves: reading our own story against the grain of the modernist revolution and postmodernist market hegemony.

Notes

1. See section 4. A significant selection of these essays has been translated in English under the suggestive title *India and Europe* (Verma 2000).
2. In a conference in Paris by Alok Rai during the festival Belles Etrangères in 2002, who saw this radical opposition between Premchand, naturally rooted in the traditions of India yet writing in a (progressive) style inspired by the Western social realism, et Nirmal Verma, uprooted and therefore in need of inventing roots.
3. Ranging from Indranath Madan (1966: 136-38), Lakshmisagar Varshneya (1970: 69 sq), Chandrakanta Bandivadekar (1977: 399) to, more recently, Jaidev (1993: 48-49).
4. Similarly the German critic Gaeffke, a classic reference, speaks of a (language of the existentialist post-war jargon) (1978: 69).
5. Review of *The Crows of Deliverance*, *Publishers Weekly* 238.36: 53, August 8, 1991.
6. p. 19. My own translation, in order to keep a very literal and almost word-to-word equivalent, including punctuation, which is generally never kept in the translations (an exception is the French *Le Toit de tôle rouge / Lāl Tīn kī chat* at Actes Sud, 2004, but not *Un Bonheur en lambeaux / Ek chīthrā sukh*, Actes Sud, 2000). Kuldeep Singh’s translation gives: “Bitty was hanging clothes out to dry (...),” the ‘*aur māī*’ sequence is skipped.
7. See the analysis of the structure of the novel in Montaut (2000). One of the threads linking memory, death, rebirth and vision with writing (and art) is the diary given by the young boy’s mother, whose death he repeatedly sees again and again.
8. Note on the transcription of Hindi sounds: *ā, ī, ū* transcribes long vowels, underscibed dots transcribe retroflex consonants and the tilde (*ũ*) is for nasalization
9. Most of these devices are omitted in the English translation: “Lying on his bed, the boy played at his secret game. He imagined that a part of him was outside, looking in at Bitty and Dairy, the diffuse afternoon light, the ceiling, as if he’d seen none of these before. At school, his art teacher used to say: ‘Look, this thing on the table is an apple. Look at it carefully. Look at it straight so you see nothing else whatever.’ Slowly, then, he would feel hi seye draw to a needle-point and stick into the apple even as the rest of him seemed to fall

- away. The other boys in the class, the desks, the chairs – all disappeared. Only the apple remained. In its nakedness, fullness, wholeness. It was all so frightening and wonderful, as if he were seeing an apple for the first time ever, as if a blindfold had come unstuck.” (pp. 14-145).
10. *Sīdhā*, with long first vowel, is the tadbhav for *siddh* (with the classical vowel lengthening compensating the simplification of medial consonant cluster)
 11. Cf. the eight, later nine and eleven, fundamental emotions in the classical theories of *rasa*, in the most clearly presented synthesis of Kunjuni Raja.
 12. Nirmal Verma has always had a special interest in painting, partly out of a personal taste, and partly out of a family surrounding since his brother is the well-known painter Ram Kumar.
 13. Fully explicit in Nirmal’s essays (see section 4), but showing without metadiscourse in his fiction.
 14. The writing alternately focuses on the same character as a first person narrator or as a third person observer in the sequence.
 15. “His mastery of succinct details, controlled epiphany, and impressionistic evocation of setting is virtually impossible to emulate” (Aamer Hussein 1991: 22).
 16. There is a definite decrescendo in the structure, the first section occupying about half of the book and the last one a bare fifteenth of it.
 17. Where there is an additional nasalization (*thī* vs participle *thī*), similar to the simple past form compared with the past (accomplished) participle. As a predicate, the form is homonymic to the counterfactual mood (Montaut 2003, 2004b).
 18. Montaut 2004: 100-104. Van Olphen (1970) after Lienhard (1964) and Platts (1876 [1967]: 145) makes it a form conveying habits, routine, remote past or duration. Similarly, Nespital (1980) labels it “imperfect habitual” in his 39 “temporal grammemes”. “Routine imperfective” in McGregor, the form is according to him used to describe “not actions presented as actually occurring, but actions presented as those which would typically occur in given circumstances” (1976: 171). Kellogg (1876: 233-234) is as often the most perceptive, both in calling the form an “indefinite imperfect” and emphasizing the lack of “reference to any particular time”, with no equivalent in English, so that “*maī ātā hū*” means according to his translation as well “I came” as “I would come”.
 19. Which, as is well known, are represented by a specifically marked form, the grammaticalized “frequentative” aspect with *karnā* (do) as an auxiliary following the main verb in the past participle.
 20. The printed translation gives: “a tin letter box hung on one nail from the gate, like a dead bird suspended upside down. It creaked rustily, rocked by the wind”, p. 4.
 21. Which is not reproduced in the printed translation: “Everything was ready: the hold-all, bundles, and one suitcase”, p. 3.
 22. Even within a series of apparently similar reminiscences, as in page 17 when the little boy remembers all the facts related to the autumnal exodus from the hill station, all processes in the short form are in a way inter-changeable, (*utrāi shurū ho jāī, cīr kī sūiyā dikhāi detī, pīlī par jāī, shahar ko dekhtā*), but the one in the long form, closing a quite long enumeration, relates to a very salient fact (*pitā kā cehrā jhāktā thā*): father’s face has so much saliency in Chote’s imagination that it breaks the continuity and prevents the use of the short forms which blurs differential features. Both sequences are respectively as follows in K. Singh’s translation: “[Chote saw what looked like swarms of ants] marching downhill in single files among yellowing pines, away towards distant cities and behind which peered one face: his Babuji’s”, p. 10.
 23. This short form in a dependant clause is located by the long imperfect in the main clause.
 24. “Seeing the lit house, Kaya recalled a picture she had seen in an old book – of a ship anchored in darkness. In the clear November night the house looked like that ship. The long veranda with folding chairs set out on it was a deck. In the summer Chacha played card here with his friends and treated them to food and drink, but they left for the plains by September. With their departure, the veranda started looking deserted. The empty chairs, the card table, the flowerpots: the ruins of a lost summer. Chacha now sat among these alone, nursing his drink, looking at the Sanjauli lights glimmering between two hills”, in K. Singh’s translation (p. 108-9).
 25. Cf. conclusion. Cf. also Rushdie, in a totally different way, in *Imaginary Homelands*, specially the chapter “Is Nothing sacred?”.
 26. “[She moved as if mesmerized], looking neither at her left nor right as though she had picked up... the scent of the cache she had been looking for all her life”.
 27. “All this I can see again, recall, repeat to myself. There was Ginny crawling down the slope, stopping short of the railway track” (p. 38 in K. Singh’s translation).
 28. “In a daze I realized that I too was screaming – even as that scream tore through me, I felt detached from myself, listening to it from the outside”.
 29. “Leaving behind nothing, a nothingness, time spinning to a standstill, a living creature running for its life between the rails, a little ball of wool”, in K. Singh’s translation.
 30. “All of which is a memory, a nightmare that keeps returning. I return to this day, and wait again by the gaping tunnel: first there is the smoke, then the roar of the wheels, the impatient panicky call from behind the bushes – Ginny! Ginny! Ginny! But that, too, subsides with the dying whimper” —
 31. Making present in the meaning the French philosopher Levinas gives to the word “presence”.
 32. Again a quite different translation in K. Singh’s: “A Lama I had not seen before rambled along...”.
 33. If such a thing as “Western” has any meaning.
 34. Even if this ethos may seem vague and more related to feelings than to objectivity (*aspaṣṭ bhāvnā*), undefined (*aparibhāSīt*) or at least not allowing historical definitions (*aithihāsik paribhāSāen*). DH, p. 70. DH will now on refer to the Essay “*Dhālān se utarte hue*” in Verma 1991, and SH to “*Shatābdī ke dhalte hue dhalān*” in Verma 1995.
 35. *jo sahaj rūp se paramparāgat hotā hai use atīt kī koī āvashyaktā nahī hai. Merī yah bhāvnā kī main bhārtīya sanskriti kā āg hū, keval islie nahī hai kī māi zamīn ke ek āsh se jurā hū jise bhārat kahte hai balki islie kī main ek aise samay mē jītā hū jo cīrantan rūp se merā samkālin hai* (DH, pp. 70-71).
 36. We may add that Freud (1929 / 2002) also, like Nirmal in the end of this essay, explicitly states the analogy between this primitive feeling (oceanic feeling, refusing the limits between inside and outside, here and there, past and present, etc.) and art (also love).

37. Both time and space perception relate to a form of consciousness (*ceṭnā*) which is indivisible, unbreakable (*akhandit*), which sees everything together, tearing through the limits of space and time (*jo kāl aur spes kī sīmāō ko bhedkar sab kuch eksāth dekhtī hai*, p. 16 “*Kāl aur smriti*”).
38. An exactly similar lesson is proposed by the abstract painter Raza (2002, 2004).
39. In N. Verma’s (1991) terms: but there is a wider, superior form of ego, *aham*, which we can call *ātman*, which is not in a relation of dual opposition with the phenomenal contingent world (*samsār*): it is, in its intrinsic truth, an element of this supreme absolute (*param*), which is somewhat larger, more diffuse and universal than social reality, to which belongs the entire nature (*prakriti*), the whole of living creatures, time and history. See also the essay “*Kāl aur srijan*”, DH p. 13sq.
40. Either socio-historical and cut off from inner realities or ego-centred and cut off from others and the world, a kind of double bind that Nirmal lengthily comments as the dead-end of the modern novel (DH pp. 22-25).
41. Both words derive from a common root.
42. In this context, *aham* is defined as “*ego kī chalnāōN aur bhrāntiyōN*” (DH).
43. Needless to emphasize the difficulties raised by such a view for a rational stand, difficulties echoed by the metaphoric formulations in philosophy and mystics, since the very use of words and sentence implies at least distinctive categories (subject / object, entity / process).
44. I emphasized the most radical contradiction (depiction of characters cut off from others, the world) but the widely commented solitude (*akelāpan*) favoured by many characters in Nirmal is part of the cutting off too.
45. ...to hamē sahsā lagegā māno ham ikāiyō kī duniyā se nikalkar sambandhō kī duniyā mē cale āe hāi. Yahā sab jīv aur prānī ek-dūsre meū antargumphit hāi, anyonyāshrit hāi, na keval ve prānī jo prānāvān hāi, balki ve cīzē bhī jo ūpar se nisprān (inanimate) dikhāyī detī hāi. Is antargumphit duniyā mē cīzē ādmīyō se jurī hāi, ādmī peron se, per jānvarō se, jānvar vānsaspati se, aur vānsaspati ākāsh se, bārish se, havā se. Ek jīvānt, prānīvān, pratipal sans letī, spandit hotī huī sristi – apne mē sampūrṇ sristi jiske bhītar manusya bhī hāi, kintu mahatvapūrṇ bāt yah hāi ki manusya sristi ke kendr mē nahī hāi, sarvopari nahī hāi, sab cīzō kā māpdand nahī hāi; vah sirf sambandhit hāi aur apne sambandh mē vah svāyatt ikāi nahī hāi, jise ab tak ham vyakti mānte āe the, balki vah vāise hī samprn hāi jaise dūsre jīv apne sambandhō mē samprn hāi, jis tarah manusya sristi kā dhyay nahī hāi usī tarah manusya kā dhyay vyakti honā nahī hāi, ham sādhan aur sādhyō kī duniyā se nikalkar sampūrntā kī duniyā mē ā jāte hāi (Dh p. 25-6).
46. Literally “absorption”: *tanmaytā*, a technical term and concept in classical aesthetics.
47. *Kālā mē vah sthir āveg hāi, jahā ham ek sāth, ek hī samay mē kāl aur kālātīt, jīvan aur mrītyu, itihās aur shāshvat mē bās karte hāi (...)* Shiv ne māno apne chehare par purus ke vaibhav aur shakti ke saundarya donō ko ek shānt, nirvāiyaktik, atal bindu par kendrit kar lyā hāi – ek asādhāran tanmayatā mē – jo mahaz tahahrāv nahī hāi, balki vah ek aisā adrishya bindu hāi, jahā sab gatiyā nishcal ho jātī hāi Dh p. 14.
48. This “langorous passivity” sounds Orientalist in its undertones; even those who appreciate Nirmal-ji’s fiction sometimes connect the “restraint” to some kind of essential “Indianness”.
49. Quoted by P. Gupta from Aamer Hussein, “Visions of India, Voices of Exile”, *Times Literary Supplement* 46.19 (Oct. 11, 1991: 22).
50. Whereas, as is now well-known, the real tradition in classical scriptures rather emphasized the power of shakti and the female principle as primary and superior (Malamoud 2005).
51. See Nandy’s account of the kshatriyazation of Krishna in Bankimchandra (25sq), of the herioization Ravana for his masculine vigour, his warriorhood, his sense of politics and historicity (20sq), of Dayanand Saraswati’s constructs.
52. While the first one enabled Gandhi to ask his followers to display the courage of the passive resistance and never fear physical or mental authority.
53. The two novels studied here have child or adolescent protagonists. The last one (*Antim Aranya*, The Last Forest, with a word for forest which specifically points to the forest as the space of eremitic life and detachment, beyond social categories and rules), stages an old dying man, and as the main protagonist, his governess who is a young man.
54. Nirmal’s word: *aspaShTtā*. See also Madan 1977 who defines the quest for hinduism as an open-ended, fluid, cultural self-definition.

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Literature, Society and the Creative Public Sphere: Towards a New Art of Cross-Fertilization

ANANTA KUMAR GIRI

We seek certainly for that sort of expression which is self-expression. When an individual feels himself hedged in he recognizes the necessity of getting a situation in which there shall be an opportunity for him to make his addition to the understanding, and not simply to the conventionalized 'me.'

G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*

Who is my audience? It took me a long time to understand that the "public" I am waiting for is the same that I am living for: humanity at large.

Raimon Panikkar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*

Literature and Society

Exploring and realizing creative relationship between literature and society is an adventure in co-realizations and transformations going beyond the logic of the fields of both literature and society. It also calls for understanding their manifold conceptualizations and realizations. Our conventional understanding of literature is that it is created by men of literature. It is not always realized that literature is part of life and society; when it is done so it is usually conceptualized and represented in a language of mirror and adaptation: literature is either a mirror of society or it adapts to the logic of society. But literature is not only a mirror of society but also a field of creative expressions and confrontations which breaks existing mirrors of society and creates new languages of self and social realizations and new landscapes of imaginations. Both literature and society are not only fields of adaptation but also fields of transcendence and transformations in which individuals and groups strive to go beyond adaptation and create new conditions of self-realization, co-realizations and social realizations. These are fields in which there is interrogation and confrontation of the existing logic of

literature and society. Literature is thus not only a field of murmuring but of grumbling and a field of contestation and confrontations of the existing grammar of society based upon a higher grumbling of self and awakened social groups and movements.¹

In exploring relationship between literature and society, the language of interdisciplinary transaction, as it happens in conventional academic corridors, is not enough. We need a new language and practice of transdisciplinary cultivation, beyond adaptation and meditative verbs of transformations. In this striving for a new language and relationship, realizing the distinction between noun and verb is crucial. In our conventional languages, literature, society as well as such important terms of personal, cultural and national identity as person, nation, writer, India, Shakespeare etc. come to us as nouns which we also uncritically use, adopt and adapt to. These nouns already from the beginning are imprisoned in a logic of possessive pronouns—this is my self, this is our literature—and any foundational critique of such possessive pronouns are met with resistance and sometimes violent annihilation. But literature, society as well as such fundamental fields of life as self are not only nouns but also verbs. They embody verbs of unfoldment, emergence and realizations.² But as verbs they are not only activist (which is the way verbs are constructed and realized in modernity) but also meditative (Giri 2009). But these meditative verbs of action, expression, communication and co-realizations are manifold-sitting, walking as well as dancing verbs of life. Literature and society are verbs of co-realizations and meditative transformations involving walking, sitting and dancing verbs (Giri 2011b). Public sphere is an important sphere in which such verbs of co-realizations and transformations are at work.

And in such transformative co-realizations, the nature of "and" plays an important role. If we conceptualize

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“and” in a logic of juxtaposition, as it mostly happens in the logic of interdisciplinarity, the terms and fields on both sides of “and” do not get mutually interpenetrated and transformed. “And” becomes a helpless presence repeating the logic of “end” (which simultaneously means end of meaning as well as ultimate end or purpose). But if our conception and realization of “and” is one of mutual interrogation, transmutation and mothering bridge then our inhabitation, meditation, dance, walk and work in the space of the “and,” the space of the middle, becomes a work of transformation—transforming a one-sided conceptualization, realization and organization of fields such as literature and society.³ While our conventional understanding and work in the space of “and” reproduces a logic of “end” and “noun,” in beyond adaptation and meditative, interrogating and mothering verbs, “and” is a space of transformations. “And” is a space of quest for infinity from the actors and fields on its two sides rather than a reiteration of the totalizing logic of totality of either of them.⁴ “And” is a mothering ground and bridge of quest for and embodiment of responsibility. In his work, *Sahitya O* [Literature and..] Chitta Ranjan Das (1923-2011), a creative seeker, writer and experimenter from Odisha, who has written more than two hundred books on different aspects of literature, society, education, and social criticism suggests such a transformative, interrogative and mothering meaning and realization of “and” (see Das 1989a, Giri 2011b). This also comes out in a joint work of co-creation in which the poetic critic and essayist Chitta Ranjan Das and poet Srinivas Udgata co-create poems and reflections on poetry together in the work *Ebam* which also means “and” (Das 2009b).⁵

Public sphere helps us in realizing such a meaning of “and” beyond the adaptive, already determined and ultimate logic of “end.” Literature helps us to express ourselves to ourselves as well as to the others and the public. Expression in the field of literature is simultaneously self, mutual and public and helps in the creation of public spheres in societies. In the creation of modern public spheres, as Jurgen Habermas (1989) himself tells us, literature has played an important role. He calls it literary public sphere. But it is one thing to talk about literary public sphere as a type of public sphere or even as a segment of public sphere and it is another thing to realize the integral literary dimension of public sphere itself. In later conceptualizations and realizations, literature becomes an integral part of public sphere through work of rhetoric, language, style of argumentation and mutual co-presence in such modes as co-walking and co-labouring.⁶ In their vision and practices, writers such as Chitta Ranjan Das, U.R. Ananthamurthy and Mahesweta Devi from India

embody this later realization of public sphere. They are tireless participants in public discourses and public spaces through speech, writing and in case of Das through regular columns in newspapers. They not only help us realize the literary dimension of public sphere but also recreate public sphere through creative and critical literary interventions.

Unfortunately our understanding of public sphere in social sciences does not fully appreciate its literary dimension and constitution. It has a very prosaic and intellectualist rendering of public sphere without realizing public drama and public poetry in it. The other limitation of contemporary social science understanding of public sphere is that it is part of an uncritical telos of modernity; originating in modernity, it can only become part of an “unfinished agenda of modernity.” Such conceptualizations of public sphere do not help us realize the work of public sphere in pre-modern and non-modern societies (cf. Giri 2002; Giri 2008; Uberoi 1996). But literature in all societies have created public spaces and public spheres for mutual communication though depending upon the nature of social arrangement and mode of government, the nature of such social manifestation of creativity has varied. In societies where creators of literature seeking critical public dialogue with their literature of protest and alternative imagination are not tolerated, humiliated and killed, meditative verbs and streams also dry up and die. Such conditions existed in the past in many societies, especially those under authoritarian regimes, and they continue to exist even in liberal modern democracies.

Literature and Society: Beyond Adaptation and Dynamics of Creative Expressions

In order to understand the relationship between society and literature, we need to understand the transformed understanding of both these fields. Society is a field which helps individuals to come together and express themselves. In sociological theorization of society, there is an acknowledgement of the fact that society is not just a field of *a priori* determination and embeddedness but also a field of self-realization, co-realizations and creative emergence (cf. Sunder Rajan 1998). G.H. Mead, one of the pioneers of modern sociological thinking and author of *Mind, Self and Society*, helps us realize the limits of the social and urges us to realize that neither “I” nor “me” is a reiteration of the existing conventions of society. As Mead tells us:

[..] me may be regarded as giving the form of the “I.” The novelty comes in the action of the “I,” but the structure, the form of the self is one which is conventional.

This conventional form may be reduced to a minimum. In the artist's attitude, where there is artistic creation, the emphasis on the element of novelty is carried to the limit. This demand for the unconventional is especially noticeable in modern art. Here the artist is supposed to break away from convention; a part of his artistic expression is thought to be in the breakdown of convention (1934: 209).⁷

Among contemporary philosophers and sociologists we also get an intimation of a post-conventional and post-social conceptualization of society. Jurgen Habermas (1990) tells us that morality is not just reproducing the conventional logic of society rather it is to learn how to think and act in post-conventional ways taking into consideration the calling of universal and universalizable justice. Alain Touraine (2007) tells us about sociology beyond society which explores the way individuals become subjects. For Touraine, becoming a member of society is integrally linked to the process in which one becomes a subject but to be a subject is to have the ability to say "no" to the existing logic if this does not allow creative self-realization. But what Touraine and Habermas have not explored sufficiently is how by cultivating the literary field on the part of self and society one can realize the post-conventional dimension of society, have the capacity to say "no" in the face of an overwhelming compulsion for "yes," and go beyond the logic of an *a priori* social. What they have not explored is how practice of creative literature can contribute to co-creating society as a field of creative expression, co-realizations and confrontation. This we find in the works of seekers and experimenters such as Chitta Ranjan Das.

From the field of literature, we also have a connected move to realize society as a field of self-expression and co-realizations. Das, for instance, urges us to realize that society has been built by those who do not conform. Personality and self for him is not just a logic of adaptation and socialization; it is a field to realize an emergent wholeness building upon one's quest for self-realization, co-realization and world realization (Das 2010). Touraine's appeal for sociology beyond society finds a creative resonance in Das who urges us to realize how boundaries of sociology are now being transcended in creative experiments and adventures.⁸

The Calling of Creative Public Spheres

We usually look at literary creativity in an individualized way but now we need to link both to fields of creative public spaces and spheres. For our *tapasya* of creativity in literature and society, we need the spheres of the creative self, intimate groups of mutuality as well as public spheres. But in each of these spheres, we continue

the modernist logic of linearity. Despite the language of sphere in public sphere our conceptualization and organization of it is linear. It is hardly a sphere where the spherical nature of our being is at work or finds an expression.⁹ In this context, we need to conceptualize and realize public spheres as manifold circles and *chakras*. Public spheres as *chakras* bring interested people together where people through creative sharing and contestation generate mutual energy. Literature can help realize public spheres as *chakras* where individuals and groups can express themselves and through processes of communicative dialogues and contestations can generate mutual energization. These *chakras* can inspire and enable the participants to bring together their vertical dimension such as quest for transcendence and horizontal dimension such as commitment to fellow beings and realizing solidarity in praxis with others.

The concept and organization of public sphere in modernity is also bound to a logic of double contingency and dualism. For example, we look at self, other and society through the logic of what Strydom (2009) calls "double contingency" of self and the other. This double contingency is also imprisoned within dualism. But now we need to bring the concept of "triple contingency" to each of these spheres. In triple contingency, along with self and other, there is also a public (Strydom 2009). But this public is not fixed, it is emergent, it is not only observing but also participating. Triple contingency does not lie only outside but also works inside. Triple contingency is also a bearer of transcendence as it transcends the dualistic logic of double contingency of self and the other.

In literature, spiritual traditions and creative imaginations we are familiar with the concept and reality of third eye. This third eye exists not only in Shiva, the meditative *tapaswee* and dancer, but also in all of us.¹⁰ Triple contingency can be linked to the work of third eye. Literature and creative public spheres can help us realize and cultivate not only the triple contingency of life thus going beyond the arrogance and exclusionary assertion of either self or other but also develop and realize our third eyes, a challenge missing in contemporary theorization of society and public sphere. Public sphere and creative meditation can help us realize both triple contingency and third eye and then move it further to the fourth, fifth and further dimensions of our contingencies, aspirations and struggles.¹¹

Life Worlds and Living Words

But for this we would have to recreate the link between what is called life worlds and system worlds through the

categories of lived worlds and living words. Our lived worlds every where are multiplex and plural but the language of life worlds and system worlds as it comes in sociology and in the works of critical theorists such as Habermas usually present a one-dimensional logic and rationality such as the primacy of rational in modernity and hierarchy in traditional societies. Life worlds every where are also subjected to dominant logic of the system world such as market, state, caste and gender. In this context, to cultivate lived worlds with their creativity, courage, transcendence and multidimensionality is a challenge which calls for us to go beyond the existing logic of life worlds and system worlds. The challenge of creativity is simultaneous: simultaneously nurturing lived worlds of vibrancy, energy, soulful togetherness and meditative solitude and living words which move us not to hatred and annihilation but to mutual blossoming and co-realizations. Both lived worlds and living words do *tapasya* for and with beauty, dignity and dialogues in the face of and in the midst of ugliness, indignity and violence.¹²

Living words work as new *mantras* of life, to put in the words of Sri Aurobindo, and embody what Martin Heidegger (1994) calls "way making movement." They just do not mirror "forms of life" but create new ways of life. They just do not reproduce existing language but create new languages of self and social realizations.¹³ They just do not reproduce the rationality of either tradition or modernity but possibly embody strivings towards what Latin American thinker Enrique Dussel (2010) calls "transmodernity."¹⁴ They are not just part of either the logic of transcendental awe in tradition or "linguistification of the sacred" in modernity (see Das 2004).¹⁵ While they seek to make the Divine and Nature part of the communicative field of humans and express it in ways understandable to modern rational mind, it nonetheless does not reduce either of them only to what is comprehensible in the language of modern rationality. It seeks to cultivate the ineffable and ever-present and dynamically moving Beyond in both lived worlds and living words while at the same time making them part of our everyday conversations. Both lived worlds and living words become sites of courage, creativity and transcendence working in between and in the margins of fear, drudgery and pull towards an imprisonment in closed walls which is often justified in the name of immanence.

Going beyond the "linguistification of sacred" (cf. Habermas 1990) in modernity and the consequent disenchantment and dualism between the religious and secular, both life worlds and living words embody new border crossing between rational and emotional, religion

and reason, nature and human, mental and supramental. The life worlds and living words embody such a new border crossing among human, nature and divine in continuously emergent ways.

Towards a New Art of Cross-Fertilization

Literature, society and public spheres are fields of lived and living worlds which have the potential of a new creativity. While our existing space and time are empty and continuously being emptied out with the logic of the system such as money, market and capital, life worlds and lived worlds help us cultivate pregnant spaces and pregnant times. Both lived worlds and living words work as seeds for a new pregnancy. Our living words can impregnate us as our lived worlds of *tapasya* can make each other fertile which is an embodiment of a new spiritual eroticism.¹⁶ Our compassion and confrontation can make us conceive new ideas and new relationships.

Our fields of literature, society and public sphere have become dry and deserted and we need to make these fertile. But for this available fertilizers from the market and external world are not adequate. We need to make them fertile through self, mutual and cross-fertilization in which our quality of life, relationships and living words play a crucial role.

It is earthworms which make the land fertile but today we need to be earthworms to each other as well as to ourselves. But once the land is fertile we would have to cultivate the land as a garden for which we need to be gardeners. But both earthworms and gardeners can remain bound only to the field thus uncritically reproducing the logic of embeddedness which also becomes hostile, opposed and violent not only to forces of emergence from the field itself but also to other fields. In this context the calling of cross-fertilization and cross-pollination calls us to grow wings and be simultaneously birds and bards, fly and sing together, wonder and wander.¹⁷ Literature, society and creative public spheres can help us simultaneously become earthworms, gardeners and birds.¹⁸ It can also help us become Socratic gadflies, as Socrates, Antigone, Gandhi, Chitta Ranjan and many other seekers and fighters of humanity have exemplified, striking the powers that be which hinders our potential, aspiration and efforts for self-realization, blossoming and world transformations.

Notes

- * Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the National Seminar on "Literature and Society: Interdisciplinary Transactions," North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, March 2010 and the workshop on "Philosophy, Literature and Social

Transformations," Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, Feb. 2011.

1. In our seminar at Shillong Professor Mrinal Miri, in his keynote address said that literature is an act of murmuring. In my presentation, I said that literature is also an act of grumbling, especially higher grumbling of self and awakened social groups. In offering this argument I am building upon the work of Chitta Ranjan Das (2010) who talks about the work of higher grumbling in personality and society based upon the work of Abraham Maslow
2. We may note here that in different philosophical, cultural and spiritual traditions, body, mind and Being are considered verbs. As Tu Wei-ming writes about body in Chinese culture and philosophy: "There's a beautiful term, *ti*, which means the body. But, that word, *ti*, can also be used as a verb. It means just my body, but also to embody. The embodiment is a process of understanding other human beings experientially as well as intellectually and spiritually" (Weiming 2000: 50). In his *Art and Experience*, John Dewey also writes about mind: "Mind is primarily a verb" (quoted in Elbridge 2000: 244-245). And theologian and philosopher Raimon Panikkar writes about Being: "Being is a verb, an action, and it has rhythm" (Panikkar 1995: 26).
3. We can note here what Deleuze and Parnet write: "It is not the elements or the sets which define the multiplicity. What defines it is the AND, as something which has its place between the elements or between the sets. AND, AND, AND [...]" (quoted in Nathan & Smith 2011).
4. This resonates with the thoughts of Emmanuel Levinas. Franson Manjali (2001) also explores such pathways in his *Literature and Infinity*.
5. So does poet and novelist Rabi Narayan Dash (2008) in his book of poems, *Ebam Kadha* (and buds).
6. While Habermasian public sphere is mainly one of sphere of argumentation I make it plural by bringing such activities as love and labor in to it. Cf Giri 2008.
7. As Mead (1934: 221) tells us:
The value of an ordered society is essential to our existence but there also has to be room for an expression of the individual himself if there has to be a satisfactorily developed society. A means for such an expression must be provided. *Until we have a social structure in which the individual can express himself as the artist and the scientist does, we are thrown back on the sort of the structure found in the mob, in which everybody is free to express against some hated object of the group.* (emphasis added)

Tabish Khair (2011: 236) from the field of literature also tells us the following which resonates with Mead's spirit:

Thus the 'individual' who is indivisible from society but this is also [...] the individual' who cannot or should not be reduced to or conflated with 'society.' It is in this creative tension that we, as creative writers and 'individual' readers, have to trace out or locate a value for literature.

8. Note what Touraine, a sociologist, and Das, a creative practitioner of literature, write about sociology. For Touraine,

One of the main themes of sociology is therefore the reversal of the conception and role of institutions. These were defined by their function in the integration of a social system. They defined and

imposed respect for the norms and instruments for the defense of individuals which enable them to defend themselves against norms. Our society is less and less a society of the subjected and more and more a society of volunteers (Touraine 2007: 191).

About sociology Chitta Ranjan shares with us the following:

The story of all real sociology is one of breaking open the boundaries. The discipline was originally bound strictly to its specific lines and limitations, and it is great that transgressions have been happening all the time. It is becoming more and more clear that society, people, do always matter more than the study of society. The older definitions and contours are fast changing and there are more and more people who are less shy and hence willing to transgress the boundaries. More mature days are in the offing and the recluses till now working in the laboratories are becoming more courageous. Yes, courage, more than anything else, always helps us to ask questions and rewrite our canons of enquiry. Intellectuals are rethinking and as it were from within more ready to revise their roles. Albert Camus has once made a remark that the intellectual's role will be to say that the king is naked when he is and not to go into raptures over his imaginary trappings. And look, all around now there are hegemonies, kings all round who are visibly naked! The intellectual's laboratory has now to come down in proximity to people where they really are, move and have their beings, suffer all the time waiting for an appropriate remedy. The academics could not as a rule do that. Shri Ramakrishna of India had once observed that "some people climb the seven floors of a building and cannot get down." But some can, he did hope, really climb and then come down. They are always of greater worth (Das 2009: 579-580)

9. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk urges us to realize the distinction between a spherical approach and a linear approach.
10. In this context, what Troy Wilson Organ writes below deserves our careful consideration:

In India looking at something from a different point of view is called 'seeing with the third eye.' Augustine, in the midst of an analysis of the nature of memory, abruptly asked: 'What third view is this?' Ad Plotinus advised, 'You must close the eyes and call instead another vision which is to be walked within you, a vision, a birth right of all which few turn to use (Organ 1987: 2).

11. This calls for cross-cultural dialogue and border-crossing dialogue between critical theory and religious and spiritual ways of thinking. It would be interesting to explore further dialogue between the concept of triple contingency in critical theory and trinity in Christian religious and spiritual tradition. For Panikkar, "Trinity is not a number but the depth and unfolding of the riches of reality, which is a living relationship" (Pikaza 2010: 119). "Panikkar thereby seeks to move beyond a form of dualism, following the best *advaita* experience (of non-dualism), opening a way to dialogue [...]" (ibid). In the same way we can realize triple contingency not as a number but as the depth and creativity of relationship beyond the dualistic logic of self and other. But triple contingency also urges us to realize that Trinity whether it is in Christian tradition or Hindu tradition is also confronted with the challenges of public—an observant and meditative public.
12. In this context, what Margaret Chatterjee tells us about different lifeworlds that we inhabit is touching:

On this side of the wall children have milk to drink at least once a day. On the other side, one *pawa* of milk has to stretch for glasses of tea for five adults plus children. A six year old girl told me this. Near the milk stall there are *mithai* [sweet] shops. This is where the bulk of the milk goes. Consciousness cries out for transformation, a consciousness imbued with conscience. Such a consciousness would grow laterally, horizontally, turning the searchlight of attention on the endless anomalies around us, the endless injustices, the lack of any sense of priorities (Chatterjee 2005: 16).

In the above paragraph, Chatterjee talks about the growth of consciousness horizontally and this resonates with Husserl's emphasis on horizontal ontology (see Mohanty 2002).

13. As expressed in the following poem:

Oh friend
You said
We need a new language
A new *sadhana* of words and *tapasya* of worlds
This is not a language of victory
Nor is one of self-advertisement and aggrandizement
Neither is it a language of doomsday
This is a language of walking our ways together
Walking our dreams, *sadhana* and struggle
(author's translation of his original poem in Odia)

14. The following quotation from Dussel (2010) helps us to understand transmodernity

Europe began to function as the "center" of the world market (and therefore to extend the "world system" throughout the world) with the advent of the industrial revolution; on the cultural plane, this produced the phenomenon of the Enlightenment, the origins of which, in the long run, we should look for (according to the hypothesis of Moroccan philosopher Al-Yabri, who we will discuss later) in the Averrīst philosophy of the caliphate of CŪrdoba. Europe's crucial and enlightened hegemony scarcely lasted two centuries (1789-1989).¹⁵ Only two centuries! Too short-term to profoundly transform the "ethico-mythical nucleus" (to use Ricoeur's expression) of ancient and universal cultures like the Chinese and others of the Far East (like the Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, etc.), the Hindustanic, the Islamic, the Russian-Byzantine, and even the Bantu or the Latin American (though with a different structural composition). These cultures have been partly *colonized* (included through negation in the totality, as aspect A of Diagram 1), but most of the structure of their values has been excluded—*scorned, negated and ignored*—rather than annihilated. The economic and political system has been dominated in order to exert colonial power and to accumulate massive riches, but those cultures were deemed to be unworthy, insignificant, unimportant, and useless. The tendency to disparage those cultures, however, has allowed them to survive in silence, in the shadows, simultaneously scorned by their own modernized and westernized elites. That negated "exterior," that alterity—always extant and latent—indicates the existence of an unsuspected cultural richness, which is slowly revived like the flames of the fire of those fathoms buried under the sea of ashes from hundreds of years of colonialism. That cultural exteriority is not merely a substantive, uncontaminated, and eternal "identity." It has been evolving in the face of Modernity itself; what is at stake is "identity" in the sense of process and growth, but always as an exteriority.

These cultures, asymmetrical in terms of their economic, political, scientific, technological, and military conditions, therefore maintain an alterity with respect to European Modernity, with which they have coexisted and have learned to respond in their own way to its challenges. They are not dead but alive, and presently in the midst

of a process of rebirth, searching for new paths for future development (and inevitably at times taking the wrong paths). Since they are not modern, these cultures cannot be "post"-modern either. They are simultaneously pre-modern (older than modernity), contemporary to Modernity, and soon, to Transmodernity as well. Postmodernism is a final stage in modern European/North American culture, the "core" of Modernity. Chinese or Vedic cultures could never be European post-modern, but rather are something very different as a result of their distinct roots.

Thus, the strict concept of the "trans-modern" attempts to indicate the radical novelty of the irruption – as if from nothing – from the transformative exteriority of that which is always Distinct, those cultures in the process of development which assume the challenges of Modernity, and even European/North American Post-modernity, but which respond *from another place, another location*. They respond from the perspective of their own cultural experiences, which are distinct from those of Europeans/North Americans, and therefore have the capacity to respond with solutions which would be absolutely impossible for an exclusively modern culture. A future *trans-modern* culture – which assumes the positive moments of Modernity (as evaluated through criteria distinct from the perspective of the other ancient cultures) – will have a rich pluriversality and would be the fruit of an authentic intercultural dialogue [...]

15. Habermas (1990) talks about "linguistification of the sacred" where sacred becomes part of ordinary language and conversation. But in this there may be a danger of reduction of sacred to language that Habermas does not explore.
16. Note here what philosopher Luc Irigaray (2002: 115-117) writes:

Carnal sharing becomes then a spiritual path, a poetic and also a mystical path [...] Love takes place in the opening to self that is the place of welcoming the transcendence of the other. [...] The path of such an accomplishment of the flesh does not correspond to a solipsistic dream [...] nor to a fin-de-siecle utopia, but to a new stage to be realized by humanity. [...] Nature is then no longer subdued but it is adapted, in its rhythms and necessities, to the path of its becoming, of its growth. Caressing loses the sense of capturing, bewitching, appropriating [...] The caress becomes a means of growing together toward a human maturity that is not confused with an intellectual competence, with the possession of property [...] nor with the domination of the world.

For Irigaray, "sharing breath" is an important aspect of this aspired for spiritual eroticism, giving birth to life and each other and making of a spiritual community. For Irigaray, "This proto-ethical plane of shared breath is the eternal germ of a spiritual community, i.e, a community of embodied individuals, caring for each other" (quoted in Skof 2011: 136).

17. A poem written by my friend Francis Regis Bouquiza about "Le Trdoubador," the wandering musicians in medieval France can be of interest. The following line from the poem in French tells us how the troubader visit from place to place:

Je suis le troubader du chemin qui me mene vers Lui
Et le passager des temps visibles, invisibles [...]

Also this poem "On Wings" by Rabi Narayan Dash (2007) can help us realize many meanings of growing wings:

When I emerged
Broken and aimless

She came out on to her terrace
 To ask if I had seen a flying cat
 And a little sparrow crying in sorrow
 If I knew leaves are already yellow.
 The world I came of, seeking
 Care, if I am I love with
 Money or work with a
 Passion for becoming
 Somebody and something
 I have already read
 'the child is the father to man'
 Sharing her words and unending dream
 I started to scream:
 'God! Return me to her,
 To child, the mother!'

About wings, Rumi tells us about its significance in the following ways: "Something open our wings, something makes boredom and hurt disappear."

18. When I present these three modes of being, I always ask for equivalent words in the local mother tongue. A Vietnamese scholar in Hanoi told me that the word for earthworm is *Konchin*, for gardener is *Kechia* and for bird *Lantivuan*. During our conversation we created a symphony of *knocking*, *kechia* and *lantivuan*.

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Exclusionary Practices: The Marginalisation of Women in State and Public Policies

TIPLUT NONGBRI

Introduction

While the issue of gender has received serious attention in the academia and policy in India the same cannot be said in the context of the Northeastern region. There is not only a paucity of studies on women the problem has further been complicated by the stereotype idea that societies in the Northeast are free of gender discrimination. Several factors contributed to this line of thinking:

1. The high concentration of tribes in the region with their supposedly egalitarian social organisation marked as it were by the relative absence of caste and class based distinctions.
2. The presence of matrilineal societies where privileged position is accorded to the female with respect to descent and inheritance.
3. Women's active involvement in the system of production thus making them less dependent upon men
4. Women's greater freedom of movement and behaviour, and
5. High incidence of divorce and remarriage particularly among tribes

Drawing inferences from these characteristics, women in Northeast India have been portrayed as having superior social status unlike their counterparts in the rest of the country

Evidence from many parts of the region has however shown that in many communities traditional institutions are not only highly adverse to the interest of women, a number of exclusionary practices are also in place which deny women legitimate access to the resources and opportunities (social, economic and political) that exist

in society. Even modern institutions like universities and system of governance with their proclaimed commitment to the principles of democracy and equality show little sensitivity to the issue of gender.

Meaning and dimensions of exclusion

Exclusion refers to a condition where some members or groups are denied legitimate access or share to societal resources and opportunities. Exclusion generally occurs in or is built into a hierarchical system whereby certain groups and categories, such as, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled tribes and women experience discrimination of different kinds. It implies, in brief, socio-cultural dominance of some groups and weak social standing of others.

Exclusion may take diverse forms¹, operates at different levels and spheres of the social structure, and draws its sustenance from various sources, such as, caste, class, ethnicity and gender inequality. These different forms and sources of exclusion may operate singly or in combination with each other. Where more than one source of exclusion operates simultaneously, the position of the excluded becomes highly vulnerable; for example, poor Dalit women where gender subordination is reinforced by their low ritual status and poor economic position

Gender based exclusion does not occur in a day or by the stroke of a pen, but is rooted in patriarchy² and reinforced by a slow and gradual process of socialization in gendered ideology. Central to this process is the culture of subjugation which views the ideas, opinions and aspirations of women as inconsequential, therefore merit little attention either at the level of mundane everyday reality or in policy. What sustains the culture of

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subjugation is the unequal power structure which enables the power holders (read men) to use the cultural and societal resources at their command not only to exclude certain issues, particularly those involving conflict of interest from the decision making agenda, but also to come up with norms, values and practices, and create a picture of the social reality that upholds their privileged position in such a manner that the excluded (women) begin to view their subjugated position as a natural aspect of their life. It would be instructive, at this point, to turn to Gramsci's theory of hegemony to understand how the process operates. Gramsci uses the concept of 'hegemony' to demonstrate how dominant groups maintain their dominance through the deployment of the twin mechanisms of 'coercion' and 'consent'³. In furtherance of their goal, cultural entities like mythology, language, literature and art, and institutions such as family, kinship, religion and education are variously called upon and strategically used, in benign as well as in not so benign ways, to construct, define and propagate the myth of the superiority of the dominant groups. By this means the dominant not only succeed to give legitimacy to their position but also make the oppressed complicit in their own subordination.

Family and the reproduction of inequality

Observation of situations in the Northeast reveals that of the various agencies that aided the powerful to maintain their hegemony, the family has been most prominent. Though the family in the Northeast is not as discriminatory towards women as evidence elsewhere in the country show, family ideology (defined as 'descent' or 'reproductive' ideology in anthropological writings)⁴ plays a vital role in their subordination. Women's centrality in the process of reproduction provides the rationale for the creation of a system in which women are not only idealized as wives and mothers, but also subjected to a system of control that robs them of autonomy of action and expression, alienates them from public life and other areas of decision making, and pushed them into a position of subordination vis a vis their male counterparts. Though the form, content and intensity of the ideology varies across cultures and groups, an examination of the socialization pattern of children reveals that among many communities girls and boys are socialized in different ways in accordance with the expected gender roles they are called upon to play in their adult life. While boys are granted greater degree of freedom of action, the girls are bound by a number of restrictive codes. For example, among the Meiteis of Manipur the story of goddess Imoinu is regularly invoked

to instill in girls values of hard work, selflessness, and obedience to the husband. Similar devices are found among the tribes in the hills. In her study on the status of women in Mizoram Mercie Gangte notes, 'daughters are carefully monitored from birth in such a way that they are indoctrinated to possess a sacrificing nature and fully internalize the feeling that they are somehow inferior to their brothers' (2009, 41)⁵. Needless to say, such an ideology is not only highly constraining to women, but also *sits ill at ease in a competitive milieu* where achievement is the goal and confidence, independent judgment and ability to adapt to the changing times are the route to success.

Inequality reinforced: Education and the culture of silence

If the family has been instrumental in propagating an ideology that relegates women to a subservient position, it is aided and abetted by the educational system. As the French thinker Pierre Bourdieu notes, education far from being a liberating agent as generally perceived, in fact serves as an instrument of social inequality by reproducing the culture and values of the ruling class⁶. In the context of the Northeast this finds vivid reflection in the content of courses taught in colleges and universities which are marked not only by the virtual absence of women but also lack of regard to the people's history, culture and society. In a recent paper, Subrat K Nanda brought into sharp focus the failure of universities in the region to address the socio-cultural and geo-political specificity of the region. Pointing to the continued dominance of conventional courses, which largely revolved around ideas developed by European and American thinkers, in the Sociology syllabi of many universities he states, 'like elsewhere in the country, in this region too, sociology of the common person, minorities and the marginalized sections does not find place (2010, 146)⁷. Though there are signs of attempts to integrate the regional dimension in some of the courses, huge gaps remain⁸.

The disconnect between the subject matter fed to the students and the specificity of the region comes out most sharply in Indian Sociology, a compulsory paper taught at both the under-graduate and post-graduate levels. Heavily influenced by the Dumotian perspective, which views Indian society as coterminous with Hinduism, there is little of the Northeast in the course that mainly focuses on mainstream Hindu culture, religious institutions and social order. This Hindu-centric approach not only ends up marginalizing cultures and traditions that lie outside the pale of Hinduism, but also seriously

affect the quality of knowledge and the capacity of students to translate what they learn in the classroom and text books into tools for their betterment. According to Nanda, tribal students in particular, exhibit discomfort in relating to several aspects of Indian Sociology as the categories and concepts used in the discourse, such as, 'caste stratification', 'sanskritization', 'jajmani system', 'karma', 'dharma', etc. which are deeply embedded in Brahminic ideology and ethos appear alien to these students (ibid, 149).

Independent observation by this author shows that courses on gender are saddled with the same problem. Like in the rest of the country, in the few departments where the course is offered most of the core readings reflect the reality of the western woman. Even attempts at indigenization made by Indian feminists proved of little help to students in the Northeast as the focus of attention shifted from the western woman to women in Hindu 'texts', and urban middle class women in the context of modernization, both of which are distant to the everyday reality of the Northeastern students.

The problem is compounded by the paucity of materials on women in the region. Ethnographic accounts of many communities prepared by the colonial administrators are marked by the absence of women. Though many of the monographs provide detailed account of the culture and tradition of the people there is hardly any space for women in these accounts. The few references to women tend to focus on their physical characteristics⁹ or depict them as beasts of burden. The contributions that women make to the economy and society at large hardly figured in these accounts.

Even after the collapse of colonialism and attainment of independence the culture of silence towards women continues. Though studies on gender entered the Indian universities in the 1970s there was hardly any work that focus on women of the Northeast. It was only towards the end of the century with the strong initiative taken by the UGC to engender the universities, which saw the establishment of Women's Studies Center in many universities in the country, including the Northeast, that research on gender received attention albeit largely among women scholars. However, quality work on the subject continues to be lacking. Most of the studies tend to be descriptive lacking in criticality and analytical rigour. Especially works conducted by insiders tend to fight shy of questioning the position of women or to interrogate the system that contributes to their subordination, which has resulted in reinforcing gender stereotypes, such as, women in the Northeast do not suffer from discrimination.

While this lack of criticality could be attributed to the

pervasiveness of the patriarchal ideology in the society, it cannot be de-linked from the failure of the educational system to conscientize the people about gender inequality and equip the students with proper intellectual tools to uncover and map the problem. The disjuncture between what the students learn in the class and their everyday reality not only deprives the learners of a concrete base of knowledge, which could serve as the baseline for research, but also creates confusion in their mind about what the correct picture is – what they see and experience or what they learn in the abstract from textbooks. Further, the continuing dominance of the positivist method, with its accent on externally observable and quantifiable behaviour, in the methodology course of many departments has also worked to obscure the importance of subjective issues and feeling state, such as, hurt, suffering, denial, and deprivation which constitute important data for analysis especially in the study of women and ethnic minorities.

Edwin Ardener has developed the theory of 'muted groups' to explain the male bias inherent in explanatory models of social anthropology (this is true of sociology and other social science discipline as well). According to Ardener the dominant groups in society generate and control the dominant mode of expression. Muted groups are silenced by the structures of dominance and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies. It is not only in the practice of fieldwork, Ardener avers, that women and other marginalized groups are muted but also in the theories and concepts that constitute the backbone of the discipline¹⁰.

Women and State Policies: Systematic neglect

The suppression of women's voices in the academia, coupled with what feminists called the 'invisibilisation'¹¹ of women in official statistics and national accounting systems, has not only perpetuated their subordination but also contributed to the short shrift given to women and their concerns in state policies. The problem is particularly acute in the case of tribal women, who by dint of the special constitutional provisions directed to protect their personal laws and customs, place them outside the orbit of general laws, therefore denying them the benefit of reformist laws and policies enacted by the state from time to time for the general population. Given that Northeast India has a high concentration of tribes in each of the eight states that constitute the region, ranging from 12.41 percent in Assam to 94.46 percent in Mizoram (2001 census), the implication for women is grave indeed. A case in point is the exclusion of the *Seventy-third*

Constitution Amendment Act, 1993 (Panchayati Raj Act in popular parlance) from many parts of the Northeast. While the Act, which contains many progressive provisions for the empowerment of women, was made compulsory for all states in the country the tribal/Scheduled Areas were exempted and left to the discretion of the state legislature within which they are located. While pressures exerted by rights-based groups and NGOs working for tribal-self rule got the Act extended to the Fifth Schedule areas, vide the *Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996* (PESA), the same was not done in the Sixth Schedule areas due to opposition from the predominantly male political elite (more on this later).

The state's indifference to the rights of women also finds clear reflection in the *Draft National Policy on Tribals*, proposed for the first time since the country achieved Independence by the Government of India. The policy whose stated objective is to bring Scheduled Tribes into the mainstream of society through a multi-pronged approach for their all-round development, and a list of measures to preserve and promote the tribes' cultural heritage, women and their concerns figure nowhere in it. Except for a single statement that the female literacy rate among the tribal population was 18.19 percent compared to the national female literacy rate of 39.29 percent (1991 Census), the Policy makes no other reference to women either as agents or consumers of development.

The same approach underlines the *North-East Forest Policy, 2001*. The policy which was piloted by the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India came in the wake of the indiscriminate harvesting of forests by timber contractors and merchants, with the stated objective of 'conserving the natural heritage of the region by preserving the remaining natural forests with the vast variety of flora and fauna that represent the remarkable biological diversity and genetic resources of the region'. To achieve this goal, it charts out a number of measures to be followed both by the state and the forest users. Its objective, however, is blighted by the short shrift given to women's needs. Whereas the policy recognizes the importance of women's involvement in conservation movement (this is the only role the policy envisages for women) it fails to take into consideration the effect of the measures on them. The policy, which was clearly underlined by an economic agenda, *conservation for greater productivity*, not only totally ignores women's role in forest related activities but also fails to come up with any mechanism to safeguard their interests. Indeed, some of the measures advocated by the policy are clearly detrimental to the poor in general and women in particular. Specifically, the emphasis given to scientific

management of forest, value addition to timber and other forest produce, and change from shifting to settled cultivation through promotion of perennial economic crops like tea, teak, rubber etc. *without spelling out parallel programmes for skill upgradation and financial assistance to women* could intensify their marginalization from forests, which is a major source of livelihood for many rural and tribal households. Studies focused on forest and people in Northeast India and elsewhere reveal that with the commercialization of land and forest women's access to these resources has gradually declined. For example, in Meghalaya where women traditionally enjoy rights over property; with the increase in the economic value of land and forest resources the title/ownership is gradually slipping away from women into the hands of men (Cf. Nathan, 2000)¹².

The scant regard shown to women and women's concerns in the policies outlined above speaks volumes about the state's attitude towards women. Given that both the policies focus on vital issues that affect the life of indigenous women in particular the absence of any guideline/measures relating to women is not only indicative of their lack of clout but also of the state's indifference to their well being.

It is not only the Central Government and its ministries that pay scant attention to indigenous women state governments are no better. Even in a state like Meghalaya where the dominant communities follow the matrilineal principle, women are excluded from many of its policies. A perusal of the Meghalaya Industrial Policy of 1988 and 1997 reveals a complete silence on the issue of women's development. While both the policies emphasized the need for promoting entrepreneurial development as a means to increase employment avenues and eradicate economic backwardness in the state, not a word is uttered about programs or actions for the economic empowerment of women.

Notwithstanding the presence of the matrilineal system which transmits descent and property rights through the female gendered ideology ensured women's continued subordination. By selectively emphasizing on women's nurturing role, along with restrictive and conditional practices, such as, denial of property rights to elder daughters and the obligation on the heiress to discharge lifelong service to the family, women's economic contribution to the household, however substantial, is rendered invisible. It would not be far wrong to say that it is this undervaluation of women's work by the family that accounts for the virtual blackout of women's concerns in state policies.

Similar process is visible in the other states of the Northeast. For example, in Nagaland, the Nagaland

Environment Protection and Economic Development (NEPED) a donor sponsored programme for environmental protection and development through people's participation reveal that the activities were primarily oriented for men.

Mention has already been made about the exclusion of the Panchayati Raj Act (Seventy Third Constitutional Amendment, Act) from the Sixth Schedule areas and other tribal dominated states in the Northeast due to the resistance by the tribal political elite on the ground that tribes have their own political institutions that function on the principle of co-operation and egalitarianism, despite the fact that among many tribes women are traditionally excluded from participation in these bodies.

Another argument advanced by the male political elite is that the Act has no relevance to tribes in the northeast as they are already placed under the protective shield of the constitution. It however needs to be noted that the special constitutional provisions for the Northeast whether under the Sixth Schedule or under Article 371 A that was envisaged for Nagaland and later extended to Manipur (Art. 371-C) and Mizoram (Art. 371-G), differ in many important respects from the provisions of the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act. Even with respect to the Sixth Schedule, where an elected body in the form of the District Council is in place, closer examination reveals that it falls short of the progressive provision of the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act. While the accent of the Sixth Schedule is on the district, as it presupposes the existence of the traditional political institutions at the grass roots level, the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment gives formal recognition to the 'village' by designating it as the *gram sabha*, and treats the same as the pivot of development and self-governance

Most importantly, the Seventy-Third Constitution Amendment Act contains the specific provision of reserving one third of the seats at all levels of the panchayats for women, in addition to those specified for Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes. This revolutionary provision, which gives explicit recognition to the organic link between women's empowerment and the development of society, has special relevance for indigenous women because the Sixth Schedule (this applies to the Fifth Schedule as well) is completely silent on the empowerment and development of women. Unfortunately the political elite in the region seems to have failed to see the significance of this provision. This exclusion has not only denied women access to political participation, but also to take part in the formulation of policies that affect their interest¹³.

This fact comes out sharply in the state of Meghalaya where women's request to be consulted in the constitution of the State Commission for Women (SCW) was met with downright rejection by the state. The matter took an ugly turn when the federation of several women's organizations in the state under the umbrella of '*Ka Lympung ki Seng Kynthei*' staged a walkout during the Chief Minister's speech at the inauguration of the commission (SCW) in the presence of representatives from the National Commission for Women (NCW) on 30th October 2004. The occasion, which should have been a source of pride and elation for all women in the state, resulted in deep acrimony between the women's organizations and the government. The cause of the conflict was the peremptory and dictatorial manner in which the Commission was constituted through a hurriedly passed Ordinance with no discussion in the Legislative Assembly or prior consultations with women's groups and NGOs who in the last seven years submitted a series of memoranda to the state government for the constitution of the State Commission for Women so that it could take up women's issues with state agencies and provide a forum where women could seek redress for their problems.

When the representatives of the women's groups protested at the undemocratic manner in which the commission was constituted the Chief Minister rebuffed the protesters and authoritatively asserted that it is the government's prerogative to constitute or set up commission and in doing so the cabinet is not bound to consult any group or people for whom it is meant. That the government's authoritarian manner hurt the sensibilities of even those who received its favours is reflected by the refusal of the Vice-chairperson designate and Padmashri awardee Theilin Phanbuh to accept her nomination to the commission.

To be sure, the prerogative to set up the SCW, as is the case with other commissions and committees, lies with the government. But if the step taken by the state is to be credible and the government serious to address the rights and needs of women, consultation with women's groups on important policy matters is a definite step in the right direction. Of course, there are bound to be divergent views on what constitutes the woman's problem, the prioritization of issues, and/or how these are going to be resolved, however, excluding potential dissenters from the consultation process and ignoring their legitimate demand for effective participation in the process can defeat the very objective for which the commission was set up

Faulty Ordinance

A close examination of the matter reveals that the government is not only guilty of transgressing the norms, expected to operate in a democratic society, in the formation of the commission, the entire exercise appears to be an eyewash mainly intended to impress the visiting NCW team. This fact comes out clearly in the ordinance relating to the constitution of the commission, namely, *The Meghalaya State Commission for Women Ordinance, 2004*. A close reading of the ordinance brings to the fore a number of lacunae in the provisions, which reduces the SCW to an ornamental body with no teeth to carry out the functions spelt out in the national Act (*National Commission for Women Act, 1990*).

If the language used in the order is any indication of the intention of its promulgator the objective of *The Meghalaya State Commission for Women Ordinance, 2004* appears highly suspect. While the ordinance in question was specifically created to deal with matters relating to women, the language reverberates with masculinist overtones. For instance, in the Chapter on the Constitution of Commission (Chapter II, section 4. clause 2) the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and members are all referred as *his*, instead of 'her'. Even with reference to the post of a Member Secretary who shall be appointed from amongst the officers of the state government, there is no stipulation that the candidate *should* have experience in the field of women welfare, only to the effect that a person with such experience is *preferable* (the word used in the ordinance is 'preferably'), clearly suggesting that the criterion is not binding (Section 2, Clause 2(c)). There is also no definition of the duties and functions of the Member Secretary anywhere in the ordinance. This silence provides scope to the state to use the position to subvert any act or decision taken by the commission if it perceives to be contrary to its interest.

Further, while the functions of the commission appears to be broadly in line with those included in the *National Commission for Women Act, 1990*, some of the clauses that are critical for the empowerment of women have been omitted in the Meghalaya ordinance. For instance, in the former (NCW Act) clauses (h) and (i) of Section 10 clearly empower the members to:

undertake promotional and educational research so as to suggest ways of ensuring due representation of women in all spheres and identify factors responsible for impeding their advancement, such as, lack of access to housing and basic services, inadequate support services and technologies for reducing drudgery and occupational health hazards and for increasing their productivity (emphasis supplied);

participate and advise on the planning process of socio-economic development of women (emphasis supplied).

The omission of these two clauses from the Meghalaya ordinance substantially weakens the power of the SCW and its ability to function as an effective instrument for the social and political empowerment of women. The role of educational research is particularly important in the present context because of the dearth of reliable and accurate information on many aspects of women's life, leading to all kinds of distorted and misleading opinions about their status in society which has contributed to their continued marginalization from all important spheres. The omission of sub clause (i) from the ordinance takes away the commission's opportunity to participate in policy decisions in matters relating to the development of women.

The Politics of Empowerment

That the omissions are not accidental but clearly premeditated came out in the Chief Ministers inaugural speech at the NCW consultative meeting with NGOs mentioned earlier. While proudly announcing the constitution of the State Commission for Women a day before the NCW visit to the state the Chief Minister laced the announcement with the pointed remark:

[T]he ...thing about the empowerment of women is that I do not know how far we shall empower them but *I believe they will not supersede men's power otherwise men will lose their identity in the long run* (personal observation and Television News Footage¹⁴, emphasis supplied)

Though delivered with a tinge of humour the statement clearly reveals much more than what the speaker intended. In the first place, the statement lucidly brings out men's image of themselves not only as the legitimate power-holders in the society but also their very identity is tied to this role. Therefore, a challenge to this role from the female sex could sharply erode men's identity hence the identity needs to be carefully protected.

The statement also reveals in no uncertain terms the state's vacillating attitude towards the empowerment of women. While the empowerment of women is clearly a national agenda strongly endorsed by successive governments at the centre, which the federal units could ill afford to ignore, the means of empowerment and the degree to which women would be empowered remains the prerogative of the [male] power holders in the state. The mode in which the SCW was constituted and the arrogant manner in which the CM responded to the expression of concern aired by various women's groups clearly sends the message that women are but passive

recipients of the 'benevolent' acts of the government devoid of voice and agency of their own. Such a perspective not only goes against the spirit of the national policy but also defeats the feminist goal to bring about a transformation in the unequal power relations between women and men.

Further, implicit in the above statement is the association of empowerment with dominance. In other words, the statement hints at the belief that by empowering women this could propel them into a position of dominance vis-à-vis men - thus posing a threat to the traditional balance of power in which men hold the dominant position. This association of empowerment with dominance poses a major constraint for women and lies at the root of men's inherent opposition to their integration into the system of governance and political decision-making process.

It is necessary to demystify this belief. While empowerment is inherently linked to power, it does not necessarily lead to dominance or the exertion of authority and/or influence over others. In the context of women, 'empowerment' broadly refers to a process by which change in a given societal balance of power is made possible. It does not privilege women at the cost of men but strives towards the equal balance of power between them.

What is more, though the main goal of women's empowerment is to achieve equality with men its target is not confined solely to those structures and institutions that perpetuate gender inequality, but directed at all structures of oppression such as those that perpetuate class, caste and race inequality. In other words, empowerment seeks to bring about a re-distribution of power in all structures that perpetuate in-equality - at the family, community and state levels.

The facts highlighted above suggest that women are not only victims of state processes but also of their own men. Despite the fact that Meghalaya is a predominantly tribal state with the state machinery in the hands of the local leadership women continue to be isolated from the decision making process, strongly indicative of their powerlessness. There is, however, a silver lining to the above mentioned process. While the state has had its way in putting the newly constituted SCW in place, with not a whimper on the ordinance from the newly appointed members, its hurried and secretive promulgation and the wide lacunae in its provisions have roused the consciousness of many of the generally complacent female population in the state who till the other day had little idea what 'social' and 'legal right' means, so used were they to being ruled by men that expression of dissent

with public policy was viewed not only with fear but as a sacrilege¹⁵.

The high publicity that the event (contestation by women's groups) received has catapulted women's issue to the centre stage prompting many women's groups and NGOs which thus far were mainly engaged in focusing on women's socio-economic needs (what western feminists described as *practical gender needs*) to add on demands for women's legal and political rights in their agenda (*strategic gender needs*)¹⁶.

The process has also brought together women's groups belonging to different communities and region, to fight for women's democratic rights with one voice irrespective of difference of language, religion or ethnicity.

Facilitating the process and aiding in creating public awareness about the matter is the print media, which gave wide coverage to the events both in the vernacular and English papers. Although the state-run electronic media ignored the momentum generated by the women's movement in the state the newspapers clearly played a supportive role by diligently reporting each and every development on the matter as they occurred.

Other challenges

Apart from the deeply entrenched gender bias, persistent poverty, disease and illiteracy, new forms of exploitation of women are emerging. This finds vivid reflection in the increase in the number of cases of domestic and sexual violence. Though such violence was relatively unknown in the Northeast, today women and children are at the receiving end of attacks. This problem is not confined to the hills but widely prevalent among the plains dwelling communities as well. According to Sanjoy Hazarika, today Assam tops the chart in the number of abuses perpetrated against children.¹⁷

Trafficking in women has also emerged as a major issue among many communities. The problem is accelerated by the geo-political location of the region, lying as it is at the junction where the borders of several countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar) meet, resulting in constant movement of population across the international border for various reasons, including the search for livelihood. The same holds true internally, where the opening of roads and rapid extension of commerce have intensified the movement of people and goods between states. This opening up of the region has increased the vulnerability of women especially those from poor families, as driven by poverty many girls from the rural areas sought their livelihood by setting up petty shops along the highways that are frequented by

hundreds of trucks, which stop for refreshments and rest. Weary from their long journey and weeks of separation from their wife and family, many men lured the girls with false promise of marriage and better jobs but ended up reducing them into unwed mothers and sexual objects. The Supreme Court ban on timber logging and the economic crisis it created for poor households has further aggravated the problem, as hundreds of families who were rendered jobless by the SC order flocked to the towns and commercial hub along the highways to look for alternative source of livelihood.

The problem is not unique to the northeast. In fact, tribal women in the central tribal belt have experienced a long history of economic and sexual exploitation. In states like Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand where the indigenous peoples have been forced out of their land and forest by revenue-hungry colonial laws and the Nehruvian temples (dams and factories) of independent India many girls have been lured to the metropolitan cities to work as domestic maids, in the process many are unwittingly forced into the flesh trade.

These processes not only grossly violate the principles of human rights and gender justice that underline the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) to which India is a party, but also strongly interrogate the role of the state and its dominant population. The ratification of CEDAW and allied instruments has little meaning unless the state enforces them to protect the rights and interests of the vulnerable and hapless section of society.

Another problem that affects women of the Northeast but finds little space in the agenda of the mainstream women's movement or the state is the continuing militarization of so called 'politically disturbed' areas which has given rise to gross human rights violations and violence against women by the armed forces in the form of rape, murder, kidnapping etc. While these processes have brought to the fore a number of women's organizations in the region, which are engaged in attempts to restore human rights and peace, in many areas women continue to be victims of politically premeditated violence. The reason for this is not far to seek. In conflict situations centering on ethnicity and state power, perpetrating violence on women through acts of rape, abduction or murder provides the perpetrator/s a psychological sense of victory over the victim and the group it belongs to. What is a matter of concern is that issues linked to ethnic and nationalist conflict are so deeply coloured by stereo-type ideas about insurgents and national security that even when such acts of violence against women occasionally find their way into the

national news they elicit little sympathy from state bodies or civil society.

Contestation and resilience

Notwithstanding the various constraints that surround their life what is remarkable about the Northeast is the high resilience exhibited by its women. Despite the deeply entrenched gender bias, spate of violence, deficit in democracy, good governance and development the people have learnt to move on. As noted above, while insurgency continues to be rife in many pockets of the region, the yearning for peace and stability is explicit in the concerted attempts made by grassroots organisations to negotiate for peace and restoration of normalcy. Notable in this regard are the *Naga Mother's Association* who trekked down hundreds of miles to the rebel bases in Burma to give the militants lessons on peace, and the *Tangkhul Shanao Long* and *Meira Paibis* of Maipur who acted as mediators between the insurgents and the government with their slogan 'No more blood' addressed to both parties. A close observation of the situation reveals that the culture of subjugation and silence perpetrated by the dominant groups when carried out to unreasonable limits serve to foster the germination of the 'culture of protest' in the oppressed. The rise of Irom Sharmila as an 'Icon of Peace' is an attestation of this fact. Sharmila who has been on a voluntary fast unto death for the last ten years as a mark of protest against the militarization of the region by the central government and human rights violations by state and non state agencies, has not only kept the culture of protest alive among women of the Northeast but has also attracted national as well as international support from peace groups.

The protest launched by the women's organizations in Meghalaya against state authoritarianism can be seen in the same light. The arrogant and dictatorial response of the state to their peaceful demand for consultation converted the traditionally compliant and passive women into a vocal and assertive group. What these protests suggest is that women are no longer willing to be silent spectators and passive recipients of the arrangements made by the state or by men. They want to be part of the decision-making process particularly in areas that affect their life. They seek to do this by non violent means, through a process of negotiation and dialogue, and by forging solidarity with all the oppressed cutting across ethnicity, culture, language, religion and gender, thus marking a shift from the traditionally ethnic or community based movement launched by men to a more

inclusive issue-based movement. To what extent this development can put a check on the hegemony exercised by men remains a moot point. But if small gains are to be counted, the contestation by women and the movement it generated, albeit still at a nascent stage, has led not only to greater awareness about the rights of women, ethnic minorities and marginalised groups in general, among a larger section of the population but also sends a strong message that the dominant, be it the state or segment/s of the population, cannot permanently take the oppressed for granted.

Concluding remarks

The processes documented in this paper reveal the complex and multifaceted character of the problems faced by women in India's Northeast. While the study explodes the myth that women in the Northeast are free from inequality, their subordination is not a consequence of patriarchy alone but a culmination of a number of factors. This is particularly true of women in tribal societies whose cultural and political distinctiveness not only place them outside the orbit of general laws but also exposed them to other forms of discrimination that go beyond gender. While gendered ideology upheld by the community pushes women into subordination it is reinforced by the indifference of the dominant groups in society to those who lie at the margins. The culture of silence that marked pedagogical and state practices both at the central and federal levels are illustrative of this fact. The problem is compounded by the region's historical and political isolation and its strategic location at the confluence of international borders, making it a point of migratory influx and a hub of intense political and military activity. The culture of protest outlined in the preceding section had their roots in these multi-layered processes. The long years of subjugation perpetrated by men through the institutional mechanism of the family, community and the state, and the threat posed to their survival by social and political violence and militarization of the region forced women to come out of their inertia and fight for their rights.

Notes

1. The different forms of exclusion include: discrimination, oppression, exploitation, segregation and marginalization.
2. In this paper the concept 'patriarchy' is used in a broad sense to refer to a system of social organisation in which authority is vested in the hands of men, irrespective of the principle of descent adopted by the society patrilineal or matrilineal.
3. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York, International Publications
4. For a fuller discussion on the role of reproductive ideology on the construction of gender see in particular L Dube, 'Seed and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations of Production' in Leela Dube et al (eds), *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1986 pp. 22-53 and L. Dube, *Kinship and Gender in South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi, Vistaar Publications, 1994
5. Mercie Gangte, 'A Sociological Study of Women and Society in Mizoram', M.Phil dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2010. See also Lucy Vashum Zehol's paper, 'Status of Tribal Women' in T.B. Subba and G.C. Ghosh (eds), *The Anthropology of North-East India: A Textbook*, Delhi, Orient Longman, 2003 pp. 293-306 for information on discriminatory practices against women in Naga society
6. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction' in R. Brown (ed), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*, London, Tavistock, 1973
7. Subrat K. Nanda, 'Sociology in Northeast India: A Synoptic View' in Maitrayee Choudhury (ed), *Sociology in India: Intellectual and Institutional Practices*, Jaipur & Delhi, Rawat Publications, 2010.
8. It is not only colleges and universities that reproduce inequality schools too play an important role in the reproduction of gender and other forms of social inequality. In her study on education in Mizoram, Lakshmi Bhatia shows how the school curriculum shapes the gender identity of the students through the representation of sex-role stereotypes of adult personalities with which they are conditioned to emulate and identify. (L. Bhatia, *The Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes through Modern Education*, in Sumi Krishna (ed) *Women's Livelihood Rights, Recasting Citizenship for Development*, Delhi, Sage Publications, 2007. See also Lakshmi Bhatia, *Education and Society in a Changing Mizoram: The Practice of Pedagogy*, New Delhi, Routledge, 2010)
9. The description of women in some of these works is characterised by strong racist and sexist undertone. For example, Hunter in his widely read book *A Statistical Account of Assam Vol II* states, 'Garos women are remarkable for their ugliness'. In his opinion, 'Garos are excessively ugly and rare to find a Garo woman with any pretension to beauty'
10. E. Ardener 'The problem re-visited' in S. Ardener *Perceiving Women*, 1975, 21-23.
11. The tendency to define work in purely economic terms, that is, in terms of 'exchange value' rather than 'use value', has contributed to the invisibilisation of women's work. Since the large majority of women generally produce for subsistence and not for the market they get excluded from the category of workers (on this subject, see in particular Andrea Menefee Singh, *Invisible Hands: Women in Home Based Production (Women and the Household in Asia Series, Vol. 1)*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1987.
12. Dev Nathan, 'Timber in Meghalaya', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 35, No.4, January, 22-28, 2000.
13. For a fuller discussion on the relative merits of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules and the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act and my critique on the exclusion of the latter from the Sixth Schedule Areas see Tiplut Nongbri, *Development, Ethnicity and Gender: Select Essays on Tribes in India*, Delhi, Rawat Publications, 2003, pp. 213-225.

14. Peitngor Cable News (PCN), Shillong, 31 October 2004
15. A slightly different version of this event can be found in Chapter 7 of Tiplut Nongbri, *A Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in Meghalaya* - Report of a study commissioned by and submitted to the National Commission for Women in 2005.
16. 'Practical gender needs' relates to needs of basic subsistence, such as, food, water, health, shelter, and livelihood. To satisfy these leads to improvement in women's lives and poses no danger to existing structures of society and sex-based division of labour. 'Strategic gender needs', on the other hand, are needs that would help women overcome their subordination by dismantling/removing institutionalised forms of discrimination, such as, patriarchy, caste and class hegemony, and/or discriminatory land and property laws that are detrimental to women (Bina Agarwal, 'Why do women need independent rights in land? in 'Mary John (ed), *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*, Delhi, Penguin Books, 2008, p 182.)
17. Statement made at the seminar, '*Resurgent North East: Constraints and Opportunities*' at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, November 18-20, 2010.

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The Anti-Essentialism of Saidian Thought

MANINDER PAL KAUR SIDHU

‘What do you think he was?’ asked Pete Ryder
‘A lover of mankind. And of jazz’

Nayantara Sahgal, *Lesser Breeds*

Going by the widespread and diverse reception of *Orientalism* it is now generally accepted in the academic circles that Edward Said is a complex phenomenon – an intellectual enigma who drenched his thought in contemporary philology yet held on to his own premises. As an engaged intellectual he was passionately committed to the issue of the role of the intellectual/literary critic in the betterment of the human condition globally, and viewed the “abdication of the social involvement by those in a position to know or do better as one of the contemporary forms of *la trahison des clercs*” (“The treason of the intellectuals”; Williams xiv). Most notably, he was a staunch defender of the rights of the Palestinian people for a homeland and was the most effective intellectual in the creation of the state of Palestine¹. If his political activism for the cause of the Palestinians instantiates his commitment to justice, freedom and egalitarianism, his abhorrence of gloating defensive nationalism is symbolic of his aversion to partisanship, exclusivity and over-valorization of national identity. It is Said’s balancing of various critical thoughts in the larger interest of the universal principles of justice and equality that makes his pragmatic philosophy viable and accepted.

Said does not fit in with any pre-conceived mould or school of thought. Much as he appreciates the archaeologies of thought, both ontological and phenomenal, of the great critical and historical minds of the modern period, he is in total denial of any limiting theoretical categorization. Deriving from the uniqueness of most theories, Said is wary of their confinement, as Patrick Williams has aptly summed up his stance:

“[Theory] begins well; it generates useful and enabling insights; eventually – and inevitably, in Said’s rather pessimistic view – it over-reaches itself, becoming in its turn too much of an all encompassing, all explaining system” (xiv). The key concepts of *Orientalism*, primarily, the complicity of the Western scholarship with its imperial regime and the focus on the historical dynamics of human experience, energize the academic subversion of the cultural constructs of colonialism. Quite unwittingly, Said has been ascribed with the role of the inaugurator of the contemporary academic school of postcolonialism and metropolitan cultural studies.

This paper analyses the Saidian thought as a liberating text – its eclecticism as well as ambivalence, its transformation and growth – as a pioneering philosophical leap towards a practical engagement of ideas with reality. It is Said’s anti-essentialism which helps him gain selectively from diverse thinkers, amateurishly absorbing the strengths of their systems of thought, casting aside their pessimism, redundancy and confinement to evolve a poetics of politics that delivers. Said’s elaborate critical discourse in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1984) cautions against the politics of intellectual indifference to social and historical reality, and the self-imposed confinement of critics in the abstractions of esoteric aesthetics.

To some a polemical figure, to many a paradoxical entity, Said has persisted as a voice that has re-defined the role of an intellectual, and the breathtaking range of his endeavour makes it difficult to believe all of it is one man: an author, a literary theorist, a compelling cultural critic, an anthropologist, a radical activist, an irrepressible dissident intellectual, political commentator, prolific journalist, skilled concert pianist and music critic. His awesome credentials have inspired some to call him arguably the most transformational thinker of the 20th century – a superstar among intellectuals – whereas some

remain highly skeptical of such claims. If Aram Veiser has titled his book on Said as *The Charisma of Criticism*, Edward Alexander maligns him as the "Professor of Terror" in a pro-Israeli journal *Commentary*. On a closer look at the life and works of Said, one finds no discernible incongruity in the steadfastness of his intellectual intentions, so that a lot of the hysterical criticism directed at him is totally unjustified. In truth, in the face of the deluge of works by academics which is sometimes restraining, combative and reductionist, Said is an inspiration to go one's way meaningfully and purposefully, offering a liberating text to the reader and to other critics.

Before delving into the relevance of the Saidian thought it is important to know the process of its evolution, its rootedness, or to use the author's own terminology, its "worldliness", which is inextricably woven into his texts. Since "texts have effects" in the real world, the material reality of the writer has bearing on the creative process – Said's "rootedness" is the condition of his uprootedness. A brief survey of his life, his cultural and political engagements, with some inputs from his memoir, *Out of Place*, is in order. Born in the dispute-ridden town of Jerusalem, he died after a prolonged battle with leukemia in 2003 at the age of 67. His schooling was culturally layered: it began with St George's Academy in Jerusalem, continued at Victoria College in Cairo as a result of the exodus on the formation of the nation of Israel, and finally culminated at Mount Hermon school in Massachusetts. Henceforth he remained in the US - graduated from Princeton - did his Masters and Ph.D. (on Joseph Conrad) from Harvard - taught for decades as professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Columbia University – was Visiting professor at Harvard, John Hopkins and Yale. Said was conversant with the various archaeologies of knowledge for he spoke French and English fluently, was very good at his mother tongue colloquial Arabic, and was also literate in Spanish, Italian, German and Latin. Said strengthened the margins by writing on a war-footing for magazines, newspapers and journals and his lectures at various universities are now landmark literary events in themselves². It is quite understandable that he received numerous honorary doctorates and awards.

His anti-essentialism is nourished by the factual ironies of his life - the paradoxes are far too many. His first name is British and the last, Arab. He is a unique case of a Palestinian Christian - a protestant –who became an American citizen –and went on to become the most convincing voice of the homeless Palestinian Muslims internationally. He lived and died in the metropolis of New York - tirelessly unveiling the subtle mutations of

coeval orientalizing of Islam, critical of the untrammelled hegemonic imperialism of the Western world in market economy and was extremely vocal about the unfair Middle-East policies of the United States. The most fruitful aspect of his critical energy is the harnessing of his assimilated thought to highlighting the injustice and exploitation by the dominant powers of the weaker nations. In concurrence with the other paradoxes, he is equally criticized and adulated, both, in the East and the West.

Said catapulted into international fame with his seminal work *Orientalism* in 1978 – a study of the "seductive degradation of knowledge"; a persuasive deconstruction of the Western construct of Eastern cultures. The conceptualization of the Orient by the colonizers was highly politicized, romanticized, discriminatory, racial, stereotypical and, therefore, suspect. Said unveiled it as a tool of imperialistic domination, a political strategy for colonial expansion that arbitrarily formulated the "European perspective as a norm from which the Orient deviates." The text interrogates the "summational attitude" of the humanistic scholars like Massignon and Gibbs, and the anti-Islamic propaganda of intellectuals like Bernard Lewis, who responded slightly to the treatise³. In a forceful rebuttal of the caricatural criticism, "disquieting polymorphousness" and willful misinterpretations of the book, Said writes:

My objection to what I have called Orientalism, is not that it is just the antiquarian study of Oriental languages, societies, and peoples, but that as a system of thought it approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint; this suggests both an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and, so to speak, from above... The reason why the anti-essentialism of my argument has proved hard to accept is political and urgently ideological. (*Orientalism* 331-334)

The legacy of Said in essence will remain with mankind forever, for "Orientalism" as a critical concept, now, broadly connotes any false assumption or belief constructed to capture collective cultural imagination. It actually symbolizes a cover up for hegemonic political intentions of imperialistic forces anywhere, anytime in the world and the thinkers in every era must remain vigilant to the manufacturing of falsehoods used as cultural tools of tyranny and abuse.

The Zionist slogan "A people without land (the Jewish people) for a land without people (Palestine)" according to Said is a lucid example of the modern guises of Orientalism. There is no denial of the unfortunate persecution and genocide of the Jewish people – the

historical experience of the holocaust is under no circumstances to be forgotten but it should not be used to deny the Palestinians their homeland by sending them into exile. The secular credentials of Said and his avid interest in music came together when he founded the award winning West-Eastern Divan orchestra with the Argentine-Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim. It consisted of Israeli-Arab-Palestinian children. His humanism runs deep and his criticism of the West is not to be mistaken for anti-Semitism. Said feels that falsehoods and unexamined assumptions like, "Arabs are all terrorists, they are all fundamentalists, they are oil-rich", "Americans are all the same", "Americans are all materialistic" are methods of barricading the study of the heterogeneous Arab world, or the multicultural American nation by creating monolithic structures or essentialized caricatures. Said's celebration of cultural diversity disillusioned all the parochial claimants of his intellectual kinship and "whether by accident or design, he finds himself excluded by various opposing partisan camps at the same time" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 6).

"Speaking truth to power is no panglossian idealism; it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one and then intelligently representing it" wrote Said in *Representations of the Intellectual* (75) and amply exemplified it. He not only spoke "truth to power", he spoke the truth to all, with the unfortunate consequence, however, that he received scathing criticism not only in the US and Israel but also in the Arab world and the Indian sub-continent. Ironically, *Orientalism* was banned in Palestine itself. He did not hesitate to call Rushdie an orientalist for his contribution to the programme of constructing a stereotypical Islam but was also with those who stood up against the archaic, resurgent fundamentalism of the Iranian fatwa against him. And so is the case with Marx - he is appreciative of the Hegelian residue in Marxism and its emergence as a force of resistance within Occidentalism and yet he locates the Marxist aphorism "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" as the epitome of the Orientalist thought. This quotation is one of the two epigraphs of his book, *Orientalism*. The layered flexibility of Said's thought is obvious when he states that "we can better understand the persistence and durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers were *productive*," yet "by the same token we must not unilaterally abrogate the connections" in the texts (*Culture and Imperialism* 175).

No doubt Said has emphasized the material reality or the "worldliness" of a text, but this thrust is gravitation towards the historicity of the text, rather than an

inclination towards Marxist ideology. Theorists with leanings to the Left, Aijaz Ahmad in particular, have been unforgivingly critical of the ambivalence and eclecticism of Said. Ahmed passionately laments his blindness towards the Marxist tradition - he closes his critique of Said, in his book, *In Theory*, with this observation, "Said's warning that a choice for Marxism entails putting 'oneself outside a great deal of things' points towards a possible inventory of renunciations... Having access to 'a great deal of things' always gives one a sense of opulence, mastery, reach, choice, freedom, erudition, play. But resolution of the kind of ambivalences and self-cancelling procedures which beset Said's thought requires that some positions be vacated, some choices be made, some of these 'great deal of things' be renounced" (219). A lot of scholars have critiqued the standpoint of Ahmad, but Michael Sprinker sums it all up when he says that Ahmad is simply confronting Said with the question, "Why are you not a Marxist?" (116)⁴.

While the breadth of Said's reading is amazing and he acknowledges with gratitude the influence of Marx, Derrida, Foucault, Fanon and other great thinkers, he is quite unequivocal about his areas of difference with them. He seems to value the playfulness of ideas; he strives to harness them urgently to bring about a positive change in human relations and abhors the reductionism of ideas and confinement to a particular critical theory merely to prove a point. Among other areas of rapprochement he shares with thinkers like Adorno, is his refusal as an intellectual to limit himself to narrow specialization, authority, systematicity and obligatory closure - he does not restrict himself to the specific rhetoric of a particular theory. Said argues that theories appear as a response to specific historical conditions and cannot be used with impunity in any context to produce pseudo-creative reading of texts.

Among the sustained influences on his thought Said cherishes Giambattista Vico, his German translator Auerbach, Gramsci, Adorno, Chomsky, Bertrand Russell and early Foucault. His engagement with the Foucauldian discourse best illustrates his eclecticism. Said's discourse on Orientalism is deeply influenced by Foucault's theory of power / knowledge. It is in fact a neat instance of the historical verification of the praxis of constructing a suitable epistemology by the West to sanctify the European politics of conquest in Asia and Africa. While Said has acknowledged the perceptive brilliance of Foucault's analysis of how power propagates itself through non-coercive cultural beliefs, which invoke negligible skepticism or immediate opposition due to their subtlety, he warns against taking Foucault as the final word on the function of an intellectual in society

and with a valid reason. The concreteness or “worldliness” of Said’s visionary argument is almost antithetical to the esoteric abstractions of the Foucauldian pessimism. Foucault is doubtful of the need or even the presence of an intellectual in society; Said envisages a role of purpose and commitment for an academic from the margins of power.

In his essay “Traveling Theory” (*The World* 226-47), Said prioritizes Foucault over Derrida. Foucault in spite of his “theoretical overtotalisation” which falls short in efficacy in realistic situations has openings into the historical and institutional practices. Derrida on the other hand limits himself – he must stick to the text, without its context, under all circumstances. It is Said’s anti-essentialism which helps him synthesize the post-structuralist Derridean and the Foucauldian structures of thought. He gains from both - the oppositional reading of texts and Foucault’s eye-opening accounts of the ineluctable, discursive nature of power. This syncretism helped Said conceptualize the “contrapuntal reading” of texts to complete the historical reality of a text for he firmly believed that “texts are fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange...a system of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture at some human cost to its various components” (*The World* 45,53). In a conversation with Bill Ashcroft in 1995 Said observed, “Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* is the point at which I thought he went astray...the moment he began to generalize into a larger theory - potentially a theory that no resistance was possible, that we were moving towards a disciplinary society, that there was a kind of clockwork quality to it - I just felt it was completely wrong” (289).

As a professor of literature Said was quite averse to the idea of fan following and stood in favour of originality and amateurishness in academics. It was this discipleship which he felt detrimentally affected Derrida and institutionalized him. In an interview with Joseph Buttigieg and Paul Bove in 1993 he emphatically makes a point: “the idea of the anti-dynastic intellectual is very important to me... I stake a great deal on the question of doing something for oneself. It is a form of independence I cherish. I don’t think the kind of works I have written... derive from formulas or concepts that can be handed down. They all derive from personal experience and that is terribly important to me” (154). Throughout his scholarly endeavour he was persistent in his emphasis on the worldliness of the works of literature and as well as the realities of the literary critic. Both the text and its critic are embedded in their respective social and political contexts – in their material reality. They cannot get away with an over and above attitude, a sort of supra-

transcendental approach or even an aesthetically empowered literary garb.

There is absolutely no anomaly between Said’s life and his texts – if his works heavily drew upon his life, his life religiously lived out his beliefs – he exemplified the significance of the engagement of ideas to reality and strove to harness non-coercive knowledge to power so that it operates with a secular humanitarian thrust for freedom and equality. Said’s legacy urges every writer and intellectual to rise above the glorification in academic specialization and excellence, to locate his/her Palestine, however big /small, landed /landless it be, and to step out of the ivory tower to work towards a world which is just and fair for all.

The reductionism of the Saidian thought to polarizations such as East-West, Orient-Occident, Islam-Christianity, Marxist-Metropolitan, colonial - anti-colonial, historicity – textuality, aesthetics – politics is the chaining down of the high-flying spirit of his anti-essentialism, resplendent in its awareness, intuition and discovery. Said admitted in an interview to the “residual hedonism” involved in the critical act of liberating oneself from one’s past alliances and predictability: “Schools and systems often exist as a method for warding off such eventualities[stripping the critic of the privilege of circumscription], that is why I am temperamentally anti-systemic and anti-school” (*Diacritics* 45). It would not be wrong to infer, considering Said’s aversion to discipleship, that he would not cherish the label, “Saidesque” attached to a work of another thinker or, even, to his own successive “stray”, attempts at interpretation of reality.

Rightly understood, *Orientalism* is primarily a well-researched discourse highlighting the harmful fallouts of the monolithic hermeneutics of social history in terms of binary oppositions and cultural stereotypes. While commentators, both hostile and sympathetic, have adopted a derivational approach and read the book to suit their specific ideologies, Said, in an “Afterword” to the book in 1994, categorically stated that the book “in its arguments is explicitly anti-essentialist, radically skeptical about all categorical designations... and painstakingly careful about not defending or even discussing the Orient and Islam”. The journey of Said is a leading paradigm of the growing section of informed humanity which is “in powerful and immediate ways, transnational,”⁵ and is engaged in working out the dynamics of global peace, human advancement and multiculturalism.

Notes

1. The dissemination of the Saidian philosophy into real politics is evident in the invocation of world peace in the foreign policy of President Barak Obama, a student of Said in the Columbia University. In spite of the risk involved, Obama invested presidential capital in the Mideast peacemaking process in the early days of his presidency and stated in the UN General Assembly on 28 Sept.2010: "true security for the Jewish state requires an independent Palestine". But the ghost of the foreign policy of the previous US regimes, and the current face-off with Iran on the nuclear issue, continue to mire the six-decade Israeli-Palestine dispute with more complexities and provocations, and peace awaits final compromises from both sides.
2. Said contributed to the *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, *New York Book Review*, *The London Review of Books*, *Counterpunch*, *Al Ahram* and *Al Hayat* (a pan Arab daily). Being an involved intellectual he lectured in more than 100 universities and colleges – his Reith lectures at the BBC, the Camp lectures at Stanford, Northcliffe lectures at University College London are now major publications.
3. Bernard Lewis' vociferous attacks on *Orientalism* are, in fact, a political response to the onslaught on the procedures and genealogy of the discourse which sources the identity, position and power of the entire guild of Orientalists. Projecting the book as anti-Western, he produced a series of essays, some of which are collected in the book, *Islam and the West*. See Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *New York Review of Books* 24 June 1982, for a provocative defense of Orientalist scholarship by the author.
4. Responding to Aijaz Ahmad's book *In theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Michael Sprinker in his essay, "The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson" interrogates the Said - Ahmad conflict in the context of the inter-relationship of Third World nationalisms to the Marxist tradition. Defending Said "as a non-Communist intellectual on the anti-imperialist Left," he avers Ahmad's indictment of Said as an inadvertent

proponent of "anti-communist radicalism," as far-fetched.

5. Michael Sprinker, "The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson" in Patrick Williams, ed. *Edward Said*. vol.1. London: Sage Publications, 2001.

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Book Reviews

The Inner Mirror: Kannada Writings on Society and Culture, compiled and edited by A. R. Vasavi, New Delhi: The Book Review Literary Trust, 2009, pp. x+205, Rs. 395, ISBN: 81-88434-04-3

In the contemporary Kannada writings "Mirror" is one of the metaphors that reflects Kannada's negotiation with other languages. "No more Mirrors only Lamps", *When Window becomes Mirror*, are the titles of an article and a book respectively in Kannada published in 1990s and 2000s. Whether we have started seeing ourselves through other languages is the concern that K.V. Narayan is expressing in his article when he calls for other languages to perform the role of a lamp rather than a mirror. Similarly Sanskrit, which was supposed to be the window through which various kinds of knowledge were supposed to enter into Kannada became a model for Kannada, thus molding Kannada like Sanskrit - this is the theme of a book by another scholar T.R.S. Sharma. The book under review aptly titled "The Inner Mirror," takes an informed position in the ongoing debate on language and knowledge.

The present decade has also seen an intense debate on the status of social sciences in India, and a sense of crisis of social science research is being perceived. In an empirical fashion, scholars have attributed the "decline" of social science education in India to the vernacularization of higher education, whereby the students and research scholars are unable to seriously engage with the knowledge produced in English and which consequently gets reflected partially or superficially. To get over this anomaly, the Knowledge Commission of India had recommended setting up of a National Translation Mission (NTM) in the XI plan period which is now busy in translating "social science" knowledge thus far available only in English into Indian languages.

Since the publication of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978), and the advent of Post-colonial theory

coupled with post-structuralism, it is said that the social science knowledge on India produced since 19th century on India has been complicit with colonial power. It is also well demonstrated that this knowledge was derived from often obscure Sanskrit texts rediscovered by the Indologists in 18th and 19th century, which were hardly in current circulation or practice. Though the postcolonial discourse was able to rewrite some of our understanding of colonialism and nationalism, it couldn't escape the language bind of the colonial creation. It was in Anthropology that some serious debate on the issues of language in understanding other societies was raised and the debate on subject-object relations was renewed. Location of the researcher and the language of the researcher were put into critical scrutiny re-examining the "truth claims" of such research.

Even the new Dalit studies scholarship that is emerging in Indian social science is problematizing the notion of theory and practice and argues for theorizing the practices through the experiential knowledge of the researcher rather than relying on the existing theories to comprehend the experience of self or other. In a sense this debate reminds one of categories such as "critical insider", "organic intellectual" etc.

The book under review has come out in this context and assumes a lot of significance for the above mentioned debates. The book was published under the series "Present Continuous" which is a corollary to the series "Past Continuous" published by The Book Review Literary Trust. It is compiled and edited by A.R. Vasavi, a well known social anthropologist, working on Karnataka. The volume provides fresh inputs and points of reference to the ongoing debate. It has 15 articles translated from Kannada into English under 5 rubrics uniformly including 3 articles under each rubric. The rubrics under which the articles have been arranged deal with contemporary issues that social sciences in India have taken up for research in the last couple of decades or so, and are related to the burning issues in the Indian society too.

Vasavi, the editor of the book, drawing upon her social science training, argues for seriously considering the insights that society obtains through its own mechanisms, along with the knowledge one produces through “objective” analysis. In her introduction she refers to her extensive fieldwork to argue that we need to take this body of writing as “social commentaries” if not as social science. The book seems to be making a case for social scientists to seriously take this body of literature within the ambit of their research work. She in effect argues for “pluralizing the Sociology of India” by taking into account Indian language writings on society and culture.

The selection of essays from Kannada, focuses on the current debates in social science in general, thus aiming to provide the social scientists in India, an “inner mirror” where they can cross-check their understanding of these issues. These issues are highly topical in the contemporary Kannada/Karnataka scenario. The essays that Vasavi has chosen for translation into English are writings from the 1980s onwards. Most of the writers have in a way performed the ‘critical insider-outsider’ role in Kannada society since the 1970s (Tejaswi, Subbanna, Devanoor Mahadeva, D.R. Nagaraj, Baraguru Ramachandrappa, Ananthamurthy, Kambar etc., all of them acclaimed litterateurs; the last two have been awarded with Jnanapeeth). But it has also chosen, apart from this 70s intellectual crop, people who started writing in 80s like Murari Ballala, K.V.Narayana, G. Rajashekar, H.S. Raghavendra Rao, and people who came to prominence in 90s such as, Rahamat Tarikere, T.R. Chandrashekar and Mogalli Ganesh. In that sense it reflects the critical edge that Kannada society has developed to introspect in the past three decades. The issues covered range from Kannada nationalism, language issues covered under the rubric “Contestations: Region, Language and Religion”; questions of religion, secularism, spirituality covered under the rubric “Religiosity: In Moral, Rational and Fundamental Worlds”; issues of social hierarchy and challenges to it under the rubric “Re-casting Caste: New Identities and Mobilisation”; issues of Gender under the rubric “Women: Personhood, Identity and Agency”; and issues related to Modernity and Development under the rubric “Modernity and Development in Locality”. Thus the selection is fairly representative both in terms of issues covered and the choice of the authors. One could argue that there could have been more women in the section related to Gender, but it is not a comment on the essays that are included in the section.

In sum *Inner Mirror* tries to contribute to the corrective measures that Indian social science need to take up in the context of several crucial issues raised within it, which

I have mentioned in the beginning. It is high time that we move away from the colonial frame and see our society not only through external mirrors but also through our inner mirrors. Language, of course, has to play a crucial role in it. We must dismiss the idea that knowledge exists only in English and perceiving Indian languages as passive recipients. The Indian language writings on society have much to offer to English in general and social sciences in particular. The series editors have aptly called this series “Present Continuous”, where Indian language writings engage, along with English, on equal terms in the production of knowledge.

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G. D. Gulati, *Central Asia under the Mongols*, New Delhi: Dev Books, 2010, pp. 209, Rs. 600.

The issues relating to the history of the Mongol empire, its social, economic life, trade and interaction with the neighbouring cultures within the vast spaces of Asia and Europe were always a subject of analysis by various scholars worldwide, such as V. Barthold, T. Allsen, R. Foltz, H. Yule and many others. The book by G.D. Gulati deals with the topic of the history of the Mongols in Central Asia, in particular of Chaghatai Khanate, its interactions with the contiguous China and India and the role the commercial network played in this part of the world.

In his introduction the author defines Central Asia from both geographical and historical perspectives. It seems to be valuable since throughout ages the concept of Central Asia changed dramatically, depending on the twists and turns of its history and political mapping. Gulati rightly suggests that from the historical geography viewpoint the definition of Central Asia as a region comprising of 5 former Soviet, now independent republics, is a narrow definition (p.2).

Although there is no unanimity among scholars about the region’s precise definition, delete, it could be referred to the vast area stretching from China (Tibet and Xinjiang) and Mongolia on the east; northern India, Afghanistan in the south; north-eastern Iran and Caspian Sea in the west; Ural mountains in the north; with its so called “heartland” comprising of five republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, different parts of which in history were variably known as Transoxiana (or Mawarannahr in Arabic), Desht-i-Kipchak, Turan, Turkestan.

The geography of Central Asia is striking for its variety, be it cultural, religious, ethnic or linguistic. Being a mixture of various cultural layers, notably, nomadic and settled ones, the region has had always deep links with the adjoining territories, especially with the so called frontier zones with Chinese, Indian, Persian and Russian cultures. It is not surprising that in the course of its history this interaction became its certain trademark. The history of the Mongol Empire proved this well.

One of the prominent features associated with the Mongol Empire could be described as a two-way traffic related to the simultaneous processes of externalization and internalization. Externalization of the Empire stretched from the Far East to Central Europe and East Mediterranean (what Chingiz Khan reckoned as a one year's journey!) meant what from today's perspective could be described as an aspect of globalization. The Mongol Empire covering almost half of the then known world of that time, managed to unite (although unevenly) different cultural centres and civilizations – Arabic, Chinese, European, Persian and Russian. This allows Gulati to rightly stress that “close contacts occurred between countries that had hitherto hardly known of each other's existence, on account of their geographical situation and the unsafe conditions that had formerly prevailed... The whole of Asia was opened up; trade in particular benefited from the new order... These rulers...brought about a large measure of security and peace, named the *Pax Mongolica*” (p. 37).

On the other hand, it was inevitable that the Mongols had to experience the other process – of internalization or the regionalization. The administration and proper management (political, economic, and ideological) over the vast lands implied the usage of already available mechanisms of governing that existed on the conquered areas – be it local elites' service, unchanged political structure or religions. As Gulati mentions, “the retention of a local dynasty and its attendant administrative apparatus was often the most practical method of controlling and exploiting the population and resources of a newly surrendered territory” (p. 35).

As far as the general notion of culture is concerned, it should be highlighted here that (according to this two-way flow of externalization and internalization the Mongols became a prominent force in both establishing their rule and culture on the one hand, and adjusting to the already existing and flourishing cultural patterns, on the other. It means that the Mongols as nomads were able to perform dual functions in the course of their interaction on the enormous territories they conquered. There could not be the other way round. The broad context - geography, history and culture of the conquered areas – dictated that in each place the Mongols had to be flexible

to sustain their rule and power. The degree of this flexibility, in its turn, depended on the compatibility of the Mongolian and the conquered cultures. As a result of this one could witness the variety of forms evolving from this interplay ranging from the superimposition of both nomadic Mongolian and Turk cultures (in Chaghatai Khanate), to the cultural “acculturation” of Qubilai and Hulagu to the Chinese (Yuan dynasty) and Persian (Ilkhans) cultural milieus respectively.

From the “cultural lenses” the history of the Mongols could also be regarded as a bright sample of the long process of cultural change from domination towards adaptation and final adjustment to the “subdued” culture. The nomadic perception of the world developed by the Mongols allowed them to rather flexibly build their relations on the new territories whether it came to the system of administration, policy, ideology or culture itself. The division of the Mongol Empire into four main khanates as it was left by Chingiz Khan to his sons showed the main lines of this interaction: 1) The Great Khanate (in East Asia with the capital in Karaqorum in Mongolia), of which Qubilai (1260-94) later ruled over China after 1279 (the Mongols' were overthrown in China in 1368 by the Ming dynasty); 2) the Chaghatai (second son of Chingiz Khan, ruled 1227-1242) Khanate (in heartland of Central Asia); 3) the Khanate of Persia (the Ilkhans Dynasty, built by Hulagu, grandson of Chingiz Khan, in 1258); and 4) the Khanate of Kipchak (Golden Horde in Russian Steppes, built by Batu, grandson of Chingiz Khan, ruled 1227-1255).

The author rightly suggests this division (p. 40) and makes an attempt to briefly trace the history of the Chaghatai Khanate, specifically pointing out that “the only truly Central Asian and nomadic vision of the Mongol Empire was the apanage of Chingiz Khan's second son, Chaghatai” (p. 45). It was exactly here, in the so called heartland of Central Asia, where the Mongolian nomadic spirit smoothly blended with the similar nomadic cultural pattern. The Mongol invasion made it possible to mould cultural patterns of the Mongols and the Turks (also known by its nomadic as well as settled legacy), which paved the way for an entirely new yet still very profound mixture of nomadic and settled cultures. In this case it could be said that the Mongols, rather easily accentuated and brought a new life towards the existing cultural pattern of the Turks, thus greatly contributing to and strengthening a totally new cultural pattern. As Gulati correctly mentions “the Mongols under the appendage of Chaghatai, had by then become Turkish in language and Muslim in religion and had transferred their social emphasis from the steppe to the oasis” (p. 63).

This cultural pattern very soon became a prominent one, giving rise to another wave of mixed nomadic-settled spirit that was later able to withstand the struggle with own brethren and even launch new conquests to the south – to India and Afghanistan. “It was the Chaghatais who sent their expeditions into the far distant places of Hindustan. It is the same region where we find Timur rising in power...” (p. 41). Due to these factors and bearing in mind the title of the book, it is not surprising that Gulati pays special attention to the history of Chaghatai Khanate in a separate chapter of the book.

On the contrary, the destiny of the Mongols in the contiguous areas, like in China and Persia, was rather different. The Qubilai reign in China, also known as the Yuan dynasty, in Chinese historiography became a bright exponent of the role the culture plays in the process of adjustment to different environment. In fact, the Yuan dynasty became so much “acculturated” to the already existing and highly developed Chinese cultural pattern that later, in the history of China, it was regarded as just one of the numerous Chinese dynasties. The same could be referred to the Ilkhan dynasty in Persia, whose founder and ruler Hulagu also became so adjusted to the already existed highly developed Persian culture that he, in a similar way as Qubilai Khan did, stood against the “primordial” and true Mongolian nomadic spirit. Gulati rightly mentions that the houses of Qubilai and Hulagu “had found at their disposal the age old tradition of ancient centralized empires – whole history of administrative customs of *yamens* and *divans*. They became the sons of Heaven here, sultans there...” (p. 53).

This fact of rather quick (within just few decades) acculturation by Qubilai (who was proclaimed the Great Khan of all Mongols) and his house was witnessed by the contemporaries, other descendants of Chinghiz khan as an act of betrayal of the true nomadic spirit and legacy of the Mongols. The shift of the capital of the Mongol Empire from Karaqorum in Mongolia to Peking in China added to the resentment of Mongol chieftains and especially Qaidu (grandson of Mongol Khan Ogedei, 1235-1301, who became the most relentless opponent to the reign of Qubilai), who stood against Qubilai’s policy of rapid sinification. As Gulati highlights, “Qaidu represented the Mongolian nomadic values that threatened the increasingly sedentary Mongolian dynasty in China. He favoured the pastoral nomadic society rather than the sedentary agricultural society ruled by a Central Government and staffed by a bureaucracy” (p. 69). Gulati stresses this fact while describing in chapter 4 the relations with China. Supporting his argument by various mediaeval sources he depicts uneasy relationships between Great Khan Qubilai and notably Qaidu.

In fact, the whole history of the Mongols after Chinghiz khan could be described as the constant tug-of-war where the price for the winner was not only the power and control over the vast areas, but from cultural point of view, an affirmation of certain cultural patterns. The almost 30+ year struggle between Qaidu and Qubilai houses perfectly shows the main lines of this tension.

In chapter 5 the author covers the issue of Indian campaigns undertaken by the Mongols and tries to find an answer to the question why the Mongols didn’t finally succeed on the Indian subcontinent. It seems that Gulati follows the commonly accepted opinion that mainly climate and geography were among the crucial factors preventing the Mongols from advancing further to the southern plains. As “In Western Europe and even in Hungary there were not enough pastures for the Mongol cavalry and stock. India too, was unsuited climatically and geographically for Mongol style of nomadism” (p. 81). Gulati depicts the history of the Mongols’ attempt to conquer India starting from Multan and south of the Himalayas in 1221 by Chinghiz khan, occupation of Lahore in 1241 by Ogedei khan, and later, in 1290s by Qaidu in alliance with Dawa Khan, a descendant of Chaghatai, who invaded Punjab and made a siege of Delhi in 1300 and 1303. Giving the chief reasons of the Mongols’ defeat in India Gulati follows the standpoint stressing particularly: internal struggle among the Mongol rulers of different houses; the extinction of the bravery of early Mongols in later period; uncertainty and disorder in Transoxiana followed by the death of Dawa Khan in 1306 who could stand against Indian rulers; the able rule of Alauddin, who himself was a war-lord, withstanding the Mongols (p. 97-99).

The chapter on Indian campaigns, along with presenting historical sketch of military invasions of the Mongols into the subcontinent, is interesting by the mere fact of its inclusion in the structure of the book. In fact, by placing the history of India (at least the part relating to the Mongols) in general canvas of the Mongol Empire and Central Asian’s history (and vice versa), the author avoids the established stereotype of the Mongol Empire developing mainly along the lines of East-West interactions only. The so-called north-south corridor did exist within the Empire (as well as in the Eurasian history), though not being so profoundly highlighted. The same could also be referred to the trade communications, particularly along the famous Great Silk Route. It seems then logical that Gulati paid special attention to this problem in chapter 6 discussing in detail the commercial network within the Mongol Empire.

The chapters on Indian campaigns and commercial network are crucial to our understanding of the body and

mechanism of functioning the Empire (in spite of the fact that only some parts of the Indian subcontinent, notably the north-western, and only sporadically and some of them rather nominally, were related to the Mongol Empire). The Indian campaigns showed us both the far extension and limits of the Mongols in acquiring new territories through military and political tools. At the same time the commercial network is a bright sample of the expansion made through purely economic measures, i.e. trade.

It is worth stressing here that the Great Silk Route could not be referred to the horizontal East-West links only. Rather it had various branches, arteries stretching geographically through all directions, including so called southern one, to the Indian subcontinent. The whole concept of Silk Route was a bright manifestation of the "globalized" world of that time, united under the Mongols, who with the force of their nomadic spirit supported by arms, were able to link and tighten the space of Asia and Europe to the maximum extent possible at that time. Within this space constructed by them the trade became one of the prominent and vital mechanisms of linking these vast territories, thus maintaining the whole premise of the Empire rather steadily. The arteries of numerous branches of Silk Route transpierced the landscape of Eurasia and made it colourful and vivid. While military campaigns of the Mongols were the way of expanding (externalizing) their power, then trade and commerce could be considered as tools of its intensifying and maintaining (or internalizing). From this perspective it was not surprising that the Mongols regarded trade as extremely important for their well-being and stability and consequently, developed a favorable attitude towards commerce and merchants. On the other hand, the specific of Mongol Empire based on military campaigns dictated thoroughly elaborated system of road links, stops, "guest houses" where couriers could freely convey messages from distant parts of Empire and change their horses. With this aim they advanced a highly developed system of postal service (*yam*) "to facilitate the travelers, the couriers and public officers on their journeys. The horses, carriages and food were supplied by the inhabitants and the safety on the roads was provided by strict police regulations..." (p. 107). Through this very specific nature of the Mongol Empire with its highly developed road communication, the trade got immense boost to revitalize anew the old Silk Route. As Gulati mentions, "the traders had to seek their permission before entering into their vast empire. On the other hand, it was the duty of the Mongols to provide them the safe conduct and protection on their journeys with goods and caravans" (p. 106).

The flourishing of the trade under the Mongols, witnessed by numerous accounts of travelers, missionaries and merchants, overcomes the stereotype of the Mongols as exclusively barbarians and destroyers of the civilized world. Of course, military campaigns of the Mongols could be characterized as a radical and rather "revolutionary" approach towards "the other" and was inevitably connected with the demolition of those who didn't want to surrender peacefully and who preferred struggle. However, the other rather untold part of the history of the Empire was inevitably linked with the processes of adjustment, i.e. governance and management. In this case the Mongols followed the same pattern as many other political entities of the world – having got resources to power and dominance, they were keen on developing and preserving mechanisms for its maintaining.

Gulati gives rather substantial account of the trade under the Mongols, basing his arguments on the evidences of Arabic, Persian, Syrian, European travelers and merchants, like ibn-Batuta, Ata Malik Juvaini, Rashiduddin Fazlullah, Marco Polo, Plano Carpini, G. Rubruck, etc. However, this description refers mainly to the so called horizontal East-West links, while the South Asian routes remain uncovered by the author. It could be beneficial for readers to trace these contacts, especially bearing in mind the preliminary standpoint of the author on linking the Mongol Empire' Central Asia with the contiguous space of India. Meanwhile, it was these routes in the southern direction which made possible to maintain for many centuries the multi-faceted links between two regions (Central Asia and India), notably in trade and religious fields.

Along with trade, the religious issue was also the one which echoed that time of cultural and religious cross contacts and made the Mongol Empire rather unique and very specific. Unfortunately, Gulati doesn't reflect much on this issue and only briefly mentions the attitude of some Mongol rulers towards religion. However, this issue is very important for our understanding the nature of religion in different cultural milieus, especially when it comes to the Mongols themselves due to their shamanism-based religious identity that was tolerant and welcomed all new beliefs. As was mentioned above, cultural patterns of the Mongols became variably transformed in different cultural milieus, be it Chinese or Persian. Religion too as a substantive and crucial part of culture (understood in a broad sense) underwent these changes, acquiring new characteristics or being changed. This was reflected in the destiny of the Mongol rulers themselves in different parts of the known world. As Gulati rightly mentions, "The Mongol dynasty in China

ruled barely a hundred years, but within that time the Mongols, who had followed their rulers in the eastern conquests had given up the heathenism of their native land and had become Buddhists. In Western Persia and in the countries round about Persia, the Mongols had become Muslims..." (p. 47).

It is worth mentioning here that for the Mongols the concept of religious beliefs was rather diluted but remained tolerant and open to the "other". That's why while adopting Christianity (Nestorian), they still remain half-shamanists (what was witnessed by Rubruck depicting Mongu Great Khan). Or being Christian, the mother of Great Khans Mongu and Qubilai, "she would bestow alms and presents upon *imams* and *sheikhs* and strove also to revive the sacred observances of the faith of Muhammad. And the token and proof of this statement is that she gave 1000 silver *balish* that a college (madrassa) might be built in Bokhara..." (as Gulati cites Juvaini's account, p. 127).

It could be summarized here that the history of Central Asia under the Mongols should not be analyzed through the prism of ferocious invasions only. Rather it had multi-faceted character reflecting the powerful interlinks between cultures, religions, regions. The attempt made by Gulati gives a good background for understanding these processes. The issues raised in the book could enlarge our scope on the role the Mongols played in the history in general, and in Central Asia in particular. For readers it would prove useful to comprehend the history of different regions, like Central Asia and India, not as a distorted but as interconnected with each other.

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Gangeya Mukherji, *An Alternative Idea of India: Tagore and Vivekananda*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2011, pp. 240, Rs. 695.

The challenge of Gangeya Mukherji's erudite book resides, in a way, in its title, *An Alternative Idea of India: Tagore and Vivekananda*. 'Alternative' to what, or to whom? The 'idea of India' is a hugely contested notion of which one wise exponent has been Sunil Khilnani who said, in a book of that name, published in India's 50th year celebrations: 'The democratic idea has penetrated the Indian political imagination and has begun to corrode the authority of the social order and of a paternalist state. Democracy as a manner of seeing and acting upon the world is changing the relation of Indians to themselves.' The 'idea of India' constructed early in the imagination

of Europe is usefully recalled by Mukherji through Alex Aronson's *Europe looks at India* (1946) which takes us back to Voltaire and Abbe Dubois, and tracks opinions for the next many decades. India's own articulation of identity comes with the nationalist discourse, about which Ashis Nandy and others have written magnificently. It would appear that the 'idea' was an imaginative construct linked to the contemporary conditions and intellectual climate surrounding the authors, the architects of the 'idea,' that subsequently served as a beacon to chart the chronology of dominant political discourse.

Mukherji's exposition is a timely reminder of this long process. Both Tagore and Vivekananda, who belong to pre-independence India, have been subjected to voluminous commentary. It is their present relevance to the emergence of a modern, global India that the reader would seek in a book published recently. The title, however, may compel one to ask if these two thinkers were 'alternate' to each other, or jointly offered an oppositional view to a prevailing ideology. The book, thoughtfully and painstakingly answers all these questions. The style is ponderous but deeply engaging, the research is most impressive, and if one is patient with the gradually evolving argument, the rewards are substantial. It is a book that should appear on every library shelf, and be discussed, especially among young and 'global' Indians.

What are the compelling issues? Rabindranath Tagore was born merely two years before Vivekananda but lived much longer than him, and consequently, witnessed the emerging debates on Nationalism. Conventional academia has assumed that Tagore and Vivekananda were mutually antagonistic, specially on the interpretation of godhead and religion. Countering this, Mukherji binds them astutely to the common thread of *sadhana*: "They engaged with deeper human themes that serve as the bedrock for ideas not merely of resistance, but of understanding of the human possibility, an understanding that proceeds to a heightened awareness of insensitivity and exploitation of all kinds and to a commitment to a more compassionate and harmonious world order" (203). This citation is from the last chapter of the book, which I think should have been moved editorially to the beginning. It is here that Mukherji stakes his claim that the two thinkers spoke up against divisive Nationalism, that 'they were not doctrinaire' (205) nor overtly 'political', yet they were breaking through the 'paradigm of violence' (217). This is crucial and apt. Tagore returned his Knighthood in protest against the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre; Vivekananda in the Chicago address called for 'the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all

persecutions with the sword or with the pen.' The book's importance lies in its assertion that Tagore and Vivekananda looked beyond sectarian divides to a humanitarian image of India: 'Theirs is not an Islamic or a Hindu, an Asian or a western identity' (219).

The book, unfortunately, begins not with these valuable observations but with a treatise on 'The National, the Regional, and the Universal.' The paraphernalia of academic research is shown to its fullest. Even as one applauds and learns, the writer's delay in reaching the avowed subject is disturbing. I am not sure that readers need to be told that 'broadly defined nationalism is the assumption of identity by a group of people...' (3), or taken through the tracts of Napoleon, Goethe, Milton, Dostoevsky, Coleridge and many others, as a lengthy preface to the 'Indian Renaissance'. The 'four voices,' Rammohan Roy, Dayananda, Jotirao Phule and Pandita Ramabai, aptly cited by Mukherji, would have been ample for detailing the context.

The chapter 'Tagore in the context of Postcolonialism' is a brilliant exposition on the culture of resistance and the rhetoric of political imagination. Rabindranath who grew up in a multilingual and cross-cultural environment had to sift through a complex matrix to arrive at his amazing innovations in poetry, music, theatre, fiction and art. His roots in the Brahmo Samaj led to the possibility of East-West amalgamations. Tagore brought a new aesthetics, a balance, and a dazzling creativity into his idea of India. Mukherji's section called 'Tagore as Trenchant Social Critic' appeals enormously, perhaps because of my own leanings. He says, 'Tagore's position on the role of women is located within his overall vision of the development of history.' Further, 'Tagore did not support aggression on the part of the proponents of women's rights, perhaps because he did not support any kind of violent assertion (81).' It is true that Tagore's interest in the feminine is a part of his idea of the civilisational process and the humanistic impulses that must guide it. These ideals transcend all castes and creeds. Mukherji's endorsement of Gurudev's stance, a 'non acceptance of extremes' carries passion and conviction. In conclusion Mukherji says, 'Tagore's alternative idea of India detailed in *The Call of Truth* subverts the prevalent idea of nation and identity' (97). This leads to a scintillating discussion of Tagore and Gandhi's relationship.

The next long essay is titled 'Vivekananda: Man-Making and Universal Toleration'. Though it is not quite the same virtuoso performance as the chapter on Tagore, the material is impressive. The idea of the '*Math*' (monastery) with its socio-religious implications is to be

analysed. Muslim boys were welcomed into the institution but could they take *diksha*? Could secular principles be inculcated within Vedantism? Vivekananda debated many such problems. In the section called 'Religion and Social Reform', Mukherji says, 'Vivekananda sought to usher in new thinking and feeling by educating the people. The diction, rhythm and syntax of his prose vibrate with the passion of his engagement against exploitation and injustice, and with the pain of compassion' (182). This is well said. Moreover, Vivekananda was a strong critic of orthodox brahminism as well as any anglicisation of India. He rebuked western commentaries as a 'railway view of India' and spoke against the people who renounced their Indian heritage. One of the famous controversies centred on Pandita Rambai who had converted to Christianity and had also alleged that the state of Hindu women was pathetic. Vivekananda argued that the Vedantic view on women was far from derogatory; the pathetic condition was to be blamed upon society, not heritage. With regard to this controversy, feminist scholars have tended to see Vivekananda as subscribing to a patriarchal belief. However, Gangeya Mukherji goes fairly deep into the history and places Vivekananda in far better light showing how his overall sympathies were with women and that he saw man and woman as equal partners, not as one subordinate to the other.

In summary, Gangeya Mukherji's book uses postcolonialism rather attractively to look over the colonial past and extend to a global future. The larger goal for Tagore as well as Vivekananda was to integrate the underprivileged into the emerging fabric of the nation. Tagore devised ways of balancing the western and the Indian paradigms he respected. Vivekananda delved into Vedantic practices but pushed out the caste interpolations to create a democratic framework. Mukherji concludes, 'Tagore and Vivekananda believed in a greater and subtler reality that transcends violence...pain of oppression, like any other pain, should not serve only to dull the sufferers into insensitivity and parochialism; rather, it serves its purpose by creating awareness of the futility of violence' (218).

As we tuck ourselves nightly, watching television coverage of terrorist acts and listening to the political rhetoric about counter-terrorism, we might recall the two seers whose 'alternate' view spoke against violence and reminded humans to be humane.

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Aravind Adiga, *The Last Man in Tower*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2011, pp. 432, Rs.699

Aravind Adiga remains majorly recognized for his Booker prize winning novel *The White Tiger* which dealt with the story of a downtrodden but extremely dedicated servant who works to extremes for the sake of his masters. His next work *Between the Assassinations*, a collection of short stories set in a fictitious South Indian town, focused on the issues of poverty and corruption. Both the works, competently exhibit Adiga's skilful use of language with its nuances and his familiarity with his surroundings.

The Last Man in Tower starts with a methodical organized detailing laying a "pucca" foundation for the readers. Written in luxuriant words the work befits the genre of fiction. The novel retains the dynamism and finesse of the earlier works. The locale is the Vishram society comprising of Tower A and Tower B, typical Mumbai blocks, which are in a state of depletion. Years of neglect and monsoon lashings would make them collapse any moment. Once pink, the Tower A is now "rainwater stained, fungus-licked grey". In the ensemble of middle class people, unprincipled gatekeeper, Marxist social worker, a precarious internet café owner and a religious but crooked secretary make the community of this society. Also we are familiarized with Mumbai's Versova Beach where rich of the city like bankers and film people jog along homeless and the poor releasing them in open; decaying slums, opulent high rising buildings, venerable temples and typical Mumbai streets jammed with variegated inhabitants. In fact, the author poignantly pictures the contrast between wealth and squalor.

In the gallery of different characters, besides 'Masterji' or 'the last man,' the protagonist, there are more than twenty residents, some more memorable than others-committed social worker Georgina Rego, the insecure internet café proprietor Ibrahim Kudwa, cleaner Mary and strange secretary Ashvin Kuthani. Masterji alias Yogesh Murthy, an unyielding and unbending retired teacher and widower opposes the bait of extravagant money given to the residents to vacate the Tower so that luxury apartments could be constructed. This cash is offered by the villainous property dealer and developer Dharman Shah through his sinuous left hand man Shanmugham. Shah had arrived in Mumbai with ten rupees and his theatrical and remarkable rise has come with a cost. "Like a lizard I went up walls that were not mine to go up." Shah's career as a builder has undermined his respiratory system and made him a chronic bronchitis patient. His health suffers but he has an indomitable drive to work more to earn more. Even his personal life is in a

mess. He knows that his mistress, Rosie, an aspiring Bollywood actress, is with him only because of his attractive financial position. His son, Satish, gets entangled with police but Shah does not have moral strength to restrain him from the wrong path.

On the other hand, 'Master ji' values civility, decency, community living, sharing, and cherishes the memories of his wife above monetary gain. However, unlike Masterji the other residents fall into the trap one by one. The money offered to both the Towers – A and B has similar yet delaying response. The residents are initially skeptical of their luck. Unable to comprehend the situation properly they discuss the offer before finally yielding to temptation for a brighter and more secure future. Their typical middle-class mindset surrenders to the bait of being upper class - living in a posh locality. Tower B filled with young executives is easier to break while Tower A seems to be a difficult task. Nevertheless, Shah is cunning enough to look for personal histories of Tower A and negotiate them. Master ji's opposition to the rebuilding of the Tower somehow represents nihilism, probably his disinterest not only in life but also indifference towards others needs, not a virtuous principle. He is obstinate just for the sake of being resistant, defiant and challenging. He is someone beyond material needs but also someone oblivious of other's want of material possessions. This presents him to be indifferent and unsympathetic towards his fellow residents or community. His position and disposition raise certain pertinent questions - is Mrs. Puri wrong in desiring better surroundings for her 18 years old son Ramu, a victim of Down's Syndrome? Is it too much of desire if secretary Kothari could see flamingos so that "all the wasted decades in between fell away"? Should the eccentricity of one man dissolve and crush the needs and desires of the rest? Still, on the ethical grounds, with Master Ji's stand, Adiga also questions the requisite and relevance of gentrification and the drive for slum clearance.

The novel though reads as unpredictably predictable -the reader guesses the end, however, wonders how that finish would close- becomes intense towards the last fifty pages. It becomes dark as the story of dishonesty, betrayal and corruption and greed which breed in an otherwise well knit community unfolds. Intimate friendships and relationships turn out to be not what they seem; these are built on petty resentments and take a brutal inhuman shape. (Neighbours take matters in their own hands). Nonetheless, Masterji evokes our sympathy even as the once harmonious living falls into bits. The incidents which began with gossip and eavesdropping take malicious turns and turn violent as all start treating

Master ji with scorn, contempt and viciousness. The narrative grows dense as the reader wonders whether Masterji would triumph or succumb to the pressures of circumstances. The murder turned suicide of Masterji by his own community leads to shock and yet an acceptance of the murderers.

Adiga has managed, as in his earlier works, to reveal and expose the corruption and violence bred in societies because of the overwhelming capitalist and consumerist culture. The human greed which becomes insatiable leads to the violence of the extreme – murder. Nothing evokes the dormant humanity of the people. Life goes on and the societies and people move on. The book raises several moral and ethical questions and interrogates the values prevalent in the contemporary Indian society.

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Vihang A. Naik, *Poetry Manifesto (New & Selected Poems)*, New Delhi: Indialog, 2010, pp. 72, Rs. 80 (HB).

Indian poetry in English is a threatened genre. It seems to have fallen into bad days over the last decade or two. Nissim Ezekiel is dead, so are Kamala Das, Ramanujan, Dom Moraes and several other talented poets. True, there is still some good poetry that is published occasionally. Keki Daruwalla continues to write and so do a few young poets like Arundhathi Subramaniam, Meena Kandaswamy and others, but on the whole, the picture is not very optimistic with the over-enthusiastic spirit of cultural nativism that has been sweeping the country of late. While poetry in regional languages seems to thrive, that written in English seems to be languishing. We seem to forget that English too is now an Indian language, which is why it is essential to encourage writers who attempt to write their verses in English.

Vihang Naik is a poet from Gujarat who has gained a fair amount of recognition in his home state as a poet and translator. Along with poetry in Gujarati, he has also penned some verse in English and the collection under review brings together several of his old poems along with some new additions. There is no denying that Naik's is a perceptive, poetic appreciation of the world: the sensitivity, the intuitive grasp of emotion, the near-concrete imagery and the manner in which he grasps a finite moment and freezes it in verse – all this is worthy of admiration. This is what a reader expects from a poet. Naik's work evidently merits a closer look.

This is a collection of 72 poems. Apparently only the

first 28 poems are new while the rest are recycled. There are some exceptionally good poems among the old ones, for instance, when the poet speaks of "Dead poets" in his "A Disturbed Sleep":

"Dead poets
haunt your dreams
and disturb your sleep.

You wake up,
startled
as in a battlefield
fighting the airy nothing.

Last night,
you remember,
the mosquito fight
you could not win." (48)

There is a subtle humour in this poem, the element of surprise that bears testimony to the author's intelligent approach to poetry.

Speaking of dead poets, it is interesting to note that the dedication of the collection is to "Nissim Ezekiel / A.K. Ramanujan / Dom Moraes / Arun Kolatkar / Dilip Chitre" all of them dead poets who have probably been an inspiration to Naik. Walking in their footsteps, perhaps Naik aspires to reach the same heights of fame, a legitimate enough ambition for an upcoming poet. It is reminiscent of a similar thought expressed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* where he imagines himself in the company of great minds of the past: Horace, Juvenal, Virgil, Homer and Ovid. Dante, as we know, succeeded in fulfilling his ambition and is now listed among the greats; let us hope that Naik's dreams, too, are realized.

This reviewer, however, has a few doubts about the poetry. In the first place, the title of the anthology, "Poetry Manifesto," sounds presumptuous. It would be accepted had it come from an established writer of international acclaim but from one who is little known on the Indian literary scene, it smacks of arrogance, as though the poet is laying down rules that should govern poetry. A little more modesty is called for.

Another point relates to the language of the poetry. One is familiar with the term "poetic license" but poetic license does not mean incorrect grammar. True, the reader expects some manipulation of syntax and word play but when one comes across a phrase like "Now/ since hundred years" or a "slut searching / the father of her children", it is a bit difficult to swallow the faulty grammar. There are several such examples.

Turning now to some specific poems for their 'poetic'

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The construct of the rural woman is vitally significant for the centrality of the village in the Indian literary canon. The concentration of the Indian English feminist canon on the urban-centric metropolitan discourse to the marginalisation of native, subaltern voices and traditions from varying geographical and cultural sites in the national state in terms of caste, class, religion and gender posits the need to relocate the marginalised rural centre and reclaim and reinvent the rural woman's images in the backdrop of the polemic of representation and pedagogy, on the one hand, and the nuanced multi-layered, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional embedded caste and class structures, on the other. In this study Dimri examines the images of rural woman and her representation in eight novels of Kamala Markandaya and Arundhati Roy (English), Maitreye Pushpa (Hindi), Ashapura Devi (Bengali), Indira Goswami (Assamese), M.K. Indira (Kannada) and Dalip Kaur Tiwana (Punjabi). The focus in this study is not so much on tracing a line of normative fictional images, but more on the exploration of new tropes and trajectories in the nation state.

The construction, popularisation, memorisation, hierarchisation and omission of any social or culture-specific image has never been an innocent act, and is by and large, determined by the paradigms of dominance and subordination in patriarchy, the cultural priorities of a community, and at the larger level by the social and political agency. Representation is currently a much debated issue in all discourses postcolonial, feminist, subaltern as well as culture studies. The focus in this study is not so much on the stereotyped representation of rural woman, but on the varying modes of acceptance and resistance, and shifts in point of view. In the last few decades the feminist focus has distinctively shifted to theoretical analyses of gender, sexuality, race, nation and class wherein memory plays a decisive role. The author explores the role of rural woman as a catalyst in the formulation-reformulation and conceptualisation-reconceptualisation of collective cultural memory.

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