

Silvestrum tenui musum medicaris avena: Vergil

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MISCELLANY

ANGLO-INDIAN LITERATURE

- READING THE ROCKS, FLORA AND FAUNA:
REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIA IN *Kim*,
A Passage to India AND *Burmese Days*
Jennifer Dawson 1

BENGAL

- Quarter* -- THE OTHER TAGORE
D.C.R.A. Goonelleke 13
- HISTORICAL ECONOMIES OF RACE AND GENDER IN BENGAL:
RAY AND TAGORE ON THE HOME AND THE WORLD
Patrick Hogan 23
- SECRET BODIES: RE-IMAGINING THE BODY IN THE
VAISNAVA-SHAJITYA TRADITION OF BENGAL
Hugh Urban 45

ENGLISH

- SRI AUROBINDO: THE LITERARY CRITIC
AS RELIGIOUS TEACHER
David Atkinson 63
- THREE IS A CROWD
Bhagirathi 73

IN A HIGH WIND

Keki N. Daruwalla 85

PROBLEMATIZING HISTORY WITH RUSHDIE IN

Midnight's Children

T. N. Dhar 93

POEMS

Ramola Dharmaraj 113

POEMS

Shaheen Dil 121

POEMS

Badruddin R. Gowani 133

POEMS

Alamgir Hashmi 147

"SUSPENDED BETWEEN TWO WORLDS": BHARATI

MUKHERJEE'S *Jasmine* AND THE FUSION OF HINDU
AND AMERICAN MYTH

Geoffrey Kain 151

ON TOUCHING YOU

Niranjan Mohanty 159

THINGS AS THEY ARE: THE POETRY

OF A. K. RAMANUJAN

Niranjan Mohanty 167

IDEOLOGICAL CONFRONTATION AND SYNTHESIS IN

MULK RAJ ANAND'S *Conversations in Bloomsbury*

K. D. Verma 181

FILM

THE WHITE MAN'S BURDENS AND WHIMS OF THE
CHESS-BESOTTED ARISTOCRATS: COLONIALISM IN
SATYAJIT RAY'S *The Chess Players*

Darius Cooper 205

FROM FLESH TO STONE: THE DIVINE
METAMORPHOSIS IN SATYAJIT RAY'S *Devi*

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh 227

HINDI

THE FIRE SACRIFICE

Susham Bedi trans. by David Rubin 251

TRAPPED IN OUR PENS

Rajee Seth 271

MARATHI

TWICE DALIT

Christian Novetzke 279

PUNJABI

THE EVANESCENT WORLD AND THE ETERNAL REALITY:

THE LAST HYMNS OF THE NINTH SIKH GURU

Surjit Dulai 297

THE SECOND DEPARTURE

Surjit Dulai 309

SANSKRIT

DESIRE UNDER THE KALPATARU

Pradip Bhattacharaya 315

SIX WINTERTIME POEMS BY YOGESVARA

trans. by John E. Cort 336

TAMIL

PAIN

Lakshmi Kannan 339

COUNTING THE FLOWERS

Chudamani Raghavan 343

cover gone . . . of the wall that he was used to leaning on . . . how easy it was to turn him into a stone.

Ma! why did you lose faith in nature's retribution . . . why?

Couldn't you have waited Ma?

(Translated from Hindi by Jasjit Purewal)

TWICE DALIT

The poetry of Hira Bansode

Christian Novetzke

My father was a mason. He constructed a Hindu temple and fixed the statue of god in that temple. All my friends would go there to take darshan. I didn't think anyone could recognize a difference between me and the other, higher caste people. We went inside one by one. But as my turn came and I was about to enter the temple the priest shouted at me, caught me by the hair, and dragged me from the temple entrance, refusing to allow me to enter. I asked why he did this to me. He replied that I was a Mahar¹ and couldn't enter because my presence would defile the holiness of the place. He said he would beat me or kill me if I tried to enter again. I asked god what sins I had committed to deserve this punishment. My father had built this temple and placed god inside with his own hands. If they say the god is theirs, why is it not mine also? And if the god is not mine, then the religion cannot be mine.

Hira Bansode related this story to me one afternoon in her modest flat outside Bombay. Such stories of temple entry and the violent repercussions they instigate are common in the Untouchable communities of India. In Hira's case, the incident above inspired a life of challenging the age old mores of caste and untouchability. Dalit² women throughout India are acquiring a distinct identity derived from the sexual inequality they experience in their own community as well as the disparities of caste, religion, sexuality, and economic status between them and caste Hindu women.

As the contemporary feminist movement in India has never welcomed Dalit women into their primarily Hindu fold, nor have Dalit

¹The name of a low caste.

²A general term for untouchables of different low castes.

women felt their needs met by organizations like Stri Mukti (women's liberation) or Stri Shakti (women's empowerment), women such as Hira Bansode are emerging from within the Dalit community to form sub movements addressing the particular needs and challenges of their community. Dalit women face different obstacles than do Hindu women. This difference, as well as casteist prejudices, eliminate feelings of kinship between the two. As Hira Bansode puts it "They are already different. High caste women are established, but Dalit women must struggle for very basic needs. In the Brahmin community, widow burning and such things existed, but this did not happen in the Dalit community. We have different problems. Our women don't even know the meaning of Stri Mukti. Therefore, the movements are different."

Caste enforced control over women's sexuality and the economic discrepancies between high and low caste women draw distinct lines between the Dalit women's movement and movements such as Stri Mukti. Control over women's sexuality is one of the deepest roots of caste. Endogamy and purity require that strict sexual rules be enforced on high caste women. As a woman's caste becomes lower, those rules diminish and become less rigorous. However, a lower caste women traditionally would suffer greater economic plights, and along with that, a lack of economic freedom. With modern India's adoption of democracy and capitalism, lower castes have achieved middle class economic status and a certain amount of freedom. Hira Bansode has benefited from government reservations in Universities and government employment as a civil servant in Bombay, yet most Dalit women have not, for the most part, shared her boon. Though the sexual restrictions placed on high caste women do not subjugate Dalit women, economic exploitations greatly restrict their freedom. This lack of economic power endangers their education, social equality, and quality of life.

The Dalit movement itself is not internally immune to sexual injustice. All of the movement's leaders have been men who do not include those issues particular to Dalit women. Previously Dalit women did not have the education or ability to pursue their own agenda. With the emergence of several gifted female Dalit writers like Hira Bansode, Urmilla Pawar, Meenakshi Moon, and Jyoti Langewar, the voice of Dalit women have raised the volume of their voices to join their male counterparts in protest.

Dalit women struggle to make their voices heard and understood, to shed light on the oppression of their culture, and eventually to alleviate that oppression and attack Indian patriarchy and casteism to make people aware of the Dalit condition. The movement is sometimes criticized for not posing a sufficient challenge to India's status quo. However, one can hardly expect such a small, emerging group to effectively challenge age old systems like caste and patriarchy. In a society at once ancient and young, such hasty criticisms are unwarranted. In addition, critics call attention to the relatively small size of the Dalit women's movement when compared to Stri Mukti, pointing out that as a movement Dalit women do not pose a challenge to their caste Hindu counterparts. Yet Dalit women do not confront Stri Mukti or its sister organizations on any level, but rather exist along side, differentiated by economic, social, religious, and sexual factors.

Some scholars are anxious to disregard the Dalit movement, paying little or no attention to the writing of Dalit women, and calling the entire movement unimportant. However the injustices that prompted Ambedkar and five million Untouchables to renounce Hinduism for Buddhism, the violent responses that greet Untouchables at the wrong well or temple, the denigrations and insults meted out to children because of their caste, demonstrate the continuing need for an Untouchable movement. Untouchability is practiced widely and Dalits are still being punished for their hereditary caste. They are still untouchable, without decent employment, shelter, or land, suffering violence and neglect. As long as atrocities against Dalits continue, their struggle is anything but unimportant.

Hira Bansode, in the introduction to her book of poetry *Phyriad*, published in Pune by Samaj Prabodhan Sanatha Prakashan in 1984, from where the following poems are drawn, expressed the vitality and urgency of the Dalit movement with this metaphor:

I visualize a funny picture: A white collar woman is running behind a western lady. There is a hundred mile's distance between them. And two thousand miles behind the white collared woman, there is a tiny point on the horizon, a Dalit woman, ever so slowly travelling in that direction.

This is an uneven race. The golden day of Babasaheb's³ dream will dawn the moment this race is finished. We are waiting for that moment.

Hira was born a Kamble, an Untouchable from the Mahar caste. She grew up in a neighborhood of various castes, yet her boundaries were established at a young age:

We could not enter the house of a Maratha or touch their water when they came to fill at the well. If a Maratha child played with one of us, he or she would be beaten, yet as children we were not fully aware of the concept of caste.

While still in the ninth standard, Hira Bansode's marriage was fixed. Her new husband as well as her father-in-law encouraged her continued education seeing that she held great potential as a scholar. However, her mother-in-law, fearing Hira would overshadow her less educated son, opposed Hira's scholastic goals and gave her rigorous tasks to perform at home hoping this would leave her with no energy or time for school. Hira maintained her housework and only after all the days work was completed, could she rush to school. Early mornings and late evenings by the light of a street lamp, Hira would study her Marathi texts.

On the day of her S.S.C. exam, Hira's mother-in-law locked her in a room. Hira was unable to complete the exam and would have to wait an entire year for another opportunity. The next year, Hira passed with a first class ranking. She continued her education only after her mother-in-law's death. Such opposition to education is uncommon among Dalits, to whom education offers a way out of their devastating conditions. In many cases the mother of a Dalit child becomes the most adamant supporter of her child's education:

The mother [of Dalit children] sweeps the roads and collects the waste and washes the cloths. She is accustomed to begging for the children in order to send them to school. The mother does countless favors for her children. She suffers so they can have an education.

³This is an affectionate term used by Dalits to refer to Dr. Ambedkar.

Eventually, Hira earned a B.A. in Marathi and in Sanskrit, as well as an M.A. in Marathi. She lives now outside of Bombay and works as a government employee. Her experiences from childhood and adolescence sprung her into a life of challenging the age old mores of caste and untouchability through her conversion to Buddhism, of presiding over a Dalit women's colloquy, *Samvadi*, combining the principles of *sri mukti* and of her Dalit ethnicity, and of calling forth from herself the distinctive voice of her poetry, variously a scream and whisper, always piercing to the heart of the atrocities and injustices she sees inflicted upon her fellow Dalits.

Hira's education and familiarity with Sanskrit are evident in her poetry and offer an interesting paradox to the reader who hears the language of high caste culture turned on itself in her poems. "Sanskrit" best exhibits this versatility, drawing heavily from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and employing Sanskrit words intermingled with the vernacular of her people.

A departure from Hira's usual subject matter is the odd poem "Hippy." She describes her impressions of the life of street children in their teens and early twenties as the narrator adopts their voice and perspective, attacking what Hira sees as their romanticization of poverty and lack of morals. What strikes me as peculiar about this poem is its inclusion in *Phyriad*, a collection of poetry dedicated in a sense to lodging her complaint against caste Hindu culture. Through her criticism of "Hippies" she almost turns the table at which she sits, facing her oppressors and judges, becoming herself a judge, and to some extent, oppressing the lifestyle chosen by the people of whom she writes. I have included this poem with the others because it suggests the various points of view Hira employs, shifting her narrative perspective often, and offers a further variety to her work.

SANSKRITI¹

Translated by Christian Novetzke
with Sucheta Paranjape and Christopher Connolly

Great culture of this land,
To hell with you!
Schoolbooks taught us to sweetly sing of you
As the most ancient, lofty culture of the world
And never to forget to honor you again and again.
But today, the schoolbook's lies infuriate me.
We are ashamed
To call you mother.
You may be to some,
but to us you are an evil step-mother.
Like age old Kunti?²
Abandoning her son Karma,
You denied us your motherhood.
Beneath caste dominance,
You smothered our bravery
Oh stone hearted culture.

Amid the sorrow of orphanhood—
You refused us motherly compassion.
As we burned beneath the summer's sun
You offered us no shade.
Stumbling in the darkness
Bestowed on us through centuries,
The lotus lamps of your eyes never lit.
We've sung our tearful songs
Unsoothed by your lullaby.
Our humanity tested and tested again.

¹Civilization

As you demolished our homes with the force of a volcano
We became ashes, ashes, destroyed.
Today the embers awaken us.
Our useless grief we drown.
Our loyalty, given for a morsel of bread,
Stands today as a flag of rebellion.
We sing the songs of revolt.

Oh heartless culture,
Sometime, tormented with repentance,
You will remember:

Those whose umbilical cord
I severed at birth
Were my children.
I never gave them my milk.
I never gave them my milk.

Therefore,
Great culture of this land
To hell with you!
To hell with you!

²Kunti, the wife of Pandu in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, abandoned Karma, her baby born out of wedlock before her marriage to Pandu.

WHEN THERE IS A TREMENDOUS EXPLOSION OF POETRY

Translated by Christian Novetzke
with Philip Engblom and Christopher Connelly

When there is a tremendous explosion of poetry,
Hollow heaps of sins
Piled to the pinnacle of the sky
And constellations of merit
Hanging empty in mid air,
I will crash down,
As the blood stained hands of drained souls
Hold to their lips jars of their own blood.

When poetry explodes,
Soft words become bayonets
And chest breaking sobs of the cheated
Ignite soft scented word flowers;
The stars' fire altars blaze up
Receiving the sacrifice of evil souls.
Their rabid bodies burn.
Clasping their sins,
Poetry's honey flowered noose
Strangles the evil and their rotted minds,
Garrotting them like a pearl necklace
Poisoned by their vanity.

O my poetry, my imagination,
Sever the obscene swollen heads
Inflated with riches
Robbed from the poor,
And mark the foreheads of the poor
With the blood from those severed heads.
To these soul-drained bodies,
Clothing themselves in death,
Give long life -- make them victorious
In their battle with injustice.
Make war on injustice!
Make war!

LOST SUN

Translated Christian Novetzke
with Philip Engblom and Christopher Connelly

When the very sun is lost
From which direction
Should we ask for eternal light?
Why should we, who walk
Holding the hand of death,
Fear a cup of poison?
Why should he, who pours
The future's oblation on a tin-plated culture,
Give obeisance to the present?
What good are sandalwood ointments
To innocent hearts
Punctured with wounds?
What ocean can drown this firestorm
Burning our souls,
When Agasthya¹ has swallowed the seas?
The fight is inevitable, inevitable.
The lightning of revolution
Ignites each wounded heart.
Rebellion shakes in every vein.
How can war not proceed
Whether to victory or defeat?

¹In ancient sage, who according to a myth swallowed the seas.

TO SHABRI¹

Translated by Christian Novetzke
with Christopher Connelly

Dear Shabri,
They say
You tasted berries
Ram ate.
Was this fulfillment?

Shabri,
Instead of berries,
Why didn't you ask of omniscient Ram,
Who knows the past and the future,
About the heart-rending sacrifice of Ecklavya's² thumb?
Why didn't you ask
About blameless Sita's³ exile?
If you had revealed the curse of your caste
I would have found fulfillment.
Shabri, here you went wrong.
Here, you were wrong.

¹ A low caste woman in the epic *Ramayana*. She gave hospitality to Rama the exiled prince by serving he wild berries. The story is very well-known.

² Ecklavya in the *Mahabharata* was an outcaste. He asked Drona the teacher of the princes in the epic to teach him archery. Drona refused his request because he was an outcaste. Ecklavya made an image of Drona and became an accomplished archer by practicing before the image as his teacher. Having mastered the art, when he went to pay homage to the real Drona, the latter, according to custom asked the pupil for graduation fee. As fee Drona asked for Ecklavya's right thumb and Ecklavya sliced it off for him.

³ Sita, Rama's wife, was absolutely faithful to him. During their exile, she was abducted by the demon king Ravana. After his victory over the demons when Rama, along with Sita, returned to his capital, he heard rumors about his people saying that Sita had compromised her virtue during her incarceration in Ravana's capital. Rama sent Sita into exile. The story illustrates the sexism of Indian culture.

HIPPY

Translated by Christian Novetzke
with Meena Chandavarkar and Christopher Connelly

We are young now,
Quite young.
Young blood, hot blood.
No religion, no shame.
No dharna, no fear.
We are colorful butterflies,
One shirt, one lungi.¹
Nonchalant, mad with freedom,
No tethers on our choice.
No restrictions, no salute.
We race in the wind.
We roll in the mud.
Because we are hippies.
Because we are hippies.
Because we are hippies.

Who is Hindu, who is Christian?
All here are cruel butchers.
We don't know the *Mahabharata*,²
We know Krishna³ and Draupadi.⁴
A woman rearing five husbands
And a lover to sixteen thousand women.
Wow! Very good! Very good!
From them we descend.
Because we are hippies.
Because we are hippies.
Because we are hippies.

¹ A garment for the lower part of the body, wrapped around the waist.
² One of the two great Hindu epics.

³ A Hindu god. Also a major character in the *Mahabharata*.

⁴ Wife of the five Pandu brothers in the *Mahabharata*.

Who would drink milk?
The entire universe drowns in a shot glass.

We have no hope,
Only a high, only a high.

Love is our aim
Intoxication, our life.

Only take a hit
And forget all the shit.

Our pal, this ganja --
Hashish, our friend,

Sways and says, "Delicious!"
We drown in the shot glass.

The shot glass drowns in us.
Our eyes burning and red.

Because we are hippies.
Because we are hippies.

We don't know the past,
Don't ask for the future.

One day's our life,
One night, one wife.

No memory of yesterday,
No faith in tomorrow.

Our whole manner, monocolor.
We are flailing kites.

We've no house, no door,
Heroes of the footpath.

For whom do we live, for whom do we die?
Everyone for himself.

We are disgusted with this mirage;
We despise the deceitful masks.

So we run and run,
Because we are hippies.

Because we are hippies.
Because we are hippies.

ON THIS CURSED BAREN ISLAND

Translated by Christian Novetzke
with Philip Engblom and Christopher Connelly

On this cursed barren island
Where only questions continue to be planted
How can we reap the ambrosia
Of undying answers?

Every blossoming, smiling morning
Wilts like a flower
At the foot of the shapeless horizon.
Each swallow of poison
Brands fragrant notes
Of sweet songs in our throats.

And yet never, even by mistake,
Does the bitter warming pain
Arise on the stony lips of the samaja purusha.¹
You who wallow in the current
Of unsatisfied pleasures,
Wallow to your hearts content.
Only when we've laid down-
Our loads for you in trust
Will you provide a permanent shore
For our sorrows?

¹A respectable member of society.

SUNRISE

Translated by Christian Novetzke
with Philip Enghlom and Christopher Connelly

I bring the sunrise
Through this dark land.
At every turn sad sunsets
Hang like refugee's heads.
Their hope of shelter
Cast out centuries ago.
The joyful festivals of their lives,
Expelled.

O friends,
Wipe the desert from your eyes.
To sow there I bring the pregnant
Spring buds of inspiration.
Wash the dark fear from your face,
I carry lamps of light
And Trample the curses of history
Under storming feet,
Releasing from bonds your pent up breath,
O royal swans!

See your shining form.
Seize the victory of your courageous liberation
O friends!

For you I bring the sunrise.
Become bright, become bright!

PETITION

Translated by Christian Novetzke
with Philip Enghlom and Christopher Connelly

O people! To your court
I bring a petition
Will you give me justice?

Birth after birth I,
A refugee in my own home,
Bear the life sentence of neglect.
My father, my brother, my husband --
Under the weight of these well-fleshed relations
My hollow existence gives way,
Pressed down day by day.
I have lost my identity,
My independence, my rights, my opinions.
See how everything falls on me?
In my home, in my society, in my country,
Who am I if I am nobody?
Will you answer this question?
O people, to your court
I bring a petition.
Will you give me justice?

Deep wounds of insult
Weep from every part of my body.
Our peoples' honor is looted
In casteism's dharma blind fields.
Every page of the religious texts
Erodes our character
As thousands of Draupadis¹ are stripped.

¹In the *Mahabharata* the Pandus lose everything including themselves and their wife, Draupadi, in a game of dice with their rival cousin, Duryodhana. Duryodhana then orders Draupadi to be stripped naked in open court. The elders, including the great patriarch Bhishma, the princes' grand uncle, watch helplessly and do not stop Duryodhana.

Brothers don't just sit
Bowling your heads like Bhishma the Pandava.
Unbandage your eyes to change
This history of defeat.
Will you offer your powerful hand in challenge?
O people, to your court
I bring a petition.
Will you give me justice?

The fruits of my progress rot.
The clouds filled with my knowledge fade.
My musky fragrance stays crammed
In a closed phial.
Tell me on which current
Shall I loose my boat.
Will you provide a shore
For my bright unsatisfied dreams?
O people, to your court
I bring a petition.
Will you give me justice?

My life is a lump of clay
To be fashioned into any image.
I want to be born
Tingling with chaitanya.²
For my resurrection I need a word,
Given, and never to be sold.
Offer a pledge
And remain true.
Will you tell me the mantra
To change this dependent life,
This desert, into a flower garden?
O people, to your court
I bring a petition.
Will you give me justice?

With the flame of the present
Dynamite the evil past,
And the aeons of insult it carried.

² Alertness.

Let the dying, helpless minds,
Accepting of centuries of slavery, burn.
Every breath here is restless;
Every ray shot through with darkness.
The sky betrays as well
With its heavy black clouds;
The earth an accessory
To these pre-arranged plots.
Will you give me strength
To fight enthusiastically
For an end to these atrocious traditions?
O people, to your court
I bring a petition.
Will you give me justice?

I petition
Against the hide-bound culture
Imprisoning us in a cold cell,
Giving us outcast lives.
This culture whose wind treats us like strangers,
In whose soil our seeds die,
Whose rain provides us nothing but famine,
Playing a deadly game that is an umbrage.
We reject this polluted life.
Will you offer a bright, auspicious dawn
To free us from this cruel curse?
O people, to your court
I bring a petition.
Will you give me justice?