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Rungh

A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment & Criticism

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editorial

Smell the Samosas, Bob !

The recent manufactured controversy over the ***Writing Thru Race*** conference confirms that the only thing worse than witnessing a power in ascent is witnessing it in decline. For those of you who may have missed the 'controversy,' ***Globe and Mail*** columnist Robert Fulford wrote a column (*George Orwell, Call Your Office*, March 30) which accused the Writers' Union of Canada of 'reinventing apartheid' by hosting a conference for First Nations writers and writers of colour. In particular, Fulford and his allies found the explanation of the conference organizers for including only First Nations and writers of colour in the discussion (the evening literary events being open to all) to be Orwellian. Fulford's condemnation brought to the fore the usual parade of charges, that the conference was engaging in reverse racism, censorship, exclusion and a misuse of public funds. The conference funders were publicly defensive and privately supportive instead of the other way around.

In response to the convulsions of Fulford *et al* at being excluded, the chair of the union's Racial Minority Writer's Committee, Roy Miki, mounted an eloquented response rooted in both, history and an explanation of power relationships (*Why we're holding the Vancouver conference*, April 7). While I do not share Mr. Miki's opinion that the Writers' Union should be commended for its enlightened approach to 'race,' I wholeheartedly agree that First Nations writers and writers of colour should be applauded for taking on the task of constructing social and cultural justice.

Constructing any form of justice requires a normative foundation and while everyone agrees that racism is bad how we fight against racism has yet to be agreed upon. Not surprisingly, Fulford and company embrace a strategy which endorses the rectifying mechanisms of the status quo or to put it in Fulford's words 'a colour-blind society'; a society based solely on merit and human rights legislation. What the conference organizers point out is that 'a colour-blind society' is not a society which champions powersharing but rather a society which favours the status quo and does not see the injustices inflicted upon those of colour. Which vision(s) of our society will govern and are there other competing visions which have yet to be voiced? This conference represents one of many signs in our culture that 'other' visions of our society are coming to the centre from the periphery.

I have little doubt that the glib and male writers who weighed in with Fulford are well aware of the arguments in support of such a conference. It is almost impossible to avoid these discussions even in the pages of Canada's National Newspaper. Why then the creation of a polarized debate about the 'new mulitculturalism' and its divisive nature? I believe that the critics of the conference while 'educated' about the issues simply lack the commitment to the very type of social and cultural justice referred to by Miki. Such a commitment requires a generosity of spirit, an assuredness of purpose and a willingness to share which has been sadly lacking. With such a lack of cultural leadership in the establishment is it any surprise that ***Writing Thru Race*** seeks answers from within its own communities?

As for Mr. Fulford, all I can suggest is don't just smell the coffee.

the HOLDER of the WORLD

an excerpt

by

BHARATI MUKHERJEE

1

Part One

I live in three time zones simultaneously, and I don't mean Eastern, Central and Pacific. I mean the past, the present and the future.

The television news is on, Venn's at his lab, and I'm reading Auctions & Acquisitions, one of the trade mags in my field. People and their property often get separated. Or people want to keep their assets hidden. Nothing is ever lost, but continents and centuries sometimes get in the way. Uniting people and possessions; it's like matching orphaned socks through time.

According to A&A, a small museum between Salem and Marblehead has acquired a large gem. It isn't the gem that interests me. It's the inscription and the provenance. Anything having to do with Mughal India gets my attention. Anything about the Salem Bibi, Precious-as-Pearl, feeds me.

Eventually, Venn says, he'll be able to write a program to help me, but the technology is still a little crude. We've been together nearly three years, which shrinks to about three weeks if you deduct his lab time. He animates information. He's out there beyond virtual reality, recreating the universe, one nanosecond, one minute at a time. He comes from India.

Right now, somewhere off Kendall Square in an old MIT office building, he's establishing a grid, a data base. The program is called X-2989, which translates to October 29, 1989, the day his team decided, arbitrarily, to research. By "research" they mean the mass ingestion of all the world's newspapers, weather patterns, telephone directories, satellite passes, every arrest, every television show, political debate, airline schedule...do you know how may checks were written that day, how many credit card purchases were made? Venn does. When the grid, the base, is complete, they will work on the interaction with a personality. Anyone. In five years, they'll be able to interpose me, or you, over the grid for upward of ten seconds. In the long run, the technology will enable any of us to insert

ourselves anywhere and anytime on the time-space continuum for as long as the grid can hold.

It will look like a cheap set, he fears. He watches "Star Trek," both the old and new series, and remarks on the nakedness of the old sets, like studio sets of New York in 1940s movies. The past presents itself to us, always, somehow simplified. He wants to avoid that fatal unclutteredness, but knows he can't.

Finally, a use for sensory and informational overload.

Every time-traveller will create a different reality-just as we all do now. No two travellers will be able to retrieve the same reality, or even a fraction of the available realities. History's a big savings bank, says Venn, we can all make infinite reality withdrawals. But we'll be able to compare our disparate experience in the same reality, and won't that be fun? Jack and Jill's twenty-second visit to 3:00 pm on the twenty-ninth of October, 1989.

Every time-traveller will punch in the answers to a thousand personal questions—the time is working on the thousand most relevant facts, the thousand things that make me me, you you—to construct a kind of personality genome. Each of us has her own fingerprint, her DNA, but she has a thousand other unique identifiers as well. From that profile X-2989 will construct a version of you. By changing oven one of the thousand answers, you can create a different personality and therefore elicit a different experience. Saying you're brown-eyed instead of blue will alter the withdrawal. Do blonds really have more fun? Stay tuned. Because of information overload, a five-minute American reality will be denser, more 'lifelike', than five minutes in Africa. But the African reality may be more elemental, dreamlike, mythic.

With a thousand possible answers we can each create an infinity of possible characters. And so we contain a thousand variables, and history is a billion separate information bytes. Mathematically, the permutations do begin to resemble the randomness of life. Time will become as famous as place. There well be time-tourists sitting around saying, "Yeah, but have you ever been to April fourth? Man!"

My life has gotten just a little more complicated than my ability to describe it. That used to be the definition of madness, now it's just discontinuous overload.

My project is a little more complicated.

My life has gotten just a little more complicated than my ability to describe it. That used to be the definition of madness, now it's just discontinuous overload.

The Ruby rests on a square of sun-faded green velvet under a dusty case in a maritime museum in an old fishing village many branches off a spur of the interstate between Peabody and Salem. Flies have perished inside the case. On a note card affixed to the glass by yellowed tape, in a slanted, spidery hand over the faded blue lines, an amateur curator has ballpointed the stone's length (4cm) and weight (137 carats), its date and provenance (late 17c, Mughal). The pendant is of spinel ruby, unpolished and uncut, etched with names in an arabized script. A fanciful translation of the names is squeezed underneath:

Jehangir, The World-Seizer
Shah Jahan, The World-Raiser
Aurangzeb, The World-Taker
Precious-as-Pearl, The World-Healer

In adjoining cases are cups of translucent jade fitted with handles of silver and gold: bowls studded with garnets and sapphires, pearls and emeralds; jewel-encrusted thumb rings; jewel-studded headbands for harem women; armlets and anklets, necklaces and bangles for self-indulgent Mughal men; scimitars rust dappled with ancient blood, push-daggers with double blades and slip-on tiger claws of hollow-ground animal horns.

How they yearned for beauty, these nomads of central Asia perched on Delhi's throne, how endless the bounty must have seemed, a gravel of jewels to encrust every surface, gems to pave their clothes, their plates, their swords. Peacocks of display, helpless Sybarites, consumed not with greed but its opposite: exhibition. And how bizarre to encounter it here, the spontaneous frenzy to display, not hoard, in this traditional capital of Puritan restraint. Spoils of the Fabled East hauled Salemward by pockmarked fortune builders. Trophies of garrisoned souls and bunkered hearts.

The Emperor and his courtiers pace the parapets above the harem, caged birds sing, and the soft-footed serving girl follows them at a measured distance, silently fanning with peacock feathers at the end of a long bamboo shaft. Below, a hundred silk saris dry on the adobe walls. Lustrous-skinned eunuchs set brass pitchers of scented water at the openings in the zenana wall. Old women snatch them up, then bar the venereal interior to the dust and heat. Above it all, the Emperor-a stern old man, sharp featured in profile with a long white beard-contemporary of the Sun King. of Peter the Great and of Oliver Cromwell, splices the sunlight with uncut gems. The world turns slowly now in a haze of blood, then glitters in a sea of old, then drowns in the lush green that chokes his palace walks. He is the monarch of rains and absurd fertility, bred with dust and barrenness in his veins, this fervent child of a desert faith, believer in submission now given infidel souls to enslave, unclean temples of scourge and a garden of evil fecundity to rule. How useless it must have seemed to those ambassadors of trade, those factors of the East India Company, to lecture an exiled Uzbek on monochromatic utility and the virtues of reticence.

The gaudiness of Allah, the porridge of Jehovah.

"Closing in fifteen minutes," barks the curator, a pink-domed curiosity of a man with bushy white brows, a pink scalp and billowy earmuffs of white hair. His name is Satterfield; the captions are in his hand.

"Comes from the Old English. Slaughter Field," he offers, uninvited. Perhaps he sees me as a searcher-after-origins, though nothing in my manner or dress should reveal it. High Yuppie, Venn would say: toned body, sensible clothes, cordovan briefcase, all the outward manifestations of stability, confidence and breeding.

"Masters," I say, "Beigh Masters." I give him my card—estates planning,

assets research. No one ever asks what it means: they assume I'm a lawyer or with the IRS. Back on the scepter'd isle, three hundred years ago, we were Musters or musterers. A clever-vowel change, in any event. "Looks like 'Bee,' sounds like 'Bay-a,'" I say.

According to a brass plate in the foyer of this old clapboard house, now museum, on an outcropping of cod-, lobster- and scallop-rich granite where a feeble estuary meets the sea, from this house a certain William Maverick once guided sloops of plundering privateers. Each conqueror museums his victim, terms him decadent, celebrates his own austere fortitude and claims it, and his God, as the keys to victory. William Maverick credited his own hard-knuckled tolerance of cold and pain and hunger to a Protestant God, and credited Him for guiding his hand over the sun-softened Catholics. It pleased him to know that "shark-supp'd Spaniards would have an eternity to offer their novenas."

It is perhaps not too great an adjustment to imagine pirates sailing from comfortable homes like this after laying in a supply of winter firewood for the wife and family and chopping, then some fish and salt pork, molasses and tea, before raising a crew and setting out to plunder the Spanish Main. We're like a reverse of Australia: Puritans to pirates in two generations. Our criminal class grew out of good religious native soil.

The first Masters to scorn the straightened stability of his lot was one Charles Jonathan Samuel Muster, born in Morpeth, Northumberland. In 1632, a youth of seventeen, C.J.S. Muster stowed away to Salem in a ship heavy with cows, horses, goats, glass and iron. What extraordinary vision he must have had, to know so young that his future lay beyond the waters outside the protections of all but the rudest constabulary, at the mercy of heathen Indians and the popish French. By 1640 he was himself the proprietor of a three-hundred-acre tract that he then leased to an in-law recently arrived, and then he returned to Salem and the life of sea trade, Jamaica to Halifax. Curiosity or romance has compelled us to slash, burn, move on, ever since.

Twelve years ago I did a research project which led to an undergraduate thesis on the Musters/Masters of Massachusetts for Asa Brownledge's American Puritans seminar at Yale; everything I know of my family comes from that time when I steeped myself in land transfers, sea logs and records of hogsheads of molasses and rum. And that seminar set in motion a hunger for connectedness, a belief that with sufficient passion and intelligence we can deconstruct the barriers of time and geography. Maybe that led, circuitously, to Venn. And to the Salem Bibi and the tangled lines of India and New England.

The year that young Charles Muster secreted himself among the livestock aboard the Gabriel, a noblewoman in India died in childbirth. It was her fourteenth confinement, and she was the Emperor's favourite wife. The Emperor went into white-gowned mourning while supervising the erection of a suitable monument. So while the Taj Mahal was slowly rising in a cleared forest on the banks of the Yamuna, Young Muster was clearing the forest on the banks of the Quabaug and erecting a split-log cabin adjacent to a hog pen and tethered milch cow. Three years later, barely twenty, he abandoned the country and built the first of many houses on an overlook commanding a view of the sea and the spreading rooftops of Salem. For the rest of his life he scuttled between civilized Salem and the buckskinned fringes of the known world, out beyond Worcester, then Springfield, then Barrington, gathering his tenants' tithes of corn and beans, salted meat and barrels of ale, selling what he couldn't consume and buying more tracts of uncleared forest with the profit, settling them with frugal, land-hungry arrivals from Northumberland, while running his own sea trade in rum and molasses, dabbling in slaves, sugar and tobacco, in cotton and spices, construction and pike building. He was a New World emperor. Even today, five townships carry his name.

In this Museum of Maritime Trade, the curator's note cards celebrate only Puritan pragmatism. There is no order, no hierarchy of intrinsic value or aesthetic worth; it's a fly's-eye view of Puritan history. More display cases are devoted to nails, flintlock muskets, bullet molds, kettles, skillets, kitchen pots and pothooks, bellows and tongs than to carved-ivory powder primer flasks and nephrite jade winecups. The crude and blackened objects glower as reproaches to Mughal opulence, glow as tributes to Puritan practicality. As in the kingdom of tropical birds, the Mughal men were flashy with decoration, slow moving in their cosmetic masculinity. What mush these worlds have thought, colliding with each other? How mutually staggered they must have been; one wonders which side first thought the other mad.

About children reared in our latchkey culture, I have little doubt. I've heard their teachers on guided tours, listened to their whispered titters of Cub Scouts and Brownies: *We beat those Asians because our pots are heavy and black and our pothooks contain no jewels. No paintings, no inlays of rubies and pearls. Our men wore animal skins or jerkins of crude muslin and our women's virtue was guarded by bonnets and capes and full skirts. Those Indian guys wore earrings and dresses and necklaces. When they ran out of space on their bodies they punched holes in their wives' noses to hang more gold and pearl chains. Then they bored holes in their wives' ears to show off more junk, they crammed gold bracelets all the way up to their elbows so their arms were too heavy to lift, and they slipped new rings on their toes and thumbs so they could barely walk or make a fist.*

No wonder!

I move from unfurbished room to room, slaloming between us and them, imagining our wonder and their dread, now as a freebooter from colonial Rehoboth or Marblehead, and now as a Hindu king or Mughal emperor watching the dawn of a dreadful future through the bloody prism of a single perfect ruby, through an earring or a jewel from the heavy necklace.

The curator returns to an empty darkened room where he can watch me, while lifting the covers off two large, wooden crates. The tea-chest wood is nearly antique in itself, except for the crude Magic Markered notations: "Salem Bibi's Stuffs." The Salem Bibi—"the white wife from Salem"—Precious-as-Pearl! I have come to this obscure, user-hostile museum to track her down.

The opened crates overflow with clothing, none of it from the Bibi's time. It's like a Goodwill pick-up. Satterfield paws through the upper

layers, lets them spill around the crates, unsorted, still in tangles. Only the moths will know this history.

More layers; the crates are like archaeology pits. I want to stop and examine, but the decades are peeling by too quickly. Not all that survives has value or meaning; believing that it does screens out real value, real meaning. Now we're getting down to better 'stuffs,' fragments of cotton carpets and silk hangings, brocade sashes and exotic leggings.

I think we are about to hit pay dirt. An old rug. Satterfield looks up. "Closing time," he says. Museum hours: Closed weekends. Monday and Friday and Wednesday afternoon. Open Tuesday afternoon and Thursday morning.

"I've come a long way to see this," I say. "Won't you let me stay?"

My eyes are more often called steely or forthright than pleading, but to Satterfield they convey, this day at least, the proper respect and sincerity. I get down on my knees, and help lift.

"Wherever did you get this?"

"A donation," he says. "People in these parts, they have a lot of heirlooms. A lot of seafaring families, grandfathers' chests and things."

"You mean someone had all this in his attic?"

"Friends of the Museum."

"Looks Indian," I say. "Indian-Indian, not wah-wah Indian." I hate to play stupid for anyone, but I don't want him to suspect me. Traces of the Salem Bibi pop up from time to time in inaccessible and improbable little museums just like this one. They get auctioned and sold to anonymous buyers. I believe I know her identity, and the anonymous donor.

Mr. Satterfield settles on one knee and lifts out the frayed wool rug with a hunting motif—old, very old—and carefully unfolds it. Inside, there is a stack of small paintings; he lifts the folds of the carpet. Then he smooths the carpet out.

"Pretty good shape for the age it's in."

I get down on my knees, smoothing the carpet in the manner of a guest who, with indifference but a show of interest, might pat a host's expansive hunting dog. "Well, aren't those very interesting paintings," I say. "Don't you think?" My voice has caught a high note; I want to cough or clear my throat, bit it would seem almost disrespectful.

"We don't keep pictures here. This is a museum of maritime trade."

There is surely one moment in every life when hope surprises us like grace, and when love, or at least its promise, landscapes the jungle into Eden. The paintings, five in all, are small, the largest the size of a man's face, the smallest no larger than a fist. They make me, who grew up in an atomized decade, feel connected to still-to-be-detected galaxies.

The corners are browned by seawater or monsoon stains. White ants have eaten through the courtiers' sycophantic faces and lovers' tangled legs, through muezzin-sounding minarets and lotus blooms clutched by eager visitors from pale-skinned continents oceans away. But the Mughal painters still startle with the brightness of their colours and the forcefulness of their feelings. Their world is confident, its paints are jewels, it too displays all it knows.

Here, the Salem Bibi, a yellow-haired woman in diaphanous skirt and veil, posed on a stone parapet instructing a parrot to sing, fulfils her visions in the lost, potent language of miniature painting. She is always recognizable for the necklace of bone. Later, when the Indian imagination took her over, the bone became skulls.

"I need to pack these up," says Mr. Satterfield.

Here Precious-as-Pearl zigzags on elephantback, by masoola boat, in palanquins—the vast and vibrant empire held in place by an austere Muslim as Europeans and Hindus eat away the edges.

In the first of the series, she stands ankle-deep in a cove, a gold-haired, pale-bodied child-woman against a backdrop of New England evoked with wild, sensual colour. The cove is overhung with cold-weather, colour-changing maples and oaks whose leaves shimmer in a monsoon's juicy green luxuriance. At the water's edge, a circle of Indians in bright feathered headdresses roast fish on an open fire. More braves stand in shallow water, spears aloft, as grotesque red salmon climb the underside of giant breakers. Their wolf-dogs howl, neck hairs rising, as children toss stones in play from the shingled beach. Around her submerged high-arched instep, jellyfish, dark as desire, swirl and smudge the cove's glassy waves. Crouched behind her, in the tiny triangle of gravelly shore visible between her muscled legs, black-robed women with haggard faces tug loose edible tufts of samphire and sea grasses. I was right—they were fascinated by us. The artist cannot contain the wonders, fish and bird life bursts over the border.

"Really. It's getting very late." He begins to turn the miniatures over and folds the ancient carpet over them.

"Where will you be selling them?" I ask, but he shrugs.

"That's up to the owner, isn't it?"

In a maritime trade museum in Massachusetts, I am witnessing the Old World's first vision of the New, of its natives, of its ferocious, improbable shapes, of its monstrous women, that only the Salem Bibi could have described or posed for. Her hips are thrust forward, muscles readied to wade into deeper, indigo water. But her arms are clasped high above her head, her chest is taut with audacious yearnings. Her neck, sinewy as a crane's, strains skyward. And across that sky, which is marigold yellow with a summer afternoon's light, her restlessness shapes itself into a rose-legged, scarlet crested crane and takes flight.

The bird woos with hoarse-throated screeches, then passes out of sight. The painting could be covered by the palm of my hand.

I lift the final one. I want to memorize every stroke.

In the largest of that series—its catalogue name is *The Apocalypse*, but I call it *The Unravish'd Bird*—beautiful Salem Bibi stands on the cannon-breached rampart of a Hindu fort. Under a sky of fire, villages smoulder on purple hillocks. Banners of green crescent moons flutter from a thousand tents beyond the forest, where tethered horses graze among the bloated carcasses of fallen mounts. Leopards and tigers prowl the outer ring of high grass; the scene is rich in crow-and-buzzard, hyena-and-jackal, in every way the opposite of fertile Marblehead. In a forest of blackened tree stumps just inside the fort's broken walls, hyenas lope off with severed human limbs; jackals chew through caparisoned carcasses of horses; a buzzard hops on a child's headless corpse.

Each conqueror museums his victim, terms him decadent, celebrates his own austere fortitude and claims it, and his God, as the keys to victory.

Salem Bibi's lover, once a sprightly guerrilla warrior, now slumps against a charred tree trunk. He grasps a nephrite jade dagger hilt carved in the shape of a ram's head and, with his last blood-clotted breath, pledges revenge. His tiny, tensed knuckles glint and wink, like fireflies, against the darkness of his singed flesh. The poisoned tip of an arrow protrudes through the quilted thinness of his battle vest. An eye, gouged loose by an enemy dagger, pendulums against his famine-hollowed cheek, a glistening pink brushstroke of a sinew still connecting it to the socket through which the smoky orange sky shows itself. The lover's one stationary eye fixes its opaque, worshipful gaze on the likeness of the Salem Bibi painted on the lover's right thumbnail.

Near Salem Bibi's dying lover, under a multirooted banyan tree smeared with oils and ashes holy to Hindus, the upper body of a lotus-seated yogi slain in midmeditation holds itself serenely erect. An infant, chubby and naked, crawls from blood-spattered shield to shield inventing happy games. A thief crouches behind a pretty purple boulder and eyes the necklets of pearls, rubies, diamonds, on courtier-warriors' stilled chests. Broods of long-haired monkeys with black, judgmental faces ring the heaps of dead and dying.

In the clean, green distance beyond the conflagration's range, on a wide road that twists away from ruined rots and smoking villages, a gloomy, insomniac conqueror on a sober-eyed elephant leads his procession of triumph-aroused horsemen, foot soldiers, archers, gunners, lance bearers, spies, scouts, mullahs, clowns, poets, painters, bookkeepers, booty haulers, eunuchs, courtesans, singers, dancers, jugglers, wrestlers, cooks, palanquin bearers, tent pitchers, storytellers, to the next gory and glorious field of slaughter. Their eyes form a perfect, glitter-pointed triangle: Salem Bibi's, her Hindu lover's, the Mughal conqueror's.

On the low-parapeted roof of the fort, Salem Bibi chants stubborn and curative myths to survive by. Her braceleted hands hold aloft a huge, heavy orb of unalloyed gold and a clear, multifaceted diamond through which a refracted lion and a lamb frolic in a grove of gold grass as supple as silk. At her henna-decorated, high-arched feet, a bird cage lies on its side, its microscopic door recently ripped off its hinges. The newly exposed hinge glows against the cage's duller metal, a speck of gold-leaf paint.

"Thank you, Mr. Satterfield."

It is a feast of the eyes, and I must steady myself, take a breath, palms outstretched on the museum's floor. You can study it for a lifetime and find something new each time you look. It's like an Indian dessert, things fried that shouldn't be, hot that should be cold, sweet that should be tart. And an art that knows no limit, no perspective and vanishing point, no limit to extravagance, or to detail, that temperamentally cannot exclude, a miniature art forever expanding.

Go, Salem Bibi whispers, her kohl-rimmed sapphire eyes cleaving a low-hanging sky. *Fly as long and as hard as you can, my co-dreamer! Scout a fresh site on another hill. Found with me a city where lions lie with lambs, where pity quickens knowledge, where desire dissipates despair!*

There are no accidents. My Yale thesis on the Puritans did lead to graduate school, but it also took me here. My life with Venn Iyer, father of fractals and designer of inner space, is no accident.

I drove out to this museum to track down for a client what he claims is the most perfect diamond in the world. The diamond has a name: the Emperor's Tear. For eleven years I have been tracking the Salem Bibi, a woman from Salem who ended up in the Emperor's court. I know her as well as any scholar knows her subject; I know her like a doctor and a lawyer, like a mother and a daughter. With every new thing I have learned, I've come imperceptibly closer to the Emperor's Tear. In that final Gotterdammerung painting, she is holding it: I have seen the Emperor's Tear atop its golden orb. Three hundred years ago, it existed in her hands; I know where she came from and where she went. I couldn't care less about the Emperor's Tear, by now. I care only about the Salem Bibi.

I should have let the keyboard do the tracking, but, like shamans and psychics, I've learned to go with hunches as well as data bases. The easiest way for a white-collar felon to make a stone vanish for a while is to loan it to a small, grateful museum under a plausible alias. And if the museum, finding itself too cluttered already, and out of its curatorial depths, were to sell it in some obscure auction in Europe or Canada, and the owner just happened to show up and buy it, he'd have title, free and clear, wouldn't he?

What I hadn't figured on was the secret life of a Puritan woman whom an emperor honoured as Precious-as-Pearl, the Healer of the World.

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta. She currently lives in New York and is a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. She is the author of five books of fiction—***The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, Darkness, The Middleman and Other Stories*** (which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1989) and ***Jasmine***—and two books of nonfiction written with her husband, Clark Blaise, ***Days and Nights in Calcutta*** and ***The Sorrow and the Terror***.

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the book of

AN EXCERPT

BY M.G. VASSANJI

Three strapping young men facing into a head wind, on our second-class paid passage aboard the SS Amra. We had boarded ship at Bombay, and throughout the journey our spirits never dipped for a moment. The world seemed small and we were conscious that we were crossing it. We were sailing to freedom, freedom from an old country with ancient ways, from the tentacles of clinging families with numerous wants and myriad conventions; freedom even from ourselves grounded in those ancient ways. Desouza, big and dark in safari suit and hat, very much the magazine picture of an adventurer; Kuldip and I, ordinary Indians in light bush shirts and loose trousers.

We trampled through the market in Aden. We walked up and down the decks looking for interesting people to talk to. There were those returning to Africa—and these you could tell by their interest in the ship's amenities (mostly the bar) and nothing else—and others like us going for the first time, ready to romanticize any sight, eager for any piece of information. The third-class deck was a floating Indian slum, to which we were drawn by the attraction of newly married brides, who in these crowded quarters had lost their colour and also much of their shyness. When we crossed the equator we joined the upper decks at the ball. None of us had any qualms about taking drinks, all of us took turns at dancing with an elderly returning headmistress of a girls' school. And finally Mombasa, when we knew we had come to Africa, where most of the Europeans disembarked on their way to Nairobi. Then Zanzibar, and, with beating hearts, Dar es Salaam. In Dar we slept the night in a hotel near the harbour and spent the following morning roaming the streets before departing on the afternoon train to Tabora.

It was in Tabora that I first recall that feeling of being alone in Africa. It was a feeling that would return, though less and less frequently; one learned gradually to guard against it. I remember vividly my first night, in my room on a ground-floor corridor. My friends were in other parts of the building. Frogs were croaking, crickets chirping, the khungu three whispering outside in a breeze. The room was solid dark, and the night air was so depleted of substance it felt like a rarefied gas carrying just a trace of woodsmoke. No longer did I feel so sure of myself; it seemed to me as if I had come to another part of the universe, that the world I had left behind, my home town of Panjim, Goa, was as distant as the nearest star in the sky.

After two years at Tabora all of us opted to leave for Dar—Kuldip for the Government Indian Secondary School, whose cricket team and syllabus he would bring to be among the best in the country; Desouza and I for their arch-rivals, the Shamsi Boys' School or 'Boyschool.'

Boyschool was away from the downtown area, at the end of Selous Street, coming after the potters' village and the poor Indian area known for its prostitutes. Behind the school were the teachers' quarters where we lived. I was not allowed to teach English literature—that was in the able hands of Richard Gregory; he was many years my senior, so I did not mind. I taught English grammar, and my other speciality: history. It was a pathetic syllabus I was asked to teach: Mughal history with the deeds of Humayun the Kind, Babur the Brave, Akber the Great; this was marginally better that the lower classes staple of Hammurabi the Lawgiver, Cheops the Pyramid Builder, and Philippedes the Runner. This, after two world wars, Hiroshima, Yalta, the independence of India. Yet who to blame—the backwardness of the community or the advice of government inspectors? And blame for what?

Years later, Boyschool moved to a better location, bequeathing its old grey building to the Shamsi Girls' School. But now the girls were kept secure, close to home, across from the mosque in the building that remains to this day a warren of rooms. There was always a shortage of teachers at the girls' school; the best went to Boyschool, the girls made do with the remainder. The result was that the boys dreamed of straight A's in the Overseas Exams, and the girls were happy with a D pass.

Some of the Indian teachers were asked to teach at the Shamsi Girls' School in their free time. We did not ask why. It was understood that we were Indians and appreciated the need; and we had no choice, there were many more where we came from. And so off to the girls' school I went after recess on Saturday—down Selour, past Kisutu, on Ring, then Mosque Street. The girls were keen and lively, fifteen to eighteen years old, and would one day be homemakers in well-to-do progressive, respectable households. They were Girl Guides and junior members of the Ladies' Committee and the Former Girls' Association, where they took cookery classes to learn 'English cooking' and did callisthenics to control their figures.

And they all wore 'shortfrocks,' with hems that were a foot above the ground but already represented a revolution—Western styles and patterns and, significantly, without the head-covering or pachedi. In one fell swoop, the Shamsi decided—at least for their younger women—to do away with this remnant of purdah, with its various stylistic conventions for girls, married women, widows, women with unmarried daughters, women with married daughters. Meanwhile, in the streets, other women walked in buibuis, burkhas, saris and pachedis; many still do.

I had then, even as a young teacher, a stern disposition with my students. Most of them had been boys. But these were girls—feminine, Oriental, and yet delightfully liberated form the traditions that would have put a physical curtain between the lot of them and me. Faced with their wiles, I found myself often at a loss.

There were fifteen girls in my class. My first lesson gave a clear indication of things to come and filled me with much foreboding.

I had arrived ready to teach the Mughal Empire to these Indian girls

abroad. What better introduction to the subject than the Taj Mahal?

"How many of you know about the Taj Mahal?" I began.

An eager show of hands. How genteel, I thought, how they raise their arms quietly only from the elbow, how unlike the loafers I taught at the boy's school.

"All right, girls, I am convinced. The Taj Mahal, as we know, represents the glory of the Mughal Empire—the emperors Akber, Humayun, Babur—"

"Tell us about Salim, sir." An innocent, almost idiotic request. And the beginning of an avalanche.

"What Salim?" I asked impatiently, turning towards the questioner.

"Prince Salim the son of shehen-shah Emperor Akber. And his lover Anarkali!" said a voice from another direction.

They were referring, of course, to the recent box-office record-breaker from Bombay about unrequited love in Mughal times.

"H*m-hm, hm-hm*…" someone hummed a song from the film and the ground seemed to slip from under me.

"Now what is this? Girls! Please!"

"*Yeh zindagi usiki hai*—" she sang, the girl called Gulnar, from the back of the middle row.

Then they all sang, "*The world belongs to the one who loves, who's lost to love and nothing but love*—"

"Now girls!" I shouted. "For God's sake!"

They stopped, somewhat ashamed at having offended. I caught my breath, wondering whether I'd ever had a sense of humour, and what I was doing in a girls' school.

Another time:

"Are you married, sir?" This, just as I entered the classroom, having cycled furiously all the way to get there in time, having run up the stairs. A two-minute delay could disrupt the entire school, not to say the neighbourhood.

"Sir has a girlfriend, perhaps."

Laughter, quite animated and open—this began to look like rebellion. Then Gulnar came forward between the desks and benches, smiling, bearing a cake with one candle, and they sang, "*Happy birthday to you*…"

Gulnar was the most attractive girl in the class, if you count personality, which you must! Gulnar Rajani, nicknamed Rita.

Bette Davis was too thin for local tastes and too tart; there was Garbo, luscious and luxurious but a little too svelte for our small-town roughness; the pin-up Betty Grable pointed a mischievous tush at you. Dilip Kumar the lover and Raj Kapoor the charming fool with so much to teach were the male idols, along with Gary Cooper, Gene Kelly and Cary Grant; there was Nargis the heart-throb, the West-in-the-East, the dreamgirl of the intellectuals. But for a brief period the imagination of Dar was caught by the brunette American beauty Rita Hayworth. The Love Goddess, the "Put the Blame on Mame" Girl, kneeling on a bed in black lace, looking coyly at you ("Am I doing anything wrong?") in the picture that hit Hiroshima before it blew up. And she was the gypsy girl Carmen looking so Indian. But let's not kid ourselves, Dar fell in love with her because she married an Eastern prince—Aly Khan—with a sheikh reciting the nikaa as the Vatican looked on uncomfortably. And she did come to visit us in East Africa. If she was discomfited by requirements of modesty and women bowing worshipfully and touching her hem, that was understandable. If she left in a huff, from Nairobi back to Europe then America, such were the ways of the great and famous. To have been selected by the prince gave her qualities, a bigness of soul, that perhaps even she was not aware of.

Dar had embraced her whole-heartedly, nicknamed one of its beauties after her. Our own Rita was a scaled-down version, of course: this was Dar, not Hollywood—but a bigger heart-throb on Jamat and Mosque and Market streets. The yearnings went deeper; she was real—walked on earth, as they said—she would soon choose, marry. Who would be the lucky devil? Her friends in class reported the latest proposal of marriage that her family had received ("Sir, Rita is thinking about her future") and which the girl was bound to turn down.

She had black wavy hair down to her shoulders, a large mouth; she was fair-skinned and except perhaps for a little at the hips—I blush—she was slim. She had a ready smile, which is hardly surprising—aren't those years the best of our lives? She had me in such a state that I would catch myself checking my appearance before class and seeking approval from them (her) instead of letting them (her) seek it from me, their teacher. I have never been lenient with myself and didn't fail to chide when the need arose.

I didn't stand a chance, of course; even the thought was a useless torment and I was determined to curb it. I was a complete outsider, without a common caste, religion, mother tongue, place of origin—I was a proper "over-comm" in every way. (Some weeks later an incident involving a pair of unfortunates was to prove me right in my pessimism about anything developing between us.) The girls all knew of my condition. There were too many of those darting eyes and calculating brains, gauging my various fumblings, not to guess. And those asides—"Sir, she is dreaming, considering a maago (proposal)"—were surely meant to tease, and they hurt.

Rita's father had been a bank clerk in Zanzibar, now retired. What progressiveness that background (similar to mine) signified, perhaps was cause for her boldness, was why she stood out. I know that once she was mobbed on Market Street for wearing a sleeveless dress and high heels. But she was a community girl, only flirting with danger, and the next day she was again out in the street properly dressed.

One afternoon after class she and her friends walked downstairs with me. The mosque yard were we arrived linked two busy streets with its two entrances. It was always crowded with people: pedestrian traffic pausing to chat; lonely men and women without a relation in the world, a penny to their names, seeking refuge and companionship on its benches; the caretaker directing servants. Someone made a loud remark about the Govo—Goan—and I longed to pedal away.

"Sir, tell us what storybooks to read," she said, almost putting a hand on my arm. (I can still see it: my arm on the bike seat, her hand poised an inch, two inches, from it.) "L*ittle Women*," I said, though *Pride and Prejudice* might have been more appropriate. And then: "Sir, which book proves God exists—the boys know but won't tell us. Please, sir."

She was detaining me—or was I imagining?

"Why doesn't she—why don't they leave me alone?" I said to Desouza later. "I don't mind having regrets from a distance, but this flirtation across an impossible chasm—"

"Tell them you don't want to teach the girls," he said.

"They'll wonder why."

"Then ask for leave to go and get married."

We were sitting in the staff room, on a corner sofa drinking tea and smoking. As Desouza spoke we both looked up to see Richard Gregory arrive and stand looming over us. "Mind if we make a baraza of this tête-à-tête?" he said.

Gregory was one of those idiosyncratic Englishmen who become an institution by virtue of the sheer consistency of their oddball—some would say perverse—nature. He had a family in England, we'd been told privately, perhaps to give the lie to his carefree existence among us. In those days it was the thing to do among the educated to make fun of Englishmen behind their backs. He seemed genuine enough to me. If he had pretended once, the role had taken him over. He was a good deal older than Desouza and myself, a big, somewhat pudgy man with a dissolute look—dishevelled, scruffy, always in dirty khaki shorts and his shirt half hanging out, sometimes showing a part of his hairy midsection. The sun did no good to him, he would turn dreadfully read, yet he'd been in Africa for almost twenty years and had no intention of returning to England. He was a walking compilation of literary quotations, knew his Palgrave by heart, and carried the Shakespeare on the current syllabus in his head. Thus prepared in perpetuum, he would shuffle from class to class partly drunk, fumbling with a pipe that was rarely lit, trying to tuck in his shirt tails, rubbing his dirty neck.

He sat down and gave a fart.

"One of the girls got your blood racing, dear boy?…" he said in his growly voice. "Sorry, couldn't help overhearing, you do sound distraught, you know…" He began purring into his pipe.

Desouza with a look of distaste was ready to get up, but I stayed him with a look.

"Mr. Gregory, what storybook—as they call it—would you recommend to a young Asian girl?"

"A young Asian girl? And upright too, I suppose? A virgin positively? *Lady Chatterley*, of course."

"Seriously, now. Not joking."

"Has to be a storybook? Have you read the poems of Sappho, now? How about—"

"My sisters read Jane Austen," Desouza said. "And Mazo de la Roche."

"They would." Gregory, in reply to Desouza's distaste for him, liked to needle him. My friend was bristling. Gregory was fumbling with his pipe.

"I wonder," he mused, "how my boys would respond to Donne. I'd have to spell it out, of course…quite the rage these days in London."

"How about this one: What book proves the existence of God? I don't think there is any, myself, but what would you say?"

"Saint Augustine. Bertrand Russell, of course, proves that God does not exist." That was Desouza.

"My dear chap. Spinoza, if you ask me." The pipe was firmly between his teeth, he was ready to go.

"How would you like to come and watch the Shamsi parade next week?" I asked him. "My girls are in a float and beg me to go."

"Love to," he said and shuffled off.

"Bastard," hissed Desouza at his back. "I don't know why you pay attention to him. You always were fascinated by Englishmen—even the one in Bombay, it was your idea to look him up."

"That was a Scotsman."

"All the same."

Desouza didn't come to watch the parade, so Gregory and I went on our own. He had a car and picked me up.

Twice every year, when the Shamsis celebrated, for days the whole town —from Acacia Avenue to Ring Street, Kichwele to Ingles—was in happy disarray.

The 'happiness' began on the first day with a flag-raising ceremony at nine AM to the strains of the Shamsi anthem played by the scouts. Then came a semblance of a guard of honour formed by all of Baden-Powell's troops—the scouts, guides, cubs and brownies—in the manner of the KAR but with a few loose feet; and then the march-past throughout the Shamsi area surrounding the mosque, the band blaring *Swanee River* and strains of Souse, followed close on its heels by boys and the town's idlers and beggars.

Every night thereafter, after the religious ceremonies conducted with abandon over loudspeakers, there was sherbet and food. And then they danced the dandia, the garba and the rasa to the beat of drums and the bleat of trumpets that were heard for miles around. The mosque was covered with lights, the enclosed yard outside jammed with people, overhung with flags.

On the final day, a Sunday there, was the parade of floats, led by the young troops. It took place at four in the afternoon, at a time, I supposed, when the sun was out of the competition and smiled benignly. There came—as Gregory and I watched, having placed ourselves on Ring Street where the crowds were less congested—a larger-than-life Churchill on the back of a lorry, puffing on a huge cigar (whose smoke we were assured was nothing but incense fumes), waving at the crowds; an Arab sheikh in a decadent posture in a very Oriental setting, lying back against bolsters, drinking, smoking surrounded by screaming, giggling houris; a snake charmer with a real cobra; a mountain with Hassan bin Sabbah and disciples plotting some nefarious but no doubt worthwhile activity; and Hollywood, complete with sparkling stars (and moon), and on each star a human starlet, waving and flashing Hollywood smiles. The topmost star, the queen of all, our own Rita.

There were volunteers serving drinks, others spraying perfumes and flinging handfuls of rice from the floats.

Walking alongside the Hollywood float, striding, beaming waving royally to all he knew, was a handsome man in white suit, wearing a black astrakhan hat aslant on his head, a cane in his hand. He was Ali Akber Ali, Dar's version of the prince Aly Khan.

How could names, nicknames, cast a spell over their bearers, moving them to immutable fates, combined destinies? It was all in the stars, shall we say.

All that week of the festival there would be a break in the religious ceremonies every evening between prayers: a procession would head off from the mosque, proceed at a stately pace around the neighbourhood…accompanied by the deep, lugubrious *dhoom-dhoom-dhoom* of a dhol and two trumpets bleating variations of the same ten notes in a wonderfully mellifluous refrain that echoed in the mind for days afterwards. Among dancing young men and women and elderly mothers of the community and shopkeepers turned noblemen in turbans and robes, went a lorry filled with Dar's 'Hollywood girls' waving. They went past shops decorated with flags, bunting, and strings of lights, stopped frequently for sherbet, and were showered with perfume and rice.

Outside the shop of the 'khanga king,' Ali Akber Ali, the son-in-law and prince, served the Hollywood girls, ladling the choicest sherbet into glasses with a flourish and a smart comment. At the variety show 'dylok' (for dialogue, or drama), performed by the members of the Ladies' Committee later in the week, he helped to manage the sets and even acted a small part as a doctor performing a blood transfusion in a heart-rending scene. By the time the shopkeepers went back to their business, satiated with celebration and sherbet and biriyani, Ali was on speaking—or bantering—terms with Rita.

To joke with a girl is to become intimate—to embrace and cuddle with words when bodies and even looks cannot but remain restrained, hidden. Joking, you can be a child, a brother, a lover. As a lover you embarrass, cause her to shift her eyes, to lose control in a peal of laughter and then stop, blushing as if kissed. Then you know you've got her; all that truly remains is to clinch it, take the first decisive step. If you are truly romantic, you send a note with a quotation in it—from a ghazal, a popular song, even a line or two from an English poem—unsigned but with a hint of its sender. This is what Ali did:

The moth, madly in love with the flame,
plunges in—
And so do I, my love
"Your not-so-secret-admirer"

A somewhat juvenile tack for a man of his age, and married for twelve years, but he was stricken. And she, the seventeen-year-old was impressed, but did not know who the admirer was.

He heard, saw, nothing from her in response. He went into her parents' shop once and, in her presence, talked with her mother, joked and recited a verse. Later he accosted her on the sidewalk, and, as she turned away shyly, he recited a sequel to the poem. He followed her to the seashore on Azania Front one Sunday, where she strolled with her friends, and in full view of them he walked along, on the other side of the road, keeping pace. In a few weeks a current of rumour, a little weak and perhaps outrageous-sounding, stirred in pockets of the community, especially among the youth.

His own marriage remained childless; there had never been much love in it. But he had acquired by it a status and a livelihood; he provided in exchange a stable marriage, and, though attractive, he had never strayed from the marriage bed. What he was risking now, in middle age, was much.

The whole of the Shamsi community was on a picnic at the ancient port town of Bagamoyo, having arrived in open lorries with cauldrons of pilau and channa and a gang of servants, the young people singing, "*ai-yai yuppie yuppie yai yai*," all the way there, as usual. On the beach: games of hutu-hutu and pita-piti, soccer and cricket with coconut branches for bats; boys teasing girls with film songs; tea and Coca-Cola, more tea and snacks. A batch of new teachers from England and India had arrived and some of them were on hand.

Rita had walked away after lunch, away from the youthful games and elderly card-playing and tea-guzzling. Her dress fluttered in the breeze and she was barefoot. She picked her way among protruding tree roots and shrubs until she reached the sandy portion of the beach. The tide was in, and there were a few swimmers struggling with the waves, fishermen beside nets spread out on the ground, vendors of coconut. She sat modestly on a tree stump, legs tucked in, looking far away to the horizon. They say, when you first see a ship, she thought, you see only the funnel.

She could not say why she had walked away so. Only that she felt miserable, depressed, in the way of youth. To her right was an old cemetery. Souls lying exposed to the sea, she thought, and began to feel nervous, recalling stories of possessed women. At the head of the graveyard was an ancient mission house. Somewhere nearby, she knew, was a slave market, even more ancient. Soon the picnic-goers, before the final long tea and after the games would venture out for the mandatory stroll and a look at the sights. There was a remnant of the community here, one or two old homes left over from times of slavery and ivory and the explorer safaris. They would go to the old mosque and visit the church, point out the haunted sites for which the town was notorious.

A rustle behind her, from the shrubbery on the right, and she started, her heart racing. He emerged, large and splendid, pushing back branches from his face. He wore a knitted jersey, his grey cashmere trouser legs were rolled up part way, and he, too, was barefoot.

This was scene reminiscent of many films of that period. Hollywood and Bollywood; this was Dollywood, Dar and derivative.

He entreated, begged went down on his knees. He would divorce his wife, he said. He was going to London. "What for?" she asked. "What's here?" he answered. Indeed, she thought. What is here? The prospect of London, of going away, of escaping to the bigger, more sophisticated world…she had never thought of that before. She eyed him without a word. During the 'happiness' they had exchanged friendly antagonistic barbs. Now words seemed difficult, awkward between them, demanded too much meaning and nuance. He was glamorous, so unlike anyone she knew—the family men of his age, shopkeepers mostly and government clerks at best, or the adolescent loud-talking and immature youths of her own age.

They walked back separately, without one more word. The friendly game of hutu-hutu between boys and girls was about to break up; now they would do a few skits. In one of them, a boy and girls would perform the nursery song "Where Are You Going to, My Pretty Maid?" It was the kind of thing they asked her to do, their Rita. And so she did, played the coy pretty milkmaid this time.

"Nobody asked you to marry me, sir she said. Sir, she said…"

Ali's proposal was, of course, unthinkable. She was a girl in the prime of life; what family would give her away to a 'once-married,' to scandal and shame? Rita became quieter in my class, and would have been inconspicuous had she not already made her impact on me. She was prone to blushing, an indication that among the girls much was said that escaped me.

My own relations with my Saturday girls became formal; the girls lost their sparkle, their laughter, were more respectful. It was depressing to be the object of pity of those who looked up to me; more so as it was about something undeclared, out of reach. By their understanding, their respect, these beautiful pig-tailed, pony-tailed, and 'boy-cutted' girls were telling me they understood my pain. *Stop it*, I wanted to shout. *Be your normal selves*—but that was impossible, they had grown up. Meanwhile, I went on with the Tudors, the Stuarts and the Mughals.

MG Vassanji was born in Kenya and raised in Tanzania. He lives in Toronto and is the author of three books of fiction—***The Gunny Sack*** (which won the Commonwealth Book Prize), ***No New Land*** and ***Uhuru Street***.

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Process Politics & Plurality

*Ven Begamudré lives in Saskatoon and is the author of three works of fiction—**Sacrifices, A Planet of Eccentrics** and **Van der Graaf Days**. Rungh caught up with him at the Canadian Association of Booksellers convention that was held in Vancouver.*

Zool Tell me a little bit about your background.

Ven Well, I was born in South India in Bangalore and I spent about a year and a half of my childhood in Mauritius and then the next three years in Bangalore again. I came to Canada when I was six and half and I have lived here almost exclusively except for a year in India and a year in the [United] States. So some people tend to think of me as a second generation [immigrant]—I don't know what the difference is between first and second generation, but they assume because I came here so early, it's almost as though I was born here. In fact, it's a bit ironic because having only lived in India, or in that part of the world for only six years, the writing is very much a matter of rediscovering my roots. This causes some critics problems because they think I should be writing in an authoritative fashion about India but it's not something that I know as much about as I do about Canada.

Zool What are your memories of India from that time? Do you have strong memories?

Ven Quite vivid ones because my earliest memory is from Mauritius, but it is more a dream. A strange thing happens to me. I will remember things in dreams. I will dream something and later on I will find some confirmation that it actually happened. I very vividly remember my last two years in India when I was four and half to six and a half and I have been basing quite a bit of the material in the first half of *Van der Graaf Days* on that. But typically when people ask me about this, I say I write about what I know, what I don't know I research, and what I can't research I make up. As a result of that, sometimes a scene which I will make up can seem more real than the actual place.

Zool How do you feel about the issue of authenticity? Is it an inhibiting factor for you or do you just find it tiresome?

Ven No, it's not inhibiting or tiresome. I try to be as authentic as a fiction writer can be in my writing, which means using my memories, using photographs—I take a lot of photographs when we travel. But not to the point that say a nonfiction writer might go out and do extensive interviews with people. Because I am not really a part of the Indian community and I don't want to deal with the Indian community where I live simply for material. If I have friends, I have friends. That's it. I suppose if I'm going to be writing about more complicated settings and characters and issues, I really should find people who can look over my manuscripts. Otherwise, I make very elementary mistakes like I have someone walking in rural India without sandals on—an Indian could have caught that.

Zool This is in *Van der Graaf Days*?

Ven No, that was in *A Planet of Eccentrics*.

Zool The reason I ask you about the issue of authenticity is that I read a review of it [*A Planet of Eccentrics*] and I think that, in some ways it was unduly harsh.

Ven That was [in] the *Toronto South Asian Review*. Yeah, the whole book sank because she [the reviewer] didn't like the cover and because the character didn't wear sandals and because there was the wrong kind of painting in somebody's living room.

Zool How do you respond to that kind of criticism?

Ven They were valid things to point out but I am not sure they were valid things to sink an entire book. In any book there are going to be mistakes. Now at the same time I have read books in which people make up a story and they want to put it in an exotic place, even if it's just Austria or something, and I have been to these cities and I know you can't get from this street to that street by going through a passage way. Those are just simple mistakes. But if the person makes grander mistakes about the Austrian people or something, then I can see that that could sink the project. I think that what reviewers do is very important; they interpret our work to other people. When the early reviews of *A Planet of Eccentrics* came out, I learned things about the book that I didn't

know were operating at a subconscious level. But at the same time, the reviewers have the same responsibilities we have which is to be fair and intelligent and objective.

I suspect, though, that that particular review might have been motivated by forces that were completely beyond my control and didn't have anything to do with the book. In the mainstream white Canadian writing community, especially in fiction, it's dominated right now by middle class, white women writers. The last Canada Council jury I was on gave out twenty one grants and eighteen or nineteen of them went to [white] women. Now we hadn't planned that at all. Nobody realized that we were giving eighteen grants to women and three grants to men. But I think that it's time this was happening and it's a symptom of what is going on in the writing community. But in the South Asian writing community, the sense that I get is that it is still dominated by men. So some of these harsh criticisms, I suspect, are motivated by the fact that the women writers are not getting their due. Now I have never met that reviewer, and I hope I never do because she's a very theoretically oriented person and I am not. I suspect it's things like that that are more at the heart of a review like that.

Zool Lets talk about *A Planet of Eccentrics*. Is that your first short story collection?

Ven First short story collection. There were ten short stories in there and my short stories tend to be somewhat long. They were written over a seven year period from 1982 to 1989. I didn't realize that it was a collection—I don't sit down to write a collection. I just write stories…But I have never been the kind of person whose early work is particularly brilliant, even in my other career which I don't practice any more, which is as a civil servant. I learn better by doing. It's not that I was embarrassed by *Sacrifices*…Fortunately, not many people noticed I had written *Sacrifices*. People knew I had published it, but not that many people read it. What it did was bought me the time to finish *A Planet of Eccentrics*, which many people treat as my first book, simply because it got a fair amount of attention. It really should have been my first book, but we're not all so patient to wait for the many, many years until we finally come up with the one good book that's going to be that first book.

Zool Were you surprised at how *A Planet of Eccentrics* was received?

Ven I was very surprised. I knew that it would not be ignored because nobody knew me when *Sacrifices* came out. I had only published two stories. By the time *A Planet of Eccentrics* came out and I had been in the *Journey Prize Anthology* and I had been to a couple of conferences. So I knew people would notice it, but that they would either like it a lot or dislike it a lot. Fortunately, I would say that 90% of the people liked it and 10% disliked it. The scholarly reviews tend to be more critical and take their time, focusing on different aspects and I learned things from reviewers. There was quite a mixed review in *Paragraph* magazine by someone whom I respect; it was a fair review. So I wrote to him and I said, "Could you elaborate on this." After his daughter was born a number of months passed, he finally wrote back to me and it was a two page letter, it was very forthright, and he gave me examples. I wrote back to him and I said, "Thank you. These are the pitfalls I hope to avoid in the next book." It's great to have people like that, you know.

Zool Right, people who can give you criticism that you can work with.

Ven What I didn't expect with *A Planet of Eccentrics* was that the reaction would be immediate. And it was; within three months people were noticing it. Also, (I did not expect) that it would have such a long life, because that book now is over two years old but there's still the occasional review of it. Now anthologies are starting to pick up the stories.

Zool I've also noticed you've been involved with some anthology projects.

Ven I've coedited one anthology on transcultural and other forms of dislocations called, *Out of Place*. And then, I recently edited an anthology which came out in April called *Loathstone*.

Zool How would you differentiate your editing functions when you are editing anthologies from when you are writing fiction?

Ven Well, writing involves creativity and analysis, in equal measures.

Zool And do you think you are an analytical writer?

Ven Fairly, but I can also be an extremely creative writer. There are times when the narrator will start speaking, and after I've listened to the narrator for a few weeks or a few months, I'll sit down and write, and it all comes out. Usually I make two more revisions when the story is finished. That is an extremely creative process, not very much analysis involved except in the revision. Most of my work does not come that easy. It's a matter of writing scenes, laying them out on the floor, cutting them up, marking them with yellow markers, coding everything '1-B,' '1-C' '2-D' '2-E'… that is not a creative process, it's a strictly analytical process. Editing is much more on the analytical side than the creative side.

Zool When you have your editing hat on, do you deal with writers the way you would wish to be treated? Is there a code you follow in trying to be supportive of work, but also being honest with writers about their work?

Ven Probably I deal with them the same way that I was treated in the early days, which is

that people would give me a lot of support, but if it looked as though I was slacking off they would suddenly draw in the reins and say, "This is a cop out, you can't do this." I'm not worried about bruising writers egos. If you don't develop a thick skin, then you're going to have problems. There's a certain time when you have to be hard when you're writing. You know, stop screwing around and get down to work, and stop doing such and such which is not working. That's the way I was treated; people were very supportive, but if I wasn't working hard enough then they came down on me hard. I tend to be like that as an editor too. I don't mean to be unkind to people. I think that the very fact that anybody is spending so much time on your work means that they care about it.

Zool What's your process like? Are you a rigid writer in the sense that you wake up at a certain time, have a set writing time, or is it when the muse hits you?

Ven No, neither one. The first few years I wrote full time. I started at nine, took a coffee break, took a lunch break, another coffee break, finished at five. And I worked five days a week, because I was training myself to sit at the desk for forty hours a week and produce material. I did that for three years. Once I had the discipline of sitting down at a desk, I discovered I didn't need to do that any more. So, now I write when very practical considerations are taken care of. I travel a lot now, and I do write when I travel, but I don't feel obliged to. Other times when I'm finishing a major project, I do have to concentrate. So, when I was finishing *Van der Graaf Days*, for instance, it had to be completely rewritten from start to finish. I went to Banff for five weeks and worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, or six and a half days a week. I gave myself half a day off and got the thing done.

Zool So, tell us about *Van der Graaf Days*. What is the subject matter, what are the different forces that play in the book?

Ven It's about a family, a South-Indian Brahmin family which realizes that in order for their son to have a better life they'll have to get out of India because the Brahmins are on the downswing. This is after independence. And so the parents leave the child with a grandmother in Mauritius. The parents go to graduate school in the US, but to separate graduate schools. The mother comes back to Mauritius to pick up the child, and then they live together in India. It takes them another three years to get to North America because of certain complications. In the meantime, the father decides to move to Canada. So then, in the second half of the novel the three people are reunited finally. It's the first time in six years they've all been under the same roof, and they don't know how to work as a family.

Zool Would you describe it as dysfunctional, or just…

Ven Yeah, it's all screwed up. [laughter]

Zool Great, and that's a wonderful territory to mine.

Ven Yeah, in the beginning of the novel, the father is the dominant character, but he disappears for a long stretch of the novel. While he's not in the novel, the mother is stronger and stronger, so when they get to Canada the father is still apparently the dominating character. My favourite character in the novel is the mother because of the way she changes, which is, she begins as a hopeless upper-class girl who is terrified of running a household, terrified of childbirth, of raising a child, and until the end she is the one who does the one thing that is very important to the son at the end of the novel. What the father has to learn is that he's not necessarily the most important person in the family, though I never thought of it in those terms. Mainly what he has to learn is just to be more human because he gets stuck having to look after the boy. It's a novel about people immigrating, but it's more a novel about a family that doesn't know how to be a family. There are probably a lot of families like this.

Zool Do you deal with issues of racism in the book at all?

Ven A certain amount. In fact, it's probably more noticeable in what I call the Indian half, the first half, because of the caste system, the different religions, the Muslims and the Sikhs and so on. I wanted to get across how claustrophobic Indian society can be. And so, in a way, those conflicts are much more insidious than the conflicts that occur in Canada based on race. It's not that I try to play down issues of racism or prejudice, but they have to be looked at in the context of the people involved, and this family is an upper-class family which has come to Canada and education is the one thing that keeps it going. So, even if they are subjected to prejudice and racism they know they will still make it. They don't allow people to hold them back because of it. Now, if they had come to Canada as labourers, then they would have been far worse stung by the prejudice and racism simply because there's much more of the society that's above them that can just push them down. When people ask me, "Why don't you write about racism?" is not that I don't write about racism, it's simply that there are different forms of racism. Much of what I write about is not racism as it is bigotry, which is [a] different thing. I get a bit worried when every problem is put down to racism.

Zool How do you differentiate between things like bigotry, or prejudice or racism?

Ven Well, racism I tend to think of…I suppose it's a matter of degree. When I look at South Africa, I can say, "This is a racist society."

Zool Because of the institutionalization of it?

Ven Yeah, the people who are put in a certain niche have no hope of moving out of that niche. When I look at Canada, I don't see it as a racist society, I see it as a bigoted society. Maybe it's a semantic difference but the main difference for me is that in Canada, you can get beyond the boundaries you're put into. When I lived in Vancouver twenty years ago, it was a terrible time to be an Indian in this city, and I swore I would never come back after some of the experiences that I had. But apparently the city has changed in the sense that there are so many immigrants and descendants of immigrants that the mainstream society in Vancouver can no longer afford to be racist. So, instead of being racist, they're just bigoted. I'm sure people could well pick an argument on the way I'm defining this but I need some way of categorizing these things. There is a matter of degree. People are mistreated in the Third World in ways they're

simply not mistreated here, even if they live on reserves. At the same time, there are people who live here who cry about the mistreatment in the Third World and don't realize what is happening on a reserve 100 miles away.

Zool Do you find that because of your perspective on these issues you are at times not seen as an ally in those sorts of fights? Do you find yourself marginalized by the people that are fighting those fights simply because you have that perspective?

Ven I don't think so. I think that it's more of the case that people look at me like I'm an established literary writer, which is not the same thing as being an established writer with a commercial press. There are different leagues we all play in, and I don't play in the National Hockey League, I play in one of the farm teams. But the players in the farm teams are just as good, they just don't happen to play in those particular arenas at a certain time. Now, the people I like to deal with are people that have interesting things to write about and care about the quality of their writing. Probably, I spend two thirds of my time dealing with white Canadian writers and a third of my time dealing with minority Canadian writers, simply because of the mix of the population. There are certain minority writers whom I think are very good and simply have not received the attention they deserve. There are also other minority writers who I think are vastly overrated and have only received that attention because they are angry and white liberal Canadians need to feel guilty, and it just doesn't cut it with me. When a minority writer accuses me of always defending white people in public, then I know this is the sort of person I do not want to have many dealings with, because they are obviously not thinking the situation through. At the same time, none of my white writer friends have ever felt that I have ever disadvantaged them.

Zool Right. To pursue that just a little bit, I think you were involved with the Writer's Union of Canada's racial minority consultations? [see Rungh – Volume 1, Number 4]

Ven I wasn't on the committee. I was at the Geneva Park Conference.

Zool What do you think of that? What's your opinion of the resolution that was finally accepted by the Writer's Union?

Ven I think that it was too bad they made that amendment, but it was fine that they made it. If it made some of them feel happier, that was fine.

Zool Which amendment in particular?

Ven Well, when they amended it from 'appropriation' to 'misappropriation' it was a semantic thing. What I was worried was that the entire amendment would be voted down. I didn't want that to happen. So, even if it had to be watered down a bit, and it got through, that was fine with me. At a certain point, you simply have to say, "Well, something was accomplished." In fact, I had very little use for that amendment, or for the appropriation resolution from the very beginning because I believe that writers can appropriate whatever they want. But that resolution mattered to so many people that were at Geneva Park that to be fair, it was my obligation to support them, and that's why I was asked to speak to it. It was an ironic situation in which a person who believes in appropriating material was the one who introduced the resolution and spoke to it, and I felt fine about that. In the long run, I think it's going to be surprising that that battle ever had to be fought. I said at Carlton University, "The people who were at Geneva Park, twenty years from now are going to be the literary establishment". But there's just certain steps that you have to go through, like the baby has to learn to walk and then to talk, and then when he's asking you for the car keys you're wondering, "Did he ever shit in his diapers?"

Zool [laughter] So it's and evolutionary thing for you?

Ven Ahuh.

Zool Within the South Asian writers as such, who's work do you enjoy, or do you read?

Ven I like Ondaatje's writing a lot, and I've always admired him. Austin Clarke was another of my heroes from way back. And it's only now that people are in a strange way rediscovering him because now there are categories in which you find him

I think I have read everything that Rohinton Mistry has published, with the possible exception of a couple essays. But I don't tend to model my writing on the writing of these people. To me, they're an inspiration.

There are two articles from newspapers on the wall in my study. One of them is the Rohinton Mistry article with the headline, "Keeping the World at Bay." I guess that's something I need to do too, in order to get my writing done. But the other is the photograph of Ondaatje in his tuxedo receiving the Booker Prize. Now, I don't want to write like these people. Though, if I could write a book using language the way [Ondaatje] has in ***The English Patient***, I would die happy.

There are other writers from whom I take literary inspiration. My favourite all-time Canadian writer is Timothy Findlay because of the type of man he is, or the type of man he allows us to see, and because he seems to care so much about the world in general. As far as other literary influences…I'm not sure who they are. Certainly when I was growing up I read the classics.

Zool And would you recommend to any young person to do that? Do you think that having such a grounding is essential?

Ven Well, I learned something interesting from Nino Ricci. I read in an article somewhere that he alternates his reading between a classic book and a contemporary book. And I thought, "What a good, organised way to do it." And yet, there are classics which I have only recently read, which amazed me that I hadn't read them earlier. [For instance], I read ***Jane Eyre*** last summer and thought it absolutely wonderful. And in a strange sort of way, I've been reading more of these classics recently because of this attitude in Canada, even among mainstream Canadian writers, that we have nothing more to learn from the European and British writers. I started buying into that and the minute I realized I was buying into it, I thought, "Well, why don't you go read some of these books and see if they're as bad as [everyone says]."

And when I write my stories I use a trick, which I assume other writers use, too. Once I know that the story is… even before I know the story is working, I sit down and say,

"I know the story. I know the characters. What is going to happen?" Then I have to worry about the style or the narrative voice. I have that narrative voice in my head as I am writing and as I am writing the first paragraph, I realize, "Oh, this is my William Faulkner story," or "Oh, this is my Sommerset Maugham story." Recently, the work I've been doing is, "Oh, this is my Carol Shield story."

Zool Where do you go now? I mean, do you have a sense of the territories, the imaginative territories you want to mine?

Ven Well, last year I finished a collection of nonfiction, fiction, and photographs, and some of those pieces have been published in a number of different magazines. I also finished a young adult novel last year. I write essays now because magazines ask for them, though I'm not good at writing the scholarly essays, so I write what they call the personal essay. The content is changing, which surprises me. In my most recent work, these are stories which I've started within the last year, which means they won't even be published for four or five years, because I'm a very slow writer. They seem to have very little to do with Indians any more. It's as though I needed to spend these four or five books, a couple of them which haven't come out yet, finding my place in the world, and then I can go on and explore other things. I just finished a story set in Prague last week. The only Indian connection is that the mother, who is actually American, attended a boarding school in South India. But the other two characters, the father is a Czech refugee and the boy is born in Canada. And I think at first I was resisting this, because I thought, "Well, it's your obligation to write about Indians for the rest of your life, because somebody has to do it." And then I thought, "There are good Indian writers who can write that stuff. My obligation is to write about what is happening in my life and around me." And if I become less Indian as I grow older, then my writing will deal less and less with India. Ironically, I know as I grow older, I find myself becoming more Indian as a person and less Indian as a person.

Zool Why is that, why do you think that's happening?

Ven I don't know why that happens. Part of it is knowledge, it's because I simply don't have as much knowledge as somebody who comes over in their twenties and thirties, but the other part of it is probably psychological. There's some gestures which I use now, which I never used to use, and my wife laughs when I do them because they're so typically Indian. Now, why should it be that your gestures would start changing like that as you grow older? I suppose there's an unconscious process of reaching out from your own civilization, which is reminding you that you were born Indian, and you're going to die Indian, and then, what happens in between?

Zool Do you find that right now there is a whole generation of children born of Indian or mixed parents who are doing a searching, a finding, a quest, as such, and that in the process of that quest they become more Indian than their parents ever were?

Ven Yeah, and they can afford to be, because nobody is going to frown on it, or beat it out of them, and they're not going to frown on it themselves. When I came to this country, in order to be a good Canadian, you had to be bilingual, and you had to be white. Now, I couldn't turn white. I nearly did become bilingual, and since I live in Western Canada I've lost the French/English thing. But if I had children, they would have the luxury of being Indian in a way I never had when I was growing up in this country.

Zool Because you couldn't bow to that passion, or because there's more receptivity?

Ven I think both. Part of it was that my parents wanted me to grow up Canadian, to the point where English was my first language. It was done deliberately so I would lose my Indian language and assimilate very quickly. But part of it was also [multiculturalism and melting pot, and that's all very well to differentiate between the United States and Canada, but still], in Canada, when immigrants came here in the fifties or the sixties or whenever, the pressure was to assimilate. It was a melting pot of a different kind. And so, in order to recapture my Indianness, I had to learn all over again when I was about 21 or 22. I never learned the language, but I started reading children's books, Indian children's books, and then I graduated to reading adult Indian books. Because what I was doing at that point was undoing the Canadianization that had occurred, but it had occurred at such a crucial time, between the ages 6 and 20 to 21. It was ingrained. It was stamped upon me. I couldn't have become Indian if I had wanted to. This was a terrible thing which was done to my generation, where as the next generation can laugh at it. You can wear it. I see young Indian women who are in high school and college walking down the streets wearing Indian clothes. My generation couldn't do that.

Zool I understand those pressures. Do you wish that you could've been more Indian then?

Ven Ironically, when I was rediscovering my Indianness, I did wear Indian. I would wear kurtas and stuff like that, and I would wear a kurta if I was giving a reading. I don't feel that I need to do that any more, even for myself. I like them because they're loose, and because I'm putting on weight, but I've discovered what I needed to discover, and so now I can wear whatever I want. But I have a beautiful Indian shawl, which I don't wear now as much as I used to. I needed it at that time, and I used it. Now I don't need it so much.

Van der Graaf Days *Oolichan Books 1993*

Languishing poem

Today

I'm going to (right) a language poem.
all-right

First – mix up the significant signifier.

Language – lang-uag-ing on image –

like two times two equals three – 2x2=3

or

blood
blood *soaked*
blood soaked *fists*
blood soaked fists *reaching*
blood soaked fists reaching *from*
blood soaked fists reaching from *swastika arms*
Bristling scalp
with blood soaked fists reaches *brown face*
ergo – face crushed underneath the onslaught.

Morrissey: London Is Dead – The National Front Disco
except
My languishing poem will be corrected.

Phinder Dulai is a Vancouver-based, South Asian writer who comments on social, cultural and political issues. These poems are part of a full-length manuscript—***Ragas from the Periphery***—scheduled for release in book form by Arsenal Pulp Press in the Spring of 1995. Funding for this project was provided by the Explorations programme of the Canada Council.

Again
the night turns
inside out

angry passion
bottled up
pours out the hollows
in my skin

Throat
parching upon
infinity
crackles and heaves
into a tense quiet

[is there noise in the air I cough on?]

A number of things:
ticking like the 4 beat rhythm
of my mind yet
my heart missing on one tic
doubling up on the toc:
*ThicaThicaThica . . . **Thica***
Dhum** . **Dhin
ThicaThicaThica .

Uhmmm, Uhmmmm, AUhmmmmmmmmmm.…

no celestial music
no
only the undying
voice of the microwave and fridge
AUHMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM.

Looking into a
reflecting window
a window looking
within

I see cracks upon my lips
Stubborn stubble caking
my holy clay face.

yes.
this is 'I'
this cliche
cartoon
with eyes popping out
bags sunken in
and a groind alive and dead

self actualizaiton is inside
you are not what you eat
you are what you have eat
I have eaten somebody's
rotten fruit, the fruit
sits still in my stomach
my stomach descends

time to mov

Am I terse yet?

My Machinary is my poetry
it runs smoothly when it is well greased
full hot fuel and always maintained

this is the lesson.

My eye never moves away from the machine
my mind is always on the passing streets
and industrial death yards
we call the centre for our commerce.

When I see
the caps of Grouse,
Seymour and Whistler
I become numb inside
because I know a different person
lives those dreams
'they always smile when they ski '

you see
today
we cannot talk
of the undulating landscapes
of the roman[tics]
those luxuriant aesthetics
are not for us.

No

my lesson is hard
and brittle
its Miller time
without the beer and testes
because I am no great man
and I have no great balls
and this life is no great tragedy.

time to move on.

self actualizaiton is inside
you are not what you eat
you are what you have eaten
I have eaten somebody's
rotten fruit, the fruit
sits still in my stomach
my stomach descends

time to move on.

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e luxuriant aesthetics
ot for us.

esson is hard
brittle
liller time
out the beer and testes
use I am no great man
I have no great balls
this life is no great tragedy.

to move on.

When I look
into English Bay,
Kitsilano
and from
Wretch beach
I see tankers
and pleasure boats
exchanging friendly
maneuvres
'they always smile when they
ride those waves '

And when I reach into the
pine smelling trails
of Golden Ears Park
and set foot upon
Allouete Beach with
my family, food, and gin
'I know a whole culture smiles
vacuously at me and past me'

And in my solitude
in one moment
my eye looks
to the vegetation
of my home soil
I heave as mother rock
heaves
and cough once more
unable to liberate myself
of the mid morning smog.

An orange smoke
that reels me
back into the plight
the home within
the forest
the city
keeping out the rhythm
our urbanity banishes away
the cycles that are in my bones
the seasons of the farmer.

Stasis is our illusion
Stasis is our control
without this is chaos

Thicathic ***Dhum*** *Dhin****Dhum***
Thica Dhica ***Dhum Dhin***

soil of **excess**

P*bh*ale—S*h*il-va*h*—D*h*ay
back drops (*tir*k*at* ***dhin***)
against (*te* *dha* ***tin***)
dark fol/*dha*/iage/[ge***dhin****dhin*]
of our
exis*dha*tence.

T*e*ree—T*e*/*hu*/runks—Stand*h*
Taal aw/ay /fro/m D*he*
Consanance per/fect ang/les
al/w*h*ays
they lean towards
a spring
of life.

L*h*imp—L*h*eaf—Bran*h*ches
hanging
the dying hands
drawn
to soil
return
rebirth.
*Tir*k*at dhin* ***dha*** *Tir*k*at dha* ***dhin***
*Tir*k*at dhin* ***gha*** *Tir*k*at* ***gha dhin***
yet this . . . .
the mere
drunken cycle—*dha*t*hica****thin***/*dha*t*hica****thin***/***dha***
of hardship

this an inebriate eye
upon
drunken earth
glancing—*dha*t*hica****thin***/*dha*t*hica****thin***/***dha***

this—A mouth that gurgles
speaks as the soil
that flows with excess

(finish with Dadra Taal Improvisation
te ***dha*** *dhage* ***dhin*** *taghadhin****dha dhin***)

Culture & IMPERIALISM

by Edward W. Said Alfred A.Knopf, 1993

Reviewed by Shiraz Dossa

Reading Said has always been intellectually thrilling: the thrill lies in his apparent audacity in pushing his conviction that literature has never been unworldly, ahistorical, or immune to gross pressures of various interests and powers and in pressing his claim that the conquest of the Muslim Arab Orient depended on and was textually sanctioned by high Western scholarship. His *Orientalism* pushed the latter thesis pretty hard, though it was tempered by confessions of respect and praise for a few Orientalists. Said's literary style has been of a piece with his substantive claims: sizzling and dazzling, driven by his considerable erudition, his passion for language and its constitutive role in the construction of global realities.

Marxism and religion, especially Islam, have both been sharply and peremptorily denigrated by Said in a succession of essays. His Zionist detractors notwithstanding, Said has little use for Marx, the Marxists or Islam in any of its spiritual and ideological versions. Said is an interesting and arresting figure in the West because he is a dissenter from within the ranks of 'the best and the brightest' in the liberal academy. Princeton and Harvard under his belt, Said is an honored scion of the literary elite in the US. His questioning of the high tradition has been nuanced and tactical and his confidence in its essential value and authority has remained intact.

In this tome, the ambiguities and convolutions that have long shaped Said's engagement with western culture are still very much in evidence. The strategy here is one of retrenchment and the tone notably conservative, despite rhetorical radical flourishes that pepper the text. For Said,western culture is not innately imperialist in any discernably direct fashion, even though it is continuously affiliated with it and in fact has habitually sanctioned the subjugation of various others in the non-west. Despite the extended litany of crimes and misdemeanors that Said assembles against it in the course of *Culture and Imperialism* , culture in the end is neither charged nor found guilty.

In this review my focus will be the philosophical assumptions of Said's literary criticism and the intellectual difficulties they generate for his own humanist stance. Far too much that is interesting, fascinating and provocatively tackled by Said will have to be ignored in this space. Reading about Said is necessary but the only way to fully appreciate him is to plunge into his books: there is no substitute for the sumptuous style and the flashes of brilliant insight that lace all his writings.

No conquest is feasible without the complicity of culture, without the symbols and tokens that dispense meaning and legitimacy to the process of mastering other lands, other peoples. Imperialism feeds off the resources and the authority of culture, though the precise pathways of cultural leverage are a matter of controversy. What is no longer controversial is that culture's centrality to imperialism lies in its literary power to displace other histories, other values, other dreams, other visions. Few suppose that the deployment of raw power, a matter of guns and stamina, is ever enough: possession of alien terrain is never secure or durable until it is redeemed by markers of superior claim by the conquerors. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad brilliantly articulates and re-articulates this insight as he recounts the contours of white transgression against blacks in the Congo; in *Shooting an Elephant* Orwell hammers home this imperial truth no less forcefully.

Imperialism relies for its success on the collusion of minds, on the acquiescence of the colonized in their subjugation. To colonize successfully is to possess and restructure native histories and intellects, to hang the sign 'developing' on their foreheads, to transform them into consumers and aficionados of metropolitan discourses on their deficiencies and disorders. In time the newly afflicted resort, as a matter of course, to metropolitan solutions and therapies for their maladies. Cultural conquest is a clear and seed operation, a clinical project of replacement and new investments. Not all native beneficiaries of this triumphant alliance of culture and violence, however, appreciated the imperial obsession with their "progress" and 'development.'

In every colonial setting the immersion of natives into the higher echelons of metropolitan culture and style produced a heightened sense of injury and insult among a small number. They suffered little

economically: the real source of their alienation was their patent invisibility, their irrelevance as human beings, their inability to safeguard their honour. Notwithstanding their mastery and easy fluency in the colonizers' culture, their implicit and usually explicit fate was to be dismissed as second-hand and second-rate.

Fanon and Cesaire primarily, but other radical critics as well, would be inexplicable except as conscientious objectors to their humiliation. Rage drives their penetrating unravelling of the pathology of imperialism, their mapping of the strategies of colonial cultural domination. Pessimism nevertheless is not their final stance despite the fact that neither doubts that colonial cultural discourses have been intrinsically and irredeemably injurious to the natives sense of their human worth.

For Said, Fanon and Cesaire are exemplary figures of native resistance to the rule of white culture, and his literary criticism builds on their radicalism. Said has paid profuse homage to both but his critical position lacks their humanist confidence, their faith in truth and in human agency.

"..no one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian or Canadian or woman or Muslim or American are no more than starting points which, if followed into actual experience for only a moment, are completely left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a world scale."

For many *Orientalism* was offensive in its Foucaultian insistence on the irrelevance of truth and of the author: discourse was sovereign, the writer (as well as the truth) an accidental, superfluous tenant in the webs of language.

In *Culture and Imperialism* , Said recoups the authority of the author and he is less wary of the possibility of establishing proximate truths. Foucault's presence is dimmer but the cognitive and moral relativism that has shaped Said's worldly, secular stand point is very much intact. In this book, essentialism is still the enemy, a jejune historicism passes for a methodology, and in these preferences lie the analytic strengths and philosophical flaws of his writing. Foucault by way of Nietzsche has enabled Said to expose the racially arrogant and contemptuous representations of the Muslims others, and it has made the world of Islam available again as a new object of study.

None of this though can adequately compensate for the philosophical weakness that threatens to liquidate Said's rediscovered humanist allegiance. Fashionable literary historicism and a pronounced fear of absolutes, is insufficient as the basis for an argument for decency in human relations and cross-cultural scholarship. A critique of oppression is sterile in the absence of a defensible theory of human nature that rules out certain forms of violence and domination in international relations. In the absence of essentialism, necessarily qualified, there is very little ontological or ethical ground left for anti-imperialist analysis or practice.

No final barriers can be erected or articulated if there is nothing fixed in human nature, nothing given, that authorises an ethics of limits, a morality of uncrossable lines. For all the plangent, often brilliant, reflections on and criticisms of the culture's tacit and occasionally overt collusions with imperialism, Said's analysis lacks adequate cogency: it falls flat because Said has no thesis, no sustained, grounded, articulated argument to offer in lieu of the imperialist rationale for conquest.

Reading culture, especially novels, is no trivial matter: it was never easy but it is peculiarly taxing in a world infused with the emblems and exigencies of imperialism. Political power surrounds and habitually invades cultural production. For Said, this miasmic,inconspicuous imperial presence in the interstices of contemporary life makes all that we do exceptionally complex:we need to know not only 'what' to read but 'how' to read. Said calls this strategy 'contrapuntal': it describes a style that reads contextually, responsive to the global movements of power that constitute the landscape of writing and writers.

No writer, Said repeatedly insists, is "mechanically determined by ideology," and no novel by good writers is ever just a pretext for a crude political program. None that he interrogates is in any straightforward sense an imperialist 'stooge.' In *Culture and Imperialism* , Said appreciatively details the aesthetic acumen of leading figures on 20th century reading lists: among others Austen, Camus, Kipling, Conrad. Yet one cannot simply and directly read them as though their novels were written in a pure space, within a territorial zone suspended above the gross intrusions of politics.

Aesthetic autonomy is not a myth but no novel, no cultural object can or does exist outside history and politics, interests and desires, power and counter-power. In Said's view, culture is deeply implicated in history, and writers are immersed in the messy world of politics willy-nilly, whether they choose to be or not. Austen lived and wrote at the fringe of imperial politics but some of her novels presupposed the concrete factuality of the British Empire. By contrast Conrad and Kipling wrote knowingly, astutely about the responsibilities of the imperial vocation as well as its obnoxious, murderous liabilities.

For both, the Empire was the massive overriding presence, the fount of European power that made the non-west available for analysis and aesthetic performance. For Said, the point is not that art is politics, that aesthetics is disguised power play, but that literature and novels happen to come to life in the world, that they reflect and represent the world, that they are susceptible to its coercive and shaping pressures.

A conventional concept of literature underlies Said's analytic stand point: that reading good novels improves us and in the process, the human condition. But our appreciation will be 'enhanced,' keener and far more intelligent if we read novels in their global political context. Two distinct, though inchoate, claims buttress this stand point: that the world and human beings are constituted in and by language and literature, and second, that power and domination are the conditions of life in the world. Foucault's influence is visible in both propositions, and it comes as no surprise that a Palestinian victim of linguistic and literal violence finds this analysis congenial.

Far less clear is the basis for Said's incipient humanist and humane sympathies. Taking Machiavellian powerplay as constitutive of the species makes the passion for imperialism both natural and normal. In *Culture and Imperialism* , Said says as much and more, he even concedes that it is regular feature of 'all cultures': representing others for the purpose of controlling them is standard procedure, an old habit of the species.

Yet Said seriously hopes for a better world 'liberated' from precisely this intrinsic tendency to 'master or control.' Foucault, and for that matter Thrasymachus and his offspring, can neither advance the project of liberation nor make sense of the humanist impulse. For what they all espouse is a view of man fundamentally at odds with the high-minded expectations of anti-imperialists. No amount of literary erudition and compassion can mask Said's tortuous philosophical convolutions, the profound emptiness at the core of his critical enterprise: his compelling inability to offer a vision of man that could possibly justify his assertions of optimism.

Minus a credible political theory, which he implicitly dismisses as a prototype of the imperial sensibility, all Said can offer are theoretical crumbs: an *au courant* historicism responsive to the flux of differences in the human condition but unredeemed by any ontological authority or theoretical cogency. For instance, Said assails the cavalier indifference of Camus and Conrad, and Austen and even Kipling, to the lives and histories of the natives on the receiving end of imperialism, he is appalled by their sheer lack of interest in the native point of view. But no persuasive reason is adduced by Said to explain what he so casually presumes: that a writer is obligated to recognise or accord respect to the sufferings of cultural outsiders, to the tribulations of others beyond the national borders. Altruism and aesthetics are as unlikely bedfellows as politics and truth, as nationalism and generosity. Starting with Thrasymachus or Machiavelli or Hobbes or Foucault traps one in the anti-humanist corner. Said's longing for liberation thus seems more like a wild wish, a forlorn cry in the imperial night, than a reasoned prognosis. Lionizing culture so effusively, even going so far as to claim that 'culture is frequently in advance of politics, military history, or economic process,' legitimises the autonomy of aesthetics and consolidates the separation of cultural artifacts like novels from the world. A claim of this kind cuts at the heart of the humanist case against imperialism: Said is playing on very thin ice since the thrust of his analysis is that the historical, the secular,the concrete is implicated in the cultural and the æsthetic.

Reading 'contrapuntally' is, nevertheless, an interesting and promising notion. Conrad and Austen, and other western literary luminaries, should be read, according to Said, in conjunction with the likes of C.L.R. James and George Antonious, Ranajit Guha and S.H.Alatas. Only such readings will enable us to acquire a historically textured understanding of the time and the spaces in which they wrote,and of the imperial outlooks and their buttressing values that filled the writerly air. Hence Said reads many novelists and writers, including E.M. Forster, Dickens, T.E. Lawrence,for us with an eye to highlighting the nuances and potencies of their context—its humane possibilities, its integral limitations and crucially, its imperial tendencies, its lethal agendas for those living beyond the pale.

Fanon occupies an ambiguous position, liberally praised by Said for his prescient attack on the betrayals and excesses of the native nationalist

"[Imperialism's] worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white or black or Western or Oriental. Just as human beings make their own history, they also make their own cultures and ethnic identities…[t]here seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctivness, as if that was all human life was about."

leaders, but deemed less attractive for his initial celebration of violence and his theoretical dependence (alleged by Said) on Lukacs. C.L.R.James and Antonious, interestingly though not surprisingly, elicit far more of Said's sympathies than Guha and Alatas because the older writers display a sense of regard and respect for western culture that transcends their critique of its involvement in imperialism.

Alatas and Guha by contrast, fail to recognize the hybrid, subtle texture of aesthetics and culture, and hence the incongruity of indicting the latter directly for the conduct and machinations of imperialism. Still, what particularly interests Said is that the four writers represent the leading edge of the movement to resist imperialism, to challenge the advance of alien culture and its authority. This is one of the solemn themes of ***Culture and Imperialism*** : that the natives in the 'third world' were not pliant, duped victims, they were 'active' resisters, they stood up to imperialism.

For Said, the point is that resistance testifies to the essential humanity of the natives, to the integrity of their culture and their native identity. Said is at pains to stress what students of imperialism in the disciplines of political science and sociology have long known. Nevertheless his breathless discovery of a tradition of native resistance is a valuable corrective to the arcane presumptions of literary critics about the realities of politics on the ground.

Native resistance to imperialism points to a sense of indigenous self-assurance, no matter how sketchily articulated, that explains why the scribes and managers of imperialism targeted culture as the site of attack. In many passages, Said penetratingly unravels the latent and manifest power of imperialism in the various tropes that circulate and recirculate in the literary, academic and political culture of the West. Racism and Orientalism,specially in their anti-Arab currency, are not only far from dead, they are constantly available for ideological and military purposes as in the case of the recent American war on the people of Iraq.

Launched under the banner of the UN and with the collusion of a number of (perpetually available) servile Arab regimes, this 'civilized' exercise in mass slaughter was prepared and marinated in the domains of the culture produced in Washington and Hollywood—a culture overdetermined by a long imperial history and legitimised by an equally long lineage of patronising academic scholarship on the Muslim Orient. Not much has changed since the publication of ***Orientalism*** in 1978 in the popular representation of the Muslim or in the generalised contempt for the Arabs that has fuelled American foreign policy in this region.

Contempt for the Arabs within this disparaging discourse has a particular edge, a lethal twist to it, that does not apply to the other others: on this Said is absolutely right.In the case of the Arabs, western culture frequently functions as imperialism, not simply as backdrop or an oblique adjunct of imperial rule. Recognising this truth has not, interestingly, compelled Said to revise his high praise of the western cultural canon, or to appreciate the contribution that 'New Historicism, deconstruction, discourse analysis, post-modernism,' have made to his prized project of human liberation.

Rather puzzlingly, Said dismisses these new methods as 'cults'—analytic styles which he has himself borrowed and adapted, and which he has helped to transform into powerful tools of anti-imperialist criticism. Contemporary colonial discourse analysis is undoubtedly a legacy of Said's foray into the terrain of western orientalism. This anomaly trenchantly serves to underline Said's cultural conservatism,his enabling sense of himself as a practitioner of the kind of literary criticism that valorises the aesthetic even as it notices the struggles for power taking place in and around the literary critic, the impassioned artist.

Contra Said, ***Culture and Imperialism*** is not the text of an 'exile,' an æsthetic or even a strictly political refugee: it is the product of a cultivated enthusiast of the European Enlightenment, a highly reflexive modernist, a confirmed secularist wary of the abundant charms of religion and nativism. Said is no exile in any significant sense of the term, but he is a redoubtable critical insider.

"Survival, in fact, is about the connections between things…it is more rewarding and more difficult to think concretely and sympathetically about others than only about 'us'."

—*Edward Said; from a lecture delivered at York University in Toronto on February 10, 1993. [see Design Book Review Issue 29/30 for complete text.]*

Illustrations from: Lloyd's Sketches of Indian Life, London Chapman & Hall, Limited, 1890

Shiraz Dossa is an Associate Professor at St. Francis Xavier University (Nova Scotia) where he teaches political theory and third world culture and politics. His numerous publications include **The Public Realm** and **The Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt** (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989) and most recently, **Reinventing Asia: Post-Modernism and the Third World in Asian Thought And Society** (NY) (September–December 1992). He received his Ph.D. in political theory from the University of Toronto in 1982.

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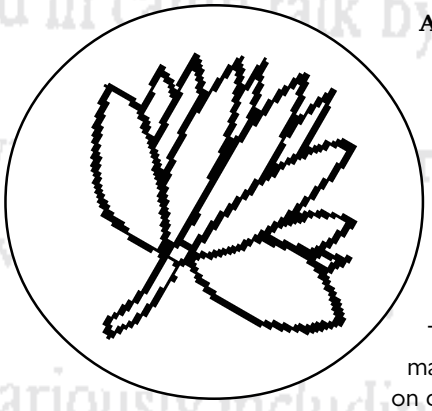


A Lotus of Another Colour:
An Unfolding of the South Asian
Gay and Lesbian Experience
edited by Rakesh Ratti
Alyson Publications, 1993
Reviewed by Mina Kumar

It is emblematic of *A Lotus of Another Colour* that the lotus on the front cover is pink. Pink is of course the usual colour for lotuses. Where is the other colour?

This anthology has all we have come to expect from anthologies by marginalized groups—a little history, lots of politics, bad poetry, essays on difference—this time by lesbians, gays and bisexuals of South Asian descent. Rakesh Ratti, the book's editor, is a founding member of Trikon, a California group for gay South Asians.

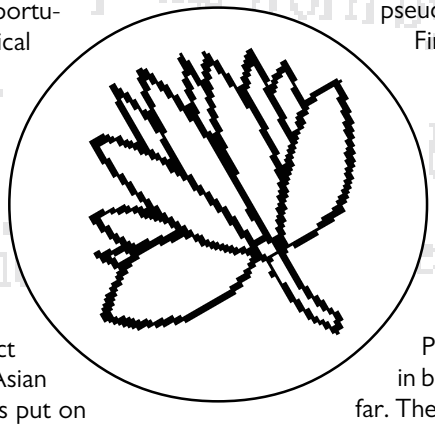
The first group of essays deals with historical views of South Asian homosexuality and political issues surrounding South Asian gays and lesbians, while the second group focuses on biographical information, a sort of "Portrait of the Author as a South Asian Homosexual" in various versions, and poetry is interspersed in between.

Ratti himself remarks on the paucity of materials to gather. There was a time when anthologies collected the works of writers who have been oppressed, but it seems anthologies now collect the works of oppressees who have been writers. Ratti apparently believes that the effort to depict South Asian homosexualities is more important than literary quality or good scholarship or anything else, which is the prime culprit in the book's failures. The other problem is his premise. It takes a while to realize this, but there is quite a bit of bisexual, gay and lesbian South Asian material that Ratti has ignored; a random list would include something of India's First Homosexual, Ashok Row Kavi, the trial for obscenity of Ismat Chugtai's story, "The Quilt", and the work of Hanif Kureishi. Another recent anthology, *Our Feet Walk in the Sky*, includes two excellent lesbian short stories by two South Asian American writers, Gaurangi Kamani and Qirone Adhikary. *A Lotus of Another Colour* doesn't even have the kind of juicy and important reclamation of important gay figures in the past: apparently Nathuram Godse and Veer Sarkar are good targets, maybe even Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha and her freind Sashikala (according to Karunanidhi).

This is not to say that the book does not have its peaks. Ian Rashid has contributed two witty poems on Indian-white sex; Kamini Chaudhyary has a scintillating description of cunnilingus; and S.D.G.'s "My friend" is a moving poem which concludes after the friend's death with the poignant lines:

I turn away, my heart aches
like it did at fifteen
when I dreamed of holding a man like you.

The photograph of a frieze at Khajuraho that a depicts a lesbian orgy is wonderful, but it represents a large missed opportunity, since it is never discussed within its historical context.



The best of the political essays is probably Anu and Giti's polemic on media relations to the marriage of two Bhopal policewomen. It's certainly more interesting than Ratti's p.c. sermons on feminism and colour-consciousness. (There is something really weird about the fact that the only appearance of black people in this book is in discussions of colour-consciousness). Nayan Shah's interesting piece on sexuality, identity and history is marred by the fact that he fails to address the Euro-fixation of the South Asian gay movement. "Trikon" refers to the triangle Nazis put on gays and "khush" is an Urdu approximation of the pun "gay", but both of these things are alien to South Asian culture. The personal essays are occasionally charming (Raj Ayyar's father teasing him about his attraction to a waiter, Kartikeya's description of *barsati* parties) and occasionally moving (Kiron's wrenching account of the death of his partner), but their worth is in general proportional to how much the reader identifies with the writer's experiences.

The first article, "Homosexuality in India: Culture and Heritage", has the potential to be a profound document, but it is undermined by shoddy thinking. The mention of fellatio in the Shushruta really says nothing about homosexuality, because surprising as it may seem, there are also women who perform this task. Shiva's female energy is his wife, Shakti/Sati/Parvati, and the worship of the mingling of male and female energies has as much to do with concepts of heterosexual marriage—and for that matter, the sublimation of female goddesses within male deities—than androgyny. The writers seem incapable of distinguishing female power from lesbianism. In the quote cited, Gragacharya speaks of polyandry and women's control of trade, but not about lesbianism, and the three are not synonymous. The repeatedly used phrase, 'female kingdom' is in itself bizarre: does it imply matriarchy or a lack of men? The article cites references to female monarchs in the ***Mahabharata*** as instructive, as if heterosexual women are incapable of being monarchs. This is the kind of sexism that masquerades as anti-heterorsexism. Is it any surprise that the article's strengths are the explicit and clearly located citations on gay men? The comments about 'Aryans' and 'Muslim culture' are particularly sloppy, and out of line with the latest scholarship. The article does contain much valuable information but it would have been much better if it had been more rigorous in its analysis. The same is true of the interview with Pratibha Parmar, which fails to address the kinds of important concerns about reproducing the colonialist gaze to be found in other places, like her interview with Trikon.

Ratti has made a commendable effort to be inclusive in terms of contributors. This anthology, happily, has no party line. While Ratti writes about the oppression of Indian women, Kaushalya Bannerjee writes of her weariness with the stereotype of 'Eastern patriarchal oppression.' Some of the writers locate their lesbianism within the tradition of romantic friendship in Indian women's lives and others reject that analysis to stress sexuality. Some contributors are emphatic about their connection to Indian culture, and some are thoroughly Westernized. The writers range from a half-Italian lesbian to a bisexual Bengali woman to a Ugandan Gujerati gay man to a bisexual Indian married male-female couple. It is revealing that many of the contributors use pseudonyms.

Finally, there is something sad about the level of ignorance Ratti assumes (and perpetuates) in his readership. It's bad enough that any phrase in an Indian language is translated right afterwards even though there is a glossary at the end, it's bad enough that Ratti feels obliged to offer glib explanations of the caste-system, *sati*, the duties of 'Moslem' women and saris in an India-lite version of things that would do any Orientalist proud (stirring deep desire in the reader for a breath of Lata Mani or Paul Brass), but when one has to read 'bum' translated in brackets as 'ass' right afterwards, that is going a bit too far. The original choice may have been the writer's, but Ratti surely should have done something abut such locutions as, "'This looks just like Shimla,' she exclaimed, comparing it to a hilly resort in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh". At least this isn't as bad as "my father is South Indian, my mother is from Hyderabad." Ratti's definition of 'butch' is a 'very masculine man or woman' is truly passe, especially considering he has the decency to put masculine and feminine in quotes in his article on feminism and men. Who does Ratti imagine will pick up this book without knowing what a lesbian is? He defines this term too in his glossary.

The pity of the book is that despite the hope represented by its glossaries, most of the material will be of interest only to homosexual South Asians (and their admirers). It didn't have to be this way: Joseph Beam's ***In the Life*** is a good example of an anthology whose interviews, scholarship and literary works are of such high caliber that it enriched its readership, instead of merely placating it by proving that there are indeed others of the same orientation.

Mina Kumar was born in Madras and lives in Manhattan, New York. Her writing has appeared in over twenty publications.

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cinema on the critical edge

Shyam Benegal's ***Seventh Horse of the Sun***
and Kehtan Mehta's ***Maya Memsaab***

Reviewed by
Ameen Merchant and Yasmin Jiwani

The flutter surrounding the debut of *The Burning Season* unfortunately caste a dampening shadow on some of the other Indian films screened at the recent Vancouver International Film Festival. *Bhaji on the Beach* by Gurinder Chada, *The Seventh Horse of the Sun* by Shyam Benegal, and *Maya Memsaab* by Kehtan Mehta were among the richest, most deeply textured and insightful films to be screened. These films represent the critical edge of the parallel Indian cinema, and of diasporic cinema, for they testify to the subtlety of human interactions and the complexity of emotions that propel our journeys through life and love.

The following review concentrates on the work of Kehtan Mehta and Shyam Benegal. And, while most film reviews tend to evade the detailed imagery of the works being examined, we prefer to privilege these details as they exemplify the well crafted symbolism of the films and the weaving of narrative forms that Mehta and Benegal use to communicate their messages.

Maya as Illusion, Mehta's metaphor of Reality

This innovative 'who dunnit' traces the absence of a presence that never was—of Maya, an illusory creature who liberates herself from the various fetters of middle-class existence.

The film begins with a visual of rippling water which gradually congeals to form the words—Maya; the image resonates with the archetypal story of creation—of illusion/society emerging from the primeval soup of creative energy. Illusion stands in sharp contrast to the grounded historicity of social institutions, of the material reality that is society. This poetic beginning shifts abruptly to a shot of a woman in a darkened haveli. Against a haunting soundtrack which refers to "Maya jagi"—maya awakened, the camera follows the woman as she dons her finery, red and gold embroidered clothes, evoking the grandeur of the past and inscribing the class-status of her existence. Against the pale waning moon

True liberation can only occur when the act of imagination translates into the materiality of action.

outside, she carries a lantern, the candle-light reflecting and visually merging with the moon outside. She appears like a ghost as she glides her way through the cavernous haveli, her face taking on an other-worldly hue. Suddenly an elderly man appears at the top of a staircase, "Maya" he calls out, and as she turns to face him, he falls down the stairs, his body gathering momentum until it crashes on the floor. So begins *Maya Memsaab*.

This dramatic beginning sets the stage for the investigation that forms the core of the story. Two detectives whose character traits evince a collage of archetypal detective figures, become the narratorial links, piecing together remnants of information to mould our understanding of what has happened. They become the tools by which we come to know that the investigation concerns Maya's disappearance, and not as the beginning would lead us to believe, her father's death/injury. What ensues is an investigation that uncovers the fleeting relationships that constituted Maya's life—relationships with her ailing father, her physician husband, and her two illicit lovers—one an underworld crime figure, and the other a bumbling romantic buffoon. Their memories and recollections make up Maya's life, showing us her struggles against the normatively sanctioned world of the middle-class wife, and her constant search for liberation through romantic escapes fashioned on the paradigms of love as proffered by two-penny romances and popular hindi films.

Maya's quest for the illusion that is romantic love, paves the way for her personal bankruptcy as she wholeheartedly engages in a spending spree, purchasing the latest of fashions and attempting to decorate her house to suit the latest 'look.' Every scene reveals her in garments that appear as if they have materialized from the pages of Vogue and Cosmo. Gauze, chiffon, silks in white, black and purple spill over the screen as Maya becomes more and more of an enchanting/enchanted illusion.

As with most illusions, Maya disappears into the stark light of (un)reality. After ingesting a potion that promises to grant eternal realization of one's inner desires, she disappears into thin air. All that is left of her is a black chiffon and silk dress, a sign of a presence that has become an absence. In semiotic terms, Maya as a sign, liberates herself from the entire sign system that constitutes Mehta's narrative.

Obviously, Mehta is taking a jab at the constraining structures that define and hamper women's lives in middle-class Indian society. Not surprisingly, the film itself is an Indian adaptation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* , yet another treatment of middle-class drudgery and the various forms of escapes and fantasies that provide moments of relief. Maya then is the sign emblematizing the ambivalences of societal definitions of woman, the dichotomies of conformity and non-conformity, where the former makes existence real or meaningful within the sign system that is the sanctioned social reality, and the latter refers to a contesting world where the definition of a good woman is countered by the definition of a loose woman. These binary gendered creations testify to the social constructions of woman that are tailored for male consumption and control. Caught between the interstices of these worlds, Maya chooses to liberate herself completely—removing herself from both these worlds. She absences herself.

However, while caught between these constructions, Maya goes through a process whereby she internalizes this dichotomy for she refers to herself in the third person. She herself identifies her liberation seeking counterpart as an 'other'—as someone who will lead her to her doom. At a superficial level, Maya appears as a schizophrenic or a manic depressive, caught between the euphoria of mania and the nadir of depression; between herself as a moral, conventional housewife, and herself as a free-spirited heroine of some romantic fiction. Through her, Mehta shows the pathology of societal institutions and patriarchal power as they work to imprison woman as a gendered construction within a binary framework—present and absent at the same time.

The film ends with a scene where Maya's diary is thrown into a lake. The visual of the ink dissolving and blending with the water lingers as if to symbolize the disintegration of an illusion. The only document that provides any material evidence of Maya's existence is lost. Her version of her self writes itself into absence.

In keeping with the shaping dynamic of the film which problematizes the colluding and conflicting definitions of reality/illusion, the ending lends itself to just this doubled reading. On the one hand, Maya's disappearance signified by her dissolving words can be seen as liberatory where woman writes herself out of the dominant paradigm of meaning and signification. On the other hand, the dissolution of identity can be seen as a triumphant act of patriarchal erasure—where woman becomes an aberration that consolidates the rationale for male-defined gender roles.

The Seventh Horse of the Sun

Set in the 40s/50s, *The Seventh Horse of the Sun* is a departure of sorts for director Shyam Benegal. Unlike his other films, such as. *Trikal* , *Kalyug* and *Mandi*, *Seventh Horse* is a tragicomedy. Not unlike *Maya* which traces the space between reality and illusion, Benegal's film is an exploration of the interstices between truth and fiction. What on the surface seems like a simple tale of (un)requited love takes on a layering that inaugurates issues of narratorial authority, metafictionality and the whole act of story-telling.

At the centre of the film is Mannek Mulla, a young railway clerk who, over an informal gathering of friends, recounts his numerous encounters with love. As the synopsis of the film suggests, rather than defining what

love is, with every story he tells, Mannek ends up describing what does not constitute love. In intricate detail, Benegal uses Mannek to describe one man's experience with three different women, Jumna, Lily and Satti.

Much like an origama sculpture, Benegal begins the film with a portrait shot of a painting. As the film moves from one frame to another, he teases out the complex layers of life and love that weave in and out of Mannek's narrative. Each layer reveals what was omitted before, and at the same time, the shifting angles expose a different perspective on the same issue.

Interestingly, Mannek has been involved in the lives of all three women at virtually the same time. The interweaving of the tales makes it unclear as to when one affair ends and another begins: Beginning with Jumna, Mannek outlines her unrequited love for the boy next door, Tanna, and her subsequent marriage to a wealthy man old enough to be her father. Mannek assumes the role of confidante and inserts himself into Jumna's life, following her into marriage and widowhood, and alluding to her affair with her husband's coachman. In the meantime, Mannek picks up the strands of Tanna's life, tracing the latter's marriage to Lily, with whom Mannek has erstwhile had an affair. Mannek instructs Lily to go ahead with her marriage to Tanna rather than make a commitment himself. He then goes on to describe his relationship with Satti, yet another woman who has succumbed to his charms. He betrays her when she tries to run away from a lecherous old man (Tanna's father). Thinking that Satti has killed herself, Mannek concludes his tale.

What is revealing about this seemingly implausible narrative is Mannek's choice of detail and his insertion into the lives of these women. The women represent three different strata of society. Jumna is the middle-class girl next door, Lily is the upper-class, educated woman, and Satti is the working-class, migrant woman. In the layering of these stories, it becomes evident how these women define each other's subjectivity and yet are without any autonomy, for it is finally Mannek who controls their lives through his narrative and imagination. He becomes the principal actor in their lives, orchestrating their actions, and telling their stories.

Despite the fact that Mannek has the authorial power, his renderings of these tales, casts him as a highly dubious character; a man with no scruples, commitment or moral courage. He uses the women to satisfy his own whims and fulfil his repressed fantasies. At the same time the women are portrayed as seemingly strong, resilient and active. The truth of Mannek's stories is questionable, and this is where Benegal exposes the unreliability of both the narrator and the narrative. In other words, how much of Mannek's narratorial forays are we to accept as truth, and how much are we to interpret as a past reconstructed—a past retold with much male imaginative licence.

Benegal's main point in this film is to demonstrate the power of the male authorial voice, and its assumption of its right to penetrate into other lives. Not only are these other lives primarily those of women, constructed around and within Mannek's narrative, but they are used to enhance his status. Outwardly expressing his marginality in these lives, Mannek in the process of retelling, consolidates his centrality in the narrative. That Benegal manages to twist this structure to foreground Mannek's own weaknesses is the essential subversion within the film. As Benegal himself put it in a response to an irate audience member's complaint regarding the negative representation of men, "that was the main point of the film."

In part, Benegal seems to be saying that it is the social structure/system that perpetuates inequalities which are detrimental to both genders; both men and women lose in the end as they conform to prevailing social dictates and normative rules. Yet, the brunt of the present system is most harshly felt in the lives of women. For no matter how strong they are, they are still contained within an oppressive system, their potentialities smothered by that system. And this is where the title of the film takes on another layer of signification.

The seventh horse of the sun refers to the mythology of the Indian Sun god—Surya—whose chariot is pulled by seven horses, each horse representing a day of the week. The seventh horse signifies the end of the cycle but also the beginning of another—the future. Benegal's film draws on this parallel in the ordering of Mannek's stories, and in particular, the ordering of his affairs. For the last affair which presumably ends with the fictionalized death of Satti marks the beginning of a new cycle. She reappears, years later, in a mist-filled market place just at the point when Mannek is expressing his regret over his inability to save her. Fiction becomes reality as suddenly Mannek sees her and chases after her. Following Satti into the mist points to the beginning of yet another story, only this time, one located in the here and now and signalling the promise of a new social order.

In bringing to crisis fact and fiction, narration and realization, Benegal reveals the hope that resides in the corridor where these merge, shading into one another. True liberation can only occur when the act of imagination translates into the materiality of action.

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Yasmin Jiwani is a cultural worker and a writer living in Vancouver.

Ameen Merchant is pursuing studies in Post-Colonial Literature at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

reverse shot ad

the *Burning Season*

a film without a context

Reviewed by Yasmin Jiwani

There is much to be said when filmmakers from outside a given community take it upon themselves to be inclusive, and to partake of the struggles of that community in the true spirit of forging links, and fighting for equality. However, for the most part, historically and contemporarily, filmmakers from outside a given community often use the cultural materials of that community as fodder for their image-making ventures. *The Burning Season* is no different. Pitched on the one hand as a journey about 'any' woman by the director, the film has also been described as providing an introduction to India and South Asian cultures by its producer. These contradictory viewpoints not only show a lack of synergy between the director, Harvey Crossland, and producer, Amarjeet Rattan, but also insert themselves in the film itself. Unfortunately, neither Crossland nor Rattan gave any significance to what their film signified in the Canadian context—a context marred by inequality and racism, a context whose defining features for people of colour continue to be exclusion, exoticization and negation, where the currency of these forms of violence are legitimized by the generation and circulation of stereotypes [see Armour, 1984; Bolaria and Li, 1988]. *The Burning Season* marks the latest stage in the continuous cycle of appropriation and stereotyping of South Asian cultures.

As a generic film about any woman's journey and struggles, the film departs from other works that deal with South Asian realities and existence in Western societies (e.g. *Lonely in America*, *Sam and Me*, and *Masala* which are all male-focused). However, the generic label is a myth. For if this were any woman's journey, then why is the woman in this instance South Asian? Why could Crossland not have limited his examination to white women? One could argue that Crossland, by extending himself to embrace South Asian realities, was being more inclusive. Well then, if that is the case, why does this South Asian woman's journey take place in India? Since the story begins in Canada, why does it not remain in Canada? South Asian cultures have a fairly lengthy history in Canada—about a century at the least, and further, have developed fairly large communities within the country. What is most offensive about Crossland's film is not that it deals with a South Asian woman's journey, but rather how it constructs South Asian realities.

In essence, the film is very much like that of *The City of Joy*, where the central character seeks to find himself in an exotic and different environment—in Indian villages and slums. There he is able to decipher who and what he is by the marked contrast between himself and the 'others.' Of course, 'they' share the core aspects of humanity—compassion, but that's where it ends. The contrasts between 'self' and 'other' are predicated on and derive their meaning from relations between 'rich' and 'poor', 'civilized' and 'savage' [Said, 1979].

The Burning Season takes this colonial theme even further, and compounds it by having the central character, who is of South Asian origin, 'return' to her homeland. To be South Asian means, within the context of the film, that one identifies with the whole of the Indian subcontinent. Regional differences are negated in the favour of creating a homogenized India. This brings to mind Hollywood's favourite technique—that of creating a generic character. As Bataille and Silet note with reference to Hollywood's treatment of the First Nations:

"The movie man did what thousands of years of social evolution could not do; Hollywood produced the homogenized Native American, devoid of tribal characteristics and regional differences. As long as the actor wore fringed pants and spoke with a halting accent, he was Indian" [1980:40].

While *The Burning Season* does not go that far, in the sense that it at least distinguishes Brahmins from the Rajputs, it nonetheless serves to create an erroneous impression—that we are all the same. Hence, it is easy for a South Asian Brahmin to go to Rajasthan (at least that is where I think the story takes place), and be integrated in a Rajput princely household without any real conflicts emerging from the different regional and religious affiliations. We are all the same, it would seem.

Nevertheless, as generic Indians, we can be used to communicate a generic message—what Crossland describes as being "the difficult journey we must all take to gain control of our lives." This of course totally negates our differences, both internally as well as externally—between the journey that confronts a white woman and the complexities that compound the life of an immigrant woman of colour.[1] But that aside, I cannot for the life of me see an anglo-Canadian woman travelling back to England to 'find herself' which is in effect what happens to the central female character in *The Burning Season*. Fleeing from her silent husband (he doesn't say a word throughout the film),

What is most offensive

who has a low sperm count, Sanda goes to India following the footsteps of her Rajput prince and lover. There she remarries again (even though she is already married) into the Rajput family. She returns to Canada without her lover, a liberated woman who has forsaken the tight, restrictive cultural codes that once constrained her.

There is a double-twist to the way in which Crossland presents South Asian cultures. Both the Rajasthani culture and the imported Brahmin hindu culture are portrayed as being oppressive; yet the imported and immigrant variant has the defining feature of being brutal, almost barbaric, whereas the former Rajasthani culture is positioned as a 'genuine article,' allowing far more mobility and latitude to its women. For instance, the Rajput Prince, Patwant (played by Ayub Khan Din) has a strong and forceful mother, who derives her strength from 'knowing her place'. In contrast, Sanda's Brahmin mother-in-law is a weak and pitiful creature, who for the most part, stays silent and watches her daughter-in-law from the sidelines. Similarly, Sanda's father-in-law is a patriarch who believes that women should be kept at home and subjugated. Patwant's father, in contrast, is a kindly old man. While immigrant South Asian cultures are problematized as being tradition-bound and backward, there is no recognition within this film, that traditions themselves can serve as anchors providing continuity in the flux of a diasporic existence, an existence marked by a history of negation and exclusion.

The notion that the home culture is a 'genuine article' and hence is possessing of humanity and compassion stands in sharp contrast to the immigrant and imported culture which is viewed as an aberration—the aberration perpetuated by the patriarchal structures inherent within that culture. Sanda is able to rid herself of the yoke of this immigrant culture by showing her henna painted hands to her father-in-law. The henna designs mark her as Rajput nobility. She thus pits one cultural framework against another in order to escape them both. Yet at no time does Crossland provide any contextual background to intercaste relations and differences. Moreover, one wonders what this gesture means in the larger context of male-female relations. Does being a member of nobility guarantee one protection from male violence? I think not, particularly as the recent research demonstrates that women across class boundaries suffer from domestic violence.

By far the most insulting aspect of *The Burning Season* is its core material—the various stereotypes that are used to compose a larger one-dimensional image of South Asian cultures and South Asian women [see Parmar, 1984]. Hence, what maybe one woman's journey, is in effect composed of various signs; signs that are so well known in popular culture and imagination that they evoke a chain of associations simply by virtue of their taken-for-grantedness. These signs construct an image of South Asian women as oppressed by a rigid, backward and traditional culture. Rather than locate that oppression in the unequal relations that prevail in most societies (the dominant Canadian society included), Crossland's film situates it within an inherently oppressive cultural framework. This simply reinforces a larger stereotype—one that crowds TV screens and is circulated in press accounts of South Asian cultures.[2] Naturally if a cultural system is deemed to be oppressive, what other choice is there for women except to leave it?

The ramifications of these kind of representations cannot be under-estimated. For those in positions of power, representations of South Asian cultures as barbaric, backward and traditional, and of South Asian men as wimps and brutal oppressors, simply serves to perpetuate a particular mind-set. Furthermore, in this era of Reform politics, such representations can serve to legitimize the exclusion of South Asians in terms of future immigration. In Vancouver, there now exists a special program on 'assaultive husbands' which is targeted only to South Asian communities. But naturally, these vital contextual factors are often deemed as being irrelevant when it comes to the creative licence of filmmakers.

To point the finger at *The Burning Season* alone would be futile. The film is part of a larger context in which such stereotypes abound. And it is the orchestration and synchronization of such stereotypes, in a variety of different media, that makes them effective. That effectiveness is part of the reason why this film has enjoyed such positive reviews in the mainstream media.[3] Its message resonates with the taken-for-granted world of common-sense knowledge of the audience and funders alike. It is a common-sense that typifies the cultures of all those who are non-white as being traditional rather than 'modern', as backward instead of progressive, and as throwbacks to some fossilized creations that are all but acceptable if confined to their indigenous environment.

As for the 'homeland,' producer Amarjeet Rattan described the rationale of the film in the following terms: "…to entertain people, and through entertainment people develop ideas. There are people who don't know anything about India, have never been to India, or might just have some Indian friends. This is going to give them more insight into the culture." [Cited in *Mehfil Magazine*]. Well, the viewer's introduction to India is signalled by a visual of peasants

about Crossland's film is not that it deals with a South Asian woman's journey,

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crowding a car, an animal being sacrificed, and the sight of Ayub Din Khan emerging from the euphoric throng in a blood-spattered tunic.[4] So much for an introduction to India! The stereotypes do not end there.

The deliberateness with which Crossland chose to construct the image of an oppressed South Asian woman can be seen from the principal female actor's account of her own life. Akesh Gill "grew up in a family that encouraged her rather than restricted her." As a newcomer to the screen, Gill had to learn how to act the role of an oppressed wife. As a woman facing a culturally-distinct situation, she provided the generic antidote to oppression—to leave the site of oppression. For white feminism, the home is the locus of oppression as it is here that patriarchal power reproduces and reasserts itself. For women of colour on the other hand, the home is often a site of shelter, providing refuge from a violent, white, racist environment.

However, there is no racism in the simulated environment of ***The Burning Season*** . Rather, racism inheres in the very structure of the production, for the weight of oppression supposedly inherent in all South Asian cultures is so restrictive that it even silences those who are victims of it.[5] Sanda is a muted figure in more ways than one. She says very little and expresses little interest in anything except Patwant, her lover. Even her interest in her child's well-being is limited to a few, silent protective gestures. Sanda's husband does not say a word throughout the whole film. And even her lover becomes increasingly silent as the film progresses. The term 'pregnant pause' would have to have an amazing degree of elasticity if it were to be used here.

Decontextualized, dehistoricized and stereotypical, ***The Burning Season*** is at best a story about a woman's journey framed against the backdrop of an exotic culture. It is a superficial treatment of the realities of South Asian women, and a negation of their multifaceted existence within the white landscape of Canadian society. The film reinforces existing stereotypes which typify South Asian cultures as restrictive, regressive and oppressive, and South Asians as a people who are obsessively in need of a cultural leg to stand on. These stereotypes are embedded in the historical and contemporary context of Canadian society—a context markedly absent in ***The Burning Season*** , but one which undoubtedly influences the way this $1.5 million text is, and will be read.

In conclusion,

Sanda stands before a mirror and gazes at the intricate henna designs on her hands. Slowly she takes some tissue and wipes the lipstick from her lips. A satisfied smile forms on her face. She has come unto her own. She is her own woman. She does not need anyone or anything. She has freed herself from the yoke of an oppressive cultural system.

For the rest of us in the margins, ***The Burning Season*** echoes a now familiar message—liberation=assimilation. Is that what the funders of this production hoped to get across? It certainly appears that way given the historical context of media representations about South Asians in Canada.

Yasmin Jiwani is a cultural worker and a writer living in Vancouver.

Notes

1. For those who would think otherwise, women of colour earn less on the average than their white counterparts (see the 1993), and further, experience far more difficulties even accessing social services.
2. See for instance, Doreen Indra's (1979; 1981) account of the coverage of South Asians in the Vancouver press. Also see Sunera Thobani's (1991; 1992) account of representations of South Asian women in ***The Vancouver Sun***.
3. See for instance, Katherine Monk's review in ***The Vancouver Sun***.
4. I am indebted to Ameen Merchant for pointing this out.
5. The definition of racism that I am using here refers to the manner in which the cultural traditions of those who are non-white are represented in a stereotypical manner and attributed with negative valuations. These are then used to represent particular social evils within society at large (Hall, 1990; van Dijk, 1993).

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Samachar

Hot News

On December 3, 1993, the production office of Rungh magazine suffered a major fire. As a result, many of our records were lost and the production of future issues of the magazine was delayed. We are in the process of reconstructing the office and this issue marks our committment to continue with the publicaton of Rungh in as timely a manner as possible. If you have not heard from us regarding your submissions, please be patient. To our Subscribers, if you have not been receiving your issues of Rungh, please send us a note and we will send you missed issues.

Call for Submissions

OUT ON SCREEN...

The First International Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Film & Video Festival of the Young and the Old is accepting submissions of films or videos that have been produced by or are about young and/or old sexual minorities (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people who are 23 and under or 60 and over). Work may be produced in any year, providing it fits above guidelines at production date. All appropriate work will be screened as part of the festival in September, 1994. 1/2 inch VHS only.

Deadline: May 31, 1994
OUT ON SCREEN
c/o Artists' Television Access
992 Valencia Street, San Fransisco, CA 94110
Tel *415* 824.3890

Slide Registry

EN FOCO, INC. is a community visual arts agency which is accepting entries from culturally diverse photographers for its slide registry. The slide registry provides curators, gallery owners, editors and arts agencies a resource of diverse photographers working in all areas of art and social documentary photography. Write or call for application. Contact:

Miriam Romais, Program Director
En Foco Inc.
32 E. Kingsbridge Road
Bronx, NY 10468
Tel *718* 584.7718

Upcoming Events

18th San Fransisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival

June 9 – 19, 1994. The Festival is presented by Frameline, a non-profit organization devoted to promoting lesbian and gay film and video. To receive a free catalogue or for more information, contact:

Frameline
346 Ninth Street, San Fransisco, CA 94103
Tel *415* 703.8650
Fax *415* 861.1404
Toll free 1.800.869.1996

What's New

Apna Style Magazine

New from Britain is Apna Style which launched its first bi-monthly issue in December/January, 1994. Produced in a tabloid format, the editors refer to it as a "radical, underground Asian youth publication that will relate to the street + club fashion and music trends that are unique to the rest of the world." For information, contact:

Double Dibble, Editor
Apna Style
1 Winslow Way, Handworth,
Middlesex, UK TW13 SQF

Many Voices HIV/AIDS Reports

The Ethnocultural Communities Facing AIDS: A National Study has released its Phase II report entitled, *Report for the South Asian Communities* . The Popular Report is a summary of what the study has learned from the South Asian and Chinese populations in Vancouver about attitudes towards AIDS, education initiatives and a general sense of the cultural factors which contribute, positively and negatively, to an increased awareness of this important issue. The Report concludes with a set of recommendations and steps which need to be taken to educate the target communities about risk and HIV avoidance. The Report is available in both English and Punjabi. For more information, please contact:

Dr. Sharon Manson Singer
Centre for Human Settlements, UBC
2206 East Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z3
Tel *604* 822.5254

Communalism Combat

is a magazine published by Sabrang Communications. The magazine has been established "to analyze and expose the machinations of communal politics in India and to publicise the attempt of secular individuals, groups and organizations engaged in fighting them. We stand for equal respect to all religions but we are opposed to the cynical manipulation of faith in the pursuit of power. Therefore, we are opposed to both majority and minority communalism." For more information, write to:

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Rungh welcomes submissions to Samachar. Please send us your calls for submissions, announcements, upcoming events, etc. and, space permitting, we will publish them.

Reading and Book Launch

MG Vassanji

&

author of *The Gunny Sack, No New Land* and *Uhuru Street* will read from his new novel, *The Book of Secrets* (McLelland & Stewart)

Phinder Dulai

poet and writer will read from his forthcoming book *Ragas From the Periphery* (Pulp Press)

May 28, 1994

8:30pm

Ismaili Jamatkhana and Centre (Social Hall)

4010 Canada Way

Tickets $8

$5 Students/Seniors/Underemployed

Presented with the support of
The Writers' Union of Canada, The Ismaili Council for BC,
City of Vancouver Social Planning Department,
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Presented by The Rungh Cultural Society and
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Rungh

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We prefer submissions on disc—
PC or Mac, unformatted text.

Sylvat Aziz
Shamiyanah – The Bazaar Wall

Photo: John Dean

Like the wall of the bazaar in Lahore for which it is named, (Aziz's) drawing carries layers of history, fragments of architecture and gardens, stories of the Moghals, of Islam, legends of love and betrayal, and images of the life of the marketplace today, the heat, dust, smells and the people…(This piece) is about Lahore, but it is also about Lahore seen through Aziz's memory and from her perspective of living in Western Canada.

Sylvat Aziz, letter from Lahore to Calgary.

"…A real tragedy is only possible in an optimistic world, if one sticks to the classical line. I believe our lives there, finally and ultimately are tragic—we know too many facts and have too little faith. Here it is the opposite. The dead go somewhere, they don't just enrich the soil with urea…Soon I will reach a critical situation when I won't belong anywhere. Because I can't withdraw from either (world) and cannot wholly accept one or the other. But I guess that's the fate of a whole bunch of people all over. It's a great comfort."

Excerpted from catalogue: SCREENS: Amantea, Aziz, Stone, Sujir.
Curated by Katherine Ylitalo, The Nickel Arts Museum, University of Calgary.