

Divya

A Quarterly Journal of South Asian Women




The Dream of शीवा

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Working Together

A Case Study:

Toronto's

South Asian Community

by

Tania Das Gupta

(This article expresses the viewpoint of one of the community workers who helped organize this community action in 1986-87. Diva)

A fellow community worker called me. She mentioned with anger and helplessness the fact that some people had been fired from a factory and how the action smacked of racism.

We knew we had to do something. In consultation with other fellow community workers we met the following day. We decided to get more information about the happening and to involve two women workers who spoke Punjabi, which would be a valuable skill in working with the affected workers who were Punjabi speaking.

We had only one contact, my friend's friend's relative, who had been fired. We contacted her and she informed us that 23 people (all except one, being women and all being East Indian) had been fired on the same shift, at the same time. We asked her to gather names, phone numbers and social insurance numbers of all the affected workers and that we would come the following day to meet as many of the workers as she could gather.

At the same time, we planned for a public meeting, a press release and contacted key people for the upcoming Sunday meeting. Tasks were divided. The men decided to book the hall and mobilize people for the meeting. The women decided to meet the workers, document the story in detail, issue press releases, contact the press and get the workers to the public meeting.

After our planning meeting, two of us met in a restaurant to draft the press release, to draw up a list of people to contact for the public meeting and other details. It was late when we finished.

On the following day, three of us set out to meet the women workers. One by one they

came, almost all of them. They were Punjabi-speaking and some were accompanied by children and/or husbands. They ranged in age from 15 to their late 50's and most were married. Almost all spoke no English.

The men felt it necessary to check us out. They asked us why we were helping them, why we do community work. There is bound to be some suspicion when young, unmarried women go to people's homes, especially to plan community action. Who knows what stereo-types they had of a group of women like us? Perhaps they thought we were "social worker types", or perhaps that our morals were questionable, etc. We told them that we were community workers and that we have ourselves experienced racism and that we have to help each other in a foreign country in such situations. This seemed to satisfy their curiosity. The men were silent spectators of the meeting from then on.

We got down to business. We noted down as much of the facts as we could. It also emerged that the women had filed complaints with the Human Rights Commission. We discussed the proposed strategy, including the public meeting, the press releases and the importance of full attendance of the public meeting with their families and friends. We asked the women if they agreed with the strategy and what exactly they wished to achieve through this community action. They replied clearly that they wanted their "jobs back". That became our objective in the months ahead, although many of us would have liked to have gone beyond this immediate need.

Prior to the public meeting, we had a lot of work to do, in between our regular work, studies and family responsibilities. We drafted the press release, typed them, delivered them to the press gallery at City Hall and to different newspapers, T.V. and radio stations. We called members of the press, we called up other key people who would be interested in the case, including some community organizations, legal aid people, some alternative press people, politicians and some unionists. We prepared a fact sheet to distribute at the public meeting.

The meeting was held conveniently for the workers in Malton, close to where most of them lived. We got two of the workers to sit onstage along with two community workers. The meeting was conducted in Punjabi and in English. One of the workers onstage, who soon emerged as the most outspoken one, recounted the entire incident of how the workers had been fired. Questioned by the legal aid workers, new details also emerged. The following was the story.

The women on afternoon shift were locked out, for requesting wage increases promised them two months earlier. The increase of 30 cents an hour had already been granted to the day-workers six weeks prior to that. The day-shift consisted of 25 to 30 women and was racially mixed. Up to that point, management had made excuses for not granting the increases. For instance, some of the women had been accused of stealing. The day-shift was not questioned about this.

On that fateful day, the women had asked management to commit in writing that they would give them the increase in the next paycheck. Management refused to give anything in writing, turned off the lights and told the women to get out. They had worked at the plant from one to over six years. On an average they earned \$4 an hour. The shift usually began

at 4 p.m. but they were never sure when it would end; anywhere from 11 p.m to 4 in the morning. In addition, they had inadequate protective clothing and arbitrary dinner breaks and rest periods, usually at the convenience of the management.

Women came back to work the next day. Some of their men also came with them. They said that they had come to work. Their men also asked management to let them work. Management said "no", that they had already hired others, and that they didn't want these "stupid Indians". The women waited outside the plant till 7 p.m. They contacted the media, none of whom turned up except a local newspaper. The reporters from this paper took the information but didn't do a write-up. Management called the police, who didn't leave until the women left.

The following week, the women went to collect their paycheck for the last 4 days worked. In this cheque, some of the women received the 30 cent increase for the 4 days, others didn't. In addition, they received their vacation pay and separation slips, which stated that they had "quit". Besides being incorrect, this statement put in jeopardy their unemployment insurance payments. They had never received any notice of being fired, nor had they received any severance pay.

At a meeting with the Labour Relations Board, the women were informed that the Board couldn't help them because they were not unionized. The Board did state that if the women filled the appropriate forms they would try and get them severance pay. The women refused to sign the forms saying that they wanted their jobs and not severance pay. About 2 weeks later, a complaint was filed with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

During the public meeting that we had organised in Malton, the legal aid workers became involved in the case and expressed an interest in taking it up and representing the workers. Our strategy was going to be multi-pronged. We would look at the legal avenues in fighting the case; we would continue with the Human Rights complaint; we would try to publicize the case through the media and; we would keep it community-based.

The public meeting was successful. There were about 100 people there, including a local news photographer. All the women workers were present, although some were late. During the entire action, we encountered the fact that all women were not independently mobile. We had to always arrange rides for them. The men at the meeting had become rather impatient when some of the women were late in coming. They repeatedly urged us to start the meeting without them, but we insisted that the meeting was for the women and so we would wait for them. It was almost as if the men were doing us a favour by being there. We also had to struggle to get the two women onstage.

As the struggle ensued and we had to interact with the women frequently, we became more familiar with their family lives and with them as individuals. Some of them were very young. Yet their work lives and family expectations had made them adults prematurely. Many worked in the factory along with their mother or other relatives. There were kin relations among the workers. Interestingly enough, there were two women in the group who never became active in the struggle, in contrast to two of their relatives who were at the forefront.

There were many occasions when delegations were sent to the Human Rights Office. We would walk in impromptu and demand quicker action on the case. We also arranged to phone the investigating officer frequently to keep up the pressure. In these situations, one

woman seemed more mobile than others because her mother was very supportive of the community action and her brother would drive his sister wherever required. This kind of family support was essential in terms of keeping the workers involved in the action. We knew very well that if the workers withdrew we had no community base or reason to continue with the demands.

In the meantime, one woman who had been previously active stopped coming to the meetings. Upon enquiring, we found out that the husband had convinced her that there was no hope in pursuing the action and that therefore she should not be involved in any meetings. Later on, when the Support Committee had some victories, then the same woman came back to the group with her husband. The mentality of her husband was that they would not really be active in any community action, but that they would reap the benefits of it.

Another major roadblock which we encountered was that a number of women, mostly younger, were prevented from coming to the meeting by their fathers and husbands. The reasons were never clarified. It was at this time that my fellow male community worker, who had been a member of the support committee from the very beginning, proved his usefulness as a male. He phoned the male relatives of these women and spent hours trying to convince them to come and remain within the Support Committee. He was fortunately successful in convincing most of them as to the importance of this for their victory.

Soon after the Support Committee became active, one of the chief spokespersons of the workers seemed to drop out of the action. We found out that company management as well as the Human Rights officials were contacting her directly and building a relationship with her, independent of the Support Committee. Earlier on, the same woman had been reluctant to be an official contact person for the Support Committee. She happened to be the only one of the workers who was fluent in English. There was some concern around this because unity among the workers was key to any success in this case. Any special understanding between a worker and the authorities was seen as a dangerous trend and people viewed it suspiciously. It was rumoured also that her brother was not supportive of the committee.

The struggle grew in momentum. It became highly publicized. The major newspapers picked up the story; together with some South Asian newspapers, some alternative newspapers, newsletters and a major radio station.

As well, we were able to regularly lobby several members of Parliament on the issue. Bob Rae raised it in Parliament and led a question period on it. As a result, the Minister of Labour at the time made a public commitment to personally expediate the case. A special government mediator was appointed, who mediated between the management and the lawyer representing the workers.

During this mediation process, management tried to project their rigidity. We continued reiterating our demands and insisted that we were prepared to go to any length for this case, including initiating a boycott of the company's products. The Support Committee had become larger by this time and had gained a great deal of credibility.

Confrontations and negotiations occurred regularly during this time and we continued to put pressure on various parties by regular phone calls and delegations.

Three months down the line, one fine day we were informed that the company had agreed to rehire the workers if they agreed to withdraw their Human Rights and any other complaints against the company. The 30 cent an hour increase would also be given to those work

ing for over 1 year at the company.

An emergency meeting of the Support Committee was called. After a great deal of soul searching, the women decided to take the Company's offer. They needed jobs and that had been their original goal. We conveyed this decision to the mediator.

On the day of the final agreement all the women workers were there with their relatives. Other members of the Support Committee were there as well. It was a tense time. We were all sitting outside the room where the lawyers from both sides and the mediator were meeting and negotiating the final agreement with management. It occurred to us that managers from the Company could be present, why not the workers?

After hours of waiting, the final document was signed by all the workers present there. Two women who had to put their signatures down also were not present there. Neither had they been involved in the action for reinstatement. In fact, earlier, they (mother and daughter) had been rehired by the company and therefore wanted nothing to do with the Support Committee. It was agreed to take their signatures at the factory itself when all the women would be going back to work. I had the thankless and yet exciting job of accompanying the women back to their factory, getting the rest of the pending signatures and handing a copy of the signed document to the manger of the Company.

The women were happy and excited to get back to work. It occurred to me that their demands were so minimal and yet that had been denied them. At the factory, they changed into their overalls, wore their caps and filed in to work. I witnessed how the manger treated them, with disrespect and "like little children" (even though many of them were mothers and grandmothers). They were disciplined by him as if they were kindergarten kids being prepared for finger painting.

While there, we found out that the women had been shuffled into separate shifts. So, some of the women could not start work on that day. Also, their work week had been shortened. It was clear that one chapter of their struggle had been closed, but another was beginning.

The struggle of these women taught us many things about the position of Indian women within their families and communities. It also confirmed some of our prior knowledge about organizing within immigrant woman's communities in general. It brought to light various aspects which are advantageous for creating unity and collective action, as well as the disadvantages in doing so. The inability to speak English keeps South Asian women in a dependent and vulnerable position as workers, as women and as immigrants. We remain ignorant of our basic human rights, the services available to us and the potential within us to make full use of our skills. It keeps us silenced in the face of indignities, it keeps us separated from other workers and from society at large. This separation is fundamental in our powerlessness in any society.

This particular experience of community action by Indian women and their subsequent victory against great odds was a process of consciousness raising for all of us involved. It made us aware of the tremendous possibilities and powers which Indian working class women have. It is a testimony against the stereotype of our passivity.

Our strength lies in our informal support networks which can serve as a tremendous base for swift and effective communication, and thus mobilization. When pushed to the wall, we can break our silence and speak boldly and lead an action, in our own language and in our

own style. Some of the older women- mothers and grandmothers- were particularly effective and supportive of the younger women, strengthening their action with their patience, nurtured through generations.

On the other hand, the rigid, patriarchal and feudal networks can also be a strong barrier to any progressive action. Again and again, the women were stopped or held back by family members, especially men. Such roadblocks were countered by strong bonds of sisterhood, (which partly originate from a sexually segregated society), as well as by support of those men who have, for personal and political reasons, chosen the path of progress within the community.

For those of us who are community workers, we became uncomfortably aware of our differences - personal and political. We, although being women, are divided by our life experiences and choices. We have different work styles, and different priorities. During the action, we had serious rifts between us and some of us had to bridge the tensions and gaps between various members. Such differences unfortunately remained unresolved and undiscussed. We were unable to discuss our differences, remove our misconceptions and fears about each other. We came together for this community action. We stayed together and worked intensively and tirelessly for our cause. However, after the victory, we parted our ways.

The experience of this action made us aware of these and other realities. It also gave us a glimpse of the possibility for change in our communities.

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a
female
physician's
perspective

by

BHOOMA BHAYANA



She sat huddled in a corner of my waiting room averting the unknowing and unfeeling glances of strangers by staring singularly at the floor. For the stifling heat of Toronto in July she was dressed rather warmly with layers of sweaters enclosing like a cocoon her multi-colored butterfly wings of Shalwar-kameez. I called her into the office. She apologetically started to tell me how her complaint was trivial that she did not know why she had come in the first place. She had burnt her thigh against the radiator and was sure that it would heal on its own. I did not understand why anyone would leave the radiator on in July but I examined her. She had a 5 centimetre second degree blistering-infected-burn on the inner aspect of her right thigh.

Further examination revealed multiple bruises and abrasions over her arms and her chest. That explained the cocoon. The cocoon of deception also fell away on confrontation. She had recently come to Canada with all the promises of "dulhanship" (wifehood) in a land of milk and honey with a "pardes deva" (man from foreign lands) only to find herself isolated in a strange culture with an alcohol dependant spouse who confirmed for her the teaching that it was the norm for men to keep their wives "in line" with sporadic random beatings. Without friends or family or facility with the language or social authority she had no recourse.

In medical school we are often taught to use ourselves as a normal yardstick. In Internal Medicine we are taught to use the pallor of our own nailbeds to compare to those of the patient to diagnose anemia. In Psychiatry we are taught to use our gut emotional response to a patient's mode of presentation to diagnose a personality disorder. This works well unless you are an anemic physician with a borderline personality disorder. For lack of a more academic title for this technique I call it "Being Judgmental". Nonetheless I looked to my own reaction to my cocoon woman and found out that I was livid. I was angered by the system that set up the marriage and I was infuriated by the husband who had betrayed and continues to betray his wife's trust. I also knew my own anemia was that I am a woman brought up in a libertarian household.

As physicians, we are probably in the unique position in that, physically and psychologically abused women often seek our help as a first and often only recourse. Because of the Conspiracy of Silence which pervades such issues, particularly in the South East Asian Community, the silence encroaches our encounters with them and their cry is not one of anger and anguish but rather a muffled silent whimper. The flags provided by apparent injuries are also not always readily available.

Wife abuse is a ubiquitously prevalent crime. It crosses all bounds of culture, economy and race. The particular dynamics perpetuate the misconception that women are inferior to men and that their role is to serve men. The apparent difference in physical prowess obviates, in that mode, the means to maintain this imbalance through physical abuse. I can draw from the Hindu collective subconsciousness that I have access to images of self-abnegating Sitas who throw themselves violently into fires to prove their purity. There are also vivid pictures of Hindu equivalents to Madonnas and Whores. The primary difference between them seems to be participation in the Conspiracy of Silence.

In any case it is not my duty to philosophize about the etiology of social evils. My cocoon woman is in pain from both apparent and invisible injuries. She requires support, empowerment and direction. What I cannot give her is a programme to be brought up again. The Sitas in her collective subconscious will burden her with unbearable guilt as she tries to remove herself to heal. Those of us who are health care and social work providers can help to strip away the cocoon. Those of us who are Sisters can remove the Conspiracy of Silence.

It is said that when women speak of the high price of rice they really mean to speak of the ingratitude of children. Some of our sisters are covertly telling us of the pain of the betrayal of marital trust. Maybe, later, in our role as Mothers we can stop perpetuating those images that endorse Wife Abuse.

sex selection

Advances in Obstetrics have been phenomenal in the last two decades. Prenatal diagnostic techniques such as ultrasound and amniocentesis have drastically diminished maternal and fetal morbidity. Also advances in the treatment of infertility have allowed for new techniques like artificial insemination by donor to bring joy to childless couples.

There are, however, a million questions about all these methods. It did not take long for "selectionists" to propose that we act as a catalyst for Darwinian evolution by not only using prenatal detection to find out early and treat but to use it to detect "undesirables" and (terminate) such pregnancies. A little Hitlerian --- and all in the name of progress.

Similarly it did not take long for those with visions of sexist supremacy to propose that we facilitate their view of the perfect family as one in which there are only sons by detecting and (terminating) daughters (I use the term daughters loosely but I believe that the preferred euphemism is "female fetuses"). It also became possible to interfere in the determination of sex at the point of conception by separating the little blue sperms from the pink ones thus eliminating the necessity of having to add abortion to sexism in making up one's moral resume. It eases the conscience a bit.

In the process of sex determination a sample of amniotic fluid- the stuff that bathes the foetus- is drawn from the womb and tested. As this contains the genetic blueprint for the baby it can tell us of genetic diseases to come and the sex of the baby. Unfortunately this can only be done once enough fluid is present so that it must be done at 16 weeks of pregnancy. By some definitions this is beyond acceptable time for a therapeutic abortion. Sex determination thus presents a tremendous moral dilemma whether or not you accept the tenet of sexist supremacy.

In India where there is a great preference for offspring of the male gender this was bypassed by the establishment of separate sex determination clinics which did not offer therapeutic abortion services but rather left women disgruntled with nature's sex selection to their own devices. I suppose that it is always easier on the soul to work in a vacuum.

In the process of sex selection sperm are treated with various chemical and physical processes to allow selection of male-baby-generating sperm to use in artificially inseminating the uteri anxious to produce male fetuses. Dr. Abramovitch is a urologist practicing in North Scarborough who runs a sex selection clinic. He tells me that the method is 85% reliable. He is particularly intrigued by the fact that 100% of the East Indian, Pakistani and Oriental patients he sees, select to have baby boys. In the native born Canadian population the split is 50/50 as most people having smaller families often want a tailor-made one- boy, one-girl type of family. Furthermore the ratio of South Asian (Indian, Pakistani) to Oriental patients that present to him is 6-8 to 1.

I am only a physician. I cannot profess to understand the complexities of this world. I do know, however, that we have strong tools to heal and to prevent illness. I was never taught in medical school that being female was a genetic illness. I realize that culture has tremendous impact on our health and our health decisions. My mother, who has taught me the basic tenets of our culture and religion never told me that it was a sin to be a woman. I am not a student of history but I do know that in antiquated societies there were certain social and economic disadvantages to bearing daughters. I also know that my father who had three daughters and one son tells me that he is just as happy as if he had three sons and one daughter. To be quite honest I'm confused by the whole issue. I certainly hope that my readers are too.

WOMEN AND THE INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

by

Judy Whitehead

Immigrant women at home and working women in Asia and Latin America are being increasingly drawn into a new international division of labour. Since the early seventies, the participation rate of women in the labour force has increased dramatically in both OECD countries as well as certain countries in Asia and Latin America. Increased participation rates of women, however, have been mainly in the service sector and in the new "sunshine" industries such as computer assembling, clothing, and electronics. In both sectors there has been very little promotion of women to supervisory or managerial positions. Indeed, an increasing trend has been the contracting out of less technically intensive aspects of such work to small firms, or even, in the case of the clothing industry, to homework paid on a piece rate basis.

These 'new' industrial relations, which largely hire women who are thought to be more docile and compliant, actually echo the industrial relations of the nineteenth century. A chief management strategy of the past decade has been the attempt to hire a non-unionized and temporary work force, often women, in both the developed and underdeveloped capitalist countries, in order to cut costs and raise profit rates. One outcome of this policy has been the integration of non-white women into the global economy in a new way, both at home and abroad.

The introduction of satellite and computer communications technology in the seventies provided new possibilities for supervising production in geographically dispersed locations through the centralization of information concerning production and retail markets. The dispersion of production lines across the globe now became a real possibility. The scope of distributing production also increased from the mid-seventies because the new technology made it possible to separate different elements of production. This allowed transnational corporations (TNC's) to shift a sizeable element of assembly line work wither to 'third-

world' countries or to smaller subcontractors at home. Generally, the aspects of industries relocated or subcontracted were the less technically sophisticated labour processes, with knowledge and more skilled operations remaining at home and the preserve of men.

Abroad, this relocation of production led to the growth of "world market factories" in South East Asia, South Asia, Brazil and Mexico, which largely employed young unmarried women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. The major reason that TNC's relocated portions of an industry in these countries was the lower wages and absence of fringe benefits which cut costs and raised profit rates of transnational corporations. Wages paid to women working in world market factories are about ten times lower than wages in comparable factories in developed countries, while they are between 20 and 50% lower than men's wages in third world countries for comparable jobs. Additional costs, such as provisions for social security and fringe benefits, are also much lower in world market factories than in the home countries.

Women workers in world market factories have few rights in terms of minimum wages, insurance funds, limitations on the length of the working day and week, security of employment, and the right to strike. Often there exist laws prohibiting unionization, indicative of the greater control which authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships exercise over the labour force in congruence with the goals of transnational corporations. Indeed, the employment of women in pharmaceutical and textile industries in Pakistan, and in electronics and clothing in Sri Lanka and South East Asia provides TNC's new avenues to exploit the most vulnerable section of the international labour force.

The most recent strategy in this process has been the return of capital to "peripheral" labour markets within developed capitalist countries themselves, where TNC's take advantage of either an immigrant labour force or women. This is occurring particularly in regions which experienced relatively high rates of unemployment in the past decade due to the decline of traditional industries, for example in Scotland, Northeast England, and northeastern United States. Here while employment for men has decreased, the participation of women in the labour force has increased. The majority of women, however, have been hired in temporary employment and low-skilled occupations in textiles and electronics which are increasingly organized on a contracting or piece-work basis. Many of these jobs are insecure, are frequently low-paid, and often non-unionized. Thus jobs are not always now relocated to low wage countries, but to low wage sectors within developed capitalist countries themselves.

In many cases, the preferred employees are women, and especially immigrant women, who are even more vulnerable to state legislation and employer's demands than non-immigrant women. The trend towards casual and part-time employment for women is often rationalized as an accepted division of labour based on a "traditional" gender division of labour in the domestic sphere. Instead of eroding a traditional gender division of labour, such employment in fact intensifies it. The temporary status of women's work and its low pay is rationalized as being merely supplementary to the main household income and to women's primary roles as wives and mothers.

(revista feminista) n° 8

VIVA!



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The result of such a strategy has been the fragmentation and segmentation of the labour force internationally along the lines of gender and ethnicity. Secure employment, career advancement, higher wages and stable production structures become the "enclave" of white middle-class men, while women become part of a labour force increasingly subjected to low wages, casual work, and insecure and often part-time employment. Since TNC's have found they can exploit a vulnerable segment of the labour force within developed countries - women and particularly immigrant women - there is less need for them to relocate internationally. Indeed there are definite advantages to having the source of supply near the consumer market: companies are less encumbered by tariff barriers and can respond more quickly to changes in demand. Subcontracting domestically has reduced the need for international corporations to relocate elsewhere, since the same labour force can be exploited in the home countries. In the process, non-white women both at home and abroad are being subsumed within the least secure and least well-paid segment of the international labour market.

It seems clear by now that such a management strategy represented an attempt to erode the relatively high wages and rights of workers gained through trade union activism in the post-war period. Indeed, one of the first firms to decentralize production and subcontract was Benetton, which faced an aggressive trade union organization in Italy in the early seventies. Smaller factories and subcontracting fragments union organization in the developed countries, making it much more difficult to organize workers in industry-wide unions. In addition, world market factories are often located in countries which either contain export free trade zones or which ban trade union activity nation-wide.

It will be the challenge of trade unions in the coming decade to combat gender and ethnic segmentation of the labour force by integrating the interests of immigrant women and women in general into unions which will protect and extend their rights, rates of pay, and working conditions. And their ability to do so will be a measure of their continued viability as representatives of the labour force in an international division of labour which will be increasingly fragmented by TNC's along the lines of ethnicity and gender.

CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST LITERATURE: an overview

by

MARIELLA SALA

I'm the bad girl of the story

I'm
the bad girl of the story
the one who fucked three men
and put horns on her husband.

I'm the woman
who tricked him daily
for a miserable plate of lentils,
she who slowly took off his robes of goodness
until he changed into a rock
black and sterile.

I'm the woman who castrated him
with infinite gestures of tenderness
and false moans in bed.

I'm the bad girl of the story.

[Maria Emilia Cornejo, 1970's]

1968 was a year of important historical events for the western world: French May, Prague spring, student riots in North America, appearance of new feminist groups, killing of Tlatelolca, were some of the happenings that made people question the credibility of established politics and culture. This same year, in Peru, a developing pluricultural and multi-ethnic country, a military government of a reformist and nationalist bent was restored. This caused the disappearance of oligarchy and the emergence of middle classes, thus accelerating the crisis and rupture of old social schemes.

Already in 1950 there had been political, economic and social changes which allowed wider access to education for women. Peruvian women voted, for the first time, in 1955. In the 60's they began to actively participate in struggles but it was only in the 70's, confluent with the military regime of Velasco, that women began to re-define their role in society. This development was encouraged by factors such as entrance of women into the universities, the widespread use of contraceptives and the deterioration of values and traditional cultural models of the family and a questioning of male-female relationships. On a governmental level, women's issues were beginning to be recognized, especially after 1975 with the Decade of Women sponsored by the United Nations and the rise of the new feminism on a national and international scale.

The liquidation of oligarchy and the presence of politicized popular sectors, drew a new map of Peruvian reality and with it, a different manner of dealing with, and experiencing the culture.

poetry

How did this situation effect Peruvian literature written by women? In the poetry of the 60's, two great women poets had become prominent although they didn't question the situation of gender in the society. Enjoying an unusual privilege, they became exceptions in national anthologies where both of them: Blanca Varela and Cecilia Bustamante, were the only women to appear among dozens of male poets. This, clearly, did not mean that there weren't other female poets, rather it says more about the critics and historians of national literature. With respect to prose, the panorama was even worse. After an interesting generation of female novelists at the end of the last and beginning of this century, there weren't, it seemed, other outstanding narrators.

It is only from the roots of the 70's and due to factors mentioned earlier, that new voices of women began to emerge which, different from earlier periods, expressed their own vision of the world in a distinct style. As poet and scholar Rosina Valcarcel says:

"Although it is true that the place of women in national culture and art is not yet representative, this intervention turns out to be meaningful for the degree as well as for the quality and content of the message, its demands and creations. Nonetheless, given the situation of women in an underdeveloped and dependent country where women are oppressed in a thousand visible and invisible forms, the voice of the poet acquires particular features. Previously the female writers worked more on their internal universe, the subjective, intimate space. Several artists translated loving sentiments constructed in ideal planes and elaborated more of an intel-

lectual eroticism. This theme, now situated in the daily life of the couple and this real act distinguishes them from their predecessors in whose production the condition of female-women, was somewhat veiled."

In the poets of the 70's the search for an identity was not restricted to isolated or exceptional cases but rather the new generations, as Rosina Valcarcel affirms, are protagonists of a social fact in Peru as in Latin America, in which women constitute a tendency, a current. In spite of this, we think that we can identify some poets who were initiators of this new wave, those who in an act of total bravery, became a type of model to be followed by women poets of the 80's.

Among these initiators we want to mention Maria Emilia Cornejo. Cornejo is unpublished even today and her suicide in 1973, at 22 years of age, truncated a poetic work that would have revolutionized the poetry written by women in Peru. Affirmative poetry from the guts, profoundly rebellious and vital, it is the first to bring irony, with a clarity unsettling for her age, to the machistic guidelines of a terribly patriarchal and misogynous society such as that of Peru.

Only three of her poems are known, although she left a book written before she died. Up until now, no editor has been interested in publishing her book although her work can be considered a landmark in Peruvian poetry and her death made her a legend for her followers. Her suicide at a young age, already married, illustrates the agony that women live, even more so if one is a poet and on top of it all, if one is a woman from the third world. This poem describes and denounces the situation of women in an epoch in which, in Peru, the emancipation of women and much less feminism was not spoken of...

Soy
la muchacha mala de la historia,
la que fornico con tres hombres
y le saco cuernos a su marido.

Soy la mujer
que lo engano cotidianamente
por un miserable plato de lentejas,

la que le quito lentamente su ropaje de bondad
hasto convertirlo en una piedra
negra y esteril,
soy la mujer que lo castro
con infinitos gestos de ternura
y de gemidos falsos en la cama.
(I'M THE BAD GIRL OF THE STORY, quoted earlier)

Along with Maria Emilia Cornejo, many poets appeared and published in the decade of the 70s (a heroic task in Peru where publishing industry hardly exists). Many of these poets, leftist militants, let flow their ideas and rebellious sentiments about social injustice, chal-

lenged the established order and some, also, denounced the inferior position of women, protesting the position of women as women-objects. But none like Maria Emilia Cornejo brought this political situation to a personal level, although others did propose a new model for relationships based on equality and companionship. In Maria Emilia, the rebellion is spontaneous, her clarity in denouncing the violence that she experienced in her female being, remains a shout inflamed in the decade of the 70's, a shout which was soon to be silenced by her sudden death.

the 80's and the new poets

It is recently, in 1981 that another poet Carmen Olle appears. Carmen continued the message of Maria Emilia, in a certain way, but with more maturity and agility in her language, reaching perfection on a verbal and formal level.

This message that Maria Emilia left and which, for her death, remained incomplete.

"Anoche besaba a mi hombre le suplicaba una nueva pose
descontada la excitacion me faltaba un poco de aire por
cierta contrariedad en la nariz para manternerme de cubito
dorsal

la pose es el esquema que traduce
la manera de constituirse en "los de arriba" o "los de abajo"
hombros-jiba-senos colgantes - orificios dentales"....

"Last night as I kissed my man I begged him for a new position
apart from the excitement I was having trouble breathing
because of a certain irritation in my nose from lying on my back
the position is the scheme that translates
the way of being "those on top" or "those underneath"
shoulders- hump- hanging breasts- dental orifices"...

With the poetry of Carmen Olle, for the first time a woman poetized her body and openly touched the topic of eroticism. In a society such as that of Lima, moralist and conservative, the poetry of Olle, named out loud what was barely whispered..

But not only the element of sex was innovative in the work of Olle; it was a poetry that asked about the existence of the female being, that questioned the situation of Latin America, that recognized the almost always frustrated experience of other women. As in these lines:

"Torpe y sin fuerzas en el aburrido domingo juvenil
y el paseo a Chosica frustrado por la bomiga desparramada
en todos los verdes
Elsa Sira Margarita las amo porque nadie sabe que camino
hen tomade sus frustraciones
estoy callada pero no ausente

Clarice Lispector escribe rodeada de sus nimos
en el hogar

Sylvia Plath pensaba dejarlo todo en aquel case
el occidente ha dado talentos como la Woolf cuya amistad
con la Ocampo hizo decir a esta: yo, como toda subdesarrollada
tengo el habito de escribir."

"Dull and without strength in the boring youthful Sunday
and the outing to Chosica is frustrated by the cow dung spread
on all the greens

Elsa, Sira, Margarita, I love them all because nobody know which route
their frustrations have taken

I'm silent but not absent

Clarice Lispector writes surrounded by her children at home

Sylvia Plath would have left it all in that case

the west has given talents such as Woolf whose friendship
with Ocampo made her say to her: I, as all third world women
have the habit of writing."

Or verses such as these, written during her stay in Paris at the end of the 70's:

"De mis contemporaneas me alejan las dificultades de no ser trivial.

En la Gare du Nord cerre los ojos muy fuerte.

Vi Paris despues de un viaje largamente sentada

en la butaca del ferrocarril con la pequema en brazos

y la torre Eiffel partida por la niebla.

Que son los Compo Eliseos o la Giconda sino el menage
delegado a las jovenes muchachas del tercer mundo?

Lavar pisos

refregar las estrellas.

(Del libro "Noches de Adrenalina")

"From my contemporaries I am distanced by the difficulties of not being trivial.

In the Gare du Nord I closed my eyes very firmly.

I saw Paris after a journey long-seated

in the train with the little one in arms

and the Eiffel tower split by the clouds.

What are the Champs Elysee and the Mona Lisa if not the
cleaning delegated to young girls from the third world?

To wash floors

To scrub the stars."

(From the book "Adrenaline Nights")

I want to refer to the reactions of the critics, mainly male, to the poems of Carmen Olle and also to the poems of other poets of the 80's. Incidentally, I happened to be the first to publish a review of her poetry, right after the appearance of her book "Adrenaline Nights" in 1981. In the article I explained more or less what I have indicated here, but with special emphasis on the fact that this time it was the vision of a woman herself, on her own sexuality. In the same article, a reference to feminine poetry was also made. Immediately, the professional male critics began to polemicize about whether feminine literature exists or not, saying that literature doesn't have a sex and that only good and bad literature exists. Happily, Carmen's was, for them, good literature. I cite this fact because I think that to a large extent the literary criticism has not been as severe as it would have liked to, with the poets who followed because they found it "very feminine" or "very modern" that the poets spoke of sex, but only when they referred to the desire that men inspired in them, and if possible, to use figures such as "mare" or "kitten" to refer to themselves and their sexual desire.

This became evident when another excellent female poet of the generation of the 80's published an extraordinary volume which did not refer to sex. Although the critics didn't dare grade her as a bad poet, in many cases they recognized her talent, but there were, of course, those who registered surprise at her lack of "ardour" and "passion" and insinuated that perhaps she was a lesbian, trying in this way to disqualify her. Carmen herself had trouble with "local chauvinism" after the publication of her book, as many literary people thought that after writing what was known as erotic poetry, it was apparent that she should sleep with them. What became clear to me then was that, contrary to what they said, for the literary critics, literature did have sex (but in the wrong sense).

But independently from the vision of the critics that syntomatically applauded the erotic quality of women's poetry of the eighties in Peru, in some cases calling it "audacious and sincere" (to my way of thinking to disqualify it), it is certain that in the 80's and especially in the second half of the decade, a number of poets appeared in the Peruvian literary world. So it is that male poets have been blocked out by the force of a good-sized contingent of women poets. It is as though after centuries of silence, they have taken over the word and have had to give testimony to the generations of women who suffered worse oppression. Because in the poetry of women of Peru today, as well as revindicating their own sexuality, you can hear a scream of the desire to be free of oppression.

I will just read a short poem of a young poet called Mariela Dreyfus in which one can appreciate the motivations and themes of the current poetic stream of women:

Descender las escaleras del hotel
y que las cosas vuelvan a su antiguo espesor.
Este placer ya ha sido pagado:
todo es dinero todo se vuelve papel moneda
el goce es dejado sobre sabanas prestadas.

Fente al espejo de la entrada
aliso mis cabellos/ acamodo mis senos

al lado de mi muchacho
timido como siempre en el primer abrazo.

El regreso a casa es solitario
y debo esconder mis pasos,
el olor que sorprenda a mi madre
mil voces violada y todavia virgen.
(Del libro "Memorias de Electra" de M. Dreyfus)

POST COITUM

Descend the stairs of the hotel
and things go back to their old thickness.
This pleasure has already been paid for:
all is money all turns into paper money
the delight is left on borrowed sheets.

In front of the mirror in the entrance
I smooth my hair, tuck in my breasts
beside my young man
timid as always in the first embrace.

The return home is solitary
and I should hide my steps,
the smell will surprise my mother
a thousand times raped and still a virgin.
(from the book "Memories of Electra" of M. Dreyfus).

Like Mariela Dreyfus, there are many young poets who, in my opinion, follow the path marked out by Maria Emilia Cornejo and Carmen Olle. Quoting again from Rosina Valcarcel when she refers to the poetry of the 80's, I agree that:

"the abuse of lyricisms of the poet is not a consequence that is free from the environment. On the contrary, the writer of the 80's in Peru swells up rebellious, naked, against all types of violence. Her triple and complex condition of Peruvian, poet and woman, projects her into the community. Intuition, reflection, passion, shamelessness, craziness are mixed up in a poetic discourse that offers unique images and metaphors. The politicalness, the feminism, and the rupture of conservative schemes, make up a generational position."

However, it is not only the talent of so many poets that distinguishes this new current of Peruvian poetry. An action without precedence, recently recitals of exclusively women poets have been given. For a few years now, circles of women's poetry have been periodically organized in different parts of Lima and in general, the poet, although spontaneously, maintains contact with a group consciousness that was unthinkable before in Peru. The isolation

broken, and the possibilities of conversing about their own interests, exchanging information and mutually supporting personal quests, have achieved a sort of poetic flowering which is blossoming in that, now, women are those who are innovating and enriching our national poetry.

prose

This has not yet happened with our prose, although many women are now writing almost clandestinely due to the difficulties of publishing, but even more so due to the lack of incentives, as they have not formed nuclei as the poets have done - if only in a casual and spontaneous way. Very few prose writers have published, although there are a few comforting exceptions: Marcela Romero, Laura Riesco and Luci Fox in the United States, or the young Aida Balta who in a period of two years has published two novels. The existence of literary contests in our medium in which numerous women writers participate, makes us think that in the coming years Peruvian narrative by women will be enriched with important work.

The tradition of women narrators in Peru, comes from the beginnings of this century and the end of the last, when intellectuals - curiously almost all widows - established the famous literary soirees where they met to converse about politics, education and culture. With the disappearance of these meetings, literary writing by women suffered considerably. Although it was a woman, Clorinda Matto de Turner, who initiated the indigenous novel in our country.

Thus, together with the rebirth of the feminist movement, access to spaces such as the Universities where women could meet and stimulate their creative work, have been fundamental for the beginning of a new literary current in Peru which has only just begun and promises to produce important works.

difficulties

Paradoxically, together with this surge of creativity of women that we have mentioned, great difficulties exist for the writers of our country. Peru, a country of 20 million inhabitants with a 15% rate of illiteracy and an economic situation which is daily more precarious, is a pluricultural, dispersed and segregated country, where the State has no cultural policy. These characteristics of Peru determine that the culture is the domain of an elite of middle-class intellectuals. Printed books rarely pass a thousand copies and, in the case of poetry, the average is five-hundred, making the cost of books so high that they become luxury items, inaccessible to the majority of Peruvians.

The high cost of paper, because of a monopoly held by the State, has caused an absence of a publishing industry in Peru. Faced with this situation, it is almost impossible to find a publisher and even with luck, young writers don't receive payment for their writing. In the majority of cases they have to fund their own publications, taking on the distribution and sales of their own books. If to this, we add the fact that almost all women who write don't have financial resources, and have to work at other low-paying jobs to survive, taking away time from writing, we have to accept what a great Peruvian thinker, Jose Carlos Mariategui, said a number of years ago: In Peru, literature is "heroic creation" and we would add, even more so if it is written by women.

OF LESBIANISM

by

Kishwar Naheed

[translated from Urdu by Saheban ~]

[Kishwar Naheed is a poet, writer, single parent and a civil servant. She has suffered intolerable multiple oppression for her sin of surviving in a man's world.

Lesbianism is a clandestine sexual practice in Pakistan, which is largely taken by women and men as an unwanted but necessary alternative to dominant heterosexual milieu, and not as a woman's right to her sexual expression. Consequently, lesbian relationships suffer from extreme forms of secrecy, guilt, hopelessness, and oppression.

It is crucial that lesbian expression be validated relieving unnecessary stress and oppression of lesbian women in the country. We recognize this article as one first step towards that goal. We also hope that this article might help to demonstrate the possible level of oppression that lesbians might be suffering and to bring support and understanding of their objective situation. We also need to recognize that writing and publishing this article in Pakistan is an act that can leave any woman open to the worst character assassination and vindictive reactions from the religious social milieu as well as the government in power.

Diva appreciates and respects the courage displayed by the writer of this article.

"OF LESBIANISM" is taken from Kishwar Naheed's newly published book "Come Back Africa" ["AJAO AFRICA", Urdu, Sang-e-Meel Publications, Lahore, Pakistan, 1987. Price: Rs. 50, Canadian \$3.50 approximately). This book is based on Naheed's experiences and thoughts while she was participating in the Nairobi Conference of 1980.]

The day before the Conference, there were headlines in Nairobi Newspapers:

"Lesbians refused permission to attend Conference".

"100 Lesbian delegates barred from entering Conference Hall".

Next day, a press conference was happening on the lawn. The place was full of big posters and pamphlets. Some were listening seriously, some with sarcasm. All these reactions were reactions of women because wherever one could see there were women, women and women. A few men that one could see here and there did not seem concerned either way.

The protest proved to be effective and the organizers of the Conference allowed all women to participate and present their viewpoint. The issues, that were not included in the official agenda, could be discussed out on the lawn or in the "Peace tent".

Lesbians chose the lawn. From that time onwards there used to be a mob on the lawn; photographers, t.v. cameramen, reporters, women coming from various countries and oldish men. Lesbian women would express their ideas with seriousness and strength and no amount of sarcasm was enough to obliterate their sensitivity towards this issue.

I was coming from a society where I had seen women, for example, young girls and their women teachers in schools expressing sexuality through laughter and the way they would look at each other. I had seen women sliding hands on women with an excuse of praising each others clothes. I had seen women in isolation of their homes, getting old awaiting their men, expressing their sexual urges in secrecy.

All these things were forgotten in the memories of childhood and youth because the life brought me face to face with man. The society taught me to draw all strength, all problems and all enjoyment from this one source. Trying to do this gave me such pain and humiliation that the one-ness of my own self was lost in the process.

Now, when I heard this viewpoint I felt a strong urge to understand it. There were questions in my mind; is it that the violence of male sexual behaviour is scaring women away? Is it that it constitutes a defeatist attitude on part of women? Is it not against nature?

These questions had come to my mind before as well. I was visiting USA and had met American lesbians. But at that time my attitude was not that of attempting to understand. Instead I was not validating this expression as a right of women or an issue to be fought for, but was taking the impressions of lesbianism that suited me. This attitude in me was strengthened by one other important woman. And that woman was Simone De Bouvoir. In the course of translating her book "The Second Sex" in Urdu, the issue of lesbianism was for me, more than marginalized.

But now I saw participants of the conference taking this issue with seriousness and I also heard that Lesbianism was taken as a symbol of the emancipation of women. I saw countless women in agreement on these points, and I thought, if so many women are coming together on this question it cannot be madness. There must be more to it. I decided, for the first time, to understand the issue.

The process of understanding started earlier than I had anticipated. I was asked by women from South Africa to read poems in their meeting. I read one poem, then another. When I was returning to my seat I saw that it had been taken. I was looking for some place to sit when some women pulled me down and created space for me on the floor. One woman kissed me on the cheek and the other gave me a pamphlet. The first one said,

"Write something on us, send something for our paper".

I smiled and the other woman took my hand in hers. Her hand was soft and warm.

I was never interested in having 'buddies' kind of relationship with women. In terms of friendship, whether with men or women, the only thing that remained crucial for me was

mental equation. The gender was never paramount in itself in this particular context. But on a very personal level, the relationship with man, right from the teachings of "Bahashti Zevar" (a religious guide determining women's role vis-a-vis men) to the thoughts of Simone De Bouvoir, the man took precedence.

This is beside the point that how this concept of precedence of man's relationship was full of pain and humiliation and how I was forced often to question the validity of it. I saw relationships becoming a precarious balance of hatred, and remained silent. I experienced sex as the mating of useless pieces of raw meat, and remained silent. I saw life becoming devoid of all life; I saw life devoid of all dialogue while surviving only on physical necessity, and remained silent.

But, today, the same moribund life had felt the warmth of a hand going deep into its core. Maybe, this woman uses some lotions or creams specially made to enhance and preserve the warmth of love in her touch. Or maybe, her hands were never used to operating in difficult situations; never cleaned dishes with soap, never burnt her hands with bleach while washing clothes, her hands never were hardened with the continuous use of broom; never burnt them while cooking; never received cuts while peeling vegetables, never were pinched with needles while sewing.

All these things may or may not be true. But even if these are true how can there be this warmth, this softness of feeling, this sensitivity in those hands?

I was married 25 years ago. I have been meeting men for 25 years. I have been shaking or touching hands for 25 years. Why, I never felt the same way before? I shook hands with rich and powerful men and women. Women who never had to stoop to housework or any work that could harden their hands; men whose power could make or break the careers of other people. Why? I never felt the softness in any of those hands.

I, who had learnt to take my restlessness as "childish impulses" was now analyzing my life in a different light. I asked her name.

"Lina"

Country?

"Caribbean Island: Will you write for us?"

The same question. But I was in my own dilemma of questioning the concepts and practices of my past.

"Yes" the word involuntarily slipped out. "Tell me, why do you hate men?"

"Hate men? - we do not hate men. Man does not need woman anymore. He only needs her to satisfy his ego, not to reach any state of sensitivity or love".

"Why not? All men love women, they marry them, they act up to them. How can you say that? Why do you say that man does not need woman? I don't believe you" I was exasperated and had to shout what I had been taught and had lived by.

She took my hand, caressed my hair and kissed me on my cheek with a lightness that was alien to me.

"In our society, a 13-year old boy has to prove his 'manhood' with a woman. You might have experienced that in your society"

"No, in our society manhood is proven in secrecy. Those maid servants, those women who bring milk, those women who clean - those are the ones. Those are the ones who serve

to experiment on. They are from a lower status, in fact no status at all, they are to be used for the proof of manhood. If they cry out loud they can be put in jail, or in police station, or sometimes are killed for speaking against 'respectable' men."

"But in our society" Christina said "by the time they are ready to get married, the excitement of a man-woman relationship has already evaporated. Now, man, to extract excitement needs more. May be, torturing woman is one of the ways. Man is taking more and more 'un-natural' ways of having sex with women".

"Listen, what's your name? But your name is the same as mine, listen Kishwar Naheed, not me, Lina, Christina, Mira, Gazada, all of them - they have come out of the oppressive circle - now man is not a determining factor in their lives. But how come, why - ? Nature, growing up - "

"O'shit - what are these? All man's interpretations. From psychology to religion whatever was written - was written by man. He wrote what he wanted. Philosophy or history, psychology or biology, universe, or geography - everything is defined by man according to his interests, woman learnt it, acted upon it and became a puppet of his ideas and definitions".

"But all historical evidence show that there are these two people, man and women. They are two parts of a whole that want to come together again. Seeking each other out".

"So, then women who are forcibly married off, who are sold every night, who become sex symbols? Is this what comes out of this "coming together of a whole" Lina was restless with anger, she stretched out on the grass. Gazada tried to calm her down with her gentle touch. Then turned towards me and said,

"Your poems are lies. Mentally, you are a slave of man and your psychology is that of a slave".

"As for me, I am sick of supremacy of man and oppression suffered by women through that. But personally, I don't like the concept of 'self-help' in terms of my own sexual needs. I feel I have to fight on so many different fronts in my country. This front doesn't seem to be the one to be fought over there, at this particular time. I feel if progressive women took an open stand on lesbianism it might become more dangerous for them, as well it can work to isolate the women of conservative groupings and families. Though, I know that the segregation of women in our society has been a factor whereby lesbianism has been developing as a need. And no one can negate that".

"So, (your society) accepts it as a deviation but not as a right". Christina said laughingly "Let's go sit in my room. We can talk at length. Why, are you afraid?"

"Of course, I will come" I said louder than I would normally speak. I hated the dishonesty of my words and the fear in my voice.

The room was untidy. A beautiful bunch of carnations was on a table. All four beds in the room were huddled together and one could not divide the pillows and blankets as being in use by four different people.

I stretched myself on one of the beds, displaying bravado. Christina put her head on my chest. I was afraid. Christina felt the fear coming out of me. She laughed softly.

"Lesbian women are not like horny men. Why are you so tense?" She tenderly took my arms and put them in a relaxing and more 'natural' position. My tongue became dry, but I

put a broad smile on my lips in order to hide my fear. She softly pushed my hair back from my forehead, lined my eyebrows, and touched my face and I felt my tenseness leaving me. "Did a man ever try to find anything but sex in your face?"

I could not immediately respond. I had a lot of practice in the art of telling lies but I could not take advantage of it and had to answer in the negative.

She went to my feet and massaged lightly, my stretched muscles. I felt relaxed but this feeling soon became heaviness in my soul, I suddenly became irritated with the conflict in me.

"Don't try to impress me. Don't make me emotional. Don't bring out the thirst in me". Christina kissed me with speed of light, stood up and said "So you are afraid of touch. A man does not even give it a thought to find and communicate with feelings hidden in a woman's body. All he wants is to become free of his own obsession. Men can go as far as to attack a woman to get this".

"But, nature, biology, action - interaction - these are there too, how can you change that?"

"O god" Lina dropped herself on the floor". You are speaking the language of your mother. Why did you not learn the language of your own feelings? Listen a new feeling needs new expression, new words and new language. As for biology - how can we say that the definition that a male-dominated society gave to it, is actually the law of nature? How is it possible? For example, the society impressed upon woman that her only purpose in life is to become a mother, the woman lived by that, but was it a true description of the person of a woman? The society said, woman is the basis of all that is evil and she is the basis of all discontent. Woman immediately pronounced herself guilty. The society said, woman is a mountain of patience, and women excelled in bearing torture. The society said a woman should look pretty, the woman left all major decisions to man and busied herself in looking pretty. And now you are repeating what the same society told you to say".

"Okay" I tried to change the subject" Did you ever have relations with men?"

"I am married, I have a son. But I find lesbianism natural and being a wife as most unnatural. Because I have little freedom of expression in ideas, in language, in expressions, in thoughts and in sexual behaviour. You have to suppress your person at all levels; you have to live in oppression of your life, soul and sexual expression to live as a wife. This is not natural".

"All right - what do you want? All women unite and what? How do you fit lesbianism in that?" I was at the edge of my resistance.

"Look, all we want is peace - for women, men and children. We want respect and value of feeling. We want to be free of social values whereby a woman exists always as an object".

"But listen, women who left men, did not fare well and took lesbianism only as an alternative. These are the women who eloped, who became women 'on the street'".

"But women and all men have to accept that woman is not there just to relieve man or to serve him in every way. As for elopement, in the whole world, men and boys elope more than women or girl do. They are the ones who become violent, abusive, alcoholic, and they are the ones who continue to oppress women with various methods. When I go to my home, I want love, not guilt or looks of suspicion. An eye that looks at my labour with suspicion and degradation, I will tear it out of its socket".

"That is true. Women never think in these terms. And the whole society, man, father, son, religion, government - everyone tries to teach women values. As if man is never devoid of those. If a woman goes out of home, she is a woman of bad character, if a man goes out of home, it is his necessity".

"Now, let us talk in the context of your exploitative system."

"How?"

"A man forces a woman to submission if he wants to relieve himself. He rapes, he coerces, he reduces. Did you hear of this in lesbian relationships?"

"That is because, like Nietzsche said, man is trained to participate in wars, and woman is there to take care of the warrior and make him happy".

"O, God - ! you are basically not a conservative woman but are unable to break the chains of the philosophy that you were brought up with. A necessary condition of loving a man is that you surrender your identity. You have to become a subsidiary of him. That is what he wants and that is what society wants. But you have a relationship with a woman, you don't need to surrender your identity. You eliminate the threat of loneliness and fulfill the necessity of becoming a 'whole'. A lesbian woman knows the intensity of love and respects the identity of her lover. Both can become a 'whole' but still preserve their separate identities. This way, both can develop their instincts and persons. And also, love and passion is the basis to sustain your existence at an emotional level. Not just to give birth to children. Also, a woman is sexually more potent if she gives birth to less children".

"I don't accept all this, whether its Mary Daly or any other writer who is presenting lesbianism as a philosophy".

"Okay, lets talk about your Adrian Rich, she herself is a lesbian now. She has written a book on lesbianism about how in the 19th and 20th century women were cruelly punished for practicing lesbianism. But women, who were humiliated by men, took this option and their personal experience told them how it is important to have this kind of relationship in order to protect the feelings of mutual respect and love. Within a woman, a garden of happiness and love blooms after coming into a loving relationship with another woman.

"And listen, when I listen to these big thinkers say sentences like "there is a woman behind every great man", I feel sick. Why can't they say that "every great woman makes a man great" instead? And societies develop expertise in keeping women subservient to men. It uses all disciplines of art or science to achieve this end.

"And also, if women are not subjected to the needs of men, many ills might be eliminated. For example, prostitution, rape, murder, sexual assault, purdah. Look how many centuries have gone by where the existence of woman had been geared towards the needs of men - what did she accomplish or what did the society accomplish?"

We had to then interrupt this discussion because the organizers were announcing the next session of the Conference. We took our papers and went to our assignments.

[This is a response to the article published in the Forum of the first issue of Diva.]

EQUAL BEFORE ALLAH?

by

NUDRAT NIAZI

The article that was presented in Forum is a classic example of co-optation of women for the sole benefit of Islamic religion.

When I started reading the article, it seemed as if here we had found a woman (at last) who is honestly attempting to discover the status of Muslim women in relation to Islam. The narrative was intense, argumentative and starkly truthful (see pages 18-20, especially passages where emphasis is added). But, then it suddenly turned and went (via Hadith) to "The Jewish and Christian View of Creation".

Now, I do not mind a tiny bit if someone wants to discuss Jewish and/or Christian view of creation to determine that man and woman are not portrayed in them as to having been created equal. What I do mind is the situation where someone would use these to shift responsibility of discrimination of women from Islam absolutely and totally.

Not only that the writer of this article shifted this responsibility from Islam, she also, most conveniently, took the whole discussion and tried to base it on the 'theory of creation' and 'how women need to study Islam'. I say 'conveniently' because then she did not have to deal with the open discrimination and actual contempt, that is apparent in the 'Holy' Quran. She could just blame everything on the inadequacy of Hadith and negative influences of Judaism and Christianity on the Muslim theory of creation. And that is exactly what she did.

No, in fact, she did more than that. She, first, most philosophically hid the discrimination and contempt of women in Quran. And then she went on to advise women to read Quran carefully and to fight 'ahadith' but not Quran. And never Quran.

Because that is where our vested interests are hung. And that is something that we cannot put in jeopardy. We will not do it even at the expense of anyone's scholarly integrity; we will not do it even if we are misleading and dishonest in our discourse.

Why? Did my friend, the religious scholar, not find time to read the Quran? Did my friend not understand simple words like these:

"Your women are a tilth for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will".

("Holy Quran" (11,223) in "The Cow" M. Pickthall, P.38, Taj Co. Ltd. Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi)

"Marry of the women, who seem good to you two or three or four, and if ye cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (the captives) that your right hand possess. Thus it is more likely that you will not do injustice".

(‘Holy Quran’ in "The Women’ IV, No.3, M. Pickthal, P.82.)

"Men are incharge of women because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)".

(‘Holy Quran’, 4/34, IV Women, 34. Pickthal) and then

"....good women are the obedient of men".

(Ibid).

And did our friend not consider the laws that are enacted in Pakistan in recent years? Oh no, but those laws are not according to the Quran. In fact, those are based on the wrongful interpretation of Islam. Otherwise - Islam has given commendable status to women..... etc., etc. We are all sickeningly familiar with this argument.

What irony? Innumerable women are being flogged, humiliated and disgraced in Pakistan but our women leaders, scholars and politicians are busy trying to justify Islam and shift-all blame from it to whatever they can find around them.

Zia’s government? Oh, yes, they are the ones who are mis-interpreting Quran otherwise Quran has given commendable status -..... etc., etc. But is it true?

The truth is that the only thing the General and his government did was to become serious about Islam. Otherwise, isn’t Islam, like all living religions of the world, based on inhuman values? Especially in relation to women, and, to less privileged sections of the population? What equality? Like in "*men are incharge of women*", like, "*you can marry two, three or four*", like "*or (the captives) that your right hand possess. Thus it is more likely that you will not do injustice*".

There are hundreds of such ideas of ‘equality’ of man and woman in our very Holy Quran. But we don’t want to hear them so, then we turn away and do our best/worst to justify and hide and lie.

For what? For women? For Muslim women? For poor Muslim women? No, we do that to save the precious ass of Islam. Because it saves ours.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Events

Oslo, Norway

NORDIC FORUM FOR WOMEN

Nordic Council of Ministers have taken the initiative to organise a Nordic Forum for Women commencing on the 30th of July lasting until the 7th August, 88.

The Forum would discuss important issues like women at work, women and research, laps and immigrant women's legal as well as socio-economic situation. More than 7000 women are expected to participate in this Forum.

It is assumed by many that the Nordic societies are "ideal" social-democratic societies where socio-economic contradictions are not as sharp as for example in Britain or in the United States. Black women are living in the Nordic countries for more than two decades now. They are organized within the national as well as the cross national organizations. Prevailing racism within the Nordic societies and the stereotype branding of women from the so-called 'Third World' as passive, underdeveloped and suppressed creatures have made their living conditions unbearable. Black women are discriminated in the labour market not just because they are women but also because they are immigrants and, in addition, Black.

Their legal status is dependent on their spouse, ie. if a woman enters, for example, Norway to join her spouse, she has to prove for three years that she is a faithful wife before she can apply for a residence permit on her own. If her relationship with her husband breaks within three years she is not allowed the separation period and is threatened deportation. This is one of the many discriminatory laws against immigrant women which are being practice in the Nordic countries.

Immigrant and refugee women, most of them women of colour, will illustrate their legal as well as socio-economic conditions during the Nordic Women's Forum.

31st July will focus on womens present legal situation while during the week there will be workshops on the issues like Racism and Integration. Black women Artists in the Nordic countries will have art exhibitions, women in the media exhibitions and different cultural programmes.

For more information contact:

Fakhra Salimi

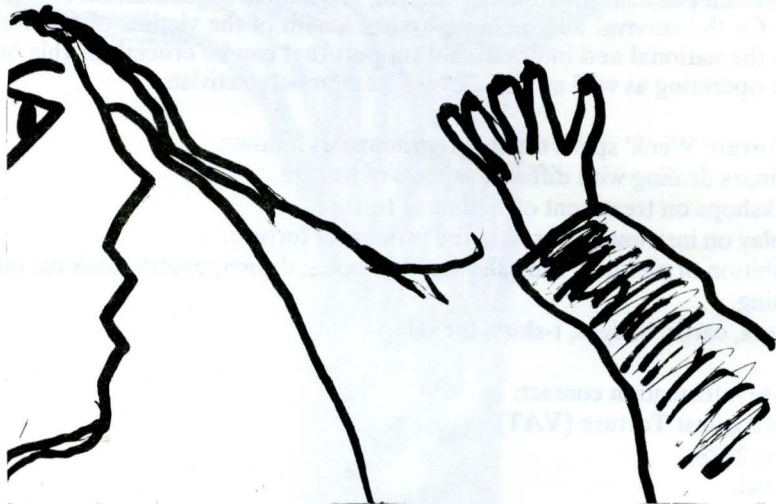
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lei 942

0674 Oslo-6

Norway

Phone: (02) 302566



ANTI-TORTURE WEEK

An "Anti-Torture Week is to take place in September 1988, in Pakistan.

Voice Against Torture (VAT) is a newly formed interdisciplinary research forum for struggle against all forms of torture: and for the treatment and rehabilitation of victims of torture.

The organizers felt the necessity of such a forum in view of the fact that torture is coming out to be a serious problem in Pakistan. In fact, it is experienced now as an institution because "in the name of religion, the state has tried to provide moral and ethical basis for torture".

VAT describes torture in one of their pamphlets, as "that extreme and deliberate form of violence inflicted upon a victim who experiences it consciously and who has no control over its form or duration".

It continues to say "The despotic character of the socio-economic formation in our society uses torture as an essential instrument for its functioning.

"In everyday life starting from family, going up to schools, streets, bazaars, places of employment, mental hospitals, police stations, interrogation centres and prisons, we find innumerable examples of torture. Thus torture can be classified as domestic, social and political.

"None of these forms of torture can be justified. All forms of torture produce effects, so the victims of torture need measures to relieve these effects".

In the present political situation in Pakistan, this kind of organization could be taken as a necessity for the survival and mental/physical health of the victims of torture. Another necessity is the national and international support that can be crucial for this organization to continue operating as well as the safety of its members/activists.

'Anti-Torture Week' spells out its programme as follows:

1. Seminars dealing with difficult aspects of torture.
2. Workshops on treatment of victims of torture.
3. Display on instruments used in the process of torture.
4. Exhibition of pictures; slide shows; film shows; drama; poetry sessions; musical evening.
5. Posters, cards, badges, t-shirts for sale.

For more information contact:
Victims Against Torture (VAT)
P.O. Box 2428
Islamabad,
Pakistan

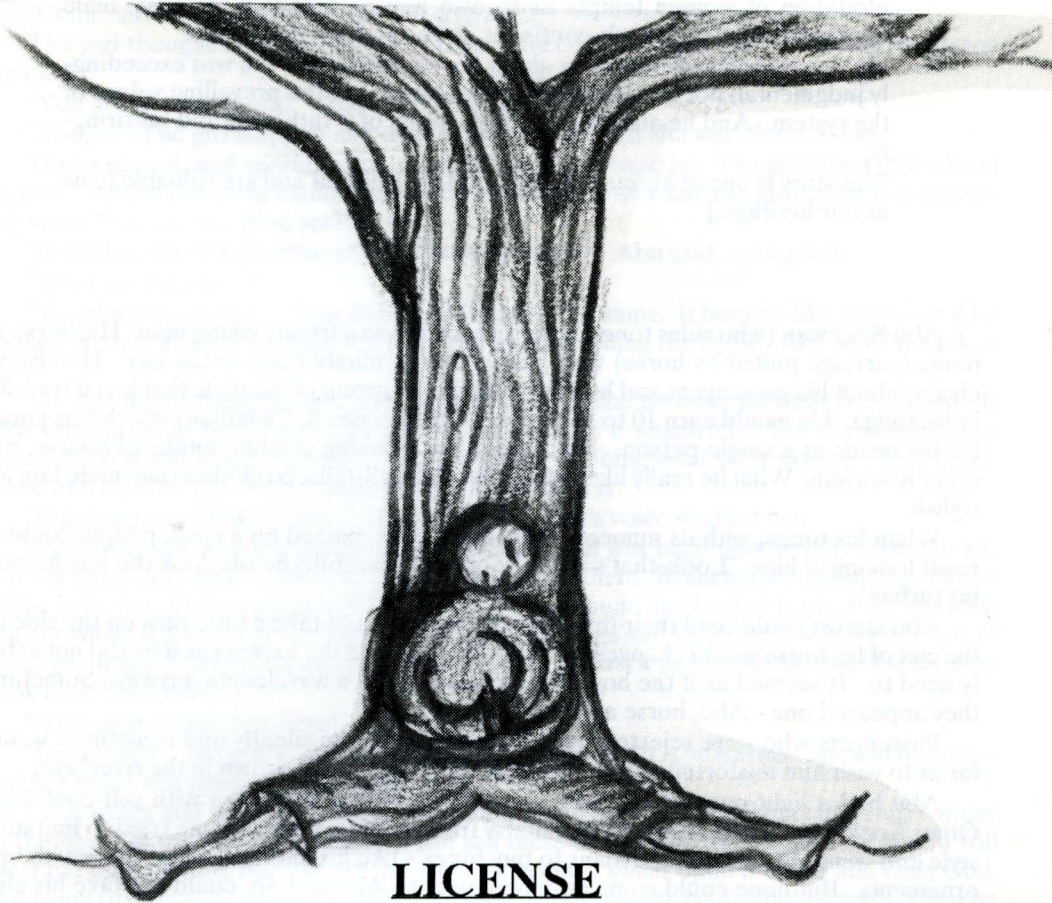
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LICENSE

by

Saadat Hassan Munto

Translated from Urdu by Saheban ~'

[Munto was part of Progressive Writers Movement of 1960's. Unlike most writers in the Movement, Munto came from lower middle class and had a perception markedly different from his contemporaries.]

One of the amazing things was the fact that unlike most writers in the tradition of Urdu literature, he refrained from creating an image of woman to suite the needs of a male culture, i.e. he did not romanticise woman. His sensitivity and recognition of various forms of sexual oppression and exploitation of women tempts us to own him as probably the first "male feminist" writer of the sub-continent, if we can term it that way.

He was also remarkably clear about the social system. He was exceedingly judgmental, not of individuals in his stories, but the prevailing values of the system. And he attacked various aspects of it ruthlessly and un-tiringly.

This story is one of his many stories that are relevant and are valuable to us as our heritage.]

.....

Abu Kochwan (who rides tonga as a profession) was a trendy young man. His horse and tonga (carriage pulled by horse) were, indisputably, number one in the city. He also was choosy about his passengers and had developed a set group of clientele that loved travelling in his tonga. He would earn 10 to 15 rupees (less than one \$, Canadian) which was enough for his needs as a single person. He did not like drinking alcohol, unlike of course, most other Kochwan. What he really liked was clean and well-tailored clothes that made him look stylish.

When his tonga, with its numerous tiny brass bells, passed on a road, people could not resist looking at him: "Look, that's Abu. Look how gracefully he sits, look the way he wears his turban".

Abu almost could read their thoughts. His neck would take a little turn on the side and the gait of his horse would change instinctively. Abu held the harness as if he did not actually need to. It seemed as if the horse apprehended Abu's wavelength anyway. Sometimes, they appeared one - Abu, horse and tonga.

Passengers who were rejected by him would abuse him silently and sometimes went as far as to wish him misfortune, like: "May his tonga and horse drown in the river" etc.

Abu had a light moustache and a constant half-smile brimming with self-confidence. Other Kochwan suffered twinges of jealousy from looking at him. Some tried to imitate his style and went as far as to take loans to buy tonga's like his and decorated them with brass ornaments. But none could come anywhere near to Abu and, so, could not take his clientele away from him.

One hot afternoon, Abu was taking a nap in his tonga which was parked under a tree. He heard something, opened his eyes and saw a woman standing by the bump. Abu looked at her for a moment. Her presence went straight to his heart. She was a girl of 16 or 17 years. Thin but strong, darkish brown but healthy complexion. She was wearing tiny silver earrings. Her black hair was parted from the centre, straight nose and a small mole on the tip, long, loose Kurta, blue 'lacha' (toe ring), and a 'chadar' covering her head.

"What will you take for 'tation (station), brother?"

"Nothing" Abu was smiling.

"What will you take for the 'tation?" Girl's colour became reddish brown.

"What will I take from you, Fortunate One? Come sit in the tonga". He said lovingly.

"What are you talking about?" the girl instinctively became defensive and tried to cover her already covered bosom.

"Come, sit. I will take what you will give me".

The girl thought for a moment and then climbed onto the tonga, "Take me to 'tation quickly".

"You are in a hurry, eh?" Abu looked back at her.

"You,---" The girl stopped and decided not to say what she was about to say.

Tonga moved, and continued to travel. Many roads went by. The girl was a little afraid by now. Abu was feeling exhilarated. When it became very late the girl asked in a quivering voice " 'tation isn't here yet?"

"It will be, our 'tation is the same - yours and mine". Abu said, eyeing her.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't understand even this? Our 'tation is the same. It became like this when Abu looked at you. I swear on your life that your slave is telling the truth" Abu looked back at her.

The girl instinctively covered her head. It seemed she understood what Abu meant. It also was apparent from her face that she did not take it negatively. But she was in deep thought. Wrestling in her mind if Abu is capable of doing what he is saying. He is handsome and stylish - but did he know what commitment is?

"What are you thinking, my Fortunate One?" Abu's voice startled her.

The horse was walking medium pace, a slight chill was beginning to permeate the air, lines of huge trees around the road were running past them. Branches were dancing. Music of the bells was adding sound to it. Abu would turn around and look at her as if he was kissing her with his eyes. After a while he stopped the tonga and fastened it with an iron bar of a hedge, jumped down and came to sit with her in the back seat. She did not object. Abu took both her hands.

"Give your hands into mine".

"Leave them" the girl said but the next instant she was in Abu's arms. She did not resist but her heart was jumping like a caged bird.

"This tonga and horse were more important to me than anything in my life - but I swear in the name of the Saint of the 11th, I will sell these and buy golden bangles for you. I will wear old used clothes, but you will live like a princess. I swear upon the One and Only God, this is my first love. If you do not become mine I'll slit my throat in front of you". Then he slowly released her from his embrace. "I don't know what's happening to me - come I'll take you to the 'tation".

"No, now you have touched me" The girl said slowly.

"Please, forgive me" Abu's neck dropped with shame "I committed a mistake".

"Can you live by this 'mistake'?" The girl's voice challenged him as if someone had challenged him to a race with his tonga. His neck straightened, his eyes were shining "Fortunate One! Abu will give you his life".

"Then, here is my hand" The girl put her hand forward.

Abu held it with strength "I swear on my youth - Abu is your slave".

Next day Abu and the girl contracted a religious marriage. The girl was a shoe-maker of District Gujrat, her name was Inayat alias Naytti. She came to this city with her relatives, who that day were waiting for her on the station to go back when she had met Abu. They had crossed all stages of love in moments. They were both ecstatically happy.

Abu did not sell his tonga and horse for her bangles but he bought gold earrings and a lot of beautiful silken clothes with his savings.

When Naytti would appear wearing silk lacha, Abu's heart would jump and dance uncontrollably. "I swear upon the Saint of Panj-tan Pak, there is no one as beautiful as you" he would say that and would hug her close to his heart. "You rule my heart".

Both were drunk with juices of youth. They would sing, laugh and roam endlessly around. One month passed, suddenly one day the police arrested Abu and Naytti. Abu was convicted for abduction. Naytti tried to make it clear that they were together with her consent but the court pronounced two-years imprisonment to Abu because their marriage was not validated by their families so it was not taken as a lawful marriage bond. Naytti cried endlessly and could only say this: "I will never go back to my parents. I will wait for you here at our home".

"Live a long life" Abu said reassuringly and gratefully "I have given the tonga and horse to Dina - he will pay you its rent everyday".

Naytti's parents tried their best but she did not go with them. Ultimately, they left her and Naytti started to live alone. Dina would come everyday and give her five rupees which were enough for her expenses.

She would go to the jail and meet Abu once every week which was insufficient time for both of them. Naytti, in order to provide small comforts to Abu, would spend her savings to bribe the petty jail officials.

At one meeting, Abu noticed that her ears were empty. "Where are your gold earrings?"

Naytti smiled and while looking at the guard, said, "I lost them somewhere".

"Don't spend so much money on me". He was angry "I am okay here".

Naytti did not say anything. Their meeting time had finished, she left him smilingly. But when she arrived home, she cried ever so bitterly. She had noticed how every meeting Abu appeared weaker than before. This time she could hardly recognize him. He probably had lost half his weight.

Naytti thought perhaps it was staying in jail and being away from her that's doing it to him. What she did not know is that Abu had tuberculosis which was passed to him from his father. Abu's father was even heavier and taller than him but t.b. had taken him to his grave within a few years. Abu's elder brother also died in his youth for the same reason.

Abu himself wasn't aware of it until he was sent to the jail hospital. He was living his last moments when he said to Naytti "If I knew I was to die so soon, I swear on the One and Only God, I would not have married you - . It is cruelty to you. Forgive me. And listen, I have one thing that I want you to have, my tonga and horse. Take care of Channi, my horse, put your hand on his head and tell him "Abu sent his love".

Abu died. Everything that Naytti had within her died. But she was a brave woman. She was capable of taking it with grace. She would stay at home all day. In the evening Dina

would come and console her. He often said "Don't worry, Bhabbi (sister in-law). One cannot do much against Allah. Abu was my brother. By God, I will do what I can".

Naytti took his words as consolation of a well-wisher. But as the period allocated for her widowhood came to an end Dina came and proposed to her. Naytti wanted to push him out of her house, she felt so deceived but she controlled herself and said "Brother! I don't want to get married".

Dina's attitude changed abruptly. He used to bring Rs. 5 every evening without fail. Now, he would sometimes bring four, or three. His excuse was "business isn't going well". Then he would not come for two or even three days. Excuse would be that the horse was sick or that tonga needed repair of this part or that. This continued for a while till Naytti could not take it anymore, so, one day she said to him.

"Brother Dina! Please do not take this burden anymore. I want to take my tonga and horse back".

He gave it back after quite a struggle. Naytti handed it over to Majha, who was also a friend of Abu's. He, after a few days, also proposed to her. Naytti refused and his attitude changed as well.

Naytti took tonga and horse from him and gave it to a stranger. He crossed the limits. One evening he came to pay the rent, he was drunk, and tried to rape Naytti. She fought him back and shunned him from the job.

Eight or ten days passed. Tonga and horse were standing idle. She had to pay the horse's feed as well as the rent of the stable. Naytti was thinking hard. What should she do? One would propose to her, other would try to rape her. Another would keep her rent money. If she would go out people would stare at her - one night her neighbor climbed the wall and tried to have sex with her. What should she do? She was going mad thinking of solutions to these problems.

One day the thought crossed her mind to start driving her tonga herself. "Why not? I can do it". She would drive the tonga every time she and Abu would go around on his time off. She knew the roads in the city well. "But what will people say?" But her mind retorted, "Why not? Don't women work? Women pick and deliver coal, they go to offices, some work at home - everyone has to earn to fill their stomach".

Naytti thought about it a few more days and decided she will ride. She had confidence in herself. That morning she went to the stable and started to prepare the tonga. All the Kochwan were taken aback. Some took it as a joke and laughed at her. Older ones told Naytti not to do it because its not done. But Naytti did not waver. She prepared the tonga, cleaned the brass ornaments, reassured the horse, And talking lovingly to Abu in her heart, she drove out of the stable. Kochwan were also amazed at the fact that Naytti rode as if she was thoroughly trained for it.

The city shook. A beautiful young woman was riding a tonga. Everyone was talking about it. People would hear it and then would stand by the road side waiting for when she would pass from that road.

In the beginning, male passengers would hesitate to ride in her tonga but then they overcame that and Naytti started to earn well. Naytti's tonga would not stand idle even for a

minute. She would get clear of one set of passengers and another would be waiting. Sometimes, the passengers would even fight about who would ride and that who had called for the tonga first.

When work increased Naytti fixed her hours - 7am to 12pm and then 2pm to 6pm. This routine proved to be comfortable. Chunny the horse, was also happy

Then, Naytti felt that some people would ride only to be near her; Would make her ride from one place to another just for the heck of it; Would tell dirty jokes to each other while sitting in the tonga. Sometimes, would say thing to each other that were meant for her. She started to feel that though she is not selling herself but that people are still finding ways to buy her. She also knew that all the male Kochwan of the city thought that she was a 'bad' woman and that they were against her.

But all these unpleasant and sometimes painful vibrations were not enough to make her restless. She was peaceful within her own person and felt good about herself.

One day, she was called by the committee of the city and the committee impounded her licence to ride the tonga. The reason they cited for this action was that a woman cannot ride a tonga.

"Sir, why can a woman not ride a tonga?" Naytti asked.

"Because she can't. Your licence has been impounded".

"Sir, impound my tonga and horse as well. But please do tell me why a woman can't ride a tonga. Women spin the wheels, women work in construction, women collect and sell coal, why can't I ride a tonga. I don't have any other skills and this tonga and horse are my husband's. Why can't I ride it? How will I earn my living? Sir, please have mercy on me. Why are you stopping me from working? What should I do? Tell me".

"Go and sit in the bazaar," the officer said "you will earn more than you do now".

These words fell on Naytti like lightening. The Naytti in her burnt.

"Okay - Sir" she said slowly and went.

She sold her tonga and horse, went to Abu's grave. She stood quietly for a moment, her eyes were dry as if after the rain the sunshine had sucked all dampness from the ground. Her tightly closed lips opened and she said to the grave -

"Abu! Your Naytti died today in the Committee Office".

She turned and went. Next day she filed her application and got the licence to practice prostitution.

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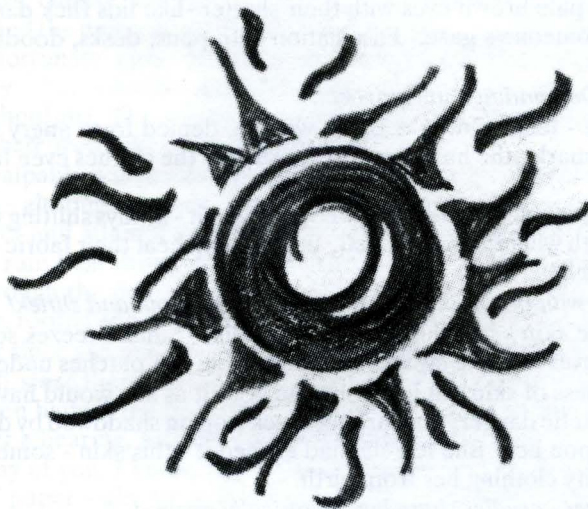
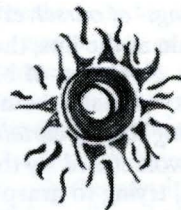
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**THE
TALL
RAINS**

by

MARLENE NOURBESE PHILIPS

*Les hautes Pluies, en marche sous l'Avril, les hautes Pluies en marche sous
le fouet comme un Ordre de Flagellants.*

*The tall Rains striding under April, the tall Rains striding under the whip like
an Order of Flagellants.*

Exil, St. John Perse

The rains, the demanding rains...of worship, of propitiation and...

Carefully, she placed the sheet of foolscap paper on the desk; she had finished reading,
now she waited...

...celebration - such rains that welcome, welcome the naked rush of stripped bodies...

Broad and flat, the face almost Simian in its aspect - a tight smile pulling at lips reluctant in their thinness; sharp, colourless and unmarked by any vestige of lipstick; back of her head a bun, little and tight as if the thin greying hair resented the scraping, bullying and pulling into its uncomfortable shape. Where the fat grey neck joined the spine, it humped.

offerings- of ourselves to this celebration of wetness...

As thin as the lips, the voice - soliciting question - rasps- someone drawing a nail across a grater. A unison of blank stares, subtle ripple of bodies shifting - discomfited, their owners try to make them less so - such was the only response.

Stinging singing curtains of dance in among the tall rains...

Malevolent and sly the pale brown eyes with their shutter -like lids flick dart slide over the class, trying to grasp someone's gaze. Fascination with pens, desks, doodles - no one looks up -

The rains! The rains! Demanding - unequivocal.

Large, shapeless, white - local white - a Black woman, denied forty angry times forty, lurks in history, leaves her mark - the hair, the nose, perhaps - the clothes even larger, more shapeless than she.

They hated her body - these clothes; they showed it, never fit - always shifting uneasy over the bulk, uncomfortable with what they contained. In the damp heat their fabric - always the cheapest - rumpled and clinked.

Buckets of heaven filled with downpour and the welcome of shout and shriek!

Pallid and untanned the skin - her skin was always moist. Small breezes soothe, cool, relieve the humidity, but never her; she sweats constantly - big wet patches under her arms.

Such a shocking whiteness of skin - in its rarity; she bore it as she would have a badge - hard won - in the face of genetic danger; that lurking Black woman shadowed by denial might have laid a heavier hand upon her. She felt she had earned it - this skin - something to be prized, a token of superiority clothing her from birth.

The intransigence of water - needles sharp hypodermically assured -

Between her and the girls the war was silent and savage - for their minds. She hadn't asked to teach them - she wouldn't if she had more of a choice. Starve or teach. But she would civilize them. Revenge! Did she consider it that?

Resistance. They knew, instinctively, this to be their path.

Guerilla tactics - neither side was above them, both actively seeking all opportunities - the subtle and not so subtle, the indirect and bold - to entrench.

Obstreperous and noise without end or beginning - waterfalls of rain...

A girl might just happen to shake out a fountain pen as she passed between rows of desks - spattering a dress or skirt; another would 'accidentally' knock over a pile of books on her feet as she passed by. Profuse apologies maintained the elaborate pretense; punishment: order-mark or detention, would only acknowledge they disliked - even hated her.

Immortality or obliteration - each year the girls attempted the first; each year success - for her at least - lay in the latter, as the washroom walls were painted over.

Rainy season of roof clatter rattle ping batter sting and sing - this season of hurried rains.

She had been with the school from its inception - almost: from private school for white and ever-so-lightly coloured girls, those from 'good' families, it had changed - almost overnight. Fearful angry unhappy, she had witnessed it; without a teaching certificate, silence - hers - was the only way to guarantee her job: teaching the brightest, often the blackest girls of the island. Their colour she could endure - just; their poverty she found insupportable.

She would never let them forget the honour their brains. - not money or status - had earned them. Exhortations were frequent and repetitive - all metaphorically white: salt of the earth, cream of the crop: to eat on the streets was bad, worse to talk to boys - at street corners inexcusable and beyond the school walls the hat must be worn at all times.

Heavy, clumsy, hot - blue navy serge, Napoleonesque and fatal to any hairstyle, the hat completed the uniform, set them apart, often sister against sister - oh, the envy it engendered in less 'fortunate' girls. White blouse, blue gored skirt, striped tie - all could be easily imitated by other schools - not so the hat; it distinguished St. Christopher's girls from every other school girl. The only limit to achievement was motivation - that was what the hat meant, so they had been told often enough

So palpable was her dislike, that day in the class-room of these newcomers - these poor-ass girls - although she would never think to use such a term, they could feel it splash them, wash over and attempt to drown them in its murky depth.

The rain beat down on the galvanized roof, its presence even more tangible for being seen through the dried coconut fronds that formed the walls of the classroom - a disused fountain, roofed and fronded - one of the coolest in the school, and home to the Upper Sixth.

Ever since she had begun reading, it had been raining - hard; it continued relentlessly.

'Well, since there are no comments, I will tell you what mine are' She raised the thin high voice even higher, the better to compete with the rain. The latter, so it seemed, refused to grant her a hearing, actively sought to drown out her voice.

'Many of you, I know, share the sentiments expressed in this essay.' She picked up the sheet of paper - almost as if she would have rather not. "Against such rains," she read, "umbrellas offer no protection, and only the expatriate would wear a raincoat." A tight example of a smile played around and across her lips as she finished reading the sentence. 'It shows some...' a slight pause, then reluctantly, 'intelligence - the writing is competent, but reveals a certain attitude that concerns us all here at St. Christopher's - ' she paused again, obviously for effect, 'your attitude to rain.' Without respite the rain roared on; she paused, cleared her throat, and threw her voice higher in opposition to the dull wet roar.

'In England, you know,' she had emphasized the word England, now she held herself more erect as she repeated, 'in England, no one ever stops what they're doing because of the rain.' She looked around expectantly - was she hoping to surprise, impress, shock perhaps? She got none of these responses. 'And more than that, they do *not* wait for the rain to stop before coming to school or going to work.'

Some girls now looked at her - blankly - as if they had never before heard the word England, did not know of what she spoke, this being one of their most effective weapons - pretended ignorance, even stupidity, knowing that she knew the exact opposite to be the case.

At its upper limits the voice rasped its harsh contrapuntal rhythm against the steady pour of the rain; its sound in unpleasant opposition to the heavy bulk of her figure which remained motionless, one hand, its plump fingers spread - resting on her desk. Such bulk deserved a heavier, more substantial voice.

'How do you think they were able to accomplish all that they have - the Empire, their navy?...' She answered her own question, 'Certainly not by staying at home until the rains are over.'

Thirsty pairs of black and brown eyes - possibly a blue or hazel pair, stared at her - implacable in their blankness. She licked her lips - quickly, the tongue flicking in and out snake-like in its movement. Mesmerized, the girls stared. 'It is because they work - rain or shine. You are not all lazy - although,' she isolated one or two girls by her looks, 'that can be a problem, but this practice of staying at home, or waiting. wherever you happen to be caught, when it begins to rain until its finished, has got to stop. It only contributes to bad habits.'

"A great force such as this demands respect-commitment or rejection," she red out loud from the essay, "indifference would be a sin." Rubbish!

Pens, desks, and doodles fascinated once again.

'I urge you to remember how fortunate you are to be here- this sort of attitude,' she pointed to the essay now lying on her desk, 'only makes my job harder. It is a well written essay, but because of its content -' between thumb and forefinger the foolscap sheet now hung - 'I can only give it an "F"'. The lesson is I hope clear.' She looked around the class: the already thin lips became a tight line bounded by two flecks of saliva at the corners of her mouth. No one met her gaze; she had won this round and they knew it.

Some years later, a young woman stood looking up at the flat implacable sky, unprepossessing in its greyness; low slung like some Bedouin tent but lacking the vivid colours and surrounding heat. She could, she felt, if she were to raise her arm, touch it. It had been - what now - three months since she had got here; it had rained everyday - well...almost. Over the last few weeks something, she could not at first quite identify it, had begun to gnaw at her, and at times she found herself thinking that there was something she ought to remember that she wasn't, or that she was forgetting something that she ought not to. With each rainfall, as with this one, it became more noticeable - sudden expected rushes of anger even rage.

The dream finally ended the amnesia, shaped and moulded the feelings and urges into something recognizable.

Then try as she might she could not forget...put it behind her - especially not now that the memory had come back so sharply and clearly. Every time she put up her umbrella, put on her raincoat and boots, went out to shop, work or classes, it came back: the image of that...the word bitch came to mind but it fell far short of the remembered image and her feelings. Images from dream and memory now became confused - were they not one and the same thing? Was it as awful as she had remembered it? The immediate surge of blood to her face told her that it was. Was it rain on her hands now, or had they broken out in sweat as they had that day her essay was read out loud? Closing her eyes at the memory, dream images of a snake headed woman surged up and before her mind's eye.

Two, maybe three girls had reached out to touch her - in sympathy - as she walked by to collect her essay: she had been so proud of it, and equally ashamed of the public humiliation. Their touch had been reassuring.

Her tears had become rain - in the dream - torrential rains that never ceased, and which flooded everything before them. The dream had named the feeling - grief, and now she grieved, as she never had before, for those days, even weeks after public disgrace - days of loss and bewilderment; she grieved, for the first time, for that girl who had felt cheated of something inestimable precious - a reality, or perhaps a perspective on some truth that related to her and her life, that was not acknowledged, let alone validated anywhere - particularly now at St. Christopher's. The rains, the tall rains...they had never had quite the same effect on her after that - her enjoyment always tinged with a little shame, sometimes plastered with the broad brush strokes of guilt at her former enjoyment.

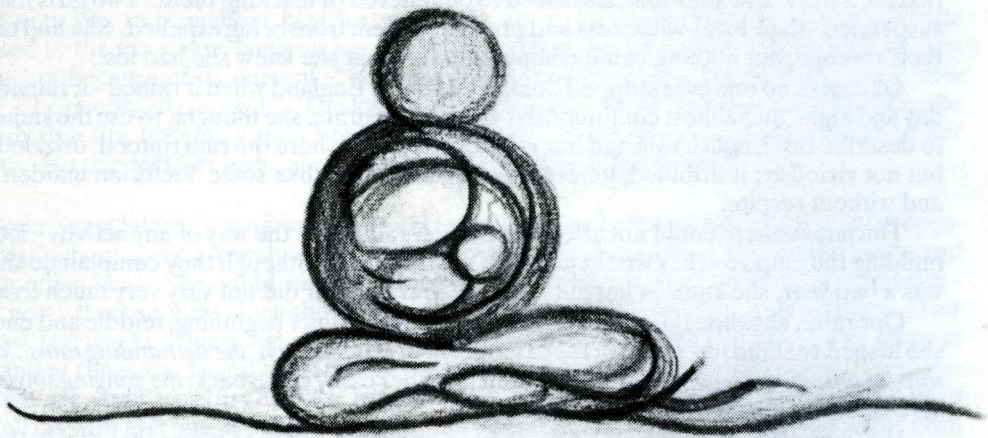
She could now, for the first time, give shape to and breathe life into this grief that she had never allowed herself to feel back then. Her friends had taken revenge on her behalf: they had rubbed the enemy's chair and desk with a stinging nettle called cowitch; that put her in bed for a week and after that, she asked to be relieved of teaching them. Two girls had been suspended - their local-whiteness had prevented them from being expelled. She had enjoyed their revenge, but nothing could compensate for what she knew she had lost.

Of course no one ever stopped doing anything in England when it rained - it rained every day and night, and almost continuously! It was inaccurate, she thought, to use the same word to describe this English rain and her rains of childhood: here the rain tiptoed, drizzled, spat, but not viciously; it dribbled, loitered, wept gently softly like some Victorian maiden aunt - and without respite.

The natives here could not afford to let their rain get in the way of any activity - let alone building the empire - they would never do anything, and although they complained that this was a bad year, she knew in her guts that the average year did not vary very much from this.

Our rains, she thought, were events - each with a distinct beginning, middle and end; how she longed to stand naked again in the innocent downpour...*oh, the demanding rains...of worship, of propitiation* - words long forgotten from her essay came back: *the stinging singing curtains of dance in among the tall rains.*

Her humiliation cut through her, as keen and fresh today as it was that day in the converted fountain of the Upper Sixth, but she knew instinctively, that this presaged something - what it was she wasn't yet sure; it came in the form of a longing hard on the heels of her humiliation - a longing for the rains of her childhood. She hadn't longed for them - not since that day, but today she longed, with an unexpected joy ached to hear their roar; feel their solidity; witness their presence...*oh, the demanding rains...of worship, of propitiation and celebration - the demanding rains of childhood.*



**TO ME
A DAUGHTER WAS BORN**

by

ARUNA PAPP

I remember very well the day I found out that I was going to have a baby. I had been married for three months and, in spite of the fact that I had not wanted to get married and had made a lot of fuss, I, then, resigned myself to it and hoped to be a good wife.

Every day, I had to sit by my mother and listen to her lectures about being a good wife. She said it was very important for me to remember not to bring any shame to my parents name and how hurt they would be if I did not live up to their expectations. Because I was the oldest, I was also responsible for the future of my other sisters. If I was not a good wife they would have a very hard time finding husbands for them. I had to set a good example. It was my duty, therefore, to do whatever my husband wanted. I must do everything to please him. She talked and talked but she never told me what it was that I must do or what was expected of me. How does a girl become a good wife over night? One day she is in school and the next day she is a wife. What is a wife? What is a good wife and what is a bad wife? I had often wondered. I had been told about the virtues of being a good wife since I was a little girl. I must cook, clean, wash, etc. but no one ever told me what the virtues had to do with being married. I did all those things anyway. So I had come to my marriage bed as ignorant as a five year old.

Growing up in high school had been a different process for me. While all the girls sat around and talked about their boyfriends, I was out in the field playing baseball and trying to beat the fastest runner. While the girls discussed their fantasies, I was playing marbles and beating up boys. I thought these girls silly and boring. I thought them stupid when I noticed them making funny eyes at the boys. When I was not playing or picking fights, I had studies that I had to keep up with or I would have to face my father with disappointment in his look. He expected good grades from me.

I recall the day I began to have my periods. I was playing marbles with four boys. I was almost thirteen. During the game, I needed to go to the bathroom so, between games, I ran there. I noticed that there was blood in my panties. I began to wonder about it, but then, too caught up in my game, I just told myself that I must have hurt myself while climbing a tree. The dean was always after me for climbing trees. She told me time and time again not to climb trees. Since I had come to the boarding school she had been trying to teach me all the things nice girls did and did not do. They did not climb trees. They did not play marbles. They did not get into fights with boys. They did not ride the bicycle like the devil was after them. They did not run up and down the stairs. They did not do this and they did not do that. Everything they did do was so dull and dumb! I hated knitting and sewing and cooking and all the things I needed to know to be a good wife but, since I could not get out of doing them, I did them as fast as I could and did them well. Then I would have free time and I could do the things I liked. Of course the catch here was that I had to bribe someone to keep watch in case the dean came around. I had to find places where we could play without being disturbed. This game was becoming very interesting and I was winning. Mr. Stevenson, one of our teachers, happened to come by and stayed to watch us playing marbles. Before I realized it, there were other teachers standing around watching to see who would win. I looked up and saw that one of the teachers was our dean. It must have been Mr. Stevenson who had asked her not to disturb the game because, I think, he wanted to see how I would fair and the dean always did what Mr. Stevenson asked.

Every now and then, I had to run to the bathroom to check on the blood that was running down my leg. When the dean saw me leave for the third time, she followed me to the bathroom to see what I was up to. I told her that I had hurt myself climbing a tree and she wanted to see where. That was the first time anyone had ever told me what was happening

to me, that it happens to all girls and will continue to happen until I grew very old. She did not explain why it happened or what to do about it but she did tell me that I was not to play with the boys any more or even speak to them.

I felt like I was doomed, that I was going to die or something was wrong with me. That night, I cried myself to sleep. I began to feel that I looked different. That everyone in the school was looking at me. They knew what was wrong with me. I was sure I walked different and sat differently too. I felt ashamed of myself. After a few days everything was fine but then it came back again. I became used to it but the feeling of being dirty, the feeling of being unclean did not leave me ever. My introduction to adolescence was a shock. It left me very depressed for weeks.

In spite of my preparation for being a good wife, I had no idea what it was to be married. I thought it would be a big party where everyone would bring me a lot of nice gifts. I would get a lot of good clothes, everyone would say how nice I looked, we would eat all the food that was prepared and then they would go home. Then I would go down the street, about seven houses away, to live with this man and cook his meals and keep the house clean and wash his clothes. I know that I could do all that very well.

However, being a wife did not come easy to me. It was a shock to learn that being a good wife meant that I was to allow this strange man to touch me in any way he wanted and to allow him to do anything he liked with me. I screamed and I kicked. I cried and after hitting him very hard, I ran away and locked myself up in the bathroom and waited for the sun to come up. I sat on the floor all night waiting for a chance to run away to my parents' home. When I came out, it was almost five in the morning and the man, who was my husband, lay on the bed asleep. He had no clothes on and he looked quite different than when I had last seen him. I had never seen a grown man without his clothes on and the sight of it made me sick.

I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. I ran until I came to my parents' home and banged at their door. My mother opened the door. They had all stayed up very late and she was quite surprised to see me standing at the door babbling away about what had happened. Upon hearing my voice, one of my aunts came to the door and when she heard what had happened, they both began to laugh. They said that I was very stupid and that it was just what was supposed to happen and if I was to be a good wife, I was never to fight like that again. With that and with some scolding from my mother, the two of them packed some food and walked me back to the new home that I was supposed to live in. I cried and I begged them to let me stay with them but, between them, they made sure that I did not get away. So began my wifely duties.

I never got used to sex. I hated the thought of it and I dreaded the moment when I would be required to lay there and be good. The few minutes that it took for the ordeal to be over were the longest for me. I lay there with my teeth grinding and my fists clenched tightly wishing that I would faint but I never did and that made it worse. I always felt very dirty and unclean afterwards. I would scrub myself for a long time trying to wash every part of me that had been touched. I felt violated. I felt damaged, used and broken. I felt like rotting garbage.

One never gets used to these feelings; one just learns to live with them. I too, learned to live with it. There were some nice things that came with being married. I was now included

in the adult gossip groups. I could go shopping, my husband took me to the movies; I had never seen a movie in my life. Father was a minister and movies were forbidden to us. Life began to go on and I began to worry about what to cook for supper and so on.

One day my younger sister came over and said that some of the girls were going to play badminton and asked me to join them. While playing badminton with the girls, I happened to tell my younger sister that I had not had my periods for almost three months and that I was very happy that at last I was healed and I would never have to worry about that problem any more. She, in turn, went home and told mother.

Next day my mother and aunt came over and told me that I was going to have a baby. I could not believe such a thing. I always thought that one had to be old to have a baby. I was not old and I had not wanted it and I didn't know how it got there. I did not know what it was that I had done to have made a baby. They both began to laugh at me and made fun of me. I cried bitterly. I felt that having a baby was a chain that was going to bind me firmer to this man I was living with. I would never be able to get away. I felt helpless. I knew then that there was no getting away. I lay in my bed crying for hours. I hated this man for doing this to me. I hated my parents for doing this to me. I told myself again and again I would never forgive them, I would get even with them somehow, someday. I kept remembering the way my mother and my aunt had laughed at me. They had called me foolish. They told me that I should be grateful that I had such a nice husband, that he loved me and took care of me. My aunt always ended her lecture reminding me that I was very lucky to have such a handsome husband and look what she was married to. Of course we all had to live with our fate and do our duty and she was making a sacrifice for her family.

As the days went by, I began to think more and more about my baby. At first I had hated the thought of having a baby and cried a lot. Now I found myself smiling when I thought about it. Every morning I was sick and, at that time, I would have liked to have pulled it out of me and thrown it away, but other times I was glad. I was mostly glad because my husband now left me alone and did not demand his "wifely duties". I spent hours thinking about the baby and what it would look like. I wanted a little girl, I thought. Then I changed my mind and it would have to be a boy. Boys have it much easier. It was better to be a boy. I would not want her to go through all that I had gone through. But if I had a girl, I could put on pretty clothes for her and dress her up. Girls looked so nice all decked out. I prayed that it would be healthy and that it would remain healthy. Every night I went to sleep thinking about my baby and woke up thinking about it. I began to love it and I began to want it. I began to think of the names. I could not settle on just one name so I picked three and thought, to myself, that I would wait and see what the baby looked like and then I would give it a name. While making little baby clothes, I began talking to my baby and singing to it. I know it could hear me. I wanted it to know that I was sorry I had made a fuss. I really loved it and wanted it. I wanted my baby very much.

One day, weeks later, my parents came to see us. They said that we were all going into town and that we should get ready. I liked going to town, so I hurried and got ready. There was a taxi waiting for us. We never took a taxi to town. We always took the bus. In the taxi, I looked at my mother and she had a very grim look about her. Is something wrong, I asked

her, why are you so grim? But she would not answer. I asked my father if anything was wrong. He turned away from me and told me to ask my mother. She sat looking out of the window, instead of facing me, and said:

"Your father and I think that you are very immature and very young. You don't know anything about having babies. Your husband agrees with us. So, we have decided that you should have an abortion". I felt cold and, all of a sudden, began to tremble. I could hear her but her voice seemed to come from a distance. She was saying, to me, that there was a lady they knew who did this "sort of thing" in her home. It only hurt a little and not for long. Of course it was much better than the pains of giving birth. I would not know what to do with a baby anyway..... She went on and on telling me why they had thought it best for me to kill my baby. They had thought it best for me to stop school, they had thought it best for me to get married, they had thought how I ought to be a good wife and how I must learn to cook and clean and wash and do my wifely duties and now they thought it best for me to kill my child. The child I had been forced to conceive. The child I had learned to love. The child I now wanted to have.

The taxi stopped at a stop light. I opened the door and began to run. I ran and ran. I felt my legs strong and willing. I felt energy that I did not know I had in me. I felt like I was flying and they would not be able to catch me. They were not going to kill my baby. I was going to take it and run away. I ran through streets and lanes. I ran through parks, crowded alleys and deserted lots. I ran until I could not stand up anymore and the afternoon sun had gone down. Then I sat down under a tree and cried. I cried as if my world had come to an end. I cried for myself. I cried for my baby and I cried because I was helpless. I thought I would not have any tears left. My throat hurt. I heard a sound that seemed to come from an animal and realized that it was me. My eyes burned, my throat had dried and I could not swallow. I found it hard to breathe. I sat there for hours crying at my hopelessness and my helplessness. I cried because I had no where to turn and no one to help me. I cried because I felt alone and frightened. I cried and asked my unborn child to forgive me for wanting to bring it into this world, forgive me for wanting it so much. I wanted to spare it all the pain and sorrow. I know that all its life it would have to face pain. Pain and hurt and all the filth and misery. I would be responsible for it because I had wanted my child to be born, but I knew that I wanted this child more than I wanted my own life. I would fight for him or her. I would protect it, care for it, love and cherish it. I would make sure this child had all the love I did not have. I would make sure that I taught it all I could about life. Tell it that life can be wonderful; it can be worth living. I wanted to sing and to play with it and tell stories to it. I wanted to watch it grow into a decent human being but, above all, I wanted this baby because I needed to live it. I needed to hold it as my own. I wanted a daughter.....

And, to me a daughter was born.

Brook and Sun

by

VISHWAPRIYA IYENGAR

The sun punishes
the brook for not loving him.

The sun tears
out from the sky
like an eye from its socket.
"Chatter your foolish music
and wave the droplets
off your water arms.
Let that pale, wane, lover moon
fashion the silhouette
of your bough-like shoulders.
I alone have a chest of charcoal
in the ribs of power,
says the sun.
"I alone know you need
the fire in my palms
to curve pebbles into breasts.
To knead the limpid twist
of water into thighs.

"Bathe in your moon-pot
foolish brook,
sieve your reflection
through your fingers.
"The Tigress cannot wait for the tiger.
Yet you bleach passion with salt".

Black silk-sky
caresses the brook's belly
like a sarong
just slipped off.
Weeds, bull rushes and ferns
warp and lisp faintness.
Coiling around still waters
like hands drained of blood.
The sun crosses its arms,
a prophet on a mountain,
"Babble foolish brook
of love and passion,
then I will throw you boulders
of gold
and unfurl your timid grace
in the timeless flow
of a mythic river".

The brook hides her shy face
behind her arms, breaks
baubles of pretty words.
Crunches black shells of oysters,
throws pearls into empty sockets
in the sky,
"It is you who have forgotten,
I remember my soul and my womb
are the ocean.
here I just play with time".

Mocking Masks

The hour has come for me to peel out my masks
one by one,
this one is fear, I wore it with laughter
and dimples.
This one is despair, I wore it with braveness,
cold steel bullets in my eyes.
This one is madness, I wore it with sanity,
in geometrically constructed conversations.
This one is hallucination,
I wore it with
child-like dreaminess.
This one is loneliness, I wore it as mirth.

Night circles around me like some
magical dressing room
of some aged prima donna.
In the mirror that is your soul
I see my face again as it was a long time ago.
The masks mock me, tease me,
then they stand up with that quiet dignity
of hidden pain
and walk away in measured gaits
knowing they will be resurrected
in stories, with names and places,
where they will swear at the witness stand,
and testify to the premeditated murder
of my own soul by myself.

Winter's Plate

How will I wait through three silvers
of full moons.
The pale white heat of my thoughts
swims with delirium of a thousand
needles
crocheting white-webs of stillness.
Through snow-blinded valleys
I walk bare footed to the frozen river
following the fragrant waft
of apple blossoms.
The naked sadhu clutching
his rust-tongued trident
laughs at the mad winter gypsy
singing love ballads -
to death lacquered boughs.

Three full moons turn
like fire-wheels
in my body that knows
not how to consume itself.
And that is why
I dance on winter's plate of silver
with anklets so chill, that even
music is a secret.
The cruel sting of age's blood
carves the earth of my body
and marks the flow of new streams
fountains, waterfalls
and rivers.
Blood freezes into pink crystals.

Mad winter gypsy,
she throws
pomegranate seeds to crows.

TO FRIENDS IN WHITE LANDS

(written after visiting Oslo in 1986)

Today I went shopping after soliciting a visa
from the land
where the fairy tale of the mermaid
was spun,
I was a stranger to your white skies
and being an Oriental
believed in the ritual of gifts.
In anticipation of hearts yet to touch
and the music sheets of perception
we would exchange.
I went shopping in the mad dog sun of 12 noon
to see the city's colonial shopping past
brimming with oriental frown.
The black slave, a death dance
for her white master.
Clothes flew like balloons
designed for a few ruppees
rejected for want of a button,
gave us, prudent shoppers of a new elite,
a vestige very international
only I could not help
having known it all.
Talons in export garment factories
who inked their eyes in a pool of black debt,
paddling the midnight veil of sewing machines
to throw white butterfly blouses

on your back.
Young girls growing blind in dark rooms
embroidering rose petals on black gowns
and crippling one day in
the violence of a mother in law
who thought blind girls should bring more dowry
A tailor I knew dropped a few jeans
on the spikes,
remembering a letter from his sixteen year old wife,
their child died of de-hydration.
She worked so hard in the fields,
and had no milk in her adolescent breasts.
Rows of strings, beads of bones, and rosewood,
bracelets of ebony,
I thought of my forests cut down,
for your newsprint
and now oranamentation.
I thought of hungry, desperate infants
chasing wild animals
to knead your beads of bone and her,
I went from object to object
asking if it was India
to take to white lands
and felt with sudden violence
that I too had become a bazaar.
My orientality engraved in silver
and turquoise. An agate egg to hold papers
(incomplete)

KARVACHAUTH

by

NILAMBRI GHAI

[On legend of a woman who ate before the moon, causing her husband's death.]

The only sister of seven brothers
tricked by their naive love for her
into eating before the moon,
seeks redemption from the nine goddesses
to breathe life into her husband's now stiff form.
Since then each year, on a crisp Autumn night
of the waning moon,
thousands of brides fast and pray
for the long life of the men
divined to be their husbands.
To eat before sunrise and then forego water and food
till the moon's reflection gleams
on the watery surface of brass pitcher.
To wish for a long life of married bliss
or else be doomed to forsaken widowhood.
Each year the husband's feet churned
by the water in the pitcher, rest secure
in her love born out of selflessness.
And each year the questions seem to grow fainter:
Why must I do obeisance before a flesh lord?
Why must I be bought and sold a hundred times?
Why must I wait for the moon?
Why must I come last?
Why must I hide my burning tears?
Why must I alone subvert my strength
to spell weakness and boost the ever-important
egos of the men in my life?
Why must I be told that the male god -
even he - is against me?
Why must I pray for another gender
in the next life?
Why must I not live for me?

On Going Crazy in Metropolis

Perhaps I am Crazy
or else this concrete world
rising out of deceptive lakes
is crazy instead.
Perhaps the last person
in the long line behind me
does not like my face
nor me here, and looks at me
as though I were someone, and yet none.
Perhaps I am already decades old
in a land that has never known senility.
Perhaps my thoughts that tell me
that I no longer am good for anything
are painfully right.
Perhaps everything that I hold
in my infinitesimal palms is already gone
and perhaps there is nothing here for you and me
except the persistent drone of cars
on six-lane expressways.
Perhaps I search uselessly for a village home
that no longer exists.
Perhaps I think too much
and worry over what my son does
when he is called names in school,
and why my daughter likes only Barbies
with blue eyes and blond hair.
Perhaps my half-glazed eyes
have seen too much, lived too long,
I know I owe you more than a broken dream,
I know I need to go home!

Punjab

Long hair - ever since I can remember
and one long strand recalls
the history of a province
I have never known, for I
never did live there, nor ever wanted to.
There was a silent constant in not wanting
to live in cities where women
were scanned naked by arrogant eyes
hungry for skin, or where they
seldom walked without a veil,
or where they seldom ever breathed alone.
I was different, and had little
to do with a language soiled
by foul-mouthed invectives,
nor was one who ate on
mopped floors out of leaf plates....

The long strand of hair slips
to another place, another time
where high priests with long swords
in blue, begin to tell a story:
"Once there was a people,
who were not anymore ,
and to bring them back 'a people'
there had to be death!"
So death there was! Cold and stark!
"Those killed were not the people", they said
who had sanctions that were tough.
To break which came the soldiers, the dignitaries
armed tough to match the fabled strength of the people.
So again there was death, this time
almost unknown,
behind locked doors,

amidst broken hearts and altars.
The hot wind blazed through the stench

of putrid flesh and congealed blood.
It gave further sanctions to the dead;
and the scorching sun burned with a vengeance
and the scorching sun burned with a vengeance
to unite the psyche of a forgotten land
in a frenzy of assassination and revenge.....

The strand of hair that suddenly seems
too fragile, alone, slips again to tell another story
that smells too much of burned hair and charred flesh.
If only to recollect its monstrosities
death strikes again with malicious vigour.
Remains of the people engrave hidden lists
and swear never to forget.
fires kindle once again
to reek vengeance, while the high priests
sense a time auspicious enough
to assert their ascendancy.
Pathetic groups collide and vie for power,
Death cements.
The people tear apart under
matted and coiled trappings.
The people, no longer now a people
remain hounded to hound,
spared to kill.
Amidst this, the high priests, the dignitaries
smile at the end product of their craftsmanship.....

A little girl draws water from a dried well.....
A feeble flame flickers precariously
inside the glass chimney of a kerosene lamp.....
Night falls over a proud land
and a strand of white hair from a long beard
glistens in the moonlight.

