

SHORT STORY

City

SUJAATHA (Translated from Tamil by V. Surya)

Coexisting peacefully on the walls were notices and advertisements of all sorts in letters a foot high: 'Nizam Lady tobacco', 'Beware the Flames of Revolution!', 'A.K. Cut-body Bras', 'Haji Moosa Textile Emporium---Sea of Fabrics', 'On 30-9-1973 All Infidels Will Shoulder Urns of Fire'.

An ordinary day in Madurai. As always, water pots stood in devout rows before the municipal taps, performing austerities for the sake of humans. Little boys were playing in the dirt without worrying in the least about tetanus. From the rear ends of buses run by the Pandian Transport Corporation issued a mixture of patriotic messages and diesel fumes. Wearing stiffly starched pants, policemen on protein-deficient diets were regulating the human and vehicular traffic that was darting about hither and thither. The city's inhabitants seemed to be in a state of what the physicists call Brownian motion. Along the left side of the street crept a thin and not very long khadi-shirted procession, scolding the government for the rise in prices. People without chappals, wearing tucked-up 'box-tied' veshtis...the petrified towers of the Meenakshi temple...the bridge across the dried-up Vaigai...Madurai! Madurai, the ancient seat of Tamil culture, known to the ancient Greeks as Medora.

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Our story is about a woman who has arrived in the city today. Valliamma is waiting in the OP (outpatients) department of the big hospital in Madurai with her daughter Paapaathi. Yesterday Paapaathi contracted fever. She was taken to the village primary health care centre, where the doctor frightened them, saying, 'Take her at once to the big hospital.' They had taken the early morning bus.

Paapaathi lay inert on the stretcher, surrounded by six doctors. She might have been twelve years old. The cheap glass-stones on both sides of her pierced nose glinted in the bright light of the hospital. On her forehead was a line of sacred ash.

From what could be seen of her arms, covered as she was up the chest, they were thin as two sticks. She was in a feverish sleep. Her mouth was open.

Big Doctor examined her head by turning it with his hands. He examined the eyes by pushing up the eyelids. He examined the cheeks by pressing them with one finger, and the skull by feeling it with all his fingers. Big Doctor had been educated in the West. A professor. Those surrounding him were his medical students. He announced in English: 'Acute case of meningitis. Notice the...'

During that unintelligible discussion Valliamma gazed helplessly at her daughter. One by one the persons in the circle came forward and looked into the girl's eyes with the aid of an ophthalmoscope. They flashed a torch into them to see if they moved. They took down notes. Big Doctor said, 'Get her admitted.'

Valliamma looked from one face to another. One of them said, 'Look here, amma. This girl must be admitted into the hospital at once. Do you see that old person sitting there? Go to him. Where is your chit?'

Valliamma did not have a chit.

'Okay. He'll give you one. Ayya, you there! Come here, sir!'

Valliamma looked at Big Doctor and asked, 'Ayya, will the child be all right?'

'First admit her. We'll take care of it. Doctor Dhanasekharan! I'll handle this case myself.' Then in English he said, 'I have to take a class. I'll see her as soon as I return.'

Like a minister followed by his retinue, he walked off with the rest of them scurrying after him. Dr. Dhanasekharan gave instructions to Seenvaasaan. Then he hastened after Big Doctor.

Seenvaasaan looked at Valliamma. 'Come here, 'ma! What's your name? Dei, you Death's Customer! Bring that register, will you?'

'Valliamma.'

'Patient's name?' he asked, using the English word.

'He is dead, 'nga.'

Seenvaasaan looked up.

''Patient' means a sick person...Who's to be admitted?'

'My daughter, 'nga.'

'Name?'

'Valliamma, 'nga.'

'What? Fooling around, huh? You daughter's name!'

'Paapaathi.'

'Paapaathi!--at last! Here, take this chit. If you go straight on, near the staircase there'll be a chair and a person sitting on it. He checks incomes. Give it to him.'

'The child, 'nga?'

'Nothing's going to happen to the child. Let her just lie there...isn't there



and entered another doorway. That was how she had entered. She recalled it now. She ran that way and reached another doorway, and remembered the wooden stairs. There it stood---the chair of the man who had enquired what her income was.

That was the place!

But the entrance was closed. Through it she could see inside. There in a corner, with her eyes closed, lay Paapaathi, still on that stretcher.

'There! Ayya, open the door a little, please! My girl's over there!'

'Come exactly at three o'clock. Now all "close".'

For ten minutes she implored him. She did not understand the language he spoke, though it was Tamil all right. She did not understand the questions he asked...He let someone else through, and in a gesture of pious gratitude was just pressing to his eyes some coins they had slipped him, when she pushed past him in the way just cleared. Rushing in and gathering her daughter up in her arms, she sat down on an empty bench and wept.

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When Big Doctor had finished taking the class for the MD students, he had a cup of coffee. Then he went to the ward. He remembered very well the meningitis case he had seen that morning. He had read recently in the British Medical Journal about certain new drugs.

'That meningitis case I told you to admit this morning---that twelve-year-old girl. Where is she?'

'But nobody was admitted today, Doctor.'

'What? Not admitted? But I told you specifically! Dhanasekharan! Don't remember it?'

'I remember it, Doctor.'

'Paul! Just go and find out about it. How could it be missed?'

the person addressed as Paul went straight down the corridor and made enquiries of the clerks sitting opposite each other.

'Where, ya? You people simply write "Admit! Admit!" But there's not even any standing space in the ward!'

'For God's sake! It's the Chief asking!'

'Is it somebody he knows?'

'Could be. How would I know?'

'No twelve-year-old girl has come to our side. Even if anyone did come, I have told them to return tomorrow at seven-thirty. Tonight one or two beds will fall vacant. You should inform us in advance if it's an emergency! Or at least drop a word that the Big Man has an interest in the case! Any relation of his?'

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Valliamma did not know what she was going to do till seven-thirty the next morning. The hospital environment made her dreadfully afraid. She did not know if they would allow her to be with her daughter. She thought about it. Then she picked up her daughter, held her close to her breast, rested the head on her shoulder, and with Paapaathi's arms and legs dangling loosely, she emerged from the hospital. Clambering into a yellow cycle rickshaw, she told the driver to go to the bus-stand.

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'What nonsense!' shouted Big Doctor, in English. 'Tomorrow? At seven-thirty? By that time that girl will be dead and gone, ayya! Doctor Dhanasekhar, you go yourself and search for that case in the OP department. It must be there! If there isn't a vacant bed in this wretched ward, there is one in our department. See that she is given one! Quick!'

'Doctor! That bed has been kept reserved!'

'I don't care. I want that girl admitted now, right now!'

The Boss had never before shouted like that, in English, or even in Tamil. The terrified Doctor Dhanasekharan, Paul, and Miranda the Head Nurse, all ran to the OP department in search of Valliamma.

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'It is just a fever, after all. We'll just quietly go back to Munaandi-Patti. We can show her to the medicine man, we don't have to go to the hospital in the big village at all. That doctor is the very one who scared us and drove us to Madurai...It will be all right. We'll tie a white cloth poultice, have a man chant over some vibhuti...We'll have it done.'

As the cycle rickshaw neared the bus-stand, Valliamma prayed, 'If Paapaathi becomes all right, I'll give an offering of two handfuls of coins to the Vaidheeswaran temple.'

Sujaatha is a short story writer in Tamil who has published extensively in literary little magazines. V. Surya is a well-known translator of Tamil novels and short stories. The short story published above reflects the shift in focus for the Tamil short story from the late sixties onward, from what was described as 'noble idealism' to a newer expression emphasized by strong story line, well-defined narrative and sharp social criticism.

On Writing in English: an Indian poet's perspective

A couple of weeks back Kaiser Huq wrote on the topic of writing creatively, writing poems in fact, in English in Bangladesh. The essay evoked considerable interest in our readers, as did the accompanying note that said that Indian writers and poets have written fairly extensively on this topic, if only because they have been more closely engaged, and for a much longer period, with the language than us. Keeping that reader interest in mind, we publish here Keki Daruwala's engaging account---originally a talk delivered at Internationale Literaturtag in 1988 at Erlangen, West Germany and which he said was 'a cursory attempt to explain to a German (and international) audience what Indian poetry in English was all about' --- of his own ongoing tussle, and delight, with the English language.

---Editor, Literature Page

We are all trapped in history. The Europeans came to trade, hung on to fight, to conquer, and stayed on to instruct. Their colonies became vast markets for their textiles and their language. Conversions followed, to another way of life and on occasions to Christianity. When they went back they left their language behind -- and half-castes. In an alien land, language itself turned brown and half-caste.

English was introduced in India with commercial objectives in view. What was achieved was something much greater in dimensions. Colonial history shows that language can be as domineering as any occupational army. It supplants myths, whole iconographies, world-view, ideologies. It ushers in its own symbols, and its own values. An armada of new texts sails in. Old dogmas and bigotries are swept away--and exchanged for new ones.

You cannot choose your generation, your parents or your language, even a foreign one at times. If your father teaches English and you have three thousand books in the house, all in the same language, you have precious few options. To become fully conscious of writing in the language of one's

neckties. Their speech was more clipped, their smiles more condescending. They even spoke their *Hindustani* with an anglicized accent. They could hardly pronounce the names of the towns they lived in. Nainital, as it is pronounced in Hindustani, got twisted to 'Nainitoll'. And they used slang. It was old slang of course, shipped some three decades ago, which had got lost on the seas, then lay rotting on the docks like dry fish, till it was dispatched by steam rail and later on mule back to those public schools in the mountains.

But the fact is that they used slang and if you did not latch on to a phrase, you were held in contempt. And then came my first conversation with an Englishman. He had to repeat himself three times to make himself understood. What an exotic accent, I thought. Why couldn't the fellow speak English as she ought to be spoken?

No other trauma intervened for the next fifteen years or so. Then as one started publishing poetry in English, critics shook their heads in disapproval. Yes, fiction, essays, articles, even pornography one could write in English, they said (though nothing like Punjabi for robust abuse). But poetry was another cup of tea. You could write it only in a language you had imbibed with mother's milk. This line of argument gave rise to what I chose to call the Lactatory School of Literary Criticism. Another august body called the Royal School of Dreamy Criticism asked me if I dreamt in English. The trouble was I dreamt in English. The words I dreamt in images mostly and seldom in language. My dreams were often silent movies. When once in a while, they did turn into Talkies, they were

like me, multi-lingual. Exiles come to alien shores and write in the language of their adopted country. Joseph Conrad, Arthur Koestler, Nabokov are examples. An Indian writing poetry in English was an exile in his own country.

The handicaps were all too apparent. One is not merely speaking of an exclusive readership. Isn't poetry restricted to a class with a certain educational background? It could be said that 7000 miles and quite a few years separated the Indian writer from the 'living speech' of the language. But didn't millions speak English in India? Wasn't it at least the second language of most educated Indians? It was the language of the bank and the stock exchange, of the Parliament, the secretariat and the law courts. The writer was at home with it. What I am trying to refer to is the difficulties in writing poetry itself. You stuck to the straight and narrow path of textual English. You cut out linguistic heroics and hesitated taking liberties with the language. It was tough enough mastering (if that's the word) the idiom. To now start fragmenting it, chopping up the grammar and entering the slippery realm of the disjunctive seemed an unthinking indulgence. As poets know, is vital to poetry. At times I hesitated in giving a full phonetic charge to my verse unless the meaning was crystal clear and each line as a unit made sense.

Yet instinctively, one knew what to exclude: words like 'deliverance' and 'renunciation', expressions like 'the wondrous mysteries of the divine', 'the oneness of Brahma', 'the stream of life'; the self (both the small guy starting with an 's' in the lower

case to the big fellow with the capital 'S') all talk of *moksha*, (liberation) and *maya* (appearance)*, all reference to infinity and eternity and expressions like 'the womb of the void' or 'the void of the womb' -- have it any way you please. I avoided them like the plague. Not once, as far as I recollect, have I talked of the soul in a poem. It was by a conscious act of will. The stranglehold over the soul, this monopoly over the spiritual enjoyed by the earlier well-meaning savants who passed off as philosophers, and the present batch of crooks who masquerade as godmen, is one of the intellectual scandals of this century.

Instinctively one made language slightly subservient to content. Those who think that the form is the poem would not take kindly to this. Literature concerns itself with the

world of the spirit and the flesh as we know it. Passions, feelings, consciousness, the past and memories get thrown in. Language after all is just one of the dimensions that make literature what it is. So it was good literary strategy to give slightly more weight to content. All language and literature are in some way a translation: you render reality (dreams, perceptions, memories, the physical world around you) into words. Surely this reality is important, and a case can be made out for giving it a certain degree (however small) of primacy over language.

How would I define insight or truth? That, which in any other tongue, would have gone as swiftly to the heart.

Looking back I find that the compulsion to mark out an identity for myself must have been very strong. Since one was writing in English it should be all the more evident that it was an Indian writing. Just bringing an Indian sensibility to

*Since then Daruwala has, in his own words, 'written an entire poem on Maya' --- an act that however should not invalidate the main lines of his argument here.

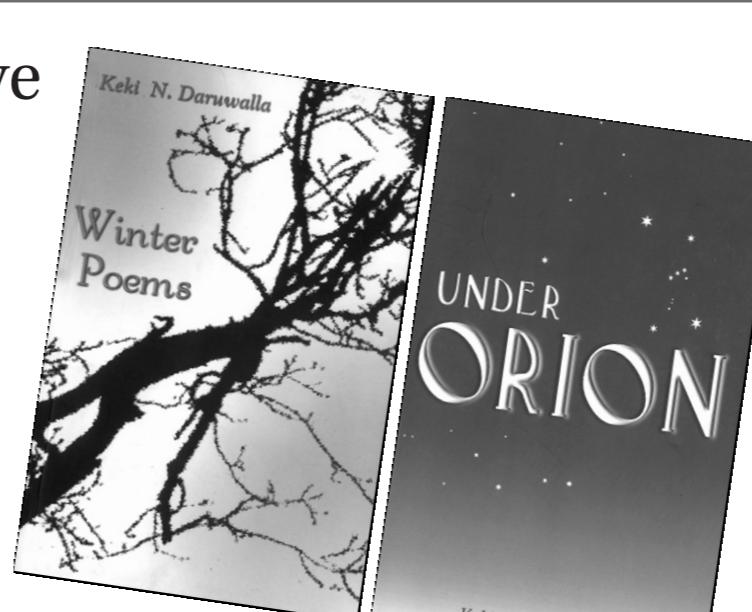
brought up on a diet of Shelley and Keats. When you left the campus you faced harsh reality around you -- drought, poverty and communal riots. One needed a harsh language, words with a saw-edge, words which rasped and got into you like the shards of a broken bottle. Slowly, almost unconsciously the poems developed a vocabulary and a soundscape of their own.

The question of patois comes up often, of the Indian contribution to the English language. Some of these experiments (in prose) have been very successful, for instance G.V. Desan's *All About H. Hatter* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, both recognized as minor classics today. Novels are one thing, verse another. We have had no such triumphs in poetry. Admitted that the Indian has his own way with English syntax, but it is no way comparable to the Caribbean patois. The Indian way of speaking English is to mix the languages -- half a sentence in English and the other tattered half in Hindi or Marathi or Bengali. Writing in that manner could bring on numerous problems. Pidgin is fine but a half-Hindi-half-English amalgam becomes impractical.

Finally, while the poet endeavours to hone the language to his purpose, language also has a way with his poetry. If you have wielded an oriental scimitar all your life, you are used to whirling it about, making fearful whistling arcs in the air and generally slashing around. But give the same man a straight bladed sword and willy-nilly, given some time, he will learn to trust and stab.

In university one had been

Keki Daruwala was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry in 1978.



The image shows two book covers by Keki N. Daruwala. The left cover for 'Winter Poems' features a dark, textured background with a stylized tree or branch design. The right cover for 'Under Orion' has a similar dark, textured background with a more abstract, geometric pattern. Both covers are minimalist and artistic.