ESSAY

A Poetry Reading: Notes on Authenticity

NORA KHAN

At a recent poetry reading I attended here in New Haven, Connecticut I witnessed an unexpected comedy show - a rare treat, as most readings tend to be like dour, precious funerals. In attendance were mostly students, in slashed tights, glitter headscarves and dark chiffon shirts. After the first, nearly inaudible poet left the stage, the second poet began to perform. He danced in epileptic bursts, crouched on the floor, burst into mawkish operetta, all the while feverishly interspersing his movements with gusts of shouted reading of his poem, which was opaque and difficult. Of course, people began to laugh, and I found I couldn't restrain my laughter, either; I hunkered down into my seat and tried to bury my face in my hands, and yet all I could see was the poet's face bright with sweat. I considered getting up and leaving the room; then, I had an overt horror that the Young Poet, in his crazed Dionysian state, would look at me and cry, "You there! Stop immediately!"

Right then, as though suddenly aware of the tittering around him, the poet shouted angrily, "What's wrong with you? Stop laughing! Stop laughing! Why is laughter our immediate response to things we don't understand?"

The hall lapsed into a deep silence. The poet's injunction had the dual effect of alienating his listeners and making some laugh even harder into their coat-sleeves. I laughed at the spectacle, and also at ourselves, and finally, at my own discomfort. Then I felt badly for the young man. What struck me in that moment was the futility of the entire poetic enterprise. Of course, it was just his enterprise, but the sensation of general futility was undeniable, and, as a fiction writer, a hardly welcome one. In my somnolent funk, I saw the chasm between author and audience as bridged only by misunderstanding, mockery, and laughter.

At Harvard, I had the great luck of having a creative writing professor and mentor, Jamaica Kincaid, who espoused the ethos that work is all that matters: Your work, your art, is what defines you. You write to save yourself. From there, I filled in the rest for myself. Nothing else: not who you love or who loves you, not what you own, not where you studied or what you "know"- all that means nothing compared to the work. Only your work means - matters.

Reality doesn't comply with the artist's desires for a pure reception, of course. If your work is what defines you, your reception of your work has some role in how the work is defined. Writers are forced to play tricks, to perform in the way The Young Poet did, drawing attention while repelling it, dancing for their readers. Specifically, we (by this I mean writers, including myself) define ourselves in particular ways to make ourselves accessible. We're Senegalese-American writers raised in Seattle who graduated from X

artwork by amina

University and Y's MFA program; we're from Missouri, lived in Eastern Europe, wrote our novel at this writers' colony; we've published here and we have matriculated there, and most importantly, we studied with Someone, and so we are of worth. (By this logic, because this person, who is already lauded, listened to us, we are worth listening to.) We're career-driven. We're deeply cynical, but pretend to a naiveté about our self-presentation. We all participate in the Game and struggle to find a space of autonomy.

I later found the Young Poet's poems in a journal, and I found they were really quite good. Why did he insist on delivering them in such a distracting manner? As I'm guessing he'd explain it, in disrupting the crowd's complacency, he was critiquing how capitalist relations have stiffened our experience of art. I sympathized with his disregard for being liked, and I recognized later that the crowd's laughter was a key part of his performance. He needed an audience that was derisive and disrespectful. Indeed, why is it we are so afraid of anomaly and disruption?

For one, anomaly gets a more severe rap these days: anomaly of origin, of self, experience and tongue. Here in the U.S., it is specifically foreign origin, experience, selves and tongues, which are subject to a peculiar system of scrutiny.

Here's an example: More than fifteen years ago, a poet named Araki Yasusada, said to be a survivor of the bombing of Hiroshima, published a series of poems in literary journals in the States, including the 'American Poetry Review'. His poems were lauded for their sensitivity and accurate depiction of war. Aside from faked memoirs, Yasusada went on to be one of the more notable literary hoaxes of our time, because Yasusada did not exist, except as the creation of a possible group of still-unidentified poets, or one working alone. The editors' willingness to print Yasusada's work revealed both a political correctness, and a desire for authenticity in the author himself (read: those who have endured suffering in war, in bomb blasts, in poverty, are authentic). How much does it matter that Yasusada didn't exist? The project was a brilliant performance; think of the notebooks, intentionally made illegible, given the appearance of being burnt. Think of the compendium of clichéd images in the poems - cherry blossoms and lakes and eyes turned to jelly in the blast - and how the printing of the poems reveals an inability on the part of the editors to discern between a truly good poet, in any language, and a poet who has the unparalleled virtues of suffering and experience of war.

I ruminate obsessively over the questions of authorial origin (or culture) as it affects the author's writing and reception, and these questions rise up, ungainly, unsightly, like so much half-masticated grass. They catch in the throat; they become more difficult to swallow each time they are brought to surface.

One of these questions: What is the future of the younger writers of educated background and discernable ethnicity? Will she or he be encouraged to write not of self, but others, of what is not known or familiar? I hope so. I can say, for myself, that the backlash to perceived 'ethnic writing' causes me great anxiety as a writer. It literally pains me to see a writer's work valued or judged by anything but universal literary standards. Of course, that which is literary is deemed so by an establishment that defines what literary is. Certain books have marks of the 'literary', and to deny that this is not partly a function of an economic prerogative (to sell books marked as literary or non-literary) is to be disingenuous.

Last summer I read Nam Le's excellent short story collection and bestseller, *The Boat*. Le is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His opening story, 'Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice' wryly depicts the trials of an author named Nam at a writing program. In short, the protagonist struggles with what story to write. He writes about Columbia and Tehran, about boys in Australia and drug rings and painters with gastrointestinal ailments. He is told, though, by several literary agents that he should "mine" his "background and life experience", namely his father's extraordinary voyage to Vietnam via boat, and the struggle during wartime, for his collection. His own peers suggest, in a move of subtle condescension, that he's a great writer because he chooses not to write about his parents' history. At the end of so many conflicting messages about literary value and authenticity, the narrator presents the whole range of hypocrisies and restrictions on how fiction is produced in this country. In my favorite scene, the narrator slams paper into his typewriter, titles it 'Ethnic Story', and begins to write his father's story. "It was a good story. It was a...great story," Nam thinks to himself, and so re-claims the story. In a move Le could have anticipated, the reviews of *The Boat* have focused on precisely what he anticipated: his biography, as an Australian-cum-Vietnamese immigrant to America. Nam Le's fiction anticipates its own reception, from the reduction to categorization; the story effectively shatters these categorizations by acknowledging and anticipating them. By demonstrating that they are just that - categories - Le elides them.

This story seems to me a validation of art's power. Le is asking us, how a story can be true when a readership and industry, thirsty for a new foreign "tragedy", is geared to read it incorrectly?

I turn to chroniclers of the South Asian Experience. There are brilliant novelists who approach their panoply of histories and cultures with care and Dickensian accuracy: Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh come to mind. There are, without doubt, many supreme writers of fiction with links to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. I, for one, find it very difficult to keep up with the sheer number of South Asian writers who flood the world market; this is more a mark of how the industry has aggressively marketed these writers. As an American first, and Bangladeshi-American second (if we are trading in designations), I read with an eye that is primed for discrepancy or inaccuracy, and alternately, the relentlessly accurate plots and themes which exhaust every entrenched cliché of 'South Asian Experience' as it is defined against a supposedly more libertarian value system: The Oppressive, Narrow-Minded Parents; The Second Generation Woman's Desire for Freedom; The Arranged Marriage; The Cruelty and Unfairness of Religion; The Cross-Cultural Conflict. These tropes, though based in real, lived realities, have become so paradigmatic that they fail to disrupt. They are duplications of duplications. One can't even defend the industry's insidious mask of pluralist appreciation.

I have been lucky enough to have an unparalleled freedom to define my personal culture, to create my own system of values. I've rarely been made aware of my background until someone else unwittingly pointed it out, or I took the time to point it out to them. In truth, my life, I hope, is inward moving, and for someone, then, to suggest (as people often do) that a person of an "authentic" experience trumps my own experience - both in fiction and life - is not only insulting, but ultimately absurd.

The other face of the coin: A writer who doesn't write from her/his background is interpreted as having "issues" with that background; s/he is self-hating, s/he has turned to oblivion, s/he does not know "who s/he is." The fallacies in these statements are obvious. I've heard desi friends' parents say their children are culture-less, without root, background or home. This is hardly true. A probashi, after all, no matter how deeply her heart is "in" Bangladesh, is still abroad. I've had the great luck to be able to exchange politics for the open values that art provides, and I never wonder what repercussions I'll experience for not knowing Bangladeshi culture very deeply. If anything, I fully accept the depth and beauty of a culture I simply cannot, and will not, know the way my parents live and breathe it. What I have experienced of Bangladesh, I hold private. I have no issues with the culture itself: I have issues with the way its images are produced, and how this proves inimical to artistic freedom.

As a writer, I have zero interest in being classified. I avoid writing about myself or my family, or their experiences, precisely because their experiences are not mine to write. I'm acutely aware that fiction seen as coming "too easily" from family history or personal experience (and the injustice of this doesn't escape me) is considered a step below 'true' literature. Real artists, this wisdom goes, write from the imagined. I have a real fear of treading upon overtly cultural narratives, precisely because I haven't resolved my ambivalence towards these narratives.

This is not to suggest that those of dual heritage shouldn't be proud of their 'original' roots, or that South Asian shouldn't write about their culture. I'm simply pointing out the manner in which being perceived as 'foreign' isn't necessarily a blessing or boon here in America, where culture and race are two of the most prickly spaces of socio-cultural debate. One isn't completely celebrated for being "Etcetera-American"; rather, you only confirm your separation. Once you've identified yourself as technically from 'elsewhere', you begin to inhabit, for others, a pre-set sphere of expectations and limited understandings. This effect resonates each day, in our daily speech, in our rhetoric about culture, in the books we choose to buy.

The artist desires a lack of affiliation, self-invention and creative mastery achieved in isolation. I wish my future work to be disengaged from contingency and cultural politics, primarily because I believe that Fiction still exists, a beautiful instrument moved by mystery. It constantly draws its own categories and edges, maps its own demise and rebirth, revives and regenerates us. Perhaps the desire to be heterodox only pushes one towards conformity. Perhaps we can only share a healthy suspicion of the culture industry, and seek new ways to undermine the song routines and scores given to us. I suspect this can be accomplished only in the content of fiction, and never in the blurb, the cover photo, or any of the machinations of ephemeral stardom, luck and profit.

Nora Khan lives in New Haven, Connecticut. She's a graduate of Harvard and the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

When Mother Died...

SHAHID ALAM

My mother passed away in July 2008. She was the most remarkable person that I have ever come across. She is the reason I think I have survived some dicey periods in my life - because she did what mothers do best: worry about and pray for their children, no matter what their age.

No, I have not seen her apparition, nor has she visited me in my dreams. But I noticed that the three-storey-tall yellow-and-crimson flowering hibiscus tree died towards the end of the same year. Or, so I had thought. I had snapped off a twig from the original tree in 2001 (from ASM Abdur Rab's garden estate, I should mention) and planted it in the inner courtyard of our house, not expecting it to take root. But it did, and grew immensely, blossoming profusely throughout the year, year after year. It was purely due to the care given it by my mother, eventually reaching the height of our three-storey building.

artwork by amina

My mother was an ardent lover of nature. Inevitably, mango, coconut, star fruit (*kamranga*), a variety of other fruit-bearing, plus mahogany and *devdaru*, trees and flowering plants dotted the spaces in and around our house. A gnarled old *kamini* tree of at least sixty-year vintage continues to flower regularly as well as to give an idea about the life span of our venerable dwelling.

Until the day the hibiscus tree died, and, after a hiatus, reaffirmed its death.

Mother had also nurtured a baby mynah to adulthood in a tin-roofed shed we had built for it in our courtyard. Their early morning conversations, which I surreptitiously observed on a number of occasions, made me believe that the mynah was human.

Then the mynah also died.

Leaving me to wonder about the strange circumstances of the two deaths within a year of Mother's passing.

The tree first. We, meaning my three brothers and yours truly, would not even think about handing over the plot to a developer as long as Mother was alive, but, what with all of us scattered now, we had to take a decision. We decided to hand the whole thing over to a developer - the best option available under the circumstances. Soon the deed was done, and I was left with a hollow feeling at the end of all the signings. The impact of the loss of the greater part of my life hit me in stages, until the day arrived when I felt in my heart that a big chunk of my own self was gone for forever.

During the transfer process, the tree was resplendent with flowers, including one branch high up with slender offshoots that displayed blossoms that had reverted to a primary red colour in striking contrast to the myriad yellow-and-crimson beauties all around them. Then, not too long after, little by little, but unmistakably, the flowers began to shrivel and fall off. That could be attributed to their natural life cycle, but the buds were falling off, too, without getting a chance to show off their splendour. Then the leaves followed suit, even the pale green new leaves. One day, they were all gone, leaving the bare skeleton of the tree for me to behold.

Was it a plant disease, I wondered, looking at bark whose sheen was fading and a trunk looking like dead wood. Well, I consoled myself, it's come to the end of its normal life cycle. Although the white hibiscus tree, a couple of years older in another section of the compound, was in full bloom. As the day for vacating the house drew near, however, the owner of an adjacent property expressed an interest in joining our offer to the developer. Subsequent negotiations meant that we were given a few months extension of stay. Within a fortnight of the extension, one morning I woke up to see, to my utter amazement, tiny pale green leaves sprouting all over the tree. It had come alive! The leaves grew to their full length, and then buds began to sprout forth from every branch, large and small. Flowers then duly showed up, and showed off, an array of yellow-and-crimson against a dark green backdrop. And with the mynah chattering away, Nature was at peace in and around my house.

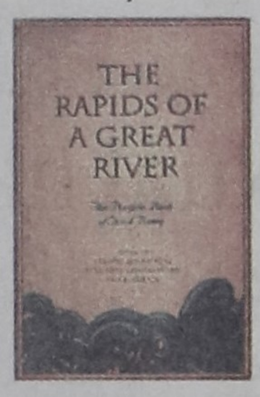
One day, however, we heard the news that the negotiations between the developer and our neighbour had fallen through, and we were to vacate the premises within a couple of months. There would be barely time enough to be able to observe Mother's first death anniversary in the house she had presided over for most of her life. Within a week of getting the news, the tree began to get sick again - shedding its flowers and, eventually, its outer sheen. Now, with our departure imminent, the tree has not recovered, has not shown any sign of returning to life. No doubt it will be cut down, and will only remain as a memory to a time gone by.

Even as the tree was finally giving up its ghost, I noticed that the mynah was growing listless, hardly touching its food. In fact, in a few days it fell completely silent, until one morning we found it dead, lying on its back on the floor. We buried it in a corner of our courtyard. As I get ready to leave this old house, I feel that I am leaving behind a way of life that had meaning only as long as Mother was with us in person, but one whose time has passed, which has vanished in the glitzy mega-slum that is Dhaka city today, far removed from the large town of open air and open spaces of the days of my childhood and youth.

Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communication department, Independent University, Bangladesh.

Tamil Poetry: *akam* and *puram*

FARHAD AHMED



There is a central division in the ancient and classical literature of India. One is the Sanskritic, Indo-Aryan stream, with its roots in the Rig Veda, thought by scholars to date from about 14th century B.C. The other great parallel flow is in what is classified as the 'Dravidian' languages, almost wholly based in south India, and of an entirely different language family than Sanskrit and its derivatives.

The four principal literary Dravidian languages are Tamil, Telegu, Kannada and Malayalam, of which Tamil is the oldest. Its recorded literary tradition dates back to more than a thousand years, with the earliest being what the three translators in their introduction to this book of translations of Tamil poetry tell us is known as 'Sangam' poetry, "named after the assembly or *sangam* of poets based in the Pandyan capital, Madurai." It is impossible to date such beginnings with any degree of accuracy, but most scholars seem to agree that this poetry, collected in eight anthologies of lyrics, ten long poems, and a grammar treatise titled *Tolkappiyam*, are probably from first century to fourth century B.C.

Though the two great ancient Indian literary traditions differ vastly in almost all aspects, there seems to be a unity in terms of a tendency to write according to classificatory schemes. Just as Panini (400 B.C.) froze Sanskrit for all times with his treatise on its grammar - in order that refined speech should eternally be the hallmark of Sanskrit - so too there were rules laid down ('codified' is the proper term here) for ancient Tamil poetry in the *Tolkappiyam*. Simply put, it divided all Tamil poetry into *akam* and *puram*. *Akam* dealt with 'that which is inside' or 'the inner world' - in other words, love poems, written in highly structured forms. *Puram*'s themes were on 'the outer world', and dealt with public life, with war, death, and the glory of kings. These poems laid the foundation for Tamil poetry, a tradition so strong that it was only from the nineteenth century onward that poets began to struggle to break, as the translators say, "free (from) traditional and prescribed forms of prosody... (and) speak with new voices and address a wide audience in the modern political and social world."

From the above it can be seen that no anthology attempting to cover Tamil poems from ancient to modern times can provide more than a glimpse of this illustrious and complex literary tradition. *The Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry* (edited by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Subashree Krishnaswamy and K. Srilata; New Delhi; 2009) represents a laudable effort in this direction. Its first part consists of the Sangam and bhakti periods till the pre-modern age of the nineteenth century. The second part is a collection of contemporary poems and poets, including Sri Lankan Tamils, women and dalits, whose voices differ sharply from what went on for a thousand years before them. Though it is difficult to judge, without knowing the language, how well the translators have done their job, and that a careful reading and absorption of the classificatory scheme of Tamil poetry is needed to understand how the ancient Tamil poems work, the book more than serves its purpose of introducing to its readers a record of a rich literary tradition and its latter-day practitioners.

Farhad Ahmed is an occasional contributor to *The Daily Star* literature page.

Tiruvalluvar
(translated by P S Sundaram)
Book II: Wealth
Learning

Learn well what should be learnt, and then
Live your learning.

Those called figures and letters, the wise declare,
Are eyes to live with.

Only the learned have eyes--others
Two sores on their face!

It is a pleasure to meet a scholar,
A pain to part with him.

A scholar seeking knowledge stoops and is lofty;
The ignorant never stoop and are low.

A well dug in the sand yields water as dug--
So learning, wisdom.

Why does one stop learning till he dies
When it makes all lands and places his?

The learning acquired in one birth
Helps a man in seven.

That what delights him delights others
Delights a scholar.

The wealth which never declines
Is not riches but learning.

(verses 391-400)

Buddha murdered
M A Nuhman (1944-)
(translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom)

In my dream, last night
Lord Buddha lay, shot dead.

Government police in civilian clothes
Shot and killed him
He lay upon the steps
Of the Jaffna Library,
Drenched in his own blood.

In the darkness of the night
The ministers arrived, raging:
'His name wasn't on our list,
So why did you kill him?'

'No, sirs,' they said,
'No mistake was made. Only,
Without killing him, it wasn't possible
To shoot even a fly.
So...'

'Ok. OK. But
Get rid of the corpse at once,'
The ministers said, and vanished.

The plainclothes men
Dragged the corpse inside
And heaped upon it
Ninety thousand rare books
And lit the pyre with the Sikalokavada Sutta.

So the Lord Buddha's body turned to ashes
And so did the Dhammapada.