

BREAKING THE BOWL OF CLAY:
The Dynamics of Representation-
Con/texts of Cultural Situation(s) Dialectics,
Social Transformation and Value

MURALI SIVARAMAKRISHNAN

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In a recent newspaper write-up, a historian and culture critic observed:

Charged times require calm contemplation. The greater the din made by the forces of hate, the deeper the need for poetry, song, philosophy, for pursuing those questions that disturb the assumptions to which we cleave(?) The outpouring on the internet and in the media post-Gujarat, is the uprising of precisely such a desire to think, rethink, speak out again and again, in the name of our humanity, or to draw on spiritual vernacular, our Divine potential. . . Death can and must provoke us to see clearly and live fully. Even in the deadliest hour truth can reveal itself.

(*The Hindu*, Sunday, December 15th 2002, p.7)

Doubtless, the fact-guide that our newspapers and media have become, not only keep us constantly updated but also on our toes. There is no dearth to information in the present. Everyone is apparently equally well informed. Questions of what how and for whom and with regard to the mode, method, medium and the rationale of what is communicated notwithstanding, we can boast about our well-informed times. Every moment is to be seen with relation to an event of global relevance. We are used to the jargon of “post” – post renaissance, post-September 11th, now post-Gujarat. And what is not but post “post”? As I write this Gujarat is going to the polls, and soon we might have some other overtones to add to our post-jargon. We tend to live in a continuous post-post but not in the present. And yet despite all these well-informed humans what we apparently have misplaced is our humanity! The media *informs* us about

every happening which is consequential or inconsequential and we respond to everything with the same nonchalance with which we watch a popular serial interspaced with loud jingles and commercials that also inform us about our compulsive need to buy this and not that, whether we need to or not. We are caught in the midst of channel wars – this is a helpless situation, a crisis of identity. Our choice is reduced to either Pepsi or Coca Cola and we have no other choice but to reach out for one simply because no one compels us to drink water. No one would deny that we are living through troubled times, we have apparently mastered the art of inflicting pain and suffering on a hitherto unprecedented scale on each other. No country is free from the deadly gator-grip of terrorism. An impending doom of genocide gathers like a cloud in our skies. Perhaps we will only stop when we have succeeded in wiping out all life from the face of the earth-along with our own selves and the entire earth. And yet we go on living in a virtual reality, arranging and readjusting our life surfing across channels.

A very bleak future indeed! Crisis, human history has always confronted, but never in the present scale. Complexity has evolved to such magnitude that we no longer know what is what; each of us embody Orwell's vision of "double think" in grotesque individual variations.

Now, to recall what I cited at the beginning: these troubled times call for the soothing touch of the spirit. *Charged times require calm contemplation. The greater the din made by the forces of hate, the deeper the need for poetry, song, philosophy.* . . . This is not to demean our technology or our visual media. It is a well-recognized fact that to sing one must have a song in one's heart - but now we have mislaid our songs. How can we resuscitate the life-giving springs within ourselves? Where do we begin? What are the positive signs of our times? How are they represented in the soothing mode of poetry and a philosophy of life?

To believe Fredric Jameson, economics has come to overlap with culture. Even without entering into the deadly fray of theories and counter-theories about the modern and the postmodern one can safely accept this point. In an essay entitled "End of Art' or 'End of History'", he writes:

. . . everything including commodity production and high and speculative production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural; and culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented

Jameson Fredric, *The Cultural Turn*,
London: Verso, 1998. p.73

I would like to add that not only has economics entered the cultural fabric but it has also come to dominate and function as a mainstay. It is

indeed economics that now leads the way. Our values have come to be conditioned by market values. And only what is marketable finds place in the value systems. The TV and Internet have come to represent primarily the commodity culture alongside the big-moneyed film industry. Now here is some space for making some quick bucks as well. They churn out so-called popular images of culture fetishizing the same as the supremely valuable commodity. “*Culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented!*” perhaps it is the developing countries more than the so called developed that face the mighty presence of the cyber world. For, the process of production of a post industrial situation has been for the developed countries a process historically necessitated, (through the feudal to the monarchical and post renaissance enlightenment, industrial revolution etc.) while the developing countries did not have to evolve through the similar paradigms in order to reach a globally shared post-technological knowhow. Nevertheless, in our present day world one cannot segregate even cultural crises! We share our technologies and we share our crises very much like we share our air and our skies. Jameson is not out of place in south India! Bhopal, Chernobyl, Ayodhya, September 11th and Gujarat are all on the same side of local paper. There is no *otherside*.

One cannot even imagine a time not so far away when one did not have access to the internet and e-mail. Some years ago, my son, then barely six asked me to “speak to him about those good old times when you had to walk all the way across the room to flick the channel button!” He could never imagine a time when the remote was not there at all. The history of television and the rise of the channel wars in our part of the world are the history of re-representation of the visual and articulated image; they have reorganized our reality for us. Information and the process of dissemination of cultural representation all have undergone tremendous upheavals with this. The coming of the TV has ushered in a paradigm shift in our frames of reference. I would like draw attention to the drastic changes ushered in by the wave of television-created imagery. In the context of Kerala the eighties was a period of turbulent change followed by a steady stream of soap operas in the nineties. The Malayalee has learned to see himself and herself on the small screen and visualize regional history in the framework erected by the popular visual images. The TV supplies the past, present, and future. What is there on television today is significant: what is not there is naturally not so.

The point I wish to highlight is the easy adaptation of a popular cultural framework by the television medium. The Asianet at its inception attempted to reframe nostalgia for a misplaced political past of Kerala by recapturing the favourite songs from the people’s theatre ventures of KPAC

and old film songs. In fact the very film industry at its inception in the early fifties had attempted to adopt and adapt Malayalam fiction very much in this fashion: the works of major Malayalam writers were recast in to the film mould. What was important then was just to retell the tale in a different medium. It took quite some time for the film industry to realize its own potential for representing. Film language was there for the discovery—an entire field in itself! A new aesthetic was in the offing. The medium grew out of all proportions and instead of being tamed it has come to tame people at large. It is a case of the subject subjecting the student into subjugation. The television has developed out of all proportions like the little Brahmin in the fabled tale of Mahabali.

Nowadays the television has come to represent the reality for us. Even when we need to verify the validity of some incident or happening we ask: was it shown on TV? As if represented on the TV reality becomes more real for us!

The theoreticians of semiotics as well as theoretically sophisticated sociologists and culture critics have time and again reminded us that *any representation is more than what it represents, more than merely a reproduction of what it represents: it also contributes to the construction of reality!*

Now we have come to inhabit a world fabricated into being by the technological media. We are living in a virtual reality. Not only on account of the complexities of the medium but also due to the inordinate influx of economic and market values into our ontological framework.

In the *Mahabharata* a Yaksha asks Yudhistira to name the most mysterious thing in the world and Yudhistira replies: The most mysterious thing is man. All around us we find everything falling, failing, dying and yet the amazing thing is that we go on living, disregarding the fact of death and decay!

In all probability human kind cannot bear very much reality. We need to hide our heads under the sand like the ostrich when it comes to dangerous *situations*. We are great self-deceivers. Our safety lies in our delusions. Hence the convenience of the TV and its fabricated delusive world. Soap operas do not make so much demands on our brain. Let us be passive and let life pass by. . .

This is not to mean that technology by itself is to be blamed for our present crises. Neither is it intended to heap complaints on the techno-media. It is the culpability of those who allow themselves to be entangled by the surface superficial textures of both that I challenge as leading to this techno-mess. True, popular culture is democratic and pluralistic; it does away with all distinctions of high and low art and addresses the common woman. But then too much of that mere entertainment industry

unconcerned *with those old fashioned questions* of values has brought us to this artful mess; we only believe in the virtual. Perhaps this is the result of the “*coca-colonization*” of culture.

How do we go on inhabiting a world well nigh virtual, where the borderlands of dream, fantasy and commerce merge inextricably into one long unending chain. The Yaksha is standing bewildered and both Yudhistira and Mahakavi Vyasa are staring at each other. This is not magical realism. This is reality for us. It is sometimes an Ayodhya, a September 11th or a Gujarat that give us a shake. Shall we dig *within* for a clear stream of spirituality, for sanity, for humanness?

“Make it new,” was the slogan of European Modernists. Fredric Jameson writes:

Let us spend our time on the bad new things, Brecht joyously recommended, and Let the good old things bury themselves; yet the passion and the praxis of actuality evidently proves less usable when the very sense of what constitutes actuality becomes confused and aimless. . . The Brechtian new would then, today, turn out to be just another of those “good old things” he suggested we do away with. (pp.93-94)

To believe in this view of Jameson is not to be too prudish and take sides against the contemporary shifting sense of values at the same time insisting on rigidity in our value systems. The creative psyche will always necessarily be on the move in a state of constant dynamis never getting stranded in any period. However in our times *in this part of the world the virtual reality* is shrouded by market values and passes for the real. Probably this is where we need to get our bearings relocated and our value systems readjusted. The Yaksha of the Mahabharata is again posing conundrums. *The Postmodern as well as the modern for us are not historical product of late capitalism they are not historically necessitated but transplanted from overseas as mental ideas.* Hence *defamiliarising* ourselves is the only possibility of release from this gator grip of those recurrent waves of colonization. We have to realize that the dream world created by the mass hysterical visual media is not real—neither does it represent the desired reality for us. It is a substitute world wherein we are the opium eaters. Is religion the only opium of the masses in the present?

We need to break our idols like way back in the sixties. *Charged times require calm contemplation. The greater the din made by the forces of hate, the deeper the need for poetry, song, philosophy.* . . . When fundamentalism reigns supreme and the forces of fascism are unleashed it is the need of the hour to think about breaking the idols. When we start killing each other in the name of religion it is time to rethink religious values and sing and dance

after the idol is broken. It will not merely do to sit back and watch those startling images of massacre and inhuman cruelty – what man in doing to man—these times plead for us to be come more self aware— *jagrata*, *jagrata*. In more ways than one spirituality is irreligious; the spiritual is boundless and unconditional, it is dynamic and vibrant and holds nothing sacred including the sacred.

There is an old Tamil song that was quite popular at one time. It goes like this:

Nanda vanathil oru andi
 Avan arezhu nalaka koyavanai vendi
 Kondu vandan oru thondi

Athai kondadi kondadi
 Pott utai thandi
 Nanda vanathil oru andi
 (*The Begging Bowl of Clay*)

An andi there was
 In Nandavanam
 Who prayed and prayed
 At the potter's door
 For days on end to get
 A begging bowl of clay
 He danced with joy
 All the way back
 With his begging bowl of clay
 He danced with it
 In sheer delight
 That he dropped
 His begging bowl of clay.
 He broke
 The begging bowl of clay

(*Andi*: a mendicant beggar often a bhakta of the Lord Shiva. In another version, “kondadi” is replaced by “Koothadi” that clearly refers to Lord Shiva who is held to be “the dancer”)

This I believe is representation at the peak of its dynamis. The breaking of the bowl is breaking the magic circle of the virtual and a reaching after the true, the vast the beautiful.

Every age had had its voice of conscience in the poet. In almost any age and in every climate we come across writing that rues the day. . . . “the time is out of joint, O cursed sprite. . . .” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*) “Who, if I cry, would hear me among the angelic orders? (*Rilke, Duino Elegies*)

Some years ago, in connection with the birth centenary celebrations of the great Malayalam poet Vallathol Narayana Menon, there was a national Seminar on Indian Renaissance. It was a gathering of many well-known intellectuals. There was a widespread apprehension and genuine concern over the then too apparent cultural and spiritual stagnation. In their preliminary note the seminar organizers wrote:

This spiritual and cultural stagnation seems to have become so deeply entrenched that when the emergency was clamped down upon the nation there was no whimper of protest from those sections of the intellectuals from whom one could have naturally expected sharp reactions. Perhaps it should be said that the emergency itself represented the lowest depths of the spiritual degradation and moral stagnation. It seems the time has come for an indepth reappraisal of these questions, especially in view of the clouds of a fascist menace looming large over the Indian national horizon.

Govindan, M. *The Menace of Fascism and the Indian Intellectual*, Indian Renaissance, ed. K. Ayyappa Paniker, Trivandrum, 1993, p. 34.

Very foreboding thoughts these. In his invited response, M. Govindan, the noted Malayalam intellectual, astutely pointed out that the crises in the cultural and social sphere is largely on account of our negligence to perceive the integrated nature of the material and the spiritual. Discussing the terrors and the menace of fascism and the Indian intellectual he said: *I think, renaissance is a kind of balance between the body and the soul—otherwise there cannot be a rebirth.* I believe this is as true of the present as then—this delicate and fine balance. Somewhere in our blind march in the desacralised times towards a postmodern, a post-technological post, post India, we appear to have left our hearts behind. Again it is a request for the misplaced balance, a quest for values. They virtual reality has blinded us, we need to break free. Break the bowl.

REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL DIALECTICS

We have come to inhabit a world fabricated into being by the technological media. We are living in virtual reality. Not only on account of the complexities of the medium but also due to the inordinate influx of

economic and market values into our ontological framework. The mass produced metaphors of this commercial culture tells us how to live in accordance with these market values. We accommodate ourselves to this commodity fetish, to this surreality. Here the aesthetic is not in any way removed from the historical and the socio-cultural. What is represented on our small screens reorganizes our reality for us. This is a dream world, but not the dream world engendered by poetry and art. The cyber-romance is not the creative romantic of the poet and artist. I would like to draw a distinction between these. Poetry and art essentially lead us towards a better humanity, towards a better world in spite of the deconstructionist's warning with regard to the politico-social density of the language of images and words. There is a world out there that is humane wherein we can suffer the voice of our neighbour and even enjoy it like music! There we do recall those dislocated values of sorority, fraternity, love and tolerance. These are not only for the saints. They are for all. As Octavio Paz, in a wild fury of metaphorical language describes poetry:

Poetry is knowledge, salvation, power, abandonment. An operation capable of changing the world, poetic activity is revolutionary by nature; a spiritual exercise, it is a means of interior liberation. Poetry reveals this world; it creates another. Bread of the chosen; accursed food. It isolates; it unites. Invitation to the journey; return to the homeland. Inspiration, respiration, muscular exercise Prayer, litany, epiphany, presence. Exorcism, conjuration, magic. Sublimation, compensation, condensation of the unconscious. Historic expression of races, nations, classes. It denies history. . . Madness, ecstasy, logos. Return to childhood, coitus, nostalgia for paradise, for hell, for limbo. Play, work, ascetic activity. Confession, Innate experience, Vision, music, symbol.

(*The Bow and the Lyre*, Austin and Londodn: Univ. of Texas, 1973. p. 3)

It has been the contention of many artists and poets around the world that the entire history of poetry could be seen as an index of the expanding human awareness. This is not to mean that there has been a logical and linear expansion—poetry does nothing like that. There is a deep felt link between the poet and the people. To believe Czeslaw Milosz, poetry has always followed “the mysterious movements of the great soul of the people”.

That sacred art of the word, just because it springs forth from the sacred depths of Universal Being, appears to us bound, more rigorously than any other mode of expression, to the spiritual and physical movement of which it is a generator

and a guide. . . Sacerdotal in prehistoric times epic at the moment of Greek colonial expansion, psychological and tragic at the decline of the dionysia, Christian, theological and sentimental in the Middle ages, neoclassical since the beginning of the first spiritual and political revolution—namely the renaissance—finally romantic. . . poetry has always followed, fully of its terrible responsibilities, the mysterious movements of the great soul of the people. . .

(*The Witness of Poetry* Massachusetts: Harvard; Univ. Press, 1983)

The last three decades of the last century saw amazing changes in the literary and artistic sensibility of south India in particular. Much like during the period of the Bhakti revival (which has of late come into serious critical debates in the contexts of evaluating cultural values and artistic revival or renaissance) it was mostly in the south Indian languages that the earliest seeds of modernism burst forth. Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Telugu and Malayalam poetry chartered out regions of the new. Ezra Pound's call to "Make it New" resounded here in this part of the world albeit slightly later than in Europe and America. Modernism came in the form of breaking of the shackles. The literary and artistic form underwent drastic changes. However, the modern was not something that was historically necessitated as in the west but an aesthetic idea/ideal that was transplanted hurriedly from alien soil. Nevertheless it survived. For instance, the trajectory of modernist poetry in Malayalam can be seen as striking a parallel to the rampant spread of market capitalism and commodity culture, although capitalism in Kerala did not evolve naturally from the social context; capitalist and feudalist values survived side by side not excluding each other. The physical living conditions of the people became altered and a new concept in space surfaced as cities became overcrowded and more urbanized. Perhaps the insight of the Marxist critic Christopher Caudwell would serve better to explicate this situation although the observation was directed in a different context. In his *Illusion and Reality*, 1937, Caudwell wrote:

Poetry reaches technically an unprecedented competence; it draws more and more apart from reality. . . the great mass of men no longer read poetry, no longer feel, the need for it, no longer understand it, because poetry, has moved away from concrete living by the development of its technique, and this movement was itself only the counterpart of a similar movement in the whole of society.

The poet came to be more and more isolated from his people on account of the hieratic nature of his utterance. However, there was a general make-

belief that the times demanded change in form and content. The late seventies and early eighties witnessed a tremendous spurt of creativity in Malayalam and Tamil writings as well. *Puthu Kavithai* and *adhunikatha* were of like concern for the Tamil and Malayalee. The need of the times was to relocate the self. This was also the period of translation: many voices from around the globe reechoed in this part of the world garbed in the local language. Pablo Neruda and Frantz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht and Paul Clean, Herman Hesse and Yvgene Yevtushenko, Octavio Paz and Ranier Maria Rilke, the list is endless. This was the case in fiction and drama alike. New writing came to be. A new dynamics of form set in. This period also witnessed a rise in political radicalism side by side. Gone were the romantic revolutionaries of the fifties and sixties; here were poets who were self-reflexive articulators of new found ideological voice. Malayalam poetry perked up and the new diction was easily imbibed by an sahrdaya. Kavi arangu were the order of the day. Poets like Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, Balachandran Chullikkadu, Punalur Balan, D Vinayachandran, Ayyuappa Paniker, ONV Kurup, Sugatha Kumari and others could draw huge crowds of young and enthusiastic admirers who carried on reciting their works even after they stopped reciting. More than ever the poetic voice, the Dravidic rhythms and the charisma of the poets achieved newer dimensions. This could very well be looked upon as the most dynamic period in the history of Malayalam poetry. Here the poet became the voice of the people's conscience. She was the kavi, the drsta in the proper sense of the term. The rise of print capitalism and the rise of the new wave of modernism in Malayalam writing almost appear to go hand in glove. If in the seventies it was the delight of discovering new forms of narratives, in the eighties it was the refraction of the image, a kind of ironical radicalism, a self-reflexive voice, a new sound of social sense. However, this intimacy between the creator and the reader/ listener, between the poet and his sahrdaya was not to remain long. The late eighties ushered in the newer post modernwave. Strange as it might appear, among the languages of the south, the most adamant and thus posing the most resistance to change are Tamil and Malayalam—and yet, these are the two languages that easily succumbed to the onslaught of what Wole Soyinka in another context has described as the *second wave of colonization*: that is Theory. As early as the late seventies literary theory hit our academic circles; but it took quite some time to seep into the creative psyche of the south Indian writer. Cultural activities had always found the intellectual atmosphere of the universities and other academic circles congenial for their growth. So was the case with modernist Malayalam poetry; it had an

academic childhood and manhood. Confronted with the new fangled ideas of the semioticians and structuralists with regard to the challengeable role of language in its efficacy of articulating the truth of the world and the veracity of the literary and aesthetic image as being a derivative sign, the creative writer became more inward looking in her act of dealing out words and images. Did the word come first or did it but replace the prior image? Where does experience figure beside these? Is experience itself a product of our linguistic universe? However, such an interface never actually surfaced in Malayalam. What really would serve to demarcate a shift in modernist sensibilities in the nineties is the nascent awareness of the voice of the subaltern—the dalit and the woman, hitherto unheard and unseen surfaced with renewed energy. Of course this is not to deny their presence until then—the downtrodden and the woman had been historically marginalized and had to be consciously brought back into the societal consciousness.

Although there was a deep felt worry whether one should articulate one's creative experience through the newly found sensibility of altercation and artifice, literary theory did not leave a scarred surface on the face of the regional writing from south India. On the other hand literary criticism was drastically affected by theory from the west. Many concepts and notions were bodily lifted and transplanted in the regional mental geography without any critical examination of their cultural context or roots. Theory came to be applied left and right indiscriminately as a tool for analysis. Writers have come to feel a certain sense of inadequacy if they are not able to air a few neocritical terms flalmboyantly to reveal their schooling and class. Applicability and relevance were never considered; fashion it was to be erudite and knowledgeable. The malleability and ductility of theoretical speculation probably would account for this easy transplant. Print capitalism thrived further in this critical boom. The late eighties and nineties in Kerala for the most saw a boom in the previously dormant publishing industry. However, the effects of these activities were insignificant in comparison with the geometric progress of the television media. Very much like the regional channels, regional writing in the south has been through a severe struggle to come to terms with its own regional identity. Because when one is constantly playing with representations one is bound to be confronted with such questions as: What are we representing? For whom are we representing? What is it that is represented and how does it represent what it is supposed to? These are not easy questions to be answered. But the fact that they have appeared at all is promising. If such a self-reflexivity were to manifest in our visual media it would certainly augur a new horizon of hope.

The postmodern debate is quite rampant in the intellectual circles in this part of the world today. Questions of the nature of cultural identity, the interface between the modern and the postmodern are all debated. Whether one believes in Jurgen Habermas's theory that *postmodernity* is but an incomplete project of modernity, at all, one can perceive certain theoretical continuities in the attitudes to representations in our times, questions which have also been discussed by the high modernists. As a single instance, G Aravindan's much popular cartoon strip of the sixties; *Cheriyā Manushyarum Vāliya Lokavum* that could on its own right represent the changing times during the onset of modernism presages many issues of the postmodern. But however, in our midst we now have many who insist on being either modern or postmodern in outlook and life and living writing thinking and being without as much as turning a questioning glance at the relevance of such theorizing in our cultural context. They would fall easy prey to the lures of the tinsel world of the small screen—for its glamour and limelight are quite easily accessible too. A current trend on all channels is the big money winning quiz programme after the *Big's B's Kon Banega Crorepathi* became a commercial hit. I will only pause to draw attention to the sort of simple questions that the participants are called upon to answer. The point is to make it easily accessible to the common man. Anyone can participate and everyone can make some quick bucks. Very democratic! Very postmodern too.

I have chosen three poems in Malayalam from three markedly different periods as signifying the changes in representation: one from the premodern times (the late forties and the trend continued up to the fifties as well), Vailoppilly Sreedhara Menon's *For Want of Rice*, one from the modern period= *A Ayyappan's Supper*, and the third, as signifying the woman's voice of the present= *Vijayalekshmy's Bhagavatham*. Here are the English versions of the three poems:

Poem 1

Ariyillanjitte For want of Rice,
Vailoppillil Sreedhara Menon *Kannikoyttu*, 1947.

Those who cared not
When the poor soul lived
Came most willing
To shoulder his corpse.

Much indeed like the great
 The lot of the commons on earth
 For they too come to be most loved
 After their death.

Much indeed like the great
 The lot of the commons on earth
 For they too come to be most loved
 After their death.
 Some chop down the mango tree
 Some clear the fence
 And some by the bereaved widow sit
 Comforting her.

Money by the compassion
 Of a neighborhood manor came
 That fetched a length of cloth
 For the dead man's shroud.

Setting his betel box aside
 An elderly gentleman marched in
 To where the woman she lay
 And busily announced
 Everything is OK
 We have laid him down
 And all we now need is some dried rice
 To strew round the body

Replied the bereaved widow
 Her voice bitter and broken
 If but we had rice
 He wouldn't have died.

Poem 2

Supper, A.Ayyappan,

While the crowd stood
 Treading the blood

Of the wayfarer who died
 In the accident
 My eyes rested on the five rupee note
 That fluttered out of the dead man's pocket.
 My wife—a grass widow, despite me.
 My kids—scarecrows of hunger.

Let today's supper be with this.
 Tonight—
 Kids sleeping peacefully
 With the taste of supper still in their mouths
 With half empty-stomachs, me and my woman.

The dead man's post-mortem
 Or cremation
 Might be over. . . .

With drooping heavy eyelids
 Trying to recollect: the blood-treading crowd.

Dead
 Dispensing
 Consecrated bread
 For the hungry living.

Poem 3

Bhagavatham, Vijayalakshmi, trans. Satchidanandan.

At dusk you take you holy dip
 And away from the noises of the world
 You read aloud the sacred book:
 Bhagavatha.

Why don't you come, come on
 Listen—you keep calling me.
 But I am busy by the fire,
 Cooking the meal for you.
 A hundred plates and pots
 Remain to be washed
 And a hundred little things,
 Chores for tomorrow.

With, my soot-blackened hands
 I turn the leaves of a mighty
Bhagavatha that will end
 Only when my life ends
 And willingly go on reading it:
 But you never come to hear me.

For want of Rice represents a still-unified community in the process of transformation, the decrepitude and the trauma of poverty and suffering. One individual's plight is represented through the evocative presentation of a tragic situation. There is a certain directness of utterance and the language does not slip away into any disordering of the aesthetic sensibility. In Ayyappan's poem the hungry man eyeing the fluttering five rupee note signifies the isolated image of the modern man. There is no organic community, there is only the individual and his personal greed. The image is stark and direct too. However, in the case of *Bhagavatham* there is this implication of the woman's role in society: does she exist in the scheme of things at all? Does she ever play a significant role in society? In the process of the construction of reality she is marginalized—she has been and she still is. The narrator is a woman, no doubt. Her male counterpart is self-assuredly living a societally sanctioned life, reading the lord's life very devoutly and even inviting her to join him, completely unaware of her "real" life. It could even be read differently: "Why don't you come and sit beside me and watch the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* on TV? It is so very religiously produced, you know!"

REPRESENTING THE REAL: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE IMAGE

No image is created in isolation. No representation takes shape in a vacuum. Every represented image is an attempt to capture a moment in its fleeting existence. Writing for us, as much as painting to a certain extent is a dialogue between ourselves and the world out there. In more ways than one it is a dialectical relationship: responding, interpreting, changing.

"Nature is on the inside," says Paul Cezanne. And the created image, whether it is eidetic, iconic or symbolic, is undeniably linked to the world out there and the world of sensations—or their echoes in our own body. Region, geography, representation and culture form one single continuous paradigm.

According to Arnold Hauser the radical sociologist, a work of art

is a challenge, we draw upon our own aims and endeavours, In interpreting it, we draw upon our own aims and endeavours, inform it with a meaning that has its origin in our own ways of Life and thought. In a word, any art that really affects us becomes to that extent modern art.

(Hauser, *A Sociology of Art, Re-Visions: New Perspectives on Art Criticism*. Ed. Howard Smagula. New Jersey: Princeton Hall, 1990, p.15.)

Seen in this light art is an order of signification common to mankind as a whole, and by virtue of its essential nature non-evolutive and non-progressive. In interpreting it from within ourselves we enter into a dialectical relationship with the represented image. Historical distance, cultural and ethnic unfamiliarity drops away under a shared human awareness. The modern does not ask for specific form or specific content. When Rilke writes: *who, if I cry would hear me among the angelic orders* (“Duino Elegies”), or when Herman Hesse writes: *And the entire history of my love/ is you and this evening* (Elizabeth”), we who read them experience a totally meaningful universe of image, a gestalt or a multiverse, wherein we move in silence as through the caves of Ajanta or Ellora, with our mind’s eye like a torch lighting up its walls. It does matter little whether we apprehend an ideal world of images or experience the concrete presence of the real mediated through allusion, allegory or symbol. What matters is that art creates for us a self-conscious other and invites us into that fictional world, a world of myth, of poetry, of icons and symbols, where we attain another self-consciousness through quite another reality. This is far from the dissolution of the thinking being in front of the TV, a mere passive receiver holding an inert remote sensor.

Primitive art was the representation of a mythological universe. Myth and form interface and the art of the primitive is the expression of the mythic conception of the world. For the cave man depicting the bison before the hunt, the image drawn is representative of the hunt and serves a magical function. Thus one could say that in primitive societies poetry, incantation and painting served ritualistic functions. In a way the work of art retained its sacredness and the image was held to be holy even after the basic ritual was over. The picture or icon of a deity serves a similar function. It is an object of aesthetic experience but it is charged with ritualistic and mystical significance—a post-ritualistic significance! In Dravidian culture pictorial representations done in the three ritual modes—*Bhuta Vadivu*, *Chitra Vadivu* and *Silpa Vadivu*—are considered sacred and holy. Now, the breaking of a mirror where in we see ourselves

represented is looked upon as undesirable. The power of the created image is still largely in operation. The entire functioning of society and history depends on the transference of the created image. In our times Banks and stock exchanges have taken over the act of representing images on currency notes, coins and the share markets. The most valuable are our societal images and roles. Our current deities are processed on the celluloid screens. We haven't marched much farther than our primitive ancestors; only our images have been transformed. The French artist Marcel Duchamp in 1917 sent in a urinal to an exhibition titled "Fountain". Through the inversion of this object and thereby draining its very functional meaning, he was obviously proposing a change of art/artist, object/public relationship. The *andi* of the popular Tamil song that I cited earlier also does a similar act. By gloating so much on the object of his affection he goes to the extent of breaking its very form. It is a tragic situation as well. But the breaking of the mud bowl is the transference of the represented image, into its essential self. In Hindu death ceremony a mud bowl is intentionally broken in order to symbolize the unity of atman and Brahman. The broken mud bowl signifies the breaking of all forms and represents the unrepresentable. The need of our times is this breaking of the bowl of clay.

REPRESENTATION AND VALUE

Any act of representation involves an act of cultural embodiment, as we have already seen. Any representation is more than what it represents, and it also contributes to the construction of reality. There does exist a dialectical relationship between the representation and the real. Therefore the inverted virtual image that our commercial culture parades through present day visual media only serves to distance us further from the reality. Ernst Gombrich has a theory of all art as illusion. However, as he would also agree the illusory image represents the real as much as twins resemble each other but cannot be said to represent each other. Similarly reprints of a work of art in this age of technological reproduction resemble the work more than they present what they in the first place were to represent. So in the endless repetition of visual images and signs that our times have given rise to we have distanced ourselves from our essential reality (if at all there is something like that) and what is more, we reconstruct our world endlessly on those lines too. Once we recognize the technologically constructed images for what they are they would become so transparent that we could see through them.

According to the Sanskrit aestheticians the entire cosmos is an aesthetic

representation: only as an aesthetic continuum could the cosmos be resolved. It is the dance of Siva. The experience of the aesthetic was considered to be a vivarta of the brahmic consciousness. Therefore in the creative art of representation the artist/poet is the god-player. And far from leading the mind towards attachment to and possession of the world of things, people, experience and sensations, the aesthetic dissociates itself from the worldly and the corporeal. It is not an escape from reality but a holistic experience of the real. The shattering of the mud pot is the shattering of all shackles and the experience of the spiritual.

In the Isa Upanishad we read:

Isa vasyam idam sarvam
 Yat kim ca jagatyam jagat
 Tena tyaktena bhunjita
 Ma grdhah kayasvid dhanam

All this, whatever moves in this world is enveloped by god. Therefore find you enjoyment in renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others. The Upanishad enjoins us to enjoy through abandonment, through distancing ourselves from the object of our enjoyment. Not in possession, but in aesthetic distancing is the relish, the ananda, the bliss of communion. *To have the mud pot, to hold it and dance, only later to drop it and shatter it.*

I would like to conclude with a small poem that would work as a Zen Koan. These are among the marvelous lines of poetry that my generation grew up with representing and re-representing our fears, anxieties, memories. This one is from Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet. *I do not recall who did this translation:*

If I die
 Leave open the window

The boy eats oranges
 (I'll see him from my window)

The reaper reaps the wheat
 (I'll hear him from my window)

If I die
 Leave open the window. . . .

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