

I have come to view my life as a writer as a compulsive and desperate quest for the meaning of freedom. Perhaps it is this central concern that lends some consistency to my irregular and fragmented articulations of joy and pain, solitude and society, the surrender of love and the wrath of revolt:

Once in a poem on my birth, I wrote:

*My grandmother was insane.  
As her madness ripened into death,  
My uncle, a miser, kept her  
In our store room, covered in straw.  
My grandmother dried up, burst,  
Her seeds flew out of the windows.  
The sun came and the rain,  
One seedling grew up into a tree  
Whose lusts bore me.  
Can I help writing poems  
About monkeys with teeth of gold?*

(‘Granny’, 1973)

This insane business of playing with words whose meanings are interpreted in a variety of ways in a variety of contexts and whose full realization is infinitely postponed, has always given me a sense of the distance I must walk, of the endless births I must take, like the Bodhisattva of the Jataka tales. This strange experience, tense and intense at the same time, is - I hope and fear - the poet’s freedom. It is the pleasant agony of being poured into a thousand moulds, of talking in many tongues and being talked to in turn, of being picked up by a stranger who recognizes himself in my words, which are now his to play upon. It is the feverish ecstasy of ceaseless deconstruction and reconstruction, of dissolution into the myriad possibilities of discourse, into the myriad subjects that readings reveal. It is the realization of the gay relativity of popular carnival opposed to everything that is readymade and finished - to all pretence at immutability, the gaiety of being ever open, ever expanding.

There indeed was a time when I had thought of a poet’s freedom as a cent of land I could call my own, where I could cultivate meanings that would ever be mine. Freedom then was the celebration of the self-indulgent individualist who failed to discern the private appropriation of meaning through an inevitable reduction of its plurality. But experience has taught me that dispossession, and not possession, is the way of freedom. It is a total giving of all the gold that solitude

## The Many Meanings of Freedom

K. Satchidanandan

fills me with, when poetry chooses to speak through me. The pleasure of writing, though apparently private and erotic, is really the festival of the collective from whose treasury of signs, symbols, myths, archetypes, rhymes and rhythms, I choose my instruments of perceptual re-orientation through linguistic subversion. My writing room is dense with people. My loneliness gets its tongue from my kin. My inspiration is but an irresistible awakening of the society I carry within. My thematic inventions are only a craftsman’s doodlings of old gargoyles. The most original of my metaphors, even, do not come from a vacuum. Even my attempts at dymythologization only

womenfolk melting like pale moons in their domestic inferno and our children, clipped of their angel’s wings, fall headlong into the monstrous structures of oppression we dutifully build for them. I have seen prisons open like the black Book of Judgement to receive patriots everywhere and sunflowers growing nails and fangs in the conspiracies of the wicked, while mad men sing from the rooftops about the immanent years of wrath. I have watched too revolutions that set out to liberate man turn into tyrannies, as guiding stars vanish and wise men stand tongue-tied before the bloody rituals of persecution.

All this has turned my poetry

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contribute to the mythology of a new world.

This realization has not been without its ethico-political implications. A poet’s freedom today is indivisibly associated with an inescapable awareness of the human predicament as embodied in one’s concrete conjuncture, even with a sense of shame provoked by the unheroic fate of the modern Prometheus, eaten away by worms rather than violated by vultures. My evolution as a poet has meant a gradual socialization of my persistent sense of the tragic and the ironic. The street has taught me its lessons. I have seen men possessed by hunger break upon their neighbours’ hearts for a grain of rice and young men bleed on our highways in vain battles, like rats before a ravaging plague, while our clumsy gods and clumsier leaders pounce on our poor in the twilight hour with their tridents, scimitars and rifles. I have watched our

black with pain and protest, pain that subverts the false optimism that the rulers everywhere try to drug their subjects with, and protest against the colonization of our unconscious by the dark mechanisms of mass communication that threaten to destroy our native ways of seeing and saying. Fighting this intrusion of contradictory consciousness demands the development of a calisthenics of combat, a renewal, and not a repetition, of our varied regional modes of perception and articulation. Such a decolonization of image and significance certainly foresees commitment - which does not necessarily involve an explicit alliance with a specific political formation. It is a broader concern for the sufferings and struggles of one’s people in their different dimensions.

Where does metaphysics come in this ontological quest for freedom? My poetry was profoundly

metaphysical to begin with. In poem after poem I contemplated death and hinted at the possibility of deliverance, deeply inspired as I was by the Upanishads in the existentialist sixties. Time, rather the conflict between time as moment and time as eternity, was central to my poetic preoccupations. Strange as it may seem, it continued into the turbulent seventies. It is quite possible to read my poems of that period of radicalism from a metaphysical point of view, for death continued to obsess me, this time not in its abstract universal incarnation but in its more concrete and tangible forms as the death by the wayside, death in the battle, death as martyrdom, death as suicide - that is, death as choice rather than destiny. The anxieties of ‘Summer Rain’, of ‘Resurrection’ or of ‘The Empty Room’, for example, are also philosophical, not purely social. I remember how, while discussing the script of a film on the martyrs of Kayyur in Kerala, I got bogged down in the question of the validity of martyrdom: how much of it is ontological choice, how much social imposition, how much of it is death and how much life, how much revolution and how much despair? No need to say, the film remained a dream. Those who care for subterranean voices can hear *Isavasya* in ‘Summer Rain’, its quest for resolution, its concern for another peace.

Morphological revolutions in poetry are inane when unsupported by perceptual ones, and perceptual revolutions are ineffective when unaccompanied by morphological ones. Both of them are ultimately spiritual in their import. By ‘spiritual’ I mean that great tradition of agony and revolt that flows from Blake to Brecht and from Tu-fu to Kim-chi Hai, that which echoes Vyasa’s cry for justice in a world torn by conflicting ideals, and still recognizes with Valmiki that there is no enemy like passive grief (*nasthi soka samo ripu:*). This is a spirituality that disbelieves all simplifications about existence and finds itself in permanent opposition to all forms of tyranny, untruth and injustice. The Buddha to me has been a symbol of this philosophical revolt. Perhaps that is why he keeps being born again and again as the sad, the wise and the angry man in my lines. Perhaps, of late, this vein has grown stronger in my poetry. This is not without reason. I have come to believe that purely materialist

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*Mutinies Now*. Nirad Chaudhuri's piece, 'My Hundredth Year' is yet another exercise in self-indulgence, and an apology - the *raison d'être* for his writings. His *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* had raised hackles on account of its dedication to the 'memory of the British Empire in India.' Chaudhuri thinks that the criticism was unwarranted and born of a basic misconception about his book.

Philip Knightley, who was associated with the Bombay magazine *Imprint* in its early years, writes in 'An Accidental Spy' how in the early sixties he became, unwittingly, a part of the covert operations of the CIA (*Imprint* was a front for them) and was wooed by KGB agents for all the wrong reasons. Jan Morris, in 'Clive's Castle', links Clive's fortunes, his ambitions and his unscrupulous ways, to the then British Mission in India: 'It was an Empire, by and large, without ideology.... For the most part their loftiest motive was Clive's loftiest too - the patriotic motive - and their basest was his too - to get rich quick' (p. 253).

An objective and dispassionate assessment of Arundhati Roy's first novel *The God of Small Things* can be possible only after all the media-generated hype around it subsides, when one will be able to see the work for what it is. The extracts published in the anthology do not reveal much, except for her deft use of language and its spontaneity. The anthology has two poems, one, 'What we lost' by Michael Ondaatje who recreates a charming old world giving way to the inexorable demands of change, and the other is 'Sampati' by Vikram Seth. It is a short, haiku-like poem, but is not as evocative, and the imagery is constrained. The selection, on the whole, makes good reading, though the colonial bias shows. It is a pity no translation from any of the Indian languages is included, though there is a significant *oeuvre* in these, both in literary and non-literary fields. Perhaps the omission is deliberate. And why not, if Macaulay's mission finds a promoter in Salman Rushdie (see his article in *The New Yorker* of 23 and 30 June 1997, which also shows a truncated map of India), who valorizes the English language, implicitly privileging the structures it embodies. The Empire rules the roost.

SATISH C. AIKANT is Reader in English Literature at H. N. B. Garhwal University, Pauri.

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### An Essay on Time

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Thompson's statement virtually empties the word human of all actual or possible substance.

Consider in this context the great perplexity of the modern situation. While seeking time as the marker of progress upon which all significance is predicated, in certain modern contexts, time that negates linear progression is meticulously nurtured.

To this one could add a related perplexity of another kind. Anthropology seems content to merely outline as to how survival of time that negates linear progression in the West is akin to the much more substantial survivals of that in say, India or Algeria. Further, the way that such survival continues to persist in non-Western societies may have something to teach the modern West. For some strange reason such survivals are often designated as 'indigenous'. One respects the implicit disposition of sympathy towards, to use that awkward and culturally inane expression, the 'Third World'. But that by itself cannot furnish firm philosophical or even anthropological basis for enlarging the ambit of such survivals in modern life.

The true significance of the persistence of a sense of time that negates linear progression is perhaps to be sought precisely in realms that modern theory and life dare not entirely negate. Painting and poetry are artifacts as different in appearance as any two human artifacts perhaps can be. But they both affirm the logic and sheer power of form. A poem signifies, in the words of Octavio Paz, 'human utterance frozen in time'. Poetry, like painting is a human happening but it is a happening that could never have a pre-history. Their power to speak and possess far beyond the bounded contexts of their origins stems from the unalterable freezing of a particular sequence of words and sounds in a poem, of lines and colours in a painting that invokes that ineffable sense of an eternal presence. It is that which imparts to the artistic form a resilience beyond the reach and might of institutions and structures of entrenched power.

SURESH SHARMA is a Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi.

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attitudes are incapable of fighting the new materialism called communalism where religion becomes not the guide to the lone soul in the dark but a ploy in the hands of day-to-day power politics, a way not to salvation but to sabotage of the most destructive and inhuman kind.

One can fight this evil only from the higher spiritual ground where all created beings are able to hear one another's call, one another's silence, and share a platform of equality. I am referring to the other discourse where the tree gets involved with the earth, the other tongue in which water speaks to the wind, the wind to air, the air to the sky, the flower to the bee, the beast to the woods and man to all of them. My more recent poems, not only the ones on saint poets like Namdev, Kabir, Meera, Tukaram, Basava, Akka Mahadevi and Andal, but even the ones on my language and region and my travels inside and outside, emerge from the borders of these two languages: the one that bargains with the visible and the one that converses with the invisible. Perhaps I still have a long way to go to realize that alter-language of the spirit where freedom breaks free of its bondage to itself.

K. SATCHIDANANDAN, renowned Malayalam poet and critic, is the Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

### Mapping Postcolonialism

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attention and appropriation within its parameters.

However, despite so many disagreements, a definite sense of the postcolonial does emerge out of this collection, and will certainly set the discerning reader thinking about his/her individual relation to the postcolonial. In particular, this book is a scholars' delight: it is a timely publication, has no truncated essays and is equipped with a useful bibliography. However, after going through so many deliberations on subject positions and the sites and politics of scholarly production, one misses the usual brief note on contributors. Considering the price of the book, the quality of the print is somewhat disappointing.

LIZA DAS is Lecturer in English at Cotton College, Guwahati.

### The Many Worlds of Indian History

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NCERT books: combined with constant attention to teaching methods, they do seem geared towards much more classroom discussion and creative assimilation.[...]

What is needed is not just more effective channels of communication through which high academic wisdom can be disseminated downwards, but efforts to democratize also the production of historical knowledge, to work towards a new kind of historical culture. There is a need to pioneer ways of developing interaction among researchers, teachers, and activists drawn from, or working among, diverse social strata. On a long-term scale, collaborative research works and textbooks could emerge, enriched by multiple social and pedagogical experiences, and based on a mutual reformulation of perspectives.[...] Surely we can agree that the many worlds of Indian history must not be allowed to fly totally apart, as the social base of producers and intended audiences of front-ranking South Asian scholarship narrows, even while reaching out towards global horizons.

SUMIT SARKAR is Professor of History at the University of Delhi. This extract from his recent book, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), has been reproduced with kind permission from the author and the publisher.

### The Place of Tradition

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it is generally true that every Indian sociologist begins as if there has been no work done by Indians before, this is particularly true of those who set out to take the Indian tradition as their point of departure. [...]

There is a large and yawning gap in time and context between the tradition that is invoked and the purpose for which, it is invoked, rendering largely fictitious that sense of filiation which is an essential part of tradition as an active principle. It is obvious that the appeal to tradition serves a rhetorical purpose; but it is doubtful that it contributes anything of value to the method of sociological enquiry.

ANDRÉ BÉTEILLE, one of India's most distinguished sociologists, is the author of several books including *Caste, Class and Power* and *Inequality Among Men*.