IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS...

Recently I was struck by the note of self-confidence and

assertion of identity by a poet when he mentioned in a

personal communication that, “My address in India is the same—

it never changes!” Such rootedness is what makes a poet or artist

unique. Roots sprouted in childhood going in search of water

and sustenance in the form of other relationships on a permanent

basis will have a natural advantage in such scenario. Childhood

is the most wonderful time in one’s life when one discovers the

world through eyes filled with ‘innocence and wonder.’ It is

indeed lucky to have such a stable childhood. Poetry that springs

and is nurtured in childhood in a congenial atmosphere is sure

to flourish into fruition and maturity in a natural process, making

towering poetic personalities, as we have seen in the case of

the numerous masters published in our pages.

But sadly this is not often the case. Take for instance my

own experience. I had to undergo at least three major

transplantations before I was nineteen. For the first ten years

of my life, I had lived in ‘a state of nature’ so to say, in the

pristine wilderness of a mountain hamlet, with all the freedom

in the world to roam the jungles, drink natural ‘mineral’ water

from the springs, to eat wild berries…. Poetry came naturally

to me through my mother who took delight in nature and in

growing plants and rearing animals. The ways she maintained

a direct communion with nature were automatically transferred

to me. The poetry of my childhood changed during my early

adolescence, when I left my tiny village and migrated to the

plains where my main family was; facing the brutality of the

actual world, the necessity to survive in it bearing the brunt of

all the callousness around, changed me. Then within about a

decade came my third shift of residence to a distant part of India,

where I had to undergo life-changing experiences. At least five

more major transplantations followed within the next five years.

Then, after sixteen years, another shift of place, followed by two

more, within the next fifteen years—the last two involving

moving to the national capital and then to Libya, with all its

upheavals over the last one year. What survived through all

these is my poetry, in the final stock-taking… but poetry that

underwent monumental paradigm-shifts. Of course, what gets

written is little, though the engagement with poetry is life-long,

24x7.

Like in my case, many sensitive young persons, some of

them poets, writers and artists, undergo a transformation of their

outlook, once they reach our metropolises and other cities from

villages and towns in different parts of the country. Eager for

meaningful friendships and relationships in the new environment,

they will tentatively put out their roots and feelers, and more

often than not, will encounter rocks and hard earth instead.

Feeling betrayed, cheated, unwanted, they may withdraw to

themselves, and even be depressed for a time. But soon they will

find ways of circumventing or countering such obstacles and

obstructions, but losing much of their essential natural

humaneness and sensitivity in the process, though some may

continue their creative life drawing on their nostalgia for their

villages. Some may even manage to preserve the basic innocence

and sense of wonder they once experienced as children, and retain

the ‘purity’ of spirit to an amazing degree; but many get caught

up in the practicalities of city life and power struggles. It is true

that when one works as part of the system, one has to be harsh

sometimes; one does so nevertheless, though aware that being

part of the establishment is against one’s grain, and imagining

that one can subvert the system from the inside. One may have

to do whatever job one may come by. The alternative of making

a living by writing or creative work alone is next to impossible

in our contemporary context. On the other hand, when one

works within the system, the treachery and bad faith that a

sensitive individual may encounter on the way, could eventually

harden one’s heart and cause one to lose one’s soul; one may

grow cynical, and even anti-human in essence …. One can blame

the brutalization by the system for this, but those who lose the

light will have lost it, perhaps irrevocably. We can say that it is

the tragedy of the times, but it remains a fact nevertheless. Till

this point, it reads like an old-world lament, doesn’t it? Well,

I have seen very young people making this very same old-world

lament. Nevertheless art will march on, reflecting reality all the

same. Hence we have the myriad projections of ‘realities’ from

the proverbial (if at all a proverb can be evolved within the span

of a couple of decades!) broken mirror of the post-modern self,

and the lack of coherence as to what one is at a given time.

Here, the word ‘subject’ gains grave importance. ‘Subjectivity’

is what really exists in the world of art—the individual maybe

entirely different and self-contradictory at different times. Thus,

we come back to the essence of art, irrespective of who the

artist is.

One can dismiss as platitudinous or clichéd, generalizations

such as ‘childhood is when poetry comes to you naturally’ or

‘adulthood is where you lose it owing to the essential pragmatic

approach one has to adopt to make a living.’ But look at plain

facts—we can take the example of our own children, whom we

encourage to take up poetry writing, competitions etc., while

in primary and middle schools. But once the stream-selection

takes place in high school classes, the same parents, especially

those of children who have chosen the science stream, will soon

start discouraging their pursuit of poetry and the arts, to prepare

them for their future ‘professional’ careers. Children may at first

be baffled by the double-standards of their own parents, but they

too soon fall in line and turn ‘practical’ subjecting themselves

to that particular area of ‘acculturation’ which prepares them

to face cut-throat competition.

I am thinking aloud on these lines now because of the

International Conference on Educational Research (ICER) 2012,

organized by Mahasarakham University, Thailand, during 21-23

March 2012, and held at Pattaya, in which I was one of the Invited

Guest Speakers. My paper was on “Peace Education and

Muticulturalism: The Indian Story,” which began by a section

on ‘Violence and Children’ drawing on my experiences in Libya

and also on what I took note of in the other revolutions of

the Arab Spring, the plight of the children exposed to sustained

naked violence in Sri Lanka during the protracted Sri Lanka-LTTE

conflict, the issue of child soldiers in the LTTE as well as in

many strife-torn states around the world, the gun-culture in the

US where school-shooting incidents involving children who use

their fathers’ guns are common, and, finally, on our own children’s

plight—they are drawn into the culture of violence in many forms

as we know. My main argument was that childhood was not meant

to be traumatized by violence, and education in peace should

be introduced as part of school curriculum from the earliest levels.

National Curriculum Framework 2005, of NCERT, envisaged by

the team led by Professor Krishna Kumar, has already done

marvellous work in this area, and OUP’s Value Education Series,

conceptualized under the leadership of Ms. Mini Krishnan, has

been found to be pioneering text books that are being used in

schools all over the country and reaching millions of children.

My presentation included all of this.

I was amazed by the variety of approaches in child education,

adopting the latest methods that have developed in the west,

presented by participants from Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia,

and other South Asian and East Asian countries, and even from

South Africa, as well as by keynote speakers from the US, besides

a large contingent of speakers from Thailand itself. The serious

thought the Thais have invested in ensuring the best educational

approach to nurture their young minds was really touching and

thought-provoking. In a country like ours with over 1.21 billion

people, such concerted efforts may not be practical on an identical

scale, but we can seriously think of reaching out to the millions

of children who badly need such special attention, progressing

from where Professor Krishna Kumar has begun. Ensuring the

preservation of a childhood which cherishes the early innocence

and sense of wonder with which one enters the world, will go

a long way in nurturing lasting peace for the generations to come.

As writers and readers of literature, it is imperative for us all

to be alive to this sensitive issue.

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In the Masters’ section we begin with the long poem “Bagh”

by Professor Kedarnath Singh, one of the living greats of Indian

poetry in Hindi. Over the years, Kedarji has reinvented himself

many times over, establishing himself as the master in successive

phases. He is also well-known as a mentor of several poets of

at least three generations. I fondly remember him writing the

introduction to my poetry collection in Hindi translation, *Aagaami*

*Pal Ka Nirmaan* in which he had deftly placed my poetry in English

as being entirely Indian, nay, Malayalee, in ethos, and sinking

deep into the spirit of many individual poems. He also spoke

on these lines during the release function. His warmth and

personal care has always amazed me. Anamika, an outstanding

poet in her own right, has rendered his poems into English in

a wonderfully idiomatic way, and yet, retaining the indelible

cultural traces.

The second master we celebrate in this section is Professor

Vishwanath Prasad Tiwari, an outstanding Indian poet writing

in Hindi, a highly-respected critic and an active literary personality.

I remember an occasion from last year’s Tagore Centenary

Celebrations organized by Sahitya Akademi in Vigyan Bhavan,

New Delhi. During a poetry reading session, Vishwanathji read

his poems, including “Woman” which we have printed here. As

he finished reading, a group of girl students (who, as I could

later ascertain, hailed from different parts of India) from Delhi

University crowded around him with emotionally charged

appreciatory comments. Coming from poetry-lovers more than

two generations younger to him, those ecstatic words outlined

the mesmeric poetic atmosphere he created for an ageless audience.

Including his Vyas Samman-winning collection Phir Bhi Kuch Rah

Jayega, he has seven collections of poems and ten works of literary

criticism among his more than forty published works. Dastavez,

the prestigious literary magazine he brings out, gives the serious

lover of literature enough matter to meditate on. His election

as the Vice-President of Sahitya Akademi more than a year ago,

has visibly given a new impetus for the functioning of the

Akademi.

The next is Sarah Joseph, Malayalam fiction-writer par

excellence and a vocal activist espousing women’s causes and

taking definitive stands on socio-political and environmental

issues. Catapulted to countrywide fame through the publication

of her books in English translation, mostly by OUP, and winning

prestigious awards like Sahitya Akademi Award and Crossword

Award (besides Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Vayalar Award,

Arangu Award, Abu Dhabi and several others), she and her

concerns have caught the attention of the discerning reader. She

is committed to whatever she takes up, from women’s issues to

environment protection and preservation of the fast-disappearing

local dialects. Her Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel Alahayude

Penmakkal (The Daughters of Alaha) is written mostly in the dialect

around the place of her birth, Kuriachira in the outskirts of the

central-Kerala town of Thrissur, Kerala’s cultural capital. Sarah

Joseph said in her acceptance speech of Sahitya Akademi Award:

“My novel, The Daughters of Alaha, tells the story of a group of

people being continuously displaced from their own soil as a result

of urbanization. The novel is a record of their native language,

history, economic transitions, politics and culture. By awarding

this novel, Sahitya Akademi has recognized the local resistance

against the exploitative culture of globalisation, expressed in

creative writing.” Alahayude Penmakkal is the first in a trilogy,

the second being Maataathi (The Woman Outsider), and the third,

Othappu (which, in Rev.Valson Thampu’s translation, received the

Crossword Award). The dialect of the poorer sections of Syrian

Christians of sub-urban Thrissur a couple of decades ago, thus

reclaimed, is an amazing relic of language. Aathi (Gift in Green,

again in Rev.Valson Thampu’s translation) is her latest novel

which bemoans environmental degradation. Sarah Joseph’s place

in contemporary feminist writing in Malayalam is unique. It

was in his Introduction to her short-story collection Papathara

that K.Satchidanandan coined the term ‘pennezhuthu’ for

feminist writing. Her deep involvement in women’s movements

and in campaigns to safeguard human rights marks her role

as a social activist too. Beginning her writing in 1972, she

published her first collection of stories, Manassile Thee Maathram

in 1973. Kaadinte Sangeetham, her second collection of stories

followed in 1975. Oduvilathe Sooryakanti, Nilavu Ariyunnu,

Nanmathinmakalude Vruksham, Kaadithu Kandayo Kantha (shortstory

collections), Recapture the Kitchen and Bhagavadgitayude

Adukkalayil (essays) are her other works. In this issue we carry

her story that speaks of intricate interpersonal relationships in

the ‘after-modern’ world of Kerala society.

In the In Memoriam section we pay tribute to the memory

of two outstanding personalities. The first, Bholabhai Patel,

passed away on May 20th, leaving the proverbial gap wide open

in Gujarati letters and the national literary scenario. He was a

polyglot and a cultural link Gujarati Language and Literature had

with the rest of India. I remember his sage presence on several

occasions in Sahitya Akademi, during his stints as Convener of

Gujarati. Professor Avadhesh Kumar Singh, in his piece which

is a personal memoir effectively coupled with heart-felt tributes

and a survey of the writer’s ouvre, takes us to the immediacy

of his departure and the profundity of the loss we are experiencing

by his passing.

Professor Vayala Vasudevan Pillai was a towering presence

in Kerala’s theatre scene, ever since the demise of the masterbuilder

of modernist Malayalam theatre, Professor G.Sankara

Pillai (whom he had succeeded as the Director, School of Drama

of Calicut University, at Thrissur). I had occasion to be acquainted

with Vayala Sir from his early days when he used to occupy a

room in the now-gone Karthika Lodge, behind the Government

Secretariat building in the heart of Thiruvananthapuram city.

He had written the name he had given to his room,

“Suvarnarekha,” in white chalk, over the wooden door. His room

then was full of books stacked from floor to ceiling, with a

little space just for his bed, making it literally a den of sorts,

if the term ‘den’ can be applied to a confirmed Gandhian. The

amateur theatre enthusiasts, many of whom were his students

(He was then teaching English in the Mar Ivanios’ College,

Thiruvananthapuram), would reverently visit the hermit in this

cave fashioned out of books. My friend Ashok (Ashok Menath,

poet, writer and playwright) who was an officer in a bank in

Kumily near Thekkady where I was employed then, was a disciple

of Vayala Sir. It was through Ashok that I first heard of him—

the strict disciplinarian during rehearsals, the nudging mentor

of actors, the inventive genius who scripted a new style of theatre

performance. Ashok used to organize the youth of Kumily and

stage plays he himself wrote and directed—all under the inspiration

Vayala Sir gave him during his student years in Mar Ivanios’

College! Therefore, when I learned that Vayala Sir was presenting

his play Agni in Tagore Theatre, Thiruvananthapuram, I thought

nothing of travelling 270 kilometres from Thekkady, a journey

that takes nine hours traversing mountain roads for the first 60

kilometres, to see the master in his creative element. I remember

Vayala Sir was himself impressed by my zeal, and eagerly asked

my opinion of the production. In later years, especially after he

left first for Rome and then to other centres of culture and

learning all over the world to pursue his doctoral research, I lost

touch with him. The last time I saw him was when I very briefly

met him in passing during one of his last visits to Delhi with

his troupe to participate in the National Theatre Festival organized

by NSD in 2006 or 2007. His death on August 29, 2011, has

certainly created a void in the sphere of Kerala theatre, leaving

his admirers and disciples orphaned. We carry – though somewhat

belatedly owing to space constraints – a sensitively written

memorial piece by Anitha Madhavan, and a translation of his

play Aandubali (The Annual Rite) by her in our In Memoriam

section.

The 150th birth anniversary celebration of Rabindranath

Tagore is coming to a close. In our Tributes section, we have

four great scholars assessing the bard’s life-work from different

viewpoints, as a fitting finale to the year-long commemorative

activities organized by Sahitya Akademi and other literary and

cultural organizations throughout the country and abroad.

Professor Divik Ramesh, in his scholarly piece, narrates the

history of the impact of Tagore in Korea. Professor Malashri

Lal dwells on her experience of translating Tagore’s poetry with

deep insight and presents the fruits of her labour—four Tagore

poems. Subhas Dasgupta, in his well-researched and finely argued

essay, is dealing with a much-discussed subject, Tagore’s concept

of translation, which stalwarts like Sujit Mukherjee had much

earlier attempted to define and criticize. However, Dasgupta’s

approach is different in so far as he tries to present Tagore’s

translation of his own work as ‘rewriting,’ and exempts it from

condemnation for taking too much liberty in translating one’s

own work, and positions his arguments in modern theory quoting

authorities such as Derrida. Mridula Garg attempts to examine

Tagore’s three novels, Gora, *Ghare Baire* and *Chokher Bali* and find

out whether he was true to his calling as a visionary in the context

of history and women’s destiny. For example, she asks why he

did not even suggest an option like widow-remarriage in the case

of Binodini in *Chokher Bali* and sent her off to Kashi as is usual

in the case of Bengali widows, implying that Tagore had not

hearkened to the call of history at least in some instances. She

seems also to be critical of the way the women characters are

treated, especially in *Chokher Bali* wherein the women seem to

suffer punishment, like Binodini’s ‘life-sentence’ of life-long

widowhood in Kashi and Asha’s tribulations on account of

Binodini’s devious behaviour, whereas male characters like

Mahendra, who are equally at ‘fault,’ are seen as not suffering

anything at all.

In Kinspeople Near and Far, we carry an essay I wrote on

Hisham Matar, the celebrated Libyan author writing in English,

and his novel, *In The Country of Men* (with an accompanying

excerpt reprinted with special permission from Penguin, UK),

an essay by Muhammad Abo Sahal on the folksongs from the

eastern region of Libya which is known for its unique culture

and traditions rooted in the Bedouin way of life, and an academic

piece by Muman Alkhaldy about the fledgling English education

in Libya and its future. Some of the couplets Muhammad has

translated which we carry within his essay are really excellent

in their poetic worth—they in fact resemble the couplets or

stanzas that Matthew Arnold culled from the great masters of

all times, and used as illustrations to explain his ‘Touchstone

Method.’ The simplicity and felicity of expression make them

unique. Muman touches upon a topic that pains the heart of

every Libyan—how English was haphazardly taught and then

stopped altogether from 1986, and resumed only towards the

beginning of the 21st century. The dictator had systematically

isolated the Libyan people from the rest of the world—first by

prohibiting the teaching of foreign languages (during the time

of King Idris French and Italian were taught), and then foreign

travel, and also by forcing them to part with all the liquid cash

and assets they had, making them deposit it all with the Central

Bank, and then denying access—and ruled them with ‘iron and

fire’ as one of my Libyan friends puts it.

We have, in our “What Are You Doing in the Attic?” section,

a self-revelatory piece by the Jnanpith-awardee Malayalam poet

Professor ONV Kurup, followed by a recent poem he wrote in

two parts, on the sanctity and power of female nudity, drawing

upon two different scenes: one, his viewing of a statue in the

British Museum, of Venus preparing for bath, and the second,

a news-photo of a group of Manipuri housewives parading nude

to protest the rape and murder of Manorama, a young Manipuri

woman, by the soldiers of Assam Rifles. Professor Omchery N.N.

Pillai, the acclaimed Malyalam playwright, in his piece, dwells

on a wonderful play-in-progress, touching on the life and message

of Jesus Christ and its relevance to every human individual with

a conscience. A critical piece by the renowned Hindi writer,

Manager Pandey adorns the rest of the section.

A.J.Thomas.