

## **Creative writing**

### **Activism is art applied in future tense**

*Aditya Shankar*

I love the concept of ghosts. There is nothing quite like it, as a creative manifestation that influences my mind as an experience of the uncertain. Sitting alone in my hostel room, I have felt the pinch of fear on some nights when you switch off the lights immediately after watching a horror movie. Looking at it in another way, fear is a terrifying dream (or nightmare) about the future. It is an uncertain futuristic experience where you are unable to predict the impending future, though you know it is bound to be distasteful either immediately or somewhere within a longer span of time.

Approaching it from a parallel perspective, I would like to analyze my experience of listening to news. It is an experience that all of us (at least in theory), believe to be an act of reaching out to what is new and relatively realistic. Though, news often is a new deviation into myth from what you thought was the real, those that are believed to have an influence on your life either in the macro or micro level. 'This is a bad, bad world' is a common summary of experience for most of us; especially when you view something as horrendous as the repeated visuals that are aired on the TV channel about how adivasis were dragged into the city centre, circled and then beaten up brutally in Guwahati. This I feel, is somewhat related to my dream of ghosts; the common connecting point being my worry of the future. This experience though very apolitical and selfish, probably applies to the cross section of the masses today.

The viewpoint to be discussed here is that future is probably experienced mostly through reality itself, not through plain imagination. The fact that no one is absolutely impartial/unbiased/objective in their experience probably extends the scope of reality into imagination. This extension, either as an imagined continuation of news that you hear or a piece of art/literature that you experience, is what makes you feel that you are thinking of the future or even ever so slightly touching it. This is not entirely a false experience either. In fact, it is vital to the way the whole world plans itself and moves forward.

This becomes more important when a group of people plot their extended realities/imaginings together to see the dreadful reality that they think is the future. An environmental protection initiative, for example, provides a striking example of how important it is to see your terrifying dream. They constantly see a nightmare where the world is a place too hot and polluted, stripped off rivers and lakes; a place where all the surviving species live underground. Rather, they extend the possibilities of the currently existing rude reality and showcase them in front of the world so that it corrects itself.

Any form of activism then, is not just reality but art applied in the future tense. Also, of all the collective dreams that a society can see, imagine or recollect, the dream that an activist sees thus becomes the most vital dream. Probably, it is also the ugliest due to its striking depiction of a possible continuation of the ugly real. If the world is imagined to be a series of infinite, ever dynamic canvases, theirs is the most brilliant canvas and probably the most worrying depiction of the possibilities of experience.

I need a pencil, a drawing board, probably a geometry box; I need a white chart that is pinned against a board; probably I need to imagine that there is sea ahead of me when looking out through the window. Because, I am trying to make an interesting drawing here to prove that I am quite incapable of plotting any futuristic event/moment. I am calling the drawing 'Ahead-a behavior experiment'; probably meaning a realistic depiction of what lies ahead of me. I am going to plot the points within the axis of a chart on this page. On one hand I have the actions that I might perform in the future. They have to be derived from an inner chart that has the history of my thought and its interaction with my physiological evolution that may lead into my possible actions. Within that inner chart lies the evolution of the behavioral traits of my ancestors against their own time. So my inner chart to derive my actions goes back until time and action existed. Then this time and action has to be relatively compared at each instant with all those actions in the rest of the universe that were happening parallel to the particular chain of action that formed my behavior. This would mean I would need to plot the entire history of time against the history of all the actions that has ever been performed. This left alone, I would also need to trace back my physiological evolution to arrive at my physical status to perform an action and this has to be derived beforehand by comparing it to all the possible elements that might have shaped the physique.

Let me get back to the back seat of my taxi in this bustling city. It is much more definite here than anywhere else. I am on a by-road now. It is like a minor vein of a leaf and I could say with surety that we move forward not knowing what is happening in the other road, forget future.

Because I plotted all this while just to reach my present. It is better enjoyed this way; from the back seat of the taxi where you know just the chaos outside. I experience this chaos as noise. Every space has its own sound/noise. I experience and probably recognize my space through sound; my space is dynamic and moving forward like the taxi; my future is an ever increasing noise that I fail to quantify.

I am in one of those moments. I am thinking about future. This is when you dispel your doubts and start to reassure yourself that poetry as a way of thinking and as an attempt of expression is an active element in the minds of the people; though unknowingly. The noise will increase and I am willing to listen.

## **I come from there**

*Mahmoud Darwish*

I come from there and I have memories  
Born as mortals are, I have a mother  
And a house with many windows,  
I have brothers, friends,  
And a prison cell with a cold window.  
Mine is the wave, snatched by sea-gulls,  
I have my own view,  
And an extra blade of grass.  
Mine is the moon at the far edge of the words,  
And the bounty of birds,  
And the immortal olive tree.  
I walked this land before the swords  
Turned its living body into a laden table.  
I come from there. I render the sky unto her mother  
When the sky weeps for her mother.  
And I weep to make myself known  
To a returning cloud.  
I learnt all the words worthy of the court of blood  
So that I could break the rule.  
I learnt all the words and broke them up  
To make a single word: Homeland.....

## **Who I am**

*Bulleh Shah*

I know not who I am,  
I am neither a believer going to the mosque  
Nor given to non-believing ways.  
Neither clean nor unclean,  
Neither Moses nor Pharaoh.  
I know not who I am.

I am neither among sinners nor among saints,  
Neither happy nor unhappy,  
I belong neither to water nor to earth.  
I am neither fire nor air,  
I know not who I am.

Neither do I know the secret of religion,  
Nor am I born of Adam and Eve.  
I have given myself no name,  
I belong neither to those who squat and pray,  
Nor to those who have gone astray.  
I know not who I am.

I was in the beginning; I'd be there in the end.  
I know not any one other than the One.  
Who could be wiser than Bulleh Shah  
Whose Master is ever there to tend?  
I know not who I am.

## **Strange are the times!**

*Bulleh Shah*

Crows swoop on hawks  
Sparrows do eagles stalk  
Strange are the times!

The Iraqis are despised  
While the donkeys are prized  
Strange are the times!

Those with coarse blankets are kings;  
The erstwhile kings watch them from the ring.  
Strange are the times!

Its not without reason or rhyme,  
Strange are the times  
Says Bulleh, kill your ego  
And throw away your pride.  
You need to forget yourself  
To find Him by your side.

## **Justice and literature--Introduction to the collection of poems, 'Chi-na Gedara Kirilige Githaya'**

*Basil Fernando*

Sometimes it is asked as to whether justice can be a subject for creative literature. The reasons for such a question may be the ingrained habits in the country (Sri Lanka) about what may be and what may not be subject matter for creative literature. These ingrained habits are based on various types of literary theories propagated in the country for centuries which were developed by Brahmanic masters in India. Martin Wickramasinghe wrote about the continuing influence of literary traditions which arose in a period of cultural decadence.

The few cultural achievements of the ancient Sinhalese which will stand the test of critical examination are confined to this classical period that produced those statues and tanks. The so-called classical Sinhalese literature will hardly stand the test of modern critical examination. It is the imitative product of a decadent period that began after the tenth century. The real and genuine classical tradition of the Sinhalese culture was lost and forgotten. A tradition that began with the decadent period of literature alone survived until the advent of the Portuguese. Because of this decadent and imitative literary tradition, Sinhalese scholars failed to appreciate their genuine older culture which survived in architectural and sculptural remains and tanks of ancient cities buried under the jungle tide. [From Martin Wickramasinghe's Complete Works, Volume 10, Essays in English pg 67.]

Still there is not much discussion about this period of decadence which started around the tenth century and has continued ever since. Perhaps the absence of this discussion may be due to the sort of crazy nationalism that is promoted by interested parties and the admission of such a period of decadence may contradict the historical interpretations promoted for the purpose of creating an artificial national pride.

When we look at this period of decadence with an open mind then we find that not only in Sri Lanka but also in India there was a period of a colossal cultural counter revolution during this period. As the roots of the political, social and cultural decadence both in India and Sri Lanka can be found in this time it would be useful to look into this period more closely.

The spread of Buddhism in India and the period of Ashoka brought about a period of enormous progress in India but the cultural counter revolution which developed later was able to devour and to destroy these developments. The golden age of India and the period known as the Anuradhapura period in Sri Lanka happened more or less within the same time period. During this period the Brahmin caste of India and the associated higher castes suffered severely. The ideas of equality which were quite widespread during the period in which India was under the influence of Buddhism and Jainism resulted in creating difficulties in finding slave labour and cheap labour. This created a crisis for those who control land, agriculture as well as the earning of wealth through ritual religious exercises which were all under the tight control of the Brahmin caste.

There was the need to destroy the influence of new social impulses created by Buddhist religious ideas and Emperor Ashoka's political reforms. The intellectual efforts that were made in order to achieve the displacement of this new situation created a massive storm which destroyed the very cultural foundations which were challenging the Brahmanistic

social control. This counter revolution took the form of religious movements and was able to wipe out Buddhism from India altogether. Theologies, liturgies, music and hymns developed on the basis of accepting the hegemony of Brahmanism and the re-imposition of the caste system. A characteristic of the religious rituals of the time was the repetition of phrases, either as hymns or mantras. The place that existed for thinking was removed and replaced with such repetitive exercises. The Buddhist universities and other places of Buddhist gatherings were reclaimed by the Brahmins and made into places of worship for Brahminism.

In Sri Lanka it was not possible to wipe out Buddhism as in India. Instead while the external aspects of Buddhism were retained, internal doctrines and thoughts were replaced with Brahminist content. Politically the introduction of a mental state which would accept a draconian form of ruling was also introduced during this time. This helped to create a powerful and a repressive monarchy. The Buddhist temple and the Hindu Kovil were brought to a close connection. Almost always, the Buddhist shrine and the place of worshipping the Hindu gods were built side by side. Among the ordinary folk, habits of timid subjugation, cowardice, habits of subsistence living and patriarchy became entrenched. Even to-date, this mindset is quite visible among Sri Lankans. It is not difficult to understand in the literature that was created during this period there was no place for justice.

The value of human society however, depends on the place justice has in the society. Genuine humanism and justice are inseparable. When literature and art is nourished by conceptions of justice they become the greatest achievements of humanity. When the Sri Lankan literature disconnects itself from the traditions of this period of decadence it will experience a new life. By the enlightenment of the intellect the ingrained habits of hypocrisy and violence that prevails can be replaced if justice finds the place it deserves in society.

There have been writers in the recent past who have tried to expose and to attack injustice. Vimalaratne Kumaragama, wrote many poems highlighting the suffering, the powerlessness and the injustices faced by the rural folk. 'Arrachirala' was one such poem. The Tibetan monk, S. Mahinda, also boldly attacked the hypocrisy and injustices and wrote about the villages 'who suffer from the evil of sexually perverted and hypocritical big people.' G.H. Perera also wrote angrily about injustice. In many writings of P.B. Alwis Perera also, there is a tone of sadness about what the ordinary local people has to suffer. Siri Gunasinghe also wrote about the 'terrible foul smell' of hypocrisy.

## **Creative writings in wretched times: Giving expression to the deeper inner mind of people facing wretchedness**

*Basil Fernando*

In the 60s and 70s there was a group of Sri Lankan writers who wrote in English. Many of them have ceased to write since the later 80s. One among them, who was teaching abroad once wrote to me around the year 2000 stating that with the changing circumstances in the country many who were writing earlier have ceased to write.

The evil that takes place in society when it is so widespread has its impact on everyone, even though there may be so many who are not directly affected by the violence, the fraud and the deceit that becomes so common. However, all human beings who see and hear these things are deeply affected by what they see as wrong and evil around them.

For many, silence comes not as a result of direct fear but due to disgust. They develop contempt for the type of despicable behaviour that they see around them. They see how life is being mocked. They see how humour disappears in their society.

In the small disputes under the normal circumstances of life, people intervene. They bring some humour to their neighbours or even strangers who may engage in some sort of quarrel. This type of normal human intervention helps to bring down tempers and calm the people.

However, when social evils are so deep and so common the people cease to intervene. In fact, internally they withdraw from a society that they internally cannot cope with.

In such times what do you write about?

Charles Pierre Baudelaire wrote *Les Fleurs du mal* ("The Flowers of Evil"). Many other writers living under such circumstances gave expression to the wrath against the widespread degeneration that is part of wretched times. And in the circumstances of Sri Lanka and other countries like Cambodia and Burma, it is the writers that can reflect on the evils of their time that can keep the creative discourse going.

In these times those critics who say that issues of justice and injustice are not suitable topics for such writings are themselves engaged in deception. In societies where murder has become so common and is even legitimised by the state itself and life is trivialised by propaganda agencies, not to be angry, not to express disgust, not to express wrath is humanly demeaning. To expect creative writers to demean themselves by contributing to the deception of their times is itself a reflection of how deep the degeneration has crept in.

In such wretched times, human commitment to others lies in trying to write about the wretched of the earth who suffer the brutality of such cruel times.

A country like Sri Lanka which has allowed large scale murder by the state as well as by its opponents for almost four decades now has created in the minds of all the people in the country a disgust for the type of society they are being forced to live in. Whether some will admit this openly or not is not the issue. The natural disgust for murder, fraud and deceit are

such inherent qualities of human beings that it would be strange if it were to be said that Sri Lankan society is an exception to this.

This deeper inner mind of the Sri Lankans needs to be given expression too. This is a challenge that the creative writers are facing under these circumstances.

### **Dalits and Negroes: The same blood of pain and poetry**

*K G Sankarapillai*

The condition of the Dalits in India is as bad as ever.

this reasserts the truth of wrath and pain in the Dalit poetry;

the truth and relevance of a poetry for justice and human dignity.

see the sources of the themes and images in Dalit poetry are not any land of dreams;

they are still the raging veins , the burning soil , and the flaming feet.

words spill out of the wounds like blood with stormy life in.

forms of their poetry is determined not by any divine call,

but by the bitterness of the sunlight

and by bursting the suffering silence of the nights.

it seeks the truth and possibility of the untold history of the man unkind.

it is not an experiment with the compassionate alternatives;

it is the explosion of the agonized soul with an insatiable quest for freedom and justice.

creating a new breed of poetic art.

creating a new aesthetics of resistance.

rediscovering the jungle of fear , pain , and protest in between words.

and rediscovering

the silence and desert lying in between two responses/two opposite actions.

a move towards a counterculture , creating a new one,

questioning the old and inhuman values of the ruling class.

lives of many poets in the Dalit poetry movement  
are central forces of the dalit's struggle for justice.  
(life of Namdeo Dhasal, one example).

they have to be studied in close comparison with the  
lives and works of the Negro poets of 20th century.  
they range from self awareness to self sacrifice for the cause of justice.  
(Aime Cesaire ,Leopold Sedor Senghor, Dennis Brutus, Langston Hughes,  
Kensaro Viva , and many others )

they have added a new sense of meaning and beauty to poetic art;

a new politico-spiritual strength of humanness to the ideology of the aesthetic  
and to the agenda for cultural action.

redefining tradition and modernity in reclaiming a democratic culture.

We Indians have an Africa in our hearts when we are tortured and murdered.

We Indians have an Africa in our expressions when we resist injustice.

this kind of a deeper parity is there in the histories of the Negroes and the Dalits.

### **Dalit poetry**

Dalit poetry is a poetry of deep, anti romantic, anti nostalgic

Cultural memory of the lower/oppressed castes-dalits- poets .

These poems are written in colloquial dialects of the poets.

They are dialogic in imagination

and in its patterns of expression.

Their poetic ancestors are the folk poems of their grandpas,

Who burned their lives in the open fields and roads and jungles

For the minimal livelihood.

Dalit Poetry is straight poetry.

‘Personal is political’ is true to the core in the following poems:

### **Which language should I speak?**

*Arun Kamble*

Chewing trotters in the badlands  
my grandpa,  
the permanent resident of my body,  
the household of tradition heaped on his back,  
hollers at me,

‘You whore-son, talk like we do.

Talk, I tell you .!’”

Picking through the Vedas  
his top-knot well-oiled with ghee,  
my Brahmin teacher tells me,

‘you idiot, use the language correctly!’.

Now I ask you which language should I speak ?

Translated from Marathi by Priya Adarker

## **The search**

*W Kapur*

What bird is this that sings a song  
Filled with such sorrow  
Such aching notes  
In the dead of night  
When my hut in its yard of densest dark  
Is drenched to brim of its heart ?  
Nor can I,  
Wanting to follow him ,  
Find my voice  
Or his direction  
Will some one tell me his name  
And the branch where he makes his home ?  
Or are you all like me, strangers?  
have you like me, lost your light ?  
Atleast my hut holds its warmth  
Perhaps I could give him some ,  
Put embers in his voice .

Translated from Marathi by Santha Gokhale

## **Mother**

*Waman Nimbalker*

Daylight should die. Darkness would reign.  
We at our hut's door. No single light inside .  
Lights burning in houses around.  
Kitchen-fires too. Bhakris beaten out.  
Vegetables gruels cooked .  
In our nostrils the smell of food.  
In our stomach darkness.  
From our eyes , welling up, streams of tears.  
Slicing darkness , a shadow heavily draws near.  
On her head a burden . Her legs a- totter .  
Thin dark body.. my mother.  
All day she combs the forest for firewood.  
We await her return.  
When she brings no firewood to sell we go to bed with hungry.  
One day something happens .How we don't know.  
Mother comes home leg bandaged, bleeding.  
A long black snake bit her, say two women.  
He raised his hood.  
He struck her.  
He slithered away .  
Mother fell to the ground.  
We try charms.  
We try spells.  
The medicine man comes.  
The day ends .So does her life.  
We burst into grief. Our grief melts into air.  
Mother is gone.  
We, her broods , thrown to the winds.

Even now my eyes search for mother..My sadness grows.

When I see a thin woman with firewood on her head,

I go and buy all her firewood.

Translated from Marathi by Priya Adarker