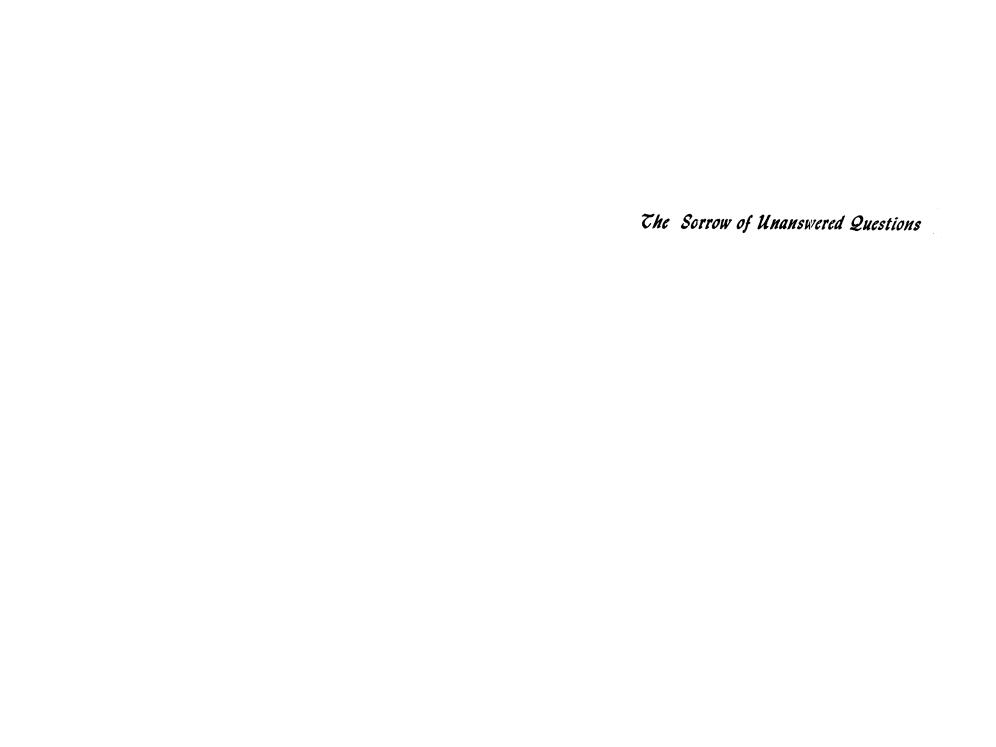
the sorrow of unanswered questions

jayshree misra



The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions

Jayshree Misra



International Centre for Ethnic Studies

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Love as Struggle, Love as Transformation: A Foreword

Two powerful themes animate Jayshree Misra's collection of short stories and poems entitled The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions. They are the themes of love and transformation. The loves are those of struggle, regulation and pain, but also celebration, with the power to heal deep wounds. The impact of these loves are most keenly felt on the women characters whose voices and perspectives are dominant in this collection. As they attempt to understand the meanings of love, these women, whether they be wives, daughters, mothers or sisters, struggle also to be true to themselves and their aspirations. Their voices are infused with the author's intensely personal evocation of her own life's experiences which form the body of the poems in the second half of the collection. She too has known the entrapments of duty as daughter and eldest sister, a bitter marriage, domestic violence, and healing through love, although anxiety always attends it. This is where The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions can be read as the personal which is political, as it comments on women caught on the one hand between yearnings for modernity encompassing the urban, education, travel and profession, and on the other, tradition, which expects ties to community, age old customs and sense of duty.

It is in their struggle to overcome the community as a regulatory site of marriage, culture and sexuality that women seek to transform themselves, displaying a powerful determination and agency. Trapped in tradition, they are cynical about love. 'Sister' is a story about a young woman who goes to her arranged marriage as to a funeral. The day is not suffused with joy and anticipation for her, but sadness and foreboding. The story juxtaposes the sister's thoughts as

she walks to her bridal mandap¹, with those of her brother, newly returned from America, outcaste because of his own marriage to a foreigner. The two voices come to a climax when the sister passes what seems like a note to her brother which is, in effect, her death warrant. It is a melodramatic climax, but all the more chilling because bridal suicides, stove burning, dowry deaths are a part of reality in South Asia. Yet, this story is about suicide as agency, the choice of a young woman who prefers death to a loveless marriage. Her transformation is at a costly price.

There are other women in the stories who show determination and courage in confronting social expectations and go against the grain of those expectations. In 'Mother', Janaki is a widowed mother who leaves her dead husband's home where she has lost status, to support her children by earning a living in the city through sewing. Her achievement is bitter-sweet. While she single handedly educates her children, her son leaves for America, never to see his mother alive again. The tenacity of these women is celebrated by the author. Their refusal to give in to the boundedness of tradition and the regulations of the community elicit our admiration. But the price they pay for challenging hierarchy is also always before us. They lose their children to the diaspora, are cynical about love, at times, fatalistic about the journey of their lives. The plots of the stories are quick, and the writing lingers on the emotions of the characters, avoiding sentimentality. As the author links women's roles with a vignette each of what it means to be a mother, sister, friend, daughter and soulmate, the composite picture of the women who inhabit The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions is that of a wounded being who nevertheless does not give up on hope. A sense of humour also helps. In the poem 'Epilogue', a wry élan is the only defence of a woman who goes through the different stages of

At a time when South Asian literature is gaining international acclaim and attention, this collection of stories and poems raises questions about what is South Asian, or Indian, literature? The language of The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions is not overtly South Asian. A few words here and there locate the contexts of the stories or poems within India or Sri Lanka. But more importantly, the situations of the women as they are caught between tradition and other, alternative aspirations for themselves is very much a South Asian concern. As its societies undergo radical transformations through globalization, the ambitions of South Asian women also shift. Their roles within the domestic sphere no longer go unchallenged by them. Their perspectives in The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions, essentially middle-class and urban, in keeping with the author's own experiences, tell of the varied opportunities available to women.

But this is also where patriarchy re-asserts itself to control and regulate women. The resulting tensions are those commonly experienced by South Asian women as they negotiate their various duties, ambitions and identities.

A sense of the cosmopolitan is also valued in the stories and poems within *The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions*. The author is the wife of an Indian diplomat. As she celebrates her "Rainbow Children" in the poem entitled 'Foreign Service Children' for instance, Jayshree Misra salutes the idea of a global citizenship, confident and at ease in any part of the world, eclectic in cultures, languages, habits and manners. Her own voice and the inner language of her poems however do not reflect such an admixture because the language of *The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions* is very much within a

wedding area, usually a raised platform

standard received English with familiar poetic images. However it is this very familiarity that makes the urban, English educated, middle class South Asian reader identify with the women and their situations in *The Sorrow of Unanswered Questions*. The courage to write about intensely personal experiences involving pain and loss becomes salutary within this framework of identification, and ultimately, therefore, celebratory.

Neloufer de Mel Department of English University of Colombo Sri Lanka

Woman

I, Woman,

Stree-jati,
Symbol of my Land,
Bound, yoked to be
Selfless, unassuming,
Velvet glove in callused hand.
Silent, always, grieving, seething,
Suppressed desires, intangible hopes.
Unable to take a stand,
Or question, reason,
Patriarchial discussions;
Such secure governance,
By this august band
Of oppressors, descendants of Manu.²

I, Woman, weary, unalluring,
Scarred body, soul and mind,
Wrapped in ancient mummy-cloths,
That defy beauty, scrutiny.
Fluttering strands of hair escape
From my fettered head.
Solitary tendrils flee my pallu³-covered head,
Tenuous independent movements.
A feeble transient display of freedom
In the shifting scenes
Of sanctioned bondage.

literal translation: woman caste.

author of Manusmriti (200 BC-AD 200), a treatise on the life of a Hindu, with specific rules in regard to women.

border of saree, let off the shoulder.

Child Widow In Memory of Radhika Devi: my great- great-grandmother.

Child Bride at ten, Child Widow at thirteen, You never knew your husband, never spoke to him, You had not yet crossed the threshold of his home, When Fate dealt you this cruel decree, So you remained for a while, in retreat, A widowed child in your parents' home.

Shorn of your hair, your bangles and rings, Toe-rings and silver anklets, ostracized by kith and kin, Your sindoor and bindi obliterated, what did it all mean? Covered in white cloth, you were cursed, so cursed, Is what they all whispered, to a child of thirteen.

You, in the prime of your blossoming childhood, Banned from *pujas*, weddings, sacred-thread ceremonies, Imprisoned within the walls of your village home, You eked out the years on rationed, tasteless food,³ Yoked in solitary confinement, so forsaken.

In the dead of night, such eerie stillness,
The rustling of trees, thunder and lightning,
Monsoon showers, the threat from the sea,
Shadows of the night, phantoms unseen,
Who consoled your spirit? Who helped you breathe?

A Child Widow, so vulnerable,
Who wiped away your tears of grief?
From dusk to dawn, dawn to dusk,
Who lifted your spirits in your hour of need?
I ache for you, in your forlorn cloister,
I grieve for all the tears you cried,
For all the dreams you may have desired,
For the simple sheltered life you were denied.

Then you took a brave step forward,
There was no looking back,
You ventured forth to your husband's vacant home,
To begin life anew, armed with inner fortitude.

You took your nephew to your side, A single mother, against all odds, You brought him up alone, with pride. I marvel at your strength and courage, My dearest, bravest Jeje Jeje Ma⁴, Pranam.

vermilion powder, in the parting of hair, symbolizing a married woman

vermilion dot on forehead symbolizing marriage

ritual of widowhood

great-great grandmother

No coward soul is mine

No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere

I see Heaven's glories shine

And Faith shines equal, arming me from Fear.

Emily Bronte (January 2nd 1846)

In Memory of Emily Bronte:

Reclusive visionary,
Mystical, passionate scribe,
Decipherer
Of the troubled human soul;
Austere guide of Love,
That triumphs over evil,
And outlasts
Violence, indifference, strife,
Even death itself,
Your haunting legacy lives on.

In The Beginning:

Not one of midnight's children I, Born nine years later To a lass of seventeen, A Rapunzel with raven hair. Were tears of frustration shed At the discovery of my sex? I know not, I care not: My young parents adored me. Dark-skinned nurses In starched-white uniforms Fussed over my birth: A grandchild of the Principal's. The city of my birth, Cuttack, A narrow-gullied crowded place, Nevertheless, my home-town, With its torn side-walks And teeming tenements Bursting at the seams... A thousand years old. No phoenix dropped At the nour of my birth, No owl hooted, The thirteenth of March, sorrowful Ides? My trials all these years, my Karma?1 Makes me catch my breath.

destiny shaped by past events

Womenfolk in the remote villages of India, as elsewhere in Asia, work extremely hard, in the fields and at home, depending on the family's status. Their work is back-breaking. The thought of being paid for such labour never arises. When tragedy strikes a family, the other members of the extended or joint family are bound, by duty, to ensure the protection of the bereaved. However, reality has often proved contrary to such tradition. To leave the sanctity of a home is difficult anywhere in the world. In India, there is no question of a widow returning to her parents' home. It is hard to imagine a young widow asserting her independence in the present-day rural context. Fifty years ago, it would have resulted in being excommunicated from the clan.

MOTHER 1950's / 1960's

Janaki brooded over this sudden turn for the worse. The excruciating pain from the cancer gnawing away at her life made her flinch. It was too late now to regret all the paans she had chewed over the years. She longed for one even now. Wait, the important thing was to muster up enough will power to beat the odds. She had to see her son again. Sunita, her daughter, had called him, saying it was necessary. Cruel, perhaps, but a necessary cruelty. The jataka² had said that once her son left for a foreign city, he would never see her again. That was three years ago. If only she could thwart that prediction, even if her beliefs about karma³ were deeply ingrained.

Sunita and Sumant. Her two children. Both in their twenties. They had not been civil to each other for three years now. Why? Why, prabhu?⁴

triangle shaped betel leaf filled with condiments

² horoscope

destiny shaped by past events

god

Where do we parents go wrong? Why do our children go their separate ways *inspite* of all the love we shower on them? *Despite* all that we try to do for them?

Janaki thought of the years she had struggled to bring them up. Married at sixteen, widowed at twenty with two babies. Life, with all its unpredictability had struck her in the gut. And now she could barely recall her dear husband's face.....it was all so long ago. The few photographs there were offered some comfort.

It had been a good thing that the extended family was well off. She, however, planned to do something for herself, much to the indignant disdain of the other members of their joint family. Where did she get such notions from? An unkind hint at her upbringing. Somehow Janaki's determination saw her through all their cutting remarks. Janaki's mother had taught her how to sew and embroider. Nimble with her fingers, she began sewing frocks for the daughters in the family, embroidering them, with smocking, then asking her relatives for a modest token amount. She reasoned it was better they paid her rather than the local durzi. It had shocked them at first. With a certain degree of calculated modesty, she made them believe it would make her feel useful, as her husband was no longer there to be her provider.

She did not want to be a burden on them. Oh, the vanity of man!! It had worked!

Then she stitched saree blouses, similar to those she had seen in a magazine that a relative had brought home from the city. Janaki had a quick eye and nimble fingers. She experimented and soon made comfortable yet stylish blouses that fitted well and proved very popular.

It was a short-lived victory. Her family and the villagemen made it impossible for her with their sneers and demeaning remarks. It was then she decided to leave. This would be the trial by fire. Afraid of her relatives and their tempers, Janaki decided to bow her head and just listen to their threats. They raved and ranted. She bit back any retorts, tears streaming from her face, fear in her breast, but, somehow, she stood firm. They finally yielded. But she would not be welcomed back ever again. Ever. She was revolting against the very essence of their tradition. Her defiance could not be condoned. Janaki would be excommunicated from their clan and forfeit any claim to them or their property. The ancient stoic faces convulsed around her in anger, but some tiny ray of hope flickered deep inside her, kept her from fainting.

Janaki took leave of her elders with sincere respect and decorum, touching their feet, for the last time, as they had insisted, asking for their blessings. Each one of them remained impassive. It broke her spirit, but there could be no turning back. Janaki knew this meant she had become unworthy, still, she must go, for the sake of her children.

Sunita and Sumant smiled valiantly, holding on to her, as they rattled down, away from the safety of their home, on a bullock-cart. The main road, where the buses plyed to the city, was half-an-hour's journey away. It took almost two hours to board a bus and another six, to reach the city. Janaki hid her face within her saree pallu⁶, then calmly decided she should not. She stood up straight and spoke directly to the man at the door of a house that had been pointed out to them as being open to lodgers. His wife stood behind him, her mouth wide open in astonishment at this fearless act of defiance. Janaki softly explained her situation. Soon they were ensconced in a small room. Their home. Their very own home. The first step forward.

The years had been hard ones. Janaki struggled daily, even if her fingers were often raw with all the needlework, to

tailor

part of the saree draped over the left shoulder, often used to cover the head, in deference

meet deadlines and complete her housework. She was determined to carve a livelihood for herself and a good life for her children. Payments in the city were good. Orders piled up. She enrolled the children in a nearby school where they settled in quickly, pleasing her weary heart with their chatter and progress.

It was only when they reached adolescence that Janaki realized the extent to which her children had drifted apart. Sumant was a year older, but they had been enrolled in the same class. It was Sunita who shone at school, bringing home prizes and certificates.

She was very popular too. Sumant was a loner. In college they went their separate ways.

The pain intensified suddenly. Janaki willed herself to continue with her reminisces, but the years passed in hazy confusion. She tried to piece the threads together and struggled with Yama⁷ for more time, a little more time......to

Sunita was soon teaching at her college. Then her wedding was arranged, with her approval, to a pleasant young man, a lecturer too, at the same university. Janaki was content. Till the day Sumant came home and revealed his imminent departure for the U.S., on a doctoral scholarship. His words, she remembered, came out in a torrent of self-defense. Janaki had smiled and blessed him, regardless of the panic that gripped her. That was that. The family astrologer, however, forebode the outcome of his choice: he would never see his mother again if he left. Janaki had dismissed this uneasily as Sumant was determined to leave. Sunita stopped talking to him. They parted like that. It broke Janaki's heart, but she held her peace.

Janaki winced as another deep attack of pain assailed her, confronting her with the knowledge that it would end now.

Sunita heard the whisper and was filled with uncontrollable rage. Mother was gone and the sudden void filled her with fright. This wrath against her brother, a culmination of all that he had been able to do, his going abroad, his detachment from her, squeezed her heart, or was she imagining it? She could barely breathe as the nurses began to ease her onto the bed.

Sumant arrived a few hours later to find his mother gone and his sister asleep. She had fainted. He cried for the first time in many years. He prayed, also for the first time in many years, for his sister, as images of their childhood flashed before him...... classmates taunting him....... Sunita, shielding him from the bullies, helping him with his homework, giving him extra biscuits. Little things. How he had resented her over the years, how bitter she made him feel. And yet...

Sunita awoke and found her brother slouched in a chair, his face in his arms. She could not hate him. But she hurt inside, for all the affection she had craved and never received. Some inner force prompted her to reach out for his hand. Probably Ma. Startled, he looked up, grasped hers in his, crying openly for all their sorrows, all the time lost. If only Ma had seen them like this. There was always tomorrow to resolve today's misfortune. Sunita closed her eyes, praying it was not too late, stifling the sudden anger that swelled unbidden to her mind's eye.

Why couldn't Ma have seen them like this? Tomorrow. They would talk tomorrow. She did not know whether she could forgive him. Tomorrow. She would think about it tomorrow.

the god of Death

Marriages are still being arranged in India, usually with the consent of the son or daughter. The elders "know" what is best. Many families still adhere to their ancient customs, despite the education, love and freedom they shower upon their children. Young adults often cannot voice their feelings or concerns, as "talking back" to elders is disrespectful. Some families have been able to resolve modern dilemmas and that is definitely a positive step forward. An enormous task still lies ahead.

SISTER 1960's / 1970's

The kids and I stroll along the sea. They can sense my sudden fear and their hands tighten around mine. I give them a reassuring squeeze as we shuffle towards the house. The rising swell of the waves echoes the panic in my heart but I must not let them know.

Two days. It has been two days. Just two days.

We watch her through the diaphanous red of her veil. She looks sad, her eyes misty, I think, or is it the reflection of the gold sequins on the *chunni*¹ that adorns her charming face? I am irritated by her calm, by the sea of chattering faces around her. She is bedecked in bridal finery. A wedding is an excuse for all the women to doll up, display those fabulous gold ornaments that are usually stowed away in a safe or bank locker. Chattels, most of them. Spineless. Like her.

This peculiar chanting of the *shlokas*² sends a shiver down my spine. It is in tune with my heartbeat as the crescendo rises. The sound seems to reverberate through the crowd milling around the *mandap*.³ How can she breathe? She is being pounded into paste but will not get up and run.

veil, long scarf

How can I run? It would humiliate them. And its too late now. They did not listen to me when I begged them not to arrange a wedding so soon. I am only 20. And I want to study, to work, to teach. But they said they had to do their duty. And that I could do anything I wanted after I was married. But I do want not want to marry the man they have chosen. I want to love, know someone else...... they had laughed, amused at such a thought. I died a little then. There was no escape. I had to do MY duty as the only daughter. And that was that.

How can you do this to your children, control their destinies? Is it a Natural Law?

My conscience sits heavy upon my forehead. I am no hero. She has to make the decision. I cannot do anything for her unless she asks me to. Why doesn't she?

This tightening of my chest feels so strange, the symptoms don't match. Wish I was a real tragic heroine and all this, my stage for tragic glory, like Juliet's...but she died IN LOVE. My FATE hangs above me, hovering like some bad spirit, a wailing banshee, awakened from the nether regions by these learned pandits, my grandfather among them, content, at having his only granddaughter bound in holy matrimony, in keeping with the true and only tradition of the clan.

Holy Matrimony, Holy Alliance. Blessed 108 times with each Mantra

Unholy Matrimony. I do not know this man. Just met him twice, with everyone else. Now I will have to live with him, share his bed, ..no, I am not ready. Keats. John Keats. Ahh, my heart aches and a drowsy numbness fills my senses... but I am not drunk. I have never even had a proper drink. Or gone out dancing. Or on a real date. I am a total, gutless failure. All I ever do is try to please everyone. Please. Please, please me? Why don't they please ME?

sacred verse from the Vedas, the holy texts of the Hindus wedding area, usually a raised platform

priests

It would be fascinating to watch her stand up, rip off her veil and scream at the crowd. But no, she would never do that. Kind, spineless, beautiful, sorrowful sister of mine.

I am in the doghouse for having married a phirangi⁵ a few years ago. The kids brought about a stalemate. Nothing I say is ever taken seriously. Never has been. My full scholarship was, in the beginning, a source of pride. Then disdain. It hurt at first. But I am now truly content with my life. And that is that. I fell in love and got married. How could you? Ma asked. Is this why we 'sacrificed' (the word is offensive) so much to send you abroad? You repay us by marrying her? I silenced them in English, introducing my dearest wife. They had the courtesy to be polite, aloof, but polite. But my sister. She welcomed my wife with love.

And now her unknown love is snuffed out before it has a chance to even flicker.

End of chapter, end of love. Bye, bye, Love. Bye, bye, Happiness. And so on. I had written asking her if she wanted my help. There was no response. The letter was probably intercepted.

Then she calls me one morning, says her marriage has been arranged. I am to bring the family for HER sake. So I do. Here I am. Standing like a handcuffed spectator. The proceedings are about to commence: An Unknown Life Sentence for her. The chap seems all right, I suppose. Forced to marry, too. When will all this end? It was fine in the olden days. But not here, not now.

Emotional blackmail. That's what it is. And I must succumb to it. I have no choice. So much depends on me. But I will surely die. I can't create a stir now. How can I shake the foundations of such a traditional family? There can be no running away. No eloping. But whom do I elope with? Silly thought. I am not ready to be burdened by the yoke of centuries. I find my feet are shackled by tradition and my words

conditioned by fear and respect. My life has been mapped out

propelled forward to do my part. And as the final intonations rise again in crescendo, she clutches my hand. Hers is damp. I give her a reassuring squeeze, clutching back, as she is pulled away from me by the womenfolk. I stand sweating, or are these tears of despair? I have to go with her to her new home. I am going through the motions for her sake. Soon she is enveloped by another circle of womenfolk. I rise to bid farewell. She thrusts something into the palm of my hand as I touch her cheek. I don't look back, in case she turns to stone. I can't bear to go back to the house now so I head towards the seashore. Minutes, hours, later, I realize I am holding something. My fist is sweaty. I unclench my fingers. There is a bit of foil rolled up tight. I prise it open. Its some medicine wrapper. I can barely make out the letters.....V A L I...oh God, oh God, I gasp, running to the roadside to get back to her new home. How could she? Where did she get it from? God.

Did she think this would be her triumph, that this act would be her final defiance? Her silent pleas for liberty and life have now been effectively silenced. She never had a voice. Now her voice cannot claim victory in its demise. What a stupid, unnecessary decision. How could she do this? Why did she? Wait, it was HER decision. Is that what she wanted to say? Hers. Not theirs or mine, but hers. It was HER choice.

Her face through the veil. Sad. Sad child. Sister of mine. Yoked. Spineless ME.

foreigner

⁶ brother

It is so hard for some elders to acknowledge the ardent and diverse desires coursing through the minds and hearts of young adults. The inevitable constraint of family or social factors often induces their decisions, the outcome of which may be cause for regret in the future. We exonerate ourselves with cynical stoicism. And the Circle of Life beguiles us all over again. The Coffee House in the Delhi University campus has been a favourite haunt of many a present-day academic, politician, bureaucrat and technocrat.

FRIEND 1970's

6 pm. The shadows deepen. He will surely come now. I glance furtively towards the wire-mesh door that swings to and fro with a regular beat as students drop in for the evening. Shining eyes and cheerful smiles. How lovely it must be to feel like that. Like I once did.

6.05 pm. He still has not come. The cheese omelettes are inviting, a costly snack, on our tight budgets, but this once-a-week ritual has brought a lot of solace to our lives. We would be parting ways a week after graduation, so this gathering is a must.

6.10pm. I cannot see him in the crowd. Reena, our ravishing beauty, is blushing at the words her fiancé has fashioned into a poem on her. She folds the letter, unfolds it, reads it again and sighs. To be in love is such a wonderful thing, when you are just 19. And if there is a promised future together, then you are truly blessed. Odd, that I feel this twinge of jealousy. If only we could all be SO sure of ourselves.

6.15pm. Abhu smiles into her second cup of coffee. Our petite, beautiful, serene princess. She is as good as all the fairy tales ever portrayed princesses to be. The waiter, hovering around our table, smiles as we summon another round of coffee.

He knows us well and our weekly tips keep his pockets jangling. We have a three-year relationship and have heard about his plans to get his daughter married this winter. We have pooled in to buy her a pair of gold earstuds. Abhu is from his state, so his deference is somehow so charmingly innate. She chides him gently for it.

6.20pm and my heart despairs, as my eyes brim over with unshed tears. I catch Appu's eyes. She has read mine and tilts her face in sympathy, with a little shake of her head. Her eyes flicker with unspoken questions. Appu is smart, attractive and very chic. Her modesty blends with her charming and kind nature.

6.25pm. Rama looks at me with concern, her eyebrows drawn as she bites on her lower lip. She is our dusky beauty, with her sultry smile and sudden scowl. Being a DU topper hasn't turned her head. She humours us with her sharp witticisms and practical view of life.

I am happy with such friends. We have had our fair share of differences over the years, but survived them, for better or for worse. And here we are.

Its almost time to leave. We have to catch the U-Special in 10 minutes or we will be late for roll-call. That simply will not do, at this point in our lives, seniors and all that. Our eyes are on the lop-sided clock, adorning the lime-green cement-washed walls of the coffee-house. Time to go, folks. Say goodbye to all our future bureaucrats, diplomats and politicians. When shall we all meet again? When the hurly-burly's done? When the battle's lost or won? Time will tell.

6.30pm. We shuffle towards the exit. I trail behind, wishing, praying, that I see him one last time, glance that one last look. How odd that I should feel such despair over someone who said he did not know what his future would be, or where he would be, but that he loved me? Who felt that I should move on. Reality sucks. And that was the easy way out for a guy who wanted to say goodbye. So why does my

silly heart beat so hard when I think of him? Why do I cry when I think of him? Why DO I think of him? He jilted ME. I take that final step through the wire-mesh door. It is like a 30's black and white movie in slow motion. A hand brushes mine. It can only be him, yes? Please? That's in the movies. I gasp and look up sharply, ready to reprimand some eager goon getting cheap thrills. But wait. It is HIM. MY LOVE. Not HIS LOVE. I stare straight into those penetrating brown eyes, willing myself not to cry. Please God, give me a break. I will fade away like a tragic heroine, my dignity intact, my heart in shambles.

____ Why are you so late?
____ I was afraid to see you here.
____ Why? You're not going to ever see me again, ever. This is the end. The final goodbye, surely, there should be one, after all, we were in love for all of a year?
___ I do love you......
___ Words, just words.
___ I have no future, no right to love you, it can never be
What a wishy-washy sentiment! I can see Heathcliff laughing at poor Edgar Linton in my mind's eye.

I push past him without a second glance, my dignity intact, my heart in smithereens.

I have just walked past this sudden stranger, who says he loves me but cannot be mine. And I, yoked by the burden of centuries, cannot fall at his feet and beg him to marry me. Can't do that.

My family will now choose a groom for me. They wrote saying it was time, that they had to do their duty. I do not have my love's pledge for the future, so now, I have to succumb to duty and obey. I have no choice. I cannot cling to my parents' home for a few years more. I have to make way. I cannot be a burden, so I do not question, I do not argue. Would they listen to me if I did stand up for myself? Really listen?

I am jerked to the present as the bus pulls up. I gasp for air. A premonition of things to be frightens the essence of my being.

Why didn't you speak to him? Its been a year now. You could have said something. He does love you. It shows in his eyes, the way he looks at you. And you love him_they all look at me with concern.

I shrug indifferently as we board the bus. It edges down past the former Vice Regal Lodge. Suddenly, the sky turns pitch dark. And still I care. And still I care. God, I sound like one of Barbara Cartland's gushy heroines!! The very thought brings the tremor of a smile to my lips. My heart tumbles and rises with each irregular motion of the bus, yoked to my swansong? I do not wish to know. Its just too melodramatic.

Betrayal. The very word conjures up a sinister world of apprehension. There are circumstances beyond our control that elicit inexplicable actions. To be able to overcome such situations is indeed a mark of strength, but we are human and therefore may err in judgement.

DAUGHTER

seventeen.

1980's / 1990's

Ma, what is love? I mean, how can you know that you're in love, really, truly, in LOVE?

What?
I don't mean to come across in such a vague fashion, but reading two pages of my student's work, plagiarized from a well-known author on my reading list, is enough to make me totally disoriented. And upset.

Ma, you never listen to me.

Sorry, dear.
I put my pen down and turn towards her. I hug her tight, my firstborn, my onlyborn. I love the young minx. Tread softly now, very softly, I chide myself.

Tell me, Ma, how can you be absolutely sure?
I feel the old familiar prick behind my eyelids, a sunken feeling in my gut. What do I tell you, darling daughter? You are only

Is love...... walking hand in hand, across desert plains, mountain tracks, uneven paths, or watching an unbelievable sunrise cuddled up in bed? Is it sipping coffee on the verandah, as dusk steals softly upon the city, enticing you both with its spell-binding mystery, drawing you even closer together with its magic? Or is it just knowing the other for whom she or he is?

Does love bring hugs of tenderness with reassurances or simply, just "I love you" hugs? Is it the sharing of sorrows, the abandonment of awkward barriers, the ability to face misfortune, secure in the knowledge of being truly in synch

with your beloved, that your actions, even if they are questioned, do not evoke anger? Is love facing the world together, always together?

What is the matter with me? I have always distrusted unanswered questions. Why does the stream flow on?

Is love dreaming of going on a cruise down the Nile, watching the Taj by moonlight or attending the Cannes Film Festival with a major script to your credit? Or is it a trip to Konarak to marvel at the esoteric beauty of the erotic sculptures frozen in time? Real and imaginary trips interwoven with your dreams? Going through parenthood, balancing orange peels on your stomach at the dead of night when you just can't sleep? Of the feeling of gracious wonder at God's benevolence, in granting you both this wondrous creation, a life? Yours to nurture and cherish.

Ma, what is the matter with you? I only want to know how you felt, I'm confused....., Juhi sighs, biting on her lip like her father used to.

Her father, my love, my lost love, once a husband, once a friend. Juhi is too young to understand. And it hurts too much, even now.

____You never take me seriously Ma, she shouts impatiently.

You never really loved father, did you?

She accuses me belligerently.

I feel an uncanny sense of injustice. I have no quick and ready answer to give her.

I am aghast at her vehemence. Her wild accusing eyes resemble mine all those years ago.

I shall never know for sure. Strips of script flash through my mind. The shadow of an imminent or actual affair and the eternal triangle: he and I and my once dearest friend from school, Sita. Lovely Sita, fair of face and body like sin. Voice so mellow. She was a charmer and she knew it. I can still see his face, glowing, his eyes concentrated fiercely on hers while they debated an issue. No one else around seemed to matter. No one else's opinions seemed to matter either. Sita, once my best friend, then a Jezebel. Me, furious, rejected, feeling small at being denied my existence, for choosing to be a good wife and mother and being spurned for this very choice. The laughter died in my heart. My eyes showed strength, though, as no one could tell that I was battling the inescapable, inevitable fact of one man's cold infamy.

No, I did not rave or rant. Nor did I throw things about. I did not pack my bags and leave.

I stopped talking to him.

Then the war broke out and he was called up. I did not say goodbye. Just watched him leave with immense grief. I had not spoken to him for three months. Ever since that afternoon.

It had seemed innocent enough but there are some things a woman just senses. Call it intuition or premonition, whatever.....

I had come home early and there they both were in animated suspense, marvelling at each other, no doubt, oblivious to me, Juhi, the world. He stared at me. That look cut deep and I felt so small. But I smiled at them both and trotted upstairs, like a good mother, a good wife, clutching Juhi to my heart, for my life's sake.

And from then on I became the inscrutable mask. Long-suffering wife indeed. I would show them all when I had decided on what to do.

In my own time. In my own way. But we are marionettes in the Master Plan. And I was no exception.

Soap opera comic strips. Yes, my life flashes past me like that, with an irregular "run-on-line". A telegram came one morning, just like the twist in the tale of a Bollywood movie. And I was made accountable. No, I did not start wearing white. I had never dressed to please people. I was all of 25, with a 3 year old baby girl, no job. I did not cry. There were no tears to shed.

Going back to college, sending Juhi to school, working...one thing followed another. It was not easy. I felt I had had a limb amputated. And all the regrets didn't help either.

Sita came once. To say sorry, I suppose, but I chose not to speak to her, just stared at her impassively. I could not cry. God knows I tried, but the tears would not fall.

Fourteen years later, my heart is broken all over again. "You never loved him," she says. I did. With all my heart.

Juhi, its so hard to explain. You'll know. You'll just know, if its right, if he's the one, you'll see.

And I give her a tight hug and kiss her cheek. She smiles. Phew. That was a close one.

Now be a dear, make me a cup of tea. I have pile of papers to grade by tomorrow.

I walk back to my table. What IS Love? How much love can one endure? I go back to scratching out another plagiarized paragraph.

The dissipation of affection between a couple can only be a prelude to catastrophe, unless there is some compromise. Uncompromising attitudes take their toll as partners demonstrate the inflexibility of the unconquerable will.

SOULMATE 2000

She saddens me. The way she watches every episode of Ally McBeal without fail. Her eyes light up at each youthful caper then brim with tears at each tender kiss. Her lips curl in contentment as things get sorted out in the end or droop in melancholy each time LIFE strikes below the belt.

I despair at her vicarious pleasure, but this is her world now. I have to tread softly.

Cable TV.

God. Why has it come to this?

He has not uttered more than two full sentences of approximately six words apiece for the whole day. Usually, a few grunts or two or three words suffice. He has not cared to listen to her for years now, really listen, so twenty years together have suddenly morphed into dust. Ashes to ashes. Wait, they had once been so good with each other. When did things fall apart?

Too much solitude. Solitude and heartache. Temper tantrums, money issues, push and shove. It was no use. He did not care to listen anymore. And she did not want to even try to understand him. So the love they once shared gradually festered, there was no other word for it, into intense detachment, bordering upon intolerance. She fought hard to be heard. But he still did not listen. He felt betrayed. That after all these years, he had somehow failed to live up to her expectations. Why, mercy, he had even lauded, indeed, been very supportive of her decision to stay home to look after the children. But it was not enough. It was never enough. Was

she displeased that he had not forced her into working once the children were older? Illogical. What on earth would that kind of reasoning be classified as? He was happy and proud of all that she did. He loved her. What else was there?

She was thoroughly fed up of the monotony of being a housewife. 'Homemaker' did not sound any better, no matter what they felt in the west. She wanted to be appreciated for the little things, the finer things, but he seemed so oblivious to her sentiments. And so they played their parts. She retreated. And when he did try to converse with her, she employed a useful tactic of monosyllabic defense. It worked. After a while, he left her alone. She then refused to meet him half -way as he fumbled in clumsy attempts to bridge this gap. So they played this particular Game of Life till Cable TV came along.

The ultimate weapon in defense-mechanism. Yes, Cable TV. And thereafter, it was two TV's with two separate channel-controls. They did not need each other to converse with, to interact with. Cable TV was the winner.

I was really depressed by such a state of affairs. There was little I could do. They had reached the point of no return, the rubicon-divide of advanced middle-age. What surprised me were other couples like them who seemed perfectly happy. Well. They seemed to be in harmony. So what had happened to their own great love?

The "l'll love you forever" syndrome. It had been so real at first. Then LIFE intervened. LIFE.

Why did they drift so far apart? Granted, their share of sorrows were perhaps more or less what the average person experienced. There had never been any major setbacks. Then why this mess?

He read whenever he could. He was a voracious reader. A learned man. Unlearned in the ways of the world. He paused mid-sentence as some vague memory tugged at his heart. Instinctively, he turned to her with a warm smile on his gentle face. But she was watching Ally McBeal and he felt like an

intruder, unwilling to break into her sanctuary. The memory slipped away as he fumbled to find his spot. And the moment passed.

She had felt his eyes on her. The need to seem self-contained somehow paralyzed her neck muscles. Strange, she ached to smile at him, to reach for his hand, to reassure him, to explain she was going through some inexplicable process. But she could not move an inch. And the moment passed.

All around the shadows deepened as the hours ticked steadily by. She rose to set the table, an old familiar habit that filled him with warmth. The maid brought in their dinner and they sat in stupefied silence, relishing the morsels of food on their plates rather than the thoughts in their minds. When would all this be resolved? Why couldn't NOW be the time? Why was it so hard for them to just speak to each other in a civil manner, with no remonstrations?

Would there ever be a time? Of compassion, of understanding, of tolerance, forgiveness? Or does one grow older and more disenchanted with the world only to appreciate the concept of maya?¹

It certainly was a harsh way of arriving at the truth. Odd that everyone did not attain this truth in the same manner. Life was unfair. Some achieved it with a degree of civility whereas others were sucked into the eye of the maelstrom. Only the strong could overcome this destructive process and deal with it logically, beat the odds.

It is time for bed. The youngsters have resolved one problem but the inkling of another has surfaced. It is almost 11pm. Time to get a book, she says to me, my yoke-sister, as I flit back to merge into her soul. I wish I was as strong as her. I appear only when she allows herself to float into an imaginary world where, as a mere spectator, however omniscient, she

illusion

can face the truth, without getting hurt. As the fusion takes place, I feel a clammy hand upon my brow, her shoulder.

Are you all right?

The concern is genuine. So why does a pleasant rejoinder freeze on my lips? I must say something, I must try. We will destroy each other like this. I must make the first move, the right move.

Mmm. Yes, thank you for asking. He smiles shyly. Yes, a beginning, a small beginning... so is this is the ultimate hope?

Personal, Unveiled:

A Collection of Conversational Verse

Strong I stand, and laugh to see
How mankind have fought with me.
Strong I stand, though I have borne
Anger, hate, and bitter scorn;

Emily Bronte (1837 or 8)

Epilogue as Prologue

When I was one and twenty, My life had just begun, I studied hard, read a lot There were dreams to be won.

I longed to watch dawn break by the sea And paint the landscape in all its glory; To dance the night away, serenely at a Ball Or like a wild thing on the disco floor; Then sip champagne from a fluted glass And thank the gods for the world at large.

This was not to be, it all eluded me, My wings were clipped ere I could fly.

Duty reared its sagely head And I obeyed the summons of my clan: The arrangements could not be undone. My youth was snuffed ere it sparked.

No, I could not climb Mount Everest
Or count the stars on a moonlit night,
Or dance on stage to the beat of 'ti ri ki ta dha'
The ghungroo's' bells were not for me:
I had to dance to a different tune,
And gladly would have too, had there been
Some Love, some Care, some Warmth.

Gender dominance soon enough Broke my Spirit and Me.

silver anklets worn in Indian dance.

Those seven years left their mark
But the bruises healed and faded,
As I hid my face from the world in shame,
A woman's grief and pain, too insignificant,
Just cannot be displayed.

All that I had ever desired:
A happy home, a kind partner and friend,
No, they all eluded me.
I tried hard to please and obey
To no avail.

Gender dominance soon enough Broke my Spirit and Me.

When I was one and thirty,
There shone the glimmering of a second chance,
After copious tears were cried in prayers
Beseeching each new and peaceful Dawn
And Deliverance.

I then married an old friend
Who set about to enchant
My beautiful little girls
And helped them walk with pride.

His Love and those admonishments too, Strengthened their self-worth, their confidence, They blossomed, in cue, And Damocles' sword, by another ugly name Simply disappeared.

And now at four and forty, My life is half-done, And I sing a different tune. I live a golden-guilded life And smile as the world spins round.

I lack no creature comforts,
There are no special reasons
For the way I am.
And if I am a fortunate one,
Osteoporosis will pass me by,
I began my calcium supplements
Not too long ago, so I may have a chance,
To beat the odds, save my bones.

I scold my daughters into drinking milk everyday,
My son follows their every move, what is a mother to say?
I threaten them with dire consequences:
Stories of Chhotto Ma²
She walked face forward, half-way to the floor
And never straightened up.

I am on HRT therapy close to five years now, Still my moody outbursts Are placed on PMT's brow.

What do I do at four and forty?

My Life is half-gone,
I have no job or pension-scheme,
No financial independence to smile about.
I spend the family income
And try to implement it
Doing freelance work,
That's rarely available steadily
Or with a regular fee, still it's the thought that counts!
Indeed, I possess no credit card

grandmother's younger sister

Or bank account to call my own,
Our joint a/c guarantees security,
But I would rather have my own.
My spouse, seasoned diplomat, regards all this
With resigned silence, intentional balm,
But I am not consoled: I regret
Opportunities lost by Circumstance
Not Choice.

Well, I have followed him around the world, Willingly and unwillingly, too, Two steps behind, as around the Sacred Fire We had once pledged our vows.

But now at four and forty, I apprehend a sudden stealth in the pendulum's Swing It frightens me.

I grow older
In the shade of the Maha Bodhi³ tree
And see my Life float
Unsurely down to the sea,
To mingle with all the flotsam
Of Eternity, It frightens me.

Is this then Maya⁴
This dissatisfaction I feel--All the regrets for what I should have done or said
If only I had remained single longer and free?
Or am I being readied
For some future Revelation

Of a Spiritual Encounter That will set my soul free, To attain *Brahman*?⁵

How will I know? Answer me, Please.

branch of the Bodhi tree from Budh Gaya, brought to Sri Lanka, planted in Anuradhapura

illusion

salvation, enlightenment, oneness

I Shall.....

In 2001, In this, my 45th year, I shall dare to put some fragrant flowers In my hair; And colour my lips with an unusual shade Mismatch my nails, wear them flaming red Or subtle jade; Pin up my hair, in any way I please, Or leave my thinning tresses tousled, To quiver in the breeze. I shall wear my trousers, with or without pleats. And drape myself in sarees, only myself to please. I shall put on weight, if need be, Not deprive my tastebuds, And exercise, just to stay healthy. I shall smile and smile, I will not share All my troubles, all my cares, For I can only depend on Me. Let Fate and the World wonder to see This new me, a stronger personality. I am done with pleasing others. And Service before Self. I shall now devote the rest of my life To thinking of myself.

I Believe

The Circle in the Garden,
Picture-worthy,
Tomorrow's society page;
We sit on wrought-iron chairs
Freshly painted white.
This our stage, lush green grass;
In the distance,
Bright orange and red cannas,
Flutter to greet the sun from oval beds.

We sip cool lime and soda, Sweet and sour, From tall frosted glasses, No margheritas At this monthly morning hour.

She says she fasts:-Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays:
Eliciting gasps
Of awestruck wonder,
From the motley crowd,
Yes/No shakes of the Asian head,
Reverence for her devoted ways.

She smiles in condescension, Tilts her *coiffure*'d hair, Preens at the sunlight reflection On her golden Cartier.

The hors-d'oeuvres arrive, Finger-food, short-eats, Marvellous descriptions: Mini-samosas, tikkas, paneer concoctions, An array of condiments, dainty productions.

The timing must be right
So I watch and wait,
As perfectly manicured nailtips
In silver, gold and flaming reds
Float towards salivating lips
And lowered heads.

I do not fast, I say----And watch the sudden scowls
Eclipse
Morning Light,
And hear the sudden gasps
Conjoin
In an evil hiss,
The Garden has been betrayed.

No, I do not fast, I say----Or pray at a preordained time---And feel the derisive disbelief
Permeate the hoi polloi,
But I do Believe and Pray
When I want, I say-And I know I am good and kind,
Thats all that needs to be said----My exit is perfectly timed.

The Dancer

She deftly extols
The nuances of ancient tales.
She nimbly evolves
With every subtle move she makes,
Sensuous yet frail.

Follow her expressive eyes, The heaving of her chest, As the Dance dances on In an exuberant trail Of the essence of Life.

She must portray
The soul of the tale,
Anticipate the drumbeats,
Her rhythm must not fail
The singer or the song,
Each time she exhales.

The Games

She preens in the mirror, admiring her looks,
Smiles, sways to the melody of the hit on the DVD,
Shakes her hair, lets it cascade;
Puckers her lips, shrugs, unafraid,
Anticipating the thrill of the chase:
The Games are about to begin.

She flicks a truant strand of hair from her face, Smoothens the gossamer cloth of her dress Over her lissome curves, in a deep primal caress: Intimations of things to be; Smiles, tempting, anticipating, The Games, about to begin.

Sweet, sweet, forbidden love, forbidden bliss.

And then she slips back into her stiletto blacks, Arches her heels, accentuates the curve of her back, The flimsy straps of her dress loosen and tighten With every move she makes, Turning this way and that, swinging, still in tune To the never-ending melody in the rented room.

She puts on her make-up, retouches her lips, Wets them again in a seductive kiss, Waiting for the curtain-call:

Bonne Chance,
I say, as she comes by, flicks the money away In the wink of an eye,
Touches my cheek in fond remonstrance,
And there she goes: with a swing to her hips,
A tilt to her chin, marking time to the rhythm
Of her body-line.

Out in the hallway, she pauses mid-stride As the sudden stranger looks her in the eye, She puckers her lips, smiles, all enchanting, He is drawn to her web, there is no retracting, The Games are about to begin.

Job Application

Dear Sir,

This is in reference......

You seek a deft creator
Of magical words and charms,
To arrest the modern consumer's mind
To your page promoting a special brand.
No, I have no portfolio to offer you,
Just a mature mind and eloquent words,
That's all I can say for now.
So take a chance on Fate's intervention,
Delineate a few images and watch how I transform
Images into crystalline packages,
In charming prose or verse.

Yours sincerely.......

A Sceptic

Love has been a many-splendoured thing To some, A four-letter word To others. I believed in Love Long ago. Now a small child within me cries For a love I cannot find: Is there such Love? I am beggared for Love And seek it in every nook and crevice. Still Love eludes me. I shall dare mock at Love: They say, pervades one's whole being And sets the soul aglow. Is there such Love? I want to know.

Zest for Love

If I should meet thee
After long years,......
How should I greet thee
With silence and tears
Lord Byron, 1816

Though Byron would have wept in silence On meeting an old lover----I know if we should ever meet again, I could only share your laughter. Love can be amusing, It's a vital force of Life. Why is there such a hue and cry Of Love's defeating power? Can a person love and hate Simultaneously? Of course, and with ease. Since all eternity, The world has loved the Lover Ignoring the wronged spouse Who bemoans the unloved state: Its the Mind that has to Love, my friend. The Body merely satiates queries. Don't look for Love in Words. Its the Mind, my friend, which never lies, The Body helps you to survive.

Disconsolate

Minutes tick by inexorably Time waits for no-one, Seasons pass, life goes on Forgetting is the hardest part.

"Did you find the rainbow's answer?"

I ask the dark-clouded sky,

My voice trembles in the wind,

Blown away, perhaps, across the universe to you.

"Did she fill your mind with her wit,
Or did you drown your pensive self
Within her supple warmth?
And did her kisses drug you like potent wine
That responsibility did not seem a waste of time?"

I still cannot forgive you, Leaving me defenceless, I was Young, Ignorant, Foolishly in Love With You.

You needed more time to bury yourself Amidst Life's offerings, And I was not the One.

"Did you find the rainbow's answer?"
Your face still haunts me, friend,
I am much too tired to cryOnly as the rains lash down,
Cold, caressing winds whisper insidiously.

Icy fingers tighten around my heart: It aches with remembered pain. I grow old too quickly, Or its that touch of cold Caught in the rain.

Hope for Love

We pledged our vows long, long ago,
Misfortune intervened... we parted, friends no more,
And a decade slipped in-between.
You and I, we met again, by some sudden quirk of Fate,
We toasted Love, our spirits soared,
But we cherished not this granted grace,
This glimmering of another chance;
You and I, in feigned indifference,
Consumed one another's dreams
As petty jealousies thrived upon proud illusions,
Misgiving intervened... we parted, friends no more
And a decade slipped in-between.

My heart does beat with simple Hope,
Endurance now, a second skin.
Time to revere Love, true Love,
Mellow, mature and kind...redolent Love
That must allay this gnawing fear, this revelation
Of losing you, a part of me, to fading memory.
You and I must repledge our vows,
Our tryst must heal our broken lives,
To enshrine this inner strength, this sacred inner space,
Never again to be defiled, till Death do us part
In Love.

Waves

The household chores are done. I wipe my face in relief, Unlatch the kitchen door, Stumble across the garden To stare at the ocean Beyond the compound wall. Sand in my eye: no more tears.

Puri sands: Golden sands.
Long have I stood upon your shifting shores.
As a child, pensive,
Scanning the horizon
For a speck to bait my fancy.
Ocean waves, roll on and on,
In a never-ending melody,
Gentle, mysterious, seductive,
Or in raging fury,
Untouchable wrath.

You and I, side by side,
Together yet apart,
It is forbidden to touch in our outside world.
Young adults, children still,
No plans were made, no promises to keep,
Just friends in love, young, unwise,
Insecure.

......Then him and I, for you, too young, Could not wed me.....

A bride of convenience, I spoke English so well,

An implement to impress his peers, A chattel for the house And a touchstone for unbridled fury. I survived.

Now I walk the sands alone,
The ocean's overture is jaded,
Even as it greets me like an old friend.
There is only Maya, this is Maya, Om Shanthi² Om.³

illusion

peace

Om, the primeval sound, representing the Holy Triad of Hinduism.

Insecure

They call me a schemer With a glad eye on security; If I honestly believed You and I Could spend the rest of our lives together, Apart, I would leave. If I did not fear the mind's vulnerability, And unhappiness in being separated, I would leave. You and I alone Know of the emptiness Of two lives disrupted: Of the sheer loneliness Of two loves torn apart. No one understands The pain we have lived with, In our different ways.

If I was sure
You could touch the rainbow's edge
Without me
I would leave,
In despair.

In Desperation

How can one man Inflict so much pain On the woman he once loved? He loved me once, long ago, Or so he said; And then ---Spent his moments Deriding my intellect, Abusing my wit, Scarring my mind, Scaring my heart, With all the pent up rage of a caged tiger: Pacing up and down in limited space. Provocation? Responsibility? The end of bachelorhood? All I know is that I have wept Too many tears. Toiled hard, Cooked, cleaned, scrubbed floors, Washed countless dishes, Fed countless guests, all these years; Nothing has been good enough. My thirst for Life Is effectively quenched.

If.....

If only I could
Control the flow
Of these unbidden tears,
Unleashed by sheer anger,
Despair and frustration;
This hot, liquid failing
That underscores
My vulnerability
In the face of your aggression.

Shattered

Please answer me, she cried: After all these years ---Did I really deserve Your souvenirs? A chipped tooth, A bloody nose, A bruised body, A scarred soul? This bleak life? Tell me, answer me, she cried: Did it serve your purpose? Was there a purpose? I was not the one to blame For all your regrets. We all stood silent As her tears flowed, Her body shrunk, her shoulders hunched With years of pain: Her petition was denied.

Rebirth

Sudden winds of dust
Thunderclouds, squalls--Its May-time once again.
Latent fear lurches through the shield
I have wrought around me:
Remembrance is a difficult bed-fellow.
The Circus has come to Town
For its May-time once again.

Sudden swirls of dust
Creeping insidiously,
Brush aside the gentle-tempered winds of early Spring.
Violent gusts shatter the landscape.
The circus top is in shambles,
Ripped apart.
Bedraggled performers stare
At canvas tatters that flutter in despair--The Band plays "Que sera sera..."
As the Show must go on.

I recall one such May-Day Several years ago, Sudden swirls of change, suffocating, Turning my world upside down, But then, Life is a Circus, And the Show must always go on.

I breathe and die a little
Each May-time.
Wait...this May-time,
The wind whistles a different tune.
Sand, grime, dust

Blur my vision,
But the rains tumble down
Ferociously affirming
Life's fragrance--Reconditioning my reflexes, just in time,
Yes, just in time.

Silver Omen

That moment,
Suspended in infinity,
Déjà vu;
That conversation,
Resumed from a decade ago.

The years between fade In mystical brackets. The pain, Joyous pain, Of knowing you again, Calms my bruised spirit, Soothes the furrows In my unhappy mind, Rekindles the embers Of my saddened heart.

Your being here
Makes me feel whole again,
Brings me back to life
From years of shackled misery.

Can we now dare to share The rest of our lives Together?

Love

It is almost the bewitching hour,
A special time.
I think of us as I walk along
The corridors of my mind,
And grope for long lost images
Of wondrous things
To describe my love for you.

I fumble in clumsy attempts
At writing love-songs
To serenade you with,
(Though Bilquis used her wit aeons ago
To woo her wise, wise Solomon).

All around us the shadows deepen,
But I am not afraid anymore.
Our love has to brave
Much rough weather.
We must wait patiently
For the Die to be Cast.

Roses, roses

Beside me sits the man I have long loved. And now I hold our child, With his mop of dark hair, Within these disinfected walls Of an alien hospital. Nurses flit to and fro Feigning indifference to life and death. Their job is to Work for the cause And weep behind closed doors. The room's fragrance-Sets my nostrils aquiver. He reaches for my hand, Our child smiles in his dreams. And I am humbled. At being thrice blessed, My dearest daughters and my son. I pray for their safety In this cruel world. The bell peals its warning: Visitors have to leave now.

And this starkness
Is not at variance
With the bustle of the outside world:
Hurrying, hurry, come on
Its just another city, another baby born,
Call a cab, lets go home,
There is work to be done.
We have to plan a modest
Naming Ceremony,

Within a month and a day.
Why is there a seven-day gap
Between the naming of a boy and girl?
No one answers me.
I still do not know, but
Thank God for His Gifts of Love.

Foreign Service Children Dedicated to my children, Smita, Amrita and Suren.

Rainbow colours, shimmering stars, Our children follow us around the world, Trusting, shy, insecure: Dreading that first day at school, Placement tests, new faces, strange accents, Their wondrous young eyes Shining with so much hope. Then its time for "Show and Share" Science projects, drawing cards For Mother's Day and Father's Day, Dressing up as Indian brides, Or in Nehru jackets and churidars. Now its the latest Barbie or Nintendo that enthralls And Choco-chip cookies and the Halloween Ball, Until its time to bid farewell. Three years have passed. Their hearts are heavy, I can tell, Barely having settled down. How do I erase those worried frowns?

Blossoming pre-teens, their fears compound, Fitting in is the hardest task, In the latest craze their thoughts are found: They MUST have braces, else, the kingdom is lost, So affix those zany multi-colours, forget the cost. Their peers dictate their every move, We may not infringe this Sacred Realm And everything we say is Wrong,

narrow fitted trousers

As adolescence casts its enticing spell,
Extolling the freedom of choice, freedom unchained,
And that is the Way of the World.
Our children are bewitched somehow

As their bodies change, their voices break
And we must tread very softly now,
For their dreams to flower and endure,
Having set our limits of right and wrong,
Underscoring the virtue of Responsibility.
Its time to bid farewell again,
Three years have passed--Their hearts are heavy, I can tell,
As we begin our next journey to a foreign land.

I wipe away their angry tears, comfort them
As this peculiar grief has no name.
Who will compel the first break
Of friendship forged in a foreign land?
No more late-night calls on this particular phone,
Whispers and giggles on who's new, who's hot----"Are we marionettes in restraint?" they cry,
And I am silenced by their pain
As we prepare to depart.

Young adults now, so brave and bold,
Striding tall into class, smiling in response
To the new social milieu, they are radiant, masterful,
Acing placement tests, interviews, lo and behold,
They are soon a part of the Beautiful Crowd,
And talk of love, sex and college, all in one breath,
Teacher references and financial aid,
Where to apply, pastures green or homeward bound,
They have their freedom of choice.

The future spreads before them,
Magnificent, tantalizing, in intangible hues
Of what may be:
Fierce pride now marks their past--Conversing in foreign tongues with ease,
Kayakaying down pristine streams,
Cross-country skiing in the Nordic belt,
Climbing mountains, trekking alien paths,
Days spent helping the underprivileged,
Enshrines their souls with a wholesome glow,
Makes their hugs tighter on coming home:
Life is so Beautiful.
But its time to pack again.
Three years have passedTheir hearts are still heavy, I can tell.

Regrets, they have a few,
Missing grandparents, relatives, puja² festivities,
The sense of belonging to one place,
One neighbourhood;
Of having seen more of the world than their own land,
But the Die has been Cast.
They are the Third Culture generation,
Global Citizens, at ease, wherever they go,
Transcending cultural differences with élan,
Truly, they are blessed,
Our children: Rainbow Colours, etched in Gold.

Molten pools, liquid fire
Dancing in mischief,
Recollections of joy;
Ablaze with passion
Of a deep-rooted anger
At mankind's inhumanity;
Softly aglow with love's special light,
Bedimmed, moist, once the passion's spent;
Truly the poets have spoken:
Eyes reflect the soul.

II

Sunlight
Peeping through crevices
Into a darkened room,
Dewdrops
Glistening in the morning sun,
Starlight
Beckoning into the mystical beyond,
Raindrops
Caressing my face in a light evening shower,
Your eyes are all this to me.

Ш

Injustice still stalks the earth untamed, I sense your pain, the futility of it all Each time you walk through the door. My words freeze, suspended mid-air---- The day's events shrivel, forlorn, unsung, Exiled forever.

But I do not despair, Life goes on.

special religious rituals

We now find peace in pregnant silence, Sipping tea on the terrace, so civilized, Growing older tentatively. Your eyes flicker, mine respond: So much is left unsaid For another time, another day. Is it already too late? How am I interpret this transition? With the mercy of a Woman Or the sudden anguish Of a Child?

Simply Love

My mind is alive
To the warmth of your love.
My heart beats in gladness
As your hands cup my face.
The world stands still
As your fingers trace my cheeks
And the nightmares recede.
My lost eyes do see
By the power of your Love.
It heals my wounded spirit,
Eases my pain,
And makes me believe
In Life, once again.

Peace on Earth

Its cloudy,
Maybe the rains will come,
Time stands still as I recall
The furrows upon your forehead.
Suddenly you smile--And the wind whistles through pine trees,
As a lotus blooms in all its glory.

The cleft in your cheek deepens
As some glad thought
Soothens your mind----And a peacock flutters through the Ridge
We had often walked together.
A finger taps your cheek
As you ponder solemnly
On Life's many burdens,
And rain-clouds darken the mid-day sun.

You laugh hesitantly,
As some memory tugs your heart
And water ripples across the lake's surface
As if a puff of wind is at play.
Then as your eyes light up with joy
Your smile widens---You flick a gnarled finger across my cheek
And a calm descends upon me.
I have finally found
Peace on Earth.

To My Parents:

Bouli

Dear Mother,
Just to say
You are cherished
Beyond the Milky Way!
You are truly loved
And respected,
Forever and a Day!
Thank you for loving me,
Thank you for your care,
And for teaching me
To value this Life we share.
You are always in my prayers.

<u>Nanuli</u>

Dear Father,
Thank you for your love,
Your support and constant care;
Thank you for your guidance
And for always being there;
For teaching me
To stand up for my principles;
Face any adversity
Question any injustice,
Value loyalty;
To respect Life,
No matter how hard it may often prove.
You are always in my prayers.

To Sasu Ma

With eyes that crinkled
As you smiled in mirth,
At some odd recollection
Of times gone by:
You embraced my little daughters
Into your special realm,
Enchanted them with visions
And wondrous tales.
You welcomed me
With your warmth,
Though a hostile world
Watched in expectant glee
For some show of animosity.
It was not to be!

We are truly blessed
To be in your Home.
You are always in my prayers.

Memories of Childhood

To my sisters: Mina, Nina, Anna & Lyn.

Memories of childhood Invade my day: The image of you, Laughing, chuckling, at play; The image of her, Serenely smiling at you, As you both sat on the steps Leading up to the roof. What adventures you planned With dolls and props: **Knights and Princesses** Coming alive In your expert hands, You outlined their hopes. What stories you conjured up Out of the blue! Then the younger sisters arrived, You played with them, Sometimes took sides. How I longed to join your merry band, But I was the eldest, banished awhile. Now we are all older, live separate lives, With families of our own, new memories to enscribe, And memories of childhood To cherish with pride.

For Bapa

(18th December 1984)

An aquiline nose, a handsome face Ravaged only by time, His hair is flecked with grav At odds with his six and eighty years. How serene he looks. His face aglow with an inner light Transcending bodily ruin. He is surely asleep. Dreaming of another tomorrow In another world, At peace, finally, freed from the bondage of old age. How often had he fretted These past four years, ever since that fatal fall That confined his existence Within the perimeters of a bed; But it was not Time, the Lord said, And so he prayed; And lived his days in anxious suspense Praying for release from this earthly body. Then he left us -----Death came swiftly As if the Lord he always prayed to Did not want him to suffer Anymore.

God rest his soul in peace. I shall always miss him And regret not having said: Farewell, *Pranam. Bapa.*!

grandfather

For Sura Pisa (1985)

I would lay these flowers By your side As a token of my regard, I cannot. My freedom is conditioned By Society And its perimeters of approved decency. It is out to prove My indecency In leaving a brutal spouse. The past is behind me, Yet too near for comfort. They whisper of my wretched 'karma' But I am a mere twenty eight And have no recollections of a Life Before this: Only the outcome: No self-esteem, no confidence; Shards in my soul.

I am told you are gasping for Life; There is little time left To know you. An event years ago, Severed our ties.

Your son was too young
Therefore an unsuitable boy
For me;
And I too young to disagree.
Fate had other plans in store,
We went our separate ways.
Now he says we have the glimmering of a second chance---Can you find it in your heart
To allow us to Hope?

For Neelan Thiruchelvam (2000)

Eloquent, determined,
Iron fist clothed in dignified élan,
He walked ramrod straight, papers, files
Spilling forth, his constant endeavours:
To end the turmoil in his land.
He spoke from the heart,
His pleas voiced his cries,
Delineating sharp images,
Unnecessary inhumanity, perpetuated,
Brother against brother;
A virulent strain, unleashed, somehow,
To serve what purpose, what just cause?
He worked hard and long, his only desire:
Peace in his land, peace in our souls.

Then sudden silence, such eerie stillness.

Smudged ink, unfinished sentences,
Incredible shock, infinite dismay,
The abrupt departure of this kind, unassuming man:
A year has past.
His spirit infuses the air he once breathed,
In this land he so loved;
He touched many, many lives,
Near and far, his beliefs and thoughts,
Discussed, still, with passionate zeal.
How can such goodness ever be harmed?

For H.C. (To the poet Harindranath Chattopadhaya)

This poem is for you, H.C.,
I am sure I will eventually know
Why your talk of spring and love
In the offing
Began to haunt me so.
You talked of meeting and mating,
Of love being the Vernal Spring----Who inspired you to write so creatively
On such mundane things?

Were you a true believer
In Love's healing power?
Did you spy that pot of gold
At the edge of the rainbow's hold?
You left us before I could address you,
And I still strive for the answers, to pacify
My Muse.

Does your poetry reflect your life? This poem is for you, H.C., I salute you for baring your emotions For all of us to see; But hark, man's true soul Is a contradiction, Would you not have agreed?

Confidante

Keeper of my secrets,
Listener of my woes;
Nurturer of my well-being,
Vanquisher of my foes:
Consoler of my spirit,
Healer of my pain,
Your friendship has always been my gain.
Thank you, dearest friend,
For being there for me,
Time upon time again.

Prayers for My Children (i)

My firstborn, doe-eyed, beautiful; Struck by the harsh reality Of my Life's tragedy, Too young.

Five years old, sensitive, protective, Her younger sister could do no wrong. Shielding her fiercely from many a sad sight, Confessing to issues not her own.

Prayers for My Children (ii)

After all these years, Each time She says Mama.... It brings a smile to my face, In the face of her need. So in want of assurance, protection; Another bruised knee, scraped elbow, Broken bones: I recall that moment I had to leave her: All alone For the first time. It cuts deep, that memory, As she stands forlorn In the pre-monsoon rain, Her face crumples As she waves goodbye: Alone, her new school life to begin; No elder sister or family to shield her; Prabhu, be with her always please

Prayers for My Children (iii)

Sunshine and roses Reflect The gentle warmth in his eyes; Compassion flows With his words, so wise: Too young in years, An Ancient in deeds, Cocooned in the love of his Family. He listens, intent, As you speak, Devouring each nuance Of your speech; Seeks only the good In this world; Alarmed by the cruelty Unfurled In the sequence of daily events, Flinches, agonized, at the slightest Act of Inhumanity; I worry for him: Protect him, Prabhu, Protect him, please

Fire

Eternal Flame,
Symbol of Hope,
Fearless cosmic force
Dancing in the wind,
With increasing intensity.
Blazing in fury untold,
Crackling, smouldering;
Mysterious destinies of Life
To destroy or unfold.
Incandescent rays
Kindling embers in a stony hearth,
Soothing the spirit,
With warmth,
On a dark chilly night.

Fire, Harbinger of Life, And Death Of the Hindu.

The benevolence of Brahma,¹
The infinite knowledge of Yama,²
Hope and fear twinned forever
In the fusion of cosmic dance.
Sacred Fire,
Absolve any remnants of fear
That I may harbour,
No, that my soul may harbour...
When You engulf my spirit
As they light my pyre of sandalwood.

In Retrospect:

If you have read the "Epilogue", you will understand why this collection has taken so long to surface. Mixed emotions. Stigma. A sense of 'what will people say?'

It was towards the end of 1999 that I took a long, hard look at myself and said: there is so much excitement about the new millennium. I want to celebrate too, celebrate LIFE with all its complexities. It is time to move on.

But how will I begin to do that? It has been so long since I thought about me, "my own self". (Yes, I do confess I love poetry and Walt Whitman is a favourite).

Here I am, forty-something, a housewife ('homemaker' just sounds better) out of circumstance, not choice. My academic record, at school and college, ground to an unwilling halt, over two decades ago. I tend to still grieve for all that I could have done, had I only taken a stand, insisted I finish my studies, found a job, etc, but I did not know how to do that.

I have to admit that I still often hesitate to speak my mind in this modern, high-tech world, where women are doing wondrously. I admire all these women who encompass both worlds of home and work, often at a great sacrifice, with sheer determination and élan. I continue to apprehend this burden of centuries, yoked around my neck. But now, I will shake it off forever, for my own sake and for my children.

I also regret succumbing to the adversity I had to encounter from the age of twenty-one until twenty-eight. Why did I put up with it? Tradition. The yoke of centuries. Telling myself I could change things. Violence rarely vanishes. Now, over twenty years later, I can smile at such alliteration. But those seven years traumatized my life.

I fled to the sanctuary of my parents' home. And I healed, slowly, but surely.. till I walked upright again, with my head held steady. My rescuers arrived, once I talked to an old friend, now my husband of almost fifteen years.....

the Creator

the god of Death

My parents, sisters, friends and especially, my two little daughters, set the Chariot of Hope rolling again. And over the years, they, together with my husband's family, my little son, my sisters' extended families, my relatives, have understood and supported me too. So I do and have liked being ME.

I cannot suffer cruelty in any form so I speak out, whenever I can. And I caution those who read my words, to delve deep into their souls before making or breaking a traumatic or violent relationship. It is vital to speak with someone, anyone, to confront your fears. Help will be at hand. The first step is the hardest, but remember, LIFE is too short, too unpredictable. And there is just this ONE life. The UN has recently declared that violence is a human rights issue. Violence against women cannot be condoned.

I still cry in anguish, to the call of my women ancestors, the child-brides, the child-widows, the mothers; to the Deliverer of the Scorching Sun, Who has burnt my Land, and the Women with it, for all these years, over the centuries. True, we do have our liberated "fortunate few", the educated and employed, happy with progress and globalization. But there still exist our sisters, the silent grieving ones, unable to break free of shackled feet, bound to tradition, to the written and unwritten laws of gender dominance.

So you find me here, talking to you about love, despair and hope in my verse. These poems have been written, torn up, lost, rewritten, over two decades. It is hope that compelled me to write them, the hope that is so vital to the essence of our beings.

And if a time comes when you are confronted with a choice, however difficult it may be, go with the feelings in your heart.

Hinduism, a person who tries to see good in every living, non-living thing, a person who respects my religion and everyone else's, as my religion gives me this strength, this acceptance.

Strange, there hovers a restless spirit within me. It is LIFE beckoning into mature middle-age. I feel this urge to break free. So is this then Maya? This dissatisfaction I feel..... is it part of God's plan? I have this wild desire to travel, alone, to explore new avenues. But LIFE intervenes and the joys, the sorrows, the humdrum of my daily routine, take precedence in my memory bank. It is not time for absolution. And the days have collaged with the months and the years, as my steps falter, memories flicker, then I must log out for the day.

So here I am, anticipating the thrill of the new millennium, the hope it promises, a speck of dust or a link in the Masterplan? Or am I a catalyst for the Drama to unfold? And that is the ultimate mystery of LIFE. One just never can tell!!

JM

Afterword

Valentine Daniel, in his book Charred Lullabies, reflects a great deal on violence, the effect of violence and the representation of violence by scholars and activists. Violence, he argues, in the lives of those he interviewed was a transformative moment. Some people were destroyed or broken by the experience. Others were transformed, their experience giving them enormous strength and conviction. They take control of their lives, give direction to those they love and take measures to preserve their humanity. Women, he argues, are often in the latter category.

Jayshree Misra is a survivor of what some feel is the worst form of violence, the violence between intimates, when trust is broken and when escape is often impossible. And yet, like the great survivors of Valentine Daniel's story, she has emerged strong, reflective and full of a passionate love for humanity. Her poems are about love, fear, tragedy and violence. They are also about renewal and regeneration. They explore the depths of feelings and relationships in a voice that will strike resonance with many people living in South Asian societies. The poems are all vivid in themselves but an underlying thread of compassionate humanity, coming out of lived experience, holds them together. As a result her poems are full of the rich texture of life and living.

In my work as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, I have often met similar women who have experienced tragedy, bereavement and violence but who regain their faith in humanity because their personalities are full of love and caring. They turn their experience on its head by making it into a creative moment allowing them to emerge wiser, stronger and full of life's energy. They reflect the triumphant aspects of the indomitable human spirit. Jayshree's poems are in the same vein, making us realize that the despondency we feel about tragedy in the real is counteracted

by the strength, surprises and playfulness of the human spirit. Let us hope that Jayshree will continue to be an inspiration to the many women who have to face violence in everyday life. Let us hope that this book of poetry will help them escape the cycles of violence and cruelty by giving voice to their pain and fears. Let us also hope that the book of poetry will help them cope with their tragedy with strength and compassion, realising that tomorrow is theirs to create.

Radhika Coomaraswamy
Director
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U.N.Special Rapporteur
On Violence Against Women



Jayshree Misra has taught English for the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma and as a second language. Born in Orissa (1956), she was educated in England, Orissa and Delhi University, where she received her M. A. in English in 1978. She has worked briefly, in the mid-80's, with the news agency UNI and the Times of India, Delhi. She recently qualified for a postgraduate diploma in Human Rights Law from the National Law School of India University, Bangalore.

Jayshree is the wife of a foreign service officer in the Indian Civil Service and has three children.

