

DEEP STORIES Silences

The Katha Literary Festival, 2003

Report

Wednesday, 12 February 2003

The Katha Literary Festival - *Deep Stories and Silences* was inaugurated with the lighting of the ceremonial lamp by Kapila Vatsyayan, culture and art expert and former Academic Director, IGNCA, Kim Scott, Australian Indigenous writer and Abid Hussain, President of Katha and former Ambassador of India to the US.

In her welcome address, Geeta Dharmarajan, Executive Director of Katha, outlined the inception of Katha and its growth, and how Katha was looking at 21 languages in the 21st century, including the oral traditions. Abid Hussain reflected on the wealth that the country has in the form of storywriters, storytellers, and their stories and works. He also commented on the creative process – the birth of an idea, its transformation into an image and ultimately, into the written word. He further lauded the writers and storytellers for capturing the truth or the essence of the stories ever present in various aspects of life, and which is a necessary pre-requisite for the ability to write, and the role of Katha in trying to bring across that truth.

The Remembered Word: Mythmakers & Storytellers

Chaired by GJV Prasad this session had Kim Scott and Kapila Vatsyayan as keynote speakers.

Kapila Vatsyayan talked of the tenuous relation between the written and the spoken word. Stating that civilizations are defined using the written word as parameter, she stressed the need of equalising the perceptions surrounding the written and the oral word—a question that has become more political than historical. Taking up the question of the Language as opposed to the Dialect, she further pointed out how geo-political boundaries do not confirm to socio-cultural and linguistic boundaries and this unconformity is the cause of conflicts of identity, culture and region. Kim Scott shared his experiences as an Australian indigenous writer and as a descendent of the one of the native people of Australia who were on the receiving end of the colonisation process of the continent.

Myth & Memory: Writers Conference

GJV Prasad chaired the session comprising of Bangla writer Bani Basu, Telugu writer Mohammed Khadeer Babu, translators Amarendra Dasari and Nandini Guha, Kalyani Dutta, and Chairperson of the National Film Institute, Pune, U R Anantha Murthy as speakers.

Opening the session, Anantha Murthy talked of the role of remembering and forgetting in the mythification process, and how over-psychologisation in narrating a

story limits it to a mere case history. Nandini Guha, translator of Bani Basu's story "The Fallen Man" pointed out the need to know what we mean by myth, as it is too multi-dimensional to be pigeonholed into one definition. She also reflected that reconstructing myth is what writers need to do rather than reliving it.

Bani Basu commented that she looked upon the occupation of the writer rather as a pre-occupation. She also talked about her writing process and the inspiration behind "The Fallen Man." Kalyani Dutta reflected how certain non-Hindu writers also delve into Hindu myths to enrich their writings.

Mohammed Khadeer Babu talked of his involvement and endeavours to record the folktales of the marginalised sections, while Amarendra Dasari commented on the need to deconstruct the idea of a collective myth or cultural register that represents the whole nation, in view of the diversity and multiplicity of Indian culture and people.

Translating Desire: Gender and Culture in India

Brinda Bose chaired the session. On the panel were Karen Gabriel, Ratna Kapur and PK Vijayan contributors to the book and media person Purabi Panwar.

Opening the discussion, Brinda Bose raised the issues of looking at Indian culture through the context of sexual desire, and what kind of politics resonated from this conjunction. In her response, Karen Gabriel pointed out that desire is socially constructed and deeply political in the sense that it was hemmed in by the myriad political claims to its social construction, and attendant entrenched interests. The panel also discussed the relationship between desire and family as an institution which prescribes normative models.

P K Vijayan introduced the idea that desire is polymorphous, and in the political context of each form, various political streams often came together on conservative positions on the issue of transgressive sexuality. Ratna Kapur pointed out that there were essentially two responses to the issue of sex and sexuality – either through the lens of the family or in terms of sexual violence. At the same time, desire is often referred to as being opposed to culture. Commenting on the current dominance of right wing politics, she explained how, through the ploy of identifying desire and culture as opposed, desire is delegitimised, and also as a consequence, the female body. She also pointed out that as a result of the identification of the Family with the Nation, even more progressive feminist groups were adopting this ideological line for fear of being branded Anti-National.

Purabi Panwar also said that it was time that our society also learnt to shape, determine and choose our own model of sexuality, and not emulate stereotypes offered by the west. She said, that mere representative, token eroticisation would not empower either men or women. This session also looked at more popular instances from contemporary Hindi cinema, in order to draw the parameters of the arguments offered.

The Performed Word: Translating the Metaphor

Pankaj Singh, chairperson of the session, highlighted the importance of the relationship between the written and the performed word. Renowned filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan spoke from the point of view of the story in cinematic

performance with reference to his experience as someone who uses diverse cultural texts as raw material for the creative process. Through the narration of a recent personal experience, he focussed also on the issue of perceived influence, acknowledged/unacknowledged, which accordingly became perceived plagiarism. Noted dancer Leela Samson commented on how dancers use their bodies to translate or interpret words, referring to the dramatic ploy, the constant projection of the nayika. She also stressed the need to question the roots of traditions. Kala Ramesh also shared her knowledge of music in performance as a response to the points raised the preceding discussion.

Writers' Conference: Women as Witches

Chairperson of the session, Ritu Menon pointed out that the central theme of Sukhjit's Punjabi story "Chandri" was not witches, but the construction of women as witches and the reasons and the politics behind such constructions. She also referred to well known instances in world history, adding that it was important to look upon woman as transgressor.

Dilip D'Souza, Bombay based freelancer, referred to Mahasweta Devi's story "Bayen," which hints within the narrative, the reasons behind the marginalisation of women by naming them witches. Hina Nandrajog recounted the contours of the story and outlined the possible interpretations.

Katha Awards Presentation

The day ended with the presentation of the Katha Awards, 2003 by writer Krishna Sobti and filmmaker Aloor Gopalakrishnan. It was followed by presentation of Tripurari Sharma's play *Mahabharat Se*.

Thursday 13 February 2003

The Written Word: The Sacred and the Profane

U R Anantha Murthy chaired the session in which twice Booker prize winning Australian writer Peter Carey and Gopal Guru of Delhi University were the keynote speakers.

Referring to instances in Australian colonial history, Peter Carey observed how the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane is strewn throughout Australia's history. Recounting how events, like the Bicentennial celebrations held recently, only celebrate and commemorate the colonisers' point of view, he pointed out that the feelings and the reactions of the colonised, i.e, the aborigines, have no place in such events. He further drew upon examples from his works *The True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Oscar and Lucinda* to demonstrate the English attitude to the convict status of the early settlers and how white Australians grew up with the anxiety that they won't be "real" people.

Gopal Guru talked of the different ways of understanding and defining the Sacred and the Profane, with special reference to Hindu mythology, the Devdasi practice, and major Marathi and Dalit literary works. He pointed out how in Indian culture and Hindu mythology, the dichotomy is always mediated and defined by the interests of the upper caste people.

Writers' Conference: Writing the Body

Chaired by U R Anantha Murthy, the session had writers Venkat Swaminathan, Mahi, M Mukundan, translators KG Ramakrishnan, D Krishna Ayyar, Vimala Balakrishnan, and danseuse Navina Jafa on the panel.

The session discussed the Body as depicted in literary works with special reference to Mahi's "Nedi" and Mukundan's "Nruttam". Talking about his novella, Mukundan explained that it is a tribute to the body, which is so often treated as a pariah and a despicable object. D Krishna Ayyar, who had translated the story, observed that in India the body is a vehicle for expression of emotions and spiritual values and not regarded as Profane.

Navina Jafa talked about the role of the mind in the transition from the profane to the sacred, adding that celebration of the body in Indian aesthetics, and especially as expounded in the *Natyashastra*, is a celebration of the understanding of the biology of the body. Gopal Guru remarked on the role of the socio-cultural space politics in defining the body as Profane or Sacred, observing how the very ghungroo which is considered sacred when tied to Nataraja's feet, is profane when it is tied to an untouchable's lathi and used to announce his social status.

Mahi recounted her experiences as a woman coming from a strictly orthodox family and also as a female writer talking uninhibitedly about the female body and desires in the Tamil literary world which, according to her, receives all such writings in a prejudiced manner. She ended by reiterating her firm decision to continue writing about "my body."

Venkat Swaminathan opined that the body is sacred and the attribution of the terms "sacred" or "profane" to it rests with our minds. Pointing out that it is the mind that defines or dissolves this dichotomy, he stressed focus on the mind. On the other hand, K G Ramakrishnan insisted on the complementary nature of the body and the mind, referring to the stress, in Hindu philosophy, of the body as linked to Kama and Artha, while the mind is used for attaining spiritual salvation.

U R Anantha Murthy talked about the paradox in India where Body is glorified, but at the same time it is also untouchable. Observing that we cannot use western paradigms to explain or understand this dichotomy, he suggested that we have to live with it and writers can delve into this paradox to search for a solution.

Translating Caste: Archetypes and Stereotypes

Tapan Basu, who chaired the session, questioned the necessity or relevance of contemporary society and literature as dimensions of a caste divided society, especially in face of certain schools of thought that believe that caste had been "adequately" overcome. Referring to the flare-ups occasioned by the Mandal Commission Report, he pointed out that caste is a part not only of the lived reality of those who are directly oppressed, but also of those who are not.

Gopal Guru highlighted how the dispossessed's attempt to translate the painful specificities of their lives into the universal fails, since there is actually no space within the universal for the socially marginalised.

Keerti Ramachandra raised the core issue of positionality of the translator. She foregrounded the questions of the translator's position by asking whether or not one has the right to translate stories about sensitive issues if one did not share the social position of the writer, and whether or not it was actually possible to do so with sensitivity and precision. Geeta Sahai and Rupalee Verma also spoke about the

issues that the story raises and their specific understanding of the contours of such a narrative and the role of personal, generational experience attained over time.

The Contested Word: Knowledge, Power, Conflict

The session was chaired by Madhu Kishwar and had Hindi writer Krishna Sobti and Urvashi Butalia, co-founder of Kali For Women, as keynote speakers.

In her keynote address, Krishna Sobti expressed concern over the increasing hold of the commercial world over 'words'. She expressed how although writing is a lonely profession, a writer cannot write in isolation and has to be in touch with reality. Urvashi Butalia spoke about the question of knowledge of and power over conflict, and the space that the world of publishing occupies in this issue. Clearly, writing about a social issue is only the first step in the making of a social consciousness through literature. She built this argument through describing her experience at the time of writing her book *The Other Side of Silence*. She continued by stressing that it is the current political issues, which are considered important by a regional community or a national community that can make a difference to what is published.

Writers' Conference: Private Spaces, Public Spaces

Chaired by Madhu Kishwar, the panel discussed the questions of Otherness, and private and public spaces with special relation to Prakash S Pareikar's "Chandrakor" and Salam Bin Razak's "The Third Attack." On the panel were writers Prakash S Pareikar, Salam Bin Razak, Damodar Mauzo and Victor Rangel Ribeiro, and theatre exponent Kirti Jain.

In his opening address, Damodar Mauzo commented on how mistrust lead to preconceptions in the story "Chandrakor". He also touched upon the differing sensitivity of the characters in the story and their reactions to the Other.

Kirti Jain delved into her experiences as a child in UP and later as a theatre teacher in National School of Drama, New Delhi to highlight the essential question of what is and is not public/private spaces. She recounted how in certain traditions women who have been left at home after the baraat goes for the wedding, dress up as and imitate men in all their vulgarity and crudity. Perhaps as a reaction against all the forms of repression they had borne under men.

Salam Bin Razak remarked how a writer is in his own world, his own private space, while in the process of writing, but at the same time is connected to the public space, as it is from the public space that he draws inspiration and gives life to his characters. This is the dichotomy.

The day ended with a Hindustani classical vocal performance by Kala Ramesh under the theme "Deep Stories and Silences of Music".

Friday, 14th February, 2003

The Interactive Word: Speech and Silence

Noted Urdu writer Joginder Paul stressed on the importance of silence both during the creative process and also in the story itself. Silence is beautiful and nothing is more communicative than Silence, he stated. He said, that whatever was written, had its counterpart in reality. A correspondence, without which the writer can not bring inevitability to the story – this was an element which, he opined, is necessary

to convince the reader and to stop the reader from forming preconceived conclusions. However, what is happening happens in the mind of the writer. Unless something or someone is imprinted in the mind, the person does not exist and the event does not happen. The story has to be perceived, it happens to you, he continued.

Recalling Sadat Hasan Manto's comment, "My characters are in my pocket," Paul Sahab added that he had no control over his own characters which come out of his books, take life and keep growing. In this connection, he emphasized the role of the reader in the creation of a story, pointing out that there are as many meanings in a story as there are readers.

On the role of language, Paul Sahab stated that a writer does not write a language when he writes a story. In fact, language is used very silently and does not exist, apart from a few brilliant artistic strokes in the story. He stressed that the writers must not be loquacious. He also touched on how we have been wrongly fed on the belief that literature is a representation of life, reiterating that literature is parallel life and not mere reporting of life which is inherent in representation. Remarking that literature is the fellowship of silence of those who are suffering, he called upon the younger generation to take up the responsibility of writing well and competently.

The session was chaired by Mitra Parikh, head of the post graduate department at SNTD University, Mumbai.

Presentations & Interactions

The second session of the day discussed the multiplicity, mode and subject in the Narrative.

In her paper, "Pirs, Poets, Performers: Sufism in Punjab," journalist Suparna Puri traced the growth of Sufi poetry in Punjab with special reference to its socio-political and anthropological dimensions. Commenting on the role of the composite culture in the region in preserving and promoting Sufism in Punjab, she pointed out that Sufism constitutes an integral part of this hegemonous heritage and has instrumentalised the socio-political change within the demographic diversity of Punjab.

Dr Vijaya Guttal of Gulbarga University talked at length about Women Saints in Indian history with special reference to Akka Mahadevi, the famous mystic belonging to the Virashaiva Bhakti movement in 12th century Karnataka. Reflecting on the essential similarity in various Bhakti movements in the country in the emphasis on the loving devotion offered to god, Dr Guttal pointed out that the position of these women saints is paradoxical. On the one hand they had broken patriarchal constructs such as the role of womanhood, the identification of woman as body-centered and the close association of sexuality with the feminine – constructs which are basis of patriarchal structure. But on the other hand, they call themselves brides of god, using the patriarchal framework as a metaphor to highlight her spirituality.

Writer and Chief Editor of Internet magazine, *Meghadutam*, R K Murthy attempted to answer why the Ramayana continues to appeal us all, regardless of age, caste or

religion, in his paper "Ramayana's Eternal Appeal: A Probe into its Survival Kit." He outlined that it is the reflection of eternal values, openness to interpretation and questions, and the element of fantasy and science present in this epic that makes it timeless and universal.

Arunima Paul, a post-graduate student of St Stephens College, New Delhi, talked of the processes of co-opting and marginalizing which disassociates and delegitimises communities and groups with special reference to Dalits and Women in her paper "Writing Self, Writing Community: Storytellers and Activism." Referring to the works of Mahasveta Devi, she pointed out how Indian women's writing has had to sculpt and delineate its role in opposition to the workings of western feminism and literature while also negotiating its cross cultural identity.

Rupalee Verma spoke from the point of view of translator and as someone who worked closely with literature in transformation from one cultural idiom to another. There are enough stereotypes, which grow into lasting myths, without any basis – a point relevant in the context of cultural and economic differences, and in the context of the growth of the right wing, she pointed out. She further highlighted the politics behind the sustained construction of the Other, and stressed the need for a fresh look, not through hairsplitting analysis of Story, but through the creation of an alternate sensitive tradition of narratives. It would have to be a narrative, which would address questions of social and communal relevance and stand firmly on the basis of simple humanism.

The Translated Word: Language, Culture, Story

This session, chaired by Kannada playwright H S Shivaprakash, began with Prof Harish Trivedi of Delhi University, outlining the necessity of resistant translation, which insist on the retention in the translated text of the deeper differences between the source culture and the target culture. In this context, he discussed the genius of late Harivansh Rai Bacchan both as a translator and a creative writer with special reference to *Madhushala*.

Aijaz Ahmed spoke about the politics of translation in a country that is no longer a colony. He discussed the politics behind translations into mainstream languages, pointing out that though apparently it is understood that the language (or source language) in which the text was originally written stands to gain, in reality it is the language into which the translation is done that benefits much more. He asserted that the source languages do not generally get a chance to come on to the stage of world literature, but is simply considered a part of a larger project – certainly as another dimension of imperialism. This inevitably would, in the final analysis, do no service to the source language or its culture, he added.

Dr Rana Nayar of Punjab University spoke of how all the concepts that we were dealing with might in fact be concepts that came to us through a necessarily distant academic scenario. He also highlighted the nuances of a globalised source culture and the implications of translations along this canvas.

Christi Ann Merrill, Assistant Professor of South Asian Literature, Gender and Hindi in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures, University of Virginia, said that

the central concern of her work was the responsibility of translating ethically. She stated that the project of translation had to be essentially a multilateral one, in which sensitivity to political context was indispensable, and that it was not merely a linguistic exercise, but a cultural and ethical one.

Interactive Theatre

The academic sessions were followed by plays performed by students of Modern School, Barakhamba Road, New Delhi and of Kathashala entitled "*The Return*" based on Manoj Goswami's Asomiya story "*Samiran Barua has come,*" and Bharatendu Harishchandra's satirical play "*Andher Nagri*" respectively.

Thru Fictional Woods

The day concluded with readings by writers Alka Saraogi, Uday Prakash and Victor Rangel Ribeiro from their works and subsequent discussion chaired by Rana Nayar.

15th February, 2003

The Visual Word: Text, Subtext, Intertext

The day began with a slide presentation by Gulammohammad Sheikh that highlighted the narrative and the story in the diverse painting traditions in India — from paintings on the Ajanta and Ellora to Mughal paintings, Bangla and Mewar traditions. Sheikh Sahab presented the entire gamut from ancient times to modern artists like M F Hussain to the audience, and also revealed hitherto hidden aspects of ancient cultures and painting traditions such as cannibalism, homosexuality and the portrayal of the tragic.

Jang Aur Aman

Filmmaker and social activist Anand Patwardhan's award winning documentary film ***Jang Aur Aman*** focussed on the nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan and globalisation. Through footages collected from different regions of both the countries and interviews with people who are directly or indirectly affected by nuclear testing, the documentary sought to highlight the futility of war to the common man and the paradoxical war hysteria in certain sections of the society pumped up by politicians.

The Fantastic Word: The Real and the Imagined

Ashok Vajpayee chaired a session in which Lothar Lütze and U R Anantha Murthy spoke about their experiences of translating from one cultural idiom into another. Prof. Lütze discussed the issues involved in translation of highly idiomatic languages. He also touched upon issues, which centered on the history of translations of South Asian texts into German. He spoke of his personal experience in translating from Rajasthani into German.

Panel Discussion: The Deep Stories and Silences in Film

Mitra Parekh chaired the discussion in which Aruna Vasudev, editor of *Cinemaya*, Shohini Ghosh of MCRC, Jamia Millia Islamia and Rashmi Doraiswamy of the Department of Third World Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia were the panelists.

The panel discussed the written text vis-à-vis the film based on it. Both Aruna Vasudev and Shohini Ghosh pointed out the unfairness of any comparison between the written text and a film based on it, arguing that the different nature of the two mediums in itself is a major reason for difference in the narrative style. Rashmi Doraiswamy took up the oft-repeated criticism that a film based on a novel does not adhere strictly to the original and that there are many changes or deletion/edition. She showed clippings from the French film *Solaris* and the Hindi remake of it to substantiate her stand that interpretations of the same text even in the same medium *can* differ.
