

Geeta

Kapur

When Was Modernism



*Essays on
Contemporary
Cultural Practice
in India*



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For Vivan

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Preface

The core of this book of essays was formed while I held a fellowship at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at Teen Murti, New Delhi. The project for the fellowship began with a set of essays on Indian cinema that marked a departure in my own interpretative work on contemporary art. This was undertaken with the purpose of exploring narrative (in narrative, genre and within genre, allegories) and further, of opening out a theorized space for the cultural encounter. The essays index three areas of my engagement: art, film and culture theory. The book maps a terrain to situate these. In the course of the work every discursive detour has led me back to selected forms of art and to renewed modes of artwriting. If I somewhat circumvent the academic conventions of culture studies it is because my critical mode arises from and returns to a primary involvement with creative *practice*.

‘I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. . . . This transformation of one’s self by one’s knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?’ Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s response to Michel Foucault goes on to say: ‘Recast in a critical light, the relation between art and theory does not lead to a simple equation and collapse of the fundamental assumptions of the two. Rather it maintains the tension between them through a notion of the *interval* that neither separates nor assimilates.’¹

As this book is the result of work researched and written from the mid-1980s through the 1990s—to be precise, the selected essays were published between 1987 and 1997—I need to indicate why readers familiar with earlier versions of the essays may perhaps re-read them here.

All the essays have been revised: annotations come in the form of additional information, supporting quotations, extended notes and references. I have, however, placed certain constraints on the task of revision. Except where I have added a brief epilogue to the text or the notes, annotations fit the time-frame in which the essay was written. Rather than leaping into the present through authorial

privilege, I wish to maintain the doubts and even the ideological misapprehensions that attend an argument and stress the authorial voice. I would like the reader to see the work as definitely periodized precisely so that the conscious post facto inclusions, the subtext retroactively woven into the text, can be seen to provide a reflexive aspect to the initial proposition.

The selection of monographic essays on artists, interpretive essays on artworks and film narratives, theoretical and polemical essays on cultural categories, work with different forms of address. The ongoing idea of the book was to relay the difference and to structure arguments across the essays, to foreground through revision the choppy sense of the historical in contemporary cultural practice. I hope the reader will be able to mark the motives and gain, through cumulative pressure, what one may call the book's 'conceptual topography'.²

The second major annotation of these essays comes via the text illustrations. In their original published versions the essays carried few, if any, pictures. Here there are more than 350 illustrations and each one is carefully placed in relation to the text, as indicated by illustration numbers on the page. The pictures present something of a parallel argument to the one articulated in the text. This is not only because illustration is crucial to any discussion of the visual arts but also because I want to make a strong case for the remarkable visual narratives that cultural practice in India throws up. And for the iconographic augmentation of contemporary life that emerges as a consequence. The domain of visibility established by Indian cinema from the prewar studios to the great auteurs of the postindependence period as well as the more recently valorized status of modern Indian art can be acknowledged through carefully chosen reproductions.

But while I would like to give visual culture its due attractions this is not an art book—it has no colour reproductions, for example. It is also not a book that chronicles modern Indian art, as even a glance at the table of contents will make clear. It is a book of essays where the visuals go in and out and play different roles. In the essays about artists and filmmakers there is what one might call an internal game of putting complementary images in place. In the essays that discuss polemical categories the pictures provide cues to scuttle foregone conclusions. Whether the images have representational value or are abstracted and eccentric, I would like to see them surface like alternative currents in the discursive scheme of the book.

The essays are arranged in three sections. The first section, *Artists and ArtWork*, opens with an essay on women artists at work. This was for a long time a speaking text illuminated by projected transparencies. In 1997 it was written up for an anthology, now it has been further enlarged. I regard it as a slowly unfolding personal statement and it is placed at the head of the book as very nearly a testimony

to my efforts at saying things differently. Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo, Nalini Malani and Arpita Singh plot a work-scenario for women artists stretching across nearly a century; I get the cues through the mediation of their very individual yet paired and complementary personae and artworks, to articulate a well-calibrated gender discourse. This peculiar morphing of female artists imbricates my own subjectivity; the interpretive process pitches me into other narratives about the national and the modern, about subjectivity and transcendence. I learn to test what Laura Mulvey calls the ‘politics of authorship’ in relation to the teachings of feminist discourse.³

Writing in this personal mode is pleasurable, useful, sometimes painful: Nalini and Arpita are contemporaries and friends, so was Nasreen Mohamedi. The text on Nasreen, posthumously written, becomes more allusive every time I work on it. Perhaps I deflect the words from the straitgate of the vacant paradise Nasreen entered a full decade ago. In contrast to the first essay, I have been trying to de-authorize the writing on Nasreen by a selected excess of interlayered quotations that gives the little sheaf of verse and prose the option of floating away beyond the reader’s hands.

The monographic essay on Subramanyan remains more or less as it was: an interpretive prose-piece with a premium on lucidity giving due respect to the artist’s own style of articulation, except that there is now a short epilogue that gives the sanguine story of the revered Subramanyan an edge—an eroticism that virtually asks to be made explicit, a projectile shattering the narrative of pedagogy associated with Subramanyan. The essay is included here to test its life in a new, more substantial context of several other essays. Set along with Ravi Varma’s nineteenth-century representational dilemmas, one can gauge the extent to which the issue of representation is stood on its head within a century. Subramanyan from the School of Santiniketan is naturally, historically, pitted against the Ravi Varma phenomenon. He further inverts the heavy take on representation by a strategy of deferral, by the formalist ironies of a mid-twentieth century modernist. Whereby he also gives a new and crucial turn to his Santiniketan lineage, bringing out those linguistic features that engage with twentieth-century art history as much as those that deal with the cultural gestalt privileged by his mentors.

Ravi Varma is a figure of contradictions working out a professional career within the terms of colonial culture; a typical eclectic who tries to synthesize elements from the Tanjore tradition, from the Company School, from Victorian salon painting and theatre, from the performative tradition of kathakali and from neoclassical Malayalam poetry. Those reading this version of my essay will find that it has been turned inside out. The notes are now in the main body of the text, there is no longer a simple storyline, the farce implied in the discourse of high meanings is read against the grain. However, the richness of material available since I last wrote

on Ravi Varma makes my claims relatively modest: the inventory of issues (what I call dilemmas) are in the process of being reconstructed by scholars into a contextualized ideology, new strategies are being found to give this period of Indian art history a semiotic reading. Even as Ravi Varma becomes the subject of many revivals, shading from radical scholarship to rightwing sentimentality favouring religious kitsch, the seeming literalism in his work turns into a crucial decoding device for the popular genres.

The film essays in the second section, Film/Narratives, have been worked over mainly for the purpose of honing the argument and developing, from *Sant Tukaram* to the Apu trilogy to *Jukti Takko ar Gappo*, and then back from *Jukti* to *Tukaram* via *Devi*, a chronicle about selfhood. A quest that inscribes itself within a particular social formation of nationalism yet exceeds it through the gift of cultural heterogeneity. I am interested in mapping Indian modernity on to a civilizational base and vice versa, in mapping civilizational rhetoric and its concerns on to the modern. Thus, for example, I try to elucidate the carryover between authenticity and the heterodox promise of the bhakti movement in a film like *Sant Tukaram*, and authenticity as a mediating category for the pain of transition between the country and the city in the films by Ray, starting with the Apu trilogy. A way of positing the sovereign self also becomes a way of developing a contemporary iconography, and this in turn becomes the subjective style of the author-director who can scarce return to the civilizational mode once he articulates himself into history—like Ghatak in *Jukti*—bringing to history through a negative dialectic a hearkening of the lost utopia.

‘And what is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?’ asks Edward Said at the very end of his essay, ‘Traveling Theory’.⁴

If the art and film essays were scrambled and interlayered another kind of calibrated narrative about modernity might emerge *via* the formal means of the visual language: from Ravi Varma to *Sant Tukaram* to the Apu trilogy to K.G. Subramanyan—particularly as Subramanyan shares with Ray the Santiniketan concern for a cultural gestalt that keeps the country subliminally present in the visual discourse—to Ghatak’s autobiographical narrative in *Jukti*. Once we have arrived at a radical historicity the assumptions underlying the sovereign self are dismantled and the first essay, ‘Body as Gesture’, becomes a signal presence. It tries out a poetics based on styles of ‘masquerade’ and implicates other essays in a feminist subtext.

The six essays in the final section, Frames of Reference, attempt theoretical exegeses on contemporary visual arts. Written over several years, the essays have been revised to make a sequential argument about the place of the *modern* in

contemporary cultural practice in India and in the third world, to set up an ideological vantagepoint to view modernism along its multiple tracks.

Modernity, or in the more specific case of art practice modernism, is my vocational concern and commitment. Even as it is hammered down as a vestige of the last century the stake in it has to be secured. With the turn of the century the vexed and valorous entwining of metaphysics and ideology in the condition of modernity—of the self within the grand universal narrative—can be too easily squandered as ‘mere’ utopia. But the modern is not an identical narrative in reckonings across nations: it has to be held in place in India by a contextualized and increasingly more critical stance.

Throughout the book I try to tackle the contestatory nature of Indian modernity, pulling the concept away from its conservative version where it is seen as emerging from a respectable lineage that becomes by some ideological miracle the bearer of civilizational values. Equally, modernity has to be saved from the default of underdesignation, that is to say from absentminded neglect of its revolutionary forms of otherness that overhaul modernist principles. The essays suggest that in India as in the third world national culture is the matrix in the fold of which the secret energies and explicit boldness of modernity have abided. And I place the modern within the troubled domain of the national that is now being turned inside out in theory, historical understanding and democratic politics.

This placement already comes with a condition: today cultural production simply requires that we introduce categories whereby cultural practice is emancipated from the institutionalized status of the national/modern. Ironically, or perhaps even logically, this is now a task for the postcolonial/postmodern consciousness to tackle.

The essays that are expositions on artists and artworks, films and filmmakers try to inscribe forms of subjectivity within the heavier rhetoric of identity which characterized the speech of the nationalist intelligentsia but which also survives in a problematic manner in postcolonial discourse that is now decidedly post-national. Along with the textual I take up the visual inscriptions of subjectivity: the image retains both the aura of the icon and the desire for profane exposure; it can reinvigorate the exhausted protocols of the identity question and at the same time help undo the overdetermined discourse of postcolonial theory. Indeed the rapid academicization of the postcolonial experience via culture studies curricula leaves the field bereft of the cause—praxis—that made the new mode of inquiry radical.

Thus the set of theses I propose in respect of the modern does a doubletake: I use a retroactive device to critically engage *and* retrieve the national/modern from the imbricated discourse of the postcolonial/postmodern.

Written during a period when the realpolitik of global capitalism threatens to take over the discourse on culture, these essays propose polemical options, as

for example a futurist consideration of an avantgarde elsewhere in the world. An elsewhere that may be the here and now. The nature of the disjuncture in the globalizing societies of Asia provokes a critique that may have a cutting-edge quality.

The last chapter in the book comes up to date not only in that it introduces what is new in Indian art but also because it posits the principle of the avantgarde or, more correctly, 'the desire of an avant-garde' that, as Laura Mulvey says, 'can contribute as much as convinced theoretical certainty'.⁵ I argue somewhat similarly for an open-ended engagement with the avantgarde and, further, for the conjunctural possibility in India/Asia as in the rest of the third world to develop a signifying space that is still a space of radical transformation. As we approach the 'end of an era' there is a temptation to succumb to a cathartic depoliticization of the narrative; we should try instead 'to keep the story open and alive, to resist resolution and closure, to insist that change can continue to happen and take on the surrounding context and its contradictions'.⁶

I am grateful to Professor Ravinder Kumar, who was Director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at the time of my fellowship, for creating a space for dialogues across disciplines and for taking special care to nurture the area of culture studies at what came to be called the Centre for Contemporary Studies within the NMML.

An angel among editor-p publishers, Indira Chandrasekhar extended her patience to accommodate my obsessive revisions and virtually 'made' the book with me. To the page grid and visual guidelines provided by the designer Alpana Khare, Indu and I added many months of work to get the visual meaning of the text and pictures right. Indu, Purnima and the Tulika team provide what analysts call a 'good setting' for the self-discovery of an author's idiosyncrasies and then allow these to work themselves out without a grudge. Tulika works with the flamboyant Ram Rahman who structures the page, chooses the typography, visualizes the cover and comes up with amazing designs.

I also want to thank Udesb Kumar of Cirrus Repro for the care in scanning, Rajjinder Arora of Ishtihaar for taking charge of printing the cover, and Sunita of Pauls Press for taking special interest in the printing of the book.

To the many authors whom I have quoted, and to the artists, collectors and institutions whose work has been referred to and reproduced, I express my thanks. I have acknowledged the public and private collections, the ownership of the works reproduced and, where available, the names of photographers, in the List of Illustrations. Despite every effort there are bound to be errors and omissions—the documentation of Indian art is still inadequate and there are astounding

discrepancies in the information obtained from even primary sources. I will be only too happy to receive corrections and further information for inclusion in future editions and other publications.

Acknowledgements and full publication details of earlier versions of the essays have been given as a footnote on the first page of each essay.

I am grateful to friends and colleagues who have sustained my ideas along the way. For almost thirty years now I have had a dialogue with Kumar Shahani on the more elusive forms of creative desire. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Susie Tharu and Paul Willemen have acted as my interlocutors in the field of film, theory, culture studies. Paul 'edited' the first versions of my film essays. With Ashish and Susie, my intrepid intellectual colleagues, I share a field of commitment as often on tough as on sympathetic ground. Nilima and Gulammohammed Sheikh provide me a considered response in areas of art and art history.

My family's support is precious: this includes my late father M.N. Kapur who set me out on my journey, my mother Amrita Kapur who still prods me when I tarry, my sister Anuradha Kapur who is a critical reader of my writings. Navina Sundaram did a penultimate read of the manuscript, my husband Vivan Sundaram is my constant discussant. He is also the technical facilitator in diverse areas and has given a great deal of his time to the production process of this book. Fortunately Vivan is one of those artists who is not hostile to the operations of the intellect, believing with me that critical writing supports the body of art, allows it mortality and retrieves it from a premature condition of hypostasis. I believe with him that art can still gain an aura and not lose its historical dynamic. To Vivan, friend companion comrade, this book is dedicated.

Notes and References

- ¹ Quoting Foucault, Trinh T. Minh-Ha responds in 'The Other Censorship', *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 226.
- ² Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989, p. 163.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. viii.
- ⁴ Edward W. Said, *The World, The Text and The Critic*, Vintage, London, 1991, p. 247.
- ⁵ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 166.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

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Artists and ArtWork



Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work

This essay sets up equations between four women artists. The sections on Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo are dedicated to the female/feminist marking of nationalism through what one may call the emblematic selfhood of a woman protagonist. With Nalini Malani and Arpita Singh I deal more specifically with the transactions, on gender terms, between private fantasy and public concern. I try to work out how these two contemporaries circumvent the heroic roles associated with nationalism in order to claim, instead, a more ambivalently socialized subjectivity.

The subject in question is the artist herself as also her painted image, both deliberately seen to be overlapping entities with complex iconographical intent. I suggest that as a quartet these artists present bodily enactments where the gesture is quite precipitate, drawing the whole body to a state of immediacy. They lay allusive trails of fetish objects, they construct linguistic signs that convert play into reflexion.

Is this a feature special to women artists, is this feminist art practice? Questioning the essentialist aspect of the feminist argument, I would like to propose that if something like an 'authentic' female experience is sought to differentiate the feminist rendering of reality and truth, the criteria have to be taken away from the existentialist frame. Rather than duplicate and 'correct' the hegemonic overtones of humanist notions such as (male) sovereignty, feminism may propose a more didactic and tendentious aesthetic within a historicized context of cultural production.

Our stress is on what forms the grain of these women's struggles. How were their worlds shaped? we ask. How have they turned figures, plots, narratives, lyrical and fictional projects set up for different purposes to their use? With what cunning did they press into service objects coded into cultural significations indifferent or hostile to them? How did they tread their oblique paths across competing ideological grids, or obdurately hang on to illegitimate pleasure? What forms did their dreams of integrity or selfhood take?¹

This essay was first presented at a conference, On Subalternity and Culture, organized by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies and Subaltern Studies Collective at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL), Hyderabad, in 1993. The first published version appeared in *Representing the Body: Art History and Gender*, edited by Vidya Dehejia, Kali for Women, Delhi, 1997.

Amrita Sher-Gil



1 Photograph of Amrita Sher-Gil by Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, ca. 1940

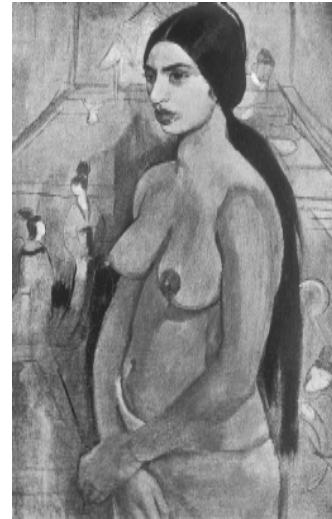
Artist Persona

Modern Indian art is distinguished for having at its very inception a brilliant woman artist, Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941).² Her paternal family was part of the landed gentry of the Punjab. They were British loyalists. The father Umrao Singh Sher-Gil was, lone among his family, a nationalist. An enlightened dilettante, he engaged himself with scholarly pursuits and photography of remarkable merit. The mother Marie Antoinette belonged to an artistically inclined Hungarian middle-class family with orientalist interests. The elder daughter of the Sher-Gils,³ Amrita, lived barely twenty-nine years but she had already made some remarkable paintings, raised key questions for Indian art and developed a compelling persona (*Illus. 1*).

Positioned as Amrita Sher-Gil is, at the beginnings of Indian modernism, we must on her account reckon with an inadvertent ‘feminization’ of modern Indian art. It is significant that another woman artist of fabled charisma, Frida Kahlo of Mexico, is a virtual contemporary of Sher-Gil. Like her, she is marked by tragic destiny. There is therefore some purpose in setting up a relationship between them to signify

nationalist considerations about the *native* woman of genius in her excessively embodied, inevitably idealized form.

Sher-Gil made an irreversible social space for the woman artist within Indian art and she did this on an expressly romantic brief: a libertarian brief learned in bohemian Paris while she was at the Ecole des Beaux Artes during 1930–34 (*Illus. 2*). As a logical counterpoint, she held fast to a severity in the code of art practice that suppressed all domestic and feminine expectations. Even more than her paintings, her letters are a testimony of this conscious self-representation which is ironically, but not unexpectedly, based on a male model of the modern artist.⁴



2 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-portrait as Tahitian*, 1934

Most women artists in India have Amrita Sher-Gil as a strong reference, if only to undo the overdetermination of her presence: her seductive persona, her sense of genius, her iconicity, so to speak, and her tragic death. What this means is to elicit from the very dismantling of the self a more precise contour for subjectivity.

The Sher-Gil persona was built on a valorized self that presumed to have the license of acting out the excess of libidinous energy, of arrogating to itself an absolute initiative of creative being. On the other hand contemporary women artists, because of the very disjuncture that feminism introduces, open out the self as monad and engage with subjectivity-in-process. Thus even when beginning from the same vexed prerogative that Sher-Gil exercised, which is to *represent* women in and through their experience of otherness, contemporary women artists take up a more reflexive subject-position. Sher-Gil, for example, was deeply protective of her women subjects and allowed them their seclusion; functioning without the feminist discourse, she dramatized her own self instead. Today's women artists, including Nalini Malani and Arpita Singh, stretch the sexuality of the female body to collide against the male gaze with some unpredictable consequences. But while the imagery may be exposed and violent their own status is maintained at a more everyday, ironical level.

Split Allegiance

Amrita Sher-Gil appeared on the Indian art scene in the mid-1930s when a handful of distinguished artists were making certain basic choices pertaining to sovereignty in modern Indian culture. The artists in Santiniketan (Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Ramkinkar Baij and Benodebehari Mukherjee) were pitching the values of inspired vocation and cultural pedagogy. Jamini Roy in Calcutta was exploring the market. A professional exhibition circuit was sought to be set up on a



3 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Hill Women*, 1935

pan-Indian basis at the turn of the century by ‘Raja’ Ravi Varma; and after him Amrita Sher-Gil made beginnings in this direction.

At this complex juncture, the aesthetic questions Sher-Gil raised become particularly engaging. In her personal striving for a historically aligned aesthetic—an aesthetic calibrated to register her European and Indian profiles—she set up the initial terms for an existentially defined progressivism. This was especially privileged in the decade following her death by the Progressive Artists’ Group formed in Bombay in 1947. M.F. Husain acknowledges only one Indian precedent, Amrita Sher-Gil, for the emancipatory agenda of his generation.

Sher-Gil’s own progressivism was a reflection of the circumstance of her birth but coming when it did, in the 1930s, the terms of (nationalist) sovereignty were inevitably inscribed within

it. Her biography took on the aspect of a cultural encounter where she presented, within a civilizational context, a struggle for self-determination. This double-take on identity featured in all cultures engaged in an anticolonial struggle. In the wake of this an alternative form of cultural modernity took shape in postcolonial contexts. The Mexican mural movement of the 1920s had already established a monumental precedent for the conversion of a civilizational into a national/revolutionary project. This later developed into an allegorical style for third-world art.

Sher-Gil’s aesthetic derived from her split allegiance. If she identified with the kind of pictorial ensemble the postimpressionists developed in their figural and *plein air* tableaux it was because she found there a plenitude of representational means. But she seemed to respond equally to the quasi-classical resurgence of realism in the period between the wars. The legacy of postimpressionism was close at hand in Paris where she went to art school. The neorealism was routed via southern and central Europe and, more specifically for Sher-Gil, via Hungary where she spent the summers during her student days in Paris. This realism also found adherents among some of Sher-Gil’s student comrades in Paris, Boris Taslitzky and Francis Gruber for instance, who later became known as important leftwing artists.⁵

This neorealist movement was born in reaction to modernism as a formalist ideology. It sought to eschew the contemporary phase of disjunction manifest in cubism, dadaism, surrealism and other avantgarde movements. Sher-Gil saw this form of realism as a bridge for her projected Indian experience. In an early pair of 1935 paintings, *Hill Men* and *Hill Women* (*Illus. 3*), she grandiloquently chose to represent the rural folk of India.

The cycle of European influences was turned all the way round by Sher-Gil in what one may call a hermeneutic retake on modernism. She privileged mannerist artists from Bruegel to Van Gogh, Gauguin, Modigliani. She brought herself into an equation with the crossed romantic–realist leanings of early modernism and adopted the modernist universalism of aesthetic affinities to embrace oriental painting.

Lovely those Basohli—things—especially the Radha Krishna one—exquisitely painted. The yellow background, the white cloud bank merging into the deep blue sky. As well painted as Matisse and that is saying a great deal. Reminiscent of Gauguin too.

. . . There is also another of his [Gauguin's] that is very Basohli in background treatment . . . 'Pasterala Tahitiennes'. How significant of the fellowship of all great art that a mind of such completely different origin as Gauguin should have a common atavism with the Basohli miniatures.⁶

We are here dealing with an anachronistic situation: Paul Gauguin, for example, could be made to serve as an introduction to European modernism in the colonial 'provinces' (designated as such in the metropolitan School of Paris). But he also provided a 'realist' footing to romantic indigenism. He could be used to peg the orientalist inclination of essentializing the 'other', but once the oriental's more developed act of self-representation came into place the ambiguity could be resolved in favour of the universal human:

In spite the fact that till now my special favourite has been Gauguin, I sometimes feel that Van Gogh was the greater of the two. The *Elemental* versus *Sophistication* (no matter how sublime) is apt to make the latter look flat by comparison.⁷

Oriental Body

Apropos representation, Amrita Sher-Gil had also as if to *act out* the paradox of the oriental subject in the body of a woman designated as Eurasian—a hybrid body of unusual beauty. This vexed solution to the problem of identity must be inscribed into her stylistics. She articulated a woman's prerogative to deal with a sexually immanent self equally through her persona as through her art. This is her unique role, to bring to bear what I call the feminization of modern Indian art.

Within this stressed sublimation of her Europeanism Sher-Gil took on the problem of representation as something of a project conducted through her art and letters in the penultimate decade of India's independence. We must remember that there were several simultaneous efforts to establish an alternative, historically valid modernism in India. Although she remained ignorant of these efforts Sher-Gil made her distinct contribution by placing the problem of representing the other in terms of ethnicity, class and gender, and thence within the national context.

Sher-Gil's trajectory began with translating European academicism and the whole history of oil and easel painting it frozenly preserves, transforming it to suit the needs of her Indian subject-matter. It would be true to say that Sher-Gil brought to Indian painting a different tradition of materiality by introducing, through her painterly technique, the depth of irradiating hue and moulded form that is the peculiar prerogative of the medium of oils. In this context we must acknowledge the earlier contribution of Ravi Varma, to ask what happens to Indian representational



4 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Woman Resting on Charpoy*, 1940

ethics from the nineteenth century when an intense attachment to oil and easel painting takes hold in several regions of the country.

Although Sher-Gil, with characteristic arrogance, dismissed Ravi Varma, the juxtaposition is very instructive. We have a male and a female painter, both possessing an aristocratic view, both devising the *indigenous body* from oil paint and, further, both wanting to materialize (and thus naturalize) the selfconscious presence of oriental women within a reconstructed local context.

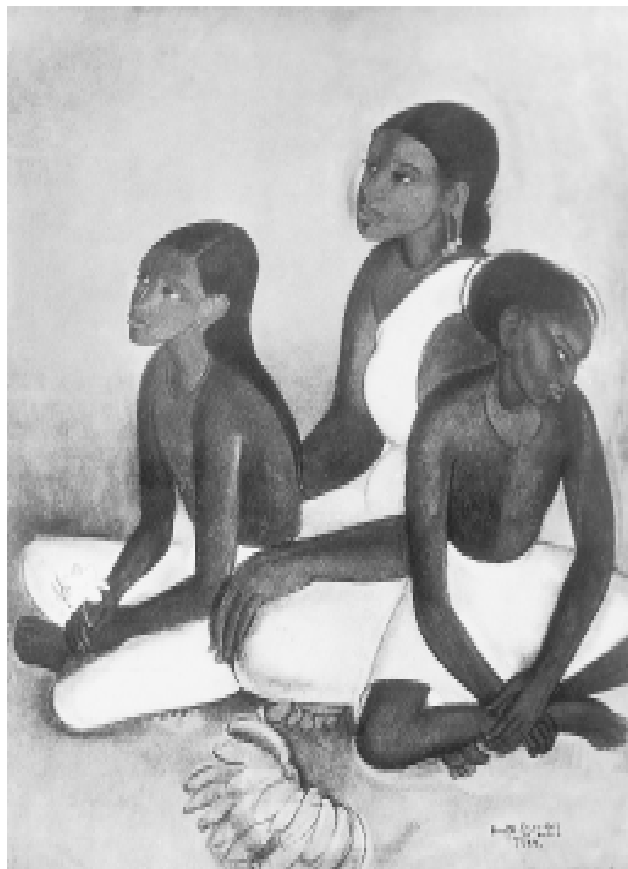
Indeed Ravi Varma's and Amrita Sher-Gil's paintings taken as paradigmatic pose a series of rhetorical questions. What happens to the mutual address of subjectivities in the figural field of an easel painting; what happens to the 'meeting-of-the-eyes' dictum of oriental aesthetics? What happens when the pictorial presence moves out of the traditional (non)frame of the mural, the miniature, and enters the easel format; when it becomes so heavily materialized in the medium of oils; when it is made contemporary and contiguous to the real-life viewer and before the alien gaze of the male/colonial presence?

What happens, among other things, is that a new history of the corporeal image develops. It substantiates itself through the indigenous body, through a kind of ethnographic allegory. At a specific level what happens with Ravi Varma is that you get an oddly embarrassed but dynamic exchange of pose, glance and gesture, as in his *A Galaxy of Musicians* (ca. 1889). With Sher-Gil female subjectivity takes a narcissistic turn. In her *Woman Resting on Charpoy* (1940, *Illus. 4*), for example, the subject portrayed is conspicuously passive, sunk in reverie.

If you map a Sher-Gil on to a Ravi Varma image the first feature that appears is the degree of condensation in the Sher-Gil image. With all her realist leanings Sher-Gil composes with a mannerist stress characteristic of the modern. From her exploratory bid on modernism she gleans this one important characteristic, of composing with (metaphorical) brevity. She is perspicacious enough to resituate this within the lyrical ambience of Indian art. She thereby attempts the kind of symbolic gestalt that would place her, belongingly, within the oriental aesthetic. Thus her quasi-nationalist, quasi-realist sentiments towards rural folk are matched by an aesthete's preference for classical (Kushan and Ajanta) and medieval (Mughal and rajput miniatures) references in Indian art.

In September 1934, just before returning to India, she writes to her parents from Budapest:

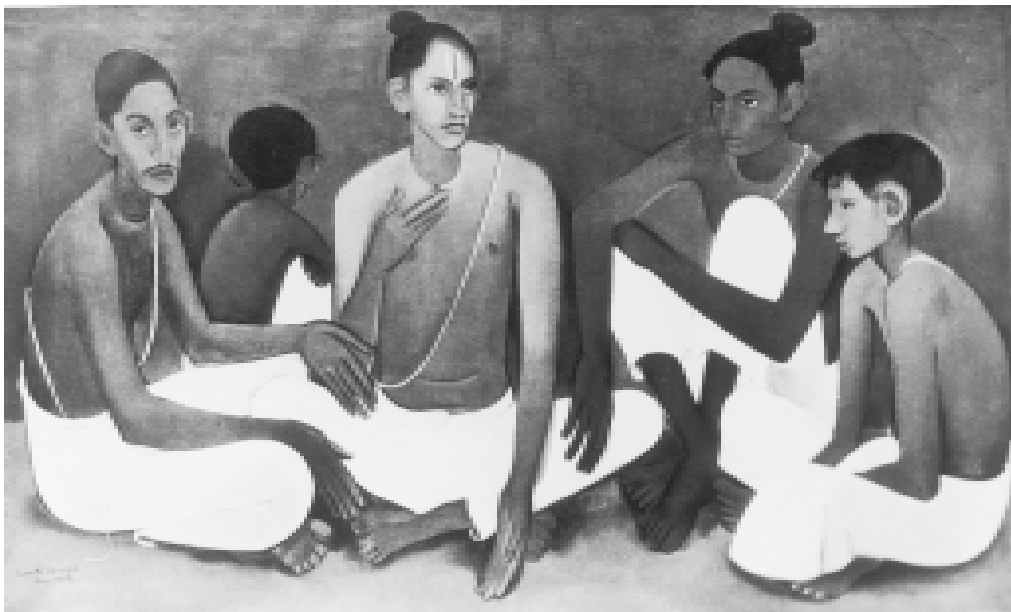
Modern art has led me to the comprehension and apprehension of Indian painting and sculpture. . . . It seems paradoxical, but I know of certain, that had we not come away to Europe, I should perhaps never have realized that a fresco from Ajanta or a small piece of sculpture in the Musee Guimet is worth more than the whole Renaissance.⁸



5 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Banana Sellers*, 1937

Indian Imagery

Amrita Sher-Gil made an extended tour of India in 1937.⁹ Immediately afterwards she attempted a summation of several indigenous traditions of painting, foregrounding the voluptuous organicity of Ajanta—where gender identity is polymorphous, bisexual and sanguine. She then worked towards an amazingly compact formal resolution, as in her 1937 paintings: *Banana Sellers* (Illus. 5) and the south Indian trilogy, *South Indian Villagers Going to Market*, *Bride's Toilet*, *Brahmacharis* (Illus. 6, 7). Yet she soon accepted the difficulty of dealing with a classical tradition, with the immanent energies of Ajanta, and turned to work with the more structured universe of the domestic and the divine in the medieval art of Mughal and pahari miniatures. She came to understand how a historical or an everyday anecdote inscribed within an ornamental structure gives medieval miniatures their moments of wit, relief, pertinence—and the possibility of direct address that turns them into contemporary chronicles. Indeed despite their precious aesthetic they are very nearly *systematic social paintings*. Sher-Gil was astute enough to privilege her contemporary needs by drawing



Above: 6 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Bride's Toilet*, 1937. Below: 7 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Brahmacharis*, 1937

on this strain—running all the way from the Akbari to the Sikh school in the nineteenth century, when the tradition virtually converts itself into a popular genre. In fact she suggested a way to translate the miniatures into a form of genre painting in oils, a genre that is able to record within the terms of a modernizing consciousness an ambiguous balance in the feudal/feminine world. In paintings like *Siesta* (1937), *Resting* (1938), *Verandah with Red Pillars* (1938) and *Ancient Story Teller* (1940, *Illus. 8*) her representations alternate between indolence and pain, gossip and romance, intermittent festivity and daily submission.¹⁰

Her project had just begun. She was struggling with a form for her chosen subject-matter—Indian women in their secluded settings. She was trying to both mimic and question the hold of eternity on their bodies. Her choice and understanding of means and ends coalesced remarkably even if it also shortcircuited the historical into a flaring female (auto)biography.

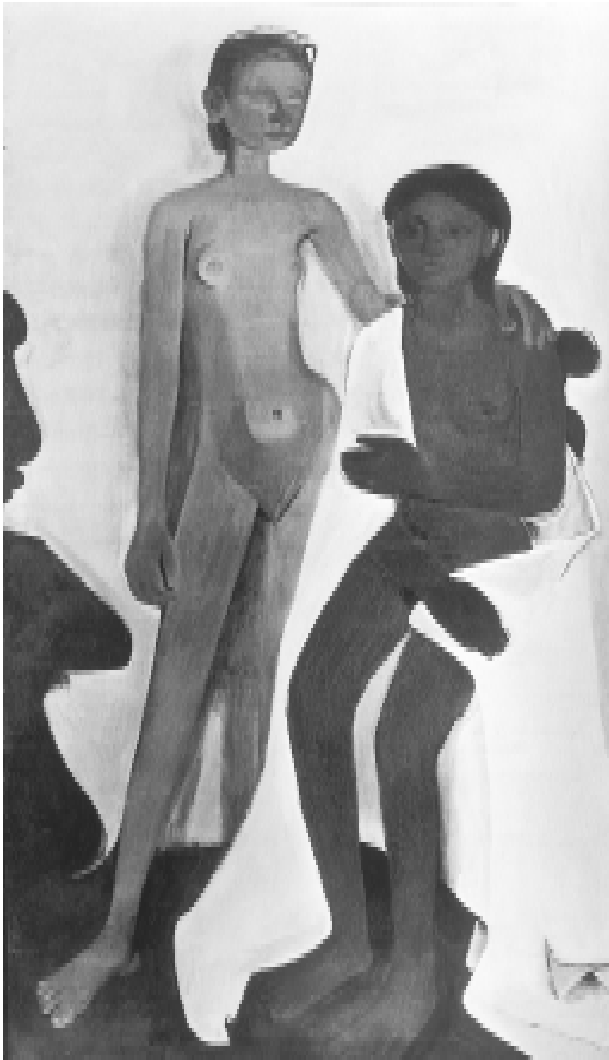
Sher-Gil's peasant and aristocratic women in a feudal setting seemed to hold in their stillness a latency of desire that would appear to exceed the artist's own potential as a middle-class woman. But perhaps it was precisely the other way around: that the artist's (occidental/romantic, perhaps bisexual) sense of the erotic, as in *Two Girls* (ca. 1939, *Illus. 9*), was actually delivered into the symbolic space of her 1940 paintings such as *Woman Resting on Charpoys*, *The Swing* and *Woman at Bath* (*Illus. 10*). Her othering process, at work through and beyond the frozen mise-en-scene, filled the paintings with orientalist imagining. More critically one might say that the women subjects of Sher-Gil's paintings, contained within their feudal seclusion, were

not perceived to have a personal vocabulary for sexual signification. They could only appear like emblazoned motifs in the erotics of a dream. Sher-Gil, who clearly saw herself to be further evolved, melded her sexuality with theirs and relayed the imaginary process of a double emancipation with a tantalizing, at times almost regressive effect.

Sher-Gil tried in her short life to overcome, all at once, the alienation due to her class, her mixed race, her gender. Seeing herself as a complex and evolving subject she tried to mediate all the way round, turning the wheel of devolving time in the lives of her imprisoned subjects by the dynamic of her own restless desire. At the same time there were, as



8 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Ancient Story Teller*, 1940

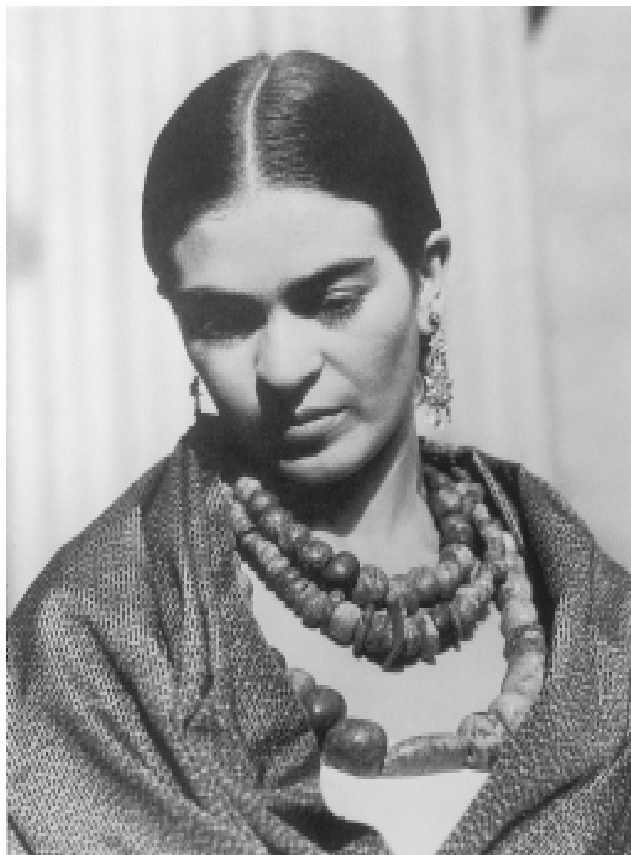


Left: 9 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Two Girls*, ca. 1939.
 Right: 10 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Woman at Bath*, 1940

I have discussed, rules of representation that she worked at by scanning a range of art-historical sources. Young as she was, she felt the need to disengage desire from a confessional self, to disengage romanticizing reverie from the material practice of image-making. Her art language involved the use of indigenous resource in the context of her nascent sympathy for the modernizing nation; she hoped to use it as a critical reflex against her personal narcissism.

When her life convulsed in inadvertent death the saga of desire she had played out in her life was seen to congeal over and gloss her painted images.¹¹ A death that conferred youthful immortality left her stranded as one among modern India's cherished icons. This may be the very fate of the native woman of genius within a nationalist context: to conduct a cultural catharsis through her own image.¹²

Frida Kahlo



11 Photograph of Frida Kahlo by Edward Weston, 1930

'Magic Spells'

If we compare Amrita Sher-Gil to her famous contemporary Frida Kahlo (1907–1954),¹³ the forms of female valorization within national cultures may become clearer. Indeed we may get to the motive and style of a particular kind of female artist persona (*Illus. 11*).

In 1938 Andre Breton wrote poetically if predictably, and with acute wonder and ambivalence, about this female icon of Mexico:

I had not yet set eyes on Frida Kahlo de Rivera, resembling those statuettes [of Colima] in her bearing and adorned, too, like a fairy tale princess, with magic spells at her finger-tips, an apparition in the flash of light of the quetzal bird which scatters opals among the rocks as it flies.

While I was in Mexico, I felt bound to say that I could think of no art more perfectly situated in time and space than hers. I would like to add now that

there is no art more exclusively feminine, in the sense that, in order to be as seductive as possible, it is only too willing to play at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious.

The art of Frida Kahlo is a ribbon around a bomb.

Frida Kahlo de Rivera is situated at that point of intersection between the political (philosophical) line and the artistic line, beyond which *we hope that they unite in a single revolutionary consciousness while still preserving intact the identities of the separate motivating forces that run through them*. Frida Kahlo's contribution to the art of our epoch is destined to assume a quite special value providing the casting vote between the various pictorial tendencies.¹⁴

Breton's fascination with Kahlo's 'candour and insolence' was indexed within the terms of the feminine ideal as visualized in the romantic/surrealist imagination since Baudelaire. It was a fascination that also had something to do with her connection with Trotsky who was an exile in Mexico at the end of his life.

The Feminine as Masquerade

Like Sher-Gil, Kahlo had mixed parentage. She persistently painted representations of her dual identity, as in *My Grandparents, My Parents and I: Family Tree* (1936), *My Nurse and I* (1937, *Illus. 12*), *The Two Fridas* (1939, *Illus. 13*). Her mother was a Spanish-Indian mestizo, her artist-photographer father was of Hungarian-Jewish descent.¹⁵ Like the Sher-Gils, the Kahlos were prominent among their country's national intelligentsia. The hybrid identity gave an added edge. We



12 Frida Kahlo, *My Nurse and I*, 1937



13 Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939

know that in countries like Mexico and India ethnicity wears exotic colours in considerations of culture, especially when the bearer of that culture is a woman. For that reason the double bind of otherness—as woman, as native—relating to the ubiquitous look of the male/European is put to scrutiny. Female or feminine masks are flaunted by the artist who plays alive her roles one by one, *as woman, as native*.

In an invented style of Mexicanness/Indianness Kahlo and Sher-Gil made themselves up into vivid artifices, asking to be fetishized.¹⁶ The mask from behind which the protagonist gains an exquisite if also at times suicidal advantage, is construed narcissism. Thus the feminine as masquerade, as a game of alternate subjectivities, becomes not only an interrogation of illicit desire for the exotic, it becomes its obverse: an interrogation of female narcissism itself.

Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, taking off from Breton, write in their important coauthored article on Kahlo:

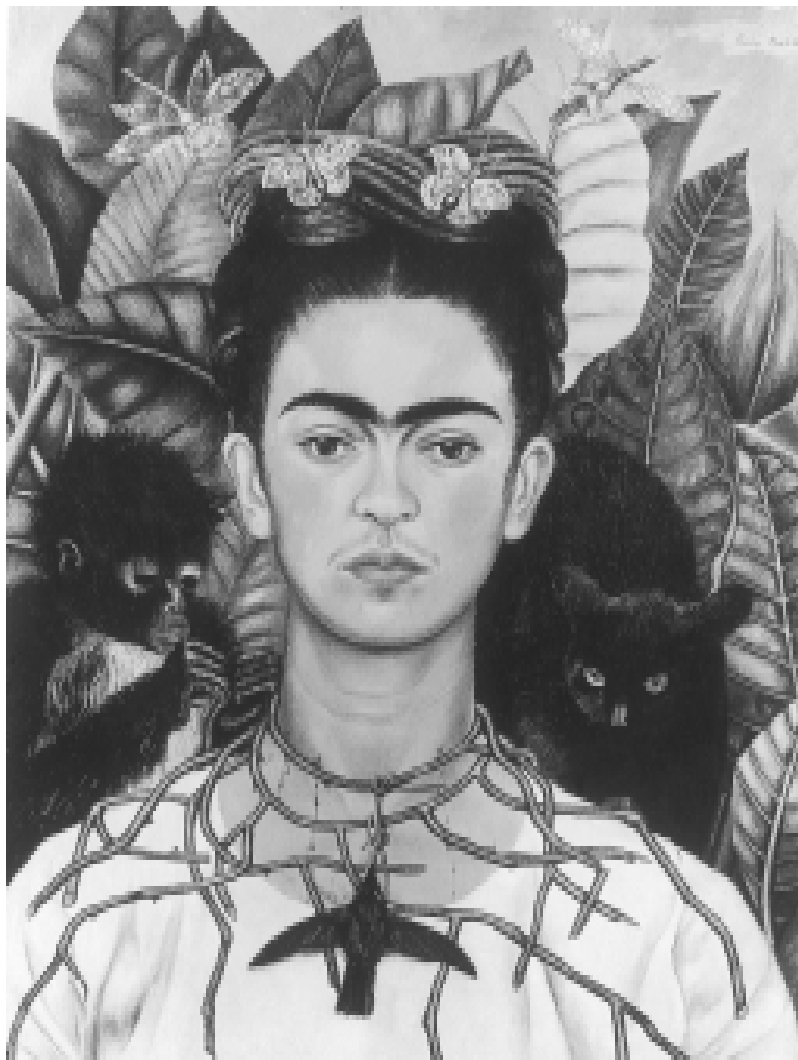
With Frida Kahlo beauty was inextricably bound up with masquerade. In her self-portraits . . . her face remains severe and expressionless with an unflinching gaze. . . . The ornament borders on fetishism, as does all masquerade, but the imaginary look is that of self-regard, therefore feminine, non-male, and narcissistic look. There is neither coyness nor cruelty, none of the nuance necessary for the male eroticization of the female look.¹⁷

I would like to suggest that there was in the very masquerade an undoing of the fetish. There was something like a voluntary barter where the selfconscious subject (the artist) offered herself as the desired object to the viewer in lieu of the images she painted and whose autonomy she was keen to secure. The creative act could then be freed, the freedom entailed both a gift and a sacrifice that was demonstrably performed by the artist. As self-construed fetish she took it upon herself to contain and hold the erotics of pain of a sexualized body. One may call this a female artist's defence of her productive interests, even nascent feminism.¹⁸

Affliction

Kahlo offered an extravagant conflation of beauty and affliction. A street accident at the age of eighteen damaged her spine, pelvis and foot and left her a semi-invalid. She suffered from intense physical pain throughout her life. Her body was subjected to numerous operations and finally in 1953 an amputation of her right leg.¹⁹ This very twist of destiny made a predictable but riveting icon of Frida Kahlo. She adorned herself—in posed photographs and in compulsively repeated self-portraits—with disinterested care, as indeed befits an icon. The adornment even turned into a cosmology of the painter's stellar self. Or into the form of a witch-dryad. Braided in her great crown of hair were snails and butterflies, she was adorned with bouquets and parrots, a praying mantis climbed her shoulder. Claspings her neck were clusters of delicate spider monkeys—she seemed to like multiplying her own simian appearance. A hairless dog (the Mexican itzcuintli) pressed against her bosom. In her famous *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* of 1940, a black cat and her pet monkey menace/caress her delicate incandescent head (*Illus. 14*). Thus Kahlo celebrated her metaphoric self-image, her face often glistening with large streaming tears.

In other pictures there was a symmetrical inversion of this visage. Her prone body, cut and sutured, would be surrounded by the disgorged parts of her own anatomy. Especially the fleshy parts, her heart (which she held bleeding over her dress), her womb, her aborted foetus. These evolved round her, making her the site of an organic catharsis, as in *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932, *Illus. 15*). She made her body an inside-out metaphor for the same life that was iconographically replete in the self-portraits. In the magnetic portraits her masquerade or what it stood for, an allusive subjectivity, was erotically alive and attracted other creatures to itself. In the masochistic pictures, such as *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) and *Without Hope* (1945), the feminine was attacked, the good objects in her body were ejected. Yet she was idealized once again—through the enactment of murderous suffering Kahlo resumed her iconic status, as in *Tree of Hope* (1946). In this successive act of condensation and displacement she was demonstrating, ironically, how the woman's body might attain apotheosis after all, but by an act of will, not the gift of grace.



14 Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940

Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen reiterate:

Masquerade becomes a mode of inscription, by which the trauma of injury and its effects are written negatively in metaphor. It is as if the intensity of the trauma brings with it a need to transfer the body from the register of image to that of pictography. Thus faces are read as masks, and ornaments as emblems and attributes. This discourse of the body is itself inscribed within a kind of codex of nature and cosmos, in which sun and moon, plant and animal, are pictograms. At the same time this pictographic effect de-eroticizes the imagery.²⁰

Allegories

As if each designation must yield to another, her other works showed the body-image loosened. Its too-stretched organicity, its masochistic sexuality gave way to a narrative, the truth-content of which was deliberately displaced by an allegorical format. Here she could identify with saints who were inscribed into peoples' everyday lives including, crucially, their political struggles.



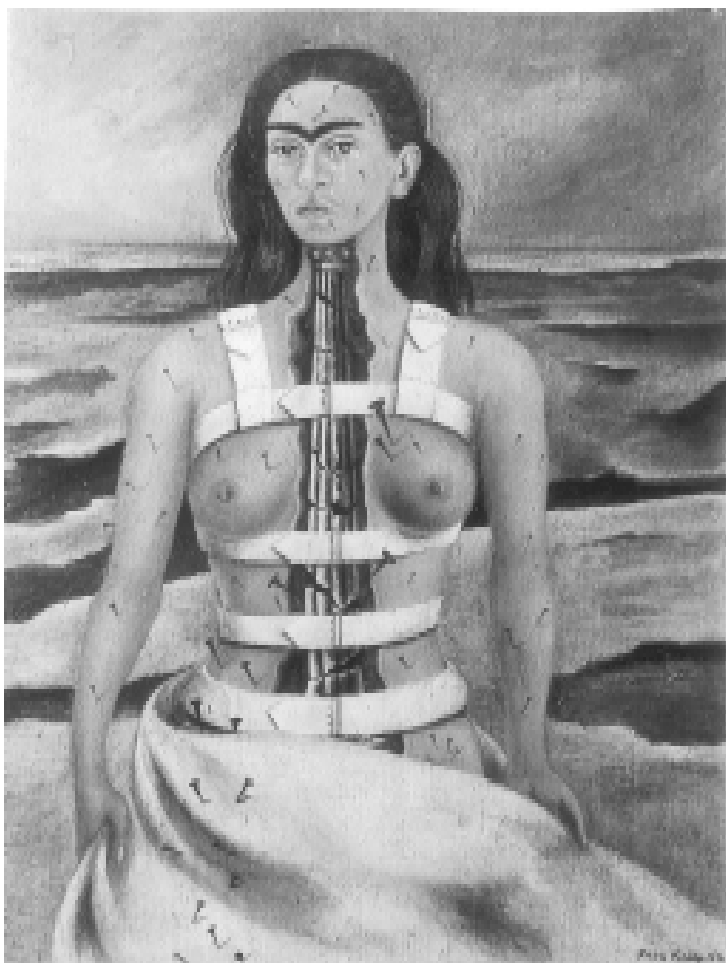
15 Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932

We have to remember that revolutionary ideology was part of the romantic will in Kahlo. She had been politically active and leader of an anarchist group since she was thirteen. In 1928 she met the photographer Tina Modotti and joined the Mexican Communist Party. She married Diego Rivera in 1929 and became part of the postrevolutionary Mexican avantgarde. She was active in the anti-imperialist and antifascist movements during the war. In 1937 she and Rivera received Trotsky and he stayed in her house in Coyoacan until 1939.²¹

To Kahlo the popular art of the retablos or ex-votos (naively painted on strips of tin or wood in three tiers: the Virgin or a saviour saint, the afflicted person shown in gory detail, a message of thanks written on a ribbon of space at the edge by the hopeful/healed believer) provided an iconographic convention for multiple acts of impersonation. Over and beyond the lore of female saints (as for example Mater Dolorosa in her painting *My Birth*, 1932), Kahlo took on the sublimity assumed in the male body, whether it be Saint Sebastian or Christ himself. She showed herself struck with arrows (*The Little Deer*, 1946, *Illus. 17*), bristling with nails and impaled, as in *The Broken Column* (1944, *Illus. 16*) where she incorporated with bitter mockery the phallic dimension in herself. The hermaphrodite nature of all saints gained her access to levels of sublimation necessary for the unrequited feminine ego.

This recourse to popular culture gave to the allegories of self a turn towards forthright martyrdom. Besides the personal, these paintings (*Marxism Heals the Sick*, 1954, *Illus. 18*) had a cultural politics imbued from the surrealists. The ex-votos gave her a device to dislodge the hold of the public mural, an ideological convention that her husband Diego Rivera led in its classical form in postrevolutionary Mexico. The mural space was institutional; the semisecret ex-voto, with its further devolution to a woman's fantastical self-representation, was a private affair. This was a subversion of the totalized quest for a national culture where people are always abstracted into a teeming populace, collectively valorized, collectively sacrificed.²²

With Kahlo, then, we have a woman artist's psychic inscription in the grand design, in the overall representational gestalt of a national culture. The intervention involved an offering of her own frail body. She made ironical use of the retablo form to find analogies for her suffering at the hands of her unfaithful husband,



16 Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944

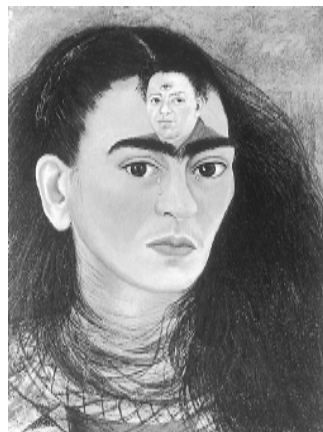
as in *A Few Small Nips*, 1935. And again in the recurring double portraits of herself and Rivera, like *Diego and I* (1949, *Illus.* 20). Was this a pathetic offering of evacuated grief? Was it an *impudent* offering of a reembodyed self, as in *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940, *Illus.* 19), where she scales the walls of the revolutionary venture and starts a gender narrative about the feminine, about female identity *in extremis*?²³

The body of the indigenous woman is modelled in Mexico in the form of the earth-mother or Guadalupe, a Spanish mestizo Virgin (an emblematic figure in Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest), or Mater Dolorosa, Virgin of Sorrows. In India she is identified with the form of (mother) goddesses (more distinctly as Durga and Kali) who are only part-aryan but placed in the fold of Hindu iconography. This body is invoked for regenerative purposes and often comes to serve as a symbol for the nation. A woman artist may find herself internalizing these iconic aspects over and beyond her intent. A peculiar concept of embodiment may thus come into play, a critical form of condensation where the woman artist becomes a propitious *site*: as body-icon, as representational agent, as allusive object of widely refracted desire.

A woman artist must at this point decathect those features of fear, desire and collective awe that are congealed in the male gaze vis-a-vis the Virgin or goddess, and thus dislodge the iconicity at work in her life and art. Thereon she may be seen to become the



Above: 17 Frida Kahlo, *The Little Deer*, 1946. Below: 18 Frida Kahlo, *Marxism Heals the Sick*, 1954



Left: 19 Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940. Right: 20 Frida Kahlo, *Diego and I*, 1949

site for testing the possibilities of iconographical rendering as such. And a criterion for the complex configuration of attributes demanded of the martyred subject within a nationally active culture.²⁴

If the native woman of genius be only part-native, the entire discourse of national culture gets a twist. In the case of both Kahlo and Sher-Gil, the dilemma of racial hybridity tugged at the unifying dream of a nation and catapulted an anxious definition of identity wherein virtual worlds were at stake. There were the worlds of important men (for example, Leon Trotsky among others in the life of Kahlo, Jawaharlal Nehru fleetingly in the life of Sher-Gil). Inversely, what was also at stake was the world, variously defined, of the *people*. It is as if on account of their mixed blood and personal sovereignty, not uncommon in aristocratic circles, the women in question would have a higher stake in destiny. And that they would therefore carry off subaltern personifications on behalf of the community. This would be the last act, as it were, within the complex scenario of their gender masquerade.

Nalini Malani
Self-Representation



21 Nalini Malani, *Old Arguments about Indigenism*, 1990

In a painting titled *Old Arguments about Indigenism* (1990, *Illus.* 21), Nalini Malani (b. 1946)²⁵ painted Frida Kahlo and Amrita Sher-Gil together and made a concealed reference to issues consistently raised in Indian and third-world art. In the painting Kahlo and Sher-Gil hold some of their key images in their laps like dolls—or is it like babies—which, considering that both women did not (could not) have children, gives the ‘babies’ a ghostly presence. The commonly acknowledged visceral pain of love, coitus and childbirth, taken to be definitional in a woman’s psychic life, is here offered in a compressed and lacerated iconography.

Nalini Malani is heir to Kahlo and Sher-Gil in the way she relays larger social issues via an allegorized autobiography. It has to be remembered that autobiography, an obsession with female writers, is slow to develop as a genre in painting, so that Sher-Gil’s personalized representations and certainly Kahlo’s oeuvre are a real achievement. Nalini, however, comes at a point when women have forced their right of self-representation. If Kaethe Kollwitz’s revolutionary images framed women’s representational ethics in the first decades of the century, the project retracts to a more subjective space in the following decades dominated by surrealism. Starting with Kahlo, the difference between male and female handling of the female experience is foregrounded. In the contemporary period this is picked up to become a form of sexual mystification (with Louise Bourgeois), a neorealist allegory (with Paula Rego), a performative presentation of subjectivity (with Adrian Piper), an obscure promise of



22 Nalini Malani, *Grieved Child*, 1981

difference is conceptualized through the practice of art, while she herself speaks like a female voice-over about intimate experience. At the far end of the line there is Cindy Sherman constructing an artifice about the feminine in and through her own body. Devising ways of speaking about the self in the mocking mode of a transparent masquerade, she then mercilessly destroys the personae so as to nearly obliterate the autobiographical project.²⁶

Nalini Malani began, when still very young, in the early 1970s, to introduce female trauma as the subject-matter of her otherwise conventionally expressionist oil painting. Gradually the masochistic injunctions of a body receptive to violence were worked out into an experience of female being as survivor. Through the 1980s Nalini worked on a plane of representation, as in *Grieved Child* (1981, *Illus. 22*), where women's bracketed lives struggle to achieve visibility. But she was beginning to recognize that this was only virtual visibility, albeit a theatric one.

It was at this time that the example of Frida Kahlo came into the picture. Nalini saw Kahlo's work in 1982, in a retrospective exhibition in Europe. In 1983 she started to do small-format watercolours, the peculiar, exorcist qualities of which made subtle connections with Kahlo. If Nalini looked back over her shoulder at Kahlo, it was to give her female protagonists literal/systematic symbologies and the virtues thereon of a mock apotheosis. There was a desire perhaps to supplant the canonization of self and image assumed by male artists (William Blake, Francis Bacon, Francesco Clemente, to name a few who have periodically engaged Nalini). In recent years her choice has reverted to contemporary women artists. Nancy Spero, for example, suits her purposes well in the way she proposes and subverts the sublime through what has been called a form of writing/painting marked by the 'pulsations of a female sexual body'.²⁷

The medium of watercolour allowed Nalini to manipulate the image in

emancipation (with Nancy Spero). It becomes an embodiment that comes across as a phenomenological encounter in nature (with Ana Mendieta). By abstracting the body as a linguistic sign, by reading it symbolically into a discourse, contemporary artists (Barbara Kruger and Judy Chicago, for example) change the semiotic of the female body, critiquing in its wake anthropological and indeed figural persistences in strategies of representation. In Mary Kelly's serial presentations, such as her famous *Post-Partum Document*, an infinity of

peculiar ways. She started to embed some part of the imagery in the gessoed surface (white gouache and gum-arabic). She then treated the body like an unfolding embryo starting with a blob which while it gained shape was already imbued with the attitude of the potential figure. She elaborated the blob with the movement of the soft sable-hair brush to gain a morphological ambiguity. The figure was not drawn; she lifted the edges of the blob of pigment with a thin brush making channels for tiny rivulets of the watered pigment to flow in and form a contour round the quivering mass of the body. Reinforced by her use of other mediums like glass painting, monotype and photocopying, the conventions of good drawing and descriptive surfaces were repudiated and her inverted virtuosity came to characterize her figures as a species apart. In sets of watercolours about eccentric men, depressed women, mutilated beggars, lumpen boys contorted in play-fights, she developed an iconography in which standards of anthropomorphic elegance were rejected. Yet these representations were in no way primitivist. The body-gesture of the figures suggested at once the oddity of the human species and the desire of her draughting hand to make the body easy in its chores but avoid giving it too civilizational a bearing. Nalini held to the ambition of quizzically testing Michel Foucault's proposition: 'The soul is the prison of the body.'²⁸



23 Nalini Malani, *Love, Deception and Intrigue*, 1985-86

Female Roles

From the start there was no doubt about the fact that Nalini's paintings are those of a woman. This was first evidenced in the way she played at representing the world on an 'as if' ticket.²⁹ As if she were a haunted girl; as if she were a matriarch; as if she were a betrayed beloved; as if she were an alley cat; as if she were a lesbian; as if she were a beggar-woman; as if she were, like *Javer Kaki*, *One-time Actress* (1991), an ageing actress. You realize of course that these are 'false maturities' which include the acts of mimicry of a little girl. Testing out a tendency to conflate and idealize, she stages the charade of an actress engaged in the life-and-death act of incorporating people who impinge on her. There is at work an ingenuous sincerity that makes her feel beholden to the world; at the same time there is a desire to subvert the gratitude into sly abuse. By testing different skins it is as if she hopes to break the yolk-bag of her narcissism, to start up a dialectics of identification. She also hopes to break the mould of social roles assigned to women.

Women are socialized into containing roles. The pain of death is acted out on the site of women's bodies; they are given the responsibility to grieve and reconstitute the social order that has been disturbed by a death in the community, especially a violent death. This containing act involves a ritualized projection in the form of mourning—which is a dramatization of their body-selves.

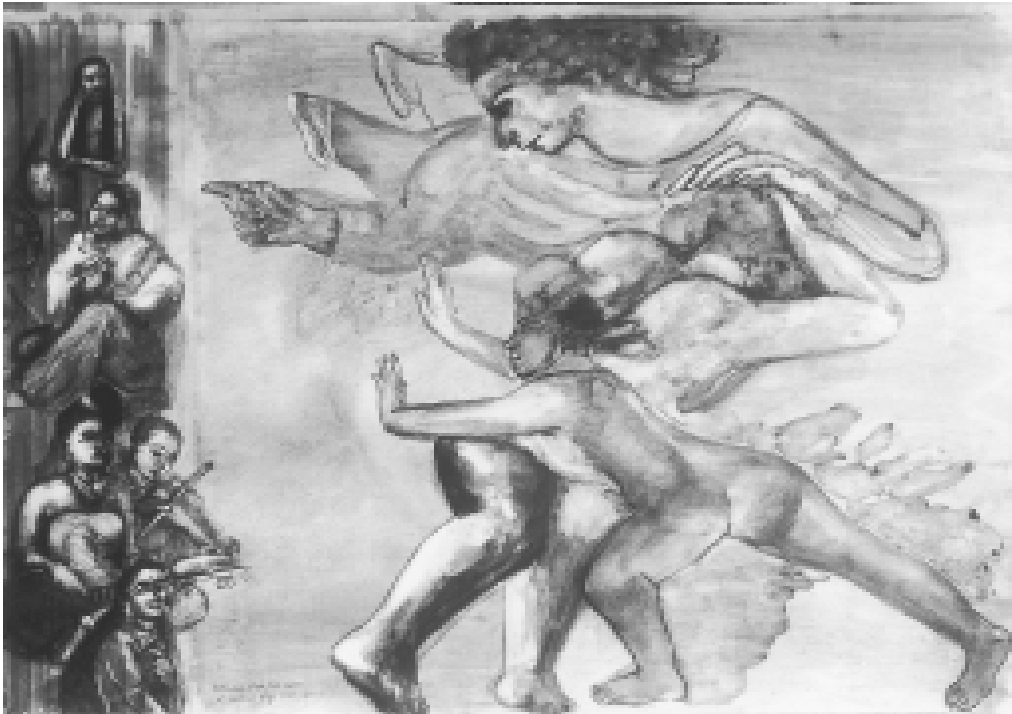
In one of her large tableaux in oils titled *Love, Deception and Intrigue* (1985–86, *Illus.* 23), Nalini adapts a conventional European format for the presentation of grief. She poses her figures in a frieze but turns them about to face/evade each other with an acid and insinuating comment about dissembling. The painting is about the motivation within all contrived ensembles like tableaux/paintings to first block and then release psychic energies into narrative effect.

In paintings like *Woman Destroyed* and *Signs of Depression* (both 1986), Nalini proposes that if the woman in question cannot play an assigned role her resistance will often take the form of 'hysterical' behaviour, which is in effect a form of intransigence. 'They rage against their bodies that have to bear pain within, rather than just disintegrate in the face of such tragedy', Veena Das says, and adds that grief is not seen as something that will pass; indeed 'the representation of grief is that it is metonymically experienced as bodily pain and the female body as one that will carry this pain within forever'.³⁰

Iconographical variations of the female figure have been hammered by Nalini in recurrent images. Eunuch angels serve as mischievous chorus. They



24 Nalini Malani, *The Degas Suite*, set of 30 books, 1991



25 Nalini Malani, *Re-thinking Raja Ravi Varma*, 1989

help you read against the grain the events of life and death acted out in the main text of the picture. A flying female, like a superwoman in the mocking form of a giant phallus, rolls over the city. There are obsessive multiplications of the same body, as in *The Garden of Earthly Delights: Self-Absorption* (1989), drawn, painted, or reproduced as print or copy. Bodies of women in states of injury, abandon and anxiety are worked through repetition towards an inalienable sympathy for the female body—and its survival beyond the demands of the male gaze. In *The Degas Suite* (1991, *Illus.* 24), a set of monotypes is turned through the process of photocopying into thirty books, where each page is worked upon and handpainted. She mimics the voyeuristic eye but then supplants it with a gender affiliation whereby female eroticism may be received more ironically, as both gift and provocation.

In the seminal watercolour *Re-thinking Raja Ravi Varma* (1989, *Illus.* 25), Nalini Malani sets up a quarrel with the nineteenth-century artist (and with me over my interpretation of his work) and offers a virtual summation of her iconographic serial on women up to that moment. A supportive mother-figure is shown blessing and metamorphosing youthful bodies and recomposing them in a heraldic sign of female solidarity. The swooping angel points at debilitated female personae in the history of images (the musician figures painted by Ravi Varma in his *Galaxy* are pushed to the margin in Nalini's watercolour) and, arm outstretched, proclaims her

protective project on behalf of her young protegees. The melded bodies, live, full-bottomed, alert, are positioned to take an intrepid stand against the burden of tradition, representing women outside the frame of history.

This merciful woman swooping into several of Nalini's pictures is, to my mind, the great imaginary redeemed from the archaeology of the self and retrieving in her wake female pain so as to bless it—like/unlike the angel's enunciation before which the human Mary shrinks. But perhaps all supernatural enunciations have a cruel tone, perhaps all speech is already thus imbued with fear, belonging as it does to the symbolic order. Even as Nalini's angel points and projects she takes on a mediatory presence; even as she compounds female subjectivities in her body she chastens the desires of the 'primal self' and conveys it into an apprehension of the real.

Scheherezade

The real is held in abeyance in Nalini Malani's work. Or, one might say, action is quickly exhausted in the cathartic move while meaning is continually deferred. And one of the devices for doing so is storytelling. Nalini works with the language of narration as in an allegory, where meaning is always sought to be reclaimed because meaning is always at the risk of being lost. Allegories, as we know, are a particularly disciplined, almost mechanical form of narration. Objects, characters, events work within preordained options of meaning but this meaning can be decoded to obtain opposite messages: the surrealist's evil dream as well as the didact's good parable.

It is significant that psychoanalysis in the Kleinian tradition regards dream as allegory. Nalini, who is familiar with that tradition, conducts her dreamwork for all to see, as a strained but dogged act of pictorialization. In paintings like *Fragment of a Past Retold* (1989) and *Wuthering Heights* (1995), the story will slip but the didactic props and cliches are cleverly positioned and help to peg it back on to the allegorical framework. Thus, assuming the role of dreamer and analyst alike, she treats the unconscious as a language-in-narration by means of which the other, also always at risk of being lost, is engaged.

Think of Scheherezade of the *Thousand and One Nights*. With Scheherezade we find a double allegory that treats of a woman's desperate bid to save herself and her sisters from the prince who will behead all the women he marries in revenge for his beloved wife's betrayal of him with his own slave. If his is a displaced act of castration then Scheherezade's nightly story to the disconsolate prince is a way of turning him into a child once more. And not only a child but a sibling, complicit with Scheherezade and her sister who together contain his anxiety by telling him stories that play out his great fear while yet swaddling him in a continuous narrative. This saves Scheherezade and her unknown sisters; it also restores the prince to a state of adulthood and love. Thus the narrative form is signified at two levels. The story of the

splendid Scheherezade and the romance of the further stories she tells which are so constructed that they always yield—keeping reality itself in abeyance.

In Scheherezade-style, Nalini's storytelling involves restoring the relationship between herself and the loved object in such a way that reality is tackled—whence the iconography of a doomed beloved and mock-mother who protects womankind at the same time as she restores, through fictional means, balance in a world ruled by male megalomania.

Men/Androgyny



26 Nalini Malani, *Watering Man, after Rembrandt (or, Small Joys)*, 1991

The male presence, in so far as it is addressed by Nalini, is tackled in several different ways—for example by the known trick of androgyny. Even as sexuality renders itself through theatrical means we see in her work the emergence of the vulnerable figure of an acrobat who is always, as in the Picassian mode, a little androgynous. Indeed many of Nalini's figures turn out to be in the *guise* of acrobats. These tender creatures who mimic the more properly mystical beings legitimize the healing role of the unconscious. In continuation of such bisexual ambiguities her over-realized creatures, as

in *Of Angels and Monsters* (1989), could be sexless.

Paradoxically, Nalini is capable of bestowing upon her male representations a sublimity seldom found in her female figures. The *Boy Dressing* series (the last image of which was painted in 1989) is a simple but strangely allusive image worked on a white sheet of paper like a repetitive trial sketch. It records a repertoire of gestures signifying sex/labour/reverie in the working-class male body. The undressing gesture, which often occurs in her work, hints alternatively at liberation from the day's labour and weariness from the night's sex. The boy's head smothered in the half-worn shirt resembles the receded neck of a turtle—a castration image—and yet the upraised arm in some of the pictures, with the fist still inside the sleeve, is the avenging emblem of an anonymous worker. On the other hand, the cameo refers also to profound significations, as for instance the representation of Christ taking off his upper garment for the baptism. Painted as if in slow motion, such images are a study in devolution: a body so self-involved as to resemble an animal licking itself. In the same bracket consider her *Watering Man, after Rembrandt (or, Small Joys)* (1991, *Illus.* 26): here is a man urinating with the pleasure of a beatific child, a village idiot, a bemused city

tramp with his belongings in a bag on his back. What is the meaning of this daily bliss?

Two aspects of Nalini's representational regime about men require further attention: the ideology of the subaltern figure she persistently portrays, and the meaning of the city-street as a site for the parade, pilgrimage, procession of life. While she has a desire to identify with the common man/woman, her sense of responsibility is ambivalent. There is more a need to get out of her own skin to get into another's, to find a common corporeal web. The membrane of paint is a loose mantle wrapped round the body and easily sloughed for the body to appear anonymous in some longed-for collectivity. Is it perhaps to find an ontological security that she so identifies with otherness of all variety?

This existential intrigue informs Nalini Malani's social vision and her pictures of the poor—mostly labouring men, sometimes a female scavenger, often idling lumpens and performing beggars—should be read a little ironically. Images of wrestling, labouring, contorting, turn into play-fighting, which unfurls into the motif of a humped beggar, poised like an ungainly dervish, dancing! There is among the working-class and lumpen figures so much alternation between balletic combat, leap-frogging alacrity and sheer weariness, it is as if she had herself tried and tested the other's will and then, almost by default, annihilated it. Spurred by a voluntarist, often reformist purpose, larger human agency is however subverted by the artist's own hand. Her unconscious harbours tragic denouement.



27 Nalini Malani, *The Sufi and the Bhakta*, 1991



Left: 28 Nalini Malani, *Hieroglyphs: Lohar Chawl*, 1989. Right: 29 Nalini Malani, *City of Desires*, 1991

The City

The city Nalini paints is the city of Bombay: Lohar chawl at Princess street, where she has her studio, bustles with commercial and working-class activities. From this vantagepoint she tries to elicit an affirmative vision of a mixed population made into a community by urban compulsions, a population of immigrants made into a society by work equations. She extracts a language, a hieroglyphic script as it were, from the street (*Illus. 28*). There is a stake in putting Bombay on a par with the metropolitan dream/nightmare that haunts the visual imagination of twentieth-century artists, putting it on a par with say Berlin, Paris, New York. There is what she herself designates in one of her titles, *A Gross Idealization of Lohar Chawl* (1989).

She has also been painting the secret city, the city by night, the city turning into a dim and muddy cosmos. In *The City and Its Ghosts/The City and Its Phantoms* (1988) she can insert her own personae, shades dogging the all-too-real characters of an alien world. There are people on the move like somnambulists. There are male/female figures carrying loads, carrying people who are lame or selfish, carrying them on their backs or in trolleys, into the maze.

There are pictures with spatial metaphors for distance often personified by figures actually walking *away* or tipping out of the frame and running. Beyond the vagabondage, the private madness, the public spectacle, this circus becomes an allegorical description of the social ground. *City of Desires* (1991, *Illus. 29*), a small painting, heralds this allegorical turn. People traverse infernos and fall like martyred heroes, preparing the ground for historical upheavals. Through this visual entropy Nalini's political sense draws out images of social abominations—of rape and riot—stepping up the vocabulary and power of the narrative means, working out a social chronicle based on the pain of individual and collective survival. If all this is a form of medievalism the consummation of it is in the watercolour *The Sufi and the Bhakta*

(1991, *Illus.* 27), where the protagonists in the figural ensemble bear anonymity without alienation and find grace through everyday transactions on the street.

The Gesture

From 1989 Nalini Malani has demonstrated what may be called an anti-aesthetic. She dehomogenized the picture surface making it smudged and erased, scarred and pitted. She started dragging, lifting, floating the figures through her white primer substance which appeared translucent but glutinous, like a kind of sludge. Then she slapped together images one upon another to make up a palimpsest, except that it tended to read, in the tradition of Francis Picabia, like graffiti: a jumble of contours rudely running into each other and flattening/fracturing the surface.

To break the pact with the viewer Nalini has devised her own ‘alienating’ methods. Images are keyed in and retried in different registers; they are tampered with and defaced to break the taboo of taste and sanity. The framed picture that normally coalesces the mirror with the window on the world is disjointed. Nalini shatters the mirror and takes off the frame—so that the *view never jells*.

Once we focus on the gestalt we see that though Nalini deliberately inscribes the sign of chaos across the surface, the gestalt retains a textual coherence: disarticulate surface and anarchist choreography are clues to interpret the dream. They are the means for the *disidentification* of the protagonist in the melee; and for a rereading of the image in terms of a pictorial trick of displacement corresponding to the operations of the unconscious, and with a similar purpose.

What is foregrounded in the blurred and unstable view is the gesture, heavily borrowed from the great art of the east and the west. Nalini elicits the gesture from the masters with passionate exactitude and then desacralizes their aesthetic. She breaks the taboo at the sexual level (giving frequent hints at obscenity), and also at the level of the art-historical referent. She overrides the rules of modernist aesthetic that say you may borrow but not filch, that you must not mix and meddle, that you must keep to visual integrity.

However gratuitous they may at first appear, her improvisations/quotations from the European masters, from the *Siyah Qalem*, from Akbari miniatures, are friendly and grateful, clever and teasing. She uses quotations in a variety of ways. First, to insert the image/ideology of an artist and make a direct comment on it—as for example, the quotation from Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo in *Old Arguments about Indigenism* or from Degas in *The Degas Suite*. Second, to use the image as an impersonation, as with *Re-thinking Raja Ravi Varma*, where the very iconography provides the masquerade and slowly unmasks other meanings. Third, she quotes drawing conventions to gain her own; she ‘copies’, one might say, and then improvises the shape and content for her own purpose. Whether this is Rembrandt’s etching of the pissing man in her own *Watering Man, after Rembrandt*, or Delacroix’s

seated figure in *Women of Algiers* in her own *The Sufi and the Bhakta*, she is giving herself a wonderfully rich art-history lesson.

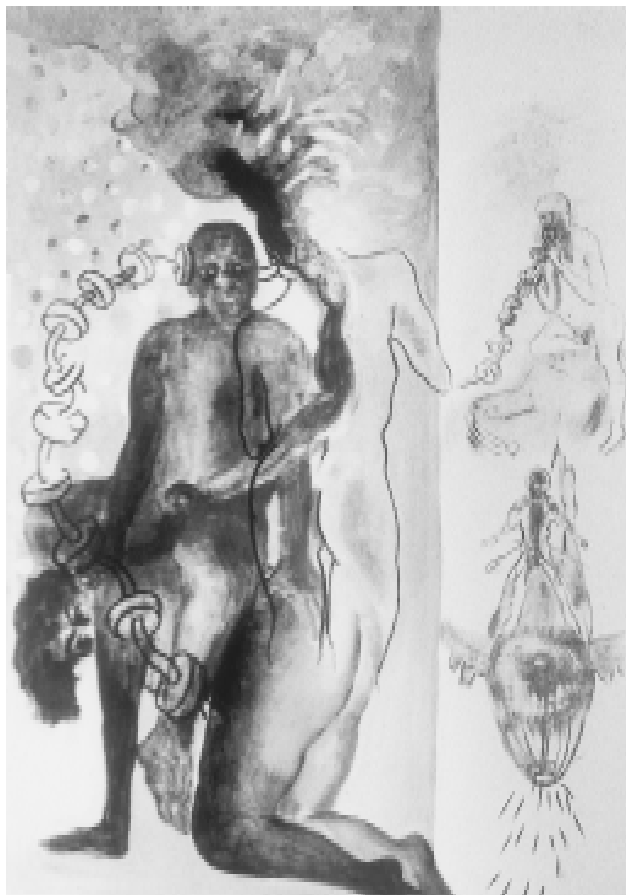
With Nalini Malani pushing her work into excess, improvisation, eclecticism and indulgent sexuality, the obvious context of postmodernism has to be considered. The excess has clearly to do with transgression; with saying all, and more. And this in turn has to do with being a woman and being an artist from the periphery, both at once. Her eclecticism does not figure as free appropriation but as ardent desire to gain speech, to gain through the masquerade the key gesture. To gain through trained invention of types the body whereby to handle the self, to recover the lost sense of compassion and dignity—but by engaging, even tempting herself, with social chaos, with nihilist dissolution.

Medea

In the 1990s Nalini Malani introduced the dimension of installation, theatre and video in her work. In 1992 she drew and painted on the walls of Gallery Chemould in Bombay a scenario which she called *The City of Desires*, and on the basis of which she made her first artist-video.³¹

At the same time she entered theatre and started working with the remarkable actress Alaknanda Samarth on Heiner Mueller's dramatic reinterpretation of the Greek myth of Medea (*Medeaspiel*, a synoptic theatre of images, written in 1974; *Despoiled Shore*, *Medeamaterial*, and *Landscape with Argonauts*, an elaboration of the theme, written in 1982).³² When the project started Nalini seemed set to use theatre for the bodying forth of her own obsessions: to appropriate the performer, to distend her figure repertoire by theatrical identification. By the end of 1993 Nalini Malani's *Medeaprojekt* (as she named her sustained work on the theme) exceeded her impulse. The performance space was extended to the foyer and the street. Nalini included painting, objects, artefacts, reproduced images on slide, TV and video in the theatre/installation. Under the spell of Mueller's speech and Samarth's voice she learned to let go, to *disaggregate* her overtly expressionist imagery. With Samarth acting out in a controlled cathartic style an inherited myth of female insanity, Nalini was as if free to move in and out of the charged scenario through a transference strategy sanctioned, even facilitated, by theatre.

Why *Medeaprojekt* so engages Malani can be seen by scanning the calibrated form of text/performance/imagery that Heiner Mueller's recreated Medea presents as a dramaturgical montage. Unlike the ethics of mourning that Antigone upholds Medea devolves into monologic speech, into howls, into a voice split in several registers across the landscape that is her grave. In the interstices of the written word, in the hiss of the chorus, in the debris after the holocaust, her memory of love as it is transposed into murder persists: of her natal family, of her children killed by her own hands.



30 Nalini Malani, *The Betrayal of Medea*, from the *Despoiled Shore* series, *Medeaprojekt*, 1993

The dried up blood
 Is smoking in the sun
 The theatre of my death
 Had opened

Nalini is fascinated by the alchemies of Medea the witch, unable to hold her pain, cruelly betrayed, cruelly the agent of her own devastation. What fascinates her further is that symmetrical to male disregard and male greed there is in the Mueller script the sign of Medea's perverse agency, her lust stretching into states of revenge and anomie. Breaking down the established parameters of discourse through exposure of the woman's (grotesque) body, the woman's hidden (castrated?) body, the object of Jason's contempt, the play presents corrupt coupling as an allegorical sign.

Medea the alien bride, caught in the ruse of desire and in the lover's bluff, rejects authority, rejects nation, rejects family, rejects the truth of motherhood as well.

As in the Mueller play—where the woman’s body is represented as a terrain trammelled by mankind—the theme of colonization becomes Nalini’s recurring motif. It becomes her (political) preoccupation to *embody dispossession*.

As for the actual iconography, Nalini recalls in the story of the barbarian princess images by other artists: women dancing with dildos in the work of Nancy Spero; Pina Bausch’s dancers slammed like bats against walls in desperate wind-slaps and the men unable to hold the woman’s body, simply unable (*Illus. 32*). For Nalini Medea is female body *in extremis*, and she is seen in a permanent state of masquerade.

In seven panels titled *Despoiled Shore*, Nalini paints fragments of the Mueller text and lets them take unexpected turns in her own replete imagination. In one panel a woman of crossed destinies shoots through her own head as if to let one part of the brainself recognize the other. Testing the logic of disintegration, Nalini draws oddly coupled figures. The column of a spine, a tail-like and phallic contraption, projects and winds through the ear, the mouth—breaking taboos, retracting to the primitive sublime as an oral, anal, orgasm. Jason masturbates even as he takes his new bride (*Illus. 30*). But the suffocation from this cannibalistic trauma is evacuated at the end of the play. Matching Mueller’s intent, Nalini creates in the last act, *Landscape with Argonauts*, a glacial image of death: disappearing into the waste of the sky, Medea is abstracted into her destiny. Propelled by the futurist machines, she opens up a space for her own murderous transcendence. In the painted installation an extraterrestrial formation hovers on the horizon exhausting desire, leaving behind on the ‘despoiled shore’ history as a vestige, as desublimated nature (*Illus. 31*).



31 Nalini Malani’s theatre installation for Mueller’s *Landscape with Argonauts*: Alaknanda Samarth performs as Medea, *Medeaprojekt*, 1993

I felt MY blood come out of MY veins
 And turn MY body into the landscape
 Of MY death

Finally, then, Mueller's fiercely political text provides Nalini a sequence of historical contexts such as that of the Greeks and the barbarians, the German holocaust, recent religious violence the world over. Interlayered as concrete fragments, there is a dimensional projection of the theme of power as global destruction.

The youth of today ghosts of
 The dead of the war that is to happen
 tomorrow

More specifically, Mueller's play becomes an analogue for Nalini: it corresponds to an extended series of tragic events in the here-and-now, as for example the massacre of Muslims in Bombay after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992–93. In Nalini's *Medea*, as in Mueller, murder is the primary motif around which the experience of exploitation is historicized and on the basis of which exile takes place, the diaspora swells, conquests are marked. Nalini's imagery (hundreds of preparatory drawings, wall-to-ceiling paintings, props and video) succeeds in condensing the condition of mourning into a mythic figure and then in making that figure shatter and resound in contemporary history.

Mutants

I want to break mankind apart in two
 And live within the empty middle I
 No man and no woman

At the time of the *Medeaprojekt* Nalini did drawings and paintings that culminated in her *Mutants* series. At once obscene and pathetic in their display of malformed limbs and mixed genitals, the mutants bring sexuality to naught. This series culminated in 1996 in a set of life-size images (in chalk, charcoal, dye, acrylic, oil paint on paper and wall). A shadowy pageant of medieval grotesqueries (or phantoms in Tarkovsky's forbidden zone), they are also a kind of apotheosis styled by a grand deformation of the human body (*Illus.* 33, 34).

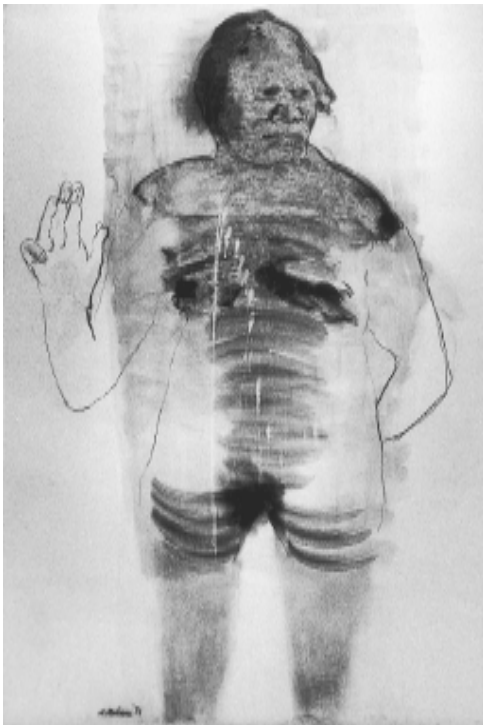
Erotic, murderous and profoundly pitiable, the mutants stand at the threshold guarding allegories of contemporary civilization. In the shadow of these implosions of limb and soul there is a strange, sanguine state of abjection; you



32 Nalini Malani, *Remembering Pina Bausch*, 1994

surrender to morbidity and to the seduction that goes with it. Acknowledging this abjection, Nalini defers the quest for selfhood—the beggared body of the mutant alerts us, as in the sublime moments of a wake, to a state of endurable mortality. She cathects this ‘hope’ first in a woman’s body, now in a mutant’s body that bares as it were the enigma of nature’s travesty: a stigmata that is indeed beyond representation.

The relationship between the figure and ground has still some of the gestalt with which Nalini started her small work on paper in the 1980s. When she enlarges these to life-size figures there remains a sense of bodily immanence. It is as if she produces her figures by rolling, coagulating, smudging balls of visceral matter, body fluids, molten blood. And they leave their impress on the beholder. The mutant has a dismembered body—loose spine, jellied flesh, sprung limbs, sheathed genitals. It is draped on an armature much like that of a puppet but with a fierce head, shrinking torso and soft, prominently exposed buttocks, it still has a provocative expressivity, an uncanny grip. Human rage is plucked from the romantic/realist repertoire ranging from Goya to Degas to the great roll-call of high expressionism, to contemporaries like Ron Kitaj and Nancy Spero. Possessed by the act of figural delineation and modelling of flesh, she presses up a wail as if to bring soul to mouth—and in the dark, shimmering profusion of breath all the cross-references, even the deliberate pastiche fade into an intensely private sigh.



33 Nalini Malani, *Mutant IV (V-Sign)*, 'A' series, 1994



34 Nalini Malani, *Mutant II*, 'A' series, 1994

Global Parasites

A series of paintings in oils and watercolour produced since 1996 announces Nalini Malani's social concern for environmental abuse she thematizes it after the title of her currently favourite book, *Global Parasites*.³³ Social concern notwithstanding, it is the condition of degeneracy evoked by the objective presence of parasites in nature and the social environment that she now doggedly pursues. While parasites are a scientifically verifiable category she projects into it the fantastical figure of the vampire, the bloodsucking bat that is the allegorical sign under which the universe of evil is realized. Nalini sees herself engaged in a critique of imperialist exploitation, while in her choice of inherited symbology one can also see her as always probing the wound (*Illus. 35*).



35 Nalini Malani, *Homage to Josef Albers (Gold Series)*, 1996–97

Yet there is objectification that comes from the range of artistic devices: acetate sheet, photocopying, screens, monotype, frottage, photos, neon, animation and video. She builds up what is by now not only a huge cast of characters but a body of pictorial quirks for a mythology of doom. She works like a doomsday oracle who spells out destruction to rid the populace of its unknown sins and all-too-intentional crimes.

If there is reparation it comes unobtrusively, in the form of a new iconography of gentle beasts—several species of animals trembling in small flocks. Needing to be saved, they help recall the tenderness that all great traditions of paintings invest in the animal form: think especially of Mughal and early renaissance painting, both inaugurating a new humanism and a reign of reason and yet offering, as in the work of Antonio Pisanello or Miskin, a state of spiritual attentiveness, a condition of grace within the animal stance. Nalini makes the sheep, hare, antelope, birds and beached whales into innocent creatures eliciting our ultimate compassion. It is through the body of the humble beast driven by global pollution that compassion (re)enters her world of cruel follies.

Arpita Singh

Female Solidarities

Arpita Singh (b. 1937)³⁴ is heir to the burden of female ennui and erotic reverie of the Amrita Sher-Gil pictures which were among the first she admired and emulated at art school in Delhi during the late 1950s. She is at the same time a worthy sequel to Frida Kahlo in that she breaks the cycle of female masochism by an act of profound reparation and makes the woman's body whole again. She helps herself to this wholeness by the imaginary gift of a girl-child. Late in life, all over again the matronly protagonist of her paintings bears a child. She transforms the solitude of mature desire to a state of magnificence. Yet, as if in desperate remembrance, this mother holds her child in the manner of a phallic substitute. This double image sublimates the envy and cruelty and grace and confusion of being a woman. Her continuing series since 1994 are variations on the theme of a woman with a girl-child.

Exhibiting together during 1987–89,³⁵ Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani, Nilima Sheikh and Madhvi Parekh found ways to deal with women's proverbial melancholy, to give it a comic/tragic face, to open it out into narratives. I make an exemplary case of the value of communication between these artists to show how they established through each other intertwined contours of a life-process, of a life in process. Nalini, by taking the high risk of complete disintegration, by her growing preference for formal disunity, by her unresolved subjectivity that teeters on the edge of gross dramatization, provoked in the work of Arpita the will to life. At the same time a tenderness blossomed in Arpita's work whereby she could circumvent the theatricality that Nalini upholds to meet up with Nilima's abiding belief in the poetics of affection. Even as she complemented the wit of Madhvi's naive painting with the phantasms of her own infantile reverie. In communion with the other women artists, Arpita pushed aside her fabulously cultivated garden of images to expose the volatile inner life of the female protagonist who breathes and expands.

Modernist Language

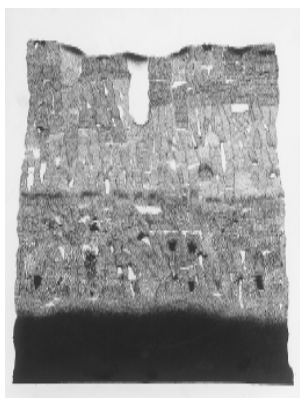
Before we go on to the transformations in Arpita's work as a result of these (post-1987) female solidarities, a brief review of her consistent thirty years' work is in place. Since the 1960s she has been among the committed modernists in Indian art, understanding the terms of reference down to the details: impasto brushwork, irradiating hues, informal design, chance encounters, erased dreams (*Flowers and Figures*, 1972–74, *Illus.* 37). Set within an overall ornamental structure replete with images of memory and romance, her earlier paintings recall Marc Chagall.

In her 1975–79 drawings the see-through nets knitted over the skyspace make playful allusion to illusionism's insubstantial support (*Illus.* 36). Like her exact contemporary Nasreen Mohamedi, she fused the structure and support through the manifest use of a grid—the ultimate trope of the modernist preoccupation with form.

But unlike Nasreen, Arpita got around mainstream modernism shaped through male hands by the use of decorative patterning. She participated in the reconstitution by women of the function and form of art via ornament within/without modernism.

As for the medium of oils, she knows better than most Indian painters how to use it to sumptuous effect. Working with pure pigment and little oil, the artist is bold in her patisserie, kneading colour, building up a dry cake with sweet stuffings, layer upon layer. She is a cook and mason at once: she squeezes the tube on the canvas and makes the pigment adhere like plaster or cement; she cuts and layers little shovel-loads of congealed pigment into waves cradling an object moulded from the same substance. She works out the figure-ground with a deeply embedded contour and then lifts off the figure like a body hypnotized. I am referring to paintings like *Sea Shore* (1984, *Illus.* 38), *Munna Appa's Garden* (1989) and *A Dead Man on the Street: Is It You, Krishna?* (1994).

Arpita distinguishes between a painterly and a graphic sensibility and uses both in her watercolours of the last ten years. The image on paper is small; the material immanence gives it magnitude beyond even the larger oils. She draws, erases, scrapes down the surface with sandpaper making the surface resemble a ruined wall, making the contour fragile to the point of being brittle. Then she draws again with red ochre, building on the broken surface and obtaining the quality of a restored fresco. She



Left: 36 Arpita Singh, *Drawing*, 1977.
Right: 37 Arpita Singh, *Flowers and Figures*, 1972





38 Arpita Singh, *Sea Shore*, 1984

draws with a kind of inverse virtuosity undermining the ‘master’ draughtsmen. Then she paints in the watercolour: she lays a ground, draws, lifts the contour with a brush and lets a negative contour of thin white runnels crisscross the surface. While the pigment in oil lies creamy thick—azure pink yellow vermilion white—the parched watercolours float and shimmer. In a painting titled *The Blue Water Sheet* (1994), a sleeping figure gains some kind of oeneiric deliverance.

Fabrications

The allusion to fabric has meaning. To start with, there are folds and swirls of drapery and plenty of cloak-and-dagger stories in Arpita Singh’s repertoire. There is a teasing aspect to the figures being like the women in purdah, secretly voluptuous. The cloth reference has also to do with weaving, with sitting on the loom like Penelope, to prolong memory. And it has to do with the specific task of stitching, suturing, embroidering with multicoloured yarns and with the blinding care that goes into that female industry.

In the early 1980s her oil paintings sported fluttering flags as if she were emblemizing the cloth support of painting. Then she introduced stitching in and around the emergent figures whereby they appeared to be as if applied, cloth on cloth, over the picture surface. If the watercolour *Garden* (1985) is like a piece of

embroidery, the *Family Lily Pool* (1994) is like a *pichhavai*, both cloth-based forms that give a different materiality to the work. Gradually she has developed an aesthetic whereby the material artifice of the painting is also a curtain/banner/mantle. Her work is seldom about looking through and beyond with a perspectival vision; the artist-spectator is ducking behind and under and over the painting, clutching at the motifs that wave and tilt the undulating surface.

In her more recent work Arpita shows stretched hems which not only have bitten-off floral borders as in old quilts, it is as if the phantasmagoric quilt itself is not large enough. The secret is let out. The edge of the picture reveals a teeming underworld of bodies and objects. It is a grown girl's coverlet still fresh with her adolescent pleasures, the pigment blooming, the surface cushioned thick with images. An Indian viewer familiar with *kanthas*, the folk art of cotton quilting made exclusively by women as part of their dowry in Bengal (Arpita's home state), will recognize the connection. The reference to *kanthas* works down to the delineation and disposition of the figural motifs in all-round patterns, the figures standing on their heads when it comes to the viewer's/user's relation to them. Seen from above and therefore always ultimately two-dimensional, this mantle of delights produces the desire for a companionable huddle.

As is so frequent in the folk and popular art of Bengal, the pattern and the iconography are open-ended. These quilts had embroidered trains and gun-toting *firangi* soldiers or any other newfangled commodity the village women had encountered. Likewise, Arpita's repertoire of planes and cars and guns and sahibs is like her great-grandmothers' imagination, full of toy-totems that designate wishes and taboos. It is a woman's world view on the material reality of things that make up the working substance of life.

Thus Arpita cues into women's work, their rhythmic of labour, their choreographic clustering of objects, their idiosyncratic formalism. This in turn connects with the revival by women artists of *patterning*, or what came to be called pattern art and included quilts, paintings, collages, in the western feminine/feminist art practice of the 1970s.

The feminist point of view should however be reinscribed in Arpita's case into two earlier ideologies to which she owes overt allegiance. One should continue to see Arpita's work within the spectrum of modernist sensibilities. Her work makes the kind of cross-reference that modern artists have throughout made to native conventions, the more so when these are living traditions of folk icons, textiles and handicraft in their midst. We know from the example of, say, Natalia Goncharova or Frida Kahlo (belonging respectively to the movements of Russian futurism and Mexican cultural renaissance in the first two decades of the twentieth century), how this move helped nonwestern avantgardes to derive a fresh gestalt—to float or conceal or find figural elements too 'well made' in the western/realist realm of pictorial



narration. In this multiple perspective one can see the ornamental principle in Arpita's paintings to be as much a modernist and indigenist as it is a feminist proposition.

Alice

Ideology apart, Arpita's decorative imagery contorts into the beautiful and the grotesque alike. It makes up codes for desired objects. It is a terrain of heavy condensation. Metaphoric images are mapped one upon another but the artist's hand subverts firm positionings and the objects do not find their subject. And therein lies the nightmare, as in the surrealist experience. It produces both the burgeoning image and the simulacrum of dysfunctional signs (*Illus.* 39, 40).



Above: 39 Arpita Singh, *The Child Bride*, 1984. Below: 40 Arpita Singh, *Woman with Car*, 1987

Older than most currently working women artists, Arpita Singh has played Alice for close to thirty years and has become a veritable little mistress of Indian art. Through the decade of the 1980s she introduced a whole array of fetish objects and decoys in her images—cups, cars, guns and aeroplanes, shoes and ducks, deep sofas and cushy flowerbeds—which were, in the sexual sense, tokens of bonafide/malafide desire. Repeatedly since she has put out picture-pantomimes where cats, dolls and nymphets begin to speak, after which it was the turn of the goddesses and then of the beloveds and the little mothers of Bengali lore. Thus she prepared herself to subject the great imaginary to a reality test; to objectify it and find a language in nursery rhyme, pictorial alliteration and

decorative motif. And then slowly, in a more complex gestalt. The dysfunctional signs, as I call them, graduated to the order of the symbolic by baiting reality.

Compositionally her pictures are made up of a huddle of men and women and children at the tail-end of the fairy tale tradition. Gesticulating figures in a perpetual cycle of innocence, anxiety and menace, you can see them pick up their thickset limbs and sock you in the face to gain reality. The more than life-size objects composed around and about these figures are toys of erotic play but discarded as though in a state of sorrow. There has always been a charade at work, the viewer is seduced and abandoned. And the pictures too have this funerary aspect, the space between figure and object is choked with large, fat flowers in posies and bouquets meant for the dead. An obituary, is it?, to the girl-child living out centuries of childhood.

Doll-Soul

At a time when everyone was still intent on giving us a quick and reassuring answer, the doll was the first to inflict on us that tremendous silence (larger than life) which was later to come to us repeatedly out of space, whenever we approached the frontiers of our existence at any point. It was facing the doll, as it stared at us, that we experienced for the first time (or am I mistaken?) that emptiness of feeling, that heart-pause, in which we should perish did not the whole, gently persisting Nature then lift us across abysses like some lifeless thing. Are we not strange creatures to let ourselves go and to be induced to place our earliest affections where they remain hopeless? So that everywhere there was imparted to that most spontaneous tenderness the bitterness of knowing that it was in vain? A poet might succumb to the domination of a marionette, for the marionette has only imagination. The doll has none, and is precisely so much less than a thing as the marionette is more.

But that, in spite of all this, we did not make an idol of you, you sack, and did not perish in the fear of you, that was, I tell you, because we were not thinking of *you* at all. We were thinking of something quite different, an invisible Something, which we held high above you and ourselves, secretly and with foreboding, and for which both we and you were, so to say, merely pretexts, we were thinking of a soul: the doll-soul.

O doll-soul, not made by God, you soul, asked for capriciously from some thoughtless fairy, thing-soul breathed forth by an idol with mighty effort, which we have all, half timidly, half magnanimously received and from which no one can entirely withdraw himself, O soul, that has never been really worn.³⁶

Lamentation

Here it is important to make an aside. Notwithstanding the apparent attractiveness of her work, Arpita's pervasive theme is death. The explanation of why it might be so seems in its recounting similar to many an artist's biography. It has to do with her father's early death when she was only six. She was exceptionally close to him, she says; he was her primary, even sole friend. Her imaginary influx draws her into a state of perpetual play but not on account of that customary source of plenitude—the mother. It is in memory of her father, to compensate for his irrevocable loss. Indeed it is compensation for a double loss. For not only did she lose her father as playmate, her mother went into an obsessively orderly mode after his death. Providing for her children in the face of social odds, she became a stoical figure, a middle-class working woman in a regulatory cast (*My Mother*, 1993, *Illus.* 41).

Arpita was left with simulating plenitude that veiled a deathlike narcissism. If her adult behaviour is distinctly girlish at times, it is as if she must play to mourn and reclaim the father; only if she plays can she make her imaginary conform to the real. Yet, deprived as she has been of the properly symbolic transformation, she mocks the law of survival. The more her pictures bloom (*Mourners' Bouquet*, 1993), the more she signals her withdrawal (*Funeral Urns II*, 1995).

Since the 1960s a traumatized sexuality, placed preciously within programmed play, has gone through visible autobiographical and pictorial transmutations. During the decade of the 1980s when her daughter was an adolescent, the



41 Arpita Singh, *My Mother*, 1993

rich surface of the painting showed masked juliets, frigid lolitas, ophelias of cruel patriarchies, little cassyndras. Sometimes these became transposed into the ambiguous identity of a girl-boy, as in *Ayesha Kidwai against White, against Grey* (1985). From the 1990s Arpita's representations include beloveds, mothers and ordinary women subject to assault, subject to anguish, subject to death. She began finally to share the task of mourning that includes one's own lost beloveds, as it includes the martyred members of society. The mourners, mostly women, present a staged and ceremonial performance, a community image where the sense of belonging is stressed by the physical togetherness of clinging bodies. Now the woman's figure demonstrates both its ability to couple as well as courage in its large and ample singularity, as in *Afternoon* (1994), *Woman Sitting—The Dissolving Body* (1995).

At the very least these scenes of violence constitute the perhaps metaphysical thresholds within which the scenes of ordinary life are lived.

In the genre of lamentation, women have control both through their bodies and through their language—grief is articulated through the body, for instance, by infliction of grievous hurt on oneself, 'objectifying' and making present the inner state, and is finally given a home in language. Thus the transactions between body and language lead to an articulation of the world in which the strangeness of the world revealed by death, by its non-inhabitability, can be transformed into a world in which one can dwell again, in full awareness of a life that has to be lived in loss. This is one path towards healing—women call such healing simply the power to endure.³⁷

Charades of Death

And instead of the simplified images of healing that assume that reliving a trauma or deathecting desire from the lost object and reinvesting it elsewhere, we need to think of healing as a kind of relationship with death.³⁸

Women may signify their life as work, as labour which includes nurturing the child, loving, mourning, but also reading, fending for themselves, witnessing the destruction of false and feminine utopias one after another. The female reader is a well-known motif in western art; it is a signifier for the inner life of the protagonist as also her modesty before the workaday world of the male. In Arpita Singh's paintings as they develop the book alternates with the child, both are substituted by a weapon. A gun places her female protagonist in the world of men with a vengeance that is never quite specified.

The mode changes as well: there is a shift from the lyrical to the dramatic, precisely via the metaphoric double-take. Arpita proceeds from a puppet-pantomime type of performance to the higher absurd. Consider the naked woman facing the



Above left: 42 Arpita Singh, *Pink Flowers, Yellow Flowers*, 1989. Above right: 43 Arpita Singh, *Ayesha Kidwai, Mourners and Soldiers*, 1992. Below: 44 Arpita Singh, *Dancers and Dead Bodies*, 1990

viewer, showing her back to a table of feasting men, in *Figures Around the Table* (1992). Consider the painting *Woman Plucking Flowers* (1994), with a field of blue blossoms in the heart of which the assassin is hidden. He shoots the naked venus showing her thick bottom as she smothers her face in the perfume. These gunmen are all over the place in Arpita's work—idle little fellows who look like thugs and create menace, others who sidle in and out like cowards distracting the main action. These are the dwarfish progeny of the crowd and chorus of theatre, but reduced to a beggary of soul in their half-employed, semiredundant status. The thugs are of course thugs; they have shaven heads, stocky torsos and trousered legs, they are sometimes in mufti and often carry guns. More of her recent pictures are about aggression—possible rape, street battles, terror and police encounters. They are about the racking violence that India has witnessed in recent years (*Illus. 42, 43, 44*).

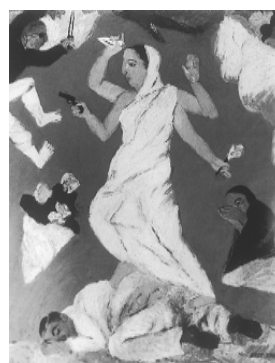
I am reminded, like Nilima Sheikh writing on Arpita Singh, of Pina Bausch's modern dance-ensemble, *Carnations*.³⁹ The careful planting of the stage with thousands of pink carnations through which the dancers plough and plunder. The persistent androgyny, even transparent transvestitism of the figures in changing costumes—the men wear little frocks. Also the menace of the real men in suit or

uniform and the sense of active terror practised on a woman through the sly manoeuvres of a game. The screams and the songs in a prayerlike chant about the seasons with simpleminded words and gestures. And then the sleight-of-hand in Pina Bausch's choreography: the collapse of the standing figure, the murderous slapstick movements of death and dying and the regathering of the limbs to life.

Arpita's work always displays flowers that shroud and embellish. They set the stage for the quiet gesture of grief, funeral postures with the offering of a bouquet. Soldier-drills, wrestlers grappling hand-to-hand, thigh-to-thigh (the postures taken from wrestling manuals), figures scrambling on the ground in proxy for sexual love: these dummies in combat are about life and death, raising the moot point about who survives, and the mockery of decoys that do survive. There is always, again and again, the gesture of collapse, the prone figure, someone felled, someone in an epileptic faint, someone mimicking death.⁴⁰



45 Arpita Singh, *Devi Emerging from the Wednesday Market*, 1990

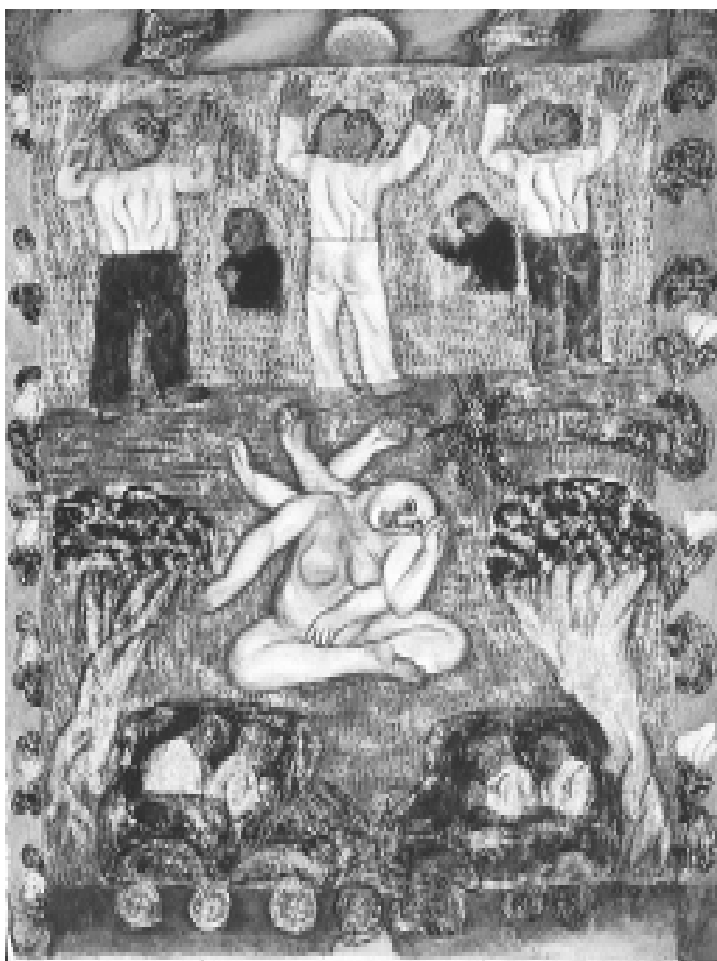


46 Arpita Singh, *Durga*, 1994

Holding Out

The gesture of the woman holding a gun, holding it with a terrible confidence, mocks the phallic weaponry that comforts men in their sexual insecurities. There is also mimicry, as in her *Durga* (1994, *Illus. 46*), of the goddess with many weapons.⁴¹ These icons, deeply embedded in the Indian psyche, are not without irony—why do men hand over to the mother-goddesses these castrating weapons?

Yet the goddess herself is vulnerable. Like the flowers Arpita insistently paints, like the luscious magnolia, the golden goddess is forced open, her hands curled, her crotch showing. Expressly social, expressly *public*. The subject, moreover, of inner motivation that needs multiple limbs to launch itself into a struggle in the busy world, as in *Devi Emerging from the Wednesday Market* (1990, *Illus. 45*). Equally, the goddess who has been torn open folds in like a lotus, she composes herself in a posture of erotic absorption. Built compactly, with packed flesh and self-protective crouch, she

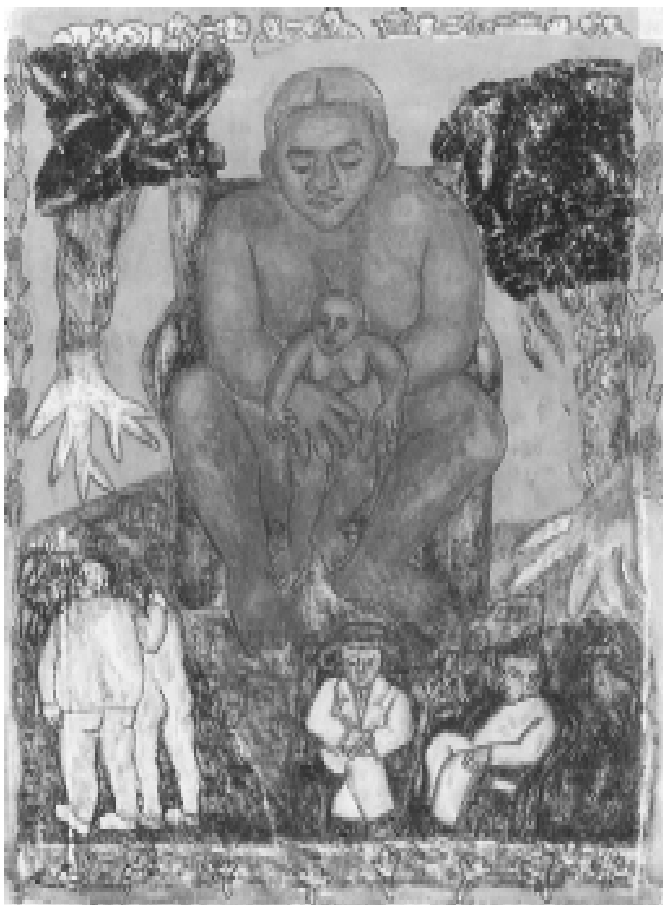


47 Arpita Singh, *A Tired Woman and Men Against the Wall*, 1992

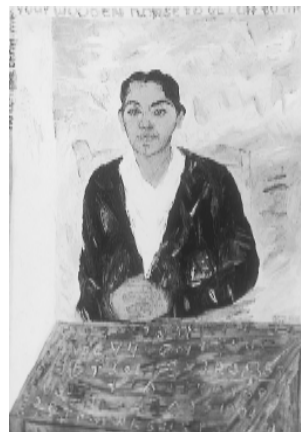
is sanguine but infinitely sad and, yes, defends herself from the blows of the world. In the watercolour titled *A Tired Woman and Men against the Wall* (1991, *Illus. 47*) the aggressors are absent but the woman rests her poor head on one of her six rotating arms, and the men line up with the hope of climbing over the wall whence they will probably be shot.

In the gesture of the mature woman holding a girl-child who is already herself a woman (*Illus. 48*), the goddess is actually transcended. Revived from private oblivion, held by her fierce and benign mother, the daughter grows up, she faces life, she endures. The narrative relay now allows, as in *My Daughter* (1995, *Illus. 49*), this moment of becoming.

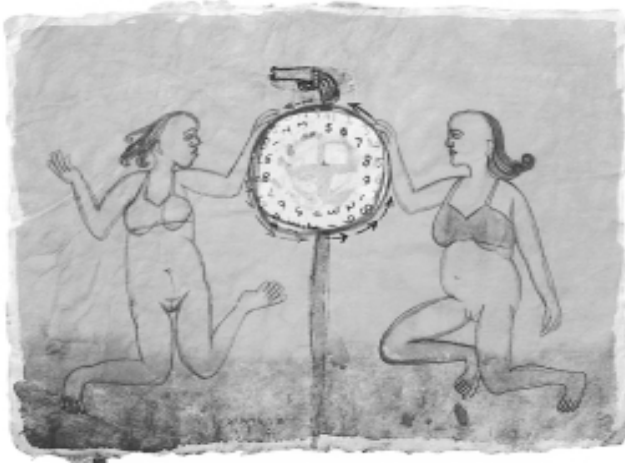
Thus do Arpita's figures survive. The recent nutlike female body clinches the message. From 1996 her reverse paintings in acrylic and her little watercolours offer a pop-out parody of a series of kitsch icons that would be charming if they were not a little crazy: half-clothed girls seem to revert to a nursery-rhyme world with,



48 Arpita Singh, *Woman with a Girl Child IV*, 1995



49 Arpita Singh, *My Daughter*, 1995

50 Arpita Singh, *Feminine Fable*, 199651 Arpita Singh, *Feminine Fable*, 1996

finally, a hard note of mockery about innocence, about modesty, and about the claimed verity of the world (*Illus.* 50, 51). Framing the feminine with goddesses and these stubborn little marionettes, Arpita makes an even more reclusive space for the female body. A body for sustaining trauma and some rare moments of effulgent grace.

Meanwhile the artist, herself a firm atheist, tends her home like a priest 'her' temple. In the studio the priestess turns into a lonely witch-mother. Arpita alters the gestalt of her pictures so that she can contract, expand, invite, expel the world—and reassemble its debris. She waves her wand in a virtuoso gesture while self-doubt manifests itself in the very process of her obsessive work. It leaves an all-over trace as if to say the figures brought to life with whispering, rubbing, scratching, redrawing, are in the end her flesh-and-blood progeny. Saved after so much cruel and caressing erasure, they are endowed with the pressing desire and dogged stamina to *hold out*.

Notes and References

- ¹ *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Volume II: The Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993, p. 40.

I am indebted to Tharu and Lalita for their critical framing of women's creative intervention. In her introduction, Susie Tharu interrogates the tendency to privilege an experiential basis for female subjectivity, as also the notion of authentic femaleness that is derived from it: 'We investigate, first, the idea of loss, which underwrites so much of the "recovery" of women's writing; second, the notion of release or escape, which tropes itself into a feminist poetics . . . third, the problem that arises as the concept of experience, which in feminist practice has a critical, deconstructive charge, is uncritically conflated with an empiricist privileging of experience as the authentic source of truth and meaning; and finally, the hidden politics of what some strands of Western feminism have set up as women's real experiences, or female nature itself.' *Ibid.*, p. 26.

An argument in favour of ideological understanding and historical contextualizing of the 'real' life of women as reflected in their creativity follows.

² Selected readings on/by Amrita Sher-Gil include a special number titled *Amrita Sher-Gil, The Usha, Journal of Art and Literature of The Panjab Literary League*, Vol. III, No. 2, Lahore, August 1942. Karl Khandalavala's illustrated monograph, *Amrita Sher-Gil* (New Book Company, Bombay, 1944) is a seminal study of her work. Detailed biographical material on Amrita Sher-Gil, an inventory of her paintings, interpretive and critical essays on her work and a selection of her own letters have been published in Vivan Sundaram, K.G. Subramanian, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Geeta Kapur, *Amrita Sher-Gil*, Marg, Bombay, 1972. See also N. Iqbal Singh, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Biography*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1984; Nilima Sheikh, 'On Amrita Sher-Gil: Claiming a Radiant Legacy', in *Evocations and Expressions*, edited by Gayatri Sinha, Marg, Bombay, 1997. A large number of photographs and letters of Amrita Sher-Gil are part of the Sundaram family archives, New Delhi. These have been edited/annotated by Vivan Sundaram for a forthcoming publication.

³ Umrao Singh Sher-Gil was the eldest brother of the landed Majithias endowed by the British with estates in Saraya, Gorakhpur. Ideologically opposed to their colonial loyalties and lifestyle, Umrao Singh lived on a relatively modest stipend from the family and led the private life of a scholar in his Shimla home. He was widely read in world philosophy and religions; he knew classical languages (Persian and Sanskrit) and kept up his reading of modern literature. He took hundreds of fine photographs of himself, his wife and daughters. Covering the period 1892–1947, these photographs make up a remarkable archive of a bourgeois family in India. The photographs of Amrita, intimate, stylishly posed—approved and touched up on Amrita's vain instruction—are the gift of an intense father–daughter gaze in the interface of the lens.

Umrao Singh met Marie Antoinette while she was travelling in India as the companion of Princess Bamba, granddaughter of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Marie Antoinette's family (Gottesman/Baktay) in Hungary had oriental leanings. Her brother Ervin Baktay was a well-known Indologist. He travelled to India and wrote an art-historical account in Hungarian, *India Muveszete* (Budapest, 1963). Marie Antoinette was a sociable, flirtatious, operatic personality (she sang and played the piano to amateur audiences). In later years, when her daughters grew up, she was a somewhat distraught woman.

Amrita and her younger sister Indira were born (in 1913 and 1915 respectively) while the couple was in Hungary where they were trapped at the outbreak of the first world war. The family returned to India and took up residence in Shimla in 1921. Seeing her special talent, Amrita was given drawing lessons, followed by a brief trip to Florence (in 1924) that her mother undertook supposedly to introduce her two adolescent daughters to the great art of Europe. In 1929, when Amrita was sixteen, she went to Ecole des Beaux Artes in Paris. Here she studied under the postimpressionist painter Lucien Simon. She was awarded a gold medal in 1933 for her painting titled *Young Girls*, leading to her election as an associate of the Grand Salon, a fact she proudly announced back in India.

Amrita returned to the family home at Shimla at the end of 1934, prepared to take up her destiny as an Indian painter. She dressed in gorgeous saris, a flamboyant beauty flaunting her unmatched artist persona. A bohemian, she provoked the colonial elite in Shimla, the summer capital of the British raj. She seduced and betrayed real and imagined lovers (among them Malcolm Muggeridge). At the same time she was a passionate and committed painter and produced remarkable paintings virtually at first go.

⁴ The reference to romanticism is fairly pointed: Sher-Gil was dedicated to Beethoven and

Dostoevsky. She chose the forceful Hungarian poet Andre Ady as her contemporary reference. She brought the same aesthetic to her painting and openly scorned sentiment in art. She embraced high passion as a vocational necessity and made an arrogant display of her temperament. This can be gleaned from letters published in Vivan Sundaram, K.G. Subramanyan, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Geeta Kapur, *Amrita Sher-Gil*.

- ⁵ To briefly sum up Sher-Gil's western sources: taught by the postimpressionist painter Lucien Simon, she adopted that aesthetic. Sher-Gil's decision to take her postimpressionism towards greater realism should also be seen in relation to her art school contemporaries, Boris Taslitzky and Francis Gruber, who became well-known leftwing artists in late 1930s' France. (Sher-Gil repeatedly painted Boris Taslitzky at art school—he is the elegant model for her *Young Man with Apples*, 1932. Taslitzky speaks about Amrita as a friend in his autobiography *Tu Parle*.) Many of her classmates including Gruber became part of the Forces Nouvelles Group (1935–39) that aspired to launch a renewed realist–humanism. Though Amrita herself was not a leftist, nor even particularly political, her choices were vindicated by the ideology and aesthetic of interwar realism. She spent her summers in Hungary—in Zebegeny—where she would have met well-known painters like Istvan Szonyi, working in the realist genre. As against the fascist version of neoclassical realism of the same period, such realisms were based on a compassionate allegiance to the people within the broad frame of European humanism.
- ⁶ Sher-Gil's letter to Karl Khandalavala, dated 30 April 1941, in Vivan Sundaram, K.G. Subramanyan, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Geeta Kapur, *Amrita Sher-Gil*, p. 134. Khandalavala, a close friend, introduced her to the wealth of Indian miniatures. With him she exchanged precise insights about Indian art that make up an annotated chronicle of a painter's encounter with her tradition. This account remains remarkably illuminating to this day. Khandalavala published a fine book on her paintings posthumously (*Amrita Sher-Gil*) and played a major role in the development of art-historical studies in postindependence India.
- ⁷ Sher-Gil's letter to Karl Khandalavala, dated 16 May 1937, in Vivan Sundaram, K.G. Subramanyan, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Geeta Kapur, *Amrita Sher-Gil*, p. 112.
- ⁸ Letter to her parents, in *ibid.*, p. 92.
- ⁹ Intent on seeing the great art of India that she had glimpsed at Musee Guimet in Paris, Sher-Gil travelled in 1937 from Shimla to Bombay, Ajanta, Ellora, Hyderabad, Mysore, Trivandrum, Cochin, Mattancheri, and then back to the north via Allahabad to Delhi. For part of the trip she had as a travelling companion the Bengal School painter Barada Ukil, with whom she also exhibited in makeshift shows.
- ¹⁰ In 1939 Amrita Sher-Gil spent a year in Hungary. There she married her Hungarian doctor-cousin Victor Egan, who had seen her through her student adventures in Europe and was acquainted with her 'promiscuity'. Sher-Gil and Egan came away from Europe just before the second world war engulfed Europe, bringing the nazis to Hungary. They were given a niche in the Majithia estates in Saraya where Sher-Gil painted her next set of important pictures based on her growing acquaintance with Indian miniatures.

Two sets of influences determine her approach to miniature paintings in their genre aspect. Educated to glean their representational protocol and stylistics by Khandalavala, she underpinned this with her lived experience in the feudal setting at Saraya. Surrounded by landed families of uncles and cousins, by tenant farmers, by workers at the sugar factory and by domestic servants, she took to posing her clan and the retainers in tableaux. These resembled miniature tableaux, sometimes in a sentimental, mostly in an ironic or playful way. On the aspect of the popular and generic aspect of pahari miniatures, see Lawrence Binyon,

The Spirit of Man in Ancient Art, Dover, New York, 1965. The researches of B.N. Goswamy on this subject are definitive; see B.N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer, *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of Northern India*, Artibus Asiae Publishers Supplementum XXXVIII and Museum Rietberg, Zurich, 1992.

- ¹¹ Amrita's last years in Saraya were a period of severe retraction into a life that was still, in the strict sense of the word, feudal. And while this allowed her some idle pleasures with her extended family it also led to a sense of privation—monetary and intellectual. Her letters speak of her isolation and suicidal depression. In 1941 she determined to return to a more stimulating life and moved to Lahore, which was at the time the cultural capital of north India—here the liberal elite, the leftwing and the nationalist intelligentsia formed an inspiring context. She arranged to show her work in a major exhibition in December 1941. A few days before the exhibition Amrita Sher-Gil, not yet twenty-nine, died suddenly. The exact cause of her death has never been confirmed but it is believed to be either a mishandled abortion or an abscess caused by a dormant venereal disease contracted in Paris. She was in the care of her doctor-husband. When her family and friends entered the house they found Amrita lying deathly pale amidst blood-soaked sheets. She had been haemorrhaging for three days and was too far gone to be saved.
- ¹² Amrita Sher-Gil had made a brief but intense connection with Jawaharlal Nehru who she first met through the Congress leader Dewan Chamanlal and his Eurasian wife Helen, Amrita's closest friend. Nehru and Amrita met in Lahore in 1936, then in Delhi in 1937. They exchanged letters (most of which her mother destroyed after Amrita's death). In 1940, just before going for a prison sentence, Nehru went specially to meet Amrita at Saraya, Gorakhpur.

Her tragic and untimely death became a public, nearly national-scale mourning to which figures like Gandhi and Nehru responded with messages of condolence to Madame Umrao Singh. (See Gandhi's letter, dated 24 April 1942, in *Usha*, Vol. III, No. 2, p. 3; and Nehru's letter, in *ibid.*, p. 5.) Immediately after independence Umrao Singh Sher-Gil presented about a hundred (from a total of about 150 paintings known to exist in public and private collections) of Amrita's paintings to Nehru as a gift for the nation. Treating it as a precious legacy, Nehru turned it into the core collection of what was to become, in 1954, the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi.

- ¹³ There is a substantial body of literature on Frida Kahlo. I include here a selection of readings that I have extensively drawn upon. First, Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, Harper and Row, New York, 1983; and *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, Bloomsbury, London, 1992. For a theoretical framing of her elaborate persona and self-made iconicity, see *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1982; specifically the title/curatorial essay by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 'Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti'. (The catalogue also includes short essays by Andre Breton and Diego Rivera.) Further, see Charles Merewether's curatorial essay, 'Embodiment and Transformation: The Art of Frida Kahlo', in *The Art of Frida Kahlo*, exhibition catalogue, Adelaide Festival, 1990.
- ¹⁴ Andre Breton, 'Frida Kahlo de Rivera' (reproduced from his *Surrealism and Painting*, Macdonald, London, 1972), in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, pp. 35–36.

Breton welcomed Frida Kahlo into the ranks of surrealism and this advanced her career. She was invited to have a show by New York's surrealist-oriented Julien Levy Gallery in 1938. Following her New York debut, Frida travelled to Paris in 1939. Andre Breton had promised her a show. When she arrived in Paris she discovered that nothing had

been organized and she found the business of the exhibition ‘a damn mess’. Hayden Herrera quotes Kahlo: ‘Until I came the paintings were still in the custom house, because the s. of a b. Breton didn’t take the trouble to get them out. . . . So I had to wait days and days just like an idiot till I met Marcel Duchamp (marvellous painter), who is the only one who has his feet on the earth, among all this bunch of cocoo lunatic sons of bitches of the surrealists. . . . Well, after things were more or less settled as I told you, a few days ago Breton told me that the associate of Pierre Colle, an old bastard and son of a bitch, saw my paintings and found that only two were possible to be shown, because the rest are too “shocking” for the public!! I could kill that guy and eat it [*sic*] afterwards, but I am so sick and tired of the whole affair that I have decided to send everything to hell, and scam from this rotten Paris before I get nuts myself.’ (Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, p. 119)

Duchamp rescued Frida’s paintings from customs and arranged to present the show, *Mexique*, whose curator was Breton. She was delighted with the vernissage on 10 March 1939. ‘There were’, she wrote to friends, ‘a lot of people on the day of the opening, great congratulations to the “chicua”, amongst them a big hug from *Joan Miro* and great praises for my painting from *Kandinsky*, congratulations from *Picasso* and *Tanguy*, from Paalen and from other “big cacas” of Surrealism.’ (Ibid., p. 122)

¹⁵ Frida Kahlo (6 July 1907–13 July 1954) was born in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City, and lived there in the famous ‘Blue House’ nearly all her life. Her father Guillermo Kahlo, Hungarian Jew from Baden-Baden, migrated to Mexico in 1891 and was a successful photographer in the Diaz era. Her father taught Frida to use the camera, to retouch colour photos, to give attention to minute details. The father’s studio portraits influenced how Frida positioned her subjects and herself, as if posing for the camera. Frida was close to her father. When she had polio at age seven her father helped her to gain strength—and she learnt the power of a sick person to attract attention and control people—even as she helped her father who was an epileptic. Her mother Matilde Calderon, Mexican of mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry, did not know how to read and write. Although she was a lively companion, there was no close bonding between Frida and her mother.

¹⁶ Both Sher-Gil and Kahlo dressed in ethnic style, flaunted their beauty, unleashed a cruel humour and dramatized desire. At the same time they cultivated a degree of self-absorption that came probably from bisexuality but also from a reclusive sense of self that produced in the end an oddly compact identity for the female subject.

Frida Kahlo developed her own sense of ‘rootedness’ and ‘Mexicanness’ to an extreme degree. She wore Mexican dress and Mexican jewellery, transforming herself, so to speak, into a Mexican artefact. She was noted especially for her use of the Tehuana costume—the long dresses of the women of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico who enjoyed a mythic reputation for their personal and economic independence (Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, p. 18).

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 26–27.

¹⁸ ‘As in so many cases, the fascination of Kahlo’s work lies in this sense of fragility, dependence and loss, countered by a mesmerizing portrait of herself on display. And, like a fetish object herself, she both celebrates and uncovers the aspiration towards and impossibility of an autonomous self.’ Charles Merewether, ‘Embodiment and Transformation’, in *The Art of Frida Kahlo*, p. 17.

¹⁹ On 17 September 1925 Frida Kahlo’s body was smashed when a street car ran into her school bus. Frida’s spinal column was broken in three places. Her pelvis was fractured; her collarbone,

two ribs, right leg and foot were all broken; and her left shoulder was dislocated. She would say in her characteristic manner, ironical and allegorical at once, that the steel rod had entered a hip and come out through her vagina, which explains why she lost her virginity in the accident. Her life became one of unrelenting struggle against illness: the travail included bone-grafts, abortions, a dangerous miscarriage, and eventually amputation of her injured foot. The spinal fusion of 1946 has been called the beginning of ‘the calvary’ that led to Frida’s death. Although she consulted numerous, perhaps too numerous, doctors, her condition grew steadily worse. Perhaps she chose to have unnecessary operations as a peculiar form of narcissism. Towards the end she made several attempts at suicide. On 11 February 1954 she wrote in her diary: ‘They amputated my leg six months ago, they have given me centuries of torture and at moments I almost lost my “reason”. I keep on wanting to kill myself.’ (Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, p. 218) Her diary’s last drawing is a black angel rising, the angel of death. ‘I hope the exit is joyful—and I hope never to come back—Frida.’ (Ibid., p. 219)

²⁰ ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti’, in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, pp. 26–27.

²¹ In 1937 the Riveras received Leon Trotsky when he began his Mexican exile; between 1937–39, Frida lent her house to Trotsky. She had a brief love affair with him. On 24 May 1940 the house Trotsky was then living in was machine-gunned by a group of Stalinists and Rivera, whose friendship with Trotsky had declined, came under suspicion and left for San Francisco. Following the attempt on Trotsky’s life Frida became gravely ill; three months later, when he was assassinated by an agent of the GPU (the Soviet secret police at the time), she was interrogated by the police and jailed for two days.

After Frida had rejoined the orthodox Stalinist flock in the late 1940s communism became a religion for her. ‘Now I am a communist being’, she wrote in her journal. ‘I understand clearly the materialist dialectic of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse. I love them as the pillars of the new communist world.’ Portraits of these pillars hung like icons at the end of her bed (Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings*, pp. 211, 212).

The in and out with the communist party continued. On 2 July 1954, recuperating from bronchopneumonia, she left her bed to participate in a demonstration against the fall of the leftist government in Guatemala which was brought about by CIA intervention. In this, her last public appearance, she made a heroic spectacle: holding a banner calling for peace, she found the energy to join in the crowd’s cry: Gringos, assassins, get out! Home again, she confided to a friend, ‘I only want three things in life: to live with Diego, to continue painting and to belong to the Communist Party’ (ibid., pp. 218–19). Frida Kahlo died a few days later.

²² Mexico gained its independence in 1821; the Mexican revolution took place in 1910, followed by a decade of civil war. The Mexican mural movement began in 1914 (under Dr Atl) and took on its full momentum from 1922 under the patronage of Jose Vasconcelos, rector of the university and minister for education in the revolutionary government of President Alvaro Obregon. Of the three major muralists, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rivera was seen to be the leader of the movement. ‘Rivera set his stamp on the Mexican renaissance. . . . He set about creating an art which would be modern, monumental and American, worthy of the revolution and with the ideological and political aim of impelling it further forward. . . . As far as content was concerned, Rivera revived the lost genre of history painting, on an unprecedentedly vast scale—the scale of the Revolution and eventually the history of Mexico from its first beginnings, through every period up to the present, combined in one massive composition.’ (Mulvey and Wollen, ‘Frida Kahlo and Tina

Modotti', in *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, p. 12) Consider the scale of Rivera's monumental murals: *The History of Mexico—From the Conquest to the Future* (1929–30, 1935), fresco on three walls at the National Palace, Mexico City, on completion measured 275.17 m². The work of Frida Kahlo resembling the retablos or other forms of popular, applied and minor arts of Mexico, were conspicuously small: for example, a painting like *The Broken Column* (1944) measured 42 x 33 cm.

- ²³ In 1923, while at the National Preparatory School, Frida Kahlo used to watch (and romanticize about) the huge and already heroic Diego Rivera painting the ministry of education murals nearby. Having joined the Mexican communist party, she properly met Rivera through the famous communist photographer, Tina Modotti. Frida and Diego were married in August 1929, and she accompanied him on his big mural projects to San Francisco in 1930 and to Detroit in 1933. In 1939 she divorced Rivera, but they were reconciled and remarried the following year. In a tempestuously famous love relationship, Rivera was constantly unfaithful and Kahlo occasionally so, but it was she who made almost a vocation of her suffering. A masochistic acting out of love and pain gave her a romantic aura, reactivated in the early years of feminism.
- ²⁴ Following the Mexican revolution the arts, especially mural painting, celebrated the invention of a new culture: an avantgarde charged with utopia. In this affirmative ethos, the figure of woman assumed a crucial symbolic value as figuring the birth of a new national culture. Indigenous woman, *la indigena*, symbolized both the pre-Columbian earth-mother, who was succeeded by Guadalupe (a Spanish mestizo Virgin who became patroness of Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest), and the contemporary Mexican woman who becomes a symbol of the ideals of the revolution from 1910. The work of Frida Kahlo is both part of this ethos and critical of such forms of cultural nationalism.

'Unlike most of her contemporaries, Kahlo addressed the question of identity both as a national subject and as something fundamentally to do with the self. That is, subjectivity was raised as a condition constituted within the context of broader representations of national identity. She did this by consistently quoting, transferring, or mimicking already existing iconographic models and representations, from pre-Columbian (Aztec primarily), colonial Spanish, Independence (Portfirio Diaz) and postrevolutionary sources. This method exposed the relations and tensions which exist between mythic constructions of origin and profane allusions to the everyday: between the iconic reification and fetishization of the subject, be it woman or *la indigena*, and its desecration.' (Merewether, 'Embodiment and Transformation', in *The Art of Frida Kahlo*, pp. 11, 12.)

- ²⁵ Nalini Malani belongs to a Sindhi family. Her father came from a zamindar family, her mother from a professional lawyers' family. Displaced at the time of partition from Karachi, the Malanis finally settled in Bombay. Nalini studied painting in Bombay's Sir J.J. School of Art, and in Paris during 1970–72. She came very quickly into prominence and has participated in most of the important exhibitions of Indian art in India and abroad. Her artistic career is pegged to some important collective ventures such as the *Place for People* exhibition, 1981, and the exhibition of four women artists during 1987–89 in several cities of India. During the 1990s she collaborated on theatre projects and made installations for the same, as for example, Mueller's *Medea* and Brecht's *The Job*. Her video work includes the installation *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998) and deals with the global theatre of war. She lives and works in Bombay, is married to a psychoanalyst, Shailesh Kapadia, and has two daughters.

The contours of her biographical and artistic career can be gleaned from essays

and exhibition catalogues. A select bibliography of articles and catalogue texts include the following. (i) 'Nalini Malani', *Art Heritage*, No. 2, New Delhi, 1980–81; *Critical Difference: Contemporary Art from India*, exhibition catalogue, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, UK, 1993; 'Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work', in *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, edited by Vidya Dehejia, Kali for Women in association with The Book Review Literary Trust, New Delhi, 1997 (included in this volume)—all authored by Geeta Kapur. (ii) *Arpita Singh, Madhvi Parekh, Nalini Malani, Nilima Sheikh: exhibition of recent watercolours*, exhibition catalogue, Roopankar Museum, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, 1987; 'City of Desires', in *Nalini Malani*, exhibition catalogue, Sakshi Gallery, Madras/Bangalore, 1991–92; 'On Mueller's Medea', in *Heiner Mueller's Medea: Alaknanda Samarth/Nalini Malani*, exhibition catalogue, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, 1993; 'Nalini Malani', in *Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996—all authored by Ashish Rajadhyaksha. (iii) 'Missives from the Streets: The Art of Nalini Malani', in *ART and AsiaPacific*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Sydney, 1995; 'Nalini Malani', in *Inside Out: Contemporary Women Artists in India*, exhibition catalogue, Middlesbrough Gallery, UK, 1995; 'Memory, Stress, Recall', in *Evocations and Expressions*, edited by Gayatri Sinha, Marg, Bombay, 1997—all authored by Kamala Kapoor. Also see *Nalini Malani: Medea-projekt: 1992–96*, edited by Kamala Kapoor and Amita Desai, Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay, 1996.

- ²⁶ The conscious inscription by women artists of *self* re-presentation, whether in a biographical sense or as allegory for the feminine, has been a rare phenomenon. However, once it is a pegged to a forceful example in western art history, the neopolitan painter Artemesia Gentileschi (1593–1653), there is a growing discourse on the subject. As women artists make their appearance in the nineteenth century, among them Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, there is a flowering: Natalia Goncharova, Sonia Delaunay, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Kaethe Kollwitz, Suzanne Valadon and Leonor Fini, enlarged the vocational range in the early twentieth century. At which point, the presence of Frida Kahlo appears to become emblematic, some reasons for which are thematized in this essay. Mention should be made of a Brazilian artist, Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973), whose cosmopolitan life in Brazil and Europe could become another point of reference in the ongoing discourse of women artists in the third world. Hereon several trajectories open up: a growing number of nonwestern women artists, including the ones under consideration in this essay, add to the now highly differentiated field of contemporary feminist art.

It would be true to say that Indian women artists now identify with the emancipatory agenda of feminism personally and socially; they are taking recognizably contestatory positions within the mainstream discourse of art history in more recent years. They have transformed two aspects of Indian art practice since the mid-1970s. The ideological underpinning of all pictorial representation hitherto taken as universally human (humane) have been revealed through new narratives that tell suppressed or marginalized stories of female otherness. Today in India women artists lead the vanguard in many ways; this is true for other Asian countries as well. Aside from representational/narrative painting, non-representational artworks by women attempt to work out the balance between plenitude and economy in a peculiar way, staging the playful and menacing eroticism of the imaginary with different sets of material devices. They replace the self within the object-world in such a way as to introduce a different metonymic reading of the real itself. This essay is dedicated to the groundswell of artworks by contemporary women artists from the south who will contribute

in redrawing the disciplinary ideology of (feminist) art history and within that, questions of subjectivity, history and the language of art.

- ²⁷ Lisa Tickner on Nancy Spero, quoted by Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 132.
- ²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Pantheon, New York, 1977, p. 30.
- ²⁹ I wish to acknowledge the help received from Shailesh Kapadia, psychoanalyst from Bombay, in understanding Nalini Malani's (and other artists') impulses, motivations and forms of self-representation in life and work. Psychoanalytic concepts have served as analogical extensions to my interpretational devices; they have helped to decode simultaneously the artist's persona and the image. However, there is no formal or normative adherence to the schools and categories of the discipline of psychoanalysis in my essay, and shortfalls, if any, are entirely my responsibility.
- ³⁰ Veena Das, 'Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain', in *Daedalus*, Vol. 125, No. 1: Social Suffering, Winter 1996, p. 80.
- ³¹ 'City of Desires', video directed by Nalini Malani (shot on U-matic by Alok Upadhyay, 18 minutes, 1994), based on Heiner Mueller's *Medea*, presented as a theatrical production by Alaknanda Samarth and Nalini Malani.
- ³² Heiner Mueller (1929–1995) wrote the play *Medea* over a number of years. *Medeaspiel* (*Medeaplay*), written in 1974 and published in 1975, was the first published exploration of the theatre of images. The Medea theme was elaborated in *Despoiled Shore: Medeamaterial: Landscape with Argonauts*, completed in 1982 and performed in 1983. The verses quoted by me are from this text.
- ³³ Winin Pereira and Jeremy Seabrook, *Global Parasites*, Earthcare Books, Bombay, 1992.
- ³⁴ Arpita Singh belongs to a middle-class Bengali family settled in Delhi since her childhood. She grew up in straitened circumstances: her father died when she was little; her mother worked in an office to bring up her children. Arpita went to art school in Delhi, is married to the painter Paramjit Singh, and has a daughter Anjum Singh, also a painter. Arpita first exhibited her work with The Unknown Group in 1960 and has had a very prolific career since. She has come to the fore especially since the mid-80s and is today recognized to be one of India's most established artists. Though not a feminist in ideological terms, Arpita took the initiative to make a statement about women's art practice in the mid-1980s, and is now identified with the women's art movement in India.

A select bibliography of exhibition catalogues comprising biography, art-works and critics' texts includes: Deepak Ananth in *Arpita Singh*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1986; Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Arpita Singh, Madhvi Parekh, Nalini Malani, Nilima Sheikh: exhibition of recent watercolours*, exhibition catalogue, Roopankar Museum, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, 1987; Nilima Sheikh, *Arpita Singh*, exhibition catalogue, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, 1994; Ela Dutta (interview with the artist), in *Arpita Singh*, exhibition catalogue, CIMA Gallery, Calcutta, 1996; Geeti Sen, 'Woman in Red', in *Image and Imagination: Five Contemporary Artists in India*, Mapin, Ahmedabad, 1996; Yashodhara Dalmia, 'Arpita Singh', in *Evocations and Expressions*, edited by Gayatri Sinha, Marg, Bombay, 1997; Geeta Kapur, 'Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work', in *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, edited by Vidya Dehejia, Kali for Women in association with The Book Review Literary Trust, New Delhi, 1997 (included in this volume).

- ³⁵ Rajadhyaksha, *Arpita Singh, Madhvi Parekh, Nalini Malani, Nilima Sheikh*. Many of the questions raised in this essay were first cued by Rajadhyaksha in his introduction to the catalogue.
- ³⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Some Reflections on Dolls', in *Rodin and Other Pieces*, Quartet Encounters, Quartet Books, London, 1986, pp. 122–25.
- ³⁷ Veena Das, 'Language and Body', in *Daedalus*, pp. 68–69.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ³⁹ Nilima Sheikh, *Arpita Singh*.
- ⁴⁰ Susie Tharu (in *Women Writing in India, Volume II*, pp. 19–32) offers a critical analysis of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979). They bring up the question of loss/release as a framing argument for women's creativity. Tharu is critical of overdetermining the vast terrain of women's literature/creativity by the high subjectivist notions of nineteenth-century Europe. She critiques expressive realism coloured by woman's 'anxiety and rage' as the most suitable form for eliciting an essence struggling to find its way out of patriarchal strictures. My interpretation of the women artists' work goes in and out of the emblematic 'madwoman' frame—indeed the iconography of angels and monsters in Nalini and of beloveds and mourners in Arpita is elaborated precisely in order to find a way of getting past binaries. If behind the angel lurks this menacing woman (the female grotesque) and behind the child a doll-soul, then behind that is the author herself, doubling with prodigious intent and confirming her difficult survival. These women artists make the entire counterproject of seducing/stealing male energy for their own generative purposes an ironical act. It is a step in the more dialectical understanding of their 'reality' which is not some unique secret but a continual act of comprehension of the social forces at work in the forming of their own complex subjectivity.
- ⁴¹ Arpita Singh has included among her female figures ambiguous and identifiable goddesses with many arms. In 1994 she bent the iconography of the goddess Durga and put a gun in her hand. Printed on the cover page of the Puja number of *Desh*, the popular Bengali magazine, this caused some outrage. Arpita has remained undaunted in her ironical and profane representation of the 'feminine'. Human, vulnerable, naked and provocative, there is an undeclared taboo-breaking politics in her oeuvre.

Elegy for an Unclaimed Beloved: Nasreen Mohamedi 1937–1990



Desert Birth

And then there are those who received the desert in the cradle . . . the terrible gift granted to some, a sort of curse that is a blessing, a natal desertion, and that condemns and brings them up to poetry. The desert is a lack of origin, a lack of engendering. . . . It is the primal scene in which the infant wakes to perfect absence; to the absence of milk, which is light. . . . Desert, desert birth.¹

Nasreen was not born in the desert but she knew and loved the deserts of Arabia. ‘. . . *the strong aridity of the desert. It makes one detached in a tiny way, in a clear and vital way*’, Nasreen writes in her diary.² The desert is a lack of origin, a lack of engendering, a natal desertion, Helene Cixous says. The infant awakens to perfect absence.³

I want to make the proposition that Nasreen’s work, founded on absence, is about the self (*Illus. 1*). That through a series of displacements she touches and transcends death, but that the insistently elided questions about the self are precisely such that offer up meaning in her work. That she is therefore within a great lineage of metaphysical abstraction in a way that no other Indian artist is. Also that she is without the tradition, being a woman artist working in India at a time when there were few others of her kind citing this benign and immense negation.

That the self should be hidden denied evacuated is part of a possible proposition about selfhood. This must be true of women saints in particular whose person is as if disembodied even when desire is embodied: the fourteenth-century saint-poet Janabai transposes the self through poetry of praise and labour:

Earlier published versions of this essay are: ‘Elegy for an Unclaimed Beloved’, in *Nasreen in Retrospect*, edited by Altaf, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, Bombay, 1995; ‘Dimensions Out of Solitude’, in *Evocations and Expressions*, edited by Gayatri Sinha, Marg, Bombay, 1997.

*Jani sweeps the floor,
The Lord collects the dirt,
Carries it upon His head,
And casts it away.⁴*

Making a daily ritual of the mundane tasks of washing and cleaning, Nasreen writes in her diary:

*The empty mind
Receives
Drain it
Squeeze the dirt
So that it receives the sun
With a flash.⁵*

Remember Nasreen's frail limbs, ascetic face, ungendered artist persona. Remember her calling as an unrequited beloved, her narcissistic engagement with her body and the stigmata she barely cared to hide. And always her departing gesture, her return, her masochism and its reward of absurdity and grace. Her continual tracking of a mirage.

Says the great twelfth-century saint-poet Akkamahadevi in one of her *vacanas*:

*It was like a stream
running into the dry bed
of a lake,
like rain
pouring on plants
parched to sticks.

It was like this world's pleasure
and the way to the other,
both
walking towards me.⁶*

The Self as Body

I am not speaking contrarily if I say that Nasreen's work is about the self and that it is simultaneously about self-naughting as well, for every passionate negation is a mystical triumph in the way of becoming. Self-naughting, *akimcanna*, is a refusal of soul in favour of a more abstract principle of mind; it is standing still from the thinking of self, and the willing of self, as Ananda Coomaraswamy (quoting Jacob Boehme) would say.⁷



1 Photograph of Nasreen Mohamedi, ca. 1972

The mind is sometimes manifest precisely in aspects of mindlessness, which was typical of Nasreen. She seemed sometimes to be living in blithe madness, laughing and sobbing, crossing over but without the help of objects, without verisimilitude, without figural devices, following a line of force that led to the horizon.

Nasreen's self offered itself up as a cipher rising from the sea; drawn from the metaphor of plenitude, it signalled anguish made visible in the very process of sublimation. Sublimity can be read as repression, a denial of the self as well as of the other. That too is a form of subjectivity, the underside of mental triumph where the body exceeds the self, where the other persists as desire despite absence.

In his *Lover's Discourse* Roland Barthes says:

*(But isn't desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn't the object always absent?)*⁸

The being I am waiting for is not real. Like the mother's breast for the infant, 'I create and re-create it over and over, starting from my capacity to

*love, starting from my need for it': the other comes here where I am waiting, here where I have already created him/her. And if the other does not come, I hallucinate the other: waiting is a delirium.*⁹

Nasreen's work, speaking contrarily this time, conceives of the full cycle of self-naughting to begin all over again with desire: it identifies with the mystical body, the female body, the body in pain, the broken body, the body in art. Finally it identifies with the body of the beloved which carries the gravity of the mortal dream. There is nothing further than separation; nothing there is to hold on to but the last grip of bondage to the other; and the measure of bondage is a measure of strength.

One of the books Nasreen borrowed from me and kept was the translated love letters of Peter Abelard and Heloise, the French medieval scholar and his beloved committed to a nunnery, both living through carnal love and castration, living through pain beyond belief and what can only be read as unwilling surrender before god in the shape of Christ. In a contemporary poetic rendering of their tragic lives, Heloise writes to Abelard:

*Like a white magnolia flower
cupped in ivory prayer,
my tranquillity rests on the evening
And floats, still in the quiet air.
I can now remember our misfortunes
without regret;
I can now be alone,
Without loneliness;
And can sleep without dreams,
and even think of you
without the pain of not being with you.*

...

*I used to call you beloved;
I do so now,
But observe the word is an imperative;
beloved, be loved; be free.
I have found another.
I no longer need you.
It is true: You are free.*¹⁰

'I have found another' is a mystical mode of speech, a luminous 'lie' where you become the godhead and, in an inverted sense, exhaust the other. Nasreen identified with the body of the beloved evacuating it of every symbolic truth except a



2 Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, ca. 1977

deeply embedded narcissism. It was the last wager on the imaginary and the more lustrous for it. Nasreen was Echo to Narcissus; both were in her. The drawings reflect the visage in the sky and catch the echo on the ground below (*Illus. 2*). There is an othering in the echo, and the other is always, in the freedom of longing, negated/recovered. Perhaps the other exists within the logic of phenomena and carries all in its wake. However you elide the encounter, as Nasreen did, her evacuated body blanched with the hope of recall.

The body hovering and possessed of a view from nowhere that is a view from everywhere: a kind of phenomenological wonder. The world is subsumed by the view but it produces a heartsickness, a giddiness from unrealized excess.

“*I am engulfed, I succumb*”, thus Barthes emblazons his mortal trust:

*Engulfment is a moment of hypnosis. . . . which commands me to swoon without killing myself. Whence, perhaps, the gentleness of the abyss: I have no responsibility here, the act (of dying) is not up to me.*¹¹

We know that Nasreen’s body was losing its motor functions from the 1980s, becoming gradually dysfunctional. There was at the end an oddly splayed movement of the limbs that could develop into the dance of a flying puppet. I am perhaps too tempted to take Nasreen’s physical affliction that made her limbs jerk disobediently as some kind of a destinal sign: a fatal sign. It was like mortality in cruel play to see this elegant woman in an inadvertent display of the body-soul, stubbing

knocking tapping hitting lunging through space. Yet maintaining under the greatest stress a control of the hand.

Barthes says:

In order to suggest, delicately, that I am suffering, in order to hide without lying, I shall make use of a cunning preterition: I shall divide the economy of my signs.

. . . The power of language: with my language I can do everything: even and especially say nothing.

I can do everything with my language, but not with my body. What I hide by my language, my body utters. . . . By my voice, whatever it says, the other will recognize 'that something is wrong with me.' . . . My body is a stubborn child, my language is a very civilized adult. . . .¹²



3 Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, 1981

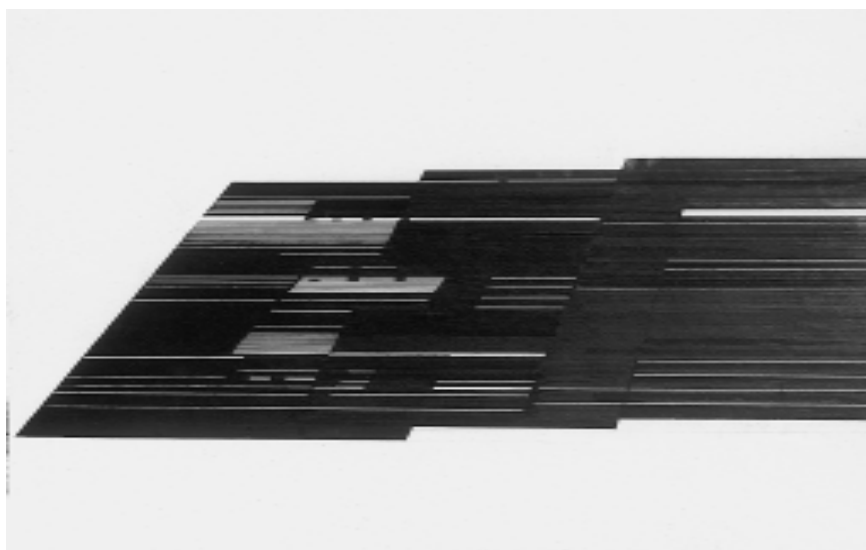
That this body should be an invisible presence in a map of a few lines is a virtuoso feat. The drawn lines appear like a remote, idealized trajectory of this stricken body, as if they must evoke a compensatory grace and precision. Indeed almost to the end she could arch the bow before the target so that the arrowhead would go through the strait gates of heaven like a mystical alphabet or a musical note (*Illus. 3*).

A precise specularity, the flight of an angel shearing space. Then, in the dark night of the soul, where the ejected body persists, Nasreen was content to work with a poverty of means. To counter the spectacle of love and of spiritual ambition, she was willing to break apart. She would simply survive, and let the calligrapher, the graphic sign, speak.

Against the Grain

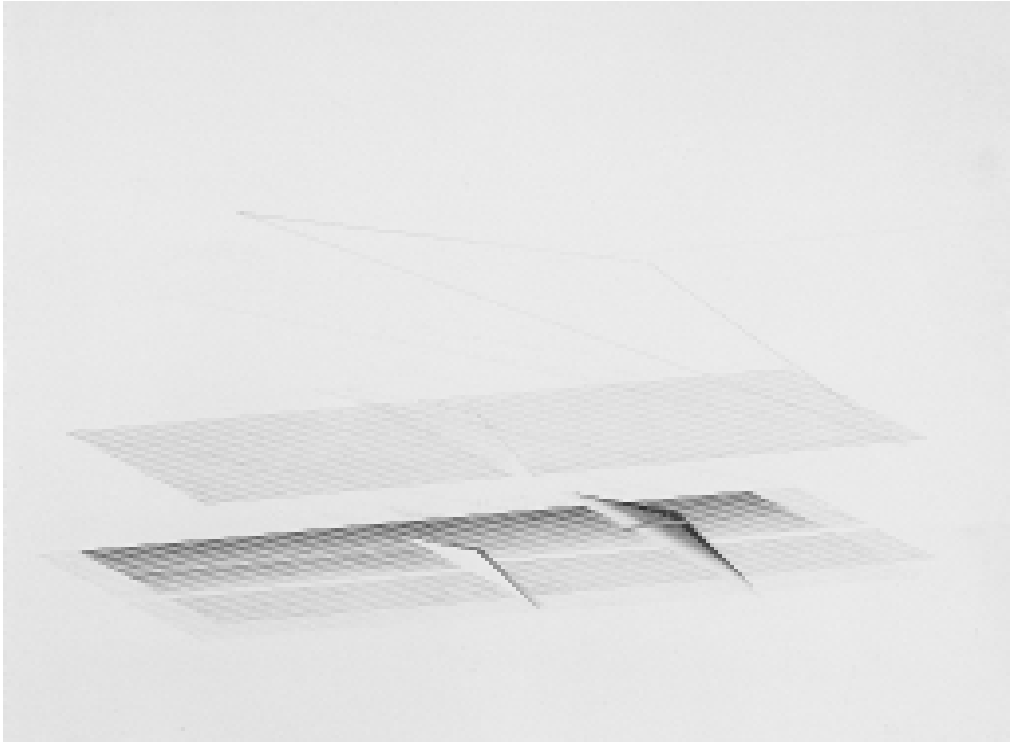
Modern Indian art continues to be committed to augmenting its iconographic resources—through anthropomorphic intent, metaphoric allusions, elaborate morphologies. Think of Nasreen's illustrious contemporaries in her immediate milieu—Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Arpita Singh. All of them succumb exuberantly to the great temptation of the imagination: they privilege condensation where images are provocatively enshrined, where icons wear the nimbus of meaning intact, where symbols give over to a voluptuous afterlife of pain and profanation. In sharp contrast Nasreen's aesthetic cleanly circumvents their substantive oeuvre. 'Maximum out of the minimum',¹³ Nasreen wrote in her diary, and spent a life working it out (*Illus. 4*).

It is not that she has no antecedents in contemporary Indian art. Bombay, her city, has had an honourable record of both sumptuous and spare abstraction—



4 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1978

among them V.S. Gaitonde, much older to Nasreen, acts as her Indian mentor in the early 1960s. The Bombay legacy also includes her longtime friend and colleague Jeram Patel, who after much wandering settles down to teach in Baroda, where Nasreen gravitates too in the early 1970s, becoming a rare presence for successive batches of students. If in the Indian situation we want to find a single complementary (also in a paradoxical sense, contradictory) artist vis-a-vis Nasreen, it should finally be Jeram Patel. Because of his passionate excavation of the negative image which signals a new direction in Indian abstraction beginning with the Group 1890 exhibition in 1963. Because he turns the materiality of the object inside out, literally, by the use of blowtorch on wood. Because also of the paradox of complementarity itself: for Jeram Patel



5 Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, ca. 1986

works out this controlled transaction between the erotic and the macabre in his ink drawings, setting up an explosion in the prehistoric assembly of bone and tool conducted through a single devolving morphology—even as Nasreen, also working with ink on paper, is engaged in clearing the great debris.

Nasreen's intention apropos Indian art, if she can be said to have one, is to core the palpitating heart of the matter. Her target is the overweening romanticism of Indian art. Notwithstanding her youthful inclination for the existentialist sentiment of Albert Camus—the texture of that voice saturated with anguish is found in her diaries—her art practice systematically denudes the seductive fruit of metaphysical paradoxes so abundant in romantic modernity, western and Indian alike.

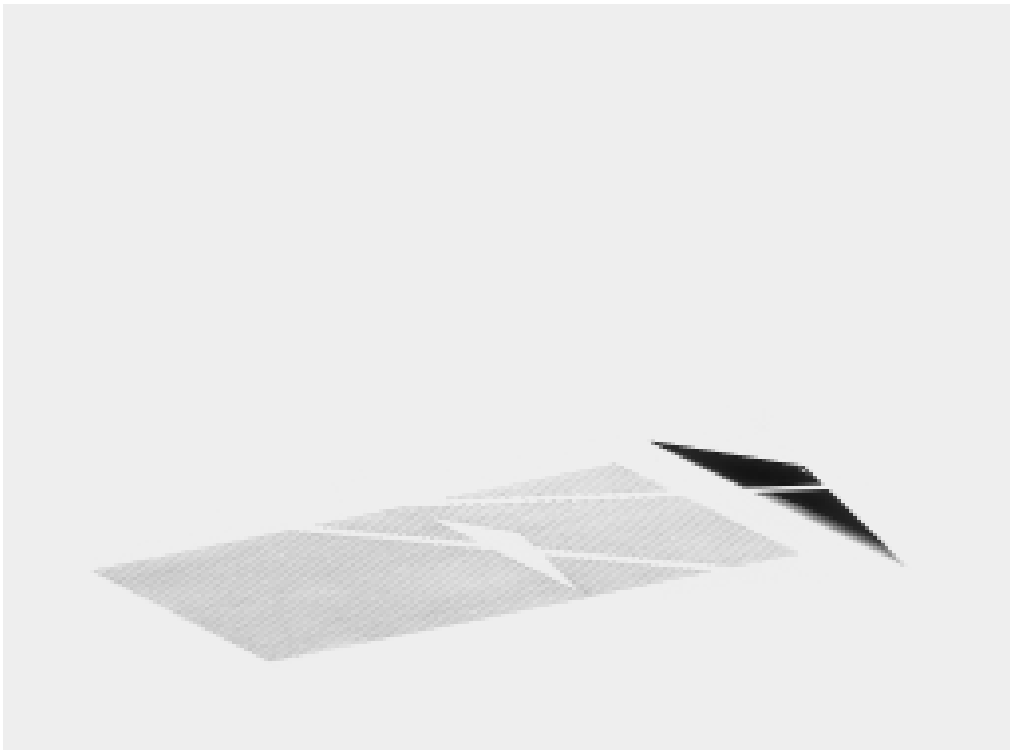
Nasreen's aim is even more severe: to disengage representational ethics derived from the artist's *gaze*. Indeed she deliberately cancels or defies the regime of the gaze, sensing the appropriative and exploitative aspects of it. And she takes up the conventions of the *glance* as in eastern aesthetics—fleeting, evanescent, always at the point of vanishing and taking the view with it.¹⁴ Further, she works with a sense of shadow: recalling Christ's imprint on his mantle, or indeed the shadow of the Hiroshima victim on the wall. She replaces the icon with the indexical sign that is always determinedly against the symbol as well.

Her aim is to coalesce phenomenal encounter and formal trace. To at least raise the question: what makes Malevich's white on white a mystical diagram and also something of an objective fact?

Utopian Modernism

Nasreen should be seen to be aligned to two art-historical lineages. Her vocabulary comes from a lyrical, expressive, spiritual source in high modernism—about which more later. It comes also from the utopian dimension in twentieth-century art which provides the metaphysics and ideology to her strongly modernist inclinations (*Illus. 5, 6, 7*).

First, the lineage of utopian abstraction. Emerging from revolutionary socialism (especially from the Soviet Union in the 1920s), it is suprematism and among the suprematists Kazimir Malevich, whose influence on Nasreen must be acknowledged. And we know that Nasreen admired Malevich. Not nature but human destiny is at stake with him, and it is posited through geometrical propositions. The flat picture plane, a cubist injunction, develops into the diagonal as a preferred form. Then a chevron, a triangle, a cross come to dominate the visual vocabulary, making geometrical abstraction stand proxy for a symbolic language. Further, an interest in



6 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1986

primary colour, in light and dark, privileges a clash of elements: thesis/antithesis. A synthetic order of reason is posited. Forms in nature are regarded as merely contingent and thus dispensable before such higher purposes as the human mind's own transcendent aims. Correspondingly, the realm of representational images is displaced in favour of a self-conceptualizing formalism that leads the way as it were to an uncharted future. In 1921 Malevich writes:

In the future not a single grounded structure will remain on Earth. Nothing will be fastened or tied down. This is the true nature of the universe. But while each unit is a singular part of nature, it will soon merge with the whole.

This is what Suprematism means to me—the dawn of an era in which the nucleus will move as a single force of atomized energy and will expand within new, orbiting, spatial systems. . . . Today we have advanced into a new fourth dimension of motion. We have pulled up our consciousness by its roots from the Earth. It is free now to revolve in the infinity of space.¹⁵



7 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1979

The constructivists, again in the 1920s and in the Soviet Union, also use geometrical means. Their intent however is to celebrate a futurist plan of the world along with the victory of the autonomous mental realm. The aesthetic premise of constructivism is different from that of both lyrical and suprematist abstraction in that there are no refracted epiphanies. Accessible forms of the spiritual and the symbolic are proposed. Energies of the mind seen as geometrical forms stand for energies of human praxis. Concrete elements from a hypothetical architecture are floated and positioned to give the sense of a dynamic order in the world, but the planar disposition of forms is strictly nonillusionistic. The act of balancing is both a measure of cognitive adjustment and a matter of environmental equilibrium. In some cases the constructivists offer actual designs for living, whether in architecture proper or in the domain of the product. And in so far as this visual vocabulary works as a kind of valorized analogy to the object-world, it favours an active encounter with the viewer—the body is a volatile entity positioned among objects. Here then is a utopian demand for perfection that is material and dialectical. It extends to the entire range of industrial products, exhibition design and architecture—one of the famous examples being the 1919–20 design and model by Vladimir Tatlin of the Monument to the Third International.

Nasreen does not come from a dialectically thought-out interest in the utopian, nor from some ordering system or futurist blueprint of the world. But there are certain odd connections. She is committed to abstraction from the start; she is attracted to modern technology; she makes nearly a fetish of good design. She is interested in industrial production: cars, modern buildings, water-storage tanks, telegraph apparatus, the urban street, airplane runways. Her photographs, about which more later, capture these material forms. She feels comfortable with cameras, photo laboratories, precision instruments, architectural drawings. She traverses a variety of architectural spaces with a sense of exact measure—the paved courtyard at Fatehpur Sikri as also the concrete sidewalks of Bombay and the asphalt highways in Europe. She is a metropolitan person, she travels worldwide. She starts to travel abroad in the 1950s, as a very young student of art, by which time the futuristic projections of the Soviet avantgarde are a part of contemporary technological achievement. The experience of speed and light, transmission and tension, and such technological extension of the senses are by then common experience. Therefore what Nasreen does with the utopian language of abstraction figuring subliminally in her imagination is to give it over to a lofty sense of design.

One day all will become functional and hence good design. There will be no waste. We will then understand basics. It will take time.

But then we get the opportunity for pure patience.¹⁶



8 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1968

Late Modernist Poetics

From the first decade of this century Vassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee can be said to have given abstraction a fully developed poetics whereby it becomes naturalized as the noblest of artistic intents. The two artists offer, each in his own way, morphologies that simulate the processes of metaphorical transformation in nature itself. The lyrical approach of Klee and Kandinsky is dear to many Indian artists. Nasreen is directly beholden to the actual language of Klee; Kandinsky's naming of the spiritual in art has a signal effect on her (*Illus. 8, 10*). In 1970, at a transitional point in her work, Nasreen notes in her diary: '*Again I am reassured by Kandinsky—the need to take from*

an outer environment and bring it an inner necessity.'¹⁷

Nasreen studies in European art schools from the early 1950s; at the age of sixteen she goes to St Martin's in London and then, after a gap, to Paris. It is not surprising that in continuation with the loftier versions of modernist abstraction, Nasreen picks up the virtuoso manner of postwar abstraction in the School of Paris (*Illus. 9*). This includes the flamboyant Georges Mathieu with his tactile expressivity of forms signated by the artist's hand. It also includes a more conceptual tachiste like Henri Michaux devising a distilled visual/linguistic mark.

Nasreen follows the French trail in the bold swatches of her oil paintings until the mid-1960s. Later the touch itself becomes subliminal, no authorial ecriture is offered. The barely visible markings of nature texture the canvas washed with



9 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1963

thinned turpentine, tinted with ochre pigment. The surface is a tracery of insect footprints, dry grass throwing invisible shadows in the desert breeze. *'In the midst of these arid silences one picks up a few threads of texture and form'*, she writes,¹⁸ and then adds a characteristic self-instruction: *'A spider can only make a web but it makes it to perfection.'*¹⁹

Acute in her use of language, Nasreen stretches the by-then-familiar Klee legacy to catch the American advance in abstraction. She comes to stand in direct relationship to an ascetic peer-figure in the late modernist period—Agnes Martin (though she actually sees Martin's work late in her own career).

Modest though her work is, Martin carries the aura of self-sufficiency; she proclaims the oracular nature of art. She makes a philosophic trek across the Judaic scriptures to the Greeks and Plato; and across Asian thought to zen and



10 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled, ca. 1968*

tao. Then she returns every time to contemporaries like Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, John Cage. Coming from the milieu of an original version of abstract expressionism in north America, she speaks in her prose poems about Platonic notions of beauty and form but from a conspicuously egalitarian point of view.²⁰

Marking the space of the sublime, her work is a form of prayer, utterances spreading over the surface of a lake, field or desert. Martin quotes from a biblical passage: *'... make level in the desert a highway for our God'*,²¹ and complements it with a taoist thought: *'If water is so clear, so level, /*

*How much more the spirit of man?'*²²

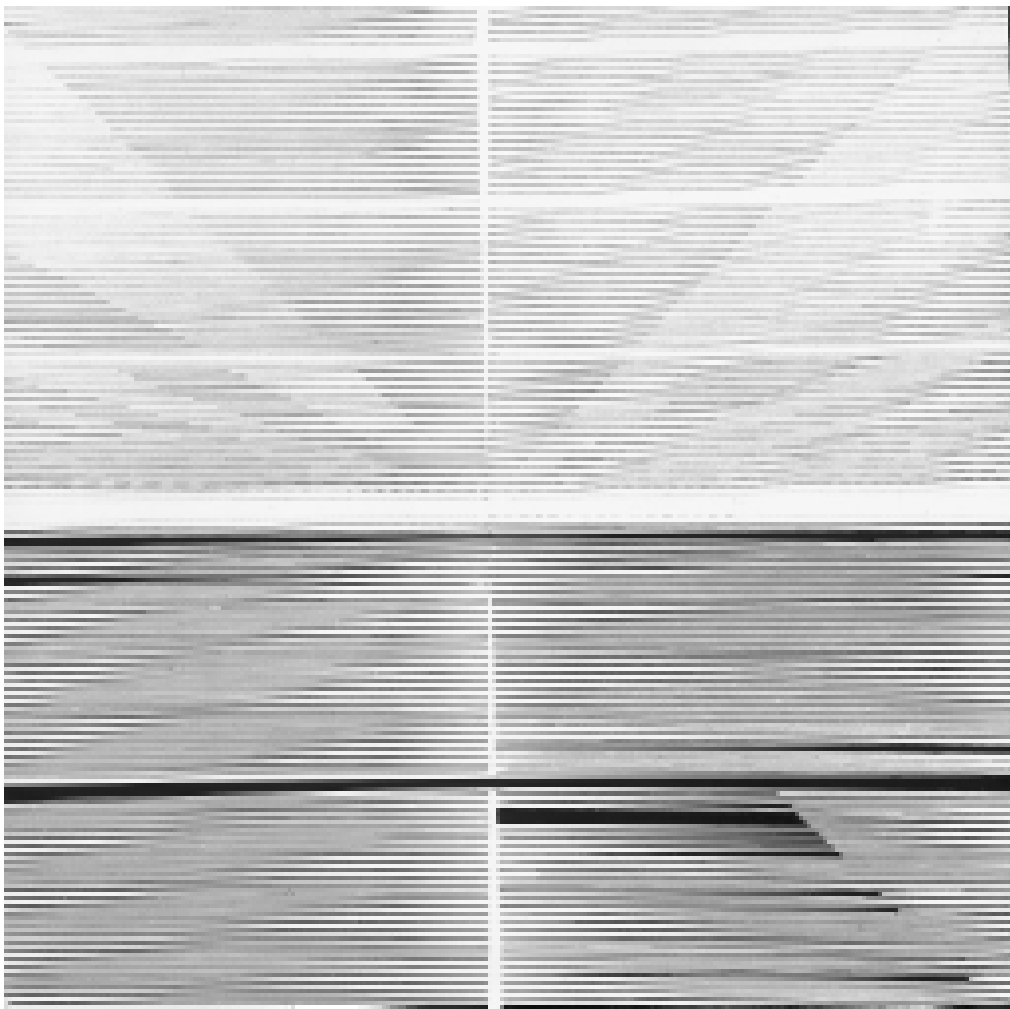
A cross-reference to a contemporary artist like Agnes Martin illuminates Nasreen's work, especially her humility before nature, her interest in the anonymous language of geometry. Martin's work is not about nature, only the experience of being before nature. It may even be antinature counting on what is forever in the mind. Like Martin's, Nasreen's classicism evolves gradually and transforms the substratum of biomorphic forms into a system of graphic marks. What is important is that each of them works out a geometry that provides optical clarity, and a paradigm for *attention*.

Nasreen could well join Agnes Martin in saying that *'Classicists are people that look out with their back to the world'*.²³

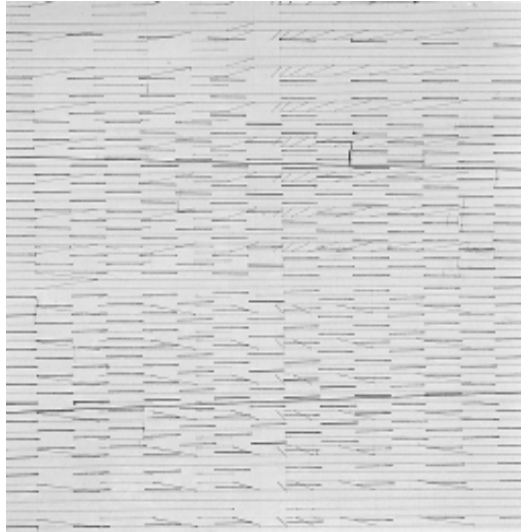
The Grid

The floor in the house of Agnes Martin, as in Nasreen's house, was polished stone: no prints of the bare foot, no illusion, only the surface.

It is worth pursuing the comparison with Martin: she worked with simple found objects; she painted dots of atmospheric colour; she drew people, grass, as little rectangles; she worked out spaces between drops of rain. She made an airy matrix. She was interested in weaving, which led to the open form of the lattice. Her parallel lines and grids were undulating, following a pencil along a string or measuring tape; and they were nearly invisible—'*luminous containers for the shimmer of line*', say Rosalind Krauss and Marcia Tucker.²⁴ Even when she returned to painting after a period of renunciation, it was still subliminal expression in the shape of pale hard paintings. It



11 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1980



12 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1976

is as if she accepted impotence, humility, empty rectangles, silence and blankness—and through John Cage she made a bridge to the minimal/conceptual aesthetic, privileging above all the grid. She tended then to be included in *systemic* painting shows and her work was placed with Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, Donald Judd, Carl Andre.

I quote two passages from Rosalind Krauss:

the grid announces among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse.

The physical qualities of the surface, we could say, are mapped on to the aesthetic dimension of the same surface. And these two planes—the physical and the aesthetic—are demonstrated to be the same plane: co-extensive, and . . . coordinate. Considered in this way, the bottom line of the grid is a naked and determined materialism.²⁵

The grid proper, made so prominent by American minimalists through the 1960s and 70s, has of course precedents in signal moments of modernism—Piet Mondrian, first and foremost. Mondrian derives a logic from nature but takes it into a hypothetical structure of the universe as conceived of, or rather as conflated with, the structure of the mind. A nonrepresentational image, with nature as the ultimate referent, gains intelligible coherence only when we acknowledge that phenomenal experience is translated into a linguistic idea whether this is visually manifest as epiphany or material presence.

By the time we come to late modernism, Clement Greenberg's theorizing favours the picture plane as the ultimate field of vision wherein experience (of nature)

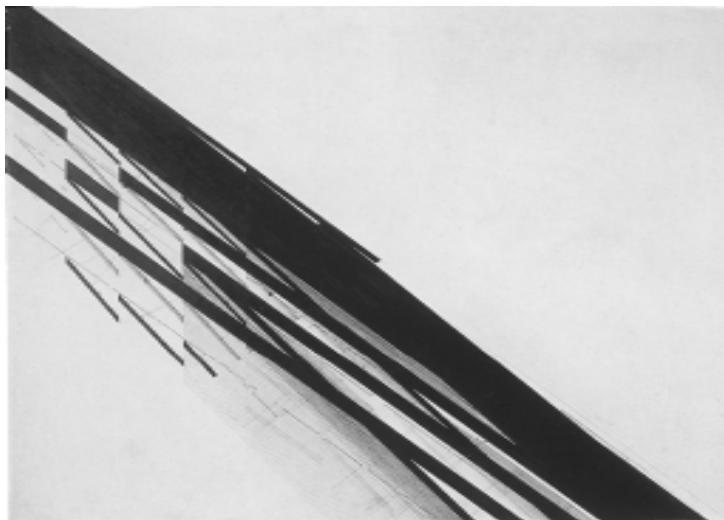
is finally translated into a purely optical sensation, an eminently visual *form* devoid of any kind of illusionistic reality, and even of linguistic meaning. Nasreen's work may be read in terms of these late modernist manifestations—but not entirely in those terms either, as I shall indicate.

Nasreen's reason for adopting the grid is familiar enough. So that a natural phenomenon may be opened out to reveal its inner matrix; so that the subtle sensation that the dismantling of the great visible structures of nature creates would surface. So that the inflected face of water or invisible wind currents from the desert plains as these are computed on to a notationally marked graph can become pure thought (*Illus. 11, 12*).

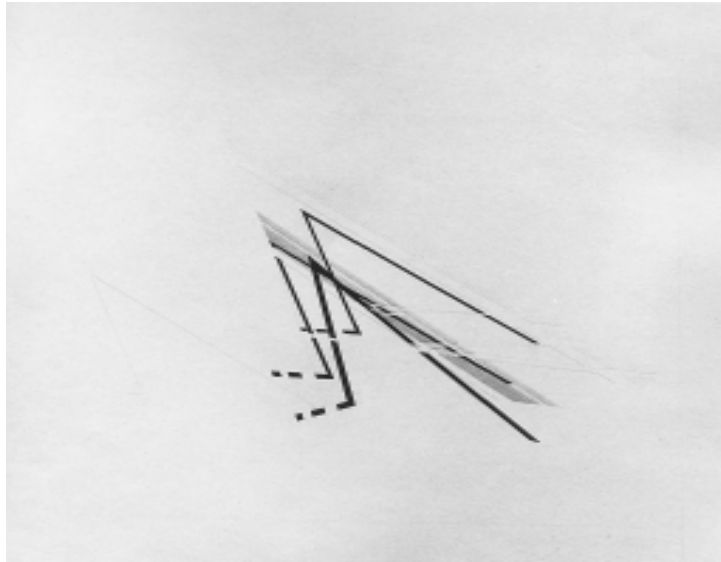
The logic is precisely that nature as referent is inducted into the ideal structure of a grid that becalms the vision into disinterested/undifferentiated states of rest. Considered in this way the grid, a structured surface, acts like a support for appearance; it is at the same time a refutation of the simulacrum.

In the 1960s Nasreen writes: '*The new image of pure rationalism. Pure intellect that has to be separated from emotion. . . . A state beyond pain and pleasure.*' And adds: '*Again a difficult task begins.*'²⁶

In art-historical terms, it would be correct to place Nasreen at the juncture (in the 1960s) when artists become interested to resolve visual language in favour of structures with no contesting and no hierarchical balancing of parts. When they are intent on adducing a neutral format in which all compositional units are equal and inseparable from the whole and the surface is in perfect unity. Nasreen acknowledges this moment and takes a firm step into graphic formalism in the early 1970s. She works, alone among all Indian artists, with small-format, strictly ruled drawings in



13 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1980



14 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1982

ink/watercolour/pencil on paper. But just as she moves away (in the 1970s) from the delicate tracery of her grey-and-ochre paintings to develop drawing-grids, she moves away (in the 1980s) from the ruled surface to diagonals, in what I call an *aspiring* mode (*Illus. 13, 14*).

Thus Nasreen is quite like Agnes Martin and not so too. In continuation of Martin's position, she may have said that an artist simultaneously seeks compassion and rational poise in the choice of structures, that is to say, in her formal aesthetic. That in the very sentience of such solitude—she writes in her diary, '*One creates dimensions out of solitude*'²⁷—the artist excavates a mystical vision of the world so that she need never be found wanting in an egalitarian world view such as the mystics proffer. But while Agnes Martin says that '*in the diagonal the ends hang loose*', or that '*the circle expands too much*',²⁸ Nasreen goes on to use both the diagonal and the circle. In the aspiring mode Nasreen prefers graphic *movement*—the lure of sound and lightning:

*My lines speak of troubled destinies
Of death
Of insects
Scratching
Foam
...
Talk that I am struck
By lightning or fire.*²⁹

Photographs: Indexing the Real

Nasreen took photographs throughout her working life but never exhibited them, worried that they would reveal some formalist secret. They provide, in actual fact, no formula but a material basis for her formal aesthetic (*Illus. 15, 16*). Derived from the physical experience of walking, encountering, stopping, positioning, turning 180 degrees on one's heels to view a mere object at ground level, it is the photographs that mark, without any programmed intent on Nasreen's part, the intersection of late modernist and minimalist aesthetic. There is in these photographs a sense of design, even a discreet theatre. There are plain views of the street beach curb sidewalk. The mobile body seeks to comprehend urban environment. There is in that process a placement of subjectivity or, rather, an allegory of (dis)placement between the subject and the object. Recall the cinematic protocol of the architect-filmmaker, Michelangelo Antonioni: a conspicuous use of modernist architecture frames the multiple perspectives for the somewhat suspenseful encounter; the freeze-frame structures the entries and exits of an existentially charged individual in such a way as to leave a memory-trace in place of her presence. With the gaze embedded in the traversed ground there is, via the presence of everyday objects, a critique of an immanent subjectivity. In art-historical terms, this coincides with the minimalist concern with real spaces and the phenomenological presence (absence) of the body within it. Her photograph says about the photographer/viewer/walker: you were here, you made an encounter, the image is concrete, you have disappeared.

That is to say, though the photographer is invisibly indexed by the photo



15 Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled photograph, ca. 1975



16 Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled photograph, ca. 1975

there is no subjectivity at stake. When the viewer walks away the moment (that carries the existential burden) will be erased. This is a conspicuously neutral space—a particular place, framing mere objects, or massive structures (as I said earlier, water tanks and highways). Further, the space can be reduced to a skeletal pattern of vertical/horizontal/diagonal lines: disembodied from the urbanscape, tilted down like a two-dimensional flat-bed picture, it is a map with(out) substance. Printed in a mediating grey, Nasreen’s photographic ‘language’ is fully articulated to denote a degree zero of space and time, a conjunctural moment of illumined negation. This is further specialized through her interest in ghost images of material objects—photograms.

If Nasreen’s photographs provide a material basis for her formal code, it explains how remote she is from her Indian compatriots who are all set to figure meaning. That remoteness is captured in an odd encounter between Nasreen and, of all people, Carl Andre. In 1971 Andre came to India (as a participant in the Second Triennale India) and found this much-loved, modest-seeming artist in an anomalous position within a voluble art scene in Delhi. Doing very spare work, she seemed to belong nowhere, and that was precisely perhaps the point. Nasreen, given her committed location in India, provides cues to several (still accessible) mystical tradi-

tions whereby we may speak of a ‘democratic space’. This connects her to what was called in the case of Agnes Martin, an egalitarian viewpoint, and to Andre’s own project: to pave the way, quite literally, in order to achieve a nonhierarchy of space. Nasreen, in Andre’s conceptual context, proposed a neutral traversal of the perceptual field: she could be seen to be interested in a similar equanimity of nonreference, in the plane without any fixed vista, in the infinite point of view of the exemplary road.³⁰

On that note we can conclude Nasreen’s art-historical detours. By the 1980s she had touched on several antecedents: from a sublimating nature-based abstraction where nature is treated as metaphor in the expanded field of the lyric image, to the conjunctural aesthetics of Russian abstraction in the 1920s, to the minimalists who take the object-world of the constructivists—their formal proposition that signals a utopian image—and return it to a grounded experience, developing a phenomenology of space at once concrete and theatric. This is where Carl Andre comes in, and also Richard Long, who turn vast bodily navigation of earth, water, sky, into a meditative act through walking.

Only subliminally aware of the minimalist proposition, Nasreen’s own astute concern for the spatial dimension tells her how all spatial encounters are privileged: you walk in the shape of your body and measure the paces as a neutral act that is also, in an experiential sense, full-bodied. In the pragmatic manner of a peripatetic monk, there is nothing more to see than there is to do beyond the multiple positioning of your body-self in the infinite prospect of the universe—but that it translates materially into the real and even the everyday with strange ease.

Asian elements—tao and zen—are suffused in Nasreen’s life. Like Barthes³¹ she is haunted by an inventory of the states of *dearth* with which zen has encoded the human sensibility: solitude, the sadness that overcomes one because of the ‘incredible naturalness’ of things, nostalgia, the sentiment of strangeness. The positioning of the body within such an everyday void, that too is a zen instruction. As is the choosing of an ordinary object as target of absolute attention. Deeply attracted to zen, Nasreen’s ambient references are metaphysical and mystical, her sympathies are serenely secular.

Edge of the Void

*Examine, and reexamine each counter, each dot where rhythm meets in space and continuous charges occur.*³²

In the late 1970s Nasreen’s drawings, etched with precision instruments, begin to ‘distort’ the actual and invisible grid she had worked with for a decade. They begin to form a black mass with diamond shapes cut into them; they are shot through with radiating lines. Tense like arrows, echoes, shafts of light, they are penetrative, flying into the constellation, revolving like a satellite, making a curious reference to



17 Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, ca. 1986

extraterrestrial energies (*Illus. 17*). This complex graphic conjunction, a steeply positioned, delicately web-bed wing, is strung to yield a set of notes that splinter into echoes and traverse the elements in a series of repetitive sounds displaced in time.

*Nature is so true.
Such truth in her silence.
If only we would listen to her intricacies.
Then there is no difference in sound and vision.*³³

Here is oriental aesthetics, especially the great melodies of Indian music—the singing voice³⁴ which gives you, in the very means of sublimation, the vibrations of the shuddering soul and a vastly spiralling melancholy. Nasreen invokes the superb ascent from the ground of evanescent desire and its plunging dissolution:

*Circular depths,
Texture of edges
To study circular depths and depression.*³⁵

Nasreen insisted on transmuting formal rigour into ordered immanence, into romance, further articulating the successive formal moves in her staccato notes. And extending the transfiguration of nature's graceful changeling, the moon, she delivers it to an expanding order of phenomena:

*Economy and structure and intuition. Overlapping forms. . . . The intense sensitivity of the moon—at each phase retaining its perfection, size.*³⁶

We find scattered across her diaries these instructions to herself which I draw out and align in a fresh poetic order:

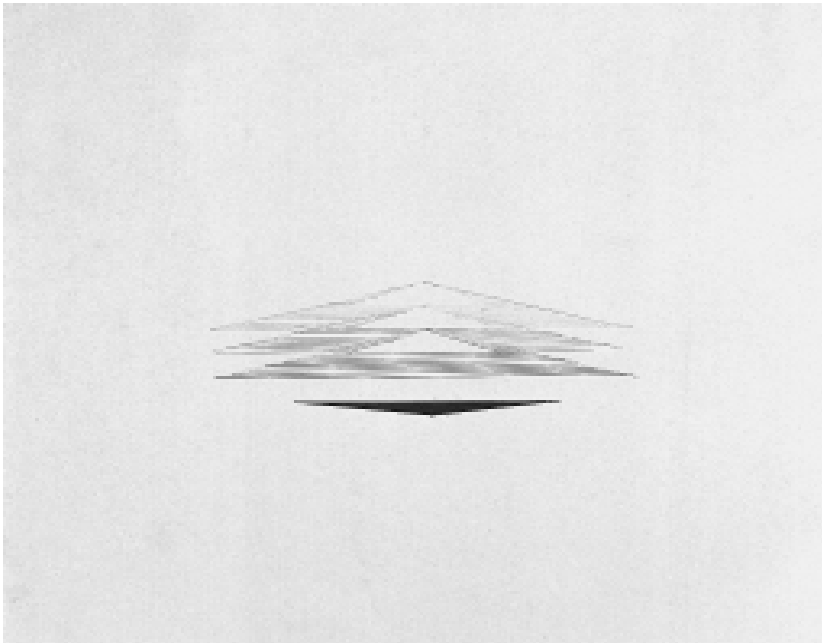
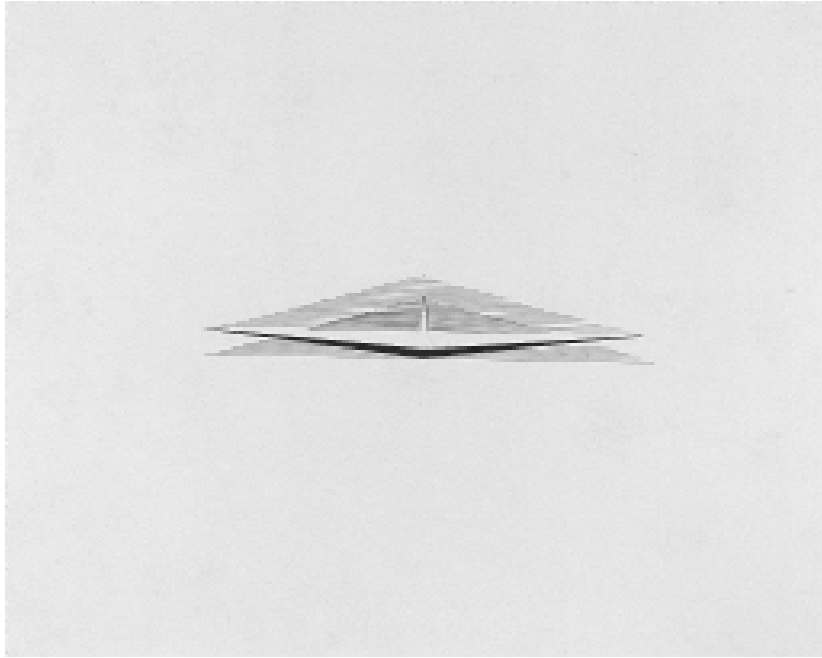
*Work in horizontals and work in
varying proportions.
Dots circles arrows leading up
and across.
Verticals in gradations
by studying edges intensely.
Curve
Curve slowly to O
At the edge of the void/
Extension from + and –
Balance/Touching/Loss of balance
Touch air
2¹/₂ 3 3¹/₂ 4 4 5 5 6 6 7 7
4¹/₂ 5¹/₂ 6 6 7 7 8 8 9 9.³⁷*

Nasreen's drawings raise the question of perspective in several different ways. Perspective as a ubiquitous premise of thought; perspective throwing up a vanishing point and providing the flip-face of imagist art that is mostly representational, anthropomorphic, blocking the horizon by foregrounded bodies. Here, in Nasreen's drawings, all is distance. The drawings lift the body into space and give it a sense of its mathematical positioning. There is nothing waiting at the end of the perspectival trajectory, no encounter at the vanishing point. Displaced through percussive shifts of the receding target, the vanishing point stretches both terrain and memory and establishes a pure perceptual field (*Illus. 18, 19*).

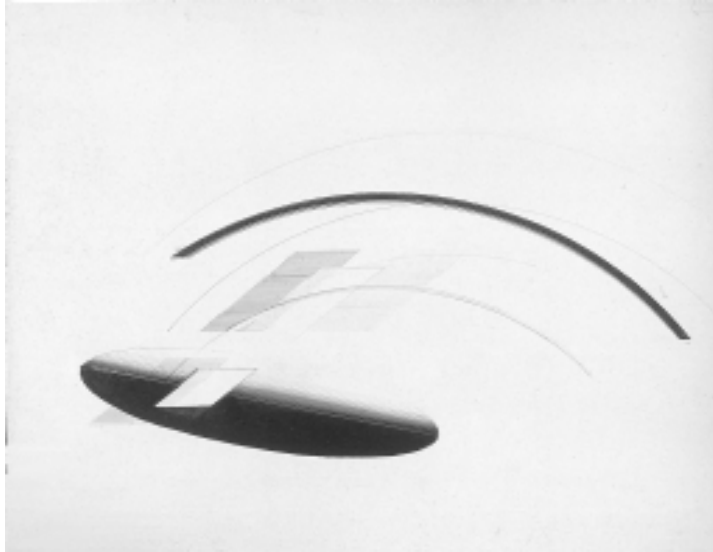
Thus the works remain optical—she is seeing as if through the telescope into stellar space and then retracting the vision, seeing it reflected back in the small orb of the eye (*Illus. 20*). The drawing itself seems to float in the optical field and then settles quite firmly: a microcosmic structure on the paper. With a mere glance she maps out the terrain she sees across these great distances, from the ground above to the sky below, finding a transparent interface of land water air.

A mini-matrix of the cosmos is reflected in the lucid eye. It gains a magical reversal through perspectival focus. With that, *cognition arrives*. Nasreen says in her diary:

*Break
Rest
Break the cycle of seeing
Magic and awareness arrives.³⁸*



Above: 18 Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, 1987. Below: 19 Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, 1987



20 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1988

The perceptual basis of consciousness and its unaccountable perspicacity is crucial to the sufi tradition. The great Jalal ad-Din Rumi says in an aphorism titled ‘Those Who Know, Cannot Tell’:

*Whenever the Secrets of Perception are taught to anyone His lips are sewn against speaking of the Consciousness.*³⁹

It is appropriate to refer here to Nasreen’s love of Turkish and Mughal architecture, and of Arabic calligraphy—of Islamic architectonics and the sublime sense of design that notates the invisible paradise. The pristine geometry on the ground and the stellar light paths in space are as if the trajectories of those *farishtas* of Islamic lore that crisscross the skies in eternal flight.⁴⁰

Passing On

If Nasreen’s graphic trajectories are like angels lifting time off the texturally rich body of the planet with its surging oceans, they also decontextualize what is through secret condensation already too textually replete. She replaces it with spiritual graffiti, like the footprints of the selfsame angel speeding to its last post in the skies—then she wipes away these footsteps, and even space itself.

Brushing off the matrices of the self like so much scum on the face of light which is her white sheet of paper, Nasreen draws with her steel instruments, with pencil, ink and brush. I said that the angel lifts off time but she then reinscribes it in reverse. This is like a script for the future: ‘*A curved line across the page*’.⁴¹

When the moon wanes the landscape disappears. The morphological

process, the process that produces form, is liquidated like an obsolete ontology. A displaced self, an objectivizing act, a nonobjective art: Nasreen shuts the sadistic *eye/I*, renounces subjectivity, folds up the memory of love, accepts the poverty of means, embraces humility. She exposes her need and takes on the mantle of a self-mocking female fool.

There is a persistent image of Nasreen as the unclaimed beloved, wandering and empty on the beach as the tide goes out. Nasreen's self-image was of one always waiting—*gathering attention*.

One morning of May she was sitting not far from her sisters in her shack beyond Bombay, at Kihim, a still vacant shore of the Arabian Sea. Sitting as if in preparation when she passed on suddenly, without a sound.

Notes and References

Italicization of all the quoted texts in this essay is mine, and not part of the original.

- ¹ Helene Cixous, 'We Who Are Free, Are We Free?', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Winter 1993, p. 209.
- ² Yashodhara Dalmia, 'Nasreen's Diaries: An Introduction', in *Nasreen in Retrospect*, edited by Altaf, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, Bombay, 1995, entry dated 12th March 1971, p. 93.
All further references to Nasreen's diary entries are titled 'Diaries', and are taken from the above source. Where exact dates are not mentioned by Nasreen, Yashodhara Dalmia has set up a chronology with the help of Nasreen's family, dating the diary entries by matching these with Nasreen's known journeys, places of residence, states of mind, etc. Where, however, the dates remain doubtful, I have indicated this in the reference by an interrogation mark within square brackets.
- ³ When Nasreen was four her mother died while giving birth to her youngest son. The family, consisting of the father and eight children (five sisters and four brothers), continued to suffer deaths. Nasreen's two elder brothers died of a debilitating neuromuscular illness, especially terrifying for Nasreen as it mirrored the advanced stage of what was happening to her own body after age forty-five.
- ⁴ Janabai (ca. 1298–1350), translated from the Marathi by Vilas Sarang, in *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, Volume I: 600 BC to the Early 20th Century, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, pp. 83–84.
- ⁵ 'Diaries', 15th November Night, 1968 [?], p. 90.
- ⁶ Akkamahadevi, translated from the Kannada by A.K. Ramanujan, in *Women Writing in India, Volume I*, p. 77.
- ⁷ A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Akimcanna: Self-Naughting', in *Coomaraswamy 2. Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, edited by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, p. 88.
- ⁸ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1979, p. 15.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ¹⁰ Ronald Duncan, 'Letter 11: Heloise to Abelard', in *Abelard and Heloise: A Correspondence for the Stage in Two Acts*, Faber, London, 1961, pp. 74–76. See also *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974.
- ¹¹ Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, pp. 10–11.

- ¹² Ibid., p. 44.
- ¹³ ‘Diaries’, 1st February 1974, p. 96.
- ¹⁴ See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, Macmillan, London, 1983, pp. 87–131.
- ¹⁵ Kazimir Malevich, ‘Futurism–Suprematism, 1921: An Extract’, in *Kazimir Malevich 1878–1935*, exhibition catalogue, The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Culture Centre, Los Angeles, 1990, p. 177.
- ¹⁶ ‘Diaries’, 1980, p. 97.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 30th September 1970, p. 93.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 12th March 1971, Baroda, p. 93.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 13th March 1970 [?], p. 91.
- ²⁰ All statements by Agnes Martin about life, thought and art are taken from *Agnes Martin*, edited by Barbara Haskell, Whitney Museum of American Art/Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1992. The book includes essays by Barbara Haskell, Anna C. Chave and Rosalind Krauss.
- ²¹ Biblical reference (*Isaiah 40*) by Agnes Martin quoted by Anna C. Chave, ‘Agnes Martin: “Humility, the Beautiful Daughter . . . All Her Ways Are Empty”’, in *ibid.*, p. 144.
- ²² Chave, quoting taoist sage Chuang Tzu (from Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, New Directions, New York, 1965/1969, p. 80), in *ibid.*, p. 145.
- ²³ Agnes Martin, ‘The Untroubled Mind’, in *Agnes Martin*, p. 15.
- ²⁴ Chave quoting Rosalind Krauss and Marcia Tucker (from ‘Perceptual Field’, in *Critical Perspectives in American Art*, exhibition catalogue, Fine Arts Centre Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1976, p. 15), in *ibid.*, p. 106.
- ²⁵ Rosalind Krauss, ‘Grids’, in *Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, pp. 9–10.
- ²⁶ ‘Diaries’, May 22, 1964 [?], p. 85.
- ²⁷ ‘Diaries’, 3rd September 1967, p. 87.
- ²⁸ Agnes Martin, ‘The Untroubled Mind’, in *Agnes Martin*, p. 14.
- ²⁹ ‘Diaries’, 3rd June 1968, On the train from Baroda, p. 88.
- ³⁰ See Chave, ‘Agnes Martin’ (in *Agnes Martin*, p. 143), for a discussion of the commonality between Agnes Martin and Carl Andre (from which I develop the tripartite relationship with Nasreen).
- ³¹ See Barthes, *Lover’s Discourse*, p. 170.
- ³² ‘Diaries’, 21st July 1969, London, p. 91.
- ³³ Ibid., 1980 [?], p. 97.
- ³⁴ For example, Amir Khan, Bhimsen Joshi, Gangubai Hangal.
- ³⁵ ‘Diaries’, May 10th, 1971, Kihim, p. 94.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 25th November 1971, p. 95.
- ³⁷ Gleaned from ‘Diaries’ by me.
- ³⁸ ‘Diaries’, 17th July 1973, Baroda, p. 96.
- ³⁹ Jalal ad-Din Rumi, quoted by Idries Shah, in *The Way of the Sufi*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 114.
- ⁴⁰ See Ramachandra Gandhi, in *Artistes indiens en France*, exhibition catalogue, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris, 1985, p. 34.
- ⁴¹ ‘Diaries’, 1971 [?], Delhi, p. 94.

Mid-Century Ironies: K.G. Subramanyan

Artist as Artisan Skills

There is some pleasure in the mere listing of the materials and methods an artist uses. You sense the concrete basis of image production. K.G. Subramanyan has worked in the technique of fresco buono, brushing pigment direct on to wet plaster. He has made monumental murals in terracotta tiles and others in cement relief by means of sand-casting. He has designed an entire menagerie of wooden toys and woven rope sculptures on a specially devised loom. He has made use of woodcut printing for designing textiles. There are stacks of little ink-and-brush drawings in his studio, along with gouache sketches in preparation for future paintings. In addition he has of course done his share of oil and easel painting. After this there is a significant shift. Several series of the most sensuously sculpted terracotta reliefs distinguish his work through the 1970s. From the 1980s sets of flamboyant little glass (or acrylic sheet) paintings backed with gold where he uses colour as never before give his pictorial language a dazzling turn.

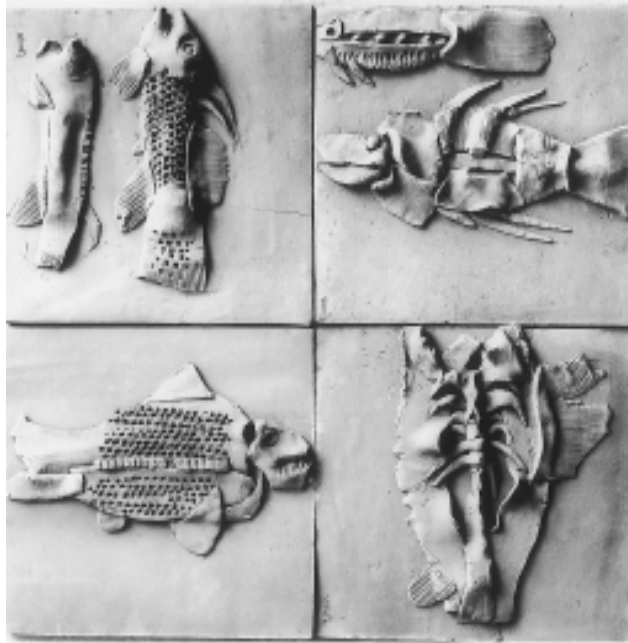
A celebrated pedagogue and writer, Subramanyan feels quite at home with theoretical formulations so long as they do not suppress the material ebullience of the art-object. A conceptual scheme will, I hope, serve to identify the very modalities of form in his varied work. Two surprisingly symmetrical sets of concepts can be derived from Subramanyan's practice.

I begin with his understanding of the craft tradition of India which is supplemented by an acquaintance with corresponding worldwide traditions. His curiosity about techniques and motifs in primitive terracottas, in peasant embroideries, in the intricate tie-and-dye weaving of the ikat fabric, may or may not enter his own work. It extends theoretically into an understanding of craft as practice, as systematized process and convention. Thus to an understanding of art as language.

As much as he is interested in putting things together, in making objects with all the deftness of a craftsman, he is interested also in analysing an object (an

An earlier version of this essay was published as a monograph under the title *K.G. Subramanyan*, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1987.

image, a surface) in terms of its structural units. He does this in his work for all to see; he also talks about art-objects in this way. Subramanyan would like to see art, modern art too, as language. As a conventional system of pictorial signs where these signs in turn transpose a universe of meanings upon the material world, including the art-object. ‘The importance of an artist is to be measured by the number of signs he has introduced into the language of art’, Matisse says to Louis Aragon in 1943.¹



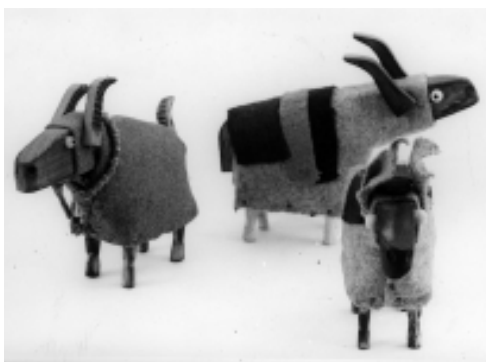
1 K.G. Subramanyan, *Fishes and Fossils* series, 1977

In my schema the paired concepts of craft and language are matched by another pair, virtuosity and wit. By virtuosity I mean perfecting the relationship between perception and skill to the point where forms spring forth by the mere gesture of the hand (*Illus. 1*). Virtuosity is prized in all traditions, but it is the oriental approach in particular that trains the artist to be the subtlest of performers, a virtuoso in a nearly mystical sense. Shaped by the orientalism of Santiniketan, Subramanyan does probably see himself as working all his life to attain an ultimate ease and grace, like the Chinese. Also like Matisse, who is quoted to have said more than once, ‘To imitate the Chinese . . .’.²

Wit is often a function of this virtuosity, it can inhabit the very elements of visual language. It is the artist’s trick to abbreviate, upturn, reanimate the signs. In oriental aesthetics it is one of the central principles of art production. As against the oriental–classical, it is often the little or more popular art traditions in India that display this attribute of wit: the exposition of the *Jatakas*, the *patas* and for example

the follies of men and women in Kalighat paintings. At yet another level twentieth-century art, placing itself in a volatile relationship to both high and low art and to the anthropologically 'available' world cultures, is replete with examples of such wit. Take for example Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Miro, Klee—the list is long.

In a twentieth-century rout of holy cows wit is a handy weapon. Subramanyan is interested in all three aspects: the oriental–classical, the popular and the modern. He will use wit as a way of amending the conservative system of signs that is a feature of all art inheritances; he will use it also to introduce sheer comedy after the rout. Like the modernists, Subramanyan uses wit with the desire to remake the world in play.



2 K.G. Subramanyan, *Buffalo, Goat, Donkey*, 1967–68

Toys and Totems

As a member of the Fine Arts Faculty at M.S. University, Baroda, Subramanyan went on a toy-making project every year during the Fine Arts Fair, a continuation of the *melas* of his student days in Santiniketan. The purpose of the fair was to encourage art students to make objects using craft techniques that they would invent or learn, whereby they would also unlearn some of the clichés of studio lessons. During this period, along with an

entire supporting faculty, Subramanyan made terracotta objects, weavings, hand-printed children's books. They designed masks, costumes, decor for puppet shows, and added every year to the repertoire of toys.³ From the continuous doodles that Subramanyan is wont to do, creatures surfaced, the plastic possibilities of which were swiftly tested in plasticine or clay. Then the craftsman colleague in the faculty, Gyarsilal Verma from Rajasthan (a master mason and a mural technician, also proficient in stone and ivory carving), came into the picture. Little blocks of wood of different shapes and sizes were sorted out to fit the animal at hand. With the parts thus rationalized a working drawing marked with measurements was prepared, then a prototype, and Gyarsilal was now ready to make multiples of the toy. All the toys were usually in the shape of animals from a mock fable (*Illus. 2*). They were small and almost invariably made of wood—planed, cut, joined and layered—or of bamboo sliced in half. The bodies of the little beasts were trimmed with bits of leather, cloth, string, beads.

A fish is made of five scalloped pieces of wood riveted together to give it a slight wiggle and a plump, graspable body. The suppleness is enhanced by the pattern of wavelets etched on its back by brushing the flame of a blowtorch over it. As the flame burns the softer layer of the wood-skin the inner grain appears, and the chunk

of wood comes to be tonally textured. To this is added the device of spotting and branding the body of the animal so that the diminutive monkey, goat, donkey, lion, the big fish and rhino are daintily or royally tattooed. The rhino, 6 x 4 x 10 inches in size, is the child's zoological tanker with two hard white knobs, clues to its invincibility on its behind.

The toy has to have a materiality in optimum relation to its many fictions.⁴ Which is to say it should be manipulable, fitted with bobbing, wheeling, levered parts, or otherwise sufficiently absurd or incomplete to invite the amused extension of its parts by the child. For that very reason, the simpler the toy the better. Its life is anyway in good hands. The child needs only a paper windmill to set all the coloured flags of the universe awhirl.

The toy, a perfect play-object, is also a seductive sign; the possibilities of the signifier always exceed the limits of the signified, and you test your improvisatory capacities through it. For of course the toy has no function or meaning beyond what the imagination brings to it. After the wane of magic the only object that can be called magical is a toy; an object that is the sum of its parts demonstratively put together, and that is also almost infinitely more because the parts, the signifying elements, are always in permutation at least for the child. And for the gameful adult as well, who will let each configuration escape a simple computation.

Modern artists have looked to the artefacts of the primitives to invent what one might call nonsense totems, a cross between a toy, a maquette, a secret object of desire; compact little semiological units for the purpose of encoding secret messages. Strictly speaking, of course, the moderns only simulate the primitives whose objects have dire purposes. But given the ingenuity of primitive totems it is hard to gauge exactly how much imaginative *dissembling* the maker allows in the ritualized belief system to produce the kind of artefact we are speaking about. Dire purpose and modernist iconoclasm could have complementary and corresponding motivations.

If you give to a contemporary tribal in Papua New Guinea, or in India, a free run of new materials, bits and pieces of industrial waste for example, what does s/he do with it? The totem or ritual object thus produced is different from the modernist found-object collage, but there is comparable irony at work. Where 'primitive' artists invest material objects with belief, the dadaists deconstruct them, exposing the transference of use into exchange value in the overall process of reification. And this s/he does by openly dissembling, indeed by making what is to all purposes a fetishist object and posing a paradoxical dis/similarity between commodity and totem. Through this cunning translation of the terms of fetishism the moderns introduce a new category of object, one which detaches itself from use as well as exchange value and conveys the *jouissance* embodied in the sign of its dysfunction.

Picasso as always gives us the links in the chain, the morphology of the new object, starting with the cubist collage, going on to cubist relief and dadaist

sculptures. Whether it is Picasso's bronze-casts of put-together objects (wood, tin-sheets, bottle, wire, bits of upholstery, silver tea-strainer, wicker-basket, dinky cars) or his ceramics from Vallauris, there is maximum ingenuity with little technical glibness. As the Spaniards Picasso and his compatriot Joan Miro, with his brightly painted, sheerly absurd bird-beast-man figures, are the 'primitives' within Europe, a civilization headed towards unlimited technical advancement. In their wake come others: for example the American Alexander Calder, who maintained an entire zoo of diminutive beasts and actually performed the circus (making the little lion roar and shit for his adult spectators). Modern artists have raised ideological questions about the object in art, giving sovereignty to metaphor and catapulting skill into play.

If toys have a history that goes back to neolithic times, then in India this history is contemporaneously practised. The small clay bull from Harappa with whorls of flesh around its neck and snout, the amphibious bird on wheels, the ant-eater, the monkey sliding on a pole, as for that matter the goddess figurines from the Gangetic plain, constitute the ancestry of what we classify today as folk and tribal art-objects. And not only in the matter of form but in iconography as well.

The difference between the ritual object and the fairground toy may not have been very great among the traditional makers and users. Today the difference is negligible. Miniaturized, the painted modern icons of Jagannath and his companions turn up as devalued little toys sold in shops along the avenue where the great chariot rolls down on the appointed day of the pageant. Thousands of popular versions of the Puri gods in majesty make up the pleasure of pilgrims and tourists. Subramanyan, a connoisseur of craft, may regret the onset of vulgarities but the toy nonetheless recalls the icon which in turn recalls ancient artisanal traditions. For the act of making must predate the iconography and the ritual to which the objects have contributed over centuries. Thus making his toys both pristine and funny, Subramanyan activates his own manifold connections with artisanal practice.

Murals

I should like now to take Subramanyan's artisanal practice to another plane of the relationship between craft and play. During 1962–63 Subramanyan designed and installed a monumental terracotta tile mural on the front wall of the Lucknow Rabindralaya. It marks the first most important achievement of his career and it reinstates in Indian art the close connection between sculptural relief and architecture. (The more publicized glazed-tile murals by M.F. Husain and Satish Gujral were done in 1966, in Delhi.)

One of a series of theatres set up all over India, the Lucknow Rabindralaya is named after Rabindranath Tagore. Subramanyan decided to make the subject of the mural Rabindranath's allegory, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, making a reference to the ambiguity of absence and presence in the magic-box of the theatre.



Subramanyan had already worked on the stage and costume design for this play on the occasion of Tagore's centenary in 1961. Reckoning that the mystical meaning of the play could have no direct pictorial transcription in the mural tableau, Subramanyan, in proxy of the poet's symbolism, reduced the story to a set of emblematic encounters while giving through the rich density of design a play of shadows (*Illus. 3, 4, 5*).

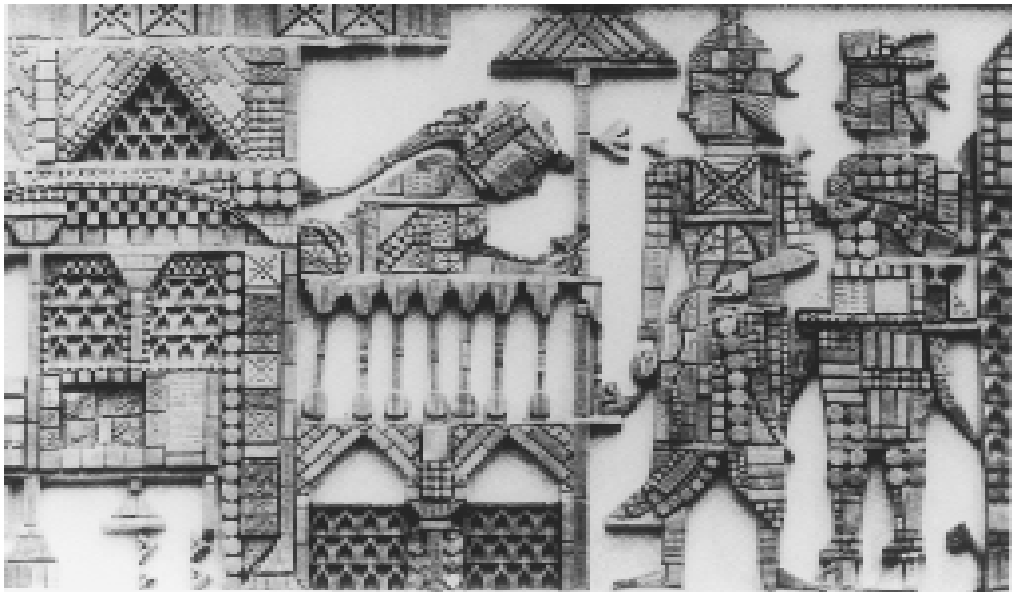
The mural is placed at the height of the second storey on a wall that faces a busy road and the Lucknow railway station. The length of the mural is 81 feet, the height 9 feet: the format is therefore emphatically horizontal. There is a compound alongside the theatre and you must look up and walk the length following the generally left-to-right orientation of the mural composition. The figures are bedecked and set within ornate pavilions, balconies, pillared facades, so that even before you have identified them you know this is a royal entourage. It includes the queen, her attendants, her soldiers. Profiled and stiff, the figures have an archaic classicism. The tableau format, its puppetlike figures and gestures, recalls several Indian antecedents.

The relief is built up from 13,000 terracotta pieces, approximately 1-inch square and up to 6 inches thick. There are discs, squares, strips, triangles, knobs and cones, most of them decoratively inscribed. While the details are not visible from so far below, a thickly indented figural pattern surfaces in the changing light.

There are units that are more semantically complete, larger pieces up to 10-inch square that make up the face and hands, the bird and crown and tassels, plaited hair and flowers. The patterned tiles are made from moulds designed in bulk by Subramanyan. These are prefabricated units. The completed units are individually handcrafted.

The project, as one can see, was ambitious. Subramanyan made a small team including his former students and young colleagues at the Baroda faculty. The work of making and firing tiles was conducted at a government pottery works at Chinhat near Lucknow. The pieces were fired with a transparent glaze which gives the terracotta surface a slight highlight and protects it from weathering. The first phase of the work was completed during the summer vacation of 1962.

The installation was completed next summer, in 1963. This phase of the work was done on site. It included, first, the actual integration of the detailed scale



Above: 3 K.G. Subramanyan, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, 1963. Below: 4 *The King of the Dark Chamber* (detail)

drawing and the terracotta bits. This took fifteen days. A scaffolding was erected and the basic contours were transferred from the cartoon to the wall surface by the method of pouncing. Stone ledges were embedded in the wall at crucial points to support the heavier clusters of tiles. Up on the scaffolding the main operation was in the hands of Gyarsilal and his mason brother, Kishore. Subramanyan would pick up the numbered tile from the numbered box and hand it to the masons, and the glazed tile was fixed to the wall with lime-plaster. No changes were permitted at this stage. The team worked almost twelve hours a day for a month and the mural was complete.

If you want to make a terracotta relief there are certain technical alternatives. It can be the kind of mosaic I have already described, and the closest traditional equivalent is a relief form called Sanjhi, ritually made in and around Delhi. Or there is the method of preparing terracotta tablets sculpted in relief and fixed edge-to-edge on

the architectural facade. The basic unit and the nature of the image will be quite different in each case. The mosaic piece being small and neutral, you can use it additively to make a decorative and/or monumental image. The tablet is a self-contained sculptural unit larger than the tile-mosaic, though never too large owing to the fragility of the medium. It presupposes a compact image and a sequential extension from one unit to another. In the terracotta temples of Bengal where the architectural unit is itself compact like a hut, the entire surface is covered with these relief tablets, the imagery is carried across several tablets in the form of a pageant or narrative. The basic sculptural unit and the temple architecture have a relationship that is based at one and the same time on exuberant multiplicity and structural homogeneity.

All the artists of Santiniketan, which is situated within a ten-mile radius of the finest temples of the Birbhum group, were familiar with the late medieval tradition of terracotta temples. The stylistics of these reliefs amply influenced the visual vocabulary of the School of Santiniketan. Interestingly, however, it influenced their painting. Is it perhaps because the possibility of the evolution of new forms is greater in translation? Subramanyan used the strategy of such transference, an alienation device so to speak, while executing the Lucknow mural by switching mediums and traditions: he referred to pictorial rather than terracotta relief traditions. The construction of *The King of the Dark Chamber* reminds one quite unexpectedly of the printed and painted templecloth of the goddess from Gujarat, *Mata ni Pachedi*.

What is directly relevant to Subramanyan's choice of reference is the fairly elaborate repertoire of images that goes into the iconic presentation of any of the seven manifestations of the goddess; and even more important, that these images are in a sense prefabricated. An assortment of wood blocks are kept at hand by the printers to fulfil the iconic necessities of the sacred cloth, but also to improvise upon the idea of the goddess in majesty. A great many of the ancillary images are meant simply to add to the festive display and therefore the auspiciousness of the primary image: musicians and dancing devotees; graceful animals like deer, fish and birds; temple domes and pennants; and, of course, decorative interludes like floral and geometrically patterned borders.

More express for use in my analysis of Subramanyan's work is the fact that even the prefabricated wood-block images are not complete and intact in themselves. If, for example, the goddess figure is quite large, her torso with two truncated arms makes one block. The other six arms holding the weapons which spring from the back in bunches of three, but fit formally along the curve of the elbow of the first set of arms, make two flanking blocks. And the body waist downwards, with the truncated forearms plus the beautifully rounded hips and legs and feet, make the fourth block. And there may be a fifth one if, say, the neck of the peacock in the throne stretches too far out and needs functionally to be detached. The icon is thus formed by the sharp and even clarity of the carved ridges which make up the contour of the image. It is

formed by the placing and composition of all the images and finally, by the art of aligning parts, the way the printer fulfils a line, encloses a shape, mechanically but with the instinct and skill of a draughtsman. Indeed he is a painter as certain of the more attenuated lines and arabesques have to be painted by hand.

As for the stylistic resemblance between these temple hangings and the profiled and decorative figures in Subramanyan's composition, it is to the piecemeal way in which these large and intricate hangings are made that I draw attention. What is significant is Subramanyan's continuing preoccupation with visual structures which guides his choices across different materials, techniques and styles of imagery, more



5 K.G. Subramanyan, *The King of the Dark Chamber* (detail)

specifically the methodology he works out for transmuting parts into a whole.

Subramanyan is interested in the way a visual unit, reduced according to some functional constraint (the type of material and tools: here the size of the wood block, but it could be the length of the yarn, the size of the loom and yet again the feasible size of the clay pieces and the nature of the kiln), encourages the craftsman–artist to programme the design with intelligence and precision. In the case of the terracotta mural it encouraged him, for example, to design a face–hand–bird–flower such that they can at once be standardized and variegated, the form working as a sign that is semantically versatile. Second, it induced him to give even the decorative units a notational value. A flower may not only appear on the skirting border of a picture, it may

be a device for constructing the patterned bodice of the beloved, it may be woven into the garland of the deity or it may become an offering in the hand of the principal devotee. The distinction between the significant and the ornamental is obliterated. Third, even such pieces as a disc, square, strip, knob, will be assigned formal responsibilities—they constitute a figure, form a snaky contour, embellish the palace facade. The image is a computation of what we may equally consider neutral/significant/narrative parts.

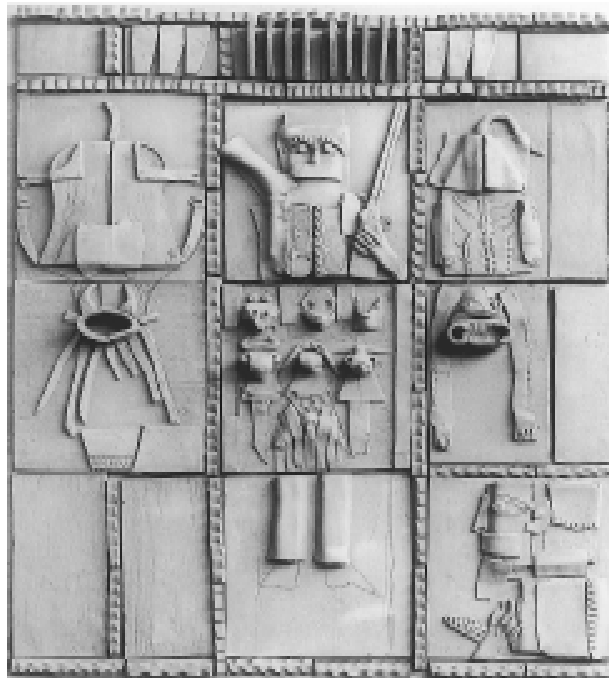
Subramanyan is especially interested in ornamental image structures that sustain iconic conventions on the one hand, and allow narrative facilities on the other. *Mata ni Pachedi* to which we have just referred, *Pabuji ka Phad* from Rajasthan and

the scroll *patas* of eastern India serve his interests in such a way. But equally I believe this to be a modernist preoccupation, this telescoping of the iconic and narrative by means of an essentially ornamental structure, which in turn is projected into what one may call a metastructure, of play.

Terracotta Reliefs

Subramanyan did several mural projects after Lucknow, the most important of which is a set of sand-cast cement constructions at Gandhi Darshan, Delhi, executed in 1969. There are carry-overs even while making toys and designing large murals—the craft practice itself and the puppet and pantomime traditions come in handy in both activities. It is, however, in his terracotta relief tablets done in sets since 1970 that the concept of the artist as artisan is fully realized, as also the performance aspect in the making of art. He demonstrates that if sculpting is a mimetic act contrived by the virtuosity of the hand, the hand is a conspirator in subverting the very mimesis through metaphoric transformations of a figural language. It is in this complex role, maintaining over and above the craftsman's tricks every aspect of his modernity including sharp social accents and a sense of irony, that Subramanyan can be said to be master.

The medium of clay simply blossoms in his hands. Subramanyan has frequently used the earthenware clay from the Saurashtra region which fires to a



6 K.G. Subramanyan, *Hunter and Trophy*, 1970

golden pink-red at about 1000 degrees centigrade. The early stages consist of cleaning and stirring the clay in the machine, then submerging the clay in water until it has the consistency of honey, as the potters like to say. The ancient orientals let their clays decay and rot under water to mature like wine for their heirs. Then kneading it to remove the air bubbles, you bring it to a point where it is gently humid, firm but plastic. All this is usually done for Subramanyan by his colleagues in the art school. Then he sits down on his haunches like a potter of all ages and puts together four or nine tiles sculpted in relief to make a larger composition which is then fixed to a plywood frame.

But Subramanyan, it should be said, does not strictly speaking sculpt in clay. Watch him use his little hands with their delicate fingers, now stiffened to part the clay, now cupped to plump the dough: the clay patties are rolled out and cut into strips with wire, then waved, arched and folded into bodies and attached to the clay base with a smear of 'slip', the honeyed clay; and if the form is solid, by merging the edges to the base. Watch him add the accessories: buttons, teeth, earrings, pockmarks and decorative patterns. These are pressed, pinched and incised into the clay with the simplest tools: his two fingers, a little spatula or a splinter of bamboo. There are also knife-sharp slits in the body which leave frayed ridges; sometimes the slit clay curls into fronds to make the pouting lips of a girl. The versatile working method puts you in mind of a baker, a mason, a tailor, a primitive surgeon, a taxidermist, a doll-maker, and last but not least, a potter. With compound craft he makes clay collages that are astonishingly alive even as they are technically accessible.

What are the antecedents in the terracotta tradition for Subramanyan's work? There are the Harappan mother-goddess figurines (variations of which are found all over northern and central India) with their flat backs and buttocks, pinched birdlike faces, and bodies studded with discs and ribbons that are the breasts, and hair, and ornaments. But the resemblance is limited to some simple techniques that Subramanyan quite naturally borrows from the primitive origins of terracotta art. One could look at the terracotta votive tablets from Molela, Rajasthan, but here the craftsman builds up an armature of clay walls on the flat clay tablet over which thinned slabs are moulded and smoothed so that the image has a convexity not unlike conventional stone-carved sculpture. Although Subramanyan uses support and stuffing to fill out forms the imagery is not built up, its solidity is everywhere contradicted in the way he reveals through folds, perforations, cracks the fragility, even brittleness, of the medium. There is the medieval tradition of terracotta temple reliefs in Bengal to which I have referred, and one might say that the way the imagery aligns and extends over joined tiles, the way the animate figures and decorative details fuse into what one may call mime and metaphor in Subramanyan's work, puts one in mind of the terracotta temple reliefs. But then again the relief tiles in the temples are worked from moulds and have a compact unity of surface spread over elaborate facades. This is

different from the stone-sculpted facades precisely in terms of their delicacy, it is true, but different also from the freely improvised forms of Subramanyan's reliefs.

I am inclined to recall very far-fetched, freely variegated references which connect with the Bengal temples and Subramanyan at the level of improvisation: the medieval bronze doors of San Zeno, Verona, and the bronze doors by Giacomo Manzu, a modernist addition to St Peter's in Rome, or rather, what would have been the clay and wax prototypes of these doors. The spatial characteristics of the units of narration which constitute the sum space of the San Zeno doors show that the artist-craftsmen of the early medieval period were already trying to devise perspectival depth, something that occurs ingenuously in the late Bengal terracotta temples as well. Continuities are maintained from relief to three-dimensionality: the merest undulation of surface becomes projected volume in San Zeno, as indeed in the terracotta temples at Surul, Illim Bazaar and Ghurisa; a solid little head pops up or a whole torso modelled in the round leans out of the surface and creates a pantomime vignette. Telescoping from San Zeno to Manzu (one of the relatively few modern western sculptors working in terracotta), one can see how these quite piquant spatial compositions become in his reliefs more subtle and glib. And ready to be cast, as in the case of the Vatican doors, into bronze. Subramanyan's terracottas play with voluptuous dimensions but are in a sense untranslatable; the medium, the technique, the body-forms are completely and simply the breathing forms of clay moulded by his hands.

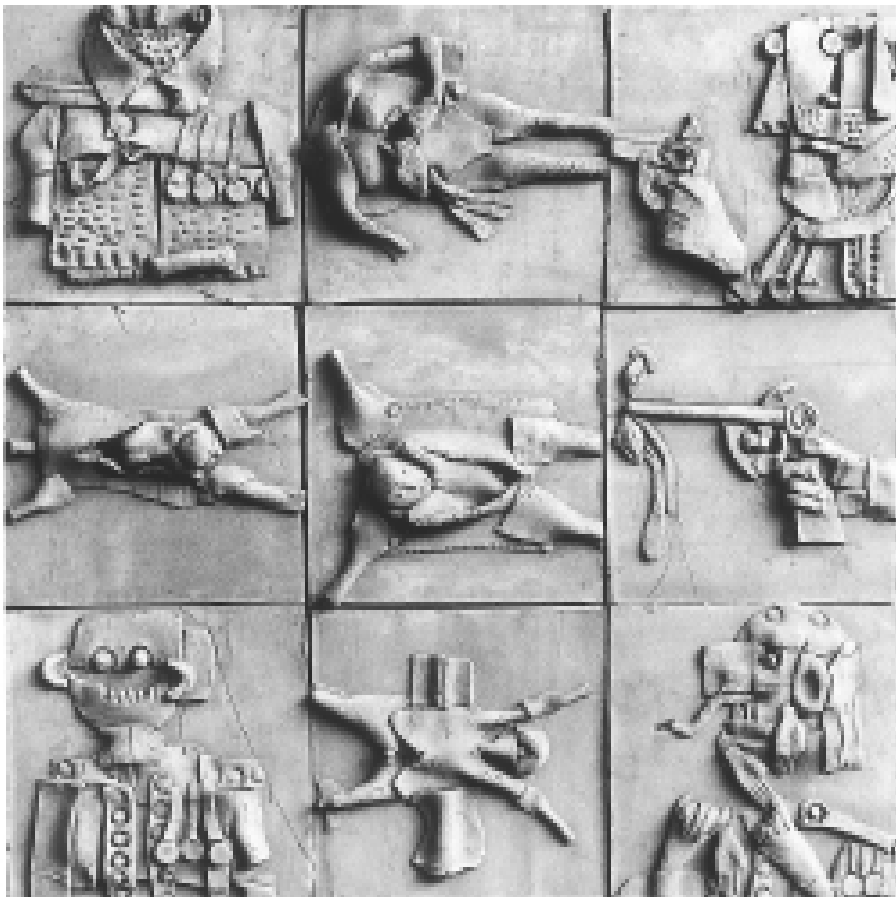
The subject of Subramanyan's terracottas *is* the polyvalent forms of the human clay: the erotic play of limbs and with that the states of death and decomposition of wounded bodies. We know that the analogies between earth and clay with the human body abound in every tradition. The substance of clay is endowed with qualities of immanent form that no other material possesses. The potter need only touch his hands to the material for it to assume living form as delicate and lively as god's creations. Indeed it is often said in reverse that god made man like the potter makes his pots and figurines, where the flesh is as plastic and vulnerable and as perishable as a clay thing.

The analogies go on. Terracotta (which is baked earth in Latin) is the result of compounding the two elements earth and fire (with the two other elements, water and air, implied: fire whipped by the properties of air consumes the humidity of clay). Earth and fire are to each other as life and sun, as body and soul. For the soul is the enlivening heat in the inert substance of nature. Thus also the ritual aspect and the alchemy of the ancient kiln where the earth is fired to a warm rosy hue as if to match the sanguine tenderness of human bodies; and as a complementary opposite the ritual of burial and cremation where the body is resumed by the elements of earth and fire to become, as is so often said, clay unto clay, dust unto dust.

The first set of these terracottas, done in 1970–71, started at the end of the story: with torture, death, decay (*Illus. 6*). Some of them directly related to news

coming from Bangladesh of the slaughter of innocent women and children. Others were made in response to pictures of flood victims in Gujarat. In both cases the tragedies were underlined by irony: war generals stalking the weak like game and counting the dead as trophies; ministers grinning to the press over rows of bloated bodies.

Let me describe a comic strip shoot-out arranged in a format of nine joined tablets (*Illus. 7*). Start from the right. The general cocks his gun; a headless corpse lies with its little hands folded across the breast; the general grins. Start again. The pistol is seen in close-up with a pair of eyes hanging on a ribbon of flesh from the muzzle; this time it is a child's body spread out like a crushed animal in front and back views. Start again. The general's profile wearing a gas mask with nozzle; the dead child again; the general shows his shark teeth. Another tablet. The uniform of a much decorated general is perched in the top middle of the nine tiles. Placed symmetrically below is an upside-down corpse, its parts disjointed over six tiles in two rows. From the torn trunk of the body emerge six penises ranged like fat bullets. But behold, these



7 K.G. Subramanyan, *March 1971*, 1971

are also little baby-heads, unformed orphans crawling out into the world. Another tablet. A soldier with his gun stands up on three tiles in vertical arrangement, his body decorated with a double row of phallic medals, each with a tiny bull's head and a different style of horns. Hanging by their tails on either side are the hunter's trophies, floppy hides with the heads sticking out, empty jaws foremost. A bearded 'pharaoh' in the lower right-hand section shows his victorious profile to both hunter and game.

But these are just stories. I want rather to emphasize the deliberately posed contrasts in the artist's handling of the medium that make these stories tragic but in the way of black humour. The contradictions work through sheer verisimilitude of clay to flesh and how Subramanyan presses the likeness. There is the rich and slimy softness of clay; when it is folded and fired the stretched clay flushes and cracks like weathered skin, porous, sometimes pockmarked, usually tender. Contrasted with this is the aspect of the artifice. Cutting and laying out slabs of clay in varying thickness to make garments of skin, hide, felt, cloth, Subramanyan is a veritable expert in the sartorial business, a clever designer, except that he also then rips the garments and scoops out the inner stuffing of dolls and effigies. Indeed the construction of these clay images resembles the toy project conspicuously. Solid knobby heads sit on soft limbs, the arched back of a graceful animal ends up in the open jaws of the human shark. Subramanyan becomes the witch-doctor cobbling human flesh, conducting a wholly denatured business with clay, but also soothing and restoring its sanguine nature to the wholesome medium.

This kind of contradiction between verisimilitude through materials and artificiality of construction is further noticeable in the way the imagery is arranged across the nine tablets. Parts are disaligned in a way that he was doing for some time before in painting but much more conspicuously in relief, as the gaps are dimensional. In rejoining they make narrow, deregistered contours that are sometimes filled with serrated edges, fretwork strips placed edgewise and clicking into place like shutters. Here then we are with Subramanyan's continuing interest in pantomime, in windows, and in peepshows.

Except, and this is important here, what you see is not the voyeur's customary game. Or rather the game is turned inside out in the very process of making and unmaking. Think of the potter's wheel, of the potter enfolding space by spinning and plumping the clay to make round and cylindrical forms. Subramanyan, who has never made pots as such, implies hollowed forms only to open them out. The smooth contours of the artisan's art are presented as gouged spaces—channels of limb, cleft and crevice of bosom, vagina, open fly. The opening and closing of convexities, indeed of the clay skin which is also the surface of the image, is a formal trick to displace obvious meanings of the game. The provoking grottos of the body are also a gap, a tear, a caesura; the corresponding stitch-up is a healing act, a suture, but also a suffocating closure of the life-form. Here is a conscious contrariness, I should think, and an

appropriation via artisanal practice of modernist irreverence towards technique and language that link Subramanyan, as we have already done in the realm of toys, to Picasso, dada, pop.

The saw-teethed hunters, for example, are subjects of mockery, they are paper tigers in relation to their vulnerable victims and show up as such, as stuffed dummies, humanly and politically disposable. Start from the dada end and think of those buttoned, booted, armoured figures and then again think of them with their stuffing taken out. Collapsible. The parade of the metropolitan robots by Richard Lindner would certainly have amused Subramanyan when he was in New York, as also the pun and parody of Claes Oldenburg's soft sculpture.

In the next two sets of terracottas done in 1977 this lineage is even more evident and is used to funny effect. In the set entitled *Wardrobe Drama* plumped clothes dance about as pillowy-billowy marionettes: leggings on hangers, limbless blouses, scarves, underwear, crumpled trousers embellished with little dots and incised lines undulating over the contours of absent bodies (*Illus. 8*). The dance is interspersed with geometrical patterns, room partitions and wooden chests. The stuffing is back, soft sculpture again, and with it the formal/linguistic variations of the commonplace with sexual innuendoes in every crease, fold and form.

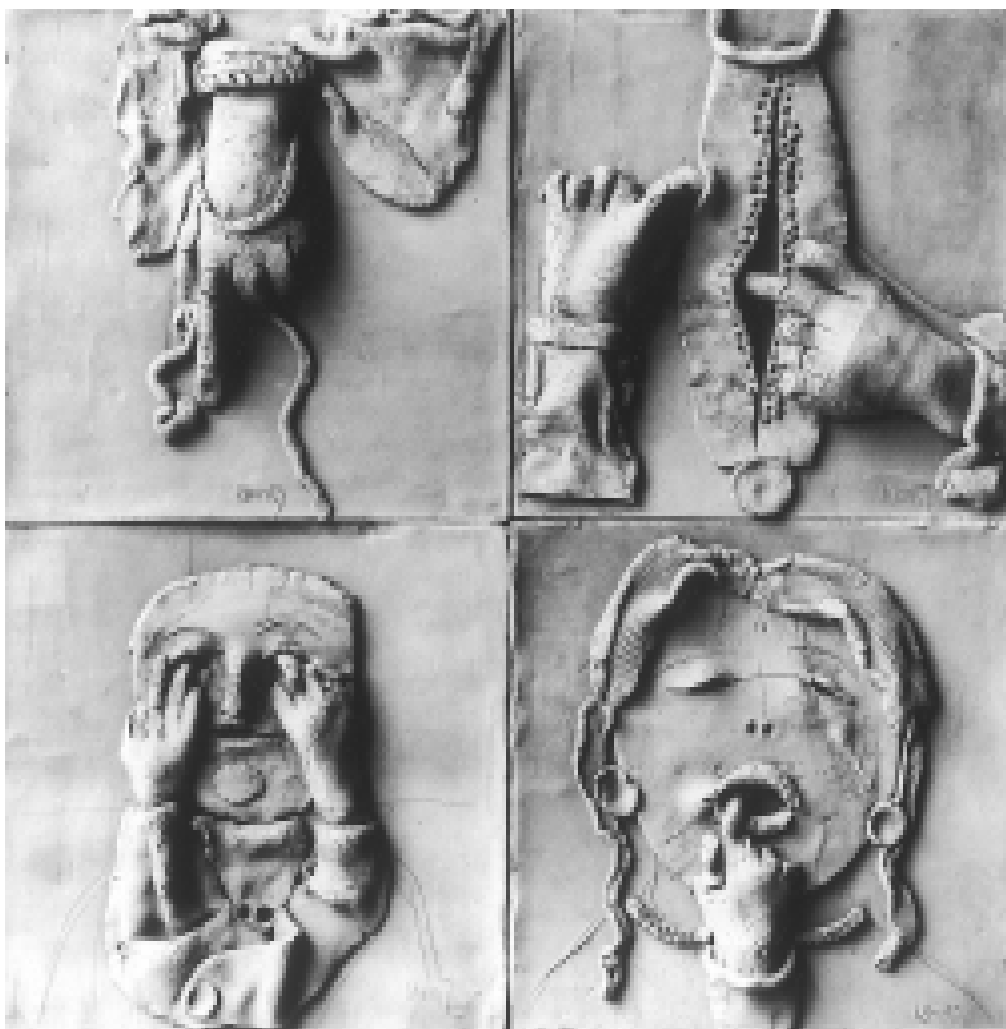


8 K.G. Subramanyan, *Wardrobe Drama*, 1977

Simultaneously he makes a set called *Fishes and Fossils* where the sly suggestion and the game of dressing and undressing continues. A fish undressed to its bone is as delicate as an x-ray print; a fish just recovered from water has a silky skin-wrap; others are dry and coarse and dead like old shoes. Little and big, slithery and plump, filigreed and finned, long-jawed and grinning, here is a sumptuous platter for some lusty mud-eating tribe. If to the cunning of the voyeur's eye he added the feel of the hand, now he adds the greedy fantasies of the mouth. This is sensuality turned to erotic fetishism with a comic twist.

The third set, done around the same time, called *Portraits and Mudras*, sheds the slightly sardonic provocation of sensual shapes Subramanyan manufactures so effortlessly. There is also a more direct interest in plasticity as such. Clay is moulded into human faces and hands for the portrayal of 'emotional potencies',⁵ as he calls them (*Illus. 9*). Or one could argue the other way round. If a growing virtuosity with plastic forms of clay gives him this strong expressivity, it also leads to a shift in style

and subject. The earlier sets of terracotta are much more designed; they are ingeniously cut-and-paste, stuff-and-rip, collage reliefs arranged in the conventions of comic narratives. Now the human features are almost naturalistically individuated, even expressionist in the way he allows himself a vigorous kneading, moulding, modelling of clay. The result is a rich portrait gallery, memorial plaques that spell out simultaneously signals of life and death. By a mere iconographic shift erotically expressive features turn into the sad grimace of the death mask and vice versa. There is the aggravated sensuousness of the face crushed under wheels, the touching mockery of the girl who peels off the skin-mask, the mischief of the smooth-faced little girl who puts her wondering finger in the lovely cavity of her mouth. Plus the ambiguous signals of the



9 K.G. Subramanyan, *Mudras-I*, 1977

independent sets of hands that accompany the heads in the four-square format of the tablets: tender, probing, mannered hands that are more mimetic than even the heads in that they imply a language, combining the *mudra* of the dancer with the mime of the deaf-mute.

Subramanyan's terracottas are as much about language as about materials and, as we have seen, he constantly plays the one in relation to the other. They are about modernist language but in so far as that has itself incorporated 'primitive' art forms. And in so far as primitivism now functions as a system of signs within art history Subramanyan has a two-way advantage. Starting from sheer artisanal practice he develops the ambiguity of the modernist sign, but then he upsets the given signifieds of contemporary consciousness, its familiar world of subjects, by devolving to material verities and received traditions once again.

In a sense the very use of the medium of terracotta is now a sign, it immediately contextualizes the meaning of the actual, invented forms. Terracotta images have been moulded from the earth and strewn all over it from the most primitive and ancient times—pots, toys, magical and iconic figures, produced at minimal cost, used and thrown away. Their very perishability reduces the commodity aspect to almost nil. They are always, even in fun, *use* objects. Moreover, for all their perishability they are not exactly ephemeral because clay forms are virtually immanent in the earth itself, they are the earth's manifestations. In this sense the terracotta forms are virtually the repository of man's artistic instinct and thus of primitive traditions—the 'little tradition', as it is so often called, easily swallowed up and yet continuous at subterranean levels. Not perennial but with a deft capacity to survive nevertheless. It is to this tradition Subramanyan is committed.

Ideological Formation

Early Years

The artistic identity Subramanyan gains from his intelligent simulation of the artisanal tradition can be traced to a specific ideological formation during his youth. Subramanyan, we shall see, worries about the anomalous position of the modern artist who stands at the end of the logic of postrenaissance art. The very ideology that gains him his place in the living tradition of Indian art also poses a problem in relation to western representational art, especially in its conventional modes of oil and easel painting. His doubt is focused on the state of the artist's unbelonging because it reduces the possibility of art functioning as a viable language within the community. That this problematic can itself generate creative solutions will be seen when we discuss his glass paintings. Meanwhile in a brief account of his biography and education it is worth noting that the implicit ideology unfolds several facets that are alternatively positive and negative in terms of artistic practice as such.

Born in 1924 into a Tamilian family living in Kuthuparamba, Kerala,

Subramanyan was the youngest of eight children of whom only two brothers and one sister survived. His father, a revenue officer with the Government of India, admired Annie Besant and was inclined toward theosophical values. Subramanyan's boyhood was marked by a high level of literacy, a fairly frequent feature in Kerala. This was especially the case in the French-administered toy-town of Mahe, where he did his schooling. Subramanyan spent a lot of time at the well-stocked public library of the town where he could browse through French magazines which frequently featured art essays. Here he also came across *The Modern Review* and became acquainted with the writings of Indian intellectuals.

Before he was thirteen Subramanyan was a member of what was known as the Rationalists' Society, which attracted the more radical youngsters of the area. Already in his adolescence he knew some of the Marxists working to build a peasant and labour movement in the region. The charismatic peasant leader A.K. Gopalan was known to his family. At the same time Subramanyan knew the Gandhians working in the independence struggle. There was, we should recall, still a meeting point between the two ideologies in the Congress Socialist Party.

By the time he was fifteen Subramanyan's political inclinations were clearly marked by Gandhian ideas. He joined the Constructive Work Group promulgated by Gandhi; he worked in the Charkha Club, learning and then teaching spinning; and he talked to student groups engaged in national rejuvenation programmes. This was in 1939. It was these modest social work groups spread over the towns and villages of India that were to be the nuclei for political action when the ultimate call for freedom came.

While he did his Intermediate at a Jesuit college in Mangalore his political activities were limited, but his political reading widened to include, besides Marx and Gandhi, Lenin and the Fabians. He had been reading Indian philosophical and literary works, including their twentieth-century exposition. Now he went farther afield and read works on anthropology, psychoanalysis and, in time, modern literature, including contemporary masters like James Joyce. In 1941 he joined Presidency College, Madras, for an honours course in economics.

At the very instant of the 1942 Quit India call, Subramanyan led a march of Presidency students and became a well-known student leader in Madras. Later the students picketed the secretariat and the police rounded up the activists and took them to jail. Subramanyan spent six months in the Alipuram Camp jail in Bellary district (originally the Haidar Ali stables, converted in a hurry to house the Mopla rebels and now meant exclusively for political prisoners). Except for the convict warders who provided strange but welcome diversion, this was an elite group, including prominent members of the Quit India movement like C. Subramaniam and Gopala Reddy. An underground library and clandestine discussions kept the community of prisoners active. On his release in July 1943 Subramanyan worked in Madras as part of the vast

network of the national underground, which included at different ends Jayaprakash Narayan and the Kripalanis. He continued to meet, at Ammu Swaminathan's home, important nationalists like G. Ramachandran and N.G. Ranga.

But even while participating in the freedom struggle he was already withdrawing from any longterm commitment to political life. Nor was he in a position to resume his academic life as there was a ban against student activists. Just at this point there was a turn of events. One of his brothers who was a police officer (incidentally also the nationalist in the family) handed him a telegram from Nandalal Bose at Santiniketan admitting Subramanyan to Kala Bhavana and asking him to join forthwith.

There is of course a preceding story. Subramanyan had been an ailing child and often confined to the house. From the start he had scribbled and drawn with exceptional interest. He had also looked avidly at the fair wealth of pictures in the Mahe library and was not unfamiliar with the work of European masters as also the oriental arts, especially Japanese woodcuts. He knew and loved the painted wood sculptures of Kerala temples. Then in Madras, unhappy with conventional academics, his creative activity had stepped up. The drawings and watercolours he produced were taken by a solicitous friend to K.C.S. Paniker, then a young teacher at the Government College of Art in Madras, who in turn showed them to the principal, D.P. Roy Chowdhury. Subramanyan was summoned by the impetuous Roy Chowdhury who suggested that he waste no more time in joining an art school. Subramanyan prevaricated but began to drop in at the College of Art more often. Meanwhile, watching his growing inclination, his elder brother had written to Nandalal and elicited a favourable reply. Subramanyan was happy and excited at this *fait accompli*. He was of course familiar through reproductions with Nandalal Bose's work and that of other Bengal artists.

During his first years at Santiniketan Subramanyan kept in touch with the Congress Student Federation in Calcutta. But as he became immersed in the ambience of Santiniketan his political nationalism came to be more strongly layered with corresponding considerations about culture.

Tagore, Coomaraswamy, Gandhi

Santiniketan was planned quite systematically as a concentrically expanding model. At its heart Rabindranath Tagore introduced the concept of communion with nature through ritual celebration of the day and the changing seasons; from there he reached out to the sense of community most in touch with nature such as that of the ancient *tapovanas*; and then to the more pragmatic unit of the peasant village whereby you entered the realm of culture and society. In 1921 the institutions at Santiniketan were amalgamated into a university and called Visva-Bharati. At this point Rabindranath introduced the need for an integrated education that would sustain the values of this particular culture and society but then extend from local and

Indian to pan-Asian and international, to a humanist universalism. This education included scholarship in the preferred knowledge system, creative expression, as well as craft rejuvenation. It is significant that as a complementary institution to the schools of advanced learning and indeed as a utopian extension of his own artistic (and aristocratic) sensibilities which inclined him toward peasant and artisanal ways of life, Rabindranath established Sriniketan, a centre for rural reconstruction. The programme included better farming and health facilities and concentrated above all on craft training which was carried out with a view to helping children of neighbouring villages to gain self-employment.

The model can be looked at from various points of view. Its political implication would need detailed discussion. The overlapping concepts of universalism, orientalism and nationalism, as these feature in Rabindranath, need to be placed in the context of the colonial discourse as it grew apace in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One may also simply concentrate on the institutional embodiment of Rabindranath's ideas in a narrow if concrete discussion of educational ideology. It is most to our purpose to identify the aesthetic project implicit in the mainstream of national cultural resurgence and enshrined, so to speak, in Santiniketan.

In its more general aspect the aesthetic project was as follows: to attend to and participate in the Indian environment where the term is taken to include, in almost equal measure, nature and culture. For the artist close tuning with his natural environment meant developing something like an Indian/regional/local 'naturalism'. This itself involved a part-philosophic, part-materialist approach and synthesized into the idea of environment as culture. Culture itself was not an overarching phenomenon. Layered with regional, local specificities, the term culture indicated among other things concrete studies of the artisan and the artefact, conventions of different categories of art, the range of communicability as also the possibility of survival of these arts in a changing society.

Though these were not the terms used in Santiniketan, the concern with environment was a concern with the material manifestations of nature and culture, with the bond of human labour linking the two within what would be called the *living tradition* of creative practice.

As an artist Rabindranath's commitment to the living tradition came first and foremost through his creative choices, as for example his use as a poet of upanishadic verse, baul songs and folk lullabies, through his working the great range of artistic forms, both *margi* and *desi*. At the same time he enjoined his colleagues to resist spiritual and aesthetic (as for that matter, political) codification of forms on any rigid national or ethnic grounds, to open themselves out to world art movements thus enlivening their own practice and making it internationally viable and contemporary. This after all would be the best test of a living tradition:

we must know that there is no such thing as absolute caste restriction in human cultures; they ever have the power to combine and produce new variations, and such combinations have been going on for ages, proving the truth of the deep unity of human psychology. It is admitted that in Indian Art the Persian element found no obstacles, and there are signs of various other alien influences. China and Japan have no hesitation in acknowledging their debt to India in their artistic and spiritual growth of life. . . . Our artists were never tiresomely reminded of the obvious fact that they were Indians; and in consequence they had the freedom to be naturally Indian in spite of all the borrowings that they indulged in.⁶

At the level of theory it was Ananda Coomaraswamy who offered the more rigorous formulations on these issues and he was, as we know, in active alliance with Rabindranath and his circle during the early decades of this century and at the inception of Santiniketan. His contribution in defining the concept of a living tradition is most important; it is he who makes the *silpin* a symbol of India's cultural renaissance. We will recall that Coomaraswamy's very engagement with art developed from a specific concern for his native Kandyan crafts, as dealt with in his 1908 monograph, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. From thereon it developed into an exposition of the multilayered majesty of Indian civilization and art. While conceptualizing tradition he kept the artisan in full view, taking into account not only anthropological but also certain radical, sociological considerations.⁷ Thus investigating medieval craftsmanly traditions, he ran his thesis along the lines forwarded by nineteenth-century utopian socialists. He placed a wager on the rehabilitation of uprooted populations in the aftermath of industrialism through craft guilds and vocational communities of the same order. Indeed this can be called the political facet of his study of tradition. (Why tradition becomes a deliberately conservative concept for Coomaraswamy in later years need not be a part of this discussion.)

Gandhi had a distinct attitude on questions of environment, on aspects of cultural indigenism, and on the living tradition. These were built into his social and political programme. Pressing a spiritual (at times even seemingly fetishist) relationship to nature and land, he valorized rural life and made his unequivocal commitment to preserving the peasants' and artisans' means of livelihood. It was through the symbolism of the charkha that the economic and political aspirations of swadeshi and swaraj were posited. If then, throughout his life, Gandhi regarded village crafts and industry as a matter of life and death in the destiny of the villager and the only means of survival for the Indian people as a whole, Subramanyan for his part would like to believe that the Gandhian model of the village has its inadvertent aesthetic as it has its humane and ideological aspects. Contextually it presupposed a quasi-barter economy, even a vestige of which helps to stall the reifying tendency that sets in with mone-

tization. The quality of work that goes into a village product and its subsequent manner of consumption cannot, Subramanyan would like to believe, be computed in terms of wage labour or exchange value. Thus the product is not, strictly speaking, commodity proper. For the very reason that its aesthetic is far from superfluous it is complementary to its function.

Let me add that Subramanyan understands full well how the future of the artisan is part of a set of major and deeply troubled issues along which the entire political and economic orientation of the country can be debated. Even in the planned future of independent India the dilemmas have remained unsolved. Subramanyan has himself been involved for over three decades with the planning of handicraft and handloom sectors, and not just as an enlightened artist–designer (a capacity in which he has been associated with the Indian, Asian and World Crafts Councils). He has tried to intervene at the level of infrastructure, to reinfuse it with the Gandhian conviction in village self-sufficiency. Having worked with government agencies like the All India Handloom Board, his critique points precisely to the degree of disalignment in planning: paths of industrial development between small and big industry, between village and urban markets diverge to such an extent and to such disadvantage to the rural sector that there is no choice but to feed craft artefacts into an alienated market system. And then to hope that some benefit percolates through middlemen to the craftsmen whose substantial basis of survival has otherwise been eroded. Subramanyan’s sense of satisfaction that the government does at least take official cognizance of the problem—in a way that relatively few third-world societies have done—is tempered by a sense of defeat. The peasant–artisan’s positional identity in the village hierarchy and that of the village in the national economy continually dwindles.

Nandalal’s Pedagogic Influence

Subramanyan joined Santiniketan in 1944, three years after the death of Rabindranath Tagore, and received his art education under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose. The ‘master moshai’ of all seasons at Kala Bhavana, Nandalal was the most important artist of the nationalist period. Both Tagore and Gandhi regarded him their comrade-in-arms in transposing nationalist ideology on to creative practice.

Nandalal moved permanently to Santiniketan in 1922 and took over Kala Bhavana. He had been drawn towards orientalist aspirations as expressed by his master Abanindranath Tagore, and as developed further in exchanges between Indian artists and intellectuals in the Tagore circle in Calcutta. This included Coomaraswamy and the more militant Japanese exponent of orientalism, Okakura Kakuzo.⁸ Nandalal owed the formula for a creative dynamic, a triangular relationship between Tradition, Nature and Originality to Okakura Kakuzo. And to his emissary, the Japanese artist Arai Kampo from whom Nandalal learnt the Japanese brush technique, he owed not only the linguistic preparation to grasp the natural environment but a rich travelling

experience through Orissa which opened his eyes to the vastly variegated forms of what was too generally called the Indian tradition.

Gradually a pedagogical method was devised at Kala Bhavana for the Indian artist seeking to define her national and artistic identity. Tradition yielded the possibility of a communicable language that in turn assumed an empathy with environment and community. These organic structures nurtured the individual whose praxis, so to speak, furthered the tradition. The triangle was thus activated. It should be added that many great poets and artists in the early part of the century, and not in the orient alone, were preoccupied with these questions.

Notwithstanding Nandalal's artistic failures (as in the smaller of the mythological pictures painted in pseudo-classical modes and produced intermittently through his career), it is evident that he understood quite early in his development the liberating effects of contemporary environment and of vernacular vocabulary and skills. How vividly this was transmitted to his students is further evident from the way Subramanyan retells it decades later:

In Orissa he [Nandalal] noticed art in a grand spectrum—temple sculpture, scroll painting, textiles, toys, various categories of art of the home and the street, lined up one after the other. To him this was as illuminating an experience as the arts of Kandy were to Ananda Coomaraswamy. His roving eye hardly missed anything, whether it was a house-plan or a doorway or a step-ladder or a basket or a frisky dancer or a holy man with a stick and bowl. He saw all these in a connected panorama within a total fabric of culture, ranged in an established hierarchy. The functional and aesthetic subtleties of even those objects that were in the hierarchy, like a garland or a floor design of a humble ritual effigy, struck him with amazement. This opened his eyes, on the one hand, to the various strands of expertise and visual interest inherent in the Indian art tradition. It led him on the other to look upon its humblest craftsmen—artists with profound admiration and reverence.⁹

The curriculum at Kala Bhavana was in this respect radical. Students were introduced to craftsmen at work, they were encouraged to rework traditional materials and techniques, and the objects produced were exhibited and sold in local fairs with the hope of recycling the taste and skills of craftsmen—artists in the urban middle-class milieu, with the young artist forming a double link. A new Indian sensibility was to be hypothesized, created, designed.

Popular art animated the visual sense of the Bengal artists in another way. In terms of actual imagery it inclined them to visual narratives (derived from the great myths as well as from tribal fables), to hybrid figural iconography and swift stylistic abbreviations. These ideological choices, at least on par with the more sentimental revivalist trends, were made possible by the fact that in Bengal there continued to be,

until well into the twentieth century, an extraordinarily active popular tradition in the pictorial arts. This tradition had constantly responded to the social and economic changes that came with colonialism, industrialization and urbanism—the Kalighat paintings and the woodcut prints and illustrations of nineteenth-century Calcutta are a case in point. This made it expressly available to modern artists.

Nandalal's own translation of this popular resource can be seen somewhat later and most succinctly in the large set of pictures he did for the Haripura Congress of 1938: I am referring to the gouache-on-paper pictures that decorated the pandal and have come to be known as the Haripura posters. These emblematic images of the working people of India, composed in the styles of figuration in the *patas* and the relief sculpture of the terracotta temples of Bengal, came across as a viable art form of great vivacity. I emphasize this here because this was, like the developing oeuvre of Jamini Roy, a most felicitous use, in the context of Indian visual art, of images derived from popular sources. Further, he exceeded Roy's objective by serving political purposes directly and with radical effect on nationalist culture.

With Subramanyan this lineage finds its most articulate expression. If earlier Bengal artists took their cue from the avid eclecticism of popular Bengali culture as it developed from the nineteenth century, Subramanyan learnt to privilege this eclecticism of ideas and forms in terms of the theory and practice of twentieth-century art. He demonstrates how the hierarchical range of an art tradition is significant precisely in the way the chain can be playfully interlinked and continually transformed. Forms which are discretely categorized can be synthesized almost unaccountably in the perception and hands of the artist so that if you pick up one pictorial element—one sign, one gesture—a twin etymology unfolds, revealing on the one hand the environmental source and on the other the formal and iconographic code. The plurality of meanings in a language is always a happy bonus for an artist; for Subramanyan, who is especially engaged with the problems of devising a pictorial language, this double etymology of forms is especially fruitful. Popular and sophisticated, ambiguous and accessible, playful and mocking, obvious and self-parodying, Subramanyan's eclecticism extends the living tradition into an artistic practice with a distinctly modernist end.

Meanwhile, to complete the Santiniketan story ruled by the ideology of cultural indigenism, artistic practice at Kala Bhavana saw the living or popular traditions fuse with what I have already designated as Indian naturalism. But what was this Indian naturalism to be?

There is no specific landscape genre in the Indian pictorial tradition but because of the pervading orientalism in Bengal the far eastern approach to landscape was enthusiastically adapted. As for Nandalal, his own response to nature was emphatically extrovert; he responded to the animation suffusing nature with a matching exuberance. And in the two decades after he moved to Santiniketan, where the natural

element virtually overwhelms the imagination, he built up an abundant resource, a 'visual naturalist' vocabulary as Subramanyan calls it.¹⁰ It was descriptive at first, structural, rhythmic and notational in later years, developing at the end a calligraphic economy akin to eastern *taschism*.

All the while Nandalal maintained and conveyed to his students that technical brilliance must be complemented by a warm zeal and moral purpose: to gain an awareness and the expressive means to grasp the environment was to establish a sense of belonging. I have already talked about this. Here I want to add that the eastern technique sometimes gave way by default to western naturalism on the grounds that both traditions place value on observation and visual fact. Or, to put it differently, the more demanding methodological implications of the oriental tradition were sometimes squandered in favour of this empiricism, and even apparently lyrical and dramatic expressions of nature turned out to be somewhat banal. At its weakest the influence of Nandalal devolved into a compulsive sketching programme. Perhaps what was wanting was the quality of reverie and what reverie makes inevitable, a more fully developed phenomenology for relaying nature and human environment within a philosophical continuum.

Art-historical debates even in Europe pose naturalism and modernism as contradictory tendencies. In India, during the phase of national resurgence when the aesthetic project took on the concern with environment and when environment was understood as the nature-culture continuum, modernism was treated as an alien ideology and source of reification. Modernism declares not only culture to be in discontinuous relationship with nature, it declares aesthetic traditions to be disjunctive and art practice to be manifestly constructed. It undertakes a persistent formal deconstruction of established meanings. Yet modernism was already, from the 1920s, imbricated in the national and popular objectives of art in Bengal. At Santiniketan it was clearly manifest in Rabindranath Tagore's life-work. The pupils of Nandalal were prepared to cut away from the moral injunctions against the west and therefore against modernism. Another take on the question of nature and culture was in the offing at Santiniketan from the 1930s.

Here we should turn to Benodebehari Mukherjee, Nandalal's student and young colleague at Kala Bhavana. He imparted to Subramanyan, his student in turn and then lifelong friend, the legacy of an artist-scholar capable of grasping the principles of the modernist revolution.

First his way of seeing. Constrained by poor eyesight, Benodebehari saw things at a distance in a broad gestalt, and then in close vicinity as *minutiae*. These two ways of seeing were translated one in terms of the other by a visual code that Subramanyan calls the calligraph. Calligraphic painting involves different sets of relationships: brush to hand, the movement of hand to formal components, the standard unit to visual facts. These analogous units constitute the final image



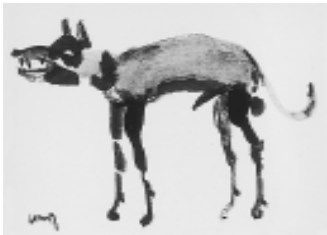
10 K.G. Subramanyan, *Figure and Mask*, 1978



11 K.G. Subramanyan, *Hanuman*, 1979



12 K.G. Subramanyan, *Dog*, 1956



Above, middle, below: K.G. Subramanyan,
13 *Monkey*, ca. 1978; 14 *Goat*, ca. 1978;
15 *Dog*, ca. 1978

which is systematic as it is ‘integral, spontaneous, irreversible’.¹¹ ‘The image and its object-correlate stand in a sort of resonating tension, holding in their interspace various physical, often metaphysical intonations.’¹²

For this act of seeing to be thus transcribed into eastern terminology a way of thinking about nature is presupposed; more specifically, a way of introspecting about nature where problems of representation are subsumed into those of space, structure, metaphor. Benodebehari Mukherjee’s images of nature are warm, tactile and specific (the fantastically eroded red earth of Birbhum, the scrub and the flaming simul tree are but a few examples). There is simultaneously a conceptual vastness by way of metaphor and by way of a disinterested structural autonomy of the image. There is a literal and conceptual vastness in the way space is enfolded and then released to extend meaning.

Benodebehari’s greatest contribution is to the art of the mural and here oriental aesthetics is linked to narrative modes of several traditions. He looks to certain prime formulations of a humanist (realist) art in the frescos of Buddhist India and of the Italian renaissance; he also looks to Mughal illuminations and Japanese scrolls to find a means to narrate what is not really a story but more a history, an allegory, a pageant. Benodebehari Mukherjee’s Hindi Bhavana mural of medieval saints is a grand procession of the holy life in India but of holiness that is to be found in the everyday lives of householders, craftsmen, minstrels and priests alike.

India has a riverine identity in name, concept and ideal; it is this life–force that Benodebehari portrays in the mural. But not through some general notion of perenniality nor as an effusion. What he does is to give the rich hierarchy of values and wide-ranging eclectic references in Indian life and thought a harmonic pictorial structure; a synthesis in the precise sense in that it is able to yield fresh theses on historicity for contemporary understanding of syncretic traditions.

The fresco was executed in 1946–47 and Subramanyan worked on it exactly in the way apprentices worked with their masters in earlier times. This one example is sufficient to prove that Subramanyan was taken through the grand portals to his cultural identity.

The other major influence on Subramanyan was his teacher and friend

Ramkinkar Baij. An artist of passionate temperament, Ramkinkar was an undoctriinaire anarchist; without being an ideologue he was a virtual revolutionary in his time. Making forays into cubist–expressionist modes to give to his toiling subjects, for example the santal tribals, the structural basis to become monuments to their own energy, he could be seen to have crossed over to the side of modernism. Known best of all as the boldest of Indian sculptors, Ramkinkar was also a prolific painter of watercolour landscapes. He was also an easel painter developing, virtually on his own in Santiniketan, an exuberant rural genre allegorizing struggle. From Benodebehari, the taoist monk as he calls him, Subramanyan gained the gravity of the artist-life. From Ramkinkar, whom he calls in comparison the ‘punch-drunk baul in love with the iridescent panorama of life’, Subramanyan got the courage to be iconoclastic, to experiment.¹³ Subramanyan’s early paintings are virtually in a direct line with those of Ramkinkar.

It needs to be said here that though he deeply believes in a significant relationship between the artist and his environment, Subramanyan for his part does not seem to have been drawn to nature as such, not at least in the same way as any of his Santiniketan mentors. This may well be a reaction, a modernist resistance to the modes of conceptualizing on and representing nature in its superabundance. Be that as it may, there is a relative eclipse of the landscape in Subramanyan’s work and it is only in those little card-packs of brush-and-ink drawings that images of nature feature as such (*Illus. 13, 14, 15*). These little ink pictures are stereotypically an orientalist encyclopedia of natural species—monkeys, goats, pigeons, crows, donkeys, trees, sometimes bunches of fish, bowls of flowers, and baskets of vegetable and fruit. These are drawn to whet Subramanyan’s perceptual and drawing skills, to literally keep his eye and hand working in effortless coordination, and to keep his humour sharp. The creatures are lively anatomical studies but equally they are meant to display animal follies: grace, cussedness, conceit and a randy sexuality. And when the animals enter his paintings they do so in archly stylized ways so that one might say that nature’s creatures in their mythic mutations are invested with mischievous intent to mimic and multiply human follies, thereby subverting the sanctity of both man and nature (*Illus. 10, 11, 12*).

Taking the cue from Subramanyan’s irreverence one can say retroactively that despite pedagogically positioned taboos some crucial principles of modernism were tested, undertaken, realized in the work of the younger generation of artists at Santiniketan—by Benodebehari, Ramkinkar and then Subramanyan. Indeed if their position is called heretical in the Santiniketan context it is only if we see ideology as a stereotyping function. Santiniketan as nurturing ground should equally be seen in terms of creative contradiction which resulted, even after protracted doubt, in unexpected resolutions.

Modernist Pros and Cons

Genre

I should now like to proceed along the course of Subramanyan's career in oil painting, studying his choices at the level of practice in the period 1950–75. First, his interest in genre. I use the term to mean a certain established relationship between subject-matter and pictorial convention which the artist may use unconsciously or deliberately, for positive or negative signification. Genres may support ideological consideration; on the other hand, by the very fact that a genre is something like an infrastructure for expressive purposes an artist may use it to explore linguistic variations on the motif.

Subramanyan's interest in the neutrality of subject comes close to that of the cubists. Though apparently indifferent to subject-matter, the cubists make their 'man with pipe', 'woman with mandolin' pictures at once personal and emblematic. There is an inclusion of souvenirs which refer the viewer, through a personal code, to a bohemian sense of community still cherished by the cubists. The structuring principle, however, points towards a subliminal futurism: a changing perception of reality, or rather, changing perception as such, wherein reality telescopes into art and the picture surface acts as a shifting interface between the two. The cubists are interested in the techniques of fabricating this elusive interface, so is Subramanyan.

Let us simply list Subramanyan's main subjects over the four decades of his painting. Pictures done in 1949–51 and titled, serially, 'woman with child', 'woman with object', incorporate multiple views of the limbs and face; they are synthetically designed images (*Illus. 16, 17, 18*). These are followed in 1956–57 by a set of pictures of animals—dogs, cats, birds—sometimes mockingly carnivorous. These in turn are followed by paintings of figures and animals—a girl decorated with pigeons, a woman hugging a rooster—that have an iconic aspect.

Interspersed with these he makes paintings that may be called quasi-realistic. Take the mural *Industry*, executed in Baroda in 1955. During the decade of the 1950s many painters try and reconcile two opposing tendencies of modern painting: a decorative and symbolically compact image drawn from the mainstream of high modernism, and the more descriptive images of everyday life accompanied by a revived polemic on realism. Perhaps this alternation between the two streams comes about in the 1950s because one phase of avantgarde modernism is at its end and there is doubt about future directions. In what I call the quasi-realistic mode, Subramanyan does some interesting graphics in England, followed in India by somewhat more sentimental paintings (such as *Man Selling Cocks* and *Landscape in the Evening* painted in 1958 and 1960 respectively). But content never being his major preoccupation, the choice is every time settled in favour of the obvious and the ordinary made into an everyday icon. It is not even the iconic that he favours so much as sets of pictorial conventions that underlie any kind of visual symbolism.

16 K.G. Subramanyan, *Woman at Tap*, 194917 K.G. Subramanyan, *Woman with Lamp-II*, 1951

In the next phase, during 1961–64, the paintings are almost exclusively still-lives: tables piled with objects of a leisurely repast or with the bric-a-brac of a studio. These fit his preferred brief, being demonstrably genre pictures with decorative possibilities. Following this he takes another logical step and goes on to paint a whole series of interiors, mostly studio interiors, with idling figures. Consider him in the context of Braque's late studio paintings where he foregrounds the structuralist basis of the modernist image; the sublimity of pictorial space; the (invisible) presence of the self-in-the-studio—a pictorial hermiticism that turns into an allegory for being in the world. Braque offers the terms of modernist autonomy and indeed a modernist poetics. However Subramanyan's straight and steady 'progress' places him in the lineage not only of the great Braque, but also among already conventionalized picture-makers in the European, but especially English, art milieu of the time. It must also be said that this academicism is not the inevitable result of choosing a genre. Even so modest an artist as Giorgio Morandi, who paints bottles all his life, will prove that the image can be construed to remain elusive to simple subject categories by a metaphysical vision.

While anonymity is a virtue Subramanyan would like to establish in his work, sublimity is not. This begins to be clear around 1966 when his still-life and studio pictures become not studies from objects as such (*nature morte* as in French) but forms animated by the quizzical eye of the artist. The content is more camouflaged

18 K.G. Subramanyan, *Sitting Woman*, 195119 K.G. Subramanyan, *Seated Woman*, 1958

but the colours are gaudy and the shapes wag and beckon. What these are, in fact, is a voyeur's version of the interior, a kind of subgenre one might say, and I am including here all the pictures up to the end of the 1960s he titles variously as 'studio' and 'interior'. It is only around the mid-1970s that the content shifts significantly. Pictures titled 'windows' are a reduction of the interior to a passing peepshow; the 'terrace' paintings are an extension of the interior, an extension of the everyday space into what the oriental tradition sees as lovers' space, the very contours of the objects within it metered to cradle lovers' dalliance. In the mid-1970s Subramanyan breaks with his own constraining parodies and transfigures the European genre of the interior by the very alternations of rhythm and space.

Rules of the Game

But this quick transformation will make sense only after a detailed analysis of his pictorial means as they develop over the twenty-five years under review, starting with the very use of the medium of oils, his handling of pigment in that medium, and the colour and surface thus obtained.

The medium of oils was far from favoured in Santiniketan. It is true that Benodebehari Mukherjee did some oils, that Ramkinkar Baij did a large number over twenty years, and that both artists were Subramanyan's direct mentors. But the overwhelming preference as well as skills were devoted to gouache, tempera and various

modes of fresco painting. Add to this the peculiar fact that by and large Bengal painting, the Santiniketan school in particular, is not inclined to a variegated use of colour, and it is clear that Subramanyan inherits some handicaps.

The Bengal painter who can be called a colourist is the Calcutta-based Jamini Roy. The Santiniketan painters virtually dismiss him as misguided. The set of gouache pictures Nandalal paints in 1937–38 for the Haripura Congress where he makes overt reference to the *pata* traditions using colour with great vivacity are a brief and brilliant deviation. But not only are these a mere episode in Nandalal's own career, Subramanyan refers to them much later in his glass paintings.

In this respect Santiniketan gives Subramanyan a mixed sense of guilt and challenge vis-a-vis oils and its modernist uses. Matters are not helped by the fact that his second schooling takes place in England. During 1955–56 Subramanyan is on a scholarship at the Slade School, London. The English tradition is not strong either in oils or in colour, J.M.W. Turner notwithstanding. While Subramanyan is in England he likes Victor Pasmore and Ceri Richards; the early work of Roger Hilton and Patrick Heron make relevant reference; William Coldstream is the Slade professor at the time. The options—one abstract and austere formal, the other loose-limbed and graphic, another literal but reticent—do not encourage a particularly sensuous response to painting.

Here it is worth reminding ourselves how different the watercolour process is from that of oil painting. First, with watercolour or gouache you work constantly with the white surface of the paper which acts as blank space but also as luminous foil; the colours scatter and converge, never losing reference to the white heart of the rainbow, so to speak. Second, you have to work quickly in watercolour and with infallible skill because the image bears no reworking. Subramanyan tries to bring the watercolour technique into a kind of equation with oils but to the latter's disadvantage. The medium of oils allows for surfaces that are matt and opaque, transparent and iridescent, but above all plastic: you build up the image from the tone and depth of the hues and in the process evolve the relationship between ground and image. Subramanyan tries to work on a contrary principle. Disliking the viscous gleam of oil paint, he mixes white with the pigment and succeeds usually in making it chalky and brittle. (He also tries, in the still-lives, to use encaustic and gritty materials like sand.) Third, rather than work out the image from the density of pigment and medium he tries to keep an improvised look in the painting while often painfully reworking it. So that you have this slightly artificial animation of gesture against what are often plain, lifeless colour 'backgrounds'.

Not that he is not aware of the problems. His very choice among European painters points to a need to enrich and elaborate the painted surface: Braque and Matisse, and then Nicolas de Stael who provides a rather more obvious tactility of colour and surface. And indeed there are a few paintings in the middle period where



20 K.G. Subramanyan, *Studio*, 1965

Subramanyan does achieve what would be called a confident and relaxed painterliness, as for example in *Seated Woman* (1958, *Illus. 19*) and the *Studio* picture of the mid-1960s. But the real change comes about in 1966–67 during his stay in New York and it is accounted for by a new command over design.

In considering Subramanyan's disposition of mark, line, edge and shape within the picture-frame, one must remember that while he is astute in the matter of design in several other media and techniques such as toys and terracottas and the later glass pictures, in oil painting he has to overcome yet another prejudice: against the easel format as such and what it recapitulates of the western tradition of painting.

The picture on the wall is an object of gratuitous dimensions where the frame conspicuously determines the compositional principle (in a way that it does not in a miniature or a fresco). Where, moreover, the format corresponds to that of the window and the mirror, thus setting up analogic functions vis-a-vis the viewer's subjective and objective worlds. Is it a frame for looking out into the world and looking into oneself and thus more than a frame, a paradigm? The easel picture is indeed an aspect of the western world view where you find this precisely matched development: the ego not only reflects but is constituted by the narcissistic gaze, hence the importance of the mirror; and rationality is, as it were, the perspectival threshold, the horizon of the perceived world, hence the window. The language that develops with and for

easel painting is realistic. This is realism aspiring to be so transparently natural that you not only forget its linguistic aspect, you begin to regard the mode as coinciding with the modes of framing the self and the world as such rather than as reality cognized by individuals within a specific historical epoch.

Uncomfortable with this entire logic from premise to conclusion, Subramanyan demonstrates how far removed an Indian painter may find himself from the tradition of western easel/oil painting. The renaissance painter used the paradigm of the mirror and window, the cubist painter uses the diagram, providing only a notational, codic reference to reality. That Subramanyan proceeds to address the problem via modernism proper is paradoxical but apt; at many levels the modernist revolution in art runs counter to classical assumptions and Subramanyan demonstrates in what could be called his artistic failures, how a stranger deals with a hegemonic culture through its own subversive moments—as for example, ‘the moment of cubism’, in John Berger’s title phrase.¹⁴

From the start Subramanyan uses antinaturalistic devices such as a heavy black line that welds the images and makes the picture appear a little like a modernist adaptation of stained-glass constructions. The stained-glass artists of course use all the ingenuity at their command to make a formal and narrative virtue of technical problems. Subramanyan, though he may love the early Christian art forms and the great medieval cathedrals, cannot clarify the hues to anything near the brilliance of coloured glass, leave alone appropriate those cunning means of composition where the pattern of figure and ground, conspicuously wedged and disaligned, becomes decoratively compact. The black line that grips the image should be seen rather as a much used postcubist convention. It is a legacy of Picasso furthered by artists loosely grouped together as late expressionists, as for example Graham Sutherland, Bernard Buffet, Rufino Tamayo and not least, our own Francis Newton Souza, who uses the line like an armature for an effigy and achieves his purpose remarkably: of ‘primitivizing’ the image and acting as contemporary exorcist. Subramanyan is not an expressionist, indeed he keeps the image in low profile with such didactic persistence that the heavy constructional device looks like a misapplication of means. Why he uses it at all may, as he says, have to do with his interest in converting a ‘volatile sketch’ to a ‘stable hieroglyph’.¹⁵ In the process he wishes perhaps to draw attention to his graphic accomplishment—and away from that of surface and colour. While his delineation is firm, Subramanyan, like many other Indian artists, has a problem with the definition of the image: a problem with resolving the relationship between figure and ground, between volume and plane, between the linear and painterly attributes of an oil painting.

The quality of sensuousness is distinct to the material and technique of oils. Consider once again how cubism, a seemingly nonsensuous and diagrammatic mode, still displays the keenest interest in the way painted planes meet each other and

reverberate, the image coming to life by this precisely formulated contour. Even Mondrian may be seen to maintain this quality; certainly his successors, for example Barnett Newman, work on the principle that line, shape, colour must be grounded, that they should butt against each other so as to make live contact along the edge.

Subramanyan's concern with the problem is seen in a fairly large set of paintings done between 1960–65. These are straightforward still-lives where he replaces the stiff grid with a more fluid one, bringing to the surface his enduring interest in devising an ornamental principle of construction based on loosely interlocked contours (*Illus. 20*). His chosen mentor during this period is undoubtedly Braque. The line now loops around the objects, gradually taking on the characteristic of automatic writing. When the motif moves on to studio interiors the gestural line, usually white, is rapidly brushed over so that it screens the image. In the ambiguity of positive and negative space, in the depths of the studio, between the grids and above the surfaces, figural signs disport. Then, through the 1960s, the brushing is further stylized and the design of the picture comes to be ruled by a calligraphic hand.

When Subramanyan moves to New York his canvases are frequently put together as polyptichs (*Illus. 21*). Two or four or six or eight units are joined together, initially for convenience as the New York studio was small, then this becomes a design proposition with an implied motif. Aligned along the right edge of each joined panel are bunches of curled forms which uncurl against the flat colour space across to the left

frame. Like confetti. But the confetti is too animate and it is thickened at the edges. You think in amusement of a lavishly tossed octopal salad decked with fruit crescents and flowers. Then you notice how the tentacles twine so that the ensemble looks like a dance of limbs, assorted girl-legs tangled with the male counterpart of tusk and hook. What we have now is a parody, or proxy, of life-forms in a coupling game.

As much as the subject is camouflaged, the design becomes vivid. And as soon as Subramanyan is able to achieve this visual double-take all the other elements in the picture become articulate. The colours become rich, the problems of graphic rigidity and the uneasy edge are nearly overcome. The brushing-in of the pigment, the dark-



21 K.G. Subramanyan, *Red Dormitory* (polyptych), 1967

ening and brightening of the brushmark by overpainting leaves the contours active against the colour surface.

I have suggested earlier that this change is connected with his stay in New York. It would be more correct to say that a breakthrough was already indicated, but that while working in New York he produced some very accomplished abstract pictures not unrelated to the current New York scene. A dominant feature at the time was precisely the design of a picture. Clement Greenberg, we must remember, was still a force in the 1960s; painters like Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland and Ellsworth Kelly worked conspicuously with principles of symmetry, with negative and positive alignments of shapes against flat, bright, hard surfaces. Without identifying with any of the current movements as such, Subramanyan derived one lesson from all—from abstract as also certain pop painters. He became unapologetically formal, allowing himself to do flat, decorative paintings like *Figure in Interior* and the succeeding *Windows I, II, III*, done after his return to India in 1968–69.

It seems as though Subramanyan needed to free himself from the overwrought culture of oil painting as it is practised in Europe and to take on the boldness of the Americans. The framing and compactness of the easel picture had, as we have noted, always troubled Subramanyan. The first step was to allow the formal iconicity of the image to disintegrate; now he broke up his own mode of ornamental clustering as well. In the polyptichs the image is fragmented, repeated, serialized. These are in a sense murals miniaturized, or rather, they transpose the values of the one upon the other to subvert in the bargain the easel format.

In describing genres I have already mentioned that Subramanyan's *Windows* suggest a cartoon strip narration; they help the viewer to take the imagery ironically. This is not only by way of the thematic aspect of voyeurism but by a trick of design: by alternating figurative and nonfigurative elements in equal measure; by variegating negative and positive shapes; by shifting the horizon line in each window-space to provide different viewing angles into an interior, the goings-on in which have been abbreviated to mock signs and bring the narrative sequence to naught.

The modernist principle of design with its stylistic abbreviations often gives way in the second part of the century to reductionist propositions. Late modernist painting as well as pop art demonstrate this tendency. There is this side to Subramanyan's New York connection: given his inclination to detach himself from subject, and subjectivity, he finds a way of construing the image with a chancy and wry sense of humour. This is the brittle end of modernist art before which the great modernists always stop short; where you attenuate art practice to become reified as retinal stimuli, visual sensation, kitsch and fetish.

The three paintings of the mid-1970s that have been mentioned before, *Terrace-I*, *Terrace-II*, *Interior with Figures*, bring to a fruitful conclusion Subramanyan's formal manoeuvres. *Terrace-II* (*Illus. 22*) in particular ties up the oeuvre into a



22 K.G. Subramanyan, *Terrace-II*, 1974

bouquet. Held out in confidence and quite lovely to behold, it makes sense of virtually twenty-five years of what I call the modernist pros and cons Subramanyan has posed in his paintings.

The face of *Terrace-II* is a bright fresh ultramarine blue, a fully saturated blue which changes in parts to turquoise green, and grey. Complementing the blue there is orange, a bright lozenge hue turning to pink and citrus yellow by the addition of a flaky, softly brushed-in white. White is the common denominator—cream-white of the canvas, zinc-white from the tube—this very vivid painting is both drawn and modelled in white. From the point of view of design this implies the conversion of negative into positive space; also the conversion of picture space into picture surface so that the structural problem becomes essentially a matter of decorative layout, a visual spectacle presented frontally.

Just as there are continuities in colour by subtle variations of surface, there is a simple module which brings homogeneity to the apparently spontaneous design. This is a looped petal-shape that springs into a scallop, plumps into a fruit; it also forms the silhouette of a bush and then, discarding the contouring function, opens out into pure arabesque, flowering over the surface, curling in and then out from the edges. All these exuberant shapes are held in place by a frame-within-frame device which even as it holds the picture also breaks, by a cunningly disaligned grid, the continuities of the arabesque.

Here is a picture that relates motif to signs: food and flowers, a bolster, climbing vines, frames of an imaginary canopy, serve as clues in a space for lovers' dalliance as I have said before, and the picture refers to oriental indulgence of pleasure. But further, the motif is related to format: all the clues are set out as equations based on the principle of ornamental rhythm, the formal counterpart of the spirit of play. Most of his preceding paintings appear to be exercises from this point of retrospect; suddenly, in a typically oriental way, Subramanyan is master.

Modernism in the Balance

Subramanyan's relationship to western painting has been problematic not only at the level of language and format but also because he feels a certain ideological reserve towards the flaming, confessionally exposed selfhood that is conceived by the Judaic Christian tradition and consolidated during the romantic movement. In India the oriental repose of Santiniketan is dislocated precisely by the romantics within the milieu, like Ramkinkar—and decidedly outside. The very definition of the modern Indian artist comes to rest on the existential plank with Amrita Sher-Gil and the Progressive artists from Bombay. Souza, for example, arrives at an intensity of expression and style with a swift, youthful arrogance typical of the romantic-expressionist sensibility. It is a moot question whether there are more casualties among such artists but it does seem to be true that they arrive at an image, that it comes across more immediately and with a certain elan compared to the more cautious, problem-solving, and in that sense pedagogic artists like Benodebehari Mukherjee and Subramanyan.

That modernism is always in the balance with Subramanyan is clear considering the way he uses the oil-and-easel format, language, genre and motif. Considering how much of his work is based on parody, he may also be putting into the balance his unease at adopting western modernism after all. We have seen how he parodies the window and mirror aspect of the easel picture, thus inverting the existential presuppositions of the viewer. This is tricky ground not just for the viewer but for the artist himself. The persistent sceptic, if he resorts to mere inversion, tends to become academic. Through all its revolutions modernism does continually commit itself to the existential concerns that Subramanyan parries. He finally rescues his work by means of that same wit, but by taking it further than parody and its implied

pedagogy. Splendidly displayed in phase after phase of his glass paintings, this is a kind of cultural wit, abundantly nourished by the popular art forms of India but also by the modernist initiative to construct and then deconstruct the image in full play. It is finally with the reverse pictures on glass that the inhibiting aspect of Subramanyan's problem-solving project is overcome.

The relevant question is, what modernism does Subramanyan adopt? During this entire century there is, counterposed with the romantic position, a structuralist–semiotic enquiry into the meaning of reality. And if ontological considerations have led to one kind of truth the investigation of reality down to its method of fabrication, its intricate sign systems, has led to another. The truths coincide when investigation leads to a recreation of meaning.

With these alternatives in view it should be possible to see the positive aspect of the problematic Subramanyan poses. If it is from an antipathy to the more flamboyant expression of self that he prefers to be reserved to the point of seeming disengaged, it is from an active engagement with the linguistic aspect of art that he prefers the more anonymous style of expression. The implications of this are manifold. Enquiry into the language of art leads automatically to anthropological questions: about the function of art as a symbolic system, about art as sign in primitive and traditional societies. Looking at it the other way round, an anthropological interest in the art of other cultures leads to linguistic concerns and thus concern about significances within one's own culture. This finds evidence in the development of modern art.

Subramanyan's choice to work out an impersonal system of pictorial signs makes him both demonstrably Indian and modern. His modernity is linked to the semiotic option and his indigenism is reinforced by precisely this choice as it gives him access to the premodern cultures of India. Where tradition is still alive to the extent that a collective system of significations can be encountered—as in peasant and tribal communities of India, art can be said to equal language. Further, the key for the language of construction in traditional societies is craft *practice* and its differentiated technical systems. Subramanyan is devoted to this learning process.

In an analogous sense cubism may be seen to be the intellectual pun, the abstracting game, the process of fabrication deployed to build up a linguistic structure for modern art. Subramanyan's work clearly acknowledges this. The moment he succeeds in making a synthesis of the concepts involved in the seeing and making, in the contructional devices of one convention against the other, he overcomes the merely demonstrational efforts at synthesis to produce a uniquely integrated art.

The Floating World

Subramanyan's reverse paintings on glass and acrylic, made in several phases since 1979, are funny, flamboyant, malicious, seductive. Though little in size and perhaps minor in genre, they demonstrate and open up possibilities beyond many

selfconsciously profound pictures. They capture a pervasive sensuousness that is no longer a hide-and-seek of phantoms but of characters in a masquerade. There is a conspicuous close-up of figures and objects clutched together in a sparkling focus.

The artist gives us his gilded gaze, making the very act of looking a confirmation of pleasure, making pleasure come full circle as the very basis of art. He gives us the erotic moment caught askance in a golden mirror (*Illus.* 23, 24, 25, 26).

A quick reminder of the motifs in play will be useful. In his first set of glass pictures the girls sometimes resemble young love goddesses in a pictorial set-up that makes them mock-iconic. In the second set, done on acrylic sheet in 1980–81, the decked-up women throw their limbs about as they gobble fruit or fondle their arch and cocky pets. There is an array of objects, each one preened to captivate the mistress in the form of a fetish. These are clearly scenarios of an erotic business. In the next sets the sensual life takes over: from grotesque representations of follies to an orgiastic display of energy that pushes familiar iconography far afield into social iconoclasm (*Illus.* 27, 28).

It is important first of all to note the technique of reverse painting as it conditions the touch and manner of Subramanyan's painting. For the technique itself induces a certain gesture of the artist's hand where implicit in that gesture is the artist's visual wit. There is punning on corresponding sources and a swift euphoric eclecticism that thereby indicates a genre. Thence you notice the specific linguistic considerations: how the signs are animated and offered in this throwaway manner; how they indicate a polyvalent motif only to open it out in a demonstration of its structural rules. And you notice that the artefact, more than its motif, signifies the covert transaction between convention and caprice in the actual making of it.

The paintings are done with gouache and sometimes with oil on transparent glass (or acrylic sheet). Because the paint has to be seen through, the painting procedure is reversed: hence reverse painting. The details, as for example the contours of bodies, facial features, embellishments like jewellery and textile patterns, are painted first; even the shading or modelling is done first. Broad surfaces like the colour of skin, the ground colour of the dress or curtain or durrie, are painted in layers over these. Since the details are painted first they are often prominent and lavish and their final effect can come as a surprise even for the artist because every layer of paint conceals the earlier layers. In such a process, then, disalignments can occur in the marks, contours, surfaces which Subramanyan, as indeed the traditional glass painter, anticipates and uses to his advantage. There is unaccountable delight when the viewer notices an image in double or multiple register. It encourages the matching trick of eye and hand, even as it provides the giveaway moment, revealing pictorial representation for what it is: a matter of building up, interposing, adjusting paint surfaces.

We should note that there are resemblances here to the techniques and effects of watercolour, gouache and tempera painting, and not only because this is also



Above left: 23 K.G. Subramanyan, *Girl with Cat-III*, 1979.
Above right: 24 K.G. Subramanyan, *Girl with Cat-II*, 1979.
Below left: 25 K.G. Subramanyan, *Girl with Pot of Flowers*, 1981.
Below right: 26 K.G. Subramanyan, *Girl on a Settee*, 1979



Above: 27 K.G. Subramanyan, *Still Life with Flying Angel*, 1980.
 Below: 28 K.G. Subramanyan, *Pink Woman, Blue Man*, 1980

the medium used for painting on glass (with the addition, if necessary, of oils). The figure-ground relationship, for example, and the importance of the left-out space is similar. Except that in the glass picture the left-out space, which is crystal, shows up as gold because gold paper is slipped between the glass and the backing frame. Then, depending on how the light falls on the painting the gold recedes and the image appears in virtual silhouette, or it radiates, pushing the image to the surface.

In traditional glass paintings gold backing is used in the form of metal foil or gold paper; often gold leaf, small sequins and mica-chip decorations are used. In Subramanyan's pictures the gold paper is a literal foil and support for the image and so even its decorative function is slightly different. Highlights over the face of a dressing-table mirror, tinkling ornaments, or a cat's whiskers for that matter, become little discs, flashes and streaks of gold sparkling beneath the crystal surface of the unpainted glass. In addition there are the usual petals, braids, eyelets, *lahariya*, all worked in as see-through patterns. When broad swashes of paint are applied they are many-hued, but each hue is set in gold. White, rose-pink, ultramarine, black, and gold. Ochre, emerald, purple, and gold. Scarlet, black, and gold. White, jade, crimson, and gold. Transparent or opaque, the colour becomes more jewel-like, more brilliant, because of the setting.

To add further dazzle, the artist adopts a virtuoso manner of delineation which resembles the ever-popular

skill of the performer's pirouette: swooping contours, curves and counter-curves, forming a conspicuous rhythm of arabesques. This was true of the set of oil paintings done at the end of the 1970s that I have already referred to. The glass pictures in particular have this inner gamelike dynamic, as they have an ornamental locking system where the convex and concave parts fit neatly, giving the rectangular face of the picture a firm compactness. Here it is worth reiterating that while ornamental construction is an attribute of a great deal of traditional art, both oriental and occidental, its appropriation by the moderns makes it more accessible to Subramanyan. Along with an obvious reference to Matisse, there is a reference back to cubism in the way interlocking shapes are faceted and joined, located and dislocated in a shallow planular space, giving the motif its partial, profiled aspect. More specifically, the reference is to the more decoratively designed phase of synthetic cubism.

But it is the gesture that is particularly important in Subramanyan's glass paintings, and it is important in an oriental way. The gesture is a part of the pictorial narrative as in so much of Indian art. It belongs to the traditions of mime and dance where references to the context being usually notational and sparse, the entire work of narration has to be done by the inflexion of face, body, hands. The performing artist presents a gestalt where the gesture attracts attention, has a provocative thrust, but retains at the same time a close ornamental fit in the overall structure. Consider on the one hand kathakali and on the other bharatanatyam, to see how the functionality of the gesture, its compositional stress and rhythmic elaboration in performance, is so pertinently worked out. Especially how in each form it changes between *abhinaya* and *nritta* with deliberate give-and-take of meanings between purely formal and semantically rich moments.

Extending the simile, notice the quick, cunning move from arabesque to gesture in Subramanyan's paintings. Having practised so long with abstract shapes, it requires little manoeuvre to make a particular curl and twist of form into hand, plant, vase, chair, pillow, bird, or bosom. A range of inanimate and animate forms become in a sense equal in the act of being thus signified—formal improvisation to metaphoric extension to subject metamorphosis, and back to improvisation. Subramanyan quite likes to do this, to create an equality between object-forms through language and thereby to make a metalinguistic point about material mutability.

So much of Indian art, Subramanyan says, 'is concerned with rousing an inert thing to life and enlarge its visual reference'.¹⁶ And he goes on to say:

The Indian artist exults in the visual world with a knowledge of its variety, impermanence, and changeability; he reacts to it in an internal way, looking for its visual constituents, not its immediate facts. He brings his exultation to the object he creates in a midway fusion, his terms of reference contained within the nature of the object, and so relative and semantically variable.¹⁷

This is like the prefiguration of cosmic design, an oriental predilection to be sure, except that it is worked out without any spiritual effusion. The linguistic and metalinguistic, the material and cosmic are treated as an evolution/devolution of forms, as an active morphology with a scale of meanings.

Other Popular Traditions

There are four different pictorial techniques and modes in relation to which Subramanyan's paintings can be seen to establish correspondences. There is, first, the tradition of glass painting which flourished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in several parts of India such as Mysore and Tanjore, Maharashtra and Hyderabad, Kutch, Saurashtra and Rajasthan, Oudh and Bengal.¹⁸ Not only do the technique and style vary in each region, the artists in question do too. They could be traditional artisans trained in several crafts and fairly proficient in both drawing and iconography or, on the other hand, straightforward commercial artists. Trained originally by European Jesuits in the technique, the most unusual of these artists were the itinerant Chinese. On commission they would make any sort of imagery, bringing to it a reticent drawing style and delicate matt colouration, plus a peculiarly oriental physiognomy—slight, slender, wafting bodies and Chinese features with smooth complexions for otherwise quite Indian characters. What is as important from our point of view is that the glass paintings are made for quite different purposes. They serve as icons, idealized portrayals of courtesans, genre pictures, portraits of nobility, calligraphic vignettes from scriptures, and sheer decorations. And they also vary in quality from superior skills to blatant kitsch. Subramanyan can be seen to refer to almost every mode of these glass paintings but in a far from pedantic way. In fact he demonstrates no serious intention at first and one could quite easily settle on a view that these paintings are an occasion for frivolity, if it were not for the concentration and virtuosity of *style*.

And we know that style is seldom an empty token. However mannered, if it is engaging it is also significant: it is both code and clue of the art-object in context. We have already seen how Subramanyan highlights the seductive aspect of the technique and medium of glass painting, and how the pictures in turn resemble the fabled golden mirror. And what does the mirror do but give us back the sensuousness of the world in its ephemeral splendour? In this way Subramanyan makes a perfect pact between style and subject so that all the pun, pastiche and plagiarism turns into pedagogy after all but in the comic mode, a pedagogy tender and mischievous about the arts of love.

Consider another popular art form, one quite closely related to glass paintings not only in chronology but also in motivation: the paintings of the Kalighat *patuas* through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which function in the urban setup of Calcutta quite expressly as bazaar pictures.¹⁹ Subramanyan's pictures

are stylistically in fact closest to the Kalighat pictures whereby he brings to our attention not only the similarities between two popular art forms but also long-range continuities in Indian painting (*Illus. 29*). Continuities in painterly conventions stretch over centuries, across genres, and between hierarchies of art forms: popular, medieval, classical.

Let me elaborate a little about the Kalighat pictures. Loading the brush with black pigment, the Kalighat painters draw out a long, springy, unerring line that has a flexibility more nearly like oriental calligraphy than English watercolours from which supposedly they learnt their techniques. The black line describes the contour, fills out the luxuriant tresses and emphasizes the border of the saris wound round the bosoms and hips of ample women. Set within these looped lines there is an astonishing display of broad, flat, sparkling brushmarks. They are notations or patterns on the objects and on the bodies of birds, beasts and fish that feature in the pictures. These are taken to another level of skill in the delicate treatment of human torsos bedecked with ornaments. Thus the image is constructed at these three decorative levels: a linear rhythm, free patterning, and sharp ornamental focus on wide open eyes, kiss-curls, silver strings, pendants and plumes—the headgear of a peacock feather for Krishna with its glittering heart and flying tendrils.

But the decorative construction of the picture as we have just described it is in a sense deliberately contradicted when the Kalighat painters, using the usual device of a double contour to round off the figures, give them explicit volume. The imagery is thus voluptuous without being naturalistic, ornamental without being flat. Further, the language so devised being contrary and crossed, it allows for transformation of subject and motif. Flat, iconic images give over to portrayals of bounteous women, and these to city scandals in the manner of genre paintings. The repertoire of plump animals could belong to myths and fables; they could be part of natural history portfolios; and not least, they could be meant for the watering palate of some connoisseur.

Delineated with a mixture of accuracy and whim, there are all manner of animals, rats and jackals, fish and prawn, pigeons and cats, in the Kalighat pictures. The yellow Kalighat cat is of course the most famous of all. A satirical symbol for mock holiness, it has a look of smug wellbeing. Big bow-tie ears, quizzical eyebrows, sad eyes, it holds a prawn hanging like a fat tassel from the mouth. The delineation is deft and sumptuous, the contour traces the spine and swells into cloud-black scallops ending in a voluminous tail. The cat has an obvious resemblance to the tiger of the goddess which is a larger, more ferocious version in the mythological pictures from Kalighat. Just as indeed there is a family resemblance between the whore, housewife, goddess in these pictures. Eclecticism in language allows a kinship of forms and more, a repertoire of jaunty creatures that is replete with clues to their own transformation.

What I believe draws Subramanyan most of all to nineteenth-century



29 K.G. Subramanyan, *Still Life with Fishes and Cats*, 1986

popular art is precisely this erotic impulse that mixes social categories with some innocence and much audacity. Even the moral tales revel in wickedness so that the good and the bad are finally made thoroughly ambiguous in pictorial vocabulary of comic delight. The pictorial vocabulary is eclectically devised. Techniques of delineation affect the style and the style affects the typology. This is perhaps how iconography is actually arrived at before it becomes a fixed category. This is how it is recovered anew by an inquisitive artist like Subramanyan (*Illus. 30*).

Consider for a moment the peculiar contouring device for the figure used in a whole range of Indian painting and adopted by Subramanyan. Painted swiftly in black, reddish-brown or pink-

red, Subramanyan's figures are shaded on the inside with a soft, smudgy, double contour which is often rouge, like a blush. Thus while there is no attempt at modelling as such, there is, as in so much of Indian art, a ruddy plumpness in the figures portrayed. When, over and above this, Subramanyan gives a girl with a deep-clefted bosom and dimpled knees these pink fat-folds in the neck, he is moving from the general conventions of sensuous imagery to specific ones—a neck with conchlike creases is a sign of beauty in classical love treatises. Almost inadvertently, then, by adopting certain technical conventions of rounding out the figures, he suggests an iconography as well.

This kind of double-take happens constantly in Subramanyan's glass paintings. He adopts conventions, defers to them, refers to other conventions, and then, quite unconcerned about originality, overtakes the prototypes to reveal an unexpectedly tendentious intent.

So look once again at his bedecked, slant-eyed girl-goddesses with their aggressive male-cat companions, torn birds, bowls of fruit, clusters of cream-white champa flowers placed in vases or in wavy tresses. In the boudoir pictures eroticism becomes a prerogative of the woman and the woman is quite aggressive, pressing down the rubbery limbs of lusting, weak-kneed men. In all this there happens to be a small sardonic sniff of the male artist, a sceptic about all else except the pleasure of a well-designed artefact. But precisely at this point Subramanyan's work invites reference to a third source, the Japanese ukiyo-e woodcut prints of the nineteenth century,

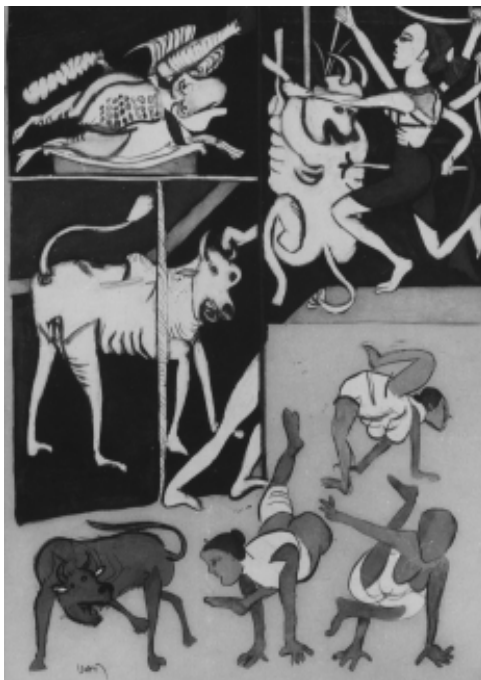
or what are in fact called pictures of the floating world. The prints include, as we know, some of the most bold and exquisite representations of women in the history of art, the specific characteristic being the artful manipulation of the erotic motif in what are at once splendidly designed pictures and items of hectic commerce.

What must particularly interest Subramanyan is how urbanity and candour catapult into this pictorial virtuosity, for nowhere else do you find such a match between a seductive display of manners and an ornamental structure. Even the actual scenario may be seen to influence Subramanyan. Here is a space that fans out like a pack of cards, opens up like a folded screen. Here is often a window-within-window space, or mirror into mirror, which makes the picture a puzzle of insets. Here is a space set like a stage where the narrative, staccato and rhythmic by turns, works itself out through elaborate mime. Here in fact even an obscene gesture finds not only a theatric but also a startlingly elegant fit. In the swirling waves of her richly patterned robes the geisha bares her smooth buttocks and the entire stance, legs askew, fingers curling in for a secret signal, become part of a game. A game between the artist and the viewer, as between the actors in the bamboo chambers.

Nineteenth-century Japanese art is part-feudal and part-mercantile. It prescribes courtly rules to the erotic game and at the same time it gives seduction the urgency of exchange value. And it grants little freedoms by way of that wit with which the rituals and the forms are executed. For wit is the one element in the circumstance that can unsettle the design, the game, and even perhaps the slavery of the prostitute. Or does it? Matching the tantalizing sophistications of ukiyo-e, there is some ambiguity about the attitude to the erotic as it comes across in Subramanyan's glass paintings.

Cf. Matisse

Perhaps a reference to Matisse will provide further clues. The likenesses are obvious at the level of the motif, in the manner of delineation, in the construction of the pictorial image. The differences are equally crucial. Matisse enters the realm of the



30 K.G. Subramanyan, *Training for a Bullfight*, 1986

woman, she has a subjective life. If she is apparently reticent, even indolent, there are other hints to her deeper subjectivity: in the wayward, delicately stressed contour, in the ever-changing colour surfaces so richly worked and at other times evanescent like her appearance. If the woman is languid and active by turn, it is not an ambiguity gained from male regard, nor is the female dynamic foreclosed by erotic anticipation. It is the vicissitude of feeling, or the intersubjectivity between artist and model that is being recorded.

Matisse, who was very nearly a misogynist in actual life, makes the image of woman strangely confessional. Subramanyan, on the other hand, is finally closer to the orientalist conception where typology and subject coincide. Even when he is deliberately provocative and parodies the iconic aspect of the woman portrayed he is scarcely ever personal, nor is she ever entirely individual. Except for a few rude and ravishing tokens the girls in Subramanyan's pictures are encased in a design. At a critical level one may call this an ornamental closure of form and meaning.

Or perhaps we should say that Subramanyan stands midway between oriental conventionality that includes a manoeuvrability but as of a game, and Matissian freedom that commits the artist, for all the gleaming arabesques and graceful design, to an iconoclastic principle through the very exercise of desire. Subramanyan links the options by way of a stylistic cartwheel. He sets up a lively circularity whereby Matisse's borrowed orientalism turns round and about into an actual oriental option once again, spiralling in its wake a handful of sparkling signs.

The moderns have taken liberally from primitive pictorial notation and pictographic language. They have imbibed the ironic abbreviation of pictorial signs from the oriental tradition and given to the image an empirical basis through a structure of correspondences, as in western art. To this eclecticism the moderns add individual style: this is a way of calling attention to self, to the vanity of a private gesture. And it rests, precariously, on an existential assumption to always signify.

Subramanyan goes on from here and lets his eye traverse and his hand touch a variety of things—in confirmation of a sense of belonging, in order to contextualize art, as a way to grasp the design of the world. There is informal affiliation with the world and a formal translation of it into a pictorial grid.

'[T]he sign is . . . a sensuous idea', says Roland Barthes.²⁰ Equally, the sensuous idea, with which the Indian imagination is replete, is to be captured in visual inscriptions as sign.

Recognizing the problematical—desiring, symbiotic—relationship between art and life, between nature and language, Subramanyan would like to exorcise the near-metaphysical proposition of 'representation'. To arrive instead at a gemlike compression of the figural motif. And with this motif to light up the environment, to make it sanguine, to give it vivacity—make it more intelligible.

Epilogue

The Decade of the 1990s

There is a sharp turn in Subramanyan's iconography and pictorial language during the 1990s.²¹ I will supplement this study of his work until 1987 with an epilogue.

In the decade of the 90s Subramanyan has produced scores of little and large paintings. The outcome of this hectic pursuit is a redundancy which allows the select successes to appear like jumping genii from the witch's cauldron. Subramanyan thinks of his work as 'magic in the making'.²²

To save the common from being too
common. To save the uncommon from being too precious. To bring some
strangeness into the sundry act. Or bring a
touch of revelation to sordid fact.²³

This is his very metier; these fermenting, somewhat frothy bouquets of pictures from a late harvest of a late summer, threshing shadows, squeezing every drop of light from the palette, never letting go of the zany angels.

A benign teacher and friend, Subramanyan is widely known as a graceful public figure in the Indian cultural context. Yet Subramanyan's oeuvre shows little tenderness towards the human figure and decidedly none towards the female body that he otherwise, in terms of pictorial wit, so brilliantly paints. Subramanyan has something of a misogynist in him and he lets this show up. But until recently the sardonic sniff was diffused by the carnival of painterly seductions, by painterly *jouissance* that went beyond Subramanyan's cynical qualifiers on love in life and art. His 90s' paintings (varnished gouache on paper, reverse painting on acrylic sheet and, more recently, oil on canvas) strip down further, revealing the vexed ghost in the body. Misogyny shades into self-irony.

It is like the mind has moulted
Cast off its cracked skin
And a bodiless body stepped out
From the wizened bones within
And hurtled through the wall of flesh
Into the heart of things²⁴

The deliberate crisis of the imagery has much to do with an acknowledgement of his own ageing process. This is first noticed when he adopts the persona of Inayat Khan in a set of pictures executed in 1988 during a stay in Oxford, called *Fairytales of Oxford and Other Paintings*. The everyday world in an English university appeared to him, as to an ageing voyeur, mad frolic. 'Ecstatic eyes peering out of an

emaciated body. I conjured up the figure of Inayat Khan, adapted from a Jehangiri drawing, to symbolize this.²⁵

While he does not paint autobiographical pictures, one can, as with most artists, read off an almost visceral obsession in the images. There are figural correspondences between the self and iconographic representations of the demonic/pathetic masked in mythological terms. There is as if an acknowledgement of a coarsening of the sensuous impulse, a hardening of ephemeral desire, a deadening of innocent pleasure. The panic and pain that come with it turn into a mocking hide-and-seek, a chase between glance and object, between self and the world.

As he has grown older Subramanyan has had the courage to make what would be considered ugly and even in a sense abusive paintings. Allegories of strange couplings, suggested sodomies, all manner of cruel and mocking intercourse abound. The creature-world is animated—pantheistically suffused, but in a denatured world. Volleys of gestures invoke the animus, evacuate the numen, spray the surface with zest: he apprehends images like bitter epiphanies.

A brilliant draughtsman from the start, he had wavered along the modernist axis on the material relationship of contour to form. Even more so on the degree of autonomy of the brushmark and the depth of pigment on the surface of the canvas. He has achieved a most precise relationship of the pictorial elements in his reverse paintings brought to a culmination in 1994–98. And as never before he has achieved, in the decade of the 1990s, a *painterly surface* in the large oil paintings. Bringing depth of hue and plasticity to figure and object, these can now take up myriad lessons of art history in one sweep (*Illus. 31*).

Subramanyan's recent paintings recall in their painterly maturity Braque and Matisse, his modernist mentors. Braque, in his last paintings, began to virtually draw with white, highlighting the material surface built up with translucent hues, proposing a peculiar form of concrete immanence based on the rigours of modernist painting. But the recent paintings by Subramanyan also recall the tryptichs of Max Beckmann and later paintings of Ron Kitaj: the complex, interlocking iconography of Beckmann in a state of historical wakefulness, and of Kitaj when he paints pictures of a present foreboding—represented by 'perverse' encounters, concealed motives, covert violence and a vision of disintegration. Thereby, and not unlike these modern masters, Subramanyan mythologizes his own body-self.

Bringing to fruition the bitterness and envy of ageing, he pitches it into states of nemesis so that you can gauge the magnitude of the artist's loss, his high stakes in painterly compensation. Bordering on the grotesque, these paintings tickle desire by allowing a glimpse of the exhilaration that comes, like a shudder, from the touch and twist and modelling and scraping of pale, bright, murky pigment. From a flurry of brushstrokes resembling the physical, somewhat devilish touch of fur and feather on the body.



Above: 31 K.G. Subramanyan, *Figure on Sofa*, 1994.

Below: 32 K.G. Subramanyan, *Bahurupee-II* (diptych), 1994





Above: 33 K.G. Subramanyan, *Bahurupee-IV*, 1994. Below: 34 K.G. Subramanyan, *Bahurupee-I* (diptych), 1994



And now a spiral gaze, turning between a family photograph and a phantom cat. So they ask, 'Do you like cats?' You can't say you do. They come from the neighbour's garden. And move like they own your house. Have kittens on your chairs. They pin you with their gaze and claw you for attention. Eerie hairy things. But fascinating when they leap or slide.²⁶

Like sly cats, Subramanyan's brushwork leaps and slides and claws, leaving dead birds fluttering in the picture-window.

From Matisse, Braque, Beckmann and Kitaj, Subramanyan can go to cartoon and comic strips, and thence to the *patachitra* traditions of Bengal with which he made an advanced alliance. One can hardly overestimate the importance of the arts of Bengal in the pictorial language, in the packed and scrambled narratives of Subramanyan. These range from the richly ornamental *patas* from Murshidabad and Midnapur to the naive and spare *jadupatas* of the santals, to the voluptuous icons and tantalizing modernity of the Kalighat *patas*, to the *saura* and myriad doll-forms of Bengal. Not to speak of the unique medieval heritage of the terracotta temples. Subramanyan comprehends and physically manipulates the life of these forms like an ancient master with a youthful desire to vocalize, visualize and grasp the vivacity of life's exuberance through the living (/dying) arts.

Maybe there is a sense of pantheism in it, making of everything a personage. Maybe there is an assumption, too, of play-acting on nature's own part. Making each thing a *bahurupee*, volatile polymorph.

The familiar Durga image is one such *bahurupee* to me, an intriguing conglomerate. Draping a wheeling panoply of iconic arms round a tantalizing female figure. Bringing together earthiness and elemental power. Carrying unspelt innuendoes to the human psyche, the beast within, the body's rapture, the conflict and the transcendence. Arching forth from a common-life drama to an allegory beyond.²⁷

There is a pictorial coup in Subramanyan's recasting of the figure of the *bahurupee*, the naive and arch and somewhat crazy masquerader of the street jumping into the fray and mimicking mythological characters. Indeed Subramanyan's work has become more performative, using the tableau format of the Durga and Kali puja pandals in Bengal. The performative supplements the specifically pictorial terms (like the picture showmen traditions spread across much of India) and adds a frenetic movement: it animates the figures laden with accessories, smitten with beasts, pecked and lacerated and replete with innuendos. 'Earthlings in the cloak of deities or vice versa. Awe-striking when riding the tiger cat, but odalisque when the cat runs free.'²⁸

Not only does he take bold liberty with mythology—in an almost libertarian sense—he catapults it into the everyday. The devalorizing of mythology through



35 K.G. Subramanyan, *Yellow Street*, 1997



36 K.G. Subramanyan, *Annunciation*, 1997

the clown-capers of the *bahurupee* is itself a form of cultural choice and has its repercussions on the actually existing pictorial language available to a contemporary artist. It is a decision to disabuse ourselves of a precious aesthetic as also of the iconic bodyguards from tradition. It leaves us insecure in the bad world, facing fear in and through a relentless masquerade of the self in the street, in the nation, in the world.

The assault on the body in later imagery has ultimately to do with the worsening social situation in India: the politics of an ascendant rightwing based on religious and ethnic aggression, a conflictual state where public murder in the form of communal riots escalates all the time. Subramanyan has depicted this aggression directly and deflected its impact into fables, parables, myths.

Since 1991 he has deployed mythological figuration and recognizable iconography, especially that of Durga. He has brought into play all manner of revenge with the heraldry of triumph associated with Mahishasuramardini. There is here a subversive crossover of human and beast, taking off from the encounter between the goddess and an assortment of *asura* figures—all choreographed into a balletic spree, brutal chase. While picking up the cues of social violence he turns it into a kind of pictorial conflagration, a bursting forth of bodies often as if at gunpoint—sprouting limbs triggered by the explosion of a human bomb (*Illus. 33, 34*).

But to return to the body at stake: Subramanyan's figuration, featuring for the most part the female image, has always suggested a form of sexual discomfiture. Now the female body and its modes of coupling, its creature existence, its pathetic states of ravagement, produce a subtext. At a compulsive level the female body is a plucked and frenzied sign signifying in reverse the fear, the attenuation, the washing away of (male) desire. At a more conscious level he seeks a linguistic style for his persistent attraction towards sadistic frictions in daily exchange of human love; for an allegorical denouement of human passion (*Illus. 35, 36*). Like some fabled chameleon Subramanyan moves through the pictorial maze of his own increasingly cruel vision. By courting the companionship of death he gains an almost terrifying energy in his paintings.

Notes and References

- ¹ Henri Matisse, 'Conversations with Aragon: On Signs', in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1978, p. 95.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- ³ See Roland Barthes, 'Toys', in *Mythologies*, Paladin, Frogmore, St Albans, Herts., 1973, pp. 53–55.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ 'Apotheosis of the Ordinary: an interview with K.G. Subramanyan conducted by R. Siva Kumar', *Art Heritage*, No. 4, New Delhi, 1984–85, p. 50.
- ⁶ See *Tagore on Art and Aesthetics*, edited by Pritwish Neogy, Inter-National Cultural Centre for Culture, Delhi, 1961, p. 59. Tagore says: 'I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny

their obligation to produce something that can be labelled as Indian Art, according to some old world mannerism. Let them proudly refuse to be herded into a pen like branded beasts that are treated as cattle and not as cows.' *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.

- ⁷ 'The art historian is less of a whole man than the anthropologist. The former is all too often indifferent to themes, while the latter is looking for something that is neither in the work of art as if in a place, nor in the artist as a private property, but to which the work of art is a pointer. For him, the signs, constituting the language of a significant art, are full of meanings; in the first place, injunctive, moving us to do this or that, and in the second place, speculative, that is, referent of the activity to its principle. To expect any less than this of the artist is to build him an ivory tower. . . . There can be no restoration of art to its rightful position as the principle of order governing the production of utilities short of a change of mind on the part of both artist and consumer, sufficient to bring about a reorganization of society on the basis of vocation.' *Coomaraswamy 1: Selected Papers*, edited by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, p. 319.
- ⁸ Okakura Kakuzo, a militant spokesperson for pan-Asian solidarity, came to India in 1902 and remained a close friend of the Tagores. His book *Ideals of the East*, published in English in 1903, was an important influence in defining the unity of Asian religion, art and thought.
- ⁹ K.G. Subramanyan, 'The Drawings of Nandalal Bose', *Art Heritage*, No. 2, New Delhi, n.d., p. 58.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- ¹¹ K.G. Subramanyan, 'Binode Behari Mukherjee', *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 46, 1–4, May 1980–April 1981, p. 23.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ¹⁴ John Berger, 'The Moment of Cubism', in *Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 150.
- ¹⁵ 'Apotheosis of the Ordinary', *Art Heritage*, No. 4, p. 50.
- ¹⁶ K.G. Subramanyan, 'Religion and Art in India', *Moving Focus*, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 99–100.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- ¹⁸ See Jaya Appasamy, *Indian Paintings on Glass*, Indian Council of Cultural Relations, Delhi, 1980; and *Thanjavur Paintings of the Maratha Period*, Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 1980.
- ¹⁹ See W.G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, Victoria and Albert Museum, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1971; and Mildred Archer, *Indian Popular Painting in the India Office Library*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1977. For a new perspective on Kalighat painting see Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World*, Mapin, Ahmedabad, 1999.
- ²⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Imagination of the Sign', in *Critical Essays*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1972, p. 209.
- ²¹ Biographical material furthering the study of Subramanyan includes the following. (i) His own writings in addition to his first book of selected essays, *Moving Focus*, two other collections are important reference—*The Living Tradition: Perspectives on Modern Indian Art*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1987, and *The Creative Circuit*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1992. (ii) The writings of R. Siva Kumar in Subramanyan's exhibition catalogues, especially 'Pilgrim's Progress', in *K.G. Subramanyan: Recent Works*, CIMA Gallery, Calcutta, 1994. (iii) For Subramanyan's role as artist-teacher, see Nilima Sheikh, 'A Post-Independence Initiative in Art', in *Con-*

temporary Art in Baroda, edited by Gulammohammed Sheikh, Tulika, Delhi, 1997. (iv) Subramanyan's own, more personal notes and verses appear, along with his exhibitions, in *Art Heritage*, Nos. 11 (1991–92) and 15 (1995–96); and in *Drawings of K.G. Subramanyan*, edited by Naveen Kishore, Seagull, Calcutta, 1998.

- ²² Also the title of a documentary film on K.G. Subramanyan (*Magic in the Making*) directed by Riteban Ghatak (and produced by External Publicity Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India).
- ²³ K.G. Subramanyan, 'Excerpts from a Notebook', *Art Heritage*, No. 11, 1991–92, p. 156.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ K.G. Subramanyan, 'Bahurupee: A Polymorphic Vision', in *K.G. Subramanyan: Recent Works*, exhibition catalogue, CIMA Gallery, Calcutta, 1994, p. 11. The figure of Inayat Khan featured in a set of paintings: see David Elliott, 'K.G. Subramanyan: An Indian in Oxford', in *K.G. Subramanyan: Fairytales of Oxford and Other Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1988.
- ²⁶ K.G. Subramanyan, 'The Paris Paintings: Pages from a Notebook', *Art Heritage*, No. 15, 1995–96, p. 70.
- ²⁷ Subramanyan, 'Bahurupee: A Polymorphic Vision', in *K.G. Subramanyan: Recent Works*, pp. 11–12.
- ²⁸ Subramanyan, 'The Paris Paintings', *Art Heritage*, No. 15, p. 68.

Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Painter: Raja Ravi Varma

Irregular Modernism

Ravi Varma (1848–1906)¹ is an early protagonist in the Indian artist's passage to the modern (*Illus. 1*). He is at the same time a turn-of-the-century anachronism. Born in the village of Kilimanoor into a feudal family with a small fiefdom and ties of blood with the royal house of Travancore, Ravi Varma was nurtured in a household imbued with a remarkable culture. From childhood he was committed to scriptural learning, the orthodox aspect of which was complemented by his love of epic and classical literature. Growing up within the paradoxical ideology of the Indian renaissance, at once traditionalist and modern, he brought himself on par with the more enlightened princes of his time as also with the educated elite that was converting a diffuse patriotism into a national purpose. A natural boldness of imagination made him a progressive. He became the most celebrated professional painter of his time, casting himself in the role of an autodidact, of a gentleman artist in the Victorian mould and, paradoxically, of a nationalist charged with the ambition to devise a pan-Indian vision for his people.

For, in retrospect, it is time to realize that Ravi Varma was striving to achieve in Indian painting what the new learning of Europe accomplished in Indian literature and philosophy. Ravi Varma struggled to introduce a great many new elements into Indian painting, elements that were pertinent



1 Photograph of Raja Ravi Varma

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only to the world of seeing, the world of the visual image. He introduced perspective, having studied its laws according to the new science. European drawing, construction and composition and a new medium altogether: oil. He tried to wield the new tools in the Indian context and what he produced was not European painting at all but a new way of seeing. He introduced large bright areas of colour in his portraits and landscapes, adapted oil to the Indian light. It would be a mistake to regard his work as only a cheap or pointless imitation of the European technique. He was all the time struggling to look around himself through his European equipment and in doing so modified it to suit his vision. He was doing very nearly what Rajendralal Mitra or Bankimchandra Chatterjee were trying to do in the field of philosophy. He possibly attempted what Amrita Sher-Gil of a later age tried to do in reverse.²

Asok Mitra's candid placing of Ravi Varma within the nationalist project takes forward the opinion of a Bengal modernist, Ramananda Chatterjee. He too saw Ravi Varma as a protagonist in the task of nation-building and recounting the ancient Indian ideal of healthy beauty and enjoyment of life, hoped that Ravi Varma's popularity might be an indication of the returning interest of the nation in mundane existence.³ However, the difference between Chatterjee and Mitra is that while the former echoes the need of his times by approving of Ravi Varma on the criterion and the ethics of nation-building, the latter, writing after independence, puts both Ananda Coomaraswamy (the most celebrated and often-quoted detractor of Ravi Varma) and Ramananda Chatterjee (his defender) in perspective by a brief and plainspeaking reference to the cultural history of the late nineteenth century. Of particular importance is the reference Mitra makes to Bankimchandra Chatterjee. The point about embodying in a material sense the message of a great civilization is exemplified by Bankim's *Krishnacharitra* where, with a clear hermeneutic purpose, the author realigns the epic features of a divine hero and sets him up as omnipotent male/ego and historical agent for a militant nationalism.⁴

Thus Ravi Varma joins the ranks of other anomalous figures in India's nineteenth-century renaissance who see their task in similar terms: of materializing through western techniques the idea of a golden past and then inducting this into a national project. Along with certain pervasive notions about India's civilizational role, national ideology brings to bear a whole range of bold and tantalizing questions about modernity that are being lived out to this day. For example, the modernizing impulse of the nineteenth century led by a movement such as the Brahmo Samaj treats historical self-consciousness as a didactic programme of reform. Here the modern serves as an emblematic category on the basis of which a polemical confrontation takes place between revivalists and progressives. The fact that the modern never properly belongs to us as Indians, or we to it, does lead to anxieties of misappropriation.

But these are often pragmatically resolved. In visual art, for example, eclecticism becomes a preferred option and the sense of aesthetic difference begins to be resolved to our advantage.

In the context of a national culture the story of modern Indian art can be told like an allegory—in the conscientious manner of the pilgrim's progress. It can also be told as a series of experimental moves where ideology and practice are often at odds and force unexpected manoeuvres. Indian artists still go riding on the backs of paradoxes, with the more adventurous among them turning this into an original act of self-definition. Sometimes, with the necessary elan, the ride becomes a critical exercise prodding the modern itself or, rather, the fixed notions of that category to diversify its possibilities outside the western mainstream.

Modern Indian art is in consequence a tendentious affair and though the cause of this is precisely our colonial history, the consequences may lie far afield. We may be inclined to develop an aesthetic of contradiction. This may happen through pictorial choices—for example, by adapting narrative means so discredited by modern art. On the other hand, our modernism could also be redefined via such linguistic disjunctions as occur in the course of the most literal adaptations, thereby opening up, even by default, figural devices that match the very exigencies of colonial, excolonial and cleft identities.

It is precisely in such matters that Ravi Varma is the indisputable father-figure of modern Indian art. Naive and ambitious at the same time, he opens up the debate for his later compatriots in the specific matter of defining individual genius through professional acumen, of testing modes of cultural adaptation with idiosyncratic effect, of attempting pictorial narration with its historic scope.

Oil and Easel Painting

Leaving aside stray examples of oil paintings (or engravings based on oil paintings) as these find their way into the Mughal courts, it was in the eighteenth century that European (predominantly British) painting was introduced into India. The modernizing impulse in the visual arts was signalled, among other important changes, by the use of the medium of oils and the easel format by Indian artists, one important aspect of which was the technique and form of attempted realism.⁵

By Ravi Varma's time European art, mostly in the way of portraits but also landscapes and genre pictures, was a common feature of colonial culture. Apart from the British, the Indian elite was also collecting European art in various mediums like oils, watercolours and engravings. There was, for example, a collection of engravings based on European art from the renaissance and also neoclassical paintings from the nineteenth century in the Trivandrum palace. Many of these were indiscriminate collections and included copies of masterpieces by travelling European artists, commissioned portraits and contemporary European works of uneven quality.

Ravi Varma is now under art-historical consideration that requires empirical groundwork, conceptual and stylistic speculation. He is conventionally seen in relation to some of those European painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who found a foothold in colonial India. One may mention in particular the works based on Indian subjects by Tilly Kettle (1735–1786) who was in India (mainly in Madras) between 1769–76; Francesco Renaldi (1755–*ca.* 1799); James Wales (1749–1795) who was associated in the 1790s with the maratha court at Poona; and Thomas Hickey (1741–1824) who was in India (Madras and Calcutta) in the 1780s and then again in 1798–1824.⁶

Partha Mitter mentions that Ravi Varma looked at examples of Royal Academy paintings in the British *Magazine of Art* of 1898. E.M.J. Venniyoor mentions nineteenth-century French painters like Adolphe-William Bouguereau (1825–1905), Louis and Gustave Boulanger (1808–67 and 1824–88, respectively) in whom Ravi Varma was interested.⁷ Ravi Varma's theatric neoclassicism and his use of colour and light that is brighter and more iridescent than, for example, the English palette, make the European reference especially relevant.

The adoption by Indian artists of the medium of oils seems, nevertheless, to have been tardy. Drawings, tempera and watercolour remained the commonest means during the nineteenth century. Ravi Varma grew up in the context of the flourishing tradition of Tanjore painting, contemporary to other hybrids included in the nomenclature of the Company School. Significantly, the new medium of canvas and possibly oils was adopted by the painters of the maratha court at Tanjore. This is important as these painters travelled to Travancore and served the court there.⁸

The fact and fiction of Ravi Varma's struggle to learn oil painting has a legendary ring. Here is not only the struggle of an artist to gain a technique but also the struggle of a native to gain the source of the master's superior knowledge and the struggle of a prodigy to steal the fire for his own people. The actual learning process for Ravi Varma was indirect, even arduous. He was initiated by his uncle Raja Raja Varma. When he came as an adolescent to live in Trivandrum, he was allowed free access to the palace by the then ruler of Travancore, the enlightened Maharaja Ayilyam Tirunal and encouraged to pursue his painting talent. The court painter Ramaswamy Naicker was however too jealous to impart the technique to Ravi Varma. In 1868 a Dutch painter, Theodore Jensen, came to Travancore and at the maharaja's request, condescended to allow the young Ravi Varma watch him paint. Although British art school education was already being imparted from the 1850s in different cities including Madras, Ravi Varma picked up his skills without systematic instruction but with passionate persistence.⁹

What I would like to emphasize is the way Ravi Varma's desire to learn oil painting is recounted by his biographer E.M.J. Venniyoor, who in turn must echo other accounts fitting it into the subsequent success story of the artist. This is

mythology in the making: to say that a native, once he has been initiated into western techniques, proceeds with the redoubled pace of a prodigy and overcomes all hurdles. What is at stake is not only native talent but national destiny.

From the very first decade of Ravi Varma's professional career the narrative is packed with success.¹⁰ He wins the governor's gold medal in the 1873 Madras exhibition and is said to have gained a certificate of merit in an international exhibition in Vienna. A second gold medal in the 1874 Madras exhibition is topped by royal appreciation. When the Prince of Wales visits Madras in 1875, the Maharaja of Travancore presents him Ravi Varma's painting. In 1876 Ravi Varma enters *Shakuntala Patralekhan* at the Madras exhibition which not only wins him another gold medal but gives him his breakthrough at the iconographical level as well, recommending him to the educated elite of India—orientalists and nationalists alike. This painting is acquired by the Duke of Buckingham, then governor of Madras. Sir Monier-Williams uses one version of Ravi Varma's many Shakuntalas as the frontispiece to the fifth edition (in 1887) of his 1855 translation of Kalidasa's *Abhijnana-sakuntalam*. In 1878 Ravi Varma paints a life-size portrait of the Duke of Buckingham and the patron declares that the painter has equalled, even surpassed, European portraitists. In 1881, through the initiative of Sir T. Madhava Rao (former dewan of Travancore state, now dewan and regent of Baroda), Ravi Varma is introduced to the ruling Gaekwads of Baroda and invited to the investiture ceremony of Maharaja Sayaji Rao III (reign 1881–1939). From this ruler, who set up the modern institutions of Baroda state, Ravi Varma receives recurring patronage. In 1888 Sayaji Rao invites him to embark on a set of fourteen pictures depicting puranic themes. Following Baroda's lead, the states of Mysore and Travancore commission mythological works in the coming decades and, until his death, Ravi Varma remains master of the mythological genre.

In 1893 he sends ten paintings and wins merit at the International Exhibition of the World Columbian Order at Chicago, one of the grandest exhibitions of the nineteenth century (and also, as it happens, the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's famous address to the Parliament of World Religions).

Every subsequent decade of Ravi Varma's life is packed with more and more success. Ravi Varma moves among the elite ranging from Lord Curzon to royal patrons in many states (prominent among them Travancore, Baroda, Mysore and Udaipur), to progressives like Gopal Krishna Gokhale. He becomes an odd genius of his times celebrated by colonizers and nationalists alike. In 1904 he is given the imperial Kaiser-i-Hind award (at which time his name is shown as 'Raja' Ravi Varma and gains currency thenceforth). At the same time he is befriended by Congress leaders including Dadabhai Naoroji and regarded as a visionary for a prospective nation. Patrons and clients, both Indian and foreign, princes and literati are eager to acquire his work until finally the middle class can acquire it as well, but in the form of

oleographs. Following up an earlier suggestion by the far-seeing Sir Madhava Rao, Ravi Varma and his younger brother C. Raja Raja Varma decide to set up a lithography press near Bombay in the early 1890s.

Surrogate Realism

While Ravi Varma has the advantages of aristocratic confidence, charm, talent and ambition that account for his unique success—placing him ahead of all his contemporaries engaged in a similar project—there are objective circumstances at this juncture that he, above all, reckons with and masters. As an artist of his time he recognizes what is at stake for all concerned: the rich density of oil paint, its exceptional plasticity, promises a greater *hold on reality*. The paint-matter of oil and pigment is conducive to simulating substances (flesh, cloth, jewels, gold, masonry, marble) and capturing atmospheric sensations (the glossiness of light, the translucent depth of shadows). Flowing from such material possibilities of oil paint is the lure of appropriating the world, of appeasing the acquisitive impulse, of saturating the consciousness with the profit of possession.

Set in the easel format, representation develops laws about framing and within the frame, about proximity and distance: the laws of perspective. Justified by the science of optics, perspective has the profound implication of assuring continuity between subject and object and therefore, no matter what the motif and style, an existential contiguity of the beholder with the painted image.

Initiated in the late seventeenth century, this is realism inalienably related to bourgeois desire, to bourgeois ideology and ethics. Despite its more obvious seductions, this realism offers a complex and often paradoxical phenomenon that has a run of several hundred years before its culmination with the realist master, Gustave Courbet. Realism proper is distinguished for establishing the material presence of the subject in an equation with the objective world through embedded structures and their transforming logic.

Among the several faces of realism manifest in the nineteenth century it is salon painting shading into a second phase of neoclassicism that offers the canon and, with it, a conservative idealism. An artist like Ravi Varma adapts this conservative representational mode of European painting. Just as prose fiction, especially the novel and its narrative project, comes to be regarded in India as per se realistic (the realist novel is queen of genres), representational painting in oils is construed to mean an enabling technique that stands for an accredited realism (*Illus. 3*). That is to say, while Ravi Varma's adaptations that range all the way from iconic portraits to narrative allegories fit better as nineteenth-century salon paintings, the circular logic persists and they are seen to promote this much-regarded realism.

And even given the misapprehension, the somewhat false aura and some distressing consequences of appropriating 'alien' conventions/ideologies, this surrogate



2 Ravi Varma, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1893

realism achieves definite ends. It fulfils the mission of the Indian elite to adapt European means to Indian needs, to become historically viable through the use of the realist genre.

Ravi Varma's first success in the realist mode is, predictably enough, as a professional portrait painter (*Illus. 2*). His aristocratic sitters often have the remoteness of memorial painting as also of painted photographs (his paintings are sometimes done from photographs). They are, in an almost literal sense, mirror images: they transfix the refracted gaze that joins the past and the present in the interface of the framed canvas. There are superb portraits of the Gaekwad family by Ravi Varma.¹¹ Of special note are the portraits of handsome, richly adorned women of the maratha clan who are at once iconic and bold in their peculiar status as consorts of a progressive royalty, portraits that seem to check the easy seduction that the endemic illusionism of oil portraits encourages.

Another kind of portrait appears when Ravi Varma paints nair women of aristocratic lineage from his own milieu (*Illus. 4, 5*). Socially permitted liaisons with higher-caste men give the matrilineally positioned nair women ambivalent erotic significance. As coded icons they are paradoxically thematized in Ravi Varma's oeuvre: these are his Malabar beauties. In the genre pictures with narratives (such as the 1892 *Here Comes Papa*), he develops conventions that are pictorial equivalents to social custom and local etiquette in an as yet nascent modernity.¹²

A systematic portrayal of the Indian people is an ongoing project everywhere in India and the rules are similar to those hypothesized for the larger question of national identity. The paradigms position the binaries racial/universal, regional/national, individual/typical in place. It is within these terms that an iconography and also, in stylistic terms, a typology for Indian representational arts is developed by Ravi Varma. And though the rules are rudimentary the pictures have some claim to being realistic. The figures are based on live models occasionally from amongst his own aristocratic family and otherwise drawn from professional models—prostitutes, dancers, singers, actresses, as for example Anjanibai Malpekar whom he met in Bombay. When live models are difficult photographs come in handy.



3 Ravi Varma, *Man Reading a Book*, ca. 1898



4 Ravi Varma, *Ammam Tampuran of Mavelkara*, ca. 1883



5 Ravi Varma, *Woman with a Fruit*, 1890s

Further, as Ravi Varma takes on the problem of the ‘correct’ rendering of persons and objects, he goes beyond the everyday to introduce what one might call genre painting that socializes the mythological. Consider, for example, *The Victory of Indrajit* (1905, *Illus.* 6), *Shri Krishna Liberating His Parents* (1905, *Illus.* 7) and *Shri Krishna as Envoy* (1906, *Illus.* 8). Painted at the end of his life, these paintings achieve a ‘thereness’ of objects, weighted and modelled and fixed in a measured space in which everything is seen to have a discrete place: architectural elements, period furniture, royal accessories, artisans’ tools. And human beings, even if they be divine envoys and legendary kings, go about their business in the given scheme of things mostly with the purpose of making a moral point to the viewer who is carefully positioned vis-a-vis the pictorial event. Whether it is a miracle as in the Krishna painting, or a court scandal as in the Indrajit painting, the spectacle is as it were attended by the laws of social behaviour. Seeing mythology thus pictorialized, the viewer obtains a manner of ‘truth’ through an objective demonstration of life’s protocol.

But the socializing process drags along a good deal of sentimentality with it. When Ravi Varma’s epic characters seek to gain the same credibility as those in genre pictures they tend to ingratiate themselves. Credibility comes to work on the lowest common denominator; the merest skills of modelling and perspective or a crude illusionism acquire magical value. The quest for a renewed iconography suffers in consequence. It is instructive to note that the process of bourgeois appropriation of the Greco–Roman past also displays its share of ethical dilemmas.

'Realism' of the Academy

The project of an allegorical transfer of the heroic ages into a resurgence on behalf of modernity has one of its fittest models in the European renaissance. What Ravi Varma has access to, in actual pictorial terms, is not renaissance classicism but a reduced version of neoclassicism and its Victorian pastiche. He has access to the perennial subject-matter of European gods and heroes transferred from age to age in the mode of allegory and in the jaded technique of *trompe-l'oeil* as they float and settle in the salons of the nineteenth century and find their way into the colonies.

The Royal Academies (started in France in the 1640s and in England in 1768) undertook the task of inculcating intellectual and moral values through aesthetics, the model for which was found in classical art (from Raphael to Nicolas Poussin), though a debate and battle for supremacy between the mind and the senses (represented by the flamboyant colourist Peter Paul Rubens) persisted. In the nineteenth century clear options were posed by their respective theorists for neo-classical and romantic painting (represented respectively by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugene Delacroix).

The European Academies had pedagogical and juridical functions for entry into the salons. They laid down a hierarchy in the choice of subject-matter. The more radical values of the renaissance and of neoclassicism and romanticism in the eighteenth century were turned thoroughly conservative by the nineteenth-century salons. These served to uphold social snobbery and the counter-offensive against a changing society by the ruling class. The hierarchy worked through the following classification. (I) History Painting representing Greek–Roman heroic deeds for which the Academy encouraged students to be familiar with classical history and mythology, and to show their skill in painting nudes and draperies alike after plaster-casts of antique statues, and to copy Old Masters. (II) (a) Historical Landscape with a classical motif (b) Portraits (c) Religious Subjects. (III) (a) Still Life (b) Animal Painting (c) Rural Landscape (d) Genre or Domestic Scenes.¹³

Under the patronage of the Academies the sense of well-being and promise of plenitude in the mythic world view were offered as pictorial manifestations of secret, pagan energies. And even as the erotic was made into a spectacle the supporting allegory was adduced in favour of moral purpose and transcendent sentiments. It is worth looking at the work of the two sons of Louis de Boullongne (1609–1674), one of the founders of the French Academy: both Bon de Boullongne (1649–1717) and Louis de Boullongne the Younger (1654–1733) were known for the elegant posing of figures, for their discreetly sensual charm and the subtle manner of infusing a mythological scene with the refinements of fashionable society. Louis the Younger is relevant for Ravi Varma in that he is a successful painter of the '*grande machines*' but also paints gracefully, if naively, the mythic verse of antiquity. His *Diana Resting*¹⁴ (1707) is a good example of classicism offered as sweet euphoria to the ruling classes for iden-



6 Ravi Varma, *The Victory of Indrajit*, 1905

tification, using an intermediate theatrics of a posed tableau. Other artists played their part in devising the mythological portrait, based on the actresses of the day playing star roles.¹⁵ This suggested easy intercourse between figures of mythology, aristocratic clients and plebeian seductresses, all treated to the European grand style of painting.

In the matter of clever transfiguration and theatric intervention the Dutch-born Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912), who settled in London and became a favourite painter of Victorian England, may be mentioned. Alma-Tadema specialized in the archaeological reconstruction of the ancient world, providing a thrilling glimpse to his nineteenth-century viewers of a Greco–Roman world but in terms familiar to contemporary Victorian high society. Thus even to sustain a sensual reverie of a golden past the mirror was focused on their own bourgeois lifestyles. Further, in the rapidly changing world of the bourgeoisie, not only myth and legend but also the operatic spectacle served a role, giving nineteenth-century painting elaborate stage sets and a strained loftiness of style and purpose.¹⁶ Ravi Varma paralleled many of these features: the ideology and the melodrama, the flats, drapes, proscenium, cyclorama and all.

Theatricality

Ravi Varma grew up in a family richly connected with kathakali.¹⁷ From his childhood he is said to have indulged himself watching theatrical performances at home and in the court. What influenced him equally were performances of Parsi and Marathi theatre which he and his painter-brother C. Raja Raja Varma, his constant travelling companion, saw in Bombay and in different venues in the south.¹⁸ Parsi theatre, playing myths and romances, gave Ravi Varma a readymade repertoire of legendary figures. It also helped him devise the postures and gestures of figures within a given format. One may set up a studio tableau for the purpose of formatting pictures. But proscenium theatre is a more useful model in that the director/choreographer has already devised a *mise-en-scene* and placed figures and props in it. Each narrative episode has its compositional solution, good or bad, worked out from start to finish. The part of the painter is to pick out the most succinct moment from the sequence for pictorial rendering.

The matter of course is not so simple, nor are the actual terms of translation so rudimentary as between realist theatre and narrative painting. For one thing, while the dress, the posture, the gesture of the figures allow imitation, the layered gaze, motivating the dynamic of realist theatre, eludes painterly transcription. Ravi Varma senses the problem and reverts to an ingenious solution: precisely because Indian narrative painting and theatre need not conform to the cumulative logic of time, because they work through spatial repetition/displacement of the figural image, Ravi Varma simply circumvents the pitched logic of a realist encounter. While his figures interact with something of a realist protocol, he breaks the spell of interlocked gazes and allows a kind of abstract gaze to surface. Simultaneously he annuls the one aspect of time that narrative arts of the west in particular favour—climax and denouement—and disperses the action.

For all their staginess Ravi Varma's narrative paintings have the figures address not each other nor the viewer but that ideal spectator who prefigures rather than follows events. If we look for antecedents at least one of these is classical Indian theatre (from *kudiyattam* to *kathakali*), where the mode of address between characters as also their gaze is directed along a distant, divergent scale, complementing plural action in the performance. With Ravi Varma there is no such grand design; the means at his command make the narrative procedure eclectic and contrary. The event depicted may suggest a climax but the congregated figures create a distracted effect and the denouement, if there is one, becomes a transcendent affair by default.¹⁹

On the other hand, the imitation of proscenium theatre itself releases a shorthand solution in lieu of realism proper. The proscenium arch supports a fourth wall which is supposed to separate the viewer from the actors, making them invisible to each other. In actual fact this wall, notated by the arch, frames the stage providing an even more focused visibility. In adapting theatric presentations Ravi Varma

7 Ravi Varma, *Shri Krishna Liberating His Parents*, 19058 Ravi Varma, *Shri Krishna as Envoy*, 1906

inadvertently, but also artfully, substitutes the more conceptually remote analogue of the mirror/window frame (used in renaissance painting) with the more open theatrical solution of the threshold (used from baroque to realist painting). This helps him avoid the ideological problems of perspective and the practical problems of its correct rendering. At the same time it gives him the possibility of making the viewer a closer participant in the noble (or pathetic) enactment at hand. A low threshold introduces a pause marking the moment of privileged, or tabooed, access. But it is also a way of aligning the real with the imaginary where the two become contiguous. The ideal character in mythology and epic is realized by Ravi Varma through an act of impersonation at the level of common theatrics, the low threshold being entirely convenient to the identificatory desires of the beholder.

The artist as dramaturge irons out the excesses of pathetic fallacy by the more logical theory of mimesis learnt via nineteenth-century European painting and theatre (*Illus. 9, 10, 11, 12*). Manifold mimicry helps render the world of appearances familiar and spectacular at the same time. The dramatic impulse gives the erotic metonymy in the Nala–Damayanti story a form of apotheosis.²⁰ Shakuntala, the forest maiden and virtual dryad in form and spirit, becomes a plump dreamer against the *ghat* landscape; in another painting she appears to be an elegant and self-confident actress, perhaps because a Parsi actress of Ravi Varma's acquaintance is said to have posed for the portrayal.²¹ An epic figure like Draupadi becomes a pitiable figure in a melodrama. And Sita is shamed by a common abduction.²² A human-size frame is put



9 Ravi Varma, *Hamsa-Damayanti*, ca. 1899

on the narrative that disturbs the space–time conjunction on the basis of which Indian epic encounters take place; the disturbance amounts to a virtual betrayal of Indian aesthetics in both its perceptual and theoretical particularities.

Mixing techniques and genres and styles with a kind of benevolent universality of intentions, Ravi Varma creates a re-vision of Indian civilization for his contemporaries. It is as if he is destined to fulfil the ‘prophecy’ delivered in 1871 by the governor of Madras, Lord Napier, who suggested that Indian artists deploy their modern skills and new techniques learnt from European painting to present not only the rich pictorial potential of India’s everyday culture but to incorporate ancient Indian mythology. The advantage of a ‘national pencil’²³ that renders an ‘ideal and allegorical’ vision gains them, along with a national memory, a national voice. Given that lineage an artist like Ravi Varma succeeds in obliterating the forms in which the past has come to us. Henceforth the past is mediated not by metaphoric forms. The past is a pastiche of present desires clad in flesh and blood and costume.

Uses of the Past

It needs to be discussed how this past sees itself so easily impersonated and what, in turn, are the effects of such impersonation on the development of painting (and other art forms such as theatre and cinema) in the following decades. If in India as elsewhere the notion of the past usually dovetails with the notion of the classical it is because of the desire to retrieve, at the imaginative level, the golden age of Indian civilization. The period from the epics to the puranas and the classical period emblemized by Kalidasa provide the frames to designate the supreme aspects of ancient India. Ideologically the classical past is set against the medieval, regarded as having been corrupted by a medley of foreign influences and by the psychology of subordination showing up in the ‘Hindu psyche’. Not only Islamic but curiously also Buddhist culture, though falling squarely within the classical, is largely excluded when a civilizational memory of India is sought to be awakened. By deduction the touchstone for the nineteenth-century Indian renaissance is clearly Hindu civilization.

To the extent Ravi Varma actually reflects this it is by sticking to one sure ideal of all classicisms: the pursuit of ideal beauty. An erotic fullness of archetypal figures now becomes the precondition for their representational poise within a society already alive to history. And though the actual mode of representing this body comes from whatever Ravi Varma has seen of western art, there are immanent references in indigenous art which make for an inadvertent visual archive. For example, Ravi Varma would have known the highly elaborate and voluptuous mural painting in the palaces of Padmanabhapuram and Mattancheri. Inducted into the lineage of Tanjore paintings (*Illus. 13, 14*), he was influenced by their iconic, full-bodied images. As also by the more kitsch, coy and witty versions on glass.²⁴

The epic grandeur, the concrete descriptions, the hermaphrodite grossness

and cunning of kathakali impersonations is part of his repertoire of images; at the same time he loved Parsi theatre.²⁵ He was saturated in the high literary sensibility of his region: the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as Kalidasa and neoclassical Sanskrit poetry were translated, adapted and elaborated in Malayalam. (For example, his kinsman Kerala Varma's translation of *Abhijnana-sakuntalam* influenced Ravi Varma in his 1876 portrayal of the tragic *nayika*.) Ravi Varma's choice of *nayikas* and of legendary couples can be seen in relation to literal descriptions of the erotic in contemporary Malayalam poetry.²⁶

The broad-hipped, full-bosomed figure is the preferred type in the neoclassical Sanskrit poetry that influenced Kerala's tradition and it is the ample feminine



Left: 10 Ravi Varma, *Shakuntala*, 1898.

Right: 11 Ravi Varma, *Shakuntala Looks Back in Love*, 1898.

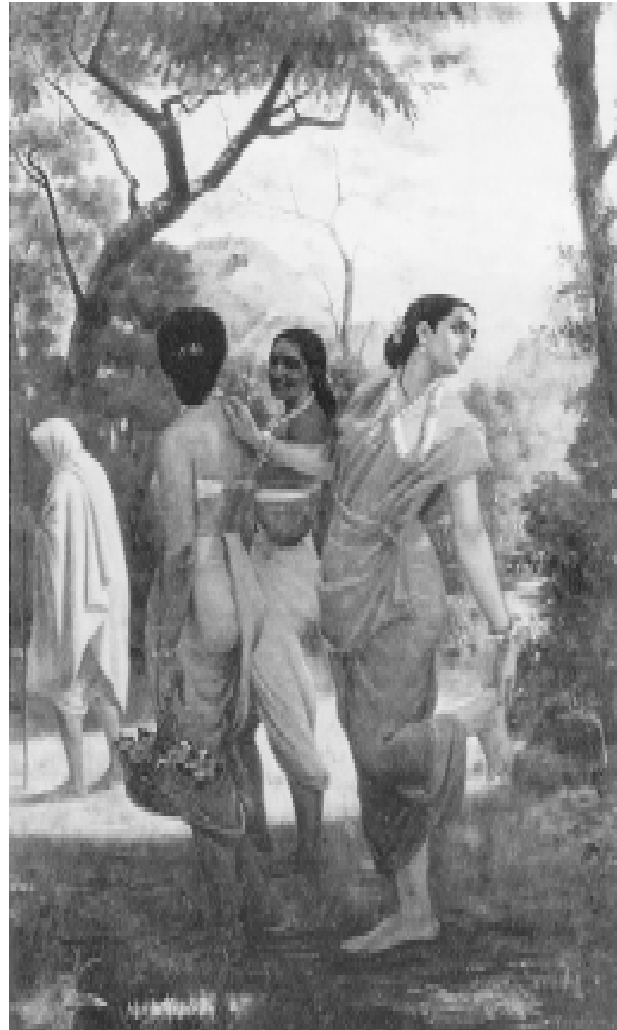


figure that dominates text after text in Manipravalam (a language tissue rich in Sanskrit words selected for their sensuous and musical qualities) produced during the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century and paying homage to numerous beautiful courtesans.²⁷

By the time we come to the period at hand this image of the past has become subject to the lure of orientalism. A product of romanticism in the imperialist age, orientalism is a way of first alienating and then eroticizing cultures of the east so as to fulfil at once the sense of western primacy and the longing for the unknown other. Ravi Varma's choices, narrowly defined, are also in every danger of becoming elaborate misunderstandings: conservative, kitsch and orientalist by turn.



12 Ravi Varma, *Jatayuvadha*, 1906

Unity in Diversity

The homogenizing project imbued with patriotic zeal encourages native imagery to gain attributes that will recommend the race to the alien gaze. This raises an endemic problem: in recommending the race you accept the terms of others' fantasies. Ravi Varma painted ten pictures during 1892–93, for an exhibition in Chicago. The paintings depicted women from different parts of India, women of different physiognomy, class and dress, the idea being to present a compound of the voluptuous, wistful, self-possessed Indian woman for universal approbation. The project had an anthropological aspect, an aspect of oriental seduction.

Venniyoor offers a description of the subject-matter of these paintings.²⁸ There were paintings of upper-caste Kerala women (*Here Comes Papa*, *Malabar Beauty*); of a Muslim woman from a courtly *zenana* and a north Indian girl awaiting her beloved (*Begum at Bath*, *Expectation*); of a Parsi bride (*Decking the Bride*); and of a maratha girl with her deity (*Sisterly Remembrance*). There was an unusual painting of

13 Ravi Varma, *Lady in Moonlight*, ca. 189014 Ravi Varma, *Madri*, oleograph

gypsies of south India called *Gypsy Family* (*Illus. 15*, also variously called *Mendicant Singer and Her Children*, *Beggars*, *Poverty*). There were portrayals of domestic south Indian brahmin women (*At the Well*, *Disappointing News*) and there was, in contrast, *The Bombay Singer*, the conventional nautch girl often portrayed in contemporary Company School paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The paintings were sent with a commentary which spelt out this self-taught artist's motivation to paint the major social types of his country: to show to the American public the charm and sophistication of the apparel of Indian women. Not only were all ten paintings accepted but they also won him two medals, each accompanied by a diploma and a citation. One of the diplomas said: 'The series of ten paintings in oil colours by Ravi Varma, court painter to several presidencies in India, is of much ethnological value.'²⁹ The diplomas go on to mention how well the faces of high-caste ladies, the costumes of ceremonial life and current fashions are painted, not to speak of the paintings' truth to nature in form and colour.

The terms of cultural diversity are pegged to the ideal of a nation that will, for all its good intentions, subsume differences and camouflage hierarchies. It is

interesting that when Ravi Varma gets his first major commission in 1888 to do a set of fourteen paintings based on puranic stories and later, in 1894, when embarking on the project to produce lithographic prints of his iconographical images, he goes on an extensive tour of India.³⁰ He looks for the physiognomy that will satisfy his representational needs. He also looks for the common costume that will unify appearances into an Indian type. It is interesting too that he travels mainly (though not exclusively) in the north for the purpose. Is it that he unconsciously assumes an aryan basis for Indian civilization—even his favourite model, as the story goes, is a Parsi actress of ‘Indo-Persian’ stock. In any case there is the evidence of his paintings wherein ethnic appearances are more or less subsumed in the name of an Indian synthesis and in the hegemonic interests of national unity.

But although the self-image of eastern cultures in the nineteenth century reflects sentimental morality with a full measure of hypocrisy tuned to orientalist expectations, Ravi Varma is a purposeful man. With his knowledge and sophistication he is able to draw on resources within his own culture and so to round off his representational project. Compare him with the other contemporary options. For all its inventiveness in terms of mixed techniques and hybrid elements, the Company School (an eclectic mix of folk *patas*, provincial miniatures and English/amateur watercolours) does not develop a viable iconography or figural type. Full of pictorial oddities after the desires and memories of the sahibs, it is construed on the native side as a trick of technical circumventions. The Indian artists’ graphic disalignment of anatomy and perspective in the process of imitating naturalistic skill produces wonderful pictures.³¹ But there is not what one may call a successful mediation of social curiosities into historical form, a reflective statement on behalf of selfconscious Indians.

I have already mentioned that Ravi Varma is part of the project of nineteenth-century India to appropriate and devise an identity, and to thus transcend western privilege in the representational project. Added to that is a grander design of the artist: to aspire to a universally attractive human ideal through an Indian manifestation. What



15 Ravi Varma, *Gypsy Family*, 1893

distinguishes Ravi Varma's project of Indian depictions is his curious ardour for a kind of iconographic augmentation of the contemporary whereby the quest for identifying indigenous models turns into a nationalist pedagogy: a cultural synthesis for establishing 'unity in diversity', but more—to approximate a living subject (*Illus. 16*).

(Re-)Production of Images

For all its high-mindedness there is an aspect of farce in the project of impersonation as undertaken by Ravi Varma. There is, as I have already said, pastiche involved in his undertaking to translate western classical modes to eastern ends. Secondly, the assumption that one can establish an innocent equation between commonplace types and imaginary personages of a divine nature (though it cannot be dismissed as mere folly when you consider that it produces great painting in seventeenth-century Europe) produces mostly charades for the upper classes here and elsewhere. In Ravi Varma's India there is, in the balance of the farce, something progressive as I have also suggested: a surrogate realism. Ravi Varma's assumption that real men and women, even plebeian actors playing the roles of gods and goddesses, may bring to classical aspirations in the Indian renaissance the full force of attraction of a live/actor's body, helps to desanctify tradition.

There is a pragmatic aspect to this intention as well. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the Indian aristocracy is itself turning part-bourgeois through material changes in social production. Through the influence of western taste it is 'losing' its aesthetic. To this is added the negotiating culture of an ever-increasing urban middle class. While its members are indifferent devotees of the Hindu pantheon, they require a new iconography that reinforces their self-image.³² This new cultural clientele is a motivating factor in the Ravi Varma project. An aristocrat himself, he is, by a democratic extension of his artistic ambitions, beginning to appreciate the needs of the middle class; indeed he is willing to devise a well-endowed iconography that serves a new class culture.

The elements of pastiche and charade and the acknowledgment of class transpositions within the civilizational effort produce a stress on form. This is what I call a farce and the farce has its uses. The past is now merely a sign, the rich tradition is an anthropological residue of a lost culture. There is a disjuncture between motif and meaning, between models and effect. This is a cultural counterpart of the larger social disjuncture we call the alienating attribute of modernization.

A comparative study of 'western-style' painters from the mid-nineteenth century onward will help to set the parameters of a popular realism and its attendant charade. Consider the Bengali painters Bamapada Banerjee (who comes close to Ravi Varma's intentions) and others like A.P. Bagchi, S.K. Hesh, J.P. Gangooli and Hemendranath Mazumdar. Consider the somewhat younger Bombay painters Pestonji Bomanji, M.V. Dhurandhar, A.X. Trinidade and M.F. Pithawalla. Ranging



16 Ravi Varma, *Lady with Mirror*, 1894

from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, these artists contextualize the peculiar painterly qualities of Ravi Varma. Even when they make genre images from a local culture, they construe the bodies according to classroom conventions of portraiture, figure-studies (from plaster-casts and live models), and make a standard application of oils, perspective and composition. Ravi Varma is self-taught and boldly eclectic; he can be kitsch but never dull. He is a little like the Company School painters, haphazard and informal in inventing technique, body-style and figural convention but for an avowedly historicist project of cultural representation.

The Bengal School painters (leaving aside brilliant moments in the oeuvre of Abanindranath Tagore) attempt to fashion an ideal but interpret a medievalist aesthetic by so diffusing the body that often only the aura surrounds the ideal gesture which is located, like all ornamental art, at the point of stasis. I would like to add further that there is perhaps no other way in which the golden past survives in the modern age except as pastiche—and farce. The Bengal School and even Nandalal Bose in Santiniketan could scarcely do anything to lessen the absurdity of so much mythic



17 Ravi Varma, *Portrait of Govardhanlalji, Nathadwara*, oleograph

invocation. Only Benodebehari Mukherjee achieved in his fresco of medieval saints³³ a synchronic structure in which the tradition of artisan-saints and everyday life could be aligned to make up a temporal mode, a continuous narrative that is in effect a people's history.

To return to Ravi Varma, the mythological rendered through mechanical reproduction reinforces the national-popular agenda. In the specific case at hand, Ravi Varma's piecemeal efforts to produce new forms and techniques is also precisely the point where classical subject-matter, translating itself in order to satisfy bourgeois desire, further translates into images for mass consumption that are facilitated by the reproduction technology of the glossy oleograph.³⁴ With its printing inks and high varnish, the reproduction technique makes the image *all surface*. It is interesting that towards the end of his painting career Ravi Varma had brightened his oil colours and made them consonant with Indian light. By the very effect of this luminescence the pictures, for all their attempted perspectives, floated to the surface. The technique of the oleograph captures, and then reinforces, this up-floated image (*Illus. 17*).

Ravi Varma's paintings yield penny icons and bazaar calendars and they expand into the great shadow-play of popular cinema. This secular transaction on religion is one kind of modernization achieved through a transfer of technology. It is also an ideological transfer: the image with an aura is delivered to the urban masses who may still revere the past but who do not often dream it—except in the very process of reification. Nor is this entire business of what I euphemistically call modernization, a matter of scorn. Even as kitsch Ravi Varma's transferred representations in the mass-produced prints, as in the cinema (more specially the cinema of Dadasaheb Phalke and Prabhat Film Company), make us reckon with the stylistics of the image. See how theatric flamboyance and the painter's art translate into the lovely pose of the courtesan in Damle/Fattal's Prabhat Studio film *Sant Tukaram*, not to speak of the great Bal Gandharva who referred to Ravi Varma's figures and became a 'female' idol of his times. These popular images set up a spirited mediation, a relay between theatre, painting and cinema, with painting making a double coordinate, thus reiterating the significance of its iconicity. By formal condensation the image reveals an inner dynamic; even more than any live pose or stance or movement, it reveals the quick and everlasting body-gesture of the would-be subject.

Epilogue

Ravi Varma's *Galaxy*: An Unframed Allegory

Ravi Varma's *A Galaxy of Musicians* has contrary virtues (*Illus. 18*). The ensemble of accomplished women is awkward and tender and quite superbly ornamental in the way the artist composes light and contour and colour from face and shoulders to turned hip and thigh to feet, and in the way the delicate arms and hands are arranged in relationship to the musical instruments. Resembling figures in majesty,

this picture also testifies to the dilemmas in Ravi Varma's admirable project: that of working with orientalist preconceptions toward a national identity. Compounding this is the dilemma of turning male ardour into a woman's subjectivity.

In the otherwise grand historical project of united India in whose name the superb galaxy is arranged for all the world like a conference of goddesses, the artist gives himself over to the prevailing orientalism: the group of eleven oriental women representing different regions of India (including muslim nair tamil parsi anglo-indian women) make up a perfect anthropological vignette. The vignette resembles conventions ranging from the grouping of divinities to courtiers and courtesans; also conventions for grouping ethnic types that continue right up to Company School compositions. But it lays out this mannered group with its uneasy glances as a testimony for a nascent modernity.

Iconographically, *Galaxy* compounds Ravi Varma's splendid portraits with his genre and national-allegorical pictures. Formally, *Galaxy* overlaps the iconic image with the tableau. The iconic image is formatted to converge spiritual energies through inviting the devotee's gaze upon a condensed motif, thus establishing hypostasis. The tableau, a theatre fragment of a larger whole, also invites the viewer's gaze, but by framing it. The image-tableau acquires an imminent (not manifest) narrative. It is, as Barthes says:

a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view . . . [it] is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social) but it also knows how this must be done.³⁵

The tableau format in western painting has contained (literally drawn the edges of) an extended allegory which does indeed have something moral, social to say. From the great seventeenth-century tableaux (of Poussin) to those of the eighteenth century (notably those of Jacques Louis David), these tableaux become the models for simulated classicism in the more academic and salon art of the nineteenth century. As I have already mentioned, salon art serves in turn as the remote and much-mediated model in the colonies.

If Ravi Varma's image offers first the tableau with an underpinning of the iconic format, it offers in the second look an active style of *staging* whereby the frozen vignette comes to have an allegorical import. In the subsequent take we have to accommodate the fact that the seemingly classical devolves into the category of a popular realism—which is other than the realism of great European art although that too is being distantly emulated—and settles into the making of a genre. That in turn paves the way for reproducible pictures through printing technology. In other words, we have to deal with mixed or even muddled pictorial conventions and techniques.

This leads one to believe that Ravi Varma does not in fact know, intellectually or pictorially, the import of the classical tableau picture; and that *Galaxy* is an example of the somewhat naive effort, revealing in the process the vulnerabilities of the incomplete subject.

Thus Ravi Varma's pictures, derived from varieties of high and low art can, in their sensuous presence, give the satisfaction that the figures in their iconographic personae are tokens of the doubly desired world—ideal and yet accessible, real. This is indeed the basis on which mass culture works out its illusions or, rather, its inversions: 'Popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of things of art to the things of life.'³⁶

In this medley of contradictory conventions is to be found pictorial gratification in the guise of reality: demonstrable evidence that the world is governed by the bourgeois tenet of a materiality; that the empirical, knowable world-as-image is also at the same time an object easily subsumed within the world of exchange values. Things of art become things of life and then both may become commodified. Ravi Varma's oeuvre covers this social terrain; our retrospect however can help to mark



18 Ravi Varma, *A Galaxy of Musicians*, ca. 1889

reverse readings whereby we can see how reified images regain their aesthetic.

The clue to the interpretative process starts from the fact that the portrait, a privileged form of European and later colonial Indian art, is mapped over an indigenous albeit popular iconicity. To reiterate briefly the steps: Ravi Varma's references come from Tanjore paintings with their more elaborate Mysore antecedents. These are superseded by what he learns of the western manner in the easel format as an adolescent in Trivandrum, first via the apprenticeship of the court painter Ramaswamy Naicker and then by watching a Dutch painter, Theodore Jensen, who is with the Maharaja of Travancore in 1868. Thereon Ravi Varma continues with his assiduous self-training and talent. Further individuation in the manner of staging a person is provided by an introduction to western (Parsi or Company) proscenium theatre. The concept of the *mise-en-scene* and the mimetic aspiration in the newer art forms come from that source. The portrait-into-theatre presentation foregrounds certain aspects of realism, exemplified still further in the newer regimes of the visual by the photograph. All these aspects together—easel painting, proscenium theatre, photography, and ultimately the cinema—determine the meaning of the tableau in Indian art with and after Ravi Varma (*Illus. 19*).

The tableau delivers what Barthes calls the essence (presumably the iconic essence) of the image into the arena of the narrative. This is particularly relevant for Indian pictorial traditions as these transit into the modern. This process of delivering the iconic makes the image appear contiguous with the 'truth' of life and therefore 'realistic', but the realism is in fact subsidiary to the act of deliverance and not a virtue in itself. This is the premise not only of pictorial art as exemplified by Ravi Varma but also, as I have already mentioned, of contemporary Parsi theatre and the first major examples of Indian cinematography worked out by Dadasaheb Phalke precisely along this icon-tableau-narration axis.



19 Ravi Varma, *A Group of Indian Women*, oleograph

Writing on melodrama, Peter Brooks relates the tableau to the melodramatic *mise-en-scène*.³⁷ The melodrama in turn is predicated on the replacement of the sacred; it enshrines the beloved in the space evacuated by the sacred orders to the profane. We know that the invented genre of the Indian ‘mythological’ massively mediates western romantic and melodramatic forms of narration and, coming full circle, alludes to the iconic. That is to say, if the melodrama involves the transference from the iconic/sacred to the simultaneously familial and public registers of the image, the mythological takes that over but reinscribes the detached beloved back into a quasi-sacred space. It maintains, in lieu of the lost realms of the gods, this close register between the iconic, the familial and the public. This is where an image like Ravi Varma’s *Galaxy* is situated.

This closely packed, richly bedecked band of female musicians, not unlike equivalent bands of angels or celestial nymphs, is something of a paradigmatic image. It suppresses time as history in favour of memory reposed in the woman who can invite and sustain the paramount gaze. Indeed, Ravi Varma’s paintings are especially important in that he makes up a female body that is a reflection of the contemporary state of the male gaze. Hovering between the sacred and profane, the aristocratic and the middle class, the foreign and the indigenous (and, in the case of this particular picture, between several ingeniously designated regional types of body, dress and demeanour), the narrative of *Galaxy* is an allegorical compound of vested interests as these are going to develop on several fronts and in the various arts throughout the early nationalist period. Not least of this is the oriental fix between the self and the other (the self *as* the other), where the binaries (as these are posed above) find cathexis in a single image of desire: *the oriental woman*. It is she who becomes, through contemporary national consciousness, an indigenously (and ideally) positioned subject.

What I am spelling out, then, is the chronology of the development (or underdevelopment) of the subjectivity of the woman in one trajectory of Indian painting. She is encouraged to shed her iconicity only to be inscribed through another form of idealization, through a kind of frozen ontology, into the tableau format. For if we recall the Barthian definition of the tableau, this subjectivity will in the very nature of the format be essentialized.

The question that needs to be asked is how the orientalist view is calibrated when it is held by European artists (like Delacroix, Ingres, or on a lesser plane, Jean-Leon Gerome); on home-ground in India by visiting British/European artists (such as Tilly Kettle, James Wales, Francesco Renaldi, Johann Zoffany, Thomas Hickey), and how it is refracted by the work of a native male artist from India—like Ravi Varma. I claim a crucial difference for Ravi Varma on the basis that the need for *self*-representation in and through the female subject comes to be intimately inscribed within such a motif as *Galaxy*. And further, that this gives the picture an ontological premise that is deeply moving even if it is not from an art-historical point of view

successful, or even from a women's point of view ideologically valid.

The *Galaxy* is something in the nature of a prognosis for a national cultural synthesis—the perennial idea of unity in diversity—worked through female/feminine representation; if here is a supposed act of self-representation of a culture via the sensuous body of the woman, it is also in fact an acting out of the bad faith of the male artist/interlocutor. Inevitably read in terms of the woman's spiritual superiority, this picture actually puts on display the male gaze in the light of which this galaxy comes into view. Its intended purpose is to coalesce vulnerable female subjects into the stereotype of civilizational ensemble and to thus make a new norm for cultural deification. But this is subverted by the very consequences of the exposed gaze and unstable format. Teased by the controlling regime of the gaze, the subjectivity in formation turns round to become nearly rebellious.

Our reference, then, is to the pressure of contradictions under which the meaning of the image is to be elicited. And for that the cue is to be found in the scattered glances—or is it the startled subjectivity?—of the feminine stereotypes. There is no 'meeting of the eyes'—a dictum of Indian aesthetics—either between the viewer and subject or between the subjectivities on display in the tableau. If the synthesizing format of the tableau or its schematic typology is belied in the embarrassed look of the individual subjects, we must elaborate the meaning of the image by asking *what* is the evasion about? In the very question the subjectivity of the women surfaces, if somewhat subliminally. There is as if a refusal on the part of the women to configure themselves into an iconic composure. And there is, even as their underdeveloped subjectivity fails to sustain an alternative point of view, a flouting of the rules of orientalism invisibly structured by the tableau.

Two women in white and gold flank the composition in the *Galaxy*: the vain dreamer from Kerala and the dancing girl from a nawab's court in a narcissistic, self-gesturing pose. Their glances cross in the top half of the picture and form a sort of triangle inside which, diagonally and a little off-centre, sits a moon-faced Maharashtrian woman in her rich red, black and gold sari. She is a compact presence; her folded leg provides a little depth to the composition and as she looks away she also provides distance to the group (*Illus. 20, 22*). The group drifts away in reverie until all the glances are brought back by a small, dark girl with streaming hair, standing almost hidden on the extreme right of the second row (*Illus. 21*).

What we have here is not only an ensemble portrait of Indian (pedigreed, manicured and bejewelled) women in their eternal act of gentle seduction. It is an annotated group portrait with the added motif of a vocation: many of the women hold musical instruments designating the public face of a wife/mistress capable of cultural responsibilities. The women not only have a vocation, they form a sort of clumsy collectivity (or club). The assumed contract encounters a hitch in the presence of the young woman at the back, which is oddly pertinent. Her one hand is held up to



Clockwise: 20, 21, 22 Ravi Varma, *Galaxy* (details), ca. 1889

the chin and the other hand, at the end of a bent arm, is clenched against the waist: the artist gives her torso a neat triangular form, her head a high delicate perch. Her informal pose, that of a girl dreaming at a window (or gazing at herself in the mirror), makes the figure the protagonist in the group, the painter's protegee. She looks at the viewer, gathering the glances all askance. She *looks* at the beholder attentively and arrests the scuttling effect on the subjectivity on display. She stops the pictorial disarray and the forced clubbing of the women, which no amount of locked limbs and group orchestration seems able to hold down. Ravi Varma recognizes that the

(male) gaze is problematic once actual identities are at stake.

With so much awkward slippage of glance and gesture in the ranged group, the young woman who does look out and back at the viewer transfers any residue of the burden of deification on to the narrative within the tableau. And what is the narrative? The covertly allegorized representational schema in *Galaxy* promotes the selfconscious notion of a composite culture that is just emerging. This is deflected by the painter's protegee into a dialogue on forms of otherness within the colonial sensibility. The deflection is a clever move. Even as the artist presents (in continuation of his larger project of a pan-Indian representation of types) a national-ethnographic

aspect, he shows himself to be working on a determined motive of self-regard. He introduces a sense of triumphant otherness in the self as such. He thereby inscribes in the otherwise gratuitous group a small, firm sign of (female) subjectivity.

With all the injudicious crossing of codes between the iconic and the narrative there is a rebellion in the ranks, and the sign of *Galaxy* develops in favour of a healthy contrariness. These stereotyped women refuse to serve the iconic function; there appears between the lines an inadvertent, or second-level allegory about representation itself. James Clifford argues that the more realistic portraits are convincing and rich the more they serve as extended metaphors, patterns of association that point to coherent theoretical/aesthetic/moral meaning. He argues that in the readings on culture that this form of textualization allows, it is the rhetorical trope of ‘allegory [that] draws special attention to the narrative character of cultural representation, to the stories built into the representational process itself’.³⁸

The female ensemble of *Galaxy*, including the dark, eagerly staring girl at the back, offers stories drawing on the nothingness around them. The odd feature is that the allegory is at the beginning rather than at the end of the narrative, for it is an allegory about cultural self-representation itself.

Finally, then, ‘Raja’ Ravi Varma, the native male artist in the orientalist schema, puts forth a performative parody of the female subject on display. Cued by the narcissistic posing of a half-hidden subjectivity in the rear, the ensemble inadvertently offers the feminine as masquerade. With deliberate allegorical interest the artist inflects the theatricality of the presentation and undermines the realism of the picture: by abandoning the (proscenium) frame and letting go. Losing grip on the bodies, he offers more than a parody, he offers an ironical view of the process of representation where the controlling male gaze is shown to be put out within the picture itself.

The tableau of *Galaxy* has to do with the business of types, and with the ‘unity in diversity’ motif of national culture. It has covertly to do with the relay of the female body through glance, gaze and gesture into the realm of voyeurism—the inner chamber of desire with its fourth wall removed. Thus we have here at once the relay of male desire and female personae. Taking all aspects into account, the picture has to do with the transition of an indigenous society into the problematic of identity wherein what is insecure is mapped on to the female body: the body posed for unabashed viewing outside the margins of history but inside a national pictorial schema. *Galaxy* thus merits iconic status and art-historical deconstruction that will prove Ravi Varma to be a crucial figure in establishing visual modernity at the exact turn of the century.

Not until Amrita Sher-Gil arrives on the Indian art scene in the 1930s is Ravi Varma’s representational dilemma sought to be tackled. I would like to hypothesize that Sher-Gil, on her south India tour, saw *Galaxy* hanging in Mysore—or if she did not, that this picture is the fiction on which her own paintings develop after the south Indian trilogy.³⁹ Her desire finds ways to gain subjectivity in the woman’s

painted image that is a woman's by right. If *Galaxy* allegorizes the beauty of the legendary land of India through the lush, lithe, glittering presence of eleven women, then Sher-Gil enlarges the allegorical reach by attempting to make the woman's subjective presence the model for the developing subject-in-history. This is the history which is being 'discovered' by compatriots and in which Sher-Gil makes a brief aesthetic intervention, introducing, with all the force of her young intelligence, a morphology that takes Indian art firmly towards the modern.

Notes and References

- ¹ Much of the biographical material on Ravi Varma in this essay has been sourced from E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1981. Other biographical and interpretive texts referred to include Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, 1960, rev. edn 1984; and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'Westernization and Tradition in South Indian Painting in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Raja Ravi Varma', in *Studies in History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1986. Since this essay was first published (in 1989) a number of art-historical studies on Ravi Varma have appeared, to which I am indebted in this revised version. These include Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal 1850–1920*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992; and Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922: Oriental orientations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994. Also *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives* (exhibition catalogue, edited by R.C. Sharma, National Museum, Delhi, 1993) which includes several contributions and a multifaceted view of Ravi Varma. A critique of the artist yet to be contended with by other art historians, is provided by R. Nandakumar in 'Raja Ravi Varma in the Realm of the Public', *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 27–28, March 1995; and 'The Missing Male: The Female Figures of Ravi Varma and the Concepts of Family, Marriage and Fatherhood in Nineteenth-Century Kerala', *South Indian Studies*, No. 1, January–June 1996.
- ² Asok Mitra, 'The Forces behind the Modern Movement', in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, No. 1, Delhi, 1961, p. 16. Mitra says further: 'To European eyes, however, Ravi Varma must have appeared stale and unprofitable, because he was too obviously an "imitation", even as it is possible to imagine that *Durgesnandini* if translated into English would have left an English reader, who had read Scott, cold. . . . It is possible that a European reader would find Iswar Gupta strange, exciting, beautiful, being different, and *Durgesnandini* dull and imitative. It is fortunate, however, that there was no campaign at the time on the part of Bengali-knowing Englishmen advising our intelligentsia to shun *Durgesnandini* and cling to Bharatchandra or Iswar Gupta: English continued to be the window open to the world; to shut it was regarded as a crime against India.'
- ³ See Ramananda Chatterjee, 'Ravi Varma', in *The Modern Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1–6, January–June 1907, pp. 88–90.
- ⁴ See Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Myth of Praxis: The Construction of the Figure of Krishna in *Krishnacharitra*', in *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995.
- ⁵ See Mildred Archer, *India and British Portraiture 1770–1825*, Southeby Parke Bernet, London, 1979.
- ⁶ See *ibid.*

- ⁷ Partha Mitter, 'Raja Ravi Varma: The Artist as a Professional', in *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, p. 38, n. 4; Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 8.
- ⁸ See Jaya Appasamy, *Tanjore Paintings of the Maratha Period*, Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 1980.
- ⁹ See Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, pp. 3–8. It should be mentioned that there were many painters in Ravi Varma's family: his uncle Raja Raja Varma had learnt the Tanjore style of painting from Alagiri Naidu, court artist in Travancore; his younger brother C. Raja Raja Varma (a very accomplished painter who however subordinated himself to Ravi Varma's career); and their sister Mangalbai Tampuratty. Ravi Varma's son Rama Varma also became a painter.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–16, 19–21, 24, 30. The story of Ravi Varma's success has been laid out by Venniyoor and repeatedly recounted: a synoptic paraphrase is presented here for emblematic use in the larger Ravi Varma narrative.
- ¹¹ Besides Sayaji Rao III, there are resplendent portraits of his consorts (Maharani Chimnabai I and II), of Prince Fatesingh Rao, Princess Putlaraje and Princess Tarabai, housed in the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum Trust at Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda.
- ¹² See Nandakumar, 'The Missing Male'; also see Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 24.
- ¹³ See Anthea Callen, *Technique of the Impressionists*, Orbist, London, 1982, pp. 8–10.
- ¹⁴ See J. Thuillier and A. Chatalet, *French Painting from Le Nain to Fragonard*, Skira, Geneva, 1964, p. 124.
- ¹⁵ See examples of paintings by Jean Baptiste Santerre, 1658–1717 and Jean Raoux, 1677–1734. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–40.
- ¹⁶ See Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson, *Art of the Nineteenth Century: Painting and Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1984, pp. 430–31.
- ¹⁷ The House of Kilimanoor cultivated performing arts like kathakali and thullal. Ravi Varma's mother Uma Ambabai Tampuratty wrote a thullal—*Parvati Swayamvaram* (Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 2), and Ravi Varma was a great kathakali enthusiast.
- ¹⁸ C. Raja Raja Varma's diary (1895–1904), quoted in Venniyoor, *ibid.*, pp. 43, 49, 56, and in Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, p. 9.
- ¹⁹ *Shri Krishna as Envoy* (1906) shows Krishna in his role as an envoy of the Pandavas to the Kaurava court, treating Duryodhana's evil design to take him hostage with cold contempt by revealing his divinity to the courtiers.
- ²⁰ See *Nala Damayanti*, ca. 1888, in the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum Trust, Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda; *Hamsa-Damayanti*, 1899, in the Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum; *Swan Messenger*, ca. 1905, in the Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore.
- ²¹ See *Shakuntala Patralekhan*, 1876 (only available in an oleograph version); *Shakuntala*, ca. 1888, in the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum Trust, Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda; *Shakuntala*, 1898, in Government Museum, Madras; and *Shakuntala Looks Back in Love*, 1898, in Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum.
- ²² Draupadi is depicted in her moments of humiliation in several paintings. Sita's abduction, shown in *Ravana Slaying Jatayu*, in Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum, and *Jatayuvadha*, 1906, in the Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore, is among the more mimetically pictorialized images in Ravi Varma. Using narrative gesture, he confirms the subtext of theatricality in the popular aspects of the realist genre.
- ²³ *The Fine Arts in India*, Madras, 1871, quoted by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'Raja Ravi Varma and the Project of a National Art', in *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, n. 11.

- ²⁴ Both Krishna Chaitanya (*Ravi Varma*, p. 8) and Venniyoor (*Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 56) confirm the belief that Ravi Varma would have seen the Padmanabhapuram and Mattancheri paintings of the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries. Transactions between the courts of Tanjore and Travancore in matters of culture and especially painting are well known. The more iconic paintings from the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries (see Jaya Appasamy, *Thanjavur Paintings of the Maratha Period*), the popular paintings on glass during the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries which spread across the present Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala (see Jaya Appasamy, *Indian Paintings on Glass*, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Delhi, 1980), and the hybrid but sprightly drawings of the Company School from the Tanjore region (see Mildred and W.G. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British 1770–1880*, Oxford University Press, London, 1955) would have been familiar to, indeed part of, the immediate milieu of Ravi Varma.
- ²⁵ ‘The performing arts (Thullal and Kathakali) favoured literalism and the concrete image. In the interpretation of a metaphoric image like elephant-gaited (*dantigamini*) already a little ungainly and recherche, the elaborate and repeated gestural mimesis of Kathakali is not content to suggest the slow, swinging gait but brings before you the prodigious animal with trunk swaying, fan-like ears waving.’ Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, p. 8.
- ²⁶ ‘If the Sanskritic acculturation of Kerala was extensive, it is very essential to remember that it was not the lyricism of Vedic poetry or of Valmiki’s epic that moulded literary sensibility and creation so much as the neoclassicism of later epochs, the Kavyas written according to the prescriptions of Dandin who went all out for literalism, concrete imagery, exhaustive delineation instead of allusion and suggestion, the systematic description from head to foot (*kesadipada*) instead of the sensuous silhouette of the feminine figure. In Sanskritic neoclassicism, the form and style of the panegyrics of kings (*narasamsa*) had annexed the description of the gods even in hymns and for the obvious reason that the Puranic stories about the exploits of gods were modelled on the valorous deeds of kings. Likewise, the literary manner of the descriptions of woman in her various moods (*mayika* lore) had been uninhibitedly extended to the hymns about goddesses. There was a landslide of this tradition in Kerala.’ See Krishna Chaitanya, *ibid.*, p. 7. For a further location of Ravi Varma in Malayalam literature, see also R. Sivakumar in *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*.
- ²⁷ Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, p. 9.
- ²⁸ In *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 31.
- ²⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.
- ³⁰ He makes a virtual pilgrimage, or is it more the gentleman’s grand tour, of the subcontinent. See Venniyoor, *ibid.*, p. 27 and p. 34.
- ³¹ For an overall idea see Mildred and W.G. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British 1770–1880*; and Mildred Archer, *Company Drawings in the India Office Library*, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1972.
- ³² See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, ‘The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology’, in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 14–15, July–December 1987. Rajadhyaksha’s conceptual framework for inscribing Ravi Varma’s iconic images into technological forms is illuminating.
- ³³ Executed in 1946–47, this 100-foot fresco is situated in Hindi Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- ³⁴ The project of the printing press begun in the early 1890s, situated in Bombay/Lonavla, suffered many vicissitudes. Difficulties of business forced the Varma brothers to sell the press

to one of the German technicians in 1901, giving him the right to reproduce 89 pictures by Ravi Varma. See Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, pp. 30, 33–41.

³⁵ 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', in *Image, Music, Text*, Fontana Paperbacks, London, 1982, p. 70.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, p. 5.

³⁷ *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 48.

³⁸ James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, p. 98.

³⁹ I am referring to Sher-Gil's *South Indian Villagers Going to Market*, *Brahmacharis* and *Bride's Toilet*, all done in 1937.

Film/Narratives



Articulating the Self in History: Ghatak's *Jukti Takko ar Gappo*



1 Ritwik Ghatak as Nilkantha Bagchi (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)

Author–Actor–Character

Jukti Takko ar Gappo (1974) is the last film made by Ritwik Ghatak (1925–1976)¹. It is about a failed life and an argument that goes beyond it, beyond Ghatak himself who acts out the life and death of a communist intellectual. The text reclaims, through its severally replayed discourse, the absent subject in conjunction with the question of praxis; it makes subject and history properly partisan within a larger utopian project.

Taking himself as primary material Ghatak puts himself on screen as the principal actor, demonstrating how a subject is formed by his emphatic presence (*Illus. 1*). And the sensuous mobility, the plasticity of his body-presence is rich material for the purpose. This presence is however composed into a triangular motif by its two flanking aspects: the author/director on the one hand and the narrativized character on the other. Both aspects function in a historical dimension so that while a sheer

This essay was first presented at a conference, Third Cinema, organized by the Edinburgh Film Festival at Edinburgh, in 1986. Earlier published versions appeared in *Arguments and Stories: The Cinema of Ritwik Ghatak*, edited by Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Screen Unit, Bombay, 1987, and in *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, British Film Institute (BFI), London, 1989.

presence is foregrounded in the film it is also a means for testing models of self-representation. In the sense that the author enacts 'his life', *Jukti* is a mock-autobiography. However, as it calls into play evidence from the symmetrically composed but alternative histories that have been condensed into the fictive character, the effect is to turn the confessional, nearly nihilist strain of the narrative into an ideological testimony of the subjectivity at stake.

In *Jukti* Ghatak makes the invisible and therefore covertly manipulative voice of the author expressly visible by acting in the film, and moreover by acting the role of a historical twin called Nilkantha Bagchi. In this sense the authorial voice comes to us in double register but for that very reason its hold is loosened. Once provided with a body the author is available for anatomical operation; the various pitches, the strains and stresses of the voice can be didactically laid out and examined. So that if ever there was an ideal author-subject that asked, like a metaphysical voice-over, 'Who is it who thus lives and dies?', it is now returned to a volatile actor-subject always ontologically incomplete in the narrative process. But for that very reason it is also invested with a more concrete immanence within the historical realm. Ghatak's play along the author-actor-character equation is thus a kind of hermeneutic exercise: he is interpreting for his own generation metaphysical questions that have a historical function.

There is, in other words, the testimony of Ghatak as author with a means through his art of interrogating his lived history, and of Ghatak as the protagonist of a contemporary story who recounts in third-person narrative a tragic destiny. The projective ego of Ghatak is undone in the full equation. It becomes a signifier in the orbit of an overarching historicity held up by the two intentionalities of author and character. Both belong to the first adult generation after Indian independence. Both examine narratively the choices of the Indian left.

Ritwik Ghatak's biography is marked by a lifelong relationship with the communist movement and with its cultural front to which a large number of intellectuals and artists owed allegiance until the mid-1950s. Simply signposting the context, we should note his reckoning from the left position of the national struggle culminating in the simultaneous declaration of Indian independence and the tragic partition of the nation on communal grounds; his deeply sceptical evaluation of the gains of Indian independence in the hands of what he would call a bourgeois-landlord ruling party; and finally his anguish at the disarray and sectarianism of the Communist Party from the 1960s onwards. When he made *Jukti* in 1974 he was at the end of his tether and his health was failing him. But he was astute enough to realize that the nation, polarized between agents of political expediency and ultraradicalism, was on the brink—and if it was the last thing he did he would intervene as an artist. To this purpose he became madly energetic, proving the degree to which he was engaged with contemporary politics. But more importantly the degree to which his intellect and his

imagination had internalized the dialectic, so that his desperate testimony was also ultimately a project for the future. *Jukti*, along with trying to pose the correct political choices, works out the problematic of praxis. This is, as we shall see, the explicit note on which the film ends.

About *Jukti* Ghatak said the following:

Which is the correct way? Society is a complex phenomenon and it should be tackled with great judiciousness. Multiple trends and tendencies cross each other continuously. The problem is which one to choose, and how to go about it.

I have emphasized that the genesis of all our present-day problems is that great betrayal, the so-called Independence. But I did not specify the current phase as strictly neo-colonial.

I can visualize only two alternatives: either straight Fascism or some way out of it along Leninist ideology. If you are aware of German youth during 1929–33, you will understand the tensions in our present-day youngsters, fast turning into lumpens. . . . The entire structure is crumbling down and I believe that some drastic turn is bound to come soon.²

In 1975, when Indira Gandhi declared a national emergency, the liberal phase of Indian democracy seemed to be over. And although democracy was restored in 1977—Ghatak died in 1976—Ghatak's prophecy about the lumpenization, indeed the continued brutalization of Indian political life can be said to have been borne out.

Alternative cinema, with some of its major practitioners coming from the third world, has battled to represent imperialism, hunger and the preconditions of praxis. The Indian experience of cultural politics suggests that the third cinema, as it has come to be called, is equally about self-representation. It is about the articulation of the colonized individual, *the absent subject*—in the history of community, nation and the world at large which the postcolonial inherits.

The Story

The prime character in *Jukti Takko ar Gappo* is first set up grandly with the name Nilkantha, a name acquired by Siva in a moment of awesome generosity when he swallows the poison that comes up with the ambrosia in the great churning of the ocean by gods and demons. This establishes Siva's omnipotence; he is nevertheless *marked* by the event: his throat is stained blue, hence the name Nilkantha. But having set up the protagonist in this mythical framework, *Jukti's* narrative proceeds to devolve his iconicity.³ Mockingly, affectionately, a transcendent figure is turned inside out into a man filled with grand illusion but also marked by the fallibility that distinguishes the martyr.



2 Nilkantha the alcoholic: 'representative of an irresponsible middle-class intelligentsia' (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)



3 Bangabala (Shaonli Mitra), Nilkantha and Nachiketa (Saugata Barman): homeless 'exiles' (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)

Nilkantha is a middle-class schoolteacher and writer; he was a communist, he is now an alcoholic. He is the 'representative of an irresponsible middle-class intelligentsia, wasted and degenerate'.⁴ Nilkantha drinks liquor with a self-destructive voraciousness. When he says at the end, 'I am burning, the universe is burning', you know that this is the martyr of all religions reduced in our own time from a blazing icon to a mere effigy, yet aspiring to die on behalf of the good, to become a sign of the betrayal of the good (*Illus. 2*).

And when he says, less like the omnipotent Siva than like the earthbound saviours of humankind, that he is tired, that he is not easily tired but he is now tired—adding that he will not rest but qualifying later even this remnant of heroism with a stern reckoning—'Life's imperatives are invincible'—the devolution is complete. The man who speaks is addressing himself simultaneously to two sets of life-affirming youth: the nihilism of the Naxalite boys is a romantic complement to the innocence of the two strangers—Bangabala, a refugee from Bangladesh and Nachiketa, an unemployed engineer—who join Nilkantha's vagabond trail (*Illus. 3*). This man who sits and waits with the flock in the forest speaks like a sage in history, and although this is a lower status in the iconographic hierarchy that has been sketched out by allusion to gods and saviours, it is a status at least contiguous with that of the historically incomplete viewer and stationed temporally in the *present*.

Ghatak's achievement is precisely that the positioning of the protagonist is emblematic but that he is not valorized; neither the protagonist nor the present he encloses within his life-chronicle is valorized. Life's imperatives, as the protagonist calls them, are momentarily compressed to form the present as they also momentarily dislodge the present from the hold of causality—of both myth and history.

What Ghatak does in *Jukti*, he does in all his films: he plays with the infinite plasticity of mythic material, then provides one figure with an iconic fixity and another, or the 'other' within the first figure, with extreme vulnerability. Then in a game of ironic proxy between the two he exorcises the false consciousness within the very schema. But in *Jukti* he goes further. He works out the problem of representing the

contemporary: how to construct a figure that is truly in the process of becoming, in the process of making choices while baiting death; how to figure the archetypal into the contemporary so that it burns with the mortality of the historical subject.

In *Jukti* he demonstrates—and indeed the film is a kind of pedagogical exercise—the immense condensation (in symbolic and linguistic terms) that must take place in such a figural construction. And then the series of displacements that must proceed so that in the narrative as such the destinal figure detaches itself sufficiently from the claims of metaphysical sovereignty through the game of masks. Having already distanced itself from the given forms of realism (the standard representational correlate to the historical), the figure stands somewhat tendentiously in the narrative as a ‘free’ signifier. But it is precisely as free as Ghatak himself. It is part of Ghatak’s iconoclastic strategy that the covert mythology of the author is deconstructed along with that of the martyred hero in that both are contained in the person of Ghatak who demonstrates the falling apart.

Ghatak as Image

Returning to the assertion that *Jukti*’s meaning derives from Ghatak’s presence in it, I now backtrack to ask: what is the special quality of this presence?

The first thing to note is that Ghatak was a theatre activist before he became a filmmaker. During the years 1948–54 he participated constantly as both actor and director in the Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association (IPTA), a cultural front of the Indian Communist Party active from 1943 in several regions in India, especially Bengal.⁵ And in the way Ghatak plays the protagonist, in the way he uses his body, his voice, his gesture, theatrical experience is more than evident.

IPTA activists used several models ranging from the realist to the Brechtian to Bengal’s living folk and popular forms. In *Jukti* Ghatak provided himself with a repertoire of acting devices to make a compelling theatrical personality which is, more than the ‘real’ Ghatak, the legendary mock-iconic figure he had by then become.

He uses the trick of dismantling body gestures, the head and limbs working separately, puppetlike, with the slightly caricatured but endearing postures of mime. It could be a reference to the chhau dance-dramas, a form he loved and (like the oraon tribal dance) inscribed significantly within his films.⁶ This is no doubt because of the way chhau combines the heroic aspect of puranic gods with the comic aspect of all heroism; the way the virtuosity of the dancers topped with majestic masks may be lit up by the mischief of an accompanying band of masked monkeys leaping between the trees and the audience. The ensemble of legendary men, gods and beasts make game of the mythological battles and the status of the victor by the typical cartwheel of the playfully absurd on which such performances turn. One scarcely knows whether the performers are appropriating the Hindu gods humbly or subverting the pantheon in the process of adapting them to their own iconographic and ritual ends. Ghatak

for his part would opt for the 'primitive' to gain a deliberately ambiguous identity for himself, and then insert that ambiguity into the contemporary political scenario.

He also takes on the mannerism of a singularly sublime identity, that of the baul singer, conveying the reverie, abandonment and grace of the crazy mendicants. This is particularly the case in the sequence where he himself sings passionately, tenderly, the song about the mother, consoling the bereft Bangabala who is at once the little daughter of divided Bengal and the little mother of the even more bereft man. He also mimics the large gestures of a jatra actor especially on didactic occasions, which he usually puts forth as a drunken harangue. He admonishes his corrupt comrade Shatrujit, who has flourished over the years writing cheap drivel, telling him to 'practise thinking', but only after he has wheedled from him ten rupees for a drink, turning the joke on himself as a wasted ideologue (*Illus. 4*). Placing himself in a too-dramatically lit frame, he mimics as well as performs a sort of ventriloquist's trick of throwing the voice into space, the dark space where the awestruck village audiences sit gaping at the imposing effigy-like authority of the jatra actor. He thereby once again turns the joke on himself as a melodramatic actor.

However Ghatak knows full well what happens to a body-presence in cinema, in the cinematic image: the encounter between the actor and spectator is incorporeal and abstract but the person, by becoming a hallucinated figure as in a



4 Nilkantha wheedles money for a drink from Shatrujit (Utpal Dutt) (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)



5 Nilkantha in his abandoned house (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)

dream, totally possesses the spectator. Ghatak projects himself on screen as both sensuous and spectral, becoming *an image of himself* by manipulating both his performance and the medium, its interpellating techniques of lighting, lensing and camera angles.

This he does at the very start of the film in one of the opening sequences. Ghatak is sprawled on the floor of a room that is stripped of everything but a slowly cranking fan (*Illus. 5*). The simple room is artificially lit with shadows that diffuse and redefine the interior space, steeply angled by the camera positions and the wide-angle lens. In this distorted space Ghatak's figure is awry but also invisibly riveted: he commands the spatial dimensions. Even when the camera further intervenes—cutting close up to him and then retreating to middle distances around and above him as he talks to Durga, his wife (*Illus. 6, 7*) and Satya, his son (*Illus. 8*)—it is as if the figure turns and tilts on its own axis. This is the mise-en-scene for a self-determining presence that is at the same time illusory in its final state of vagabondage. When the beautiful Bangabala, a refugee from Bangladesh, enters the room the light through the window has dematerialized Ghatak's lean body, making him visually a far advanced *liminal* figure so that the narrative sequence may be taken to give us the equation between spiritual intransigence and the irreducible expressivity of human presence.

To restate the interpositioning of theatrical and filmic presentations in *Jukti*, we see how sheer presence may



6–8 Departure (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)

Above: 6 Nilkantha's wife Durga (Tripti Mitra) tells him of her decision to leave. Middle: 7 Nilkantha accepts Durga's decision. Below: 8 Durga waits as Nilkantha says goodbye to their son Satya (Ritaban Ghatak)



9 Nilkantha quotes poetry to Bangabala sitting on a Calcutta street bench (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)

be turned into virtuoso performance. And by implication we know how, by the histrionic powers of an elect soul (as in ritual and primitive drama), a person is offered to the spectator for identification and catharsis. This is a presupposition on which expressionist drama functions; it includes, as for example with Antonin Artaud, the exhibitionist/masochistic elements of such performance. But in *Jukti* we see further how the insubstantial image on the screen may be used to advantage in turning this offered, and in a sense ‘sacrificed’, presence into an absence. The actor leaves us with the compulsion to introject ourselves into this talking shadow which has survived the catharsis and become discourse.

And how often Ghatak appears on the screen with his head floating in space, the frame cutting his head from the torso at the level of the neck in what is a conspicuously unconventional framing device, memorably when he is sitting on a street bench under a starry sky quoting Yeats to the village girl like a poet of all ages (*Illus. 9*). Or in the scene in the forest when he quotes Lenin to the young Naxalite, his head sculpted against the dark luminosity of the long night ahead. He has the audacity to project the guillotined head of an inveterate actor, nodding, laughing, teasing and deriding itself with an inexhaustible resource for gesture and speech.⁷

Ghatak, and this film in particular, has been attacked for being self-indulgent and exhibitionist. The charge can be conceded at the first level as a person-

ality trait but at a more advanced level we know that he makes this a self-parodying act which becomes, as part of the larger design of the film, a provocative practice.

Take the aspect of himself in the form of the *actor's head* drawing attention to itself for its inimitable expressivity. The mechanism by which this seduction takes place is the camera and behind the camera is presumably Ghatak as director, the focusing eye and ideal spectator. Ghatak, in other words, is face-to-face with himself, and this encounter where the subject confirms its existence has obvious psychoanalytic and archetypal antecedents (the mirror according to Lacan and the myth of Narcissus). I bring this up to emphasize the powerful impact of the mirror encounter: the encounter between the ideal ego with the promise of mastery and control over life's performance, and the ego experienced as still awkward, *insufficient*. Although Ghatak in this last film made at the very end of his life, is accused of regression, quite the contrary is true. He actually tackles the narcissistic element in the processes of self-identification. He examines the narcissistic *relationship*, measuring the gap between self and mirrored self, transferring the weak sense of history that it implies into a cinematic form which initiates an explicit discourse on it. In that sense the narcissistic relation becomes precisely the pretext for a discourse about the social, raising questions of identity on both imaginary and symbolic levels, levels at which a subject simultaneously articulates itself while being articulated into history.



10 'Actor's head' (Jukti Takko ar Gappo)

The Fool

The hybrid, even contrary figure that emerges in the process of self-encounter is the figure of the fool (*Illus. 10*). The holy fool belongs to all mystic traditions and, in the more comic guise of the wise buffoon, to all ancient literatures, especially dramatic literature. (Consider for example the cunning figure of the *vidushaka*, clown and didact, in classical Indian drama.) Complementing the figures

of the zen monk and the sufi fakir, the mendicant and minstrel of medieval India, the holy fool is a mediator of spiritual discourse. In Europe he gains a historical position of another order with Cervantes, catapulting aristocratic chivalry into madness; and with Shakespeare, fascinated by the inquiry into the secret terrain of mortal melancholy, we get the existentially developed figure of the poor fool reading and rebutting, with the mere talent of speech, destiny's signals on behalf of his companion, the hero.

Ghatak is often called an expressionist. This is correct and he accepts the responsibility. What I should like to emphasize is that with Ghatak expressionist art in

its full dimension includes the remote antecedents of mannerism and the more proximate prerequisites of romanticism.⁸ It includes working out such contradictions as mannerism threw up between the uncharted aspiration of the individual and an investigation of social anomie. It includes the dilemma of romanticism: a glorification of the folk—of their mythic fantasy and so-called authenticity, with an understanding of the development of capitalism and the rise of an advanced working-class consciousness. And it includes, finally, an examination of middle-class conscience (the problem of bad faith) and revolutionary utopias, as in the literature of the modern period. Ghatak's expressionism finds further reflexivity in Marxism: appropriately, he is an admirer of Bertolt Brecht, and like Brecht he works on historical contradictions as such, formally and ideologically, for all to see.

To pick out some mannerist-expressionist components in Ghatak's work, let me look at his style of figuration. I have already spoken about the odd close-ups where the head floats and wobbles, and of the tilted compositions. Consider again how the extremely angled shots—top angles or very low angles—distort not only the interior space (for example the lines of the walls, the bars in a window, an open door) but also the figures, so that they are tilted forward or back. See how he combines this with the use of lighting, with well worked-out artificial shadows and a wide-angle lens which emphasizes the depth-of-field, and you have an almost perfect description of a mannerist image.

I want to emphasize here that it is usually his own figure that the camera distorts, most remarkably when you see him at the end as the police bullet hits him in the stomach. You see a distorted figure and the implications are various: if in mannerism such attenuation signifies alienation, a quotation from the convention can become in the Brechtian sense an alienating device. The distorted figure is seen to be at variance with our sense of gravity whether we are positioned with the camera or in defiance of it; however when we are positioned in our seats such a figure displaces our contractual stability of space. This leads to a double conclusion: the tilted figure seems to be about to fall back or forward not to reinforce the depth of field, *not for a greater reality effect*, but for the purpose of forcibly pulling the viewer into the frame. The viewer clutches at a figure that seems to be falling out beyond even as Ghatak falls forward upon us when he dies, splashing liquor over the actual lens.

Now one might say that to make the shadow on the screen and the spectator clutch each other is objectionable in that it makes identification physical, visceral. What I am arguing, however, is that Ghatak does the opposite—he breaks the pact by going too far, by defying the spectator's optical expectations of figures in space, expectations concretized by the renaissance that cinema has internalized. If I feel dizzy or awestruck sharing the inhospitable space the character inhabits then, for all the exhibitionism, he is breaking the voyeuristic spell, making me conscious of the relationship induced in cinematic viewing.

A Narrative Space for Exile

The relationship of the spatial with the narrative situation in *Jukti* has to be looked at further. At one level the narrative of *Jukti* is quite conventional: it is a third-person narrative whose prime character possesses the determining awareness. But there is a deviation in that the character is not guided by the psychological motivations of, say, the realist hero, nor for that matter by those of the antihero, his familiar, subversive companion in whom indeed the great part of modern tragedy (in literature as well as in film) is enacted.

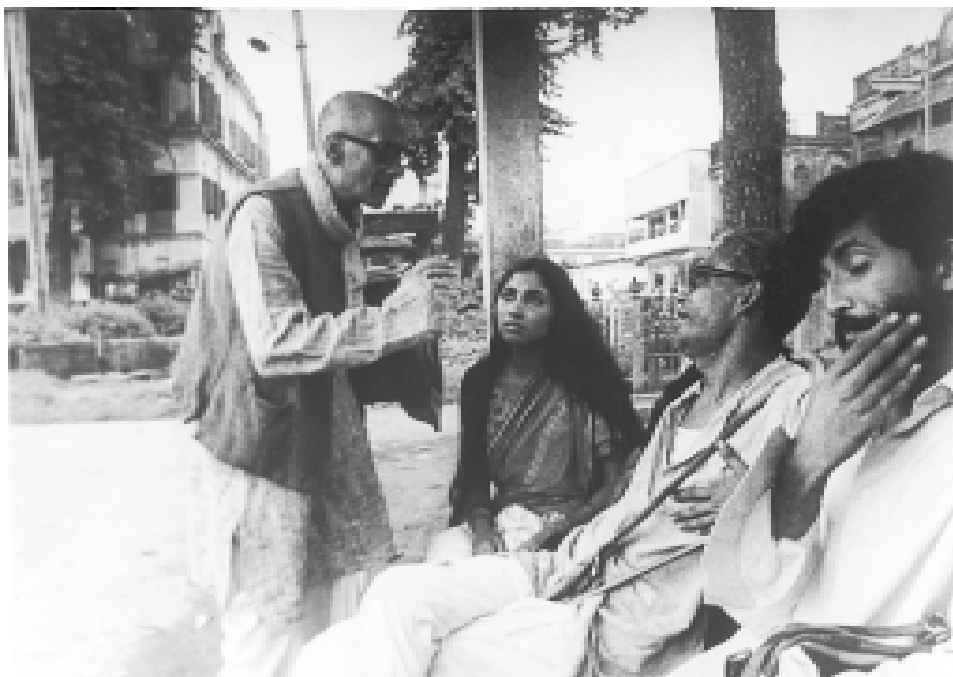
Correspondingly, the odd positioning of the camera in *Jukti* does not serve, as in similar uses of the convention, to encourage identification (for example, making the figure larger than life), nor to suggest alienation (for example, foreshortening and disfiguring the character). Nor is it quite used to mark out the psychological states of the character, his psychic stresses.

I have indicated that in almost every film Ghatak seeks to construct a subjectivity that stands midway between an archetypal category and a class formation, or rather a subjectivity that stands apart in a state of temporary and dynamic autonomy from the congealed embodiment of mythic consciousness: the icon. He seeks to construct what in one sense may be called a liminal figure, and the liminal figure implies by definition a spatial disjunction. Consistent with that, Ghatak's cinematic devices—including camera angles, lighting, lensing and depth-of-field—give the figure in space this uneasy location, on the join as it were between reality and irreality.

To put it another way, by interposing diagrammatic and dimensional models of spatial projection Ghatak succeeds in making the narrative space and the figural trajectory through it, a manifest maze. The space is a critical area of operation, an area of doubt, of speculation and of planned volition. A pictorial mode of positioning a figure in space becomes also a way of mapping the subject in history. And thus Ghatak, over and beyond providing this uneasy ground to the filmic narrative, plays with meanings through a set of spatial paradigms in which we as spectators are variously positioned, every time a little askance.

Seeing how Ghatak achieves this symbolic clutching together of the figural motif, I must now introduce the ways in which he *counterposes* the spatial structures in *Jukti*. He continually dismantles the overdetermined images, suggesting not only how the principle of montage (not surprisingly Ghatak regarded Sergei Eisenstein the ultimate master of cinema) works through a rhythm of closed and open forms but further, that tight metaphoric configurations merit quite different, even converse, narrative procedures.

Thus, for all his expressionist tendencies, Ghatak releases the image into what one might call an unmarked horizontality, a literal flatness, as of many a landscape in India. Bleached and undifferentiated, such frames are in conscious contrast to the evocative, tonally rich and symbolically moulded landscapes of his other films



11–12 Street discourse (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*). Above: 11 Bangabala, Nilkantha and Nachiketa: a drunken Nilkantha declaims, walking down a Calcutta street. Below: 12 Jagannath Bhattacharya (Bijon Bhattacharya), Bangabala, Nilkantha and Nachiketa: a conversation at dawn

such as *Ajantrik*, *Komal Gandhar*, *Subarnarekha* and *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*. I would like to suggest that this is a deliberate formal device that corresponds to the anecdotal mode in which *Jukti Takko ar Gappo* is made.

Fully conscious of the epic form of narration (just as he is of melodrama), Ghatak obviously understands how the epic proper comes to be inducted into the picaresque and dramatic forms of narration, then into romantic realism, and finally into Brecht who virtually draws the tail-end of realism back to its source in the epic. Ghatak speaks frequently of the epic form and of Brecht.⁹ But if we want to deal with the anecdotal aspect of *Jukti* and the narrative space in which it functions we have to understand his interest in the documentary form of cinema¹⁰ and not surprisingly, his affinity to aspects of Jean-Luc Godard.¹¹

Ghatak uses what could be called Godardian techniques in *Jukti*—the interspacing of neutral images of the city and the landscape, the insertion of documentary footage, the abruptness of frontal address over and against the fictional narrative so as to privilege the present. Indeed Ghatak adopts the logic of the cinematic present in *Jukti* and he does this as much by the narrative style, the seemingly spontaneous performative aspect of the actors, as by the way the series of scenes are laid out. The exiled group (Nilkantha, Nachiketa, Bangabala, the impoverished Sanskrit teacher Jagannath Bhattacharya) meanders through perfunctory, nearly amateurish settings. They are seen wandering the Calcutta streets punctuated by derelict tea stalls and liquor shops, at the river front and on park benches (*Illus. 11, 12*). They go across the outskirts of the city and beyond into the countryside where they tarry with Panchanan Ustad, an exponent of chhau. Then through parched fields and peasant-land till they come to the symbolic crossroads where they meet a drunken cart-driver who directs them to their destination by saying go right, then left, then right, then left. Nilkantha does make his way back to his son and estranged wife, now working as a schoolteacher at Kanchanpur, only to be compelled to set out once again.

Indeed the most politically motivated sequences function in a narrative space that is conspicuously unoriginal, even indifferent. This is to be seen in the caricatural, very Eisensteinian montage sequence. Outside a factory lockout an incoherent trade unionist is shown barking out his harangue in unison with a street dog. In another episode the anarchic nature of tribal peasant insurgency is presented by Ghatak in some sketchy, long-shot, high-contrast takes with little figures running helter-skelter threatened by the landlord's gun-toting henchman shown in distorted close-ups. Here Jagannath is killed. Similarly the grand finale of prolonged crossfire between the Naxalites and police offers, in its inter-cut suspense, a mock-battle, as if to say that the meaning of the event lies not in the *mise-en-scene* or in the dramatization but in the sheer *encounter*, as it is always called in police reporting. It is an abbreviated, notational record of the mortal struggle in lieu of which the peremptory death of the hero is pushed up and enlarged into a rhetorical question: how do

you terminate the inexorable present except by a parodic death?

Nilkantha dies after delivering the coda of the film. Then the corpse is picked up by the police and carried through a barren, boulder-strewn landscape, with the captive party walking briskly in single file to a marching tune. This style of drumming the tragic hero across an empty stage has all of Brecht and Godard in it, but there is all of Ghatak in it too: his own black humour gained from the position of an exile to which he was relegated by the end of life.

That *Jukti* treats of an exile is obvious; that its narrative space is finally derived from a chosen indigenous space and tradition of exile needs to be considered. I have referred to the figure of the holy fool who stands in the space of exile. To back it there is the Indian epic tradition of the hero's exile in the forest, and the tradition of the peripatetic prophet and preacher. There are the vivid, variegated lives of the itinerant medieval saint-poets; and there are contemporary minstrels like the bauls. Moving across vast geographical areas, the mendicant lives out the metaphoric scope of exile, the idea of movement as such, of moving on, being quite central to his life and message: 'What is *made* will crumble, what is standing will fall; but what is the living moving *jangama*, is immortal.'¹²

The saint-poets we encounter in the Indian tradition—Mahadeviakka, Tukaram, Kabir and myriad others—represent, in some form, caste and gender transgressions. In their itinerant life, in the grace and accessibility of their discourse, in their heterodox communitarian ethics, in the very playfulness of their presence and absence in society, they are also oddly elusive. Ghatak, while formulating the narrative structure and space appropriate to the figure in exile, recalls this subaltern mobility of the saint-poets.

This model of exile provides Ghatak with a way to both humble his overriding subjectivity and to give it the power of the collective. For we know that the saint-poets even as wanderers were embedded in the true collective of peasant and artisanal communities, and that they rose beyond it to the vanguard position of reformists and revolutionaries within the larger, hierarchically structured society. Thus Ghatak, by sanction of his own tradition, has the privilege of access to a collective and communitarian identity. Rejecting the metaphysically privileged subjectivity as also behaviourist reading of socialized men and women, he can query the meaning of *action* (and nonaction) from the peculiar position of these heretical ancestors.

Indeed we might say that just as subjectivity is posited in and through the spatial dimension in *Jukti*, it is also posited in and through the temporal dimension, signified as praxis. Ghatak is fully conscious that it is only when the figure is placed in such a space-time conjunction that the historical moment can be formulated. And he is fully conscious that cinematic means are eminently capable of producing this space-time conjunction, thus redefining the ontology of the subject as a subject in history. This brings me to a consideration of the film's praxis.

Death Problematized

Through the cleverly arranged narrative in *Jukti Takko ar Gappo* Ritwik Ghatak embodies the process of acting out, of enactment, and of political action. There is quite certainly a psychological *acting out* process in the film; Ghatak is acting out his own unresolved romanticism and he uses a well-known marker for the cause: alcoholism. It is also true that this acting out process involves a degree of infantilism along with adult idealism. But precisely because he is also conscious of the inner core of romanticism, Ghatak is able to contain its excess; as master of the melodramatic form he can handle the dysfunctions of both infantilism and of idealism so as to arrive, narratively, at a political resolution.

While the alcoholism is to be put down as a means of acting out, other characteristics like his childish play with a stoical wife, vagabond companions, renegade colleagues, and finally with the militant youth and the police he encounters at the end of the film—all these should be seen in terms of a conscious enactment of the many aspects of the fool. If he is the eternal child in the film, making up to its mother after every act of irresponsibility, turning her admonishments into more lavish appeals, he is so in an especially Indian context where the pranks of the child Krishna and man's

childlike supplication to the goddess Kali provide a kind of cyclical energy pattern for the male consciousness. The motif of the mother, so central to the Bengali consciousness, is always present in Ghatak's films; here we have the wife-mother who is literally called Durga and the destitute girl, a substitute little mother, who is equally significantly called Bangabala (*Illus. 13, 14*). Ghatak places this cruel and compassionate mother-figure in her iconic form within an even larger matrix of myths (after Jung, whom he admired), thus converting what may be myth as mystification, a specifically construed superstructural value in Bengali culture, into the perennial source of the human unconscious. This conversion can be seen as an ideological operation with which one may be out of sympathy. But so far as the playfulness of the man-child in the film is concerned, he enacts it with sufficient irony to refute any charge of false



13–14 Female personae (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)
Above: 13 Durga: schoolteacher, stoic survivor. Below: 14 Bangabala
with the chhau mask of the goddess



15–20 Nilkantha's apotheosis (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*)

Above: 15 Nilkantha, Nachiketa and Bangabala come across a group of armed Naxalites in the forest. Middle: 16 Nilkantha evaluates his own life in terms of revolutionary politics with a young Naxalite. Below: 17 The police chase the Naxalites



Above: 18 A policeman throws a hand grenade at the Naxalites. Middle: 19 Nilkantha refuses to leave the site of the 'encounter'. Below: 20 Nilkantha, hit in the crossfire, lurches forward. Liquor from his bottle splashes the screen

consciousness. He enacts the child in order both to appease the mother and to subsume her powers within the more existentially complex figure of the fool. This is the subject, archetypal and historical at the same time, who possesses by sanction of all tradition the prerogative of speech. And since speech is volatile and always in excess, he is impelled into provocation within the social.

While Ghatak's alcoholism is presented in the film as an empty marker of an impossible desire for plenitude, or rather for the lost object of plenitude which is the mother, the relationship between two forms of infantilism is established to the advantage of the adult subject: he is able to counterpose himself vis-a-vis the mother in the ironical figure of the wise buffoon. If however even this figure must suffer dissolution in death—and the death is greatly played up in the film—then there is the transferring of a sensuous object of desire to a more abstract one, which is *utopia*. What is important is that it is not transference at a psychological level alone; the supreme dissolution enacted in dying is immediately preceded by a hardheaded evaluation of his own failed life in terms of contemporary history. In a night vigil with a group of Naxalite youth, Nilkantha/Ghatak evaluates the terms of revolutionary politics envisaged in figures like Marx, Lenin and Che Guevara, and puts himself at stake. As this self-evaluation is addressed to a young radical in turn evaluated by him as suffering from an *infantile disorder*, the concept of utopia is reaffirmed through discourse as a historical project yet to be fulfilled.

In this penultimate discourse Ghatak is at one level absolving himself, transferring his own kind of infantile disorder into Lenin's historical category where it is truly to be critiqued. He is transferring and also perhaps transacting between an old man and a boy the pain of alienation, the alienation of the political exile. He is attempting to split this alienation into what could be called its defensive and reflexive parts, so that the tragedy of the young Naxalite becomes disembodied idealism while his own tragedy becomes, in exchange, a historical suicide, a full-bodied *intervention* (*Illus. 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20*).

Nilkantha dies an exaggerated death, standing in the way of the crossfire between the Naxalites and the police. As he is hit in the gut he lurches forward. He is foreshortened because the camera is set at a low angle and he appears almost horribly comic; as if to confirm his own absurdity, he stretches an arm and spills the liquor in his bottle, pouring it out over the lens. If emptying the bottle is an ironic comment on the futile dream of plenitude, the splashed and dirtied lens, the interface between our reality and his, appears to be a comment on the impossibility of positive viewing on our part as well. The veil drawn over the lens is an antididactic gesture to say that even as the truth slips between the Naxalite and the old man, it slips between the image and the viewer, and that there is no definitive access to the outreaching utopianism.

There is a good deal of demagogy in *Jukti*, as also vanity and caprice. But what Ghatak presents in the moment of death is the *coda* which holds compacted in it

both the discourse of the speaking subject and that of contemporary history. For the dying speech, as brave as it is enigmatic, modulates the tragedy of a historical suicide. To his wife who appears at the site on a brief mission and becomes a witness to his death, he tells a story by the contemporary writer Manik Bandyopadhyay: a weaver admonished by his comrades for running the loom while they were on strike against the moneylender's exploitation, replies—I run an empty loom so as not to let my limbs rust, so as to keep in practice. And then adds of himself, as he actually dies, *one must do something*. One must act irrespective of gain, irrespective even of the result. Pessimistic as this may seem, this is an injunction to act, and to act politically.¹³

Like death praxis too is problematized. It is wrenched from the rhetoric both of the philosopher and of the militant. Paired with death in one instance, in the next praxis is shown to transcend even death. As a prime figure of metaphysics death is thus prevented from fulfilling its function of *closure*: it is emptied of its conventional existential meaning and given an indeterminate status. Thus death becomes a retro-active sign weaving a dialectical notion of time into the narrative; it is made to stand proxy for action. This, in a sense, is a special cinematic privilege: to enact and replay the tragedy-and-farce axiom of blocked history.

Notes and References

- ¹ For biographical material on Ghatak in English, see Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Return to the Epic*, Screen Unit, Bombay, 1982; Haimanti Banerjee, *Ritwik Kumar Ghatak*, NFAI, Pune, 1985; Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Debating the Third Cinema', in *Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen, British Film Institute (BFI), London, 1989. For a selection of Ghatak's writings, biographical data and filmography, see *Ritwik Ghatak: Cinema and I*, Ritwik Memorial Trust/Film Finance Corporation, Calcutta, 1987. Also see Shampa Banerjee, *Profiles: five film-makers from India: V. Shantaram, Raj Kapoor, Mrinal Sen, Guru Dutt, Ritwik Ghatak*, Festival of India USA 1985–86, Directorate of Film Festivals/National Film Development Corporation, Delhi, 1985.
- ² *Chitrabikshan*, January–April 1976, pp. 75–76; English translation by Haimanti Banerjee in *Ritwik Kumar Ghatak*, pp. 76–77.
- ³ This occurs not only with the main character of the film but also between characters, each with a symbolic name and a persona: a typical and an individual identity. To recount the names alone, the wife is called Durga, the son Satya, the young graduate Nachiketa (the young sceptic in the *Kathopanishad* burning with the desire for truth), the destitute girl Bangabala (daughter of Bengal), and so on.
- ⁴ Ghatak, quoted in Banerjee, *Ritwik Kumar Ghatak*, p. 79.
- ⁵ See *Cinema and I*, pp. 105–11.
- ⁶ Ghatak found occasion to include a long dance sequence in *Jukti*; he had already made a documentary on chhau, *Purular Chhau Nritya*, in 1970.
- ⁷ We know of course that the man portrayed will be dead at the end of the film; so will the author identified in body and mind with the character; and so, tragically, was Ghatak himself, a year after the film's release.
- ⁸ See Arnold Hauser, *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origins of Modern Art*,

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986. The age of mannerism brings with it the slow and incipient process of individuation evolving in consonance with the material history of the renaissance and the development of early capitalism. But this soon reaches the psychic condition of alienation such that the individual now sees himself as in charge of his destiny but unable to fulfil it within the terms of the society, economy and polity that have simultaneously evolved. Henceforth the very relationship between subject and object will snap and the bereft subject will see himself mirrored in a fantastically distorted, if surreally elegant world which mocks even as it mirrors the figures and forms of an unattained selfhood. Mannerist art forms generate and contain excess—as emotional resource and linguistic oversupply of signifiers—and out of this excess the tragic-comic character is construed as a pervasive presence taking unexpected twists and turns in the unconscious. This is the prefiguration of the romantic, which in turn prefigures the modern in its expressionist form.

- ⁹ See Ritwik Ghatak, 'Music in Indian Cinema and the Epic Approach', in *Cinema and I*, pp. 41–43.
- ¹⁰ See Ritwik Ghatak, 'Documentary: The Most Exciting Form of Cinema', in *Cinema and I*, pp. 46–59.
- ¹¹ Ghatak had seen some Godard films; he occasionally speaks about this in his writings: 'You see I agree with Jean-Luc Godard that anything which seems to an artist to be able to [*sic*] conveying his message is entirely valid—be it song or dance or newspaper headlines or commentaries or just about anything.' *Cinema and I*, p. 72.
- ¹² See A.K. Ramanujan's 'Introduction' (to his translations of Virasaiva *vacanas*, Kannada free verse) in *Speaking of Siva* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973), where he speaks about the opposition between the standing and the moving in the Virasaiva religion, where 'a Jangama is a religious man who has renounced world and home, moving from village to village representing god to the devoted, a god incarnate' (pp. 20–21).
- ¹³ One must do something, one must act. This constitutes the individual and his *svadharma* in a specific space and moment of Indian epic construct and history.

Sovereign Subject: Ray's Apu

The First Decade of Independence

It can be argued that the national movement, as it 'demobilizes' itself, hands over the task of cultural transformation to the state, enjoining artists to cooperate with its new institutional structure. Further, that artists, like their intellectual counterparts, perpetrate a set of self-deceptions during the period of transition to a national state; that they can be seen to use a kind of ethnic identification with extant (and idealized) traditions while gaining the upper hand through a rational-liberal discourse which is the basis of actual economic and social power in their society. An overlapping projection of (past) authenticity and (future) progress provides a formula for a democratic impulse, but it may be at the cost of the very people on whose behalf freedom was won. Both aspects of the projection have a euphoric dimension that obscures the present subaltern identity of the people in question.

Intellectuals 'always face the dilemma of choosing between a "westernizing" and a *narodnik* tendency', Ernest Gellner says,

but the dilemma is quite spurious: ultimately the movements invariably contain both elements, a genuine modernism and a more or less spurious concern for local culture. By the twentieth century, the dilemma hardly bothers anyone: the philosopher kings of the underdeveloped world, all act as westernizers and all talk like *narodniks*.¹

In Nehru's effort to situate nationalism within the domain of state ideology there was, as we know, a concerted effort to engage in planned development. There was an attempt to create a new framework of institutions to embody the 'spirit of the age': humanism, science, progress, and their synonym, modernity. Partha Chatterjee calls it a 'statist utopia'.³ Even a cursory glance at the public institutions set

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up for promoting the arts after independence reveals that the cultural policy favoured a centralized and integrationist functioning.⁴

Culture was sought to be institutionalized precisely in order to carry out the overall mandate of modernization. In fact this institutionalizing process was conceived of as a way of disentangling the modern from the nationalist polemic. The latter had often to speak in the name of tradition even if it covertly strengthened the desire for the modern. While the national struggle had attempted to simulate a civilizational quest, the national state was bound to privilege culture as a means of cohering contemporaneity. In fact it would privilege culture above art as well, precisely because the intrepid claims of art always exceed, or subvert, even the more progressive rhetoric of institutionalized culture.

In India, as in other postcolonial countries (Mexico for example), artists have taken this institutional support for granted, nurtured as they have been throughout the anti-imperialist struggle on the idea of a benign national state. The nation's artists are provided with a sanctioned space in which they struggle with and resolve the riddles of language and sovereignty. For their part the artists seem to assume, even unconsciously perhaps, their responsibility to decode these terms and reconstitute them in what would be a national/modern art. By the same logic Indian artists, while testing the existential implications of the modern in the context of the nation, have been facilitated by state patronage to gain a metropolitan identity.

If we extend the argument about the consequence of what has been called, after Antonio Gramsci, the 'passive revolution'⁵ to analogous developments in the realm of contemporary arts, we find that Indian modernism has developed without an avantgarde. A modernism without disjunctures is at best a reformist modernism. The very liberalism of the state absolves the left of confrontational initiatives on the cultural front. Similarly, the very capacity of newly independent India to resist up to a point the cultural pressures of the cold war era makes it less imperative for artists to devise the kind of combative aesthetic that will pose a challenge to the Euro-American avantgarde. We know that cinema, literature and the visual arts in Latin America have revolutionized the very forms of the modern they inherited from old and new colonialisms. Whether this derives from a particular kind of civilizational legacy, from the politics of liberalism adopted by the Indian state, or from peculiar accommodations made by the Indian middle-class intelligentsia when it moved from colonial to independent status, Indian artists have tended to avoid radical encounters with contemporary history.

All the same there is nothing to be gained from the kind of cynicism that Ernest Gellner for example uses to designate culture in the postcolonial countries. Even if art practice is ostensibly harnessed to the operation of the ideology and cultural policy of the new national state, creative practice is usually heterodox. There is a certain rebellion and also a dissembling radicalism among artists. Quite often there

may be utopian formulations or, on the other hand, subversive symbols that have political import. Complemented by even an episodic intransigence on the political front, it is enough to confound generalized theses on politics and culture.

Cultural Creativity

It is worth recalling that in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan the romantic section of the nationalist elite led by the poet himself had encouraged an idealized aristocratic-folk paradigm for propagating a universal culture. The Santiniketan ideology in the practice of the arts was anti-industrial; with its strong craft orientation it was also obviously antiurban and emphasized environmental, ecological concerns.⁶ Its vocational definition of the artist favoured a guru-shishya etiquette where the student idealized the master (Rabindranath was Gurudev, Nandalal Bose was the incontrovertible 'master moshai'). It abhorred the professional artist who was seen to demean himself by resort to the market. The modern was treated as the troubled feature of something like a civilizational project to which India, as part of the orient, would contribute its unique dynamic. This was the agenda of Benodebehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij. Indeed it was this indigenous romanticism combined with the canonical aesthetic of Ananda Coomaraswamy and the artisanal basis of Gandhian ideology which gave us the contours of a nationalist cultural discourse in the area of the arts. With the later alumni the aristocratic mentality of Tagore vanished. It had been transfigured already by the tribal persona of Ramkinkar Baij; now K.G. Subramanyan opted in favour of a transaction with the popular to arrive, through a series of modernist mediations, at a strategic notion of the contemporary.

By 1947 the course of Indian art was set *away* from Santiniketan. But if this phase of national culture was left behind in the irreversible process of post-independence modernization, the very abandonment gave rise to a permanent nostalgia for indigenist life-forms. It also led to a project for creative compensation fulfilled by an array of invented traditions.

What also got sidestepped with the advent of independence was the experiment of the cultural front of the communist movement, the most important aspect of which was of course the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA).⁷ This left another form of nostalgia, even a fierce regret, which led in turn to some major statements in art. It characterized for example the self-reflexive form of Ritwik Ghatak's cinema: the loss of a radical dream is actually thematized in his *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Jukti Takko ar Gappo* (1974). Ghatak, positioning himself to go beyond the so-called intermediate phase of bourgeois democratic culture, claimed modernism to be part of a logic beyond reform; indeed he positioned the logic of twentieth-century revolutionary socialism against reformist modernism. In this somewhat voluntarist exercise he provided the impetus, rather like the unorthodox genius D.D. Kosambi,⁸ to see Indian tradition turned inside out, to question the

assumptions about myth and reality, to problematize the nurturing potential of perennial symbols by confronting them with a historically shaped subjectivity. Precisely from this point of view Ghatak, a product of IPTA, would reject the overdetermination of the aesthetic. He would pitch his expressional ambiguities beyond the westernizing/narodnik paradigm and give the interrogative mode its political edge in the contemporary.

The pan-Asian revivalism of Santiniketan as well as the people's movement of IPTA turned out to be lost causes in postindependence India. We therefore have to resume investigation of an apparently nonideological or liberal aesthetic. Clearly, it is within this discourse that Satyajit Ray's redemptive promise in the realist genre is to be located. And though this will be the basis of the critique as well—that is, his unproblematized faith in the self-emancipation of the Indian (or more precisely, of the emergent Indian middle-class) consciousness—it is because of its redemptive promise that *Pather Panchali* (1955) gains an emblematic place in the first decade of independence. Liberal discourse, privileging a realist genre with its rationally conceived possibilities of transcendence, gives *Pather Panchali* and the Apu trilogy their seminal significance in postindependence India.

Modernizing Project

Ray's choice of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novels *Pather Panchali* (1928) and *Aparajito* (1931),⁹ his choice of a story—set some time in the early years of the twentieth century—of the growth, travail and transformation of a young brahmin boy in the mainstream of the modern, has obvious allegorical value. The footsteps of the brahmin boy mark the transition of an impoverished but literate and gracefully poised culture of perennial India, as also the transition of 'the people' towards a subliminally perceived destiny. Narrativized with appropriate pathos, each discovery of the boy is accompanied by loss and the discovered self carries the weight of familial and social responsibility. This is a responsibility, however, that is displaced in various registers of consciousness, dodged and deferred through various stages of life. This is a story about the romance of the self and the world in the heart of Apu who passes through urban anomie like a sleepwalker, and who gains in the balanced aesthetic of Ray's cinema a life that will stand testimony as a realist document for numerous lives-in-the-making.

I will argue that by virtue of its universal success *Pather Panchali* confirmed that an Indian cultural creativity was at work to link civilizational memory with the sense of sovereignty that independence brings. There was in the making and receiving of *Pather Panchali* a hope that this cultural creativity would overcome the painful alienation of the colonial experience by turning it into a rite of passage to modernity. The colonial experience could then be marked with a before and an after: the before would be designated in terms of memory, or more properly as civilizational

plenitude that yields the great imaginary. The present would move on to the destined point of arrival where the process of self-reckoning with otherness and authority, which is to say the symbolic order, has been tackled. Reality, contemporary reality, would now surface, materially replete, from its nourishing matrix. But it would also be indelibly printed with the structures of rationality gained at the collective level in the struggle for independence and revealed in the new national formation.

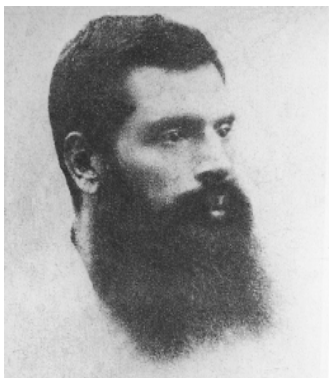
Pather Panchali served to provide a gloss on the civilizational trauma caused by progress; it sublimated (and displaced) the threat of modernization into a dream of autonomy. And it fulfilled the need for a newly self-regarding middle-class intelligentsia to channel its conscience. *Pather Panchali* became in the process something akin to an ethnographic allegory (built on a promise of plenitude) which denies and even seemingly undermines the politicality of a national formation (an artifice for social authority), but in fact served by deliberate default as a national allegory. That default may be seen as a way of reading one thing for another, a structure of narration corresponding to a structure of feeling. In a reticently existential film sovereignty corresponded to what one may call the political unconscious of the expressly conscious artist in postindependence India. It led 'logically' to a narrativization of the self via the nation—the most determining political paradigm delivered to the modern consciousness by the nineteenth century. Therein the nation tends to appear less as a societal struggle and more as an evolutionary trace in the consciousness, which is precisely the paradox at the heart of such a discovering mission.

The *Apu* trilogy is replete with symbols of colonial India in which it is temporally placed, but the colonial (like the national) consciousness is not really addressed. The village as a pristine community of precolonial India is linked directly with the sense of the historical present, Ray's own contemporary India, where the nation is the determining but invisible trajectory in the wake of which the individual can at last be valorized.

Ray's National Status

It is usual to argue that Satyajit Ray¹⁰ belongs naturally to the Bengal heritage, beginning with the rationalized ethics of the Bengal 'renaissance' through the liberal strand of the Brahmo Samaj to which his own family belonged (*Illus. 1, 2, 3*). And to the literary and artistic traditions reposed in Rabindranath Tagore.¹¹ Ray is indeed a literary filmmaker in that the developed conventions of the Bengali novel as well as its particular set of emancipatory themes are his basic material. His choice of Bibhutibhushan's novel *Pather Panchali* and its sequel *Aparajito*, which encompassed the environmental structure of the Bengali village and the destinies that ensued from it—this choice itself was significant in that it gave him, through its picaresque mode, the secular space for his succinct and contemporary narrative on film (*Illus. 4*).

I will argue that it is the ethics of his own version of realist cinema as this



1 Upendrakisore Ray: grandfather



2 Sukumar Ray: father



3 Satyajit Ray at age eleven, 1932

is internationally received which makes Ray India's emblematic *national* artist in the decade after independence. At the biographical level the actual inscription within national culture of his first film *Pather Panchali* (1955), followed by *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (1959), makes of itself a runaway story. With all the difficulties of finance Ray faced during the three years he spent making *Pather Panchali*, it was finally the West Bengal government, on the personal recommendation of the chief minister Dr B.C. Roy, that bailed the film out. No one, however, knew very much about why they were supporting the project and found justification in it being a kind of documentary. The money was granted from the account of a rural upliftment programme of the government because the film was called 'The Song of the Little Road'!

Jawaharlal Nehru had to intervene to allow the film to circulate abroad as there were objections from Indian diplomatic missions that it was too stark and pessimistic.¹² It had a prestigious opening, first at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1955)¹³ and then at Cannes (1956), where it won an award for the 'best human document'. In 1957 *Aparajito* won the Golden Lion in Venice and this confirmed Ray's international reputation. *Pather Panchali* opened commercially in London (1957) and then again in New York (1958), where it achieved huge popularity.¹⁴ All of this was superimposed on the quick success of the film in Calcutta itself with high praise from Ray's compatriots everywhere. Thus traversing regional/national/international contexts, *Pather Panchali* became independent India's gift to the confluence of world cultures. 'Each race contributes something essential to the world's civilization in the course of its self-expression', Marie Seton quotes Coomaraswamy from the *Dance of Siva* at the head of her biography of Satyajit Ray.¹⁵

On seeing *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* Stanley Kauffman wrote that he believed Ray was determined to preserve the truth about his people and that, paraphrasing James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, he was 'forging in the smithy of his heart the uncreated conscience of his race'.¹⁶ The Indian intelligentsia too held it in similar



4 Outdoor shooting of *Pather Panchali*: Satyajit Ray with film crew and actors. Subrata Mitra and Bansi Chandragupta are behind him.

regard and in terms that were not dissimilar. On the one hand it was seen as a testimony of individual conscience, and on the other as a civilizational expression mediated by some form of ‘racial’ memory, producing symbols with contemporary aesthetic affect. This was the cultural discourse that the Apu trilogy enriched—a romantic, even orientalist discourse, shared by resurgent nationalities of the east in the first decades of this century with Coomaraswamy and Tagore as its key figures.

Tagore and Santiniketan

It is well known that it was from Rabindranath Tagore, a friend of the family and a lifelong inspiration, that Ray derived his sustaining aesthetic;¹⁷ the need in particular to test contemporary Indian art forms on the simultaneous value of the *indigenous* and the *universal*—euphemisms in Ray’s case for the regional and the international. In this sense Ray can be seen as completing India’s civilizational quest as this had been articulated in renescent terms since the nineteenth century. Here, almost by deliberate default, the question of national culture was overwhelmed by preferred metaphors of perennality.

But then *Pather Panchali* and the Apu trilogy as a cycle can also be seen as answering, in some unprecedented sense, a contemporary and most immediate need for a suitable visual solution to the question of representing everyday life in India (*Illus. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10*). The perennial and the everyday: this was Ray’s project. Ray imbibed this under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee during his student days at Santiniketan’s Kala Bhavana.¹⁸

In this sense, then, Ray was not only completing a nineteenth-century project, he was bringing two of its most distinguished cultural products across the threshold into realism: the Bengali novel in its own version of a *bildungsroman* and the pictorial language of the Bengal School, but more specifically the Santiniketan artists whose ambient imagery aspires to a kind of oriental naturalism. Now, as a filmmaker, he seemed to resolve with exemplary economy the question of image,



5–10 Apu's passage
 Above: 5 Aunt Indir (Chunibala Devi) rocks baby Apu to sleep (*Pather Panchali*).
 Middle: 6 Apu (Subir Banerjee) gets ready for school: his sister Durga (Uma Das Gupta) combs his hair, his mother Sarbojaya (Karuna Banerjee) tucks in his dhoti (*Pather Panchali*).
 Below: 7 Apu (Pinaki Sen Gupta) learns to perform rites as a priest after his father's death (*Aparajito*)



Above: 8 Apu (Smaran Ghosal) as an adolescent schoolboy (*Aparajito*). Middle: 9 Apu (Soumitra Chatterjee) in his rented room in Calcutta, playing the flute (*Apur Sansar*). Below: 10 Apu's bride Aparna (Sharmila Tagore) enters his Calcutta flat (*Apur Sansar*)



11–14 Social encounters in the everyday

Above: 11 The grocer-schoolmaster (Tulsi Chakravarty) with customers and a punished schoolboy (*Pather Panchali*). Below: 12 Durga and friends at Ranu's wedding watch fascinatedly as a woman applies *alta* on the bride's feet (*Pather Panchali*)

iconography and pictorial narrative—questions pending precisely since the Santiniketan project wound down in the 1950s.

Satyajit Ray's relationship to the indigenous filmmaking tradition of India, a rich and variegated tradition nearly as old as film history itself, is an area still to be properly examined. It should reveal a third and perhaps surprising trajectory running through his cultural formation. Here I want only to note that there is at work a conflation of the virtue of the camera lens (*objectif* in French) and the rest of the elaborate apparatus that goes into producing the moving image, with the convention, the aesthetic, the ideology and the norm of realism. This is not the place for a critical debate on the realist genre in cinema, but it is worth remembering that this conflation



Above: 13 Aparna's mother shields her daughter from marriage to an insane man: 'Who are you giving your daughter away to?', she asks her husband (*Apur Sansar*). Below: 14 Apu's friend Pulu (Swapan Mukherjee) asks Apu to marry his cousin Aparna to save family honour (*Apur Sansar*)

initiates the viewer into a magical pact with the real whereby s/he comes to believe that the paradoxes of fantasy and perhaps even historical contradictions can at the least be visualized. The viewer moreover is led to believe that by virtue of this privileged participation in an inviolate perceptual model, a pristine cognition is also as if at hand and possibly also a universally valid resolution between nature and culture.

Ray is valorized for authenticating, in so contemporary a medium as film but yet with a commitment to the conscience of his 'race', a reforming will that befits the prevailing human conditions in India (*Illus. 11, 12, 13, 14*). He is also believed to have authenticated with an aesthetic modesty, the progressive aspirations of the liberal middle class. For the Apu trilogy enacts with its 'poverty of means' the painful entry of

a traditional society into the historical process. It replays the rhythm of that transformation in the very narrative mode of the three films while also confirming the transcendent imagination of the author–artist: Apu, the hero of the novel and the film, is also a writer. The conspicuously placed cathartic moments of the Apu trilogy mark a patient pace and then grant the individual his process of becoming. For Apu outpaces by a finely tuned voluntarism the ritual rites of collective survival, to take his unique place in the wide world.

Death and Desire

Apu's material world is enlivened by seasonal cycles, kinship networks, children's games, adult rituals. Thus 'naturalized', simple episodes (and the film is made up of these carefully edited episodes) turn into absolutes that prefigure the fixed markers of human life: birth and death. But if all this is seen as the unmotivated truth of collective life, the very texture of a community, Satyajit Ray on his own part seems to press no strong structure on the film.

Twenty years after the film was made Akira Kurosawa,¹⁹ the Japanese filmmaker, is quoted to have said:

It is the kind of film that flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river. . . . People are born, live out their lives, and then

15–18 Death in the family

From top to bottom: 15 Sister's death: Sarbojaya embraces her dying daughter Durga (*Pather Panchali*). 16 Father's death: Apu helps Sarbojaya raise the dying Harihar (Kanu Banerjee) so that he may sip *gangajal* (*Aparajito*). 17 Mother's death: Nirupama (Sudipta Roy) finds an ill and dying Sarbojaya sitting under a tree (*Aparajito*). 18 Wife's death: Apu receives news from Aparna's natal home of her death during childbirth (*Apur Sansar*)



accept their deaths. Without the least effort and without any jerks Ray paints his picture but its effect on the audience is to stir up deep passions. There is nothing irrelevant or haphazard in his cinematographic technique. In that lies the secret of its excellence.²⁰

Though *Pather Panchali* is manifestly episodic, actual historical discontinuity, like the experience of the colonial/national, remains an invisible feature. One has instead the fantasy of overarching continuity—from civilizational origins to the ambiguously periodized historical present. Thus the riverine metaphor, and the reception of *Pather Panchali* as a graciously easy film. But of course this is a typically realist ruse: the apparent absence of structure, of structural devices. By the time the Apu trilogy is complete one is aware of a subliminal grid placed on the natural flow of life so that it comes to be marked and narrativized as destiny.

The narrative of the trilogy is marked, for instance, by a recurring motif of death: the death of Apu's sister Durga, the death of his father and mother, and the death of his beloved wife Aparna (*Illus. 15, 16, 17, 18*). The death theme is worked out in the actual cinematic sequence with complete predictability, the editing of shots around the event signal separation/pain/loneliness and at the end, on Aparna's death, tragic



19–22 Bonds of affection

From top to bottom: 19 Nature's child: Durga with a calf (*Pather Panchali*). 20 The lovers: Apu teaches Aparna English (*Apur Sansar*).

21 City friends: banter between Pulu and Apu (*Apur Sansar*).

22 Father and son: Apu claims Kajal (Aloke Chakravarty), his son by Aparna, and bears him away (*Apur Sansar*)

alienation. There is a metonymic simplicity, a part-to-whole relationship of easy relay in the way life's great transitions are indicated. It is as if this loss-inducing society (colonial society?) is to be overcome by a philosophic acquiescence which is in turn overcome by a larger historical motif of survival (*Illus.* 19, 20, 21, 22).

Paradoxically, the deaths accelerate Apu's determined evolution. Indeed there is a flamelike sense of self that grows steadily as Apu encounters life and death and life again, and the flame is like the gleaming individuality that has been on the anvil in bourgeois literature since the nineteenth century. If separation by death sustains the romantic motif of Apu's outward journey his persistent departures make him ever more the modern exile. It is Ray's own high modernity that helps him portray Apu's introspective individuality so gracefully. Finding himself a suitable mirror image in the sanguine, clear-eyed persona of the actor Soumitra Chatterjee, he portrays the chaste urbanity of the young man, his vulnerability as he is poised on the brink of liberation, and his *jouissance* as well. The terms of this idealization are predictable: the bohemian outsider within bourgeois contexts, the garret artist who will indulge himself in grand speech and creative reverie at the cost of economic gain, the poet protecting himself from reification in an indifferent city.

If this idealization of the metropolitan artist seems like vengeance for his wild sister Durga who is sacrificed to the elements in the ancestral village, it also serves as the price of selfhood in an anthropological sense—whereby indeed some of the pain of the sacrifice can be redeemed. For Durga's zest is the primitive version of the almost mystical lover that Apu is in the last part of the trilogy, when he has lost his wife as well. Then the story of a sovereign self comes full circle. He rescues his little son stalking some imaginary game in the mock-forest of his mother's ancestral home, and when he carries his son away on his shoulders the relentless succession of deaths, of loss and degradation, has been broken. We know that Apu's own selfhood is now firmly positioned vis-a-vis a future. The spoken word hinged on doubt characterizes the destinal narrative, but the final shot of *Apur Sansar*, the son perched on the father's shoulders, offers an archetypal image of doubling. The carefully wrought protagonist enters another regenerating cycle working more consciously towards enlightened desire: a typical Ray motif.

Spatial Dimensions of the Narrative

Ray transforms the harmonic structure of the novel by inscribing and then submerging a synchronous grid of life's chores. Though immured in destiny, Apu weaves in and out of the grid and in the end stretches back to repeat himself through his son, weaving another more developed pattern. Thus the narration is spatialized; thus too little Apu in all his phenomenal encounters can always gain a threshold. Ray demonstrates this in *Pather Panchali* in the way every occasion for infantile desire throws up a prospect.



23 Apu gazes intently (*Pather Panchali*)

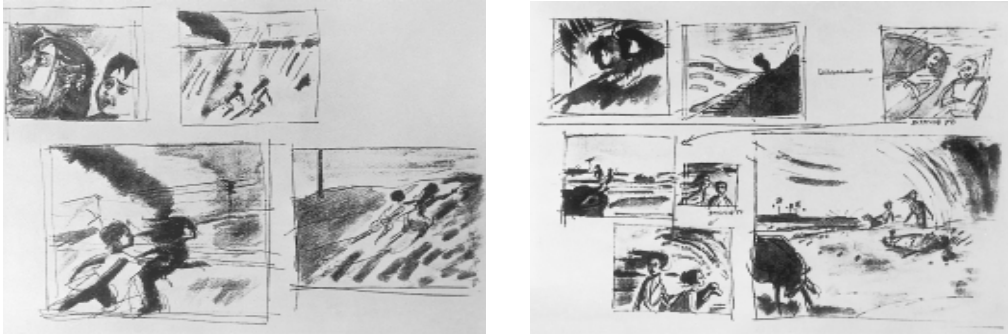
In Nischindipur Durga is the little dryad who, with aunt Indir the benign witch, alleviates poverty by thieving the village harvest of fruit. Together they create a sense of pleasure against Durga's parents' persistent sense of privation. Durga and aunt Indir die in *Pather Panchali*, both wanting, desiring. The father and the mother die in the second film, *Aparajito*, entirely evacuated of desire. This symmetry gives Apu, who

probably sees himself as neither poor nor rich, his turn for poetic manoeuvre. In the last film, *Apur Sansar*, he finally unlocks the grid—the balanced stasis of peasant life—and emerges as the solitary wayfinder magnetized by the horizon.

Like Apu's, the viewer's gaze is relieved by the horizons set before every turn of event (*Illus. 23*). Ray's sequencing of perspectival shots, his overall editing of space, which is to say the narrative inscription of space, produces real and invisible horizons ranged in several registers to facilitate exit. Nor is this entire achievement a formal affair. The mise-en-scene of the film is crucial. It is well known that Ray insisted on shooting *Pather Panchali* out of doors in the countryside to achieve the 'true' naturalism that was preferred by Jean Renoir and the Italian neorealists whom he so admired. Not unusual in the west, this was a brave decision for Ray as he was more or less a novice without funds at the start of the project. The result of this enterprise was anyhow different from Renoir and the Italians in that with Ray nature indexed, even perhaps fetishistically signified, his commitment to an idealized reality. We will see how it is in nature, in actual space marked by his tracking camera, that he accomplished his revelatory passage into the real.

Remember the famous scene in *Pather Panchali* of the two children, Durga and Apu, in the *kash* field beyond the village, near the railway line (*Illus. 24, 25*). This is the first sequence Ray shot of the film; this is where he demonstrates naively, superbly, how cinema can accomplish an immanence of the concrete by a delicately edited figure-ground relationship. He shows how natural elements are synchronized to produce a prefiguration of destiny; how he can overcome pragmatically discrete notions of nature and history, and in an eminently spatial encounter, gain an *image* of both at once.

The children play hide-and-seek in the plumed grass, they put their ear to the strange reverberations of the telegraph poles, and then seeing for the first time the long imagined train appear on the horizon, they run towards it, Apu far in the lead. It advances like a metal dragon thundering across the landscape only to disappear swiftly leaving a trail of black cloud (*Illus. 26, 27, 28, 29, 30*). How often Indian filmmakers



24–25 From Ray's sketchbook: wash drawings of possible film scenarios for *Pather Panchali*, sketched in the manner of comics

have used the train to cut up framed space and dislocate time, creating in the wake of its disappearance primitivist nostalgia, totemic fear, sheer anticipation. But in *Pather Panchali* the train produces the kind of epiphany Ray is peculiarly capable of conjuring, an epiphany springing from a simple mise-en-scene and a stereotypical symbol. There it is, the train, invoking rustic, childish wonder and turning into the paradoxical symbol of imposed yet desired modernization. There it is, the classic cinematic miracle of the train, transposed on to the landscape in such a way that nature itself seems to herald history. And Apu witnesses this open-mouthed until the camera, now on the near side of the train, shows the speeding hulk cut across his little body, leaving him momentarily and forever charged.

It is at this point that Apu first comes into his own. Here he recognizes his yearning, in the thrumming of the poles and in the silence preceding the apparition of the train. Still in thrall of his sister, he finds a signal for becoming in the *passage* of the train and advances to take responsibility, as far as possible, for his own destiny. Ray invokes a mesmeric potency in nature to gain the reality effect. Apu first tarries in the landscape and then flies like an arrow in the heart of time, signifying in both movements that here, at this spot, the child's soul and the phenomenal world fuse and become lucid, self-revealing. This is also Ray's own realization, in terms of a perfectly chosen mise-en-scene, of cinema's privileged relation to phenomenological veracity.

But equally in this early sequence Ray is at pains to translate his sense of the real so that it might, even given the epiphany, remain on the right side of realism. Everything that follows this scene in the *kash* field will build up to Durga's death, giving her a permanence of being and thereby a trace of the iconographical memory that illuminates her name. And yet at the end of *Pather Panchali* when Durga is dead and the bereaved family prepares to leave the village of Nischindipur with its destroyed ancestral home, the otherwise impractical poet-priest, Apu's father Harihar Roy, declares that *this must sometimes be done*. That departure is necessary. Moreover, while the last shot of the family departing in the bullock-cart recalls the almost ubiquitous melodramatic conventions of Indian cinema (which coincide with and



26–30 The *kash* field. Above left: 26 Durga and Apu hear a mysterious hum (*Pather Panchali*). Above right: 27. Apu puts his ear to the electric pole (*Pather Panchali*). Middle left: 28 Durga is screened by *kash* flowers (*Pather Panchali*). Middle right: 29 Apu runs towards the train (*Pather Panchali*). Below: 30 The train with a plume of smoke appears on the horizon (*Pather Panchali*)

sometimes assimilate what one may call Indian realism: recall similar scenes in *Devdas* and *Do Bigha Zameen*), in *Pather Panchali* it is the steady gaze of the *little* protagonist that recognizes, however bleakly, the inward journey of his life.

Having signalled the crossing over of the hero in *Pather Panchali*, having indicated Apu gently pushing fate into a space for becoming, in the next film, *Aparajito*, Ray puts tradition itself in the balance. He puts the idea of tradition as well as its generic modes of the mystical and the melodramatic in balance with the self-creating subject, the invisibly inscribed subject-in-history that is Apu.

The journey on which Apu thus embarks, moving from Nischindipur to Benares to Calcutta and then possibly to some unknown shore, illustrates precisely like the neorealism of Italian provenance the journey that countless young men will make in India. It does so in a way that allows to be heard, like a faint but insistently repeated undertone, the rhythm of their distant figuration. It does so in a way that allows to be seen the remote emergence of these countless young men in a narrative evocation of the national story. This is what makes the Apu trilogy something of an allegory—except that if the allegory at the national level has the express purpose of exorcising superstition so as to replace it with necessity (specifically economic necessity), there is in the novel and equally in the film a further transcending step. Apu rejects the supposed perenniality of village life; he abandons the rigours of his brahmin identity but also the bondage of labour in the city, so that on the realm of necessity is mounted an ordering principle of freedom.

The Apu trilogy, then, has two overlying motifs, one devolving and the other evolving. If the first motif is a kind of sublime fatalism, the second involves the rites of passage for a modernizing young adult. Ray establishes a perfect synchrony in these two primary motifs, pivoting them on childhood adventure but seeing them prefigure the demonstrably allegorical extension to Apu's quest for knowledge and sovereignty. What I shall go on to argue is that this notion of freedom itself may produce a condition of hypostasis.

Secular Imagery

'With apparent formlessness *Pather Panchali* traces the great design of living', Lindsay Anderson said at the time of the Cannes award in 1956, adding that Ray does this while giving the impression that 'he has gone down on his knees in the dust' and 'worked with complete humility'.²¹ On another occasion, as if pressing the point, Ray commented: 'I direct my films in harmony with the rhythm of human breathing.'²²

Nearness and distance are almost as if metrically composed and then intoned by the breathing life of forms. Ray places much of his work within the formal lyric mode. At the heart of the lyric is the desire for the numen, or to put it the other way round, the lyrical is an expression of the numinous and thereby haloed. Even the



Above: 31 Aunt Indir: inquisitive, gaping (*Pather Panchali*). Below: 32 Durga holds a guava to the old aunt's nose: a shared moment of childish greed (*Pather Panchali*)

occasional irony within the lyric mode must work itself around the numen and not subvert it. For that very reason I should like to see the numen residing first and foremost in the ancient aunt Indir who is, for all her little wickednesses and folly, treated with utmost tenderness.²³ She is numinous because she is the last breath, the ultimate waif of traditional society. Here is also the irony and the very mischief in it turns into grace because the errant hag's breath goes out just like that, suffusing the phenomenal world with unfinished desire. But then Indir is compressed into the soul of the younger waif Durga, whose breath is high with the passion of pure childish greed. Free from accretions, it wafts across the village ponds and groves. Taken together in intimate moments of eating and laughing, these two give us the confirmed image of the



33 Durga dances ecstatically in the monsoon rain (*Pather Panchali*)

numinous in *Pather Panchali* (Illus. 31, 32). Then at the end of the film there is something like an apotheosis. Soon after the old aunt dies Durga dances ecstatically in the torrential monsoon rain for all the world like a mad little demon. Or an adolescent goddess. When she dies she is reclaimed by the stormy night. And yet Durga is not really canonized; indeed she is nearly forgotten as the narrative proceeds and she leaves behind only a melancholy resonance, that small *excess* of unfinished desire which is the very attribute of lyric naturalism (Illus. 33).

In all this Ray takes his cue from his immediate literary sources, Rabin-dranath of course, and Bibhutibhushan who may have had a less developed notion of generic options in literature but who could, as we see, elicit from material details a fully experiential world. Ray follows Bibhutibhushan in his reproduction of splendid imagery that just stops short, deliberately, of iconographical complexities. In fact he even inverts the icon, as in the old aunt, and yet retains the numinous as simply a breathing figure imaged forth with cinematic persistence.

Ray relies on a certain romanticist faith in the image as such: the image as against symbol and icon. I have already spoken about Ray's cinematic image with its phenomenological veracity, its breathing form and numinous grace; the image in more generic terms as a focus of his lyric naturalism. I should now like to argue how, given Ray's liberal and reformist ethics, this kind of image is imbued with a secular sensibility. By disallowing any mythic overload or excessive condensation or

metaphorical density to develop in the imagery, that is to say by sustaining a lean aesthetic, he strengthens its realist-modernist features. Ray places himself modestly but firmly at the juncture where romantic reverie meets with realist conscience to find formal solutions. Then, desaturating the image and allowing an ironic retake on its inescapable symbologies, he makes a gracious transition to the aesthetic of modernism. Ray offers a post-Chekhovian sleight-of-hand that brings him close to an ebullient 'realist' like Jean Renoir.²⁴ Also to Francois Truffaut who in turn spans Hitchcock/Hollywood and the vanguard formalism of the French 'new wave'. Ray is sophisticated, playful, witty, and for all the burden he carries in representing India, he is a cosmopolitan filmmaker.

Ray is of course quite easily situated in film lineage. I am referring to the composite, broadly realist movement in cinema signalled by Renoir (to whom Ray apprenticed himself when he came to India in 1949 to make his film *The River*) and theorized by Andre Bazin, the philosopher-critic of existential persuasion.²⁵ He is closer to the Italian Vittorio De Sica whose lasting intervention in cinema history via *Bicycle Thieves* (1947) influenced Indian filmmakers (Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*, 1953, being the first evidence). With 'classical' Hollywood directors like John Ford as the baseline, Ray picks his way through several options, aligned to realism on the one hand and to the new wave on the other. Finally, however, he retracts from the logical extension of both tendencies, particularly the latter which while incorporating realism gives itself over to modernist surrealism (as in Luis Bunuel, Alain Resnais). Like the Japanese masters Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu and Kurosawa, he finds a cultural location from where he can clarify, or even rigorously demystify, the means of representation. He offers the belief that art lends transparency to history and arrives at a near-classical repose.

Ray's somewhat dissembling faith that cinematic representation in the realist genre lends transparency to history itself is complemented by his remarkable achievement in rescuing and reinforcing the secular image within his own culture. And so we return him to the tradition of the modern within this culture—its quasi-liberal ideology underwritten by a Brahmo sensibility which seeks to infuse western values within an indigenous civilizational ethic, however that may be designated (or as a matter of fact precisely as it is designated by the poet-philosopher Rabindranath). Thus individual emancipation as in the bourgeois ethos can be translated into a drive for selfhood within a purposefully interpreted vedantic logic and delivered, twice mediated, to the contemporary. Through this process of translation you receive from Ray, as also from Rabindranath, his social and cultural contribution in the form of an eminently lucid reflection on the process of 'becoming' via the very vicissitudes of everyday life. Here is a double paradigm: the heterodox values of modernity set within civilizational beliefs (such as the spiritual propensity implied by the notion of *samskaras*). Within this complex structure of values Ray is circumspect. He draws in



clear, firm, but delimited contours, secular figures that are consonant with the new social formation of contemporary India.

Even as he completes his first film on a shoestring budget he proposes through its precise figuration to clean out iconographical fuzziness and correct civilizational sloth. He provides a ‘pure’ narrative in a *mise-en-scène* that is, in the Bazinian sense, the arena of lived life. Here the protagonists may not, from a necessary sense of irony or from tragic purpose, command the universe, but they see the narrative through with the dignity of struggle (*Illus. 34, 35, 36, 37*).

Authenticating the Modern

Bibhutibhushan’s splendid novel is one among the narratives that are generically categorized as *bildungsroman*.²⁶ In its generic form it gives Ray the occasion to shape an elegant, allegorical tale wherein the claims of individual sovereignty and secular culture are raised. Thus, while there seems to be no overtly progressive ideology that motivates *Pather Panchali*, nor even the Apu trilogy as a whole, there is the inexorable process of growing up and knowing within the terms of modern society the truth, or rather the ethics, of survival. It is through this kind of subliminal politics that Ray inflects the historical legacy to which he belongs.

34–37 The struggles of life
From top to bottom: 34 Indir conducts her meagre chores (*Pather Panchali*). 35 Sarbojaya calls out to Indir leaving the house in a huff (*Pather Panchali*). 36 Harihar gasps for breath on the steps of a Benares ghat (*Aparajito*). 37 Apu prepares himself to meet his son for the first time (*Apur Sansar*)

Ray does not valorize historical change either in his early classics or later. Nor does he introduce narrative disjuncture whereby the unconscious may find its formal manifestations, a language and speech which interrogate historical change itself. In other words, Ray does not stake out the contemporary as a contested space for historical forces to act in—he simply lays the ground.

It should be remembered that his mentor Rabindranath Tagore had already problematized these issues in the early decades of the twentieth century. Consider the question of Hindu male militancy in his novel *Gora*; consider the high stakes he places on the creative spirit of his female protagonist, Charulata, in *Nashtanir*. In *Ghare Baire* Bimala literally acts out the turmoil of nationalism from her niche in the home. Ray gives these protagonists a vexed consciousness that detaches itself from civilizational determinates to engage with the more ambiguously placed promises of history.

Indeed it is somewhat inhibiting to Ray's position that in cultural discourse, as in particular forms of aesthetic resolution, Tagore has already bestowed so much more complex and even painfully contradictory meanings on self and subjectivity, on love, language, race, community, people and nation—on all those emancipatory epithets of the modern which derive from the double heritage of reason and romanticism. Ray, on the other hand, can only work with the deliberate use of anachronisms, as in his early films *Jalsaghar* (1958) and *Devi* (1960). The passing away of feudalism, for instance, is established through a negative denouement of a seamless tragedy. Historical insight is in this way elided in favour of an existential truth and cultural authenticity.

Ray is not only a prime exemplar of the authentic and authenticating artist, he lays to rest the vexed debates on tradition and modernity. I refer to these debates as they have proceeded from the Indian renaissance in the nineteenth century, debates engaged in by Tagore, Gandhi, and also Nehru beginning with the *Discovery of India*. For a society undergoing rapid change after independence authenticity becomes once again the redemptive sign—an illusory redemption even, but expressly functional in sustaining a national discourse. More specifically, the consolidated aspirations of the liberal middle class have to be fulfilled, and they need an art form that will emancipate them not only from the tradition/modernity debates but also from the ensuing bad conscience into which they are cornered by traditionalists and radicals alike. The middle class, favoured by the nation-state, need moreover a demonstrably secular and sufficiently classical (or classicized) art form; a 'high' art form to gain parity, via the national, with universal (international) cultural discourse.

Ray certainly gives his class an existential basis for authenticity. Deferred and even elided, the wager on the *contemporary* surfaces as a vestigial presence in the *Apu* trilogy. The contemporary becomes a pressure on the cinematic figuration of his narratives; it leaves traces which allow themselves to be read as secular, modern, yet

systemic enough to gain a classical profile. He does this, to reiterate in a sentence the argument that has run through the essay, by handling directly and to his advantage the relation between civilizational motives and historical affect. Letting the one and then the other outpace each other, he fills the 'ideal' role of an Indian artist within the progressive paradigm of the 'first decade'.²⁷

Allegorical Account

We have already seen how the Apu trilogy touches a notion of authenticity that is existentially ascertainable. More specifically, it provides a measure of authorial credibility: a nonwestern artist in the best moment of his own historical self-regard, the moment of national independence, claiming individual sovereignty. I want to conclude by moving into the more vexed area of interpretation and suggest that the Apu trilogy is, and has been taken as, or perhaps should be taken as, a kind of *ethnographic allegory*.²⁸ It answers the continuing need of the liberal imagination, western as well as Indian, to comprehend 'otherness' on humanistically coeval terms. It answers the need to work out a system of equations within a cultural matrix that is finally, inevitably, universal and in that universality committed to a destinal narrative—inventing that term to mean at once destiny and destination, immanent life and a metanarrative that proxies for transcendence.

Ethnographic writing is allegorical, James Clifford says, at the level of its context: in what it says about cultures and their histories, and of its form: in what is implied by its mode of textualization.²⁹ He goes on to say that to shift focus from ideology to ethnographic allegory in readings of culture is to suggest that the more convincing and rich realistic portraits are, the more they serve as extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent theoretical/aesthetic/*moral* meaning.³⁰ Further, as a rhetorical trope 'allegory draws special attention to the narrative character of cultural representation, to the stories built into the representational process itself.'³¹

This is the point I want to stress: the allegoric/narrative character of cultural representation in a film like *Pather Panchali*. Representation interprets itself in the narrative of the film, it opens out moments of moral insight or, rather, categories of 'truth' (fictional, cinematic and social) that fulfil the most wide-ranging cultural expectation, beginning with the local and culminating in the national.

Ray decidedly belongs to an intellectual climate that respects what Clifford calls positivism, realism, romanticism³²—nineteenth-century ingredients of twentieth-century cultural studies. But, as Clifford goes on to say, studies in rhetoric (understood in my argument to mean figures of expression and more precise linguistic decodings) have disrupted the assumption of 'presence' that underpinned the positivist–realist–romantic consensus. Meaning does not flow through seamless discourse nor does it emanate from it as numinous presence. Indeed the recognition of rhetorical moves in the quest for meaning has disrupted the inclination to valorize the

symbolic (underwritten by an elaborate realist project) over allegory.³³ And the doubts generated by this disruption help us to understand that culturalist/humanist allegories³⁴ stand behind the fiction of 'difference' deploying exotic symbols in aesthetic discourse, even as at one time spiritual explanations used to mobilize the interpretation of other cultures towards a norm of transcendent sameness. If most 'descriptions of others continue to assume and refer to elemental or transcendental levels of truth',³⁵ if there is a continuing need to establish through a nexus of symbologies, human similarities over and above cultural difference, then we can know that a definite elision is at work. 'This synchronic suspension effectively textualizes the other and gives the sense of reality not in temporal flux, not in the same ambiguous, moving, *historical present*',³⁶ but in retrospection that encourages the recovery of the other by way of a redemptive psychology.

Ray allows the protagonist of the *Apu* trilogy to *redeem himself*. He stands extra tall at the crossroads with his child on his shoulder at the end of the last film of the trilogy, *Apur Sansar*. But there is in the very courage of this verticality a break between the past and the future, and a deep-rooted regret at the alienated space of the present. This alienated space concretizes the sense of pervasive social fragmentation, the sense of a constant disruption of 'natural' relations. This, Clifford says, after Raymond Williams, is characteristic of a subjectivity inducted into city life and suffused with romantic nostalgia for a happier place elsewhere in the past, in the country.³⁷ The self cast loose from viable collective ties is an identity in search of wholeness; having internalized loss it embarks on an endless search for authenticity, a sign of wholeness which becomes by definition, however, a thing of the past—rural, primitive, childlike—accessible only as fiction and grasped at but from a stance of incomplete involvement. Thus there is a withdrawal from any full response to an existing society. 'Value is in the past, as a general retrospective condition, and in the present only as a particular and private sensibility, as individual moral action.'³⁸

If Ray is part of the positivist–realist–romantic framework, then it is my purpose to show how 'presence' is in fact used to symbolic effect; how so-called empirical evidence in the form of realism and, on the other hand, artistic spontaneity designating longing, desire, aspiration, characteristic of the romantic/lyric mode, are drawn out and yoked. So much so that the rhetoric of 'presence' is established and becomes the inescapable truth of all expression.

There has been unmitigated trust extended to Ray's conscience story via *Apu*. But there is also the methodological ruse one can elicit from it: the truth-effect in the inadvertent form of an ethnographic allegory that will give us the clue to ramified cultural meanings—through reverse allegorical readings that work the text against the grain with political intent. While likening the *Apu* trilogy to an ethnographic allegory it becomes possible then to ask what significant displacement, what civilizational subversions it introduces in our notion of the contemporary.

It may be necessary to conclude with a set of paradoxical answers. First, it is probably the refusal on Ray's part to directly address the contemporary that makes the Apu trilogy function as a national allegory. For anything more frontal would be too partisan even as it would be, paradoxically, too divisive—like the contradiction of Indian independence presented by Ritwik Ghatak in his three post-partition films: *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha*, *Komal Gandhar*, and the 'betrayal' acted out in the body and myth of a radical consciousness in *Jukti Takko ar Gappo*. Satyajit Ray prefers a subtle, submerged, subliminal treatment of the contemporary/national; he conveys it through the conduit of individual sovereignty—the artist's idealized sovereignty, rendered like a romance of the liberal imagination, with the anachronistic figure of Apu guiding it through its narrative logic.

Thus Ray tells a real story and lets it work as a national allegory or, vice versa, constructs an allegory from otherness—the priestly family in feudal India—and makes it work as a tale of self-redemption and moral sovereignty for his own class and person. In this rendering the real struggle of the 'other' life, the life of the rural boy who makes the epic journey from the country to the city, is gently appropriated with the advantage of never having to admit to a social disjuncture as such. An organic identity is posited over and against any kind of historical formation. What is more, this kind of identity can assume a secular character by virtue of its having been delivered from the imaginary order, as a gift of past plenitude. So that one may then say that Ray arrives at the secular not through demonstrable negation of faith but through an aesthetic—a realism imbued with the grace of classicism, thereby with greater illusionism—that achieves the effect of a clarified and reasonable reality.

Ray fulfils for the Indian intelligentsia (and for a sympathetic foreign intelligentsia) its need to redeem the innocent pastorate—now left behind, as can only happen with a traditional/peasant society such as India (*Illus.* 38, 39). He also achieves an authentication of the modern self engaged in the act of redeeming this recent past which slips away even as we interpret it. This is a mediatory role consisting of a conversion of the terms of allegory from ethnographic to national. The conversion succeeds because it is noncombative, because it undertakes a salvage operation, and because what is salvaged is common humanity with a glimpse of its nearly inexhaustible resources. Ethnographic data, seen as a form of material immanence, serve as a base for the nimbly placed narrative schema of a national allegory with the hope that in the end we will rationalize a lost world and even make it conform to a history that runs into the contemporary with comprehensible ease.

This too is a type of rhetoric which conceals its function and invokes instead a desire that is utopian in the ahistorical sense. The encoding of a haunting past not only places others—the eternal peasant, or the priest, or elsewhere as in *Jalsaghar* and *Devi*, the feudal lord—in a present always slipping into the past, into ruin, it not only denies a community or a class a future, but also obstructs inventive cultural

38 Apu daydreams while reading (*Pather Panchali*)39 Apu, Sarbojaya and Harihar leave Nischindipur for Benares in a bullock-cart (*Pather Panchali*)

possibilities and historical change. An imaginary plenitude that nurtures and subsumes, evokes and concretizes the ‘presence’ we referred to above, also in a sense loses the future.

Village boys still grow up and move from the country to the city; they suffer loss and disaffection, poetic inspiration and bruised praise for their courage. If at the end of his life in 1992 Satyajit Ray were to tell the Apu story again it could never be the same as when it was told in 1955 or else it would appear entirely disingenuous (as indeed his late films often do). The substantive element of the story is never transparent; it is better seen as a material amalgam with different levels of density and opacity and (to pursue the metaphor) with geological faults in the bedrock on which the realist narrative pattern, or the conventional form of it, is constructed. Today, when the question of identity is thrashed about on various occasions—on grounds of regional authenticity, religious fundamentalism, national culture and the hegemonic universalism of advanced capitalistic polities—life-narratives have perhaps to be denatured to be even seemingly realistic. In other words, with the concept of identity so thoroughly problematized the fictive form itself must be subjected to the disruptive demands of reflexivity.

The sublimating ethics of the Apu trilogy notwithstanding (indeed precisely because of the cultural creativity that it so appropriately puts into place in postindependence India), we must test its cutting edge along the lines of the liberal ideology on which its aesthetic is based. If on the narrative impulse of that identity there could at one time be a transference between a person's and a people's sovereignty, today it would be difficult to find a social promise (or a trope) on which its formal (that is allegorical) transfer can be conducted. Today liberal ideology itself has to construct a narrative that includes the loss of that social promise, and along with that a methodological doubt about a coherent storyline. It would have to include the *absence*, and through fictive reversal and retake it would have to work towards an indefinitely delayed denouement, whether in the form of tragedy or, on the other

hand, some unaccountable *jouissance* perhaps. But the discreet optimism which Ray could once command, the aesthetic of gentle closures and unstressed beginnings, that kind of narrative ease would no longer suffice.

The very progressivism in the Apu trilogy can be seen in the paradoxical form of this conclusion to become diffused, to settle into a splendid hypostasis of hope. How then shall we read the allegory that the Apu trilogy evokes: as an indelible imprint on the national conscience not yet consciously elaborated or perhaps already vanishing in that remarkably optimistic first decade?

Notes and References

- ¹ Ernest Gellner in *Thought and Change*, quoted in Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p. 4.
- ² Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, chap. 5.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- ⁴ The National Gallery of Modern Art, Jaipur House, New Delhi, was formally opened in 1954 by Dr Radhakrishnan, but its collection had already begun with a gift to Nehru in 1948, of a large number of paintings by Amrita Sher-Gil. Briefed to collect works from the nineteenth century, it now has a collection numbering nearly 30,000. The institution has from the start functioned under the Ministry of Education (Department of Culture). The Lalit Kala Akademi, one of three Akademis dealing with the different arts, was set up in 1954 by a parliamentary resolution initiated by Nehru and Maulana Azad, the then education minister. Though entirely state-funded, it is an autonomous organization with all-India representation comprising artists, critics and art functionaries. Over the years, regional centres have been opened in several cities. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations, also set up by the joint initiative of Nehru and Azad in 1950 and with the vice-president of India serving as its chairperson, promotes international cultural activity. The Film Finance Corporation, later called the National Film Development Corporation, was mooted as an idea to promote good cinema in the early 1950s, but came into existence with the direct encouragement of Indira Gandhi in 1960. It functions under the Information and Broadcasting Ministry with the brief of supporting noncommercial cinema. The National School of Drama, Delhi, and the Film and Television Institute, Pune, were started in 1961 and 1959 respectively, to serve as all-India institutions for higher learning in theatre and film.
- ⁵ Partha Chatterjee makes a qualified use of this concept throughout his *Nationalist Thought*.
- ⁶ See K.G. Subramanyan, *Moving Focus: Essays on Indian Art*, Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, 1978; and *The Living Tradition: Perspectives on Modern Indian Art*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1987.
- ⁷ Collated information on IPTA is available in *Marxist Cultural Movement: Chronicles and Documents*, Vol. III (1943–64), compiled and edited by Sudhi Pradhan, published by Mrs Pradhan and distributed by Pustak Bipani, Calcutta, 1985. See also Malini Bhattacharya, 'The IPTA in Bengal', in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, No. 2, January–March 1983; and Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals for Revolution: Political Theatre in Bengal*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1983.
- ⁸ See D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962.
- ⁹ Bibhutibhushan's story of Apu and Durga was serialized in a Calcutta journal in 1928 and published as a two-part novel titled *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* in 1929 and 1931 respectively. Bibhutibhushan was a unique man who led a life as opposed to the lives of the

privileged Tagore and Ray families as you could get in the city of Calcutta. A village boy, he managed to get a degree in Calcutta but lived the impoverished life of a schoolteacher just outside the city and then, from 1924, in Calcutta, where he came to know other writers, among them Nirad Chaudhuri. Generous and unembittered by his hard life, he became a widely popular writer and attained the status of one of Bengal's foremost authors.

When Satyajit Ray started dreaming up his filmmaking career in the late 1940s he chose *Pather Panchali* right away, recognizing that the novel was a classic in its own right and linked with the literary traditions of the world in terms of its generic structure. *Pather Panchali*, the first film, corresponded to the novel of the same name; the two subsequent films, *Aparajito* and *Apur Sansar*, were a two-part extension of the novel's sequel titled *Aparajito*. The three films were together called the Apu trilogy.

¹⁰ Biographical material on Satyajit Ray is widely available. See especially, Marie Seton, *Satyajit Ray: Portrait of a Director*, Dennis Dobson, London, 1978; Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, Vikas, Delhi, 1980; and Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, Rupa, Delhi, 1990.

¹¹ Satyajit Ray's family, among the most distinguished in Calcutta, were prominent Brahmos, beginning with his grandfather, Upendrakisore Ray, who was a pioneer in the Calcutta printing industry and the author of several articles on printing technology, published in the London-based *Penrose Annual*. He was also a writer-illustrator of children's literature including, most prominently, *Mahabharata for Children* and *Ramayana for Children*. Rabindranath Tagore, a family friend, was an enthusiastic advocate of Upendrakisore's writings. Sukumar Ray, Upendrakisore's son and Satyajit's father, began writing early, producing children's illustrated literature like his father and also criticism in the fields of photography, painting and literature. Returning from his studies in printing technology in London in 1913, he started a magazine for young people, *Sandesh*. This made him a household name in Bengal with nonsense rhymes such as *Abol Tabol* elaborated over several years. Although Satyajit never knew his father, the latter exerted a great influence on him. Satyajit edited, illustrated and designed *Sandesh* and made several children's films throughout his career, occasionally quoting his father's nonsense verse as in his film *Parash Pathar* (1958), even as he has filmed his grandfather's story *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1968). He also made a fictional short on his father, *Sukumar Ray* (1987).

Sukumar Ray, who was a close friend of Rabindranath Tagore, travelled back with him from London in 1913. He involved himself in passionate debates within the Brahmos—the Ray family belonged to the Sadharan Brahma Samaj—as for example on the question of Rabindranath's affiliation to Hinduism and the objections it raised among the Brahmos, as also his alleged equivocation on nationalist issues. Sukumar Ray, prone to premonitions of death and wrapped in pessimism on the issue of faith, withdrew from the Brahma Samaj towards the end of his short life. Tagore deeply mourned his premature death at the age of 35 in 1923, when Satyajit was only two years old. For a detailed chronicle of Satyajit Ray's family, see Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, pp.13–55.

¹² Nehru authorized the showing of *Pather Panchali* at Cannes at the express suggestion of Marie Seton. It is also worth mentioning that Nehru invited Roberto Rossellini to make his India films in the 1950s, that he knew John Grierson personally and that he invoked the tradition of the British second world war documentary in starting the Films Division (1949). Nehru's support for *Pather Panchali* could possibly be placed with other efforts to engage Indian cultural practices with those of European contemporaries in a reciprocal way. Indeed

one can conjecture Nehru's seeing *Pather Panchali* from a precisely nonorientalist point of view, wishing to show before the world that a self-emancipating India existed in the conscience of a confident *auteur* such as Satyajit Ray.

- 13 The film was invited to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, by Monroe Wheeler on the strength of some stills he saw in 1954 while the film's shooting, begun in 1952, was in abeyance due to lack of finance. The film was to be shown in New York in 1955; in between Wheeler asked John Huston, who was coming to India, to be his emissary and check out the progress of the film. On the basis of a silent rough-cut Huston approved the film and later wrote glowingly about his early encounter with Ray.
- 14 Among the numerous stories connected with the early success of Satyajit Ray it is worth mentioning that both at Cannes and Venice it was the English critics and filmmakers who supported him; the French in both cases found him by and large incompetent, as one can gauge from Rene Clair's comment—that as he had now won the award at Venice he should go away and learn how to make films. There is also the widely quoted comment by Truffaut that the film was merely 'pad pad pad about paddy fields'. However, the commercial release of the film in the Academy Cinema and the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, in London and New York respectively, was a clear confirmation of its international success. The explanation of this success in terms of the film's universal humanism and liberal progressivism is discussed in a very finely articulated evaluation of the Apu trilogy by Robin Wood (*The Apu Trilogy*, Praeger, New York, 1971). A compendium of worldwide comments on Ray (and by him) is to be found in *Film India: Satyajit Ray: An Anthology of Statements on Ray and by Ray*, edited by Chidananda Das Gupta, Directorate of Film Festivals, Delhi, 1981.
- 15 Seton, *Satyajit Ray: Portrait of a Director*.
- 16 Stanley Kauffman, 'World on Film', quoted in *Film India*, p. 27.
- 17 Satyajit Ray had met Rabindranath Tagore only a few times while he was a student at Santiniketan. But Tagore's aesthetic continued to be an all-pervasive influence in Bengali culture long after his death in 1941. For a collection of Tagore's relevant essays, see *Rabindranath Tagore on Art and Aesthetics*, edited by Prithwish Neogy, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1961. Apart from Tagore's aesthetic as available to Ray through his family connections in Santiniketan and via his philosophic essays, there is the whole world of Tagore's literature which is in fact the basis of several of Ray's films—*Teen Kanya* (1961), *Charulata* (1964) and *Ghare Baire* (1984). *Devi* (1960) was based on a story inspired by Tagore though written in fact by Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee. Ray also made the documentary *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961).
- 18 Ray studied art in Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, in 1940–42. He left without completing the course because he did not feel he had it in him to become a painter, and he joined an advertising company in Calcutta. But the experience had a lasting influence on his sensibilities and indeed on his loyalties, as his film on the artist–teacher Benodebehari Mukherjee, titled *The Inner Eye* (1972), shows.
- 19 Ray knew Kurosawa and held him in deep admiration. It is interesting that Ray considered Kurosawa—regarded the most western among his compatriots in Japan—in terms of an affirmative orientalism, an ideology Ray derived from Santiniketan. Indeed he placed his love of Kurosawa in particular, and Japanese cinema in general, within the principles of an art practice learnt from Nandalal Bose, and on the ideological rendering of the eastern imagination by Okakura Kakuzo. See Satyajit Ray, 'Calm Without, Fire Within', in *Our Films, Their Films*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1976.

- ²⁰ Kurosawa, quoted in Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, p. 91.
- ²¹ Quoted in Seton, *Satyajit Ray: Portrait of a Director*, p. 114.
- ²² Ray's interview with George Sadoul in *Cahiers du Cinema*, quoted in *Film India*, p. 130.
- ²³ Ray actualizes this in the way he directs the old actress, Chunibala Devi, to literally act out her life's spent talent. The moment of Indir's death which, in the years it took to complete the shooting of the film, could have truly been Chunibala's own death, is compacted into the thud of her skull on the ground as Durga shakes her already dead body huddled by the side of the pond. Finally abandoned, the bemused witch has meanwhile been subtly enlarged by Ray's camera and she sometimes gazes into the lens, head-on, in a tight close-up, seeing blindly into our faces. This itself is part of the actualizing job, a cruel, compassionate, humorously mocking image, reflected in the mirror of the lens. But there is also wonderful handling of the figure in profile or with her back to the camera walking away on one of her begging missions—thereby denuding the numen in what is almost a parodic act of will.
- ²⁴ 'Renoir came in 1949', Ray says, recounting his apprenticeship with Jean Renoir when he came to India to make his film *The River*, 'and the moment I discovered that Renoir was in town, I went and looked him up. He had a feeling for nature; a deep humanism with a kind of a preference for the shades of grey, a sort of Chekhovian quality; and his lyricism and the avoidance of cliches.' He further recounts that as he already had the making of *Pather Panchali* in mind he told Renoir about it while he helped him with location hunting in the suburbs and villages of Calcutta. According to Ray Renoir said, 'It sounds wonderful, make it, I think it will make a fine film.' Satyajit Ray in an interview quoted in *Film India*, p. 123.
- ²⁵ The embedding of cinematic realism within a phenomenological/existential matrix; the articulation of an ontology of the photographic image and the potential of film technology to replicate and replay lived life; the possibility of achieving a phenomenological plenitude as well as aesthetic transparency—all this makes Andre Bazin the prime theorist of cinematic realism during the 1950s. The highpoint of this aesthetic is Jean Renoir, with the Italian neo-realists as also Bresson forming a further extension. These issues are discussed over several essays in Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974.
- ²⁶ For a discussion on the form and genre of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel under consideration, see Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'Pather Panchali', in *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984.
- The novel has been translated into English. See *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road*, translated by T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherjee, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1968; *Pather Panchali*, translated by Monica Varma, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1973; *Pather Panchali*, Rupa, Delhi, 1989.
- ²⁷ Ray, with a moderately articulate style, answers questions that we can reconfigure into an ideological position. For a series of selected statements see *Film India*, pp. 136–39.
- 'Somehow I feel that a common person—an ordinary person whom you meet every day in the street—is a more challenging subject for cinematic exploration than persons in heroic moulds, either good or bad.' (p. 136)
- 'I commit myself to human beings . . . and I think that is a good enough commitment for me.' (p. 138)
- 'I was closer to Nehru, I think. I admired Nehru, I understood him better, because I am also in a way a product of East and West. A certain liberalism, a certain awareness of Western values and a fusion of Eastern and Western values was in Nehru, which I didn't find in Gandhi. But, of course, as a man, as a symbol, in contact with India's multi-

tude, he was quite extraordinary. But as a man . . . I always understood what Nehru was doing as I understood what Tagore was doing because you can't leave Tagore out of this, it's a triangle.' (p. 138)

'But you have to have the backing of your own culture very much. Even when I made my first film the awareness was there. I had a Western education, I studied English, but more and more over the last ten years I have been going back and back to the history of my country, my people, my past, my culture.' (p. 138)

'I can understand and admire Mao's revolution which has completely changed China and achieved—at a cost—the eradication of poverty and illiteracy. But I don't think I could find a place in China, because I am still too much of an individual and I still believe too strongly in personal expression.' (p. 137)

'Well, go to Benares. Go to the ghats and you will see that communism is a million miles away, maybe on the moon. There are such ingrained habits, religious habits. I am talking of the multitude now, I am not talking of the educated, the young students, and, of course, everything falls back on education and the spread of education. . . . Only through education could it happen.' (p. 139)

²⁸ This term and the ensuing argument is taken from James Clifford. See James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 98.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ James Clifford refers to De Man's critique of the valorization of symbols over allegory. See *ibid.*

³⁴ Ibid., p. 101.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

³⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, quoted in *ibid.*

Revelation and Doubt in *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*

A Hermeneutic Task

In an interpretation of the two films *Sant Tukaram* (Marathi, directors: V. Damle and S. Fattelal, 1936) and *Devi* (Bengali, director: Satyajit Ray, 1960), I wish to suggest how the movement for national emancipation provides a double-take on given iconographies. There is a desire to invest faith in tradition as well as an inclination to dismantle cultural codes from a position of profound suspicion. Discrete or transposed, these opposing attitudes define a 'living tradition'; more pertinently, they facilitate contemporary cultural practices.

A living tradition may be taken to be derived from the material substratum of a civilization; it is what may be considered its immanent form. When Ananda Coomaraswamy designates tradition as a perennial resource its implied plenitude is at once a utopian concept, a material base and an attribute of aesthetic production (sacred or mundane) that is manifest in *use*. This notion of a living tradition aspires to a continual transformative process. The question is how in that process historicity is structured, and with what forms of reflexivity.

I want to emphasize that this is not merely a programmatic operation; it has to be realized in aesthetic terms. Even while the synchronic structure of a myth may be opened up and its symbology set out as a series of motivated signs within the dimension of contemporary history, we must also be able to recognize in the process the ingenious use of genre, the inflexion of motifs, their formal deconstruction. We should recognize above all the narrative strategy of such transformations whereby an inherited iconography is decoded and sometimes radicalized. For the narrative move is most closely analogous to, indeed interchangeable with, human action. 'When men produce their existence in the form of praxis they represent it to themselves in terms of

This essay was first presented at an Indo-Soviet conference, The Indian Revolution: Retrospect and Prospect, jointly organized by the Centre for Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, and the Soviet Institute of Oriental Studies, at Leningrad, in 1987. Earlier published versions are: 'Mythic Material in Indian Cinema: Investigating *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*', in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 17-18, 1989; 'Revelation and Doubt: *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*', in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, edited by Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir and Vivek Dhareshwar, Seagull, Calcutta, 1993.

fiction', Paul Ricoeur quotes Marx as saying, and further: 'The referent of narration, namely human action, is never raw or immediate reality but an action which has been symbolized and resymbolized over and over again.'¹

With the rising tide of nationalism there is a tendency to bring myths and legends, structures of feeling embodied in symbols and revelatory icons to the surface; to make them eminently visible so as to take on new or newly adapted forms in the various arts. Tradition is thus mobilized, it *shows* itself to be a living tradition by fronting itself. This is particularly relevant to the visual and performing arts (as also cinema). By a certain formal positioning of the body/image, the ubiquitous phenomenon of tradition shows up and seeks beholders, native and foreign, who have hitherto turned away from it in ignorance and embarrassment.

There is some defiance and also naivete in the way visibility is thus established. But taking the figuratively worded proposition about the surfacing of tradition a little further, I should like to see it in terms of a formal category of frontality variously manifest in Indian popular arts: frontality of the word, the image, the design, the performative act, in several systems of address. This could mean for example the appearance of flat, diagrammatic and simply contoured figures (as in Kalighat painting), and the setting up of a tableau in a figure-ground design with notational perspective (as in the Nathadwara pictures and the photographs which they often utilize). It could mean in performative terms the repetition of motifs within ritual 'play' (as in the lila) or, at the more popular level, the deliberate evacuation of space to foreground actor-image-performance (as in the tamasha). Frontality is also established in an adaptation of traditional acting conventions to the proscenium stage as in Parsi theatre, where stylized audience address is mounted on an elaborate mise-en-scene. Even a quick review of these characteristics provides, as we can see, a schematic rendering of an aesthetics of the popular arts in India.

Although every aspect of the artistic tradition may be pressed into use in the affirmative urge of nationalism it is often the popular that comes in most handy. The popular will include fragmented (or sometimes bartered) aspects of the classical, as it will urbanized versions of the folk and the tribal. Although the popular is a catchall category it can be reasonably well defined in art history as an urban, eclectic impulse accompanying social change.² Eclecticism in this motivated context conveys an artistic wit and nerve to construe a hybrid form that is at least potentially iconoclastic.

Contrasted with this desire to advance the archetype and induct it into a nationalist history, there is in the later nationalist and postindependence phase a need to question, differentiate between, and even alienate traditional beliefs and forms. To consciously imprint a new normative structure on the imaginary; to deconstruct the actual symbols in the tradition making the critique itself a basis of what we have been calling the living tradition. The hermeneutic of suspicion, in other words, must follow the hermeneutic of affirmation. Whether it is portrayed sentimentally or with dignity

and rigour, *reality* in the art practice that ensues from this negative commitment is now handled by *realisms* of various persuasions.³

This essay deals with the successive inscription of revelation and doubt, faith and dissent. I make, first, an investigation of the affirmative idiom of *Sant Tukaram*, seeing its iconography and devotional narrative transmuted into a contemporary rendition of the tradition. I then place it face-to-face with the realist interrogation in *Devi* where Ray patiently unmasks a pathetic illusion of the holy. I deal deliberately with discrete modes to see how in the transitional decades of national self-definition alternating strategies are used to recoup and critique traditions; how contemporary cultural practice evolves in effect by compounding these alternatives to form the *modern*.

Sant Tukaram

'Saint' Films

In filmic classification *Sant Tukaram*,⁴ along with other 'saint' films, may be placed in the category of the mythological.⁵ However it belongs more correctly to a subgenre of special significance. The saints' lives are quasi-biographical material. Their message of spiritual equality makes these lives legendary as well as expressly adaptable to historical ends. We know of course that in the nationalist ethos saints' lives were especially valorized and made to light the way to social justice. The need to publish new editions of Marathi bhakti poets was emphasized as early as the mid-nineteenth century by M.G. Ranade who, like other middle-class nationalists of the period, saw



1 Vishnupant Pagnis as Tukaram (*Sant Tukaram*)

the seventeenth-century bhakti movement as a kind of Protestant movement wherein caste differences were sought to be softened.⁶ Other eminent historical figures, notably Gandhi, made the message of spiritual and consequently social equality a part of the political campaign itself. From 1932 harijan welfare became one of Gandhi's principal concerns. It included the establishment of an All-India Anti-Untouchability League. In 1933 the weekly *Harijan* was started and during 1933–34 the Mahatma completed a 12,500-mile-long harijan tour.⁷

This contextual factor was evidently recognized by the makers of the 'saint' films at Prabhat Studios (Prabhat Film Company). Damle/Fattelal's film *Sant Dnyaneshwar* (1940) propagated among other things nonviolence, truth and national consensus. Contemporary reviews and discussions of the film examined its social content. For example K.A. Abbas, a leftist writer and filmmaker of the Progressive Writers' Association and Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), commented on the degree of 'realism' in the film, praising it for its naturalness in the first part while criticizing its devolution into a series of miracles in the second part—the director succumbing, as he put it, to the conventions of the popular mythological. 'A saint is something more than a magician', Abbas wrote in his review.⁸ Abbas queried the choice to recoup traditions through the techno-magical possibilities of the cinema and entered the debate about the political import of popular culture as such. The reply in the *Bombay Chronicle* by an unnamed critic confirms that in India, as in Europe, alternation between the magical and realist potential of the cinema was an ongoing polemic.⁹ The point I shall be making at some length is that the bhakti saints and their portrayed lives have to be seen neither in terms of realism nor in terms of the mass appeal of the miracles that defenders of such films cite. The films have to be seen as socially symbolic narratives. For, like literature, cinema supplements the primary representation of the social with its own narrative representation through a process that may be called 'iconographic augmentation'.¹⁰

The Iconic Image

The pictorial convention on which *Sant Tukaram* is based is such as to give its imagery an iconic aspect, taking iconic to mean an image on to which symbolic meanings converge and in which, moreover, they achieve hypostasis. An iconic image, according to this functional definition, may or may not be mythological or religious but it does suggest an iconographic process wherein morphology—a dynamic principle of formal aesthetics—takes on the gravity of the symbolic to thus ground itself in a given tradition (*Illus. 1*).

The immediate antecedents of the Prabhat films, including *Sant Tukaram*, are the films of Dadasaheb Phalke (1870–1944).¹¹ As the pioneer cinematographer of India, Phalke projected the iconic image in a more literal sense (*Illus. 2*). He drew upon a traditional iconographic repertoire. His express aim was to bring forth the Hindu



2 Child Krishna (Mandakini Phalke) dances on the hood of the serpent-demon Kaliya, and is worshipped by *nagins* (Kaliya Mardan)

pantheon through the technical magic of the cinema; to revive the gods of the puranas; to fortify and gladden the masses of India in a moment of national self-affirmation. Stepping into a corridor of antecedents one may ask, what visual sources were tapped for the purpose? The iconic, at the conjunctural moment of Indian cinema, already includes the naive element—as in early photography where the subject is positioned up front or rather, where subjectivity itself takes on a frontal aspect, the better to allow its magical capture as image. But this in turn includes pictorial iconography, the formal positioning and frontality of Indian photographs of the nineteenth century referring both to icons proper and to the pictorial conventions of idealized portraiture in medieval times. For although medieval portraits are shown in profile there is an aspectual iconicity in the posture offering a deflected grace: the portrait sets up a complementary relation to the icon. Mid-nineteenth century pahari and Sikh miniature portraits (shading into the Company School) continue to confirm this formal attitude. While abandoning the sacred protocol of the pictorial tradition early Indian photography inherits the humbler version of the artist's idealizing imagination. It reverts the profiled types once again to staid attention and lends a fresh alertness to frontal address. In continuation, early cinematic imagery has the naive boldness to invoke pictorial origins and complete the circle by assuming the attributes of the (pseudo) icon.

It is Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), the foremost painter of his time, who transfixes the type in the oil-and-easel format until the iconic image becomes, in this paradoxical relay, peculiarly overdetermined (as well as undermined by the self-doubt of a new middle class). An aristocrat from Travancore, Ravi Varma was admired by the colonial English for the way he learnt to imitate the manner of the European salon painters, by the Indian princes whose portraits he was commissioned to paint, and by the Indian middle class for whom he performed the ultimate feat of the culturally eclectic artist: drawing on mythology as it had been revived by popular Hinduism, he gave to the gods features as accessible as those of actors in the rapidly growing urban (especially Company) theatre of the period. Ravi Varma's paintings, while they acted out an earnest fantasy drawn from Indian mythology, displayed the odd turn of hybrid genius which colonial cultures present.¹²

What Phalke did with these several sources, especially with Ravi Varma whom he greatly admired, is a long story. I mention this here because Prabhat Studios, established after Phalke, drew on the same sources as he did or received them



3–5 Iconicity and frontal address (*Sant Tukaram*)
 Above: 3 Tuka faces the camera as he adores his lord Vithoba and consort through song and speech. Middle: 4 The camera looks at the idols from the point of view of the adoring Tuka. Below: 5 Switching point of view again the camera frames Tuka, establishing a transfer between idol, saint and viewer, between sacred and secular protocol

materialized as cinema via Phalke. However, by the time we come to the mid-1930s the cinematic image itself was gaining a self-regard and a language of its own. *Sant Tukaram* is a prime example of this early fulfilment.

Let us look at the characteristics of the image as it comes across in *Sant Tukaram* to recognize how religious iconicity is mediated to secular effect in the filmic process (*Illus.* 3, 4, 5). Repeated over-the-shoulder shots of the devotee first put god and the viewer in contact. But even as Tukaram the saint adores the black-faced Vithoba and witnesses his miracles in wonder the cinematic image is construed to symmetrically reverse the gaze: the saint turns around to let the viewer 'adore' him and witness his sublime speech and song. It is his generosity of address towards all phenomena, real and divine and, with it the alertness and dignity of sacred protocol that help the film in transmitting a nonvoyeuristic gaze to the viewer. But if in this performative about-turn there is a transfer of affect between god, saint and viewer conducted through the very body of the saint, there is also a cinematic rhythm in the reversed gaze which makes for reciprocity, an intersubjective truth-effect that is ultimately secular.

The film *Sant Tukaram* succeeds among other things precisely in the way it develops an *iconic sign*. The iconic in the language of cinema derives its characteristics from painting. Figurative images, especially portraits, rest not only on likenesses or resemblances but equally on an economy of representation, and with that an autonomous logic of positioning and structure. This inevitable distancing between the pictorial image and the real world acquires additional virtues in the transfer between painting and cinematography. The iconic sign, peculiar to cinema, denotes precisely this transfer (of icon-image-sign) and helps in breaking down a rigid assumption: that the cinema upholds ultimate verisimilitude.

The Actor's Presence

I have already noted how Indian figural painting, especially portraiture, establishes degrees of 'ideal' alienation. This factor goes into the very style of representation, into the splendid performance of Vishnupant Pagnis as Tukaram. How does this man 'play' the saint? What icon-image-sign does he transmit? I ask this with the intention of moving on from a relatively formal to a phenomenological description of the image on the screen. The aim is to grasp the meaning that accrues from the choice of certain language conventions especially where an instance of rare subjectivity, here the existential equivalents of saintliness and grace, is involved.

Writing on Robert Bresson's *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1950), Andre Bazin mentions how *The Diary*, in usual Bressonian fashion, constituted a cast of amateurs or beginners but even so resembled not so much Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1947) as Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). It resembled not a neorealist film to which it was closer in time, but a silent film composed of

monumental, severely stylized, close-up images of Saint Joan and her interrogators.¹³ Bazin writes how Bresson, like Dreyer, was concerned with the countenance as flesh

which, when not involved in playing a role is a man's true imprint, the most visible mark of his soul. It is then that the countenance takes on the dignity of a sign. He would have us be concerned here not with the psychology but with the physiology of existence.¹⁴

One might say that if Pagnis is memorable as Tukaram (just as Marie Falconetti is as Joan), it is because he becomes transparent in his soul and is yet opaquely present as image. Or, to put it the other way round, Tukaram is realized in the material countenance, in the features and stance of this unique performer, Vishnupant Pagnis—but it is by subverting the actor as actor that the sign surfaces.

The point I want to raise via Bazin is how privileging the countenance as flesh, or the player's physiognomy, allows an extension from the pure icon to what may be called the indexical sign.¹⁵ Here the image refers to the object in the real world by virtually pointing to it, by establishing a direct link, by a contiguous and thus existential relationship. Bazin regarded this indexical function of the photograph, where the 'truth'-content of the image is supposed to be manifest, to be its proper and supreme function. By extension this function applied to the cinema. By



6–8 The 'physiology of existence': the everyday countenance of Tuka/Pagnis (*Sant Tukaram*)
 Above left: 6 Tuka teaches his son Mahadeo (Pandit Damle). Above right: 7 His wife Jijai (Gouri) listens to Tuka's discourse. Below: 8 Tuka, surrounded by his loving family, waits in penance at the banks of the *Indrayani*, hoping to recover his verses from the river

phenomenological inquiry he gave such an image a simultaneously spiritual and realist basis (*Illus.* 6, 7, 8).

Bazin was a Catholic, as were the themes of the films he was describing. Compare him now to Ananda Coomaraswamy who showed through a lifetime's scholarship of medieval aesthetics that the difference between eastern and western thought is not so great, that both traditions rely on metaphysical principles of transfiguration when they seek to define the idea and image. Further that both traditions in their respective materiality seek to define that interface between the idea and image where the contours of form become resplendently, sensuously visible. Bazin speaking as a contemporary Catholic, posing ontological questions in existentialist terminology, in terms of the soul's living truth, should however be distinguished from Coomaraswamy who dispelled the concept of soul in favour of a less personified figure of thought. Being a medievalist of clearly oriental/Indian intent, his metaphysics favoured monism and what he called 'self-naughting'.¹⁶

In the *Natyashastra* the actor is a *patra*, a vessel, conveying the attributes and emotions of a 'character' to the viewer while remaining intact himself. He is at once deity and man, he is both an iconic and an indexical sign. By virtue of this double coding the 'character' devolves and what is conveyed in performance is body, voice, discourse.¹⁷ In several Indian theatrical traditions, for example the Ramlila at Ramnagar (Varanasi), little boys who are apprenticed to play Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are treated as both deity and child and nurtured on that account for over two months. But their apprenticeship entails training in reciting the verses of the *Ramacharitamansa*, not in acting.¹⁸ Once the performance begins they must simply *be*, and they must simply speak the text. They raise their voices and intone the text in an unvarying but astonishingly clear and lofty manner and they succeed in reaching out to the thousands in the audience. The enunciation is the determining factor, for the text as discourse establishes symbolic paramourcy. The god is sheer presence or, on the other hand, a 'mere' sign.

The Political Ground

I now want to draw attention to the way cross-referencing between cultural creation and political history may take place. Presentation of the saint's discourse within the historical space and *spiritual hegemony* of Mahatma Gandhi makes *Sant Tukaram* not only a film for the faithful but also strangely radical. I would presume to say that it is the same resource in tradition that yields the discourse of Tukaram, Gandhi and the ingenuous saint-genre of Prabhat Studios, the filmmakers and actors making their own popular contribution, as they saw fit, to national culture. In other words, traditions are polyvocal and have a cumulative effect by the relay of word and utterance of a consciously positioned discourse.¹⁹ Thus it is that in the slightly deregistered but closely packed *voice*—in speech, song, exegetical recount—of

Tuka the humble actor Vishnupant Pagnis finds his own existential force. Tuka says, 'Listen to Tuka preaching—like a shower from a cloud descending',²⁰ and the recipient here is a dedicated actor-devotee. Pagnis's presence extends beyond his fine, nearly beatific countenance, beyond his actor's reverie, beyond even his being, into becoming through discourse a reflective symbol within a political situation already conditioned by a contemporary 'saint', Mahatma Gandhi.

It is sometimes said that Gandhi's discourse was analogous to or even derived from that of the bhakti saints; he himself was most attached to Tulsi, Kabir and Narsi Mehta. But take the figure at hand, Tukaram, and the analogies will be as easy to establish. Consider how Tukaram demolishes bogus claims to religious power by his own spiritual intransigence; a sudra by birth, he claims that his lord makes no distinction between castes. But consider also how he hesitates, indeed declines to upturn the social hierarchies of the day and opts for stability in the face of an imperial power that would uproot the entire tradition.²¹ The common cause Gandhi makes with this attitude is self-evident. It is Gandhi's belief in balancing voluntarist change with a containing symbolism (or, on the other hand, heretical utterances with cautious action) that brings him close to a certain aspect of the saint tradition and thus to large sections of the Indian people educated through this literature.

Gandhi's presence is said to have had a quality of humour and intimacy, a swift grasp of reality and attendant grace. Similarly, his speech took the form of direct address. The factor he himself put forth as the source of this address was what he called his 'inner voice'. Received directly from god in the manner of mystics, it was transmitted to the listener by way of actual enunciation—the choice of words, the tone, the length of the sentence, the duration of speech—to become 'unmediated' discourse.

As much as the message it is in the style of being and form of discourse that there is a resemblance between the Mahatma and his saint forebears. Gandhi is in a sense the actor-pedagogue on the nationalist stage. This has less to do with any banal notion of communication than with the ability to present aspects of spiritual being: the distantiation that comes from sainthood (especially as a sanyasi, which the peasantry perceived Gandhi to be) and the intuitively correct and quick *yielding* before the force of conscience in a moment of praxis.

For that very reason, of course, Gandhi did not present causally structured arguments drawing on history. He was not interested in history, he would claim, nor even in politics, except to concede that it so encircled modern man that he must inevitably deal with it in order finally to annul it. Consequently Gandhi preferred not to speak of nationalism as such, not at least in the way it was spoken of by the west and its colonized opponents alike. This, he believed, showed a process of corrupt symbiosis that would lead India to the same malaise: the nation-state and its material structuring on a monstrous scale that would then destroy individual dignity, community values and spiritual truth. Instead he put his faith in such utopian communities as

ashramas, constituting them as models for the truth-seeking polity of the future.

I need only reiterate this transfiguring procedure in Gandhi's leadership to configure the argument about sainthood: the body, the utterance, the word, the miracle are instantly relayed, making the personality in question open to quick and changeable manifestations but equally to intransigence and praxis. What remains elusive and intractable is the 'rumour' of sainthood; when judged in terms of historical causality it gains forms of peculiar transcendence.²²

Narrative Movement

I have spoken about the nature of the image in *Sant Tukaram* and the cinematic signs it yields. I have also discussed the discursive aspect of the film and how speech and song may be existentially conveyed in person, but how these also belong to a cultural language and its norms of meaning production which constitute what we may call the living tradition. I shall now look at the narrative procedure of the film as the means by which it takes account of all these aspects and becomes what I have indicated by cross-referencing to Gandhi, a socially symbolic construction.

It is in the narrative that the content of the discourse, the meaning of the words as they are uttered in passionate verse, is mobilized. In so far as the saints' lives are perceived in the Indian tradition as historically 'true' but also emblematic (closed off by the self-realization of the saint through voluntary death, suicide, *samadhi*, or some form of mythic assumption), the retelling or replaying of these lives will tend to follow the allegorical mode. This is true for *Sant Tukaram*. Consequently, as compared with the phenomenologically rich but overdetermined and unitary 'realism' that Andre Bazin seeks in cinema, we can place *Sant Tukaram* in the genre of the Indian 'mythological' and see in it a different constructional principle. The miracles, for example, are so embedded in the story as to be seen not only as motivating points of the narrative but even, one might say, ideal prototypes of human action (*Illus.* 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14). The question of realism is thus always kept a little in abeyance though never quite eschewed, since the pedagogical aspect of the life of a saint requires constant reference to reality. What is interesting is that the *social* is introduced, as in the realism of Bresson and even Rossellini, by opening out the subjectivity of the elect protagonist within the historical. This entry is by way of a saint's acts of transgression; they may be in a political context those of a rebel or a revolutionary.

'Can metaphysics be converted into action? And can action have meaning beyond itself? These are the questions that have haunted filmmakers who do not stop at naturalism.'²³ Kumar Shahani poses this with reference to the saints of Prabhat, going on to say that if the answers are in the negative neither these saint films nor post-Rossellini cinema would have been possible. In *Sant Tukaram* it is the unselfconscious simplicity fusing thought and action which makes for this particular form of didactic narration. Shahani adds that such simplicity can rarely be repeated even by the authors



This and the facing page: 9–14 The healing of Tuka's son by his lord Vitoba (*Sant Tukaram*)
 Above: 9 Jijai, furious with Tuka for his 'blind' faith, drags her sick child Mahadeo to the temple. Middle: 10 Pushing through the congregation, Jijai enters the temple. Below: 11 The sick child flails his arms and cries out



Above: 12 Shoe in hand, Jijai confronts the idol; the child is threatened by her rage.
Middle: 13 The divine hand appears, the child is healed.
Below: 14 A grateful Tuka cradles his son in his arms



15–19 Contrasting styles: humility and conceit (*Sant Tukaram*)

Facing page: Above: 15 Tuka, the lower-caste devotee of Vithoba, sings his *abhangs* and leads the *kirtankars* through the streets and temple. Middle: 16 The grace and rhythm in the body of the singing saint. Below: 17 Jijai, devoted to sustaining her impoverished family, lovingly bathes her buffalo

This page: Above: 18 Villainous Salomalo (Bhagwat), the brahmin priest of Dehu, whose performance style is a caricature of Tuka's singing. Below: 19 Beautiful Sundara (Shanta Majumdar), Salomalo's mistress, in a seductive pose reminiscent of Ravi Varma's paintings



themselves, and asks whether this ‘aspiration’ to transform the subject-matter itself into form and content is not dangerous when conducted deliberately and in imitation of the naive. The uniqueness of *Sant Tukaram* lies in the fact that ‘The legend, the heroic saint himself, dictated the movement of the film.’²⁴

The actual movement of the film consists, in the first instance, of Tuka’s song and reverie. This releases the spring of miracles which in turn mobilizes the life of the villagers—the peasants and artisans of the village of Dehu—and forms the material environment within which the struggle of Tuka’s impoverished wife and children is foregrounded.

Having already mentioned the unique presence of the actor who plays Tuka, Vishnupant Pagnis, a word about his performative style (*Illus. 15, 16*). Shahani points out how Pagnis as Tuka moves only his torso when he sings; the body moves in a subliminal rhythm above the hips and the viewers see him often in close-up, singing to himself as he sings to us.²⁵ Sometimes we see him in mid-close-up, leading the *kirtankars* and singing with them as he winds his way in and out of the village streets, weaving a community together. The singing modulates the pace and structure of the moving image. Compare Tuka’s style with that of his corrupt rival, Salomalo the priest, who sings the plagiarized verses of Tuka with the body all askew, using the



From top to bottom: 20–23 The miracles (*Sant Tukaram*)

20 The idol of Vithoba breaks into dance. 21 In response to Tuka’s devotion child Krishna pours grain from the sky. 22 The goddess emerges from the waters of the *Indrayani* holding Tuka’s verses.

23 Accompanied by heavenly attendants, Tuka is borne to Vaikuntha in a chariot drawn by Garuda as the villagers look on in wonder



24–25 Tuka's children play with the precious gifts sent by Shivaji to test Tuka's sainthood (*Sant Tukaram*). Left: 24 Tuka's son Mahadeo dresses up like a prince. Right: 25 Kasbi (Kusum Bhagwat) is ravished by the silks

jerky movements of the tamasha actor (*Illus. 18*). One might also compare the pragmatic, uncouth but vulnerable Jijai, Tuka's wife (*Illus. 17*), in her attempted naturalism or spontaneous 'expressionism', with the seductive stylization of the courtesan after the hybrid mannerisms of Ravi Varma's pictorial compositions (*Illus. 19*), and note how a diverse stylistics is consciously used to set off the integral being of Tuka.

The second mobilizing feature of the film is the childlike, indeed childish set of miracles. The stiff idol of Vithoba comes alive smiling as he dances on his little feet, arms akimbo. The wheatstalks in the ravaged fields shoot up of themselves as Tuka sings with his eyes closed. Child Krishna pours grain from the sky with his own two hands to save Tuka. The goddess emerges from the depths of the water with Tuka's bundle of verses intact. Vithoba multiplies the person of Chhatrapati Shivaji, a hundredfold, at Tuka's request, to fool the invading armies. Tuka ascends to Vainkuntha in a chariot flown by Garuda (in the shape of a great hairy bird). The miracles make happy omens for the magical aspect of the cinema since its very inception; there is a never-fading thrill in the technical transformation of contours, substances, bodies, and there is a special thrill in the kinetic transformation of hitherto static iconography (*Illus. 20, 21, 22, 23*).

The fabulous, even where it appears ephemeral, has a narrative function. This brings me to the third aspect of the movement in *Sant Tukaram*. Because the magic is inducted into the everyday life of the little community at Dehu it becomes a motivating impulse towards a materially plentiful existence. The first signs of this are the wholly generous acts of Tuka himself, as for example when he walks through the village like a divine somnambulist letting the plundering army of little children take their pick of his great bundle of sugarcane until by god's grace there is but one each left for his own two children, the poorest of the lot, but made happy so easily.

Then there is Tuka's gracious effect on his community as shown in the sequence where his priestly interrogator, Pandit Rameshwar Shastri, an authority on the vedas, comes to Dehu to indict Tukaram for defiling the scriptures. Riding into the



26–28 The power of Tuka's *abhangs* (*Sant Tukaram*)

Above: 26 The villagers congregate around Tuka as he sits under a tree singing. Below left and right: 27, 28 Pandit Rameshwar Shastri (Shankar Kulkarni) finds the villagers singing Tuka's *abhangs* as they perform their tasks



village, the priest is bewildered to see the villagers engrossed in artisanal tasks by virtue of Tuka's supportive verse and song (*Illus. 26, 27, 28*). There is a wonderful tracking shot parallel to the priest on the horse but taken from the near side, so that you see between the camera and the priest an entire pageant of working people engaged in their craft, trade and domestic chores. Singing all the while, they give rhythm to their daily life. The film here achieves (through remarkable use of a depth-of-field and sustained lateral movement which prolongs the penetrating view) a shift in the viewer's perception—the priest and his cohorts rather than the poor in their hovels are the objects of the viewer's voyeuristic interest and derision. This sequence also achieves a retake on the viewer's attraction to the spectacular miracles. Here is evidence of real emancipation shown to be immanent within a community of unalienated labour. Here life, song and work combine to attain the sustained rhythm of reverie we associate only with leisure. This gift to his people is the saint's true miracle.

The actual miracles in *Sant Tukaram* are naive to the point of being crude, just as the image and its iconography are construed cursorily and simply signpost the event. But it is also as if the moments of fallibility suggest complementary moments of identification, just as the moments of material want and suffering recall moments of plenty. Take for example the scene where Jijai and her two children succumb to greed and play unabashedly with Shivaji's *nazrana* but at Tuka's rebuke willingly surrender

the ruler's wealth (*Illus.* 24, 25). In another scene the village poor loot god's boon to Tuka, the piles of grain at his door; and in that upsurge you see, inadvertently almost, the glistening energy of muscle and movement mounting up to revolutionary effect. The energy born of need becomes, through the saint's encouragement, a virtual prefiguration of peasant insurgency (*Illus.* 29, 30, 31, 32).

If the film has a Melies-like magicality (via the example of Phalke), the miracles also initiate a sensuous gain in the daily life of the community and become the mode of social transformation in the film. Ultimately Tuka's ascent to heaven is fairly matched by Jijai's pathetic but real claim to see him back home for his daily meal. We can see the other part of the cinema, the early realism of, say Pudovkin, already moulded into this saint's life on film.

Through the materiality of the miracles and the precise conflation of faith and labour, through a cinematic narrative that interweaves magic and realism, through the physiognomy of Vishnupant Pagnis as Tukaram and the phenomenological elaboration of a life-in-poverty in peasant India—through a propitious combination of these factors given dignity by the national struggle, *Sant Tukaram* becomes a revelatory text conducive to a hermeneutic of affirmation.



Clockwise: 29–32 Tuka happily watches as the villagers collect and carry away the grain bestowed by divine grace (*Sant Tukaram*)

Devi

Patriarchal Sin

Satyajit Ray's *Devi* is a classically constructed narrative.²⁶ Somewhat as in a suspense drama where the viewer anticipates the next stage and slips into it the sequences in the film move imperceptibly. The plot is attuned to the young Dayamoyee's destiny, her life runs swiftly into madness, she is dead at seventeen. The plot-time is tuned to the brief life of the quarry which, once marked, runs on giving fleeting measure of reality but in the foreclosed form of tragic denouement.

Real time is absorbed by the real space in which it functions. In the grand household of the feudal patriarch, in the large dark rooms and resounding corridors, life moves but slowly, blocked by heavy furniture, hidden behind doors and screens. The shriek of Daya's pet parrot lifts the gloom; the clatter of the old man's wooden sandals subsides into the shadowy magnitude of the place. Ray is of course famous for creating a mood and an atmosphere (to which art director Bansi Chandragupta and cameraman Subrata Mitra contribute greatly). We see this in *Jalsaghar* and will see it again in *Charulata*: how the mise-en-scene and the camera movement coincide to establish a perfectly integrated setting.

In this sense Ray fulfils the conditions of realism quite perfectly: he offers a seamless narrative and uses to maximum advantage the elements of perspectival depth, of sound and shadow, of rich chiaroscuro, of a spatial dimension designed to harbour a strange intentionality. In deference to a noble rationality wherein the investigations of man-in-society become scientifically viable, he not only fulfils the conditions but reiterates the equation between narration, realism and tragedy. By embedding human destiny in an interposed map of nature and culture (heredity and environment) he also examines the contours of psychic distortion—a manifestly modern preoccupation.

In *Devi* the rationalist project in the double register of realism/modernism strikes at the hidden note of perversion. Thus the core of this film is revealed when unintended eroticism unwinds in the heart of the ageing aristocrat, Kalikinkar Roy, passionate devotee of goddess Kali. This destroys the old order, sacrificing nevertheless a young couple to it. As he watches Dayamoyee, his beautiful daughter-in-law, perform the ritual puja before the goddess and as he receives her devoted attention, we see a visible conflation of patriarchal motives with the cruel deification of a desired object. The dream that is forming in the old man is still, in terms of the plot, to be revealed; in terms of the image it is already established in the body and performance and cinematographic capture of Kalikinkar. There is an exhibition of sensuality which, in Ray-fashion, is discreet enough but it should not be missed: the crumpled brocade clothes of the aristocrat; his delirious love of the goddess; his covert, almost spying glances at Daya; and his freely surrendered limbs as he relaxes on the tiger-skin chair while she washes his feet. There is submerged obscenity in the discreet representation.

The faint repugnance towards the floundering old man is set against sympathy for the clear-eyed younger son, Daya's husband Umaprasad, who studies in Calcutta in a liberal environment. And though Umaprasad is in no way heroic or even fully emancipated, his body, his direct compassionate smile, his voice and words have a firm contour (of which you get manifest proof in his well-articulated handwriting as he writes his name several times over with fine bold penstrokes). The difference is not just between old age and youth; it is also between the way images are formed and positioned. Even the dandyism of the young man riding with a friend in a horsecab in Calcutta has a poise that signals the making of a selfconscious, perhaps imitative but also progressive, middle class in nineteenth-century Bengal.

The figural contrast of the aristocrat and his son is of course ideologically dictated. Ray is speaking in class terms about the degeneration of feudal patriarchy. If there is some sympathy towards the aristocrat suggesting also sympathy for the dying order (in *Jalsaghar* it is the very motif), it is only as much as is necessary to maintain the balance of realism. The terms of criticism are clearly in favour of the enlightened bourgeoisie and its urban middle-class extension. And they are precisely those formulated by the Brahma Samaj movement: the rational, liberal progressivism which Ray's family inherited as Brahmos and which Ray saw modernized into a universalist aesthetic via Rabindranath Tagore—a close friend of the family in whose university at Santiniketan Ray studied art. I would in fact emphasize that in this film Ray does deal with false consciousness in its more-or-less precise meaning as class ideology which functions most prominently through religion. Regrettably, critics harping on Ray's subtlety sometimes shy away from placing Ray in a political context, denying him even his own reticent manner of ideological critique and social intervention.²⁷

While we can see the dream-thoughts in Kalikinkar's imagination, we have little premonition about the quickness and finality of the dream: he sees Daya-moyee as Kali and rises in the morning crying out in ecstasy that she is goddess incarnate come to bless his house and the community. A monstrous process of condensation in the aristocrat's psyche culminates in the dream-content, all the mixed-up elements of the old brain find 'truth' in a flash and he achieves via cunning displacement the projection of his desire in a socially consecrated space.

'I do not think it is necessary . . . to form a plastic conception of the psychic condition at the time of dream formation', says Freud.²⁸ But the cinema since its inception has been doing precisely this, providing a plastic conception of the psychic condition at the time of dream formation by a virtual stream-of-consciousness relay of images. How the transparency, the overlapping density and transposition evolve into ghostly mutation in the darkened cinema-hall that simulates in turn conditions in which dream formation takes place, this has been long theorized. In terms of authorial choice it means that you can either achieve a collapse of the conscious subject or, if the filmmaker intends to encourage reflection, use the cinematic apparatus to retrace and



Above: 33 Kalikinkar Roy (Chhabi Biswas), feudal patriarch, with his son Umapasrad (Soumitra Chatterjee), a student in Calcutta: the sceptical son questions his father's exaggerated faith (*Devi*). Middle: 34 Dayamoyee (Sharmila Tagore) and Umapasrad: partners in a companionate marriage (*Devi*) Below: 35 Kalikinkar with his daughter-in-law at the domestic shrine. He is beginning to conflate Dayamoyee with the goddess he adores (*Devi*)

thereby demystify the very dreamwork involving condensation and displacement. In a modest way, *Devi* provides the plastic conception of hidden desire in the patriarch's vanishing world and then a reflective understanding of the dream process as it attains a symbolic aura in the real world.

Kalikinkar's desire is cast in the oedipal mould and then inverted. In the oedipal story and its reenactment in the male child's psyche there is desire to murder the father in revenge for the sense of castration he produces in the boy. In *Devi* it is the father who, coveting the daughter-in-law, wishes to castrate his son. Kalikinkar's passions find sly transference between the goddess and his son's wife. He succeeds by a form of public deification to expiate his guilt at the cost of virtually 'killing' the little (false) mother. There is an inversion which makes the desire more predatory, the complex more indigenously apt (wherein the father usurps the son's right), and the dying order more mournfully absurd (*Illus.* 33, 34, 35).

In the Indian social imagination the mother-goddess (Durga/Kali with many aspectual variations) is both beneficent and cruel. She is a nurturing mother with annihilating powers. Here, in *Devi*, the girl who is to become goddess is all docility, which heightens the tragedy but also corresponds to one element in the mythological construction of the goddess and gives the tragedy a further twist. In Bengal the goddess in her manifestation as Durga/Uma is the very daughter come home (so that when customarily the Bengalis call their daughters *ma*, they are at once adopting the goddess and deifying the daughter). Kalikinkar's desire to possess the mother and dispossess the son of his beloved is further compounded by his sin with regard to the daughter-in-law, making the figure of patriarchy (pathetically, tragically) evil. There is in this patriarchal setting an awesome cathexis: tenderness, fear and greed in the old man; despair and the need for a violent catharsis in the defunct household.

Ray's reason for taking up this story of a feudal patriarch using the mother cult to appropriate his own progeny's bride seems to lie not so much in moral disgust as in protest against unchallenged authority. All-empowering and authoritarian procedures, even when these are gained from myth and religion—or precisely when they are thus gained, are implicated in this critique formulated like his Brahma forebears in the enlightenment mode. There seems to be a distrust also of excessive eroticism and of libidinous display as in the cults of the mother-goddess, a distrust gained by Satyajit Ray from his mentor Rabindranath Tagore. One might add that as in the case of Tagore there is a didactic intent, to make a critique alike of bogus deification and of the artist/author/activist who disgorges the phantoms of his imagination to gain communitarian catharsis. Such catharsis is seen as calamitous in that it starts up a process of cultist mystifications, secret loyalties and indiscreet valorization: of the self, of the folk, of the community, of the nation. If Tagore introduced this critique with reference to Bankimchandra Chatterjee and devalorized his protagonists in *Gora* and *Ghare Baire* (also in *Char Adhyaya* and *Chaturanga*), the enlightenment

thesis was to be used polemically by Ray's supporters against Ritwik Ghatak's use of mythic material and melodramatic form in the coming decades.

The Lesson of Tragedy

One of the ways Ray protests against traditional authority is to exaggerate the actual hold of feudal command. The zamindar's declaration of Dayamoyee as goddess incarnate induces almost the entire populace around Chandipur to bring their grief to his door, asking for blessings from the goddess but also paying obeisance to the zamindar's glory. Streams of pilgrims wind across the countryside and press up to the household shrine. Then one incident is isolated: a miracle is performed amid suspense (through the editing pattern of inter-cut shots commonly used to build up filmic suspense) and a poor man's dying child is restored to the dazed father by Daya's blessing (*Illus. 36*). But then the disclosure in this vainglorious drama takes place with the aid of the same man. As Daya is being destroyed by her daily role the man returns and sings one of Ramprasad Sen's famous songs to goddess Kali, and at this moment two things happen. Seeing the man's serene and melancholy face in close-up as he sings we realize that now it is *he* who is blessing the girl. He recognizes her suffering. The dignity of the poor is restored, as also a popular mystical sensibility in verse and song that cuts through ritual and speaks directly of pain. Indeed as a benediction the song becomes an expression of our pity for the trapped girl virtually dying before our eyes.

And what does Ray do with the young Daya? To her he attaches from the very start the two elements of fear and pity that signify the effects of classical tragedy; he does this imaginatively, by showing how small she is. It is sentimental but as effective a marker as any used in tragic conventions. How little she is derives from the young small body of the actress and from the way she is held and cherished and also spoken of by the husband who agonizes at her absurd transformation (*Illus. 37, 38*).

Her vulnerability is equally established by the way she is captured by the camera, as a diminutive figure. In fact her littleness seems to become an insistent motif especially after she has been deified. You see her seated in the shrine from close enough but you also see her as the camera saw the clay icon at the start, tilted, about to fall backwards. You see the signs of a trance showing on her weary face (a trance evoked as much by the claustrophobia of priests, chanting, incense and beseeching pilgrims, as by her own half-doubt about her status), but when she actually swoons and falls sideways like a doll the camera has withdrawn and you see her in long-shot—bereft,



36 A poor villager brings his sick grandson to Dayamoyee (*Devī*)

broken. When the husband returns they exchange an intelligent, complicit look of *adult* understanding but he is able to do nothing against the father. When you see her next the camera is moving above the pressing crowds, following the husband's gaze as he watches her from the privacy of an upstairs window while she is being converted into a public spectacle.

Again, how small she looks wearing her sari pulled over her face as she hurries into the night, intending to escape with her husband to Calcutta. But she stops among the giant weeds by the riverbank whispering 'I'm afraid, I'm afraid', and returns to her awesome status at home. Finally when he comes again she has just gone mad, having failed to produce the miracle for her own dying nephew. Her face and clothes are in disarray and she runs out into the fields. Silhouetted against a warm bright light, she runs with her body stiffened like a wooden puppet, hopping



Above: 37 Ummaprasad finds his Daya slipping into madness (*Devi*).
Below: 38 Beautiful Daya with her pet parrot in the veranda of her father-in-law's ancestral mansion: she is an object of desire and envy in the household (*Devi*)





39 Daya runs to her death through a field of flowers (*Devi*)

awkwardly into a mass of sunflowers (*Illus. 39*). Fear suffuses the narrative at this stage, there is hardly any feeling of pity any more: she is a denounced witch and even at her best, no more than a tragic sign. Being a child, she has gained no knowledge from her circumstance and the tragedy is, as it were, purposeless.

What is important is that Ray, as part of his protest against the empowering procedures of myth and religion, does not ever make her face and figure take on an iconic aspect. The paramount point of view is that of her husband with which the director identifies; and in that point of view there is tenderness, compassion and, rather than the condescension that may go with it (remember Nora in Ibsen's *Doll's House*), a peculiarly relieving sense of friendship. She is his young companion who will soon face the world with him in the big city. In refusing to give her an iconic aspect Ray overcomes her own developing doubt. For her husband, the director and the viewer she is always human and therefore the more tragic, until the very end when she is for a moment dehumanized to become purely symbolic, a tragic sign. This last moment is significant in that it makes the film a testimony against a dead order where the icon is as it were the last of the debris. And you see it as such—a throwaway doll.

Reformist Conscience

Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee situates his story around 1860. Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (where rationalism in the figure of Nikhil is well developed) is placed four decades later. Ray in his turn decided to make his film long after Tagore, in the Nehruvian era. Indeed for Nehru, who released the film to foreign audiences, it must have seemed in the nature of a proclamation declaring the old order dead.

Where should we position the young husband in *Devi*, the preferred protagonist who fails so miserably but nevertheless becomes emblematic of a not-yet-realized consciousness? In 1860—or in 1960? The discussion of *Devi* can be contextualized if we take up the question arising from the point just made: is the film an intended anachronism?

Chidananda Das Gupta suggests that Ray's work traces the social evolution of the middle class in modern India, suggesting that in some of his films even post-Tagore characters are observed from a Tagorean moral viewpoint. Ray, he argues, is ill at ease when this literary mediation no longer suffices, so that the period after *Charulata* (1964) shows a spiritual exhaustion which he overcomes but only after he has replaced passionate identification with his immediate past with a contemporary political project.²⁹ But what is this project? And doesn't the past continue to feature

poignantly in it so that Ray's oeuvre can be said to be a continual retake? He maps the past on the present in a subtly overlapping arrangement; he repeatedly foregrounds what he regards as perennial values; he encircles the nodal points of desired reform and then, in a realist manner, lets the 'truth' surface. Is this reflective project meant to redeem a universalist model of humanism, or the autobiography of his class and his culture, or the progressive conscience of a modern Indian artist?

Here we can only ask how usefully Ray establishes the anachronism of a 'period' film within contemporary reality. And the question easily splits into two parts, the ideological and the aesthetic. It is possible to argue that some of the social issues he represents in the first phase of his films (from *Pather Panchali* to *Charulata*, including *Devi*) are not only located in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, but also that they are most keenly felt and examined in that phase of Indian nationalism and not to the same extent since. There is the question of religious reform and 'modernization' of the Hindu religion (or indeed its replacement, as propagated by a section of the Brahmos, with a variety of alternatives including atheism). It may be argued that as nationalism advanced the question of reform was left behind or even overtaken by its opposite force, revivalism; and that however progressive Nehru's own position was in this matter, the Congress Party and even the communists let the problem of religion (along with that of caste and community) subside before other declaredly more vital goals. If this is so, Ray's insertion into the contemporary of a period drama where the collusion between feudal ideology, religious superstition and senile delusion are presented may be a profoundly intended anachronism. It can serve to cause disjunction, to force upon us a fresh look at our deeply anomalous contemporaneity.

Realist Aesthetic

Does Ray's aesthetic also function through active recall and reflection? Take the narrative form. If with the end of foreign rule the Indian middle class, among them artists, felt the need to face up to cultural contradictions (with a scepticism which at times even queried the gains of political freedom), it is not surprising that this need was conditioned by a bourgeois literary preoccupation: that of introspecting about subjectivity, society and the limits of rationality in fictional narrative. In this act of introspection the choice of genre, style, form does come from the nineteenth century (from Ibsen or Chekhov). It extends via existential morality into the twentieth century. Nor is it surprising that an Indian filmmaker chose to 'go back' to this narrative form as late as 1960. Each medium has its own history and cinema, still young, solves its own problems along a time-scale and routes different from those of literature and the other arts. Italian neorealism itself proves this. Andre Bazin is at great pains to show how it needed the transition from silent films to talkies and from a primitive to a sophisticated technology of lensing, lighting and outdoor shooting, before cinema could lay claim to a phenomenological rendering of reality *qua* reality where even the

aesthetic factor may surrender itself.³⁰ Only then, argues Bazin, is the image you see on the screen not reality artificially ‘framed’ but reality imperceptibly ‘masked’. The plot is simply set in the theatre of life, the *mise-en-scène* coinciding with nature itself. The photographic image and cinematic realism have an intertwined ontology as also a technological and formal logic, and in Bazin’s view it finally goes much further than any other form of realism in the arts.

In India the development of cinematic realism by Satyajit Ray has to do with a long process of gestation which includes precisely the contributions of Jean Renoir and Andre Bazin. Not until after Ray made his Apu trilogy, supplementing it with four more ideologically oriented films (*Jalsaghar*, *Devi*, *Mahanagar* and *Charulata*), could we have even recognized the promise of an Indian version of cinematic realism that is concretely in place—in India. That is to say, Ray is the very artist who extends, through the use of modern technology and cinematic means, the psyche and the creative grasp of the middle-class Indian artist. The goal is to place the author in a particular position with regard to the real: to endow him with a commitment to veracity, intellectual equanimity and a language to enunciate the ‘truth’.

However it has to be said that while Ray cleans the mirror of reality, retrieving whatever nobility we may yet find in contemporary life, he leaves us meagrely equipped to handle conceptually and through art the further complexities, the intransigences of cultural phenomena including myths. If it is because of Ray’s conserving classicism that the pain of Daya’s tragedy is drawn straight and clean, like a thread from its cocoon, then it is for the same reason that the finespun story of *Devi* is contained within the cocoon of a domestic environment. And though he does, to a point, succeed in presenting the tricky problems of religious distortion, there is a therapeutic aspect to this. Ray is not at his best in handling the malaise of the social body but he is at showing the seamy side of a familial complex which, once exposed, may be restored to health. However mythologies, as also travesties of the divine, are so structurally embedded in social practices that it needs a many-pronged narrative to loosen their hold. Short of that realism can become a reformist procedure for sifting the accumulated bad conscience of society.

One may conclude on the note that Satyajit Ray’s humanism and its attendant realism are placed within an eminently liberal model. Furthermore, his belief in empirical perception and in an evolutionary logic where heredity, tradition and environment are taken as crucial determining factors fit nineteenth-century literary positivism where, in the spirit of science, the human is amenable to rectitude though often through tragedy. On this Ray superimposes the ethical regime of authenticity. Recall that in the first decades of the twentieth century a true-to-the-soil ethics inspired varied endeavours within the secular domain of identity formation; the authentic leads on to a perennialist ideology, likely at times to be ahistorical. So too, for all its valuable rationality, Ray’s cinema stops short of effecting an upheaval in the

structural formations designated as the Indian civilization and making a radical intervention in the historical process on hand.

But this is precisely the point. The polarity I set up with two examples, *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*, provides a good indication of the range of emancipatory discourses that dominate Indian cultural and artistic practice in the crucial transition from the colonial period. Within the hermeneutic of affirmation and suspicion a radical thrust is present, but it remains inevitably *outside*. Signposted with Ritwik Ghatak, it provides a pressing tendency, a tendentious view, that later marks the trajectory of a cultural avantgarde.

Notes and References

- ¹ See Richard Kearney, 'Dialogues with Paul Ricoeur', *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986, pp. 23–24.
- ² There is a vast literature on the subject of the popular in art history. There has been an ongoing debate on the subject in India at least since the 1930s: at Santiniketan, around the Prabhat films in Pune, in the Progressive Writers' Association, and of course within the IPTA movement. The debate continues today, especially in Indian art (see K.G. Subramanyan, *Moving Focus*, Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, 1978; *The Living Tradition*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1987) and in contemporary theatre. The overwhelming character of popular Indian cinema raises somewhat different questions, in part due to the commercial component, and it also encourages a populist sociology. There is as well a more sharply focused debate on the progressive and formally significant aspects of the popular in cinema. See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Neo-Traditionalism—Film as Popular Art in India', in *Framework*, Nos. 32/33, 1986.
- ³ It is necessary to note that an artist like Rabindranath Tagore, Ray's mentor, can confound styles of commitment, generic classifications, as well as the chronologies that we may give to the hermeneutic task in the making of the living tradition. Even as his entire aesthetic and especially his poetic oeuvre is based on the assumption of the revelatory powers of the numen, of the enshrined icon and the direct address it demands, he can, in his novels for instance, subject the 'icon' to interrogation, confirming its man-made, even ironical features. More specifically, he can capture the existential moment of doubt in the very avowal of the emergent middle class, reflecting his own society as it sheds its aristocratic etiquette and religious camouflage. But even fewer artists can achieve, simultaneously, the reconstruction of an archetype that turns into a device to speak about the 'type' within a class; to present the problem of a class-constructed psyche which so quickly appropriates mythic elements to serve vested interests. I am thinking of Ritwik Ghatak, for whom too Tagore has been a mentor. Certainly in the cinema only Ghatak dares to put his stakes so high and, expectedly, the cinematic means he uses are bold and hybrid: he does not subscribe to the sacred as such or to the revelatory. Nor does he rest content with doubt that declares itself proof of the rational and an automatic representation therefore of the secular. He places rationality within a melodramatic genre and examines the status of doubt there, in that fraught schema where tragedy is made to give itself over in favour of praxis.
- ⁴ The film *Sant Tukaram* was made in 1936 in Marathi by the Prabhat Film Company in Pune. It was directed by the inspired two-man team of V. Damle and S. Fattelal. Damle came from

an enlightened middle-class family of rural Maharashtra; Fattal came from a working-class family of the culturally active city of Kolhapur. Both of them started drawing and painting early; both served as ‘art directors’ in drama companies in Bombay, theatrical culture being a popular business in Maharashtra. Each in his own turn served as an all-purpose apprentice to the artist-brothers Anantrao and Baburao Painter in their pioneering efforts in the field of film, settling down to a career in cinema from 1917 when Baburao Painter set up the Maharashtra Film Company in Kolhapur. In 1929 they split with this company and formed, along with a few others (including the soon-to-be famous V. Shantaram), the Prabhat Film Company. Shifting to Pune in 1933, they set up the exemplary Prabhat Studios, producing some of the most significant films of the 1930s and 1940s.

Here I will name only those films that embraced myths and legends from the Indian literary tradition. In Kolhapur Damle/Fattal had already made a silent mythological, *Karna*; and in 1935 V. Shantaram made a film on Sant Eknath called *Dharmatma*. Damle/Fattal made *Sant Tukaram* in 1936, *Gopal Krishna* in 1938, *Sant Dnyaneshwar* in 1940, *Sant Sakbu* (with Raja Nene) in 1941, and in 1944, *Ram Shastri*. Damle died in 1945 and Prabhat continued up to 1953 with Fattal making several other films in the mythological genre. Shantaram traversed several genres to span five decades of Indian filmmaking. Even so, the naive set of films we have referred to constitute, with *Tukaram* at the apex, a unique moment in Indian cinema.

Sant Tukaram ran continuously for a year in Bombay. In the countryside people walked miles to see open-air screenings. For the first time an Indian film won an international award: *it was rated one of the three best films at the prestigious Venice Film Festival in 1937*. *Tukaram* was played by Vishnupant Pagnis, a former bhajan singer. Jijai, *Tukaram*’s wife, was played by Gouri, a working-class woman at Prabhat; the producers kept her lower-caste accent intact. Some of the verses were taken from the original *abhangs* of *Tukaram*; others were specially composed for the film by Shantaram Athavale and set to music by Keshavrao Bhole. Both the player and his songs became part of the popular consciousness of the time in the most sympathetic sense of contemporary cultural overlay, building on the medieval bhakti tradition.

See Babu Watve, *V. Damle and S. Fattal: A Monograph*, National Film Archives, Pune, 1985.

- ⁵ Other classified genres are the historical, the western, the musical, suspense and horror films, and ‘film noir’. There are the neorealist films followed by the more ambiguously defined ‘new wave’ or art films, accompanied at the margins by avantgarde experimentation and independent cooperative ventures outside the industry. Developments since the ‘new wave’ often recall the theories and methods of earlier masters, foremost among them Sergei Eisenstein.
- ⁶ See Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885–1947*, Macmillan, Madras, 1985, p. 83.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 328.
- ⁸ K.A. Abbas in *The Bombay Chronicle*, 25 May 1940, quoted by Babu Watve in *V. Damle and S. Fattal*, p. 35.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–40.
- ¹⁰ Kearney, *Dialogues*, p. 24.
- ¹¹ See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, ‘The Phalke Era’, in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 14–15, July–December 1987.
- ¹² See Geeta Kapur, ‘Ravi Varma: Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Indian Painter’, in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 17–18, June 1989 (included in this volume).

- ¹³ Bazin, one of the foremost film critics from France, produced his major writings in the 1950s. See Andre Bazin, 'Le Journal d'un cure de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson', in *What is Cinema?*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ¹⁵ Taking C.S. Peirce's division of the linguistic sign into its three aspects—the iconic, the indexical and the symbolic, film theoreticians have shown how especially appropriate this definitional procedure is to cinematic language and effect. See Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Secker and Warburg/BFI, London, 1982.
- ¹⁶ See A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Akimcanna: Self-Naughting', in *Coomaraswamy 2. Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, edited by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.
- ¹⁷ Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 133.
- ¹⁸ See Anuradha Kapur, *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings, Gods: The Ramlila at Ramnagar*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1990, pp. 233–35.
- ¹⁹ 'We possess the wealth of words/With weapons of words we will fight/Words are the breath of our life/We will distribute this wealth of words among the people/Tuka says, look! the meaning of word is God/With Word, we will extol and worship.' Translation of Tukaram's verse quoted in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, edited by Jayant Lele, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1981, pp. 119, 123.
- ²⁰ Translation of Tukaram's verse quoted in G.B. Sardar, *The Saint-Poets of Maharashtra: Their Impact on Society*, Orient Longman, Bombay, 1969, p. 128.
- ²¹ For a fine discussion on the subject, see *ibid.*
- ²² (i) See Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 328–30; (ii) Regarding the deification of Gandhi from the point of view of historical deconstruction, see Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur Distt., Eastern U.P., 1920–21', in *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984; (iii) I am grateful to Gyanendra Pandey for a discussion on Gandhi in the context of the present paper.
- ²³ Kumar Shahani, 'The Saint Poets of Prabhat', in *70 Years of Indian Cinema (1913–1983)*, edited by T.M. Ramachandra, Cinema India-International, Bombay, 1985, p. 201.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- ²⁶ The film *Devi* was made by Satyajit Ray in 1960; it was his sixth film and though he was already well established as an international figure, this film did not have any great success in Bengal and had some difficulty in obtaining export permission owing to its critical handling of Hindu orthodoxy. Significantly, Nehru intervened and released the film to foreign audiences.

The film is based on a story by Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee (1873–1932), a well-known short story writer beholden to Rabindranath Tagore for his literary achievements. The actual idea and motif of the story were in fact given to Mukherjee by Tagore. The story is set in late nineteenth-century Bengal in the grand zamindar household of Kalikinkar Roy who is a devotee of Kali and, after the recent death of his wife, somewhat besotted by the ritual of worship. He has two sons and two daughters-in-law (and a great retinue of relatives and servants) in his house. While Tarapada the elder son is a weak man dependent on his father's wealth, the younger son Umaprasad, studying in a college in Calcutta, is already attuned to the progressive ideas of the nineteenth-century renaissance in Bengal. He is encouraged to question his father's feudal and religious superstitions by his

obviously heterodox teacher and friend in the city.

Tarapada's wife Harisundari is strong and astute, and impatient of the cowardice which such a hierarchical household produces; her little son Khoka is attached to his aunt Dayamoyee, wife of Umapasrad, who is not only very young but doll-like and beautiful and everyone's favourite. She is her husband's beloved; but she is also the obsession of the old widower Kalikinkar, whom she devotedly looks after, arousing in him, as it turns out, sensual desire and religious delusion.

He dreams one night that Daya is an incarnation of the goddess. He forthwith worships and deifies the girl, installing her as the goddess incarnate in his domestic temple and exposing her to the priests and populace of Chandipur as a beneficent deity to whom they must appeal in their need and suffering.

A disbelieving Umapasrad returns home to find his Daya besieged by pilgrims from the entire countryside; he sees her perform a 'miracle' and save the life of a pauper's dying child. He protests to his father against the stupidity of such superstition and persuades Daya to run away with him to the city to escape this farce. She agrees but then revokes her decision because of fear—the fear of denying her destiny, should it be truly divine.

The story then quickly moves to its tragic end. Little Khoka falls ill and despite his mother's protestations, is put into the lap of Daya who must save him. The child dies, the distraught mother accuses Daya of witchcraft, the father-in-law reverts to the clay deity and wails in bewilderment, and Umapasrad returns to find his wife deranged by the inhuman stress. Even as he calls out to her human self she runs out to her death across a sunlit meadow.

²⁷ See comments on *Devi* in *Film India: Satyajit Ray: An Anthology of Statements on Ray and by Ray*, edited by Chidananda Das Gupta, Directorate of Film Festivals, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 44–48.

²⁸ In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, included in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, Random House, New York, 1938, pp. 321–22.

²⁹ Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1980, pp. ix, x, 43, 48, 69.

³⁰ Bazin, 'The Evaluation of the Language of Cinema' and other essays, in *What is Cinema?*

Frames of Reference

Detours from the Contemporary

The true picture of the past flits by. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.

Walter Benjamin¹

The Past as Image

The persistence of the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as they figure in third-world debates are best appreciated if we see them as notations within the cultural polemic of decolonization. They may be used in all earnestness as essential categories and real options but in fact they are largely pragmatic features of nation-building and mark the double (or multiple) register of a persuasive nationalist discourse. Sufficiently historicized, both tradition and modernity can notate a radical purpose in the cultural politics of the third world.

Certainly the term tradition as we use it in the present equation for India and the third world is not what is given or received as a disinterested civilizational legacy, if ever there should be such a thing. This tradition is what is invented in the course of a struggle.² It marks off the territories/identities of a named people. In this sense it is a signifier drawing energy from an imaginary resource—the ideal tradition. Yet it always remains, by virtue of its strongly ideological import, an ambivalent and often culpable sign in need of constant historical interpretation so that we know which way it is pointing.

What we in India today call tradition was put in the fray by nineteenth-century nationalism. Since this version of tradition emerges in the decolonizing process as an oppositional category it has the power of resistance, as we know very well from

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Gandhi. It has the power to transform routinely transmitted materials from the past into volatile forms that merit the claim of contemporary, even radical, affect.

Cultural scholars of this century, foremost among them being Ananda Coomaraswamy, excavate the past to provide the present (in their opinion an errant and impoverished century) with perennial life-symbols. In conjunction with the ideal tradition, the manifestos of swadeshi produce in the first decades of the twentieth century, an aesthetic that is clearly didactic.

For Coomaraswamy tradition provides not only the canon of the master-craftsman, it assumes via the very order of language a form of paternalism and the authority of law:

But whereas the Occidental conscience operates only in the field of ethics, the Oriental conscience, *pramana*, *chih*, etc., orders all forms of activity, mental, aesthetic, and ethical: truth, beauty, and goodness. . . . Just as conscience is externalized in rules of conduct, so aesthetic ‘conscience’ finds expression in rules or canons of proportion (*tala*, *talamana*) proper to different types, and in the physiognomy (*laksanas*) of iconography and cultivated taste, prescribed by authority and tradition: the only ‘good form’ is *sastra-mana*.³

But for Coomaraswamy tradition is also always a complex code designating material practices along with ideal iconographic forms. Becoming a set of working canons it can bring together, in an intricately worked hierarchy, high art and everyday objects. Canonical rigour, despite the transcendent criteria to which it refers, is based on the actual form and function of things, idols, objects. This includes the linguistic particularities of folk forms—the semiotic substratum of a given civilization.

If we have so far considered only the case of what is commonly known as the major arts, let us not forget that Sankaracarya is reported to have said, ‘I have learnt concentration (*samadhi*) from the maker of arrows.’ Not only in fact does the ordinary workman, weaver, or potter, work devotedly, but . . . he always forms mental images, which he remembers from generation to generation. . . . Preeminently of this kind, for example, are on the one hand those unlettered and obscure women of the villages, whose drawings executed in rice-powder and with the finger-brush in connection with domestic and popular festa (*vratas*) represent an art of almost pure form and almost purely intellectual significance.⁴

Even while addressing national cultural traditions from a conservative position Coomaraswamy produces an interventionist discourse, opening up new and numerous other issues besides ‘Indianness’. His didactic aesthetic contextualized within an anti-imperialist struggle has peculiar pertinence. It includes issues about the function of art and artisanal practices, the hermeneutic cross-referencing of materials

from premodern cultures, the place of orientalist perspectives in the formation of a more universal world culture. These are also the issues Rabindranath Tagore takes up, though in virtual opposition to the more severe injunctions of *swadeshi*.

Tagore, Coomaraswamy's contemporary, handles tradition in such a way as to dismantle the codification. Tradition for him is a notional category allowing an infinite extension of its own nurturing body through poetic allusion and metaphor. The Tagorean way is very nearly the romantic way: it deals with immanent energies that are inexhaustible in the mythical fashion and encourage continual transfiguration of material resources within and beyond a given culture. It includes the anthropological evidence and spiritual experience of extant forms. It includes an encounter with the numen (*Illus. 1*). And the emotional resonance of the *rasa* theory, for example, which radiates from the heart of iconic forms.



1 Rabindranath Tagore, *Figure*, ca. 1938

If it is a fact that some standard of invariable formalism has for ages been following the course of the arts in India, making it possible for them to be classified as specially Indian, then it must be confessed that the creative mind which inevitably breaks out in individual variations has lain dead or dormant for those torpid centuries. All traditional structures of art must have sufficient degree of elasticity to allow it to respond to varied impulses of life. . . . There are traditions which, in alliance with rigid prescriptions of rhetoric, establish their slave dynasty, dethroning their master, the Life-urge, that revels in endless freedom of expression. This is a tragedy whose outrage we realise in the latter-day Sanskrit literature and in the conventional arts and crafts of India, where mind is helplessly driven by a blind ghost of the past.⁵

Rather than the canonical it is the romantic designation of culture that gains ground in India through the twentieth century. It is in a sense the more utopian dimension. As against systematic transmission, it allows nonsystematic or intuitive interpretation of traditions with two quite opposite options: that of finding elective affinities at the level of feeling, but also that of introducing more anarchic disjunctions, of loosening and upturning the forms of tradition. The two filmmakers Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, postindependence heirs to Tagore, reflect the one and the other option within the broadly romantic view of tradition.

Thus even the very act of handling tradition is in a sense political: it involves personification/mediation/representation of material that is seen to have been

hitherto buried. Received like a patrimony, tradition has a heroic and authoritarian aspect. On the other hand, the affiliation to tradition understood as a nurturing body can become overweening. It is more difficult to shed, leading to softer options in aesthetics and art practice. These personifications are therefore tricky and it becomes necessary to demystify the figures of father/law and mother/matrix through less tenacious ones that nevertheless sustain the engendering *function*, at once masculine and feminine. We can, for example, take tradition as an androgynous figure to empower it differently but also to subvert its conventional and normative hold. Part of the politics involved in the handling of tradition is to subject it to phantasmal as well as functional transactions.

Transacting Traditions

There are other broadly sociological ways of looking at the Indian tradition as it has come to us since the nineteenth century. The social matrix yields at least two distinct art histories, the aristocratic and the middle-class, each with its own way of interpreting cultural nationalism. The princely attributes of ‘Raja’ Ravi Varma of Travancore make up one part of the lineage. His art offers to restore, with the help of western/bourgeois mediations, civilizational pride to its people. We must understand how this representational masquerade in the quasi (neo) classical mode can set up allegorical scenarios and how it provides a kind of valour to contemporaries, helping them play out with unintended irony odd but emancipatory roles.

On the other hand, the ambience of the landed gentry of nineteenth-century Bengal inclines them, as for example the Tagore family, towards a pastoral nostalgia. This is part of a larger sociological context—a nineteenth-century alliance of the progressive gentry with the folk in matters of culture is precisely the principle on which romanticism in Europe and realism in Russia develops. Against the neoclassical kitsch of Ravi Varma, the Tagore family bequeaths poetic references from upanishadic to medieval mysticism to the perennial resource of peasant songs. Combining noble learning with dilettante experimentalism within the framework of the new national enlightenment (the Indian renaissance), they bring into this frame of reference the art of the folk. There is a strongly pedagogical aspect to this project, particularly as it is carried out in Tagore’s university at



2 Nandalal Bose, *Ear Cleaner*, Haripura poster series, 1937–38

4 Ramkinkar Baij, *Sujata*, 19353 Ramkinkar Baij, *Threshing*, ca. 1950

Santiniketan from the 1920s. In this lineage there is, then, a definite democratic urge which Nandalal Bose (*Illus. 2*) and his pupil Ramkinkar Baij, the intrepid subaltern from Santiniketan, exemplifies (*Illus. 3, 4*).

Indeed it is this aspect of real (and positional) subalternity in Santiniketan that combines in the first half of the twentieth century with the artisanal basis of Gandhian ideology and the craftsman's canonical aesthetic of Coomaraswamy, to give us a threefold composition of nationalist culture in the area of art and craft. In the actual practice of artists like K.G. Subramanyan, heir to this nationalist culture in the postindependence era, the residual romanticism vanishes completely. His practice accommodates, selfconsciously and with considerable wit, a series of modernist meditations so as to arrive at a strategic notion of the *contemporary*.

The paradigm I propose for this invented Indian tradition is of course extremely schematic. There are several cross-references. The appropriation of the folk as an indigenist project could be a way of deferring the drive for a westernizing modernism until it can be handled by a more independent, properly middle-class

intelligentsia with a questioning mentality. With such inspiration Jamini Roy in Calcutta devises, 1930 onwards, a populist modernism that offers new icons to a nationalist middle class (*Illus. 5*).

It is precisely folk traditions (rather than the indeterminate proletarian culture) that are taken up by the cultural front of the Communist Party of India. In the 1940s and 50s IPTA (the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association) mediates folk traditions, especially in performance, to progressive, clearly socialist ends. A narodnik style of politics is played out in India as it is in other colonized cultures. There is crucial mediation towards an indigenous variant of socialism provided by the Gandhian framework where peasant communities become self-complete prototypes for a new and utopian social structure.

The other aspect of this invented tradition is more clearly metropolitan. It is attributable in the first instance to the Indo-Hungarian artist Amrita Sher-Gil who trained in Paris in the 1930s. At a second, more cumulative level, it develops through the 1940s and 50s into a variant of modernist universalism in Calcutta (the Calcutta Group), Bombay (the Progressive Artists' Group), Madras (the Progressive Painters' Association) and Delhi (Delhi Silpi Chakra). Seeing themselves as progressives, several generations of Indian artists seek to represent the Indian people in an emblematic mode. Only a few of these artists are communists, namely, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (*Illus. 8*), Zainul Abedin (*Illus. 9*) and Somnath Hore, whose works mark Calcutta of the 1940s. Very briefly, F.N. Souza in Bombay and Ram Kumar in Delhi (*Illus. 7*) can be seen to be fellow-travellers in what is believed to be a transitional society—a newly independent people transiting towards a form of egalitarian democracy frequently called socialism. The progressive elements in the bourgeois consciousness—its initial engendering and later appropriation of a further, more revolutionary consciousness—a fairly well-set narrative of modernism as such.

Progressive projects are still mediated via nationalism and these promise, in existential (more than political) terms, modes of cultural self-determination. In the 1950s there develops what may be called a national/modern aesthetic. It is emblematically exemplified in Bombay by M.F. Husain (*Illus. 11*), in Madras by K.C.S. Paniker (*Illus. 6*), in Delhi by Satish Gujral (*Illus. 10*) and in Calcutta by Paritosh Sen. Thus the metropolitan artists and intelligentsia also show nationalistic sentiments,



5 Jamini Roy, *Queen on Tiger*, ca. 1940

albeit in a modernist/universalizing mode. To put it another way, they can be seen to not only mediate but in fact fashion the cultural self-image of a new nation declaring its resistance towards imperialism through a homogenizing representational schema of their own. Various aspects of the modern are negotiated in the cultural field by a fairly independent bourgeoisie and a fairly selfconscious middle-class intelligentsia, among them artists. They are able to pose issues of their own identity even if they cannot so easily resolve the postcolonial cultural problematic of sovereignty. This leads them towards what now comes to be called, in liberationist terminology, third-world cultural politics, as well as towards a more comprehensive *international* vocabularization.

If tradition is to be functional it will involve the study of genres, conventions, rhetorical devices, symbologies and other linguistic features. There is a kind of plunder involved in the living use of tradition along with a continual replenishment of desecralized resources.

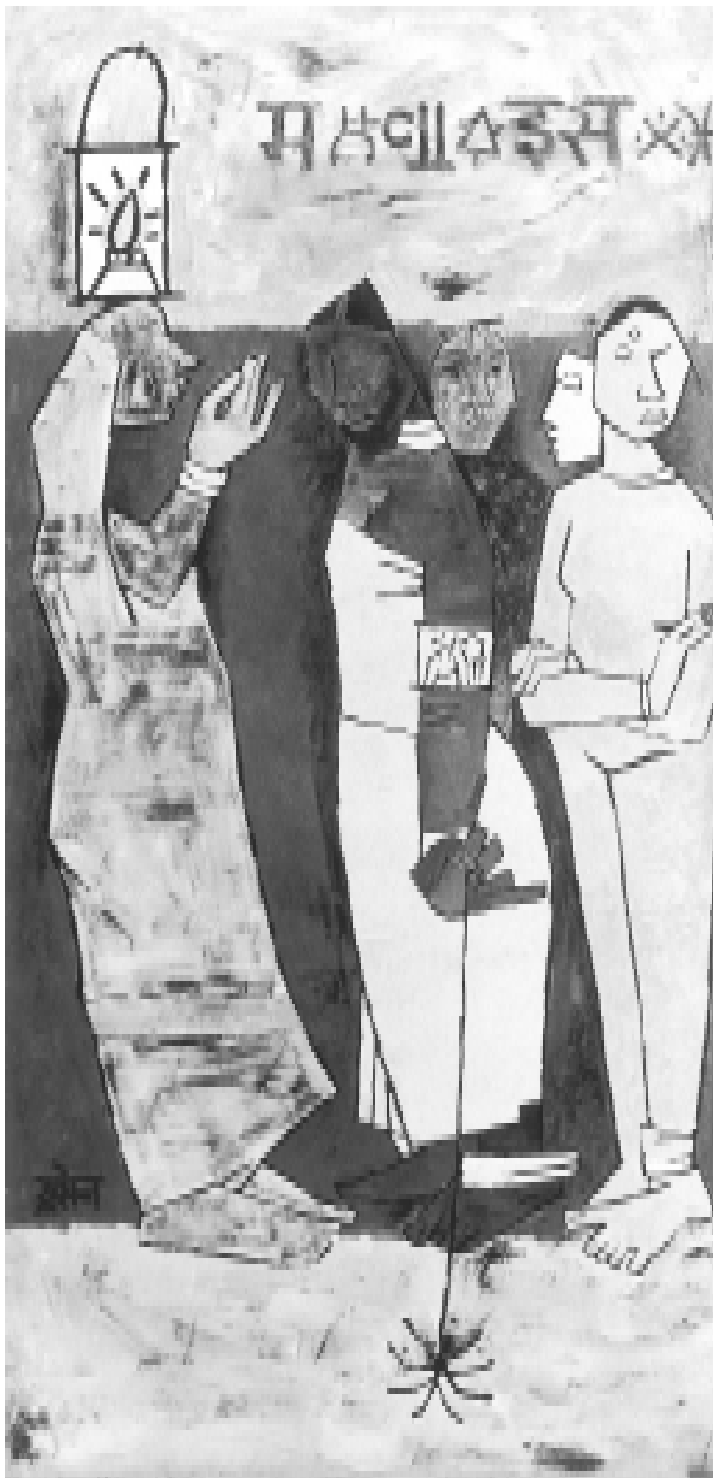
This has further implications. One is that we work less with seamless systems like myths and more with constructed forms like the epic—remember Bertolt Brecht. Another is that we subject myths to allegorical readings, turning them inside out and placing them as open secrets within larger epic structures. Ritwik Ghatak achieves precisely this in films like *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Subarnarekha* (1962) and *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973). He desublimates given myths and provides an existential exit into new social meanings. It can also mean that we work less with spiritual consensus on life-symbols and more with morphologies of art objects followed by semiotic analyses of given imageries where the signs float up to constitute an elaborate montage. I am thinking of the formal configurations in Mani Kaul's documentary features (*Mati Manas*, 1984; *Siddheshwari*, 1989). Is such a modernist mode a reductive process, making traditional forms serve only as signifiers? Or is this another



6 K.C.S. Paniker, *Victory*, 1957



Above left: 7 Ram Kumar, *Destitutes*, 1953. Above right: 8 Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, *Gone Mad*, 1952. Below left: 9 Zainul Abedin, from the Famine series, 1943. Below right: 10 Satish Gujral, *Days of 'Glory'*, 1952
Facing page: 11 M.F. Husain, *Between the Spider and the Lamp*, 1956



modernism that tests the historical efficacy of culturally replete images, elaborates them into new iconographic schema? And pushes them towards more reflexive structures as in the elliptical narratives of Kumar Shahani's cinema (*Khayal Gatha*, 1989)?

Third-World Alternatives

The term contemporary gives a definitional ambiguity to the present. We can 'correct' the situation by giving contemporaneity an ideological mantle of the modern, but this does not solve the matter either.

Modernization is a social and economic process now applicable mostly to underdeveloped/developing societies (of the third world). It is a term full of ideological import, even overdetermined one might say by sociological theory and usage. Non-western nations, while struggling with the processes of modernization, are excluded from the claims of modernism. While modernity stands in a transactional relationship with its two companion terms, modernization and modernism, it easily gives up the ghost in postcolonial discourse as far as its ontological drive is concerned. One is left a little uncertain with a bare term like contemporaneity.

Modernism is a cultural term strictly relating to the arts and situated at a particular point of western history—the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Imposed on the colonized world via selective modernization, modernism transmits a specifically bourgeois ideology. With its more subtle hegemonic operations, it offers a universality while obviously imposing a eurocentric (imperialist) set of cultural criteria on the rest of the world. Yet, as modernism evolves in conjunction with a national or, on the other hand, revolutionary culture, it becomes reflexive. Through it one is able to mark historical disjunctures in western art, to expose its ideologies and thus to encourage national vanguard initiatives.

Meanwhile, despite incomplete modernization a unitary logic of advancement, as this was conceived of in nineteenth-century Europe, continues to be imposed so that some one or the other among the peoples of the world is always seen to be out of step. In view of the critique mounted by the third world on the euphemistic projection of bourgeois culture as the 'universal modern', there has been a tactical move by western ideologists. The same linear model assumes, in the metropolitan concentration of culture, other geometrical figures like the centre and the periphery which camouflage the crude progressivism of the linear model. Backwardness is not spelt out as such but questions of otherness (marginality, minorities, ethnicity, religion) spiral up in its stead. Can our modernity survive this particular form of forced regress along the identity question?

A good deal is being said about the abandonment of the centre-periphery model as well. The new system for perceiving difference, the key word, is to project cultural phenomena into an infinite series. A problematic universe is mapped on to a differential system that is, as system, considered neutral. There is in consequence a

reduction of the world into sameness. It looks like the cultures of the third world can hardly gain from one or the other model.

If, however, the third world is polemically construed to chastise the first and second worlds, it must by definition be volatile. Third-world politics wedges into the global bind established between the first world and the second world. Thus telescoped by history, the third world becomes a succession of actual alternatives and even a dialectical option. It has at least hypothetical efficacy. Issues are confounded only when the term is used not as a lever but substantively, when it attempts to condense the past struggles and present crises of a medley of postcolonial societies.

Matters are far from simple in societies designated as postcolonial. Here, if anywhere, capitalism and socialism contest one another; here is the world arena for ideological battle. This generates deeply vexed identities in terms of class and language, race and gender. Individual destinies are at stake as much as new collectivities. Indeed the profoundly paradoxical nature of existence in the societies newly inducted into world history offers fewer rather than greater possibilities of generalization. If we must in any case undertake to bring the anarchy of differential practices (including custom, knowledge, art) into some kind of a recognizable order, one frame for which is the third world, it also means that the theorizing must be so much more complex.

National Allegories

While the political truth of colonial experience and of the anti-imperialist struggle is self-evident, its logic excludes several other political truths. Even fundamental categories like production systems and class relations are bracketed. Nor do third-world countries yield comparative cultural formations. Historically invented in the process of decolonization, tradition is governed in each case by a national ideology that emphasizes difference; national tradition becomes a sufficiently variegated sign to merit close and special attention. Once independence has been gained nationalism itself poses ontological questions: what is at stake in being Indian? And though the question may easily devolve into rhetoric, there is a burden of it that rests on a particularly fraught class and its individuals. This is the urban middle-class intelligentsia, which includes artists.

Even after a century of self-identification within the nationalist paradigm this cultural elite rests most uneasily on its privileges. When nationalist truth and unrealized socialism no longer suffice this class must cope with the further states of social entropy. The responsibility of reckoning falls less on the aristocracy, less on the peasant or proletarian classes, because none of these is premised so exclusively on questions of self and identity. It falls on the middle-class intelligentsia. This is the sort of burden, perhaps fictitious, that Rabindranath Tagore envisaged during the early decades of the twentieth century for the activist-intellectual and artist in India. Recall the self-ordained responsibility assumed by Gora and Benoy in his novel *Gora*, by Nikhil and

Sandip in *Ghare Baire*—the responsibility to evolve his own subjectivity into an exemplary selfhood that indirectly but surely fulfils the demands of an exemplary nationhood. Recall also Sucharita in *Gora*, Bimala in *Ghare Baire* and later, in the 1930s, Ela in *Char Adhyaya*, and *their* exemplary demonstration of doubt, precisely so that the bind between self and nation is radically refashioned.

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.⁶

Beyond Tagore this equation becomes the formula for a collective identity that may come to resemble, through the paradox of liberal consensus, a form of socialism. So Nehru hoped. The more developed left constituency can envisage totalities of another more egalitarian kind, but it is precisely these that are under post-Marxian scrutiny. Third-world narratives, biographical and literary, in their recounting become *national allegories*. What is to be remembered in the Indian and larger third-world context is that contradictions are rife and one has to put up all the fights at once. Along with the fight against imperialism one has equally to fight the antidemocratic forces of local dynasties and dictators. The fight is also against reactionary forces especially aggressive in traditional societies; indeed against such antimodern forces that use tradition, which served a useful function in the national struggle, to regress into communal and religious fundamentalisms.

Against Conformism

At the beginning of this essay I quote Walter Benjamin as saying that in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. We have seen how definitions of tradition and modernity are constantly repositioned in the discourses of the third world. The relationship between the two has to be thought through at every point so as to avoid replicating the exploitative relationship the west has established towards traditional societies. At the same time the nationalist bind in which tradition and modernity have hitherto coexisted has to be brought into a larger, more open discourse.

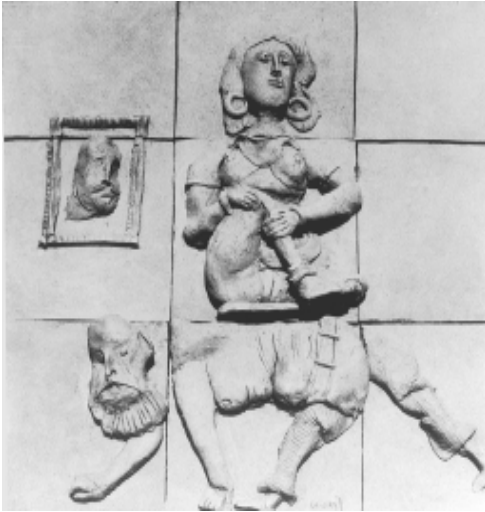
The point is to tackle the very problems that western cultural hegemony suppresses or neglects, and this requires above all that the two concepts tradition and modernity be disengaged from the abstracting ideology of capitalism. It requires restoring to tradition a material–historical affiliation, and to the modern a self-reflexivity necessary to bring about change. We have to bring to the term tradition the concreteness of extant practice; to make a genuine extension of small particularities, resourced from ancient and contemporary practices, into new configurations. At the same time

12 F.N. Souza, *Varaha*, 197413 Jogen Chowdhury, *Ganapati*, 1976

we have to bring to the term modern a less monolithic, less formalistic, indeed less institutional status so as to make it once again a vanguard notion leading to a variety of experimental moves. Only with such initiatives can third-world cultures begin to justify their worth as alternative cultures.

Nor is this an entirely hypothetical proposition. Already in the nationalist phase the colonial intelligentsia contextualizes the terms tradition and modernity via patriotic norms of belonging. For the early Coomaraswamy tradition covers anthropological terrain in a richly material sense. It stands in opposition to the anthropology adopted by western modernists when they make formal correlations with primitive cultures. Even though nationalism as ideology introduces its own measure of abstraction into the concept of tradition it also, at the very moment of inventing it, poses the problematic in urgent, contemporary terms. It thereby sees it as *process*, as tradition-in-use. Consider again Tagore's Santiniketan and the aesthetic project as realized by the three luminaries at Kala Bhavana: Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij. If we supplement the Santiniketan artists with Jamini Roy on the one hand and Amrita Sher-Gil on the other, we will see how the western discourse *about* oriental (including primitive) cultures is confronted. Rather than distancing alternative civilizations into objects to be processed by western subjectivity, the nationalist intelligentsia makes some genuinely anxious, and responsible appropriations within their own societies. If, then, in the postcolonial ethos all third-world texts appear to be national allegories, all national allegories attempt to restore conceptual wholeness to lost communities through the process of decodifying precisely the canonical images of an inherited tradition (*Illus. 12, 13, 14, 15*).

Appropriated tradition may indeed resemble the endemic form of eclecticism that the contemporary western imagination encourages. But this is without the

14 K.G. Subramanyan, *Devi*, 197915 Meera Mukherjee, *Cosmic Dancer*, 1982

extremity of otherness that produces forms alienated from function and meaning. Furthermore this eclecticism can yield, as with the moderns, *acts of transgression* that lead to cultural radicalism. Thus, positing a tradition-in-use in third-world societies encourages an effective method of politicizing culture. It must in addition find a way to resist the business of reification to which the artefacts of ‘other’ civilizations succumb. It is true of course that capitalism everywhere produces commodification for which correctives are not easily at hand. It is also true that in societies like India modernization after the capitalist mode has produced a commodification not only of traditional artefacts that serve the state and the market, but of the idea of tradition as such. Tradition must therefore be continually redefined to defy conformism.

Present Choices

Like the traditional, the political mode of aesthetic anarchism followed by the moderns may be ineffectual in the context of the culture industry operating under multinational capitalism. The postmodern vanguard tries to propose other means of politicizing cultural practice—by a more strategic form of ‘minority’ (ethnicity/race/gender) transgression and resistance—so that the question arises whether in the era of globalization postmodern strategies are useful for us as well.

Indian artists must derive the norms of their actual practice from specific aesthetic and generic issues and indeed such material considerations as they find pressing in their geographical environment. Just as the first world continues to use the principle of primacy quite literally to subsume the polemic into a larger appropriative project—sometimes through theory, sometimes through consumer tactics—the number of Indian artists who mark their local affiliations as the ground of their speech,

increases. If this is positioned against the recognized hegemony of the national and the modern, the question arises: is this a postmodern proclivity?

Postmodernism, while it seems to accommodate otherness as never before in the history of capitalist culture, does so through a process of such infinite differentiation that all questions of identity are shredded along with the normative function of culture and even the necessity of choice. We need to negotiate the terms of cultural devolution very carefully. Still needing to coalesce individual *identity* with living *collectivities* at the social level, we have learnt to question the tendency towards a unitary and machismo formalism within modernist art. On a similar basis, we must question the careless and aggressive *laissez-faire* of postmodernism which throws entire cultures to the gambler's wheel, treating cultural artefacts like so many fetishist pawns in the game of global exchange.

Although the Indian intelligentsia must engage in transnational discourse on the question of third-world and alternative identities, it may help to resist letting the postmodern categories of discourse coincide entirely with the political entities that arise as a consequence of decolonization. Third-world peoples should not lend body to the stripped phantoms of the deconstructionists' art. By not allowing too neat a fit between the dilemmas of decolonized cultures and postmodern theorizing one may safeguard the material and political struggle, save it from appearing subordinate to categories within the western academic discourse. It is however in our interest to recognize one thing. The sea change created by the emergence of other cultures, our cultures, in the role of historical protagonists has required western intellectuals to fashion different perceptual and theoretical models. The postmodern phenomenon may be the consequence, not a description, of a universe realigned by social praxis within disrupted societies, necessitating in its turn a theory of displacement.

Even the discourse set up by the expatriate intelligentsia tends to become too much the privileged voice of the diaspora (arguably so called). Its members, positioned in the western academic world, are inclined to establish canons of radical discourse for the rest of the world. It is true that there is a certain urgency in the task of the third world inside the first. Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, current exponents of the privilege of exile, make up a distinguished lineage. But there is also the temptation to establish a hierarchical superiority for a culture-in-exile and to designate it as more militant. The diaspora voice is a mode of speech suitable precisely to address the white world. This is not the only call for militancy, though we should hark it all the same. Meanwhile we have to beware a third-worldist mentality as well. There is now a third-world rhetoric surpassing third-world solidarity and overdetermining the representations of radical issues for us. This radicalism by proxy preempts and forecloses praxis on site, where it may most matter.

We have to, in other words, look at the peculiarly structured interreferentiality of Indian national culture as a continuous formation. To look at ourselves as

aspiring to enrich the neutral ground of the contemporary with a transplanted tradition as also with the universal marker of the age: modernity. We should look at ourselves in the form of a postcolonial nation-state coalesced into the third world to gain political solidarity. And, finally, rather than allowing ourselves to be theorized into political homogeneity, we must engage in a dialectic that takes into account the material factors within our own histories.

If the third-world intelligentsia, among them artists, perform a task, it is to bring existential urgency to questions of contemporaneity. As with all existential expressions, this is split into two aspects. Tradition is turned into a critique, modernity into lived experience, and both into a revised civilizational discourse that goes beyond nation-state and third-worldist dogmas, beyond also the divisive bigotries of the present world, so as to gain a utopian dimension. The artist-intellectuals of India and the third world are not different in this respect from their counterparts in the first and second worlds. It is important to remember this too, so that we are not overwhelmed by ideologies and left with polemical rather than life-sustaining forms of cultural practice. If third-world culture is a political entity, an oppositional discourse and a compendium of practices, then it is the last that will engage artists in the concrete task of making traditions-in-use that nurture contemporary existence.

Notes and References

- ¹ 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', V and VI, in *Illuminations*, Collins/Fontana, London, 1973, p. 257. (Emphasis added.)
- ² See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.
- ³ A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Introduction to the Art of Eastern Asia', in *Coomaraswamy 1: Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, p. 113.
- ⁴ Coomaraswamy, 'The Part of Art in Indian Life', in *ibid.*, p. 91.
- ⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Art and Tradition', in *Rabindranath Tagore on Art and Aesthetics*, edited by Prithwish Neogy, International Culture Centre/Orient Longman, Delhi, 1961, pp. 63–64.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', in *Social Text*, No. 5, Fall 1986, p. 69.

National/Modern: Preliminaries

The following set of cultural theses is arranged (deliberately disarranged) to trigger an interplay of the modern with the national. But before relaying this dynamic in an Indian arena it has to be admitted that in global debates the proposition is put the other way round: where are third-world cultures, burdened with their respective nationalisms, placed in the centre–periphery model of international modernism?

Historical scholarship in India has spelt out the subtle forms of complicity in colonial and postcolonial transactions. Self-evident truths about the structures of domination/subordination exposed by subaltern studies need to be recalibrated if we consider that they leave the intelligentsia, among them artists, held fast in the vice of ideological overdetermination.

On the other hand, in a somewhat disingenuous logic of radical inversion, marginalized cultures are now seen to be riding into the citadels of power in vanguard formations. The regional, it is argued, is authentic ground circling the international to finally evacuate it of its content. These inversions have to be tested before we can resume the well-worn mantle of partisanship and ask again: is there a third-world ethics active in the critique of Euro-American modernism?

The sense of geometrical play in these positional debates needs to be worked through. Meanwhile, I want to predicate possibilities of cultural creation that may, with some degree of voluntarist effort, serve as historical openings here and now.

All breakthroughs have a future in mind and all futures are rhetorically prefigured in manifestos of contemporary practices. What the following set of theses tries to do is to make a tendentious rearrangement of the terms of identification. So

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that while asking where we are placed in the cultural geography of the globe we examine, simultaneously and more substantively, the place of the modern in Indian cultural practice.

The concept of the centre–periphery as a kind of political geography of world cultures is based, surprisingly, on the orthodox Marxist base–superstructure model. Advanced industrial societies constitute the centre; postcolonial or ‘under-developed’ societies form the periphery.

Ironically, it is socialism (the second world) that belies this model. In the first half of the twentieth century it was the socialist vanguard that consciously shaped the meaning of internationalism; it was they who led the historical avantgarde of the arts. I refer to the Soviet constructivists, to Meyerhold, Mayakovsky and Eisenstein. And then to Bertolt Brecht. Cold-war ideology narrowed the terms of the historical avantgarde in the arts, though it simulated the conceptual reflexes. This distortion came to be further embedded in the logic of late capitalism that functions over and beyond artists’ intentions. In the postwar decades artists engaged with the object-nature of art, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, for example, may indeed signal beyond the inevitabilities of reification but it would be difficult to credit them with gaining historical efficacy for the work of art. The signal stands alienated in the cultural field, the object barely defies commodification. Even today, with socialism in a shambles—or perhaps for that very reason—internationalism should be predicated within a utopian dimension where the work of art goes beyond fetishism and becomes actually transformative.

With or without the utopian dimension, internationalism is the consistent norm of the twentieth century. A revamping of older terms like regional diversity in the postmodern ethos does not entirely take away its subordinate status. Even when regionalism implies territorial/cultural integrity preserved in the peripheral zones, metropolitan culture mediates this to confirm its own supremacy. To be specific, the notion of multicultural difference in recent decades does little more than provide a medley of attractions to the institutionalized culture of capitalism. Moreover, the term cultural difference relativizes other cultures vis-a-vis this monolith in such disadvantageous ways that the cohering principle of the *universal* is once again proposed as an immanent ideal of art.

It is a continually repeated dictum in Indian cultural debates that the regional provides the resources that make up the universal. Every admirer of Satyajit

Ray is ravished by his description of Indian life—with a naturalism that authenticates the region and is authenticated by it. It is interesting that Ray insists on the regional specificity of his film practice over and above the national and international claims on him. Yet we must remember that his reputation is contextualized by a new claim to the universal: a validation of the lens (*'objectif'* in French) and the consequent ontology of cinema as formulated by Andre Bazin.¹ Ray's cultural specificity is valued within a transcendent schema, the aesthetic of *manifest reality*, made possible through the universalizing technologies of photography and cinema.

Given his phenomenological purism, realist cinema for Bazin is a rare economy of means substantiated in humanist terms as lived experience—most notably in the cinema of Jean Renoir. But the universal is claimed equally by a desubstantiated aesthetic of the late modernist kind. Consider Clement Greenberg's formal purism developed in the years after the second world war on behalf of American art, and we can see that it is through retroactive reductionism that Greenberg emphasizes the iron rule of the universal. If Marc Chagall, his head full of hasidic tales, is seen to feed the universal unconscious in a Jungian sense, Clement Greenberg in contrast would disapprove even a degree of irony in Chagall's anachronistic narrations.² Chagall must chasten his sense of the fabulous to properly belong to the School of Paris—which was the 'universal' aesthetic during the best part of Chagall's career. Or else he must be content to remain a provincial of no account.

Why Clement Greenberg with a neat but meagre schema attracts such vast adherence in the institutions of modern art, why he is seen to stand for a contemporary version of the universal aesthetic, is at least partly because he confirms the centre-periphery model of Euro-American modernism. He prefigures an elegant diagrammatic abbreviation of cultural globalism coming into its own during the period of late capitalism.

How do you get around the hard facts of this cultural hierarchy? The argument about regionalism has to be rudely dialectical in contrast to the Greenbergian ideal favouring a unitary form of the visual. Relying on geography and gigantism—a remapping such as that of the world in Peter's Projection—it requires a radical shift of terrain.

It is true that no one will scorn alien geographies, cultural condensation, heavy metaphor, after Gabriel Garcia Marquez. There is indeed a shift of terrain. 'The power of Marquez's narratives lies in the insistent pressure of freedom as the absent horizon', Kumkum Sangari says, adding that this 'is not an abstract freedom: it is precisely that which is made present and possible by its absence—the lives that people have never lived because of the lives they are forced to live or have chosen to live.'³

There is also a fullscale assumption of Marquez into the ruling ideology of

difference. There is a valorization of difference now as there was in the past of the universal, and the symmetrical inversion is a little alarming. It disengages literary affect from the pressure of historical *cause* and implied *praxis*.

It is precisely to compensate for the regionalist deification of cultures that the third world as a mode of self-definition becomes polemically useful. It makes for a political alignment of forces. Even anthropology must heed the politics of interpretation across the intercultural plane; an ideology of difference in and of itself provides no guarantees for any form of liberation. Therefore we have to not only engage with euphemisms about a universalist aesthetic and with the instrumental versions of that

Above: 1 Tukaram (Vishnupant Pagnis) retrieves his verses from the river through divine intervention (Damle/Fattelal, *Sant Tukaram*, 1936). Below: 2 Benodebehari Mukherjee, *Medieval Hindi Saints* (detail), 1946–47
Facing page: The protagonist Ramu (Satindra Bhattacharya) (Ritwik Ghatak, *Nagarik*, 1953)



aesthetic in its international accreditation and global form, but also with regional diversions in which so great a writer as Marquez is looped.

As we well know, geography, gigantism *and* ethnicity are all-important in India. The marked homeland can be rendered free from historical processes; it nurtures hinterland arcadias—regions within regions. Thus internationalism, also nationalism on occasion, is opposed by a kind of ‘tribalism’ where an ultimate, and now perhaps residual, authenticity abides. This reactive principle reinforces the centre-periphery model, though inversely, as a form of strategic encirclement. It also provides in its very inversions clues for reading the aesthetic and political issues at hand.

What are these issues? First of all there is a dissembling at the heart of the argument about authenticity: it masks the urge for modernity. Indian artists revert time and again to a naive stylistics, thus reiterating formal solutions that have their source or analogy in modernism even if this is unrecognized by the artists in question. For example, there has been a recurring preference for frontality/iconicity in the visual and performing arts and in cinema: in Parsi theatre (of the nineteenth and early twentieth century), in the cinema of Dadasaheb Phalke and the saint films of Prabhat Film Company (spanning the first half of the twentieth century). This matches, in a sense, the earnestness of intent that encourages a substantive rather than an ironical aesthetic. This frontality, this very lack of irony, this symbolic reconstruction of faith, gives us on occasion a masterpiece like *Sant Tukaram* (1936) which remains anomalous yet paradigmatic of a secular culture that is intensely contemporary whether or not it is precisely modern (*Illus. 1*). When communitarian and secular ideals combine, when storytelling realizes itself in national allegories, how shall we designate these if not as structures of modernity? Take



the example of Bengal: the representation of santals in the work of Ramkinkar Baij, of artisan-saints in the mural by Benodebehari Mukherjee (*Illus. 2*), IPTA’s production of *Nabanna*, Satyajit Ray’s Apu trilogy, Ritwik Ghatak’s *Nagarik* (*Illus. 3*). Ranged across three decades—the 1930s through the 50s—these are some of the works of our transitional modernity. They make up the cultural history of Indian modernism.

The paradigm for debating cultural issues in India is *not* internationalism. Modernism, seen as culminating in an international style and turning on a logic of ‘art for art’s sake’, has not been crucial to

India. Moreover, we have a modernism without an avantgarde. Does this spell serious retardation? Indian artists have been buffered by a national and progressive state, so model and strategic action are perhaps less acutely positioned vis-a-vis each other; there is less dramatic confrontation than has been the case in Latin America, and indeed no declared avantgarde politics. We work with a benign cultural nationalism and hope to tackle new encroachments, for example American neoimperialism, on the same basis, whereas it was the need among other things for strategic interaction with ongoing US imperialism that made Latin American artists so politically forthright.

Instead of vanguardism there is in India the double discourse of the national and the modern. It is a generative discourse and can yield multiple equations. Nationalism calls up the category of tradition, modernism catapults into internationalism. This then becomes a four-part equation enabling one to confront the question of 'invented traditions' that erupts during nationalism with current globalism and its improvisatory techniques of cultural appropriation. The equation also brings us into the realm of the postmodern.

In India change in any direction is no swift business. It has to simulate the



4 Bhupen Khakhar, *Celebration of Guru Jayanti*, 1980

slow civilizational process that we have hitherto admired as an economical (rather than wasteful) solution to cultural differences. If one now asks why it is that we are not so preoccupied with the global fix on cultural difference, the answer may lie precisely in the civilizational presumptions of our cultural discourse. Deriving from a highly developed metaphysic, this is an extensive and vastly hegemonic discourse. The civilizational legacy is also extremely sophisticated, using that term to mean also a pragmatic style of operation. I am referring to the categories of *margi* and *desi*, a design that is in effect a fully developed theory for cultural integration. There is thus a well-known civilizational design whereby the high or classical cultures that are extant relate with the popular or vernacular cultures to form reciprocal patterns (*Illus. 4*).

As for what our regional identification might be on the world map, this has gained hardly any cultural significance beyond the rhetoric of solidarity. We are well aware of the claim of regionalism internally, as a way of constituting a multicultural national state. The entire premise of the national state, with its centralized administrative and cultural operations, involves such questions as the definition of regional integrity based on vernacular cultures and the definition of organic intellectuals as against mere ethnic intransigence. And then, in the light of these issues, we require to come to terms with what it means to define cultures ethnically, linguistically, communally. Does it mean that all the potential consciousness of a community must work itself out through multiplying nationalisms?

While a great part of social science scholarship, especially studies of Indian nationalism, takes up these questions systematically, the cultural implications of the nation-state ideology are not worked out at the same level of complexity. All the same, and more significantly, they come up in current cultural studies debates and actual practices. There is, for example, a good deal of polemic on the claimed superiority of regional literatures; cinema, especially in Bengal and Kerala, continues an extended discussion on the greater authenticity of vernacular cultures.

Almost any definition of regionalism, in so far as it names a community, privileges ethnic over economic/political definitions, and we have to remember that in the postmodern age 'advanced' cultures coopt precisely this kind of unit—the more 'tribal' the better—for it becomes the minutely differentiated aspect of global multiculturalism. There is no value in making ideological inversions of operative hierarchies, especially when hard economic realities are involved. Why do American cultural agencies operating in India make a point of funding research projects on ethnic, i.e. folk and tribal, communities and cultures? It is the agenda of global multiculturalism to bring nativism and cosmopolitanism face-to-face via ritualistic/neoexpressionist



5 Meera Mukherjee, *Ashoka at Kalinga*, 1972

'interpretations' of ethnic forms; it is the agenda, not so coincidentally, of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and transnational corporations to evacuate the mediating grounds of the national. From the point of view of cultural resistance to global pressures, one might say that the discourse of national culture is preferable to that of regional cultures for the reason that nationalism is not a *devolving* concept—though indeed it can be a bigoted one.

National units, having 'evolved' through such turbulent centuries and with so much struggle (as indeed with much internal repression), are at any rate more complex formations. The internationalism that goes with advanced capitalism cannot entirely or easily coopt the expressly political and volatile category of the nation. Nations cannot easily be swallowed whole, only tribe by tribe—which leaves the question begging how nations themselves swallow their own peoples tribe by tribe.

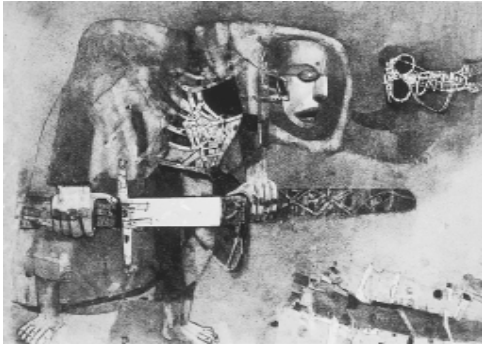
This finds its own historical forms of annexation from pan-Indian ideologies. Ancient India, Indian nationalism and the postindependence national state: in all three phases some form of hegemonic status is assumed by Indian ideologues. A centre-periphery model where we are on the periphery, even when this is recognized at one level of global reality, does not easily coincide with the terms of cultural self-perception still current in India.

If what I propose in respect of India is true, that internationalism is not a paradigm for cultural discourse, then we have to come to terms with a more workable paradigm, one that straddles the two fully developed concepts of nationalism and modernization. We know that these two concepts are historically consonant and even at the deepest level mutually contingent, as nineteenth-century Europe exemplifies. In the case of India too the convergence is fully manifest. It was Nehru's modernizing project that entailed strongly centralized governance of the newly founded nation-state. What is more, in this grandiose design for the modern nation his own ontological quest (as perhaps that of many nationalists with an ambitious project of selfhood) was movingly but perhaps naively inscribed in his last will and testament.

That there is both the need and the possibility to develop a mutually critical relationship between the national and the modern was already available in an early twentieth-century text like Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*. His protest and anguish over the conflated concept of the modern nation form the intrepid core of what has been a major forum of cultural debate in India. Today, not only Gandhian socialists but the very communists who advanced the cause of the modern nation must reckon with cruel ironies, as both the national and the modern are coerced to surrender their emancipatory agendas by religious fundamentalists and market forces.

Meanwhile nationalism in our experience to date is a foil to western universalism. It helps resist imperialist hegemony; it also serves as an environmental

Above: 6 Ganesh Pyne, *The Assassin*, 1974. Middle: 7 K. Laxma Goud, Untitled, 1976. Below: 8 A. Ramachandran, *Sandhya*, from the *Yayati* panels (detail: panels 9–12), 1986



testing ground for unheeding modernism. Just as modernism, a cultural and specifically aesthetic category, interrogates through its formalist means, its negative dialectic and its valorized transgressions, the dangerously totalizing ideology of nationalism.

What all this also implies is that modernism has no firm canonical position in India. It has a paradoxical value involving a continual double-take. Sometimes it serves to make indigenist issues and motifs progressive; sometimes it seems to subvert if not nationalism, then that on which it rests and purports to grow, that is, tradition.

Thus paradoxically placed, modernism in India does not invite the same kind of periodization as in the west. This is also why it is still not played out in the Indian context, whether in political or formal terms. This itself is a problem: the emblematic (even heraldic, one might say) use of the term modern

when in fact it should be historicized and placed in precise relationship with social and economic conditions. But if we recognize that there is in any case a discursive extension of such terms and therefore a fair degree of ideological manoeuvrability from one society to another, then the ambiguous position of modernism in the Indian cultural context makes for certain advantages.

I have already indicated how this allows something like the Indian modern to evolve with its own set of canons. These serve to signal in the direction of the western (towards the high or canonical) modern but encourage living traditions to flourish as well. This historically displaced logic is, I should like to assert, as politically relevant for us as some hypothetical absolute into which western modernism has evolved. This displaced logic will often be anomalous and bold, providing revisions and corrections to an overarching internationalism (*Illus. 5*).

This locational ideology in an archaic and mock-ironic form of ancestor worship is institutionalized in Calcutta and Santiniketan and carried as current legacy in Bengal by an artist like Ganesh Pyne (*Illus. 6*). It is given a southern contestatory model at Cholamandal during K.C.S. Paniker's pedagogical influence in the 1960s and 70s. It takes on the aspect of everyday narration among artists from the School of Baroda, like Laxma Goud (*Illus. 7*). It motivates individual artists in every region of India to create necessary chinks in the armour of modernism. The lineage of artists committed to their location shows up abundantly, as for example among the Kerala artists, from Kanayi Kunhiraman's monumental *Yakshi* (1971) to A. Ramachandran's mural *Yayati* (*Illus. 8*), to a fierce sense of identification with a mythologized land and its people among the younger generation of Kerala radicals touched by (vexed by) the narrational pedagogy in Baroda.

Indigenist genres make for located knowledge and this, in Gramscian terms, is the source for the strategy of interference. Anthropologists and cultural theorists will now privilege such interventions in order to argue in favour of partisanship on the homeground of culture and politics.

I wish to reiterate this because the sovereign 'subject' (derived from the enlightenment and transmuted into romantic reverie on the self) undergoes so much existential pressure through the nineteenth century, and subjective intentionality is so enlarged in the rebel figure of the modern age, that the founding equation between subject and history may be jeopardized. The category of history tends to be reduced to a condition of stasis in modernist discourse with the result that the very narrative of the self may also be grounded. 'Modernism is indeed fixated on the experience of "the" subject (radical or otherwise), always postponing or ignoring questions of the way that experience is implicated in, determined by, specific dynamics of social change.'⁴ But *not*, as Paul Willemsen goes on to say, *any old social change*. The urgency of where this change takes the world is greatest in the erstwhile 'native' who is now the displaced subject of history. Potentially at least, it is this embodied consciousness



9 Bimal (Kali Bandyopadhyay) the taxi driver with his wayward 1920 Chevrolet, 'Jagaddal', now in a state of ruin (Ritwik Ghatak, *Ajantrik*, 1958)



10 Nita (Supriya Choudhury) comes across her brother Shankar (Anil Chatterjee) practising a *raga* on the riverbank (Ritwik Ghatak, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 1960)

that most persistently tries to articulate the self into history.

Even as the ideology of Indian nationalism is worked out there is a continual self-definitional discourse on the subject, a partisan discourse. It is precisely at this existential point, on the question of self-determination that the national and the modern converge. Here, nationhood and selfhood are almost deliberately, for grand metaphorical purposes, conflated; or, on the other hand, conflicted through a critical debonding. This can be seen in film after film of Ritwik Ghatak, from *Ajantrik* (1958, *Illus. 9*) to the 1960s' post-partition Calcutta trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*Illus. 10*), *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar*, to *Jukti Takko ar Gappo* (1974). Ghatak counterposes an exile's journey with a communitarian ideal and dream of plenitude still within reach in his milieu. In *Jukti*, an autobiographical film, the fictional subject-in-history is put through critical scrutiny and becomes the figure for deconstructing the otherwise teleological narratives of nationalist history. Ghatak articulates himself through involute iconographies and further narratives, whereby a certain civilizational memory may be redeemed in the form of alternative or fictive histories.

Ghatak tackles (through what Adorno called 'negative commitment') the initial progressivism and consequent stasis to which the historical consciousness of the modern subject may be led. He extrapolates beyond the impasse as a postindependence Indian. We thus get an amazing confluence of discourses: from the melodrama that refers among other things to the Indian classical tradition and its rhetorical mode, to the existential normativity of the high modern, to Marxist historicity and its transcendent form of praxis. This is as complex a handling as we can achieve on the self, and on the lost utopia of subjectivity in the contemporary consciousness.

Thus third-world art is not to be predicated on the question of protest alone: it has to be structurally different. This art has the peculiar (hermeneutic) task of translating civilizational modes, as for example the epic form of narration in living

performance, into the historical present. It must then reconsider the historical mode in terms of ethical options elicited, hypothetically at least, from a polity made alert through the colonial experience and its acute divisions. In the postcolonial transition artists have to evolve structures for reflexivity that have at best the possibility of an epic alignment of several historical trajectories, at the very least the layered semantics of allegories. A material and generic change is required. Kumkum Sangari elaborates on this transformative mode via Marquez:

Marquez's marvellous realism not only emerges from the contingent, simultaneous, polyphonic contours of his material world, it is also a transformative mode. . . . Though he digs beneath the rational encrustations of colonialism . . . he avoids the familiar 'Third World' bind, the swing from disillusionment with an inadequate rationalism to an easily available mysticism—in some sense mutually constitutive categories brought into play by colonialism. Marvellous realism answers an emergent society's need for renewed self-description and radical assessment . . . questions the Western capitalist myth of modernization and progress, and asserts without nostalgia an indigenous pre-industrial realm of possibility.⁵

As it happens, this mode, with precisely the anachronistic positioning of an 'indigenous preindustrial realm of possibility', is favoured in Indian cultural debates. At its best this is the basis on which past, extant and invented traditions are brought into play—weaving histories and their disjointed paths into a complex whole.

It may, however, be true to say that it is only after the hierarchy of high modernism comes into question that the possibilities already articulated in alternative cultures come to be recognized. The monolith has to be dismantled. But even as these indigenous forms gain visibility they may, in the process, be appropriated unless the case for an alternative, interventionist history is pressed. And while this is partly strategic action, its value lies in rescuing the very subject that was modernism's prerogative and that postmodernism buries declaring as it does 'the death of the subject'.

In western discourse the aesthetic of the 1990s is seen to devolve into a new decadence—less from an end-of-the-century despair than from an enormously self-satisfied sense of omnipotence that is designated as global multiculturalism. World cultures have been ethnicized once again and are now made to yield batteries of signs which are then reconstituted into an international, or universal, culture. Peter Brook, brilliant as he is, comes to grief in handling *The Mahabharata*, the more so in making it into an epic film. This is because among other obvious misrepresentations he believes performance 'signs' will suffice as 'message' while he changes entirely the epic structure into a dramatic narration of high destinies. Brook's belief that culture

has its justification in an unassailable metaphysics, a humanism that never fails, devolves in the postmodern context into sheer play with cultural codes. Anthropology and semiotics, the sciences favouring *difference*, seem to revert us ironically to a kind of essentialism.⁶

Through absentminded benevolence the centre is maintained, serving as it does cultural vested interests. At the same time peripheral initiatives—national, regional, local interventions, seen as culture-specific, are assiduously appropriated for the sake of that higher universal purpose.

Under the circumstances, we on the periphery should desist from using essentialist categories of an ancient civilization including perhaps those of myth and other indigenously romantic, organic-symbolic modes of thought. We should desist from thinking in conventional anthropological terms in so far as these invite communal politics based on regional, ethnic, religious and tribal formations. Uncritical curiosity about origins and the construction of pseudohistories therefrom easily lead to false consciousness though this may be proffered as third-world ideology. Renewed imperialism makes the terms of discourse deeply problematical, and at the very least this should be recognized. How can we make radical assumptions even on behalf of popular culture when it is in the very process massively reified?

Even in the overall local and international context of cultural pastiche it is possible to conceive of a counter-practice that resists political reaction based precisely on the last prerogative that societies like ours hold out as a distinction—the prerogative of still living traditions. It remains for us to resolve how we should transform these into *traditions-in-use*. And, following from that, how we name the contemporary and in which category of discourse we choose to locate it.

Notes and References

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- ³ Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, edited by Tejaswini Niranjana et al., Seagull, Calcutta, 1993, pp. 259–60.
- ⁴ Paul Willemen, 'An Avant-Garde for the Eighties', in *Framework*, No. 24, 1984, p. 64.
- ⁵ Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', in *Interrogating Modernity*, p. 246.
- ⁶ Rustom Bharucha, 'Peter Brook's "Mahabharata": A View from India', in *Framework*, No. 35, 1988.

When Was Modernism in Indian Art?

[T]he innovations of what is called Modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our present moment. If we have to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition that may address itself not to this by now exploitable because inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.

Raymond Williams¹

Material Conditions

Taking the cue from Raymond Williams's 'When Was Modernism?', there is need to reiterate that we in the third world continue to commit ourselves to the immanent aspect of our complex cultures. We persist in trusting the material status of meaning manifest, in Williams's words, as a 'structure of feeling'.² We commit ourselves to relating forms of art with social formations, for this kind of a grounded relay of cultural history will help the process of survival within the new imperialism that the late capitalist/postmodern world sets up.

Whatever the chances of that survival, it may be worth mentioning that modernism as it develops in postcolonial cultures has the oddest retroactive trajectories, and that these make up a parallel aesthetics. It is crucial that we do not see the modern as a form of determinism to be followed, in the manner of the stations of the cross, to a logical end. We should see our trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream and, in their very disalignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international. Similarly, before the west periodizes the postmodern entirely in its own terms and in that process also characterizes it, we have to introduce from the vantagepoint of the periphery the transgressions of uncategorized practice. We should

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reperiodize the modern in terms of our own historical experience of modernization and mark our modernisms so that we may enter the postmodern at least potentially on our own terms.

Modernization in India is a real if incomplete historical process. Dating from the British colonial enterprise, the process dovetails with the efforts of the post-independence Indian state to establish, through a large public sector and a planned economy, a balanced growth of industry. If, despite the nomination of postindustrial societies as global arbiters in the management of capital the process of industrialization is still in progress in this predominantly agricultural country, it need hardly be said that class politics is still relevant in India. The communist parties of India, the CPI and the CPI(M), support the irreversible project of modernization with a reasonable, secular nationalism. They also support through their cultural fronts the struggles of religious minorities and of women. The left fronts in India, given the growth of fundamentalist reaction, may now be the only organized movements to speak the language of modernity. To the first world this may seem paradoxical: in a postmodern world where not only cultural initiative but even the historical modern is threatened to be taken out of the hands of Marxism (or parodied with malicious quips that name Stalin as the great modernist by virtue of his rapid modernization programme), it may be worth recalling these forceful anomalies in the developmental process of the third world. Here indeed the modern continues to be placed nowhere more correctly than along visibly socialist trajectories.

Modernity is a way of relating the material and cultural worlds in a period of unprecedented change that we call the process of modernization. It is also an ontological quest with its particular forms of reflexivity, its acts of struggle. Modernity takes a precipitate historical form in the postcolonial world, while its praxis produces a cultural dynamic whereby questions of autonomy, identity and authenticity come to the fore. These are desired individually but are sought to be gained in collectivity. Even the tasks of subjectivity, so long as they are unresolved, require acts of allegorical exegesis—often via the nation. There is a chronological fix between nationhood and modernity so that both may stand in for a quest for selfhood. Ever challenged in the postcolonial world, modernity continues to provide a cutting edge; it marks necessary historical disjunctures in the larger discourse on sovereignty.

The characteristic feature of Indian modernism, as perhaps of many postcolonial modernisms, may be that it is manifestly social and historical. But western modernism in its late phase is not the least interested in this diachronicity and opposes it in the name of a *sublimity of the new*. Or, to put it another way, by a hypostasis of the new. Consider the high modernist argument as it shifts from Clement Greenberg to the postmodernist Jean-Francois Lyotard. When late modernist art is not metaphysically inclined it is, as we know, absolutely formal. Late modernism finds in the work of Greenberg a peculiar cathexis in and through sheer opticality. Lyotard in

turn prefers epiphany to materiality and process and thus leaves out historical representation, considered to be too grossly accountable within something so local and involute as national cultural identity.³

Given this obstacle race of history it is possible to argue that Indian artists have only now become fully modern—in what is characterized as the postmodern age. I mean this in the sense of being able to confront the new without flying to the defence of tradition; of being able to cope with autonomy in the form of cultural atomization by invoking *and* inverting notions of romantic affiliation. That is to say, the mythology of an indigenous ‘community’ and the lost continent of an ‘exile’—both alibis borrowed from the grander tradition of the romantic—are allowed to shade off into the current form of identity polemics. This already mature modernism means accepting the ‘dehumanization’ and decentering of the image. It means being self-conscious through an art-historical reflexivity; that is, through overcoming the anxiety of influence by overcoming the problem of originality itself. It is not surprising that in a country like India with its cultural simultaneities, its contradictory modes of production, modernism should have been realized through the promptings of postmodernism. For, in economic terms, modernization declares its full import when it comes to be propelled by global capitalism.

This is not unrelated to the fact that India is now, after five decades of protective nationalism, opting for integration in the world economy via what is called liberalization—the stage and style of capitalism which the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank dictate to the developing world. It is an internationalism under duress in that its first condition is the delinking of growth from any form of nationalism. With this precipitate internationalism the Indian artist is now, for the first time, shocked out of the nationalist narrative of identity that makes certain overt demands for authenticity in the existential and indigenous sense. The very achievements of the modern Indian artist can begin to appear too conscientious: first, because they are secured by forms of realism instituted like a reverse mirror image within the modern; second, because this euphemistic modernism keeps in tow a notional ideal of a people’s culture. Folk/tribal/popular art becomes a heritage that can stand in for, even usurp, the vanguard forms of the modern.

As the national/modern moves in tandem into the late capitalist age this double bind of authenticity is virtually abandoned. The grand narrative of civilizational transformation which haunts the progressive sections of the Indian modern now appears to the younger generation of Indian artists as simply anomalous. Not so surprisingly they echo Lyotard⁴ who, in a rhetorical manner, designates realist criteria as pernicious. Even if Lyotard’s moves are equally pernicious to our cultural considerations, it is possibly true that these older terminologies of representation and identity connected with the modernizing function have become seriously problematized. Moreover, by maintaining, even in rhetoric, the notion of a people’s ‘authentic’

culture, we may jeopardize avantgarde interventions based on surreal and other subversions. So that indeed one might ask again, *when*, if the avantgarde has been thus blocked or deferred or deviated by what one may call the national cause, was modernism in Indian art?

The Politics of Modernism

The 'when' in the title of this essay is of course polemically placed. It refers to a period of self-reckoning locked in with a commitment to collective social change. It refers to the project of figuring subjectivity as a locus of potential consciousness. The when is a site of vexed doubling within colonial/postcolonial identity and the permanent ambivalences that it launches.

The painful debate on identity, nowhere more viscerally handled than by Frantz Fanon,⁵ is a debate within the modern consciousness at the last juncture of decolonization when the question of freedom is lifted out of an existential universalism and cathected upon the subordinated yet intrepid body-presence of the 'other'. A condensed unit of humanity drawn from an overwhelming demographical explosion caused by the emergence of the colonized people, this other displaces the safe space occupied by the pristine self in western ontological discourse. The entire western project for authentic being thus comes to be differently historicized in the moment of decolonization. Identity is seen not simply as a rational individuating project within the utopian plenitude of romantic community. It also involves reclaiming the ground lost (or never found) in history, the ground where the self may yet recognize itself in the form of a collective subject.

The debate on how to politicize one's otherness seems now to be given over to a politics of negotiation. It remains to be seen how a further project shall be set up to match that moment of modernity when a reflexive and revolutionary critique of its own deformities can still be mounted. The chips are down and there has to be some way, a political not a counter-metaphysical way; there has to be an alternative project whereby this nonidentity between the self and the other, which was once a call to rewrite history, has to be given a function larger than that of differential play. Or, that play itself has to gain a praxiological motive through a cultural avantgarde.

In the postcolonial dialectic of modernity the term avantgarde is often subsumed by the term progressive, which refers more properly to the debate on realism/modernism. That is why I begin with Raymond Williams. But when realism turns rigid it is worth recalling with Fredric Jameson that the modern itself had a politicality far greater than we are taught to recognize.⁶ He notes the persistent use of the vocabulary of political revolution in the aesthetic avantgardes which complemented, perhaps even compensated for, the deep subjectivity to which modernist works were committed. That subjectivity itself prefigured a utopian sense of impending transformation where society was seen to be moving towards a greater democracy.

It is worth remembering this because there is a further case for reinforcing the fact in nonwestern societies where the modern, occurring in tandem with anti-colonial struggles, is deeply politicized and carries with it the potential for resistance. This is progressive as also polemical, so that there is a tendentious angle on modernity within our cultures whether they draw out theories of domination/subordination from the subaltern point of view (after Gramsci), or build an identity politics in a rhetorical mode (after Fanon). For Indians there is, besides, a profoundly paradoxical entry into the modern: the entire discourse against the modern (after Gandhi) gives us another utopian option to consider, one which is in its own way a negative commitment of tremendous force in the achievement of modern India.

The discrepancies in the stages of capitalist development in India remain so huge that the modern is charged with strong anomalies. Modernization, both desired and abhorred throughout the nationalist period, is continually contested even in the Nehruvian period. Indian modernity is often quite circumspect, mediated as it is to a point of handicap by negative evaluations of the very practice that it is evolving.

There is the further question as to what categories Indian modernism adopts. Is it the aristocratic/high art category or the more historicist one found in modernism's conjuncture with realism? Or does Indian modernism satisfy the condition of romantic radicalism in its bid to align with the 'liberating vanguard of popular consciousness'?⁷

The moderns anyway stage a mock confrontation between the mandarins and the luddites, a tantalizing play between the classical and the popular, which is worth our while to consider. More specifically, the modern period cherishes great artists who, as Fredric Jameson suggests, are seen to be holding over some archaic notions of aesthetic production, a handcraft aesthetic within a modernizing economy, and in the process valorizing perhaps for the last time a utopian vision of a more human mode of production.⁸ This is especially true for third-world cultures. In India primitive techniques, artisanal skills, iconographic references are much valorized; and the modern, comprising the indigenous and the avantgarde, has a two-way relay and a paradoxical politics.

There is of course a strictly leftwing intervention in the process of defining Indian modernity. A movement charged with a radical popular consciousness provides, through the 1940s—a period when the communist movement poses a real alternative in political and cultural terms—the ground for a great many innovations in theatre, cinema, literature (and to a lesser extent the plastic arts). I am referring to the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association⁹ (IPTA), which breaks away from the innate conservatism of a civilizational discourse. It breaks with the brahminical/sanskritized resources privileged as the Indian tradition and thereby gives the emerging *tradition of the modern* in India the possibility of *not* being trapped in the citadel of high art. It should however be mentioned that though 'the people' are invoked in the discourse

and practice of Indian leftwing movements in the arts through their very forms (especially in theatre) and through their participation as an alert audience, the Indian left produces its own conservatism, even an incipient Stalinism. Something like a slogan of national in form, socialist in content is built into the programme. Thus while it is modern and in the Indian context also avantgarde, the movement represents itself as realist and progressive and tilts the definitional balance of Indian modernism. This obviously prevents it from trying out more daring formal innovations.

Caught in the cold-war division between freedom and commitment during the first decade of independence, the progressive movement tends, as it proceeds, to ground aesthetic discourse. For, if in the heyday of socialism we do not designate art practice in avantgarde terms, we cannot in postmodern times so readily invent a vanguard discourse that has an appropriate historical import. We should have to use the term radical rather than avantgarde, but do we thereby scuttle the diachronic model with free signifiers; do we beg the question of modernism itself?

Indian Modernism: A Brief Account

If Indian artists have often appeared to be hamstrung over the progressivist as against 'correctly' modernist definition of modernism, if they have seemed to be stuck at the crossing-over, it is not so surprising. They are living out the actual material transition. Let me recall notationally the history of the modern in Indian art.

Indian artists have been tardy in making a direct avowal of modernism. They have moved on from the sceptical position held by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Abanindranath Tagore through the first three decades of the twentieth century to a more complex engagement that was developed in Santiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore, and taken over at different levels of complexity by Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Benodebehari Mukherjee from the 1930s. It is precisely at this juncture that a modernist vocabulary (as against initiatives which laid down, for half a century before, propitious ground for modernization) was introduced in several brave gestures. A rural boy in Tagore's Santiniketan, Ramkinkar Baij, ventured to introduce, in a somewhat hazardous manner, a postcubist expressionism and through that means to openly valorize primitive/peasant/proletarian bodies, to give them an axial dynamic. He thereby sought to bring through the ruse and reason of indigenous subject-matter a methodological shift in constructing the image (*Illus. 1*).

This was differently taken up by Jamini Roy in Calcutta during the 1930s. Roy 'objectified' the tradition by bringing the question of folk iconicity and urban commodification face-to-face. Exactly at the same time there was an alternative in the form of the interwar realism initiated by the part-European, Paris-trained artist, Amrita Sher-Gil (*Illus. 2*). With her intelligent masquerade as the oriental/modern/native woman, she gave to this emerging modernism a reflexive turn. She died a sudden death in Lahore in 1941, the year of death of the octogenarian savant Rabindranath

Tagore. By then Indian art had begun to pose considerable formulations on modernism.

A reckless manner of cultural symbiosis was reenacted by the Bombay-based artists Francis Newton Souza and Maqbool Fida Husain (*Illus. 3*) in the late 1940s. They belonged to near working-class backgrounds and to minority communities (Christian and Muslim). Other important artists of this six-member group, significantly called the Progressive Artists' Group, were Sayed Haider Raza and the dalit artist K.H. Ara (*Illus. 7*). Together these artists achieved, in the first decade of independence, a positively modernist stance. Several artists' groups claiming modernism came into existence during the 1940s and 50s in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Of these the



Below left: 1 Ramkinkar Baij, *Santal Family*, 1938–39. Above: 2 Amrita Sher-Gil, *South Indian Villagers Going to the Market*, 1937. Below right: 3 M.F. Husain, *Balram Street*, 1950

Bombay Progressives were the most ‘correctly’ modernist: they worked with a mandatory set of transfer motifs of the dispossessed but they offered a formalist manifesto that was to help the first generation of artists in independent India to position themselves internationally.

The two enactments of modernism are seen developing together in India. In the romantic antecedents of that term the heralds and witnesses to social change ought to be carrying the flag of modernization (and thus also of modernism), which includes expressionist realisms of different shades. Thus in India M.F. Husain, K.C.S. Paniker, the Mexico-trained Satish Gujral (*Illus. 4*) and Ram Kumar, briefly inspired by the French left, held that position until the early 1960s. Just as artists with a commitment to social transformation set the terms of revolt each in his/her context of community or nation, the outriders created the necessary disjuncture: the artists who established themselves in India became cultural emblems within a progressive national state, and those who left for Paris and London became equally emblematic outsiders of modern fiction. They embodied the modernist impulse of choosing metropolitan ‘exile’—the first criterion of modernity, according to Raymond Williams.¹⁰



4 Satish Gujral, *Song of Destruction 1*, 1953



5 F.N. Souza, *Nude Queen*, 1962

Like hundreds of garret artists in Paris and in London, these early ‘settlers’—prominent among them Souza (*Illus. 5*) and Tyeb Mehta (*Illus. 8*) in London, Raza, Akbar Padamsee (*Illus. 6*) and Krishna Reddy in Paris—celebrated their solitude, their radical estrangement and the immanent ‘truth’ of art language, to become the first heralds of internationalism in India.

The premise of international art was not of course innocent of ideology. Even as it led the nonaligned movement, India stood closer to the second world than to the first and the west continued to be marked as imperialist, however alluring its cities, its citadels of modernism, may have been for Indian (and myriad other) artists. The older imperialist markings were transferred to postwar USA where, as we know, it had become ideology proper. The American cultural establishment elicited from the boldly original and freedom-loving artists grouped together as American abstract expressionists, the slogan of cultural ‘freedom’ vis-a-vis the socialist bloc. In the bargain, New York with its immense energy won the day even over the erstwhile Parisian fix. Those who had been part of the School of Paris, among them some of the best Indian artists of the 1950s, turned sympathetically to New York in the 1960s. They gained a fresh painterly ground and the poetics of an authorial gesture.

At the ideological level one may add that the US agenda to export cultural freedom came to India late. Fellowships for artists’ residencies in New York were made available in the 1960s and 1970s to well-known Indian artists by the J.R.D. Rockefeller III Fund as a kind of postscript to its blatant strategies of intervention in Latin America; and the American side was highlighted by Clement Greenberg’s visit to India in 1967 when he accompanied a large official exhibition of modern American painting sent by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. But the ideology as such did not make headway because of the nationalist self-regard persistent among even the most international of Indian artists.

Meanwhile there was a divergence in the Indian art scene itself. A generation of Indian modernists came to be attracted once again to a European, more precisely Italian and Spanish, rather than an American aesthetic. Artists like Jeram Patel (*Illus. 9*), J. Swaminathan (*Illus. 13*), Jyoti Bhatt (*Illus. 11*), Himmat Shah (*Illus. 10*)



Above: 6 Akbar Padamsee, *Two Prophets*, 1955.
 Below left: 7. K.H. Ara, from the *Black Nude*
 series, 1963. Below right: 8 Tyeb Mehta,
The Blue Shawl, 1961

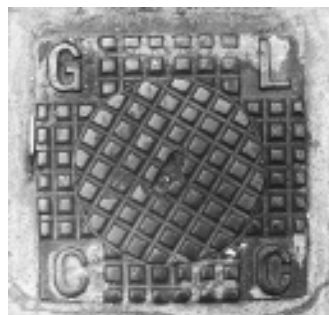
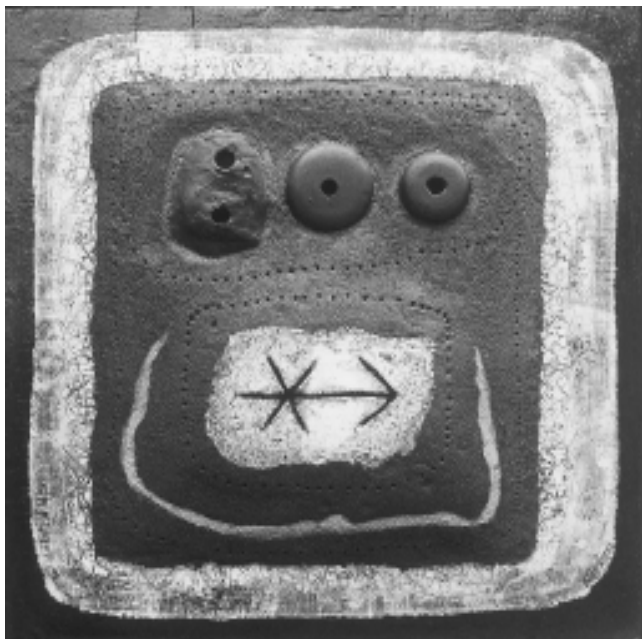


and Ambadas responded to the informal aesthetic (of Antoni Tàpies, Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, for example) and this showed up in the *Group 1890* exhibition of 1963. The exhibition manifesto was written by Swaminathan and the catalogue was introduced by the then Mexican ambassador to India, Octavio Paz. The attraction of the eleven-member Group 1890 to material/ritual/occult signs reissued the modernist enterprise in the coming years. It came to be situated with peculiar aptness in a visual culture of iconic forms still extant in India. This indigenism produced a playful modernist vocabulary replete with metaphorical allusions. Nagji Patel is an example (*Illus. 12*). But the surrounding rhetoric of Indianness also grew apace in the 1970s and 80s. It acquired official support both in the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Lalit Kala Akademi with artists like G.R. Santosh gaining national status. This institutional aesthetic tended to shortcircuit some part of this enterprise, leaving a pastiche in the form of an overtly symbolic art proffered as neotantism.

One is tempted to plot a tendentious narrative of oriental transmutation during the decades 1960–80: to show how the Parisian aesthetic was surmounted by the hegemonic American notions of freedom in the matter of world culture, how this was questioned by the liberationist rhetoric of the Latin world, and how all this contributed to form a distinct (rather than derivative) entity called modern Indian art. And how it acquired a national seal. For at the level of painterly practice many



9 Jeram Patel in his Baroda studio, painting with a shovel, 1961



Above left: 10 Himmat Shah, *Untitled*, 1965. Above right: 11 Jyoti Bhatt, *Manhole*, 1962. Below: 12 Nagji Patel, *Animal*, 1974



13 J. Swaminathan, *Shrine-II*, 1965

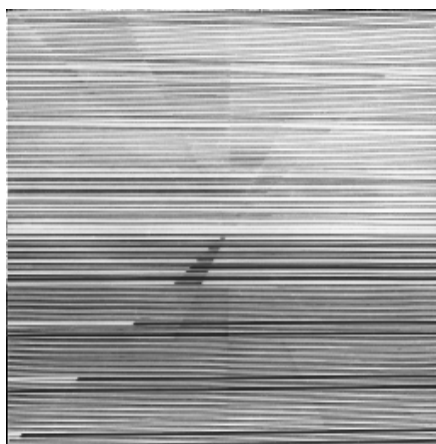
tendencies were recycled within the Indian sensibility. Exuberant forms of abstraction blazoned forth in Raza (*Illus. 19*), Ram Kumar (*Illus. 16*), Padamsee (*Illus. 14*), V.S. Gaitonde (*Illus. 15*). Abstract artists of the erstwhile Group 1890 and the so-called neotantrics held sway, especially the freer among them like Paniker (*Illus. 21*) and Biren De (*Illus. 20*), who contributed a subliminal, even ironic symbolism. At the same time, the work of artists with an informal sensibility, like Mohan Samant and Bal Chhabda, surfaced. Finally, artists with an indelible ecriture shone out: I am referring to Somnath Hore's inscription in paper pulp of the social *wound* (*Illus. 17*) and Nasreen Mohamedi's capture of private grace in her ink and pencil grids (*Illus. 18*).

These complex developments are only signposted here to fill out the contours of the larger narrative of the modern. By 1978, when the relatively old-style modernist Harold Rosenberg was invited by India to sit on the jury of the Fourth Triennale India, the more strictly modernist style in Indian art, especially abstraction, was on the wane. Rosenberg saw what he was to describe in his generously mocking manner as a 'much of a muchness' of representation by younger artists. He was referring to artists positioned against modernist formalism: late expressionists with a social message and artists trying to tackle the problem of reification in art language and the objects/icons of late modernism who had moved into popular modes and narratives, turning objects into fiction, icons into discourse.

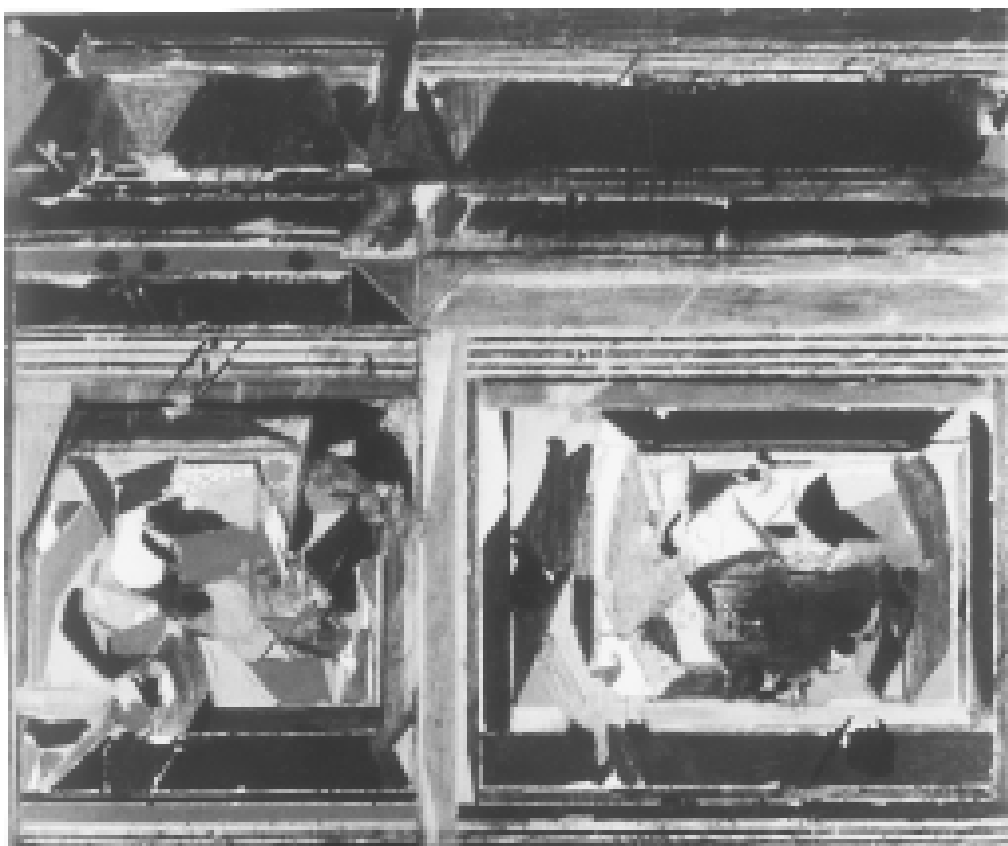


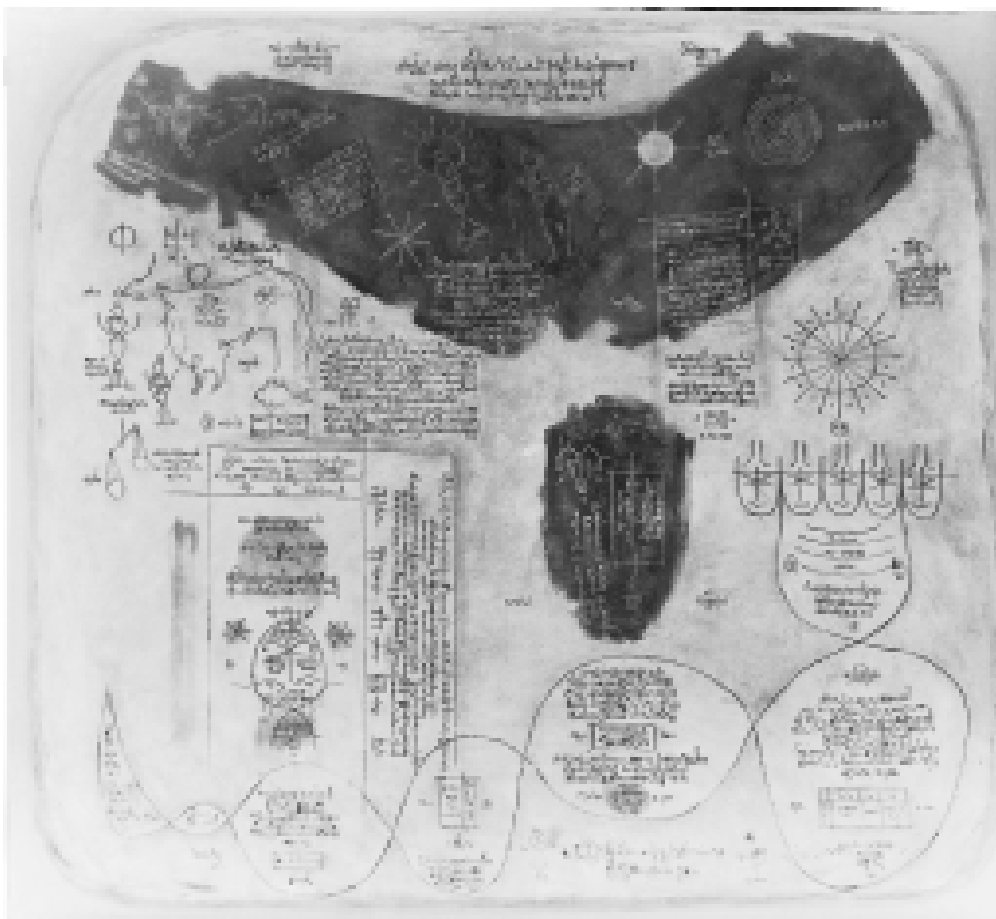
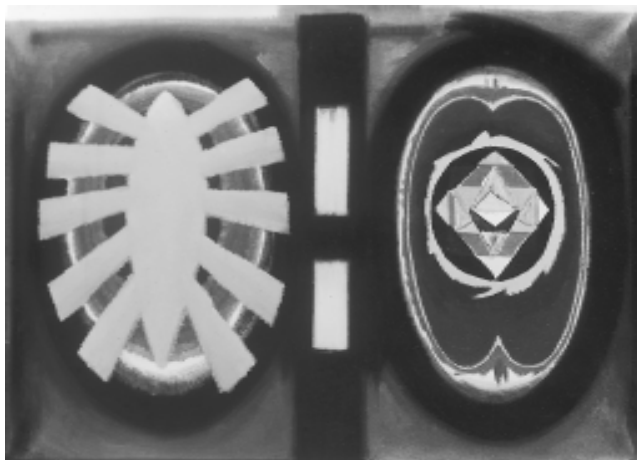
Above: 14 Akbar Padamsee, *Sun-Moon Metascape*, 1975. Below left: 15 Ram Kumar, *Flight*, 1976. Below right: 16 V.S. Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1974





Above left: 17 Somnath Hore, from the *Wounds* series, 1977. Above right: 18 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1980. Below: 19 S.H. Raza, *Rajasthan*, 1983





Above: 20 Biren De, *June* 1967, 1967. Below: 21 K.C.S. Paniker, from the *Words and Symbols* series, 1965–66

Narrative Extensions

Noting that an interest in allegory had developed across the board but especially in the third world—from Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Salman Rushdie—Fredric Jameson provides an ideological twist to the impulse:

Fabulation—or if you prefer, mythomania and outright tall tales—is no doubt a sign of social and historical impotence, of the blocking of possibilities that leaves little option but the imaginary. Yet its very invention and inventiveness endorses a creative freedom . . . agency here steps out of the historical record . . . and new multiple or alternate strings of events rattle the bars of the national tradition and the history manuals whose very constraints and necessities their parodic force indicts.¹¹

During the 1970s not only third-world writers but also filmmakers and artists moved into magical realism, courting narrative abundance for deterministically motivating desire. In India this form of quasi-historical representational practice led equally deterministically to a variety of social realisms featuring artists as varied as Krishen Khanna, A. Ramachandran, Gieve Patel and Bikash Bhattacharjee. By the end of the 1970s an affiliation was formed with what was at the time the School of London after R.B. Kitaj—anathema indeed to Paris and New York but seen by several Indian artists of this generation as an antidote to the formalist impasse of late modernist art. This move also tried to take into account the lost phases of twentieth-century art: Mexican muralism, German new objectivity, American regionalism. That is to say, all those artists left in the wide margins of the twentieth century that a too-narrow definition of modernism ignores. This was the virtual manifesto of the 1981 exhibition *Place for People*, featuring Bhupen Khakhar (*Illus. 23*), Gulammohammed Sheikh (*Illus. 24*), Jogen Chowdhury (*Illus. 26*), Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani and Sudhir Patwardhan (*Illus. 22*).

The narrative move activated the strong traditions in Indian art itself, including its revived version in the nationalist period. At this juncture K.G. Subramanyan, the wise and witty father-figure linking Santiniketan with Baroda, took up genre painting (on glass) as a form of parody of the high modern. Parodying as well the ideologies of the popular, he slipped over the cusp—beyond modernism—and made a decisive new space for Indian art. This was extended by subversive tugs in social and sexual directions in the hands of an artist like Bhupen Khakhar. A regionalism developed in Baroda and it combined with the urban realism of Bombay. A representational schema for cross-referencing the social ground was realized. A reconfiguration also took place of the realist, the naive and the putatively postmodernist forms of figuration. Indian art, even as it ideologized itself along older progressivist terms, came in line with a selfconsciously eclectic and annotated pictorial vocabulary.

If we argue that Indian efforts at finding an identity were reinforced by a

kind of ethnographic overspill into fabulous narratives and new ideologies of narration, it can also help position the interest in pictorial narration in Indian contemporary art during the 1970s and 80s in a more provocative stance. To the traditions of K.G. Subramanyan and Bhupen Khakhar add Gulammohammed Sheikh, and we can see how these artists moved via pop art into a representational excess of signs to renegotiate several traditions at once. The intertextuality of their images, the art-historical references, the popular idiom serve as a more confident avowal of a regional and properly differentiated national aesthetic. Art language now affirms its multivalence, opening up the ideology of modernism to the possibility of alternative realities. By its transgressions what is retroactively called the postmodern impulse opens up the structure of the artwork, too-neatly placed within the high culture of modern India. The new narrators rattle the bars of national tradition and let out the parodic force suppressed within it.

During the 1980s a number of Indian artists assume the authorial confidence to handle multifarious references, to deliberately disrupt the convergent philosophy and language of Indian modernism. Prominent among them are women artists of a figurative turn. Arpita Singh (*Illus. 25*), Nalini Malani, Madhvi Parekh (*Illus. 27*) and Nilima Sheikh are active in the 1980s. Anupam Sud, Arpana Caur and Rekha Rodwittiya (*Illus. 28*) reinforce the turn. These artists introject a subjectivity that is existentially pitched but does not devolve into the currently celebrated schizophrenic freedoms. Gender interventions come to mean that the narrated self is inscribed into



Left: 22 Sudhir Patwardhan, *Ceremony*, 1984.
 Right: 23 Bhupen Khakhar, *In a Boat*, 1988.
 Facing page: 24 Gulammohammed Sheikh, *Story of Aziz and Aziza*, 1989





Above left: 25 Arpita Singh, *Woman Sitting*, 1992.
Above right: 26 Jogen Chowdhury, *Nati Binodini*,
1975. Below: 27 Madhvi Parekh, *Durga*, 1993



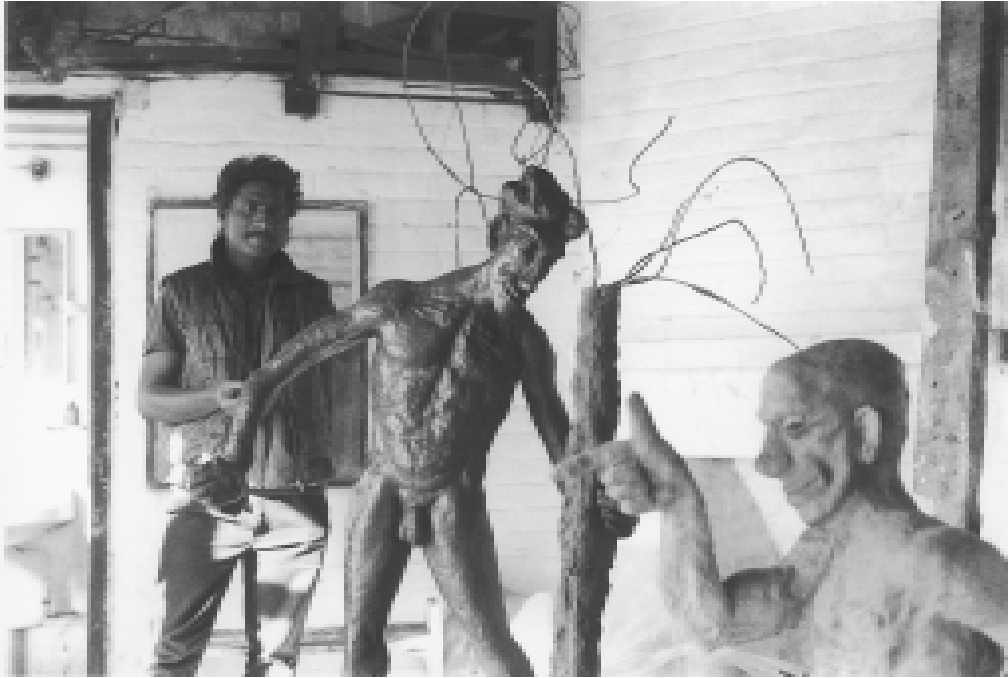


28 Rekha Rodwittiya, *A Milestone on the Journey*, 1989

the social body through allegorical means with a secret intent that exceeds its textual character. For there is always in our unresolved modernity and in our postmodern retroaction the haunting need to release a repressed consciousness, and in the case of the more politically inclined artists, to introduce a mode of intervention.

Postmodern Pros and Cons

The adventures of the aesthetic make up one of the great narratives of modernity; from the time of its autonomy through art for art's sake to its status as a necessary negative category, a critique of the world as it is. It is this last moment (figured brilliantly in the writings of Theodor Adorno) that is hard to relinquish: the notion of the aesthetic as subversive, a critical interest in an otherwise instrumental world. Now, however, we have to consider that this aesthetic space too is eclipsed—or rather that its criticality is largely illusory (and so instrumental). In such an event, the strategy of an Adorno, of 'negative commitment' might have to be revised or rejected, and a new strategy of interference (associated with Gramsci) devised.¹²



Apropos forms of interference, The Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association (1987–89) most nearly attempted such an avantgarde function within the Indian context. It was constituted by young Kerala artists like Alex Mathew, and the charismatic K.P. Krishnakumar who committed suicide in 1989 (*Illus.* 29, 30). Its members were affiliated for the most part to ultraleft groups in a provenance of India frequently governed and consistently influenced by the communist movement. Their mode of intervention and how they pitch themselves into the practice and discourse of radicalism make an exemplary story terminally situated in the project of modernism.

It is often argued that the antiaesthetic in the modern–postmodern conjuncture suits the third world very



Above: 29 K.P. Krishnakumar with unfinished sculptures, 1986.
Below: 30 K.P. Krishnakumar, *The Boatman*, 1987

well. This is the position of the third cinema protagonists, the crisis in modernism itself being attributed to revolt by cultures outside the west. We also know for a fact that black ideologues and feminists have found the possibility of conceptualizing a far greater degree of freedom through an understanding of postmodernism, through an understanding of the operations of power in relation to which their own art activity is inevitably positioned. It is precisely the task of the politically inclined artist to make this conjunctural moment more profoundly ironic; to once again question the existential status, the indexical ramifications of signs in the politics of our times. This has to do, as Hal Foster points out,

with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short it [postmodernism] seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations.¹³

At this point it becomes more than a polemical strategy to say that with the advent of the postmodern there is a release of new productivity in India and that it provides a relief from Indian modernism developing according to its so-called inner logic. It is worth noting, therefore, that this entire discourse might mean something quite precise within a continuum of Indian art: strongly imagist and almost always covertly symbolic, Indian art may have already come into crisis through the too-easily assimilated modernist principle of metaphoricity. Since the pop divide took in surrealism and dada—specifically their critique of representation and reification—the image has been persistently questioned (by the forms of theatricality in minimal art for example, and by the ‘idea’ in conceptual art) in the west. Not so in India. It is worth asking if our own fixation with the past as image, with the heavy claims for cultural condensation, does not require a sorting out of the over-signified image.

The postmodern aesthetic now plays with the image of images, the simulacrum—it plays through parody and pastiche. With the market entering Indian art practice on an institutional plane the factor of commodification is firmly on hand. In fact Indian artists may be nearer than they know or acknowledge to postmodernist kitsch through ‘instrumental pastiche’ and exploitation of ‘cultural codes’. In India, now, one may find a mock-surreal confrontation between the protagonists of the real as against those of the simulacra over the live body of the modern—a confrontation to claim the very sublime that Lyotard attributes to the postmodern avantgarde.¹⁴ All avantgardes have to take account of the market now; all art practice has to reckon with forces that sully the sublime. Which is why, in place of Lyotard’s illusory account of transcendence, the term ‘interference’ may be more correct.

For myself I hope to find affinities for Indian art beyond the simulacra and towards a historically positioned aesthetic. There is a strong glimpse of this possibility: if postmodern art, preferring the spatial over the temporal dimension, produces

a flattened version of time and narrative, a cut-out image of the contemporary without its historical referent, there is already in Indian art an appreciation of these problems. There is an attempt at a radically different ordering of the part to the whole so that the different ordering of the relationship between metaphor and metonymy is worked out as a form of 'cognitive mapping'.¹⁵ A utopian vision is sought to be worked out by structures other than the overworked ground of mytho-poetic symbolisms favoured in indigenist versions of modern art. The immense imaginary, always seductive to the Indian psyche, is now consciously transfigured by a handful of Indian artists into open structures, paradoxical signs.

The cue for a complex handling of the postmodern may come, more than anywhere else, from cinema. The cinema of Kumar Shahani, for example, uses the fictive device of epic narration not only to keep a hold on history, on the dimension of time and memory which the postmodern age is determined to displace; it also poses the question of aesthetics and reification within the narrative itself. The conditions of hypostasis are staged precisely to resist the unadmitted stasis of the commodified image. Thus the image that Shahani so sumptuously nurtures as a cinematic privilege, or rather as cinema's privileging of the imagist realm that constitutes the unconscious itself, this image is made profoundly ironic in its very beauty in films such as *Tarang* (1984) and *Kasba* (1990).

Ground Realities

At this juncture I would like to *reverse the argument*. Having gone through the logic of art history in an optimistic mode—anticipating further complexities within what I called the modern-postmodern conjuncture—it is worth asking if all questions of aesthetics might not be mocked out of discussion at the level of ground realities and in the current play on lifestyles as differential culture. The postmodern has as many cosmopolitan conceits as the modern ever had and requires over and above that a command of technology and media and of international market transactions far exceeding the modern. We do not, in the third world, have command of the mechanisms that may be used to undo the terms of this reified culture which offers so many seductions. We do not even have the backing of the historical avant-garde that Europe conceived as its dialectical method for battling reification and other vagaries of capitalist culture.

The political discourse of the postmodern promises to undo the totalizing vision of the historical universe and with that the institutionalizing of the modern. But it subsumes nevertheless the politics of actual difference based on class, race, gender into a metadiscourse of the one world order rivalling, despite its protestations to the contrary, any global hegemony sought or established by the modern. This postmodernism supersedes the kinds of cultural praxis historically possible in different parts of the world to such an extent that one might say that *our* cultures in the third

world do not at the moment stand a chance. Thus the cultural manifestations of the postmodern may be something of a false gloss on the hard facts of the political economy to which these are related.

All this is further contextualized by the fact that India has now been pulled into the logic of multinational capitalism, a fact only lately declared and now openly celebrated. The Indian government now puts out posters showing a great elephant breaking free of his chains. It is not clear whether the elephant is the people, the nation, the state, or the big bourgeoisie, but perhaps that is the whole point. There is this deliberately conflated representation of an Indian identity hitherto signified entirely, even defensively, in nationalist terms, terms that are now seen as fetters.

The Government of India has accepted 'solutions' for its economic crises in full accord with the IMF/World Bank prescriptions for 'stabilizing' the less developed countries, when in fact the experience of a majority of the countries that have accepted 'structural adjustment' packages has been disastrous.

What metropolitan capital demands via the IMF and the World Bank . . . [is] an 'open-door policy', namely that it be treated on a par with domestic capital itself, which inevitably entails encroaching upon the latter's extant economic territory. The transition demanded and enforced is not one from Nehruvian state intervention to an alternative regime of state intervention in favour of domestic monopoly capital, as in the case of the metropolitan economies, but to a regime of state intervention in favour of monopoly capital in general, both domestic as well as foreign, in which the foreign element inevitably constitutes the dominant component.

We thus have a switch: of the state acting as a bulwark against metropolitan capital . . . getting transformed into a defender of its interests against the domestic working masses.¹⁶

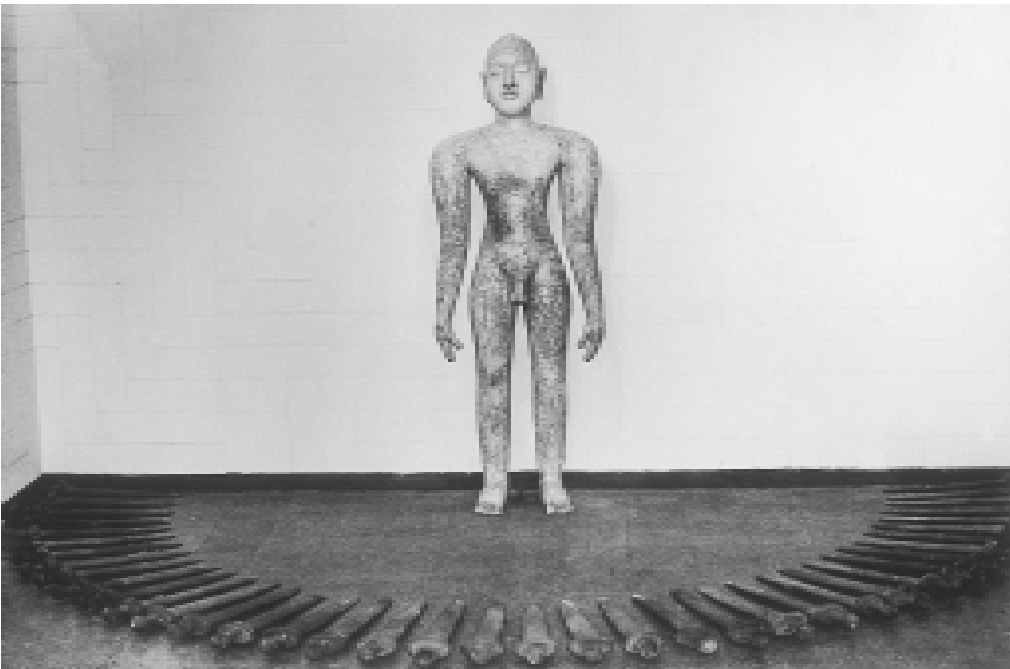
What we are doing under the tutelage of the IMF and the World Bank involves not only anti-poor, proconsumption policies but also the virtual surrender of national sovereignty—operable only on the basis of a welfare state. It predicates surrender on all fronts including the basic right inscribed in every anti-imperialist and nationalist agenda: the right to make our own economic laws. The specific pressure by the USA (via GATT and Intellectual Property Rights legislation) commoditizes all knowledge. Discussion of the cultural logic of late capitalism thus has to be contextualized so that the new imperialisms are kept fully in sight. For whether or not nationalism as such can any longer be upheld, the new globalism has to be seen for what it does. It seeks the disintegration not only of socialism but also of postcolonial national formations.

Ironically, even contemporary radicals will say that what is happening to the Indian nation is what ought to happen to national formations in good time: they

must break up to give long-needed space to new social movements, to subaltern groups and their struggles. The entire discourse from the liberal democratic to the radical is now, especially after the defeat of socialism, arraigned against large collectives, against the national, against the nation-state. It is as if the nation-state presents an even greater danger than imperialism as such. This, however, is far from the historically experienced truth of colonial/postcolonial nations. Especially as the neoimperialism of the west is happy to let reactionary nationalisms thrive—on the basis of fundamentalism, violence, territorial fracture.

Even as all categorization is now ranged on the level of majority and minority communities, all discourse proceeds thereon—as a politics of communitarian difference. Within the first world plurality is nothing more than liberal tolerance and neoethnicity is another face of antisocialism. It needs to be said that painfully wrought nations in the third world cannot be subsumed in that discourse. We are beginning to be taught the lesson that religion and its call for differ-

Above: 31 Somnath Hore, *Comrades*, 1984.
Below: 32 N.N. Rimzon, *The Inner Voice*, 1992



ence, even in a democratic country like India, can quickly bring us to the brink of fascism—precisely perhaps if we capitulate on the national. Whatever else it may have failed to achieve, the national is still constitutionally (and experientially) predicated on modern, secular values and produces, therefore, a democratic polity.

Metaphoric Recall

Not so long ago socialism, its history interwoven with that of bourgeois culture and therefore with modernity, transmitted strength and hope from its different registers of radical opposition. Without the socialist narrative and without national allegories, what is it that will sustain a symbolic order of collectivities in our imagination? And how shall we oppose the collectivities forged in the name of the holy by the religious bigots of the day? Nationalism along with socialism may for the moment be a lost cause, but as for the more dangerous forms of totalization—racism, religious fundamentalism—these grow apace and will not be contained by postmodernism's preferred metaphors of schizophrenia, the unassimilable feature of nihilist freedom. The terror of religious revivalism is very real. However, when the east is demonized it should be placed face-to-face with the rise of reactionary conservatism, indeed of neofascism in the west and the terror that it spells. With the politics of emergent ethnicities, with the noncontextual appropriation of traditions and the obscurantism of religious militancy, we are increasingly held to ransom by a fundamentalist or racial consciousness.

In an age of political retrenchment it may be useful to place nostalgia for socialism to the fore and designate it as properly symbolic. There is good reason to recall that the modernist project was engaged in an affirmative act of desacralization; it was engaged in a decoding and a secularization of works of the past and the present (*Illus.* 31, 32). This is of the greatest importance in evaluating today the significance of that modernism.¹⁷

In India for the moment it looks as though there is a modernism that almost never was. The more political among Indian artists may be right after all in believing that the as yet unresolved national questions may account for an incomplete modernism that still possesses the radical power it has lost elsewhere. Positioned as an intrepid form of the human, signified in an order of verticality, thus John Berger introduced Picasso into the arena of the modern: as a vertical man.¹⁸ Despite this male imagining of the modern it may be useful to place, like an archimedean point, a stake on an anthropomorphic truth of the modern revolution. For the Indian artist this stake is beyond irony, and beyond also the proclaimed death of the subject. Mapping the chronological scale of realism/modernism/postmodernism on to the lived history of our own deeply ambivalent passage through this century, it may be useful to situate modernity itself like an elegiac metaphor in the 'new world order'.

Notes and References

- ¹ *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 35.
- ² See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Verso, New York, 1977, pp. 133–34.
- ³ See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965; and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ The following discussion takes off from Homi Bhabha, ‘Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition’, in *Remaking History*, edited by Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, Bay Press, Seattle, 1989.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 311.
- ⁷ Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, p. 35.
- ⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 307.
- ⁹ Collated information on the IPTA is available in *Marxist Cultural Movement: Chronicles and Documents*, compiled and edited by Sudhi Pradhan, published by Mrs Pradhan and distributed by Pustak Bipani, Calcutta, 1985.
- ¹⁰ Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, p. 34.
- ¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 369.
- ¹² *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, Bay Press, Port Townsend, WA, 1983, p. xvi.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. xxi.
- ¹⁴ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 77.
- ¹⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 417–18.
- ¹⁶ Prabhat Patnaik, ‘A Note on the Political Economy of the “Retreat of the State”’, in *Whatever Happened to Imperialism and other essays*, Tulika, New Delhi, 1995, p. 206.
- ¹⁷ See Jurgen Habermas, ‘Modernity—An Incomplete Project’, in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by Hal Foster.
- ¹⁸ John Berger, *Success and Failure of Picasso*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965.

New Internationalism

Vexations

The first world has entirely appropriated the term international for its own perceptions and exploits. The experience of internationalism has to be claimed by the immigrant inch by inch. Here is both a strength and a problem: the need to negotiate with powerful cultural elites within the western world and the inevitability of measuring success in terms of the positions gained in the control of culture and media that attend on it. If the aim is to turn the centre–periphery model inside out then the gained positions may not change the model. We should continue to question the radical import of this. Australia has achieved something of this status: from being the provincial periphery of the Euro-American aesthetic it has moved, through strategic alignments along the periphery, into the centre. But as this is the postmodern world's ideologically evacuated centre, the Australians must reinforce themselves through the physical presence of a periphery. In keeping with their own interests they are calling upon Asia-Pacific regional solidarity—with more imagination and goodwill than the Euro-American aesthetic ever allowed, it should be added.

The immigrant's identity is formed within the western metropolis; the emigre forms the core of the modern—the modern being a consciousness of exile, as Raymond Williams argues, speaking about the politics of modernism.¹ Edward Said also increasingly privileges the exile's perspective.² One might even say that the western, the modern and the international form a relay that is ontologically, if not materially, compounded within exile consciousness. But precisely because of this slippage between immigrant (emigre), exile (diaspora) and voluntary migration, because of the deployment of this ambiguity for a 'free' discourse on identities, it may be useful to sort out a definitional schema for differences.

Third-world polemicists located in the first world take the national not only as a lost cause but also as a negative hypothesis. World affairs are conducted

This essay was first presented at a conference, New Internationalism, organized by the Institute of New International Visual Arts (inIVA) and the Tate Gallery in London, in 1994. The first published version appeared under the title 'A New Inter Nationalism: The Missing Hyphen', in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, edited by Jean Fisher, inIVA/Kala Press, London, 1994.

according to the hegemonic goodwill or hierarchy of economic interests of the first world, they argue; and the immigrants, more keenly aware of the contradiction between goodwill and interest, make it their mission to expose that. For polemicists located in national cultures 'inter-national' is a firmly hyphenated term. The national is their express concern and determined reality; the international is a system of interdependence that is based on alert strategies of national *independence*.

So what are the terms in which I talk about a new internationalism in Indian art? Until recently India was moving along a planned, progressive, modernizing process; it had worked into its cultural programme a debate that spelt: national in content, international in form. Yet there are only a few artists

who tackle the national–international equation in terms that are not xenophobic or ingratiating to the globalizing dictate but based on international solidarity (*Illus. 1*).

Even as developed nations weaken the material base of the developing ones a great deal of cant about one world and polyvocal identities is offered theoretically. The visibility of the East Asian 'tigers' suggests that the economic miracle of late capitalism brings cultural internationalism suddenly into effect. By the same token Indians are becoming aware of the limited value of a seat in international forums when this is not backed by economic viability. But the postmodern age offers a more deterministic scenario for internationalism than western liberal discourse is ready to acknowledge. Indeed one might argue precisely in favour of anachronistic models of mid-century nationalisms: the progressive leadership provided by Nehru, Nasser and Tito did inaugurate, within the cold-war context and in the first flush of postcolonial euphoria, a new internationalism via concepts such as Afro-Asian unity and nonalignment. Even if this does not meet with current historical considerations as hard politics we do know that socialist internationalism, an emphatically revolutionary cultural phenomenon, gained in the early decades of the twentieth century a vanguard position in world culture. And that it sustained the dignity and struggle of third-world nations until at least the ripening of the Cuban revolution and the defeat of the United States by the Vietnamese.



1 Krishen Khanna, *The Dead: Preparation for a Photograph*, 1970

In the absence of any such ethical considerations it is our collective business to make any further euphoria about the 'international' difficult not only for the western elites but for ourselves too.

My schema for this purpose includes the simultaneous consideration and critique of nationalism and of secular culture, of primitivism and of the avantgarde. I will try to indicate the relayed connection between these. And if instead of a universal aesthetic there is more about national cultural manifestations, then I hope it will be taken as in some part a shifting of the high ground of western art institutions to where we stand: inside/outside in a state of permanent (self)doubt. This is an imperative especially reserved, as we too well know, for the 'others' whose last defence is their persistently defined identity.

The Primitivist Trope

There have been extensive critiques of two major exhibitions: '*Primitivism*' in *Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984) and *Magiciens de la Terre* (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989). The first invoked primitivism in the classical modernist model, the second in a laissez-faire postmodernist mode. I should like to look at two arguments: the famous one of Thomas McEvilley regarding the MoMA exhibition,³ and the other (more modest but also from my ideological perspective, more trenchant) of Cesare Poppi with regard to the Paris show.⁴ The first is based on a respect for anthropological contexts and ethnic particularities, which is to say a respect for otherness; the second respects a historical operation of culture based on the assumption of meaning through reason. Here is an argument for integrative knowledge that allows an insight into differential aesthetics and treats that in turn as evidence of a politically honed evaluation of the contemporary as such.

The western avantgarde shows itself time and again to have no problem in becoming primitivist—the better perhaps to obstruct the pressure of plural *histories* of nations and peoples that are similar, except that they are 'out of sync' and therefore embarrassing to its universalist claims. By and large there is an underlying internationalist assumption that comparative cultural phenomena are to be placed within synchronous models, and synchronicity is perhaps best adapted from anthropology to curatorship. Conversely, therefore, today's curators may act a little like old-style ethnographers foraging around the world for trophies.

Converted into museum practice, all that is valuable in the ethnographer's vision is depoliticized; lived experience is compacted in the exhibitions as affective *presence* that offers art in a condition of hypostasis. In the face of such curatorial charismas it is precisely the business of the critic and historian to introduce temporality and to reinforce the diachronic nature of cultural formations, to insist on something of the potential consciousness of artists, to engage with their praxiological motives. Also

to locate the 'structure of feeling' model of Raymond Williams within the very display of comparative cultural phenomena, to seek in the slow temporal moulding of forms an annotated morphology to reveal thereby the hidden moment of reflexivity.

As international exhibitions become overworked ground for identity made easy, there is reason to believe that variations of primitivism may be the definitional core of a new internationalism. From the point of view of participating third-world artists this is the persona they may adopt to enter the international arena.

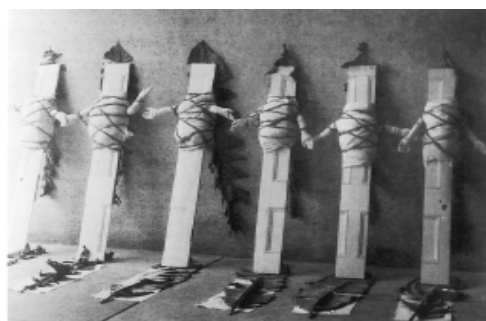
Primitivism is a kind of masquerade and within such terms a theatric mode is entirely valid. Ritual is one such theatric mode: it allows and encodes the rite of passage or a transgressional *entry*. As entry into the citadels of white cultures is so difficult such simulations will thrive in the forthcoming art of the third world—sometimes in a complex allegorical unfolding of identities, sometimes as tactics. Simulation is very likely to become a simulacrum, a copy of that which is nonexistent—what orientalism, for example, or primitivism are about: copies or models of that which does not exist. And it is worth cautioning ourselves lest the joke turn on us.

Southern Avantgardes

I will speak about three international exhibitions outside the Euro-American orbit: the third Havana Bienal (1989), the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane (1993) and the first Johannesburg Biennale (1995).⁵

I went to the Havana Bienal in 1989. The country, though besieged, still saw itself as a true communist outpost with a cultural vanguard that could represent not only the radical elements in Latin America but also those of the third world. Indeed Cuban curators toured many third-world countries on low budgets to compile lively national shows. These were exhibited thematically within non-national groupings. There were in addition ancillary shows of great vivacity, highlighting aspects of contemporary art, craft and popular kitsch production in hybrid postcolonial (arguably also postmodern) cultures. The dynamic director of the Havana Bienal Lillian Llanes, whose own preference is American minimalism, seems to have been prompted to see the presence of a simulated icon, fetish and ritual altar as a legitimate extension of phenomenological encounters that a constructed exhibition space foregrounds. The Havana Bienal offered theatric presentations of body, object and soul that postmodernist art practice, especially Joseph Beuys's avantgarde ironies, promises. It had, in addition, a thick layering of collective cultural meanings that are accretions of a postcolonial politics (*Illus. 2*).

To this curious subversion of American minimalism Havana added a sense of primitive/primitivist materiality that was in a sense ingenious. The aim may have been to deconstruct the object within modern art practice into its semiotic aspects and to call into question identity politics, especially Afro-Caribbean roots, through the



Above: 2 Jose Bedia Valdes, *What Have They Done to You, Mother Kalunga?* (installation view), 1989. Below: 3 FX Harsono, *Just the Rights / Those with No Right to a Voice* (installation view), 1993

polyvocal speech of a masquerading native. Gerardo Mosquera critically articulates this position in Cuban art,⁶ thereby questioning the cultural economies of modernism itself. The Havana experience was about excess that allows one to try everything and therefore become transgressive. As a spectacle in the aftermath of surrealism played out on an anomalous island off the American mainland, it tried to break every code— aesthetic and political.

I returned from the Havana Bienal with a question: why is there no avantgarde in India? Cuba had proved that the avantgarde concept was neither an imperialist prerogative nor a cold-war ruse. The 1993 Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane confirmed this thought, this time in a context that is geographically proximate to India. The answer to the question requires backtracking into the ideological terrain of contemporary Indian art. Meanwhile, to continue the argument at hand, the 1990s have been

overrun with multiethnic pluralisms and many of the Asian artists are now willing to adopt, in a valorized form of otherness, some sort of a primal persona: Indonesian, Thai, Filipino artists reconsecrate art and stage shamanistic revivals. Indigenous materials, elusive gestures and the body are much foregrounded in Southeast Asian art. Many of these are euphemisms for the political message (*Illus. 3*). The fact that these are for the most part less ironical than their Latin American counterparts raises other questions. Indeed the paradoxes accumulate from one continent to another and make up another cultural agenda for investigation.

I call this current Asian project a means of navigating the void that lies at the heart of such geopolitical geometries as local/global. The navigational means are sometimes naive, even disingenuous. No matter: there is in a spectacle like the Asia-Pacific Triennial a peculiar urgency to challenge the sort of spectacles the west favours.

In Havana the Cubans had made the selection; in Brisbane the Australians, as shepherds of a somewhat chaotic and uncharted avantgarde in Asia, had selected the show with local help. Then came a South African initiative in the form of

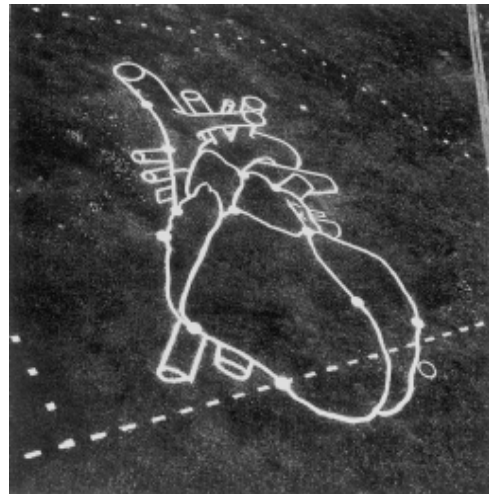
the Johannesburg Biennale where a predominantly white art establishment invited international curators to land in a deeply riven society, to see and choose and formulate and bring artworks, coopting South African artists in what was to be ‘a celebration of the reentry of South Africa into the world community’. This opened up a Pandora’s box of white/black, north/south, first-world/third-world relations. The presence of international curators in the midst of this anguished nation-in-the-making provided an understanding of the shape a new internationalism might take.

The team of international curators was divided, in my mind, along stereotypical lines. The white curators were as always ambitious and tough with a built-in work ethic upholding, though somewhat discreetly, the sign of western-style ‘excellence’. Most of the nonwhites were reticent, embarrassed and a little reluctant in the presence of so much zeal. Certainly we were not able to act like discoverers (in the new world order) of aesthetic parities and universal exotica. The South Africans were divided to the bone about the project and legitimately at war among themselves; those white and nonwhite identities offered a split mirror-image of one’s own self before the highhanded jury of international art. I hated being a juror.

The stereotyped roles continued. I felt the need to reemphasize that through this century the avantgarde has been related to the historical as well as to the primitive—and that in South Africa both spell *apartheid*. I felt the need to acknowledge the coded self-doubt of a white artist and place it against the message of the black artist (*Illus. 4, 5*). Together they make up the complexity of the artistic struggle. They should be read so as to confront, not condone, the ‘International Trans-Avant-Garde’ aesthetic that Achille Bonito Oliva for example proposes.⁷ The elusive trails that Oliva proposes and the singular ‘ideal’ that Jean-Francois Lyotard theorizes in his famous essay ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’,⁸ are undone through alternat-



4 Willi Bester, *Homage to Bixia*, 1995



5 Doris Bloom and William Kentridge, *'Heart'*, 1995

ive art-historical readings that are sufficiently political to merit the title of a new internationalism.

Cf. The 1960s

It may be useful to reflect for a moment on older forms of internationalism. The concept of the historical avantgarde, as in the Peter Burger version,⁹ introduces questions of art and institution, of art and life, of a praxis located in the imaginary. Rather than a glib dovetailing of epiphanies this gives one a different perspective on the symbolic order in art. Making for a post-surrealist ethos, this suggests how the organic comes to be replaced by the fragmentary, the montage, the allegorical. How displacements are crucial and part-to-whole relationships are problematized into odd seriality and insecure relays. How all this facilitates the hermeneutic task of reconstructing the past and ultimately, through these many deferrals, a historical vision. Thus we come full circle to the radical critique of international modernism by third-world artists.

Let us recall the Latin American filmmakers of the 1960s—the Argentinian Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, the Brazilian Glauber Rocha, the Cuban Humberto Solas and Tomas Alea—all part of a legendary relay. Solanas and Getino declared in their famous 1969 manifesto, 'Towards a Third Cinema': 'every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or penetrates the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the system finds indigestible.'¹⁰ Third cinema comes into being after 'ten years of the Cuban revolution, the Vietnamese struggle, and the development of a worldwide liberation movement whose moving force is to be found in the third world countries'.¹¹ Further elaborating the 'transnational' function of this revolutionary cinema, Solanas and Getino aver that the 'testimony about a national reality' can be 'an inestimable means of dialogue and knowledge on a global scale. No internationalist struggle can be carried out successfully without a mutual exchange of experiences between peoples, if peoples cannot manage to break out of the balkanization which imperialism strives to maintain.'¹²

Renderings of the National

The international acquires a new dimension precisely because the national is now deconstructed in terms that go beyond the famous levering consciousness of the exile. These are terms based on recognition, after Benedict Anderson,¹³ of the imaginings of a community as nation; terms that have both a peculiar persistence and fragility. Related to this are critiques of the nation-state by subaltern studies historians who urge us, among other things, to give close regard to the pain and struggle of such societal 'fragments' that survive without.¹⁴ They thereby force a revaluation of the nationalist narrative which sees the nation as some kind of a transcendent, continually

coherent whole; instead, the nation is seen as a differentiated structure configured by its fragments.¹⁵

The national in India refers to several things at once. It refers to the nationalist consciousness with its ambivalence towards western-style modernization of society and state. The extreme example of this position is of course Gandhi, whose social reflexion sets modernity and the nation at odds with each other. Even while he 'invites the masses into history' he undermines institutionalized collectivities in a manner resembling anarchism. This brings him full circle into modernity through a paradox. In contrast, there is the actual emergence of a national state and the regime of modernity it favours through institutional structures of universal franchise, formal education, courts of justice and democracy. With independence

the newly liberated economy comes to be enshrined as the very essence of the nation. This is the Nehruvian era of socialism, secularism and non-alignment, when 'the task of nation building' is quite literally taken to be the objective of state policy. During the eighties and more so the nineties, with the erosion and finally the sweeping away of all three pillars of the Nehruvian utopia, we are at a juncture when the economy is being evacuated from the collective conception of the Indian nation.¹⁶

Considering the predominantly developmental model of mid-century third-world nationalism and the high stakes, including economic sacrifices, that globalization now demands from the third world, any discussion of nationalism will have to include the fallout of western attempts to dismantle developing national economies through malafide legislation, embargos and economic sanctions. And it will have to contend with more than a cultural idiom to include all forms of resistance against this new US-led imperialism.

If, as is often argued by Indian social scientists, the modern comes in the wake of a 'passive revolution', most radical initiatives get defined as the cultural values of the middle class—'the lonely bilingual intelligentsias', in Benedict Anderson's telling phrase.¹⁷ This in turn explains the exclusion in discourse as well as cultural practice of such notions as subversion, transgression and even serious disjuncture. Nevertheless we have to recognize how mainstream nationalism *is* challenged from within; how along the trajectory of the national a figure like Gandhi is contrasted by an Ambedkar to produce a discourse on subaltern classes in terms that are militantly modern. These are terms inscribed within the Indian constitution. The antibrahmin movement active in different parts of the country produces a corpus of dalit literature that is anti-institutional in the most radical sense. National state institutions in the postcolonial period are challenged for the elite definition of modernity forged by Nehru. A more grassroots socialism as well as extraparliamentary politics come into play in the 1960s and 70s. Correspondingly, there are cultural movements based on tribal/peasant,



Left: 6 K.P. Krishnakumar, *Standing Figure with Outstretched Arm*, 1989. Right: 7 Savi Savarkar, *Untouchable with Dead Cow-I*, 1996

ethnic and caste subversions. There is a typical leftwing radicalism along with a strong communist movement from the 1940s. From the 1960s, Maoist or Naxalite articulations in literature, theatre and film are produced in several parts of the country, especially in Bengal and Kerala. Taken together these form an alternative culture that drives a wedge into the otherwise sanguine existentialism of modern Indian art. There is, in other words, more radical art practice than we may acknowledge in the normal course of recounting our national modern (*Illus.* 6, 7). And only after we have taken these into account shall we know the nature of our own modernity. How far is it classical and conservative? How far is it dissident, radical, perhaps nihilist? The sort of internationalism we envisage will be predicated on these historically posed and continually questioned hypotheses.

Meanwhile we need to shore up all the arguments whereby the national

can be made rational and humane. This involves a recognition of the many-nations-in-one argument. This also requires a full articulation of the 'nation and its fragments' with urgent attention paid to the 'truth of the victim'. We should, I believe, be committed to a world that has understood the dangers of a grossly progressive ideology. However, this should be a world which stands corrected in a way to be able to resist the religious revivalism, ethnic bigotry and market pluralism activated by the conjuncture of backward capitalism and neoimperialism.

Even as the international net of debt and bondage and the unequal exchange of commodities grow ever tighter, the intellectual resources whereby such a world might even be comprehended, are inhibited and paralysed by the fear of ethnocentricity. While the real world in which people live and work slips irresistibly into the homogenizing maw of international capitalism—one world!—the ability of contemporary intellectuals to even conceptualize this world except in terms of an infinite and incommensurable plurality is fast disappearing down the vortex.¹⁸

In considering this paradox we are compelled to recognize that internationalism is not some floating sign that can attach itself as easily to the reactionary content of national religious or ethnic revivals as to the progressivism of the left as to the notion of marginality and difference in the postmodern sense of these terms. Internationalism has intertwined the histories of all nations. Here the only floating sign worth extracting is that of secular culture.

A Bid for the Secular

The inclusion of values and artefacts from tribal, popular and mass cultures in shows all around the world is the token effect of radicalisms emanating from critiques of the enlightenment. But it should, I believe, address the one question that is carried over from the modern to the postmodern, and that signals more than anything else the value of a new internationalism: the question of the *secular*.

Secular culture is a *good setting*; here subjectivities retain their difference. Literary examples like Amitav Ghosh's anthropological work of fiction, *In an Antique Land*, prove that the secular and the subjective consciousness share common ground. Discerning a differentiated body-politic, alert artists/authors will not allow a liberal indulgence of religious sentiments. This is despite, or perhaps because of, the evidence of the Rushdie affair which proved how readily, and to my mind tragically, the secular is jettisoned from cultural transactions. It brought up the desperate temptation of doubletalk by the Asian intelligentsia on behalf of the faith-bound. For all the vulnerability it revealed in the heart of the immigrant precariously situated in the white world, it left one aghast at the reciprocal and therefore near-total regression into prejudice. If Salman Rushdie was wrong in exoticizing Islam, the compatriots of

Rushdie were far more in error in giving credence to the much-mediated and thereby equally reified categories of belief, reverence, faith. How did the sacred, indeed religious sentiment, suddenly surface in cosmopolitan diaspora consciousness, and even more militantly than in ‘underdeveloped’ national cultures?

Alok Rai, one of the few who supported Rushdie from India, argued:

Some protest there was, against this surrender to religious bigots. . . . But this was drowned, on the one hand, by the clamour of the faithful, and on the other, by sneers at ‘armchair liberals’. These much-reviled creatures had, it was alleged, once again displayed their ‘western’ affiliation, their insufficient rootedness in indigenous mental realities, their inadequate awareness of the depth of the people’s religious emotions. . . . In a frenzy of narcissistic guilt, the elite indigenists simply volunteered the pass to those who claimed to speak on behalf of ‘tradition’ and a mythical ‘people’ to the Shankaracharyas and the Imams.¹⁹

Living in India, I oppose such regression. Like Rai I do not believe in the concept of blasphemy and cannot commit myself to such anachronisms in contemporary cultural discourse. Faith in the emancipatory spirit of the imagination and acute reflection on human contradiction suit the intellectual temperament, religious sympathy does not. I learnt this during recent manifestations of Hindu fundamentalism (Hindutva) when artists and intellectuals on a common cultural platform tested the courage of the secular position in India—in the face of some ugly manifestations of faith.²⁰

As a political and cultural proposition within Indian nationalism, secularism is in many ways unique—including the fact that it is enshrined in the constitution of the Indian state in a way that it is not in other countries of the subcontinent. Its trivialization, its unrealized potential and its further erosion are a matter of trauma and grief, and of determined action. An entire polity depends upon it for its very life. Nor is this secular a political abstraction as many people have too readily argued; it is inscribed not only in the constitution but within the experience of tradition and in the ethics of modernity in India. And therefore it is to be defended as a major criterion for national survival and international cultural discourse.

Reflexive Practice

New internationalism should be a project that both creates and dismantles cultural hegemonies; that offers in fact the possibility of reading off quite naked allegories of the national as some Indian political philosophers are passionately engaged in doing.²¹ We should not be content with reviving plural ethnohistories in an aggregative form or with reterritorializing arenas for cultural practice across the globe on cue from the balance of power enshrined in the new world order.

There are strong contrary motivations at work everywhere across the



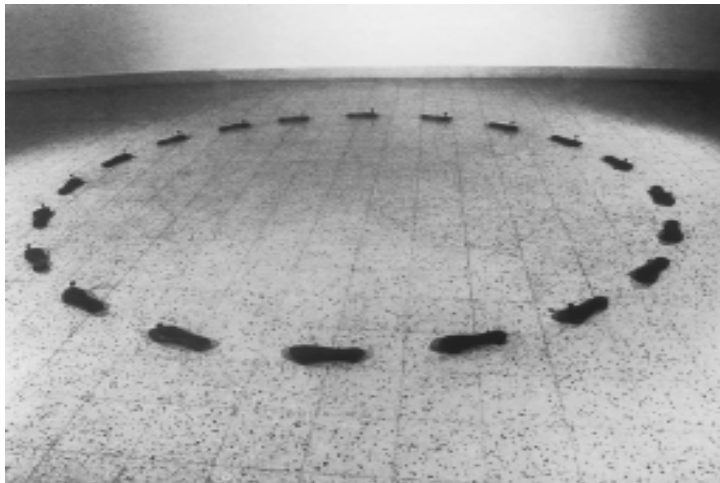
8 Nalini Malani, *City of Desires* (installation view), 1992

globe to be oddly, sometimes precariously, positioned in national and international arenas. This angled entry used to be called tendentious art practice. This is the radicalism that will have to be elicited in the postmodern age. For, alongside the discourse, new internationalism has to be contestatory on the strength of individual artists who are able to conduct a hard retake of their aesthetic practice (*Illus. 8, 9, 10*).

Artists may intervene in the system by choosing to give historical efficacy to anarchist initiatives in the intrepid manner of the modernist *self*. On the other hand they may systematically set up collective, and in the postmodernist style theatric, pre-conditions for praxis. In both anarchist manoeuvre and theatric performance there is a space outside (the outsider's space?), so that while the artist slots into a personal role there is a more elusive play with processes of induction, with the possibility of masquerade and even for that matter the lure of nihilism—the command of which usually spells out the manifestos of radical and feminist art.

Sufficiently matched by historical irony, the project at hand must be taken for what it is: a crusade under the sign of sovereignty even as that notion turns itself inside out; a crusade to return otherness to the secret fold of the self where it helps to form an identity but an identity nurtured in solitude and tested in the field as praxis.

A new internationalism is therefore not a matter of consensus. The very term asks for immediate dismantling.



Above: 9 Vivan Sundaram, *House/Boat* (installation view), 1994. Below: 10 Pushpamala N., *Labyrinth*, 1994

Notes and References

- ¹ See Raymond Williams, 'When Was Modernism?', in *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London, 1989.
- ² See Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, edited by Russel Ferguson et al., The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York/The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990.
- ³ Thomas McEvilley, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief', *Artforum*, November 1984.
- ⁴ Cesare Poppi, 'From the Suburbs of the Global Village: Afterthoughts on Magiciens de la Terre', *Third Text*, No. 14, Spring 1991.
- ⁵ *Tercera Bienal de La Habana*, exhibition catalogue, Centro Wifredo Lam/Editorial Letras Cubanas La Habana, Havana, 1989; *First Asia-Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1993; *Africus: Johannesburg Biennale*, exhibition catalogue, Transitional Metropolitan Council, Johannesburg, 1995.
- ⁶ See Gerardo Mosquera, 'Modernity and Africa: Wilfredo Lam in his Island', *Third Text*, No. 20, Autumn 1992.
- ⁷ See Achille Bonito Oliva, 'The International Trans-Avant-Garde', in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, edited by Thomas Docherty, Harvester/Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1993.
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- ⁹ Peter Burger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984.
- ¹⁰ Quoted by Michael Chanan in 'The Changing Geography of Third Cinema', in *Screen*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Winter 1977, p. 374.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid., pp. 379–80.
- ¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983.
- ¹⁴ See Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu–Muslim Riots in India Today', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, March 1991.
- ¹⁵ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993.
- ¹⁶ Satish Deshpande, 'Imagined Economies', in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 25–26, December 1993, p. 13.
- ¹⁷ *Imagined Communities*, p. 127.
- ¹⁸ Alok Rai, 'Black Skin, Black Masks', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVII, No. 39, 26 September 1992, p. 2099.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 2012.
- ²⁰ See articles and reportage in *Mukta Nad: Hum Sub Ayodhya*, Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, New Delhi, 1993.
- ²¹ See, for example, Sudipta Kaviraja, 'The Imaginary Institution of India', in *Subaltern Studies VII*, edited by Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992.

Globalization: Navigating the Void

Global Capitalism

Silvering and fragile, Noam Chomsky stands in the footlights, speaking like an angel in profound rage. His unremitting data on capitalism and his indefatigable act of stripping the liberal myth down to its brutal form is matched by his detached way of calling the bluff of futurist propaganda spinning from the profits of the TNCs that glorify globalization. There is among intellectuals and activists an impassioned backing of Chomsky's analyses. But even as he reveals the Corporate Gulag that destroys through redoubled deceit and in the name of freedom sectors of life inimical to the single aim of profit, his loneliness on the world stage deepens.¹

Current capitalism (that no longer merits the hope that it is the late, or last, stage of capitalism) can be reduced, despite the rhetoric of liberalization, to hard statistics about slashed wages, massive unemployment and increasing destitution in the heart of the metropolitan north. As for the south, even facts shrivel before the bitter farce played out against its interests. As large parts of its population drop from the purview of the globalists, the 'one world' and its media-fed population celebrate, in however schizophrenic a manner, a consumerist utopia.

The terminology of globalism refers unblushingly to an ideology of the market dictated by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, G-7 and GATT; to a global market of which the United States, having 'won' the cold war, is the moral conductor. It sets the norm not only for free trade but also (in the same universalizing mode) for human rights, for historical and cultural studies. What is being globalized therefore is American-style capitalism and its implicit world view.

Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* ends on the theme of American domination and delivers its rebuttal in a spirit of sustained opposition to imperial power that newer terminologies like globalization will not be able to pronounce. 'There are far too many politicized people on earth today for any nation to readily

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accept the finality of America's mission to lead the world', Said writes.² To that I should like to add, as an inhabitant of the third world (and a little removed from the internecine wars in the American academy about the ontological status of anticolonial histories and the transcription of these on to a condition of postcoloniality), that there is not only 'an internationalist counter-articulation' stemming from the resistances in the 'underlying world map'.³ This map is in fact the politically alive geography of the south where ancient ground heaves to change continental relations through economic competition, through the power of anticolonial discourse, through the forceful heterogeneity of cultural practice.

From Where I Speak

A great deal of present postcolonial cultural discourse overextrapolates on the idea of an 'underlying world map' and treats it as some sort of a semisurreal terrain with interstitial spaces from within which the colonials/subalterns work out sly strategies of complicity and subversion. Although I do not deny the importance of opening up the too rigid opposition between colonial and postcolonial positions by what one might call the categorical device of hybridity, I should like to recall the more outspoken anti-imperialist practices of which India holds a fairly honourable legacy.

First of all there has been, in conjunction with nationalism, a certain kind of utopian commitment to the international in India. There was a revolutionary bias in the definition of internationalism as early as 1920, emblemized by M.N. Roy's exchanges with Lenin at the Second Congress of the Communist International. A social-democratic and communist alternative was inscribed within mainstream nationalism from the 1930s. Alongside the anti-imperialist, the antifascist stand during the war signalled by Nehru and foregrounded by the Communist Party of India offered another kind of international solidarity. All this in turn conditioned progressivist cultural and aesthetic categories of modernity and modernism. Nehru's postindependence internationalism based on Afro-Asian unity and the nonaligned movement (NAM) not only negotiated the cold war, it transformed itself into the crucial category of the third world pushing internationalism towards a fresh agenda. This was a contestatory postcolonialism well understood in India, though more fully developed in other countries—Cuba, Algeria, Vietnam, fighting a life-and-death war of liberation against Euro-American imperialism at the time.

Second, and this is the nationalist dialectic, until very recently a judiciously protectionist national economy was both a promise and a reality in India. From where I speak there is still ground for debate about the nation-state. With all the calumny it has earned, it may be the only political structure that can protect the people of the third world from the totalitarian system that oligopolies establish—ironically, through the massive state power of advanced nations. Whether the nation-states of the third world can become yet again the site of opposition is now a particularly vexed

issue, nor is this the place to go into the possibilities of survival of national economies and national cultures. Leading Indian Marxists are rearticulating key issues about the economy in terms of the nation and the state.⁴ From other points of view along the ideological spectrum there is interrogation underway concerning the ethics of the nation-state in relation to the polity, the people and communities.⁵ Accompanied by a cultural discourse and practice that differ both from that of the west and of other post-colonial countries, this is worth examining in its own terms and not only as a differential device for theorizing postcoloniality. As Partha Chatterjee says:

the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are positive not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West. How can we ignore this without reducing the experience of anticolonial nationalism to a caricature of itself?

'Western universalism' no less than 'Oriental exceptionalism' can be shown to be only a particular form of a richer, more diverse, and differentiated conceptualization of a new universal idea. This might allow us the possibility not only to think of new forms of the modern community . . . but, much more decisively, to think of new forms of the modern state. . . . The project then is to claim for us, the once-colonized, our freedom of imagination.⁶

In the context of this dialectic it may be useful to backtrack on the trajectory of our cultural nationalism. Given India's sustained struggle for independence and the precise mode of its decolonization, its cultural life is alternately conservative and progressive. It is a peculiarly pitched colonial modernity, not derivative in some deducible sense but heavily mediated. The mediations derive from its classical-imperialist past, its civilizational spread and its strong nationalist movement. Even while Indian nationalism works around the militant motif of *swaraj* it nevertheless takes the form of a 'passive revolution'.⁷ Independence is gained through Gandhi's uniquely peaceful and intrepid principle of a people's *satyagraha*; but within the terms of a negotiated transfer of power the sovereign state comes to represent the interests of the Indian ruling classes.

In saying that Indian cultural life is alternately conservative and progressive I am referring to the way nationalist consciousness has been split, supplanted, differentiated and reconfigured by leading positions. Key terms like *swadeshi* are discussed within a cultural *mise-en-scene* that includes among its major players Gandhi and Tagore.⁸ One paradigm for national culture can be derived from that seminal exchange. As evidence of Tagore's stand there is an entire pedagogical system elaborated in his university at Santiniketan. Called *Visva-Bharati*, the national here extends into the universal realm of the poet's imagination. What is more, Tagore introduces the troubled terrain of the international where he finds himself groping in a manner far

more complex than his fuzzy universalist enunciations would indicate. Along with his close yet vexed relationship with the west, he devises an Asian version of internationalism, he communicates with contemporaries in Japan and China, he receives adulation and rebuffs.⁹

It may be useful to retroactively elaborate the motif of sovereignty (as it derives from the nationalist discourse) and see it in the richly polyvocal literature of Tagore. He is already, at the start of the twentieth century, writing novels both intensely introspective and polemical about the definition of the nation in terms of its people. He links this up with the question of subjectivity: in *Gora* in the transposed identity of a white man who grows up as a foundling in a Hindu home; in the volatile woman protagonist from a feudal household in *Ghare Baire*. He steeps these characters in the great vortex of contemporary nationalist history, making them interrogative figures of mixed portent. He prefigures a historically shaped subjectivity with a potential consciousness actually realized in the later narrative of the nation. To the Tagore lineage may be added the motif of sovereignty worked into an ethnographic allegory in Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy, where the protagonist Apu lends both sublimity and catharsis to the quest of a postindependence nation.¹⁰

On the other hand there is the culture of the left. In balance its project of modernity is not very different from that of the liberal intellectual stream: not denying the progressivism it promotes, the promise of daring new forms that break through the realist conscience is often absent. But daring forms do exist. In Santiniketan itself, a tribal persona with radical affect is already assumed in the mid-1930s by the artist Ramkinkar Baij. He positions his tribals as migrant labour in *Santal Family* in the compound of Kala Bhavana at Santiniketan. From the next decade the history of the Bengal IPTA (Indian Peoples' Theatre Association) testifies to major theatric achievements like *Nabanna*. From the heart of this vortex the revolutionary filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak brings to bear the left ideology as witness to moments of advance and regression in postindependence India. His last film, *Jukti Takko ar Gappo* (1975), becomes an occasion for him to reflect autobiographically on the interposed meanings of revolutionary practice in art and politics. Not surprisingly, the mode is tragic.¹¹ During the same period Mahasweta Devi, the radical feminist writer from Bengal, devises the role of a surrogate mother in monumental proportions, stretching the gendered subject to allegorical attenuation and thus to the ends of historical narrative. As Gayatri Spivak says, Mahasweta Devi offers to the young Naxalites of the time a 'history imagined into fiction'.¹²

We may continue with the radicals of subsequent generations who favour a dialectics of the modern and the primitive/subaltern, who seek to elicit from it a politics of the local—as against national—community. Certainly in the valorized mode of contemporary ethnography the local is a place of knowledge; the local in India often signifies vernacular culture, tribal authenticity. The local is also the site for politically

honed sets of choices at a given place and time. Both the peasantry and the proletariat must take the local as immanent ground for a politics of revolt, a concept that was used to the bitter end in Mao's cultural revolution and matched in India through the 1960s and 70s as a ground for militant action by the Naxalites. This created a radical, nihilist poetics that marked the ground of Indian art, but its politics often shortened the life of the protagonists. Witness the case of two Kerala artists of exceptional talent: filmmaker John Abraham and sculptor K.P. Krishnakumar, both of whom died prematurely in the 1980s signalling the desperation—economic, existential, political—of producing art in our times.

They may or may not have subscribed to the common view of several CPI(ML) groups that the Naxalite movements were a continuation of the nationalist independence struggle, but the consequences of such a view were clearly applied to them. In effectively assigning to the nation's nationalist bourgeoisie a colonial identity, which therefore provided no useful precedents to the practice, the Kerala Radicals' vanguardism . . . [assumed] the highly contradictory responsibilities of having to 'introduce history into a land that knew only memory'.¹³

Ashish Rajadhyaksha, while discussing the short life of the Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association (1987–89) and its otherwise generally tragic history that ended with Krishnakumar's suicide, argues that the terms of individual action and collective struggle and the invoking of a grand tradition of left discourse mean that the

idea of 'belonging' now came inextricably to be linked to the image of exile. . . . What one could belong to was a combination of left utopia and personal memory, making for an art that was highly individuated and allegorical. . . . While on the one hand this provided an apparently moral high ground from where to reject all other forms of identity, on the other—and more painfully—it also posed the problem of how to inhabit the condition of exile.¹⁴

The preceding trajectories with some key cultural markers show why Fredric Jameson's formulation about the national allegory being the preeminent paradigm for third-world literature continues to be valid.¹⁵ This view of the national can be complemented by James Clifford's reformulation of the local in terms of ethnographic allegories—the narrative means for a grassroots recuperation of lost identities.¹⁶ In both cases the allegorical breaks up the paradigmatic nature of the *cause*: in the first case it questions the immanent condition of culture taken as some irrepressible truth offering; in the second case it splits the symbolic homogeneity of the people (from whom a whole series of organic metaphors is drawn) into its differentiated parts. There may be good reason to break the metaphoric mode suitable to a romantic

version of culture/people/nation and thus avoid heavy condensation of these terms. There is a pending hermeneutic task to work out a mode of displacement and exegeses; to go beyond the historicist argument and into an ethical imaginary—an ethics that does not become constraining law or institutional decree. ‘One may speak of secular space, and of humanely constructed and independent histories that are fundamentally knowable, although not through grand theory or systematic totalization’, Edward Said says. ‘I am talking about a way of regarding the world as amenable to investigation and interrogation.’¹⁷

Taking the cue from various examples of Indian art in the twentieth century, we can claim a tradition of the modern that inscribes within its very narrative the aspirations of a secular nation. Logically, contemporary examples of the same practice offer a critique of the assumptions that render the secular nation self-evident.

A problematical account of the community and nation is sustained by today’s interventionist documentary filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan, who are functioning in the face of a partially communalized society—communal being the term coined in India for sectarian and increasingly fundamentalist religious communities. Wounded but still fairly democratic, the polity of contemporary India is a worthy audience; to them Patwardhan addresses his trilogy on the *unmaking* of secular India in the last ten years, culminating in the 1994 documentary, *Father, Son and the Holy War*. Here religious fundamentalism is seen as a pathetic discourse of virility. Resistance is shown building up in the everyday lives of women who appear in the film as the lean survivors of an unholy war raging in the streets of urban India.

Postcolonial/Postmodern Entanglement

As a consequence of the historical determinants coloniality imposes one can see that codes are still available in staggering variety to the postcolonial artist. These offer strategic choices and benign practice ranging from the high to the low, from the centre to the periphery, from the local to the global. The postcolonial artist may be seen as navigating the void between these seductively posed polarities, sustaining a romance by turning exoticized otherness into social realignments.

Is there in the third world today a historical commitment to national selfhood and collective cultural praxis? Or is it a pragmatic undertaking, an interpretive process, a sorting out of the representational dilemmas of postcoloniality? At one level of discourse this question devolves to a rather simple political preference. Without going into detail I should like to position myself, as I hope I have already indicated, in favour of a conflictual rather than negotiating stand on the question of postcolonial culture.¹⁸

Consider in this context what Homi Bhabha is theorizing. ‘Driven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity’, he wishes to ‘rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial’.¹⁹ And to thus assert alterity through a valoriz-

ing of the other who is now so demonstrably the speaking subject. Bhabha's politics of cultural difference favours the short manoeuvre and the subtle negotiation. There is also the longer navigational pull—to borders, frontiers, horizons, which are all deferred to postpolitics and pitched beyond the fin-de-siecle present: 'Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderline of the "present", for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix "post"'.²⁰ And further:

The present can no longer be envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities. Unlike the dead hand of history that tells the beads of sequential time like a rosary, seeking to establish serial, causal connections, we are now confronted with what Walter Benjamin describes as the blasting of a monadic moment from the homogenous course of history, 'establishing a conception of the present as the "time of now"'.²¹

Walter Benjamin's melancholy metaphors of exile, taken up by Raymond Williams and Edward Said, become leitmotifs of the twentieth century, markers of the modern consciousness. Infused as they are with their own generational anguish of the diaspora, we can track through these authors modernity's emigre soul and the political opponent's exile. We can also extrapolate therefrom the postcolonial condition of refugee labour developing into a new kind of peripheral identity. But to move from the tragic life of Benjamin, from the interventionism of Williams and Said, to Homi Bhabha's discursive moves on otherness, is a detour. A celebration of migrancy as exile, of vagrancy as diaspora: what shall we make of that?

His politics is ratified, Bhabha would no doubt claim, by his engagement with Frantz Fanon.²² Here is however the paradox. Bhabha denies the relevance of the older politics of anticolonialism. He turns it into a discursive radicalism: 'There is no longer an influential separatist emphasis on simply elaborating an anti-imperialist or black-nationalist tradition "in itself". There is an attempt to interrupt the Western discourse of modernity through these displacing, interrogative, subaltern or post-slavery narratives and the critical theoretical perspectives they engender.'²³ Having virtually buried the struggle, he still elicits support from Fanon and goes on to speak about unbelonging, black resistance, the lure of community and gunrunning politics—as in Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*. Homi Bhabha constructs a kind of spiral around otherness, giving it an abstracted political dynamic. Skimming metropolitan manifestations of multiculturalism, he then plunges into the hallucinatory consciousness of the black mother in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. He matches this with Fanon's interrogations of deformed ontologies in the colonial process of othering.

'The power of the postcolonial translation of modernity rests in its

performative, deformative structure’, Bhabha says.²⁴ At his best there is in Bhabha a foregrounding of subjectivity, extracted from the margins of the metropolis through a series of masquerading tactics. In an emphatically postsocialist narrative this performative flair is all. Bhabha supplements it with a concentration on the subject’s inwardness, stillness and negative praxis—the narcissistic, deformative othering of self. This is to stand in for the dispossessed of the world. Bhabha’s literary examples allow for the privilege of belonging to finally disintegrate, for a self-transgression to take place. There is a preference for a psychic subversion of any given notion of identity: a preference for a surrealist (and therefore anticapitalist?), liberal/libertarian (therefore anarchist?) mode.

If one disentangles the postcolonial and the postmodern, Bhabha leaves one with a discursive as against an insurgent subjectivity.²⁵ In fact the Bhabha legacy functions best in the cosmopolitan world of the ‘twice-born’, the immigrant intelligentsia from the third world lodged within the first world whose identity is ambivalent, restless, interrogative—though hardly in this age diasporic. Bhabha’s position is strengthened and enlivened by Salman Rushdie’s sharp-witted self-parody of the immigrant identity. “‘The Satanic Verses’”, Rushdie writes, “. . . rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure.”²⁶

Given the flawed self-image and the theatrics of the indeterminate soul in Rushdie’s virtuoso fiction, Bhabha’s virtuoso discourse about the tactical manoeuvres of postcoloniality becomes the more ironically valid. But this is also where the problem lies. Thus mythologized, the material becomes serviceable for ethnographic investigation, for extravagant fiction but also, in a less friendly register, for ideological manoeuvres by vested interests in the globalization project.

This is a floating intelligentsia to supplant a rooted intelligentsia; the discourse of postmodernity puts to rout the notion of the ‘organic intellectual’. Once again continents and nations recede into native habitations and we have interpreters and translators decoding cultures across the globe. Paradoxically, if hybridity is the survivor’s credo in the age of globalization, global culture under the chasing speed of radical representation emits a great buzz on *identity*. It also produces an extraordinary communications syndrome, except that in the absence of any sense of projected equality, communications can too often be an empty signal. This is what might be called the simulacrum of cultural identity, where theories of representation and rhetoric about the ineluctable otherness of identity press urgently. But it is only a *play* of choice, not a test of praxis.

In the all-round navigation of the shoreless horizon there is a surfeit of semantics about displacement; we are always ‘somebody’s other’, always dodging the mockery of cooption.²⁷ The real choices—about community versus the communal, about ethnic vulnerability and neoreligious fundamentalisms—choices that are national vexations turning into tragedies—remain blurred in the exile’s imagination.

Consider in this light the chaos that was stirred within Asian communities in relation to the Rushdie problematic.²⁸ Religious and nonreligious members reacted with defensive rage to the ideological provocation *The Satanic Verses* was seen to pose. Secularists, whether they were ranged with white intellectuals or with the ‘hurt sentiments’ of their Asian fraternity (including fundamentalists), lost the opportunity to wrest the terms of the debate from the western liberal intelligentsia. They surrendered the right to discuss the matter of self-representation at the cutting edge of ‘blasphemy’—to discuss, for instance, whether or not an allegorization of painful moments in a people’s history leads to a new reflexivity. Whether or not a relentless parodying of grand moments in a national charade of representations leads to a sharpening of real difference; and whether this difference involves, besides fictive characters, embattled collectivities that elude the politics of exile. These were some of the questions worthy of Rushdie’s audacity. Instead, as fundamentalist sentiment overtakes the metropolitan world ‘the third world liberal intelligentsia—in some sense, citizens of the world, out of sync everywhere—have to pay its cost in their daily lives’. Thus Alok Rai argues, pitching the postcolonial trauma beyond Rushdie and back to the intrepid Fanon.

As Frantz Fanon was to discover, for all his keen sense of himself as a unique individual, he was ineluctably burdened with the experience of his people: ‘I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors.’ . . . Quite apart from the comprehensive material damage, one carries the coded inscription of the unequal colonial relationship in the deepest recesses of one’s being. Thus, Fanon was an eloquent analyst of the twists and turns of the dialectic of the post-colonial consciousness, in which betrayal and inauthenticity are a constant danger, and appear in bewildering and unsettling disguises.²⁹

Let us concede that it is the privilege of those who live their lives within the format of a national culture to resist globalization, as against the privilege of those who live more global lives to seek its emancipatory features. Let us concede that it is pointless setting up a symmetrical hierarchy of belonging and unbelonging that works like a seesaw. Even conceding these, my disagreement with the exile rhetoric of Bhabha, and even Rushdie, is predictably that I want the location of self and culture to be less shifty, less a matter of continual displacement of categories one to another. In Bhabha’s view, ‘The contingent and the liminal become the times and the spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference in a postcolonial criticism.’³⁰ I would argue for a greater holding power of the historical paradigm where differences are recognized to have real and material consequences, where agency is neither ghost-driven nor collapsed into a series of metonymically disposed identities that are but fragments spinning their way to entropy.

There are societies that have undergone a long period of decolonization

and developed, beyond the terms of hybridity, a sustained postcolonial vision that has, along with concrete manifestations, the ability to theorize on societal conditions. These societies have devised, moreover, styles of historical praxis and futures beyond postcoloniality. This may be kept in view to arrive at a more dialectically worked-out politics than a perennially inbetween position allows.

‘[T]he *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the space-clearing gesture’, says Kwame Anthony Appiah.³¹ Claiming greater location and agency for the African artist, he goes on to elaborate:

Sura Suleri has written recently, in *Meatless Days*, of being treated as an ‘otherness machine’—and of being heartily sick of it. Perhaps the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual is simply that as intellectuals—a category instituted in black Africa by colonialism—we are, indeed, always at the risk of becoming otherness machines, with the manufacture of alterity as our principal role. . . . This is especially true when postcolonial meets postmodern. . . . The role that Africa, like the rest of the Third World, plays for Euro–American postmodernism—like its better-documented significance for modernist art—must be distinguished from the role postmodernism might play in the Third World.

For all the while, in Africa’s cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as Others. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease, and political instability, African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama, music and visual art all thrive.³²

Clearing Space

Global culture could be a less suspicious enterprise if it became clearer which is the culture that equates with marketism and how it can be critiqued. Can global culture still be critiqued in the terms Theodor Adorno used, as culture industry or the ideology of mass culture within capitalism?³³ To this an ample ‘answer’ is already provided from the same context by Fredric Jameson.³⁴ Writing about the peculiar dilemma of cultural reification within the citadel of the modern itself, he places consumerism on the cusp of the modern and the postmodern and offers ideological safeguards in the wake of the historical and systemic changes underway. He does this through a generous yet relentless exercise of critical reason that leaves little scope for nostalgia but helps check the despair about the market from evolving into ritual manoeuvres and mean survival. Thus he saves cultural praxis from moving into reverse gear, crushing in the process what remains of the emancipatory imagination. With Jameson, as always, critical reason and cultural praxis are pegged together to form a utopian discourse—but whether or not that discourse, given its historical antecedents, tends to exclude the third world remains a difficult question. The third world so

designated, as a place of aggregative self-representation and collective nemesis, becomes a revised, anthropologically dictated narrative. Is it that it excels in revenge histories about otherness but lacks the initiative on historical reflexivity to envisage a future? It is one of my contentions in the subsequent argument that the pros and cons of this very problematic make up the critical path toward selfhood, authorship and avantgarde practice among third-world artists.

As regards the global culture industry, there is now a recycling argument attached to first-and-third-world relations. Globalization, which has a great deal to do with selling commodities including units of the culture industry (exemplified by how hard the United States fights for the export advantage of Hollywood and American TV networks), comes with the theory that people around the globe negotiate at every turn and recycle/refunctionalize the foreign inputs anyway to arrive at a hybrid fecundity.

Hybridity for Bhabha, let us remember, is the historical effect of colonialism and is to be used as a discursive device to decode the condition of postcolonialism. There is along with this a more functional form of hybridity. Therefore a distinction has to be maintained between hybridity as a long-term cultural process involving materials, language and difficult choices of discourse; hybridity as practice leading to a certain virtuosity learned against the risk of extinction in colonized cultures; and hybridity as a matter primarily of quick ingenuity required to ride current market demands where indigenous form and artisanal life adapts itself to the national-global market in whatsoever manner is most readily available. Nestor Garcia Canclini's trenchant argument along this track holds good for the survival in Mexico of indigenous traditions.³⁵ They survive in their plurality by means that have a good deal to do with urbanism, innovation and a simultaneously closed and open identitarian politics of the postmodern age where the artefact has a new exchange value and prospers as a sign for reified communities in the globalized market. This can also serve as a success story for Indian crafts and for evolving forms of popular art that capture the national and international imagination, not least the great Indian film industry.

We can go on from here to very briefly designate the more lively aspects of global culture as it transforms indigenous and national cultural formations. There have been cultural scenarios set up (as for example in Mexico and other Latin American societies) to prise open superposed cultures in an appropriate masquerade of representations. There are formal recordings of cultures altering the terms devised in the great metropolis of the western world (as happened in Japan after the second world war). There have been probings by historically deprived identities of a radically reconstituted otherness (as for example among the black vanguard in literature, in art, in performance). There are fantasies of plenitude proffered as resumed orientalist desire in contemporary Chinese films. And there is, finally, the reflexive option set up by each one of these intertwined possibilities that contributes to establishing a utopian realm

of the other that is best reclaimed *by* that other. This is proved by the avantgarde now sweeping through the south, including Asia.

In India of the present, where the national formation is disintegrating, there is an uncomfortable relationship between the public and the private, the state and commerce, the national and the global. With the new links between the Indian and global markets, international ramifications are surfacing across the board in the culture industry (the electronic media, film, advertising and art) and this cannot but have an emancipatory result—even if in the form of unbottled genii and quick innovation. Moreover, globalization allows for the first time freedom from the national/collective/communitarian straitjacket; freedom also from the heavily paternalistic patronage system of the state. It allows freedom from the rigid anti-imperialist position in which postcolonial artists find themselves locked, and the freedom to include in postcolonial realities other discourses of opposition such as those of gender and the minorities—discourses that question the ethics of the nation-state itself.

It is possible then that in India, as in various parts of Asia—Thailand, Indonesia, Hongkong, South Korea, the Philippines, China—the positively postcolonial avantgarde in film and art will come now: a reflexivity posed as some form or other of countermodernity, made possible by the changed norms of cultural hospitality in the postmodern age. The initiative to hold international film festivals and biennials with a third-world, southern or regional focus is but a symptom of more substantial change in the actual political conditions building up to a breakthrough in the contemporary arts. With the older institutional structure built up during the nationalist or revolutionary phase in flux, with the *not so hospitable* economic realities of the postmodern age (the naked expropriation of the south by the trade and labour laws of the north), and with growing disparities mocking the unity of the nation itself, a new battleground for cultural action opens up. If it seems that this avantgarde will be a postmodern affair it will not be so without a serious challenge to the *terms* of that phenomenon, precisely where these become baldly global.³⁶

The local–global, a geopolitical proposition, can be turned into a spatial metaphor for what I call navigating the void. The natives' (by now) multiple passages beyond involve a progressively more precise signalling procedure on each shore and threshold: a performative or even properly theatric gesture that marks these as a series of *disjunctures*. This is propitious ground for the emergence of a historically positioned avantgarde. Let me take a quick example from India. If there is a sudden spate of installation art in India (raising the question: why now?), we have to look first to the appearance of an art market for an answer. Installation is an art of *presence* in the field of the object; it is a form of the deconstructed object where it invokes the dynamics of presence but in an unhomely, indeterminate setting. I choose the work of three Indian artists to make the point. The first is a female act of passion staged (in Bombay, in 1993) by Nalini Malani and Alaknanda Samarth: an installation/performance of

Heiner Mueller's *Medea*, the barbarian princess who murders her children to avenge her exile, her betrayal, her redundancy in the superior civilization (*Illus. 1*). The second is an installation that gives evidence of public murder: Vivan Sundaram's *Memorial* (Delhi, 1993), a ceremonially laid out site to bury the victim of communal carnage during the 1993 Bombay riots—the documentary image of the sacrificed Muslim providing by its presence the mise-en-scene for national mourning (*Illus. 2*). The third, N.N. Rimzon's *Man with Tools* (Delhi, 1993) provides a recuperative symbol for self-sufficiency, the artist's commitment to the ethics and poetry of use-objects producing an icon out of the dedicated body of labour (*Illus. 3*).

These examples propose intrepid stands in the tragic mode: the first offers a kind of ecological nemesis on man's greed from a feminist position; the second constructs a renewed space for political affect where historical anchoring is marked as different from national belonging; and the third attempts a transposition of the hieratic into the human—the humble figure adorned with a ground-halo of tools from a poor smithy becomes an icon with an aura. Contrapuntally these works propose a



1 Nalini Malani's theatre installation for Mueller's *Despoiled Shore*. Alaknanda Samarth performs as Medea against Malani's painted panels, *Medeaprojekt*, 1993

utopianism precisely on the ground of the national and the regional, securing these as sites for political battle. With allegories of home and journey, departures and death, work and apotheosis, a subjective quest becomes a politically measured space for transcendence. It also involves a strategic doubling of identity where no authority holds.

Thus, when we speak on behalf of postcolonial countermodernity we should be speaking not just about identity, as that can appear from the vantagepoint of postmodernism as a reflection of dead realisms and of an unreconstructed reality. We should be speaking about psychic and formal sublimation as one finds in the avantgarde heritage of surrealism, for example, where the quest for selfhood combines with libertarian freedoms. Also of a practice based on epiphanies of language understood not only as a grammatical proposition but as something that springs from purposeful intransigence and lost utopias. We should be speaking about the structure of potential consciousness (after Lukacs) from a 'blasting of a monadic moment' (after Benjamin), both of which are still able to render the historical experientially—one on a sustained diachronic scale, the other as a hermeneutic revelation.

The modern is charged with the energy of revolutionary struggle; it is replete with the memory of 'native' transgressions. Today it is the secular cultures of



2 Vivan Sundaram, *Memorial* (installation view with *Mausoleum* in the foreground), 1993



3 N.N. Rimzon, *Man with Tools* (installation view), 1993

the postcolonial era that are premised on a countering impulse. It is this heritage that is to be carried over into the present postmodern to evolve a more definite commitment to praxis. This will incur perhaps a dispersal of the regimental movement of the Euro-American avantgarde into more differentiated moments that we can now begin to see as radical interventions in the ideologically regressive one-world system.

Avantgarde Filmmaker: Kumar Shahani

There are artists in the third world who would globalize themselves but cannot because of their utopian sense of the international, and also because of their relationship with their own cultural tradition and its hermeneutic potential that does not fit into the conventions of mainstream internationalism. I have in mind the case of a contemporary Indian filmmaker, Kumar Shahani (*Illus. 4*).³⁷

What Shahani does is to actually demonstrate the terms of conversion between an older universalist concept of the international and globalization. He grounds himself in the enlightenment notion of a theory–practice dialectic; he offers the possibility of aesthetic abstraction based on a rational discourse on the world but matches it with obscure metaphors and willing surrender before the imaginary. And lest it turn narcissistic, he delivers this imaginary into the great symbolic realm that is the compassionate pedagogy of the epic.

In *Maya Darpan* (1972, *Illus. 7*), *Tarang* (1984, *Illus. 5, 6*) and *Kasba*



4 Kumar Shahani during the shooting of *Kasba*: K.K. Mahajan, the cinematographer, is on the left

(1990, *Illus. 8, 9, 10*) the theme is at the first level pedagogical: industrialization and the emancipation of women, capitalist development as part of a historical process towards socialism, the desired breaking up of the feudal family and of the nation into class categories. The filmmaker builds up a national allegory but not to confirm the nation. It is a framing device for an analysis of class. From an altogether different point of view it is a space for the location of artistic traditions that have a civilizational spread and therefore extend the nationalist discourse. As Shahani himself puts it:

Perhaps the failure of India to re-constitute itself as a nation is an opportune indication for the world to see that the era of nationalism, founded upon the exclusively Western

European experience of the last few centuries, cannot serve as a model of self-determination any longer anywhere in the world, not even for the emerging sub-nationalities. I imagine that the future of civilization demands an extension and inclusion of the civil society to the other, rather than the divisive exclusions that the anomic processes have set in motion through ethnic, linguistic, and other fundamentalisms.³⁸

If the national is broken up, so is the male collective of the working class: both are disciplinary concepts and in their later, more abstracted phases, often authoritarian. They are broken through futurist projections into states of plenitude, through the sheer beauty of image, among other devices, the excess of which allows imagist cinema to signal a surplus attraction and break open hermetic constructs. Shahani's brief is precisely to *not* let the one subsume the other; to not privilege the symbolic over the imaginary, or vice versa. He keeps a hold on the 'real' by demonstrating a condition of concrete immanence in the actual work. This is done through a materialist semiology, if one may call it that: first, by a systematic signification of the sensuous in the structure of the film; second, by the image turning itself inside out through chosen contraconventions of cinematic narration. In *Maya Darpan* the female protagonist barely escapes; there is a didactic closure tolling the literal end of the feudal family. In *Tarang*, which is like a chronicle foretold, the exploitative male protagonist slips into a position of mythologically sanctioned defeat and exposes himself.



Above: 5 Janaki (Smita Patil), a working-class woman, with Rahul (Amol Palekar) the entrepreneur: a fateful transaction of vested interests (*Tarang*).
Below: 6 Hansa (Kawal Ghandiok) gives Janaki a gift: sign of complicity in the sexual relationship between Rahul, her husband, and Janaki (*Tarang*)



Above: 7 Taran (Prabha Mahajan) walks through the pillared veranda of her father's feudal haveli: an alienated life in a provincial environment (*Maya Darpan*). Below: 8 Tejo (Mita Vashisht), ambitious daughter-in-law in a family of hill-town traders, broods in the privacy of her bedroom (*Kasba*)



Above left: 9 Tejo confabulates with a young contractor, Mohinder (Deepak Chhibber): romance and conspiracy to extend her fortunes (*Kasba*). Below left: 10. Dhaniram (Shatrughan Sinha), brash and corrupt elder son of the family, marries the meek Nandini (Navyajot Hansra) (*Kasba*). Below right: 11 Ela (Nandini Ghoshal) with Ateen (Subroto Chattopadhyay): anti-British terrorists, desperate lovers (*Char Adhyaya*)



As Shahani moves in *Tarang* from the national allegorical to the epic, he introduces a subtheme of male sacrifice, its outer parameters based on the Urvashi myth. He completes the dismantling of male authority not only by a Brechtian didactic inversion between subject and object (master and slave) but also by a subtle axe of irony as in Anton Chekhov, on whose story ('In the Gully') his third feature film *Kasba* is based. In *Kasba* a dignified exit from the petty deceits of provincial life is prompted by the gentle self-evacuation of the girl protagonist. A nonidentificatory mode with dispossession as a key note is used whereby Shahani, taking the cue from Chekhov, invests the film with an almost mystical melancholy.

Shahani's more recent film is based on Rabindranath Tagore's novella *Char Adhyaya* (1997, *Illus. 11*), where the subject, dedicated to the cause of the nation and of the collective good, is bound for betrayal. After the ascetic logic of history is spent in the way of death the lost subject 'realizes' the higher dynamic of love as the very premise of subjectivity and, therefore, of responsible action. The novella is the last of a trilogy (preceded by *Gora* and *Ghare Baire*) in which Tagore examines the ideology of passion in its many aspects. Shahani's adaptation is driven by his own interrogation of ideological constructs, by his pursuit of a more compassionate form of agency that he would like to designate as the subject-in-history.

Issues such as these are often 'resolved' by Shahani through the female presence that always takes the shape of a dual persona of nurture and death, an actual duo that combines to make an elegiac figure of disinterested desire. It is in that

metaphysical moment of self-naughting that a dialectical move into the third alternative is made. Shahani uses this dialectic to arrive at the figure of the 'true beloved', a hypothetical figure who embodies the erotics of pain and resurrects herself in the uncharted space of transfigured knowledge.

In *Khayal Gatha* (1988, *Illus.* 13, 14) and *Bhavantarana* (1991, *Illus.* 12), films based on classical Indian art forms (the first on the musical mode of north India called khayal; the second, shorter, film on the person of the great odissi dancer Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra), Indian aesthetics, usually offered as a rhapsodic means for deliverance, is treated through cinematic iconography to metaphoric narration. There is an extreme condensation of art forms in their continuum through the centuries. At the same time a displacement of one art form into another is introduced so that each of these becomes part of the metonymic chain that reconfigures Indian poetics as a vastly imbricated and structurally replete system that is still fully alive.

Khayal Gatha is consciously about excess, further complicated by an involute form-within-form structure. It makes each of the traditions of Indian art, from music to painting to film itself, dovetail to constitute a great *formal* riddle. (On the question of formalism one may mention that *Khayal Gatha* is followed by *Kasba*, a succession that suggests an ironic retake on modernist formalism, specifically its fixation with consistency and semantic opacity. For, *Kasba* is once again about transparency and translatability. From Russian story to Indian film, it is about economy in the literal and formal cinematic sense to which economy of the self in the renunciate mode is tendentially added.)

The context for these condensed interpretations of traditions is a narrative space where there is also a sublimation of material cultural history to the pure cinematic time of now. This is an undeclared avantgarde gesture where traditions are disengaged from the national past (and so turned into a critique of that kind of appropriate configuration) but where the cinematic text, as in *Khayal Gatha*, proves the limits of translatability before the foreign viewer and thereby obstructs the way to any easy process of internationalist assimilation. This then brings the question of the national, or a larger category such as civilization, once again into the discussion.

Through these series of films there is a conversion of pleasure into excess, then into greed, then into instructive pedagogies about true plenitude and redemption. The inner core of compassion is probably the universalizing principle that Shahani gains from the Indian civilizational matrix. He has learned to complement Marxist rationality with the Buddhist double paradigm of logic and compassion drawn from the imbricated discourse of the anthropologist-historian D.D. Kosambi, Shahani's Marxist mentor.

We have talked earlier about the problems of self-othering. What does Shahani do with the question, persistent in third-world art practices, of the artist as ethnographer? Compared with those of Satyajit Ray and of his other more intimate



Above: 12 Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra: an odissi performance in the open (*Bhavantarana*). Middle: 13 Sohni (Navyajot Hansra) prepares to cross the Chenab to meet her lover (*Khayal Gatha*). Below: 14 Kathak *abhinaya* by Pandit Birju Maharaj, accompanied on the *tanpura* by a *shishya* (Rajat Kapoor) (*Khayal Gatha*)

mentor, Ritwik Ghatak, Shahani's solutions are confounding. He allows, for example, bold exoticization of his subject; he allows otherness to inhabit cinematic space with full romantic allusion; he elicits the longing from within national cultures and gives them a civilizational aura of desire; he even baits the question of orientalism that has been revived by postmoderns in the era of globalization.

And it is on this basis that he tackles the subject of reification. He will redo Hollywood material in the form of an allegory that simultaneously tackles the actual material process of modernization. He will deal with the predatory instinct of capital, with the flowering of traditions, with mortality played out in epic versions of the female persona. He will deal with the displacement of meaning from the sacred to the profane and back so as to precipitate the inevitability of a secular culture.

Shahani, I propose, seeks his own globalization but in such a way as to make it impossible. The globalization he seeks has to do with the commodity form: to make film and the subject of film and cinematic narration and the image it offers vulnerable to this fetish obsession. And the prime case for this paradoxical desire for globalization rests with his unproduced scripts, which make a parallel argument to those that have been realized. I take for consideration only one of these projects: a film on the history of cotton, which speaks simultaneously about material production, commodity exchange and democracy. Here his being Indian becomes a real

challenge, for the projected scenario stakes India's place in world civilization through manufacture and trade. This he then transforms into a universal poetics of production—even as there is proof today of the most vicious tariff systems coming into global operation to destroy these productive capacities.

The Soviet Union collapses. The USA begins to make final thrusts to control *all audio visual* production through a market-directed production process. Even the earlier 'collaborators' of capitalist design, like Zanussi, protest and are aghast at the complacency of their American colleagues.

Against this background, the GATT negotiations: the gradual subtle shifts of production, distribution etc. which make for a nearly complete take-over of European cinema. . . .

Yet, there are people who seem to want one to try and move out of the increasing marginalisation in a uni-polar world which has reduced Bertolucci to a slick craftsman and Straub into an eccentric. But we still have to find ways of striking out—through institutions and individuals whose voices may be heard above the din of the market-place, with the kind of material and spiritual resources that such initiatives need.³⁹

It cannot be a coincidence that each of Shahani's unproduced scripts is a global venture in terms of span, sponsorship and finance. His odyssey, or that of his scripts, in search of producers and finance makes up an allegorical tale on its own. He raises both ideological and accounting fears in the conservative and still powerful cultural bureaucracy of India, and he embarrasses foreign agencies with an approach premised on his right to abstract through and beyond his nationality—reconfiguring even the set matrix of Indian civilization. He believes he has a right to deploy an enlightenment ethics via a materialist/Marxist world view, to release and critique the image through psychoanalytic procedures. That all this can be done by an Indian filmmaker through a symbolic structure that does not name itself according to any national tradition is a challenge that potential film producers cannot meet. He fails, in other words, to convince Indian and foreign funding agencies alike that an Indian filmmaker can engage with the historical avantgarde.

Why he will *not* be globalized is of further interest. The critique and reflexivity within his films of the very phenomena he aesthetically presents is the obvious reason. The other reason is that he still codes his narration within a modernist method; he still makes his subject-matter esoteric, and to that extent the post-modern stylistics to which his form of presentation seems to belong refuse to unpack their signifying motives according to rule. The 'political unconscious' in Shahani's works offers a contrary aesthetic time and again.

Finally, there is another reason why Shahani will not be globalized: he insists on *secularizing* traditions, the ones he handles being the ones that have

been touched by technology and seen through the sophisticated lens. Having done that, he constantly produces the kind of metonymies that require inverse forms of reading. Turning what has been made technologically available into coded relays of archetypal/classical forms once again, he creates an elliptical relationship between medium and meaning.

Secularizing tradition also means that the key to the hermeneutic is not, ironically enough, in the hands of the occidental viewer enthralled by oriental tradition or the mystique of ethnography. Nor is it in the hands of the authentic Indian seeking immanent truth. It is in the hands of the one who will allow the metaphysics of universal discourse to abide while being able to differentiate the nodal points within the historical; to elicit, in consequence, not universal culture but a universal meaning out of the widely varying cultures of the world—in the more advanced anthropological sense of the term ‘culture’. We are then back to a utopian promise that does away with the solipsism of presentday aesthetics through a negative dialectic. Adorno’s words recall this best:

In an intellectual hierarchy which constantly makes everyone answerable, unanswerability alone can call hierarchy by its name. The circulation sphere, whose stigmata is borne by intellectual outriders, opens a last refuge to the mind it barter away, at the very moment when refuge no longer exists. He who offers for sale something unique that no one wants to buy, represents, even against his will, freedom from exchange.⁴⁰

Notes and References

I owe the phrase ‘navigating the void’ to the title of Timothy Hyman’s essays (mimeo.) on art history circulated in the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda, in 1981.

¹ This image refers to Chomsky’s keynote speech on 11 November 1994 at a conference on Globalization and Culture, at the Duke Center for Critical Theory, Duke University, USA.

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Verso, London, 1994, p. 348.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

⁴ Marxist economist Prabhat Patnaik argues that the liberalization programme in India should be cautiously paced out. The old agenda of economic nationalism, he says, was worked out at a time when an international economy worth the name did not exist; initiated in Latin America during the depression, the subsequent ideological variations on that theme have been based on the actual experience and intellectual developments of the 1930s. ‘Other developing countries like India adopted such strategy, properly speaking, only after independence when the consolidation of the international economy had not progressed far and when the process of internationalization of capital in our sense was still in its infancy.’ While admitting that the programme of economic nationalism is unsustainable, he argues that ‘the “marketist” response, which has the backing of leading capitalist powers and agencies like the Fund and the Bank, and has internal support within a section of the capitalists (seeing in “globalization” a means of expansion, even as rentiers), and in a section of affluent middle classes (seeing in it a means of access to new commodities), is likely to be detrimental to the working

masses, not only transitionally but over a protracted period. A neo-mercantilist strategy is not easily replicated nor as workable in the context of world recession, nor necessarily desirable in the context of India's extant democratic structures. Is it possible then for an economy like India to evolve a response of its own?' See Prabhat Patnaik, 'International Capital and National Economic Policy: A Critique of India's Economic Reforms', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXIX, No. 12, 19 March 1994, pp. 686, 688. See also Prabhat Patnaik, *Whatever Happened to Imperialism and other essays*, Tulika, Delhi, 1995. See, further, Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Democracy and Development in India', in *Democracy and Development*, edited by A.K. Bagchi, St Martin's Press, London, 1995.

- ⁵ Anthropologist Veena Das writes: 'The emergence of communities as political actors in their own right is related in India to changes in the nature of political democracy. We know that the anticolonial struggles, as embodied in several local, regional, and national-level movements in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were about the sharing of power. Yet by the end of the twentieth century the nature of representative democracy has itself been put into question, for it has become clear that even when power is exercised in the name of representation it tends to become absolute, and "to speak in the name of the society it devours".' She continues: 'It is this political context of the state's assertion and arrogation of authority which explains why so many social scientists have raised powerful voices in support of "tradition", and why they have expressed the hope that alternative visions of life may be available in the form of traditional ways of life, of which diverse communities are the embodiment.' See Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, p. 14.
- ⁶ Partha Chatterjee's continuing interrogation of the nation-state in relation to the polity finds recent elaboration in his *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, pp. 5, 13 respectively.
- ⁷ For an elaboration of this Gramscian concept in the Indian context, see Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Critique of the Passive Revolution', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXIII, Special Number, 1988; and Partha Chatterjee, 'Moment of Arrival: Nehru and the Passive Revolution', in Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988.
- ⁸ For the Gandhi–Tagore debate, see *Truth Called Them Differently*, edited by R.K. Prabhu and Ravinder Kelkar, Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1961. For a recent interpretation of the significance of this debate see Suresh Sharma, 'Swaraj and the Quest for Freedom—Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation', in *Thesis Eleven*, No. 39, 1994.
- ⁹ For a brief evaluation of Tagore's international engagement, see Tan Chung, 'The Rabindranath Thunder of Oriental Dawn: A Sino–Indian Perspective of Tagore'; and Swapan Mazumdar, 'The East–West Colloquy: Tagore's Understanding of the West', in *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, edited by Bhudeb Chaudhuri and K.G. Subramanyan, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1988.
- ¹⁰ For an elaboration of this argument, see Geeta Kapur, 'Cultural Creativity in the First Decade: The Example of Satyajit Ray', in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, No. 23, 1993 (included in this volume under the title 'Sovereign Subject: Ray's Apu').
- ¹¹ See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic*, Screen Unit, Bombay, 1982; and *The Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, edited by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, BFI/Oxford University Press, London/Delhi, 1994, pp. 95–96. For a further exposition on Ghatak's last film, see Ashish Rajadhyaksha, '*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*', and Geeta Kapur,

- 'Articulating the Self in History: Ritwik Ghatak's *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*', in *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, BFI, London, 1989 (included in this volume).
- ¹² Gayatri Spivak, 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World', in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Methuen, New York, 1987, p. 243.
- ¹³ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Last Decade', in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, edited by Gulammohammed Sheikh, Tulika, Delhi, 1997, p. 258. Read Rajadhyaksha in relation to Anita Dube, *Questions and Dialogue*, exhibition catalogue, Baroda, 1987; and Shivaji Panikker, 'Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors: Crisis of Political Art in Contemporary India', in *Creative Arts in Modern India: Essays in Comparative Criticism*, Vol. II, edited by Ratan Parimoo and Indramohan Sharma, Books and Books, Delhi, 1995.
- ¹⁴ Rajadhyaksha, *ibid.*, p. 248.
- ¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', in *Social Text*, No. 15, 1986. This should be read in the context of the reply by Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory', in *Social Text*, No. 16, 1987.
- ¹⁶ James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986.
- ¹⁷ See Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 377.
- ¹⁸ Homi Bhabha's elusive track of postcolonial discourse is critiqued from a position that asserts the continuing validity of the anticolonial struggle by Benita Parry: see 'Signs of Our Times: A Discussion of Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*', in *Third Text*, Nos. 28–29, 1994.
- ¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 175.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ²² Homi K. Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition', in *Remaking History*, edited by Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, Bay Press, Seattle, 1989.
- ²³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 241.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Parry, 'Signs of Our Times', *Third Text*, Nos. 28–29, p. 13.
- ²⁶ Quoted in Alok Rai, 'Black Skin, Black Masks', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVII, No. 39, 26 September 1992, p. 2103.
- ²⁷ For a polemic on the travails of otherness, see Rustom Bharucha, 'Somebody's Other', *Third Text*, No. 26, 1995.
- ²⁸ See special issue titled 'Beyond the Rushdie Affair', *Third Text*, No. 11, 1990.
- ²⁹ Rai, 'Black Skin, Black Masks', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVII, No. 39, p. 2100.
- ³⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 179.
- ³¹ K.A. Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?', in *Critical Inquiry*, No. 17, 1991, p. 348.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 356.
- ³³ Theodor Adorno and Mark Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1979, pp. 120–67.
- ³⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 317.
- ³⁵ Nestor Garcia Canclini, 'Memory and Innovation in the Theory of Art', in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 3, 1993.

- ³⁶ For a discussion on the conditions for a historical avantgarde that not only accommodates but derives from the conditions of radical disjuncture in the three worlds alike, see Paul Willemen, 'An Avant-Garde for the 90s', in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, Indiana University Press/BFI, Bloomington/London, 1994.
- ³⁷ Born in India in 1940, Kumar Shahani graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, in 1966, where he had been a student of Ritwik Ghatak. He went to France for advanced study of cinema and spent the tumultuous years of 1967–68 in Paris. Here, he gained the experience of an apprenticeship with Robert Bresson while the latter was shooting *Une Femme Douce* (1969). Back in India, Shahani became famous with his first feature film *Maya Darpan* (1972), following which all his major films, *Tarang* (1984), *Khayal Gatha* (1988), *Kasba* (1990), *Bhavantarana* (1991), have won awards and been exhibited in a range of mainstream and avantgarde film festivals all over the world. Problems of commercial release make his films rare to see. He has been designated a difficult filmmaker, intellectual and ideological in ways that make him controversial and at the same time seminal in the Indian cultural context. A film based on a Tagore novella, *Char Adhyaya* (1997) is supplemented by a whole series of unproduced films: these include scripts in various stages of completion on the psychoanalyst W.R. Bion, on the Indo-European woman painter Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941), on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and on the world history of the production of cotton. A theoretician of cinema, Kumar Shahani has written and published extensively. For a selection of his essays, see 'Dossier: Kumar Shahani', in *Framework*, Nos. 30/31, 1986. For further information, see *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, edited by Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, pp. 197–98.
- ³⁸ Kumar Shahani in an unpublished letter to the historian Ravinder Kumar (Bombay, September 1994).
- ³⁹ Excerpts from an unpublished letter from Kumar Shahani to the author (Bombay, 14 October 1994).
- ⁴⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, London, 1974, p. 60.

Dismantled Norms: Apropos an Indian/Asian Avantgarde

The Norms

Indian art reflects the cultural agendas of the last fifty years in its forms of modernity. At one end there is a sustained attempt to give regard to indigenous, living traditions and to dovetail the tradition/modernity aspects of contemporary culture through a typically postcolonial eclecticism. At the other end there is a desire to disengage from the overarching politics of the national by a reclusive attention to formal choices that seemingly transcend both cultural and subjective particularities and enter the modernist frame.¹ My intention here is to step outside this by now familiar paradigm and recognize alternative forms of self-designation by the artists, as also non-conventional attributes for the artworks. At an empirical level it means attending to the changing art forms in the current decade. At a theoretical level it means that we foreground disjuncture and try to name the possible avantgardes. But first a count-down on the norms as these have characterized the decades preceding the 1990s.²

Secular Identity

Given the variety of well-appointed actors in the theatre of Indian art there was, until recently, an aspiration for the artist to become a central national figure. It was hoped that the artist would articulate in work and speech a historical position that would clearly demarcate a hospitable national space. This ideal of an integrated identity had something to do with the mythic imaginary of lost communities. It had to do with nationalism, third-world utopias and postcolonial culturalism.³

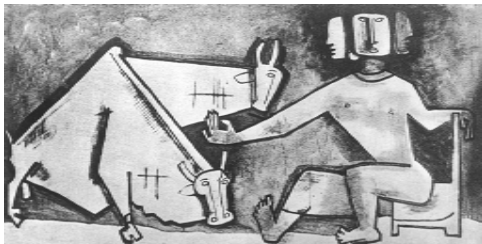
Between the 1940s and 1960s, the integrated identity of the Indian artist was, in an anti-imperialist sense, political. Somnath Hore was part of the communist movement, J. Swaminathan was a communist–anarchist, and K.G. Subramanyan a Gandhian. Most contemporary artists, prominently M.F. Husain and Satish Gujral, were privileged members of the Nehruvian liberal ethos. Until recently the identity of the Indian artist was largely modern and secular. While there might have been conservative artists, there would hardly be a fundamentalist among them. And if that

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identity questioned modernity it did so on the basis of a tradition that was, despite the invocations of sacred myths and symbols, ‘invented’ during a nationalist resurgence and was therefore sufficiently secularized.

Or this seemed to be so until we began to interrogate this past. In doing so we recognized in hindsight a bad faith in some of the terms of nationalist cultural discourse. In particular that the sectarian pulls of religion had not been fully considered, making both the modern and the secular well-meaning but recalcitrant ideals.

In the postindependence ethos Maqbool Fida Husain characterizes the ‘function’ of the national artist: he marks the conjunction between the mythic and the secular and then between secular and aesthetic space (*Illus. 1, 2*). Husain, along with some of his peers (F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza and other members and associates of the Progressive Artists’ Group of 1947), has helped to give modern art in India an autonomous status—an autonomy that was however already institutionalized in the west a century before. At the same time, because of a socialist register in the liberal society of postindependence India, an artist like Husain has occupied a converse status—that of peoples’ representative. The two contradictory modes of formalizing the Indian artist’s identity—as autonomous and as spokesperson of the people—are held together



by an idealized notion of the artist’s access to internal and cultural plenitude. To further facilitate this utopian identity Husain invokes a pantheon of benign gods in a reworked iconography. They are the artist’s mascots in the ideological terrain of national culture.



Above: 1 M.F. Husain, *Three-headed Man with Two-headed Bull*, 1954. Below: 2 M.F. Husain, *The Last Supper*, 1991

Today Husain is a controversial public figure. He has been close to state power and to the bourgeoisie. For the people, for the layperson, the lure of Husain's bohemian persona and what he produces—a modernist/populist update on the Indian heritage—are attractive. By this logic it is not Husain's intention to provoke on the basis of class, sex or religion. If any form of subversion can be attributed to him it comes from the inherent tendency in modern (expressionist) art to put an autobiographical stamp on the image. Thus references to myths and epics carry the same libertine style of representation that the artist's self may sport, and the authorial signature enhances the complicit nature of all iconographical renderings including the more erotic among these. The artist, making an expressly personal intervention in epic realms, can appear to be driven by hubris or, on the other hand, by unjustified intimacy.

The unfolding 'case of Husain' in the last few years proves that whatever was sanctioned in progressive politics of the postindependence phase—by a centrist state, the national bourgeoisie, a secular people—has come to be desanctioned by the Hindu rightwing.⁴ Precipitated by the charge that Husain is a Muslim artist playing with Hindu myths and religion, the controversy is about the right of representation through images and whether this right is bound by community (inevitably embedded in religion). It brings up the necessary role of the Muslim artist/intellectual in defining the nature of Indian secular culture. It raises questions about the status of mythology in contemporary life, of the relation between cultural symbols and secular politics. It also brings up the fate of modern art in the developing orthodoxies.

From an opposite pole, the more radical exponents of democratic culture have expressed some discomfort with an artist's presumed expertise in slicing through the layers of this stratified society; with his right to draw imaginative inspiration by touching simultaneously high-caste, dalit and tribal cultures while leaving the source compressed within a too-steeply hierarchical structure. What has also been challenged is the mapping of the artistic imagination on to a transcendent horizon, for this is the scale at which the heroic self-designation of the national artist is pitched.

Even as cultural imperialism dressed up in euphemistic phrases becomes globally more rampant, our redoubled critical task is situated in the framework of a national culture. But from the other end, as it were. I would maintain that the norm of a modern, secular identity is honourable, but that its gestalt has to be rethought. At the same time the normative profile that Indian cultural practitioners, artists among them, have hitherto adopted needs reconsideration.

Living Traditions

At an ethical level, the votaries of a nationalist position will expect to fulfil the responsibility of always contextualizing their artistic choices, situating them within the continuum of a living tradition. This is felicitous. Sensitive handling of living traditions helps maintain the sense of a complex society which informs and

sometimes subverts the modernization that the very institution of the nation-state inaugurates (and the market promotes).

Ritual arts and crafts are part of perennial life-processes until today. They are also part of daily drudgery, as they are now part of an openly exploitative capitalist economy. In economic terms this phenomenon provides a lesson in humility because the terms of survival are so hard. It is a lesson that Meera Mukherjee lived in her life and art, using tribal metal-casting techniques, using imagery from the everyday and the iconic in humanist traditions—from Buddhism to the bauls. Furthermore, she found a personal stylistics, going ‘beyond’ the matrix of tradition and technique to a contemporary vision of the working people. In cultural terms this can be understood through a radically revised ethnography as well as from within the imaginative universe, by using the sympathetic sensors of art language itself.

In continuation with his Santiniketan training K.G. Subramanyan has conducted something like an ongoing workshop without walls around artisanal practices. His pedagogical role in fine arts faculties in M.S. University, Baroda and Visva-Bharati, and his status within the Indian government’s policy initiatives on the handloom and craft sector are well known. As a practising artist he has evolved modes of interaction with the polyvocal languages of the folk, especially the terracotta and *pata* traditions; more importantly, he has found a new syntax for the material vocabulary of artisanal forms. Thus he has contributed to extending this living tradition into and beyond the closed circuitry of traditions—and I refer to both repetitive craft traditions as well as the repetitive ‘tradition of the new’ in western modernism.

Another kind of relationship was nurtured by artist–critic J. Swaminathan with the primordial, the adivasi (in terms of ethnic designation, the tribal) artist: this was first offered as a speculative possibility when he formulated the manifesto for Group 1890 in 1963. Later, in 1982, he institutionalized this into policy on becoming director of Roopankar, the twin museums of contemporary urban and tribal art in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Swaminathan claimed existential continuity with the primordial imagination in the creative act itself. His kind of metaphysical formalism involved a conversion of cultural symbols and formalized icons into the more elusive numen; it led simultaneously to a pristine aesthetic, to structural readings of the symbolic in tribal communities, to linguistic play in modernist art:

It would seem that there is nothing which comes in the way of our direct appreciation and apprehension of what is commonly termed as tribal art. . . . Further if . . . we take recourse to ethnological or anthropological methods, or if we refer to archaeology and history, our aim and intention should never be lost sight of—to emphasize the numinous function of art, neither to replace, nor to subordinate [it].⁵

The lessons that Meera Mukherjee, Subramanyan and Swaminathan offer

are decidedly different, yet each of them implies that modern artists in India must start from degree zero of their existential ambitions as they stand at the threshold of a culturally rich and materially pauperized hinterland. A hinterland that holds living traditions with a vast number of differentiated skills and vernaculars which it must somehow be their ambition to know and decipher. This requires not just ethnographically correct answers but a generosity that can encompass and contain the loss of 'superseded' culture.

It needs to be noted, however, that living traditions are now subject to the ever-revised categories of anthropology. The tradition-versus-modernity argument was high on the common agenda until recently; later, structuralist assumptions about conceptual commonalities between cultures came to the fore. All these are subject to new critiques. Artistic choices, once globalized, enter the new (or non) ethics of post-modernism. This celebratory neotraditionalism is based not so much on material practice as on the appearance of simulacra. This has to be taken on board in any further discussions on the subject.

Eclectic Choice

The more polemical aspect of the ethical proposition about living traditions (or the perennial contemporaneity of all creative expression) is the ideology of cultural eclecticism. Artist-teachers in India (going back from Gulammohammed Sheikh to K.G. Subramanyan and K.C.S. Paniker, and further back to Benodebehari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij and Nandalal Bose) have persuasively argued that colonial cultures achieve a synchronous complexity by intricately weaving local, vernacular and ethnic strands around a 'standard' heritage.⁶ By extension, national cultures in their postindependence status achieve certain lost parities with other civilizations.

Further, eclecticism serves to emphasize the democratic right of politically subordinated cultures to invent new syncretic traditions of their own and thus to participate in an international discourse of modernism through such (usually nationalist) mediations.⁷ Decolonization is an especially propitious moment to open the floodgates of the national/modern imagination, rupturing its too-conscientious project of identity with heterodox elements from the rest of the world. It is this dismantled identity that then enlarges the scope of contemporary art practice.

Within the terms of a colonial–postcolonial transition, artistic eclecticism corresponds to the polemic around an Indian identity. There are artists who make free use of tradition by proffering mythic attributes and invented ancestral origins in their work—A. Ramachandran, Ganesh Pyne, Laxma Goud, Manjit Bawa, Manu Parekh, S. Nandagopal are examples. Thus eclecticism can be a defensive rearguard action. It helps to balance nostalgia and derivativeness up to the point where sources are transformed into independent creative expression and serve to define difference.

Conversely, the use of iconography can become an act of subversion.

Sustained at an ironical level by older artists like M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza, K.C.S. Paniker and K.G. Subramanyan, iconographical devices continue to be generative among the next generation of artists. Consider the infusion of the erotic in the fabled, miniature-inspired narratives of Gulammohammed Sheikh. Consider Jogen Chowdhury's attenuated representations, his ever more provocatively staged encounter with figures from his own Bengali middle class and their peculiar body-language mediated through the stylistic conventions of the Bengal *pata*. Consider the homoerotic tableaux of Bhupen Khakhar who takes Indian popular art from the nineteenth century across the modernist crucible of forms and arrives at a kitsch-sublime of his sexual fantasies. Almost more than any other Indian artist, it is Khakhar who has helped to dismantle the incumbent norms.

Bhupen Khakhar, Jogen Chowdhury and Gulammohammed Sheikh were three among six artists (the other three were Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani and Sudhir Patwardhan) who presented a seminal exhibition titled *Place for People* in 1981. They made urban narratives/representational fantasies, an ideological choice. Creating a combustion in the heart of Indian modernism, they set apace in the 1980s many pictorial (auto)biographies along the Baroda, Bombay, Kerala trajectories.

Modernist 'Integrity'

The terms national, secular, modern are so familiar in Indian cultural discourse that modernism as such is not always examined. The formal logic, the stylistic dovetailing and contending ideologies of modernism are not systematically investigated in the sometimes fortuitous, sometimes passionate syncretism of contemporary Indian art. The modernist enterprise is made up of aesthetic choice, existential temperament, recognizable style and the auteur's characteristic signature. But that these modernist assumptions, when placed in a nationalist paradigm of authenticity, may present a paradox becomes evident only when the formal regimes of modernism are foregrounded.

In the context of these developments, it is important to emphasize that Indian artists do occasionally work with developed adaptations of expressly modernist canons and, indeed, with a modernist poetics. There is a short but intense history of Indian modernism that is perfectly consonant with economic and political modernization: it does not require a hermeneutic of tradition, nor a demonstrable nationalist purpose, nor even the alibi of postcolonial eclecticism.

The first phase of self-declared modernism in India dates from the 1940s (triggered, as I mentioned, by the formation of several 'progressive' groups). It coincides with the immediate postindependence decade. Typical of several mainstream modernists from this generation is an expressionist aesthetic. Let me take Tyeb Mehta (a later associate of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group) as an example to examine the representational procedure of these artists. Mehta accepts the necessity of art-



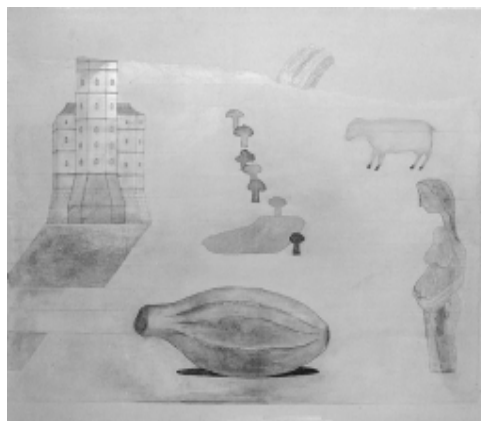
Above: 3 Tyeb Mehta, *Kali-II*, 1988. Below: 4 Tyeb Mehta, *Mahishasura*, 1998

historical cross-referencing but privileges the analytic mode of structuring references. He thus makes the sources formally coeval and the image symbolic in the universal sense of that term. Tyeb Mehta's inscription of a figural metaphor for terror on a brilliantly painted ground reads like a death-mask in the context of late twentieth-century art. This painterly double-act of mourning and celebration places him with internationally situated modernists devoted to existential paradox and formal mediation. Mehta's figural ensembles invoke not only the arcadia of classical modernism (Matisse and Leger) but also mythical battles: the devourings of goddess Kali, the apotheosis of the buffalo-demon Mahishasura by goddess Durga (*Illus. 3, 4*). His recent work is wedged like a historical marker in the project of Indian modernism; it is subliminally mapped over contemporary tragedies such as the marginalization of his own Muslim community within what is designated as a national-secular space. Mehta works towards synthesizing the image, resolving it into an iconic pose that engages but also transcends cultural and subjective particularities. He thus offers, in a sense, one 'solution' to the paradox that is Indian modernism.

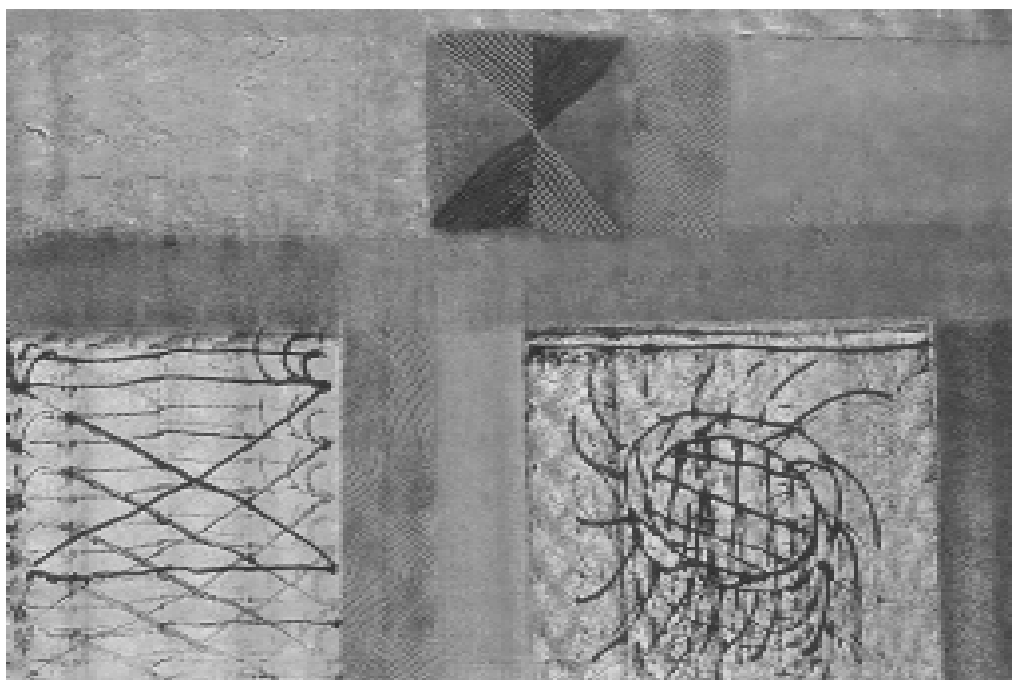
The iconic has had a central space in modernism since the beginning of the century. An important category of modernism, it transposes romanticist impulses to abstraction. After the 1960s one part of the modernist-expressionist enterprise moves towards contemplative imagery: the works of the trio S.H. Raza,

Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar, belong here. There are artists who, in deference to the modernist principle of condensation, convert lyric images into spiritual numens—J. Swaminathan (*Illus. 7*), Biren De, Prabhakar Barwe (*Illus. 6*). And convert numens into airy grids—V.S. Gaitonde, Viswanadhan, Nasreen Mohamedi. We thus have a body of work that makes virtue of (nature-based) abstraction to gain metaphysical ends.

There are successive generations of modernists—Jeram Patel (*Illus. 5*), Amitava Das, C.S. Douglas—who work out their subjectivities through a vestigial expressionism to arrive at a discrete form that yields a graphic trace and artists' ecriture. Alongside, sculptors like

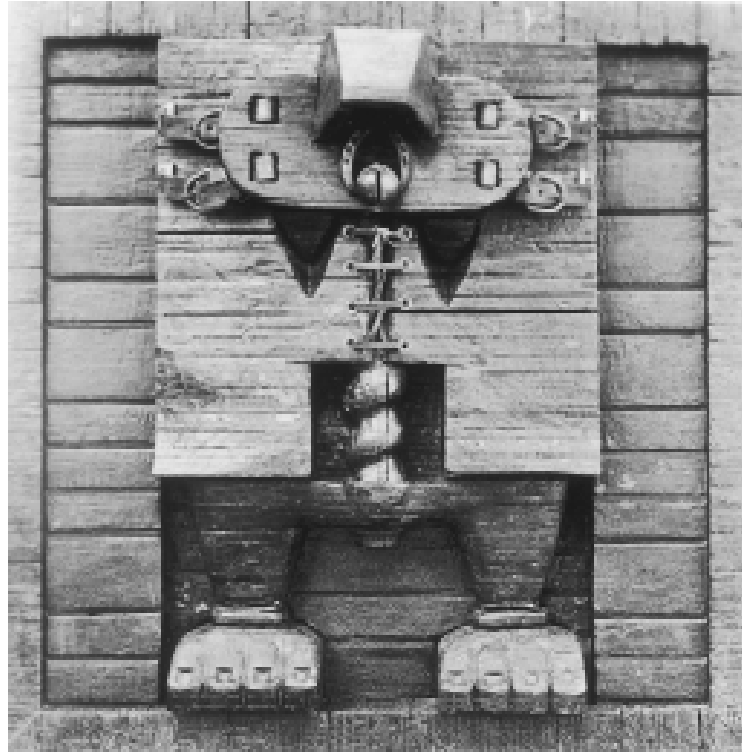


Above: 5 Jeram Patel, *Drawing*, 1974. Middle: 6 Prabhakar Barwe, *Existence*, 1987. Below: 7 J. Swaminathan, *Untitled*, 1993





8 Himmat Shah, *Untitled*, 1987–88



9 Satish Gujral, *Shakti (Burnt Wood)*, 1980

Satish Gujral (*Illus. 9*), Himmat Shah (*Illus. 8*), Nagji Patel, Latika Katt and Valson Kolleri convert formalized objects into contemporary icons and back again into concrete entities, thereby emphasizing the significance of material immanence in modernist art.

Modernism has valorized the near-autonomous logic of the hand, sign and metaphor in the making of artworks. This connects the modernist with the ‘primitive’ or tribal artist by a looped argument, giving the former the privilege of possessing a visual language and the latter that of contemporaneity. This universalized notion of the image can be positioned as the common norm of modernist formalism, also often standing in for ‘integrity’.

For a younger generation of artists it is precisely the displacement of these three authorial elements—hand, sign, metaphor—on to other more problematic levels of materiality and semiotics that is important. It causes a disjuncture of meanings and loosens out new chains of meanings. It is in this manoeuvre within the conceptually open, half-empty space of modernity that the more fraught social identity of the contemporary Indian artist abides. And it is in the moment of historical mortality, in the death-act of making and destroying the (art) object that the new politics of art practice takes hold.

Avantgarde Alternatives

In his formulation of the historical avantgarde, the German theorist Peter Burger identifies some key characteristics, one of which is anti-institutionalism—including opposition to the institutionalized autonomy of art. The establishment of autonomous art within bourgeois culture is interrogated, a reconnection between art and life and an integration of high and low cultures is encouraged.⁸

I will argue that if the avantgarde is a historically conditioned phenomenon and emerges only in a moment of real political disjuncture, it will appear in various forms in different parts of the world at different times. To develop this point, I extrapolate from the American critic Hal Foster's reflections on the subject. Although indebted to Burger's concept of a historical avantgarde, Foster takes issue with Burger's sectarian position on the avantgarde of the 1920s:

[H]is very premise—that one theory can comprehend the avant-garde, that all its activities can be subsumed under the project to destroy the false autonomy of bourgeois art—is problematic. Yet these problems pale next to his dismissal of the postwar avant-garde as merely neo, as so much repetition in bad faith that cancels the prewar critique of the institution of art.⁹

Clearly, a historicism that conflates the before and after and designates cause and effect on the presumption that the prior event produces the later one is not acceptable to Foster, and he goes on to say:

Despite many critiques in different disciplines, historicism still pervades art history, especially modernist studies, as it has from its great Hegelian founders to influential curators and critics like Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg and beyond. Above all else it is this persistent historicism that condemns contemporary art as belated, redundant, repetitious.¹⁰

Hal Foster takes a position in favour of successive vanguards precisely to make contemporary practice viable—as advanced and ambitious in its critical stance as the 1920s' historical avantgarde. I am suggesting that we extend the argument by a deliberate deflection: the successive form of the vanguard is extended to include hitherto unlogged initiatives. This deflected argument will rebound as a critique of Foster's own (Euro)Americanism, of his indifference to nonwestern ideologies of plural modernities/alternative vanguards.

Once we admit history—over and above art history—as the matrix from which the notion of the avantgarde arises, then there are always plural histories in the reckoning. For a long time now Latin American cultures have followed a radical agenda that has developed into a cultural dynamic quite independent of their Euro-American antecedents. Similarly, an African or Asian avantgarde will come into its own if at least two moves take place simultaneously. One, a move that dismantles the

hegemonic and conservative features of the national culture itself. Two, a move that dismantles the burdensome aspect of western art, including its endemic vanguardism. That is to say, such an avantgarde would have to treat the avantgarde principle itself as an institutionalized phenomenon, recognizing the assimilative capacity of the (western) museums, galleries, critical apparatuses, curators and media.

Who's Afraid of the American Avantgarde?

Here a quick retake on the American avantgarde might help since it so mediates and dominates the art-historical discourse on the subject. It is worth remembering that in the American context the parameters of the debate on the avantgarde are conditioned by the Americans' own telescoping of modernism. The first great phase of modernist art in the United States emerged as late as the 1940s. By the 1960s, American art critics had already marked the end of modernist art *per se*. American modernists, having pushed an ideology of freedom in the cold war years on the single ticket of heroic abstraction, brought it to a quick impasse. The positioning of the avantgarde was the recuperative part of the teleology. With the next generation of more academic art historians in the lead, American artists became exemplars of a disciplined vocation.

The avantgarde of the 1960s—pop art and minimalism (in Europe: fluxus and *arte povera*), positioned in certain relationships to the suppressed histories of dada and constructivism—did respond to the outwardly directed radicalism of the decade. And the conceptual opposition to the modernist aporias of the period were based in some part on the intrepid stand of youthful revolutionary energy intent on upturning, as in the decade of the 1920s across Europe and Russia, the last bastions of bourgeois modernism. But if the American neoavantgarde replayed the 1920s' battle with modernism, we should remember that it was in terms of a very reduced notion of this modernism and of modernist painting: Marcel Duchamp was face-to-face with Pablo Picasso; A.M. Rodchenko with, say, Max Beckmann; but Donald Judd faced only a Kenneth Noland—one formalism against another. A too-precise battle, too easily won, straitened the discourse of the neoavantgarde into retinal epiphanies versus bodily encounter. It needed the feminist-led extension of the conceptual art movement, with its emphasis on the political import of phenomenology and semiotics, to give the avantgarde some bite in the 1970s.

Not only is there is no reason whatsoever for the rest of the world to subscribe to the vocational stringencies of the American vanguard, there are other larger battles to be taken account of: alternative avantgardes must emerge in opposition to the American power structures of art, academia and, above all, politics. They do in fact emerge—and within the United States as well—to challenge the biggest monolith of all: the American state and its capitalist fundamentalism.

Political forms of cinema and magical narratives in literature from Latin

America have knocked peremptorily at the gringo citadels since the 1960s. Enough has been produced in the visual culture of the neighbourhood to break any notional monopoly of the American avantgarde. Other parts of the world find their own cultural equations and make precise linguistic choices. Clement Greenberg's aesthetic, for example, meant very little in Asia; there was always a greater attraction for eccentric and excessive acts of art-making and therefore other models served the purpose. In the post-1960s period, for example, pop art and the attenuated forms of narrative reflexivity that R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney developed apropos what came to be known as the School of London find reverberations among the narratively inclined Indian painters. The new image painters of the 1980s, like Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke in Germany, or the more florid Italians like Francesco Clemente and Enzo Cucchi, strike a chord in Afro-Asian postmodernisms, given the expressionist bias of the first-generation modernists in several of these cultures. On the other hand, the mythic-romantic aspect of the conceptual art practised by Joseph Beuys and his followers has fascinated artists in many parts of the world, including younger Asian and Indian artists. Feminists have learnt from each other across cultures and this brings into the orbit of imagination artists as disparate as Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Nancy Spero, Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman.

An Indian/Asian artist does not aspire to be part of the monumental trans-avantgarde of Europe; for the same reason the American avantgarde is seen as a discrete phenomenon within mainstream internationalism. Even renegades from the American canon—from the painterly to the minimalist, from the postpainterly to the conceptual—gain other meanings in other contexts. The continuing debates on the avantgarde, invigorating as they are, cannot—precisely because the avantgarde is not a moral or academic but historical force—claim a determining discourse on the avantgarde *elsewhere*. Once they are unstrung from the logic of a Euro-American master-discourse on 'advanced art', third-world vanguards can be seen to be connected with their own *histories* and mark that disjuncture first and foremost.¹¹

It is true that in the (still operative) imperialist phase of internationalism plural histories are hierarchized in terms of effective agency. But this view has been repeatedly challenged since liberation politics came on the agenda. The discourse of decolonization has staked the claim that these cultural alternatives, positioned as they are at the cutting-edge of poverty, are as valid as any criterion that we recount in conventional art history. Contemporary Euro-American cultural discourse cannot function without a recognition of the major shake-ups that have taken place in its hegemonic assumptions: just as Mexico and the Soviet Union challenged Europe in the prewar era, and Cuba and Vietnam challenged the United States in the 1960s, Asia may well be the economic rival and cultural nemesis of Euro-American power in the coming decades.

Asian Art: A Poetics of Displaced Objects

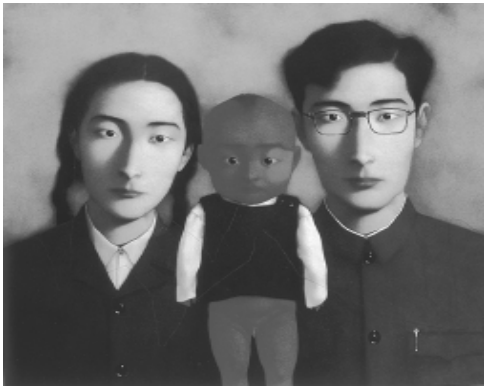
Asian cultures are faced with multiple paradoxes barely covered by art-historical debates in the Euro-American context.¹² It needs to be emphasized that if re-historicization of modernism has been undertaken in western art history via the very distinction made between modernist and avantgarde ideologies (as for example, the issues around the 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition '*Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, and how these were reversed in the 1989 Centre Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*¹³), then this form of exposition is wide open for interventions: the disjuncture of decolonization makes a particularly useful vantagepoint.

We can now speak of the coproduction of modernities as between the colonial and the colonized, and quite certainly of the coproduction of postmodernism on the elaborately theorized experience of postcolonialism. Indeed, one may now pose a somewhat parodic question: whether it is time for avantgarde initiatives in the non-western world to place qualifiers around Euro-American art and treat it as ethnographic source material for *its* productions.

An *anthropological* intent that figures alterity is now active in the Asian arts. The point is to go beyond the well-known primitivist trope. There is an opening out of the sacred and thus of the self-incorporating secret with which art-objects in traditional societies are imbued. There is an interest in tribal materialism and cosmologies as these concern indigenous peoples in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Australia and the Americas. The counter-taboo against any interference by metropolitan artists in the life-world of tribal artists was based on one kind of ethic (epitomized by the writings of Claude Levi-Strauss). This has been broken to the extent that interaction between so-called closed and open communities is inevitable in the present electronic age. Every space has been invaded or will be shortly. Artists bear witness to the fact that a new ethics of reciprocity has to be devised that is wary of the ethnographic sentiment for conservation, of an art-historical desire for a traditional aesthetic, of national appropriations, of imperialist robbery. And of artistic masquerades on behalf of the people.

In most third-world countries indigenous and civilizational values are covered over by more recent manifestations of *nationalism*, of national struggles and, in some cases, of the revolution. Not surprisingly, the Mexican mural movement is the monumental representational project in this regard. (In the Philippines allegorical painting, somewhat like the Mexican mural movement, is still strong, ranging in more recent years from, say, Edgar Fernandez to the surreal mappings by the artist-couple Reamillo and Juliet to the collective work of the Sanggawa Group.)

While national liberation movements—their triumphs and their occasional reversals—is a continuing subject of cultural creativity, the representational projects are now accompanied by strategies of future survival. The relay of blood and memory in the history of the nation yields a simultaneous vision of material and



Above: 10 Heri Dono, *Ceremony of the Soul* (installation view), 1995.
Below: 11 Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: The Big Family-I*, 1996

cultural transformations underway on specific locations. There is cleverly coded *political art* in Indonesia with artists like FX Harsono, Heri Dono (*Illus. 10*) and Dadang Christanto (*Illus. 12*) making up an advance guard: using aspects of the Javanese tradition of puppetry and pantomime, converting theatric traditions to conceptual and political ends, staging strange artefacts, macabre figures, disciplined robots with a precisely calculated charge, they mount a cumulative critique. They thus represent as well as act out the tragic consequences of an oppressive state.

Many Asian societies have witnessed a dispersal of their populations through successive waves of migration, and are therefore subject in their cultural manifestations to mediations of diasporic, now *global*, concerns. The immigrant simultaneously questions imperialism as s/he does the ideology of nationalism, thus deprivileging the hierarchies set up by located interests. Equally, however, the deconstruction of capitalist myths is acted out more and more outside the west; it now takes place in eastern loca-

tions where transnational corporations find their local collaborators. So the issue of location is once again important, this time inversely, as a site of global exploitation and of cruel profit through local collaborators. (The work of the Thai artists Vasan Sithiket, Kamol Phaovasvasdi and Navin Rawanchaikul (*Illus. 13*) find ways to show how people's ecological integrity is being destroyed daily and precisely in the third world.) A landscape with debris forms the basis of twentieth-century political imagery that is still, in our part of the world, finding new forms of articulation.

What we are dealing with is *transcultural signs*. For if national allegories and their deconstruction are foregrounded in many of the Asian countries, the various forms of cultural creativity are based precisely on a metamorphosis of the inputs I have been speaking about: anthropological resources, national ambitions, transnational capital and its economic-ecological devastation. It is this conjuncture that has, in the



Left: 12 Dadang Christanto, *Untitled* (installation view), 1995. Right: 13 Navin Rawanchaikul, *There Is No Voice* (installation view), 1993



last two decades, produced a volatile situation and an avantgarde in Asia.

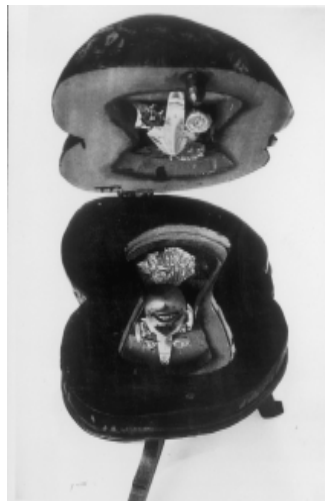
The Chinese avantgarde bursting forth in the aftermath of Mao's cultural revolution (and subsequent death) produces bitterly parodic pop paintings. Zhang Xiaogang (*Illus. 11*), Feng Mengbo, Wang Guangyi, and Yu Youhan are examples. More recently, elaborate and ironical forms of installation and performance art have multiplied: the work of Gu Wenda and Chen Zhen (*Illus. 14*) are formally as complex as they are flamboyant and provocative. The installation/performance projects of the Chinese artist Cai Guo Qiang include, besides the spectacle of exploding Chinese fireworks, the making of mock-primitive boats armed with arrows and the historical reversal of the theme of voyage and discovery in a project undertaken in Venice called *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot Project* (*Illus. 15*).

Along with the articulation of a new cultural cartography (charged with a geopolitical force), the Asian region is rich terrain for the formation of new subjectivities, especially female and *feminist subjectivities* long held captive by the heavily guarded patriarchies of the region. It is while interrogating hegemonic aspects of collective consciousness and national allegory, both personified by male protagonists, that artists like Imelda Kapije-Endaya of the Philippines and Arahmyaiani from Indonesia signal solidarities with victims of global capital. In the process of radical recodings, as in the case of Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook (*Illus. 16*), the transition

from the social to the familial to the subjective takes place through a relay of melancholy metaphors that can be seen, together with artists like Susan Victor from Singapore, Chen Yan Yin from China and Bul Lee from South Korea as a corporeal and immanent language of dissidence. Asian feminism stakes claims as a contemporary intervention, revealing culturally rich female self-knowledges where family, self, social abandonment and the erotics of pain are all put out for scrutiny.



We have to consider the status of the object in relation to *indigenous crafts* as in the Asian countries objects, sculptures and installations are produced from materials and skills quite different from the west. We must remember that in Asia materials are still connected with live artisanal practices. There are artisans in transitional stages within the village and urban market economies who have traditional skills; urban artists have (access to) vestigial skills. Consider the work of the Indonesian artist



Facing page:

Above: 14 Chen Zhen, *Jue Chang—Fifty Strokes to Each* (installation view), 1998.

Below: 15 Cai Guo Qiang, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot Project* (performance view), 1995

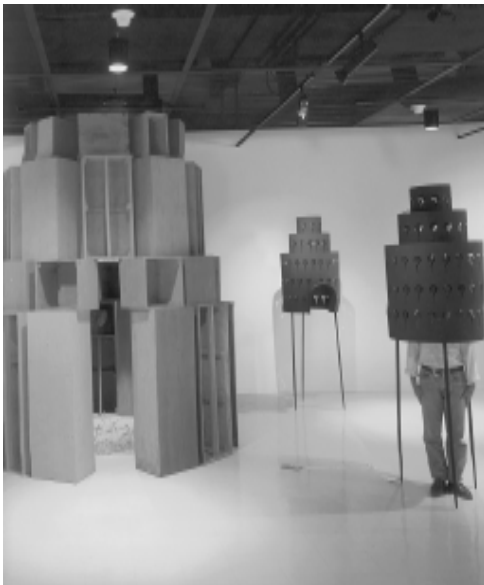
This page:

Left: 16 Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Girl Says There Is Always the Night* (installation view), 1993.

Right: 17 Nindityo Adipurnomo, *The Burden of Javanese Erotica* (detail), 1993

Nindityo Adipurnomo (*Illus. 17*) who welds ancient and new eroticism through the use of exquisite craft, making the act of handcraft itself a voluptuous, if also ironical, ‘gift’. And of Soo-Ja Kim from South Korea, using traditional silk and brocade textiles as ornamental flourish and floating arabesques, as deliberately devalued stuffings in migrants’ bundles.

There is here a question of skill as paid labour and the problem of exploitation of indigenist art practices. There is also a question of authenticity—not an issue of being within a tradition but of possessing a language that transcends it while respecting the material conditions of artisanal practice. It is not enough to fabricate in order to textually deconstruct an art-object for its own sake. We have to find new ways of speaking about the material predispositions of Asian artists as well as their



Above: 18 Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky* (installation view), 1987–91. Below: 19 Montien Boonma, *Sala of the Mind* (installation view), 1995–96

neoconceptual operations on the notion of a raw indigenism.

The object in the installations of many Asian artists signals an in-between stage of use and *exchange value*. In a situation of incomplete modernization and uneven market economy there is a quasi-commodification at work: older forms of fetishism survive within new forms of reification in a consumer culture. The object installed within such a context is neither fully functional nor sacred nor entirely part of commerce. There is reference to all three aspects at once, and to a fourth aspect: the making of art with its own parameters stretched between art-historical context and formal autonomy, with the paradoxes and ironies this enfolds. This inbetweenness can give the object in the installations a peculiarly liminal presence.

We must further remember that the object of art, both by itself and in the theatrical *mise-en-scène* of the installation, is quite differently conditioned in societies that have an active tradition of *magic, fetish and ritual*, including elaborate performances. In the Philippines, in the small town of Baguio, artists have construed an indigenous aesthetic with poor materials and shamanistic performances to ‘appease’ destiny: I am thinking in particular of the late Roberto Villenuve and Santiago Bose.

Incarnate experience, in the larger phenomenological sense in which these traditional cultures know how to mobilize the image, should now include a new poetics of space. I am speaking of the *contemplative aesthetic* introduced



20 Agnes Arellano, *Vesta, Dea and Lola* (installation view), 1995

by contemporary artists from Asia, such as Filipino artist Agnes Arellano (*Illus. 20*), tend to be about the redefinition of identity through mythic concreteness—a resurrected body in the *iconic* mode, a numinous presence in the dismantled condition of self. It is no wonder then that the theatric temporality of the installation form experienced as a secular site for benediction has been so optimistically pursued in Asia in recent decades.

Because the civilizations of the Asian region hold a continuing lure for the transcendental, there tend to be revivals of a scriptural/metaphysical aesthetic. Similarly, there is a subtle diffusion based on the enshrinement of mystical desire in the heart of dissenting cultures. A creative relationship between the classical, the mystical and the everyday secular which demands what I called living solidarities, is precisely the range of contradictions contemporary Asian artists must tackle.

Given that Indian/Asian art has been so dominated by the metaphorical—the metaphors heavy with civilizational values—the assembly and installation of objects in foregrounding metonymic meanings perform a crucial function. The processes of condensation are eased and the artist is able to introduce both the poetics and politics of displacement. The installation form, presenting a phenomenological encounter based precisely on the act of displacement—of found and sited objects, concrete and ephemeral ideas—produces propitious results for Asian art. It raises questions on the notion of the artist's proper domain; her/his entry into public spaces and the discourse emanating therefrom. It reflects on the equation between the citizen–subject, the artist and artwork in the imaginary (evolutionary) public sphere.

I will now take up implications that emerge from the developing Asian/Indian situation. The first is the recurring status of the hybrid sign within colonial

by Chinese artist Xu Bing (*Illus. 18*) with his monumental scroll *A Book from the Sky*, and other language-based works mimicking, invoking civilizational pedagogies. In the work of the Thai artist Montien Boonma (*Illus. 19*), the suggested circumambulation and peculiar sensory saturation resulting in a spiralling 'aura' produces a form of hypostasis. His modestly installed temples are designated as precincts of meditation that give to the act of spectatorship a deliberate reticence and to all the senses together an indexical charge of mortality that is both pain and *jouissance*.

Many sculptural ensembles

discourse as it pertains to contemporary artworks. The second is the politics of place in the global context with specific reference to postcolonial discourse, the production and exchange of artworks.

Heterogeneous/Heterodox

By confronting these [historical] issues, perhaps we can understand more clearly the cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of transition and transmutation. In the process, the concept of homogenous national Asian cultures seen through consensual art traditions can be redefined. Indonesian installations that represent the violence and burden of postcolonialism can be contrasted to Korean history painting of resistance during the colonial period; Philippine mural painting that makes allegorical reference to the Roman Catholic faith can be compared to a Buddhist-inspired medicinal-herb installation from Thailand or a cow-dung painting from India; the native female body is examined as the focus of sexual desire and physical abuse in works by Indian, Philippine, and Korean artists. This is not the 'clash of civilizations' . . . it is the chink and clang of the heterogeneities and hybrids that make contemporary art from Asia so full of surprises and expectations.¹⁴

The pleasure of heterogeneity is also a claim to heterodox politics, which is what the definition of the avantgarde in Asia may most closely approximate. I will add a rider here so that the issues do not get stereotyped on the other side of the divide. Playing the devil's advocate, I will suggest that colonial–postcolonial cultures in Asia have been too ready to capitalize on eclecticism. I am in favour of the honourable conventions of eclectic art practice, taking it as a privilege of complex civilizations that have strongly syncretic aspects. But I take a critical position at this juncture because as a multicultural norm (which is itself constituted in large part through the debates raised by the diverse cultural processes released in the postcolonial period), it can mask the sharper contours of an identity forged by the pressures of modernity, decolonization and global capitalism.

A continued insistence on eclecticism and its conversion to various ideologies of hybridity within the postmodern can serve to elide the diachronic edge of cultural phenomena and thus ease the tensions of historical choice. It can lead not only to nostalgia but also to a kind of temporal recoil. For in societies where traditions are part of the material life of living peoples and modernity is still and again besieged—by religions/fundamentalisms of every kind—recycling tradition is anything but an unproblematic business. It can help the rightwing propagandists and suit their tastes. This is what we have to remember apropos postmodernism itself. Global-scale eclecticism can lead to the kind of *laissez-faire* where every choice and combination is ratified by the participatory spirit of postcolonial/postmodernism.

To put it in more ideological terms, we must look not for hybrid solutions to the tradition/modernity dichotomy but for a dialectic. The heterodox elements from the national culture itself—which is to say the counterculture within it—must first be put into the fray: the visual inputs of the popular, the marginalized cultures of tribal communities, of minorities and dalits, of women. A space for contestation has to be recognized within the national/modern paradigm so that there is a real (battle) ground for cultural difference and so that identities can be posed in a far more acute manner than postmodern notions of hybridity can accommodate.¹⁵

This may be the precise time to reconsider why postcolonial artists may, in fact, refuse the passport of cultural hybridity into the postmodern. That is, of the postmodern that promotes simulacra based on attenuated cultural mediation of the contemporary. It may also be the time for these artists to treat plurality as a means of posing a series of alternatives that have some bite left from the earlier, more dialectical notion of contradiction.¹⁶ Modernism has (a still unrealized) revolutionary history—even if it is at present in retreat; postmodernism, even if it is ascendant, coincides with a retreat of all anticapitalist ideologies. I would like to revert to a historical dialectic developed in the radical strains of twentieth-century avantgarde art and to link modernism and postmodernism by that means.

Geopolitical Tremors

Globalization and its contingent ideologies make up the kind of postmodern space that requires new mapping strategies. Multiple places and plural histories are yanked together as sites of speculation, as sites of operation for the TNCs, and for their sheer exploitability in the labour and consumer markets.

Moreover, the TNCs force a form of multiple interference that dislodges the earlier international stake and splits it into the local and the global. It thereby also reinscribes artists into an anthropological discourse and gives them a command over otherness that is, by now, largely emblematic. It is this that is prone to be trivialized both by postmodern discourse and by the kind of postcolonialism that reduces itself to ethnic banalities. We have to make sure that otherness has less to do with the fancy-dress of multiculturalism and more to do with political reflexivity and cultural action of a kind that opens the possibility of direct, democratic address.¹⁷

Even anthropology—the most located of all disciplines—makes sense in its excessive forms at the brink: of subjectivity *in extremis*. Indeed if otherness is not to become another kind of an ecriture you have to position the self and art practice in a critical dimension: where linguistic investigation remains distinct from yet another indigenist style and cultural translation foregrounds its political agendas.¹⁸

The possibilities of redefined location are coming to be better understood by artists of the third world as they stake their position within the terms of a new global culture. In that respect it is not surprising that Asian art has come into an

avantgarde aspect at a point of double reckoning with old and new imperialisms and at a moment when the fruit of the economic miracle begins to taste bitter at the core. If the Asian avantgarde is based on a sense of the future, as it must be, this lies in the enlarged theatre of political contradictions.

The question, then, is not of reinventing discrete national traditions nor of manufacturing something like an integrated Asian/global tradition. This politics requires the harnessing of countercurrents—currents that carry and sublimate civilizational values crisscrossing those that painfully desublimates them.

Nor is such transgressive energy to be nurtured in the raw; the aesthetic is elaborately coded in Asia and the recoding requires adequate formal means. It requires an understanding of the classicizing principle; it requires considerations due to surviving artisanal practices in the commodified context of globalized economies. There has to be an ethics of identity in Asian societies that requires not only posthumous retribution on behalf of destroyed cultures but also devalorization of the self, of subjective indulgence, in an act of living solidarities with the cultures that survive. To reiterate an earlier proposition: acts of radical desublimation that avantgarde art practice require are that much more complex in cultures based on a sublimation of civilizational ideals through centuries.

A hermeneutic must be put to work in the art of Asia today; it is a major excavation of precisely the geopolitics of place that includes tradition *and* the TNCs. Marion Pastor Roces dramatizes this to excellent effect:

The vocabulary of geology is especially useful in visualizing the ground of tradition as active and substantial and subject to dramatic or imperceptible processes of subduction. Slippage, fissuring, accordioning, folding in, absorption, collapse; building up—all irruptions within highly local dynamics—elude confinement in fixed strata. Specialists need to direct their attention toward volatile chemistries and tracteries of ancient and current traumas. And if potential for equilibrium or disaster is calibrated with a healthy respect for the indeterminate, it may be possible to gain an understanding of forces that reverberate jaggedly and fracture the binary formulations so fundamental to Western epistemologies into capillaries—not just vivid fault lines—of stress.¹⁹

The Cultural Dialectic in India: A Politics of Place

I want to introject the notion of an avantgarde into the specific cultural dialectic in India, or what one might call a politics of place.²⁰

There are two major opposing forces in India's social terrain. The claim of the Hindu right claim to a hegemonic status mounting in moments of crisis to a near-fascist use of majoritarian power. And the equally massive force at work within the nation towards the realization of a more radical democracy and the recognition of

economically backward and socially oppressed sections of the polity: dalits, religious minorities, women. These volatile forces threaten to pulverize the centrist state and throw up styles of identity which shake the certitudes of its progressive nationalism.

Stepping back along the tracks of change, it may be worth mentioning the two prominent approaches deployed to deal with the stress of change in Indian cultural history. Terms like continuity, eclecticism and reinvention all try to work through the more elastic substances of old civilizations—from tradition *to* modernity. The subalternist's response privileges transgression, subversion, hybridity, and proposes another style of (or even exit from) modernity.

Once norms like cultural sovereignty, (autonomous) high art forms and an institutionalized aesthetic devised alongside the compound canon of the national/modern come to be dismantled under pressure from globalization, the transformative and the transgressional approaches break down. Once the state and the national bourgeoisie begin to play out the game of economic liberalization, the Indian artist is certain to have to shed 'his' singular identity, to arrive at a more polyvocal presence. It is no longer a matter of pitching into an indigenous identity (frequently hijacked by cultural conservatives), nor of self-representation through existentially authenticated art forms. Even the strategies of subversion will need to be worked out into a new style of making, of placing, of reconstituting the world of objects and values in the fragmented gestalt of our times.

Is there a substantive aspect to cultural differences within a changing India? How do production values supersede the demands of conservative elites and avid consumers—as also conventions of third-world radicalisms established elsewhere? How do we relate with the radicalisms immanent in the social terrain at home, how should we recognize and name an *avantgarde* in India?

The argument I want to introduce is that the model for an *avantgarde* in Indian art could be part of the same dialectic that is motivating social theory. Consider how Indian historians further the methodology that breaks down the national narrative, the cultural paradigm, the object of attention and the very subject of history. How they seek to replace teleologies (which happens to be the mode of projecting modernist art) with phenomenological encounter and discursive analysis (which coincide with the mode of apprehending the historical *avantgarde*).

Developing the analogy further: Indian social historians now frequently work with the idea of the fragment, accepting that it provides a part-for-whole significance in the moment of loss—the loss of a humanist utopia, for example, the very evacuation of which has to be sustained by historical vision.²¹ The fragment may be seen as something split off because of an ideological disengagement from the pressure of a given hegemonic culture. Or it may be an element that was never integrated and which further devolves to withstand assimilation. This could be the point at which the feminine transforms itself into a feminist position, or at which the dalit consciousness

performs an act of cultural secession in order to create a state of extreme alterity.

The cultural dialectic in India requires that analysts and practitioners—artists among them—foreground positions of marginality and reveal such contradictions that bring creativity to the brink. Indeed one may argue that any cultural creativity requires the deployment of social analysis on the one hand, and a commitment to avantgarde practice that deals with materiality and process and facilitates transformation, on the other.

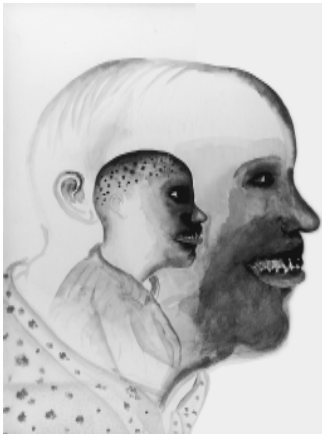
Thresholds have to be crossed once nationalist protectionism in art (as in economics) is dropped and the vexed category of the Indian/modern stands exposed. Dating from the middle of the 1980s, changes have occurred in art practice that have now, in the 1990s, acquired an edge. A newly differentiated politics emerges along with a long overdue art-historical retrospection on sources and language.²²

Indian Art in the 1990s

Before going on to a more detailed exposition of the work of some of the key players, I want to map the significant trajectories in the Indian art scene today. Artists still undertake, in a far from exhausted way, representational subversions. At the same time they develop textually complex allegories based on the image. To this has been added a repertoire of monumentally styled iconography by younger sculptors. In recent years there is more recourse to masquerade, and there is the actual staging of artworks in a theatric *mise-en-scène*. Art as object, and its status at the level of assembly and installation, need to be explored if we are to make sense of artworks using found material and conceptually coded signs. The domain of reproduction has been extended within the gallery from the print to the photograph to the video, thus devalorizing the uniqueness of the image/object. Armed with a battery of new signs, artists have taken the initiative to enter and designate the public sphere. One might

even say that by undermining the image they seek a fresh mandate on historical motifs. But there is also, as *against* these public concerns, a manoeuvre towards counter-reification through the crafting of the unique fetish—where coded desire deflects both the alibi of objective representation and public forms of address.

I present here two versions of the representational project. Making a deliberate and somewhat provocative binary between the male/female exponents, I show them to be consciously attempting ironical counterpoints in current iconography. This is followed by another deliberately posed (but not exclusively gendered) binary: of private fetish and public concerns.



21 Bhupen Khakhar, *And His Son Also Had Black Teeth*, 1995



21 Bhupen Khakhar, *An Old Man from Vasad Who Had Five Penises Suffered from a Runny Nose*, 1995

Male Body in the Painterly Domain

The interrogation of identity by Indian artists today coincides with the loss of a certain equation between history, sovereignty and the subject. The gain provides a centrifugal force where the artist pulls out fragments of otherness and clads the self, but sparsely. Is this, then, a no-norm artist? Or is it a consciously masquerading subject who is more often than not a mock-surrealist with astonishing layers of interiority still immanent?

The legacy for this kind of figuration is most precisely attributable to Bhupen Khakhar who, as he grows older, develops a unique form of intransigence through not only the play of taste but by an intimate and deeply unsettling presentation of homoerotic and transvestite motifs (*Illus. 21, 22*). Pushing his art to the brink he brings, ironically enough, a sustainable understanding about gendering in the spiritual protocols of Indian culture. He has found a visual language through and beyond indigenism and built an iconography that privileges marginal lives. This includes gender, caste, class identities but *also* a quizzing of the male/modernist representational style in its heroic self-stance.

The lineage of new figuration is carried on by younger painters and sculptors. Since the 1980s two 'generations' of painters have worked in and around the narrative/allegorical axis: among them are Surendran Nair and Atul Dodiya (also, each different from the other but roughly of the same generation, Savi Savarkar,

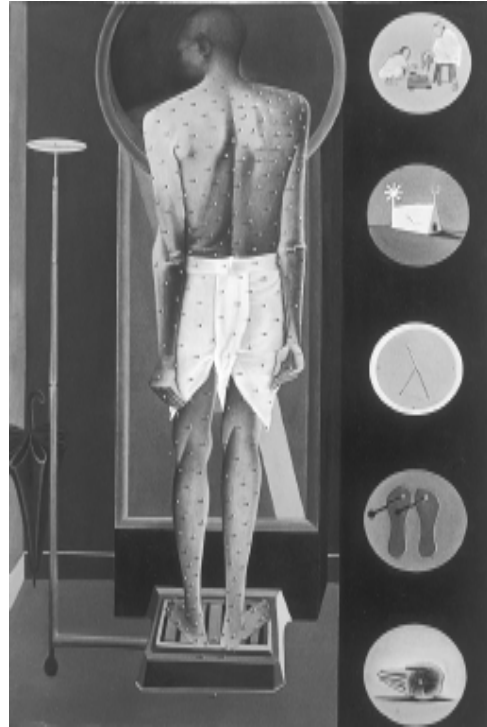


23 Atul Dodiya, *Sea-Bath (Before Breaking the Salt Law)*, 1998

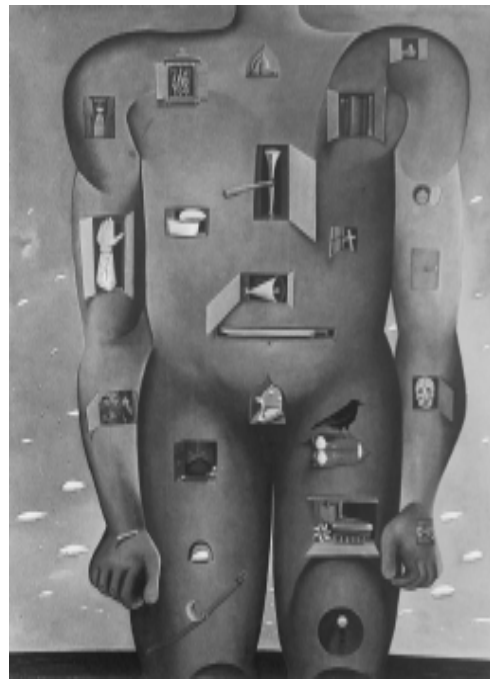
Vasudevan Akkitham, Nataraj Sharma). I will take up Surendran Nair and Atul Dodiya in some detail. These two painters construe *pictorial allegories* based on recognizable (ancient and contemporary, private and public) icons. They have been working in tandem to recast figures in paintings, bringing to the representational project a precise form of critical annotation. As Indian artists they make a particular contribution to the relation between the icon and narration; and as contemporary artists of a progressive turn they translate the mythic into the allegorical, allegories into contemporary, secular encounter.

There is an aura of hidden meaning with Surendran Nair; there is a play of chance encounter with Atul Dodiya. What happens at the level of a hypostasis with Nair is, in the case of Dodiya, montaged in the form of contingency. Both, as we can see, are surrealist devices to enrich the image. They give the high modern vocabulary of images (from surrealism) a second level of irony associated with postmodernism, and yet remain committed to the meaning of the picture puzzle.

The Gandhi project taken up by Dodiya and Nair is a way of coming to terms with the prime representative phenomenon of twentieth-century India (*Illus.* 23, 24). At the end of the century it involves a re-vision of a destinal life. In order to do this both painters in their own ways not only paint Gandhi like a contemporary *icon*, they inscribe themselves in the tradition of dedicated image-makers and, adopting the popular mode, mediate the passage to the 'sacred' and beyond—where the calendar image may be seen to serve the purpose as well as a 'good' painting in dispersing the message. There is here a contrary semiotic charge: the reinstatement of the aura for the image dismantles the actual sign, exposes its vulnerability: Nair's Gandhi stands on what looks like a weighing machine, his body studded with little crystals of salt and



24 Surendran Nair, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Corollary Mythologies)*, 1998

25 Atul Dodiya, *Gabbar on Gamboge*, 199726 Surendran Nair, *Auto Da Fe*, 1995-96

sand that spangle his back but also pierce it like nails. He is a martyr. Nair weighs him with the salt of the earth and finds him floating—like an ascending avatar.

In their courage to re-present Gandhi, Nair and Dodiya's ongoing representational project grips the ethical over and beyond the merely semiotic game-plan offered in postmodern art. The artists seem to position themselves as exemplary citizen-subjects: in the choice of their iconography they are both conscientious and critical, and they evaluate its worth through the twist and turn of meaning in the still available repertoire of cultural symbols within the social domain.

Both take up the Vishnu myth. Nair's recumbent figure, whose body-line is also the horizon, sprouts a whole herbarium from the navel; flowers, fireworks, a forest of symbols shoot out and hang like luscious pendants, like instruments of torture in the night sky. Mimicking the myth of origins, he gains this *jouissance* spiraling from the male belly even as he screws down the pristine body with the unicorn's horn and, with perverse pleasure, fixes the godhead like a svelte dummy.

Alongside this recumbent figure Surendran Nair has made a succession of erect torsos referencing occult iconography (*Illus. 26*). Featured as the cosmic body, the torso becomes a framing device for more secret signifiers: towering like a silhouetted mansion, the body is cut open by little windows in the tiered niches of which are placed objects of ritual, torture, propaganda, provocation. While the protocol of the icon is maintained (corresponding as it were to the flat picture-plane/ fixed frame, held

‘sacred’ in modernist painting), the icon is punctured and its numinous body deflated. This kind of profane iconicity houses, literally, an arsenal of gratuitous devices and itemized symbols; it spells out a vocabulary for a counternarrative about art and religion alike. This is a kind of hermeneutic where an abstruse allegory is recoded without it being demonstrably decoded in the first place.

Atul Dodiya’s Vishnu is surrounded by a zoological spectacle: the coiled serpent, *sheshnaag*, lifts its reptilian head and smiles along with a chorus of devotees, one of whom might be the redoubtable artist–creator—Brahma/Picasso/Dodiya himself, blooming at the end of Vishnu’s abdominal gut. The myth of origins is here returned to the sporting ground of a bunch of benign denizens; but it is the sly fox in a vignette that gives the picture its title, *Grapes Are Sour*. The picture itself a mockery of mythology in the spirit of an agnostic who, moreover, puts his origins at stake: he openly recognizes himself to be the grandchild of modern art and is engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the masters to escape their aura and project his own.

Thus Dodiya pushes on: he takes the postmodern penchant for pastiche head on and tests the painting conventions of the high modern vis-a-vis the popular Indian (*Illus.* 25). He inscribes the surface with lessons of art history—turning on a sharp irony to camouflage the full force of genuine pedagogy. In his actual practice he argues the case for painting with whoever will denigrate it as a sentimental relic of high modernism; it is as if he is ready, singlehanded, to prolong the life of painting. And in India, where there is no fear of its disappearance anyway, he incorporates the object-nature of painting, objectivizing the painted surface, making of it a tough support that receives the cryptic sign of disaffection. It softens to act out existential dilemmas and hardens again to display, as on a billboard, the political travesties enacted in the everyday. As painted surface and as the provocative iconography of a motivated self, Dodiya’s work is brilliantly polemical.

Full-bodied Sculpture

A host of new avatars descended quite suddenly on the sculptural ground, and ahead of their painting peers. The decade of the 1990s saw the rise of a new representational tendency towards the iconic among young sculptors. These sculptors—mostly from the art schools of Trivandrum and Baroda—made a dramatic rupture with modernist conventions and offered a retake on classical Indian traditions. With amazing figural skills, they began to redefine contemporary sculpture in terms of a theatric ensemble of modelled, cast (from clay to plaster and fibreglass), painted, and frontally posed figures in a somewhat kitsch and parodic mode.

The first retakes on the sculptural tradition came from Dhruva Mistry and Ravinder Reddy; over the years, Reddy has found a way of further monumentalizing the iconic form in classical Indian sculpture, making the gilded icon a voluptuous object of contemporary delight.

Reddy's sculpture is about seduction, ornament, gigantism, iconicity, repetition, fetish. Fixed with a burning gaze, such a code defines the erotic nature of nearly all Indian art. This has less to do with subjective mutualities, more with a dangerously bold encounter of the human and the divine that sanctions similarly permissive play by mortals. Reddy equates the eroticism in the divine and popular, high and low traditions and thereby puts into place a kitsch-sublime that goes beyond parody.

The *yakshi*, to whom Reddy repeatedly refers, is not to be embraced; *she* touches what she will make fertile. Traversing tricky ground, she now appears in Reddy's work as the aboriginal woman, the tribal girl, the studio model from the rural neighbourhood who does not resort to ruse: he finds her a sculptural version that mocks false advances. Thus Reddy sets up a generative cycle between life and myth; the construed pleasure derived from the female icon is at home in the popular and celebratory experience of the everyday; it is humorous, performative, readily accessible.

Once the repeatedly fashioned and benignly fetishist portrait-head and free-standing figures find a place in the vast resource of live faces/anointed idols, one can see that Reddy makes his way beyond the cruel reification of the sensuous in contemporary exchange. Reddy's great golden heads and life-size figures are mock subscribers to an anthropological pageant; they keep to a state of contemporary wakefulness, a little dazed by their own immortal beauty (*Illus.* 27, 28).



27 Ravinder Reddy, *Krishnaveni*, 1997



28 Ravinder Reddy, *Woman '95*, 1995

Another, different trail was blazed on the sculptural front in the 1980s: it was first configured in 1985 in the exhibition *Seven Young Sculptors*, and then between 1987–89 it developed into The Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association. This Kerala–Baroda group hammered out a militant agenda, arguing that Indian art required a radical interrogation of political and aesthetic issues. K.P. Krishnakumar adopted a heroic agenda in his tragically brief career. He used the figural gesture, often profoundly comic, to taunt the viewer and also to signal faith in the sculptural presence itself. In an act of Brechtian double-take he hoped to reinscribe a lost humanism in the local liberationist politics of his home-state of Kerala, and thenceforth perhaps in (what he might have called) the betrayed map of the nation.

It needed a sculptor like N.N. Rimzon to mediate the aforesaid stances with the choice of a reflexive language. Rimzon makes traditional icons a noble pretext for radical deviation. When conceiving the male body in the archaic–classical mode, his antecedents are quite apparently the heterodox traditions of Jainism and Buddhism. It is a body chastened by yogic austerities; it makes possible an apotheosis (as in *Inner Voice*, 1991 and *The Tools*, 1993). But as an atheist Rimzon creates a scriptural elision whereby other texts can appear in the discourse of the body.

He directs the image, anthropomorphic or symbolic, toward a material asceticism that reinstates the aura of the artwork but challenges the processes of its



29 N.N. Rimzon, *Far Away from One Hundred and Eight Feet* (installation view), 1995

reification: through the suppressed ritual of carnal love, the concealing of the sacred, the violence and purification of art. In a series that represents complete lovers, ideal labour, upright ascetic—the last, the ascetic, becomes a portal. If you step back, beyond its threshold, the ego reverts to the primordial. You can also step forward, as in *Speaking Stones* (1998), into the historical. This classically composed ensemble is of topical relevance. Rimzon encircles the seated figure with newspaper cuttings on communal violence in India. Weighed down by stones that obscure the news but assimilate the information, the seated man performs a profound act of mourning and expiation as part of the responsibility of the retracting citizen-subject.

Formally, Rimzon's work is a considered retake on phenomenological encounter, it is a contribution to the minimalist aesthetic of appropriate bodily regard in the realm of the material/metaphysical objecthood. To the extent that it is the chastened body of sculpture that propels the viewer, this is a controlled encounter; and it is this level of precision in finding a formal analogue for the activity of circumambulation, for a meditative ambience, for spiritual protocol, that contemporary art gains a real iconographic charge and the aspect of an incarnation in secular space.

Further, the indigenous tradition of dissent and locally pitched politics takes Rimzon into the area of transgression, as in his work *Far Away from One Hundred and Eight Feet* (1995), referring to dalit discrimination and the punishing rituals of a caste society (*Illus.* 29). At that juncture, cultural exile from within the surviving/stagnating communitarian structures is seen to be almost inevitable. The profane is structurally present in the sacred, and Rimzon's obsession with essence implies anxiety that is itself a productive possibility of the soul—its private precondition of praxis.

While both aspects in Rimzon's work, the absolute and the material, retract to a notion of the primordial that is in the process of shedding metaphorical fuzziness, mythical excess, he is in no way a primitivist. He is interested in taking the coded body of the archetype and turning it into a replete object of contemplation—and contention—in historical consciousness.

We have to find further ways of conceptualizing this oddly symbolic, variously displaced art practice that manifests itself in the stark gestures of civilizational avatars, dismantled. For it is here, in the structure of a seemingly tabooed space, that there is also signalled the 'loss' of a monadic self that is conceptually male.

Female Body in the Representational Field

What are the norms that need to be dismantled in Indian art? One of them is precisely a properly clad, symbolic formation that is by and large male. And it may be that in mocking contest with Duchamp's bachelors, it is being stripped bare by the brides, even!

We can track three directions taken by Indian women artists in the last decade. Artists who paint the female body and those who find other representational

modes like photography and video to work with the feminine as masquerade. Those who take feminist concerns into issues of materials, female labour, ethnography and environment. And those that enter the domain of fetish.

The oeuvre of the senior painter Arpita Singh *holds the ground* in order to sustain and survive socially generated traumas. During the 1990s her image of the girl-child, traced through the successive phases of her life to motherhood, forms the core of an allegory that contains explicit images of subjective and social violence. This is often portrayed in the form of a direct combat of wrestling bodies, or as peremptory death. However, the frame that surrounds the painting holds this played-out terror in a balletic balance. The protagonist matures in the end with the naked grace of a saint and an apotheosis is revealed not least in the painterly manner itself. Arpita Singh marks the moment of female self-canonization in Indian art. The body is represented to act out mortal pain and erotic self-absorption with an almost identical gesture of liberation.

Related in her poetics of affection to Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh offers the coded inflection of a carefully crafted visual language. With their medieval/oriental sensibility, her miniaturized paintings offer vulnerable representations of the female self converging on the body that bears and brings forth the child. Then, in her enormous tent-like hangings she introduces a sweeping orbit, a mock-infinite spatialization, thus establishing a *mise-en-scene* for the staging of the beloved's performative



30 Nilima Sheikh, *Shamiana* (installation view), 1996



31 Anju Dodiya, *Rose-fever*, 1998

body—from Akkamahadevi to Meerabai to Sohni. This levers her pictorial proposition into a kind of rhetoric: with a near-transcendent impulse she unfolds a calibrated structure of gendered feelings that move like lightning from the everyday to the erotic to the mystical—scattering signs on the painted *shamiana* (*Illus. 30*).

If the elliptical space opened by Nilima Sheikh swallows her ecstatic figures in its radiance, Jaishree Chakravarty, in her cascading paper scrolls, blanches the field to light up paths for invisible voyages. If Arpita Singh encodes her psychically notated good and bad objects in the closet-proscenium of the picture, younger women artists like Rekha Rodwittiya present frontal images of the woman engaged in a series of healing vocations secured with her use-objects. And Anju Dodiya, tipping out of her space like a giddy acrobat, wields her props in a daily masquerade and poses vexed questions by openly doubling her identity (*Illus. 31*). I am proposing the possibility in contemporary Indian art of the female self reconfiguring both existential and topographic elements to gain a situational identity.

As if to break the too-elusive notion of female self, to mark and textualize it in a way that it does not get interpellated into an ethnographic notion of a situational identity, Nalini Malani goes against the grain and packs the artwork with a disintegrating subjectivity. Refusing to concede a sane social space in which meaning can be reconstituted, she suggests that the tattered fabric of the world unfurling in the wake of the woman's wilful descent will have to serve as the proverbial mantle of universal shame. She pitches the artwork as a subversive agent that can turn around to designate the new historical forces at work in the actual global space.

In her fudged and shadowy drawing series titled *Mutants* (1993–95), Malani demonstrates a devolution of subjectivity to the point of measured degeneracy. She gestures towards the world by filling up the world-vacuum with her own subjectivity, now worked through the body and soul of a painfully exposed androgynous figure. The mutant's body, serialized in drawings and paintings of changing



32 Pushpamala N., *Phantom Lady or Kismet* (artist photographed by Meenal Agarwal), 1996–98

scale, is evidence of the concealed modes of violent expropriation; the mutant's soul, planted with a stigmata, offers 'the truth of the victim'.

In the decade of the 1990s Nalini Malani enlarges her engagement with the identity of the (female) victim into myriad phenomena under the somewhat ironical trope of nature. She invokes psychic horrors worked out in mythological structures and fuses these with biological and environmental degradation (as in her installation for the staging of Heiner Mueller's *Medea*, in 1993). In *Medeaprojekt* Malani works with a new allegory for an ancient tale, investigating exploitation and violence as political categories. Through the Greek myth she tests the ground for an argument—what happens when you go 'against nature'. Further, she transfers the anguish of female othering into theatric forms of catharsis and critical reflex (as in her installation/video for a staging of Brecht's *The Job* in 1997). Most recently, she elaborates this proposition of othering in a video installation about ethnic violence and fullscale war.

Given that female personae are now up for persistent masquerade, the possibilities of photography, video, installation and performance open out. Besides Nalini Malani, these have been tried by Rummana Hussain, Pushpamala N., Ayisha Abraham. Turning to the medium of photography/performance, the sculptor Pushpamala has had herself photographed (by Meenal Agarwal) as *Phantom Lady or Kismet*—a heroine from B-grade film noir (*Illus. 32*). Through this persona, she plays out the cliché of the desired subject/discarded object. The narrative sequence played by Pushpamala in costume has a foreclosed quest: she is reified in the image of the dangerously pursued heroine replayed as an ironical denouement. The artist acknowledges pastiche and reveals the trick: *the empty enigma*. In her more recent work (cross-referenced to Cindy Sherman's photo-project, *Film Stills*), Pushpamala enters another kind of melodrama and gets herself photographed as a middle-class heroine dreaming

her existence through banal situations and mass-produced kitsch. In its give-and-take of dreams a commercially hand-tinted photograph becomes a perfect artefact; it is a symbolic thing but it is also a simulacrum—the copy of a copy, the original for which does not exist. In initiating that empty enigma the person that is the openly masquerading artist refers to a kind of pristine self, a demonstrably false innocence, whereby she can conduct, as if from ground zero, a retake on the arts of representation.

Stripping Bare

Besides the working of these symbolic alterities there are specifically annotated relationships with materials and labour in the work of Indian women sculptors like Meera Mukherjee. And now, a new phenomenology and function of the object that reworks a formalist aesthetic towards ethnographic readings.

The work of Navjot Altaf and Sheela Gowda makes the point of cultural deconstruction through ingenious relays of material signifiers in transposed contexts. Navjot's project is about elaborating the context of art production from village community to metropolitan gallery. Sheela's work is honed to a minimalist aesthetic that makes the message spare—like a life-sustaining parable.

An ethics based on collective creativity informs Navjot Altaf's practice as she struggles with the received orthodoxy of Marxism and definition of radical art. Having worked earlier with schoolchildren and women's groups, she now attempts a much more ambitious project: of living and working with tribal artisans and ritual image-makers in village communities of the Bastar region, sharing the experience with an art writer and a video cameraman who record the nature of the interaction.

Navjot packs the nakedness of her sculptures with the rude resistance of archaic goddesses positioned within invented traditions of feminism that are notated with contemporary texts. Her own sculptural style is openly 'primitivist'. She amalgamates in the truncated, totemic female figures elements of innocence and fertility. Other elements in the installation resist fetishist closure. She encodes little wrapped rolls (tied tight like tampons) of newspaper cuttings about the affairs of women. These are stacked and framed in acrylic. Thus her dwarf-marionettes are motivated by a contemporary concern and they will make it across the pedestrian crossing (painted on the floor of the gallery) by an inner/outer propelling.

The recent installation called *Modes of Parallel Practice* is more disparate in means, message, image: the first factor in the work produced in the process is an 'earthing' of the image through the use of materials—notably wood and brick and fabric—that are basic to tribal economies and cultures (*Illus. 33*). The jointly/discretely made forms hug the ground and clutter the surface (adding to organic materials, PVC pipes and plastic bags) and shoot up as totem poles, all the while declaring their material/magical/use-value. As productive bodies and linguistic signifiers of a material culture that is still partly based on barter (at any rate not completely reified by money



33 Navjot Altaf, *Modes of Parallel Practice: Ways of World Making* (installation view), 1997–98

exchange), they have a rough-and-ready existence. The artist enacts her belonging/unbelonging in the theatre of this environmental work.

This cross between an anthropological experiment and an art workshop has to be informed today with all the hazards and calumny that earlier primitivisms and newer, revisionist studies of interculturalisms have gone through. The premise is shaky, but what Navjot seems to suggest is that the primacy of metropolitan creativity is equally shaky and needs at least to be played out from different ends of the language network. She seems to say in this work and the texts wrapped around it in a semi-confessional mode of contemporary anthropology, that we live through an astonishing continuum of representational and symbolic attitudes and that it may be an affirming thing to try and inhabit this labyrinthine passage, whatever kind of charade this entails.

Sheela Gowda's commitment to material existence, environmental concerns and women's labour in rural India leads her to choosing materials like cowdung (treated/combined with neem oil and kumkum). Besides being part of the everyday economy of the Indian woman who must recycle excreta as house-plaster and fuel, this gives her a malleable sculptural material that is replete with meaning and, indeed, properly signified in the realm of environmental/cultural ethics. Even as the woman's material existence is signified by the use of this one raw material, an antiaesthetic is also benignly signified, accepting ridicule and recoil as part of the regenerative process.

The stuff is turned into cording pats, bricks and walls, plumped and strung like blood pouches or, as she calls them: 'gallant hearts' (*Illus.* 35). This transposition of basic raw material, this reissue of 'primitivism' becomes also a way of anointing female labour; formal discreteness references art history, leads to subtle allusions, even as the object itself remains deceptively simple.

Recently Sheela Gowda has turned to another kind of labour-intensive artwork: she makes two sets of 350-foot-long ropes by passing 700-foot-long ordinary thread and doubling it through the eye of a needle. Then, gluing a handful of these threads and adding blood-red pigment to the fevicol, she makes them appear like great coils of disembowelled innards. The rope-end is tasselled with the clutch of needles that have performed their meticulous task and now droop and glisten like a prickly ornament or a miniaturized object of torture. The ropes are looped all across the white cube that can be up to 20 feet high (*Illus.* 34). They thus dissolve the strict right-angle format: a little like Pollock's single-surface, high-tension drips, the strung-up



Left: 34 Sheela Gowda, *And Tell Him of My Pain* (installation view), 1998. Right: 35 Sheela Gowda, *Gallant Hearts* (detail), 1996

drawing—deep red on white—seems to flatten out the wall and floor. In the next moment the dematerialized space refers to the dominantly male aesthetic of minimalism (much like Eva Hesse) so as to challenge it.

These ropes that are like umbilical cords and intestines and blood-trails become the body's extension/abstraction in longing. They 'tell him of her pain', as the title says, but make of this pain a strange ritual of self-perpetuation. This is a visceral work, but very far from being gory. The woman's body is erotically signified through its absence and the work involves you in a combined enticement: of her labour and her narcissism which together turn into the act of doing, nurturing, being.

When you return to the formal proposition the ropes, laid out as loosely knotted arabesques in the large white cube, are meant to challenge body-scale. Even as you walk through the festooned space the body disentangles itself and the linear pattern recedes into a spatial dimension set for a virtuoso performance that you prefer to behold rather than reenter. So the particular route which finally takes Sheela Gowda to her concern with the ethics of (female) creativity passes through a form of symbolic theatre, tantalizing you by pulling out yards of her wound/womb and the very arterial system that pumps blood to her heart.

This kind of metonymy that never recoups the body to which it refers, what sort of a subject does it figure, what sort of an encounter is this? I would like to present Sheela Gowda's new work as a radical unframing of the exhibition space. Even as she feels at home in the white cube of the gallery she has adopted the logic of the parergon—the frame that disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away and leaves just space. And even as she entangles the spectator's body in imitation as it were of the artist's own body, it is to arrive at the experience of an unfolding structure—the temporality of what appears to be infinite unravelling but it is clutched and terminated at certain points on a metaphor of pain.

Gender Fetish, Sited Artwork

Knotted, moulded, bedecked with full-blown genitals, the monumental fibre sculptures of Mrinalini Mukherjee are at the same time macabre and ornamental (*Illus.* 36). They are metaphors for fecundity—nurturing/devouring mother-goddesses—but they are arrived at by the process of a fetishist suturing of the shredded body, by the crafting of a sexually prodigious form. She has an interest in wresting male power, in exposing the phallic nature of totemism, in devising through female sensibility and craft a fetish that materializes the fear of the female grotesque.

As against Mrinalini's gigantic effigies Anita Dube's miniaturized, textured and adorned fetish, her assembly of bones sheathed in red velvet and trimmed with beads, encapsulate desire in a state of ecstatic perversion, making it a caressing, dissembling object of female masturbation (*Illus.* 37).

A new generation of artists, both men and women, seem to be taking a

sharp turn towards fetishism, incorporating sexual magic into the commodity nature of the art-object. Prominent among them are the older artist Ranbir Kaleka, now working with video installation to create a form of meditative hypnosis. Younger artists like Anandajit Ray on the one hand and Jitish Kallat on the other, work out image and surface to create an interface of high and popular art forms, of interiority and exteriority, conflated to make a neutral compound for self-imaging. Inclined to mock high culture, high art, high purpose, painter-sculptor Sudarshan Shetty produces images that are simulacra. He fabricates kitsch paintings and objects, mimicking the manipulative aesthetic of the marketplace including the use of advertising photography (*Illus. 40*).

Claiming this to be their form of social alertness, other younger artists in the cosmopolitan cities (especially Bombay) work at the edge of the social matrix where they perceive the entropy created by the spin of industrial, mercantile, electronic expansion. They convert the free realm of consumer culture into quasi-political games, recognizing the farce played out between the masquerading subject and the seductive object. These artists (for example Tushar Joag, Kausik Mukhopadhyay, Sharmila Samant, Shilpa Gupta, Monali Meher) initiate a form of social demolition and dismemberment that foregrounds desire—in the debris so to speak. The closure of the fetish, the accessibility of the net:



Above 36 Mrinalini Mukherjee, *Woman on Peacock*, 1991.
Below: 37 Anita Dube, *The Book from Silence (Blood Wedding)*, 1997

the ideology of current work both retracts and opens out to include interactive and exchange strategies. In video/computer work the input ranges from the conceptual to the trivial and indicates precisely a menu that spells post-modernism.

As against the artists mentioned above, there are attempts—by other young artists—at breaking open the fetish in magic, art and commodity. Site-specific works done on a monumental scale but in a transient mode—as erasable signs, as traces in the nature-city continuum—have been undertaken by Soman in Kerala, and by M.S. Umesh (*Illus. 39*) and Srinivas Prasad in Bangalore. Subodh Gupta from Bihar/Delhi uses indigenous materials to reverse the narrative, turning ‘authentic’ experience into simulacra (*Illus. 38*). Mock-ritual presentations of ethnographic material that resemble rustic ‘life’ and use-objects in the fast-changing rural-urban environment bring the question of cultural identity upfront like a badge for difference in global expositions.

Following the utopian idea of an artists’ collective lived through by the Kerala Radicals in the 1980s, there is from the 90s onwards a renewal of the idea of group projects, but in more informal and negotiable terms. Artist-run workshops like



38 Subodh Gupta, *Untitled* (performance view), 1999



39. M.S. Umesh, *Earth-work* (installation view), 1996



40 Sudarshan Shetty, *Home* (installation view), 1998

still hope to build not only interactive languages but possible communities through more socially participatory art practice.

Historical Markers

There is now a transgressive spirit in the contemporary art scene that includes a welcome polemic on the ‘correct’ application of the modernist canon. More recently, there is a critical reckoning of global post-modernism through conceptual manoeuvres: I now go on to certain installations that set out materials, process and site in such a way as to embed them in a specific social matrix. I am referring to projects undertaken in recent years by Vivan Sundaram, Rummana Hussain, Nalini Malani.

Vivan Sundaram in his work of the last decade installs the historical motif as a documentary/allegorical account of the contemporary. This is exemplified in his 1993 *Memorial* to the dead man on the street—victim of the carnage of Muslims in Bombay in 1992–93. His successive installations unpack art-objects to become metonymically linked signifiers. Then, in his public installation *Structures for Memory* (1998, *Illus.* 41, 42), the object-world is conscientiously reassembled to become a formal commemoration of the national journey.

A site-specific installation in the Durbar Hall of the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta (a white marble monstrosity built by the British in the early twentieth century), the *Structures for Memory* project is a workshop reconstruction of the modernizing process in India. The installation disembowels the imperium by its contradictory trajectories from floor to dome—as for example the 80-foot narrow-gauge railway track that cuts through the middle and turns this ceremonial meeting-place into a railway platform. A great symbol of British India’s modernizing project, the Indian Railways (lauded by Marx, denounced by Gandhi) multiplies the meaning of the space: place for transport and transit, temporary home for migrant labour and refugees, burial ground for tragic journeys undertaken at the time of India’s partition. A mammoth steel container on wheels encloses spoken verse from the partition.

In the first perspectival view, the cathedral-like space becomes a platform or a lumber-yard; then the space becomes performative, with the sound input settling

Khoj International in Delhi and other curatorial initiatives like that of C.S. John and Pushpamala N. in Bangalore, Navjot Altaf in Bastar and the Open Circle group in Bombay, bring the transient, site-specific installation mode of environmental exploration to a critique of the utopian dream. With works surfacing on the cusp between the environmental and the historical, these artists



41 Vivan Sundaram, *Structures of Memory* (installation view), 1998

in on rough-hewn objects such as the wall of jute bags inscribed with a hundred-year history of (Bengal's) peasant and labour movements. And then it becomes a museum within museum for public pedagogy: 500 box-files with names and photos of eminent Bengalis arranged like a bibliotheque. Each relayed element is notated and signified through empirical data, displayed texts, voice-over and video images. Thus physically montaged in space, the parts become mere signifiers, and the body navigates through the structures of memory even as it steps into and across the obstacles scattered in the project of recuperation.

Placed within a dome that is consecrated with verses by Rabindranath Tagore and Jibanananda Das about the immanent forms of history, Sundaram's installation is, by its very nature, overarching. In a transposed montage of many objects, the imagined whole is a phenomenological experience that temporarily suspends historical time. The interesting question is how the domed and perspectival (renaissance) space of the Durbar Hall is also turned into a map, a flat-bed design for receiving information, a crane-view of an urban ethnography archive, a fairground spectacle.

Inserted in the space is a consideration about the fragment: an installation in so many parts is a lesson about how unfinished objects in a construed workshop



42 Vivan Sundaram, *Structures of Memory* (installation view), 1998

constitute meaning. How, through recitations of names and dates and events narrativized in time, they gain cumulative meaning. How, also, these objects reinforce the contradictions, undo the need for condensation, refuse any closure of meaning. It is through hands-on practice, through insistent proof of making and manufacture, that Sundaram's more ambitious installations—exposing methods and relations of production—demonstrate a way of coming to grips with the material world, affirming that it is still amenable to praxiological motives, future utopias.

Through foregrounding material process art history is specifically socialized. Formal devices are taken from minimalism and *arte povera* but the lay viewers, walking here and there in a dispersed itinerary, make the fragments fall in place as post facto historical design. Though the installation functions seemingly without authorial presence, as a new kind of genre, the theatre of repeated encounters construes an active spectator who tracks the space carrying a belief in the normative designation of the citizen; a spectator who reconstitutes himself/herself through participatory presence at the sites of knowledge production privileged by the 'hidden' author. If the possibility of reconfiguring the world by a conceptual recoding of the fragmented parts requires utopian belief, a concrete form has to be devised to set apace, to motivate, the



Above: 43 Rummana Hussain, *Living on the Margins* (performance view), 1995. Below: 44 Rummana Hussain, *Home/Nation* (detail of installation), 1996



lay citizen to become an inquiring subject. Dealing in public history, the artist creates a mise-en-scene for discursive agency, ‘nominates’ himself as citizen-subject and stages a democratic encounter whereby the author *along* with the sometimes recalcitrant spectator reemerges as a political subject.

Rummana Hussain’s installation *Home/Nation* works through a set of displacements where nothing adds up, neither the subject nor a place of belonging (*Illus.* 43, 44). But the very unbelonging is specifically sited—in Ayodhya (later in Lucknow). On offer are bits of body which make up in configuration a lived life of pain, privation, longing and a strong compensatory faith. As for the nation, it is made implicit through a negative commitment or, in the romantic sense, a negative capability to build an imaginary sense of wholeness through loss. Hollows of doorways and mouth and fruit suggest the more wholesome convex forms that complete the metaphors for life—full bellies, complete domes, lit halos and hands cupped in prayer, not want. Rummana Hussain’s work is as much about material fragments in lieu of historical evidence as they are about torn memory that is also emphatically historical.

Modes of self-inscription into the historical are worked out by the artist: she proposes an aspectual engagement with the female body and devises personae that fit each travail. After December 1992 she chooses a historically indexed masquerade

about 'the Muslim woman'. In *The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal* (1997) the overlap of female body (personally afflicted, always subject to intrusion and violence), historical site (Ayodhya, Lucknow, Bombay), traditional fetishes, wish-fulfilling objects that help aestheticize pathetic and valiant prayer, produce a provocative montage.

This part-for-whole narrative about a Muslim woman's identity in India adds up in the installation to a kind of transcendent meaning so that while she speaks of the fear of marginalization and social rupture, she confirms the intricate patterns of a syncretic culture to which she contributes her own body—suturing the wound with an autobiographical skill that translates into an act of social reparation. In her performance piece *Is it what you think?* (1998) her own body is presented in a state bordering on apotheosis (she died in 1999). She asks crucial questions, as if from an Islamic crucible, that return her to an immanent state of doubt about what is too easily theorized as religious identity, female subjectivity/feminist protest.

And hereby she not only pitches her identity for display, she constructs a public occasion to test the viewer's gaze. She may not be equipped to signify the public sphere which the citizen-subject inhabits but she knows how to polemically position herself in the democratic space of a liberal society that consecrates the individual in the fullness of her individuality and then narrows her political rights. She unframes and then frames herself as icon, and evidence, on secular ground.

Nalini Malani, in a recent video installation, transfers the theme of subjective masochism to systematically perpetrated ecological evil across the globe. She has tracked down victims of chemical poisoning who stand as metaphors of old and new imperialism including the vagaries of a globalized economy.

I used the word telescoping: it is as though Malani, focusing and refocusing through a lens, spots the denaturing processes devolving earthly life into a continuous narrative of calamities. This world view has inevitably enveloped the theme of violence and war: her end-of-the-century contribution to contemporary art is an elaborate video installation titled *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (Illus. 45). It features twelve video monitors relaying scenes of religious terror/ethnic conflict, the undoing of national boundaries, the migration of refugees across continents, the explosion of bombs, the retraction into the womb of traumatized infants. The monitors are placed in tin trunks on the ground with quilts pulled out like traces of fugitive lives. On three walls there are large video projections: on the largest wall in front a video montage shows simulated images of the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with an animation film by Malani where she draws, animates and bleeds humanoid figures into the terrain of a guilt-ravaged universe. On the flanking walls two young women act a charade whereby their iconic bodies unscroll themselves on the ground, gather themselves and press against the imaginary surface of the screen. Distorting themselves in the time-span of the bombing sequence, they suck the gaseous diffusion and sublimate, as if, the lethal onslaught of bombs exploding on screen.



45. Nalini Malani, *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (installation view), 1998

The room with the video installation is bathed in a cold blue light. The tin-encased monitors on a glassy (mylar-covered) floor reflect the flickering images. The installation carries the name *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, after Sadat Hasan Manto. Heard at the site of the installation in voice-over, the story is excerpted to focus on the death of the ‘lunatic’ Bishen Singh who stands between the new nations of India and Pakistan in 1947. He is shot down by guards in the no-man’s-land between the barbwired borders of the two countries. Nalini’s work is a response to the nuclearization of India and Pakistan; the bombs make more belligerent the communal call of ruling rightwing parties. The story and the installation, which includes archival footage on India, Pakistan, Palestine, Bosnia, works as an allegory of the war victims and refugees of the twentieth century.

In Conclusion

An avantgarde artist in India has to recognize that if the logic of modernism is both syncretic and secular, it must also be radical; that while postmodernism is semiotically diverse it must be pitched to the substantial message of history.

To that purpose we have to work out our relationship with the west-

ern notion of *alterity* that is a form of absolute otherness as attributed to aliens, and of a radical singularity in ethical and political terms as attributed to the self. For this now produces a cynical, certainly bleak and abject construction of contemporary subjectivity; and encourages alienation that dissimulates radical projects. On the other hand alternatives—*alternative* positions in society—are quite visible in the southern world. I believe that artists from the third world, from Asia/India are in a position to still engage with historical options.

In the current conjuncture, then, there must be *art at the cutting edge*—of community, nation and market. This art will differ from western neoavantgardes in that it has as its referents a civil society in huge ferment, a political society whose constituencies are redefining the meaning of democracy, and a demographic scale that defies simple theories of hegemony. The national cannot, then, be so easily replaced by the neat new equation of the local/global (as in so many ASEAN and other East Asian countries), nor even perhaps by the exigencies of the state/market combine.

What we might look forward to, however, is not only emerging social themes but a renewed engagement with art language, a radical compound of *formalism* and *history*. A calibrated exposition of subjectivity through motifs from private mythologies/interstitial images will match the task of grasping the shape of social energies in their transformative intent. We know that it is in the moment of disjuncture that an avantgarde names itself. It recodes acts of utopian intransigence and forces of dissent into the very vocabulary and structures of art.

Notes and References

¹ See Vivek Dhareshwar, 'Postcolonial in the Postmodern Or, The Politics after Modernity', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXX, No. 30, 29 July 1995.

² See Tapati Guha-Thakurta's art-historical exegesis on the national/modern in her *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850–1920*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992. Guha-Thakurta furthers this work in her essays 'Visualizing the Nation', in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 27–28, March 1995; and 'Locating Gandhi in Indian Art History', in *Addressing Gandhi*, SAHMAT, Delhi, 1995. The debate on art and nationalism has been further elaborated in a study by Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental orientations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

For contemporary mappings of the national/modern in art practice, see Geeta Kapur, 'A Stake in Modernity', in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Caroline Turner, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1993. The debate on the artist inhabiting a national space through an expanded local–regional ethics has been evaluated through the account of one art institution designed for pedagogy and practice in postcolonial India: see *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, edited by Gulammohammed Sheikh, Tulika, Delhi, 1997.

³ For a critique of this phenomenon, see the selection of essays in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, edited by Tejaswini Niranjana et al., Seagull, Calcutta,

1993; and *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, special issue: 'Careers of Modernity', edited by Tejaswini Niranjana, Nos. 25–26, December 1993.

- ⁴ For a recent account, see Michael Brand and Gulammohammed Sheikh, 'Contemporary art in India: a multi-focal perspective', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999.
- ⁵ J. Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers: Catalogue of Roopankar Collection of Folk and Adivasi Art from Madhya Pradesh, India*, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, 1987.
- ⁶ K.G. Subramanyan, one of the most eminent artist-teachers in contemporary India, has elaborated on the uses of tradition in the making of art (especially as this was developed in Rabindranath Tagore's university at Santiniketan). He extends the idea of a living tradition through an ever-renewed eclecticism. See the three compilations of his essays: *The Moving Focus: Essays on Indian Art*, Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, 1978; *The Living Tradition: Perspectives on Modern Indian Art*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1987; and *The Creative Circuit*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1988. His teaching methodology has been elaborated in Nilima Sheikh, 'A Post-Independence Initiative in Art', in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*.
- ⁷ For a political historian's perspective on the problem of colonial culture and derivative discourse, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988. I am also referring to the kind of mediation conducted by Gayatri Spivak (*In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Methuen, New York, 1987) and then Homi Bhabha (*Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994) over the past two decades on the question of the postcolonial consciousness. Reference should also be made to works of fiction from the diasporic sphere that mediate by finding fictive spaces for the denouement of the postcolonial imaginary, as in the inimitable Salman Rushdie.
- ⁸ The generative formulation of the problematic comes from Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984. I am also indebted in the following argument to related positions found in Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies*, Verso, London, 1981; and in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986. See also the Introduction in *Questions of Third Cinema*, edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, BFI, London, 1994. Specific reference to the position of plurality and cultural politics in the postcolonial era is developed by Paul Willemen in 'An Avant-Garde for the 90s', in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, BFI, London, 1994.
- ⁹ Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', in *October*, No. 70, Fall 1994, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹¹ It will be instructive to place the American discourse on the avantgarde as conducted, for example, in the journal *October*, discussions of DIA Foundation and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, vis-a-vis the discourse on the avantgarde in the wake of decolonization and the subsequent postcolonial/third-world cultures in the journal *Third Text* published from London.
- ¹² There is growing literature on Asian art. For a comparative understanding of Asian art, see *Tradition and Change*, edited by Caroline Turner. Also *Modernity in Asian Art*, edited by John Clark, The University of Sydney East Asian Studies Number 7, wild peony, Sydney, 1993; and John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Craftsman House, G+B Arts International, Sydney, 1998. For a more popular review of Asian art, see issues of *ART AsiaPacific*, a magazine published from Sydney since 1993.

- ¹³ There is an extended polemic on these two shows. See, for example, Thomas McEvilley, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief', in *Artforum*, November 1984, reprinted along with related texts in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, edited by Russell Ferguson et al., New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York and MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990. On *Magiciens de la Terre*, see Cesare Poppi, 'From the Suburbs to the Global Village: Afterthoughts on "Magiciens de la terre"', in *Third Text*, No. 14, Spring 1991.
- ¹⁴ Apinan Poshyananda, 'Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition', in *Contemporary Art of Asia: Tradition/Tensions*, Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1996, p. 28.
- ¹⁵ For discussions of popular culture, especially the cinema, see *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 23–24, January 1993; and *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, No. 29, January 1996. The discourse on minorities commands a vast body of literature in Indian historiography: for the interlayered question of caste and gender, see Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender', in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakravarty, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996.
- ¹⁶ For a polemic on the necessity of working with *contradiction* as part of the project of anti-colonialism, see Benita Parry, 'Signs of Our Times: A Discussion of Homi Bhabha's Location of Culture', in *Third Text*, Nos. 28–29, Autumn–Winter 1994.
- ¹⁷ For a perspective on the issue of multiculturalism in the visual arts, see *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, edited by Jean Fisher, Kala Press/inIVA, London, 1994.
- ¹⁸ Hal Foster complicates this issue to bring out its dialectic in 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Marian Pastor Roces, 'Bodies of Fiction, Bodies of Desire', in *Contemporary Art of Asia*, p. 84.
- ²⁰ I want to make a notational reference to two texts that can be seen to frame the question of culture at this historical juncture. See Vivek Dhareshwar, "'Our Time": History, Sovereignty and Politics', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXX, No. 6, 11 February 1995. For a dialectical response to the recent tendencies in social theory to supersede the discourse of the nation, see Partha Chatterjee, 'Beyond the Nation? Or Within?', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4–11 January 1997.
- ²¹ See Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, annual number, March 1991. The concept of the fragment finds elaboration in Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.
- ²² I have developed this argument further in 'The Centre Periphery Model, or How Are We Placed? Contemporary Cultural Practice in India', in *Third Text*, Nos. 16–17, Autumn–Winter 1991; 'When Was Modernism in Indian/Third World Art?', in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 3, Summer 1993; and 'Navigating the Void', in *Cultures of Globalization*, edited by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 1998. (Later versions of these essays are included in this volume.)

List of Illustrations

I have tried to make the captions in this List of Illustrations as complete as possible. Where dates of artworks are uncertain/unknown, I have followed a convention in art history and used *ca. (circa)* as a means to allow up to a ten-year span. Thus I have attributed dates to all artworks to fulfil the ongoing process of documenting Indian art. Similarly, in the case of artworks with uncertain information regarding size and medium, I have included available/approximate details. While I take responsibility for errors of information/judgement, this entire attempt, based on visual perception of the artwork, art-historical crossreferences and consensus, is made in the belief that revisions will be forthcoming when better evidence is available.

I gratefully thank the museums, galleries, institutions, private collectors and artists from whose art collections I have selected works for illustrating the text in this book. These public and private collections are named in the individual captions listed below. There are, however, some gaps and omissions in the acknowledgement of collections due to lack of information available to me. I regret these.

A large number of photographs and transparencies of contemporary artworks have been made available to me over the years by artists. I would like to extend my grateful thanks to them for helping me develop an archive from which I have drawn extensively in this book. I would also like to acknowledge photographers whose photographs have been reproduced in the book. Among them I have been helped to identify: Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, Edward Weston, Raul Salinas, Jorge Contreraschacel, Marc Vaux, Jyoti Bhatt, Kishor Parekh, Prakash Rao, Prabjit Singh, Ravi Pasricha, Himanshu Pahad, Meenal Agarwal.

All photographs from the following films reproduced in the book have been obtained from the National Film Archive of India (NFAI), Pune: Damle/Fattelal's *Sant Tukaram*, Dadasaheb Phalke's *Kaliya Mardan*, Ritwik Ghatak's *Jukti*, *Takko ar Gappo*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Nagarik*, *Ajantrik*, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sansar*, *Devi*. I am grateful for their kind cooperation. The filmmaker Kumar Shahani provided me with photographs from his films.

Body as Gesture: Women Artists at Work

- 1 Photograph of Amrita Sher-Gil by Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, *ca.* 1940.
- 2 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self-portrait as Tabitian*, 1934, 90 x 56 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Vivan and Navina Sundaram, New Delhi.
- 3 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Hill Women*, 1935, 147 x 90 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Vivan and Navina Sundaram, New Delhi.
- 4 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Woman Resting on Charpoy*, 1940, 74 x 88 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
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- 7 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Brahmacharis*, 1937, 88 x 147 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 8 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Ancient Story Teller*, 1940, 90 x 74 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 9 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Two Girls*, ca.1939, 158 x 90 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Vivan and Navina Sundaram, New Delhi.
- 10 Amrita Sher-Gil, *Woman at Bath*, 1940, 92 x 70 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 11 Photograph of Frida Kahlo by Edward Weston, 1930.
- 12 Frida Kahlo, *My Nurse and I*, 1937, 30 x 35 cm, oil on metal. Collection: Dolores Almedo Foundation, Mexico City, Mexico.
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- 14 Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940, 63.5 x 49.5 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Harry Ransom, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, USA.
- 15 Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, 31 x 39.5 cm, oil on metal. Collection: Dolores Almedo Foundation, Mexico City, Mexico.
- 16 Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944, 40 x 30 cm, oil on masonite. Collection: Dolores Almedo Foundation, Mexico City, Mexico.
- 17 Frida Kahlo, *The Little Deer*, 1946, 22 x 30 cm, oil on masonite. Collection: Carolyn Farb, Houston, Texas, USA.
- 18 Frida Kahlo, *Marxism Heals the Sick*, 1954, 76 x 61 cm, oil on masonite. Collection: Frida Kahlo Museum, Mexico City, Mexico.
- 19 Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, 40 x 28 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA. (Gift of Edgar Kaufman Jr.)
- 20 Frida Kahlo, *Diego and I*, 1949, 30 x 20 cm, oil on masonite. Collection: Mary-Ann Martin/Fine Arts, New York, USA.
- 21 Nalini Malani, *Old Arguments about Indigenism*, 1990, 92 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Chester and Davida Herwitz Family Collection, Worcester, Mass., USA.
- 22 Nalini Malani, *Grieved Child*, 1981, 122 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Vivan Sundaram, New Delhi.
- 23 Nalini Malani, *Love, Deception and Intrigue*, 1985–86, 173 x 223 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Jaffer Islah, Kuwait.
- 24 Nalini Malani, *The Degas Suite* (after the monotypes of Degas), 1991, a set of 30 books with 32 pages each, each book 23 x 28 cm, monotype/photocopy and watercolour on sunlight buff paper.
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- 26 Nalini Malani, *Watering Man, after Rembrandt (or, Small Joys)*, 1991, 51 x 35 cm, watercolour on paper.
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Elegy for an Unclaimed Beloved: Nasreen Mohamedi 1937–1990

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- 12 Nasreen Mohamedi, Untitled, *ca.* 1976, approx. 48 x 48 cm, pencil on paper. Collection: XAL Praxis, Bombay.
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- 5 K.G. Subramanyan, *The King of the Dark Chamber* (detail).
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- 7 K.G. Subramanyan, *March 1971*, 1971, 62 x 62 cm, terracotta relief. Collection: Museum of Fine Art, Menton, France.
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- 12 K.G. Subramanyan, *Dog*, 1956, 44.5 x 58 cm, gouache on paper. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 13 K.G. Subramanyan, *Monkey*, ca. 1978, approx. 10 x 14.5 cm, ink on card. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 14 K.G. Subramanyan, *Goat*, ca. 1978, approx. 10 x 14.5 cm, ink on card. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 15 K.G. Subramanyan, *Dog*, ca. 1978, approx. 10 x 14.5 cm, ink on card. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 16 K.G. Subramanyan, *Woman at Tap*, 1949, 91 x 61 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 17 K.G. Subramanyan, *Woman with Lamp-II*, 1951, 91.5 x 66.5 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 18 K.G. Subramanyan, *Sitting Woman*, 1951, 91 x 66 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 19 K.G. Subramanyan, *Seated Woman*, 1958, 82.5 x 60 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 20 K.G. Subramanyan, *Studio*, 1965, 84 x 114 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 21 K.G. Subramanyan, *Red Dormitory* (polyptich), 1967, 123 x 92 cm, acrylic on canvas. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 22 K.G. Subramanyan, *Terrace-II*, 1974, 166 x 168 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 23 K.G. Subramanyan, *Girl with Cat-III*, 1979, 36 x 29 cm, reverse painting on glass. Collection: Mala Marwah, New Delhi.
- 24 K.G. Subramanyan, *Girl with Cat-II*, 1979, 39 x 31 cm, reverse painting on glass. Collection: Vivan Sundaram, New Delhi.
- 25 K.G. Subramanyan, *Woman with Pot of Flowers*, 1981, 61 x 44.5 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet. Collection: the artist, Santiniketan.
- 26 K.G. Subramanyan, *Girl on a Settee*, 1979, 39 x 31 cm, reverse painting on glass. Collection: Gulammohammed and Nilima Sheikh, Baroda.
- 27 K.G. Subramanyan, *Still Life with Flying Angel*, 1980, 58.5 x 43.5 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet. Chester and Davida Herwitz Family Collection, Worcester, Mass., USA.
- 28 K.G. Subramanyan, *Pink Woman, Blue Man*, 1980, 58.5 x 43.5 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet.
- 29 K.G. Subramanyan, *Still Life with Fishes and Cats*, 1986, 85 x 59.5 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet. Collection: Geeta Kapur, New Delhi.

- 30 K.G. Subramanyan, *Training for a Bullfight*, 1986, 85 x 59.5 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 31 K.G. Subramanyan, *Figure on Sofa*, 1994, 51 x 43 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet.
- 32 K.G. Subramanyan, *Bahurupee-II* (diptych), 1994, 104 x 64 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet. Collection: Centre of International Modern Art (CIMA), Calcutta.
- 33 K.G. Subramanyan, *Bahurupee-IV*, 1994, 80 x 91 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet.
- 34 K.G. Subramanyan, *Bahurupee-I* (diptych), 1994, 104 x 64 cm, reverse painting on acrylic sheet.
- 35 K.G. Subramanyan, *Yellow Street*, 1997, approx. 152 x 152 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Karuna Khaitan, New Delhi.
- 36 K.G. Subramanyan, *Annunciation*, 1997, approx. 152 x 152 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: E. Alkazi, New Delhi.

Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Painter: Raja Ravi Varma

- 1 Photograph of Raja Ravi Varma.
- 2 Ravi Varma, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1893, 120 x 86 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 3 Ravi Varma, *Man Reading a Book*, ca. 1898, approx. 61 x 40 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum.
- 4 Ravi Varma, *Amma Tampuran of Mavelkara*, ca.1883, approx. 76 x 50 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum.
- 5 Ravi Varma, *Woman with a Fruit*, 1890s, 60 x 45 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 6 Ravi Varma, *Victory of Indrajit*, 1905, approx. 183 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore.
- 7 Ravi Varma, *Shri Krishna Liberating His Parents*, 1905, approx. 183 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore.
- 8 Ravi Varma, *Shri Krishna as Envoy*, 1906, approx. 183 x 122, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore.
- 9 Ravi Varma, *Hamsa-Damayanti*, 1899, approx. 200 x 110 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum.
- 10 Ravi Varma, *Shakuntala*, 1898, 89 x 65 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Government Museum, Madras.
- 11 Ravi Varma, *Shakuntala Looks Back in Love*, 1898, approx. 173 x 90 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum.
- 12 Ravi Varma, *Jatayuvadha*, 1906, approx. 183 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore.
- 13 Ravi Varma, *Lady in Moonlight*, 1890, 75 x 59 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 14 Ravi Varma, *Madri*, oleograph.
- 15 Ravi Varma, *Gypsy Family*, 1893, approx. 173 x 90 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum.
- 16 Ravi Varma, *Lady with a Mirror*, 1894, 103 x 72 cm, oil on canvas, Government Museum, Madras.
- 17 Ravi Varma, *Portrait of Govardhanlalji, Nathadwara*, oleograph.
- 18 Ravi Varma, *A Galaxy of Musicians*, ca. 1889, approx. 115 x 152 cm, oil on canvas.

Collection: Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore.

- 19 Ravi Varma, *A Group of Indian Women*, oleograph.
- 20 Ravi Varma, *Galaxy* (detail).
- 21 Ravi Varma, *Galaxy* (detail).
- 22 Ravi Varma, *Galaxy* (detail).

Articulating the Self in History: Ghatak's *Jukti Takko ar Gappo*

- 1 Ritwik Ghatak as Nilkantha Bagchi (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*).
- 2 Nilkantha the alcoholic: 'representative of an irresponsible middle-class intelligentsia' (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*).
- 3 Bangabala (Shaonli Mitra), Nilkantha and Nachiketa (Saugata Barman): homeless 'exiles' (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*).
- 4 Nilkantha wheedles money for a drink from Shatrujit (Utpal Dutt) (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*).
- 5 Nilkantha in his abandoned house (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*).
- 6–8 Departure (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*). 6 Nilkantha's wife Durga (Tripti Mitra) tells him of her decision to leave. 7 Nilkantha accepts Durga's decision. 8 Durga waits as Nilkantha says goodbye to their son Satya (Ritaban Ghatak).
- 9 Nilkantha quotes poetry to Bangabala sitting on a Calcutta street bench (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*).
- 10 'Actor's head' (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*).
- 11–12 Street discourse (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*). 11 Bangabala, Nilkantha and Nachiketa: a drunken Nilkantha declaims, walking down a Calcutta street. 12 Jagannath Bhattacharya (Bijon Bhattacharya), Bangabala, Nilkantha and Nachiketa: a conversation at dawn.
- 13–14 Female personae (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*). 13 Durga: schoolteacher, stoic survivor. 14 Bangabala with the chhau mask of the goddess.
- 15–20 Nilkantha's apotheosis (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*). 15 Nilkantha, Nachiketa and Bangabala come across a group of armed Naxalites in the forest. 16 Nilkantha evaluates his own life in terms of revolutionary politics with a young Naxalite. 17 The police chase the Naxalites. 18 A policeman throws a hand grenade at the Naxalites. 19 Nilkantha refuses to leave the site of the 'encounter'. 20 Nilkantha, hit in the crossfire, lurches forward. Liquor from his bottle splashes the screen.

Sovereign Subject: Ray's Apu

- 1 Photograph of Upendrakisore Ray: grandfather.
- 2 Photograph of Sukumar Ray: father.
- 3 Photograph of Satyajit Ray at age eleven, 1932.
- 4 Outdoor shooting of *Pather Panchali*: Satyajit Ray with film crew and actors. Subrata Mitra and Bansi Chandragupta are behind him.
- 5–10 Apu's passage. 5 Aunt Indir (Chunibala Devi) rocks baby Apu to sleep (*Pather Panchali*). 6 Apu (Subir Banerjee) gets ready for school: his sister Durga (Uma Das Gupta) combs his hair, his mother Sarbojaya (Karuna Banerjee) tucks in his dhoti (*Pather Panchali*). 7 Apu (Pinaki Sen Gupta) learns to perform rites as a priest after his father's death (*Aparajito*). 8 Apu (Smaran Ghosal) as an adolescent schoolboy (*Aparajito*). 9 Apu (Soumitra Chatterjee) in his rented room in Calcutta, playing the flute (*Apur Sansar*). 10 Apu's bride Aparna (Sharmila Tagore) enters his Calcutta flat (*Apur Sansar*).
- 11–14 Social encounters in the everyday. 11 The grocer-schoolmaster (Tulsi Chakravarty) with

- customers and a punished schoolboy (*Pather Panchali*). 12 Durga and friends at Ranu's wedding watch fascinatedly as a woman applies *alta* on the bride's feet (*Pather Panchali*). 13 Aparna's mother shields her daughter from marriage to an insane man: 'Who are you giving your daughter away to?', she asks her husband (*Apur Sansar*). 14 Apu's friend Pulu (Swapan Mukherjee) asks Apu to marry his cousin Aparna to save family honour (*Apur Sansar*). (Photographs courtesy National Film Archive of India, Pune.)
- 15–18 Death in the family. 15 Sister's death: Sarbojaya embraces her dying daughter Durga (*Pather Panchali*). 16 Father's death: Apu helps Sarbojaya raise the dying Harihar (Kanu Banerjee) so that he may sip *gangajal* (*Aparajito*). 17 Mother's death: Nirupama (Sudipta Roy) finds an ill and dying Sarbojaya sitting under a tree (*Aparajito*). 18 Wife's death: Apu receives news from Aparna's natal home of her death during childbirth (*Apur Sansar*).
- 19–22 Bonds of affection. 19 Nature's child: Durga with a calf (*Pather Panchali*). 20 The lovers: Apu teaches Aparna English (*Apur Sansar*). 21 City friends: banter between Pulu and Apu (*Apur Sansar*). 22 Father and son: Apu claims Kajal (Aloke Chakravarty), his son by Aparna, and bears him away (*Apur Sansar*).
- 23 Apu gazes intently (*Pather Panchali*).
- 24–25 From Ray's sketchbook: wash drawings of possible film scenarios for *Pather Panchali*, sketched in the manner of comics.
- 26–30 The *kash* field. 26 Durga and Apu hear a mysterious hum (*Pather Panchali*). 27 Apu puts his ear to the electric pole (*Pather Panchali*). 28 Durga is screened by *kash* flowers (*Pather Panchali*). 29 Apu runs towards the train (*Pather Panchali*). 30 The train with a plume of smoke appears on the horizon (*Pather Panchali*).
- 31 Aunt Indir: inquisitive, gaping (*Pather Panchali*).
- 32 Durga holds a guava to the old aunt's nose: a shared moment of childish greed (*Pather Panchali*).
- 33 Durga dances ecstatically in the monsoon rain (*Pather Panchali*).
- 34–37 The struggles of life. 34 Indir conducts her meagre chores (*Pather Panchali*). 35 Sarbojaya calls out to Indir leaving the house in a huff (*Pather Panchali*). 36 Harihar gasps for breath on the steps of a Benares *ghat* (*Aparajito*). 37 Apu prepares himself to meet his son for the first time (*Apur Sansar*).
- 38 Apu daydreams while reading (*Pather Panchali*).
- 39 Apu, Sarbojaya and Harihar leave Nischindipur for Benares in a bullock-cart (*Pather Panchali*).

Revelation and Doubt in *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*

- 1 Vishnupant Pagnis as Tukaram (*Sant Tukaram*).
- 2 Child Krishna (Mandakini Phalke) dances on the hood of the serpent-demon Kaliya, and is worshipped by *nagins* (*Kaliya Mardan*).
- 3–5 Iconicity and frontal address (*Sant Tukaram*). 3 Tuka faces the camera as he adores his lord Vithoba and consort through song and speech. 4 The camera looks at the idols from the point of view of the adoring Tuka. 5 Switching point of view again the camera frames Tuka, establishing a transfer between idol, saint and viewer, between sacred and secular protocol.
- 6–8 The 'physiology of existence': the everyday countenance of Tuka/Pagnis (*Sant Tukaram*). 6 Tuka teaches his son Mahadeo (Pandit Damle). 7 His wife Jijai (Gouri) listens to Tuka's discourse. 8 Tuka, surrounded by his loving family, waits in penance at the banks of the

- Indrayani*, hoping to recover his verses from the river.
- 9–14 The healing of Tuka's son by his lord Vithoba (*Sant Tukaram*). 9 Jijai, furious with Tuka for his 'blind' faith, drags her sick child Mahadeo to the temple. 10 Pushing through the congregation, Jijai enters the temple. 11 The sick child flails his arms and cries out. 12 Shoe in hand, Jijai confronts the idol; the child is threatened by her rage. 13 The divine hand appears, the child is healed. 14 A grateful Tuka cradles his son in his arms.
- 15–19 Contrasting styles: humility and conceit (*Sant Tukaram*). 15 Tuka, the lower-caste devotee of Vithoba, sings his *abhangs* and leads the *kirtankars* through the streets and temple. 16 The grace and rhythm in the body of the singing saint. 17 Jijai, devoted to sustaining her impoverished family, lovingly bathes her buffalo. 18 Villainous Salomalo (Bhagwat), the brahmin priest of Dehu, whose performance style is a caricature of Tuka's singing. 19 Beautiful Sundara (Shanta Majumdar), Salomalo's mistress, in a seductive pose reminiscent of Ravi Varma's paintings.
- 20–23 The miracles (*Sant Tukaram*). 20 The idol of Vithoba breaks into dance. 21 In response to Tuka's devotion child Krishna pours grain from the sky. 22 The goddess emerges from the waters of the *Indrayani* holding Tuka's verses. 23 Accompanied by heavenly attendants, Tuka is borne to Vaikuntha in a chariot drawn by Garuda as the villagers look on in wonder.
- 24–25 Tuka's children play with the precious gifts sent by Shivaji to test Tuka's sainthood (*Sant Tukaram*). 24 Tuka's son Mahadeo dresses up like a prince. 25 Kasbi (Kusum Bhagwat) is ravished by the silks.
- 26–28 The power of Tuka's *abhangs* (*Sant Tukaram*). 26 The villagers congregate around Tuka as he sits under a tree singing. 27, 28 Pandit Rameshwar Shastri (Shankar Kulkarni) finds the villagers singing Tuka's *abhangs* as they perform their tasks.
- 29–32 Tuka happily watches as the villagers collect and carry away the grain bestowed by divine grace (*Sant Tukaram*).
- 33 Kalikinkar Roy (Chhabi Biswas), feudal patriarch, with his son Umapasrad (Soumitra Chatterjee), a student in Calcutta: the sceptical son questions his father's exaggerated faith (*Devi*).
- 34 Dayamoyee (Sharmila Tagore) and Umapasrad: partners in a companionate marriage (*Devi*).
- 35 Kalikinkar with his daughter-in-law at the domestic shrine. He is beginning to conflate Dayamoyee with the goddess he adores (*Devi*).
- 36 A poor villager brings his sick grandson to Dayamoyee (*Devi*).
- 37 Umapasrad finds his Daya slipping into madness (*Devi*).
- 38 Beautiful Daya with her pet parrot in the veranda of her father-in-law's ancestral mansion: she is an object of desire and envy in the household (*Devi*).
- 39 Daya runs to her death through a field of flowers (*Devi*).

Detours from the Contemporary

- 1 Rabindranath Tagore, *Figure*, ca. 1938, 20 x 26 cm, ink on paper. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 2 Nandalal Bose, *Ear Cleaner*, from the *Haripura Posters* series, 1937–38, 63.3 x 56.3 cm, tempera on paper. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 3 Ramkinkar Baij, *Sujata*, 1935, height 275 cm, direct cement, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 4 Ramkinkar Baij, *Threshing*, ca. 1950, 121.5 x 89 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National

Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

- 5 Jamini Roy, *Queen on Tiger*, ca.1940, 73.5 x 61 cm, tempera on board. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 6 K.C.S. Paniker, *Victory*, 1957, 152 x 121 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: K.C.S. Paniker Gallery, Trivandrum.
- 7 Ram Kumar, *Destitutes*, 1953, 122 x 102 cm, oil on board. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 8 Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, *Gone Mad*, 1952, linocut.
- 9 Satish Gujral, *Days of 'Glory'*, 1952, 72 x 59 cm, oil pencil on paper. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 10 Zainul Abedin, from the *Famine* series, 1943, 43 x 60 cm, chinese ink on paper.
- 11 M.F. Husain, *Between the Spider and the Lamp*, 1956, 244 x 122 cm, oil on board. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 12 F.N. Souza, *Varaha*, 1974, 91.5 x 91.5 cm, oil on canvas.
- 13 Jogen Chowdhury, *Ganapati*, 1976, 55 x 55 cm, ink and mixed media on paper. Collection: private, Calcutta.
- 14 K.G. Subramanyan, *Devi*, 1979, approx. 55 x 55 cm, terracotta relief. Collection: University Museum, Panjab University, Chandigarh.
- 15 Meera Mukherjee, *Cosmic Dancer*, 1982, height 56 cm, bronze.

National / Modern: Preliminaries

- 1 Tukaram (Vishnupant Pagnis) retrieves his verses from the river through divine intervention (Damle/Fattelal, *Sant Tukaram*, 1936).
- 2 Benodebehari Mukherjee, *Medieval Hindi Saints* (detail), 1946–47, approx. 244 x 2307 cm, fresco buono, at Hindi Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 3 The protagonist Ramu (Satyendra Bhattacharya) (Ritwik Ghatak, *Nagarik*, 1953).
- 4 Bhupen Khakhar, *Celebration of Guru Jayanti*, 1980, 167 x 240 cm, oil on canvas. (Untraceable, probably in the UK.)
- 5 Meera Mukherjee, *Ashoka at Kalinga*, 1972, height approx. 366 cm, bronze. Collection: ITC Maurya Sheraton Hotel, New Delhi.
- 6 Ganesh Pyne, *The Assassin*, 1974, 47 x 67 cm, tempera on canvas. Collection: Victor Banerjee, Calcutta.
- 7 Laxma Goud, Untitled, 1976, 46 x 61 cm, etching.
- 8 A. Ramachandran, *Sandhya*, from the *Yayati* panels (detail: panels 9–12), 1986, 243 x 610 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: E. Alkazi, New Delhi.
- 9 Bimal (Kali Bandyopadhyay) the taxi driver with his wayward 1920 Chevrolet, 'Jagaddal', now in a state of ruin (Ritwik Ghatak, *Ajantrik*, 1958).
- 10 Nita (Supriya Choudhury) comes across her brother Shankar (Anil Chatterjee) practising a *raga* on the riverbank (Ritwik Ghatak, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 1960).

When Was Modernism in Indian Art?

- 1 Ramkinkar Baij, *Santal Family*, 1937, 300 x 175 x 275 cm, direct cement, at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 2 Amrita Sher-Gil, *South Indian Villagers Going to the Market*, 1937, 145 x 87 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Vivan and Navina Sundaram, New Delhi.
- 3 M.F. Husain, *Balram Street*, 1950, 130 x 82 cm, oil on canvas.

- 4 Satish Gujral, *Song of Destruction 1*, 1953, 88 x 108.5 cm, oil on board. Collection: Jagdish Kapur, New Delhi.
- 5 F.N. Souza, *Nude Queen*, 1962, oil on canvas.
- 6 Akbar Padamsee, *Two Prophets*, 1955, approx. 61 x 125 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: private, Paris, France.
- 7 K.H. Ara, from the *Black Nude* series, 1963, 5 x 55.5 cm, oil and watercolour on paper. Collection: Pundole Art Gallery, Bombay.
- 8 Tyeb Mehta, *The Blue Shawl*, 1961, approx. 122 x 91 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: E. Alkazi, New Delhi.
- 9 Photograph of Jeram Patel by Kishor Parekh, 1961: the artist painting with a shovel in his Baroda studio.
- 10 Himmat Shah, *Untitled*, 1965, 61 x 61 cm, sand, wax, plaster, pigment and silver leaf on board.
- 11 Jyoti Bhatt, *Manhole*, 1962, black and white photograph. Collection: the artist, Baroda.
- 12 Nagji Patel, *Animal*, 1974, 60 x 46 x 23 cm, black marble. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 13 J. Swaminathan, *Shrine-II*, 1965, approx. 90 x 90 cm, oil on canvas.
- 14 Akbar Padamsee, *Sun-Moon Metascape*, 1975, 137 x 137 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: H. Mallik.
- 15 Ram Kumar, *Flight*, 1976, 178 x 101.5 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: private, Bombay.
- 16 V.S. Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1974, 177 x 101.5 cm, oil on canvas.
- 17 Somnath Hore, from the *Wounds* series, 1977, 49.5 x 69 cm, paper pulp.
- 18 Nasreen Mohamadi, *Untitled*, ca. 1980, approx. 48 x 48 cm, ink and pencil on paper.
- 19 S.H. Raza, *Rajasthan*, 1983, 175 x 175 cm, acrylic on canvas. Chester and Davida Herwitz Family Collection, Worcester, Mass., USA.
- 20 Biren De, *June 1967*, 122 x 173 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 21 K.C.S. Paniker, from the *Words and Symbols* series, 1965–66, 150 x 167 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: K.C.S. Paniker Gallery, Trivandrum.
- 22 Sudhir Patwardhan, *Ceremony*, 1984, 127 x 107 cm, oil on canvas. Chester and Davida Herwitz Family Collection, Worcester, Mass., USA.
- 23 Bhupen Khakhar, *In a Boat*, 1988, 170 x 170 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Times of India, New Delhi.
- 24 Gulammohammed Sheikh, *Story of Aziz and Aziza*, 1989, 167 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Devinder and Kanwaldeep Sahney, Bombay.
- 25 Arpita Singh, *Woman Sitting*, 1992, 40.5 x 30.5 cm, watercolour and acrylic on paper.
- 26 Jogen Chowdhury, *Nati Binodini*, 1975, 55 x 55 cm, ink, pastel and mixed media on paper. Collection: Roopankar Museum of Fine Arts, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal.
- 27 Madhvi Parekh, *Durga*, 1993, 152 x 304 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.
- 28 Rekha Rodwittiya, *A Milestone on the Journey*, 1989, 172 x 86 cm, charcoal on paper.
- 29 Photograph of K.P. Krishnakumar by Vivan Sundaram, 1986: Krishnakumar with unfinished sculptures in Kasauli.
- 30 K.P. Krishnakumar, *The Boatman*, 1986–87, height approx. 183 cm, painted resin fibreglass. (Destroyed in fire.)
- 31 Somnath Hore, *Comrades*, 1984, height 32 cm, bronze. Collection: E. Alkazi, New Delhi.

- 32 N.N. Rimzon, *The Inner Voice*, 1992, height of figure 207 cm, diameter of arc 456 cm, each sword 71 x 17 cm, resin fibre glass, marble dust and cast iron. Collection: Foundation for Indian Artists, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

New Internationalism

- 1 Krishen Khanna, *Che Dead: Preparation for a Photograph*, 1970, 184 x 125 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Ravi Rekhi, New Delhi.
- 2 Jose Bedia Valdes, *What Have They Done to You, Mother Kalunga?* (installation view), 1989, 300 x 300 cm, site-specific installation with wall drawing and objects on floor at The Fort, Havana, Cuba.
- 3 FX Harsono, *Just the Rights/Those with No Right to a Voice* (installation view), 1993, installation with fabric, cotton, plastic foam, doors, plants and natural materials.
- 4 Willi Bester, *Homage to Bixo*, 1995, 48 x 48 cm, collage. Collection: The Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 5 Doris Bloom and William Kentridge, *'Heart'*, 1995, 13000 x 7000 cm, whitewash-drawing on fire-scarred veld at Walkerville, south of Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 6 K.P. Krishnakumar, *Standing Nude with Outstretched Arms*, 1989, height approx. 183 cm, painted resin fibreglass. Collection: K.P. Ammalukutty Amma, Trivandrum.
- 7 Savi Savarkar, *Untouchable with Dead Cow-I*, 1996, 178 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 8 Nalini Malani, *City of Desires* (installation view), 1992, six walls and floor, approx. wall height 427 x floor width 366 x wall area 1830 cm, site-specific installation with drawings in charcoal, watercolour, synthetic polymer paint with shaped drafting film and red oxide on floor at Gallery Chemould, Bombay. (Work destroyed after the show; video film *City of Desires*, directed and owned by the artist.)
- 9 Vivan Sundaram, *Boat* (installation view from *House/Boat*), 1994, approx. 750 x 300 x 175 cm, installation with handmade paper, wood, brass telescope, two video monitors. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 10 Pushpamala N., *Labyrinth* (installation view), 1994, dimensions variable, charred wooden sandals. Collection: the artist, Bangalore.

Globalization: Navigating the Void

- 1 Nalini Malani, *Despoiled Shore* (after the play by Heiner Mueller), theatre installation from *Medeaprojekt*, 1993, 7 painted panels, 244 x 902 cm, acrylic paint and charcoal on gypboard. Alaknanda Samarth performs as Medea at Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay.
- 2 Vivan Sundaram, *Mausoleum* (installation view from *Memorial*), 1993, 137 x 193 x 91 cm, site-specific installation with steel, fibreglass, neon light, inlaid marble and plaster (life cast) at AIFACS Gallery, New Delhi. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 3 N.N. Rimzon, *Man with Tools* (installation view), 1993, height of figure approx. 183 cm, diameter of objects in circle 300 cm, resin fibreglass and iron. Collection: Eggie Schoo, Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- 4 Kumar Shahani during the shooting of *Kasba*. K.K. Mahajan, the cinematographer, is on the left.
- 5 Janaki (Smita Patil), a working-class woman, with Rahul (Amol Palekar), the entrepreneur: a fateful transaction of vested interests (*Tarang*).
- 6 Hansa (Kawal Ghandiok) gives Janaki a gift: sign of complicity in the sexual relationship

- between Rahul, her husband, and Janaki (*Tarang*).
- 7 Taran (Prabha Mahajan) walks through the pillared veranda of her father's feudal haveli: an alienated life in a provincial environment (*Maya Darpan*).
 - 8 Tejo (Mita Vashisht), ambitious daughter-in-law in a family of hill-town traders, broods in the privacy of her bedroom (*Kasba*).
 - 9 Tejo confabulates with a young contractor, Mohinder (Deepak Chhibber): romance and conspiracy to extend her fortunes (*Kasba*).
 - 10 Dhaniram (Shatrughan Sinha), brash and corrupt elder son of the family, marries the meek Nandini (Navyajot Hansra) (*Kasba*).
 - 11 Ela (Nandini Ghoshal) with Ateen (Subroto Chattopadhyay): anti-British terrorists, desperate lovers (*Char Adhyaya*).
 - 12 Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra: an odissi performance in the open (*Bhavantarana*).
 - 13 Sohni (Navyajot Hansra) prepares to cross the Chenab to meet her lover (*Khayal Gatha*).
 - 14 Kathak *abhinaya* by Pandit Birju Maharaj, accompanied on the *tanpura* by a *shishya* (Rajat Kapoor) (*Khayal Gatha*).

Norms Dismantled: Apropos an Indian/Asian Avantgarde

- 1 M.F. Husain, *Three-headed Man with Two-headed Bull*, 1954, 61 x 122 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: private, Hyderabad.
- 2 M.F. Husain, *The Last Supper*, 1991, 213 x 488 cm, acrylic on canvas. Collection: Pundole Art Gallery, Bombay.
- 3 Tyeb Mehta, *Kali-II*, 1988, 170 x 150 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: E. Alkazi, New Delhi.
- 4 Tyeb Mehta, *Mahishasura*, 1998, 260 x 175 cm, acrylic on canvas. Collection: Glenbarra Art Museum, Himeji-City, Japan.
- 5 Jeram Patel, *Untitled*, 1974, 56 x 75 cm, ink on paper. Collection: the artist, Baroda.
- 6 Prabhakar Barwe, *Existence*, 1987, 120 x 140 cm, enamel on canvas. Collection: Behroze Sabatier, Bombay.
- 7 J. Swaminathan, *Untitled*, 1993, 117 x 173 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Glenbarra Art Museum, Himeji-City, Japan.
- 8 Himmat Shah, *Untitled*, 1987–88, 19 x 11 x 3 cm, ceramic with gold leaf. Collection: Mrs Shekhawat, New Delhi.
- 9 Satish Gujral, *Shakti (Burnt Wood)*, 1980, 91 x 91 cm, burnt wood, metal and leather. Collection: Janak Datwani, New Delhi.
- 10 Heri Dono, *Ceremony of the Soul* (installation view), 1995, 500 x 500 x 100 cm, installation with stones, plastic radios, tape players, fans, wood and fire.
- 11 Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: The Big Family-I*, 1996, 150 x 190 cm, oil on canvas.
- 12 Dadang Christanto, *Untitled* (installation view), 1995, height of each figure approx. 180 cm, installation with terracotta and bamboo.
- 13 Navin Rawanchaikul, *There Is No Voice* (installation view), 1993, 259 x 122 x 122 cm, installation with photographs, glass bottles, cork and wood. Collection: Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.
- 14 Chen Zhen, *Jue Chang—'Fifty Strokes to Each'* (installation view), 1998, installation with wood, iron, chairs, beds, leather, ropes, nails and various objects at Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Collection: Annie Wong Art Foundation, Hong Kong.
- 15 Cai Guo Qiang, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot Project* (performance view), 1995.

- 16 Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Girl Says 'There is Always the Night'* (installation view), 1993, 350 x 720 x 60 cm., installation with metal boat, motor oil, hair, cloth and 'sa' paper.
- 17 Nindityo Adipurnomo, *The Burden of Javanese Erotica* (detail), 1993, 120 x 400 x 50 cm, wood, photographs, jewellery and mirrors.
- 18 Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky* (installation view), 1987–91, 4 banners approx. 1500 x 100 cm, 72 text pieces 103 x 6 x 8 cm each (folded), 19 boxes 49.2 x 33 .5 x 9.8 cm each (containing 4 books), installation with woodblock print, wood, leather and ivory. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.
- 19 Montien Boonma, *Sala of the Mind* (installation view), 1995–96, 4 parts 270 x 100 x 100 cm each, installation with steel, graphite and tape recording.
- 20 Agnes Arellano, *Vesta, Dea and Lola* (installation view), 1995, 3 figures: 38 x 72 x 91 cm, 85 x 74 x 57 cm, 160.5 x 84 x 77 cm, cold-cast marble (life cast).
- 21 Bhupen Khakhar, *And His Son Also Had Black Teeth*, 1995, 61 x 45 cm, watercolour on paper.
- 22 Bhupen Khakhar, *An Old Man from Vasad Who Had Five Penises Suffered from a Runny Nose*, 1995, 116 x 116 cm, watercolour on paper. Collection: Ranjana Steinrucke, The Fine Art Resource, Berlin, Germany.
- 23 Atul Dodiya, *Sea-Bath (Before Breaking the Salt Law)*, 1998, 56 x 76 cm, watercolour on paper. Collection: the artist, Bombay.
- 24 Surendran Nair, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Corollary Mythologies)*, 1998, 180 x 120 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Nitin Bhaya, New Delhi.
- 25 Atul Dodiya, *Gabbar on Gamboge*, 1997, 214 x 152 cm, oil, acrylic and marble dust on canvas. Collection: Centre for International Modern Art (CIMA), Calcutta.
- 26 Surendran Nair, *Auto Da Fe*, 1995–96, 244 x 183 cm, oil on canvas. Collection: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan.
- 27 Ravinder Reddy, *Krishnaveni*, 1997, 193 x 190.5 x 188 cm, painted and gilded polyester-resin fibreglass. Collection: the artist, Vishakhapatnam.
- 28 Ravinder Reddy, *Woman '95*, 1995, 166 x 84 x 60 cm, painted and gilded polyester-resin fibreglass. Collection: Padmini Reddy.
- 29 N.N. Rimzon, *Far Away from One Hundred and Eight Feet* (installation view), 1995, approx. 2000 x 700 x 80 cm, site-specific installation with terracotta pots, straw brooms and rope, at Buddha Jayanti Park, New Delhi.
- 30 Nilima Sheikh, *Shamiana* (installation view), 1996, 6 scrolls, 225 x 180 cm each, canopy 540 x 585 cm, hanging scrolls of casien tempera on canvas, canopy of synthetic polypaint on canvas, steel frame, customwood hexagonal plinth with ramp. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.
- 31 Anju Dodiya, *Rose-fever*, 1998, 71 x 107 cm, watercolour on paper. Collection: Sangita Jindal, Bombay.
- 32 Pushpamala N., *Phantom Lady or Kismet* (artist photographed by Meenal Agarwal), 1996–98, set of black and white photographs in an edition of 10, 41 x 51 cm each.
- 33 Navjot Altaf, *Modes of Parallel Practice: Ways of World Making* (installation view), 1997–98, room size, installation with wood, paint, PVC pipes, cloth, feathers and brick. Collection: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan.
- 34 Sheela Gowda, *And Tell Him of My Pain* (installation view), 1998, 2 sets of ropes 10,500 cm each, thread, needles and pigment. Collection: the artist, Bangalore.
- 35 Sheela Gowda, *Gallant Hearts* (detail), 1996, 366 x 30 x 15 cm, thread, cowdung, kumkum.

- 36 Mrinalini Mukherjee, *Woman on Peacock*, 1991, 214 x 130 x 77 cm, hemp. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 37 Anita Dube, *The Book*, from a 13-piece sculptural installation *Silence (Blood Wedding)*, 1997, 21 x 13 x 15 cm, bone, velvet, beads, thread, glass and lace. Collection: the artist, New Delhi.
- 38 Subodh Gupta, *Untitled (performance view)*, 1999, performance by the artist at Khoj International Workshop, Modi Nagar.
- 39 M.S.Umesh, *Earth-work (installation view)*, 1996, time and site-specific installation on one acre of uncultivated land at Kodigehalli near Bangalore with pigment, charcoal dust, bamboo shelter, live cows, lights. (Work destroyed after the show.)
- 40 Sudarshan Shetty, *Home (installation view)*, 1998, installation with life-size cow, paint, wood, fibreglass, stainless steel and nylon rope. Collection: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan.
- 41 Vivan Sundaram, *Structures of Memory (installation view)*, 1998, approx. size of hall 2000 x 3000 x 2000 cm, site-specific installation with 1500 cm rail track in the Durbar Hall at Victoria Memorial, Calcutta.
- 42 Vivan Sundaram, *Structures of Memory (installation view)*, 1998, approx. size of hall 2000 x 3000 x 2000 cm, site-specific installation with stacked gunny bags 500 cm high, jute coils, velvet-covered objects in vitrine, in the Durbar Hall at Victoria Memorial, Calcutta.
- 43 Rummana Hussain, *Living on the Margins (performance view)*, 1995, at Chauraha, National Centre for Performing Arts, Bombay. (Video of performance included in the 1996 installation *Home/Nation* at Gallery Chemould, Bombay.)
- 44 Rummana Hussain, *Home/Nation (detail of installation)*, 1996, photographs by the artist and Urdu text on handmade paper. Collection: Ishaat Hussain, Bombay.
- 45 Nalini Malani, *Remembering Toba Tek Singh (installation view)*, 1998, size of room 600 x 400 x 300 cm, installation with video projection on walls, 12 monitors with video clips, tin trunks, quilts, mylar flooring. Collection: the artist, Bombay.

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A commitment to modernity is the underlying theme of this volume. Through essays that are interpretive and theoretical, the author seeks to situate the modern in contemporary cultural practice. She sets up an ideological vantagepoint to view modernism along its multiple tracks in India and the third world.

The essays divide into three sections. The first two sections, Artists and ArtWork and Film/ Narratives, raise questions of authorship, genre, and contemporary features of national culture that materialize into an aesthetic in the Indian context. The last section, Frames of Reference, formalizes the polemical options developed across the book. The essays here propose resistance to the depoliticization of narratives, and affirm an open-ended engagement with the avantgarde. They explore the possibility of art practice finding its own signifying space that is still a space for radical transformation.

GEETA KAPUR is an independent art critic and curator living in New Delhi. Her extensive publications on modern Indian art include the book *Contemporary Indian Artists* (Delhi, 1978), exhibition catalogues and monographs on artists. She is currently writing a monograph on Tyeb Mehta. Her essays on cultural criticism have been widely presented in forums of art history and culture studies. Her curatorial work includes the show 'Bombay/Mumbai 1992–2001' in the multi-part exhibition titled Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis, at Tate Modern, London, in 2001. Geeta Kapur is a founder-editor of *Journal of Arts & Ideas* and advisory editor to *Third Text*. She has held research fellowships at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, and Clare Hall, Cambridge University.

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