



The Guarded Tongue: Women's Writing & Censorship in India

The Gender and Censorship Project in India is the most ambitious program Women's WORLD has yet undertaken. It culminated in July 2001, in a conference of 200 women writers, and a publication, *The Guarded Tongue: Women's Writing & Censorship in India*, which summed up discussions from earlier regional workshops. Selections from *The Guarded Tongue* follow, along with a more detailed description of the program.

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Women's WORLD Program in India: The Gender and Censorship Project

The Gender and Censorship Project in India is the most ambitious program Women's WORLD has undertaken. It is a ten-language partnership project with Asmita, an activist women's organization located in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh. Asmita's program includes legal assistance for women in distress; networking and campaigns, particularly around violence against women; training, popular education and outreach; and research, publications and cultural work. The Gender and Censorship project was designed and led by a five-woman team: Ritu Menon of Women's WORLD (co-founder of Kali for Women, the oldest women's press in Asia); Vasanth Kannabiran and Volga, two leading members of Asmita; and the feminist writers Ammu Joseph and Gouri Salvi. The purpose of the project was

. . . to see how gender-based censorship, embedded as it is in a range of social and cultural mechanisms that invalidate women's experience and exclude them from political discourse, is far more pervasive and far more difficult to confront than official suppression. To see how critical the silencing of women, and the use of systemic force to ensure that silence, is to the maintenance and perpetuation of patriarchal power. (*Gender & Censorship Project Workshops Reports*, p. 4)

The project design consisted of five components, all of which have now been concluded except for the publications. They were

- Three-day research workshops of 15 to 25 women writers, diverse in age, class, genre, and degree of recognition, held in ten different Indian languages: Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, and Urdu. Selection of participants was done with local writers and/or non-profits; and participating writers were asked to prepare by reading *The Power of the Word* in translation
- Survey research with a questionnaire designed by social scientists
- In depth follow-up interviews of five writers from each language group
- A concluding conference bringing all the participants together, held in August 2001
- Publications summarizing the findings, including two volumes of interviews

The project's goals were to build an Indian network of women writers who will provide solidarity and support to one another; facilitate the creation of alternative forums for women's writing; empower women by providing opportunities and training for skill development in all aspects of publishing; interact with other educational and literacy programs in producing or providing gender-sensitive material; analyze how and when particular forms of censorship operate; and resist the more blatant threats to freedom of

expression by religious groups or the state. The project has already stimulated the first anthology of Urdu women's literature published in India in the last sixty years; a ground-breaking panel on women and censorship at the annual meeting of the Indian Association for Women's Studies; the formation of the first Indian women writers association in West Bengal; and considerable attention in the press. Project support was provided by the World Association for Christian Communications (WACC), the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development.

By all accounts, the workshops were a series of revelations of the connections between self and situation:

The thread that ran through most of these workshops was disconnection: the disconnection between what women said and what they wrote; between their spoken words and their silences; between their husbands' and fathers' apparent encouragement and support, and their explicit, disapproving silence when a norm was violated. Between women as the subject matter of writing and women as subjects and writers. Between language, literature and social movements, and the emergence of women's voices. Between language and gender, gender and genre.

A taste of the project's richness, and of Indian women's writing, can be found in these brief selections from the project report, *The Guarded Tongue: Women's Writing and Censorship in India*.

Introduction

What do women write about? Everything under the sun, is the answer that one hears in chorus. What is it that women can't write about? There is a pause-and one group says (and this is almost unanimous): Religion, Politics and Sex. You then wonder: what is there left to write about? When the women belong to a religious minority leading an embattled existence, whose very identities are under siege, it is amazing to see how much they can and do write about. But even women who claimed they could write about religion and politics said they couldn't write about sex. Many said they couldn't write about themselves. And yet they write. Persistently. Secretly. Writing seems an addiction, a mechanism for survival. One woman spoke of how the minute her husband left for work, she would simply drop whatever she was doing and rush to pick up a pen and paper, pouring out her emotions, until it was time for him to return. The meal may be late and the house a mess, but at least she'd got her writing done. Another writer said she had performed a special *do rakat namaz* [prayer] so that she would be able to attend the workshop, and for its success.

For most women writers in the country, writing remains an isolated, solitary activity, often surreptitious, generally unacknowledged and undervalued. Although the number of women writers may well run into some thousands, they are still invisible, encounter all manner of obstacles in expressing themselves freely, and experience many forms of direct censorship simply because they are women. Examples of this range from an outright ban on reading and writing and denial of access to education, to a kind of

editorial censorship by the market which decides which women can be published and when; as well as to all kinds of self-censorship which often comes into play even before any external silencing takes place. In between lie the constraints placed on women by families, communities and society in general. All of these militate against women's ability and freedom to realise their potential as creative, productive and responsible members of society, actively engaged in progressive social change.

In addition to the above there are some peculiar problems that women writers face, as distinct from men. An age-old gender-division of labour leaves women with little time to write at all, let alone write with freedom. Taboos on what is permissible as subject matter exercise a powerful negative influence. The essence of a culture of 'equality' discourages women from taking their place in progressive writers' organisations and establishments. Because there exist no active networks of women writers, women are usually more vulnerable to attack, and are compelled to defend themselves individually and in isolation. The question of censorship then becomes particular, one woman's misfortune rather than a cultural societal bias that is deeply gendered.

What is it that connects women to writing? And what is it that defines and determines the contours of that writing? What are the limits of the freedom that women are allowed in self-expression? Is a poem or a short story like an exotic sweet or a neatly embroidered handwork or a well-trained voice, to be displayed on occasion as a sign of feminine accomplishment? Marked by measured cadences and neatly drawn lines--never flamboyant, never demanding attention, just gently drawing praise with modest, womanly grace.

These are the questions and confusions that haunted us during and after a series of ten workshops on women and censorship in India. These workshops in Urdu, Telugu, Marathi, Malayalam, Hindi, Gujarati, Kannada, Bangla, English and Tamil, held in different and varied surroundings, brought up new issues and allowed fresh insights into the nature of censorship that women face. The thread that ran through most of them was disconnection: the disconnection between what women said and what they wrote; between their spoken words and their silences; between their husbands' and fathers' apparent encouragement and support, and their explicit, disapproving silence when a norm was violated. Between women as the subject-matter of writing, and women as subjects and writers. Between language, literature and social movements, and the emergence of women's voices. Between language and gender, gender and genre.

Our attempt was to see how gender-based censorship, "embedded as it is in a range of social and cultural mechanisms that invalidate women's experience and exclude them from political discourse, is far more pervasive and far more difficult to confront than official suppression". To see how critical the silencing of women, and the use of systematic force to ensure that silence, is to the maintenance and perpetuation of patriarchal power.

The Women and Censorship project evolved from, and is informally part of, a worldwide initiative launched by Women's WORLD (Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature, and Development), an international free speech network that seeks to catalyse global feminist work on the right to free expression.

Women writers from across the world who belong to Women's WORLD (a spin-off from the International PEN Women Writers' Committee) believe that gender-based censorship is a major threat to women's freedom of expression. The term, coined in 1993 by Filipina writer, Ninotchka Rosca, refers to the historical, worldwide silencing of women's voices through various means which subtly, but effectively, obstruct the achievement of equality, sustainable livelihoods and peace by women.

The Women's WORLD/Asmita project seeks to explore the issue of gender-based censorship with Indian women engaged in creative writing in different languages. The initial, language-specific workshops planned under the project brought together groups of women writers representing as wide a range as possible in terms of age, experience, perspective, or ideology, geographical location, socio-economic and cultural or ethnic background, genre of writing and other possible variables.

Our objectives are to:

- build a network of women writers who will provide solidarity and support to each other
- facilitate the creation of alternative forums for women's writing to be published and circulated
- analyse how and when particular forms of censorship operate
- empower women by providing opportunities and training for skill development in all aspects of publishing
- creatively interact with other educational and literacy programmes in producing or providing gender-sensitive material
- resist the more blatant forms of censorship and threats to freedom of expression by the state or religious groups

The workshops were designed to enable writers to share experiences, thoughts and feelings in a friendly, informal environment. They were loosely structured, and featured no academic papers or formal presentations. The idea was to encourage participants to think and talk about their lives as women and as writers and, in the process, determine whether or not gender influences their experiences and perspectives and, consequently, their writing.

The primary purpose of these interactions is to collectively determine whether or not female creative writers in India face any form of censorship (direct or indirect) from any quarter: the state, the market, community leaders, society at large, families and/or, even, themselves (i.e., self-censorship). A second but equally important objective is to elicit writers' opinions on whether or not anything can and should be done about gender-based censorship, as well as their thoughts on possible cooperative efforts to counter obstacles to free expression by women.

Presented here are narrative reports of our 10 workshops, conducted between 1999-2001, culminating in a National Colloquium of writers from the 10 languages in Hyderabad in July 2001. The reports highlight the issues raised and discussed by approximately 175 women in the course of our workshops. An analysis of this fascinating exercise and experience-the first of its kind, we believe-will follow after the conclusion of the National Colloquium.

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Core Team and Project Co-ordinators
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What do women write about?

Urdu Writers' Workshop

. . . So, what do women write about? About love, modestly. About longing, delicately. Sajida Sultana said that using obscene language is wrong. But what is obscene? Sex? Emotion? The human body? Human desire? If all this is expunged from the canvas of women's writing, what is left? Sultana Sharfuddin said that contemporary Urdu writers lacked a women's perspective and lived in a world of illusion and fantasy, they did not present the reality of their lives. But given the seclusion of women and gendering of space, both material and ideological, what options do women have? Ashraf Rafi says, "I am not me. Another picture of me is set out." Fatima Taj says, "I don't write about sex or society but I am present in each piece that I write. It is my identity." Yet another writer said, "My lips are sealed but my heart is bubbling." Many women felt that both their voice and language had been taken away by men, that a writer needs experience and yet language is a limiting factor.

Jameela Nishat, Urdu

Why do women write?

Telugu Writers' Workshop

Why did these women begin to write? What was the cause, the power, the urge that drove them to first pick up their pens? This question swept the women back to the early days of their writing. They didn't begin writing in the hope of gaining fame or recognition. Unlike male writers who claim that a flower emits its fragrance as a bud, the women did not begin to write when they were six or seven years old. Nor did they write because they came from learned or scholarly families, encouraged by doting fathers or uncles; or to transform society and bring about a revolution. These are the reasons that men give.

For women, the common cause was loneliness and alienation. They had no one to share their thoughts or feelings with. Some women were the first to be educated in their families, and entered a new world with countless visions and hopes. Some had struggled with family and community to achieve this education. All of them found the burden of the restrictions placed on them, at home and outside, unbearable. Was the emotional turmoil and mental confusion they suffered as a result of these restrictions natural, they wondered. Without any clear sense of how to fight these restrictions, unable to conceal the rebellious thoughts that churned in their minds, many women claimed they picked up the pen as an instrument, a weapon of survival.

Abhuri Chaya Devi says:

I come from an orthodox family. My father was a great disciplinarian. He never displayed affection or love. My mother was caught up in ritual purity and orthodoxy. She would wear her 'madi' [trans tk] clothes early in the morning and wouldn't touch anyone afterwards. She would vent all the anger she felt towards my father on us. When I was in the twelfth class I became friendly with a boy. My mother was furious and confined me to the house. There was no one to share these experiences with or seek advice from. Laughter was prohibited in our house. 'Why should girls laugh?' they said. I wrote a story, 'Sleep' about a girl who goes to her mother in her sleep and says, 'Mother, I feel like laughing. The laughter is bubbling up, what shall I do?' Even if I laughed in college someone would come and tell my parents that I was laughing at my teacher's jokes. I had to drape my sari to cover both shoulders. The college principal had put up a notice that girls should cover both shoulders with their saris. I wanted to rebel against all this. I chose the story as my weapon. My first story, published in the Nizam College magazine, was about my father. About his rules. He even decided what clothes I should wear. The story was called, 'My Father is a Dictator'. Afraid that he might read the story I ended it on a conciliatory note, saying that our fathers and our husbands only wanted what was good for us, after all, and that our joy lies in fulfilling their desires. That was out of fear of my father's anger.
. . . I would write letters to [my father], but could never stand before him and speak freely. Writing was the only means I had to reach out. The only thing I could do freely. Writing became my weapon.

. . .

Silalolitha, a poet whose name is Lakshmi, was married at eleven and sent to her husband's home at fourteen, with no idea of what marriage or marital sex meant. She had no work. Life seemed meaningless. No friends, no one to whom she could open her heart. Confined to the house she would get books from the library and devour them. She read the best Telugu literature during that period. That reading raised many questions—about herself and her life. Trapped by these doubts, denied the possibility of discussion, she decided to write and establish a channel of communication for herself. She wrote stories to her penfriends. There was hell to pay at home for those letters. Finally she broke out of her marriage, resumed her studies and took to writing seriously. She always wrote under a pen name because she was filled with a revulsion for her own. She censored herself while writing, couldn't write as freely as she wanted to in the early days. She started with love poetry, then moved to stories that focussed on the suffering of women around her.

Volga, Telugu

Ayoni

Volga

The reason for my telling this story is the story itself. I love stories. Placing the cot out in the open under the sky, lying next to my ammamma and watching the moon. I would fall asleep listening to the stories told.

On rainy nights, listening to my ammamma's voice above the dripping of the rain, I would cover myself warmly with blankets, and if they weren't enough, I would nuzzle into my ammamma's tummy and listen to her stories. Lost in her tales, winter nights would pass quickly. Summer nights never seemed long enough. After I learnt how to read and write, when I could read the Telugu primer by myself, I wrote my first story. I don't remember it now. Later my nanna affectionately brought me a *Chandamama*. After reading *Chandamamas* for two years, I wrote a story when I was nine and sent it to the magazine. It wasn't published. Nobody knew about this. I never told anybody-not my nanna, not my ammamma. Not even my friend, Radharani. I waited eagerly for its publication for nearly six or seven months. Then I forgot all about it. Now, three years later when I feel like writing a story once again, I remember that *Chandamama* story. What a difference there is between that story and the one I want to write now!

How wonderful that story was! How good the people in it! How well they looked after the princess with the beautiful white wings who came down to them! They gave her all that she wanted. They listened to the wonders of the world she came from. How they loved the soft white wings of that little girl, the bright innocent eyes of that bird-child, her soft feet and her tiny palm! They made a soft bed for her. They decked her with garlands of parijata flowers. They cooked sweet payasams for her. In spite of all this, she yearned for her mother and father. She said she wanted to go back to her world. So, with heavy hearts, they let her go back to her world. Spreading her wings and flapping them gently, the bird-child soared into the sky.

After writing that beautiful story, what shame and pain there is in writing this story. That story was a dream. This is my own story. I, who had such a beautiful dream in my ninth year . . .how changed I am after three years . . .what a nightmare my life has become! I want to tell everybody the meaning of what I am today. By telling this story I want to show that the real me is not what people think I am, but the child who could write the *Chandamama* story. That's my desire. A desire that has been tormenting me for the last year so I have stayed alive just to write this story. I can die after I write this story.

If I had found the right word, if only I had known the word I would have finished the story last year and died. Confused, searching for a way to tell my story, I stumbled unwittingly up on a word. The song from the movie *Lavakusa* was on the radio. Bhagyamakka and I were lying down chatting, when there was an announcement on the radio: "You will now listen to a song from the movie, *Lavakusa* . . ." I hadn't listened to music for two years. Songs are sweet to listen to. There is always something good in them. Worried that I was not beautiful or pure or worthy enough to listen to them, I had stopped listening to songs for the past two years. I moved far away from them. When I was about to leave the room Bhagyamakka stopped me. I loved the songs from *Lavakusa*. I had seen the film four or five times. I even used to sing some of these songs. I have forgotten them now.

"We will narrate the story of Srirama. Listen to the story of the great and chaste Sita . . ." the words of the song were on the radio.

Bhagyamakka was telling me about the movie and the song. Rama killed Ravana. "Raghupati saw his wife come to him and asked her to prove her chastity . . ." Bhagyamakka, her eyes filling with tears, abused Rama: "A brainless idiot. Suspicion on a woman who is an *ayonija*! Why this test for the wife of Rama, the embodiment of

dharma?"

I asked: "What does *ayonija* mean?"

"I know what it means. Sita was not born like other human beings. That's why she's called an *ayonija*. She was born at the edge of the plough."

"How's everyone born?"

Bhagamakka laughed uncontrollably. Saying, "Like this." Putting her hand on my stomach she moved it down to the passage through which children are born.

"Chee," I said disbelievingly.

"Why do you say, chee? Children are born that way. I saw this when Kamala was delivering her child. That's called a *yonni*. Sita was not born from there. That's why she is an *ayonija*. We are all *yonijas*. Sita is an *ayonija*."

Yoni, Yonija, Ayonija . . . Something was happening to me. A sudden pain shot through my head. Sita's an *ayonija*. I don't know anything about being born like that. But I can now write what I have been wanting to all these days. How wonderful it would have been to be born an "*ayoni*"! How I love this word "*ayoni*"! Are you angry? Are you disgusted? But you don't know anything about my anger and my disgust. If you did, you would wish that my desire be fulfilled. You are all good mothers, aren't you?

Now I will tell you my story. That day, the last of the good days, I remember it so well . . . I have forgotten many other days but I have forced myself to remember that day . . . I keep bringing it back to mind again and again, lest I forget. . . . It was the 4th of January . . . The exams had ended and they had declared Sankranti holidays. The whole Sankranti month, I used to get up very early in the morning. I loved to draw *muggulu*. I drew really big ones. I'd sprinkle tumeric, kumkum and petals of banti flowers on them. I only heard my ammamma talk about *gobbenmalu* but I had never used them. I couldn't find any cow dung. That day I drew a snake *muggu*. A snake couple, long, broad, twisted and entwined around each other. After I finished the *muggu*, I suddenly grew afraid. Feared that the snakes would come alive and twine themselves around me. I panicked and ran into the house. Almost as if the snakes had scented my fear, they came that evening and caught hold of me.

What kind of snakes were these? Black, with huge hooded heads spitting venom. They came in a car, I was walking beside the car. As it was winter, it was dark by six. I was walking home, happy my exams were over, vexed to have lost the game of carrom at Radharani's house, and scared that amma would scold me for coming late. The car was black, gleaming. Seeing my reflection in the car's mirror I was about to cross the street when two snakes swung around me and dragged me into the car. They spewed venom on me. I thought I was dead.

How good it would have been to die! But I didn't. I realized those snakes had brought me here. It was hell. I learnt the meaning of hunger, fear and darkness then. Until now I had only known the joy of eating taste-filled food when I was hungry, the comfort of my amma's arms or my ammamma's soft belly when I was scared. Nightfall brought the certainty of lights being lit and a sky brightened by the moon and stars. How can I tell you about my fear at not getting food when I was hungry, being tossed into a dark room crying for food? To get over my hunger, to get rid of it, I had to do what they asked me to. A huge bull-like man fell on top of me and tore my *yonni* apart.

I became unconscious. The blood kept streaming out. But I got some food. Only, I didn't know whether I was swallowing food or blood.

The same thing three days a week. I found my *yonni* disgusting. In my childhood, my amma and ammamma would hide it so carefully. Even I had not seen it except during my bath. I knew nothing about it. Nobody told me about it. My amma and ammamma told me in many ways that I should not touch it and not allow anybody else to see or touch it either. I only knew it as "shame, shame." But I used to like it anyway. Especially

when I saw the boys naked, I would feel relieved that I was a girl and did not have that dreadful tail hanging between my legs like that. It was if I had escaped some disaster. I used to pity boys. I used to feel sorry that the poor things had to put up with that sickening tail dangling between their legs all their lives. Beyond that I knew nothing about these organs. Nor did I know their names. Once Radharani said she knew their names and would tell me, but for some reason she didn't.

After coming here, I have stopped pitying men. Knowing that they can turn that tail into a poisoned knife and the horn of a rhino, I am terrified of men.

I was ten, then. Men would come three days a week. It seems they suffered from some disease and if they pierced me the disease would be cured. The moment they entered the room, I would cry and be filled with fear. But I was not expected to cry. They would throw me into a dark room and starve me. If I thought to escape by closing my eyes, the man would not let me do so. He would tell me to look and I would keep looking. Then I was not a little girl. Not a human. Not even a living creature. Just a *yoni*. That's all. The only thing. A small hole. All those who came there wanted only that hole. They buried their diseases there and left. I . . . who was I? What was I? Was I the hand that mixed the food? Was I the mouth that ate? Was I the stomach that was filled? Was I only the *yoni* that fed me?

Everybody saw me only as a *yoni*. I felt pure hatred towards it. I am not just that. I am something apart from it, please talk to me, treat me like a human being, like a small child. Who's there to listen to me?

Where are the amma, ammamma and nanna? To everyone I am just *yoni*.

When I see men approaching, my mouth is filled with bitter fear. When I hear angry male voices or their raucous laughter, I feel my ears bursting. I shrink into myself. I try to curl into the place from where my fear springs. And still they see me. I can't find a place to escape from them.

When I was a child, I hid behind a coal-sack in the backyard, while playing hide and seek one day. Nobody could find me. I kept waiting for someone to find me but no one came. Finally, I got scared and came out. Then I was afraid of being alone, but how I wish I could now find a space where no one can reach me!

There are many women here. It's said that they spend their nights in pleasure. Bhagyamakka says, "There's no pleasure, no nothing—only hardship for food."

Bhagyamakka knows my pain.

"When you grow older you'll get used to it, it won't be painful," she says.

The years go by. I keep growing. And as I grow, my single desire grows. If only I didn't have this one organ! Bhagyamakka laughs when I says this to her. "If that's not there, there would be no world," she says. Does the world then exist only with pain? Does the world exist only with violence?

"This pain is only for people like us, isn't it? Aren't a lot of people happy? Children who grow up with their parents don't have this pain, do they?" says Bhagyamakka.

I don't know. Don't they have it? I wonder whether they too would be allowed to live without some pain or the other. But what have I to do with other fortunate ones? I don't want this. They brought me here only because of this. They made me into a repulsive, dirty pit, a diseased mound. They filled my body with all kinds of diseases. I fear for the little children I sometimes see outside.

Will any of them become like me? How many such hells are there? How many children like me are thinking of dying? How many more will become like me? How does one stop this?

As for myself I want to become an *ayoni*. If you think my desire is perverse and bad, stop this violence. Destroy all those snakes that take away little girls because of their *yonis*. Stop this trade. Impotent in the face of this evil you turn your disgust instead

towards me. You find my story revolting.

But, you know, my story for *Chandamama* did not say whether the winged child who came from the world of birds had a *yon*i or not. The question whether that child was an *ayonija* or an *ayoni* did not even arise. That child was so beautiful! How wondrous the world grew when that child came here.

In a world like that perhaps I won't have this desire.

If I were to write that story now, would I say that men wound barbed wires around her wings? Would I write that they threw chilli powder into her innocent eyes? Would I write that they crushed the *muddabanti* flower-like nose of the bird-child? Would I write that rivers of hot tears flowed from the child's eyes. Would I write that, in the end, the child turning into a mass of pain and tears, could not fly but sank lifeless into the dust and mire?

I don't know what I would write.

Now I can only tell this story, however ugly. That beautiful one is lost to me forever. Now that I have written this story, I can die. I waited for six or seven months to see if my story would be published in the *Chandamama*.

I know this story won't be published anywhere now. I needn't wait. I can die.

Translated from the Telugu by the author.

The need for time and space

Marathi Writers' Workshop

For me, creativity is like a raincoat. When I enter my house I hang the raincoat outside the front door. I long for the day when that raincoat becomes my skin, but it hasn't happened yet . . .

Mangala Godbole

The common grievance was of inadequate time and space for creative writing in their busy, tiring lives as working women, wives and mothers.

"For years I have dreamt that a Marathi woman writer will publish a lengthy, humorous novel, and that that writer will be me. But I find I often cannot even write a short story," said Mangala. "All I can write are short, humorous pieces. I am simply tortured that I cannot write that novel." She recounted a conversation she overheard between two male writers talking about their incomplete books. One of them said he was taking leave in order to finish his book; the other spoke of having rented a small flat away from home, with his wife sending him his meals so that he could complete his novel undisturbed. "Where does a woman writer find the luxury of such time and space?" demanded Mangala.

Gouri Salvi, Marathi

Lessons from Experience

Lalithambika Antherjanam

. . . Very long ago, one of the best-loved poets of the Malayalam language asked me on a public platform: "Why has there not been a single woman poet in this land, where the Goddess of Poetry is conceived and worshipped in a woman's form? Although they are eulogized as personifications of passion, why has not even one of them composed a single line of love poetry?" He held up his chair, and demanded: "Look at this—this is a tool of wood. It has four legs, a back, a seat. Has woman, after all, functioned only as a tool like this?"

I was distressed. I did not quite follow the comparison between a woman and a chair. Was womanhood an inanimate object like a block of wood, for others to chisel and carve? If a work of art had warmth and movement and the power to make decisions, what would it become? This poet had certainly written innumerable love poems, but if a young woman composed love poetry, did he understand what her life in society would become? Would he allow his sister to go in search of love, experience love, as he himself did?

Besides, from time immemorial, poets have with indulgence called women weak, deceitful, and cowardly. Because women have constantly heard this, they have come to believe it too. Eyes like black kuvala blossoms. Cheeks like roses. A forehead like a crescent moon. And lips like red tondi fruits. But no one looked at the heart trembling within that breast, its warmth and power, its tears and hopes.

Women, as conceived in literature, were always objects of pleasure. Even the shining models from history and the epics have lost their glow. According to Christian belief, the very first woman was, after all, accursed. Although it was on the evil advice of the serpent, it was she who plucked the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and she offered it to her husband. As for her husband, who attained knowledge, he realized the danger of allowing her to taste the fruit and deliberately snatched it from her. Thus she became a sinner in her husband's eyes as well as in the eyes of God. And so Eve, made from Adam's rib, plods on, shouldering the burden of her curse, the eternal representative of womanhood. As for the Hindu epics: Sita was repudiated, Draupadi was dishonored. In Rajput times, Meera had to take poison, Padmini had to jump into the fire. In the modern age, when tradition loosens its grip on them, they will show you. Wait and see. The very flow of your poetry will change direction—

I think I said something like that. When the meeting was over, the young poet asked me, "If you were to have the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge now, Chechi [elder sister], what would you do with it?"

I laughed. "Don't you know? I'm a woman, too, remember—like the very first woman, I too will put it into your mouth, younger brother." . . .

Excerpted from an essay published in *Cast Me Out If You Will: Stories & Memoir*, translated with an introduction by Gita Krishnankutty, Calcutta: Stree, 1998.

The Door

Anamika

I was a door.
The harder they beat me
The wider I opened
They walked in and saw
A great cosmic whirligig
When the grinding stops, the spinning begins
When the spinning stops, the sewing begins
Something or other, all day, non-stop.

And in the end my broom sweeps it all up
Sweeps up the stars in the sky
Mountains, trees, stones
All the shards and splinters of creation
Collects them in a basket
Stores them somewhere
deep inside
In some corner of the mind.

Translated from the Hindi by Ritu Menon.

The Fish - 1

Gagan Gill

Death flashed in her eyes
As if it were a flickering star
As if it were a sky full of birds
As if it were the wind
Before it rains.

The fish lunged out of the water
As if
It were not death out there
But a longing to return
To the primal dream.

She caught the water
In her fine teeth
As if
It were the very last time
She knows, this river-fish
She'd die, going to the sea.

She wanted
Before this death of hers by drowning
One last time
To return
To the waters of the river.

Then, in her own waters
This river-fish
She drowned.

Translated from the Hindi by J. P. Das, Madhu B. Joshi, and Arlene Zide.

The Fish - 2
Gagan Gill

It's not water
But the sky
Which has filled the brain of this fish.

Not water,
But a longing to fly,
Has filled the body of this fish.

She has been emptying herself
Into the sea
For centuries, endlessly.

Swimming past fish, large and small
Rapt in thought
This fish asks herself
Say, your sea, where has it gone?

Swimming, this fish
Repeats the question,
As if it were a prayer or mantra.
She doesn't know, this fish
That the sky has filled her brain
That the skull-breaking rites*
Have already begun
Within herself.

Translated from the Hindi by J. P. Das, Madhu B. Joshi, and Arlene Zide.

*The skull of a dead person on the funeral pyre is cracked in order to
allow the soul to escape.

The Squirrel

Ambai

Standing with legs planted on facing shelves, his head hidden in clouds of dust, one hand pressed to his throat to control an imminent sneeze, he seemed, as I craned my neck to look at him, a good, obedient genie conjured up with a rub of the wonderful lamp.

"What is there at the top, sir?"

"Dust, dust!"

"No, sir, I mean what books!"

"I'll see, madam. People write many good books without having to do all this climbing. This is rubbish, madam, just rubbish."

"If you like, I'll climb up, sir!"

"No, madam! This is my duty." He let fly ten sneezes.

"These are just women's books. Do you want them?"

"Throw them down, sir."

They fell with a thud. Volumes of Penmadhi Bodhini and Jaganmohini, followed by lots of others. The sight of them crashing through the roof, splitting open even this grew familiar. For someone who doesn't believe in miracles, here was an overdose. As my finger touched the spine of a mended, nineteenth-century book, a tremor rose from the sole of my foot, like an orgasm. Anna Sattianandhan on her deathbed, asking her husband to pray and, on the third floor, only the squirrel and me to grieve. The woman who first set out on horseback to spread Christianity broke through the meshed windows of this very third floor. A Bengali girl writing to her father, pleading that he should not sell his only house to meet her marriage expenses, set fire to herself and the killing flame chased through this room, like a snake. The flame spread through the third floor, its shape visible to the squirrel and me. The Telugu cataloguer wasn't there that day.

What had appeared on the third floor were not mere books; they were whole generations throbbing with life. Stately matrons wrapped in nine-yard saris, wearing shoes and carrying rackets, playing badminton with the white women. How best can young women please their husbands? So many sermons on the subject, preaching untiringly. Addressing her as "my girl," trying to sound kind, they preached the dharma that women should follow. Nallathangal, chasing her son even as he pleads with her to let him go, pushing him into a well, and jumping in herself. A brahmin priest, stubbornly refusing to perform the last rites for a girl because she is an unshaven widow. Knee-length tresses shorn as she lies dead. The devadasis dedicated to temples, dancing to exhaustion, singing, "I cannot bear the arrow of love." Gandhi addressing women spinning at the charka. Uma Rani of the journal *Tyagabhumi* declaring, "I am not a slave." "Kasini" giving new patterns for bangles in the women's section. The Ananda Vikatan cover girl walks, swinging her arms, while her husband carries the shopping bag. Tamarai Kanni Ammaiyar—the lotus-eyed one—saying, "Let us give up our lives for Tamil." Her real name in Sanskrit: Jalajakshi. Ramamrutham Ammaiyar angrily confronting Rajaji, who wrote: "Gandhi won't come unless you pay him money." They are all here. I am also here. Sometimes they are like wisps of smoke, weightless, shaved, a heaviness in my heart. Razors appear all around. Each lock of hair falls with a harsh sound and rubs against my cheek, roughly. It is only when the squirrel taps his tail twice and raises dust that my senses return. It is leaning on Kalki with Ammu Swaminadhan on the cover. It has finished eating the glue.

I look down through the hole. The librarian's head is leaning against the chair. On the table, a file titled "Subject: String." His favorite file. Three years ago a shining violet file, now mouldy, corners dog-eared. The file began with a letter saying that a string was

needed to separate old magazines, here by month, there by year. The letter in reply said, "It is not a practice to supply string to the library; explain the reason for departing from it." Then the explanation: the magazines that are not separated by month are all mixed up and useless. Useless for whom? For researchers. What researchers? Are they from Tamil Nadu or from abroad? The letters piled up. One day the librarian pulled out a bundle of string from his trouser pocket, and then wrote a letter asking to be reimbursed for the string. Which set off a series of letters beginning with the query, "Why a bundle of string?" Every evening the file would make its way to the table. He has not yet been reimbursed.

The squirrel chirps. Keech. Keech. My only link with reality. My companion in illusions. Keech. Keech.

I know. It is late. Your glue is finished. But I don't want to leave these women. A magic string holds us together. I hear them talking. As Shanmuga Vadivu's veena strikes the first note of the octave, the sound leaps to my ear. "Beholding the colourful lotus and seeking it, the bee sings a sweet song, utterly lost," sings K.B. Sundarambal. "Utterly lost," echoes Vasavambal from behind, accompanying her on the harmonium. On the Marina Beach, Vai Mu. Ko hoists the flag of freedom. With children in their arms, the women who oppose Hindi go to jail.

See, this is another world! That glue should have infused a little of this world into you. A world for you and me.

"Come down, lady." Smiling, he looks up.

"I'm up here."

He comes up.

"The ruling has arrived."

"What ruling?"

"They find all this mending very expensive. Not many people use these books. Just one or two like you, that's all. How can the government spend funds on staff, glue, etc.? They are going to burn them all. All these old unwanted books."

My mind goes blank. At the edge a small thought rises. So the file about the string has finally come to a close. Only the burial is left.

"Come, lady."

I approach the iron stairs and run back to look once more at the room. The evening sun and the mercury lamp spread a strange light on the yellowed books that are to be burnt. Like the initial flood of fire that spreads over the pyre. He turns out the light.

The darkness mingles with the dull red light changing everything into a magical flame, deep red. The squirrel, with its legs spread out, lies prone before the window as if in surrender. As I go down the stairs, a little wave of thought. The window faces north.

Translated from the Tamil by Vasanth Kannabiran and Chudamani Raghavan.