First Heat Heart of a Thing

By Yasmin Ladha

Ce texte démontre bien qu'il est possible d'utiliser ce véhicule linéaire qu'est le langage pour exprimer une façon de penser labyrinthienne qui défie l'oppression patriarcale omniprésente dans les structures du langage.

Had Noorjahan taken a linear approach to explain how one of the birds escaped, their subject-Ruler relationship would have prevailed. Emperor Jahangir would have punished her for such carelessness. However, Noorjahan waffles with cunning, "heats" things her way.

I want to write about not conveying a clear thought. It is true, I do not know how to pursue the cultivation of conveying an unclouded thought.

Follow Instructions:

- 1) First, hoe.
- 2) Then a dry packet of seeds, followed by rain water.
- 3) In absence of rain water, proceed to ungate dam water.

Yes, there is this way, which is precise, controlled, and technological. But to insist, this is the only way to cultivate, is domination. It endangers me. You see, I cultivate by suppression.

Are not domination and suppression the same thing? Yes...no, maybe not. Like the Master of Dam, Dam-wallah, of exalted rank, initially I am also confused. But soon thereafter, we part ways. The Dam-wallah wants clarity: I must respond by a checkmark in either the "Yes" or "No" slot. There is no slot provided for wafflers. The Dam-wallah insists I not dialogue in a manner unconfined to slotting. Exasperated by my sulky retreat from slot commitment, he checks out my credentials.

Deviation: Trinh T. Minh-ha writes:

Never does one open the discussion by coming right to the heart of the matter.... People approach it [heart of the matter] indirectly by postponing until it matures (1).

However, the Dam-wallah is incapable of understanding that when I shuffle or waffle, I am actively heating the "heart of the matter." Instead, this is how I am read on the Dam-wallah's computer: (positive green blinkers flash)

"valid, licence to unconfirm."

(explanation)

"writer from the margins. .."

(green blinkers)

"season of the margins" (blink blink) "let her be merry."

This is how the Dam-wallah organizes me. He calls me Other. He is the Centre. He calls me Third World. He is First World.

The Dam-wallah insists on how I dialogue. He slicks me into

linearity when my shape is womb-Om. He defines/culminates/presses me into a catalogue/category/coolie/condiment. "Cut," says the director Dam-wallah, when I do not actress-coo Third World, as set out by the First World. (Readerji, why the frown? Third World is everywhere these days: computer screen, Hollywood screen, Toronto glitz. Heck, it is our season!)

The truth is, what does the Dam-wallah know about me? That my speech sings (gayati). My speech protects (trayate). I come from Prajapati, who creates. When she sings she is Gayatri. But in Dam-wallah-centric land, I have been granted a season. Gayatri is housed in a museum. The Dam-wallah is a damn, fine collector.

Pssssss—Cultivate by suppression, forsake the obvious:

When I was young, my grandmother rubbed my hair with coconut oil and like an ancient Chinese master repeated over and over again, "Toast your eye on the invisible, all visible is cataract vision."

Suppression is magic because is it suggestive. Domination is linear/ clear/ subjection.

Minh-ha writes:

Clear expression, often equated with correct expression, has long been the criterion set forth in treatises on rhetoric whose aim was to order discourse so as to persuade...clarity as a purely rhetorical attribute serves the purpose of a classical feature in language, namely, its instrumentality...to mean and to send out an unambiguous message. The language of Taoism and Zen, for example, which is perfectly accessible but rife with paradox does not qualify as "clear" (paradox is "illogical" and "nonsense" to many Westerners), for its intent lies outside the realm of persuasion....Obscurity is an imposition on the reader. True, but beware when you cross railroad tracks for one train may hide another train. Clarity is a means of subjection, a quality both of official, taught language and of correct writing, two old mates of power: together they flow, vertically, to impose an order (16-17).

The Dam-wallah asks me: "If there is no water, how will your crops grow?" My cultivation thrives on paradoxical bliss. There is a Rajasthani proverb:

ammar rachyo me machyo If the sky turns crimson-red it will rain heavily (Ahuja 161).

But for my crops, the sun comes down personally, doing away

with the messenger, the crimson-red sky. The sun wears fiery red anklets, dances on my crops. My crops bloom because they are in love with the sun and mistake its fiery red for water. There is an Indian legend that the moonsical moony *chakor*-partridge eats blistering coal, mistaking coal for moon fragments.

Once again, the Dam-wallah's rationality.

"Impossible, how can one eat what one loves? Don't take me for a ride!"

"My moon-eyes, *I am* taking you for a ride! Paradoxical reading compels that one jump off the edge. Then realizes the other shore. So jump! Jump, baby jump!"

But trust me my Dam-wallah-ji, I shall not cheat you unless you are the peck-pecking tourist on the streets of New Delhi, for quickie tourist consumption. Let me back-up to your rigid, "How can one eat what one loves?" Better still, meet Sara's Granny-amaa in Meatless Days. This Dadimaa's penchant for Allah and

Me: "Another half an hour."

But with Master Dam, it is a teeth-pulling headache.

Warning Readerji—paradox advancing: with Dam-wallah, it is both a teeth-pulling headache and a love headache for I cannot abandon him. Because he brought me here, to big rich country. Maybe you can "heat" this question, yourself. Right now, I am busy with two crazies: Masta-Dam-wallah who organizes even the rice in my mouth, "Eat with fork not with hand," and the loony-bin chakor eating fiery coal. Both, full moon crazy. One day, I read that words are cow dung, anyway. (End of experiment).

But Readerji,

How far am I allowed to slip and slide?

The Dam-wallah has paid my bride price.

I am still under the Dam-wallah's colonial rule. I, Other, cannot stain my poetics raw. Like perspire and sweat (am not



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Food, too, could move her intensities. Her eyesight always took a sharp turn for the worse over meals—she could point hazily at a perfectly ordinary potato and murmur with Adamic reverence "What is it, what is it called? With some shortness of manner one of us would describe and catalog the items on the table. "Alu ka bhartha," Dadi repeated with wonderment and joy; "Yes, Saira Begum, you can put some here." "Not too much," she'd add pleadingly. For ritual had it that the more she demurred, the more she expected her plate to be piled with an amplitude her own politeness would never allow (Suleri 5).

Reader ji, where am I? You see, the Dam-wallah interrupts our text constantly, compelling me to digress. Not digress in a movement sense but in a red light sense. Stop! Explain! So, I write and explain first for the Dam-wallah's benefit, why my crops blooms in absence of water. Sadly, I implement what Audre Lorde warned me of: "This is an old and primary tool [unpacking/explaining everything the Centre's way] of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns" (qtd. in Minh-ha 85).

Let me experiment without interruption:

That poetics, or call it writing, is au naturel, moving with invisible connection, even no connection, tripping, falling, leaving, merging, doubling, forgetting. Readerji, watch me trip. Look no hands!

(Warning: I do not know where I will land—an experiment): My teacher Fywed sends me a burp across the page/table. Poet Roberta (I call Robbie) is one-and-a-half years old. Her neighbour Fywed lets her pee in her pants, right on the street. No slotting/scolding. Both Fyweds give. "AND / here / and here / and here.." (Webb 66). Aspro dawa ya kweli! Aspro the honest medicine! Whenever Robbie and I become too excited, we get a headache.

Robbie: "I think it is coming. Yours?"

allowed to sweat), my poetics are hued, never stained. The Dam-wallah loathes bad smell. Remember, I am the Dam-wallah's condiment/exotic. Ours is a scizophernic relationship: sometimes I am his coolie

sometimes I am his condiment.

From my margin homeland, a wise mother points her finger at me: mama bell accuses me of "passive acceptance of commodification" (hooks 4). As set out by the Dam-wallah, my cultural overseer. That I aid his sell: I, his coolie/I, his condiment. Then baba (mama hooks' grandmother) says, "play with a puppy he'll lick you in the mouth," which means not allowing Damwallah folk get too close, then they want to take over. But I also practice my grandmother's saying: "Kill a snake in such a way that the snake dies and stick remains unbroken." I am married to the Dam-wallah. He paid my bride price. A blue passport. At red stops, I forward explanations; a colonized wife's duty. Outward, I practice aruba, Imam Ghazali's sermon. Doesn't matter if the sermon is out of eleventh century. That a woman's wifely duty is to feel like making love with her husband because she loves him. (Very complicated to unpack, maybe sly Imam knows it is hard for a woman to love I-patriarch-husband). But my condiment tongue which is the only language my Dam-wallah hears, is also rife with paradox. It allows me to heat the heart of the matter and to waffle with cunning. (Readerji, there is no sin being open minded and cunning at the same time.) This way, I resist slotting/ slaughter in my marriage. My content is so transparent it moves unhindered. Let me explain.

Resisting slotting/slaughter:

In my story, "Lakshmi," an East Indian woman celebrates Diwali (Festival of Lights) at Mrs. Gola's, a woman she meets for the first time in New Delhi. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and indulgence. She is especially worshipped on Diwali. Rest of the year, she is worshipped as Lord Vishnu's consort. Behind him. At the bottom of the Ocean, she is by Vishnu's feet, pressing his legs.

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Males like their women to model Lakshmi ma. She is a paragon of womanly virtue and giddy-lotto wealth. Worshippers lust after her and Lakshmi always gives and gives and gives.

Lakshmi sits on a lotus. Plentiful, ample. Forever, turns a blind eye. Never mind. She is like barwa-raga. Raga which soothes both bird and serpent. She is feathery kind. She will say never mind. bpNichol kind. And like bp, her back burns. The worshippers are eating her up. Her worshippers do not know that Lakshmi is sick. That they have polluted her back with greed, now Lakshmi has an ozone back.



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Mrs. Gola's plight is the same. Another Lakshmi giver. Since the day she becomes a bride, she is effaced with a barrage of honour. She is slandered with honour. Slotted. Paradigm of a good woman in Lord Vishnu and Buddha's society.

When a bride enters the door's entrance. Halt. That arch in her limbs is loosened, removed. Now henna and sandalwood paste are wanton heat. One day, she hands over her black thing (magazine desires, scent). Her lap now piled with keys, rice, money and turbans. Only she can fill turbans with honour. The turbans, stretched out alm bowls. The colours of alm bowls make her giddy. Yellow, pink, red, mustard. Her Padshah-Poseidon-Pathi-Husband and tall Bhima-sons' worshipping saliva, acidic. Makes holes in her meat.

The woman-traveller is wary to label her "mother." She practices refrainment by calling her *Didi*, mother's sister, never mother.

"Why not?" (Readerji-Dam-wallah duet).

If she does this, she refines *Didi's* complexity. Your frown clears, your duet too. Instant satisfaction, digestion, "Sure I can relate to this, I have a mother!" This is why woman-traveller thicks her tongue careful, heaves it with cunning, removing mother, inserting mother's sister. This way, Dam-wallah-Reader is compelled to stop (for a change), and meditate about Didi, and daughter and *Didi's* relationship, as several kinds exist.

I am sharp on paper but not in action, "Gently-gently, Husband-mine," I say to Dam-wallah. Core rule: never defy my husband but

my content is so transparent, it moves unhindered:

Mrs. Gola has tall Bhima-sons. She lacks nothing. Honour, wealth and men. How can she ask for a daughter? Mrs. Gola finds a way.

...Didi's still wish. So still, it is stolen. Still-stolen. Stealthily, she gives her birth. Still and alive. Out of the reach of Buddha or Shiva or Vishnu, any sneerer who questions, "How can she want Eve?"

In the fleshy recess of her zenana sex, an obvious place (is it?), a dull protein glints ... *Didi's* content so transparent it moves unhindered in the bazaari republic. Buddha does not know. Shiv

does not know. That Didi's daughter grows in her womb for thirty-five years. Now she daughter, woman-traveller lights the lamps, one by one, behind Gola Market. Lakshmi rests.

Like Buddha and Shiva in the story, the Dam-wallah's control over me is pseudo, a mirage. My thick layered speech, where I waffle with cunning, is a communication which exalted Dam-wallah cannot usurp, because he is innocent of such speech. As my Grandmother says, "Allah, your husband's palm so vacant, unlined as a baby's bum!"

When I occupy "hibiscus weather," my husband gets mad! He can't stand my meandering and

leaving things until tomorrow. But I have never grasped linearity. Even as I do dishes, I let them soak, sweep the kitchen, phone Delhi, can't get through, so I phone Robbie, and return to dishes. Sometimes I will return to the dishes in the morning. In between these chores, I gather side stories. I dream in snatches, loose my dreams. Do not panic. Eastern slotting is loosing freely. Not exactly "easy come, easy go," but catch the spirit, and no, "easy come, easy go," is not a hibiscus saying from East Indian tropics.

Sometimes I do not even know I am looking for something. I just find it, wow! Next day, it may slip away. My husband is in agony: "Your bloody negligence, damn your hibiscus weather!" He takes my season of the margin, very serious. Every morning, he records my stories, unfailing as a nurse with her thermometer.

He doesn't know that I approach an idea indirectly, just coming to know her, just saying hello. When I am ready, she will come back. Or I will go to her. (Of course an idea is a "she." I am from Prajapati. Sa Hum.) Like a fish, I nibble here and there. I know I will re-connect. Return to the same place once again for nourishment. Ready this time.

Once upon a time story of how Emperor Jahangir meets Noorjahan. In the forest the Mogul Emperor finds two beautiful birds. However, the birds hamper his hunting. He sees a beautiful (naturally) girl in the forest, Noorjahan, and hands the birds to her. When he returns from his hunt, Noorjahan is waiting diligently. But she only has one white bird. Jahangir is furious, and asks her how it happened? She said, "like this," and lets the other white bird escape.

Readerji, the story is not finished (go to the next page).

Warning to Readerji and Dam-wallah: And, don't ask, "but like Robbie is white, eh?"

First Heat Heart of a Thing is from the author's collection of multi-genre fictions, Circum the Gesture, which she is currently working on.

Yasmin Ladha teaches a creative writing course for women at the University of Calgary. Her book, Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories, was published by NeWest Press in 1992. A chapbook, Bridal Hands on the Maple, was also published in 1992 by Second Wednesday Press.

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BARBARA HUDSPITH

On visiting the sight of the last witch's burning at Dunning in Perthshire, Scotland

She writhed a woman in torment on that soft green knoll

A flock now sending their low sad moan over the black loam, over the drystack wall

so rigid

in the dank fog

Her screech now hushed in the empty autumn air where the rooks flap and scream in the tip-top boughs bedded softly on this snow-squall night

> And we We rush arm-in-arm down that silent road

Her low moan lost

as we near the purple heat of the gas fire's glow our tea already on the hob our buttered scones ranged thick against that ancient horror

Barbara Hudspith runs a bed and breakfast business from her home in rural Dundas, Ontario. She writes poems as well as articles and short stories on the subject of women's religious experience.