

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.

Psssss—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

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.

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).

Readerji, 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 *Dam-wallah* 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.

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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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

Her low moan lost

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

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

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