

Literary  
Journal

ENGLISH

## EDITORIAL

In September 2019, The Department of English, Stella Maris College conducted the Annual Intercollegiate Students' Seminar, titled *Indian Theatre: Centre Stage*. The seminar was held in honour of the late Girish Raghunath Karnad, the renowned Kannada playwright, whose plays draw upon historical and mythological stories to represent the themes and struggles of the contemporary world.

From 24 hour immersive plays on Kashmir to the 20 minute short play phenomenon in Chennai; from the mythological tradition of Kalidasa to their modern evocation by Karnad, we've seen that the face of Indian theatre is fluid and is rapidly evolving. Over the two thousand years of its existence, theatre in India has always found a captivated and contemplative audience. Stories from Indian history and fantasy occupy a very real space in the present, with every iteration bringing out new theories and ideas to add to the vast collection of our theatrical tradition. The papers presented during this seminar attempted to capture this very essence through the study of different playwrights and dramatic styles across the country.

With this issue of the Literary Journal, we invite you to experience the diverse and multifaceted tapestry of Indian Theatre and hope you enjoy exploring it as much as we enjoyed putting this issue together.

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## Contents

### CRITICAL ESSAYS

**“You Own Them as They Own You”: The Master-Slave Dialectic in Zubin Driver’s *worm* play by Susanna Correya**

**The Metamorphosis of Shakuntala: A Feminist Reading of Kalidasa’s Play by Samyuktha Iyer**

**Immersive Theatre and the Portrayal of Kashmir in Nandita Dinesh and Bhawani Bashir Yasir’s play *Information for/from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir* by Aameena M**

**Women and Storytelling, Agency and Patriarchal Control in Karnad’s *Naga-Mandala* by Aswathy Mohandas**

**Arangil Ninum Jeevithathilekku (From the stage to reality): A Study of the Impact of KPAC on Kerala’s Socio-Political Milieu by Amalu John and Swathy V. Nambi**

**The Nexus between Neo-Colonial Exploitations, Commodification and Neo-Cannibalism in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* by Vineetha A.V**

**The Short-Play Phenomenon: The Rising Popularity of Short Plays in Chennai theatre since 2017 by Jeshma Chand**

### CREATIVE WRITING

**a grief playlist by N.M. Mathangi**

**The Masquerade of Smiles by Sayujya Shankar**

**You Think You Know My Story? by Remy Tresa Abraham**

**For Concord by Candy C Thomas**

**Colourless by Sagina Jenefa Grace Samuel**

**Breaking away from your clutches by Anton Joesmiya**

**An Ode to my Mother by Sheryl**

**A Grumpy Sonnet by Aswathy Mohandas**

**Audacity by R. Taniya Ishwarya Tamilarasi**

**Rigid Structures by *Krishna J. Nair***

**suthan by *Madhuri Lalwani***

**Rebirth by *Vineetha A V***

**I wish we all could live like kings by *Subashini. K.J.J***

**Portrait of a Poem by *Nivedhana Pandian***

**Abhirami Andhaadhi - A Translation by *Subhasree Maragathavel***

**There you are by *Monica Rajgopal***

**Quiet Disaster by *Hima Mouli***

**An Entry from an Encyclopaedia of Aquatic Life by *Riya Nagendra***

## **“You Own Them as They Own You”: The Master-Slave Dialectic in Zubin Driver’s *worm play***

*Susanna Correy*

*I.M.A.*

*Awarded Best Paper at the Students’ Seminar 2019*

Zubin Driver’s *worm play* is a two-character absurdist play that satirizes consumerism, capitalism and politics through the peculiar interactions of the anonymous Master and Stephen who are trapped within a giant worm. Once a hierarchy is established within this space, we witness them assume and perform the roles of master and slave respectively. Through a Hegelian framework, the present paper attempts to analyze the dialectical development of both master and slave, and argue that hierarchy is unstable and reversible.

In harmony with Hegelian discourse, the master and slave, Master and Stephen, are produced as subjects through mutual recognition. In addressing Master as “my lord” (Driver 131; act 1), Stephen posits him as the dominant character, the “independent consciousness whose nature it is to be for itself” (Hegel 115). While Stephen is never explicitly referred to as a slave, he is seen to perform a functional role in a rather automatic fashion at the outset. He exemplifies the Hegelian “bondsman”, a “dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another”.

As the superior member of the pair, Master is entitled to desire. It falls to the lot of Stephen, the slave, to pre-empt Master’s desires and satisfy them. There are several instances in the play where Master commands Stephen to “get [him] some wine” (Driver 143; act 2); Stephen takes his role of cupbearer seriously, but bursts into a satirical lament at one point:

s. can i get you some wine my lord? good evening my lord.

.....  
s. all the time my lord, every time, at your service my lord, keeping it going with a smile  
my lord, what am i doing my lord, nothing ... i am performing my little nothing  
function, my lord ... (Driver 134; act 1).

Whereas Master has the privilege to “achieve satisfaction in the enjoyment of [the things he desires]” (Hegel 116), Stephen has to ensure that his own desires are “held in check” (118). This he does by sublimating them into work whereby “[he] becomes conscious of what he truly is”. Aware of Master’s dependence on him and his fondness for wine, he manipulates the situation to gain leverage: he complies with Master’s demands for wine and even volunteers some when none is called for. Although he is alienated from the wine, he is aware of its destabilizing effects. With every draught, Master becomes more fretful and less lucid.

It is on account of his dependence on Stephen that Master becomes a catalyst for – perhaps even the instrument of – his own destruction.

While Master is preoccupied with ideas and ideologies viz. “the nation ..., the big picture, the framework”, Stephen, who describes himself as “the man who sees it all happening” (Driver 134; act 1) is acutely aware and insightful of the real world populated by worms, which are metaphors for human beings (138). Master is unacquainted with the real world and the worms and bombards Stephen with enquiries about them. He asks, “... these worms, what are they like? what do they eat? where do they live?” (132)

It is uncharacteristic of the master to express interest in the conditions of the slave unless he wishes to exploit them. When Stephen transforms into the Worm-Man, an embodiment of the ideological state apparatus, and offers Master ideological monopoly, he eagerly accepts:

ws. [...] the worms are hungry; they need an essential core ... a substratum they can rely upon, an invisible, yet total, framework.

m. and i am that framework.

ws. precisely my lord the whole of human history will bow in obeisance to you, no longer will philosophers, poets, thinkers, strategists like me wander confused through the cosmos ...

.....  
ws. [...] what matters is that we have one big picture that we all accept ...

.....  
ws. ... and it is you who will personify the big picture!

m. (*ad jingle*) get the big picture! get the big picture! (Driver 137; act 1)

On observing that the Worm-Man, who peddles in illusions and “mystical nonsense”, has enticed Master with his “hypnotic verbiage”, Stephen attempts to confuse and dismantle the latter’s sense of supremacy with counterarguments (Driver 133; act 1). He insists that “imagination is not power” (138) and points out that “the master has been too involved in his own fantasies” (139).

The identities of the characters cause us to anticipate a shift in power. Master remains nameless throughout the play. While his title does not confer the individual identity that a name does, it is invested with power. However, this titular power is downplayed due to the playwright’s deliberate use of lowercase. It implies that Master is not absolute or eternal, but replaceable and disposable.

Stephen has both a given name and a family name which would enable him to function normally and smoothly in society. However, there is a paradox: in his having a proper name, we assume that he should, by extension, have a fixed identity, but this is not the case. Stephen, unlike the static Master, is a shape-shifter. As Stephen Mascarenhas, he executes the duties of a slave; as the Worm-Man, he deludes Master; as the audience member, he defiantly spells out Master’s defeat in the “life-and-death struggle” (Hegel 114): he tells him he is “already dead” (Driver 146; act 2) and “disintegrating” (147), and that he will be “[carried] ... into the huge drain of time”.

The fact that Stephen is not called “Slave” is noteworthy because it entails that he is not in a derivative position or straitjacketed by the prescripts of an epithet, but capable of enacting his own will.

Where dialectic development is concerned, Stephen exceeds Master by far. This prompts us to wonder who the “master” was all along.

The gut of the worm is a microcosmic representation of the world at large and its inhabitants are vehicles for social, cultural and political meaning. In Driver’s words, “The [play] was a response to the ongoing socio-political economic ecosystem that we exist in where one sees a continuous movement towards totalitarian capitalism” (qtd. in Kumar).

The Worm-Man, the propagator of capitalist and consumerist ideologies, describes himself as “a strategist, a marketing man” with “the power of god” who “decide[s] what toothpaste the worms use, what underwear they buy, what kind of sex they have, what makes them laugh, what makes them righteous” (Driver 136; act 1). We see that Stephen is subject to

the overwhelming influence of this rhetoric when he professes that “[he] too believe[s] in what the world is talking about” (134).

Driver goes on to say:

[The play] operates on two levels – the larger geo-political system ... around us and the interpersonal politics between any two human beings. At a human level, when you put people in a group, some kind of politics and a power structure emerge. The same narratives then continue on a larger geo-political level (qtd. in Kumar).

Lakshmi Chandra opines that *worm play* was written in response to “the political situation ... in Maharashtra (where elections were due at the time of writing of [the] play)” (xxviii). Political groups, like the characters in the play, have an agenda and they struggle for power. Although these groups are construed as the masters who wield power over the common folk, the Worm-Man states that the reverse is true: it is, in fact, the people who “form leaders” and “tear them down” (Driver 135; act 1).

The play attempts to subvert the belief that people are enslaved to ideologies by asserting that ideologies are reliant on people to sustain and reproduce them. As Stephen reminds Master, “you own them as they own you” (Driver 147; act 2). Once people become conscious of this, they can rise up against the system, dismantle it and reconstruct it. Yet, ideologies breed ideologies; old masters are deposed only for new ones to take their places and the cycle recommences.

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## The Metamorphosis of Shakuntala: A Feminist Reading of Kalidasa’s Play

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*Awarded Best Paper at the Students’ Seminar 2019*

Kalidasa’s *Abhigyanashakuntalam*, or The Recognition of Shakuntala is a work of literary genius, a stellar representation of the Sanskrit literary and dramatic tradition in India, which thrived across its landscape, fuelled by the works of many great artists. In fact, Kalidasa, said to have lived in the 4th-5th century, was considered one of its greatest exponents, and his verses speak for themselves in terms of literary and artistic merit. And yet, when he borrows the character of Shakuntala from the Mahabharata, he leaves something to be desired. In this piece of seven scenes, he describes the story of Shakuntala, first introduced by Vyasa as the mother of

Bharata, and ancestor of the Kurus, and she is instantly transformed into a virginal beauty, a beloved of a king, a heartsick lover awaiting her husband, a woman wronged, and most importantly, a virtuous, chaste wife. Perhaps he immortalised the name of an otherwise minor persona in the epic, breathing life into her character, but in doing so, he seems to have taken away the qualities she was endowed with, turning her into the archetypal heroine; the ideal Hindu housewife.

The Mahabharata has defied its times in its portrayal of women; Satyawati, Kunti, Draupadi, Gandhari, and so many other women of this epic have been depicted as feisty and strong, and have constantly stood up for themselves and taken steps for their survival. It is important to remember that Shakuntala is a predecessor of women such as these. She is beautiful and innocent, but she also has an instinct for self-preservation. When King Dushyanta arrives at the grove of her father, Rishi Kanva's ashrama, she consciously chooses to marry him, a decision she makes in the *absence* of her father, asserting her autonomy over her self. The self-willed daughter of an apsara, she shows a sharp intelligence, an understanding of human nature and foresightedness when she makes Dushyanta promise her that her son will inherit his throne. When he leaves, promising to send for her, she doesn't pine for him like a lovelorn damsel, but sets about doing her duty. She doesn't go to him even when she realises she is pregnant; she raises Bharata with her father's help until he asks her who his father is. The Shakuntala of the Mahabharata only goes to Dushyanta to seek an answer to her son's question.

In contrast, the setting of the play focuses deeply on the character of the king, giving him the qualities of a good man of high class and merit, traits essential to the hero of a Sanskrit drama. The plot of the play seems to view Shakuntala from a fixedly male gaze; her beauty is elaborately furnished with fine verses, described using budding blossoms and curving creepers. This Shakuntala is far more naive and virginal, and her decisions never seem to be her own, but manifest in the form of her friends' teasing words and her own indirect articulation of her feelings. By surrounding Shakuntala by so many people, Kalidasa draws away the quality of independence imbued by the original heroine. Even her choosing to marry the king is seen as a culmination of a course of events resulting from their mutual emotions, resulting in a subtle loss of agency as the king coaxes her into accepting him.

When Dushyanta leaves, Kalidasa, in an attempt to protect the integrity of his hero, and to fill a seemingly gaping plot hole in the story, introduces the curse of Durvasa, in order to exonerate Dushyanata. In fact, the explanation for this sequence of events, which is unknown to Shakuntala, is given in the final scene by an all-knowing seer. In the Mahabharata, the conspicuous lack of insight into this event seems to be Vyasa's way of showing an imperfect ruler with all the failings of a man— and foreshadows a later abandonment of a wife by her husband in a gambling hall. The drama then shows us a pregnant Shakuntala, who, bearing a token of her husband (a ring), is sent by her father to his kingdom, highlighting the Hindu belief that a woman's place is in a husband's house, and that a woman who chooses to stay with her parents even after consummation is considered loose and wicked. Shakuntala is escorted by Kanva's disciples to Dushyanta's kingdom, where we see her completely deserted on all sides— by the husband she loves and the disciples she trusted. Shakuntala is helpless when faced with Dushyanta's lack of recognition, and his words about the cunning of seductive women is emphasised by her inability to produce an answer, in stark contrast to the epic's Shakuntala who immediately stands up for herself and heatedly answers that his accusation is against the dharma of a just king and a good man. Dushyanta's rejection breaks Kalidasa's Shakuntala, who wails



and cries piteously, worried about her own plight, enhancing her innocence and glorifying it, but it only strengthens Vyasa's heroine, who is not here looking for her husband, but seeking her son's father and the inheritance he owes him. While the play shows Shakuntala, weeping and attempting to guilt the king, ultimately being chastised for her attempt to be independent by Kanva's disciples, who tell her that her fate is to be decided by her husband, the Mahabharata shows a furious Shakuntala turning to leave, drawing on her immense will and sense of independence, completely breaking free of the norms of her time. She rebukes Dushyanta by saying that Bharata is destined for the throne, but Kalidasa doesn't introduce her son until the very end, thus turning this dialogue into a debate on morals.

Ultimately, Kalidasa's Shakuntala is recognised by Dushyanta through the ring, and when he seeks to bring her back, she accepts gracefully and happily, still thinking and respecting him as her beloved and willing to forgive his previous actions. Throughout the play, her voice, thoughts and agency are replaced by the voices of societal convention and other characters, especially the men she is surrounded by. The contrast of her virginal, helpless state to the strong, wilful woman of the epic enhances the aspects of the love story that Kalidasa sought to write, but destroys its original message. His attempts to bridge gaps in the original story eradicates any blame placed on his hero, creating the perfect situation for an ideal love, but erases entirely the woman's perspective. From being the *subject* of the Story, Shakuntala becomes the *object* of the Play, a thing ultimately given value through a man's recognition of her beauty and virtue. Her constant need for protection, her mother's whisking her away when she was abandoned, her necessity to follow the norms enforced upon women, all show us that she is a *pativrata stree*, modelled after the likes of Savitri and Sita, rather than the unconventional women of the Mahabharata, who have often broken the boundaries and laws set down by men and god.

Kalidasa, bound perhaps by the tradition of creating heroines within Sanskrit plays within their limitations of a patriarchal system, brings out the ideas of his times through this revisioning of Shakuntala. *Abhigyanashakuntalam* is not doubt a literary masterpiece, but to a feminist, it is a disappointing shift in perspective, once again demoting its women to the position of scapegoat in the grand scheme of things.

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## **Immersive Theatre and the Portrayal of Kashmir in Nandita Dinesh and Bhawani Bashir Yasir's play *Information for/from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir***

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In 1947, the British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act, an act that divided British India into two new independent countries – India and Pakistan. In October of that very year, the two countries went to war with each other. The main reason for the Indo-Pakistan war of 1947 can be traced to the status of Kashmir. Kashmir, as a Muslim majority state governed by a Hindu king, Maharaja Hari Singh, situated between the borders of the two countries, found itself caught in the powerplay between the neighbouring countries in the post partition era. In 1948, the Kashmir problem was raised in the United Nations by India. The UN drew up a resolution calling for a ceasefire and a formulation of a truce agreement. It also declared that the future of the state of Jammu and Kashmir should be decided by a plebiscite. Neither India nor Pakistan were able to agree on the terms of demilitarisation and so Kashmir continued to be a point of contention over which more wars were fought between the two countries.

Seven decades later, Kashmir is still a live wire and has continued to remain one of the most heavily militarised regions in the country. In August 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370 of the Indian constitution, effectively stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its special autonomous state. This decision sent shock waves throughout the state as well as the entire country and has been met with a wide variety of reactions that highlight the contentious nature of the issue of Kashmir in the minds of the Indian people. In times like this, a nuanced understanding of the Kashmir conflict is required for outsiders to better comprehend the situation in the state. *Information for/from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir*, a 24 hour long immersive play, written by Nandita Dinesh and Bhawani Bashir Yasir and published in August 2018, does just this. This paper will look at how Dinesh and Yasir use the form of immersive theatre to portray Kashmir in all its complexities, something rarely seen in mainstream representations of the state.

As a 24 hour long immersive play, *Chronicles from Kashmir* is site specific. Previously it had been staged in a two storied building in Kashmir, and in a theatre workshop outside Pune. The audience are invited to stay in a theatrical Kashmir for 24 hours. The length of the play lets them experience the state with all its nuances. In the foreword to the play, Nandita Dinesh, one of the playwrights, talks about what the play aims to accomplish. “*Chronicles from Kashmir* seeks to create a sense of “balance”: between differently positioned voices that emerge when speaking about Kashmir; between differently placed narratives on the “victim”/ “perpetrator” spectrum.” (Dinesh and Yasir 7). This is evident in the play as each scene gives voice to a different group in Kashmir ranging from Kashmiri Pandits, to women, artists, militants and even the Indian soldiers stationed there. This polyphonic narrative enables the play to present different voices from the state that vary in their perspectives but are equally valid. This can be clearly seen in Scene 6 titled “The Incarcerated”, which tells the stories of different militants and rebels captured and imprisoned. The scene gives the audience the story of four different prisoners, from different familial backgrounds and who had joined the rebellion for different reasons. The reasons vary

from genuinely believing in the cause to joining the rebellion because it was the thing to do at that time. By refusing to portray the prisoners as martyrs or villains, and portraying them as just people, the playwrights refuse to follow the mainstream narratives of Kashmiri and Indian nationalism which works mainly on the binaries of heroes/villains and victims/perpetrators.

Nandita Dinesh, in her paper, “Grey Zones: Performances, Perspectives and Possibilities in Kashmir” talks about the difficulty of sustaining the “victim” and “perpetrator” binaries in war zones.

To an outsider who has no personal stake in/affiliation to the conflict in question, victimhood and perpetration are often two points on a spectrum; a spectrum on which individuals align themselves/find themselves aligned at different points at different times...the binary between the two notions that have come to define war (of victim and perpetrator) is insufficient to capture the many identity based affiliations that comprise one’s positioning as a recipient/inflictor of violence during a time and place of war. (3)

She uses Primo Levi’s concept of the “gray zone” to look at the area between “victims” and “perpetrators” (3). This term was used by Levi when talking about the Holocaust, where inmates would willingly let others die or even kill them so that they could survive. Levi explained that their actions can neither be looked at as bad or good but has to be viewed in the “gray zone”. The first scene, “The Experiment” recreates the Milgram experiment. Though the teacher willingly participates in the experiment at first, as the voltage of the charge increases, he becomes more reluctant. After the first student stops screaming and is presumed dead, the teacher expresses a desire to not continue with the experiment. But the boss and the coordinator scare him into reconsidering his decision by mentioning files they have on him and alluding to punishments. At the end, he is taken away to deal with some paperwork before he can supposedly leave. This scene highlights the complicity of those who would not usually be considered as perpetrators in the perpetration of violence. The teacher’s actions can be viewed through the “gray zones” as he is neither fully a victim nor fully a perpetrator of violence. He occupies a liminal space between the two. The Milgram experiment, being the first scene, sets the tone for the rest of the play and encourages the audience to look at the victim/perpetrator binary as a spectrum.

In the beginning of the play, the audience are thoroughly checked for the presence of any diversionary materials, like cell phones or other technological devices and these are taken away from them before entering the performance space. They are taken around the performance space by the guides, who get to decide the order in which they see things and how long they spend in each scene. The guides act as authority figures who get to control and direct, to a certain extent, the audience’s perception of the events. This reflects how public perception is controlled by those in power.

Dinesh, in her book *Theatre and War: Notes from the field*, borrows Sundar Sarukkai’s idea when talking about the theatre practitioner-researcher who has no lived experience of war. When such a person decides to engage in theatre in war zones, they have a choice and they are asserting it. The choice to engage also denotes a choice of not participating in the experience. They can leave whenever they want to, which is not a choice for those who embody that lived experience. (31). Though audience interaction is integral to *Chronicles from Kashmir*, and is encouraged, the audience has a choice to be involved as much as they wish. Every couple of scenes, the audience are taken to areas of the performance space called “Installations”. This acts

as a place of comfort where audience are offered snacks and given a place to rest. This place also contains interactive questions that require audience members to add their response, gallery components, word cluster displays, reading sections, and buzzfeed booths where Bollywood movies on Kashmir are played. The audience are given time to relax and compare their experiences in previous scenes with the various materials available in the installations. This creates a clear distinction between the Kashmiris, the “insiders” of the play, and the audience, the “outsiders”, as the latter, like the theatre practitioner-researcher, have the choice to decide the terms of their involvement, a luxury that people living in conflict zones never have. This insider-outsider distinction can be seen as an indication of the power hierarchy between the two groups, where the outsiders are more privileged than the insiders of the land they are visiting.

Bhawani Bashir Yasir, one of the writers of the play and the founder of Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi, when talking about the role of theatre, said “Theatre makes a nation wise, vigilant and vibrant. Theatre aims at reading, redefining and reflecting the mind of a nation. Thus, a nation without theatre is a ‘dead nation’.” (ektakashmir.org.in). Likewise Dinesh and Yasir, by recreating the varied experiences of different groups and individuals involved in the Kashmir in their play *Information for/from Outsiders: Chronicles from Kashmir*, have sought to redefine the essentialist ideas of Kashmir and portray the valley in all its complexity and beauty.

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## **Women and Storytelling, Agency and Patriarchal Control in Karnad’s Naga-Mandala**

*Aswathy Mohandas*

*I.M.A.*

A.K. Ramanujan, in his essay “Towards a Counter-system: Women’s Tales”, contrasts classical or Sanskritic points of view with oral forms of storytelling found among women in Karnataka. These oral tales, according to Ramanujan, present a “second alternate world [that] speaks of what the first cannot” (447). This paper proposes to explore the close link between women and storytelling in Karnad’s *Naga-Mandala*, focusing on how storytelling is an agency for women and how this agency is limited or controlled by patriarchal power.

Storytelling is a part of a culture's folklore. Within the category of folktales, there are various sub-categories. One way of categorising is to look at folktales as 'male-centred' and 'women-centred' (Ramanujan, Introduction xxiv-xxv). 'Male-centred' folktales focus on male heroes, usually young princes, who leave their kingdom in search of adventures. These tales usually end with a wedding; the kingdom and/or the bride are prizes the hero wins. On the contrary, 'women-centred' folktales usually begin with a marriage or union, followed by separation and suffering for the female protagonist, and end with a reunion with the male partner, usually brought about by the woman's act of 'telling' her own story. Apart from the obvious difference regarding the focus on male and female protagonists respectively, these categories also bring out how much agency the two sexes have in Indian society. Telling her own story is almost the only agency a woman has. This agency too is limited because it operates within the patriarchal framework; the woman uses storytelling not only for self-expression, but also to "earn her husband" (Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter-system" 446).

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* takes up two such women-centred folktales and arranges their sequence in such a way that a possible source for one of these tales is provided by the other— that of an old married woman, whose discontent takes the shape of a story and a song. Karnad not only traces the folktales back to their origins but also brings out how women's stories are mediated by the male, in this case, the playwright within the play, who is referred to as 'the man'. The play makes use of a complex, multi-level, story-within-a-story structure. It begins with 'the man', a failed playwright for whom staying awake through the night in question is the only way to prevent death. This man overhears the conversation of the flames who come to the temple he is resting in. These flames, personified as women, are storytellers who gossip about the events that happened during the day at different homes. One of these flames, who arrives late, tells the story of an old woman, who did not tell the story she was bursting to tell. As a result of this, the story and the song escape through her open mouth as she sleeps, in the form of a woman (the story) draped in a saree (the song). At this point, this 'story' enters the temple and is requested by the flames and 'the man' to tell her story. This story, narrated by 'the story' itself, is about a young woman Rani who, attempting to win her indifferent husband's love by means of a love potion, unwittingly enamours a Cobra living in the anthill in front of her house. The Cobra or Naga, visits the woman every night in the guise of her husband. When she becomes pregnant, the husband is furious and accuses her of infidelity. In the end, however, everything works out in favour of the woman; she wins back her husband's love, gives birth to a child and the Cobra strangles himself in her long tresses. Within Rani's story, there are also instances when she tells stories to herself to cope up with her frustrations and loneliness.

Karnad, in his note to the play, has acknowledged that it is based on two oral tales he heard from A.K. Ramanujan (*Naga-Mandala* 20). Ramanujan talks about these tales in his essay "Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales". These two tales are- "A Story and a Song" and "The Serpent Lover". Karnad not only uses these tales but also reworks them. In Ramanujan's version of "A Story and a Song", the untold story and the unsung song escape from within the woman not in the form of a woman draped in a saree, but as a man's shoes and coat. Karnad, by using female images for the story and song, effectively brings out the close link between women and storytelling. In the case of the story, "The Serpent Lover", Karnad takes the original folktale a bit further. In Karnad's play, the story, as its own teller, examines the gaps and ambiguities within itself, instead of being content with a happy ending. The man, at the flames' request for a happy ending, invents one after 'the story' leaves. The way in which the man distorts the story, by

furnishing a totally different ending, serves to bring out how the male artist or editor mediates women's stories and experiences. The chain of narration in *Naga-Mandala*, if traced back from the smallest story-unit, reveals how the man, the patriarchal mediator, has control over all the micronarratives in the play, which are told, or left untold, by women.

Karnad, in his play, echoes Ramanujan's notion of women's stories as a "counter system" (Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter-system" 446) to patriarchal grand narratives. According to Ramanujan, women tell stories, not only to make children eat or go to bed, but also to articulate their internal conflicts and frustrations, and to communicate with other women using the "symbolic language" (Introduction xiii) of folktales. Unlike 'male-centred' tales, 'women-centred' tales focus on women's agency and subjectivity within the oppressive patriarchal framework. Telling stories enables women to cope with the restrictions and roles that are imposed upon them. The importance of telling a story lies in two aspects- its cathartic effect for the woman and its "subliminal, often subversive, meanings" (Introduction xxii). In *Naga-Mandala*, a connection is implied between the old woman's marital frustrations and that of her story's protagonist, Rani. The split in the male figure- "sullen husband by day" and "passionate lover by night" (Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter-system" 444-445), literalised in her story as two personalities- the husband and the cobra disguised as the husband, is perhaps the only way the old woman can make sense of what seems to be her "disjointed encounters" (Karnad, Introduction 17) with her husband. The fictional story enables the old woman to fulfil wishes she cannot fulfil in reality- that of a faithful husband, a child and a passionate lover, while, at the same time, the use of a fictional persona distanced from herself shields her from the guilt she would otherwise feel, for transgressing patriarchal norms, even in her imagination. Also, the ending, with the cobra killing himself, is perhaps a way in which the woman can protect her own internalised role as the faithful wife. However, the use of fantasy is not just for catharsis and wish-fulfilment; it is also a strategy for self-expression and subversion right under the nose of patriarchal censorship. Unlike masculine narratives like the epics, in Rani's story, "it is her infidelity that is used to prove that she is a *pativrata*, a faithful wife" (Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter-system" 444). The notion of a chastity test itself is questioned as the test of handling the cobra, her lover, barehanded, makes the villagers perceive Rani as an embodiment of chastity, a divine woman.

The play does not reveal why the old woman does not tell her story. Whatever the reason, her inability or hesitation to exercise the only agency she probably has, of telling her own story, has unpleasant consequences. When she keeps her story and song to herself, they become "choked, imprisoned inside her" (Karnad, *Naga-Mandala* 25). This paves the way for the suppressed story to turn against the old woman herself, its creator. The escape of the untold story, in both Ramanujan's version and Karnad's play, leads to tension between the old woman and her husband. This brings out the power of storytelling and the importance of telling one's own story. When the woman abstains from telling her story, the story escapes anyway and is left at the mercy of 'the man'. In Ramanujan's version of the folk tale, the man at the temple is the old woman's husband. Karnad's naming of the character of 'the man' seems even more significant in this light, because it seems to implicate men in creating the oppressive conditions that give birth to women's tales. It is highly ironic that the man does not recognise the story, his wife's, if one were to go by Ramanujan's version, as at least a familiar one. To him, it is just another story that he takes ownership of.

Karnad's play, by examining the origin, suppression, narration and patriarchal control of women-centred folktales, indirectly draws attention to the position of the original creators or tellers of these tales- women. According to Ramanujan, the place of the tellers within the community is one of the most important contextual aspects concerning any folktale (Introduction xx). The fact that the old woman, the creator of the story and the song, is not shown on stage and does not even get to be the teller of her own tale, brings out the extent to which women's narratives have been marginalised. Even her story and song seem to be left, at the end of the play, in possession of 'the man', a playwright, who manipulates and appropriates them as materials for his new play.

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### **Arangil Ninnum Jeevithathilekku (From the stage to reality): A Study of the Impact of KPAC on Kerala's Socio-Political Milieu**

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KPAC – Kerala People's Arts Club, is one of the most prominent theatre groups in Kerala which has now grown into an emotion among Malayalis. Founded in 1950 by a group of individuals with Leftist ideologies, KPAC and the themes of its plays have a huge role to play in reforming the socio-political scenario of Kerala during the mid-twentieth century. Despite gifting us many popular artists like KPAC Lalitha, KPAC Azeez, KPAC Sunny, G Janardhana Kurup etc., and many songs that never leave the tongues of Malayalis, the characteristic feature of KPAC is not only its theatrical aspects, but also its influence on the society and its role in promoting the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Kerala. According to Vayala Vasudevan Pillai, KPAC "is a cultural organisation with a political purpose." In accordance with this statement, this paper looks at KPAC as a political forum and studies the socio-political impact of its plays in the society of Kerala in the 1950s and '60s.

Kerala People's Arts Club is one of the oldest theatre groups in Kerala established with the aim of spreading social awareness, and it has become a harbinger of social renaissance. The extent to which KPAC inspired its audience in the first two decades of its functioning was reflected in the victory of the Communist Party of India in the 1957 Kerala elections. The plays staged by KPAC played a substantial role in propagating the ideas of the Communist Party and

made the audience rethink the beliefs they held till then. Two major thought provoking plays are *Ningal Enne Communist Aaki* (You made me a Communist), and *Mudiyanaaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son). These plays have also been adapted into movies that have increased their popularity.

While studying the impact of the plays of KPAC it is important to know about the socio-cultural scenario in which they were placed. The social system in Kerala during the colonial and pre-colonial times, unlike the rest of India, was closer to feudalism than the Varna system, and was also entwined with the class system. The Namboodiri Brahmins were the highest in the ritual caste hierarchy. The Nairs who came right below Namboodiri Brahmins, were the land-owning rich community. Most people from the lower castes were agricultural labourers in the lands owned by the people of the upper castes. Upper caste communities had the right to demand forced labour from the lower castes and they only had to provide them with food. The working class suffered a lot of exploitation from the upper castes as they were prohibited from owning agricultural lands and were denied education. All these prevented the working class from achieving social, cultural and economic development. The plight of the working class and their slow uprising with the encouragement of the budding Communist party is shown in the plays *Ningal Enne Communist Aaki* and *Mudiyanaaya Putran*.

The play *Ningal Enne Communist Aaki* is about the transition of an elderly man, Paramu Pillai, from a conservative upper caste Hindu into a communist. Initially, Paramu Pillai is shown resisting his son Gopalan's revolutionary Communist ideologies and is concerned about the reputation of his family among other affluent landlords like Keshavan Nair. Later when Keshavan Nair cheats Paramu Pillai and usurps his land, he accepts Gopalan's ideologies, and is seen protesting for his rights with a red flag at the end of the play. This transition reflects the transition of the public from submissive workers to people who recognise their agencies. Apart from the symbolic plot, the script helped in triggering conscientisation among the audience. The dialogues of Mala, a working class revolutionary woman, and the casual conversations between Gopalan and his comrade, Matthew are symbolic and representative of the tenets of Communism in Kerala. For instance, when Mala comes to know about her father's helplessness when Keshavan Nair had kicked her mother to death, she says "Maalaye chavitti kollan vannal, nammalde aalkaar nokki nilkilla Acha! (If he comes to kick me to death, our people will not remain silent anymore.)" This is a clear example of the change in times and mentality of the working class and how the working class have realised that they alone can fight for their rights. This play explicitly conveyed the idea that Communism is the solution to social issues. This is evident in a conversation between Gopalan and Matthew, wherein Matthew says to Gopalan, "Shabdavum chalanavum undakkunnavaaranu nammal. Orangikidanna ee naatumpuram polum shabdikkanum chalikkanum thudangirikkunnu. (We are the ones who create voice and revolt. Even this village which was in a reverie has started to voice out and revolt.)"

In a personal interview with the secretary of KPAC, Advocate Shahjahan explains why *Ningal Enne Communist Aaki* and other KPAC plays had such a profound effect on the audience, when he says, "KPAC plays don't merely advise people on what is wrong with the society. Instead, the plays give a full view of what would be the repercussions if the situation continued. The audience could not shrug off the matter like random advice because they could see the result and could imagine themselves in the characters' place." *Ningal Enne Communist Allathaaki* was a cartoon published as a response to the play *Ningal Enne Communist Aaki*. When asked about the reason the response didn't affect the public as much as the play did, Adv Shahjahan says,



“KPAC plays are relatable. The audience find their lives portrayed as a story. Secondly, KPAC doesn’t state the problem and leave it like that. It emphasises that a change is required and also shows how the change is to be made. At the end of the plays, the audience is educated on what needs to be done.”

*Mudiyanaaya Putran* is another play which clicked due to its relatability. This play is about a prodigal son, Rajan, who ends up making the working class aware of their rights. This play shows the real life struggles of workers who had to face untouchability and exploitation on a daily basis. First performed in 1957, the play shows the transition that had come in the society after the advent of Communism. The *Pulaya* workers in the play are shown responding unhesitatingly to the taunts of the upper castes. They form a labour union and protest for their rights when they realise that they are not paid the profit. Unlike earlier times, they do not silently fold their hands when kicked out of their jobs. Rather, they voice out their protest by demanding a reason. All this shows how principles of Marxism and Communism had seeped into the society and reached the lowest rung by 1957. Adv Shahjahan explains the reason for this in his interview saying, “KPAC’s intention was not to blindly propagate CPI. Rather it was to initiate progressive thinking, which forms the tenet of CPI in Kerala.”

“Why KPAC succeeded in moving a vast audience is because it was not commercial. While other theatre groups adjusted their plots to their financial needs, KPAC never cut short the number of characters because it couldn’t afford their costs. For KPAC and its members, it was a social cause rather than commercial,” Adv Shahjahan elucidates.

The social causes addressed by KPAC in its plays are relevant even today. That is the reason why plays like *Ningal Enne Communist Aaki* is still being staged after almost 3000 performances. The artists, who first played the characters of Gopalan and Paramu Pillai and others are perhaps not alive today, but these characters still live. Nandagopal R. Menon in his report for *Frontline* writes,

The plays reflected the social realities of the day and the aspirations of the downtrodden, for a society free of exploitation and oppression. Theatre transcended the realm of entertainment and took on an agitational and propagandistic function. The plays projected the existence of an alternative and explored the possibilities of achieving it through conscious political praxis.

The success of KPAC’s plays was first testified when *Ningal Enne Communist Aaki* was banned on the 85<sup>th</sup> day of its performance, and the second time when CPI formed the world’s second Communist government in Kerala in 1957.

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## **The Nexus between Neo-Colonial Exploitations, Commodification and Neo-Cannibalism in Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest**

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In this consumerist world, nations are divided into developed, developing and underdeveloped countries and most of the developed superpowers base their economy on capitalism while the developing and underdeveloped nations become the sites of exploitation from where resources ranging from natural to human capital are siphoned off by the wealthy sections of the world. Commodification or “the transformation of goods, services, ideas and people into commodities, or objects of trade” (“What is Commodification?” 00:17-00:25), is an inherent characteristic of capitalism and the developed nations wield an indirect yet powerful control over the less developed nations by means of globalisation, cultural imperialism and capitalism to gain profit out of the latter’s resources by commodifying them. The impact of this indirect mode of control or neo-colonialism on the less fortunate, oppressed people is spread out across different arenas of their lives. The play *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan addresses one such impact of neo-colonialism and commodification on the lives of laypersons – organ trafficking, which in the twenty-first century is also called neo-cannibalism. This paper aims to explore the intersection of neo-colonial exploitations, commodification and neo-cannibalism, and the impact it has on the economically weaker sections of the society as depicted in *Harvest*.

Organ trafficking is one of the vices that is very prevalent in the world. It is a form of commodification of human beings through which human labour is sold on the market to an employer – “the trading with ... body parts through formalised or informalised organ transplant” (“What is Commodification” 00:39-00:53) is a gruesome example of the effect that consumerism has on the society. *Harvest* is set in a futuristic world with cutting edge technology where money can buy anything. The play deals with the plight of the economically weaker sections of the society represented by Om and his family, who are forced to take dreadful measures for survival because of the abject poverty that they live in. Having sold the rights to his body parts to an American buyer through the organisation ‘InterPlanta Services’, Om relinquishes the last amount of agency that he has as an individual. Soon the people working for the Americans invade the lives of Om, his wife Jaya, his mother ‘Ma’ and his brother Jeetu – the guards from the agency force their way into the family’s tiny apartment, confiscate their belongings and replace their food with “goat-shit” food pellets (Padmanabhan 27). Om and his family are Indian slum dwellers who live in a single-roomed apartment in a tenement building that has one toilet with limited water supply which forty families share. InterPlanta Services alters the poverty-stricken life of the family by providing them with luxuries such as a dining table, a television and even a toilet inside the house with uninterrupted water supply at the instruction of the American donee – luxuries that come with a huge cost. The family ends up paying for their elevated lifestyle with their lives as they are transformed into commodities that are used for the benefit of the Americans; this commodification, a classic trait of capitalism, dehumanises them because they are no longer humans, but are products with viable organs in the market. Neo-colonialism is rooted in capitalism and refers to “a form of global power in which transnational corporations and global and multilateral institutions combine to perpetuate colonial forms of exploitation of

developing countries” (Halperin). Padmanabhan’s play reflects the contemporary exploitation of the former colonies and in this case, the exploitation takes the form of organ trafficking. Neo-colonialism, being an extension of capitalism, “enables capitalist powers ... to dominate subject nations through the operations of international capitalism rather than by means of direct rule” (Halperin), and in *Harvest*, Om’s family is merely one among thousands of families that are coerced into selling their organs to the foreign market. Thus the neo-colonial exploitation of Om’s family is juxtaposed with its commodification.

The market value of a product depends on how useful and economical it is. In the case of organ trafficking, the donor should be healthy and also a match for the donee. The American donee ensures that Om and his family are ‘moulded’ to suit his purposes and hence he radically alters the family’s living conditions. The apartment is turned into a hygienic space that will be conducive to the growth of healthy organs ripe for transplant. This space resembles a laboratory where Om and his family are reduced to lab rats. A futuristic technology called the contact module – a globular structure with the ability to capture everything that is going on in the apartment – is installed by the guards at the centre of Om’s apartment through which the American donee contacts the family. The image of a stereotypically attractive Western woman named Ginni appears on the contact module and she speaks in a sultry, sugar-coated voice, convincing the family that Om’s body parts would go to her while in reality, Ginni was an illusion constructed by Virgil, an old American man who is the actual donee. The family is under constant surveillance by their American employer and the guards from InterPlanta Services, who become a part of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) which controls the family by inciting fear in them if they deviate from what is expected of them (Althusser 75). This sense of fear arises from the fact that Om, Jaya, Ma and Jeetu are objects of scrutiny and are constantly being watched by their oppressors. The contact module records everything that happens in the room – even the family’s private moments. Their personal space is destroyed and privacy becomes a luxury that the family can no longer afford as opposed to the materialistic luxuries that they have been provided with. The RSA uses the Panopticon system of surveillance to scrutinise and assess the behaviour of people. The objects of scrutiny, being aware that they are under constant surveillance, modify their behaviour to adhere to the codes of conduct put forth by the RSA (Foucault 201). In *Harvest*, Jaya pretends to be Om’s sister-in-law and the wife of Jeetu because Om had enlisted his marital status as ‘unmarried’ in his application form for this ‘job’. The presence of the contact module forces them to carry on with this charade not only while talking to Ginni (Virgil) but even when the gizmo is turned off.

As the plot unfolds, every member of the family except Jaya falls under the grasp of their consumerist American employer. Virgil uses attractive technology, promises of a luxurious lifestyle and the figure of an attractive, skimpily clad Western woman to persuade the members of the family to donate their organs. By recruiting Om, Virgil recruited the entire family to cater to his materialistic needs. Virgil, being a part of the futuristic world, requires the bodies of young people to extend his longevity. He says:

We look for young men’s bodies to live in and young women’s bodies in which to sow their children ... (because) we lost the art of having children. We began to live longer and longer... and more demanding...soon there was competition between one generation and the next – old against young, parent against child. We older ones ... prevailed. But our victory was bitter. ... So we designed this programme. We support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves. (Padmanabhan 116)

This act of manipulating the poor to sell the rich their organs for a pittance is in fact a type of modern-day cannibalism. By setting the play in a futuristic world where people can use and dispose of human bodies like clothes, Manjula Padmanabhan magnifies the macabre brutality of the organ-trafficking groups as well as the consumers of these organs. This neo-colonialist exploitation of the less privileged coincides with commodification which in turn takes the form of ‘neo-cannibalism’ as put forth by Nancy Scheper-Hughes to refer to the commodification of human organs procured by means of trafficking, coercion or trade from the poverty-stricken people of the third world countries in order to serve the “ailing patients in the first world.” Jaya is the only character in the play that refuses to be the prey of this capitalistic, neo-colonialist and neo-cannibalistic exploitation and the only way she is able to wield her agency is by taking her own life, thus depriving Virgil of the ‘commodity’ that he had bought. *Harvest* is an open ended play in which in the last scene, Jaya’s death, seems imminent while at the same time, there seems to be some kind of hope for her to break free from the clutches of her oppressor. The latter seems to be unlikely because for Virgil, his acquisitions are expendable, and Jaya’s death would not affect him as much as she thinks it would. *Harvest* is “directly about the body, about what it means to have agency over one’s own personal container” (Padmanabhan xiii).

To conclude, the proletarians – the people of “the lowest or one of the lowest economic and social classes in a society” – placed at the juncture of the nexus between neo-colonialism, commodification and neo-cannibalism are always at a disadvantaged position as they are oppressed by the bourgeoisie in a large number of ways, ranging from gender and racial oppression to class oppression (“Proletariat”). *Harvest* depicts the destructive relationship between the rich and the poor in the capitalistic world. This play can be “performed in cultural settings other than India, with alternate victim-oppressor binaries” and the crux of the play is organ trafficking and the “use and abuse between people, culture and economies” (Padmanabhan xiv). Thus, by using Om and his family as the representative of the victims of capitalistic exploitation, Manjula Padmanabhan gives voice to the economically weaker sections of the society through her play *Harvest*.

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## **The Short-Play Phenomenon: The Rising Popularity of Short Plays in Chennai Theatre since 2017**

*Jeshma Chand*

*II M.A.*

The paper attempts to examine a trend in Chennai theatre since 2017 that saw an influx of short plays. A list of plays and theatre festivals help in establishing this statement. The study undertaken looks at this trend from psychological and logistical points of view, with the help of the primary documentation of interviews with theatre artists.

The paper takes the aid of details of the major theatre festivals that have been held in Chennai – Short + Sweet, CAT Fringe and Erotica festivals, along with a series of plays performed by theatre groups such as Crea-Shakthi and Koodam to establish the thriving existence of this trend. The growth of this phenomenon since 2017 is a result of the experimental nature of Indian theatre. It can also be attributed to the borrowing of theatre traditions from other countries, as is the case with Short + Sweet.

The Short + Sweet festival, founded in 2002 by Mark Cleary in Australia, has the tagline – “a more creative world 10 minutes at a time” (official website), which establishes the only rule of a performance of 10 minutes or less . The festival was brought to India by the Prakrithi Foundation which, since its inception in 2011, has had overwhelming responses from the audience. The festival invites submissions from directors and Independent Theatre Companies. It hit a new high in July 2017 when it received “the highest number of entries by way of scripts and Independent Theatre Companies” (Meera Krishnan qtd. in Nath), which reflects the enthusiastic participation of artists.

The Fringe Festival, curated by B Charles, that had its first run in September 2018 had a set of four short plays by Colour Slate, directed by popular theatre and mime artist and improviser Naresh D Raj. “I was inspired by the various fringe festivals that happen across the world, like the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (which was held last month)” (Charles qtd. in Pillai). The main aim of the festival was to shine the spotlight on the lesser known artists in Chennai.

Erotica festival, held in March 2019 is also an initiative of Chennai Art Theatre in order to open up a platform to discuss eroticism in an open-minded manner. The success of the festival that had four short plays with explicit content suggests that Chennai has improved a lot in terms of theatre audience. The same city that once showed resistance when *The Vagina Monologues* were staged, has now sold out the shows of Erotica Festival (Charles qtd. in Joseph)..

The above statement makes the discussion centred more on the audience rather than the performers. Although “a shorter period means heightened action and it challenges the writers, directors and actors” (Sitaraman), it helps in catering to a vibrant audience. The diminishing attention span, which actor and director Meera Sitaraman attributes to the increasing popularity of short online videos, has played a major role in the birthing of short play festivals. As Beckerman points out, “the random audience, nourished by the mass media and universal education may be evolving into a new communal type. If so, the theatre artist will have to learn what its predispositions are and how to deal with them” (qtd. in Bennet 8).

The short play format also seems to have excited the audience as they get the pleasure of watching as many as 10 or 11 plays in a span of 2 hours or less. This gives the format a

fascinating outlook. Unlike Short + Sweet and CAT Fringe Festival, Erotica Theatre Fest had all its four stand-alone plays contributing to the bigger universe of the theme of eroticism. This has definitely attracted a niche crowd for itself, while the other two festivals offered a melting pot for various social and political themes to be woven together.

The audience responds on the basis of the “social and cultural learning (nurture) and 'hard-wired' cognition (nature)” (McConachie 4). In this scenario, having a collection of short plays of varied themes helps in bridging the gap between the two aforementioned points and in bringing a heterogeneous crowd to feel the same amount of gratification. On the other side of this instant gratification spectrum is the artist whose experience, in Howard Barker’s words, is a payment that “entails a dispensation from the actors to the audience in the form of *perceptions*” (116). This is evident especially in the case of festivals like Erotica and Koodam, where the audience is bound to leave the venue with altered perceptions.

Moreover, traditional theories suggest that “since the actor’s performance is based on the play and the dramatist is conceded to be the creative artist, the actor must be an interpretive artist” (Chaillet). Thus, when the actor becomes a medium of expression for the character, the audience rises to prominence as it is in the recipient end. However, borrowing Goffman’s concept of the “repertoire of actions” of the audience, which are “pre-formed” and “dramatised” into a performance (qtd. in Heim 3), it is safe to assume that the audience-performer dynamics is stronger in short plays, not only because “it ideally doesn’t take time to detail things to the audience, but at the same time, the impact of the core content remains strong” (Gowrisankar), but also thanks to the nature of the very stage that holds the performance. It is noteworthy that most of the plays under study, especially those at the CAT Fringe Festival and those by Koodam, were staged in smaller venues – The Artery and Art on Terrace respectively.

One can assume that this breaks down the distinction between the dramatic, the stage, the gestural and the theatre spaces that are traditionally seen as four different aspects of theatrical space. While the theatre space is a product of the interplay between all of these (Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones), short plays demand the blurring of such distinctions by allowing themselves to be accommodated into smaller venues.

Interestingly, some artists still fall back on full length plays and see the shorter format as an experimental ground. Director and founder of Crea-Shakthi, Dushyanth Gunashekar light-heartedly remarks that he prefers the conventional full length play format, just as a cricketer would prefer playing Test matches. “Just like in cricket, we have to play it right to keep the audience engaged” (Gunashekar). However, to the artistic director of Theatre Nisha, V. Balakrishnan, who is also the recipient of the Hindu Playwright Award 2019, short plays accommodate his “endeavour to perform short stories on stage.” Hence, the possibility of adaptation of short stories is also amplified by the platform.

Furthermore, the challenges in working out the logistics of a production are reduced to a large extent when it comes to the short play format. For instance, Chennai Art Theatre was able to take the Erotica festival to Bangalore for another round of shows. It would be more complex and exhausting to have four full length plays travel across cities. Thus, the minimal nature of technicality including set, light, costumes and even music allows for travelling and reaching out to a wider audience. Festivals like these are also equally popular among artists who get to share stage space and green rooms with artists from diverse backgrounds. Actor and director Anantharaman Karthik (Koodam) states that the Short + Sweet festival offers a comfortable

space to concentrate just on the creative process as they provide technical support and also take care of marketing (qtd. in Nath).

The affinity to short plays is thus, a trend that Meera Sitaraman believes will “evolve in its own ways like all forms of theatre.” Similarly, Gunashekar takes it a bit forward and opines that the short form can be taken to new avenues. According to him, digitisation, hybrid digital-live performance pieces, and the collaboration of a cross section of artists are possible outcomes of the trend. Chennai seems to have embraced the format, leaving the artists more responsible for making good use of the opportunity.

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### a grief playlist

*N.M. Mathangi*

*I.M.A.*

*Winning Entry in the Bhavana Memorial Creative Writing Competition*

this poem is a celebration.

a celebration of lists, a list poem!  
a party i'm throwing for myself,  
a party you're attending:

1. the women in my family hand down their pain  
like they hand down their wedding silks:  
cradling it in their arms,  
lowering it into trunks that smell of moth balls and moths,  
with an instruction manual falling from their lips in rapid tamil about how to launder them  
so they'd feel fresh as the day they were made.
2. my mother mixed her pain into the salt she would forget to add in my idlis. on the day  
she died  
my lips felt strange;  
salt  
was not something they were used to. her sarees lie in a wardrobe with a single orange door  
for four months before it  
fell  
to  
me  
to sort things out  
throw out the bad, keep the good.  
but how does one choose?  
my mother never taught me the finer art of distinguishing between kancheevaram and  
designer.  
i am hit  
by a tsunami tide of memories calling out to me from the golden mango motifs stitched into  
her pallu.  
i run my fingers over the thread. they come away bloody.
3. green is the colour of our grief.  
green walls that i couldn't/can't deal with for they looked like  
my mother's face  
before it spasmed into the story of a genius' brain malfunctioning at 42. 42 year olds do not  
die in green rooms holding their daughters' hands.
4. 21 year olds should not be asked  
to marry by well-meaning relatives who shove words like 'duty' and 'responsibility' into my  
hands  
as forcibly as a milk ladle.  
please, don't shove me in front of the stove, i don't like it here.  
please, don't shove me in front of the fire - i saw it eat my mother up.  
i saw red flames licking at her until she became ash in a pot that my father flung into a  
viole(n)t evening ocean.
5. i drown myself in the smells of ujala blue white shirts and heat  
when i walk the streets of this city.  
i have realised that overdosing is a favourite pastime of mine



so when they ask you how i'm dying so well everyday, tell them  
i diet - i overdose on grief and chennai sunshine.

6. welcome to the party, to our house.

we are the survivors,  
the legends you have heard of.

here, we teach you that three is a terrible number to leave behind: the sight of well-salted  
idlis against yellow plates is nauseating.

we will reteach age old recipes to you.

we will teach you how to hold a pen and make tapestries out of ink, how to hold your pain  
in your hands as elegantly as the pleated pallu of your saree,

we will teach you how to eat your joy and preserve it on the insides of your wrists.

7. today,

i open the trunk of my mother's wedding silks.

indigo imprints greet me, looking as fresh as the day they were made.

i place

my very own kancheevaram

atop hers —

a generation of silks.

i let the lid fall shut.

## The Masquerade of Smiles

*Sayujya Shankar*

*Assistant Professor, Department of English*

A macabre masquerade of smiles

Brought to you by...

Shapeless bodies.

Dreamless memories.

The dark mis-identities.

The masquerade of smiles-

Slick, oil drips down painted faces-

Red. White. Black. Yellow. Green. Neon.

Colours of happiness

Splattered like blood.

And drips.

Drips.

Drips.

Seeps into the skin,

Into the mind,

Into the very being.

Rehearsal.

Fingers snap.

Bones crack.

Feet stamp.

Palms clap.

Muscles snag.

Bodies fall apart.

The puppeteer shall lose his puppets.

There is no more a masque.

Instead...

*Stomp*

*Stamp*

*Thump*

Heeled stiletto to stage.

A jump.

A sharp blade to the stage-

The ground cracks.

A cackle

As bodies fall flat

Re-hearse-all.

The bodies squish into one another-  
Puppets in a puppet box;  
A mass of grinning heads,  
X-es for eyes, button nosed  
Blackened straw for hair...  
And a single thread for the puppet master.  
The women howl their masquerade-  
Like the wind, like the whiz of electric shocks  
That run daily through their nerves,  
A perverse desire to slaughter  
And sleep amidst a dead audience.  
Scene one.

An eerie hum of solace,  
Strums, thrums, drums  
Through the masqueraders-  
Their bodies bent, eyes wide and wild  
The laughter on their lips... never escaping.  
A madness like never before.  
A fury of oppression vehemently  
Choking the raw raging roar.  
Scene two.

Amidst the annihilated stage.  
A scattered audience.  
In the silence of nothing, and nowhere,  
The bodies lie still  
And crumpled-  
defeated  
Like useless bin-worthy-paper,  
Oil-slick-masked-faces facing upward,  
Sprawled,  
A grotesque grin slit across the faces.  
Curtain.

A masquerade of smiles.  
Brought to you by...  
Denial.  
Despair.  
Death.

## **You Think You Know My Story?**

*Remy Tresa Abraham*  
*I M.A.*

They called me Talia upon birth.  
They said I was beautiful.  
They said I'd bring fortune to my father's  
land.  
They said a stalk would result in doom.  
Whose doom?  
My doom?  
Their doom?  
  
But Alas!  
It came to be,  
And a sleep like that of death embraced me.  
I was left in an estate.  
Alone.

Who wants to live with their rapist?  
With someone who left you pregnant?  
With great responsibilities?  
All without your consent!  
  
Though what I want doesn't matter anymore.  
My babies matter.  
Their future matters.  
So I went to my rapist.  
The King, the husband, the father of my  
children.  
  
But what a cruel play by fate!  
I'd rather my children be cooked and served.

No one to help me.  
No one to save me.

I ought to have been careful.  
Cautious. Wary. Mindful.  
Not just earlier.  
But also later,  
When I was alone, all alone.

A King,  
Stumbled upon my place of stay.  
Overcome by my beauty  
He left me two gifts.  
Sun and Moon.  
Precious babies, truly they were.  
They woke me up.

He came back later though.  
But Alas!  
He was a married man then.  
It was not to be.  
But maybe I did not want it to be.

I'd rather be burned than be his wife.  
But what a cruel play by fate  
That the wife be killed instead.

Look what has become of me!  
Wife to my rapist, the King.  
Forced into a life I did not want,  
A life I did not choose.  
All for love.  
Love for my children.

Do you still think you know my story?  
You wouldn't know  
You couldn't know.  
Because it's not my story that has been told.  
Not really.

*Note: This poem is based on one of the earlier versions of Sleeping Beauty, titled 'Sun, Moon and Talia' by Giambattista Basile, originally in Italian. This particular version published in 1634 is more gruesome as opposed to the widely popular tale of Sleeping Beauty.*

## For Concord

*Candy C Thomas  
I.M.A.*

### **John 4:8**

“Love one another”  
I love God, not my brother.  
God? Where is the love?

### **Home?**

The sound of my name  
makes you unable to see  
Muslims as Indians.

### **2020**

### **Trust the Law**

Sticks, stones and rods bruised  
Peaceful protests- instilled fear.  
What secularism?

### **Safe?**

Beware the flag that  
makes citizens fear the law  
for doing no wrong.

### **Speak!**

The world is burning.  
Koalas; democracy.  
Extinction draws near.

### **Violence**

Children: Our future.  
Masked miscreants thrash students.  
Organized attack.

Politics must not  
be a game played by the old.  
We must take a stance.

## **Colourless**

*Sagina Jenefa Grace Samuel*

*II B.A.*

I was taught that you  
Represented something special  
Each and every one of you.  
Yellow and orange,  
Brightness you signify  
Descending shades of red,  
Deal with demons and danger.  
The palette of brown and green,  
What else could the world have been?  
Oh! Turn to the pompous purple  
Royalty and power belong to you.

Then come a few of you  
Who're mistaken and misspoken  
For thoughts so broken,  
Racism, colourism, colonialism,  
Black and white unfortunately  
The pioneers of political terms.  
Blue and pink, your subtle strength  
Reflects the way we look at mankind  
Silently becoming the seers of stereotypes.  
Sad but true, is how colourless  
Colours have been made.

## **Breaking away from your clutches**

*Anton Joesmiya*

*II B.A.*

A whiff of silence and beauty  
broken with the soft and harsh  
sounds of waves  
Like you are.  
Were.  
With the gentle softness of hands  
Clasping tight  
Along with the harshness of  
sharp words  
Still keeping me tight  
Bleeding.

And I too keep crashing into  
The shore like the wave does  
Hoping,  
Maybe sometime you'll glance a smile  
at me  
But  
Remember, I will be close to you  
But you'll never hold me tight again.

## An Ode to my Mother

*Sheryl  
I.M.A.*

"I want to be like my mother",  
Was a cliché statement back at school  
But I never wanted that  
Because she changed from being me to  
Becoming a Mother.

Mother,  
You were me,  
Just a girl  
With dreams and desires  
In jeans and tees.  
Mother,  
You were me,  
Just a girl  
Delinquent and witty  
Compelling and ambitious  
You were me mother,  
Selfish and clever  
I've heard all of it from maama  
Who used to say, like mother like daughter.  
  
And then you changed.

Changed in the name of love and  
Bound by the chains of marriage,  
Funny how a chain became a chain  
You, the selfish belle became selfless  
And metamorphosed into mother.  
The wild spirit caged itself  
And the fire of your heart grew faint  
Denims turned to yards of cloth  
And tees turned to responsibilities  
Which clung tightly to your breasts.

The girl who was once me,  
Is no longer me.  
She became a wife,  
A mother and a daughter-in-law  
And lost herself in the process  
Now tell me mother  
You want me to be like you?  
No.  
  
Become me again,  
Become you.

## A Grumpy Sonnet

*Aswathy Mohandas  
I.M.A.*

Ripples of batter on a lake of black,  
The core of crimson and a halo bright,  
Imperfectly perfect, a much-loved snack,  
When I saw thee, it was love at first sight!

Speckles of mustard on a lake of white,  
the porous snow born of a tall tree's womb  
and fathered by the heav'nly cloud, so light!  
Amidst thee will the crispy island bloom.

Stubbles of drumstick on a brown marsh loom,  
As yellow turtles swim by flowers red.  
Bubbles arise and tasty vapours fume;  
Oh quick, alight, from this thy hot stove-bed.

Dosa, Chutney and delicious sambar,  
All taken away, I glare from afar.

### **Audacity**

*R. Taniya Ishwarya Tamilarasi*  
*I B.A.*

Beneath my shame,  
Buried is the game,  
Which I once won,  
In a time long gone .

The guilt and pain,  
Still surrounds my name  
With pride and lust  
Trying to turn me to dust.

But I will keep my head high,  
Will never let the crown fly.  
For I am a Queen of Valour  
With unhealed wounds buried deeper.

I wasn't afraid when the battle begun,  
For I knew I was blessed by God, the Spirit  
and the Son.

Now, Every time I look at my wounds and  
scars,  
I remember my prosperous battles and wars.

I am strong and bold,  
Not one who can be controlled.  
For I am a Queen of Valour  
Wearing the crown, *vallar*

I fear no dark,  
For my foundation is rock.  
This life is a sinful game  
And audacity is my name.

### **Rigid Structures**

*Krishna J. Nair*  
*III B.A*

Our house stands in the far  
End of a street, further  
Away from an intersection.  
Tales have been told about  
How Appa built it, with  
Bare hands, bare chest  
And the sweat dripping down  
His and twenty other odd foreheads.  
Appa says, "it is built of stone  
And sand and meager forms"  
For he is a man of science,  
A man of facts, of black and white.

Through blank stares and buffering  
And salt and pepper moustache  
And a loose gray stray strand  
Trying to hide behind the trauma.  
Appa, as a routine, renovates.  
Trying to rejuvenate the dying structures.

A bookshelf here, a new stove there.  
A couple more lights to brighten  
A slowly dying house.  
For there are only four broad,  
Yet withering shoulders,

Our house stands in the far  
End of a street. I say, it is  
Made of eight broad shoulders  
Trying to hold the ceiling,  
Making sure the roof does not  
Fall apart.  
Our house stands. Slowly,  
It is falling apart.  
Through the static noise in  
Phone conversations, religiously made  
To children, one in another state,  
One in another country.

Trying to hold a ceiling.  
Sweat dripping down  
Two even foreheads  
While a feline roams around,  
Filling in silences left behind  
By four broad shoulders.  
Two in another state,  
Two in another country.

### **suthan**

*Madhuri Lalwani*  
*III B.A.*

my culture is trending  
  
Sindhi women find it easier now  
to purchase this relief  
in convenience  
  
least walk unrestricted  
in crippled bodies  
  
a tongue that couldn't be  
breathes in her women.  
  
having adjusted to slim fit homes  
my world knows not how to express  
  
the equally crippling air  
for once celebrates you,  
for her own stylish reasons  
  
and you hope  
Sindh doesn't die out in the sun

she's not forgotten on balcony wires  
yet again, her self divided

i feel when a cultural object  
is the new big thing  
you ought to hold it tighter.

a trend is an unheard cry,  
the last goodbye  
and i refuse to let go

i wear my pride  
as amateur blood  
relearns the tongue  
Sindh tries to speak

it's odd however,  
in her cries i am reassured of home  
in her cries i know she exists.

*Note - Traditionally, Sindhis typically dressed in Kurtas with the Suthan (now known as the Palazzo pants).*

## Rebirth

*Vineetha A V*  
*I M.A.*

the scorching pain of the acid can be  
felt even today: my skin raw and charred  
black burns as far as anyone could see  
male wrath and i was left forever scarred

a skinny waist, flat buttocks, puny breasts  
a flabby stomach, stretch marks, saggy tits  
i've been on both sides, both forms he detests  
fat and skinny shaming: i'm blown to bits

i was hit: once, twice, many times each day  
my body covered in welts and gashes  
regular sex in which i had no say  
abusive marriage, lots of whiplashes

i'm scarred, whiplashed and shamed but i will  
rise  
from oppression: volition is my prize.

## Portrait of a Poem

*Nivedhana Pandian*  
*II B.A.*

He painted a picture of me  
He is fixated on my formlessness  
He hates me  
His tears found a place  
within the empty spaces of  
my cold eyes  
He called me an egotist  
my fears his strokes  
interpreted as arrogance  
He doesn't know  
He paints my lips redder  
than they are  
He isn't a liar but  
he always liked stories

Maybe that's why I was sculpted  
to fit his pain  
I was his fraud but also  
his truest reflection  
Maybe that's why he tries  
to pen me down  
Desperately, into the crevices  
ignored by Time, that Hypocrite  
He is writing himself through my being  
A portrait of me is  
A portrait of him.

## Abhirami Andhaadhi - A Translation

*Subhasree Maragathavel*  
*II M.A.*

1. With the sanguine sunrays as her *tilaka*  
Worshipped and held precious like a red ruby  
by the spiritually enlightened who felt her  
glory

4. Oh beautiful goddess! Before whose soft  
lotus feet  
Mortals, *devas* and the great sages prostrate  
and pray,



like a tender pomegranate bud  
and as striking as a bolt of lightning  
with Lakshmi, the one, seated on a red lotus  
and Saraswathi who holds the *manikya* veena,  
as her ardent devotees,  
the saffron hued, divine mother Abhiramee is  
my sole companion and saviour.

2. She, my companion, the divine that I bow  
to and my great mother  
The root, body and the spreading branches of  
the Vedas  
Wielding snow-covered floral arrows and the  
sweet cane bow  
With the *paasha* rope and the *ankusha* spear  
in her hands,  
Is none other than the eternal beauty of all  
three worlds, Abhiraami!  
And this is the great knowledge that I have  
learnt.

3. Learnt I have, my holy mother  
The truth that nobody knows, the depths of  
the Vedas  
And to you I have surrendered,  
placing your lotus feet on my head,  
Distancing myself from the ignorant who  
know not your divine glory  
Those sinners who will fall unto hell,  
unknowing of the greatness of your  
devotees,  
Hence here I am bowing down to your  
splendid form.

I beseech you to appear  
In the company of the great one,  
With his laburnum decked braids,  
Bearing the snowy crescent, the snake  
And the feisty Ganges which he created,  
The pure Lord Shiva, and never leave me  
By always residing in my memory  
With your Holy spouse.

9. Oh Holy Mother! The mind and eyes of  
my Holy Father,  
Lord Shiva, is occupied with the vision of  
your Holy bosoms  
That are large like the Meru mountains  
Glowing in golden hue,  
which satiated the hunger wails of the infant,  
With the generous flow of your breast milk  
Brimming with maternal love.  
With those Holy bosoms, heavy with  
compassion  
And adorned with pearl necklaces,  
You, wielding the sugarcane bow and the  
floral arrows  
Along with your enchanting smile,  
Oh Mother! Come and stand before me.

### **I wish we all could live like kings**

***Subashini. K.J.J***  
*I B.A.*

I wish we all could live like kings.  
What if I could do this?  
What if I could do that?  
I could be the greatest flautist  
Or take a walk with my cat.

I might be a rockstar in the making...  
Maybe I'll try my hand at baking!  
Mountains, I'd lift with ease  
Or wear a dress that shows off my knees.

Might go on one too many shopping sprees  
And gift my friends some designer briefs.  
I'd like to put away my responsibilities  
And write cute odes on little leaves.

They say I'm bizarre, my dreams too bold  
I promise, I'll give them up when I'm old.  
But these pretentious people just can't see  
That we're not that different; you and me

We give up all our crazy dreams,                      And watch them wash away in streams,  
But let me have my moment now                      As all of you did, and the ones above

So sit back, helpless, watch me fall and fail  
Just hold me, please, as I sob and wail.  
You can't do much about it though  
Now watch this go back, to and fro.

Oh! How I'd love to do so many things,  
So I close my eyes and spread my wings  
I hope and pray for golden rings  
With earnest hand to heart I sing-

I wish we all could live like kings.  
I wish we all could live like kings.

**There you are.**

***Monica Rajgopal***  
*I.M.A.*

There is a sense of Majesty about you. When you come by, everybody stops to watch; everybody stops to stare. They stare regardless of whether they have been expecting you. They watch, unconsciously awestruck by you and your comp(a)ortment; They watch even if you have irked them a bit, arriving later than when you promised; They watch captivated.

Your manner while passing by exudes in every element, confidence. You serenade like a soft flowing perennial river, and your plentiful eyes expose many myriad souls through those rusted grill lenses.

You enter with a puff of air around you, and you exit with a heavy, almost arrogant puff of air about you. I haven't seen you in a while. Silly as it may sound, I miss you. I miss your smell, your gait, your feel, your breath.

There you are!

Nearly a connatural Olympian, standing gallantly in that city Station on Platform number three, on your Tracks.

*There you are.*

## Quiet Disaster

*Hima Mouli*

*I B.A.*

"So do you want to talk about it?" Just Janice asks, spectacle-enlarged eyes fixed pointedly on me. Her name isn't actually Just Janice, but that's always how she chooses to introduce herself everytime I come to her, as if we were meeting each other for the first time. Apparently being on a first name basis would "foster better relations" and "smoothen the flow of communication". Well, a rose is a rose, no matter what you choose to call it and a therapist is a therapist, first name or not.

I actually find it funny how she asks me if I want to talk, as if I have a choice. "Is anything funny?" she asks suddenly. "No, not at all." I reply, with what I hope is a poker face, my voice steady and calm with years of meticulously trained politeness.

"I'm not here to lecture you Myra, I'm here to help you."

"What's there for me to say? I haven't done anything."

For a moment, her eyes narrow in a surprisingly open display of irritation before her face reverts back to its usually schooled composure. that split second of annoyance probably the only indication of emotion she would show all day.

"We've been over this Myra. This isn't about what you may have done. This is about how you've been feeling lately. EmotA noted several long lapses of aggressive and negative emotion on your part in the past few weeks. I understand that you have been facing some... personal challenges recently and I hoped you could talk about them and find a positive outlet through this session. I only want to help you, Myra, I'm on your side."

The sympathy in her voice flows so smoothly into her words that I almost buy into it. Almost. What pissed me off even more than her insincere pity was the dismissive tone she used.

"Personal challenges? This isn't some random teenager phase or drama! This is my family! A family that now no longer exists because my parents decided, out of the blue, after fifteen years of marriage, that they want to call it quits!"

Janice stares at me stone-faced and silent. Even the silence of the room seems accusatory." It's then that I realised the tone and the volume I had just spoken in. The complete lack of control I had displayed would be deemed unacceptable.

"I see EmotA's observations were accurate." she finally said.

She doesn't seem vexed anymore. There are no quietly spoken reprimands to calm down and the accusatory air is long gone. This is unsettling; like a fog suddenly clearing, only to reveal something far worse. Not for the first time, I wonder why it feels like I am the one to feel the brunt of pain and separation for a decision I had no part in. Why aren't my parents in therapy with me? Most of all it stings that the one to identify that I am hurt was not my family but a stupid electronic device. I cursed EmotA, the Emotional Assistant- a device that monitors emotions based on variations in pulse. Every citizen has to wear it so the government could "predict emotional patterns" in order to "preempt and prevent aggressive and unnatural behaviour."

As if reading my mind, Janice asks, "Do you understand the purpose of EmotA, Myra? Do you understand how important and necessary it is in today's world?" She continues without pausing for any reply.

"Once, centuries ago, our world was in a dastardly state. The third World War left us in the most awful and desperate conditions. There was terrorism and violence and an abhorrent loss of life. World peace had become an impossible dream. That was when scientists created EmotA. With its implementation and decades of ceaseless effort, that impossible dream has now come to fruition. We have finally put an end to an endless cycle of violence."

She paused and levelled her gaze at me, allowing the gravity of her statement to sink in.

"This is why it is so essential for us to teach every generation to control negative and aggressive emotions. They are unproductive and unnatural and over time can lead to catastrophic actions."

There's something about all this, the direction this conversation keeps taking, that unsettles me.

"Does that mean I'm in trouble now? I'm sorry I keep losing control over my emotions... I just don't know what to do." Horrifying thoughts of being taken away and sent to the 'wellness asylums' stream through my mind. I hate the situation at home but I had heard chilling stories about those places. I hate how meek I sound, how much my voice reveals the fear I am feeling.

However, once I say this, something in Janice's eyes softened, and the smallest of smiles appeared on her face. "Don't worry Myra. I'm only here to help you." The way she repeats those words over and over only adds to the cold anxiety uncoiling inside me.

"Cases like yours are not uncommon. Some people just need more help than others. There is a place, a school which can provide that help. You will have to leave your current residence and stay there, but it is a wonderful place that I'm sure will soon be like home. In time you will overcome these difficulties. It's going to be alright, Myra, everything will be alright."

That night, after my things are packed, I cast a final glance around my room. It feels odd to think that after tomorrow this would no longer be my home. It feels even worse that these walls were likely to show more emotions at my departure than my parents. I feel disoriented. More than sad, I feel empty and hollow. A small part of me is glad to leave all the turmoil behind, but I must be a terrible person for feeling that way. I need to distract myself from all this negativity. I take out the painting hidden behind my cupboard. It's old, decades old, so old that it is on actual paper, yellow and frayed. It is by my great, great grandmother, painted in fiery reds and oranges with intense streaks of darker colours. It was titled A Song of Hate and Rage. I never knew what hate and rage meant. I assumed they were really old words that people don't use any more. I never asked anyone about them either. I just knew that there were people who definitely would not approve of this art. There was just something so explosive about it. something passionate, unrestrained.

I can't take this where I am going. If they find it, the consequences might not be good. Instead, I look at it, absorbing the design, memorizing the colours. After they are done with me, I will be what they want me to be, controlled and predictable. I only hope I hold on to the memory of this painting. and the passion behind it that I cannot understand.

### **An Entry from an Encyclopaedia of Aquatic Life**

*Riya Nagendra*

*III B.A.*

*Winning Entry in Intra-Departmental Blackout Poetry Competition*

