

Myth and Monologue: Some Aspects of Abhinaya in Contemporary Verse.

(Critical presentation with live readings at PEN, Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, 14-10-06)

I would like to start with the poem that prompted me to make this little presentation. Sampurna's short poem addressed to Gandhari and published in the 'All poetry is protest' pamphlet, reminded me of a sequence in three parts that I had composed about six years ago. Its called 'Mahabharata Sequence' and I begin, in classical epic format, with part 1:

Reading – 'Kunti reminisces'

MAHABHARATA SEQUENCE

I

KUNTI REMINISCES

Orange had always been my favorite colour.
The earthy, unimportunate orange
Which the sun cast, absent-mindedly,
Before revealing himself,
The mustard-fields aglow with his unassuming light.
It was partly because of this that I summoned him,
Partly, because I wondered, as all children do,
If it were light or the eye that made things visible.
I thought the sun could tell me for certain,
And believed he would come to me as I had imagined him,
A being composed entirely of light,
Though gifted with speech.
The sage had warned me, when he taught me the strange words,
To be in no great hurry to use them,
To choose a propitious time with care;
Yet how could I have known, tutored as I was,
In neither love nor prophecy,
That words alone,
Which had seemed so trifling till then,
Could wield such power;
That mere words,
Given to a child by an aging sage,
As if they were only new toys to play with,
Could bring about such things,
Compelling a god to fulfil his lust
Against his own will:
The sun made flesh,
Piercing my mortal loins with more than mere light.
Was this the seer's idea of a joke?

Or had he forgotten how curious a young girl
Could be, about things he no longer cared for ?
Ever since that morning I have been a lover of the dark,
An incurable seeker
Of tenebrous spaces in which to brood;
Cold, penitential spaces, where I could dare envision
The son I abandoned amongst the riverside reeds,
Whom I never dared, while he lived, to call my own;
My son, whom I left there, with no-one to protect him,
Yet swaddled in an armour that was quite his own -
His earrings glistening in the sun they came from.
How often, since that morning, I have thought of the sun
As some-one worshipful though terrible to behold;
Some-one I could trust to look over our son,
Guiding him by strange signs,
Without fully revealing himself;
And yet, in all these years, I have never dared
To think of him simply as some-one I had loved,
Boldest, as I have been, before midnight,
Most cautious at noon,
When my shadow curled into me,
And I trembled to think,
Pressing my secret even closer to my heart,
That the light I shone by was not my own.
History will have its way, making of this what it will,
Saying what it must,
Remembering in the most memorable of rhymes,
What I have longed to forget,
Speaking of me, perhaps,
As a selfish woman, inexorably weak,
Though born of a heroic line.
It is some comfort to think that my son,
Whose ends I always thwarted in life,
Has earned in death the fame he sought;
Yet so much for posterity.
It has never mattered to me so much as it did to him.
My concern remains, as before, with the living,
For I am still amongst them;
Though I have little left to do now,
Having lived too long in fear of light,
But play out my one heroic deed,
Which is one that no-one will ever get to hear of:
Today, I will not shirk the sun's brisk advances,
But endure his terrible coming with pride,
Summoning him home, once again, into my eyes,
As I did our firstborn, a few weeks before he died.

Now time, having done its worst,
Has little left to destroy.
Night gives way unreluctantly to orange,
And dawn comes gently over the mustard fields.

There are many impulses at work behind the emergence of a poem, most of which, I believe, remain unavailable for analysis to the particular individual chosen by the poem as a vehicle for its own emergence. In the context of the poem I just read, I would like to focus upon a specific impulse that remains clearly visible to me. The impulse to perform 'abhinaya', so to speak, in the English language. This is not an impulse that suddenly overtook me when I started writing this sequence. It is actually something I have been experiencing repeatedly-as many of us have - since early childhood, since those inspired wonder-brimming Amar-Chitra-Katha comic days, when we received summarized versions of the epics in appallingly ungrammatical English, accompanied of course by the most horrendous illustrations. Thankfully there was also Duhkantiram banarasidas, cook and housekeeper from Azamgarh, who recited chaupais and dohas from the Ramacharitmanas after dinner and described at length his favorite portions of the story of Rama and Sita at bedtime. So I was fortunate enough to receive the epics as a child from a living oral source. We made bows and arrows out of kite-string and broomsticks and crowns out of coloured paper, while also playing cowboys-and-red-indians and world war II. I recall nearly setting the house on fire just before sunrise at age of six, in a devout and utterly inspired attempt to perform a yagna in the kitchen, according to prescribed Amar-chitra-katha comic procedure. I was quite convinced that it was possible to propitiate the gods till they became as visible to me in the balcony as they were in the comic-books. My perilous yet innocent an well-intended fire was weaned upon a heap of shredded newspaper, an old shoebox and a monstrous katori-ful of Ghee. That old urge to commune with spirits not visible to the outer eye, together with an almost chronic irreverence for newspapers and all they contain have remained with me over the years; though thankfully, there has been considerable change in my ritualistic and pyrotechnical practices.

Back in those days, There was also my maternal grandfather who read the whole Adi-parva of the Mahabharata to me in Gujarati verse: here's a small demonstration of what it sounds like:

Recitation: Adi parva chap 1. Gujarati verse form

My paternal grandfather simultaneously insisted that children should read literature that was more 'modern', 'stimulating' and 'relevant' and proceeded, towards this worthy end, to read to us- of all things- lamb's tales from Shakespeare. But be all this as it may, my concern over here, is with need for abhinaya on the written page; and with certain aspects of abhinaya that lie at the heart of dramatic monologue.

‘Abhinaya’, in its broadest sense, which is the sense that I have been using it so far in the essay, is a term that can be extended technically to include all forms of enactment. In the classical arts, however, it acquires various much narrower and more specific senses. In Khayal and thumri, for instance, it can refer in a somewhat abstract fashion to the manner in which a singer enters the role of a nayika- not primarily through body language but through the notes themselves and the moods they evoke. If for instance one were to sing a simple line of a thumri like this:

Demonstration- ‘hori khelan kaise javu’

The listener would sorely feel the absence of any abhinaya in the notes. Sung like this, on the the other hand:

Demonstration

One would feel the beginnings of an enactment that lies at the heart of the central line of the thumri, and provokes improvisation within parameters at once formal and emotional.

In classical dance forms -of which, being a Hindustani musician, the one I am most familiar with is kathak- abhinaya tends to refer specifically to the formal enactment in dance of a scene- usually though not necessarily of mythological origin. I have been fascinated, over the years by the way in which abhinaya, in this restricted sense relates with the tradition of mythological dramatic monologue in the English Language. And would like to draw attention to certain connections and contrasts. What I have in mind here is a little triadic model with the epics, dramatic monologue and abhinaya at each of its apices.

Let me start with my own experience as a reader of the Mahabharata, and the process that began with a child-like need for enactment and culminated in a series of Mahabharata-based monologues. Around thirteen I remember spending my summer holidays reading the Mahabharata for myself - mainly in Kamala Subramaniam’s highly accessible English prose translation; but also at times referring back to the Gujarati verse version. Later on I was to read some ‘relevant’ portions in Sanskrit with the the help of a Hindi prose translation. It became apparent to me, as an emerging adolescent, that the Mahabharata , in addition to being a great story full of fascinating characters and the most poignantly dramatic moments, was also concerned with the attempt to explore and possibly resolve chaos through a process of philosophical inquiry. The Gita may be seen as the culmination of this seemingly doomed and hugely idealistic attempt. The narrative of the mahabharata constantly poses and puts forward for the reader’s examination, a string of philosophical questions; it does this, at times through the narratorial voice of Vyasa, but more commonly through the speech of the characters themselves. The questions that absorbed me most intensely were the one’s concerned with volition and predestination. ‘Daiva’ which translates pretty accurately as ‘fate’ seems to become a character in its own right, one whom the other characters frequently refer to as the agent responsible for their own actions, a will infinitely more powerful than their own. Questions of volition and predestination acquired for me, a sudden post-pubescent urgency; and reading the text in the light of such questions, I often found myself wanting

desperately to know what was happening in the mind of specific characters at specific moments; to enter the mind of Dhritarashtra, for instance when Krishna reveals himself as Vishnu; or the mind of Draupadi when she calls out to Krishna in the vastraharan scene. What I was to encounter, however, on the part of the text, was a strong resilience to such readerly penetrations. What did Karna actually feel when he surrendered his armour to Indra - did he not feel loath to part with it, even for a minute? What did any of the pandavas feel about sleeping with the same woman as their brothers? Was there something decidedly kinky about having sex with the same woman as a sibling, or was it a complete turn-off that had to be put up with because of 'daiva', that indomitable and omnipotent agency that was making decisions on their behalf? The text itself refuses to engage with such questions at an emotional level; and I was left alone with lots of gaps and two alternatives: either to accept that such things are not given unto me to know; or to begin a process of imaginative conjecture and concentrated hypothesizing. I chose the latter and found myself scribbling between riyaz-sessions, and on the bus home from school little prose fragments spoken by my favorite characters, even the odd snippet of metrical verse that never found its way into a complete poem

This resilience on the part of the text to the sort of readerly penetration I so much desired has much to do with classical epic format. The Mahabharata tells me what Bheem is feeling about Draupadi largely by means of what he says to her. The speeches are usually stylized and powerfully rhetorical. There is also the occasional narratorial/authorial intrusion on the part of Ved-Vyas when he describes the manner in which a character is speaking or hints at the emotional context of the speech by means of a grand epic simile or some other classical 'alankara'. I cannot think of any part of the Mahabharata however, where Bheem - or another character for that matter - comes up front and speaks out his mind in the absence of a specific, perceived listener. What I want to point out here is that the business of 'thinking aloud in verse', the direct externalizing of a character's psyche, that lies at the heart of dramatic monologue is conspicuously absent in the classical epic format; and that my own need to compose monologues based on the epics, arises, amongst other factors, of course, from the absence of such strategies in the original text.

I think the need for a detailed externalization of a character's psyche lies at the core of dramatic monologue. Verse monologues tend to be self-addressed or at least addressed to no specific listener, though this is not always the case. Poems like Browning's 'My last duchess' come to mind as notable exceptions. If I may trust the translations I have read, it seems safe to say that the Homeric epics follow a similar format based upon an aesthetic that doesn't significantly accommodate dramatic monologue in its contemporary sense, which is to say quite simply that they don't allow any of the characters - even Ulysses, a chance to think aloud at length in the absence of a discernible, external listener. Perhaps it is at those moments when the petty mortals of Greek tragedy address the gods in despair, that we witness the beginnings of a literary stance that approaches the condition of contemporary monologue. I am reminded, at this point, also of some moments in early Sanskrit drama - like Bhasa's Charuduttam, when a character speaks an aside, in order to let the audience know something that is going on in his or her mind that is crucial to the development of the plot. I recall, in context, Professor Khsirsagar, my Sanskrit teacher, when I was studying Sanskrit aesthetics and

literature in translation, suggesting that we write a paper on Bhasa's asides and how they function in the unfolding of plot and development of character.

A brief glance at the History of dramatic monologue traces it back to its moorings in Elizabethan theatre., to those famous Shakespearean soliloquies that most of us can quote from. Hamlet of course is a case in point,; a play in which large portions are devoted not to the development of the plot but simply to the externalizing of the protagonist's psychological states. On the Elizabethan stage we thus see a serious exploration of the condition of monologue; of speech that is addressed to nobody in particular; and devoted entirely to the externalization of a character's thought and feeling; and yet soliloquy is not quite the same thing as dramatic monologue. There is an obvious but important difference between the two forms.- the simple fact that soliloquy belongs to the realm of theatre, and functions within the broader context of a specific play, a piece of writing intended for theatrical performance; whereas dramatic monologue as such belongs to a poetic tradition, a tradition, that is to say, of poems composed to be read aloud and upon the page independent of a broader theatrical or dramatic context.. As such, dramatic monologue as a mode of English verse begins with the romantics and comes into its own with the Victorians- with the immaculately musical mythological monologues of Tennyson and the historical monologues of Robert Browning

What has been becoming increasingly apparent to me, from all this, is that mythological dramatic monologue as a written poetic form, independent of theatre, is in origin a western, and for that matter, post-romantic phenomenon. It is not likely that we would be writing verse-monologues spoken by characters in the Mahabharata- either in English or Hindi or Bengali - but for the influence of post eighteenth-century Euro-american literature upon our aesthetics and literary practices. As inventions go- if I may take the liberty of speaking of it as one- I think dramatic monologue is a very useful one; one that gives me the freedom to engage with the epics more directly without compelling me to depict a particular scene or construct a narrative of the story-telling kind. It allows me to breathe, so to speak, through my personae in a manner that is more leisurely and self-reflexive than either theatre or the prose narrative would normally allow; and it enables me to perform in the English Language a sort of abhinaya that is intensely self-reflexive and free from the need to narrate a story; a sort of abhinaya that is wholly concerned with the emotional state and the thoughts of a character in a particular situation.

I can't speak with any critical authority on how this sort of abhinaya relates to contemporary classical dance but the connections fascinate me, particularly because I have been working recently with dancers as an accompanying singer. I have been discussing these issues with Samjukta Wagh—the kathak dancer whom I just sang Kabir with at the NCPA day before yesterday ; and with poet and dance critic Arundhati Subramaniam. What I gather from their observations is that deeply self-reflexive abhinaya, free from the traditional narratorial concerns, from the need to depict and relate the facts of a story, remains the rarer variety; though there has been an increasing interest in such forms of abhinaya in recent times; in forms of abhinaya that approach the state of thinking aloud, and of addressing nobody in particular, a condition, that I believe lies at

the heart of dramatic monologue , and is its raison-d'être. This increasing interest in expansively self-reflexive forms of abhinaya, in the world of contemporary classical dance, has much to do, Arundhati reminds me, with the changing sociology of dance; an area which I am simply not qualified to discuss but would love to know more about.

I have been warned not to take too long over this presentation as there are three speakers this evening; but my track of thought wouldn't be complete without mentioning and reading from the Odysseus-monologues of Louise Gluck published recently in a collection called 'Meadowlands.' These are poems I read around the time I started work on my Mahabharata sequence and I don't think I can honestly deny their influence. There is in Gluck's style, a succinctness of line and conception and an emotional directness which I painfully feel the absence of in my own writing. What Gluck does with her mythological monologues is alternate them with domestic, personal poems that capture similar moods and deal with similar situations and concerns to those of the mythological characters. It becomes evident on a second reading of the book that the lives of Penelope, Odysseus and Telemachus are a mythological parallel to her personal family-life; the monologues capture and dramatise emotions that are central to the situations the domestic poems describe: both groups of poems address themes like divorce, infidelity, jealousy and the emergence from adolescence into adulthood

Let me start with Telemachus, the son who doesn't see his father for most of his growing-up years; and has been brought up by a mother surrounded by suitors whom she refuses, in curious fidelity to a husband whose return is uncertain:

TELEMACHUS' BURDEN

Nothing
Was exactly difficult because
routines develop, compensations
for perceived
absences and omissions, my mother
was the sort of woman
who let you know she was suffering and then
denied that suffering since in her view
suffering was what slaves did; when
I tried to console her,
to relieve her misery, she
rejected me. I now realize
If she'd been capable of honesty
She would have been
a Stoic. Unfortunately
she was a queen, she wanted it understood

at every moment she had chosen
her own destiny. She would have had to be
insane to choose that destiny. Well,
good luck to my father, in my opinion
a stupid man if he expects
his return to diminish
her isolation; perhaps
he came back for that

Circe comes across as a strong character whenever she appears in the sequence.
She will allow Odysseus to leave her island but remains unable to accept his departure,
or the woman he returns to:

CIRCE'S GRIEF

In the end, I made myself
known to your wife as
a god would, in her own house, in
Ithaca, a voice
without a body; she
paused in her weaving, her head turning
first to the right, then left
though it was hopeless of course
to trace that sound to any
objective source: I doubt
she will return to her loom
with what she knows now. When
you see her again, tell her
this is how a god says goodbye:
if I am in her head forever
I am in your life forever.

I would love to discuss these poems in more detail some time; but I guess I will have to
postpone that to a future session. I will end now with a Gluck poem from an earlier
book; a poem that invokes the familiar myth of Sisyphus- a myth so terrifying that she
cannot resist the temptation to alter it:

Reading- 'The Mountain'

THE MOUNTAIN

My students look at me expectantly.
I explain to them that the life of art is a life
of endless labor. Their expressions
hardly change; they need to know
a little more about endless labor.
So I tell them the story of Sisyphus,
how he was doomed to push
a rock up a mountain, knowing nothing
would come of this effort
but that he would repeat it
indefinitely. I tell them
there is joy in this, in the artist's life,
that one eludes
judgement, and as I speak
I am secretly pushing a rock myself,
Slyly pushing it up the steep
face of a mountain. Why do I lie
to these children? They aren't listening,
they aren't deceived, their fingers
tapping at the wooden desks –
So I retract
the myth; I tell them it occurs
in hell, and that the artist lies
because he is obsessed with attainment,
that he perceives the summit
as that place where he will live forever,
a place about to be
transformed by his burden: with every breath,
I am standing at the top of the mountain.
Both my hands are free. And the rock has added
height to the mountain.

Thank you