

## Critic Note

### Intimate Strangers by Subba Ghosh

Familiar unfamiliarity, remarked Hasan one day, this whole place is the same as in Cairo yet it is all so strange. I could be back home and not be at the same time. Everything seems the same until they start speaking. It's the language.

Twenty-two strangers converged onto this strange place to live together and share their spaces and thoughts not just with each other but also with the community around them.

Hasan like all the others lived in the space between the mind's city and the city around us. The image was not unreal but as Baudrillard would say, Hyper - real. Every aspect of life is scrutinized analyzed and squeezed for the last drop of knowledge it could provide after all this was transitory and tomorrow we will return to our mind city which will probably have changed a little because of this place.

It was a crossroad. Where we all arrived with our own baggage, with our own contradiction. This was the second time for me and I thought I had pretty much seen it all. It wasn't so. The place seemed to have acquired new dimension over time. May be we also change over time and the place we do not recognize on return is probably because we fail to recognize ourselves and reconcile with our contradictions.

The seeming cultural divides that we perceive as we cross each other's paths that seem so unfathomable are illusory in many ways. The other to us whether it is the ideological divide between the third worlds and the first worlds and all the other worlds in between. Between the haves and the have-nots. Between the gives and the give nots. Every other that we see seems to reflect nothing but ourselves. The production of the other inevitably takes something of our own reflection into it that we fail to recognize but see in the sub-conscious.

I was probably fighting myself as much as I was fighting you, Tapfuma's remark referred to not just the feeling of alienation that one experienced because of being outside the language, outside the code that gave the feeling of being in a shared space. Yet in the midst of this alienation we could see the birth of a new language a new set of signifiers that could be symbols of a shared situation of reaching out. But the gentle rebellion of Tapfuma was loaded with questions. They were hard questions looking at the idea of language as the set of signifiers coded with ethics and culturally specific, but I guess the most interesting part was to be outside the language, the absence of a shared language always creates that potent vacuum which can be a well spring of creative energies.

Alienation could be an internalized situation which one never realizes until one is confronted by its physical manifestation in the violence of the other, Jagath Weerasinghe and Masood both came from places burning from long drawn out conflict between ethnic groups.

Sri Lanka has been burning for a long time. It is in the sub-conscious architecture that we see an internalization of the violence that comes to symbolize the working of the whole social structure and that it is through the element of violence that has totally overtaken the desire for peace. Peace is no longer a settlement of discontent but a cessation of hostilities however temporary, Ethnic divide in this case of the majority Sinhalese in confrontation with the minority Tamil groups has seen conflicts that

have overwritten historical compulsion for immediate political power. The artistic outpouring expressing the anguish of war and the pain it brings is mainly expressed through the pain of one community in the absence of the other.

Question from Subba, "Why do the accounts of art from Sri Lanka have a complete absence of artistic expression from the Tamilian community ?"

Answer from Jagath, "May be there are no good Tamilian artists !" Hasan, "That answer is loaded !"

Here the reference is to this internalization of violence in such a manner that the divide between the communities have created such a distance that we do not see it ourselves. Masood's expression reflects that violence that tears at the basis of our social fabric. He anguishes on how the territorial conflict is systematically erasing the cultural heritage that creates the Kashmiri identity, its Sufi ideology of peaceful co-existence of religious entities, Kashmir is an issue that bifurcates opinion within the Indian sub-continent. It is a question of extremities. Should Kashmir stay within the Indian Territory or should it be given over to Pakistan since the notion of an independent Kashmir has died long time ago. What happens to the rights of the self-determination of the Ladhakis and the people of Jammu who are in the minority ? Do the minority have a voice ? Do fundamentalist right wing governments in power within the country polarize these extremities of other fundamentalism like the Islamic one that have emerged. These questions raise more questions and we vex at our inability to find an answer to these questions. But may be there is no one to answer these questions. But the torment of Masood is not just his torment but of every body that lives in proximity.

The question of conflict between interest groups does constitute the problem of the society in unrest. Indonesia has a similar tearing at its structure both political and social. Within the complicated inter religious and ethnic rivalry there is also the question of its territorial integrity, as like the Timorese the people of Aceh also demand secession. All this is further complicated by a marked political instability. Marintan through her performative art expressed the need to tread the fine and delicate line threading through the plethora of conflicts that surround trying to create a system to understand them.

The journey to Modinagar brings to consciousness the magnitude of the journey we all undertake. The journey to Modinagar is not just a transit from a big cosmopolitan to small town. Modinagar resides in between the poverty of the rural and the decay of the industrialized urban. The surrounding villages telescope it and its collapsed industrial infrastructure has left it mired in a frustrating limbo short of any urban selfhood held in check by an almost feudal grip of an unsuccessful capitalist venture. In such a situation a gathering of such a group of artists inevitably magnifies the disparity of class visible here onto a world wide screen where it manifests itself as the first world versus the third world conflict. Sue Rees expressed her reservation of an unqualified demonisation of the economically developed countries, albeit USA and Europe making them responsible for all problems that afflict the third world. But history cannot be read selectively. What seems to be a local conflagration inevitably has some of its roots in this troubled first world / third world relationship, but the blame game cannot be an escapists route of taking any responsibility.

The issues do lead to historical reading of these conflicts many of whose origins lie within the ideological politics of colonialism and its heritage. It is surprising many of us exclaimed that despite being almost a second post - colonial generation these issues continue to be of consequence. Colonialism residue is not just the fragmentation of the polity but of a social vacuum in the absence of a political structure that its colonizers evacuation has not been able to fill. In fact many of the ideology

has been reconstituted by the colonial mindset a psychology that cannot extricate itself from the feudal and the colonial. (Ashis Nandy, Exiled at Home). The reading of the colonial psychology does lead to a certain understanding of the action and reaction within these zones of conflict. But besides these conflagrations many agree the real conflict remains in the question of culture. Culture as a source of identity formation; Culture as zone of contention between the so-called West and the East, or the "first world and the third world". Between capitalist and socialist systems.

A gathering such as this at Modinagar is not without significance. It draws out the whole gamut of processes and contradictions that go into the creation of a sense of identity and a selfhood. Cultural groups have dragged cultural identity formations, which seemed at a time to be a free and untrammelled understanding of the self in relation to cultural systems and social structure, into areas and that could be regarded as limited trans-national identities. A certain grouping attributing a shared historical or cultural heritage. What is attributed, as innocent funding logistics in its insistence of forming such territorial categories does seem to have its roots in cultural colonialism of the 19th and 20th century. The so called regionalization of the "Southeast-Asia", Caribbean, African, Latin American, seems devices to manufacture cultural identities free and liberal development of the cultural identity that creates itself from the assimilation of plural influence not belonging to any regional boundaries or limited readings of zonal histories. I guess countering these limited notions of cultural identity is what the meeting of all these strangers from across the world accomplish. It is not the production of art objects, but the objectives of creativity that flies in the face of regional constraints.

Going through the gamut of expression at the workshop one cannot escape one of the many conclusions that any identity system etches itself on the body; it is the body that is at the center of these conflicts. The body not as an organic being but rather as "Body without Organs" (Deleuze and Guatarri, Anti-Oedipus). A desiring machine; The body in the performative or in interaction as a social being reflecting on the violence or the alienation within society; The body that sites itself on the threshold of the public and the private. Thus when Sovan showed the secretly taken image of a woman taking her bath, there was a protest at the violation of what constitutes the privacy of the individual. It was felt that the very idea of a selfhood has been violated. To expose such an image as art raised further questions on what constitutes the privacy of the individual. The body recalling death as its culmination. Within it is nothing but hollow. It is only on its surface that we see historical events and identity systems etch themselves (Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punishment). Extricating itself from any Cartesian absolutism the will of the body lies on its surface. It reflects its participation as part of the social structure, either within the colonial systems or caste or class based recognitions. The will to power emanating from within the organic structure of the biological body (Nietzsche, Will to Power) speaks of a discursive language that transforms the conscious language into the symbolic that manifests the creative language of the artists. Strangers do remain strangers till the end but with the formation of a shared symbolic order we see the development of a certain intimacy. The intimacy of a shared vision. Thus when we disappear into the dust of the hot afternoon of Modinagar we depart not as we came, unacquainted, but as intimate strangers,