

Saumitra Chakravarty**Poems****Manas-Kanya**

The Sun, its daily ritual done
Sank in sombre meditation.
Deep, in the gathering gloom
Dusk crept out of its crevice
Peered out for a spark of light,
Leapt nimbly from twig to twig---
And whispered to the eyes
Brightening behind the veil
Her time was come.
The eye of the Sun-God shut
The glare of a hundred eyes
Absolved her of guilt.

Lamps flickered,
Shadows quickened
On the earthen walls.
The twilight's tears
Washed away one by one
The fury that storm and sun
Had done. Her little hut,
Now a mansion fit for kings
Her forehead anointed with red dust,
The veil edged with red, lifted
And slipped gently
In the evening breeze;
The stern knot of hair
Loosened and fell
Cascading to her waist.
The day's stark edges
Dimmed. She was free.
She had drunk
The fragrance of the champak
Nectar of the gods.

In the dusk, her peers
And she, those dim silhouettes
Sat by the lamp
And were one:

One with the gathering dusk
One with the hope
Of the autumnal moon
Rising in their breast.

She, of the female form
Of her essence they had drunk.
In the lamplight---
She was a goddess, tender-eyed.
Saviour, grain-giver,
Absolved of the fury of the Sun.

She was theirs
A goddess of myth and lore
Softly come to them
Cloaked in dusk.
She was Lakshmi,
She was Manasa, Sheetala
Chandi---a Woman
Alighted from her altar
Freed from the rituals of men.
She was theirs
In the paeans they sang,
She was theirs
In simple worship,
The meagre offering of work-stained hands.
She was theirs
In the dreams they wove
Like the shadows flickering
On lamp-lit walls.
She was theirs
In fears forgotten
And life's labours done.
She was theirs
In the shadow of evening
And the Autumnal moon
In the sky.
She was theirs
When the barren fields
Hid their wombs in the dark
And gaunt spectres
Fled away into the night.

But the Sun would arise
His lustre, the shadows dispel.
The little lamp

Wind up its dreams,
Its fantasies, one by one.
And she, her head would bend
Her dreams gone;
The female essence
Her totem of hope,
Her secret talisman of fear---
Slipping through her fingers
Myth, lore and paeon
Stilled upon her lips,
Would, her goddess, find
Safe in its niche,
High up in its altar,
Locked in its mask of Beauty---
Consort, seed, dream-daughter
To the host of gods,
Slayer of male demons
Ten-armed---
For the three worlds of men.

The Last Requiem

The dull strokes
Of the woodcutter's axe
Rose and fell.
Rose and fell,
Like a woman keening,
Beating her breast in pain.

In the forest clearing
The tree, stoic and mute
Watched in silent farewell
His hoary limbs,
Fall one by one
At his feet.
A giant heap
Hid the coiled story
Of his birth

Under mounds of earth,
Hid the sad saga
Of spent stories
And tales untold.
Once he was home,
Hearth and husband
To virgins of the village:

The inexhaustible essence
Of the eternal male
That took and gave:
Embraced and surrendered
His chastity unsullied;
Like Mother Earth's
In her union with the sky.

The virgins of the village,
Seed-bearers of a vanishing race
Embraced him in first flush
Of innocent surrender;
Their ritual done,
They found a mate
To quench their human thirst:
The tree smiled and understood
His blossoms rained down
Like stars shining in
The dark of their coiled tresses.

They drank his oozing fruit
And swirled in ecstasy.
In hunger he gave to them,
In famine, their proud head unbent.
In the dark of evening
He was the light of their lamp.

In worship, they brought
To him, their offerings
Their offerings, forest-fed.
Their simple worship
Gods of altar and temple
Would never bless.
In death, their last sigh
Heaved in his embrace,
Their black bodies
Slept in his embrace.

They were gone.
Ages long ago, they had fled.
The forest vibrated no more
With dancing feet,
Glowed no more
With dust of red and green.
The chanting voices, the hymns
On betel-stained lips,

Were still, ages long ago.
Hunger, famine,
Sickness, the lure of lights
Brighter than his,
Oil-lit, on earthen walls,
Had snatched them
From his dark embrace.

Now, his time was come.
He looked down and sighed---
Sighed, with the ghosts
Melting away, one by one
In the hush of legendry,
His limbs falling
In the giant heap
At his feet.
The axe rose and fell,
Rose and fell.

A small string of beads
An offering, long-forgotten
Of a village virgin,
The tree had clasped
To his hoary breast,
Fell and spilt
Like drops of blood
At his feet.

In the giant heap
On the forest floor, outspread,
A single spot of vermillion,
Where a young widow
To his arms returned,
On a single twig
Sang his last requiem.

[Certain trees like the 'mahua', play an essential part in tribal life, festivity, ritual and provide food in famine, oil for their lamps, etc. Almost every part of the tree is vital to the survival of these tribes. Young girls are first married ritualistically to the 'mahua' tree and then to a human groom. But with the enforced assimilation of the tribes into mainstream culture, these customs are fast dying out.]

The Eunuch

Somewhere on the inner page,
Between front and centre, it was;
Glanced at, shrugged, forgotten.
Though the cameras had zoomed in
At the time, impaled her in a flash.

They took all she had.
Shame was her birthright,
The lurid red, her wages of shame.
The widow hugs her weeds of white,
White, the virgin's proud cocoon.
For the eunuch, white is but a shroud.
They took all she had,
Her blackened tresses, her gaudy wares,
Her refuge, her sex, her name.

Eve sprang from Adam's rib;
Ardhanareeshwara, most revered lord
With but one breast, half a genital
Stands forever engraved in stone:
All- embracing, androgynous, complete.
Tiresias, switching worlds and sexes,
Blind as he was, was a seer.
Were they ever at home in either?

Shikhandi, blessed of the Yaksha,
The mighty Bhishma felled,
Gave Amba, her bitter-sweet nectar of revenge:
A fractured human identity---
Two selves, two banks of a river,
One high-up, cloud-kissing, male
The other, lowly, plain;
And yet, they say, the two halves
Reached out, fused, embraced,
Gave the blind seer, his vision.

The eunuch's two uneasy halves
Do not, however, make a whole;
One turns its back on the other.
The trusted 'khoja', sexless guardian
Of a thousand nights,
Privy to a thousand sighs,
Never breathed one,
Not one, of his own desire.

Item in a Daily: "Eunuch tonsured, forced into white, beaten, paraded on the street".

Myths are not made of such
That seek a self in their shame.

Saumitra Chakravarty, who got an Hons degree in English Literature from Calcutta University with an Hons, holds a Ph.D on "The Search for Identity in Contemporary British Fiction". She teaches English Literature at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Bangalore and guides research students. She has presented papers in several national and international seminars. She has published a book of poems, *The Silent Cry* (2002), and co-authored a book of critical essays, *The Endangered Self* (2003). A book of translations of short stories of four major Bengali women writers on women's issues is currently under publication with Oxford University Press. She is working on a second book of poems on issues related to tribal women and their habitat, some of which have already been broadcast over All India Radio.