

Conversations about Empires

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First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Ilkley Literature Festival.

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ISBN 978-0-9572349-2-5

Conversations about Empires is part of Allegories of Power: Art, Empires and Ideas, a partnership project between Ilkley Literature Festival, Alchemy, Bradford Museums and Galleries and Harewood House.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Design dg3

Ilkley Literature Festival, The Manor House, 2 Castle Hill, Ilkley LS29 9DT

Registered In England and Wales Company No: 1061343.

Ilkley Literature Festival is a registered charity. Charity No: 501801

Introduction

In the Summer of 2012 Ilkley Literature Festival commissioned short residencies from four leading poets, Daljit Nagra, Patience Agbabi, Raman Mundair and Moniza Alvi as part of 'Allegories of Power: Art, Empires and Ideas' – an exciting partnership project between Alchemy, Bradford Museums and Galleries, Harewood House and Ilkley Literature Festival.

Each poet was invited to Yorkshire and given the opportunity to visit 'Silk – Bradford and the Subcontinent', a new exhibition at the city's Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, which revealed fascinating textile links between Bradford and the subcontinent and included historic and contemporary silks from both places, with commissions of Dhaka muslin, Karachi brocades and new work by textile artists Shehnaz Ismail and Anne Crowther.

The poets were then given unique access to the rooms and collections at Harewood House, a magnificent Georgian mansion to the north of Leeds. Built in the mid-18th century by Edwin Lascelles with money his father had made in the West Indian sugar trade, Harewood has Robert Adam interiors, Chippendale furniture and a landscape created by 'Capability' Brown. The poets were able to explore the state rooms, Old Kitchen and servants' quarters, and view papers belonging to Lady Canning, a close friend of Queen Victoria's and wife of the first Viceroy of India.

Their brief was simply to respond in whatever way they wished and the work they created is collected here for the first time. The poems were premiered at Ilkley Literature Festival in October 2012 with Indian dance interpretations by Manasamitra and read at Cartwright Hall and at a special event at Harewood House.

Rachel Feldberg

Director, Ilkley Literature Festival

Introduction to Uses for a Sari and 15 Ways of Looking at a Silk Sari

I've always been struck by the beauty and versatility of a sari. I have early memories of being mesmerised by my mother's ritual of putting on and taking off her sari. The patient pleating, folding, tucking and draping. The magic of how an impossible length of silk transformed into something gorgeous. How every sari is different in hue and texture. The way my mother appeared taller and confident in a sari, how she moved differently.

Saris captured my imagination – my child self could see endless possibilities in a sari – saris could hide you, disguise you – transform you. Saris are art: they make our landscapes more beautiful. A flash of vibrant silk cuts through a dreary day.

Uses for a Sari and 15 Ways of Looking at a Sari are celebratory responses to the delightful Silk Exhibition at Bradford's Cartwright Hall Art Gallery.

Raman Mundair

Uses for a Sari

Draupadi put us onto it –
The possibilities of a length of silk
The forgiving drape and swathe
The dramatic fall of fabric
That holds a multiple of uses
Think – Swiss army knife
But of seductive attire

Ah, the ever ready sari
Champion of damsels in distress
An essential piece of kit
For plucky lasses in a pickle

SOS ladies? Your sari's on standby!
Distracted by the glossy sheen?
The sensual sheer folds?
Look again, and behold
A transformative thing of beauty
Ta dah! An instant
Shelter, sunshade, sail...

Ladies...
Survival instincts askew?
Saris are the solution for you!
SMERSH's seductress spy
May not have lost her secrets
Quite so quick
Had Bond to fight
Through yards of Varanasi silk

And Pauline, in her perils
Tied to the railroad tracks
Would've had no need for
The tardy Jones to rescue her yet again
Had she worn a lovely
Rajasthani number –
Fluorescent and with intricate mirror work
Guaranteed to glint and catch the engine driver's eye

Rapunzel – a note
When that guy comes a calling
Forget your delicate hair
Don't you know that silk is stronger by far?

Salome – seven veils?
What a waste!
One sari would be enough
And twice as effective

Medusa...
What about a sari wrap?
Give those snakes a wee break ay?
And you never know – maybe your luck might change!

Oh and women, never fear
Your femininity won't be compromised
You'll be impressed at the curves
That will miraculously appear
On the most boyish of girls
And how your hips will acquire
That certain va-va-voom

Oh yes, more is more
You can never have enough silk
Enfold yourself in its embrace
And surrender to its sensual grace

And for the more impetuous,
The adventurers and sensualists
And the ones who wait for their mistress's restraint
Bind the silk closer

For there is nothing vanilla about a sari, oh no –
Within the cloth both whip and manacles await
For there are fifty shades of grey silk sari

Raman Mundair

15 Ways of Looking at a Silk Sari

1.

bright Aberdeen sky amplified:
prayer flag saris
on washing-line

2.

wet silk clings to running body
- monsoon sari

3.

brave goosebumped back
sari ballooning blue
pallav whipped wild
in sudden Shetland gale

4.

a swooping patang:
side-saddle
on the back of a Dehli motorcycle
slipstream silver pallav

5.

iridescent silk caught
between millstone grit
and sullen sky:
Yorkshire sari

8

6.

soft rounded belly-flesh
valleyed in Varanasi silk

7.

early light
through bamboo grove
splinters red silk:
morning walk
in Lodhi Gardens

8.

between the legs
unexpected
- silk

9.

hennaed hands
rest on sky-blue sari:
Chagall perfection

10.

sensual origami
the ritual unfolding
- sari sighs
and slips
and falls
round naked feet

9

11.

long journey north,
sudden colour:
saris drying
by the railway line

12.

a river
of watered silk
rolls down her breast,
pools in her lap
and flows to the floor

13.

Glasgow
Southside grace:
gold sari lady
steps from taxi

14.

Birmingham rain:
small boy shelters
beneath Bandhani sari

15.

she is an artist:
bare back
in a frame of magenta silk

Raman Mundair

Introduction to The Weavers from Benares

As a teenager growing up in Hertfordshire with a mixed (English/Pakistani) background, I was fascinated by Indian and Pakistani clothes. My aunts in Pakistan would send me presents such as girls there would wear for a wedding or special occasion. I never saw an ordinary sari or an ordinary salwar kameez – so the wondrous clothes at the Silk exhibition struck a chord with me!

Prior to the residency I had been working on a long poem based on my family's experience of Partition. Thus I was interested in the Moslem weavers who, in 1947, had left Benares (now Varanasi) the Hindu city of pilgrimage and made the journey to Pakistan. My family story was a tragic one, but *The Weavers from Benares* is a poem of survival.

I found the descriptive labels for the Silk exhibition very helpful in finding a language for silk, as was Brenda M. King's revelatory book *Silk and Empire*. It was difficult at first to decide on a shape for the poem, whether to have it as one unbroken piece or to divide it into stanzas. Once I'd arrived at the 10-line stanzas, the whole thing started to fall into place.

Moniza Alvi

The Weavers from Benares

The Buddha himself on attaining Nirvana
was wrapped in our fabric –
in sumptuous red and gold
and shimmering blue.
We were Moslems in Benares
the holiest of Hindu cities.
City of light, older than time
where Hindus come to die,
or to bathe in the sacred Ganges.
City of pilgrims, city of weavers.

We left in the turmoil of '47,
felt we had no choice
but to turn our backs
on our luminous city.
Life itself can be torn,
can change its texture.
We journeyed uncertainly
to Karachi and Lahore
Hyderabad and Khaipur.
Silk travelled with us.

We took refuge in silk,
in our saris, dupattas, bridal veils
their landscapes, starry skies
their blending of sunlight and shade
their subtleties and tiny details –
lilies, carnations, cypresses...
The endless possibilities of pattern.

The distinctive rustle
of a weighty Benaresi sari!
Divinity caught in its length!

With difficulty, with determination,
with sureness, silk travelled.
Yes, finally
we re-established ourselves,
our looms and shuttles –
thanked Allah for our skills
thanked Him for silk.
Now alas, we make fewer saris.
Polyester is frequently added.
Yet still silk travels.

The sky is silk
the grass is silk
our dreams are silk.
Silk travels
timeless and changeable
as the Ganges in our first city,
Benares, renamed Varanasi
as in *The Mahabharata*.
Strange old new name –
soft and flowing.

Moniza Alvi

Introduction to Tiger

To read Charlotte Canning's Indian Journals was fascinating for me. I'd left my birthplace, Lahore, Pakistan when a few months old and didn't return until I was an adult, so I'm always keen to read of first impressions of Pakistan or India, particularly, perhaps, those of a woman.

Lady Canning, it seemed, had a desire to create something of the English Country-House in Barrackpore, hence the yards of chintz. Strongly inspired by India, she produced numerous water-colour paintings before her death from a fever at the age of forty-four. She was adventurous and warm-hearted as well as talented. The violent time of what the British refer to as the Indian Mutiny and Indians call the First War of Indian Independence, took its toll, however, on both Charlotte and her husband Viceroy ('Clemency') Canning.

I was struck by her painting of a room that appeared so orderly and gracious – such a contrast to the mayhem that couldn't be kept at bay. To try to represent this, in the course of the poem I changed the form from the more decorative to the more anarchic.

Moniza Alvi

Tiger

Inspired by Lady Charlotte Canning's journals and her water-colour of the sitting-room at Government House, Barrackpore, 1859.

She ordered 450 yards of her favourite
blue-striped chintz with rosebuds –
it was all *very pretty, cool and English*

though the twenty foot high ceiling
was hung with punkahs, those strange fans.
And there were so many doors,

thirteen in all, and at each one
a watchful, turbaned servant, hands
joined, as if in prayer.

Jhilmils, just like Venetian blinds,
and tatis, wetted grass veranda screens,
kept out every chink of sun.

But nothing could keep out India.

Like a tiger

it roared through boredom
roared through Englishness and British rule

more ferocious than the Hot Weather
it tore through ceremony and certainty

its jaws aflame –

Cawnpore, Lucknow, Bibighar, Allahabad – all fell.

Fighting & guns & murders...

And then the retribution – the rallying cry:

‘Remember Cawnpore!’

Dear Lady Canning wrote Queen Victoria
Our thoughts are almost solely occupied with India.

But what did the tiger know or care
about thoughts or letters
or chintz or water-colours?

Moniza Alvi

Introduction to The Adoration

My poem was inspired by a watercolour at Harewood House. It is titled Krishna and the Gopis. It shows a blue Hindu god, Krishna, sat atop a tree and playing his flute. Beneath the tree are many cowherd girls, or gopis, who are looking up at Krishna with an adoring demeanour.

My ekphrastic poem is based on the myth of Krishna and the gopis which I researched in the British Museum.

My poem alludes to the Bhakti tradition of poetry, which is a pre-10th century literature that is highly expressive and openly displaying a love of God.

In my poem the cowherd girls are transported to Heaven after Krishna makes love to all of them. A god is permitted to make love to mortals as the mortals are subsequently granted great favours.

On another level, I regard my poem as a rampant mating of sources: Harewood House, British Museum and Rachel Feldberg / Ilkley Literature Festival!

Daljit Nagra

The Adoration

Wahwah! to you damson lovers who mark your damsels'
forehead with red-dot kumkum
and pink her cheeks with coyness
loh! how lordly your manner, how heedless!
In this, marital hour
are you not seeking auspice
from above, from the Ooperwallah?
It's to Him the cowgirls pray.

Even now, over yonder
woh! the moon, the moon rushed in her gopi cheeks
when Krishna has roused his flute,
his cardinal flute heralding a long-awaited tryst
for the gopis, the cowherd girls, who, on the sound
of his first great *phooooooooo!*
are leaving behind the cowpat fire and the gruel on the go
while the husband is away dancing with the djinns ...

Over fourscore tune-haunted herd-girls
in the jungle's crucible
falling before Krishna, the blue enchanter,
who lowered his flute to rouse them thus, 'Greetings Gopis,
why are you so late
lodged in this fang-and-claw-lurking land?'
'Lord, we are summoned by your love *yah!*'
'But your husbands? Is this buxom rollicking flesh,
this flesh-world become mere tender?'
'Lord, be not savage *yah!* How long we been moiling
always uphill?'

Krishna, who knew they sought the bhakti sublime,
remained cross-legged.
He was incomparably staggering, *yoh!*
as he watched the gopis looking slurred
while some drew upon the moonlit earth with their
toes zags
others sobbed kohl or kajal tinted tears
trickling upon the bosom to make the saffron drabble.

Still steadfast, they stirred as one, once more,
'O eminence, are you not the ultimate *om?*
We been nurturing the tooting plant of your love
and our ground for you alone is rooted *yah!*'

Krishna, on a boulder,
surround-sounded by their choral
lovelorn moan
beneath his yummy toes
felt himself
ooze a hot-gush jaggery
god-breath

at once each gopi following her top button
from its eye
slowly softing
unhinged
aieee!

Each gopi rising levitational along the chubby air layers.
Each gopi spread-eagling upon the jungly divan, *oooh!*
Each writhing gopi as the Lord whizzed
a whippy wet peck above
a finger-score there
a pet below
a kiss here, no, no, just here...*waaaaah!*

Willy-nilly million arms Krishna
the super-nippy King of Love!

Back on his boulder, he blew his glossy flute
and watched each gopi hand pinching to be gripping
a wildflower garland, a vanamala.
Each hand feeling itself disappearing from the pink jungle
upward!

I say it's over to you you
kumkum dabbing damson lovers
keep in tune with your herd-girl
or you too may find yourself
craning up for Radio Ooperwallah
where you must be hearing your
bridal gopi going *whoooooooooooooooooooo*
aloft on her Krishna garden
soaring for its bhakti slot
in the weightless heaven...

Daljit Nagra

Introduction to The Doll's House

I aimed to honour the exquisite craftsmanship inherent in the design of Harewood House but simultaneously acknowledge its source of wealth. Sugar became my material both physically and metaphorically. Further inspiration came from the Harewood leaflet Sweet Treats and the work of Yinke Shonibare at Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, who recreates Western artifacts using 'African' textiles.

Patience Agbabi

The Doll's House

The source of the wealth that built Harewood is historical fact. There is nothing anyone can do to change the past, however appalling or regrettable that past might be. What we can do, however, what we must do, is engage with that legacy and in so doing stand a chance of having a positive effect on the future.

David Lascelles, Earl of Harewood

Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.

Pablo Picasso

Welcome to my house, this stately home
where, below stairs, my father rules as chef:
confecting, out of sugar-flesh and -bone,
décor so fine, your tongue will treble clef
singing its name. Near-sighted and tone-deaf,
I smell-taste-touch; create each replica
in my mind's tongue. My name? Angelica.

This is my world, the world of haute cuisine:
high frosted ceilings, modelled on high art,
reflected in each carpet's rich design;
each bed, each armchair listed à la carte.
Come, fellow connoisseur of taste, let's start
below stairs, where you'll blacken your sweet tooth,
sucking a beauty whittled from harsh truth...

Mind your step! The stairway's worn and steep,
let your sixth senses merge in the half-light...
This muted corridor leads to the deep
recesses of the house. Here, to your right,
my father's realm of uncurbed appetite —
private! The whiff of strangers breaks his spell.
Now left, to the dead end. Stop! Can you smell

cinnamon, brown heat in the afternoon
of someone else's summer? This rust key
unlocks the passage to my tiny room,
stick-cabin, sound-proofed with a symphony
of cinnamon; shrine to olfactory
where I withdraw to paint in cordon bleu,
shape, recreate this house; in miniature.

All art is imitation: I'm a sculptor
of past-imperfect; hungry, I extract
molasses; de- and reconstruct high culture
from base material; blend art and fact
in every glazed and glistening artefact
housed in this doll's house. Stately home of sugar.
Of Demerara cubes secured with nougat.

Look at its hall bedecked with royal icing –
the ceiling's crossbones mirrored in the frieze,
the chimneypiece. The floor is sugar glazing
clear as a frozen lake. My centrepiece
statue of Eve, what a creative feast!
A crisp Pink Lady, sculpted with my teeth,
its toffee glaze filming the flesh beneath.

The music room's my favourite. I make music
by echoing design: the violet-rose
piped ceiling is the carpet's fine mosaic
of granulated violet and rose,
aimed to delight the eye, the tongue, the nose.
Even the tiny chairs are steeped in flavour
delicate as a demisemiquaver.

Taste, if you like, sweet as a mothertongue...
See how this bedroom echoes my refrain:
the chairs, the secretaire, commode, chaise longue,
four-poster bed, all carved from sugarcane;
even the curtains that adorn its frame,
chiselled from the bark, each lavish fold
drizzled with tiny threads of spun 'white gold'.

The library was hardest. How to forge
each candied volume wafer-thin, each word
burnt sugar. In the midnight hours, I'd gorge
on bubbling syrup, mouth its language; learned
the temperature at which burnt sugar burned,
turned sweet to bitter; inked a tiny passage
that overflowed into a secret passage,

the Middle Passage; made definitive
that muted walkway paved with sugar plate,
its sugar-paper walls hand-painted with
hieroglyphs invisible as sweat
but speaking volumes; leading to the sweet
peardrop of a stairwell down and down
to this same room of aromatic brown

in miniature. Here, connoisseur, I've set
the doll, rough hewn from sugarcane's sweet wood:
her choker, hardboiled sweets as black as jet;
her dress, molasses-rich; her features, hard.
This handcarved doll, with sugar in her blood —
Europe, the Caribbean, Africa;
baptized in sugar, named Angelica,

has built a tiny house in Demerara
sugar grains secured with sugarpaste,
each sculpted room a microscopic mirror
of its old self; and below stairs, she's placed
a blind doll with kaleidoscopic taste,
who boils, bakes, moulds, pipes, chisels, spins and blows
sugar, her art, the only tongue she knows.

Patience Agbabi

Grateful thanks to:

Alchemy and Nima Poovaya-Smith, Director of Alchemy, who played a major role in initiating, brokering and conceiving both the pilot and full scale programme for Allegories of Power.

Janet Simmonds, Museums Manager, Bradford Central, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

Nilesh Mistry, Museum Officer (International Art), City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council and the staff of Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford.

David Lascelles, Earl of Harewood.

Diane Howse, Countess of Harewood.

Anna Robinson, Head of House and Collections; Grace Hailstone, Exhibitions and Collections Officer; Jennifer Brooke, Head of Learning and the staff and volunteers at Harewood House.

Seni Seneviratne, Ilkley Literature Festival Poet in Residence 2012.

Supriya Nagarajan, Artistic Director, Manasamitra; Shrikant Subramaniam, Dance and Education Officer and the dancers, musicians and staff of Manasamitra.

Rashmi Sudhir, Arts Engagement Officer, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

Simon Warner and Sophie Marschner, Leeds College of Art students who documented the events on film.

