

**SYNAPTIC NARRATIVES AND HALF-BODIED WOMEN:
POETICS AND PRACTICE OF VILAS SARANG'S
AVANT-GARDE WRITING**

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'Literary creation is pre-eminently a synaptic activity', declared Vilas Sarang (1942-2015), one of the most exciting and neglected writers and critics of the post Independence India in his essay 'Synaptic Narrative'. He is famously known as the only Indian author Samuel Beckett recommended to his publisher the Grove Press. Sarang is known for his disturbing nightmarish short stories in *The Women in the Cages* (2006), *The Boat People* and the novels like *The Dinosaur Ship*, *Rudra*, *Tandoor Cinders* (2008), and *The Dhamma Man* (2011). He has written remarkable short stories, poems, a novel and also brilliant pieces of criticism in Marathi and English. Conventionally his sensibility is closer to the modernist canon comprising of Kafka, Beckett and Joyce. His Marathi short story collections are *Soledad* (1975) and *Atank* (1999) and translations of his stories in English are collected in the above-mentioned collections. His Marathi collection of poems is published under the title *Kavita 1969-1984* (1986) and his collections of English poems are *A Kind of Silence* (1978) and *Another Life* (2010). However, he is also someone who has reflected and theorized consistently about literature, especially fiction and translation. His collection of criticism in English is a self-published book *Seven Critical Essays* (?). He also wrote significant criticism in Marathi *Sisyphus ani Belakka*, *Aksharanchya Shrama Kela*(2000) *Manhole Madhla Manus*(2008), *Sarjanshodh ani Lihita Lekhak* (2007), *Vangmaiyeen Sauskruti Va Samajik Vastav* (2011). He has also published *The Stylistics of*

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Literary Translation (1988) which is also translated in Marathi as *Bhashantar ani Bhasha* (2011) and edited the anthology *Indian English Poetry Since 1950* (1989). He has also edited reputed literary journals like the Bombay Review and The Post-Post Review. The present essay explores his poetics and practice of literary writing and considers Sarang as a true postmodern writer from Lyotardian perspective as he risked marginalization and neglect by being completely counter-conventional in his poetics, politics and practice in both English and Marathi.

Elaborating on what the term 'synaptic' means, Sarang explains that the term is borrowed from physiology. It describes 'synapse' as a place where nerve-cells join and an impulse is transmitted from one cell to another. In Sarang's narratology, 'synapses' is about narrative transitions, logical connections and the devices of narrative continuity. It is what linguists would call the 'coherence' or semantic or logical unity - as against 'cohesion' or 'verbal unity' of the text. Sarang wants to develop a theory and a method of 'irrelevancy' and 'discontinuity' in fictional narrative, which has unexplained narrative transitions and which help to create a deliberate effect of abruptness. Sarang adds that he does not want to focus on this type of calculated effect but 'downright disregard for narrative continuity'.

Questioning E.M. Forster's formulation of a story as 'the king died and the queen died' and the plot as 'the king died and the queen died of grief', Sarang asks, 'this happened...then that happened...' Okay, but who said it has to have logical progression?" Why not something like, 'the king died and the prince ran away with the court jester?'. The point is, says Sarang, between "the king died "and the next byte of information, there is a chink that you can take advantage of. The degree of linkage -including its near absence- may be set according to one's artistic choice. Forster's emphasis on causality and logic was fine in 1927, Sarang points out, but today in the age of uncertainty, it tends to dampen the spirit of "synaptic adventurousness".

According to Sarang, because of this powerful constraint of writing continuous, coherent fiction, the writer has no time to go in the search of the opposite impulse, that of discontinuity which a poet is free to explore. This has resulted prose fiction lagging behind in terms of form, as compared to poetry. Vilas Sarang notes, "By daring to set up narrative tensions synaptically, prose fiction can expect to generate unexpected possibilities of meaning, and go on to ever more complexities and richness. An adventurous exploratory spirit is built into this approach, for one always dares falling over the precipice of meaninglessness."

Sarang notes that while the experimentation of discontinuous form is common in the modernist poetry, like that of TS Eliot, discontinuous progression is not so common in fiction. He argues that fiction, especially longer fiction, always runs the risk of becoming predictable due to the demands of intelligibility, of unity and continuity. These demands, Sarang notes, are largely due to commercial reasons. Poetry, on the other hand, is not as much enslaved to market place and hence has more freedom to experiment with discontinuity and 'irrelevancies'. Sarang also points out that the devices of allegory, metaphor and symbolism that are common in poetry are actually 'synaptic' devices -linking and joining devices.

Sarang believes that though surrealism and magic realism in the latter half of the twentieth century have played a salutary role in contributing to "fiction technology" by loosening the hold of logic and magic-less realism, these techniques have grown predictable and formulaic in their own right. Sarang talks about the dramatic advances in animation techniques in cinema as exemplified in the films like *Antz* and *Shrek*. These films can make anything seem 'real' and blur the distinction between virtuality and reality. 'Magic realism' looks less 'magical' today, as the magic seems to be fading.

Best illustration of what Sarang means by 'synaptic narratives' would be his own practice as fiction writer. For instance, the story 'A Revolt of Gods' begins by describing a routine day in the life of the narrator, a city photographer who goes to the Ganesha immersion ceremony at the beach. The synaptic leap in the otherwise 'realistic' happens when the hundreds of clay Ganesha figures brought for immersion to the sea stand up and start running away. The miracle shocks the city and there are speculations about why this happened. Some people wonder if it is the punishment by the gods for all their sins. Then the things settle down as 'the absconding gods' do not torment the city-dwellers, and the photographer talks about Mumbaikars ability not to be surprised for long and their ability to return to normal life very quickly. One of the photographer's customer, a certain accountant Mr.Kini discovers that whenever he sat to recite Ganesha prayers and mantras, only cuss words and abuses came out of this mouth for absolutely no reason whatsoever and he feels that these events are because of his personal sin. Then another synaptic leap happens when the clay mice, which accompany the Ganesha statues, start swarming the city. Towards the end of the story, the narrator is unable to sleep because of the disturbance of mice goes to the seashore at night and witnesses hundreds of Ganesha figures crowding the beach and immersing themselves. This miracle makes no sense to

either the narrator or the reader of the story. At the end of the story, the narrator goes to meet Mr.Kini to inform him that as the miraculous revolt has ended, he might just as well relax. However, when Kini who is praying resumes his prayers, curses instead of prayers start coming out of his mouth as if they were prayers. The story is cryptic and open for allegorical explanations, but the story which makes no rational sense and which is full of irrelevancies and open-ended narration does not offer any explanation regarding its own 'moral' or 'point' it is making. In fact, it is deliberately made 'pointless', full of unexplained synaptic jumps. It has a bizarre and irrational quality of a freakish nightmare.

The same surreal nightmarish quality pervades Sarang's Kafkaesque story 'Om Phallus' in which the narrator named Anil Rao wakes up one morning to find that he has turned into a gigantic erect phallus. Like Gregor Samsa, there is no terrifying shock, but only immediate routine concerns like how to speak and move around without arms and legs and to meet his girlfriend Latika for the last time. Anil Rao flees to a village where people consider him to be a manifestation of Lord Shiva and worship him. A synaptic 'leap' happens when a woman named Rakhmabai who considers him a god falls in love with him and wants to bear him a child. A synaptic and tragic twist in the tale comes when the erection goes away and "Om Phallus" becomes a limp organ unable to jump around. On his pleading, the woman takes limp Anil Rao, wraps him in a sari, and leaves him on a rock under a tree far away from the village. In the story, Sarang uses the myth of Shiva's Lingam in the story the erect phallus tells the villagers who think he is manifestation of Lord Shiva. The story tells of creation of the world by three highest gods in Hindu mythology: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. In the story, Brahma asks Shiva to create the world and Shiva agrees. However, when Shiva submerges in the water for thousands of years to meditate and create the universe. Impatient Vishnu asks Brahma to create the world, as Shiva shows no signs of resurfacing. When Shiva returns to find that Brahma has already created the world, he is furious. He finds man full of anxiety, fear and confusion and hence, threatens to destroy the world by opening his third eye. Brahma pleads not to do so and promises that everyone will worship Shiva in the form of Lingam. Shiva agrees not to destroy the creation. As for his lingam, he says that he has no use for it now, as it was to create a perfect human race. Therefore, he broke off his lingam and threw it upon the surface of the earth. This version of myth is from the Shiva Purana, narrated in Wendy Doniger O Flaherty's *Hindu Myths* (1975).

What is important for us to note is that the use of myth in this story is not a typically modernist use of myth. Eliot's reflection on the use of myth is a typical instance of the

modernist use of myth. One of the vital features of modernism was a symbolic and avant-garde use of myths, and again Eliot was among the earliest modernists to theorize and critically speculate on using myths in modern literature. His essay, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' published in 1923 issue of Dial reviews Joyce's novel Ulysses and compares Joyce's 'mythical method' 'a scientific discovery' comparable to Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Eliot says, "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him." The mythical method, Eliot argues, which was adumbrated by Yeats in poetry is "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." He notes that instead of narrative method, we can have mythical method, which is "a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form" which many critics desire.

Sarang's use of myth is by no means a mode for "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" or a way of shaping and ordering the chaos of the present. His use of myth seems to be more satirical and parodic in its intent. It also seems to be serving more of 'synaptic' function of making startling leaps and introducing discontinuity. Myth in Sarang is a 'synaptic' device used to create dizzying and baffling effects. It exemplifies his 'synaptic adventurousness' rather than a desire to impose order and shape on incoherent reality of modern life. In a way, it is the exact opposite of Eliot's 'mythical method' in that it imposes disorder, discontinuity and incoherence upon the coherence of ordinary narratives.

An excellent example of this synaptic use of myth can be found in his story "The Odour of Immortality". In this story, Champa a Nepali sex worker in Kamathipura dreams of freedom from her oppressive state by making quick money and returning to Nepal. The madam of her house demands fifty thousand rupees for her freedom and so Champa starts taking in more customers than most of other girls. Having heard of the myth of Indra who was cursed with thousands of vaginas on his body, she fantasizes about having ten vaginas all over her body so that she would be able to take ten customers at a time and make money faster. She remembers the supernatural powers of the tantric Mahant Satyendra who can actually help her fulfill her desire for having ten vaginas. The Mahant uses his powers and Champa develops vaginas on her body. Champa becomes a great hit in the market, and other madams and pimps become jealous of her success. They inflict black magic on her so that anyone who has sex with Champa immediately becomes impotent. Her business suffers and she is crestfallen. In a synaptic leap, Sarang introduces strange twist in

the tale. One day a beggar comes to her and demands sexual favours. Out of pity and because of his good looks, Champa allows him to have sex with her. However, she realizes that the beggar is none other than Lord Indra in disguise. She falls at his feet and tells him that she has been cursed that anyone who has sex with her will become impotent. Indra says that was precisely the reason why he wanted to copulate with her, as he had grown sick and tired of his lust and ill repute as a fornicating god. In return, Indra blesses her that all the vaginas on her body will turn into eyes as they did once on his body. When her body develops thousand eyes, the sight of her eyes dazzled people. Champa dies of AIDS in the end and her picture is worshipped in Navratri in Kamathipura.

Sarang's use of myth as can be seen in "The Odour of Immortality" is by no means a "shaping device" but a tool to generate new mythological forms. Sarang seems to be using myths to create new mythology of his own. The most famous example of Sarang's use of myth as a synaptic device is his story "Interview with Mr. Chakko". The story is imaginary account of an interview with a sailor named Chakko who is shipwrecked and marooned on an unknown island of Lorzan. The mythical/synaptic aspect of this island is that women on the island had only half bodies-either upper half or the lower half, while men had whole bodies. The protagonist, Mr. Chakko first marries a woman with lower half of body "who only knew how to open her legs". Later as he feels that he needs someone to talk to, he exchanges her for a woman who only has upper half of human body. The story recounts bizarre details of Chakko's life on Lorzan. One 'synaptic' incident is when his fellow mate Vaiko desires to go the island of Amuraha where men are half bodied and women are full bodied. When Vaiko reaches Amuraha he is torn apart from waist by hysterical hordes of women. In the end when Chakko manages to flee the island after decades and return home, he marries a 'full bodied' woman named Lakshmi. In a gruesome 'synaptic' twist to the tale, Chakko gets hold of an axe and cuts Lakshmi into two pieces as he is too used to half bodied women.

The story is open to multiple interpretations. The author, however, puts an endnote to the story recalling Freud's statement that there is something "in the nature of sexual instinct, which is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction." Wendy Doniger (1999, 215-216) looks at this piece as a satire, a tongue in cheek allusion to the myths of splitting and doubling of women in Greek and Hindu mythology. The axe-wielding Chakko obliquely alludes to axe wielding Parshurama who on the orders of his father beheaded his mother only to have him revive her. Sarang however is more interested in creating a new mythical narrative, rather than using myth to impose order on the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".

One can also consider Sarang as a true postmodern Indian writer in English. When Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) in his 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism' states, 'A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern', he is accentuating the import of the avant-garde tendency of certain postmodern art, which is radically experimental, non-conformist and irreverent towards the established rules of art. This irreverence towards traditional and established norms makes the modernist work possible in the first place and it is precisely the spirit behind postmodernism too. Taking a cue from Lyotard's theorization of the term postmodernism as nonconformist writing i.e. the writing that does not play to the gallery of the market, media or academia I argue that the post-eighties postcolonial novel in Indian writing in English as popularized by Rushdie, Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri or Vikram Seth is not really 'postmodern' and that more marginal and experimental writers like Vilas Sarang who have courage to write against the grain of market pressures and academic outlook can be thought more profitably as 'postmodern'.

As seen earlier, it seems that poetry, rather than fiction, was first to articulate modernist sensibility in India. When we come to 'Indian Fiction in English', however, we find entirely different story. Vilas Sarang (1989:4) points out modernity was available to the Indian English poet readymade that and modernism came to some Indian languages much earlier. The same can be said about postmodernism in Indian writing in English. Interestingly there is no counterpart to modernist fiction in the west in Indian writing in English. The great absence of the fiction inspired by Kafka, Camus, Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway was filled up the fiction inspired by Marquez, Kundera and Grass. We started imitating the postmodern movement in fiction without imitating modernism in English. This shows that Indian Writing in English, though it pretends to be radical is actually extremely conformist, derivative and usually falling prey to fashions.

Unlike postmodernism in the West, which grew out reaction against establishment of modernism, postmodernism in Indian writing came out of desire to conform to the postmodernist movement in the west and especially the Latin American Magic Realism boom of the sixties and seventies. Influence of Marquez, Grass, and Kundera on Rushdie is unmistakable. However, Rushdiean School of fiction was obsessed with the postcolonial themes of migrancy, allegories of nationhood and experience of Diasporas. As I resist the tendency to conflate modernity and colonialism, I also tend to protest the tendency to conflate postmodernism with postcolonialism. The postcolonial novel, which came as postmodern novel after Rushdieian revolution in the early eighties has today become a

cliché, dogma and conformity with Ghoshes and Kiran Desai's still playing the raag postcolonial in their latest works. It conforms to the International market forces and caters not only to the western audience but it also caters to the tastes of postcolonial academicians armed with postcolonial theorization of the exile and the migrancy finds these convenient to discuss.

The genuine postmodern spirit, it seems, is non-conformist in Lyotardian sense. It resists the overwhelming forces of market, academia and established modes of writing and I find that the Great Indian Postcolonial novel is not postmodern in its spirit. The writer which I would like to term as postmodern are not the ones obsessed with postcolonial run-of-the mill themes of allegories of nation, colonial experience, diaspora, migrancy etc but are non-conformist and radical in their attitudes. Vilas Sarang is severely neglected because of his radical and non-conformist mode of writing which combines grotesque imagery and extremely unsettling themes. Yet one of the reasons for his neglect is that he writes in a neglected form of short story. Novel, as Sarang himself argues (2006: 283), is a 'prisoner of the market place' and short story is truly a Guerrilla form. Any theorization about postmodernism in Indian fiction will have to address the inequality among fictional genres. The novel remains the big boss and the other modes of fictional narration like short story or fables and this I think is because novel is more market friendly commodity. Sarang is avowedly anti-representational modernist in his aesthetics and provides a refreshing alternative to over-hyped 'diaspora' and 'exiled' non-resident Indian English writers like Salman Rushdie, VS Naipaul and Kiran Desai.

Vilas Sarang is also a marginalized voice in Marathi and that has largely to do with the establishment of the nativist dogma. Sarang's bilingualism placed him on the borders of the Marathi literary establishment too. In the past sixty years, the bilingual writers like Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Vilas Sarang, Gauri Deshpande and Kiran Nagarkar have played a considerable role in establishing modernism in Marathi literature and in Indian writing in English. Bilingualism also seems to be related to the phenomenon of displacement and migration, which has received great deal of attention in the case of Indian English Diaspora novels, but has not been mapped adequately in the case of bhasha writers.

There was a vicious attack on bilingual imagination from various quarters like nativism and nationalism, which has lead to subsequent marginalization of certain authors like Sarang and Nagarkar in Marathi literary scenario. Vilas Sarang (1994/2009) writes, 'In view of the regressive mood of Marathi literature...the rise of a phenomenon called

nativism (Deshivad) is probably not surprising. Ironically, its leader is the novelist Bhalchandra Nemade, the one-time avant-garde, tradition-breaking author of *Kosla*, with the practitioners of "rural literature" as his principal followers. They have accused writers such as Chitre, Kolatkar, and myself of being "slaves of Western culture."

Sarang (1994/2009) notes, 'Bilingualism can leave you in a tricky situation. Marathi readers have frequently complained that my Marathi sounds as though it was translated from English, and I daresay they are not entirely off the mark. At the same time, whenever I have written directly in English, there sometimes came the complaint that it did not sound quite English... It can be the unenviable fate of the bilingual writer to be turned away from both houses he considers his own.' As Sarang notes, the English idiom of a bilingual writer is seen as not being English enough and the Marathi idiom is perceived as Anglicized and hence inauthentic and this results in dual alienation of a bilingual writer. This predicament of dual alienation is an important context for analysis of translations made by these writers.

Using Lambert's classification(1974) between 'additive' and 'subtractive' bilingualism in a different context, we can see that the Anglo-Bhasha bilingualism is not 'subtractive' in the sense nativists and nationalists see it , but it is actually 'additive' as it adds to two literary cultures simultaneously. It expands the repertoire and horizons of two literary traditions. It is in this light that we can look at the contribution of the 'Anglo-Bhasha' bilingual writers. The double hybridization of two artistic idioms resulting from bilingual writings is in fact a creative phenomenon.

Sarang's literary criticism was extremely unconventional and provocative. One illustration of his outside the box thinking can be found in his original insight regarding caste politics and sociology of caste in Marathi literary history. In a provocative article, "Marathi Sahityatil OBC Yug' (in the magazine 'Khel' vol. 7, 2007) he attempts to theorize the relationship between this societal category and the poetics practiced by these writers in terms of the questions of identity. The article is later anthologized as 'Marathi Vangmayatil Madhyamvarniya Yug' in his collection of articles *Vangmaiyeen Sauskruti ani Samajik Vastav* (2011). It is interesting how he changed the title of his article from 'OBC' Yug (2007) to 'Madhyam Varniya' (of the Middle Varna) in his collection in 2011, probably to avoid controversy.

Sarang points out that this mass of 'Other Backward Classes' is a heterogeneous and scattered one. It lacks any 'face of its own'. Historically, the modernist poets of the nineteen forties and the fifties in Marathi like BS Mardhekar or Vinda Karandikar were from the upper-castes. After the sixties, the Dalits and OBCs started making in-roads into Marathi literary world. While the Dalits were aggressive and assertive, the OBC writers were very often on the 'middle grounds'. Sarang points out that Bhalchandra Nemade, a major OBC writer of this period, failed to provide leadership as he remained closer to the identarian politics of 'grameen' writing and 'sub-culture' (pot-sauskruti) politics. As the time precedes, the 'grameen (rural) literature' will give way to the category of 'OBC' literature, Sarang notes. In short, great shift in literary values is under way.

Sarang remarks that in terms of literary practice, it did not have a poetics of its own. It often used the brahminical upper caste aesthetics, or used the Modernist idiom, or used the Dalit poetics or often followed the poetics of 'grameen' or 'rural' literature. After 1980, Sarang argues, however the situation changed and the OBC writers started asserting themselves in poetry. Their preferred mode was 'realism' which gave rise to 'realistic and unadorned poetry in Marathi.' They could not identify with the poetic idiom of the poetry of earlier generation be it conventional-romantic one or be it modernist one. It seems the OBCs' search for their own identity, their own face and their own voice will be critical for Indian cultural scenario.

Sarang's controversial conceptualization, irrespective of its accuracy, is fascinating and has far-reaching implications for literary studies in India. However, some questions need to probe further. For instance, why did the OBCs stay away from Dalit politics and poetics? What were the impact of the Mandal Commission implementation and the rise of OBCs as a force in Indian politics on the way Indian literature was read and written? What is the impact of the swing of the OBCs towards the erstwhile upper caste party BJP (see the statistics from the Hindu given below) on cultural politics of India, especially, the identarian ones? Specifically, with the OBC as a Prime Minister who has a thumping support from the upper-castes as well, what will be the trajectory of OBC identity politics in India?

To conclude, it can be said that Sarang was never afraid of questioning the conventional and widely prevalent understanding of culture, poetics, politics and practices in his writings. His avant-garde outlook of risking marginality is the trait of postmodernism as conceptualized by Lyotard which is a prerequisite for a work to become truly modern.

His courage and originality of outlook was the reason why he was neglected by the establishment in Marathi as well as in Indian writing in English. In the literary world dominated by political correctness and creative timidity, his untimely demise will be a great loss to Indian literary world.

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