

# Line Byline: Poetry As and Against Journalism

Amitava Kumar



1.

Let me begin with the obscure. Not simply in the sense of the obscurity, subtlety, or indirection of poetry that is often posited against the professed plainness of prose and its accessibility. Instead, let us take up the obscure in the sense of being unknown, ignored, not open to discovery: that, then, which is not news.

This is the twentieth April of Nineteen Seventy-Four or  
a professional assassin's right  
hand or the leather glove  
of a detective or a spot stuck on the binoculars  
of an attacker?

Whatever it be--I cannot call it just another day!

The poet Alokdhana, writing in an old, sprawling city on the banks of the Ganges in India, approaches a date and makes it unreal. This could really be an important day, maybe they shot the leader of the new democracy movement. Maybe the neofascist government at the center sterilized all the male members of the minority Muslim community in one colony. A woman was raped. Perhaps. This could be an important day: its unreality is announced by this poet by comparing it to a grainy detail of the detective's glove in a B-grade Hindi movie. In a world rendered surreal by capitalism, it is not the realism of journalism but the contrary realism of poetry that brings us the news.

The different orders of the real....What does it mean to call to mind the detail of a Hindi movie while speaking in New Jersey--even if it's true that the poet Alokdhana counts among his heroes Walt Whitman who has the honor of having one highway rest-plaza named after him in this state? That invocation, it seems to me, inaugurates an inquiry that involves, but also exceeds, the poetry inscribed in the posters held by protesters after the Brixton riots in Britain proclaiming "Because You Were There We Are Here." It includes the place of the East in the imagination--the minds and the media--of the West.

2.

The newspapers did not fail to mention the Hollywood story, "An Affair to Remember."

I read of the February 23 shooting at the Empire State Building in the newspapers and wondered how I could talk about this with my students.

Suddenly, truth became a matter not to be sought from books or the words teachers write on the blackboard. This time we were to study the lines of chalk drawn around dead bodies.

The newspapers made no mention of the fact that in the US last year, 20,000 people died in homicides and 30,000 in suicides.

The book of poems written by an Egyptian Jew in exile gave way to another image. A foreigner carrying in the crook of his arm a tiny gun.

There is a terrible solitude that surrounds the dead; it is only enhanced when the dead is also a killer. I looked at the newspaper photographs of Ali Abu Kamal. In one of them, his young son, sitting between his grief-stricken mother and sister, holds a large, framed picture of his father. Printed beneath that photograph was a blow-up of Abu Kamal's face from the same picture, the only mug-shot we will now see of the dead man.

In the second photograph, Abu Kamal was no longer a father or a husband. We no longer saw him against the cheap backdrop of a Third World studio-photographer's imagination: a canvas curtain with flower-beds painted on them, simulating a large garden outside one's home or, perhaps, the romance of easy, unrestrained travel to far-away places.

The black and white pages of the newspapers we held in our hands did not hold our vision: that had fled the land about which the poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote:

Sometimes pus  
Sometimes a poem.  
Something always bursts out.  
And always pain.

If we were so inclined, we might already have seen in that close-up of his photograph the face that was described by one of Abu Kamal's victims, "He looked crazy, just a mad old man."

Amichai could only find this terrible, moving consolation for his own pain:

But through the wound on my chest  
God peers into the world.  
I am the door  
to his apartment.

What color are God's eyes? I ask because I read about the wife of a "recent immigrant" who was also badly injured in the Sunday shooting. "She's got the reddest eyes I've ever seen," a hospital worker said of the grieving Mrs. Carmona.

In Abu Kamal's violent end and in the grief of the Carmona's, like the shadow of the negatives that persist in the black and white images we see, we were confronted with immigrant histories.

"Despair is still my star," bemoaned the Syrian poet Adonis. And I'm ready to see-- quickly, urgently--how it comes to be that a single man's sense of unremitting loss draws upon another buried, often denied, narrative of collective injury inflicted in an unequal world.

It is a recognition of that which should turn this story of Ali Abu Kamal into the history of the grief of entire nations.

Or, if you prefer, rewrite the symbol of the Empire State Building, from the Hollywood romance of a single man sleepless in Seattle into the nightmare of millions living life as a waking sleep.

And it is in writing, I would like to tell my students, that one works against death. That one protests against annihilation. Against the failure of memory. A ruse that works as a revenge against the collective forgetting of other deaths.

It was perhaps this that Amiri Baraka had in mind when he wrote in "The Flying Dutchman" that Charlie Parker would have played not a note of music if he could have walked up the East 67th Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note!

3.

I am riding in a New York subway car, reading a literary article about the Brazilian poet, João Cabral de Melo Neto. The review mentions that Cabral had reached a dead end as a poet "[u]ntil he happened to read one day that life expectancy in his native Recife was even lower than India." As a result of this new knowledge, the poet made a turn from speculative poetry to a social one. He wrote *The Dog Without Feathers*. "With that poem

he rediscovered the city of his birth, its river, the rio Capibaribe, and the people who survive however marginally along its banks." Shortly thereafter, I search for and find Cabral's poem about the river in his birthplace.

And I never saw it seethe  
(as bread when rising  
seethes).  
In silence  
the river bears its bloating poverty,  
pregnant with black earth."

I am held by the poem's presentation of this image of the river that "never opens up in fish." Even in the description of its stagnation, Cabral conveys the dynamism of his inquiry. The sluggishness of the river and its poverty evokes a response very different from that which is incited by the closed-mindedness or the complacency of the bourgeoisie on its banks.

It is there,  
with their backs to the river,  
that the city's "cultured families"  
brood over the fat eggs  
of their prose.  
In the complete peace of their kitchens  
they viciously stir  
their pots of sticky indolence.

I invoke this poetry in opposition to the popular journalism of the West. When the sun rises over the skyscrapers of New York City, darkness has already fallen in the land of my birth. In that area of darkness, the head of the New Delhi bureau of *The New York Times* discovers the face of otherness that offers the comfort of absolute difference. "Shackled by Past, Racked by Unrest, India Lurches Toward Uncertain Future" is the title of a story filed by Edward R. Gargan. From that remote wasteland of meaning, the journalistic Indiana Jones files his report on his reading of the runes of frozen time. "More than 70 percent of India's people live in villages, where their habits, customs and traditions have changed little over the centuries, even as economic, religious and political forces have changed around them."

By the article's end, it has become possible to psychologize current struggles and fit them in a vision of the eternal, fixed psyche. The concluding quote reads: "The Indian temperament is not democratic enough." Let me engage in a bit of psychologizing myself. In this article, we are back in the nightmare space of an American childhood-memory of the fifties and sixties. It is dinner time in a white, middle-class American home. The child, who is refusing to finish the food on the plate, is remonstrated by the mother, "Eat your food, Billy. There are children going to bed hungry in India."

*The Times of India* is not too different from the *The New York Times*. To quote Alokdhana again:

They are professional murderers  
those who choke and strangle to death the naked news  
in the shadow of sensational headlines  
they show themselves again and again the serfs of that one face  
the map of whose bathroom is bigger than the map of my village.

The publishing houses of this country like the pale worms  
found in the icy cracks:  
on the banks of the river Hooghly, before taking his own life  
why has the young poet screamed-- "*Times of India*"

Why, indeed? Because, as Neruda wrote in his memoirs, "we can say that our readers have not yet been born." Poetry is unable to function as journalism because journalism will not allow any space for the poetry of protest--the poor and the illiterate find space neither in the pages and tv screens of the powerful media, nor, lest we get carried away let us also declare, between the covers of the prestigious, prize-winning volumes of poetry.

4.

Even news is only advertising. In a poem entitled "What's in the News: A Type of Love Poem," I have attempted to allow poetry to present a critique of that condition. Let me quote the beginning stanza:

As I flip the channels on my TV  
the flames in L.A. are melting the cheese on a burger  
in a Perkin's commercial. I am saying this to you in a far off space  
to the right which is empty now but will have two hours from now  
the density of your body, your voice and short hair,  
the thin skin of veins on your thigh supporting me as I  
watch the beaten-down brutalized body of Rodney King  
boldly going where no one has gone before, and  
even as I catch a glimpse of a crowded meeting in a ghetto,  
a split-second later, I'm only left witnessing the whole of Americana  
ventriloquizing through the single drop of beer  
left shimmering on a bottle's lip: "Why Ask Why?"

And yet, unlike journalism which presumes a public sphere, in other words, a public, poetry is often unable to boast of a broad constituency. Why? To an extent, that is because of poetry's affectation. Even in postcolonial zones of poetic engagement, drawn perhaps by the strain of Western romantic tradition, poets continue to speak about the conditions of loneliness--albeit in strict, interrogative materialist terms. Maheshwar, a

journalist and poet of the Indian People's Front, writes from his hospital bed just before his death:

My friends do not want to stick by my side |  
beyond the ritual exchanges about our well-being.  
It is right at this point  
that my loneliness descends  
and like the dusk spreading in the sky  
fills the corners and the insides of my brain.  
This loneliness alone is my strength  
in its womb  
takes birth my desire to live....

You will be finished--  
you will be killed  
because--  
when did you learn in life  
the politics of sharing with someone  
someone's loneliness.

This is no ordinary loneliness, after all it insists on a shared condition. Yes; and yet, as a repeated gesture, it marks the poet, however self-critically, as nevertheless solitary. For poetry to adopt the publics produced by, and available to, journalism, poetry will have to inaugurate another politics of affiliation. While retaining its difference from journalism--forcing singular constructions over allegedly objective ones, ditching an ideologically saturated realism for irruptions of marginalized realities, exchanging news for the newsworthy--poetry will need poets as public intellectuals. Poets, not uprooted souls wandering the dark fields of the republic, but grounded in possibilities. Is the poignant lament of the Indian poet Ved Prakash Vatuk, an immigrant in the U.S., the most effective one available to us?

To each community  
I have become  
nothing more  
than a lost part  
of some other "they."  
My home is a prison of time  
the world my exile.

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