

Translation of the writers' text

Launch of Trickster City

12th February 2010

Delhi.

Azra Tabassum:

They say in Delhi, there are no red lights; there are only the hands of strangers.

We, along with all our co-writers of *Trickster City*, who are among the audience, welcome you all. We would like to thank Ankur and Sarai, along with whom we have made, through Cybermohalla, a generative space. A space where we pose and think through our most challenging questions. We thank all our co-travellers, who argued and debated with us, challenged us further as we wrote and questioned.

Lakhmi Kohli:

We made Cybermohalla a space where unfinished stories may find a narration.

We know that fearless speech requires fearless listening.

Over the years, we have realised, that people's capacity to surprise each other is inexhaustible.

Suraj Rai:

To be continuously surprised by another can evoke fear. To us it presented an ocean of possibilities. Stories became the oars with

which we navigated this vast ocean.

But the questions one might ask now are –

How can one know another's desire to surprise?

How can one become aware of the possibilities in someone?

Neelofar:

What is “to surprise”?

Does surprise excite? Or is it that by being surprised we re-
animate ourselves?

Is being surprised a self-absorbing game? Or does it make us tug
anew at the weave of our relationships?

Jaanu Nagar:

It must be said that these two words – “surprise” and “capacity”
– are vital for understanding any environment or context, and to
find ones own connection with it.

To surprise, to think the intangibles in life and in force of life,
and ones capacity to search new directions within them – these
indicate the quality of ones life.

Love Anand:

We live in the city. In living in it, we affirm its multifareous
forms, and yet we find ourselves incomplete within it. It is in
this incompleteness that the desire to search begins. As we
search, some people appear around us as missing persons.

Azra:

Everyone renews within them their stubbornness to live. We

recognise it as an intellectual process, as something that expands and deepens with time.

When we say 'missing', we are not talking about a lack. The 'missing' is that which provides the impetus, the capacity to move from a known threshold to multiple thresholds. We keep reaching out to those thresholds which give us the high of weaving together new creations. And this becomes part of our desires.

To recognise something as 'missing', is to open oneself up to imagining and discovering oneself, new directions and ones co-travellers.

Suraj:

We set out on this long journey of writing. We'd write about that around us which perplexed us, and these perplexities we'd share with each other.

But merely transcribing what one sees and hears – is that writing?

Chiselling ones writing through ones own experience, memories and perspectives, we encountered questions. To move ahead without thinking these questions through was impossible. And so we asked ourselves:

Can every day be accounted for?

Can every moment be recalled and narrated?

Does every passing moment get absorbed in our past?

Every space is somewhat like a story. A story told over many

pages. And there are those pages too, which get folded at the edges, and so, when they are turned, they either wrap and silence many pages, or open out several new pages. Time is revealed, or gets concealed in this way. And along with it, many people too.

This is the threshold at which we realised that – to write is to keep active a sense of the force of life. This sense is for the writer, for the one who is being written about, and also for the thoughts and visions that unfold when one writes.

[Neelofar reads a text]

A cot on the road divider, and on the cot sat she... There is a pair of thick glasses on her eyes, because of which one of her eyes looks big. Her black hair are curly. Her hijab in her hands, she is staring unblinkingly at the bald patch of land before her. Her experienced heart knows a fountain will powerfully sprout out from this land. The sand on this hillock will soon be moist; the garbage will turn to gold. This place will breathe and make space within itself for many lives to breathe within it...

A strong gust of wind. It starts slowly, but then gathers velocity... The sand doesn't want to stir. The wind wants to draw it towards itself, seduce it with the promise of flight. How long can dust on the ground refuse the promise of this intoxication? Soon it let itself be carried away. And she? She sits, her eyes smarting... Each time she opens her eyes, she sees things have changed. Is it her mind, or is the world spinning? How is this place is changing the way it is?

The dust is slowly settling. One can see, the bald patch of land is generating something. Have these bodies been carved out of its own mud? Or have they been carried by the wind, brought to rest here? All the bodies are in different postures. Postures that don't make it seem as

if this place were new for them. It seems as if these bodies know this space, know the waves, the crests and troughs that constitute this place.

[Love reads a text]

It is dark in the lane now. The bottle is empty. This roof is on the seventh floor. Like countless nights that have passed, and all those nights still to come, it begins from his feet. “Tha-Tha-Thaiyya...” Till his hips gyrate to a rhythm that he alone knows. Then the tips of his body – his head, his fingers – stir. His torso sways. Every pore of his body secretes a music, each cell that makes him stir. He begins to dance.

He can't piece together how things changed for him. But he knows something inside him was cast away, was slowly pushed aside and locked out by his surroundings. The climb up the forty steps to the roof on the seventh floor was a daily passage to solitude, so he could be alone with what was precious to him.

There was a time when the roof was not all he had.

The courtyard was open to the sky. It was past midnight, and there was no sign of sleep in his eyes. The drum beat loudly. Voices sang. Among these, another voice – but it didn't sound like someone was singing; it sounded like a beast letting out a wail. It was his voice.

Jaanu:

Confronting us, a poet in our neighbourhood said to us, “Come to me when you have a question that goes beyond my relationships and world of work.” This critique compelled us to start a new dialogue with our own self.

We asked ourselves: How do we think about a space which is only beginning to get formed, where relationships and the world of work are still tenuous, and where wandering and weaving are

happening together, challenging each other? To be introduced to a person, and to be introduced to a place – how are these different? Does a person become what he does because of a place? Or does a place become what it does because of the people in it? Perhaps both. Perhaps place and people keep forming each other and clashing with each other.

[Neelofar and Love read]

Recognising the pitch of the whistle, a flock of pigeons turned sharply in its flight, waylaying pigeons from a neighbouring flock startled by this sudden intersection. The boy continued to whistle, guiding his pigeons. He scattered grain on the roof on which he stood. Their wings flapping furiously, the pigeons alighted on the roof. The boy counted them while they pecked lustily at the grains. Each time he spotted a pigeon from another flock amidst his own, he grabbed it and pushed it into a cage. Then he set his own pigeons free to fly once again in the sky.

A woman appeared at the window of her first floor. “I am roaming far more in my dreams than I can possibly roam in Sawda-Ghevra,” she said. “Just recently, I was at the shrine of Lattu Shah Baba. There is so much spiritual depth and quietness there. I could see myself sitting by the shrine, offering namaz, seeking the saint's benevolence. I saw, Babaji is asking me about the good and the bad in my life, and I am answering him. Then I am going towards the shrine of Haji Ali—angels are carrying me to it. I am dressed in white clothes; I am flying. Suddenly I see, the fridge has caught fire.”

The man with the drums played on his drum and walked through J-block, his eyes scanning his surroundings. He paid no attention to the hullabaloo around him. He looked past it, to some point far away. But whenever he'd reach that point, it was as if by virtue of

having reached it, his relation with it would end. His eyes would always be set ahead of him. Up ahead, some goats were nuzzling around in a sack, trying to chew on the cauliflowers in it. Till he was far from them, he kept looking at them; but when the man with the drums reached them, he removed his gaze from them and walked on, as if his destination lay further ahead. Did he even have a destination? He didn't halt anywhere, but only kept walking. When my niece was much younger, why did my mother scare her by saying, "Don't fuss, or the dhol wala will take you away"? She used to say the same thing to me, and possibly both my elder sisters too were kept in check by evoking this same figure. A drummer beats his drums, and amid the crowd that gathers around him because of this noise that he produces, his eyes lose their focus. Drawn by the sound, the crowd follows him, but maintains a distance. Weaving a web of glances around him, the drummer disappeared into K-block.

Azra:

Stories never complete themselves. They always remain unfinished, and that's their strength. This is what keeps alive an anticipation in listening, and surprises the story teller.

My love for writing grew when I realised that the words that we hear around us, or which we say ourselves in our everyday, are not only part of language, but each word has an expansive world of its own. A shadow accompanies every word. A word is that tool which opens out the possibilities for creativity. These possibilities are infinite.

When I realised this, I found myself inextricably bound to the shadows cast by different words. I actively began to seek them around me, and explore them in my home and among all my

companions.

When we find ourselves thinking, “I now understand this place”, or “I understand this person completely”, it means we have stopped thinking, ended our curiosity about things.

“I have not understood”. When one says this, s/he opens out new ways of listening and speaking. And that's when we begin to excavate again that which we thought we had already found and we had.

“What is my own capacity, creativity, possibility?” This is where our journey began, but soon our words changed. Or perhaps I should say, the words that circulate between us may still be the same, but over time, their edge and their velocity keep changing.

Suraj:

The question is not only – “What are we giving to a context?” But equally important is the question – “What have we brought with us to that context?”

Questions change. How questions are formulated, changes. The relation of the teller and the listener to words and stories also changes. “Capacity, creativity and possibility” make this flight and scaling new heights possible.

But “capacity, creativity and possibility” can only breathe when they are given flight, outside ones own self. Otherwise they remain, merely, as ones experience or story.

Azra:

Is there anything outside experience and stories?

I was finding it difficult to write beyond experience and story. My co-travellers realised this when they saw my pen had dried up. Self-love allows inner desires to flower, take flight. But it also reduces ones capacity to spread ones arms and take in other lives.

How does one discern what it is that one is weaving;
which possibilities we are nurturing;
which possibilities we want to be in dialogue with?

How will we know if we are stuck merely in repetition?
How will we know if we have turned ourselves merely into
archives from which we keep producing and presenting things
before others?
After all, that's not what we want to do!

We tussled with this difficulty and searched resources so we may
emerge out of our own drying up.

[Love and Neelofar – dialogue]

Love: Lets marry tomorrow?

Neelofar: Why? What good will that do?

Love: You'll start living in my house.

Neelofar: Then?

Love: *We will live together.*

Neelofar: *Then?*

Love: *Those things will happen, which happen between husband and wife. We will have children. They'll call you 'ma' and me 'dad'.*

Neelofar: *Then?*

Love: *Don't you know?*

Neelofar: *What's new in this? Isn't something new possible? All this has already happened in the world, hasn't it?*

Love: *By saying this you have equated my love with everyone's love. What is it that you want?*

Neelofar: *Something which really is different.*

Love: *I can't think of my life without you!*

Neelofar: *Really? And what if we don't end up together?*

Love: *I will die then!*

Neelofar: *That means there never was any love between us.*

Love: *Why! Why do you think that? I love you a lot. You don't see this in what I say to you?*

Neelofar: *I used to live even before I met you. Yes, when I met you, I felt this special feeling, and so I found my life even more beautiful than before. To me, these feelings that you have given me will remain with me even after you're not there, and they will ensure I don't feel your absence. Our love has opened new paths for me in my life. If these paths were to close after you are not with me, then what would your love have given me!*

Love: *Do you love me at all?*

Neelofar: *To live is to be in movement. Love which gives you opportunities of flight in life is love that will remain with you always. Whether that love be of friendship or of relationships.*

Love: *What do you want? Why don't you just be explicit about this!*

Neelofar: Along with you, I want the entire world. After all, how long will we remain lost in one another?

Love: Yes, you're right. Go on, take the entire world. Take whatever you want... I think, maybe you want to work.

Neelofar: No.

Love: Then what do you want?

Neelofar: My desire is to fill each day with colours, and this is the desire I want to continue to fuel and live with in the time to come.

Azra:

Resources which made us emerge from ourselves, made us reach beyond ourselves.

So we may find again our romance with our expressivity.

A search which took us beyond our own stories and experiences, into the city, to search again a new language.

[Love reads a text]

Many sharp images came to mind as I sat down to write a review of Godfather. But after an sms conversation about what I was thinking with some friends, these images became blurred. As if the canvas on which I was painting had been spoiled. Thinking about this spoiled canvas, I wrote:

Three men herding forty goats crossed my path. One of the men pulled a goat by its ear; the goat bleated loudly, resisted, and was dragged along, helplessly. The remaining thirty-nine goats followed quietly in line. The two men walking along them hit them with sticks occasionally. I marvelled at how dragging one goat by its ear can control an entire army of goats. The goat right in front can sense it's going to be killed and so it struggles, refusing to move. And the goats

behind it follow quietly, afraid that if they don't, they will get their ears pulled!

[Neelofar reads a text]

Watching Chris Marker's La Jette, I felt:

...All of us see dreams with our eyes closed, and when we open our eyes, we try and think about those dreams. We search frames through which these may enter our lives. What happens if no connection remains between what we saw and what transpired? All of us nurture an inner life within our selves. It lives on in spite of the conditions of life. If this inner life – this internal life – were to be subtracted out of our lives, all that will remain, merely, is the grey, visible, social world.

Lakhmi:

Our emphasis on performative expression was not to veer away from either the truth or the imaginary, but was a challenge we posed to ourselves to encounter every place, each person as shape-shifting.

Some questions arise:

What is life? What is life force? What is to crack something open to make it reveal itself? What is a mystery? What is truth? What is a lie? What is imagination? Who are we? And who am I?

And then we return again to search resources.

[Love reads]

Though, it must be said, one doesn't need to wait too long in order to find happiness. Just dream new dreams in your sleep at night, laugh

away the indignity you felt at work, and pocket all the tickets that will lead you to happiness. These are tickets that can also be bought in black. People line up, stand in queues for these tickets! Just that they're a little scared of asking for them. Who is to say if some official is standing nearby, in vigil, to declare them as criminals if they were to ask for them. And then, everyone is wary too, of how much they will be charged for these tickets in black!

[Neelofar reads]

Outside the cinema hall, their back against the wall, stand many young men, countless dreams in their eyes. Eyes which are staring, now at the cinema hall, now at the actors whose photographs adorn the posters. Eyes with which they check hurriedly what the person standing next to them is looking at, or trying to look at. Maybe they have just come out after watching a show? And are still playing the character they had seen on the big screen? Maybe someone who is without a job is imagining he has found one? And someone is convinced he has now finally found the way through which he can plant the seed of his love in the heart of his beloved? Outside the cinema hall, every pair of eyes is as if dreaming many dreams.

Dreams that are dreamt with open eyes can't be called strange dreams. These aren't dreams dreamt while one sleeps, which can be brushed aside after waking up. These are not daydreams, that they get left aside, tucked away in ones mind alone. Many set out to fulfil these dreams, to make them reach some kind of conclusion. That is why some head out from home, a small bag packed with a change of clothes, and a few rupees in their pockets. He disappears from his known world in search of that other world. Or someone reaches a set where a shooting is on, doing everything within his means to get a chance to show his skills. And that, in front of someone who must have first come here to be

an actor himself, and is still in queue.

These young men hang around the cinema hall for hours, as if stuck to its walls, waiting for that moment which will reveal to them if it is possible, after all, for what they have seen to become reality. They halt there, laze around, behold the walls, the posters, the public entering the cinema hall, the viewers emerging from the cinema hall, their friends and, if nothing else remains, themselves.

A police constable, a stick beating the floor, comes near them and says, “What the hell are you doing here? Why are you standing here? Just loitering? Or are you a ticket blacker? What do you keep doing here? You're not standing here with the intention of picking someone's pocket, are you? I've been watching you for a while now.” These young men who dream with their eyes open (these “pickpockets”, “ticket blackers” and who knows what else they are or might be called next) – listen quietly, or they sometimes become gutsy and talk back. They aren't about to produce any hafta, so the constable can beat down on them a bit harder. For now, these young men will move away. But for sure, they will be back again tomorrow.

Suraj:

Before us today is the question – what qualities of life can we etch out in the zone between the state and the truth? These are the two poles towards which arguments often veer. And the state always asks us – what examples of “being alive” can you provide which can vouch for the truth of what you say?

What are the circumstances about which we become without words? An image emerges before us when we think about this question:

To embellish its truth, the state declares every person a citizen, and every space a territory. It is difficult to make an estimation of what and how many kinds of threads weave a person or a place. Because the state searches for the extent of a thing; it is not concerned with depth.

The state makes rules and regulations. Those who follow them are good citizens, and those who do not, are traitors. Through what words does someone who is in the grey zone between being a good citizen and a traitor express her/himself?

Azra:

The state prepares its eyes in such a way that it will approve of us only when we dawn on certain costumes. But in the time this eye takes to blink, so many kinds of scenes – internal and external to us – open themselves out. Scenes in which one is free, in which one dances, makes others dance, runs, makes others run with him, where one is sometimes a stranger, at other times a neighbour, sometimes on a journey, and at other times a companion in another's travels.

Jaanu:

In the time between when a place breaks and is re-made, can be found many kinds of life, many kinds of signs of life. But the city – the same city that is made up of strangers, where strangers hold hands – is also expert at pretending these signs of life don't exist.

Suraj:

There is a place called Ghevra. A new place in the city, which is still being settled. Through this place we reached those questions which are often uttered once and forgotten, or sentenced to that realm in which they are answered in simplistic terms of behaviour, or in black and white – immense pain or joy.

Places give shelter to different kinds of searches. To rest in these places is not to get planted in them, but to find in oneself a deep urge to embark on another flight. One often thinks people go to a place to search how they may settle down in it. But actually, it is after someone reaches a place that his search begins, is born in him. This search may be of many kinds – search for a habitat, for a gathering, for meeting others. That these desires emerge in every person who comes to a place is not a co-incidence. Then what is it?

Many ways in which one can think about this question have to be found. The important thing is that this is a realm that can't be called or explained as “experience” or easily narrativised.

Jaanu:

Our book, *Trickster City*, begins its life in one part of the city. But this does not mean the book is based on a partition. Every word on a page breathes with life, and when things breathe, the desire to find their own way of living is born in them.

Words fill a book with the breath of life. They can transform lives into a life force. No, a book is not a magical realm, but it has its ways of giving birth to worlds that are magical.

Azra:

There are many paths ahead. Open arms call out to us.

We thank you all, once again, for being with us today. We hope you will read this book, and will want to continue this conversation with us.

Thankyou

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