

# Decolonial Subversions

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Movement in Verse: Poetry as  
Ethnographic Dialogue

Ranjana Raghunathan

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# Movement in Verse: Poetry as Ethnographic Dialogue

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Ranjana Raghunathan<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

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The silences around Indian women's histories and experiences impelled my ethnography among Tamil women in Singapore. In the process, I found myself in a deluge of stories – micro histories beyond the narratives of community or nation, life stories of women, perplexities of belonging for gendered diasporic subjects, yearnings for attachments distant and near, and desires to document intimate worlds. Dissatisfied by the incompleteness of field-notes and academic papers, I resorted to writing verse to process the inchoateness of lived experiences and ethnographic fieldwork. I performed a few of the poems that arose during fieldwork at open-mic platforms, where some of my interlocutors had also gathered to share their own words and narratives. I collaborated with one of my respondents to design an event to curate conversations about Indian women's experiences through dance, poetry, music and panel discussions. My own biography as an immigrant of over twenty years found some resonances in the life stories of Tamil women and a general sense of up-rootedness. The verse that I share here – what I call the poetry of ethnographic dialogue – arose from these interactions.

Tamils, an ethnolinguistic sub-category in the national category of 'Indian,' have had a presence in Singapore since early migration waves following British colonial expansion in the nineteenth century. The waves of migration and settlement have continued to date, driven by an immigration-based population policy, and market demands for labour and technical skills. Yet, the histories of Indians in Singapore have merely documented Indian women's presence as aggregate numbers in immigration reports or prison records, nameless photographs or victims of abuse in colonial archives, and as reproductive agents for an immigrant community to set roots – devoid of any subjectivity. My doctoral research from 2015-2020 is a response to these omissions. It has been published in various formats, including as a chapter outlining the historical context of Indian women's presence, in a 2022 anthology of Indian women's writing. The anthology – a collection of personal histories and lived experiences in various genres, such as poetry, personal essays, and fiction – is a

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<sup>1</sup> Ranjana Raghunathan is an Assistant Professor at the School of Liberal Arts and Design Studies at Vidyashilp University, Bangalore India. She can be reached at: [ranjana.r@vidyashilp.edu.in](mailto:ranjana.r@vidyashilp.edu.in).

powerful response to the historical silences of women's everyday lives, in women's own voices.<sup>2</sup>

Writing verse gave me avenues to co-create and collaborate with some of my interlocutors. Poetry and collaboration also became my tools to process fieldwork, and opened-up ways to think about migration as an intimate experience. They enabled me to trace silences and enter the complex lived experiences in ways that are perhaps more respectful to the storyteller than the theorizing project of an anthropologist. What follows is a collection of four poems. My first poem grapples with the gaps in histories and what it means to be an Indian woman in a diasporic context, my second and third poems centre two Tamil women's life histories as refracted and narrated through my affects and emotional responses, and my fourth poem is the imagination of an ethnographic dialogue about movement.

## Indian woman

I am an Indian woman  
A non-entity in a history book  
In a world of movements  
Conquests and expansions  
Economics and wars  
Slaves and labour;  
I am the one who shrinks  
And implodes  
To a dot  
To a void

I am the salt in the ocean  
The foam in a wave  
That kissed you on the shore  
You are the mountain  
Standing tall  
Hardened by the sun  
I am the cave, where  
Water trickles into a stream  
Moving an inch in a million years  
I am the dampness of the cool cave  
You are the harshness of the hot sun  
I am the body that reflects you  
Here now and gone tomorrow

<sup>2</sup> Shailey Hingorani and Varsha Sivaram, eds., *What we Inherit: Growing up Indian*. Singapore: AWARE, 2022.

Because you move.  
But I move too  
I moved too!

I am an Indian woman  
An index in a history book  
About a world of buildings and roads  
Railways and bridges  
Temples and mosques  
I am a number in the census  
A dot in the economy  
Of GDP growth  
And productivity matrix  
I am the womb that gave birth to you  
Neither slave nor labourer  
A wife! Ha!  
Both slave and labourer  
The reason you exist  
Is the only reason I am allowed  
In history  
To exist  
To be  
A void  
A non-existence

I am death in life  
You are dead life

## Across the shore

Home had receded into a void  
A place known only to the vacant gaze  
And the silent stories of my *amma*'s tears<sup>3</sup>

She drifted on the seas  
Rode the noisy waves  
They drowned her fears  
Salty foam veiled her pain  
She was married off and cast ashore  
On this tiny red dot of an island

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<sup>3</sup> *amma* – mother, in Tamil language.



Forever uprooted, forever adrift  
Unprepared to dwell or to cook *rasam*!<sup>4</sup>

For sixty years  
Through children  
And grandchildren  
Who grew into adulthood  
She remained a child to her mother  
Longing for a home that was  
Prior – to everything  
The very beginning  
Unmoored  
Unmarried  
The ocean was her being

“I will return one day  
If for nothing but to die”  
She dreamed.  
That piece of land  
Across the shore  
Lay waiting  
It spoke in her dreams  
And cried in her tongue  
Just the way she mourned  
And sang the dirge of *oppāri*<sup>5</sup>  
For every single death  
Of kin her land had claimed  
Faraway  
Their life and death  
Were the same  
On this tiny red dot of an island.

“I loved your brother more  
And caused you much pain”  
She gasped.  
And asked for my forgiveness  
As she breathed her last  
And with that breath  
She took with her the songs  
And all the tales

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<sup>4</sup> *rasam* – a thin, spicy southern Indian soup served with rice or had as a drink.

<sup>5</sup> *oppāri* – in Tamil folk song tradition, it is an ancient form of lamenting with eulogy.

And the dirges  
That piece of land dissolved  
And became my hazy dream  
Full of lies about her home here  
Amidst us  
On this tiny red dot of an island.

Home had receded into a void  
A place known only to the vacant gaze  
And the silent stories of my tears

“What good is your education  
If you cannot even make *rasam*?”  
She chided.  
I read every book in the library  
Neither free nor captive  
She held me close  
Afraid to let me go  
Until I was married off and cast ashore  
Her unsaid rules  
And kitchen tales  
About faraway lands and faraway people  
Were my training  
For a married future  
She worried I’d suffer  
As she did  
And focused on the minutiae  
Turning dust to gold

Her fears were a premonition  
About the early years of  
My married uprootedness  
I drifted in the seas  
Of strange tongues  
I rode the noisy waves  
They drowned the evil eyes  
Mislaid food and strewn rice  
I lay shivering on the cold floor  
Of my home on this tiny red dot of an island;  
Forever uprooted, forever adrift  
Unprepared to dwell or to cook *rasam*.

How do I mourn your death *Amma*?



You took all the songs with you  
 What do I tell of my life *Amma*  
 When you lived here only for me?  
 On this tiny red dot of an island  
 You watched me grow  
 Beside my children  
 Their English and my silence  
 Are your death, *Amma*.  
 And with yours –  
 A part of me  
 And my children  
 And our kin

I cannot mourn your death *Amma*  
 You took the songs that I never learnt to sing

Today, I am sixty  
 Lived on this tiny red dot of an island  
 For as long as you did  
 It is home to me and my children  
 But I mourn that it could never be for you  
 You searched your kin among faces of strangers  
 In temples, all alone  
 As your silent tears watered my roots  
 Because ---

Home had receded into a void  
 A place known only to the vacant gaze  
 And the silent stories of my *Amma's* tears

## Life circles

I am only visited by welfare workers  
 They bring my daily meals  
 And ask if I want something –  
 In a tongue –  
 I neither understand nor speak  
 I mumble in *Tamil*  
 They shake their heads, and smile  
 My tongue is dead

I want some spice to bring it to life

'Can you bring me Indian curry?'  
 No no no no ... that is not possible  
 They shake their heads, and smile  
 Leaving a box of canned food  
 And instant noodles  
 At the door of my one-room rental flat

My legs, swollen  
 I drag them to bring the food box in  
 I save it – for grandchildren and great grandchildren  
 I sit by the table and cook myself a curry  
 Today, I made egg curry  
 How else do I eat that food?  
 Bland and tasteless  
 My tongue is dead

I have diabetes  
 And blockages in my heart  
 My blood boils –  
 Blood pressure they say  
 Water in my lungs  
 Breathing is a chore  
 A burden as heavy as  
 My legs, swollen

This is the story of my life  
 Breathing air that cannot enter  
 Eating food that I cannot digest  
 And seeing the world through one eye...  
 I lost one eye at six  
 I helped a girl in my village  
 Remove the thorn in her leg  
 It poked me in the eye

This is it  
 This is my life  
 I cannot remember anything *ammami*<sup>6</sup>

Not my *ooru*<sup>7</sup>  
 Or

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<sup>6</sup> *ammami* – a respectful way of addressing a woman, can also be mother.

<sup>7</sup> *ooru* – polysemic Tamil word that can refer to village, nation or home.



The year I was born  
 The year I came here  
 The year I got married  
*Ammma* sent me away on a ship...

Alone, with a box of clothes  
 On the ship – For eight days  
 I ate there  
 Slept and bathed there  
 With strangers  
 I must have been ten  
*Ammma* said I had to marry my uncle  
 He was here long before I came  
 He could not find a girl here  
 We got married, after my puberty  
 He was thirty, I was twelve  
 We signed papers in court

This is it  
 This is my life  
 I do not remember anything *ammani*

Locked in his *kampung*<sup>8</sup> house, all day  
 Until he returned at dusk  
 Until I had children  
 Until they were older  
 I was a prisoner of his fear –  
 That other men might take me away  
 Reeking of alcohol –  
 He returned  
 Bare hands or the *rotan*<sup>9</sup> –  
 His weapons  
 My silence was mine  
 He ensured I had no friends  
 And I spoke to none  
 I never learnt *Malay*  
 Perhaps I lost bits of *Tamil*  
 To my silence  
 My tongue is dead

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<sup>8</sup> *kampung* – village in Malay language, but also used to refer to the community spirit of Singapore's past.

<sup>9</sup> *rotan* – borrowed from Malay for cane, referred to a cane stick used to beat.

Locked in his *kampung* house, all day  
This is how I narrate my story  
I have only mumbled in *Tamil*  
To welfare workers  
Who shake their heads, and smile  
I sit here all day  
And stare

This is it  
This is my life  
I do not remember anything *annmani*.

I only want my son to get better  
Mentally ill  
Lives in a welfare home  
Wife died  
Child given away  
Government gives him food  
And shelter  
But who will love him after I go?  
My three other sons have families  
Whose children I raised  
I live to love my mentally ill son

This is it  
This is the story of my life  
I do not remember anything *annmani*

My sons sent me here  
To the government housing  
After they took away my money  
I had given birth to ten  
But four are alive now  
One died when I visited my *ooru*  
He ate food that he could not digest  
On that ship  
I never went back again  
My land caused their death  
My motherhood is a murderous sin  
My *ooru* swallowed my son  
I sit here all day  
And stare  
I only want my son to get better



Who will love him after I go?

I returned with tears after every visit –  
To my village, To my mother  
*Amma* sent me away on a ship, alone  
I chose silence, to avoid violence  
Of hunger in the village  
Of an unhappy husband here  
My brother left his wife and children here  
And returned to die in the village  
It is his land, after all  
Where is mine?  
I sit here all day  
And stare

Why didn't god take me?  
All my kin have died  
Why am I kept alive?

This is it  
This is my life  
I do not know anything *ammani*

I cannot walk  
I cannot cook  
I cannot do anything myself  
This is how I narrate my story  
Because...  
I have only mumbled in *Tamil*  
To welfare workers  
Who shake their heads, and smile

I sought brides for my sons  
From my village  
Against their wishes  
My fear imprisoned them –  
What if the wife they choose runs away?  
But she died  
And he is in a welfare home  
Other sons are happy  
I only want my son to get better

I cannot remember anything *ammani*

You say I am eighty  
 You say I was born in 1938  
 But what does that mean?  
 This is it, this is my life  
 Seen with one eye  
 Does the pain become half?  
*Amma* sent me away on a ship...

Alone  
 I cannot breathe  
 I cannot eat  
 I cannot walk  
 I sit here all day  
 And stare  
 Can you bring me Indian curry?

## Movement in Verse

Birthed by excess in fieldwork  
 At the limits of prose –  
 Contained in neat concepts  
 Theory and argument  
 Oh, argument!  
 Tongue-tied but imploding within  
 Myriad questions  
 And deafening silence –  
 In the walls of ivory towers  
 And the violence of transmuting dialogue  
 Into a sole-authored monologue.

Birthed by the solitude  
 Of unanswered questions  
 Wondering why –  
 Ethnography is sealed,  
 In vaults of ‘publish or perish’  
 And not breathing free,  
 In the ground of emergence?  
 A gathering of interlocutors and public  
 Create and perform –  
 Perplexities and epiphanies  
 Voices and silence  
 In a cocoon of verse.



Birtherd by ethnographic dialogue,  
Between –  
A stage and a mic  
Researcher and researched  
Words and applause  
Pauses and excess  
Resonances and the unutterable  
Movement and staying  
Movement and belonging  
Movement and holding  
Movement and letting go