

**THE FIRST ANNUAL
RAJYASHREE KHUSHU LAHIRI MEMORIAL LECTURE**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DISSENTING VOICE
RITU MENON**

**DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY KANPUR**



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RAJYASHREE KHUSHU-LAHIRI (1959-2014)

Dr. Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri, an alumnus of IIT Kanpur, was born in Srinagar in 1959. Her parents were based in Shimla and it was there that she attended both her school and college. Following her graduation from Shimla's Saint Bede's College in 1975, Dr. Khushu-Lahiri moved to Delhi University to pursue her Masters degree. She received her M.A. in English in 1981 and subsequently came to the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur to work as a PhD scholar. Here, under the supervision of Professor R. K. Gupta, Dr. Khushu-Lahiri wrote her thesis exploring the representation of polygamous male in the works of American women novelists like Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather. In 1989 she was awarded the doctorate and the following year she was appointed as lecturer at St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad. In 2006, Dr Khushu-Lahiri joined the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Roorkee as Assistant Professor and in 2011 she moved to the then newly established IIT Ropar to head the Humanities and Social Sciences department there.

Throughout her teaching career that spanned more than twenty years, Dr. Khushu-Lahiri taught both undergraduate and postgraduate students and also guided several MPhil and PhD scholars. The purview of her own research also expanded during this period in several directions. She retained a keen interest in American literature and gender studies all her life but also explored with enthusiasm newly developing areas like cultural studies and postcolonial studies. The number of papers that she published in various Indian and international journals bears testimony to this wide-ranging eclecticism that characterised Dr. Khushu-Lahiri's research.

Dr. Khushu-Lahiri's academic career, tragically cut short by a fatal road accident in 2014, was punctuated by a number of awards and recognitions including Fulbright doctoral scholarship at University of Minnesota, USA (1988), UGC postdoctoral fellowship (1991), Associateship at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (1995), and British Council grant at Oxford University, UK (1999).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DISSENTING VOICE

RITU MENON

*When artistic freedom is forbidden, the compulsions of
life and literature become the same.*

-Nayantara Sahgal

As we are in an educational institution with a very old history of enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge, I'd like to highlight a few significant aspects of both enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge, and relate them to my talk today. The three aspects, or rather the three desirables, in my view are:

- Debate
- Dissent
- Critical reasoning

I'd like, moreover, to relate these to what will form the main substance of my presentation, to the question of voice, through which debate, dissent and critical reasoning find their articulation. And so I will speak about: The Silent Voice, The Dissenting Voice, and The Disobedient Voice.

I take as my premise the fact that we are social beings, that as a people and a society we believe that we are interdependent, by which I mean that we acknowledge that there is a social contract, which not only operates between an individual and society, but which becomes the source of authority for governance. I also take as given that, in addition to leading our lives as private individuals in the domestic sphere, and engaging in our workaday lives with a community of colleagues and fellow professionals in the professional sphere, we are also active in the public domain, an arena in which we participate, interact and contribute variously as spectators, as interlocutors, and as socially responsible citizens. We may enact these several roles discretely or simultaneously; they may on occasion overlap, they may even occasionally conflict with each other, but together they constitute what we think, and make, of ourselves, as complete social beings. So, to illustrate, I am simultaneously wife and mother; daughter and friend; publisher and writer; activist and advocate; interlocutor and mediator; employer and manager; and so on, and each of these selves is in a dynamic relationship with the others, and with society and family. In other words, each influences and is influenced by these relationships – which are both private and public.

Let me turn now to the three aspects/ issues I mentioned at the beginning, namely debate, dissent and critical reasoning, and why they are important not only in the interests of enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge, but in public life, and in the life of the nation.

We are all familiar with the figure of the Argumentative Indian, famously categorised as such by Amartya Sen.

You encounter this Indian on the street, in the television studio, the classroom, at home, in Parliament, in the law courts, obviously and so on – this is the level of the everyday or trivial. We are also familiar with this figure in academia, where the value of a well-argued proposition or hypothesis is recognised as being essential to both theory and practice. But, as Bhikhu Parekh reminds us, there is an equally valuable tradition that we have inherited, and this is the tradition of public debates, a practice that seems to have fallen out of favour, or at least to have receded somewhat, in present times.

These public debates, Parekh says, were a public spectacle, where two or more individuals debated issues in front of thousands of people. He gives the example of the debate between Christian missionaries and Hindu pandits in the early twentieth century, a debate that was chaired by the Maharaja of Banaras. This debate continued for three weeks, with the Maharaja asking the Christian missionary to fire the first question. It would be rare for such a public debate to take place today, I think.

Parekh goes on to say that Gandhi in his time was at the centre of no less than six debates – between him and Veer Savarkar, from which emerged his seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*; between Gandhi and the “terrorists” or revolutionaries, as we say now, on non-violence; between Gandhi and Tagore on education and on foreign cloth; between Gandhi and the modernists on what the model of development for India should be; and finally between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the question of caste. The debate between Gandhi and Nehru on agriculture vs. industry, is of course well known. These debates, far from being a display of egotism or an exercise in one-upmanship, were conducted in the public domain and sought to chart an ideological, philosophical and political course for the country, by taking on board competing, sometimes opposing, world-views, and at other times, even fundamentally different strategies for arriving at a *modus operandi* for the country. One way or another, they became part of public consciousness, and in some critical respects, they are still current, for the project of defining who and what we are, as a country and as a people, is a continuing one.

The existence of public debates should have also seen the concurrent emergence of what is today called a public intellectual – and, in a way, Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Azad, Asaf Ali and others could be called that, too – as a robust and regular feature of public life in India, but, barring a few exceptions, this has not been the case. Who or what is a public intellectual, and does he or she have a defined role in society? This may well be an appropriate issue for debate – and in my view, it is certainly worth debating – but I’d like to attempt a characterisation (not a definition) of such a person. A public intellectual is someone who, by virtue of his or her professional or social or creative endeavour, enjoys a status in the public sphere that accords them a certain respect and credibility. Such a person should be autonomous, should take a position independent of those in power, should be able to legitimately interrogate, challenge or critique ideas, issues and isms of whichever hue, in the public interest, and at critical or significant junctures; such junctures are frequently accompanied by a churning of some sort, and may herald important social changes.

The most obvious, and possibly the most well-known, of such intellectuals in the ancient world was the philosopher Socrates, poisoned because he objected to the Athenian judicial system, and because he denied the existence of deities. In the Christian era, as Prof. Romila Thapar has pointed out, European philosophers like Locke and Hume, writers like Voltaire and Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau and others, questioned conventional knowledge and practice.

What is noteworthy in these examples is the fact that these thinkers proceeded from critical reasoning and rational argument; and from within an intellectual tradition that, in time, placed a value on such debating. Debates may be contentious, even virulent, but they cannot and must not be stopped by a bullet.

This brings me to my second issue, that of dissent, and the presence of public intellectuals in society provides me with an entry point to this discussion. Before I go on, however, I should add that public intellectuals require, as Romila Thapar has said, a public that is aware of what needs to be discussed and why, one that would respond to critiques and questions in a spirit of respect and mutual exchange.

In October 2015, a small, individual act of protest by two creative writers snowballed into a phenomenon of unprecedented proportions, and brought the question of institutional accountability into the foreground, and into public consciousness, as never before. Uday Prakash, a Hindi writer, and Nayantara Sahgal, writing in English, returned awards that they had been given by the Sahitya Akademi, in protest against the silence of the Akademi following the assassinations of three fellow writers: Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare in Maharashtra in February 2015, and M.M. Kalburgi in Karnataka in September. Kalburgi, like Uday Prakash and Nayantara Sahgal, was an Akademi award winner; returning their awards was, for Prakash and Sahgal, simultaneously an act of solidarity with the murdered writers, and an expression of disquiet and unhappiness at the literary body's failure to condemn the assassinations. Sahgal's letter accompanying the return of her award said:

It is a matter of sorrow that the Sahitya Akademi remains silent. The Akademis were set up as guardians of the creative imagination, and promoters of its finest products in art and literature, music and theatre.

... In memory of the Indians who have been murdered, in support of all Indians who uphold the right to dissent, and of all dissenters who now live in fear and uncertainty, I am returning my Sahitya Akademi Award.

Within a few days of Sahgal returning her award, the writer Shashi Deshpande resigned from the Advisory Board of the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi, in a similar gesture of protest, and in a very short span of time other well-known writers – Ashok Vajpeyi, Keki Daruwalla, Sara Joseph, Krishna Sobti, among them – followed suit, creating a wave of what the media called, "award wapsi", a wave that very quickly became a flood. Each writer's letter to the Akademi echoed the disquiet and unhappiness expressed by Sahgal at the continued silence of this national academy of letters, as well as at what they apprehended as the growing intolerance of points of view, opinions and beliefs, that did not conform to dominant ideologies. Krishna Sobti, the nonagenarian writer said: "I protested because the country cannot afford Babri and Dadri," referring to the lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq that had taken place in the immediate past. Uday Prakash said he protested because, "Authors stand with ordinary citizens and the disadvantaged last man. Now, no one is safe against offenders." Sara Joseph protested because, "Writers are murdered and the right to eat what one wants is denied. Plurality of society is at stake." Ghulam Nabi Khayal said he protested because, "... returning the award is the only way to express my resentment. I want to live in a country that is secular, not a place where freedom of speech and religious identities are facing threats from communal forces." And so on.

By the end of October, more than 40 writers had retuned their awards, and their protest was joined by 400 artists, 12 filmmakers, 53 historians and more than 100 scientists. Resolutions in support of the writers came from all quarters, including the International PEN, which noted the vitiated environment in which books were no longer burned, and writers were no longer censored – they were simply killed for their views or for what they wrote.

The world had never seen anything like this spontaneous, collective protest ever before.

Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M.M. Kalburgi were rationalists, who wrote and spoke on faith and superstition; on a scientific temper; on ethics and religion; on literature and society. The hundred scientists who joined the writers, artists and filmmakers in their protest, responded to what they saw as an alarming erosion of rationality, and the threat that this posed to any scientific enquiry. Their statement said:

The scientific community is deeply concerned by the climate of intolerance, and the ways in which science and reason are being eroded in the country. It is the same climate of intolerance that led to ... the assassinations of Prof. Kalburgi, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar and Shri Govind Pansare. All three fought against superstition and obscurantism to build a scientific temper in our society.

Scientists who signed the statement included five recipients of Padma Awards, and heads of science research institutions: the Indian Institute of Sciences, the Harish Chandra Research Institute, the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, the Institute of Life Sciences, the National Institute of Immunology, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Raman Research Institute, IIT (Mumbai), among others. Dr. Pushpa Bhargava, former vice chairman of the National Knowledge Commission, returned his Padma Bhushan award, saying:

In any rational and reasonable society, as in a democracy, dissent is accepted as a norm, and reasoned dissent is encouraged. However, in India at present, the space for reasoned dissent is shrinking day by day.

T. Jayaraman of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences said, "In a democracy like ours, there is no option but to tolerate dissent. Dissent is integral to science ... Reason must prevail." In an extraordinary and unequivocal declaration, the scientists acknowledged that they had been influenced by the writers:

The writers have shown the way ... we scientists now join our voices to theirs, to assert that people will not accept such attacks on reason, science and our plural culture. We reject the destructive narrow view of India that seeks to dictate what people will wear, think, eat and who they will love.

I think it would be correct to say that never before in the history of independent India, had there been a concerted action like this by the scientific community, or a spontaneous convergence of resistance by a very large number of people who we might legitimately call public intellectuals, acting in the public interest.

How do we read this powerful voicing of dissent? What meaning can we assign to it that is not fleeting or purely topical? What implications does it have for such protests in the long term?

There is nothing new about individual acts of resistance that are intended to shame those in power into recognising and acknowledging the importance of what is being resisted. Fasts unto death, hunger strikes, even immolations, are a fairly common last resort in India. We have only to recall Irom Sharmila's decade-long fast protesting the imposition of AFSPA in Manipur to know its continuing occurrence. Or, more recently, Anna Hazare's Anti-Corruption fast, which – unlike poor Irom Sharmila's – obtained the desired result. The writers' protest was nowhere near as extreme, and it was certainly not life-threatening, but it was a game-changer in other respects. Let me try and elaborate.

Before the assassinations of Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi, the Tamil writer Perumal Murugan, put out a statement announcing his "death" as a writer. This was in January 2015, and followed his self-exile from his village, where he had been vilified and hounded and his safety threatened by a bunch of people who objected to his novel, *One Part Woman*. Murugan feared for his and his family's lives, and has been in hiding, somewhere in Tamil Nadu, ever since then. In an attempt to secure his own safety, he instructed his Tamil publisher to destroy all copies of his book; to recall whatever might still be in circulation; and informed him and the general public that he would never write another word. There is a strong suspicion that the guilty in all four instances belong to extremist organisations, possibly with political patronage, a suspicion that is strengthened by the fact that no one has yet been arrested for either the assassinations of Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi, or the attacks on Murugan. My concern, however, is slightly different, and has to do with both the symbolic and the actual value of gestures like the declaration of "death", or the returning of awards by writers and others.

Perumal Murugan's symbolic death as a writer, powerful and poignant in itself, was simultaneously an announcement of his repudiation of a society that was unable to accommodate contrarian points of view, and unwilling to exercise restraint and tolerance. The only weapon Murugan had was his writing, and he chose to use that weapon – or, rather, to lay down arms – non-violently. His response was the opposite of what his attackers had done: he countered their aggression with renunciation; where they chose violent verbal and physical abuse he opted for silence; where they stalked the land and flexed their muscles, he made himself invisible. But it would be a mistake to see Murugan's decision as one born of weakness, for it would not have been an easy choice; indeed, steeped in pain, that painful decision radiated out far beyond his immediate environment and struck a chord among hundreds who responded to his gesture with shock, dismay and outrage, that things could have come to such a tragic pass. We did not know then that his symbolic "death" would be followed by three very real ones, in short order.

The return of an award clearly does not carry the same charge as an announcement of a symbolic "death", but it is also a difficult decision, for any such act is an act of renunciation, and like all such acts, entails a significant loss. Awards are hard won, are a recognition of individual worth by a peer group, and are cherished above pecuniary or monetary considerations. Their return, however, like Murugan's, is a repudiation, not so much of society but of the awarding institutions -- in this case, the Sahitya Akademi, whose remit is the dignity and integrity of writers, and its mandate, the safeguarding of freedom of expression. The writers who returned their awards had a single-point demand: that the national academy of letters unequivocally condemn the murder of three of its constituents. That is all. But that was plenty.

The significance of this symbolic gesture was not lost either on society or on other groups and individuals, who also chose to break their silence and express their solidarity with the writers. Their protest stirred the collective conscience in such a way that individual resistance was transformed into a collective battle; more importantly, our duty as responsible citizens, to demand that fundamental rights be protected, was restored to centre stage. Equally, and again for the first time in independent India, an institution of the state was held accountable for its sin of omission, for remaining silent. (This silence is of a qualitatively different order than Murugan's silence, for it is complicit in what is being violated.) As the sociologist Shiv Visvanathan said, "They (the writers) were not merely returning an award, they were fighting the crime of silence with dignity." The writers who returned their awards did so on behalf of society, and by so doing reminded the Sahitya Akademi of the fact that a) it is an autonomous body, answerable to no government or political party; and b) that its duty is to provide a forum and a safe space for the dissenting voice. As such, this moment of interrogation by writers and artists constituted a turning point of sorts, and in the words of the critic and cultural commentator, Sadanand Menon,

This is that moment when we will see a necessary contradiction between the institution and the state, a healthy and vital contradiction ... It is a moment when that possibility exists. If it can be worked on and negotiated, then it would become what you would call momentous.

How then are we to understand the meaning of dissent? When Nayantara Sahgal linked the "right to dissent" with the "right to life" for a writer, she was telling us that an intellectual life is not simply, or only, a life of the mind, that it is concerned not only with ideas and esoteric problems; rather it provides a normative frame of values by which individuals and societies live. And at the same time, she reiterated that writing entails a commitment to truth. I quote Shiv Visvanathan again:

Dissent becomes a way of life for a writer ... Dissent is an act of courage, of standing up against a tide ... It is an act of aloneness, of facing up to a crowd, when a single voice can puncture silence.

And as the feminist writer Sara Paretsky has said, "Silence does not mean consent. Silence means death."

In her words:

Every writer's difficult journey is a movement from silence to speech. We must be intensely private and interior in order to find a voice and a vision – and we must bring our work to an outside world where the market, or public outrage, or even government censorship can destroy our voice...

I come now to the last part of my talk, and to what I have called the Disobedient Voice. I should clarify at the outset that I use the word "disobedient" in the same spirit that Gandhi deployed it, when he called upon Indians to take to "civil disobedience" in defiance of unjust laws and punitive taxes; to non-violently refuse to co-operate in perpetuating inequality and oppressive domination. I am referring here specifically to the work of women writers, and of feminists who have been active in the academy, in research and educational institutions, who have claimed the right to disobey, if what is demanded of them is submission, subjugation and

subordination; of obedience to oppressive and discriminatory custom and practice, often accompanied or enforced by physical violence. Because to obey silently, to be seen and not heard, to comply, to never raise one's voice were, and still are, the desirables of good behaviour for women.

Writers, by definition, are a disobedient lot; but women writers who disobey, who break the rules, who do not uphold social taboos, can also be subversive, even dangerous. Because they begin to break their silence, begin to find their voice and raise it. They begin to write.

As writers we live by words, words are our currency. And like currency, the more they circulate the greater is their value. The more they challenge, the greater is their subversive potential. The more they subvert, the greater their danger. And women who live a way with words know that in patriarchal cultures, writing is a subversive activity.

So we are censored. The power of the word is neutralised by the guarded tongue, guarded by families and communities; muzzled by convention; silenced by the state or religion; ignored by the market and literary establishments; censored by ourselves.

But we persevere. The Pakistani writer Feryal Ali Gauhar says, "I only write from a place of siege, from an undefined sense of loss. This is not the same as a sense of deprivation ... The only thing I can do is relieve my heart by writing." Bama, the Dalit writer says,

Writing is not a hobby for me, it is a very personal struggle.... to live the shame again, to feel the anger again, to see the dreams dissolve like a dewdrop evaporating on a rose petal. I must tell you that, for me, writing in a situation of social exclusion is to experience it as breaking the unbroken and forced silence of the victim, and allowing the militant in the victim to speak.

Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, who has lived with insurgency in the north-east for close to a quarter century, speaks of being crushed into silence by state repression on the one hand, and by the death threats of militants, on the other. She writes, she says, in order not to suffocate to death.

.... I am the woman lost in translation
who survives with happiness to carry on.
I am the breath that opens the mouth of the canyon,
the sunlight on the tips of trees;
there, where the narrow gorge hastens the wind
I am the place where memory escapes
The myth of time,
I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain.

Mamang Dai's writing is an act of resistance, just as Bama's is an act of disobedience, and Feryal's an act of survival. Yet each of them, like very many others like them, also sees her writing as a *political* act, because she is taking on social norms and mores, and breaking the taboo on what women are "allowed" to write about. They are writing about war, about violence, about sexuality, about caste, about religion, and about refusing to remain silent. When women name the oppressor in their writing, they are engaging in the ultimate act of disobedience—they are saying that they will no longer be complicit in that oppression.

When, through their individual voices, they speak of a common, even a collective, experience of discrimination, they expose systemic and structural relations of power—between men and women; between state and citizen; between ruler and ruled.

To disobey by oneself, as only an individual, is to risk being disciplined or punished; to disobey collectively is to begin a movement. The women's movement – born of the fire of consciousness, of a kind of disobedience, you might say – is unique in the world for having no "leader", no "ideologue", no hierarchy of power or authority. It has no formal structures, no "party line", no high priestesses. Some would say it has no pedigree. It is polyphonic, it speaks in many voices, using many tongues. It took as its starting point the fact that women make up half the world, and as such, their experiences, their labour, their productive and reproductive value, and their contribution to social, economic and political life *had to be taken into account*. Feminist writers and academics realised that in order for this accounting to happen, they would have to go about setting the record straight—for which they would need to devise new tools of analysis, forge new concepts, arrive at theory via empirical work that challenged received wisdom, upset conventional disciplinary requirements, and departed from accepted methodologies. They would have to disobey the rules, at least some of them, for most of the time.

In short, they would have to begin rewriting. Rewriting history, economics, sociology, political science, law, literature, autobiography and memoir – every field of enquiry and arena of expression from the perspective of their experience and analysis. The reality of one half of human experience would be brought into the light; be made visible, and given voice.

Underlying debate, dissent, and what I call disobedience, the thread that is common to all three, is their common purpose: to bring to public notice that something inimical or undesirable is occurring in our shared social lives; that trends or directions or events that are a threat to the social contract by which we live, are taking hold and need to be articulated and challenged. Implicit in bringing to public notice is a call to public action in order to restore, or redress, the social order. It is a call for intervention by what we now call civil society, by which is meant, simply, a socially responsible citizenry. Not surprisingly, such a call for public action, a call that necessarily questions the status quo, comes in for *its* share of rejection, resistance or even outright condemnation. It falls to all of us then, to raise our collective voice, to not remain silent, to persevere.

For implicit in this endeavour is the very much larger objective of progressive social change, of egalitarian gender relations, of substantive equality, where none of these currently exists. Equally, none of them can be achieved in isolation or without the co-operation of all participants. My point is simply this: in order for enduring change to take place, we move from silence and complicity to disobedience and non-co-operation, in order to arrive at a place where voluntary co-operation becomes desirable, and where dissent is acknowledged as an essential condition of change.



RITU MENON

Ritu Menon has been in publishing for over forty years, the last thirty as a feminist publisher, having co-founded Kali for Women in 1984. Her personal, professional and political involvement with the women's movement in India and South Asia introduced her to activism for social change and opened up new vistas of research, writing and publishing. She has written and published widely on women, and is co-author, among others, of *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition; From Mathura to Manorama: Resisting Violence Against Women in India*; and *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*. She has also edited several anthologies of women's fiction; of interviews; and of poetry.

For some time now, she has been researching and writing about women's lives in an attempt to introduce the idea and practice of feminist biography; she sees this as a necessary step towards archiving and restoring the contribution made by a variety of women to India's cultural, social and political history. She is the author of *Out of Line: A Literary and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal*, and is currently working on a biography of the dancer and actress, Zohra Segal.

Menon is a founder member of Women's WORLD, an international free-speech network of women writers dealing with the gendered nature of censorship, through which she has worked with over three hundred writers in South Asia in workshops, seminars and colloquia. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2011.



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