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The Aqueduct Gazette

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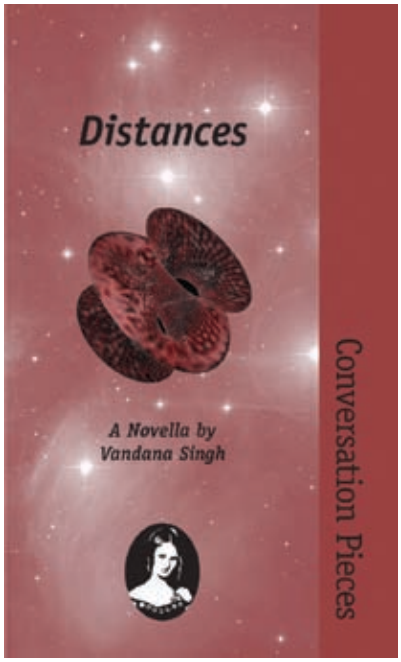
Newly Released – by Vandana Singh, *Distances: A Novella*



Last winter we released Vandana Singh's *Of Love and Other Monsters: A Novella*, which appeared on *Locus's* Recommended List for 2007 and Gardner Dozois included it in his *Year's Best Science Fiction* anthology for 2007. This winter we are pleased to present Vandana's *Distances*, a story of science, art, and deception; a fascinating far-future science fiction, set in a desert city. The green-skinned Anasuya, a geometer and immigrant from a very watery part of the world, works to solve a mathematical problem for off-planet visitors whom she comes to suspect of a hidden agenda. In the process of solving the problem, she creates powerful art in the pursuit of the mysterious muse who haunts her work.

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Filter House named on *Publishers Weekly's* Best Books of the Year in F/SF

Nisi Shawl's *Filter House*, which received a starred review in *Publisher's Weekly*, has been named by *PW* one best books of 2008 in the Fantasy and Science Fiction category. Here, by the way, is the review:

> This exquisitely rendered debut collection of 11 reprints and three originals ranges into the past and future to explore identity and belief in a dazzling variety of settings. "At the Huts of Ajala," a folktale concerning a girl wrestling with a trickster god before her birth, is full of urgent and delightful imagery, while "Wallamelon" is an elegaic, sophisticated exploration of the Blue Lady myth. Of the several science fiction stories included, the strongest are "Good Boy," an engrossing experiment in computer psychology, African gods and postcolonial anxiety, and "Shiomah's Land," a cross-genre bildungsroman involving a girl who becomes the wife of a goddess. The concluding tale, "The Beads of Ku," is an utterly arresting, authoritatively delivered tale concerning the diplomacy of marriage and the economy of the land of the dead. The threads of folklore, religious magic, family and the search for a cohesive self are woven with power and lucidity throughout this panorama of race, magic and the body.

New Conversation Pieces

My Death: A Novella

Lisa Tuttle's *My Death*, number 21 in the Conversation Pieces series, immerses us in the world of an expatriate American writer living in Scotland. Devastated by the death of her husband and not yet ready to work on a new novel, the unnamed narrator decides to write a biography of Helen Ralston, an early 20th-century novelist whose novels the narrator had read and loved in college. Ralston and her work had so sunk into obscurity — modern scholars seem to know her only as the student and lover of the better-known painter and novelist W.E. ("Willy") Logan — that the narrator is surprised to learn that she's still alive. With great excitement, she arranges to meet Ralston, interview her, and read her notebooks. The meeting proves deeply unsettling, though, for the narrator not only discovers that Ralston owns copies of all her own work, but that she also seems to know more about her than anyone else conceivably could.

At the heart of the mystery surrounding Helen Ralston and — perhaps — the narrator lies the self-portrait Ralston painted in the late 1920s. Before Ralston began writing novels, she studied painting with W.E. Logan. Logan painted her as Circe, and Helen painted herself as an island titled *My Death*. The narrator must figure out why Ralston titled her own self-portrait thus and what this has to do with the eerie, unmistakable connection between herself and Ralston. In Tuttle's deft hands, it's a thrilling, fascinating read. Aqueduct readers won't want to miss it!

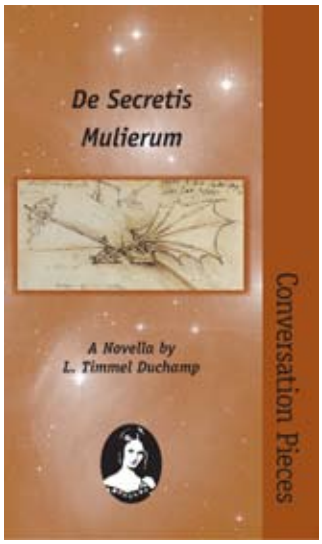
De Secretis Mulierum: A Novella

L. Timmel Duchamp's *De Secretis Mulierum: A Novella*, number 22 in the Conversation Pieces, is the story of graduate student Jane Pendler's pioneering use of a new technology called the Post-Scan Device (PSD), which is owned and operated by the Pentagon. Because it allows observation of past events, it's an exciting, promising new instrument of research for historians. It's threatening, too, since it carries the potential of establishing the most cherished traditions and notions that form the (mostly unnoticed) foundations of historical thought. Jane, therefore, gets involved in what later comes to be called "the opening skirmish of the PSD wars" and finds herself on the opposite side from her dissertation advisor.

Jane's account of "the opening skirmish" begins:

> If countless numbers of people throughout history have wished for an early menopause, probably no one wished more devoutly for it than Thomas Aquinas. No doubt he literally *prayed* for it morning, noon, and night. A picture comes to mind of him kneeling in his cell, pleading with the Virgin for release from a burden even Job hadn't been forced to bear.

According to the evidence presented by the Past-Scan Device, Leonardo da Vinci and Thomas Aquinas were both women in drag. Jane's advisor says that's impossible, that the technology must be bogus, and pulls the plug on Jane's dissertation research on Leonardo. What's a feminist graduate student to do? What else, but do the research behind her advisor's back, of course…



De Secretis Mulierum originally appeared in the May 1995 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. It was a *Locus* recommended novella for 1995, the year of its original publication.

"A masterful exploration of sexual identity and sexual mastery…marvelously intricate…"
—*Tangent* (Summer 1995)

Distances (cont. from page 1)

Here is an excerpt from the book:

She was a rider like no other. Her function was to lie in an amnion that had been specially constructed for her, with her neck-slits open. The sap that was exuded by the feathery organs inside her neck-slits and by the undersides of her fingernails and the tips of her breasts—the sap her people called *vapasjal*, that which is given back or returned—contained microscopic organelles the chemists at the temple called spiroforms. The spiroforms tasted the molecules in the mixture; as they interacted with the chemical stew of the amnion, a space blossomed in her mind, the most abstract made-world there could be: the sthanas itself: the solution-space of the mathematics. The tiny, invisible machines that swam in the fluid recorded the chemical changes wrought by the spiroforms and transmitted to the Temple's data banks a holographic representation of this inner space, brick by proverbial brick. Other holo-riders had to sit directly in front of a display that recorded the chemical reactions in the standard vats, and, through a complex science of interpretation and analysis, including trial and error and constant tinkering, they had to attempt to fill in the solution space of the given mathematics. For Anasuya this process was like a blind person mapping the contours of the world with a stick, and it horrified her because for her mathematics was experiential, a sixth sense that bared before her the harmonies, natural and artificial, that formed the sub-text of the world. Floating in the amnion, she entered unmapped territory; she was a speck, a ship lost in vastness, a rider on waves of maxima and minima, an explorer of a space that, but for her, would remain only guessed at. She entered this mathematical country as an explorer would enter a new land: she looked for singularities, skated over manifolds, sketched out the abstract, mountainous terrain of bizarre mathematical functions; she sought branch points and branch cuts and hidden territories bearing algebraic surprises. She took the esoteric world of the sthanas and made it her reality.

Distances is rich with the wonders of sharply contrasting worlds with fascinating social relations, all seen through the prism of Anasuya's sensitive, intelligent outsider's vision. The story takes Anasuya to the moral conflict at the heart of creative work for artists as well as scientists, a conflict full of contradictions and terrible costs. As both a physicist and a fiction writer, Vandana explores this territory with unflinching honesty and subtlety.

Forthcoming in 2009

Spring

Conversation Pieces Series—

The Buonarotti Quartet: Stories by Gwyneth Jones. Four stories by Gwyneth Jones, set in the future of the world she created for her White Queen trilogy: "Saving Tiamaat," "The Fulcrum," "The Voyage Out," and "The Tomb Wife." This is sophisticated feminist space-opera at its most intriguing.

Three Observations and a Dialogue: Round and About SF by Sylvia Kelso. A collection of essays and a correspondence between Sylvia Kelso and Lois McMaster Bujold on the Vorkosigan saga: "Letterspace: In The Chinks between Published Fiction and Published Criticism."

Summer

The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 3, Carnival of Feminist SF ed. Liz Henry

Late Fall

Imagination/Space: Essays and Talks on Fiction, Feminism, Technology, and Politics by Gwyneth Jones. In this volume, the author focuses her sharp attention on developments in the genre over the past twenty years, with particular reference to politics in general and feminism in particular.

The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of SF Feminisms by Helen Merrick. Australian scholar Dr. Helen Merrick offers a rich, fascinating narrative of feminist sf from its origins to the present.

Special Feature: "Women Writing in India": A Conversation with Urvashi Butalia and Anita Roy

by Vandana Singh

[Editor's note: Vandana originally posted this conversation on Ecstatic Days, Jeff VanderMeer's blog, on October 2, 2008. We thought Aqueduct's readers would be interested to hear about a sister feminist press in India, Zubaan Books, which just published The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories, *a collection of Vandana's short fiction, and so we're reprinting here.]*

October 8th, 2008

So free am I, so gloriously free
Free from three petty things:
From mortar, from pestle, and from my twisted lord
Freed from rebirth and death I am
And all that has held me down
Is hurled away.

These words were written by a woman called Mutta who lived 2600 years ago in Northern India. They appear in a book that changed my life. The book is *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, edited by Tharu and Lalitha. The translation of this particular poem is by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy.

"I also discovered that Indian women's rights movements were among the most active and vigorous in the world.

When I first came across this anthology some fifteen years ago, it was a revelation. I knew that there was a history of women writing in India, that women had written some of the verses of the Vedas, among Hinduism's oldest scriptures (first written down from an even older oral tradition about 3500 years ago). But the depth, the richness, and the immediacy of the voices in the anthology took my breath away. At that time I had no future visions of being a writer, but over the years the words of these women has enabled me to feel part of a continuity of voices through the centuries.

Who was Mutta, and what caused her to pen the lines above? It turns out that when the Buddha lived, back in the 6th century B.C., women were not allowed to join the sacred order, even though Buddhism admitted that Nirvana could be attained by anyone, man or woman. In what might have been the world's first agitation for women's rights, women repeatedly appealed to the Buddha to let them join the order, and finally he was persuaded. These Buddhist nuns wrote of their new-found freedom in these celebratory verses.

Growing up we learned the songs of the rebel poet-saint Mira, who lived in the early 1500s. I read about women who had participated in India's freedom struggle. But I was quite unconscious of a whole body of literature that spoke to women's concerns and struggles until much later.

Somewhere during my late teens and early twenties, the name of a publishing house called Kali for Women impinged upon my consciousness. My own introduction to the possibilities of an indigenous feminism had occurred during my Himalayan trek to study the Chipko movement, but my consciousness of it was fragmentary, incomplete. Around the time I first laid my hands on the anthology of women's writings, I came across another book: *A History of Doing*, by Radha Kumar. Published by Kali for Women, it was a pictorial and verbal history of women's struggles in India. Reading it I realized that there were some interesting things about women's rights movements in India that were different from those I'd read about in the West: they were dominated by rural women, and they concerned collective rather than individual rights. I also discovered that Indian women's rights movements were among the most active and vigorous in the world. But, like the anthology, this book allowed me to find a certain sense of perspective and belonging in history's long stream.

Kali for Women was founded by Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia and was India's first feminist press. Later on, in an age where other feminist or women-friendly presses came to be, Urvashi founded Zubaan. The word means "tongue" in the sense of voice, or language. Today Zubaan publishes fiction for children and adults, and non-fiction, including academic tomes, bringing to the forefront some interesting and unusual voices that might otherwise be lost. They include collections of fiction by Indian women, including translations from many Indian languages. Zubaan published my children's books in the Younguncle series—I count myself unbelievably lucky to have been "discovered"

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by Zubaan editor Anita Roy. Zubaan is also the publisher of my first short story collection, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories*.

So I asked Urvashi and Anita to tell us a little about the world of feminist publishing in India and how they see the world from their office up in a flat in Hauz Khas, a suburb of New Delhi. They took time between traveling and editing to answer a few questions.

I'm really honoured to be asking questions of you, Urvashi and Anita. When Anita first discovered my writing through my Youngun-cle book, I learned that Urvashi was the one who had started Zubaan. As I had admired you from afar for a long time as one of India's foremost feminists, I felt very special to be published by Zubaan, to the point of being very nearly tongue-tied when we first met. So, can you tell me, Urvashi, how Zubaan came to be?

Urvashi: And we have loved publishing you, Vandana, and hope to continue doing so. Zubaan is, in many ways, a child of Kali. As you know, Kali was founded in 1984 by two of us, Ritu Menon and myself. We worked together for 19 years, publishing books we loved and then, we decided to split up. We split for all the reasons people do, they're never good, but sometimes the only "solution" seems to be to separate. So we shut down Kali and went our separate ways. I set up Zubaan at the time, in 2003. The choice before me was to give up publishing altogether, which I wasn't willing to do, I love the work, or to join another publishing house. But I felt very strongly that I had an obligation and a responsibility; to the authors who had invested trust in us and given us their books and to my colleagues who would have been out of a job had we just shut down. So Zubaan came up. Basically its mandate was to do what Kali was doing but also to expand and take account of the changes in the women's movement and try to build those in. So while the spine of our work remains the straightforward academic research-based books, we are also doing a lot more fiction and general books, and we went into doing books for children and young adults. This is the list that Anita developed and continues to develop for us. At the time we took this on, no one was paying much attention to young adults. I'm glad to say this is changing.

Zubaan's birth as a child of Kali happened also because of other reasons. The issue about feminist publishing is that it is believed that it is a temporary phenomenon, that in some ways its success is its very failure. Let me explain; in Kali we set out to fill a gap, to answer a need, to be part of a political process of mainstreaming the voices and concerns of women. In many ways this has begun to happen in the world of writing and publishing. Women are no longer discriminated against in the same way, their voices have in many ways become mainstream. From the early days when we did not have any difficulty finding authors to today when we have difficulty holding on to them is a very different story. Does that mean there is no place for us any more? That we should give up the focus on women and move into mainstream publishing? When Kali was going through its break up this was the question put to us by many — why continue to publish on women, there is really no need for that any more. But I strongly believe otherwise. I believe we continue to have a role, that the world of women's writing is not finite, that as long as there is a movement and a politics, writing will be born out of that, and it is our responsibility and our commitment to reflect this, to publish it, even if — as increasingly happens — we end up publishing writers who then move on to more mainstream publishers. But that is our role and function. So all the reasons that were relevant when Kali was born, still remain: to center-stage women's writing, to reflect what is going on in the movement, to reverse the flow of information, which had traditionally been from North to South, West to East.

"I believe we continue to have a role, that the world of women's writing is not finite, that as long as there is a movement and a politics, writing will be born out of that..."

Anita, I know you grew up in the U.K. and later moved to India . How did Zubaan find you? How did you find Zubaan? What is the most exciting thing about working there?

Anita: When I was working in the U.K. as an academic commissioning editor (for Routledge and then Manchester University Press), I got to know about Kali for Women. At that point (in the 1990s), Kali was THE name that everyone associated with Indian women's publishing and gender studies, and Urvashi was already very much a "leading light." Internationally, there was a lot of interest in new academic areas like postcolonial studies, and especially in women's studies and gender, so these were "boom" areas for us from the West. I met Urvashi and Ritu at one of the regular events put on by Women in Publishing (U.K.), and immediately started chatting with her. Her ability to connect with any- and everyone, automatically put me at ease: though I have to confess that I was more than

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Women Writing in India
(cont. from page 5)

a little in awe of her at the time (she will laugh long and hard at this, but hey, it's true!!).

Over the next ten years, I found myself living and working in Delhi — first for Oxford University Press and then with the Indian office of Dorling Kindersley. Delhi's the publishing hub of India, and everyone seems to know everyone. We'd meet up very often at booklaunches and publishing events, and soon became firm friends. I was thrilled, therefore, when she asked if I would join the new company that she had set up in 2002, Zubaan. As the mother of a young kid, I was really looking for a part-time job and the opportunity to work in a small, women's press was too good to pass up. It had been a dream of mine to publish high-quality, imaginative and progressive children's books for Indian kids — and the market seemed ripe to do so — so we dreamt up "Young Zubaan" and started this as an imprint within Zubaan to be able to do this.

"Lots of people raised their eyebrows sceptically and said "Feminist books for kids?"

Lots of people raised their eyebrows sceptically and said "Feminist books for kids?" — but for us, YZ is not about pushing a particular political agenda, it's about publishing books which open up alternatives. At a most basic level, it's challenging the stereotypes — which are rife — about what girls and female characters can/should/are allowed to DO. But beyond that, it's saying that there are multiplicities of experience out there, there are imaginative leaps to be made, and children in India — of both genders — need the tools to make those imaginative leaps so that our society in the future can, perhaps, be less sexist, less classist, more inclusive, and more tolerant.

"The thing about this kind of thing, Vandana, is that no mainstream publisher would bother with such publishing, but for us, this is the oxygen that keeps us going."

Give us an idea of some of the books Zubaan publishes that makes it stand apart from other publishers, especially in an age where there are plenty of major Indian women writers being published by big name houses.

Urvashi: Here are some examples. When we were in Kali, we published a book that, till today, remains to me the most important book we have ever done. It is a book called *Shareer ki Jaankari* (*Know your Body*) that grew out of a Government Development programme, a very radical one, called the Women's Development Programme. It was developed by a group of women working on health within that programme — they had a series of workshops and the book grew out of that. It was entirely written, conceptualized, illustrated by rural women from Rajasthan's villages, 75 of them, all of whose names appear as authors on the book. Having produced two copies by hand (and having sealed each page in plastic using clear plastic bags from the village shop to keep the books safe from peeing children, they brought the book to us in Delhi asking if we would like to publish it. They struck a deal with us whereby we would price the book at cost or less for the village women and could sell it in the market at a different price. We were delighted to publish it, a book that comes from rural women, that goes to them, this is every feminist publisher's dream! We printed 2000 copies; before the printing was over they had pre-sold the book in their areas so we redid it, and till today, it continues to be reprinted; we must have done over 50,000 copies, and we have never sold one copy through a bookshop, it only goes directly to village women. The fascinating thing about this book was because it was about women's bodies the village women had to find a way of depicting this, they drew pictures and then tested these in the village and everyone laughed, saying you never see a naked woman in a village, how could these pictures be realistic. But of course their problem was, how to show the female body in a book about the body without showing the naked body? So they went back to the drawing board and came up with an ingenious plan. They'd show a woman fully dressed, covered from head to toe, but then you would have a small flap you could lift up and you'd see the vagina, the breasts and so on! You'll have to see the book to see what I mean, but it was a wonderful solution. Of course it drove out printers crazy – at the time books were bound by hand and most of the workers were young boys so they had a field day!

The thing about this kind of thing, Vandana, is that no mainstream publisher would bother with such publishing, but for us, this is the oxygen that keeps us going.

Another book that we did that was different was Baby Halder's autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary*. Baby is a domestic worker, a maid servant working in a home near Delhi. She had a difficult and violent

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life, was married at the age of 13, a mother by 14, faced much violence in her marriage, and one day, took her three children with her and left her husband. In Delhi, where she came, she searched for a job and in the end found work in a house where the employer was a retired professor and happened to be the grandson of Premchand, the Hindi writer. He noticed that she paid much attention to books in his home and asked her if she could read, and she confessed that she had always wanted to study but that she'd been pulled out of school to be married. He then loaned her books, encouraged and coaxed her to read, and one day gave her a pen and a notebook, and she wrote her life. That book became an international success but for us the important thing about it was that it represented the voice of someone on the margins of society and the kind of thing that would never see the light of day.

We were also the first to publish Vandana Shiva. In fact, we had to persuade her that she had something to say, and that she should write a book to say this. Eventually she did, with much coaxing, bullying, and we had a classic on our hands. Similarly with Radha Kumar's book *The History of Doing*. At the time histories of the women's movement were virtually unknown, a few books existed, but almost nothing published locally. When we asked Radha to write the book, she was a bit skeptical, but we persisted, and I had to turn up at her place every morning, wake her up, sit her down and tell her, write! She hated me for it, as did the many young men and women who hung around her home in various states of dress and undress. Every time I walked in with my writing pad and pen, I felt a bit like a criminal. It took YEARS and we almost gave up, but in the end the persistence paid off, and the book became a reality and later also became a classic. The thing was that in Kali — and this has not changed after we morphed into Zubaan — each book was a political project, it was something we believed in, it was something we felt should be published and we were willing to put everything into making sure that it did get published. This is not how most publishers operate, but then most publishers do not wear their politics on their sleeves. For us, every book we did was a project that fed into the women's movement, and every writer had to be nurtured and coaxed and encouraged to write. Remember that we were not only battling an indifference to women's writing, but also a feeling among women that they had nothing important to say, and who would be interested in it anyway.

"…every book we did was a project that fed into the women's movement, and every writer had to be nurtured and coaxed and encouraged to write."

Anita: There's one book that has been in the pipeline for many years, and is still in the pipeline, but which, once it is published, I think will be a wonderful eye-opener. This is called GirlPower by an activist and documentary filmmaker called Vani Subramaniam. Vani's idea is to write a book that answers the question on the lips of many young Indian girls and women: What's feminism got to do with me? She challenges the idea that feminism is a western concept that has simply been "imported" — and gives a fantastic overview and insight into the genesis and development of the Indian women's movement from its early beginnings to the present day. What's unique, I think, is that she sees it in a truly global context, so she talks about feminist icons from Ancient Greece to modern Egypt, from Africa to China. AND, what's more, manages to be fun, and irreverent, and challenging while doing it. This is one of the books that I'm really looking forward to publishing, and see, in many ways, as a kind of "flagship" for the Young Zubaan list. Another project that Zubaan has done, which has been groundbreaking in its own way is "Poster Women." We collected posters from women's campaigns from across the country — individuals and organizations lent us thousands of their posters and this resulted in a major exhibition that travelled around the country and internationally. We're now in the process of archiving and documenting these "ephemera" to built up a really useful, unique, historical visual archive of the movement, through its campaign posters. This, again, is the kind of project that a mainstream publisher would simply not have been able to do, but it perfectly gelled with the Zubaan funda, which is not only to publish feminist works, but to contribute in whatever other ways we can to the movement itself.

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Women Writing in India
(cont. from page 7)

It took me until my teen years to discover that one could have indigenous forms of feminism, that is, feminisms that were not influenced by or inspired by the West. The Chipko movement was my particular eye-opener. What was your experience?

Urvashi: To me, Indian feminism, or feminisms is/are very much home grown products. The current wave grew out of political movements within India, although as you know, middle class Indians — and many of the early feminists came from this class — are often very well read so we — and I count myself among the women who came into the movement then — were very aware of the thinking and trends in western feminism. Nonetheless the political cauldron in which our thoughts hubbled and bubbled was here; it was the post independence hope and disappointment; it was the Naxalite movement, the Jayaprakash Narain-led Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini movement, the Telangana movement and many others, These were mostly people's movements, fighting upper class oppression, fighting unjust laws and so on. They had many men and many women within them, and women in these movements were slowly coming to the realization that they faced a considerable amount of patriarchy within the movements. These were the first stirrings of what one might call 'feminist' consciousness in India. And the early women's groups grew out of this. Also very very influential was the report of the committee on the status of women, a document called *Towards Equality*, which was published in 1974-75 and which showed for the first time with documentary evidence that the position of women had been worsening since independence in many fields.

Alongside this, there were movements like Chipko which you have mentioned, which grew in rural areas and then spread across India, though in different variations. So there was one kind of activism happening in the cities, inside of movements and then there were things like Chipko, not necessarily feminist but which hold an important place in the history of the women's movement and in the politicisation of women.

A possibly related question: in the West, feminism arose as a challenge to tradition. In India this is also true but it is perhaps equally true that in India tradition has a thousand streams. In some of these streams women are not an underclass. To what extent have women appropriated or brought to the forefront, or changed tradition to forge a feminist movement? And what part has women's literature played in this?

Urvashi: Well, tradition has always been a strong presence and shadow in the women's movement. Sometimes its influence has been negative. For example in the deifying of women, turning them into goddesses, which then robs them of the right to be human. It's a convenient way of channelling women's energy into something that while seemingly empowering them, can often be quite disempowering.

But Indian women have also fought this and broken away from tradition in very radical ways. You know the story of the anti-alcohol movement in Andhra? It began because of the nationwide thrust on literacy. In many states, and Andhra was one of them, women came out in great numbers to study, flouting the received wisdom that they should stay at home. One such woman, called Rojamma, read in her literacy class a story about a woman whose husband frittered away all his earnings on drink, was always drunk and therefore violent, and of course brought no money home, so the family was hungry. As she read the story she recognized with a shock that it was her own story. She shared it with a friend who shared it with a friend and suddenly the women in her neighbourhood realised that they were not alone in facing violence and dealing with drunken husbands. And in dealing with poverty. So they decided to get together and support each other, and it was out of this that the anti-alcohol movement was born, one of the most powerful in India, which succeeded in toppling the state government. "Traditionally" quiet, these women evolved an ingenious system to alert each other when one of them was being beaten. They would start banging their rolling pins, or other kitchen implements against tins, and this bush telegraph would fly across homes and fields, and they'd all collect in a jiffy to protect the woman who was being beaten… look at the lessons here, strength, innova-

"They would start banging their rolling pins, or other kitchen implements against tins, and this bush telegraph would fly across homes and fields, and they'd all collect in a jiffy to protect the woman who was being beaten…"

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tion, courage, sophistication, a political understanding… it is quite amazing. There are hundreds of such examples that make this movement both unique and different, and rooted in its own political history. (*Vandana's note: here is a link to the site of a famous movie, a docu-drama,* When Women Unite: The Story of an Uprising *about this movement: http://www.lbsnaa.ernet.in/lbsnaa/nlrc/films/nellore.htm*).

Literature has played a role here, too—although one needs to expand and stretch the definition of literature. But for example Baby Halder's story has been an inspiration to so many women across the country, and in the case of the anti-alcohol movement, it was a book, albeit not literature, that started the movement off. Writers often intervene or play a leading role in such movements, as for example Mahashveta Devi has done in the tribal movement in India, or Dalit writers have done in the Dalit movement. This is true also of many other writers, but of course the reach of literature is limited by both class and language.

There is a popular misconception in the West that because Indian women suffer so much they must be meek and take their suffering lying down. People have commented as such to my husband, that he's lucky because he has an Indian wife who will agree with anything he says (upon which he starts to laugh hysterically). I was once told by my hairdresser that I was lucky to live in a country like the U.S. where I didn't have to be mistreated. I've come across this attitude many times. Any comments?

Anita: When I was working in Dorling Kindersley, many of my British colleagues would be shocked at the sheer volubility and outspokenness of my Indian female colleagues! It was a real eye-opener for them who, I think often, expected Indian women to be meek and quiet. Not a chance! I was lucky enough to work with some of the most articulate, funny, irrepressible and talented women in the industry. Of course, this has a lot to do with CLASS. And I think unless you inflect your understanding of gender with an understanding of the class (and caste) divisions that operate in the country (both in rural and urban settings), it's not possible to really understand the challenges that Indian women as a whole face.

Urvashi: I can't tell you how many times I have had to face this. In a variety of ways. Often when I say I'm a feminist publisher people look at me in shock, horror and a kind of admiration. Feminist publishing? In India? That must be so difficult they say, you are so brave. But there's nothing of that here, I'm not brave. And even though women in India face the worst kind of oppression, they also have the best kind of opportunities. Every type of reality exists here, as the cliche goes, and there are thousands of women like me who are quite ordinary, who do things because they believe in them, and to whom this country provides the space and opportunity to do so. The fact that India is a democracy is often underestimated by so many people outside. The women's movement in this country is one of the strongest and most dynamic in the world; where else do you have 1.2 million rural women in positions of elected power at the village and municipal level! But of course India is also a place where women are deeply oppressed, where tradition works against them and where they themselves are often complicit in upholding patriarchy. But as Anita says, you turn a corner and you meet a strong woman. That's got to be good news!

Thank you, Urvashi and Anita!

For more about the posters and Zubaan
Poster Women: A Visual History of the Women's Movement in India
http://www.zubaanbooks.com/ ~ http://www.zubaanbooks.com/posterwomen/

Hanging Out Along the Aqueduct... The Decolonization of the Mind

by Vandana Singh

When I was a seventeen-year-old fresh out of high school, I experienced a significant paradigm shift. In that dizzying period of freedom between the end of high school and the beginning of college, I went to the Himalayas on a trek. I was part of a recently formed group called Kalpavriksh, a loose-knit, unstructured collection of students interested in the environment. The lot of us, mostly New Delhi-based teenagers and a few college students in their twenties, took off that summer to study the Chipko movement. This is one of the most famous grassroots environmental movements in the world. Illiterate village women are its backbone—it is a nonviolent movement that has no single leader. For the most part it is an attempt by the local people to save their remaining forests from the depredations of timber-hungry industries and the government, but it has also evolved into a movement for social change. Villagers in the Himalayas depend on the forest for survival, so to them this struggle is not about an abstract philosophical or sentimental idea. The word Chipko means "to stick to" in Hindi, and in fact the desperate tactic of the activists has been to put their arms around the trees and stand between them and the man with the axe.

"This was also the place where an older woman could stand bare-faced, red-faced, fists in the air, and incite her people to continue their struggle. And guess what, she'd never read Betty Friedan."

We spent maybe twenty days traveling from village to village in the Himalayas, going up to remote villages at 10,000 feet, eating the peasant food that people shared with us, sleeping in wooden huts in blankets and sleeping bags. We drank water from mountain streams, got bitten by bedbugs and mosquitoes, forgot electricity and other home comforts, and once climbed a huge cliff in the middle of the night, following a village guide who had spent the better part of the day telling us his village was "just over there." I lost my glasses down a gully when I slipped on the pine-needle-strewn path. We found porcupine quills one day where a panther had killed the porcupine only the night before. As we traveled, sometimes on our own and sometimes with Chipko guides, learning and singing the songs of the movement, it came to us how incredibly arrogant and patronizing we city-folk were in our assumptions about the rural poor. Some of these people had protected their forests, guarded them and revitalized them, entirely on their own initiative, based on their observations of what happened when you over-cut or clear-cut. They had done this without ever having read a single environmental manual. They had taken the slogan of the government's forest department, which went something like "What are the benefits of the forest? Resin, wood and trade," and converted it to "What are the benefits of the Forest? Soil, water and fresh air." (It has a real lilt in the original Hindi.) The full power of grassroots social change was, however, brought home to me near the end of the trip.

We were at a meeting of several Chipko-activist villagers in a high valley. They had come from far and wide in that region of the Himalayas. There was some kind of podium set up, maybe a loudspeaker, and quite a vast crowd sitting on the ground in front of it. Various men and women went up and had their say. I was standing near the back of the considerable crowd, a little tired, not paying too much attention, when it hit me. The woman on the podium was an older lady. She stood straight and tall, her lean face filled with passion, punching the air with her fists as she spoke. I looked around me and saw men and women, young and old, the divisions of caste and class blurred. Here was a place where tradition normally restricted upper-caste women to cover their faces in the presence of strange men. Here was a place where nearly everyone was illiterate, where the postman had to read people their letters when their relatives wrote from the plains. Some of the villages were so remote that they had never heard of coffee or television; in one village the women shyly asked if we were women (our shirts and jeans having confused them somewhat) before starting to talk with us. But this was also the place where village women had ganged up and smashed the illicit distilleries of men who, in their despair at the failure of agriculture, had taken to drink. This was also the place where an older woman could stand bare-faced, red-faced, fists in the air, and incite her people to continue their struggle. And guess what, she'd never read Betty Friedan.

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So it came to me then in a sort of rush that (a) feminism was not an exclusively Western phenomenon, and (b) people, however poor and illiterate, could lift themselves out of environmental and social degradation without us. In fact it was possible for "brown folks" to fall into the same colonizing mindset as the British with regard to our own rural poor—and somehow, despite this, said rural poor could take their fate into their own hands. It was a simultaneously humbling and exhilarating realization.

"Decolonizing the mind…involves approaching your own marginalized cultural paradigms as well as those of the dominant establishment with the same curiosity, appreciation, skepticism, interest, engagement and reserve."

Until that time I'd been a fairly typical Delhi middle-class student, educated in an English school. I had somehow internalized a lot of assumptions, growing up in the city. Like how the West somehow epitomized progress and feminism was a Western phenomenon. That as part of a "developing" country we were only some way behind the Western countries on the same track to the same place. It never occurred to me until then that there could be models of development, or feminism, or environmental action, *other* than Western models.

I was born in a free India; my grandparents and parents were the ones who remembered British rule. I'd been brought up on stories of my grandmother participating in the Salt Satyagraha during the independence movement; my great-uncle permanently lost his health languishing in a British prison and died young, as a result of which I never knew him. My grandfather's own paradigm-shifting moment had come during the Salt Satyagraha, when (as a junior bureaucrat in the British government) he realized the power of Gandhi's salt march to the sea and came to question the British occupancy of India. Despite my family history and the freedoms I now took for granted, I hadn't shrugged off that most insidious form of colonization, the kind that can remain generations after the conquerors have left: the colonization of the *mind*.

I want to make it clear what I'm talking about, here. There are, broadly speaking, two extreme responses to colonization (or to any dominant world-view that has influenced you). You either unquestioningly absorb the assumptions and perspectives of the dominant view, or you rebel and reject everything about it. If you rebel against the dominant view, you might dig into your own past and your own culture and romanticize it, while rejecting everything that the dominant Other represents. This is the reactionary view. In their non-extreme forms both these approaches have been important ingredients in the Indian struggle for independence. The former helped people understand how the British thought and functioned, whereas the latter did the necessary job of enabling a conquered people to realize five thousand years of non-colonized history, and the achievements that came with it.

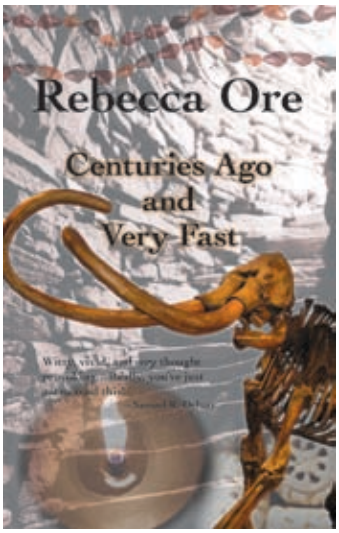
Decolonizing the mind is the third alternative. This involves approaching your own marginalized cultural paradigms as well as those of the dominant establishment with the same curiosity, appreciation, skepticism, interest, engagement and reserve. The first two alternatives are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin. They are both responses to the dominant culture in which that culture is *central*. To be free of that kind of dualistic thinking is to go in another direction entirely.

My own half-formed thoughts on the decolonization of the mind were first birthed in that high Himalayan valley. Realizing the implications is the work of a lifetime. This has taken my family and me in unusual directions and kept us in an interesting place at the edge of mainstream culture (whether here or in India). From home-schooling my daughter for many years to my responses to scientific culture in and out of research physics, it's been quite a journey.

The edge of the river has turned out to be a fascinating place: here are strange eddies and flow patterns and unexpected topographies that make it a far more interesting place than the middle of the stream. It is also a nice place from which to write speculative fiction.

Forthcoming, Spring 2009

Centuries Ago and Very Fast
by Rebecca Ore



When I first met him running on the moors, I thought he was gypsy or part Paki with his otter body and the broad head that ended in an almost pointed chin, but he said he was European, old stock, some French in the bloodlines. His left little finger ended just below where the nail would have been…

A gay immortal born in the Paleolithic who jumps time at will, Vel has hunted mammoths, played with reindeer tripping on hallucinogenic mushrooms, negotiated with each successive wave of invaders to keep his family and its land intact, lived as the minor god of a spring, witnessed the hanging of "mollies" in seventeenth-century London as well as the Stonewall riots in twentieth-century New York City. He's had more lovers than he can remember and is sometimes tempted to flirt with death. *Centuries Ago and Very Fas*t offers fascinating, often erotic glimpses of the life of a man who has just about seen it all.

England, that has such beautiful men in it, wasn't even an island when Vel was born, and Vel was born in drowned country between here and there…

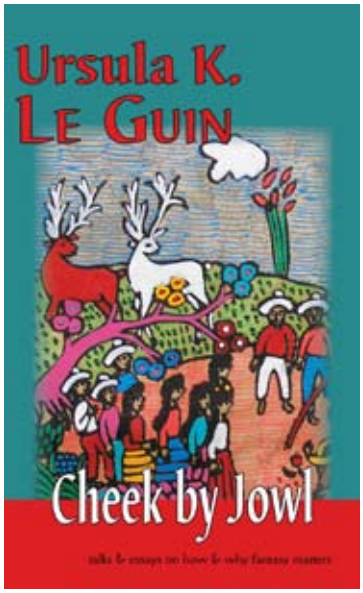
Witty, vivid, and *very* thought provoking, these interwoven narratives of the most sophisticated of primitive lusts start with a gay caveman who happens to have been around over fourteen thousand years. Finishing an afternoon tryst with a Puerto Rican drag queen at the Chelsea Hotel in New York, he and his new friend wander back to Greenwich Village to end up smack in the Stonewall Riots of late June '69. Then we go hunting (and killing and dressing and eating and a few other things that might raise your eyebrow) a mammoth. But that's only the beginning.…Ore's little book has intelligence and charm. Really, you've just *got* to read this!"

—Samuel R. Delany, author of *Tales of Nevèrÿon*

Cheek by Jowl
Talks and Essays About How and Why Fantasy Matters
by Ursula K. Le Guin

The monstrous homogenization of our world has now almost destroyed the map, any map, by making every place on it exactly like every other place, and leaving no blanks. No unknown lands. A hamburger joint and a coffee shop in every block, repeated forever. No Others; nothing unfamiliar. As in the Mandelbrot fractal set, the enormously large and the infinitesimally small are exactly the same, and the same leads always to the same again; there is no other; there is no escape, because there is nowhere else.

In reinventing the world of intense, unreproducible, local knowledge, seemingly by a denial or evasion of current reality, fantasists are perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves. They are trying to restore the sense—to regain the knowledge—that there is somewhere else, anywhere else, where other people may live another kind of life.



The literature of imagination, even when tragic, is reassuring, not necessarily in the sense of offering nostalgic comfort, but because it offers a world large enough to contain alternatives and therefore offers hope.

The fractal world of endless repetition is appallingly fragile. There is no illusion, even, of safety in it; a human construct, it can be entirely destroyed at any moment by human agency. It is the world of the neutron bomb, the terrorist, and the next plague. It is Man studying Man alone. It is the reality trap. Is it any wonder that people want to look somewhere else? But there is no somewhere else, except in what is not human—and in our imagination.

—from "The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists"