

JUGALBANDI

JAMEELA BEGUM AND AJAYAKUMAR, P. P.



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(English: Poems and Paintings)

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— I —

INTRODUCTION

DIFFERENT STROKES

I

I sit in the midst of paintings and poems that are engaged in a dialogue. These works are also a dialogue between a student and a teacher as much a dialogue between two artists working with different forms of media. How does one write about a dialogue that touches history, nature, artists, thinkers, leaders, emotions, passions, stories, and memories? This list is by no means exhaustive. How does one respond to a growing correspondence of minds? I recall familiar works being widely recognized as belonging to one or the other category of ekphrasis. There is also a newfound interest in ekphrastic poetry and there are studies coming up in the other half of the world. Rather than listing other poets and their works, I feel it as enriching to contemplate on the compositional wavelength that makes possible such a sustained creative tempo across media and mind. The most striking aspect that merits attention here is the kind of compact that emerges between the paintings of Ajayakumar and the poems of Jameela Begum.

I start thinking of that moment of origins, of beginnings. When the first painting was shared in Facebook there was an artistic response in a few days. This was not a one-time response, for those

who responded to the subsequent paintings by then had now started looking forward to the corresponding poems. I also suspect that the poems in turn inspired Ajayakumar to come up with his next painting. But the beginnings cannot be read and understood in the Facebook time alone. Was it the charcoal of an idea that made the beginning? Beginnings know no individual.

In mediis rebus

A thought
An instant
An outline
In the smithy of the mind

Emerge details that flesh out the thoughts
A brush dipped
In the colours of an instant
But that is only one kind of a beginning

Try again:

Charcoal and colours
Enact emotions
Then/Simultaneously/Later
(There can be more choices)
Words on the page
Bring in that third perspective

'In my beginning is my end
In my end is my beginning'
Let me add my two pennyworth to it:
Somewhere in the midst
There are endings and beginnings

A continuing compact
Composing fictions that imagine
The rainbow of life, death,

The rhythm of emotions,
 And the world
 We turn the pages
 And look for fictions we read

II

The hallmark of this collection of creative work is the discovery of a wavelength that harmonizes the language of perception of both painter and poet. It does not iron out differences; they are perceived when the representation of the different subjects is parsed. The means and media employed to represent the subject is different. Yet, they come together to reach the same point of comprehension.

There are four portraits by Ajaykumar and each one becomes distinct not because of the personality. It is a telling use of the pencil to lay bare something of what the artist discovers of the personality during that moment of creation. A case in point is the portrait of Ayyappa Paniker. This is the cue that the poem also takes up to elaborate:

I see
 a figure not me
 looking back at me
 awestruck
 asking me
 is that you?

Similarly, the depth captured in the eyes of Basheer is matched in verse capturing the Sultan of Beypore in an interesting frame:

“Sharp eyes peer...
 to ironically ponder
 On the paradoxes of life and living.”

This eye for detail characteristic of any visual artist is evident in that rich luxuriance of bell fruits with the odd green fruit providing a pictorial moment of recognizing differences which the poem uses effectively to draw a picture of the vicissitudes of life. These portraits of still life are pleasant as they trigger memories, tales, and even a whole history from Eve to Steve Jobs as in the poem “Rainbow Apples.”

The power of evocation of the paintings comes out best for me in that contemplation of a “Stony Scene.” I was reminded of a lesson I had studied in my primary class in the Malayalam text book titled “Even a stone has a story to tell.” That is precisely what “Stones Speak” tells me. The image of the stone

“Left destitute
I call out
No one hears
No one sees
I stand exposed
Dry and parched”

is a contemplation and filling in of details reminding of the precarious existence of life and the environmental destruction that has ravaged the ecosystem.

I also discover the presence of traditions, styles, and languages that work in various ways in text after text. Perhaps because of the differences, they perform a concert, more precisely, a jugalbandi. The compositional harmony of this book reveals of itself of the way one keeps moving from painting to poem to painting endlessly. I do not intend to read all the paintings and poems here; I share here something of what I have tasted and relished.

The way the paintings and poems are placed alongside each other serves to discover the fluidity of the narrative subject rather than a fixed object. The perceiving mind roves around colours, shades, tones, and hues available in the immediate reading experience and

even ventures to imagine an archive of memory that effects such represented subjects and subjectivities. In our trying times when we are overwhelmed by a virus and its mutant formations, one is free to wonder about the relevance of such artistic expressions. The world is not expressive of a single purpose. We wake up to new realizations about the world every moment of our life. These brush and pen strokes capture something of the myriad moods of the human mind to give a pause and offer some insight on to the fictions we use to represent our thoughts and reflections.

And so Mary's basket rolled down the way
Balancing new thoughts and dreams
In the minds of many who passed that way
Fact and fantasy ploughing fertile minds.

I can only offer this tentative note and pause to take another look at Mary's basket.

B. Hariharan
Professor and Head
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MY PORTRAIT

I look
above my glasses
perched
on the tip
of my nose
at my portrait

I see
a figure not me
looking back at me
awestruck
asking me
is that you?

I question
my end and my beginning
the days and the nights
the life
that has made
all the difference

I scribed
words
for I could not
but sing
the golden flowers



Ayyappa Paniker; charcol on handmade paper by Ajjayakumar, P. P.

of thoughts
I sang
of pain
of joy
of urban jungles
of village girls
of the Kurukshetram of life

I wept
for the forests
for the old
for the shifting
sands of culture
for a grieving earth

I played
with irony
tap tapping words
bursting laughter
painting caricatures
a mere thief a robber.

I guided
many through
labyrinths of thought
enquiring minds
restless search
and research
I journeyed
many a town
and country
to leave my mark
to rest again
in my own Kavalam

I am you
you are me
reconstructing me
so let it be
so let the enigma prevail
I take my leave.

—Jameela Begum

ACROSS BORDERS

Middle East nurtured centuries of viticulture
Egypt crushed grapes to bubbling glasses
Greeks carried it to the Black Sea and to Spain
Romans to the valleys of Rhine and Venice
Danube and Rhone, Burgundy and Bordeaux
Spreading sweetness and camaraderie.

Columbus transported it to the new world
The foothills of the Andes Mountains
California cherished it in Sonoma and Napa
Divine deep purple globes with green shades
Suspended clusters, never ever single
The vines of nature canopied together.

Heart shaped leaves receiving the sun
Keeping vines fresh, to set budding
More and more shoots, to breed fruits
Flower clusters shaping into berries
Its greenness one with the leaves
Ripening and filling with the nectar of Greek Gods.

Christ toasted wine to friends and foe at Eucharist
“This is my blood” atonement for your sins
To wipe out greed, treachery and malice
Releasing the white dove of peace



Ajayar
25-6-21

To keep humanity together in uprightness
The blood He shed for mankind's sins.

Rivers meander round and round hillocks
Mountains shift in strong currents of water
Water and land flow in and into each other
Each making way for the other to find space
Yet we build human walls where there are none
Fencing in and out what belongs to none.

The vineyards continue to spread its canopy
Crossing boundaries, traversing land and valley
Finding roots wherever it winds its way
While religion and region divide and shed
Rivers of blood and find exultation
In keeping the other at bay; they do not belong.

In the valley of Napa stand rows of grape vines
Heavy with the juice of its ripeness
Clusters jostling, waiting to be pressed
To be trampled in vats, meeting of juice and feet
Celebrating the immersion of nature in nurture,
For, after all, that is the elixir of life.

—Jameela Begum

BALANCING ACT

Once Mary had a basket of eggs on her head
For an instant she jerked her head in wanton pride
Out fell the eggs, breaking them and her dreams
The upturned basket went rolling down the way.

Someone down the lane, caught it for its beauty
A finely woven basket twined dexterously in and out
Marvelling at the shades of grey and brown
And turned it upside down to see it more

Someone walking up the lane, looked long at it
Wondering what was that under the basket
Hen crouching on eggs to hatch a litter
Or was it an empty one with no promises.

Someone coming down with passion fruits in hand
Stopped to place three of it on the base with care
One more would have upset the balance on the base
It was not like filling a whole basket.

Someone saw the three green round passion fruits
But not the basket, the winding vines of abundance
Of lost paradise and the trees of pride
A lost world of mankind's disobedience.



Fruits of passion; oil on canvas painting by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2018)

And so Mary's basket rolled down the way
Balancing new thoughts and dreams
In the minds of many who passed that way
Fact and fantasy ploughing fertile minds.

—Jameela Begum

SULTAN OF BEYPORE

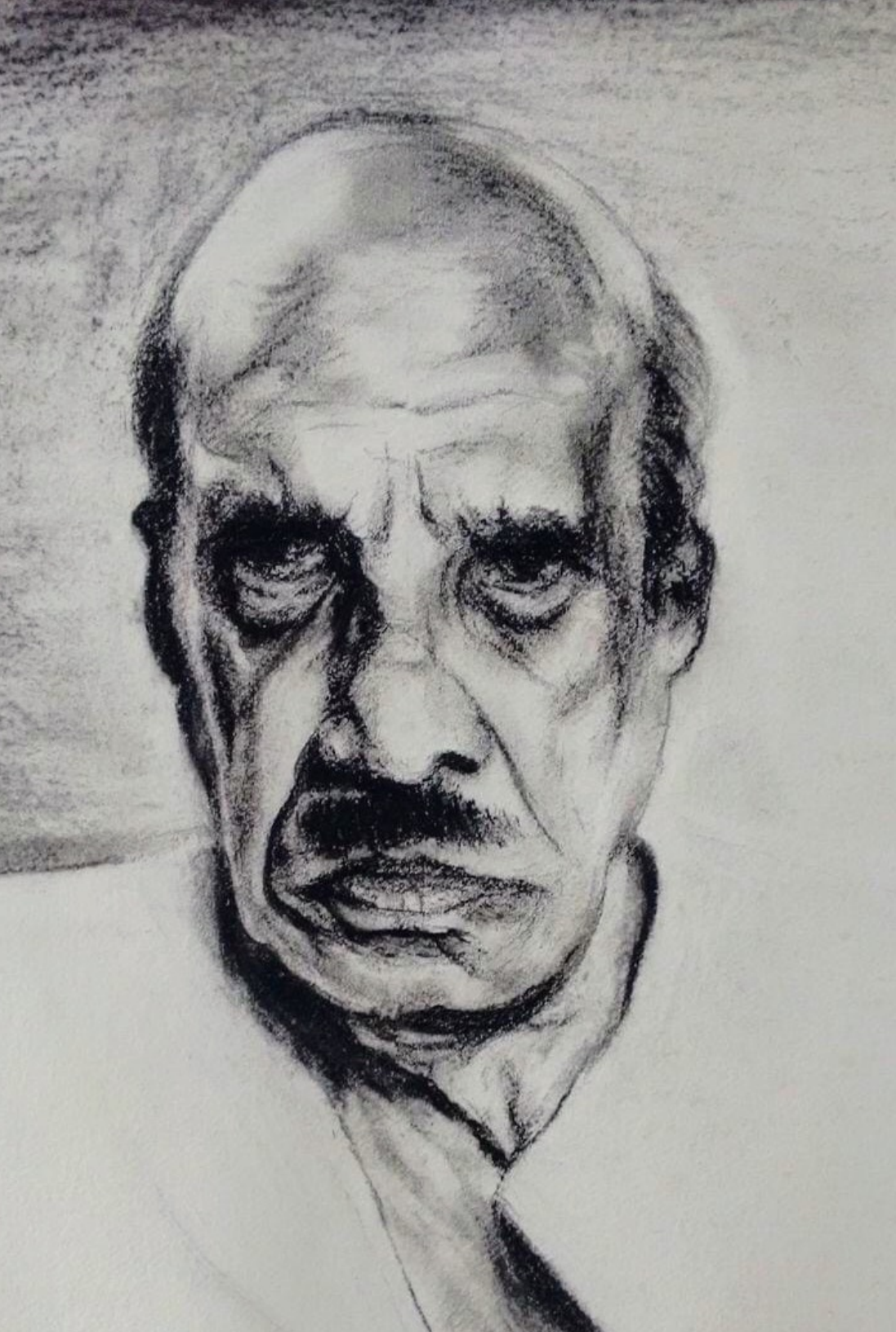
Reclined in an easy chair, lost in ruminations
Clad in Khadi, inspired by swadeshi ideals
Sharp eyes peer at the canopy of the Mangosteen tree
Seeing delicate webs of relationships
The irony and humor of the struggle to live.

Walls divide yet unite
Ignite fantasies of the beyond
Mystery pulsating in soft hushed tones
Mixing sensual and ethereal tunes
Emotions overflow high walls within walls.

The rose bush tenderly pushed forth its red flower
But only to crumble in a hand
That stretched to give but lost the accepting hand
For walls and walls distance the near
Within or without, prison walls are rigid.

Carefree as a goat, bleating in delight
Pathumma tended her goat with love
Fed her with green fodder and rice gruel
Dreamt of the flow of milk to extend
The comforts of her home.

Alas, to fall a victim to her merciless siblings
To forsake her dreams for her extended family



Sulthan, Vaikom Mohamed Basheer; charcoal on handmade paper portrait by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2017)

For to give one was to give all
To keep alive the circle of human bondage
Partners in the cycle of life.

What a pride to boast of past glory
Me Granddad 'ad an elephant
So soothing to be drowned in superstitions
To measure out life within four walls
Shutting out strife and turbulence.

The bullock cart plodded along its way
To strange lands and variant experiences
Sifting old beliefs and accepting new thoughts
To live with the times, to embrace change
To return and overturn the mini elephant.

So the Sultan of Bepore wove his tales
In the small village of Vaikom
Breathing life into multiple mindscapes
Placing pawns to ironically ponder
On the paradoxes of life and living.

—Jameela Begum

TREE OF LIFE

Red, reddened chambakkas from honeyed flowers
Red dropped rose apples string from tree to ground
Branches loaded with the heaviness of juicy fruits
Stand suspended in a dance of euphoric glee.

Hands touch the shimmering polish of ripeness chamba
Sever each from each, from branch and tree
Sifting not the well formed from cankered ones
Gathering all to fill baskets to relish or ditch.

Hands tear down these red drops more than rain
Raindrops leave behind the tears of the tree
Tilling ground for sprouts to spring in the sun
Making sure of a return though ruthlessly mangled.

The red blossoming faces of children at play
Each alike in their shout of joy, yet so different
So differently moulded to weather the storms of life
Some challenged in a society that takes little care.

Hobbling on in fear of jeers and smites
Lost happiness in life's pursuits and narrow paths
Knowing little that it makes all the difference
Take refuge high above in whirls of dreams.



Red, red champakka; oil on canvas painting by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2021)

The red drops of life on the ground
Trampled and sucked in by slushy soil, wait
Wait for another life to be born in fullness
One to be lovingly prized and caressed.

—Jameela Begum

—7—

RAINBOW APPLE

Inscribed to the fairest of all
Eris's golden apple unleashed discord
At the wedding of sea nymph and mortal
Cast a spell of contention on Olympus
Unleashing strife and conflict and dispute.

The Trojan war fought for fair Helen
Foreseen in the race for the golden apple
Aphrodite won the apple with a promise

Apples on plate; oil on canvas painting by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2018)



Placing beauty above wisdom and wealth
Paris fell for beauty, love and lust.

Painted on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel
Eve clings to a golden fig in the Garden
The apple not the forbidden fruit for Angelo
The Temptation and Fall not of an apple
Newton's apple fell to the ground.

Come summer, under the ripening sun
Branches bend with the heaviness of apples
Golden yellow, red delicious and crunchy green
Tempting to bite and drown in its nectar
To pluck truck loads for the cider press.

Not on Mount Olympus or the Garden
Not a contention or a transgression
But celebrating the flow of communication
The curved Rainbow apple of Steve Jobs
Invades our homes to win the race.

—Jameela Begum

— 8 —

STONES SPEAK

I am a stone now
Hard and brown
Tended by none
Pushed to a side
No longer a rock
Water flows over me, no more.

Stony river; oil on canvas painting by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2020)



Once, the bubbling waters
Played around me
Played with me
Covered me
Hugged me
Hid me from human eye.

I heard the joy
Of childish laughter
As fresh streams
Gushed over me
Reveling in its power
But it could not displace me.

Then, I felt the cold drops
Droppings of the sky
Strong and harsh
Muddy waters of slush
Pushed me at its will
Set me trembling at its will.

I lost my home
Under the cool waters
Broken and torn
I am helpless
The embrace of clear waters
No more.

Left destitute
I call out
No one hears
No one sees
I stand exposed
Dry and parched.

NIGHT WATCH

When the lamps of heaven are dimmed
Nature gently folds its silent leaves
Running waters smoothly flow
The lullaby of the cool wafting air
Slowly casts a spell of drowsiness.

Owlish eyes ferret out its prey
Fierce passions are let loose
Fear stalks the streets and hamlets
Wild screams punctuate the night
Witness the trauma of innocents.

Sharp gory unblinking eyes see it all
Far away on the streets on running buses
Nirbayas being brutally tortured
Soumyas on trains hunted and torn to pieces
Wives beaten and daughters raped in their homes.

Trust within the home shattered
Promises of pure love never kept
Suryanelli not a place but a hell
One of many others resounding
With the screams of teenage girls.



I sit on top of the world; charcoal on handmade paper by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2017)

Owls hunt prey to keep alive
The law of balancing nature
Human nature hunts to destroy
Leaving behind scarred victims of abuse
Mangled body and tears soaked in blood.

If owls were to hoot in words
The hoary tales of the night
Blood on hands that remain
Would many hide in shame
Bridle the beast in them?

—Jameela Begum

— IO —

PHOENIX

Kamala, you rise from your ashes
As Kamala Das
You are born again
As Kamala Surayya
You have left your body
Your spirit reaches out in love.

You merged with the coolness of the leaves
Protected by an ancestral home
Under the wings of knitted relationships
Submerged in readings of the beauty of love
Wide eyed you gazed with a throbbing heart
You flowered and flitted from bush to tree.

Words sprouted as never ending leaves
From your body and the depth of your being
Languages flowed from the fireball within
You became Madhavikutty, Kamala Das
Calcutta made you, away from home
You sang of the sweltering summer in the city.

My Story was your story
You sold your body to mystify
To stir the strings of passion
Which you could not deny



Kamala Das; charcoal on handmade paper portrait by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2017)

Clutched in the grip of conformity
Living life as half- dead.

Loved and curled up at his feet
Writing of wild thoughts and men
And the lustful overtures on body
You loved the love of your grandmother
The neermathalam tree that flowered
Wafting the fragrance of selfless love.

Your quivering voice sang of violence
Wrung in the fire of wild passions
You wept for the harlots and the child
You dared to speak of social taboos
You were both the voice and the victim
Of your dark tresses in a world of hierarchies.

You sought relief in a hijab, O Surayya
Wrapped in the melody of Quranic verses
You felt the warmth of spiritual love
Your soul tilled the desert of your being
Your heart bled from your trespasses
You yearned for a slumber of peace
In the eternal Kingdom of Love.

—Jameela Begum

— II —

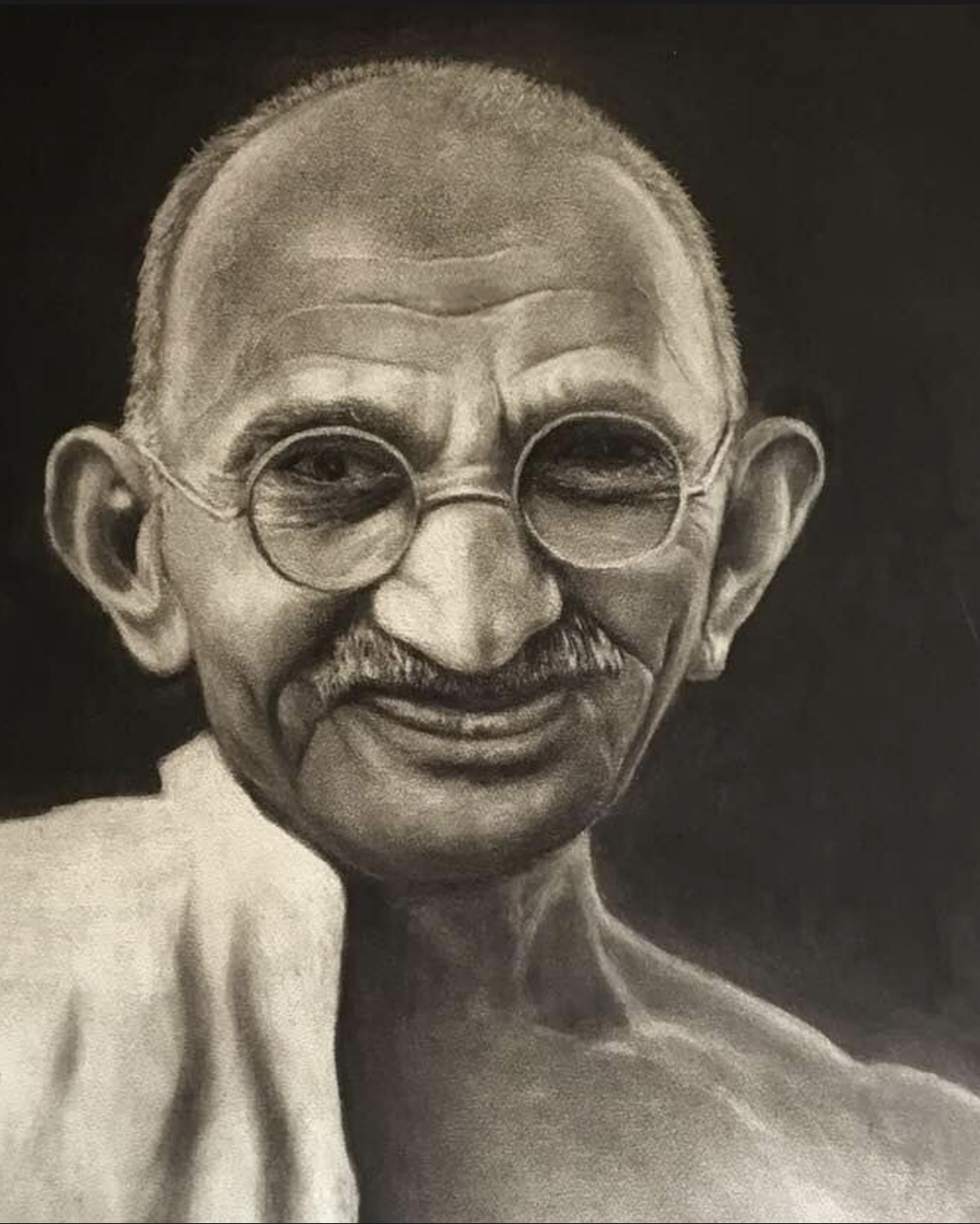
INDIAN

Bapuji, I see tears in your gait
A long pole to aid your weary feet
Those restless feet were once ever so fast
I wondered when it touched the ground
Snowballing public feeling against violence.

Thoughts moved faster than your feet
One thought, one aim, one plan of action
The dream of a nation bonded in oneness
Dissipate in the war of words and religions
In the power play that sealed the knell.

You marched with the silent majority
Shearing roots of feudalism
Shared rice gruel in harijan huts
For to be Indian was to be equal
Chant together the song of oneness.

Long traditions and customs die hard
Change is in the mind not in the land
Divisions are roused when majority claims
Selflessness is lost in the selfishness of greed
Bewildered people gaze and know not why.



Mahatma Gandhi; charcoal on handmade paper portrait by Ajayakumar, P. P. (2020)

When you boarded the train to Africa
You little knew that you had to return
To save a people from colonial bondage
Larceny of priceless spices and stones
Calling it culturing of the uncultured.

For the Indian flag to unfurl its Chakra
You strained to appease the power hungry
You helplessly watched the drawing of the LOC
Cut the body of a nation that went up in flames
Sowing seeds of vengeance and hatred.

To part ways is a matter of the heart
Packed trains leaving packed stations
Unknown destinations, families torn apart
Looting and violence, murder and fires
Rend the air to leave scars that never heal.

Your smile died on your lips at the horror
Your eyes could take in no more
You prayed to the crowd to show tolerance
Intolerance cut down your life of non violence
A victim to the violence you silently sparked.

—Jameela Begum

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JAMEELA BEGUM, A.

A well-known academician and Professor of English (Rtd.) at the Institute of English, University of Kerala, Dr. Jameela Begum contributed much in promoting Canadian Studies in India and served as the president of Indian association for Canadian Studies and the secretary to the International Association. She was instrumental in introducing skill based programmes through ASAP. Her skill in writing poetry reveals yet another facet of her personality.



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AJAYAKUMAR, P. P.



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Dr. P. P. Ajayakumar, is currently working as the Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Kerala. The Chief Editor of *Littercrit: An Indian Response to Literature*, an International literary journal of repute published from Thiruvananthapuram, he has more than 35 years of experience spending quality time on teaching, writing and publishing across disciplines.

