

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Volume 6:2

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2025

A Visual Story

Towards The Land of Love

****Medha Sinha**



"Run! "

Disha yelled at the two women who were scrambling down the inflatable raft down from the left over wing exit.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The noise of Kalashnikov bullets ricocheted harshly against the duralumin interior of the airplane.

Below, the military had surrounded the aeroplane.

The two men were lumbering towards the emergency exit

Disha moved , fast as lightning, and lodged herself between the door and the last two passengers.

Bang!

Disha could taste the blood in her mouth. Her feet gave way and she toppled down the inflatable raft.

"Idiots," she whispered in a raspy voice, "you're gonna die too"

And then, everything went dark.

When Disha opened her eyes, she was in a boat, in a strange stream. The boat drifted in the current like a leaf with an attitude. Disha kept sitting there, trying to wrap her head around the sequence of events. But she saw no airplane, no Kalashnikov wielding men, nor any military. Rather, this was a gently pulsing stream, moving forward. And Disha felt no regrets that would hold her back. She remembered putting herself between hijackers and escaping passengers, and then the bullet tearing through her.

"I did believe, zindagi badi nahi, lambi honi chahiye"

She smiles contently. The boat seems to hum in tune, almost acknowledging her.

Disha felt a peal of giggles burst forth. She didn't try to control it. When the laughter had died down, she saw a very curious woman, propping her chin on the edge of the boat and looking at Disha. Her dusky skin glistened like milk chocolate, her long plaited hair floated in the waves.

Disha made eye contact with the woman and blinked very slowly, like a confused cat. The woman, in return, tilted her head in confusion.

Disha could feel the awkwardness of the moment stretch on like uncomfortable rubber bands.

So, she cleared her throat and held out a hand.

"You want to climb up?"

The woman looked mildly shocked.

"You want me to..."

"Yes." Disha replied bluntly, "do come on in if you want".

The woman took Disha's outstretched hand and climbed up.

"I didn't expect another person will pull me up in their boat ever again" she mumbled.

"Why not?" Disha asked with genuine curiosity.

"It's a long story." The woman replied.

Disha grinned.

"Well," she said, "we seem to have eternity now. And I do like a good story!"

The woman had opened her mouth to speak, but paused.

Disha followed her gaze, and there was another woman, wrapped in a lilac cloth from under her waist, her hair tied up in a top knot, with two leaves and a flower tucked in it. She was floating, and there was an empty earthen vessel in her hands, which she was using as a buoyancy tool.

"Hello!" Disha waved.

The woman with the vessel didn't respond.

Slowly, Disha's boat moved closer to the floating woman.

"Shall we pull her up?" Disha asked the first woman gingerly.

"Worth a try" the woman toyed with her braid.

And Disha, without further ado, pulled the second woman on board.

The second woman looked at Disha and laughed.

"Women are getting their own boats too?"

Disha blinked in mild confusion.

"Back in our days," the second woman said, "only men got boats. Women could stay or be pushed."

The first woman hummed in acknowledgement.

"What do you mean?" Disha asked with awe.

"Long story." Said the woman.

Disha smiled and clapped her hands.

"I have a feeling it's going to be quite a while. Why don't we exchange stories?"

The two women looked at each other, then at Disha, to ensure that she was not kidding.

Disha's face looked very sincere. The second woman heaved a sigh and turned to the first woman.

"Why don't you start?"

The first woman cleared her throat and started speaking.

.....

Story 1: Shyama's Story



I was Shyama, the Janapada Kalyani of the prosperous city of Sravasti. You might not be very familiar with the concept.

Janapada Kalyani... One who brings blessings to the Janapada, is a courtesan with royal decree and a significant amount of power... Only if you know how to negotiate for it.

And I was taught well by my predecessor.

The king would have preferred if I were a simple, passive diplomatic chip in his political bargains. I, however, decided to be the diplomat myself.

If I wasn't going to mark boundaries, could I really blame anyone for crossing them to exploit me?

Ah, the carefree days... As the most beautiful woman in three kingdoms combined, worshipped like a goddess and a queen... Not because of association with questionable forces of nature nor men, but by my own right.

But of course one cannot have good things for long.

And neither could I.

I lived in an Ashoka flower grove, surrounded by vibrant red blossoms that sprung to life when the winter lay down on her back, parting herself to let Spring ease through. The entire grove seemed to burn with a flame so vivid, it could set the calmest of hearts on fire. Yet the flame that burned the brightest, was none but this Shyama.

I was called Shyama. Dark skinned... Like freshly tilled soil right before saplings break through... Like a calamity waiting to happen to a still heart. There was no man who could claim to steal my heart, for I was unmoved, even by their most sincere displays of affection and devotion.

And yet there I was , so deeply and irreversibly undone by love. 'How?' You might be tempted to ask. Let me tell you the story.

It was a delightful spring evening. My *sakhis* were lounging in the sprawling gardens, and my admirers had thronged the outer meadows.

There was this boy, barely past his teens. I remember his name... he was called Uttiya.

He was deeply, and hopelessly enamoured with me. Tried to serenade me several times to no avail.

Of course I was not going to give up my position as a diplomat- mistress for a boy still wet behind his years.

But there was no stopping Uttiya. Especially when he loved, and loved, and did not ask for anything in return. Not even to be loved back.

I would have turned the other way in blissful denial. However, when you are loved and you don't love back, at least in one way or another... fate has a strange way of putting you in your place. And I was no exception.

It was during this time, the King's men were taking away a trader from foreign lands.

"He's a thief.", they announced . They had decided to execute him.

"He looks like no thief" I had spoken.

"We have not managed to catch the real thief," the King's men had spoken in hushed tones,

"And the Queen will have our heads. So we must show her a thief to take out her wrath on!"

I don't know what happened. But I felt an inexplicable urge to save the man in chains. He looked like a marmoreal figurine, sculpted by the heavens with delicate care. It pained me to see him bound in iron chains. Looked like a graceful swan chained in an ugly cage.

"Give me some time to find the real thief" I pleaded with the men, bribing them with gold coins, "Don't kill an innocent like this! "

"Two days," they said gruffly, "We will hold the prisoner two days before we execute him."

And they left.

I knew I had to do something. I didn't know if it would be worth it! But it was out of love!

Uttiya had come again.

"Kalyani..." He whispered reverently, "what troubles you?"

"Nothing" I murmured.

I was suffering enough. I had no right to bring this boy, utterly irrelevant and ignorant of the situation into this mess.

But he pressed on.

And I spoke, about the false charges, about the foreigner in chains, and about my heart which yearned to save him.

"I'll go!" Uttiya said.

"I love you hopelessly, without return. I am doomed already!"

He said with a bravery that made my heart ache.

"Then go!" I had said

"Prove that you love me enough to die!" My voice sounded a little more caustic than usual. I was trying to hide that I was getting a little emotional over this insufferable brat.

And Uttiya, foolish, brave ... beautifully stupid Uttiya ... he agreed without any hesitation.

So I gave him my ring with the King's insignia, so that beautiful idiot freefell in the maws of certain death.

When they set the foreigner free, I seized him by his hand and dragged him out to the boat. He was declared innocent by the King's men, we had no need to flee. But I didn't dare stand on the soil where Uttiya had shed blood for love, and dare to love another. Or maybe I was trying to escape my own cruelty.

In the dead of night, the boat moved forward with the two of us. The foreigner... Now he had told me he was a merchant named Vajrasena... Kept singing praises about my kindness in setting him free.

"You are a fool" I had told him, "there's no rock in the prison you were thrown in that is harsher than me!"

He laughed like it was a jest.

"How did you free me?" He kept asking.

"I'll tell you later" I said.

"It's not time yet. We're on the stream. Let's keep our eyes ahead for now."

I knew the truth would come out eventually. I was, at this point, just delaying the inevitable.

Finally I caved. Not to force, but to the promise of love. And acceptance.

And I told him everything. About Uttiya. About his sacrifice for love. About his death in exchange for Vajrasena's life.

And he, like a bow with a snapped bowstring, violently jerked back. Called curses upon me. Called curses upon himself for being saved so despicably as me. And shoved me off the boat the next time the boat docked.

He did lament too... About the loss of love, about the lack of ability to forgive, forget and move on. He kept calling out for me. But when I showed up again in tears, he shoved me again. And departed.

.....

Shyama finished her story.

“That's so terrible of him!” Disha gasped.

“What did you do?” The second woman asked softly.

Shyama gave a sad little smile.

“By the time Vajrasena's boat disappeared, the King's men had come for me. I was not going to be escorted back to the city as a fugitive in chains. So I jumped in the river.”

Disha looked frightfully astonished, but the other woman were seething with rage.

“I think love itself is stupid! It makes you do stupid things!”

Disha and Shyama turn to face her.

“Why don't you go next?” Disha chimed in softly.

“Very well” The woman sighed, “Hear my story then.”

.....

Story 2 - Prakriti's Story



I was born in the house of a forest sorceress. I did not know who my father was, as many chandalas in our time did not. But my mother raised me with utmost care and love. She had very little to call her own. But whatever she had, she poured out for me. Bent herself backwards, providing more for me than would have been possible. My mother named me Prakriti, for she was in the lap of Nature when she had me, and I, to her, was a blessing of nature.

It was delightful to look at me. Men of our village were thoroughly smitten with me. But I knew what I really was in their eyes. I was barely human, and they would undress me with their eyes whenever they saw me, but they wouldn't let me draw water from the same well. So of course I kept my distance from those fastidious fools.

There was an exception. When I had started blossoming into a woman, a king had spotted me in the forest, and was taken with me. He wanted me to be part of his consort palace. But I could see the greed in his eyes. My mother thought it was more than someone born in my station could hope for. But I refused this. I was not going to be someone's exquisite plaything. No! They might think I'm not human enough, but I know *I am*.

Days were passing by. My mother grew increasingly worried about me. And I refused to lend her an ear.

One day, after sunrise, I had gone to fetch water from the river. On the way back, I ran into a monk. He was parched. I hesitated.

"I'm chandala born." I said

"Water bears no Jati, Kalyani" He said softly . And cupped his palms. I poured water in his cupped palms and he drank deep.

"Blessings on you!" he said as he left with a swish of saffron robes.

I kept staring after him.

There was someone who was brave enough to drink water poured from my vessel. There was someone who saw me past my birth, past my lineage. And he had such kind eyes.

I kept yearning for hearing his voice again. Was it his approval I sought? Or was it the fact that I could be seen as a human being too? I started getting a new high. And my heart told me, this was love. It was in a way, correct. But not the way my heart had intended.

My mother rebuked me, rebuked my audacity to look at a monk with the eyes of desire. She reminded me monks aren't meant for love.

Both of us were foolish!

"You're wrong!" I had told her

"This monk lives to love the universe. Am I not part of the universe? Why can he *not* love me?"

I was not prepared for the fact, that being in love with existence meant not loving one of them in particular. Or maybe I had hoped to get a little more out of this monk. Recognition. Kindness. Even the feeling of being accepted as I was!

Eventually, my mother stopped fighting me. I kept waiting at the roadside with my humble earthen vessel full of water, in case I ever run into the monk. But he never came. He seemed to have disappeared, and he had taken my peace of mind with him.

My mother could not bear to see me like that. She gave me her scrying mirror. It was an artifact of great power.

"Take this" she said.

"You will look in this if you want to see where your accursed monk is!"

I had danced with joy that day, much to my mother's exasperation.

Soon, I grew tired of looking at the monk in the mirror. I yearned to see him in person again. I needed him to acknowledge me, not go about his daily business, unaware he was being watched.

As my desperation grew, my mother grew worried.

"Foolish girl!" She had chided me, "If you keep venturing out of forests, you are going to land in a sea of trouble!"

"But I must meet him!"

I kept pushing.

And this time, just to protect me, my mother chose to employ her art of *sammohini*.

"This is extremely potent" she had said, "It can pull in even the Thunder Wielding Indra from his throne in Amaravati."

Yet, employing Sammohini on the monk proved to be a colossal challenge. Mother was not prepared. But once it started, she could not leave without finishing the ritual. So she pushed on.

"Keep dancing," she told me.

And I did. I heard her slow, agonized whimpers. It was like someone was yanking her veins from her body. I did not dare stop dancing.

And the monk had come. He had been pulled to our forest against his will. And this time, his face had the look of anguish. His eyes were like that of a stag caught in the maws of a lioness. I looked in the mirror. And I shuddered at the cloud of black smoke I saw around him.

"You monk" my mother gritted through her agony, "you belong to us !"

I saw the monk tremble. He closed his eyes and folded his hands.

"Tathagata... Save my soul from desire. Mara appears before me."

I froze in my tracks. The monk who had offered me the chance to serve him, the chance to quench his thirst, was now calling me Mara! The demon of attachment!

And in that moment it dawned on me what I had become... a she-beast, driven by nothing but selfish desires.

I looked at my mother, who was now hunched over the offering bowl in agony.

"Demoness!" I wailed

"What have you done!"

I think I was yelling those at myself.

"Ungrateful!" My mother hissed, "You seek out a male and now that I bring him before you, you call me a demoness!"

"Curse this !" I yelled louder.

The monk shuddered and winced.

"Curse you, monk, for giving me a taste of acceptance!

Curse you mother, for dragging this man here against his will," I yelled,

"And curse me for hoping I could be loved like I wanted to be"

I smashed the mirror on the ground.

I watched the monk's face go from panic to relief.

I watched my mother convulse, and a thin stream of blood trickled down her chin.

I watched the monk and the monk fell to his knees and whispered...

"Buddho Susuddho karuna mahannvo

Yoccanta suddhabbara-gnana locano

Lokassa papupakilesa ghatako

Vandami Buddham ahamadarena tam."

(To the most pure Buddha, mighty ocean of mercy,

Seer of knowledge absolute, pure, supreme,

Of the world's sin and suffering the Destroyer—

Solemnly to the Buddha I bow in homage.)"

.....

"What did you do?" Disha asked.

"Nothing quite as dramatic as Shyama here," Prakriti smiled, " I simply served the Nuns' Sangha as a lay Upasaka for the rest of my life "

"Why keep the vessel?" Disha asked

"It was all I had when I had nothing else"

Prakriti responded with a smile.

“I would draw water, and I would pour water for the nuns using this very vessel. I guess in a way, you could say, I learnt to love beyond personhood.”

“Ah! Selfless love!” Shyama sighed wishfully, then turned to Disha with a little grin.

“You know about selfless love, don't you?”

Disha looked a little bashful.

“Why don't you go next?” Prakriti smiled.

“Okay” Disha smiled back, and proceeded to tell her story.

.....

Story 3- Disha's Story



I am Disha. I was born in Bandra, Mumbai in 1997. I was my parents' youngest daughter. I went to Dubai to study aeronautical engineering when I was 19. There, I fell in love... If you can call that... With a classmate of mine. By the time we graduated, we were engaged. Within a year, we were married. He worked in a multinational company. Insisted I play as his homemaker. And I was young and stupid. So I agreed.

Of course things started going southwards.

He played the caring husband initially. But he slipped in a comment or two about how he was the sole bread-earner of the family every once in a while. It stung, but I tried to ignore.

Slowly, the jabs turned more frequent, more obvious. Slowly, he started accompanying the jabs with physical violence.

And that was when I was fully, and thoroughly done!

I moved back with my parents to their Bandra house. I knew I didn't have many prospects in India with Aeronautical Engineering, but there was one place that would take me in. The Cabin Crew of the airlines. I kept applying. Most turned to dead ends. But eventually my persistence bore fruit. I was hired by the Sky Asia airlines. And I was happy with my job, you know?

Yes, there were creepy pilots and other air hostesses trying to beat you in the game, but I was happy. In the air, smiling, hurtling through the skies at an impossible speed. It was so liberating! And for the first time I felt I belonged. In a roundabout way, I guess, I fell in love with the vast, deep blue sky.

My career, for the most part, was pretty uneventful. Of course there was occasional flirting, or even the nuisance of passengers, but it didn't get to me. I had seen how bad humans can become, so I ignored them.

There was a guy, he was a doctor. He flew with Sky Asia several times. A very polite and respectful guest. We went out for tea a couple of times. Maybe he grew on me a little.

But before I could actually take a step in that regard, came the fateful flight that evening. Was it yesterday? Was it last week? Last month? Time seems to warp strangely here.

But that flight. Oh, how foolish indeed. Make regular passengers take off shoes. But ensure problematic people can sneak in their problematic things on board.

Ha ha ha! They let the two bring Kalashnikovs on board. Darn Kalashnikovs!

And of course our plane was hijacked. Eventually we managed to negotiate terms with the bloody idiots.

They, of course, were played. And they realised it only after the last two passengers were escaping the flight through the left over-wing exit.

The military had surrounded the plane. In fervent desperation, they fired a round at the last of the passengers. I moved to barricade the door, as the last two passengers made a narrow escape.

.....

By the time Disha finished her story, the boat had touched the shore. Boat people rushed over to help them dock the boats.

"Where are we?" Disha looked around with awe.

"You're home," one of the boat-people replied while helping the three of them from the boat to the shore. "Welcome to the Land of Love!"



About the Author

****Medha Sinha** is a young artist, creative writer and scholar. Her academic and spiritual interest lies in Buddhist philosophy. She has completed her Master's in English Literature and is presently pursuing her B.Ed from Jadavpur University and seeking her research guide for higher academics.