

Balconies and Balustrades

Sharmila Roy

If I could lunge time backwards then I would definitely take it to a time when I was nine or ten years old, to a time of balconies and loggias, to cast-iron balustrades and shimmering eyes of stars lighting up dark corners. The alternating patches of light and shade creating a chessboard effect, joining other shadows of low stools and rolled up bamboo mats on the veranda, and then moving through gaps in the balustrades to join other shadows of the street outside, were familiar and reassuring. Why am I writing like this as if balconies don't exist and are some rare specimens to be viewed under glass casings? My answer sways between a yes and a no. Of course, balconies are there. But mostly they are ornamentations with not much outside space, no usable decking. But then one cannot discount the eye-candy factor either. Balconies of forgotten shapes supported by columns or console brackets are whispers now in this impossible universe.

Looking back, I suppose this space very much outside the interior, yet inside, a space between the public and the private, enabling to view the world outside without really involving oneself, was a very desired space in my growing up years. Paintings of Impressionist painters like Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt come to my mind. I remember going to my mother's maternal uncle's home which had a spacious veranda and there my mother's grandmother used to hold court sitting on a woven bamboo mat. She was *Bamma* to everyone. I can never think of her without her bell metal water jug and a silver box of *paan* or betel leaves, folded in a triangle with a clove stuck in it to hold the shape. There was also a bell metal bowl we called it *pickdani* where she would spit from time to time her saliva mixed with slaked lime and

catechu paste. In the evening, my mother's aunts would sit there with her, having *paan*, drinking tea from small teacups and in the winter, maybe, one of them would knit a sweater for a newborn. The veranda became a space for folklore, storytelling, conversation, gossips, collective morality and sometimes, literature. A safe place for the exploration of ideas indeed!

The same balcony would become a different place in the morning. No more a symbol of leisure, it transformed itself into a matter of fact working space. Since there was no stands or rafters, clothes would be hanged from a clothesline with wooden push-down clothespins. Plastic was yet to become a household material. The clothes would dry in the sun, fresh and bacteria-free. In the monsoons clay pots filled with charcoal, a fibrous husk of coconut and incense would be lighted under semi damp clothes to ward off mustiness. The fragrant smoke engulfing the veranda smudging all lines and colours had a dreamy sweetness to it. There was an unsaid competition among the aunts to hang up clothes as neatly as possible to prevent wrinkling, especially the free-flowing sarees. In the late afternoon, these were taken off the line and folded and each one of them took theirs to their rooms. The clothespins going back into a cardboard box signalled for a change of scene enlivening worn-out gestures.

As children we had the balcony to ourselves on holidays, especially on hot summer afternoons, to play out our antics. The adults would retire to their semi-dark rooms after lunch for a siesta. Free from adult dominance, in the hushed tones of the afternoon it became a wonderland through our imagination and we became characters, sometimes, from *Treasure Island*, sometimes, from *Coral Island* or if the mood permitted *Huckleberry Finn* and *Feluda*. We opened our dream-booty, sucked the sugar cubes and the sultanas and splashed in the waters of the open sea. This was then our cherished refuge travelling in the uncharted pages of children literature.

There is no doubt in my mind that the yesteryear verandas located between the muted interior of the house and outside, were associated with images of becoming warm, interweaving

space and time with all things ordinary and commonplace. A space full of transformative power. An essential and never an exotica by itself, but always with an allusion of exotica, a hyphen- space of blurring binaries.

About the Author

Sharmila Ray is a poet and non-fiction essayist, writing in English and anthologized and featured in India and abroad. Her poems, short stories and non-fictional essays have appeared in various national and international magazines and journals. She is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of History at City College, Kolkata. She has authored nine books of poetry. She conducted poetry workshops organized by British Council, Poetry Society of India, Sahitya Akademi. She is the Vice-president of Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library. She has been reading her poems in India and abroad. Her poems have been translated into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Slovene, Hebrew and Spanish. Currently, she is working on a manuscript of non-fictional essays. She may be contacted at sharmilaray25@gmail.com.