

The Dark Sun and The Woman Who Wore a Hat

Kamal Desai

Translated from the Marathi by **Sukhmani Roy**

Foreword by Susie Tharu

When a new text makes its way into a new language and a new world, inevitably there will be losses and gains. Not least among the gains of these careful translations is a new life for these works among an English-reading public alert to the questions that are being raised in the closing years of the twentieth century.

When *Kala Surya* (1968) and *Hat Ghalnari Bai* (1970) first appeared, Marathi readers were dazzled by their formal originality and by the charm of her prose. The writing was difficult, but irresistible. Sukhmani Roy reports on the excitement with which as a young woman she first read and then repeatedly re-read these stories. I can vouch for a similar thrill when in the mid-nineties Sukhmani's translations made these seductive and compelling texts available also to me. I am still not sure that I know exactly what they are about, yet they have provided some of the most enjoyable of reading experiences that I have had in recent times.

Readers will find here a poised and economical (though by no means a decorous) prose that is also enigmatic, witty, full of surprises, and an authorial voice that is never quite what or where they expect it to be. They might also be pleased to learn that in distinct contrast to the hostility that has generally been the lot of women writers, Kamal Desai's work has received serious critical attention. She has been variously and persuasively read as existentialist, feminist, poststructuralist. Though this might sound like an impossibility, I suggest that what we have here are texts that are all these- and more. Both *Kala Surya* and *Hat Ghalnari Bai* feature women protagonists whom we must- since we have no other choice- take at their word. Both protagonists demonstrate a rage for life that brooks no other law. Femeness and femininity are thematic in themselves and as metaphor for the active, mobile principle- the principle of transformation as it were- in what might be regarded as the human condition. At the same time femininity itself is not naturalized but presented as irrevocably social: wrought out of the intertextual throng and rush of everyday life in a middle-class Maharashtrian domestic world. These are the materials out of which the self (female or male) is composed, as also the materials it engages with, interrogates, and deconstructs in its bids for life. Much of the pleasure of Sukhmani Roy's sensitive and erudite translations is in the attention she is able to draw to this inter-textuality and to the agility of Desai's prose.

Need I add that like their protagonists, these works persistently escape classification. What are they? Who are their ancestors? What are they about? I leave that to the reader. I only promise the pleasure of the text.

Extracts:

The Dark Sun

Chapter 4, pp 65-66

I walk up to him, hesitant, uncertain.

'Why have you come? Aren't you scared of coming up to me?'

His voice is fading. Probably he will die. At his request, I give him some water.

I want to marry you, to be incinerated in sin. Since sin is an attribute of this earth, you have obeyed the morality of the earth.

Lead me from light into darkness.

Darkness is my kin, my friend.

Come darkness, come.

Come in a four-horse chariot.

Come in a ten- horse chariot.

Come in a zero chariot of zero horses.

Come in no chariot of no horses

Come through the particles of air.

Let me be crushed and powdered in your venomous embrace.

Let me find peace in your tender embrace.

In you, let me be you.

I am not afraid of you.

Because you are the true support of the soil.

Besides, God Almighty is an unnecessary object. He is uninvoked. But he has created a lot of commotion. His interference must be stopped. It is because of him that we accept the opposite, the path of light, a false path.

Therefore first of all the assault of the Almighty must be countered. He must be banished from here. Then the earth could remain earth and we could improve.

I have declared war against God Almighty. You must help me.

Three days and three nights we fought.

God Almighty was fighting with all his divine wealth of virtues. It's there is the sixteenth canto of the Gita.

The funny thing was that I had no infernal wealth.

The Woman Who Wore a Hat

Chapter 2, pp 122

When she walked along the road people stopped her and asked with heartrending concern: 'You are the one, aren't you? The one who has forgotten everything? How are you now? Can you remember a few things? Your ailment is awful, but also amusing.'

She must not walk along the road!

'Really? Not even her own name? If you forget your own name, you don't even know who you are. What do you do then?'

So many people called to inquire- the house was like a public eating place. As if no one in the world had ever lost their memory. She was the only one.

'What a thing to happen! A fever or a headache is understandable. But this is an unheard-of calamity. What does it mean? Simply not to be able to remember anything? How can it be? How does it happen? And then what should one do? How can one live? It's better if a person falls ill and dies of some disease, that at least is understandable. This is beyond comprehension.'

'But then you will get used to these people. This town. Even if you don't remember the past, the future will take shape here. Seeing that woman with a big tikka on her forehead everyday, you will come to regard her as your mother. Anyway, what is memory? It's only a habit, something attained. It maybe difficult in the beginning, but you'll soon get the hang of it. Everybody should be like you, should learn to determination.'