

Ananya Chatterjea

Etchings in the Sand

A Project of Memories

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*In the complex zone where boundaries of space and time blur
Conjuring up random mosaics
Yesterdays running wild into tomorrows
And todays seeming to shadow into yesterdays
Memory blending with imagined moments
Enduring dreams with fleeting experiences
Relentlessly asking,
wanting to address that infinitely torturous question
What would it be like if this had been so?
Would life be different had this not come to pass?*

Etchings in the Sand, a performance project created by two South Asian women, playwright and performer Meena Natarajan, and choreographer and performer Ananya Chatterjea, premiered at The Little Theater, at the Hennepin Center for the Arts, in Minneapolis, on June 1st, 2000. Produced by Pangea World Theater, it had a two-week run, and was part of a series produced by the company, entitled *Journeys. Etchings...* was an exploration of memories, fragments of the past that remained with us as we travelled across continents. For me, it was created through a very different process than my usual work, which is issue-oriented and often described as political theatre. In the writing she does for her theatre company, Pangea, Meena tends to focus on the story line which is to be dramatised, and there is a clear social context for the piece. And for both Meena and I, it was different in that we had never worked overtly with autobiography before. In *Etchings...*, without necessarily having planned for it to be so, we implicitly agreed to move away from the usual "burdens" of representation that artists of colour are urged to bear within the rhetoric of a liberal multicultural setting, and to work outside the political imperatives that press upon us in such contexts. Instead, we created from a deeply personal store of memories that did not necessarily resonate with larger political issues.

Many of the women who came to see the performance

came up to us afterwards and told us that they had simply loved it, and talked about how it had taken them on journeys of their own, remembering experiences, things, smells, sounds, that they had not had the space to revisit in a while. On the other hand, some audience members, most of whom were academics, had a difficult time relating to the piece: for them, there was too much nostalgia, and too much uncritical remembering. I wondered about this discrepancy in audience reactions, and also about what exactly read as nostalgic? For though we had focused on pain and loss, we had worked with happy memories, letting go of some, and lingering over others, just as we do in our daily lives. We had never really allowed memories to hold us in the past, but used them more to examine what our present was built upon. We had also worked with the act of remembering as a process, flowing in current time, of creating another layer of memories in a friendship between two women. Remembering aspects of our own pasts and bits of our ancestors' pasts, was a way of documenting stories that had helped us move along our journeys, and now lived with us. It is hardly surprising that such a process felt so precious for us, located as we were in the South Asian Diaspora in the USA, where so many children come to know about their personal heritage through stories about family members and events remembered and recounted. Remembering, in fact, is what enables one to set foot in the future, with some knowledge about where one has come from.

As we worked through the project, I invested more and more in the process of active remembering - something we never have time for in the hectic pace of our lives - as a way of tracking our journeys across time and place. Often my daughter Srija played in the studio as we worked, and we reflected on the ways in which, for her, this experience

too would become a memory for her growing years. We also realised that in the course of her play she had been paying deep attention to the stories we had been talking about as we formulated the lines, for she often repeated the lines and told us how she loved to hear the stories about grandparents, for instance, whom she only got to see on occasional vacations.

I started to write this reflection on the *Etchings...* project, though admittedly as a creator and performer in the project I am biased, because I wanted to share some insights that have come to me subsequently. Obviously, we were not talking directly of, say, the independence movement or the women's movement against deforestation in India, or about how the intersections of race, class, gender, and nationality circumscribed our experiences here, in the USA. Yet, there was something about the process of two women taking the time to remember and recreate, claiming artistic space for such deeply personal projects even when they did not comment on significant political events, that reverberated with feminist values. Something about the process of bouncing memories off each other, creating a deep listening for the nuances of each other's voices, about the way in which memories were called up through embodied images - the sound of bangles on a moving wrist, seeing a hand pushing away strands of hair from the face, the vision of lowering skies and the smell of rain - told us about women's ways of processing experience. Something was learned about the inevitable changes brought by a colonial history in recognising that these women, who could not really speak each other's languages, remembered and shared in English. There was something urgent about the way in which we re-imagined moments in the lives of our parents, grandparents, siblings, that revealed the typical diasporic anxieties about retrieving

memories, the fear of losing connections with dear people, far from us, and with an idealised homeland. The already complicated hybrid identities created through discontinuities in passport-issuing offices in Meena's case also reminded us of the phenomena of migration and labour created by the politics of capitalism. It also hinted at Tamil discontent and resettlement in different locations, a phenomenon that has obviously assumed larger dimensions lately, specifically in places like Sri Lanka.

I want to walk briefly through the structure of the piece in order to situate my reflections better. I felt it was necessary to inhabit two interrelated but different voices in the process of writing this article, one as the creator, reflecting on the piece afterwards, and one as performer, as myself, but more as a character inside the piece. The performance began with a series of playful queries as the women participated in a game-structure reminiscent of hopscotch. The questions suddenly segue into a pit of buried and painful memories as the women stumble into a mound of earth. Drawn to it as if magnetically, Ananya digs deeper and deeper into it, despite Meena's initial apprehensions, and rediscovers objects, now dark and muddied, but still retaining the power to make the women recoil as the memories associated with these objects overwhelm them. As more and more objects are found, the women are caught up in a deluge of painful memories. Words tumble out of Meena's mouth, even as Ananya's wringing hands breathe out the anguish of unstoppable memories: *There are places in our memory which are forgotten. Like places which we visit once and never return to, they are neglected, left vacant, and decay in our infinite search for other memories...And there are those other memories that refuse to die, that refuse to leave, that persist in spite of our efforts to forget them, that hang like clothes in the wind, some tattered and torn, others new and whole.*

Meena's hands tremble on pieces of clothing that hang limp from a washing line as the words rush from her mouth. Ananya's body is racked in the throes of memories, once packed away, now unearthed. The way the women interact with the objects also makes it clear that the objects themselves are not what cause the pain. They are triggers in a chain of memories and their presence invokes feelings of loss and sadness by association.

Memories play into our consciousness in different ways. The intense moment of being overwhelmed by avoided memories leads into a movement section that deals with coming to terms with loss. In the remembering there are moments that can be lingered on, despite the absence they make us reckon with, because they bring us pleasure tinged with sadness. Ananya dances in a long diagonal line across the stage. As she fades into the exit, revolving around herself, Meena is discovered, unravelling yarn, as she shares memories of her grandmother. As Ananya joins her, and they work through the yarn, they talk about visions from their pasts, and conjure up images, fictions blending into concrete facts remembered. For me, this was one of the richest sections, which carried the piece through a gamut of emotions, as remembrances of deaths and betrayals intersected with memories of happy childhood moments, of love and fun. What most affected me here was reflecting on the ways in which women listen and communicate with each other. During rehearsals we had noted how we tended to cut across each other's words when we talked normally. This did not mean that we were not listening to each other, but, in a rather typical South Asian way, we were braiding into each other's words, and our words fell into the complex network of sounds and meaning we were creating together. At other times, there were silences punctuated by breath only, some short pauses which allowed the weight of

some words to sink in, some longer ones that allowed us to listen both inside and outside ourselves.

These typical rhythms and their variations came into the performances. For like Urvashi Butalia, who has documented oral histories of women, we were struck by the particular nature of listening to (South Asian) women: "Many oral historians have written about the difficulty of speaking to and with women, of learning to listen differently, often of listening to the hidden nuance, the half-said thing, the silences which are sometimes more eloquent than speech. Listening to

women, is, I think, a different thing between women, than it is between men and women." Intentionally then, this scene is cut through and through with the rhythms of our interaction. There are moments of quiet listening: Meena touches Ananya's face gently as they sit side by side, *sitting on the beach in Madras in the early dawn... I look at my mother, committing every feature to memory, note the creases in her forehead and cheeks. She looks at the sea. I look away at the land. As her fingers trace the line of Ananya's face, remembering is doubled, she remembers her mother's face on her friend's, but in the process also commits to*



Ananya Chatterjea in *Journeys* Photo: Erik Saulitis

sensual memory the features of the latter's face.

For Meena, who had suffered the loss of several family members through accidents, this remembering in and through the body was a particularly vital moment. It reminded me constantly of the meaning of "nostalgia" as predicated by feminist Jigna Desai, who draws on the Greek semantic origins - *nostos*, meaning return to home, and *algos*, meaning painful condition - to argue that the word connotes "physical embodiment of the post-colonial diasporic condition of homesickness." Meena's fingers touch Ananya's face with gentleness, even as they are tinged with the sharp pain of loss and the intense awareness of the possibility of imminent loss that is always in our lives. Remembering and re-imagining bleed into each other as she talks about her sister *that last day on the bus, the two of us sitting next to each other, she falling asleep, her head resting on my shoulder, the feel of her skin against my arm, feeling her breath fan in and out... and I pushed her away*. Ananya is close to Meena, kneeling beside her and holding her in a tight embrace. She looks in the same direction as Meena, trying to visualise that moment. And her brows knit as if in puzzlement, her picture, drawn for her no doubt by Meena herself, at another time, does not quite match Meena's picture this time, *but you didn't. You let her rest*. The frames of their visual memories coalesce as Meena slides back to her previously drawn scenario, and agrees, *I did*. At such moments, there was no way or need to question the "truth" of these memories. Our processes of remembering are so laden with our creative interpretation, with the particular perspective from which we view what we like to call "facts", that it is perhaps important only that we remember what and how is valuable to us as our legacies of the past.

This quiet listening to each other is intersected by quick interchanges, still

permeated with memories of sensual experiencing. The details they remember and desire are articulated rapidly one after another, often in phrases that complete each other's thoughts, chasing each other's memories on their heels. They intersect with each other, together weaving an aesthetic typically South Asian in flavour. *Wishing for the stars/ on starless nights such as these/ those little star bindis that Ma made and stuck on my forehead/ to wish for the light on dark monsoon days/ brownness of Calcutta monsoon days, muddied and waterlogged/ Raag Malhar in the afternoon and it's stopped raining/ white jasmine buds on black hair... fire crackers at 5 a.m. on October dawn, loud enough to wake the dead...* The memories are filled as much with longing for the fragrance of the jasmine buds and the desire for that visual image, as with recognition of the irony of embarking on an exposition of the Raag Malhar, a classical melody of monsoon rains, supposed to invoke torrential showers, when it actually dries off the rain.

As they run through their inventory of memories, some sad, some amusing, some that make them shake their heads, they are once more reminded that this act of sharing memories is creating another set of memories for the future, when maybe this live interaction will no longer exist. As their minds travel from the past through the present to the future, the thought that has dominated the entire piece is reiterated: endless departures and arrivals. Ananya begins a long movement section that carries her diagonally across the stage. Meena sits on the floor, and as she gathers up her yarn, she speaks *and in the space and time between entry and exit/ moments filled with farewells, greetings, dedications, memories,/ movings, exiles, nights, days, dreams, futures, victories, defeats/ moments ripe with restless wondering/ vibrating on the edge of oblivion and renewal/ moments exhaling into the peripheries of an*

unlived hour.

At the end of the run, and after many reflections with a friend on the process of creating and performing *Etchings...*, I have come to value the project even more. The process had taken us through many years and across several cities, and all of that richness of journeying had been ours to share. We had also, together, escaped the necessary call of multicultural policies that command us to fall into necessary representations without specifically intending to do so, and just by creating an artistic project for ourselves, refused to fit into the groove popular for "third world women". We had claimed complex subjectivities through the fragmented narrative of memories, even as we had insisted on articulating histories that were very different from each other. It seems to me that there was a moment in Western theatre when women's autobiographical projects were appreciated and all the rage, but now they are passé, and women of colour who are just beginning to claim that space are often frowned upon. Of course, these women of colour have had to struggle to claim any space in the field of representation. I want to claim that the project of remembering and recreating moments of our lives as theatre, however fictionalised, is one that is still permeated implicitly with the politics of resistance. It is one to which attention needs to be paid, for this is often how we transform major historical narratives that fail to acknowledge our lived realities. Our performed remembered fragments had not included major historical events, but

they had mingled time frames as they exist in our experiencing, and they had arrested particular moments in the fleeting history of a constantly changing cultural context.

Urvashi Butalia, (1998) *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Viking/Penguin Books India Ltd., New Delhi
 Jigna Desai, (1998) Unpublished Dissertation
 Meena Natarajan, (2000) *Script, Etchings in the Sand*

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