

enqish

KEYwording

ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

English is not a language but a cryptic history of the world in the 20th century. The contestations and ambivalences related to the myriad practices and the receptions of the language have been mirrored in all other histories of culture; including cinema, music, food, fashion, knowledge dissemination et al. The films in subtitles...the texts in italics...the sound from unfamiliar sources...the smell of local oils in food..., respectively, have made subsections in the ways of archiving and memorising cultural habits and artifacts, even in the most forward looking set-ups. That, there are more works kept in subtitles and italics and with other kinds of notes in the margins than those which are marked as *original*, does not, in any substantial way, change the status of the former being categorised as *the other*.

This is a testimony of a practicing poet, born in post-colonial India with English as her first language, of coming out of the italics.

It fits like soulskin sometimes. And it takes one hell of a lot of nip and tuck and darn at others. We've had a long and interesting courtship, with all the fear and mistrust that goes with intimacy.

That's English for me.

It was Thomas à Kempis who said he'd rather experience 'contrition' than know how to define it. I commiserate with that. I don't know how to define English and I don't know whether it's good for my health, my moral fibre, my politics, or my inner wellbeing. But it is the language I know.

It's the language I fight in, wonder in — on occasion, dream in. The language I wear closest to my skin. Pajama language, in a manner of speaking.

It's the language I write poetry in as well, which makes it endoderm language. Or more. The language *under* my skin. The language I breathe in. Well, almost.

Let me just say I'm comfortable enough with it to laugh at the snobberies of my 'English medium' education. And comfortable enough to enjoy words like 'archipelago' and 'palimpsest' and 'peripatetic' without apology for my polysyllabic fascinations.

Belonging doesn't come easy, though. There will always be bits of the self that stick out, that stay obstinately unmapped. Belonging nowhere, belonging everywhere — both seem to take negotiation.

There are some places I know I don't belong to, however. I don't belong to the tribe that sees English as a sign of Western contamination or to that which sees it as a passport (along with fairness creams and smart phones) to the Great Indian Dream. I don't belong to the tribe that seeks to consciously 'sully' it or to that which believes it must be cleansed.

I am an amateur. A diehard, committed, believing, practicing amateur. An unlicensed practitioner. A non-card-carrying lover of English. A language upstart. That is the only way I can enter this space, the only way that empowers me, the only way that makes sense to me – particularly with a language that has its battalions of experts on everything, from its anatomy to its geopolitics, from its chemistry to its palmistry, from its rhyme to its reason.

...No, we don't serve up
neat styrofoamed verse.
We sprawl, we lumber, we stain.
We love like everyone else,
with the thick odour of pathology.

We are ink and syrup
and virulent acid.
We are the midgets
who turn in three strides
into lords of the universe.
We are here to restore order,
to put the voices – of books, lovers,
teachers, customs officials --
in their places.

We are the upstarts,
ready finally to take up space,
demand time,
settle down on the page.

'Claim'

Upstart-ness, I've found, doesn't entail *trying* to be mutinous. I don't have to split my infinitives or roughen my cadences to prove my distance from a colonial history. I don't have to write about caste violence and communal genocide, tsunamis and Himalayan yogis, to establish my cultural credentials. I don't have to pepper my work with Tamil phrases or Sanskrit aphorisms to underscore my rootedness. In short, I don't have to try to be idiosyncratic. I don't have to try to be a cultural oddball, to prove that I am different or contemporary or cutting edge. I don't have to try to be *anti-English* to prove I'm politically kosher.

There are multiple ways to question, to critique, to examine a heritage, without denying, severing or feigning amnesia over it. I don't feel the need to amputate my history; I merely don't want to be a puppet of it. My journey through language is about my journey to become *me*.

It is a journey that seems to call for relentless, interminable subtraction. But subtraction isn't just pain; it is also elation. Outsiderness isn't just about feeling evicted, lost, homeless. It is about growing lighter, less encumbered, about finding sudden exhilarating vantage-points, and deeper views of the canyon of cultural memory than ever before. The outsider can be a fugitive. The outsider can also be a guest, even a welcome visitor.

Give me a home
that isn't mine,
where I can slip in and out of rooms
without a trace,
never worrying
about the plumbing,
the colour of the curtains,
the cacophony of books by the bedside.

A home that I can wear lightly,
where the rooms aren't clogged
with yesterday's conversations,
where the self doesn't bloat
to fill in the crevices.

A home, like this body,
so alien when I try to belong,
so hospitable
when I decide I'm just visiting.

'Home'

A journey from English to english sounds facetious. But it's not far from the truth. *There are few capital letters/ than we supposed*, I wrote in a poem five years ago. This is a tale about coming to terms with language as a lower case affair — emphatically not about capital letters. This is also a tale about coming to terms with language as a substance riddled with holes. English to english to en_lish, one might say, if one was being coyly graphic.

English has meant resource and refuge, scalpel, scimitar and sanctuary over the years. Increasingly, it is a process, an unfolding, potholed and uncertain, a journey that entails leaps and unexpected trapdoors.

I've struggled and I've floundered. I've reveled in its alien delights, its treasures, its rich elsewhere. But I've also seen it as homecoming, resorted to it in times of need. And while it has sustained me, it has also, on occasion, betrayed me.

It's been a journey from awe to acquisition, apprenticeship to armed conflict, armistice to awe all over again. (Although none of it has been as linear as it sounds.) I'm not sure I'll ever make my peace with all the tripping, the falling, the plummeting it entails. But then what of those times when it stretches out, a long, breathtaking Persian carpet to the stars?

I remember early encounters with nonsense verse in Tamil, bits of doggerel in Hindi, nursery rhymes in English. I didn't have a clue what any of it meant; I loved it all the same. I remind myself of this now: the fact that the sound patterns of poetry sustained me at a time when the meaning was almost entirely incomprehensible. I loved the soaring and diving and careening of it. The fragmentary flashes of meaning were more than enough. Who wanted more?

Born in a home with Tamilian parents (both second generation English speakers), a sister and a grizzled cook from Kerala (who doubled up as a glorious nocturnal storyteller), life was a polyglottal mess of English and Tamil, with a smattering of Hindi and a rich whiff of Malayalam.

I was dimly aware of hierarchy. At the start, English seemed to be the language adults knew; I remember complaining as a three-year-old to my mother that my sister and her friends excluded me from their games by deliberately 'talking English' to one another. They were, in other words, pulling rank.

But then came school and a gradual emergence into a verbal universe. English was no longer 'adult' language; it was both home language and world language, though there was a mild change of flavor depending on which side of the door one was on.

Soon, the real distinction in my life wasn't about 'inside language' and 'outside language', or 'childspeak' and 'adultspeak'. It was about the distinction between prose and poetry. Prose – whether English or Tamil or Hindi – was sane, staid, unsurprising, conversational, comfort food. Poetry, on the other hand, was magic language, holiday language, dance language, music language, electric language. It was a reminder that language – whether English or Tamil or Hindi – was, at heart, mysterious, unpredictable, sly, feral. Poetry was the language of danger. Of discovery. Of heart-stopping illumination. It was heightened, intense, pressure cooker language. When you applied that kind of heat and pressure to language, its chemical properties changed. It became quicksilver. Language came alive.

I speak of it as a distinction of genre. But that wasn't the whole truth either. The distinction was a matter of attitude. Poetry wasn't only made. It could be found. All it took was alertness and a willingness to carry one's awe and relish of language into other areas of one's life.

‘Govt Split over Aluminium’ was a caption in *The Times of India* one morning. As an eight year old, I had no idea what it meant. But I sang the phrase to myself, tasted it, gargled it, sipped it. By the end of the day, I had made it mine. Aluminium was surely one of the most delicious words in the language – supple, elastic, versatile, capable of being enunciated with different stresses and tonalities. Who gave a damn what it meant? Even mundane journalese, it seemed, could be an occasion for verbal calisthenics. If one took speech out of one context, hurled it into another, dimmed the house lights, turned on a spot, threw it up in the air, language turned magical. The sorcery began.

I was around thirteen. It was afternoon. I was in my grandparents’ home in Madras on my annual vacation, browsing through my grandfather’s library. Impulsively, I pulled down a book by someone called TS Eliot. I had no idea who he was. I started reading. Two hours later, I was still reading. All the while I knew – exuberantly, irrefutably, thrillingly – that I was in the presence of poetry.

What was it about? I had a dim idea. And yet, even as a neophyte reader, the opacity and the density of the verse wasn’t a deterrent. I could recognize it even without being able to decode it; understand it without being able to paraphrase it. Mystery was poetry’s domain, and I was fine with it. I’d come home.

English, Hindi, French, Marathi – these were merely names of languages you could tame. You could learn to sound at ease in them; you could ‘mug them up’ for exams; you could watch movies, read books in them. But poetry? You approached it with delight, with care, with attention – the way you’d perhaps approach a wild animal you wanted to befriend. This was language that entailed depth, intensity, guile. And yet, for all the obvious craft involved, this was language that resisted domestication. Poetry wasn’t just about ideas or emotions, about mind or gut. It was about something that came from such a deep place in one’s inner magma that by the time it emerged on the tip of the tongue, it left you singed, chemically altered. It yoked together terror and truth.

Then followed the more formal academic engagement with language when poems turned into Poetry and reading into Education.

Not entirely dismal, however. These were years of active acquisition, but also of absorption. They gave me the license to marinate in poetry and in that other surprisingly creative domain: literary criticism. The best critics, I realized, were shamans in their own right, who could lead you into the inner life of a poem, to that dark cavern where its heart pumps and its life energies flow.

But above all, I realized that literature was not just about a shadow world, but a daytime universe. Poetry was as much about precision as about passion, about exactitude as about excitement, about craft as about creativity. And it was the combination of night and day that made it profound, blazing, life-altering.

A curriculum that comprised a pantheon of dead white male poets wasn't a problem either. Shakespeare and Herbert, Wallace Stevens and Rilke, Neruda and Whitman – these were writers to devour. There was enough parallel study to uncover the other side of the story: how many currents flowed, unacknowledged, alongside what is considered a mainstream. I was aware that literary cartography was a tricky business – imprecise, arbitrary, selective. I knew these poets were just a fraction of the world polyphony, but I loved them all the same.

There'd always be other voices: peripheral voices, forgotten voices, those I'd have to strain to hear. Then there were the silenced voices, hopelessly irretrievable. The silencing made me fearful. That was perhaps my biggest fear as a sixteen-year-old: of never finding a listener. I was beginning to realise this wasn't a private adolescent anguish, but a very real possibility. English, as we studied it, had its riches. But it was the language of a chosen few, a remote and starry devaloka.

Thankfully, I could create my own eclectic parallel reading list. Through my undergrad years, I did just that, immersing myself in Basho and AK Ramanujan, Elizabeth Bishop and Buson, Erica Jong and Nammalvar, Arun Kolatkar and Yehuda Amichai. But I knew how precarious this equilibrium was, how easily you could be excluded.

Many years later, in the title poem of my first book, I wrote about the act of ‘cleaning bookshelves’ as an act of sedition. Reorganizing one’s shelves, stumbling upon old flyleaf inscriptions, fingering the tactility of crumbling paper and glossy coffee table covers – the poem talked of all the magic and elation of bibliophilia. But above all, it was a poem about a literary mutiny, a quiet coup d’etat. It wasn’t about silencing any voices, but about shuffling around existing arrangements, and setting up conversations between writers who, I wished, could meet each other, share a drink with each other, perhaps. And so the poem turned into a playful rewriting of the canon, a blurring of borders between high art and low art, mainstream and periphery:

Begin by respecting the logic
that governed earlier conjunctions –

respect the hauteur
of the book not journeyed,

the complicit camouflage
of the borrowed paperback,

the frowning grandeur of the Russian classics,
upper shelf, upper caste,
lost in the austerities of a glacial tapas,

the sly tight-lipped smile
of the coffee-table volume,
lusciously swathed,
venerable geisha,

and the amber geniality
of the leatherbound coterie,
still fragrant with the smoke
of old cheroots
from colonial living rooms.

Then trace the occult insignia of silverfish
on paper that crumbles at a touch
into dragonfly-wingdust.
Rediscover the flyleaf inscription
of a lover's ex-lover,
damply intimate,

and rising somewhere
the crushed
azalea scent
of Manderley...

Tumbling unexpectedly
out of the mists of mothball
and nostalgia, a world
of lighthouses off the Devonshire coast
and dungeons stuffed with precious ingots –
embrace the lost world of Enid Blyton,
blessed Blyton,
beloved reactionary.

Now comes the chance to intervene,
match-make, infiltrate
old boy networks -
allow Kerouac
to nudge familiarly
at Milton,
Mira at Shankara,
watch Nietzsche sniff suspiciously
at Krishnamurti.
And listen close,
as Ghalib in the back row
murmurs drowsily
to Keats.

Open trunks.
Allow the musk
of a buried adolescence to surface
as Kahlil Gibran and Swinburne return
to claim their share of daylight and liberty
with all the dust
and truculence
of the unjustly exiled.

And amid the whispers
of reunion and discovery,
the hum of interrupted conversations
resumed after centuries,
know that it is time
to turn away.
And accept finiteness.
Accept exclusion.

'On Cleaning Bookshelves'

When I emerged from my Masters, I gleefully followed Randall Jarrells' dictum: 'Read at whim, read at whim!'

I also wanted to *write* at whim. But that wasn't so easy.

Poetry was the shortest and most direct route to the self that I knew. Also the most pleasurable. Since language was *my* way of knowing the self, English became a desperate device, an invaluable tool. I had to sharpen my implements, know the rules, learn the game. And yet, I didn't want a borrowed language. I'd spent my life believing others possessed a superior wisdom and life was elsewhere. Now I wanted to inhabit myself.

There were years of apprenticeship – conscious and unconscious – during which I tried to write like those I admired, and scarily enough, often ended up sounding like those I disliked. There were years of *séance* when other voices spoke through me, unbidden and unsought. There were also years of ventriloquism, during which I writhed in envy while other poets spoke in what I recognised was actually *my* voice. And of course there were spells of laryngitis, when I had no voice at all.

But I knew what I wanted: a language that was both familiar and startling, a voice that could whisper and still be heard, a language polished like gunmetal and yet agile enough to creep into the crevices of lullabies and the folds of old saris. I wanted a language that could speak of my love of Keats and my dislike of literary brahminism in the same breath. A language that could speak lyrically of my grandmother's self-possession (*the secret of a world/ where nayikas still walk/ with the liquid tread of those/ who know their bodies as well/ as they know their minds*) and savagely about pundits with faces *about as medieval as nylon* and macho intellectuals with *brains bullworked into maleness*. A language that could speak of personal dream worlds (*the moonwatered stone of Egyptian temples, the zephyr in Khorasan and medieval feelings of yearning for paramours whose eyes smoulder like lanterns in winter*) and implicate at the same time, women's compartments on peak-hour Bombay locals and convent schoolteachers (who spawn students that must *prefer wrens and martins to daydreaming/ daffodils to Venus flytraps*). It wasn't about trying to be contemporary or postcolonial or Indian in any self-conscious way, but I was aware of a surge of power in reclaiming bits of myself I had frittered away – to *books, lovers, teachers, customs officials*.

The art of the murmured voice is what I once called poetry. To keep the faith that one's murmur will be heard – despite the odds – was the most difficult challenge of all. But oddly, impossibly, the murmurs did get heard. Echoes did happen. Subtle echoes. But undeniable ones.

The responses to my first book convinced me that I could write in a language that was mine enough to be personally rewarding, and shared enough to be somewhat rewarding for others. When the poems were translated into Hindi and Tamil, Italian and Spanish, I realised that there were unexpected homes for this odd Bombay-Tamil-Anglophone voice; that it could leak into other lives in ways I hadn't imagined.

And then a review appeared in *Poetry Wales*. A critic patted me avuncularly on the back for my command over rhythm and sound, and then proceeded to rue the absence of an 'identifiably Indian' ingredient in the work. The review was mildly annoying, but more than anything else, it fed into a deeper disquiet. As an arts writer and curator, I had started to encounter the many self-appointed gatekeepers of culture, and was beginning to realise that the only way to be heard was sometimes to be gatekeeper oneself – not a prospect I relished.

I wanted to write a poetry that could be vulnerable, that could disarm, expose its own underbelly. A poetry that could be critical of a cultural history and yet deeply implicating of the self, that could embrace contradiction, the many roiling paradoxes of the lives we lead. Somewhere between verdict and sound bite, between a culture of terminal sanctimoniousness and terminal triviality, there had to be another way, a real language, *my* language.

That's what I was looking for. But to sound provisional, uncertain, contradictory – all these were signs of weakness in a world of magisterial stances. Even to confess to a love of Keats was treason in a world of postcolonial lawmakers. To be myself, I realised, would always be fraught in a world with its own formulae for authenticity and belonging. I didn't want to surrender a hard-won quest for language merely to suit the diktats of a fundamentalist ethos. I had to reclaim my right to speak the way I wanted – assertively. The alternative was to be taken over by the cultural police.

The problem, I realised, wasn't progressive or orthodox opinions; the problem was calcified attitudes, dogmatic perspectives, prescriptive worldviews. The problem was that the world resorts – particularly when challenged – to readymade language.

That was the birth of a poem about my need to resist those voices that constantly legislate on belonging, a poem that's entered more than one anthology and continues to evoke strong responses:

You believe you know me,
wide-eyed Eng Lit type
from a sun-scalded colony,
reading my Keats – or is it yours? –
while my country detonates
on your television screen.

You imagine you've cracked
my deepest fantasy –
oh, to be in an Edwardian vicarage,
living out my dharma
with every sip of dandelion tea
and dreams of the weekend jumble sale...

You may have a point.
I know nothing about silly mid-offs,
I stammer through my Tamil,
and I long for a nirvana
that is hermetic,
odour-free,
bottled in Switzerland,
money-back-guaranteed.

This business about language,
how much of it is mine,
how much yours,
how much from the mind,
how much from the gut,
how much is too little,
how much too much,
how much from the salon,
how much from the slum,

how I say verisimilitude,
how I say Brihadaranyaka,
how I say vaazhapazham –
it's all yours to measure,
the pathology of my breath,
the halitosis of gender,
my homogenised plosives
about as rustic
as a mouth-freshened global village.

Arbiter of identity,
remake me as you will.
Write me a new alphabet of danger,
a new patois to match
the Chola bronze of my skin.
Teach me how to come of age
in a literature you've bark-scratched
into scripture.
Smear my consonants
with cow-dung and turmeric and godhuli.
Pity me, sweating,
rancid, on the other side of the counter.
Stamp my papers,
lease me a new anxiety,
grant me a visa
to the country of my birth.
Teach me how to belong,
the way you do,
on every page of world history.

'To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find
Me Identifiably Indian'

And then, one day in March 1997, language deserted me. I'd been betrayed before, but never so definitively. There are various ways I describe that experience. A near-death experience. A dark night of the spirit. But I think of it as my first visceral encounter with the blank spaces on a page of poetry. I hadn't quite understood their significance until I fell headlong into one of those craters.

When I started emerging, many things in my life changed. My self-definition, for one. I was now more seeker than poet. And I was filled with the terrifying discovery that there were giant silences in my inner life that could never be permeated by language. As I emerged, it felt like I had urgently to come to terms with this deafening silence of the universe, this place where language is ashes in the mouth.

Until this time, my questions about the inadequacy of English were cultural. Could I find words to speak of the cow-hoof-dust light of a north Indian dusk? The dark camphorated recesses of my grandmother's pooja room? The crackle of my mother's sari when she returned after an MD Ramanathan concert? I knew certain experiences could only be forded by image. Metaphor could carry you over most trans-linguistic gaps. Also over emotional and cultural abysses.

But this was an abyss of another kind. Not despair – I was familiar with that terrain. Here, words were distant, spectral. And so was everything else – love, dreams, rages, desires, traumas. Nothing counted. This was wordlessness.

Life returned seemingly to normal in a week. But something changed, irrevocably. And the poetry began to gradually reflect that disturbingly real experience. It grew quieter, less obviously dramatic, more perforated. There were more pauses, less of an anxiety to fill in the gaps.

It wasn't about losing faith in language as much as about realising that nothing – not even my hard-won personal English -- was foolproof. The ropes were frayed, the magic carpet tattered.

To swing yourself
from moment to moment,
to weave a clause
that leaves room
for reminiscence and surprise,
that breathes,
welcomes commas,
dips and soars
through air-pockets of vowel,
lingers over the granularity of consonant,
never racing to the full-stop,
content sometimes
with the question mark,
even if it's the oldest one in the book.

To stand
in the vast howling, rain-gouged
openness of a page,
asking the question
that has been asked before,
knowing the gale of a thousand libraries
will whip it into the dark....

'Another Way'

And even as I struggled with this betrayal, I began to dimly see its gifts. When I decongested language, allowed it to grow less fevered, more expansive, more open to bewilderment, it breathed easier. My relationship with it grew less clingy. And something else began to emerge in the holes – something that wasn't me, something truer.

Something is being dismantled,
something that was clunky

like armour, passé like petticoats
in a new world,

and I hope it's something in the head,
some ageing manual learnt by rote,

some mechanical way of parsing
a life-sentence.

'Reverb'

It felt dangerous. But curiously, life wasn't losing its ethical concerns, its politics, its questions about dharma. It's just that as I started following a deeper imperative, some of these questions seemed to fall into perspective, growing strangely more energised.

We thought it meant going against the grain,
and of course it did,
but not with clenched teeth
and knotted sinew

but by listening just beneath the skin --
the urgent gurgle of current,
rife with frogspawn,
pushing rapidly
upstream.

'Counter'

Nor did it mean an erasure of sensuality, of the 'uncensored wilderness of greed' that is the body. Earlier, writing the 'spiritual' had always felt mildly embarrassing, because it seemed to reinforce stereotypes of the esoteric East. As Indian women artists, we'd had enough of that, surely? We wanted to be women with bodies, hormones, hungers, not ethereal sprites, anaemic archetypes. But now, the spaces between words uncovered a lust for a deeper life, which, curiously enough, provoked a more erotic, exuberant verse.

...I could swallow you,
feel the slurry of you
against palate
-- and throat,
ravish you
with the rip, snarl
and grind of canine
and molar, taste the ancestral grape
that mothered you, your purpleness
swirling down my gullet,
and it would be a kind
of knowing,

but you still wouldn't be
me enough...

'Black Oestrus'

And perhaps even truer than lust was a growing glimpse that underlying all this – whether the need for sex, love, knowledge or the sacred – was the same octane. My language had to grow subtler to reach it, but subtlety didn't mean a loss of voltage.

It's here again,
sweeping through my life,

ripping apart jeans, books, kurtas, income tax returns,
wiping the grin
off the Bhairavnath mask
from the Thamel street shop.

Except this time
there will be no cut-and-paste,
no frantic attempt
to get the lines right,
check the silver, count the spoons.

There's terror in the air
but as earthenware crashes
and something like flesh
blackens on the griddle,
I feel it –

the solar plexus lurch,
the shiver of guilt,

a mothwing flutter of authorship

'Almost Shiva'

Language didn't need to be impregnable in order to be strong, or soft in order to be vulnerable. Pauses didn't mean an absence of muscle, of spine. The more the gaps, I realised, the stronger, the more tensile it could become.

...But there are choices
other than cringing vassal state
and walled medieval town.

And there is a language
of aftermath,
a language of ocean and fluttering sail,
of fishing villages malabared
by palm, and dreams laced
with arrack and moonlight.

And it can even be
enough.

'Epigrams for Life after Forty'

The terrors haven't subsided. But I am more at ease with gaps than I was fifteen years ago. That brings me back to where I started: those times when language was a mystery and mystery wasn't a problem.

...Grant me the fierce tenderness
of watching
word slither into word,
into the miraculous algae
of language,
untamed by doubt
or gravity,

words careening,
diving,
 swarming, un-
forming, wilder
than snowstorms in Antarctica, wetter
than days in Cherrapunjee,

alighting on paper, only
for a moment,
tenuous, breathing,
amphibious,
before

 leaping
to some place the voice
is still learning

to reach.

Not scripture,
but a tadpole among the stars,
unafraid to plunge
deeper
if it must –

only if it must –

into transit.

'Leapfrog'

English today is a bit like my body – *so alien when I try to belong,/ so hospitable when I decide/ I'm just visiting.*

Perhaps that's even all right?

It was snobbery perhaps
(or habit)

to want
perforation,

to choose cotton, for instance,
with its coarse asymmetries,
over polyester
or unctuous rayon.

But this, I suppose,
is what we were looking for all along --
this weave
that dares to embrace

air,

this hush of linen, these frayed edges,
these places where thought
runs

threadbare,
where colours bleed into
something vastly blue
like sky,

these tatters
at peace almost
with the great outrage
of not being around.

It's taken a long time
to understand
poems matter
because they have holes.

'Poems Matter'

english

A TESTIMONY BY Arundhathi Subramaniam

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KEYwording is a project by Madhusree Dutta and Ines Schaber.

Until the late 80s, the Arsenal, in whose context this project takes place, has used keywords as a search criterion for films in their collection. This practice was later abandoned because 'the standard categorisations used to sort films and make them accessible in a popular form would exclude many films as the given categories do not and cannot be applied to many of the experimental films that Arsenal collects.'

Retrospectively though, the terms can be read not as a normative function within an archive but as a positioning of an organisation and its political agenda. The current project is to address, yet again, the space that lies between the possibilities of opening and locking of themes and practices when anchored on keywords. Keeping the Arsenal archive as the immediate context, instead of avoiding the pitfalls of applying words on films we attempt to pluck a few words from the contemporary cultural practices to rethink the ways of archiving and the struggle to keep contemporising that what is archived.

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KEYwording is part of Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice. The idea of the Living Archive is to initiate projects that carry out archival work as part of their development, so as to link research, preservation and publication in the context of contemporary curatorial and artistic practice. Living Archive represents the attempt to undertake archival work that does not serve self-preservation only but is contemporary, creates something new and enables new approaches.