



**CELEBRATING THE
DEMONESS: SHADOW
PLAY AS PERFORMANCE
AND REAL LIFE**

MANJIMA CHATTERJEE



PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

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**Celebrating the Demoness: Shadow Play as
Performance and Real Life**

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Hanumana faces the rakshasas. Installation view of Tholu Bommalatam puppets from Andhra Pradesh at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



**Celebrating the Demoness:
Shadow Play as Performance
and Real Life**

Curated by Anurupa Roy
Venue Old Goa Institute of
Management



Scenes from the Mahabharata war. Installation view of Togalu Gombeyatta tradition of Karnataka, with animation by Atul Sinha at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Curatorial Note

Artists *Mohammad Shameem, Asha, Maneesh Pachiaru, Pawan Waghmare, Sajeesh Pulavar, Sadanand Pulavar, Balakrishna Pulavar, Lakshmana Pulavar, Gunduraju, S. Chidambara Rao Sindea*

Light Design *Bharavi*

Collaborators *Atul Sinha, Vishal K. Dar*

Curator *Anurupa Roy*

It is unknown where the journey of shadow puppetry began. What is a shadow—a play of light and shade? Shadow puppets are probably the oldest form of puppet theatre in the world. Did early humans huddle together in a cave, sitting around a storyteller who cast shadows on the cave wall with the bones and skin of the animals they had hunted? This exhibition looks at the relationship of the object, the light source and the surface that receives the shadow—a magical mix of science and art. From some of the oldest forms of shadow puppetry like the Tholu Bommalattam from Andhra Pradesh to Togalu Gombeyatta of Karnataka, and Tholpavakoothu of Kerala to the zoetrope and colour wheel—the exhibition looks at the journey of shadows from live performance to animation and moving pictures.

The exhibition traverses beyond just the form of shadow puppetry. It also looks at the world of stories and life itself through the lens of light and shadow. In shadow puppetry, the epics are recorded and passed on from one generation to the next, orally through the metaphor of shadows. The epics which have characters who are many shades

of grey—like Yudhisthir, Shakuni and Ravana. And it is only in the narratives of shadow puppetry that we learn about the backgrounds of Shakuni and about the many Ravana, not only the ten-headed being but the avatar with a hundred heads, the Mahi Ravana and Chhaya Ravana. The shadow is a metaphor, as is light. Just like life, and in shadow play.

Celebrating the Demoness: Shadow Play as Performance and Real Life

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Lankini laughs—as she does, her enormous eyes become visible, and her nostrils quiver under the weight of the tremendous nose ring she wears. Her huge ears tremble and her uncharacteristically short hair stands on its ends. She appears as poised to leap, and Hanumana on the other side of the room, presently busy fighting off three demons at once, is the likely victim of her attack. Her laughter evokes startled responses from old men peeping in to look into the room, and nervous giggles from a group of schoolgirls that turns to fits of laughter as they push each other towards her. Of course, it helps that the figure of Lankini is massive, and that she is strategically positioned at the doorway, with a motion sensor that switches on the light behind the screen, marking her appearance, and her laughter, each time someone passes by her. The white screen suddenly features an awe-inspiring demoness with abundant teeth and flaring nostrils before slowly fading to white again.

Lankini in the present context is, in fact, a puppet from the Tholu Bommalatam tradition of Andhra Pradesh in the exhibition *Shadow Play* at the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa. This exhibition, curated by Anurupa Roy, examines the possibilities of puppetry, right from traditional forms such as Tholu Bommalatam, Tholpaavakoothu, and Togalu Gombeyatta to a peephole murder mystery being played out in a miniature Goan casa. Roy does a remarkable job of playing with viewers' imaginations: combining sound and LED lights to create magic with the solar system, using a top light and paint with sound and black cutouts to create a magical underwater experience, and setting up a colour wheel to tease the viewer to interpret the



Installation view of the massive Tholu Bommalatam Lankini puppet at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph by Manjima Chatterjee.



Installation view of a scene from the Mahabharata, from the Togalu Gombeyatta tradition of Karnataka at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



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world outside in different colours. An innocent-looking zoetrope (a nineteenth-century optical toy) installed in a corner plays with the concept of seeing by creating an impression of motion using a series of still images and a rotating cylinder—as these drawings turn in the “blink of an eye”, we are fooled into believing that we are being watched by a pair of animated eyes.

In five cleverly designed spaces hosted within the Old Goa Institute of Management, *Shadow Play* explores the historical and present-day possibilities of puppetry. While the modern explorations focus on shadow as illusion, the traditional set-ups represent moments from shadow performances, captured in a photographic freeze, as it were.

As we enter the space exhibiting traditional puppets, our path is barred by an enormous figure of Shatakantha Raavana (Hundred-headed Raavana), in the form of a cutout made from corkboard. The figure stands as a statue, independent of operators, casting larger-than-life shadows across the tiny ante-room. This would not be the way the actual puppet would look, of course, but the shadows cast by the numerous fractal cuts in the figure are astonishing. Most viewers entering the space stop to admire this figure and engage with it by scanning a barcode on a poster put up nearby, which reveals a story from the *Sillekayatha Ramayana*, an oral narrative followed by leather shadow puppeteers for nearly a thousand years. This *Ramayana* depicts Rama as a character marked by hubris, who goes on to trigger an unnecessary war with Shatakantha Raavana, an enemy far more powerful than him, and learns some truths about himself and his wife, Sita.¹

Next, a scene from the *Kamba Ramayana*, depicted in the style of Tholpaavakoothu, a form of leather shadow puppetry originating in Kerala in the ninth century, depicts a tense moment in the war between Rama and Raavana in Lanka, with a wooden Garuda puppet poised to swoop down a taut string and save the shadowy Rama and Laxmana from the prince Indrajeet’s snakes. The scene is, in Schechner’s sense, “restored”² by way of recreating the *koothumadam*,

the theatres specifically constructed for shadow puppetry—down to the oil lamps that sustain the shadows at the actual temple sites where these spaces are located. A television screen placed nearby depicts the scene as it would have been presented during the live performance, further reassuring us of the authenticity of this showcase.

In the next room, the shadow puppetry tradition of Andhra Pradesh, Tholu Bommalatam, is used to show the über-macho Hanumana warding off not one, but three demons, each more fearsome than the other, while the battle scene plays out on an animation screen next to the group. Magical Mahiraavana—Raavana's brother, brother-in-law or son in different versions of the story, master of *Patal-lok*—watches the scene morosely from across the room while Lankini, guardian of Lanka, hidden from view in her corner, laughs uproariously every so often to remind us to go and look at her as she guards the exit .

Deep within the exhibition lies the final room where, surrounded by puppets from Karnataka's Togalu Gombeyatta tradition as audience, the Battle of Kurukshetra is played out in the animated form of the same tradition. Soldiers fighting the Mahabharata war, from the Togalu Gombeyatta tradition, are displayed around the room, and show the influence of British soldiers in their clothing. One such soldier—in a purported act of defiance by its creator—sits on a sterile mule instead of a horse!

The animation is terrific, the positions of the puppets, particularly in the Hanumana room, inspired. Yet, what stays with me is the sound of Lankini, laughing.

LANKINI SPEARHANDS

Let's return to the story. Who knows Lankini? In the tale, she is only known to Hanumana. She is a fearsome threat to all who attack Lanka. And yet, who would dare to do so? Raavana's formidable reputation would be a deterrent to most potential invaders. Only the foolhardy, or all-powerful, such as Hanumana, must dare. She must

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A scene from the Ramayana. Installation view from the Tholpavakoothu tradition of Kerala at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Manjima Chatterjee.

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Shatakantha Raavana. Installation view from the Togalu Gombeyatta tradition of Karnataka at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Manjima Chatterjee.

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have expected his arrival. The story tells us that, like most Rakshasa characters, she was originally a celestial being, grown too arrogant with her position at Brahma's door and cursed to live out her life in monstrous form until defeated by a monkey. She is a Gramadevi³ or a village goddess; terrible in her role as a protective mother. She has eight arms, most armed with bloodied weapons, and is dressed in nothing but the heads of warriors she has killed in battle. Clothes are for those who seek acceptance in society; Lankini revels in her role as the outsider—fearless, grotesque, and free.

I have always wondered: why do the *rakshasas* laugh? In performance art, particularly in India, the entry of *rakshasa* characters is marked by raucous laughter. This laughter is the antithesis of the serenity that is sought by the soul. More often than not, it is meant to be the laughter born of arrogance, loudest before its defeat. In shadow puppet performances, the *rakshasas* shake as they laugh, and grow to an immense size as they approach their puny, but brave opponent. It is a moment that is supposed to generate awe. It is also a moment that, in this case, revels in subversion, for at the very next moment, the puny Hanumana will grow in size to equal the *rakshasi*, or shrink to become even smaller and defeat her with his cleverness. The audience watching this performance knows what is surely to come, and yet the viewing community is stunned into fearful trembling as the imposing *rakshasa* makes an entry with earth-shaking laughter.

I teach drama at a fairly posh school in Noida. In two plays based on the *Ramayana* in two successive years at our school, Raavana's laughter has had a role to play, generating mostly comic relief for an urban audience unfamiliar with the tropes of folk performance. Raavana's laughter is not only "restored", but is also reified, representing the essence of *rakshasa*-ness. But when I look at the Tholu Bommalatam Lankini lurking behind this door in the old Goa Institute of Management, it strikes me that she, like the space she inhabits, is much more than what she represents. Lankini's laugh exhibits her fearlessness, but is also wickedly joyous. Her laugh may have been intended by her creators to instill fear in the hearts of the

pitiful souls that must approach her, to catch them by existential surprise. But to me it seems that she laughs because she gets to show off her big yellow teeth and shake her cavernous nostrils. She laughs because she knows that she can swallow entire humans and not be remotely shaken while at it. She laughs to celebrate herself in this moment. To me, Lankini is more than inspired: she is inspiring.

Bakhtin, in his seminal *Rabelais and his World*, lays out a number of points about laughter. Most interestingly, he discusses various analyses of the grotesque and the role of “destructive humour”.⁴ Quoting Jean Paul, he talks about the “radicalism of humour” which “is not directed against isolated negative aspects of reality but against all reality, against the finite world as a whole”.⁵ This kind of laughter is a comment on the limitations of our existence. In such a case, the grotesque is not, and cannot be, separated from humour. The excessive, the larger-than-life, the “too much-ness” of things must necessarily evoke laughter, as a coping device if not anything else.

As we go up the stairs, in a different exhibition, titled *Look, Stranger!* curated by Rahaab Allana, three larger-than-life Mumbai women are frozen in time by Homai Vyarawalla, just as they are about to release their javelins into the sky. Elsewhere, a Burmese woman’s scream is frozen in a window pane, at the moment before she must, inevitably, drown. We see the mouth that was opened in a gasp about to emit a roar, an angry, unrelenting laugh, one furious assertion of life before going under. All of them seem inspired by Lankini—monstrous, larger-than-life women, all, breaking out of their visible and invisible outlines, expanding beyond their bodies through sound and gesture.

THE GROTESQUE FEMALE

When I look at Lankini’s body, or the bodies of Homai’s women, I am reminded that, in folk cultures, the grotesque realism of the body is often deeply empowering and positive. To quote Bakhtin again, “it makes no pretence to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and body”⁶— in fact, it celebrates its connection to all things

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Installation view of the series “Freedom from Fear” (2014), Mayco Naing, as part of “Look, Stranger!” curated by Rahaab Allana at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

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Installation view of a photograph by Homai Vyarawalla, as part of "Look, Stranger!" curated by Rahaab Allana at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Detail of an installation from the Togalu Gombeyatta tradition of Karnataka at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



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worldly, real and human. Our folk goddesses are often considered fearsome and represented crudely. The humongous bleeding vagina that is Kamakhya Devi, the terrific, “black as night” Kali, spilling blood from every head she wears on her body, Lajja Gauri at the moment of birthing, and the fearsome Matrikas — all bodies extending beyond themselves, celebrating the possibilities of life and the undeniability of death for all who dare to acknowledge them. They are real and yet unreal, bodies and more than bodies.

The abundant body is not merely a single body, but a body of people who are growing, changing, and whose life is continually being recreated and renewed. It is “grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable”.⁷ A recent animation of the Shaheen Bagh protest (against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act in India) by Gitanjali Rao pictures this collective body through the motif of eyes.⁸ A woman lights a lamp, and opens her eyes. She is joined by a second, then a third, and so on until the eyes are the lamps and the lamps become eyes. The women’s heads are covered, but there is neither shame nor fear in their gaze. There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of eyes, challenging, questioning, and daring. They are distinct and yet, they are one. One multi-headed monstrous woman, a veritable Lernean Hydra.

Angry women are fearsome because, to the male mind, an angry woman is even more unpredictable than the regular docile one. The female body is itself fearsome. To the uninitiated and religious, the female body is the site of sin, the entry point into a life of debauchery. So the monks of the Swaminarayan sect, among others, cannot be permitted to even look at a woman once they have reached a certain position. The male mind must be protected from temptation lest it be swayed towards sex. Hannah Williams, in “The Resurgence of the Monstrous Feminine”⁹ talks about the codification of the “disgusting, defective” female body, “leaking, bleeding, oozing” all through Western history. In our part of the world, the major reason women could not be considered spiritually superior was their supposed inability to conquer their bleeding parts. While a man could acquire

the ability to contain his *tejas* (energy) or *veerya* (bravery)—both euphemisms for sperm—by simply choosing not to ejaculate, a woman could not similarly hold in her *ritushraav* (seasonal flow—a term laden with normative implications) and therefore contain her body within its set boundaries. Devdutt Patnaik’s works extensively touch upon the linga-yoni relationship—time and again, he talks about the Prakriti-Purusha relationship as that of taker and giver.¹⁰ Linga gives, yoni receives. Prakriti, as Kali, is wild and untameable. Purusha, as Mahadeva, seeks to shut his eyes to the world and not engage with it. They are separate, disparate points in creation. It is when they turn to each other and seek domestication that the circle of life comes to be. Purusha has to agree to give; Prakriti has to agree to receive. Purusha penetrates, Prakriti holds. This is the only relationship that matters—the fundamental life-giving relationship, rooted in sex, in the body and extending beyond two bodies to envelop the entire knowable world. The gross body symbolised in the linga-yoni becomes a spiritual body of more-than-linga-more-than-yoni that represents the Life Principle.

It’s all very philosophically rich, and I have to admit that I’ve always enjoyed this idea of the Perfect Whole. But what of the female body that is not sexually tempting? Is such a thing possible? Of course, there are positive asexual beings, both male and female, who populate our myths the world over. We have Gargi Vachaknavi, the female Rishi (or Rishika) who finds mention in the Upanishads and, perhaps, her peer Sulabha Maitreyi (who may or may not have married Rishi Yajnavalkya, but is better known for her non-sexual output). Amruta Patil bases the graphic novel *Aranyaka* on the imagined lives of Yajnavalkya, his first wife Katyayani, his partner-in-*sanyaas*, Maitreyi, and Gargi.¹¹ In a series of powerful images, Maitreyi (called the Fig or M in the text) deliberately sheds the aspects of her body that label her as beautiful. She cuts off her hair and starves her body, finally travelling out of her beautiful royal home in search of a teacher. “She swam upstream like a salmon”, writes Patil of M’s journey of adaptation from the life of a princess to that of a Rishika, pointing out that, even after transforming her body, M, like the salmon, had to

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beware of “the jaws of a bear waiting midstream”. A woman may seek to de-sexualise her body, but there is no guarantee that she will not be seen through a sexual lens.

The female form that most often escapes the sexual gaze is that of the female monster. Barbara Creed in her excellent study of female monsters in films shows us how the character is essentially representative of male fear of female sexuality. From Medusa to *Alien*, the fear of uncontrolled female sexuality keeps popping up in identifiable or disguised ways. Most recently, the monster in *Stranger Things* brings to mind *vagina dentata*¹² and the fear of castration that seems to have come back to the horror genre in Hollywood with the *Me Too* and *Time’s Up* movements gaining traction. How does the *rakshasi* fit into this space?

The grotesque body of the *rakshasi* is considered ugly, gross, and laughable. Juices ooze out of her, too, and all she inspires is disgust or, at the most, fear. On occasion, you may run into a Shoorpanakha, a *rakshasi* with delusions of beauty, whose crude attempts at initiating sex are immediately punished by Lakshmana who shows her what her rightful place is (demurity), and defaces her for such sexual audacity by cutting off her nose and ears—the Ramayana era’s version of an acid attack. Slightly more palatable is Hidimbi, a *rakshasi* who desires Bhima for the child she may have by him and seeks no further claim to him or his life. Although resident of a jungle, she fits the domesticated woman template to an extent and is therefore celebrated. Pootana, who takes on a beautiful maternal form to kill the baby Krishna, is drained first of her beauty and only then her life, as punishment.

An interesting departure is Patil’s other creation, Katyayani, the protagonist of *Aranyaka*—a human woman who behaves like a *rakshasi* and revels in the gross body. She eats, cooks, and feeds others, developing stories and metaphors for life around the culinary arts. She takes great and obvious pleasure in sex while she observes the ashram’s subtle philosophies at work, and never removes herself from a deep and overarching connect with all that is earthly and

consumable. Patil depicts her as a plump, well-rounded woman with prominent eyes and a unibrow. Her journey with her partner Y (the Rishi Yajnavalkya) is the journey of human civilisation, moving from hunting and gathering to agriculture. Their search for the perfect residence brings them to build an ashram at the border of field and forest. Neither wholly domesticated nor wild, firmly focused on the body and its needs and yet capable of supporting spiritual quests, Katyayani is an Earth goddess in human form. Were she a *rakshasi*, she might have been a soul sister to Hidimbi; since she is not, she is ignored. All we know of Katyayani is that, when Yajnavalkya took *sanyas*, he supposedly offered his wives a choice between his cows and property and his learning. While Maitreyi chose learning, Katyayani chose the cows, thus pinning herself down to the earthy and the real, and forever removing storytellers' interest in her. The fate of a wholesome woman with a firm focus on the gross body and its needs is not, after all, interesting. Or is it, perhaps, too fearsome to be allowed to persist, because she is, finally, self-sufficient?

But what do we make of Lankini? She is neither a potential wife, nor a girlfriend, nor seems remotely maternal. She is the fierce protector of an island; a goddess without a consort. And yet she is not quite self-sufficient, for she is, after all, a tired warrior seeking release from her mortal coils. What does it say that she secures this release at the hands of the hyper-masculine Hanumana?

MARKING THE POSSIBILITIES

In conversations which took place between September 2019 and March 2020, Anurupa Roy, curator of the project, discussed the importance of these characters and the rationale behind the choice of representations with me. "In each of the forms we chose to represent", she said, "We were looking at the characteristic features of the form, which give it its distinct flavour. Lanka Dahanam is a major episode in Tholu Bommalatam, and the fight between Lankini and Hanumana is a major highlight, taking place over an entire night. One of the things that make Tholu Bommalatam special, is that these

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ten foot puppets are among the largest shadow puppets in the world, and they expand and contract. Hanuman's changing size is a major aspect of the story, and Lankini is therefore a major figure. This form is also different from many other forms, in that the *rakshasas* are given backstories". In the traditional story, as suspected, Lankini is the perfect foil to show off Hanumana's magic. But what matters to us is that she's present, and what a presence she has!

A muscular woman armed with fangs, claws and weapons, Lankini is nevertheless clearly represented as a woman. She wears a garment that highlights her breasts and jewellery that is expected of married women. Her hair—which in a sexualised female figure would have been one of the points of attention—is short and spiky. Her head is disproportionately bigger than her body, her eyes, nose and mouth are overlarge, and her overhanging belly suggests that she has given birth. Lankini is the very epitome of the grotesque female.

Compare this figure with the Tholu Bommalatam Hanumana, whose entire body is speckled with jeweled flowers that have holes punched in, causing it to glow when light passes through. Hanumana is also muscular, flaunts a moustache as a sign of his virility, and wears ornaments appropriate to his royal lineage. His tail, which will have a critical role to play in their battle, is equally bejeweled as his body. Hanumana's body, most importantly, is proportionate, even handsome. This is because Hanumana, even though he is a lifelong bachelor, is an icon of virility. His is the virility that women can only lust after, though, and never have. As a being that has rejected all women, he is beyond the purview of dangers such as *vagina dentata* and is therefore a male ideal, as well.¹³

The exaggerated orifices on Lankini are consistent with Bakhtin's analysis that in the grotesque body, it is the parts that are open to the world that are emphasised, or, in Bakhtin's words, "the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world"¹⁴ Bakhtin calls this "the ever unfinished, ever creating body"—the body which can both

swallow up and regenerate. Most often, such a body is depicted in folk art at the point of dying or giving birth. Lankini, her belly suggesting the promise of life, offers the possibility of death to those who dare challenge her. Not one inch of her looks likely to cower in fear. If anything, she looks like the biggest reason to be afraid. Yet, it is said that the mighty Hanumana did not wish to engage her in a fight only because she was a female. He wasn't afraid of her, even though she was massive and had a reputation that preceded her. Being of a chivalrous bent of mind, and because he wanted to be gentle, he simply swished her with his tail. The first swish toppled her, while the second knocked her out. The gross female body was thus defeated by the virile and sophisticated male one.

The layer of meanings gets more complicated, however. The swishing of Hanumana's tail, a barely disguised metaphor for a penis, brings to mind the Teyyam performances and other folk drama performances (including puppetry) where the Teyyam artist, under the influence of the spirits that control him, sprays audience members with his semen. Occasionally, the jester in folk dramas will do something similar. Hanumana's tail then appears to have gross significance, too. However, in the larger scheme of things, the swishing of the tail, not accompanied by ejaculate, is once again the hallmark of the higher being. It is the promise of something that will never be delivered; the mythical equivalent of flashing. Hanumana's tail, magically extending and contracting at his will, capable of setting the entire land on fire, may be doused only by his own saliva, indicating his sexual self-sufficiency. For Lankini, the swishing of the magical tail is enough to see that this is the monkey she has waited for. She doesn't desire his seed or his body. She gracefully lies down in his path and allows him to pass. What a let-down that thought is for me. That magnificent *rakshasi*, with the ever-creating body that is engaging with the world in newer, different ways, perhaps even changing the rules of interaction, surely cannot be the same woman who lies down to allow a monkey a walkover! She of the body that is more-than-body, and the laughter that threatens the world as we know it, must have a more heroic passing, or better still, a victory. The world needs more than

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threatening right now. In India, in 2016, the number of rapes reported was almost 39000, of which a large number were children. Over the years, the numbers seem to be increasing rather than decreasing, a trend that is resonating across the world. Some of us have prayed for an apocalypse now. As these thoughts pass my head, I imagine Lankini turning to me and winking with her bulging eye.

For in the moment that we meet Lankini, that moment of lying down has not arrived. I'm thankful to Roy that Lankini appears, but is not defeated. I choose to think of her in this way, frozen in time, at the moment before things start to happen. She is still triumphant, cackling away with a wicked gleam in her eye, her huge nostrils trembling under the weight of the nose rings she wears. I imagine being in a crowd, watching the shadow players bring her on with her rousing laughter. Her laugh at this moment comes from a destructive humour, I think. It is a humour that brings to mind the apocalyptic dance of Kali, the thousands of lamp-eyes lighting up the by-now hundreds of Shaheen Baghs across the country. A humour that seems to resonate in the metallic swishing of the javelins of Homai's giant women as well as in the scream of the face in the window. Anything could happen as a result of that laugh. The *rakshasi* is as yet undefeated. Her possibilities are alive. The blinking eye whirrs on next door, perhaps seeing, perhaps not. Some girls in the crowd shiver beside me. They exchange a quick glance and giggle. Maybe, just maybe, Lankini's laugh has sparked the birth of a couple of *rakshasis*.

Notes

¹ In this version, Shatakantha Raavana was the mightiest emperor of the known world. After defeating Ravana of Lanka, Rama was feeling rather proud of himself for having defeated one whom he considered to be the greatest of demons. A divine voice intervened and told him about Shatakantha Raavana, claiming that he, in fact, was the greatest of demons. Now Shatakantha Raavana had done Rama no harm and was not interested in fighting someone whom he considered unimportant, but Rama insisted on attacking him with all his armies and powers. Shatakantha defeated him easily and rendered him unconscious. The battle was considered lost until Sita took on the form of Mahaakali, killed Shatakantha and all his armies and saved the day. When Rama regained consciousness, he was horrified to see Sita in this form, but she insisted that this was her true self—the *Shakti* (power) that is an innate aspect of all creation—and that he must accept this side of her and offer worship to it. Only then would she consider returning to the form he knew and had always lorded over.

² Richard Schechner, *Performative Circumstances from the Avant Garde to Ramlila* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983).

³ Devdutt Pattanaik, *Sita* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013), 194.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 26.

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.* 19.

⁷ *Ibid.* 19.

⁸ Gitanjali Rao, *Animated Tribute to Shaheen Bagh*, Uploaded on Youtube. 13 February 2020, https://youtu.be/ucxfM_DnLV0 (accessed May 16, 2020).

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⁹ Hannah Williams, “The Resurgence of the Monstrous Feminine,” *Granta* (online edition), 24 June 2019, <https://granta.com/the-resurgence-of-the-monstrous-feminine/>; accessed February 12, 2020.

¹⁰ See Devdutt Pattanaik, *Seven Secrets of Shiva* (Chennai: Westland, 2011).

¹¹ Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka* (Chennai: Tranquebar, Westland, 2019).

¹² Many sources, including, but not limited to Verrier Elwin, “The Vagina Dentata Legend”, *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 19 (1943): 439-453; Emma Rees, “The Shocking Mythical Tales that Underlie Attitudes to Rape in India”, *The Conversation* (Australia), June 13, 2014. <http://theconversation.com/the-shocking-mythical-tales-that-underlie-attitudes-to-rape-in-india-27950> (accessed February 13, 2020); Gemma Angel, “Pulling Teeth: Ovarian Teratomas & the Myth of Vagina Dentata”, *Researchers in Museums* series, University College, London, UK. 4 March 2013. <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/researchers-in-museums/2013/03/04/pulling-teeth-ovarian-teratomas-vagina-dentata/> (accessed February 13, 2020); Sezin Koehler, “Pussy Bites Back: Vagina Dentata Myths From Around the World”, *Vice*, 15 June 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/payq79/pussy-bites-back-vagina-dentata-myths-from-around-the-world (accessed February 12, 2020).

¹³ Although it is possible to read his meeting with the rakshasi Surasa—whose toothy mouth he enters and exits in a flash—as an example of Hanumana outwitting a *vagina dentata*.

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 26.

Biography

Manjima Chatterjee is a drama explorer, teacher and occasional writer. Manjima read English at St Stephen's College, Delhi University, and Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics. She has a PG Diploma in Drama in Education (Theatre for Education and Social Transformation) under Maya Krishna Rao from Shiv Nadar University. Her articles have appeared in Arts Praxis, the Arts-in-Education journal of NYU Steinhardt, as well as in anthologies such as *Nation, Nationalism and the Public Sphere* (Sage; Banerjee and Ray, eds), and newspapers such as *The Hindu*, *The Hindu Business Line*, *Education World* and *Hindustan Times*. She was shortlisted for the BBC's International Radio Playwriting Competition and won The Hindu Metro Plus Playwright Award in 2013. Her book, *Two Plays on Hunger*, was published by Dhauli Press in 2018, and her play, *Mountain of Bones*, was published in *Creating a Profession: Disparate Voices of Indian Women Playwrights*, an anthology of works by female Indian playwrights.

Manjima has conducted workshops on drama-in-education with teachers from schools across the country, including the DPS group of schools, and was privileged to moderate a panel introducing drama and storytelling based learning to a delegation of 1500 Sahodaya School Principals at the 25th National Conference of Sahodaya School Complexes held in November 2019. She teaches drama and serves as the Central Arts Curriculum Lead at Shiv Nadar Schools.

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