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RUTH VANITA

Sappho in India

As violets fair, O chaste, sweet-smiling Sappho . . .

trans. Beram Saklatvala¹

Violet . . . the colour of Things . . .

That are hard to name

. . . that men call ‘mad’

Or oftener ‘shame’.

Laurence Hope (‘Violet’ Nicolson), *The Garden*

of Kama, 1901

Sappho’s poems came to India in the late eighteenth century. Sir William Jones
(1746-94), whose main life-work was in and on India, as philologist, scholar,

¹ Loeb, Alcaeus Fr. 384, which Saklatvala, like many editors, combines with Sappho Fr. 137.

translator and poet, translated fr. 1 into Latin, compared Asian poets' immersion in natural beauty with that of Sappho,² and accepted the idea that "a Greek Emperor" publicly burnt her poems.³ Other British poets in India also referred to Sappho in their verse, for example, Anna Maria (born 1770), a British poet of uncertain provenance.⁴ The first Indian poet to write in English, Henry DeRozio (1809–31), took Byron's view of 'burning Sappho'⁵ as a poet of unrequited love,⁶ a view that persisted in India for over a century. In his 1827 sonnet 'Sappho', DeRozio quotes a line from Byron's *Don Juan*, and writes:⁷

Her love was like the raging of a storm,
Sweeping all things before it; and her song
Was like her soul of passion

Although Sappho as lover of women appeared in English as early as John Donne's 1633 'Sappho to Philaenis', and also in seventeenth and eighteenth-century English

² Jones 1808 (originally 1777): 142.

³ Jones 1807 (1773): 344.

⁴ Anna Maria, 'Ode' in Gibson 2011b: 55.

⁵ Byron, 774.

⁶ Gibson 2011a: 81.

⁷ Chaudhuri 2008: 164.

translations,⁸ the idea of her as a poet of heterosexual passion, supported by the story of her suicide for Phaon was accepted as fact in India until the twentieth century.⁹

Throughout the nineteenth century Sappho was perceived in India as the greatest European woman poet. Her name was used to praise ancient and medieval Indian women poets; thus, from 1876 onwards, the ninth-century Tamil poet Avvaiyar was termed the ‘Tamil Sappho’,¹⁰ and Schelling calls the eighth-century love poet Vidya ‘the Sappho of India’.¹¹

Once Indian women started writing English poetry, Sappho’s name was more often associated with them. Of Toru Dutt (1856–77), the first Indian woman to publish poetry in English, Edward Thompson wrote, ‘Toru Dutt remains one of the most astonishing women that ever lived, a woman whose place is with Sappho and Emily Bronte, fiery and unconquerable of soul as they . . .’¹² Another critic wrote of Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949), ‘perhaps even the mind of a Sappho, reborn in a Sarojini Naidu, must pass through Lethe’.¹³

⁸ Vanita 1996: 41–50.

⁹ For the Phaon story, its origins and afterlife, see Morgan, AND OTHERS (this volume).

¹⁰ Barnard 1786: 695, Zwelebil 1974: 125.

¹¹ See Schelling 1994.

¹² Thompson 1921: 344. Toru herself follows Plato in calling Sappho ‘beautiful’: Das 1921: 244.

¹³ Crippen 1914: 163.

Decades later, Kamala Das (1934–2009) was frequently compared to Sappho, but this comparison was more specific.¹⁴ Das was a confessional poet and fiction-writer in English and Malayalam whose main theme was love. In her controversial 1970 memoir, *My Story*, she described her polyamorous and bisexual feelings. Eighteen years later, she published *Chandana Marangal* (translated into English as *The Sandal Trees* in 1995 by V. K. Harris and C. K. Mohamad Umer), perhaps the most searing lesbian love story by an Indian woman.¹⁵

Sappho came to Das through a mediating literary ancestor – Adela “Violet” Nicolson (1865-1904), an Englishwoman who lived and died in India, writing under the pen-name Laurence Hope, and who in her time was repeatedly compared to Sappho. Das mentions Hope,¹⁶ and Das’s biographer quotes her as saying, ‘Poet Laurence Hope had many lovers, including a lowly boatman. ... She wrote The Garden of Kama, erotic poems That is the poet I could identify with’.¹⁷ Hope’s rumoured Indian boatman lover recalls Sappho’s invented boatman lover, Phaon.

Hope’s claim to being an Indian Sappho is grounded in more than a rumour. In her three volumes, about half the poems are in the voices of Indian characters,

¹⁴ Dwivedi 1983: 117.

¹⁵ See George 2000: 731-63.

¹⁶ Das 1988: 158.

¹⁷ Weisbord 2010: 195.

mostly men. Most of her poems are about passionate love, and are cast in an I–You mode that conceals the speaker’s gender while often revealing that of the beloved, which is usually but not always female. Typical is her most famous poem, ‘Kashmiri Song’ (‘Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar’), which became popular in Europe between the wars, and still appears in numerous works, from Vikram Seth to Mary Higgins Clark.¹⁸

Unlike Sappho’s poems, Hope’s generally celebrate clandestine love. In ‘From Behind the Lattice’ in her posthumously published 1905 *Last Poems*, the ungendered speaker addresses a white woman with ‘red-gold hair’:

My great desire (ah, whisper low)
To plant on thy forbidden snow
The rosebud of a kiss¹⁹

In ‘Oh Unforgotten and Only Lover’ (1905), the speaker remembers a night spent with the only woman s/he ever loved, confesses to unworthy loves since, and knows that the unforgotten lover considered their night together not just ‘a sin’ but ‘a crime’.²⁰ The speaker debates ideas of sin and love, in a manner reminiscent of

¹⁸ Gibson 2011b: 321-25, Seth 1993: 57, Clark 2008: Epigraph (the novel’s title is a quotation from “Kashmiri Song”).

¹⁹ Hope 1929: 395.

²⁰ Hope 1929: 446-440.

Alfred Douglas's 1892 poem, 'Two Loves', and uses the word 'shame' in the way Douglas did:²¹

He [homosexual love] said, 'My name is Love.'
Then straight the first [heterosexual love] did turn himself to me,
And cried, 'He lieth, for his name is Shame' . . .
Then, sighing, said the other, 'Have thy will,
I am the love that dare not speak its name.'

Douglas's 1892 sonnet, 'In Praise of Shame' concluded, 'Of all sweet passions Shame is loveliest'.²² The word was a euphemism for homosexual love by the time Hope's speaker declares:

And not for the highest virtues in Heaven
The utmost grace that the soul can win
Would I resign what the sin has brought me,
Which I hold glory and thou – thy shame.

²¹ Douglas 1896: 110.

²² Douglas 1896: 22.

In the dedication of this volume to her deceased husband, Adela Nicolson confessed having indulged in ‘lighter love’ and concluded, ‘Useless my love – as vain as this regret / That pours my hopeless life across thy grave’.²³ Two months later, having prepared the book for publication, Adela, then 39, committed suicide.

Adela had moved to India at the age of 24, with her 46-year-old husband. Other British residents in India considered them eccentric because of their closeness to Indians and Indian ways of life. He taught her Urdu and both wore Indian dress; she also dressed as a Pathan boy to travel with him.²⁴ After he retired, they visited England briefly and met the literati, including Thomas Hardy, but then returned and settled in Kerala, Kamala Das’s home state.

Reviewers of *The Garden of Kama* (1902) doubted that Hope’s poems were translations of Indian lyrics as they purported to be, and one noted: ‘It is now an open secret that ‘Laurence Hope’ is the pen-name of Mrs. Malcolm Nicolson’.²⁵ Following Adela’s suicide, R. Garnett reviewed her posthumous volume, praising its ‘consuming intensity of passion, recalling the strains of Sappho’, and added that ‘India and “Laurence Hope” were made for each other’.²⁶ In an obituary in the *Athenaeum*, Thomas Hardy praised the ‘tropical luxuriance and Sapphic fervour’

²³ Hope 1929: v.

²⁴ Macmillan 1988: 206–7.

²⁵ Anonymous a 1902 .

²⁶ Garnett 1905: 206.

of her poems.²⁷ It was widely rumoured that she had briefly eloped with composer Amy Woodforde-Finden (married to an officer in Adela's husband's regiment in India) who set 'Kashmiri Song' to music.²⁸

As with Sappho, whether or not Adela herself experienced lesbian love is less important than the fact that she wrote about it, among many other forbidden types of eroticism, such as male-male love, inter-racial love, polyamory, and sado-masochism.²⁹ The clinching evidence is textual, in the little-noticed 'Song of the Colours' (1901). Six colours speak, and Violet says:

I were the colour of Things, (if hue they had)
That are hard to name.
Of curious, twisted thoughts that men call 'mad'
Or oftener 'shame.'
Of that delicate vice, that is hardly vice,
So reticent, rare,
Ethereal, as the scent of buds and spice,
In this Eastern air.

²⁷ Millgate 2001: 213.

²⁸ Castle 2003: 614–15.

²⁹ Hope 1929: "To Aziz: Song of Mahomed Akram" 185, "Devotion of Aziz to Mir Khan" 287-94, "Laila, to the Ferengi Lover" 149-50, "On the City Wall 151-52, "Afridi Love" 48-51, "Yasmini" 52-55.

Adela's husband and friends called her Violet, and at the fin-de siècle, violets were symbols of homosexual, especially lesbian, amours, as in Michael Field's transcreations of Sappho in *Long Ago*: 'Theirs was the violet-weaving bliss / And theirs the white, wreathed brow to kiss',³⁰ this symbolism persisted into the late twentieth century.³¹

Given the code meaning of the word 'shame', it is hardly surprising that other homosexual writers were drawn to Hope's poems. In 1946, Somerset Maugham, himself homosexual and associated with India, published 'The Colonel's Lady', based on the Nicolson, with whom he was acquainted.³² In this story, a pompous man discovers that his wife's acclaimed book of poems published under her maiden name recounts her affair with a younger man. An admiring critic remarks, 'You know, as I read and re-read those heart-rending pages, I thought of Sappho', and a bookseller compares it to Housman's *The Shropshire Lad*.³³ Fifty years later, in his 1997 *ghazal* (Persian or Urdu poem with a very specific metrical and rhyme scheme) 'Tonight', Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001), a gay poet of Indian

³⁰ Field 1889: xi; on this work, see Johnson (this volume).

³¹ See Bergman 2004.

³² Maugham travelled to India in 1938 and based several of his writings on his experiences, including his 1944 novel *The Razor's Edge* (the title of which is taken from the *Katha Upanishad*) and his 1958 essay, "The Saint" which is about Sri Ramana Maharishi, whose ashram in India he had visited.

³³ Maugham: 12, 16.

origin, uses as an epigraph the first line of Hope's 'Kashmiri Song' and quotes a phrase from its second verse.³⁴

Hope inaugurates the connotation that would increasingly accrue to Sappho in twentieth-century India – that of homosexuality in general and lesbianism in particular. Both in literary debates and in popular fiction, Sappho becomes a site for writers to discuss lesbianism. As early as 1936, the Urdu poet Raghupati Sahay (1896–1982), whose pen-name was Firaq Gorakhpuri and whose homosexuality, although he never stated it, was an open secret, defended homoeroticism in the Urdu *ghazal* by listing ten great writers, among whom he included two women:³⁵

.... Sir, are you aware of Shakespeare's Sonnets and their motives? Do you know of Walt Whitman and his poem 'To a Boy'? Have you heard Sappho's name? Do you know the meaning of Lesbianism? Do you know of the refined and pure book called *The Well of Loneliness*?

In 1945, conversely, woman writer Bani Ray wrote a Bengali story, 'Sappho', in which the woman narrator is disgusted by Mondira, a spinster

³⁴ Ali 2003: 82–3 [Ruth, is this correct? Poem written in 1997, but cited from the 2003 item in the bibliography].

Yes

³⁵ Kidwai 2000: 265.

described as ‘masculine’ and ‘manly’ (37).³⁶ A beautiful young man sets out to seduce Mondira and then rejects her whereupon she commits suicide. The narrator frequently apostrophises Sappho as the first and unequalled woman poet of passion, ‘the dark eyed luscious Greek beauty who had breasts hard as ivory, thighs like silver, toes bright as gold, eyes shining like blue sapphire’, who ‘stood against nature’ by making love to a woman, and on whom nature avenged herself.³⁷ The story ends: ‘The glamorous woman poet in the glowing background of Lesbos and this girl without wealth or beauty – there was nothing to link them together, yet both were destined for an identical end.’³⁸ Twenty years later, Rajkamal Chaudhuri, in his homophobic Hindi novel *Machhli mari hu’i* (Dead Fish) compares his bisexual heroine to Sappho.³⁹ All the other writers on homosexuality Chaudhuri cites are modern.⁴⁰

Two mid-century Urdu poets engage with Sappho in a more nuanced manner. Though they try to explain away her love poems to women, they use terms and categories from eighteenth century Urdu lesbian-themed poetry to frame female-female desire. Indian poetry by both men and women has a long tradition

³⁶ Ray 1977: 34, 37.

³⁷ Ray 1977: 33.

³⁸ Ray 1977: 42.

³⁹ Chaudhuri 1966: 115.

⁴⁰ Chaudhuri 1966: 122.

of bridal mysticism with female speakers addressing male divinities. However, the late eighteenth-century Lucknow poets Sa'adat Yar Khan, pen-name Rangin (Colorful) (1755–1835), and Insha Allah Khan, pen-name Insha (Elegant Style) (1756–1817) invented a type of non-mystical Urdu poetry in which female speakers, usually addressing other women, discussed their everyday lives and loves, especially love between women. This type of poetry, known as *rekhti*, became the rage for a while but, after the defeat of the 1857 revolt, was labelled obscene and excised from the canon.⁴¹

Urdu poets, however, continued to read it. Between 1936 and 1941, the eminent modernist and bohemian Urdu poet Mohammad Sana'ullah Dar (1912–49: pen-name Miraji), wrote a series of essays on world poets, in a literary magazine published from Lahore (then in undivided India). Among them was '*Maghrib ki Sabse Bari Sha'ira: Sappho*' ('The Greatest Woman Poet of the West: Sappho'). The essay is devoted to narrating Sappho's life, stating as facts many legends, including those of her marriage and suicide. He speculates that had Lesbos not been at war during Sappho's youth she might not have spent as much time in the company of '*humjins* companions', and her verse might not have focused on the theme that caused it to be burnt later.⁴² *Humjins*, a created compound (from *hum*,

⁴¹ Vanita 2012.

⁴² Miraji 2009: 232.

meaning ‘we’ or ‘shared’ and *jins*, meaning body), is still used as a translation of ‘homosexual’.

Miraji draws on Indic lexicons, writing that the ancient Greeks considered Sappho a daughter of Eros and Aphrodite, and glossing these names in parentheses as Kamadeva and Rati (the Hindu God of love or desire and his wife, whose name means erotic pleasure). He notes that Sappho uses a term for her female companions which later came to mean *tawaif* (the north Indian word for courtesan), but it did not have this meaning in her time. Nor, he continues, should we consider her term as similar to *zanakhi* or *dogana*.⁴³ These two words, drawn from nineteenth-century Urdu glossaries, occur frequently in *rekhti* poetry, referring to a woman’s female lover. *Zanakhi* comes from *zanakh* (‘wishing bone’), because women formed couples by breaking a wishing bone together, while *dogana* from *do* (two) refers to twinned fruits and by extension to a woman’s intimate companion who is her second self. Both words also referred to sexual intercourse between women.⁴⁴

Miraji states that Sappho’s term for her companions had the meaning that *saheli* (a woman’s female friend) or *dupatta badal bahen* (‘sisters by exchanging veils’) now has. The latter term refers to north Indian women’s practice of

⁴³ Miraji 2009: 238.

⁴⁴ Vanita 2005: 184-88.

exchanging items of dress to declare themselves sisters; men exchanged turbans to become brothers.⁴⁵ Miraji seems unaware that female lovers in *rekhti* also perform this ritual. Insisting that Sappho's relations with women were neither sexual nor pedagogic, he writes that she gathered around her young women who were informal and intimate with one another.⁴⁶ He terms the young women *humdum* and *humraaz*. *Humdum*, literally, those who breathe together, refers to close companions, and is used in both friendly and romantic contexts. *Humraaz* means those who share secrets. Translating Sappho's verses about virginity, Miraji speculates that she had suffered some harm of which she could not speak, and that purity was very dear to her, which is why she could not surrender her body or soul to any man, but the untouched bodies and souls of unmarried girls were pleasing to her.⁴⁷

He proceeds to say that Sappho developed romantic feelings for several girls, especially Atthis, which 'may upset the narrow-minded',⁴⁸ and that although he has no argument in favour of such love, we should expand the circuit of our thoughts to view these events sympathetically. Suggesting that love poems to

⁴⁵ Vanita 2012: 118, 139, 246–7.

⁴⁶ For the European scholarly background to this conception of Sappho, see Goff and Harloe (this volume).

⁴⁷ Miraji 2009: 237.

⁴⁸ Miraji 2009: 239.

At this may have caused Sappho's works to be destroyed, he asks, 'now when a few fragments remain to us, can we say that the world has benefited from the destruction of these gems? Rather, we would say that a few narrow-minded people deprived posterity of beautiful poems. For beauty does not arise from rules or norms. Rules and norms change, they are born and die every day. But beauty is not an everyday matter'.⁴⁹

Miraji's Sappho is constructed on the well of loneliness model, and her suicide for Phaon is the outcome of lifelong anguish. He translates a few poems, but omits fr. 1, and adds three lines to fr. 31 to end it thus:⁵⁰

But alas, this is not in my fate
It's written in my fate that I sit here, sorrowing
Life does not release me from sorrow
Even death seems not far from me.

This construction derives from the typical male lover in the Urdu love poem (*ghazal*), who yearns and pines but rarely enjoys fulfilment. Women lovers in *rekhti* form couples and are often happy, but having rejected them as analogues for

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Miraji 2009: 241.

Sappho, Miraji casts her as a great poet and therefore necessarily sorrowful. He himself took his pen-name from his beloved, Mira Sen, a Hindu girl who did not return his feelings, and modelled himself partly on medieval woman mystic Mirabai, whose songs express a largely unfulfilled yearning for union with Krishna.⁵¹ He draws an implicit parallel between the conventions of Urdu and ancient Greek poetry, pointing out that poems in Sappho's era were composed not for the solitary reader but to be sung or recited to a group of listeners.⁵²

The next Urdu commentator was Abdul Aziz Khalid (1927–2010), a poet of Indian origin who moved to Pakistan at Partition. An erudite scholar who knew many languages including Hindi, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, he was a poet and translator, who translated the *Mahabharata* into Urdu. In his translation of Sappho, *Sarood-e Rafta* (Lost Lyrics), he adopts an eclectic style, sometimes heavily Persianised and Arabicised, and at other times colloquial, also using Hindi and Sanskrit words.⁵³ It is unclear whether he translated from Greek or from English, because he makes some errors, translating *Dika* as *Disa*, possibly from English

⁵¹ Patel 2002.

⁵² Miraji 2009: 227–8.

⁵³ Urdu and Hindi are the same language grammatically and syntactically, sharing most of their everyday vocabulary, and are not distinguishable as spoken languages. However, they are written in different scripts; also, Urdu literature tends to have more Persian and Arabic words in its vocabulary and Hindi more Sanskrit words. Some Urdu poets use more Arabic and Persian words than do others, just as some Hindi poets use more Sanskrit words than do others.

Dica, which was often used in nineteenth and early twentieth-century translations, and continued to be used much later too.⁵⁴

He chooses as epigraph a famous phrase from poet Ghalib, ‘*Zikr us parivash ka*’ (Speaking of that fairy-faced one), which is often used in a complimentary way by Urdu biographers.⁵⁵ Opening with a string of quotations about Sappho, from Plato to Byron and Miraji, Khalid’s introduction terms her the greatest of all women poets, and says that the ancient Greeks admired the beauty of her work as much as they did Helen’s physical beauty.⁵⁶ He too uses the word *tawaif* for courtesan.

Khalid follows Miraji in arguing that Sappho’s relationships with her female friends (*saheli*) and disciples (*shagird*) was innocent (*masoom*) and in keeping with the spirit of Greek religion. He claims that the word *hetaira*, used by Sappho for her companions, later happened to become associated with homosexuality, as a result of which Sappho’s name was tarnished, people tried to show that she was a voluptuary, and colourful, pleasurable (*rangin’o laziz*) stories were told about her.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Field 1889: xxiv, Carman 1903: 14, Way 1920: 15-16, Barnard 1958: 19.

⁵⁵ Abdul Salaam Khurshid used it as the title of an essay about Khalid himself (Nasir, 54-58).

⁵⁶ Khalid 1959: 9.

⁵⁷ Khalid 1959: 12.

The words Khalid uses for homosexuality have specific connotations in Urdu. One, *shahidbazi*, refers to male pursuit of sweethearts, generally beautiful male youth, and the other, *s'atari*, refers to women who love women, and also to dildos. Departing from Miraji, Khalid states that there were two Sapphos, putting this forward not as a theory but as fact.⁵⁸ He says the other Sappho was a *deredaar tawaif* (high-class courtesan) and a *kasbi* (prostitute) who also wrote poetry and who drowned herself from the Leucadian rock for love of Phaon.

Following a strategy employed by nineteenth and early twentieth century English translators, such as Michael Field in *Long Ago* (1889),⁵⁹ Khalid adds many lines to the fragments, but does not indicate which are his additions and which translations. He uses an inordinate number of exclamation marks, one in almost every poem; virtually all the smaller fragments become one-liners with exclamation marks. Many of his translations are replete with Arabic and Persian words, but he also uses the Hindi term *deviyon* for both Goddesses and women, in accordance with modern Hindu practice, and draws on Sanskritic phraseology, as

⁵⁸ For the ancient origins of this story, which was already current in the fifth century BC, see Coe (this volume); for the early modern version, see Johnson (this volume).

⁵⁹ For Field, see Goff and Harloe (this volume).

in *Mrig naini hans roopi goriyon!* ('Doe-eyed, swan-like fair ones!') (fr. 41). His addition of Urdu tropes often dilutes a poem's power, as in fr. 1:⁶⁰

. . . Don't be sorrowful, don't weep,
The fairy will descend into the glass, the idol will speak,
Willingly or not, she will love you
Where's the beloved (*mashuq*) who has not turned lover (*ashiq*)?
She'll beat her head to your verses for hours
Your melodies will run through her veins . . .

Likewise, he ends fr. 31 with an odd, tacked-on couplet:⁶¹

Ae naubahaar-e naaz, rahe tu sadaa suhaag!
Us mast ko tu laghzish-e mastaanaa le chali!
Oh delicacy of the spring, may you remain ever happily wedded!
You lead that drunken one down a pleasurable slippery slope!

⁶⁰ Khalid 1959: 22.

⁶¹ Khalid 1959: 24.

In this invented couplet that has nothing to do with Sappho's fragment, Persian words like *lagzish* combine strangely with *suhaag*, the Hindu word for a married woman's status, and the idea of marriage combines equally strangely with that of her seducing a man intoxicated with desire.

His translations of the shorter fragments are better because they escape the verbosity of the longer ones. Thus, he turns fr. 143 into a couplet:⁶²

Kinaar-e darya chane ke paudhe

Ajab bahaaren dikha rahe hain!

Chickpea plants on the seashore

Display a rare splendor!

Occasionally, his expansions are charming, as in this *rekhti*-like translation of fr. 81, which adds details and puns, also altering the meaning:⁶³

Lekin sundar, sudaal Disa!

Kya saunf ke taaze konpalon se

Apni zulfon ko baandhti ho

⁶² Khalid 1959: 65.

⁶³ Khalid 1959: 38.

Mehndi lagi naazuk ungliyon se?

Is baat ko jaan-e man na bhoolo

Karti hain shaguftagi ki pariyaan

Pyaar un se jo phool daaliyaan hon

Jin ke joode hon soone soone

Rahti hain voh door door un se!

But beautiful, well-shaped Disa!

Why do you, with delicate, henna-stained fingers,

Bind your tresses with fresh fennel buds?

Don't forget, my life, that the fairies of blossoming

Love those who wear flowers.⁶⁴

They stay far from those

Whose knotted hair is bare!

Khalid was a modernist poet, and most of his translations are in free verse, but he employs some internal rhymes and catch-phrases from Hindi verse, as in fr. 48

⁶⁴ There is a pun here. *Daaliyaan hon* could be a *rekhti*-type dialect verb, meaning those who wear flowers, or could be the plural *daaliyan* as a noun, meaning 'those who are flowering branches.'

(which he expands to 13 lines): *Ae mohini murat! Ae sundar surat!* (Oh enchanting one! Oh beautiful face!),⁶⁵ and fr. 96 which he transcreates in rhyming quatrains.⁶⁶

Later in the century, several Indian writers in English interpret Sappho variously. Keki Daruwalla (born 1937) uses Sapphic stanzas in his four ‘Sappho Poems’, sometimes with unintended comic results, as in his ‘Sappho to Aphrodite’:⁶⁷

Bring back Gongyla to my side!

May she once more become my bride!

May she, her lyre and her fire

Beside me purr!

Marxist writer K. Satchidanandan (born 1946), in his ‘Burnt Poems’, which were originally in Malayalam and translated by him into English, claims not only that girls’ love poems worldwide seldom escape being burnt but also that women mystics, Hindu and Christian, hid their sexual desires under a ‘veil of piety’ to escape fire. Oddly inverting the history of Sappho’s reception in the West, he

⁶⁵ Khalid 1959: 39.

⁶⁶ Khalid 1959: 56–7.

⁶⁷ Daruwalla 2006: 8–9.

concludes, ‘Of course, Sappho: / she was saved only as / her love poems were / addressed to women’.⁶⁸

Equally oddly, Indian English poet and critic Rukmini Bhaya Nair, positing a ‘feminine sexuality’ which ‘rejects strong heterosexual boundaries’,⁶⁹ and claiming that Sappho’s poetry survives ‘only in fragments because it posed such a threat within her culture’,⁷⁰ suggests that postcolonial women writers should develop ‘a sexual poetics that embraces a sensibility that I call, after Sappho, a “hermaphrodite awareness”’.⁷¹ Though her poem ‘Love’, a meditation on the nature of love, is entirely about heterosexual emotion,⁷² in ‘Hermaphrodite Longings’, a *hijra* who tries to rob her on the street reminds her of Sappho:⁷³

It was your face I saw
In the mutilated body, in the coarse
Horsewhip tactics of that *hijra* . . .
I had to face

⁶⁸ Shivdasani DATE: XX

⁶⁹ Nair 2002: 202

⁷⁰ Nair 2002: 211.

⁷¹ Nair 2002: 201.

⁷² Nair 1999: 120-25.

⁷³ Nair 1999: 132-37.

Your terrible longing . . .
Sappho knew well
That scored, transvestite passage
That politic mixing
Of the sexes.

Though Sappho's poetry has nothing to do with transvestism or transgendering, this rewriting of her is in tune with a common modern Indian tendency to conflate same-sex desire with androgyny and transgender, based on the assumption that same-sex desire is an inversion of cross-sex desire and must therefore arise from a desire to change sex.

More interestingly, Sujata Bhatt , intersperses lines from Sappho in her 'Reading Sappho, I am reminded of Chickpeas',⁷⁴ to recall her mother as a sweet-voiced young woman, finding many uses for chickpeas (which take various forms in Indian cuisine), wearing silk garments and flowers in her hair, and later, on her deathbed, telling her daughter not to cry.

India's first lesbian writers claimed Sappho too. In Inez Vere Dullas's 1986 poem 'Mitylene in Bombay', Sappho's songs are sung 'by voices new, in tropic

⁷⁴ Bhatt 1988: 39–40.

clime’;⁷⁵ Suniti Namjoshi and partner Gillian Hanscombe quote Sappho in the title of a 1991 essay about lesbian sensibility in lyric poetry;⁷⁶ and in 1999 six women in Calcutta founded an organization Sappho for Equality (www.sapphokolkata.in), whose website bears the legend, ‘You may forget, but let me tell you this / Someone in some future time will think of us’. From 1998, when the film *Fire* launched the first public debate in India about lesbianism, journalists use ‘Sappho’ as a signifier.⁷⁷

Indian classicists in England and in India developed a special relationship with Sappho. Poet and philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) ‘waxed enthusiastic over Sappho’ when studying at Cambridge;⁷⁸ as K. D. Sethna (aka Amal Kiran) points out, Aurobindo wrote in Sapphic stanzas a mystical poem ‘Descent’ about being possessed by God and experiencing the oneness of the universe, which in some ways recalls Sappho’s poems about Aphrodite’s and Eros’s descent to earth.⁷⁹

Beram Shapurji Saklatvala, aka Henry Marsh (1911–76), poet, historian and educationist, belonged to an eminent Indian Parsi family which migrated to

⁷⁵ Vanita and Kidwai 2000: 347–8.

⁷⁶ Hanscombe and Namjoshi 1991.

⁷⁷ Martins 2006: 1, Anonymous b 1998: 4.

⁷⁸ Sethna 1998: 51.

⁷⁹ Sethna 1998: 52–4.

England. In the introduction to his *Sappho of Lesbos* (1968), Saklatvala ably assesses the poet, her reception, and unproven stories about her, such as that of her suicide. He points out a fact that commentators rarely notice after Greece's unquestioned absorption into Europe: that 'her birthplace was in Asia Minor' because Lesbos was 'an outpost of Greece in Asia', and part of the Persian Empire about a century after her birth.⁸⁰ Quoting Maximus of Tyre's comparison of Sappho's loves to Socrates' (*Or.* 18.9), Saklatvala dismisses modern attempts to explain away her love for women, but reads this love as colouring 'all her poems' with 'sorrow', 'with the continued ache of . . . desire unfulfilled', while her poems about marriage 'are full of passion and of joys remembered'.⁸¹

He translates many of the poems into accomplished Sapphic stanzas. With those fragments wherein words have survived only on one side, either right or left, he employs the ingenious method of italicizing Sappho's words and completing them with his own. This method is the opposite of that employed by translators like Anne Carson, but the results are often surprisingly satisfying, even beautiful, as in fr. 63:⁸²

⁸⁰ Saklatvala 1968: 3.

⁸¹ Saklatvala 1968: 9, 10, 14.

⁸² Saklatvala 1968: 100.

Dream, in the dark night, *here in my silent room,*
You come when sleep *like to a god descends;*
Sweet god of power, from pain *he sets me free,*
To separate the power *of love from sorrow.*
And yet I hope not to be joined *in this.*
Nothing from all the gods *can give me pleasure*
For, being not *with you now, the dream is false.*
All the sweet joys of love *cannot console me!*
Would it might happen to me *that you came*
In the real night, to give me for my love,
Not the dark dreams of night, but your true presence!

There is an early connection between the matrix of Sappho's songs and the earliest Indian songs: 'her poetry is rhizomically connected to Vedic hymns to the Goddess of the dawn, and to the verse forms of the earliest Indian epics'.⁸³ Rig Veda 1.81.5, 'None like thee, Indra, has ever been born or will be' has been compared in this regard with fr. 56.⁸⁴

⁸³ DuBois 2010: 57.

⁸⁴ West 2007: 50.

Perhaps for this reason, one of the most successful translations is Sisir Kumar Das's out-of-print translation into Bengali.⁸⁵ Bengali is a daughter of Sanskrit and Sanskrit a sister of Greek; Das's use of a Sanskritic Bengali vocabulary produces fine effects. Das, an eminent scholar of comparative literature, translates 90 ancient Greek poems, of which 18 are by Sappho. Unaccountably, his book is unavailable in US and UK libraries. He selects those of Sappho's fragments that lend themselves to translation as complete-sounding poems, translating some in free verse and some in metrical forms, four in an approximation of the Sapphic stanza. His translations of fr. 1 and 31 are particularly successful.

Das's translations stay close to the originals; he uses English words like 'violet' and 'hyacinth' when there are no Indian equivalents. In his extensive endnotes, Das presents legends about and debates around Sappho. He uses *shohocharini* for female companion, a word that conveys the sense of living and walking together. He notes that Sappho was later accused of being *shomokami* (one who desires the same sex) but remarks that most ancient Greek love poems are *shomokami*.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Many thanks to the author's wife and his daughter-in-law, Shampa Roy, for sending me scans of the book, and to Abhishek Chatterjee and Srijeet Mukherjee for reading the poems aloud to me and checking my translations.

⁸⁶ Das 1989: 57.

In fr. 96, which he translates in three-line stanzas, simple equivalents for ‘moon’ (*chaand*) and ‘rose-fingered’ (*golaap aangul*) combine with the Indic ‘*jholmol*’ (sparkling, twinkling) and ‘*godhuli*’ (cow-dust, the golden haze produced by returning cattle at dusk) to create felicitous visual and sound effects:

Ekhon she 'i lidiyaar mohilaa shobhaay

Roopey jholmol korey, jaimon aakashey

*Golaap aangul chaand daikhadiley godhuleer sheshe.*⁸⁷

Now she, in the company of Lydian women,

Sparkles in beauty, as in the sky

The rose-fingered moon emerges as twilight ends.

In fr. 94, he employs three-line stanzas with two shorter lines followed by a longer one, as in the original, and fills out the last stanza, as do many English translators. Translators into Indian languages have the advantage of being able to draw on Hindu equivalents for the Greek gods, goddesses, altars, and worship rituals:

She 'i ghoore ghoore phira, debotaar poojaar beditey

She 'i bonobhoomi, she 'i paakheeder abishraam daak

⁸⁷ Das 1989: 16.

*Nirjoney dujoney.*⁸⁸

That same encircling the Gods' altar to offer puja,

That same forest, those same incessant bird calls

We both, alone together.

And in a wonderful as yet unpublished 2017 poem, Suniti Namjoshi connects Sappho's Goddess more directly to Hindu Goddesses:

To speak to Aphrodite with such assurance,
and to have
the goddess answer — only a great poet
is capable of that.

And yet, had she lived to old age
would she have dared
to grumble that though Aphrodite
was much the elder
she, Sappho, looked older by far,
and that those
who had loved her no longer loved —
they were long gone,
or they loved no one at all. And would
the goddess
have murmured, 'It is not seemly, Sappho,
that you should think
of love.' Had that happened,

⁸⁸ Das 1989: 16.

she'd have turned
to a goddess more ancient still,
fierce, and strong armed.

Further Reading

For more on the reception of Classical literature in India, see Vasunia (2013) although he does not mention Sappho. The 32-Volume *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, now available online, will repay further study, as he both commented on and imitated many Classical authors.

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