

Theater Review of Suk Aur Duk Ki Kahani

By Linta Varghese

This piece originally appeared in Samar Magazine #29

Published May 13th, 2008.



Sukh aur Dukh ki Kahani (Stories of Joy and Sorrow) began in 2004 when Chitra Aiyer approached [YaliniDream], and asked her to facilitate theatre workshops for members of Andolan, a New York-based organization mobilizing low-wage South Asian women workers. The following year [YaliniDream] started holding workshops for interested members of the organization. Just two years later in 2007, the theatrical performance Sukh aur Dukh ki Kahani began taking form. Finally, in April of this year, a production that was four years in the making culminated on stage at the Puffin Room in New York City.

The performance, comprising five interconnected monologues interrupted by song and movement, conveyed scenes in the lives of five Andolan members. Only the first piece, "My USA Story," is narrated in English. Three others, "My Aunty," "Shaku's Story," and "Freedom Fighter" are in Bangla. The remaining one, "Employer Exploitation, Prison and Hope," is told in a combination of Hindi and Marathi. Short vignettes help situate each monologue. Before Shaku's story of early marriage and the loss of two infants in Bangladesh, we see three women mimicking the motion of throwing a stone to see where it lands before hopping on invisible hopscotch boxes; Before Violet's story of her life as a domestic worker in the United States, all seven women stand on stage acting out the motions of washing dishes, vacuuming, folding clothes, and cleaning. With no translation between the four languages nor any narration over the vignettes, the audience is asked to literally hear and see each narrative, aided by the tone of the performer's voice, limited hand gestures, the sound of an accompanying cello, and snatches of English projected onto images on a screen at the back of the stage.

While the larger themes of worker exploitation in the United States, gender-based discrimination within the family, and the Bangladeshi war of independence provide necessary backdrops, the small details in the narratives are what animate each story. Speaking of her love for the aunt who raised her when she was a child in Bangladesh, Mursheda states that "the nights I talk to my aunty, I can't sleep." Violet evokes the condescension of her ex-employer by recalling how "he used to call me with his forefinger." Mukta conveys the dehumanizing circumstance of war when she tells the audience that on the afternoon two Bangladeshi collaborators took her son away after the war of 1971, "they didn't even allow him to have his lunch." Bhagirathi holds her hands out, palms up and gently flexing as she remembers cleaning the grand house of her Long Island employers "with bleach and Fantastik without gloves."

Photos by Jennifer Prithvee Samuel



YaliniDream

Though the lives of domestic workers are hidden behind the closed doors of private residences, there are periodic glimpses inside as cases of exploitation make their way to courts and into the media. While the publicity given to these cases is important for addressing the exploitative conditions of work and the fact of worker abuse, the domestic worker is often cast as nothing more than a victim. Someone who slaved away. Someone who was abused. Someone who will receive justice through the legal system.

Through the act of writing and speaking, the women in Andolan challenge these dominant, impoverished representations of themselves. Each story is taken directly from the writing of their own lives that the women undertook in the workshops facilitated by [YaliniDream]. As a product of self-reflection, contemplation and creation, Sukh aur Dukh ki Kahani, presents five women who narrate their lives into much more than that of helpless victims of exploitation who can only be saved by lawyers and the courts. By narrating their aspirations and losses, their lives in South Asia and the United States, and their experiences as women, workers and organizers the members of Andolan, the audience is forced to recognize the totality of each woman's life, not just that portion that marks her as a low-wage worker.

Sukh aur Dukh ki Kahani follows a long tradition of work that bears witness to injustice, a practice in which both the speaker and listener are implicated and transformed. The performance presented a clear vision of how witnessing can transform the speaker. In writing and sharing the stories of their lives, the women of Andolan publicly reclaim an existence beyond work, a necessary and powerful step in a world that tends to reduce people to crude economic beings. I was, however, left wondering what transformative potential lay for those watching the performance. Was witnessing itself a transformative act? Or was there something more that could have been asked of us? But perhaps the very act of asking these questions is the start of transformation itself.

Linta Varghese is a visiting professor at Vassar College in the Anthropology department. Her work focuses on the South Asian diaspora and neoliberalism.

Bottom Photos by Jennifer Prithveeva Samuel

Postcards: Photos by Jennifer Prithveeva Samuel; Design by Elisa Armea



YaliniDream

bookyalinidream@gmail.com 917 687 3275
 www.myspace.com/yalinidream 41 Madison Street #3F
 Brooklyn, NY 11238