



TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

VOLUME 12, NOV 2020



Williams, C.V. "Tree of Truth."

Transnational Literature, vol. 12, November 2020

URL: <https://transnationalliterature.org/>

Tree of Truth
C. V. Williams

Would I make yet another phone call to India today, I wondered? Could I be bothered with these small tasks of dialling that number, waiting to see if it was answered, either being granted an audience or denied – all in the lap of the gods – in order to hold onto the love I'd felt for Krish for the past decade? In my last phone call from Sydney to the countryside outside of Mumbai, I'd laughed and asked him whether he relied on my persistence. It had been just the day before that he'd not answered the first call because he was at work. On my second attempt, he'd found a quiet place to take my private call but, even then, had been interrupted, so our conversation had been cut short.

"You think that I'm so determined I'll just keep on calling, always calling? Am I really that persistent?" I asked.

"Yes, you are," he said, and then gave a deep quiet chuckle. I used to misunderstand, thinking it was a display of his arrogance. These days it didn't sound self-satisfied; it sounded to me as if he felt reassured by my steadfast love. That he recognised the continual sacrifice we both made, the restrictions on our communication, and accepted it, knowing that I was not like many other women, who would make demands on him that he couldn't or wouldn't satisfy.

He had a responsibility to his parents to be there for them in their old age, yet he did not want to marry anyone in an arranged marriage – under great pressure from both his mother and father – all the while believing that they would not recognise me as a suitable life partner for him. I was already attached; I was beyond the pale of his religion; at forty-five I was too old to bear him a child. His mother wanted a grandchild, after all, and was prepared to fall into floods of tears to emotionally blackmail him – not once, but on a recurring schedule – calling in relatives to reinforce her message. He continued to resist the pressure. Once he cried in front of the extended family. Later he shouted – and his father told him to leave home. He went. But he had to

turn around once his father phoned him, asking him to return, as his mother was ill and wanted him back. He was their only living progeny, as his sister had committed suicide at the age of twenty-two. He was his mother's only chance to become a grandmother.

The weight of all this emotional responsibility and counter-responsibility weighed heavily on me. Was it my role to sacrifice my love for him and his love for me for the sake of a woman, a couple, who had chosen to have only two children – one a poet and the other a young woman who was unhappy enough from whatever cause – who lacked all hope of fulfilling her dreams – who was desperate enough – to kill herself? How much more sacrifice was needed to right a wrong that could never be righted? Why should I sacrifice my force of passion? Why should I assist the poet to sacrifice his love for me? This all sounded like melodrama – but was deeply felt. Who could be sure that even if I did take the initiative to break our bond, against every instinct I held, that this would create the happiness that his mother wished for? I didn't believe his personality would allow him to contentedly fall into line to play a happy family farce.

I sighed and rang Krish's number. It was mostly always a relief to me to speak to him, allowing me some reprieve from the momentum of my own family and work responsibilities. But would I get through to him this time? *He may not be able to answer*, I thought once again. But this time I was trying his home number, and it was early morning there. When I'd rung him the day before, it had been his lunch hour, a busy time of day, and he'd been with colleagues, I guessed. Yes, I knew that he was the most junior member of staff and it was difficult in the close atmosphere of his work for him to take a private call, so I rarely phoned him there, not even during his lunch break. He did his best. I knew that. After the first months and years of doubt, I'd come to realise those difficulties. I'd faced the problem of finding a secluded spot, by myself, whenever I'd stayed in India. It was a momentous task to find any privacy in a country of 1.3 billion sticky beaks. He'd been quite successful in the task over the past ten years, I had to admit.

Now I rang and hoped for better luck. He answered. Remarkably I could hear him clearly, despite the fact that his voice was very deep because he hadn't been awake very long. This was one of the rare times when the phone line was sharp and his words distinct. He was calm and speaking slowly, in his bedroom, not out walking on the street to catch a bus as so often happened. No honking of autos' horns, no political messages being blasted from a passing van with a PA system, nor were there shrill, argumentative voices in the background.

His parents had returned home after a group holiday to visit temples in the far north of India, he told me. I'd already had a conversation in which I'd asked him why his mother was going further afield to pray, and what did she pray for, a wife for him? Then I'd scolded myself and softened, saying I hoped she'd enjoy it, because she'd never travelled to the north of the country, and it would be educational for her to see how people in other cultures conducted their lives. Even to experience cultures which were only slightly different from her own village life on the west coast of the country.

They had even gone to Daya, he told me now. A clear phone line, yet still I couldn't be sure of the place name.

"Where?" I asked. "Dala, did you say?"

He spelt it. "Starts with G. It's G-A-Y-A."

Oh, deep into Buddha territory, I thought. He must be saying "Bodh" before "Gaya". Krish

sounded happy. He told me he'd noticed that his parents were showing much more energy since they'd returned. The trip had generated a renewed vigour for life. My hope was that they'd realise they should enjoy their own lives while they could. Develop a taste for travel instead of trying to govern the life of their thirty-year-old son.

"And my father told me a happy story," Krish continued, "about Rama and Sita." He was presuming I remembered Rama was the seventh avatara, or reincarnation, of Vishnu the preserver, and Sita represented Vishnu's consort Lakshmi, a great and noble woman.

"I've never heard it before," he went on. "It's not part of *The Ramayana*, it's something written later. About a ritual that Rama had to perform for someone who had died. And he didn't do it. Perhaps he was away, or busy with someone else. He had a fix-ed time ..."

"A 'FIXT' time, is the way it's pronounced," I corrected him.

"Yes, a fixed time, and he hadn't done it. So Sita decided to do it for him. But no one else could do it for him – it was his responsibility. Even so, she loved Rama and she carried it out. Then he arrived in time to do it and she said not to bother as she had. He did it anyway. But he was curious and questioned whether she really had done it.

"Are you lying to me?"

Krish had entered into the dialogue in telling me the story, yet at first I thought he was asking me the question. No, he was impersonating Rama. And now he returned to the narrator's role:

"There were five beings who could have seen her perform the ritual: a cow, a *thulsi* plant, a river, a Brahmin priest and a banyan tree. He asked them all whether Sita had performed the rite and four told Rama that they had not themselves seen her doing it. They loved Rama and could see he was worried. They didn't want to upset him, either way."

The phone call ran on, and still I could hear Krish's voice very clearly.

"The fifth and last observer was the banyan tree. The tree said that, yes, it had seen Sita performing the ceremony. It told the truth, the only one of the five who understood the importance of truth, an importance set above whether a person might be hurt or not in the telling of truth.

"Now for another complication in the story," I heard him say.

"Sita had become very angry about Rama's lack of trust and the others' reactions. So she came down to earth and set a curse on them. Her curse was effective. The cow lost its voice, and that explains why cows now cannot speak."

My mind immediately jumped to a familiar and almost opposite myth, as indigenous Australians explain the kookaburra's raucous laughter bestowed on those robust birds to wake all animal and bird life within earshot to the glory of the fiery sun each morning.

But Krish's story was about denial, not beneficence. In this story, the plant *thulsi* would never again be used in rituals. The river lost its force so that during the rainy season it no longer rose over its banks to flood and make the surrounding fields fertile for future crops. And Brahmin priests would remain poor ever afterwards.

But the honest banyan, the truthful one, became a sacred tree. *And the most famously sacred of all the banyan figs, the Bo or Bodhi tree, was the tree under which the Buddha found enlightenment*, I thought. Krish would expect that I saw the connection; there was no need for him

to spell it out.

I could hear him eating as he told me the tale... a slight slurp behind his words.

"What's in your mouth?" I asked abruptly.

"Oh – I, just before you rang, plucked a mango from the tree below my window," he laughed.

"Easy for some," I said.

"Yes, not so far to fetch it." He seemed pleased with his current life, the fruits of the earth at his very door.

"I'm thrice blessed," he said. "Mango, and chakka – you know it, 'jackfruit', we ate it together, remember? And mangosteen, which come from Burma and Malaysia, countries like that, but now Mumbaikars devour them. We grow a plant here also."

Krish is much taken by the tropical cornucopia in his midst. Just as he is also taken by this story told to him by his father, as his father must have been impressed with it to narrate it to him. It was so precious a story to Krish that he had in turn conveyed it to me. I was included in this golden circle of narrators. I knew the story must have significance to the father and son, following the trip to Gaya. But did I understand it, really? I knew that Krish would have performed rituals for his sister after she died, but were there any that had to be performed many years later? Had he missed some – or even one? He and his father would know the answers to those questions. I doubted they would have missed any knowingly. But the role I played here was to listen, not accost Krish with discomforting questions. I was being lulled by the delight in his voice.

Now Krish was telling me something more about "Gaya", the place sacred since the time of Buddha, with its banyan also sacred at the very least since Buddha had sat beneath it and gained enlightenment. Not the original tree, but others planted in its place over the past two and a half thousand years. But now I was having trouble hearing – the line was not as clear as when the call had begun. My thoughts could wander a little ...

So, had the Buddha's banyan tree already been considered sacred before he ever sat underneath its spreading branches, I wondered? Hindus had a monopoly on sacredness through their primordial and polytheistic understanding of the world... whether via ancient, contemporary or retrospectively truthful storytelling. They loved their myths equally with their faith. Truth was both mutable and immutable, it seemed. The mutability extended even to stories about truth itself.

Most people revere the Buddha for what they believe was his break from some of the evils of that early straitened form of Brahmin Hinduism. In the way he criticised the rigid caste system, for instance, declaring that it was not by birth that one might be considered either a Brahmin (a member of the highest order) or an outcast "untouchable" (a *shudra*, now known as *dalit*) but by deeds alone. Yet as the decades and then centuries rolled by, many aspects of Buddhism were incorporated into Hinduism, and conversely many aspects and rituals from Hinduism were merged into some forms of Buddhism, especially Tantric Buddhism as practiced in Tibet. By the 7th century AD, Hindu teaching had placed the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu, one of a long line of human incarnations of the deity descended to earth. And if the Buddha was to be effective in challenging the elitism of Brahminism, what better place could be found for him to gain enlightenment, in order for his teaching to be effectively carried down the generations, than

under a *Bodhi* tree that had already been consecrated?

I had a vision, as I'd had so many times before, of my little voice trailing down a phone line to meet a sonorous baritone of confidence explaining, often through parable, an Indian's mindfulness of acceptance of fatalistic forces, which needed to be understood as all-powerful in order for an individual, one among many millions co-existing, to gain the fruits of individual human potential. How strong was my characteristic personal persistence in the face of Krish's "maha-cultural" persistence? I had to wonder. *I must follow my "living love story" to its conclusion, I thought, to understand this mind-set, with all its beauty and ugliness, vision and blindness. I must persist in order to challenge, and perhaps even finally overthrow, the microcosmic effects on my small life from the failings in this common system of acceptance.*

Later, thinking about the effects of Buddha's questioning of truisms, it seemed to me that the Buddha's teaching was an Eastern equivalent forerunner of an agenda of equality of individual human rights that had been slowly gathering pace throughout the Western world ever since slavery had been officially abolished. Even so, the teaching of individual human rights still holds little sway in many hidden parts of the ostensibly civilised world. Where power is absolute. In some places in Muslim countries where religion based on the Koran offers the male-interpreted teaching of the prophet Muhammad for the salvation of humankind at large; in Jewish enclaves where believers take only the Torah as their holy directory; in sects within Christian countries where Jesus Christ is the saviour and the Holy Bible the supreme tract interpreted literally, Garden of Eden and all. The Buddha's teaching may reach the edges of an Indian believer's deep faith in Hinduism, Jainism or Sikhism, only where it may be incorporated compatibly into that faith. In "god-forsaken", multi-religious or atheist-accepting societies such as Australia, Buddhist teaching might also have an ameliorating effect, without deeply penetrating a culturally self-satisfied protective skin, which is largely reason-based and volitional.

But whether within religious dogma or without, in so many parts of the world refugees – who are not prepared to suffer the social hardships of whatever cursed territory they happen to have been born in – may be treated as second-class citizens: by family members, by villagers, by townspeople, by urban citizens, by others of their nationality who deny them individual human rights ratified by a majority of governments of the globe.

Refugees are hewn out of many types of split and roughened wood. It was clear to me that the love Krish and I held for each other, our precious yet precarious bond, if known publicly would also make us refugees from the stratified social system that still holds sway in India, a social system tenacious in the thinking of generations of Hindu adherents. If known, it could have rendered us outcasts from that family-dominated culture. Rather, Krish would be cast out – unthinkable for him – while I would never be allowed in. There remains alive a relentless setting of parameters for self-perpetuation of the Hindu faith by priests with vested interests, where marriage within Hinduism is sanctioned whereas the marriage of minds and bodies outside of Hinduism, or worse, breaching its borders, is feared. One can't become a Hindu, one must be born a Hindu, it's said. A statement which conjures the symbol of a snake eating its tail – effectively a closed circle.

I could see a lack, a denial, in the numerous forms cited in the Gaya story passed on to me: the sacred cow, a symbol of *ahimsa*, or non-injury, turned dumb animal; the denial of a

flower's right to be included in a celebration of all the deities' flora; the drying up of a river, prevented from breaking its banks to renew the earth's fertility; the poverty of the priestly class which would have to use superstition to contain anti-social impulses among its subjects, in order to retain its power, respect and livelihood, dependent as it was on those who laboured for their own and the Brahmin priests' living.

Only the brave banyan was strong and persistent in its pursuit of truth, regardless of outcome.

But after all, had cows ever spoken human language? And was it perhaps considered sensible to ban *thulsi*, or basil, from rituals so there would be enough left to be used for its medicinal properties? Had there been a river in that part of the country which had dried up, I wondered? Drought was a common enough denominator in explaining the downfall of many ancient civilisations, from Egyptian to Mesopotamian, from Aztec to Khmer. Community storytellers, or priests, could posit supernatural explanations for the natural upheavals that members of their communities found hard to accept.

As I'd listened to the simple narrative, I could feel creeping over me a very Western rational approach to story – and I was making ready to throw some questions at Krish to bring the myth and the reality of the countryside in that part of India into unison.

I would have tried to find out more, except Krish's father had come into his room and was explaining that he had to visit his own elderly mother, who had had a fall. Of course, Krish would accompany his father so the phone call would end there. I hoped that the old woman, whose will for life was so strong, even as the strength of her body was fast diminishing, would survive the fall and be able to rest easy.

"I need to go with my father. She's very frail. You understand?"

"Yes, I expected you would go. We'll talk again."

Despite the abrupt end to the call, suddenly I could feel my own inner calm. Even though the thought of Krish's grandmother's health was disturbing, I was no longer agitated by my will to question, to winnow truth from fable. I felt restored. I'd been appeased by Krish's gentle tone, the curiosity of his mind, his love of story, his compassion for his grandmother, the bond he had with his father about questions of truth and ethical behaviour. Better that my attempt to find logic in the parable had been cut short. I'd needed comfort and I'd found it in a simplistic story about a banyan tree. If others found the tale so compelling, why shouldn't I accept it as valid in and of itself, as a simple homily, not demanding my inflated sense of reasoning analysis?

Yes, I'll call again, I thought. To mimic the kookaburra's attachment to the joy of life, to celebrate gum trees as well as figs ... but not too soon. Let Krish show some initiative, find space and time to express his love, his own truth in his own words. I would remain wrapped in the memory of a warm cocoon, a mantle shaped by the gentle sound of his voice, as long as it might last.

For always remaining in the back of my mind are two facts: the common occurrence of the fig in both Australia and India – the Port Jackson Fig and the Bo tree, among many others – and the knowledge that it was beneath one of these *ficus* species that Krish and I had first sought sanctuary during an unbounded tropical storm, a downpour which surely broke many rivers' banks.

Dr C. V. Williams

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