

South India to Germany: Sajitha Shankhar's Engagement with European Art and Culture

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Abstract

This paper considers the impact of European art and culture on the South Indian artist, Sajitha Shankhar, born in 1967. Sajitha first discovered the work of European artists such as Kathë Kollwitz, Max Beckmann, Marc Chagall, and Kazimir Malevich during her time as a young art student at the art college in Trivandrum, Kerala. After an early marriage at the age of 20, Sajitha moved to the Cholamandal Artists' Village in Madras, Tamil Nadu, the neighboring state. Living in India's largest artists' commune, which brought modernism to South India, offered her possibilities to meet visiting artists, who were often Europeans. She forged friendships and found admirers of her talent, which resulted in invitations to study and show her art in Europe, initially Britain and Germany.

Through her art, Sajitha, at this time, was trying to express her shock at the reality of her marriage into a family of artists only to discover that the support for her work that she had expected was, in this conservative Hindu family, reserved for men only. Even after the birth of a daughter, she struggled to continue to maintain her career and development as an artist against the wishes of her in-laws with whom she was forced to live.

Sajitha's continuing drive to win recognition resulted in an award in 1995 given by the Charles Wallace Trust of the British Council. Before Sajitha left for England, friends from Europe also helped her arrange exhibitions in several German venues. Sajitha left alone for England, leaving her five-year-old daughter for the first time in the care of her father and her paternal grandmother, who was by then widowed and living with her son and Sajitha. Her husband was anxious about Sajitha's departure. This was her first time out of India and her first opportunity in a long time to focus on creative activity. This article concludes with an account of Sajitha's reception and artistic development in Germany, especially through her work with the printmaker, Oskar Gölzenleuchter. How the politics of the time and place, especially the shifting roles for women, and how her own deteriorating marriage affected Sajitha and her art are important aspects of this account of intersecting cultures.

Keywords: contemporary South Asian art, Sajitha Shankhar, feminism and politics

In art school in her native Kerala, in South India, Sajitha Shankhar (as she would later become known) emulated the work of Western European artists. At the time, in the 1980s, she produced street scenes influenced by Kerala Communists' concerns with the poor, the stories of Franz Kafka, as well as the art of Kathë Kollwitz, Frida Kahlo, Max Beckmann, Marc Chagall, and Kazimir Malevich's early figurative work. She found valuable lessons about humanity in the reproductions that she saw.

Years later, Sajitha would name Kollwitz, whom she identified as "a Berlin based woman artist in the 1920s," as an artist who "has made a particular impression on me. Especially her compassion for the poor and powerless, having devoted her life to the moral and social betterment, have made her an artist of great admiration to me" (Indes Réunionnaises, n.d.).

Sajitha graduated art school in 1987 at the age of 20 and immediately married. Her new husband, from the neighboring state, Tamil Nadu, was a graphic designer whom she had barely met. Her move into his conservative parents' traditional Hindu home and his lack of support for her artistic ambition shocked her. Sajitha was unhappy, despite landing in a comfortable middle-class household with servants. Art, it turned out, was emphasized in her husband's family, just as she had calculated—but it was reserved for men only. Even when she retreated to her reading, her in-laws scolded and discouraged her.

After the birth of their daughter in 1989, Sajitha insisted that she and her husband move to Cholamandal Artists' Village in Madras, Tamil Nadu's capital. Cholamandal, founded in 1966, as India's largest artists' commune, brought modernism to South India. Resident artists live in their own homes, but function as a community, running a cooperative which manages the village and sales of works through a permanent exhibition. Cholamandal became one of the most important meeting places for

international artists in India. Sajitha made her home there distinctive, decorating the exterior with her own terra cotta reliefs (Figure 1).

Escaping her father-in-law's disapproval, Sajitha began to make and show more art. She sold to people who came to visit Cholamandal. Among her first collectors was Wilhelm Ringsiep, her husband's German boss, who recognized her talent. He wanted to buy so much of her work that she was reluctant to sell so many paintings at once. Since they needed money, her husband ordered her to sell. Asked a price, she had no idea and quoted only 5,000 rupees per painting. Her buyer, who became a friend, bought two paintings, paying her 18,000 rupees each. He continued to purchase her work, becoming a major supporter.

When Sajitha organized a catalogue of her art, a few close friends wrote short texts including the Kerala-born feminist essayist and poet, Kamala Das, and English artist Sian Bowen, who contrasted Sajitha's new techniques with her former "private dramas": "The characters no longer appear to interact directly with the viewer, whose role has thus been shifted with subtle but specific intention. We now become 'voyeurs' of half told stories, which we are drawn into through an ever-increasing complex juxtapositioning of rhythms and heightened color relationships" (Sajitha,



Figure 1. Sajitha's terra cotta mural on their Cholamandal house, 1992. From: Sajitha Shankhar.

1995a). For sponsoring her catalogue, Sajitha credited, among many others, the Alliance Francaise de Madras and Wilhelm Ringelsiep, her German patron.

Sajitha's catalogue featured her statement on her art and working process, dated December 22, 1994, in which she tried to explain her aims and hopes for future achievements, as well as stating that she had only just begun to work (She was then just 27 years old):

Once I begin to work on a painting, a chain of thought comes to the fore and I feel a compulsion to develop ideas through an open-ended series of works; some people might interpret this as a form of escapism but I see it rather as a conviction in the validity of art itself.

Before actually beginning a painting, I always have a particular theme in mind, but through the working process this develops and changes as my own relationship with the canvas or water colour is formed. To hold conviction in my own mind a work must begin to ask questions to me about our very existence. I believe therefore, that when the dialogue between a work of art and the artist is deep-rooted, the presence of the artist in that work is ever-present. When considering aesthetics, for me this is one of the most important and telling aspects of art.

From the works of great masters, such as Masaccio, Rembrandt and Picasso, specific moods and feelings are evoked with such sincerity that we can also relate such emotions to our own lives. If a work retains our concentration and attention, [it] can speak to us of moods and moments of our inner selves. I believe that it is only then that it is elevated from "decoration" to "art." For

me, only art can lift and speak to us in such a way and this is the reason that through the centuries, [art] has come to shape civilization (Sajitha, 1995a).

By citing the "Masaccio, Rembrandt and Picasso," Sajitha suggests that she leans towards European art at this time in her life. Europe also represented escape from her personal situation in India, escape from the limited roles society there assigned to women.

She concluded her statement by saying, "What I continue to aim to communicate through my art are the problems of human existence, with particular emphasis on those encountered by women—the love, dreams, hopes and sorrows of humanity. My deep and strong friendships enable me to realize [sic] the meaning of art itself" (Sajitha, 1995a).

Sajitha also reproduced her poems; one called "Echoes of This Day":

This day...
colours burning bright...
fire of bright colours,
licks every part of my body.
To forget the traumas
of the past, the ship-wrecked life
of yesterdays.
A tight rope walk...
between sanity and lunacy.
I recollect...
the broken pieces of canvases,
where stormy relationships were...
intertwined and trapped.
This day...
canvas and colours,
and strong strokes—
violently fornicate
and sigh. (Sajitha, 1995b)

This poem reveals even more than her choice of visual works of art. It gives a symbolic but thinly veiled portrait of how she viewed the marriage that she had herself arranged. It turned out to have been a hefty price to pay for her trip out of Kerala to the freedom that she imagined—but did not find—in her marriage to an artist in a family of artists.

The cover of her catalogue was a black and white photograph of Sajitha in her studio with her daughter Shilpy asleep on a cot. This photograph wraps around the catalogue so that Shilpy is shown alone on its back cover and Sajitha is at her easel on its front cover (Figure 2). Sajitha's figurative art in this studio view looks rather expressionist.

Whether in color or black and white, some catalogue images are enhanced by lines from Sajitha's poetry. An untitled charcoal drawing (from 1994) (Figure 3) of a figure crouching on the beach appears on the page opposite her own statement. To this image, she attached these lines:

Force of sorrow...tension...

It goes through this...

Wild and strong waves...

Sea...sometimes

I wanted to be with you.



Figure 2. Sajitha's terra cotta mural on their Cholamandal house, 1992. From: Picture provide by Ringelsiep.



Figure 3. Sajitha Shankhar, *Untitled*, 1994, charcoal on paper, Size, Unknown collection. From: Sajitha Shankhar.

The expressed desire to be with the sea seems to be the other side of Sajitha's usual optimism: her death wish, when life felt too desperate, too impossible. Usually, however, despite the odds, she kept on trying.

Her first solo shows featuring this catalogue took place in February 1995, at the Alliance Française de Madras and in May in Ernakulam, Kerala. On the invitation to the latter, which she billed as, "Women and Reality," Sajitha quoted from a poem, called "New Face," by the African-American writer, Alice Walker about drawing from within one's "inexhaustible spring within our twin and triple selves" (Walker, 1973).

The art critic Anjali Sircar wrote in *The Hindu*, about this show in Ernakulam, on "The changing face of woman," saying that Sajitha "interpreted figural themes with a classical restraint and put forth her theme: 'We look at how far we have come, and then we know there

can be no turning back". She quoted from Kamala Das's catalogue statement: "Sajitha does not celebrate the fact of her existence... she does not offer any solutions, nor does she pass on messages. She gifts the viewer with the *Weltschmerz* of today's displaced generation. She knows how different today's world is from yesterday's. ... Sajitha's art is strong meat and cannot be ignored" (Sircar, 1995).

Sajitha produced a series of drawings and paintings of Kerala, made between 1993 and 1995, called *Poems of Nostalgia*. Faced with turbulence in her marriage and unsupportive in-laws, Sajitha longed for the simpler life of her childhood, the relative peacefulness of her schoolgirl days. Sircar viewed this series as "an unfolding narrative that stirs interest in. ... the huddled figure that entices one to discover the story within the story." (Sircar, 1995) Sajitha depicted abstracted nudes in *Poem of Nostalgia*, a multi-panel painting (Figure 4).

A painting she called *Spiritual Smell of Motherland* (Figure 5), an oil on canvas of 1996, is a bold vertical image of an orange-red mother, with web-like feet, holding a small child in her

arms. In rendering this figure, Sajitha appears to recall the early figurative work of the Russian modernist, Malevich, perhaps inspired by a reproduction of Malevich's 1911 *Bather* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) (Figure 6), a male figure with similar webbed feet, painted in a warm color. Sajitha's figure seems to soar over the landscape of small houses, surrounded by green fields. Here again, she seems filled with nostalgia for her family and her Kerala childhood.

Sajitha's continuing drive to win recognition resulted in an award in 1995 given by the Charles Wallace Trust of the British Council. Sian Bowen, who sought out Sajitha after seeing her show in Madras, encouraged her application, which required her to find a place to live and work for three months. Sajitha applied to

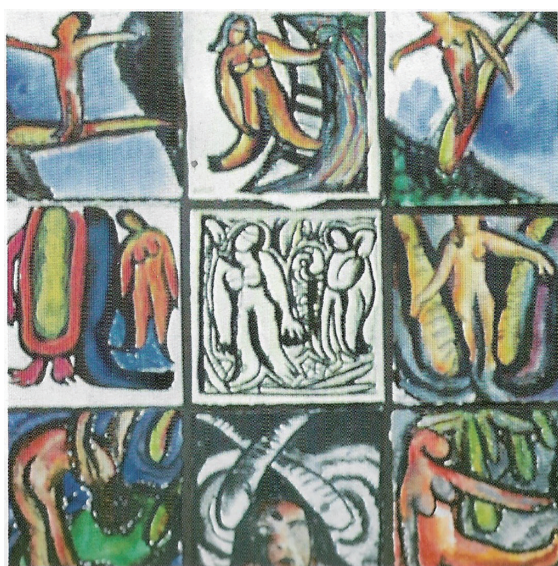


Figure 4. Sajitha Shankhar, *Poem of nostalgia*, 1995, mixed media, 30 x 30 cm, Unknown collection. From: Sajitha Shankhar.



Figure 5. Sajitha Shankhar, *Power of nostalgia*, 1996, Oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm. Collection, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).



Figure 6. Kazimir Malevich, *Bather*, 1911, Gouache on paper, 105 × 69 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. From: WikiArt.

spend most of her time in northern England where Bowen lived, close to the Anglo-Scottish border.

Before Sajitha left for England, a German supporter and friend, Inge Ringelsiep (ex-wife of Wilhelm, her husband's boss), who lived near Dusseldorf, had already visited Sajitha's studio in Madras. She reported that she had found a gallerist to host a show of Sajitha's work in Gelsenkirchen, in the North Rhine-Westphalia state of Germany.¹

Sajitha went to England on October 9, 1995, leaving her daughter, Shilpy, then five

years old, for the first time in the care of her father and her paternal grandmother, who was by then widowed and living with her son and Sajitha. Though Shilpy was already in school, Sajitha's husband was anxious about his wife's departure.

For Sajitha, this moment of personal freedom enabled her to make her "emancipation series of art works" (Figure 7)². She was able to express the frustration of trying to be an artist and survive in her confining marriage.³ She also explains that while in the UK, "I was able to do my meditation" and found "clarity in life, stopped worrying about little things."⁴

This was Sajitha's first time out of India and

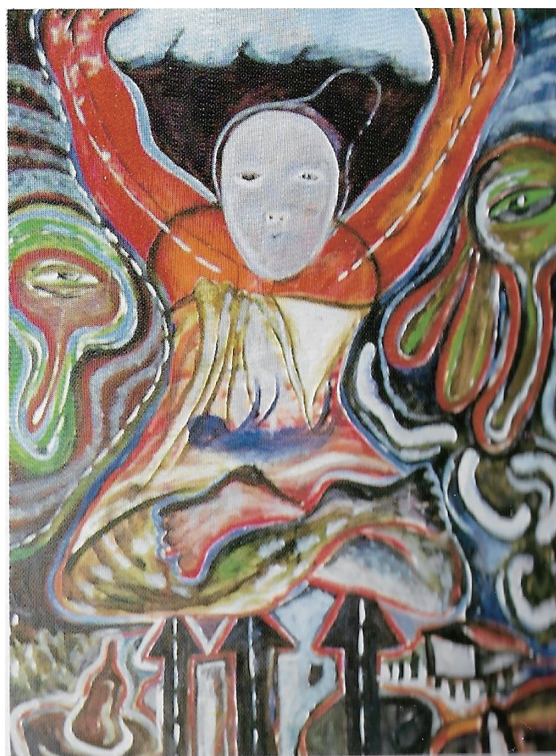


Figure 7. Sajitha Shankhar, *Emancipation*, 1996, Oil on canvas, 180 × 120 cm, Collection, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).

¹ Inge Ringelsiep to Sajitha, letter of June 6, 1995, collection of the artist.

² Sajitha to the author, email of May 14, 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

her first opportunity in a long time to focus on creative activity. She made drawings in charcoal, dry pastels, and acrylics. Work on paper was more practical for her at this time, especially charcoal drawings, for they could be rolled up and easily transported from country to country as her exhibition opportunities materialized. Her charcoal drawing, *Women and Reality* of 1993 (Figure 8) won a major prize. Her haunting images were most often females and included self-portraits.

Sajitha showed her work in a solo show again entitled "Women and Reality," reflecting: "To hold a conviction in my own mind, a work must begin to ask questions to me about our very existence. ... the presence of the artist

in that work is ever-present."⁵ She hints at the spiritual direction that her art will take in the future. The positive response and purchase of her work left her with funds to bring home.⁶

Sajitha's show, "Women and Reality," translated as "*Frauen und Wirklichkeit*," opened at the Elsa Brandstrom Gymnasium in Oberhausen, Germany, organized by Heinz Schumacher, who taught at the school and had collected her work, after learning of it through Wilhelm Ringelsiep, who had shown him his large collection of Sajitha's work. Ringelsiep had written that her works were "private dramas" with "intensity of feeling" about which he observed: "We now become 'voyeurs' of half told stories, which we are drawn into through an ever-increasing complex juxtapositioning of rhythms and heightened color relationships." (Ringelsiep, YYYY)

A second German show happened because a woman artist, Iso Wagner, who like Bowen, had visited Chalamandal, had become an enthusiast for Sajitha and her art. Wagner arranged for Sajitha's work to be shown from January 9–24, 1996, at the *Kunstsemina Freie Hochschule*, a multi-disciplinary art school in Metzingen, Germany, just south of Stuttgart.

While Sajitha was in Metzingen, her husband insisted on coming to Germany for a few weeks, leaving their daughter with his mother. While he was visiting, Peter Ludwig, the chocolate magnate, art collector, and director of his own museum in Cologne, invited Sajitha for dinner. Her husband accompanied her to Aachen, to see Ludwig, who held a doctorate in art history and had created a foundation to nurture the arts in Cuba. He spoke of his desire to establish a museum of contemporary art in India, inquiring if Sajitha would like to work with him on this project.

Sajitha recalls that her husband, upon



Figure 8. Sajitha Shankhar, *Women and reality*, 1995, Charcoal on paper, 42 × 35 cm, Cleveland Gallery, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).

⁵ Sajitha quoted in "Women and Reality for the Queen's Hall," unidentified clipping, artist's files.

⁶ Ibid.

hearing of Ludwig's interest, became jealous and began speaking to her in Tamil in front of the other guests, urging her to leave before the discussion had ended. Later, she remembers him demanding, "Are you Picasso? Are you Chagall? Are you so great?" When she defended herself, he returned to India without her. Sajitha's promising connection to Peter Ludwig as a patron ended the following July 22, with his sudden death from a heart attack at the age of 71.

Sajitha, after the end of her show that January, went to see her German friend and patron, Inge Ringelsiep. Then Sajitha visited the Gelsenkirchen gallery about which Inge had written as a place that might show her work. At that moment, the gallery showed lithographs by the well-known Günter Grasse, whom she got to meet. After Sajitha showed him her catalogue, Grasse encouraged his dealer to show Sajitha's art.

Inge had also shown Sajitha's work to the artist, H. D. (Oskar) Gölzenleuchter, who lived nearby in Bochum. When she had visited her ex-husband in India, Inge had brought along a catalogue of Oskar's work for Sajitha. Thus, Oskar and Sajitha had each admired the other's art and expressed interest in meeting. Oskar thought that Sajitha took an interest in his work, "in part, because social criticism content was not strange to her." Oskar and his wife, Renate, invited Inge and Sajitha for dinner and, looking at more of her art, asked her to come back to work and have a show at his studio and gallery, "*Werkstatt Wort und Bild*" (Workshop for Word and Image).⁷

Anticipating more success, Sajitha returned to Madras from Düsseldorf, eager to see her family and share with them her triumphs. Her husband organized a party to celebrate Sajitha's home-coming, but once the guests departed,

became enraged and gave her a black eye. Sajitha went into shock. Still only 28, she was having a wonderful career, which only provoked her spouse and threatened her happiness at home.

Sajitha had difficult choices. Her husband was pleased to have her contribute her earnings toward the expenses of expanding their house, but not to have her return to Germany for the show she was invited to have by Gölzenleuchter the following autumn. Her husband wanted her at home in the traditional role of an Indian wife and mother.

Yet Sajitha wanted to return to Europe, which offered escape and boosted self-esteem: only abroad did she find her art recognized so that she felt happy and respected. Yet the money that she earned from sales, fellowships, and prizes created tension with her husband. While not huge sums in Europe, these amounts went much further in the Indian economy. She earned more income from her sales of her art than her husband did working full time as a graphic designer.

Sajitha wrote in her diary, "Back from Germany and I am going through old dailies and magazines. ... In *Kala kaumudi Malayalam* ... a young 16 year old girl was cruelly mass raped (known in Kerala as the *Sooryanelly* issue). My mind is sad and agitated. I cannot think for many days. I cannot sleep for many nights. Finally, I started this work *Darkness at Noon*" (Figure 9) (Wilson, 1998). This work depicts a famous serial rape and kidnapping in Kerala by a series of men over a 40-day period in 1996, which became a huge scandal involving many people including politicians and women's rights activists (Sajitha & Nair, 2008).

Sajitha's immediate response to this brutal mass rape was to make a large horizontal drawing (6 × 9 feet). She borrowed the title

⁷ Oskar and Renate Gölzenleuchter to the author, email of May 5, 2017. "*Sajitha interessierte sich sofort für meine Arbeiten. Ihr zum Teil sozialkritischer Inhalt war ihr nicht fremd.*"



Figure 9. Sajitha Shankhar, *Darkness at noon*, 1996, Charcoal on paper, 165 × 325 cm. Collection, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).

Darkness at noon from Arthur Koestler's novel first published in 1940, which expresses the author's disillusionment with the Soviet Union's version of Communism at the outset of Second World War. Sajitha, too, was expressing disillusionment—not with Communism—but with the treatment of women in society. Her agitated drawing expresses the horror of violence against women.

On the right side of the wide drawing, a woman is being stabbed; on the left a bull-like horned animal attacks another woman and on the far left are children who have suffered abuse. The theme (the violent bull, the victim's head in the lower left corner), aspects of the horizontal compositional design, and its execution in black and white suggests that she had been looking at reproductions of *Guernica* by Picasso, whose art she expressed admiring. Despite her embrace of European art at this time, Sajitha's work remained highly personal.

Before Sajitha returned to Germany, The Easel Gallery in Madras, gave her a second solo show in August 1996, which she called "Beauty by Mistake," after the Czech Milan Kundera's

1984 novel, *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. His character, Sabina, was an artist who chose this title for her show, which Sajitha borrowed for her own work. It seemed to fit her idea of revolutionary content.

A catalogue, entitled *Sajitha R. Shankhar Recent Paintings and Drawings*, was intended to serve for this show and the next one, the following October, in Bochum, Germany. The title page featured a quotation from Milan Kundera: "Unintentional beauty. Yes. Another way of putting it might be 'beauty by mistake'. Before beauty disappears entirely from the earth, it will go on existing for a while by mistake. 'BEAUTY BY MISTAKE'—The final phase in the history of beauty."

Next to the quotation from Kundera was a reproduction of *The Search Within* (acrylic on canvas, 1995) (Figure 10). There a woman's torso and head are suspended over forms that might be legs. Disembodied eyes populate this painting. The woman holds a house and a baby, recalling Sajitha's own story with her daughter and her fear about losing the home that she had worked so hard to build.



Figure 10. Sajitha Shankhar, *The search within*, 1995, Acrylic on canvas, 183 × 76 cm, Collection, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).

A substantial review of this show appeared in *The Economic Times*, captioned, “Dreaming of emancipation,” a headline that cannot have endeared her to her husband. “Her work has a character that constantly draws attention to a larger concern than a mere autobiographical reference.” This male critic found Sajitha’s charcoal drawings “resplendent” and her “Daily Sketches” “a very special achievement,” but he did not like her *Darkness at noon*, which he claimed “trapped rather than released emotion” (Menon, 1996).

Another male critic, M. L. Johny, writing in *The Hindu*, was more enthusiastic: “After

removing all the false notions of beauty attributed to women, what remains is that which really counts,” says Sajitha. This would be a real share in power, that is equality within humanity. And this is what Sajitha wants to express through her intimate autobiographical drawings and paintings” (Johny, 1996). Singling out *Ammaye Chavitti- Kinattilecku* (*Kicking the mother into a well*) Johny praised Sajitha’s “mixing up of past and present in this manner gives a collage effect to her works.” He then argued “Lucy R. Lippard, the American feminist critic, says “The feminist ‘collage aesthetic’—of putting things together without divesting them of their own identities—is a metaphor for cultural democracy.’ Sajitha’s works upholds [sic] this cultural democracy.” (Johny, 1996)

Kicking the Mother Into a Well (1996) (Figure 11) is a remarkable horizontal charcoal drawing, which is divided to form a triptych-like frieze of episodes. On the left, there appears to be the head of a man with two small feet above his face; in the center is a large eye in a circle next to a hand; on the far right is a winged child above another figure and what may be the well referred to in the title.

Below this image in the catalogue was another horizontal charcoal drawing, once again with three figures. Called *My Diary notes* (1996) (Figure 12), it features three images of a woman, the central one (wearing a bindi dot on her forehead as Sajitha does) cradling a small child. The left or first image appears to be the same woman pregnant, carrying the child within her body (but visible in a faint outline). The last image (on the right) depicts the mother’s arms cradling the absent child, perhaps grown too large for holding.

Sajitha suffered a huge disconnect from new public discourse in India about feminism to the archaic mores she faced at home. Feminist theory had not yet changed ordinary women’s lives. Johny argued, “When a feminist artist derives or creates a visual language, it



Figure 11. Sajitha Shankhar, *Ammaye chavitti- kinattilecku (Kicking the mother into a well)*, 1996, Charcoal on paper, 72 × 30 cm, Collection, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).



Figure 12. Sajitha Shankhar, *My diary notes*, 1996, Charcoal on paper, 72 × 30 cm, Collection, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).

also involves a rebellion against the male/dominant art language. Sajitha's steps falter slightly in this aspect. Her works are expressionistic. But this expressionism is not purely feminine and its masculinity is too visible to be overlooked" (Johny, 1996). Possibly this critic was not familiar with German Expressionist women artists, from Kollwitz to Gabrielle Münter.

When Sajitha was planning to go to Germany for three months where her work would be shown in Bochum from October 4 to 26, 1996, as Gölzenleuchter had offered, her husband insisted that he would join her

there. She left alone, but he followed, leaving Shilpy in his mother's care. The Germans called Sajitha's show, "Women and Reality: Sajitha R. Shankar," although she had intended it to be called "Beauty by Mistake." Her catalogue from the Easel Gallery show in Madras listed the German venue as having that same show. Actually, Sajitha showed some of the same paintings and drawings, but she added woodblock prints, which she produced after arriving in Germany.

One of Sajitha's prints was called *Sleeping With the Moon* (1996) (Figure 13). It shows a woman curled up in a fetal position under



Figure 13. Sajitha Shankhar, *Sleeping with moon*, 1996, Woodcut on paper, 60 × 30 cm, Collection, City. From: Sajitha Shankhar.

a crescent moon. She had learned to make woodblock prints with Gölzenleuchter, who spoke no English. He later recalled that “After some initial misunderstanding, we began to understand each other through gestures, sign language, and drawings.”⁸ Somehow, with the help of his wife’s occasional translations, they even managed to make some prints together, eventually collaborating on both prints and paintings in which he made one part and Sajitha made the other (Figure 14).

Oskar and his wife Renate understood and empathized with the situation of woman in India. They appreciated Sajitha’s emphatic stance in her art and her personal resistance to violence against women. They also admired Sajitha’s determination: to learn woodblock print techniques from Oskar, to escape her private domestic drama, and to have her show at his gallery, arriving with her works in tow.⁹

At the exhibition opening, Gölzenleuchter



Figure 14. Sajitha with her art works in Bochum, Germany, 1996. From: Oskar Gölzenleuchter.

welcomed Sajitha, praising her work. He spoke in German, but arranged for an English translation for Sajitha. “In January ’96,” he recalled, “she carved her Indian women’s topic into a piece of Balkan polar using my Swiss wood carver’s knife, and on the working table next door she printed it with German paint [sic] onto paper handmade in France. When she left the workshop four days later, she left some beautiful pieces of work... good ideas... and her promise to practice art-internationalism.”¹⁰ He also spoke about “her opposition against women’s oppression, against the killing of girls—which is still practiced in India...,” but noted that her art was never “shrill and obtrusive. I admire her poetry and her sensitivity on her way to emancipation for herself and for others. ... her longing for a life in harmony with nature is easily comprehensible for us...”¹¹ He praised Sajitha “as an artist who works figuratively, an artist who follows the tradition of social messages.”¹²

⁸ Oskar Gölzenleuchter to the author, May 5, 2017, “Dennoch konnten wir uns, mit anfänglichen Missverständnissen, über Gesten, Zeichensprache, auch über Zeichnungen verständigen.”

⁹ Renate and Oskar Gölzenleuchter to the author, May 5, 2017, “Sie brachte, ohne Zollerklärung, einige Kisten gerahmter Bilder mit. Der Zoll machte natürlich Probleme, die aber mit viel Überredungskunst behoben werden konnten. Es waren genügend Werke, mit denen wir in der Werkstatt eine Ausstellung machen konnten.”

¹⁰ Official typescript of introduction by H. D. “Oskar” Gölzenleuchter at the opening of Women and Reality: Sajitha R. Shankar (Indien) Zeichnungen-Malerei-Holzschnitte, 4.10-26.10 1996, Werkstatt Wort und Bild im Bochumer Kulturrat, Germany, n.p. Attached to Sajitha’s copy of this speech are reviews in German and many photographs of her and others in her show.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

The German press was also enthusiastic. In Werner Streletz's review, captioned "Harmony of Culture and the Feminine Force," he observed that Sajitha drew upon the tradition of her own country as well as from European classical modernists like Picasso and Chagall (Streletz, 1996).¹³ Another reviewer, wrote that Sajitha's "pictures are a diary of an Indian artist" (Unsigned feature, 1996)¹⁴.

Since his gallery functioned as a cultural center for both visual artists and writers, Gölzenleuchter had asked Sajitha to introduce to Germany a literary personality from Kerala through a series of her charcoal drawings that he would exhibit that November. She chose *Nerchakozhy*, a book of stories and a film, *Amma Ariyaan*, both by the late John Abraham, the writer and filmmaker, who like her, came from Kottayam. They had first met at the Art College in Trivandrum, where he was a frequent visitor, but they stayed in contact. Sajitha respected his intellect.

During the course of this show, Sajitha learned that E. K. Nayanar, the Chief Minister of Kerala and a Communist, was visiting Germany. She invited him to see her show. Her friend Oskar Gölzenleuchter, who was also a Communist, owned a woodcut copy of Marx's Communist Manifesto, which he gave to Sajitha to present to the minister, who was very pleased.

Sajitha too gave a speech, thanking her hosts, speaking in her native Malayalam, which Prasanna Pillai, a nurse from Kerala living nearby, translated into German. Sajitha told how much she had been attracted by the "feminist-socialist ideals" in Gölzenleuch-

ter's images.¹⁵ She mentioned that her work commemorated the late John Abraham, whose "moves are a heavy reality—like a movie within a movie, a solid reality with life which strikes viewers deaf and dumb and motivates them to introspect. I am reminded at this point of Passolini, the Italian filmmaker, poet, novelist, and Marxist. If John were still alive today, it would be a great gain for art."

Then Sajitha spoke about her own work, "My paintings are the truths of my life...in other words, they are my story, my memoirs. Once I began my work, I cannot step away from it. It continues into new works." Sajitha concluded with a brave political comment considering the pro-Leftist audience to whom she was speaking: "even though I sympathize/lean towards communism, I find it hard to completely accept this philosophy as it rejects feminism."¹⁶ This comment was accurate, but it was also incendiary.

Gölzenleuchter's speech followed. He addressed the Kerala Chief Minister and called Sajitha "a representative of her motherland" and said, "We can see in her the urgency to promote Kerala's efforts to educate its people, especially its women." He found Sajitha influenced by "the realistic tendencies of the classic European modern age and last but not least by the revolutionary Mexican art of Frida Kahlo, among others."¹⁷ Gölzenleuchter grasped that Sajitha shared not only Kahlo's suffering, but her cosmopolitan world view.

Publicity in the German press attracted some Indian citizens from Kerala living in and around Bochum. Following that, awareness of Sajitha's work spread among the Indians from

¹³ Sajitha got to know this writer, a friend of G. Grass.

¹⁴ The date and newspaper name on the artist's copy of this review is water-stained but legible; it is attached to the speech by Gölzenleuchter.

¹⁵ Translated from Sajitha's typescript of the speech, collection of the artist.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.



Figure 15. Sajitha and Oskar G. in Bochum, Germany in 1996. From: Oskar Gölzenleuchter.

Kerala all across Germany.¹⁸ Oskar recalls how they flocked to the show. Germans also responded and bought Sajitha's work. "For us, as for most of the German visitors, the show's encounter with Sajitha's art was their opportunity to learn firsthand about contemporary Indian art," he explains.¹⁹

In December 1996, Sajitha had another show at Saras Albano Müller's gallery in Schwelm, Germany, after the dealer had seen her work at Wort und Bild. Sajitha's six shows in Germany were all successful and she continued to sell. It was only in Europe, however, that she could bask in her success, since her husband was so jealous. Traveling abroad to show was her only escape from emotional chaos.

Sajitha later wrote notes for her unpublished autobiography and reflected about escaping from the "mental and physical torture" that she experienced at home: "All the extreme experiences taught me a lot in my life.



Figure 16. Sajitha Shankhar, *Self portrait*, 1989, Charcoal on paper, 90 × 60 cm, Collection, City. From: xxxxx (year, page).

... Whenever I tried to enjoy the happiness, he [her husband] always made me upset or disturbed me. So that, I think I tried to escape from the family. I traveled to Europe often. There I enjoyed being an artist [and being respected as an artist]. That happiness I never got in my house in India..."²⁰ Later, divorced, she would turn to more Indian content and style, finding the freedom to be herself in her home country (Levin, 2017).

¹⁸ Oskar and Renate Gölzenleuchter to the author, May 5, 2017. "Über die großen Berichte in den Lokalzeitungen wurden auch indische Bürger aus Kerala, die in Bochum lebten, arbeiteten, auf Sajithas Ausstellung aufmerksam. Das sprach sich dann unter Kerala-Indern im ganzen Land herum."

¹⁹ Oskar and Renate Gölzenleuchter to the author, May 5, 2017. "Für uns wie für die meisten deutschen Besucher der Ausstellung war die Begegnung mit Sajithas Kunst ein erstes Kennenlernen einer aktuellen indischen Kunstposition. Moderne Kunst aus Indien? Bekannt waren uns zum Teil die doch überwiegend traditionellen, religiös ausgerichteten Skulpturen, zum Tanz, zur Erotik, zu den verschiedenen Mythen, Gottheiten."

²⁰ Sajitha to the author, sharing her notes for autobiography, begun 2010, written mainly in Malayalam; this passage written in English.

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