



Trembling: The winds and I

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Abstract

This is a text based on a keynote address that I gave at the IDIERI, 2022 conference in Warwick.² The theme of IDIERI, 2022 was “Navigating mess and complexity in uncertain times.” It is particularly relevant to this issue because the project described in this keynote emerges from, and is embedded in, our on-going work at Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF) and addresses Sustainable Development Goals 1, 4, 5, 10 and 13. The project is about teenage girls in Lucknow, India. It includes critical dialogues, poetry and drama, and culminates in a collectively curated script and performance. As girls in India, it reveals their fears and concerns about their current lives and their view of their future. Their embodied voices and poems show us what their lives are like and how they feel about the uncertainties shaped by their experience. Strict patriarchal social norms leave them feeling insecure, unsafe and unfree at home and in their immediate environment. It emerged that while they have a caring, connected relationship with nature, the climate crisis seems too distant. Their concerns about securing their present lives are more immediate.

Keywords: critical feminist pedagogy, voice relationship with nature

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Introduction

I am an Indian feminist educator, living and working in India. In my keynote, I will present a descriptive analysis of a drama project done with adolescent girls in India post COVID. My analysis emerges from my own experience and perspective, and work on the ground in Uttar Pradesh, one of the most socio-economically challenged states in India. The project emerges from, and is embedded in, our on-going work at Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF) and addresses Sustainable Development Goals 1, 4, 5, 10 and 13. Our vision at SHEF is to educate everyone about gender equality, social justice, personal flourishing and for active democratic citizenship. We work with children from very poor families and from caste groups considered the lowest. Our goal is to break the poverty cycle of our students' lives, by raising their aspirations and empowering them with the skills and knowledge needed to realize these aspirations. We also believe that education can be a powerful social and individually transformative force, provided it is transformed. Our goal is to expand and deepen the idea of quality education to include one that addresses all the Sustainable Development Goals, most particularly gender equality and social justice. We have worked with a great deal of success for nearly four decades to include a critical feminist pedagogy in our official curriculum for girls and more recently for boys too. Raising an awareness of the cruelty of caste and class inequalities is another important goal for us and we believe any quality education must include critical thinking on these issues. Today climate justice is an all-consuming issue globally and it impacts the most vulnerable populations the most. As such we have also directed our attention to this, though only to the extent that our students feel the need for us to do so.

The project described in this text includes critical dialogues, poetry and drama exercises, and culminated in a collectively curated script and performance. This project reveals the girls' fears and concerns about their current lives and their view of their future. Their embodied voices and poems show us what their lives are like and how they feel about the uncertainties shaped by their experience. How important is the climate crisis in the context of who they are – their personal histories, their social and economic circumstances and where they are both geographically and in terms of their political histories? What is more urgent, ecology or sociology? Given all their personal pressing needs, what is the girls' relationship with their physical environment? I bring some answers to these questions through the voices of the girls themselves -through their poems and their theatre performance.

This text is based on a keynote address that I gave at the IDIERI, 2022 conference in Warwick. The theme of IDIERI, 2022 was - "Navigating mess and complexity in uncertain times." It was a well-chosen and particularly relevant theme, especially at this point in history when we were hopefully emerging from the pandemic. This crisis brought home to us painfully that we are living in an age of crisis: climate crisis, meaning crisis, mental health crisis, energy crisis, diminishing natural resources, increasing poverty and inequality, the fears associated with increasing domination of Artificial Intelligence in our lives, the politics of space, the threat of the re-emergence of the Cold War, world peace crisis. The threat of a nuclear war has become alarmingly real with the Ukraine-Russia war. It is a very long list and I could go on. We are all afraid! As we go about our lives there is an underlying feeling of fear and anxiety about the future – ours, our children's and our grand-children's futures!

My keynote is about the fears of young girls from India and what their key concerns are, about their lives in the current context and for their future, about the nature of the uncertainty and mess that they are navigating.

But before I plunge into the content of my project, I want to back up a little and situate myself by telling you why I am an educator.

Why am I an educator?

I am a daughter of refugees. Fearing for their lives, both my parents had to flee from their homes along with their families, when India was cruelly partitioned into 2 countries – Pakistan and India, by the British, in 1947: A parting gift as Britain's colonial rule ended. Though they were both born and lived in Rawalpindi, they did not know each other. They left their homes, separately, with their respective families. A marriage was arranged and my parents were married on January 30th 1948, the same day that Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated! My mother joked about it often – "a 13 day national mourning was declared in honour of our marriage!" My mother was 16 and my father was 20. My father lost his own father at 14. He was forced to abandon his schooling, to don the patriarchal mantle and become head of the family. He was orphaned at 18 and rendered homeless at 20. He made his way to Pune, and it was there that he built his life and there that I was born.

I was the daughter of a strong patriarch. Trying to find his own moorings in an alien land, he clung to his own culture tenaciously and raised me with strict standards 'appropriate for girls and women'. I was raised to become an obedient, devoted wife,

a good mother and a dutiful daughter-in-law and was trained accordingly. Education did not play an important role in this plan for me. As my family grew in wealth and status, I was sent to a high-quality private girls' convent school, as was the practice for girls of my social class. Though academically sound, the school was conservative in its pedagogical and philosophical approach – our school motto was “I serve”. I graduated from my school at the top of my class and was sent to an all-girls domestic science college, much against my wishes. One year into the college, a suitable boy was found for me, and I was engaged at the age of 17, married soon after, and shipped off 1000km away from my home to Lucknow, with an incomplete college education, to a city which was culturally very different from the one I grew up in, and, most importantly, where I knew NO-ONE.

Determined to have an education, I managed to home-school my way to a college degree and later to a masters degree from Lucknow University, where I was able to attend part time. I also became a mother to 2 lovely daughters, who sadly received a very lukewarm welcome, because a boy was expected and preferred. Reluctantly, but determinedly, I tried to be the good wife, mother and daughter that I was raised to be. In August 1982, the tragic death of my younger cousin, also educated in the same school as me, ripped my comfortable, traditionally 'safe' world apart. She was burnt to death in her own home, most likely by her own husband and in-laws, though it was passed off as a suicide. Shocked and bewildered, I could not sit and do nothing. I started an organization to help women in distress called Suraksha. In the course of my work, I began to conduct awareness workshops with young girls in schools and colleges. It was in dialogue with them that I realized how disconnected their education was with the reality of their lives and how little it prepared them to navigate its gendered terrain – JUST like my own education!! Like my cousin and I, they were being short-changed by their education, which gave them many academic skills, but did not give them the important knowledge that they were equal persons and had the right to use this education to become the drivers of their own lives. I began to think critically about my own education and my own life. Discontented with the quality of my 'high quality' school education and my comfortable but subordinate status at home, I began my journey as an educator and as a feminist.

I began to read about alternative schools, and thinkers and proponents of alternative education, such as J. Krishnamurthi, Rabindranath Tagore, and John Dewey, amongst others. My inquiry led me to the Krishnamurti School in Varanasi, where I met Ahalya Chari, an educator, who befriended me and encouraged me to start a

school. I reared back in alarm: “NO! That’s too big an undertaking! And I’m not qualified: no education degree!” “But you have all the right questions!” she replied encouragingly.

A couple of years later, in January 1986, very nervously, I started Study Hall School with 6 children, in my garage. Armed with my question – “What is an education that will respond to the learners’ needs and life? What will enable and help them to live their lives joyfully, respectfully and successfully?”

What is the purpose of Education?

After years of asking questions and exploring several avenues, I hold the view that the purpose of all teaching and learning, - all education, actually - is to answer the fundamental question, “Who am I and what is my relationship with the Universe and others in it?” This is a view closely aligned with educational theorists Anne Dyson, James Britton, Barbara Rogoff, Vivian Paley, J. Krishnamurthy and Jerome Bruner among others, who perceive the learning child as a social interpreter, using the cultural tool-kit of metaphors, concepts, categories and theories implicit in the language and multiple discourses, some inherited and some encountered, which provide the cultural frames, with which she makes sense of reality, reinterprets and invents it, along with her place in it. (Sahni, 2017)

It is in asking this question and seeking answers that we find our meaning and our directions for living. In this age of crisis this question acquires a new urgency. As Boleslavsky put it, the goal of education is not just to know, but to learn to live. (Boleslavsky, 1933) Unfortunately, education systems have conceived of education narrowly defined as a means of preparing students only for a earning a livelihood.

It is in looking for an education for living, if you will, that I have been working as an educator for the last 37 years– through my organization Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF). Our vision reads thus: “To educate everyone for gender equality, social justice, personal flourishing and for active democratic citizenship!” Gender equality comes first in the list of priorities, because gender discrimination has lethal consequences.

We run a number of schools and programs reaching a diverse student population – diverse in terms of class, caste, geography and gender. Today, SHEF has transformed 1040 schools, trained 100,000 teachers, impacted the lives of 5,000,000

children and reached out to 20,000,000 community members, through its network of schools, teacher training programs, community-based learning centers and partnership with government schools.

I believe, along with Edward Bond, Dyson, Heathcote and others that the arts, and drama in particular, offers a great site in which to ask the fundamental question, “Who am I and how am I related to the Universe and others in it?” My students corroborate this. When asked why they cared so much about their drama classes, this is what they said: “It helps me express my feelings”; “Helps me find who I am”; “I can be my real self here”; “I learn a lot about myself here”; “I can talk about my fears and understand them”, etc. David Best tells us that feelings are a kind of cognition, a source of knowledge, and have immense educational value because we not only learn from our feelings, but we also learn how to feel deeply. (Best, 1985)

The Project

Methodology

25 girls (age 15-17) from our schools in Lucknow - Study Hall (middle class) and Prerna (low-income homes) - participated in a series of 5 workshops, where we all talked about our fears and worked through them using poetry, dialogue, and drama. In these workshops we engaged in critical dialogues with the students. These included drama exercises, such as “still images”, “hot seat”, improvised drama, poetry-writing and recitation. The students’ poems were eventually woven into a script by them and their drama teacher, which they called, “Trembling: The Winds and I.” The girls performed this, engaging actively in devising the play, helped by their drama teacher. I describe the play in some detail a little later. All these activities occurred over the course of 6 weeks.

I then analysed all the data, including the transcripts from the workshops, the poems, the improvised drama and the final performance. I present the analysis in the following sections of this paper.

The Philosophical Context

Before I go any further, I present the philosophical and historical context which frames the discussion below. In terms of my own Indian philosophical tradition, I use the idea proposed by the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy, of a unified reality, expressed in their aphorism “*Aham Brahm Asmi*”. The meaning of this mantra or

aphorism is simply this: I am in everything that exists and everything that exists is in me. Furthermore this unified reality is conscious: *Pragyanam Brahma*. Ultimate reality is of the nature of truth, consciousness and bliss: *Sat, Chit, Ananda*. The Vedanta school also holds the belief that there are multiple levels of reality. The world as we know it, with its diverse forms of life and matter, is an illusion, or *Maya*. We live under a veil of ignorance, or *avidya*, because we think of it as ultimately real, which it is not. Vedanta invites everyone to seek *moksha* or *nirvana* as the ultimate goal in life. Moksha means liberation from *Maya* – i.e., transcending an illusory reality and achieving our original unity with the Brahman – which is the ultimate reality. The core self – the Atman - was always identical with Brahman, which is why it is referred to in a hyphenated way as atman-brahman. It only seems separate because its true nature is obscured by *Maya*. Attaining moksha can take many lifetimes, depending on the extent of striving and progress made in each lifetime.

A true Vedantist would look at all of the crises mentioned above, with a fair degree of detachment and equanimity. After all it is all *Maya* – simply an illusion, and we are all living under a veil of ignorance. This is not to deny the gravity of our lived experience. Vedanta also believes in levels of reality - though our unified self with Brahma is what is really real or ultimately real, our self living in *Maya* is also real while being illusory. Because the lived experience is very real, the joys and pains are very real. We have to live through them, deal with them and cope with them. However, *how* we deal with them is important. While I must deal with the here and now, I am invited to do so with detachment and equanimity. Furthermore it is such a comforting belief that I am one with the universe. *Tat Twam Asi* – that thou art - also forms the foundation of care and responsibility. How can I not care about everything in existence, animate and inanimate, sentient or not? Everything forms part of my ‘self’ - my earthly self and my cosmic self. How can I not feel responsible for it? So when I care for the universe and everyone and everything in it, I am caring for myself. There is no conflict with my self-interest. (Dasgupta, 1992)

I now turn to the western tradition – *modernity*, starting in the 18th century, with the renaissance of science, the arts and the industrial revolution. It came full of shining promise, shone for a while with great offerings and hopes for a prosperous future for all, but eventually tottered and failed. In the latter half of the 20th century *postmodernity* emerged in response. It questioned the promise and broke open the grand narrative of inevitable progress through science and technology. Too many people were being left behind. It gave voice to all those who were excluded: women,

gay people, transgender people and black people, Dalits³ and the colonized. It gave us multiple perspectives of the truth – not one scientifically verifiable truth, but many truths based on geographical, historical and personal contexts – who I am? What are my own personal history and circumstances of birth and life? Where I am – in history and on this planet determines what is true for me. But while all this brought us some freedom, it left us with a fractured sense of reality, increased our anxiety and our sense of uncertainty.

Today, in the 21st Century, many of us are suffering an “in-between-ness” – a lack of language to describe our feelings, our fears and anxieties. Not having a narrative to hook our lives onto we are in despair. In countries like India, the religious narrative, always strong, has taken even firmer root (in ways that are not always good, unfortunately). Even so, the global crises of all kinds have shaken us up. The pandemic, brought home to us, the ephemeral nature of our lives, shook its foundations and showed us how everything we take for granted can change and be disrupted in an instant - how vulnerable we all are. It made those already vulnerable, naked! Even before the crisis, the information technology revolution and the feminist movement created disruptions in society that many have not yet assimilated into a new picture of reality. We haven't yet developed a language to describe/express new structures of feeling. I could see that with my students as they struggled to find a language for their feelings.

Metamodernity: I recently came upon this idea of metamodernity, made popular by Dutch Cultural theorists – Timothy Vermeulen and Robin Van Der Akker, developed by Linda Ceriello, Greg Dember, Brent Cooper, Lene Anderson, Tomas Bjorkman and Hanzi Freinacht, and I felt a resonance! It combines the confident, often naive optimism of modernity and the cynical nuance and irony of postmodernity.

In the words of Hanzi Freinacht, “The metamodernist has her own unapologetically held grand narrative, synthesizing her available understanding. But it is held lightly, as one recognizes that it is always partly fictional – As a protosynthesis.” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 364).

³ *Dalit* is a term used to refer to any member of a wide range of social groups that were historically marginalized in Hindu caste society.

This idea gives me pause and hope - We have debunked the modernist myth of inevitable progress, of the joys of unbridled capitalism. We believe in the postmodern challenge to the grand narrative of modernity. But as we try to deal with the anxiety and uncertainty created by postmodernity, we are trying to find a new narrative, a new meaning, an audacious hope in the face of the crisis facing humanity and most importantly a new language. We might be metamodernists.

“One of the traits of metamodernism is ‘playfulness’. It takes the awareness of our limits, that postmodernism made us so acutely aware of, but instead of being crippled by them, it instead opts for playfulness, for an acceptance of its inadequacy, its fallible nature. It is a delight in the attempt; it is a belief that there is something beautiful in the striving. This playful spirit of metamodernism, this ironic sincerity and pragmatic idealism are essential for the problems we face today”. (Cussen, n.d.)

I tend to agree with him that we need metamodernism. Our world is drowning in complexity. The naivete of modernity and the cynic nihilism of postmodernity will not work. Metamodernist principles are already inherent in the contradictions of modern society. Late modern society is pregnant with metamodernism.

“People need to build interpersonal trust, based on self-knowledge, humour and critical thinking. Only when such trust is in place can we successfully gather around a meaningful struggle for something greater than ourselves, like the climate crisis.” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 250)

I found these ideas very useful as I was trying to make sense of what the girls said and wrote and the meaning that they were making of it. I use these as a theoretical or philosophical framework, if you will, and invite you to keep them in mind as I describe the project and bring to you the girls’ voices.

Our girls’ voices

How the Project developed

We began by just talking to the students about their drama classes - why they loved drama and what it did for them. That’s where they said that it helped them make sense of their feelings because they could talk about them, confront them, give them a language and make them their own. They said they valued this enormously, that it made them feel more at ease with themselves.

On the second day we talked about how poetry also does this for us. It opens up a space for us to do this self work. They wrote poems about their feelings, without any particular topic. Volunteers were invited to recite their poems to the whole group.

Poem 1

Kyon roka hai in ansuon ko? Behne to do
Ye jo kuch kehna chahte hain, inhe kehne to do
Kyon chupa ke rakkha hai inhe khud se hi?
Apne hi to hain, inhe behne to do
Inhe khud ko khud se milne to do
Jo hona hi tha, wo ho gaya na
Bus bohot ho gayi ye ghutan
Ab in ansuon ko role ne do na

English Translation:

Why are you holding back these tears?
Let them flow.
They are trying to say something,
let them say it.
Why have you kept them
hidden from your own self?
These tears are yours, aren't they?
Let them get to know you.
Whatever had to happen
has happened already.
Now enough of this suffocation!
Let these tears flow!

Resham Sahu

Poem 2

How does it feel to know how to feel?
To know that truth is all but a lie
That I'm not me nor you are you
But the things I can feel are only a few
I lay shackled inside of this flesh and these bones

Wondering if I'll ever know how to feel
Knowing that sometimes pain is all it takes to heal

Vartika Srivastava
(This poem was written in English).

Upon being asked how they felt while writing their poems, here's how they responded:

S1: I felt like pouring myself out.

S2: I felt free.

S3: I felt lighter.

S4: I felt a little sad and purely real. When we express ourselves through a diary, a poem or a painting then we get a repetitive encounter with ourselves and connect to ourselves.

S5: I also felt sad for all the girls who contain their feelings and are not able to express them.

T: So this is the self work. There is a lot of work involved. When you wrote your poem you crafted your emotions and when you performed it you got to learn about yourself. Our self is not just something that happens, it needs a lot of work; it needs crafting and it is worth it! In Vedanta it is said that you must have "Sakshi Bhav." It means you must be able to detach yourself and look at yourself, then you get objectivity and are able to unite with yourself even better. "Naming the nameless".

The girls seem to understand what poet Audre Lorde expresses so eloquently – that while there is much of ourselves that is historically and socially constructed, there remains a 'deeper reality of feeling' within us, which is more intimately in touch with what it means to be human. (Sahni, 2017)

The conversation shifted very easily to gender; to what it felt like to be a girl in society and at home. The girls were asked to write about how they felt as girls during COVID times.

On the third day – Here is how they described their feelings in one word during COVID times:

S1: Frightened	S13: Vulnerable
S2: Fearless	S14: Frustrated
S3: Weak	S15: Confused
S4: Scared	S16: Traumatized
S5: Suffocating	S17: Disappointed
S6: Tied down	S18: Unhappy
S7: Devastated	T: Uncertain
S8: Tense	S19: Sad
S9: Helpless	S20: Uncomfortable
S10: Captivated	S21: Lonely
S11: Depressed	S22: Unsafe
S12: Afraid	S23: Lazy

They also expressed these in still images and commented on each other's images. Volunteers then read out their poems.

Poem 3

In COVID times

I remember the COVID times,
As I hear another funeral bell chime.
Nothing has been the same ever since.
Thinking twice before embracing my own parents,
Desperately praying that all of this ends.
My pillow was more familiar with my tears,
More than I have ever been over the years.
I felt vulnerable and lost,
Comfort existed but I got paused. (Ironic sincerity)
At last we rose above it all and conquered the fight,
Rejoiced in celebration, day and night.
It was the bubbliest moment and everyone was pleased, (Pragmatic)

idealism)

Until the recently recovered cousin took off his mask and sneezed.

(Humour)

Ishita

This poem is quite metamodern in its tone, has ironic sincerity, pragmatic idealism and an ironic humour.

Poem 4

(by the Teacher)

In COVID times

Uncertain, afraid!

Vulnerable, unsafe!

Someone knocking at my closed door,

“Is it death?” I wondered.

Terrified at first,

Trying desperately to calm down.

Life flashing past my eyes!

Turbulence!

And then, calm.

“Let me embrace this uncertainty,

Welcome the one at the door, or not!

And live with it, or not!”

They also did an improv drama – about what their homes were like during COVID. Some of the issues the plays covered were:

- a) Doctors had to work day and night at great risk to themselves and their families, who lived in fear for their doctor parents.
- b) In some instances salaries were cut in half, resulting in huge hardship for families.
- c) Some of the girls from Prerna work as domestic helpers and many of them were fired, resulting in much financial stress at home.
- d) In almost all homes mothers had to do all the work at home and continuously deal with everyone’s demands; working mothers had to work twice as hard - do both the office work and housework.

- e) The daughters were asked to do house work while the sons could focus on their studies, sit idle and play video games.
- f) Children were frustrated as they couldn't go out and play.
- g) Everyone in the family was frustrated and violence grew at home – women and girls being at the receiving end.

After the plays were performed, students and teacher again came together to discuss what they had performed. Since most plays focused on mothers, working women and daughters bearing the brunt of COVID lockdown, a discussion on gender inequality ensued, with all the girls sharing instances of the discrimination they face at home, in their families.

S7: My mother used to take online classes first, actually she's a teacher in Study Hall only. First, she used to take classes and father was also at home at that time. He used to make breakfast sometimes but all the time mummy had to do all the house work also.

Teacher: So when did she do it?

S7: After classes

URVASHI: And what about her in-laws?

S7: They don't live with us.

URVASHI: But what if they did?

S7: Then she would have to take care of them also!

S5: They would obviously not tell their son to do it, they would tell the daughter-in-law.

S4: It starts from the family itself where there is a younger brother, everybody in the family is pampering him and if he has an older sister, they expect her to become a second mother to him even though she has a life of her own!

S5: Aunty, this is my life story!

S4: At the same time if it is an older brother, then he is responsibility free, he won't even know what class his sister is studying in and he isn't bothered.

For homework the teacher asked the girls to think about everything they had just discussed – about the fact that we seem to have accepted and normalised gender inequality; how men have captured all the public spaces, leaving women confined to the home; how girls and women are unsafe everywhere, at home and out of it. The girls were asked to write a poem about this, with the invitation that they might include ideas on how girls and women should navigate this difficult gendered terrain.

This is one poem that emerged:

Tan ke bhoogol se pare,
Ek stri ke mann ki gaanthe kholkar,
Kabhi padha hai tumne,
Uske bheetar ka khaulta itihaas?
Agar nahi, to fir jante kya ho tum,
Rasoi, aur bistar ki gadit se pare,
Ek strike bare mein?

English Translation:

Away from the geography of our bodies,
Have you ever opened the knots of a woman's mind
And read her?
Read the burning history inside her?
If you haven't,
Then what do you know about a woman
Apart from the arithmetic of the kitchen and the bed?

Tanu

I think it's ironic, it's sincere, it's critical and it's beautiful! – I can feel the knots of her mind opening up as she writes this. She has found a safe space to feel indignant of course, but it's not an over-sentimental expression, but an earnestly critical one – ringing with ironic sincerity, expressed with a light hand.

It's interesting that their gendered lives and the unfair gender relations were upper-most in their minds. They didn't think about the climate crisis. I am reminded of Hanzi Freinacht's words:

“People need irony in order to build interpersonal trust, based on self–knowledge, humour and critical thinking. Only when such trust is in place can we successfully gather around a meaningful struggle for something greater than ourselves, like the climate crisis.” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 250)

That is one of the points I want to make: For people on the margins, girls and women in very patriarchal societies like India, Dalits, black people, the LGBTQA+ community, the poor, etc., the climate crisis is too distant. They are more concerned about their everyday crises. Their lives are so fragile, uncertain, unsafe and unreliable that very often they don't have the bandwidth to think beyond them, to consider issues such as the climate crisis. They are struggling to find security in their houses – a sense of home there. Those are the immediate, perennial crises that they are confronted with every day.

On the fourth day, when I asked them to make a still image and come up with one word for how they felt about all the work they had done together so far, - the conversations, the poems, the drama, - here is what I got:

S1: Complicated

S8: Freedom

S2: Awakening

S9: Awareness

S3: Confidence

S10: New personality

S4: Realisation

S11: Reborn

S5: Not be afraid

S12: Flying bird

S6: Sexism

S7: Unfree

It is interesting how the tone or the mood seems to have changed. It is much more hopeful, optimistic and confident. The self-work over the 4 workshops seems to have given them a way of navigating their uncertainties. Lorde (1984) describes the transformational power of emotions expressed and worked with: “As we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self motivated and empowered from within.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 58)

In the “Hotseat” activity, each one of the students completed the sentence, “I am afraid that...”

S1: I am afraid that I am not a perfect person for everybody.

S2: I am afraid that I am a failure.

S3: I am afraid that I will have to listen to what others have to say all my life.

S4: I am afraid that I might lose myself.

S5: I am afraid that I might lose my real self due to pressure of society.

S6: I am afraid that I might fail in exams this time.

S7: Scared of losing someone close.

S8: I might lose my friends.

S9: That I won't be enough.

S10: That I won't be able to achieve my goals.

S11: I am afraid of losing my family members.

S12: I might fall if I ride a scooter.

S13: Afraid of losing the love of who are close to me.

S15: One day I will be cast aside and forgotten.

S16: How to share my problems, as no one understands.

S17: What will happen if I'm not successful?

T2: I am afraid of being lonely.

Their fears are very personal and relational: Fear of "losing", – their own self and others, - of becoming invisible, of being forgotten, of being caged by others' expectations and demands. It was on the heels of the pandemic, so many had lost people in their families. But what comes up again and again, in this work and others, is a sense of the despair, of alienation, of not being allowed to be a self, because of the gendered strait jacket that society imposes. This is the uncertainty that haunts them more than any other fear. It was only compounded by the pandemic - the fear of

losing people they loved, the fear of dying. They weren't thinking of the larger climate crisis. Their fears were much more immediate.

All the girls' poems were curated and turned into a script which they performed, presented below in full.

Script of the play

Father: Come inside... I will break your legs if you step outside

Girls 1, 2, 3: Father! When you are at home, then we girls are silent, very silent. Father - we don't need any history book or any school to understand fascism

Girl 4: No, no...Boys from the high caste neighbourhood, walk with such a swagger. They go to the city to study and when they return to the village they go thundering in their motor bikes; Boys from the high castes walk with such an air... (Intersection of caste and gender)

Girls 2, 3, 4: Girls from high castes, walk very carefully...very quiet, eyes lowered, frightened as they walk. Girls from high castes walk very carefully, very hesitantly

Girls 5, 6, 7: Boys from high castes walk with such an air.

Girls 2, 3, 4: Girls from high castes walk very hesitantly

(Man raises his hand to hit a woman who has cooked bad food)

Girl 6: Is this how you cook food, tasteless...you....!!!

(Woman starts crying)

Girl 4: Why have you held back these tears?

Let them flow, na

Let them say what they want to say, na

Why have you hidden them from themselves?

They are your own, let them meet their 'self', na

What was destined to happen, has happened, na

Enough! Enough of this suffocating holding back
Let these eyes cry their tears now

Girl 3: I am afraid - of these tears and of this repression

Girl 1: Yes, I am afraid

Girl 2: I am afraid too

Girl 3: Yes, I am fearful, anxious

Girl 4: I am terrified

Girl 5: This fear is eating me up

Girl 6: Yes I am afraid

All: Yes, we are afraid, fearful, very fearful...afraid...but of what, of whom,
why ... we don't understand this

Girl 1: The moments when we should have laughed and played, fear took
those moments and made them its own

Girl 2: Fear roamed around me and found all my weaknesses, got to know
them well

Girl 3: Fear – at times of others, at times of society, at times of what they
said, at times of being cast out

Girl 4: I was still trying to deal with all these fears when the Corona Virus
came! My world of fears grew and grew

Girl 5: Quiet, eerie streets, eerily silent, the virus spread, and everyone
disappeared...people hid themselves in their homes

Girl 6: It was hard but I hid my fear... Holding on to a fast changing
world...it can't change...but it had changed...People gone, missed, eyes
moist..

Girl 7: Get rid of the fear in my heart, I told myself
But how? Troubled by this fear too...

For a moment, it felt that I had changed a little, in some way
Then I looked at myself – yes – I have changed
Not just me...everything around me...nature, the seasons
The winds slowly, slowly
Trembling, tottering...they blew
As though someone has torn and shredded this veil, this wind, this air
The trees embracing this trembling wind
The wind clutching the trees
Each darning the wounded holes in the other
Stitching the tears
Trees...no not trees
Trees are tailors

Song

Tree! No – Not tree but tailor art thou
How many nests have you stitched
How many winds have you stitched
Stitched the sun's rays but it scattered
Scraps of shade scraps of shade
Tree! Not tree but tailor art thou
You stitched the earth and the colours emerged
You stitched the water with the sky
Earth, colour, air, water
You crafted them all together
Tree! Not tree but Tailor thou art....

So what does all this mean?

The project was an effort to collectively deal with the uncertainties of our present - the current, daily human condition - and in the case of these girls in this particular context, it was their own lives as girls, many of whom are Dalits. The play represents their fears of being a girl, of being a Dalit, of being oppressed, being beaten, of living in fear at home. All these fears compounded by the corona virus and its potential to kill. Those were their fears, and they expressed them using every medium they found - drama, poetry, dance, dialogue and story- which was finally sewn together into the script of the play.

We all worked together, enabled by these tools, to find a language to build another narrative for ourselves, and find our audacious voice. The girls in this project are struggling to find a sense of home, at home – in their houses, with their families and in their communities. They are struggling to shake off the gendered expectations of others close to them. This struggle is so all-consuming, that the climate crisis feels too distant - not really their problem. They still carry the expectation and hope that the world can become a hospitable home for them, as they win their battles at home. That the world will fulfill its promise of being 'home' to them. As Bond says, the child has the right "To be at home, to make the world its home and for the world to be its home, which is articulated in the right of itself and others to be at home in the world." (Davis, 2005, p. 135)

The song in their play is significant. It is about the Tree – life giving, integrating, caring and nurturing. Through this song they express their relationship with nature, which is a caring one, not a fearful one. The song rings with a note of hope and love. The tree is a symbol of nature as an integrating protective force, one that can darn together all their black holes of fear – bodily, psychological, economic and social. We can take care of all these fears if we hold each other. We can darn all the holes in ourselves like the tree, if we work together. According to Lorde (1984), recognizing our deepest feelings gives us the power to challenge the dominant definitions of truth that construct our sense of self and the way we relate to others in the world.

So what are these girls telling us?

While the climate crisis is a very real one and it is looming large on the world's horizon, crying out to be taken seriously, it means different things for different people, depending on who we are and where we are in geography and history. Globally, we live in different time zones and seem to be able to understand that. But we also live in different time periods depending on where we live. The global south has been pushed several decades behind by Colonialism. Youth is not the same everywhere! Greta Thunberg's reality is very different from Resham's. Greta is worried about losing a safe, secure future that she took for granted. It is in danger of being destroyed by the climate crisis, she protests. Resham's concerns are much more immediate and closer home. She is worried about security and safety at home in the present. Her fears about her present condition are obscuring the dangers of the climate crisis, and I can understand and sympathise with this.

In my work, I keep trying to get my students to see how the problem is systemic. It is much bigger and deeper than the individual – father, or brother, or husband. All of us are part of a cruel patriarchal system, playing our prescribed and scripted roles in it. This thought is both overwhelming and freeing. It frees us from having to hate people we would rather love – i.e. the men in our lives, - if we can understand that they are socialized into their roles by a cruel system. In this case too we cannot fight shy of owning the concerns about the climate crisis. While our girls and we, who are fighting for their right to live a life of dignity, already have too much on our plate, this crisis will nevertheless affect us. As a climate activist said to me, “If there is no planet, your gender struggle won’t matter”. No, it won’t matter. Actually, in the end, nothing will matter. But in the here and now, at this level of reality, it does matter. The multiple levels of reality come to my aid in this. I must deal with the reality that faces me, even if it is temporary, ephemeral and seemingly inconsequential in the larger scheme of things. If I take this perspective, it gives me a sense of detachment, preventing an overwhelming and often paralyzing hysteria and anxiety.

So how should we cope?

As educators it is important to be brokers of hope. While we need to have a realistic approach, we cannot, and should not, be prophets of doom. The metamodernist idea of pragmatic idealism is a useful one, and sits well with me. So how should we cope? What is the best way forward given all our circumstances? What will work? Once again, I think the arts -drama, poetry, song and dialogue, come to our aid. Our cultural circles provide us a great place to collectively figure out local solutions to a global problem; to name our reality as we tell our stories, and collectively find ways of transforming ourselves and our world.

As an educator, every time I work with our students and teachers, I see that allowing space and time to work on our feelings and allowing our self in, is a vital task for education and educators.

About the author

Dr Urvashi Sahni is a social entrepreneur, women’s rights activist, and educationist who has been a pioneering activist in the field for more than three decades. In 2017, she won the Social Entrepreneur of the Year India award conferred by the Schwab-Jubilant Bhartiya Foundation. In 2020 she co-created Catalyst 2030, a global network

of over 800 social entrepreneurs. Combining her activism with research, Dr. Sahni has several publications to her credit. She is a leading expert in curriculum design and reform, teacher training and education governance with a special focus on girls' education and gender equality. She is the founder and CEO of Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF). Over the last 37 years, Dr Sahni's work, through SHEF has impacted over 100,000 teachers and 50,00,000 children, most of whom are girls from disadvantaged communities. Additionally, Dr. Sahni is an Ashoka Fellow and a non-resident fellow at the Center for Universal Education at The Brookings Institution, USA.

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