

Ariane von Graffenried says she switches languages to address nationalistic perceptions



Stories, music, messages

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Spoken word artist Ariane von Graffenried, who recently performed two pieces from her collection of spoken texts *Babylon Park*, says it difficult to talk about the book because it is a collection of so many small subtexts and characters. She performed as part of Kavya Sanje at the Rangoli Metro Art Centre

"It is not a novel, which is one story," says Ariane, who performed the texts *Babylon Park* and *Calamity Jane*. The texts usually blend multiple languages, typically French, German, Bernese and English, though her Bengaluru performance largely featured English translations of her works, with examples from the original multilingual texts.

"It crosses language barriers in form, and content. The text features different places in the world, from small villages

where only a few live, to big Babylonian metropolises. Geographically, it is about different places (largely in Europe)," explains Ariane, an author with a doctorate in theatre studies, who writes for stage, radio, and newspapers as well as scientific texts.

She is a member of the award-winning writers' collective 'Bern ist überall'.

Since 2005, she has performed as a spoken word artist with musician Robert Aeberhard as

the duo 'Fitzgerald & Rimini'.

Babylon Park is her most recent work. It is also about different characters and their stories. *Calamity Jane*, for instance, was an American frontierswoman and scout, who fought against the Indians. Calamity, who was known to be more masculine in real life, was played by Doris Dey, in a biopic.

Doris, points out Ariane, is known to have been the epitome of an American women in those days.

"Humour is tricky, it is culturally defined. Perhaps it is also something that just happens to be funny. My characters are not funny, often they are a bit freaky.

They are not perfect, they struggle and I adore them. What is important to me is to make them lovable," explains Ariane.

Switching languages, she says, is an

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artistic technique that she chose not only because it is something she is interested in, but also to address the nationalistic perceptions about language.

"Nationalists have this idea about the mother tongue, about dialect being the first language. Internationalists focus on English. I don't care for this discussion, I think it is silly and I ask about the father tongue, street tongue, migrant tongue. There are so many different languages."

"I like using it as a technique because I am interested in the sounds of different languages, the musicality. And of course, I also enjoy people talking in as many languages as possible. These characters, they come from different classes. My characters include hooligans, sex workers and jet-setting women."

Ariane says she likes to talk about all of them and their struggles, by getting them to confront each other and also to confront languages.

"Switching languages is a political statement. Here in this town, there is an issue about language, it is the same in my country. I don't like it if language is instrumentalised by nationalistic ideas. I don't think we have to be proud of a language, we should just be grateful to know as many as possible and use as many as possible." Since *Babylon Park* is a collection of spoken word texts, sound plays an important role in the work.

"The materiality of the language, the sound is the most important thing, things like reduction, repetition, articulation, and intonation are all formal aspects of the text. The aesthetics of the text is shaped by the switching of languages, where some languages focus on the narrative, some, on poetic structure, and others, on rhyme patterns."

That means, that the text is about playing with form and telling a story. "There is always a story in each poem or prose piece. It is always about some people, then language is personalised."

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