CIS Event (with ELAC & OxPEACE)

‘The Art of Transformation:
Creating Peace in the Fog of War’:
Poetry & Testimony by Dr Rama Mani

with Mr. Edward Mortimer and Prof. Kalypso Nicolaïdis

Armistice Day, 11th November 2014, the Ashmolean Museum

The stage is set with a Persian rug, three chairs of varying heights and a footstool, all draped with textiles and cushions, richly patterned and embroidered. Rhythmic Eastern music flows through the speaker system, the audience murmurs with expectation. Today is Armistice Day, its significance brought into sharper focus by the First World War centenary, and it is hard to imagine a more fitting occasion to attend a Rama Mani performance. Her myriad public appearances are part of a veritable Ramayana, a global journey of change and engagement that transforms members of the audience into fellow pilgrims. ‘Rama Mani is the most modern of Renaissance women, with the most ancient of wisdom,’ CIS Director Prof. Kalypso Nicolaïdis introduces the accomplished storyteller.

What follows is a fluid succession of eleven performances that draw on Rama’s first-hand experiences in war zones and crisis areas. We watch, transfixed, as Rama transforms into a host of characters. Before the close of the afternoon, we will have travelled across five different continents, stopping in cities and villages tainted by war and hearing the testimonies of a dozen men and women who did not bend the knee in the face of adversity. Ordinary people, artists and custodians of culture, each one is known to Rama personally. Ibrahim, an Iraqi student, is forced to flee to Turkey when the ISIL captures Mosul, where he becomes a humanitarian worker. Raouda, her fingers stained with liquid napalm, who after years of incarceration and unabated militancy, will transform herself, after the violent second Intifada, into a counsellor and healer of women traumatized by the Occupation. The four Bahati sisters, Congolese sisters who spend 10 years as refugees in Uganda before breaking onto the Canadian music scene after an electrifying performance at a commemoration ceremony in Winnipeg of the ‘invisible’ genocide in DR Congo that has claimed 7 million lives. Raymond, former IRA man and now an artist living in Belfast...

A shiver runs down my spine, as I recognize the voice of Raymond Watson, an artist from Northern Ireland whom I met at the OxPeace Conference in May, where Rama Mani chaired the ‘Arts, Culture, and Peace’ panel. He told me about an art installation that he was working on in Belfast, where paintings were flown as flags all across the city that still buckled under the memory of confrontation. Other speakers included Sudanese filmmaker Taghreed Elsanhouri, who is present here today. We exchange glances as we recognize a mutual acquaintance, so skilfully channelled through Rama Mani. But a very different Raymond stands before us now: an outspoken, angry young man, who recounts smearing his stools across prison walls, handed the paintbrush not by the gentle hand of the muse, but by a cruel fate. For Raymond, like for many of the others,
art became the means of catharsis, both personal and communal. But before I have a chance to process the conflicting emotions that Raymond’s testimony has stirred up in me, Rama transforms once again...

Indeed, Rama Mani’s performance is good theatre. And like all good theatre, it speaks on a number of different levels, its role at once narrative and didactic. Firstly, it condenses witness testimonies given in different languages, at different times, and in different locations into a single aesthetic performance piece, allowing a metanarrative of humanity and endurance to emerge. Secondly, it teaches us to respond emotionally to subject matter that as an academic community we are all too inclined to consider in rational terms, thus *humanizing* conflict. ‘The language of diplomacy, of the UN, of journalism, seems very flat in comparison,’ comments Edward Mortimer (All Souls), who better puts the performance into context with reference to the historical significance of the centenary. Thirdly, ‘The Art of Transformation’, in both form and content, is in itself a convincing proposition that art plays an important role in peacemaking. Art, a multifarious and ever-changing form of human self-expression, can be a means of remembering or a way of forgetting, a treatment and an inoculation, a form of entertainment and a solemn rite, an apology and an act of forgiveness.

Rama harnesses a primordial human impulse to tell stories and to hear them in her analysis of contemporary conflict. The animated discussion that follows the performance touches upon the fighting in eastern Ukraine, the obstacles that stand in the way of conflict resolution, such as the financing of war economies, the ethical implications of different ways of framing a conflict in the media, as well as other issues of contemporary relevance. The challenges remain, but today we’ve tapped into a key to unravelling the complexity of conflict, one that could give us further insight into its resolution. No doubt, it merits further consideration.

**Rama Mani** is a Senior Research Associate at the Centre for International Studies, University of Oxford, and a Councillor of the World Future Council. She serves on the Advisory Board of the NATO Defence College and the UNESCO-CISH International Centre for Human Sciences (Lebanon). She was formerly Executive Director of The International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Sri Lanka, and Director of the Global Peace and Security Course at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. She is the co-founder of ‘Rising Women, Rising World’, a nascent global movement of women with visionary strategies for transformation. In 2013, the University of Marburg awarded Rama the Peter Becker Peace Price for the combined impact of her scholarship and peace activism.

[www.rama-mani.com](http://www.rama-mani.com)

[www.youtube.com/users/RamaManiNews](http://www.youtube.com/users/RamaManiNews)

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