

Three Voices
Monologues for radio or stage
By Karin Shankar

Characters:

Kakooza, 10, Uganda

Padmini, 10, India

Amy, 10, USA

The stage is divided into three parts, representing separate regions of the world. The play's three characters each occupy one of these regions. In a small village in Central Uganda is Kakooza; in a village in southern India is Padmini; and in a poor neighbourhood of New York City in the United States is Amy. When the sun (the stage light) rises on one region as a character speaks, it has set on another and is dimmer on the third, following the Earth's motion.

Narrator: This is the story of three children, Kakooza, Padmini and Amy, each ten years old, separated by thousands of miles of land and ocean.

Kakooza lives with his grandmother in a village in Central Uganda. There are powerful thunderstorms and lots of rain here. Kakooza's village is small. The surrounding landscape is covered with lush, green rainforests.

Padmini, lives with her family on the south-eastern coast of India. This is a tropical land of coconut palms and old temples.

And finally, Amy is from a poor neighborhood in New York City in the United States. Her city of 8 million people, is bustling and very noisy.

We travel between these three points on the globe, following three lives. This is a story told in different voices, about very similar situations. We begin in Uganda with Kakooza. He tells us about the person closest to him, his grandmother.

Kakooza is surrounded by a pool of light. He stands centre stage with Nambi, who is asleep in the background.

Fade in Kakooza sound motif.

Kakooza: My family is very small, we are just two: my grandmother, whom I call *Nambi*, and I. *Nambi* wakes up at sunrise every morning to cook breakfast and collect water. But one morning was different. *Nambi* did not wake up with the sun. She stayed in bed saying, "Kakooza, I feel very cold and I have a headache." I could see *Nambi's* small body shivering under the sheets so I covered her with another blanket. I dressed quietly for school and left. That evening, when I returned home, *Nambi* was still asleep. She said, "I'll be fine soon Kakooza. Don't worry too much. Maybe I just need to rest." But I couldn't help worrying. *Nambi* usually had so much energy. And now, all she wanted to do was sleep.

Fade out Kakooza sound motif.

Narrator: We leave Kakooza for now and travel east, about 5000 kilometers across the Indian Ocean to Padmini, in her village in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Padmini lives with her parents in a small house. She begins her story by telling us about the day her sister was born.

Fade in Padmini sound motif.

Padmini is seated stage left. Beside her is a bowl of marigold flowers. She plays distractedly with the flowers as she talks.

Padmini: My baby sister was born on the day of *Pongal*, the winter harvest festival. On *Pongal* morning, I woke up early. The house smelt like sweet coconut pudding that *Amma*, my mother, had cooked. I ran outside and found her decorating our front door with mango leaves and marigold flowers for the festival, like all the other houses in the village. She seemed very tired that morning; her eyes had dark circles underneath them. *Amma* said she was going to take a nap. I stayed outside, playing with the flowers and

leaves. Suddenly, I heard her call out loudly to my father. I froze. I dropped the flowers I was holding as my father came rushing out the door saying, "Padmini, I am going to call the mid-wife. Stay with your mother till I get back!"

Fade out Padmini sound motif.

Narrator: More than 13,000 kilometers away from Padmini, in New York City, Amy's story begins in her public school classroom.

Fade in Amy sound motif.

Amy's prop is a book. She delivers the monologue with a slight shortness of breath, almost as if reliving the experience.

Amy: It was a rainy Wednesday afternoon. We were in my favorite class, Mrs. Travis's art class. Wednesdays are also the one day in the week that my Mom gets off early from work to pick me up from school. Usually I take the school bus. We only have each other, my mom and I. She has two jobs and works very hard for us both, so I don't see her very much. In art class, I had been coloring a picture of the ocean when I started to feel a little stuffy. I got up from my seat and stood by the open window for a few minutes, but it didn't help. My cold from the day before had been getting worse all morning. I thought it was just because of the rain. I began coughing and felt like I would never stop. The back of my throat was itching and the coughing only made it worse, and in between coughs, I was wheezing for breath, but there wasn't enough air entering my lungs. I felt as if I was breathing through a straw. I started gasping to take in bigger gulps of air. Then my chest began to tighten. The other students around me thought I was just fooling around and told me to stop but I couldn't, I was having the biggest asthma attack that I had ever had! I was terrified...."

Fade out Amy sound motif.

Narrator: We return to Kakooza now, telling us how scared he was about his grandmother's health.

Fade in Kakooza sound motif.

Kakooza: The third night of *Nambi's* weakness, I cooked dinner, *Katoogo*, which is made from beans bananas. But she refused to eat. That night, instead of shivering with cold, she felt very warm and was sweating. So, I opened the door, for the cool night breeze to enter. I left the hut and began to cry quietly outside. *Nambi* was already looking weaker and so tired. I didn't want to lose her. I didn't want to be alone. Four years ago, when the violence came to our hometown, my parents sent me to live with *Nambi*, in her village, many kilometres away. They were going to follow, with my little brother. But they never did. The violence separated us. Now *Nambi's* strange weakness was going to separate her from me also.

Fade out Kakooza sound motif.

Narrator: Meanwhile, Padmini recalls how surprised she was when her father told her that her mother was going to give birth.

Fade in Padmini sound motif.

Padmini: Some minutes later, I heard my father return with the village midwife, the *dai*. She was old. She had a kind face and wrinkled hands. Her hands had helped many, many mothers in our village give birth. They told me to wait outside the house. I tried to close my ears to the sounds that came from *Amma's* bedroom, cries of pain. I was so worried for her. I must have been outside for a few hours before I heard a new sound, of a baby crying! The little baby was here! When they opened the door for me, I found *Amma* exhausted and half asleep in her bedroom and there by her side was the little newborn. My baby sister was tiny; smaller and thinner than any baby I had seen, but I knew she would grow soon. My father said she was born a month early which is why she was small. Over the next few

days, my baby sister only started to look smaller and my parents were very worried. The *dai* returned often those days and I heard bits of their conversation: that the baby was losing too much water; that she could not keep any food in. She didn't even eat the honey that the *dai* suggested we feed her. My mother was also ill these days, tired and she could not even feed the baby any milk ... if my baby sister did not eat, wouldn't she die?

Fade out Padmini sound motif.

Narrator: We hear from Amy again now, telling us how scary it was, being unable to breathe.

Fade in Amy sound motif.

Amy: I knew I had to remain as calm as I could and stop panicking because if I didn't, it would make my breathing even worse. I wished my mom was near. When I had an attack before, she sang a song to distract me, while setting up the nebulizer. But my mom wasn't here and my inhaler was in my bag in another classroom. Now I had to concentrate on keeping myself relaxed. Mrs. Travis had realized that something was wrong. She got up from her chair and came closer. My breathing was now shorter and faster. Each time I tried to speak to explain, I started coughing. I felt like a fish out of water gasping for air. In all of this chaos, my chair was knocked over and I fell to the ground as the other children crowded around me. Mrs. Travis told them to clear the room and at that point, I must have begun to lose consciousness. The last thing I remember is Mrs. Travis running to the telephone in the back of the room.

Fade out Amy sound motif.

Narrator: Meanwhile, Kakooza resumes his story, of how he realized a way to save his grandmother.

Fade in Kakooza sound motif

Kakooza: I knew from school that when a person had no energy, did not want to eat, and was very warm or very cold, this was no magic spell. They were ill and most illnesses could be treated in a health centre. But where was the health centre? I had never been to one. Maybe there was one in the next town? Dreadful thoughts filled my mind again, of losing *Nambi*, of being alone, and I started to feel hopeless. Who could I turn to, to help us? And then, I thought about my teacher in school. She knew a lot! She would know what to do. In school the next morning, I told her about *Nambi*. My teacher said she would take me to the health centre because she thought *Nambi* had malaria. After school, we went on my teacher's bike to the health centre, an hour and a half away. When we reached, the health worker said that he would come to see *Nambi* soon. I wanted to cry out, "Soon? Why can't you come immediately?" But I looked around at the people in the small room, nearly 20 of them, all waiting to be treated, and I understood. *Nambi* would have to wait. Late that evening, the health worker arrived at our hut. In the dim light of our kerosene lamp, he looked at *Nambi* and told us it was really malaria. Then he checked me, to see if I had any signs of the disease. I didn't. He gave *Nambi* some medicine and also a bed net for us to sleep under every night. Before leaving, he took me aside and said that I had arrived at the health centre just in time to save *Nambi*.

Fade out Kakooza sound motif.

Narrator: We move to Padmini now and her recollections of what her family did to save her new born sister.

Fade in Padmini sound motif.

Padmini: My little sister would die if she didn't eat or drink water, that's what we all knew. But we couldn't force her to eat. The *dai*, aunties, uncles and

neighbours all came to our house to tell us what to feed her, but my baby sister couldn't keep anything in her body. Till finally, on the fifth day, my father decided that he would take my mother and the baby to the government health clinic a few kilometres from our village. We had never been there because there was always someone in our village to cure illnesses. We had also heard that the lines to see the doctor were very long there. *Amma* agreed to go, even though it is unusual for a new mother to leave her home with her baby. There, we waited for nearly two hours before a doctor could see us. He took one look at my baby sister and said that she needed to be given only breastmilk for six months. He also gave her what he called, an "ORS solution." He told us that this was nothing more than a mixture of salt, safe boiled water and sugar.

Fade out Padmini sound motif.

Narrator: Amy speaks again now, remembering how she felt when she regained consciousness.

Fade in Amy sound motif.

Amy: When I woke up again, I was in an ambulance and the paramedics were putting a mask on my nose and mouth. I was beginning to be able to breathe again. I could feel tears streaming down my cheeks and wished again that my mom was near. I didn't know where I was going and was happy, at least, to see Mrs. Travis in the ambulance. I had never had an attack this bad before. Last year, I started swimming, which mom said was especially good for kids with asthma and also taking ballet lessons and doing everything the other kids did. So I became a little careless about taking my inhaler with me everywhere. When we arrived at the hospital, Mrs. Travis said that my mom had been called at work and would be here soon to take me home. When Mom finally arrived she ran in and gave me a tight hug. She was crying.

Fade out Amy sound motif.

Narrator: As Kakooza, Padmini and Amy end their stories, they also face some difficult questions.

Kakooza: What would I have done if *Nambi* had died? What would *Nambi* have done if I had fallen ill? What if my teacher had not known where the health centre was? Why was our good health so *uncertain*?

Padmini: Salt, water and sugar. These were the things that would make her alright again? We nearly lost her for *salt, water and sugar*? But we had these things at home. Why didn't *Amma* know? Why did the *dai* not tell us? Why was the life of my baby sister hanging on a last minute trip to the health centre?"

Amy: As my mom held me tight in the emergency room, I closed my eyes and thought how sad she would have been if anything had happened to me. The time I spend with her is important because she is always working. I know that she works so hard partly because of me because I am ill often and our insurance doesn't cover all our hospital bills.

The three sound motifs begin to merge. Lights on all three characters.

Amy: I wish our hospital bills were not so high; maybe I would see Mom more often.

Kakooza: I wish we had a health centre in our village so that *Nambi* and I could take care of each other.

Padmini: I wish we had known the simple ways to help my little sister so that she wouldn't have had to suffer so much, the first days of her life.

Narrator: These three voices are also the echoes of the voices of millions of other children across the globe; children with similar stories to tell, about how one of their most essential rights, to health and wellbeing, is denied. They are left asking questions, that few adults, including their parents, teachers and governments, can fully answer.

Amy: Why should keeping me healthy be such a burden to my mom?

Kakooza: Why must good health care be so far away?

Padmini: Why is it that we know so little about good health care?

All three: How will you ensure that we have a healthy childhood?

Kakooza, Amy and Padmini begin to echo these questions, turning towards each other; they then turn out to the audience and ask the same questions.

Lights out.