

AWAKENING A CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

Anuradha Nalapat from Bengaluru engages with Caravaggio's Magdalen in Ecstasy, unravelling layers of spiritual and psychological complexity.



In June 2025, visitors to the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), Bengaluru, were treated to a rare and electrifying encounter: the opportunity to behold Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy—a long-lost masterpiece by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, the tempestuous genius of Italian Baroque art. Painted in 1606 and rediscovered only in 2014, this oil on canvas stands as a quintessential embodiment of Caravaggio's tenebrism—his radical technique of employing stark contrasts between light and dark to heighten spiritual and emotional intensity.

Caravaggio (1571–1610), a name synonymous with visceral realism and unfiltered emotion, left behind an artistic legacy so profound it birthed an entire movement—the Caravaggisti. His technique profoundly influenced masters like Rubens and Rembrandt. Yet

Caravaggio's impact goes beyond mere technical innovation; it is deeply human. His turbulent life—marked by violence, impulsivity and rebellion—bleeds into every brushstroke, each painting a crucible of flesh, spirit and unresolved suffering. Presented in collaboration with the Consul General of Italy in Bengaluru, the NGMA exhibition offers more than a glimpse of a Baroque treasure—it becomes a portal into the soul of the repentant Magdalen.

The Magdalen in Ecstasy transcends mere representation in oil and canvas. It becomes a metaphorical pilgrimage—a gateway through suffering, repentance, and transcendence. The viewer imaginatively steps into the psyche of the saint, portraying Mary Magdalen not only as a penitent sinner but as a luminous symbol of feminine resilience and spiritual rebirth.

THE LIVING DEAD AT THRESHOLD

...And then finally I arrive at the gateway, it's bricks one by one tuning into my intentions, aligning under my gaze. They erect themselves from right under my bare feet with each step that I take. Strange. Am I, Mary Magdalene, the sinner, and now the gateway too!?

I have dragged my tired body and my heavy feet through the maze of my life. Sins they call it- my actions, segregated from my circumstances. They don't see the cold stone walls that imprison me, the puppeteer behind events that define me, the dark shadow dances of pleasure and pain. They choose to be blind to the wooden doors that heave shut behind me as the looming forms of hungry men fall upon me. They casually leave, satiated, leaving behind the sinner and the bitter after taste of violations. Left over on the dining table is a branded animal called Magdalene, left to lick her bruises that bleed in shame and mockery.

What they don't see, I see, what they don't hear, I hear and I do what I must do. In the dark shadowy folds of my stained white robe, I tie them tight, each chunk of guilt and shame anointed upon me. They hang like heavy knots of house keys or coins women tie to the tips of their garments. Off late I have been opening them, airing them out one by one - the name calling, the accusations, the stoic judgements. Each key I choose to touch, falls at my feet, rises, and then resurrects under my watchful gaze. But it has reached up to my waist, these bricks, this gateway of death and resurrection built on the substratum of sins. Collective sins. Not individual. It's quite persistent in its spread. My body aches! Let me just rest awhile.

'Not yet, not so fast, she demands of me,' a few more keys to air and I must hear them click into place, break open the shackles and transform themselves into symphonies of glory.' I slow down my numbing climb up her body. I can only follow her bidding. She drops down, her tired feet stretched on the burnished red ropeways of her life. Her elbows pin down, arresting the raucous, mindless chatter of the demons.

'Your robe slips off your bare shoulders, cover them', habitually I remind her. This habit, she and I, we have pursued for the hundredth time. She pauses awhile, smiles and shrugs it off her shoulder blades, exposing her flesh. 'Why do I need more keys, she chides me, I'm a little weary now,' she

IN BENGALURU NGMA, THIS OIL ON CANVAS STANDS AS A QUINTESSENTIAL EMBODIMENT OF CARAVAGGIO'S TENEBRISM.

instinctively curls her fingers protectively upon the slight swell of her abdomen. Her loosely entwined fingers held in prayer, begs release. To be able to just untangle. Its time now. She's reached. She will be able to hear me now. Time for me to speak to her. And on her behalf. 'Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.' I whisper.

Her fingers are ready to disintegrate and merge even as I continue my climb, absorbing her. I have just marked her fingers purple and her lips grey.

'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'

I continue. She hears me and nods her head in gratitude.

'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

She struggles to keep her head up. Her eyes are almost shut, her throat parched.

'My yoke is easy and my burden light.'

Her jaw drops and her head falls back just as I support and cradle them in my arms. The Westerly's howl in her ears, inviting her into the sorry plight of the living dead. 'Not interested,' -she whispers in a trance, through the haze of lights dancing before her. She can barely think. She's now embedded in the high-pitched symphony of crickets interspersed with the tinkling of bells, brooks and stars as the voices of redemption chase darkness away.

The last of a tear drop leaves her eye as I engulf her. Absorb her into me.



THE GATEWAY WITHIN: A CONTEMPORARY REIMAGINING

The interpretive narrative, titled *The Living Dead at the Threshold*, opens with a striking image: a woman arriving at a metaphorical gateway—one that forms and rises beneath her weary steps. “Am I Mary Magdalene, the sinner—and now the gateway too?” the voice asks, setting the tone for a reflection that is both introspective and universal.

The text explores Magdalen’s inner torment: past sins imposed by society, the psychological weight of judgment, and the physical trauma of violation. These are not merely biographical fragments but symbolic echoes of every soul’s passage through guilt, shame and eventual healing. The folds of her robe conceal not only modesty, but years of buried anguish—now slowly loosened like the knots of old keys and coins, emblems of memory, transaction and tradition. The artist draws attention to the visual cues Caravaggio has embedded: Magdalen’s resting elbows atop a skull (a classic *memento mori*), the shadowed creases of her tunic, her exposed shoulder, the subtle swelling of her abdomen, and her slightly parted lips—all tactile signifiers of transformation. These are not merely artistic decisions, but deeply spiritual waymarks—illuminating the path toward awakening.

DIVINE DIALOGUE AND HUMAN DESCENT

In this poignant reimagining, Magdalen is not alone. She is accompanied by a silent presence—a divine voice that gently ascends through her body, offering

scripture and solace. “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours,” the voice whispers. Every part of her—hands, lips, jaw—is lovingly observed as the voice absorbs her suffering.

As Magdalen surrenders to ecstasy, she becomes suspended in a liminal space between life and death, matter and spirit. Her final tear—a detail Caravaggio renders with delicate realism—can be interpreted as a release, a symbol of purification and transcendence. The “high-pitched symphony of crickets interspersed with the tinkling of bells, brooks, and stars” becomes the soundscape of her spiritual metamorphosis.

ART THAT BREATHES AND BLEEDS

Caravaggio painted with urgency and intensity, often working directly from live models and capturing them in raw, unidealized form. It is this directness that one can channel in her response. Her prose is not merely a description—it is a visceral encounter. She perceives Magdalen not as a passive subject, but as a breathing woman—an archetype of sacred suffering whose spiritual agony and ecstasy become accessible and even redemptive.

This artistic dialogue—between a 17th-century Italian master and a 21st-century Indian artist—transcends time and geography. It affirms, once again, that great art is never static. It breathes. It evokes. It transforms.

As NGMA Bengaluru continues to bring such global masterpieces to Indian audiences, it creates space for interpretation and introspection. Magdalen in Ecstasy may have been lost to the world for centuries, but in the hush of that gallery, in the voice of viewers’ reflection, she rises—resurrected and radiant.

EXHIBITION NOTE:

The *Magdalen in Ecstasy* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was on view at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bengaluru, in June 2025, in collaboration with the Consul General of Italy.

About the writer: Anuradha Nalapat is an artist and writer based in India. Her practice engages deeply with themes of femininity, transformation, mythology, and the spiritual self. ■