INTERVIEW

Abha Dawesar  The Indian author of four critically acclaimed novels - Family Values, That Summer in Paris, Babyji, Miniplanner - and the winner of the American Library Association’s Stonewall Award for 2006 as well as the Lambda Literary Award for 2005 talks about her fantastic protagonists, their stories and superb settings, her own growing up in New Delhi, living in Paris and making home in New York City in an exclusive interview with Urban Confusions Poetry Editor Shilpa Kameswaran

How do you see yourself transcending from writing your first book ‘Miniplanner’ during weekends between a full time job in a Manhattan based investment bank to your present status of an award winning author of four critically acclaimed novels?

I struggled to finish my second novel Babyji while working in a global financial services firm and just couldn’t do it. My work involved a fair bit of travel along the East Coast and through all of Canada and left no time to focus on the book. I realized that if I wanted to finish it I had to quit and devote myself to writing. It took me time to take the plunge; just before quitting I camped in Death Valley and slept under the stars in the freezing cold, listening to the howls of coyotes and watching the Great Bear move across the night sky. I decided the risk was worth taking.

You were born and raised in New Delhi India, how exactly and how extensively did your life in an urban megalopolis setting influence the storylines of each of your novels?

Place is a character in all my books. Miniplanner, for example, for me always had the rhythm and feel of a quick taxi ride through Manhattan at night. Babyji is very much a novel about Delhi and That Summer in Paris is a love-story not just between people but between the narrator and the city of Paris. Moreover the language in each of these books and its style is very much determined by the setting. Family Values takes place in an unnamed city; the claustrophobia of the Boy’s immediate surroundings is reflected in the flat tones of the narrative.

Are the protagonist and performers in each of your novels, characters belonging to the cities for a practical purpose or is there a deeper, wider connection with the characters and the cities they inhabit?

Yes, I think there are deeper connections. In Family Values the city is corrupt and its corruption is directly related to power, the kind of political power that comes to a city from being a major capital. The concentric ripples that make up the novel---the Boy’s tiny home, his family, his city are all bound together by the glue of this corruption. When I wrote That Summer in Paris, I knew it would be a novel about mortality, literature, and art. To my mind it was entirely
obvious that the novel had to be set in Paris, a city that embodies both aesthetic beauty as well as the madness of literature. The two main characters of the book both write in the English language and Paris provides them a distance but also an oasis for their souls. Let’s not forget that many words in the English language that are used for ‘higher’ ideas be they in literature, art or gastronomy originally come from French.

How important are the urban-scapes in which ‘Miniplanner’, ‘Babyji’, ‘That Summer in Paris’ and ‘Family Values’ are set to the story and circumstance of the characters itself? The urban-scapes are characters. After the protagonist they are the most important characters of my novels and sometimes jostle for center stage.

What specific genre of writing do you believe your four primary works falls under?

Literary fiction. To drill down any further is impossible since each book is further removed from the preceding one than that one is from its predecessor. In other words, I think the distance between my works keeps increasing. I don't know if this will continue to happen in the future but I suspect it might.

The city of New York has consistently and constantly for centuries now influenced the creative works of artists and authors alike. What does living, working and making home in Manhattan mean to you as an Indian author writing in English?

As an Indian author writing in English I don't know because I cannot write a novel in any other language and most of my reading since I was a child has been in English. To answer your question I have to separate the three words—Indian, Author, English. As a writer I need to walk the streets and think. I love the fact that I can do this at any odd hour in Manhattan and be assaulted by its bustle. One of the things I don't like about my native Delhi is that there are few places to walk around the neighborhood. In order to cross the street safely and walk without climbing up a steep sidewalk (where it exists) I have to get in a car and drive to a park. New York City is one of the most diverse cities in the world and I absolutely adore the fact that I can buy Indian spices ten minutes from my home, talk in Hindi to street vendors, give directions to French tourists in their language and basically find the culture I am missing on a particular day without effort. I can see the Empire State Building from my window. I live less than two blocks from it and flying in or driving into the City I feel an immediate sense of home on seeing the colored spires of the Empire. Living in the throes of a commercial district glutted with tourists and men in red jackets hustling to sell tickets to its roof suddenly seems a small price to pay.

What do you think of the phenomenon of ‘Urban Confusions’ in your own life? What role has it played as a creative catalyst?

I’m no less the native animal from a concrete jungle than say a tiger is from Corbett or an elephant is from the Serengeti. My fondness for trees and wide open green fields of mustard and wheat notwithstanding, the truth is that cities of high population densities are all I’ve ever known. How do you separate your body from the way you walk or your mind from the language you speak? The urban phenomenon is no creative catalyst it is the very chemical I’m made of.

In your personal life, which are the cities and urban centers where you have schooled, lived, worked and traveled in?

Delhi

I was born and lived in Delhi for seventeen years on the same street. It was congested like most parts of the city and tended to flood badly in the monsoons owing to poor drainage and encroachments onto the street by the residents. It is still a city with little civic sense and a lot of open refuse. Its most beautiful historical structures are framed by piles of waste matter and its stray animals feed on these and sometimes die. What I have never ceased to find shocking is that neighborhoods with monthly rents and real estate prices that contend with those of Manhattan or Paris continue to dispose their waste at the end of the street out in the open. The Municipal Corporate of Delhi and the state government focus their efforts in the centre of the city where the politicians live while the rest of the city puts up with its lot. Delhi is two cities in one no matter the prism you use to look at it.

1) It is old and beautiful and young and vulgar. The new developments and malls dotting the city are very often tasteless or downright ugly. The old walls and hidden monuments that have survived provide sudden escape in the most unexpected places.

2) It is filthy rich and woefully poor. You can spend your day in Louis Vuitton stores (there is one in every big mall) and spend as much on lunch as most Delhites earn in a month. You could be living on a piece of property worth several million dollars or sleeping in the harsh winter on the sidewalk just a kilometer away. You could be flying in rosé wine and a French cook from Paris for a party or going through the discarded scraps of the same party. Economic disparity is a fact about the world; in Delhi it is extreme, at every turn, and openly flaunted.

3) It is mostly unjust and sometimes just. Your children might be raped and eaten and the police won’t even lodge your complaint but on the other hand you could drive over someone on the sidewalk and kill him and get away with it. Sometimes the city can take it no more and rebels through whatever system is at hand—the media, SMS campaigns,
marches in the street.
4) It is dry dusty and hazy except when it is not. The climate in Delhi (unlike say in the south of India) has its own peculiarities. The wet and humid monsoons with their epidemics of cholera, dengue, and malaria are followed by a foggy winter of delayed flights. Suddenly the air clears a little, the sun is pleasant, women eat peanuts on their terraces and oil their hair, government bureaucrats take their lunch on the extensive lawns near Rashtrapati Bhawan, everyone owns the city and smells its flowers before the brief spring is gone. Through the long dry months the green areas of the city turn brown. Residue from the continuous construction and metro work films the leaves and trees with dust. In the summer hot winds blow in and people fight a constant battle against savage storms. The bottoms of doorways are lined with wet cloth and the house swept two times a day till, inevitably, at some point the will crumbles and all efforts stop. Then the monsoon comes again and everyone celebrates the first day before the rain too unleashes its terrors.

In other words, nothing about the city is temperate in any way. As it continues to grow and urban pressures become unbearable Delhites are going to fight harder for their space and lose their tempers more often. Just the daily business of commuting, dealing with the quotient, and finding some silence in the noise takes up so much energy that one does not live there and come away unmarked.

New York
I’ve lived in the ‘greatest city on earth’ since I was 21 and for most of that time in the same apartment. Most of the books I’ve read and that have formed me are on a bookshelf in that apartment, that apartment is in New York and consequently New York is home. I’ve written some part of each of my four novels there and suffered the traffic on Madison Avenue almost every night. I love the taste of the water in its taps and its clear crisp blue skies in the winter, I don’t see enough of its two rivers, and sometimes I catch myself acting provincial, resisting crossing over to the boroughs which have so much to offer. I moved to New York to write, I’d been offered a few jobs after college and I chose the one I did because it was in Manhattan. It is mostly large and wide enough to accommodate any idea but sometimes the many small circles of people within it can be as petty as in a little town. But here you always have the option of re-inventing yourself and finding new communities. You just have to sit by the steps on Union Square to begin afresh. It feels new and vibrant every day, in large part thanks to the constant influx of artists and fortune seekers from all over the world. But this is also a very historical part of its culture, in the very first years of its existence downtown Manhattan was already the home of a dozen languages. Walking through the city is to own it and claim it, this ownership, coupled ironically with the easy anonymity the city affords are its two greatest draws for me.

Paris
To learn a language as an adult and to frequent a place without working or living there is to choose from love not necessity. The fact that this moment of choosing coincided with my decision to start writing full-time also means that I associate Paris with writing. I’ve been incredibly fortunate to have made friends quickly and found doors open. To be thrust in your late twenties into ways of thinking and seeing, categories, and ideas, different from the Anglo-Saxon mindset in which you were educated pries open the mind. I think the French language did something else too; it made me write more often in present tense in English.

In your fairly new interest as an emerging visual artist and photographer, your subjects are often reflections of city life. How does the ‘unusual’ in an urban setting interest and stimulate you as a visual artist?
It depends on the urban setting. Delhi is an endlessly rewarding experience from a visual perspective. You see a thousand things that strike you as soon as you step out of the house and because of the huge population you see bustle and activity in every corner. New York is about speed, I usually need to filter it out rather than take it in. I prefer feeling its energy while walking to parsing the visual stream ahead. It is racially diverse but somehow it feels there are fewer stories hiding, maybe because some aspects of life are so common and shared in New York. Most of my art has happened in New York, partly I think because art is somewhat less portable than writing which needs just a pen and paper or a laptop. Partly, I think because the need for reflection becomes acute in New York where it is easy to live without it. One can get pulled into the constant whirl of social and cultural life in the city and go through years without stopping. I’ve done it myself and I know plenty of people who do it. Photography occupies another place in my life all together. I’ve no training in painting, drawing or writing but I started first taking photo classes in my pre-teens and continued through college. As the world went from analog to digital my own relationship with photography changed. Out was my interest in black & white and portraiture and the magic of the dark room and in was a new easy way of making notes for a novel.

Do you see your pieces of fiction and photography merging to create new forms of art in the near future? Maybe, photo-essays or audio-slideshows?
I’ve done a hybrid project before and it could happen again. I think it will happen spontaneously when it does and in spite of myself.
You have trotted the urban centers of North-America, mainland Europe and South-Asia for various readings, book signings and conferences, do you feel a larger political or social responsibility while at these public interactions than, just being an Indian novelist?

I can only represent my own work. That said, every Indian person in a foreign environment inevitably ends up fielding questions on India. One responsibility I do feel as an Indian is to try to convey that multiple viewpoints exist in India, that the cultures of the north, south, east, and west are very different from one another and that no matter what my writing or any other writing about the country conveys it is but a sliver of a sliver of a sliver of the truth. Nothing and no one really can hope to capture or represent this sub-continent or its many ways of life, its millions of truths and its billions of stories. Writing, specifically, is somewhat bound by language and there are seventeen of them on the hundred rupee bill alone.

Since I don’t think of myself as just an Indian novelist, just a woman, just a New Yorker, just a racial minority in America etc your broader question is impossible to answer though I might just be thinking of myself as a writer.

The tone of public discussion is inevitably set by contingent events, the concerns uppermost in the minds of the specific people participating at a particular time, and the subject of the book at hand or the theme. To remain honest to oneself is about as much as one might hope to achieve.