

Arundhathi Subramaniam, Indian poet, author, editor, Charles Wallace fellow, Homi Bhabha fellow and Raza awardee in an exclusive conversation with Urban Confusions Poetry Editor *Shilpa Kameswaran*.

Which are all the cities that you grew up, lived and worked in? How did the evolving life in these cities affect your writing?

I was born in Bombay and grew up there. It's a city I've always had a deeply ambivalent relationship with. I've loved its cultural exuberance and cosmopolitanism, its energy and pulse. And I've loved -- still love -- its sea. Thank god for that sea! It comes to your rescue every time the city threatens to take over your life, reminding you that it's a harbour city, a city that breathes other winds, that cannot help but be open to other tides. But it's also an unrelenting city, a city that abrades, unsettles, unnerves. And in the past two decades the growing sense of communal fracture and parochialism have been disturbing. It's shaken some deeply-held beliefs about the city's inclusive spirit.

The fact that it's a city I love and love to hate shows up again and again in the poems, I think. It's a city 'of L'Oreal sunsets', a city 'botoxed by vanity', a city 'that coats the lungs/ stiffens the spine/ chills the gut/ with memory'. But it's also a city in which you could look out 'on a sooty handkerchief of ocean' and find your moment of magic, of luminosity, of reprieve. It's a city 'that would have us believe' that the only way to live is 'to follow the frantic zeal of streets/ that hurry us all the time towards/ offers open only till stocks last'. But it's also a city that reminds you that you can find your centre wherever you are, that no one belongs more or less than you do: there are 'so many ways of tasting neon/ so many ways of latticing a wind/ so many ways of

being ancillary to the self/ without resenting it'.

I've tried to escape from Bombay for years and never quite managed it -- until last year when I decided to up and head to a yoga centre down south, in Coimbatore. I now divide my time between the two places. And I find the distance has helped. There are times when Bombay seems less of an adversary now and more of a bruised fellow fugitive. In 'The City and I', a poem written on returning to Bombay after November 26, 2008, I saw it as a stray dog rather than a predator: 'mangy/ bruised-eyed/ non-vaccinated/ suddenly mine.'

Talk to us about the Urban Confusions present in your life and how they affect your literary expressions as a women author in liberalizing India?

I've answered most of this already, I think. I do believe it's an exciting time to be in India today. Despite all the sordid sagas of corruption and communalism and gender discrimination that unfold every day, there's also something in the air. It feels like we're on the cusp of a breakthrough. But it's so precarious, we could lose it entirely. And I'm not just talking about economic possibility. I'm talking about the winds of spirit and culture too. However fanciful and new agey it sounds, something's stirring.

About being a woman poet, I guess I'd say that I'm not squeamish about the word 'feminist'. My politics have informed my poetry in all kinds of ways, and continue to do so. Perhaps the textures have changed, that's all. I'd only say that when I look back on my three books of poetry, I realise that what has come out of

the closet is the fascination with the idea of the sacred. This was probably more muted earlier (although certainly present from the very beginning).

Many think that a spiritual journey means moving away from the sensual. And that's such a myth! I've found that as the spiritual quest has grown more centrestage in my life, the only poetic vocabulary one can find for it is intensely carnal. So it's not some kind of facile movement from the political to the existential, from the outer to the inner. The spiritual journey actually energises one's politics and one's poetics, as much as it inflects and fine-tunes them.

My idea of the political was never to wave a flag, anyway. The excitement about free verse is discovery. You sit down to write something and you find at the close of it that that 'something' has changed -- and you have changed too! A chemical reaction has taken place. Your rage is different, your love is different, your grief is different, and you are different too. It happens to me as a reader of poetry as well. That's why poetry is such deep sorcery.

It's transformational. A cliché, but true.

So writing a poem for me is not about sitting down to write an idea -- political or philosophical. It's about trying to make this moment live in all its sensuous immediacy. At the same time, I'm not against the idea or the intellect. The world of the mind is hugely important to me. But poetry is a reminder that idea and object, the subtle and the gross, the abstract and concrete, aren't separate anyway. They happen simultaneously, inextricably, in our experience. And poetry is about verbally distilling this seamlessness. These worlds aren't disparate, though we sometimes pretend they are.

I'm not sure I've answered your question, Shilpa! But let me just add (since I've digressed so much already) that in the future I'd like to see my poetry grow subtler, but without any loss of voltage. I like the heightened dramatic mode. But I also like tonal variety. I'd like my poetry to have the choice to murmur -- if it so chooses -- but without losing intensity. Dropping your voice can, in fact, be a political decision. In a market-driven world, in a world of shrill self-advertisement, dropping your voice is an act of resistance. You drop your voice, keeping the faith that you will be heard. You drop your voice, keeping the faith that in some way your murmur will have its impact on the world around you.

At the same time, the murmur must be molten. Without that moltenness, there can be no poetry.

As an Indian poet writing in English with a wide international urban readership, how do you suspect the cross-cultural factors coming into play with respect to the interpretation of your poetry?

A quick response this time! I welcome different cultural readings. Perhaps something is lost when a poem (which is a cultural entity) travels to readers of other countries and cultures. But I do believe we understand poems on many levels. I wouldn't have been able to paraphrase a word of TS Eliot when I first read 'Wasteland' and 'Prufrock' as a girl of 12 or 13. But I knew -- definitively -- that I was in the presence of poetry. There was no doubt about that. I do think we understand poetry even if we can't entirely decode it. And I like to believe that holds true when we read poems that embody other world views. We smell their 'poemness' right away even if we can't figure out all the allusions and cultural references.