

Vol. 6, Issue-1
February 2015

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English



6th Year of Open Access

Poetry | Fiction | Research Papers | Author Interviews | Book Reviews

Chief Editor
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor
Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

Vishwanath Bite in conversation with Arundhathi Subramaniam

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Assistant Professor in English
Government of Maharashtra's
Ismail Yusuf College, Jogeshwari (E),
Mumbai, 60. Maharashtra, India.

Arundhathi is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *When God is a Traveller* (HarperCollins India, New Delhi, 2014 and Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle, 2014). Her prose works include the bestselling biography of a contemporary mystic (*Sadhguru: More Than a Life*, Penguin) and a book on the Buddha (*The Book of Buddha*, Penguin, reprinted several times). As editor, she has worked on a Penguin anthology of essays on sacred journeys in the country (*Pilgrim's India*), co-edited a Penguin anthology of contemporary Indian love poems in English (*Confronting Love*) and edited an anthology of post-Independence poetry for Sahitya Akademi (*Another Country*).

She has received the Raza Award for Poetry (2009), as well as the Charles Wallace Fellowship (for a 3-month writing residency at the University of Stirling) in 2003; the Visiting Arts Fellowship for a poetry tour of the UK (organized by the Poetry Society) in 2006; and the Homi Bhabha Fellowship in 2012. Her recent book, *When God is a Traveller* (Bloodaxe Books, 2014), is a Poetry Book Society Choice shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize.

Arundhathi has worked at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai, for several years, leading a discussion-based inter-arts forum named *Chauraha*. She has also been Head of Indian Classical Dance at the NCPA. She has written on literature, classical dance, theatre and culture for various newspapers (including *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express*, among others) since 1989. She has also been columnist on culture and literature for *Time Out, Mumbai*, *The Indian Express* and *New Woman*.



Will you tell us something about yourself (place of birth, school and anything in between)

I was born in Mumbai (Bombay at the time), which is also the city I grew up in. It's the city that I consider to be mine, although I now spend long spells of time away from it. It's an exasperating city. I have deeply ambivalent feelings about it. There's much to dislike, but the affection for it is also real.

I studied at the JB Petit High School in south Bombay. It was a progressive school, run by a dynamic and visionary principal. But I was always uncomfortable with the standardization that the institution of a school, by definition, seems to entail. And although I was a reasonably good student, I spent a good deal of my time, longing to be elsewhere. (My poem, 'Side-gate', is precisely about that kind of daydream of escape that I often engaged in, but never had the nerve to execute!)

Which books did you find yourself reading whilst growing up and which are you currently reading?

I was omnivorous as a reader from the start. But I was always excited about poetry. My taste in poetry was varied and has continued to be that way. In my adolescent and early adult years, it ranged from Wallace Stevens to Basho, Rilke to Margaret Atwood, Neruda to Arun Kolatkar, TS Eliot to Denise Levertov. A very eclectic menu! Some of the old favourites remain by my bedside table, or within arm's reach – Neruda and Kolatkar, for instance. But for some years now, I also find myself reading a lot of AK Ramanujan and John Burnside.

The other passion that has remained constant is Eastern philosophy and spiritual literature. Initially, my tastes were more philosophical; later they veered unabashedly towards mystical

literature. For years on end, I read no novels whatsoever (except for some British crime fiction writers), and immersed myself in literature related to the mystics – from Ramana Maharishi to Meister Eckhart, from the Buddha to Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and many between and beyond.

Other than poetry and spiritual literature, I retain an abiding love of the 19th century women novelists – Austen, George Eliot, the Bronte sisters. For lighter reading, I enjoy crime fiction, preferably interwar British novels, authored by women writers, with a body in the library thrown in for good measure! It's wonderful comfort literature.

What inspires you to write poetry?

If the question is why I am drawn to poetry, the answer is several reasons. 1. It's the shortest and most direct route to the self that I know. 2. It's the art of the murmur. It reminds me of the sorcery of the hushed voice. 3. It allows me to inhabit a moment more fully than I would otherwise. 4. It is truly a dark art – its economy and compression can leave one chemically altered and enduringly transformed. 5. It's a form that allows for self-revelation and self-composition at the same time. 6. It is the realm of metaphor – that magic archaeology that leads one to places one never imagined. 7. Above all, it embraces silences more than any verbal art I know. It compels me, as a reader and as a writer, to make my peace with pauses, with blank spaces, with gaps, with commas, with hyphens, with uncertainties.

If the question is about how a poem begins, I'd say an image is usually the starting point. Or else, there's a strong emotional charge that demands to be expressed. Sometimes, in a moment of relative quiet, a line appears that demands to be followed to its end. Once I write a draft, I usually put away the poem for days, sometimes months. When I return to it – and it's usually a carefully arranged accident – I read it afresh. That freshness of reading is vital. If the poem still holds, I know I can trust it. That's when the process of reworking and revising begins. If it doesn't hold, I know it can be put away without too much personal regret.

Who are some of your favorite poets?

I've answered this earlier, and they are too many to name. But currently, I'm reading a lot of the Bhakti poets (having worked on an anthology of Bhakti poetry called *Eating God*, published a couple of months ago by Penguin.). So, at present, my favourites are Nammalvar (translated by AK Ramanujan), Tukaram (translated by Dilip Chitre), and Annamacharya (translated by V Narayana Rao and David Shulman).

What advice do you have for aspiring poets?

For one, make sure you read as well as write. Far too many young people write poems, but make no effort to read anyone else! It's a strange and unfortunate situation. Go out there and buy books

of poetry. If you expect to be read, make sure you read others as well. Besides, if you truly enjoy poetry, how can you *not* read it?

Secondly, don't be in a hurry to publish. Take your time writing, rewriting, reading — and above all, listening. A good poet is a good listener above all. Marinate in the art, and gradually the timbre of your own individual voice begins to emerge. It can take decades, but when it does begin to happen, it can be so heady and rewarding that it's worth the wait.

Thirdly, don't write poems because you want to make money or get famous. It won't happen. Poetry is a low-key art, a quiet art. And its relative invisibility, I'm learning to understand, is its strength.

And finally, I'd say a writing group can help hone one's understanding of form and craft tremendously. Consider starting or joining one. The crucial ingredient is to find a group that is supportive but not uncritical. And make sure you keep the focus on hands-on workshop critique, not on self-congratulation!

Can you describe the time when you first realised that creating was something you absolutely had to do?

I think I knew I wanted to be around words – listen to them, utter them, play with them, string them into patterns — even as a child. But the urge for self-expression took on another urgency as an adolescent. It took me many years after that to see that poems can emerge not just from the urge to splatter myself on the page, but also from the ability to listen deeply. I've said this before, and I'll say it again: I really do think that when we're lucky, poetry is just an inspired eavesdropping on the self.

Do the Internet and social media contribute to the well-being of poetry?

I guess they do. I still prefer the older technology – books. But that's a generational preference, I suppose.

I don't spend too much time on the social media. But I must add that I've been editor of the India domain of the Poetry International Web since its inception in 2004, and feel grateful and humbled by the incredible variety of Indian poets in various languages whose work I've been fortunate enough to read and present. In addition, the Poetry International has awakened me to contemporary voices from places as varied as Israel, Zimbabwe, Ukraine and China – all because it promotes quality English translations of international poetry. It's a tremendous resource for anyone interested in poetry.

What do most poorly-written poems have in common?

What a good question! I suppose I'd say, first and foremost, a lack of precision. Poetry, for all its celebration of ambiguity and paradox, is a highly precise art. This may sound like a contradiction, but it isn't. It takes great exactitude to arrive at a line that has texture, and multiple shades of meaning.

The other thing that makes for indifferent poetry is a lack of intensity. A good poem must scorch the page. You may have a certain verbal facility but when there's no voltage, you end up with just a tepid poem.

Then there are tonally flat statement poems that are more prosy and journalistic than anything else. For me, a poem is a verbal utterance that dances – it should have the ability to leap from one point to the other without joining the dots. It is emphatically *not* plodding, terrestrial language. There should also be an element of danger about it – the sense that you are in the presence of language on the verge of taking off from the page to some unknown destination.

What do most well-written poems have in common?

Precision and passion. Honesty and dexterity. The capacity to lead one into places of illumination and mystery at the same time.

Why is it such a difficult market for poets right now?

It has been for quite a while. And I used to grumble a great deal about it. But I've actually begun to see that this state of marginality has its advantages. It gives you the freedom to take your time over your work, to experiment, to extend yourself, without worrying about external variables like marketing, sales and the like.

Why don't people read poems as much as novels? Multiple reasons, I suppose. Above all, I think people are daunted by poetry. They believe it's a formidable, difficult art. Then there's the perception (fostered by generations of schoolteachers) that you've 'understood' a poem only if you can 'paraphrase' it. In other words, we've been encouraged to believe that a poem is only about its meaning. We haven't been urged to see it as a complex compound of form and content, of sound and semantics.

Has your idea of what poetry is changed since you began writing poems?

Yes, I suppose I saw it more as self-expression in the past. And now, more as an act of attunement, of alignment, of listening, as I said earlier. What has stayed the same, however, is a love of language and its resources. What has also stayed the same is a love of the image, rhythm and tone – all ingredients I consider vital in poetry.

What aspects of your poetry reader in general and Research scholars in particular must discover and explore?

I think an attentive ‘deep focus’ exploration rather than a set of premeditated conclusions is what I wish for more of. I also wish academics and serious readers would focus not just on the ‘what’ but on the ‘how’ of poetry, not just on sociology but on the more sensuous aspects of the poems. I’d be interested in readers taking the cues from the poems themselves — looking for recurrent images; mapping changes of direction from one book to another; exploring the ways in which certain themes are treated; for instance, following certain preoccupations, such as the existential journey, or gender, or love, or the city, and exploring how the treatment changes within and between books.

How would you describe uniqueness of each of your poetry collections?

Looking back, I think the first book, *On Cleaning Bookshelves* (Allied Publishers, 2001), was a stylistically varied volume because the poems in it happened over a period of ten years. It was an exuberant volume, and I’m still fond of it. It contained many of the themes that have remained abiding preoccupations – relationships, cities, gender, the spiritual quest. The second book, *Where I Live* (Allied Publishers, 2005), was more cohesive in some ways. All the poems returned time and again to the theme of belonging — or not belonging — on various levels, ranging from the personal and geographical to the political and spiritual. The third book, *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems* (2009, Bloodaxe Books) compiled the first two volumes with new work. In the new work, there was a fascination with places of convergence between the sacred and the sensual, the erotic and the existential. In the new collection, *When God is a Traveller* (HarperCollins, India and Bloodaxe Books, UK), the dominant preoccupation is journeys as a source of dislocation and discovery, ancient human pilgrimages from innocence to experience. There is also a need to engage with certain mythic archetypes (such as Shakuntala or Muruga) and draw nourishment from their explosive transformative potential.

Are there any new poets that have grasped your interest?

In India, there are several fine young poets writing today, many of them women. Recently, I’ve been reading the work of Karthika Nair, Mona Zote, Anindita Sengupta and Anupama Raju, and find them strong and interesting in different ways and for different reasons.

How do you see the Literary Scene in India? Is it progressing or retrogressing?

I find many remarkably accomplished voices at poetry workshops that I periodically conduct. There are also many more volumes of poetry that seem to be in the offing, which means that even the publishing scene has improved. In addition to HarperCollins, which is a large publishing house, there are smaller and very determined initiatives, like Poetrywala, Pratilipi, Copper Coin, Brown Critique and Sampark that are doing a fine job.

How will you judge the body of Contemporary Indian Writing in English in general and Indian English Poetry in particular?

That's a large question, and I'm not sure how to answer it. What I will say is that I believe that the best of Indian poetry in English today is on par with the best of Anglophone Indian fiction.