



In Conversation with Arundhathi Subramaniam

(This is an edited version of an on-stage conversation with well-known poet, biographer and editor Arundhathi Subramaniam on 29 March 2023 in Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh)

Akshaya Kumar: I have been reading your poems for the last twenty years now. Your poetic energies are inexhaustible. Whenever I read your poems, I feel that you have already attained a poetic crescendo, and that it would be difficult for you to exceed yourself, but with each new collection, you bounce back with greater energy and vigour. Let me begin the conversation with your first collection – *On Cleaning Bookshelves*, which I read long back. The title of the collection looks very ordinary. Cleaning shelves is a routine domestic drudgery. But in the collection, it becomes a trope of dismantling all structures of knowledge. Shelves become the site of happening. In the title poem of the collection, different writers from all across the continents and of different generations, who are otherwise stacked in different almirahts, begin to talk to each other. They enter into conversational intimacies. In this first collection what really startles me, is your degree of unrest. You come across as a poet who carries within her body, within herself, an enormous rage. So, words as they occur on the blank page, don't just land on the page easily. The words "stab ... the white autocracy of silence." Every poem bears the burden of legendary past and its mythical heroines from Kali to Kannagi—all known for their all-devouring rage. In "Andheri Local" a women's compartment turns into "A thousand-limbed/ million-tongued multi-spoused Kali on wheels". In another poem "Madurai", after caricaturizing an orthodox Punditji, you remind him of your fiery descentance: ". . . /that I am descended/ from an ancient tribe of women/ capable of damning entire/ Madurais/ its eternal infernos/ with a sorcery/ born not of virtue/ but of rage." This is re-living Kannagi in modern times. It is very easy to lapse into rage, but very difficult to orchestrate and harness that rage into legible poetry. So, we'll go along and read some poems from latter collections as well.

So, Arundhati let me begin with this ordinary question: is there a post-life to rage?

Arundhati Subramaniam: First, let me just drink in this moment. I am reconnecting with several people here who are familiar for various reasons, so that makes this session special.

Thank you for these observations, Akshaya. Sitting here with you today in this postprandial session, recovering from lunch, and thinking about a whole body of poetry, is a journey in itself. And your observations are, for me, a way of reconnecting with aspects of a journey that can sometimes seem like it happened a long time ago.

I am particularly glad that you began with the first book. Not many people have even access to this collection anymore, because it is out of print. No copies exist as far as I know, other than those that were procured at that time in 2001.

It was probably the year 1999 when some young journalist asked me how I saw poetry. I remember saying it's a kind of 'disciplined savagery'. So, it is interesting that you asked me this question about rage, because it actually takes me back to that moment. And since then I probably have come to a point when ... well, I have certainly not transcended rage, but I do have a line in my recent book that speaks of those who have learnt 'the tricks to turn rage into celebration.' There is a trick, and I don't know how many of you here want to learn that trick! For me, it took me decades, and I am not sure I am there yet. I trip up and I forget my tricks every now and then.

But I would say two things. For one, making poems is a chemical process. Just think of the times we've all sat down and written out our anger on the page of a diary. It doesn't have to be a poem; it could just be a daily journal. But one invariably finds that by the time one has reached the end of the page, that rage has, in some subtle way, been transformed. Each of you knows this, right? You can sit down and write out your anger, but by the time you turn the page, something has changed. And I think that chemical transformation is thanks to the alchemy inherent in the writing process. So, perhaps

that had something to do, Akshaya, with the way my rage was transformed or inflected over time.

But I'm not sure that's the complete answer. I think what changed was also my own life journey. A spiritual practice changed the way I breathed, and that changed the way I inhabited myself, and that changed the way I inhabited the page, I think. So, I think what is important to me today in poetry, apart from precision and authenticity, is intensity. There is no writing for me worth its salt without intensity. I was saying this just yesterday: a lukewarm piece of writing has no reason to exist. You can do it for yourself, and I do plenty of it for myself, but I don't necessarily want to share it until it has a certain voltage. That voltage is the reason for a poem's existence.

It took me time to realize that that voltage did not have to come from anger. And that voltage didn't have to have a name. I didn't have to call it rage, and I didn't have to call it passion, and I didn't have to call it love. It was just intensity. So, I'd say that what interests me today, Akshaya, is voltage *with* subtlety. Not losing sight of subtlety, but never compromising on that energetic mainspring. That's the aspiration.

AK: I have also tried to map the journey of your rage through other poems, other collections thereafter. The intensity is perpetually there, but when I read your *Where I Live*, your rage turns more sober, and you become reflective. You are more into ambivalences or existential dilemmas. This is not to say the rage is compromised, but perhaps this is the next level of what you call 'disciplined savagery'. For instance, in *Where I Live*, the poem that immediately comes to your mind is "Home." Now this is a very ambivalent take on the idea of home, because we think home is a black hole that sucks you up, and we sometimes feel very safe in the environment of a home. But you seek a home that does not really put any demand on you. So, let me read this poem.

Give me a home
that isn't mine,
where I can slip in and out of rooms

without a trace,
never worrying
about the plumbing,
the colour of the curtains,
the cacophony of books by the bedside.

A home that I can wear lightly,
where the rooms aren't clogged
with yesterday's conversations,
where the self doesn't bloat
to fill in the crevices.

A home, like this body,
so alien when I try to belong,
so hospitable
when I decide I'm just visiting.

So, when I read this latter collection *Where I Live*, collection where you have undergone some new experiences obviously, your rage acquires necessary complexity. There is a poem you write about Madras, and you say that the city holds you and also doesn't hold you at the same time. The exact lines are:

City that creeps up on me
just when I'm about to affirm
world citizenship

So, this tense ambivalence which you register here in this collection, for me is the next stage of transformation that your rage sometimes naturally takes. You seek almost a planetary expansion. So, how do you relate this new-found ambivalence to the rage that you now seem to have channelized into more inward reflection. Or should I say that have forgotten your rage, altogether?

AS: Not forgotten, I promise you. Very much there.

When I look back on the first of my five books of poetry, *On Cleaning Bookshelves*. I sometimes think that all the elements that are important to me today, were already there in their most nascent form.

The seeds were already there. It helps me to go back and look at it, because it's so easy to forget who you were, you know? It is so to create a narrative about who you were three decades ago. I realized that book is still pretty much me. Even in that book, the notion of home, or of belonging, was complex.

I realize I was writing even then about relationships, I was writing about cities, I was writing about gender politics, myths, journeys. But *how* I was writing about them was different. With my second book, *Where I Live*, that preoccupation intensified. There were clearly personal and cultural reasons why I started to feel the need to address the gap: the gap between where I live and where I belong. And there was a deepening spiritual need to address those questions. Where do I belong? Who am I, or where am I from? Where is my home? All those age-old questions. How do I bridge the gap between where I live and where I belong—personally, culturally, politically, but also existentially? I think those questions were there in the first book, but they took on an urgency now.

So, there is a long rage poem (since we are discussing rage) addressed to a Welsh critic, “To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn’t Find Me Identifiably Indian,” in *Where I Live*, which is actually saying, “I have my own indefinable way, my own complex way of being myself. I would like to be subtle about it. I would like to be quietly celebratory of this ambiguity. But if you appoint yourself cultural gatekeeper and presume to tell me how to be Indian, maybe I will have to be assertive, and tell you that I will *not* pander to your definition. I may not be able to define my Indianness, but I will not allow your definition to be the last word on me either.”

So, there is that kind of rage in the second book, too. We belong to places in very, very contrary ways, don’t we? There are moments we belong, and moments we don’t. In my first book, for instance, there is a poem, “Winter, Delhi, 1997,” that talks about being with my grandparents, which is as uncomplicated a state of belonging as it can get. And yet, the same poem speaks of a conversation about what it means to be Hindu with a grandfather who might have his own definition of it. The poem speaks of the impulse to gently infuriate

him by talking about a romance with a Pakistani cricketer! So, there is deep affection, as well dissent.

I think there has always been a fascination with the gloriously muddy ways in which we are ourselves. And a refusal to iron out that messy, complicated belonging just to make life easier for a beloved grandfather, or a much less beloved Welsh critic, or for anyone else.

In the later books, that is distilled into a certain passion or intensity, but perhaps it is less reactive. In “A Song to Catabolic Women” in the recent book (*Love Without a Story*), the speaker seems to have found a way to turn a rant into an anthem. Let me quote some excerpts:

We’re coming apart,
we’re going downhill,
the fury’s almost done,
we’ve had our fill.

We’re passionate, ironic
angelic, demonic,
clairvoyant, rational
wildly Indian, anti-national.

We’re not trying to make our peace
not itching for a fight,
we don’t need your shade
and we don’t need your light.

We know charisma isn’t contagious
and most rules are egregious.

We’re catabolic women.

We’ve known the refuge of human arms,
the comfort of bathroom floors,
we’ve stormed out of rooms,
thrown open the doors.

We've figured the tricks to turn rage
into celebration,
we know why the oldest god dances
at every cremation....

We're not interested in camouflage
or self-revelation,
not looking for a bargain
or an invitation.

We're capable of stillness
even as we gallivant,
capable of wisdom
even as we rant.

Look into our eyes,
you'll see we're almost through.
We can be kind but we're not really
thinking of you.

We don't remember names
and we don't do Sudoku.
We're losing EQ and IQ,
forgetting to say please and thank you.

We're catabolic women

We've never ticked the right boxes,
never filled out the form,
our dharma is tepid,
our politics lukewarm.

We've had enough of earnestness
and indignation
but still keep the faith
in conversation....

We're unbuilding now,
unperpetuating,

unfortifying,
disintegrating.

We're caterwauling,
catastrophic,
shambolic,
cataclysmic,
catabolic women.

So, there's still rage. But there is also more joy. And that gives the rage a certain buoyancy, perhaps.

AK: There is also one thing that consistently runs through your poetry. You write poems decade-wise. When you turn thirty, forty, then into fifty, you write poems to celebrate your journey around these temporal matrices. Why am I asking this question is that your rage increasingly turns into a kind of an intelligent whisper. For instance, I am reading this poem "By Thirty." I am not dramatizing 'thirty' as a marker of rupture, but certainly there is an ostensible shift. Let me recount some lines from the poem:

By thirty
the midriff thickens
to remind you
of the babies you never brought up, brought to
fruition.
Satori is a deferred project.

By thirty you begin to smell death
on dawn visits to bathroom...

By thirty
you can almost smile
at the treachery
of friends, lovers, schoolteachers.
Perhaps by forty
You'll will forgive them.

So, three-four things. One is, you begin to smell death, and now you

are talking in whispers, and third you are ready to forgive all those who were treacherous. So, what is this change of tone? From the fear of death to this whole idea of whispers and then that you are aware that there is a treachery all around you and then you are also forgiving?

AS: Well, it's based on the *hope* that maybe by forty I will forgive them. So, it is predicated on the future. I am well past forty now, but I'm not sure that future has arrived!

All lyric poetry is haunted by time, isn't it? I know the preoccupation with finiteness, with death, with temporality, has been consistent in my work. That might explain the poems you mention: 'By Thirty' in my first book, "Epigrams for Life After Forty" in *When God is a Traveller*, and "The End of the World" in *Love Without a Story*.

But looking at chronology here is interesting. My first book was published in 2001, when I was actually well into my thirties. (I was born in '67, so you can do the math.) The poems there were written through my twenties and through the early thirties, so it strikes me now as you read this poem that a personal turning point of 1997 had happened well before the book was even published. What happened in 1997 was a kind of death experience, a very intense encounter with silence. When I came out of that particular encounter, it was clear to me that I had to return to some of the old questions that had haunted me, but now with a certain urgency. I now became a conscious seeker.

So, by the time the first book was published, something had already shifted. That began to unfold in the second book in a very particular way. There was a deepening unease, which I think is very much a part of *Where I Live*. That unease plays itself out in a poem like 'Home'. But there is also an implicit insight that there is another way to belong. The poem starts with the line, "Give me a home that isn't mine." It takes me by surprise today, because it seems prescient. It anticipates certain directions that my life took, which felt, at one point, like exile, and later, like a much deeper homecoming. So, when I look at that poem (especially those lines, "A home, like this body, / so alien when I try to belong, / so hospitable when I decide / I'm just

visiting”) I guess was already a longing for a more authentic sense of self.

I was talking about the bhakti poets yesterday, and how they came to my rescue, when I desperately needed them. They were important to me, because they’d ‘been there, done that.’ (You know, you need to hear that sometimes. You need to know that others have walked this journey before you. That you’re not alone.) And reading them, I learnt there is no way to make this life journey without dropping down deep into the body and the heart. It is not a coincidence that the last section of *Where I Live* (in the international Bloodaxe Books version) is suffused with a kind of dark passion. There’s a visceral, erotic quality to those poems, a kind of sensual elation.

So, the preoccupation with death, with the life of the spirit, was there quite early. It was always alongside the rage. I guess I’m not the kind that knows how to ‘rage against the dying of the light’. Mine is more a poetry of the murmur, but hopefully a molten murmur—one that allows me to whisper, but never losing the impulse to scorch the page.

AK: You refer to your tryst with bhakti and bhakti poetry. Bhakti poets also traverse a difficult terrain in the sense that they were seekers and at the same time they were reformers, poets-as-activists. In your poetic cosmos verbs as markers of action operate in a conspicuous way. They carry the intensity of your rage and thirst. Obviously, nouns fail to express the seeker in you. But this gamut of thirst and rage and seeking in way determines the dominant drift of your poetic curve. I do not mean to say that you are predictable as a poet, but some of possible future directions and trajectories are well laid-out.

AS: Except that when you see yourself more as a verb than as a noun, you are much less predictable, even to yourself. So maybe you can anticipate the future directions I will take, I can’t.

All I know now, as a poet, is that my sense of belonging right now might lie in a deep sense of ease with a friend over a cup of orange chai in an Irani café. But tomorrow that sense of belonging might look very different.

I think the bhakti poets rescued me because they were not merely interested in worshipping the sacred. They were interested in *embodying* the divine. They wanted to make the sacred *crunchy*. They wanted to make the divine *thingy*. That is the essential quest of metaphor, isn't it? You are trying to capture the abstract in words, you are trying to give it texture, you are trying to give it form, you are trying to give it shape, you are trying to give it grain. You want to be able to touch, and smell, and taste the intangible. So, that need of the bhakti poets to embody the divine, dance the divine, sing the sacred, spoke deeply to me. It also resonated with my own nascent, still-unfolding understanding of yoga.

AK: One word which you used here, which is very important and which you use in your poetry also is "thinginess." You, in one of your poems, do talk about "the unstoppable garrulity of things." But in a latter collection, your emphasis then moves from verbs to adjectives. Let me draw your attention to your poem "Let Me be Adjective". Adjectives are facile cosmetic descriptions. Verbs are much more animate, much more kinetic, and action-oriented. How do you express this thinginess? Because when I read your poetry, I see accent on the verbs, but I was taken aback by this poem when you said that "I am describing, and for description I need adjectives."

AS: That's an interesting observation. I'm enjoying this conversation!

It's certainly not that I have decided to forego the verb in favour of the adjective. The verb is far too important, and will always be. Not just for the dynamism it brings to a poem. But also because it allows me to see myself as a practitioner of verse—a 'doing' person—rather than a Poet (with a capital P).

Let me try to make this as concrete as possible. When I grew up, I was a passionate viewer of Indian classical dance. And while I was fascinated, I also grew weary of the content. There was the *nayika*, the heroine, waiting endlessly for her beloved. This infuses our classical love poetry, in Tamil, in Sanskrit, and in every other Indian language. This pining woman seemed tiresome to me because of her

passivity. This woman would adorn herself, as she waited. There was a lot of *alankara*. She would braid her hair with fragrant jasmine, she would smear her body with sandal paste, she would look out of windows, hoping for this lover to turn up. The dancers always announced that this was not just a woman waiting for a man, that there was a deeper subtext at work. We were told this was actually the devotee waiting for her god, this was the human waiting for the Divine, this was the *jivatman* waiting for the *paramatman*.

Now this logic somehow did not appeal to me. As a young woman, I was impatient. I thought, why on earth can I not see a different kind of heroine? Why is her entire life predicated on the absence or presence of this male god? And then my own journey unfolded. And I began to see these sacred poets anew. In fact, they became much truer literary ancestors for me than I'd ever imagined. Why? Because these poets told me that waiting does not have to mean passivity. That waiting can be a kind of dynamic receptivity. A vibrant stillness.

So, the verb remains important. But my understanding of the verb has probably changed. A poem must have aliveness. But aliveness does not have to mean hectic movement. Aliveness can mean stillness. And that kind of stillness is far from lifeless. My challenge is how to smuggle that stillness into a poem.

I'm not sure I know how, but I keep trying, because that stillness is really the heart-centre of the poem. My own experience tells me that that stillness is the place from which all words emerge. The question is: how do I aspire to make that live in a poem?

So, I don't see myself as having given up the verb. I just see myself approaching the verb somewhat differently. In fact, the poem you mention, *Akshaya*, is actually full of verbs, although it is paradoxically titled, "Let Me Be Adjective":

And so, the verb is all.

But I'm not ready for it yet.

I tie knots

every now and then

to dam the flow,
to pretend

I am thing,
I am thing

and to pretend
you are too,

more thing than I,
worthier of being described.

And until the knots come undone
as one day they must

let me modify
qualify
anoint
counterpoint
apostrophise
parenthesise
invent
dissent
Let me take wing
let me sing

you.

I suppose I'm asking,
like the old bards did
to be your garland

not always tenderly floral

just a little tart,
a little contrary

the kind that isn't always allowed
within walled gardens

But even as I meander,
let my trail
be the thread
that completes the circle
I long to make around you

Love, let me be adjective.

AK: So, what I am trying in this conversation is that I am connecting the dots, how rage travels and how it takes different hues, and how the lexical changes, and how your age-growth maps also go along with that. And also, how you begin to then realize that things may manifest in number of ways. And if you are making God also a thing, God then becomes suddenly very playful, and very intimate, and very friendly, and your rival also, you never know. But, one word that, and this is a word one might trace its beginning in your earlier collections is 'conversation.' You are in a conversation, which now increasingly is available in every page. This conversation is a very enabling mechanism, so to say, because rage if channelized in a conversation, then it gives you a space of co-habiting, and then it also becomes a space of living life together. So, in your this recent book of non-fictional prose *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, you literally enter into conversations with 'quiet' contemporary woman mystics who, as you put it, are "not spiritual celebrities," but who in their self-contained way are deep into spiritualism. So, this whole idea of conversation, and you say you converse with people who are often quiet, and quieter. Now, there are two possibilities. When you converse, you expand; other is you dissipate. How do you look at that?

AS: Well, let me say that I should be having conversations with you more often! It sets me thinking about the connections between my poetry and my prose. You're zeroing in on certain keywords that point me to some very pivotal experiences. That suggests a very comprehensive reading of the work at your end.

Did you say conversations can make one expand or dissipate? Well, yes, when I think of the poem from my first book that you mentioned, “Madurai,” I think of that unfortunate Pandit-ji “with a face about as medieval as nylon.” I guess that was a bit savage. Today, I hope I would have a different kind of conversation with him. I doubt I would ever agree with him, but I hope I would be less enraged by him.

So, from there to my most to my most recent book of poems, *Love Without a Story*, I guess what has shifted is my approach to conversation. The new poems are full of conversations with people of very different persuasions, in terms of faith, ideology, politics, life choices. There is a monk whom I meet on the road to Mount Kailash. There is a naked woman mystic whom I meet somewhere in the wilds outside Kancheepuram. (She also makes it into *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, the book of prose that you mentioned.) There is a friend with whom I have had heated discussions as a student, in seminars and cafeterias, when we probably believed our dharma was to convert each other! I now say there is “no edge to our voices any more/ when we speak of Zen/ or Gramsci.”

Similarly, *Women Who Wear Only Themselves*, the book of essays, is about four contemporary, little-known women who are on spiritual journeys. Each one is very different from the other. One is on the path of bhakti. Another is on the path of tantra. One is more cerebral; another is more of an ecstatic *avadhuta*. One is a layperson; the other a monk. I am not trying to play advocate for any of them or their paths. I am simply saying, my life was enriched by listening to these diverse women. I am saying, my life is enriched by knowing they exist.

I suppose I have learnt that you can love people without necessarily agreeing with them. And even if you don’t love them as intimate friends, you can still include them in your gaze, and not seek to erase or cancel them. I learnt that from personal experience. But I also learnt it from the bhakti poets who taught me that dissent and affection can go together. These poets argue with their gods, but they never stop loving them.

If you try to critique something from a place of contempt or derision, it is never going to change or respond positively to you, because you are already looking at it as the 'Other.' The *bhakti* poets, in their finest poems, never speak to their god as a frozen Other. There is always the implicit assumption that this seeming Other and the self are going to unite. That union is a matter of time. That faith infuses all their poetry. This god might be unpunctual. This god might be elusive. This god might be whimsical, or contrary. Or even unjust. But, there is really no divide. The self and the sacred are part of the same continuum. If you include another in your gaze, in your heart, rather than try to chop them off, something begins to shift.

Conversations can be about disagreement, about long silences, about pauses. But they still spell connection. That's important to me. So, to answer your question, I'd say yes, the new poems keep the faith in the importance of dialogue.

AK: And there is a full poem in praise of conversations, and you write a long poem on conversations, but I am reading just three-four lines from the poem:

The ones that meander into truth
The ones that lie in parentheses
The ones that lie

Meanderings and conversations are analogical. Even God in your poetry remains a traveller. Let me also quote two incantatory lines from "God is a Traveller" which always ring in my mind:

Trust him
whose race is run,
whose journey remains.

Is God still in the state of becoming?

AS: Yes, because that god needs to be embodied every single day, every single moment. That's the challenge. That's a journey. And the same poem says:

Trust him
who recognizes you –
auspicious, abundant, battle-scarred,
alive –

That's the god who is willing to circle the world all over again just to see it through your eyes. That god has to be recovered every single day, because if the divine has to look out through your eyes you need to do a fair amount of cleansing of your vision. So, if you ask me, personally, I'd say the vision is clearer than it was before, but the journey is still underway.

AK: You refer to bhakti poets and I can understand bhakti poetry is kind of a cup from where you drink modern poetry from Ramanujan to other people who draw sustenance from it. But in your case as I could see that and I was reading your biography of Sadhguru, so I could see that you had moments of deep uncertainty at some stage in life, and you say "I was dying, in a way." So, therefore I can see that there is a pre-Sadhguru phase and a post-Sadhguru phase. So, from *bhakti* poetry to this very unequivocal kind of acceptance of Sadhguru as your Guru, how does this outward that travel into your poetry? How does that really manifest in your poetry?

AS: The bhakti poets actually came into my life after I met Sadhguru. I needed to re-read them to remind me that others had felt what I was going through—this tremendous sense of homecoming. At the same time, I needed them to remind me that home is a place where you can have passionate arguments with your spiritual guide. I love the way the bhakti poets treat god as a habitually disobedient member of their families! I love the way they combine their spirited dissent with joyous homecoming.

That's what the ideal families are about, aren't they? You know that you are different from this beloved being in front of you—utterly different in your views, your opinions on many subjects—and yet, this person offers you a key to unlock a part of yourself that enables you to see how connected you are—to each other and the world.

The encounter with your spiritual guide can feel like an ambush. It can be bewildering. And the bhakti poets spoke of bewilderment like few others did. They taught me the freedom in loving wildly, and hoarsely, as well as the joy in being vulnerable (because that is what love entails). And they told me that it is possible to acknowledge your vulnerability, not to try swaddle yourself with new costumes, new armours, new bulletproof vests.

So, what happened with Sadhguru's advent in my life was a sense of wonder, which I think is an integral part of that book that you mentioned. At the same time, the journey has been potholed by doubt. The journey has had its share questions, of misgivings, of disagreements. The book I wrote distils both: the spirit of enquiry and the wonder. I didn't want to write a hagiography. I was sure about that. But I wasn't writing an exposé either.

What the journey has given me is what I think a regular spiritual practice gives everyone: I feel like a less divided being. I am more distrustful of the binaries the world would have us live by. I see the world of flesh and spirit as much more connected than I did before. I see that the spiritual journey can be about doubt and faith, adventure and anchorage, the physical and the metaphysical, the body and the beyond, the mundane and the mysterious.

Just to acknowledge that mystery; to allow that uncertainty, and not be in a hurry to fill it up with words—I think, this has been my *sadhana*, as a seeker and as a poet.

AK: When you talk about process of aging, or when you talk about this pre- and post-Sadhguru phase in your life, and when you approach God as one who is in a state of journey, there is a possibility of a narrative, still. I was intrigued by your title *Love Without a Story*, what kind of love is this, which does not have story to it?

AS: What happens when stories end? All of us have known some stories that end. We have all lost at least a pet dog, maybe one human being who mattered very much to us. I think that was the starting point of those poems.

Of course, I never think of a book like that at the start. I work on a lot of discrete poems, and later when I look at them, it seems like they are collectively returning to a particular preoccupation.

So, here the preoccupation was just this: when a story comes to an end, there is a pause; but what happens when one is not in a hurry to fill in that pause? When one is not in a hurry to fill it up with another story—what happens then? Is there a way to bring that pause into this poetry? That was my question. This unfolded into a series of poems around the themes of time, of conversation, of intimacy, of journeys.

But I want to go a little deeper, because that is implicit in your question, Akshaya. I think we have talked of *bhakti* and the spiritual journey. We've also talked of the body, which has been an integral part of my journey. I found I couldn't side-step the body or the heart, and embark on a spiritual journey. I have an early training in classical dance and I have some early training in yoga. But I am not a great practitioner of hatha yoga, I should add, and I don't practice Bharata Natyam anymore. At the same time, the metaphor that remains important to my work and my life comes from these disciplines. It is the notion of the 'spine': how to retain spine but not turn rigid. That is essential to, I think, the wisdom of many Eastern spiritual, aesthetic and martial arts traditions. It's essential to the understanding of dance and yoga. For me, this still remains important. The diversity of conversation in *Love Without a Story* with all kinds of people of diverse faiths and convictions is possible only if one knows that there is a way to bend, but not break; a way to disagree, but not hate or despise. That's something I'm still learning, by the way.

AK: So, I have seen that though there is no story, but the orbit is really circumscribed to that extent. And therefore, when you say "love without story," there is a story to even this claim.

AS: In fact, *Love Without a Story* is full of potential stories. Whether it is an encounter with a naked woman mystic, with a busful of Pakistani pilgrims on our way to Ajmer, with friends on our way to the monastery of St Francis of Assisi in La Verna, or even with a dead parent—there are stories implicit in all the poems.

But the book doesn't say there should be no more stories. It simply says that there are pauses in stories, there are great roaring silences within stories, and as long as we are in touch with those silences, it's okay. Sing your story loudly and lustily, tell all the stories you want. (Except for the fact that I will not write fiction. I will stick to poetry!)

I am interested in archetypes—the way characters in mythic stories can embody something elemental, something illuminating. So, in my poem cycle on Avvaiyar, the old woman poet of Tamil Nadu, I use her story as a stepping stone. I'm more interested in the wisdom she embodies. I'm less interested in the plot of her life.

AK: In this collection, you write a lot of 'nostalgic' poems. These are the poems when you are in your fifties, and there is perhaps a lot to look back. Through the mythical *Avvaiyar*, a woman poet or a group of women poets, you even give up the vanity of remembering things – “Nothing to declare anymore, she says, not even nostalgia.” What is left then?

AS: Avvaiyar is an old woman, she's a poet, and she's a traveller. She is an integral part of Tamil consciousness. And it's why she resonates with me, I guess. (There is a grandmother poem called 'Heirloom' that you might remember all the way back in *On Cleaning Bookshelves*. The germs of an idea, as I said, are often to be found in the first book.)

In my later work, I have grown more interested in the archetypal. And I am increasingly fascinated by the figure of the crone. What kind of 'knowing' does she represent? In this poem, Avvaiyar tells me that it is possible to have a gaze that is not stained by nostalgia. Is there such a way to look at the world? Without past and future—how would it look? She puts it quite simply:

For lovers flatten
into photographs,

photographs
into reminiscence,

reminiscence
into quiet.

And then what's left?

Perhaps just the oldest thing in the world --
love without a story.

And at the end of the poem cycle, she teaches me
more about ageing. She says there is a way to walk
the world:

learning to trust only the wisdom
that sings,

learning the equipoise
of crumble,

not looking
for a point,

knowing the point, if any,
is a shared fruit and laughter,

knowing there's no sadly
or happily ever after,

and [she] finds a new credo for mendicants,
a new paradigm:

stay molten-tongued (never lukewarm)
even if ragged in rhyme,

unhurried, forever out of step,
always on time.

AK: This is my personal belief and observation that "Spiritualism is the graveyard of poetry." How do you carry poetry and your spiritual yearnings together? Once you are into that spiritual mode, how do you recharge your poetic imagination?

AS: What a wonderful question. Someone told me something similar many years ago—an actor friend, who’s no more. He was talking about his own journey. He said, “I don’t want to get too much into this meditation stuff, because I won’t be able to act. I need to feel passion, and rage, and grief, all of that. Without that, there can be no theatre, no poetry, no art.”

I was much younger than him. And I believed that what he said made perfect sense. But I also knew I had this obstinate need for ‘something more’ that I could not name. We can just call it ‘God’ for convenience, but obviously that’s not a satisfying word. It’s just ‘something more’.

Later I discovered, however, that a spiritual journey is not about becoming devoid of rage, or passion. It is about experiencing those very emotions more deeply, but also allowing them to be transformed by the very act of acknowledgement.

During a very quiet writing residency in Scotland in the year 2003, it struck me that I had actually convinced myself that I needed to suffer in order to write! If I didn’t suffer, how would I be creative? Many are encouraged to live by this myth. But there *is* a way to feel deeply, to feel another’s pain and even your own pain deeply, and still not suffer. This was what I saw Sadhguru embody. And it fascinated me. I am not always very good at practicing this myself, and I blunder often. But there is a way.

I think learning this has been an important part of my journey. We often think being spiritual is about turning into a placid cabbage, right? I mean, it would be wonderful to look as tranquil as those Gandhara renditions of Buddha, you know. I have actually yearned to look like one of those sculptures!

Ever since I was in my teens, I thought I had questions about the meaning of life. That set me off on my journey. Then I found Joseph Campbell, the writer and scholar, who said something very interesting in an interview. (I’m paraphrasing; he says it so much better than I am.) He says, “Eventually you realize that you are not looking for the meaning of life. What you are looking for is a more

profound, more heightened experience of life itself.” That was an insight that struck me.

The spiritual journey does not make you insensitive, or insulated, or detached. In fact, it allows you to experience life much more deeply, because you’re less scared of it. This is what Sadhguru often points out. He says the spiritual journey is about being passionately involved with life, but not about getting entangled with it.

This resonates with me. When you are more secure, more at ease with yourself, you can actually listen more attentively to many more people, with their own diverse stories, fears and prejudices, because you are less clogged with yourself, or what you think of yourself.

A long answer to a short question!

AK: I think I have asked addressed some of the questions I could identify as structural to your poetic oeuvre. I would not discuss with you your seminal anthology of bhakti poetry *Eating Gods*, because in one of the literary festivals I have already discussed that book with you. But I am definitely curious to ask one question on your edited book, *Pilgrim’s India*. Of course, this book takes into its sweep a formidable array of writers who have written on their sacred journeys. As I read them, one ontological question bothers me: What is not a pilgrim?

AS: No one. We’re all pilgrims of some kind. It’s just that there are unconscious seekers and conscious ones. As you become more conscious of your journey, you become more alive to the possibility of the sacred everywhere. That is when you become a true pilgrim, I suppose. Until then you are an unconscious life traveler.

I wanted *Pilgrim’s India* to make room for every kind of traveler—the sceptic, the believer, the secular vagabond, the mendicant, the mystic. In fact, the book has that lovely poem by Arun Kolatkar, that many of you, as students of English Literature, might know. It is a poem called “The Old Woman” from his book, *Jejuri*. The speaker goes to the pilgrimage site of Jejuri in Maharashtra, but finds no sign of the sacred in the temple shrine. But when he emerges, and has this

this random encounter with an old beggar woman, what he sees in her eyes is nothing short of a *vishwa roop darshan*. A cosmic vision. So, that is the possibility of the sacred. It can assail you when you least expect it.

AK: Conversations can be never-ending. But just one last question and observation. Indian English poets often claim that they are the descendants of Indian *bhakti* poets. Do you consider yourself as a modern-day Meera or Andaal? And are we heading towards the rise of a poetry of the Divine Feminine—*shakti*, as a sub-genre within the larger rubric of contemporary Indian English poetry?

AS: Well, yes, several Anglophone poets have engaged deeply with the *bhakti* poets, from AK Ramanujan to Dilip Chitre and Arun Kolatkar, and many more.

I will say that in my case, I turned to the *bhakti* poets, primarily as a spiritual seeker, not as a translator. I was experiencing something within myself that they gave me a language for. Eventually, they ended up helping me not just as a seeker, but as a poet as well. That's when I reclaimed them as my clan, my tribe. That later led to the anthology, *Eating God*.

But do I consider myself a modern-day Meera or Andal? No, I certainly don't. For one, it reeks of hubris. Once you claim to be a great *bhakta*, you cease to be one. As a lover, you are, by definition, flawed. Love returns you to a lower-case identity. No capital letters are possible in there.

There are also contextual differences. I am a modern-day seeker with a heritage of scepticism, and one that I value. But then, there are strongly sceptical elements in many *bhakti* poets too, such as Kabir and Tukaram. So, they can sound uncannily like our contemporaries as well!

Let me say that I recognize something of the experience of *bhakti*—the intensity and fear and desperation that fuels it. Also, the doubt that goes with it. I belong here with these crazy poets, because they're

a tribe of heartbroken, unlicensed seekers. These are proud amateurs, not card-carrying members of the spiritual elite.

About the poetry of Shakti as a sub-genre in Indian poetry, I don't know. I hope not actually, because if it becomes a category, a certain self-consciousness, a certain preciousness might enter the picture. And that is the death of good poetry!

Let's just say that it may not have been fashionable to talk about Saraswati or the Muses, but poets have always known we need our goddesses! Art has always involved a mix of manual labour and mystery. Without mystery, there is no art. And I'd add, without the Goddess' grace, there is no poetry.

AK: With this, we come to the conclusion of this session. As usual, talking to you has always been an experience of some kind of self-reflexive expansion. Of course, talking to an academic may not be as fulfilling as talking to a self-effacing mystic woman. But there is one thing connects us in the vibrant conversational network—we in our distinct ways are seekers.

AS: I just want to say I am particularly grateful for this session, Akshaya. Thank you.