



“Moon and Mud in the Very Same Frame”

Arundhathi Subramaniam in Conversation with Akshaya Kumar

(This is an edited version of a live conversation that took place on 21.10.2024 at Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh before an audience with the poet and editor Arundhathi Subramaniam on her latest anthology titled *Wild Women: Seekers, Protagonists and Goddesses in Sacred Poetry* published by Penguin Random House.)

Akshaya Kumar: We have been inviting Arundhati here for the last couple of years now, and each time there emerges a possibility of renewing the conversation. This book *Wild Women*, I always knew was in the making, and its journey started long back. The image of an Andheri local railway engine as Kali and the image of furious Kannagi hurling her breast on Madurai that occurred in her first collection, still resonate in my mind. The journey that starts with such powerful characters, has no other option but to go forward with more discoveries and storms in its stride. Reading this book is just like navigating a storm, because each page is full of energy, and energy when I say, looks a very average word. What the book unleashes is a gush of high voltage energy. Each *bhakti*-poet, which is included in this anthology, is a poet with an exceptional background, who can be historicised hagiographically only. Each poem is a clarion call. I remember that in her previous anthology *Eating Gods*, she describes *bhakti* hymns as sacred pop songs. Somehow in this collection, the tone and the mandate become far more serious. And therefore, she calls that this collection as a kind of a cry. She further qualifies that the cry takes many forms. The cry is mix of prayers, love songs, complaints, and anthems. And also, very succinctly she would say, the tone is celebratory but not triumphalist.

The tone is celebratory also because the collection of four hundred pages takes onboard fifty-six women *bhakti* saint poets. This

is unprecedented. We, at the best, zero in on the familiar names of Meerabai, Andaal, Akka Mahadevi or Lal Ded, but fifty-six women saint poets is a staggering figure! And you have 'Meera Bai of Manipur' to 'Meera Bai of Mughals,' and a whole horde of the likes of Meera Bai. The number of bhakti women saint poets grows exponentially in this collection. And I tell you, the amount of conviction with which this rebel of the women is chronicled and contained, is self-consuming. I am not happy with this term 'anthology' because sometimes it looks like a mere collection of items, but here on every small detail of the book there is an imprint of the editor. Arundhathi as an editor owns every poet, and she speaks through them as much as they speak through her. She therefore is for all practical reasons an author. Besides including the translations of their verses, she introduces them with very pertinent anecdotes, tracing their background in terms of their allegiance to different traditions. When I say *bhakti* poetry or literature, it is a larger cultural formation which has its own discursivities. *Wild Women* is an anthology within anthology. She has divided this book into three parts. There are fifty-six women saint poets, then there are poems where women as protagonists feature, and there are texts where women and *devis* are celebrated.

In the collection, Arundhathi almost decolonises spirituality, and that too at multiple levels. First, spirituality does no longer remain just a male stronghold. In her *Eating Gods* there was a dominance of the male *bhakti*-poets. Spirituality is decolonised in another sense. It not approached as an abstract theory of personal emancipation, rather it is approached as a way of life which can be gainfully harnessed for collective upliftment. Spirituality attains instrumentality. When you read these verses, you realise that each poem can propel you to do better; can re-energise you and give you some direction. Spiritualism, as it comes through the *bhakti poets* and their travails and challenges, the component of self-struggle is foregrounded. These poets do not leap-frog into the zone of the infinite, into some miraculous state of frenzy. There was an effort; there was a struggle. So, spiritualism is not without its social praxis. It is not a facile kind of jump into the unknown.

This anthology is a mega-project, and as I observed earlier, it contains many anthologies within it. The traditions of *bhakti* poetry

are too many, and there are regional variations and local denominations of *bhakti* as culture. I am reminded of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* wherein he says that nations are imagined through informal ways. One of the ways in which nations are imagined is through the journeys of the pilgrims. Reading this book is travelling to every nook and corner of the country. Entire Indian landscape is covered in terms of the footprints of *bhakti*-credo across the land. Bhakti poets have been somehow dug out, excavated from all corners of the country and together they constitute the cartography of the nation. It is this dormant form of cartography which comes alive in this book.

In course of designing and compiling this book, Arundhathi has mentioned that at times she threw her hands in despair. So, Arundhati, let me start the conversation. What prompts you to re-invent Kalis and Kannagis for the newer generation? If Kannagi plucks her breast and hurls it on Madurai as a curse, you throw *Wild Women* as no less than a hand grenade. This is a kind of hand grenade thrown on all those who still think that spiritualism is a facile, feminine kind of longing. What is your take on it?

Arundhathi Subramaniam: I just want to thank you Akshaya, and all of you here. It always feels like a homecoming when I am here. There is something that is deeply invitational and I am very glad to be here. And one of the primary reasons is the fact that Akshaya speaks in images and whenever people speak in images, I am at home. So, thank you for that image of hand-grenade. It seems like a terrific start.

And why this hand grenade? You know, oddly enough, I have been asked by three people, all of them male, none of them Akshaya. Why is it *Wild Women*? Can't it be another kind of woman? Aren't there other kind of women? And I will come to that later. But a hand-grenade seems like a good entry point. I think this book for me was a lifetime in the making, but after the anthology that Akshaya mentioned – *Eating God*, which was published in 2016, a few questions started gaining momentum. For me, reading mystic poetry of any persuasion, whether it is St. John of the Cross, or Kabir, or Basho, has always been necessary. Mystic poetry of various kinds has rescued me in different points of my life, in a way that reading

philosophy never has. And yet a question that endured for me was, where are the women? Where on earth are the women? As I started reading with a certain feverishness as my own existential journey took on a certain momentum, I realised that the women I knew—Meera, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Lal Ded – were a handful in the Indian subcontinent and most of them had been flattened into anti-septic saints. They turned into women in states of such swooning surrender that I could not relate to them. They seemed to have dropped their bodies, the physical selves entirely. They seemed to be devoid of hunger, hormones, and seemed to turn into ethereal puffs of vapour. And when people turn into vapour too easily, I am excluded, because I don't know how to enter that space. So, it always felt to me that women on spiritual quest had turned into these ethereal beings that I could not quite relate to, and on the other hand I found, as I started digging more deeply, that there are legions of women in the subcontinent that I have never heard of. So, whether it was the fact that they have been flattened into hagiography or completely consigned to oblivion, both ways we have lost them. There is really no entry point, at least for me.

So, another question this it is linked to is the fact that when we speak of women or the spiritual path, many people will say, "I am very spiritual." And one is never quite sure what they mean, and far too often when people use the word spiritual, they seem to suggest a state of easy surrender, and that word surrender to me, is such a difficult word. It makes me very uncomfortable. I think as a woman I have felt deeply uncomfortable with romantic literature of all kinds which has spoken of women who seem to drop their agency at the drop of a hat. And a question that I often went back to personally on my own journey, was a question that I encountered when reading Valerie Saiving Goldstein, a Christian theologian. I read her in my college days, years ago. And she asked a very simple question which always stayed with me: "If we are encouraged to surrender all the time. Surrender ourselves to God. If we have not learned to value ourselves, what is the value of that surrender?" That question has always been with me. What is this journey of selfhood? How do we find out who we are? To me that is what the spiritual journey has always been about.

So, what excited me about this project was to find women with bodies, with questions, women who are human, women who are confused, women who are bewildered, women who ask questions which are deeply inconvenient, and who are willing to stake their lives on those questions. That's the only difference between, as I see it, me and them. They stake their lives on those questions. That started the journey, and I think that was the beginning of the hand-grenade. I would hope that this book journeys into the lives not just of women, but as much into the lives of men and any gender that people choose to identify with. Simply because I think all of us, each one of us, yearns without knowing it. It is often an unconscious yearning. We all yearn for a less lopsided and less exclusionary heritage of culture and spirituality. We all thirst to know of ancestors we can claim as our own. We thirst for friends we can claim as our own. Sisterhood that we can claim as our own. We want to know that other people have walked this path before and we are not alone. I think that deep thirst was something that I felt and it simply grew.

The moment which was very telling for me, was an anecdote that I read many years ago about a Buddhist woman Roshi, a Zen Roshi, who gave a talk on "Little Known Women in the Buddhist Tradition." She gave the talk and found that a young woman in the audience was in tears and a long time after the session was over, the young woman continued to cry. When I read that, no one needed to explain to me what had happened. I knew. And I wonder whether that incident in some way is an incident you recognise in yourselves in some way or the other. It can play itself out in many different ways. I remember entering a Goddess temple with just a certain smidgen of curiosity and little else in 2010. And I hear the thirty-three names of the goddess in the temple. I was not approaching it with any great religious fervour or devotion. I simply sat there. But something stirred when I entered that space. And it felt like what stirred had nothing to do with religious allegiance, with a sense of political validation that this appealed to my feminist credentials, none of that. Just the sense of something too long forgotten. Having suddenly heaved again in this shock of retrieval, suddenly heaving again into my living experience. It felt like I had touched groundwater. When you read a poem, a poem that really works, it is like touching groundwater. It is knowing that a thirst has been addressed that you

didn't even know existed. That's what a poem ought to do for you. And I hope that this book and all the other reading that you do, I hope poetry will never leave you at any moment in your lives. I hope you will touch groundwater again and again, because this is the most distilled utterance that we know. And when we come into contact within, we are irrigated on one hand, and to use a completely different metaphor, we are in the presence of that hand-grenade all over again. We feel alive and energised.

AK: So, you rightly said that these moments of spiritual epiphanic awareness were lost somewhere. But as you go through these poems page after page, you are swept off your feet and realise that there is a torrent of awareness that seems to overwhelm you. One question however has always bothered me, and other younger people like me: is there an algorithm for this kind of a leap?

AS: That's a good question. I am fine with this book being read just as an archive. This is a possible archive of voices that you knew and many voices that you are likely not to have known. There are many voices here that at least took me by surprise. I can only answer this from my own experience because I am not good at algorithms. I would be probably something other than a poet if I were. I read AK Ramanujan's *Hymns for the Drowning*, many years ago. I read it and saw that this was an accomplished translator, and put it away. I have always enjoyed AK Ramanujan; I go back to him. That was it. When my own journey took on a certain intensity, I happened to stumble upon his *Hymns for the Drowning* again. These are his translations of the Tamil poet and Vaishnava saint Nammalvar. And suddenly it was an ambush. This is what it was all about. When you are deeply lonely, this is when poetry can rescue you, because you suddenly realise you have a campfire of dead poets perhaps, but living poetry. And that's how a poem can come and pick you out some of your darkest moments. It's fine to read it simply as an archive. But when a book is going to come and ambush you that's something you can't programme. Many things have to be aligned perhaps for that to happen. There is a certain mystery about it. There is one thing I would suggest all of you: never lose your willingness to be surprised. We are living in times where the mind feels so clogged with information. That it is possible to sometimes feel like one's capacity for gobsmacked wonderment is gone. But poetry is meant to return you

time and again to that state of, “Oh my God! I really don’t know.” I hope some of these women will come into your lives like that. You could read them simply because they ask strange and wonderful questions. They ask questions which some of us don’t dare to ask even today.

For example, Punnika is a slave girl 2500 years ago at the time of Buddha. She attends a talk by him, in which the Buddha says that when you have deeply internalised the *dharma* or *dhamma*, your words will come from a different place within you, and what you say will sound like a lion’s roar. For me, it was something that spoke to me deeply. When Punnika then found herself on the way to Ganga, walking down the steps of the *ghats*, she meets this very orthodox, ritualistic Brahmin. And she asks him where he is going, and he says, “I am going to the water”. She says, “I have to go, it’s my work, but why are you going, it’s cold.” He says, “Well I am a Brahmin, I have to do my thing, wash away my sins.” To which Punnika says, and this is when the lion’s roar enters, “Beware! You may wash off your sins, but you may also wash off your merits. I am prepared for that.” The exact in translation read thus:

If these rivers could carry off
the evil kamma you’ve done in the past,
they’d carry off your merit as well
and then you’d be
completely left out

And the Brahmin is suddenly stunned into silence, because questions about purity, impurity, and karma are suddenly staring him in the face. And a quiet moment occurs when he suddenly realises that this young girl seems to know a lot more than he does. I never knew of Punnika. Why did we not all know about her? Why did we not hear of her children? Why did I not hear of Soyarabai as a young girl, why did I not hear of her, the fourteenth century Maharashtrian woman mystic, who says: “If menstrual blood makes me impure, / Tell me who has not been born of that blood?” Why had I not heard of her? Even though I am a Tamilian, why had I not heard of Shenkottai Avudai Akkal, an eighteenth-century mystic? She is a Brahmin child widow, and it would have been a life of great seclusion. She has an encounter with a wandering spiritual teacher

and her life is transformed. In poem after poem, she asks questions about why menstruation is impure, why ideas of ritual impurity exist. And she says that if the idea that saliva can be considered a source of contamination, then everything is impure. The first word, sound, and form, is impure. The *vedas* are impure because they arrive through the saliva of those who utter them. All of creation then based on this logic is contaminated. Why had I not heard of her? Why had I not heard of Janabai? To me it felt like these were women asking questions about everydayness. And everydayness is not something you need an algorithm to enter. It is a part of our lives. That is what Janabai tells us, and she has the gumption to make the leap from everydayness to the extraordinary. She says:

i eat god
i drink god,
i sleep on god

i buy god,
i count god,
i deal
with god

god is here
god is there
void is not
devoid of god

jani says:

god is within
god is without
and moreover
there's god is spare

She basks in surplus divinity while she is casually going about her home – eating, sleeping. This is what some of the finest female voices bring into the realm of sacred poetry. They remind us that the sacred is not up there; it is not remote and unattainable. You don't have to purify yourselves endlessly to reach this. It's right here and now. It is immediate. Which is why Sule Sankavva, this wonderful

prostitute poem of the twelfth century says that the men around her are unsurprising, and that her relationship with them is essentially transactional. But her god she says is *nirlajjeshwara*, a shameless god. You will never be judged by a shameless god. This is a god who will get his hands grimy and messy in the business of *samsara*. You don't have to purify yourselves to reach him. You don't have to become self-conscious speakers to read these voices and be touched by them. You just have to be willing to be surprised, to allow a poem to take you over, and lead you by its own logic. So that, you can see the moon and the mud in the very same frame, and see that they are not separate.

AK: But as I gather from the book and your answers, the social unrest is the point of beginning of a lifelong quest. Spiritualism that the bhakti poets – men or women – eventually lapse into or attain, actually starts from the everyday social discriminations and their entire relentless interrogation of the social hierarchies. So, I have gone through the bio-notes. Most of these women poets have faced some kind of social deficit and deprivation. So, spiritualism therefore is deeply rooted in the social. That it is the social unrest that actually propels them to look inwards and outwards as well.

AS: I think, I am not so sure. I'd say that the social unrest is a wonderful entry point for us when we encounter these poems. But I believe there are appetites for which we have no name, and I think the appetite for the sacred is one such appetite. It's a nameless longing. It's a longing for something you cannot quite define, and for a want of a better word, you sometimes end up calling it, a god with a name and form, a nameless god if you want, a shameless god if you want. But you end up calling it something. But that unappeasable hunger for something that you are not able to define, to me that is also an integral part of this journey. Which is why I mentioned Akkal, because I don't think this is a poetry of mere social reform. It comes from a place that suggests a woman who has not just been reformed, but one who has been transformed. And that transformation which is deep and radical, I believe comes from that unnameable place, which the Buddha himself did not name. He just said that when you internalise this deeply enough, it will come as a lion's roar. It is not the voice of a social reformer alone; I don't believe it is. I believe it is a much deeper voice than that.

There is a realm of mystery which makes these women more than mere social reformers. And that to me leads us to *bhakti* itself, which I think is such an overused, misused, maligned word. We are using it all of the time, so it has turned into this dreadfully mangled word. We forget that devotion is not pining, servility, servitude, or turning into a puddle of spinelessness at the feet of the guru or god. *Bhakti* is a very profound science of intimacy, and we don't know it. And perhaps the only way to know it is to experience it, and allow it to deepen you and transform you. Not being in too much of a hurry to give it a name. *Bhakti* is not about uncritical surrender at all. Women here are passionate, argumentative sometimes, erotic, they are "wild." So, we come to that question of "why wild?" And I say it is this. It's the fact that poetry is itself a subversive utterance.

Sacred poetry is even more subversive which we often don't realise. We think that religious poetry is about love songs to god. Right? Boring. And of course, some of it is terribly boring. I have spent much of my life gnashing my teeth on all the poems I have grown up with *nayikas* endlessly pining for their lord. They do nothing more than waiting for absent male lovers to come. And of course, when the male lover comes, and assuming he is god, when he comes, he is always unpunctual, unfaithful, he comes with tell-tale signs of his love making with other women. God must be promiscuous. And you have to take it. If this was female yearning, I wanted none of it. So, I was happy to throw that lot of poems out the window as far as I was concerned.

When I talk of sacred poetry today, I am talking about reclaiming those aspects of it that speak to me. Perhaps the most important thing I realised about yearning is that it is not passive. *Bhakti* is not passive. There is a reason why the protagonists in the second section are women. Because deeply implicit in this is the understanding that somewhere between endlessly doing and in order to achieve and simply passively waiting, there is a middle and third way. And that third way is one that turns yearning into something active. Yearning can be a radically alive state of stillness and receptivity. This yearning is being transformed into a new kind of self-possession where these women begin to self-discover that they are quite whole as they are.

AK: There is an unmistakable insistence on approaching the sacred hymns or *padas* as poems. And indeed, when you look at these poems you find all those conventional tropes and elements of poetry. There is irony, paradox, and a necessary climax. But don't you think 'sacred poetry' is an oxymoron in itself. Because poetry by its very nature is a secular form of art.

AS: I think poetry by its very nature can touch precisely this realm that I am calling indefinable. For want of a better word, we call it sacred. I agree with that entirely. Everything in that sense is capable of transforming us. You look at mud long enough, it can transform you. If you look at your lover for long, he/she can transform you. That is what I love about what I call sacred poetry. God becomes a wonderful device that you talk to, argue with. The idea that you can argue endlessly with this God. You can because you are intimate with him/her. You can hurl an abuse at this God, you can throw tantrum and call it a prayer. This is your license. But the God then becomes this device you can love and direct your passion towards. This is why Akka Mahadevi tells us:

Take these husbands who die,
decay and feed them
to your kitchen fires!

This is why Lal Ded says:

I pestled my heart in love's mortar,
I roasted it and ate it up.
I kept my cool but you can bet I wasn't sure
whether I'd live or die.

These are women who are using metaphors of kitchen. A kitchen can transform you too. They remind us that something else can go on in this kitchen and it is not the kind of food you and I might want to eat. It is dangerous. It is a sacred laboratory. So, this is what I believe the finest poets do in using this god as the interlocutor, the amoral presence in their life. We don't need to be believers to read this poetry. It is an invitation to drop persuasions of all kinds. I'd say use the word "sacred" as a provisional word. Use it, drop it. You don't have to be a believer or poet to read these poems. Let them wash over

you with a certain openness. No conclusions. The finest poetry never invites us to full stops, but always commas and pauses, and sometimes it just leaves us with a big question mark. And that is fine too.

AK: Coming to the anthology part. In the first part, you stop at Indira Devi. What happens to sacred poetry post-Indira Devi?

AS: It will perhaps be written by some of the people in the room. I wanted to stop with the twentieth century. If you go to the last section, which is the write-up to the twenty-first century. There are contemporary poets too. I wanted a sense of a journey that comes all the way to this moment and then leave it, and of course the rest of it is there for the rest of you to fill in.

AK: Your third section is about poetry, but I am talking about the march of the sacred in the twentieth century. That stops at Indira Devi, which looks to me a very abrupt kind of ending to this part. Because if sacred is a continuous tradition, it is part of everyday life.

AS: Akshaya, one has to stop somewhere with a book.

AK: I am curious to know. Are there mystic poets, post-Indira devi which you could not include for practical reasons?

AS: That's a good question. There are many contemporary women poets writing about using mythic figures in certain ways. That to me still does not constitute what I consider to be this kind of mystic poetry. Perhaps, I'd say, I see my own work very much in the literary tradition of poetry that recognises mystery in particular way. And that is sensitive, I hope, to the energetics of language and pause, sound and pause. Investigating sound and pause. You don't have to sit there and be bored. Poetry is not about me or who I am. It is about your life and every sound that you utter. Every pause that you are capable of, and every pause that you have in a conversation, perhaps unconsciously. It's just about growing more conscious. Everyday speech, just becoming more conscious of that. Where is it coming from? Which part of you is it coming from? I don't have to ask you if you understand this. You will know the difference.

AK: Even in the last section when you say, the twenty-first century, which for us is no less than a long nineteenth century. My point is that you pick up four poets, you even go beyond India to include a Sri Lankan and a Greek within that framework. Haven't you short circuited the trajectory?

AS: I think an anthology is a *thaali*. It will just give you multiple flavours you can taste. You can't do everything. And *Penguin* will perhaps excommunicate me. But I'd say that there is room for definite expansion if you want. There is a book that will happen hopefully next year, and it is a book of poems of my own. And I hope that in some way will pick up some of the threads that this anthology leaves.

AK: I could not come across this word, the 'divine feminine'. Have you used this word?

AS: I have tried to use it minimally.

AK: What is the strategy behind not using this phrase in a conspicuous manner? I see many contemporary Indian women poets and translators like Mani Rao, Priya Sarukkai Chhabria, Karthika Nair, Tishani Doshi, and others are actually creating a '*shakti* cult of poetry' in ways which are unconsciously collaborative.

AS: Oh, I see! That would be another conversation where I see each one of these poets. I recently did an interview with someone around contemporary poets that I felt deeply drawn to. And I think Mani Rao's translation of the *Saundarya Lahari*, Kala Krishan Ramesh's poems to Murugan, and Karthika Nair's poems on the women of the Mahabharata. I see these as reclaiming women voices in ways that speak to me, and not sacred poets necessarily. Kala Krishana is not about women's voices except she is a woman, but she addresses Murugan as a very real living deity in her poems. So, to me, these voices and works have mattered. At this point, I want to read a poem from *Wild Women* to give the audience a flavour of the tone and content of the verses included in the book, but I am not sure what to read.

AK: Read a poem.

AS: Here is Nammalvar. You know when I was talking to you earlier about why these women *bhakti* poets are called as ‘wild women’. To me they are wild because poetry itself is wild. It asks dangerous questions. Sacred poetry even more so, because it overturns the hierarchy between human and divine. And when women take on those questions, it becomes strictly dangerous. So, here is Nammalvar saying:

You have all heard Meera talking about being Baawri

Right? One crazy woman. What does that really mean? To my mind, Nammalvar gives us an answer when he speaks of a young girl’s mother who is telling her neighbours, “I don’t know what’s happened to her. She has just gone crazy.”

It goes on:

My girl, who’s just learning to speak
says,
‘I’m beyond all learning.
I’m all the learning that you learn.’
‘I’m the cause of all learning,
I end all learning,
I’m the essence of all learning
says she.

To me this is an example of the ‘wild woman’ as ‘wise woman’. What seems to happen to this girl is state of divine possession, says her mother. Something has changed deeply in this young girl. She is no longer the girl her mother knew. I feel this is what the wild women always point us to. That there is really no way to journey into the deepest parts of ourselves without acknowledging the wild in some way. There is a call of the wild that each one of us has to heed. That means being willing to take risks, being willing to ask some tough questions. Not just of the world, but first of yourself. It is about self-implication at its deepest level. And yet there are rewards. The wild woman becomes the wise woman.

AK: Are you attempting a manual of Indian feminism?

AS: I am contented hanging around poems that make me happy, poems that excite me, poems that speak to me deeply, women who take my breath away. I just wish I had known of them Akshaya. They would have rescued me many times over in the past. It helps so much to know that one is not alone. That these questions are not questions that we are asking for the first time because we are so different and live in the age of information technology, and we are original. No, we are not. We are not. The very same questions, preoccupations, and bewilderments have existed all down the ages.

AK: Last question from my side. This kind of conversation is open-ended. This question might look little out of place. Is the category of ‘woman’ any longer secure?

AS: Elaborate.

AK: Because you know, we teach our students Judith Butler and all other people who say that the whole idea of sisterhood is deeply problematic, and this idea of gender and sex is implicated in all kinds of performative practices. Did you ever interrogate, or did you have the occasion to interrogate the sexual orientation of the poets you included as ‘woman poets’ in this anthology?

AS: As I say in the second section of the book, the poems that excite me are the poems that lead me to places where definitions begin to melt. Where identities begin to dissolve, where hierarchies begin to fall apart. So, there is a reason why I am drawn to those poems. We don’t know where God ends and the human begins. This is why Radha can kick Krishna out of bed. This is why Narsi Mehta, the Gujarati poet, has the Gopi tying Krishna’s arms to the bed post. She will not let him get away:

To the foot of the bed I’ll fasten your arms.

You are the gardener, I the flowering vine:
Why plant me if you will not water me?
You are the honey bee seduced by my love,
You, dying in the fragrance of my lotus heart.
To the foot of the bed
I’ll fasten your arms

All this is possible. These would seem like transgressive acts if we believed that our Gods were just meant to be worshipped at altars alone. These transgressions are possible because it is relationship of such intimacy. Rupa Bhavani, seventeenth century Kashmiri poet, she says: "On Shiva's path, becomes Shiva Himself." You are not looking any longer to simply worship the divine, you are looking to embody the divine. When that happens, you are going to be led to places where nothing makes sense. This is why all of us effortlessly understand why Bulleh Shah dresses as a woman and wears dancing bells. We know that when it comes to intimacy, anything is possible. We don't know who we are when we are in intimate relationships. I do believe that the finest female protagonists of these poems, and the finest female poets, lead us to these liminal places. Where we don't wear ourselves rigidly. We are willing to wear ourselves the way we want to wear ourselves. As an answer to that, let me read you this very short poem by my favourite from today, that is Rupa Bhavani:

I have not bowed, I never will
The one who listens
Is resplendent, within me
That is worship, that's what I do

AK: One poem I will also like to read. This is by Janabai translated by Arun Kolatkar, my all-time favourite

god, my darling
do me a favour and kill my mother-in-law

i will feel lonely when she is gone
but you will be a good god, won't you
and kill my father-in-law

i will be glad when he is gone
but you will be good god won't you
and kill my sister-in-law

i will be free when she is gone
I will pick up my begging bowl
and be on my way

let them drop dead says jani
then we will be left alone
just you and me

So, let us now have some questions, comments and observations from the alert and responsive audience here.

Audience 1: You mention that *bhakti* is a profound science of intimacy. I consider, so is poetry. But later on in the conversation, you also mention that poetry is supposed to be consumed in a way which makes you pause, sit, and not understand. So, in case something is supposed to make you feel intimate in a way, how are we supposed to consume that without understanding?

AS: I would have to write many paragraphs to explain that god can be sublime, and can be seen in the transcendent and imminent all at once. Big words. I don't think I will have to use any of these words, and you will understand it entirely. We all recognise an utterance that is borne of the heated intimacy. Where we know that a person can be master and slave, all at once. Basically, where we know that all hierarchies are redundant. Right? That's what poetry can do. It can lead you right there to a naked, wild experience of that moment without anyone having to explain to you what it is about. I think that is why poems work. It is a highly distilled utterance that takes you right there, to the heat of the moment. It speaks to you differently. You recognise and understand it without me saying anything. The poem says it much better than I ever could.

Audience 2: How do you perceive human desire? In the sensuality of these women, does sexuality also come there? How are they projecting it towards that god we are talking about?

AS: What do these poems bring? For one, they acknowledge body. They acknowledge the fact that it is fallible, finite, but that it is also capable of something miraculous. It seems not just an impediment that has to be transcended. It is an instrument of the divine. It is the very site of the sacred. It cannot be wished away or side-stepped. They bring us face to face with that body. I would say that desires, as most of know, in some way have to be confronted and acknowledged,

and only then do they undergo the fire of transformation at some point. This is essentially about deconditioning desires. So much of human desire is conditioned desire. How do we peel away all that is conditioned and speak of what is the earliest fires that we know of? Hunger, thirst, the deep greed for the other. How do we speak of those appetites? The best poetry takes us there. I would say that's where the human meets the divine, where we are no longer talking about doctored desire, and realising that what animates one part of our lives is no different from what animates another. I think peeling away centuries of conditioning is also part of the journey of any spiritual seeker.

AK: Let us fold the session, and thank the poet and editor Arundhathi for giving us a chance to have a feel of her new book *Wild Women*. We are sure that this book will trigger new debates across disciplines.