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An Indian Writer in Troubled Times

Geetanjali Shree is part of a new generation of Hindi writers that explores new directions by bringing postmodern eclecticism to themes and forms established by Hindi authors of the post-Independence generation. Although Shree has travelled widely and spent many writing hours outside of India, the main part of her work is firmly located in the subcontinent. Her novel *Mai* ('Mother', 1993) gained widespread appraisal, also because of the English translation by Nita Kumar. It is a very vivid and intimate portrait of an Indian middle-class family, composed of memories and emotional insights into the struggles and relationships of a mother with the children, and men and women in her family.

Interview >
South Asia

By Thomas de Bruijn

Hindi writing has a special niche in Indian culture today, developing as a record of intellectual life in postmodern India. Among the younger generation of Hindi writers, Shree has established herself with a considerable production: a dissertation on Premchand (*Between two Worlds*, 1989), three novels, two volumes of short stories (*Anugunj* 'Echo', 1991, and *Vairagya* 'Asceticism', 1999), stage plays, and essays. In April 2003, Shree was invited by IIAS to contribute to a one-day seminar on 'Identity'. In this article, Shree answers questions on her literary work and her other publications with wit, humour, and sincerity.

Intimacy, directness, a detailed perception of personal emotions, in a changing and uncertain contemporary social context characterize all of Geetanjali Shree's writing. Her novel *Tirohit* (2001) focuses on lives and loves conducted on the roof that becomes a metaphor for an area of transgressions where a story of forbidden friendships and loves unfolds. (In traditional Indian neighbourhoods several houses are under one common roof spanning a vast area.) The novel reaches deep into the characters' inner thoughts and emotions in a manner that is rare in Hindi fiction.

A similar emotional insight, present in the many descriptions of scenes from everyday life in *Mai* and *Tirohit*, transpires in a paper Shree presented in October 2003 at the 'Food and Emotion' workshop held at SOAS, London. She describes various perceptions of the presence and absence

of food in her own environment and the emotional experiences it invoked:

'A train journey. I was going to the toilet when I saw a young dishevelled bearded young beggar sloppily eating with his hand from a *dibba*, the kind people use in the slums to carry water to the community toilets. A foul stench ran through my nostrils into my whole body (no exaggeration to create an effect here) and as my eyes followed the source of the stench I noticed a nauseating assortment of food in the *dibba*. The beggar took no notice of me, and kept eating with a detached concentration that I've wanted to have but never achieved in my life as a writer/thinker.'

In many of Shree's works, the narratives lines are more or less fragmented. In the novel *Hamara Shahar us Baras* ('Our City That Year', 1998), this technique serves to capture the effects of political violence and polarization between communities in a university town on a group of middle-class intellectuals. The novel echoes the threatening atmosphere after the demolition of a mosque in Ayodhya and reports the disruption of life and thoughts by the riots. When asked if this 'collage' style conveys the impression the events make on the 'narrator', rather than a moral judgement, Shree remarks:

GS: 'Yes, its not moral judgement the novel seeks but a more dispassionate picture of the ways the situation is impacting – no, not the narrator – but the educated middle class characters. The 'narrator' is pretty much deadpan and

continued on page 4 >

शायद छिप-छिप के अभी भी लोग मिलते हैं? शायद हों अभी भी ऐसी औरतें जो बच्चों को स्कूल-कॉलेज भेजकर, पति को काम पर रवाना करके निकल आती हैं अपने घर से छत पर और उतर जाती हैं किसी और के घर के सुनसान दरवाजे से पीछे को निकल रिकशा लेने? नाहक। छुप के। लेबरनम हाउस के बड़े फाटक से नहीं पीछे झाड़ियों को दबाकर, लाँघकर।

लाँघना एक ऐसी क्रिया जिसमें खुशी की छलछलाहट है। लाँघो तो तन अलग, दिल अलग फड़कता है। लाँघी जाती है दीवार, झाड़ी, छत, दहलीज़, सीमा, चन्द्रमा। लाँघते ही छूटती है खिलखिल हँसी बुरके के अन्दर से, जो दबाए न दबे डरे जाए पर चिटके।

वह हँसी बिटवा तुम कभी नहीं हँसोगे। वह हँसी हँसने के लिए बिटवा तुम्हें ल, डकी होना पड़ेगा। लड़की जो हमेशा नंगी होती है। इतनी नंगी कि उसे ढेरों कप, डे चढ़ाने पड़ते हैं, परत-पे-परत, परतों-पे-परतें, और वे सारी बुरके से ढुक्नी प, डती हैं। वह नंगी लड़की जब हँसती है तब निकलती है वैसी प्यारी हँसी।

< Translation

Who knows today too, people meet in secret? Maybe there are still women, who pack off the kids to school and husband to office, and climb up from their house to the roof and down from there into another house and to its deserted back door and out, to get a rickshaw? Just so. In secret. Not from the front gate but at the back, pressing down the boundary wire and jumping over.

Jump over! An act full of thrill. Jump over and the body pulsates apart, and the heart apart. You can jump over walls, the bush, roof, thresholds, borders, the moon! The moment you jump, hee hee, tinkles of laughter escape from behind the veil, not to be repressed, terrified but spouting away.

That laughter Bitwa you will never laugh. To laugh that laugh Bitwa you will have to be a girl. A girl who is always naked. So so so naked that to cover her you have to dress her with layers and layers and more layers, and cover then all those layers with the veil. It's when that naked girl laughs that this lovely laughter bursts out!

From: Geetanjali Shree, *Tirohit*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan (2001), p.90-91. (Translation by Geetanjali Shree)

Tirohit

ized audience that regards Jhumpa Lahiri and Rushdie to be just as Indian as Premchand, Nirmal Varma, or Krishna Baldev Vaid. Nevertheless, even in its postmodern guise Hindi writing seems to hold on to the specific esthetical framework that it has developed.

ThdB: How do you see your work against this background; do you feel still bound or influenced by this tradition or did you venture out into new directions, leaving the literary past behind?

GS: 'I can only give a subjective answer: I do not feel constrained because of the connection with the so-called tradition of writing modern Indian fiction. First and foremost because I am a "true" writer/artist and freedom is what I live by! Or at least I have the illusion that I strive and reach for it. Secondly, modern Hindi literature really came up in a big way concomitant to the national movement and that gave it an origin of assertion and protest. It made it a great site for reaching out for freedom! Breaking against traditions! Creating new ones. Nothing was so sacrosanct that it must not be questioned. On the contrary. Sure, there was all that drive for writing to reform society but that's not the rigid unchangeable guideline for all writers. I would even venture to say that some of our greatest contemporaries don't fall into any such simple slot.'

ThdB: Not only did you choose Hindi instead of English, haven't you also taken a different stylistic path than the 'mainstream' Anglo-Indian authors have chosen?

GS: 'I don't see such a difference between my styles of writing and themes from Anglo-Indian writers. Our themes may be located in modern India or NRI [Non-Resident Indians] West, we are basically a generation of "modern and postmodern", eclectic, sensibility and that's our vantage point, whatever our geographical location or script. This is a generation questioning the whole notion of "purism", given its sinister political message in current India and the world, and celebrates and lives hybridity. I fear using the word.' (See box below ThdB.)

'Within this larger reality alone operate the differences there might be between different language writers. Personally, I do think a point should be made about the "sameness" of English and Hindi and other writing from India because the difference lies in the politics and power available to English over and above other languages, not in the worth and themes and styles and experimentations in either.'

ThdB: Does language, Hindi or English, matter in terms of the distance between you and your writing?

GS: 'For me and for many others it is a retrieval and reinvention in both because our colonial experience has given skewed connections to both languages. So I really feel this distance from both English and Hindi. Yet I do suspect the exploration is more fascinating in Hindi because of the "easier" terms available to succeed in English (a point that is not to be over-stressed). I am not suggesting I will succeed more easily in English but I can succeed with much less, given, for instance, world and language politics, and hype regarding images of the East. The challenge is that much less therefore. This is a point I consider very important.'

ThdB: The many changes in Indian society that transpire in your work have the effect of seriously limiting the openness and hybridity of the cultural discourse. What do you think is the future of the artist-cum-intellectual in India?

GS: 'I'll only repeat what I said about the breed of hybrid eclectic writers I belong to. That's massively related to the changes in my immediate and larger world society. I do not

continued from page 1 >

cannot differentiate on relevant, volatile, as opposed to bland, unimportant bits and 'narrates' both in the same voice creating the collage which is the novel, which the readers may pull out significant meanings from.'

'Our City, That Year' displays Shree's concerns about the impact of recent political developments in India on artistic freedom and intellectual life in general. The rise of Hindu nationalism threatens the secularist tolerance that gave post-Independence Indian cultural and intellectual life the opportunity to flourish. In an essay called 'Writing in Troubled Times: reflections of an Indian writer' Shree writes about these developments:

'The emergence of an ethos which is gradually gaining power enough to direct and control events like never before. Recent developments in India bear this out. Gujarat, the text book controversy, the Simla Institute episode, the painting of Saraswati by Hussain, the stalling of Bhupen Khakkar's exhibition for its explicit homosexuality, and just a few days ago an injunction that Indian girls may not wear the low-cut, waist revealing, hipster jeans in fashion today. An ethos more threatening because it is fast installing itself at the centre. Among the biggest casualty in this growing rigidity and narrowness are social relations. State-sponsored wedges are driven between religious communities, as, for instance between the Hindus and the Muslims and now the Christians too.'

In these 'troubled times' new Hindi writers have a special position in Indian culture. On the one hand they connect with a prestigious tradition in Indian writing. The rise of Hindi was an important medium in the struggle for freedom from colonial rule. Also, in the period after Independence, it reflected developments in modern Indian culture. Hindi writers of today write for a small but well-educated and global-

About the hybrid By Geetanjali Shree

It's a concept which means a lot to my kind and indeed it is the space we work in, the space in fact which is most vibrant and full of experimentation, retrievals, and innovation. I fear using the term only when I think of the academic definitions of it. Because then I worry that it is linked to a Western-derived notion of identity as a bounded entity as opposed to a more free-flowing, multi-cultural, pluralistic entity that our society still knows and which I am talking about. I am not trying to blame the West; I am only saying that concomitant to the emergence of modern nation formations, a certain notion of the self emerged which, whether as 'pure' or 'hybrid', whatever it chose over the other, relied on the notion of a 'closed' identity. Perhaps it has also to do with the Enlightenment and its stress on the rational and the scientific. The 'Eastern' in me believes as much in the irrational, intuitive, ritualistic, 'constructed', richly make-believe world with all its open-endedness as does the artist/writer in me which does not fancy one bit a well-defined, neatly out-lined being! So niggle about definitions we can but hybridity and eclecticism both belong to and make very much my world. With the political imperative in today's 'fundamentalist' world, East and West, adding to their worth. <



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know what to say about my future or any artist-intellectuals' future in this world. It's a mixed bag: there are enough instances of dwindling support for them in fields such as social sciences and literature, but there are also the new spaces created by the drive for respect and equality of different 'cultures' making for coverage in the media, the awards, the study of other languages and literatures.'

ThdB: Although it would do you no justice to call you a 'feminist writer', the women in your work are key figures, and you expose much of the inner life of Indian women through them. How do you construct the women in your work?

GS: 'Because I am a woman I have an inbuilt empathy for women. Naturally they creep into my work. But the challenge for me lies also in "imagining" other creatures sympathetically and I'll always try to do that. Provided that it doesn't change as I work along, my next novel is plot-centred around two men.' <

Dr Thomas de Bruijn is a specialist in early and modern Hindi and Urdu literature. He was the Guest Editor for the special theme issue on South Asian Literature in IIAS Newsletter 21, and was an affiliated fellow with the IIAS.
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Hamara shahar us baras

यही जगह है। हमारा शहर।

घबराकर जिस शहर में निकल गए थे वे तीन कि अपराध और अपराधी, घायल और मुर्दे, सबको निकाल लाएंगे। साफ-साफ देख लेंगे और जैसा साफ देख लेंगे वैसा ही साफ दिखा देंगे। शरद, श्रुति और हनीफ जिन्होंने ठान लिया था कि लिखेंगे। कि इस वक्त चुप नहीं रहा जा सकता। सबकुच खोलकर रख देना है। कि जो हवा चल रही है वह हवा नहीं, बवंडर है; जो हमें कहीं उखाड़ न दे।

बारिश हो रही है। ट्रेन से उतरकर श्रुति प्लेटफॉर्म पर खड़ी है। एक थरथराहट भरी बेचैनी उसके पैरों के नीचे से गुजरकर ट्रेन के साथ-साथ निकल जाती है। लोग गिरते-पड़ते, भीगते बाहर को सवारियाँ ढूँढ़ने दौड़ गये हैं। शहर के गाय और कुत्ते पानी टपकाते प्लेटफॉर्म पर सुस्ताने चले आए हैं। पानी पटरियों की तरफ रुक करके बह रहा है। वीराना है।

उस बरस एक बार सड़कों पर ऐसी ही नदियाँ बहने लगी थीं, पर वह बारिश नहीं थी, टकियों का पानी था, जो मुहल्लों के मुल्लों ने जहर के डर से खोलकर बहा दिया था। शरद दूर से उसे पहचानकर बढ़ा। वह खड़ी रही, अकेली, इंतजार करती। दोनों आमने-सामने आ गए हैं। उनके चेहरे उन्के शब्दों में उलझकर अजीब बंधी जकड़ी चुप्पी पैदा कर रहे हैं। वे सँभले कदमों से बाहर आ गए।

तीनों समझते थे कि सबकुच वहीं बाहर था, जो हमें इतना भयभीत और व्याकुल कर रहा था। उन्हीं का डर था, जो मुझमें भी भर गया था। मैं घबराने लगी। वे लिखने की कोशिश करते और बीच में छोड़ देते। अपने लिखे को खोखिला पाते और कहते, 'सब रटी-रटाई बातें हैं, जिनको लिखने से कुछ नहीं होगा'; क्योंकि वे हर तरफ नकारी जा रही हैं। सरकारी नारों की तरह बेमतलब हो चुकी हैं। तब मुझे लगा था कि कुछ तो करना ही पड़ेगा। कैसे भी हो, लिखना तो पड़ेगा। चाहे समझें या न समझें। और वे न सही, जिनमें से एक पेशेवर लेखिका थी और दो बुद्धजीवी, तो मैं ही सही, जो बस नकलकर्ता हो सकती थी।

उस वक्त में कुछ ऐसा नहीं था कि साफ दो टूक बात कही जाए। तभी मैं लिख सकी, जिसे न दो टूक कहने का तजुर्बा था, न हठ। नकल उतारने को अगर लिखना कहे तो मैं बस वही कर रही थी। वहीं कर सकती थी। इनके पीछे-पीछे रहकर जो टुकड़े उठ आए, उठा लूँ। जो, जहाँ मेरी नजर में पड़ जाए।

मेरी नजर के आगे वही घर है, वही फाटक, वही लेटरबॉक्स। उसका पल्ला खुल गया है और बारिश की सतत बूँदे उसे हिला रही हैं। श्रुति फाटक पर ठिठक गई है। उसकी चप्पले ही नहीं पैर भी, टखनों तक भीग गए हैं। शरद ने फाटक खोला। घर के सामने की खुली जगह में जंगली घास भर गई है।

वहाँ एक मधुमालती की लतर हुआ करती थी, जिसके नीचे गुलाबी मसूड़ों पर सफ़ेद दाँतों की कतार देखकर अजीब मतली-सी आई थी और मेरा कलम मेरे हाथ से छूटकर उसी के पास जा छिटका था। बाद में मैंने सोचा भी कि क्यों नहीं उन्हें देखकर मुझे मधुमालती के गुलाबी और सफ़ेद फूल याद आए? उल्टे मधुमालती के फूलों को देखकर हमेशा वही गुलाबी मसूड़े और सफ़ेद दाँत याद आ जाते और उबकाई-सी आती। न ही उन्हें देखकर वह सुंदर सेहतपूर्ण हँसी याद आई, जो पूरे चेहरे को खिला देती थी। वह

This is the place. Our city.

The city the three of them scrambled out in, in a panic, to nab the guilt and the guilty, the injured and the dead, all and all. To see clearly and so show clearly. Sharad, Shruiti, Hanif, who had decided they would write. For it was not a time to keep quiet. For it was a time to show it all out. For the wind that was blowing was no breeze but a typhoon. Which, who can tell, may uproot us all? Its raining. Shruiti gets off the train and stands on the platform.

It is raining. Shruiti steps from the train and stands on the platform. A restlessness vibrates under her as the train screeches past. People running helter skelter, drenched, competing to get transport. The town's cows, dogs, and goats showering raindrops, seeking shelter on the platform. The water flowing down on to the rails. Its grey, bleak.

That year similar rivulets flowed on the

roads once, but, that was not rain but water from overhead tanks which entire neighbourhoods had released for fear it was poisoned.

Sharad hurries up on seeing her. She stands, alone, expectant. They are now face to face. Their faces entangled in their words and forming tight bonded silences. They walk out with careful steps.

The three thought that everything was out there, which was terrifying and unsettling us so. It was their fears that got into me. They tried to write and abandoned it midway. Sick at the hollowness of their words, words which are repeated ad nauseum and will bring about nothing by being written; because they just go around uselessly. They ended up being meaningless like official slogans. That's when I felt something has to be done. Somehow something has to be written. With or without comprehension. And if they won't, one a professional writer and

two professional intellectuals, then I, a mere copier, will.

There was nothing such in that time which could be stated in neat. That is why I could write, who neither cared nor could be neat and clear. If copying is writing then I was writing. All I could do. Shadow them and pick up whatever bits and pieces I could. Wherever I spot any.

I spot again that house. That gate, that letterbox. Its flapped open and incessant rain makes it quiver. Shruiti stops at the gate. Her slippers and ankles too are soaked. Sharad pushes the gate open. The front yard full of weeds.

That's where the Madhumalti creeper used to be and seeing under its pink and white flowers the white teeth on pink dentures, puke had filled my throat and my pen had flown out of my hand. Later I asked myself why I didn't think of Madhumalti flowers on seeing the dentures? Why instead, whenever I saw Madhumalti flowers I always saw again those dentures and felt pukey. Nor, on seeing them, did I remember that wide merry laugh which shone up the entire face. They, the dentures, fallen on dust, torn away from the laughter, became some mere revolting shape, nothing to do with the person or personality they belonged to. Daddu always said, cage an identity within sharply marked outlines and it'll no longer be a person but some mere lifeless cut-out. That a person was the radiance flowing out of a body and spreading and lighting up the open, suffusing in its glow everything. Try closing the glow in a sharp defined shape that you can then see it clear then the light will just switch off and a lifeless cut-out remain. A cancerous piece of flesh.

But pieces are all I could pick up. The time was wrong, even had I the skills, to fill in blanks and find linkages. No leisure. Just, quick quick panic panic, copy copy. Even if a bit of here gets copied there, an irrelevance reported, a bit from there leaking here, never mind. When life itself was a 'collage', in which, like after a bomb explosion, bits fly all around and get stuck in absurd new unions, where was the respite from broken, incomplete pieces? Now ever heard of cauliflower bumper crop in a field of corpses? Then hear it now. There was in our city that year. And ever heard that such shining white tight fresh cauliflowers find no takers? That too in our city, in that year. Just such things, no head or tail and not up to me to join together like a jigsaw and make recognizable. Just pieces, the worth of which I could gauge not, nor wanted to. That was not my concern, only copying was. From the start, me, a copier. From the start? I don't know. For no one knew where the start was. But from where their panic got into me so that I flung out a hand and pulled up some paper and opened my pen in this air so smoky and dusty and resolved if not you then me I'll write that is copy whatever is said or shows that is what falls on my ears and in my eyes and if not with understanding even without just write. For it had to be written – about our town that year. Someone had to be witness. And who knows even the garbled speech of the idiot has sense in it. And who knows there shall be years other than that one? Like maybe this, in which Shruiti is standing and Sharad makes to pull her indoors.

From: Geetanjali Shree, *Hamara shahar us baras*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan (1998), p.7-8. Translation by Geetanjali Shree.

धूल में पड़े, हँसी की सारी सुंदरता को बेआबरू करते एक धिनौना आकार भर हो गए, चेहरे की सारी शक्तिशयत को भुलाते, उस इनसान के सारे अस्तित्व को गायब करते। दहू कहते थे कि पहचान नहीं, बेकार बेजान कट-आउट रह जाएगा, कि पहचान तो बाहर फूटती और फैलती और खुले में विचरती, हर चीज से लिपटती, घुलती, रोशनी है, जिसे किसी टुकड़े में बंद करोगे कि विशुद्ध अस्तित्व बनेगा तो बस बुझ जाएगी और मरा हुआ आकार रह जाएगा। मांस का धिनौना लोथ।

मगर मैं तो टुकड़े ही उठाती रही। वक्त नहीं था, सलाहियत की छोड़िए, कि बीच के हिस्से भरूँ, जोड़ती कड़ियाँ तलाशूँ। किसी भी चीज को इत्मीनान से करने का वक्त नहीं था। बस, डरते-डरते, जल्दी-जल्दी, इनकी काँपी करती गई थी। चाहे इधर का उधर लिखा जाए, गौर ज़रूरी कलम में खिंच आए, यहाँ का टुकड़ा वहाँ चस्पॉ कर जाऊँ। जब जीवन ही 'कोलाज' बन गया था, जिसमें बम के विस्फोट से जैसे, कतरे उछलते हैं और इस जगह के उस जगह जा चिपकते हैं, निहायत बेतुकी आकृतियाँ गढ़ते, तो अधूरे बिखरे टूटे से आखिर बचाव था ही कहाँ?

अब लाशों के खेत में गोभी की फ़सल सुने हो कभी?

तो सुन लो।

थी हमारे शहर में उस बरस।

और सुने हो कभी कि ऐसी सफ़ेद, तर्रोताज़ा, गठे जिस्मवाली गोभी कौड़ियों के दाम भी न बिके?

सो भी हमारे ही शहर की बात, उसी बरस की बात।

ऐसी ही बातें थीं, जिनका न सिर, न पैर और मेरे बस का नहीं था कि टुकड़ों को जोड़-जाड़कर असल सूरत दिखाऊँ। बस, टुकड़े ही थे, जिनकी वक्त न मैं आँक सकती थी, न मुझे आँकना ही था। वह मेरा ठेका नहीं था। बस काँपी करना था।

शुरू से ही मैं नकलकर्ता रही हूँ।

शुरू से, कि नहीं, पता नहीं; क्योंकि यह किसी को नहीं पता था कि शुरू कहाँ है। पर वहाँ से जहाँ से उनकी घबराहट से डरकर मैंने झपटकर कागज़ खींचा, कलम खोला और धूल धुएँ के मौसम में जुट गई कि तुम नहीं तो मैं ही लिखती हूँ, यानी तुम्हारी ही काँपी करती हूँ, जो बोलो, देखो, कहो, यानी जो-जो मैं पकड़ लूँ, और समझ के नहीं तो बिना समझे ही लिखती हूँ।

क्योंकि लिखना तो था ही उस बरस और शहर के बारे में।

किसी न किसी को तो गवाह बनना था।

और क्या मालूम नासमझ की अनर्गल वाणी में सार हो...क्या पता उस बरस के बाद बरस और भी हों...

जैसे शायद यह, जिसमें श्रुति खड़ी है और शरद उसे अंदर खींचकर दरवाज़े की साँकल और जंजीर लगा देता है।