Reading, Writing and the Contours of Power: Mridula Koshy Speaks to Maryam Mirza

Described by the poet and novelist Jeet Thayil as ‘an extraordinary Indian moralist with an unmistakable gift’, Mridula Koshy is the author of several short stories and two novels. She was awarded the 2009 Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize for her collection of short stories *If It Is Sweet* (Tranquabar Press, 2009; Brass Monkey, 2011), which was also shortlisted for the Vodafone Crossword Book Award. Her debut novel *Not Only the Things That Have Happened* (HarperCollins, 2012) was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award in 2013; her latest novel is entitled *Bicycle Dreaming* (Speaking Tiger Publishing, 2016). Mridula Koshy’s short stories have appeared in journals such as *Wasafiri, The Dalhousie Review* and *Existere*.

Born in India, Mridula Koshy moved to the United States as a teenager where she lived for twenty years before returning to her country of birth. She now resides in New Delhi and is the co-founder of The Community Library Project. In this interview with Maryam Mirza, Mridula Koshy discusses the pressing impulses, themes and causes that have animated her life as a writer and community worker.

**Maryam Mirza (MM):** Ms. Koshy, did you always want to be a writer? I believe you have had numerous, fairly disparate, jobs in the past.

**Mridula Koshy (MK):** No, I have not always wanted to be a writer. Although yes, I have been told from an early age that I would-should become a writer. And this was because my grand aunt was a poet. Chief among the reasons I feared this idea that writing was something you inherit was the lack of agency. A gift visited on you is a gift that can be
withdrawn as easily. I feared and avoided writing because I was certain that anything I wrote would be evidence that I wasn’t a writer.

When I began writing it was somewhat reluctantly in response to a move to Delhi, a city I had left twenty years in the past. I had no other means to figure out how to be a part of the collective thinking of this city other than by writing. Subsequently I have always thought of writing as something you do, like any other work, and of course as something you struggle to do well. I don’t subscribe to the idea of talent.

MM: While your debut novel was published in 2012, you have been writing short fiction for much longer. This is perhaps an unfair question, but which one among your many short stories is your favourite and why?

MK: I don’t have a favourite short story, but some of them mean more to me than others. “The Good Mother” was written at a time when I was going from being the mother of two to the mother of three - a death of sorts of the two, which I then treated literally and literarily. Most of the time my stories are about images and ideas that I see out there in the world. The stories that mean more to me are the one that deal with things I am working out within myself. Similarly, I feel close to the emotions of the story, “Passage”. I woke up one morning and there was an email from my brother-in-law. My sister had been hospitalised. She is alive and well today but I wrote the story to figure out how I would have dealt with the grief if I had lost her. To my surprise the story ended with the narrator’s husband comforting her. I suppose that’s what I think would happen to me. Would I be comforted? I still don’t know. A story can tell you a lot but it also ultimately apart from you.

MM: Do you know how a story will end before you put pen to paper, or fingertips to keyboard?

MK: Yes, I almost always know. Whatever idea I am working with is the end of the story I then set out to write. Most of the time I write because I have felt something confounding or seen something amazing, often an image, sometimes a feeling, and this image or emotion is something I want to hold and turn in my hand, to examine and understand it. I want above all to experience it again. Writing allows me to do that. I write to get back to that moment and so, of course, that moment is the end of a story I am writing.

MM: How has your return to India from the United States shaped the direction that your writing has taken over the last few years?

MK: I no longer write. I wrote to join the conversation about who we are in India and in the
world. I have been frustrated to see that in India literature is the purview of the few. The many are excluded from it. How or why would I write under these circumstances. All the bemoaning about ‘people’ no longer reading refers only to the select who are viewed as ‘people.’ Those who have for centuries been forbidden literacy on pain of punishment - Dalits and lower caste citizens - and those who are taught poorly in schools so that they are literate but not fluent - the working class - are the majority of Indians. In a country of over a billion people an English language best seller is a book that sells 5000 copies. Most recently my contribution to literature in India has taken the form of working with others in the library movement. Libraries that are free and open to all are sorely missing in India. My work with The Community Library Project addresses this gap by running two free libraries and networking with dozens more spread around the country.

MM: Are there any contemporary South Asian writers (diasporic or otherwise) with whose style or thematic preoccupations you feel a particular affinity?

MK: It is difficult not only for me but for many others who write in South Asia to feel that connection to another writer, to feel that we are writing with or against another. This is because we are few and our interests are necessarily divergent as we try to cover the vast swathes of what needs to be covered thematically. Contemporary Indian literature in English is a series of small points of light in the dark -- dim and distant from one another. Literature in a few of the other Indian languages fares only a little better. The many points of light that could have been were never realised because those who could-should have been writing have been excluded from it.

That said there some writers whose voices resonate for me and whose thematic preoccupations I share. To name a few: Rajathi Salma, P Sivakami, Benyamin. And I admire too many writers to name here.

MM: Your work often examines the multi-layered contours of grief and trauma, but does not disallow the possibility of humour. I’m thinking, for instance, of the second half of the novel Not Only The Things That Have Happened which grapples with a seven-year-old boy’s harrowing journey first from Kerala to New Delhi, and then to the US. In Chapter 5, you have poignantly portrayed Madhu/Asa’s first day in Los Angeles with his adoptive family, where we see him wailing almost unremittingly, feverish and unable to sleep. Shell-shocked as he is, as Madhu furtively watches his new sisters, and he has four, he observes, ‘she is supposed to be one of his sisters […] What a disappointment to produce girl after girl […] The other two sisters come into the room […] This one will get married soon. She should. She looks
old and tired.’ Do you find it challenging to weave humour and irony into representations of deeply distressing human situations such as Madhu’s?

**MK:** Humour is a great way to show multiple perspectives. What is funny to Madhu would never be seen as funny by the Gardners. We readers can see both perspectives. Fiction depends on such devices to achieve its greatest accomplishment - fluid movement of readers’ sympathy from one character to the next and ultimately the ability to hold opposite truths without fracturing the universe.

Humour is also about resilience. And resilience is a powerful idea, which I want to convey in my writing.

**MM:** Please tell us about your interest in the theme of (transnational) adoption which, in addition to *Not Only The Things That Have Happened*, you have explored in the short story “Jane Eyre”.

**MK:** I am interested in literature as one space in which power difference and corruption can be addressed. Good literature has always been literature committed to examining how we structure our lives and the ideas to which we subscribe.

In any relationship, a power difference creates the possibility of exploitation. In an adoption, the child by virtue of being a child, the biological mother by virtue of being poor and disenfranchised are at the mercy of the adoptive family. Add to this the power difference between the state and the individual, between the countries that adopt and the countries from which children are adopted, you have a potent mix designed to oppress. Children of the poor, children of the poor nations, children of nations at war are transported across the world and removed from their parents, families, language, religion, culture all in the name of saving them. There is the fiction that they are orphans and an additional fiction that this is the way to save them. For the individual adoptee these multiple fictions add up to psychic harm. Adoption as an institution is known to be rife with corruption of the kind practiced by middle men who coerce biological parents to relinquish their children. Various legal structures are put in place to address this corruption. But in the end such corruption cannot be addressed completely and satisfactorily. I contend the institution is itself corrupt in its embrace of the inequality built into the triad - adoptive parent, biological parent and child/adoptee.

**MM:** Your work is peopled by a vast array of “subaltern” characters, such as refuse collectors, working-class single mothers and domestic workers, but you also often also endow them with the determination to put up a spirited fight. One such character is Aruna, the protagonist of your short story
“Almost Valentine’s Day”. As a lower-class Indian immigrant in the US, Aruna does not hesitate from resorting to manipulation and blackmail to secure her future. How do you conceive of subaltern agency and resistance?

**MK:** People resist injustice. Resistance is defining for people. This resistance can be collective or individual. Fiction as an art form can be quite restrictive of the attempt to tell a collective story, a people’s story, while excelling at the story of the individual. I haven’t the skill, craft or art to tell the story I would really like to tell, i.e. the story of the collective. However, I was pleased with “Almost Valentine’s Day”. My protagonist is sneaky, maybe even a little unlikable and often baffling to me as a writer and reader. But resistance is like that: simultaneously necessary and baffling in that it even takes place. Why don’t people take their beating lying down? Why are the beaten so hell bent on finding the interstices that allow them to fight back, to breathe? It seems to me that in my writing I am expressing the possibility that people aren’t necessarily noble or courageous in their resistance to injustice, but yes, they are resistant. By any means necessary is one way to look at subaltern struggle.

**MM:** Would you agree that a major ‘character’ in some of your works of fiction, including the short story “Romancing the Koodawalla”, is the bustling Indian metropolis, a place which is at once terrifying and full of possibilities, especially with respect to how intimate relationships are imagined and lived?

**MK:** I have lived in a couple of very different cultures in my life: the American culture and the Indian. The latter is more pluralistic in its outlook, more embracing of contradictions than the former. However, the same fascistic tendencies in politics is present in both countries and their governments: both are characterised by powerful states that embrace surveillance, enforce homogeneity and nationalism through the instrument of the police and the military. Having seen differences and similarities within two cultures, I do not make the assumption that the status quo is given. People exercise choice at every turn, individually and collectively. My narratives are about such choices.

The metropolis of Delhi figures strongly in my first book and again in my third. It is a place where people from different classes and different levels of power and powerlessness live in close proximity to one another. Delhi is especially fascinating for the way in which the powerful and the powerless share household space. The contradictions of their lives are laid bare in such intimacy. As is the understanding that power is mediated in these characters’ lives through class, or gender or caste. I think about a writer like Ian McEwan who must either hope for an accident or go to great lengths to contrive to bring an upper middle class character in contact with a working class character. So in his novel *Saturday* the first contact between neurosurgeon Perowne and the working class Baxter is through a collision in traffic.
Later Baxter rather unbelievably invades Perowne’s home, holds the family hostage, attempts to kidnap Perowne’s daughter etc. In Delhi characters meet across class and caste lines without recourse to accidents and kidnappings. In the first world much of what would previously have been described as domestic work is rendered invisible. Food is cooked, packaged etc. elsewhere and the middle and upper class consume it without seeing those who have prepared it. This is not so in Delhi. This proximity is what I focused on in my writing. Much of what I write about is the intimacy of small moments within the context of this proximity. In my story “Today is the Day”, the narrator, a little boy is a servant in a household. He sleeps on the floor by an elderly member of the household who he asks what he should do in the event of a fire. She tells him to save himself. I find such moments between people explosive. This intimacy in which a character is laid bare to another is more powerful and more sustainable than grander narratives, for example the narrative of love across class and caste lines. Other writers who have concerned themselves with this narrative have dealt with the impossibility of such love by killing off their characters, which is rather problematic for the argument of resilience with which my writing is concerned. So Velutha in The God of Small Things is killed off and so Robbie and Cecilia are dead in McEwan’s Atonement.

MM: You are actively involved in The Community Library Project in New Delhi. Can you please tell us more about this initiative?

MK: All over India, organisations and people are engaged in debating the purpose and need for minimal literacy versus the need for fluency in reading and the attendant access to books as a powerful tool for thinking. We hear from the government and from non-governmental organisations that we are a poor country and it is best to confine our limited resources to education that produces a skilled workforce. We hear from multinational corporations and other international authorities that literacy must include digital literacy. They are interested in India for the cheap labour pool it provides. In the future this labour pool will have possess some digital fluency. India as an unthinking market is another attraction.

Some of us are interested in building a citizenry that is more than an obedient workforce and market. A publicly owned and operated library system that allows people access to free books and builds their fluency as readers and thinkers is key to developing citizenship that is empowered by its ability to think critically.

Having said all that, which sounds lofty to me and must sound lofty to the reader, I will add that the group of us who created The Community Library Project are realistic folk who run two small libraries in the National Capital Region (New Delhi). The libraries are free and open to all, and owned and operated by its members. It is a small revolution that allies with
similar libraries throughout the country to create a larger revolution. An open door, a warm
welcome and a rich collection of books and a rich ecosystem of programming ensures
thousands of our poorest citizens are reading and thinking in New Delhi. They are children
who will soon enough be adults. Member ownership and leadership in the library means that
this will be a generational project that not only equips its members with books and reading
but also with politics that allows them to continue as adults to raise the issue of access to
books. We are building a library movement, thankfully not alone, but rather in partnership
with dozens of other library leaders.

**MM:** In what ways has your activism informed your fiction, and vice versa?

**MK:** I talked a little bit about resilience in my answer to an earlier question. My activism has
put me in close touch with this resilience. It is from my activism that I derived the need to
portray the resilience of my characters. In my home, we have a wonderful Woody Guthrie
quote on a poster. He talks about not wanting to write the ‘kind {of songs} that knock you
down.’ I too don't want to write that kind of ‘no good song.’ Instead, my stories are like
Guthrie’s songs, interested in saying ‘to you that this is your world.’

**MM:** Ms. Koshy, thank you very much.