Professor Bashabi Fraser in Conversation

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Bashabi Fraser (1954-)

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Professor Bashabi Fraser is a poet, children's writer, translator, critic and editor. Her poetry collections are *Thali Katori: An Anthology of Scottish South Asian Studies* (Co-edited with Alan Riach; 2017), *The Homing Bird* (2017), *Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers* (2015), *Ragas & Reels* (2012), *From the Ganga to the Tay* (2009), *Tartan & Turban* (2004), *Just One Diwali Night* (2004), *Topsy-Turvy* (2004), *Rainbow World: Poems from Many Cultures* (Co-edited with Debjani Chatterjee; 2003), *With Best Wishes from Edinburgh* (2001), *Edinburgh: An Intimate City* (Co-edited with Elaine Greig; 2000) and *Life* (1997). Her other books are *Scots Beneath the Banyan Tree: Stories from Bengal* (2012), *Peoples of Edinburgh: Methodology and Evaluation* (Co-edited with Helen Clark and Joyce Connon; 1999), and *Peoples of Edinburgh: Our Multicultural City, Personal Narratives, Experiences and Photographs* (Co-edited with Helen Clark and Lorraine Dick; 1996). Some of her critical works are *Rabindranath Tagore's Global Vision* (Guest Edited for *Literature Compass*, a Wiley-Blackwell publication (2015), *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter* (2006; 2008, with a British Academy Research Grant) and *A Meeting of Two Minds: The Geddes Tagore Letters* (2005, with a Moray Foundation Grant).

The outcome of her recent UK-India Educational Research Initiative (UKIERI), a funded research project in collaboration with Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan is in two co-edited publications: *A Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment* (2017) and *Scottish Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Continuum of Ideas* (2017). Her recent book, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Critical Biography* is in press (London: Reaktion Books). Bashabi is Editor-in-Chief of the international peer-reviewed open-access academic and creative e-journal, *Gitanjali and Beyond.*

Her awards include the Word Masala Foundation Award for Excellence in Poetry (2017), a special felicitation as a poet by the Public Relations Society of India International Women's Day in March 2017, Outstanding Woman of Scotland on the 2015 list by Saltire Society, the Rabindra Bharati Society Honour for promoting Tagore Studies in Europe in 2014, Women Empowered: Arts and Culture Award in 2010 and the AIO Prize for Literary Services in Scotland in 2009.

Her research interests cover Postcolonial Literature and Theory, Diaspora, Migration and Transnationalism, Tagore Studies, the Indian Partition, Personal Narratives and Oral History, and Creative Writing and Practice. She is working on the personal narratives of Scots in India. In her research and publications she explores the intermeshing of culture and identity, dislocation and relocation, otherness and belonging, memory and nostalgia, and conflicts and freedoms.

She is a Patron for the Federation of Writers in Scotland, a Council member of the Association of Scottish Literary Studies (ASLS), an executive committee member of Scottish PEN, Writers at Risk Committee (Scotland) and the Poetry Association of Scotland. She is a Trustee of the Kolkata Scottish Heritage Trust, a Director on the Board of the Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust,

an Ambassador for the Workers Educational Association (WEA), Scotland, and is on the Management Committee of the Scottish Association of Writers. She is now involved in celebrating the UK-India Year of Culture, 2017-2018.

A doctorate in English Literature, Bashabi Fraser, is a Professor of English and Creative Writing and co-founder and Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs) at Edinburgh Napier University, UK. She is an Honorary Fellow at the Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh. She is also a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and has been an Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) International Research Fellow (2016-2017), writing on Rabindranath Tagore.

Bashabi Fraser's poetry is the source of "light where the sun sets" and "an offering of love and devotion" (*Letters* 93, 101). Fraser's poetry authenticates her formidable creativity and apt awareness as a "progressive writer" (Hasan xiii) of the Indian diaspora exploring the "cultural roots and commitment to the enduring earth and unravel the fathomless depths pertinent within the "micropolitics of everyday living in an urban environment" (Dasgupta). Her poetry is characterised by the "immediate joy of [her] own soul" and "is saved from all doubts and fears" to state vividly the affairs of day as "the consciousness of the real seeks the corroboration with the touch of the real" (Tagore 21) outside the poet. Bashabi Fraser's poetry contributes towards the creation of a space of togetherness, unity, association and understanding. It makes us feel at India as well as at Scotland.

This interview traverses the mind of the poet, and explores the entelechy involved in her creative participation. Through Bashabi Fraser's observations we are able to discover her myriad experiences as a poet and a critic which interrogate boundaries and harmoniously connect her two homes – India and Scotland with the World. The interview emphasises the spirit of cosmopolitanism which is necessary for humanity to imbibe within itself in order to feel the immortal immersed in life, Rabindranath Tagore's "Jiban Debata." Fraser's creativity is enmeshed with the spirit of freedom which is the fountain of progress for the human civilisation, well reflected through her poetry and perspective.

As an established poet, please can you share with us your first experiences on writing and how it all began?

As a little girl I had accompanied my parents to London where they went to do research at the London School of Economics (LSE). My father was a Commonwealth Scholar and my mother had an LSE scholarship. As scholars from India, the British Council took responsibility for them, and the officer who was in charge of Indian scholars was Julian Dakin, a very tall blonde man

with intense blue eyes which reflected his innate kindness and goodness. At that time, I thought Julian was my friend as he came to our house regularly. Later, I realised that Julian was a very close friend of my parents. Julian bought books for me and read them with me. I started writing poetry for Julian and he took some of them with him. One day he came back with the Commonwealth Scholar Journal and showed it to my parents. It had three of my poems written when I was 7 years old, which had won the Commonwealth Scholar first prize that year. My parents were astounded as they had no idea that I wrote poetry. That was the beginning of my journey as a poet. Children learn languages as quickly as they forget them. In London, I had forgotten Bengali as I did not hear it around me, since ours was the only non-English family in our London neighbourhood. The only language I knew then was English, which has remained my language of creative expression since.

You have written more of creative verse than prose. What do you feel regarding writing poetry? How is it associated with your life?

Poetry has been my first love. For a long time, whenever I was asked to write something, I always wrote in verse; I could not write in prose. For me, poetry reflects the rhythm of life itself and is its very essence. It permeates every fold of my life and I have always carried a poem with me. As a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Dundee University when I was asked to write what poetry meant to me, I wrote, "Poetry can be my angry response to social injustice or political ineptitude. It can be the outlet for dealing with strong emotion or deep depression. It can be an explorer's tool, a formidable weapon, an artist's brush. I enjoy the method it demands, the epiphanic moments it offers and above all, the joy of identifying words that crowd and jostle round me, which can be captured to express elusive thoughts in a form that contains the meaning – forever – for me."

Your debut collection of poems Life *was published in 1997 by Diehard Publishers, Edinburgh. It marked the beginning of a poetic journey. Today after a long, widely recognised poetic career, how do you look back to* Life*? An Indian edition of this book was published by Writers Workshop in 2001 and it was known as* With Best Wishes from Edinburgh. *How do the poems of these two collections signify the beginning of your poetic career?*

I was very unsure about the quality of my writing, which is why I did not attempt to bring out a collection for a long time, though I had won prizes for poetry while I was growing up and had poems published in journals and anthologies as an adult. My friend, the late Angus Calder, a poet, critic, historian and academic insisted that I publish my work and arranged for me to meet Sally Evans of Diehard Publishers, who went through my file and said she would

publish my work. I was unknown then, so it was very brave of Sally to do so. *Life* was launched at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 1997 to mark the 50th anniversary of India Independence by Dr Singhvi, the then High Commissioner of India. It had some good reviews in British journals, got me registered with the Live Literature Scotland list of writers as a poet and helped me start my journey as a British Indian poet. Having the Writers Workshop publish *Life* as an Indian edition titled *With Best Wishes from Edinburgh*, was like an endorsement from my country of birth. Also, many leading poets who write in English in India have been published by Writers Workshop, so it was good to be part of the Indian poets' family. It was a pleasure to work with Professor Purushottam Lal on this publication project, and both he and Mrs Lal were affectionate supporters of my poetry. That was my homecoming as a poet.

How is the home and the world blended in Life *or* With Best Wishes From Edinburgh*?*

Life/With Best Wishes from Edinburgh voices my British-Indian experience, humbled by the Himalayan grandeur, drenched by India's Monsoons, haunted by London's streets and caressed by snow on Scottish Highlands. The two editions reflect on Indian and global politics and violence, on the plight of women and on love, freedom(s) and the world of nature, on my personal experiences and responses to local and global concerns.

Your co-edited anthology Rainbow World *(2003) is a collection of poems from many cultures rich in colour, astounding melange and pure beauty What was your mission in publishing this anthology of poems which draws the attention of a sensitive heart?*

I was invited by Hodder Publishers in London to a meeting where the commissioning editor invited me to edit an anthology of poetry from around the world for children to be used in primary schools, public libraries and with young reading groups. It would be a treasure trove of poems which children could identify with as part of their many cultures, poems which spoke about cultural journeys, of multiple experiences of food, costumes, festivals and opened up the imagination to the rich diversity of the world. I invited the poet, Debjani Chatterjee to co-edit the book with me and Hodder commissioned us to do it. It was great fun choosing poems for the anthology and editing *Rainbow World*, and the illustrations were as vibrant as the voices of the poets. The book sold over 6 thousand copies and went into several prints.

Your Topsy Turvy *(2004) and* Just One Diwali Night *(2004) appeal to me both as children's literature as well as vignettes of magic realism. As an established poet and a creative writer what are your observations on creativity and children's literature?*

As a little girl, I devoured children's classics like *Pinocchio*, *Black Beauty*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, *Heidi, Peter Pan, The Wizard of Oz,* and *Wind in the Willows*. I loved the magic world in these books, the talking animals, the love of open spaces and natural landscapes and the play with language. I could immerse myself in this children's world of the imagination and lose myself. It could be interrupted by disappointments, loss, violence and even cruelty, but at the end of the day, innocence and goodness won, and there was always the solace of returning home, and as Dorothy says at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, "There is no place like home."

Being bilingual gave me the privilege of reading Bengali children's literature. It was a joy to read Sukumar Roy's nonsense rhymes, encounter his eccentric characters, experience their adventures and enjoy the play with words. I read fairy tales in *Thakumar Jhuli* and *Thakurdar Jhuli* where the world of threatening towering rakshasas did not cower princes from saving sleeping princesses. Adventure stories like *Dersho Khokar Kando* were gripping and children's magazines like *Sandesh* and *Shuktara* were a joy to look forward to. I read and acted in Rabindranath Tagore's plays like *Abak Jalpan* where the humour weaves round a pun, the irony and wry humour of his many skit-like plays in *Hasya Koutuk* and *Dakghar* (The Post Office) where a sensitive sick boy's love of life, his urge to travel and see places and his ability to identify with people from all walks of life became eye openers to another world of reality. So my own children's stories emerged as a result of my dual exposure to two cultures, both rich in their imaginary evocations and clever use of language.

Later, I read Rudyard Kipling, C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, which opened doors into the jungle, a winter world of dark magic waiting to be replenished to life by good forces symbolised by Aslan and the idea of a quest in *The Lord of the Rings*. I guess my children's stories saw a syncretic blend of my two worlds of children's literature.

The heroine of both my books is Rini, who is actually a cousin of mine, who as a little girl listened to these stories which she loved as these adventures were all about *her*.

India and Scotland get bridged through most of your works; your creative worlds are spanned harmoniously, celebrating contrasts while also finding commonality. I am reminded of James Clifford's seminal essay "Travelling Cultures" (1992). By exploring the ideas of home, roots, displacement, identity, your poetry marks Will Kymlicka's "multicultural citizenship." What are your ideas regarding connecting India and Scotland creatively? How does Tartan and Turban *(2004) inaugurate this trend?*

Very early on in my life, I realised I had two worlds. As a child in London there was my parents' world where they spoke Bengali and their world of Indian and British friends who enjoyed my mother's sophisticated Dhaka cuisine. And

there was my English world with Julian Dakin reading poetry and classics with me, swinging in our back garden with friends, baking cupcakes in school and in my mother's kitchen – which looked as if a flour storm had blown over it, the fine dust settling on the kitchen top after my efforts – walking with friends in Kensington Gardens and playing rounders in school.

Then we came back to India and I had to re-learn Bengali, but my English world stayed with me in the language we studied at school and the books we read and continued to read. At my boarding school in Kurseong in the Himalayas, the routine was very much unchanged from its British days and this cloud country, which was cold and damp, shrouded with rain clouds and drizzling on most days, reminded me of the English weather. Most of our nuns were European, and our schoolgirls – a cosmopolitan group from various Indian states, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ireland, England and some Anglo Indians and Nepalis. The London I had known (in Barnes where we lived and ours was the only non-English family) did not seem as cosmopolitan as my Himalayan school did. But I missed London, so it stayed with me. Then when I went to study in Edinburgh, I had no problems settling into my British life again. It was as if I had picked up from where I had left off. I did miss India though, my parents, and especially my little daughter, my friends and relatives. But my supervisors and teachers were warm and welcoming and took me into their circles and I did make some very good friends, who have remained close to me.

I carry my two countries with me like a portmanteau. I miss one while I am in the other and I find myself defending India in Scotland and Scotland in India.

I think my Scottish husband was responsible for igniting my interest in the links between Scotland and India. Moreover, I met people at parties and dinners who spotted me from across a crowded room and came up to me to ask me where I came from. I had people on the streets stopping me to ask me the same question. And my proud answer, "From India," seemed like the cue they needed to tell me how their father had been a tea planter in Assam, or a jute factory manager on the Hooghly; how their mother had been born in Calcutta, an Aunt a missionary in Madras, an Uncle in a regiment posted in the North West Frontier Province or how their grandparents were married in Bareilly… till I realised that there was a fragment of India in every Scot – in their immediate family connections and also in treasured items brought back from India: a Kashmiri shawl, a walnut wood pencil box, an engraved Muradabadi wall plate, a decorated sedate elephant or a resplendent dancing peacock. And India had seeped into their language, in words they used without realising that they had come from their encounter with the vast Indian subcontinent, words like shampoo, bungalow, dinghy, guru, chutney, punch, peeliwali, dulali, bazar and of course, chai – some words brought in through those wonderful cultural bridge builders, the Arab merchants, and other words lifted from the rolling Indian plains.

I witnessed a love for Indian classical music and dance here, of Indian writers in English amongst readers and lovers of the cuisine – India appealing to the Scottish/British aesthetic taste, to the intellect and the palate. This was not by accident, but the result of a long historic association.

I had gone to a Punjabi wedding in Leith, in Edinburgh, and was photographing the unfolding scenes of activity where turbaned Sikhs wore tartan kilts with the pride of their hybrid identity and spoke with their distinct Glaswegian accent. This was the Singh tartan, and later I learnt that there were at least three Singh tartans in Leith. The "here" and the "there," the "elsewhere" and the "somewhere" entered my poetry as I noted the departures and arrivals in my observations and experiences which went into my poems in *Tartan & Turban*. This is where I caught myself living between my two worlds.

Being an avid reader of your works I believe that your poetry culturally and historically connects Kolkata (India), the land of Rabindranath Tagore and Scotland (UK), the land of Walter Scott. My personal observation is that your poetry reflects a soul in love with both Kolkata (India) and Scotland (UK), assimilating and diffusing nostalgia, a harmonious existence and a life of celebration. How do you feel playing an important cultural role between these cultures/nations?

After I came back from London in 1963, like many Bengalis, I was immersed in Rabindra culture, listening to Rabindranath Tagore's songs by vocalists, on the radio and the gramophone, at every official events, at concerts and my mother, a beautiful Rabindrasangeet exponent, sang his songs at various public gatherings and hummed his songs under her breath as she did her chores round the house. We choreographed and danced his dance dramas, and directed and performed in his plays. As a teenager, I read his novels, short stories and poetry and heard his poems recited by renowned artists, by family friends and by children (sometimes excruciatingly badly). In Edinburgh, as a student, our family friends, Carmen Dakin (Julian's widow) had introduced me to Jeannie Geddes the wife of the geographer, Arthur Geddes. My parents knew Arthur Geddes when they were researchers at LSE. Jeannie gave me a collection of Arthur Geddes's translations of 14 songs of Rabindranath into English, with notations. Yet when I came to live in Scotland, I was surprised to see how few people remembered him and there were many who had not even heard of him.

It was here that the Geddesian, Murdo Macdonald introduced me to Patrick Geddes's Indian connection and told me of his correspondence and friendship with Rabindranath Tagore. Part of the correspondence was at the National Library of Scotland, the other part at the Rabindra Bhavana at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. In India, many people had forgotten who Geddes was and at the Museum at Rabindra Bhavana, there was no mention of him at all. This is what led me to compile and edit their letters and revive the memory of

the two great men – of Rabindranath in Scotland and Geddes in India. This was the beginning of creating a niche for my studies on the links between Scotland and India, exploring the historic links between the two nations through my research and poetry.

And yes, the romance of the Scottish Highlands and reflective lochs, of history, legend and socialist thinking in Walter Scott's novels and poetry did capture my imagination while I was growing up.

Kolkata remains a city I return to again and again, its cultural vibrancy and liberal thinking drawing me like a magnet; its intimate streets making a space for me on my annual journeys where I return to do my research in its rich libraries and archives, visit its book district to browse for new and second hand books to augment my collection and renew my contacts and collaboration with its many universities and those within driving distance from the city. My visits to Kolkata replenish me as a writer and researcher.

It was Professor Krishna Sen and Professor Tapati Gupta who first told me of you and your works. Professor Gupta had lent me her copy of your From the Ganga to the Tay *(2009) and that was indeed a eureka moment for me. Till date I have read the epic poem which connects India and Scotland as evident through its title, 6 times. Every time I re-read this book I draw a different dimension and cherished inspiration from it. Please can you share your observations regarding this marvellous creation of our recent time.*

Both Krishna Di and Tapati Di (as I call them) are academics I respect and admire. It is encouraging to know that they believe in my poetry and have recommended it to you. That is their generosity and I am very grateful for that.

Growing up in India, rivers have always fascinated me. Civilisations have grown alongside rivers. Rivers signify life and symbolise continuity. The Indo-Gangetic plains have attracted migration and invasion through the centuries. Here the rivers have watered a fertile expanse, seeing people sow, build and grow right through their epic journeys. In Scotland, I realised what a historic role the Tay has played in shaping the nation's economy and social structure and how it has been closely linked to India over two centuries. *From the Ganga to the Tay* is a modern epic poem in which the two great rivers converse about a shared history as they have remained intimately connected through colonial enterprise and postcolonial debates. The poem covers centuries, and in including ecology, geography, history, mythology and legend, it is thematically rich and I hope, engaging. It traverses continents, crosses and re-crosses boundaries and is thus inter-continental and transnational in scope.

The poem operates on various levels. It is a modern epic: an epic as the rivers have divine lineage with the Ganga (Ganges) as the Mother Goddess, leaping from the coiled tresses of Lord Shiva, the God of destruction, while the Tay has Nordic allegiances, having descended from Thor and Odin, and is

enriched by his Celtic inheritance. Both rivers have the spark of divine will and power in them. At times, the rivers attain heights that are sublime in their sense of power and knowledge as exemplified in their use of language. Both assume anthropomorphic identities, as they are proud and expansive, with distinctive identities and hence have recognisable voices. In fact, the continuing rhythm and intermittent rhyme mirror each phase in the rivers' flow, as they leap down from the mountain/gush out from a loch, fast pace over rocks, break banks, devastate, widen, deepen, meditative in their lower reaches, before they willingly meet the sea.

The poem is modern as the rivers' dialogue is rooted in recognisable history and as they are moved by contemporary concerns about environmental sustainability, nuclear warheads, past and ongoing conflicts and peace. It is a concrete poem as its shape on the page mirrors a river's meandering course, embedded within whose bends are metaphoric images in photographs by the artist, Kenny Munro, whose images that are visually suggestive.

Amongst its multiple themes, the poem traces the Dundee-Kolkata links in the jute route which is discussed by the rivers in a knowledge exchange that looks at industry, economics, world trade and the interruption by war. Notable figures like Patrick Geddes, Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Scottish engineers and businessmen enter the reminiscences/exchanges as do the nameless individuals displaced by the Highland Clearances and the Indian Partition.

The poem has been read at several literary festivals, conferences and community centres in the U.K., India, Germany, Italy and Japan. It has been performed at concerts at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the Tramway Theatre in Glasgow. A dance drama adaptation was sponsored by Glasgow Peace Arts in 2014 and this year (2018), the British Council, commemorating 70 years of long association with India, sponsored a dance drama adaptation by Rhythmosaic, presented by The Bengal in Kolkata, in March 2018. The poem remains relevant with its message of peace and continuity as the world faces continuing conflicts and the effects of climate change. It is an East-West dialogue that brings the world closer together through its shared concerns and reflections. This slim book took five years of research to write!

I feel and graphically understand the postcolonial diaspora after reading Ragas and Reels: Visual and Poetic Stories of Migration and Diaspora *(2012). Every poem has a significant inner story encouraging the reader to participate in the conversation on histories, cultures, nostalgia, association, home and future associations. Your observations/experiences in this regard, please.*

For many years, I have been following the work of the photographer, Hermann Rodrigues, who has been taking photographs of South Asian people who have

migrated to Scotland and settled here, and also travelling student and IT personnel from the subcontinent.

Human beings have moved from time immemorial; this could be because of the adventurer in us, a wanderlust; it could be for economic reasons – for a better life, or for political/religious reasons, for a safer life. It could be for marital reasons; and now, with climate change, we can use the phrase – to seek better pastures. I do not really understand the aspersion that is cast on migrants these days, especially in Europe and India, as Europeans moved to the peripheries in America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, colonising and settling in these countries, while India has witnessed wave on wave of invasion and migration through the centuries and has survived through an ability for accommodation. Migration which has created diasporas has thus struck me as a reality that has shaped the socio-cultural fabric of nations. No society is or can be monolithic and any attempt to make it so, ends in disaster for those who are forced to move and those who remain.

Questions like where have people come from, why did they move and how many times and what brought them to their current destination – have always stirred me. This is why Hermann's exhibitions of the "broon Scots" moved me to want to know the stories of these people, what brought them to Scotland and what have they carried with them here from the "somewhere" they came from, how do they relate to the "here" and "there," what/how have they contributed to their adopted nation and how have they integrated in the host land and what links do they retain/maintain with their one-time homeland. It has been a pleasure to work with Hermann, select the photos and write the stories of migration and diaspora in verse, experimenting with various poetic forms – the sonnet, acrostic, villanelle, linked haiku and various other forms.

Mothers not only play an important role at home, but also in the world. They exert a powerful influence over their children's lives, which their children carry them around inside for the rest of their lives, largely through fantasy, symbolic thinking and imagination. Through the canvas of your Letters to My Mother and Other Mothers *(2015) you have not only addressed issues related to "mothers" and "mothering," but also explored memories that involve the issues of "motherhood" through poetic dialogues between the East and the West. If you can kindly share your vision and perspectives of creating your* Letters to My Mother and Other Mothers, *which I am sure is very special for you.*

Yes, this collection is very close to my heart. I lost my mother in June 2005. My mother, as I say in Introduction to the book, was a very dynamic woman. She was a great intellectual; she was artistic, talented and committed to social justice and social inclusion. Yet towards the end of her life she was affected by acute dementia, losing her short-term memory altogether. After I lost her, I could not write about her for a long time. Then one night, I saw her in a dream, not as she

was in a wheelchair towards the end, but as she had always been, generous, observant, alert, kind and caring. When I woke up, the dream unfolded in a poem which wrote itself – a gift poem. Then I realised that I had actually not stopped talking to my mother. When she was alive, I could talk to her about everything – books, films, politics, climate change, social issues, my romantic crushes…and I did the same now, conversations which became my poems ("letters") "to my mother." My mother was quite a feminist, a supporter of the under privileged and a staunch believer in equal opportunities and non-violence. I share her concerns and ideology. This is where the "letters" (poems) "to other mothers" come from. In these poems, the warmth of mothers, their unconditional love for their offspring/s, their giving nature, their strong sense of familial and social responsibility, their dreams for the future generation – all come through, poems which emanate from my own life-experiences and as a witness of events around me.

Through your creative endeavours it is well evident that you have embraced "the simple religion of spiritual vision, purity of heart and harmony with the universe" (xxi), as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan stated – a world where borders cease to exist, to emphasise the importance of love and fellowship. This is apparent in The Homing Bird *(2017). Would you please share with us your observations on this aspect of your creativity?*

I do not know if I am spiritual or not, but I do see the spiritual in humanity and a force that connects us to nature and runs through all things.

I do not believe in political borders and boundaries. In fact, if I could, I would have a world without borders. What worries me most are borders of the mind which create so much conflict in the world. Like Rabindranath Tagore, I believe people and nations can only progress and exist with cooperation and mutual appreciation and respect. I guess I am an internationalist at heart. I have crossed and re-crossed borders, so I guess I am a transnational citizen of the world, though I do have strong loyalties to my country of birth and my adopted country. But when I see divisive politics destroying nations through the rise of narrow nationalism which leads to fascism, I am pained and cannot identify myself with the country I grew up in and thought I knew. But at heart, I guess I am an incorrigible romantic as Bluntschli in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* would say. I am an optimist and have faith in India's resilience, its silent enforcers of its democratic spirit and in humanity in general. This is what impels *The Homing Bird*. The title poem was commissioned by Scottish PEN during The Year of the Homecoming in 2009. It dwells on my two worlds – the one I physically left behind, but which has never really left me, and the one which I hope will slowly embrace me wholeheartedly. The themed collection reflects, like my previous collections, a sense of the past, of the impact of history determining my present experience.

How do you see Poetry as an important medium interrogating and addressing social issues which in present times seem to deconstruct the ethics of humanity, drifting away from the hallowed principles of Tagore and Gandhi.

Both Tagore and Gandhi have acknowledged the primacy of Truth as a constructive driving force for society, which is driven by love and compassion, tenets which are intrinsic to humankind, and which can ensure the continuity of life and this planet.

Poetry is the natural expression of humankind, as poetry came long before prose. It reflects, as I have said earlier, the rhythm of life itself. The metaphoric signification that poetry allows, makes it a rich vehicle which with its scope for the multiplicity of meaning it facilitates within its compact structure, makes it a compelling genre. The play with language which it allows makes it an attractive tool as one can use irony, allegory, satire, humour and innuendo like a double-edged sword, often with impunity. I can play/experiment with form and sound patterns, making it quite a disciplining experience. It is a powerful vehicle for questioning, assessing, giving voice to troubling thoughts without being didactic. Poetry can nurture joy, truth and romance and sustain us. I do not think poetry can immediately change anything, but since it has the capacity to move, to touch our emotions and stir our passions, it can instigate diverse responses which the poet may or may not intend in readers and listeners, its rhythms appealing to something deep inside us that can transform our lives. It resonates with the seething molten inner core of our being, both primordial and sophisticated, creative and rejuvenating. If poetry is put at the heart of a nation, a cultural revolution can restore harmony and dissipate conflict in all societies.

Would you like to share with us any of your recent unpublished poem which you feel also addresses issues of life.

I have been writing poems for a collection which looks at the plight of birds in a world facing the stark reality of climate change. I will share one such poem with you.

I have also reached a stage when I am reconnecting with old friends and right now, I have renewed my friendship with my school friends and our reminiscences have taken us back to Kurseong in the Eastern Himalayas where we all were in more than one poem – time when there was innocence, romance and hope which is expressed in the next poem. The question of the outsider, the "other" remains a poignant question as social inclusion seems too idealistic in today's world. This is the theme of the third poem.

Kolkata: From Nabanna's 9th floor

These are my Brooklyn Heights
The ambitious city's fugitive flight
To escape the tired, tedious streets
And seek the peace of cloud retreats

From here the coils of arteries
Of flyovers, bridges, lines of trees
Are necklaced, festooned festively
In measured strokes of artistry.

The river ruminates below
A distant, sluggish, dreamy flow
The sun slopes down, the grey haze clears
The marvellous Howrah Bridge appears.

When from the depths of heaven's way
A regal kite salutes the day
Its powerful wings hold back the wind
It glides and views us trapped within

A glass which frames this skyhover
A mighty monarch and rover
Free to glide and free to roam
Free to ride the gust and gloam

And scrutinize each narrow road
And read the city's every mood
A witness in whose memory
Is held this city's history.

After the Final Exams: In the Schoolyard in Kurseong
(to my classmates)

We are back in that moment
When the present stretches
Like the pine trees around us
Sun-tipped and comfortably still.
That moment when the past
Has been folded away
With lavender flowers
In a chest of drawers –
Each for one class of every year
That we have packed, parcelled
And closed decisively.

With exams over we can lounge
Lazily like the school cat
Taking in the vistas of range
On range of wooded hills,
Unchallenged by their daring
Crests, spellbound by their magic.
The future awaits beyond these
Mountains, unravelling on the plains
Below – invisible for now.

The wind has not galloped here
To propel the falcon in flight
Who hovers in an opal sky
Beyond our vision and intent.
This is that moment which we share
With friends who have been friends
For years, this moment between
The past and future, when we
Have no ambition or idea,
No anxiety, mission or fear
Of what awaits us. Happy
For now in this unhappening
Moment, a present when
Life knows the bliss
Of not turning back or moving on -
Van Gogh's sunflowers reflecting
The sun's captivating glance.

The Stranger

I heard the peal of thunder
Break the sky asunder
I heard the palm tree crash
With lightning's blinding flash
When you appeared at my humble door
Your face illuminated
Your garment agitated
You stood expectantly, not cowered
By the fierce downpour.

I looked at you with wonder
What had urged you to surrender
To the vagaries of this tumultuous night
When the river rose in rage
And all the birds took flight
From which hell's gate had you run away?

But I did not question you
I only welcomed you
To this sanctuary which holds storms at bay.

Finally, as a Poet what message would you like to share with the readers and the people of the world.

Poetry is transformative. Its soul is freedom. It cannot be suppressed. Like a fresh spring, it will tumble down all precipices and flow into a compelling river. It is life giving and liberating like a river. It can be ebullient, jubilant, loving, angry, accepting and accommodating. And like a river, it is unstoppable. But if its sinews are curtailed and it is forced to dwindle to a trickle or choked till it dries up, civilisation will cease to exist, just as a river drying up leads to desertification. Yes, poets should be allowed to speak and all readers who have poetry in their hearts should be encouraged to listen/read their work and share their joy of creation.

Bashabi Fraser, Thank you.

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