

## The Word-worker: An Interview with Smita Agarwal

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(Smita Agarwal, 1958-)

Smita Agarwal is a well-known Indian poet writing in English. She hails from Mussoorie, Uttarakhand. Her poems have received awards and residencies from the British Council (1994), the Arvon Foundation (1997) and the Charles Wallace Trust (1999). She is the author of *Wish-granting Words, Poems* (New Delhi, Ravi Dayal, 2002) and *Mofussil Notebook* (Calcutta, Sampark, 2016). She is also the editor of *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* (Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2014). Her poems have been curated in magazines, journals and anthologies published from India and abroad. Her critical articles have appeared in *Poetry Review*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *Plath Profiles* (of which she is also an editor and translator). She is a professor of English, University of Allahabad, India and Director of the Centre for Women's Studies at the same university. She

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Despite it being an over two-hundred-year old, evolving and flourishing tradition, the demographics, linguistic diversity, cultural plurality and complex politics of India renders the writing of poetry in English in the country a contested site. Hence it is always informative and interesting to figure out how poets writing in English establish a readership for themselves, negotiating and strategising in the process. This interview with Smita Agarwal attempts to interrogate and explore the ways in which the poet expresses a contemporary Indian reality in her poems. Focussing on *Wish-granting Words* and *Mofussil Notebook*, the interviewer probes issues like post-colonialism, hybridity, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in the poetry of Smita Agarwal. Agarwal's childhood, education, abiding memories, friendships, failures, proclivities and her lifelong affair with the English language come into play to form a composite picture of an artiste's struggle and choices for self-expression. This interview also attempts to highlight Agarwal as a feminist poet and seeks to unearth the reasons behind the strong current of Eco-criticism so palpable in her poetry. Also, the poet as translator forms an important chunk of the interview. Living and writing in Allahabad, India, a city famous for its literary heritage and whether that is pressure or privilege is also taken up for discussion. Since Agarwal is a poet-academic, her views on the current state of Higher Education in India are also elicited together with her advice to the younger generation of poets who are currently attempting to find a foothold for themselves.

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*Hello, Professor Agarwal, hope you are fine. Thank you for giving your time for this interview.*

You are welcome, Mr. Karmakar.

*Let us begin the interview with a very mundane question. Please tell us a bit about your childhood and educational background.*

I've had a happy and secure childhood receiving the love and support of not just my parents and siblings, but also of the extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. My father was an army officer. Every two years the family packed its bags and moved to a new station where we went to a new school, made new friends, at times, picked up the regional Indian language. All in all, childhood was a time of great adventure, you know, travelling the length and breadth of India in long trains with steam engines that belched out smoke and blackened one's face and matted one's hair and occasionally reddened one's eye with a tiny

coal splinter! I was born in an educated family, so we were constantly encouraged to educate ourselves intellectually and culturally. Also, the Indian Army of the 60's and the 70's was one big happy family, lion-hearted yet utterly amusing, in hindsight, as an organisation struggling to be oh-so-British in a postcolonial India steadily moving towards acquiring its own unique identity. So, while my father, Prabhakar, was permanently christened Peter, and we all knew how to belt out Auld Lang Syne at every Farewell *Bara Khana* (grand feast), the army of those days was totally above caste and parochialism and the army was very fair, just and caring about women. Unlike what we believe to be the Indian mindset, my parents never let me feel that there was any difference between girls and boys. My dad would oftentimes take my sister and me to the Army Obstacle Course making us crawl through rubber tyres and shimmy up ropes. He made me strong and encouraged me to be my own person.

My father wanted me to become a doctor or a top notch bureaucrat. True to his training, even before I was a teenager, I started coming into my own and asserting myself. I loved reading and writing, I always stood first in class. I dashed all his hopes and did my own thing: an M.A. in English Literature, topped up with a Ph.D. on Sylvia Plath. One of my juvenilia poems published in *Femina* (June 8-22, 1979), clearly exploits this embattled situation:

TO MY FATHER

Today I have wrecked your time—  
Weathered battlements  
Swept aside teaching and preaching  
(And all your love)  
Today – I have endeavoured to  
Shape my own tomorrow....

*Memory plays a role in shaping your imagination. Can you elaborate on how childhood memories and a sense of belonging to Nature and family find expression in your poetry?*

Ah! *Speak, Memory*.<sup>2</sup> Nabokov! Well, first, let me just say, I feel, memory is shaped by imagination rather than the other way round. A poem may be built around a memory, but, it is *built*, it's a creative act, an intellectual construct. The imagination may play any which way with the memory. Ultimately there are so many versions of that memory that it is very difficult to pin down a single unalterable *truth*. There are literary theories on this: so many discussions on the art of autobiography and the truth of autobiography. We have our own in-house version of this. Many of Kamala Das' poems seem like the utter truth but she herself always said that they were inventions. So, best, we love the poem and not

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<sup>2</sup> Title of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical memoir first published in 1951.

seek out the truth of the matter. If we compare and contrast Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* with the poems of Sylvia Plath, two people writing of the same events, we see how each recalls it differently, making me believe that one may start off with a memory and soon realise that the event is actually occurring in the writing!

Now, to answer the second part of your question, yes, I do write poems on childhood memories and Nature. I belong to the Himalayan region of India, Garhwal in Uttarakhand, richly endowed with natural beauty: glaciers, mountains, rivers, alpine meadows, wild animals; astounding biodiversity! We lived in the hills, travelled widely in the hills, holidayed in the hills. My Father would point out every flower, every tree. We just fell in love with Nature. Those were days prior to TV and the digital revolution. The hills were very Wordsworthian. Seeing it all waste away and getting destroyed at such a rapid pace is very painful. My poems like "Binsar Barahmasa," "Still Life," "The Lie of the Land: A Letter to Chatwin," "Monsoon Cantata," "Daywatch in the Scriptorium" etc. articulate my deep connection with Nature. More recently, in "Earth Day – 2018," I have used satire as a lament.

*You did your Ph.D. on Sylvia Plath. Can you tell us the reasons behind this choice, and to what extent have you been influenced and inspired by Plath's poetry?*

It was happenstance, serendipity, if you wish to see it so. At that time, around 1979 and 1980, my reading of Modern English and American Poetry were limited to Yeats, Auden, Eliot, Whitman and Robert Frost, since these were the only poets taught in class. At an Elocution Competition at IIT Delhi, I heard someone recite Plath's "Mirror." I was hooked by it. To date, I cannot recall what I loved about the poem but it hit me like lightning. Now, I believe, it was the technique. May be, it was a new kind of voice? The poem was ominous? Whatever! The end result was that I needed to read more Plath. Her work was not easily available in India and there was no Internet at that time. My maternal uncle, a writer and a traveller, gifted me a copy of *Crossing the Water*. There was no looking back then. I had plunged into having this lifelong affair with Plath's poetry. Because of Plath I read up so much more – Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Ted Hughes and others.

No, the troubled, anguished life of Sylvia Plath did neither influence nor inspire me! In fact, when I was young, I would lap up the biographies to learn how to avoid the pitfalls. However, contrary to her life, the poetry of Plath continues to inspire and influence me. She is a master craftsperson. Her auditory imagination is one of the best I have encountered. Her poems are meant for the human voice and ear. Meant to be spoken out and heard, not just read off the page.



(Smita Agarwal at the Gravestone of Sylvia Plath)

*Please allow me to ask you a few questions on your poetry. But, first tell me, when did you compose your first poem? Also, tell us how you decided to become a poet?*

Ummmm... interesting question! My first poem! I studied at St. Mary's Convent, Allahabad, India, from 1964 to 1966. I recall studying in Class 3 B with a curly haired lady called Mrs. Massey as the Class teacher. I must have been seven years old at the time. 1966 happened to be the Centenary year for the school. Along with a few other Junior School girls, I was one of the privileged few chosen to be photographed for a souvenir postcard, standing in front of the grotto and praying, vigorously dancing in a circle with a Nun leading the dance. I continue to treasure that postcard! Besides this, as I was a bright student, I was also asked to contribute a poem for the Centenary Magazine. This was my first poem and maybe this is what set me off on my adventure as a poet. Maybe the poem still exists somewhere in the school's record. But, there is more to the writing and

publishing of my first poem. Trauma and grief are also part of the story. The poem had to be written in class, in pencil, and in the neatest possible handwriting. Other girls were writing their pieces too. Mrs. Massey was tearing her hair and really losing control trying to get the girls to pen their pieces neatly. She was quite beside herself when she approached my desk. She spotted some untidiness and slapped me hard on my left cheek. I was a pampered child led to believe I was brilliant, beautiful and infallible! My world came crashing but I didn't weep. I blinked back my tears, finished my poem and grew up!

I cannot say exactly when I decided I'd be a poet. What I can say with certainty is that I always knew I was a poet. Words and rhythms were constantly swimming around in my head. I was always scribbling, inventing. Playing with words brings me the same joy as one would experience playing music or cricket. Anyway, I was writing the usual poem for the school or college magazine. Then, in October 1976, two poems appeared in the then popular magazine, *Imprint*, published from Bombay, now Mumbai. Ruskin Bond was the magazine editor, and the poems were published under the pseudonym "Mandy" that I had chosen because my then boyfriend, a Pereira from Mumbai, had told me that Mandy was a drug. Some months later, I received a cheque of eighty rupees made out in my name. This event made me tell myself that I was, indeed, a poet!

*A poem takes a long time to compose. Can you tell us how you work on a poem? Also, tell us what are your ideas on technique in poetry?*

Not necessarily. For me, sometimes, the rough draft of the poem may come into being pretty fast. At other times, I labour incessantly. The composition process varies. Yes, I work on a poem. Once a rough draft is ready, the real task begins. I let it lie around, sometimes for days, at other times for months. Some poems may eventually be abandoned altogether. When I am working on a poem its rhythm is constantly playing in my ear like the drone of a *tanpura*. I may be performing my routine daily tasks but the poem is speaking to me constantly in my inner ear. During this constant conversation, I may change an image, delete or add words or lines. The poem is within me like a foetus, or around me like an incubus; an irritating, nagging being eating away my peace of mind. I run away from it, I block it, but I am also in love with it and am therefore committed to giving it form and life. *Wish-granting Words* has a poem titled "Poetry" that is all about the process of composition. It ends with the following lines:

It'll go on for hours, won't it love?  
Till we're exhausted and my fingers ache?  
Hopefully, by then, the weather will have cleared...

This poem is a direct address to “Poetry.” It was written in my apartment at the University of Kent, England, when I was invited to be the University’s Writer-in-Residence.

As to the second part of your question, I am deeply enchanted by the display of technical skill and formal control in a poem. Do read up a poem titled “Mimosa” by the German, Durs Grunbein. See how a single shy shrinking flower is made to represent the cosmos of love, and how well it all comes through even in the English translation! The original German should be quite masterful! I believe a lot of damage has been done to Indian Poetry in English by those practitioners who think free verse involves no formal technique. While one must feel good about the democratic internet and the web allowing so many Indians to express themselves in poetry in the English Language, conversely, one cannot turn a blind eye to the millions of tons of mediocre and absolutely bad verse being churned out by these over enthusiastic poets. These people have no clue about the fine art of poetry. For them, a poem is the untrammelled documentation of unanalysed emotion! The result is verbal diarrhoea or verbal vomit. As for me, periodically, I deliberately challenge myself to write a sonnet, villanelle, ghazal or dramatic monologue in order to keep myself in the trim. However, technique is not merely stanza form: symbols, metaphors and careful punctuation are also equally important aspects of craft.

*Allahabad is a city that has gifted the world some well-known poets like Sumitra Nandan Pant, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Harivansh Rai Bachchan and Mahadevi Verma. Does this legacy touch upon your evolution as a poet? Apart from this, you have Arvind Krishna Mehrotra as your colleague. So tell us to what extent the work of Mehrotra influences you?*

Certainly! The awareness of Allahabad’s tradition of poetry in the Indian languages helps in building one’s self-confidence. Walking down the streets, visiting these poets’ residences, listening to anecdotes related to their lives, their loves, their quarrels leading to bitter court battles, Firaq’s famous wit and scathing satire, all add up to a sense of history – that one isn’t living a pipe dream. In the Staff Room of the English Department, we sit around the very same teak wood round tables that Firaq and Bachchan had sat around! In 1980, Faiz Ahmad Faiz visited Allahabad. In his honour, a programme was organised by the University of Allahabad under its famous Banyan tree. I was one of the girls selected to sing Faiz’s ghazals. It was a historic occasion. Faiz, an eighty-six-year old Firaq Gorakhpuri who had to be carried onto the stage and Mahadevi shared the stage and mesmerised the audience with their verses. Most of us present there recall Faiz reciting his famous lullaby for a Palestinian child: “*Mat robachchey...*” Allahabad’s literary history does impact a person wishing to make writing a life practice.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra is no longer my colleague. He retired several years ago. Yes, but while he was there in the department, he was a serious critic of my poetry and I learned a lot from his plain-speaking, telling it as it is, ways. As far as his style of writing poetry is concerned, it is very different from mine. He never encouraged me to imitate his style, rather, he insisted I find my own voice.

*Simply put, Indian women poets writing in English fall into two categories: Pre-Independence and Post-Independence poets. Pre-Independence Indian women poets writing in English are closely connected with romanticism, lyricism and nationalism. So tell us how far does the poetry of Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt and Aru Dutt attract you?*

Good question, Goutam. I read and reread the poems and other writings of Dutt and Naidu for their historical relevance. These are my foremothers, my poetic ancestors. I didn't choose them. They happened. Now that they are there, I read them and about them to figure out how they fashioned the course of Indian Poetry in English. I am particularly impressed by the struggle of Toru Dutt. "Baugmaree" and "Sita" are my favourite poems. I have written a short piece examining the life and poetry of Toru Dutt. This was published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXXIX/1 (March, 2004). Naidu, I admire both as a creative and public person of boundless energy and adamant determination. She excelled in several fields all at the same time. I feel, she was judged harshly by critics when they labelled her poems derivative. Thank God! A feminist perspective is recasting the earlier opinion and Naidu's poetry is being valued for its ability to evoke a sense of wonder and enchantment in a language that grew organically out of the *Ganga-Jamuni* cultural milieu of Hyderabad.

*Post-Independence Indian women poets writing in English break out of the Romantic/Victorian mould of yesteryears. They experiment with form and diction and an open elliptical space gives them scope to illustrate the highs and lows of women's situation and feelings in modern and contemporary India. The resentment, pain, anguish, violence, subjugation of women along with the cry for liberation of Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Tara Patel, Lakshmi Kannan, Gauri Deshpande and Eunice de Souza mark the changing identity of Indian Poetry in English written by women. What are your views on this?*

Indeed, the Post-Independence generation of Indian poets writing in English, both male and female, modernised the subject matter and idiom. The country had changed and was steadily changing. Tagore's mysticism, Aurobindo's spiritualism, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Toru Dutt glorifying the Indian past, Naidu's fervent nationalism were no longer making sense under the changed circumstances. It was a time for change for Indian poetry in English also. Kamala Das wrote on women's issues like Akkamahadevi and Meerabai. Though she



adopted Akkamahadevi's directness of tone she did not feel the need to use juxtaposition, paradox and irony the way Akkamahadevi uses them. Mamta Kalia and Eunice de Souza mastered the art of irony and satire and exposed the hypocrisy in so many of the country's cultural practices.

*Allow me to quote what you said about poetry in a short piece on poetry written for The Times of India: "A poem performs a civilizing function, answering not only a human need for emotional expression but for rational control as well. And by resolving the warring forces, poetry does the work." What did you mean by "warring forces?"*

This was said long ago. A poem may try to resolve the warring forces, may not succeed but will still be a good poem just expressing the many nuances of the conflict. Just think of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and its last line, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." "I'm through" is ambivalent. Does the speaker mean her relationship with Daddy is over or does she mean she's at last through to him, cleared the blocks and connected with him?

My statement is for poets focused on expressing subconscious psychological material and using the structure of language and the devices of poetry to gain rational control over chaotic emotional material. Upon the untimely demise of my father, I was left with a trainload of raw emotions. I wrote "Joyride" as an elegy to my dad giving a lean shape to these emotions within the clean, clear structure of a villanelle.

*Regarding your definition and function of the poet, I remember your opinion that the poet is "self acutely aware of life." Can you tell us the reasons behind such an assessment?*

Whenever I read good literature, I am reminded of this, over and over again... how did the writer see it this way? Obviously because the writer sees the same old hackneyed stuff of life in a different way... obviously because this writer, no magician, just an ordinary human, is "acutely aware" of whatever is happening around her/him. I believe that an accomplished writer or poet lives at several levels simultaneously. S/he's just a lot more sensitive to all that's going on around her/him. Go ahead and read "Water Supply" in Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* and you'll see what I mean. The poem is a master class in defamiliarisation and would never have come about if poets weren't "self acutely aware of life."

*Your Wish-granting Words casts you as a poet of symbolism because of your abundant use of various kinds of symbols. Poems like "The Bed Book," "The Kaomao," "The Map," use symbols. Please tell us how you create a balance while using traditional and personal symbols within a composition?*

This is a matter of craft. After all, why use a symbol at all? To layer the narrative by adding nuances. My desire as a poet is to communicate effectively as well as engagingly. If I create a symbol, I make the poem interesting and engaging for the reader's appetitive mind. However, even for the best of poets, personal symbols are a territory fraught with danger. Personal symbols may sometimes come through as *recherché* and dense for the reader, which is why we struggle with a poem like Sylvia Plath's "Couriers" or parts of Eliot's "Four Quartets." If you plait together personal and traditional-cultural symbols you make your poem more accessible to your reader. After all, as a poet, you have to have a viable relationship with the reader and not a narcissistic one where the poet is whispering sweet nothings into her/his own ear!

*Your Wish-granting Words seems to be a collection of long-cherished wishes of humans. The collection seems to be a quest for exaltation, salvation, peace, liberation and sacrifice, leaving behind the greed of materialism. How far do you agree with this observation?*

Thank you for interpreting the poems this way. *Wish-granting Words* refers to the power of words to fulfil the poet's wishes by animating the poet's thoughts. An important clue to understanding the collection is the epigraph, a couplet by Faiz Ahmad Faiz. The first line of the couplet describes the journey of a poet and the second line refers to the job of a poet which is to memorialise every step of that journey. This is the organising principle of the collection. In *Mofussil Notebook*, too, the poems revolve around the epigraph, a couplet by Zauq, which articulates the poet's dilemma of being caught in a situation of both disengagement and a wry, amused, engagement with the world.

Hence, *Wish-granting Words*, memorialises various phases and facets of a poet's life: from a description of personality and inner weather ("The Map," "The Planetoid"), to poems about the rites of passage ("The Kaomao," "The Bed Book," "The Lie of the Land," "At Forty" etc.), to love and its accompanying euphoria or disenchantment, to motherhood, to bereavement and loss ("Joyride"), to the salvation of creativity ("The Word-worker," "Daywatch in the Scriptorium," "Parrots," "Distance" and "Poetry"), to an engagement with nature and society ("Monsoon Cantata"— composed after the Babri Masjid incident) to the ultimate restorative balance and commitment of the last poem, "According to my Bond...." This is how I see it.

*Like other Indian women poets writing in English, your poetry is also personal, autobiographical and self-revelatory. It seems that confessional poets like Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and W.D.Snodgrass inspire you to narrate your own wishes, dreams, experiences, aspirations and feelings. So what do you confess and how do you use your confessions to represent the total female community in India?*

I may have read a lot of confessional poetry during the course of my research, but this trait of using personal material to create a poem may be discovered in my juvenilia even before I was aware of Plath and her ilk. I guess, this is because a lot of Hindi poetry that falls upon one's ears as a child, is, broadly speaking, confessional. Since I am a singer, as a middle class Indian girl child, my vocal music education began at an early age with the *bhajans* of Meerabai and the highly personal and romantic lyrics of the Hindi film industry, Bollywood, as we call it now. So, if the first poems you memorise are, "Morey toh Giridhar Gopal/ Doosrana kei" or Lata Mangeshkar's "Lag jaagaleykephir ye basinraathonaho," one's immersion in the confessional mode is pretty much inescapable!

"Feb. 1944. Kasturba talks of Life with Gandhi" and "Lopamudra" are confessional poems as well as dramatic monologues that interrogate female sexuality. "My Bindi" may also be called a confessional poem. This poem emerged from a Bhojpuri folk song that I often sing, "Mori Bindiya Key Rang UdaaJaaye." Such poems deal with issues that the entire female community in India can relate to.

*Let me ask you another question related to the previous one. You are sometimes confessional and sometimes impersonal. You follow the tradition of older poets but your poems bear their own individuality and you mention it in Eunice de Souza's Nine Indian Women Poets. To what extent do your poems subscribe to T.S. Eliot's Theory of Impersonality?*

Yes, your question is an extension of a comment I made in Eunice de Souza's *Nine Indian Women Poets*. Let me tell you, my poem may *appear* personal, subjective, but it need not necessarily be so. Please give some credit to my imagination and creativity! I may hear of an incident and use it to write a poem and make it seem as if that's a leaf out of my life. Eliot talked of "objective correlative": the poet's ability to universalise personal material so that it became accessible to all. I do that all the time.

*Before asking you questions on your second collection of poems, Mofussil Notebook: Poems of Small-town India, I want to know the reasons behind your use of the word "Mofussil" which is from the Urdu word "Mufassil," meaning "divided." Can you please comment on the title of the book?*

Well, there is a distinction in spelling here: Mufassil and Mofussil. Mofussil is a colonial coinage to describe the small town as an administrative unit in comparison to the metropolitan capitals of the East India Company, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. It is in this sense that the word has been used: Allahabad as a mofussil space, part rural, part urban, impatiently hurtling towards becoming a Smart City, caught up in a confusion of tradition and modernity. In an interview

that may be found on YouTube, I've explained that I wrote some of the poems because I felt, in contemporary India, most of the interesting things at the level of human psychology, politics, cultural production, women's empowerment and the English Language were happening in the interstices that exist between the mofussil and the metropolitan; between tradition, modernity and the contemporary. Hence, *Mofussil Notebook: Poems of Small Town India*.

*Every section of this book is marked by the lines of Indian poets writing in English. The first section is marked by Nissim Ezekiel, the second by Arun Kolatkar, the third by Eunice de Souza and the last by Jayanta Mahapatra. What are the reasons behind the using lines from these canonised poets at the beginning of each section?*

Glad to know that you have gone through the book thoroughly. The principle of structure and organisation. Each section of the book prefaced by a line from a well-known Indian poet writing in English contains poems that are accretions around that central idea or emotion expressed in that line. It is also my way of acknowledging my debt and gratitude to these poets who showed me the path. Let me also state here my gratitude to my publishers, the inimitable, charming and affectionate, Ravi Dayal, and Sunandan Roy Chowdhury of Sampark who reposed their faith in my work. Even today, writing and publishing poetry in English in India is not a viable business model. It takes passion, guts and a sunny temperament to make it happen.

*Poems like "Chutney: A Multilingual Existential Poem," "Angrezi Vangrezi," "Ode to a Saijan Tree," "Vintage Love," "Beggary in Bhatiyali" are examples of hybridity, where various Urdu and Hindi words are blended in with English. Tell us how you create this postcolonial twist?*

As a poet, I am receptive to language: the idioms, the inflections, the rapid changes, grab my attention immediately. Moreover, Allahabad is a place where annual religious events like the Magh Mela and the Dusshera Mela are celebrated with gusto, and cultural events like the Dadhikando fair, the Rakhi Mela give me the opportunity to mingle with enormous crowds and eavesdrop. Besides this, teaching young people at the university lets me into their way of using language to express their world. Contemporary India's affair with the English Language is a riveting, evolving narrative. In Uttar Pradesh, the inventiveness is mindboggling. "Madam, his face-cutting is like a *goonda*" may be difficult to understand for a white Anglophone person but is perfectly intelligible to me. This is what I mean when I underscore the point that the most interesting things at the level of language are happening in mofussil towns, their aspirational engines full-throttle, spinning them out of their orbits of rural-mindedness and tradition,

hurtling them on towards contemporaneity. I have not created this twist. It is all around me. As a poet, I am attentive and quick to respond. “We two were sitting *agal-bagal...*” is a snatch of a conversation between colleagues, two professors of English having a relaxed conversation in the Staff Room! My poem, “I Love You” from *Mofussil Notebook* casts an amused glance at the vexed issue of caste in contemporary India.

*You love to play with the English language and your poems show the changes undergone by Standard English due to its assimilation with different cultures. Can you tell us why your poems place so much stress on the use of the English language and is this your way of preserving typical Indian culture and ethos by using the English language?*

Playing around with words and rhythms is my passion as a poet and I derive immense joy doing this. I was an energetic young person who got into trouble with authority because of excessive energy. Even today, as I turn sixty in a few months, if someone were to take away the solace I derive from my poetry and music, very soon I will be found getting into trouble for what good and gentle people term “disruptive” behaviour. No, no, it is not my agenda to preserve Indian culture and ethos. I am neither a saint nor a politician. I am a poet. My job is to record what I witness in a language close to my heart.

*The poems of Mofussil Notebook show the evolving poetic maturity of Smita Agarwal. Not only postcolonial irony and hybridity but also metaphor, interplay of memory and imagination, Indianisation of English, struggle for existence, questions regarding women's empowerment are interrogated in a very thoughtful way. Can you comment on your journey to maturity?*

Well, if one's been in the business for so long, it's but natural to register changes in one's work. If the earlier poems are personal and emotive, the later poetry seems to have dealt with all that and is moving towards issues social, political and environmental. These are my current concerns. My next collection will include poems on grandmotherhood, ageing, death, women's issues like sexual harassment and rape and, of course, poems on the desecration and the degradation of the environment.

*It seems that you are not happy with the present education system in India and colleges and universities have to take some drastic steps to make the students more competent and eligible for jobs so that they can establish themselves without any recommendation and support. Your teaching as a Professor of English at Allahabad University perhaps makes you realise the precarious condition of the present system of higher education. Your poem, “Undergraduate Indian English” can be taken as an outcome of this realisation. Please tell us about the problems and the possible solutions to the present system of Higher Education in India?*

Politicians and bureaucrats frame India's policies for Higher Education, resulting in vote bank politics compromising on merit. The application of the reservation policy in Higher Education may have democratised Higher Education but is also complicit in producing a sizeable number of India's unemployable graduates. This stares us in the face on a daily basis if we are teachers of English. In Uttar Pradesh, the youth believe that English is their gateway to a dream job. It is taught very poorly in Government schools and colleges and youngsters who gain admission in a Graduate course in the University are flummoxed when they encounter the English literature syllabus. They petition us to teach them Wordsworth in Hindi! So, where are we headed?

One possible solution could be to rejig the syllabus and make it interdisciplinary and comparative in nature. India has excellent literature in its various languages. English translations of these texts, which are culturally closer to the scholar, should be included in the course. It's a well-known fact that even British universities have moved on and beyond Chaucer and Spenser. At best, these authors are offered as electives. Yet, creaky, antediluvian, Indian universities will teach them to the utter bewilderment of the student who will query after a class on Chaucer's *Prologue*, "Ma'am why are you teaching me French? I want to learn English!" Offering a basket of courses cantered on English translations of the *Mahabharat*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavat Gita*, Kabir, Meera, Ghalib, Premchand and such texts and writers makes far more sense.

*Your poems like "Richa," "My Bindi," "Lopamudra," "In Utero," "Millions," focus on women in general. Would you like to call yourself a feminist poet?*

Yes, definitely. If an issue regarding women moves me, I like to use my writing to highlight it, create awareness about it. I'm a feminist. In poems like "Feb. 1944. Kasturba Talks of Life with Gandhi," "Lopamudra" and "My Bindi" I perform a kind of hit and run operation of feminist revisionist writing attempting to address and subvert gender stereotypes present in social conventions. The late Khushwant Singh who reviewed *Wish-granting Words* in *Hindustan Times* and other dailies in his syndicated column, "With Malice Towards All" boosted my self-confidence by expressing his appreciation of "Feb. 1944. Kasturba Talks of Life with Gandhi." I believe, historically and culturally women have been discriminated against. I speak for equality and I'm not anti-male. I respect men. So many of them are my good friends and companions.

*The ending of Mofussil Notebook suggests your passive acceptance of whatever is going on around you. A trace of pessimism can be found here when you say in "Moving On":*

*Let things come, let them go...*

*for such is their nature...  
No agitation, no rancour.  
And a gratefulness for  
Manipulation, cowardice and deceit  
For making us what we are...  
Human and cheap...*

*In the same way in "Love song IV" you write:*

*There is no past, present or future  
There's no bitterness  
Nor sweet memories...  
Nothing ever happened...*

*Why are you in a stoical mood and can't be hopeful regarding the future?*

Goutam, a poem encapsulates a mood, not my worldview or personal philosophy. "Moving On" and "Lovesong IV" speak of disappointment in human relationships. The pessimism is dealt with in the poem and anyways, "Lovesong IV" ends with the words, "I'm free...." That's liberation not pessimism or hopelessness!

*A lot of young people now are contributing to Indian Poetry in English. Are you familiar with their works? Who are your favourites among them?*

Indeed, the impact of globalisation and technology in India, have contributed to a mushrooming of poetry in English. As mentioned earlier, most of it is poor or mediocre. Poetry writing courses, poetry writing workshops, poetry slams, poetry contests, are available like puncture repair shops on Indian highways, if you know what I mean. In our days, there was none of this. One learnt from trial and error and a lot of reading. One took a bunch of poems to seniors and waited interminably for their scathing comments. There were no reading groups or poetry societies in the towns that I grew up in. In Mussoorie, in the 70's, all aspiring writers kissed the ground Ruskin Bond walked on, which was mainly the road from Landour to the Mall. We even hid inside shops so that we could bob out at the appropriate moment and elicit a smile from him. He was a great inspiration. Next, Adil Jussawalla, Keki Daruwalla, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Eunice de Souza helped me hone my craft. Ravi Dayal was amazing. He sat me on his dining table covered by an eye catching Fab India tablecloth and, pencil in hand, he pored over each word and line of my manuscript. The conversations on poetry that I had with Peter Forbes, the then editor of *Poetry Review*, are also memorable. But, prior to all this, I had been to the Arvon Foundation's writer's

workshop at Lumb Bank, Heptonstall, Yorkshire, and entered my poems in a Poetry Competition sponsored by the British Council, where my poems were awarded thrice in a row over three consecutive years,

However, to come back to your question, I like to read Vijay Nambisian and Manohar Shetty. Tishani Doshi, Mona Zote, Michelle Cahill, Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee and Sumana Roy have written some poems that come about once in a lifetime. Nandini Verma and her Airplane Poetry Movement show a lot of promise and, among the slam poets, Aranya Johar has both spunk and chutzpah.

*Nowadays, not much research is being conducted on contemporary Indian Poetry in English. Work on canonised poets is being repeated and rebashed. Besides, professors are not interested in new poets and they are not allowing their postgraduate students to take on new poets as research subjects. What is your opinion regarding this problem and what can be the future of Indian Poetry in English?*

Poets will write and publish independent of research or no research on their work. The future of Indian Poetry in English is bright! If the works of contemporary poets are not taken up as research subjects, the loss is totally for the academic world! If professors are disinclined to let their scholars work on contemporary poets, then those professors are lazy. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra has been snarling like an angry dog and repeating ad infinitum that the critical work on poetry in English emerging out of the Indian universities is below par and that poets are the best critics of each others' works. I think we should pay attention to this.

*Poets like Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Nabina Das, Nitoo Das, Nabanita Kanungo, Mona Zote, Malsawmy Jacob and Janice Periyat have given the poetry of the North East a new name and recognition. What is your opinion regarding the emergence of North East poetry? Don't you think, from every corner of India, poets like them should come forward to give Indian Poetry in English more power and voice?*

Yes, poetry in English from the North East has indeed been a movement of sorts inspired by the dedication of persons like Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih. The distinct landscape and culture of India's North East, their matrilineal tribal societies, the early advent of Christianity strengthening the English education of the natives, the uneasy political relationship that this region has with the Centre, all make it a fertile ground for the growth of poetic utterance. I must particularly commend the poets of this region for rising above pettiness and assisting each other in discovering their individual voices. The Bombay poets have done it, the North East poets have repeated the feat, why should not the rest of India follow?



*I wish to learn of your reading habits. Can you please tell us about this? It is obvious that, as a professor, you have to discuss literature with your students most of the time. But in your daily life, outside of your day job as Professor of English, do you discuss literature with family and friends?*

I read several things at the same time, bit by bit, and slowly. Unlike my younger days when I would pick up a book and read it cover to cover in a day or two, I no longer feel like doing that. In a given day, I may be reading up an essay on some aspect of literary theory because I have to teach a class, I may be reading a nausea inducing UGC Regulation because it has to be discussed in a meeting, I may be reading a volume of poetry because I have to send in a review, I may be reading a biography.... That's how I do it. In my daily life, outside of my day job, I rarely discuss literature with friends unless, Ishiguro has just won the Noble and it comes up in conversation naturally. Within the family, it is my son and daughter-in-law, who, though lawyers by profession, have appetitive minds and do a lot of reading themselves. They often have queries and initiate discussions.

*What is your relationship with the English language? How did it become a part of your background?*

English has always been around me. My parents, both my grandfathers, my uncles and aunts, were all proficient in English. It was spoken at home along with Hindi, Garhwali and the vernacular *dehati* of the ayahs and servants. For my middle class family of pundits, landlords, judges and army officers, speaking fluent English and being educated in Convent Schools run by missionaries was a virtue of sorts. If I say, English is as much a mother tongue as Hindi and Garhwali, I would not be wrong. I've had an easy and comfortable relationship with the English language.

*The city is a major concern in International poetry. What are your ideas on this especially since you live and write in a small town in India?*

I'm happy I have gone with the flow and have been able to write on the place I live in. Since Allahabad is growing and changing at a rapid pace, I can mine this sociological phenomenon for poetry like Eliot showcased a smog filled London and Arun Kolatkar, the Bombay around Kala Ghoda.

*More poetry reading sessions are needed and the reason behind it is known to you. You have read poems abroad many times. Would you like to talk about these experiences? Apart from poetry reading sessions, videos of these sessions hold importance also. I have watched videos of some of your poems, in English as well as Hindi, on YouTube. Would you like to comment on the art of reading out poems aloud to an audience?*

I have been fortunate enough to have been invited to read in the U.K., Europe and the U.S.A. I once attended the reading session of a famous Australian poet who mumbled and read in such a thick accent, most of the audience was sorely disappointed. If you are reading to an international audience you must select well and enunciate clearly, else the reading will fall flat.

*You have shown your interest and creativity in translation also. You have translated Sylvia Plath into Hindi. These translations have been published in Plath Profiles, an international, multidisciplinary journal on Plath studies. What is the process you go through when translating a modern British poet into Hindi? Apart from Plath, is there any other writer whose work you want to translate?*

My translation of Plath's "Sheep in Fog" will appear in the next issue of *Plath Profiles*. I've also translated "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." I must thank William Buckley of Indiana University for nudging me on. I have a published essay easily available on the Internet which is also in the Required Reading List of the Translation Course of Ambedkar University, Delhi. In this essay, I discuss in detail the process I go through when translating Modern British poetry into Hindi. I stress on the sound value of the rhythmic word and term it "aural" translation. Let me add, I enjoy it a lot. My next translation project is probably going to be Meerabai's poems or Srilal Shukla's satire, *Raag Darbari*.

*After the sad demise of Eunice de Souza, you are one of those senior poets from whom new comers and poetry lovers expect advice and guidance. Would you like to say something to the emerging poets and the readers of Indian English poetry in general?*

Thank you readers for your interest in Indian Poetry in English. You are an important cog in this wheel. You sustain the morale of struggling writers. Also, a word of appreciation for publishers like Speaking Tiger and Paper wall, for a job well done. Emerging poets, read each other, help each other, never give up.

*Thank you very much for your insightful answers. Hope you have enjoyed the conversation.*

Yes, I have enjoyed the conversation. My best wishes are always with you, Goutam.