

Tishani Doshi, *The Adulterous Citizen: Poems, Stories, Essays*. Philipsburg, St. Martin: House of Nehesi Publishers, 2015. i-viii+123 pp. ISBN: 9780996224222.

The title of the volume under review, *The Adulterous Citizen*, is borrowed, albeit in a bit changed form, from Suketu Mehta's book *Maximum City*. Tishani Doshi, who is the daughter of an Indian father and Welsh mother, uses the following extract from Mehta's book as an epigraph to the title poem of the volume, "The Adulterous Citizen": "I am an *adulterous resident*; when I am in one city, I am dreaming of the other. I am an exile; citizen of the country of longing" (Doshi 11; emphasis added). She replaces the word "resident" with "citizen" which lends a sense of legitimacy to the individual's residency in multiple places. This "promiscuity" implies a middle-class individual's love affair with multiple cities and countries, and his or her cultural hybridity. Love and citizenship here overflow the porous borders of nations and cultures. Transnational residency and participation in many cultures indeed characterise the life of the author-narrator. What is unique in the volume, however, is the fact that the speaker, while enamoured of multiple places, does not fight shy of the "local" which is her source of genesis, constant reference point and a place of multiple returns. The global and the local make a seamless cartography.

Doshi is a powerful poet, and the poetic flavour penetrates even her short stories and essays. The first section of the volume contains 21 poems, followed by four short stories in the second section while the third and final includes two essays. Many of the pieces are autobiographical in nature and the memory of her parents are powerfully present in most of the pieces. Doshi is mainly a poet and her book of poems *Countries of the Body* (2006) has won critical acclaim, but she is a novelist as well (*The Pleasure Seekers*, 2010). Some of the pieces in this volume were published earlier. Powerful imagination often blur the boundary of the real and the unreal/surreal in the pieces collected in the present volume. The poems and stories revolve round cities/countries (and sometimes small villages and retreats) of the world like Madras (now Chennai), Berlin, Amman, Cartagena Nairobi, the USA, Wales, Mexico and Bhutan. While moving round the world, the speaker does not lose sight of the place of his/her origin. The poetic personae in the poem "In Cartagena" observes nostalgically, "But what I find instead/ is the city of my birth,/ the city of Madras" where she "almost expect[s]" "to see flower girls/ in tattered skirts/ walking the promenade/ with baskets of jasmine" (18). This is a loving act of finding another city, other cities, in the fold of a single city. This poem declares loudly that the cities, and lovers, share the secret that they can touch another even if "an ocean divides them" (18). One can indeed "walk through the streets of one/ while dreaming of the other" (18-19). This is again asserted in the last lines of the title poem, "The Adulterous Citizen": "to lie

in the folds of one city/ while listening to the jagged,/ carnal breath of another” (12). The word “carnal,” like the word “adulterous,” conveys a sense of the erotic, thus evoking the desire for union with multiple love points. This lack of loyalty to one single city, town or country is not really an act of adultery, but the right exercise of a global citizen who moves round the world and yet can return easily to the city of his or her birth. In fact, Doshi, in her poems, returns again and again to Madras, “the city of my birth.” Madras figures prominently in “The Day We Went to the Sea” which seems to portray a tsunami-ravaged Marina beach where “a woman hold[s]/ the tattered edge of the world/ in her hand” (3), in “Homecoming” where she shows “how Madras loves noise –/ loves neighbours and pregnant women/ and Gods and babies/ and Brahmins...” (4) and showcases its sights and sounds. The daily spectacles return again in “Madras Morning” in more contemporary forms and nuances – with images like “call-centre boys and girls/ who are practising their accents/ on their way to work,” “air hostesses in green/ comparing heels/ and the stewards and the clerks/ in brass-buttoned coats/ and the Air India pilots/ sneaking their last smoke,” mothers “who’ve kissed the children goodbye/ and left instructions/ with the maid/ we who don’t know/ how easily the world/ moves without us” (9). Most of the images here underline the activities of communication that bind the places together. At the same time they show how the old world is changing, giving place to a new one where “mother” figures are replaced by those of foster caretakers who take care of the children while the mothers are away at work places. This is a world where growing number of women are joining the job market and engaging themselves in the public spaces. In projecting Indian cities and villages, Doshi does not forget to focus on dark points in the lives of the Indians, particularly those of the poverty-stricken people. The poem “The Deliverer,” for instance, is divided between Kerala, India where a sister from “Our Lady of the Light Convent” collects abandoned “children/ because they are crippled or dark or girls” and how one of them is adopted by an American couple and how the girl “grows up on video tapes” and returns in imagination to the scene of birth “in some desolate hut/ outside village boundaries/ where mothers go to squeeze out life,/ watch body slither out from body,/ feel for penis or no penis,/ toss the baby to the heap of others,/ trudge home to lie down for their men again” (7). Doshi concentrates on her Welsh mother and her partly Welsh background in two of her overtly autobiographical poems: “Falling, 1968” and “Memory of Wales.” In the former, she uses the word “fall” both in the sense of collapse of the old world with the revolutionary movements (like the Students’ uprising in Paris in 1968) taking place all over the world and her mother’s falling in love with her Indian father against the background of such a world-shaking event. It records the poet’s intense imagination concerning how her mother might have felt while arriving in India to live with her husband and the in-laws. It also dwells

on the birth of child out of her “Celtic belly” and the initiation of “slow possibility/ of love in my father’s life” (14). Doshi’s essay “Memory and Imagination” included in this volume offers us some more details about her mother’s life and the Welsh village which she had left behind. It corroborates the images of the latter poem (“Memory of Welsh”) which articulates the memory of an eight-year-old girl’s walking into a playground (“Everything begins here in the playground:/ beauty, decay, love, lilies. Memory/ starts here on the stairs, in skylight.”) and envisions her mother’s childhood “in the playground of memory.” Movements both in space and time thus constitute an important motif in his poems, and the two museum poems – “At the Rodin Museum” and “Understanding My Fate in a Mexican Museum” – powerfully bear witness to this. Subjects like womanhood, bodies and love attain both realistic and surrealistic proportions. In poems like “That Woman” the cautionary warnings of the mother figure (“Don’t become that woman, / my mother said. / By which she meant,/ don’t become that woman/ who doesn’t marry/ or bear children”) are reflections of the social attitudes that even women internalise. In some other poems like “Open Hands” surrealistic streaks are unmistakable. On the whole, in the poems of the volume an intensely sensitive mind hovers around objects and places of the world and convey powerful feelings through the use of images and symbols, often very private.

The sense of the social reality and the sense of the “unreal,” often surreal, reality, continue even in the next section. “The Navjeevan Express,” the first story in the second section, is a vivid narrative of a train journey which reflects of the social reality. In this story the narrator takes her mother to Baroda, who has not travelled in train for a long time and is thus very excited about the journey which in the end results in an unfathomable frustration. She nourishes in her mind “romantic notions for the trip: sunsets, rivers under bridges, platform life” (41). A journey by train in India, even if in an AC compartment, offers one access to the socio-cultural reality of the country – a kind of *Bharatdarshan* – and on this journey she discovers the real, unpalatable aspects of the country – irregularities like late running of the train, malfunctioning of the air conditioner and vulgarities of the co-passengers who, bereft of finer senses of life, resort to mundane rites, rituals and exercises with little or no considerations for others. The mother’s frustration is eloquent: ““It was a mistake to come,” says my mother, “I want to die in my own home, by my sea, my sky. Do you understand?”” (53-54). This is a plea that resounds with the sense of a home insulated by a sense of refinement and peacefulness, a space where the entry of vulgarity is barred. In her daughter she finds a co-sufferer and willing sympathiser. The next story “Spartacus and the Dancing Man” is an intimately private story of togetherness disrupted by the “death” of young Spartacus, one of the three siblings, who “was born with three holes in his heart.” The two other children are the speaker and her sister Bean. The sisters are full of imagination and memory, and they visualise all sorts of

embodied spirits in their house. This house has now become a house of memory after they abandon it after Spartacus's "death." Spartacus's absence leaves a big "hole" in the family which can never be mended. Through an intensely imagined picture of a family frame, the narrator leaves the reader at a loss with the silent question – is the house really abandoned and revisited after decades or is it a "house" of the narrator's imagination, a metaphorical one? Is Spartacus a real character or just a dream? Whatever it may be, the story, like the house of ghosts it tells about, will continue to haunt us for a long time. The next story – "The Decline of Henrietta" – too borders on the unreal. Set against the American background, the story is a narrative of a young woman whose "decline" remains largely vague. The same is true of "The Excerpts from the Journal of a Delusional Widow." The word "delusional" injects an element of doubt into the credibility of the visions that the widow experiences and hurls the narrative into the zone of surreality. The presence of the "boy monk" which influences the widow seems to be an unreal presence, a figment of imagination. Set in the high altitude of Leh and its neighbourhood, it also speaks of the speaker's journey into unfamiliar mountain terrains, into areas like Chang La Pass which is situated at the altitude of 17,525 feet, or into Pangong Tso where she comes across a school with seven children who come from remote areas. Pangong is a place "divided between Ladakh and Tibet" (84). It is a wonderful story with a dreamlike quality. Doshi's poetic gifts are, as already stated, abundantly evident in the stories as well. This may not work well everywhere. This might be the reason why "The Decline of Henrietta" evokes an environment that is largely incomprehensible.

The third section of the book contains two essays. Both are autobiographical in nature. "Memory and Imagination: Twin Roles in the Novel" offers information regarding the autobiographical contents of her poems like "Falling, 1968" and "Memory of Wales" discussed earlier. She argues that memories, particularly childhood memories, are "charged with a certain power, making it truthful in a way that even reality cannot be" (93). It is from this perspective that she observes "the secret architecture of my [i.e. her] parents' romance" (100) across countries and cultures and writes the novel *The Pleasure Seekers* where the story "spreads over decades between the four anchors of place" (100): Madras, London, Nercwys (her mother's village in Welsh) and Anjar (her father's ancestral village). A writer carries the memory and transforms it into a story: "In the end, there is memory and there is the imagination, twining and uncoupling till there is only one thing: the story. And the story is the only truth" (103).

The second essay "Around the Edges of the Great Swamp: Reasons for Writing" offers more information about her life and writing. Writing, for her, is "a refusal to shut up" (108). She further comments, "That writing allowed me to disentangle myself from the many mythologies that bound me to family, country, identity" (119). She was so immensely influenced by poets like Mark Doty, Mary

Oliver, James Tate, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Pablo Neruda, Rainer Maria Rilke and Richard Hugo that she knew that Business Administration which she had been pursuing in America at that time was not really her cup of tea, that she would be a poet instead. Hugo's words in *The Triggering Town*, "a slim volume on the aesthetics of writing," had great impact on her: "You owe reality nothing, and the truth of your feelings everything" (qtd. in Doshi 115). In fact, the powerful flow of this truth characterises the entire volume of Doshi's writings: poems, stories, essays. She reiterates this when she observes, "It's okay to make things up, and the things you make up can sometimes be more real, more powerful than the truth itself" (114-5) and again, "I write to find the truth, however false it may be" (119).

The volume makes a pleasant reading. The poetic flavour is never missing in the pieces and it mostly ignites a passion for travels, both outward and inward. Doshi as an "adulterous citizen" contributes to a better understanding of both the local and the global.

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