

Literature and the Indian working class: Mridula Koshy in conversation

Vanessa Guignery

École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, Lyon, France

- The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 3 January 2023. <http://www.tandfonline.com/https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2022.2158442>

Abstract

In this interview conducted in Delhi on March 20, 2022, Indian author Mridula Koshy discusses the specific circumstances of writing, publishing and reading in contemporary India. She talks about her determination to engage in a conversation that involves all members of Indian society and explains why, a few years ago, she decided to stop writing fiction and concentrate instead on her work at the free community library she co-founded in Delhi. Referring to her short stories and her 2016 novel *Bicycle Dreaming*, she discusses her interest in small lives and unexceptional characters. She shares her dissatisfaction with Indian contemporary literature in English that portrays the working class in a way that satisfies the curiosity of middle-class readers but fails to engage with a larger readership. On the other hand, she praises the scope of Indian literature in other languages, especially in Malayalam and Tamil.

Keywords: Mridula Koshy; Indian literature in English; working class; caste; readership; Malayalam literature



Mridula Koshy

Introduction

For Indian author Mridula Koshy (2013b), “[w]riting, like politics, is a fundamentally collective project” (n.p.). She therefore considers her literary publications as a contribution to the work already done by others and envisages them as a way to “join the conversation about who we are in India and in the world” (Koshy 2021, 174). This attachment to the collective is

reflected not only in her writing but also in her life commitments. Born in 1969, Koshy grew up in Kerala and Delhi, moved to the US with her parents at the age of 14 and remained there for 20 years, living in deprived neighbourhoods and doing menial jobs while studying at college. She then worked as a trade union and community organizer in Portland, Oregon until she returned to India in 2004 with her partner and their three children. In the early 2010s, she co-founded The Community Library Project in Delhi which runs free community libraries and encourages people to “think through books”.¹ She explains that as a trade union organizer, she was “interested in the question of who has power and how we can redistribute it”, shifting it from the boss’s side to the workers’ side. She considers her founding of the free community library as “a continuation of that past experience of organizing for power” (Koshy 2020, n.p.).

In 2009, Mridula Koshy published *If It Is Sweet*, a collection of short stories set in India and the US, which feature characters from various class backgrounds, are formally innovative and often marked by abrupt, surprising, moving or poignant endings. Mothers, lovers, domestic workers and migrants subtly reveal their longings and the emotional dramas at the heart of their lives, relating to class or caste divide, misconstrued friendship, lesbian love, failed motherhood or mourning. Her first novel, *Not Only the Things That Have Happened* (2012), tells the story of a four-year-old child given up for adoption by his underprivileged Kerala mother who, ever since, has longed to be reunited with her “Lost Boy” (the title of the novel in the Australian edition) and of the adopted child’s nagging interrogations about his origins. Set in a Kerala village torn between the conflicting demands of Catholicism, caste and leftist movements for the first part, and in the American Midwest for the second, the book explores the complex and painful feelings of loss and searching for identity involved in inter-country adoption. Both mother and son feel unmoored and struggle with their imperfect memories, using their imagination to fill the gaps in their personal narratives. Koshy’s second novel, *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016), relates a year in the life of Noor, the teenage daughter of a Muslim kabadiwala (an itinerant buyer of waste) who works in Chirag Dilli in South Delhi. The writer, who at that time read picture books to groups of teenagers after school, said she wanted to narrate a story “that could be their life and recognizable to them” as well as “test the theory that [she] could tell a not-simple story simply” (Doshi 2016, n.p.). She described her novel as her “attempt to understand how family life is sustained among the working class” and to see “if there is a level of poverty below which family life – mutual love and sacrifice – is not sustainable” (Koshy 2017, n.p.).

Koshy’s novels and short stories reveal her interest in portraying the everyday lives of members of the lower working class (servants, waste pickers, scavengers, street vendors) and the travails of poor and marginalized people (Dalits, Muslims, women) without turning them into either victims or heroes. Her narratives thus give a visibility and a voice to individuals who often remain unseen and unheard in society and in contemporary Indian literature but the writer is careful not to essentialize or commodify poverty. She said in an interview that she does not want to write texts that “knock you down” but stories that “portray the resilience of [her] characters” and are “interested in saying to you that ‘this is your world’” (Koshy 2021, 179). Simultaneously, she does not aim to chart the illusory emancipation of subaltern subjects and their increasing agency or upward mobility, but to draw the portraits of unexceptional people leading ordinary lives. She explained for instance that her goal in *Bicycle Dreaming* was to see “if it would be possible to write a story in which the reader is asked not to empathise with the exceptional characters, but rather with their humanity” (Nandan 2016, n.p.). The Dalit and Muslim scavengers and waste buyers she depicts in this novel suffer from ostracization because of their caste and religion but they still show a proud dedication to their work, and teach their children the values of self-respect and dignity. Koshy’s talent also applies to her subtle portrayal of women who are both disenfranchised and resilient, as in her uncollected

short story “And Ain’t I a Woman?” (Koshy 2011) that proposes vignettes of the lives of domestic servants in a New Delhi colony.

Koshy is concerned about reaching out to the Indian working class while being aware that her use of English in her creative writing probably rules out this community of readers.² In 2010, she wrote an essay about the state of literature in India, “Literature: What News from a Changing India”, in which she insisted on writers’ accountability to an Indian, and not western, audience (Koshy 2010). In the following interview held a little more than ten years later, she shares her views on the current situation of Indian contemporary literature in English and other languages. She also looks back on her literary career and life trajectory to cast light on her interests and heartfelt convictions.

This is an edited transcript of a conversation with Mridula Koshy which took place at the Community Library Project, Khirki Extension in Delhi on 20 March 2022.³

Vanessa Guignery (VG): Your collection of short stories, *If It Is Sweet*, and your two novels, *Not Only the Things That Have Happened* and *Bicycle Dreaming*, focus on members of the working class in India. Why are you particularly interested in portraying this social class?

Mridula Koshy (MK): I have class politics, so the lens, curiosity and interest with which I approach the project of writing is one that’s already determined, even before there is an interest in writing. I have an interest in the question of power and who has power in our world today, which is a largely capitalistic world. The working class have very little power. Their labour is not their own. They are prevented from even being able to say: “I do not want to give you my labour anymore”. I’m not just talking about the classical definition of slavery or indenture, but in many other situations, you are not allowed to collectively withdraw, to go on strike. There are laws about how you can exercise that right, so everything seems heavily weighted in favour of people who own the factories (and not the people who do the work in the factories) and of people who define themselves as the intellectual class. The important thing about those thinking jobs is not that *they* are thinking or that other people are not thinking, which is not true (everyone is thinking all the time). The important thing is that they have a lot of power. They determine what products are created, regardless of whether those products are useful to anybody and they determine how people will be persuaded to acquire those products. So I guess I have this lens.

VG: Did that interest compel you to start writing?

MK: I started writing late. I was 35 when I started writing and I was almost 40 when I got published. Most people, if they were going to be writers, would have been writing when they were teenagers and publishing in their 20s. Reading and writing are activities that are culturally determined, but they’re also very much determined by who has access. I was very interested in the point of view of people in this culture, in this society – I hate to use the word “nation” because increasingly it would become so nationalistic in this country, but within the boundaries of what this nation is. When I started writing, I was naive enough to think that writing was a way to engage with questions that working-class people were also engaging with, completely forgetting that they wouldn’t be able to read my books. Of course, I thought that if I was good enough, then I would get published, and then if I got published, perhaps I would be good enough to be translated. A big disappointment for me was not getting translated because my effort was completely driven by this idea that there’s a conversation going on and I want to join that conversation. I hadn’t understood the degree to which literature, being the exclusive purview of a few, already determined who wasn’t in that conversation. Other conversations were happening in other places that were not determined by literature, so eventually I exited.

I had done 10 years. There was a game to it that was very enjoyable at times and at times quite oppressive – a game of getting invited to residencies and to festivals and making friends and trying to be treated fairly but that wasn't happening. There was a heavy gender-determined hierarchy. Access to the good things in that world was determined by gender. All the men were always drinking and getting the prizes and all the women were always working really hard. The option of not getting a prize didn't really exist in the sense that we all had to try and get one. We all in India had to try to get published by someone abroad, and a prize helped with that goal. The way it's structured in India means that if you are writing literary fiction, which I was, you're not going to get a big print run. So, the only way to get a big print run is to find someone abroad. Then, if you are successful abroad, they print you there and that potentially adds to the print run in India. But even when being wildly successful – with the exception of one or two people every year – most publishers in India barely print 5,000 copies. That's nothing! Sometimes people tell me: "In such and such country, 5,000 is a good print run". But this country is the size of a state in India so for the size of this country, 5,000 is quite sad.

So, I did my time. Initially I was naive but eventually I thought I had no choice but to engage with all those things, like getting into festivals or trying to get published. I was no longer naive but quite determined that this must be the way to do it so that, in some sense, I was stuck. And then at some point I increasingly realized: "I don't have to do this". For a short time, people said: "Oh, what happened to her?" and somehow that felt hurtful to me. But there's a whole world of people who really don't care who goes to which festival or who gets invited to what, and they're having conversations that I want to be a part of. And it happens that my love for literature moves with me wherever I move. So when I exited this small part of literature, which is the world of book-publishing and book-writing in English in particular parts of India, I found there were lots of people who are interested in reading stories of all kinds of things, and they just don't have access to books.

VG: You first published a collection of short stories and then two novels. And yet, in a 2013 essay on why you read Alice Munro, you called the contemporary novel "that unbearably bloated creation which confuses its desires with its ideas" (Koshy 2013a, n.p.). What are your feelings towards the novel and the short story as literary genres?

MK: I felt that I had to write a novel. During the ten years that I was writing, I was constantly conflicted between what I wanted to do and what I felt I must do if I wanted any chance to be a participant in this whole thing. The novel has a very strong hold on us and that's too bad because most novels could be a lot better if they were shorter. Even when it's a decent novel, it is sometimes part of a bad project. To me, the novel is too celebrated: people think that something big means it's better and should be more celebrated. I prefer short stories especially because of the way they confuse things. All my short stories in my collection are homages to people I like who write short fiction. I would see something in a short story that was exhilarating and I would wonder: "Can I try that also?" and I would try it. So, all my short stories were like an experiment. I would tell myself: "I like this. I would like to copy it. I would like to see how it applies to this place and these people".

I have a short story called "P.O.P." which was inspired by Alice Munro because I saw what Munro could do in a short story. She can do a multi-generational short story and I found that really exhilarating because I thought that only a novel could do multiple generations. In slavery, they used to separate the family physically and you were not allowed to not only read and write, but also to marry, to raise your own children: in other words, you were not allowed to have generations. I wanted to write a short story in which people have generations because the only people who have grandparents and great-grandparents are middle-class people, upper-class people and kings. They have lineage, they have progeny, they have future and they have past,

but working-class people don't have a future or a past. So, I wanted to do generations for that reason.

Alice Munro's project is also very gender-related because she gives small women a platform and she exalts them through their presence in literature, for instance through the act of stitching a skirt and wearing it and feeling able to go and marry someone you've never met by getting on a train, taking a journey, getting off the train and meeting the stranger whom you will now live with. This is the only life you're given to live in a universe that will outlast you by billions of years. So this moment matters.

VG: You said in an interview that in *Bicycle Dreaming*, you wanted to write about “an unexceptional poor character” (Doshi 2016, n.p.). I was wondering if your project in this novel could be related to what the Malayalam writer Mukundan said when he defined himself as “a writer of small things” (Pande 2022, n.p.).

MK: *Bicycle Dreaming* was my last attempt to try to use writing as a way of entering into a bigger world than just this one room. We all live small lives. We live for a very short time and big forces far beyond us are acting on us. In *Bicycle Dreaming*, I wanted to push back personally against the notion of heroism, which you see, for example, in Aravind Adiga's (2008) novel *The White Tiger*, in which the driver redeems himself by not being anything like every other working-class person. He is exceptional. I'm always more interested in the question of how, because we are so small, so much is unknown. Even if we find ourselves inside the novel as a character or a reader or a writer, we remain very small and large forces are at play. So, we don't know what will happen next in big ways. We only know what will happen next in terms of “Tomorrow I'll have the same job. If I'm lucky they won't fire me tomorrow. I'll learn how to ride a bicycle. I'll keep my friendship with my neighbour. My feelings for this boy will become something and he might respond”. Especially in the world of children, one can depict this.

There's a type of literature with children as characters, which is celebrated for giving us the child's point of view and the distance of the reader from that point of view and all that irony. But I wasn't very interested in that. So, my book is very intentionally flat: everything the child character Noor says happens and there isn't much irony. I'm not interested in that tone of the adult who knows more than the child. There's very rarely something happening to her where we know the next thing that's going to happen, where she's surprised but we're not. I'm interested in the idea that she's really small and we're also really small. Irony, on the other hand, makes us feel big: it's very self-congratulatory, just as compassion is.

Also, I don't think Noor experiences her life as misery. She has her share of burdens: sometimes her best friend doesn't like her, sometimes she misunderstands things, she's too hasty in her way of living in the world so she's careless with people's feelings, but then she becomes aware, belatedly, that she wasn't nice to her friend. It's the life of an ordinary child who's not exceptionally gifted in any way. She doesn't feel more than other people and she's not intellectually gifted. Her friend at school, Ajith, may be so. It's hard to know because we see him from some distance. He's surly sometimes so it's hard to really like him.

VG: Noor's friend Ajith is a Dalit. To what extent was caste part of your project in *Bicycle Dreaming*?

MK: *Bicycle Dreaming* was written before the community library started, but when it was written, I was working with a handful of children. In the six-year period from 2009 when my first book was published to 2015 when the library was created and I stopped writing, I was doing a once-a-week reading club with a bunch of kids. At its height, there were maybe 25 kids in that club and the kids in class knew each other's caste. One day in class, we were reading a story that had a waste worker in it and one boy said “kabaddi”: he mock-made the call of the

person who goes door to door, and everyone laughed. And then I realized that they were looking at a boy in the class, both laughing at him and feeling uncomfortable. It was a moment where lots of contradictory feelings were in the room. I remembered it afterwards when writing *Bicycle Dreaming* five or six years later.

I grew up a Christian in India, in Kerala and in Delhi, and then a small part of my childhood was in the US and I had a lot of different other experiences, which gives me some distance from the issue of caste but probably I also have some internalized things around this question. I think having politics is a way of seeing yourself also, and that's been helpful. I was lucky that I found class politics in the labour movement in the US; for a very short time, I worked in it and was an activist in it in college. And then I was very lucky to find the library and meet people here who have helped me acquire anti-caste politics.

I was very moved by what the Malayalam writer Benyamin (2018) answered when he was asked why he writes: "Because I'm looking for my brother."⁴ I was very moved because he said what I have been trying to say. He said it very coherently and succinctly and in terms that everyone can understand. I think that whether you're a writer or not, everybody's trying to find their brother. We're trying to live with one another. Even when we do it very badly, we're still trying to do that. If someone would tell us how, it would be helpful. I think literature helps us to some degree, even a stunted literature maybe.

VG: Do you feel that Indian contemporary fiction in English has been sufficiently concerned with the working class and has portrayed the working class in a satisfactory way?

MK: I think that most often the portrayal exists for the middle-class person who's consuming that literature to satisfy some prurient curiosity. We often celebrate curiosity in literature because literature allows you to access other ways of thinking and of living than the one you're familiar with. So if you read a Russian novel, you will learn something about that context and that can be a good curiosity. The big project of literature is certainly empathy and when you identify with a character unlike yourself, then you have the potential to see life from their point of view. But most of the time literature concerned with the working class in India, by Aravind Adiga or other writers who are very celebrated, is satisfying a grotesque curiosity for how people live. We feel a revulsion for this poverty, a fear that if we get too close, it'll rub off on us. That revulsion is very much based on the caste system that we grew up in. Those who read and write come out of that system and the education system that they enter is part of that system. So we are taught to be revolted. This curiosity is not a humanistic, compassionate or broad curiosity, but a curiosity of revulsion and we mostly satisfy this curiosity which allows us to feel comfortable with our distance. Literature reifies and makes solid the distance between people. So instead of being an experience of empathy or seeing things through the eyes of another character, we are comfortable with the wall between us and them because our curiosity confirms for us when we read about them that they belong over there and we belong over here. That's very problematic.

VG: I find empathy a difficult notion to grasp. Could talk a bit more about the project of empathy in literature?

MK: It's really important to have accountability with your readers but that project doesn't exist in Indian literature. So it doesn't matter how hard I try in my writing: unless a reader can talk back to me, there's no process for developing empathy or anything else, whatever empathy might mean. I believe that these are aborted or stalled efforts at thinking as a society and I'm extremely frustrated by our literature in India because our efforts are very poor. Even if I have won an award, I would say that my effort was poor because it takes more than one person writing a book or being able to write a book or managing to get published or attending a festival.

It takes a lot of people reading and arguing together and a lot of other books to exist with your books. In our country, as many books as are written, there are a hundred thousand times more books that are not written, so we have a very poor literature.

For me, the word empathy is more about an individual having empathy with another individual and their individual experience of the world and it's less about class. I said that people in India will read with that revulsion, that revolted curiosity, but aside from that, they read to feel sad that someone is hurting, so often enough that active individual empathy is successfully achieved, even in bad books. You feel sad for the main character who had a bad time, maybe even had a bad time because of certain political realities, like their father's work was lost, he was a waste worker, but now he's not able to do that work. But given the larger picture of the missing hundred thousand books that never got written, that individual act of empathy often only affirms to you your own humanity, and that's all, that's all it is. We go back to the question of whether you're approaching your reading practice from a place of revolted curiosity or engaging in your reading practice with the project of empathy. But the project is extremely forestalled and broken because it becomes an empathy that satisfies *your* dignity and *your* humanity.

We are curious people and we are humanistic. We feel sad when we read about people who are having sad lives and that's wonderful for us. We are that way, we festival goers, reviewers of books, writers of books, professors, students, all together, all of us just feel so bad about children who knock on our car windows and ask for money, and we really just wish the people who are supposed to fix that would fix it. How do we live when little children knock on the windows of our car and ask for money? In the same way that anybody anywhere lives with multiple contradictions, our project of literature helps us to live with that contradiction but it does not help us to address the contradiction or to be conflicted in that contradiction. It helps us to feel satisfied and satiated with the way things are. I do think however that there's another kind of empathy apart from the human self-congratulatory empathy, an empathy that makes you act in the literature of commitment. Not so much Alice Walker as someone like Richard Wright. You read someone like him and it calls you to action.

VG: What do you think is missing in Indian literature in English?

MK: A big part of what is missing is the dialogue between books that a more democratic literature would have. By democratic, I just mean more people participating. A big part of what is missing is accountability with readers. Some of the best writing in India in English is what comes to English in translation, like Benyamin (who writes in Malayalam), Sivakami or Salma (both writing in Tamil). Anything that comes out of Tamil into English translation via Lakshmi Holmström is going to be brilliant because she's a great translator and she's choosing the books so it's already been curated by that act of translation. The most contemporary anthology of women's writing in India is Annie Zaidi's (2016) volume, *Unbound: 2,000 Years of Indian Women's Writing*, and it includes many women who have written in other languages and then have been translated into English. When our Indian English books are placed on the shelf in the library, there's one satire and one working-class novel and one novella and one suspense book and that's it. And so, there are all these spaces between the books where there were supposed to be many more books. Writers in other Indian languages have more books that they're working with and they have readers who hold them accountable. Their readers argue back, sometimes by writing books or by writing reviews, but many times by reading or not reading. I'm sure academics also play a big role in terms of those arguments.

There are many structured ways and then some unstructured ways in which a book either languishes or doesn't. That's a conversation that's missing in Indian literature in English, and without that conversation, a lot of us are just writing into a void. Our mental landscape is so poor. We are uniquely different from, say, African American writers: when they write, they

have a lot of other writers that they're arguing with and who are concerned. And they have produced a very rich literature despite great efforts to exclude them from literature. For example, they were not allowed to learn how to read and write, and it was on pain of being killed. To learn was a dangerous thing and to teach was a dangerous thing – and that's what's happening in India today – but they somehow, as a people, overcame that.

In India, there still are many people who have engaged and overcome, as, for instance, Yogesh Maitreya (2020) who published a wonderful collection of short stories, *Flowers on the Grave of Caste*. Maitreya is a small publisher who has suddenly been discovered overnight and there's a little bit of celebration going on. He's running a small, independent publishing house called Panther's Paw Publication and he has used his publishing house to publish his own writing and the writing of other Dalit writers. His short stories are breathtaking and they don't follow the rules of Indian English writing. They're very different. People could say: "Oh, he really needed an editor because this is dramatically not right". There are some very interesting arguments about what is English and who gets to say what English is. Those conversations have been going on in a stilted fashion for a while.

I was at the Jaipur Literature Festival one year when they had an emphasis on Dalit writing and Sivakami (the author of *The Taming of Women* [Sivakami 2012]) was the speaker, and when she finished speaking, someone in the audience who's quite important stood up and asked: "When will Dalit literature move on from the memoir or the autobiographical mode?" They were citing Rigoberta Menchú and other writers. They had this idea that there are stages: the first stage is when people don't know how to read and write, then they learn how to read and write, and then, in a halting stilted manner, with a poor command of language and with great help from good editors, they produce a work that is breathtaking in its new insight into how they live in those Andean mountains. And as in the case of Rigoberta Menchú, afterwards there's controversy with the question: "Did she really write it?" She said she suffered greatly; we revisit this and ask: "But did she suffer enough?" So in Jaipur, this person in the audience was asking this really brilliant writer who had been invited to this festival some fundamental question: "Are you even a writer? Isn't your literature stunted?" Never in that festival does anyone ever talk about how mainstream upper-class literature is stunted. Instead, people engage in conversations where once again everybody just gets confirmation of their own humanity.

VG: You partly grew up in Kerala. What do you find particularly remarkable about Malayalam literature?

MK: Malayalam literature is breathtaking. It's richly informed, not just by itself being full of reviewers, academics, readers, writers, all classes, all people participating, but it's also richly informed by its sense of itself as very cosmopolitan and related to the world of this subcontinent and beyond. Indian writing in English is strongly defined as subcontinental writing but Malayalam literature doesn't think of itself in subcontinental terms. It thinks of itself in terms of Kazuo Ishiguro or Haruki Murakami, because all these books are available in Malayalam. They're all translated. If you look at the publisher DC Books, for example, and many other publishers in Kerala, the list is huge. It's full of Swedish writers and all kinds of writers. So, people who read in Malayalam are reading many writers. American literature was criticized by one of the Nobel committees for being insular and I think Malayalam literature is the opposite of insular. It's very adventurous. People are interested in reading all kinds of things.

I can't really read in Malayalam, so I miss a lot. I read Mukundan and Paul Zacharia in English, but one of the things I took away from them was their ability to be abrupt in their beginnings and in their endings. Readers can be shocked and think: "They're breaking rules. You're not supposed to write like that. Where's the closure? Who published these people? This is bad literature". I like this idea of what is good literature and what is bad literature, and I like the possibility that good is bad and bad is good. Sometimes we dismiss something as bad

literature, but it could bring more oxygen than we have in this room over here where we're spending all our time struggling to breathe.

You referred earlier to Mukundan's self-definition as a writer of small things. I like the idea of smallness. One of my favourite writers is the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness. I like him because he writes from a small place and he's very big, he's loud. Icelandic people have a mythology that goes back and they have epic feelings. I like how you can come from a very small place, like Iceland or Kerala, and you can be extremely loud, so loud that you don't have to follow the rules and the conventions. Mukundan is not a small writer but he's not following any rules at all. And then, there are all these people who come from big places like America and they write these really small pathetic lives – novels written by white women in America in which there is a black maid who has feelings and then there's a white child who rescues the adult black maid from her misery. That is completely ahistorical: it never happened, it cannot happen. But then, the person gets to go on a big circuit and gets a MacArthur fellowship, and everyone says: "This is so big and this is so powerful." I say: "No, you're just from a big place and it's a very small thing, but it's amplified because you are in this privileged place. You're part of your race and your nationality. Everything makes you so big but what you've done is not that interesting".

VG: Do you think we can take part in big things even if our lives are small?

MK: I'm a Catholic. I don't practise as such but I believe and I love reading the Bible. It's a great piece of literature. Once I was in church and this priest was talking about the story in the Bible about waiting for the bridegroom and keeping the lantern lit because the bridegroom may arrive at night. It's a wonderful metaphor. It's very evocative. This priest referred to that story and talked about leadership and about being ready. What happened in the CAA-NRC (Citizenship Amendment Act–National Register of Citizens) protests in December 2019 in India was like a bridegroom.⁵ It was history arriving. Many of us will live very short lives and we will never encounter history. But in 2019–20 when we protested CAA-NRC, we encountered great forces.

In America, I worked in the labour movement with a woman, Amy Stear, who has since passed away, who was this wonderful communist. She also believed in the power of history. She used to say: "You have to do your work where you are. You can't go to join the guerrillas in Nicaragua". This is where we are. This is Delhi. This is where the work is. This is where you have to do it and you could do it all your life and not have anything come up other than live your life. And then after a while, if you are lucky, there's also history and there's a chance to intersect with history. The priest in the church said: "When history comes, be ready". Amy used to call it opportunity. She said: "Every time something happens to break the movement – you are building something and there are forces that crush you, that break you and your organization – every effort to break the movement is an opportunity for organizers". I find that idea of being ready for history and of using oppression as an opportunity to organize shattering in a good way.

VG: Can you talk about your conception of literature in relation to the work you do in the community library?

MK: At the core of what I was doing when I was writing was that I really loved literature. I loved it as a way of talking to people in the past, as a way of maybe talking to people in the future – not just as a writer, but for everyone who participates in literature, including little children who are reading books. All day here in the community library, there are eight or ten or 20 read-aloud happenings, where four or five or eight children are sitting together and somebody's reading and everybody's talking. Sometimes, when I'm reading with a child, I might say to them: "I think there are around 10 or 20,000 copies of this book and somewhere

in Norway right now, some child is opening it at the same time that we are opening it". To me, that's what literature does. You are talking to that child in Norway. You can be six years old. You don't have to know how to use email. You're talking to the child in Norway because she's reading the same book. She's potentially thinking about the same things. That's so powerful and I don't think that that belongs to only a small group of people.

The way we read here looks very different and often people who come to the library ask: "But do they read?" We are reading right in front of them but the visitors don't see it because they think that someone who opens a story and reads to other people is not a legitimate activity or a legitimate way of reading. That's not considered as intellectually worthy. I completely disagree. Also, repeatedly, people come to the library and they want evidence that some one person here is going to stand out, as if we're like a sieve and we're sieving people for that one person who will then write a brilliant book. This is not what it is, this is not a sieve for that. Our aim is to broaden literature, not just by literally bringing people into literature as it exists, but by having people engage with literature in a way in which ultimately literature will have to change.

There's a worldwide understanding that readers are these lonely people who have drawing rooms and curtains and bookshelves. When I was little and I was reading books like *Jane Eyre*, I was very influenced by that view of literature. For example, early in *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist is sitting and reading and her bully of a cousin comes and disrupts that. Often in that dreamy child narrative, there's a lost soul and then literature saves them and in the end, they create literature. In many of these books, by the end the protagonist turns into a writer. It's not a bad understanding of things: there are people who sometimes become writers because they're introspective and shy. In writing workshops it's often celebrated and the facilitator or workshop teacher will say to you: "You have been an outsider, you've been lonely but that's your secret power. Now you write a book because you've been observing people all these years". But there are many other ways to enter literature than be someone who was lonely and an outsider and, of course, who had a living room or a drawing room to read and lived in a society which had a library every few blocks.

We lived in Portland, Oregon, for ten years and my kids were born some years into my living there: the oldest was about seven when we left and I had a five-year-old and a three-year-old at that time. All of them had library cards. We lived in a very poor neighbourhood (it was a black neighbourhood) and there were immigrants there, like me. That was a rich society and we were working class in that society; at times we were quite poor but even then, the library was there because we were in a rich country. Children who are from the working class here in India don't have that. Is it because India is poorer than the United States? Yes, but it's also for many other reasons. There's a caste system in India and a particular understanding of reading, which is not just class-based but is also caste and colonially based: the idea is that reading is for studying, not for thinking. So, the emphasis is that we acquire knowledge, we become equipped to do work. So, if you're an engineer, you read engineering works; if you're a doctor, you read medical works; and if you're a government-school attending child, you learn to read so you can read a factory manual or a script for a call centre job to make phone calls. The overall purpose of reading here is specifically Indian and different from the American way.

Notes on contributor

Vanessa Guignery is Professor of contemporary British and Postcolonial Literature at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon in France. Her research interests focus on issues relating to the poetics of voice and silence, hybridity, generic transformations, fragmentation and genetic criticism. She is the author of monographs on Julian Barnes, B.S. Johnson, Ben Okri and Jonathan Coe, and the editor or co-editor of some 15 collections of essays on contemporary British and postcolonial literature (notably on Ben Okri, Janet Frame, Nadine Gordimer and

Caryl Phillips). Her latest monograph is *Julian Barnes from the Margins: Exploring the Writer's Archives* (2020) and she edited a special issue of *Études Anglaises* on contemporary Nigerian literature (2022). Her edition of *Conversations with Ben Okri* will be published in 2023. She was a visiting researcher at the "Centre de Sciences Humaines" (CSH) in Delhi from January through April 2022. Website: www.vanessaguignery.com

References

- Adiga, Aravind. 2008. *The White Tiger*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Benyamin. 2018. "In Conversation with Benyamin, the Winner of the JCB Prize [with Jinoy Jose P]." *The Hindu*, October 26. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/benyamin-is-the-winner-of-the-jcb-prize/article25331033.ece>
- Doshi, Tishani. 2016. "Allure of the Unexceptional." *The Hindu*, February 27. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/tishani-doshi-talks-to-mridula-koshy-about-bicycle-dreaming/article8285187.ece>
- Koshy, Mridula. 2009. *If It Is Sweet*. Chennai: Tranquebar Press.
- Koshy, Mridula. 2010. "Literature: What News from a Changing India." In *India Awakens: Under the Banyan Tree: Catalogue of an Exhibition held at the Essl Museum, Vienna, 26 November 26, 2010 – February 27, 2011*, curated by Alka Pande, 164–168. Klosterneuburg: Edition Sammlung Essl.
- Koshy, Mridula. 2011. "And Ain't I a Woman?" *Social Policy Winter*: 10–12.
- Koshy, Mridula. 2012. *Not Only the Things That Have Happened*. Noida, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins India.
- Koshy, Mridula. 2013a. "Why I Read Alice Munro." *The Ladies Finger!* October 12. <http://theladiesfinger.com/why-i-read-alice-munro/>
- Koshy, Mridula. 2013b. "Those Who Have a Stake in the Adoption Narrative." Mridula Koshy Blog, October 21. <http://mridulakoshy.blogspot.com/2013/10/hearing-back-from-those-with-stake-in.html>
- Koshy, Mridula. 2016. *Bicycle Dreaming*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger.
- Koshy, Mridula. 2017. "Tete-a-tete with Mridula Koshy, Community Organizer, The Community Library Project." READ Alliance, July 3. <https://medium.com/@readalliance/tete-a-tete-with-mridula-koshy-community-organizer-deepalaya-community-library-project-2e57f00e006e>
- Koshy, Mridula. 2020. "In Conversation with Mridula Koshy [with Khorshed Deboo]." *Paper Planes*, February 25. <https://www.joinpaperplanes.com/mridula-koshy/>
- Koshy, Mridula. 2021. "Reading, Writing and the Contours of Power: Mridula Koshy in Conversation with Maryam Mirza." In *Creative Lives: Interviews with Contemporary South Asian Diaspora Writers*, edited by Chandani Lokugé and Chris Ringrose, 171–179. Stuttgart: Ibidem/Verlag.
- Maitreya, Yogesh. 2020. *Flowers on the Grave of Caste*. Nagpur: Panther's Paw Publication.
- Nandan, Vishnudas. 2016. "Riding her Dreams: On a Ride with Mridula Koshy." *FWDmedia*, April 13. https://fwdlife.in/riding-her-dreams-on-a-ride-with-mridula-koshy?fbclid=IwAR0WN5LgFX_CrigsqvbcuiKIId2yCt_MXAhAa7_hY1drp76071klJvoY1AKw
- Pande, Alka. 2022. "Delhi: The City and its People. M. Mukundan, Nandakumar K, Fathima EV in Conversation with Alka Pande." Jaipur Literature Festival, March 13. 41'43". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH9qkpZNCfY&list=PLO4JTjY_3Zc8X8ww8mj74JZHdVFW6bXea&index=151
- Sadana, Rashmi. 2012. *English Heart, Hindi Heartland. The Political Life of Literature in India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Sivakami, P. 2012. *The Taming of Women*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Zaidi, Annie, ed. 2016. *Unbound: 2,000 Years of Indian Women's Writing*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.

Notes

¹ <https://www.thecommunitylibraryproject.org/about-us/>

² On the politics of the use of English in India, see for example Sadana (2012).

³ This interview was part of a research project conducted at the Centre de sciences humaines (CSH) in Delhi, funded by the Institut des sciences humaines et sociales (InSHS) of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in France.

⁴ In an interview, Benyamin said: “In the very beginning of the Bible we encounter a haunting question, when God asks Cain: ‘Where is thy brother?’ I think the question forms the crux of my literary quest. I am constantly in search of an answer to that question and I search for my brother among the marginalised, oppressed, discarded, abandoned, murdered and mauled. I want to find them and tell their story to the rest of the world. This mission keeps me writing” (2018, n.p.).

⁵ The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) aimed to facilitate grant of citizenship to specific groups of people who had migrated to India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan prior to 2014. While Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians could benefit from the CAA and therefore no longer be considered illegal immigrants, Muslims and Jews were left out of the CAA and, as a consequence, excluded from the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the official record of legal Indian citizens.