

## SUDHA RAI

### Sipping the Jasmine Moon: A Conversation with Lakshmi Kannan

**Sudha Rai:** Congratulations on your fourth volume of poems *Unquiet Waters* [New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005]. What are your thoughts on this occasion?

**Lakshmi Kannan:** I'm grateful to Keki N. Daruwalla who did a thorough job of editing the poems. He also streamlined some of them till they were shed of the extra flab.

**SR:** Did you ever feel you were a part of a "generation" of Indian poets, sharing common concerns about identity or politics?

**LK:** O yes. One's own age and the times one lives in can never be ignored or wished away. My contemporaries and I who are from the post-Independence era saw many changes as children and as young women. For one thing, a regional identity in terms of asserting one's own language (the vernacular), seemed to take on an almost political colouring, as if it was done as an antidote to the postcolonial hangover that was still lingering. It was the closest they could get to "nationalism." Another change that one noticed was an awareness of feminist thoughts, even if "feminism" was at a nascent stage and was yet to be articulated clearly. Many of us grew on this slow-but-unsteady movement that came to be called feminism. Our voices were heard, they registered, our points of view were recorded, or debated, or contested, but we could make our

presence felt. There was as much approval of what we wrote on the one hand, as there was much hostility on the other. So it sort of blew hot and cold for us. And I would like to say that what we usually mean by a “generation” has shrunk now, in the sense that every decade seems to be as long a measure of time as to seem almost like a generation that has gone by. Things are changing so fast even at the same time when certain things never seem to change at all. So when I participated in international feminist conferences, there was so much that was rapidly changing for women the world over. Yet there was a lot that was common for women from Asian and developing countries. The Asian women in particular had to contend with very deep-seated traditional and social mores that were hard to rationalise. The term “modern” in itself seemed to be suspect, and always seemed to beg a question. This had an impact on their governments and political leaders as well. We learnt a lot from the colloquiums with our Western counterparts, from Europe, the North American zones and other areas. We admired the way they handled the tough deal they had in their countries in their work place, their marriages, relationships, the very economics of their lives and so on. Many of them had to define what was “feminine” for their society and it was impressive to see how they grappled with the diffuse scene to eventually forge a language that was came to be understood by the entire world of feminist thinkers. There were some seminal, path-breaking books on feminism that were most iconoclastic, so I lived at a time when I witnessed the evolution of a feminist philosophy. Yes, that’s what I would like to call it. Essentially, a philosophy of being, nothing less. These national and international events made for a learning experience and helped every woman and man to evolve a philosophy of life. Because it called for some kind of a revolution in thinking, even unlearning in some ways, today we’ve moved on to a realm where we’ve taken the feminist arguments to the level where it rightly belongs—that of *human rights*. It’s as simple as that. All these concerns touch each generation

and each age group in a special way. For example, you see the wide range of career options for young women now. A few decades back, only a few standard options were considered “proper” or “respectable” for young women.

**SR:** Your last collection of poems *Exiled Gods* was published in 1985. How do you evaluate your journey as a poet in the interim years? What has changed and what remains constant?

**LK:** Lots of things in my life went downhill for me after 1985, and the next decade and a half unfolded like a long, frightening nightmare. My husband did not just take seriously ill, he seemed to develop every imaginable disorder in his system. The ramifications of this on my life and my writings are such that to enumerate them would be like a tedious litany of woes. I wrote very little during this period. I published some fiction though, in Tamil, and translated a few stories into English. I wrote a novel and translated that as well for Orient Longman. I did write poems in the interim period and published some of them in journals. That was when I began to notice how water as a large metaphor, or a symbol, seemed to take hold of my thoughts and inundate some of my poems. I sifted them from the other poems that were not moistened by any water element and slowly worked on the present collection. It was as if I just had to surrender to some dictate from the overpowering, manifold and magnificent presence of water. Almost as if I had to bow to its supreme power. As for the time factor, while journals readily publish poems, when it comes to a collection of poems there are few takers. Publishers prefer fiction to poetry. For a couple of years the only offers I received were from publishers I didn’t believe in. Their production and editorial values were not impressive. There was no point in going ahead just to burst into print. I preferred to wait, even if it was a long wait, and then Sahitya Akademi happened. It was the editor Keki N. Daruwalla’s initiative and his firm conviction about poetry that helped in bringing out this volume as a part of their publication programme for the

Akademi's Golden Jubilee year.

**SR:** I find the title *Unquiet Waters* so apt—allowing you to look deep into the currents of human consciousness, liberating their spirits and voices.

**LK:** Like I said, water as an element pulled me towards it and its immense thematic potential opened up for me in this particular phase of my writing. The more I plumbed the depths of water, the more water I seemed to draw on its myriad forms. I think it's a question of focus, or of staying focussed on a theme. In this phase, water gave me clarity, transparency, it showed me some submerged lives and echoed with very human voices. It was important to stay within this consciousness for the collection.

**SR:** I am also struck by the scriptural epigraphs from the *Agni Purana* and *The Old Testament* used as invocations. Both texts frame the spiritual significance of the “waters.” Do your poems endorse any philosophical tradition or system of belief? Especially through the symbols?

**LK:** Actually, I found an uncanny similarity in the two epigraphs from two different faiths. If you study and analyse, all spiritual paths converge on some points that could be universalized. I think my poems try to absorb from various systems of belief. They absorb messages from diverse spiritual background and once again, the waters washed over them and assimilated them. There is an interesting analogy in Buddhism, again about waters and the different peoples of the earth *vis à vis* the taste of salt. In the chapter, “The Universal Salty Taste,” Nichiren Daishonin, a thirteenth-century Buddhist priest from Japan (whose continuation of the message of Mahayana Buddhism is now followed the world over, and who is in the direct line of Gautama, the Shakyamuni Buddha), explains about salt and the sea: “Even if one were to prepare a feast of a hundred flavours, if the single flavour of salt were missing, it would be no feast for a great king.” He goes on to say: “The Nirvana Sutra compares the water of all the rivers flowing into the sea

and becoming salty to the people of different capacities, instructed through the various provisional teachings who attain the Buddha way when they take faith in the Lotus Sutra.”

**SR:** In this collection you celebrate the struggle of ordinary women to hold on to their aspirations. I'd like to point out just one curious exception, “Don't Wash,” where an interesting reversal of the power of water to “create” occurs, for water can also “erase” Rasha Sundari Devi's secret endeavours in the kitchen space, to attain literacy. Do poets need to consciously write women into history?

**LK:** Interestingly, this very poem was selected by the British Council for their women writers' website they launched recently as [www.womenswriting.com](http://www.womenswriting.com). I've always celebrated the struggle of the so-called “ordinary” women (and men) in my writings, be it fiction or poetry. They come through to me as truly heroic in the way they strive to triumph over their endless struggles in life. And I'm glad you've so sharply noticed a reversal of role for water in this poem. For indeed, Rasha Sundari Devi should not wash away her magical scribbling on the kitchen wall. Living within what could be termed as a *brutal culture of erasure*, the woman had to save her writings from being erased. She and her writings are one: she is the subject, and she is also the creator of her destiny. Indian patriarchy is so clever and calculating that it can take what it wants from a woman (her utility as a homemaker, wife, mother, and breadwinner) and erase all else that fall into the category of talent, language skill, or the arts. I was fascinated by the will, determination and the sheer ingenuity of this woman, as she forged ahead to teach herself the language of Bangla at a time when literacy was denied to women and it was a definite taboo. She starts right from the scratch, learning alphabets in the hardest way, almost stealing words and letters like she was a thief. So it is not as if I wrote her history, she has herself written her life-history in the widely acclaimed *Amar Jiban*.

**SR:** In your poems “Don’t Wash,” “O For Shame,” “An Autopsy,” and “Ask for the Moon,” you dramatize the notion of “transgression” for Indian women and their silent and successful resistance. Transgression, in one of my favourite poems, “Ask for the Moon,” is beautiful and complete, and in no way fearful. As the young, transgressive woman narrates her symbolic rebirth—“I sipped at the jasmine moon / there was more of it. / I drank some more, little by little”—the impossible dream is embraced and assimilated. Are there any techniques you consciously deploy to enable your readers to experience a woman’s inner being... her psychology?

**LK:** “To each her own,” as the saying goes. I let each of the protagonists in these poems go about her “transgression” in the way that best suits her and her cultural context. All I had to do was to follow them through the stages of their transgression without imposing myself, or my technique, on any of their thoughts or actions. For instance, “O For Shame” was one of those rare poems that came whole and at one go. My hand just obediently wrote it out like it was some “dictation” in which I had to just listen to my heart, to my ears, and see from the eye of my mind. In “Ask for the Moon” the younger woman in the poem realises the futility of arguing with that arrogant Brahmin male who claims an absolute patriarchal right to recite the Gayatri mantra. It is a mantra for invoking the sun for a healthy, regenerative energy. So she just quietly goes ahead and does what she wants to do and finds out for herself that asking for the moon is surprisingly easy. She just has to take sips at the jasmine moon from the bowl of water till she drinks up the entire moon, that’s all! All she needs is the political will to bend the gender at a point where it breaks what her community calls a “transgression,” when clearly, it’s not. The sun (or the moon, for that matter) is nobody’s monopoly. Actually, if the sun is God Aditya for the Hindu Indians, she is a female deity in Japanese mythology. Called Goddess Tensho Deijin, she is inducted in

Buddhism as a female power who protects everyone who has faith. So what's the message? Surely there's a larger world out there. I must share the reaction of a few social scientists and anthropologists to this particular poem in a seminar. They told me that women have been clubbed with the dalits ["Untouchables"] in being forbidden to recite the Gayatri mantra. It doesn't matter if the woman is demographically defined as belonging to "upper caste and upper class," but where the Gayatri mantra is concerned, she and the dalits are declared ineligible to recite this sacred mantra.

**SR:** Your pen name is "Kaaveri" and you constantly situate and intermingle rivers (Ponni, Gomti, Ganga) and women. What do rivers voice about women that women themselves cannot?

**LK:** Plenty of things! For instance, have you noticed the mirthful abandon with which women splash about in water when they bathe, or when they want to get drenched in the rain like in "O For Shame"? In the poem "A River Remembers," if I may be permitted to quote a few lines from it to elucidate:

River Ponni flows as usual  
remembering  
how the women once buried their faces  
in the silky folds of  
her shining waters  
seeking adventure, seeking life.

You see how without verbalizing or articulating their desires and their aspirations, the women just express their joy and oneness with the feel of water on their bodies, on their being. It's such an intimate relationship. The river Gomti lashes out at embankments to make her presence felt—and feared—or else she is taken for granted. And in an extended prose-poem titled "Ponni Remembers" that is not in this collection, Ponni is the river Kaaveri, all woman, and totally free in her watery form to live life on her terms. As for my pen name "Kaaveri" I had been using it for my fiction in Tamil long before I worked on this collection. I am very fond of the river

Kaaveri as I grew up in Mysore as a small girl and it carries very affectionate memories, of the river, my grand parents and my mother.

**SR:** Rivers touch a very deep chord in the Indian mind and poets like A. K. Ramanujan and Keki Daruwalla have dwelt on themes like transition, change and decay in the context of rivers. But in your collection, you sculpt so many diverse themes with water... waters are everywhere!

**LK:** Waters are everywhere because that is, after all, the dominant theme of this particular collection. But if one must go by the themes you noted *vis à vis* the poets you mentioned, then my poem “Crossing the River” is also about transition, from this life to the next, and “A River Remembers” has a hint of decay in the way it traces the decadent elements in a retrograde culture.

**SR:** How did you relate to the Tsunami tragedy? The lines, “Let there be rough waters / as I go with the tide,” from your poem with the first line as the title, haunt me as an epitaph for the victims.

**LK:** Quite so! How aptly you picked out the right lines for the Tsunami victims. But coming back to your main question about how I related or reacted to the tragedy, I was stunned and benumbed by the deluge. Suddenly there seemed to be too much water all around and in its most ferocious form too. I couldn’t make anything of it. Although I wrote a couple of poems on the Tsunami, I wrote them more to explain things for myself than for any reader or journal. But I must confess that my poems look much too small for the magnitude of the tragedy, that was matched only by the magnitude of people and nations that rose to their tallest to help the victims.

**SR:** Would you be happy to be described as “a poet of nature?”

**LK:** Being only “a poet of nature” would be a limiting factor. I’ve many poems that engage in interior dialogues/monologues, or in a debate with cultural constraints and



man-woman interface. Poetry *per se* works through images and metaphors. So, instantly as it were, it can project the nature and environment that lives *within a person*. It can externalize the rivers, the sea, the rain and the elements that play out their drama within people. Poetry can project all of that, much like a hologram.

**SR:** As a founder member of The Poetry Society of India, what are your comments on the “then” and the “now” of poetry in India? Is the politics of regional writing *versus* writing in English a factor to reckon with?

**LK:** It most certainly is. At the TPS, we organize poetry competitions on an all-India basis, and we tie up with various organizations such as the British Council, Delhi and other educational institutions. The prize money offered for translations from regional languages is invariably lesser than the one offered for poems written originally in English. I’m opposed to this, but like you said, rightly, it was a factor “to reckon with” because our co-sponsors offer only an unequal deal for the translations. As for “then” and “now,” apart from changes in trend, style and themes taken, we’re amazed at the number of children and youth who are coming up with poetry. They write good stuff, too, show a lot of social and political concern, and a few of them also sound honest. One hopes that they preserve their sensibility as they grow older and that poetry doesn’t get relegated to a less important activity.

**SR:** Have the interests of Indian readers shifted to diasporic poets?

**LK:** Not really, at least not as when compared to fiction. Suddenly, there seems to be a lot of critical interest in diasporic fiction, but in poetry I don’t find a parallel trend.

**SR:** I find the epigrammatic strain very pronounced in your recent poems—a pithy, feminist wisdom. A signature stylistics of Lakshmi Kannan?

**LK:** I always strive for economy in expression and look for a concise way of putting things.

Even in my fiction my style goes staccato in places. A deeper reason is the desire to leave a pool of silence in the reader's mind. A writing should both create and sustain the silence of reflection in the reader's mind. So I abstain from saying anything more than I should.

**SR:** How can women poets re-inscribe social values?

**LK:** Actually, women are so creative in their lives—whether they are into writing, painting, music or any creative arts or not is irrelevant to this aspect. They are already re-arranging paradigms for themselves. With poets, it becomes easier as they can re-create lives, and in the process of writing, they can discover a path or a direction, as also a whole new grammar and language to address this very complexity of their lives. That makes things clear for themselves.

**SR:** One section of *Unquiet Waters* focuses on poems on Ganesha. Are there any modern elements in your representation of the elephant-headed god?

**LK:** This is for a critic or a reader to say. Ganesh seems to be a great favourite with most people and he also comes through with different forms at different moments in one's life. Above everything else, he seems to be an icon who is the most approachable and has a friendly proximity.

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**SR:** How do you approach the idea of modernity?

**LK:** I don't think or worry about it at all! I leave it entirely for the critics and scholars to figure out what they consider "modern" or "contemporary."

**SR:** I find a strong pictorial dimension in your poems that seems to draw on the techniques of visual art such as portraiture, rather than the descriptive powers of the written word. Would you agree?

**LK:** Yes, I think so too. And when I read the works of other poets too, I find myself looking for

this evocative element that can conjure images and pictures for me on tangible terms.

**SR:** Do debates about colonialism and postcolonialism—language, history, and the politics of gender—affect your writing? Can there be poetry *sans* politics for you?

**LK:** The politics of language in the postcolonial scenario definitely influence me as a writer and as a person. As for the politics of gender, it's so pervasive that one can never wish it away. But when it comes to poetry, you can equally have poems that voice political concerns just as effectively as have poems that are free of this political colouring. They could take you to the environment around you, the universe, the mysteries of other living beings breathing along with you, the trees, plants, flowers, birds, animals giving you a sense of participation, the whole works. I find such poems are truly elevating.

**SR:** How do you interpret the term “sacred spaces” both as an individual and as a poet? Can poetry have relevance as a sacred space?

**LK:** What is “sacred” definitely needs a “space” to encompass it and preserve its sanctity. We know that while “space” is a word that has come to be used any which way by the self-assertive times we live in, “sacred” is a word that makes people go squeamish or awkward. Yet we know it is very much there in our lives, living within a shy, discreet space, living a secret life that is not shared often with others. Having carved a “space” for itself in an otherwise amorphous world, it lives a secret life that is not often shared with others. And what is “sacred” about this space for poetry when we know for a fact that modern poetry accommodates a lot of irreverent stuff and black comedy or humour? What I can see even in this kind of poetry is a poet/narrator/protagonist who is eloquent in the way s/he questions God or the forces above like an equal, voicing his indignation or sense of absurdity in a way no bright columnist, or journalist or activist or

feature-writer, can. And this space is obtained only within the esemplastic powers of poetry that whips, melts, welds and fuses to arrive upon a poem. He/she has just breathed life into this poem and now it has *praana*, the life-force. It is the closest approximation to something sacred.