

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

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. 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 feamayk for3A15, q

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 o

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.