

Bombay



An early image in your mind's eye can frame your view of a city. Poet Arundhathi Subramaniam leverages a literal window to consider lessons from her evolving relationship with Bombay.

One of my earliest life memories is a wide window. Through its lazy cursive grill, I could see an enormous peepul tree and a distant smudge of ocean. I remember standing at the windowsill, watching clouds, filled with a nameless longing and the deep sadness that three-year-olds know.

That remains my window to the world even today. Not because I live in the same apartment, or the same city, but because that memory holds in its spacious geometry many of the ingredients that make up my idea of home.

An ageing Hindi film star lived in that building. He was a bearded mountain of a man. His wild past was legendary. But he had found peace in a second marriage and the guidance of a Himalayan yogi. A gracious bungalow lay across the street – the Jinnah House, where the architect of Pakistan had once walked the manicured gardens with his beautiful Parsi wife. The road to the left led to a Jain temple with its ornate, strangely compelling iconography. Not far away was the green hush of the Tower of Silence where the Zoroastrians laid out their dead.

That window offered a frame within which to view the matter-of-fact tumult, the precarious cultural chaos of a place called Bombay – also Mumbai and Bambai. (Later, some insisted the city must have a single name. Their voices grew louder; mine grew quieter. My city, however, stayed incorrigibly many-tongued, many-named.)

Through that window, I learnt about languages – that it was difficult to know where one ended and another began. My parents spoke Tamil and English. My Delhi-bred mother spoke Hindi as well. Our grizzled cook told me tales in Malayalam of ghosts, serpents and murmuring coconut trees.

Mesmerized, I understood him perfectly. My mother listened to Hindi film songs on her old college transistor. I woke to her bell-like voice gently intoning Sanskrit prayers in her pooja room. Twice a week, Telugu and Tamil compositions routinely flooded my room as she learnt classical music from her loquacious music teacher. My father hummed the Bengali songs of Pankaj Mullick in a fine baritone. My sister went to a downtown school, where the flavours of Parsi Gujarati were pervasive. Life was a welter of sounds and tones, mysterious and familiar all at once.

At that window, I learnt about the sea – of “shoals of pomfret summered by sun / and smuggler’s boats on starless nights” (‘Sea at Versova’ in ref. 1). I learnt of harbour cities and the argots of traders from across the world. Years later, every time the city overpowered me with its suffocating self-importance, I looked for a glimpse between buildings of the Arabian Sea. That sliver of ocean rescued me, reminded me that it might be possible someday to escape the hysterical self-absorption of the metropolis. I daydreamed of escaping the confines of school, “pounding into the tides / foaming galaxies of unbottled fiction / deferred coastlines / endless nights.” (‘Side Gate’ in ref. 2).

At that window, I sensed that this was a city of dreams. An insomniac city where sleeplessness was sometimes a thirst for awakening. I could smell maya, mirage and the throb of big hungers, big plans. This was the city of Mahalakshmi, the goddess of abundance. But self-realised Himalayan yogis weren’t that far away either. When Haidakhan Baba visited our resident movie star, I stood in line to offer my salutations. (My motivation was sadly ignoble: it was to claim the sweets he offered greedy children who sought his blessing. Still, something about his poise and mien registered.) In this magic city, mean sea level seemed oddly connected to mountaintop.

At that window, I learnt about peepul trees. About the nesting habits of pigeons. About how July rain dripped from the leaves. Later, I learnt about a man who awakened beneath a

peepul tree two thousand five hundred years ago and was never the same again. That story remained inspirational.

The poet Nissim Ezekiel described it as a city “unsuitable for song as well as sense”. Hoshang Merchant called it the “of art nouveau elevators / and staircases to nothing”. I called it a “city uncontained by movie screen / and epigram”. It remains the city of postcard cliché: of mobile bhajan singers on local trains, doughty dabbawalas, Dharavi shanties and buildings held together by “more willpower than cement” (‘Tree’ in ref. 2). But it is also the city of my grimy heart: of monsoon walks on Marine Drive, the mournful visage of Madame Blavatsky looking down at poetry readings in the Theosophical Society, the pink lyric shock of flamingos in Sewri. Of faces – battered and lived-in, alive and hopeful.

I have spent much of my life along its smoggy coastline, longing for escape, when elsewhere, I have longed to return. Now, more anchored in my own axis between earth and sky, the city no longer bullies me. Its builders’ lobbies cannot twist my arm, its leaders no longer browbeat me. I will not be confined by its ideas of worth and scarcity. My gaze is affectionate. But I am not deceived. Bombay will not mourn my passing. I leave no enduring footprints on its sands.

I am now a hitchhiker. I know the freedom of passing through. “The floor space index I demand/is nothingshort of epic” (‘Confession’ in ref. 2). As I look today at its heaving turbid sea, I claim this city. I am not its victim, its survivor, its product, its effluent. I now know the hitchhiker’s ancient secret: I am one of its many rightful owners.

Arundhathi Subramaniam ✉

Unaffiliated.

✉ e-mail: arundhathisubramaniam@hotmail.com

Published online: 11 January 2024

References

1. Subramaniam, A. *On Cleaning Bookshelves* (Allied Publishers, 2001).
2. Subramaniam, A. *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2009).