



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal
Vol 9 No 1 March 2024

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Assistant Professor, Department of English
St Xavier's College, Ranchi, Jharkhand



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

‘When Landscape Becomes Woman’ Arundhathi Subramaniam & the Womanist Discourse

Dr Neeti Singh

Associate Professor

Department of English, Faculty of Arts

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

Email: sufiandtheswan@gmail.com

Abstract: This is an attempt to review and interrogate the thematic and stylistic aspects of Arundhathi Subramaniam’s verse with reference to her latest books, *When God is a Traveller*, 2014 and *Love Without a Story*, 2019. Both anthologies exist in the twilight zone of life-experience, both offer verse that is gynocritical and intersectional. Both are landmark contributions to women’s writing and Indian poetry in English, in general. Subramaniam has recently won the Sahitya Akademi award for year 2020, in the category of English Poetry for her work, *When God is a Traveller*. She has eleven book publications to her credit (poetry and non-fiction), five of which are anthologies of her own poems while three among them are edited anthologies of bhakti and contemporary Indian verse. To observe and interrogate the contradictions of existence as poet and as woman; to explore the subversive nature of things and posit disconcerting questions from a space of deep epiphany and interactions – these are some of Subramaniam’s poetic preoccupations. Her verse is at once earthly and ethereal, anchored in history and mysticism, it coalesces with the contemporary and the present. As human and woman, she writes to question, explore, celebrate and disconcert - not to bring comfort or nurse complacency. Also, she brings dynamic experimentation and a certain charm and pizzazz to the poetic page, which fructifies into poetry that is womanist, polyphonic, refreshingly eclectic and deconstructs.

Keywords: Postmodern, feminist reading, polyphony, womanist, gynocritic, intersectional.

“When I say "woman," I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history.” (‘Laugh of Medusa’, Helene Cixous)

“Known is a drop; Unknown is an ocean.” (Avvaiyar)



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

The best of poets writing in English (or English translation), we have known as questing sage, bard, seer, simpleton, vagabond. Most women poets in time have walked in the shadow of published male writers and learned to see themselves and the world around them through the refracted lens of patriarchy and male gaze. Unpeeling the layers of patriarchal imprint and retracing their steps all the way back home to the primal script of unmet female needs and dynamic; re(dis)covering the female body, recovering language and psyche from a tangle of deep patriarchal structures assimilated into the ink of emotion and thought (conscious unconscious), has been a sustained and ongoing enterprise for Indian women writers/poets in postmodern and postcolonial times.

In the collective woman's journey, in the here and now of thinking and writing life as womanist craft, bhakti and creative phrase, Arundhathi Subramaniam is an established woman poet on the Indian and international scene. Recipient of the *Sahitya Akademi* award for 2020, for her book, *When God is a Traveller* and a few others besides, she has to her credit, eleven book publications – poetry and nonfiction. This essay offers a discussion of two of her latest books of poems – *When God is a Traveller (WGT)*, 2014 and *Love Without a Story (LWS)*, 2019.

To interrogate the paradox of existence, to confront the subversive nature of life-things and to write poetry from a space of deep interactions and epiphanies – that appears to be central to Subramaniam's poetics and politics. She writes to question, to explore and to confront - not to bring comfort or stroke frayed nerves. She also brings a certain charm and pizzazz to the poetic page and is much lauded for writing poetry that is empowered, discerning and deliberate, subtle and sensuous, ancient and new and refreshingly eclectic.

In her 'Introduction' as editor of *A Book of Bhakti Poetry: Eating God*, Subramaniam describes bhakti as "something fragile, urgent, moltenly alive", and the province of Bhakti poetry she describes as "this sharp text message to the human epicentre, this bruising and yet exhilarating arrow to the core of one's being." (x) Elsewhere she calls it, "a relationship



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

of such intimacy” that it makes “every tone permissible – rebuke, banter, humour, lust, entreaty, indignation, rage”. God, she says is sublime, exalted and beautiful, but then he is “also family.” (xiii).

As an “upstart seeker,” “desperate devotee” and “amateur flounderer” herself, Subramaniam infuses her verse with these same energies. Most often the husband-god-lover-traveller figure in her verse, is an ambiguous motif of the sacred-secular matrix. Like Kabir, Meera or Andal, her verse is self-aware, fiercely eclectic and epigrammatic. Writing and subverting continuously Subramaniam’s verse locates/relocates and rereads the tapestry of time, text and context in ways that are resistant, womanist, gynocritic and polyphonic. To recall Elaine Showalter from ‘Towards a Feminist Poetics’, “the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than to adapt male models and theories.” (Showalter, 131)

Her poetry in *WGT* & *LWS*, deliberately aims to subvert and disconcert; it alters myth and stereotype and performs, at the same time, womanist readings of the archetypal nymph-woman Shakuntala and of Avvaiyar the wise old crone-poet from the Sangam literature of Tamilnadu. As she works with memory, myth and archetype, rakishly tilling and re-structuring the soil of poetic language, Subramaniam’s poems contribute significantly to the gynocritical project – editing, altering and refashioning old lore into new stories – stories that are womanist as they honour and uphold the intersectionality of existence - honouring love, fair play and the natural order of things in human and gender equations.

I shall begin with her earlier work (*WGT*), which consists of fifty-one poems and is divided into two sections titled, ‘Deeper in Transit’ and ‘When God is a Traveller’. The first section has twenty-two poems, many of which delve upon the nitty gritty of language, writing, and craftsmanship. The poems engage a variety of themes with contexts and references that are time and place specific. ‘Black Oestrus’, ‘Rutting’, ‘And This Is About Pain Too’, ‘Demand’, ‘Lover Tongue’, ‘Forever Connected’ and ‘Swimming’ – are poems of lust and love – they chart the seeker’s trajectory from the grime and dust of being “body” to an arrival in the here and now of being spirit-soul in the body-chalice. Considering that it is a woman (an Indian woman) who speaks so directly and unabashedly of female sexuality and body -



I could swallow you,
ravish you
with the rip, snarl
and grind of canine
and molar... (4)

these are feminist poems that mark a significant arrival for Indian English poetry by Indian women and men in general, in the postcolonial context. The poems in general are intersectional and multi-layered using theme and form to engage polysemically with gender, culture and the art and craft of creative expression. Bhakti, God as traveling subject and the process of being “deeper in transit”, form the symbolic framework and undertext of the poems.

Another aspect that’s particularly fascinating is, Subramaniam’s creative experiments with language which she prays should come to her like the “quiet logic of rain” - as organic, fleshy and fertile like algae or larvae. “Grant me”, she says in ‘Leapfrog’, “the fierce tenderness of watching word slither into word, into the miraculous algae of language, untamed by doubt or gravity,” (9). Or elsewhere in ‘Flagbearers’ where language becomes a “salad,” chewable and intimate - “our mouths stained with the green salad of language”. And yet, in the next line, language is potent and personified: we must believe that “words tame, words stanch, words embalm, words know.” This is no less than brilliant epiphany, this is (what Subramaniam herself would affirm), ‘bhakti’. But this is also anti-poststructuralist and anti-existentialist. Subramaniam upholds the structuralist’s belief in essence and the presence of essentialist qualities in all language and semiotic that surrounds us.

Supremely supple, untrammelled and organic, Subramaniam’s approach to word, phrase, syntax, is extremely well researched and sharp on technical detail. For example, in ‘Lover’s Tongue’ she writes of “yearning for the rumble of verb or the soft flesh of pure vowel... your landscape of unforgiving nouns”. This is fascinating usage of noun and verb to denote the function of naming and active performance.

Another method that Subramaniam employs (who herself is a seeker and meditates), is that which is kin to the Buddhist concept of onion-peeling – where layers of karmic staining and cultural breeding are removed



as the poem gradually sheds layer after layer of skin, moving past the mess of blood and gore to the shining bareness of bone. ‘Rutting’, which brings us to the “monsoonal ferocity of need”, is an example; so is ‘Demand’ which candidly acknowledges the primacy of “body” with its “uncensored wilderness of greed.”

*

The second section which bears the same title as the book, has at its centre, Shakuntala as motif and archetype of the tragi-comic romance. As poetic and mythical prototype, Shakuntala functions as a symbolic bridge between the earthly and ethereal aspects of the poetic subject, and holds within her iconic presence, all the joy and dilemma of multivalence.

Before I launch into a brief survey of ‘Eight Poems for Shakuntala’, it is pertinent to note, that Subramaniam’s choice and treatment of the Shakuntala myth is deconstructive and womanist. In her next book of poems published five years hence, her hand has mellowed - so too her choice of the archetype that is central to her work, *LWS*. It is Avvaiyar – middle aged woman poet from three generations of Tamil literary traditions, she is an old hag, quite at peace with grey hair and menopausal fat. Shakuntala in comparison is in her early youth - half-celestial half-human and ravishingly beautiful, she is ready to follow the stars in her eyes and make her journeys through pain before she can arrive at a ripeness which already belongs to Avvaiyar the zen hag whom we meet later in the work that follows *WGT*.

Disillusionment and exasperation with the fairy tale of Shakuntala underlie Subramaniam’s brilliant rendering of the ‘Eight Poems for Shakuntala’. The poet performs a feminist reading of the Shakuntala myth – addressing the gaps and silences in the narrative and rewriting from a location in equal humanity with equal rights.

The rendering is ambiguously layered and hints a resonance with the poet’s biography. Coalescing her own vision and impersonating Shakuntala in parts in the text, Subramaniam creates a palimpsest where she writes herself into the Shakuntala narrative with ‘chipped mickey mouse magnet’ and bits of emotion around ‘betrayal’ and ‘eviction’. For ‘when the ceiling crumbles, or ‘the sky collapses’ there is displacement and heartbreak.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

She begins with a brisk dismissal of Shakuntala's foggy location in the half-celestial category and humanises her instantly with, 'What did you expect?' she asks, "What could you be but halfway, forever interim? / What else but goddam human?" (48). The exasperation underlying the adjective "goddamn", foregrounds the poet's unwillingness to participate in the mumbo jumbo of myth and exploitative narratives of deification which are no more than masked strategies of control and patriarchal manipulation. Kalidasa's subplot of Durvasa's curse and the subsequent loss of ring and memory too is dismissed in poem '4' as sheer opportunism, she writes, "As for his amnesia, be fair. He recognised the moment when he saw it – sun springtime woman.." (53).

Poem '3' acknowledges the lack of fullness in Shakuntala's location – the clear thinking, "grizzled sage Kanva", an "evergreen" home in "tourist brochures" and the utter repression of her sexuality. Surely, on some nights, she too must long for "a lover's breath" and "respite from too much wisdom". Sexual pleasure and social protection however cannot ("should not") be reason enough for entering a marriage which sounds more like a "bargain". Poem 8, critiques the quintessential idea of 'happy endings.' Shakuntala's happy ending has in its folds the son she birthed in exile – a welcome answer to Dushyant's throne that has craved for a male heir to carry the royal bloodline. Is this a "happy ending" or a "bad bargain" (56), she asks.

In a brilliant move towards resolution and poetic justice, Subramaniam at this point crosses the thin line that divides fiction from fact and past from present. She steps into Shakuntala's shoes, as saviour and prototype, and spells out a few demands: Let the hermitage be in south India, let it be "in coconut green light, / the sage and I in conversation," "And let me never take for granted / this green into which I was born." As for Dushyanta "warrior with winedark eyes", let him "...gambol forever with knobble-kneed fawns / in the ancient forests of memory." Poetic justice indeed! And fit rebuttal to the patriarchy of the Manus, the Ved Vyasas and the Kalidasas of the golden past.

Further, she advises the Shakuntala-minded nymphs of present times to take a pause, acknowledge the blessings of pre-marriage days - the green paradisaical home/hermitage, parents true love, childhood friends and the friendship of mothers and elder sisters. The poet urges all the Shakuntalas, to stop selling



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

themselves so cheap. This is sound advice and contribution to the gynocritical archive. This is also a step toward the wisdom of Avvaiyar – the grey haired, unpretentious poet-hag in *LWS* - who affirms the lightness of being, of “shared fruit and laughter” and the fact that “there’s no sadly / or happily ever after.” (47)

Among other poems that I personally liked there is ‘Benaras’ (seven etched cameo verses), ‘Quick Fix Memos for Difficult Days’ (a cluster of wisdom notes in the manner of dohas), ‘Six About Love Stories’, ‘Bones’ (1 & 2) and ‘When God is a Traveller’ composed in seven stanzas that read like seven mantras and begin with a line that repeats like a refrain – “Trust the god” (or) “Trust him” who in colloquial terms, is omnipresent and all pervading.

Trust the god
ready to circle the world all over again
this time for no reason at all
other than to see it
through your eyes. (100)

In tone and sensibility, the *WGT* poems are deconstructive, well researched, urban and banal; creatively speaking, they are contrapuntal and alert, and they carry tension in their poetic muscle which is supple, strong and bullishly holds with cheerful vigour, the performative verb.

Subramaniam’s poetry is livewire, it does not permit the reader to rest or relax. Rather, the poems challenge the reader, with their tight tapestry of symbols, myth, allusions, technical detail, rich vocabulary, syntactic experiments and deep cross connections. On the other hand, poems in *LWS*, that follows, sustain the poet’s characteristic style and approach to poetic language, theme and form; at the same time, they also project a remarkable shift – a well-rounded ripening that comes from a maturing of thought and a subtler aesthetic. Comparatively *LWS* brings us poems where the subversive spirit has deepened but also mellowed, and the previous vigour has acquired more poise, more grace.

*



Love Without a Story, 2019, (LWS) interrogates the quintessential play of properties that inform and sustain the quality of love. The poetic icon at the centre of this work is of Avvaiyar – a level headed but brash and unconventional, middle aged woman who has made peace with grey hair, ex-lover and the stereotype of sainthood and gender. In a hardbound book of over hundred pages, with forty-two poems, *Love Without a Story* unfolds before the twenty-first-century reader, new ways of understanding and writing a love poem. The work combines indigenous and global poetic techniques and unapologetically celebrates bonds from a space that is sensual, uninhibited, gendered and androgynous. The tapestry (Persian carpet) of love, poetry and womanhood that unfolds, is euphoric, contrapuntal and carnivalesque.

Seven poems directly address the late Avvaiyar – brash and unconventional poet-crone, Avvaiyar, “who’s been dead for four hundred years”. Fat and naked she sits, she thinks only of her master, she walks the world alone.

And on such a path, she says,
it’s best to be
a crone. (35)

What’s more this is no ordinary crone. Crone, by the way, is a fourteenth century coinage from Anglo-French origins, it means a woman who is old, withered, and even cantankerous, the term was used derogatively in Middle English as abuse. But then the word crone is an Anglican take on the figure of the ageing woman, the term that Subramaniam chooses to use for the ageing woman is ‘Avvaiyar’ – a word from the Tamil language (which is also her mother tongue), it literally means respectable woman.

According to *Abidhana Chintamani*, the first encyclopaedia of Tamil literature, Avvaiyar was a title used to refer to at least three woman poets located in different eras in the Tamil literary and poetic tradition timeline. In light of its usage and etymology, Avvaiyar in Subramaniam’s poetics translates as wise middle-aged woman who is also a poet. Metaphorically speaking, one can say that Avvaiyar is Subramaniam’s poetic muse, mother or alter ego. Or perhaps Subramaniam herself is Avvaiyar - the fourth Avvaiyar? Located in the interstices between past and present English and Tamil poetic traditions; she journeys as middle-aged / Avvaiyar through literary root and soil of language, poetry, woman - human.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

Looking back and discoursing with the first Avvaiyar who is located in Sangam literature and the successive second and third Avvaiyars, Subramaniam herself a mature and powerful poet – opens up through the Avvaiyar motif, a discourse through space and time that holds both potential and promise. The iconic Avvaiyar pervades the book as theme and guiding presence. The overall tenor and approach of the poems is passionate or banal and the love expressed between layers of the here and now and thereafter, is at once seeped in both the physical and metaphysical worlds - in the sauce of reverence and irreverence. Love in all its forms, from a child's unquestioning faith and fantasy to the nonchalance, camaraderie, reverence, passion and terror of adult relationships, forms the underlying bedrock of this collection of poems. There are poems tracing childhood and growing up years, there is the quintessential love poem, the perceptive cameos of an absent poet woman, poems that read like hymns to a goddess and those that are full of bhakti for a formless presence.

Her experiments with language in this collection, are even bolder and yet there is more ease, more grace in the poems. Richly layered, yoking the past and the present, the near and far, subtle and contemporary, with brilliant word-play and syntactic juxtapositions the poems open up creative fresh ways of using the English language – for instance, expressions like 'Let it April me over' (61), or 'gandhigandhigandhi.' (49). This leads one to thrill over several poems of Subramaniam's anointed as they are with an ingenuous contouring of the English idiom. On point is 'Missing Friends', where she portrays the youthful vigour of classmates and friends discussing in one breath (perhaps in a college canteen), big names from literature and social theory they have read. What the poet has achieved here in terms of pushing the limits of language, rhythm and syntax is akin to performing with words a brilliant trapeze or ballet – which in turn dares us to look out for more experimentation and fusions in Indian English poetics and language. Subramaniam writes:

At times we'd disagree

teilhard de chardin, he'd say,
salim chisti

tukaram, you'd reply, pinkola estes,
(or irrelevantly, Agatha Christie)



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

and we'd shake our heads sadly –
gandhigandhigandhi.

it was a world of common nouns
we inhabited –
comforting really' (49-50)

*

'The Theory of Wandering' (6-7), where Aegean breezes mingle with Vrindavan's forest and the school bus of childhood transports the child 'full steam' to "Mystras or to Crete / and once there, to waft / back again on foaming lute waves / into a sleepy Bombay apartment..". A child's poetic imagination is used here to contrive with ease the suspension of adult logic and accomplish the speckled play of adventures and wanderings, and of presence-absence. Then some poems also double up as memoirs. Poems like 'Mitti', 'Finding Dad', 'Parents', 'When Landscape Becomes Woman', 'Deleting the Picture' and 'Missing Friends' brilliantly extend the thread of the poet's childhood and teenage years. When realisation dawns "that mothers are women", that your dad's loved in ways that were "crazy" and that although "At times we'd disagree:" friends and days of friendship are missed.

In a romantic love poem, 'The Need for Nests', ('The Strange Thing About Love' & 'Let Me Be Adjective', being the other two) where the passion/tension of shared moments is characteristically sheathed in tightly sculpted word-images, the poet maps that moment of realisation when 'it isn't enough to follow the trails' and 'the need to build nests' becomes imminent. In a rare moment of unabashed confession (made all the more endearing because it is rare) she offers to her love the following lines:

With you
the flight is pure song
and the grand tempest
of argument.

With you
the wings of cranes
are warmed by the heat
of local fish markets.



With you
even the moon smells
of mackerel. (64)

*

In a grand gesture of love heartfully offered to the lover as food, Subramaniam sprays with ‘smells of mackerel’ the king of romance, the moon! This unexpected yoking of two entirely disparate experiences, and the vertical movement (descent) of the moon to the robust smell of mackerel in local fish markets is nothing short of brilliant ingenuity. Here is a poet who has pierced the pores of language and found her path to the feeling psyche.

Then there are poems of bhakti - divine love, and poems dedicated to the goddess and her strange ways of loving humankind. The three Goddess poems in the collection are marked by the dramatic unfolding of life and death instincts of Eros and Thanatos; while bhakti poems (or poems that touch bhakti), like ‘La Verna’, ‘Let There Be Grid’, ‘Ninda-Stuti’, ‘The Monk’ among others, capitalise on the palpable tension between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses. Bhakti in these poems operates between faith, doubt and enlightenment across a canvas that is eastern and western at the same time.

‘La Verna’ for instance, is infused with a hint of the Nath Ulatbamsi. It is a landscape steeped in upheaval and structures of deep harmony: “rock melting into forest,/ wolf into lamb,/ sky into mineral,/ gnarled root into cosmos,/ where faith is a gaunt wooden crucifix/ against an ache of valley...” (20) Further on, an Indian and a Russian discover they are carrying in their bags ‘the picture of the same fakir/ with quizzical gaze and dirty robe.’ (21) The goddess (Neeli Mariamman) on the other hand is a potent form of silence and sensuality, “Her tongue is toxic” “her gaze tundra”, “The universe is her hamlet,” and her (Medusa like) laughter “her empire.” These representations of the goddess as the fierce feminine, are reminiscent of the folk and traditional forms of devi - goddess as shakti, portrayed in indigenous sacred lore and in the *Devi Bhagvatam* – received mystic lore documented by the ancient Rishis.

‘Ninda Stuti’ in particular enunciates the poet’s sympathies with the complaining voice. While a complete surrender to divine will is encouraged (rather, expected) in bhakti, in a recent interview with Paromita Chakrabarti, Arundhati Subramaniam reiterates that on the path to liberation, doubt and



scepticism can coexist with faith. Referring to the connection between poetry and the spiritual journey, she says: “The fact that both are about wonder, about turning abstraction into visceral experience, about asking what the poet Ruth Padel calls ‘the bedrock questions’. Both nourish each other. My love of poetry never allows me to trust a de-sensualised spirituality; my spiritual quest insists on a certain authenticity in my practice of poetry.” (Chakrabarti)

It is this allegiance to the sensual and the authentic that we find so enriching in ‘The Fine Art of Ageing’, a set of eight poems that offer honest reflections on the politics of location, gender and self against the backdrop of contexts that are cultural, geographical and historical and impact the end product through language, literary form and content.

The Avvaiyar poems (including the last titled, ‘Afterword’) are central to the *LWS* poems. In these, the poet drafts a blueprint of Avvaiyar – the respectable, wise old woman’s psyche. Her admiration of youth and beauty are acknowledged, so is her wisdom and sense of privilege – for aging has brought freedom from the stereotype of being pretty and woman. And then we arrive at Avvaiyar’s “face / where the civil war / is almost over.” She occupies a space of independence and self sufficiency, for in the end when the stories (memories) fall silent what’s left is the ancient fact of ‘love without a story.’

Arundhathi’s poems are witty, nonchalant, wise, epigrammatic - especially the Avvaiyar poems that are forged like word-chalices – they hold aphorisms and meditations like elixir or aged wine touching the bone of be-ing. What is more, Avvaiyar like a true blue-blooded crone who has had her share in the past, of being stared at by “the forest of wet eyes” now (re)turns her female gaze on the male lot, whom she then proceeds to label and categorise into ‘types’. As a perceptive, empowered, womanist voice, Subramaniam has infused the at-once-ancient-and-eclectic Avvaiyar, an iconic motif, into the gynocritics of poetic yarn. No more the whining complaining woman’s voice, here in the free unburdened space/face of the ‘crone’ located outside ‘civil war’ and blackmail, at peace with being woman and of age, here is to be found a woman at once powerful, wise, beautiful in her own way, and free. Another nail from the interdisciplinary discourse is brought in and driven home in the fourth poem where the poet alludes to the fact of how history has marginalised and othered the woman and how it has continued to ignore the voice of the subaltern (women included). I quote:



..... She knows
that everyone everywhere
believes they've been wronged,
that history was written by someone else
and that they're always
right. (40)

*

However, Avvaiyar is compassionate and 'lukeworm' in her critique, she knows that "The thing about age / is seeing through the game / but being able to smile / at those who play it." (42) This stance is cast aside too as the crone grows into a space of 'molten-tongued' honesty and finds an inner rhythm of doing things, however unfashionable or out of sync. In the last poem in the book, she emerges once again wearing the poet's hat of creative ripeness and effulgence, and as she ponders on the ambit of life and poetry, she leaves us with insights into the exuberance and magic of new twilights. In other words she reinstates through 'Afterword', the last *LWG* poem, that poet and poem are organically fused – they mirror each other in a continuum of growth, leaps and loops.

Interestingly, both *WGT* and *LWS*, end with poetic statements on the form and function of poems. In the former book it is, 'Poems matter' - poems matter because they are "this weave that dares to embrace air", poems are "this hush of linen" "threadbare" "tatters" that matter "because they have holes" because they are porous and organic (*WGT*, 102-103). In *LWS*, through Avvaiyar she ponders over the supple plausibility of the random lyric, "it may not be so difficult", after all, to make a beginning - "to decant quietly into some dawn, leaving behind a smudge," or "nothing at all" and then on some days she suspects the (poetic) plot might be thicker and the weave richer than envisaged. Or the yarn may fray and unspool at times, or perhaps, "she might ride a Persian carpet to the stars." The supple tenacity of the lyric to construct/deconstruct, is limitless and beyond comprehension, so the poet alludes.

*

To sum up, *Love Without a Story* offers a refreshing and a profound take on love as nurture, underlying essence and driving force of all existence and relationships. The forty two poems in the book offer a wide



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

range of characters and cameos woven from myth, memory and introspection; they form an oblique take on love in all forms, in a polyphonic world peopled with family, friends, lover, poets and cities from the past they weave a world that is as surreal as it is real. Poems in *WGT* on the other hand, are as exquisitely crafted, intelligent and impressive in their experimentation with theme and language. Often they resonate with indigenous poetic forms, for instance in ‘Osteoporosis’, when the poet plunges into an address directed towards the reader, “You comment on the gait of women in the country, those above fifty..” (24) - one is reminded of Kabir - the Nirguna bhakti poet, whose trademark it was to begin his Shabad and Ramaini verses with an arresting question or a provocative statement addressed to the listener who in his times, could be a myopic Brahmin or Muslim priest, or a greedy merchant or anyone lost in the blind ceremony of ritual. In comparison the *LWS* poems are mellower, softly resonant, contrapuntal. They carry creative tension with a sense of ease.

So, to conclude, with *When God is a Traveller & Love Without a Story*, Subramaniam has secured herself a place of pride as alpha woman poet on the horizons of English verse, national and international. Her signature poetic idiom, reflective of her uniquely sensual syntax and gynocritic style – has flagged off for Indian women and for poets in general, new poetic and womanist benchmarks. She has triggered a poetic movement where deeply layered resonances of the collective metropolitan mind tie in with the nation’s primal moorings in bhakti and its distracted sense of the sacred-carnal.

Both books stand together in successive progression and maturing of poetic theme and style - an array of ninety-three variegated poems, hosannas and lyrics – threadbare cotton, linen or “Persian carpet” – each stringing a thread - a ditty – to launch a multi-layered, dialogic discourse that is as primal as it is postmodern and womanist. The poems are also performative, palimpsest and polyphonic. They take for women what rightfully belongs to them – the simple right to live equally, to breathe, to think in their own heart and skin. As poet who wears her ‘face’ with awareness and grace Subramaniam has successfully arrived at a location that mocks cumbersome boundaries and stereotype. It is a space of transgressions, possibilities and extensions; it is a space “where landscape becomes woman”. Arundhathi Subramaniam has come a long way and one wonders, what’s next?

*



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

Works Cited

- Chakrabarti, Paromita. 'Arundhathi Subramaniam on her new volume of poetry and why faith and scepticism go hand in hand.', *Indian Express*, New Delhi. June 9, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/express-sunday-eye/love-doubt-and-other-filters-5768132/>.
- Menon, Ramesh. *Devi: The Devi Bhagvatam Retold*. Rupa Publications, 2006.
- Showalter, Elaine. 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', *Women's Writing and Writing About Women*. Croom Helm, 1979.
- Subramaniam, Arundhathi. *Love Without a Story*. Cntxt Westland Publications, 2019.
- . *When God is a Traveller*. Harper Collins, 2014.
- . Editor, 'Introduction', *Eating God: A Book of Bhakti Poetry*, 2014. Penguin Random House. pp. ix-xxviii.
- Walker, Alice. "The Laugh of the Medusa", Tr. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *The University of Chicago Press Journals. Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893.
- "Who is Avvaiyar", *Secrets of the Siddhas - Health, Longevity and Enlightenment*. Facebook, uploaded on May 13, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/100463666750204/posts/652115684918330/>.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024