

"Two Different Feelings at the Same Time." Interview with Atima Srivastava

By Stephanie Rott, University of Cologne, Germany

1 Atima Srivastava was born in Mumbai (India) in 1961, moved to Britain when she was eight, and has since been living in North London. She has written two novels, *Transmission* (1993) and *Looking for Maya* (1999), both of which are set texts in the syllabi of several Universities in Britain and other European countries ranging from Poland to Spain. Several of her short stories have been commissioned for and published in anthologies such as *New Writing 2001*, *Well Sorted* and *Tran-Lit*. She has worked in television for over 13 years as a film editor and, more recently, as a director in documentaries and magazine shows. She has three screenplays to her credit: *Dancing in the Dark Tx* (1992), *The Legendary Vindaloo* commissioned for Channel 4 (1993); and *Camden Story* developed for the BBC. A play, *Why not Love?* has been commissioned by The National Theatre and she has written the libretto for a new opera, *Cross Currents*, commissioned by Broom Hill Opera, performed in June 2001.

2 Atima Srivastava has won the first prize in the Bridport Arts Short Story competition, Arts Council Awards for her second and third novel, and a Hawthornden Fellowship. She was Writer in Residence at the University of Singapore, University of Sophia (Bulgaria), University of Mainz (Germany) and Ewha Women's University (Seoul). She has taught Creative Writing courses and lectured around the world supported by the British Council. Presently, she is working on her third novel, tentatively titled *The Non-Resident Indian*, and on a commission from the Leicester Haymarket Theatre.

3 The following interview exclusively deals with Atima's second novel *Looking for Maya* whose first chapter is featured in the second issue of **gender forum, Mediating Gender** 6/2002. In *Looking for Maya* the central character, 25-year-old Mira Chowdhary who has just graduated from university, tells the story of her relationships with two completely different men: Luke, a really nice British chap, and Amrit, an unconventional middle-aged British-Asian writer and university lecturer of postcolonial studies. However, her story is not only about love and passion, but also explores themes of identity, culture, family, and friendship.

Stephanie Rott: I would like to start with the first question that refers to the title of the novel *Looking for Maya*. "Maya" is the Hindi word for illusion, but Maya is also the name of Amrit's Indian wife. Why did you choose this title?

Atima Srivastava: I chose the title because in a way Maya is the woman that Amrit has lost, and in a way she stands for a sort of perfect love, or some kind of love that can't be reached. This central character, Mira Chowdhary, is reaching for an illusion, she's reaching for something which can't be. And I like the idea of making it a two-fold meaning: she is looking for Maya, i. e. illusion which means that she's looking for something she can't have, and also wanting to find out about what it was that Amrit lost in the woman Maya.

S.R.: Would you say that "looking for" hints at Mira's quest of identity? Is she trying to find out more about who she is?

A.S.: Good question, yes, definitely. I think that *Looking for Maya* is also a hint towards identity, because she's got this English boyfriend who is the opposite of her. Then she meets this Indian man who she seems to think there's something in him which she can add to her identity to make her identity more whole, or have some sort of recognition or something. And he's also a writer or whatever, so it is a search towards a feeling of wholeness which, in turn, is also about a feeling of identity. A whole identity.

S.R.: So Mira is in search of a whole identity. Do you think that she goes through a kind of learning process? Would you think of your novel as a *Bildungsroman*?

A.S.: Well, I don't think my novel aspires to that. I don't think the novel is that epic. I think it's more of a "rite-of-passage" story. I think that it's more about an individual, this girl, who looks for something which she feels is missing, and in that quest she learns more about loss than about gain. That's what I felt when I was writing it. It's about, and that's why it's a "rite-of-passage", about growing up. In many ways we don't find the things we search for. Maybe we find other things, rather than the things that we've searched for. So in her searching, she actually understands about and suffers loss. I think it was more to do with that sort of idea. I also wanted to write about the feeling when you have left university, and that you want the world, you know. You want everything to happen to you. And when things do happen, then perhaps, it's not what you think they're going to be.

S.R.: So you intended to write a love-story?

A.S.: Oh, yeah, definitely. An unrequited-love-story, yes. The idea of love as illusion, the idea of knowing yourself through someone is very attractive but, it is also an illusion in a sense. But also a kind of big idea originally for me was this feeling that Mira is 25, and she wants life to happen to her. She wants experience. She's ready and there's that thing, I don't know if you remember it, but later on, there's this line when she says: "I suddenly wanted to protect the things I already knew rather than disregard the things that I knew and go forward." So it was about that feeling as well. Mira gets a knock. But that's what life is.

S.R.: I've got the impression that the novel deals with difference, not only cultural, or ethnic difference, but also with interpersonal differences, with boundaries between people and within human relationships. Could you please comment on that?

A.S.: The novel definitely is about differences. But, again, differences which keep us apart, and differences which also bring us together. I think that I'm always concerned with how a thing, whether it's love, whether it's intimacy or whether it's difference, or desire, how those feelings engender not one but two feelings in us. The example is that with Luke. Mira feels "he's so different to me," and she thinks she can "handle him." It's like pushing something away and wanting it at the same time, to be in that moment where you're pushing and pulling at the same time. I don't know how to comment on that, it's only what interests me; if you want me to say something wider, that's linked up with identity for me. I wrote something about identity a few months ago. It was about a feeling of "here" and also of "there" at the same time. So in that way, with reference to India: 1. feeling of India, "there" and 2. feeling of "here" which I think is different to how British-Asians feel. They feel "I'm British, but I'm Asian." But I actually don't really have a feeling of Britishness; I feel I'm a Londoner, right, but I also belong to India. And so what exactly is this feeling of looking back and looking forward all the time? Well, it's not the feeling of exile, 'cause I feel at home in both (laughter), you know what I mean? And if there are tensions, then to exist within the tensions means that there are also other things circulating. With Mira, for instance, there's Luke, and then there's Amrit. But then there's also Tash, and Frank, and so there's lots of different influences; this is shown at the end of the novel when they have tapas. They're all together, and Mira says: "I had the feeling that something important was happening." So life, our existence, our notion of identity is made up of so many different things and we embrace all of them. We feel different on different levels about them; I'm trying to address all that (laughter).

S.R.: On the one hand, there are Luke or Tash, for instance, they're both from "broken homes" or "dysfunctional families," and on the other hand, you have Mira who comes from a stable Indian background. Would you think that it is the family where differences are located?

A.S.: (Pause) I'm hesitating to answer that question, because, on the one hand, yes, certainly as far as I have experienced things, but that's very much to do with the kind of background I've had. I've had a very stable family life, but at the same time... (laughs). I mean it's always two things with me! On the one hand, I've had a very stable family life, and on the other hand, I haven't had to deal with too much family. Most of my family live in India. I can be, if you like, romantic and happy and so on, but my parents are here. So on the one hand, I'm very close to my family, but I'm not so in proximity to them. I don't know, I shouldn't make the generalisation, but it just happens that many English people who I know do come from "broken homes." So of course the difference is that. But I have friends in Europe who come from very similar backgrounds to mine. I have friends in Spain, for me their family is just like being in India and I'm like: "Oh my God!". It's just like being in India! You go to someone's house, the grandmother is there, uncles and aunties are there, everybody is there... So on the one hand, I say that I enjoy the feeling of the family being stable, but then, when you're confronted by that in another culture, you think "Oh my God, let me get away from that!" So I don't know, if I'm answering the question correctly. Yes, differences are located in family, but I think that a stable Indian family is not very different from a stable English or Spanish or German family. Nevertheless I think that it does make a difference if you come from a stable background. I just think perhaps my experience is not quite typical, because it seems that I know a lot of English people who don't come from that kind of background. But I'm sure that's not true for all English people. I don't want to make that kind of comments like "all English people are like this and all Indian people are like that." 'Cause that's not true. But of course I know Indian people who are also from "broken homes." My idea of family has been very very formulated by my own experience, of course. And that experience has been stable and loving. I didn't have a terrible childhood (laughter).

S.R.: (laughter) You didn't? Why not?

A.S.: Yeah, exactly, how could I be a writer? It is very important to have had a terrible childhood, no? (laughter)

S.R.: Let's talk about the male characters. We've already mentioned the opposition of the characters of Luke and Amrit. Would you say that the difference between them is connected to their respective ethnic identities, or could Luke also have been an Indian, and could Amrit also have been an Englishman?

A.S.: That's a very interesting question actually. Could it have been reversed? Could Luke have been an Indian and could Amrit have been...

S.R.: Or even French or whatever?

A.S.: Yeah. - I think so. In a way, if you like, the things that Amrit represents are quite universal, aren't they? Really you're right, I've just never thought of it like that. Sure, because I think that they also occupy different spaces. What is Luke to Mira? Luke is about friendship, you know, he's like a brother, he's like a friend. There's a kind of deep friendship which is about forgiveness, and even when they break up he says "we'll be alright." And they are alright. You could say that relationship is more evolved, because it moves. The relationship moves on. At the end Luke introduces his new girlfriend to Mira, and things go further. Mira also wants to know who he is. That relationship has evolved, whereas the relationship with Amrit - because it occupies another space, it occupies something which is not just about two people, it's more about a quest of her own in a way - that relationship doesn't evolve, does it? It becomes more distant, it becomes more about yearning. I think it adds another frisson that Amrit happens to be Indian, because actually, if you look at it, he is nothing like Mira in terms of his Indianness. Mira's Indianness is influenced by her parents who are Indian poets... It's a quite interesting question, and in my head, when you say that, if I suddenly make them two different ethnic groups, yeah, you could do it. Yeah, if it's a film you could have Amrit as French and whatever... Yeah, great!

S.R.: Alright, Mira uses spatial metaphors when she refers to Amrit. She says, for instance "he's like an alien country" where she wants to travel. Why does she do that?

A.S.: I didn't think of it - spatial metaphor - but, yes you're right, she uses a lot of those metaphors, because again, I think in her mind this person represents a country, a space, a background, a landscape in which she can fit herself. Whereas Luke is real. He is a real person whose hand she can hold, or who she can get angry with, or who she can ask to go and

buy tampons, who has cold feet in the morning... You know, he's a real person, whereas Amrit is more like a landscape.

S.R.: Where she can lose herself?

A.S.: Yeah, but also find herself (laughter), again the two things! So that's why. And Amrit is unknown as well, because he has his whole other life. In a way you can say it's like being lost in a landscape. We don't know what is there. You can see it's a forest or whatever. Or a snowstorm. In a way that's what he is. But, imagine being lost in a snowstorm that you can touch. You can see the crystals, but you don't quite know where you are. I like your questions, 'cause I haven't thought about them.

S.R.: Now, here's the question concerning Mira's parents. In the course of the novel it turns out that Amrit is not only different from Luke, but he is also opposed to Mira's parental unit which she calls RaviKavi.

A.S.: That's very specific. Mira comes from this family unit, okay that's clear. To make that more intense I borrowed an idea from Hinduism. Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, so there are many Gods. Now, many of the Gods are together, married to each other, and you worship them together. A very common couple of Gods that people worship together is Shiv and his wife Shakti who is the Goddess of power and strength. When Hindus worship them together, Shiv and Shakti, they call them ShivShakti, that's how it's called. In Hindu culture husband and wife are as one. When you get married, your two souls are joined and become one. So it's this whole kind of, again this wholeness, this oneness. Actually in real life, many Indian people, when they talk about going to see their friends, they often run the two names together. It's something I notice that people do without really thinking in the same way that they do with the Gods. So I thought it would be nice to show that RaviKavi becomes one. Through the words you actually see that they are one. You know, united front. And that idea, I think is, very non-Western. It is a non-Western idea, although in the West we talk about feelings of wholeness. But you don't talk about your identity being merged into another person. On the whole I think people in the West would be quite disturbed or offended, if you talked about two of them being one. So I wanted to show very much how Mira is a product of that kind of unit. Not only is it stable, it is very much a kind of traditional but free unit. Naturally I suppose that the notion of a quest for wholeness would be inherent in Mira.

S.R.: I see, yes. But could we get back to the other part of the last question which refers to the opposition of Amrit and RaviKavi?

A.S.: Okay, so RaviKavi are like that. And then Amrit is the opposite of them which is that he has many independent relationships. His children are nothing like the kind of child Mira was. He is a very oppositional person, but also quite exotic. Now, that's another thing. I'm interested in that idea, because, as an Indian woman I've often been faced with this idea that people say that English people find Indian people exotic. But I've always found it the other way (laughter). Obviously you look at things which are different to what you know, and you find them exotic. So I thought it'll be interesting to show that Amrit - although he's Indian on the one hand, he's brown - is exotic to Mira. The idea of having affairs is exotic to her, or the idea of somebody not being married and having more than one relationship is exotic to Mira. You know, it's something exciting or adventurous. Again, that unknown territory.

S.R.: And it's opposed to a protective home?

A.S.: Yeah, and a solid home, if you like. Here: stability, something known, something safe. And there is excitement, adventure, the unknown.

S.R.: Yes, and Amrit is also the character who speaks a lot of writing as such. What does writing mean to you as a writer? Mira, for instance says in one passage that she feels the powerful urge to grasp her memories and then she sits down and starts to write her first novel.

A.S.: That didn't happen to me! (laughter) I don't think I'm like Mira at all in that way. Because I try not to have any conversations about writing if I can help it, you know. To be absolutely frank with you, I just know that I love writing. I just know that I have a powerful urge to tell stories. I have no idea where it comes from, on one level. And, two, I also don't have an agenda. I don't kind of think "I've got this message and I must tell the world", you know. And I don't like theories. I want to write. Obviously, I've got certain things I want to say. And you want to order your experience, things like that, sure. But I think, also the very impulse to write... I really have no idea (laughter), because, you know, when it's not working, you just think "why am I doing this? I could have a real job." And when it's working, it's just so fantastic. So there's really some kind of "deep mystery," too. I know that it's quite an old-

fashioned thing to say. Going back to the character, again, I think that Mira's book coming out is quite incidental almost, isn't it? I think that for her grasping the memories is, again, trying to enter a landscape that she can't enter. For Mira writing is connected with trying to understand your identity. But for me, Atima, I think it's something much more mysterious and bigger than just trying to "pin down your identity." I think that trying to pin down what your identity is, number one is rather fruitless an activity in real life, because it's changing. And, two, there are other ways to pin down your identity. Writing is a way to pin down other things like ideas or feelings which aren't always that certainly referring to the question "Who am I?" Sometimes I just want to tell a story: "What's that about?" Then I just want to tell the story of these characters that are running around in my head.

S.R.: So do you always have these characters in your head, as you say, do they sometimes emerge, or can they also be based on people you know?

A.S.: I have to say all the characters I've ever written, whether it's in a novel or a play, are always rooted in reality. Always. It doesn't matter whether you begin with an idea or with a character. I don't really use people that I know very well, 'cause I know them too well. Sometimes, you meet people and there's something about them that makes you go: "Why are they like that?" (laughter). Whereas with people you're close to you don't really care why, because you know them and love them regardless.

S.R.: (laughter) Then for you writing is also about trying to understand people...

A.S.: People, yeah, and sometimes just finding people funny or finding people weird. Sometimes you ask yourself, if someone is being an interesting person to you. But I find that the characters emerge. Sometimes, you are compelled to write about a person. I felt compelled to write about a character like Amrit, for instance, because he is a composite of many people I've known - men and women - who did intrigue me on various levels, tutors even, or just people who I didn't understand, because they lived in a weird way. So Amrit was a composite character. But in other things I find that characters kind of emerge.

S.R.: During the act of writing?

A.S.: Yeah, during the act of writing. Very much so. I think it also depends on the medium you're writing. Characters seem to come differently in a play than in a novel or in a short-story. In a way I can't even talk about it, because sometimes you don't even know. I think a large part of me is in all my characters, sure, (laughter) and that's fine for me. I don't know if all writers are like this, 'cause many writers say that not. They say they make everything up.

S.R.: Amrit is also the character who mocks Mira, when she's writing her first novel. He says "Are you writing the 'great immigrant novel'?" and then he fears that the novel will be published by the "Black Women's Press." Could you please comment on Amrit's point of view?

A.S.: Okay, he's mocking it, because he thinks that "the great immigrant novel" is always about mangos and grandmothers, you know, exotica, and that's what the West wants. They want to read about 'the exotic'... There's no Booker Prize we know of an Indian novel which is like, for instance, Bridget Jones' Diary. An Indian novel has to be about the landscape... If you look, that's true, isn't it? History, epic's weep of history, mangos, families, three generations, and nature, these things. You don't get metropolitan novels. When you're this young Indian, you're writing of being oppressed, okay. So "the great immigrant novel" is about feeling like a victim, feeling victimized and saying "white people are so terrible" and "life is so bad," that sort of idea. According to Amrit, being published just by the "Women's Press" as a young Indian woman, that's bad enough. That's apologetic writing, but the term "Black Women" would be even worse, 'cause later on he also makes that long comment about...

S.R.: Yes, I think he says that "Women's Writing" doesn't interest him, for it is apologetic and second rate, and that, as he puts it, "writing is about ways of seeing the world and not about feeling the world."

A.S.: Yes, exactly. Which is a general feeling about male writing and female writing anyway. Amrit is a misogynist. Therefore he says that to Mira, although he's also doing it to tease her. He puts her down as well by that.

S.R.: Yes, and then Mira says that she knew exactly what he thought about such publishing houses, how they make concessions for untalented opportunists. What do you

think about Amrit's attitude towards "Women's Writing"? Do you feel like a "Woman Writer"?

A.S.: I partly do agree with Amrit's view. "Women Writers" are not untalented, but there are a lot of people out there who use, if you like, "the race card," who use the "women's card," or who use the "gay card." They're writing about something, and their only sort of qualification for writing about it is that they are "that particular victim." I think that's quite a generally held view amongst people. There are certain kinds of people who use this particular "disability." But that's okay. Maybe that's not even true anymore, I don't know. I don't completely agree with Amrit, I think it's the kind of thing that people say to put down other people. In the end, even if you're writing about being I don't know, a single mother who is gay and black and disabled, if it's a good piece of work, it's a good piece of work. Who cares why? I partly agree with Amrit's view, although I think that it is very male, it's nothing Indian. There's sort of two views on the issue of "Women's Writing" and a lot of it is confessional. *Looking for Maya* is in the "confessional genre."

S.R.: Would you feel disturbed if somebody labelled you a "Woman Writer"?

A.S.: No, not at all. I don't care. Of course, I would only like to be known as a writer, that's what I'd like to be known as, a London-writer. But if somebody called me a "Woman Writer," no, why should I be offended? Or a "Black Writer?" I think most writers wouldn't want to be put in just one hole. If I'm called a "Woman Writer", does that mean that men don't want to read me? Why would that be? No, why should I be offended? I would be offended, if somebody said I was a bad writer! (laughs)

S.R.: Amrit is a lecturer dealing with postcolonial studies and there's a bit in the novel where Amrit and Torquil point out that "Black Politics," victimhood, and issues of race, class, and gender are en vogue these days. Would you agree with them? Would you consider yourself an Asian writer?

A.S.: No, I mean again, those statements are linked up with what Amrit says about it. It's a point of view. If you're oppressed, people like that. People don't want to hear about somebody being happy (laughter). Yes, anger is en vogue.

S.R.: So what do you think about "Postcolonial Studies?"

A.S.: I have to say, personally speaking, there's a bit in *Looking for Maya* where Mira had been given lots of A3 photocopied articles in a seminar on Postcolonial Literature, and she lined her underwear drawers with these sheets. I'm just not a theory person, and so that was me making fun of theories. I don't get involved too much in the whole kind of theory side of things, because that's not why I'm writing novels. I'm writing novels because I want to tell stories. Now, it's not my job to theorize about my novels. I can tell you about what I feel why I wrote something. I don't have a problem with people analyzing my texts, because once you've written a book, it's out there, and people can and should analyze it the way they want to. And you the reader is entitled to read a book the way you want to read it. And I think it's very interesting, actually, when people have written papers using my novels. I find them very interesting, because obviously, you think "Oh, I've never thought of it like that." If you're just asking me what I think personally, I just think "Well, it's out there," but I certainly wouldn't read something that Homi Bhabha, for instance, said and go "Oh, how can I illustrate that in my novel." I wouldn't even know how to do that to be honest.

S.R.: In the novel Mira is disgusted by "that sort of white women", as she puts it, "hanging around with the men who formed the 'Black Students Alliance'", and she also disapproves of Luke's overzealousness with "the Indian culture." Could you please comment on that?

A.S.: First of all, it's not that Mira disapproves of it. If you read it, it is that she says she remembers, when she was at college, there were these white women who would hang around with black guys. Because again, what she's trying to do in her quest for identity is that she's trying to place other people. She's trying to place where other people are. It's not that she disapproves of them. That's just something she observed. Concerning Luke's overzealousness with Indian culture, Mira shouldn't think like that, because Luke was into it before he met her. So she feels bad, she shouldn't think like that. I think that this is something, I'm sure at a particular age, all black women feel like that, if they have a white boyfriend. I think I probably did that at that age, maybe younger, rather seventeen or whatever. If you're with somebody, you think "are they interested in me because of my culture." But that's also to do with what you know about your own self, isn't it? Mira realizes that Luke is basically a genuine person. Why shouldn't he be interested in Indian culture? It's natural when he says

"why can't we go to India." Luke and Mira have two agendas. He just, of course, he wants to go to India. He can mix in more with her family. But for Mira it's another agenda, she wants to keep him separate.

S.R.: Okay, so let me ask my final question. Mira's parents provide a very negative definition of the term "hybrid." They say that hybrids are out of place and inauthentic like the British soldiers in colonial India. Do you share this notion of hybridity as "being out of place?"

A.S.: No, I feel exactly the opposite. I think that's why I wanted to show that, on the one hand you've got this stable family. They're good people, they're nice people. But, of course, by the very fact of what they are - which is RaviKavi -, their whole view of anybody who isn't like them is not right. So hybridity is the opposite of that, if you like. They think that's inauthentic, whereas I think, Mira occupies that space, which again - to go back to my original subject - is both. There's a feeling of, if you like authenticity (what does it mean anyway), but there's also a feeling of hybridity. In a sense you start thinking that hybridity exists everywhere, even within the notion of authenticity. I think what RaviKavi think about hybridity is the exact opposite to what Mira feels or knows about herself. But she feels that she has to find out what her hybridity is and what it means. I think she feels it. She feels different, she feels caught in, and part of many things. She knows that she is not like her parents. She knows that there are other influences and just wants to find them. To her parents hybridity is alien, whereas for her it's not alien. For her it almost makes up what she is. I think she occupies the space which is where hybridity begins. If you like, you can go on and on trying to find out what hybridity is. In a way her parents seem to be one, RaviKavi, the same. But actually, if you look at their parents, perhaps to their parents they are hybrids. They left India, they only have one child - there are many things, so it seems that hybridity really is the actual thing that happens in life which is that we do change, we are open to other influences. Think about it, even if you live in a village, and you've never been out of the village, you are still a hybrid, if perhaps you speak another language using a computer. If you speak to the the village priest, for instance, you use another language than at home. I mean you are still open to many different influences. There is no such thing as purity or authenticity. Although, again we want the illusion of that, we want the idea that there is something authentic. We aspire to that. Maybe, there isn't anything authentic. So I thought that's something that Mira grapples with. Again, she grapples with wanting to find out what it means: "Am I out of place, or is this what I am?"

I don't think it's the question that the novel particularly answers. I don't think that it's a question that can be answered. You know, you're a flux.

S.R.: Time is also a flux. Thank you very much, Atima. I'm looking forward to your new play and your third novel.