

Sita Brahmachari

in conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

Sita Brahmachari: Hello, my name is Sita Brahmachari, and I have always worked with young people – in community and education – and, at a certain point, I have become, it seems, a children’s and young adult author.

Gabriel Gbadamosi: Your debut novel, *Artichoke Hearts*, is a coming-of-age account of new life, the new self-image of puberty of a young girl. But that in balance with generational death, with a grandmother who paints her own coffin. Two questions arise from this: How much do you draw on your own family experience of puberty and death? And, since both the girl and the grandmother are artists, what role do you see creativity playing in response to life’s major challenges? And, in particular, the multicultural experience of contemporary Britain, in which identity may need to be created, rather than given?

SB: Very interesting question. I think, yeah, it goes very deep for me, that moment of transition and puberty, and I do find myself writing it again and again. And, I think it was a very complex moment for me in my own childhood, that I wasn’t able to articulate for many, many reasons. Some of them were culturally rooted and some of them were confidence-rooted; and those things were two very connected things for me. When I found

myself working with young people, it was that 'moment' that I was working with all of the time. Then I found myself writing for young people: it was that 'moment' again.

I used to write a lot, I wrote diaries, I wrote travel journals when we went to India with my family. One of them became a content of my second book: *Jasmine Skies*. But I kept that world secret, believing it to be a kind of... a place outside of my identity in the real world. I had lots and lots of stories in my drawers, but never thought that those stories could be novels, or in some ways speak to other people, they felt very personal.

And, then I had my third child, Esha-Lily, as a baby, and my mother-in-law, Rosie, was very poorly with cancer. She was an extraordinary artist and activist, and I had known her since I was nineteen years old. So, she was sort of another 'mother figure' for me in my life. We were walking down the road outside my own children's large London secondary school, and it was the last day of term just before the summer holidays, and we all remember what that felt like, that stretch of time and freedom. The children were doing, what I call 'taking up the pavement'. So, you know, just not seeing anyone else. And Rosie was very frail, and we were walking up the road and I was holding her arm and she got knocked down. And this sort of tiger rose up in me and I was shouting at these children – which I don't usually do – 'Come back here and apologise immediately. My mother-in-law has been knocked over!' And she was like, 'Oh, don't make a fuss, don't make a fuss.' And they picked her up, these large sixth-form boys, picked her up off the pavement and they chatted to my mother-in-law all the way home. And by the time we got to our door, they were the best of friends; and she was asking them about their summer and saying, 'How exciting...' in what they were doing, and where they were going. We went inside and we sat and had a cup of tea, and I remember still her hand shaking as she drew it to her mouth and she said, 'Do you know, Sita, when

I was young and beautiful, you know, people used to want to take photographs of me? I had a lot of attention. People would *hang* on my words.' and she said, 'But now I'm old, I realise I am *wholly* invisible to young people, and I've got so many great stories to tell.'

Something kind of visceral happened in me, that this person that hid their stories away suddenly thought, you know, there could be a purpose in me writing for young people. I could bring something to this intergenerational, intercultural conversation, and I wasn't really conscious of how that connected to my own self as a child at that point.

But as I started writing, I realised that I was writing the vulnerability of that 'moment'. So, as one generation was passing, in the character of Mira, another generation was kind of understanding what its inheritance was; and there's a moment in *Artichoke Hearts*, as the grandmother knows that she's dying, where she says to her granddaughter, 'I'm giving you this charm, Mira'. I'm actually wearing the manifestation of the artichoke charm that's in the story.

GG: A necklace hanging from your neck?

SB: Yeah, so she says, 'I'm giving you this charm, Mira, because most children have wonderful, open, trusting loving hearts, but as people get older, they put layers around their hearts, for good reason, because, you know, tough things happen, and you need to be able to survive and get through your day.

Mira meets this boy in her class, called Jidé Jackson, who is a Rwandan refugee adopted by teachers at the school, and he has a very well protected heart; he's actually the cleverest boy in Year 7 at school, but he hides it very

well. And in a creative writing class – and here comes the creativity again – at school, Mira and Jidé are able to meet by slowly unpeeling the protective layers of their hearts, through creativity and through writing, to find out what’s happening in the middle.

GG: Do you think that the core of the creativity that you’re describing is finding a way to integrate your different identities and perhaps the identity of your family and society within the book – the young girl is both Indian and Jewish? Do you find that, actually, the kind of multicultural creativity that you are describing is a process in which all of these cultures, and selves and practices are beginning to speak to each other – it’s dialogic?

SB: Absolutely, that is the experience that I grew up with, that life was a constant dialogue between cultures and understanding and sometimes misunderstandings and sometimes disagreements and sometimes agreements and extraordinary ... Suddenly, things happening like, you know, walking home from school in the Lake District and your aunt is there from India, taking saris out of suitcases asking which aunty would like this colour best. And suddenly, you know, you’re the child in the middle of this. And then she is singing and dancing in your front room in a barn in the Lake District and you’ve just been at school making lemon curd, and this is your life.

GG: Your writing, it’s often been remarked, makes the reader ‘feel’ as well as think. That the inner emotional – some readers have said spiritual – life of the characters is what gives them the power to reach into our own problems and struggles and find meaning. In this way, it seems that you

delight, but also teach. Do you see yourself as a teacher? And if so, how do you leave your fiction open enough for readers to go on their own journey?

SB: I don't see myself as a teacher. Actually, it's very interesting and I bring my dear dad into this, in a way, because he was of that immigrant psyche that would say, "What are you? Are you a teacher? Are you a community worker? Are you a writer?' Be what you are going to be, don't do this in-between thing.' And I don't think I understood what that meant, until after he died. And quite often I think... actually, I often say to children in schools, that one doesn't understand that how the people in your life have touched you, until they have gone. Then you can start to mine, if you like, these intangible, ephemeral things, the small moments that made you want to reach out to someone who's different to yourself. Or even someone that's behaving in a very difficult, or obtuse, or even cruel manner and, kind of, want to try and unpick the layers and understand who they are.

GG: There is often in your work reference to something like – and many young people would feel this – a deep ache, either of injustice or of loneliness. Is this fundamentally from your own experience? Is there, in your experience of being kind of young, Bengali, British growing up in the Lake District, a sense of loneliness and injustice, and have you contextualised it fully, do you think, in your life? Because it's certainly in your fiction.

SB: Yeah, I think that was my experience of growing up: not to be able to tell the narrative of the whole of who I was, in the climate that I was living in; not understanding, and not seeing that narrative in stories as a child, I think

had a really deep impact on me – subliminal – but it was like, ‘Well, you are not there, so, you don’t “belong”.’

The other thing that I think I was mediating – which I think often children do with their parents wherever they are from – is, you know, an observant child will understand the complexities of the adult world in a purely emotional way, but not necessarily understand what’s going on. And I think living with a dad from a very different place, he talked sometimes about being suspended between worlds. And I think when you love people, you’re wanting to reach to understand, ‘Well, what worlds are you suspended ... because we’re the children and we are here?’ But, then as a grown-up person you think, of course, there’s this whole other group of people and a there’s a whole other childhood in this other continent that is that person, too.

So, I think having that in your family is both, you know, something that would make you very empathetic, and I think millions of children around the world have that: they don’t know that that’s a gift, but it’s my mission, in a way, to tell them that it is; there’s a space that is created in that wanting to understand.

GG: ‘Dare, dream, believe, imagine.’ These are words that appear in your dystopian future-set novel, *Where the River Runs Gold*, which is actually about the situation of climate change having become chaos, following hurricane Kronos, and the, kind of, work camps, the enslaved situation in which people find themselves, basically, pollinating flowers and crops by hand because the bees have died off. Are these words – ‘dare, dream, believe, imagine’ – a motto for yourself, almost as you are describing, or are they an incitement to rebel?

SB: I think, the things that I was mediating as a child, a lot of those things were about an unexpressed anger, about not being able to do those things, or not feeling like those things that I was doing privately were the things that were in books publicly.

I think I have become braver as a writer – maybe. When I wrote *Artichoke Hearts*, I never believed it would be published – it was published. Unbelievably for me, it won the Waterstones Book Award and then I've written all of these books. So, I had to have a word with myself and say, 'Well, maybe you *can* write.' Maybe it's okay, but I think people think, 'Oh well, you're going to be confident because you've won that award.' But, actually, it was a new confidence, and it's been building in my stories, and all of my stories up until, *Where the River Runs Gold*, have been set in the present time.

And I think this 'dare, dream' bit is also a sort of pep talk to myself: You know what, Sita, you have always wanted to write a dystopian novel, which somehow allows yourself to move beyond even, kind of, national politics, to look at what it is to be human and that the children who are displaced in Bangladesh, in the world, people can look at those children because of climate change and go, 'Oh well, that's in another world and we're really sorry, but we're used to that climate change happening there'. But *Where the River Runs Gold* is within a European landscape and it happens to everyone, everywhere. And I think that's about me bringing worlds together and daring, and dreaming, and imagining, that I can do it!

GG: I suppose beyond, therefore, let's widen this beyond your own experience of growing up with this dual heritage within the Lakelands. Let's

go on to explore some of the actually existing conditions which, in your view, globally perhaps, stop us. Now, in despite of the slightly wind-rattling bookcase behind you – which I feel is a great sort of special effect for this interview...

SB: [Laughs]

GB: ... you have the confidence, for example, for the invention of new words and I think there was never one more telling than the word 'equaliser'; not as it suggests about fairness or quality, but applied to child labour – enforcing short, myopic vision only for the job in hand and stopping any longer-term vision, any wider vision.

But let's go global at the actually existing conditions in the world that, in your view, stop the young, as it were, looking up around at the world and at themselves, and dreaming bigger things. Do we need new words to describe the reality of the global exploitation of child labour? The exploitation of resources leading to climate change, does this need to fill a new language?

SB: Greta Thunberg...

GG: Climate change activist, very young, from Sweden.

SB: Yes, she says, 'Don't call it 'climate change'; she says, 'Call it "climate extinction"'. She's very clear in the way that she speaks. I think it's a great privilege to be writing for young people in our time, as an adult, because I

feel very strongly that there has been a period of not-listening and short-term, myopic decision-making. And now, we're at a point where the children – my own daughter included – are leaving school to strike to say, 'You're taking our future away.'

And yes, you know, I'm stuttering now thinking about 'what language?'; I'm a writer so, my job is to try to find language that is going to make people, kind of, scrutinise what is actually happening, so that we don't just use a political, easy language, as if we're not walking towards extinction – which we are – and the children know it!

So, as I was writing this dystopian novel, it just felt like, well, it's set in the near future, but it felt like well we're in the dystopia, so we have to find the language that alerts people to that as well – that's your job as a writer. And so, one of the things that was really fantastic about writing this novel...

GG: *Where the River Runs Gold.*

SB: *Where the River Runs Gold...* What are the truly golden words? And, for me, it's the young people who are investigating this and creating this. And I think, yes, there is a deep criticism of an education system in this story that makes testing the only principle of learning.

The children in my story, Shifa and Themba, are what all children start off as being. They are truly explorative about the world and the universe, and the stars and they have a strong sense of, 'That's just wrong! How is it possible that the Paragons can have this, and we Freedoms have to eat at a food bank?'

GG: The novel is segregated into several different classes of people.

SB: So, there are Paragons of virtue – which are clearly are not; there are Freedoms – which clearly are not; it's the majority of children after this hurricane had come. The adults have bought into a system because they've been afraid. So, they've said, 'Okay, if our food is provided; if our children's education is provided to the age of twelve; then we will go along with this plan that the children – because the bees appear to be extinct – must go and pollinate the crops.'

The parents have kind of sold out to this functional educational system which is just about food production – for their children. Whereas the Paragons' children can have something else, the Outlanders and the Foragers are there just trying to find what they can that's left in the landscape. It's a deeply, deeply, divided society that I have written about before in the present, but writing it in this book, has felt very, very powerful for me because it's allowed me to kind of see what happens to these children who are robbed of books, who are robbed of libraries, who are desperately, desperately trying to cling on to the power of the imagination and the dreaming.

They are the children of parents who were Syrian refugees generations back, who had the knowledge of beekeeping, but the only way that this can be kept alive is through storytelling. So, this story is, for me, is about – if we remove children's ability to see far into the distance by placing a lens in their eyes, which is all about function, what kind of world will we live in?

GG: Your descriptions of a visionary landscape of fauna and flora remind me of the poet, Ted Hughes, and you grew up in the Lake District, like Wordsworth. Do you have a vision of nature and of the human powers of imagination and love that can lead to regeneration from our fallen state?

SB: Ted Hughes has been a massive influence actually on my writing and his book on creative writing has been a massive influence on me being a writer. I have memories of walking around in the fells of the Lake District and feeling this kind of force, this almost supernatural force of nature. I had this sort of wild imagination and I used to think I could see spirits, and if the sweep of an owl passed me, I would imagine, you know, ancient spirits. And then in a novel, *Kite Spirit*, I wrote years later, the owl, I discover, is the Celtic representation of the spirit of the dead coming back to life.

GG: Well, it still obviously here in the wind rattling in your bookshelves.

SB: It's still rattling here... and I have to say, I'm quite known as a spooky author in the children's book world. [Laughs] I used to... I felt a very spiritual connection to the natural world, and it's taken me quite a long time to really feel at home in a city environment, in terms of – in a 'soul' way. In terms of diversity of a city, it's what draws me and keeps me and it's my storytelling place. I do have this sense that most holidays that we have, we go and find a mountain, if we can, and be at the top of the mountain. I do have this sense that I'm never more fully at home than in a mountain landscape.

GG: Well, I'm drawn to and rather perplexed by almost the dialogue – let's call it that – the dialogue between almost the pagan and the Christian; the Christian in the sense of the idea of the regeneration of our fallen state. But then also, a slightly pagan idea about a return to our original unfallen, rewilding of the earth, which would be embedded in the innocence of childhood.

SB: And I think a lot of the anxiety that comes, you know, amongst young people now, is about a lack of connection to the natural world, lack of connection to knowing where their food comes from; I think that's really, really important.

So, yeah, I do also think that a lot of the spaces, for example, in the inner city which are accessible to young people, like the school playgrounds, for example, which have been built on, means that nature is also becoming accessible in our city to some people, and not other people. That's something that I feel to be *absolutely* wrong and needs to change. I think that goes back to having had it and knowing how precious it was in my own childhood. In some ways, it probably was the thing that allowed me to mediate all the complex things. It gave me the space to walk around and think about what I had seen, in terms of conversations between cultures and backgrounds. Children need that space.

GG: The urgent transmission of knowledge that you've acquired to future generations who might not have access to it. You don't want, it seems, to me, to scare the horses in your fiction. But there does seem to be a deep underlay of atrocity going back in human history: slavery, the Holocaust, death trains, forced child labour... How do you balance the grim facts with the need for 'hope' in your fiction?

SB: I don't want to not include those stories because I think those stories have – because they're painful and because they're difficult – not been written properly into stories for children in the past. They have been...

some of them have been written, but not as a sense of these are the people we are now, and these are our histories. It's not something that is constantly written, it seems to me, in children's fiction.

People, for me, are extraordinary treasure troves of what is now, but what has been. And the legacy that they leave now contains all of those pieces. So, for example, in *Tender Earth*, Bubbe Dara, the Jewish grandmother, she brings her tiny shoes, and she offers them to Lila, and she says, 'These are the shoes that I arrived in when I was a child, when I was ten years old.' And Lila says, 'But Boba, your feet haven't grown at all.' And she says, 'Yes, that's right, that's what *that* does to you.' I wrote it and I was sitting back from it and thinking, 'Whoa, do I really want to offer this?'

Then I thought actually this is really, really important. Bubbe Dara, she's a very, very warm character who, in some ways, is offering that story herself because she wants to make a difference to that child. So, she does it actually in a way that's quite gentle. She says, 'Oh I don't get them out much, those shoes. I don't get them out much', and puts them back and then she leaves the child with a kind of trail of thought that allows them to trail around and think about what that means.

GG: Perhaps this [is] already an answer to my final question. Which is, what advice would you give to new writers of fiction for children and young adults?

SB: Well, let me give you a story, because I don't really like to give advice. I was at Book Aid International yesterday, with a wonderful writer, Onjali

Raúf, and her first book – as my first book – won the Waterstones Children’s Book Award; it’s called *A Boy at the Back of the Class*. It’s a wonderful story, and I knew that when we were standing in this warehouse, stamping these books, which were to go to refugee camps in Uganda.

I knew that we would be chatting and talking. She’s writing her second book and she said to me, ‘Oh, is it really difficult to write your second book?’ And I said, ‘Well, yeah, every book is really difficult. But your journey is similar to mine: you wrote something; it was noticed; and now you have got to write another book.’ And you think, ‘I’m looking behind me to see who the writer is.’

So, it’s really hard, and I said, ‘Well, my only thing that I can say to you is... when I’m writing, I’m writing, and I retreat. And I cannot think about but what does this person think, or what does this organisation think? I’m not “representing” anybody when I’m writing – apart from the story.’

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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