

WRITERSMOSAIC

Shara Atashi

In conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant (CG): I'm here with Shara Atashi, in the headquarters of the Royal Literary Fund in central London. So, Shara, welcome to *WritersMosaic*. I think we came together through the good words of Michael Rosen, who knows you very well, who acted as your mentor. So, you've been with us now, almost from the beginning of *WritersMosaic* of—about a year ago; and I've detected in your writing a kind of poetic sensibility, I'd say, in all of your writing. And there's a line in one of your essays where you say, 'I have lived in poetry all my life.' Is that still the case?

Shara Atashi (SA): So, one part of it is personal, but the other part is, I think, Iranian; that you live in a... you live as a conquered country inside an epic poem. It's like that. I think most Iranians are like that. They grew up with Hafez and Saadi and, in normal conversation, they quote poets all the time. So, that was in me when I became an exile. Yeah, it is; you look at life through metaphor. And you see everywhere, you see forms, and you see the poetic devices actually, that's, that's how I mean it.

CG: You see the poetic devices? Can you give us an example of that?

SA: Yeah. I've been, for example, and I, when I see—when I look at the sea at the shore I see a smile. And I see the teeth in the foams, and the lips are the sky and the sand. So, that's how I look at life.

CG: So, you, you were born in Iran to artistic parents. You're the daughter of a famous poet, Manouchehr Atashi. What was it like to grow up in a household full of art and full of artistic expression?

SA: Unusual. But when I went to school and saw other, met other people, I noticed that our life was different. Our house looked different; there were books piled in every corner, and I discovered books for myself. I was not told what to read. I had the doll with the radio, when I was very little, and my mother always put the classic channel, so that I listened to classic music all the time, I grew up with it. And I discovered books in every corner, and I started reading them.

CG: So, what were you reading in the early stages of your life? Do you remember?

SA: So, one was the, I think was the very first book I remember is *The Little Match Seller* by Hans Christian Andersen. I think that shaped me, shaped my empathy in a way. It was a story, and it was much later, I was

four years old. My parents say that I started reading when I was four. So, one was that.

CG: Can we drill down a little bit? Why would it have shaped your empathy do you say?

SA: Yeah, because it's so awful. It's this little girl on a Christmas Eve. You know, my relation to Christmas was not the same that I have here. You have Armenians, so we did celebrate Christmas with the Armenians; but I could never believe that there is a child—that a child freezes on the street and tries to light these matches and look at the flame and I still have the details of it in my head, my memory. I don't know why my memory has saved it that she loses a shoe. I know Hans Christian Andersen was a cobbler, so shoes have a huge meaning. And that she loses one shoe, and the other shoe is just taken by a boy who says he will make a cradle for his child. So, that these are the details that make it special. And every Christmas I remember this tale. Yeah. So, this is the empathy that I feel responsible for people, and I can feel it; I can always also think that that can happen to me. Anything bad that happens to other people, I say, 'That can happen to me and to anyone.'

CG: And it's important to say, isn't it, that in a way, all writing is an act of empathy? Would you agree?

SA: Absolutely, yeah.

CG: Obviously, your father's a famous poet. Can you remember when you started to read his work?

SA: Yes, I do. I do, there was one—again, I don't know—I think a little bit of it is, it's Iranian melancholy. But I remember one poem, which is a rhyme actually and it is about a green bird. And it's a full rhyme, but I don't know why. It's a green bird who sits on our roof and um, it is trembling for some reason, and you don't know why. And so, he does a little beauty mark on the wing and, and he dies. That's the whole point. And I don't know why now why I think it's, it was his way to just create emotion, yeah. So, when I saw him after years in 1990s, in Frankfurt, and there were people sitting around and asking him to read famous poems, and I asked, 'Would you read that for me?' And then it was the moment when he was my father again: the story of the green bird, yeah.

CG: And what was your father's voice like? Can you describe it?

SA: Yes. He smoked a lot. It was parse and um, and very warm and kind. He never raised his voice. Never. He was a born poet. You could see that, yeah.

CG: You say he was a born poet. How could you see that?

SA: Because people who have a father, they have a different relation to the father. He was so significant. He was sitting; the image in my mind: he's always sitting at a desk writing, or my mother would just put him in his room and close the door. Yeah um, yeah.

CG: [Laughs] Yeah. So, writing is a solitary experience, then?

SA: Yeah.

CG: So, at what age do you think you recognised that you yourself had a facility for writing?

SA: I think I wrote a lot when these political things happened during the revolution, and we left and I started keeping records, and I tried conscious literary writing like Angela Davis, I remember that; and Marx and Lenin and Che Guevara, and things like that. And then—

CG: You were imitating Che Guevara and Marx and Angela Davis in your writing as a twelve-year-old?

SA: Yes, before I entered my German school, and then, and then the world was different. You know, the things that happened, there was a hostage crisis, and then all the Iranians felt sorry, fell against each other, and accused each other because they were all, you know, there were so many different groups of—and we could, we all couldn't go back because the

war started. So, nobody believed that Khomeini would remain and so something happened to all of us. And I went to school in Germany, in a new language, which I had learned and then suddenly Lenin was very bad; Marx okay; but Lenin was very bad; and Che Guevara, too, and everybody was pro American and—

CG: So, but you left then, Iran, during the revolution, with your mother, but your father remained behind. Why was that?

SA: He could not leave, you know. He was, I think he belonged to Bushehr, where he was born, and everybody worshipped him there. And he was not able to live without my mother. And he was not able to travel and leave his—although he was a translator, he was not able to his soil. So—

CG: Yeah, I think you write in your piece that he didn't want to leave the soil that had made him, made him a poet.

SA: Yes, he was very connected to the language, and he needed people to look after him. And my brother fell ill, you know. I think it was '77 that he fell ill, and we—and the doctor said he would, he wouldn't survive three months, but he lived 10 years. So, my mother was taking care of him. My father took it his way; you know, he became very weak through it. He couldn't handle the pain, but the job was with my mother, and I had broken my shoulder when we left. You know, it was—I had broken my collarbone.

And my mother just wanted to leave because people became aware and said, 'Look at what Khomeini has written. This is madness. What's going on? This is not what people wanted. And we must leave.'

CG: So, just to clarify then; so you left with your mother and your brother, or just your mum?

SA: Yeah. My brother—

CG: You left with your mother and your brother?

SA: Yeah. My brother—

CG: And where were you leaving from? Were you in Tehran?

SA: Yes, from Tehran.

CG: And your father remained in Tehran?

SA: Yes. The Islamic law would prevent women from travelling without the permission of their husbands. So, the men—the world of men became dangerous. And before that we were freer than the European women, really. Yeah. And so many people were afraid, and many people left for that reason. But we believed he would return. That's the other thing we

believed he would—that wouldn't last; Khomeini wouldn't last. And then he would return but then the war started.

CG: So, you went to school in Frankfurt, in Germany. And at that point, Shara was not your name. What was your name? What was your given name?

SA: Sharayah.

CG: Why did you change your name to Shara?

SA: Nobody could pronounce it, but they were also mocking me. I think one reason is the age that boys become rude in that age, but I had no experience. I went to a girl's school until the eighth year. And the other reason was that they couldn't pronounce it. And so, I chose myself a nickname.

CG: So, Sharayah means the 'red field poppy'. Have you ever thought of returning to your original name?

SA: Well, I do use it. Some—I have one friend who got from those days who calls me still 'Sharayah'. And another friend calls me Atashi. Now I leave it up to people what they want to call me, or not. So—

CG: I'll try Sharayah, for the course of this conversation. And, hopefully, I will—I'll have it embedded in my mind by the time we finish, and I'll call you that from now on. Now, it's kind of clear to me: the trauma of departure for you from Iran to Frankfurt to Germany; the separation from your father; often when people are migrants and they're displaced they sometimes talk about the trauma of the journey. But Freud talks about the trauma of arrival and living in a foreign place, and he talks about the uncanny; living with the unfamiliar. Do you share that notion?

SA: It becomes—one has two personalities when one arrives: The country that you leave no longer exists, and the country you are in will—can become your home, if you stay somewhere, yeah. But when I left Berlin in 2009, I lost it again: that idea of, idea of home. And it has been difficult since 2009, to really say I belong to a place; but also, I have accepted that I'm a guest, that my nostalgia is something I need for writing. It is crazy. Nothing's going to cure that. Nothing. I am a guest, and I am a polyglot. I speak the language of the people wherever I am so I can live. I must accept that I live as a guest and belong to myself much more than before. So, it's not exactly what Freud says, but I belong to myself, you know.

CG: You said an interesting thing there. You said that nostalgia is the kind of source for your writing, and nothing's going to cure that. Do you want it to be cured?

SA: Well, I don't know how it is. I mean, I can say I think in Berlin, for example, I am in that age in my twenties, I discovered Berlin and that was living in socialism because the... you know, when I went there, the dinar was only 150 equal; it would be equal to 150. And as a young person, and my flat would be equal £250, and it was huge. And it was like having that luxury and then feeling free. So, I didn't need, you know, I could be nostalgic about that and think back and say, 'My God,' but from Iran, it's a different thing. It is mysterious because my tears just come, and I don't know why when, for example, there is a two-minute film based on a poem by Hafez and I have seen it a hundred times.

CG What is it?

SA: It's called *Thursday Appointment*. And each time I watch it, I must cry because Hafez was the poet of love and peace and—but in a specific way, which is existentialism, it's not mysticism. It is an older couple and they—at the traffic light, and they see a younger couple are fighting in a car, and there's a child sat in the back. They try to intervene, and the wife has flowers. So, they give the flowers to them, to the other couple and they fall silent and the child smiles. But then you see the wife of the older man is not there. There is this tray of dates and some rose petals. Millions watched it without understanding the words; but the meaning is that the wife wasn't there, it was her spirit. And the poem they quote, has to do with peace with ethnicities that existed in Shiraz. And it is from the 14th century you must consider. And this idea of—in the poem, is the idea of

bringing peace to others. If people were able to apply this to normal life, you would have a peaceful world. And in this... in this little film it is there. And the mysterious thing is that it is film language, you know, colour, juxtaposition, all those little details in two minutes only. They did work for people who don't understand the language, but maybe not to this extent, yeah.

CG: Yeah, I get what you're saying. I want to watch the film. Now, I'm going to read you something that was written to me by my friend and your friend, Michael Rosen, the great writer, polymath himself, renaissance man. So, Michael Rosen reached out to me probably about a year and a half ago and said, 'Oh, I've got a really interesting person who would benefit from being associated with you, Colin, and perhaps you with her.' And he said, I asked him this morning, 'I've got a couple of questions,' I said to him, 'What did you see in Shara to recommend her to me?' And Michael Rosen wrote back: 'A parallel to you, Colin, that is a dual commitment to the personal and the cultural, as expressed across generations. She reflects that through her exploration of her father's work, and the particularities of it within a wider Persian culture.' How do you respond to that?

SA: Which part of it?

CG: Well, to the last part. I mean, do you think he's got a good assessment of what you're trying to do with your writing?

SA: Yes, I think, I think what I'm just trying to bring to attention that the poetry is the true person's history, because it's with no other country like that, you know. All nations have their epic poems, but within Iranian it has been, the language has been preserved, the culture has been preserved inside poetry. And I try to show people how one can always be opposed to governments, without being radical, or without angering, you know, how you can get away with it. And I must say it in a way without, you know, making it impossible. You can, there is a space where you can rely on people's ignorance of those who would fight you. I don't know if I'm safe, you know. I've never been in the situation where I could just get out and do dangerous things, but I will never lie. I will always say the truth and, yeah, and that's been the Persian culture, you know.

CG: I'm going to give you another Michael Rosen quote. The second thing I asked Michael Rosen about you was, 'What did you learn from Shara?' And he answered this way: 'I knew nothing of this particular rural culture, and how it has been told through her father's poetry. More personally, I learned how difficult it is to tell these interwoven stories of personal, artistic, and cultural importance. I put myself in Shara's shoes, as I've tried to do something similar. If you're a writer, one way to read is to allow what you're reading to offer you possibilities. That's exactly what I got from the way Shara was wrestling with his different levels and areas of attention.' So, do you get from reading an understanding of what also might be possible for your own writing?

SA: I do.

CG: Can you give me an example of that? Can you think of an example?

SA: From what I gained? Let's say Dostoyevsky. You know, that strengthened me in a way that I know that he was arrested. He spent most of his life—

CG: Let me just explain to those who don't know Dostoevsky. Fyodor Dostoevsky from Russia, the great writer who wrote *The Idiot*, *Crime and Punishment*, etc. So, what did you gain from him?

SA: My morale. And also the way how to address the things I want to address without—and get away with it. I think my thing is always get away with it and don't lie. And from him it was that—

CG: When you say, 'Get away with it,' you mean to sort of fly below the radar, so that you're not censored or penalised by the authorities?

SA: Yeah, because I think that wouldn't change. I think so many people die, and I would like to write about them. Like, Baktash Abtin, you know, or someone 45 years old, who recently died and before even, you know, before, before he was translated, it's so horrible, yeah. And I don't want to, I don't want to go to jail because then I might not be able to write, you

know. We are living in a country where Julian Assange is in jail, and maybe it's dangerous to say it even. And I want to be someone who tells those stories. And that's what I get, because I know Dostoevsky wasn't—spent 10 years in jail and hard labour and exile in the best years of his life just because he had read out from a letter. Just because of that, nothing else. And Iran takes hostages and here you never know, yeah. I feel also protected by the—I don't have a reason to anger the man in power. But—

CG: Yeah, but what do you get though from the writing of Dostoevsky? What do you get from the approach that he's taken to his writing? Do you get some sense of how that might steer your own writing?

SA: Yes. His characters, his psychology, I think he has done much more for me than any psychologist would do. I think he's better than, better than Freud as a psychologist, psychoanalyst, actually. So, I feel haunted by his characters. I read Marquez but Marquez I—

CG: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Colombian writer.

SA: Yes. He's also someone who speaks out in his way, but that's more, that's close to my world of imagination. His style of writing, his—I also structure, have circular structures rather than straight ones and um—

CG: So, I asked Michael Rosen what he gained from being with you. What did you gain from being mentored by Michael Rosen?

SA: Well, he made me see that things are possible. I mean, he connected me to you. And he's, yeah, I mean, somehow removed the gatekeepers and opened my way. And he did it in a way that I never do. He's—when he was with me on Zoom, he would use his mobile phone and show me, you know, it's easy though it—and I'm not good at that. I'm not when you—

CG: When he says, 'Show me and do it,' what are you referring to? Do what?

SA: Well, for example, look for publishers and a contact, that person contact. I said, 'I would like to use my knowledge to make my living. No longer public service. It has changed. And I would like to, you know, I would like to use this knowledge that I have. I think I should give it back to the world.' And he said, 'Yeah, you can contact Yalda Hakim, for example. Say that you would like...' I said what I would like to do, and he showed me that everything was possible. Also, from his own, you know, I knew he had COVID. I actually had no hope that he would agree to being the mentor.

So, I just had said it to Literature Wales, when they asked me who I would like to have as a mentor, and I had no idea. I thought Michael would be on my political level. So, that was the reason for me. And I knew him from *Word of Mouth*. And his *Zola* novel. And then I had started reading *Many Different Kinds of Love* and I thought, 'Oh my god! If he can after such a

horrible illness start right away, then we are made to do that. I should try that at least, yeah.’ He’s an amazing person to just chat with. So, it was luck that his agent said ‘Yes’.

CG: Yeah, yeah. Well, I’m, I’m, you know, one of his biggest fans. I was very privileged to work with him for more than 10 years at the BBC. And he’s both an insider and an outsider. So, all hats off to Michael Rosen, and all hats off to you.

Now, one of the pieces that really touched me, and I think you write with great tenderness, is an example of what you might write when you come to write the memoir of your father. So, you wrote a piece for us called *Large Glass*, which is the title that comes from the Duchamp. And when you talked about seeing that image that work from Duchamp, which you can describe for me in a bit, you said, ‘It was as if I was looking into a mirror.’ Why so? And describe the artwork and why were you looking into a mirror?

SA: The form spoke to me. You know, you can get an overdose of art, in a way. It’s called Stendhal syndrome. And um—

CG: What’s that? I haven’t heard this ‘overdose of art’. What’s that?

SA: Yeah, that is Stendhal, was a French author in the 18th century, I think. It’s his pen name. And he once went to Florence and had a little

nervous breakdown from the beauty of the city. So, Japanese people often get a slight nervous breakdown in Paris, and then they call it Paris syndrome. And, with me, it happened with that, that place. And it happened with *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, when I saw it once, that my knees gave in.

CG: But let's, let's stick with the Duchamp. Let's stick with the Duchamp. So, what is, what is the art? Describe it for us first and then talk about why it had this effect on you.

SA: You have these symbols that take you to the subconsciousness. And that's it, you know. There was like a crack of mine someone had cracked through me in that phase because—I don't know it happens sometimes that you break down and it is, yeah, it was like shattering. I think it was a breakdown, but it happened throughout. Because that was it, yeah. It opened my subconscious to me. And—

CG: What's interesting about that though is that the artwork was created. And then, in the midst of it being transported, the glass cracked. But Duchamp didn't discard it, he kind of patched up the artwork in a way that nobody else could imitate him; and that became even more powerful in a way. So, even though it's a metaphor for you, it's a suggestion also, that it can be empowering.

SA: Yes, it can be empowering. So, this is like a mirror. It tells your story because it uses abstraction.

CG: So, when it comes to your father and keeping his memory alive, you wanted to do that by translating his poems in the beginning, but there was no market for it into English and German. There's more of a market now, so maybe that's something you could pursue. But you are embarking on a memoir called *Tomb at Bushehr*. Can you give us some sense of what that title refers to and how you're achieving your ambition, thus far? I mean, obviously you haven't finished it, but how far have you got with it?

SA: So, *Tomb at Bushehr* is, when my father died, he belonged to the people, yeah; and they somewhere wanted to bury him next to other poets in Tehran. But people in Bushehr wanted to have him there. And the story of Bushehr and the heroes of Bushehr, that's a world I will be dealing now in my memoir. But it is interesting that there is a clay tomb, clay mausoleum, and that was neglected for years. There's just one photograph of it, how it looked like. And there are the Heroes of Bushehr; you know, they fought the British, and real heroes, and they are buried there, and they wanted to put my father there next to them because I gave voice to Bushehr. And so, this is why it is. So, I'm going to change that probably to *A Whisper from Bushehr*, and that will be a poetry collection with 34 poems and a short preface. And my memoir I would like to finish, it's now called *From the Close of a Long Verse*. It's a line from a poem by him, but it refers to the—to living in an epic frame.

CG: Can you explain the significance in Persian or Iranian culture about Bushehr?

SA: They managed to scare the British away. Their warriors then their fighters, they opposed the British. You know, they fought them and then they managed to drive them away.

CG: What period is this?

SA: It is in the 19th century and the beginning of, the beginning of the 20th century. And those are exciting stories to just go into detail in the memoir.

CG: So, it strikes me then that what you are embarking on, or what you are undertaking, is an act of devotion to your father.

SA: It is. Yeah, maybe there is some reason. It's feeling guilt, or commitment to my mother, rather than my father, because she saved him, and he would have died without her. And she—

CG: When you say he would have died without her, what do you mean?

SA: Well, he had—well, he did not live a healthy life, you know; he did unhealthy things and, and he needed someone, you know. My mother *never* said anything about the private things she experienced, that [she]

had to suffer. But when they—she was asked and someone wanted to get other things that when people speak about, you know, everybody worships him. And she said to a young reporter and said, 'If I tell you the things you're asking for people are going to suffocate you.' But I can say one thing: 'That Atashi was a tree and you had to water it to give fruit.' And the whole family, you know, all said: 'That's exactly what he was.' Yeah'

CG: He was a tree that you had to water to give fruit.

SA: And he produced fruits, you know. I have 4,000 pages of poetry. So, my life is not enough to translate it. So, somehow, I believe that he's alive; and I believe that people I have lost are alive. That's a comfort; someone lives in—in the ink on the paper.

CG: There's an extraordinary passage in your essay, *The Large Glass*. The year before your father dies, you have a kind of existentialist moment when the sky seemed to crack open, and you go weak, and you almost faint. And you tell your father about this moment. And also, it's—there's some element of one of his poems in that experience as well. And your father, to explain it to you says: 'Certain phenomena do exist. And it was just an experience with the metaphysical world. It was just poetry.' Do you remember that moment?

SA: Yes, yes. I remember that he said, 'You know, meta, is what's up, and the physic is what's down. That's all there is.' He made it possible. I was

never raised with a religion, and I was always warned that superstition is something very dangerous and very bad; but poetry is something that is never wrong. You can write on the page; everything on this page is right. So, the superstition and then you deal with it in a poetic way. So, it is, for me, I think that was very helpful. First, okay, miracles—you know, Garcia Lorca says, 'Only mystery makes us leave. Only mystery.' So, I have that on my desk up —so that I'm always aware that every day is a mystery and a miracle. And my father explained it to me, and my mother lived it. My mother lived like that. And my father explained it to me, but he was not surprised or anything, you know, it was not; he was not fatherly. He was just explaining, 'Yeah, now it's your time.'

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

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