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Hyderabad Literary Festival 2013: Creative Challenges from Women Writers

By Bonnie Zare

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Keep your eyes and ears open for Anupama Raju, Dipika Mukherjee, Mridula Koshy, Kunal Mukherjee, and Priyamvada Puroshotham

The **Hyderabad Literary Festival** (18-20th January, 2013), now in its third year and growing in stature, rightfully prides itself on bridging the local and global. Each year the Festival, sponsored by Muse India, looks outward by honoring a guest nation and inward by honoring an Indian language. Three parallel sessions mainly featured writing in Telugu and English, though there were sessions devoted to French, German and Urdu writers as well. One of the refreshing aspects of the conference is the amount of poetry that is read, rather than the sessions being dominated by short stories and novels, as can often be the case. I wondered whether **dalit writers** would be well represented and what degree the audience would receive news of **current queer writing**. I also was eager to see **whether and which women writers** would be featured prominently.

Happily, the programme contained a large number of women writers, and I had to miss out on some (including Meena Alexander, alas) to hear others, which is always the case with a vibrant gathering of multiple talents on display every hour. On Friday, Harimohan Parivu interviewed the prolific and well-known **Anita Nair**, author of *Ladies Coupe* (lauded as a feminist novel if you are coming to her name newly), *The Mistress* and 11 other books over the past 15 years. The session featured a lively reading from *Lessons of Forgetting* about a young girl's relationship to her long hair, and I am eager to check out this book, which Nair noted was the darkest in her oeuvre. Nair stressed the discipline and sheer time that good writing requires and echoed other writers such as Virginia Scharff who speak of the necessity of being a “poor friend” or a derelict “family person” to accomplish the work. Women are often under high pressure to be social, at the very least with their family members (and I could also relate to this description of the necessity of being faithful to the work as a scholar). Although session host Harimohan Parivu did draw Nair out on the subject of her female characters' refusal to be obedient good girls, overall he gave very little attention to gender, which was disappointing.



Panel with Tabish Khair, Dipika Mukherjee, Germain Droogenbroodt and Kunal Mukherjee

A highlight of the festival was hearing the poetry of Kerala writer **Anupama Raju**. Look for her poems (along with those of many others including Ultraviolet's Anindita Sengupta) in the **Harper Collins Anthology of English Poetry** (2012). The reading began with her poems “Everyday Sounds of the Other” and “The Time Eater.” “It is a Poem that Brought me to this Country” alternated lines of the national pledge said by schoolchildren with images from the Indian landscape:

“The first line
threw me into a well
of floating fetuses and two-finger tests....

India is my country and all Indians
are my brothers and sisters....

The next line drove me to a mall
class fantasies of debris and discounts
money can buy you love they said
as they dropped dead
I did not say goodbye.”

Another highlight of the Festival was the breath of fresh air ushered in by the lively Dipika Mukherjee, a writer from Singapore, who has published the thriller *Thunder Demons* (long-listed for the Man Asian Booker Prize), and whose most recent poem, which appeared in *World Literature Today*, was “**Say the Names**,” a response to the murders committed by a white supremacist at the Sikh gurdwara in Wisconsin. Mukherjee read “This Shawl,” a poetic response to the recent horri-



Writer Priyamvada Puroshotam

Delhi rape case. The poem was tremendously powerful – stay tuned, as she gave me her permission to post it here once she hears back from a publisher.

Other writers to watch out for include **Mridula Koshy**, author of *If is Sweet* (Harper Collins 2009) and *Not Only the Things That Have Happened* (Westland- Tranquebar (India, 2009 and Hunter Publishing, Australia, 2011) about the story of a mother and son told from multiple onlookers, **Kunal Mukherjee**, author of *My Magical Palace*, who read stories of shadowy intensity about childhood bullying and teenage same-sex desire, and Priyamvada Puroshotam. I made a beeline for the bookstall to get Puroshotam's ***The Purple Line***, which tells the story of six different women who never meet but all share the same gynecologist. The purple line refers to the indicator on the pregnancy test stick, the line that can suddenly and definitively

alter a woman's planned future. Puroshotam said she developed the idea from sitting in waiting rooms for the gynecologist, "which in India is often a two-hour wait. I started thinking about how she saw similar kinds of people waiting with me each time," and imagining what had brought them there that day. The audience was, for instance, brought inside the mind of the character Zubeida who is married to a guy she thinks of as "the merchant with the beard" and who wants to bed her three times a day. Zubeida is surprised by the frequency but over time it becomes a "ritual," similar to what she does in prayer, "gently closing her eyes and thinking of parakeets, platitudes and Paris." The excerpts were serious but studded with flashes of humor, and Puroshotam's dynamic reading (she has a theater background) enthralled the audience.

I trust that the Hyderabad Literary Festival will only grow stronger in the coming years. While Telugu writers are not responsible for conveying their sessions' readings and debates to a non-Telugu audience, I wondered how the organizers might provide a capsule review after the sessions. (See [this article](#) from *The Hindu* for a snapshot from one session, which refers to a Telugu writer understandably objecting to the tag of "local" writer.) Very few dalit writers in any language were present, and they also have not been a prominent presence at the previous two Festivals. I am reminded of the painful and inexcusable literary segregation of black writers in the US. Few queer writers or writings were offered either, and I hope that the organizers will take it upon themselves to seek out these diverse voices as they continue to offer a stimulating forum for writers and readers.

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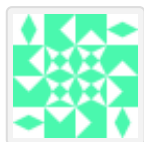
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About: **[Bonnie Zare](#)**

Bonnie Zare is a Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wyoming. She is co-editor, with Nalini Iyer, of *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*, and her work has appeared in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, and *South Asian Review* among others. She has designed the courses "Gender and Sexuality in Postcolonial Writing," "Women of India: Lives and Literatures" and the India overseas course "Social Justice in Culture and Practice." Zare is Founder of the Keep Girls in School Project, which raises awareness about issues of formerly abandoned children in Andhra Pradesh. She feels lucky to regularly stand under the big open skies of Wyoming and also amongst the pulsing rhythms of Hyderabad. Bonnie is part of the editorial team of *Ultra Violet* and takes care of the section on International Feminisms.