

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## 'The Globalisation of Ideas and Thoughts is a Supremely Hopeful Development': An Interview with Altaf Tyrewala Sandra L.M. Rota

Born in 1977, Altaf Tyrewala lives in Mumbai. He studied advertising and marketing in New York and graduated in 1995, before returning to Mumbai in 1999 to work on his debut novel *No God In Sight*. Published in 2005, the novel gives voice to some of the eighteen million people that today crowd Mumbai. Tyrewala's short stories have been included in several Indian and international anthologies.

**SANDRA L M ROTA:** Let's start with the purpose behind *No God In Sight*: what was, if any, the image or representation of Bombay that you wanted to convey? And what was, again if any, the urgency that made you write that novel?

**ALTAF TYREWALA:** The novel came about organically. When I returned from New York after my graduation, I just wanted to write a novel. I did not know how, I did not know what I wanted to say. I began working in the e-learning industry as a copywriter and instructional designer. I suppose many factors eventually locked in. I was experiencing Mumbai as a working adult. I was realising things about myself and my background that I had not thought of before. And there was my growing tiredness with words thanks to the textual excesses of the Internet. I finally found my groove with the abortionist's monologue. I wrote that story at work, between scripting storyboards for some American client. The fictional monologue allowed me to step out of my cocooned middle-class world-view and place myself in the minds and situations of personalities far removed from me. That is how *No God In Sight* really came about, as an attempt to go beyond myself.

**SR:** Contemporary accounts of Bombay mostly tell of a bleak, dangerous city, polluted in many ways and thorn by religious hatred and corruption. Your novel partly conveys the impression of a depressed city, which is all quite reasonable given the developments after Ayodhya. However, can you give me some positive aspects of Bombay? Something of the city that has not changed in spite of all or something that gives you hope for the future?

**AT:** That is a difficult question to answer at this point of time. As a nation, India has almost fetishised change. Nothing is remaining untouched: the landscape, the culture, language, food habits, personal relationships, financial habits, nothing. We see proof of this most visibly in India's cities. Mumbai is no exception. Everything has suddenly been tagged with a deadline. Decades-old buildings, centuries-old neighbourhoods, names of streets, even relatively new malls are not exempt from the desire to update, upgrade or rebuild. This lends the city a very precarious, tentative feel. In a sense, I consider it my good fortune that I wrote about the city just before this mad rush to change caught on. I sympathise with writers and artists trying to make sense of the city right now. Right now there is not telling what kind of city Mumbai will turn out to be. I suppose we will get our answer a decade or so later.

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**SR:** Do you think Bombay has changed from being a *city* whose structure was that of many nearby villages to a *metropolis* whose grid is defined by ghetto-quarters? Would that explain the solitude of your characters?

**AT:** Until now, Mumbai used to be both: a city with urban ghetto-quarters as well as *gaothans*, or village clusters. But now the latter are slowly being eradicated and the city is being turned over entirely to the anonymous urban grid. The solitude of my characters is more a reflection of my own reticence, rather than some wider comment on the alienating urban environment in which they exist. Because of its vigorous communal ghettoisation – where people of the same religious communities cluster together, even in ultra-modern skyscrapers – the city continues to have strong neighbourhood vibes. You cannot just start living anywhere you want. You have to be vetted first, by the real estate agent, the property owner, the society office, the local police station, and if you happen to belong to the wrong community or cast, then the doors will slam shut on you.

**SR:** Do you have any favourite place in Bombay, where you like spending your time or going for a walk?

**AT:** John Baptista Garden in Mazagaon. There is something about the city's eastern sea-board that makes me very nostalgic about its past. Maybe it is because the oldest parts of the city lie along its eastern coast, including the Bombay port. If there is one part of the city that has still remained relatively unchanged, it would be this part.

**SR:** Nowadays a metropolis is the emblematic *lieu* of globalization where differences are erased. Do you think that after its metropolitan turn, Bombay is now on its way to become more similar to other big cities like New York and London and more distant from its surrounding Indian context? I have the impression that this is what happens to those cities that take on the characteristics of a metropolis, they stand out as points on the globe that have more in common with each other than with their environment.

**AT:** What is the surrounding Indian context? I have not seen one in all my years of travel outside of Mumbai. People are the same whether they are in the village or in the city. I do not know if it is a mark of sophistication or of backwardness, but I have seen the same hankering for money and power wherever I have gone in India. Even the poshest skyscraper complex in Mumbai will function like a village, with a few people snooping around in everyone's business and the residents who run the society office treating the place like their own personal kingdom.

**SR:** Has your work ever been described in terms of 'postcolonial'? How did or would you relate to that?

**AT:** No, I have never seen my work being described this way. But I do not particularly care for jargon of any sort.

**SR:** At Turin Book Fair 2010, it was interesting to hear you say that you love Bombay and New York in the same way and that when you stay in either city you start missing the other after a while, so that the ideal would be to have the two cities superimposed and connected by a door. It made me think that one aspect that distinguishes previous 'hybrid' writers from later generations is their approach to

issues of belonging: in an equal condition of bilingualism, bi- or multi-culturalism, double nationality or citizenship, the former felt this condition as problematic and struggled to find a synthesis whose conclusion was that they could only inhabit, and belong to, 'countries of the mind'; the latter, on the contrary, do not seem to be affected by such anxiety, not in the same degree at least, and seem well at ease in this condition, making the best out of it. What, do you think, has changed?

**AT:** No, one is never at ease with this rootlessness. I actually find myself very anxious about the space and geography I inhabit. I am very aware of the way space affects my thoughts, my moods and output. I have been living in Boston for the past six months. I am going to spend the next year in Berlin. But this international life is not something I would have opted for, if belonging to India and living there was not such an uphill task. Over the past several years I searched high and low in Mumbai and its surrounding towns and villages for a suitable place to call home. I probably would have compromised if I had not had any other option. But since I did have an option to live abroad, I could not see myself living in places without electricity, water supply, sewage, or pliable roads. I could tolerate all that when I was younger. But as one grows older, one just does not have the patience for the absence of basic amenities. Whether or not I go back to live in India, I will always remain aware of the ways in which my own nation failed to fulfil my most basic expectations, not least the freedom of free and fearless expression.

**SR:** For the same reason, do you think that, while previous 'hybrid' writers were at times called 'postcolonial', 'expatriate', 'diasporic', later-generation writers may better respond to definitions like 'metropolitan', 'cosmopolitan', 'non-resident' or 'globalization' writers? Would these terms (partly) describe you?

**AT:** Yes, I suppose all the latter terms could describe me. Also, 'homeless' and 'nomadic'.

**SR:** How do you relate to issues of globalisation? Is your attitude to its effects and potential in terms of culture mainly negative or positive?

**AT:** I belong to the strata of society that enjoys the spoils of globalisation. I would be a hypocrite if I decried it too vehemently. I enjoy the malls, the chain bookstores, coffee-shops, and American-style highways. India is too old a culture to be swept away entirely. It has assimilated global influences quite successfully in the past, and I do not see why things will be any different this time around. Having just lived in the U.S. for the past six months, I can see what havoc globalization has wreaked in that nation, with jobs being outsourced without care for the earning capabilities of the American middle-class. If one defines globalisation purely in terms of consumerism, then obviously it is a catastrophic development for the world. However, there is also the globalisation of ideas and thoughts, and in that sense it is a supremely hopeful development.

**SR:** Are you working on anything in particular at the moment?

**AT:** Several things. I am almost wrapping up Mumbai Noir, a collection of crime fiction short stories that I am editing for Akashic Books. The thirteen contributors have done an excellent job at capturing the city's underbelly and I think Mumbai Noir

will make the city proud.

I am also working on a longish prose-poem of sorts.

**SR:** I have one last question, which springs out of a consideration: you call the city 'Mumbai', while other writers I have talked to stick to 'Bombay'. Is there any reason for you using that toponym, apart from its being the official name of the city, which would be quite reasonable enough in itself. A linguistic preference, a particular feeling for the name, or else?

**AT:** Sandra, I use 'Mumbai' out of a sense of helpless acceptance. It is a sort of self-punishment, to remind myself not to take recourse in any fantasies of the past. No matter how much we may lament it, 'Bombay' is gone for good. I know many people who continue to call the city by its old name, and I just consider it a very futile sort of rebellion against hard facts.