

# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Interview with Kavita Ezekiel  
Mendonca

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Sarangi

**Kavita Ezekiel Mendonca** was born in Bombay to Prof. Nissim Ezekiel and Daisy Ezekiel. She was raised in a Bene-Israel Jewish family in Bombay, India.\* She attended Queen Mary's School, St. Xavier's College, Bombay University and Oxford Brookes University, U.K. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English, American Literature and Education. Her career spanned over four decades in Indian colleges, American International Schools and Canada, teaching English, French and Spanish. She also held the position of Career Counsellor at the International School in India, where she taught Advanced Placement and other courses in English for sixteen years.

She is a published poet. Her first book, *Family Sunday and other Poems*, was published in 1989, with a second edition in 1990. She has read her poems over All India Radio Bombay, and her poems have also appeared in *Poetry India*, *SETU Magazine*, *Muse India* and *Destiny Poets*, UK, to name a few. She has her poetry page at <https://www.facebook.com/kemendoncapoetry>.

Kavita also writes short fiction. Her work is strongly influenced by her father's work. (The late Nissim Ezekiel was an eminent poet, well-known in India and overseas). She lives in Calgary, Canada, with her family.

*This interview was conducted via emails in the rainy days of June 2020.*

Q. So, you are a poet, the bearer of a poetic legacy and you are so lyrically called 'Kavita'. Tell us about how poetry happened to you?

A. I am so pleased you asked this question at the very outset of the interview. Thank you for that. My name Kavita, for which I have my father, the late poet Nissim Ezekiel, to be forever grateful to, means 'Poetry' in Sanskrit. That is the origin of the word. My father was the 'Kavi' (Poet) and I was his 'Kavita'. Shakespeare said, 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,' but I wonder sometimes, if I had a different name, would I perhaps have been a different person? Of all the Jewish and Indian names available to him, my father seems to have put some conscious thought to giving me a name which reflected something that was of prime importance to him in life. My mother must have understood this, because she acquiesced too. I never heard mention of any controversy over my name in the home. My grandfather spoke Sanskrit, but I am not sure if that had anything to do with it. He was a

‘Science man’ and didn’t really understand my father’s passion for Poetry, but never objected to it either. He let all his children follow their dreams. In one of my poems, ‘The Many things my Father loved,’ published in the May-June issue of *Muse India*, I make mention of the significance of my naming. My father...

Named me prophetically  
So I could write about him  
And the many things he loved  
It’s my turn now, returning in full circle  
To declare the things he loved  
As I too love the many things he loved  
Because it is he who taught me to love them.

People who know me, say I have been lucky in having a poet for a father. I think it’s more of a blessing, and carrying on his legacy is particularly dear to my heart, especially as I get older. I want him, and the historic and innovative role he played in shaping Modern Indian verse in English, to be remembered after his passing. I feel a responsibility to introduce him to younger poets writing in India today, and to overseas poets, whenever the opportunity presents itself. So to answer this question, my poetic legacy comes with an amount of pride and humility, but also with great responsibility, and one that I take very seriously. I started writing poetry at the age of nine, as many children do, and later published some in the college magazine. I published my first book (*Family Sunday and other Poems*) in 1989, with a second edition in 1990. I was steeped in Poetry from a very young age, having a poet for a father, and attended many Poetry readings and Art exhibitions with him, since he was also an Art critic. He also held poetry reading sessions on how to read poetry out loud, something which I loved as a child, and the importance of which I emphasised to students in the teaching of Poetry in my own classes. My favourite classes to teach were Poetry and Creative Writing to High School students. During a long teaching career spanning a little over four decades, and raising two children while working full time, there was a hiatus in my writing. After semi-retirement a couple of years ago, I began writing again, kind of revived it, but with a new fervour.

The floodgates have opened,  
The dam has burst,  
The words pour out  
Like raging water, un-muddied and clear,  
Carrying everything in its path,

(Lines from my poem, ‘The Poetry of Homes’)

Am I a poet? I write poetry, so I am a poet, but I will say I am evolving as a poet. I remain a work in progress.

I was in the process of getting my second book for publication, when my student and dear friend, Wendell Rodricks, one of India’s top designers, passed away suddenly, a few months

ago. His death was a shock. He had accepted my invitation to write the preface for my book. In deference to his memory, I have postponed the publication of the book.

Q. In what ways do you think that your Jewish identity has influenced your writing?

A. I was born and raised in Bene Israel family in Bombay but my parents and grandparents were not orthodox Jews. We were liberal Jews. Here in Canada, they are known as Reformed Jews. I spent much of my childhood living with my grandparents, and an older aunt who taught me all the beliefs, customs and traditions of the Jewish faith. We were well assimilated into the Indian cultural milieu and readily accepted by peoples of all different religions and faiths. I went for the New Year prayers with my grandmother and aunt, but understood little, as the prayers were in Hebrew. My aunt had taught me to pray the *Shema*, and that was all the Hebrew I knew. I went to Christian schools and colleges and embraced Christianity. I loved the hymns of worship and the teachings of Christ as they gave meaning to my life. I particularly experienced a deep personal joy in that faith. My father, who was an open-minded and highly tolerant person taught me that all religions ultimately lead to the truth, just in different ways, along different paths. In the last few years, I have begun to explore my Jewish roots, something that happens to many individuals as they get older. It is an exciting journey. My poem 'Alibaug,' is the first poem I wrote that reflects my Jewish identity. Legend has it that the first Jews were shipwrecked off the coast of the Konkan, and the survivors went on to live in the neighbouring villages. To quote from the poem:

I miss Alibaug  
The flickering lanterns, sleeping on mats, eating from \**thalis*  
I miss Alibaug  
The hushed whispers between cousins  
I don't know when I can return  
To the land of my ancestors  
The land of the *Shanwartelis*, the Oil pressers,  
I yearn for the unsullied rustic scenes,  
The dotted fields of cows and the music of their bells  
The hush of the chickens settling down for the night,  
And I don't know where the fish sleep  
In the folds of the waves  
Or in the folds of my memory.

I have several others with Jewish themes, one that has particular significance for me. It is currently in publication. In boarding school, I was teased about 'killing Christ', and wrote a poem called 'The Crucifixion,' in which I protested that I wasn't there when it happened, and in High School, I was called Shylock, though I was nothing like him. The nickname came out of the fact that we were studying Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Both times, I was the only Jewish student in my class. These characters are just stereotypes, and as children mature, they begin to see beyond such unconscious prejudices.

Q. We realise that you are multilingual and have taught English, French and Spanish in your teaching career. Do you feel that your poetry partakes of, and benefits from your multilingualism?

**A. Yes, definitely, my poetry both partakes of, and benefits from, my multilingualism. I love reading Pablo Neruda and other poets in Spanish, and I do translate some of my own poems into French and Spanish, though I am conscious of the need to do this more consistently.**

I have begun reading poetry in Marathi, especially the poetry of the well-known poet Shanta Shelke, with whom I had the privilege of working with in my first job at a college in Bombay (now, Mumbai). Marathi is the language we spoke at home, along with English. I love Hindi too, a love of that language was nurtured in me by a maternal aunt, who was a wonderful Hindi teacher. I wanted to major in English and Hindi in college, but that option was not available to me, so I took French, which I loved equally. My favourite subjects to teach in Canada were French and Spanish, both language and culture, to all levels of children. My belief is that poetry that is written in one's native language is more natural, in its ability to be powerfully expressive as it utilises the natural idiom of one's identity. But with the myriad influences of so many languages, I often wonder 'What language do I think in? What language do I dream in?'

Q. A large number of critics opine that Indian English Poetry started with your father. What do you think about it?

**A. This has been a widely acknowledged fact, and I am humbled and proud to be the daughter of a man who dedicated his life to Poetry, and to tirelessly mentoring so many younger poets and writers. He certainly was a foundational figure in this genre of writing, and has been called 'The Father of Modern Indian Verse in English.' Often times, he has been called 'The Big Daddy of Indian-English Poetry.' Whenever I visited him at the P.E.N. office, there was a crowd of young writers clamouring for his attention and his advice, and I watched him poring over many of their manuscripts, late into the night, after a whole day of teaching, and his own writing. It was rough on my mother and us children. I get many messages about my father's contribution to the shaping of their poetry, and others speak of how his poems got them started on their own poetic journey. He especially paid great attention to detail, going so far as to advise poets on punctuation (commas and full-stops!) to achieve maximum impact in conveying meaning. He had a painstakingly incisive writing style. He was also the first to make the ordinary, the subjects of his poetry. Many writers followed suit. My husband recalls how, as a young man in 1975, he came across an article written by him for 'Freedom First' and marvelled at how an Indian writer, writing in English, could express himself so beautifully, with economy in words, and hold the reader's attention. The critic Bruce King was foremost among several other critics, who paid tributes to my father as a pioneer and champion of Indian English Poetry.**

I am fiercely protective of his reputation as the Father of Modern Indian Verse in English, because I personally witnessed first-hand his contribution to the field of poets writing in this genre of Poetry. He put the needs of others before his own, often, actually always, setting aside the needs of his own family. It concerns me deeply when well established poets make him just a footnote in their interviews, or give him a passing

reference, or express irritation about the significant input he had in giving them a head start in their poetic journeys of success. Often, he even edited huge manuscripts completed unrelated to Poetry, charging nothing for his services. He was never interested in money or material things. It was complete dedication to writing and Literature. Anything I say on this subject will fall short in describing his historic role. *The Journal of South Asian Literature* of the University of Chicago dedicated an issue to my father, Nissim Ezekiel, in 1976. It is available to read online. I am in the process of writing a poem ('Waiting for Daddy') about my sentiments on the subject of his complete dedication to mentoring students, writers and poets. The poem begins:

Daddy, the poets have gone home now  
They have taken their commas and full stops with them  
You must be hungry now, daddy  
Let's have lunch together,  
I have brought along my poem  
But it can wait  
I can wait.  
Eat slowly, take your time, enjoy your meal  
Let's laugh together  
At those silly 'knock knock' jokes  
You love to tell,  
Don't worry about the clever student  
Who will be waiting in the wings  
To ask you questions about your life  
And then ask others, who with masks of love  
Rob a man of his private suffering  
To indulge a world with its love of sensationalism.  
You took it to the grave  
We were splashed with the mud  
And they with false fame,  
How little it mattered to them,  
They who chose ignorance  
Of how we waited for you  
With our poems and our love  
And how it broke our hearts...

Q. How do you read your father as a poet?

A. A copy of his *Collected Poems* is always on the desk, beside me, as I write. Among my father's poems, my favourite is 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher.' I read his poems daily, almost like a Devotional.

I have to say I greatly love, respect, and admire him as a poet, his honesty, rawness and vulnerability, his constant struggle for identity, his humanism, his love of Nature and his search for the truth, his fearless admission of his flaws and his loneliness and the alienation that sometimes he sometimes felt from himself. I love that he was deeply rooted in his faith

in God and mankind, without being maudlin or overtly religious, and had his roots firmly in India, and especially his love for the city of Bombay. In fact, he has often been called 'The Poet of Bombay.' It is easy to read his poetry and identify with so much of it, though it is profound, and contains layers of complex thought, simultaneously. I turn to his Poetry for peace, for inspiration, for the economy and precision with which he uses his words, and for his depth of thought. I love that he made ordinary things the subjects of his poetry, and it has been said that he was one of the first poets to do so. He is a strong influence in my writing, and when I read my poems out to my husband, who is my best critic, and incidentally is a good writer himself, he often says, 'you sound like daddy.' I hear echoes of his voice in my poetry, though I have no illusions that I'll ever be a poet of his stature. I have a poem about that, again awaiting publication. What I will say though, is that though I have big shoes to fill (I have a brief poem titled 'Big Shoes to Fill'), I am walking with my father, every step of the way. I feel his loss palpably and struggle with the fact that Alzheimer's disease ravaged his brilliant mind in his last years. He revised every poem meticulously, and was dedicated to his craft, and to promoting poetry in India. He had a strong work ethic and was a voracious reader. My father, Nissim Ezekiel, was a versatile poet and as a family, we were very excited when he won the Sahitya Academy award in 1983, and the Padma Shri award in 1988. He was a philanthropist at heart, and immediately donated the prize money from the Sahitya Academy award to charity. He also worked in an honorary capacity for the AJDC (the American Joint Distribution Centre), which helped less advantaged and poor Jews with their education. His work At the PEN India was also carried out in an honorary capacity.

Q. Who were your father's favourite Indian poets?

A. I am not absolutely certain about his favourite Indian poets. I never discussed it with him, but he must have read poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Toru Dutt, Mirza Ghalib, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, T.K. Doraiaswamy and others. I think he must definitely have read Kabir, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and Amrita Pritam. Of course, he read the Poetry of all his contemporaries, and even published, and helped publish their Poetry.

Q. Do you remember the first volume of *Quest* edited by your father? Who were the poets featured?

A. I was too young to remember the first volume of *Quest*, though I knew my father was its first editor. The thing is I had 'the lived life' with my father. The analysis of his poetry and other writing was a subject for the scholars and the critics. It was founded in 1954 and some of the writers and poets featured were: [Nirad Chaudhuri](#), [Dilip Chitre](#), [Allen Ginsberg](#), [Jyotirmoy Datta](#), [Mujibur Rehman](#), [Agha Shahid Ali](#), [Jayanta Mahapatra](#), [Dom Moraes](#), [Ashis Nandy](#), [Gauri Deshpande](#), [Adil Jussawalla](#), [Mahapatra](#), [A.K. Ramanujan](#), [Saleem Peeradina](#), [Arun Kolatkar](#), [Dilip Chitre](#), [Keki Daruwalla](#), [Anita Desai](#), [Kiran Nagarkar](#) and [Abraham Eraly](#).

Q. You have been a witness to the formation of the canon of Indian English Poetry. What's your take on it?

**A. There was clearly a phalanx of poets who formed the canon of Indian English Poetry. I won't name them all here, but it seems to me that the heights they reached, still set the standard for excellence in Poetry writing. (Of course, I feel that it must not become a rigid, unbending criterion, because poetry evolves over time and will reflect the mores of societal changes.)**

I remember when I was very young and when my father was writing his poetry, it was P. Lal, who was himself a poet and an essayist, who gave a platform to Indian writers writing in English. In the 1950's, he founded the Writer's Workshop. I still have a memory, as a young girl, of the beautifully designed cloth-bound covers with Indian motifs, of the books of Poetry that were published by him. Because they were attractive, they drew you to read them and one was sure the contents must be excellent. (Talk about judging a book by its cover!). P. Lal published writers like Pritish Nandy and Sasthi Brata, and later, Dom Moraes and my father, Nissim Ezekiel. Any article I read about him reports that it was Nissim Ezekiel who 'created a voice and place for Indian poets writing in English and championed their work'. My father also published a book of poetry by a fellow poet, and helped some struggling Poetry magazines to survive, by financing them himself. I remember the conversations in my home about these undertakings, because he had a family to support, and a Professor's salary does not really allow for business forays. My father's contemporaries were poets in India, like [Jayanta Mahapatra](#), [Gieve Patel](#), [A. K. Ramanujan](#), [Arun Kolatkar](#), [Dilip Chitre](#), [Arvind Krishna Mehrotra](#), [Eunice De Souza](#), [Kersi Katrak](#), [P. Lal](#) and [Kamala Das](#), among others.

Q. Cricket and poetry, between the 1950s and 70s, were Bombay-centered. Do you recall those days?

**A. Yes, I do!! It was an exciting time and I recall the late 60s especially. During my school final exams, West Indies were playing India. I was glued to the radio, listening to the cricket commentary, rather than studying for the all-important ISC exams. That caused a lot of problems with my mother who despaired of getting me away from the radio. To her relief, I did well.**

Truth be told, I wish I could tell you that, as a teenager in college in the 70s, I found great joy in the written (poetic) word. Instead, I found joy in the poetry of young love – its ecstasies and tragedies, changing every few months!!! I found joy in music, in friends, in eating out, in choirs, in rock bands and had memorized every song of the Beatles and the Mamas and the Papas and completed both my Bachelor's and Master's Degrees by 1975.

Q. Who were the other important poets apart from your father at that time? Was there any significant event you can remember and would like to share with us?

**A. The other important poets writing during my father's time were A.K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes, Gieve Patel, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Adil Jussawalla, Kersi Katrak, P. Lal, Dilip Chitre, and others.**

I recall a time when I was doing the exams for my Bachelor's degree in English Literature, and there were two exams to write, in a day, with a short gap between. It was a time when I experienced severe personal stress, and I wanted to give up. The Bombay heat was excessive, and the material to be studied was vast. I had burned the midnight oil often,

and was exhausted physically. My father had a mantra for all such times in life. It was, ‘if you are tired, don’t quit, take a little rest and come back to it later, once you have rested.’ He understood my fatigue, and told me that fellow poet, Kamala Das, had given him the key to her house, and as she would not be home at the time, I could go there, have my lunch and get refreshed. He would walk me back to the examination Centre, a short distance away, to write my next exam. On every occasion, when I wanted to give up, whether it was a challenging job, or something else, he saw me through with his amazingly positive attitude. That was the only time he took away from others who clamoured for his attention.

Q. Your poems, we have observed, offer a grand wealth of nature imagery. Could you tell us about the images that attract you and how you put them to poetic use?

A. I love Nature. It is a calming, healing force for me. The power of, and beauty in Nature is unparalleled. I write about Nature, naturally. The images in my poems are pictures of what I see, painted in words. I write about nature as I see it. I wish I were an artist. I would spend hours depicting the spectacular scenes I witness. I’ve done some sketches, sitting on my back patio, and I signed them, ‘The Imperfect Artist.’ Here, where I live, I am surrounded by Nature. When I come downstairs in the morning to drink my first cup of chai, the scene that greets me is uplifting. I see the amazingly poetic clouds in a sky of changing colors, beautiful trees from the three kitchen windows, and the greenness of the freshly-mown lawn. My neighbour had planted five spruce trees in his backyard, and they have grown tall and stately now. They seem to speak to me. The neighbour across the alley has a large beautiful tree with some kind of red berries too, and we have two cherry trees, and an apple tree that we planted last year. It was a gift from my family for Mother’s Day. Watching the robins bathing in the bird baths, the sparrows sitting in a line on the fence, ‘the lilacs bending low over the fence,’ and the colourful flowers in the front and back garden beds, the garden which my husband has lovingly planted (he’s the one with the green thumb, my job is to water and weed), attracting the butterflies and some bees, soothes my soul. The squirrels chasing each other on the fence are fun to observe. We have winter six months of the year here, and summers are short. Some people find winter beautiful. I find it challenging, though I don’t deny the beauty of the snow-capped mountains which can be seen in the distance, if you take a short walk and brave the slippery sidewalks.

I inherited the love of Nature from my father. Our first rented home, a ground floor flat, had a large garden which the landlord zealously maintained, was chosen by my father himself. He always said he wanted to be buried in it. The flat was also close to the sea. We took regular walks with friends after school, and on Sundays with our family.

My father loved the sea breeze  
He wanted to be buried in the garden  
In our home by the sea  
So he could feel the breeze on him  
Under the earth,  
He would be thankful for the coolness.

(Lines from my poem ‘The Many Things my Father Loved’, published in the May-June issue of *Muse India*).



**My poem ‘Family Sunday’, published in my first book of Poetry, describes this event. Father saw beauty in everything, a tiny blade of grass blowing in the wind, would be beautiful to him. As a young girl, I had to bend down real low to see its physical form, let alone appreciate its beauty. But now, on my walks, when I come across a blade of grass waving in the breeze, it presents itself to me with magical beauty, and I show it to my daughter, who looks puzzled! We have come full circle!**

Q. How have your roots in India and your routes that have taken you to different parts of the globe affected your work?

**A. India is my birthplace, but the love of the country and Bombay (it is still difficult for me to say Mumbai), the city of my birth, flows very strongly in my veins. It is my home, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually, and it’s not mere nostalgia. It goes way deeper than that.**

**Tell Me If You Know Where Home Is**

*‘All the lonely people, where do they all belong?’*

*Eleanor Rigby: The Beatles*

**I’ve never really left home**

**The place is always in my head, becoming as a noisy child’s rattle,**

**If I shake my head from side to side**

**As Indians do back home, it still doesn’t help,**

**My ancestors often said ‘Everything will be alright in the end**

**And if it’s not alright, it’s not the end’**

**I can’t get away from the clamour of Indian sayings ...**

**(Lines from my poem, published in the May-June issue of *Muse India*)**

To describe my rootedness in India with a metaphor: the pine tree on my front lawn sends its roots so deep into the flower beds, making the soil too acidic for growing flowers. No matter how many of the roots we dig out, when we prepare the soil for planting, they stubbornly entrench themselves and seem to multiply! Similarly, my roots are too deeply entrenched and I can’t seem to uproot myself, though physically I have done that. However, home to me is also where my family is.

I took a year’s sabbatical to pursue a Master’s Degree in Education at the Oxford Brookes University in England, and missed our home in the International School where I taught English, in the foothills of the Himalayas. I took comfort in the fact that we were going to return. But, now that we’ve immigrated to Canada, how do we return? That comfort of the assurance of return does not exist.

Indians have migrated to every part of the globe, and with this diaspora, Indian English poetry has reached the far corners of the world. The Poetry that comes from diaspora Indians can be powerful in the context of memories, and the aching yearning for their homeland that they evoke in their writing. It is not mere nostalgia, as some like to think. They have lived in both places, and are richer for the experience. To provide an example, I am familiar with the poet Imtiaz Dharker, whom I knew as a young girl, since she was among the poets who formed part of the circle of poets with my father. My father himself lived for many years in

England, and his first book of poems, *A Time to Change*, was published there. His Poetry was definitely enriched by his experiences there, and his subsequent travels to myriad countries where he was invited to read his poetry and also as Writer in Residence and Visiting Professor. He always returned to India, and felt that if one went abroad to settle, one would be lost. My own experience confirms this as a fact, although I migrated for different reasons. Turning back was considered, but that posed many challenges, and did not happen. Reflections in hindsight are useful, only in so far as they help you move forward, and not leave you wallowing in regret. That would definitely be counterproductive. My father and I had many discussions about career paths. Again, I took that route for family reasons. One writer I admire is the novelist Jhumpa Lahiri. The richness of cross cultural experiences that find a voice in someone like her, is enriching. Diaspora writers carry two homes (or more!).

To quote again some lines from my recently published poem, 'Tell me if you know where Home is.'

I've never really left home  
The place is always in my head  
There are no cockroaches here, though not the reason for leaving  
But I heard they are beginning to come to my city  
Perhaps then I will feel at home,  
We are becoming a bee city too, I can now plant flowers  
That will bring butterflies, I chased them as a child, in my home garden.

Still, if the cockroaches come, they will increase my homesickness  
I had a fear of lizards too, been no sightings here yet  
Home is anywhere the heart is, as the saying goes  
With or without lizards and cockroaches,  
Back home the bees are happy.

Q. What are the themes that you are currently writing about? Tell us something about your work at present.

A. At present, I have been writing some Zen Poetry. These poems are perhaps not in strictly Zen format, but more in theme. They are intended to be peaceful and contemplative in nature. In addition, I continue to work on poems that I began writing, but didn't quite finish for various reasons. One poem is called 'The Poet's Breath', and describes how I was named. I enjoy writing poems about the Art of Poetry, and have written quite a few based on that theme. I think all poets write poems on this theme, at some point in their poetic career. I have recently written some Blessings, and some Pandemic Poetry, one of which, 'A Psalm of Hope', has been published. I am in the process of preparing a talk entitled 'Authenticity and Simplicity' in the writing of Poetry for college students in Jamshedpur, in India, which I have been invited to give, and an article about my father, for a newsletter put out by the International Organization of the Bene-Israel Jewish community, to which I belong. I was invited to do a Zoom presentation on my father by the Indian Jewish Heritage Centre, and the Cochin Jewish Heritage Centre in mid-May. The presentation was very well received. I write as I experience different events, and emotions related to those events, or scenes in

**Nature I see unfolding around me. I live close to a lake and a Nature reserve, and this affords me much pleasure and peace, in addition to superb flora and fauna. I write anecdotal poetry and all my poems tell a story. I have written a brief memoir of growing up Jewish in Bombay, seventeen pages to date, with the promise of more!**

Q. Can the poets change society for good?

**A. I'm going to answer this question with personal examples. But, I would like to preface my comments by asserting my faith in the belief that Poetry is good for the soul, and when the souls of human beings are touched and healed, soothed or moved, Poetry has done its work. I place emphasis on the inner life, and at the risk of sounding clichéd, I'll say that when the souls of people change, society changes. 'Poetry is soul food'. Nature is pure poetry, yet also when poets write about Nature, they can make us see aspects of it we may not previously have been aware of. We become conscious of the beauty around us and the value of caring for our environment. Children are taught to appreciate Nature through Poetry, and to write their own in response to things they love about Nature.**

**Poetry addresses the inner life. When I get messages from people who have read my Poetry, and respond to it by telling me that they not only enjoyed or 'loved' the poem, but could identify and relate with it in terms of situations they have been in, or that it helped them see something differently, or communicated emotions to them that they have been feeling, but have been unable to express, or brought about change in their way of thinking about certain ideas, I know that I have made a 'change for good,' in my own small way. Poetry is therapeutic and definitely helps you to understand yourself and other people. There are poems written for different purposes, such as to bring about social change, poetry which influences social and political thought. For example, with the issue of racism that has resurfaced with the recent death of George Floyd, the poetry of protest is a powerful tool to not just express anger, but to bring about social change.**

**As mentioned earlier, Poetry is very important for children. It helps them learn to use and love words to crystalize their thoughts and feelings. It helps them verbalise ideas and learn communication skills, so vital for their development. Children sometimes surprise us by writing the best Poetry, unsullied by filters or the need to impress. They see the world with fresh eyes, and with wonderful innocence. I love reading Poetry by children and also Poetry written for children. Several months ago, I got a message, a sort of confession from one of my students in an Introduction to Poetry course I was teaching at an international school. She apologised for passing a note to another student in the class in which she said, 'This is so boring.' She went on to say that she now writes Poetry, and said she feels that 'she must thank me because she supposes I must have had something to do with it.' That message gave me joy and great hope for the future of Poetry.**

Q. How, in your opinion, has the proliferation of online platforms given a boost to Poetry?

**A. Undeniably, yes. At least in terms of the amount of content. The democratisation which the internet has brought about gives voice to countless people who we would otherwise have never heard. It is not that people, in pre-social media times, did not have a love of poetry, or didn't write poems. They did. But their voice was never heard or was restricted by**

boundaries, never able to find publishers, or have something published which soon receded into the shadows, never found again or discovered accidentally. To quote those haunting lines from Thomas Gray's, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*...

*Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.*

Who knows how many countless Shakespeares, or Kabirs, have gone on into obscurity, their works never to see the light of day? Perhaps, their works are treasured by immediate family, a loved one, but since unseen, never the general public. Today, we have a flood of poetry on numerous online sites. And variations in poetry. And people pushing boundaries in the way they interpret what poetry is. The imagery in the way words are arranged on a page, art, music and photography which add depth to plain words and carve their message indelibly on the reader's mind, add new paradigms of what we must now consider poetry. And each successive evolution becomes a welcome jolt!

Still, proliferation brings with it the enduring caution for 'buyer beware'! The mediocre jostle with the pure for attention and '*The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.*' Easily available content quantity, does not always mean quality. Sometimes one feels while reading that publishing online becomes a race to the bottom with regard to quality. Poets may feel pressured with social media to publish more and more with quantity becoming the new currency of success. Acolytes indulge in flowery, excessive praise, inappropriate and completely out-of-proportion to the value of a poem. I too use online platforms, and I am conscious of the need to guard against the temptation to rush into print.

Q. How do you look upon the travel of Indian English Poetry all these years?

A. As a child and well into my twenties, I recall that being 'good' at English Poetry meant being well-versed in the poetry of England and the masters of American poetry. I don't think much has changed in that regard. Our curricula in School and University did not really include a body of Indian English verse, not in great depth anyway. Maybe the stray poem from Tagore and a passing mention of Sarojini Naidu. And, we as Indians, remain resolutely westward-looking in our quest for excellence in English Poetry. Not that there's anything wrong with looking to the West ... unless we are willing to concede that the downside of future generations of Indians doing the same and indulging in the same denial of Indian voices as worthy enough to be studied. If Rudyard Kipling, who is an Englishman, can be studied in India for his poems, so rooted in Indian culture, why not Indian poets?

My father's poem 'Night of the Scorpion' was included in school and college textbooks in India and overseas and I observe that there is a trend toward some colleges including Indian poets in their syllabi.

What I see happening with Indian poetry is our Indian poets realising that they do have their own voice. And it needn't be a clone of either England or Ireland or Wales or Scotland or America or Australia. We have Indian poets from myriad cultures, backgrounds, religions,

native tongues in India and in diaspora-settled regions of the World who have voices in poetry, speaking in the one language all of them can understand (English). They have moved away from themes earlier thought to be real 'poetry' and opt instead for the poetry of their lived experiences. We have the great Rabindranath Tagore to look up to, to find inspiration in the literature, song and art of our own linguistic heritage and then express it in English. I see the same Indianness in my father's poetry, a refusal to be flowery, to dabble in fantastical imagery but instead write about the ordinary, the mundane – all deeply sourced in his lived, Indian experience.

Q. Who are the poets from India and abroad whose work has motivated and influenced your writing?

A. The poets who have influenced and motivated me from abroad are numerous and I mention them in no particular order: Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, D. H. Lawrence, Yeats, Wordsworth, Robert Browning, Keats, W. H. Auden, Maya Angelou, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Carlos Williams, Edgar Allen Poe, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, Paul Verlaine, the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, and my contemporary, the American poet Edward Hirsch, to name a few. Since I studied English and American Literature for my Bachelor's and Master's Degrees, I grew to love many of the poets who have a significant place in the history of the literature of their countries.

The poets from India are: Nissim Ezekiel, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, the Marathi poet Shanta Shelke, Ruskin Bond, and a few others. I am definitely making it a goal to try and read more Indian Poetry, particularly the poets that write in Marathi and Hindi, since I speak, read and write both these languages. The poets that write in the vernacular language are simply outstanding. Some of the languages I am not familiar with, I have to read in translation.

I must add a special note about the amazing poet Ruskin Bond who was a fellow resident of Mussoorie, in the Northern Indian State of Uttar Pradesh. From 1982 to 1998, I taught in the English department of the Woodstock International School. I was also a Career Counsellor for five years, after a sabbatical year at the Oxford Brookes University, in Oxford England, where I obtained a Master's degree in Education. Ruskin Bond, lived just a short distance away and we often met him on his walks in the local bazaar. On her sixth birthday, he granted a special interview to my daughter and autographed one of his books for her. She was absolutely delighted, of course!

Another amazing poet with whom my paths crossed, was Shanta Shelke, the well-known Marathi poet. On completion of my Master's Degree from The University of Bombay, I got a job at a college where she was on the faculty. It was pure magic when she recited her poems to us on occasion.

And the poet Nissim Ezekiel was an eloquent speaker, and could charm an audience with the way he recited his poems. I attended most of the readings, if not all, and was so proud to call him my father.

Q. You also write short fiction. So, how do you build bridges between the two genres?

**A. I mostly write stories about my father. They revolve around special memories of him, I had growing up, the things he said and did, and the things he taught me. One entitled ‘Walt Whitman and the Professor’ was published by *The Bombay Review*, a couple of issues ago. They would not strictly be classified as short fiction, but as Nonfiction. I hope to publish a collection of these someday, again to preserve his legacy for my children and grandchildren. I have written one or two short stories, realistic fiction, like the one entitled ‘Holi and Mary’s Boy Child’.**

**I think both Poetry and Fiction, or Nonfiction are forms of writing and do not necessarily clash with one another. I don’t feel a tension there. But, I best express myself through Poetry. It is a compact and condensed form of writing, though I have written longer poems as well. If I want to tell stories about the ‘colourful and larger-than-life character’ that my father was, I need the expansiveness that is afforded by prose writing. I have written some pieces about school memories, and other subjects such as Happiness, and on the subject of Arranged Marriage. I was once on a panel discussion on this subject on All India Radio, Bombay.**

**Q. What can be the role of a poet in the new normal times?**

**A. I’m certain that by now, most people are familiar with Kitty O’ Meara’s poem that went viral, and I’d like to begin with a few lines from the poem, which speak to the role of the poet in the new normal times. The poem starts with the activities we have all been almost forced into doing:**

**And people stayed home  
and read books and listened  
and rested and exercised  
and made art and played  
and learned new ways of being  
and stopped  
and listened deeper...**

**The last stanza answers the question more specifically:**

**and when the danger ended  
and people found each other  
grieved for the dead people  
and they made new choices  
and dreamed of new visions  
and created new ways of life  
and healed the earth completely  
just as they were healed themselves.**

**I myself have written poems and personal reflections, and my poem, ‘A Psalm of Hope’, believes that if you have been granted the gift of life, as in a new day, that there is hope. That**

is the role of the poet, to provide hope to himself or herself, and others. To quote a stanza from my published poem:

**The world will look different  
If you can spend a day  
Without fearful utterances of the words  
Virus, Pandemic, Lockdown,  
Not to deny their existence  
But render them voiceless and faceless  
For even a moment, so time may not pass you by.**

If my father were alive at this time, he would be reminding us about the resilience of the human spirit. I grew up with this teaching, and it has helped me tremendously in these trying and challenging times. In my home, all of us have made a conscious decision, not just to avoid mindlessly listening to depressing news, but to take each day a step at a time, and move forward, so as not to lose time, as my poem says. The virus is relegated to the background, though it forms the backdrop to our lives. It is a time for poets to provide hope, while recognizing suffering and death, caused by the Pandemic. It is a good time to be reminded to 'Be still.' I have been making a small list for myself about, 'The Things that I knew before the Pandemic, and the Things I learned from the New Normal.' The profusion of Poetry readings online, are testimony to the role poets play in bringing hope, cheer and goodwill to the world. I myself have participated in these readings. Poets have always influenced society, not simply by holding up a mirror to it, but by showing us how we can 'improve our reflections.' Those last words in quotation marks are mine, and affirm my faith in poets.

Q. Is there a poem which reflects you? Can you please share this with us?

A. There are so many poems that reflect me ... in fact all my poems are a reflection of me, so this is a tough choice. I'm sharing this particular one, since many of poems are about my father. He is mentioned either indirectly in them, or the poem is about him. I am still struggling with the loss of my father. I just don't seem to stop grieving for him. I had moved to another country, when I got the news that he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1998. It was a devastating blow. My brother told me that it was better for me that I remembered him as he was before. He said he would not give me any news about him, as I was too far away. I last saw him in 1997. The poem Loss is a Tandem poem, which means it is a poem written alongside one of my Father's poems. It is a genre I have created, where I draw inspiration from a poem of his, kind of like a parallel poem, if you will. However, the subject, the imagery, and themes are my own.

**Loss**

**Kavita Ezekiel Mendonca**

*Tandem Poem to accompany Poster poem 1 by Nissim Ezekiel  
(My father talked too loudly.... but just before he died)  
Dedicated to my father who sadly passed away from Alzheimer's in 2004*

**My father could not talk to me  
Before he died  
Could not reach me in a distant land  
Twinned in spirit, separated by geography,  
I heard he remembered me  
Said he could never forget me  
Memory without a memory  
Not able to remember  
Not able to forget  
Trapped in a maze of loss.  
Two losses  
The greater loss is mine**

**Thankfully,**

**He could not remember  
What he had lost.**

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Q. Thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity of interviewing you. We wish you rich creativity ahead and look forward to engaging with your work in future.

**A. Thank you for the opportunity of sharing my thoughts and ideas with you.**

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\* The term 'Bene-Israel' refers to the largest of the three Jewish communities in India (the other two are Cochin and Baghdadi Jews). According to legend, they descended from '7 couples' who were the remnants of a shipwreck near the village of Navgaon, on the Konkan coast in India, near Mumbai. Because of the centrality of the Prophet Elijah in their oral traditions, their ancestors may have lived in the time of Elijah in Israel and their arrival in India dates anywhere between the 8th century BCE and 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. They became assimilated in the coastal communities, taking up farming, carpentry and mainly, oil pressing. Because they observed the Jewish Sabbath, they came to be known as 'Shaniwar Telis' or 'Saturday Oil Pressers'. They were fair-complexioned, with light eyes and wavy hair.



The distinctive experience of Jews in India was that they were held in high esteem and never faced discrimination. The languages spoken at home are usually Marathi alongside English. Prayers are said in Hebrew. In the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, many Bene Israel moved to Bombay (Mumbai), Ahmedabad, Karachi and Calcutta and distinguished themselves in many fields such as Education, Law and the Armed Forces, including the British Army's 'Native Forces', and its successor, the Indian Army. Today, the Bene Israel number about 5000 in India and 40,000 in Israel, after an exodus of Jews from India in the 1950-60s.

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*Indian American Writers* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2019) and a collection of poems, *Moon in my Teacup* (Kolkata: Writer's Workshop, 2019). Fond of books, plants, music, good conversation and the idea that the world can become a better place through dialogue, Basudhara can be reached at [basudhara.roy@gmail.com](mailto:basudhara.roy@gmail.com).

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