

## Madhuri Vijay speaks with Ulka Anjaria

### Transcript

#### **Aarthi Vadde**

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a new podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies. I'm one of your hosts Aarthi Vadde. John Plotz is my co-host and you'll be hearing from him in other episodes.

If this is your first time tuning in, you're probably wondering what this podcast is all about. Well, Novel Dialogue invites novelists and a literary critic to talk about novels from every angle: how we read them, write them, publish them, and remember them.

We hope to bring you, our listeners, lively sophisticated dialogues that dissect the art of novel writing and consider the influence of characters, plots, and stories on how we think about our world. If you like what you hear please subscribe to Novel Dialogue on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.

It is a great pleasure to welcome critic Ulka Anjaria and novelist Madhuri Vijay to the show today. Ulka is professor of English at Brandeis University and the author of a terrific recent book called *Reading India Now*, all about contemporary Indian fiction and pop culture.

Madhuri has written one of the most absorbing novels I have read in a long time. It is called *The Far Field* and it's amazingly accomplished given that it is unbelievably a first novel. It follows a young woman Shalini, traveling from Bangalore to Kashmir in the wake of her mother's death and slowly learning about the sectarian conflicts in Kashmir by spending time with a series of memorable hosts. Madhuri won the prestigious JCB Prize for literature for this novel and is joining us today from Hawaii, which gives me two very different yet equally compelling reasons to be jealous of her.

OK, with that said, I hand the virtual mic over to Ulka.

#### **Ulka Anjaria**

Thank you so much, Aarthi and thank you Madhuri for joining us today. It's really a pleasure to have you. I read *The Far Field* a few months ago during my pandemic reading spurt and just loved it really from the first page. I just found it so refreshing, something really different coming out of India and I'm teaching a class on the Indian novel next semester, so I immediately like scrapped the syllabus I had, put your novel first, and actually first I think significantly because as a kind of framing for the whole class and some of the questions I want the students to answer so I'm incredibly honored that you accepted our invitation to join us here today and I'm looking forward to our conversation.

I think you're going to begin by reading a short passage from the novel.

## Madhuri Vijay

Yes, that's right, but first I'd like to say thank you so much, Ulka and Aarthi for inviting me on this podcast. It's a rare opportunity as you said for writers to talk to the people who talk about books and I'm very grateful to be here. And I also want to apologize in advance to your students for next semester. [Laughs] Anyway, well thank you. Thank you both. So I'm just going to read the first section of *The Far Field*.

"I am 30 years old and that is nothing. I know what this sounds like and I hesitate to begin with something so obvious, but let me say it anyway at the risk of sounding naive. And let it stand alongside this. 6 years ago, a man I knew vanished from his home in the mountains. He vanished in part because of me, because of certain things, I said, but also things I did not have until now. The courage to say. So you see, there is nothing to be gained by pretending to a wisdom I do not possess. What I am. What I was. And what I have done. All of these will become clear soon enough.

"This country, already ancient when I was born in 1982, has changed every instant I've been alive. Titanic events have ripped it apart year after year, each time rearranging it along slightly different scenes and I have been touched by none of it. Prime ministers assassinated. Peasant guerillas, waging war in emerald jungles, fields cracking under the iron heel of a drought, nuclear bombs cratering the wide desert floor. Lethal gases blasting from pipes and into 10,000 lungs. Mobs crashing against mobs and always coming away bloody. Consider this. Even now, at this very moment, there are people huddled in a room somewhere waiting to die. This is what I have told myself for the last six years each time I have had the urge to speak. It will make no difference in the end.

"But lately the urge has turned into something else, something with sharper edges, which sticks under the ribs and makes it dangerous to breathe. So let me be clear here at the start. If I do speak, if I do tell what happened six years ago in that village in the mountains, a village so small, it appears only on military maps, it will not be for reasons of nobility. The chance for nobility is over. Even this story or confession or whatever it turns out to be is too late."

## UA

Wow, thank you so much. That's such a great it's such a great opening and I think sets the stage for some of the issues that I think this book is very much about. I mean, it's a mystery like when you open that you know, there's things that we don't know about the character. It's also a political novel, which you allude to in this indirect way, and as the reader would read a few paragraphs more find out that it's novel about a woman and her fraught relationship with her mother, so I was interested in all of these three kind of themes and styles. Is there in terms of political novel, or kind of a personal novel is there is there one that you felt was more important when you were writing or do you feel like the whole point is the intertwining of these different strands?

## MV

Exactly that. I felt the whole point was the intertwining and that any attempt to disentangle them would be false and a kind of violence. It is always struck me as an extraordinary thing that we can be both so...such private personal intimate creatures while at the same time you know dealing with, and dealing with, and interacting with and learning about huge geopolitical events.

**UA**

The book is set partly in Kashmir and it's very much set in the middle of political events happening regarding the occupation. I mean, I know you're asked this a lot in interviews, is this a novel about the political situation and what is your novel? How is your novel a political novel? And I feel like in the past interviews you said a little bit you resisted a little bit that overtaking of your novel just by this kind of political question. Why is that the case and can you speak to that a little bit more?

**MV**

Yeah, I think it's I think it would be a mistake to, just as I think it would be a mistake to reduce the novel any novel to a purely political commentary, I think it would be a mistake to reduce the character that I'm writing about and often you know, people when people ask me about the novel, they particularly ask me about her, this woman Shalini, who travels from Bangalore to Kashmir in search of this man and gets caught up in all of these political currents. She is often termed as a sort of a symbol of privilege, a symbol of naivete, a symbol of being sheltered and a symbol of ignorance and she is all of those things. But I think it would be an incredible disservice to forget that she is also a person, well character in this case. That she that she is also a private individual who has certain deprivations in her past, who has certain joys and sorrows and losses and all the myriad things that make us who we are. And I notice this more and more even in the way that we talk about people today, especially having gone through, you know, having watched the US election play out the way it did, it was interesting that people so often turn you know, talked about in terms of their political affiliations their race their gender and then we sort of expected to act in a way that conformed with the expectations one has of that political bloc. Whereas of course, each of those people is a person and it's in some way therefore they are unknowable. And that's why I push back against Shalini being termed just of you know an upper class you know woman with a certain amount of money and a certain you know defined in terms of her geographic origin. She is all of those things, yes, but there is also something about her that is unknowable and mysterious, and therefore I think somewhat sacred and it's the same thing that exists in all of us and so my resistance to the novel as a sort of political commentary is, rises in part because of that, because I think it also flattens the human beings involved.

**AV**

Can I jump in on that question?

**MV**

Yeah.

**AV**

So struck by the way you had this little split between person and character. And I think too that the reason, people love novels is because you relate to characters as though they are people you know, and critics sometimes try to help students or readers understand all the artwork that goes into making a character feel like a person, but it sounds like in your mind when you're thinking about Shalini, she, is she a person first and a character second, or how does that work for a novelist who has to sort of craft the thing that they then forget is a craft almost and becomes like another person?

**MV**

That's a good question. I think I, I'm not entirely sure. I think that it, you do tend to forget that there is a difference between the person and the character and certainly when I was writing, you know they felt very real to me. You know it's funny. I began writing this novel, 7-8 years ago now. And at that time, the conversation about quote unquote "privilege" had not arrived at the point where it is right now and so I wasn't, I didn't think of that word, even and with all its connotations. I wasn't thinking of her as quote unquote "a privileged person." I was. So. Yes, I mean? I'm answering this very badly, but I think now when we read a book like the one I wrote we tend to immediately use that lens of privilege and savior narratives and all of that. We have all these you know little phrases that we can immediately tag onto it. But at the time I was writing, I simply thought about how it was possible that you could have two people on different sides of the country living such extraordinarily different lives and what on earth would happen if you just brought them into the same room with one another. I was thinking of it purely in terms of human interaction and human compatibility and human misunderstanding and incomprehension. I was thinking of it, yes, I was thinking of it in terms of imbalance of power. And I knew that in some way she would be incapable of transcending not only her societal constraints, her class and what have you, but also certain psychological barriers that she had constructed around herself or that had been constructed around her because of her family and other factors. But I did not, I did not have these academic, intellectual terms, you know, bouncing around in my head, and to be honest, there is a little, I feel a little bit of a sense of loss when I, you know when somebody talks about and here again, I'm talking you know going back to the one of the original questions you asked where, about reducing this novel to a political novel. To me the joy of the novel is simply the joy of human interaction and you know, I thought about this a lot, but what the particular pleasure of a novel is as opposed to a movie or as opposed to, you know a video game I suppose, but I think it is for me at least the pleasure of watching the granular shift in human thought and emotion, and feeling as an interaction progresses, and that was my entire focus when I was writing. I really wanted to know and to watch how her, how her mind and understanding shifted with each person she met, with each interaction she had with that person.

**AV**

Lastly, you pointed out how novels compare to other genres, especially younger genres like video games and film. I was just thinking, this is almost a question for Ulka because she's the critic on the show. But of your voice inside of Indian literature and like who we would think of as perhaps in the genealogy that lead to Madhuri Vijay, who would we think of, you know, and I wouldn't think of Rushdie or Roy, who are much louder novelists in the way that they use language and the way that they move in, in a kind of experimental way, at the level of the sentence, the word, the reference, the illusion. It feels noisier, and your novel felt so quiet and beautiful to me, but also like, equally gripping for its quietness. Like a sudden detail will just have this incredible impact where Shalini's orientation just shifts in response to a situation. And so I was wondering, Ulka, if you think that there are writers who didn't quite make it to US shores with the same kind of success as a Rushdie or Roy, but who we would see is in the same tradition of writing.

#### **UA**

Yeah, I mean, definitely. I think that there is a kind of, that that is as you said louder, more more flashy and I think that that did appeal to, so I you know like I've been reading a lot of Ismat Chughtai, this Urdu novelist and short story writer who I think is one of those people and I think you know like she's a writer, writing, you know, she's a Muslim woman so again it could be very easily slotted into certain kinds of kinds of expectations about what kinds of things, she has to write and she's always breaking expectations and writing stories that refuse, I mean to be not only put in a kind of political moment, like she's writing at the time of partition, but doesn't write about partition at all. She's much more interested in the inner life of you know of women, and messy things like sexuality, and queer desire and things that you know just were not legible at all. And I think she's someone who's really been kind of written out of the tradition of you know like Indian literature, which has which I think has been, the public facing part of it, the part that writes about big things like Partition or the Emergency often get more get to be more important and again I think because you chose, Madhuri, to write about Kashmir people want to put you in that slot but I actually would put you much more in the tradition of Ismat Chughtai.

#### **MV**

Thank you I'm so glad you said that. I, you know when I think about it I, it seems to me that there is an Indian novel in which the writer seems, the writer acts as a sort of guide through a world, through the world of India and Rushdie falls very much into that category I think. Where he is sort of encapsulating the nation and translating the nation as a, as an entity, as a whole for the reader and that, you know, and that explains his popularity because you know because because in some ways, his novels are kind of a map. But someone like Ismat Chughtai is not explaining, she's not acting as a sort of as a guide for a reader who is perhaps outside of the country. I was, and I was aware that I didn't want Shalini to be a sort of, a guide to you know the non-Indian reader. Rather, I wanted her to be a guide in some ways to an Indian reader because it is sort of a fallacy that Indians know everything about India. That there is Indian and not Indian. To me that was, it was just simply not true because I don't know about Kashmir. I didn't know about Kashmir before I went there. I didn't, I don't know, I know very little about Assam. I know very little about,

my god, I mean, I grew up in Karnataka but I know very little about you know, Andhra Pradesh, I know it's so. To me, it was more interesting to have a more inward-facing gaze that rendered what is generally supposed to be my territory as alien and it is alien. So yes, that that was exactly what I wanted to what I wanted to do, but you're right because it is Kashmir, it tends to be perceived more as a kind of, "here is a grand statement."

**UA**

I want to talk a little bit about writing process and things as well. I mean, another repeated question that I've seen in a lot of or several of the interviews that I saw read with you is like is Shalini a fictionalized version of you? Which like I sensed some annoyance when you had to answer those questions. My 13 year old son is also a budding writer and he, he just wrote a short story about this 14 year old boy. He said "I changed the age to 14 so they won't think it was me," but of course, the teacher still said, "Oh, this is clearly you." He just felt it was so, [MV: Right] and I you know, I told him about your the interviews you had. It just feels felt to him like such a stifling of creativity to just assume that you know anyone that is at all mildly at all like you just have to be a version of you. Is that is that how you feel or how do you, how do you deal with that idea of your writing someone kind of that could be close to you but clearly isn't you?

**MV**

I mean, I'm sort of perplexed by it, honestly, by the need to ask the question and even more by the need to know. Say that it was me, say that it is me, say that I did every one of those things and what, what earthly difference could it make to you, you know? Other than a sort of sense of titillation. Other than the pure prurience of you know scandal or you know, whatever you imagine my scandalous life to be. What what difference does it make? I've never really understood the need to need to investigate a novel that way and I was lucky, maybe because I grew up at a time when the novels that I read weren't even accompanied for the most part by author pictures, you know. I barely had the sense that the people who were writing the books were real human beings, you know, I thought they came down from some godly realm, and they just sort of appeared in my library. But I think, I think it's a strange, it's a strange way to read a book and quite limiting because it suggests that your criteria for, for what you consider worthy are somewhat, somewhat stifled and so you know you asked me if I find it stifling I do, that, I find that question stifling but it must be stifling to the reader as well. I mean how could it not be?

**UA**

When you're writing, how do you write characters with whom you share more characteristics personally? And then you have Amina, Riyaz, Bashir, you have a range of characters who are you know who, who come from a place you know with its own language. I don't know if you know Kashmiri, but like you're writing about you know, and kind of culturally, politically, economically different than Shalini. Do you, do you enjoy equally the project of expanding and constructing these different characters or is there, or is there some part of characterization, because your characters are wonderful they're

there, they live beyond the page. I feel like I know them and that partly comes from, I think a really impressive use of dialogue and but yeah, I'm just wondering like what is your, do you enjoy that process of characterization? I would guess you do from what I read but I'm just curious hearing it from your angle.

**MV**

I really do and thank you for saying that. I always thought I was rubbish at dialogue actually, but I'm glad to hear you disagree.

**UA**

Definitely disagree.

**MV**

It's so much fun for me, it's just the most, the most pleasure I get in writing is watching characters develop, and I haven't been doing it long enough to know for certain, to be able to explicate it but what I, what I have come to think that it is, is, it's, I kind of, it's mostly throwing stuff against the wall and seeing what sticks. I, when I wrote the first draft, I would just have people say, and do all kinds of wild things that were totally inconsistent with what turned out to be their character. But it became clear that these things were in fact, inconsistent and then in other cases I would have them do things that felt right. And so I would have to then expand the character to include that tendency or those characteristics and that gave me a whole other room to play in so to speak. So it was really a process of experimentation and mistakes and just wild, you know just wild writing for a long time. But the interesting thing was that as the drafts progressed I could see the contours taking shape around each of these people to the point where towards the end when I was writing, when I would begin writing again, I could feel my vocabulary, changing because Shalini had a certain vocabulary, she tended to favor certain sentence, certain sentence constructions, she likes the words more than others, and I could feel those words and those constructions and those tones coming out in the same way when I wrote Riyaz's dialogue, Riyaz's gestures. I could feel the same you know, I could feel him favoring certain gestures and facial expressions and what have you. It was, it was a really interesting process for me and that really was one of the things I enjoyed most. So yes, I really, I do like making characters, making people, whether or not they are anything like me.

**UA**

What about influences, do you have other writers you love, other writers you read while you're writing? Or just a novel that you love?

**MV**

So many writers and novels that I love that it would be a little bit. It would take a little too much of your time. I tend to find that whatever I'm reading happens, it's a very odd phenomenon and makes me mystical in a way that I am usually not mystical. But I tend to

find that whatever I happen to be reading, whether it's you know fiction or nonfiction gives me something, something valuable for whatever I happen to be working on at the time, and maybe it's just a sort of form of confirmation by, as I stand to see what I'm working on, and whatever I'm reading at the time. So I don't, you know, I know certain people, certain writers like to read only certain things while they're working on a book, but I, I'm far more of a magpie. I have always loved Ismat Chugtai, that you know, as you mentioned earlier. I have loved Alice Munro and JM Coetzee, Baldwin, Zadie Smith. I, the list is really endless. I don't, I don't consider myself to have any particular influence, a singular influence. Anita Desai. I think is another one of those writers like Ismat Chugtai, who, while seeming to write about very closeted, private, minuscule words is actually writing very capacious and ambitious novels. And so she has been, I would say, as close to a particular influence as I have had. And many, many more, of course.

#### **UA**

Yeah, that's great and Anita Desai is also someone who's been kind of left out of the you know that kind of global understanding of the Indian novel. I did want to ask you one question about the mother-daughter relationship before we get to our final question because I found it to be a very, like beautiful, but also frustrating you know part of the novel and I think you know you did it really well. I think there's an assumption sometimes that mother-daughter relationships are always great, like they're friends you know, and I don't know if that comes from, you know Bollywood or something but like there is this idea that, but I think it's actually global I think in India it's there, but again another reason I like Ismat Chugtai because she always has a problematic relationship with her, with her mother or mother figures. So just tell us a little bit about that relationship, was that you know it gives Shalini another dimension, and again cannot be reduced to some political novel.

#### **MV**

The mother that I was writing about began in some ways as someone who was just, she was, she was just sad, you know, in the way when I first started writing. But as time went on, she started becoming a little more unpredictable and a little more eccentric, and a little funnier, and a little wilder. And every time she did that, the book became more interesting, and Shalini became more interesting to me. I don't know that I have a particular interest in mothers and daughters. I certainly think of them. I mean, I have an interest in the relationship insofar as it is one of the most important relationships for any human being, but I'm not, I'm just as interested in fathers and daughters and you know, brothers and sisters. I also do, you know, I think that there is a tendency, especially now perhaps in pushing back against what you talked about, you know about the mother and daughter relationship being perceived as sacred in some way. There is this sort of, there's. I think a slow growing tradition of mothers who are incredibly bad and you know, sort of monstrous and who have monstrous thoughts. And you know then their bodies are horrors to them, and so on and so forth. And I understand that, but I never wanted Shalini's mother to be that kind of mother where she was so appalled by her motherhood that she was just you know, that she was just sort of grotesque, I never wanted her to be grotesque. I'm not interested in the grotesque. I'm interested in this wild swinging between affection and

disaffection, and tenderness, and the need to be alone. And I had a child about a year ago, and it's, it's been a very interesting literary experiment because there is sort of sacred aspect to it where you can't quite believe that this is a real thing. But something that isn't often written about in literature, in mother and daughter relationships is just the silliness of it. You know, the pure, the pure absurdity of motherhood, and you know, the random farting. And you know this sort of, there isn't as much capacity in literature for the purely joyous and absurd as there seems to be for the tragic and the grotesque. And I wish even in that I had included more silliness in the book in this relationship and not merely had it be so heavy all the time, because both of those things exist at the same time, often in the same moment, and I'm sure there are people who've written about motherhood in exactly that way, and I haven't read them, and I ought to, but the, it was the wild duality, the polarity of it that I wanted to include and that I now know, that I now know to be the case.

**UA**

Because everything is not a damn metaphor!

**MV**

Exactly!

**UA**

and that's the that's the problem and I, we're having a conversation with novelist, and I blame critics for this, we're completely at fault for taking every single thing that people want to write and making into a metaphor for something else and sometimes-

**MV**

Sometimes a fart is just a fart.

**UA**

Sometimes a fart is just a fart. But it's just hard and you know, I think and I think that's the danger, with motherhood too, that's why I actually think your example of Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, she's she's a you know, she's a bad mother, she's also like a metaphor. So I guess that's why I was thinking that yours is, that's why I said, like she's it's more uncomfortable because it's just more real and it doesn't feel like a metaphor. It doesn't feel like a, you know, it just feels like a real relationship that's hard, in a way that I think, you know, sometimes even the cruel as you say even the cruel or grotesque mothers feel like they stand in for kind of something else, loss, abandonment, so.

**AV**

Now I know what the trailer for this podcast will look like.

**MV**

**AV**

A fart is just a fart?

**MV**

Yeah.

**UA**

Madhuri, thank you so much we've taken, I've taken so much of your time, you've been so generous with your answers. There is one final question that we're asking in all of these Novel Dialogue podcasts, which has to do with, again something not, something mundane and not metaphorical. Just what is your favorite treat that you like to give yourself while you're writing, you know what do you do or play or eat when you're struggling with what's on the page? What's something not metaphorical about yourself?

**MV**

That's very easy. It's a big bag of potato chips. I really love potato chips and whenever anything is hard, not just the book, but I, I can be consoled with potato chips.

**UA**

And are you a standard potato chips or do you like-

**MV**

No there's a particular potato chip flavor here it's called, what is it called, Maui Onion, something like that, it's it's, uh, it's I only see I've only ever seen it here, but that's my, that's my preferred brand.

**UA**

That sounds awesome.

**AV**

We're just going to have to assemble like a pandemic comfort foods-

**MV**

A pantry

**UA**

I love that. Well thank you so much, really. It's been a pleasure talking to you. It's a really fantastic book and you're I mean, it's very exciting and congratulations on its success, too, it's very well deserved.

**MV**

Thank you both and thank you so much, Ulka and Aarthi, it was really a pleasure to talk to you.

**AV**

Oh, it was a delight and as we approach the end of another Novel Dialogue, John and I would just like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and acknowledge support from Brandeis University, Mellon Connected PhD program and Duke University. Nai Kim is our production intern and designer and Claire Ogden is our sound engineer. Recent and upcoming dialogues include Bruce Robbins speaking with Orhan Pamuk, Martin Puchner with Catherine Lacey and Gerry Canavan with sci-fi writer Kameron Hurley, author of *The Light Brigade* and *The Geek Feminist Revolution*.

So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening and hope you hit that subscribe button and tune in again.