



**Q&A WITH SHILPA AGARWAL
AUTHOR OF HAUNTING BOMBAY**

How would you summarize HAUNTING BOMBAY in a nutshell?

HAUNTING BOMBAY is a literary ghost story set in 1960's India that tells the tale of three generations of the wealthy Mittal family who have buried a tragic history and the ghosts of the past who rise up to haunt them. It is about a family's darkest fears and desires, about the struggle to belong, and the ultimate power of voice and truth.

So your book is a ghost story?

Not a traditional one but a literary ghost story – the ghosts are metaphors for the dispossessed, those who have little or no power in a family, community, or nation. Readers have said that it evokes Toni Morrison's BELOVED in the way it is interwoven with the characters' spirituality and how an unspeakable past continues to haunt their present-day lives. The novel has very suspenseful and eerie moments but it is also full of humor and lightness, especially in the interaction between the members of the Mittal household.

As a supernatural story, does HAUNTING BOMBAY break with the tradition of the Indian novel?

I would say that it expands the boundaries of the Indian or South Asian novel. When I was researching ghost stories, I discovered fairy legends, mystical traditions, references to ghosts in the ancient religious texts, and a 115-year old English translation of Sanskrit Vampire stories which I've woven into my novel. There is such a rich tradition of the supernatural in India yet I didn't find any other English-language South Asian authors who were writing about it. Readers instead have connected my writing to the mystical and magical literary traditions of South American writers Isabelle Allende and Gabriel García Márquez.

Is your book also a mystery?

Yes - the story opens with the drowning but as it unfolds and the ghost begins to haunt the household, the Mittal family's tangled memories of that drowning day – of where and what they were doing when the child died – are revealed. The family and the servants all have secret desires and motivations – the ayah who was dismissed was in love with someone in the household, the father illicitly visits drinking dens while his children sleep, the driver maintains a relationship with an aging prostitute in the red-light district, one of the housemaids despised the ayah and so forth. There are a number of characters who could have been involved in the child's death. My protagonist Pinky's journey in the story is one of finding the truth of what happened but also finding the courage to face that truth because oftentimes truth itself can be terrifying.

Why did you set the story in 1960?

At the moment of India's Independence in 1947, Prime Minister Nehru had talked about how the nation, suppressed by centuries of invasion and colonialism, at long last finding utterance. I

wanted to set my novel thirteen years after this moment, as the nation moved into its adolescence to explore this idea of finding utterance – of a national consciousness informed by the voices of the underclass. I also set it in the 60s because I wanted to weave in my parents’ stories of their youth. My mom’s family were refugees during the partitioning of India and I wanted to show both the loss and sense of hope at that time.

What inspired you to write about the dispossessed?

I wanted to untangle the idea of utterance and who has the power to speak and who is silenced. HAUNTING BOMBAY takes place in a bungalow on Malabar Hill, the old elite colonial enclave. It opens on a day that a granddaughter in the wealthy Mittal family is being bathed by her ayah (nanny). The ayah is called away and when she returns, she finds that the child has drowned. She of course is immediately banished from the bungalow but the family’s lives, including the servants, spin out from that unalterable moment in time.

I began to wonder what the child and the ayah would have said about what happened that drowning day. What if we could hear *their* versions of the truth? In the story, my thirteen year-old protagonist, Pinky Mittal, who has been adopted into the family, must find the courage to seek the truth which is oftentimes repressed by those in power. Pinky becomes haunted by the ghost of the dead child who is communicating outside the mode of human language. My story is an exploration of how the privileged can hear the voices of the dispossessed - about what sacrifices and risks must be taken in order to actually hear.

Do you draw on your own background in the book?

I have always been intrigued by stories that have been passed down through generations. I was born in Mumbai to a family uprooted by India’s Independence in 1947 and the subsequent Partition of the country into what is now India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. My parents and grandparents experienced the loss of their ancestral homes and saw with their own eyes the tragic violence of that turbulent time in history.

Bits of their stories were passed down to me when I was a child, mainly facts – how they got out of Pakistan and where they ended up once they crossed the border into India. But I always wanted more. I wanted to know how they felt, what they saw, what they left unspoken in the darker recesses of their hearts all these years. When I was an adult, my family began to answer some of these questions, revisiting some of the most painful times in their lives.

Their stories began to grow flesh. I heard about how my grandmother almost drowned while bathing in a lake, how an uncle was trying to get out of Pakistan in a train attacked by a mob and survived, how they slept in tents, how they finally crossed into India on foot. How they were connected to the future by a thread of hope. That very same thread is woven into the narrative of my book, a search for truth and belonging in a world that has broken open and become utterly terrifying.

Is this a women’s story?

It is a human story. It is about women exploring their prohibited desires and their struggles and sacrifices to live within a society’s rigid moral codes but it is also about how men are often burdened by their own set of cultural expectations and obligations.

What was your writing process like?

I started writing the novel when I was pregnant with my first child. After that, I had to write in snatches of time – when my child napped, when I didn't feel utterly exhausted by sleepless nights and changing diapers and newborn colic. After my children began to sleep through the night, I began to write early in the mornings before dawn because that was the only time of day I could lose myself in my writing without fear of distraction. That time of day also lent itself to expanding my imagination especially in the supernatural realm – it was pitch black outside and eerily quiet in my office except for the clicking of my fingers on the keyboard. The most important thing for me was having a disciplined schedule, writing every day even if I didn't feel like it.

The supernatural nature of your book lends itself to film. Have you thought about HAUNTING BOMBAY the movie?

Yes, I'm very interested in developing a screenplay. One friend described the 'movie version' of my book as a "cross between Mira Nair and M. Night"!

Are you working on your next book?

Yes I am. I am intrigued by the idea of crossings and in HAUNTING BOMBAY, I explore the crossing of the centers of powers with the peripheries and the intersection of the living and the dead. My second book also brings in mystical and magical elements but explores the crossing of the realms of heaven and earth.