

Rivista di poesia comparata

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Stella

Iniziative

8 dicembre 2019**Semicerchio a "Più libri più liberi"****6 dicembre 2019****Laura Pugno alla Scuola di Semicerchio****5 dicembre 2019****Convegno Compalit a Siena****4 dicembre 2019****Addio a Giuseppe Bevilacqua****29 novembre 2019****Maurizio Maggiani alla Scuola di Semicerchio****8 novembre 2019****Laboratorio di poesia: Valerio Magrelli****12 ottobre 2019****Semicerchio e LinguaFranca a Salon de la Revue di Parigi****27 settembre 2019****Reading della Scuola di Scrittura****25 settembre 2019****Ultimi giorni iscrizioni al Corso di scrittura creativa****20 settembre 2019****Incontro con Jorie Graham per l'uscita di "fast" (Garzanti)****19 giugno 2019****Addio ad Armando Gnisci****31 maggio 2019****I'M SO TIRED OF FLORENCE: READING MINA LOY****12 aprile 2019****Incontro con Marco Di Pasquale****28 marzo 2019****Sconti sul doppio Semicerchio-Ecopoetica 2018****27 marzo 2019****Semicerchio al Convegno di Narrazioni Ecologiche-Firenze****24 marzo 2019****Premio Ceppo: Semicerchio e Guccini a Pistoia****15 marzo 2019****Rosaria Lo Russo legge Sexto****6 febbraio 2019****Incontro sulla traduzione poetica -Siena****25 gennaio 2019****Assemblea sociale e nuovi laboratori****14 dicembre 2018****Incontro con Giorgio Falco****8 dicembre 2018****Semicerchio a "Più Libri Più Liberi" Roma****6 dicembre 2018****Semicerchio issue on MIGRATION AND IDENTITY. Call for papers****16 novembre 2018****"Folla delle vene" di Iacuzzi a Semicerchio**[Home-page - Numeri](#)[Presentazione](#)[Sezioni bibliografiche](#)[Comitato scientifico](#)[Contatti e indirizzi](#)[Dépliant e cedola acquisti](#)[Links](#)[20 anni di Semicerchio. Indice 1-34](#)[Norme redazionali e Codice Etico](#)[The Journal](#)[Bibliographical Sections](#)[Advisory Board](#)[Contacts & Address](#)[Saggi e testi online](#)[Poesia angloafricana](#)[Poesia angloindiana](#)[Poesia americana \(USA\)](#)[Poesia araba](#)[Poesia australiana](#)[Poesia brasiliana](#)[Poesia ceca](#)[Poesia cinese](#)[Poesia classica e medievale](#)[Poesia coreana](#)[Poesia finlandese](#)[Poesia francese](#)[Poesia giapponese](#)[Poesia greca](#)[Poesia inglese](#)[Poesia inglese postcoloniale](#)[Poesia iraniana](#)[Poesia ispano-americana](#)[Poesia italiana](#)[Poesia lituana](#)[Poesia macedone](#)[Poesia portoghese](#)[Poesia russa](#)[Poesia serbo-croata](#)[Poesia olandese](#)[Poesia slovena](#)[Poesia spagnola](#)[Poesia tedesca](#)[Poesia ungherese](#)[Poesia in musica \(Canzoni\)](#)[Comparatistica & Strumenti](#)[Altre aree linguistiche](#)

Visits since 10 July '98

1937527[« indietro](#)**LETTER FROM MUMBAI: INDIANNESS**

di Arundhati Subramaniam.

It was Thomas a Kempis who said he'd rather experience contrition than know how to define it. It is a sentiment I'm beginning to feel more and more deeply about particularly in relation to the whole question of «Indianness».

There have always been self-appointed experts on the subject, of course. State propaganda, films, television soaps and advertisements have been doling out prescriptions for a long time. To uncritically applaud the country's nuclear muscle seems to be one way of being Indian. To metamorphose from miniskirts to saris seems to be the popular media's strategy of shedding Western contamination and becoming the real McCoy Indian woman. Local political parties believe Indianness can be acquired by banning Valentine's Day and renaming the Prince of Wales Museum the «Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya».

Then, of course, there are the myriad provincial strands of the cultural establishment. There are the local «back to our roots» obscurantists who want classical dancers and musicians to be emissaries of a «pure untainted» Indian culture. Or those who believe Indian theatre must draw on traditional indigenous idioms if it is to be meaningful and anchored.

And finally, there is the nativist literary bastion. My generation may like to believe that the whole question of English being an Indian language is old hat. We may believe it's been proved that English is as Indian as cricket or democracy. And yet, the same argument reinvents itself time and again in all sorts of insidious avatars. There's a virtual knee-jerk reaction to English poetry in India in some circles, for instance, evinced in the impulse to instantly deem it precious, self-conscious, esoteric, navel-gazing – and, of course, nowhere as earthy, throbbing and vital (read «as Indian») as poetry in other Indian languages.

If the Indian writer in English has the local linguistic reactionaries to contend with, she also has to negotiate another brand of 'Indianness' expert – a certain species of Western cultural commentator. An Italian friend tells me that an academic journal in Milan recently bemoaned the «new-Victorian» hangover of Indian poetry in English, its inability to come of age, the absence of a strong representative voice (as exemplified by Rushdie in the novel). And just last year, a similar view was endorsed by a reviewer in «Poetry Wales» who lamented the lack of an identifiably «Indian» element in English poetry in India, so unlike the robust patois of Caribbean poetry. These are not isolated instances; they are part of a «not-quite- Indian enough» chorus that has been around quite a long while. The trope of the simpering slavishly mimicking Peter Sellers brand of Western Oriental Gentleman reinvents itself in all these arguments. It will evidently take time for a certain kind of Western reader to accept that «the literatures of the world are not», as Adil Jussawalla puts it (in his introduction to *New Writing in India*), «colonies in his empire of taste».

I believe it is important to periodically reassert one's resistance to this quest for the «identifiably Indian» – a quest that tells us more about the seeker than the sought. Underlying it, clearly, is another guise of colonialism, based on the premise that there is a core Indianness that can and should be identified, labelled, itemised and brandished like a visa (to what might seem like Destination Literary Paradise but is actually a literary ghetto). Not so very different, after all, from the fundamentalists back home who are forever devising Procrustean means to arrive at unitary cultural identities.

What this kind of criticism ends up doing frequently is to reduce the role of the Indian artist to that of a vendor of exotica, «an alterity-manufacturing machine ». Will roughening our cadences and splitting our infinitives establish our distance from our colonial history? Do we still secretly believe that we must write about earthquakes in Bhuj, wars in Kargil, yogis in the Himalayas and pot-bellied children on pavements to prove our credentials as authentic Indians? Do we have to arrive at a cleverly packaged Orientalist formula to be artistically kosher, to prove that we belong? Are we in fact back to the stage of having to prove that English is our language? That we have the right to speak it the way we want? That each one of us – whether our idioms are mandarin or demotic – are as much part of the same bhel-puri that typifies the complexity of the Indian cultural experience?

I remember a conversation a couple of years ago with a group of Germans interested

in finding out about «cutting edge» work in the Indian arts. I realised then all over again just how vexed this whole business of Indianness actually is. I also realised just how long it would take an outsider to any culture to understand the complex negotiations that its people make with their cultural inheritance. For what might seem boldly transgressive to the outside eye could well be a shallow or derivative artistic endeavour within a certain context. Likewise, what may seem conservative to the outside observer may well represent a significant moment in a particular milieu.

A Hindi film in a grittily realist mode, for instance, is likely to be regarded as far more audacious in India than the flamboyant kitschy musical film that the West now regards as bold Bollywood pastiche. Why, given the complexity of the Indian cultural scene, we know that a Gujarati playwright writing a social realist play is clearly exercising a choice quite different from a Marathi playwright doing the same. An Indian poet in English employing an idiom that seems a trifle formal or self-conscious to a Western reader may actually be negotiating her way around the eroded linguistic terrain of the popular media and political propaganda. She may also be trying to walk that perennially challenging tightrope between what Adrienne Rich calls the «non-eferential» and the «paraphrasable».

In his deeply insightful introduction to his book, *Lives of the Poets*, publisher and writer Michael Schmidt says that poetry is an art that flourishes when language itself is interrogated. And one may add that there's no telling how many conceivable ways there might be of interrogating language. Schmidt also says that «the greatest reader in the world has a primary task: to set a poem free». For this to be accomplished, he says, «the reader must hear it fully». To hear a poem fully, of course, one has to listen to the poem itself, not to some pat mantras and preconceived notions about poetic practice that one applies routinely to every work one encounters.

If becoming an artist is a process of growing into oneself, then there is, of course, never a question of arriving. As a writer, I believe finding my voice is part of a journey of endlessly deferred discovery. Yes, I do hope that in the process my voice does get more honest, more supple, more creative, more «me».

And in this deeper quest for authenticity – of a very different kind from the kind discussed earlier – I've always felt empowered by Borges' remark in his Harvard Lectures. None of us need feel anxious about trying to be contemporary, he assures us, because none of us has yet figured out the magic formula of living in the past or the future. And applying the same logic to cultural identity, I've decided Indianness is one of those things I needn't worry about. I simply am – whether I like it or not – as Indian as they come.

[→ top of page](#)

12 ottobre 2018
Inaugurazione XXX Corso di Poesia con Franco Buffoni

7 ottobre 2018
Festa della poesia a Montebeni

30 settembre 2018
Laboratorio pubblico di Alessandro Raveggi a Firenze
Libro Aperto

23 settembre 2018
Mina Loy-Una rivoluzionaria nella Firenze dei futuristi - Villa Arrivabene

22 settembre 2018
Le Poete al Caffé Letterario

6 settembre 2018
In scadenza le iscrizioni ai corsi di scrittura creativa 2018-19

5 settembre 2018
Verusca Costenaro a L'Orchestra

9 giugno 2018
Semicerchio al Festival di Poesia di Genova

5 giugno 2018
La liberté d'expression à l'épreuve des langues - Paris

26 maggio 2018
Slam-Poetry al PIM-FEST, Rignano

19 maggio 2018
Lingue e dialetti: PIM-FEST a Rosano

17 maggio 2018
PIM-FEST: il programma

8 maggio 2018
Mia Lecomte a Pistoia

2 maggio 2018
Lezioni sulla canzone

[» Archivio](#)



scuola di scrittura creativa

- » Presentazione
- » Programmi in corso
- » Corsi precedenti
- » Statuto associazione
- » Scrittori e poeti
- » Blog
- » Forum
- » Audio e video lezioni
- » Materiali didattici

 Europe's leading cultural magazines at your fingertips
EUROZINE

Why do young women dominate Finnish politics?

Author: Janne Wass

Finnish politics today is dominated by strong, politically savvy women, many under the

[read in Eurozine](#)

Editore
Pacini Editore

Distributore
PDE

Semicerchio è pubblicata col
patrocinio del Dipartimento di
Teoria e Documentazione delle
Tradizioni Culturali dell'Università
di Siena viale Cittadini 33, 52100
Arezzo, tel. +39-0575.926314,
fax +39-0575.926312

web design: Gianni Cicali

POWERED BY BYTE-ELABORAZIONI

Semicerchio, piazza Leopoldo 9, 50134 Firenze - tel./fax +39 055 495398