

Cover design: Whitney Lyle

LOSING YOUR MAP

by Nishita Sharma

In *Bombay Blues*, the adult sequel to the acclaimed young adult debut novel, *Born Confused*, multi-talented author Tanuja Desai Hidier takes her heroine, Dimple Lala to explore Mumbai and everything that it means.

A decade since we last clinked tea cups together, now hot off a plane from the Jaipur Literature Festival, Tanuja Desai Hidier, the American author of the seminal 2002 young adult novel *Born Confused* (recently hailed by both *Rolling Stone Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly* as “one of the greatest Young Adult novels of all time”), meets me open-armed, aglow with the thrill of the reunion.

“It was just fantastic,” says Tanuja. “The energy in the entire place was quite buzzy,” she says of the Jaipur

Literature Festival, set yearly against the majestic pink backdrop of Jaipur. “It was really neat to be somewhere where the buzz is about reading – like you’ve found your tribe, in a way,” she says buoyantly. Having been invited numerous times to speak, she waited till the publication of her new book *Bombay Blues*, the adult sequel to the much-lauded *Born Confused*, to attend.

With its accompanying unique album of Tanuja’s original songs called *Bombay Spleen*, based on themes in the book, she has been credited with creating an intellectually stimulating literary and musical multicultural landscape –



Tanuja signing a book for a reader at the “From *Born Confused* to *Bombay Blues*: New York to a new Mumbai” session at this year’s Jaipur Literature Festival

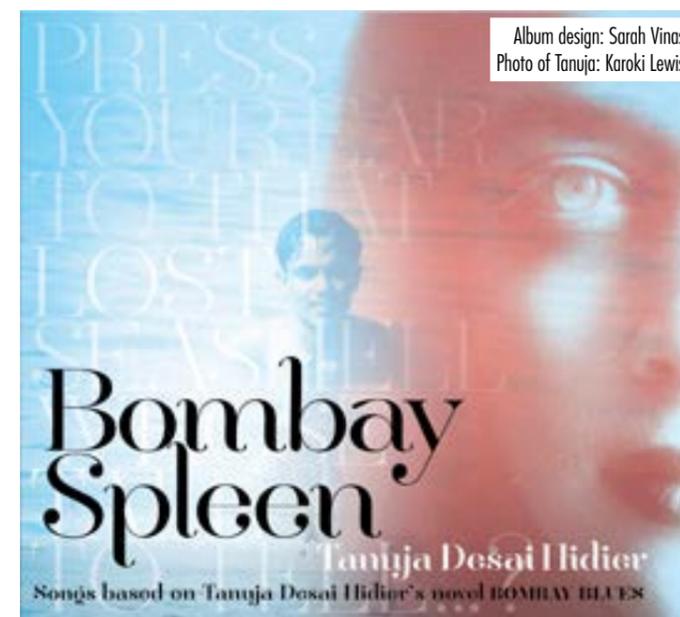


At an intersection in Jaipur
Photo credit: Gaurav Vaz

capturing the hopes, questions and truths of the young diasporal experience through her *Born Confused* and *Bombay Blues* heroine, Dimple Lala.

“The running joke with my friends was that I was always six months away from finishing *Bombay Blues*,” she says of finally accepting the festival’s invitation. By the time Tanuja arrived in India in January for the festival, with the release of *Bombay Blues* and the re-release of *Born Confused* having happened stateside only a few months earlier, the juggernaut of the publicity machine was in full swing.

“It was such a joy discussing the journey from *Born Confused* to *Bombay Blues* with Monisha Rajesh. The energy in the room and the dynamics felt really nice,” says Tanuja about her question-answer session with the writer of *Around the World in 80*



Album design: Sarah Vinas
Photo of Tanuja: Karoki Lewis

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Trains. She also performed an acoustic set of songs from the *Bombay Spleen* album with Gaurav Vaz from the band The Raghu Dixit Project and then sang with musician-come-Booker-Prize-nominated writer of *Narcopolis*, Jeet Thayil, and his band, Still Dirty, thoroughly enjoying the literary-musical mash-up.

“The entire event was very rock ‘n’ roll because the first time any of us had ever played together, was actually when we played the concert,” she laughs.



Tanuja with New York-based musicians Ranjit Arapurakal and Karsh Kale at *The Bombay Blues* book/album launch party, curated by the Solo Session, Cafe Zoe, Mumbai
Photo credit: Sweetie Kapoor



Bombay Spleen collaborator Gaurav Vaz (of the Raghu Dixit Project) with Tanuja
Photo credit: Sujata Haria

“It was quite a shift to come out of the three years I spent on the book and album, where you’re inhabiting an internal landscape, and then all of a sudden, there are parties and events”

“It was actually technically a sound check, but someone opened the doors and the crowd rushed in and it suddenly transformed into the actual gig!” For a writer given to working long intense periods, the impromptu experience was liberating. “There was something quite releasing about that, because you just go with the flow – a freewheeling energy,” she says.

She speaks animatedly about the ambience of the festival. “It felt really celebratory,” she recounts. “The setting was a captivating swirl of not only authors, but musicians and dancers, with beautiful Rajasthani fabrics flowing overhead. The closing night writers’ ball opened with a striking moment.” Romance and reality momentarily juxtaposed. “The entrance was the most beautiful of all, because you walk under this arch and rose petals come cascading down around you. There was literally a man on top of the arch with a bucket and he was sprinkling them over the guests as they arrived. It was amazing,” she says.

The last few months promoting *Bombay Blues* internationally, have been a stark contrast to Tanuja’s writing life, usually spent double over a laptop in her favourite jeans. “It was quite a shift to come out of the three years I spent on the book and album, where you’re inhabiting an internal landscape and then all of a sudden, there are parties and events. Spending all those years in that creative space where you go so deep internally feels like you’re deep-sea diving. Then suddenly you pop your head out and have to talk about everything. It took a little getting used to,” she says.

Tanuja had always intended to write a sequel to *Born Confused*, which she planned to set in New York City. But promoting the *Born Confused* book and the *When we were Twins* album ended up being a “full-time lifestyle” she says, talking about the readings, events, concerts and travelling that ended up peppering the decade. She also had two children in between both books. “I was always working on things,” she says, talking about the two

film adaptations that she wrote based on *Born Confused* and the numerous notes she accumulated for different ideas, including those that led her towards *Bombay Blues*.

In the end, something compelled her to set *Bombay Blues* in India. “It felt natural in terms of the characters’ lives themselves,” she says. Having explored Indian-American culture in the U.S., it now felt organic to return to what she saw as “the source”. Becoming a mother also had an influence. Mumbai had a particular draw, being the home of her family history and the place her parents had met at medical school. The city was a place of familial warmth and fascination, firmly rooted in her consciousness “that seemed a half dreamed up place” but “more real in many ways than America” where she had grown up in an almost all white Massachusetts town.

In *Bombay Blues*, the book’s central character, American-born Dimple Lala, now nineteen, arrives in Mumbai because of a wedding. Ironically, during one research trip to India, the writer inadvertently ended up seeing many weddings from her hotel window, when she unexpectedly got sick. “The story ends up being much more about the unanticipated and what happens when you literally and metaphorically lose your map,” says Tanuja, explaining the evolution of her protagonist’s journey.

The title of the book is taken from the colour that struck her most when she started photographing Mumbai. “There were the tarp rooftops of the shanties, the blue skins of some of the gods, a lot of the fisher boat bellies were painted in this amazing blue shade and then there were the wonderful blues of the Mount Mary Basilica. That colour really moved me and I started to think about the blues in music, the wild blue yonder and the mood, of course. And Dimple starts to do the same in her landscape.”

Talking about the changes in the diasporal landscape in the last ten years, the multi-faceted artist says, “It’s getting harder and harder to limit the people in the diaspora to the country that they live in – to define them by their >>123

geographical base.” She is talking about the cross-pollination that has occurred internationally between Asians in the arts. Where before musical, theatrical and literary artists from New York, London, Mumbai, Lahore and Nairobi might have been separated by oceans and continents, the decade has proved one of great synergy, creating “sister cities”, as she puts it.

She recounts the number of DJs and musicians from London and New York that she bumped into in Mumbai during her trips and earlier in 2008 when she journeyed to see if India would “spark something”. At an arts hotspot in Bandra called Zenzi, the writer started to sense the first pangs of a new connection. “There are lots of people that overlap in this scene and I was just running into people that I knew from New York literally on the street, which was incredible. For the first time in my life, I thought, I might be able to create a connection with India through my modern life today, rather than my connection being entirely based on history. That was really eye-opening,” she says explaining how the portal became a conduit to developing the layers of *Bombay Blues*.

Thinking about how this has affected her sense of self she says, “Identity and cultures are constantly in motion and evolving. For example at the *Bombay Blues* launch party at Cafe Zoe, having folk from India and my life in London, sitting so easily next to people from my previous life in New York, and all of us literally dancing to the same beat and sharing the same space – it’s like a microcosmic view of what’s happening on a global level, in many ways. A lot of that shaping of cultures, that identity dance, is in your own hands – and feet.”

Dimple Lala’s journey has become a reflection of a voyage Tanuja once took in a land of blue hues. “When you have an art form, you are constantly shaping your identity through that. Dimple is doing that through her photography. My parallel journey has been an exploration of that through the writing of her journey.”