

new-age HEROINES

RIGHT TRACK From
left: Elizabeth Gilbert,
Avni Doshi and Leila
Slimani at Rambagh
Palace, Jaipur



Three formidable writers, three powerful voices, three distinct styles—**Elizabeth Gilbert, Leila Slimani** and **Avni Doshi** tell **Neville Bhandara** why they do what they do

Photographed by **ADIL HASAN**

The

afternoon sun lights up the colonnaded chequerboard-marbled hallways of the Rambagh Palace, Jaipur. Built in 1835 as the residence of the queen's favourite handmaiden, it later became home to Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II and his queen, Jaipur's most famous royal, the glamorous Maharani Gayatri Devi, who captured hearts and headlines from Mumbai to New York. The 'people's maharani', years ahead of her time, delighted in defying convention and making her voice heard. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that I am here on a crisp, pre-pandemic January afternoon to meet three women who are also unafraid to speak their minds: the writers Elizabeth Gilbert, who with *Eat, Pray, Love* (Bloomsbury) shook up the somewhat staid genre of travel writing by delving within; Leïla Slimani, the literary sensation whose *Lullaby* (Faber & Faber) won her France's highest literary honour, the Prix Goncourt; and newcomer Avni Doshi, whose *Girl In White Cotton* (HarperCollins) was hailed as one of last year's most illuminating debuts.

Gilbert is the first to arrive, greeting me with a warm "Hi, I'm Liz." Doshi breezes in next, lively and zoned-in. Slimani comes straight from representing her country at a diplomatic meeting (she's also the personal representative of the French president Emmanuel Macron to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie). Over the next hour, at a time when we have not yet been forced to contend with COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown, Gilbert, Slimani and Doshi reveal why they write what they do, why honest women are to be feared, and why, when wielded correctly, the power of literature is universal.

"I DON'T CONSIDER MYSELF A 'WOMAN' WHEN I WRITE, I CONSIDER MYSELF A WRITER" - LEÏLA SLIMANI

Neville Bhandara: What drew you to writing?

Avni Doshi: I've always been drawn to storytelling and I love to read, so writing came naturally—it was something that felt private and intimate and allowed for that feeling of expression I'd looked for my whole life.

Leïla Slimani: Before I was a writer, I was an admirer of writers—of [Charles] Baudelaire, [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky and [Gustave] Flaubert. When I was young, I thought that the life of a writer was fascinating—their days were full of passion and adventure, and they lived like rock stars. I wanted to live that way. But now that I am a writer, I write to say the things that aren't allowed, to anger people, to disturb them...but more than anything, I write to have the right to be impolite.

Elizabeth Gilbert: I grew up on a small farm to parents who didn't believe it was their job to keep their children entertained. So my sister and I had to invent for ourselves. We would play in the woods behind our house, diving into these make-believe worlds that sprung from her imagination. By the time she was nine, she was writing books and I began to imitate her. So I guess you could say I was drawn to writing because my sister was a writer... We realised early that by creating our own world, we could escape work and shut out the noise. And I've continued to do that ever since.

NB: What does it mean to 'write as a woman'?

LS: I don't consider myself a 'woman' when I write, I consider myself a writer. I have no religion or gender, my skin has no colour. Being a woman doesn't define me when I write.

AD: I'm interested in telling stories about women, for women; I'm drawn to their lives. Growing up, I loved listening to the conversations my grandmother had with my mother and her sisters—they seemed to be the most interesting things in the world... I thought the lives of women were romantic...the way they gathered and the secrets they shared (as well as the ones they didn't) intrigued me.

EG: I spent the first half of my career writing as a man. I came to New York and got a job in journalism, where I operated from a very male perspective: I wrote about men, I was comfortable in rooms filled with men, all my colleagues were men... And then something happened when I left my first marriage because I didn't want to have a child: I fell into depression, and I left that world behind. I then had to go on a woman's journey, which meant learning how to feel and express my intimate secrets—all of which led to *Eat, Pray, Love*. Suddenly, I became known as 'the ultimate chick-lit writer', which I thought was hilarious because I'd spent the last 15 years writing about men. Now I write for a female audience and I consider it an honour to 'write as a woman'.

NB: Women writers are often told, more so than men, that they are 'writing for themselves' and 'about their experiences'. How does that make you feel?

AD: I do write for myself and I'm proud to do so because no one has ever written for me before. I grew up with the kind of domesticity that's always been shunted to the side, but I'm comfortable with pushing it into the limelight and making known the intimate conversations that I mentioned before. The world of women, with all its experiences, is important and central. And that is what I



me—a woman of colour. I can't deny that being represented with that nuance affects me. Why should it matter whether it's in fashion or literature?

LS: In fashion, I can understand. But in literature, like with Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, where in the beginning you don't know the colour of the character... many people were shocked by that. "You have to say what colour the character is," they said, and she simply said, "No." Just like some people wrongly say that there is 'feminine literature' and 'literature' (when really, all literature is literature), for readers to not know but still be able to identify [with the character] and his or her experience, in the end, is what matters and makes literature universal.

NB: So why are strong, honest women feared?

EG: Because they are the greatest threat to the status quo. Traditional systems are dependent on the suppression of women. So when we start saying we've had enough, it shuts down the show.

LS: I think I'm more interested in the 'honest' part rather than the 'strong' because I think most women are strong. Even when we look weak, we are strong—because we have no choice.

EG: You're right. Somebody once asked me why I "always write about strong female characters." And I said, "What other kind are there?"

LS: There is this idea that a woman who speaks up, who tells the truth, is a woman who is going to destroy everything—your family will lose its honour and you will bring shame to everyone. So we've been kept silent. Silence is the perfect tool of patriarchy—it costs nothing, but takes everything. So yes, people are afraid of us speaking up. And it is not just people we don't know. It is our fathers, our brothers and our sons who don't want us to speak up or look within, as they will have to then redefine what it means to be a man. You see, there is a very real problem with masculinity.

NB: What's the single most important piece of advice you would give aspiring writers?

EG: Write to one person, and one person only. I've done that for every book I've written, which is why my favourite thing about *Eat, Pray, Love* is when people say it was "like you were speaking directly to me." Sometimes I read books and think, "This is very well written, but I don't know who the author is talking to." When I ask first-time writers who they have written their book for, the answer is usually vague. They'll say it's "for divorcées between the ages of 30 and 50." But that's not a person, that's a demographic. So write to a person, because it helps, I promise.

AD: Be fiercely protective of your time. Because when you are trying to write, time is everything.

LS: Learn to say no—to your husband, to your children, to your friends. Stay by yourself and work, and read, and write. ■

seek to do through my work. If men are excluded along the way, I don't feel bad about it.

LS: I can understand that, but I don't agree when you say, "No one has ever written for me." I've never seen a character in a novel who looks like me, but I've identified myself in works such as [Leo Tolstoy's] *Anna Karenina* and with characters, like those of [Gabriel García] Márquez. In a way, that's the magic of literature—it may not be written for you, but when you read it, it's yours.

AD: But don't we talk about experiences with too broad a brush stroke? There are nuances to them, and I think it's powerful to see yourself represented with specificity. Take fashion, for example. I can look at a magazine and appreciate a woman for her beauty, but I feel different if I see someone in a glossy who looks like