



# Voices from the Gaps

# Cherry Muhanji

“

*Houses collect things: old newspapers, junk mail -- Her. She had come under cover of night, a stowaway with Brother's child tucked in the bottom of her belly . . . Brother's house grew people: real cousins, arthritic aunts, nervous uncles, and Aunt Marion's boy, the one with the ti-tongue. They had moved North, each trailing a dream from behind, like a peacock in mating season, in full color, from plantation to plant in one easy step.*

— Her

”



## Biography

Cherry Muhanji is a native of Detroit, Michigan, born Jannette (Jenny) Washington on April 26, 1939. A lesbian poet/writer and mother of 3 sons and 3 grandsons, Muhanji's childhood love has been with poetry. At the age of fourteen, Muhanji was introduced to Edgar Allen Poe's poem, "The Bell," which triggered in her the desire to paint images and emotions through the use of verse.

Muhanji has written poetry throughout her life and only switched to writing prose in the 1980s because poetry made no money. Although Muhanji left poetry to write *Her*, she did not completely abandon it, as the language used in her novel can only be described as poetic prose. Much of Muhanji's own life is veiled in *Her*, which is largely autobiographical up through the first half.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1939
- \* African-American, lesbian poet, writer, and academic
- \* Her first published novel was *Her* (1990).

This page was researched and submitted by: Julie Hua on 3/10/98.



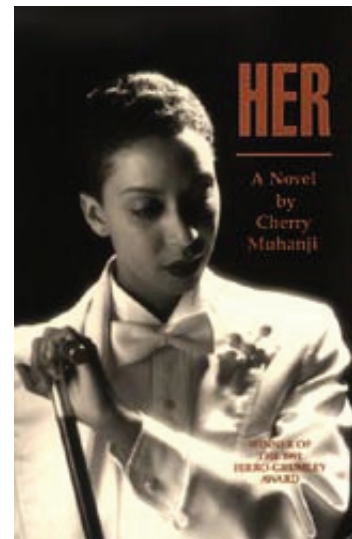
# Cherry Muhanji

## Biography continued

In the book, Muhanji writes about a lighter skinned, “hi-yella” Black woman named Sunshine who struggles to find a sense of belonging within the Black community living in an area of Detroit called John R Street. Her, which took 3 years (from 1987-1990) to complete, was a version of Muhanji’s life that she “wished would have happened.” Thus writing the novel gave Muhanji the satisfaction of having the “last word.”

Muhanji’s love of poetry and literature led to her academic pursuits in English, Anthropology, and African-American World Studies at the University of Iowa. She completed her B.A. in 1990 and her Ph.D. in 1997, which culminated in a novel, written as her dissertation, entitled *Mama Played First Chair*. In it, Muhanji tells the story of a female Jazz instrumentalist, exploring the various contributions and influences these women had on jazz. Muhanji is also in the process of conceptualizing a novel that grapples with the “joy and abuse of organized religion.” Her other publication, *Tight Spaces*, is a book of short stories co-authored with 2 other individuals. It was published in 1987 and won the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1988.

Finding time to write is what Muhanji finds most difficult presently, as she is teaching at universities. This shift into academia has also posed an obstacle for Muhanji as she finds it more difficult to write using creative and metaphoric language. Her creativity is sometimes squelched by being emersed in so much theoretical writing. Claiming she can no longer write poetry, Muhanji satiates herself by reading it. Her favorite poet is Walter Benton, author of *This Is My Beloved*, and her favorite novel is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* because it has re-created and reclaimed a voice that was long thought to be lost, that of the middle-passage female slave. “Fiction,” Muhanji states, “tells more truth than many things.”





# Cherry Muhanji

## Selected Bibliography

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