# 9.0 Writing Against the System with Aarthi Vadde (EH, CH)

## Transcript

**Emily Hyde**

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*. I'm Emily Hyde, and I'm here with Chris Holmes. We are the two co-producers of this podcast, and we are joined by one of *Novel Dialogue*'s founding hosts, Aarthi Vadde, who is the E. Blake Byrne Associate Professor of English at Duke University. Chris and I wanted to talk to Aarthi about the focus of Season 9, which is TECH. That's a wide-ranging term by which we mean pretty much everything: digital technology and its role in our lives today, that's from the most banal practices of everyday living to the most unfathomable products of our very latest artificial intelligence model. But we're just as interested in the technologies of the past as we are in the technologies of the future, and our lineup of novelists and critics promises a wide range of conversations.

**Chris Holmes**

I'm really excited for this season. We have such a great lineup of novelists and critics, and that includes the writers Ken Liu, Lauren Beukes, Kim Stanley Robinson, Fernanda Trías, Vauhini Vara, and Álvaro Enrique. Aarthi, we wanted to talk to you because your forthcoming book, *We the Platform: Contemporary Literature after Web 2.0*, promises to expand the landscape of what we think of now as literary culture. You've been writing and teaching about this for a while now, and that includes a really influential piece in *PMLA* titled “Inside and Outside the Language Machines.” Could you give us a gloss of the forthcoming book, just so the listeners to this season know what they might be in for?

**Aarthi Vadde**

Oh, yeah. Well, first of all, thank you, Emily and Chris, for having me on in this way. It's really interesting to be on the other side of the mic. So the book that I'm working on, *We the Platform*, is really thinking about what contemporary literature looks like after the kind of efflorescence and proliferation of mass writing. So when I say mass writing, I mean all of the ordinary expression we see on the web today, on social media platforms, in the form of blogs or consumer reviews. Think of Yelp, Amazon, any of these places where ordinary people are professing, expressing their opinions. And so my book is looking at the web as basically the predominant platform of cultural life, and one that needs to be understood in light of literary history, and needs to be understood as changing the concept of literature to some degree. So I think our discipline has been founded upon the rules of print culture, and it's had to adapt to web culture. And we've been pretty resistant to that fact in many different ways. So I'm hoping the

book will use contemporary literature, older writers like Jennifer Egan, Teju Cole. Probably not old, but pretty established writers, and also younger writers like Lauren Oyler. And then people on the fringes of the literary field, like Stewart Home, a British writer, and associated with the avant-garde. Trying to look at all these writers for cues on how to adapt to this world. Not necessarily in a gung-ho way, but in a critical, intelligent, still literary way, like how to respond to the world that Web 2.0 has furnished us.

**CH**

We won't tell Teju that you called him old.

**AV**

I know. [laughter] He is not old. He is established. [laughter]

**EH**

Established enough to be on the very first episode, I think, of *Novel Dialogue*.

**AV**

Right, yeah, yeah. And you know, in the older days of Twitter, now-defunct Twitter, he had some really great Twitter projects that I consider to be literary. *Small Fates* was a series of tweets that he did on an almost daily basis for the better part of the year, drawing attention to headlines from Nigerian newspapers and kind of rephrasing them and ironizing them. And that project was influenced by the feuilleton, which was a print culture project, you know, kind of responding to like ephemeral lives and thinking about how to direct people's attention on a platform that was all about monetizing attention in a moment where I don't think many literary writers would even consider Twitter as a location for publication or as a venue worth thinking about for art. So I'm really interested in his early work in that vein, how it informed novels like *Tremor*. Interested in, you know, Jennifer Egan's early work for Twitter, which I don't think was quite as platform specific as Cole's was, not quite as attuned to the rhythms of Twitter as Cole's was, but still really interesting. Everyone remembers that short story, "Black Box," that she published first on Twitter and then with *The New Yorker* kind of simultaneously—I suppose she published it through *The New Yorker*'s Twitter handle.

**EH**

That transition from thinking about a reading culture to a mass writing culture has been really interesting to me. I've been thinking about that ever since I first read it in some of your work in relation to my students and what they consume and what they produce as well. I don't know. I've been thinking about the novel in particular as a container and you're describing a kind of mass writing that's more dispersed. And so the novel seems partly unrelated because it's such a container. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end that comes maybe bound between covers,

maybe! But also, that's maybe something that it—it's an affordance. It's something that it can offer this mass swirl of writing that's surrounding us at all times. So the thing that I've been thinking about recently is how invisible so much of the Internet is. The algorithm that governs the scroll that you're reading, you have no idea how that works or how it's working or why it's working the way it is. You use ChatGPT and it generates some prompt and you have no idea how it got to that prompt and neither does it. [laughter] And then, on a more material basis, the huge amounts of energy and water for cooling necessary to make just one ChatGPT search or one prompt to make it work so quickly. So I guess one of the things that I think the novel does is kind of reveal the invisible. I'm wondering how you think contemporary fiction right now is making all the invisible that surrounds us visible.

**AV**

Yeah, that's a really interesting question. And there's one—I sometimes wonder if thinking about it in terms of affordance is useful because there are things the novel can do, and then I think there are things that the novel just can't do. And I wouldn't want to assign more agency to a literary form than it really has, because I think that risks losing the legitimacy of what it is. So I don't really think that the novel can gesture towards the invisible infrastructures in a kind of technical way. In part because we now know, and engineers have been telling us this for a while, that we've accepted that the way that technology works is on some level, unavailable to even the experts who have developed these models, right? So we're not going to come along and say the novelist knows what these people don't, because it's not really available to us. And so I think that what the novel can do is, in some ways, becomes invested in showing us the limits of our knowledge of these things, and to couch it in forms of language that makes it more apprehensible in terms of a longer history. So I can think of a couple novels that, I think, address the computational surround that you're talking about. Maybe at the most thematic is *Satin Island* by Tom McCarthy. And if you remember, I think it's from 2015. So it might seem like—it's a decade ago, but that feels like 100,000 years ago at this point. This corporate anthropologist is assigned to write a great report, which is supposed to be this kind of encyclopedic, if not necessarily narrative, distillation of the world that he is observing. And then the kind of punchline of the novel is not that the report is unwritable, but that it's already been written by the computational surround that envelops him. And so there's this fear of redundancy. And it's sort of ludic, but it's also sort of dark. And so I feel like that is almost the postmodern standard for how one addresses a totality, whether it's like the capitalist totality or the computational totality or both. So that is one way I think that invisibility is marked. It's through like, what if these writing agents are rendering us redundant? And that's certainly a conversation that's being had much more powerfully now around AI. The other way I think the novel can mark invisibility is maybe through defamiliarization, which is, again, a kind of standard way to answer the question. But, so, when I was getting to know the history of Web 2.0 and coming across the way people spatialized it and described the layers of the web, the metaphor of layers actually comes up a lot. And I found it useful to think about Web 2.0 in terms of a content layer and a code layer. So the content layer is the screen where we're all writing our thoughts, and the code layer is that infrastructure, the protocols, the templates, the way that information moves across the network, that many of us don't see, and even if we saw, wouldn't know what to do with. And

I think that McCarthy's interested in that code layer in a kind of abstract way. But there are also writers like Yxta Maya Murray, who wrote a novel called *Art is Everything*, who are interested in the content layer, which is a layer that we're all pretty familiar with. And her novel *Art is Everything* is quite interesting in that she novelizes all these genres of mass writing and uses them to unfold a story. So, the protagonist is a conceptual artist, and her art is sabotaging websites. And so you see the plot unfold through Yelp reviews that contain like large screeds against certain—she has these things that she's always kind of criticizing. So she goes on to, I think, a museum's website, and says, Why are you missing this artist? And she's constantly calling attention to institutional erasure. So what I think that novel accomplishes through using mass writing is showing us how many opportunities we have to write against the system that also thrives on our writing. So I think that is a way too to talk about what seems taken for granted, in terms of invisibility. It's not really the part—it's not the code layer, but it's the content layer, like I'm going to contribute to it in a way that sabotages what it's supposed to do, if that makes sense.

**EH**

Yeah, it makes sense. And I think you have your slogan, your bumper sticker, right there, “write against the system”!

**AV**

Write against the system. Yes. [laughter] I have one other example, I don't know if it's going to be useful.

**CH**

Examples are helpful when it's this kind of complicated interaction. So I'm very happy to have another example.

**AV**

Okay, because Murray and McCarthy are novelists. But there are also conceptual artists, and kind of weird figures, like Fred Benenson, who's a data guy. I think he got started on Creative Commons, and he definitely was a Kickstarter employee. These people use the novel in certain ways that I think is interesting. So there's what novelists are doing, and then there's what non-novelists are doing with the novel. So in my book, I talk about a conceptual artist named Xu Bing, who actually tries to write an icon novel, a novel written entirely in visual images. So it's called *Book from the Ground*. And it's really interesting, because he spent decades compiling images, starting with, like, airplane cards, cards designed to communicate to all people through pictures. But then he adds emoji, and all of these icons from your digital screens. And I think when an artist picks the novel to reimagine in terms of pictures—he actually said, “I'm trying to imagine a universal language that is inspired by the Internet, and the Internet's dream of universal communication.” And the result of that experiment was, to my mind, not very readable,

but very, almost sublime in its ability to compile slowly, and over 100 pages, a story in picture. And it seemed to me like you could—the objective of the novel was doomed to fail, but in failing, it was sort of revealed to us, like, this cultural confusion about universality of communication. In trying to achieve transparency, what you achieve is obscurity.

**CH**

Oh, wow.

**AV**

Yeah. And so that became an interesting reflection on what the internet is today, like the early dream of the internet was accessibility, transparency, immediacy, but what was accomplished by the internet is so much more of this noisy swirl of competing stories. You know, truth seems impossible to know, these infrastructures seem impossible to access. And yet we kind of exist with a rhetoric that doesn't match reality, constantly, as a result of it.

**CH**

So, if I might transition into something that I was thinking about, you know, your idea of digital platforms, and how novels adapt to and respond to—that it's not so easy, you're saying as to say, well, the novel can just borrow these supposedly more transparent ways of having cultural exchange, that that landscape has really, in many ways, kind of distorted what we think of as transparent exchange, and that there's something happening beyond a one-to-one exchange that has to do with noise, and a mass form of communication that often is non-communicable. And so I wonder if you'd think some more through the way in which you think that the novel is in dialogue with this. You know, on the one hand, the novel has always, you know, re: Bakhtin thought about how to absorb other forms and to be more useful as an instrument of cultural exchange. But on the other hand, it has retained some of its, you know, small-c conservative narrative forms in doing that. And now it seems like in order for it to have a kind of exchange with this, what you're describing in Web 2.0, something radical has to happen. And so I wonder if you could talk us through that a little bit.

**AV**

Yeah, I mean, I think when the novel confronts the internet, and I think when novelists confront the internet, it's largely in a couple, at least two different ways, I think. And maybe there's a generational divide as well in how novelists confront the internet. When I think about, you know, the generation of Egan, Cole, Cusk, versus a generation, say, of an Oyler, maybe a Naomi Alderman, Murray, people like that. And I think for the older generation, I think there is this real, almost detachment from the internet, where it's kind of looked at askance as a non literary environment. And then when you go into it, you can make it literary, you could theorize its literariness, by historicizing it in light of print culture, you can take these risks that are generally not huge risks, because you have an established reputation. And I think those novels tend to be

interested in questions of form that may or may not seem radical. So, you know, when Rachel Cusk talked about the end of character, this was a huge moment in autofiction, and in a lot of people writing about what is a novel without characters, what does that even mean? If you go back to *Transit*, the most overt statement she makes about character in *Transit* is in reference to, at the very opening of the novel, an astrologer who's sending her emails, who she then realizes after a series of emails is probably a bot shaped by an algorithm. And she says, you know, this couldn't possibly be a human, because it's too character-ful. It's so modeled on a type that it's impossible to believe in its reality, but that itself has an appeal. And so there is where I think a literary theory of character is born. And it comes into being through differentiating itself from a bot. Yet when that theory of character took off and became widely discussed, everybody left the bot behind for some reason. It was just thinking about character in the history of the novel without thinking about the foil, which was an algorithmically shaped type. So that's where I think form has been rethought. And, you know, I'm not sure that the *Outline Trilogy* is a super radical text, but I think it was received as a watershed moment in the history of the novel.

**CH**

Yeah. Cusk became sort of a genre unto herself with that trilogy.

**AV**

Yeah. And then with the younger generation of writers, I think there's a more sociological component, a more professionalizing component, because there's this new doxa that says you need to have an online presence to actually become viable for publishers to want to publish you. And so you have someone like Oyler making her reputation in literary reviewing. You have first novelists developing social media followings in ways that seem almost required in order to break through. And I think that's leading to a generation of novelists who have become very aware of themselves as exploited, as performative, and as, in some ways, reflecting on the sacrifices that you have to make as a professional writer and those floating into the novel itself. So I think *Fake Accounts* is all about, what does it mean to make it? What are you sacrificing in order to make it today as a professional writer in a place where everyone is competing for attention?

**EH**

Another take on that would be the novel *Yellowface*, right? Which is also about creating a persona that has written, well, stolen a novel. But it becomes, I mean, that novel is interesting for a lot of reasons. But one is that it becomes kind of gothic, like this haunting ghost story. So thinking about that in relation to what you're saying about character and its validity is interesting.

**AV**

Yeah, I almost think of that novel as post-autofiction, if we can, because it becomes about stealing and performing an identity, but then, like, stealing this identity becomes a feature of the author herself, R.F. Kuang, kind of dividing herself into multiple characters. So rather than

having the author figure, you have a young author who has experienced her share of online criticism, as so many of these young authors have experienced now, and seem to not be able to avoid responding to it through the text. I think we see the same thing with *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, Sally Rooney reflecting on literary celebrity, right? So it does feel like the novel is coming closer to reality television on some level, where there's the author who exists in the world of letters, and then there's the novel that becomes a place to combine that existence with whatever is the story. And the story is becoming more and more about the making of the novel, the reception of the novel, things like that. It's becoming almost more internalized. Like, the whole industry is internalizing itself in the novel.

**EH**

Well, now I'm sad. I have to change the subject. [laughter] I'm sort of amazed we've gotten this far without talking about ChatGPT.

**AV**

Yay, us! [laughter]

**EH**

But the image you just painted of the industry kind of eating its own tail, internalizing its own self, and making novels out of that, links up with a lot of the interesting writing, I think genuinely interesting writing that is being done with AI. I recently taught Sheila Heti's story "According to Alice." Sheila Heti, season six of *Novel Dialogue*.

**CH**

Good callout, Emily. [laughter]

**EH**

And it was one of the most generative discussions about really big ideas in literary studies, like authorship, reality, originality. For the first time in a while, I felt like my students and I were having really big philosophical questions about what the novel, or in this case, the short fictional, maybe fictional story, can do. And so I wonder what you're thinking about how novels either can be written with, like in collaboration, if that's the right description, with AI, or just what you think fiction is doing by being in dialogue with maybe a "character," I'm putting that in quotes, that is AI, within the world of the novel.

**AV**

Right, like Alice, the bot that Sheila in part created, the bot that Alice's users, who are legion, in part created, and of course, the developers who created the platform that Sheila Heti used. So I

do think that when thoughtful writers use AI, or use generative AI in their work, really groundbreaking things can happen. And I want to emphasize that it will be as rare as previously a groundbreaking work was, right? Not everybody's going to make good work with AI. Many more people will make much more terrible work. And I think the discipline has focused on slop, has focused on—when I say the discipline, I mean, you know, other literary professors like ourselves. I have focused on all the ways it will ruin things. But I think when you do that, you miss the opportunity to talk about the artists who are using it in ways that might actually do something different with form, that might actually reassert fundamentals, like you're talking about Emily, like what is authorship? The history of the author is one of the history of intellectual property, it's the history of a certain idea of possessive individualism. It's one that, in theory, we have questioned, but in practice, we maybe want to defend. We should at least have these conversations. AI is a moment in which these conversations must be had at a practical level. But also, having those conversations at a practical level should not prevent us from talking about people who are doing aesthetically interesting things.

So I absolutely think that you will see very interesting things. And again, it's up to us to identify them, and to make sense of them, because other people will miss it. And I'm really afraid that people will—that there will be a chill around using it amongst people who are using it to do interesting things, right? So Heti is an example of someone who has taken the idea of the bot and run with it. And I actually think that it makes a lot of sense in terms of the history of her work. She's always been someone interested in other people's words and recording devices that she tape recorded her conversations with Margo for *How Should a Person Be?* And she's treating the bots as vast recording devices. And so, you know, part of what her next novel is going to be is a giant editing project of like, you know, a billion words that she has amassed from these bots. So it's, I think, important to kind of think about where they fit in the history of writing, not imagine that they're entirely different and entirely perverse, but also that they might enable us to have new conversations around things like privacy and intimacy, right? I mean, most of the words that she's finding are about sex, which is not surprising. And—yeah, and you know, it's a crazy thing. I taught “According to Alice” too, in my course, and the students—it was an interesting occasion to talk about like, what you will share with a machine. What does it mean to kind of start from scratch again, and even try to imagine, I'm not saying machines have consciousness, but the idea of another consciousness that's truly alien, like bots are an occasion to think about that question. So I think there's just so much that could happen in literary fiction that hasn't happened. Maybe it becomes closer to the questions of science fiction, but it doesn't always look like science fiction. Like Heti's books don't look like that.

**CH**

Hmm. Yeah. No, and I'm very interested, you know, our work together is called *Novel Dialogue*, and that what you're shaping there and thinking about Heti's work is yet another kind of “novel dialogue.” And one that seems like it could be generative of things, you know, that we've been trying to answer as we think about novels and that novels seem to have been trying to answer, whether that's about like sex and intimacy or whether it's about who is the author in an age of mass writing platforms. Those are both questions that I think won't be abandoned necessarily if

we're thinking more seriously about those technologies. But it does—I'm someone who, I feel very old when I think about these things and it does feel scary. So, you know, maybe you can leave us as your final thoughts on this, a little bit of—one more example of how instead of something to be scared of, that we can think of it as generative of the questions that we want to answer in a “novel dialogue.”

**AV**

Yeah. Well, I think, you know, a lot of what the generative AI debate has opened up for me, and maybe this is a productive way to think about it in a time of so much destructive behavior and fear is the gut punch question of like, what are you really motivated to do? You know, I asked my students this in the class I taught on AI and literature and film. I said, is there anything in the world you wouldn't want to automate if you could? And it really was greeted with silence for a while because everyone's thinking in terms of tasks they don't want to do, right? Like if only I could automate my homework or I could automate taking notes in lecture or something like that. But then one person said, I would never want to automate eating dessert. I really want to do that myself, you know? And I was like, so you really want to taste the things you love, you want to savor something. And, for a long time, at least in my courses, I've depended on students wanting to be there. And if you want to be there, it's because you want to read and write for yourself. And if you end up using a tool like ChatGPT, not as a labor saving device or a shortcut, but as an augmentation of your thought, then you're going to be more creative. And I just think that you're going to want, it's a moment for everybody to say, like, what do I want to do? And what do I want to spend my time on? Because people keep telling me my time is shorter and less available. And, you know, I'm constantly trying to be more productive, but if I could stop, what would I do? And I feel like that's what gen-AI is to me. It's like, well, what would I want to do for myself? And I think reading novels is still one of those things. And I don't know how many people would want to truly automate that process of reading or writing, if that was something that they were there for, because it was not something anybody else was telling them to do. So it feels like a moment to assert that.

**CH**

That's as good of an answer as I could have hoped for and leaves me with a sense of actual hopefulness, which is so rare right now. Emily, do you want to take us out?

**EH**

Sure. I just want to shout out to the student who wants to eat dessert. I think that's a brilliant answer. Absolutely brilliant. [laughter]

**CH**

Yes. Yeah. I love it.

**EH**

So, Aarthi, thank you so much for chatting with us about tech and leaving us with a small grain of hope and a long list of novels and novelists, both who have appeared or will be appearing on the podcast, and maybe some that we hope to talk to in the future. Listeners, everybody else, stay tuned for more great conversations between critics and novelists starting next week. *Novel Dialogue* is a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. Beck Daly is our production intern. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. And we always thank the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support.