

# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## Revelations of a Pantheistic Poet: Dr. K.V. Dominic in Conversation

Goutam Karmakar

*Dr K.V. Dominic, English poet, critic, short story writer and editor, is a retired professor of the Post Graduate & Research Department of English, Newman College, Thodupuzha, Kerala, India. He was born in 1956 at Kalady, a holy place in Kerala where Adi Sankara, the philosopher who consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, was born. He took his PhD on the topic 'East-West Conflicts in the Novels of R. K. Narayan' from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala. In addition to innumerable poems, short stories and critical articles published in national and international journals, he has authored/edited thirty books so far. Another poetry book of Dominic translated into French by Dominique Demiscault is in the process of being published in France.*

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GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Since no autobiography of you has been published, readers would like to know about your early days. Can you please tell your readers a bit about your childhood days,

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schooling and college days? And do your childhood memories and parents cast any influence and inspiration for your writing?

**K.V. DOMINIC:** I belong to a below average middle class family. I am the fourth son of the six children family. I have no sisters. My father and mother, who are no more, were not educated—could only read and write in their mother tongue, Malayalam. They worked hard to look after us and we never had to starve. I was just an average pupil in school – not very studious. I was not smart enough and to some extent reserved in making friendship with others. In my undergraduate college days I grew smart enough to be the leader of the class. The influence of my parents is on my character and conduct – honest, sincere, truthful, gentle and compassionate to all including non human beings.

**GOUTAM KARMAKAR:** You have dedicated your *Winged Reason* to your beloved father Varghese Kannappilly. Your poems like *Maternal Attachment*, *Parental Duty* show your great concern for parents. But poems like *Parents Deserted*, *Gayatri's Solitude* present the worse picture of aged parents. How have you presented the problem of the old and the younger generation's attitude towards it? You also believe that human life is a cycle where today's torturer become tomorrow's victim. Kindly elaborate this a bit.

**K.V. DOMINIC:** The generation gap at present is very wide and unbridgeable. My parents and that generation were very loving and caring to their parents as well as to their children. They had to work really hard to sustain the families, whereas the new generation or youth are not so caring and considerate to their parents. They are generally lazy and are not prepared to take pain to look after their parents. So to say, they are more selfish than their parents. That's the reason why many of them discard their parents to old age homes or anywhere seeking their own comforts and luxury. In doing so they never think that it is a vicious cycle and that one day they will also be discarded by their own children.

**GOUTAM KARMAKAR:** It seems that you have been greatly influenced by Jayanta Mahapatra. So kindly tell us how have you been influenced by him? Apart from him who are those philosophers and poets who have influenced you to write verse?

**K.V. DOMINIC:** Jayanta Mahapatra is the greatest contemporary Indian poet in English. I have edited a critical book on him clubbing with five other less established poets. I have met him several times, invited him for our GIEWEC literary festival and been fortunate to be with him for five days at Pondicherry Central University. There GIEWEC honoured him with Lifetime Achievement Award. He is like an elder brother to me. I have taught his poems and essays in college. Though some of his poems are difficult to grasp and obscure in that sense, his use of language, imagery, symbolism and such stylistic aspects as well as the depth of the themes attracted me. The message in his article 'Silence to Poetry: Piercing the Rock' influenced me a lot in my compositions. He states that

Poetry has always been responsible to life. By this, one means that a poet is first of all responsible to his or her own conscience; otherwise he or she cannot be called a poet. And

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may be the other factors necessary to the makings of a good poet will only come later. These may ordinarily imply the craft, or the language the poet will use with skill in his poems. But somehow, these appear as frills in a poem that is already full with feeling, because the poem would have already done what it was meant to do; in other words, touch another human being, before one came to notice the other qualities of the poem.<sup>1</sup>

I care more the content or message of the poem than its style. Apart from him, the Romantics and Victorians, Robert Frost, Indian poets Tagore, Ezekiel, philosophers like the Buddha, Christ, Gandhi, Nehru, Marx, Swami Vivekananda, Darwin, Sree Narayana, Said, Fanon and the scriptures The New Testament, The Vedas, and epics Mahabharata and Ramayana etc. have influenced me in my compositions.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: You are a late bloomer in this arena. But why have you started to begin with poetry leaving other genres of writing? How have you been able to hear the song of the Muse, better call it Cuckoo (your given name to Muse)? In this context can you tell why you have named the Muse as Cuckoo?

K.V. DOMINIC: As I have written in my preface to *Write Son, Write*,

Since poetry is the shortest form of literature, most captivating and didactic, I believe that in this busy, hustling world people should have a special attraction to poetry. Since reading habits of modern man diminish considerably and she/he substitutes that habit to watching TV and such visual media, I believe that it is my duty as a writer to promote poetry at any cost.

The image of cuckoo for the poetic Muse came to me when I went through Stephen Gill's preface to his masterpiece *The Flame*. He has used the image of robins for the Muse. Cuckoos are found everywhere in our area and no birds sing sweeter than them. Hence I thought of concretising the Muse through cuckoo.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: In your poetic collections you have written many elegies. So what is your attitude to death? And where lies the similarities or differences between your elegies and those of from Gray, Tennyson or Arnold?

K.V. DOMINIC: My attitude to death is very positive. I believe in the existence of the Creator and all His creations have to say goodbye when He calls back. Yes, I have written many elegies. 'Ammini's Demise,' 'Michael Jackson, King of Kings,' 'Elegy on My Ma,' 'Massacre of Cats,' 'Tribute to Mohammed Rafi,' 'To My Deceased Cats,' 'Siachen Tragedy,' 'Martyrs at the Borders,' and 'Tribute to Siachen Martyrs' are all elegiac in tone. My best elegy is 'Elegy on My Ma.' Great poets Gray, Tennyson and Arnold have written long elegies with a special purpose and highly philosophic mind. And they have followed the norms of classical elegies to some extent. Many of my elegies

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<sup>1</sup> Jayanta Mahapatra, 'Silence to Poetry: Piercing the Rock,' *Haritham*, 08 Jan. 1997. Accessed 15 Jan. 2000. <http://literarism.blogspot.in/2013/01/about-self-poems-and-poetry-mahapatra.html>

are born from a really mourning mind. It was a vent to express my outburst of emotions. Of course I have added philosophies as well.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Through your pen you have questioned about the inequality of the individuals mainly poorer sections, oppressed and the marginalised ones. So how have you tried to give them identity and individuality? And in doing that how have you tried to dissect injustices and corruptions at all levels?

K.V. DOMINIC: I have portrayed the problems of the poor, the marginalised, women, weaker sections and the downtrodden in many of my poems. The injustices done to them by the five percent of the society, the rich and the government, have been brought to the notice of the readers through these poems. I haven't exhorted these sections to rebel against the government or the rich for exploiting them. Rather I have been indirectly trying to make the rich and the government aware of these miserable ones' plight and do reparations for their exploitations. By establishing the eternal relation between God the Creator and Man and Nature I have been emphasising the fact that all human beings are siblings and again they are siblings of other beings on earth. Hence it is one's duty to protect others and not exploit them. The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and the universe as a single religion in place of diverse religions on earth are the driving force of my writings.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: There is a kind of dualism in your compositions. Sometimes you look so honest for your sensuous and vivid description and sometimes so brutal and pensive. How have you balanced this kind of dualism in your verse? And does this duality hold any specific purpose for you?

K.V. DOMINIC: This duality is part of our life as well as world. As Shelley has stated 'our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought', I have composed majority of my poems on the saddest thoughts. At the same time we find in nature as well as in our lives occasions and instances of mirth and happiness. I have portrayed them as to evoke positive and optimistic thinking which gives us boost to voyage on this turbulent sea of troublesome life.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: You have dealt with poverty, religious harmony, suffering, corruption, unemployment, childhood, nature, environment, female foeticide, beauty, transgender, in your poems. So where lies the unique poetic characteristics of K.V. Dominic?

K.V. DOMINIC: I think that no other Indian poet in English has dealt with as deeply as me the issues of cruelty to animals and their relationship with human beings and relationship between God, Man and Nature. There lies my unique characteristic.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: You are a poet, professor, critic, editor and short story writer. So can you please tell me how you are managing your time schedule? And how have you diverted your energy in so many ways?

K.V. DOMINIC: True, I am involved with many activities at the same time. Editing four issues of two international refereed journals takes much of my time. Being the secretary of Guild of Indian English Writers, Editors and Critics (GIEWEC) having 250 members – all writers, professors and research scholars, I have to reply to their emails, at an average of some twenty replies every day. Besides editing of my edited books; and after all these activities I have to find time for my creative writings. Moreover there will be several phone calls from the members and friends every day which have to be attended to without any lapse. I am a responsible husband and a father and so I will have to find time to complete my domestic duties. In spite of all these busy schedules I go to bed at 11 or 11.30 pm and get up at 5 am and take a siesta for one hour after lunch.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Your dealing with nature, your philosophy of beauty, the mysticism and sensuousness cast you as a man of Romantic sensibilities. How far would you like to call yourself a Romantic one? And does your writing in free verse serve any specific purpose for you?

K.V. DOMINIC: Actually I am not following any school or there isn't any direct influence of any movements in my writing. True, you may find elements of Romanticism as well as Realism in my poetry. When an idea or an emotion comes to my mind I don't want to strain much to put them on paper. I am least bothered about rhyme or stanzaic patterns. I am very particular about the diction to be very simple as well as apt and rhythmic. Alliteration and assonance, if at all any, come unawares. So to say the difference between prose and poetry is very thin in my poetry.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: In one interview you have said that 'Write My Son, Write' is your favourite poem as it is a document of your philosophy and views. So how have you manifested your views and philosophies here? Apart from this in which poems can we see autobiographical elements?

K.V. DOMINIC: As I have stated in my prefaces to the poetry collections, Advaita philosophy and the Buddhist and Jain thoughts have exerted great influence on me and my writings. In my magnum opus 'Write My Son, Write' in 21 sections, using God the Father as my mouthpiece, I have manifested my philosophic views. God the Father reminds His human children of their role and position in this world among the multitudes of other children. He also points out to them their disabilities and warns them not to boast of their superiority or treat sub humans as their slaves or torture them or kill for their comforts and luxuries. God exhorts human beings to flow with the system and never play discordant notes in the multicultural, universal eternal symphony.

'Multicultural Harmony' is another philosophic poem in six sections. There the poet himself is addressing his fellow beings and reminds them of the need of multicultural coexistence in this world. Autobiographical elements are there in some other poems. Elegiac poems such as 'Ammini's Demise,' 'Elegy on My Ma,' 'Massacre of Cats,' 'To My Deceased Cats,' are autobiographical. 'Helen and her World' is another autobiographical poem.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: You have been influenced by three philosophies, namely Hindu, Jain and Buddhist. How far do these three philosophies shape your creative faculty? And in this context your readers want to know how far your upbringing as a Christian influences your writing?

K.V. DOMINIC: The inspiration for my love for all creations of this universe – humans, non-humans, plants and lifeless objects – springs from the philosophies of Hindu, Jain and the Buddhist. One of the main themes of my poetry is this relation between God, Man and Nature. Though I am born as a Christian I am not tied to the practices of Christianity. I deem all religions equal. In fact my religion is universal religion, which preaches to love all creations of the world and show discriminations to none. I believe in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. This love is the theme of majority of my poems. Christ has been a great influence on me. I consider Jesus Christ as one of the finest souls lived on earth. His preaching on the theme of love influenced me a lot. He was indeed a revolutionary – stood for the poor and downtrodden and lived among them. He was crucified by the clergy, and now the corrupt, worldly clergy is crucifying him daily. I agree cent percent to Gandhi's view: 'I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.' I have been criticising this anti-Christian way of life of the Christians through my poetry and short stories.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: You have discussed a lot about the condition of women in our society. How have you presented the problems faced by women? And do you think that women are venerable?

K.V. DOMINIC: True, I have composed several poems about the condition of women in our society. I have also attacked the root cause of their problems – the element of patriarchy. Through several women characters – fictional as well as historical – I have portrayed the issues and problems. No doubt women are venerable. I repeat my lines from 'Multicultural Harmony':

Woman is most venerable  
for she is your mother  
she is nurse and teacher  
and above all  
she is the lamp of house.

Men very often fail to measure the quantity of work women do in their houses. They have to bear children in their wombs for nine months, give birth to them painfully, feed them and rear them. Very often they are not able to sleep well when they have feeding babies with them while their husbands will be fast asleep. I am talking about the majority of women who belong to the average and poor class. Again they will have to work hard in their kitchens, and then on their farms or as labourers to look after the family. Most often women are more dutiful and hardworking compared to men. What they have earned is spent for the family, while a good share of their husbands' earnings is spent in the liquor shops and bars.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Poetry is the criticism of life. How have you proved this dictum more strongly? It is very much clear that from the very beginning you have taken the role of a social reformer. So how have your compositions worked as an agent of social reformation?

K.V. DOMINIC: The primary duty of a poet or a writer is to point out the drawbacks as well as evil practices of his fellowmen. His writings should act as a correcting force to the society. A poet is a

man having more sensibilities and moral consciousness than ordinary people. Hence it is his duty to educate the masses. The ultimate aim of our life is attainment of happiness. But one's happiness shall not be a cause for another's sorrow. So how everyone attain happiness causing sorrows to none is the economics the world needs. This universe is a big concert, and it is the duty of everyone to play concordant notes and not discordant notes in this huge symphony. The poet should teach the society to play this harmonious note. In fact very few play concordant notes and flow with the system. Huge majority play discordant notes and disrupt the eternal flow of the universe. That exactly is what I have been pointing out through my poetry and short stories.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: You are a poet deeply rooted with your native culture and land. So how have you presented the surrounding and culture of Kerala in your works? And what makes you truly a poet of Indian sensibilities?

K.V. DOMINIC: No poet can remain in the sky and write about fictitious things having no connection with reality. His feet are rooted in the place he belongs to. He can't shut his eyes and write. He is bound to observe things happening around him. Similarly he can't write of a people and culture which he is unfamiliar with. Rooted in Kerala I have access and familiarity with the locale and people around me and I write on them. This is what exactly other poets and writers are doing.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: It is very much clear that you are quite disappointed with the Man who is according to you the cruelest and ungrateful creation of God. Why do you think so and are you ashamed of being a part of human kind? In this context kindly tell what kind of utopian society and role of man do you dream of?

K.V. DOMINIC: Taking into account the universe as a big house and God the Creator as the father and all creations as His children, Man is the cruelest and ungrateful child of God because he alone disobeys and disrupts the eternal flow of the universe; he alone plays discordant notes of His symphony. Man is trying to annihilate the entire life on earth. The damages he does to Nature and environment may lead to total annihilation. At the same time using his brain he has done unimaginable wonderful things which other species can't do. I am not ashamed of being a part of human kind. My purpose is to make human beings aware of the destruction they have been doing on the earth. I believe that what I have been feeling, or many other poets like me have been feeling, can be felt by all human beings if they are made aware of. Thus this world can be made a better place. It is not a utopian world or society which I am seeking.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What are the perceptions of beauty of K.V. Dominic when he says that eternal beauty is in achievements eternal? And how far have you become aesthetic and transcendental while portraying Mother Nature?

K.V. DOMINIC: I believe in the concept of a Creator and all creations in this world are His. Religions call Him God the Father. He is the eternal truth. He is the embodiment of beauty and all His creations are beautiful. Thus this universe and all its inhabitants – living and non living are beautiful. Hence nothing is ugly to God, the Father. But man is not able to find this beauty in all

creations. What is pleasurable to his eyes or other senses, he calls beautiful. My argument is that outer beauty which is transient or mortal lies on all creations whereas eternal beauty – beauty which gives eternal happiness – lies in eternal achievements of man.

Nature is considered a mother because like a mother Nature feeds and protects the inhabitants. But her wicked sons, human beings, try to rape and even kill her.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: How will you like to define the term ‘Multicultural Symphony’ in the context of your works?

K.V. DOMINIC: ‘Multicultural Symphony’ is the title I have given to my third collection of poems. The opening poem of the book is titled ‘Multicultural Harmony.’ In that poem I have explained in six sections what I mean by multicultural symphony or harmony. The beauty of this universe lies in its diversity. Unity in diversity among human beings is termed as multiculturalism. There are innumerable religions, philosophies, languages and cultures among human beings. For a happy life on earth – the ultimate purpose of life – a harmonious existence of human beings in the midst of their heterogeneity is essential. That is what I mean by multicultural symphony.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Poems like ‘A Sheep’s Wail,’ ‘I am Just a Mango Tree,’ ‘Nature Weeps,’ ‘Attachments,’ ‘Natures Bounties’ show your concern for nature and the anthropocentric attitude of Man. So what are the roles you have tried to fulfill as an eco-socialist through your verse? And how have you presented the interconnectivity of God-Man-Nature in your compositions?

K.V. DOMINIC: I believe in the teachings of science and my concept of religion is based on them. To me religion and science are twin sides of a coin. Unlike the biblical story of the creation of man I believe that man is an evolutionary being. Thus taking man as one among the multitudinous species of animals he can’t claim any superiority or mastery over other animals. It is our reasoning power which makes us think selfishly and assume ourselves as the chosen ones of the Creator. God the Father can never discriminate or show partiality to one of his children (Men). He loves all creations equally and hates none. True, man has some distinctive features and powers. Other species also have such distinctive features and powers which we do not have. Hence there is no logical reason for us to claim any superiority or mastery over other species. The anthropocentric attitude of man is a crime and sin against Nature as well as the Creator. Man has to learn this truth and be humble enough to allow other beings and plants to live with him. He should be rational enough to think that other creations – non-humans, plants and lifeless objects have equal right to this planet. Live and let others live should be our policy. We shall never exploit nature for our comforts and luxury. We can use the bounties of nature to serve our necessities – for our survival or existence as other animals do. Before you cut a tree for your shelter, another tree should be planted. The equilibrium of the planet should be maintained always.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: How far have you succeeded in your goal as a poet? The fight for a meaningful life has just started and a better world is yet to make. So definitely you are writing and please share with your readers about your future projects.

**K.V. DOMINIC:** When I started writing I never thought that my poems would get such appreciation from different parts of the world as they have now. I started composing very late in my life, only thirteen years back. I consider myself as a minor voice. By the grace of God the messages I convey through my poems have hit the minds. More than 50 critical and research articles have been published on my poems. In addition to the four poetry collections published by Authorspress, New Delhi, one complete collection of my poems and another critical book on my poetry came out from USA in 2016. Translations of my poetry in Hindi and Gujarati have been published. Similarly translations in Bengali, French, Telugu and Tamil are going on. Researches on my poetry for PhD have been begun by some scholars. These all show that I have succeeded in my goal as a poet. As for my future plans, I will go on writing on new themes and burning issues of the world. Changes in the attitudes and habits of man will not come suddenly, but gradually. I am very positive and optimistic and believe that a better world will be born.

**GOUTAM KARMAKAR:** Your patriotism, your fight for the marginalised and oppressed sections give your poetry a postcolonial touch. And at the same time you're dealing with landscapes and social issues with the tools of irony, satire and humour which make you a poet of postmodern sensibilities. So how far would you like to define yourself? And what should be the role of younger generation of poets?

**K.V. DOMINIC:** Your analysis of my poems is right. You can label me as postcolonial and postmodern. What a poet ought to write now – that is exactly what I have been writing. I touch universal themes as well as national and regional. I live in a place which is semi urban. So I observe and experience both urban and rural things and issues. Since our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought, as Shelley says, my advice to the younger generation of poets is that they should concentrate more on saddest thought and be mouthpiece or spoke persons of the poor, down trodden, and the marginalised. They should fight against the cankers of the society. They should be protectors of the environment and nature.

**GOUTAM KARMAKAR:** Thank you, Dr. K.V. Dominic! Kindly enlighten us with your writings in future.

**K.V. DOMINIC:** Thank you Goutam.

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