



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



In Conversation with Sanjukta Dasgupta

Jaydeep Sarangi and Antara Ghatak

Sanjukta Dasgupta, Professor and Former Head, Dept of English and Ex- Dean, Faculty of Arts, Calcutta University, teaches English and American literature along with New Literatures in English. She is a poet, critic and translator, and her articles, poems, short stories and translations have been published in journals of distinction in India and abroad.

Her inner sphere overlaps the outer on the speculative and the shadowy. There is a sublime inwardness in her poems. Her recent signal books include Snapshots, Dilemma, First Language, More Light, and Lakshmi Unbound. She co-authored Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family, Gender: Post-colonial Readings of Tagore's Fiction and Film, and she is the Managing Editor of Families: A Journal of Representations.

She has received many grants and awards, including Fulbright fellowships and residencies and an Australia India Council Fellowship. Now she is the Convener, English Board, Shaitya Akademi. Professor Dasgupta has visited Nepal and Bangladesh as a member of the SAARC Writers Delegation, and has served as a co-judge and Chairperson for the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia region). She has visited Melbourne and Malta to serve on the pan-Commonwealth jury panel. She is now an e-member of the advisory committee of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, UK. She is Visiting Professor, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland, and she is the President of the Executive Committee, Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library in Kolkata.

The interview was conducted via email in December 2018.

Q: When did you start writing poems and short stories?

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A: I began writing poems and short stories as a teenager. In fact, my earliest attempts to write poems and short stories were not really spontaneous but compulsory. At my school the English language teachers set the students ‘tasks’ in writing short stories and poems and referred to them as ‘compositions’. When I discovered to my delight that I could translate my imagined world of bandits, heroes, weeping heroines and brutal evil characters into words, and as a result, earned credits in class, I naturally felt anything but humble. My poems at this stage were about flowers, skies, rain, friends, school and of course love. Those were dreary pieces about yearnings and tears and now I would find them very embarrassing.

Q. Any mentor?

A. My first mentors were my parents. Both of them were teachers, so learning from them was easy, as they were experienced in dealing with difficult students in class. They motivated me through example and by sharing their experiences about enrichment of the mind through intensive reading. They introduced me to various literary genres and also encouraged me to develop reading and writing skills in my native language Bengali and of course English.

Q. When did you discover your talent for writing?

A. In high school I realised I could handle the English language with a certain amount of competence as, without any very conscious determination, an urge to spin stories and write poems was irrepressible. Perhaps all the love stories, tragedies and lyrical poems I was reading, in both Bengali and English, inspired me to create narratives and poetic lines that on critical reading did make me think these were not appalling or insipid. However, I strongly feel it is my readers who tell me whether a piece has been successful or otherwise.

Q. What are the preconditions for a good poem?

A. A poem has an element of indefinable spontaneity about it that perhaps can be the result of a creative churning within the mind of the poet. I think ‘precondition’ is an inappropriate word when we try to define a successful poem. The ‘goodness’ of a poem depends on the standpoint of the reader and the intellectual maturity of the poet.

Q. How do you structure thoughts into a poem?

A. I do not follow any specific technique or model but my wide reading of world poetry inspires me to write the way I do, trying to create a fine balance between substance and style.

Q. You have written fine poems on Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Do you have a spiritual mind or does it reflect a new development within you?

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A. If you have read my poems on Hindu Gods and Goddesses with some attention you will find that in my poems about divine Hindu icons there has been a concerted effort to break free from known stereotypes. I have tried to deconstruct and reinterpret the mythical figures and divine idols of worship.

Q. You also voyage into dreamscapes as a kind of meta language of suggested meanings. Do you find this observation justified?

A. A person who persists in weaving words into poems is always on a journey, trying to seek out the unfamiliar or find hidden layers within the familiar. In such a respect, a poet is most often a dreamer, not daydreaming, but dreaming about a harmonious world of love and human solidarity. As the first premise of language is communication, I have tried to use words in my poems that are reader- friendly and invite empathy.

Q. Is writing an act of resistance and emancipation for you?

A. Creative writing for me is to explore, expose and excavate the world we have been born into, as well as the world that is recreated through history and oral traditions. Every poet has a purpose, every poem is a political assertion, through resistance inevitably liberation from the oppressive spaces can be achieved by a poet.

Q. Could you comment on the poetry scene in Kolkata?

A. Though the Bengali poetry scene has always been brilliant in the city of Kolkata, poets who chose to write in English were always greeted with indifference and had remained marginalised. It is precisely in the last two decades in general and in the last few years that poets who write in English have made their presence felt in the sophisticated literary milieu of Kolkata. Judging by the enthusiasm and the talent it seems that Indian English poetry has now deeply rooted itself in the culture of Kolkata.

Q. How do you see the role of a poet in the age of cyber technology and Facebook?

A. The role of a poet is to dream of new horizons and new ways of dreaming of the world outside the self and the world within, leading to an enlightened understanding of the universe. Social media and cyber technology and the advent of cyber culture can only enhance the poet's ambit that covers the illogical trajectory from the cosmos to cosmetics.

Q. Can a bilingual poet 'think in English' where English is L 2?

A. To 'think' in English implies that the words suggest themselves seamlessly to the poet as they are born on the page. This ease of expression depends on the subjectivity of the poet. If a poet's training at school and college and beyond has centred on English as a first language, acquiring this skill is often possible. When it is about acquiring skills in creative expression

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while trained in English as a second language, there usually is a problem of stilted use of language, that often seem like translated writing. However, practice can effectively overcome such lacunae.

Q. Who are important reviewers/critics on you?

A. My reviewers and critics have mostly been faculty members of English departments of various universities and colleges. Among them I would like to mention Professors Somdatta Mandal, Sachidanandan Mohanty, Murari Prasad, Asha Viswas, Jaydeep Sarangi, Amit Sankar Saha, Gargi Talapatra et al.

Q. Publishers often consider publishing collections is a commercial suicide. How do you view this?

A. As poetry is not about profit and is more about invaluable cognitive responses I am not sure I can comment on the suicidal projects that publishers are apprehensive about.

Q. Do you think that a poet should gloss or use end notes if he uses native expressions?

A. Definitely.

Q. Is it necessary to know the biography of the poet to comprehend a poem?

A. The subjectivity of a poet defines, determines, inspires and motivates a poet. Therefore in order to comprehend a body of poetry composed by a particular poet, knowledge of the poet's life is essential. Appreciation of a single poem of a particular poet included in an anthology however does not entail such a requirement.

Q. Would you please mention a few poems that represent you as a poet?

A. I think all the title poems of my five published books of poetry-*Snapshots, Dilemma, First Language, More Light* and *Lakshmi Unbound* can be read as signature poems that represent me as a poet.

Q. Didi, would you share with us one of your recent poems?

A. 'Kolkata/Calcutta'

**Job Charnock's Calcutta
Post-imperial Kolkata
Three villages merge joyously
Gobindopur, Sutanuti, Kalikata
In an inseparable embrace of creation**

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Calcutta/Kolkata
My cosmopolitan city
Rooted in the soil of rural Bengal
Fusion and effusion
Local and global cultures
In incessant dialogue
Cathedrals, synagogues
Temples and mosques
In peaceful co-existence.

Kolkata you inspire me
Kolkata you shock me
Kolkata you heal me
Kolkata you kill me
Kolkata you love me
Your love makes me persist
Your love makes me insist
That Kolkata is MY city
Though I am a citizen of the world.

Sanjukta Dasgupta, 8 April 2018

Q. Your co-authored book *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family, Gender Post-colonial Readings of Tagore's Fiction and Film* is out. How is this book different from other books on Tagore? Why is it named 'Radical Rabindranath'? Is it simply an alliteration?

A. The title 'Radical Rabindranath' is not about simple alliteration. The more I noticed Tagore's experiments in various literary genres and his constant transformation from one premise to another, I felt here indeed was a radical intellectual who had the courage of his convictions. Those who have read the book carefully will notice that it was Jawaharlal Nehru who had unequivocally stated that as Tagore became older, he became more and more radical. In fact I was quite delighted if not relieved to come across Nehru's statement, as it supported so positively my primary argument.

Q. You are a poet, storywriter, critic, poet, editor and translator. How do you manage so many facets of life?

A. As you notice, all these roles overlap, so such multi-tasking is all in the day's work.

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