



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo: Satya Banerjee

Interview with Arup K Chatterjee

Elisabetta Marino

Arup K Chatterjee was awarded his doctorate at the Center for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, in 2015. He has taught English, as an Assistant Professor, at colleges in the University of Delhi. In 2014-15 he was a recipient of Charles Wallace fellowship to the United Kingdom. He is the founding-chief-editor of Coldnoon: International Journal of Travel Writing & Travelling Cultures <<http://www.coldnoon.com/>>. He is the author of The Purveyors of Destiny: A Cultural Biography of the Indian Railways (Bloomsbury, 2017). He is an Assistant Professor at the School of Law, O.P. Jindal Global University.

Q. How did you develop such a deep interest in English literature? Did you begin as a child? Who were your literary models and favourite writers?

A. My interest in English literature came through a deep and abiding interest in Urdu poetry – which serves as a guacamole dip to my writing. But first, my English was marinated in an unfinished grounding in Bengali literature.

I am a firm believer in the aristocracy of languages, especially when used for a literary purpose. I do not know about peasants of other nations, but in ours, peasants too – or perhaps more so peasants – speak in an aristocratic manner. They would – and I say this with a great deal of respect – ideally like to give you a leisurely background before describing their grievances, chagrin or joys in tardy tunes.

Good Urdu hardly ever condenses itself in one word where twenty could suffice. And brevity in Urdu has its own charms – usually cynical or ironic. Its imagery has cultivated in me senses of abandonment and suspension of disbelief – the language speaks to me of romantic or surreal otherworlds. The ability to abandon inhibition and disbelief is still the most essential quality a writer should imbibe. A reader has the privilege of harbouring inhibitions – about imagining an altogether new world. But an author cannot assume the same.

Bengali, which is my mother tongue, for several reasons, did not come to me naturally. I was not schooled in that language. When I came to acquire it, I could only use it in a flawed or

theatrical way. The usage inspired either awe or humour in the listeners, far from facilitating ordinary communication.

As a consequence, my English too started developing strands of complexity. It led me to discover that element of the unsaid in my speech and reading, which had to find a new expression – one where all my unfinished, aristocratic, or otherworldly articulations could cohabit and fructify – a dialectical synthesis.

I wrote the usual odd English poem or two, early on in school. However, serious reading – and writing – came only with John Keats and Percy Shelley. They were also my first models.

In prose, Arthur Conan Doyle was, and remains, one of the supreme mentors. That kind of English is perennially handy for me to learn the language better – and the art of precision. The Holmes stories are extremely materialistic. They may be set in an inaccessible time. But they refer to objects, places, geographies and identities that are very specific – very accessible. The world conjured in our imagination is therefore very tangible, especially keeping in mind the fact that any loss of grasp over tangible 'data' might lead the sleuth, and the reader, astray. The stories taught me to be specific, about characters, emotions, colors, furniture, and so much else.

Frankly, even a grammar book by Wren and Martin was a great influence on my writing – those passages of prose and poetry it contained at the back! The book continued to be an influence on my thoughts until it was destroyed by termites, two years ago – after 23 years of service to my intellect.

Grammar is the soul of poetry, and poetic emotion in writing. This core principle was exploited phenomenally by two modern French thinkers, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. They lent me their spirits in my years at the university. Both of them seemed to be quarrelling with the physiognomy of language, exorcising it, re-conjuring it, undressing it, ravishing it, nurturing it and then declaring it amorous or amorphous.

A poetic voice of great influence lurked in the background during many of these hours of philosophy – the voice of T.S. Eliot. These are the writers I read and re-read – to the point of cocooning myself in a boudoir throbbing with their ecstasies.

Q. In 2015 you were awarded second prize in 'The Other Side' poetry contest, promoted by the prominent *Cha: Asian Literary Journal*. Can you tell us something about your poem, entitled 'Karvat'? Can you also expand on your activity as an artist?

A. To answer your second question, first – since it refers to an enterprise that worries me, excites me and even makes me feel more responsibly towards – the enterprise of art!

Writing is not art, unless it reaches a stage of madness – a sort of mad precision and perfection, as I see it.

Poetry is often compared to art, but then such a poetry must also have equally powerful conceits. The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' for instance! The poem has immortalised art, as well as a certain artistic object. Ironically, that object is also interwoven with strands of death or disease.

If I am to be an artist, I must comply with two major responsibilities. First – since I am not a practising artist in any form of the fine or performing arts – as a writer I must write with the

precision with which one sighs or hopes to live a little longer, just before death. Second, I must be able to inspire the same emotional duress in the reader or the spectator, as though the writing were their own work, and that reading it encompassed the remaining life-span of their readership.

This, somewhat idealistic and even untenable standard, brings me to your first question – on ‘Karvat’! The fact that it was a submission for a prized poetry event stirred my poetic ego. It was probably the only time I will have made an entry into a poetry event. Personal circumstances, the artistic sensibility and, finally, opportunity do not always coincide. It did then.

However, ‘Karvat’ was intended to be much more than that. I wanted to take a step towards bold declarations of certain obscenities, sexual overtures, and linguistic experiments in the English language. I was writing then from, and for, a very specific paradigm. Indian writing is usually irreverent towards English nowadays. Barring some of the greats writing poetry from India today, there is general apathy towards codes of grammar. There is equal apathy towards drama, opulent descriptions, imagery, solidity of poetic scenes, and even dialogue. I acknowledge this apathy could itself be a valid postcolonial or postmodern aesthetic – but not in my concerns. Often the lack of dialogue or poetic excess strikes me as cases of impoverished imagination and the poverty of our ears – ears contented with ever so little melody or ever so much of loud expressionlessness!

‘Karvat’ is a world of excess, between the characters of Qasim and Sufiya – a world that they have indeed lost to the circumstances that are rather too real for their own good. In Qasim I saw a Thomas de Quincey, guarded more in his language (Latin or Urdu, as the case may be) and narcotics, than his religion. In Sufiya, I intended a reincarnation of the hungry child that de Quincey finds in London, or the 20-year-old seamstress who goes down into the knitting-women’s basket, with her Citizen Evremonde, Sydney Carton. I wanted Sufiya to live on. But, I also wanted Qasim to be able to murmur after the separation, something of that immortal sentence: ‘It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.’ In fact, that entire sequence from *A Tale of Two Cities* has invisibly gone into the writing of ‘Karvat’:

‘You comfort me so much! I am so ignorant. Am I to kiss you now? Is the moment come?’

‘Yes.’

She kisses his lips; he kisses hers; they solemnly bless each other. The spare hand does not tremble as he releases it; nothing worse than a sweet, bright constancy is in the patient face. She goes next before him – is gone; the knitting-women count Twenty-Two.

Qasim and Sufiya are characters who – while outside India – talk in English and chaste Urdu, within the walls of the poetic stage. There is another character, a third, who listens to the story that Qasim narrates in first person. Spaces are deliberately made to coalesce and situations are consciously left amorphous, so as to bring the reader to a Coleridgean world – even though the reader happens to be from the twenty first century.

Karvat means to toss or turn over in sleep. It usually comes during moments of uneasiness. My intention was to opiate the reader into half a diseaseful slumber, not a very comfortable one.

Q. 'Karvat' is somehow connected with the idea of travelling, which is pivotal in your writing as an academic. In 2011, you even founded a literary journal and magazine, *Coldnoon: International Journal of Travel Writing & Travelling Cultures*; can you tell us more about this project? What kind of writings does it foster?

A. 'Karvat', as said, is a poem set outside India. The chief of its action takes place in Plymouth. I used the landscape of the Hoe, in Plymouth – its local pub culture and fish and chips outlets – to create an Oriental narrative based on Sufi symbols, somewhat resembling a romantic exchange which might have occurred in Delhi or Lucknow in another time.

I was advised by one of my professors – who is duly regarded by most as a legendary guide which he undoubtedly is – that Plymouth was not the best of the English sea-towns to experience. Most people would agree with this. I happened to experience unprecedented things in Plymouth, around the Hoe. I wouldn't like to blame Plymouth for it though, it couldn't have been the virtue of the place alone. If someone else were to travel to Plymouth, and this person was a character in a story, they would certainly have their own quirks, their own mechanisms of communication, their own foreign air to blend with that of the sea-town of 'fish and chips'. Travel is not simply because Qasim and Sufiya are in Plymouth, but also because parts of the town become their little corner of Ballimaran (from Delhi).

This leads me to my own theoretical model of travel – travelogy. The definition has changed over the years. It has taken on many new strands. But largely it is thus: travelogy is how much home a traveller creates in a space of the *unheimlich*. A space that is haunted is never your own. It haunts you, and you bring your own haunts – your own *heim* (home) into it – in order to civilise yourself, or give a civil address to the alien space where you are.

You only ever belong in travel – whether it is your home (which is an oneiric haunt, possible only in the activity of daydreaming) or whether it is a hotel (which is a portable aspiration for your home). While you are on the road, you might think you are travelling. But you're simply mobile – not travelling – until you have rested at a place, felt sufficiently exhausted, and had plenty of time to undergo a bodily experience of the cooling off of your perspiration and your erstwhile landscapes. The most immediate example I always give is that of a traveller on a hot afternoon. Imagine they have just taken a moment's pause, and experience a momentary yielding of their exhausted body. There is that ephemerally temperate thing they might experience – that *Coldnoon* moment – when travel and travel writing really begins.

It is such experiences that *Coldnoon* takes up, more often than not. It sees travel differently, as comprising more local or ground travels – urban geographies, situations, suburban plots, characters thrown into each other's way by accident, aspects of travel in literature, cinema, music, architecture, gender, and so on.

Coldnoon is about every such kind of travel which is not grand – or is not 'travel writing' in the narrow traditional sense of the word. Why, as I generally like to ask, should not be my journey

to work be able to produce ‘travel writing’? Or, why cannot my home, if it suddenly became a haunted house, not become a tourist site? If it were to, it always has the potential of being a travel destination, doesn't it? Michel de Certeau has said more succinctly than anyone I know, so far: we travel to distant lands to rediscover what has become unfamiliar back home.

Q. Starting from last Summer, the new issues of *Coldnoon* are focused on four cities: London, Lahore, Cairo and Calcutta. Why did you choose these cities?

A. I cannot not have chosen London. I might be culpable of being ever so hybrid or colonial. But I believe the British Empire should always have a chance to feature, either in dominant or self-subversive ways, in travel writing. After all, it was the empire that really created the culture of modern travel writing. The French and the Dutch were pioneers too, but we learned the writings of those who ruled us.

Anyhow, Britain had to feature – and London was a good enough representation of Britain. My primary interest was to see how the writers and artists could subvert the logic of imperial and nostalgic Britannia.

Calcutta is my hometown and a colonial city, and so, similar logic follows here. While I was sympathetic to the interests of fellow-denizens of the city, and old-timers, I also wondered if some authors could upset the logic of the old-fashioned nostalgia that we have for the ‘city of joy.’ After all, not everything there is hunky dory, nor shall it be.

I was glad to have published quite a few writings which offset the good-old classical ways of seeing Calcutta – and the same earlier for London.

Lahore was my first choice of a Pakistani city, because I knew some Lahori friends, by then, who wanted to write stories and narratives about the city. Besides, there were those Indians who had visited the city and had brought home plenty of diverse acrylics to paint new portraits of a canonical landscape. Pakistan needed to be heard, or spoken about, being such a close neighbour of ours. Whether or not India and Pakistan talk to each other, in India we must always hear or read of Pakistan.

And finally, Cairo – an Egyptian city, which was once the hub of imperial harems and royal passages! Someone had to talk of Cairo, before speaking of Paris. We would always have Paris, but first I wanted to cover the imperial threshold into the heart of darkness.

The next series of writings will of course feature a new quartet of cities. Paris could surely come in there, and so could Delhi. I am very desirous of reading what writers have to say about Ballimaran – if they do have anything to say about the place after all.

Q. The subject of colonialism is intimately connected with your latest literary effort, what you called ‘A Cultural Biography of the Indian Railways’: the forthcoming volume entitled *The Purveyor of Destiny*. Can you tell us what prompted you to write this book? Who or what inspired you?

A. It is a disconcerting query, for I fear it might not fetch a very erudite answer – I hate for the wonderful academic effort in your question to go begging for a reciprocal response.

But the truth is, I really did not have a very academic inspiration or a paradigm to work from, while writing *The Purveyors of Destiny*. It is a cultural history of the Indian Railways – they were indeed built by the British with a lot of love, labour, industry, ambition, panache, and a lot of tyranny. Without a doubt the history embodies a history of the exploitation of the subcontinent. Every narrative of romance, adventure, glamour and every bildungsroman tale set in postcolonial India owes its larger-than-life dimensions as well as its vanity to the British diaspora of engineers who laid the railroads – Rudyard Kipling’s ‘Bridge-builders’, if you will.

Notwithstanding so much of academic rationale – notwithstanding the entire work being a self-conscious critique of how colonialism and postcolonial-inebriety have shaped the most prominent of India’s railway journeys – my inspiration was colonial, in its own right.

I warmly welcome you to critique that.

As to the question, which I wish I could have evaded, my real inspiration came in two narratives, of major importance especially in India.

The first were the Sherlock Holmes stories. They were extremely popular in India – even more so in an age when Indian television had not started screening non-Indian productions – until about mid-nineties. Fathers and grandfathers would read Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories to their sons and grandsons. I was particularly inspired by the train sequence in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, where Doctors Watson and Mortimer, and Sir Henry Baskerville, take the train from London Paddington to Dartmoor. Later, Holmes and Watson take a train from Dartmoor to Coombe Tracey, in the same novel. The scenes are etched in marble in my mind – such were the effects of colonisation. My grandfather colonised his son, who colonised me. I have read those train sequences more than any religious fanatic in our country has read the Holy Scriptures.

The second narrative was Richard Attenborough’s Oscar-winning film, *Gandhi*. The film has a pivotal scene where Gandhi tours northern India with his friend and wife. Ravi Shankar plays the *desh raag* on the sitar. It is a very cleverly and artistically drawn sequence. And it had its desired effect on me – I claimed it to be a true story of India. After seeing the film I kept humming the notes, fancying the plush dinners that the Britons might have had on the trains while Gandhi and his kind travelled half-naked in the third-class carriages. In short, I loved the trains because they had a great sub-text of luxury. Later, I came to love the same trains because I realized you could do anything with a train – represent anything, even the great wonders of the world. You could show someone eating consommé, meat pies and Sancerre on the trains – you could show them in a portable home and a portable empire. You could show that imperialism defied gravity and the tropical climate, that it could enlist the subservience of millions of workers and penetrate its way into every corner of the subcontinent – civilise it, and politely plunder it with all possible felicity in British manners.

Q. What about the role of railways in one of the most difficult times for the Indian Subcontinent, namely the 1947 Partition?

A. *The Purveyors of Destiny* does take this up in a major way. This is in fact the period in Indian history that gives the book its title.

In 1857, though it was cautiously underplayed, one of the major vulnerabilities of the British Empire was its Indian Railways. Their railroads in India came under the siege of the ‘Mutineers’. And more than the real damage itself was the fear that railroads could be the most embattled sites during the uprising.

Ninety years later, the same railway tracks were properly bathed in blood.

I am personally very averse to take the point too far – it would very soon lead to a flurry of adjectives all too graphic and never very useful. That is what many scholars writing on Partition have done. It is true that the railways were the ‘dumbwaiters of Partition’, in India. They transported mutilated corpses with as much efficiency as they had hitherto transported cutlery and upholstery. But imagery of the partition is rather too inextricably embedded onto the railways. This is unfortunate. What the mutiny could not enact the partition did – an atavistic and macabre subversion of modernity through the use of the very apparatus of civilisation that the British gave us.

Lord Mountbatten’s orders prohibited the British army from providing safe passages to Partition victims. Only British civilians were allowed that privilege. With the British gone, we made the utmost use of their industry to mark a passing retreat to savagery. And, of course we could never quite overcome that. The history and the imagery haunts me – I regret not being able to talk very objectively about it. I wonder who can.

Q. Can you expand on the role of Indian railways in both literature and the film industry?

A. As I have hinted earlier, the Indian Railways became a predominant tool of representation. The railways began as an industry. But actually they were preceded by representation, and followed by representation.

Even before the first passenger train ran from Bombay to Thane, in 1853, there were numerous debates in the British Parliament on whether such an industry would suit Indian traffic and Indian customs. There were also debates on whether the older system of irrigation canals should have received larger subsidies from the government than the railways. Of course, the expenditure on the Indian Railways was probably hundred times or more than that on irrigation canals. As a consequence, the railway project of the empire was criticised by many leading economists of the age, the drain of wealth theorists, Florence Nightingale, M.K. Gandhi, and many others. Droughts, famines and plagues followed the expansion of the railways in India.

One leading thinker of the nineteenth century, however, celebrated the introduction of the railways into the empire. He believed that the growth of the railways would foster the growth of parallel industries. The thinker was Karl Marx, and his prophecy was indeed very accurate. Iron and steel, timber, tea, cotton, jute, sugar, fruits and vegetables and even opium industries were largely helped by the railways. But another set of parallel industry, which even Marx could not have imagined, was that of representations. All the debates preceding and following the railways

were representations, after all, in one form or another. These were later consolidated in literature and cinema.

What if the Indian Railways did not exist at all? Rudyard Kipling's resounding refrain, 'rail me to the hills, for old sake's sake' would not have been there in the first place. His 'Among the Railway Folk', written about the railway town of Jamalpur, might have been set in Manchester. Many of Flora Annie Steel's stories would have disappeared, and Mark Twain's *Following the Equator* would not have been written. Considering Twain was in debt at the time, and the book provided him a way out, the Indian Railways can be said to have done serious service to the world of American literature. Twain's debt may be evaluated at \$3 million in today's equivalents.

Without the Indian Railways, a large portion of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* would have been irrevocably lost. A lot of regional Indian literatures from the turn of the century, a lot of the drama of the Indian freedom struggle, the bomb blasts, the attempted assassinations and train robberies, the Kakori Conspiracy, Gandhi's tirade against the railways or his touring the country in third-class carriages, R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days*, many of Ruskin Bond's stories, and so much more would have to be eliminated. India's claim to the Oscars and world cinema – Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* and Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* – too would have been aborted. And an even longer list of homegrown cinema – *Sholay*, *The Burning Train*, *Half Ticket*, *Bees Saal Baad*, *Toofan Express*, *Manthan*, *Dil Se*, *Chennai Express*, *Parineeta*, *Baton Baton Mein*, *Julie*, *Kitaab*, *Masoom*, *Ijaazat* – would probably have never existed, either.

The idea is not simply to ask what Indian literature and cinema would have been without the railways. Rather, as the renowned railway historian, Ian J. Kerr, has suggested, a cultural historiography of the Indian Railways reveal patterns of cultural shifts in the sociopolitical history of India. To do that is a massive task, and *The Purveyors of Destiny* is only the beginning.

For the industry of representations to be taken seriously, one must first understand that the railways were built to represent something majestic and armorial – imperial glory, invincibility, architectural grandeur, and dwelling-in-mobility. The railways themselves came to be represented in love stories, thrillers, detective plots and nationalist sagas. Until now, it was still too early to expect the larger audience to understand this fundamental reciprocity of representation. Now that the railway representations are progressively diminishing – and we have entered an age of the post-railways – perhaps people will be more willing to acknowledge the phenomenal scope of the industry of representations.

Q. Any plans for the future?

A. I tried writing *The Purveyors of Destiny* both as an academic work as well as a voiceover for the railways themselves – as though it were a biography. The Indian Railways is the chief protagonist – a very flawed, endeared, neglected, adored, ambitious, gallant, and tragic character – in the book. My primary interest is in giving voices to characters, albeit from another time. The most ideal and challenging character for me would be someone who has arrived from a different time into the present one. The railways was one such character. The researches that the book led me to have

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left a large surplus. The industry of a railway book must not end there, if Marx is to be trusted. It must and will lead to many parallel projects.

I am presently working on a history of India, told with a difference. Since history is not really my training, I have no qualms about introducing conjecture and narrative into history. And that liberty would be duly accounted for – my history shall have no claims to authenticity. It would rather like to appeal to the believability of the whole affair, that is, the telling of the history of India across three thousand years.

Another project, and this one is especially close to my heart, is a novel set in another time. It is not exactly a historical novel, for it does not focus so much on political or cultural history. It happens in a world of characters who we are all very familiar with, who lived around the same time, whose paths never really crossed, and very surprisingly so. In the novel, they all come together over a mysterious affair set in the heart of Empire.

Q. Thank you, Arup!

Elisabetta Marino is tenured assistant professor of English literature at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. In 2000, she published a book on Tamerlane in English and American literature (Tamerlano dalla letteratura inglese alla letteratura americana) and edited the proceedings of the 2001 'Asia and the West Conference' organized at Tor Vergata. She co-edited the collection of essays entitled Transnational, National, and Personal Voices: New Perspectives on Asian American and Asian Diasporic Women Writers (2004), and in 2005 she published a volume entitled Introduzione alla letteratura bangladesi Britannica (an introduction to British Bangladeshi literature). She has translated poems by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, collected in a volume entitled Talismans/Talismi (2006), and edited the second volume of an e-book, New Asian American Writers and News from UK, Italy and Asia: Literature and the Visual Arts (2007). In 2010 she edited the second volume of another e-book: Una città tra Oriente e Occidente. Istanbul Shanghai (A City between East and West. Istanbul Shanghai). In the same year, she co-edited a volume entitled Positioning the New: Chinese American Literature and the Changing Image of the American Literary Canon. In 2012 she edited, together with Tanfer Emin Tunc and Daniel Y. Kim, a Special Forum of Journal of Transnational American Studies (dedicated to Sau-Ling C. Wong), entitled Redefining the American in Asian American Studies: Transnationalism, Diaspora, and Representation (eScholarship, University of California). Her book on Mary Shelley and Italy (Mary Shelley e l'Italia. Il viaggio, il Risorgimento, la questione femminile) was released in 2011. The volume she co-edited entitled Europe Facing Inter-Asian Cultural, Literary, Historical and Political Situations was released in 2014, while another collection of essays she co-edited, entitled The West in Asia and Asia in the West, Essays on Transnational Interactions has been released in 2015. In November 2016 she published a monograph devoted to Romantic dramas on a mythological subject (La metamorfosi nella mente. I drammi a carattere mitologico di Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley, Mary Shelley). She has published extensively on travel literature,

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on the English Romantic writers, on Italian American literature, Asian American, and Asian British literature.

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