



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



An Interview with Ketaki Datta

Elisabetta Marino

Ketaki Datta is an Associate Professor of English at Bidhannagar College, Kolkata; a novelist, a critic and a translator. She wrote her PhD thesis on Tennessee Williams, which she published in 2011 under the title The Black and Nonblack Shades of Tennessee Williams (Bookworld, Kolkata). Among her accomplishments as an editor, the following volumes deserve mention: Indo-Anglian Literature: Past to Present (Booksway, Kolkata, 2008), New Literatures in English (Bookworld, Kolkata, 2011), and Sahitya Akademi Award-winning English Collections: Critical Overviews and Insights (Authorspress, New Delhi, 2014). Her translation from Bengali of Paadi (The Voyage) by Jarasandha (the pen name of Charu Chandra Chakraverty) was published in 2008 (Booksway, Kolkata), while her translation of Shesh Namaskar by Santosh Kumar Ghosh (Shesh Namaskar = The Last Salute) was released in 2013 (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi). Her articles and translations have been published in various international journals, and her poems are featured in Brian Wrixon's anthologies in Canada. Her debut novel, A Bird Alone (Sarup Books, New Delhi, 2009) has been highly commended by the reviewer of Dorrance Publishing Co. (USA), besides being positively reviewed by Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi), the Telegraph, and the Sunday Statesman (India).

I became acquainted with Ketaki Datta in 2007 thanks to our mutual friend, the writer and scholar Debjani Chatterjee. I was immediately struck by the quality of Ketaki's academic output, as well as by her charismatic personality and her extraordinary capacity to create bonds of trust, affection, and esteem with whoever she happened to collaborate. Hence, I was granted the possibility of contributing to one of her critical anthologies; moreover, I had the pleasure of reviewing A Bird Alone. The subject of the present interview is her second novel, One Year for Mourning (Partridge Publishing Co.), published at the end of 2014.

EM. The theme of loneliness connects your first and second novels. I believe, however, that far from signifying dejection, loneliness is employed by you as a fruitful tool to achieve self-understanding and better communication with the others. Can you expand on this?

KD. Both Anita and Kathakali were loners in a certain sense of the term. In order to fill up the vacant hours, both of them indulged in creative pursuits: Anita used to write letters and

sometimes whatever she felt like, and Kathakali had to write to give vent to her pent-up feelings. Both wrote in order to fight off their sense of being alone. Neither Anita nor Kathakali are lonely individuals: they are brave fighters for a noble cause: rearing the forsaken child of a 'bai' [dancer] like Chandana, or rendering selfless service to an ailing mother with devotion. Even when they are left alone, they know how to make life more meaningful. You are right, Elsa, in your views.

EM. Writing is often used as a 'treatment' by your characters, as a way to come to terms with positive and negative experiences. Is that a suggestion to readers? Is writing a cathartic means of self and collective salvation?

KD. Oh Elsa, you are a brilliant observer, nay a veteran critic! Yes, Anita used to read and write in her leisure hours to keep herself meaningfully engaged, while Kathakali writes poems to fill in the empty hours. Yes, both seek catharsis from this hobby. I advise readers to keep themselves engaged, of course, meaningfully, and to make the most of their existence on earth.

EM. What is the role of music in your narrative? (It seems to me that art and music act first of all as healers).

KD. Music, art: all these are the *raison d'etre* for a person who loves to practise them and who stays deeply engrossed in them. Anita loved to write, Chandana used to play sitar; Kathakali's mother plays sitar, Kathakali, the narrator loves to write poems. They are not a means of escape from reality, but rather they are ways to find the ultimate happiness we all long for. Art and music have the potential to keep a person mentally healthy and sound.

EM. You address important social issues, such as arranged marriages often clashing with love and true affection. Can you expand on your views?

KD. In this third-world society, patriarchy still takes an upper hand in any family. In the case of Rani's aunt, her love for Goutamda, in her young days, might be an infatuation, but her love for Keshababu, her sitar tutor was, perhaps, more than just an infatuation. She wanted Keshababu to plant a zygote in her womb, so that her dream of being a mother could become a reality. But her own husband, Dr Bharat Roy, a frustrated MRCP doctor, fails to satisfy her either sexually or materialistically. Real love and the love that keeps a woman doggedly contented are two very different things. In my novels, real love and the fake world of camouflaged love are poles apart. Rani never loved Dr Bharat Roy, but she loved both Goutamda in her youth, and Keshababu as an extramarital fling; she was satisfied by both in different ways.

EM. Your style has become much more sophisticated in your most recent novel: shifting narrators, flashbacks, digressions. What can you tell us about your style? Is it connected with the subject and with the idea of mourning, which is the piecing together of fragments of the past in order to overcome a sense of loss?

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KD. As far as the norms of narratology go, direct narration by the omniscient narrator, writing in the first person, is always like a heart-to-heart talk or a *tête-à-tête*. Naturally, the first person narrator has enough liberty to overcome all shackles of extraneous impediments, like maintaining silence at a particular point, scanning a character, if unnecessary, and so forth. The idea of mourning, in the strictest sense of the term, has never been at loggerheads with the subject. So, dovetailing the two has always seemed easy for me. Days in the past have been narrated rather freely, just to give the readers a feel of the narrator's background, the reason for her being in the hick town, Hridaypur, and the associated details which would remain meaningless, or irrelevant, if their connection with the past was severed. The style in which I tried to narrate this story was simply conversational and straight from the heart, where the reader can be privy to all the happenings in the narrator's life.

EM. Motherhood and the violation of motherhood (from abortion, to unnatural behaviours) are pivotal in your book. Can you tell us more about this?

KD. Yes, it is an interesting question. Motherhood is considered to be the acme of all emotional states a woman can go through. It is the ultimate fulfillment of her dream of begetting a child in which she can see a reflection of herself, on which she can shower all her affection and again, an achievement she has always dreamt of. But, especially in the case of Rani, 'motherhood' proves to be fatal, as she fails to mother a child for Goutamda (who she loved to distraction) and could not be a mother to Dr Roy's offspring, as it never would happen (was Dr. Roy an impotent?!) Goutamda would not marry her, hence, it was obvious that a moment's weakness leading to her conception would cost her heavily: hence, abortion! And, as Dr. Roy could not satisfy her basic bodily needs, she had to turn to Keshabbabu, her sitar tutor, to be a mother. Keshabbabu's child would never be allowed to cross the threshold of Dr Roy's residence, as the baby was not his. The baby had been put into an orphanage by Rani's father. In India, an illegitimate child is usually an eyesore to the stepfather (exceptions may obviously be there). Much later, when Rani was about to lose her sanity, she turned to the sad chapter of her life and made a mess of everything. Even her memory failed her. Hence, motherhood is portrayed in this novel in various ways.

EM. I sense, for example in Rani's behaviour, a sort of split life: what she would like to be, what she has to be. Will there ever be a reconciliation? Is this the condition of many women, in your view?

KD. I had no intention of presenting a split life lived by Rani. Rather, it was her postmarital frustration which drove her mad to make her dream come true. Artistically, she was being enriched by her sitar playing and, inwardly, her dream of being a successful woman (by being a 'mother' of a newborn) was taking shape. It was the case of Rani. It is quite difficult to comment that this is universally applicable to all women. In a sense, it is true. Every woman dreams of leading a meaningful existence through her motherhood. If it goes awry, any sort of unusual behavior or frustrated attitude can be found in her. There can hardly be a

reconciliation between ‘having’ and ‘not having’; however, in reality, a balance is struck between the two.

EM. In your novel you seem to be drawn towards people on the margin, people who are ostracized by society for mostly unfair reasons ...

KD. Not exactly. It really seems like that or turns out to be so. The people who once were at the centre get pushed to the periphery and begin to feel that they have been marginalised, or to be precise, that they are being treated as marginalised. The immediate references are Rani and the narrator herself. In an Indian household, till now, a mindset rules which stops a married woman from leaving her husband for good, even for a justifiable reason. Innumerable social forces are there to pin the woman down. Her existence will be jeopardised, her social status may be threatened, and she may stand ‘befallen’ in the eyes of others. Even, the bride’s parents are hardly courageous enough to stand up for the cause, howsoever justified their daughter’s cause may be. And, that too, is through fear of ostracism. And, in case of the narrator, Kathakali, she has no other option but to listen to her brother’s *diktat* of staying in the ground floor of their house for a year. In fact, she would love to embrace the loneliness as she knew that she would turn the phase into a creative one, a productive one. Yes, I feel at one with characters like Rani and Kathakali, as they strike a chord in my heart somehow.

EM. You inserted Michele, a character with AIDS. Do you wish to make your readers more sensitive to other people's problems? Do you want to annihilate the indifference and selfishness that often shroud our conscience?

KD. Michele, a tourist with a sad tale, simply, rather casually, walked into the scenario. It is just as simple as that. But, yes, if you make it a case in point, I must say that I would love to see people sharing empathy with the poor, sick, endangered human beings like Michele, a victim of AIDS. Your observation reminds me of a few lines from Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*

Ah love, let us be true
To one another! For the world which seems
To be before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

Couldn’t we be a little more concerned about one another in our society? I am certain that the world would have been a better place to live in, then.

EM. The character of Rani is a true masterpiece in my view. The final part of her story is really touching: is writing stories, for her, a kind of replacement for a truly upsetting and unsatisfactory life? Is she on the verge of madness, due to the loss of her beloved child?

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KD. For my characters, sublimation is a sustained process, not an end reached by means or vice-versa. Perhaps you are not aware of Anita Basu, the protagonist of my debut novel *A Bird Alone*. Rani, though no match for Anita, surely loved to write and find solace in this practice, which helped her to communicate not just with herself but with a wider audience. You may call it a refuge: she seeks to turn a blind eye to all the ordeals she was being put through by Providence, one after another. Yes, she wanted to be 'a mother'. She became one, too. But Nayanika was put in an orphanage by her father, with whom she trusted the responsibility for her child. But, fearing harsh criticism by society, her father chose to put Nayanika in an orphanage, in the vicinity of their neighbourhood, once she attained a certain age. But Rani, after her return to Dr Roy's residence, after not being allowed to go to see her child once again, felt sad, and at last, it took a heavy toll on her psyche, and she turned semi-lunatic, calling her child 'dead', addressing her by some imaginative name. It was not, of course, a literal loss, but, in the realm of her imagination, Nayanika had a distorted existence, with a different name and identity. Repressed desire for motherhood stayed 'repressed' forever, and hence such a sad consequence.

EM. The death of the narrator's father is truly poignant. It coincides with a very happy moment in the narrator's life: her brother's wedding. Is that a metaphor for life? Good and bad things often happening at the same time?

KD. Again, it was a chance happening, a coincidence. On the day of her brother's wedding, her father passed away. The mirth of the occasion changed places with the poignancy of the untoward transpiration. I would love to quote Shakespeare: 'As flies to wanton boys/ Are we to the gods/ They kill us for their sport' (*King Lear*). No one never knows why sad and happy incidents are juxtaposed together in the drama of existence. Maybe for a variation, which God loves to see. Was it essential for Eustacia Vye to die in a ditch, when she was about to unite with the man she loved, the dream of settling in Paris was on the point of being fulfilled? I am referring to Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. Similarly, the narrator's father's death simply coincided with her brother's wedding and it was the game of Providence, over which no one has any control.

EM. What can you tell me about the narrator herself? I am under the impression that the character conceals parts of you.

KD. Of course, the narrator is a part of my own self. I will not elaborate on this point, but leave it to the readers to find out.

EM. The very end of the book, in my view, carries a very positive message: The year of mourning turns into a book, collecting all the poems written by the narrator ... Is this a message for your readership? Is this your way to encourage your readers to turn even the worst moment into a possibility for creating something beautiful, to share with the wider community?

KD. Thank you for finding the positive message at the end of the novel. However, Kathakali did not intend to make that one year so special through her writing of poems. But it happened. She loved to write and it was a manifestation of her suppressed feeling of ‘deprivation and loss’. I am happy if the readers take it as an antidote to silent suffering and transform the moments of pain into something creative. If such a message can be driven home, I feel, the world would change a bit. Catharsis won’t just be a term in the pages of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but sublimation would be a term taken up by the reading public to convert sadness to happiness.

Thank you Elisabetta for inspiring me to write more through this long interview, and for devoting so much of your time and energy to this.

EM. Thank you, for this inspiring talk! I look forward to your new literary venture!

Elisabetta Marino is tenured assistant professor of English literature at the University of Rome ‘Tor Vergata.’ She published a book on Tamerlane in English and American literature (2000), and edited the proceedings of the 2001 ‘Asia and the West Conference’ organised 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 bangladese Britannica. 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 (Le Lettere, Firenze). The volume she co-edited entitled Europe Facing Inter-Asian Cultural, Literary, Historical and Political Situations (Universitalia, Roma) 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 (McFarland, 2015), has just been released. She has published extensively on travel literature, on the English Romantic writers, on Italian American literature, Asian American, and Asian British literature.

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