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Interview with Indra Das

By Alok Amatya

Indra Das is most well-recognized as the author of *The Devourers* (2015), a novel that won the Lambda Literary Award for straddling the genres of sci-fi, speculative, and fantasy fiction alongside LGBT themes. Das's short fiction is widely published in horror and sci-fi anthologies, as well as magazines like *Tor.com*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Asimov's Science Fiction*. He spoke candidly with Alok Amatya over email about the current literary landscape, the work of writing transgressive genre fiction, and his own experiences as an upcoming global author.

We seem to be living in an exciting moment for genres like fantasy, horror, sci-fi, superhero, and speculative fiction. The last ten years have seen adaptations of books to big budget films and hit TV shows. It seems that the prestige, the money, and the number of readers commanded by genre narratives continue to grow every year. The demarcation between genre writing (fantasy, supernatural, horror) and so-called serious literature appears more blurred than ever.

How do you feel about writing literature at a moment like this?

Entertainment corporations may be willing to do science fiction and fantasy narratives with big budgets. But because of massive corporate monopolies using genre as a way to take over the market, we've seen mainstream stories becoming more and more dominated by megafanchise storytelling. That leaves little room for experimentation, originality, and creativity, at least when we're talking about large readerships, prestige and money. So now we have a hundred different superhero and *Star Wars* movies and TV shows a year; that isn't exciting or interesting to me. I've loved *Star Wars* and superhero movies in the past, but when that's the only thing studios are willing to bet on with any confidence, it's not a good thing. Corporate-owned monocultures are taking over.

Don't get me started on late capitalism and art! Publishers are being absorbed by monopolies, as are studios, so a shrinking number of corporations control the global funding and distribution of art. I don't necessarily agree that readers, prestige, and money are growing in response to genre narratives. If anything, most writers are getting paid less than before. None of this is good for the health of our interconnected cultures. It's true that on a global scale, pop culture has fully embraced

genre, but in a way that doesn't leave much room for celebration.

In corporate storytelling, the emphasis is on branding, formula, and utilising old IP to tap into pre-established fandoms as an audience. For anyone who's not working within that framework, things are more difficult. Obviously, other avenues remain for more idiosyncratic storytelling, and more so in publishing than in movies and TV. As for India, I don't know that speculative fiction is significantly more popular than before, unless we're talking about mythofiction with a Hindu nationalist bent. It may be that Indian critics and readers who like speculative and non-realist literatures have become more vocal because of social media, online magazines, and other digital avenues.

Are you optimistic about a growing readership? Perhaps, readers and editors are more receptive to works of literature that push the boundaries of genre, temporality, and cultural expectations?

On the positive, there are a lot more opportunities for writers around the world in genre fiction. There are new imprints, and a lot of online magazines, that make it much easier for international authors to submit their work than when I was starting out. And as a result of various shifts and a lot of activism, there are more international writers, and writers of marginalised race, gender, and sexualities getting published in the genre fiction world. Indian and South Asian writers are getting a little more exposure on the world stage of science fiction and fantasy

readership, which is good. The main thing remains to find a way to keep writing as the world crashes and burns.

Late stage capitalism means creative industries are in turmoil; the ground beneath our feet is ever shifting. I think it's unwise to make any general statements about the state of literature or the arts at this point. Things can change in a second. When your country is on the precipice of making the full dive into fascism, it's not easy to discuss the creative industries optimistically, because art is an enemy of fascism. It's a precarious time. The edifice, though, remains firmly under the control of supremacist structures, and the corporate stranglehold on art, including genre fiction, is only getting worse as capitalism begins to spiral into the horrible effects of its unsustainability.

Where do you see your own literary style positioned in the current literary landscape?

My literary style; well, I'd like to think that keeps changing from story to story. I like to cross genre boundaries. Fluidity is important to me in everything. I dislike boxing things in -- obsessive categorisation.

In your recent novel *The Devourers* (2015), three of the main characters -- Makedon, Fenrir, and Gévaudan -- are shape-shifting werewolves with superhuman capabilities. They are animal-like in strength, live for thousands of years, and consume human meat when they're hungry. They consider themselves to be superior to humans

(whom they call khrissals in their language). Why was it important for your novel to create such a unique vantage point -- that of characters who almost look down humans? Does the novel set out to puncture the inflated sense of self that humans often have, in thinking about ourselves as creatures superiors to animals and plants? Is this as a commentary on the limitations of human beings?

Whether or not I intended it, if you see those themes in *The Devourers*, then those themes are part of the book. I try not to be prescriptive when it comes to my writing. The art should speak for itself, and it's up to readers to parse what it says to them. But certainly, the apex predatory nature of the shapeshifters has a correlation to humanity's nature as Earth's apex predator. I found it interesting to explore the ways in which the more human they become, the more monstrous they become. After all, animals aren't evil, even when they kill each other. But humans, who have created a moral universe for themselves to inhabit, become evil by their own making. Because we've become aware of our own actions in a way that animals haven't (as far as we can tell).

As I wrote, I found that I wanted to blur the line between what we consider bestial and what we consider human, and between carnal mortality and divinity. Our god-like capacity to do good is spectacular (by preventing mass death and suffering via vaccines and other technologies). Sadly this is overshadowed by our more rampant ability to also cause mass death and suffering across ecosystems and

cultures. The power granted by our strange intelligence can create a god-like appetite for destruction, as we see in this anthropocene era. So the shapeshifters become almost witless carriers of humanity's various abilities: to harness unbelievable power, to become as gods, to devour the world, to change endlessly. And to be good if they choose, but to endlessly be unsure of themselves.

There's a refreshing novelty to seeing werewolves in cities like Kolkata, Fatehpur Sikri, and Mumtazabad in your novels, albeit set in a historical past. Tell us about your attention to place and environment in *The Devourers*. What is the value of depicting these places in a fantasy novel?

I went to the past because I wanted to tell a vast sprawling story that followed myths as they change and transmit across cultures and across historical periods. The rest was all organic; I like writing in an immersive style. So, I did the research and wanted to make my vision of those places and those times as tactile and real as possible. And when it comes to the present-day scenes, I was just writing as someone who lives in India, so it was much easier to evoke things in a hypersensory way. I don't know about the value of depicting my own country (and its past), but it's only inevitable that an Indian writer would write about India.

The *Devourers* often challenges readers through its gritty and irreverent style. Whereas some fantasy novels limit sexuality to slow-boil romances, your writing is honest and direct. Your characters have a

messy flesh-and-blood existence, with werewolves killing animals and humans alike. The novel portrays acts of lovemaking and sexual violence candidly. Is it important for you as a writer to take the audience out of their comfort zones, with a gritty and honest portrayal of human life?

Not all my writing is as transgressive as *The Devourers*, but the transgressive is important to me, even if my courage falters sometimes on the page. Perhaps because I grew up reading and watching things that were meant for adults and loved it. Within Bengali culture and a broader Indian context, you're taught to be ashamed of your bodies. Sexuality is a forbidden subject, subject to a great deal of shame. So encountering books, movies, or art with transgressive elements -- horror, bodies in sexual union, or being destroyed -- meant a lot to me in ways it's still difficult to express. These works trust you in a way the world doesn't when you're infantilised. They trust you to see that the world can be ugly, strange, confusing, and revolting. That humans are complicated, and they can sometimes find pleasure in what is broadly defined as disgusting. We're animals and we're prudes. That sets up a lot of tension, which can be very satisfying. Shame is a deep wellspring for art. Human beings have a lot of trouble being completely honest with each other, without shame. So I like to tap into that by taking readers to a place of honesty, where one can confront shame, disgust and arousal, dysphoria and euphoria. Being truly honest is fascinating to me, in how it can completely disrupt things, in both harmful and incredibly healing ways.

How do you conceive of your audience? Are you writing for a mature audience, rather than for young adults -- or perhaps for both?

Obviously, I wouldn't want very young children to read *The Devourers*. But I think teenagers can and should deal with challenging art -- if they're up for it -- with eyes open. But one's mileage will vary. Some people won't like transgressive or horrific fiction, and that's okay. Whatever the degree of transgression, I'm writing for adult readers of all ages, and basically whoever wants to read me. If teenagers want to read my work, I've no problem with that. I've gotten emails from some fairly young readers who've talked about their own awakenings of fluid or marginalised gender and sexuality, and how reading the book helped them process some of those feelings. There are few things that make me happier as a writer than to hear that.

How do you see the relationship between genre and gender? In your short story "A Shade of Dusk" (2016), you write through the perspective Lokhi, of a woman who suffers from endometriosis. This disease of the uterus affects Lokhi's entire social existence, including her relationship to loved ones. In *The Devourers*, the werewolves are hermaphroditic by nature, and capable of sexual intercourse with one another. Is there something liberating in the space of genre writing -- be it fantasy, horror, or sci-fi -- that allows for a candid exploration of gendered and sexual experiences? Is your work always insightful about acute bodily

experiences, or is there something about fantasy and/or horror that lends itself to this subject?

Genre fiction can imagine ways of existing in one's gender and sexuality that are opposed to the restrictions of our limited real world. And that's wonderful. Or scary. Or both. No matter whether one is cis- or trans- or genderqueer, my fiction is about the contrast between existing in the bodies we're born with and our multi-dimensional, sentient, supernatural perceptions of the world and our places within it. Often, it is about the tension of existing in a human body, given that our cultures have so much discomfort in accepting bodies that aren't idealised versions of what we actually are as humans.

The boundary-less imaginative of non-realist genres is perfect for exploring gender and sexuality. India is a country that's inundated with sexual violence but culturally very gender essentialist, sexist, misogynistic, and patriarchal. We see bodies being broken on behalf of bigotry every day on the news, but we can't see so much as a human breast or a bare ass on a movie screen without the censors moving in. So I like to push against that in my art. My stories often explore the fluidity of gender and sexuality. I don't know how insightful they are, but it's something that's never far from my art. Some of my earliest and most formative education about the fluidity of sexuality and gender as a teen came from reading Clive Barker's works, or watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (yes, it's dated in several ways, but important nonetheless).

Your novel *The Devourers* subverts the traditional distinctions between east and west in multiple ways. For one, the werewolves are European, but they travel through South Asia during the time of British colonial rule. At least one of the werewolf characters forms a lasting partnership with Cyrah, a Muslim woman from Mumtazabad. Did you have to make a concerted effort to merge together fantastical worlds from west and the east? What type of work was involved in imagining South Asia as a place where dark fantasy narratives take place?

None of it was planned from the start. I wrote a short story about a man meeting a werewolf in Kolkata, and eventually, it flowered into all of that. A lot of it came about from an interrogation of my own cultural context. Being an anglophone and atheist Bengali Indian, I grew up with art from Western Europe, the bastion of our former colonizers. I'm fascinated by bleeding borders, syncretism, and humanity's variegated array of cultures. I'm fascinated by the way that cultures mingle and constantly form new iterations, through communication, communion, and violence. India itself is a showcase of a myriad mingling cultures, though our current dominant majoritarian culture wants to stamp all that out for a genocidal brand of monoculture. Our tendency to draw bloody borders around everything can't stop our inherent need to communicate with each other and share our stories. It is beautiful that this happens no matter how violent our histories. I asked myself: why did you write a short story about a werewolf, of all things, in Kolkata? The novel was an answer to that question. I'm a cultural

hybrid myself, sometimes to my shame -- and as I've said, shame is a fascinating thing to focus on. India, too, is a hybrid nation, and Kolkata a hybrid city. Like all of the world, really, in the end.

Speaking broadly, what impact would you like to see your writing have on the cultural landscape, particularly that of South Asian literature? While some popular books in India seem to be reaching back to religious and heroic myths for material, your work looks to break new imaginative ground in fantasy, sci-fi and adventure narratives. Do you hope that more writers will follow in your style and milieu?

I want to see stories that tell truths about India in interesting new ways, rather than pandering to cheap exoticism or homegrown patriotic utopianism. I want more Indian writers writing what they want, exploring and breaking genre boundaries, rather than chasing after market trends. Rather than what they think will be popular or make money. There's no way to predict any of that anyway. The market is fickle, and doesn't care about you or your stories. You should care about the story you're writing. I want more people writing things we've never seen in Indian literature, whether or not my work has inspired them.

Who are some writers that you either admire or find yourself in conversation with? The latter end of your novel, which takes us to the Sundarban wetlands of West Bengal, reminds one of Amitav Ghosh novels like *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*. Nalini

Singh is another contemporary author who writes across fantasy, romance, and sci-fi, even featuring werewolves in some of her work. Have any works you read as a youth been particularly formative?

Some of my favourite cross-genre novels -- which I read when I was younger -- are Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Miles Gibson's *The Sandman*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and works by Alan Moore and Susanna Clarke. When I was first venturing into adult fiction as a child, I read and watched a lot of things with horror elements in them (including, yes, Stephen King's novels, which left an impact on me). Amitav Ghosh's work was definitely an influence, though I prefer *The Shadow Lines* to *The Hungry Tide*. When I was writing *The Devourers*, I wanted to meld the styles of literary realism and fabulism, drawing inspiration from authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, and Salman Rushdie. Charles Portis' novel *True Grit*, and the Coens' film based on that work, had a distinct influence on Cyrah's voice, her journey, and her relationship with Gevaudan. William Blake's work also played a pivotal role, as a reader of the novel can probably tell.

Some books I've found rewarding in recent times are Samit Basu's *The City Inside* (a.k.a. *Chosen Spirits*), Vajra Chandrasekera's *The Saint of Bright Doors* (it's exactly the kind of brilliant, uncategorisable novel I want to see more of from South Asia), Gigi Ganguly's *One Arm Shorter than The Other*, Usman T. Malik's *Midnight Doorways*, Kim Fu's *21st Century Monsters*, Kim Neville's *The Memory Collectors*, Nabeh Ruthnum's

Helpmeet. I'm currently reading Olga Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob* (translated by Jennifer Croft), and it's astonishingly good.

Tell us about the process of writing *The Devourers* (your debut novel) and getting it published. What were some difficulties encountered along the way, and what advice would you give to younger authors looking to get published?

In college creative writing classes, I wrote two short stories that became the first chapter of *The Devourers* and the section with Fenrir's point-of-view. Then I expanded those into the first draft of the novel as my MFA thesis project, writing it in the last few months of my time in university. Then I submitted it to a lot of agents for a year or two, got many rejections, expanded, rewrote, revised many times. Eventually, my current agent, Sally Harding of the Cooke McDermid agency (who's been an invaluable partner) read and loved the novel. Then, the two of us together did a very thorough editing pass. We submitted to publishers and got a lot of rejections, some of them saying they liked it but it was too hard to sell or too Indian (the latter from Western publishers, of course). Then eventually Chiki Sarkar, then at Penguin India, accepted it there, for which I'm grateful. So it was published in India, and we kept going through rejections for Western publishers, until Mike Braff at Del Rey/ Penguin Random House loved it. And so the North American edition was born. That edition is still selling, slowly but steadily. And for that, I'm most grateful.

Advice to authors starting out; bolster yourself for rejection, there will be a lot of it in a writing career. You have to get used to it. Keep writing, whether or not you're being published. Keep the momentum going. That way you have a bibliography of work ready to revise and send out for the dry periods. Read a lot of fiction across genres. Don't be a genre essentialist. The wider you read, the more inspired you'll be. Experience all art, as much as you can--movies, TV, music, visual art, comics, etc, within your means. Without inspiration, there won't be life to your own art. If you know other aspiring writers and get along with them, think about starting a writing group so you can give feedback to each other.

Tell us about what's in the pipeline. What can readers expect to read from you in the near future?

I have a horror short story called "Here Comes Your Man" in Ellen Datlow's latest horror fiction anthology *Screams From the Dark: 29 Tales of Monsters and the Monstrous*. It's about a young Kolkata couple whose weekend in Santiniketan turns nightmarish. It's more of a psychological horror piece than graphically violent, but it's a dark one for sure. A short story of mine about time travel, alternate timelines, romance and regret -- set in New York City -- should be coming out on Tor.com. I have a novella -- set in Kolkata -- also in the pipeline. But it's not been officially announced, so I can't really talk about it.

Indra Das is a writer from Kolkata, India, and his works have appeared in several publications including Clarkesworld Magazine, Asimov's, Slate Magazine, Strange Horizons, and Tor.com, and has also been widely anthologized. He completed his M.F.A. at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Indra's debut novel The Devourers was the winner of the 2017 Lambda Literary Award for Best LGBTQ SF/F/Horror.

Alok Amatya is an assistant professor of English at Lyon College, Arkansas. His research interests include environmental humanities, global literature, and indigenous studies, with a focus on narratives of conflict over natural resources. His work has appeared in Environmental Humanities and Modern Fiction Studies.