

More Brechts and Nerudas needed now: Goutam Karmakar in conversation with Sunil Sharma

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ABOUT SUNIL SHARMA

Sunil Sharma, a Mumbai based academic administrator, has established himself as one prime figure in the arena of Indian English literature. He had more than 26 years of degree-college teaching experience. With his optimism and patience he makes his student aware of their inner spirit and here in lies his success. But he has not restricted himself only as a professor. And his penned compositions at once gave him success as a poet, essayist, translator and fiction writer. Apart from this he is a widely-published Indian critic, editor and literary interviewer. So far he has published 14 books. Till now three collections of poetry namely *Golden Cacti* (2012), *Poems on Highway* (2013), *Mundane, My Muse* (2014), one collection of short fiction, one novel and six books (as co-author) have come out on his part. His popularity and creative faculty are appreciated by foreign universities. His six short stories and the novel *Minotaur* were recently prescribed

for the undergraduate classes under the Post-colonial Studies, Clayton University, Georgia, USA. Sunil Sharma earlier edited the *Episteme*. His some co-edited books are *The Renaissance Man: Rob Harle: A Study of his artistic universe* (with Sangeeta Sharma published in 2015), *Indo-Australian Anthology of Short Fiction* (with Rob Harle & Sangeeta Sharma published in 2014), *Indo- Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (with Rob Harle and Sangeeta Sharma published in 2013), *Delightful Dickens: Some Tributes* (With Sangeeta Sharma published in 2014) and *Acerbic Anthology* (With Mutiu Olawuyi published in 2013). Currently, he edits English section of the bilingual Setu published monthly from Pittsburgh, USA.

In an extended conversation Goutam Karmakar is got the chance to explore the thoughts of Sunil Kumar. I hope Sharma's readers will be pleased while

reading the answers of him. Here is the text of that interview:

TEXT OF THE INTERVIEW

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Sir kindly tell us something about your childhood days, schooling, college days and tertiary educational background. Have your childhood memories and surroundings left any impact in your writing?

SUNIL SHARMA: My parents were both teachers. It was a lovely house, nurturing and value-driven. Liberal, tolerant; artistic ideas were a staple over dinner. Father taught Hindi Lit; he was also an expert on English Lit and western philosophy. Ma was a teacher of drawing and painting. At 93, she continues to inspire and amaze me.

Father was a writer who could not pursue his writing due to some circumstances but he remained a poet by heart. Such a democratic and art-filled house provided the best nursery for me. I was exposed to Schopenhauer and Goethe along with Kalidasa by father and Picasso by my mother. I was youngest of three children. Father's early death left a deep trauma. I could never overcome that emotional loss. Ma was and is a great support.

Schooling and college education was done in a developing city near Delhi that later on grew into a boom city. Luckily, at PG level, I got some very dedicated and erudite teachers who molded my thinking in a different direction—Marxism. It was the age of

exciting 70-80s in India and most universities were red. That liberal-humanism and commitment for the downtrodden still forms my inner vision and overall outlook on life and informs my writing.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Apart from being a poet and fiction writer, you are also a freelance and literary interviewer. Besides that you edit and translate works. How do you able to manage your time schedule in so many ways? Sir tell your readers about your engagement with □Setu□ and the purpose of Setu.

SUNIL SHARMA: You have to do multiple tasking---just for the love of it. And you enjoy the fruits---the sublimity of these artistic conversations; almost uplifting in nature.

Setu is a bridge across languages and cultures and intends to showcase the best of human civilization to counter the Alt-right and other ideologies out there to negate the gains of liberal democracy so far. It encourages constant interrogation of false stand of the officialdom and lies.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: At which age have you started writing? Why have you started to compose poems so late? What is your definition of Nature?

SUNIL SHARMA: In Standard VIII, I wrote my first Hindi short that was published in a leading national daily from Mumbai. Poetry happened late---in early 50s. A miracle! At that age, we all are prosaic!

Do you want to know my definition of nature? Perhaps you have to ask a saint

or a naturalist. But yes Mother Nature inspires me. Nature or prakirti is within and without. Purush is irrelevant sans prakirti. It is the all-encompassing system. We are just insignificant. Our relationship with Mother Nature should be of a bhakt. Our ancestors deified it. We raid and pillage it. Results are catastrophes.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What are the immediate sources of inspiration behind your writing of poems, short stories and fictions? Who are your favourite authors whose works you want to read more and more?

SUNIL SHARMA: Life, the underprivileged, the Unsaid of the Unseen.

Definitely---not my ego as the principal subject or theme of writing; prizes; lit fests; self-promotion; wrestling with language in a formalistic mode.

They are not for me. Effacement of personality is my mantra as far as writing is concerned and community over self.

Poetry is all about the muted; not about the privileged discussing poetry in high places and literary bazaars promoted by multi-nationals and national brands to attract some star dust. I write to project them as patrons of culture. That is an exclusivist culture; a sanitized version of reality and arts.

For me arts are subversive---the last enclave of resistance. I try to do that by projecting, foregrounding the other side of the narrative. I try to highlight the actors left out in the cold and rehab them as the main cast of rolling action.

My favourites are Dickens, Tolstoy, Gorky, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Sartre, Camus, Mann, Marquez and Kafka. In India, it is Prem Chand, Ghalib, Manto, Renu and many others.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What is your definition of poetry? What role do emotions and imagination play to you while composing verse?

SUNIL SHARMA: Poetry is clean breath in a smoggy city! It is lifeline and very vital to living meaningfully in a crass and commercial culture.

It gives you inner harmony and peace. It is therapy for troubled souls in an amnesiac world. It is the connecting rod between past and present---and directs us to future.

Emotion and imagination intersect with words---alchemy is poetry. Sincerity and good intention added intensifiers.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Your □Golden Cacti□ deals with the everyday realities of urban India. What are those everyday realities?

SUNIL SHARMA: Please find out---by close reading of a simple collection of poems about urban horrors and delights. You will not be disappointed while reading the pieces.

Golden Cacti deals with symbolic of life and living in most harsh circumstances. It gives hope to grim survivors. It is like finding lyrics in a desert-like place.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Your poems give voice to the under-privileged, marginalized and suffering classes. So how have you attempted to raise social

equality in your poems? It proves that you are a great humanist. How have you gained inspiration from □humanity□?

SUNIL SHARMA: I think this is the continuation of my earlier answer. Nice observation. And you know I have partially answered earlier.

Raising consciousness is my primary task as a humble writer. Great masters! They did and do that. I learn a lot from them---as their lowly disciple working from afar. They are the best examples of finest writing across the world---and inspiring for us as human beings. Fighting for good causes in a scientific way and changing consciousness through art.

It can teach everybody---this great and global community of peoples---so many lessons and values, provided you are listening. Elitist writing or experimental language- play never appeals to me. Writing should spring from a pure and feeling heart full of empathy for the underdogs.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: How have you projected the women and the elders in your works? Kindly tell what of utopian society do you dream of?

SUNIL SHARMA: That is the job of a critic and a reader to find out. They are all there in clear sunlight. Please discover them by visiting those verbal sites in my books and strike a conversation with them. You will find that most are living in your neighborhood too. That kind of affinity will change your modes of perception about them.

No utopias for me, please. I dream---like the other 99 %---of a just and deeply humane society that is possible through right choices and combined actions. I want a society that does not discriminate and welcoming all.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: You are very fluent not only in English and Hindi but also in Urdu & Punjabi. So has your multi-lingualism affected your creative faculty? In which language do you feel at home while writing?

SUNIL SHARMA: I am familiar with the language I am writing at that moment.

Multi-lingualism helps gain you better perspectives and comes handy in challenging the hegemony of English in a post-colonial world, its elitism implied in its use and power of a foreign legacy that continues to make a country feel inferior. Multi-lingualism is must to understand a rich nation like India.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: How far has the daily life in the suburbs of Mumbai reflected in your □*Mundane, My Muse*□? What have you used the term □*My Muse*□ here?

SUNIL SHARMA: Mumbai provides the daily situations that inspire me. Hence, the term is used. It does not dull me but sharpens my observations and clears filters. I have tries to show the grind, the shocking poverty, the slums, the crowds and a desire to live life to the full, to chase dignity and some wealth, and a decent life in a mega city. I think the struggles of the poor need to be documented in a foreign language. That I do.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: How have you constituted the images of nature and towns in your □Poems on Highway□? To what extent does this book project you as a postcolonial poet where you have raised questions on behalf of the □subalterns□?

SUNIL SHARMA: The travels, the commutes, along the highway give me glimpses into life that I try to capture through poetry. Highway poems are tribute to those daily journeys.

As to these questions of impact of writing as a writer---post-modern or post-colonial, I repeat, it is the job of readers and critics to determine that. Any finished work takes on meanings in political readings only. Subaltern readings are crucial. The term comes overloaded with accumulation of layers. Gramsci is our real guide here. Every serious writing takes on position of radicalizing consciousness and undermining status-quo by exposing false ideology. Sadly, poetry is no longer radical. Bengali poetry and regional poetry are still bold and beautiful but not to that earlier level, the revolutionary level. Poetry must expose---like any other form of serious and committed writing. We need more Brechts and Nerudas now for a mass society and a de-radicalized age of sheer consumption; voyeurism and utter passivity as a mere spectator.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What is the capital theme of your □*Minotaur*□? What are the techniques you have used as a novelist here?

SUNIL SHARMA: Colonialism and post-colonialism; power that corrupts and revolutionary consciousness and praxis. Rests of that for you have to read that and explore. I have given sufficient clues my dear.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What are the unique poetic features of Sunil Sharma? You are a poet, critic, editor, interviewer, fiction writer and translator and more over a human being. So what is your □real self□?

SUNIL SHARMA: I am not some kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde persona. Deep down and simple is my poetry. About real self I can tell you Goutam that I am trustworthy, caring and honest with a heart full of love for suffering humanity.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: How have you engaged yourself as a translator? What are your translated works? Have you faced any difficulties while translating a work?

SUNIL SHARMA: Not much. Some poems and Small body of works here I translate. It is a tough task---rendition of one language into another but overall, fulfilling also.

Q15. GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What are the future prospects of Indian poetry written in English? You know it sir that poetry is neglected, marginalized as it can't bring more money to the publishers. Everyone is more interested to go with lucrative fictions and short-stories. As a poet what will be your suggestions and advice for a better future of Indian English poetry?

SUNIL SHARMA: It is increasingly better now in terms of visibility and recognition. Things are improving now over the years.

Fiction is no better. It does not fetch money simple because we as Indians do not want to invest in book culture.

Poetry---writing---is not largely about money but expression and satisfaction.

As poets, we must buy others and invest. Create quality. Edit anthologies. Promote young poets. Organize seminars. Bring them into canon. That will sure redefine the canon and the field---and bring money as well.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Sir can you tell your readers about the capital theme of your □ *Haunting and Other Stories* □? What inspires you to write this book?

SUNIL SHARMA: It is a collection of short fiction that echoes the great liberal tradition of story-telling of the West and it is also a kind of conversation with some writers like Dickens and Hemingway, extended dialogue that sets up our relationship with the dead and the organic within writing and its author; kind of dialogic relationship with cultural texts that are forever fresh□and reality as depicted in them□and now.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What are your future projects? Do you want to write play or compose haiku in later?

SUNIL SHARMA: No. I am not qualified for that challenge.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: What will your advice to all the upcoming poets

who are writing in English? And what will be your message for your readers and for the humanity in general?

SUNIL SHARMA: Go on writing. It is important in a post-truth world. Every sane voice is important in crazy times.

Solidarity, Justice, Common humanity in a divisive world---that is my message.

GOUTAM KARMAKAR: Thank you very much sir for sharing your thoughts and views with me.

SUNIL SHARMA: Welcome. It□s a pleasure talking to you Goutam.