Atima Srivastava Interviewed by Mary Conde

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Abstract
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You come from a family of poets, don’t you?

Yes, my parents and uncle are well-known Hindi poets, and my grandmother is a quite famous Hindi poet. She’s just died, and I’ve been thinking of translating some of her poems.

But you never thought of writing poetry yourself?

Oh God, I can’t stand poetry! I never learned to appreciate it.

How did your writing career start?

I wrote a short story, ‘Dragons in E.8’, which has been like a lucky charm or a talisman for me. I’d never written a short story before, and I entered it on the off-chance for the Bridport Arts Centre competition in 1988, and it came first out of three thousand. I won a thousand pounds, and the judge, Martin Booth (to whom I am utterly, eternally grateful), put me in touch with his agent. Then I wrote my first novel, Transmission, which Serpent’s Tail published in 1992. The strange thing is that my father won an All-India competition with his first short story when he was seventeen.

How old were you?

Twenty-six. I was born in 1961, so I’m thirty-three now.

I read Martin Booth’s report on the competition, and I was interested to see that he said of ‘Dragons in E.8’ that ‘It should be a novel’ – meaning that as a compliment, of course! He also said that he had tears welling in his eyes as he read the ending, although he recommended cutting the last sentence. (‘Maybe your books or television documentaries will tell you why people become heroin addicts.’) Would you cut the last sentence, in retrospect? What kind of audience did you imagine the narrator addressing?

How could I fault what he said! Of course I’d cut it! I suppose the implication of that last sentence is that I, like everybody else, used to
think of heroin addicts just as statistics. Not that I set out to write an ‘issue’ story. I was very flattered when a girl I knew who was a heroin addict said to me, ‘I didn’t know you took heroin.’

Anyway, he did say that cutting the last sentence is all he’d do to the story, bar correcting the typing errors ...

Oh, that was mortifying! I gave it to the secretary at work to type, and – I’m not being racist, but – English secretaries! I didn’t even read it through, and I felt terrible when they sent it back, with millions of misspellings. I mean, I’m a brilliant speller.
There are a lot of comments about English people in Transmission: the speculation that they are obsessed with chocolate and puddings because English food is so boring, for instance. Do you think of yourself as English or Indian?

I think of myself as an Indian living in London, although I think there’s a lot of Englishness in me. That observation about the puddings is my dad’s. My mum loves English puddings, but my dad’s been here twenty-five years, and never eaten an English meal.

What’s an example of your ‘Englishness’?

I value my physical privacy. In India, if you want to go and listen to some music in your room, people will ask ‘What’s wrong?’ And through living here I’ve learnt certain formulas of politeness. But I might meet someone at a bus stop and tell them my life story – an Indian person wouldn’t do that.

I think part of my ‘Indianness’ is my deep connection with my family, knowing who I am through my family. The Indian child has a deep sense of self-esteem through being loved, and I’m an only child, so I was mega-loved! I think there’s a certain level of acceptance of behaviour in India you don’t get in England, too. An example is something my dad told me quite recently: his mum died when he was quite young, and his dad married again, and there was only one existing photograph of his real mum. His dad said he’d get it framed, but then he said he’d lost it, and later it occurred to my dad that he’d destroyed it deliberately. Now, in England this person would be in therapy! But my dad said he thought he was right: he didn’t want the children to grow up worshipping the photograph.

Language is very important, obviously. I’m bilingual in English and Hindi, and because I can speak my own language it’s relatively easier for me to get by in India. While I was writing the new novel I thought of the Hindi phrase to describe the light changing to evening. I used the word ‘dimmering’ in the end, which I don’t think really exists in English.

I’m going on my annual trip to India in December. But at present I can’t imagine living permanently in India. I think if I’d stayed in India, I’d only have mixed with middle-class Indians, instead of mixing with lots of different classes: I’m obsessed with the English class system! I did get a British passport about four years ago, because I was fed up with queuing for a visa to go to France for the day.

So it wasn’t from a great love of England?

I do love England ... but I don’t know why you say ‘England’! I only know London!

When did you come to England?

When I was eight. I was born in Bombay.
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Like Kipling.

Yeah! I was listening to a programme about Kipling on Radio 4 just a few days ago, and I thought, if it was all right for Kipling to write about India, why shouldn’t I write about England?

Do you feel you can write anything you like?

Yes! I feel very privileged. I’ve got my own flat, I can earn enough money to write by working in television, I got an Arts Council grant for my second novel, and I love writing. And I don’t feel I’ve got to sell positive images. I’m sorry, but if you’re in the business of selling positive images you should be in advertising!

Do you write very quickly?

I wrote Transmission like the clappers. And it’s practically a first draft. This second one was a bit slower.

How do you write?

Partly in longhand in an exercise book and partly straight on to the computer.

Were the characters in Transmission based on real people?

I put my friend Philippa, and that’s her real name, in Transmission, and she was like, ‘I low dare you kill me?’ But I needed the narrator to get a sudden shock of mortality. Besides, I didn’t have any use for that character any more. Of course, the narrator isn’t me exactly, and I’m a television editor, not a researcher.

How did you get into television?

Well, I did a degree in philosophy and literature at Essex University, but I dropped the philosophy after one year, and I should have done American Studies so that I could get a year in the States – I loved American literature –

Have you been to the States?

Only to Florida and New York when I was seventeen, with my parents, with a view to settling there. But I’m very glad we didn’t move permanently away from London.

Where were we with your career?

Oh yeah, after university I worked as a waitress (I used that in Transmission) and then I worked for two months as a gopher in television and then I got put into the editing room. I wanted to do something with my hands because I’d done literature before and was fed up with researching. Then I got made assistant editor. I’ve been an editor for about ten years now. I learnt the craft of editing from technicians who were quite often racist classist sexist homophobic males, but who were nevertheless very professional and taught me how
to do my job professionally, when all I wanted was to sit with my feet on the table.

Have you suffered from racism?

Well, no, but I’m from a middle-class family, and very self-confident. And I was all right. When I started school in England I was at an advantage because I’d had such a good Indian education. I was the best at grammar and spelling. I dislike all this scrabbling for power, and blaming people: ‘I’ve got a headache, whose fault is it?’ I want to live in an integrated way.

Do you think working in television has influenced your work?

I do sometimes see things in sequences. And I’ve done a couple of screenplays. I thought that would be good because I’m good at dialogue, and it’s fun to see it come to life, but I must admit I didn’t like the collaboration, and writing scripts takes so long! I’m not really interested in writing anything but prose.

Why haven’t you had your short stories published?

Because I’m waiting to write a few more.

Can you say a bit about your second novel? What’s it called?

There’s no title as yet. It’s written from the point of view of a lower middle-class English girl about her childhood friendship with an Indian girl who she discovers, years later, is a heroin addict.

So in a sense you’ve returned to the subject matter of ‘Dragons in E.8’?

Well, yes, but there’s a lot more to it than that! Susan Jones, the narrator, is English, but her identity is composed of the Indianness of her friend Meena with whom she grew up, and in many ways Meena is quite English, especially what with having emigrated to Spain! (Eldorado and all that.)

I liked the crossover in the new novel where Meena says of her ‘little Empire’ of her Spanish garden and swimming-pool that it’s “Just like the British Empire. Planned by geniuses. Executed by morons. Thwarted by Cunning Natives.”

Yes, the Cunning Natives being the Spanish workmen who’ve managed to build a house for themselves out of the wages from Meena and her husband Simon, who are paying them by the day.

I think it works very well ... And are you going straight on to a third novel?

Yes!