

INTERVIEW

1

A Duologue with Dissanayake

Debabrata Das

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

“A number of postcolonial writers...deliberately distort facts to please their Western consumers”

Daya Dissanayake

This is a conversation with the noted Sri Lankan poet, novelist and blogger Daya Dissanayake, who happens to be the first-ever e-novelist of Asia. He is also the recipient of the prestigious SAARC Literary Award. The conversation happened on 29.03.2019 at the Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata (India).

Deba: First of all, a warm welcome to India.

Daya: Thank you very much!

Deba: You are the first e-novelist from Asia. Tell us about the journey.

Daya: I always wanted to connect with a larger readership, as Sri Lanka is a very small place. The idea came to my mind in 1998, when the internet first came to our country. Then my son advised me to go online. It was my son who designed the website for me. The website is saadhu.com. It is so because the title of my second novel, which happened to be the first e-novel in Asia, was “Saadhu Testament.”

Deba: Why did you decide to write about the saadhus?

Daya: I personally know a number of sadhus who are rendering great service to society. There is no doubt that a few of them are fake, but many of these modern-day sadhus are genuinely committed to the social cause. As you know, in our part of the world, poor people need service whenever they are in distress. In many cases, they get this service from these sadhus. However, their contribution goes unnoticed most of the time. My novel acknowledges their contribution to society.

Deba: Don't you think that the decision to go online as a writer might affect your financial interests negatively?

Daya: Yes, it does. But it affects the publisher negatively, not the writer.

Deba: What about the writer's royalty?

Daya: Only yesterday I came to know from some of the Bengali writers that in Kolkata they get less than 10% in royalties. The situation is no better in Sri Lanka. The bitter truth is that the writers get their royalties only on declared copies. The writers hardly ever learn about the actual number of copies published. Naturally, you would find only a handful of writers who survive on royalties. Therefore, publishing online seems to be a better option for any modern writer.

Deba: Do you then predict a bright future for e-novels?

Daya: I have always believed that the electronic novel is the future, and the audiobook will follow. The reason why I'm saying this is that in this mobile age, people get hardly any time to read books at home. They prefer books that can be accessed anytime, anywhere. E-books are the best option for this mobile generation.

Deba: Don't you think that the reading habit is declining everywhere?

Daya: Yes, I do agree. In Sri Lanka, the situation is even worse.

Deba: What do you think is responsible for this?

Daya: The main reason for this is our obsession with television. The Americans have been calling the TV an “idiot box” since the 1950s. They continue to call it by the same name. But in our part of the world, things are quite different. Here, unfortunately, parents themselves encourage their children to get addicted to television. I think that mobile phones and electronic gadgets have worsened the situation in recent times. Children normally read when they see their parents reading. In my house, there is no TV. Naturally, my grandchildren are not interested in watching television at all. They have picked up the habit of reading books like their parents and grandparents. So, the atmosphere within the family is very crucial.

Deba: Coming back to the subject of your writing, recently I was reading your novel *The Bastard Goddess*, in which I came across a strong female voice. To be honest, I found the gender issue common in almost all of your works. Is it a coincidence, or do you do it with a purpose?

Daya: I don't do it with any purpose. It happens naturally. Even in Buddhism, you find that Buddha considered women sacred. In Sri Lanka, people believe that the Buddha manifests himself through the mother. We have always been a matriarchal society. I have always believed that women are stronger than men. They live longer and possess better abilities to handle hard situations with ease.

Deba: You sound like a feminist.

Daya: No, I'm not a feminist. You can better call me a humanist.

Deba: Though we are neighbouring countries, we hardly read each other's literature. In regards to Sri Lankan literature, we, in India, generally read Sri Lankan diasporic literature more than literature produced by the writers who are settled in Sri Lanka. Can you explain the reason for the popularity of diasporic literature?

Daya: One reason is that our publishers have shown no interest in taking our works abroad. Governments have also not taken any initiative. A few years ago, the Indian Government

started a project called Indian Books Abroad, through which they promoted Indian books in foreign countries. I think that the project has been aborted. Anyway, at least they tried to do something positive for indigenous artists. But, most unfortunately, our government has not even thought of taking such initiatives.

Deba, tell us something about other Sri Lankan novelists.

Daya: The most prominent Sri Lankan novelist, among the writers in English, is Ediriweera Sarachchandra. He is a bilingual writer. His novels are hailed as the best English novels written in the twentieth century in Sri Lanka.

Deba: I do not think that Sarachchandra's works are as popular as the works of diasporic writers such as Shyam Selvadurai, Michael Ondaatje, and so on in our country.

Daya: That is primarily due to the fact that the works of those diasporic writers are easily available in India. Also, they know how to "market" their works. However, the problem with these diasporic writers is that they do not have any first-hand experience. They come to Sri Lanka for holidays. Their main source of information about Sri Lanka is the media. Everyone knows how reliable the media can be as a source of information about a country! All of them are biased. Thus, the diasporic writers base their works on second-hand, even third-hand materials. Their works can be closer to the truth only if they write about their childhood experiences in the country. However, there is another important issue that influences their representation in a major way, i.e., the demand of the publisher. The publisher wants these writers to please their Western readership so that they can sell easily in the Western market. Therefore, it is futile to expect authentic representation of the Sri Lankan people and its culture in the works of these diasporic writers.

Deba: Both India and Sri Lanka have a rich heritage of oral literature, but we do precious little to preserve it properly. Don't you think that the governments of these two countries must take

some serious initiatives to save our oral literature from extinction?

Daya: Oh, yes, that is a good question! Oral literature will be lost completely unless we record it. Oral literature lost its place with the advent of radio. Previously, they were passed down to the next generation by the elders at the evening gatherings, but with the coming of radio and then TV, that practise stopped. Therefore, today it has become mandatory to have government policies to preserve them. An initiative was taken by the SAARC Cultural Centre, based in Sri Lanka, a few years ago. They started preserving traditional knowledge in South Asia. They held one conference too. More importantly, they provided funds to a few selected research scholars from the SAARC countries to do research on the traditional knowledge of their respective countries. But after its first four-year term, it became totally politicised. As a result, in the last four years, nothing has happened there. A more painful fact is that even the completed projects were not published!

Deba: Traditional knowledge, of different forms and kinds, has been widely used by a number of postcolonial writers across the globe. Do you think that may help the cause that we have been talking about?

Daya: I don't believe in postcolonialism. I don't think that we can draw a rigid line between the colonial and the postcolonial. Ironically enough, a number of reputed postcolonial writers have colonial mindsets. One of the reasons for this may be that most of these postcolonial writers are from elite backgrounds. What else would you expect from these elite writers?

Deba: Besides indigenous themes, the question of identity (though the two are deeply interconnected) has emerged as a key issue in world literature in recent times. What is your take on that?

Daya: V.S. Naipaul is the best example of what you have just said. As I've already hinted at, these writers deliberately distort facts

to please their Western consumers. They exploit the subject of identity simply because there is a demand for it in the market. However, in doing so, they tamper with the history of their respective nations. That is most unfortunate.

Deba: Ethnic conflict has been a common theme of many Sri Lankan diasporic novels. Do you see any political agenda behind that?

Daya: It has a definite political dimension. It is done to portray not only Sri Lanka but the entire South Asian region in a negative light. It presents our part of the world as a place of degradation. The main problem with these writers is that they write about what they hear, and what they hear is what they want to hear! And those who tell them those stories are there to tell them what they want to tell them!

Deba: Have those infamous ethnic conflicts been resolved in Sri Lanka?

Daya: No, they are not over as yet because whatever issues the Tamil people raised have not yet been resolved. Issues are still there, but they are not strong enough for a prolonged war.

Deba: How is the government handling this issue at the moment?

Daya: They are not handling it at all!

Deba: Don't you think that this might lead to another disaster in the future?

Daya: Yes, that can happen anytime. We don't have peace; we only have the absence of war.

Deba: Recent ethnic conflicts have involved Muslims too. How do you explain that?

Daya: That is again unfortunate. The politicians want something, especially in the South, to get the Sinhala-Buddhist votes. There are two major political parties: one party is surviving on the Sinhala-Buddhist votes, and the other party has its eye on the minority vote bank. Some of the Buddhist monks have been getting involved in this conflict because of their

religious interests. Financial motifs are also there. This nexus is taking the situation beyond control.

Deba: Don't you think that people like you should join politics to rescue Sri Lanka from its present plight?

Daya: Politics is something I have always avoided. I have been very critical of both politics and politicians in Sri Lanka because, in our country, politics has become synonymous with complete corruption.

Deba: Would you call this political bankruptcy a colonial leftover?

Daya: I do not see it as a colonial leftover. The source of this bankruptcy lies in our flawed concept of democracy. That is why, when Bhutan decided to become a democratic state, people protested. They preferred to live under the king. A Bhutanese poet wrote that democracy divides people. I also strongly believe that in Sri Lanka too, people are divided because of our flawed concept of democracy.

Deba: What would you prefer then?

Daya: I would prefer anarchy.