

In Conversation with Dalip Kaur Tiwana

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Abstract: In Interview with Dalip Kaur Tiwana, questions pertaining to the research topic and other relevant areas such as Feminism, the author's views on art and the craft of writing, her favourite authors and her advice to young and budding authors are asked.

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- **For the last six decades, you have enriched Punjabi literature with your novels, short stories and other non-fiction writings. What inspired you to take up writing?**

I was an MA student at Mahendra College in Patiala, when I wrote a tiny short story — my very first — for the College magazine. In the story, a peepal tree (*ficus religiosa* or sacred fig) talks to children and relates anecdotes to them. The Principal of the College, Teja Singh, was impressed and called me to his office and said, "You can write very good stories. Write a story every week and show it to me," he commanded. This is how I took to writing short stories.

Subsequently, one of my stories, *Agni Parikhya*, grew too long. I sent it to Dr M.S. Randhawa, the then Vice-Chancellor of Punjab Agricultural University, for his opinion. He wrote back: "I thought such wonderful stories are written only in English, but you, a Jatt girl, has written such a remarkable novel that I have sent it to Bhaapa Pritam Singh for publication."

Bhaapa Pritam Singh published the novel in a beautiful format and sent it to me with a note: "Bibi, whatever you write next, send it to me for publication." The novel that I wrote next was *Eho Hamara Jeevna* which won the Sahitya Akademi Award. This is how I began writing novels.

- **How do you fathom the psyche of women characters in your novels?**

After reading my first novel *Agni Parikhya*, Dr Jaswant Singh Neki wondered how Tiwana could penetrate into the deep psychic layers of the novel's protagonist, Mandeep, that are normally accessible to the psychoanalysts only. Well, in response, I would say that as a woman I can feel and understand more deeply the worldview and lifeworld of womankind.

- **In your novel, *Who Am I* the protagonist Pawan transcends the world. Do you also experience such kind of transcendence while writing about a character or you had already experienced such thoughts and then you put it on paper?**

While portraying a character I so identify with her that I begin to think and feel like her. Nothing is premeditated.

- **In your novels you have raised issues related to caste, class and gender. You have depicted the unjust treatment meted out to women whether they are illiterate village women like Bhano or highly educated ones like Pawan. Has the attitude of society towards women undergone any change in contemporary times?**

Due to changes in society, the fate of my 'characters' has also changed to a certain extent. These characters are no longer so weak and helpless. At the same time, the women of today are caught up in different kinds of problems. Earlier, the problems were largely family-centric, now issues relating to girls' education, employment, freedom and equality have embroiled them into a new set of problems besides the domestic ones.

- **You have not mentioned the names of the main characters in your novels such as name of the younger Sardarni in *Gone are the Rivers* and of your grandmother and foster mother (Badi Beji) in *A Journey on Bare Feet*? Is there any specific reason?**

In those days, the social status and role of a woman were more important than her name. That's why she was not called or addressed by her name.

- **You have not discussed anything about Partition in your novels. Could you please elaborate?**

I was very young at the time of Partition, and then we lived in a guarded bungalow. My family or me did not have to pass through the Partition travails. I have touched on Partition here and there in my writings, but I have not written any novel on this gargantuan tragedy.

- **In your autobiography *A Journey on Bare Feet*, one does not find a mention of date and year. Is there any reason?**

It was not required.

- ***A Journey on Bare Feet* is your autobiography in strict technical sense or is there some element of fiction mixed with it?**

If one cannot speak the truth, why should one write an autobiography? One can always write a novel.

- **Your novels *The Tale of the Phoenix* and *Who Am I* are imbued with philosophical ruminations often referring to Vedantic Philosophy and Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana and the sayings of Guru Nanak, Kabir and other saints. How these have shaped your vision as a writer?**

It is not correct to say that my writings are based on *granth*s or religious books. However, spirituality and religion are woven into the very texture of our life. One cannot ignore these important aspects of our society and culture.

- **Which writers in Punjabi you like the most?**

I like some of the Punjabi literary writings, but no Punjabi writer has impressed me in his or her entirety. I like writers such as Aashapura Devi, Agyeya, Camus, Hesse, Hemingway, Qurratulain Hyder, Kazantzakis, Dorris Lessing, Mahadevi Verma, Ayn Rand.

- **You have mentioned Tantrik rituals performed by Maharaja Bhupinder Singh in *Gone are the Rivers*. Had they really happened because in his book titled *Maharaja –Lives, Loves and Intrigues* Diwan Jarmani Dass has not presented Maharaja Bhupinder Singh as a man of high moral character.**

I reproduced only what circulated in society at the time. It was not borrowed from any book nor from fantasy.

- **As a writer, are you satisfied with the kind of work being done in the field of translation? Do you think enough efforts are being made to translate the regional writers into English, so as to make them available to a much larger readership?**

I can only comment on the English translation of my novels. Quite a few translations are mediocre. *Gone are the Rivers* and *Tell the Tale, Urvashi* are good translations. Khushwant Singh praised the former in a review. Likewise, Rana Nayar had good words to say about the translation of *Urvashi*. Scholars equally proficient in Punjabi and English are hard to find in Punjab and India.

- **You have visited several countries during your long literary career. How is Indian literature, particularly Punjabi literature, being received internationally by the overseas readers?**

I have been to the UK, Canada and America. I found that Punjabis there love their language and literature all the more. They read Punjabi literature and also write in their mother-tongue. This is encouraging.

- **What, according to you, should be the ultimate aim of a writer?**

To provide new models for human life and culture based on truth, beauty and goodness. The higher the character, vision, and knowledge of the writer, the higher will be his goals.

- **Your comments on your own craft as a writer?**

The sub-title of my autobiography is: Writing is my prayer. The rest I have left to time.

- **So far you have written fifty novels and seven collections of short stories besides many critical essays and autobiographies. Which one of your writings would you say is closest to your heart?**

When I write or publish anything new, I like it to be sure. After some time, however, I begin to feel that I couldn't write what I had wished to (write). This propels me to write afresh. In the long run, all my works appear

the same to me. My readers, admire *Eho Hamara Jiwana*, *Lang Gaye Dariya*, *Katho Kaho Urvashi* and *Teen Lok Se Niyari* more than others.

• **Which literary works or writers have you loved to read?**

My doctoral work was on the genre of short story for which I examined the writings of five major Punjabi short story writers. I was led to read extensively short stories written not only in Punjabi but also in other Indian languages I knew as well as English.

• **In your literary autobiography *Puchte Ho To Suno*, you mention some of the writers you have read such as Hemingway, Kafka, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and so on. Which writer have you liked the most?**

I like Hermann Hesse, above all his novel *Siddhartha*, Doris Lessing entirely, and Nikon Kazantzakis who wrote *Zobra The Greek*, *Christ Recrucified* and many other wonderful novels.

• **What are you writing these days?**

I have written four short novels over the past one year namely: *Ehi Sach Hai*, *Deh To'n Paar*, *Agli Tarikh Tak* and *Gafoor Si Us Da Nao'n*. *Ehi Sach Hai* is about a man who dies or is killed in Kashmir. Akash is his name. To his wife Akash's father, a brigadier, says: "Why are you crying? You are the wife of a brave soldier and martyr". She answers, "The truth is that Akash is dead and so am I." So, for her the truth is not that she is the wife of a martyr, but that her husband is dead and gone leaving her in wilderness.

• **What would you say about the soldiers recently killed in Pulwama?**

The girl in *Ehi Sach Hai* says that it is we who label our dead as martyrs; others regard their martyrs as dead. We deceive ourselves and the dead by using such labels as 'Shaheed'. Men die or are killed in fight – that's all, that's the plain truth.

• **When I commenced my PhD project, I knew no one who was similarly engaged in doctoral research on your novels in English. What is the status at present?**

Well, 'Comparative Literature', where researchers study literature across linguistic boundaries, is not very strong in our region. Nonetheless, I know of two students, at Delhi and Jaipur Universities, who are researching my work in English.

• **Your Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *And Such Is Her Fate* hints at the practice of bride-price among peasants. Does this practice continue?**

This practice of paying bride price was confined to the Harijans and in a very few cases, to the poorest segments of the peasantry. By and large, women are no longer bought and sold in Punjab. Instead, offering dowry has become the norm. We pay the scavenger for removing the domestic refuse; in the same way, people give dowry to marry off (i.e. dispose off) their daughters. The Punjabi word 'Kuri' (girl) is the feminine form of 'Kura' (refuse, dirt). The fact is that the condition of women does not change radically; they remain weak and vulnerable in any case.

• **Dowry is banned in India. Your comments?**

Yes, dowry is legally banned, but who cares? Only the ways of giving and taking dowry have changed. Formerly, dowry was given and displayed openly; now the give and take is secret.

• **You seem to believe in astrology. In your case, as mentioned in *A Journey on Bare Feet*, a Purohit correctly predicted that you would have a bright future – that you would pursue higher studies and earn fame as a writer. Are astrological predictions reliable?**

I believe astrology is a science. Nowadays, astrologers are not that well-versed in this science. Astrology or Jyotisha is an Upaveda, a part of the vedic lore, and is written in Sanskrit. Those who study and understand it thoroughly can predict accurately. It is possible that occasionally a quack's guess may also turn out to be right.

• **In your literary autobiography *Puchte Ho To Suno* you mention that you dreamt that a book of yours had won an award. This proved to be the case. Do your dreams come true?**

Yes, quite often. That's why dreams scare me at times. When my brother Birinder Singh was in the Bangladesh war in 1971, I saw a dream of him. He was very small and with me. Suddenly, he got lost somewhere. I cried, 'Veere, Veere', where are you? Then I saw him sitting on a tree and smiling: "Sister, I'm here only, Why

are you worried?’ he said. When Birinder returned from the war, he told me how one late evening when the fighting was horribly fierce and corpses lay scattered all around, he climbed a tree and saved his life.

- **It is believed that there is telepathy – an intuitive communication – between close relatives to which you refer also in your novels. Do you believe in it?**

It depends on how sensitive the person and how intense is the mutual attachment between relatives. Nowadays relationships are based on self interest; they have become utilitarian. Sisters are asking for their share of the ancestral property and thus becoming their brothers’ rivals. In fact, everybody is busy with his or her own self and interests. Television, mobile, internet do not leave the youngsters; money-making and career obsess others. All kin ties and social relations are at a discount. Aged parents are ignored or maltreated; brother-sister bond is losing its warmth. When relationships are falling apart, how can telepathies work?

- **Is westernization behind this state of affairs?**

Yes, to a large extent. The post-enlightenment western culture lays emphasis on the fulfilment of bodily needs. Deep and enduring relationships are of the soul, but soul is no one’s concern anymore.

- **In *A Journey on Bare Feet*, you write about your close relatives like grandparents, mother, father, uncle, aunt and others. Who influenced your personality the most?**

My mother. She came of a family where saints and sadhus were always welcome and well served and where prayers were said daily. My mother was very religiously inclined and devoted to the Gurus. She would get up at 2o’ clock in the morning, bathe in cold water even in winter and recite Sikh scriptures without fail.

- **Was it your mother’s influence or your learning that shaped your spiritual orientation?**

I think my personality was essentially moulded by my mother. Look, we were five sisters, my only brother was the youngest sibling, my dad was not alive and we had no paternal uncles. There was a certain ambience of insecurity and vulnerability surrounding our life. In such a situation, my mother told us, first, never to do such thing that needed to be concealed and second, to never forget God and death. Her maxims gave us immense courage and moral strength.

- **In India, we see our ‘self’ as part of God: ‘Aham Brahma Asmi’. What do you think of the western perception of ‘self’?**

There is no basic difference between eastern and western perceptions of self before the advent of modernity. The Bible says that God created man in his own image. The modern west views the individual self differently: in the modernist perception, the self is either physical or social. It is this perception that dominates the west. In India we do not equate ‘self or spirit’ with the body or with the socially formed individual personality. *Mahabarata*, the great Indian epic, proclaims: ‘For the sake of the village a family may be sacrificed, for the sake of a province a village may be sacrificed, and for the sake of one’s own soul the whole earth may be sacrificed.’ Soul is important for us; the individual is all important in the modern west. Unfortunately, India is now going the western way.

- **In your novel *The Tale of the Phoenix*, Aunt Gautami says that the way a tiniest scratch on the human body makes it restless, a single suicide makes the entire cosmos restless. But now so many youngsters are committing suicide.**

The youth as well as farmers are committing suicide today. It is because we have forgotten God who has created us. Those who commit suicide do not acknowledge their responsibilities, nor ponder over the consequences of their act. We get this human life after so many births. This life is very much valuable. By forgetting its importance we destroy it as if it is a toy to be played with and broken as soon as we get fed up with it. We are attached to the whole Universe and nature. The sun rises for us, the wind blows for us, the earth produces for us and we live –all these energies work for the sustenance of our existence. Why to destroy it for no reason?

- **What solutions do you suggest to overcome depression and suicide?**

Gadgets like video games, mobile, TV and computer keep the children self-absorbed; their use should be minimized. Children should move out, play outdoor games, become social and encouraged to express themselves by all means.

- **Are our youth driven to suicide because they are unable to express themselves even to their parents?**

Today, the parents do not have time for their children. Therefore, children have found different ways to pass their time. They are self absorbed in their own world and do not express their feelings to anyone.

- **Your advice to research scholars working on your novels, short stories and other miscellaneous writings?**
General scholarship; knowledge of literary theory and method; deep familiarity with local history, culture and society; and feminism in all its aspects will be good aids to fruitful literary research including my own writings.

(Compilation of two Interviews of Dalip Kaur Tiwana by the researcher on 4th Feb 2015 and 17th Feb 2019)

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I Amandeep Kaur (Research Scholar, English) had taken the interviews of the author Dalip Kaur Tiwana on 4th Feb 2015 and 17th Feb 2019 respectively at her premise i.e. at Punjabi University, Patiala where she lives as a writer-in-residence. This Interview is the compilation of these two interviews taken on the above said dates. As my research work is based on her novels namely *And Such Is Her fate*, *Gone are the Rivers*, *Twilight*, *Mark of the Nose Ring*, *Who Am I*, *The Tale of the Phoenix*, *A Journey on Bare Feet* (autobiography) the interviews were taken in this regard.