AUTHOR AS A CITIZEN OF THE GLOBAL VILLAGE:
AN INTERVIEW WITH SUNNY SINGH

Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal

In January 1999, Sunny Singh's first play, *Birthing Athena*, was staged at the prestigious Sri Ram Centre, in Mandi House, New Delhi. The play was a critical and commercial success, with its story of emotionally fraught relationships in modern India -- relationships between ambitious mothers & daughters, and between young professionals looking to reconcile ambitions that involve a global reality with relationships requiring some geographic stability. The play is split into three acts and has only three characters. In the 1999 production, the roles of Savita, Shankar & Ritu were essayed by Prabha Tonk, Sunit Tandon & Seema Chari. Her *Single in the City*, *Nani's Book of Suicides* and *With Krishna's Eyes* have been received well by the scholars. For instance, mark the view of *Indian Review of Books* about *Nani's Book of Suicides*: “Sunny Singh makes certain you don't lie back and enjoy, but sit at the edge of the chair gnawing your nails to the quick as you hypnotically turn the pages… This angst-ridden book is strangely moving… It cuts too close for comfort. Remember to laugh off Sunny Singh's spell and the eerie feeling that someone has just written a part of your life. It's just a book after all, not magic.” Currently, she teaches creative writing at the London Metropolitan University. This literary talent discusses with Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal several social and literary issue of contemporary significance.

1 Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal is Senior Lecturer in English at Feroze Gandhi College, Rae Bareli, (U.P.), India. He has his doctorate on T.S. Eliot from Allahabad University. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal is interested mostly in Indian Aesthetics, Diaspora and Contemporary Critical Theory. His interviews with a number of contemporary literary figures, as well as his research papers, book reviews, articles and poems have appeared in publications, including *South Asian Review, Kavya Bharati, The Vedic Path, IJPCL, Quest, The Confluence, Kafka Intercontinental, Pegasus, IJOWLAC, The Journal, Contemporary Vibes, Promise, The Raven Chronicles, Yellow Bat Review, Poetcrit, Carved in Sand, Turning the Tide, Blue Collar Review, Creative Writing And Criticism, Bridge-in-Making, Katha Kshetre* and *Hyphen*. Several anthologies have selected his poems and articles. His poem “To Lord Krishna” is in the celebrated anthology, *The Pagan's Muse*, Citadel Press. Several of his literary pieces have been included in *The People's Poet: Summer Community Magazine* of 2004 and are posted on websites. He has also edited a critical book on Stephen Gill. He actively participated in the International Literary Festival, 2008, organized by Kerala Language Institute at Calicut (Kerala, India) and also presented an illuminating paper there. He edits *Parnassus: An Innovative Journal of Literary Criticism*. He can be contacted at nilanshu1973@yahoo.com or nilanshu1973@rediffmail.com.
NILANSHU KUMAR AGARWAL : Sunny Singh graduated with honours from Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, in 1990 with a degree in English and American Literature. She is currently enrolled in a PhD programme at the Universidad de Barcelona. In 2005, Sunny relocated to London, where she teaches creative writing at the London Metropolitan University. Does the memory of your homeland haunt you in these alien lands? Are you nostalgic about your home? I think you are quite homesick as you call yourself “Bollywood fanatic, bhangra-mad” in your blog. What do you say? What effect has this nostalgia left on your writings?

SUNNY SINGH: I am very uncomfortable about the assumptions this question makes about me, and indeed issues of homesickness and nostalgia. Why should one need to be homesick in order to be a Bollywood fanatic? I have been a huge fan of Hindi cinema since I was a child in Varanasi. Same holds true about being “bhangra-mad” – my father loved bhangra from his time in the army and passed that love down to us. And living in Delhi just cemented that fondness. I don’t think either of those have anything to do with being homesick.

I think the idea of “alien” lands is one that is steadily changing, based on historical shifts, technology, as well as personal experience. When I was very young, my father worked for the Indian government and so we grew up in various parts of India – often in small towns along the borders – but that did not remove us from our roots in rural UP. Similarly when my father began accepting foreign assignments, we grew up in places like New York but we never felt anything but Indian.

Moreover, when you are discussing everything from the price of potatoes in the local mandi and the panchayat level politics in the village with friends and family on a daily basis, it is very difficult to feel disconnected. And I do that daily via skype or chat, where I know what is happening in Azamgarh and Lucknow, and Tehri as much as I do about London where I am currently based. Besides, I am involved on a daily basis with people – through my project, through family and friends – who are in India, in its metropolitan canters, as well as in its small towns and villages.

And again regarding the issue of nostalgia – I think this idea is drawn from writings and experiences of an earlier generation; from writers and people who “emigrated” to foreign lands and due to factors of economics and technology were cut off from their roots. Also the immigrant experience is quite different – one chooses to become part of a foreign
land, assimilating in the host culture while somehow fighting to retain one’s natal identity. I am not an “immigrant” – I am an expat who lives in the part of the world that interests me and then returns to India when I am done. I have lived in five continents so far and have never felt an iota of nostalgia – after all, my homeland is not lost to me, it is there, with me, stamped in bright gold on my passport.

NKA: Why do the Indian authors and intellectuals move towards the West? Does the West provide better opportunities to the authors? How will you differentiate between the publishing scene in India and the West? Are the western publishers better than the Indian ones?

S. SINGH: I think it is dangerous to generalize about authors and intellectuals moving towards the West as some general trend. There are after all a huge number of intellectuals, artists and writers who live, write and publish in India. I think different people move for different reasons – I am sure people like Amitav Ghosh or Vikram Seth would have different explanations, just as Salman Rushdie’s family moved to the UK for very different motives. I can only speak for my own personal decisions: I have a curiosity to see the world and experience it. I move as and when opportunities and personal interests coincide. And I return to India when the need or interest arises.

Regarding publishing – I don’t think you can make such vast generalizations about western publishers being better than Indian ones. This varies from one publisher to another, and from one language/country to another. I find that Indian publishers are at par with international ones – they are willing to take similar risks, find interesting new ideas, new names, and bring them to the reader.

NKA: In your blog entry ‘Hypocrisy or Just Plain Ol’ Hubris, You Betcha!’, you discuss the racial prejudice of the British and the West towards the East in general and India in particular. The racial slur makes an Indian aware of his “double consciousness”. Is there a way out? Or should we just follow Rushdie’s suggestion - “I am recommending the ancient tradition of making as big a fuss, as noisy a complaint about the world as is humanly possible”– in the essay ‘Outside the Whale’ of his celebrated critical book Imaginary Homelands?
S. SINGH: I think that particular blog entry was not so much about British and the West in general but about biases in the media which continue to frame events in dichotomous terms. So when the Irish “troubles” were on, these were somehow a “political” issue, while the same sort of political movement would be described in bleak sectarian terms if it were happening in Iraq or India or somewhere in Africa.

More importantly, that blog post was directed towards a section of the media in India itself that idolizes USA and Europe as somehow epitomes of democracy, secularism and so forth. It was to point out that the hate speech that is present in public discourse in places like Switzerland, Holland and most importantly, given their political/economic and military importance, the USA is of such magnitude that we cannot imagine similar stuff at the same level in India (no matter how much we complain about Hindutva and sundry fringe elements). The images and words used in western elections, in the past year, are not only blatantly prejudiced in terms of race, religion and ethnicity, but also the sort that incite violence against specific targets, even the political opponents. These are the sort of things that the EC would clamp down very quickly on, and would be completely unacceptable to general public in India.

NKA: In the aforesaid blog, you describe yourself as “Bollywood fanatic”. What are your views about the current scenario of Bollywood? The show industry has gone a sea-change in India. Now, more and more serious movies are being produced. Bollywood is something more than mere titillating thriller of the past. Moreover, there appears to be a close kinship between cinema and literature, as more and more movies are being created on the basis of literary classics. We have the examples of Othello, Macbeth and Namesake etc. What do you think about all this? What difference of perception do you find between the movies of today and those of 1970s/1980s?

S. SINGH: As full disclosure, I must first of all tell you that my PhD is on commercial Hindi cinema and considers issues of critical perception (amongst other things). So I could go on and on about this particular topic. But in short, I find the derogatory attitude that many Indian intellectuals have towards Hindi cinema to be shocking, as well as misinformed.

Let us just look at how you have phrased the question including the phrase “mere titillating thriller of the past”? For an industry that has produced over 30,000 feature films over nearly a hundred years, that is a terrible generalization; of the kind that no French,
American, Italian or German intellectual would make when speaking of their cinema(s).
In 1990s, there were films like *Roja, Bombay, Maachis and Sarfarosh* – were these “mindless” thrillers? The 1970s were a “third” golden era for Hindi film production, and shaped the generation of film-makers who are creating exciting work today, like Farah Khan and Aamir Khan. Even the much derided and scorned 1980s produced some really interesting cinema. So why should we assume that the cinema today is somehow “new” or “divergent” and not a continuing era in the evolution of the industry?

Let me also point out that not even a dozen films that Hollywood produces every year are “great” and barely two dozen of them are watchable. Hollywood produces a lot of big budget trash, and some really good stuff. The same goes for “Bollywood” – we produce some good cinema, some absolutely brilliant cinema, and a fair amount mediocre, and some absolutely rubbish cinema. Let us start being realistic however about how we look at it and consider it.

Finally the link between Indian cinema and literature is a very long standing one. After all it was Tagore who thought – as early as the partition of Bengal - that cinema could work to mobilize a primarily illiterate population. Even the earliest filmmakers looked to literature for inspiration. Moreover, from the earliest days, filmmakers cut across to literature while poets and novelists wrote script and dialogue for films. In fact, when you consider historically, it is amazing how closely intertwined commercial cinema and literature are in India – perhaps far more than any other commercial cinema industry in the world. Even today you get Vikram Chandra cutting across to scripting films and a poet like Gulzar making films. So the newer stuff – Omkara and Maqbool are simply drawing on a long standing legacy of collaboration between film and literature.

**NKA:** Sunny teaches creative writing at the London Metropolitan University. Can literary creativity be taught? Is it not something spontaneous? Wordsworth defined poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; while teaching of any course is structured and methodical. How can an emerging author establish a proper coordination between the two situations?

**S. SINGH:** I don’t think creative writing programmes are about teaching literary creativity. I would compare them to art schools where you learn techniques and skills for creating art. Or to music schools where you can learn to play the piano or the sarod. Does that mean every student ends up as a Picasso or a Chopin? No. But it is time we started
looking at literary production as an artistic pursuit with its own set of competencies. That is what - I believe - creative writing programmes attempt to provide.

As far as my own experience is concerned, I think the whole Romantic enterprise has probably done more harm to literary production than anything else. Not because they weren't great authors, but because of the myth-making they did around literary production. We know that Coleridge worked for days, even weeks on writing a single poem. Same is true for Wordsworth and the others. Yet the myth that grew out of the era was of this fabulous organic writing process that is somehow inspired and thus grows spontaneously.

Let us be reasonable: even poems don't get produced spontaneously; they require a huge amount of polishing and parsing. And when it comes to novels, this “inspiration” premise gets even more absurd. How can 80,000 words be written as a spontaneous overflow of feeling? It requires discipline and hardwork – and those CAN be taught. The importance of discipline and hard work cannot be overemphasized. There are immensely talented people out there who never produce any considerable body of work not for any other reason but that they lack the discipline. At the end, I believe in what Einstein said about genius – its one percent inspiration and 99% perspiration.

**NKA: What is the response of the West towards Indian literature? Do the westerners, particularly the British, approve of our creative efforts? Are they not filled with some bias towards us, because of their complex of racial superiority? Or do you think them to be objective and dispassionate? What is the reaction of the West towards your works?**

**S. SINGH:** First of all, I don’t think these monolithic categories of “West” vs India are very helpful. India produces great writing, and also some awful stuff. At the same time, there are people in western countries – readers, editors, critics, publishers – who love Indian literature and there are others who are oblivious to it. To reduce all of this to simplistic categories is not really helpful to any meaningful discussion.

Second, why should we care if anyone approves of our creative efforts? Surely in the past sixty plus years, we have moved past that postcolonial inferiority complex that requires a stamp of approval from our former masters?

I am also particularly worried about the generalized assumption that there is a “complex of racial superiority” either in the west or in Britain. This is not to say that there is not a
meta-narrative rooted in imperialism of the past that can be found in the media, or even politics.

But in general terms, I don’t think readers decide on the merits of literary efforts based on “complex of racial superiority.” If that were the case, writers like Amitav Ghosh, Orhan Pamuk or Ben Okri would not be as influential and respected.

And finally, as an author I fervently hope that readers – from any part of the world - are not be “objective and dispassionate” as you suggest. That in itself is a death sentence for all art. Art is meant to challenge and provoke, and make people think, feel and experience. And if a reader is going to be “dispassionate and objective,” they are not going to participate in the aesthetic, emotional, intellectual experience that art offers.

Finally speaking specifically about my writing, I write about India, about the changes facing us, and about the way we are coping with the transformation of our culture and society. Some people are interested in those issues and ideas and others aren’t – both in India and abroad. But their approval is really immaterial to the literary process. I find readers from all parts of the world who understand and connect to my writing. For example, I am fascinated by the fact that there are people who read my work in Italian or French and connect to it in an immediate, urgent way. In contrast, there are people who are Indian, live in India, and cannot find a way to connect to what I write. What I am trying to explain here is that an empathetic reader is not necessarily limited to one’s own country or culture.

**NKA:** What are your views about the curriculum of English studies in India? Is it not parochial, colonial and the last jewel in the crown of the Empire? What should be done to decolonize it?

**S. SINGH:** I have not really studied English literature in India so I am probably not the best person to speak of this. In general terms, in my interaction with the intelligentsia in the country, I do notice that there is an inordinate amount of respect for western literature, often from the colonial period, amongst some of this set. Often – and I find this terrible – this is the same group of people who know very little about Indian literatures and philosophy. Forget classical works from our ancient past, these are the same people who make a virtue of knowing very little about any of the medieval and modern literatures in any of the languages of our country. Yet they hold forth on Rimbaud et al. It
is laughable and tragic at the same time. I am always reminded of Fanon’s explanation of the colonized intellectuals when I meet them or hear them.

At the same time, I have to point out that this is changing quite dramatically with the new generations coming forward. I feel that they are one more step in the decolonization of the mind, a process that will take much longer than our freedom struggle did. And yet I do see that happening – slowly but steadily.

One area that requires greater push is the academia – and here I speak as an academic more than as writer. We need to start challenging the “West as Theory, East as Object” formulation that so many of our intellectuals rely on. Why are we looking constantly at western critical theories to make sense of cultural production in India? Why are we not coming up with more culturally specific theoretical formulation? I believe this will change as the newer generations permeate through academia, but it will be slow process, far slower than in the more open field of artistic creation.

**NKA:** You are a multilingual scholar with a complete command over the literature / cinema of at least three languages—Hindi, English and Spanish. Out of the three, which one is closest to your heart? Please make an emotional statement.

**S. SINGH:** I don’t really think of anyone of them being particularly close to my heart. I suppose Hindi is the first language I learned – it is the language of my childhood and my earliest memories; the language I speak at home and the language I first learned to read. But then English is a language that I always associated with communication – of being able to travel, of being able to talk to people who were from different places. It is a language I choose to write in so it is special in its own way. Spanish is a language I learned because of friends, and a language I learned as a grown up so I have a different relationship with it. And same goes for any other language I add on. These are all special in different ways. My mother always says that we have five fingers that are all different shapes and sizes but if you cut one of them off, it isn’t as if the pain will be any less. So for me, all the languages I speak/work in are part of my life and each is special in its own way.

**NKA:** How has your association with the Non-Profit organizations helped you in your writing career?
S. SINGH: I don't think being involved with non-profit organizations has anything to do with my writing. I believe that I was fortunate in getting so much from India – in terms of education, culture, up-bringing. My grandmother always said that if you take something, then you should put something back. So for me, being involved in non-profit organizations is a way of putting something back to the society that has created me. I don't think it helps my writing in any way except perhaps keeping me in close contact with ground realities in India.

NKA: What are your future writing plans?

S. SINGH: I am at a fairly early stage of my writing career so I enjoy challenging myself by experimenting with ideas, styles and forms. Increasingly I find myself dividing my time between nonfiction and fiction. So on one hand, I have just finished my PhD. dissertation which will have to be turned into a book in the near future. Plus I do a fair amount of academic writing – mostly on issues to do with culture, with a specific focus on cinema. I also write creative nonfiction, often looking at ways in which politics and culture intersect. On the other hand, I have been experimenting with the short story form for the past couple of years. I started initially because I did not have the time and energy to work simultaneously on a novel while I was working on my PhD. But over time, it has grown into a separate experimental process. So far it has been extremely rewarding to work on the short story – it is such a different form from the novel that it really pushes me as a writer. As a result, my writing has grown in ways that I had not imagined. So for the moment I am working on the short stories, continuing to write small pieces, trying to polish and refine my craft.

There are ideas that are still germinating for a novel but I have learned to wait till those ideas have grown fully. Eventually I will go back to writing another novel.

Work Cited