

# Q&A on Sunny Singh's short story *A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil*.

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## Abstract

With its rich semantic texture and evocative imagery Sunny Singh's short story *A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil* invites various readings. The story tells how a young girl is both attracted and confused when her grandmother's neighbor, who lives in a lesbian relationship, massages her skull and oils her curly hair. When the grandmother at one point forbids the oiling sessions, the girl suddenly becomes aware of hidden meanings and intuitions associated with this practice.

The essay juxtaposes a reading of the story from a more conventional western perspective with an interpretation from the point of the Indian system of aesthetics based on *rasa*. From this double perspective, it discusses various stylistic and thematic aspects of the story. Diverging interpretations are presented of the role of the characters, the functionality of their characterization, and the use of description and suggestion to evoke the semantic framework of the story.

The juxtaposition of two readings was prompted by a discussion with the author during a conference panel on rebellion in modern Indian literature and film. To prevent the impression of imposing a "scholarly" reading on a more "intuitive" reading, the essay continues the dialogue with the author and invites her to react to the reading and discuss the notion of an "Indian" aesthetic model, its relevance for her writing, and current critical approaches to modern Indian fiction. In her response, Sunny Singh explains how the theme of the story was prompted by her perception of the sharing of knowledge of sexuality and intimacy in a tightly-knit Indian social context. The discussion with the author extends beyond the specific story, and she presents her views on how her scholarly knowledge of modern Indian culture stimulates her in her creative work. Thereby, it aptly frames the exploration of a reading of *A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil* from the perspective of Indian literary aesthetics.

Keywords: Indian English literature, Sunny Singh, lesbian relationships, sexuality, Indian women

This essay sets out to experiment with a reading of Indian literature written in English that is complemented by a dialogue with the author. A conversation of this kind actually took place in the context of the panel on "Rebellion" at the 2010 European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies (21. ECMSAS) in Bonn, where Sunny Singh read the story *A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil* and discussed it with the members of the panel. The discussion revealed that, although a reading that focuses exclusively on the psychological development of characters is perfectly capable of producing meaning, Singh's writing also invites an interpretation inspired by concepts from Indian literary aesthetics based on the notion of *rasa*. During the discussion, the author appeared to be fully aware of this polyphony, and she recognized the framework of Indian aesthetics as a structuring element in her work.

The analysis of *A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil* that was discussed with Sunny Singh at the conference juxtaposes a reading based on conventions of western writing with an analysis of the contribution of Indian aesthetics to the rich semantic texture of the story, without giving precedence to one or the other hermeneutic strategy. This read-

ing will be presented in detail here, followed by questions and answers by the author on this reading and other aspects of her writing.

A prominent element in this reading is the functionality of the aesthetic concept of the work in relation to the representation of rebellion. It will argue that the composite aesthetic program of the story aids the representation of a specific form of rebellion in the narrative that arises from the tension between social roles and responsibilities on the one hand and the limited opportunities to experience individual freedom at the other hand. It shows how such freedom can only be experienced at the fringes of the formal social structure, where traditional patterns are less rigid. The discussion with the author yields an interesting additional perspective on the story, which complements the reading presented in this essay.

*A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil* is only 1600 words long, and consists of a memory by a first person narrator of her encounters with a couple of unmarried women – Anu-di and Vibha-di – during her childhood. She and her grandmother are neighbors of the couple and visit them regularly. On one of these occasions, Anu-di proceeds to oil the girl's short-cut curly hair with jasmine oil, a common practice of Indian women to keep their hair straight and soft and protect it from harsh sunlight. The oiling of the hair, accompanied by massaging the skull, is a sensual but confusing experience for the girl. She washes her hair afterward to get rid of the strong smell. One day, the grandmother abruptly intervenes and stops Anu-di from oiling the girl's hair. After that, relations with the neighboring couple are restored but it is evident that a line has been drawn. Later, on the narrator's wedding day, Anu-di comes to bring her a garland of jasmine and explains to her the true nature of its scent.

And when I was being dressed for the wedding, Anu-di – still in her girly *churidaar-kameez* [Indian pants] – brought a heavy garland of fresh jasmine. She smiled at me, only half-mischievously, in the mirror as she pinned the flowers to my hair. “Now that you are grown up, you'll know the scent is an aphrodisiac.”

### Inner tension

A reading that focuses on the inner tension caused by the girl's incapacity to appreciate and understand what the oiling of her hair with jasmine oil is about, is perfectly capable of producing meaning from the story. Such tension is caused by the girl's unawareness of the prejudices felt by her grandmother against her neighbors. She is fascinated by the couple's free life-style and their distance from conventional Indian family life:

That they lived by themselves, that they seemed to need no one else but each other; that no family ever visited them; that students from the university seemed to inhabit their house and then disappeared into the world beyond. All invitations, for weddings and engagements, births and pregnancies, would be sent to both of them – Anu-di and Vibha-di. There were never any last names on the envelopes.

When Anu-di oils the girl's hair, she is not insensitive to the strong sensuality of this practice and is also curious, although she cannot yet understand its full meaning. The narration subtly implicates the reader in the tension created by this situation. Al-

though the couple is not explicitly described as lesbian, the reader is informed of the unconventional nature of their relationship. Interesting elements in this respect are the references to the clothing of the women:

Vibha-di always wore crisp saris, starched and ironed to perfection. But Anu-di wore *churidar-kameez*, looking for all the world like a school-girl with her hair pulled back in two thick plaits.

The mention of their life surrounded by casual friends rather than family marks them as being detached from the order that governs regular society. The suggestion of acceptance of the women's unconventional lifestyle is challenged when the grandmother objects to the oiling of the girl's hair. Suddenly, the women's behavior is qualified as illicit and something in which a young girl should not be involved, although the reason for this it is never explicitly explained to her. She can also at that point not completely understand why this has happened.

The first person narrator does not reflect much on the events, as the narration only registers her reactions. It is only when she "becomes a woman" through marriage, which classifies her into an accepted social category, that the remark by Anu-di makes her understand what actually happened in her childhood. The explanation frames the narrator's memory of the oiling of her hair by Anu-di as belonging to a world that seems lost to her for good with her entering the life of a married woman.

### The Indian perspective

Reading Sunny Singh's story without any knowledge of the background of Indian writing or aesthetics is perfectly satisfactory. Yet, the prominent presence of the Indian context and the evocative description provide an incentive to explore alternative hermeneutic strategies, especially those rooted in Indian literary conventions. South Asian culture is no monolith and there is no single "Indian" system of literary aesthetics as such. What is available is a well worked out classical theory of artistic creation and reception based on the concept of *rasa*, which emerges in its earliest forms around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and is passed on and extended until the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD.

In Indian art of all periods and genres, the influence of these aesthetic theories can be found, but it is in no sense defined by this paradigm. It is more the case that Indian art always shares some elements that can be linked to concepts described by the *rasa* theories. When formulating a reading of modern Indian writing in English that engages with Indian artistic modes, it is therefore fitting to take into account both the concepts from the *rasa* paradigm, as well as the aesthetic practices of Indian writing which developed in the classical genres and in modern vernacular literature.

The classical Indian system of aesthetics is first articulated in the context of drama. It is based on the notion that art should evoke the sensation of a limited number of emotions (*rasas*). Within *rasa* aesthetics, the goal of art is to provide stimuli that facilitate the experience of emotion in the reader/viewer/hearer that mirrors the represented emotional state. The performer does not transfer his own or his character's

emotions, but arouses the experience of an individual emotion in each member of his audience. At its highest expressive level, art evokes a purified form of emotion that is no longer colored by the particular individual instances or stimuli in the minds of the audience, but becomes a generalized (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*) experience of the emotion *per se*.

In the course of the development of this aesthetic system, the earliest forms of which have been found in texts dating around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, theorists from various schools added new insights, but left the basic principles intact. It was also extended to other realms, such as religious experience, psychology, or linguistics. An influential religious interpretation equated the experience of purified emotion with mystical enlightenment. The emotion that is felt in this instance was called *śāntirasa* – the emotion of peace. Another important concept in later theories, *dhvani* (lit. ‘sound’), came from the realm of linguistics where it refers to the capacity of language and signs to suggest or refer to the non-literal meaning of a word. This concept was integrated into the paradigm of the experience of pure emotions through artistic representations.

The *rasa* paradigm has remained elusive as a tool for analyzing Indian art. Although it is possible to recognize elements from the theories in literature, music, or other form of expression, the system is descriptive rather than prescriptive and seems to have developed its own discourse. Like other Indian theoretical paradigms, it has a penchant for classification rather than for the analysis of artistic creation. A number of genres seem directly modeled on *rasa* theory, but Indian writing from all periods shares notions that can be linked to the basic principles of *rasa* theories.<sup>1</sup>

In a number of elements in *A Cup Full of Jasmine Oil* a link can be found with Indian aesthetic modes or practices of Indian writing. Most striking in this respect are the associations conjured up by the title of the story. The image of the cup of fragrant oil is a perfect tool for the evocation of an emotion which is central to *rasa* aesthetics. The story makes optimal use of the emotional overtones and mood-setting functionality of the jasmine oil, as it refers to the conflicting emotions its fragrant scent evokes in the narrator.

“Off you go,” she would laugh, her voice full of mischief. I would clamber back over the wall, bewildered and uncertain, sure that I hated the scent of jasmine oil, keen to find the next occasion Anu-di would offer to oil my hair. My grandmother would briefly glance at me with sharp, keen eyes, then shoo me off for a bath, as if delaying for another day something she needed to tell me.

The sensual and erotic associations of the oil are expressed in the description of the rinsing of the narrator’s hair by Anu-di. The fact that it is involved in an intimate bodily ritual makes it a very strong sign. The apotheosis of the story comes when Anu-di explains the aphrodisiac quality of jasmine oil, but this was already “in the air” and becomes neigh superfluous, so heavily was the story scented with the associations connected with the unguent oil. The references contained in the oil make it a perfect *leitmotif* for setting the mood of the story, preparing the expression of emo-

<sup>1</sup> For a description of the system of aesthetics based on *rasa*, see: Gerow 1971 and De 1963.

tion, and leading up to the generalization of this emotion. By its nature, the oil becomes a metaphor for *rasa* and the main emotion of the story itself, as the Sanskrit word literally means “juice”. This is also how it effectuates the generalization of the emotions presented in the story.

Setting the mood is an elementary role of images and of the typecasting of characters in Indian writing, as it assists the expression of the dominant emotion of a work of art. Both in the choice of images, as well as in the representation of characters, stereotypes are preferred over original, innovative images or the individual motivations of the characters. The latter are there primarily to represent recognizable roles that agree with the emotional setup of the story and allow generalization rather than in order to develop into “well-rounded” characters.

The representation of Anu-di and Vibha-di can be seen in this light. They do not change or develop during the story but provide a reference to the emotional complex of love and sexuality, setting a mood through the images with which they are described. The description of the couple is a function of this expressive purpose: the girlish dress of Anu-di contrasts with the crisp, starched, and ironed sarees of Vibha-di – the dress of married women – to emphasize the opposition between the more aggressive, exploring sexuality, and the socially accepted role of the married housewife.

Although the couple appears to express a stable emotional complex, the signal they send out is a disturbing one. Their “abnormality” seems to be accepted by the social context, but the open eroticism of the jasmine oil in the hands of Anu-di causes a sudden breach of this apparent order. Anu-di serves to fill the role of the “trouble-maker”, which in many Indian narratives is filled by younger sisters or brothers, setting the narrative in motion by creating chaos and a crisis of emotions.

The character of the grandmother is also interesting in this respect. She is not described in detail but has a crucial role in restoring order. Her intervention may, in a conventional reading, appear conservative or dismissive of the lesbian relationship of Anu-di and Vibha-di and of the “wrong” sexuality implied by the oiling sessions. From another angle, which would comply more with the Indian models, she has an active and positive role. She restores order and thereby facilitates the realization of the story’s dominant emotional state, which is marked by the tension between order and the challenge of sexuality, be it the “right” kind associated with married life, or the “illicit” kind in a lesbian relationship. The slippery, unguent nature of the oil is a perfect sign for the conflict of emotions and the challenge in the story. The grandmother’s intervention was inevitable, considering her role as guardian of honor and social order. Her action is not necessarily prompted by personal motivation or dislike of the two women, but by her role, which is defined largely by the external social fabric.

At the end of the story, things seem to have been put right by the conventional marriage of the narrator. The universe is whole again. This dimension makes the story more than just a personal account, and turns it into a microcosm that mirrors complex existential questions. In this respect, the way the unconventional life-style of the two women is described is full of significance. Their being independent of family or other social ties, their free life-style, their being visited by loose friends –

these are images that carry a resonance of renunciation (*tyāg*), the stage of life when one withdraws from society to live the life of an ascetic. It is considered a cultural or religious ideal in South Asian culture, a location for the experience of deepest existential truth, where the individual prevails over the social persona. While this life outside the world can only become a practical goal in life for a limited number of people, it informs many cultural forms and their expression in art. This renunciation is not a neutral ideal, as it is potentially dangerous: ascetics have access to powers that can disrupt the social fabric and the established order of things. Singh's story places the confusing sexuality in this ambivalent context, cut off from social rules and obligations, thereby tapping into a powerful semantic complex. The choice of context contributes to the generalization of the emotions in the story and to its functionality as a microcosmic representation of a larger order.

The miniaturization of great themes is not uncommon in Indian literature and can be found in the Sanskrit epics as well as in modern short stories. The format of the short story lends itself very well to this concept. When all the images and characters in the frame of the story fulfill their set roles, the generalization of the represented emotions is achieved, making the particular stand for the universal.

## Rebellion

As mentioned before, the story seems to contain a subtext of rebellion against heterosexual gender roles in the presence of the lesbian couple. Their rebellion is not an active one, the two women live their lives in their own circle of friends and in the small community that is depicted in the story. It presents itself in the life of the girl through the oiling of her hair and prompts correction by the grandmother. This kind of rebellion does not lead to intense drama or irreparable ruptures in the relationships between the protagonists. It is depicted as a tension between expected roles and a disruptive reality that hinders the fulfillment of that role. Indian epics provide interesting examples of such situations, such that of the legendary king Rama, hero of the Ramayana epic, who is prevented by the manipulation of one of the king's other wives from succeeding his father and fulfill his destined role as successor to the throne. In modern writing, the protagonist is often torn between traditional role-models and social structures and a modernized world where these concepts lose their meaning. Individual freedom comes with more complexity and choices, which trouble many of the protagonists of modernist fiction in Hindi and other Indian languages.<sup>2</sup>

In the story discussed here, rebellion also has a more positive aspect. Instead of the grave existential crises of the alienated characters in modernist Hindi fiction of the post-Independence period, the ambivalence of the girl is surrounded by and embedded in the safety of familiar characters, a safety that does not seem to have been broken by the grandmother's intervention. The couple is invited to the wedding of the woman who grew out of the little girl. This suggests an alternative to the breakdown of traditional values of modernist fiction. In Singh's story, the confusion cau-

<sup>2</sup> Various aspects of the protagonists in modern Hindi fiction and cinema have been described in Damsteegt 2003. See also De Bruijn 2003 and 2009.

sed by being confronted with alternative social behavior is resolved in a more harmonious way than the struggle of a previous generation of urban middle-class youth.

### The perspective of the young girl

A striking element in the story, which is also functional in its thematic layout, is the use of the focalization point of a young girl to narrate the story. Given the importance of clearly defined roles of characters in the Indian aesthetic framework, children have a special role. They are not yet fully taken up in the social fabric that defines the agency of adults, and, instead, represent a stage of life that is free from the obligations of family and societal ties. In contrast to western literature, where youth is often seen as a happy, care-free phase of life, many Indian stories describe this as a lonely state, detached and disconnected from the social world of adults. Children do not have the well-defined social identity of adult characters. In the work of the Hindi author Nirmal Verma (1929–2005) children are often protagonists or provide the focalization point for the narration. They provide an eccentric perspective, from which the situation in the story is perceived without the hermeneutic grid of adult social roles and categories.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, they are closer to the sphere of renunciation, where the idiom of asceticism rules. It is as if renunciation and its individualism at the end of life is the mirror image of the identity-free state of childhood. This is a subtext in the meeting between the girl and Anu-di that helps expand and generalize the images represented in the story.

In Singh's story, the meaning of the oiling of her hair and of Anu-di's innuendo was evident to the girl, but it was perceived objectively, without qualifying it as either right or wrong. She is able to perceive it in a very personal manner. It is only at the end that her perception is framed by her new status as a married woman, at which point she starts to understand the meaning of the jasmine oil. She can now face Anu-di from a distance, without the imminent threat of being overwhelmed by something she does not understand. On the one hand she has lost touch with the uninhibited perception of childhood, while on the other hand it gives her a sense of safety and belonging. Her becoming part of mainstream society through marriage radically cuts her off from the "renunciation" of youth, which may harbor a deeper truth and individuality, but is also confusing and potentially disruptive to the social order.

### Suggestion

The most powerful element in Sunny Singh's story, when viewed from the perspective of Indian aesthetics, is that it suggests rather than spells out the emotions. The images do not produce an algorithm that leads to a fixed meaning, but rather incite a range of associations around the main themes of the story. The polyphony of each of these associations adds to their effectiveness.

<sup>3</sup> These aspects of the perspective of children in Indian fiction are also described by Edwin Gerow for three Bengali novels by Bankim Chandra, Bhabani Bhattacharya, and Bibhuti Bhusan Banerji (1974).

This is particularly relevant for the central character in the story, the young girl who is confronted with a confusing new sensation and a new role in the world of women. The scent of the jasmine oil, the bodily sensation of being held, touched, and massaged by Anu-di, are not an explicitly sexual experience, they rather conjure up a complex of associations, ranging from the safe sensuality of female hair-care to overt sexuality. The author's choice of the proper images adds to the evocative nature of the story. All of these images resonate with concepts that play an important role in Indian life-styles and culture. They silently refer to a vast universe of stories, rituals, and customs that give meaning to life. The hint at this level of referentiality adds enormous depth to the personal account that the story is.

Sunny Singh's story follows in many respects the rules of *rasa*-based aesthetics and the conventions of Indian narratives. The way the scene of the story is set evokes a world that follows a defined order of referentiality. Yet, at the same time, it is full of tension and unexpected emotions. The elements described here provide the story with a semantic layer that is an authentic part of the author's background and may well arise from an unconscious intention to conform to models from Indian writing. Within the broad spectrum of Indian literature, there is no single model that may have inspired her, but the story has overtones of social realist stories from the first half of the last century, by authors such as Premchand (1880—1936). The urban middle-class setting, the absence of an idealist agenda, and the focus on the characters' responses to the situation bring it stylistically closer to more recent writing by post-Independence authors such as Nirmal Verma or Manu Bhandari (1931).

### Synthesis and polyphony

The Indian element is just one of many strands in the rich texture of Singh's prose. The story can stand on its own and be enjoyed without knowledge of the Indian references or understanding of the *rasa* aesthetics. As such, it is a sensitive portrait of a young girl's confusing confrontation with sensuality and the social norms that regulate sexuality. The reading proposed here should not be mistaken for an attempt at essentializing the story. A reading that also takes into account the story's functionality in the context of Indian literary modes does not lead to a more authoritative interpretation. It does open a new dimension in the story that can also be applied to other Indian fiction written in English. The confluence of various semantic schemes gives this literature its rich polyphony.

In the case of this story, the confluence of semantic schemes is functional, as only through the focus on the psychology of the girl and the resonance of cultural values, can the impact of the events be made visible. The polyphony of "western" and "Indian" aesthetics allow for a deep and complex form of characterization.

This is a good point to turn once again to Sunny Singh and ask her some questions in connection to the things mentioned above.

**How do you react to the above reading, especially as regards the connection with Indian aesthetic theory and literary traditions?**

I find your reading quite complex, layered, and interesting. As a writer, I believe that the creative loop is finally closed by the reader who actively makes meaning of the text. Of course, a more informed and empathic reader can draw a more nuanced and richer meaning from a text. After all, *rasa* can be consumed and enjoyed at various levels depending on the reader's own ability, training, knowledge, and empathy, but only a *rasik* can fully savor it. So the polyphony you mention allows different readers to savor the story at varying levels of meaning and pleasure.

At the same time, I am concerned by the suggestions of heteronormative discomfort in your reading. I wrote the story because I was approached by some people in India who were compiling a LGBT anthology including writing by allies.

Initially, I hesitated as I am conscious of the power of storytelling, the assertion of power that comes with that act, and the ways in which the marginalized have been, and continue to be deprived of that power. I am also very cautious about speaking on behalf of less privileged voices, especially as that apparently helpful act often perpetuates the appropriation of storytelling. Nevertheless, after much deliberation, I thought I had found a way to address some of the issues.

Now I am once again flummoxed. At the risk of going on a tangent: I am reminded of the praise lavished by western friends on Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. In contrast, I remember disengaging completely from that film when one of the female leads declared that "there is no word in our language for what we are doing." I remember thinking which Indian language has no word for LGBT desires and activities? My own favorite term for a lesbian lover is *svayamvar-sakhī* from *Kathāsaritsāgar*, which combines traditions of friendship, intimacy, and female agency in a lovely verbal capsule. When I was writing the story, I was remembering the complex ways in which genders and sexuality are constructed in semi-urban and rural parts of India and how they are so different from the dominant, postcolonial heterosexist discourse.

This is why I would disagree with your reading of "illicit" or "wrong" vs "married" and "right" categories. In most traditional Indian homes, young children often experience their initial moment of erotic desire or experience in a homosocial setting. These are linked to conversations amongst adults, family, and social rituals including the one I write of: oiling each-other's hair.

For me the story was more about the difficulties of regulating erotic knowledge in a traditional home where different generations live in close intimacy. So a child may know, intuit and/or understand completely different levels of erotic information. For me, not only does the narrator have no conception of "right" vs "wrong" kinds of sexuality but she has very little conceptualization of any kind of sexual pleasure except what is intuited dimly through sensual pleasures.

And yes, Anu-di is meant to play the role of the mischievous younger sibling or aunt who often precipitates a narrative crisis just as the grandmother is meant to maintain balance. But for me, the crisis is not of lesbian desires but of premature sharing of knowledge.

I think you are also right about the role of the child narrator. However, growing up does not mean the earlier world is lost. I find that an implicitly Biblical reading, drawn from the ideal of childhood as a prelapsarian paradise which is lost by the acquisition of sexual knowledge. For me, the narrator as a bride finally has access to the pleasures she only dimly intuited as a child.

But again, I must reiterate that it is the reader who closes the creative loop. I can have my views, but if the reading works for you, then it is the most valid one.

**Where in Indian writing would you locate the sources of influence on your work?**

Some influences you have already identified. As a writer from Banaras, I grew up reading first in Hindi. We were not only surrounded by Hindi literature but there was a real sense of pride in the language and how we used it. We were also exposed to other regional literatures, but in Hindi translation. At the same time, we grew up with the oral tradition of not only storytelling but also poetry and the epics. A favorite memory from childhood is staying up late on bedrolls spread out on the roof of our house during summers: my uncles and aunts and grandmother would recite poetry. Then there were Russian children's story books – again in Hindi. And Hindi films and film songs. Finally, Banaras has a great tradition of the *Rāmīlā* performances. I think my writing probably shows all these influences.

Unlike many Indian Writers in English, I came to English and most western literature, quite late. I think this is also a reason for the polyphony. Even though I write in English, my imagination is rooted somewhere in Hindi.

**This story has an all-female cast of characters. Is this a characteristic of your work and, if so, what significance does it have?**

The story has an all-female cast because I wanted to emphasize the domestic centerdness of feminine homosocial spaces in India. I see the difference in queer stories and films from India vs many western traditions. In many western narratives, homosexual relationships happen somewhere “beyond” but not at “home” which is generally conceived of as a heterosexual unit. In comparison, when you look at homoerotic narratives from India, before colonial interruptions and now, they seem to focus on locating the characters at the domestic core. I wanted to emphasize that domestic, familial aspect, and in some ways counter the isolating, expelling narratives of queerness that we receive from US and Europe.

However, I do focus on female characters a lot in my writing. Initially this was due to a limitation in my own craft as I felt I was better at writing women characters. Fortunately, I have since gotten better at writing male characters.

There is also an ideological aspect to this. I began writing female characters that I knew from my rural, semi-urban childhood where “tradition” did not automatically equate oppression, sexual repression, or a lack of female agency. I approach male characters the same way. I don't want the stereotypical patriarchal male, or the effeminate colonized one, or men who are fractured or incapable of emotional intimacy. Again this is rooted in my own experience but also driven by not frequently finding these representations of men in contemporary or recent Indian literature.

**Rebellion seems to play a prominent role in your work in many forms. What models do Indian literatures provide for the representation of rebellion? Are these different from what western writing provides?**

I am not quite sure what to make of this question. I grew up in various small Indian towns and it seemed that everyone was eccentric, almost as if “rebellion” was the norm. As a teenager we moved to New York and for a while, I thought that I had found my personal paradise of rebellion.

But the older I grow, the more I begin to believe that there is no possibility of rebellion in Hinduism. I don't mean this in some Orientalist superficial way. What I mean is when there is a rationale, justification, and precedent to be found for every act, it is very hard to rebel in the western sense.

Also, it helps that Hinduism does not have a fundamental text or a fundamental god or even laid-in-stone rules. We live by social norms, which can be changed, and there is no real penalty – in the Abrahamic sense – for breaking norms. In a way, if an individual is strong enough to withstand social pressure, they can “rebel” without spiritual, eternal penalties. You don't get thrown out of paradise, or have death and destruction rained down upon you and yours by a vengeful god; you also are not obliged to submit or follow anyone, or accept anything that is told to you. Instead, if you disagree with the orthodoxies and you are the bravest prince in the land, you can rebel against all that is expected of you, and instead of being cast out and punished, you get to be “enlightened” and become Mahavira or Buddha. If you are a great poet and refuse to abide by social rules, you can write your own hagiography and be considered the perfect divine seeker and lover, like Mirabai. In a sense, the crux of the matter isn't the act of rebellion but one's ability to carry it off.

What you get is again the perfect Indic paradox. There is the social imperative to maintain balance and therefore abide by social norms or even the larger orthodoxies. At the same time, there is a clear tradition insisting on relying only on one's own understanding, not believing anything that one is told and following one's own path.

This is the paradox in my writing as well. My characters “rebel” in a western sense of the word, and yet in the Indic sense, they are doing something quite traditional which is discovering and keeping their personal *dharma*. Both my novels have looked at the issue of rebellion, but I think *With Krishna's Eyes* is better at articulating this internal paradox.

For this kind of discussion and understanding, I go back to medieval and classical texts for inspiration and understanding as most recent Indian writing does not satisfy my need for this complexity.

**You are a scholar of the aesthetics of Indian literature and cinema. What approach would you recommend to describe and analyze the agency of Indian aesthetic models from the ‘past’ in contemporary South Asian narrative art?**

This is a really difficult question. First we have to acknowledge the extent of rupture caused by colonialism, not only as a political process but as educational, intellectual, and creative processes were deliberately reconstituted. So, for example, Lord Macaulay decides to privilege Manusmriti as the basis for Hindu personal law. The choice of one of the most patriarchal, caste-ist, misogynist and homophobic texts over the more liberal ones is telling. But the impact of this privileging in legal codes and its impact on social formations and systems of education is not yet debated or understood. How did this choice, for example, inform Article 377? How did it help create a nationalist ideal of men and women in Victorian hyper-masculine, homophobic, and misogynist moulds?

Unless we are ready to address this, attempts to use classical aesthetic, philosophical or social models will be dismissed or critiqued for being either “essentialist” or worse, “Hindu nationalist.”

Here two points must be made: one, colonialism caused a serious schism between the “westernized” intellectual elite, brought up in Macaulay’s mode of being Englishmen in brown skins and the regional language or Sanskrit educated intellectuals who often reacted by closing themselves off from change and began to “preserve” the cultural patrimonies. Even today, few scholars cross these boundaries: Sanskrit scholars are horrified if the old texts are deployed for contemporary culture while many of the “English language” scholars automatically choose to work with western theoretical models.

But when we look at the ways in which colonialism was resisted, we find that a lot of performance and aesthetic traditions were maintained not amongst the educated elite but by living popular performance: simple *rangoli* in a doorway, or ritual paintings in bridal rooms, or narrative and theatrical performances, and songs (rather than “high” poetry). Most scholars approach these from western theoretical frameworks, but imagine the possibilities if we could get a generation of scholars adept in classical texts, as well as the intellectual tools to analyze and rethink these!

As the colonial past fades away, more cultural production is reclaiming these ideas, not by simplistic return to the past but through the recreation of older traditions in new ways. You can see it popular cinema or music in India. It is happening far more slowly in literature due to exigencies of the form itself. I guess I am lucky as I go back and forth between scholarly writing and fiction, because I can think about these issues while also participating in the change.

**The reading of your story proposed above does not engage with a postcolonial or post-modern hermeneutic of Indian writing in English. It does not depart from the “Empire writes back” discourse but looks at writing from the point of view of the semantic functionality in both western and Indian traditions, apart from the perspective of power. Do you think there is room for such an approach or is it imperative, because of history, to refer to English writing from South Asia as “postcolonial”?**

I wish more scholars were engaging in similar readings, using earlier aesthetic models to understand how Indian writing is evolving. Postcolonial scholars talk of: “hybridity” but often all that means is that western theory is combined with superficial markers of Indianness.

Unfortunately the implicit base for a lot of these “readings” remains Western. For example, there is constant writing about “exile” in diasporic writing from India and other former colonies in Asia and Africa. But “exile” is implicitly constructed in Biblical terms, as a traumatic rupture with a paradise, and constantly coupled with guilt and shame. But what happens if we culturally place the idea of “exile” in India? The greatest “exile” story is the Ramayana, where exile is heroic and not coupled with guilt or shame. How would this change our readings?

Indian Writing in English is especially vulnerable to being considered through the post-colonial lens as it overtly attempts to “write back.” But I believe this is a generational issue: for many of my generation, English is no longer a foreign, colonizer’s language. It is exactly as Persian was in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Just as there is an Indian school of Persian Literature, there will be an Indian school of English Literature, and it will not be about the “Empire writing back” but about telling Indian stories in yet another language.

Finally, while Fanon, Said and others provided useful theoretical models for considering postcolonialism, we need a new set of theories to consider the changes brought by time and shifts in global power balances. Should we not find ways of theorizing how the postcolonial will evolve, especially when the former colonizers lose their status and influence? And yet, few scholars of culture, literature, art are theorizing the impact on culture and cultural production.

**Applying models of South Asian culture from western scholarship always carries a risk of essentializing or going along with the political and cultural biases that influenced this discourse. How do you perceive this risk?**

There is always a risk, but knowledge of risks is also a good way of managing them. So an awareness of the risks of essentializing or going along with the biased discourses can help create nuanced understanding. What is more problematic is that few scholars are comfortable using Indic theoretical traditions to make sense of Indian cultural production. I believe despite best intentions, this perpetuates “West as Theory, East as Object” formulations. In my ideal world, I would be able to read Faulkner or Hemingway, or Barnes or Morrison using *rasa* theory, with as much

scholarly approval as is granted to those who read Premchand or Mahabharata or my work using deconstructionist, psycho-analytical, or feminist theories. Personally, I think in the next few decades, this shall become not only possible but far more popular.

In that sense, your reading is one step in this direction. And for that, I am grateful, not only as a writer – who must necessarily be flattered by such a positive scholarly reaction, but also as a scholar who finds parallels with her own views.

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