

DSC Prize Interviews: Celebrating on South Asian Literature

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2015/01/16/dsc-prize-interviews-reflections-on-south-asian-literature/

2015-1-16

At the end of November the shortlist for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature was revealed at LSE.

*Sonali Campion conducted interviews at the event with the prize's co-founder **Surina Narula MBE**, shortlisted author **Romesh Gunesequera** and chair of the judging panel **Keki Daruwalla**. On the eve of the Jaipur Literature Festival where the DSC Prize winner will be announced, India at LSE shares their reflections on the prize, the shortlist and writing about South Asia.*

It's the fifth year anniversary: how did the prize come about?

Surina Narula: The drive was at the Jaipur Literature Festival which we started where we met a lot of writers and others. We talked about how there is the Booker Prize, but then you have to be published in England to qualify for that. There was no prize to recognise writings of the region, or written in local languages. So this was a place nobody had been, particularly because it also gives prizes to translations.

The main idea of this whole prize is that we sitting in the West – I've been living here for 20 years – can understand that region better. Because at the end of the day we are all human beings. It's only the culture, the place we come from that separates us. So if we can understand those histories, understand the culture, the differences will lessen, and we will be able to do better work as well. I mean if I as a social anthropologist, trying to empower women through my work, if I understand the real issues and problems through the literature I can do much better work. So for me the Prize was very interesting because I understood societies like I had never understood them before: Bangladesh women highlighted in *The Good Muslim* by Tahmima Anam, Jamil Ahmad's book on Pakistan's feudal society – I would never have understood what feudal society means today. So for that I think the prize is quite important.

A lot of the novels seem to be quite political. Is it something that comes specifically from the South Asian context?

SN: Now I slightly differ. I don't think they are political but all said and done when you read a book – even if it's about relationships – somehow the history of a place seeps in. For example, Khalid Hosseini's book *And then the Mountains Echoed* is a story of love between a brother and sister set in Afghanistan and in America. I don't think it's political and yet, at some point, yes the history seeps in that the girl was sold. It can really happen in these countries that a girl is sold. How can you extricate yourself from these histories or realities?

I may have lived in the UK for 20 years but my mother still tells me her stories of 1947. My father lost his mother, she was hacked to death. So was his entire family of brothers and cousins and sisters and their children. He had never got over it, he always talked about it. But how can you extricate yourself? Without being choosing to be political, it comes out in the writing. You know Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*? It's about two brothers, their stories. But it is set in Calcutta in the 1950s and 1960s so gets linked to the political scene in Calcutta, you cannot separate the two. It's going to take two more generations I guess, before we forget.

But should we be forgetting? Isn't it part of the role of literature to help future generations engage with the past?

SN: Only insofar as the past reflects them, and makes them understand the present. If the past is going to reinforce religious separation, cultural separation or some incident, for example the British rule in India...we got our independence 50 years ago. We cannot blame today's Britain for what happened so it's better to move on, except where it helps us understand where those people are coming from, and to understand current problems, like why there is so much poverty in India. But we should not remember history as something to hold against others. We should move on.

Congratulations for being selected for the shortlist. One of the great things about your book is that it brings out a light side as well as a heavy side of the situation in Sri Lanka. How challenging is it to strike that balance?

Romesh Gunesequera: It's one of the issues that I have, in a sense, dealt with all my life. My first book came out around about the time, or my first writing came out at a time when Sri Lanka was at the beginning of this traumatic period, back in 1983. And so whenever I've touched on Sri Lanka I've had to deal with really quite a difficult reality. Difficult politically, difficult socially, all sorts of things.

At the same time, I deeply believe that in imaginative fiction there has to be a level of enjoyment. How you do that is one of the things that all writers have to deal with. Think of someone like Dickens for example, who wrote about terribly traumatic things and actually very effectively to make social change. At the same time there's nothing funnier than Dickens – that combination is very powerful. And it is something I guess that I have tried to deal with, mixing a kind of lightness with the heaviest of subjects. Right from my early books it's been like that. One or two are a bit darker, but with this one it was quite important for me to work out how do you write about a situation like this where it's difficult to think about – the past is traumatic, the future is very very uncertain, and the present can be quite scary.

You mentioned the book has come at quite an important time – perhaps you can expand on that?

RG: For me the book is important because...I saw it as a very peculiar challenge because as I write fiction I want the books to have something which is a life beyond time. It has to be something that you read and feel that it's fresh now, you read in 20 years and you think it's fresh then. And I've been lucky enough with my early books, people find them for the first time today and I think they find them reasonably real. The trouble with this moment in time is that I feel that there's so much change going, and so much manipulation of our environment going on – not only in Sri Lanka. Our memories are being managed, our past is transformed. And most importantly our language is being controlled. Not controlled, but it's been changed and manipulated. And therefore to write a book that makes sense of now and will make sense later is a peculiar challenge today, more so than in the past.

And on the topic of language, the book obviously has a very satisfying language – how much do you think about the tone of the language, not just the words?

RG: It is something I've always been very conscious of. One of the things all my books have been about is language. It's most evident in my first novel *Reef* you have a person who's telling their story but in the course of the book you see him taking control of his language, so that the English language becomes his language, and he can do what he wants with it. To some extent that is the story of our times as well, how particularly the English language is becoming owned by all sorts of people and is also not owned by anyone. I think that is a wonderfully liberating thing and for a writer it is tremendously exciting.

So to move on to my final question – a prize like this that focuses on South Asian literature. What do you make of that?

RG: I do admire the way they've designed the prize, because although it has a South Asian focus, that's almost the only boundary. It's open to anyone anywhere, nationality isn't important, which I think is a great thing, particularly these days when people talk about multiple identities, immigration and so on. It's also great that even the definition of a novel is pretty open: the judges are left to decide what works. So I think those are very enlightened rules, which you don't get in most prizes.

So tell me about your experience as a judge for the DSC Prize

Keki Daruwalla: I was asked to be the chair of the jury and I loved it. It was a big commitment so I haven't written a word for six months, when normally I'm writing all the time. But reading was a very great pleasure. I've kept away from reading for a very long time. Khushwant Singh once told me that if you read you won't be able to write, meaning you need the time. If you have a day job, and you read where will you have the time to write?

When you are reading, how do you judge the books?

KD: You read a book, you react to it. I reacted to Khaled Hosseini very favourably so he was in the longlist. You also notice trends – the novelists go back to their own formulae. For example, there is a sort of a policy with a lot of novelists who want to cater to two worlds, both South Asia and the West. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, very very fine writer – she'll write about America, she'll also write about Bengal and the connection, the nexus, how people live, how they go back and forth. That's her strong suit and so far she has been sticking to it. That happens with numerous authors, for example in *A God in Every Stone?* by Kamila Shamsie, another of the shortlisted books.

It was a difficult task to zero in on a shortlist from such formidable longlist. There were moments of great beauty in the multiple narratives and the jury was impressed by the deep structure of each book and the way characters were developed. We were also glad to find that the plots were uniformly organic and the writers did not succumb to formulaic writing. Most of the novels grappled with the socio-political realities on the ground. All of them did so in ways that were moving, challenging, and thought-provoking.

The DSC Prize winner 2015 will be announced on 22nd January. To read more about the event and the shortlisted books see India at LSE's [event blog](#) posted in December.

About the Interviewees

Surina Narula MBE is a charity patron, with over 20 years experience in the strategic development of some of the world's largest charities. Mrs. Narula is also an accomplished entrepreneur, working in the family business, the DSC Group, an international conglomerate focused on real estate, construction, infrastructure and retail.



Romesh Gunsekera is a Sri Lankan-born British writer. His most recent novel *Noontide Toll* has been shortlisted for the DSC Prize.



Keki Daruwalla is an Indian writer and poet. He written more than 12 books and published his first novel "*For Pepper and Christ*" in 2009.



Note: This article gives the views of the interviewees, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics