

Interview

An Interview With Mamta Kalia

- Tanu Gupta

Q: How and when did you start writing?

A: I was married and then we were in Bombay. My husband decided to quit his job and went to Allahabad. Both of us could not leave the job. So, I kept on working. I was working in SNDT University, Bombay, teaching there. I joined a hostel where both staff and students used to live. Life was pretty lonely there. So, at that time I had a lot of anger also. I was not very comfortable. We were newly wed and my husband had to leave in Allahabad. He did not want to go to Allahabad but he was offered a printing press there. I could not give up my job though I wanted to leave it. I had a very uncomfortable life. My roommate used to spy on me all the time. She used to read all my letters. She used to steal my things even bread. I was a rebel like in the sense my parents were very methodical people. My father brought me up but he was always full of instructions and guidance. I wanted to bite. I wanted to bite everybody. I wanted to express myself in the worst of words. It was very dissatisfactory. As a young girl of 27 I was not happy at all. I had to live a life which I never wanted. I didn't want to teach there also. I wanted to go away. I didn't know even what I wanted to do. I was reading at that time. I was reading the poets like Sylvia Plath. I think I was bundle of lot of things at that time and living by myself at that time alone in Bombay was not a joke. That hostel used to be vacated at 5 o'clock and I used to be left alone because I was married and had no takers. I couldn't even have a boyfriend because my first affair had not yet over. At that time I wrote my first poem *Tribute to Papa* and then I wrote a number of poems in the same mood feeling very rebellious. At that time Nissim Ezekiel was editing a poetry page in Illustrative Weekly. I sent my *Tribute to Papa* to him. I sent a book post not even a letter. I didn't know the address even. I addressed the letter to the department. His reply was on an inland letter. He said that your poems are of exceptional interest. I feel I want to know more about you. I want you to come to me with more of your poems. I felt better. That was something very nice. I told my husband about it when he rang me. My husband said to me that Nissim Ezekiel has late of being on drugs and cocaine. So talk to him from distance and don't be wild in front of him. That was a warning. I found Nissim Ezekiel a very straight forward person. I went to meet him at Church gate station. It was just a walking distance. He asked me to write a good number of poems and then send them to him. I was already writing in Hindi. So, writing was not new to me as my uncle was a writer. So many members in my family used to write. He asked me "Are you sure you want to get *Tribute to Papa* published as it is against your father?" I said "When I am sending it to you that means I am very clear about it. It doesn't bother me if anybody reads it even if my father reads it. Let all the damn father read it". If somebody tells me to write I could write easily as my switchboard gets on. When I sent my poems to Nissim Ezekiel he gave me an entire page in Illustrative Weekly in India, a very very prestigious journal. Overnight I started getting attention from everybody.

Eunice de Souza wrote a review of my poems. And within a month or say a few my book *Tribute to Papa* was published. Nissim Ezekiel had himself sent those poems to P. Lal.

Q: What do you think about feminism?

A: Well, feminism in India is very different from feminism in west. There are some things which we got naturally like the right to vote. But there are somethings which we don't get naturally like personal freedom. In west women have got a lot of freedom. They have independence to move around. They got this right to vote in sixties but we got it in 1947. But, I feel, this political freedom doesn't have much sense unless you have personal, economic or social freedom. So, feminism is very important fact in India and there is one more big problem in India that women folk have very sharp differences in there status. We are the glorious minority of educated people but a lot of women in India are uneducated and living in villages. They are living in small towns and in traditional families. Feminism should try to restore the dignity of that sort of women, those unknown, anonymous women who can't reach where educated women have reached.

When we talk of economic freedom then all the talk about feminism fails. As feminism has never tried to provide economic freedom to a woman. I still remember when we were children my mother couldn't go when her mother died as she didn't use to carry any money. Money used to be with dad only. She used to carry a purse, she was modern, she used to wear lipstick but money was provided by her husband only. I think economic freedom is must and a woman should have some money of her own despite of her husband's income, especially the woman living in small towns otherwise they will always be having subordinate position. I have been in teaching profession and I have found girls are pursuing such courses which don't entail much money. Like in our college they used to opt for home science, painting, drawing etc. Most of them are borrowing books from the library. I feel feminists should take care of such essentials. Feminist are always talking about physical freedom, sexual freedom, that is unless the body is liberated mind cannot be liberated. Though I am not a puritan and I don't profess to be one but I don't talk about freedom of sex. If you say you want this physical freedom your body is yours you can use it when you want, these were the things which were prevalent in forties and to bring them after fifty years do not make any sense. And I feel in these days feminist should talk about essentials of freedom.

Q: Do you feel female psyche is more contradictory due to the Indian tradition?

A: That's true a woman writer is always in the doldrums as she has to coordinate so many things. She cannot be completely rootless as this is not the fabric of our society, though she wants some freedom. Just to call herself a feminist writer she cannot break herself from the society. You have to make a balance between your family and work. I think we shouldn't become extremists while writing because it leads to imbalance and it cannot do anything good to anybody.

Q: Have you ever faced conflicts in your life? Can these conflicts be completely eliminated from life?

A: Lots and lots of. My life is full of conflicts. They are the part of my

existence. When I was one and a half year old I suffered from smallpox and then diphtheria and tetanus. All these are fatal diseases. My parents used to leave me in bed. They had just given me up to be dead. I was given some medicine those were available at that time. Even then I survived that decided my role as a fighter. Even as a student I used to have a lot of problems with fellow students. If somebody used to ask me to keep quiet I used to talk a lot and to make a lot of noise. When some boy used to excel in the class I used to read overnight and to burn midnight oil to show him down. I used to take challenges very easily. This remains with me upto my M.A.

We are two sisters and my father had put this idea in my mind that we are not daughters, we are sons. I started regarding myself as a boy. Like other feminists I have never complaint that we are women that's why we are facing this. However, when somebody except more labor out of me my relative, my friend, or anybody, I give a good fight.

Q: Do you think a woman is more frustrated than a man? What are the causes of frustration?

A: Yes, that's true. The reason being a woman applies her mind and heart and her whole sensibility in a particular cause whether that is a small cause like going for watching a movie or a big cause like bringing up her children. In her efforts, in her enterprises, frustration becomes a part of her life.

Q: I have observed one thing in the poetry of Modern Indo-Anglian woman poets that sometimes their behavior is bizarre. It is in your poetry also as when you said "I want to pick my nose in public place." What are the reasons behind this type of behavior of woman?

A: No, I think it was an attempt to shock people. During those days in seventies when life was a rough road, I wanted to hurt everybody and used to behave in a very prim way.

Q: How do you think we can resolve the issues that forced women to live dual lives?

A: I think every imperative condition brings along with it its own solution. If a woman is living a dual life, If she has to look after home front, creative front and professional front, her energies are multiplied and she cops up very well. If a man is made to do all this, he will break down.

Our system is so flexible that we switch over very easily and we don't mind it. At the end of the day we say we are enjoying all this. I still remember when I used to cook, I used to dust 'atta' from my cloths and get into the car and move to college. I also couldn't leave my family hungry. It was so natural to me I was facing the home front and at the same time I was teaching T.S. Eliot in the college and facing no problem at all. The problem comes only when somebody pricks your ego, somebody hurts your feeling then you remember all those complications which you are facing and you remember all those frustrations and tensions because of those interventions.

Q: Do you write with the intention of creating awareness among women and improving their life or only for personal reasons?

A: I write with a particular aim. I feel that even if I can make small section

of women aware it will be the biggest award for me.

Q: Why did you stop writing in English after the publication of your two volumes of poetry?

A: I didn't stop writing. I feel that writing really push you in the mainstream of certain group. I started writing in Delhi in both the languages then I moved to Allahabad. You know, Allahabad is a Hindi predominant area. There were a number of writers and everybody condemned me. They said "You are moving towards Nihilism. You should write nicely. You should be methodical in your ways. In Hindi you are not writing like this". I received their dirty looks and nasty remarks. Frankly speaking after *Poems* 78 people were ready to pounce upon me. But when my two novels in Hindi came their whole attitude changes. I was the most current sought after name at that time. My husband is also a Hindi writer. He also didn't like the tone of my English poems. That's why my attention was diverted a little. I am always easily diverted. That's the problem. Then I started writing in Hindi. After that I became very busy with my job and seminars. Even then I found people going back to my these two earlier collections of English poems. Everybody was mentioning these poems when they talk about Kamala Das. Even after that many editors from the south published my poems in English. Some publishers also want to put all my poems together.

Recently I am writing a novel in English *The Big Bazaar*, its about communalism. It's about professional life of students who do their MBA and join multinationals and their quality of human awareness is completely deteriorated. They just become automatons. So I haven't given up. You can say I am a person who doesn't believe in dying.

Q: You have written about the boredom of married life in your poetry. Do you consider marriage as a constraint in pursuing one's career?

A: Yeah, to some extent marriage does constraint your career. Because something happens inside your feelings, inside your heart but that system cannot be negated by any law. You don't want your partner to suffer. If he is suffering you also suffer. A part of you dies. I feel this part at a more emotional level. Though nobody puts shackles on me. But the progressive career of a girl is hampered because a girl may be expected at a certain place at a certain time by our traditional family. You can not really deny that marriage is not a constraint in a girl's career and this question requires a deep research and a deep attention.

Q: Why you choose irony as a medium of expression?

A: This is the way I follow in Hindi because there are three ways of writing. One is Flat narrative which is very boring. The other is emotional sort of. I don't like that sentimental poetry as you cannot all the time wear a placard that you are a woman. So, the only way of writing is that you wear some extra nails or extra fangs or tusks only then you can be read. Nowadays people require ampicillin for cold and cough, ginger is no longer effective. The same is the case with language. You have to evolve your own diction at language as you have to work on content. And its not easy.

