

Interview

In Conversation with K.K. Srivastava

- Wendy Mary Lister

EXCERPTS from an e-mail Interview conducted with K.K. Srivastava, a poet from India, by Wendy Mary Lister; A poet – Reviewer from Dorset, UK.

K.K.Srivastava: Author of two volumes of Poetry 'Ineluctable Stillness – published 2005' and 'An Armless Hand Writes – published 2008.' Both his contemporary forms of Poetry volumes have been very well received in Literary circles, particularly in the UK, USA And Canada, Also countries like Greece, Austria, New Zealand and India. In 2009 he was conferred the membership of International Artists and Writers Association, Recognised at the UNESCO in USA for what IWA cited as “his distinguished literary, artistic and humanistic contributions.” In 2010 he was awarded the 'Decree of Merit,' for his works by the Austrian Literary Circle, for his excellent contribution to Literature. His books have been reviewed in newspapers like Hindustan Times, Pioneer, Hindu, Tribune on Sunday and various other leading newspapers, plus many Established Literary Journals and magazines. K.K. Srivastava is a master when it comes to using poetry as a tool for self-introspection. A deeply private person, his poetry is mostly philosophical and psychological. In intense poems of gnarled syntax and surprising rhetorical power, he plants the seeds of style and concern. His work is now being noted for it's seriousness, high moral tone, extreme allusiveness and dedication to mundane realities of life and to philosophy, in ways that few practitioners have attempted in recent years. Born in 1960 he grew up in Gorakhpur in India. He did his post graduation in Economics from Gorakhpur University. He is a reclusive writer. He hardly ever seeks any publicity for his works. Having written a Review on both of his works, I was asked to participate in an email Interview with the author, who I found to be very sincere in his open expressiveness. Srivastava has touched upon various aspects of life and childhood influences which go into his images in his poetry. He is now concentrating on his third volume of poetry which is due out in 2012.

About the Interviewer: Wendy Mary Lister, 45, having lived in Germany for 17 years now lives in Dorset U.K. She reads and writes poetry and reviews. Her poems and reviews have appeared in many International magazines.

WML: Having read and studied both of your volumes of poetry, I note that in some of your poems you have used imagery from traces of your childhood memories and possible turmoil. Could you please explain why you used these images in your poems?

KKS: Please permit me to initiate you into the background of the place I hail from. I was born in a small city called Gorakhpur in a State known as Uttar Pradesh. I am talking of the period from 1965 to 1983 when a significant portion of my life, childhood and early adolescence was actually formed. My memories don't take me to the period before 1965. I was born in 1960. Eighteen years that I spent there were firm years, unquestionably very important, leaving a sort of indelible impact on my personality and psyche, the latter I suppose being an incontrovertible part of the former in any individual. I am always bemused and haunted

by the circumstances and conditions that came to dominate that place. Food being served at 7 in morning and 5 in the evening, everyone in deep slumber by 8 p.m with morning starting at 3 with virtually every one having the first and last cup of tea (these were not cups but tumblers of different sizes and shapes) of the day by 5 in the morning. Schools, one or two roomed; small rooms hardly spacious enough for ten children; became room for the Principal and teachers. Classes took place outside. Forty children looking hopelessly at jaded teachers who knew only what was written in the books they held in their hands. My teachers used to fill blackboards with solved problems from books and then left the left-over learning to imaginative ingenuity of students. So it was a chaotic story; absence of spaces, one-sided perceptions, futility of existence, a sense of growing incompleteness all around. Fortunately, my uncle who taught English to students of Intermediate classes and who himself was a self-taught man, introduced me to the world of books. I found books on English literature and philosophy scattered on some mats, wooden cupboards and a few tables in his room. It was here I was introduced to Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Dostoevsky, Christopher Marlow, William James, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Naipaul etc. From my uncle I learnt my first lessons in being a self-made and self-taught man which I am today. All these introductions as perceptions stayed buried in me fugaciously. And over a period of time gave birth to a world of illusions for me. All along I, for a considerable period, kept groping in a world of illusions: a world of "childhood memories and possible turmoil" as you say. For a long time I had no idea of the way ahead and analysis eluded me.

Much later when I chanced upon laying my hands on Albert Camus book, *The Rebel*, the knot of obscurity started melting; enabling me understand the warp and the woof of the place I was born and brought up and also oddities of childhood and eccentricities of adolescence. It was a society that was clue less; people there had answers to all of their questions. People were so sated with life as to be unable to pose questions. It was a society incapable of assessing itself, assuring itself. It was completely satisfied place; fixed routine; no aberrations. Then I related what Camus wrote to what confronted me there in my childhood and early adolescence-the conditions, the talks, the commonalities, the behaviour, the circumstances, the satisfaction. I thought it was a place where people's problems were already solved problems. No need for fresh answers. As Camus and later Naipaul in his classical book *India: A Million Mutinies Now* aptly point out, such societies lacked the power of rebellion. I don't think there is a scope for quarrel with this argument. Amidst that clueless, questionless society where I was born and brought up, many more questions started cropping up in my mind, though intermittently.

Can one rid oneself of his memories, childhood ones, traumatic ones in particular? These are not impenetrable memories; these explain away so much of your behaviour even without your ever knowing it. Dr Carla Kraus, the poetess from Vienna who had done great amount of reading and research on Freudian psychology, after reading my first book wrote a long letter to me asking me questions about my childhood. She confessed she had her own childhood mired in traumatic experiences and saw

similarity in thought processes. She continued to inspire me write the way I write till she died in 2009. Coming to your question, I feel the birth itself is highly traumatic. Birth involves passing through a dark tunnel and facing a world that the child finds traumatizing, threatening, intimidating but alluring. Such an encounter, psychologist Woodworth describes as confrontation of the child with "a shining sun." The first poem titled Birth Trauma I wrote for some magazine in 1988. Remember the poem "Infant Sorrow" by William Blake. Somewhat similar to that. By the time I turned forty, I was able to integrate various contradictory influences of my childhood courtesy the time spent with serious books and authors. I searched for a unique blending of what people I interacted with during my childhood, early adolescence and much later, perceived as fulfilled emptiness which, in reality, was nothing but an illusion.

It are through these illusions my words, my ideas came to me; through these illusions it was the inner self, uninhibited, unrestrained that was forthcoming. "I" has never been a problem for me when I write. Acceptance of facts makes travel for words, for subjects for your writings easy. It is in this context; let me add one more thing. I have seen hollowness of supreme quality which sometimes is really harrowing when I find members of chattering classes from the elitist layers of society ceaselessly wallowing in remembrance of their student life from elite schools/colleges. Naipaul refers us to what he calls "Defects of Visions" while describing the wounds on Indian civilization. These chattering classes suffer from such defects of vision. The picture is the same; dimensions different.

WML: Having done your post-graduation in Economics, why did you feel the need to take up an interest in Literature and the writing of Poetry, especially when it has nothing to do with your core subject Economics? How that departure occurred?

KKS: This is an interestingly natural question. Gorakhpur University's Economics Department, like any other department was and perhaps even now is not a department the academic marvels of which a student can acknowledge and brag about. Teachers were ill-equipped to tackle books of higher level; they confined themselves to some selected books in Hindi (which is our language) which could make one pass the University exams and do nothing more. Students exactly wanted this. This sort of teacher-taught relationship perhaps still continues there. I, on my part, opted for English as a medium for writing exams and was necessarily to move to University library for books in English as classroom lectures in Hindi proved not of much help to me. And the library did not frustrate me. Almost all standard books of reference I got there. But there also started the decline of my interest in Economics. My disconnections and distantness with Economics started taking a shape around 1980 on my trying to read Don Patinkin's Money, Interest and Prices. The book: a hard-bound, very dark green covered book infatuated me. I was not able to address myself to mathematical portions of it, nearly seventy five percent or more. Economics was growing mathematical in nature and for me slowly it got dethroned.

WML: When you first started writing poetry, did you feel your flow came naturally? And who and what were your influences, for example other poets that you read in your lifetime? Or was there a sudden urge to release all those thoughts that had been in the back of your mind from the past and present that you felt you needed to let it all out and poetry was the way to do this?

KKS: Through philosophy and psychology I got attracted towards poetry. So I don't think it was a natural flow. The flow, if at all it was a flow, came through disciplines not much connected with poetry. These disciplines have a defining influence on me. By 1990 or so, I had fair acquaintance with the writings of Henri Bergson, Nietzsche, Proust, Freud and Jung. I got opportunity to read some of the poems by T.S. Eliot, his longer poems. During same period I had a chance to read Muktibodh, the well known Hindi poet who wrote long poems with differing interpretations, Muktibodh's poems took me to far off lands of anonymity and speculations I was fascinated by their understanding of human psyche, human psychology, and the use of allusions, particularly by Eliot in his poetry. My experience in group dynamics where I watched certain individuals' behaviour in groups further reinforced my early enthusiasm towards expressing myself and the expression took the shape of poetry. I seriously started penning poems, sometime in 1995 or so. I am very slow when it comes to writing, not given to producing a book every six month. For any writer past is unique to him. Past is the reservoir of what Carl Jung calls, "collective unconscious of mankind". Past guides him to understand present and to foray into future. For me, like anyone else, my past lies somewhere else while the present though intertwined with past dictates me to other directions.

WML: I have read some of the reviews for both of your volumes of poetry. I agree with some reviewers that you have a philosophical feel to your musings. Do you feel writing in such a philosophical style is necessary?

KKS: For a long time, the relationship between metaphysics and poetry has been debated among scholars. Philosophy and poetry make excellent bed-fellows. Philosophy helps poets indulge in what Bosanquet refers to as "penetrative imagination." which in turn renders it possible for poets to illumine our variegated experiences. Then let us not forget psychology. Philosophy, psychology and literature-the trios make a deadly combination when it comes to literature. But there is a risk here. This combination makes your poems difficult and as they say incomprehensible. Sunday Tribune, a newspaper noted both "erudition and cadence" in my poems but concluded that the book is a "mere cold philosophy". You stand on a double-edged weapon. If such a poem exists, it requires a sort of intellectual apogee to decipher it otherwise you have some gifted readers suffering from pre-matured intellectual failures, ever willing to condemn your poetry. I recall you once praised Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Prominent critics of that time described the book as, "wild raving of a lunatic." Such critics and readers abound everywhere. A writer must be least concerned with readership. I never bother. Here condemnation comes first looking at who is involved and what is his background.

WML: What is it that makes you feel that you need to write poems? And what does this mean to you as a person?

KKS: Poetry to me is an effort to fuse ideas with words. You must be skilled at both, for if you are naive at either, you are anything but a poet. Sometimes, I confine myself for long hours to a room where apart from me only books live and there in all isolation, I travel long distances, all alone by myself in search of a poem. On the way I meet my retrieved memories, the individuals I have seen, met, interacted, their sagacity and antics too. Some insane men exquisitely garbed in sanity. Their benign smile hiding the dark empire they have lorded over for long. Some captivatingly beautiful women with extremes of ugliness inside them. Deprivation of opportunities and resources to meet innate needs, you know, makes some people extraordinarily good and decent but some it makes malodorously stressed, restless, lonely ones exhibiting peaks of unbridled, abrasive and dictatorial behaviour. Their sadistic behaviour derives for them momentary pleasure that substitutes for the pleasure eluding them due to deprivations just mentioned. When I pen my lines, it is a huge world of vast and varied possibilities these memories open before me that I plunge into. Some of my poems like Saturday Dinner Party, Folie a' deux, The Urbane Gentleman from my first book and Of Friedrich Nietzsche' "Superfluous People", I (For those unable to step out of themselves), Confessions of A Modern Anchorite from the second stem from my voyage into such possibilities and remembrance of such interactions.

Margaret Atwood in one of interviews tells the interviewer Christopher Levenson (interview published in *Manna* 2 in 1972) that all "words used by poets are evocative words" and "have intellectual side to them" I feel a sense of self-protectiveness pervades any poet's works. In my poems I try to break the shell of self-protectiveness and come out of it. I am never satisfied either with what I write or with myself. Sometimes, I spend sleepless nights pondering over certain happenings and stay completely restless till words and ideas help me spread myself on A-4 size papers.

WML: Stephen Gill, Canadian poet rates your poetry as strange and opines that you write on topics unpoetic while Patricia Prime, the reviewer from New Zealand finds what she calls "visionary qualities" in your poems. What are your feelings on their stated views?

KKS: I am fortunate that poets and reviewers of such distinction have read and rated my poems. I am humbled by the fact whatever little acknowledgement I have got so far has come from established literary societies and circles, mostly from abroad.

WML: I often find thoughts, observations and deep considerations in your poems, longer ones in particular. Also I feel you explore everything around you, a form of investigation goes on and on. Do you agree?

KKS: "Description as Choice" is an essay by Prof A. K Sen, the well-known Economist. He writes there that any intellectual exercise (he writes in the context of old clash between two sets of Economists—one concerned with realism of assumptions underlying economic models and the other with predictive ability of such models, I feel it is equally applicable to an exercise of this nature in every field), involves five

processes i.e observation, selection, analysis, description and prediction.. As a matter of fact when I was in charge of Training Institute at Jaipur, I often used to begin talking to the trainees by referring to this essay and then applying these processes to actual work being done by them. In literature too this happens. In any writer's regimen this scheme should normally reign supreme. In most of the poems, particularly longer ones which involve many fractured realities, I have experimented with this scheme. I will prefer to be dubbed as an introspective poet, which aspect your poet friend Bernard in his review and a few Indian reviewers did focus on.

WML: As a modern contemporary Poet, what are your thoughts on the subject of 'Indo-Anglican poetry?' Do you feel that modern writers should 'resuscitate' dead words? Or attain a new method of tonality?

KKS: I have been reading for quite some time now journals from USA, U K and Athens. I feel the quality of poems published there are qualitatively superior and technically sound, good experiments in forms. Poems of Albert Goldbarth, Mark Leidner, Emily Grosholz and the likes teach a lot. Style reigns supreme. Imagery is unique. Poems are remarkable for their depth and flow. Some modern poems have psychological forces in operation. Free verse is here to stay. Content, imagery and stylistic diversity cannot be kept aside and all must make excellent bed-fellows. Poetry of Indian poet Jayanta Mahapatra takes care of all these. A writer has to carry with himself the burden of everything he has read, cogitated or experienced. All these must get reflected in his works.

WML: In a time when you no longer say 'my love,' in modern poetry, what are you feelings of the role of love in men -women relations in our modern society? What is your view on how it affects poetry today, when contemporary poetry is philosophically deeper in a sense and not so much like the great romantics of our time?

KKS: I am afraid this question could be better answered by more flamboyant gentlemen. Let me assure you here there is no dearth of such men around the world. Oscar Wilde's plays depict such characters vividly. Though very poor both at love and love-making, men-women relationships have arrested my attention, surreptitiously. The best form of this relationship has come to me in a few lines from Pablo Neruda's poem Poor Fellows,

They say terrible things / about a man and a woman
who, after much milling about, / all sorts of compunction,
do something unique, / they both lie with each other in one bed.

Men-Women relationship has always attracted poets world over. And why poets only? Almost all writers even if some of them may be misogynists. This relationship is highly penetrative, imaginatively fertile area of research for any writer. A poet longs for images of women which is very natural thing. He uses it to incorporate themes suiting his sensuous and sexual requirements. Similar processes poetesses also seem to be wading through. A time comes when for a writer man-woman relationships are nothing but mere intellectual stimulants.

WML: Poetry in our modern world is on decline, Do you think as a whole that Poetry/Literature can be restored into today's contemporary

world, where traditional forms have no place in our modern society? Do you feel that people are swaying towards free verse, because they can understand it straight off, where as the more traditional style has left people unable to read and understand, and this might be partly the reason for its decline? What are your views? And how does this affect decline of poetry in India?

KKS: With Ezra Pound the beginning of unconventional style of poetry writing starts. Poetry is about thoughts. When you enter into arena of unpoetic topics, you enter into an arena of writing that seeks a definite departure from traditional style-strictly sticking to form, syllables, rhyme etc. Free verse allows you the freedom of experimentation; word-play is possible, you can toy with ideas. Further, the globe is fast becoming skewer and skewer, urbanization, disintegration of joint families, crowd on the roads, lack of space among persons, high ambitions all these impact on modern literature. Regarding decline of interest in literature, frankly speaking, not much can be done. You cannot generate readership. Literature is not in demand, it is unattractive. People (both young and old) have more faith in nudes in international magazines than in the works of serious writers. All over the world, poetry societies have been struggling to keep poetry alive. It is saddening and pathetic scene but tell me what you can do. We can take the horse to water but cannot make it drink. Then let us keep writing silently, quietly. Not all roads lead to Rome. Time will take care.

WML: Do you feel that the youth of today have a interest in Poetry/Literature as such, or do you feel that the educational system does not promote it so much in today's world?

KKS: Not all things are dismal. Allow me to cite some instances in my case. In a book fair organized by Heidelberg University, my second book was on display. I have no inkling how my book reached that book fair. An eighteen year boy telephoned me praising my poems published in a literary magazine here. Eleni I. Grivas, a young poetess from Greece sent me her book for a review by me. I receive many books of poems from authors requesting me to review their books. I get many invitations to attend poetry festivals held here and abroad. A very old Professor from Dhaka University wrote to me asking for my book. And it must be happening with most of the poets, I suppose so. Therefore, fascination, if at all it is a correct word to use, is there. A portion, not very significant one though, exists that likes poetry. But don't you think it is a small, tiny lot that dominates the world. There are readers of poetry though limited in number. Serious poetry is struggling but it will survive.

WML: There has been a rapid growth of un-poetic poets who have been attacking the reputation of poetry in such a manner, that it annoys, frustrates. How do you view this situation?

KKS: The job of a writer is to write. I agree there is mushrooming of poets who produce thirty pages book and then seek the status of international celebrity. More powerful ones spend a lot on publicity of their books. Nothing works. These are all self-defeating exercises. I have never heard of publicity functions held for revered Indian poets like A.K Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar or Mahapatra's books? Poetry is an altogether different genre. Fame, if at all it has to come, will come due to

content representing depths of your thoughts coupled with uniqueness of your style and never due to amount of money squandered on its publicity. You know "one book wonders". Fame is like a beautiful woman. The more you chase it the more it will elude you.

WML: In India what are the normal reactions to your volumes of poetry and your style?

KKS: Here we are slow to react. There is a wonderful chapter perhaps titled as *The Acedia* in Nirad Chaudhuri's book *The Continent of Circe*. This book I read first time was in 1980 and by now many times. In my times of sadness and monotony, I go to this book and believe me it gives me an inenubitable ecstasy and solace. If you read this book and this chapter carefully much of the answer to your questions you will get.

WML: I have read preface in depth of your second volume of poetry, 'An Armless Hand Writes.' I find it very challenging and absorbing, Do you have any plans in the future to move towards Prose?

KKS: Unfortunately I do not plan writings. But yes, having read Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* and Kafka's *Diary*, may be in distant future, I may attempt a *Diary*.

WML: In the future, will you change direction and steer away from observing the world and its unusual happenings, life's turmoil etc and, head into the direction of the great romantics and write in part, some poetry like those of the classics, sonnets, prose? Or will you continue to write contemporary style poetry and some free verse? Are there any plans to write your third book and will its style have the essence of the other two volumes? Or will it differ in part?

KKS: I am working on my third book. I am very slow. I will continue to write the way I write. I am not a mimic man. Rosemary C Wilkinson, former President of WPS wrote to me advising I must never change my way of writing. So did Carla. Frankly speaking, I cannot disown the style that has come to me naturally. For any modern writer thoughts and experimentation with forms of presentation are crucial rather than counting how many syllables are there in each line and what music the last word used creates. I am wedded to my style of writing and I don't believe in divorces.

WML: Do you find all the demands on your personal life around you, and pressures from your work, affect your concentrations when you take solitude to go and write your poetry?

KKS: All these things are separate. Not everyone is a writer. I am a man with intellectual integrity and draw my lines very carefully. Yes, I don't believe in gossiping, backbiting, forming groups, hatching conspiracies and to top it all net-working. So I save a lot of time for creativity. But it does not mean that one who does not do all these things will start writing.

WML: Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night, with random thoughts that come to you? Or is it just a myth that poets do this quite naturally?

KKS: Night submerges naturally into any writer's works. Night soothes my infuriated ideas. Yes, I wake up many times in the middle of the night to get hold of the dream I have just lost. Or the dreams I will be chasing before it dawns. My thoughts are random, uneven but evenly placed.

