

Spotlight on a South Asian writer

Interviews with Daisy Abey

Dr. Debjani Chatterjee

2/4 & 3/1

Tadeeb is happy to announce that Debjani Chatterjee will do a regular spotlight feature for us, interviewing a different South Asian writer each time.

In (2/4 & 3/1) issue Debjani Chatterjee interviews Sri Lankan poet and novelist, Daisy Abey.

Daisy Abey was born in 1941 in Matara, Sri Lanka, but has lived in England for almost forty years. She divides her time between London and Leeds, but also finds time for occasional visits to Colombo. Her first novel, *Gimhana Tharaka* ("Summer Stars"), was written in Sinhala. In the mid 1990s she began to write poetry in English and since then has brought out several of her poetry pamphlets. Her poems have also been anthologized in various publications, including the Redback Anthology of British South Asian Poetry (2000). In 2003 her first novel in English, *Like The Wind*, was published.

DC: Daisy, you are both a poet and a novelist, and you are also that rare phenomenon a truly bilingual writer, writing as you do in both Sinhala and English. Can you describe the process that made you a bilingual writer? And are there things that you find you can only write in one language and not in the other?

DA: I spent the first 23 years of my life in Sri Lanka and my mother tongue is Sinhala. While studying at Peradeniya University (1960-1963) I had to improve my English because that was the language of the textbooks. In fact English had been the sole medium of teaching in the university until just before I enrolled as a student there. When I moved to England in 1965 I again worked to improve my English, particularly the spoken language, by studying in adult education classes and of course by the practice of speaking it in everyday life. Now I am glad to say that I can write in both languages with equal fluency.

DC: Few people can write creatively in more than one language and you certainly demonstrate a rare proficiency.

DA: Well, how well I write is, of course, for my readers to judge.

DC: I was glad to review your fine novel when it came out in the UK last year. But are there plans to publish it in Sri Lanka? You have now lived in Britain for most of your life, so how important is it for you that your work is read in the land of your birth?

DA: I am happy that my novel *Like The Wind* is being published in Sri Lanka by 'Vijitha Yapa Publishers and Bookshops' towards the end of this year. Although I have lived in the UK for more than half my life, there is never a day that goes by that I am not haunted by images of my homeland. England, even at its brightest and best, is a far cry from the rich tropical sounds and colours of Sri Lanka. I do so miss the friends of my childhood and the warmth and generosity of Sri Lanka people. There seems such a contrast at times when I encounter the inward-looking materialism of middle-class suburbia in southern England. But I have also lived in the north of England and observed working-class life there that again is very different. What life is like in Britain, as conveyed by the media in Sri Lanka, is very different from my own experience; and if there is any merit in my work, then it is in the way that I portray a more realistic vision of life in Britain for an emigrant over the last four decades.

DC: And what about the way in which the media here portrays Sri Lanka?

DA: Yes, that's unrealistic too. Sri Lanka doesn't figure much in the popular imagination here, but when it does stereotypes inevitably come in. It is "an exotic place for tourists", 'a place of communal violence', and so on. The Sri Lanka that I often write about is the country of my childhood and young adulthood.

DC: Living in Britain has made you a writer in English. But are there any other ways in which Britain has shaped your writing?

DA: Being exposed to contemporary English literature, especially poetry and the novel has hugely widened my horizons and helped to improve my style. Writers can always learn from other writers. I belong to a writers' co-operative, Sixties Press, which publishes novels and poetry collections by a wide variety of authors.

DC: Is it important for you to read widely? What are you reading currently? Are there any writers Sri Lankan and Britain - Who have influenced or inspired you?

DA: Oh yes, to write well an author must read widely and deeply. The novel that has most influenced me is Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. I have enjoyed walking on the Yorkshire moors where she found her own inspiration. But I like reading contemporary fiction and some poetry too. I generally make a point of reading the novels that are short listed for the Booker Prize. These days my access to Sri Lanka literature is perhaps more limited. The bookshops and libraries here aren't good at stocking this, so I depend on visitors from 'home' or my own visits to Colombo to stock up. Currently I am reading a novel in Sinhala by a well-known Sri Lankan writer, P G Punchihewa. Very little Sri Lankan literature is translated and so it remains inaccessible to English readers.

DC: I saw that you had translated your poetry from Sinhala to English in the multilingual EmLit Project volume edited by Paula Burnett, and I have heard you speak approvingly of the ambitious Europe-wide translation project that it represents. But do you regard translation can ever be truly successful? How do you regard translators in the world of Literature?

DA: I certainly think that literary translations can be successful and the best translators are usually writers themselves. If the writers are also first-class translators, then their translations will be as good as the originals, but of course this is very rare. Translating poetry will be especially demanding; that is why I greatly respect the work that you yourself have done in translating from several South Asian languages.

DC: What are you writing at present? Are you a disciplined writer and do you write everyday? Have you a particular place and a time for writing? Do you use a pen to write or do you use a word processor?

DA: I am planning a new novel, which will be a sequel to *Like The Wind*. When I start a project I work at it for several hours each day, but in-between projects I get on with the rest of my life. I write in bed when I wake up at 6am and I like using pen to write. I have a computer downstairs in my dining area and I do type up my work, but first drafts are always in longhand.

DC: You are uniquely placed to compare British and Sri Lankan attitudes to literature. Do Sri Lankan and British readers have different expectations of writers?

DA: In general the Sri Lankan market mirrors that of the UK and there is a wide spectrum of taste. We live in a 'global village' now, so I suspect this is a universal phenomenon.

DC: Was it easy or difficult for you to get published? What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

DA: British publishers tend to publish work only when the writer author has an established reputation or when it is evident that the work will cater for a vast commercial market that thrives in 'sex and violence' in large quantities. Serious literature has become completely marginalized. The first chapter of my novel was sent to a Shorelines 2003 competition for first chapters of novels, and it was selected as one of the ten best chapters. This greatly encouraged me, but it still did not help me to find a commercial publisher. I must have submitted my novel to a wide variety of publishers until finally Sixties Press, which had already published *Concern* and what it can do in terms of print runs and distribution is limited. On the other hand, because my novel was first published by Sixties Press, it was seen by Vijitha Yapa Publishers and they are a major Sri Lankan company. They will repackage my novel in doing a Sri Lankan edition. So my advice to new writers would be: 'don't be too hopeful, but at the same time don't give up hope if you believe in your work'.

DC: Can you please explain what you mean by 're-packaging'?

DA: They'll do a new cover for the book. Moreover, they'll have my full Sri Lankan name. Daisy Abeygunesekera, on the cover so that anyone picking up the book would realize that it was by a Sri Lankan. This could help marketing in Sri Lanka. But here in the UK I use the shortened form of my name. Daisy Abey.

DC: I see. I quite like the cover of *Like the Wind* but certainly has dark cold colours and I expect brighter colours would be welcome in Sri Lanka. Finally, what are your literary ambitions? How would you like to be remembered as a writer?

DA: I would like my novel to be translated into Sinhala and I wish that the original English version could be set as an 'A' level text in Sri Lanka. I would like to spend more time writing poetry, and hope to also write at least one more novel and then see what happens. Even though I live in England, I would love to be well-known as a writer in Sri Lanka.

DC: I would love those things to happen for you too, and wish you lots of luck! Thanks, Daisy, for giving me this interview.
