

CONFLICTUENANCE

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Legends Old, Stories New

Report on Commonwealth Writers Prize: Session on Legends/Fables in Contemporary Fiction

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty

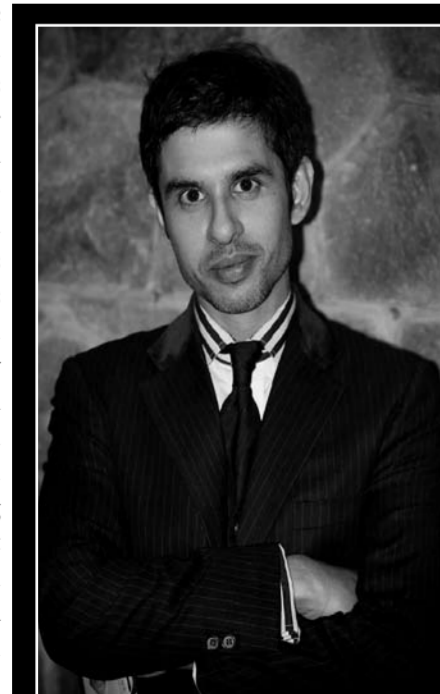
What happens when you get a group of passionate prize-winning authors from Commonwealth countries around the globe in a room with erudite literary academics to discuss the importance of myths in modern novels? A dynamic discussion with alternative perspectives and stimulating ideas. And that's precisely what happened at the South Campus of the Delhi University on the afternoon April 7th, just one of the many events planned around the city as part of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2010.

As Andrew Firmin, manager of the Commonwealth Foundation's Culture Programme, explained, the Foundation picks eight novels (four 'best first books' and four 'best books') each year from among the Commonwealth countries and brings the writers together at a chosen location to meet each other and the public to facilitate inter-cultural exchange and learning. Each writer has won within his or her own region already before arriving at this final stage. These events bring wider attention to these stellar writers, and bring their varied and innovative writings, combined with challenging and revealing discussions, to a broader audience. This year the eight novelists met in Delhi for a series of discussions and readings, held over a course of 6 days and culminating in a prize-giving ceremony on April 12th. The Foundation is assisted by communications consultancy Champollion abroad, while literary consultancy Siyahi planned the Indian events. Each event involves a discussion on a particular topic among a select number of the eight writers together with local experts, and ends with a question-answer session with the audience.

This particular discussion, titled *Legends and Fables: How is Contemporary Fiction Informed by Traditional Forms?* was held at the lovely South Campus of the University of Delhi. It was compered by Shradha A. Singh, assistant professor of English at Kirori Mal College, and moderated by Malashri Lal, joint director of the South Campus and professor in the Department of English at the University of Delhi. Malashri set the context by referring to her recent non-fiction book *In Search of Sita* and how during



from left: Lakshmi Kannan, Andrew Firmin, Sukrita Paul Kumar, Prof. Malashri Lal (moderator, at centre), Michael Crumme, and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani (Photo courtesy: Aditi Yadava).



COMMONWEALTH WRITERS' PRIZE 2010 WINNERS

Best Book:
Solo
by
Rana Dasgupta
British author,
based in India



Best First Book: *Siddon Rock*
by **Glenda Guest**, Australian.

the research for it she came to see the *Ramayana* and other such epics as living tales and correspondingly "the idea of Sita as a living idea in the contemporary imagination". But, realizing that the views of researchers and writers may not be the same, she stressed the need to bring together authors and academics to get new perspectives on this topic.

And as if right on cue, young Nigerian author Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani (winner of best first book from Africa, *I Do Not Come To You By Chance*) offered a distinctly different perspective. Since most Nigerian books are based more on tradition and myth, she consciously moved away from that stereotype to present the Nigeria of today. She passionately explained how this change in mindset is critical for the progress of her country: they must escape the hindrances and burdens of their past and move towards a better future. "We need to de-configure ourselves in order to move forward." Even the few incidents in her novel referring to myth show how traditional thinking weighs the characters down.

Sukrita Paul Kumar, associate co-ordinator at the Institute of Life-long Learning at South Campus and known for her lucid writings on the Partition, offered an opposing perspective. She sees myths and modernity easily co-existing in today's India, and their relationship being a dynamic one. She spoke of how the process of creating—of writing—is complex and difficult to explain, and how the process of articulation transforms the experience. We may not realize the influence of myths and traditions because they lie in our subconscious. And from there, they can influence not only the content of our stories

age; what about the concept of freedom of expression; who does the writer write for?

Globalization: Literary Losses and Gains

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty

As part of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (CWP) 2010 event, a very relevant discussion took place at the auditorium of the British Council in New Delhi, titled *Globalization, Writing, And The Right To Be Read*.

Established in 1965, this community of 54 countries represents and promotes a wide range of identities and cultures. The CWP is one of most inclusive literary prizes: viewing the Commonwealth as four regions, each year judges from each region first select a winner for Best Book and a winner for Best First Book. These eight regional winners come together at a new locale each year to participate in wide-ranging interactions with the public, and finally a single Best Book winner and a single Best First Book winner are chosen.

Sharmistha Panja, professor of English at Delhi University, moderated the discussion. She set the tone by reading from the blog of a young Iranian woman, frustrated by the war and its impact on her life. Given the world of globalization and such new literary forms, Sharmistha posed some interesting questions: What does it mean to be a writer in this day and



(From Left) Sharmistha Panja, Marié Heese, Rana Dasgupta, Jai Arjun Singh

South African author Marié Heese (Best Book nominee for *The Double Crown*) felt that we're caught in a conundrum: on the one hand, there is now a tremendous opportunity to communicate, while on the other, there is a failure to do so. There is a general Americanization of everything, and particularly among the rich in countries the world over, there is similarity of culture. Marié felt particularly passionate about multi-lingualism: it can be additive or subtractive. Instead of knowing several languages, we often lose one language in the process of gaining another. Instead, "we need to find a way to live on multiple levels."

British-Indian author Rana Dasgupta (Best Book nominee for *Solo*) presented a different perspective. In response to criticism of globalization, he said, "We all feel globalization is coming from somewhere else." It's true many things are lost in the process of globalization. And therefore, we need to find new forms of belonging in this new world. Via his writing, he tries to imagine what it would be like to be a citizen of globalization—not the image portrayed by advertisements of the mobile business man in a suit armed with high-tech devices, but rather a different and perhaps more common reality, like the perspective of a refugee.

Indian journalist and blogger, Jai Arjun Singh, raised several interesting points. In today's world a writer has no responsibility to write in a particular way or about a specific subject: an Indian need not write about India. The important thing is to write in an authentic way. He also stressed the need for more good translations so that we can access the literature of different languages.

Globalization is de-stabilizing the traditional systems of publishing, writing, and reading. Its process and the outcomes are unpredictable, and this discussion could merely scratch tantalizingly at the surface of this currently evolving situation.

today, but also their form: e.g. the fables of yesterday are the 'short shorts' of today.

South African author Marié Heese (winner of best book from Africa, *The Double Crown*) supported Sukrita's view of the power of the subconscious with her own experience. Quoting a South African playwright, Marie said "One's subconscious is one's co-author." She explained how she doesn't begin with an idea; she begins with a story and the story finds the writer. Having long been interested in ancient Egypt and via various readings, she came to be fascinated by the strong personality of Queen Hatshepsut, the main character of her book *The Double Crown*.

Lakshmi Kannan, an established bilingual author who writes both in English and in Tamil under the pen-name Kaaveri, asked the vital question "Who do I write for?" and answered, "The reader who is conditioned by myths and fables". She highlighted this unique and critical relationship between the written work and the reader using an example of one of her own short stories, 'The Coming of Devi'. In it, the main character (a thoughtful middle-aged woman) and the goddess Devi, both tired of waiting for the priests to stop arguing, take the situation into their own hands: the Devi occupies the pedestal in the temple without going through prescribed rituals. This story caused a major debate among her readers, with many protesting the unconventional ending: how could the woman and the goddess act without the permission of the male priests? Lakshmi pointed out how in India the power issue is often equivalent to the gender issue.

This topic of fables and contemporary fiction was almost made for author Michael Crumme (winner of best book from Caribbean and Canada, *Galore*), who comes from the far-flung Canadian province of Newfoundland. It's a very sparsely populated island with isolated fishing communities, where the often harsh physical world and the mythical world (composed of British and Irish tales) go hand in hand. He said he wanted to find the most outlandish folktale and put it into his novel *Galore*. From close family friends he heard the story of a man thought dead, but on the point of burial, wakes up, walks home from his own funeral, and lives on for many years to come. To Michael, the tale seemed to epitomise the spirit of Newfoundland; when there seems no hope, suddenly there is an unexpected resurrection.

Audience members were eager to jump in with insightful comments. Marta Dvorak (professor at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris) brought attention to Michael's earlier and shorter works. Taisha Abraham (of Jesus & Mary College, Delhi) spoke of the need to include Christian and Islamic myths in such discussion. Savita Singh (Delhi poet and professor at IGNOU) remarked that if myths are important in prose, they are even more important in poetry as myth can explain so much in so few words. Australian author Glenda Guest summarized that our myths are our foundation, and that both we and our modern stories build on them. Hina Nandrajog (of the South Campus) furthered that thought, saying that, with our new stories, we are in fact creating new myths, fables, and legends.

Malashri summarized the session by referring to the ever present subconscious and collective memory, and how it plays a significant role in writings. "We are linked to our past, whether we know it or not."

This left Shradha to just thank the Commonwealth Foundation and Siyahi (the literary consultancy) for hosting the event, and all the experts—both writers and academics—for their lively participation and stimulating contributions.

Given the avid interest in this topic and its fundamental link to storytelling, the discussion could have easily continued for several hours more, and that may be just what happened in various cafés and classrooms and book clubs around town. And that's all for the good. As other writers said, in another place and time, "we are trying to start the conversation—not have the last word."

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty is a writer and business/academic editor, based in Delhi. She has also contributed to the *International Herald Tribune* (IHT/ NYT), the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Mint*. Details are available on LinkedIn: <http://in.linkedin.com/in/ranjaniiyermohanty>

