

Kavita A. Jindal interviewed by Patricia Neculae, Romanian translator of *Raincheck Renewed*

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1. What made you choose poetry as a means of expression? What is poetry to you? Do you feel closer to poetry or to fiction?

I don't think I consciously chose poetry. I just happened to start writing poems from early on. So poetry chose me. When I was at school it was something I did in the afternoons when I wasn't busy with another activity. It remained a constant in my life; I enjoyed writing whenever I could.

In more recent years, with poetry I feel like I can slip out of a window from my 'real' life to another experience and then slip back in through the same window.

It's not that I feel closer to poetry than fiction, but poetry is my first love. It's been with me longer. With my fiction, and here, I mean specifically my short stories (as my 'long' story is still in the draft stage) I follow a different route constructing it than I do for my poetry. I usually have a concept which I want to incorporate in a story. And although when I write the story, it is the idea that dominates in my head and the story is built around that, I want the reader's reaction to be the opposite of that. I want the reader to enjoy the characters and what's happening to them, while the concept just provides context and background for what is going on in the characters' lives.

2. Is there still room for poetry in contemporary (British) literature? Is it still – or was it ever – necessary?

There is room for poetry. It is a niche space, but it thrives. Poetry has been overtaken by other forms of writing in popularity but I find it interesting that it has retained a presence even in new media – such as the internet.

Poetry is necessary and always will be. As an example, song lyrics are also poetry and most people respond very strongly to their favourite songs. In songs, the tune is as important, if not more important than the words, but when people refer to songs that mean something to them it's often because the lyrics have touched them.

It's possible that the print form of poetry and reading poetry will be even more marginalised in the future, but human beings will always respond to and create poetry in some form.

3. Your poetry seems very "reader-friendly", an invitation to dialogue. What is your relation to your public?

I did make an attempt in my poems to be conversational and one reason I did that was to attract new readers to poetry. I was fortunate that I succeeded at that at some level; in that there were definitely people who had not bought a poetry book in their life who went out and purchased **Raincheck Renewed** after readings or seeing an excerpt of a poem in the newspaper.

But generally, readers and audiences are people who are interested in poetry.

4. Which is – in your opinion - your most representative poem, the one you would like to be saved if all others were to be lost? Why?

I'm not sure I've written that poem yet! But if I were to make a list of my favourites, 'One a Penny, Two a Penny,' would feature on the list.

5. How is the reader Kavita Jindal? What do you like to read, is there a relation between your reading and your writing? Are there any major influences on your work? Is there an anxiety of influence?

I like to read absolutely everything I come across. I believe there must be a connection, however distant, between what I read and what I write, but I am not conscious of it and I prefer not to be conscious of it.

I can't cite particular influences on my work; there have been so many. On the other hand, I've always had my own opinions and my own style, both held against the grain of what may be in or out of fashion. So, I feel no anxiety about influences; I am open to all positive forces that feed my writing.

6. Your shorter poems seem both spontaneous and possessing the wittiness of epigrams. Are they the fruit of epiphanies or the product of a process of essentializing an experience?

Patricia, this is a very good question, because you've given two answers that are much better than mine. The prosaic truth is that I dislike 'padding'. If I think I've said what I wanted to say, then I stop there. It doesn't matter to me if the poem ends up being four lines or six lines, I don't want to add unnecessary words. I believe the true impact of the emotion expressed will be lost if I go further.

7. Past and memory are recurrent themes in your poems. Is it a hindering past or, on the contrary, one which is essential in configuring an identity? On a slightly different level, I'm also thinking about your multi-cultural past and the role it plays in your work.

Our past shapes us and I would not like to refer even to the times of hardship as 'hindering'. It is fair to say that I draw what I need to from the past and I'm lucky that I have had what seems to me to be a very interesting life. The fact that I had to adjust to living in a new place every few years has definitely played a part in my writing.

Being of a curious nature, I tried to pay attention to the languages and cultural mores surrounding me, and often, I was the outsider, which allowed me to observe without having to fit in.

As for my Indian heritage, without it, I would not be me. So if it plays a role in my work it is the essential but understated role of making me who I am. I feel like I belong to the universe, or the whole world, if that makes sense. My work speaks to people who feel the same; anyone with a similar sensibility. My work is not restricted to this or that single community.

8. Irony and self-irony are an important feature of your writing. However, it is never malicious or disdainful, it always suggests a deeper understanding. Is the nexus irony – self-irony a way of being both in the outside, in a critical position, and in the inside, as part of the criticised world?

Yes, absolutely. I feel that if you just satirise or criticise certain things, without offering a solution, then the least you can do is include yourself in the criticism. My poems offer commentary but I'm not presenting solutions, nor do I want to make monsters of normal people following normal modes of behaviour. I'm just pointing out incongruity when I see it.

9. There is a fine balance between optimism and pessimism in your poetry. Could they be perceived as the two faces of the same coin?

I would agree with two faces of the coin if they were optimism and melancholy. I'm definitely melancholic. After all, I'm a poet. Pessimism is scary. It's not for me. But I can see how some poems can be read as having a hint of underlying pessimism. But maybe it's more cynicism than pessimism. So we end up with a mix of optimism and cynicism.

10. One of the most epic sections of your volume describes the relationship between a daughter and her father. It has the unique quality of creating vivid characters out of just a few lines. Is there a biographical background to it? Could it also be read as the relation between a poet and tradition?

The series 'My Father's Life in Mine' is biographical to the extent that there was estrangement between my father and myself after he abandoned the family when we were still teenagers, without any means of support.

In his youth my father was a poet too, and strangely, this sequence of poems is a tribute to him, although it may not seem like it. It is also a crafted poem, not a statement of facts, but the events in it are based on his and my biographies.

11. *Aspiring to Be a Tai Tai* is one of the funniest sections, but one cannot escape the feeling that there is a darker side to it. What made you write about the world of a tai tai?

For a few years in Hong Kong I lived that lifestyle some days of the week, while on the other days I stayed in my room, wrote poems and refused to see people or dine out. It was a major collision of lifestyles all in the same week and made me acutely aware of the pleasures and miseries of both. I used the title 'aspiring to be a tai tai' because that is what the shopfloor assistant wanted to be: the woman who could spend hours shopping in her department.

To my surprise, everyone has found that title amusing and also the poems in that section. It's turned out to be the most popular and quoted part of ***Raincheck Renewed***. As I explained in Q 8, this satire is not an indictment of the tai tai. That is one sort of normal life. And everyone should live the best life they can have, why not? This sequence is about self-awareness, and as you've already noted it uses irony and self-irony.

12. A word to your Romanian readers.

Enjoy and weigh your words – yours and other people's. Words make a difference.