LIVING IN A WRITER'S RAINFOREST

an interview with

Sharmistha Mohanty

by **Graziano Krätli**

Sharmistha Mohanty has published three works of fiction—*Book One* (1995), *New Life* (2005), and *Five Movements in Praise* (2013)—and a book of translations from Rabindranath Tagore, *Broken Nest and Other Stories* (2009). She is the founding editor of the online literature journal *Almost Island*, the publisher (with the poet Vivek Narayanan) of Almost Island Books, and the initiator of the Almost Island Dialogues, an annual meeting of writers from India and abroad held every winter in New Delhi since 2006. Mohanty has worked as a scriptwriter in the Indian cinema with several directors including the late Mani Kaul. She is currently on the International Faculty for the Creative Writing MFA at the City University of Hong Kong. The recipient of fellowships from the Indian Ministry of Culture and the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Germany, she lives in Mumbai with her husband, the filmmaker and video artist Kabir Mohanty.

Graziano Krätli: Sharmistha, you are a writer, the editor of an online journal, and now also a publisher of poetry and literary fiction. How did these three roles develop and intertwine?

Sharmistha Mohanty: I've been a writer since my early twenties, so obviously that is the core, and that impels all the other activities I'm involved in. Writing became my fundamental work ever since I went to the Iowa Writers Workshop, where I was deeply influenced by my teacher—the truly profound James Alan McPherson. When I say "truly profound," I don't mean only as a writer; he was profound as a human being. That really left a mark on my own evolution, because today I feel that writing and the way one lives and manifests one's being are not separate—that the writing always contains what is beyond writing.

The online journal really came from a desire to open up a space for serious work, in English, from within India. I saw this space as being threatened and overtaken by the market. Alongside, there was also the intent to translate from Indian languages, and to try—in a humble way—to bring the English and non-English worlds closer. Wanting also to be rooted in India but be international in scope. The books also really come from the same impetus. Indian English has barely any independent publishers. So the intention was to open up a space for dialogue within India and between India and the outside world. The Almost Island Writers Dialogues was an extension of this idea, and grew from the journal. I felt the need for live dialogues and not only virtual ones. Dialogue on the web makes many things possible. But there is nothing that can replace human presence. For me, the being of a writer also speaks, as strongly as his work does, and not always in the same direction. Moreover, there are things that get exchanged in speech, with writers sitting before each other, which are special, and random, and that is a true dialogue the web can never replicate.

So we've had six very intimate dialogues between writers from India and abroad. Some of the international writers have been Bei Dao, Claudio Magris, Tomaz Salamun, Vahni Capildeo, Forrest Gander, George Szirtes, and from India Adil Jussawalla, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Vinod Kumar Shukla, K. Satchidanandan, Joy Goswami, and I. Allan Sealy, among others.

As a writer these dialogues and the journal have changed my life. I don't think I could begin to count the ways in which they have shaped me and will continue to do so. The wide range of work widens of course one's own possibilities. And the live dialogues have confirmed my faith in the integrity of the great writers—not a narrowly defined, but a spacious integrity. Bei Dao talking about how poetry took on meaning for him as a young man loading boats at the Summer Palace in Beijing. Joy Goswami talking intimately about his mother's untimely death in his arms.

I think the contemporary cultural landscape, at least in the major cities, is fairly dismal. The arts are certainly not a part of "India Shining." All those people who want us to be like the "developed" nations are concerned with an achievement that has to do with money and globalization. They've forgotten that thought is central to the growth of a culture. I don't know how much we as Almost Island can do, except keep doing. There is a kind of inevitable aloneness which sometimes becomes loneliness as well, doing this kind of work. But it slows down the pace of living and watching, and therefore it makes one see.

I think right through my work, and especially in the new book, *Five Movements in Praise*, I've wanted to place very disparate realities next to one another.

GK: You mentioned translation from Indian languages, and the intention to bring the English and non-English worlds closer, as one of your objects as editor and publisher. What are the pros and cons of being an Indian writer in English today?

SM: In India there are particular challenges to writing, especially in English. I don't think we can discount the fact that even now, English is very much a minority language. One takes that as a challenge, and I myself take on the paradoxes of writing in English from and about very rooted things. There are a couple of other writers I admire who do the same thing here, and quite a few poets. But it remains a difficult task. Unlike the writers and poets who write in an Indian language, and can take on the tendencies of their own contexts or contradict them, we don't really have that connection; we will in that sense always be somewhat marginalized. In fact, fiction in English has largely been either oriented towards Western audiences, or it's been superficial. There is no experimentation with form, the Anglo-Saxon model of the novel reigns supreme, European work is hardly ever read. There is also no concern with contemporary realities, or its opposite, a great inwardness. Much more admirable work has been done by the Indian poets writing in English.

But aside from these things, which are external and contextual, there are other challenges. I think right through my work, and especially in the new book, *Five Movements in Praise*, I've wanted to place very disparate realities next to one another. This is one of the fundamentals of an experience rooted in this country—the lack of smoothness, that unevenness of the terrain. How to do this in English? Does the language sometimes make things sound external when they are not, make them sound distant from oneself when they are indeed inside? Perhaps rhythm and cadence are ways to get around this. I find that I often come to a place of using the sentence or the long paragraph almost like a chant, or a recitation, or prayer. It may partly be there in the unconscious, a kind of personal and larger cultural memory.

In one sense English is a challenge, but in another, a privilege. A very educated Indian writer, working in English, is holding together so many different realities and cultural nuances, living in a kind of writer's rainforest as it were . . . I think that vantage point is rare anywhere in the world and we are not actually able to honour it fully. So one can express the span of a life where varied things have moved towards or away from each other with a great velocity. Or things moving in parallel without ever meeting. Immense arcs of time becoming visible.

GK: You started *Almost Island* as an online journal to "open up a space for non-market oriented writing," then you initiated the Almost Island Writers Dialogues followed by Almost Island Books, which publishes finely designed and produced hardcover books of poetry and literary fiction. Was the decision to publish the journal exclusively online motivated by reasons other than practical (i.e., financial)? And, conversely, are you planning to stick to print for the books, or to release an e-book version as well? In other words, what is your take on the interplay of digital and print—or physical and virtual—in the creation, production, and consumption of literature today? And do the writer, the editor, and the publisher in you think along converging or diverging lines on this issue?

SM: You know, those of us who write in English end up needing an audience beyond national boundaries. A strange necessity, no matter how you look at it. A poet in Bengali or Tamil doesn't have to think about this. Ideally, I would love to have my audience right here in India, but the reality is that my readers are spread over India and different parts of the English speaking world. The Internet makes this exchange with readers eminently possible and also exciting. Personally I have been helped and sustained by my friendship with writers in America, in England, in China, in Germany, my students in Hong Kong. When I began the journal I think I knew this was the only way a dialogue could happen over vast geographical distances.

With the books, I'm still rooted in the book as physical object. But the fact that a book can now be sold all over the world makes a difference. So in a way Almost Island Books can have the best of both worlds—real and virtual. I think we will stick to the physical book for now, but I do feel that both the physical and virtual modes are of almost equal significance. For me, a journal on the Internet is a great idea and we've

done well for it. But had I never travelled, or invited writers here, had I never met some profound writers of our time, the exchange would have remained limited.

GK: This last question may be the easiest or the most difficult to answer, depending on the approach and the direction you may want to take in answering it. A limited budget, of course, forces you to be extremely selective as a publisher, which is helpful in some ways and frustrating in others. But let's just imagine, for the sake of this conversation, a more challengingly tempting scenario. If Almost Island had a much larger budget (i.e., one that would force you to be selective in ways other than those dictated by financial constraints), what would your choices be vis à vis fiction, nonfiction and poetry? In other words, who and what would you publish, and why? Feel free to name specific genres, authors, or titles as an example of your preferences, tastes, and opinions on current literature, by Indians (both resident and diasporic) as well as non-Indians.

SM: Actually, given that I and my colleague Vivek Narayanan are practicing writers, we would not publish much more even if we had a much bigger budget. We are not a "publishing house," but a literary entity which has a journal, does writers dialogues, and is interested in doing, at the most, one or two books a year. Anything more than that is impossible to manage in terms of time.

However, if I still had to answer your question, I would say there is one tendency I would definitely push in publishing. I feel that we need to oppose the force of formulaic realist narrative novels that seem to have such a stranglehold in the English language writing world. I teach at a Creative Writing Programme based in Hong Kong—but which has students from many different countries, especially Asian ones—and I know that much of the time I see real, raw talent in students, but they smother that in order to force themselves into this formula. It's a curious phenomenon, and obviously born from the fear of not being able to enter the marketplace. There are a few things involved here, a kind of denial of other modes of "narrating" other than English or American ones; and something even more dangerous—a kind of belief only in the rational. You know, Michel Serres said somewhere, "We shall soon be unable to consider anything outside rationality." Anything outside the so-called "real" is magic and mysticism. This means that we from India, and those others from Asia who work in English, are also bound by this rationality, and it prevents us from looking into other ways of narrating that could impel or transform our own work. This is especially ironic as those other ways are still living traditions in many Asian cultures, definitely in India.

The other thing I might publish more is translations of older poetry from India—by older I mean ancient or medieval—as well as works of aesthetic theory. This ties in to what I said above, and would have an impact on it. I've spoken a lot in this new book about the idea of the "originary." A culture that does not originate is a dead culture. And when you destroy a culture's natural sense of aesthetics, invention, and ways of being, and graft on things from other places, you get ugliness and a dead imagination. So I would publish things that would help us look back and forward at the same time, though that is no easy task. rt