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Vishwanath Bite in Conversation with Vinita Agrawal

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Vinita, author of *Words Not Spoken*, is a Mumbai based, award winning poet and writer. Her poems have appeared in *Asiancha*, *Constellations*, *The Fox Chase Review*, *Pea River Journal*, *Open Road Review*, *Stockholm Literary Review*, *Poetry Pacific* among others. She was nominated for the Best of the Net Awards 2011, awarded first prize in the Wordweavers Contest 2014, commendation prize in the All India Poetry Competition 2014 and won the 2014 Hour of Writes Contest twice. Her poem is one of the prize winning entries to be published in the British Council's Museum Anthology 2014. She has also been anthologized in three Indo-Australian ventures and several other international compilations. Her current manuscript of poems has been accepted by the Finishing Line Press, Kentucky, USA and is due to be published this year. She has been widely interviewed by national and international journals. She can be reached at www.vinitawords.com



Will you tell us something about yourself (place of birth, school and anything in between)

I was born in Bikaner, Rajasthan but I never really lived there. Due to my father's job I changed many cities and lived across the length and breadth of India. To keep my education stable, my

parents put me in a Boarding school in Kalimpong in the early years of my schooling and I did the rest of my education from Kolkata as a day scholar because my parents had also moved to Kolkata by then. I did my B.A. and M.A. in political science from M.S. University Baroda for which I received a UGC Scholarship and Gold Medal.

Which books did you find yourself reading whilst growing up and which are you currently reading?

I was the quintessential bookworm when I was young. I preferred reading to any other activity. I devoured fiction in my formative years. I read Enid Blytons, Hardy Boys, Nancy Drews as a young girl of 8 or 9 then moved on to the thrillers and all Romantic Novels picking up just about everything that was on the Current stands. In my late adolescence, I was very partial to the classics of Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and Jane Austen. Basically, I prefer reading books that highlight the courage of the human spirit and the endurance of man which is why Leon Uris, Earnest Hemingway, Oscar Wilde and M.M. Kaye are my favorite authors. I also enjoy reading biographies. Alongside all this I am always always reading poetry.

These days, I enjoy non-fiction more – particularly books on the Buddha. I also enjoy reading books on culture and travel. Currently I'm reading the *The White Mughal* by William Dalrymple. Last month I read a *The Tao Of Physics* by Fritjof Capra which I enjoyed immensely.

What inspires you to write poetry?

I write poetry whenever I have something to say. So poetry for me is a means of self expression. I'd like to quote Manto in this context who said that "we write when our sensibilities are hurt". Manto was a writer of fiction but I could easily adapt his line to the task of writing poetry as well! Sometimes i think I'm just a woman with too much time on my hands and thus I can afford to indulge in poetry...I admire those wonderful poets who juggle careers and family life and still churn out soulful verses from between the narrow crevices of their busy lives.

On a serious note, what inspires me most to write poetry is the ever-widening circle of pain at the core level of existence. We all feel its ripples but when we identify ourselves with a poem that:

echoes our sentiments exactly, then we become a fraternity, a bonded humanity. That is the joy of writing...we write for others in the exact same moment that we write for ourselves.

Who are some of your favorite poets?

Pablo Neruda, Jayanta Mahapatra, Rilke, Keats, and Kamala Das are some of my favorite poets. That said, I have to add that there is such brilliant poetry being written in small towns of lesser

known nations, that I find myself getting attracted to the depths of the verses rather any one poet in totality. The collective voice of a nation appeals more than its individual chords. I find poetry coming from the Middle East and Eastern Europe very fascinating.

What advice do you have for aspiring poets?

For aspiring poets, the only advice is to write! And write more! The more you write the better you get at the craft, the wider becomes your lens to view the world. It is essential to evolve constantly as a writer. And for that it is essential to write something everyday.

Can you describe the time when you first realized that creating was something you absolutely had to do?

Every new moment, every new experience, the piercing stabs of old memories, the fanciful trepidation of creating new ones, a new leaf on an old tree bark, a cloud – dark and pregnant with rain, my family, my loved ones...just about everything about life makes it imperative for me to write poetry. Honestly, I write more than I speak! And this has been the case forever...so it would be difficult to pin point a particular time when I felt an urgent need to write. It's always been there.

Do the Internet and social media contribute to the well-being of poetry?

Well the internet and social media like Facebook and Twitter have played a strange role vis-a-vis poetry. On the one hand it has made almost everyone a poet because it's so easy to reach an audience using social media and on the other hand it has trapped us in mediocrity because with superficial Likes, even an average poem gains the credibility it does not deserve. So, one needs to be watchful of the social media. Do not get carried away by its accolades. But use it wisely as a viable platform to promote your work. At all times, stay grounded.

What do most poorly-written poems have in common?

That's a good question! Well-worn metaphors, poor use of language, mixed-up tenses, ordinary perspectives, losing focus of the poem's subject, tame endings, insipid writing and a weak structure are some of the elements of a poorly written poem, in my knowledge.

What do most well-written poems have in common?

It follows logically that the opposite of all the above are the hallmarks of a good poem. However, ironically, that is not strictly true. Sometimes a short, hard hitting poem written in very simple language can linger in your mind for days. So what really matters, I guess, is to write in an inspired way, to deeply feel what your are penning...when you write, your poem must face the reader, look him or her in the eye and say – Read Me. It should shy of scrutiny and analysis. It

has to be that deeply written. I would like to be humble about the poetry I've written, so would not like to answer this question like an expert. This is just my personal opinion.

Why is it such a difficult market for poets right now?

It's difficult to make a living out of writing poetry yes, but by no means would I call poetry a difficult market. In fact, now more than ever publishers are willing to publish poetry. In India, Harper Collins, Rupa, Penguin and a few other mainstream publishers are bringing out poetry books once again, after a hiatus of almost ten years. That's awesome! Even abroad, the concept of chapbooks, e books , digital editions etc are giving poetry a new breath of life. The market for poetry is out there – kicking and thriving. It's not a dying trend.

And if one wants to be pessimistic, then well, even fiction does not succeed commercially if it's not good. So the crunch is for all writers – whether poets or authors.

Has your idea of what poetry is changed since you began writing poems?

Poetry is more grounded, less romanticized these days. Earlier it used to be airy, fanciful and over imaginative. Now, in keeping with the no nonsense, realistic attitudes of our younger generation, poetry too has become crisper and kind of pragmatic.

What aspects of your poetry reader in general and Research scholars in particular must discover and explore?

I would urge readers and research scholars to study poetry as a voice representing a particular section of society. If you study poetry closely, vernacular and regional poetry has a voice that is distinct from urban English poetry. Similarly, the voice of Eastern European poetry is much more subtle than poetry written, say in the States or in England. Middle eastern poetry represents the voice of strife, war and disillusionment as compared to poetry of the Far East which focuses more on identity and philosophy. It would be great if researchers could extract and observe the comments on society hidden under the geographic expanse of poetry.

How would you describe uniqueness of each of your poetry collections?

I would prefer critics and reviewers to explore the trends in my poetry over the years. Let them tell me how it has evolved, whether it has evolved at all. Two new collections of my poetry will be out by this year. That should give the readers some scope to draw conclusions.

Are there any new poets that have grasped your interest?

Yes there are many! But I don't want to name them here because I am afraid I shall leave out a few really good ones and regret that terribly. Overall, I'd like to say that the new poets use the

language enviably. They don't hide behind their poems. Their poetry is bold, unashamed, unabashed and really looks you in the eye!

How do you see the Literary Scene in India? Is it progressing or retrogressing?

The literary scene is booming in India. Indian writers are being recognized and rewarded abroad and that's marvelous! Even NRI Indians are doing a great job of portraying Indian culture and ethos through their writings in the country of migration. With so many high profile literary festivals cropping up round the year, there's no dearth of limelight for everyone. People are taking to reading once again, despite the television and the internet. If we could inculcate the habit of reading in our children, I think we could easily sustain this upward trend in the literary scene in India.

How will you judge the body of Contemporary Indian Writing in English in general and Indian English Poetry in particular?

Compared to contemporary writing trends in the country, poetry certainly comes on the lower rung. I believe fiction is most popular, then culture and travel, then motivational non fiction and then other genres of nonfiction. Poetry comes after all that...

What is the role of the Central Sahitya Akademi in popularizing the Indian English Literature?

Sahitya Akademi is a wonderful literary body in India. It is like the benevolent Godfather of the literary circles of the country. Whenever we do meaningful work in terms of writing and researching we run to the Sahitya Akademi for endorsement and promotion. Where else would we go? The body recognizes the contribution of fine arts in our country like no other institution. It's wonderful that we have such a platform for our country's writers.