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Interview of Siddhartha Gigoo: Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2015 (Asia)

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Q: 1. Congratulations Siddhartha Gigoo for being awarded the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2015 (Asia) for your short story ‘The Umbrella Man’. Out of 4000 entries, your story is the winner from Asia. How are you feeling after being awarded? How are you looking at a decades ago Siddhartha, whose poetry and prose were rejected by publishers, and who now has proved his pen? Is he (old Siddhartha) saying something to you?

A: Thank you! Frankly, I’ve not won anything. The story ‘The Umbrella Man’ has won the prize. To quote a line from one of my favorite movies, Notting Hill, it’s a ‘surreal, but nice’ feeling. My writings have been rejected several times by literary journals and publishers. I got used to rejection, and kept on writing while waiting for responses. In a way, rejection is good. It makes you question yourself and your writing, and strive for better quality. It makes you go on and on.

Let me tell you a secret. I’ve been submitting stories for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize for the past 3 years. The first story I submitted three years ago wasn’t shortlisted. I felt dejected. Then I submitted another story, and it, too, didn’t make it to the shortlist. Last year I submitted ‘The Umbrella Man’ just because submitting stories had become a habit. I had little hope. Because I’d a bunch of stories, I decided to keep on submitting; many stories were mere drafts. Last month, when I got to know that my story is in the shortlist, I felt elated. I read the story a couple of times, just to assess its quality. I read dispassionately as though I was a critic.

Q: 2. The story ‘The Umbrella Man’ tells something, symbolically, about the longing of a mental patient. The story reminds the reader of an exiled poet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz. What is the story behind the story? What do the umbrella and No.7, the protagonist, symbolize? Please let the cat out of bag! (Smile)

A: The story 'The Umbrella Man' came to me last summer in the most bizarre circumstances. I used to go to my balcony at midnight to watch the planes land at an airstrip nearby. And during the day I used to see an army of ants carry tiny food grains into their holes. In the evenings, I would narrate these scenes to my wife, Aishwarya, and daughter, Amia. Amia would tell me ghost stories, in which a one-eyed-crow always made an appearance. Delhi was burning that summer. And rain was nowhere in sight. One night, I dreamt of a solitary man who chances upon an umbrella. I wrote about this man and his conversation with his only friend. No one knows what happens afterwards. I wish to meet the Umbrella Man once in my lifetime, although I know, he may have no interest in meeting me.

While writing the story, a thought about giving the man a name occurred to me. But instantly I felt the man should not have a name. 7 is my favourite number. So I chose to call the Umbrella Man, Number 7. I'm not sure what this man symbolizes. He is just an inmate living in an asylum. He yearns for rain. All he possesses is an umbrella. And one day he is set free. We write about freedom. We talk about it quite often. But what is freedom? How does one attain freedom? What does it mean to be free? I haven't any answers yet.

I've trouble understanding some of my stories. There are a few stories in my book – A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories – which I'm unable to grasp. I depend on the readers to help me understand.

Q: 3. What do you think made 'The Umbrella Man' win the Commonwealth Award? To whom would you like to dedicate this award?

A: This is such a difficult question. One of the judges says, "'The Umbrella Man' presents a surreal meditation on mental health and the environment, through its ghostly voice, abstract and philosophical themes, and telescopic structure. We congratulate Siddhartha Gigoo for his sensitivity and perception, which made this story stand out from the rest."

I'm indebted to my parents, wife, and daughter for listening to me and helping me come out of knotty situations during writing. Had it not been for my grandmother's yarns and stories, I would not have written a word. She was an ace raconteur. Now I would like people to read the other stories in my book.

Q: 4. You did your schooling from Kashmir, BA from Udhampur and Masters from JNU in Delhi. Do you feel yourself a triple-exiled?

A: You're right. I miss all the places I've lived in. My old ancestral house in Khankah-i-Sokhta, SafaKadal, Srinagar. A dormitory in Jammu. Several houses in Udhampur. One of them had no windows. It was dark and dingy like a barn. We lived there for years. My grandfather lost his memory there. We struggled to survive. But we came out of it alive, despite the misery and emotional deprivation.

I've lived in Finland, USA and England. Delhi is my home now. The city is a melting pot of cultures. Almost everyone is a migrant here.

Q: 5. What have you lost and gained from the exile?

A: I wonder how one must measure losses and gains in life. I lost both my grandparents some years ago. They died in exile. I know, for sure, they had wanted to live and die in Kashmir, their homeland. Exile is a great teacher. It teaches you many things about life. Exile teaches you how to adapt, to leave frugally and to stop worrying about mundane things. During the initial years in exile, my family, like several other families, experienced terrible hardship, but then the daily ordeals helped me gain a philosophical outlook towards life. The only thing I know is that I don't know anything. But the desire to know is still aflame in my heart.

Q: 6. You came up with a heartrending novel "The Garden of Solitude". Other Kashmiri writers write about Kashmir. But in two contexts, Kashmiri-Pandit writers write about the pain of exodus and the Kashmiri-Pandit community, and the Kashmiri-Muslim writers write about widows and half widows of Kashmiri-Muslim community. Do you think that they should fill this void because they are the offspring of the same conflict or should Kashmir wait for the second coming of Agha Shahid Ali who wrote about and for both these conflict-torn communities of Kashmir?

A: Agha Shahid Ali remains an inspiration. My father knew him very well. I remember meeting Shahid in his house when I was a kid. His poetry is mesmerizing. I wonder how he wrote such exquisite poetry. Every line of his is beautiful. He is my Lorca, my Neruda. Why should Kashmiri Muslim writers write only about Muslims? And why should Kashmiri Pandit writers write only about Pandits? It's absurd. It defeats the very purpose of writing.

Q: 7. What do you think about the return of Kashmiri pundits to their homeland? The Govt. wants to settle them in separate colonies. Does it carry any political game? What is your say?

A: We continue to be a forgotten entity. Now is the time to reclaim our roots, our homeland. As a writer, I try to reclaim my roots and ancestry through my writings. Physically, it's not feasible for me to return to Kashmir and settle there. Except memories and emotional ties, I've nothing else left.

But if we are to return to Kashmir and rebuild our houses, the people of Kashmir must create the conditions. The bitterness and mistrust between the Muslims and the Pandits must go. Can both communities come together? Can the majority protect the minority? Can the Muslims and the Pandits bury their differences? Can they rise above sectarian, religious and ideological lines? Can they stop blaming each other? Can the Muslims pave way for a harmonious co-existence with the Pandits? At an individual level, the answer to all these questions is an emphatic YES. But at a collective level, one is doubtful. There are divergent opinions. There is a sense of betrayal.

The younger generations of both the communities- the children of conflict and the children of exile – must lead the way. Governments will only talk when it suits their vested interest. I don't think they are genuinely interested in addressing the concerns of the Kashmiri Pandits. They should invite us for a chat, listen to our woes and aspirations. Empathise. Show concern. Be sincere.

Some years ago, a bunch of young Kashmiri Pandit exiles living in Delhi and elsewhere, and young Muslims of Kashmir created a Facebook group. The purpose of this virtual group was establishing people-to-people contact. This group strove for reconciliation among Kashmiris, irrespective of their religious and political beliefs. The members of this group acknowledged the injustices inflicted upon both communities. Muslims feel Pandits betrayed them and the state repressed them. Pandits feel Muslims persecuted them and ousted them from Kashmir. This group worked towards the homecoming of Kashmiri Pandits. In a small private way! In 2011, the members of this group even created opportunities for some of the displaced Pandits to stay in Muslim homes in Kashmir. A few years ago, because of this group, a few young Pandit migrants went to Kashmir for some days and lived in the houses of Muslims, and some young Muslims

from Kashmir came and lived with the Pandit migrants living in Delhi and elsewhere. The bond between the members of this group has strengthened over the years. The bitterness has faded, though there is ample banter among them, in keeping with the Kashmiris' penchant for sarcasm, wit and humour. Everyone kept cynicism at bay. We embraced hope and love. The founders of this group are solution and action oriented. The group today has more than 3000 members. The members do their work quietly.

Such imaginative efforts are laudable. But in a larger context, there has to be a lasting political resolution to this dispute. And the solution must be acceptable to all the stakeholders – the Pandits, the Muslims, the Dogras and the Ladakhis. This is the tricky part. The very solution can become a problem.

Q: 8.What according to you is the best suitable solution for the Kashmir conflict?

A: I wish I'd a clue. Frankly, I don't even think about it. On paper, we've drawn up interesting solutions. If you browse through various Facebook groups on Jammu and Kashmir, you will come across excellent and imaginative solutions.

Q: 9. You are a poet, short story writer, novelist and short film director. Which one explains the best Siddhartha Gigoo? Why?

A: Cinema interests me a lot. I'm a film buff. I learnt scriptwriting and direction by watching movies, going through tutorials available on the Internet, and reading books on cinema and filmmaking. There is no end to learning. The two short films 'The Last Day' and 'Goodbye, Mayfly' are based on two of my stories. I would like to direct a full-length feature film. It costs a lot of money. I've a story in mind. What would not I give to see it on celluloid? I'll continue to write. Even a film has to be written.

Q: 10.What are your upcoming titles?

A: I am working on a non-fiction anthology – a collection of personal memoirs of Kashmiri Pandits. A close friend of mine is the co-editor. The book will be published by early next year. I'm also working on a script for a full-length feature film. It's set in Kashmir. The production team is exploring various funding options like crowdfunding.

Q: 11. What are you reading right now? What are your favorite books? Which one influenced you the most—and why?

A: Bulgakov's 'The Master and Margarita'. I'd read it many years ago. I wonder what is making me re-read it.

I keep going back to Dostoevsky's 'White Nights'. It is one of my favourite stories.

The first book I read was 'The Crescent Moon' by Rabindranath Tagore. During my school days (I studied at Natonal High School, Karan Nagar, Srinagar), I read novels by Maugham, John Fowles, Hermann Hesse, Orwell and Hemingway. During my graduation days, I enjoyed reading Nikos Kazantzakis, Jean Genet, Thomas Mann and Dostoevksy. During my university days, I discovered Borges, Marquez and Mishima. A few years ago, I got introduced to the writings of Pessoa, Saramago, Sebald, DaniloKis and Bolano.

The book that has influenced me the most is Thomas Mann's 'The Magic Mountain.'

Q: 12. What is your advice to the emerging writers of Jammu and Kashmir?

A: For those who wish to write stories and novels I have only one thing to say: Read. At first to enjoy, and then to learn how stories and novels are done. This is what I tell myself, every day.