

GENDER PERSPECTIVES

South Asian Writings
in English and in
English Translations



Basudeb Chakraborti
A. S. Chandel



About the Editors



Basudeb Chakraborti is Professor of English at the University of Sikkim, Gangtok. He was earlier Professor of English at the University of Kalyani, where he taught Linguistics, Indian Writings in English, Translation Studies, and Victorian Fiction. Since publishing his doctoral thesis on Thomas Hardy in 1997, he has published *Some Problems of Translation: A Study of Tagore's Red Oleanders* (2005), *Indian Partition Fiction in English and in English Translation* (2007) and co-edited a book entitled *A Talent for the Particular: Critical Essays on R. K. Narayan* with Professor Raymond Jean Frontain of Central University of Arkansas in 2013. He is currently working on a book tentatively titled *Representation of Dalits: Indian Writings on Dalit Texts in English and in English Translation*. In 2003, he was a Visiting Humanities Scholar and Teaching Fellow at the University of Central Arkansas.

E-mail: basudeb_c@rediffmail.com



A. S. Chandel is UGC Emeritus Fellow, former Professor & Head Department of Library & Information Science, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, presently working as University Librarian, Sikkim University, Gangtok and is a member of Advisory Board of National Library, Kolkata. He held various positions in Universities and academic institutions like OSD (Mizoram Univ.), Visiting Professor/Fellow (NEHU), Chairman, Library Digitization under the UGC Project (Potential for Excellence), NEHU, Shillong, Adviser, Digitization, Central Univ. of Jharkhand Ranchi, University Librarian-cum-Head, Computer and Instrumentation Centre, Incharge ARIS Cell (ICAR), of Dr Y S Parmar Univ. of Horticulture & Forestry, Nauni Solan, Himachal Pradesh.

He was also selected and nominated from SAARC nations to represent India as Deputy Director (Information) to SAARC Agricultural Information Centre Dhaka (1994-1997). He has been a member of various Boards and Committees and Councils of national importance. He has several publications to his credit which includes books, edited books, papers in national and international journals and chapters in the edited books. His recent publication is *Knowledge Management in Digital Era* (2012). He has organized several seminars/conferences including participation in International Conferences in India and abroad. He is recipient of PLA (Punjab Library Association) – Prof Satija Award for Professional Excellence (2011) and Award of Honour by Association of Agricultural Librarians and Documentalists of India (2011).

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Editors

Foreword

It is a great pleasure to write foreword to a book the preparation of which itself has a story. Professor Basudeb Chakraborti, the first editor of this fascinating collection of essays from the world of his fraternity, first proposed to start a journal. As someone who had edited a journal for a decade or so I knew that the proposal was not acceptable, particularly from a person who was himself with us for a short while. He came to start the Department of English at Sikkim University on my request; there was no regular faculty member to handle two batches of English students and there was no proper syllabus. Although the guest faculty members from Tadong Government College, Gangtok, were very forthcoming in every respect the mundane activities of a department were better left in the hands of someone senior and someone more regular in the department. I had never known or met him, but after hearing him over phone and seeing two of his books I thought he would be able to deliver, and he actually did.

This collection of essays is a delivery-plus, something I did not expect him to do. But he could not perhaps have done it if he had not come across his co-editor Professor A.S. Chandel at the University guesthouse during his tenure with Sikkim University. The two jelled and complemented each other's shortcomings. The two of them also worked very hard, ignoring their advancing age, to produce this book in such a short period. And what a better occasion to release the book than the foundation day of our university!

I know that Prof. Chakraborti is leaving our university and there is no certainty of Prof. Chandel either, as he is like the migratory bird from across the sea. I am grateful to them for what they did for me and for this university. Their service to the University will always be remembered.

Coming to the book I am not competent to say much. My discipline is different and my knowledge of English literature is next to nil. What appears to me is that with the women writers in English literature coming of age, inspired of course by feminist theories of different hues emanating from the western hemisphere, gender perspectives have emerged as one of the most important perspectives in English writings as well as in English translations, especially in African, Latin American and South Asian continents. Being voiceless or perceived to be so for ages the sense of urgency and even vengeance noticed in gender perspectives is perhaps justified. What is not justified perhaps is the rather conspicuous absence

of important male writers in this field but the few who are there are truly committed to their ideology.

This book is certainly not the first of its kind but the first from Sikkim University and that makes the book special for me. I have no doubt that this book will be of great help to the students of English literature who are deprived of a good library and who perhaps are yet to be exposed to the art of reading and writing of English literature. The essays in the book will teach them how to read a text and how to write about them besides giving them the knowledge about the important texts dealt with by various authors. The book is also valuable because it gives one message very clearly to the students, that is, literature cannot be shackled by the political boundaries of nation-states and the everyday lives of people across nation-states are very similar with each other. I am sure the students reading this book will appreciate that literature connects the people across continents, not just their hearts but also their minds.

There may be some editorial errors in the book, which is inevitable because it was produced in a very short period, but I hope the readers will pardon the editors and the publisher for those errors and appreciate what they have done instead. I for one would do so because I believe that we make mistakes only when we do something; do nothing and you will make no mistakes.

Let me end this foreword with my deepest sense of appreciation for the editors and the contributors to this volume.

T.B. Subba, Vice-Chancellor
Sikkim University

Introduction

The 10th SAARC summit was held at Colombo in 1998 and the SAARC leaders jointly announced that South Asia, “while reflecting a rich, complex and varied plurality of cultural and religious traditions, was heir to a profound civilizational continuum of great antiquity.” (Kumar, 21).

Ranjit Kumar accepts not only the pluralism in the traditions of culture and religions of the SAARC countries but also ‘common civilizational continuum of great antiquity’. But this view has also been challenged by social historians. Fierce debates on this subject remain inconclusive even today. Aitzaz Ahsan in his thesis entitled “The Indus Saga: from Pataliputra to Partition” underscores the following contentions:

I have taken pains to trace the history of this region only to attempt to prove that the civilisation that has been inherited by Indus citizens (Pakistanis) is not the gift of Aurangzeb or of any other emperor. Nor it is the legacy of any fundamentalist obscurantist, Hindu or Muslims ... During the last 6,000 years Indus has remained independent and separate from India for almost 5,500 years. From prehistory to the 19th century, Indus has been Pakistan ... (12).

Indeed it is a fact that linguistically, racially, ethnically, and culturally people of Pakistan are more connected to the people of Central Asia and parts of Iran than to the people of the Arab world. It will not be exaggeration if someone thinks that Indus Muslims are different from Indus Hindu. Mohammad Ali Jinnah in his Presidential address of the annual conference of the Muslim League held at Lahore in 1940 categorically states that the difference between them are not merely the difference between two religions. According to him the difference between Hindus and Muslims are of racial as well as civilizational differences.

A careful examination of even the image of one India during the pre-colonial period is an alien concept. The fact is that there are many ‘Indias’ in India even today. Prior to the colonial rule, India was divided into many kingdoms. Lack of cultural, linguistic, religious and administrative homogeneity was an important mark of the Indian sub-continent. The ‘essentials of Indianness’ as something homogenous may

not be a subject matter of any debate today. The Indian sub-continent in general and India in particular was not and is not indivisible, unitary and single in its culture and civilisation. The comment made by Aijaz Ahmad in this context is relevant:

One of the difficulties with the *theoretical* category of Third World Literature, it should be clear enough, is its rather cavalier way with history; its homogenization of a prolix and variegated archive which is little understood and then hurriedly categorized; its equally homogenizing impulse to slot very diverse kinds of public aspirations under the unitary insignia of 'nationalism' and then to designate this nationalism as the determinate and epochal ideology for cultural production in non-western societies; its more recent propensity to inflate the choice of immigration into a rhetoric of exile, and then to contrive this inflation as the mediating term between Third World and the First. (243).

Pluralism is the kernel of this land. It is also a fact that a well-orchestrated attempt has been made to construct a single narrative of Indian culture in general and of Indian writings in English in particular by the privileged and the major Brahminical cult of Hindu religion. The concept of the Indian nationalism was practically born after the British colonization in the nineteenth century. And the essence of this Indian nationalism stands on the solid foundation of pluralism and heterogeneity. There is nothing pejorative in this comment. The establishment of the colonial rule in India brought about an administrative cohesion among the various regions of this vast sub-continent. To run this complex and difficult administration, the colonial rulers tried to create an English knowing class of people. And for this purpose the British colonizers in the early period of their rule tried to unite the heterogeneous groups of people living sparingly in different parts of the land by passing the Charter Act in 1813 producing "two major changes in Britain's relationship with the colony: one was the assumption of a new responsibility towards native education and the other was a relaxation of controls over missionary activity in India." (Viswanathan, 23). The most important aspect of this Charter Act 'renewing the East India Company's charter for a twenty-year period' was that it enabled the colonial masters to homogenise people belonging to different cultures into a class of people who are Indians in origin but European in taste and culture. A remark made by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in *Bangadarshan* is relevant to this context:

There is one outstanding barrier to the writing of Bengali by educated Bengalis. Educated people do not read Bengali; and what educated people will not read educated people do not wish to write. (qtd. in Mehrotra, 54).

Even after the independence of India in 1947, we continue to carry on the same colonial legacy by categorising any literary work written in English from any corner of our country as an Indian writings in English. When a Tamil, a Marathi or a Bengali writer writes anything in their regional languages, we tend to address those pieces of writings as Tamil literature, Marathi literature or Bengali literature. The regional identity is maintained carefully. In case of any literary work in English written by any person belonging to any region of the country we hardly regard them as Marathi, Tamil or Bengali literature in English as if Indian writings in English is monolithic and homogenised. It may be one of the strategies for perpetuating the colonial tradition of one indivisible, unitary and single concept of 'Indianness' in English. Is there any one Indian ethos or one Indian tradition? The fact which we need to accept is 'Diversity in Unity' instead of 'Unity in Diversity.' 'Diversity in Unity' may appropriately characterise the pluralistic fabric of Indian society and culture.

However, my purpose of writing this 'introduction' is not to undertake any long-standing discourse on the unitary Indian ethos and the poetics of gender. The South Asian region includes Afganistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. These countries are internationally recognised as South Asia. In case of any conflict occurring between two or more countries of this region, the conflict is addressed as 'South Asian Conflict' even in the United Nations. Moreover, once most of these countries were under the British colonial rule. Keeping all these things in mind and hypothetically accepting the fact that these countries in South Asia represent heterogeneous culture, I group literatures in English produced in all the countries in South Asian region into one broad category, entitled "South Asian Writings in English and in English Translation." The significance of the phrase, *Gender Perspectives* in the title of this book, is that all pieces of writings except some that deal with English, Nepali and Dalit literature. All others are based upon gender perspective. The first article entitled, "Some Stray Thoughts on Great Literature (Mainly Poetry)," is by Amaresh Dutta; a living legend in Indian academia. We are grateful to him for his contribution. The way Amaresh Dutta presents what the aesthetics of great poetry and 'What is a Poet' are illuminating and thought-provoking. In defence of his thesis the point of view he has introduced in his article is well-structured and balanced. Dutta's article deserves to be the lead article

in this book. Tirthankar Chattopadhyay's article, "Letters to Friends: Tagore, Priyanath Sen and Jadunath Sarkar," is unique, for this article shows the relationship among Tagore, Priyath Sen and Jadunath Sarkar, revealed through their written correspondence. The most interesting part of the correspondence between Tagore and Jadunath Sarkar, Chattopadhyay logically underscores is how Tagore responds with appropriate tolerance and broadmindedness to Sarkar's unsympathetic and harsh comment on his dream of *Visvabharati*. Chattopadhyay is more investigative than interpretative in his research.

The rest of the articles are grouped alphabetically in different categories beginning from the essays on Afghan writers followed by the essay on Bangladeshi writers, essays on Indian writers, on Nepali writers and at last essays on Sri Lankan writers.

Jayita Sengupta's article on Khaled Hosseini's (A novelist of Afghan origin) first novel, "The Kite Runner," undertakes largely a textual analysis and perceptive interpretation, focusing on the narrative action. The unique hint of this article is that Sengupta tries to show that *The Kite Runner* may be considered a futuristic novel.

Payel Chowdhury's article is a vivid representation of Afghan women in "A Thousand Splendid Suns." She meticulously examines the violence perpetrated to Afghan women during the Taliban regime and subjugation of women under Islamic Fundamentalism in feminist perspectives.

Kalyan Chatterjee's article, "Salam Azad and Partition Fiction" is an appraisal of what Salam Azad, a *Bangladeshi* writer undergoes traumatic experience of the Indian partition fiction. Azad's novel delineates the barbarous attacks on the people of the minority community in Bangladesh, though Azad is very much categorical in narrating that there is hardly any ethnic, linguistic and cultural difference between Hindus and Muslims. Azad's novel "The Grave" shows how Bangla Muslims are driven to Assam and number of migrated Muslims outnumber 'Assamese speaking population'. Even the food habits of the people of these two communities are identical. Azad's novels, Chatterjee cogently argues, are 'narrative journalism.'

Angshuman Kar in his article, "Partition and 'After': Situating Abdul Ghani Sheikh" aims at examining three short stories translated into English from Urdu, written by Abdul Ghani Sheikh of Ladakh, the nature and the gruesome effect of the Indian partition in 1947. Indeed, it was not a division of a country into two. It was a "heart divided." Taking up three

translated stories in English Angshuman Kar shows how Ghani Sheikh upholds the 'positive human values' in his short stories. The article concludes that unlike Manto, Ghani Sheikh looks forward to welcoming a kind communion between India and Pakistan being influenced by the multicultural and multilingual history of Ladakh.

In the essay, entitled "The Transformation of Draupadi in Bachint Kaur's Draupadi and Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi," written by Archana Sahni, the female protagonists of Bachint Kaur's Draupadi and Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi are named Draupadi, and bear some similarities to the well-known heroine of the Mahabharata. The former text is an English translation from Punjabi, while the latter is an English translation from Bengali. These texts are not based on the epic as such, but they contain episodes that can be considered re-workings of some key moments related to the epic heroine Draupadi. Sahni is especially involved with analyzing those scenes in the fictional sub-texts that speak about to the protagonist's persecution and appear to be re-workings of key episodes in the epic. Sahni also attempts to investigate the manner in which the fictional texts setup a dialogue with the larger story of the oppression of woman by the various colluding socio-political layers of patriarchal society.

Chirantan Sarkar's essay, "Defining Heterodoxy: Songs of Lalan Sai" aims at showing that the Songs of Lalan Sai have their origin in the esoteric practices of Bauls. Songs of Lalan Sai are characterised by a strong criticism of divisive identities based on caste and religion. Bauls defy the authorised scriptures and refuse to worship the deities and images. Continuing the legacy of the Indian materialist traditions, Bauls value direct sense-perception as opposed to idealist spirituality, thereby transgressing the dominant norms of Brahmanic-Hindu theology and those of orthodox Islam. Sarkar shows how Bauls consider women as automatically perfected beings and in the field of esoteric practice, often male practitioner is encouraged to aspire to womanhood which certainly constitutes a critique of the fundamental principles of Brahminical patriarchy. Sarkar finally shows that an attempt is made to demonstrate how the legacy of appropriating and de-contextualizing Lalan still continues to be reinforced in different spheres of contemporary Indian cultural activities.

The article, written by Harajit Goswami shows how Temsula Ao changes the gendered roles of man and woman in her short stories. The author examines cogently some aspects of 'Private and Public Space' of Naga women in the context of the 'Naga struggle for self-determination

and consequent retaliation by the State.’ The private life of women in Nagaland was disturbed by the social turmoil.

Paramita Halder in her article, “Severed States, Marked Bodies: Reading Women, Reading History in Partition Fiction” attempts to bring out the manner in which social structuring and prejudice facilitate the process of women’s victimization through a study of the predicament of women as represented in the partition texts. These texts are Bapsi Sidhwa’s “Ice Candy Man,” Jamila Hasmi’s “The Exile,” Rajinder Singh Bedi’s “Lajwanti,” Amrita Pritam’s “The Skeleton” and Lalithambika Antharjanam’s “Dhirendu Mazumder’s Mother.” Halder’s study brings out the manner in which patriarchal biases and the masculine concept of nationhood mark the bodies of women to be forbearers of the community’s sanctity and honour which in turn facilitate in the scheme of their destruction.

Partha Sarathi Gupta’s article, “Writing Orality, Telling Histories: A Study of the Oral Narratives of the Bongcher Community of Tripura in English Translation” is an attempt that analyzes Bongcher poems and folk tales of the oral tradition translated into English as ‘retelling’ of histories of a culture that is on the threshold of extinction. The Bongcher community happens to be a sub-tribe of the Halam community of Tripura and Mizoram, whose orally circulated narratives are the only remnants of its history and culture. Gupta has made close reading of lyrics and tales of the Bongcher oral tradition. The author pins down some aspects of the folk, such as the use of the grotesque and other scatological images.

Sankar Sinha in his article, “Narrating the Self: A Study of Two Dalit Autobiographies” aims at focussing the importance of ‘subaltern studies’ in general and Dalit autobiographical fiction in particular. In his article Sinha indeed tries to establish that Dalit literature is a voice of protest against the millennium old barbarity and inhumanity perpetrated to the lower caste people of the Hindu society. The author also makes distinction between the form and the content of traditional and mainstream autobiography and those of Dalit autobiography. Sinha shows how Dalit Activist writer like Omprakash Valmiki and others underline the importance of education to members of Dalit community to fight against outrageous violence and prejudice of all sorts committed to Dalits by upper caste Indian people. He concludes his essay saying that Dalit narratives are ‘narratives of trauma, pain, protest and social change’.

Here alphabetic order is violated for including my interview with Bama Faustina, a Tamil Dalit activist writer. This violation is done due to

the preceding article on two Dalit autobiographies by Sankar Sinha.

Santanu Ganguly's article, "The Response of Sarojini Naidu to Western Literature: A Study of Her Early Letters" shows how a good number of women being encouraged by the spirit of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance tried to enter into the domain of higher education. Indeed the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century was confined only to certain families in Calcutta and in its vicinity, who were exposed to the West through their knowledge of English. It was not a renaissance in the true sense of the term as it could not touch the lives of the vast majority of the people in the country. Ganguly attempts to survey the impact of the renaissance on Sarojini Naidu's career as a poet-politician. Ganguly also tries to show how Sarojini Naidu was influenced by the ancient and the contemporary writers and how her familiarity with the past impacted upon the style and the content of her literary works. Ganguly meticulously read her letters and his research appears to be interpretative.

"The theme of Subalternity and Sexual Politics: Indira Goswami's 'Nilakanthi Braja'" written by Sarita Sharma, is an endeavour to develop the theme of subalternity and sexual politics in Indira Goswami's novel. The way Sharma examines the concept of 'subalternity' with reference to Goswami's narrative has been cogently argued. Sharma shows how 'Nilakanthi Braja' delineates faithfully the indescribable and untold sufferings of the widows writhing in miserable poverty and sexual pestering in the holy city of Brindaban.

Sayantana Chakraborty in his article tries to show how Tamsula Ao, an Ao-Naga poet foregrounds her experiences of negotiation between what her community is at present and what it was in the past. The change in the landscape, soundscape, smellscape in Nagaland results in the creation of an alien environment. Sayantan Chakraborty makes phenomenological and geographical studies of the region with reference to Tamsula Ao's poems.

Shobha Sharma's article studies themes and recurring images of some poems of Rajendra Bhandari. She shows in her article how Bhandari's poems are characterised by mysticism as well as myth, how he uses 'words' with multiplicity of meaning and nuances in his poems. Words in his poems play an important role.

Deepa Pradhan and Pratap Chandra Pradhan's projects are unique attempts to acquaint interested readers, living in different parts of the world, with the richness and long tradition of Nepali literature written in English

and in English translation. The history of Nepali writings in English will benefit students and researchers of Nepali literature. These two articles also record writings of Nepali diasporas. A comprehensive overview of Anglo-Nepali literature written in different literary genres is one of the major characteristic features of these two researches. Bibliographical references of Anglo-Nepali anthologies of poems, novels and short stories are important for future researchers of this literature.

Basudeb Chakraborti's article is on Tehmina Durrani's two novels, one of which won Italy's Marissa Bellasario prize. The article underscores how Tehmina Durrani, an activist writer in Pakistan fights for the women's empowerment.

Himadri Lahiri's article "Writing from the Margin: Reading Mukhtar Mai's 'In the Name of Honour'" is an in-depth study of the memoir written by the illiterate woman with a low caste background in a remote village in Pakistan. She was gang-raped for a 'crime' she did not commit. Lahiri shows how the memoir displays the indomitable spirit with which the victim negotiated her post-rape world with its overtly patriarchal structures. He also brings out the 'politics of representation' that is very much evident in the entire process of the production of the memoir.

Pramila Chettri's article, "Crisis of Identity after 9/11: A Study of Mohsin Hamid's 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist'" is on the traumatic experience of the narrator after 9/11. The writer protagonist of the narrative, Changez is a Princeton graduate and after his traumatic experience in America and subsequent disillusionment after 9/11, he returns to Pakistan. Chettri shows in her article how 'the novel revolves around the AL-Quaida on the World Trade Centre and the American mood in its aftermath which prompts Changez to question his own identity and his place in America.' Finally Chettri points out that a close reading of Hamid's narrative reveals that the protagonist's identity becomes problematic in a multicultural and multinational world.

Alka Nigam's article underscores how woman's quest for identity makes Arasanayagam's writing essentially feminine as well as contemporary, for it reveals 'the underlying existential problems of our life.' She examines Jean Arasanayagam's nine poems and a novel with a view to exploring the writer's feminine psyche and her continuous longing for identity. The central character of Arasanayagam's novel is also a woman in search of her identity. Her observation on Arasanayagam's writings towards the end of the article, that situating self at the centre and then

'weaving out magical stories of rare charm is a matter of no small significance' is very much thought-provoking and eye-arresting.

Most of the essays in this book on South Asian literature in English and in English translations except five are focussed in gender perspectives. The thrust area of those essays is how writers, intellectuals and academicians are eager to promote women's empowerment in one way or another. All writers attempt to write their articles on feminist perspectives. Pakistani, Afghan and Sri Lankan authors emphasise on dismantling patriarchy to the extent which will help women fight for their empowerment. Two essays on Nepal are important from historical as well as contemporary perspectives of Nepali literature in English and in English translation. Indeed these two essays present a comprehensive literature review on Nepali literature. Essays on Indian writers are on different aspects of gender perspectives.

Basudeb Chakraborti

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Interview with Bama Faustina; A Dalit Activist Writer

Basudeb Chakraborti

1. Who are Dalit Writers?

- A. I expect Dalit writers to be free from all caste bias and be capable of experiencing the pain and the agony, joy and sorrow, and the strength and weakness of Dalits. They should also be able to sense and celebrate the humanizing richness of Dalit culture and Dalit struggle for freedom from all kinds of oppressions, the annihilation of caste and for the establishing of a society based on the values of freedom equality and fraternity, as dreamed by Dr. Ambedkar.

2. Would you accept any piece of writing on Indian Dalit community as a Dalit text, written by non-Dalit writers like Muluk Raj Anand, Munshi Premchand or Mahasweta Devi?

- A. I would accept any text that reflects the above sentiments as a Dalit text.

3. Rabindranath Tagore wrote a dance drama, 'Chitrangada.' It is about a Dalit woman. Do you think that Tagore was a Dalit writer?

- A. Tagore was eminently a writer who transcended all narrow loyalties and dreamed of an India that would become a heaven of freedom.

However, I do not think it is necessary to categorize him as a Dalit writer because he wrote 'Chitrangada.'

4. Raj Gauthaman comments on one occasion:

Who has the right about Dalit? Of course one who is born a Dalit has that birthright. But it is also possible for Dalits to become so attuned to upper class attitudes that they have lost their sense of themselves and may even write enemies of Dalits. By the same token, it is possible for those who were not born as Dalits to write about Dalits if they truly perceive themselves as Dalits.

- A. I agree with Raj Gautaman completely. As for my reaction, please refer to my reply to your first question.

5. **Do you think that Dalit writer underscores the policy of rejection or it upholds the principle of appropriation?**
- A. A Dalit writer will certainly reject the status quo that legitimizes and maintains any kind of oppression, exploitation and dehumanizing practice and will appropriate all that enhances human freedom, human right and human fellowship.
6. **What is the fundamental difference between the aesthetics of the mainstream Indian literature and that of the Dalit literature?**
- A. Aesthetics of the mainstream Indian Literature caters largely to the upper class and upper caste sensibilities and sentiments and divorces beauty from justice. Its form and content are basically determined by the existing society and its norms. Dalit literature, on the other hand deals with the earthy, rustic and raw reality and is attuned to the heart throbs and cries of the poor and oppressed for justice and freedom. Hence the form and content of Dalit literature will reflect the liberative normlessness and critical and celebrative spirit of the subaltern struggle.
7. **The Shavian dramas upholds the principle of “Art for Like’s sake” in spite of their accommodation of some aspects of artistic merits like humour, conversational acrobatics, fun etc.**
- A. I don’t believe in the principle of ‘art for art’s sake’. I believe in ‘art for people’s sake’. In ‘Karukku’ and ‘Sangati’ I have tried to depict the vibrant life of Dalits - how they struggle against and survive the tremendous odds placed against them socially, politically, culturally and economically. It is up to the readers to judge if the depiction is prosaic and dull. The great awakening these books have created and the popularity with which they have been received may be an indication of where truth lies!!
8. **Why are Dalit narratives autobiographical in form? Is it simply because Dalit writers want the indivisible and single minded devotion to delineate the extent of cruelty perpetrated to them by the people of the high caste society? Dalit writers like you have used first person narrator in their narratives simply to emphasize how the Dalit community has been writing in pain and brutal torture from time immemorial. Have you used autobiographical form for that reason?**
- A. As you say, Dalits have been writing in pain and brutal torture because

of the stigma of untouchability from time immemorial. As a result, they have been deprived of their identity, individuality and humanity. So when a Dalit writer wants to express his or her anguish and cry for freedom and human-hood, naturally, he/she chooses the first person. The 'I' represents not only the narrator but also the whole Dalit community to which he/she belongs. We need that identity which gives us a sense of belonging and togetherness with our brothers and sisters, which embraces the past, present and future of our people. What happens really, I believe, is the interpenetration of the individual consciousness with the collective consciousness resulting in an autobiography which can at once be the story of an individual as well as the story of a people.

9. Would you kindly let us know the extent of hazards you had to encounter at the time when you knocked the doors of the Indian publishers? I want to know the publication history of your novels.

A. After finishing my first book 'Karukku', my friend gave it to many learned and knowledgeable people for their comments. One of the Professors who read it condemned it as 'rubbish'. Main stream publishers refused to publish it. Finally a charitable institution run by Jesuits came forward to publish it. My second book 'Sangati' was also published by them. Both the books were widely read and critiqued - some accepting it as a new genre of literature and some refusing to accept them as literary works. But both became very popular and were translated into other languages. Now my books are "wanted" by mainstream publishers.

10. In 'Sangati' you have described the untold suffering of the Dalit woman as:

At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. (59). Do you think that Dalit women are doubly exploited? They are exploited by their husbands as well as the male members of the upper class Hindu society.

I invite your comment on it.

A. Dalit women experience triple exploitation and oppression at three levels- caste, class and gender:

- because of their caste they are treated as non-human by the upper caste women.
- because of their poverty they are exploited by the economically powerful.
- because of their gender they are oppressed and exploited like any other women. In addition to this, as Dalit women, they experience more violence than the upper caste women.

11. As a writer you have your identity as a member of the Dalit community. At the same time you are a woman. Does your identity as a woman come in clash with your identity as a Dalit woman?

- A. I perceive myself as a Dalit woman. I have no other identity other than that. I don't see any clash in that. Both are interwoven and I face all kinds of violence and atrocities in spite of my education, employment, freedom and popularity and even celebrity as a writer. As a Dalit woman, I experience all kinds of vulnerability and helplessness. For a Dalit woman, her identities of being a Dalit and being a woman cannot be compartmentalized.

12. The Communist Manifesto begins:

The history of Mankind is the history of man's class struggle. How do you reconcile your politics of caste fight with the Marxian class struggle?

- A. Struggle against the caste is more fundamental than class struggle. According to Dr. Ambedkar, in the beginning there was the division of labour and later it became the division of labourers. Class struggle arises out of the conflict of interests and vision between the bourgeois and proletariat classes. Caste introduces vicious divisions among the proletariat and thus renders class struggle ineffective.

13. Dr B. R. Ambedkar inspired the people of the Dalit community to embrace the religion of Lord Buddha. You are a Christian. Every dominant religion encourages generosity, non-violence, forgiveness and tolerance. How would you make use of the world religion in the culture of resistance?

- A. The values of the dominant religions that you mention do not suit Dalits in their struggle for liberation and empowerment. Actually Dalits are generous, non-violent and tolerant. The dominant religions

built a spirituality of submission based on these values. Their rebellious spirit was domesticated and they were made to believe that their plight was the will of God and if they accepted it meekly and live out their life doing their duties in a spirit of generosity and good will to their oppressors, they would be blessed by God. In fact, resistance and resilience are their inborn tendencies and Dalit culture is culture of rebellion. We need a religion that upholds rationality and enlightened ethical values, as advocated by Dr. Ambedkar. Though Christian religion has very little attraction for me, I advocate the revolutionary values of Jesus Christ who took the side of the poor, the sick, the out-castes and the marginalized of his time and society, stood for their rights and justice and proclaimed a new heaven and new earth. So only a religion that will not only encourage us to fight against a system that is oppressive, violent and inhuman but will also give us the strength to build a society of freedom, equality and fraternity will be beneficial to Dalits.

14. In your personal life you aimed acquiring formal education for the purpose of fighting against the caste oppression. You have become a teacher. Don't you think now the only way to come out of this gruesome upper caste Hindu oppression is the expansion of education of members of the Dalit Community?

A. True. Dr. Ambedkar said, 'Educate, agitate and unite.' Education is the emancipatory weapon for Dalits. On account of their poverty many bright Dalit students are not able to go for higher studies and prove themselves. Even today in educational institutions Dalit student are segregated and are not given full attention and encouragement to come up. Often they meet with open and sometimes subtle discrimination. Besides their academic studies, they need to have a critical understanding of the society which discriminates against them. This critical awareness will enable them to make use of their knowledge power to change the caste-ridden society.

This is a transcript of interview taken by the author with Bama Faustina: a Dalit activist writer.