

Interview with Lakshmi Raj Sharma, Author of *The Tailor's Needle* Vivek Dwivedi

While I was working on my DPhil thesis on literary theories, of which Homi K. Bhabha was one of the theorists, I realised how very significant and relevant his views were in analysing a literary text. I found that his concepts such as mimicry and the uncanny, as related to the broader concept of anxiety, contained some seminal principles without which a large part of contemporary literature would remain unappreciated or little understood. When I read Lakshmi Raj Sharma's *The Tailor's Needle* (UK: Picnic Publishing Ltd, 2009) certain features of Bhabha's theory fell into pattern because this text, apart from providing the various *rasas*, seemed to prove Bhabha so right. My interest in the novel, and its author, grew several times and I began to study it with greater interest. As I read the novel it dawned upon me that if I interviewed its author, certain riddling features related to magical realism, and postcolonial theory (particularly Bhabha's version of it), would find some explanation.

Sharma is a professor in the Department of English and Modern European Languages in the University of Allahabad. He is author of the novel, *The Tailor's Needle*, and a collection of short stories, *Marriages are Made in India*, and he has written books and articles on literary criticism and literary studies most of which are to be found on his website: <http://www.lakshmirajsharma.com> and biographical information on him is available on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakshmi_Raj_Sharma

What follows is the interview, after the exchange of pleasantries. The interview was held in the English Department of which Sharma is currently the Head.

Vivek Dwivedi: What made you write *The Tailor's Needle*?

Lakshmi Raj Sharma: I have always had a fascination for India's romantic past. The Indian stories of courage, self-esteem and romance which I heard in my childhood had a great impact on my imagination. I would often marvel at the kind of people who lived just a little over half a century ago in this country. In contrast to my own contemporaries these people were exceptional human beings with exceptional values and exceptional daring. The idea of this novel seems to have resulted from a number of these stories that shaped my childhood. I was living with the burden of these romantic tales on my mind and needed to liberate myself from them. This is probably how the novel took shape.

Besides, having been a quiet observer and listener in the presence of my older brothers and sisters, I seem to have imbibed much. Then, I became a teacher, and gradually, over several years, towards middle age I began to find my voice. That long silence probably found its expression in *The Tailor's Needle*.

VD: Till recently most of your writing was of an academic nature and now since you have turned to creative writing, which of the two do you prefer?

LRS: I was always keen to write creatively in some form or the other, having written limericks and rhyming verse in my childhood. However, being less confident about my creative talent, I tended to avoid making public the limited creativity that I possessed. I always loved literature, taught it and wrote about it. Then I was virtually

forced into writing plays for an annual function organized by a university hostel. The success of these plays year after year helped to increase my self-confidence. Then Bandana, my wife, suggested that I try writing stories, and I did. The result was *Marriages are Made in India* (2001). Since the stories did not fare too badly, I felt encouraged to step on to the more difficult platform of writing a novel. My critical writing still draws me to the desk but now I have a lust for writing fiction. Fiction came to me slowly but surely and now I cannot help writing fiction whenever I can find the time.

VD: Is there any autobiographical element in *The Tailor's Needle*?

LRS: No. The novel is set in times before I was born. All fiction must be related, at least, distantly to its author. So it may be possible to see something related to me in my novel. But the novel is as distant from my personal experience as any.

VD: Marriages and weddings play a unique role in your novel, and this becomes even more significant when we read it after your story-collection which is called *Marriages are Made in India*. What do you have to say?

LRS: Indian weddings have a unique charm about them. The ceremonies are so engaging and involve so many people. There is a story in almost every Indian wedding, not only in every Indian marriage. A typically Hindu wedding can still link us to the past of India, though now these weddings are gradually changing due to commercialization and technology. But the weddings in *The Tailor's Needle* are romantic and four out of five of these weddings are uniquely romantic; they have a mystery around them. The strategy through which Maneka hooks up her bridegroom and then the manner in which her marriage takes her into the mysterious Nadir Palace and the gothic world is what gives spice to the novel's plot. She also forces Larry Stephens, the District Collector to marry his maid servant in a highly dramatic incident. The marriage of her sister, Sita, also has a fairy-tale attached to it. Her maharaja-groom tricks her into marriage just as Maneka had tricked her groom into it. Shrimal's marriage is unique again and results from some kind of deceit; both parties hide their faults at least till the wedding becomes a possibility. Yogendra's marriage with Gauri is the hurdle which gives tension to the narrative in *The Tailor's Needle*. An inter-caste marriage in those times was virtually impossible in India and the fact that Savitri, Maneka, and Sir Saraswati could make it become a possibility shows their zeal and determination. This marriage is steeped in romance. Yes, marriages are very significant events for me. I see them as agents of transformation in people. Marriage is one of the biggest instruments of change.

VD: Have you used magical realism in *The Tailor's Needle*?

LRS: I have tried to use no set formula or literary device unless it comes naturally in the narrative. I have used certain features of the British Comedy of Manners, probably without knowing it. This happened unconsciously because I had always wanted my narrative to be like fiction rather than seem too realistic.

VD: If you did not want to use realism in *The Tailor's Needle*, then you may have fallen into the trap of magical realism, maybe unknowingly. Do you agree?

LRS: No. Why must you force me to answer this question? I was conscious that I

could sound like a derivative Salman Rushdie and therefore I tried to avoid using the device of magical realism in my novel or, at least, his kind of narrative technique.

VD: Did you succeed in eliminating magical realism from your novel? I felt that there was more magical realism in the novel than most novels that have employed this device. And I see such a great deal of magical realism in *The Tailor's Needle* that I have been driven to write an article on it.

LRS: Now since you are so insistent, let me see how I can explain this. The answer to this question is not straightforward. I personally feel that India's past has so much magical charm and romance that it cannot be shoved down the throats of Western readers without giving them indigestion. Therefore any Indian author who chooses to take the reader into India's past would have to tread into fantasy of some kind or the other. And probably I have, in places, ventured into using this literary device. But trust me that if there is magical realism in the novel, it is accidental rather than intentional. Since you have written a scholarly book on Indian literary theory, you would know better than anyone else about the fact that the postcolonial author tends to rake up the uncanny – the concept that Homi K. Bhabha speaks of. The Indian writer of our time should not pretend to write for the consumption of India alone. And I do not claim that I did not have the Western reader in mind when I wrote *The Tailor's Needle*. This of course does not mean that I have not written for India. To the Indian reader my novel will sound more realistic and to the Western it is likely to sound more magical. Any Indian writer would need to use a device such as magical realism or its equivalent when he has the Western reader in mind. Of course there can be the exceptional writer who can escape this problem entirely. For an author like me the image of India is inextricably linked with the “extra rational” and I believe that the extra rational is more than the rational, not less.

VD: Did you experience any problems in deciding the kind of language you would use for a novel that is set in India between the 1910s and the 1940s? If you did, how did you manage to overcome them?

LRS: Language plays a very crucial role in this novel and is a major issue in it. This aspect of the novel has been noticed by the British novelist Gisela Hoyle, who happens to be one of my novel's reviewers. (The review figures in the *Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society*: Volume 4 Number 01 April 2010). To write about the early twentieth century in a language that is contemporary to this time would make the narrative unconvincing and even sound illogical. I, therefore, tried to craft some scenes in the first few chapters, deliberately, by visualising the kind of language people (the Indians and the Brits) would use in those times. The language used by the British Viceroy and the language that is used to describe him often borders on the rhetorical. I imagined that a man in his position would tend to use language artificially, in a public rather than private vein. And there are several references in the novel that highlighted this fact. Once I pitched the novel in its setting, the language of that kind began to come almost naturally to me. A writer in my position is compelled to transfer himself into the space and time that he creates. His imagination takes care of the rest. Or, so it seems to me. The language of this novel may seem simplistic on a superficial reading, but its use is actually a part of the narrative technique. It makes the novel something different to a product of our own times.

VD: How much has your study of literary theory impacted the writing of your novel?

LRS: If at all there is any influence of my study of literary theory on this novel that has happened unconsciously. My primary purpose was to tell the story rather than teach literary theory through my fiction.

VD: Are you aware of the fact that this novel employs no clear cut genre? Does it not seem to be deficient regarding the purity of genre?

LRS: The problem of genre was a vital one for me. I could not write a historical novel because the characters in this novel are not actual people. Yet, the flavour of the novel for me was rather that of a historical novel. I thought I was writing a Raj novel or at least I began writing it as a Raj novel but then somewhere in the course of the novel the story took on a Gothic nature and then it tended to be a murder mystery. But by and large it is a political novel that is multicultural within an ethnic setting. If you ask me to name another novel which is like mine, I would have to say that it has moments of *A Passage to India*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula*, and *The Vicar of Wakefield* with a George Orwell savour. What I am convinced is that *The Tailor's Needle* is, above all, a literary novel.

VD: If your novel has so many generic elements then it definitely has magical realism because to quote Zamora and Faris, “magical realism is a mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic”. Do you agree?

LRS: I am too small a person to disagree with the learned authorities you have quoted.

VD: You have also written a second novel, *Emancipation*, and a collection of short stories as mentioned on your website. What are these about?

LRS: My other unpublished works of fiction – which are a novel, *Emancipation*, and a collection of short stories, *Contemporary Woman*, have tended to dwell largely on women's issues. Of course they are literary fiction and often go beyond women's concerns. Matters related to women have engaged my mind even more after *The Tailor's Needle* was completed. The mystery of what woman is has gripped me more and more. I have marvelled at it. I have come to realise that even more than man, her creation is evidence of the Creator's art, or perhaps His craft. I have seen her as at once the most innocent as well as the most knowing of the people on planet Earth. My fiction has tried to grapple with some aspects that reveal her mystery. In these works of fiction I have tended to see the evolution of women to a point where a crack in society seems to appear. I see men and women taking to roads that would lead to an entire reworking of the social order. This later fiction at times probably visualises a situation where men and women are no longer opposites and often do not need each other to the extent that they did in the past.

VD: I look forward to reading these new works. Thank you Professor Sharma, for this enlightening interview. It was indeed an engaging experience for me.

LRS: Thanks, Dr Dwivedi, for giving me the opportunity of discussing my writing with you.