



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



In Conversation with Vijay Kumar Roy

Rob Harle

Vijay Kumar Roy (b. 1978) has been recently honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Indian Institute of Oriental Heritage at its 38th Annual International Conference. He was Poet of the Month in Poets International for February 2015, and has been elected Executive Member of North Zone of The Association for English Studies of India. He is editor-in-chief of ArsArtium, an international journal of humanities and social sciences (www.arsartium.org). He is also an honorary member on the editorial boards of a number of international journals in India and abroad. He teaches English at Northern Border University, Arar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He has also taught in two universities in India and one in Ethiopia.

Dr Roy writes in English and Hindi. His poems have appeared in both national and international journals of repute. Many poems have also been anthologised in The Rainbow Hues (2014), The Enchanted World (2013), The Poetic Bliss (2012), The Melodies of Immortality (2012), The Fancy Realm (2011), and Poets' Paradise (2010).

His first book, Premanjali, a collection of poems in Hindi, was published in 2009 and second book, Aesthetic of John Keats: An Indian Approach, in 2010. The Melodies of Immortality (2012), an anthology of poetry in English, edited by him, was widely welcomed by leading poets in India. While teaching in Ethiopia he co-translated and edited K. Sekhar's book Hindi – Speak with the Hearts of Indians (2013), which became very famous and one of the best sellers, particularly in the universities where Indian teachers were teaching and the local teachers aspired to obtain their doctoral degree from Indian universities.

Having an avid interest in research, he has edited and published a number of books: Post-Independence Indian Poetry in English: New Experimentation (2015), English Language Teaching: New Approaches and Methods (2013), Spiritual Poetry of India in English Translation (2012), Contemporary Indian Spiritual Poetry in English: Critical Explorations (2012), Teaching of English: New Dimensions (2012), Indian Poetry in English: A Comprehensive Study (2011), Women's Voice in Indian Fiction in English (2011), and co-edited Comparative Literature: Critical Responses (2014), Contemporary Indian Fiction in English: Critical Studies (2013), Value Education and Professional Ethics: An Anthology (2013), and Humanities and Social Sciences: The Quintessence of Education (2012).

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Q. Hi Vijay thanks for talking with us. This interview will have a global audience, not just your Indian colleagues, so could we start by you telling us a little about your childhood, schooling and tertiary education in a personal way?

A. I was born in a small village (Pandaul), located on the bank of Bagmatiriver, in Darbhanga district of Bihar (India). I received my primary education from Government Middle School, Madhopur Pandaul. There was no high school at my village, so I studied from class 8 to 10 at MFDS High School, Sormar Baghla, Samastipur. It was about three kilometres from my village. I used to go to high school on foot and by crossing Bagmatiriver in a boat. The most memorable days of my schooling are that several times the boat sunk in middle of the river, particularly in summer season, and I, with a number of my friends, swam to its bank to save ourselves and our books and notebooks. Every time we lost our pens and some books and notebooks. I got my secondary education from Samastipur and BA Hons, MA, LLB, PhD all from LN Mithila University, Darbhanga.

Q. You seem to balance your time easily between writing poetry, working in the academy, editing journals and travelling to conferences and book launches. Is that an accurate assessment and do you ever wish you could sit under a tree and just write poetry?

A. I try my best to manage time for all the work. As in day time it is not possible to get time to work on research papers, journals, books and poetry, so I work at night for these purposes. I don't write poems under a tree. Yes, sometimes my pen and paper ardently make me awake in night resulting in composing poems.

Q. You have a strong need to educate and also expose corruption in the education system. Do you know of any specific reasons you care about this?

A. Yes, I believe that education is a pious profession. Its sanctity should not be compromised with money.

Q. If you had to pick five writers only who had a major influence on your own writing, who would these be?

A. They are: John Keats, William Wordsworth, GM Hopkins, GB Shaw and William Shakespeare.

Q. I'm going to ask you a question that is often asked. For P.B. Shelley, 'poets ... are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society.' Do you think that quote still holds true in this age of cybermania?

A. Yes, I believe in Shelley's philosophy. It has its relevance in this age and will be relevant in future too. A work of art has strong impact on an individual, who is a unit of society. In India there were a number of poets (like Kabir) who are known as social reformers. When a teacher is said to be 'a social engineer' then a poet must be said to be a values preserver.

Q. Rushdie once said, 'A poet's work ... to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start argument, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.' Do you agree with Rushdie's statement?

A. Yes, I agree with his statement. It is a poet or a writer who brings to light what is latent in oblivion of time, and it is true that he gets his themes from them.

Q: Do you travel overseas or away from India very often? If so, do you have a favourite country besides your 'mother' India?

A. No, I don't travel overseas very often. Though I have visited three countries, and I have taught in two universities of two countries. While I stay in a foreign country and talk with my friends they often speak that India is like a continent, not a country. The reasons they give, are: India is the second most populous country of the world; numerous languages are spoken here; different cultures are practised here; and the followers of all religions live here together. So, being in India and travelling here means understanding minimum three to four languages and having experiences of more cultures and religious practices than one aspires to discover in foreign countries.

Q. Poets can now publish their work on the Internet (websites, blogs, online journals and so on). Do you think this ease of publication, often without peer or editorial review, encourages a lowering in the quality of poetry?

A. I don't think it is lowering the quality of poetry. Being published by any way, the success of a poet depends upon the readers of his poetry and also on the research carried out on his poetry. We have seen that several times some publishers don't accept publishing a book of an author and when that book gets published from some other publisher it becomes a best seller. As far as publication of poems on the Internet is concerned, I think it is a platform for reading and criticism, which can make the poet understand the minds of the readers and critics. Everything changes in course of time and we are bound to adapt according to that change. I believe that there is dearth of good critics these days that has resulted in lack of interest in poetry.

Q. Thinking about this above internet-communication phenomenon, do you think some good poets/writers who would not have been heard twenty years ago at least now can have an audience?

A. Yes, I think the Internet is a great help to them. But still there are more writers who are away from access to the Internet. They are unable to publish their writings.

Q. Training may be beneficial to honing a poet's skills but it is my belief that without passion (or deep serious commitment) no amount of training will produce a really good poet, do you agree with this?

A. I strongly agree with this belief. Though there are many poets who got world-fame and prestigious awards without having any formal training, but if one gets training in absence of seriousness then it is not beneficial.

Q. Basho said, 'A poet doesn't make a poem, something in him naturally becomes a poem.' Do you think it is correct?

A. Yes, I think it is correct. Poetry comes spontaneously. A poet is born, not made.

Q. As you know I've had quite a lot of dealings with India recently, scholars, students, publishers, editors and writers. Without exception I've found the respect, courtesy and old fashioned 'good manners' between Indians, and between Indians and myself to be refreshing, encouraging and simply delightful. Do you find this to be the case also?

A. In the most parts of Indian there is a belief, 'Atithidevobhava.' It means guests are like divinity. Respecting guests and those who visit them is deeply rooted in Indian culture and tradition.

Q. Would you tell us how your poems get written? Do you get a 'hit' of inspiration? Do you revise a lot?

A. I never fix a time to write poems. My poems get written without a plan, mostly during night. It is rarity of ideas that compels me to take a pen and paper and write poems. Those ideas don't allow me to sleep without completing my compositions. Inspiration and influence play important roles in it. Yes, I revise my poems a lot after writing them. I have experienced that revision is a soothing balm for a poet.

Q. Do you prefer writing poetry or fiction stories?

A. I prefer writing poetry.

Q. Your poetry often has strong elements of humanitarianism and a deep spirituality, would you care to expand on this and possibly the reasons for this outlook/philosophy?

A. I can't escape from telling that the elements of my poetry are the part of my experiences of life. There are other elements also in my poetry, and I must expand beyond these elements in near future.

Q. Indian literary scholars and academics such as yourself have a deep knowledge of all the great British writers such as Keats, Eliot, Shakespeare, Yeats, Dickens and Shelley. I don't hear much about the French masters such as Baudelaire or Rimbaud. How much do you attribute this to British colonialism in India?

A. This is the fact that what we have today is the effect of colonialism, but after independence also the same interest or you can say Indians took more interest in British writers, and particularly in those who were influenced by India and Indian ethics. So the roots can be traced to British colonialism but hunger for knowledge is the fact in Indian context. French and Greek masters are also studied here along with American, African and some other writers but British writers are more in number.

Q: I've noticed what I can only describe as a 'gentle tone' in much contemporary Indian poetry, much more so than in say American or Australian poetry. I find this especially so in your poetry. Would you care to comment about this?

A. Human being is a spark of divinity. Nature is manifestation of God. A poet easily understands these two facts. Besides these, the effects of ethnicity and ethics shape the mind of a poet.

Q. I think anthologies are a wonderful way to bring poets to the readers' attention, ones which they may not be familiar with. You are represented in numerous anthologies. Would you agree with this statement?

A. Yes, surely. Anthologies offer poetry of several poets. Having one anthology helps the readers to learn poems of a number of poets for general as well as research purposes.

Q. It is my personal belief that being authentic to oneself in an Existential sense is far more important than winning say a Pulitzer prize. 'Better to have no public, than to have no self.' Would you care to discuss this somewhat, anti-literary establishment view?

A. It is true that when a writer is satisfied with his own work then only he can expect interest and attention of the readers towards his work. I believe that it is happiness arising out of a composition that is very close to supreme bliss, which is incomparable in human life. Winning prizes is a kind of encouragement to a writer. But it does not mean that those writers who are not honoured with a prize are not great writers. There are various writers who did not receive a prize but their works are best sellers and researchers take more interest in them.

Q. Charles Simic, one of my favourite poets said, 'Like our ancient ancestors who inhabited an animistic universe, the poet claims the interconnectedness and sentience of all things. This is what haunts: a world where magic is possible, where chance reigns, where metaphors have their supreme logic, where imagination is free and truthful.' Would you care to comment on this powerful insight of Simic's?

A. I have asserted my similar views in previous questions. A poet is equally connected with natural and social phenomena. He believes in abstract and concrete both. Sometimes he 'dances with the daffodils' (Wordsworth) and sometimes for him 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever' (Keats). He believes that 'Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety' (Shakespeare). He firmly believes that 'He prayeth best, who loveth best' (S.T. Coleridge). Finally he believes that 'This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is a divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body' (Blake). Thus it is true to say that where sunlight is unable to reach, a poet's mind can reach easily.

Q: Poetry and to a slightly lesser extent short stories seem to be experiencing a resurgence in this era of high speed living, hedonism, consumerism and excessive input of images and media-driven messages. Why do you think this might be the case?

A. This is the truth. There could be many other reasons also for resurgence. Poetry pleases our heart. It is a matter of heart; it requires seriousness. People don't want to be serious for poetry. These days a number of other sources are available for enjoyment on television and the Internet without seriousness. They have brought changes in people's hobbies. Decrease in reading habit is one of them. Materialistic outlook is responsible for all these changes at large.

Q. Contrary to this apparent resurgence it seems there are not many young poets (under 20 years) writing. As an educator do you find this the situation in India? If I am correct do you think it is because academic programs are now being tailored more and more to 'buck making' instantly after graduation, not as in the past where knowledge and cultural improvement was seen as a desirable end in itself?

A. Yes, their number is less but there are young poets. This is the age that makes one a poet, full of imagination, great dreams and vitality. But they lack support and encouragement from the established poets. There is lack of contact and confidence in them to come on the stage and in magazines and journals. In that age group the choice of their future profession, stiff competition and hard labour in that direction distract them from poetry. It is difficult to talk about cultural improvement and moral sensitivity in these days. If we talk about ancient education system in Indian context then higher education was meant for salvation; it was meant not for this world, but for another world. Time has changed meaning of everything. Traditional education is overlooked due to rise of professional education, which is meant to

prepare professionals. Values are ignored; accumulating wealth by any means has become a strong passion in every profession.

Q. What type of audience do you write for specifically, if any?

A. I write for all kinds of audience.

Q. One final question – your most recent book of poems, *In The Realm of Beauty and Truth: A Collection of Poems* contains many wonderful poems. When can we look forward to your next personal volume of poetry?

A. It can take about two years to come up with the next volume of poetry.

Q. Vijay, thank you so much for your time.

A. Thanks.

Rob Harle is a writer, artist and academic reviewer. Writing work includes poetry, short fiction stories, academic essays and reviews of scholarly books, journals and papers. His work is published in journals, anthologies, online reviews, books and he has two volumes of his own poetry published – *Scratches & Deeper Wounds (1996)* and *Mechanisms of Desire (2012)*. Recent poetry has been published in: *Rupkatha Journal (Kolkata)*; *Nimbin Good Times (Nimbin)*; *Beyond the Rainbow (Nimbin)*; *Poetic Connections Anthology (2013)*; *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry (2013)*; *Rhyme with Reason Anthology (2013)*; and *Asian Signature (2013)*.

His art practice involves digital-computer art both for the web and print. His giclée images have been exhibited widely. He is especially interested in promoting the inclusion of visual art in academic, scientific and literary journals.

Formal studies include Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Literature and Psychotherapy - his thesis concerned Freud's notion of the subconscious and its relationship with Surrealist poetry.

Rob's main concern has been to explore and document the radical changes technology is bringing about. He coined the term technoMetamorphosis to describe this. This past concern is now moving towards helping to restore our abandoned metaphysical and spiritual modes of being through literature especially poetry.

He is currently on the editorial board of several literary and art/technology journals. Artwork, Publications, Reviews and selected writings are available from his website www.robharle.com. Email: harle@robharle.com.