

Meenakshi Mukherjee

Meenakshi Mukherjee was an active and helpful member of *Transnational Literature*'s Advisory Board from the journal's beginnings. Although I had several email conversations with her, I was never fortunate enough to meet her in person. However, three scholars who knew her well have contributed their personal tributes. – Gillian Dooley, Editor.

Tribute to Meenakshi Mukherjee A.N. Dwivedi

A sound scholar of English Literature and a Sahitya Akademi award winner, Meenakshi Mukherjee passed away in Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) on Wednesday 16th September 2009, at the age of 72. She was then traveling alone and was going to board an Indigo Airlines flight to Delhi. She fainted and collapsed at Gate 22 of the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport (RGIA), and was rushed to the Apollo Medical Centre at the airport itself where she was declared dead. Her relatives, who had come to see her off, were still at the airport.

Meenakshi, wife of litterateur (late) Dr. Sujit Mukherjee who was the Chief Publisher of Orient Longman, is survived by two daughters. At the time of her death, she was on her way to Delhi to release her new book, *An Indian for All Seasons*, a biography of famous historian R.C. Dutt published by Penguin India. The book was slated to be released on Thursday.

Meenakshi, a seasoned teacher of English, taught in a number of Indian colleges at Patna, Pune and Delhi before joining the University of Hyderabad. Her last yet longest spell was as Professor of English at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She was a visiting Professor in several foreign universities, including the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkley, the Macquarie University (Sydney), the University of Canberra, and Flinders University (Adelaide).

Professor Mukherjee also participated in the literary activities of the country and abroad, in national and international seminars and conferences. That's how I met her first at Jodhpur (Rajasthan) in 1989. She was the Chairperson of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) from 2001 to 2004 and the Chairperson of its Indian chapter (IACLALS) from 1993 to 2005.

A recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award in 2003 for her book, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2000), Prof. Mukherjee authored several other books, such as *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), *Realism and Reality: Novel and Society in India* (1985), and *Re-reading Jane Austen* (1994). She also edited about half-a-dozen collection of essays, some of which are *Considerations: Twelve Studies of Indian Literature in English* (1977), and *Early Novels in India* (2002). Apart from these, she jointly edited a few volumes like *Another India* (with Nissim Ezekiel, 1990) and *Interrogating Postcolonialism* (with Harish Trivedi, 1996).

Prof. Mukherjee was the founder-editor of *Vagartha*, a journal that published Indian Literature in English translation from 1973 to 1979.

The demise of Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee at a time when Indian English Literature needs her most is definitely an irreparable loss to the academic world in particular and to lovers of literature. Her memory will linger long with us. In the words of Wordsworth:

The memory of what has been
And never more will be.

Remembering Meenakshi Mukherjee

R.K. Dhawan

Meenakshi Mukherjee, 72, passed away in September 2009 at Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad. She was a versatile scholar, a pioneer in the field of research, having written extensively on Indian literature and history of the novel in India. She is best known for her critical works *The Twice-Born Fiction* (1971) and *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1985). In 2003, she received the Sahitya Akademi (Academy of Letters) award for *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. A characteristic quality of her work, as is evident in this work, is that it reflects the predilections and concerns of her own country. She died at the airport, on her way to New Delhi to attend the release of her latest book, *An Indian for All Seasons: The Many Lives of R.C. Dutt*. One might say that Mukherjee was herself an 'Indian for all seasons' as a literary figure in the Indian academia – a teacher, scholar and critic.

Mukherjee taught at a number of universities – Patna, Pune, Delhi and Hyderabad. Her longest stint as a Professor of English was at School of Languages, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. It was mainly during this period when she achieved eminence as a critic and scholar. As also, she was Visiting Professor at many universities abroad, including the University of Chicago, University of California at Berkeley and University of Texas at Austin.

After active teaching, she along with her husband, an eminent scholar and critic, settled down in Hyderabad. Her husband, Sujit, who died a few years ago, was a delightful company. He had a subtle sense of humour and was known as a critic for witty remarks on writers and writing. Mukherjees felt at home in Hyderabad, perhaps for its mild culture and temperate weather.

I first met Mukherjee in the 1970s as a colleague when she taught English at one of the elite colleges, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi. We often discussed common subjects, especially Indian English novel, which we felt had not received sufficient attention from critics and academics. This was much before Salman Rushdie received the Booker for his *Midnight's Children*. In a letter written to me in 1981, when she was teaching at the University of Hyderabad, she hailed the publication of *Midnight's Children* and said that the novel was a landmark in the annals of Indian English literature and would pave way for rich crop of literature in this area. How perceptive a critic she was, we can judge it now – Indian English novel having made big strides since then.

Mukherjee made a remarkable contribution to the field of the Indian English novel, for which she would always be remembered. She championed the cause of

Indian writing at a time when it was a plant of poor growth. It was a time when British literature was the canon, and all other literatures – American, African, Commonwealth – were on the margins. Her stupendous literary research *The Twice-Born Fiction* gave a great fillip to the English studies in India. There was an awakening amongst scholars; they realized the importance of India's own literature. They felt that Indians were under no moral obligation to study the British literature alone. We, she felt, need not question the validity of Indian English literature, for it truly represents the diverse cultures, ethnic affiliations and aspirations of the people.

C.D. Narasimhaiah, a well-known Indian critic, in his seminal book, *Moving Frontiers of English Studies*, strongly pleads for the need to project Indian sensibility in literary criticism. Indian includes the question of expressing our national identity and asserting our self-respect through a legitimate recognition of the genius of India. It may be said about Meenakshi Mukherjee that she not only projected Indian sensibility in her criticism but also emphasized the need to highlight native tradition in literature. For Mukherjee, an Indian text, based on our traditions and philosophy, is as good as any other text. The great advantage an Indian English text enjoys in our classroom over any British or American text is that the student has direct access to the culture surrounding the text, even outside the classroom. He can be persuaded to see the text not only as something printed on a page but as something related to him in real life as well. When the culture connotations of a text pose no barriers, the learner can grapple directly with the language of the text.

As a critic, Mukherjee may be classed in the category of liberal humanists. She stated her point of view without any radicalism or aggression. This was perhaps her strength as a critic. Her modesty as a person and as a critic will keep alive her intellectual presence in literary circles and we shall always cherish her memory.

**Meenakshidi
Tabish Khair**

I met Meenakshidi for the first time on my last day as a PhD student. It was the year 2000; she was one of the three examiners who had evaluated my PhD thesis and, now, was going to confront me with all my errors and omissions during the public oral defence. Of course, in those days, I would not have dared think of her, let alone address her, as Meenakshidi. She was Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee, a leading scholar of Indian, British and postcolonial literatures, the author of major studies like *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), *Realism and Reality: Novel and Society in India* (1985), *Re-reading Jane Austen* (1994), and *The Perishable Empire* (2000). She had edited or co-edited around half a dozen collections of essays, such as *Considerations: Twelve Studies of Indian Literature in English* (1977) and *Midnight's Children: A Book of Readings* (1999). The founder-editor of a journal *Vagartha* (that published Indian literature in English translation in the 1970s), she had taught in a number of Indian colleges in Patna, Pune, and Delhi before joining the University of Hyderabad. Her last and longest spell was as Professor of English in the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She had been a Visiting Professor in several universities outside India, including University of Texas at Austin, University of Chicago, University of California at Berkeley, Macquarie University (Sydney), University of Canberra, and Flinders University (Adelaide).

Of course, at my PhD defence in 2000, I had no idea what kind of a person she was, but I had a fair notion of her wide and sharp scholarship, her vast erudition and her tendency, as a writer and academic, to take a stand on various matters. In the event, she fully lived up to all my (and my supervisor's) nervous expectations from her as a scholar, engaging me not only on the text of my PhD thesis but also on a couple of footnotes! What came as a surprise to me was the person we met at the party later that day, after I had been awarded my degree. I guess we had expected a cold, reserved intellectual or a university don aware of her star status. Instead, what we met was a warm, caring person, with a charming smile, almost 'domestic' in her way of relating to people. Even when the conversation veered into literary and philosophical areas, she was more willing to listen than to pronounce.

Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee was someone I had long respected as a scholar; after my PhD party she also became Meenakshidi, a kind of elder 'sister' with whom I stayed in touch, by email and through the usual conferences, until one day I got the unexpected news that on Wednesday, September 16, 2009, she collapsed at the Hyderabad airport and was later declared dead. She was about to fly to Delhi for the launch of her latest book, *An Indian for All Seasons*, a biography of historian R. C. Dutt. She is survived by two daughters.

Meenakshidi had been shattered, just a few years earlier, by the death of her husband, Dr. Sujit Mukherjee, himself a distinguished scholar. It was a loss she had slowly and painfully learned to live with, and she had lately returned to a busy, intellectual life. It seemed too early for her to leave it all behind. It was doubly sad to think of Meenakshidi, loved and admired by so many, dying alone in an impersonal airport. But then I thought of it and realised that she might have wanted it to happen like this, after all: on the go and without any fuss. This was not just an aspect of her personality but also of her scholarship, which was calm, detailed, persevering, sharp, clear and remarkably unfussy.

Even though it was too early for her to put down her pen, there is some consolation in the recollection that she received one of the highest national awards in her last years: the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2003 for her book *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. She was also the Chairperson of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) from 2001-2004 and the Chairperson of its Indian chapter (IACLALS) from 1993-2005.

As one Indian scholar put it in an obituary, 'Mukherjee's example and influence were decisive in shaping the field of colonial and postcolonial studies in India, particularly with respect to the complex transactions between modern Indian literatures and the West. She was that increasingly rare figure, a truly multilingual scholar at ease in several Indian languages, translating between them and English, and able to speak with authority and insight on the cross-fertilisations that led to the development of new genres in colonial India.' Yes, Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee will be missed – her multilingual scholarship, her contributions to writing and academia, her intellectual generosity that was, nevertheless, based on a clear understanding of her own position as a scholar and writer. But along with that, Meenakshidi will be missed: her charm, grace and personality, her quiet but probing conversation, her vitality, and her smile.