



## Conversation

Neila C. Seshachari

### Writing As Spiritual Experience: A Conversation with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (PhD, UC-Berkeley) came to the United States in 1976 when she was 20 years old to earn her Masters Degree at Wright State University. Poet, short story writer, and novelist, she is a prolific writer who has published four books of poems (*Dark Like the River*, *The Reason for Nasturtiums*, *Black Candle*, and *Leaving Yuba City*), two novels (*The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*), and a collection of short stories (*Arranged Marriage*) since 1988. She has edited two collections of American multicultural literature: *Multitude* (1993) and *We, Too, Sing America* (1998). Her numerous recognitions for poetry and fiction include awards from Barbara Deming Foundation (1989), Santa Barbara Arts Council (1990), Gerbode Foundation (1993), Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award, Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction, PEN (Oakland), Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction, Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize, and Pushcart Prize, the last two for *Leaving Yuba City*. She is a Professor of Creative Writing at Houston University and has taught at Diablo College and Foothill College in California. She is a founding member and President of Maitri, a help-line for South Asian Women in the Bay Area.

Read [fiction by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni](#) previously published in Weber Studies.



Neila C. Seshachari (Ph.D., U of Utah) is a Professor of English at Weber State University, where she teaches twentieth-century American literature and critical theories, among other courses. Her most recent publications include an edited collection, *Conversations with William Kennedy* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1997), and a pioneering chapter titled "Asian-Indians of Utah: The First Recognition" in *Asian Americans in Utah: A Living History* (State of Utah, 1999). She is currently working on a book-length study on the subject. Other authors she has interviewed include Alan Cheuse, Ann Beattie, May Sarton, Maxine Hong Kingston, and William Kennedy.

*You have Masters and PhD degrees in academics. Your dissertation on Christopher Marlowe at the University of California\_Berkeley was written under the direction of Stephen Greenblatt, and it's titled, "For Danger Is in Words: A Study of Language in Marlowe's Plays." How did you get into creative writing and make it your career?*

Yes, that was quite a departure for me. It certainly wasn't anything I had planned because I had intended to study literature and then teach it in college. For many years I did just that as well, although now I teach purely creative writing. I think what happened is that although I loved the Renaissance and I continue to love it, at a certain point when I was getting my PhD at Berkeley, my political consciousness was changing. I felt that my life as a woman of color living in America was so divorced from what I was intellectually spending all my time on that a great dissatisfaction, a kind of crisis of consciousness, rose up in me. I figured I had to start writing about what was of importance in my life, and one of the big things was the act of immigration and the ways in which it had changed me, the ways in which it had really made me see the world differently and see my place as a woman in the world differently, the ways in which it had made me appreciate my own culture as well as question my own culture, and question my life in India, and all that was very important to me. So I started writing tentatively, not very well. I wrote some pretty bad poems at first.

*Your poetry is infused with questions of social justice.*

Yes, right from the beginning. The roles for women and the structures of patriarchy that women struggled with have been very important as points of exploration in my writing. That's how I've moved into writing; it wasn't something that I had planned at all. And as I wrote, I did not, for many years, think of myself as a writer. It was only after *Arranged Marriage* came out and won a number of awards that I began to think, "Oh, maybe I am a writer."

*And so your appointment at Foothill College was not in the writing program.*

No. It was purely for literature. I taught all kinds, but especially 20th Century and multicultural literature.

*Before you came to this country when you were nineteen, had you written any poetry? Had you written any plays, short stories?*

**No. I didn't write in India.**

*And your first collection of poetry was published in India?*

**It was published in India, but that was many years after I came here. I wanted my first work to be published in India. And I had no connections with Indian publishers, but I wrote to P. Lal, who is the editor of *Writers Workshop*, and I sent him some poems and I said, "I don't know where to place these or where to send a book. Do you know anyone who would be interested?" He wrote back and said that the *Writers Workshop* would be interested in publishing them.**

*And then, for your second book, did you go to an American publisher here? How were you received then?*

**By then I was already publishing in magazines, so it was not a problem.**

*This leads me into a question about your audience, your readers. In *Yellow Light: The Flowering of Asian American Arts* (Temple U, 1999) edited by Amy Ling, I remember you have answered that specific question: Who is your audience? Would you enumerate that again for me?*

**Sure. When I'm writing, I really try not to think about audience because that concept seems very limiting to me—because as soon as I, at least as a writer, begin to think of a particular audience, I become consciously or subconsciously very influenced by what I think that audience likes and would want me to write. I think that's very detrimental to the writing process. So I try not to think about audience at all. But once the piece is written, and I think about whom I would like to reach, I think about many different kinds of people. On one hand, I would like to reach people of my Indian background, Indian-Americans, South-Asians, and I certainly hope that my work will have for them the pleasure of recognition. In terms of others or a larger readership... I think of the author as being at the center of these rings or circles, these concentric circles.**

*Describe them for our readers.*

**The South-Asian circle is one of the first. The larger second circle is the Asian-American one, and then a larger one still is of women of many cultures, the large readership for whom I write in terms of wanting my work to reach them. But ultimately, I think the audience is whoever is interested in our books. And so when you write without thinking about anyone in particular, when you're doing the very best you can, in some ways you will reach people that you never even dreamed of reaching. That to me is the ultimate success. For me as a reader, that has been the case in writers I thought I would have nothing in common with and find no pleasure in their books, but when I read them, I learned so much from them.**

*I have noticed there are two kinds of readers: those who go only for the acknowledged canon which comprises only white writers with a sprinkling of a few African-Americans and Native Americans, and some others who are normally not given to reading Asian writers or any writers of color. And they react, "Oh, this, this writer... I can't say the name!" When that happens in my classes, I say to my students, "You have a good education. Apply phonics and read."*

**This reminds me of a funny story. When I first published and got an agent, my agent who was a very good agent—and we are now good friends—was very concerned about the same thing. She said, "Oh, your books will never be successful because no one will be able to pronounce your name and remember your name, so they will not be able to go and ask for your books at a book store." She said, "I really think you need to change your name. Let's think of really shortening your last name. How about 'Diva' instead of Divakaruni." And I didn't say anything because... she has a very unusual, difficult last name herself [Dijkstra], and I just didn't say anything. And so she inferred from my silence that that was not acceptable to me. But I know what you mean about those mainstream readers.**

*So, have you discovered or recognized that some readers don't want to read works by a writer with a difficult sounding name, and how do you reach those kinds of readers?*

**Well, my personal view is that a lot of times you reach people through magazine publications. So I'm not averse to being published in all kinds of different magazines. Some writers are very snobbish; they only want to be in *The New Yorker*, or they only want the *Atlantic Monthly*, and I love it when I'm published in the *The New Yorker* or *Atlantic Monthly*, but every once in awhile I give one of my stories to a women's magazine like *Good Housekeeping*. And it's interesting that they've been very eager to publish my stories which I would not have thought would be the case. So they are always asking my agent, Does she have something for us? And once in awhile I give them, and for that same reason, Neila, I've received so much—some very interesting feedback from the fan mail I get from people who read my stories in *Good Housekeeping*. As for the ordinary readers, whom we think of as mainstream readers who are not interested in these issues, perhaps, they think they are not interested, but when they come across a story, an unusual story like my stories in *Good Housekeeping*, they do understand, and they do relate. They are very appreciative, and it creates an interest in them from where they go on to read other things. And that would be one way of reaching that kind of audience. But at a certain point, I guess I'm just as intractable as other authors and think, "If they want to read me, they can read me; and if they don't, they don't have to." But I'm doing a little bit by putting my work out there through magazines that will introduce readers to writers they wouldn't have knowledge of otherwise.**

*I'm with you. A person may not want to read a 200page novel, but may be willing to venture out into a 15page story.*

**But having read that 15-page story, then would think, "Oh, I really like this kind of stuff. Let me see what is available in the market or in the library."**

*As you wrote to Amy Ling about these concentric circles, you have the Indian-American writer in mind but you also have the larger audience...*

**Right, and that is so important because I think that there is one group of political thought in writing literature that thinks: "You only write for your own people. Why should you write for anyone else?" But that defeats the whole idea of literature, which is about reaching across boundaries and barriers and making available to people lives they would never read otherwise.**

*You wrote to Amy Ling that you had two expectations from your readers: "I want them to know me and my people as we are. I want to break the stereotypes that they might hold in their heads." And I see how you mean that. So do you then consider yourself primarily an Asian-American writer with a mission?*

You know, when I think back on what I said, I think this is like my hope of what my stories will do for me more than, "Do I alter the world?" More than my expectations from the reader, this is a kind of hope. I do think that writers need to have a social purpose. Too much of the writing we do today is done, especially in the more literary kinds of writing that we come across, for the sake of art, for the sake of structure. It's experimental or it's dealing with individual issues and has chosen specifically and purposely to stay away from social questions and social concerns. Many writers, many of the award-winning writers write like that. And I just don't agree. I think the writer has a social responsibility. Now, I don't think that the social responsibility can take the place of art. What you are writing has to be good first of all; otherwise, any social purpose will not be served because it will not move your readers; it will not speak to your readers. But I do believe that writers have to have a social responsibility.

*And that brings me to your social service. You were president of Maitri, the help-line for South-Asian American women. Did you help start it? Did you get involved in Maitri before you started writing? Was there a symbiotic relationship?*

Yes very much, a simultaneous relationship and symbiotic relationship. Maitri was founded in 1991, which was the year *Black Candle*, my poetry collection came out. It was early in my writing career, and I was one of the founders. A group of my friends, we got together and founded it, and it grew. It was a very small grassroots organization operating out of my home. We just got an extra phone line and we started the service. And now it's grown into a really large organization.

*With an office of its own?*

With an office of its own. And we've hired a fulltime person for the office, and now we have, the last I heard, about 40 volunteers. And we have now lots of support from the community as well, whereas, when we started, there was a lot of consternation in the community. We were the first hotline for South-Asian women on the West Coast, but now there are more services of that kind and it's much more accepted. That was a big part of my life, and since I've moved to Houston, I've been working with Daya, which is a similar organization, and I'm on their board.

*Were you inspired ... I'm not saying that you picked these stories as they were...*

Right. In fact, I was very careful not to take any of the stories as they were, off the women who came to us. But I was tremendously moved and affected by their lives and by the problems that they faced, and they really made me aware of a lot of things about our community that I had not known or that I had known only a little bit of, which is, how within this very successful affluent community [of South-East Asians] these women were in situations of great distress and often great want, where they had no access to any help-line.

*I'm reminded of Mistress of Spices where Tilo reaches out to all these South-Asians—Islamic people, Hindus, brahmins, nonbrahmins, all kinds of people.*

Yes. Also we South-Asians like to portray our community as comprising of very successful women; yes, it is certainly very successful, but we must not forget those who are not and those who are struggling and those who need help. I think in my writing, as well as in my work with Maitri and Daya, that has been a big force.

*I have a question about the fiction, "Crossing," that you wrote for Weber Studies — the one we published in the winter 1998 South-Asian Special Issue. The narrator who lives in California is now visiting her brother in Vermont, and she makes a comment that her Punjabi-style dress, the salwar kameez, which was ubiquitous and never noticed in California is now so eye-catching. Everybody is gawking at her.*

Right.

*And that made me realize that in the United States, we face questions not about diversity in general but varying degrees of it. And now you live in Texas; you moved from California, which is one of the most cosmopolitan states. Everyone can live there and dress the way one wants to; one can have one's ears, nose, and lips and eyebrows pierced the way one wants and nobody...*

Nobody pays too much attention.

*How do you find Houston in terms of diversity and multicultural awareness?*

It was very different; it really made me aware of how the quality of immigrant life and the nature of immigrant experiences are very different from state to state and very different on the coast as opposed to inland. So, it really made me aware of all of that, and then, the culture is not as open to immigrants in Houston, although in Houston it is more open than in other parts of Texas, in the smaller towns.

*So how does that affect you as a writer and as one who is trying to reach out to help readers?*

Well, I'm still digesting this experience. It takes me a long time to digest the experiences of my life and start writing about them. I've jotted down some story ideas about immigrants living in Texas and what their experiences have been. I think it will be awhile before I can write them. I'm still writing about immigrants in the San Francisco area, but I think that I realize that it is a very different experience and I already have some idea about how to bring out the difference of this experience.

*In the nine years from 1991 to 2000, you have published an enormous corpus—four books of poetry, two novels, one book of short stories and another one about to be out, and the novel halfway done.*

And then two anthologies that I edited, *Multitude* and *We, Too, Sing America*. I edited them all by myself, although I see that as an advantage. I find it easier when I am working on my own as opposed to when I'm trying to collaborate with other people. And they took a long time. I wanted to really focus on quality multicultural literature.

*And they include Asian-American writers in the fullest sense—as Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, Indian?*

Yes, as well as Native American and some Eastern European writers, because they have become part of this too.

*The first anthologies of Asian-American writing included only Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese writers, and some editors even said they were not considering any writers from India even though there are some wonderful writers of Indian origin in this country.*

Yes, absolutely.

*Now, you write poetry, fiction, novels, and some nonfiction too. Do you consider yourself primarily a poet or a fiction writer?*

I would respond to that by saying that it changes for me. If I'm working on poetry, then I am a poet at that time, and right now I'm working on a novel, so I'm very much a novelist—that's all I am and nothing else. Once in a while if I'm stuck in the novel, I write down my other ideas in a notebook and they're for later, and I focus on the novel.

*So, the genre you write in is not determined by the availability of time.*

No. As you know, I'm in the middle of moving back to California, and I have no time at all, but the novel is what I'm working on, and if I can do only a paragraph at a time, that's what I'm doing. Once I'm in a work, I have to kind of mentally think in that work. I can't do others, nothing major, nothing creative. I write other things, but I don't write anything creative. I get into the pacing of the novel or story and until that is done, I have to stay with it, although I'll do editing work. For instance, while I'm writing the novel I could edit my book of short stories, but that is different. As you know, editing takes a different kind of creative energy as opposed to creating new work.

*I was very interested in the acknowledgments of your books. I think all acknowledgments in books tell a great deal about the making of a book and the creative influences on writers, and your Mistress of Spices mentions not only your mother and your mother-in-law but also Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, "whose grace illuminates my life every page and every word." What are the influences of your mother and your mother-in-law and Gurumayi?*

I think my mother and mother-in-law have just been very supportive of my writing. My mother-in-law doesn't read any English at all, but when my books come—it's very endearing—she'll just sit with my book and she'll look at the cover and she'll look at my picture in the back, and she'll tell me she is very proud of me. And she'll just physically touch the book, and so I know that her support is very much with me. And my mother, too, is very supportive, although we don't discuss my writing. Because I think in terms of ideas, my mother is very different in many ways from who I am, and I'm sure she doesn't agree with many of my ideas. And I'm sure when she reads certain passages, the more rebellious or shocking passages, she must be going, "Oh, how could she? How did I give birth to this child?"—but overall she is very supportive. And so they both have been important role models in my life, and people I respect. And also they remind me that when we think of women, a lot of times, being professionals living in the West, we think of a particular kind. But I want my books to reach women just like my mother; I'm writing for them as well. If my mother-in-law could read English, I would be writing for her too. So I never want my work to become elitist or exclusionary and not try to include or invite these women into the work.

*I remember the poem "How I Became a Writer," the one that you read yesterday, too. It is really the most favorite one of mine in all your collection of poetry, which includes some very compelling poems. I keep thinking of the autobiographical possibilities of that poem, although I know the persona in the poem is not to be confused with the poet. For instance, the lines "'Write mo-cha.' Her cool fingers / petal over mine like the layered red plantain flower / we are writing." Is this part biographical?*

Well, I think just that one image, not other parts of the poem. I do remember my mother helping me write my first words; that part certainly is true. So in a very literal way she (the little girl) has then become a writer.

*How often do you see her?*

Not very often, maybe once a year or once in two years, but as I did the meditation, I felt that in some inner way I was connected to her. So I felt that I was very close then, and I continue to feel close, whether I see her or not. And I think that it made me aware of or put me in touch with my inner self, and I believe, for me at least, that that is the source of all our creative inspiration. And that our art comes from that source which is beyond the self as ego. So that when we are in touch with that deeper part of ourselves, all we have to do is really keep the ego out of the way and the writing flows. And so I think that meditating and having my guru's blessing has really helped me.

*Yesterday, you mentioned that when you were thinking of writing The Mistress of Spices, you had a vision—a literal kind of vision of Tilo, and she said, "Look at me, I'm Tilo, I'm the Mistress of Spices."*

Yes, I had not thought about writing this particular novel, *Mistress of Spices*, in this particular way. It wasn't that I went through steps in logical thinking to arrive at that [vision]. It was a very intuitive and inspired kind of image that came to me and that is what I mean, that in some ways I was in touch with something within me that I cannot explain and that is beyond logic. When I think of writing, I think of it as of all my worldly activities—all my secular activities—the most spiritual one, because it puts me in touch with

Clark Taylor, Weber State University

And then going to the other part of the question about Gurumayi as my spiritual teacher—it's very hard to explain because I think the blessing that has come to me through her and through following that path of meditation is just beyond words.

*When did you meet her?*

I met her when I was writing *Mistress of Spices*, and so I'm sure she has influenced that, particularly the mystical and spiritual aspects of that book.

*How often do you see her?*

Not very often, maybe once a year or once in two years, but as I did the meditation, I felt that in some inner way I was connected her. So I felt that I was very close then, and I continue to feel close, whether I see her or not. And I think that it made me aware of or put me in touch with my inner self, and I believe, for me at least, that that is the source of all our creative inspiration. And that our art comes from that source which is beyond the self as ego. So that when we are in touch with that deeper part of ourselves, all we have to do is really keep the ego out of the way and the writing flows. And so I think that meditating and having my guru's blessing has really helped me.

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*That's a very interesting idea.*

And therefore, I'm very, very concerned with making my books absolutely the best they can be, and I'm very willing to listen to criticism. My ego is never upset when someone says, "Oh, you've made a mess here." I want the work to be absolutely as good as it can get. The work is more important than my mental feelings.

*And I think indeed that *The Mistress of Spices* makes a big departure from your previous writing inasmuch as you plunge into magical realism. And I love the way it works because at one level your work is magical but it's also firmly rooted in realism.*

Right, because it's very much about the lives of immigrants and their challenges today living in America.

*Could you comment on the magical realism in your work?*

I would have to not call it magical realism because although there is magic and there is realism, it's in a way a little different from the work of, for example, Garcia Márquez, whom I love very much, or Isabelle Allende, whom I admire greatly. One of the big sources of inspiration for me were the folktales and myths of Bengal, which are woven into *The Mistress of Spices* in a very central and significant way. So I think it's a little different because it draws on these very particular Indian supernatural traditions.

*But they are magical nevertheless because they loom larger than life. This balancing of one writerly track on the magical and the other on the realistic—was that hard to do?*

It was difficult because I was trying to bring together these very diverse worlds. I was trying to bring together old Indian folklore with the realities of life in America—the harsh realities of inner-city life in America and Oakland. So that was difficult to do. I think the voice of Tilo was what really allowed me to bring those things together. I think what happened when I was writing the book was that I was able to conceptualize the characters as realistically as I could so that each of the characters became powerful presences. You have the lonely American who comes into the store and Tilo falls in love with him, and he was mysterious. By the way, until well into the novel, I didn't know what his identity would turn out to be. He was a mystery to me as well as to Tilo. I knew that he could not be Indian. He had to be someone from outside of her culture, and he couldn't be a white American. I just intuitively knew that that was not the kind of person she would fall in love with.

*So what is his identity?*

Well, he's Native American; he's mixed, but the Native American is really important in him.

*What kind of research did you have to do for *Mistress of Spices*? It has all these spices, and you write about all of them.*

Right, I've been interested in *ayurveda*, the traditional ancient Hindu system of medicine, for a long time so I did a lot of ayurvedic research as well. At Berkeley and in the Bay area, there are a lot of ayurvedic practitioners and you can get a lot of books as well. So I did do a lot of ayurvedic research. Some of it came out of, again, the folklore of Bengal, the ways in which spices were used in my home when I was growing up, not for cooking but for medicinal purposes. There are some good luck spices. You have certain ceremonies where you would use certain spices to bring good luck and avert the evil eye—the mustard seed to avert the evil eye and the haldi, which is auspicious. So I incorporated all of that info, and then every once in awhile I just made things up.

*Now *The Mistress of Spices* has been optioned out for a movie?*

Yes.

*Is it being filmed right now?*

No, Gurinder Chadha has finished the screen play and she's right in the final processes of getting all the money together to start casting and contracting with the actors. The last time she emailed me she said she knows people who would fund it, but I'm waiting to hear from her.

*What about *Sister of My Heart*? That also seems to be a very "filmable" book.*

A lot of people are interested in *Sister of My Heart*. The problem is that so much of it is set in India that it's going to present problems in filming. So you need more of a budget to film intercontinentally. And whereas *Mistress of Spices* has people of many backgrounds and races, *Sister of My Heart* is full of Indian characters, so we'll have to wait and see.

*Just this past week, we saw *Such a Long Journey*, the movie version of Rohinton Mistry's novel of the same name. It's an Indian-Canadian venture filmed entirely in India with all Indian characters.*

Yes, it's like Deepa Mehta's *Earth*. I think there is a possibility, and there is a market. So I think we'll have to wait and see. If it becomes a film, great, if not, I'm okay with that with *Sister of My Heart*. Not all books are meant to be made into films.

*Sister of My Heart ends on the kind of note that could easily lead to a sequel. It's very open-ended. Are you planning one?*

I'll tell you something. This is an exclusive for *Weber Studies*. The novel I'm working on right now is a continuation of the story of *Sister of My Heart*. It's not a sequel in that the voices have changed, and there are a lot of things that are different. One of the two narrators in the novel is Sudha.

*And she is the same Sudha as in Sister of My Heart?*

**But now she is different because of what she's been through. She's changed. And the other narrator is Anju's baby who dies before he is born. So the other narrator is the spirit of this child looking on all of these events and narrating about human nature through what he sees.**

*The second narrator is a voice! The novel uses polyphonic voices?*

**Yes.**

*And you haven't thought of a title to give me another first for Weber Studies?*

**Well, I'm thinking of the title *Loneliness Candy* because—and I'm not sure if it will fit the tone of the book finally—one of the themes of this book is the idea of loneliness and the idea of being alone and how so much of what we do in life is to stave off or push away this idea of loneliness which we are afraid of. When we look at this very same idea not as loneliness but as aloneness, from a weakness it changes into a strength. And to be able to be alone and to be able to be comfortable in your aloneness, I think, is a very important growth stage in humans. If you are not afraid of being alone you become a much stronger individual because so much of what we fear is being alone. That idea is important in the lives of all of the characters. Do you like that title, *Loneliness Candy*?**

*Yes, it's intriguing. I was interviewing Alan Cheuse some years ago when he was in the process of finishing up a novel. I had his galleys, and he would keep changing the title every now and then, and I would say, "Alan, you have to tell me the title because the interview is now going into print!" Finally the title he chose was *By Light Possessed*, but the galleys that I got had a title that I don't even recollect now.*

**Well, with *The Mistress of Spices* I knew from Chapter 1 this was going to be the title of the book. There was no question in my mind. With the book of short stories that is coming out, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, I wasn't sure of the title. There were two stories in it that I was thinking of. The story that I was thinking of and my publishers also really liked had the title, "The Love of a Good Man," but then because Alice Munro's book came out, I said, "No, I don't want to use that title because it will seem derivative, even though it wasn't."**

*The Unknown Errors of Our Lives is also a very fine, suggestive title.*

**And I think it relates magically to the entire book because, seen from one angle, the book is about all of these things that we do without realizing the consequences of these actions and words, and many of which turn out to be the unknown errors.**

*When I was thumbing through *Black Candle* recently, I was struck by the similarity between the poem "Restroom" and the story "Clothes." When I read "Clothes" in *Arranged Marriage* some years ago, I didn't really connect this.*

**Right, in fact they both were inspired by the same incident, but they took very different forms. In the poem, the wife has just arrived from India and already the husband is in the hospital.**

*And in "Clothes" they live together long enough for them to fall in love with each other before the intruder shoots the young husband. But when you were talking about aloneness, I thought of this young protagonist of "Clothes," who finds herself alone.*

**And she chooses to be alone. She could go back to India and be with her parents, but she chooses to be alone.**

*Have you tried writing poems in Bengali?*

**My Bengali is not good enough. My vocabulary in Bengali is just not as extensive as my vocabulary in English, and I don't always fathom the nuances of Bengali words.**

*Your poetry certainly reads as we expect poetry to, but even your fiction and your novels are full of lyrical language and rich metaphors.*

**I think a lot of that often comes from Bengali, but I can't do it the other way. There are many English concepts that I wouldn't be able to translate into Bengali. Many Bengali ideas and words I can translate into English, if not directly, through nuances. I can get the ideas across.**

*A word like *dard*—pain of longing, pain caused by separation from the beloved...*

**Yes, or a word like *abhiman*, which I write in the novel in a scene where I have to express *abhiman*. How would you explain *abhiman*? It's love and pride together. So there are all these difficulties and challenges with that.**

*So what are the challenges to an Indian-American writer whose vision is bilingual as yours is?*

**Whose vision is both bilingual and bicultural. Trying to get some of these ideas across, I have difficulty with words like *dard*, *abhiman*, or even the various concepts of love that you have in Indian culture which are very different. Here, when you talk about love, you presuppose that you're talking about romantic love, and that is not at all true in our culture. So it is a challenge to get these cultural ideas across.**

*So, are these some of the pressing problems you see for Indian-American writers?*

**Yes. The other problem—and this is more on the level of language and style—I think the other larger problem that we face, particularly as Indian-American writers, is that we are expected by our community to write a certain kind of book. And people complain that mainstream publishers expect you to write another kind of book and that too is true. I think the pressure of what your own community wants you to write is much greater. And they're like, "You must not portray us like this. You must not do this. You must not betray these secrets. You must not...." Talk about the ten commandments! I think there are one hundred commandments that your community lays on you.**

*So how do you get across? How do you keep up your voice and your freedom and your integrity as a writer?*

**I think that at a certain point you just have to not think about those questions. You have to think, "What is the story I'm writing? Why do**

I want to write it? And how can I make it come alive? What can I do to make my characters real-life human beings? How can I be accurate and true, and yet how can I stay with my passion?" And beyond that, really, writing is not the time to think about anything else. Though, of course, you have to have a political consciousness, you have to have all of those things. But when you are writing your first draft, particularly, anything else gets in the way.

*Many writers who deal with their political consciousness become irate, but you seem to be different. Let me quote, from Weber Studies, a line from my book review of your book of poems, Leaving Yuba City: "There is no rancor in her poetic vision, only chiseled images that cling to one's consciousness like shards of glass." How do you keep yourself from having that rancor and angst?*

Well, thank you first of all, I really appreciated that comment. I think it's always a challenge; that's why perhaps all of my experiences have to have such a long incubation period because, of course, the first thing you feel is the anger and the upsetness and the sense of injustice and outrage, but I can't write from that space. So then I have to let that incubate for a long time until it takes fictional form and what I wanted to say comes out through the lives of characters who are living it. And at this point I'm not concerned about the initial outrage but about the characters. What would be real for them? How would they feel? I try to get inside their heads and stay inside them. So, I try to negate the authorial presence as far as such a thing is possible.

*Now, about your novels. They're steeped in romantic possibilities and magical realism. Even in the direst of happenings, there is that light of hope; there is that romantic possibility.*

Yes, I wouldn't say romantic, perhaps, but certainly optimistic possibilities. Yes, that's very important to my writing. Also, I have a great deal of hope for people who pass through traumatic situations and difficulties, and part of it does come from seeing the women that I have been working with all of these years who come out of terrible, terrible situations that many of us can't even imagine happening here in the 21st century or in the 20th century in the United States, which is one of the most advanced places. And they come to these things or suffer through these things and they make new lives for themselves, so I am aware of how resilient the human spirit is, and I wish in my writing to honor the human spirit that is capable of this, to come through the fire and to prevail. That's why I find it ironic when people tell me that my stories are so sad, that all these terrible things happen to the women, and I think they've missed the point. Yes, these terrible things have happened to the women, but look how the women come through them with greater self-knowledge, with greater strength than if they had just had an ordinary happy life. And it is those possibilities of the human spirit that I find most intriguing. One of the writers that I have really admired for many many years has been Tolstoy. And I think Tolstoy does that. When you look at his stories like *Anna Karenina* and he says that, right in the beginning, happy families are all alike—who wants to write about them? The unhappiness in our lives and what we do with that are really what makes art.

*Have you ever felt you are in a diaspora? You were not an expatriate. You came to the USA for an education and you stayed. But now you have lived here for many years and you are keenly aware of the realities here for immigrants. Besides, it's very apropos to talk about living in a diaspora and to write about postcolonial verities. But let's talk about the diaspora first. Do you feel you are in one?*

Well, the way I think of it is, yes, I am because it is a physical fact that I have left my homeland, whatever my motives were. And I have decided to settle in a land that is very different and a culture that is very different. So whatever the original motive or intent was, I do find myself torn between two cultures especially now that I'm bringing up children here, and I'm torn by the desire to go back to India for long or short periods of time. I'm conflicted by the fact that my mother is alone in India. All her children are here [in the United States]. I think the idea of the diaspora is very important to me and in my writing it comes up many times because I'm aware of other people whose entry into America was even more diasporic than mine. And I write about them too; their stories are important to me.

*When you were talking a little bit about postcolonial writing last evening, I was reminded of reading in Leaving Yuba City this poem about these children who attend a Christian convent school and how the nuns had no idea that they treated these kids as if they had no past, no culture, no traditions. That is a powerful story for postcolonial hegemony that the British left behind.*

And it is very true to much Indian experience of schooling, because we have all over India these convent schools. And many parents are very anxious to send their children because the level of education is high, but, yes, it is such a cultural oppression. I've tried to deal with it in that whole series of poems, "Growing Up in Darjeeling," where I went to an Irish convent school and although most of us were Indian-Hindu children, we were always treated as second-class and the few Christian children and the very few White Christian children were the goal, the desired ones. Also, there is a poem in there where I try to deal with this in a funny way. One of my very few humorous poems. It's about the dance where we are all preparing to go to a social. And it's a moment of great trouble for us Indian girls because we don't know anything about Western or ballroom dancing. And so we are madly trying to learn all these steps, the waltz, the cha-cha-cha.

*I remember that poem; it's a funny poem, even though the humor comes through the hegemonic influence.*

Right, why should we who have such an old and wonderful tradition of dance in India be made to feel lacking because we don't know the cha-cha-cha?

*And now, for a question that I could have started out with. Something about your writing process. Every reader wants to know, and I want to know too.*

The actual process itself is very mysterious to me. But I can tell you all the physical things that I do, which is the way I write as I try to have a certain amount of time every day. I am very disciplined about it. Right now my life is in flux because I have to do things like make sure the house is painted. This is not my regular existence. In my regular existence the children go to school and I go to my writing desk. And when I'm really inspired I stay at my writing desk except for a brief lunch break until I have to go pick up the children. And those are wonderful times for me when I can write the whole day. And I'm hoping that once I get to California and settle down, I can do that.

*And how do you write your novels? Do you have a certain plot or outline in mind? Do you have a graph of the events as Kurt Vonnegut did, for instance, in Slaughter-house Five?*

No, no I don't have any of these things. It's a process; it's an organic kind of process. Now, the down side of that is that I often have to come back and do major revisions because I get a good idea later in the novel, and then I have to make sure I am ready in the first part of the novel for this wonderful idea, but I'm never resentful of that. I'm always so appreciative when I have an insight which I didn't have before that I don't mind doing the extra work. And I know, for example, I'm writing a chapter, and I know what's going to happen in this

chapter.

*Is it written someplace?*

It is in my head, although maybe I have some notes on the side. As I'm writing, I jot down notes and phrases, but beyond that I really don't know, except for this novel in progress; I know my final scene; I know my final image, but I don't know how I'm going to get there.

*By which you mean you know the ending?*

By which I mean I know a certain scene where two characters will do something, but because it's open-ended—and I always write these open-ended novels—I'm not one hundred percent sure. Let's say, two characters will remain married or get divorced, or a character is planning to stay in America or go back to India, or someone else is going to get married to someone else or fall in love. But I know; I have this physical image of this last scene where these two characters will come together and do something. I don't know what they are going to do.

*Give me an illustration from The Mistress of Spices. What was the scene or the place you were writing toward?*

In *The Mistress of Spices*, I knew there was going to be an earthquake scene. I didn't know how the earthquake would happen or what would bring it about, and I didn't know what would happen after it, but I knew there would be an earthquake in which the Mistress of Spices would be involved and for which she would feel responsible. So that's the kind of thing. So I knew that scene and I knew the feelings of that scene and I knew it wouldn't be the end scene. I knew that the novel had to go on after that.

*And in Sister of My Heart?*

And in *Sister of My Heart*, I knew that the book would end with the two cousins coming together in America at the airport, but I didn't know anything else.

*You didn't know about their familial complications?*

No. Not until I was almost at the end of the novel. Do you remember that scene where Anju's husband is talking to one of the other guys in the airport and the guy sees Sudha, who is very beautiful, coming out of the airport and he says, "Oh, is that your wife? Aren't you a lucky guy." And Anju's husband doesn't say, "No, this is not my wife." He just *allows* that to happen and Anju overhears the whole thing and is devastated that her husband would allow that misunderstanding to occur because she has always had this suspicion that he really is obsessed with Sudha, but I didn't know that until I got to that scene. So some things I know, and some things become apparent as I'm writing.

*Yesterday somebody said that for every Jhumpa Lahiri or one successful Indian-American writer, there are one hundred writers struggling to come ahead. What is your message to emerging Asian-Indian writers?*

I always feel that I'm not qualified to give advice or a message, but I can say what I feel, which is that if one is really passionate about one's writing, the first thing a writer has to do—and this happens as you are writing; you have to write for awhile before you understand it—is to figure out how important writing is in your life, and if it is really, really important, then you have to do everything you can to further that. You have to give yourself time; you have to give yourself the necessary education, by which I don't mean joining a creative writing program but reading to educate yourself, reading carefully as a writer, being aware of what is being written, especially by writers of your background, and then, in the end, being very determined, because there are going to be for most people a lot of rejection slips, a lot of heartache. But if writing is really important to us, we have to keep doing it.

*Have you had these heartaches?*

Oh yes, when I first started sending out my poetry, I got lots of rejection slips. Now I was very fortunate that very early in my fiction writing career, I was taking a class in writing, a short story writing class, because I had never written short stories.

*From whom?*

I was taking it from Tom Parker, who teaches in the Bay area, and he really liked my work and he said, "I think you can become a really good writer, but you need an agent." And I said that I didn't know any agents, and I didn't know how to go about getting one, so he said, "Let me send your work to an agent." And that was Sandy. She became my agent; she called back and she said, "I really like your stories."

*How many stories had you sent her?*

Three stories; those were all I had. I didn't even send them. My teacher sent them, because I wasn't confident enough to send anything at that point. But then she did become my agent and since then she has handled all my fiction, so the rejection is much less traumatic when she gets it.

*The rejection is second-hand.*

Exactly, secondhand, and she'll say, "Oh, such and such magazine said it's not right for them. Why don't we send it on to...?" It's not like getting that letter in your mailbox and having to open it. Yes, the agent is the buffer between you and the cruel world.

*You have such a distinct fictional voice. How did you develop it?*

Thank you very much. Well, personally, I don't think I have a very distinct voice; I think it changes very much from book to book.

*I'm not talking of a character's voice. I'm talking about the narrative voice that's independent of a character's voice.*

I think I'm still developing a style. Perhaps style is what you're talking about, because in terms of voice, I do feel the characters take over the book, but in style and in what I select to present, I feel I'm really just at the beginning of what I hope I will grow into. I have all these visions I don't yet know how to put into words. So I'm constantly struggling with that.



*I want to read here what I once wrote about you: "Since Wordsworth first articulated that every good creative writer has to create the taste by which he or she is to be judged, we have noticed how various and varied is this taste that has to be developed by every successful writer and how inextricably connected it is to the writer's voice. The Mistress of Spices and Sister of My Heart demonstrate amply that Chitra Divakaruni has indeed found both her genre—magical, integrated with realism—as well as her voice. At no time does one feel that there is an attempt in her novels to emphasize the exotic of the East to manipulate the reader. The mythic voice comes naturally to Divakaruni and finds its rationale in both India and America." Explain to me the process behind that development. I know, as a critic, that this is the product.*

**I think, perhaps, if I can explain that at all, I really believe in being true to little things, true to details. So that when I am describing, for example, life for Sudha and Anju in this old crumbling marble mansion, I want to be true to the little details as they're sitting on the terrace and they feel that crumbly black brick under their legs and the aunt is rubbing hibiscus oil in their hair, the smell of that oil, the touch and the feel of the bricks.**

*I remember that.*

**I think that by being true to detail I try—perhaps that is my style and that is my voice. If I can get these minute things right, then the greater story falls into place somehow for me. But I must say I always think of all the things I need to improve on as a writer, and I hope I will never stop thinking that way. I think it is important for me to continue to think that way. And I didn't tell you that I now have ideas for my next three books, and in each of them I hope I will be able to go beyond what I'm doing right now.**

*I am reminded of how Seymour Lawrence of Delacorte Press gave Kurt Vonnegut a contract and advance for three novels at one time, and Vonnegut promised that the first of the three would be his "famous book about Dresden." When he finished writing Slaughter-House Five, he said to Seymour Lawrence, "Sam—here's the book."*

**My agent takes care of those things. She tells me, "A single book at a time. You don't want to give them all three at one time. Then they won't appreciate them. You want them to think that you are theirs, but not forever. Only if they treat you right."**

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