PROGETTO “PASSIONS: INTERVISTE A PERSONALITA’ DI RILIEVO INTERNAZIONALE”

Referente del progetto: Prof. MENA MISTRANO

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Intervista

EMILIA LODIGIANI e SANJUKTA DASGUPTA
INTRODUCTION

Taking part in the project Passions was not only a huge privilege but also a great opportunity for me to grow and encounter two kind-hearted and brilliant women, who sparked my curiosity on several topics and allowed me to broaden my horizons.

When I first talked to Professor Mena Mitrano about Passions, I did not know who I was to interview, which contributed to initially create suspense and a sense of expectation. But it was only when I found out about the two personalities I was assigned to, that my excitement and interest in the project grew further, and I felt truly blessed. The first interviewee, Emilia Lodigiani, is the founder of the Milanese publishing house Iperborea whose mission, since 1987, is that of gathering and spreading the prime of Northern European literature in Italy. The second one, Sanjukta Dasgupta, is professor, former head and currently dean at the Department of English at the Calcutta University Faculty of Arts. She is a scholar, a translator and a poet.

In preparation to the meetings, I had the chance to research and put myself in the shoes of the two interviewees while delving into their lives and works. During the interviews I was lucky enough to learn about two wonderful women who, each in her own way, highlighted a corner of their world and gave it to me, with a generous spirit of sharing.

They both have a rich and multifaceted life, with special characteristics and areas of interest and, to my pleasure, the interviews came to be rather conversations where the most disparate topics were addressed, from profession to family, religion, feminism, love and nature.

The first interview that took place is the one with Emilia Lodigiani. As a student of Scandinavian literature, I was thrilled at the prospect of interviewing her, a celebrity in the field. Though in the context of my studies she was frequently brought up, I did not know much about her, other than what she had done for Scandinavian literatures on the Italian
publishing scene. Therefore, I was very curious and intrigued and I had many questions to ask her.

As a matter of fact, part of my interest in Scandinavian literatures was born by leafing through the delightful books of the Iperborea editions, which overlooked one of the shelves of the small but well-supplied bookshop I used to visit during my high school years. How many times had they told me not to judge a book by its cover! Yet, initially I was fascinated most of all by the aesthetics of those 10 x 20 cm books. As stated by Iperborea, the particular format, hallmark of the house, is the same of the terracotta bricks, the most manageable object ever invented by man, which serves as a reference to a constructive universe of brick-books that will build a better world. The format is also a hint to tourist guides, as an invitation to embark on a journey of discovery of a very special area of the world.

Those forty-five minutes of the interview, while sitting on my chair and stuck in my room in a general lockdown atmosphere, have been a wonderful journey through the landscapes of Emilia’s life, aspirations and desires. Now retired, she has left the management of the publishing house to her two sons, nonetheless she still manages to be a forge of ideas. Proactive, energetic and full of projects, she has entered what she, referring to Hindu philosophy, calls the fourth phase of her life and she is ready for this new path, which is what we inherently talked about: paths. That of the Scandinavian literatures in Italy; her own personal and professional one; and, last but not least, the very deep and not-so-physical one that led her to Santiago de Compostela. Her elegance and her good taste exuded from the screen while she was talking to me about these topics. The story she brings within herself is an encouragement for anyone who desires to do something of their own. She herself is an inspiration not only for those who decide to take a course in publishing but for all those who live for their passion. We now look forward to finding out what else she has to give us.

Sanjukta, on the other hand gave me a glimpse into a world I know very little of. In light of my background, I was certainly less prepared for this encounter, but as soon as we started talking, I was easily invited in a wonderful universe of literature, humanity and
passion. Through her words, she made it possible for me to see what being a feminist in 2020 India means and how this integrates with her activism. Her answers to my questions were well-thought, long descriptions and insights into the current Indian situation.

Before starting our interview, she showed me her books, as in an attempt to make them more concrete and real for me, despite the 7414 km which separates us. In this way she somehow managed, even for a moment, to eliminate the distance and the lack of tangibility that we all are experiencing nowadays.

Our attention was particularly directed to the matters addressed in her two last collections of poetry, *Lakshmi unbound* (2017) and *Sita’s sisters* (2019), and in her first book of short stories, *Abuse and other short stories*, which was published in 2013 and will shortly be followed by a second one. I was impressed by Sanjukta’s ability to blend her background in English literature - of which she is a fine connoisseur - and the most pressing themes of contemporary world, locally but in a global perspective.

Her poems, which deal with many different topics -- women’s condition, violence, religion, culture and so on -- transcend all these themes to detect deeper ones and get to the core of issues that are very personal and universal at the same time. She manages to move from the necessity of circumstances to a contact with the spiritual element. The reading of her books and our further conversation have been a glimpse of light on a world about which I had only vaguely heard and never investigated on my own before. Her work not only allowed me to access it, though for a short lapse, through her personal filter and point of view but also, and most importantly, was the propulsor to educate myself on the topic.

It was also interesting to discuss her relationship with language and languages. She belongs to the 8% Bengali native speaking population of India, while the language of her poetry is English. Not only does she write creatively in English, but she also translates from Bengali into English. Among the works she has translated, there is a collection of poetry Tagore wrote for his wife, which we will talk about in our conversation.
Getting to know two persons, two women, of this caliber and having the opportunity to listen to their personal output on several topics, was a huge inspiration to me. Before starting this project, I feared that a degree of closeness could not be achieved because of the physical distance. To my pleasure, this experience came to prove me wrong and showed me that physical distance can be overcome very easily when passions and words are involved.

EMILIA LODIGIANI:

*Intervistata:* Emilia Lodigiani  
*Intervistatrice:* Carlotta Verdi  
*Data:* Giovedì 19 novembre 2020

CV: Iperborea, come tutte le grandi passioni, nasce da un desiderio, una mancanza, che in questo caso è da un lato personale, strettamente legata alle Sue vicende biografiche - il ritorno in patria dopo dieci anni trascorsi a Parigi, dove aveva avuto modo di entrare in contatto con le opere di autori scandinavi di punta in quel periodo, allora già tradotti in francese, dall’altro invece da una effettiva assenza di una voce nordica nel panorama editoriale italiano.  
Lei, anche su impulso del fratello, decise di fondare una casa editrice indipendente in un contesto dominato da grandi gruppi editoriali, seguendo così una sua passione.
Una scelta frutto di coraggio, ma forse anche di un pizzico di incoscienza. Quale di questi due elementi è stato decisivo?

Inoltre, la parola passione è intimamente connessa al concetto di sofferenza e sacrificio. Quanto, secondo Emilia Lodigiani, bisogna essere disposti a sacrificare per dare voce alla propria passione e che cosa questo ha comportato nel Suo caso?

EL: Mi piace l’osservazione che hai fatto, che la passione nasce da una mancanza. È vero, hai sottolineato le due mancanze, la mancanza mia, personale, di quel momento di vita un po’ in crisi e la mancanza oggettiva nel panorama editoriale italiano dei libri che avevo scoperto. Però mi fai pensare che c’era un’altra mancanza, una carenza. Io, se devo pensare alla mia vita prima, cioè prima di Iperborea, che costituisce uno iato, mi sono sempre immaginata come una scrittrice, per la verità. Ho sempre pensato di avere un certo talento per l’uso delle parole, che credo sia in parte innato, in parte che succede a chi legge tanto. Tuttavia capivo di non avere abbastanza fantasia, l’urgenza ce l’avevo, ma non avevo abbastanza cose da dire in un certo modo per diventare realmente scrittoress. Quando ho cominciato a leggere questi autori nordici [Lars Gustafsson, P.O. Enquist, Torgny Lindgren, Henrik Stangerup, Thorkild Hansen, ndr], ho pensato che loro dicessero le cose che avrei voluto dire io ma da grandi scrittori, da veri scrittori, e quindi era inutile che mi ci mettessi. Perché mi ci ero anche messa, ho scritto dei racconti, ho partecipato a dei concorsi, ho scritto delle poesie, come quasi tutti gli italiani d’altra parte. Poi ho capito che era un modo per colmare quello che io sentivo come carenza, il bisogno di dire certe cose ma la mancanza di strumenti per dirle.

Per quanto riguarda invece l’aspetto di coraggio o incoscienza, direi che ha prevalso nettamente la seconda. Non avevo la più pallida idea di quello cui andavo incontro, e forse è andata bene così. Non sono sicura che l’avrei fatto altrimenti, perché ho dedicato a quello il 90% del mio tempo, anche sacrificando un po’ marito, vacanze e tutte queste cose.

Credo che, seguendo la passione, uno segua piuttosto un principio di profondissimo piacere, i francesi direbbero di *apaisement*, di pacificazione con se stessi. Quindi io non parlo di sacrificio, parlo proprio di amore per quello che si fa.

CV: Lei ha affermato di pubblicare libri cercando di esprimere con essi quello che avrebbe voluto esprimere da scrittrice. C’è qualcosa che sente di non essere ancora riuscita a esprimere attraverso la voce altrui? In tal caso, ha qualche progetto in serbo?

EL: Sì, moltissimo [ride], moltissimo e mi dico, adesso che avrei tempo, potrei mettermi a scrivere. Però, non so se anche per via di questo periodo strano di clausura, ma ci sono tantissime distrazioni e non ho ancora ben capito che cosa farò della mia vita [ride] nella cosiddetta quarta fase, nell’ottica delle fasi induiste della vita. Mi ha sempre affascinato questa concezione dei cicli della vita. La quarta fase è quella che per gli induisti arriva dopo la nascita del primo nipote, che segna proprio uno stacco. Nel momento in cui sai che qualcosa di te continuerà, comincia il ciclo della foresta, dello spirito e c’è un po’ di distacco dalla vita pratica per andare verso lo spirito. Da che ho passato le redini della casa editrice prima a un figlio, adesso a due figli, mi sono volutamente molto ritirata e io sento profondamente questo distacco. Continuo a fare lavoro dietro le quinte, faccio ancora lavoro di redazione, correggendo le traduzioni e do il mio parere, se richiesto, sui libri futuri da pubblicare, però non prendo nessuna decisione, di proposito, perché ritengo che sia giusto lasciare spazio ai giovani, il mondo è molto cambiato e loro hanno molte più energie, molte più idee. Sono pronta a dedicarmi a qualcos’altro. Però mi manca per ora quella fonte di passione che dovrei avere per buttarmi in qualche altra impresa. Lo scrivere resta sempre nel retro del mio cervello, chissà se prima o poi ci riuscirò. Per ora scrivo filastrocche per la mia nipotina [ride].

CV: A proposito di lavoro e del ruolo sempre più marginale ma comunque decisivo che riveste nell’ambito della casa editrice.
Il comodino di Emilia Lodigiani - io me lo immagino come luogo vivo e di passaggio, dove libri, quindi idee potenti, rimangono anche per diverso tempo, prima di essere scoperti e prendere vita in una nuova forma, una nuova lingua.

C’è qualcosa che non manca mai su questo comodino? È un comodino caotico e pieno di libri da scoprire oppure organizzato con metodo e cura?

EL: Mi leggi nel pensiero [ride]. Il mio comodino è molto disordinato, e purtroppo è anche molto statico. Accumulo libri. Accumulo libri che vorrei leggere. Alcuni, quelli sopra, sono spesso libri di lavoro che devo leggere, per dare il mio parere; oppure libri, tanti, di amici che scrivono e che me li mandano.

Poi da nove mesi circa, ho perennemente sul comodino la bibbia, perché all’inizio del primo lockdown ho deciso di cominciare un progetto di lettura integrale della bibbia con due mie amiche-cugine. Abbiamo un appuntamento una volta alla settimana, e ci troviamo a discutere quello che abbiamo letto, leggendo ovviamente anche i commenti, perché non ha molto senso leggere la bibbia senza supporti di biblisti che la conoscono bene. Prima di tutto il nostro mentore è il cardinale Ravasi, che è il biblista per laici più interessante e più profondo. Per teologi ce ne saranno molti altri, magari anche più bravi, ma non è quello che ci interessa particolarmente. E quindi è appunto un comodino disordinato, con una superficie in alto che va e viene, una sotto che resta sempre ferma perché ci sono i libri che vorrei leggere, che restano lì e che prima o poi forse verranno letti.

CV: Le onorificenze di cui Lei è stata insignita dalle case reali, e non solo, di diversi paesi nordici [Cavaliere dell’Ordine della Stella Polare dal Parlamento svedese e da Re Carlo Gustavo di Svezia, 1996; Cavaliere dell’Ordine della Rosa Bianca di Finlandia, 2009; Cavaliere dell’Ordine di Orange-Nassau di Olanda, 2011; Commendatore dell’ordine reale al merito di Norvegia conferita su incarico di re Harald V, 2011, ndr] sono senz’altro indice dell’attenzione e del rispetto che le politiche culturali nordiche hanno da sempre riservato alla cultura, ma sono soprattutto il riconoscimento dell’effettivo contributo da Lei dato nel rendere nota in Italia questa grande provincia della letteratura universale, per parafrasare Claudio Magris.
Come è cambiato lo sguardo dell’Italia nei confronti del Nord, e più in particolare della Scandinavia, nell’arco dei 33 anni di vita di Iperborea? E quanto, secondo Lei, la letteratura ha contribuito, mattone dopo mattone, alla costruzione dell’immagine che l’Italia si è fatta di questa periferia d’Europa?

EL: Sì, sono quattro i paesi che mi hanno dato onorificenze. La prima è stata la Svezia, nel ’96, quindi era da solo otto anni che esisteva Iperborea, ed ero stupefatta. Seconda la Finlandia, poi l’Olanda. Ultima la Norvegia, recentissima, che anzi mi sembrava quasi un po’ immeritata perché ormai sono mio figlio Pietro e Cristina Gerosa, la nostra direttrice editoriale, alla guida di Iperborea.

Direi che l’immagine dei paesi nordici è molto cambiata in questi trentatré anni perché quando io ho cominciato l’immaginario era triplo, se vogliamo.

Uno: Ingmar Bergman. Tutti vedevano il Nord come i film di Bergman e quindi per molti affascinantissimo, per altri di una noia mortale, suicidario ed esistenzialista in una maniera pesante per molte persone. Io adoravo Bergman.

Su questo stesso filone di immaginario cupo c’era Strindberg. Io avevo scelto proprio Strindberg: una vita come secondo libro di Iperborea pensando di sfruttare almeno un nome noto che c’era. Ricordo che i primi tempi, quando andavo a parlare ai librai e facevo loro questo ragionamento, loro dicevano: “è noto ma nessuno lo vuole leggere, ha fatto una pessima scelta” [ride].

Poi c’era il mito delle fanciulle nordiche, libere. I giovani italiani partivano per il Nord con l’idea che lì fosse facile conquistare queste stupende fanciulle bionde, eteree, esili, anche grazie al fascino del latin lover. In realtà, come poi dovevano scoprire, non era proprio così. Il mito si era creato perché i nordici hanno sempre avuto un rapporto molto naturale con il corpo nudo, per esempio nella sauna, che fanno tutti in comune, o prendendo il sole nudi anche a febbraio.

L’italiano che vedeva tutte queste fanciulle così nude, pensava che fossero anche molto libere. Di fatto invece l’etica protestante era piuttosto severa. Beh, poi forse da noi era anche peggio [ride].
Infine il terzo aspetto, che era l’unico realmente positivo, era la terza via, il socialismo. Erano stati loro a creare il concetto di welfare. Sono stati loro i primi a sperimentare un vero socialismo reale, con l’attenzione dello stato per il cittadino, la cura dalla culla alla tomba, come si diceva.

E quindi c’era da un lato quest’immagine che era un po’ severa, alla Bergman, e dall’altro l’aspetto pseudo erotico dell’avventura. Ma in generale erano visti come noiosi, cupi, suicidari. A poco a poco è aumentata una conoscenza reale. Non dico che è solo merito di Iperborea, che senz’altro ha spinto un po’ di gente a viaggiare di più nei paesi nordici, anche se credo che un po’ lo è [ride]. Ovviamente l’Unione Europea ha fatto molto, così come hanno fatto moltissimo l’interrail e gli scambi fra università. Di fatto però la letteratura ha contribuito, e direi che l’effetto Iperborea si è visto soprattutto nel campo editoriale, della pubblicazione di libri. Questo ce l’hanno proprio detto gli editori nordici a un certo punto, quando la concorrenza è cominciata a essere per noi tristemente forte, dopo aver vissuto in un regime di monopolio per dieci anni. Inizialmente interessavano solo a noi, a Francoforte le altre case editrici non andavano neanche agli incontri con gli editori nordici. L’interesse nei confronti del Nord è cresciuto soprattutto dopo i nostri due successi, L’anno della lepre e La vera storia del pirata Long John Silver, in parallelo a due successi molto forti di altri editori, Il senso di Smilla per la neve, forse il primo super best-seller nordico, e Il mondo di Sophie.

Poi è cominciata la serie dei gialli che ha influenzato moltissimo in un altro senso l’immaginario italiano, ma anche europeo e mondiale, visto il successo che hanno avuto. E anzi, ha anche un po’ sviato l’immagine. La gente leggeva i gialli e pensava che il mondo del Nord fosse davvero così, cioè molto inquietante, un po’ torbido, con giochi di potere molto evidenti. Io ho avuto parecchie discussioni con lettori e con appassionati su questo argomento e dicevo, “prendiamo l’Islanda, se leggi i gialli islandesi ci sono 16 morti all’anno”, in realtà in Islanda c’è un solo assassinio all’anno. C’è una persona in prigione”. Quindi la visione risultava un po’ distorta. C’era anche la soddisfazione dell’europeo del sud, con tutti i difetti che noi conosciamo, verso questi primi della classe, di poter dire, “ah, ma allora non sono proprio come vogliono farsi passare, hanno anche loro le proprie
magagne”. Direi che adesso, finita questa grande saga, soprattutto quella di Millennium, l’immagine si è un po’ equilibrata.

CV: A fronte di queste fasi passate, crede che ora ci sia un rinnovato interesse per il mondo nordico? Le sembra una visione più positiva, rispetto a prima?

EL: Direi di sì. A partire dall’aspetto ecologico, che per loro è sempre stato fondamentale, e della cui importanza ci stiamo accorgendo anche noi. E senz’altro, anche quello dell’educazione, della scuola. I paesi del Nord sono rimasti un modello, con tutti i difetti che possono avere. Noi leggiamo che il paese più felice è stato la Danimarca per un po’ di anni, e adesso è la Finlandia, ci guardiamo intorno e ci chiediamo come sia possibile. Si tratta di una felicità che deriva proprio dalla soddisfazione del cittadino.

CV: Le faccio un’ultima domanda, un po’ più personale forse. So che Lei ama camminare e che è andata a piedi fino a Santiago de Compostela.

Questa esperienza ha coinciso con un momento particolare della Sua vita? Che cosa rappresenta, o ha rappresentato, questo pellegrinaggio nell’economia di un’esistenza?

EL: Ma tu sai tutto [ride]. Ha rappresentato moltissimo e penso che forse la soluzione sarebbe rifarne un altro adesso. È una storia lunga ma per farla breve, io sognavo di fare quel pellegrinaggio da quando ho visto il film di Bunuel, La via lattea, avevo 17 o 18 anni. E da allora mi sono detta, ma se esiste davvero questo pellegrinaggio, se esiste questa cosa, io voglio finire la mia vita sulla strada, sulla via lattea. Quando poi mi sono sposata – mio marito era razionalissimo, aveva sette anni più di me, le donne vivevano sette anni più degli uomini, quindi avrei avuto quattordici anni di vedovanza – ho cominciato a dirgli che una volta vedova sarei andata a piedi fino a Santiago de Compostela.

A un certo punto, era l’81, siamo andati per motivi di lavoro suo a Santiago e lui è rimasto affascinato dall’idea che nel ‘99, ultimo anno del secolo, ultimo anno del millennio, anno in cui avevamo deciso di andare in pensione, avremmo fatto questo pellegrinaggio. E arrivati nel ‘99, mio marito, che rispettava tutti i suoi programmi, era pronto per partire, mentre a
me sembrava una cosa da matti: mio figlio aveva fatto un anno di studi in America e sarebbe tornato quell’estate, mentre io avevo un lavoro folle in quel periodo. Fosse stato per me non sarei partita, ma mio marito sarebbe andato ugualmente, anche senza di me.

Così, all’idea di sentirmi derubata del mio pellegrinaggio, ho acconsentito a partire insieme a lui, con l’idea di fare una passeggiata, senza arrivare fino a Santiago. Per me arrivare a Santiago non era un’esperienza di passeggiata, aveva uno scopo religioso, io non riuscivo a staccare il pellegrinaggio dall’aspetto spirituale; invece per lui, che non era religioso, era l’esperienza di camminare su una delle grandi strade che ha fondato l’Europa, una strada su cui hanno camminato milioni e milioni di persone. Era questo l’aspetto che interessava a lui.

Per me doveva essere un andare all’incontro con il divino e io, che sono di formazione religiosa e praticante, ero in un’epoca, durata dieci anni, di ribellione contro la chiesa, contro tutto, e non ero pronta a riesaminare il mio rapporto con Dio, quindi non volevo arrivare a Santiago. Però si è partiti. E una volta arrivati a Leon, lui che aveva un mese di tempo e aveva avuto dall’esperienza quello che voleva, è tornato indietro. A quel punto io sono andata avanti da sola perché ho capito che invece ero chiamata a uno scontro con Dio, ero chiamata a decidere, e a quell’epoca mi sono riconvertita. Adesso avrei bisogno di un’altra riconversione. La lettura dell’antico testamento è uno shock per chiunque, e per chi ha dei dubbi è una lettura molto pericolosa. Papa Francesco, che io amo molto, consiglia di leggere la bibbia, io consiglio di leggere solo il vangelo, c’è un tale abisso.

Il cammino è stata un’esperienza fortissima, è stato tutto un incontro con angeli che mi hanno spinto.

Ora, non c’entra niente ma mi inviti a fare delle confessioni pubbliche tremende [ride], va bene che parliamo di passioni, quindi va bene. All’epoca c’era un’associazione, Amici del Cammino di Santiago, a cui ci eravamo iscritti, e a Milano la rappresentante era Elena Manzoni, sorella di Piero Manzoni, l’artista, e mamma di quella giovane artista, Pippa Bacca, che aveva fatto un viaggio in autostop in abito da sposa attraverso i paesi colpiti dalla guerra come performance artistica, e durante il tragitto è stata uccisa.
Per lei era una sfida poetica e bellissima, con l’idea di portare un messaggio di bellezza, speranza, amore e di essere protetta proprio da questo, quindi è stato un fatto terribile e a maggior ragione sconvolgente.

Così, prima di partire siamo andati a trovare Elena che ci avrebbe dato la Compostela, una specie di pagellino dove si mettono i timbri cammin facendo e più timbri ha più valore acquisisce. Io la mia Compostela voglio portarmela nella bara e voglio che bruci insieme a me, a dire, sono stata pellegrina.

Ed Elena, che aveva fatto il cammino con le cinque figlie tutte piccolissime, perdersi nei boschi quando non era ancora segnalato bene, ci aveva detto che quando sul cammino avremmo avuto momenti di depressione e di sconforto, sarebbe intervenuto sempre un angelo. Per me è stato del tutto così: ho sempre avuto dei momenti in cui stavo male o in cui mi sono persa, ma accadevano degli episodi così sconvolgenti che alla fine ho capito che sarei dovuta arrivare in fondo perché c’erano dei segnali troppo forti, per cui è stata un’esperienza molto forte, molto mistica e molto bella. Direi una delle esperienze più belle della mia vita.

Il mio rapporto con lo spirito, con l’eterno, con Dio, chiamiamolo Dio, è un’altra delle passioni della mia vita perché è del tutto irrisolto, è una lotta continua. C’è quel libro bellissimo di Gabriella Caramore, La parola Dio, che si interroga sulla possibilità o meno di salvare la parola Dio, liberandola da tutti i pesi, gli orpelli, le brutture, le storture di cui l’abbiamo caricata. Alla fine lei la salverebbe, e anch’io la salvo.

CV: Grazie. È davvero un racconto bellissimo.

EL: Il mio motto quando avevo vent’anni era, “Follow the dream, follow the dream, follow the dream”, preso da Lord Jim di Joseph Conrad. Poi da grande, il motto di Iperborea, è diventato “Noblesse oblige”, che significa, se tu hai il privilegio di fare un mestiere stupendo, di avere a che fare con gente stupenda, tutta animata da passione, hai il dovere di esserne all’altezza, umana soprattutto. Che significa, nei limiti del possibile, rispondere a tutte le mail, a tutte le lettere, e usare bellezza, attenzione, gentilezza.
CV: As you know, this interview project focuses on passion which, as you said to me in one of our exchanges, evokes both creativity and intensity, and it is the leading force of our activities. Can you tell us more about your own passion and what brings your work to life?

I would also like to add that passion is a very intense word, connected to suffering in its etymological meaning so, does your passion have to do with an open wound, a gap that needs to be filled, a fracture that must be fixed?

SD: That’s a good question. Relating passion to work, one needs to think in terms of not only intellectual engagement but much more than that. It is your entire subjectivity. And
in my case, in terms of profession, that is classroom teaching, guiding research at the PhD level, and also guiding more project works at a postdoctoral level - those have been about critical writing and that too requires passion but that passion does not include my own very personal subjectivities. It is not about myself, it is about the text and my response to a particular text, my association with the text in the terms of my interpretation and my own standpoint, my ideologies and the methodologies that I would advise the students to follow in reading those texts. So, as a professional, or even as a public intellectual, that work involves critical thinking, critical expression and critical writing.

However, when I write creatively, it is not only an outpouring of my own personal frustrations, ambitions and dilemmas but, a little more than that. If I were 16 it would all be about a lost boyfriend, yes [laughs], but I am no longer a 16-years old and even though I was writing poems since my schooldays, I thought they were so very personal, so that’s not the sort of poetry that I wanted to share with the world because that’s more in the term of very confessional ways of just noting down one’s expectations, disappointments, frustrations, desires, which are deeply personal and yet, a transition period that each individual goes through in some way or the other. But when I matured, that’s the time when I felt that my subjectivities were extending to my understanding of the public domain, that is not only my own immediate environment, with regard to my identity, not only as a wife, a mother or as a professional, a professor at university, but with regard to my identity as a responsible citizen not only of India, but of the world.

As soon as I tried to create a negotiation between being an Indian citizen and a citizen of the world, it becomes much more complex and complicated, but I am able to establish a network of responses which is about intersectionality, where I try to understand races, cultures, religion, people, and therefore I felt that, when I begin writing I should be able to address these in some way or the other. Now, I sent you those two books [Lakshmi unbound (2017) and Sita’s sisters (2019), ed.] because I was under the impression that probably you were doing some course on South Asian literature, where you would be able to associate these Indian icons, like Sita and Lakshmi, in terms of religious icons. Therefore, now that you are telling that you are more into Swedish and Russian cultures, I am thinking it was a
bad choice [laughs]. But, at the same time, if you have read those books carefully, they are also addressing gender injustice, gender segregation and gender violence and throughout the world women are still the second sex, we are all struggling for gender equality, for gender justice, but somehow, the mindset refuses to change. Our clothes changed, our ways of expressing us probably changed, but inherently, through social conditioning, our attitudes’ approaches somehow never seem to change radically. My personal feeling is that somehow, we are stuck to that sort of well known, absolutely clichéd definition that the man is the dominant and the woman is some sort of a secondary person in terms of her role, whether it’s in the house or in the workplace, where they have to deal with the barriers very famously described as the glass ceiling. So, women being in the decision-making body whether it is in the government, whether it is in the administration, whether it is in the little institution that they might be working in or even a non-profit organization, like a club, even then, somehow all the decisions remain absolutely framed within a sort of male dominance. And women’s role has been to cater and support those decisions rather than interrogate and, if necessary, get to dismiss those - that’s the way I like to look at it and therefore my own personal response, in terms of the poetry I write or even my short stories, has two layers. One is deeply subjective - it is about a person and an identity and it is about very private, personal, intimate emotions. At the same time the other one tries to reach out to others as well. It is not so internalized that it would become so dense and abstract nor so generalized that there would be no way of understanding what is happening in the poem or in the short story. I try to avoid that, being a teacher of English, I always felt that communication is the first word that we need to understand in terms of language. If language fails to communicate, if it is not reader friendly, that the reader has to sit down with a dictionary to understand what the creative writer has written, then I am really failing the reader. My language use should be of such a nature that it will freely flow from my pen into the reader’s mind. That’s the way I would like to look at it.
CV: Talking about languages, you are a translator as well, which is strongly related to writing poetry. As you state in the preface to your last book of poetry, *Sita’s sisters*, when you write poetry you are somehow compelled to do so by a need to translate your feelings and thoughts into verbal, human communication.

But in the first place, you literally translate, from Bengali to English, in order to “fill gaps others haven’t bridged”, where “you and me become us”. So, how can you go beyond apparently objective differences and gaps that seem impossible to be overcome? How can you, through translation, build a connection that makes the global and the local one thing? And why is it important for you to do so?

SD: You see, my advantage has been being a teacher of English, which is not our local language nor is it our local culture and so, the minute I walk into a class, I am really translating a culture for my students.

Even when I am choosing ordinary very well-known poems by Shakespeare or Wordsworth. These are poems written in English and my students have no clue what English culture is about, what even English flora and fauna are about. There is a very famous poem by Wordsworth called *The daffodils*. No Indian student has ever seen what a daffodil looks like. Thanks to the internet I can at least show a picture in the class. But imagine when we were students, we just heard about the daffodil. Yet, there is a line in the poem, *ten thousand saw I at a glance*, and the language was so griping that we, in that class, not having seen a single daffodil, we too could join Wordsworth and see ten thousand at a glance. So, in creative literature, there is always that element of the imagination, that imaginative leap.

In the case of translation, if you just go for word translation, then it is like translating a textbook in order to pass your exam. But creative literature translation involves a sort of intimate emotion in the sources, that is the local language texts, whether it is Italian, French, or Bengali. Total emotion in the text and also an understanding of the target language -the language in which I want to translate.

I translated into English, and thanks to my ability to handle the English language with a lot of confidence I am able to translate in a certain way because I write creatively in
English, so translating also has not caused me so much of misery because I can easily communicate with the reader, who has to feel that the text is reader friendly.

So, if it is not going to challenge the translator and you have to go in for approximation to such a degree that you will kill the original word, it is not going to work. Therefore many very wise theories of translation have suggested that, in the case of translation of poetry, poet translators are better because they have a sense of rhythm, they have a sense of language and they have that sensitivity of a poet, which is why when they are translating into a different language, the words they are picking up in their mind, which are resonating in their mind, are poetry words, rather than absolutely basic translated words, which will communicate the meaning but will lose all the grease of a translated piece. So that is the way I have translated and I have found it not so bad. In fact, I recently co-edited a book of Tagore’s poems.

He was the first Asian and Indian to have got the Nobel prize in literature, in 1913, the first Asian to get it in British India. India was not free then, India became independent in 1947, he wrote his poems in Bengali, and then they were translated into English when he went to England, and his friends in England, all British men, sent the translated manuscript to the Swedish Academy and they fell in love with these poems. It was 1913, all of Europe was getting ready for war, the First World War, and so here comes a poet who is so mystical, who sees a sort of connection between the earth and the heavens, without going into anything related to religion, it is a sort of pantheism, a sense of god, a sense of justice, a sense of equality, which permeates the entire world, so Tagore was a very superior creative writer. He was very intelligent and he was also very sensitive. And therefore, they often suggest he was more of a poet-philosopher, a visionary. So, I recently translated these poems of him which were never translated into English before because they were ignored – and here we are addressing the gender question. Because as soon as his wife died, he wrote about 27 short poems within one month from her death. Now as you know, translators would always go for those big poems of nationalism, whereas these poems which he had written to his wife, were ignored. Maybe scholars referred to them, maybe some translated a few lines of one poem, but they were never considered good
enough to be translated fully. There was also a notion that Tagore was in love with his sister-in-law, who was a much smarter woman than his wife, and there was a notion that probably he did not much refer to his wife—although they had 5 children together. I translated them in order to emphasize how in those sonnets, maybe from a sense of guilt, what is coming out is his total devotion to his wife, strangely. It is not a husband writing to a wife, a wife who has also been the mother of 5 children, but almost like a lover writing to his beloved. It is really like a Petrarch writing to his Laura. It is so romantic that is unbelievable. And they were easy to translate because he wasn’t using very complex Bengali or Sanskrit terms. It is fascinating how these poems have absolutely contradicted the known notion that Tagore was alright, he was a functional husband, he was not a dysfunctional husband, but he did not really care about his wife. The 27 poems register the notion of very strong elegiac love poems.

CV: You also wrote a book titled Radical Rabindranath. What does being a radical imply to you? Would you, in special regard to your position as a feminist scholar in 2020 India, define yourself a radical?
SD: I wish I could, but I’m not so sure how radical I am, because if radical is total dismiss of everything that is gone before I am not that sort of radical. However, thinking out of the box, interrogating stereotypes, de-stereotyping, questioning, and coming to some conclusions which are about a much more balanced outlook - that is what I would consider radical. In the case of Tagore also, what was found very fascinating was, the older he was getting, the more radical he was becoming. When he was a much younger man, he didn’t have that sort of confidence. In my book, I even talk about his pre-Nobel prize period and his post-Nobel prize period. After he got the Nobel prize, he travelled all over the world many times both in the East, that is Japan, China, Korea, even West-Asia, and through Europe, America and also England, and that’s how it began. So, he was exposed to the entire world. He became a cosmopolitan, but we call him a rooted cosmopolitan. Not a cosmopolitan who has forgotten everything about their home and distances themself from their home. Tagore was not that sort of person. He could take the world
together with its good and bad and try to see how there could be a meeting point, how there could be mutual understanding. Even just a few months before he died, in 1941, he understood that the Second World War was threatening and he wrote a very important essay, *Crisis of civilization*, where he talked about how inhuman and subhuman we are all becoming with our density for profit and power, the most corrupting urges which destroy the humanity in us and our sense of ethics. As soon as you want to go for profit you think that ethics doesn’t matter and corruption is something that you accept as a way of being successful in your particular enterprise. So, if everything is about corporations and enterprises then you are a robot, an automaton, rather than a human being. First precondition of being a human being for me it would be to be empathetic, to be able to understand others. Just understanding oneself is to become absolutely a selfish authoritarian, but to reach out to all the others, that is humanity. In fact, in South Africa there is a particular philosophy, it’s called Ubuntuism, popularized by Desmond Tutu, who got the Nobel peace prize. Tutu wrote this poem about the concept of ubuntu, that is about being happy, or living as others are happy. So, if others are happy only then you can say I am happy, and that is a human response. We have this sort of differentiation from being a homo sapiens, that is a human being, and a human animal- we are also animals. But when we stop being an animal and become a human being is when we believe in Ubuntuism, that is believing in empathy, in tolerance, in loving others by being sensitive to others. But if you are overpowered by those capitalist urges of profit and power then what happens is that you are killing your soul in order to find the finest soul in the Louis Vuitton bag [laughs].

**CV:** Speaking of empathy, one of the poems in *Sita’s sisters* is called “*Kind Karuna,*” which means compassion.

**SD:** That’s right. I deliberately named her *Karuna.*

*Karuna* also relates to the Buddhist religion. The Buddhists use the word *karuna* a lot, in terms of compassion, so that is also something I thought would be important in terms of making those associations.
CV: From “poems of resistance, a freedom song”, as you define Lakshmi unbound, to Sita’s sisters “poems of resistance and resilience”. How did this transition happen?

Lakshmi is an individual setting herself free, whereas the dimension of sorority grows in Sita’s sisters. Does the transition also have to do with a more collective perspective?

SD: Let’s take the word patriarchy, which doesn’t mean that all men are bad and all women are good. That would be very simplistic and a position like that would also probably never be able to pass any scrutiny. But what makes us what we are is the overarching presence of patriarchy in all levels of our social and personal life, globally and locally. Patriarchy plays a huge role in the way we look, in the way we dress up. Which is why we can blame the Chinese about foot binding, but what about the first world women in their stiletto heels? Isn’t that an oppressing pain also? Yet there is a sort of imposition that if I can carry a stiletto and be seen in stiletto, it means that I am much more distinguished that the others who wear those flat shoes. The emphasis is always on the body, either in terms of body shaming or glorification of the body. Have you ever heard a woman getting raped because she is full of rings? Never. Or because this woman is so pretty? Never. It is all about the objectification of women. That becomes much more important. And it is so in India as well, which has a much more conservative culture. But that again differs in terms of which part of India, which category or class of Indians you were thinking of. English speaking India is a micro-group, and belonging to that micro-group I am a sort of person of privilege. Most women and girls, who are often married off by the time they are teenagers, never reach exposure to western education, which only comes a little later after primary school, towards colleges and universities.

In such terms therefore, Karuna is not an urban city woman. Karuna is a village woman who has been trained to accept her life, the concept that the woman is married off, looked up at as a sort of piece of land and expected to provide children for the family, and male preference is one of the preconditions. So, giving birth to a boy is celebrated, while giving birth to a girl means that something is wrong with the womb of the woman and the mind of the woman. So, in such circumstances, a woman is shamed throughout, even if she
brings new life into the world, instead of being celebrated, if she gives birth to
girlchildren, then she is abused, insulted and, in many cases, there is a possibility of her
being killed as well. In some circumstances therefore, when we think of India, if you think
of one India, the one I am from, it would not be a good understanding. As soon as you
leave the city of Kolkata and go into the villages in the outskirts of my state, the positions
of women are not like mine, there are both gender issue and economic class issue.
Therefore, to even call myself a feminist is something that I do very deliberately. You will
notice that even in the first world universities many women will be sitting in a women’s
studies class and would say “Well, I’m not really a feminist”. While I was teaching in the
US, I taught a couple of courses on postcolonial literature and post-colonial films, many of
the students were not very confident and I remember I would laughingly say outside the
class that if they take up gender studies then they are going to lose their boyfriend. And
this is in America, University of New Mexico. There is a teacher who was there and would
tell me, “Everybody is dropping out of my class because the boyfriends object to the fact
that students are becoming too smart and defeminized”. And this is in America, not in
India. Therefore, it is complex. It is so much ingrained throughout the world in our
collective sight generated by patriarchy, which is so deep rooted that it will probably take
many more years to uproot it. And why does it got to be uprooted? Because of the simple
fact that men have not changed. Men in their minds may admire me a feminist, the way I
am freely talking about feminism and gender equality, in a lecture, but at home they will
want their grandmother or their mother, as being the sort of ideal woman rather than a
smart independent woman. If the man is challenged, he would expect an independent
woman to behave like his mother, which most women do. Women have a special voice for
men, which is not the voice in which I am speaking. It would be a much more gentle,
sweeter voice. That is the feminization of the role of the woman that is appreciated by
patriarchy. When you talk a little less, never voice your own opinion, leave all that to the
classroom, and when you go back home you go back a hundred years. So, it is 21th
century in the classroom, but early 20th century at home. That is the sort of disparities that
we have culturally, but I think it is true in some way or the other throughout the world.
CV: Women, gender and equality. These have somehow been the connecting thread throughout our conversation. As you know, yesterday we celebrated the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. This year’s theme is “Fund, Respond, Prevent, Collect!”. As in previous years, this day will mark the launch of 16 days of activism that will conclude on 10 December, International Human Rights Day. What is the role of the poet in the context of – to use your words – breaking the gates of patriarchy?

SD: In India, the role of the poet also is a little frustrating and disappointing because the poet can only get to those who understand the poet’s language. In India, with so many illiterate and semiliterate men and women, among those 70% of people, in the remote villages, what I am writing is not reaching them, what I am writing is reaching a micro-group of students and readers who understand English. Bengali literature is also very rich and advanced, those who write in Bengali are able to reach up to a level little deeper into the villages because it is the local language but still there are so many who don’t know what the language is all about. Only yesterday, I had to hire a maid to help me because my son and his family are coming and I thought that I have done enough domestic work so I need help because three more people are joining the house, and I asked this woman, who is in her early forties, if she went to school. She said, no. Then I asked if she could write her name. Her answer was, yes. So, I said how did you learn to write it? She said, she just managed to learn. – She cannot recognize the alphabets, she draws her name like a picture when she has to sign.

Can you imagine where we are? It is very frustrating because being a part of women studies, we have even had projects on women’s empowerment by encouraging women in eco-friendly business when they were working with handicraft which absolutely are made with local indigenous products which are all green products. But reaching and understanding them it has been such a problem, because they cannot even showcase what they are doing since they don’t understand the language. They can only make the product. So, we have to go into many levels in order to understand what we are doing, therefore
the poet part of me is a little different from the activist part of me. I would nevertheless like to bring in my activism translated into my poetry in order to generate more and more awareness among young readers, so that the others can take forward what I have not been able to do successfully, apart from raising a few questions. That would be my way of looking at it. Looking at future.

[End of interview]