
A TALK WITH SIDDHARTH DHANVANT SHANGHVI¹

FELICITY HAND

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
felicity.hand@uab.cat

Received: 23-01-2015

Accepted: 24-02-2015



FH One of labels used a lot in academia is of course this very unsatisfactory thing called “postcolonial”. How do we talk about the kind of writing that is coming out of the former colonized nations. Do we actually have to give it some kind of name? Teaching in university one is obliged to label writers so can you suggest something more useful for us?

SDS I hate the phrase “post-colonial”. One thing that is very interesting to me is to have an entire people defined by a kind of former government so to actually have that baggage label stuck onto them seventy years on after that culture and that society has long been dismissed is also a kind of colonialism. Another thing that comes to mind is that you would never find in other societies people being parcelled together by governments either past, present or future so writers that wrote during the Bush regime in America were never classified as “post democracy writers”.

That brings me to another discussion of the phrase “magic realism”. Now what does magic realism mean to you? Why is it that writers out of India or Africa are always classified as “magic realists”? When you talk about Kafka or somebody turning into a cockroach, that’s not classified as magic realism. But if the same story is set in Asia or South America it is classified as magic realism. Writers coming out of Asia, Africa or South America are defined as magic realists, which takes away from the strength, the power of the realism and the imagination of the writing. So all these classifications that

¹ The text is based on the talk given by the author at Casa Asia, Barcelona, 26th May 2014. The editor wishes to thank Ms. Núria Rota for her kindness in providing the audio of the interview.

come out of academic life to my mind both acknowledge in the same breath as much as they they dismiss.

It is important that writers actually take ownership of how they define themselves. One phrase that stays with me is from Toni Morrison who wrote that definitions don't lie in the hands of the defined, they lie in the hands of the definers. So it's really important now to wrestle that power back and to say how you want your own fiction to be defined, if you do at all.

FH Are you happy about being compared to writers such as Salman Rushdie or Vikram Seth in the sense of being a "Midnight's Child" if one can use that term?

SDS These are writers that I respect immensely, their fiction has influenced my life and my imagination but I find categories that lump together people by the colour of their skin or by geographical or national demarcation very limiting. So I'm very grateful for these entirely undeserved comparisons with people like Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie but it would be far more interesting if if somebody had read a book of mine and found some resonance with a Spanish writer or Chilean photographer, this would be far more interesting and engaging for me.

FH Let's talk a little about contemporary India. I'd like to hear about your attitude to ageing, which is a topic that comes up in your novels, and the traditional values of deference and respect to the elderly. Are you conscious of any significant changes in this area in recent years?

SDS I will answer not broadly but specifically. I moved back from California to India to care for my parents. My mother has since passed away and I came back because my father had cancer. What was important to me was what how he aged. The idea of actually living on well into the sunset years has lost its patina, has lost its shine for me. Taking care of my father after he had his cancer made me rethink the importance of actually accepting medical care in certain situations. So he had brain cancer, he been treated, he's completely finebut the chemotherapy has damaged his brain to a point where his life for him is not as meaningful as it was. Was it important for him to have taken the treatment in that case? That was an important takeaway for me. So I can

speak about it personally, there was that sense of moving back. How he aged and whether it is important to get the medical attention available is also a big question.

FH Do the elderly still occupy a central role in families?

SDS That shift has happened so while people are very devoted to their parents they often move away. This was my case, I lived away from Bombay, my sister lives in Bangalore. So while we are very devoted to our parents there is also a certain shift, a certain space....

FH I imagine that would be class-based.

SDS Oh, sure but then most things are class-based, money-centric, how much you can do for someone is reliant on how much economic freedom you have.

FH True. The trouble is people in the West have this idea of the authentic India being found in the villages. They don't contemplate the idea of the middle class value system which is not perhaps so different from ours.

SDS People are humans, we are more alike than we are unlike.

FH You have mentioned in one of your essays the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party]. I should add that the news coverage on the elections was rather scanty here in Spain. Some information about the BJP was of course talked about, but I wondered if you think there will be any kind of backlash, a return to more traditional roles as far as what we were talking about, a more open attitude to gender roles.

SDS I'm hesitant to comment on that party because there is an institutionalized hatred towards Narendra Modi, some of which is entirely deserved, but another thing is not respecting that fact that he is an incredibly shrewd political operator. He may not choose to implement the politics of hatred that he exercised in Gujarat when he's in Delhi because he knows that he's playing to a larger audience. The politics of hate that would have worked in the state [of Gujarat] may not necessarily apply when he's playing on the international stage. This is very much the role he is playing. He's also invited leaders from countries that India has historically had problems with such as Pakistan.

He is a man who is operating with a different apparatus so he will be guided by what is good or bad for tourism – the larger footfall of people, of votes, of international public perception - so he'll not do anything that is bad for business. I'm pretty sure that he'll be guided by what is acceptable in western societies because that's what our market is. In that sense, it might be safe to say he's not going to rock the boat.

FH So the so-called Muslim minority [172 million people according to the 2011 census] will have nothing to fear?

SDS I'm sure they do. I'm sure they're watching their backs.

FH Will you give us your views on changes, if there have been any, towards rape and gender violence. What about people's attitude that if a woman is out late she is "asking for it". I'm thinking of the 2012 Delhi gang rape which was reported extensively in the Spanish press.

SDS Yes, this is the case of a young woman who was returning on a bus and was assaulted by several men and gang raped. She was identified in the Indian press as *Nirbhaya*, "the fearless one", which I find offensive because it is taking away the heinousness of what happened. This was the most fearful, horrifying, outrageous, inhuman act - - - so how can you call it fearless? So it was obviously someone who decided to make it a cause celebre: let's call her the fearless one. It was some idiot on a newsdesk in Delhi who decided he was in a position to decide how she was to be looked at publicly.

I don't think these attitudes have changed, they don't change overnight. What is important is that the language is changing, people insist on calling it by its name: rape. In due course, wider understandings of sexual violence will come to India. In other parts of the world they are talking about the rape of men at the hands of women, 42% men claim to have been sexually assaulted by women. Another important fact is when they are looking at statistics they fail to look at men in prisons, which is the highest concentration of rape of a group of people anywhere. And let's not forget that America has the highest incidence of reported rapes of women.

FH In your novels you do break a lot of taboos about sex but there is still an area that seems to be still a great taboo and almost unthinkable, which is rape in families.

SDS Let me tell you about an incident which involved me personally. It was a case of a wedding I heard about recently. You can't imagine how offended I was because there was a uncle who was found guilty of having assaulted a cousin or a niece, and the people wanted the wedding to go ahead, which is a typical Indian situation. Their attitude was let's not invite him to the wedding because of what he did. But not being invited to a wedding is not exactly castigation for the kind of crime. He should have been reported to the cops by the survivor.

FH So it still is a taboo

SDS The reality is that the majority of rape cases are committed by someone who is known to the family.

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi (b. 1977) has two bestselling novels to his credit. His debut novel *The Last Song of Dusk* (2004) won the Betty Trask Award, one of the best known prizes for new writers in the United Kingdom and the Italian award Grinzane Cavour, as well as being nominated to the international IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. His second novel *Lost Flamingoes of Bombay*, published in 2009, was short-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize.

Shanghvi has been voted one of the fifty most powerful young Indian people by *India Today*, one of the ten most creative men according to *Hindustan Times*, as well as "The Next Big Thing" by *The Sunday Times*, among others. He currently collaborates with *TIME* magazine and he has contributed to the editorial pages of *The New York Times*.