Appendix I. An Interview with Sunetra Gupta

Saha: Since meeting you at your book launch event the one question that comes first to my mind is why is there such a long gap of ten years between the production of your last novel *A Sin of Colour* and your latest one *So Good in Black*?

Gupta: There isn't much to say here except that it has been hard to divide my time between bringing up children, being a scientist and my career as a writer.

Saha: Your new book seems to revisit the dichotomy between crime and sin that was explored in *A Sin of Colour*. *So Good in Black* explores the existential theme of creation of values in a world of no fixed morality. How far has existential philosophy influenced your work?

Gupta: I have always been influenced by and attracted to existentialism. I think the tussle between tragedy and the refusal to be included within a tragic narrative constitutes a fundamental existential dilemma in my writing.

Saha: *So Good in Black* depicts memory as a redemptive force. You have often used memory as a narrative device to go back and forth in time. Is memory for your characters just nostalgia or a base for construction of identity?

Gupta: I remember describing nostalgia as 'an easy mead' in one of my earlier books, so that is certainly not how I like to use memory. But once again I think that is a tension between the different uses of memory that creates unexpected tilts in the plane of the narrative.
Saha: Your migrant characters do not show much identity crisis due to cultural displacement. Even Moni in *Memories of Rain*, when she loses her identification with England, it is mainly a manifestation of a personal betrayal that she suffers. Are your characters comfortable in their surroundings because they belong to a particular milieu / class or is it because they go through an effortless process of self-fashioning that is typical of the human condition in the postmodern world?

Gupta: That's probably just because, while being sympathetic to it, I'm not terribly interested — artistically — in cultural displacement. I'm not sure that my characters are ever entirely comfortable in their surroundings but they usually have bigger things to worry about than cultural displacement.

Saha: You have said that multiculturalism ghettoizes people and stops them from building a culture — as if British culture does not belong to them. Amartya Sen has said that often in the garb of multiculturalism it is plural monoculturalism that is promoted hindering the idea of integration. Do you subscribe to this view?

Gupta: I'm not sure that those who promote 'multi-culturalism' are entirely confident about their goals. It is, naturally, extremely desirable that cultures should co-exist and enrich each other — but it is also important that they should not serve as permanent impermeable membranes.

Saha: Your works are perhaps the best examples of cultural integration in literature. In *Memories of Rain* Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" occurs side by side Tagore's lyrics, in *A Sin of Colour* Tagore's songs enters the text as naturally as Brecht's ballad, and then
there is the evocation of Pandavas' "agyatavasa", in Debendranath's and Niharika's disappearance, alongside the existential theme of exercising one's freedom of choice. Are these due to conscious effort or just free-flowing streams of thought?

**Gupta:** They are not due to any conscious effort as such, but rather due to holes appearing (and disappearing) within impermeable membranes that I mentioned in the context of the last question.

**Saha:** You have once said that writing for you is structured dreaming. Is that why you hate semi-colons and quotation marks and not use them since they do not occur in your dreams, structured or otherwise?

**Gupta:** I'm not sure I abide any more by that statement, made so many years ago, about structured dreaming. I do feel a direct need to explore the possibilities that lie outside simple grammar and I certainly maintain that our response to punctuation can be very visceral (in either rejecting or submitting to its many forms). Both semi-colons and quotation marks are intrusive at some level, but I do not feel so strongly about them as to not allow them to be inserted by the editor.

**Saha:** Your narratives are always aesthetically rich but they skirt away from being extrinsically exotic. Amit Chaudhuri in his *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* has said that you seem to have missed out somewhat on the spotlight as enjoyed by some contemporary Indian-English writers. But going on your book release functions this time round, did you find that you have created a niche audience for your work?
Gupta: That's difficult for me to answer. I don't think I want to be in the spotlight – I just need the space to write.

Saha: How was the reception to your book in Calcutta and how special is Calcutta for you?

Gupta: It was very valuable to me to have a book launch in Calcutta, the city that occupies so much of my being. But not having my father around any more – he died five years ago – has made it difficult for me to want to return; this was a good way to break that pattern.

Saha: In matters of longing and belonging to a place, how do you see yourself especially in comparison to your two daughters' perceptions on the same issue?

Gupta: My daughters are too young to have a sense of longing or belonging, or at least to able to communicate it to me in any way. But one thing I know is that there will be a huge difference between us with regard to these perceptions when they are older - but perhaps that is inevitable between mothers and daughters whether or not they grow up within the same 'culture'.

Saha: What is your current project as a writer?

Gupta: There are three writing projects I'm involved in - my new novel, a book on the relationship between the languages of science and literature, and an illustrated children's book on women scientists.

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