

## Interview

### Creative Writing and the Creative Process

**Hemachandran Karah in conversation  
with Professor K. Srilata**

**K. Srilata** is a poet, fiction writer, translator and an academician based in Chennai. She is Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras. Her poems, *In Santa Cruz*, *Diagnosed Home Sick* won the First Prize in the All India Poetry Competition (organized by the British Council and The Poetry Society, India) in 1998. Her poetry collections include *Seablue Child* (2000), *Arriving Shortly* (2011), *Writing Octopus* (2013) and *Bookmarking the Oasis* (2015). Her debut novel *Table for Four* was long-listed in 2009 for the Man Asian Literary Prize. She also has several translations to her credit including R. Vatsala's Tamil novel *Once There Was a Girl* (*Vattathul*). Srilata is also part of the team that runs Yavanika Press, an e-publishing site specializing in poetry.

**Hemachandran Karah (HK):** You are a teacher, researcher, writer, and translator, and we are privileged to have you at IIT. Today I would like to focus on your journey as a creative writer in this conversation, and I am sure other aspects of your scholarship will emanate from there.

**K. Srilata (KS):** Thank you, Hemachandran for giving me this space.

**HK:** Can you briefly talk about your growing up years and when you started writing?

**KS:** I have been writing from ever since I can remember. As a young girl, I used to read and write sentimental poems. Then I went on to write short pieces and started sending them out for publication; that's how slowly I got into writing and that is something that has never left me. It is something that I have held on to right through my life except for a short break.

**HK:** I suppose that was when you were pursuing your PhD.

**KS:** Yes, the kind of writing that PhD demands took me away from the frame of mind one needs to function as a creative writer. The intellectual pursuit of writing a thesis created a break, but I returned to creative writing after I joined IIT as an Assistant Professor about 16 years ago and I have been at it, writing both poetry and fiction.

**HK:** Academic writing is often viewed as dry and has its own demands like giving references, end notes, footnotes, etc. How do you handle both research writing and creative writing? There are very few people who do both well.

**KS:** I am not sure how well I do both; creative writing is like being possessed by a demon or something, at least that is how it has been with me. It is something which becomes an obsession and I have to get it out on paper, otherwise it does not let me rest. And academic work is equally dear to me, especially the teaching. I would not say research as it is narrowly defined today increasingly is as dear to me, but my teaching is very dear to me as is my writing. So, I think what we need to do is actually not think of these as two separate pursuits.

Unfortunately, these are often seen as different pursuits, and creative writing is viewed as being entirely out of the range of academic scholarship. We fail to see the connections between the two, and we also fail to acknowledge and establish that connection for students.

**HK:** How and by what means can we acknowledge that in our classrooms as teachers?

**KS:** Well, I pursue it in a very bold, unafraid way. If writing is your calling, you boldly assert that it is what you want to do, and do not care if it does not get the points in the system. One has to move beyond what people think, or thinking that you are a lesser person/academic because you would rather be writing poetry or fiction than may be publishing a research paper.

Instead you should pursue what you really want to do. I know it appears that today it is easy for me to say this as I have been in this field for long, and also have a stable job. I am not advocating that it is an easy path and everyone should do it, but suggesting that ideally we should be able to work towards thinking about ourselves in that way, and then you will be able to communicate the same to your students, scholars and others that you interact with.

**HK:** I like your symbolism about being possessed by a demon. Because it helps me to understand that when you are gripped and moved by something, you want to put it down, whether it be a poem or a painting. Should we not follow that even in academic writing, where you listen to your voice and decide your field accordingly, instead of selecting a field that is 'fashionable'?

**KS:** Yes, that is right, it is ultimately a search for meanings. And you rightly say that even the choice of academic pursuits should not be driven by externals like 'fashionable area' but by what sorts of questions we want to seek or the kind of fields that we want to navigate. It is about making meaning, also in a sense making that meaning available for others; I think academic pursuits should ideally be driven by that search for meaning.

**HK:** Coming back to the demons, they have taken you to poetry, fiction; it looks like it is taking you in different directions.

**KS:** Well, I think it has kind of pushed me more towards poetry than towards fiction, but that may be because of the fact that I have a full-time job, and I tend to write in bursts in fragmented units of time. And, you can manage to write the draft of a poem in about say half an hour to an hour which you cannot really do with fiction, where you need longer stretches of uninterrupted time. But I find of late that I am also drawn to writing certain kinds of non-fiction.

**HK:** I remember a TV interview where the musician discussed writing of songs; he said that he would hum the song, and the writer wrote the lyrics. And sometimes, the lyricist wrote the song first, and then the musician came up with a suitable melody.

In your case, the situations and sentiment choose the literary form?

**KS:** Yes, that is right.

**HK:** It is good to know the workings behind creative writing. Please tell us more about your recent works.

**KS:** My new book of poems was published a month ago. It is titled *The Unmistakable Presence of Absent Humans*. When I was putting this collection together, I did not make any conscious attempt to thematically link the poems, there was no grand narrative; but then I found that one particular idea surfaced repeatedly: the idea of absent presences.

**HK:** Can you please elaborate this further, perhaps read some lines from the book.

**KS:** Let me refer to the 'Preface' of the book to explain the idea. Absent presences are quite unmistakably presences, and the idea of disappearance is often a traumatic separation. It was as though I have been trying all along to find the words for these things. The absent is always present in our lives in difficult and powerful ways, in ways that we may not always be able to explain or account for. Growing up as a daughter of a single mother I was acutely conscious of the absence of a father. My mother's challenging life as a divorcee in 1970s India had implications for my own life. It was the shadow under which I walked. For one thing we were oddities in a world where families meant not just mothers and fathers, but also uncles and aunts, grand uncles and grand aunts, and grandparents.

The constant presence in our lives was the absence of people who we felt ought not to have been absent. I think people experience absent presences as an itch and in my case I used poetry to get at it. This is also perhaps why I have tried to imagine, what absences might mean to the lives of characters in mythologies, Sita's twins Lava and Kusha for example, or Penelope, the wife of Odysseus. I have also been haunted equally by the question of what forced disappearances must mean to people in conflict-ridden zones.

There is yet another absence, a disappearance that we have recently started to experience, that of the ideals of social equality and secularism, this disappearance too has found its way into some of my poems. After having worked on this collection for several years, I noticed that this idea of absences of various sorts was what informed many of the poems. And today, looking back at my earlier work as a poet I think that perhaps that sense of blankness was fuelling my work.

**HK:** Would you say that your first novel, *Table for Four*, has absence as the underlying theme as well?

**KS:** Yes, that's right. The novel has a peculiar background to it because I had spent a year in California, Santa Cruz, as a student on a Fulbright pre-doctoral scholarship. I found the year very difficult as I was homesick, and I wanted to run back home. I had housing challenges like finding a housemate, arranging things, and by the time things settled down, it was time for me to leave.

It was my first stay outside the country, and technology like Google wasn't there, and one was clueless. I had never seen a supermarket in my life before. Many things were new, annoying and I was extremely uncomfortable. After I came back to India, got married, had a child, started working in IIT, I somehow forgot all of that. But with the setting of the novel being Santa Cruz where I had spent a very uncomfortable year, my experiences entered the book. Of all the characters, Maya perhaps is the character that is closest to my own voice. She is trying to pursue her PhD and has this strange landlord; it is a book about stories and secrets of different people. It is a loosely connected set of four stories really more than a novel.

**HK:** Reading your poems I felt a sense of absences, and now I have a better understanding with the author discussing her idea of absent presence! I have also observed the repeated figure of the mother sending the children off to school in many of your stories. Please tell us something more about it.

**KS:** It is interesting you should ask me this since the next book that I am planning and hoping to write is part non-fiction, part fiction. It is going to be a mixed genre, where I actually explore the idea of children who do not quite neatly fit into the school system. This partly comes from personal experience as a parent as raising children is very difficult in a competitive environment. When children do not neatly fit the system or do not manage to get straight as people tend to think that there is something wrong with the children. Instead we need to see that something is wrong with the system at large. The system allows only a narrow bandwidth of skills or abilities to flourish, and there are countless others.

**HK:** Yes, human possibilities are abundant.

**KS:** You are absolutely right, and as a scholar of disability studies you would have a better understanding about it. There is a huge spectrum of people who are left behind in our education system. I find that increasingly troublesome because people are literally cast out of the system unless you have somebody who can mentor you through that, or navigate it for you. This is even more difficult when you are a child who does not know how to operate in this complex world. So, you just fall through the cracks for no fault of yours.

The book that I am planning will partly be a personal account, and will

also attempt to reach out to stakeholders (though I do not like to use that word). There are parents and educators who are beginning to feel that something is not quite right with the system.

**HK:** So, we see things by intuition and experience.

**KS:** Yes. Also it explores that there are no quick fix solutions, it is not as if you take the child out of this school and put him/her in another school. Shifting from mainstream to alternate school does not mean things are solved, because there are blind spots and problems in every system. And, this is a deep flaw I think in the larger social systems which believes in standard solutions.

I think it is important to have a larger debate about different approaches to education, to consult special educators or teachers who work in mainstream schools, and parents of differently abled children or different sorts of intelligences, it is important to have that conversation.

**HK:** I am reminded of your story, 'You Expert Woman, You', where the narrative mocks the notion of expertise at the end. In a way the expertise is the child's, rather than the mother. That is the crux of disability studies, it is about experience, intuition and knowledge.

**KS:** Yes, you create your own knowledge. Whether it is children with disabilities or parents/caregivers, you are thrown into it and you come up with the most incredible solutions.

If our schools would learn to look at those solutions that come from people's experiences rather than the top down approach where they just try to push things down our throats, things could change a little.

**HK:** I am glad that you put it this way because now disciplines like disability studies are moving away from moral questions and social constructions about disability.

It is about inventing solutions, creating pathways, creating new temporalities. It is interesting to see your sustained engagement in the area, both in your writings and your experiences as a mother. It comes across vividly in your work.

**KS:** Thank you.

**HK:** You have talked about your creative journey. I would like to know your views about creative writing courses in India. Should we mimic the Western model of creative writing courses or can we have something

unique and specific to our own situation?

**KS:** I have noticed that in the last 3-4 years that writers, especially younger poets have a tremendous drive or ambition to do writing programmes, MFAs either in the US or UK. They are driven to undertake the courses even at the enormous financial cost to themselves and their families. And there is hardly any funding for these courses.

**HK:** And hardly a job after that.

**KS:** I must say that I do not quite understand that because I think one should instead observe life around, use all the resources available, thanks to the internet, and write.

With so much online material, you should be able to manage writing. I know it is lovely to have a whole year to yourself to just sit and write, go to a classroom where you can just sit down and write and so on, but it is not essential.

**HK:** The classroom will give you a feedback on your writing.

**KS:** Yes, but I think it is not essential. It can sometimes be counterproductive.

**HK:** May be the faculty of mind can be systematically trained for writing from early years.

**KS:** Yes, that might be a better approach.

**HK:** Thank you Srilata for sharing your insights on the creative process and education for special children.

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