

Unfolding the World of Vihang A. Naik: Interview of an Indian Poet by Goutam Karmakar

--- an interview by **GOUTAM KARMAKAR**

About Vihang A. Naik

Vihang A Naik, born in Surat, India on September 2, 1969, is a contemporary poet writing in English, widely published and won many awards. He is educated from The M.S. University of Baroda with Philosophy, English Literature and Indian Literature in English Translations. Now he is working in the capacity of Associate Professor in the Department of English at Shree Ambaji Arts College, Ambaji. His collections of poems include *City Times and Other Poems* (1993), *Making a Poem* (2004) and *Poetry Manifesto: New & Selected Poems* (2010). His Gujarati collection of poems titled *Jeevangeet* (2001) is dedicated to the cause of victims of Gujarat Earthquake on 26th January, 2001. He also translates poetry written in Gujarati language into English including his own Gujarati Language poems into English. His poems have appeared in literary journals and anthologies. His further information can be found at www.vihang.org/.

In a discussion with Vihang A. Naik, Goutam Karmakar got a chance to explore the poetic cosmos of Naik. There, Naik explains his experience of being a poet. He openly shares many things about his poetry. He answers each question with great patience. Hope his readers and poetry lover will enjoy reading it.

TEXT OF THE INTERVIEW

GOUTAM KARMAKAR (GK): Before starting the usual conversation let me introduce once again Vihang Ashokbhai Naik to the world. Can you tell me about yourself and education?

VIHANG A. NAIK (VN): I grew up as human being with normal everyday life. Of course, while changing cities my school did change. I was born in Surat of South Gujarat. Then shifted to Ahmedabad, Baroda , then again to Ahmedabad then Baroda. (He did his schooling in Navrachna School at Vadodara in Gujarat and graduation and post-graduation in Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda).

GK: Today you are one of the widely acclaimed established Indian English poet, critic and editor. It is a great journey and has there been a struggle behind your emerging as a poet of lofty ideals?

VN: That's a good question as you are familiar with that story I guess Goutam. As I look back I can tell you a particular incident. It is not a struggle but a worth story to share. I used to scribble poetry from the later part of my school days. In my college days I have written in English one collection of poetry. But due to some reason I have burnt it totally and this incident was published in the local newspaper. There is no anger right now for that.

GK: Once you said that poetry can be captured in any art and it depends upon the artist how one captures it and to what extent the aesthetic experience is put in any medium. Then tell me Sir in a more elaborate way about the definition of poetry to you. How can you define your *Making a Poem* and where have you laid your focus while writing a piece?

VN: It is the faculty of intuition which can work when you have worked or crafted over the work of art. Poetry is fusion of thought and feelings with conscious craft involved. It is all about writing about writing and this writing may come from conflicts, incidents, surroundings of villages and towns, meeting with people from different sections and going to the ancient and modern places. *Making a Poem* about poem is where the focus is laid right now. I don't know what would be next.

GK: In an interview you said, "I don't know why I write poetry...may be the creative urge which would not let you pick up any medium that you are comfortable with...it is not the rhyming scheme that enthralls me about poetry but I think poetry is life which enthralls." In view of the above can you tell what and when did inspire you to write poetry?

VN: A nice observation Goutam. The question of "what" and "when" is devious one. It is difficult to tame inspiration. Poetry happens, if it has to happen. Actually simplicity inspires me and I always try to look at the simple things of life, culture, environment and the people along with their ways of living. Whenever I see something which should be done in the society I take my pen to raise my voice for I always believe what Shakespeare said that the pen is mightier than the sword.

GK: You are a bilingual writer like many other Indian English poets. So I want to know whether you write directly in English or 'transcreate' your native (Gujrati) lingual thought into English.

VN: Writing poetry in English language is different and writing poetry in Gujarati language is unique. Both experiences are different. But of course, the mind set, attitude and tendencies may have similarities. I do not transcreate from my native (Gujarati) lingual into English. But I

often translate some poets who write in Gujarati language into English including my own poetry first written in Gujarati language. Not that I discourage transcriptions.

GK: Why have you taken only poetry as your lifelong companion? Is there any influence of ancestral poet or writer in your writing or by following whom you have decided to go with poetry? Kindly discuss it.

VN: I do not have an ancestral connection neither do I have any contemporary connection. It is just that I happen to write poetry. If I remember it was during my morning walks in Maharishi Arvind Garden in Fatehgunj in Baroda that muse struck me. I came home with some verse in me that would not let me rest until I put it down on plain paper. Then I worked on it till it turned out to be a poem. It was beginning. I think then the story begins. Now it is history.

GK: Poets are often called social reformers. As a poet do you think so? And is there any message that you want to share before the readers through your poetry?

VN: Yes Goutam, I certainly agree with you that poets are often called social reformer. But I do not fall in this category. I believe I do not have any social agenda to spread or any manifesto other than poetry. I even believe that poetry is not a vehicle to propagating any propaganda. I view poetry in my own way, not a vehicle of social change but if poetry does something than it is good poetry. Even if it changes perspective or sparkle a flash of light it has achieved something.

GK: Among all the poems that you have written till now which one is your favourite one and why? What is the important thing that readers don't explore till now and you think they should explore and know about it regarding your verse?

VN: I believe poetry appreciation is subjective art. One may like one while the same poem may be disliked by the other. However, there must be objective criteria to evaluate. I like all my poems from *City Times*, *Making a Poem*, *Poetry Manifesto*. Of course, I like my poems written

in Gujarati language which are collected in *Jeevangeet* as well including some translated by me.

GK: Often it is heard that influences hamper the original thought process and creative faculty of a writer. Do you really think so? Besides this is there any challenging fact that a poet faces while writing poetry?

VN: Again this is personal question. Since you have brought out such a significant issue I should comment. Influences are not that bad always. Some of the best literary works have come out of healthy influences in your search any literary histories whether it is Indian or Western. But we should safe guard between influence and imitation. Bad imitation is unhealthy for writers or poets.

GK: Do you follow some specific rules in your poetry? You are more familiar with free verse and why? Sir can you kindly elaborate your writing style and how does it differ from others?

VN: When you call it poetry and not prose. It has to be different from prose. I did try to create some, like you pointed out, specific rules. But I would like to put it in category of free verse because I do not follow any particular style or specific conventions for longer time. I myself would defy it rules that I follow after some time. But I am in there for innovation and intuition.

GK: Irony and satire along with pastiche and meta-fictions are presented in your poetry. Your handling of imagery and symbolism often project you as postmodern Indian English poet. Do you really think so? How far you want to differentiate this modern and postmodern canon in Indian English poetry?

VN: Well. I do not consciously label myself as postmodern or post-postmodern or modern. It is difficult to trace modern from postmodern because we are living in India and Indian poetic traditions are often different from Western poetic tradition. In India, I believe, we have more poetry traditions with each Indian language therefore scenario in India would be different from the West which certainly need further exploration.

GK: Besides being a poet, you are also a professor. How can you manage both these two and which one you like most? What do you do in your leisure time to relax?

VN: I like both. I just try to make a balance between my voice and vision and you have to be conscious of how to make the best use of your time as given by the almighty. In my leisure I often listen to music or go for a walk.

GK: Now-a-days people are taking lucrative fictions, short stories and dramas most for their research work. Hardly a few are interested in poetry. Do you agree with me? How do you see the future of Indian English poetry in India?

VN: Poetry matters. Poetry will always matter because civilization will always need poetry. You get best of language in poetry which is hallmark of civilization. I think, in every era, people think that poets do not get enough audience which is not true. In our age we have got maximum exposure for poetry than any other age. The technology has made our age easy to take your poetry any where you choose. I think the future of poetry in India is as good as the future of human along with Indian English poetry.

GK: Are you satisfied with the concurrent pattern of education in academic institutions where focus on poetry is hardly given? As an academicians do you think that more seminars, conferences on poetry and poetry competitions must have to organize to make the situation better?

VN: I really appreciate your concern of contemporary education system in India. Well, some efforts are made by literary institutions like Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi , The Poetry Society (India) New Delhi and so many significant others are doing significant work to promote fine taste in India by way of seminars, conference, literary festivals and some few workshops here and there. Yes, but you are right. Considering multilingual and multicultural like India you feel less is done and more can be done.

GK: In your “Poetry Manifesto” you have mentioned in the very beginning before content the names of five Indian English poets. Why have you mentioned the names of only those five? Besides this, any more Indian English poets whose works you love to read?

VN: Well. That is dedication to Indian English Poets who are now no more. The poetry I have enjoyed read therefore I thought I would dedicate to these Poetic Masters of contemporary India. However, I love to read any good poem even now.

GK: Now-a-days many people are writing poems in order to get cheap publicity. I think writing poetry is not at all easy. Will you categorize those as bad work? Do you think the notion of good poetry and bad poetry exist?

VN: Since the time the writing of poetry took up race there were some groups who always claimed that their verses were more polished. In this polishing business some were rightly excluded as bad versifier or some worst that do not deserve to be considered to be called poetry. There will be always good poetry written. Now, how do they differ is all that matters. But I believe reading the poetry that a bad poetry can be, with some craft, converted to good poetry.

GK: Do you ever long for any prestigious national or international award? Have you achieved your goal till now as a poet?

VN: I was never after an award. Not because it excludes some very good poets but I should not be a motivating factor for a poet to contribute to his society and add to the culture that one lives in. I did, and that book did enter Limca Book of Records besides receiving some significant awards from India and abroad. But they came very late after my long practice of writing poetry. For my dreams I am a human at first and want to do something for that human being through my verse. Regarding my goal I want to make people aware and sensitive to every impulse of life for people have to be aware towards their culture, society and norms of life and that is something worth to arise in them.

GK: Many new poets are now emerging in India. What would be your advice to those emerging aspiring poets? And what message do you want to give to all the universal readers of poetry?

VN: Poetry is good for reading. It will make you human. My advice to emerging poets in India is never get lost in imitation or getting trapped in publicity. Just pour out from your heart with good amount of craft with enough learnt poetic talent which changes with time. Innovation and intuition is hallmark of good poetry. Keep up your good works for good cause. Keep reading as reading will give birth to poems and readers may create writers also for readers, I think, are the real people who make verse.

GK: Thanks a lot Mr. Naik for giving me the time and for these insightful replies.

VN: It's pleasure talking to you Goutam. Keep on your reading and writing.

About the Author

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