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Tatjana Debeljački vs. Rokiah Hashim

Interview

QUESTION: HOMETOWN AND GROWING UP?

ANSWER: I was born in the state of Penang in the northern part of Malaysia (Malaya) in 1953. Malaya was still a British colony then. I was the third child in the family of five siblings. My dad was in the police force and mum was a teacher. She even taught me when I was 7 years old. It was not very common to have a working mother those days. But my mum came from family of educators and enjoyed a very special status as educated person and insisted on working.

My dad was working in different parts of the country and moving around a lot due to the state of Emergency which was the armed uprising of Malayan Communist Party trying to take over the country from British under the pretext of independence. And he was in the battle fields in the jungle as he was in the police field force which was very much a special military unit but

under the police. So I missed him a lot and must say it affected my upbringing and formative years very much. And I began to hate wars!

But dad had a way to make it up when we were all living together when I was 9 years old. He would take me to jungle-trekking, hiking and all the outdoor things. I guessed that's how I fell in love with nature and many of my poems are eco-poems. But most important it was very much character building experiences and being with my dad whose ideas on daughters were very different from ordinary Malay-Muslim society in Malaysia. He taught us to be independent, to follow your heart, to be strong and to believe in yourself.

My life had a lot of interesting stories and experiences and I guessed that drove me to be a writer. To tell and to share what I went through since small. It had been an eventful life.

QUESTION: THE TRUE PURPOSE OF ART?

ANSWER: Yes, all genres of arts is a portrayal of beauty and refinements. At least that's what it should be. It has a purpose to uplift humankind through its subtleties that could provoke the mind and the soul when properly executed and portrayed.

In Islam, we have Sufism which is very much a high degree of spiritual attainment and experiences and arts is the medium to achieve it. This is where arts loaded with messages could alter thinking and behaviours and has effects on morality. Even in other cultures, arts soften us and make us gentler and lead to less aggressive behaviours.

QUESTION: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN POETRY AND PAINTING?

ANSWERS: The magic and power of visual portrayal. That's where the connections are. In poetry, the strength, depth and meaning of words, symbolisms, imagery and metaphors are so powerful that they portray images in the readers mind and imaginations. The same with paintings. The images on canvas, colours and an artist's perceptions on the subject he painted leaves a strong visual impact on the mind of people looking at it.

I am a theatre trained person. And the spectacle of a scene is very much derived from the visual impact and interpretation of the written words of the script which is the same like in poetry. And its extension goes into films as well. It's the written words of scripts being interpreted into actions just like the written words in poetry.

I don't paint but always spend a lot of times in art galleries wher ever I go and always feel at ease going through the paintings and always feel a special bond with them emotionally and quite naturally.

QUESTIONS: WORKS, JOURNEYS AND FRIENDSHIPS?

ANSWER: I was a lecturer in a Teachers College for 20 years and writing was a part time vocation. It was after my early retirement at the age of 45, and coincided with my divorce and after bouts of difficult court battles and death of my mother whom I was very close with, I went into full time writing. Thinking back, I wasted lots of precious writing times during those years. One of the few things I regretted most in my life!

I am also into translation works after getting my Post-Graduate Diploma in Translation. I specialized in Lite rature Translation and went into teaching it in few places including universities for few years.

Then I started writing regularly and given a column in 2007 in a major national daily. The column is called Variasi (Variation) for film, theatre reviews and critics and various arts issues. I also wrote regularly in other newspapers and arts magazines every now and then.

In 2013, Malaysia hosted World Congress of Poets (WCP) in my second hometown Ipoh where I was brought up. WCP is under World Academy of Arts and Culture a UNESCO recognized organization and like they said the rest is history. During the poem festival I had the chance to interview Professor Ernesto Kahan the 2nd Vice President of WCP a Noble Peace Prize Holder through IPPNW which is International Physicians For The Prevention of Nuclear War. Prof Kahan is a prominent peace and environmental activist and inspired me a lot to do more into becoming an anti-war, peace activist

seriously through poetry. So I attended World Congress of Poets every year since then. 2014 I went to Peru, 2015 in Taiwan, 2016 in Czechoslovakia and last year in Mongolia.

For your info, my first poem published by the prominent Literary magazine in Malaysia in 1987 Dewan Sastera was an eco-poem titled Port Dickson And Sunset and described by critics as a timeless piece. I was overseas a lot when I was working as lecturer. So the environmental , peace and anti-war issues were very much in my DNA and they affected my writings long before I started attending WCP. In WCP there are many peace and environmental poets and being in the fraternity is very much like being with your best friends! You meet like minded people and people who speaks the same language.

QUESTION: FILM AND THEATRE CRITICS SINCE 2007?

ANSWERS: Yes, besides poems I am also film and theatre critics and been writing in major national dailies in Malaysia. The newspapers are Berita Harian, Harian Metro and Utusan Malaysia. I had been writing in them for a long time since 1990 when I was in Scotland. But since 2007 I was a columnist in these newspapers. Anyway since 2015, I concentrated more on poetry though at times I feel compelled to write critics especially when there are films I need to say something about.

A film critic book was published in 2015 titled Kritikan Filem Siti Ruqaiyah Hashim (Film Critique by Siti Ruqaiyah Hashim) which is compilation of my film reviews and articles since 2007.

QUESTION: BI-LINGUAL POEM ANTHOLOGY KATARSIS-CATHARSIS?

ANSWER: This is my first poem anthology published. And the reason was because I was not encouraged to publish my poems at first. It wasn't a very beautiful story, but I was always very critical with social issues and some people are not very happy about it. So my poems were not taken for publication but I kept writing them online and in blog.

But after coming back from WCP in Peru in 2014, I decided to take my risks and throw away caution to the wind. I stopped writing film and theatre critics but concentrate more in poetry. So I published my poetry book on my own in 2015. That's how Katarsis-Catharsis came into being. It's a bi-lingual poem anthology in Bahasa Malaysia and English. Then a year after that, the book was translated into Spanish by some friends in Argentina. I was in Formosa Argentina and Asuncion Paraguay for the launching and promotion of the Spanish-English version of Catarsis-Catharsis.

QUESTION: BI-LINGUAL ANTHOLOGY NEWS FROM STRASBOURG WITH OTHER WORLD PEACE POETS?

ANSWER: Last year I published an E Book in a bi-lingual anthology titled News From Strasbourg. It is in English and Bahasa Malaysia consisting of 60 poems altogether. 20 poems were mine and there were 12 other international poet's peace poems in it also. They are poems of Prof Mohamed Rabie (Palestine/ USA), Prof Ernesto Kahan (Argentina), Prof Istvan Turczi (Hungary), Prof Jia RongXiang (China), Zhivka Baltadzhieva (Bulgaria/Spain), Samah Sabawi (Palestine/Australia), Milutin Djurikovic (Serbia), Moaen Shalabia (Palestine/Israel), Fahredin Shehu (Kosovo) Amin Maher (Iran) Mesut Senol (Turkiye) and Bei Ta (China).

QUESTION: CURRENTLY WORKING ON A SECOND PEACE POEM ANTHOLOGY?

ANSWER: I am currently working on my second bi-lingual Peace Poem Anthology to be titled Alleys of Paradise 2. They will be published in English and Malaysian Language just like the first one. It is an E Book and will be published in Malaysia. There are 20 other international poets works in it. I take between 2-6 poems from each poets with peace, lack of peace and anti-war and anti- violence as the themes.

The poems are chosen mostly from poets whom I know personally or recommended by close friends. I am particular about the poems and the poets

themselves. Many people write about peace poems, but do they really believe in it? And only after knowing people personally, met them or had worked with them you know who they are and what they believe in.

I am also a human rights activist and very committed in the issues of Palestine, Rohingyas, Kashmir, Syrian war etc so I am very particular if people write peace poems but indifferent about all these issues which are very much affecting everybody globally.

I take a balance of about 10 Muslim poets and 10 non-Muslim ones. I want it to be a forum for dialogue as well. Situation now is such that the Middle East and many Muslim communities are embroiled in arm conflicts, wars and facing persecutions and genocide. This is my little effort as a human being to help stop wars, conflicts and to profess the importance of peace.

QUESTION: CURRENTLY WORKING TOGETHER WITH A RENOWNED POET IBRAHIM HONJO?

ANSWER: Yes, I am doing a joint anthology with Ibrahim Honjo and we are publishing a tri-lingual anthology in English-Bahasa Malaysia-Serbo-Croats and hoping to publish it by August so that it could be launched during the coming Putrajaya International Peace Poem Festival. So we are communicating a lot day and night! Sometimes he send me messages at 4.30am Vancouver time and I send him at 2.30am Malaysian time.

But I find Ibrahim a very easy person to work with and I am happy to strike a good, cordial and close relationship with him. And it was like that from the very beginning when we met in Morocco for the 5th Rabat International Poem Festival. I am happy because we get to know each other better very well too and this facilitate our works tremendously.

On top of that for my second Peace Poem Anthology Alleys of Paradise 2 , 6 of his poems will be in it. And some photos he took while we were going around the Oedaya where Paradise 2 is in Rabat, will also be in.

QUESTION: BETWEEN DREAMS AND REALITY?

ANSWER: The funny thing is I don't dream too much. I am a very practical and serious person. Both feet are very much on the ground. The only time I dream and allow myself to dream is in my poems! A little fantasy here and there. Even then, my poems are a lot on human rights and environmental issues. So where is the space for me to dream?

QUESTION: FUTURE CREATIVE WORKS?

ANSWER: For poetry, I am fully booked for the next two years to do mutual translations anthologies with other poets from all over the world. Also joint anthologies with writers from China, Europe, USA, Latin America and Middle East.

For theatre and film critics there are more books to be published. And I'm starting my autobiography which was planned since few years ago.

On top of that, I am setting up an arts foundation called PUJANGGA (literally meaning scholars) and planning many artistic programmes. I am the Chairperson and we are working together with various quarters in and out of Malaysia. We are going to have an International Peace Poem Festival in August this year. Some 20 international poets will be invited and together with some local poets, we are starting the Putrajaya International Peace Poem Festival which is planned to be an annual festival.

We are also going to have film appreciations programmes, photography and arts exhibitions from time to time.

QUESTION: ACHIEVED EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO? WOULD YOU BE AN ARTIST AGAIN?

ANSWER: Do you know anyone who achieved everything they want in life? Is there such thing like that? I doubt there are. I am a very realistic person. And life is very much about choices. And whatever you choose you have to deal with them whether you achieved what you wanted or not.

I am a practicing Muslim and believe very much in fate and life as determined by Allah. But we are endowed with abilities and efforts to make our dreams come true.

Yes, given the chances all over again, I will still choose to be a writer. No question about that. I found writing is very fulfilling. You can do so many things with your writing. And so much could be achieved through writing.

QUESTION: ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY?

ANSWER: I am very concerned about world peace and environmental issues. We need to educate people to learn about peace and solving conflicts peacefully. For thousand of years human resorted to wars and conflicts in dealing with their differences. Its high time we make wars obsolete. And we need to educate people about environmental issues a lot. Not much things are done to face challenges in these areas especially in under-developed countries due to lack of funds. But we only have one Planet Earth and everybody has to do something about this whether we like it or not.

It was a great pleasure talking to you and you are always welcome to our house "Diogen pro culture", magazine for culture, art, education and science.

Thank you.

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