

An Interview with Poet, Critic and Author Aju Mukhopadhyay by Goutam Karmakar

Goutam Karmakar

Ph.D Research Scholar,

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,

National Institute of Technology Durgapur,

West Bengal, India

About Aju Mukhopadhyay

Born in Calcutta(Kolkata) in 1940 and now settled in Pondicherry, Aju Mukhopadhyay has established himself not only as a bilingual poet but also as a critic, short story writer, essayist, biographer and fiction writer. He was an executive officer of a nationalised bank but later he has given all his time to his writings. So far 33 books have come out from his part. Among these few are written in English and few in Bengali. He has published many volumes of poetry namely *The Witness Tree*, *In Celebration of Nature*, *The Paper Boat*, *Insect's Nest and Other Poems*, *Aju Mukhopadhyay's Poems on Sri Aurobinda and the Mother*, *Short Verse Vast Universe* (Haiku and Tanka), *Short Verse Delight* (Haiku and other short verses with essays), *Manhood*, *Grasshood and Birdhood*, *Time Whispers in my Ear* (Selected Poems). Apart from writing poetry, he has published fictions and short stories. His short stories are *White Bird and its Black Shadow* and *The Moments of Life*. His one published novel is *In Train*. He is an eco-socialist and his love for nature is reflected in environmental fictions namely *Water and Pondicherry Environment*. In five anthologies he has published his short stories including in *Einfach Menschlich* (Simply Human), published by the German Language Department of the University of Mumbai, where his short story has been translated in German and selected as one of the Indian Short stories. He is the second short story prize winner from Bangalore in 2007. In more than 50 scholarly books he has contributed essays. Critical books have been published which contain papers on his short stories and two books have been come out where his novel *In Train* comes under scrutiny. Many well researched papers on his novel find place in those two books. He has also written a number of essays and biography namely *Sri Aurobindo's Ideal of Freedom and Human Unity* (Essays), *Sri Aurobindo: The Yogi of Divine Life* (Philosophy and biography), *The World of Sri Aurobindo's Creative Literature* (Literature), *Mother of all Beings* (Biography), *Lord Ganesha* (Monograph), *The Mother of All Beings* (Biography) and *The Story of India's Progress* (Non-fiction; India Past and Present).

He finds interest to write on wildlife, Nature, animals and environment. Besides this, he writes regularly in magazines and e-zines both in India and abroad. He is a published author and his writings are found in many national and international journals. His Bengali poems are translated into several languages along with his

English pieces. Anthologies have come out containing his works. In 24 anthologies his poetry written in English has come out. There are eight books where he is discussed along with other poets and writers. So many academicians are discussing about his poetry and are publishing their thoughts over his verse in many reputed journals. A large number of critics have commented in anthologies regarding his poetry. He is a very popular poet and this proves when his poems remain at the top of the list of poems in www.asianamericanpoetry.com for about three months in 2007. In www.poetsindia.com he has managed to place himself among top ten recent poets. Many of his works have been praised and well acclaimed as in www.Moontowncafe.com his poems remain at the top of the list. He writes regularly in Syndic Literary Journal (US), Creature Feature from Cyprus, Sons of Camus International Journal from Canada /Cyprus. He has written in Singapore's International journal, Kitaab.com, Margutte (Italian), Poetas Del Mundo (Spanish), Sketchbook (US), The Seventh Quarry Swansea Poetry Magazine (UK), Best Poetry, All Poetry, Author's Den, World Poetry Yearbook, World Poetry Society, World Haiku Anthology, and many other Indian and foreign Poetry sites. In order to attend as many as 37 national and international conferences, poetry competitions, seminars, SAARC Sufi festival, World Poet and Writers' Peace Meet, festivals of poetry, he has traveled across not only different parts of India but also traveled across Europe, Africa, America and Asia. He also loves to write travel articles. His writings on literature and environmental issues are found in 60 books and 24 Indo-Australian and Indian anthologies his poetry has found a place. Society for Science and Environment has called him 'Key Environmentalist' for his concern over environmental issues. He is in the editorial board of many reputed international journals and as an editor he has also edited in Bengali four beautiful magazines. He has edited twenty20 journal's summer issue No.3 as it is labeled an American Ezine for its Indian Edition. He has received a number of awards for his writing.

All the informations regarding Aju Mukhopadhyay can be found at www.ajumukhopadhyay.com. His blog is www.aju-mukhopadhyay.blogspot.in

Q1. GK: Before going to explore the inner world of you Sir, allow me to ask you a bit about your family and educational background.

AM: I was born in a joint family consisting of large numbers of members like 25 to 30. We were one of the old Calcuttans with our house more than hundred years old in north Calcutta. At one time my great grandfather was one of the ruling business tycoons of his time. Due to some reasons we did not enjoy plenty in my childhood days. So I had to be engaged in services from an early age with a minimum qualification of School Final pass certificate. But I continued to study in evening colleges, evening classes in universities and through correspondence courses. I acquired master degree in English and some other degrees and diplomas in commerce, languages, professional diploma in banking and allied subjects.

Q2. GK: What makes you to become a poet? When did you perceive that poetry can be your eternal partner?

AM: I believe that a poet is born. I tried versifying in my mother tongue in some exercise books during my teens and gradually found me in print in some little magazines; I edited some such magazines. Poetry is an art form carrying the expression from inside the heart and psyche, mind and other parts of the being. It matters not in which language as it suits the poet. It usually remains with the poet intact as published or not till he or she lives or until ceases to create and express for some reason.

Q3. GK: kindly tell me about your definition of poetry. Being a Bengali poet have you been influenced by Rabindranath Tagore? Apart from him do you want to mention any other writers who have influenced your writing?

AM: Good poetry must be a synthetic product of thoughts, ideas, dreams and visions grasped intuitively. Imagery, symbolism, subtle ornaments make the poetry enjoyable; pleasant to hear, beautiful to see. They are the media of poetic creation. Whatever the force that dominates a poem is a unique creation which gives pleasure. Poetry must have rhythm, at least inner rhythm and there is no wrong in rhyming though it may not be compulsory. Poems rhymed are the natural products in their usual form. And poetry must contain pithy sayings in any form. Tagore is always with us, true. Sri Aurobindo is more with me with his poetry, philosophy and other works to mould my thought and creation though I must say that I don't think of any other work while working out my own creation. Influences remain in the background. I like some English Nature poets too like Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats. I like Walter De La Mere and Eliot. I like the spiritual plunge in poetry; I like William Blake. And P. B. Shelly was great romantic poet.

Q4. GK: It is a well-known fact that you are a bilingual writer. You have written poems in Bengali and English. Like many other Indian English writer, do you think and compose directly in English or transcreate your native lingual thought into English?

AM: I think that thoughts do not have language unless one makes monologue or dialogue with himself before he writes. Thoughts may be inarticulate but taking a shape it may be language. I may simply say that I think, may be in both the languages, if it may be so and there are other processes, particularly when images and ideas do not have linguistic form at the primitive stage. On the whole it is a complex process; inexplicable sometimes like poetry.

Q5. GK: Now Aju Mukhopadhyay is an established poet and the one who is good at writing short stories. But before that you were a bank officer. I think behind this journey there was a great struggle. If so, then kindly share your journey.

AM: As I said, a poet is born. I published and edited short story journals from an early age before coming to banking job though some other jobs I did at that time. I had a long banking career, transferable for the most part. I did serve literature even as a banker but it was a struggle and the creations weren't a plenty. In fact after taking a voluntary retirement and settling in a service-free life I could begin anew my writing career. Among other usual jobs as a family man I can devote much more time for literature. Among other things writing essays and critiques takes longer time.

Q6. GK: Arvind Krishna Mehrotra told in an interview that there were few criticism of Indian Poetry in English that came out of our universities. It means Indian poetry in English is not getting proper attention as more focus is on dramas and fictions. Do you think so?

AM: You mean that universities do not often publish books on Indian English poetry, giving preferences for dramas and fictions. True as it is in society; looking for dramas in life as well as in literature and fiction has been the norm as more materials for gross entertainment, sometimes rustic are available in them. Poetry is subtle, finer in tune and symbolic with imagery often accompanying it. It quenches thirst of the real connoisseurs. Poetry performed in songs and recitations like that of devotional poetry, tales enacted like dramas in folk literature and retelling the epics and Puranas like Hari katha have some mass appeal; such poetry run their time even without written words but pure poetry do not have that luck. And for less popularity it is neglected by educational institutions and publishers. True that it is the age of novels. Novelists, even without testing their talents and capacities in other genres, feel themselves exalted.

Q7. GK: Do you think every poet has a set of goals to achieve? If it is yes then what are the goals that you want to achieve as a poet?

AM: This question seems to have been germinated from some corporate house; goals to achieve, excellence in management, corporate ethics and more such jargons which are the key words of the commercial world. I don't think that a poet may be guided by such terms. Though creative writing, poetry writing courses are in vogue, I think as I said that a poet is born. The core issue is that poetry is born in some deeper region of the being even when the subject matter is social problem or something personal; after all it is something subjective. A poet should aspire for excellence. Technically a poet can improve by studies and undergoing courses but above all it is personal evolution. And like many other professions and hobbies there is no wrong if a poet expects due honour, etc. But in this respect, I feel that the world here is more rotten than in other spheres of life. Awards, honours and such things in the modern world, particularly in India, are things of management; a maneuvering process. Let me not go more into it; it is suffice to say that there are many exceptions and that it is a complex world. One thing I believe is that what I create

remains unless polluted by some interested people; now without my knowledge or later when I won't be here. But I strongly expect that they would remain in their original places. I have the faith that proper people, now or later, would be able to judge the respective quality of poetry by different poets despite their success or failure in maneuvering. Comparative studies may be made. It may be seen at a later date if big awardees prove their worth in most of their creations or if some others without such awards were greater in proving their excellence. There are so many Nobel Laureates in various countries; how many prove to be worthy of the choice when the totality of their creations are judged? How many prove worthy of such big awards as Tagore did throughout his life up to 1941 after receiving it in 1913? I always seek improvement and excellence in creation; other things may help on the way but their absence does not deter me from creation.

Q8. GK: Your poems can be taken as supreme example of eco-poetry where much emphasis is laid on the human-nature relationship. Do you really consider yourself as an eco-socialist? Comment on the current human-nature relationship that you are witnessing in our surrounding?

AM: Ecology comes on the way when I find that Nature is suppressed or mutilated to his detriment by man guided mostly by his scientific-technological pride or Nature is simply neglected for ignorance and lack of awareness. I spontaneously protest such human activities in poetry and prose and try to tell my views about the possible consequences. Man has so far corrected many of his scientific views about Nature.

I write on Nature and prefer its conservation in its pristine form for I believe it to be the face of the creator. One may try to turn, twist or use it otherwise for his material benefits or aesthetic pleasure to a limited extent but exceeding the limit teaches him its disastrous consequences. This is a very big issue which cannot be discussed here. Leaving other things I may say that I write on Nature for my genuine and deep love for it as an environmentalist. I am part of Nature and my surrounding Nature is in me. As I am so Nature is!

Q9. GK: Your poems are often called voice of the voiceless. Is there any existential crisis that you feel while writing poetry? Do you think your poems cry in search of root and identity?

AM: I have settled in a place quite away from my birth place; still keeping touch with it but my childhood surrounding has been totally lost. I have moved round large numbers of places in the world but have never settled anywhere. Nothing permanent; people in my surrounding hardly know me. A poet is alone in a deeper sense. Rootlessness and aloneness may haunt me, true, but that's something different, expressed spontaneously which I have written in some poems and autobiographical short works. I thank you if you have discerned them.

Giving voice to the voiceless with sympathy and feelings is the quality of some poets and writers. I have written in defence of Adivasi people of America, aboriginals like Jarawa in Andamans, in favour of the hungry and the deprived the world over in various poems like “Adivasi”, “The Uncivilised” and “Structural Violence” and “Hunger and Thrust”.

Q10. GK: How do you celebrate nature in your ‘In Celebration of Nature’? Do you really think that your poems deal with social injustice, social inequality and philosophical insight into the nature of things? Do you call yourself romantic to project the pen-picture of reality?

AM: In In Celebration of Nature my poems are mostly in adoration of Nature; published in 2007 by a very senior poet, Baldev Mirza, from Aligarh. Philosophical and other insights including something sarcastic and romantic are there but hardly anything against social injustice though I have written plenty of them elsewhere.

Q11. GK: Metaphor and similes are abundant in your poetry. Your use of images and symbols is precise and economical. You are not bounded in the rules of versification. So Sir can you elaborate your writing style? And what makes you different from other Indian poets writing in English?

AM: Thanks for your good understanding of my poetry. I am giving below my process of writing poetry as it is in one of my short essays titled, “What is Poetry? How I relate myself to it?”

“When I write it I find that words come, known and sometimes unknown, to fill the space to express a particular idea or depict a scene. When in the process of creation imaginations and formations which usually precede any such work, vanish or give birth to alternative links to help me complete the work. Rhyming may come automatically, sometimes I may try but do not exert too much in it. Really, it is a feeling that something is getting done, that I am pushed. My poems often rhyme and rhythm is there but I do not strictly count the metres. Certainly I remain in the forefront as a social being or a Nature lover or lover of the unknown.”

I humbly avoid the question you ask leaving it to the apt critic to find out the difference of my poetry with that of the others.

Q12. GK: Besides being a poet, you are a writer and a prolific critic. But where do you find your creative faculty at its pick? In what way do you want to be known, I mean as a poet or fiction writer or short story writer or critic or a man of versatile?

AM: I have written in almost in all the genres of literature in a broad sense. At one time I wrote features; travel and others, light journalistic work and short essays including biographies in The Hindu in its Advertiser’s pages, in Indian Express on Saturdays and in Deccan Herald in its

Sunday magazine pages. I have written many short stories, essays and critique of poetry and other literature. I have my stories published in different journals and ezines and selected in different anthologies, Indian, Indo-Australian and in such anthology of Indian Short Stories in German language, titled, "Einfach menschlich" (Simply Human). I received prize for writing a short story. I have a novel published long ago and I am considering doing another. I have two volumes of Short Stories in English and three in Bengali. Another book of short stories in English is under consideration now. Among the essays and critiques two on Albert Camus has fetched Albert Camus Centenary Writing Award in 2013 from SCWI journal edited and published from Canada /Cyprus. I have published ten volumes of poems in English and two in Bengali. My poems have been published in large numbers of journals, magazines and anthologies the world over. I often write short verses in Japanese styles like haiku, tanka and haikun. I feel myself a poet first and then writer of the other genres of literature. I write on environment and wildlife also. It is beyond me to decide how I shall be known.

Q13. GK: Kindly tell me Sir how many awards have you received? Among those which one gives you most happiness? Do you ever long for some more prestigious award? Kindly share your inner dream world.

AM: I received the following awards, not so famous or perhaps not so prestigious:

Certificate of Competence as a Published Writer by the Writers Bureau, Manchester, UK in 2000, Best Poet of the Year-2003 by the Poets International, Bangalore, India, 2007, Editor's Choice Published Poet award by the International Library of Poetry, USA and Excellence in World Poetry Award, 2009 by the International Poets Academy, Chennai. Lucidity Poetry Journal from Sugar Land, USA awarded me Certificate of Merit in June 2011. The American Biographical Institute offered American Order of Merit but it was not accepted for some reason. Latest is Albert Camus Centenary Writing award in 2013 from SCWI Journal from Canada /Cyprus.

One happiness is that all who honoured me weren't known to me. I didn't see them except one Editor of "Poets International" journal to whom I was really acquainted later and they decided on their own without my knowledge. About awards I have already spoken earlier. They are helps on the way but I don't wait for them to come for my creativity.

Q14. GK: It is a well known fact that you have spent a long time dealing with Sri Aurobindo. Can you tell me the name of the books that you have written on Sri Aurobindo. Why have you suddenly taken Aurobindo?

AM: Besides large numbers of essays on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in different magazines and besides translating their works in Bengali, I have the following books published on them in English: Sri Aurobindo's Ideal of Freedom and Human Unity (Essays), Sri Aurobindo: The Yogi of Divine Life (Philosophy and biography), The World of Sri Aurobindo's Creative Literature

(Literary), Mother of all Beings (Biography) and The Mother Of All Beings (Biography). My books on them in Bengali are: Sri Aurobindo: Ekti Divya Jiban, Divya Janani, Sri Aurobindo Mayer Siksha Bhabana, Sri Aurobinder Alok Sadharan Galpo and Sri Aurobinder Kabita.

I came and settled in Pondicherry as devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in response to an inner inspiration.

Q15. GK: Do you really think that the whole world should know the principles of Sri Aurobindo? How will you relate his philosophy in this world of materialism? Do you think more people should come forward to explore Sri Aurobindo?

AM: It is for the benefit of mankind that Sri Aurobindo wrote The Life Divine wishing that man should now or later participate in building a life based on spirit. Spiritualism is the basis of Indian life. Sri Aurobindo never asks people to give up life's all journeys, take sannyasa and go to the forest. He wished them to live in the world, participate in worldly affairs but without the down-grading attachment to all mud and poison of it. He wished man to transform his lower nature to divine nature by participating in spiritual practices to embrace Divine light, bliss and joy. This is not so simple as said but the promise is that it is possible. In his epic poem "Savitri" he made a promise that "Matter shall reveal the Spirit's face" for according to him matter is not the opposite to spirit. The curve meets. God is involved in matter so matter reveals his face. If it is not possible to attend that stage quickly one may take the plunge and go to the extent possible in this life growing towards light and joy and Divine Life. It is never a utopia for he knew the affairs of life treading all paths of life before he became a Rishi, a seer poet.

When man has tried to achieve communism, the utmost form of materialism, killing millions of men and women in the most barbarous way (by the dictators born out of the so called Ism) in the process yet not getting an iota of the promised equality of man, economic or social, what is the wrong in trying to go differently to achieve a divine path which is never fraught with such dangers but promises. If not successful man will live the life they live now. Nothing great shall remain to lose. When every infallible theory has failed why not try the seeming utopia even? It is already a high time for all mankind to embrace Sri Aurobindo with all earnestness and plunge in an effort certainly rewarding, to whatever extent possible.

Q16. GK: Are you happy with the present condition of Indian English poetry in India? How do you want to project the future of it? What measures can be taken to place poetry among the first choice of academicians?

AM: I have already said that poetry is a backbencher in the list of popular literature world over, specially in India. Indian English Poetry hasn't gained reputation as the novels as all the writers of Indian diaspora living in foreign countries write mainly novels akin to the language of the country they live in with very rare exception, maybe. Indian English Poets mostly live in India and none of them has received any big awards from abroad like the novelists or storytellers

except one Vijay Seshadri who's almost unknown in India or elsewhere. Those living here write with Indian background and Indian accent, on Indian subjects. It need not be otherwise. It is long since Raja Rao said that we would write our English, we need not follow others in the British island or elsewhere. Yet there are quite some Indian English poets who are published in many international journals. And some of them are published by foreign publishers. I have written large numbers of critiques on Indian English poetry including their comparative studies. Some of their outputs are remarkable. For proper placement of Indian English poems they should be included in the curriculum of Indian educational institutions at various levels on a very selective basis by neutral and competent editors. More poetry festivals in the country should be arranged by institutions. Government establishments need to be neutral and unbiased in selecting and conducting such festivals, in awarding poets. Real development of anything may be achieved when real merits are properly awarded.

Q17. GK: Can you notice any changing trends in Post-Independence Indian poetry in English? In which category does your poetry belong? Modern or postmodern?

AM: Contemporary subjects are more and more included in Indian English poems. My poems too are modern, sometimes with universal themes as those on Nature and Spiritualism. For more, I leave it to the critiques.

Q18. GK: You are the inspiration of many upcoming poets. People are following you. What will be your advice to those emerging poets? Do you read pieces of upcoming poets?

AM: I have said that I do critique modern poets. Poetry should be based on inner inspiration and sort of realization, if any. Poets should try to be original creators, not imitating others. Poets should be courageous, straightforward and their expressions should be easily understood keeping the poetic norms, surely. Rhythm and rhyme should be the ways of creating poetry though it need not be following the traditional styles of English poetry. Let Indian English poetry gain its own shape and style.

Q19. GK: It seems that you have not attained your satisfaction in writing till now. It seems you are engaging yourself in some future projects. Can you tell me what those are? When will the world come to know about all those?

AM: I have quite some projects and manuscripts almost ready for publication but the most difficult hurdles on the way are the publishers. It seems that publishers are always the gainers; with more development of technology numbers of books produced and sold are beyond the knowledgeable account of the writer. I think that he is the loneliest fellow on earth. While they compete with each other they don't know if and when their books are really sold and how many. All the promises seem vague after some time. I am not with those who are satisfied with this

situation; happy seeing their books in some electronic-digital sites and some in their hands. Big publisher means with huge resources and international presence, as I understand. Books by such publishers only are reviewed or discussed in newspapers while newspapers call for books from all for reviews. It is the usual arrangement. So long as these uneven situations remain it is difficult for Indian English Poetry to gain good base to prosper. Everything should be judged on real quality; not based on preference, nepotism or influence.

Q20. GK: As a Bengali writer you have read Bengali literature a lot. Do you want to flourish as a Bengali poet also? Do you read contemporary Bengali writings?

AM: I have read and have written in Bengali earlier and still contribute occasionally in magazines with 12 books published in that language. My biographical books on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother ran for a full edition and there were second prints of them. Other books are mostly out of stock. I don't find much scope now nor find time to write in it more as I am fully engaged writing in English reaching all Indian and international readers. I have occasional meeting with Bengali works now though in English I have written on some classical Bengali writers. I have quite some pieces written in Bengali and published which could be published in book form.

In this regional literary field grouping is rampant. Here I have found more anomalies, less sincerity with chances of falling into deceptive group activities; at least my experiences do not prompt me to write in bigger regional commercial papers and magazines. Whichever the commercial papers I wrote deception was the result. Chances of writing in English are brighter and places for writing in my mother tongue are rare as I am out of touch with the Bengali literary group. Technically I am not as equipped in it as writing in English. Living away from Bengal I don't count for it more than occasional contributions in literary magazines run by friends and old acquaintances.

Q21. GK: Sir is there any message that you want to give to the world? Is there any suggestion to this world where culture is in a state of degradation?

AM: It is true that culture is in a state of degradation due to commercialization of art and culture, literature and drama and everything like that. The digital world gives more chances of deception. Many television channels prove disastrous towards development of genuine culture. Big publicity and propaganda drown all genuine creative endeavors and fields. Folk songs are deprived of their original tune and role due to commercialization. Some of the programs, audio and visual, are pushed by force to the detriment of classical works. This is a problem of the age to be discussed in broader fields by all concerned to come to a decision towards improving the genuine creations.

Q22. GK: Thanks sir for giving me the time and for being so cooperative.

AM: Thanks Goutam for your keen study of my poems and interesting questions.