



Interview

Dr Sapna Dogra in Conversation with Rajlakshmi Prithviraj

Dr Sapna Dogra

Assistant Professor of English, Government Degree College Baroh, Kangra,
Himachal Pradesh

Dr. Sapna Dogra completed her B.A and M.A. in English Literature from University of Delhi. She holds a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is presently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English in the Government College Baroh, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. Her research interests include Folklore Studies, Translation Studies, Indian English Writing, Hindi Literature and Popular Literature.

Rajalakshmi Prithviraj is a Military Educationist and an Air Warrior by profession, a psychologist, psychotherapist, life coach and military strategist by qualification; a mother of two children, she is also passionate about writing. She grew up in the Silver City of Odisha, Cuttack into a Tamil Brahmin family and considers herself to be an eternal child at heart.

Sapna Dogra (SD): To begin with, could you tell those who don't know a little bit about yourself and your books?

Rajalakshmi Prithviraj (RP): I am a woman in blues who is also a writer, poet and author by passion. My tryst with writing began when as a child I would participate in poetry and writing competitions in school. With age, job and then marriage, this passion took a backseat. However, it was after the demise of my husband that I took to writing as a therapy.

Till date I have penned two contemporary reality fictions through Kindle Direct Publishing with Indian editions via Pothi. My first novel, *Silence Under the Blue Sky* (2015) deals with the trauma and lifelong pain that a martyr's family endures. And my second novel, *Love Under the Blue Sky* (2016) bring out the love story of two air warriors. Both my stories attempt to bring out the humane emotional facets of the people associated with the wondrous organisation called Indian Air Force. These stories can be classified as contemporary reality fiction because they are real life stories that have been fictionalised to some extent to protect the identity of my characters. Yes, all my characters, from both my stories, exist in real life.

SD: Describe the route to your first novel being published.

RP: Well, to be honest, my stories are dedicated to my husband Late Squadron Leader V Manoj, a Military Helicopter Pilot from the Indian Air Force, who was martyred in an air crash in August 2012. My first novel, *Silence Under the Blue Sky*, was published via KDP platform and Pothi. I chose this route because, every single dialogue, every incident described has actually taken place, except for the few fictionalised portions. I didn't want to lose my rights over this significant chapter from my life book. My second story is about how I met my husband. That again is a chapter from my personal life book. So, I definitely was not willing to give away my stories to anybody. Hence, for writers like me, where we are way too possessive of our life stories, KDP and Pothi are blessings in disguise.

SD: From an Educationist in Indian Air Force to a novelist. Describe the transition.

RP: To be honest, I never did plan this transition. It happened when I was on the verge of a mental breakdown. I could never mourn my husband's death because I was five months pregnant with our second child when he died. My elder child was four and half years old at that point of time. So in 2012 I was busy as a mother letting the wife in me take a backseat. However, with the passage of time, I noticed this was taking a toll on my psyche. And I had to take action. My work did keep me busy but I needed to vent out. So writing became my therapy tool. When I finished baring my heart, I felt much better. However, it was only when my then superior, one whom I hold in high esteem, said that

my writing is worth its salt that I decided to continue. Inspired by his encouragement I penned my second story as well. And thus began the journey of the writer in me.

SD: Have you ever received a rejection from a publisher? How did you feel about it?

RP: Well, I never really approached a traditional publisher in the first place. The stories were way too personal; hence I didn't want to lose my rights over them. Both my writings are chapters from my life book, so I really did not want to give it away. So, there was no question of rejections. I chose KDP and Pohti as my publishing platforms. Right from the cover design to formatting so layout, the entire process was like giving birth. These stories are my babies, one that came into this world in memoriam of my sweetheart. People did argue that self-publishing doesn't pay much but when I chose this route earning via writing had never been my aim. Years later, when I reached out to yet another Veer Nari like me who had been bereaved that very day, she told me, "Don't worry, I have read your story. I am doing exactly what you did that day". Thereafter, many martyr's wives have reached out saying how much my story has touched their heart and that my writing did give them hope for a better future. These words are my achievements.

SD: Tell us about your writing routine. What's a typical writing day for you?

RP: I have no fixed routine. It takes a song to spark my imagination or a random picture. When that happens, I reach out for my diary to write or my phone to type. There are days when I don't write anything and then there are days when I end up penning three to four chapters. So, no fixed writing schedule yet. However, I plan to devote more time to writing and take it up seriously. It's not the lure of money or earnings associated but the mere fact that words have the power to touch innermost corners of the reader's heart, mind and soul. If my writings have helped people heal, I think I should write more.

SD: What inspires you to write?

RP: I have two inspirations. Firstly, it is my sweetheart, my husband. Though he died after six years of our marriage, the memories I share with him would suffice to create countless stories. Secondly, it is my organisation that is made of wondrous people. Whatever I am today, I owe it to this organisation called Indian Air Force. I have healed because of the men and women in blues and their family. My children are growing up to be strong independent girls because of the environment this organisation provides. I live my life queen size with no judgements, no bias because of this very organisation. The world calls me a widow but my clan, which now includes those from the Army and Navy as well, call me a Veer Nari, a phoenix. What more can a person ask for in terms of inspiration.

SD: It seems that there are no ends to your creative talents! What's next?

RP: Thank you for stating so. I am just another Phoenix who is learning to rise from her ashes. My future projects include writing more stories in the Under the Blue Sky series that would bring out different facets of the life of air warriors. Again, all reality fictions for sure. I am also penning poetry, especially couplets. So those are in the pipeline as

well. I am also working on two non-fiction writings at the moment. So at the moment, the writer in me is busy juggling time with the professional me and the mother in me.

SD: What are you reading right now? What are your favourite books? Which one influenced you the most — and why?

RP: Right now I am reading Robert Coram's *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War*. It's an amazing biography of a military strategist who is now revered by military planners all over the world. Boyd's key contribution of OODA Loop or the decision making cycle has relevance not only for the military but also for the academic and business worlds as well.

My all-time favourite books are *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy and *The Townsman* by Pearl S Buck. I also binge read books by Enid Blyton, Nicholas Spark and Mitch Albom. Richard Bach and Brian Weiss are two writers whose writings helped me in my journey towards healing.

If I have to choose one book that has influenced me the most in recent times it has to be Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*. Especially when I am reading Boyd now, I am able to draw a parallel between the two protagonists. In fact, Jonathan is similar to all the protagonists of my favourite books. Bach's book made me believe that every life has a life purpose. However, the onus is on us individuals to find our life purpose. The book also taught me to compare and contrast every situation and subsequently modify as well as adapt the lessons drawn to real life. This is the principle that my life now revolves around. In fact, each of us have a Jonathan Livingstone Seagull within us. It is upto us to identify this facet of ours and give wings to our dreams.

SD: What has been the worst criticism given to you as a writer? How do you feel about it?

RP: I cannot call it a criticism because the word is negative. I would rather name it constructive opinion or suggestion. I was told once by a person who had read *Silence Under the Blue Sky* that my writings were more conversational and not literature kind. Since, I had narrated every single thing that had happened, every single thought which crossed my mind verbatim, I knew it was bound to be conversational and informal. Notwithstanding, there is no age for learning, so I am hopeful that my subsequent writings would meet the requisite standards to be termed as literature. As Scarlet O Hara said in *Gone with the Wind*, "After all, tomorrow is another day".

SD: What has been the best suggestion given to you as a writer? How did you feel about it?

RP: The best suggestion, given to me as a writer was by a very senior officer whom I revere and respect. He had said, "Write with brutal honesty and sincere intent. You'll find that nothing will go wrong ever. Besides, there is always scope for improvement because perfection is like utopia". It is so true. In fact, his statements resonate with life, like life lessons. So, yes, in the hope that every writing turns out to be a better version than before, I lift my pen to pen my thoughts.

SD: Do you ever have writer's block?

RP: I write when an idea suddenly hits me. I am not a disciplined writer which is contrary to what I am as a professional. So, I haven't experienced writer's block yet. However, now that I am in the process of committing more time towards my writings, I am sure Writer's block will befriend me enroute. Hence, I will try crossing that bridge when I get to it later. For now, I am happy being the eccentric writer that my best friends consider me to be.

SD: Who do you write for?

RP: I write for my daughters. They are still small and after my husband's death, I don't know how long I will live. So I am writing my stories so that they get a glimpse of the life their parents lived when they grow up. I write for myself, to heal, to live all the happy moments all over again because I don't know whether my memory will support me as I age. I write for every Veer Nari under the blue sky as proof that a Phoenix will always rise no matter what the circumstances. I write for every individual who wants to know more about the armed forces because there is a humane, emotional side to every warrior. I write to inspire every individual to pen his or her life story because, by virtue of being unique by birth, each of us have stories within ourselves. Stories that have the power to impact lives.

SD: Name some of your favourite writers/poets?

RP: My favourite writers include Thomas Hardy, Pearl S Buck, Harper Lee, Richard Bach, Mitch Albom, Brian Weiss, Edgar Allen Poe, Guy De Maupassant, O'Henry, Charles Dickens, John Grisham, oh the list is endless. My favourite poets include Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Lord Byron, Amrita Pritam, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Thomas Hughes, Lang Leav, again the list goes on. I love reading, so any good book or poetry that has the power to be comfort food for my soul, is my kind of book or poetry.

SD: What do you like to do when you are not writing?

RP: When I am not writing I love to cook, bake, dance, listen to music, craft, quill, go on treks or hikes, go biking, doodle, study via MOOCs, meet up friends or at times, do nothing and introspect. I have way too many hobbies to keep myself busy and engaged.

SD: What has inspired you lately?

RP: When you mix the colours of all three services, that is, olive green for Army, white for Navy and blue for Air Force, you get the colour Purple. Hence, it is this concept of jointmanship or purple spirit that is my inspiration at the moment. So my subsequent writings would likely be around this concept in one form of the other.

SD: What is the hardest thing about being a writer?

RP: In my case its consistency. My profession takes priority first. Second comes my family and finally it is me. So, my being the last priority in my life means the writer in me tends to take a backseat at times. Notwithstanding, I am sure with passage of time I will

reach a middle path someday. Till then, I am sure the road ahead will not be that easy for me.

SD: Finally, if you could pass on a single piece of advice to yet-to-be published writers, what would it be?

RP: If I could pass on a single piece of advice to yet to be published writers, in case they happen to be people with similar thoughts like mine, I'd only repeat the core values of my organisation, "Mission Integrity Excellence". Treat writing as a mission and strive to attain excellence with utmost integrity. By doing so, you will touch the sky with glory because even fate will ensure that your writing reaches the very people whose life its meant to impact. Thank you Dr Sapna for this amazing opportunity and for believing in me. Truly grateful.