



Interview

Evocations from the Past: History as Testimony in Neelum Saran Gour's 'Requiem in Raga Janki': A Conversation
Madhukar Rai

A well renowned figure in the realm of contemporary Indian literature, Prof Neelum Saran Gour is an accomplished writer, translator, academic and an insightful chronicler of Allahabadi culture, history and folklore in many of her works- both fictional and non-fictional. Prof. Gour has to her credit six novels, four collection of short stories and one work of literary nonfiction. Over the years her works have garnered immense praise and critical acclaim owing to her delicate blend of imagination and authenticity. Her narrative style reflects her keen observations about the subject showcasing her imaginative flair supplemented by her in-depth understanding and awareness of her cultural milieu. Her narratives resonate with the ethos of northern India capturing the essence and evolution of the *Sangam city* from what it was during her childhood days to the present times. Born and brought up in Allahabad to a Bengali mother and a Hindi speaking father, she received her initial education from St. Mary's Convent Inter College, Allahabad and subsequently went on to study History, Philosophy and English Literature at the prestigious University of Allahabad passing her exams with distinction. Though she felt inclined to pursue civil services during her graduation days, a dream cherished by every other student of Allahabad University with the place having attained the popular sobriquet of being the IAS factory of the east, she later decided to join academia out of her deep interest in literature while simultaneously pursuing her passion of writing.

Her notable works include *Grey Pigeon and Other Stories*, *Virtual Realities*, *Sikander Chowk Park*, *Song without End and other Stories* and her famed novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*. Her work has featured in several anthologies and reputed journals both in India and abroad. Apart from her novels she has to her name numerous critical articles, short stories, book reviews and columns on a wide array of

subjects. A recipient of the coveted Charles Wallace Fellowship in the year 1993, Prof Gour has conducted many creative writing workshops for Sahitya Akademi and the Central University of Rajasthan, been a Writer-in-Residence at the Universities of Kent and Stirling and a visiting faculty in universities like JNU and Jamia Millia Islamia in her long and fruitful academic life.

The following is a gist of the conversation with the author about her literary journey, creative inspiration and her take on life and art with particular reference to her latest novel 'Requiem in Raga Janki' which won her the prestigious Hindu Prize for Fiction in 2018 and the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award in 2023.

(This interaction contains the ideas and opinions expressed by the author that have been documented by the interlocutor in his own words)

Madhukar: Respected Ma'am, firstly, on behalf of my entire Department of English, DDU Gorakhpur University, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to you on your remarkable achievement. Winning the Sahitya Akademi Award is a testament to your phenomenal contribution to the world of letters and I feel extremely privileged to have this interaction with you. I am sure that your invaluable insights and authorial experiences would prove extremely fruitful for students and researchers of literature like us.

Neelum Saran Gour: Thank you very much, Madhukar for your kind compliments. I sincerely appreciate your department and express my sincere regards to your Head, all the faculty members and students wishing all of you good health, happiness and academic excellence.

Madhukar: Thank you Ma'am for your generous words of praise. Without further ado, I would like to ask you a few questions related to your literary journey and creative inspiration. Ma'am can you share your journey as a writer leading up to winning the Sahitya Akademi Award for your latest novel?

Neelum Saran Gour: Well, it's been a very prolific and memorable journey for me. As you rightly pointed out, I was born and brought

up in Allahabad and completed my education in the city itself. Being a single child of my working parents, I had ample time and liberty to invest myself in reading books which consequently opened up diverse and distant avenues of self-exploration for me. My parents were very caring and imposed no restrictions allowing me to live my life as per my own wishes. I loved my company as well as the company of my other family members which included uncles, aunts and my grandmother. I started writing at a very tender age of six, thanks to the congenial ambience at my home. I wrote plays for our school's puppet theatre, play-lets for school functions and stories and poems regularly. My characters are not people who happened all of a sudden but are the results of an inquisitive and creative endeavour that came naturally to me. I had already developed a strong passion for writing by the time I entered university. My experiences at the University further strengthened and shaped my creative acumen and I decided to devote my life to writing. Within six months of completing my Master's programme in English, I joined the Dept. of English as a Lecturer in the year 1977. Life since then has been a meaningful enterprise despite the responsibilities I had to attend to performing multiple roles of being a wife, mother as well as my teaching engagements in the university. I had to balance my personal and professional duties while at the same time ensuring that my creative work does not get impeded. I kept my writing on and managed to write a few novels on topics that aroused my interest culminating in my latest novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*.

In the year 2017 when I was completely engrossed in writing my novel, I was offered the position of Headship. I politely declined it citing my personal engagements. Six years from then, when I received the news of my novel being awarded the Sahitya Akademi I was elated. It is definitely a great moment for any writer to get acknowledged for one's work and I too am no exception. It was a surreal feeling.

Madhukar: Ma'am, How did you decide on the title of your novel *Requiem in Raga Janki* and what significance does it hold in relation to your story?

Neelum Saran Gour: The word requiem refers to a musical composition performed in remembrance of a deceased person. It's a kind of death dirge. While I was reading about the story of Janki Bai Allahabadi, the chief protagonist of my novel and her incredible talent of Hindustani classical music by dint of which she uplifted her from a life of penury to a life of prominence after facing unremitting horrors in her childhood, I was startled to realise how we, as a community have forgotten our social and cultural history, our legends and lore and most importantly our cultural icons like Janki Bai Allahabadi. It's extremely pathetic that Allahabad or for that matter the entire Northern Indian landscape which was once the emporium of culture, music and performing arts started getting devoid of its rich and vibrant tradition in the wake of colonial modernity. My novel chronicles this eventual change which came with the invention of the gramophone in the early twentieth century and the crucial impact it had on Hindustani classical music which was flourishing then under royal patronage with live performances in packed concerts and only the most affluent people of the city in attendance. The gramophone significantly changed and extended the nature of audiences for the classical Hindustani music. It allowed for mass production and distribution of music recordings, making classical music accessible to a much broader audience. This technological advancement meant that people could listen to music in their homes, at their convenience. It also helped to preserve the performances of legendary artists, allowing future generations to experience their music. Despite such an illustrious history of music, it is this discernible erasure of our past glory and musical tradition that propelled me to choose this title as a musical tribute in remembrance of a forgotten musical maestro whose life and legacy needed to be told to the world.

Madhukar: That's indeed is a very interesting take on the subject Ma'am. My next question is- were there any particular authors or literary works that influenced you to write this novel?

Neelum Saran Gour: To be frank, the life of Janki Bai Allahabadi itself was the greatest inspiration behind this novel. I was enchanted when I first came across her tale in bits and pieces rummaging through old history books, colonial archives and courtly memoirs documenting the history of classical Hindustani music and its various

ragas emblematic of different moods and occasions like happiness, mirth, anger, disappointment, joy etc. But yes, before writing this novel I had to read many things particularly about the musical tradition of Allahabad, the once prevalent kotha-culture and the different ragas in detail from various available sources. It enriched my understanding of Janki Bai's life and musical temperament. As to biographical details about Janki, there was precious little to be accessed. Only two copies of her verse collection exist, of which I was fortunate to obtain one. There is a well-researched article in the Hindi magazine 'Dharmayug' and a short film by Doordarshan about her. I explored archival lists of gramophone records such as Akbar Allahabadi's personality and poetry, the Delhi Durbar and the national movement as it evolved in Allahabad.

Madhukar: Janki Bai's life is undoubtedly a tale of resilience and fortitude pitched against a mountain of adversities and personal loss which she tides over with grace as portrayed in the novel. Ma'am what were the challenges that you encountered while writing *Requiem in Raga Janki*?

Neelum Saran Gour: Challenges are an indispensable part of a writer's life particularly when you are working on a subject or idea that has been barely explored in literature. As I previously mentioned when I first took upon this idea as a potential subject for my novel, I was struck by the insufficiency of material on her. This confounded me greatly as how come the life of one of Allahabad's greatest musical artists whose mellifluous renditions bequeathed an air of divine grace and enthralled her audiences that included kings, princes, nawabs and the elite and influential of the city bowing in front of her musical orchestrations could over the passage of a hundred years fade into anonymity. I took this challenge of resurrecting her life through my novel and reinstating her with the respect and recognition that she deserves in society.

Madhukar: Ma'am many readers have hailed your book as a celebration of the notion of 'female agency' through Janki Bai's life and ordeals. How far do you agree with this statement?

Neelum Saran Gour: Once a book enters the public domain it's the readers who decide its fate. However as the author, I would not negate the statement at all because Janki Bai's character does exude an air of feminist assertion, a person who coming out of the infamous dingy alleys of Allahabad where her mother was sold in a brothel and could have easily faded into oblivion decided to carve her own path. She found her muse in Hindustani classical music-thanks to her mother and was extremely fortunate to find a tutor like Hassu Khan whose strict training established her as own of the finest practitioners of Hindustani music in the Indian subcontinent. Her journey epitomizes her lifelong conflict with her fate- from being stabbed fifty six times by her suitor, a life changing incident that earned her an unusual hypocorism of 'Chhappan Churi' facing desertion by her father, a failed marriage, losing her adopted daughter to cholera and son to the evils of drug addiction. But despite her miseries, Janki Bai never compromised with her art. Music for her was not an achievement but an offering, a kind of spiritual calling that she soaked herself in every way.

Unfolding against the backdrop of colonial India, Janki's story offers us with a glimpse into the extraordinary life of a lone woman who defied societal norms and left an indelible mark on history and music. Her ascension from the sordid corridors of being a 'kothewali' to becoming one of the most cherished voices of her time is an example of her unwavering commitment to her vocation. It was difficult to even imagine that in the patriarchal society of Allahabad which she was a part of. Her story also makes us reconsider our popular perceptions of the kotha as a place of moral debauchery and sensual indulgence, emphasizing its importance as a bustling center of artistic and cultural patronage, something that lost its charm in the wake of colonial modernity.

Madhukar: Ma'am I came across one of your interviews published in the Times of India where you talked about how the figure of the courtesan has drawn considerable re-examination in the present times? What can be the reasons behind this?

Neelum Saran Gour: Well, Janki's story struck me for its existential reverberations, the story of an artist torn between her inner and outer

life. But talking about the courtesan culture, I think that the primary reason for this renewed interest in the life of a courtesan is the rich repository of cultural and historical essence that it imbibes. Courtesans in India, often referred to as *tawaifs*, played a significant role in the cultural and musical landscape especially during the Mughal era and the subsequent princely states. They were highly skilled in classical music, dance and poetry and were considered as embodiments of a refined culture and etiquette having been trained in the popular *sangeet gharanas* of the time. The *gharana* system in Indian classical music refers to a lineage or school of music that follows a particular style and tradition. Many of these courtesans thus played an important role in the preservation and propagation of classical music, transmitting the musical traditions of these gharanas to wider audiences. This interest thus stems from an eagerness to explore the rich history and cultural impact of these women for example Gauhar Jaan and Janki Bai Ilahabadi. Exploring courtesan culture also sheds light on the prevalent gender roles of the time, notions of sexuality and female agency. It challenges our conventional assumptions compelling us to re-examine the concocted narratives of history which have been handed down to us by historians and hence not free from their innate subjective biases.

Madhukar: Ma'am, one important message that you wish to convey to your readers through your novel?

Neelum Saran Gour: The readers are free to interpret my work as they wish to. I believe that is the essence of art. Though on a personal note, I would like to say that we need to be observant and culturally sensitive as students of literature. Janki Bai's story teaches us that one's adversities in life cannot be a deterrent to realizing one's dreams provided one is resolute and daring enough to pursue it with conviction. Secondly, we need to narrate such stories more and more. The contemporary set of readers need to know about the glorious history, culture and customs of this land. Our heritage shapes our identity. Delving into the past, knowing about the lives of important figures, artists, musicians, leaders, courtesans etc. acquaints us with their contributions in life, their struggles and resilience against all odds. And, for knowing our history it's very important for us to read, something which I find is on the wane in the new generation. It's

important for us to understand how societies have evolved, the challenges they faced and the progress they made.

Madhukar: Ma'am your opinion on the state of Indian writing in English in India?

Neelum Saran Gour: I think that the state of Indian writing in English is very good. It's an ever evolving and expanding arena. In recent years, we have witnessed a vibrant resurgence with new writers experimenting with new forms and narrative techniques. It's good to see so many young talents ranging from university graduates to even working professionals writing these days dealing with a wide range of themes, emotions and issues. Literature has branched out in unexpected ways. While this literature continues to reflect Indian culture, tradition, social values, the changing patterns of life and living, recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience, something that was lost in the concoctions of colonial discourses that brought out only one dimension of things. When we see the growth of creative writing in India and the kind of admiration it has garnered both within the country and worldwide there arises a sense of hope for the future.

Madhukar: Thanks for your observations ma'am. Ma'am over the past few years we have seen a gradual shift in literary discourses that have given rise to new fields of interdisciplinary research, spatiality studies being one of them. In many of your novels like *Three Rivers and a Tree*, *Allahabad Aria: Stories about Allahabad* or for that matter *Requiem in Raga Janki* itself you have kept the city of Allahabad as your fictional backdrop? Is it some sort of an individual fascination that most of your stories are about this city itself? How do you react when readers call you as one of the finest raconteurs /chronicles of the city?

Neelum Saran Gour: See it's not something that was pre-meditated. We need to acknowledge the fact that the spaces we inhabit have an indelible impact on our cultural conditioning, thought process and even our consciousness. Allahabad is a city I was born and brought up in, received my education and taught for four decades of my life. There is no place on earth that I know better than this city. Whether

it's my stories about the city or my anecdotal narratives of the history of my university everything has been told from an insider's perspective, collective memories and imprints culled from my long association with this place as one can evince from my works.

The city, as I have tried to portray through my novels carries a unique cultural character of its own marked by a beautiful co-existence of different cultural and linguistic traditions, a prominent center of art and music for many years. You will find people of different tongues be it Awadhi, Hindustani, Urdu, Persian, Bhojpuri, Braj Bhasha and English all in this city living together since centuries. All religions be it Hinduism, Christianity and Islam have their presence in this city. It's not only the holy Sangam of three rivers that attributes this place its identity but also a harmonious confluence of different ways of life and belief systems that imparts it a mutually cohesive and multi-cultural appeal. Coming to my novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*, the city of Allahabad is very crucial to understand the pulse of my narrative. Allahabad and the entire North India had a very rich tradition of Hindustani classical music which got significantly altered with the arrival of the gramophone. My protagonist Janki Bai epitomizes the opulence and prosperity of classical music in a city where she once came as a destitute child but went on to become its greatest cultural ambassadors. Allahabad for me is not a physical space, it's a realm of consciousness which pervades my work. It's like an omniscient observer that moves with the passage of time but does not cast away its antique charm and artistic efflorescence. However, over the years the city as I used to know it has changed considerably. With a change in political dispensation one can notice a perceptible shift in the attitudes and mannerisms and the cosmopolitan ethos that it was once known for. Anyone who has lived in this city for a long time can tell you that. The city for me is a creative landscape that holds the canvas on which I apply my brush. It's my place of belonging and comfort. But I am also critical about it. I have many reservations about the changes that this secular city has underwent in the past few years casting a sense of disconnection and defamiliarization for the natives like us. People are the same but their priorities have shifted. For me it's an integral part of my literary imagination.

Madhukar: Thank you very much, Ma'am for your insightful words. I am extremely honored to interact with you and learn so many things from your nuanced understanding of literature. Thank you very much for sparing your valuable time to speak with me about your novel. It's truly an enriching moment for me as a student of literature. Ma'am one last question of mine to end with. What honest advice would you like to give to the new generation of writers?

Neelum Saran Gour: The only advice I would like to give to the new generation is to be real to themselves, to find authenticity in their expressions. Remember, it's your originality and observation of events that sets you apart from others. Be true to yourself and listen to your inner voice. Pay attention to the world around yourself, the people, and their interactions. Be firm about what you stand for and what matters to you. Writing is not a vocation, but a calling just like any other art form. It's about finding fulfillment in your expressions and convictions. Thank you!