

Mobile Empathies:

Rana Dasgupta
interviewed by
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‘**M**y writing is fuelled by an interest in the hidden, in the suppressed, in forms of life and language rarely articulated in the mainstream culture,’ Rana Dasgupta tells me when I ask him about the inspiration for *Solo*, the eagerly awaited follow-up to his 2005 debut *Tokyo Cancelled*. The cycle of stories in *Tokyo Cancelled* began in the hypermodern non-place that is the transit lounge, ‘in the Middle of Nowhere, in a place that was Free of Duty but also, much more importantly, devoid of any obvious egress, like a back corridor between two worlds,’ so it seems entirely appropriate, after missing each other by days in Jaipur and London, that when we do finally meet it is in cyberspace via Skype. It’s noon in Delhi, dawn in London. Dasgupta’s little daughter is playing in the next room, she clammers on her father’s lap to say hello to my cat as we discuss literature. In life as in Dasgupta’s novel, the everyday and the world of ideas are inextricably entwined.

In *Solo*, Ulrich, a blind centegenarian, looks back at the tumult of the last century from his dark, dank flat next to the bus station in Sofia. His account of his failed love and unfulfilled ambitions is elegiac and tender, whilst at the same time inviting the reader to explore how the grand narratives of history impact on small, quiet lives. ‘I’ve been fascinated for a long time by events in Eastern Europe, by the post-communist world,’ Dasgupta says ‘by things that are also happening in India in some ways but are more stark and traumatic in Eastern Europe. In *Solo* I wanted to think about the impact on the self of having to live through successive demolitions of political regimes, where you have to pick yourself up, remake yourself,

Speak a new language, act under new rules, where the continuity of yourself is cut up into pieces. There's a slight amount of calculation here too. The issues I wanted to write about like failure and old age, I really didn't want to write in an Indian context because then it becomes an ethnic statement. I felt that Indian critics and readers would claim it in the way I didn't want it to be claimed, whilst Western reviewers and readers would distance themselves from it and make it into an exotic piece and wouldn't feel implicated. Eastern Europe is useful, Bulgaria captures the political and social issues I wanted to talk about and can't be dismissed by Western readers as a third world piece - it is a part of European history.

'The subjectivity of *Solo*, the impulse behind writing a book like this and *Tokyo Cancelled* too, is that there is the possibility of understanding what it means to be a human being where ever you come from. When I travel, there is always a sense of marvel of how varied the world is. I don't usually feel I would never understand these people or could never live in this place. I feel a certain sense of connection with places usually when I go there. I suppose the other thing is - because that's a warm and generous impulse, there's also a mean and cynical impulse desire to disrupt expectations of what everyone thinks the world is. The perversity of this novel was to refuse the American and European historical narratives. The vision of the twentieth century given in this book is one where all these strange political experiments add up to very little. They don't accumulate, they don't enlarge, they're just kind of pointless. The American idea that the twentieth century was very meaningful, that it was a great fulfilment of history is just not borne out by the experiences of so many people in the world. I chose Bulgaria because I wanted to write about a small place where all the forms of modernity were in place but they didn't add up to much.

'There's a sense that we don't own our history as we once did - the book starts with this idea. Ulrich's grandmother's immersion in her history astounds him. His grandmother carries within her all the community from which she came. She can recite all the names of the dead and continues to write their names on trees. As a child Ulrich is already distanced from this and finds it otherworldly. The melancholy of this book, because there's a strong sense of melancholy in the first part, is that one's distance from history becomes greater and greater. This is definitely part of Indian experience too. Even people who would love to want to carry on their traditions don't have sufficient knowledge of them. Although in another sense this is also a great freedom as well as a loss - not being part of our own history we become part of all histories. To some extent this is the subjectivity out of which this book springs from, the idea that there are not *those* people with *their* histories, which they could recount ad nau-

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seam, and that I would never be able to tell and that at some level it doesn't concern me except as exotic entertainment. I refuse that sense of distance that those histories are not mine, that they wouldn't engage me.'

Whilst explicitly engaged by politics and philosophy, *Solo* is also a deeply and genuinely strange, richly haunting novel, allusive and elusive, refusing to submit completely to analysis. Dasgupta's prose is dreamlike, subverting the boundaries between magic and reality, past and present. The novel is divided into two movements, 'Life' and 'Daydreams'. In the first part, organised around the chemical elements of the periodic table, Ulrich looks back over his life, whilst in the second, he daydreams the future. The novel follows Ulrich's imaginary progeny, from Bulgaria and Georgia to New York. Boris is a gypsy musician from the impoverished Bulgarian countryside who becomes a global star, and befriends Irakli, a suicidal young poet from Tblisi and his sister Khatuna, an ambitious gangster's girlfriend. The book is remarkable because of Dasgupta's global subjectivity, his mobility of empathy, and his ability to see life and plenitude in people who are often sidelined and ignored by mainstream culture. The reader is disorientated; space is reconfigured. The people and places we have been taught to see as peripheral in Occidental orthodoxy become central. Dasgupta says 'I think this global subjectivity arises from opposite impulses: one is a dislike of the exotic in every form – the exotic meaning that some people are radically other to me; they may be beautiful or horrifying to me but nothing flows from them into me and vice versa. I find this boring, this idea of people being very different, but it's a delicate balance because the opposite is that everyone is the same, which is also undesirable.'

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Dasgupta's writing plays alchemical tricks with time too. So many contemporary novels aspire to be like films, are film scripts in waiting or hooked on the neat editing tricks of that medium, but *Solo* is remarkable because it gives the writer the experience of time itself, of writing as a time-based medium. Ulrich's recollections are both a meditation on time and an experience of it. Dasgupta's prose ebbs with the slowness of nothing happening and swells and floods with the speed of elation and catastrophe. Reading *Solo* reminded me of watching Tarkovsky, so it gives me a chill when Dasgupta tells me 'One thing I did a lot while writing this book was to watch a lot films, like Tarkovsky's films where the issue of time passing is the whole issue. Film is of course a time-based medium – Tarkovsky's memoir is called *Sculpting in Time* and the whole subject there is a camera in the world in time and it was that feeling of just inhabiting somebody else's time that I wanted to capture. In fact I've just been watching some mobile phone footage shot by a friend who died while I was writing *Solo*, and there's something that's just incredibly poignant just about experiencing somebody else's place in time, and some of that poignancy was what I wanted to capture with Ulrich: of a life remarkable primarily for its duration. This was a huge writing challenge because you have to make the reader feel a hundred years has passed without any events to hang that duration on.'

Meeting writers is a dangerous business, the textual intimacies and complications the reader expects of the author rarely survive off the page, yet talking with

Dasgupta is like living in one of his novels, thought-provoking and exhilarating. Which writers have excited him, I wonder? 'I remember reading *Midnight's Children* on a train years ago and being overwhelmed by a sense of excitement about what novels could do,' he tells me, 'but I don't read a lot of contemporary fiction. Most of my touchstones are nineteenth and early twentieth century writers removed from me in time like Flaubert, Kafka, Dostoyevsky and Mann. The things that primarily motivate me to write are not literary things. Other books have given me a sense of scale and ambition of things to measure my self against but not necessarily ideas about how people should speak, how prose or form should be. My inspirations and motivations come from real life. Growing up half English and half Indian probably gave me a powerful subjectivity, especially as my Indian side was quite suppressed.

'My primary influences are not from fiction but writers like Walter Benjamin. His essay on the storyteller was very important to me when writing *Tokyo Cancelled*. He has this amazing image in that essay of how soldiers who fought

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in the First World War returned poorer not richer in stories. Benjamin thinks back to Tolstoy and Stendhal and the great traditions of war literature and storytelling and contrasts this with how men returned from this war without anything to tell. He puts this down to a certain relationship between human and industrial, and also the loss of relationship to human time, human duration, to death in particular. Benjamin has this other vignette, he reminds us of those medieval pictures of people dying sitting in their beds, with the whole village or town gathered around them to hear their last words. In that moment even the poorest wretch has an authority. This is the authority that the storyteller borrows, but we don't have that authority in our time, now that we've exiled death from our lives, now that

people don't die in their own beds. Some of these concerns about what it means to die exist in that pure sense, divorced from the sensationalism of achievements and events. These are the concerns of *Solo*, an excavation of that storytelling competency as a cultural competency related to death and life.

'I was also thinking about Agamben's concept of naked life and Bergson's idea of duration but I didn't really know what this book was about when I started writing it. Not only was Bulgaria unknown to me but also the philosophical terrain I was exploring. I wrote my way into that space. Many previous drafts were trashed because I reached a point where I exceeded my basic enquiries. In contrast in *Tokyo Cancelled* each story rotated around a central philosophical idea or question. For instance the Frankfurt story was all about an illegal Turkish immigrant to Germany and the horrifying way German society

appeared to her, where we as the reader didn't ever know whether this was real or not; it has to do with technology and mastery. Folk tales lend themselves well to this investigation of sensual fears and preoccupations but of course *Solo* is a bigger book and it is a sustained enquiry of a number of these themes.'

What's next after *Solo*, I ask, aware that many writers are reluctant to talk about new projects. Dasgupta is vague, but not evasive. 'I'm trying not to repeat myself so I'm trying to explore a different kind of terrain. I want to work out things about desire and love and other impulses. I want the new work to be very contemporary. I'm bored with history now, I really want to think about the contemporary. But it's very early. I exhausted myself with *Solo* and poured out everything I want to say. I want to replenish myself, to travel.

'I value Delhi highly, this city has given me a lot. Even at this point of time, despite the boom, despite how expensive things are and the constant demolition and rebuilding of everything, there's still a kind of languor which one couldn't find in London or New York which allows one to sit around and think about things and not feel one should be on this treadmill. I'm fortunate enough to have really amazing intellectuals and artists around me, fantastic people who challenge me in what I do and engage me. But Delhi is a foreign country to me and its not always pleasant being here. Although I sometimes fantasise about living somewhere like a small town in the South of France - something as different from here as I could imagine - I think I've become dependent on discomfort. I think all the time about comfort systems that work, electricity that never goes off, places where driving is low intensity. But actually, when I'm in a place where everything does work everyone around me seems so complacent, I get a little unhappy about it and want to shake people up and say this is not how the world is.'

His writing does just that. Dasgupta's fictional world is often uncomfortable, disorientating, tragic and beautiful, and never allows the reader to indulge in thoughtless complacency.