
A TETE-A-TETE WITH PROF. MANJU JAIDKA

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(Anupam Vatsyayan in Conversation with Prof. Jaidka)

Prof. Manju Jaidka is a name to reckon with in the widespread academic circle. This year, in October, after a long (more than 40 years), joyous, and rewarding journey as a teacher, she entered the phase of retirement from active service. In addition to the numerous administrative responsibilities which she shouldered during her illustrious career, like being the former Chairperson of the Department of English at Panjab University, Chandigarh, Director of the university IAS Study Centre, and convener of various committees, examinations and decision-making bodies, her main concern remains to forge an international network of like-minded academics for the exchange of scholarship, a task she has been successfully engaged in over the last two decades.

Her national and international assignments over the past four decades have been inspirational for many. She has been travelling and lecturing extensively in India as well as the US, UK, Europe, Canada, China, Nepal, etc. In addition, she is the recipient of prestigious fellowships, including a Fulbright and two Rockefeller. Throughout her career, she undertook assignments at universities like Oxford, Harvard, Yale, Illinois, Iowa, New York, and Concordia. Back home, as the Chairperson of the Chandigarh Sahitya Akademi from 2008-15, she made tremendous contribution towards the promotion of literature and culture in Chandigarh by organizing lit fests, book reading sessions, critical discussions, and literary events. She is presently the chief functionary of MELOW (the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the World). In this capacity, over the last twenty years, she has been organizing international conferences successfully every year. Additionally, Jaidka has held the post of Executive Director of the International American Studies Association and also serves on the advisory board of several international organizations.

An active blogger, Prof. Jaidka has authored almost two score books, countless research papers, along with a kindle publication on management of disability. The fountainhead of inspiration, Prof. Jaidka is energy personified. Fondly referred to as MJ, Prof. Jaidka is also a swimmer and a salsa dancer. It is apt to say that MJ re-defines commitment, be it for her work, her research or her relationships. In her, we see a blend of work and fun, as she treasures each passing moment of life. She, indeed, stimulates minds and shapes personalities (as her student I can vouch for this).

We, at the *Journal of Literary Aesthetics* requested Prof. Manju Jaidka, who superannuated recently from the Dept. of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh, for a contribution to its latest issue. We asked her to speak of her extraordinary teaching career of over four decades, her publications, her various stints abroad, her creative writing, her Shimla connection, her views on present literary scenario, and how she managed to juggle all this with her multifarious commitments as a mother, wife, daughter and, public persona. Given below is her response.

And now, in MJ'S own words:

I feel honoured on being asked to contribute a piece to *The Journal of Literary Aesthetics*, not simply because it is the literary endeavour of a reputed college, but more so because some of my very dear former students are associated with it. I feel proud and excited when I see my former students taking initiative and doing things, making a difference to whatever field they are engaged in. Their achievement is not just theirs; it is mine, too.

I have been a teacher for more than four decades now. 44 years, one month and ten days, to be precise. That is a long time! Now I may have superannuated but I doubt if the teacher in me will ever hang up her boots because a teacher is always a teacher. More than that, a teacher is always a student and the day one stops being a student is the day when ceases to be a teacher. Learning is an endless enterprise, a boundless sky into which we can fly forever, get lost in and – paradoxically – find ourselves.

I began teaching in 1974, even before I turned 21. My career, when I take a backward look at it, has been a very pleasant roller-coaster ride. There have been highs and lows, crests and troughs, but the feeling I have today is that of satisfaction. I have done my best, I loved what

I did, and I see the rewards before me in my students who are doing well in their chosen professions. They are all confident young men and women, contributing to the society. No, I do not take credit for their success – that is entirely their effort – but I feel delighted to have been a part of their formative years, a part of their onward journey.

At this point I would like to refer to Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and the distinction he makes between 'work' and 'play'. Work is what one is obliged to do whereas play is that which we do voluntarily. If you've read Tom Sawyer's *Adventures*, you would know what the context is: Tom has tricked his friends into whitewashing the fence for him. He has been smart enough to convert work into play and is happy with the results. This story can be a starting point for one embarking on a career. If you treat your career as 'work' it becomes a drudgery, but if you treat it as 'play' it is smooth sailing and you can even enjoy it.

In particular, I would like to address young women teachers who have to juggle their careers and private lives all the time. It isn't always easy but nothing ever comes easy. If you recall the poem "Adam's Curse" by WB Yeats, there's a line that goes: "It's certain there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring." One has to sweat and toil in order to reap the fruits of labour. In the early years of my career I recall waking up as early as 4.00 or even 3.30 a.m. in order to prepare my lecture for the day before my children woke up, then give them their milk bottles, make arrangements, and leave instructions for them to be looked after and leave for work by 8.30 a.m.

But time moves on. Children grow up, learn to look after themselves, study hard, become independent and find their own lives. Whatever you do for them in their initial years prepares them for the time to come. Similarly, in the classroom our interaction with the students is for a short duration but you need to keep in mind that you are being judged ALL the time. Not just how and what you teach, but also whether you come prepared or not, also your attitude, your commitment, your punctuality, your involvement with your subject – everything is under scrutiny all the time. Perhaps not consciously but at least unconsciously it all gets registered. So what is the impression you wish to make? That's for you to decide.

Students are smart, clever, and discerning. They can see through a good teacher and a not-so-good one. Being surrounded by distractions like the cellphone, Facebook, etc., their

attention is divided in far too many directions and they are tempted to take shortcuts in studies. An effective teacher can keep them focused and interested in the subject. There are teachers and teachers: those who are indifferent and also those who are passionately involved with their subject. The latter do well in their profession, go places and are remembered by posterity. The others fade away, or else are remembered with horror!

The teachers from my student days whom I recall with love and respect were those who were serious about their work and also good human beings, those who could reach out and connect with the class. I am not referring to the ones who were on a popularity binge all the time: the kind who chummed up with their students, chatted with them in the class, treated them to tea and coffee, etc, in a bid to be 'popular' with them. I do not subscribe to such tactics; I do not like the idea of jumping on to a popularity bandwagon. On the contrary, I have been a strict teacher and a stickler for rules. My point of view has been: if I'm given a responsibility let me do it honestly. If the students go wrong it is my belief that they need some disciplinary action or else they will do worse tomorrow. This attitude may not go down well with many, but such has been my approach.

Nothing in the world is stagnant. The field of higher education has changed a lot since I began my career and I confess I am not entirely happy with the changes I have witnessed. When I began teaching it was not a well-paid profession but one took it up for the love of it. But now, although teaching brings in a decent amount of money, the love for the profession is missing. I have seen young, freshly-recruited teachers being very casual about their work, not meeting classes regularly, not even preparing their lectures the way they should. Of course, there are exceptions – God bless them! – but they seem to be a rare breed. The respect that teachers once commanded is seen today only in exceptional cases.

Even Literature today is not given the importance it deserves. Humanities and the liberal arts are not given their due. Most students who take admission in Literature departments are either those who have not qualified for professional courses or those who do not have any goal in life. The saving grace is that there is *still* a small percentage of students genuinely interested in literature. They are the ones who read and discuss books, write poetry, are visionaries and dreamers. They bring us hope for a better world and the world badly needs

such people because, as Yeats famously told us, “in dreams begins responsibility.” Literature is a relief from the humdrum of everyday life. It is an oasis in the midst of a torrid desert. In times of trouble it gives us solace. It provides hope and promise. It is something that completes a human being, awakens our finer being, distinguishing us from baser creatures. (Would your cat or dog ever respond to poetry?) Without literature the level of civilization would be much lower; we would be simply crude, unthinking automatons. Those of us who teach literature are fortunate beings for we have the chance to shape future visionaries.

I often use a simile from the kitchen when discussing teaching: you can add as much or as little sugar as you wish to your profession. Substitute sugar with passion and you know what I mean. You can put in as much hard work as you want. The output will be commensurate with your input. If you work hard there will be doors opening up for you and you will go places. I personally have been very fortunate. Although I remained rooted to Chandigarh and Panjab University, I have had a lot of opportunity to travel abroad. In fact, almost every year I have been crossing international borders on some fellowship or academic assignment. The most prestigious of these fellowships were a Fulbright Postdoctoral award and two Rockefeller awards. I have also had visiting fellowships, speaking engagements and travel grants to some of the top universities in the world: Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Illinois, Dartmouth, Concordia, just to name a few. Travel helps one to grow professionally and also personally. As TS Eliot says: “the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

Along with teaching, academic writing has been an integral part of my career. I did it all through my career, not because I was obliged to but because I enjoyed researching, writing and publishing and brought out more than a dozen academic books and sixty-odd research papers (a good number in the field of literature). At the same time, a secret ambition remained in my heart to be a story-teller. Time and again I would scribble a poem or a short story but did not take the task seriously. Then in 2011, I published *Spots of Time*, a novel which had been in the making for about ten years, and a play – an academic satire – titled whimsically *The Seduction and Betrayal of Cat Whiskers*. That marked the formal beginning of

my creative writing and I have continued writing since. At this point of time I enjoy doing creative writing more than academic.

I would also like to mention my novel, *Scandal Point*(2014)that is set in Shimla, the hill-station nearest to Chandigarh which is the favourite summer holiday destination for a lot of people. I have enjoyed my visits to HP University in Shimla, and to the IAS where I was a resident associate for three consecutive summers from 2011 to 2013. Shimla has a haunting charm that grows on you and calls you back time and again. *Scandal Point* is set in Shimla, revolving around the popular landmark on the Mall called Scandal Point. It narrates the legend behind this spot and is part historical part fictitious. The book has been very well-received, particularly in Shimla where it occupies a prominent position on the shelves of leading book shops on the Mall. The story seems to have touched a chord in the local people and it has been dramatized and presented on stage. In 2012, a local government school dramatized a part of it. In 2018 August, Loreto Convent, Tarahall, did a full-fledged play based on the book. They staged a musical performance in which about 700 students participated. It was multi-lingual, weaving together popular dialogue and songs from Hindi, English, Punjabi and Pahari. Altogether it was a delightful performance. I was very impressed and so humbled, marvelling at the way my book could impact so many different people in such creative ways.

All stories emerge from real life and so do mine. A story-teller has to make his/her tales credible to readers, so the link with reality should never be severed. Events from real life form the warp and woof of a story and are treated imaginatively, re-created in the mind, and then presented before the reader. The stories that appeal most to a reader are ones that highlight some interesting aspect of human life: the human, the ludic or the absurd. Sometimes our experiences cause us a lot of anger or resentment. On such occasions creative writing can be a panacea and help us transform our negativity into creativity. I, too, have used the real world as grist for my mill and tempered real life experiences with fantasy and imagination in my books.

Among my non-fictional prose works I'd like to mention my book *TheNext Milestone* that was first published on Kindle and then in a regular print edition (2015, 2017). It is a very

personal narrative and I wish to share it because I want to underscore the point that nothing comes easily in life: there are adversities, there are trials and tribulations that one has to cope with – but one has to keep going, no matter how hard the struggle. In my case, my first-born was a boy who was 100% disabled and I looked after him for 37 years, coping with all the physical and emotional pain and agony. He suffered throughout and I, as the mother, suffered in silence as I watched him writhing and squirming in pain until he finally left us four years ago. *The Next Milestone* is a partial account of the trauma we both went through. I wish to stress that when faced with adversity, one has to carry on without breaking down. Life has its challenges but these challenges can actually make you stronger. And when you remain strong the whole cosmos seems to rise in your support.

Homo sapiens are social animals. No one is an island and no one lives alone. As a human being, and also as a professional, it is very important to be part of different clubs, societies, and associations, whether professional or private. Being part of an organization helps you bond with like-minded people, encourages teamwork, and hones your leadership skills. If you can take on responsibility and lead some such organization then you will be in a position to guide younger people, showing them the way, grooming them into responsible adults. I have been a part of many organizations but the longest (twenty years) has been with MELOW, an academic association for world literature. I floated it with a handful of colleagues but now it has about 700 members at any given time. We have held 18 international conferences, bring out a journal of high standard, run a website, blog, Facebook page, google group, etc, etc. It makes me feel good that I have been instrumental in setting up a society which commands credibility across national and international borders and has the chance to shape and mould upcoming generations.

And finally, I would like to repeat that I have always loved my job and my students. My passion for my work has been the wind beneath my wings and I will cherish happy memories of the last four decades. But nothing is forever and when the time comes, one has to get off the train. I may disembark but the train does not stop, the journey continues with other passengers, other drivers, other landmarks and signposts ahead. As I disembark, I

wish my younger colleagues and the upcoming generations a bright and glowing future with many rainbows and twinkling stars. Reach out for these stars and make them yours!

“Ah that man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for”.(Robert Browning)

Good luck and God bless!