

Umi Sinha

in conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant: Can you just introduce yourself and tell us where we are?

Umi Sinha: My name is Umi Sinha, I'm a writer and I live in Eastbourne.

Colin Grant: And where are we sat? Is this a special place for you? Do you do any writing here or any reflecting? What happens in this room?

Umi Sinha: I do tend to... Yeah, it's my living room. I've got a study area. We're sitting at the dining table, which is where I tend to write because the light's better here and it doesn't feel quite as serious as sitting at my desk.

CG: So, can we begin by touching on *Belonging*... this wonderful story with three central characters... overlapping stories or parallel stories? Can I begin by asking what drew you to this story in the first place?

US: I was doing an MA at Sussex University and I had written short stories and had some published, but I always wanted to write a novel and I never had a big enough idea. And I do think you need a big idea for a novel. I went to my children's school one day. It was a Rudolf Steiner school and the teacher had put up the children's paintings on the wall and they were all the same painting. And I looked at them

and I said to him, 'Where do you get the idea to tell the children what to paint?' And he said, 'The night before painting day every week, when I go to sleep, I ask my guardian angel for an idea.' And I thought that was quite funny. So, that night before I went to bed – I don't have a guardian angel that I'm aware of, but anyway – I asked my unconscious mind for an idea, and I woke up the next morning and that opening scene of *Belonging* just played through my head like a film as I was in that sort of half-sleeping, half-waking state. And I knew that it was the beginning of something big. I didn't know what had happened, or the explanation for the very dramatic event in it. But I knew that was the beginning of the novel that I had asked for. Then I spent probably another seven years trying to work out what it was about. But it was clear it was set in colonial times which made sense because basically, I'm a product of colonialism.

CG: In the course of the book, towards the end, you quote Kevin Parry. Kevin Parry knew what the book was about before you knew yourself and reminded you when you forgot. So, what was the book about?

US: He felt it was about belonging, essentially, but he never actually used those words. I think he just had an instinct for what I needed to do, and I kept getting distracted by the events, the happenings, the historical events... and forgetting to focus on the central issue of the novel. And it wasn't until the second-last draft, many years down the line, when I finally settled on the title *Belonging*, that I suddenly thought, 'Ah, that's what it's really about'. And then I understood what he had been talking about, because every time we would have a conversation, he would say things and I would feel a bit baffled, like I didn't really understand what he was talking about. So, it always felt as if he was a step ahead of me. He was a very experienced and talented writer. He's dead now, sadly.

CG: And do you think you need to keep that notion of what it is about as you write... almost at your elbow as it were?

US: I think it varies from person to person. Some people know what they're writing about when they start. I don't think I do. I had some ideas for what I want the second novel to be about, for example. But what I'm realising now that I'm on the second draft, two-thirds of the way through... that what I thought it was about was... I was thinking of the peripheral things rather than the central thing. Stephen King said something interesting, which is: 'The first draft, you're telling yourself the story. The second draft, you're telling the reader the story.' And I think that first draft is the one where I am discovering what I'm writing about... because I don't actually know, often, what I'm going to say until I write it. It's a bit like that quote [attributed to EM Forster]: 'How do I know what I think, until I hear what I say?'

CG: Now, we are in a room surrounded by lots of books. And I know, from reading your essays and recording your essays, that books were very important to you as a child and that has followed you through to your adulthood... When it came to thinking of yourself as a writer, were there particular writers who you thought were influential in your own writing?

US: It's hard to say really. I think most of the writers that I really admire write very differently from me. I would love to write like Marquez or Nabokov or Tolstoy. But I realise that I have quite a simple, straightforward writing style. And if I write anything that has a kind of poetic flavour, I immediately feel it's pretentious and have to take it out. So, I think they have influenced me but not directly in my writing style. But I think there are writers... those three that I mentioned, but also Ann Patchett who I'm a great admirer of... I don't think there's any that I can directly think influenced me.

CG: But are there writers who you go back to time and time again? So, for me it's always Naipaul. Even though I find him an irascible fellow and I disagree with him

a lot of the time, I've been schooled by him in a way through reading him. So, he's a kind of benchmark for me and I wondered whether you have anything... any writer like that for you.

US: I'm not sure I do really. I was very influenced by Victorian novels when I was a child because my mother had a huge collection of them. And I think *Belonging* was quite influenced by that. The voices of the Victorian characters came quite easily to me because I had read so much of Victorian writing; and it's a period that I felt, I almost feel as though I lived then. It feels so familiar to me.

This new novel I'm struggling with more, because it's set in the Second World War which is a period that I didn't really know much about. And I think, there I've been reading more modern writers... of course Ondaatje. And one of the things I think I have learned from him, and from writers like Seamus Deane who wrote...

CG: Seamus Deane... I know him... he wrote *Reading in the Dark*.

US: *Reading in the Dark*. Yes, set in Londonderry, I think. It's a brilliant book and it's so spare... so spare. It's like poetry. Oh, and the other one, Anne Michaels...

CG: Oh yes. I know her too.

US: Something about leaves, I can't remember the title. And there's something about the spaces and the gaps they leave that I really admire; because I'm somebody who tends to write fairly 'filled in'. And I'm trying more with this book to be a bit sparer in my prose.

CG: Now this is very complex and complicated book, and often when you begin as a novelist, I imagine you'd think about the architecture for your book. Did you have

an architecture in mind as you wrote, or did that emerge in the course of the writing? And were there any models for that?

US: I felt I had to have a structure in advance. So, I decided that I was going to do it like a plait. There would be these three inter-weaving narratives and they would alternate.

CG: And how do you bridge that gap between your experience and what you write about? So, is that gap bridged by research?

US: It's bridged by research. It's also bridged by imagination, really. I mean I think I spent so much time daydreaming as a child, being someone else. And that someone else was often male because my life was so incredibly boring as a child. All these books about men going on adventures... I always pictured myself as some adventurer, like Allan Quatermain or one of the Rider Haggard kind of heroes.

Yeah... I think what I do is I read everything I can find... a lot of novels set in the period because you get the kind of details in novels that you don't necessarily get in non-fiction; a lot of non-fiction first-hand accounts, if I can find them, because that gives you the kind of accuracy and the authentic feel. I watch films to try and get a picture of what things looked like. And then I spend a lot of time immersing myself in the characters' minds. So, I go for walks and imagine if I was this character walking along this riverbank, what would he be thinking? If he saw that cloud in the sky, what mood would he be in? What would he make of it? What would it look like to him?

CG: Now, I've had the pleasure of recording your essays, and your long essay in particular would seem in a way to give the uninitiated reader an insight into why you might be drawn to this particular subject and to this story. But in terms of your own belonging, in terms of your own identity, there's a very strong sense of your

duality and the fact that you were a hybrid person, as many people are... and I wondered whether that is one of the key things which you are transmitting in this book... this sort of shift in between cultures.

US: Yes. I mean I think that is something personal to me but it's also as you say, it's a growing thing. There are a lot now of mixed-race people in the world and actually there aren't that many narratives that focus on that. And I think also, there's a sense of not belonging in many, many different ways in the world now, because people are so displaced. You know not many people are born and grow up in the place where... you know... who spend their whole lives in one place, as they did perhaps one hundred years ago.

I remember Hugh Lupton, who does a performance about the poet John Clare and the Enclosures Act when people were displaced from the land, saying that to those people, the sky was like the dome of a skull. And the landscape in which you grew up was like the inside of your head. And that when you were driven out of your landscape, it actually drove you out of your mind. And of course, John Clare ended up in an asylum. A lot of people now are displaced and don't have those anchors and roots; and I think there are advantages to that but there's also perhaps an increasing feeling of people feeling alienated.

CG: I think as a reader though, you are anchored by this book because of the very accurate-seeming – to me anyway – the accurate portrayals of place in India and in Brighton, Sussex especially. Both are really well defined. How much was that association with these places a benefit to you when you came to write about them?

US: I deliberately chose actually to write about them. The scene that I mentioned that I had in the dream was actually set in a house in Brighton, or in England anyway. I assumed it was Brighton because it was similar to Lewes Crescent, where we lived at the time. I transposed it to India. Basically, because I thought I'm going

back over a hundred years in history, I've got to imagine these characters and their lives, and I don't really want to have to imagine places as well. It just all became... it was too much, to have to research that as well. So, I thought, if I set it in places that I'm already familiar with, that's one less thing that I have to research.

CG: *The New India Express* said of your book, 'It deviates from the predictable anti-colonial narrative and instead portrays the intimate lives of the colonials, not the natives.' Why did you make that decision? Because it's quite surprising, because of your background, one would assume, rather... *very arrogantly*, that you would not do that... that you would write about the natives, as it were. Why did you make that big jump?

US: Because it seemed to me that writing from the point of view of the natives, it's pretty predictable. And I thought actually perhaps it's more illuminating for people to see how the colonisers also suffer... that actually it's a damaging thing for everybody involved, as George Orwell mentions in his recollections of being in Burma. It puts you... he talks about the Englishman having to wear a mask and your face grows to fit it, and I think that feeling of... they also lose identity. I just felt it was more illuminating in some ways to see the damage it does to human beings, both when you're oppressed and when you're the oppressor. But I think it's much more obvious what damage it does to the oppressed, than it's obvious what damage it does to the oppressor.

CG: But also, there are surprises aren't there? Towards the end, people realise that they're not what they imagine themselves to be, and they might have some Indian blood in them for instance. And you talked about that in one of your essays about the moment you realised that you were Indian in part and not necessarily English as you presumed. So, you're also curious about teasing out those core ideals that we hold for ourselves which may not actually be true.

US: Yes, and actually there was a huge amount of denial in India about people having Indian blood. It was something people were deeply ashamed of and hid. And interestingly a few years ago, I met someone, and I could tell she was Anglo-Indian. She said to me, 'Oh, we were the last family who left the Raj' and 'We were...' And she was talking as though they were this white family. And I was looking at her and thinking, you're Anglo-Indian. Everything about you says Anglo-Indian to me. She was in total denial about it, and this is... you know we're talking about... ten years ago.

CG: What was it about her that you recognised immediately as being Anglo-Indian?

US: Mannerisms, attitudes, appearance, everything.

CG: Now, there's a lot of... we mentioned Seamus Deane earlier, and I was struck when I read his book, *Reading In The Dark*, there's a scene where there's a rat infestation and the adults... they kind of build a trench around their neighbourhood... A deep trench and they fill it with broken bits of wood, paraffin and then they set it ablaze. And then they chase all the rats into the trench. Now, *Belonging* is a very violent book and I must say, I sometimes went to sleep and had nightmares about what I'd read.

US: Really?

CG: Yeah... they stayed with me... very impactful. I suppose my question to you is: to what degree, can you as a writer in this book remove yourself sufficiently from it for you not to have had the kind of residual, possible deleterious effect on your psyche as someone like me? I suppose to put it more simply, how did you manage

to keep yourself at bay from the horror and destruction of what you're writing about?

US: I don't know that I did. I think I went there, but you know, I've always been, I think, what's called a melancholic. As a child, I loved reading sad stories. Every time my parents upset me, I would imagine myself dead and lying in my grave and how sorry they'd be. So, in a weird sort of way that kind of material really attracts me. I'm not quite sure why that is... Probably not very healthy. I actually had to cut a lot of what I had in there because it was too awful.

CG: I'm interested in that... the way that you come to that decision about what is too awful. What are the criteria that you use to decide what is too awful for you to write about? What is also too awful for the reader to read about? How does that process arrive? I suppose it's organic, but did you have some sort of red lines that you would not cross?

US: I think it's about graphic description. I think what I realised was I had about forty pages of detailed description of what happened in the entrenchment, when they were trapped like those rats and the pit being shelled day and night. So, there was a lot of physical description, and it was pretty horrific. And what I realised in the end was, it was... I read somewhere that they had found... when they found that Bibighar – where the massacre took place...

CG: Sorry, could we just back... just to help the listener along, this is Cawnpore we're talking about, aren't we?

US: The British pronounced it as 'Cawnpore', but it's actually Kanpur.

CG: And before we get into the details, just to remind the listener what happened at that moment in this terrible event.

US: Well basically, there was an uprising in India in 1857 against the British. And it was across most of the north of India. And it wasn't just the army, so it wasn't technically a mutiny; it was also civilians who rebelled. And the British ended up kind of confining themselves. They were besieged basically. So, in Cawnpore, they built this entrenchment which was a square area of ground that they built a low wall around – a wall so low that one British officer described it as being 'a wall a cow was capable of jumping over.' So, they were effectively out in the open in a couple of barracks... and there were a couple of wells in there. And of course, as soon as the shelling started, those buildings were destroyed. They were basically caught practically in the open, being shelled day and night.

CG: And these are soldiers and civilians, women and children as well?

US: Yes, people from the civil lines as well. So, civil servants and their families. Women and children as well. And then, yeah... I won't go into too much detail, but I think what I realised was when they actually found the site – the women were eventually moved to a different house – when the soldiers came upon the site of that house, they found a little note on the floor and it was just a list of somebody's family and it just went, 'Momma died... such and such a date... Baby died... such and such a date... Susie died... such and such a date', and that was all. And I thought that was so incredibly moving – the sparseness of that note. And I thought, actually I don't need all that big description. So, I ended up doing it in about half a page of her afterwards reflecting back on what happened and it's very much the basics of what happened, without going into any of the graphic detail.

CG: Now I think you did it very well, but it's still very powerful and impactful and memorable. Well, I wanted to get onto this... to finally get onto the current novel... so, again an historical novel I gather. Is that right? What is it about?

US: It's about a Sikh soldier in Italy in the Second World War, who's on the run.

CG: Did *Belonging* lead to this, smoothly?

US: In a funny sort of way, it did. It almost felt... I did an event at the Tata Lit Festival in Bombay and John Horne who is a historian at Trinity College Dublin, I think, was a facilitator; and he said to me, 'It's really interesting that nobody seems to have made a link between the Mutiny and the First World War. There's definitely a link.' And I said, 'Well, I think I did that in my novel.' He hadn't read my novel then and he said, 'I think there's also a link with the Second World War.' And I mean, obviously there is because of the continuity of the colonial relationship between India and Britain; and I think that got me thinking... It was almost like I've done these three generations but maybe there's another generation.

CG: Yes, because the link is also, obviously the link about allegiance... where your allegiance lies, isn't it? And if you're an Indian soldier fighting for the British, come the day when you sniff the possibility of independence, would you break smoothly from it or do you hold to the people that you fought for in the past, perhaps?

US: Yeah, I think that's a lot of the push-pull and also the complexity again because there is a point in the book, a scene I'm just writing at the moment where a Pole is a bit surprised by why an Indian is fighting for people who are occupying his country. But that complexity of that British relationship with India which had started in 1601, or something like that, and started with a trading relationship and then, you know, a private army in which people were mercenaries. So, it wasn't

actually like an occupying force at that point. And then, with an administration being taken over and territory being claimed, and it was kind of a creeping thing... and it wasn't until after the Mutiny of 1857 or the War of Independence of 1857, that the Crown actually took over. So, that's the point at which the Empire really started. And by then of course, Indians were working for the East India Company and had a lot invested in it.

CG: Now, we joked earlier, or you joked earlier about moving steadily east over the last few years and that you might end up in India if you kept on moving. I wondered to what degree through the writing you move closer to India in terms of not just your writing and reflections at the time, but spiritually, emotionally reflecting on your past, perhaps?

US: Yes, I think... It's interesting. It's been a developing thing because when I left India, as I say in one of my essays, I really wanted to be English. I felt I was spiritually English, and I was going to find my... I would belong in England, which turned out not to be the case. I started revisiting my father. I got to know him really as an adult when he was about seventy, maybe. I visited him two or three times a year after that, every year, because my sister and I kept thinking, 'Well, he's not going to live much longer'. He lived to ninety-three. So, I got to know... obviously I became reacquainted both with him and with India and began to realise how important it was and how formative it had been although I hadn't realised it. And I had actually thought about retiring there at one point, but I think the way things are there at the moment, I wouldn't want to. I don't really... I think what's happening there is really upsetting and frightening and reminiscent of partition actually and the terrible things that happened then.

CG: Well, Umi... thanks very much for agreeing to be interviewed by me and for letting me into your home and for sharing your stories and your reflections on writing... and thank you very much for *Belonging*.

US: Thank you.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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