

Sita Brahmachari

In Conversation with Karen Sands-O'Connor and Darren Chetty

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Colin Grant (CG): This is *WritersMosaic, in Conversation*. Sita Brahmachari talks to Professor Karen Sands-O'Connor and Dr Darren Chetty about their new book, *Beyond the Secret Garden*. It's both a critique of the English classic from 1911, *The Secret Garden*, but also looks at how Black and racially minoritised children have been depicted in English literature from its early stages.

[Music]

Sita Brahmachari (SB): I'm Sita Brahmachari. I'm a children's and young adult author. And I am so happy to be here today in the *WritersMosaic in Conversation* with Dr Darren Chetty and Professor Karen Sands-O'Connor. I'm just so happy to be celebrating the publication and launch of *Beyond the Secret Garden* with you. It is such

an important anthology. *Beyond the Secret Garden* crosses all aspects of the web of publishing for children, about children, who's being published, how—the historical context of who the storytellers are today. So you really have a broad web of connections in this collection.

Karen Sands-O'Connor (KS): I think we've been really lucky because we both have complementary skills, and the things that I'm really strong on help the columns get better, and Darren can give something completely different.

Darren Chetty (DC): One of the things I think I didn't quite get right in the *Good Immigrant* chapter was I didn't spend a lot of attention talking about writers of colour who are doing good work, partly because I was speaking about the perspective from in school, which that even though those books existed, they weren't necessarily getting picked up.

SB: So just give a little summary of that piece that you wrote.

DC: Well, I mean, the title, *You can't say that! Stories have to be about white people*, was something that a year two boy said after another child had taken my advice and given their main character the name of someone in their family, which was my very gentle way of tiptoeing in the fact that they could draw on diverse sources for their writing,

because I'd noticed that children of colour were nearly always writing white characters in their stories. And I've done a lot of work, and we both have done a lot of work, with teachers, who typically say, 'Yes, this is true my school as well', and typically also say, 'And we've never really talked about it. We've just assumed that's how it is.' And my sense has always been that that tells us something significant about how we understand education, how we understand literature, how we understand—

KS: How to talk to children.

DC: How to talk to children. And there's something quite assimilatory going on in that we think we have to be a certain type of way in the writing we produce. And I think even young children, they're producing literature, they're producing art when they do a bit of writing. And I think often we think of writing as just learning secretarial skills or grammar skills, but they are producing something meaningful. So I wanted to explore that. And I looked at some of the teachings practice and how that never really gave them the message that they could draw on their backgrounds. But I also looked at the books that were being read, and that whilst there were diverse books, and I bought a bunch, and as a teacher, often my own money, those books were typically home time books, reading 10 minutes before the end of day or read a story, and the main text that we were basing our curriculum on were surprisingly narrow in their outlook. When I was approached to do the column, I realised I just didn't have the

knowledge. I was interested in the subject, but I hadn't explored it. And I knew Karen had, and therefore, if we collaborated, we could actually get some serious historical context to it that I just wouldn't have at my fingertips or any means.

SB: I'm hugely grateful actually to you both and to Karen to have a historical context to which your work is viewed as a writer. When you put your work out into the world, it's a complex, for me, very complex process of mediating my own culture, my own history, my own experiences in, say, growing up in the countryside as a mixed-race person. I know, Darren, you've written very much about that in *Welsh (Plural)* too. And it seems to that sense of belonging and where you belong as a writer within the culture but also then where the children that you write about belong, I've written about again and again in my stories, and yet I see it very rare—I have seen it very rarely critiqued in the way that you have done that. What do you bring to—when you look at one of these books that you're reviewing in *Beyond the Secret Garden*, can you give us the gamut of what you—knowledge will you bring to it? Because it seems like you're operating—I mean, for me, the context of slavery, postcolonialism, where we are now, war zones of the world, all of these things you seem to be connecting with.

KS: Yeah, well, I will tell you a couple of personal stories that connect to that. One is that I was born just a year after the riots in Detroit. And I was born in Detroit, but very quickly after that, we moved out of the city. And my dad was a city planner in Detroit,

a junior city planner, and they sent him into the riots. And he would never talk about that with me. He just refused. And it really affected me, him not speaking about it, because I know that he fought all through his career as an urban planner for social justice in many ways, but that experience really scarred him that the people who were in charge wouldn't go, but they sent him in to calm things down. He was 23, 24. And so for me, it was this push to want to really find out about history, find out about what happened in my own country. But also then when I met my husband, well, he wasn't my husband then, but when I met him, we took a trip to Ireland at one point. And his last name is O'Connor. And he said, 'Well, I must have Irish blood in me because my last name is O'Connor.' And I said, without thinking about it at the time, I said, 'Or you were owned by somebody Irish.' And he said, 'What?' And I said, 'Well, your family's from Jamaica, chances are that that's the history.' And he said, 'They never taught us that in school. It never even occurred to me that that was part of my history.' And he was really shocked. And I felt terrible, actually, because it wasn't really on me to give him that information. It should have been something that he either heard from his own family or learned along the way. And it was an education for me in thinking about how to talk about history.

DC: Yes, I think also, and I think Karen and I have discussed this, there's something about children's literature and how it is beholden to the past. If you go into the big bookshops and you look at the adult section, you'll see all the new—and it's often

avant-garde experimental literature. When you go to the children's section, it is mostly the classic, repackaged, with new illustrators so they're up to date, and then people working off them. It's a very intertextual style of writing, children's literature. But with that comes the possibility with many of these tropes, to just repeat tropes that had their origin in that golden age of children's literature that not only coincided with British colonialism, that was, in some ways, an apparatus of it in helping young British readers understand their place in the world.

KS: Yes, absolutely. I mean, I think that a lot of the writers of the empire were writing to teach the next generation how to control the empire. And I mean, that's a stated goal of some of the authors.

SB: And *Beyond the Secret Garden*, the title, obviously the reference is very clear to a generation of people who may have read that, and as children, uncritically also, they may have loved the story. *Beyond the Secret Garden*, what does it mean?

KS: So *The Secret Garden* is a novel that was written in 1911 by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Really interesting character herself. She had American connections as well as British connections. And she wrote the story about a bad-tempered little girl named Mary, who came from India, in a chapter and a half, I think; India disappears in the first chapter or so. And she comes to a manor house in the middle of Yorkshire.

And then it has Jane Eyre overtones because there's a crying voice in the night that she goes to find, and she discovers it's her cousin, who is ill in some way. It seems to be an imaginary illness, which is then healed by working in the garden where Colin's mother was killed. So a story of regrowth.

SB: And the Ayah, the nursemaid that comes with her, it's an interesting treatment of her in the story, isn't it?

DC: I think it really is. Because I read it as a kid, and I had these intense mixed feelings reading it. And I remember reading it and thinking, *yes, Mary is clearly set up as bad tempered and needs to become a better person, and her time in the English countryside produces this better person.* But I read it with the expectation that she would return to India and show this better side of herself. And of course, she doesn't ever do that because I now read in scholarship, part of Hudson Burnett's project was to say that these Brits abroad are losing their way. And it says at the start, 'She's sick because she was in India.' So it's by returning to the motherland that they are regenerated and replenished. And this was an actual concern Hudson Burnett had as some an expat in America, who'd never set foot in India.

KS: And in fact, it's a really old trope. I mean, you go back further and you see literature about the Caribbean where the Creole child, and in this case that means a white child

born in the Caribbean, is bad tempered, it has violent tendencies, and comes over to England and learns to be cool, calm, and reasonable. And this is something that repeats and repeats and repeats throughout children's literature of the 19th century.

DC: And so *The Secret Garden* becomes this place of cultivation, cultivating the garden, but self-cultivation, and in that way stands almost as the archetypal example of that golden age of literature and what it's trying to do.

SB: So how is what you're trying to do in this collection of columns, which will, when published with English Media Centre, will stretch out through education, will reach a lot of people who are either studying children's literature, aspiring writers, academics, hopefully lots of people who are working in publishing will want to read this work as well. So how is your story different?

DC: We're trying to have, I think, a more nuanced conversation about children's literature, one that isn't just the short reviews we see, which are essentially copy and pasted from the press releases, and which aren't the culture war stuff, which most of those pieces are written by people who you can tell haven't read an awful lot of children's literature. So we've resisted, although we, as you say, we cite the work, we cite all the work we talk about, we've resisted an approved list-banned list binary because we don't think that's going to be particularly helpful in education. I've always

had slight caution around the project of reading for pleasure, which I think is— obviously, you want every child to read for pleasure, but I think if you're a child of colour growing up in Britain, not everything you read is going to be pleasurable. You're going to have to find a way of reading things that are quite painful. And I'm not suggesting at primary school you should be given as much racist literature as possible, but if you've got to go and study at secondary school and university, if you're going to study English literature, you're going to have to engage with some painful stuff because it's there, embedded in that culture and in that legacy. And I want to help young readers and the teachers of young readers to think through some of those ideas, have conversations, and feel empowered to actually say, like I guess I said with *The Secret Garden*, 'I like these aspects of this book, but I think these aspects have got it wrong for these reasons.'

KS: And maybe the pleasure of reading that kind of literature is in realising that you yourself can move beyond these problematic stereotypes or difficult passages and begin to think for yourself what literature should be.

SB: You were talking about how that—maybe a feeling that you don't want to traumatize children by telling them the history [laughs], but at the same time, when you then explore those stories as a writer, you're always looking to find—I'm thinking about *Cane Warriors* by Alex Wheatle—you're always trying to find the—which is a

child experiencing slavery, escaping from slavery—but you're always trying to find the agency and the power in that child to allow them to go, *oh my goodness, there were children then, like me, who were struggling with something, but they're moving through it and out of it in a hopeful environment.* Can I just ask, how would you frame the culture wars within children's—a lot of people would wonder how would the culture wars have come to children's literature in any way.

DC: Well, I mean, I think we're seeing it most starkly in the United States with actual bans on books, LGBT+ books and Black authors, particularly books that write about American history have been removed from bookshelves—

KS: And libraries.

DC: And libraries with different arguments sometimes being used, but they've amounted to de facto bans where you can't share those books.

KS: Because we don't like those ideas.

DC: Because we don't like those ideas.

SB: So censorship, essentially?

DC: That would—yeah. I mean, censorship often is associated with the state, and some of these are state, and some of these seem to be—

KS: More local.

DC: Yeah.

KS: But I mean, I think also with children's books, it is a sense that somebody is trying to impose Black and Asian stories onto White children. And you get publishers who say, 'Well, we have one Black author, so we're good.' And I've actually heard publishers say that, and it's shocking.

SB: And the Campaign for Literacy in Education report has only just come out. Can you give us some highlights of who is being heard and seen in children's publishing today from that report? What is actually happening? What's the picture?

KS: Well, the picture has been better, shall we say. This year was the first year there was a significant drop in the presence of Black and other racially minoritised people in characters in children's books. Went from 30% last year to 17% this year, is that correct? Yeah. And we think that this is partly a response to publishers drawing back

somewhat after publishing quite a bit following the murder of George Floyd and that possibly they feel like they have done diversity now and they can move on to something else. We hope this is not the case. We hope that it's just a blip of a year but—

SB: When the report started, there was this really big boost, wasn't there, in terms of—

KS: It was slow [laughs].

SB: So what were the statistics? What were they?

DC: So the first year, it was 1% of children's fiction had a character of colour as the protagonist and 4% had a character of colour in any significant way. Yeah. So that was a very low benchmark, and things could only really go up from there. And certainly it helped, I think, certain indie presses get off the ground and put diversity at the forefront.

KS: And prizes as well.

DC: And prizes. And there was—it was easier, perhaps, to attract interest in media and some money to run certain initiatives, and some of the major publishing houses did awards and stuff for writers. We had a year-on-year increase. I think there was a boost. There was that moment where, in response to Black Lives Matter protests where a lot of people were like, *we must read Black authors*, and I think publishers, for whatever reasons, and they may be purely monetary ones, thought, *we need to increase what we're publishing and fulfill that need*. Now, it may be that some of those books didn't sell as well as they had hoped, or it may be that they've just found another thing that they need to respond to which will make them money. But there has been a problem, I think, and I think what we're now looking at is things like marketing budgets. And when I first came into children's writing, I really thought that the bookshop was a meritocratic space, and realising that actually publishers were putting money into how prominently books were displayed and which books get into which shop and into supermarkets, we don't see many writers of colour in that kind of league of that kind of profile.

SB: When we look back at children's literature in a hundred years' time—I know that you've been very much part of the Seven Stories archive—in a hundred years' time, when people look back, who are the authors you think that they're going to find and the books that you think, I mean, the books that can give children agency into the

future, for the next generation of writers to pick up and say, *okay, this is what was happening in the past*, because we've become historical, don't we? [Laughs]

KS: Yeah. Eventually we all do. Yeah. I'm hoping they'll come to the study center in a hundred years time that I have created and look at that archive. And if they do, I can tell them right now that they'll already see authors and illustrators like J.T. Williams and Angela Davis. I've got some Sita Brahmachari things, people like Errol Lloyd, that—who were the pioneering figures. [Missing name], [missing name], and yet many people don't even know who they are now. And we need to keep talking about those people. We need those people to be part of the classics as well.

SB: Professor Karen O'Connor and Dr Darren Chetty, I really would like to thank you for coming in and talking about this incredible seminal collection, *Beyond the Secret Garden*.

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CG: Sita Brahmachari was in conversation with Dr Darren Chetty and Professor Karen Sands O'Connor. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

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

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