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An Evening with D. C. Chambial: A Short Interview

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D. C. Chambial (born 29 Sept., 1950) who is supposed to be the follower of the path of his more popular predecessors, Nissim Ezekiel, Keki N Daruwalla and Shiv K Kumar, is a celebrated poet and an eminent contemporary critic. Chambial made his debut in the realm of Indian English poetry by publishing his collection of poems, *Broken Images*, in 1983. Still his pen does not stop to re-image Chambial in the list of Indian English poets. Chambial, the poet, has stoutly established himself with the regular publication of his verse anthologies – *The Poetry of Himachal Pradesh* (ed. 1983), *The Cargoes of the Bleeding Hearts and Other Poems* (1984), *Himpaat* (poems in Hindi, 1985), *Perceptions* (1986), *Gyrating Hawks and Sinking Roads* (1996), *Before the Petals Unfold* (2002), *This Promising Age and Other Poems* (2004), *Mellow Tones* (2010), *Words* (2012), and *Hour of Antipathy* (2014). All these books, except the last one, are published in one book, *Words: 1979-2010* (2012), available from Aadi Publications, Jaipur. His poems have also been translated into many languages.

Chambial's greatness, as a poet and critic, has been honoured and awarded by several national and international awards, certificates and medals such as: Lachian Art Letters Bronze Medal (USA, 1987), Australia Bicentenary Poetry Day Silver Medal (1988), Poetry Day Australia, 1st Decade Bronze Medal, 1991-92, Certificate for Excellence as International Writer, 1992, Directory of International Writers (University of Colorado, USA), Poetcrit: Poetry Magazine of the Year, 1995, Michael Madhusudhan Academy Award 1995, Poetry Day Australia, Dove in Peace Award, Gold Medal, 2000, "Life Time Achievement Award" by Poetry Intercontinental, Chennai, 2009; and so on. His bio-data has also been included in several publications of International Biographical Centre, Cambridge (UK); American Biographical Institute, Raleigh, NC (USA); Marquis' Who's Who, Illinois (USA); Directory of International Writers (University of Colorado, USA); ; The International Who's Who in Poetry 2003 & 2007 (Europa Publications, London, UK); Eminent People of Today, 2003 (IBC, UK); Who's Who in Asia, 1st Edition 2006-2007 (Marquis' Who's Who, USA), etc. He has published several critical articles on contemporary poets, in many national and international journals and anthologies. He has also co-edited a book of critical essays/articles, *English Poetry in India: A Secular Viewpoint* (2011), with PCK Prem.

Here is the text of the interview:

---Interview---

PG: Good Evening, Sir!

DCC: Good Evening. Welcome. Please be seated and be comfortable.

PG: Please, tell me, what makes you to write as a poet?

DCC: A labourer is a labourer because he does manual work. Similarly, you call me a poet because I write poems. My poems are my spontaneous psychic reactions to the goings-on in the world.

PG: **You are often known as a tri-lingual writer. Many an Indian English Writer ‘transcreate’ (term coined by P. Lal) their native lingual thought into English, especially Manoj Das. So, what about you? I mean ... do you think and write directly in English or it’s a total process of ‘Transcreation’?**

DCC: We, Indians, have learnt English as second language as it is not our mother tongue. So, when one starts using a foreign language as a medium of his thought expression, it is certainly a process of transcreation. But when one has been teaching, speaking and using that language for about five decades, it becomes natural with one. A language does not necessarily belong to a person whose mother tongue it is, but also belongs to a person, who can use it successfully in his creative writings.

It might have been transcreation when I started writing at the age of 15 or sixteen in my school days. English was introduced to us in sixth standard and I began dabbling poetry in English and Hindi when I was in tenth standard. But, now it is a spontaneous activity with me.

PG: **Today, D. C. Chambial is widely acclaimed as an established Indian English Poet, Editor and Critic. It’s a long run and, I think, there has been a great struggle behind these all. So, kindly share your experience of emerging as one.**

DCC: Certainly, there is a long struggle in achieving anything that one longs for in one’s life. Nothing can be attained effortlessly and immediately. My first poem was published in 1969, in *Skylark*, an international journal of poetry published from Aligarh and edited by Baldev Mirza, himself, a very good poet. Prior to that, I had published my poems in our College magazine.

Poetcrit was established in 1988 after I attended the World Congress of Poets held in Madras under the aegis of *Poet*, a magazine devoted to World Poetry, and edited by late Krishna Srinivas, the poet. Editing a journal gives one a lot of experience not only in whetting one’s critical acumen in selection of material for publication but one also learns a lot in the art of writing – verse as well as critiques – besides editing.

As a critic, I started writing after my post-graduation in English literature, especially after my M. Phil. and Ph.D., when I realized I had been introduced to various literary movements and technicalities of writing and was equipped with the knowledge to evaluate a work of art – poem or work on a theme – judiciously. The last two degrees became the founding stones of my writings as a critic, because a research work trains, conditions and chisels one in the art of evaluating a literary work.

PG: **Kabiguru, Rabindranath Tagore, has also been acknowledged of the influence of his ancestral poets into his poetry. Do you want to acknowledge any writer or poet, who influenced your writing?**

DCC: Whenever one begins to do or write something, one yearns to write like someone whom he/she has studied and whose works have attracted him/her. In this regard, I owe my debt to the British Romantic Poets, especially Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge and. among the American poets, Robert Frost is my favourite.

Among Indian Poets, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Krishna Srinivas, O. P. Bhatnagar, Shiv K. Kumar, Kamala Das, IK Sharma, RK Singh, and HS Bhatia are my favourites. I have learnt a lot from them.

PG: So many influences hamper the charm of original creation – how far do you agree with this?

DCC: Yes, I do agree with you. But these are the poets that I like and read their poetry whenever I have leisure. I do not blindly imitate or follow them. It is only unconsciously that the influence of their poetry creeps in while I write. While writing, I am never conscious of these poets and their themes and technique. I write only as myself and none other. Therefore, the question of obstructing or weighing down my creative originality does not arise. However, some critics have found the influence of English Romantic Poets on my poetry that I cannot deny.

When you happen to browse through the corpus of critical writing on my poetry, you'll find that critics have found varied influences on my poetry. Sometimes, similitude of thought occurs in the poems of poets placed, geographically, culturally and in time, quite apart. Many critics have found such similarities in my poems as mentioned in *The Poetry of D. C. Chambial: Views Reviews and Comments* at page 149. While a host of other critics have found resemblances with other poets as well.

PG: How far do you believe that Indian English Poetry is a distinct property in the context of World Literature? How do you foresee the future of it?

DCC: Indian English poetry is distinct from World Poetry in as far as it responds to the problems of Indian people which are verily different from the native problems of the people who belong to other countries. The themes of universal and humanitarian concerns remain the same everywhere.

Now Indian English poetry is no more an imitation of the English Poetry as it was with the first generation of Indian poets who wrote in English. The contemporary poets are free from the obsession of English of the English. The post-independence Indian English writers can manipulate this language to suit their purpose. Thus, this language has thrown off the label of Indo-English/Anglo-Indian and has come of age as Indian English which is different from the British or Kings English. Now Indian English is an accepted label even in standard dictionaries like American/Australian/African English.

The future of Indian English poetry is very much secure. It is being taught and studied in several foreign and Indian universities. I personally think that the critics have to evaluate poetry objectively according to the methods laid down by the proponents of contextual criticism (a sub-movement of *New Criticism*) – Murray Krieger in his books *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956) and *Theory of Criticism* (1976) and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, in his book, *Of Grammatology* (1967), which lays emphasis that "there is nothing outside the text" to judge its true worth than judge it by the poet's social status. **Here, I would like to quote to Ms Boulton, what she has said in 1953, about contemporary poets, in her book—*An Anatomy of Poetry* [1991 rpt by Kalyani Publishers]: "They are the only poets whose poetry can be nourished and drawn out by our encouragement, or stunned by our neglect, and the great living are even more a part of a nation's glory than the great dead" (52).**

PG: How do you bifurcate the modern and post-modern canons in Indian English Poetry? And in which of the two, does your poetry belong?

DCC: Modernism as a movement started during the closing years of the 19th century and influenced much of the poetry in the first half of 20th century. Post-modernism as a movement in literature, art, music, architecture, philosophy, etc. started in the 1940s and 1950s.

So far as Indian English literature is concerned, most of the poetry written from 1921 to 1950 was imitative; what followed next, from 1950 to 1980, it subscribed to the modernism in its response. There was a noticeable change in the technique and handling of the contemporary issues in poetry that was written in and after the 1980s, which one can call post-modern. It was a reaction against the imitative and modernistic poetry. Post-modern Indian English poetry is free from English bondage and breathes free in the native air and the native thought.

When I write my focus is only on the contemporary problem and the mode how a poem is finished and not on movements. It is left for the discerning critics to explore. But it is said: the spirit of contemporaneity envelops the environs.

PG: **Bruce King in the introduction of his book, *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, has rightly defended against the prejudices of those who claimed that Indians could not write authentic poetry in English. And many an Indian critic believe that the popularity of ‘Bhasa’ (term used by G. N. Devy) Poets often mars the fame of the Indian English Poets. How do you respond to this observation?**

DCC: It was once believed. Now the Indian English authors are as deft in their style and thought-pattern as the native writers of this language. The ‘Bhasa’ writers write in their own mother tongue, hence are natural with it. English is no more a foreign language for the Indian English writers, nor do they carry any obsession about it as a foreign language. Such critics, who cherish only the English values and look at Indian English as English make such comments. There are critics who without reading the contemporary Indian English writers/poets label them as incompetent. True all cannot attain good quality, but to say there is none worth reading is fallacious as well as injudicious. They are advised to first study the poetry by contemporary Indian English writers before coming to any conclusion. When Indian literature is being taught in universities – native as well as abroad, are they propagating something inferior at the cost of good literature?

PG: **Do you believe in the discrimination of major and minor poets in the realm of literary creation?**

DCC: It is not discrimination but differentiation between the established authentic poets and the struggling but not established poets. It is the quality, technique and innovation that makes one a major poet. While the major poets are original in their writings, the minor ones are mostly imitative. Major poets are more concerned about their language and its proper usage, the minor ones attribute their lapses to poetic license. Poetry writing is, in fact, a very difficult vocation which some, by fallacy, consider easy. It is so complex that even the most established ones falter. In this respect, I’ll advise those who try to discriminate between major and minor poetry/poets to read T.S. Eliot’s essay – ‘What is Minor Poetry?’ – to see the things in their right perspective. **Besides, “just as there are many fine poems written by minor poets, sometimes single poems by which alone a poet is known, there are many lapses in the work of most of the major poets” (Boulton, *The Anatomy of Poetry*, 76).**

PG: After T. S. Eliot, a great devoid of English Literature regarding the advent of new genre and movement has been remarkably found. Even, it is said of the new writing that all are “Old wine in a new bottle”. How do you explain this static situation of literature?

DCC: No two persons are alike, neither two ages. This fits well with Eliot and later poets and their ages. T. S. Eliot was an outstanding modern poet. The themes that he tackled in his poetry were unique and new and were never handled before him as he did. Since then, many great poets have emerged in all the continents and have bagged Nobel Prizes in literature because of newness, originality and handling of themes in their poetry. In this ever-changing world there is nothing static. In this regard, I’ll like to quote from Tennyson:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
(‘Morte d’ Arthur’)

When old themes have been taken by the post-Eliot poets, they have been dealt with differently that displays their individual talent. T. S. Eliot also honours individual talent.

PG: In an interview with Dr. S. C. Dwivedi, you acknowledged that ‘the Romantic poets in general and John Keats in particular’ is formative influence on your poetry; and you also admitted ‘Poverty, social inequality, social injustice – viewed with a philosophical insight into the nature of things’ as the inspiration for your creative activities in another interview with Dr. Atma Ram. Are you romantic to portray the pen-picture of the reality?

DCC: With the help of images and symbols, I try to romanticize the prevailing contemporary reality. Thus, both these elements coalesce in my poetry. If reality is described barely, it becomes history; poetry is not history; it is amalgamated with human emotions to display different and superior probabilities of life.

A poet always tries to portray something sublime and universal under the garb of reality and personal. Poverty, social inequality, and social injustice are the haunting problems of sensitively thinking minds. These, for sure, need abolition from the face of earth. A sensitive poet with a socially concordant vision is always haunted by such problems and he, in his thoughts, is concerned about them. He is ever busy in his contemplation to achieve that end.

Such social problems - poverty, social inequality, social injustice etc. - provide leaven for the mind to contemplate on them for their solution. Therefore, it, indubiously, acts as a catalyst to stir contemplation.

Yes, it’s a way to look on things and life. Romanticism adds pleasure to the sordid reality and provides an opportunity to look at reality from a different stance. It also adds new dimension to reality, I suppose.

PG: All poetic works are the confession of the poet’s self and sometimes biographical. In some poems like “Superannuation”, “Pricks of Time” etc. from your book, *Words* (2010), the personas have unfolded their hearts. So, what is your stand on that?

DCC: If you have read my latest collection, *Hour of Antipathy* (2014), you must have observed my stress on “memory and dream” in the preface to this book. Memory is historical

reality – biographical in nature – and dream, the imaginative reality. All artifacts – belonging to any mode and medium – are the results of artists’ imaginative reality. An artist’s life and imagination both commingle to give birth to a poem/artifact. Pure imagination takes the thing away from truth; personal experiences of a poet/writer/artist bring it down to rugged reality. A work of art/poem has to be, as I have already stated, an imaginative reality – a harmonious probable blend of the two. All imaginative works are built with the bricks of personal experiences. Therefore, this element can’t be ruled out from my poems.

PG: Your poetry successfully draws all the aspects of Nature mingling with scientific temper. Is it a natural tempo of a poet or an urge of a science graduate?

DCC: While science lingers in memory and appears with white-hot imagination at the time of composing a poem, yet, I think, it is the innate cadence of the poet.

PG: How far do you believe that you are a social reformer?

DCC: I touch the social issues that need redressal for the weal of humanity: all are born alike with similar sentiments, blood and bones; then, why there should be any inequity in society. All are equal in the eyes of God; the society should also respect this Godly attribute. A thinker gives ideas and has no power to put them into practice. Thus, not social reformer in the political sense, but social-reformist-thinker is more appropriate term.

PG: Your pain and anger draws a complete picture of this dystopian society. How far do you agree with this?

DCC: I think, I have tried, and am trying, my best to show it to the concerned part of our existence – the polity, who is entirely responsible to bring about such a change; only, if they wish so. I wish, the man of universal brotherhood awakens their hearts and they realize the pain and misery of the destitute in society and do something tangible to alleviate their suffering.

PG: In a recently published book, *Mapping Thematic Variations: The Poetry of D. C. Chambial* (2015), Dr. (Mrs.) Santosh Ajit Singh has analyzed your poetry in the light of Marxism. How far do you feel the influence of Karl Marx in your works?

DCC: Where there is a quest for redressal of human problems, Karl Marx and existentialism are bound to creep in. She has applied this literary canon to interpret my poetry on the basis of Marxian criticism; hence, the question of Karl Marx’s influence on me. However, when you look at a hungry, poor child/person, you think of ameliorating his hunger/poverty both sympathetically and empathically, or there is concern about rampant materialism, there Karl Marx steps in unobtrusively and unconsciously. But, what is concerned with economic, political and philosophical issues is Marxian in concept. She concludes in that article that my “attitude is not one of apathy but one of sympathy with the tormented classes. I believe it extends beyond this to a genuine empathy with them” (144), and this is what she has explored in that article.

PG: Wordsworth is famous for his use of pathetic fallacy to glorify Nature decked into the Romantic circumference. In the poem, “The Cargoes of the Bleeding Hearts”, you have used the device to draw the stern reality, where you are saying:

The Sun’s gone
The moon wails,
Meteors play funny tricks.

This is a great unification that makes Chambial look like Wordsworth. Kindly tell me something on this uniqueness.

DCC: Pathetic fallacy, a term, was invented by John Ruskin and it is the attribution of human capacities and feelings to natural objects. The image in these lines is a perfect example of pathetic fallacy. The human attributes of going, wailing, and playing funny tricks – in fact, causing destruction – have been attributed to natural objects the sun, the moon, and meteors respectively.

In this image, one will find a juxtaposition of the pleasant life-giving and exasperating life-destroying forces. The sun and the moon are life giving energies/things/objects and have been used as symbols for life. Life is possible on this Earth only because of sun's heat and light. The moon also provides solace to humanity at night. Meteor is any one of the small solid extraterrestrial bodies that hits the earth's atmosphere; and if, perchance, it is not destroyed in the atmosphere and reaches the Earth, it causes great destruction. Consequently, it becomes a symbol of appalling destruction. This symbolic use of the sun, the moon, and meteors also represents happiness and pain in human life.

PG: Your poems are packed with symbol and imagery. How consciously do you use them into your poetry?

DCC: Images and symbols are the instruments, called figures of speech, in the hands of a poet/writer to convey his/her views more authentically, but obliquely. These not only make the verse more ornate, but also emphasize the theme of the poet. These are used to say things indirectly, so that the reader has to work hard to grasp the poet/writer's point of view. The main difference between poetry and prose is that while prose tries to put ideas directly and elaborately before the reader/audience, poetry presents ideas economically and circuitously to its readers/audience. The main joy of a poem lies in its hidden or veiled meaning. The more a reader works hard to unveil the hidden meaning, the more he/she enjoys it. A reader's efforts put to reach the imaginative level of the poet provide him/her greatest pleasure: when one gets that pleasure, one feels satisfied. Every poem's objective is to give joy and satisfaction to its reader.

PG: According to the great American Poet, Robert Frost, your favourite one, 'Writing in free-verse is like playing tennis without net'. You also write in free verse. How will you justify this argument?

DCC: Robert Frost is really a great and one of my most favourite poets. Yes, I do agree with him. Net appears as an obstacle as does rhyme and meter in poetry to most of the contemporary poets. While writing in free-verse or *verse- libre*, one is free from the restraints of rhyme and meter. Here, one is free to achieve one's poetic objective freely beyond the precincts of metrical constraints. Thus, writing in free verse is much akin to "playing tennis without net" – without the restrictions imposed in the free play/writing.

I have also written poems in measured meter of various forms like sonnets, Villanelles, Pantoums, Kyrielles, etc. I do not write only in free-verse, though it is something natural with me.

PG: Besides being an Indian English Poet, you are also a writer and a playwright. Kindly share your other creative part and your future plan on that.

DCC: I had once written a One-Act Play in Pahari. It was relayed from AIR Shimla around late seventies and was hailed as a social drama. But, since then I have not tried my hand in writing any play. Yes, on and often, I do write short stories. My main forte is only verse.

PG: **Many a time, your poems are studied along with the poetry of R. K. Singh and I. K. Sharma. Kindly share your views on your contemporaries.**

DCC: It all depends upon the critics and scholars how they prefer to study my poetry. Though, as already said, I like the poetry of R.K. Singh and I.K. Sharma, my contemporaries and also friends, yet I can't write as they write because individualities are never the same nor nuances of life. The poetry of these two contemporary poets is different from my poetry in many aspects. My poetry has also been studied with the poetry of T.V. Reddy, S. C. Dwivedi, S. Nath, R.C. Shukla and many other living poets.

PG: **You have been honoured with several national and international awards. Do you ever long for Sahitya Akademi Award?**

DCC: Awards are certainly incentives, but to look always for awards gives tension and frustration when one fails to get one. Therefore, a true artist never bothers about Sahitya Akademi or any other Award. Not award, but true and probable portrayal of one's notions and thoughts is the goal of a genuine writer. Awards have always been controversial. One, without a desire for any award, is free to express oneself without any inhibition.

PG: **What would be your message or suggestions for the budding poets who are aspiring to be Indian English Poet?**

DCC: Learning by practice. Read the poets, you like most, and read them well. Write and be original. Revise, revise, and revise; revise not as a poet, but as a critic. Revision is very important. It helps remove gaps, if any, in logical development of thought, typing as well as punctuation errors and present the work, finally, in a finished form like the finely carved statue of a dexterous sculptor.

PG: **Thank you a lot, Sir, for your precious time that you spared and spent with me! Thank You and Good Night!**

DCC: It's my pleasure. Thanks. Good-night!
