

Somerville writer Bansari Mitra discusses her new book: Ghosts from the Past: Gothic and Postcolonial Themes in 19th and 20th Century Novels

With Doug Holder

A fellow Bagel Bard and Somerville resident told me she has a new book out from the Wilderness House Press "Ghosts of the Past: Gothic and Postcolonial Themes in 19th Century and 20th Century Novels." I caught up with Bansari Mitra, and she generously agreed to an interview.

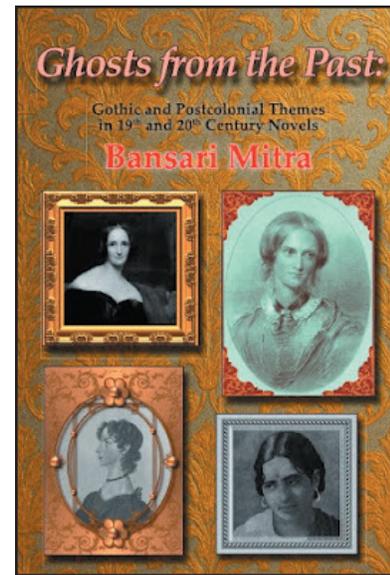
*Bansari Mitra specializes in Victorian and Postcolonial Literature and other areas of interest includes Folklore, Popular Culture and Film Studies. She has published a book on the migration of western folktales to the East, entitled *The Renovation of Folktales by Five Modern Bengali Writers* and articles on Indian films in *Asian Cinema and Kinema*. She has taught in universities in Louisiana, Maryland, Georgia and New York and she has been a research fellow in Trinity College Dublin and Birkbeck College, London.*

From her publisher's website:

"This book focuses on genre studies and examines Gothic's outstanding characteristics like loose plot, hidden crimes and ruined settings. Anne Bronte redefines Gothic by writing in a fragmentary way. This storytelling is further examined in *Jane Eyre*. The story resists closure because Jane cannot establish peace with the characters that haunt her. The adage "no happy woman writes" makes us reflect on the unhappy life of Mary Shelley which led her to write her "monstrous" novel, *Frankenstein*. Instead of literary criticism that stems from Romantic and feminist sensibilities, there is a new interpretation of the non-western character, Safie, whose story is a variation from the other tales of catastrophes.

Broad categories fail to define genres, like Eliade and Devi's works, *Bengal Nights* and *Na Hanyate*. We reexamine the limitations of various forms of life-writing like memoirs and autobiographies and the encounters and clashes between eastern and western cultures. We also examine the form of Gothic and swashbucklers, two popular, successful types of film. Western and eastern cultures differ, especially when settings and plots are reinvented to create blockbusters, and themes are revised to suit the palates of eastern audiences. The last essay focuses on transformations of Gothic from Victorian to contemporary times. In a wide assortment of mysteries, the common themes of a missing woman and misinterpretations of the detective heroine show how settings of Gothic have changed from 18th to 21st Century."

Bicentenaries of Shelley and Brontes were recently celebrated, discussing their impact on contemporary times, so it is time to look at their novels in a new way."



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How has it been for you as a writer in Somerville?

Davis Square has a vibrant community that is great and I have never seen so many festivals, fairs and other activities, enlivening up the neighborhood during weekends anywhere else. Harvard Square and Porter Square, easily accessible by public transportation, have been especially wonderful for me because of the bookstores, where poetry reading and book-signing events kept me engaged ever since I came to Boston. It has enabled me to form networks with academics and creative writers who helped me to revise my book and supplied information about websites like Poets & Writers and magazines that give advice about publishing. The Cambridge public libraries also aided me in vital ways, especially during the lockdown.

Do you agree with the adage "there are no happy women writers?" In the case of Mary Shelley was this true?

I do not entirely agree with this, because this adage was coined by a 19th Century American authoress, Sara Payson Willis (Fanny Fern) who, in her novel *Ruth Hall*, portrayed the struggles of a penniless widow trying to eke out a living by her writing. The novel is also famous for the maxim, "a man's happiness is through his stomach". In fact, a lot of late 18th and 19th Century American and British women writers tried to make money by writing, as it enabled them to take care of their children while earning enough to keep the home fires burning. Most of these widows and spinsters were facing enormous hardships because very few professions were open to them, like school teachers and governesses. Mary Shelley also had a very sad life because she eloped with Percy Shelley at the age of seventeen, faced deaths of her children, life-threatening miscarriages and finally, being widowed at twenty-five after Percy Shelley was drowned. She had to earn a living as a writer, and she did not have much success as with her first novel, *Frankenstein*. The adage is definitely true in the case of Mary Shelley, as well as the Brontes, who repeatedly faced bereavements in their short lives. Now things have changed in the 21st Century, so there are happy as well as unhappy women writers. I would say that this saying is outdated.

You write that "in this book we reexamine the various forms of life-writing like memoirs and autobiographies and the encounters and clashes between eastern and western cultures." What are the drawbacks of "life writing" novels? Do you find eastern and western cultures have some commonality, where they don't clash?

Often it is difficult to classify them, either as memoirs or autobiographies, and life writing is too sweeping a term. What we examine is how many real-life incidents are portrayed, whether they are distorted or glossed over. Also, when they are recalled years later, how much of these experiences are fictionalized to appeal to readers. The recollection of memories, especially in controversial novels like Eliade's and Devi's, can help us sometimes to get both sides of the picture, from western and non-western points of view. In my essay on Indian adaptations of classic Hollywood Gothic and swashbuckling films, especially Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, I show how the audience's need for thrill and suspense are the same in western and eastern countries, so blockbusters can appeal to all kinds of viewers, young or old. Bollywood films are now gaining attention, so

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we can examine the reworking of themes in them when they are borrowed from the west and Indianized, although they keep the core of the plots intact.

You explain that Shelley and the Bronte Sisters have been celebrated for their impact on contemporary times. Explain.

I think that Artificial Intelligence is causing such controversies now that Frankenstein can be examined as the kind of science fiction that is a cautionary tale, very relevant for our times. Also, I feel that there could be a new interpretation by focusing on the only non-western character, Safie, who is generally regarded as a shadow of the other women characters. Anne Bronte has always been eclipsed by her famous sisters, Charlotte and Emily, but she wrote the "first sustained feminist novel" according to Winifred Gerin. She is now being recognized as a writer who would have earned a place much earlier in the canon like Fanny Burney and Elizabeth Gaskell. Although Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre has always enjoyed a great deal of attention from critics, we can examine the growth of a feminist heroine through her progress during the five stages of her journey from urban to rural settings. How Nature is represented in the novel as a pagan goddess, thus reinventing the Cinderella myth set in the Victorian Age. Fairy tales continue to fascinate readers throughout ages, and Brontes grew up on them, borrowing patterns from them to design the plots of their novels. Thus generic revisions are effected in their novels.