

**DR. K. SRILATA AN INTERVIEW WITH V. RAJESH & J. JAYA
PARVEEN**

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Dr. K. Srilata is a creative writer, translator, and research guide. Her recent novel “Table for Four” has been longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. She is working as an Associate Professor in the Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Chennai, Tamilnadu. She has done B.A. (English) in Stella Maris College, Chennai, and M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. (English) in Central University, Hyderabad. She has received several fellowships for writing and research: Charles Wallace India Trust writer-in-residence at the University of Stirling, Scotland (2010); Sangam House writer-in-residence (2010); and Fulbright Pre-doctoral Fellowship, University of California, Santa Cruz (1995 – 1996). Her areas of interest are creative writing, fiction, and translation studies.

Dr. K. Srilata has co-edited the book “The Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry” with Lakshmi Holmstrom and Subashree Krishnaswamy (New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2009). She has also co-edited “Short Fiction from South India” with Subashree Krishnaswamy (Delhi: OUP, 2008). She has written in “The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing Self-Respect History” (an anthology of women's writing from the Dravidian Self-Respect movement) published by Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2003. She has authored the book “Creative Writing” and co-authored the book “Restoration Age” (Tamilnadu Open University course book) with Anuradha Shyam. She has written a lot of articles on women’s writings, feminism, politics of feminist translations, politics of modernity, eco-criticism, formation of female readership, etc.

Q.1. Can you say something about your family and educational background?

Answer:- I am the daughter of a single mother and grew up as a fairly lonely child. This perhaps explains my turn to writing. I went on to do a PhD in literature.

Q.2. When and how did you start your literary career?

Answer:- I have been writing, in a sense, since the age of five. *The Indian Express* in those days used to have a column called “Youthink” and they were the first to publish my work. Over a period of time, I built up a body of work.

Q.3. Who is your inspiration to write stories or novels?

Answer:- There is no one source but, of course, my material comes from my observations, from my life.

Q.4. Do you find any difference between writing poems and novels?

Answer:- They are very different, obviously. The requirements are different as is the mind and the discipline. But writing poetry is good training when you want to write fiction.

Q.5. Writer or translator – Which one do you like the most? Why?

Answer:- Writing, any day! Translation is something I came to by accident, through my writing really.

Q.6. Many of the recent novels are well-crafted. What is the role of spontaneity in writing novels?

Answer:- There has to be an awareness of craft and structure. But spontaneity is necessary too.

Q.7. The term writer-in residence is quite new. Can you describe what it is?

Answer:- Writing residencies will support a writer for a short duration of time. During this time, the writer will be given boarding and lodging. He or she can write peacefully – without the usual worries of day to day life. It is a luxury, really!

Q.8. People with technical knowledge normally don't appreciate creativity in language or literature. How do you feel working with engineers in the IIT?

Answer:- I don't think that is true. A lot of engineers have healthy respect for creativity.

Q.9. You write about the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidian Movement women writings. Are you influenced by these popular movements in any way?

Answer:- I was – at one point in time. Very much so.

Q.10. What do you think about female readership? Do women come out of their families to form literary circles?

Answer:- I am not sure how to answer that.

Q.11. Do you think the female creative writers have the freedom to write what they think or feel about the society or themselves?

Answer:- Depends on their background – familial and social. A lot of women writing today seem to be very “free”, very fearless – though sometimes perhaps at the risk of not being subtle.

Q.12. In this technical era, even SMSs and blogs carry creative messages, poems, paintings, and articles. Nobody cares about the writers. What do you think is the future of creativity in the coming years?

Answer:- I think writing and creativity will survive.

Q.13. What is the main theme of your recent book “Table for Four”?

Answer:- “Table for Four” is the story of four characters who share a house in Santa Cruz, California and whose lives, inevitably, intersect in rich and puzzling ways: Maya, a young Indian woman in her twenties who is pursuing a Ph.D in the University of California, Santa Cruz, Prithvi uncle (her mind-reading, reclusive landlord whose most favoured form of communication involve post-it notes), Derek (a former correspondent who once covered the Afghanistan war and with whom Maya falls hopelessly in love) and the seemingly happy-go-lucky Anglo-Indian woman Sandra with whom Maya instantly bonds. All four characters are at the crossroads when the wheels of the story begin to move. Prithvi uncle’s daughter has got herself into a mess. Maya is about to leave for India where she will have to confront the burden of a complex past full of ambiguities and unresolved tensions. Sandra plans to move out with her good-for-nothing boyfriend. Derek has just announced his intention to leave though no one quite knows what his plans are.

Prithvi uncle invites the three others to dinner on the eve of Maya’s departure, suggesting that they use the evening to tell each other the stories of their lives. The table is set for four and the scene for story-telling but Derek fails to show up and Maya cannot tell her story. We hear the stories of Prithvi uncle and Sandra. But not Maya’s, trapped as she is by the terrible secret of her past, a secret that involves the death of her ayah’s daughter, an ayah who is really more a mother. Hers is not a story that can be easily told or accessed. It remains, till the end, an interior story, never heard by the other characters. As for Derek, his story too remains untold except to Maya.

Each of the four characters has depths the others don’t suspect, depths that give rise to questions. Why does Maya stay away from the sea? Why is Prithvi uncle so reclusive? How does he know so much about what is going on in their lives? Why does Sandra spend so much time on Orkut? Why can’t Derek possibly return Maya’s love? Why does he fail to show up for dinner that evening?

As a novel about the slippery nature of truth and the way stories get constructed, told or, alternately, suppressed, “Table for Four” has about it an element of the metafictional.

Q.14. How do you feel about your book “Table for Four” getting longlisted for Man Asian literary prize?

Answer:- I wasn’t expecting it at all and felt quite delighted!