

Writer's Postcards by Dipka Mukherjee. Penguin Books, 2023 \$15.99, (paperback)
208pp, ISBN: 978-9815058772

In Dipika Mukherjee's captivating new memoir, *Writer's Postcards*, the award-winning author and poet takes readers on a journey through her peripatetic lifestyle. Through vivid prose, poetry and poignant reflections, Mukherjee delves into her experiences and musings as a solo female traveller. From her transformative writing residency in Rimbun Dahan, Malaysia, to her encounters teaching conversational English to ex-political prisoners who fled Tibet, and documenting the harrowing stories of their escape, each chapter unfolds with compelling depth. As she embarks on a quest to meet the Dalai Lama and grapples with the complexities of language preservation as a distinguished professor at Shanghai International Studies University, Mukherjee's narrative brings to light issues of international concern. From literal heart-stopping moments in Kuantan to encounters with ancient rituals like the Danza de los Voladores in Chapala, Mukherjee fearlessly navigates themes of foeticide in India, the exclusion of women in ancient rituals, political unrest in Myanmar, and the vibrant world of Patachitra painters in Pingla. She offers reflections on finding home in new places, coping with loss, and the ever-changing landscape of identity.

Writer's Postcards details Mukherjee's nuanced perspective on navigating unfamiliar territories, accustomed horizons and our collective human experience. She examines the extraordinary and the unheard, 'told through a perspective of my own lived experience and imagination, a distinct narrative of a non-white female body as a *flâneuse*, travelling with intention, through our marvellous and varied world.' The context is defined with a poem originally written by a Mutta — an Indian woman who lived 2,600 years ago and translated by Indian historian and filmmaker Uma Chakravarti and academic Kumkum Roy,

*So free am I, so gloriously free
Free from three petty things:
From mortar, from pestle, and from my twisted lord
Freed from rebirth and death I am
And all that has held me down
Is hurled away*

With the book divided into three distinct sections – 'Saviour', 'Musings', and 'Voyage' — Mukherjee skillfully tells stories with rich cultural and societal undertones that bubbles to the surface when stirred. In 'Saviour' Mukherjee navigates the complexities of familial relationships, cultural heritage and personal identity. 'Musings' is a museum of essays each offering insights into various aspects of life, from the mundane to the profound. Meanwhile, 'Voyage' is a heartfelt homage to cities, countries, to a father and brothers. Throughout the book, Mukherjee's narrative

voice resonates with authenticity and depth, conveyed through her excellent use of lyrical prose. As she travels, pulled by writing residences, jobs, family, curiosity, she acknowledges the strangeness the world still offers to a solo travelling woman. During her time as a writer-in-residence at Rimbun Dahan in Malaysia, a Grab driver asked her 'are you sure you are not a serial killer?' The peculiarity of this encounter later evolved into a heartening appreciation for her craft, as the driver resolved to encourage his daughter to pursue her dreams of becoming a writer. Through this experience, she gained insight into the diverse challenges faced by writers in Malaysia, including the complexities of bilingualism, bidialectalism, and cultural multiplicity. Additionally, she discovered the taboos surrounding censored topics and the struggle for recognition in English-speaking countries, all of which underscored the validity of the driver's concern. Similarly, her literary festival visit to Mandalay, one of the most censored countries in southeast Asia, immersed her in the political climate of the country. She examined the impact of socio-political unrest on art as evidenced by a female-led panel on self-censorship highlighting examples of women writing under pseudonyms and only men having authority over Buddhist literature. Her reflection of the dangers of artistically closeting a region with a plethora of untold stories, was succinctly captured in a poem by poet and professor at the Mandalay University of Foreign Languages, Zaw Thun from his book of poems *At the Roadside Magic Show* :

*Now Myanmar is like the man inside the box,
being poked by sharp, inhuman spikes after spikes,
tangible and intangible,
from within and outside.*

*Yet, as after the show,
appeared the man from inside the bamboo box
with not a scratch on his body,
So does Myanmar survive safe and sound...
terrorism finds no room here.*

Thun's metaphor of a man trapped in a box resonates throughout later chapters as Mukherjee encounters similar confinements in Itaparica, Brazil. During her residency at Sacatar to work on a novel, a Brazilian filmmaker cautioned her against writing about Candomblé – an Afro-Brazilian tradition – fearing it could provide ammunition for the government to completely ban these practices. Mukherjee reflects on this self-censorship by writers in the region, the scarcity of Brazilian stories in translation, and the subsequent impact on the region's narrative. She ends the chapter with the thought, 'I wish there were books available in translation from this fascinating country for I am intoxicated by Brazilian voices by the time I leave.'

Mukherjee challenges readers to think of language, dialect, culture, and the stories we don't have access to, the ones without websites or the printing press.

I am on my way to Pingla, home to about eighty-five families of Patachitra painters or Patuas, artisans practising an ancient art form by painting stories in a series of frames on long scrolls of cloth. As they unfurl the scrolls, they sing the stories.

What gives her encounters and experiences a life of their own is her opinionated, often subjective approach. She recounts a Q&A session she moderated after the viewing of *Shonar Pahar, The Golden Mountain*, at the 2018 Chicago South Asian Film Festival and how it challenged her to critically assess the Bengali cinema drawing a pattern of misogyny in Bengali nursery rhymes. According to her, from babyhood, girls are lulled to sleep with poems about swinging in the air, comb in hair, waiting for a groom to sweep them off. She cites a memorable nursery rhyme about a young girl's wedding –

*The moon is up, the flowers bloom
Who sits under the kadam tree?
Elephants dance, horses sway, I
It's my darling's wedding day.*

She argues that creative artists tread a fine line between verisimilitude and genuflecting on the archaic, and challenging accepted norms is only the beginning. Likewise, during a visit to Guadalajara, a city in western Mexico, she discovers the *Danza de los Voladores* also known as the Dance of the Flyers, an ancient traditionally male Mesoamerican ritual still in practice. The *Danza de los Voladores* is deeply rooted in religion and is said to be performed to the rain god after a severe drought, to make the land fertile again. Her fascination became inquisition regarding the exclusion of women in this ritual. "...why, I wonder, are women not soaring too? Our attention is further drawn to not only the exclusion of women in this ritual, but the barriers of language in documenting and retelling of stories. "...I have so many questions but I don't want to come across as a clueless tourist engaged in cultural voyeurism, dishonouring ancient traditions." As a non-native Spanish speaker, gaining access to the answers she yearned for was daunting. However, when she returned in the company of Colombian artist Esperanza Cortes who speaks fluent Spanish, tongues were loosened and details flowed freely albeit still stiff on women's exclusion.

In *Writer's Postcards*, readers are transported to new places, cultures, languages, and traditions. Mukherjee wants readers to feel the warmth of the sun through the words, taste the food, caress the stone walls, lean outside the balcony with her vivid descriptive writing and for the

most part she is successful. She expertly asks questions on the authenticity and accuracy of stories we read. She examines the distortion of knowledge from the perspective of the chronicler, as in her research about the *Danza de los Voladores*, where she discovers that the sixteenth century Franciscan friar Juan de Torquemada documented the practice of erecting a flying mast at major festivals (as seen in *Danza de los Voladores*), as archaic as he believed they were practising idolatry neglecting the spiritual significance and meaning it holds to its people. *Writer's Postcards* offers an immersive journey to explore and learn in the way every reader yearns to engage with a book. Her command of language and narrative techniques not only shows her intellectual acumen, but the undeniable effect of travel on the creativity of an artist. As a sociolinguistic award-winning fiction and poetry author, Mukherjee eloquently delineates how travel serves as her conduit for creative exploration, cultural immersion, and invaluable research opportunities in this remarkable non-fiction travelogue. This is the book you should judge by its cover because it is everything it says it is.