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Elisabetta Marino

A Multimedia Artist in an Ever-changing World: An Interview with Samit Basu

A filmmaker, a comics writer, a short-story author, and a novelist, Samit Basu is unquestionably a wide-ranging artist and one of the most interesting voices in contemporary Indian speculative fiction. Born in Kolkata in 1979, he earned a degree in Economics before dropping out of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, to pursue a writing career. He furthered his education in London, where he took a course in broadcasting and documentary filmmaking at the University of Westminster. He is now based in India and works between Delhi and Mumbai. He has also penned children's and young adults' narratives, as well as being a columnist and essayist.

Elisabetta Marino How did you start your career as a writer? What prompted you to undertake such a challenging life project?

Samit Basu I started writing at the age of 22, in a somewhat dramatic fashion – I got the idea for what became my first novel while in my first month at a big Indian business school, and dropped out and went home to write it. Two years later, it was published by Penguin India. I was lucky, it sold well and reviewed well and was a bestseller for several months, which started me off on this career. This was in 2003-04, and it was still a time when the West was not interested in genre books from India, so it was several years later that I had novels published in the UK and the US.

What prompted me... I had always wanted to do something creative for a living, though I did not know what it could be. India is still a very feudal, rigid society and most people still do not have much choice in what they do for work – they end up following conventional paths that are supposed to lead to financial success, social status, or immigration, ideally a combination of these. But around when I was in college, the country was changing, and for my generation it seemed possible to not go the doctor/engineer/lawyer/MBA route. I had no idea or opportunity to study the creative fields, but I had been a very enthusiastic participant in anything writing or performance related all through my childhood, and promised myself that if I ever had an idea that I thought was good enough to be a book, I would drop everything I was doing and work on that. That happened at an impractical time, but I decided to dive in when it did.

EM Your debut novel, *The Simoqin Prophecies*, is probably the first science fiction fantasy book ever published in India. Can you tell us more about it? What about the readership's reaction?

SB There are publishing worlds in a number of languages in India, and genre is not really something that we pay attention to in this part of the world – so I am sure there are multiple works between magic realism, children’s books, science fiction and fantasy that were published before mine, especially if including short-form work and multiple languages. But *Simoqin* was certainly the first major-publisher English-language “big” fantasy book to be successful and go “mainstream”, and was marketed by the publisher as India’s first SFF novel in English – I did not know of any other, at least, but the chronology is not something I take a lot of specific pride in. I did not know much about genre when I started writing – I had read anything I could get my hands on, of course, but I had thought of SF and fantasy as convenient ways to describe books, not as whole publishing / cultural ecosystems in themselves. I got a sense of all of that only after getting published, after which I got to experience all the cultural barriers relevant to my field. The book itself is a large fantasy novel set in a multicultural world, where each region is based on a different mythology. One of the key ideas in this book was that it would be centred around an imaginary south and east, as opposed to north and west, and tell a classic fantasy story but reexamine the parts of it, subverting tropes, inserting humour, examining ridiculous cultural assumptions while also being a straightforward fantasy saga drawn from myths, folklore and pop culture. It was not a big release from a publishing point of view, so I think everyone was surprised when it hit number 1 – I certainly was, my dream at that point was just to write a novel that got published. It is difficult to place *Simoqin* genre-wise in a country that did not see genre – but it was clear that nothing like this book had been published in India before, and I think there was a certain curiosity about a young author doing something unusual as well. Whatever it was, it helped people find me, and so projects from comics and films and other media arrived, and two decades later here we are.

EM In your artistic career you have also authored some graphic novels. Why did you choose this genre? What are the advantages it offers, if compared to other expressive forms?

SB I cannot draw, and I knew no one in the comics industry, so I was delighted and surprised when a comics company approached me to write for them. Like with film, afterwards, the joy of collaboration in the core of creation is something authors rarely get to feel – it is not that publishing is a solo act, there is a whole set of people who work on a book to improve it, but the experience of working with artists in comics / graphic novels to create something bigger than the sum of its parts is truly wonderful. With film, of course, it is a hundred people working together. Artistically, each medium teaches you new ways to approach work, tell stories, consider aspects of craft that you would miss from just writing prose. Comics teaches you to edit writing better, work better with dialogue, break down stories into their elements, and consider space and layout. Spatial and visual thinking are not absolutely necessary for writing prose, but the ability to see stories visually absolutely makes you a better writer. I have come to realise over the years that I am essentially a novelist, that is where I do my best work. But working in other media certainly taught me many interesting lessons.

EM Indeed, you have also proved successful as a director. Can you tell us more about *House Arrest*, the Netflix film which was released a few months before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic? What are the issues you tackle in it?

SB To be quite honest I do not feel like I am anywhere near successful as a director – though I do think it was a personal achievement to have managed to have a film out with my name on it as writer and co-director. I do love the intersection between the arts, and have really loved working in comics, film and TV, and other media, even for projects that never saw the light of day (I did a public art project with an artist once, almost worked on a Japanese videogame, and once almost got to produce a Pokemon music video, for example). I do not think I can explain in words how chaotic Bollywood is though – it makes publishing look remarkably stable and organized – but ever since my first few books were successful, I started getting offers to write screenplays, and after writing many screenplays over many years that never got made (usually because they were ambitious fantasy or sci-fi projects that conservative Indian studios did not want to invest in), I decided to write a screenplay that was so small – set in a single flat – that no producer could tell me it was too big to make. I wrote the film that ended up becoming *House Arrest* in 2012, I think – by the time it was released it was 2019, there were very successful stars and a senior director involved, and it was very different from what I had envisioned, but I was very grateful to get the opportunity to be on set as co-director, because the process of actually making a film from start to finish is something you can only understand by going through it – much like writing a novel, though of course infinitely more chaotic.

EM How do you think the pandemic has changed our world? Have we really become better and more responsible human beings?

SB I am not sure it has changed our world – though it should have. I think it showed us a lot of things in the world that needed changing, and that humankind was not anywhere near as advanced as it thought it was. When the next crisis comes, will we do any better? I do not know.

EM Let us move to *Chosen Spirit* (2020), newly released in 2022 under the title *The City Inside*. What are the major differences between the first and second version of the narrative?

SB There are about 10,000 extra words, some of which are about including the events of 2020 and 2021 into the decade-ago background of the near future. But I do not think these are major changes, really – *Chosen Spirits* and *The City Inside* are still the same book. I look at *The City Inside* as a new draft of *Chosen Spirits*.

EM *The City Inside* has been labeled “a dystopia” or “an anti-dystopia”. Yet, in the “Acknowledgements” section of the volume, you argue that your book “is set not in a dystopia, but in a best-case scenario”. What do you mean by that?

SB I mean that dystopia is a function of distance. I do not see the book as dystopian, it is just a projection of real India a slight distance into the future – and a fairly optimistic prediction, the real future is going to be grimmer, but I wanted the book to be hopeful. To the rest of the world, and to relatively privileged Indians – who are the readers, I guess – it may seem dystopian, but that is because they clearly have not been following news about India, or not thinking about what it means and where all of it will go. And the book is not even about the underprivileged, or the absolutely poor and oppressed – the protagonists are all privileged, so if that seems dystopian ...

When I say best-case scenario, I mean that I tried, in the book, to find hope and meaning for the central characters, but honestly if the current social, political, and economic trends in India continue, real-life future is going to look worse than anything in the book.

EM What is the role played by technology in *The City Inside*? Is it a valuable resource? Does it pose a threat to society?

SB The technology in *TCI* is all real technology, already invented, just not as widely available yet – the idea was to look at technology that is definitely going to be around a decade in the future, not invent technology in a sci-fi sense that would end up dominating the plot. For this book, the important aspect of technology was its effect on human life at the individual and societal level, and the different ways it is used for different people – technology in the US, or Europe, is very different from tech in India or China, and tech use is radically different even within India, or other countries, depending on what layer of society you are in – in terms of how much choice you have in its use, what is forced on you, what it gives you, what it takes from you. That is because people have different rights, safeguards, and opportunities in different places.

EM The society you depict in your novel is thoroughly homogenised. Difference is censored or suppressed. Is this a prerequisite for manipulation?

SB I do not think it is homogenised any more than our present-day world. But yes, censorship of difference helps manipulation. And the homogenisation of society in the book is not as terrible as it could be.

EM Current political events in India constitute the background for the novel. Can you tell us more about it? Did readers recognise that the near future you depict closely resembles their present?

SB The idea was that readers did not need to know the news the book referred to – the point was the atmosphere of the present. I was pleased to see that readers both in India and abroad managed to feel the “vibe” of the book and relate to it, which was the goal. I am not sure if readers in the west thought there were specific references they missed, because there were not in particular, or if they were there, they were explained. Most of the news

in the book is made up, or projections of previous news but knowledge of those previous real incidents is not necessary. It is very strongly rooted in Delhi, of course, but the aim is to centralise the universal experience across the world as we all face the same technologies and the same vast challenges, however differently we experience them. I strongly believe that we can understand the local environment and the local culture of any place, because differences are all surface – if we engage with empathy, nothing is foreign.

EM In your narratives characters are often on the move, drifting to other cities, looking for a place to call home. What is the meaning of “home” nowadays?

SB I do not know! I do not feel at home in the country I live in, but certainly would not feel at home elsewhere. I like to say home is wherever the wi-fi is, but I think home is really where the people you care about are. You can make new homes by caring about new people.

EM From your point of view, the point of view of a committed writer, how can literature and the arts contribute to fighting inequalities, post-truth scenarios, neoliberal hegemony? How can they foster a more equitable, just, and inclusive society?

SB I think they can do what they always have, which is inspire people, move people, make them feel things, build their empathy, entertain them. But the key victories against all these things will be won by politics, not art. Art both shapes and influences politics, but that is not its key function.

EM Can you tell us more about your latest novel, *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport*?

SB It is a science fiction adventure, out in October from Tordotcom in the US and Canada. Here is the description: Shantiport was supposed to be a gateway to the stars. But the city is sinking, and its colonist rulers are not helping anyone but themselves. Lina, a daughter of failed revolutionaries, has no desire to escape Shantiport. She loves her city and would do anything to save its people. This is, in fact, the plan for her life, made before she was even born. Her brother, Bador, is a small monkey bot with a big attitude and bigger ambitions. He wants a chance to leave this dead-end planet and explore the universe on his own terms. But that would mean abandoning the family he loves – even if they do take him for granted. When Shantiport’s resident tech billionaire coerces Lina into retrieving a powerful artifact rumoured to be able to reshape reality, forces from before their time begin coalescing around the siblings. And when you throw in a piece of sentient, off-world tech with the ability to grant three wishes into the mix ... None of the city’s powers will know what hit them.

I wanted to do a fun adventure after the realities of *The City Inside*, though the book also deals with several themes.

EM What are your artistic plans for the future?

SB I honestly do not know! I have been a full-time writer for the last two decades, but the world is changing so fast, and the creative industries are under so much strain, that it is absolutely impossible to make plans. There is lots of work I want to do, and a few things in progress, but what medium it will be in, what country it will come out in and when ... I have no idea. I am working on another novel, and doing a few film projects on the side, trying to make sure I remember I am very lucky to get to do any of it, and trying to make difficult guesses about what will help the work survive. Coming from where I do, I am very used to a lack of infrastructure, no supportive institutes, general confusion and chaos – but that does not make these things easier to deal with. All that said, it is lovely to have found ways to get the work to endure for two decades now and find new people to engage with in various parts of our world, so I look forward to all of it.

Elisabetta Marino is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata” and Head of “Asia and the West” Research Centre. She is the author of four monographs: a volume on the figure of Tamerlane in British and American literature (2000); an introduction to British Bangladeshi literature (2005); a study on the relationship between Mary Shelley and Italy (2011); an analysis of the Romantic dramas on mythological subjects (2016). In 2022, she translated *Parkwater*, a Victorian novel by Ellen Wood, for the first time into Italian. She has published extensively on the English Romantic writers (especially Mary Shelley and P. B. Shelley), Indian diasporic literature, travel literature, and Italian American literature.

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