

***INTERVIEW OF AUTHOR MONA DASH
WITH PUBLISHER TARA INDIA RESEARCH PRESS***

Q. Please tell us a little about ‘Untamed Heart’ What is the story about, in your own words?

Answer: ‘Untamed Heart’ is the story of a woman named Mohini and her search for identity and freedom. Set in a very identifiable set up of a traditional family in India, Mohini begins to question concepts such as love, duty, sacrifice. Thus, it is also a story of love, betrayal, friendship and discovery of self beyond your own boundaries.

Q. Why ‘Untamed Heart?’ What is the inspiration behind the name?

I have to admit, I didn’t come up with the name ‘Untamed Heart.’ My first draft to RedInk had gone in with a completely different name. But once we had to finalise the book and title, the editorial team was keen to choose something which drew from the book, but not in an obvious manner. We drew up a list of probable titles and discussed each. ‘Untamed Heart’, suggested by one of the editorial team of RedInk, was eventually chosen as it encapsulated the essence of the character. The heart is unfettered and untamed, and indeed that’s the way it should be. We should let it feel free.

Q. You tackle a lot of important social issues in your book. What inspired you to write about it?

I hadn’t consciously set out to make the book about social issues. But within my friends and family circle, I often met women who seemed to undergo a metamorphosis after getting married, and turn into someone completely different from their original selves. That is how the character of Mohini came to my mind, and the rest followed, in terms of the life she is leading, the challenges she faces. How does she take a step on her own, for her own self? It wasn’t possible to answer this without exploring as well the environment around her and the prevalent social issues, issues that shape women, their lives and their ideas.

Q. Your character, Mohini. Please tell us a little about her. Is she based on you? If not, then is there a Mohini in your life?

I am glad you asked me that! One very usual question writers face is if the book is autobiographical, and I am often asked that about my other short stories as well. But, no, it is not autobiographical, nor is she based on anyone specific in my Life, As I mentioned before, I have seen many in the same situation as Mohini was at the beginning of the book. There are shades of Mohini in many of us, the experiences she faces are not entirely rare, but not everyone does what she does. That is the reason I enjoyed writing about her.

The concept of Mohini came to my mind from the avatar of Vishnu as Mohini. In the form of Mohini, Vishnu was all powerful with the beauty of a woman, the strength of a man. That is what I felt Mohini had to find in herself, through the people she meets, the relationships she has.

Q. How do you think Mohini can impact your readers' life? How has Mohini impacted your life?

Some of my friends who have read the book have said Mohini is 'awesome,' and strong. Therefore, I would hope that she can inspire anyone else who might be in her situation. I also hope that people can learn from her mistakes, for she is not perfect. She carries on, she falls, she gets up and carries on. She is resilient and genuine. I feel proud of her! There was a moment in one of my discussions with the editor, when she commented, 'But Mohini can never say such a thing,' and at that moment I realized, she wasn't someone I had made up, she had become a person in her own right.

I enjoyed writing about her; I remind myself of her strength in face of a difficult situation.

Q. How does your own life compare to Mohini's?

There is very little similarity apart from the fact that I am also married and I live in London. I have a very supportive family and I never had to take difficult decisions like she had to. I don't have her patience or her nature to serve. I am an Engineer and

also hold a MBA, so I have worked in full time demanding jobs for several years. Her search is not the same as mine. I don't make puris as well!

But I feel the issues she faces, in whatever ways, does come up at some point or the other in most women's lives, including myself, whether in India or elsewhere. Certain reactions, certain experiences will resonate with today's woman I feel.

Q. What is your inspiration behind writing?

People, relationship, places and how displacement affect these. I am drawn to the intricacy of Life, of how History and Geography shapes us, how the small things matter so much even though we don't accept that they do. I like to explore Life behind the external facade.

If you are asking why I write, as most writers will say, the world inside the head is so real yet so unreal compared to the one outside, that it is fascinating.

Q. What are you currently working on?

There are quite a few things I am working on now.

My second collection of poetry is to be published soon by Skylark Publications UK through a crowd funding initiative, so I am working with the publisher to edit and finalise the collection.

I am part of a south Asian writers' collective called The Whole Kahani, and our first anthology of short stories was just published.

Then, I am also working towards a PhD in Area Studies, and am involved in the research for this to eventually inform my next novel.

I have another novel which I am halfway through. I am brimming with ideas and it is very busy!

Q. How is life in London compared to India? How has that change inspired your writing style?

The main difference is of course the family and support structure you have left behind in India. But London is a city very easy to fit into as it is incredibly diverse. There is a lot of opportunity and energy in the city, yet it hasn't lost its old world charm. Living here makes one more self-reliant and lets you develop a stronger sense of self. It is a beautiful city and anyone who is influenced by Literature will feel the connection here very strongly.

In terms of writing style, well I have been in London for the last fifteen years, so a lot of my work tends to be based here, or connects with London in some way. Compared to 'Untamed Heart', my current writing is perhaps more about diaspora and associated themes.

Q. Is there any message that you would like to send to your readers?

I hope my readers enjoy the book! I don't want to advice or sound preachy, but since you ask me for a message... If there is a Mohini in your lives, do love and respect her. If you find yourself in a situation and want to be like Mohini, then try to cultivate a sense of value and worth to the world.

Q. Could you tell us a little about the key concepts that you have described in this book?

For me there are two main issues, one is identity and the other is a sense of connection with the world around you in order to deliver value. To be of help to anyone else around you, you need to have self-belief yourself. Once this is done, and then how do you get out of your own narrow sense of self to connect with the outside world and contribute to it? It's not just about pretty clothes and a pretty face therefore, it is the internal strength.

Q. What kind of target audience did you have in mind while writing this book?

I am afraid, in spite of working in sales and marketing, I actually didn't think of the audience before writing the book as we are advised to do!

I think any thinking, empathetic person should want to read it, but in terms of demographics, the target audience I guess will be women. Young women who may not relate to these issues, but still to be aware of; and older women who may have already been through something like this. I do hope though some men will read and like it as well!

Q. Every writer seems to have a writing process. Could you share about yours?

Indeed, some writers tend to be very organised and plot their stories well in advance, plan the chapters and so on. It does depend on the genre, for example for a thriller, you have to plan. I tend to be very disorganised in that sense. I first write, write to my heart's content, and then I formalise the structure.

I am however disciplined and I try to write everyday. Time, as we all know, is excruciatingly limited due to all of Life's other demands, so that actually pushes me to make the best of whatever time I get and grab. I don't think waiting for the right inspiration is the right approach. If you are ready, it will come.

EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

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Now

After lunch, appetites sated, when everyone retired to their rooms to sink into a deep slumber, pause for an hour and savour some moments of coolness on a hot day, Mohini quietly stepped into the living room. Nothing dramatic, none of the subterfuge you would expect with running away. A usual afternoon, silence sat in the room as if she belonged; the phone did not ring, the doorbell was silent.

The mute television cast shiny pictures on the walls. Mohini tiptoed across the room, stepping deftly over Gobind sprawled on his mat, suitcase held out. He remained sleeping, the doors of the two bedrooms remained shut, the air-conditioners whirred softly and people remained in deep slumber. People, though technically they were her family.

The case pulled at her arms; was it under the twenty three kilos stipulated by the flight? She hadn't checked. She had no time to plan for this journey, a journey begun in haste, without a return date. She shut the front door of Flat 6; an elegant cream once, it was now dirty with fingerprints and smears of dust. Perhaps in response to Mohini's fervent prayers, the old lift with its grilled doors came up quickly.

'Don't open...' she willed to the doors of the four flats on that floor. The last thing she wanted was someone to step out and say, 'Mohini, so where are you going now?' If everything went well, she would offer a coconut in the Shiva temple; whenever and wherever she would find one. The *durwan* was half-asleep on his chair and barely looked up when she smiled at him and made her way out of the gates of the flat complex. The May heat hung over the city, and for the first time she was glad of its intensity rendering everyone powerless in an afternoon slumber. The time of escape was carefully chosen by her, not the thick of night but in this blinding heat that paralysed thoughts and breath. This heat which made you stop and sleep, and wake only when it was giving way to the evening coolness.

Now outside the gate, she was a part of the crowds – the vegetable sellers with the dried okra, the wilting coriander leaves free with any purchase, the cyclists pedalling tediously in the sun, the stoic cows with splashes of colour left over from being sprayed on at Holi; she was one of them. Just another individual on a busy Indian road. A dozen auto-drivers were parked outside and each of them tried to catch her eye.

Flagging one, she got into it. 'To Connaught Place. Quick, jaldi! Jaldi!'

It was only when the noisy engine started, that she leaned back on the hard frayed yellow seats, suitcase at her feet, red holdall still on her shoulder. Runaway, getaway, runaway.

The driver grinned at her in the side mirrors – a young guy in a patterned shirt – she realised she could have asked for a pre-paid auto and paid lesser, but you didn't think of money at times like this. Nor of comfort, she thought, when the dust hit her face as he revved the auto and mingled with the maze of vehicles moving randomly with no adherence to traffic rules.

Looking at her watch, she went over the plan yet again in her head – a forty minute journey to the flat, ask the neighbours for the key and manage a quick dinner there.

‘Help yourself to what’s in the fridge,’ Rajani had said – ‘Order a taxi to the airport at six pm.’ And then the flight out of India, that should work.

You are worth so much, Mohini; you can do it, voices from the past still lived within her. She knew she was worth much more. She had to believe in herself.

Once the flight took off, away from this country, she could stop looking over her shoulder to check if a known face was still chasing her, whether her past life was waiting to claim her back, she could relax. Then it would be part two of the plan. Go back to work, find a place to stay, find her feet, find a reason to live.

From that moment when it had all started some three years ago, to this sudden flight. From that moment when she had suddenly started questioning and throwing away all that was familiar to her. From that Mohini of the four walls, to this Mohini set adrift.

(Extract from the ‘Untamed Heart’ by Mona Dash)

Bio

Born and brought up in the coastal state of Odisha in East India, Mona Dash comes from a family of artistically inclined professionals and academics. Mona has been living in London since 2001.

By education she is an engineer and MBA and with that comes the price of working as a sales manager in an international Telecoms company. By choice she is a writer and with that comes the freedom and happiness of writing poetry, stories and fiction.

Most of her work explores themes of love, displacement and belonging. Mona is inspired by different cultures and having travelled extensively as part of her work, likes to observe and write about how a place can significantly influence human nature and behaviour. Relationships, subsequent betrayal, and a quest for something fulfilling also emerge as strong themes in her work. Her characters are caught in

between the west and east, tradition and modernity, the routine and something beyond the ordinary.

Her short stories and poetry has been published in various anthologies and magazines in the UK and India such as KavyaBharati, Muse India, The Lake, Poetry 24, 3 Elements. Her work has also been anthologised in Suvarnarekha , Dance of the Peacock, Foreign Flavours, Foreign Encounters and other recent anthologies. She has recently gained a Master's in Creative Writing at the London Metropolitan University.

Dawn-drops is her first collection of poetry published by Writer's Workshop, India. Her first book of fiction is represented by Redink Literary agency.

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