



THE YEAR IN RETROSPECT  
MEENAKSHI MUKHERJEE

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Meenakshi Mukherjee grew up in Patna, India and studied at Patna University. She did graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania and taught at Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, the University of Hyderabad and the University of Pune. Having retired from Jawaharlal Nehru University, she is now an independent scholar based in Hyderabad. She has been a visiting professor at the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Texas at Austin, Macquaire University in Sydney and the University of Zagreb in Croatia. Her major publications are *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1985); *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2000); and *History, Geography and Culture*, edited by Franco Moretti (2006). – Address: 10-A Rukmini Devi Colony Annexe, West Marredpally, Secunderabad 500026, India. E-mail: meenakmuk@gmail.com

When I arrived in Berlin in October, the view from my window in the Villa Jaffé resembled perfectly my laptop's screen-saver. In Hyderabad, I never paid much attention to the autumn scene on my monitor, regarding it only as a picture, remote from my tropical reality. Now in Grunewald, the picture came alive. I could breathe in every shade of burnt orange, russet, ochre and gold that shimmered in the sun, and it was a heady experience.

Soon some other experiences at Wiko also turned out to be heady, specially the magical supply of books, the speed with which titles I had only seen in bibliographies – and despaired of ever being able to read – materialized on the library shelf, sometimes within twenty-four hours of my putting in the request. Since my work was on nineteenth-century India, I had initially wondered if German libraries would have the kind of material I need-

ed. My first surprise was getting articles from *The Bengal Magazine* and *Calcutta Review* dating back to the 1850s, which despite much persistent effort I had failed to locate in India. But after receiving from Hong Kong University – on-line – a prize essay written by a student in Calcutta in 1905 on ‘The Causes and Prevention of Famine’ I stopped being surprised any more!

During the first week of my stay I did not realize the impact this wondrous supply of books would have on my life. Socially that was the most difficult time, where every day at the dining table I had to go through the ritual of explaining who I was and what exactly I was doing here. Probably others too felt it was an ordeal, but outwardly most of them appeared to be perfectly at home. Conversation ranged from constitutional law to clinical depression and evolutionary biology – subjects on which I had nothing to contribute, and often my role was that of a silent listener. But after ten months of stay at Wiko, I am now convinced of the benefits and stimulations of this interdisciplinary interaction. Once the Tuesday colloquiums started, I grew interested in seeing how research questions are formulated differently in various areas of knowledge – especially those to which I had never been exposed. This is not to say that I was always able to follow the nuances of each and every argument, but I did gradually gather the courage at least to ask ignorant questions. I particularly enjoyed the colloquiums on Art History – and there were about six of them this year.

Before coming to Berlin I had already done some research on my project, and on 10<sup>th</sup> October I ceremoniously typed the first page of my proposed book – rashly thinking now it was solely a matter of putting in so many hours of work each day. Ten chapters in ten months seemed a manageable target, specially when I knew I would not have to run a house, drive through the maddening traffic of Hyderabad and fulfil the multiple social and academic obligations that I had at home. Little did I know that my work would assume a life of its own – expanding uncontrollably, footnotes in one book enticing me to read twenty other volumes, and the references found there taking me in other unforeseen directions. The temptation of being able to access any book that had even a remote bearing on my work was irresistible. The admirable library staff cheerfully aided and abetted my adventures, even provided me with a car to go to the Freie Universität when the librarian there refused to part with a particularly decrepit volume. Like Penelope’s shroud – Draupadi’s sari would be a more apt metaphor – my project became potentially inexhaustible.

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But there were other pleasures to be explored – and by that I do not just mean Berlin’s well-known attractions – concerts, operas and museums, which did often enrich my weekends. The high point of my stay was my discovery of two writers with whom I had no prior acquaintance. They were both Fellows at Wiko. The whole world has read Antjie Krog – she has received over a dozen literary awards in various countries, but such are the mysteries of book distribution in the world market that even though postcolonial literature is supposed to be my field, I had not found her books in Indian bookshops. At Wiko I read *Country of My Skull* and *A Change of Tongue* avidly but slowly, savouring her unusual sensibility as much as her highly charged prose that quivers with energy. The African Poetry Evening she presented during our stay revealed her other talents: as translator, poet, performer, event organizer. Getting to know her as a friend was a special bonus of my Wiko year. The other writer is Dževad Karahasan, a quiet introspective person with whom I did not have a chance to talk for the first month or so. During a Thursday dinner when we happened to be sitting next to each other I asked him if I could read his work in English translation. He was noncommittal, but in a few days I found in my Wiko mailbox an unpublished English translation of his book *Sarajevo, Exodus of a City*. I was bowled over by the intensity and searing power of that autobiographical fiction. Since then I have read a section of a longer novel by him – again in unpublished English translation – a philosophical thriller set in medieval times – perhaps the same genre as Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* or Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name is Red*. These comparisons may be wrong, as I have not read far into the novel – but I continue to wonder why a writer like him has not yet got a publisher in English. Towards the end of my stay at Wiko, I happened to meet another writer – Istvan Voros – from Budapest who was kind enough to share with me some of his tantalizing Tao poems and one enigmatic short story in English translation. I consider myself fortunate that I had these extraordinary literary experiences at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

While my research work continued on its own meandering way, I greatly profited from two other activities at Wiko – firstly the lecture series at EUME (Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe) on “Concepts and Genealogies of Modernity”. Exposure to Western ideas is an integral part of our education in India, but in my profession there is very little direct academic contact with West Asia and North Africa. Listening to scholars from these regions and getting acquainted with some of the current debates in history, identity and ideology from their geographic and cultural perspective was an experience I valued. Friendship with Samah Selim and Randa Abou-bakr – both from Cairo –

whom I met at these EUME meetings (Randa was a Humboldt Fellow) is likely to continue beyond my Wiko year through our shared interest in Comparative Literary Studies. The other activity from which I gained a lot was that of the Fellows Film Club, started at the initiative of Miriam Hansen and Alex Nagel. I cannot thank them enough for arranging to screen some wonderful movies – specially the Berlin series. In the winter months it was an added pleasure to be able to indulge my film appetite without stepping outside the warm Villa Jaffé.

But in February when the Berlinale began I had to brave the weather. In my youth in Delhi I used to stand in queues for many hours to buy tickets for international Film Festivals. In recent years I had to give that up because as I grew older, the queues also got longer. I could not believe that at the Berlin Festival one could see most of the movies one wanted – and for me that meant films from the small countries of the world – without too much jostling in the crowd. I took in as much as I could, basking in between screenings in the familiar film festival ambience in the plaza of the Sony Centre and the festive marquee outside the Zoo Palast.

There were other diversions – those of an academic nature. Like an old war horse responding to the bugle's call, I could not refuse invitations to speak to students in classrooms. This was my post-colonial network kicking into high gear in the Fatherland. After Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus introduced me to Professor Rüdiger Kunow of Potsdam University I interacted with the students of his course on "Cultures in/of Mobility" twice (one of the sessions was at Wiko); also with a large lecture class of Professor Christopher Reinfandt at Tübingen University – there the added attraction being a punting trip on Hölderlin's river, organized by my long-time friend Professor Gerhard Stilz. Professor Stilz also found time to visit me in Berlin to follow up on some collaborative work we are doing, as well as to comment on my unfinished manuscript, which he read with meticulous care. Another lecture I was invited to give was at Humboldt University, in Elahe Haschemi's course on "Postcolonial Intertextuality". My trip to Venice in March was also in connection with Postcolonial Studies, but subsequent lectures at Heidelberg (South Asia Institute) and Paris (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme) were on my current biography project and I gained a lot from the discussions there. I had a very fruitful interactive session at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (Berlin) discussing my current work. I am also grateful for inputs from friends at Wiko who read some of my chapters – specially Moira Gatens and Chris Foley. Bernard Levinson, whose office faced my apartment, was a constant source of help in technical matters and a sounding board for some of my ideas. Salman Bashier helped by asking

some very unusual questions about my work, making me aware that I should not take certain basic assumptions for granted.

As I write this report in the last week of July, three days before my departure, I am surprised to find that, despite the numerous other pleasurable activities that drew me away from my research and despite the unplanned proliferation of my original project, I have somehow been able to fashion the rough first draft of a book. Given my miserable track record regarding deadlines, this should be a matter of some satisfaction, but strangely, rather than feeling elated at what I have achieved, I am beset by a sense of regret at what I did not achieve: namely even an elementary competence in spoken German. Dhruv Raina and I faithfully attended our weekly German class with Eva von Kügelgen and enjoyed each session. We learnt more about German life and literature from her than about how to decline adjectives and conjugate verbs, but not because she neglected to teach us grammar. At our request she took us to see Bertolt Brecht's house and his grave, and she would often recommend plays and films we could see. She was willing to help us with language as well as with culture, but not much linguistic progress is possible unless the students do their share of work. At the end I realize that the only sentence in German I have learnt to say fluently is "Leider habe ich keine Hausaufgaben gemacht."