

CS Lakshmi: In Conversation with Malsawmi Jacob

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C S Lakshmi (right) with Malsawmi Jacob. Photo by Priya D'Souza

We present a conversation with the well-known Tamil/English writer, feminist activist, archivist, and Founder Director of SPARROW, Dr C S Lakshmi, known widely by her penname Ambai. Malsawmi Jacob, her colleague at SPARROW and a regular contributor to “Your Space” of *Muse India* engages her in a dialogue which touches upon her multitude of activities and takes us on a journey into her life and times-- the heady days of the feminist movement in post independence India. Her brief profile can be viewed by clicking on her name at top left.

We invited Ahana Lakshmi, grand-daughter of Kumudini, or Ranganayaki Thatam, the enormously talented Tamil writer, whose short story was first translated by C S Lakshmi for *Femina*, to write a Comment on Ambai. We are grateful to Ahana for having readily agreed to do it for us and for sending it over at short notice. The Comment is featured as a separate article in this Section.

Malsawmi Jacob: Lakshmiji, how does it feel to be a woman of substance?

C S Lakshmi: [Laughs].

MJ: The works you've done in different lines-- your research, SPARROW, writing-- they're all remarkable. Just give us a glimpse into your mode of working, please.

CSL: About being a woman of substance, if you say this to my family they would laugh, because they still think of me as a failure [Laughter]. You see I'm not a corporate person, a Professor or a Vice Chancellor or something-- which many of my classmates are.

MJ: The family's the hardest to satisfy, right?

CSL: So I don't think that I'm a woman of substance, the way you see many women of substance these days-- like Kiran Bedi, or Indra Nooyi... But I can say that I've done in my life whatever I wanted to. I've done it with a great struggle, but I've done it happily and with great satisfaction. Even the failures in the process have taught me. And the research and the writing I do, I'm not able to separate them; because in my writings and in my research, I'm concerned about human lives. Even when I research about women and their life stories, I'm interested in knowing what the men in their lives do. I have some very interesting instances of fathers, husbands, and brothers standing by women in the family. These are things that have to be emphasized. We have to see that it is a particular kind of value system that is oppressing women. Not men oppressing women.

MJ: Yeah, that's true.

CSL: The notion of men oppressing women or women oppressing women will go if we understand this. That's why I'd like to keep women's lives as open as possible. I understand all the nuances in their lives when I do research. But my research didn't begin with women initially. I did my PhD in American Studies. Even there, although I was in an international school of studies I didn't want to take up foreign policy as my subject. I wanted to take up human issues. I studied Hungarian refugees coming to the United States after the 1956 uprising and the US refugee policy. The US claimed that they were a great country to which anybody was welcome. But in immigration and refugee policies, they are not like that. Fifties was the time when they had a great Red scare in America. So refugees coming from Hungary were all seen as Communists and they had problems coming into the United States. They also realized after coming here that the picture created by the Voice of America was very different from the real America.

Once I completed my PhD, I knew that I'd never teach American History. I thought that even though I had not specialized in Indian History, I have to concentrate on something that has to do with India. Since I was a writer, I took up women writers as my subject. The first book I wrote, *The Face Behind the Mask*, is about Tamil women writers. It was in the process of this research-- I'd already written stories-- I felt that talking to older writers who wrote before me would be a great experience.

That's how all this-- archiving women, research and writing-- it all happened kind of together. I feel that I started writing differently from 1967 onwards. I believe that happened because I left home when I was 19. So long as I was at home, the way I wrote was very different from the way I wrote after I left home.

I did some unusual things,-- unusual for those times. I passed my MA in 1966, with a first class. And the normal expectation of parents in those times was that you should do IAS, or become a bank officer, or do something big. But I wanted to be a village schoolteacher. And that was not appreciated. I became a schoolteacher, not exactly in a village but in a small town. That was the only girls' high school in that town. I chose that town because a writer friend of mine lived there. He told me, "You say that you want to do so many things, so why don't you come and teach in this school?" I went there and started teaching.

MJ: Tell me something about it.

CSL: I wanted to work there all my life, but I was thrown out within eight months [Laughter]. Because I was extremely idealistic. The Correspondent of the school believed in a kind of feudal system of authority, in which I didn't fit in. The way I taught my students and the way they moved with me, was very different from the way they moved with other teachers. The other teachers feared that if they did something that the Correspondent didn't like they would lose their job. I didn't have that fear. I had no fear of being poor or anything like that. My salary was Rs 150, and I was very happy [Laughs]. What happened was, the Correspondent's daughter had died in some accident. They had made her statue and encased it in glass. The Correspondent expected all the teachers to gather there every Friday and sing devotional songs. Because she felt that her daughter had become divine. I used to sing very well those days. Every Friday they would call me and say "Join the bhajans." I'd make some excuse or other, saying "I have a cold, my voice is not okay today," ... things like that. At one point when I couldn't get any more excuses. I said, "I don't want to come." They were all shocked. The Correspondent called me and said, "This is something that has never happened in the school." I said, "I can't do something that is against my conscience." And so they threw me out.

MJ: Whatever made you so fearless and strong in your stand at that young age? You said you were not afraid even of being poor.

CSL: From my childhood I felt that I was on my own, that I had only me to depend on. Another thing-- people like us who were born in the forties grew up in the post-independence period, when the nation was very important for us. This notion of service for the nation, doing good for others, and the idea that when you are truthful there is nothing to be afraid of, were instilled into us from our school days. Many of the teachers who taught us were spinsters who had dedicated themselves to education. So these ideas came along with the school.

MJ: You imbibed them?

CSL: Yes, and I also felt that if I'm doing something which my conscience accepts, then I can face the consequences. And money particularly didn't bother me. You know that many Gandhians didn't believe in being

rich during the freedom movement.

MJ: Your family didn't consider you a great success-- though we do. Did they finally accept what you were doing? Like, after you've become a well-known writer and you've done so much social work, especially working for women, ... did they eventually learn to appreciate you?

CSL: Not really. In my family no one reads me, because what I write is not something that appeals to them. Running an organization like SPARROW is not something they think of as a great thing. Their notions of achievement and my idea of-- not achievement, but leading life in a particular way-- are totally different. Finally, what it has come to is that they have tolerated me.

MJ: They were not even secretly proud of you even though they didn't express it?

CSL: If they were proud of me they could be openly proud [Laughs]. I was not at all what they wanted me to be. I did my PhD, but I didn't pursue an academic career, though I got a Fellowship. And they were not happy with the turns my life has taken. They don't criticize me, but they're not overwhelmed with what I have done.

MJ: At least they didn't try to stop you.

CSL: No, they never tried to stop me. But the appreciation was not there. Except my elder sister, Rajeswari, who appreciated me a lot later in life and supported my research by translating my interviews and assisting me in transcription. She has done a lot for me. But I don't know whether she has read my stories.

MJ: [Laughs] And I enjoyed your stories so much. The research you did on women artistes in India, that's also a really massive one. Can you just talk a little about it?

CSL: I got a Homi Bhabha Fellowship in 1992-1994, and I did a project called 'The Idiom of Silence.' It was on women musicians, dancers and painters. It was to understand how women perceive their lives, to understand their lives from what they've spoken and also from what they've not spoken. Because very often we're not able to put into words everything that has happened in our lives. Very often, we have to couch it in silence. It was a way of understanding oral history, actually.

MJ: What were your findings? What did you get out of this research?

CSL: I have understood that oral history has to do with many different tellings of one life. If different people interview a person, you may get different perspectives, although the events may be the same. Every time it's narrated, it may be narrated differently. There is no question of thinking of authenticity or veracity because oral history has to do with memory and recall. And very often, you recall a memory differently at different stages of life. Like a woman who has delivered a child will talk about the child. If you interview her after fifty years, she may mention it only as an incident. So memory and recall depends on at what stage you intervene in a person's life. Also, how history has changed during that time. For example, there's an old musician called Gangubai Hangal. I asked her, when a particular musician sang very well in a concert, did she write and tell her that she enjoyed her music? She was confused. She said, "But why should I write?" She understood communication very differently. She'd probably tell that musician if she met her, 'I heard your concert and it was great'. But my generation believed in writing and appreciating. So we were at different stages of life and a totally different generation. If I ask the same question to a very young artiste now, she would probably say, 'Yeah, I just tweeted her'. Oral history is not static; it is changing all the time. The contents don't change, but the perspectives are changing all the time. If a person reads the same interview after twenty years, they would look at a person's life very differently from the way I saw. This project was basically to understand oral history and how women talk about their lives and what happens in women's lives that don't come out in the open. Things that have remained hidden in the crevices of their lives,-- that's basically what I wanted to find out.

MJ: So it may be worth interviewing the same person several times over the years?

CSL: Yes. And the questions you ask may vary according to your own experiences of life and your perspective. If you're an academic person, you may ask very analytical questions. The answers also may be very crisp and dry and to the point.

MJ: Was this-- your interest in women's lives-- connected with the starting of SPARROW?

CSL: This project on women musicians and others happened after SPARROW was started. SPARROW started in 1988, and before that, in the book *The Face Behind the Mask* I had interviewed old women writers. That time I had not recorded the interviews; I'd only taken notes and given them a questionnaire. But later I did a very big project called 'Illustrated Social History of Women in Tamil Nadu'. It was to be illustrated with photographs, conversations, interviews, speeches, stories, poetry, drawings, and many things. When I did that research, I interviewed many different kinds of women. That time I recorded the interviews and also collected a lot of photographs. A close friend of mine, Geraldine Forbes, had done similar research. Not only oral history, but she had also collected a lot of photographs and other things. We had to think about where to place all these resources we had collected. At that time, Dr Neera Desai was also thinking of interviewing feminists, which was consequently published by SPARROW. I asked her where she was going to keep all the resources she had collected.

Initially, we were thinking of starting a women's archival centre as part of a University. But the University works in a very different way and we felt that the kind of projects we want to do would never be allowed within a University setup. We wanted a lot of autonomy in terms of choosing projects. No University was willing to accept an autonomous body under its wing. That's how we started separately [Laughs].

MJ: SPARROW has come a long way since then. Are you happy with the state of SPARROW, with what you have done?

CSL: I'm very happy with what has been possible all these years. I feel that we've done good work, and that we've been able to do because we worked independently. We could make mistakes and learn from them. For ten years, 1997 to 2007, *HIVOS* (Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation) funded us. That was when we were able to do a whole lot of work. The oral history we have done-- because oral history is our anchor project-- and the way we have stocked the library, the way we're conserving and preserving the material-- I'm very happy with it. I'm also very happy with what we've done in terms of video recordings. We could do all these, because we have many supportive elements outside. I'm very happy with the work we have done. But I'm not too thrilled with the financial status we are in. I feel that we should've done better than this.

MJ: We deserve better!

CSL: We deserve much better [Laughs].

MJ: You are deeply interested in the lives of women-- including their struggles-- not just their achievements. You have also struggled. What were your struggles on your way to become a major writer?

CSL: I did my MA from Madras Christian College. Then, I went to a village. When they threw me out, I couldn't come back home, because I thought that my father would say, 'I told you so'. So I taught in a college in Chennai. I took a room in a distant relative's house. I became the talk of that road, and it was not easy because people would gossip about you.

I had started writing much earlier. Initially, like always, it began with poems, very bad poems. And when I was in my pre-university, I took part in a novel writing competition for young people. I wrote an adventure novel that won me the first prize, when I was around sixteen.

MJ: Is it translated into English?

CSL: No, it's a children's novel. When that got me first prize my parents were thrilled. Later on I wrote a few adult stories in popular magazines that were slightly different in content, but not totally different from popular stories. They were slightly different in the sense that there were women in the stories who asserted themselves. But the way the story was narrated and the language and the values were very much similar to what my parents would have approved. So they didn't particularly mind it except for a couple of stories where a woman refuses to go back to her husband and things like that.

During my final year BA, I took part in an adult novel writing competition. I was about nineteen. It was about

platonic love. I belong to a generation where they never discussed the body at home. We didn't even talk about menstruation. It was as if we had no body and were floating without a body although we lived by the reality of the body. Like I've said in a Tamil interview, there was an Alsatian dog in my house which was not allowed inside the kitchen. And what the dog would do-- it would put its entire body in the kitchen and keep just its hind leg and tail out of the kitchen, pretending that it had not entered the kitchen.

I always say that women live like that. They pretend that they keep tradition and break tradition in their own way. And it gets accepted eventually. I was deeply influenced by two of my uncles. One uncle joined the Ramakrishna Mission and had become a *sanyasi*. Another uncle had also run away to Ramakrishna Mission, and was later brought back. So, the influence of Ramkrishna was there in the family. When very young, I used to think that I didn't want to get married, because I didn't like the physical side of life. This novel is about platonic love between an idealistic woman and an idealistic man. Because I didn't know anything about love or the body, I separated the body and the mind, and did such tricks in the novel [Laughs]. The novel won a second prize in a prestigious competition. I wrote it when I was doing my final BA, the prize was announced when I was doing my MA. The novel was serialized when I was in the village, when I was teaching in that place. When I saw my novel as a serial in a magazine I felt very alienated from it. In the first place because I had come out of the home and the world seemed very different. I had studied with boys-- it was a co-ed college. And I knew now how to relate to the opposite sex which I didn't know earlier because I was at home and I studied in a girls' school. The world had kind of widened for me and it had opened so much, that I felt very embarrassed for my earlier novel [Laughs]. Especially the platonic stuff. I could see the holes in the whole thing. But the novel was very well appreciated, and the editor of the magazine wrote, "This is not an ordinary novel, this is a *kavya*." A lot of people believed in it but I didn't. When I was in the small town I never wrote. Because I was so busy looking at these girls growing, and kind of trying to stabilize myself in that place. But when I came to Chennai and joined the college and I had this room to myself, at that time I wrote a story. It was called 'Wings get Broken'. It was translated as 'Wings'. I sent it to the popular magazines as usual and they all returned it.

MJ: All of them returned it?

CSL: They all returned it, saying it was not acceptable. What I didn't realize was that my style of writing and my ideas had changed entirely. The strange thing was that I didn't understand this. At the end of 1967 I went to Delhi to do my PhD. And sent the story to a Tamil literary magazine called *Kanaiyazhi* and asked, "Is something wrong with this story?" The editor, Kasturi Rangan, came to the hostel. He said, "There's nothing wrong with the story; you sent it to the wrong journals." And then he published a series of my stories which had been returned by the magazines. He recently passed away. Many young writers in Delhi wrote for his magazine.

MJ: Is that the first of your stories that contains feminist thought?

CSL: I didn't know that it was feminist, because in my life I took many feminist decisions without knowing they were feminist. Another thing is, even when I came to understand feminism, I never thought of feminism as a theory outside my life. It's always been part of my life. I feel I can't write a story or take a decision in life wondering whether it is feminist or not. Because I feel that feminism has mingled so much in my life that I'm not able to do anything without that perspective. As far as writing stories is concerned, we can't open the pen and say 'here I'm going to write a feminist story.' Stories don't happen like that, you know, even poetry does not happen like that. I would say that was the first story which was couched in a different language, which at that time I didn't understand was feminist because it was very defiant language.

MJ: Some women we interviewed have complained that they were branded as 'woman writer' instead of just 'writer'. Has this happened to you also?

CSL: It has happened all the time because in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere, women writers are considered a kind of a group which is outside of literary history,-- on the fringes. Even when they wrote literary essays, they would be mentioned as women writers. When they write general literary history, the women are not mentioned at all. Even very good academics have done this. I'll give you a simple example. When my first short story collection came out it didn't get any review for ten years. First, they just couldn't believe the stand I was taking in the stories. And they were also confused because many of the stories were not about women. Some of the stories were about men. And the second collection of stories which came about eleven years later, and was published by a very close friend of mine who was a writer and a publisher; there were some thirteen stories. Four stories had what you call women protagonists, although in my stories there are no protagonists. Let us say these

stories had women characters. The other stories didn't have any women in particular. One story was about a pig, another about a river, and another about a fish. And another story was about death. When he wrote the blurb, he wrote that they were about women's issues, but he didn't know what to do about the nine other stories [Laughter]. So he wrote that these stories are experimental. I wrote to him saying that I don't experiment with my stories so I don't think you can write that. He said, "Even if a male writer had written these, I would have given the same blurb." I said "I don't agree with you. Just last year you published a good story collection of a male writer. The first story was about a three-year-old boy. Till the last story, all the stories had only male characters as main characters. But you never said that these stories were about men. You said these stories are about life. But when I write four stories about women you say these stories are about women. My stories are also about life. When men write it becomes universal, even when they write about women. But when women write, it becomes a very restricted area of functioning. So when they say women writers, it's not just a gender division they are making. It's a yardstick. Women writers are secondary writers.

MJ: Secondary citizens...

CSL: Yes, and secondary writers. So when they call you a woman writer, they're insulting you. When I go to some college to give a talk, they say "Ambai is a woman writer." Sometimes I get up and say, "Look, the fact that I am a woman is pretty obvious. So you don't need to say I'm a woman writer, you can say I'm a writer. And I don't think you can constantly refer to me as a woman writer unless you're referring to male writers as male writers, which you don't." When they use the term woman writer as a yardstick, I object to it. When you deal with women writers as a community of writers, in the context of society, that is different.

MJ: That's very funny. If somebody's writing chiefly about women's issues, maybe it's okay.

CSL: No, but there are male writers in Tamil who have written very good stories only about women as all the characters. But you don't call them women writers.

MJ: Even when we think of English literature, say Thomas Hardy. His protagonists are often women. But they don't call him 'woman writer'.

CSL: [Laughs].

MJ: Many awards have come your way. Which are the ones dearest to you?

CSL: Actually very few awards [Laughs]. These earlier prizes I won are just prizes in popular writing area. After that until a couple of years ago I have won absolutely no awards except the *Katha* story award. I've been the most un-awarded writer, I tell you [Laughter].

The first major award that I got was the life time achievement award from *Tamil Literary Garden* which is a part of University of Toronto a couple of years ago. Then there is-- Tamil Nadu Government has instituted-- not a government thing but the money is given by the then Chief Minister Kalignyar Karunanidhi—to this group of publishers who hold a book exhibition every year, to give an award to two or three writers. I got the award for Tamil fiction last year. These are the only two awards I have received. Yes, I got the *Crossword* award. But the award is basically for translation. Of course, they consider the original story,-- we share the award with the translator. But what is dearest to me is the *Tamil Literary Garden* Award and the citation they gave, clearly stated that the one who gives this award knows me as a writer. So that was very heart-warming and satisfying.

MJ: You started writing at a young age. What was the motivation? Where did you get the genes from?

CSL: My father was a voracious reader, so was my mother. My mother was also an artiste, a musician. I feel that creativity was in the family.

MJ: And the form of expression...

CSL: Yeah, the form of expression was different in the family. I learned dance and music, and so creativity was associated with my life from childhood. Writing was only an extension of it. Also this love for language which I had. My initial education was in Tamil. I loved the language. And I love poetry and Tamil songs. My mother sang a whole lot of Tamil songs. I feel that that made me want to write. I used to write very good compositions in

class. There were times when I got zero in English and 97 in Tamil [Laughter]. And when you love a language you want to express yourself in that language. Also, the house was full of Tamil books. My mother was very fond of reading. And these serials in magazines, she would bind and keep them. So a lot of reading I did even when I was a young girl. When we were young we didn't have many toys. But we had a big green wooden trunk in our house which was full of books. And I remember, as a young child, hugging a book and sleeping, and not a toy. I used to keep a diary where I wrote whatever I felt. There were many unexpressed emotions and feelings in the family context which came out in the diary, and later as stories.

MJ: I'd been wondering how you were so deeply rooted in Tamil. So it's because of Tamil medium schooling. And, I remember you telling us someone wrote to you saying, "I like your poems" whereas you don't write poems. Reading your works, I find that they do have a poetic effect, like prose poetry. Stories like 'Forest', 'Glow', they don't have an 'end' in the usual sense. They just give you a series of pictures and experiences. Maybe that's what gives it a poetic effect. How important is the traditional plot to you?

CSL: I don't believe in a story plot. That's why when people ask me 'what are your stories about?' I'm not able to tell them because my stories don't have that kind of plot. I also find that if you see life, nothing is complete. There is no beginning and ending. So in stories also I'm not able to give a final ending. Everything happens in fragments in life, so in my stories. The plot doesn't mean much to me. When I think of a story, I think of it in series of images and colours. I think of stories as *alap* in music, which is the rendition of a *raga*. First you elaborate the raga, then the song happens. I think of stories like that, where you can expand the notes and take the notes to many places. Music can keep resonating. Stories are also like that. I connect most of my creative work very closely to music. And somehow music is the background of my stories. Even when I don't mention music there is some rhythm in the story which is connected to it.

MJ: Yeah, one feels that the veena or the tanpura is always playing in the background. Maybe we'll come back to the music side later. And like you said, some of your stories are very visual.

CSL: And also, someone asked me once "How come there are so many layers in your story?" But I don't think of it in terms of layers. Real life is in several layers, I feel. Like you know, the time we had floods in Mumbai and we had to stay back in the office. There was a pregnant girl in the office, one of my staff, and I thought, if this girl goes into delivery pains, what am I to do? I know nothing about delivering babies. The roads were full of water. We had to stay with no light in the office. In the morning when the water sort of stopped flowing furiously, we got out, and I dropped everybody by my car. On the roads we saw-- children's bags, floating chappals, a body of a buffalo, a dog-- so many things. There were people carrying their children on their shoulders because the children had spent the night in school. The water was still knee-high. And through all these-- broken trees, and everything, I came back home. I opened my door and went to the balcony to see whether water had flowed into the study. We have a small pot of lily, kept at the window sill. Very rarely does that lily bloom, it's a yellow lily. That day it had five flowers!

Life is layered like that. And even if I write about this just like this, people would think that I add on layers. Life is layered; it's just a question of looking at it like that.

MJ: In other words, you're only being realistic?

CSL: Yes, I'm keeping my eyes open and seeing what is around me. And not connecting it with a thread or anything. Because everything is disconnected in any case. I see in fragments, and we're also in fragments, not complete, whole people in that sense.

MJ: But don't your readers expect some sort of an end to the stories?

CSL: I don't know, I can only give them what I can. I don't even know who my readers are [Laughs].

MJ: They don't get back to you, give you feedback?

CSL: They don't really get back except to criticize me.

MJ: Your stories like 'Vaganam', feel like a series of video clips. And in your 'A Saffron Coloured

Ganesh's the seascape is like a series of snapshots.

CSL: I live near the sea, and the sea and mountains have great fascination for me. I'm also fascinated by cinema. My work is so visual also because I learned dance. In dance you have to express yourself and make sure that people understand what you show on your face. And some of the great artists like Balasaraswati have taken this *abhinayam* to an extent where-- they have a song *Krishna nee begane baro*, calling little Krishna and Balasaraswati has done some extremely different expressions for that one line. She would expand on it, and each expansion would be an image. You can recall Krishna in a cradle, you can recall Krishna eating mud and the mother protesting, and then slowly, Krishna would grow and become a man and then the *gopis* would call him. This fascinated me, that through words you can create images. And the fact that when we listen to certain expansion and elaboration of *raga* in music, that music creates images in you. It takes you to places, like certain kinds of music makes you feel you're in the mountains, and some as if you're floating on water, that kind of a thing. That and this love for cinema-- I feel they're all combined in somehow becoming part of my writing.

MJ: You dance, you do music, you sing. Do you paint also?

CSL: No, I don't. There are two things I do very badly; one is poetry, the other painting. I can't draw for nuts [Laughs]. Although I love painting, I can't. That's why I do it with words.

MJ: And your colours. All your writings have a vibrant multi-colour. Say, in 'In a Forest a Deer' a pillow case is 'dark blue and yellow and black'. Even a notebook in 'A Forest' is 'camel yellow'. Do they play more part than just description? Are they symbolic also?

CSL: They're not symbolic. I don't use symbols in my stories. Indian life is full of colours, you know. Like for any auspicious function we use *haldi*. Then we use *kumkum*. And the kind of South Indian silk saris—I'm fascinated by the colours and the kind of weaving that they do. And there's also another strange thing. Since I was a dark child, my mother never bought dark coloured clothes for me. I was always made to wear pale colours. And I hated pale colours. It was only when I was twenty six that I broke into colours in my life. Once, I wanted to borrow a sari from a friend of mine. And she only had a black sari with silver border. I told her "How can I wear this?" It was a black sari and I'm dark. She said, "Just wear it, I don't have anything else." I wore that black sari, and everybody said "This looks beautiful on you." It was then that I broke into purples and peacock blues and other colours. Until then I was wearing cream colour, light mauve, and things like that. When I broke into colours, the colours came into my stories also.

MJ: Interesting. Please talk about your music some more. In your real life as well as in your fiction.

CSL: Actually I can't separate my life from my fiction. My mother was a musician. And I started learning very early in life. My mother also played the *veena*. I learned it later but not much. For a long time I continued to sing. Around 1974 I lost my voice.

MJ: How did that happen?

CSL: When I was teaching in the school there were some sixty students in the class and I had to shout. Whenever someone asked me to sing I was always ready. I had an extremely resonant voice just like my mother's. My mother sang till she died at 93. When I returned from the small town I went to learn music from a teacher in Chennai. She had told me, "You're able to learn fast but your voice is very thick." I was surprised. So I checked with one of the best ENT specialists in Bangalore. He told me "You've got nodules in your vocal cords which can be removed with microscopic surgery, to get back your singing voice." I didn't want to lose my singing voice, so I agreed to the surgery. Much later, another doctor from abroad told me that after surgery like that you have to rest your voice for six months. I didn't know it, and the doctor also hadn't told me. When I started teaching I lost my voice entirely. I underwent that surgery to get back my singing voice and I lost even my speaking voice! For a long time I went into deep depression for not being able to sing. Because singing was very important for me. I didn't have great knowledge about music but I loved music. Then a great guru told me, "You can't sing but nothing stops you from listening to music. Also, in Tamil, they say 'You may lose your voice but you always have your fingers'. That means you can play an instrument. I did try to learn *veena*-- earlier also I learnt a little bit from my mother and others. But I couldn't pursue it further because I was at a difficult stage of my life. But the music that I love, it remained in my life. I still like to listen to music, and a lot of things I imagine in terms of music. So that kind of flows into my story.

MJ: It's in your story. And, 'A Movement, A Folder And Some Tears' is a very powerful story. Could you just talk about it, how it was brought out? And it's also a new format, with e-mails and things.

CSL: About the format, I don't specifically think about it. Sometimes when I think of a story, the kind of format also comes. The story is about us who were part of a movement and how our lives changed during the movement. And how at a particular point we felt that we were not able to pass on our passion to the younger generation. How the younger generation has got into the corporate world entirely. I actually thought of this story when we went to protest the Gujarat riots. We were all sitting there, Mrinal Gore had come. Pushpa Bhawe was there, and a whole lot of others of the old generation. We were on hunger strike at Flora Fountain. We were all part of the women's movement. Very few from the next generation were there. Maybe daughters were brought along. On the same road we had taken out *morchas*. And the same group now sat on a small space chalked out for this hunger strike. It was a strange frustration we felt. There were so many passionate talks that we had had and we brought so much into our own lives. Many of us had started documentation centres, because we felt that this movement has to be documented. And here we were, you know, the same group, with a generation that was older than us, who had all gone through so many *morchas*. Now we couldn't talk too strongly about the Gujarat riots. There were some from our own generation outside the movement to whom we could not talk because they held such conservative views. They thought that our protest about the Gujarat riots was-- some people even told me that it was anti-national! And how this poison of communalism has seeped into our lives! Even into the lives of some people very close to us. This story was born from that sense of shock and surprise. How could this happen while all of us were awake and aware? How did this happen? That kind of a feeling. That story came out of that.

MJ: In the author's note of your Vodafone-Crossword award winning collection, you've suggested that you're a compulsive writer [Laughs]. You didn't say that, but 'we write on and on', like that. What is brewing at present? What can the readers of your English translations expect in the near future?

CSL: The last collection of short stories I brought out is currently being translated by Lakshmi Holmstorm. Penguin will publish it this year. It's called *Fish in a Dwindling Lake*. And I'm working on another short story collection which may be published this year also

MJ: How do you write, how do you manage to get time with all the other work you're doing?

CSL: I write early in the morning or late at night. But when I'm working on a story I can write any time. But I don't write every day, and I'm not a prolific writer. I consider SPARROW a very important part of my life. So I give a lot of time to SPARROW, and I also feel that as a writer, it is very important for me to introduce younger Tamil writers to the readers. When I started writing, there was nobody to introduce me to the readers. There are many good writers and poets in Tamil now, who deserve to be introduced. So I read them and write about them. I'm not a society lady, so I don't have to attend parties and all. So there is plenty of time to write.

MJ: You deliberately keep off parties?

CSL: Parties take a lot of time. But since I choose to do this, I don't have time to do other things or socialize in a different way. I restrict those kinds of activities so that there is time to do this.

MJ: Thanks a lot, Lakshmi.