

In Conversation

Carving a Niche in Indian Horror Writing: An Interview with Neil D'Silva

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Neil D'Silva, has carved an irreplaceable niche for himself, that too in a short span of less than a decade, amongst the writers dedicatedly contributing to the genre of horror fiction writing in India. He started as a self-published writer in 2015 with *Maya's New Husband*, the sequel to which came out in 2021 as *The Birth of the Death*. Horror became his forte; his second novel *Pishacha* (2017) was a supernatural love story, followed by *Yakshini* (2019), impelled by the Nirbhaya incident, and *Baak: A Desi Horror Story* (2021), based on an Assamese folk lore. Another of his full-length novel, *What the Eyes Don't See* (2020) is accessible on Wattpad. Five collections of his short stories – *The Evil Eye and the Charm* (2015), *Bound in Love* (2015), *Right Behind You* (2018) and *Ringa Ringa Roses* (2020) are offered in hard book format and *Desi Horror Stories* is free to read on Wattpad. There are also two volumes of Micro Horror tales and four batches of bite-sized Horrors d' Oeuvres available through his website. He has additionally co-authored two non-fictional works – *Haunted: Real-life Encounters with Ghosts and Spirits* (2019) with Jay Alani and *The Spirits Talk to Me* (2020) with Sarbajeet Mohanty, both of whom are renowned paranormal investigators. The instant success of his first book initially attracted publishing house like Rupa and later Penguin Random House, Hachette India and HarperCollins to commission his work. Some of his novels and short stories have been selected for screen adaptations too. He, deservedly, finds a place in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Indian Writing in English* published in September, 2023.

RD: Neil, you had a long-standing and steady, rather flourishing, profession which you gave up to follow your calling as a writer. For how long had you been holding back your desire and what compelled you to finally

take up writing?

ND: I was introduced to the world of stories in a profound manner in my earliest years. My father, Philip, freelanced as a sub-titlist for movies, from Hindi to English, for the overseas markets. He would receive bound dialogue scripts of the movies, which he would then type out in both languages on his Remington typewriter, and I, even as a child, would sit beside him, fascinatedly, as his fingers flew on the keys. He would at times ask me to read out the dialogues so he could type faster, and even ask me to translate some of the scenes when he wasn't around. We thus worked on some of the biggest blockbusters of Hindi cinema in those years (late 1980s, early 1990s). This was my education in story and scriptwriting.

After my postgraduation (M.Sc., Organic Chemistry), I started a coaching class business. This was in May 1998, and for 18 years, I taught thousands of students. I made money, bought my first house (I was 27 then), married, started a family, and partook of materialistic luxuries whenever I could afford the time. However, this consumed all of my youthful years. Though I had immense love for teaching, and still do, slowly a sense of discontentment began growing in me. I realized that I was a creative person at heart. Even during my teaching years, I'd sometimes take out a book and pen and scribble stuff. I'd send short stories to publications, though I never won anything. I even freelanced as a content writer at nights, just to feed the writing bug inside me.

After I hit my mid-thirties, I questioned myself whether I saw my entire life in those premises of my coaching class, just regurgitating school and college syllabus to new batches of students year after year. Initially I thought this was a passing phase, a midlife crisis, and I needed to focus on the career that was paying me so well. But that was not to be. The discomfort only grew, till it began gnawing at me from within.

In the late summer of 2014, my wife Anita and I were holidaying in Goa with our kids. One night when the kids were asleep and we were sitting on bamboo chairs overlooking the moonlit beach, drinks in hand, I spoke to Anita about the yearning I had for over a year then. I don't remember the conversation, just two bits of it. One was me telling her something like, "I want to leave something behind for posterity." (Pardon my immodesty; I was probably too drunk at that point.) And the other was she telling me, "If you want to do it, do it now."

That was it. That night, I did not go to bed, but hacked away at the outline

of a story I had in mind. As the story took shape on my old laptop, I felt that I was onto something good! And I wrote for the next few days, even after returning to Mumbai. It was the Diwali vacation period and I had a break from the coaching classes. I self-edited the manuscript, got a cover designer, and self-published the book on Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing. And thus, *Maya's New Husband* was born. It was January 3, 2015, and I was 39 then.

Maya's New Husband became an instant bestseller. It hit Amazon India horror category #1 on the next day itself, and stayed there for around 2 years. People wrote to me about the book. The reviews poured in. A literary agent contacted me. And in March, I received my first of many screen options for the book.

I then decided to pursue writing for good. In a few months, we took the decision of shutting down the coaching class and focus on my writing career. I don't miss the coaching class now, but I do miss the teaching at times.

RD: Of all the genres, you chose writing horror. Why horror? What drew you towards this genre?

ND: The fascination for horror grew in me as a kid too. Firstly, I need to put it out here that I grew up in a highly liberal family, even as far as our reading habits were concerned. Dad's humongous collection of books had books of all genres from all over the world. And I had free access to most of them. Reading such a wide variety of genres shaped me up as a kid. And yet, my interests were always drawn to the dark tales. I was an introverted, cocooned, sheltered kid, and perhaps it was this reason why I felt more at home in the gothic chambers and insidious forests in children's horror books such as the *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. I was introduced to Edgar Allan Poe quite early on, and I fell in love with his short but terribly scary stories. Another major influence was Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Though not horror per se, but parts of the book about Lemuel Gulliver's travels to lands filled with thumb-sized beings, giants, monsters, filled me with dread. It was only a matter of time before I picked up (and devoured) *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and all those classics. To add, among Dad's regular clients for translation were the Ramsays. All the cult movies of the Ramsay brothers were translated in our house, and I watched their song-books (replete with pictures from the movie) with awe.

When I took up my pen to write much later in life, the story that evolved in my mind was dark and gory. I never stopped to think about genres. Let me take you back to 2014, when I debuted as an author — there was no Indian horror author on the scene then. Romance and mythology were the two big genres. But I wasn't writing to be a commercial success. I was writing to satiate that voracious fire within me, and hence perhaps I spilled out all my childhood phobias of loneliness, serial killers, and gruesome murders into *Maya's New Husband*. It wasn't a plan for me to write horror. It was just predestined. (And I was also born on Halloween at midnight, to boot!)

RD: Were there any early influences, events or writers, that propelled you to take up the genre of horror writing?

ND: Well, as I mentioned, my biggest influences among writers were Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, and many other American horror writers who were making a name for themselves around the 80s and 90s, such as Stephen King, Anne Rice, Dean Koontz, and Clive Barker. Speaking of Indian horror, there wasn't much literature that I read (or could read, because there weren't many Indian horror writers that I knew growing up), but I was greatly influenced by many screen works. These included the entire legion of movies from the Ramsay Brothers' oeuvre, early movies of Ram Gopal Verma such as *Raat*, *Bhoot*, and *Kaun?*, and later shows such as *Zee Horror Show* and *Aahat*. To digress, I do feel we have lost that touch with traditional Indian horror in recent times.

Another major influence was my own personality and characteristics. I was an introvert, a seeker of loneliness, and a highly creative kid. My imaginations were wild. I would speak to myself when alone. I would visualize things that didn't exist. This wasn't because of any trauma but it was just the way I was, and the fact that the 80s and the 90s were lonely times for most kids like me. We had no distractions, no ways to entertain ourselves except books and the infrequent times with the television. I'd be alone at home in the afternoons, inventing my own games, reading books, conjuring stuff out of my mind; and in the evenings after the regular games, friends would sit and swap stories. These were often horror stories, mostly stemming from the rumour that our colony was built on an ancient burial ground.

Horror always stayed with me in its many forms. I would not say I was terrified of it (creeped, maybe), but there was this inexplicable fascination that drew me to the genre again and again.

RD: What is the most fascinating, if we can use this word for horror, thing about writing horror and what have you found most challenging?

ND: For me, it is always facing my own fears. I find that aspect of horror bone-chillingly cathartic. I, now that is a paradox, but let me explain with an example. If there was one thing that was mind-numbingly terrifying for me, it was human death. Even if there was a natural death in the colony, it would disturb me for days. I would not stay in a room alone in the aftermath, worried that the ghost of the person, or the dead body itself, would scramble up to me and take me along. When I watched the movie *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* as a child, which was a satirical comedy, I was actually terrified. There's this sequence where Satish Shah's character is in a coffin, dead, but the coffin keeps gliding by itself on the streets. I had no sleep for several nights, thinking the coffin would slide into my room. But when I wrote *Maya's New Husband*, death was the central theme. The book focuses on a serial killer who uses the goriest ways to kill. Despite all my childhood fears, I went all out. I described mutilations, necromancy, even cannibalism in detail. It petrified me, it disgusted me. But at the same time, I felt a new, bolder person growing within. I won't say I am purged of all those fears now, but it has certainly made me less terrified of them.

RD: You have alluded to occult practices in *Maya's New Husband* and mythology in *Pishacha*, and *Yakshini*. Could you enlighten us regarding these hallmarks of most of your oeuvres?

ND: I am by no measure an expert of occult practices or mythology but I am quite fascinated by both these subjects. My earliest initiation to Indian mythology was through *Amar Chitra Katha*. I was perhaps the biggest buyer and collector of them! I still have more than 200 ACK comics in my collection. Reading these books with their beautiful illustrations and impeccable language shaped my childhood in a big way. I was besotted (for want of a better term) by the heroic acts of the characters, the different worlds – of the Devas, the humans, and the asuras – and the stories themselves. Then I was smitten by the fact that these stories aren't just stories, but they are the part of a much larger universe, and every little bit of it is intertwined in this larger cosmic truth which governs every aspect of Indian culture.

I was introduced to the occult worlds by certain shows on television that gained popularity in the 80s. I remember *Maano Ya Na Maano* vividly. Then there was this show named *Aghori* which I would avidly watch. They told me of the dark side of human behavior, of the paranormal and

supernatural, of the entities that live in parallel with humankind, mostly aloof but at times impacting our lives. My imaginable mind took wings. I began to explore Indian occult in a bigger way.

It was a natural progression to include themes of both mythology and the Indian occult (I believe at times these are inseparable), in my stories. *Maya's New Husband* has the core theme of the Aghora. My bestselling book *Yakshini* has a Yakshini as the central character but it also has a Gandharva and the description of their abode in Alakapuri under the domain of Kubera. I have also written a book titled *Pishacha*. Such subjects resonate with me. I love to imbibe Indian themes of both mythology and folklore into my stories, even if the characters are contemporary. Perhaps this has become my trademark style of writing.

RD: You have tried your hands at both, fiction and nonfiction. Which do you find more stimulating?

ND: Fiction!

Fiction has more potential to entertain, and I don't mean just the readers. While plotting fiction, the whole world is open to you, quite literally. I can bring my characters to life and make them play in whatever way I want to. I also have an abstract notion of a potential reader in mind, and I try to visualize how my reader would receive certain aspects of the story. From the worldbuilding to the actual writing, and even the editing process, I find writing fiction much more satisfying.

Nonfiction has its own lure, though. It's greatest attraction for me is that it allows me a much greater scope for research and teaches me so much. The writing challenge in it is to write in a neutral voice. It is quite easy for the author's bias to seep in when writing nonfiction. Keeping it out of the narrative while still keeping it interesting is a fun challenge.

But if I had a fiction project and a nonfiction project to choose from, I'd go for the former.

RD: Can you let us have an insight into your creative process?

ND: I am not a very disciplined writer, to be honest. I can only write when inspiration strikes me. I don't have a muse, nor do I believe in it, but I need to have a strong compelling thought to begin writing. When that happens, which actually is quite often, I keep everything aside and start with a brief

outlining process. My outline is often quite threadbare; I don't infuse it with many details, just a few bullet points about how I see the story going forward. With just this meagre ammo, I start writing the first chapter. Now, this is where I truly begin to understand if the story is worth putting time and effort into, and, most importantly, if I would be able to do justice to it. Once I am invested in the process, I write at a stretch till the first draft is complete. I regard my first draft as an extended outline — that's me telling me the story — and I'll work it over repeatedly till I have the story I wish to give my readers.

Over the years, I have taken to the habit of traveling to write. I book myself a room in a hotel or a cottage or some accommodation like that in a small town that's not as distracting as Mumbai is, and take my trusty MacBook Air there to write my story. I usually stay in these lonely locations for 10-15 days at a stretch, working dedicatedly towards one story and getting the draft ready. Of course, it helps from the horror perspective as well. The more secluded the place is, the more terrified I get, and the more terrified I get, the better I write! Well, there have been instances when I have been writing in the wee hours of the morning and my mind has played nasty tricks on me, making me shut down my laptop and go to bed!

RD: What do you do when, while writing a story, another story idea pops up in your mind?

ND: Yes, this has happened on multiple occasions. It's human tendency to be distracted by the lure of a shiny new object even if you already have an older version. It's the same with story ideas. I deal with it depending on how seductive this lure is. If the lure is mild — which often means I have a story idea flash with just some beats — then I'll write it down somewhere and park it till I finish the current one. But if the flash is too strong, and if it already comes to me as a somewhat developed idea, then I would keep aside the current story for a while and write the new one. I know this is not a great writing practice, but I already told you I am not a very disciplined writer.

And I have a strong example to justify this. *Yakshini*. The concept of *Yakshini* hit me when I was already writing another story. I chucked that one to write *Yakshini*, which I wrote in 21 days, and the rest as we know is history! (I am still writing the story I gave up at that time, though.)

RD: You are adept at writing novels in book form and your work is available through virtual medium, like Wattpad, also. Are the writing tech-

niques different for both?

ND: Not really. I used the same process to write. I believe a story must be told the best way we can, the medium where it will be put up does not matter too much. But, having said that, there were a few considerations I had to make for the book I wrote for Wattpad, which was *What the Eyes Don't See*. For one, I needed to keep the chapters shorter. My typical chapter is around 4000 words, but for my Wattpad novel, I kept it at around 2000 words. Secondly, the hooks at the end of each chapter were very important. When reading virtually, it is so easy to browse away to another website after a chapter. So, I needed to keep my readers going on. In a physical book, this is not a big issue because readers who have a copy of a book will most probably read it anyway. A third minor change I had to make was to keep the language snappier. No verbose language, no complicated philosophies, not much subtext. Virtual readers mostly read books for entertainment. They want good stories, and I considered it my duty to keep the story at the forefront.

RD: Four of your works – *Maya's New Husband*, *Yakshini* (2019), the story "The Clay Mother" from *Ringa Ringa Roses* (2020) and *Haunted* have been selected for screen adaptations. Have you contributed to writing the screenplay for them? How is writing for the screen different from writing a novel?

ND: Yes, I will be writing the screen adaptations for a few of these, and in different capacities for each book. However, as I also have a few other screen projects going on at the moment, I might be able to only contribute in the capacity of providing inputs or being present at storyboard discussions when things begin to roll.

I wrote the screen treatment for *Yakshini* in 2019 when it was being made into a daily TV show by a major channel. The show didn't happen because of COVID being one of the reasons, but I did get to learn the process up close. My biggest learning was that screenplays follow a very different structure from novel drafts. Since it is a visual medium, a lot of the storytelling is done through the set-up of the scene, which means the scene needs to focus more on the plot development. Descriptions are done away with. Characters have to be detailed much more than in a novel because there are many attributes that will show up in a visual medium which won't in a book, and I am not talking only of their physical form, but also of something like their involuntary habits which the actor might wish to portray – such as, does she bite her nails when she is nervous? does she

bow to a deity as she passes by a temple? Such detailing becomes part of the screenwriting in subsequent drafts.

Having said that, I ensured that the core essence of my story wasn't changed. I wanted Meenakshi to stay Meenakshi as I had written her.

RD: It might be difficult to choose, but of all your works, which do you hold close to your heart?

ND: There are two books that are closest to my heart.

Maya's New Husband, of course, because it was my first novel. It gave me a new birth, as an author. It gave me my readers. It made up my mind that I could do this – write – and earn a livelihood out of it. But the bigger reason is because I truly and very substantially enjoyed writing this book. Being my first book, my mind was a complete blank slate, a tabula rasa, and I could pepper it with whatever thoughts I had. *Maya's New Husband* is stark and gritty. It has gore, it has violence, it has sexually overt scenes, it has a lot of controversial content. It might not be my best book in terms of language, but it was my uncensored and undiluted best.

Then there is *Yakshini*. This one catapulted me to the bigger league. I was publishing books on Amazon KDP until then. *Yakshini* was taken up by India's biggest publisher, Rupa Publications. The book did well too, and brought me further commissioned deals from Penguin Random House, Hachette, HarperCollins, among others. Regarding the writing process too, *Yakshini* was nearly a miracle. I wrote it in a fugue state, almost at a stretch in 21 days as I mentioned earlier, but the most uncanny thing was this all-consuming feeling I had that someone was actually narrating the story to me and I was just writing it. I had the absolute feeling of being a scribe for a story that came from an unknown place. I can't truly explain that feeling in words despite working with words being my livelihood and sustenance.

RD: Your work depicts strong women characters. Any particular person or driving force/ inspiration behind them?

ND: From a storyteller's point of view, I have always found female characters compelling. I find that women have a wider emotional spectrum than men. Their actions are driven by nuanced thought processes, which take into account so many more factors than for men. Women think ahead and plan and weigh the consequences of an action rather than giving way

to their impulses. And the cliché is true – one does not really know what women want! I believe in this more as I write more.

All these observations come from the strong women that have been part of my life. My mother and grandmother and even my aunts were all very resolute women, firm in their decisions, level-headed in their actions, refined in their speaking, and also had tender loving hearts at the same time. In my family, women have been very instrumental in taking decisions whether it is buying the house or planning a family event or even the day-to-day mechanics of the home, even while also working outside the house. The same is true of my wife and I see signs of these traits in my teenage daughter already. How then can I not incorporate strong women characters in my stories? They are but a reflection of what I have myself experienced.

RD: Now, you cannot skip this question. Have you ever personally experienced any supernatural experience in your life?

ND: Have I actually seen a ghost? No, that has never happened. Or at least I do not know if I did. But I have an active imagination and a mind that's open to notions that most others would dismiss as highly improbable if not impossible. When I shut myself in hotel rooms in nearly desolate regions to write my horror novels, I have had experiences that I cannot put my finger on. While in the thick of my writing (in the wee hours of the morning), lights have flickered, I have got unexplained cold chills and smelled funny odors all of a sudden. Once I felt I saw a tall figure standing in my room, watching me as I write, just out of my peripheral vision. It seemed all too real at the moment, but when time passes you begin to wonder if that wasn't just your imagination.

A friend of mine who is a paranormal investigator told me that I write horror with such passion that it riles up the spirits of the other world and they come to watch! I don't know if that's a comforting thought. I take it as a compliment, though. In that sense, he further told me, that I might be a psychic without knowing it. A lot of people who work with the paranormal tend to have a mental focus that is beyond the five known senses, and the more we live with the paranormal, the more it develops.

The only apparently direct (well, to put it that way) incident I had with a ghost – and this I say with a lot of skepticism – was when I saw my grandfather fifteen years after his death in a bank where I was struggling to get a home loan passed. The sighting of my grandfather (if it was in-

deed his spirit) helped in an almost miraculous manner as that particular loan got passed that day after around three months of severe trials and tribulations.

But the kind of encounters that they show in the movies — where a ghost conjures in a haunted location and scares the wits out of you — that is yet to happen. I keep my mind open.

RD: What is the scene of horror novels in India? How do you see the future of horror writing in India? Can it hold its ground at the international level?

ND: The horror literature scene in India is definitely on a major upswing. As I mentioned in a previous reply, there was no dedicated Indian English horror author when I started out in 2015, but now I can count as many as 40 authors who publish regularly. Even the visibility of the genre is increasing beyond books. Horror is a major genre for the OTT web-series, and some of these are book adaptations. My own books have scored screen adaptation deals. Apart from that, various podcasts have spawned of late which directly deal with the paranormal and supernatural subgenres. Several notable podcasters are also horror authors, such as Jay Alani and Sarbajeet Mohanty, both of whom I have co-authored books with. All of this indicates the increasing popularity of the horror genre in India.

We still have to work at the international level though. Indian horror is still to go beyond the borders like Korean and Japanese horror has done. This is slow progress. In my opinion, the thing lacking is quality. Our horror stories already derive from our rich folklore, but they need to stand the approval of the international audience in terms of story-building, character development, and nuances of language. This will take time, but with each book that we collectively put out, we are getting better. We need a major breakthrough horror novel in India itself, which will propel the genre to superstardom like Chetan Bhagat's books did for college romance in the 2000s. Once that happens, perhaps the genre will gain the confidence to break out on foreign shores as well.