

East Meets West—the nature of human identity

Lexington author imagines the *political sublime*



Dr. Ashmita Khasnabish

By Laurie Atwater

In Lexington there is a female scholar who likes to visit Walden Pond and write under the trees. When she is there in the heart of colonial America, she could be transporting herself back to her native India where she had the habit of studying by the window and dreaming of far-off lands. Or perhaps she is at the library on the campus of Bowling Green University in Ohio where she studied for her PhD. You can be assured that wherever Dr. Ashmita Khasnabish finds herself in the world, her mind is traveling across borders of academic disciplines, of cultural, religious and philosophical thought, of gender divides and psychological constructs.

Dr. Khasnabish is a multi-disciplinary thinker and scholar who has traveled a very interesting road to her current life as a lecturer at Boston University, a mother and author of two books: *Jouissance as Ananda: Indian Philosophy, Feminist Theory, and Literature* and her most recent *Humanitarian Identity and the Political Sublime*.

I visited with Dr. Ashmita Khasnabish recently and we discussed her new book and the evolution her life as a feminist writer and thinker.

As a young girl in India, Khasnabish was greatly influenced by her father. He was a statistician by profession, but Khasnabish notes that “he is a poet and a philosopher.” Now eighty-three, her father spent a good deal of time with the young Ashmita attending seminars and talks on philosophy and literature and always took her to the famous Indian Philosophical Congress.

As a student at the very prestigious Bethune Collegiate School and Lady Brabourne College, she ranked 9th among three million students in the West Bengal. “I was ‘first girl,’” Dr. Khasnabish explains. “I was the ‘first girl’ from grade 1 through grade 11. The students who have that distinction go to the best university which was Calcutta University. Good students usually go on to study

“I think of myself as a universal human being.”

Dr. Ashmita Khasnabish

science. But my father wanted me to study English literature so that I could carry on his passion.”

And carry on she did. Ashmita graduated from Calcutta University with Masters Degrees in English literature and Linguistics, the romantic little girl who dreamt of other places left India and came to the United States in 1989.

“I had that little girls’ dream that I was nurturing all those years,” she explains. In India it is almost expected that academically gifted students will travel abroad to further their studies. She followed her ambition to Bowling Green State University in Ohio where she earned her Ph.D.

While finishing her dissertation in 1994 she met her husband—they married and moved to Canada where he was working at the time. “We went to live in Ottawa, Canada,” she explains. “But I wanted to come back to the United States.” In two years time, they moved to Boston and she was invited to join the staff at Brown University as a visiting scholar. She stayed at Brown from 1996-2006 at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women.

“I fell in love with this country,” Dr. Khasnabish says. “I love libraries. In India you can’t take many books out. There is something good about this country. Here there is a respect for privacy and I like that. I grew up in a city in a very tiny house—I never had a study of my own. I like winter—I like nature, I love trees!”

Since coming to the United States, Dr. Khasnabish has progressively become immersed in gender identity issues—first at the Pembroke Center and then through the Brandeis University Women’s Studies Research Center and the Stone Center for Women at Wellesley College.

Khasnabish acknowledges a huge debt to the feminists who have embraced her at these academic institutions. As a post-colonial Indian woman who studied English literature extensively and lived in the United States, she found herself looking at the notions of identity formation through a number of lenses

and then blurring the focus across traditional lines to create a new way of looking at identity.

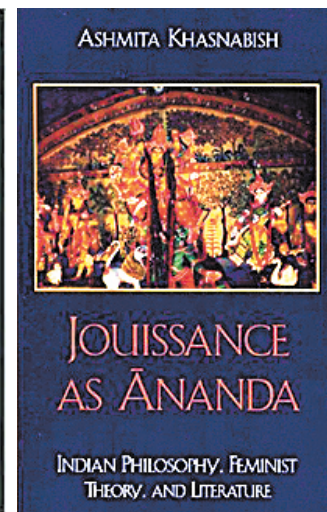
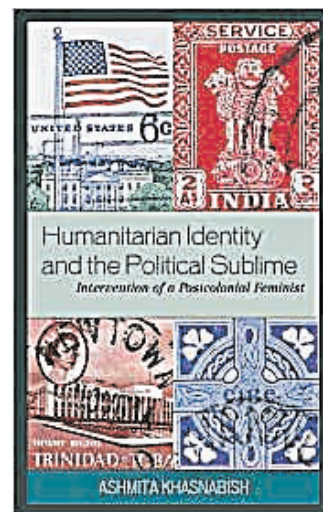
In her first book, *Jouissance as Ananda: Indian Philosophy, Feminist Theory, and Literature* Dr. Khasnabish explores feminist theory through the writings of French feminist and philosopher Luce Irigaray known for her theory of feminine *jouissance* (which was a response and repudiation of Lacan’s definition) and the Indian theory of *Ananda*, or attainment of a higher consciousness. This higher state is a purified state which equalizes emotion and reason, is a state of ego-transcendence. “Why do we have gender hierarchy? If you go beyond ego there is no discussion of gender,” Dr. Khasnabish says.

Expanding upon her first effort in building a bridge from Western to Eastern philosophies, Dr. Khasnabish has released her second book *Humanitarian Identity and the Political Sublime* which delves further into canons of western philosophy and the cornerstones of feminist thought, to blaze a new philosophical trail that cuts through gender, culture, religion and politics and invites the reader to imagine a different way to see ourselves and others.

“With my second book my objective was to embrace the American audience not only in the academic world but in general,” Khasnabish says. “Political sublime has the connection with my previous book where I talk about feminine divine. In addition to being an academician I always have the desire to change the world—I don’t know why. If in any way I can contribute to community and to society I would like to do it.”

This desire to communicate and relate the idea of higher consciousness, sublime or divine in a way that would embrace aspects of Western thought and feminist theory—motivated Dr. Khasnabish’s thought and study over several years.

Dr. Khasnabish taught a course called *Shaping of Western Culture* at Lesley College,



in 2007 while she was a Visiting Research Associate at Brandeis. “I have always had a lot of interest in Enlightenment philosophers—especially Kant...I knew him before but did not look at him in this perspective. Kant’s favorite term is *sublime*,” she says. Though Kant’s view of the sublime is quite sexist—in it in it Dr. Khasnabish finds a basis for building what she calls a “new enlightenment philosophy”—the *political sublime*. In her scholarly book she writes: “The “political sublime” is a framework in which the psychic merges with the material.”

“I wanted to create a way to bring the sublime into everyday life. The expression—*political sublime*—I coined this myself, because it means practicing the sublime in everyday life.”

The book is divided into three parts and explores a vast territory encompassing western philosophers, feminist theorists, psychologists and literary works. She then focuses her attention on the Indian philosophers Amartya Sen and Sri Aurobindo.

In part one Dr. Khasnabish explores identity formation, the tension between the material and the spiritual and sexual inequality. Part two discusses colonization—the inequality between the colonist and the colonized and its similarity to the subjugation between the sexes. Both conditions thwart the formation of a truly transcendent identity. Finally, in part three, Dr. Khasnabish lays out her vision of the *political sublime*.

Ultimately, the book is a prescription vision of a world in which we could transcend our differences and embrace our shared humanity. Of her vision she writes, “I strove to sketch a philosophy which teaches us how we could live on earth peacefully with each other as human beings being focused on our humanness...”