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 [back](#)
 [home page](#)

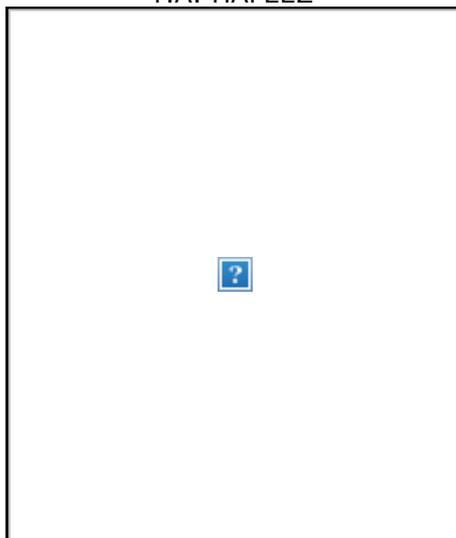
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Literary Review

IN CONVERSATION

Speaking through her work

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"The neem is the miracle tree, the tree of blessings; it dates back to dreamtime. I chose it as the leitmotif of my novel as it is a symbol for India," says **INEZ BARANAY**, author of **Neem Dreams**. The Madras Book Club and the Madras University's English Department had organised a reading of the novel recently. Four characters and their relationship with this ancient tree of wisdom make up the Australian writer's book, which is a critique of globalisation and the imperialism that exploits traditional knowledge systems.

Neem Dreams is Baranay's seventh book. Her earlier works — six novels and one non-fiction — include **Beyond Careers**, **The Edge of Bali** and **Sheila Power**.

Baranay teaches creative writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast. Excerpts from an interview with **KAUSALYA SANTHANAM**.

How did the idea of the neem as the central motif of the novel come to you?

IT came as an organising principle. I had heard of the neem in Queensland where I live and which is hot and dry like Chennai; there is an NGO called Neem Peace that promotes the use of neem. The name appeared to me as the perfect image.

Do you feel very strongly about globalisation and patents? Have these concerns been expressed in your earlier books as well? Is there an element of activism in this?

Globalisation is the predominant symbol of our times. In my previous book, **Bali's Edge**, I had touched on ecology. But it is specifically introduced in **Neem Dreams**. In the mid-1990s, when I began writing the novel, there was a controversy over the patent issue and the appropriation of traditional knowledge systems. I thought it was an ideal way of exploring the other themes in the novel. As for activism, this is my work and a writer speaks through her work.

Is there not too much emphasis on the dirt and the excrement in the country?

I don't think so. We look at it and move on. For a foreigner, it would be artificial not to dwell on it, for, it is a part of his or her experience. There is also the other side. Things turn and look different...

Does India elude the foreigner?

That may be partly true but it is true for Indian writers too. There is no one India or, you can't know all of India. It refuses to be fixed in a theme. And if you are a foreigner, you are always one.

But you seem to know her sights and sounds, and are able to capture the flavours...

I have been here eight times since 1980. I came to India first as a tourist. I became a yoga student of B.K.S. Iyengar. I knew that I wanted to write a novel about India. But it is such a huge country. Rather than rushing from one place to another, I chose to halt at one place for many weeks to get to know it well. I have travelled in different strata of society and sought out various people — NGOs, women studying various medical systems, entrepreneurs and others.

How did you conceive the idea of weaving together the experiences of four characters?

To manage four characters is difficult. But they insisted on being there and evolving and they refused to kill themselves. All four had a kind of reality as people, as characters. Each had a different dream and different quests coming to the neem — as eco-scientist, capitalist and so on.

Does the novel have a target reader?

Every book appeals to a certain section of readers. I am not pretending to be an Indian. It is a positive aspect of globalisation that we live in hybrid cultures. Chennai and Mumbai have more in common with other capitals of the world than perhaps two disparate places in one country. I have more in common with Meenakshi (who is educated in the U.S. in the novel) than with many Australians. My western background is not as relevant as fusion and the circulatory energy between cultures. I do believe that nativity doesn't define us. As human beings we are capable of understanding each other and literature makes this possible.

Do you bring an Australian vision to your work?

My parents, originally from Hungary, were displaced people from Italy. After World War I, they happened to land up in Australia with a random throw of the dice. Italy is now just a name to me and being an Australian is only a twist of fate. There is the possibility of being at home everywhere and nowhere. I became an Australian only by leaving the country, when people asked, "What are you? Where do you come from?"

How is the response to the book in Australia?

I wanted the book to be published here. It had to be responded to in India. I've spent years immersing myself in this country and I can't expect Australians to react in the same way. They have the usual exotic images of India. I have a great love for this country. I don't think India has finished with me yet. I'll have to do another book on her but it will take some time.

Do you prefer the stream of consciousness technique for your novels?

I don't use that terminology, as it seems to mean words that flow without discipline. I'm a slow and painful writer. I don't over-explain or doggedly point out how this thought leads to that. Each character in my novel speaks in various voices. This is my seventh book and they are all different.

How satisfactory is the denouement?

Without being mystical, I should say the characters take over. Pandora is driven by political passion and a great desire to do something different. I see an effective opposition to this phenomenon of globalisation. Each person's action is important. It's not for me to tell people what to do. All I can do is explain ideas and present them with clarity and understanding. The final image is of the tree — everlasting and abiding.

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[go to top](#)