

Postcolonial Writings and Metaphors: The Tailor's Needle

Dr. Janmejy K Tiwari

Department of English & MEL

University of Allahabad

Allahabad

Interview of Professor Lakshmi Raj Sharma (LRS) with Janmejy Tiwari(JT)

April 07, 2013, Sunday

*On April 07, 2013, I had a meeting with the teacher and author, Lakshmi Raj Sharma, one who is so very difficult to talk to outside the classroom. He hardly ever gives you a private sitting. After I requested him several times, he finally agreed to meet me at his residence and that for a maximum of forty minutes. On reaching there, however, I found him in an unusually friendly and talkative mood. He had probably decided that he would not be like his traditional, reserved self. What follows is my interview with him, an event which left me thinking for days about his novel, *The Tailor's Needle*.*

JT —Thanks Sir, for agreeing to give me your precious time. This is my first experience as an interviewer so please forgive me for anything that goes amiss.

LRS—You are welcome Janmejy. Be confident and comfortable. There is always a first time for everyone. Within an hour you will be one interview old. [we laugh] You are no less than anyone I have ever known. And you are actually helping me by interviewing me. So please go ahead and ask whatever comes to your mind.

JT—What made you a writer?

LRS—Since the early eighties I had been associated with the English play that was annually staged in the Muir Hostel of the University of Allahabad. In the early years I directed plays that were written by professional English or American dramatists. But I found that the audiences did not appreciate the plays much as they could not identify with the alien situations depicted in the plays. I then started writing plays myself with Indian settings, people and situations. These clicked and I got much acclaim as a playwright in this particular Hostel. It then struck me that if I could write plays I might as well try my hand at short stories. The result was *Marriages are made in India* (2001). The success of these stories encouraged me to write my first novel, *The Tailor's Needle*, first published in 2009. But another reason for my inclination to write was that I had been a quiet and shy person, dominated by my more talented brothers and sisters at home, then by my extravert fellow students, and finally by my colleagues in the English Department of the University of Allahabad. I was unconsciously struggling for years to say things that remained unsaid and were probably said in my fictional writings.

JT—What is the significance of the title *The Tailors Needle*?

LRS—In the metaphor of the title there is a suggestion that human beings, if they are to be successful, must be like the tailor's needle which passes through every material without making distinction. This suggests that for the right minded there is little difference between people of different races, genders, and nationalities and one must be able to play a role in connecting a variety of people without being judgmental. Thus there is a similarity between the successful citizen of the world and the tailor's needle. Of course, like the tailor's needle is pointed enough to penetrate any material, similarly one must have the keenness and penetrative perception that only a certain kind of education can give. In the novel, Yogendra is the tailor's needle and his sister, Maneka, is not. Yogendra therefore survives the most difficult situations where Maneka, in spite, of being more daring, fails.

JT—What motivated you to write such a grand novel?

LRS— Grand? [laughs] Certain stories that I had heard in my childhood were struggling to set themselves free from my mind. This novel incorporates a number of those stories fusing them together. Of course the stories have been fictionalized. You call it a grand novel, if that is true, it is perhaps because the people who are the chief characters in the novel are grand. Besides, the age in which the novel is set was much grander than ours, as I see it. The subject matter of the novel too relates to a viceroy of India, two maharajas, and an England returned barrister, Sir Saraswati, who outsmarts them all. And then there is his daughter, Maneka, who is a true daughter of her father—often even more impressive than him. Grand people make grand stories. But another reason for my writing this novel was that I was always fascinated by the line, “Nations are narrations”. I tended to see in the stories, which I heard in my childhood, a great deal of what made up India’s past. The phase in which the novel is set, 1917-1944, was a period markedly different to other periods in Indian history. I tried to capture in *The Tailor’s Needle* the flavour and pace of the life of that period.

JT—Magical Realism has been a major tool of postcolonial authors of India and abroad. What role does magical realism play in this novel?

LRS—When I wrote this novel I did not know that I would be accused of using magical realism. However, you are the third interviewer who has asked this question about magical realism. On second thoughts, it seems to me that magical realism has entered the world of the novel surreptitiously. I suppose that magical realism is an alternative way of presenting the reality, reality as perceived by an author of an intuitive bent of mind. The improbable and the mundane co-exist in several parts of *The Tailor’s Needle*, with the one entering into the arena of the other. A number of turning points in the novel’s plot are based on highly improbable happenings. But what is improbable for some need not be improbable for others. What is

magical for the Westerner might be quite natural or real for an Indian. It is probably a question of faith and belief for some—a question that is absent in the case of others. The narrative does not stop to ask the reader whether he believes in certain strange, magical happenings. For instance, there is a *sanyasi*, Swami Jeevananda, who can summon Sir Saraswati and his son to his *ashram* without their knowing it. He will leave his body in their presence and all this is predetermined by the *sanyasi*. Everything happens according to his plan and the story is told as though nothing very surprising has happened. Similarly, Maneka dismisses a *fakir* whose curse virtually ruins her life. This curse determines the second half of the novel's plot. There are other events of a similar nature in the novel which are told as if they were commonplace mundane happenings. My father used to narrate such stories in my childhood with a straight face and that seems to have entered my way of narrating events.

JT—Do you keep any literary theory in mind while writing a novel or short stories?

LRS—I definitely do not keep any theory in mind while writing fiction. For me it is an experience, an episode, a deeply felt conviction that needs to be translated into fiction. But being a teacher of literary theory some theoretical framework probably does enter my mind as I write. In the contemporary situation, it is difficult not to be affected by post-structural theories particularly by post-colonialism.

JT—Have you used mimicry in *The Tailor's Needle*?

LRS—I have not used it knowingly at all. Though now in retrospect it seems that the characters of the Viceroy and his mother could have something of what Bhabha describes through his theory of mimicry. They (particularly the Viceroy) reveal a desire to be above ridicule and mimicry. This could be a result of the fear that they are actually not above ridicule and criticism. I remember my childhood in Mirzapur where many Brits lived like lords and superiors. They would make fun of Indians and did not give us our due. They were

apprehensive that they could also come under the critical eye of Indians and therefore often lived away from Indians, meeting them in very formal ceremonies only. In a number of places like cubs and train compartments Indians were not allowed entry. This aspect of the colonizer has entered the pages of the novel. The Club Night scene and Shreemal's comic encounter with the ticket collector in the train are two instances. Making the Viceroy a clown could also have resulted from this childhood experience. But at the same time, I also wanted to go against Aristotle's views when I turned the Viceroy into a clown.

JT—Does your novel contain postcolonial discourse? If yes, what features of post-colonialism do you see in your novel?

LRS—I don't think that is a very fair question to put to me so directly. That could be the subject of a paper written by a researcher. I have never given much thought to this subject. But on the face of it there are questions of language. There are several places in the novel where both English and Indian characters ruminate on the use of the English language; some cannot help misusing the language. Then there are the questions of race, gender, education, enslavement, domination, and the annexation of territory belonging to the Maharaja of Kashinagar. It would be a good idea to quote a part of the second chapter of the novel to show postcoloniality. See from here [points of the page] on page 4, up to this point:

Lord Mortimer Edmund Griffin-Tiffin, His Excellency the Viceroy of India, sat in his thickly cushioned chair looking at the mirror with its bejewelled frame, and saw in it the reflection of a rather comic face. His barber made every effort to ensure that His Excellency's excellent skin remained unharmed by the exigencies of an overpowering pair of scissors. His moustaches, side-whiskers, and curly wurly hairstyle were examined from 360 angles to make sure that not a lock or curl stood out in rebellion, and that every strand around the bald pate surrendered in submission.

'That's not a bad job at all!' said His Excellency. 'Am I free at last?'

'You was always free Sir!' said Mehmud, 'It is we peepull who are slaves.'

'You're getting cheeky, Maymood! I think my predecessor gave you far too much liberty. Who says India is enslaved? A country in which an ordinary

barber can backchat so boisterously with one no less than the Viceroy himself, can hardly be called enslaved. Is it not a proof of the permissiveness to which the British character can stoop?’

‘Lord Sahab, you asking me? I says there is in fact no limits to which the British character can st . . .’ (*The Tailor’s Needle*, p. 4)

JT—There are certain characters whose names resemble some well-known postcolonial critics like Tiffin and Jaan Mohammad. Have they any relationship with postcolonial critics with the same names?

LRS—No, these characters have no relation with postcolonial scholarship. Their nomenclature is not intentional. The Viceroy’s name Griffin-Tiffin has resulted from my acquaintance with the Canadian literary scholar Ernest Griffin. The Viceroy has been named – Mortimer Edmund Griffin-Tiffin and I thought the name had the potential to draw a smile on the reader’s face. The name of Jaan Mohammad is also not given for postcolonial reasons. I did read Jaan Mohammad before I wrote the novel and the name could have crept into my mind unconsciously. But I must add that in my childhood I came across a domestic servant by that name in an Englishman’s home. This man was a wonderful cook and my father would sometimes hire his services in parties where the guests were British. Since this man in the novel is a domestic also, it well might be the childhood memory that has led to the christening.

JT—At another instance, in the case of the Viceroy and his mother, the theory of Oedipus Complex seems to be in the background. Is it intentional, if yes, what do you show by this theory?

LRS—Yes, that is pretty obvious. The Oedipal problem is now such a common and familiar problem that it can enter the plot of a literary text without quite seeming to be there. But in this case, I remember seeing a film, “Throw Momma from the Train”, which had an impact on my mind and when I thought of the mother and her viceroy son I was probably thinking of the film. What do I show by the use of this theory? Let me see . . . The Viceroy is by no means a very normal man. His sexual preference too is different to the general sexual preference of heterosexuality. Through his relationship with his mother I try to introduce some humour and some pathos. If you stop to ask yourself what is it that makes you laugh, the answer a number of times will be, “It is oddity or something happening in an unusual way that generally makes us laugh.” The Viceroy’s awkward and strange behaviour with his mother therefore becomes comic but it also adds to the pathos of the situation. I expect the reader to feel sorry for the Viceroy and not dislike him.

JT—**The novel is set in the colonial period of India and especially in your native town, Mirzapur. And it seems that the empire is writing back to destabilise the very institution of colonialism. Is it the duty of every postcolonial author to dismantle the concept of the colonial empire?**

LRS—I cannot speak for every writer as every writer has a different working programme and a different reason for writing. But I suppose it is natural for an author of a colonised country to show the coloniser how he has harmed the culture of the colonised country [though the truth often is that the intermixing of cultures is more beneficial than harmful]. In *The Tailor’s Needle*, however, I have also tried to write from the Brit’s point of view, because I did not want my novel to fall to the level of propaganda. Besides, I believe that if we Indians have a few virtues as a people, so do they and it is necessary for an author not to deny them their merits.

JT—There is a line in the novel “There is no difference between the worlds of traditional India and a country like England. The relationships between men and women remain roughly the same everywhere. The standards of decency and propriety also remain the same”. (p. 290) It seems that you want to bridge the divide between the Eastern and Western points of view. Is it so, or is it a technique to dismantle the rather more traditional binary opposition of the East and West?

LRS—This line reflects the opinion of a character who has had his schooling in England and is Indian in his way of thinking. In my childhood I was told by an Englishman (settled in India) that the best of any country are roughly as good as the best of any other country. Besides, why should any race be essentially superior or inferior to any other? Each has traits that are peculiar to it but each also does possess the ability to be the tailor’s needle.

JT—Is it possible for a British author to be truly post-colonial?

LRS—Why not? Everything is possible. What is not possible? Shakespeare is a good example of such an author. He saw the problems of colonisation and set them in the form of a play in *The Tempest*. He has given as much attention to his characters from the Orient, like Cleopatra, and Othello (who is virtually from the Orient), as he has given to his other heroes and heroines. Shakespeare has shown them in a different light (from his Occidental characters) at the level of attitude and behaviour and that is only because they cannot be shown as identical to the Occidental characters. There are obvious differences between the people on the two sides of the globe and an author like Shakespeare cannot be blind to them.

JT—All the four marriages that occur in the novel are ill-matched. Is there any connection here between your popular story “Marriages are made in India” and the marriages you choose to show in the novel?

LRS—There is no connection between that story and the novel. The ill-matching lends support to creating comic situations and to the fact that I believe that in the ultimate analysis all marriages are marriages of convenience. They are, I am tempted to believe, necessary evils. Who would like to ensnare and enslave himself or herself by marriage if there was an alternative? In the West there are new alternatives emerging and so fewer people get married there than they do in our country. Even in India in some of the metropolitan towns we now have live-in relationships instead of running into marriage.

JT— **But seeing the marriage of an English district magistrate, Larry Stephens, to his Indian maid, Nimmi; and the marriage of Sir Durga and Joyce Muddleton, it seems that marriages are really made in India against the popular belief that marriages are made in heaven.**

LRS—The marriage of the district magistrate with his maid was introduced for dramatic reasons, to give a dramatic turn to the plot, apart from the fact that I had heard of such a marriage actually taking place. Sir Durga's marriage with Mrs Muddleton never actually takes place. They do not marry but live as neighbours to keep meeting each other.

JT— **What do you want to prove by introducing such inter-racial and inter-caste marriages in the novel? Is this is an attempt to connect two cultures or unite India by blurring the boundaries of castes, boundaries that have been proving obstacles since time immemorial?**

LRS— Marriage (if it is within communities, castes or nationalities) tends to perpetuate social difference. It cements the “we” and “they” feeling. I look upon marriage as an institution that is meant for comfort and convenience but I do not consider it the most *natural* act. It is not natural to be tied up in marriage, it is merely socially convenient. Without the institution of marriage there would be chaos and violence all the time and children would not

get the same care. It is therefore necessary to continue with the institution of marriage; but it is not natural. To give you an example, man cleared up forests only in order to live more comfortably in clearly marked-out and open spaces. Marriage is like that cleared up space. But forests are more natural than cleared up spaces. I see marriage as an unnatural arrangement for societal convenience.

JT—Somewhere in the novel you seem to be anti-feminist, for instance, “Evil is always latent in women”. But in the case of Maneka you are a staunch feminist. She is more masculine and less feminine. What message do you try to convey through the novel to the feminist scholar?

LRS—The statement you quote is from a dialogue of Shreemal. The opinion contained there is his opinion, not mine. I have raised that point to show *his* inadequacy. There are people like him in society. I am not revealing my own position on feminism through that statement. My position on feminism is by no means simple. I have a tremendous concern for women, as you have seen in the case of Maneka. This character emerges as the single most powerful presence in *The Tailor’s Needle*. This happens in spite of the fact that when I began I had thought of centring the novel round, Sir Saraswati, Yogendra and Gauri. But Maneka ran away with the plot. She did not allow me to follow the rough outline of the plot I had in mind. For the 1930s and 40s, Maneka must seem a vamp. At a time when women were not supposed to think for themselves, and were virtually to be at the service of the patriarchal system, Maneka is indeed ahead of her time. She must seem a freak or even a wayward woman to the highly traditional mind. However, in spite of some very wicked things she does, she still manages to retain the sympathy of the reader. At least this is what my first readers told me about her. They described her as the life of the novel and described my novel as *her* novel. What does this mean? It is a clear indication that I tend to dwell on women’s problems and probably manage to look upon these problems from the woman’s points of

view. A writer sometimes points out a negative feature in a woman, not because he is a woman-hater but because he sees some women going wrong. Similarly he can see some men going wrong and point this out by painting the picture of a deviant man who represents men of that kind. In doing so the writer should not be considered a man-hater.

Maneka rebels against her father, dislikes her mother and brother for supporting the father, chooses to marry the man of her choice and also the mode of selecting her husband. In addition to all this she ensures that her younger sister's husband will not take her lightly. She forces the district magistrate, a symbol of power, to marry his own maid. She helps her brother to marry the woman he loves against a social set up that would not allow such a marriage. I think only a feminist could create a woman like Maneka.

I would, however, say that I am not a blind supporter of women, though I am greatly concerned about them. I have often been disappointed by women who have seemed to me little better than social butterflies. And I have particularly disliked women who mistook liberty for licence. I have tended to be irritated by women who mistake the inch for the yard. But then I am irritated equally by men of the same kind. I would want to see women stronger than they are but stronger not to throw men into the margins. I see a degeneration setting in feminist movements. If the sole object of a feminist movement is to rise to power that movement is bound to collapse after a point. Men and women make up the world together and if the world is to remain healthy both sexes must progress equally. Women who would be monitors or disciplinarians only, would lose out in the ultimate analysis. This is the theme of my second novel, *Emancipation*. Power should not corrupt anyone, whether it be a man or a woman. Women must learn how to handle power, or they will become as corrupt as some irresponsible men in the past as well as the present world. I believe that by giving power to women gradually, we will help them to understand the nature of power which will ultimately make them more balanced possessors of power. The process of empowerment should be

gradual rather than sudden. Sudden empowerment will also end up suddenly just as has been the case with a number of dictators who grabbed power and corrupted themselves with it. The woman in the West is much better prepared to control things responsibly than the Woman in a country like India. She has acquired this position over several decades. I think Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes an impressive point when she speaks against a blanket generalisation of all women. Women in various parts of the globe are at various stages of evolution, even more so than their masculine counterparts. We must respect this fact.

I am happy to see that a number of women even in India, particularly in the metropolitan towns, are showing the kind of maturity that is evidence of a healthy and progressive attitude. If this trend persists then Indian society as a whole is likely to gain and the progress of women will become a reality. If not, then the progress achieved thus far can come sliding down to the original position.

JT—Does doing a diploma or certificate course in creative writing really help the author in composing a poem or writing a novel?

LRS—I have no experience of that as I never joined any of these courses. But I suppose it would help a prospective creative writer, at least marginally, to join a course, learn the basic rules of the game of writing fiction, and be read by other readers before the agent/publisher race begins. But some basic talent is required before the courses and diplomas start showing their effects.

JT—Do you think that one who is not born with talent as a writer can never acquire a writer's talent?

LRS—I would like to answer your question twice and give a different answer each time because I am not sure if there is a single complete answer to this question. My first answer:

Our Indian philosophical theories that are inclusive enough even to incorporate our astrological system into the philosophical and aesthetic theories mention three or four ruling planets that make creative writing possible if they are rightly positioned in the birth chart. Find it funny? [laughs] I think these are Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and the Moon. With the proper positioning of these one tends to become a literary author. Thus our ancient sages saw only some people acquiring the art of literary authorship and so fate did play some role in the matter. My second answer: Much of the writer's talent is nurtured by practice. The more one reads and writes the better one tends to be as a writer. A few decades ago I was not half as talented an author as I am now. Thus talent also improves with practice. One has to go on practicing and learning the craft of fiction. One learns from others and one learns from one's own mistakes. That said, one must possess [laughs] the gifts given by Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and the Moon.

JT —What are your views on the categories of fiction, the division of novels by genre? Do the planets play a role in the different genres that novelists choose to write in as well? [both laugh] I want an extended reply from you on this.

LRS—I see you catching me on the wrong foot, Janmejaya. I hope I will not get trapped in the process of answering your question. Well, let's see. As a professional author I am supposed to know this subject inside out. But I seem to know much less than is really good for my health. The division of the novel into genres is made probably to facilitate the contemporary publishing industry. Each publisher, unless it is a Penguin, Random House, HarperCollins or another publishing giant, specialises in a particular kind of fiction. Each publisher knows where the readers of that kind of fiction will be found or where the market for that category of fiction is readily available. Thus a publisher (also a literary agent) may specialise in historical fiction because he knows that that genre will have ready buyers. The writer of historical fiction, likewise, must know which publisher/agent to approach. Thus for the sake

of convenience, novels are divided into several groups and sub-groups – mysteries, adventure novels, fantasies, science fiction, romance novels, horror novels, autobiographical novels, family sagas, feminist novels, crime novels, magical realism novels, Christen novels, etc. The list is unending. **Popular novels** are divided into these various genres and marketed by specialist agent/publishers.

It is important to note that these genre novels are by no means of a fixed nature. They keep changing according to the readers' tastes and often even change readers' tastes if they are really classy. Thus a mystery can combine with an adventure novel as well as a family saga and become a novel with a different genre that might suit several categories of readers or not suit any. Similarly there can be n number of permutations and combinations of the various genres to create various other genres which might be lapped up or rejected by the market. It is the market that keeps a genre popular and the writer of that genre going.

JT—Which means that genre novels are only popular novels?

LRS—It seems so. A literary novel for instance should not normally be put into the genre-category of fiction writing because a literary novel does not really follow the demands of the market and therefore often kicks the bucket even before it is born. Literary fiction is a deeper affair and it should not normally follow the needs of the marketplace. Today's literary novelist must keep in mind the length of a literary novel, however. You've got to be really well known as a literary novelist to be able to write lengthy novels like Tolstoy or Dickens who could go on writing to any length and still find publishers.

JT—That brings us to the next crucial question. What is the genre of *The Tailor's Needle*?

LRS—Broadly speaking it is a literary novel and therefore its literariness overrides every other generic element that it might contain. My publisher called it “a literary masterpiece” probably to humour me. [smiles] But I will tell you the inner story. It is actually a novel that contains the fusion of genres not for the convenience of the publisher/agent or the market but because it is written largely for what is known in Sanskrit as “swantah sukhay” or my own pleasure, not for anyone else’s.

JT—Now I think you are getting into a trap, Sir. You say you have written it for “swantah sukhay”. But the second half of your novel seems to be tailored for the readers’ convenience. You have still not answered the question on the genre of *The Tailor’s Needle* and in addition you must tell me why the two halves of the novel are so different to each other.

LRS—Yes, you are right Janmejy, you do have me in a trap. First let me tell you about the various genres that cohere in this novel. It has something of the historical novel, as it has distorted history in the background. But it cannot be called a historical novel as the history is too distorted for that genre. It is to an extent a Raj novel, and then it has the Comedy of Manners element fused into it. It is also a multi-cultural novel, a murder mystery, the paranormal romance, a magical realism novel, the political novel, and the post-colonial novel. I think that makes it a fusion novel of sorts that does not follow any pure generic pattern.

Now for the two halves of the novel. The first half is more literary than the second. The second half was written with a consciousness that something had to be done to ensure that the reader remained glued.

JT—Then it was not really written for your own pleasure or “swantah sukhay”?

LRS—Yes, you have got me in trouble. I'll correct myself. The first half of the novel is written for self-pleasure; the second half of the novel takes me for a ride. The novel gets out of my hands in the second half and the plot pulls itself to a completion with so many different flavours jumping into it. Once you try to introduce elements that are extraneous to the main plot then it is difficult to keep things tidily under control. But I must say that I do not regret that the novel wrote itself, without me playing too much of a part in it, in the second half. If I had tried to keep it under strict control, it might have become a problem novel for me. You know like a child can become a problem child if you exercise too much control on him.

JT —**Why did you not enter your novel for any prize like the Booker or the Commonwealth Award for fiction?**

LRS—I thought that was the publisher's job. And I could not interfere with the publisher's decisions. Besides, my novel may not be good enough to be entered for such purposes.

JT—**Do you want your novel to be translated into Hindi or any other regional languages?**

LRS—Why not? Every writer wants to be read in other languages.

JT—**Do you write for special readers or do you never keep the reader in mind, like Salman Rushdie, while writing?**

LRS—When I write plays I keep specific audiences in mind. But while writing my novels, there are some readers I keep in mind, people who are there in my mind in an influential way. My wife is one of them and then there are some of my wonderful teachers like Professor Alok Rai and Professor Richard Dutt. Similarly when I write my critical books I have Professor Rajnath in mind.

JT—**The novel is set in your hometown Mirzapur. Is it an autobiographical novel?**

LRS—To an extent every novel is written out of real experience. But this novel is set in the period before I was born. So you cannot call it my life's story.

JT —**Romeo is the name of your dog and the same dog appears in the novel. Is it not autobiographical?**

LRS—Yes, the Romeo episode has been inserted into the plot of the novel. But much of that too is fiction.

JT — **Do the characters of the novel grow naturally, as Dickens' and Hardy's do or do you mould them according to the story?**

LRS—Some characters are conceived before the novel begins and some take birth during the course of writing the novel. I do not have a fixed scheme for the creation of my characters. They both pre-exist the novel as well as take shape along the route, before the novel is completed.

JT—**Have you written something after *The Tailor's Needle*?**

LRS—Yes, another novel, *Emancipation* and my second story-collection, *Contemporary Woman*. *Emancipation* is about two feminists, one American and the other English, who travel to the smaller towns of India to educate women about their rights and about what women in the West are doing for their freedom. In the process both the women undergo a transformation in their own lives; they do manage to break up one home. This novel is not against feminism but the wrong kinds of feminism that are sometimes practiced. *Contemporary Woman* is a collection of stories that depicts a number of women who are able to overcome their problems and some that are not. These are both books of multi-cultural fiction with a global point of view.

JT— Thank you Sir, for giving me so much of your valuable time. It was a privilege and pleasure to talk to you.

LRS—Thanks, Janmejay, for considering me worthy of your attention. I enjoyed every minute of the interview.

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