



**Lapis Lazuli**

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An Interview with

Michelle Cohen Corasanti

Conducted by Ajit Kumar

Michelle Cohen Corasanti was born in 1966 in Utica, New York grew up in a Jewish, Zionist home where she was taught that after the Holocaust, the Jews found a land without a people for a people without a land and made the desert bloom. She went to Israel when she was sixteen years old and returned shocked and horrified by what she witnessed and learned. She received her BA from Hebrew University in Jerusalem and her MA from Harvard, both in Middle Eastern studies. She's also a lawyer trained in international and human rights law. While in graduate school at Harvard, she met a Palestinian from Israel who was doing his post-doctorate in chemical physics

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jointly with his Israeli professor and a Nobel Prize recipient in physics. She married him. Michelle had wanted to devote her life to helping to bring about peace, but there was little that could be done. Over a decade later, she read *The Kite Runner* and realized at that writer can reach into people's hearts and change them. That's when she decided to write *The Almond Tree* in order to put the reader in her shoes. *The Almond Tree* was first published in October 2012 in English by Garnet Publishing. It was released in November 2013 in South Asia by Fingerprints Publishing. *The Almond Tree* is an epic novel having a great gripping and compassionate work of fiction.

Dr. Ajit Kumar holds his Ph.D. on Doris Lessing from Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, India. He has got his many research papers published in National and International Refereed Journals and Anthologies of English Studies. He has completed his two edited books on British Female Authors and Doris Lessing. He has also been honoured with Best Research Paper Award in World Conference AIAER-2010. He has interviewed many other USA, UK and India based authors.

Ajit: Michelle, Congratulations for a grand beginning!

Michelle: Thank you so much.

Ajit: Critics call your debut novel *The Almond Tree* 'an epic' ! Did you ever think that your work would be acclaimed as an epic?

Michelle: No, never. When I wrote *The Almond Tree*, my target audience was Americans in general and Jews in particular. I felt that the US, through American ignorance, enables

Israel. As Jews, we were always taught what Zionism meant for us, but we never learned what it meant for the Palestinians. My goal was to help shine a light on the plight of the Palestinians and to show a better way.

Ajit: Would you please share something about the culture and life style being a Jew?

Michelle: Jewish culture is very diverse. We come from all over the world and are products of our environment. For me, Judaism is a religion like Christianity. I personally grew up in a conservative, Zionist home. My ancestors came over from Poland in the late 1800s. The majority of my friends have always been non-Jewish. I grew up in an American environment except for the years I studied in a yeshiva, a Jewish school that was run by a Hassidic Jew. During that time, I studied Judaism half of the day and the other half secular studies. It was a very conservative environment. I kept kosher and dressed conservatively. When I graduated from the yeshiva in sixth grade, I went to public school and became as American as the average American. When I lived in Israel, I really saw the diversity. For example, there were Jews from Yemen who had multiple wives. In Judaism, a man is allowed an unlimited number of wives. In Europe, the chief rabbi banned polygamy, but in countries in which polygamy is permitted, Jews still practice it.

Ajit: When did you start writing this novel?

Michelle: I started writing *The Almond Tree* over a decade after I returned from Jerusalem and almost immediately after reading *The Kite Runner*.

Ajit: Where did the inspiration come from?

Michelle: The seed of the story came from my former Palestinian husband whose father went to prison when he was young for helping a Palestinian refugee bury arms. As the oldest of

nine children, my former husband had to work to support the family. He rarely went to school, but because he was brilliant at math and science, it was enough to get into college in Israel. There, in an environment of publish or perish, the Israeli professors embraced him. I didn't write his story, but it was the glimmer of hope that inspired me.

Ajit: What do you read as a background to the writing?

Michelle: The story is based on my personal experiences. The greatest issue I had was learning how to tell my story. As I needed to learn how to tell my story, I read the classics to see why they endured the test of time, the bestsellers to understand what's working now and the books that brought about change.

Ajit: The novel moves from Israel, US and then Gaza...How have you managed to bring all the three different pictures in one book?

Michelle: I wrote about what I know for the parts in Israel and the US. I had never been to Gaza, but during the seven years in which I wrote *The Almond Tree*, Israel's war on Gaza, the flotilla and the horrific siege were happening and I felt I needed to shine a light. I did massive research to write those forty pages on Gaza. It took two years to write about Gaza because I lost all perspective. I was so afraid that I would miss shining a light on one of the countless horrors, that I overwhelmed the reader. Finally, an editor told me that less was more and that's when it clicked. If I just gave the reader a feel for the situation that would be more effective than overloading him.

Ajit: Why does Ahmad move from one place to the other?

Michelle: Ahmad could never achieve what he did if he only remained in his village. He came from a rural, impoverished village. Due to his brilliant mind, he is able to achieve a scholarship to Hebrew University and then onto Harvard as a post doctorate. Israel has a

policy of pushing Palestinian intellectuals into the sciences as a form of ethnic cleansing. Israel makes it easier for Palestinians from Israel to study science, but then Israel makes military service a prerequisite to high level scientific jobs. If they want to work in their field of study, these Palestinians usually have to leave the country. As a result, when I was at Harvard, I met a number of Palestinians from Israel who were doing their post doctorates at Harvard and MIT and other top universities. Most of them came from rural villages. I wrote about what I knew.

Ajit: The novel is famous for the diverse experience of young Palestinian boy in the different circumstance of life... what made you do this?

Michelle: Ahmad, my protagonist, is a compilation of many Palestinians from Israel I knew personally and whose lives I witnessed. I wrote about what I know that affected me.

Ajit: What are your ideas about family, love, and friendship which are the basic themes of the novel?

Michelle: I believe that we need to focus on our commonalities to advance each other instead of our differences to destroy one another. Love is the answer, not hate. We need to find our common humanity.

Ajit: Did you write your novel for a particular group of readers and Why?

Michelle: For Americans in general and Jews in particular. My goal was to bring about social change. The US supported the Apartheid government through the Reagan years. An Apartheid minister said to a US minister that he knew that the rest of the world was against Apartheid South Africa, but as long as the Apartheid government had the US, they didn't need anyone else. The same holds true, in my opinion with Israel. The US gives Israel \$3 billion a year and complete diplomatic support. In the US, we are

bombarded with Zionist propaganda and we are unaware of the truth. Many Jews I know in the US are also unaware of the truth. My goal with *The Almond Tree* was to bring about change. In my opinion, awareness leads to understanding and understanding leads to change. I feel that if the US changed its policy and stopped enabling Israel to oppress the Palestinians, we could see change. So I targeted the people I thought could help bring about change.

Ajit: Is there anything biographical in the novel?

Michelle: I am the almond tree. I wrote about what I witnessed and learned. People ask if I'm Nora. I'm not. Nora is everything I wished I could have been but failed to be.

Ajit: Where does the idea of Almond tree come from?

Michelle: The almond tree is a witness. That's what I was; a witness and silence should never be an answer to violence. The lessons I took from the Holocaust were that we can never be bystanders to human suffering. For me, never again means never again for any people ever. *The Almond Tree* is my testimony. It's what I witnessed; it's my refusal to remain mute in the face of violence. I was not the victim in *The Almond Tree*, but I was a witness.

Ajit: Don't you find your personal movement to different places is similar to the movements in the novel?

Michelle: Of course. I wrote about what changed the way I saw the world so I wanted to recreate my experiences for my readers in hopes that I could reach them as well.

Ajit: Is there anyone else who suggests you about your writing?

Michelle: The story in *The Almond Tree* is very personal, but I did get a lot of help with the writing. I didn't become a writer because I wanted to tell stories. I became a writer because I had a story to tell. I had six editors who taught me how to tell the story that had been inside of me for over a decade.

Ajit: May readers call your novel a Memoir then?

Michelle: I can't think of anything in *The Almond Tree* that wasn't fictionalized reality. It's a fictionalized memoir that has a solid basis in reality. The characters are compilations of many Palestinians I knew over the years.

Ajit: Could you please share the central concept of *The Almond Tree*?

Michelle: I hoped to show how strong we could be if we focused on our commonalities and worked together. Love, peace and kindness are more productive than hate, war and evil.

Ajit: Did you start writing with some particular motif?

Michelle: I was desperate to help end the needless suffering and to show a better way.

Ajit: Have you tried to bring the feminine issues in your novel?

Michelle: One theme I used was from Arabic literature. I took a course in college called East/West. Typically, an Eastern man would go to the west to study. There he would fall in love with a Western woman, but be forced to return home. At first, he would look down on his culture, having been blinded by the West, until his blinders came off and he realized the greatness of his culture.

Ajit: What would you choose between feminine and social issues for your future novels? What is more important for Michelle?

Michelle: I have lived in both the east and west. In the west, we find love by dating. In order to attract a man, we typically have to dress sexy and use our looks. We choose who we marry in the US, but half the marriages end in divorce. I have an appreciation for a culture in which a woman doesn't have to use her sexuality to attract a man. I also think there are many positive aspects to arranged marriages made in good faith. For me, the most important issue is that we learn to treat all people with respect and equality.

Ajit: Whom do you admire the most among novelists and why?

Michelle: Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman who wrote in the voice of a black slave, because she helped bring about the civil war that ended slavery.

Ajit: Where is the contemporary fiction going and how would you like to contribute?

Michelle: Racism is based on not knowing the other. Literature allows us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and get to know the other. I hope I can help foster peace and love between all people in general and shine a light on the plight of the Palestinians and help bring about peace. I see many trends in contemporary fiction from *Fifty Shades* to *Twilight* to *The Kite Runner* and many more in between.

Ajit: What are your major concerns as a writer ?

Michelle: To make sure my story is strong enough that it transcends the historical context. In *The Almond Tree*, I wrote about a Palestinian boy who overcomes seemingly impossible obstacles to achieve what others have only dreamed. My concern was that my story be reach anyone who has overcome hardship so that reader can relate to my story on a human level.

Ajit: What is your schedule for writing?

Michelle: I write during every free second I have.

Ajit: Which aspects you love discussing?

Michelle: I love when people want to discuss what we can do to bring about positive change.

Ajit: Have you ever thought about what makes your novel different from other current ones?

Michelle: I'm a Jewish American writing in the voice of a Palestinian Muslim with empathy for what Zionism meant to the Palestinians. Many people would say I've written a story against personal interest. I don't see it that way because first and foremost I belong to the human race.

Ajit: Have you, anywhere in the novel, tried to highlight the relationship issues between man and woman?

Michelle: Yes, first between my Palestinian protagonist and his first love, a brilliant and beautiful Palestinian student he met at the university, my protagonist and his Jewish love and my protagonist and his arranged wife who becomes the love of his life.

Ajit: Which are the traditional issues and rituals which you personally and artistically don't appreciate?

Michelle: In the US, we like to look forward, but I loved how in more traditional societies they respect traditions and rituals. It made me feel more grounded.

Ajit: Why do the diasporic issues emerge in the novel?

Michelle: I wrote about my personal experiences and those of people I've known and loved from a different world than my own. In order to meet, we were either in their world or mine so someone was always in the diaspora.

Ajit: Well, what next should the readers expect from Michelle?

Michelle: I'm currently finishing my second novel. It's a story of forbidden love, betrayal, and family secrets. Here's a bit about the plot: Ester Jabotinsky, born to wealthy Jewish parents at the turn of the 20th century in Odessa, loses everything when the Communists take over Russia in 1919. She is forced to flee to Palestine. There, she falls in love with a Palestinian man, but is forced to marry within her faith. Their forbidden love endures, leading to tragedy that will haunt her for the rest of her life. In 1990, when Rebekah Rose, a Jewish American, meets a Palestinian from Israel, she knows instantly that he's the only one for her. Can their love overcome history, politics, religion and hatred? And what of the secret that ties these two stories together?

Ajit: Any message for the readers?

Michelle: May the battles that we fight be for the advancement of humanity.

Thank you very much for the lovely interview.

Ajit Kumar