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Transcribed by Kayra Maes

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## Playing with the Genre of Crime Fiction: Elizabeth Chakrabarty in Conversation about *Lessons in Love and Other Crimes*

Elisabeth Bekers, Sofie Vandepitte, and VUB students (transcribed by Kayra Maes)  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Dr. Elizabeth Chakrabarty combines creative and critical writing to explore issues of gender, race, and sexuality in an interdisciplinary way. During a visit to Vrije Universiteit Brussel on 27 April 2023, the British author and former professor of English talked to Prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers and pedagogical assistant Sofie Vandepitte about her autobiographically-inspired debut novel *Lessons in Love and Other Crimes* (2021), a literary crime novel-cum-queer romance whose Indian-British protagonist Tesya experiences a series of hate crimes in academia. In the interview, Chakrabarty speaks in depth about the novel's generic hybridity, the (im)possibility of closure after hate crime, and her plans for a second novel. Kayra Maes (MA student in Linguistics and Literary Studies at VUB) transcribed the interview, which was edited by Bekers and Vandepitte.

Keywords: British literature, postmodernist literature, literary crime fiction, queer romance, racism, trauma

### Introduction

Dr. [Elizabeth Chakrabarty](#) is a British writer who has recently stepped away from an academic career in literary studies in order to concentrate fully on her own writing. In her work, Chakrabarty combines creative and critical writing to explore issues of gender, race, and sexuality in an interdisciplinary way. In 2021, her debut novel *Lessons in Love and Other Crimes* was published by [The Indigo Press](#), alongside her essay "On Closure and Crime", which can be consulted on the publisher's website. Around the same time, Chakrabarty also published "On Evil (Crime in the Academy)" in *Wasafiri*, the UK's leading magazine for contemporary international writing. In both essays, she addresses the racism she has encountered in academia, a topic that she also explores in her literary crime novel-cum-queer romance *Lessons in Love and Other Crimes*. Victim to a series of race crimes, the novel's queer Indian-British protagonist Tesya tries to navigate life – and love – in the wake of trauma. As the plot unravels, Tesya, in true *whodunnit* fashion, comes closer to discovering her aggressor's identity and obtaining the closure that was denied to the author in real life. Chakrabarty's postmodernist text complicates this seemingly straightforward plot, by moving back and forth between Tesya's experiences of love and crime in the past and the present. Furthermore, the fictional story, bookended by three autobiographical essays, is set in motion with a brief reference to a dead body whose identity is kept under wraps until the very end, while the novel is interspersed with metafictional notes by the author as well as a series of enigmatic 'lessons' written by the perpetrator.

This interview was facilitated by Chakrabarty's month-long residency at Passa Porta, the international house of literature in Brussels, and took place on 27 April 2023 at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in the context of the classes on postmodernist literature taught by Professor Elisabeth Bekers as part of her first-year survey course on Literature in English. In

their conversation with Chakrabarty, Bekers and Sofie Vandepitte, pedagogical assistant in the Multilingual Bachelor in Linguistics and Literary Studies, discuss *Lessons in Love and Other Crimes*, delving deeper into the novel's generic hybridity, the possibility of closure after a race hate crime, and Chakrabarty's plans for her second novel. At the end of the interview, they opened the floor to the students in Linguistics and Literary Studies, whose questions are also included here. Kayra Maes, Master student in the Talent for Research programme of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings, transcribed the interview, which was edited by Bekers and Vandepitte.

More information about the author and her work can be found on the author's website (<https://elizabethchakrabarty.com/>) and at the Indigo Press, a London-based independent publisher (<https://theindigopress.com/product/lessons-in-love-and-other-crimes-paperback/>).

**Elisabeth Bekers:** When you announced your novel, you said that it is set in a university and the first thing that then comes to mind is that it must be a campus novel.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Oh, yes.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** However, when you read your novel, you quickly realise it is not a run-of-the-mill campus novel.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** No.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** It is probably not even a campus novel. In fact, it feels very hybrid, because you have passages that are focused on the experiences of the author, you then enter into the fictional story by way of metafictional comment(s) on the writing of the book, all of which make you consider what we also addressed in class: "What are the hallmarks of postmodernist fiction?" Are you conscious of this as a writer? For example, do you deliberately mix genres, because you want to be a postmodernist writer? Or is this something that never crosses your mind? How do you feel about the generic labelling of your novel?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Well, I have sort of answered this by the extract that I read just now. So, there are two essays that open the novel – there is also a shorter one at the end – and the second essay is titled "How To Write About The Trauma of Racism" and in this essay, I talk about this awful hate crime I experienced. I always knew that I was going to write about it – not autobiographically, but through fiction. But then, funnily enough, one of the things about playing with genre fiction, and writing what is essentially a literary crime novel, is that I was confronted with the difference between what happens in a crime novel – the closure that it brings – and what happens in real life. In the UK, many crimes are never solved; the police do not even turn up half the time. About hate crime in particular, a recent survey has shown most people actually do not report things unless they are very serious. So, although I did not call my novel postmodernist fiction at the

time, in a way, writing it did have to do with critiquing the crime genre, but also... [Hesitates]

**Elisabeth Bekers:** The simplicity of it, perhaps? With its clear outline of crime, detective work and resolution?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Yes. To me, it was always more about the psychoanalytical aspects of the genre, particularly around hate crime and closure. So, while the reviews described the novel as a page-turner, you can also read it for its psychoanalytical aspects, for fulfilling this thing that is very important to me, that is to say: "You can have closure after a hate crime, you can find out who was behind it, you can get some form of justice."

**Elisabeth Bekers:** That way, your novel not only comments on the genre, but also provides food for thought in real life. Fiction becomes a way to deal with reality, to do things that reality cannot.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** That is the fantastic thing about fiction... The wonderful thing about my residency at Passa Porta is that it gives you time and space to work on different things. Especially when writing about something that has happened in your home country, you can focus on it much better when you are abroad. It was very exciting for me to arrive in Brussels and to live here for this period of time.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** So, it is not so much about being in Brussels and writing about Brussels, but about giving you the necessary distance from your home.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** It is about two things, actually. I have also started a new book that is partly set in Brussels.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** Was that the incentive behind the trip?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Yes, it was. In fact, editing this second book, which is half set in England and half set on the continent, is an interesting thing to do while I am here, because there are always things that you forget about countries.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** You have been to Brussels before, right?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Oh, yes, I have been here a number of times. I have family connections in Belgium.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** Can you say anything more about the novel?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Not really, because it is just so early.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** The reason why I am asking is that we, researchers in the VUB's Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings, are working on a project about literature that is set in Brussels, about authors who wrote here. There are the Brontë sisters, Joseph Conrad, Victor Hugo... It would be nice to have a contemporary addition to our list, so definitely keep us posted.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** I will. This second book is also playing with crime; it is also about love and hate; it is equally political, but it will still be very different to *Lessons in Love*.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** We often hear that writers who have published a successful debut novel find it very daunting to work on their second book, because they have all these expectations to match. Do you experience this as well?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Yes, but my novel came out during the pandemic, exactly two years ago now. I had this international book launch on Instagram Live with the wonderful poet Nikita Gill. And a year later, we did a real-life event in the Feminist Bookshop in Brighton, who have been really supportive of my work. So, not only did *Lessons in Love* come out during lockdown, but I had also already started this second book, so I just kind of carried on, you know?

**Elisabeth Bekers:** In other words, there was a bit of a gap between the publishing and the marketing of *Lessons in Love*, which gave you enough time to start writing your second book without any pressure.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Indeed.

**Sofie Vandepitte:** Is your second book also characterised by the generic hybridity we see in *Lessons in Love* or is it more conventional, so to speak?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** There is some metafictionality in it, but less so than in *Lessons in Love*. However, for the second book, I have written an essay that may be published alongside it too. Conversely, for *Lessons in Love*, my publisher commissioned me to write the essay "On Closure and Crime", which is published on their website, after I had finished the novel.

**Sofie Vandepitte:** You mentioned previously that the second book is also a literary crime novel. Where does your interest for the genre come from? Not only is the genre often very white, crime novels are also generally told from the perspective of the detective or the perpetrator rather than the victim.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Yes, I wrote about this in the essay "On Closure and Crime." I was an academic for twenty years and like many academics, I had to commute to work. In the UK, train stations often have a shop called WH Smith, where you can buy, say, bottles of water, but also novels. These are usually genre novels – romance, fantasy, crime – and

as I am not into romance or fantasy, I used to buy crime novels quite often. And although I was not reading critically – some crime novels, I just flipped through, because I could not stand reading about so much violence, particularly against women – I did get intrigued by the genre. During this particular period, I also lectured on psychopathic characters in fiction, and one of the things I would discuss in class was crime drama in TV and film. All of which led me to contemplate the simplicity of the genre and made me want to do something more with it, play with it in a hybrid way. For example, *Lessons in Love* is not a crime novel with a straightforward detective. There is a detective, a very nice one, but she is not much in it.

**Sofie Vandepitte:** Exactly, she is more of a side character.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Indeed. Which reflects my experience of crime as well. Over the years, I have met various police officers in relation to the things that happened to me — the racism. However, all I have used of my own personal experience in the novel is the specifics of the race hate crime; and I have given the race hate crime to a character. Everything else is pure fiction.

**Sofie Vandepitte:** In that sense, the ending of the novel is very interesting, because it kind of reaffirms the genre, no? But I am going to stop here, because I do not want to give anything away. [Laughs]

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** I think what I do is give a variety of endings, but yeah, I think we should leave it... I would love for people to read the novel themselves.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** I think we need to read the novel in class next year and have you come back. [Note of the editors: The following term the same group of students did indeed read *Lessons in Love and Other Crimes* as part of Prof. Dr. Bekers's second-year course on *Identities in Literature in English*.]

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Yes, I will come back.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** This is a good time to open up the floor and hear if you have any questions for Elizabeth Chakrabarty.

**Question:** Do you feel that the hybridity of the novel reflects how you experienced the race hate crime against you?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** It was very important to me to take myself out of the novel. Instead of dredging up all the memories that make me anxious even now, I only used the specifics of the race hate crime I experienced to explore it in a fictional way. I examined the psychological impact of race hate crimes on a person and the way it ripples through so many different aspects of their life. One of the things I wanted to do is to let the reader see my protagonist in different environments, with different people – her family, her best

friend – and the ways in which the race hate crime impacts all these relationships. I made a conscious decision not to write about myself.

**Question:** I am only one-third through the novel – and enjoying it quite a bit so far – and I am wondering specifically about the lessons that you put in there, because they do many different things for me. For one, the fact that they are sometimes written in the second person makes me feel as if they are being read to me, as if I am the perpetrator.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** That is so interesting to hear. Each chapter indeed has a lesson in it, a lesson from the antagonist, through which we get little glimpses of their character. I deliberately wrote the lessons in that voice, so that the reader feels as if they are addressed to them.

**Sofie Vandepitte:** It messed with my head a bit as well.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Did it? I mean, it is quite malevolent...

**Sofie Vandepitte:** In any case, it is interesting that you gave your antagonist so much psychological depth.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** Which goes back to the crime genre. Just because somebody does horrible things to one person does not mean that they are not an angel in the rest of their life. This is what we see in the lessons; we get to know this person who has had “loving” relationships, bought nice presents for people, been to dinner parties, but who also has a whole other side... In the lessons, we get a sense of the very wide spectrum of this character.

**Question:** I have not read the novel yet, but I did read the abstract, and I noticed there is a female love interest. Does the protagonist openly identify as lesbian? And by extension, does the novel reflect on the hate crimes that are committed to people who are not straight, especially in relation to race?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** The main protagonist is queer. In the UK, we use “queer” now, or “lesbian.” Some of the hate crimes that I explore in this novel could be conceived as having to do with her sexuality, but in fact, most of them are related to her being mixed-race like myself. My father was Indian, my mother is English, and as I said previously, I also have stepfamily connections in Belgium, so I am kind of a mish-mash. So, I wanted to write about hate crimes against Asian people, which are not talked about very much in the UK, which is bizarre, since we have an Asian prime minister now. In fact, we have many different Asian political leaders in the UK. Going back to your question, I will leave you to read the novel yourself, so you can make up your own mind, but the thing with hate crimes is that there are always connections between different sorts of hate crimes. Another question?



**Question:** You mentioned that you have tried to take yourself out of the novel, but where do you think the power lies in writing about trauma and traumatic experiences? Is there any purpose to writing, to putting these experiences down? Does it allow you to explain yourself? Or does it rather remove the need to explain yourself?

**Elisabeth Bekers:** Or put differently, is writing a form of therapy?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** It is weird, you know. I am a writer. This is what I do, what I have been doing for years. Decades ago, I acted, I made films. Then I got into writing poetry, prose, short stories, et cetera. To deal with my trauma, I saw a therapist. To me, they are two separate things, especially because publishing anything, be it fiction or non-fiction, means opening yourself up to questions that could, in a sense, retraumatise you. That being said, the anxiety that came with my trauma, I wanted to explore in my writing. I was intrigued as to where I could take it in a fictional medium.

**Question:** You talked about hate crime against Asians and I am interested in how you perceive solidarity across communities, especially historically? During the nineties, there was more solidarity between Black and Asian communities in their struggle against racism.

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** That is a really interesting question. Personally, I am very sad that there is less solidarity across communities today. For those of you who do not know, there was a lot of solidarity across different ethnic groups in the UK in the nineties, with many movements against racism in the arts, in sports... However, what has been amazing about the response to my novel is that I have had people from all walks of life get in touch with me, telling me it struck a chord with them, not just about racism, but also about their experiences with gender-based hate crimes, stalking, and so on.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** One last question?

**Question:** Would you write a sequel or a spin-off of this novel?

**Elizabeth Chakrabarty:** I didn't think so initially, but it's something I have thought about. It would not be a direct sequel at all, but there are some characters that I could potentially revisit. But given what happens in the novel, let's say there are certain things that wouldn't provide for a sequel.

**Elisabeth Bekers:** We all really need to read your book, do we not?