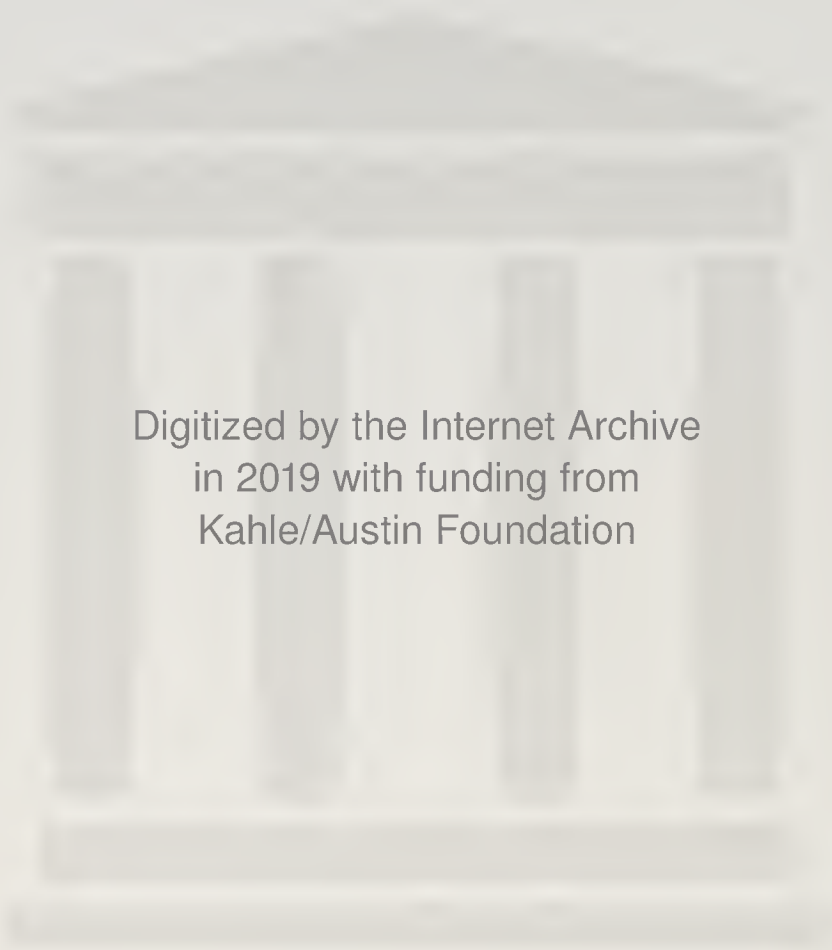
Configurations of

EXILE

SOUTH ASIAN WRITERS AND THEIR WORLD

CHELVA KANAGANAYAKAM



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For my children
Shankary and Jegan

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Contents

Introduction

Labels, Lives and the Poetics of Inclusion

While discussing the overwhelming prevalence of mediocrity in contemporary writing, Zulfikar Ghose, whose own fiction reveals an almost obsessive concern with perfections of form and language, often at the expense of "national" or "ethnic" markers, laments the "implicit endorsement given them by professors of literature who choose works that fit into neat categories and so can be talked about with that ponderousness which is the pose of a fake seriousness"(*Art*, 58). Having thus blamed pedagogical practice for inadequate critical standards, he then provides an example of such categorization: "A group of novels by South African writers, for example, makes for a semester's package tour of racial guilt, moral outrage and historical enlightenment, and the eager economy- class students, who are more anxious about their grades than their culture, don't even realize that the ride they're being taken on has nothing to do with literature"(58-59). Presumably, Ghose's list of authors does not include Nadine Gordimer, J M Coetzee or Bessie Head, whose works hardly cater to economy-class teachers or students. Regardless of who would find inclusion in such a course, one can hardly take issue with the general premise that categories, political or otherwise, can well celebrate authors whose ideological stances are more convincing and rigorous than their writing. Particularly in a political climate that valorizes marginality, the dividing line between aesthetics and ideology has become increasingly difficult to locate, with the consequence that good and bad art may well depend on which side of the ideological divide the author chooses to stand.

Ghose's objections can be dismissed on the grounds that they are mainstream, conservative, liberal humanist, elitist or simply biased, but the fact remains that an obsession with content has enabled inferior writing to masquerade as great art. And Ghose is not alone in wanting to transcend narrow boundaries that determine the significance of literature. Dambudzo Marechera, himself a writer of immense commitment to

the political and social life of Zimbabwe, stubbornly resists any attempt to define him in nationalist or racial terms. "Either you are a writer or you are not" says Marechera. "If you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you" (3). In many ways, Marechera's fiction is a refutation of his overt stance, but that hardly alters the force of his repudiation or the sincerity of his utterance. Like so many others, Marechera did not see the paradox of preaching a universalist aesthetic and writing a nationalist fiction as necessarily problematic.

If Marechera insists on distance, Chinua Achebe, for example, desires closeness, and identification with the realities of a postcolonial Nigeria. His project, when he began writing, was twofold: to subvert the essentialist fiction of writers such as Joyce Cary and to give expression to the aspirations of his people. "The writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front" (30) says Achebe. The tendentious edge is hardly constitutive in Achebe's recent work—particularly in *Anthills of the Savannah*—but that he chooses to parade his "message" is not without significance. Derek Walcott, another writer who draws from eclectic, including Western, sources, insists on the West Indian quality of his writing. His work, too, becomes a part of the assertion of Caribbean identity. As Walcott points out, "Antillean art is [the] restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent" (9). Neither Achebe nor Walcott needs the shelter of a nationalist or regional category but that they chose to identify with one is not without significance.

The issue, then, is far more complex than a simple duality of the universal and the particular would suggest. Had the conflict turned on the binary of good art that espouses no cause and inferior art that flaunts its ideology, one would have no difficulty in jettisoning one or the other. Such a formulation suppresses the ambivalent and paradoxical quality of attempting a taxonomy. If categories limit and "fix" they also provide the basis for comparison and analysis. A specific agenda and a commitment to art do not have to be seen in mutually exclusive terms. And the notion of a universal aesthetic does not automatically ensure an exalted status or a freedom from categorization.

Admittedly, categories are a mixed blessing. They provide boundaries that limit readership. Thus it is possible to argue that those not interested in Indian writing are not likely to be drawn to R K Narayan, and that if such categories had not existed Narayan might have been seen simply as a writer. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that it is crucial to see

Narayan as an Indian writer, for it is in this context that one could judge him in relation to other writers from the region, such as Raja Rao and Anita Desai. It could be argued that critical standards are sharpened and reinforced rather than blunted by categories. And it may well be that to abandon categories would be to fall prey to a universalist criteria, the kind that insists, as Arun Mukherjee points out, that "all human beings belong to the one big family called humanity" (11).

And it is important to remember that a universal aesthetic is also a category although it creates the illusion of transcending such a taxonomy. Fiction may well be about language and plot and character, but none of these exists outside the reach of ideology. To fault a writer, for instance, for a flaw in the plot, may well be to ignore the relation between plot and a Western teleology. Writing is necessarily implicated in ideology, and as Arnold Itwaru points out "the fascination with plot comes from and informs a rationality in which a plotting sensibility is esteemed" (49). His insistence that his own fiction be called a "book" rather than a "novel" is a reminder that terms used almost casually in literary criticism are hardly innocent or neutral. One needs to remind oneself that the famous opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is so compelling not because it utters a "universal truth" but a very specific one.

Positions that spurn narrow categories are themselves often hegemonic categories. In the editorial of a special issue of *Canadian Literature* devoted to South Asian writing in Canada, W H New referring to a comment made by Bharati Mukherjee that the Canadian imagination has been nourished on "papayas as well as Red River cereal" adds that the "observation *is* a useful reminder that European vicissitudes are not the only influences that have been shaping Canada, and that the two official languages are not the only arbiters of variety open to national cultural understanding" (3). Here again, one observes that the conflict is not between narrow enclaves and a universalist embrace, but rather between two categories, one hegemonic and the other tendentious.

If categories are important and inevitable, they are also problematic, for they are neither homogenous nor static. They remain markers, but they are hardly inclusive. Trends in recent publications reinforce the attraction of such categories, but one needs to be aware of their provisionality. Categories often reveal what they are not rather than what they are. As early as 1938 Raja Rao claimed: "we cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us" (5). Others who followed expressed, in different ways, what it means to write from the perspective of an

Indian. Such pronouncements alert the reader to distinctions that must be borne in mind, but they also reveal that such assertions are inevitably tentative. In fact, part of the pleasure of categories such as "South Asian" is derived from their chameleon-like quality.

In one of the several prefatory notes in *Because of India*, Suniti Namjoshi discusses the problematic issue of self-definition, particularly for a writer who locates herself on the margins of several centres, as a feminist, a lesbian and an expatriate. According to her, regardless of the many traditions that one could legitimately claim kinship with, "the problem still remains: as a creature, a lesbian creature, how do I deal with all the other creatures who have their own identities, or perhaps I mean their own identifications?" (84) She goes on to write her poetry, her fiction, and her fables in a manner that celebrates her marginality and gives expression to the perspective afforded by the various intersections that shape her life. The imaginative landscape her writing inhabits has very little connection with other contemporary Indian writers. If one were to think of Indian writing as being either referential in the manner of Nayantara Sahgal or experimental in the manner of Allan Sealy, Namjoshi's work belongs to neither category. What she creates is a fabulist and familiar world, often self-reflexive and parodic, one which parades its inclusiveness and artifice. And yet in a very deep sense, her world is Indian in its philosophical and mythical assumptions. Even without the names and places that occur in her writing, one could recognize a fundamental Indianness in her work. She has said that *Conversations of Cow* could not have been written by someone not possessing an Indian sensibility. It is this convergence, this desire to retain a part of an inherited *weltanschauung* while asserting a freedom from fetters that insist on conformity that one encounters repeatedly in her writing.

Namjoshi's imagery is often recognizably Indian. The landscape she depicts gathers its strength from the vegetation of Maharashtra. In a very different way, an Indianness permeates the work of Zulfikar Ghose. In a remarkable poem entitled "The Oceans," Zulfikar Ghose speaks of the effects of time, of perception and memory, "of multidimensional and tumultuous existences," and adds: "I want to see again what I have seen / to confirm former convictions and to know / that a certain vision is a continuing truth" (*Memory*, 28-29). Memory serves to validate and underpin the vision, although the expression of that vision could be a deliberate departure from the kind of realism that memory insists on. Apart from two novels, very little of his fiction specifically focuses on India or Pakistan. Quite self-consciously, his writing seeks out other

landscapes that have no ostensible bearing on South Asia. In *Figures of Enchantment*, the character Popayan offers an insight into this ambivalent stance through a compelling metaphor: "He himself had known the demon that could suddenly possess the soul and draw it to some alien landscape as if it were a bird migrating from a dusty scrubland, where it had twittered and warbled, that can discover the full range of its singing voice . . . in a cool dark, forest that is as unlike its native habitat as is the terrain of the moon from that of the earth" (62). The imagined world, the world created by artifice, may be only tangentially related to the referential, but that in no way inhibits the writing; in fact, it becomes integral to his work, which, in any event, is suspicious of overt realism. As he puts it, "the only certain reality is that which is known to be an appearance . . ." (*Art*, 21). His vision of India transcends, for the most part, remembered realities. What he strives for is a freedom from geographical markers, from facile formulations of nation and nationalism, without being impervious to notions of identity.

Ghose's work is a far cry from, say, that of Rohinton Mistry, whose *Such a Long Journey* attempts to chart in meticulous detail the lives of a group of Parsis in Bombay. Mistry's work, not unlike Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*, is less concerned with the collective than with the stresses of a small, often beleaguered, community in India. In this respect, his work resembles Michael Ondaatje's semi-autobiographical work about Sri Lanka, namely, *Running in the Family*. While both Ondaatje and Mistry are concerned with landscapes that have been left behind, the former's work is insistently experimental, often parading its constructedness, while the latter's is referential. A sense of nostalgia pervades the work of both writers, but the similarity ends there, and if Mistry's work leaves one with the impression that Bombay needs to be relived, Ondaatje's work asserts that Sri Lanka needs to be refashioned.

Mistry's work is about Bombay, and at first glance there is very little in the novel to distinguish it from any novel written in India in a regional language. A part of the novel's strength derives from the act of translation—of capturing the quotidian details of Bombay in a language largely alien to that world. More importantly, the sensibility—the perspective of the marginalized—is what links the novel to diasporic South Asian writing. There is very little "Canadian" content in the novel, although it is in its angle of vision an expatriate novel. A close parallel is Arnold Itwaru's *Shanti*, again a novel about "home" but narrated from the perspective of one who recognizes the complex workings of a hegemonic system.

Itwaru's work, along with those of David Dabydeen, Kirpal Singh,

Satendra Nandan and M G Vassanji, suggests at once the appropriateness and irony of the "South Asian" grouping. In their work one sees the realities of Guyana, Singapore, Fiji and East Africa. They recreate the experience of migration, and of dispersal occasioned by the colonial project. They also reveal that generalizations hardly suffice and that the experience of Singapore and Fiji, for instance, have to be seen from very different perspectives. They also reveal important differences in cultural assimilation. As Nalini Natarajan rightly points out, "a good number of diasporic Indians living in Western countries, for instance, seek at least partial assimilation to bolster their socioeconomic status; however, a large percentage of diasporic Indians residing in places such as Fiji, Kenya, and the Caribbean resist or even reject assimilation because of their sense of cultural superiority over the indigenous peoples" (xvi). To move from Nandan's *The Wounded Sea* to Vassanji's *No New Land* is to be conscious of very different worlds inhabited by those of Indian origin. And from here to move to the minimalist poems of Kirpal Singh is also to realize the curious interplay between the personal and political in a country like Singapore. The term "South Asian" suggests a retreat from arbitrary inclusion and a consolidation of ethnic identification, although one cannot fail to recognize the obvious subversion achieved by the multiplicity it accomodates.

Politics appears repeatedly in South Asian writing, in subdued fashion in Shashi Tharoor and Vikram Seth, and in more obvious ways in several others, including Tariq Ali, Rajiva Wijesinha and Jean Arasanayagam. Morality and violence are constant preoccupations in Ali's work as the author moves from South Africa to Spain and the Soviet Union, always to explore the pressures of living in the midst of an oppressive system. Wijesinha and Arasanayagam write insistently about the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, about the absurdity and trauma of living in a country where all are by definition "South Asian" and yet each side subscribes to a nationalist myth that valorizes itself and marginalizes others.

As against the preoccupation with versions of home is the writing that confronts the reality of exile. Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* are about groups of migrants in Britain from the Caribbean and from India. Such writing often contains a tendentious edge, and confronts issues of racism, of religious bigotry, of miscegenation and forms of discrimination. Here too the writing hardly conforms to a simple pattern of resistance. In the prefatory comments that precede the stories in *Darkness*, Bharati Mukherjee speaks about her own experiences as an immigrant first in Canada and later in the United

States. She makes a distinction between the distancing of exile and the inclusion afforded by becoming an immigrant. Her movement from one country to another also coincides with a conversion from one version of the immigrant to another. Going to the United States is, according to her, "a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of migration" (3). Her writing is as much about the pain of alienation as it is about the need for assimilation. Aamer Hussein, too, speaks in binary terms in an essay, appropriately titled "The Echoing of Quiet Voices," but his vision is one of doubling rather than division. The process he perceives is one of accumulation, as the expatriate writer adds the exilic experience to the inherited one. Of expatriation he says: "There is, instead, a tremendous inherent privilege in the term, a mobility of mind if not always of matter, to which we as writers should lay claim: a doubling instead of a split" (102). There are others, such as Salman Rushdie, who perceive the intersection of home and exile in relation to a new, interstitial space, which is located on the margins of two cultures and yet retains its own distinctiveness, its own centre. It is a concept not unlike the "borderlands" discussed by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, who says about the new *mestiza*: "she has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (79). Rushdie discusses this sense of an interstitial centre in some detail in *Imaginary Homelands* in which he claims that "however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy" (15). An intriguing and complex concept, this space eschews the notion of otherness in favour of autonomy, but one that foregrounds the imaginative instead of the referential. Rushdie makes no claim to create realistic worlds. "We will" says the author "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (10).

None of these makes the task of defining South Asian writing any simpler. In fact, even a body of writing more manageable, like Indian writing in English, has always occupied a contentious space. Vikram Seth, for instance, belongs clearly to a realist tradition and *A Suitable Boy* captures in minute detail the lives of Indians in the 1950s. Tharoor too works with modern India, and yet his mode in *The Great Indian Novel* is distinctly mythical, drawing on the *Mahabharata* to create a contemporary, if satirical, epic. Add to these, say, G V Desani's *All About H Hatter* and one recognizes that generalizations are at best provisional.

A classification such as "South Asian" is, paradoxically, more than a category. It resists easy formulations. Its difference is what makes V S Naipaul, himself a writer of South Asian origin, dismiss Indian writing as flawed and aimless. He claims that "the novels themselves are documents of the Indian confusion" (216). He faults the writing for not doing what it does seek to do in the first place. Naipaul seeks a particular kind of order, the kind that is paraded by him in *The Enigma of Arrival* and satirized by David Dabydeen in *Disappearance*, and it is Naipaul's failure to see that order that causes his disappointment. In a different context, New points out that "the cast of mind that defines by claiming universal truths—and then sustains these 'truths' by excluding 'messy' alternatives—appears to enjoy the neatness of categories, and perhaps relaxes in the associative, generalizing appeal of metonymy" (6). And this is precisely the basis of Naipaul's criticism.

South Asian writing is not necessarily about economic and social realities. And if it is, it works with assumptions that are noticeably different from Western norms. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* acknowledges its debt to *The Tin Drum*, but to read it without a sense of the Indian epic would be to misread and misinterpret the text. The impulse that lies behind such writing finds expression in an essay by Sasenarine Persaud who, having discussed the Indianness of his novel, *The Ghost of Bellow's Man*, claims: "One thing is certain and this is that this work, like the work of other writers of Indian ancestry born in the West Indies, is deeply influenced by Indian aesthetics" (27). Such comments may well become generalizations, but they do provide a salutary reminder that South Asian writing is not simply an offshoot of a Western tradition.

The last three decades witnessed yet another phase in the South Asian diaspora, as writers from East Africa, South Africa, the Caribbean, Sri Lanka, India and several other nations left their homeland, by choice or by necessity, and created homes for themselves in England, Canada, the United States or Australia. To say what their work does not seek to do is perhaps easier than to define what it does achieve. These are not meant to be imitative of a British or American tradition, except in very general generic terms. And this is also probably one of the reasons why these works do not readily fit into any easy taxonomy. M G Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* is about Tanzania and Shyam Selvadurai's *A Funny Boy* is about Sri Lanka, and they are both South Asian in a special sense. The issue, however, is not the label, but the vision offered by these works. The perspective of these works is at least in part a result of migration, and that is crucial to an understanding of such writing. Selvadurai's writing

is about ethnic strife and sexual politics, and neither one is likely to have found expression that readily in a Sri Lankan context. To be able to write about such issues with such honesty requires the perspective and security of exile. And if a lot of this writing is distinguished by a nostalgic gaze, it is also important to recognize that such a vision is shaped and altered by the otherness of exile.

In an introduction to a collection of essays on writers of the Indian diaspora, Natarajan quite rightly insists that "because the circumstances surrounding diasporic movements from the Indian subcontinent are so various, generalizations can only be made with caution" (xiv). And she adds that the term *Indian* "can also indicate an unproblematized category subject to the fallacies of essentialism and homogenization" (xv). Even as one speculates on the various strands that connect and distinguish this body of writing, one needs to remind oneself that the significance of this literature is dependent on conventions that are widely different from Western ones. As Arun Mukherjee rightly comments, "Contrary to the assertions of the liberal humanist critics, literary appreciation as well as literary production are culture based and no universal criteria can be worked out that will apply regardless of cultural differences" (26).

To invoke cultural and political specificity is not to circumvent aesthetic considerations. And even here one can hardly expect consensus among South Asian writers. Ghose, for instance, claims: "We keep putting words together that re-invent the self, that conjure up images which is our way of testing the solidity of reality . . . which, once created . . . possesses the aura of revelatory truth" (*Art*, 62). To apply this to the work of, say, Bapsi Sidhwa and Suniti Namjoshi would be futile, for they work with very different thematic concerns. Aesthetic value is not a fixed category and established categories would not, for instance, explain the structure of Itwaru's *Shanti* or Ravi Velloo's *Kampung Chicken*. One can hardly underestimate the symbiotic relation between the subjective position of these novels and the imagination that shapes the experience. If one chooses to ignore the historical context one would also misunderstand the imagination that shapes the work. If one foregrounds the thematic at the expense of the artistic one indulges in a pointless solipsism. In an artistic climate that all but worships critical jargon, it is easy to forget that it is literature that shapes and determines the course of criticism. South Asian writing, then, is about experiences that have not found adequate expression, and in realizing its project it also insists on a constant rethinking of outmoded aesthetic standards.

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Tariq Ali

Born in Lahore, Tariq Ali grew up in Pakistan before moving to Oxford, where he studied Politics and Economics at Exeter College. He is a film-maker, a critic and a writer and is currently employed at Bandung in London.

Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree, Tariq Ali's most recent novel, begins with a description of Yazid's chess statuettes, given to him as a present by the carpenter Juan, himself a victim of religious persecution in Spain. The carefully-crafted pieces provide a visual image for the thematic preoccupation of the text. The Moors are given the colour white and "their Queen was a noble beauty with a mantilla, her spouse a red-bearded monarch with blue eyes . . ." On the other hand, the Christians are black "and they had been carved as monsters" (7). The chess set thus serves as a gesture of resistance, an emblem of the antagonism and ongoing struggle between the Muslims and the Christians in Moorish Spain. The dualism, of which the chess set serves as a synecdoche, provides the basis for the narrative as the novel traces the fall of a Muslim way of life distinguished by its tolerance and its magnanimity.

As the novel progresses the simple binary with which the novel begins gives way to a rich ambivalence. Multiple narratives dispel the authority of a univocal voice without diminishing the tendentious quality of the text. If the novel celebrates a multicultural Islam, it does so in a manner that recreates a culture in all its complexity. The outsiders, the rebels, the converts and even the enemies are created with a fullness that reinforces their humanity. The political context of oppression is never lost sight of, but what gives the novel its particular texture is its capacity to problematize what could well have been seen as a straightforward binary.

Politics is perhaps the one constant in all of Tariq Ali's writing, which includes fiction, drama, film scripts and criticism. *Streetfighting Years*, *Can Pakistan Survive?* and *Redemption*, to name a few, are all about politics. If his criticism is strengthened by an in-depth knowledge of the political scene in Europe, Asia and Latin America, his fiction and drama are a result of the imaginative transformation of political issues into art. A narrow "national" focus hardly encompasses the range of Tariq Ali's

work which is framed more by thematic concerns than geographical boundaries. Thus *Necklaces*, for example, is set in South Africa, and raises the problematic issue of the need for resistance while not turning away from the morality of violence. Working with the practice of "necklacing" —burning with a tire—informers, the author creates a play that demonstrates the ambivalence of what could well be rationalised as self-preservation or simple nemesis. The play, very much like *Iranian Nights*, which was a response to the Rushdie affair, is topical, timely and insistently complex.

Tariq Ali's most notable achievement as a writer is probably his recent novel, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*. And it is fitting that this novel, which traces the fall of Moorish Spain, should be awarded the Archbishop's Prize in Spain.

INTERVIEW

Your work as a political activist and a writer, taken together, presents a profile that is almost unique. Among contemporary writers who belong, in general terms, to the South Asian diaspora, no one has been as involved in global politics as you have been. Did this preoccupation begin before you left Pakistan?

I was interested in world politics long before I left Pakistan. I have attempted a brief explanation of the reasons for this in *Streetfighting Years*. Pakistan was a young country at the height of the Cold War. Its unelected leaders, civilian and military, had decided to align the country with the United States. Successive Prime Ministers and Presidents went regularly to kiss ass in the White House. Those students, like myself, who were hostile, for example, to the Ayub military dictatorship were also hostile to its global sponsors, the United States and Great Britain.

You mention in one of your books that your mother was a member of the Communist Party. Was she an active member? How did that affect your own views on politics?

My mother, Tahira, joined the Communist Party of India in 1941 at the age of seventeen. She was strongly under my father's influence. He had joined as a student in the late thirties. When Pakistan was formed, my father did not rejoin the newly-formed Communist Party of Pakistan, but my mother remained an activist till the Party was banned in 1951.

You also mention that your father was the editor of the Pakistan Times. *What did that entail? Until it capitulated to political pressure, was it truly an independent newspaper?*

The Progressive Papers Limited was the most radical and the most influential chain of newspapers in South Asia. It was the brainchild of Mian Iftikharuddin, a leading left-wing political leader of the Punjab and a fellow-traveller of the Communist Party. He was a very close friend of my father and talked him out of active politics and into political journalism. The team of editors assembled by Itfikharuddin consisted of the country's leading intellectuals: Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Chiragh Hasan Hasrat, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Sibte Hassan as well as my father. The newspapers soon acquired gigantic circulation, the largest in the country. From the very beginning they were critical of the failures of successive regimes internally and wanted Pakistan to follow a neutral course in world politics like Nehru and, later, Nasser. It was a strange situation. The Left as such was very weak in Pakistan, but the Progressive Papers were very strong. It was something of an anomaly. The US Embassy in Pakistan saw these newspapers as a permanent irritant and when General Ayub seized power in October 1958, the Americans asked him to deal with the *Pakistan Times*. The Progressive Papers offices were surrounded by soldiers and the newspapers were taken over by the Government in April 1959. My father resigned in protest and Ayub ensured that he was not employed for another ten years. This episode pained me a great deal. But it also made one realize that press freedom and democratic rights, in general, had to form the basis of any socialist programme. Anticommunists in Pakistan celebrated the government takeover of the Progressive Papers. Their owner, Mian Iftikharuddin, died of a broken heart in 1962. Journalism became a mercenary profession. The prostitutes showed greater dignity.

Was this kind of political climate the backdrop to your confrontation with Bhutto?

Yes, but Bhutto himself was one of the more liberal elements in that regime. My feelings towards him were ambivalent. I think one side of him was very radical and the other side had to defend the regime when he was a minister in Ayub's government. Even in the early days, he was very bright and then he broke with Ayub and later led a movement against him and became the principal focus of the antidictatorship struggle in West Pakistan.

You grew up in Lahore before and after Partition. I am reminded of Zulfikar

Ghose who, in his autobiography, describes the experience of growing up in Sialkot and Bombay. What was your experience of Lahore? Was it then a dynamic city?

I loved Lahore. My first years were spent in our family apartments on Nicholson Road, near the tiny streets and shops of Qila Gujjar Singh. I always found it a vibrant city and loved nothing better than playing cricket with the street urchins every weekend. And yet . . . and yet it was only half the city it once had been. The city had been ethnically cleansed during the bloodbaths of 1947. Partition was a bloody memory for my parents. They had lost all their Sikh and Hindu friends to India. I remember often of how, when we were going somewhere in the car, my father would point at a house and he and my mother would recall its Hindu or Sikh inhabitants. Lahore was a multicultural city par excellence and as I grew up I read accounts of what it had once been like. It was history, slightly unreal. It did not bother me during my youth. I enjoyed Lahore a great deal. I loved life in Government College under its ultraliberal Principal, the great Punjabi scholar, Dr Nazir Ahmed. I used to bike everywhere, knew every small street in the city. Like other young men interested in politics and literature, I would spend a great deal of my time in the tea and coffeehouses on the lower end of the Mall. From this vantage point we could also keep an eye on the young women on whom our hearts were set. In my case a languorous beauty who was an art student. At the first sighting I would leave my friends and follow my beloved, usually to exchange a few words face to face in order to heighten the real romance which was confined to long telephone calls. These calls became a substitute for the real thing, but this did not mean they were any less intense. We used to boast to each other the next day. "Four hours!" "Is that all?" someone would mock. "I had six hours." I think my greatest triumph was spending a whole night on the telephone, though the pleasure was slightly spoilt by the realization that our phone was bugged by the security services.

Often we would go boating on the Ravi, sometimes when it was lit by the moon. Lahore, during the fifties and the early sixties, was a pleasant town. Today it has grown out of all recognition. A filthy, polluted metropolis, but with a few oases still intact.

Streetfighting Years *is a very compelling book. It is one of those rare books in which tone, style and content seem to merge quite seamlessly. I want to come back in a moment to some of the issues you bring up in the book, but I would also like to draw your attention to what you didn't deal with. For instance, during this time, the Left in Sri Lanka was quite active and it counted among*

its members some of the finest people in the country. You don't devote much time to the country or its experiences. Was that deliberate?

It was deliberate. I could not write about every trip or every experience. My two trips to Sri Lanka were brief and both were involved in helping to sort out factional differences within a Trotskyist grouping. I stayed at the headquarters of the Ceylon Mercantile Union, just on the edge of the sea. This was really convenient as I used to get up every morning, cross the railway track and go for a long swim to the great horror of the local fishermen who thought me crazy. The swim prepared me for the hard day that lay ahead, confined to a room hearing different groupings explain why they were correct. On one occasion Bala Tampoe drove me to Kandy stopping en route to show the sites of the JVP insurrection.

I now wish I had also written about my two visits to North Korea, a truly surreal experience with enormous comic possibilities. Kim il Sung's Korea was a parody of Stalin's Soviet Union. The "great and beloved leader" was everywhere. On one occasion as we were driving back to Pyongyang from a trip to the country, the car stopped abruptly. I sighed. The driver smiled. My interpreter and his boss got out. I thought they needed to urinate, so I remained in the car, but they signalled and I followed them. It was on this spot, they informed me, that the great and beloved leader first saw his mother after years of exile. I roared with laughter. "Please," I pleaded with them. "Enough of all this. Soon you'll be showing me spots where the great leader urinated and defecated . . . " To my amazement they both burst out laughing and from then became human beings. We talked a great deal about the quality and conditions of life, which revealed the reality behind the slogans.

Streetfighting Years *describes the tribunal to arraign the US for war crimes in Vietnam. Until I read the book, I was not aware of your involvement with the project. Appearing before the tribunal must have been an important experience.*

The War Crimes Tribunal to arraign the United States for genocide in Vietnam was modelled on the Nuremberg Trials which followed the defeat of fascism at the end of the war. The difference being that this initiative was the result of a meeting of two minds. Two of Europe's most distinguished public intellectuals, Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, issued the call to which many, myself included, responded eagerly. You've obviously read in *Streetfighting Years* of my total obsession with the war in Vietnam. The War Crimes Tribunal was therefore a welcome initiative. It was not allowed to convene in London (a Labour Government was in power) or in Paris (where General de Gaulle, uncharacteris-

tically, caved in to US pressure). We met in Stockholm where the Socialist Prime Minister, Olaf Palme, was a strong opponent of the Vietnam war. Many years later, when Palme was assassinated, I did wonder whether some nutty spokes in the USA were paying off old scores. His murderer has still not been found.

You spent the better part of the sixties and seventies actively fighting for various international causes and were heavily involved with Left politics. Do you regret this in any way?

Not at all. In my book *Streetfighting Years* and even in the final pages of *Redemption* I indicate that I don't regard that phase of my life as a waste.

Did you feel that you had to move on to other things?

I felt by the eighties the world situation had altered and something fundamental was going to happen. I felt that there was a wall in front of one in the shape of a massive roadblock in the way of achieving what we wanted to achieve. You had to move in another direction. So I started making films, writing books and gradually got to where I am.

Could you elaborate on that aspect of your work?

I made documentaries—we had a program which we put out on British television which we called The Bandung File. This was probably the only international program of its kind anywhere in the world. That ran for four years from '84 to '89. We used to cover the Indian subcontinent, Africa, the Caribbean, Black America, and so forth. During that time, I also scripted a film called *Partition* which was about the partition of the Indian subcontinent. That is how I began to get involved in the more creative side. In this culture there is a dividing line between aesthetics and politics. Someone like me is constantly trying to erase that dividing line, to cross that line, as it happens in most other cultures.

You don't make much distinction between writing fiction, criticism, drama, and so forth. Such a classification is difficult in your work.

Well, there is a distinction. For me writing plays and fiction marked a very sharp change in my own priorities. I felt that was the way I was pushed by history, by myself.

There is very little in your education, both in Pakistan and England, that leads to or holds the promise of writing literature.

Absolutely right. This was something deep in me that got pushed out at a certain point.

What made you read so widely, not only traditional authors but also contemporary postcolonial writers?

When I was growing up in Pakistan, we had a huge collection of Russian novels in translation at home—Gogol, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, etc.—and that first got me interested in fiction. And then when I came abroad I read all the English classics. I read Dickens, Bronte, Austen etc. I enjoyed it.

You didn't think of reading literature at Oxford.

No, I didn't. I was told those days that if you did literature you had to learn Old English. The thought was nightmarish. Maybe if I had gone to North America, I might have studied literature. Oxford courses, when I was there from '63 to '65, were a nightmare.

Was Oxford also not willing to accommodate your politics?

It was conducive to them in many ways. I had come from Pakistan, which was under a military regime. In that country one was not allowed to think freely. And in comparison Oxford was a real joy. I have criticisms of Oxford, but I enjoyed it immensely and the intellectual atmosphere was very stimulating. And I learned a great deal.

You mention in Streetfighting Years *that your final exam would well have been a disaster because of your political stance.*

That was a sort of rebellion against the system. At that time there was a war going on in Vietnam and I was so caught up in it that I felt everything else had to be subordinated to it. And so my answers in my Oxford exams were a very deliberate gesture against the Oxford Establishment. It was like saying, "I don't care a fuck about you, go away."

What was it like to be connected with a person like Bertrand Russell?

Well, I met him twice, and he was a great old man. He was very stimulating intellectually despite the fact that he was in his eighties. It was wonderful, but I am not star-struck by any of these great names.

How about your visit to South America?

That was frightening, but then one was young and didn't care. I used to think if I were to be killed, well that was that. So many people were being killed and there was nothing special about that. Subsequently a friend of mine who writes books about Latin America said that one of the Generals in Bolivia, who was then a Colonel, had told him that if they had known who I was they would have shot me.

That is scary when you think back about it.

Yes, and another thing that was scary was that in the early seventies one day I was standing in the street chatting to an Iraqi oppositionist who was a friend of mine when someone came up to him and talked to

him. He was a cousin of his who was being trained to become an officer at the Sandhurst Military Academy. They spoke in Arabic and then my friend said that his cousin would very much like to be introduced to me. I agreed and we chatted for a bit and then this man left. And then my friend told me that his cousin had mentioned that while they were training at Sandhurst, one of the things they had been trained in was how to deal with civil disorder. They used to flash pictures of the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and around some of the principal leaders—including myself—they used to put a target so they could shoot at us. So to hear that was scary.

Streetfighting Years *also mentions your interest in the theatre and your response to attending theatrical first nights in London. How did you become a theatre critic?*

My interest in the theatre goes back a long way. In Lahore I was Secretary of the Dramatic Club and loved treading the boards, even though I was a terrible actor. I loved the frisson which only a real live audience can provide. When you write a history book or a novel, the response is atomized. Very different. The response to a play is always fascinating. Do they like it? Why is it that one night they liked a particular joke, while the next night it was ignored? My own playwrighting is always a response to some crisis. I think the theatre has a role to play in urgent responses to the big events making or unmaking our world. *Iranian Nights* was a sharp response to the Rushdie affair. *Moscow Gold* was an epic Meyerholdian play, a response to Gorbachev and perestroika. Some of our "predictions" turned out to be not so far from what subsequently happened.

I became a theatre critic because I was offered the job by *Town* magazine. It was a magazine like *Esquire*—it doesn't exist any longer. Because I enjoyed the theatre, they offered me the opportunity of being a theatre critic. But the British theatre was peculiarly awful at that time. It was going to come out of it just at the time I left, but the Boulevard Theatre was then quite moribund. It put me off theatre for a long time until it began to change in the late sixties.

Was it mainly social plays that were being performed?

It was mainly drawing-room comedies, and the most interesting things you saw, for instance, were like Peter Brooks's production on the Vietnam war called *U S*. I wrote a critical review of it. Then there was also Peter Weiss's, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean Paul Marat, As Carried Out by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton under the Direction of*

the Marquis de Sade. This was a brilliant play. Things were beginning to change, and under the influence of Kenneth Tynan the overall quality began to get better. But the kinds of plays I reviewed were generally bad.

Were you interested in writing plays before you became a theatre critic?

No, and for a long time I didn't think I would write a play. What happened was that after the Salman Rushdie fatwa, I felt there had to be a response—a cultural response—so I went to Max Stafford Clark—the artistic director of The Royal Court—with a suggestion and he thought it was a good idea. But since I had not written anything for the theatre he suggested that I work with another playwright. He named a few and I chose Howard Brenton, who was a solid political playwright. So both of us sat down and wrote the play *Iranian Nights*. It was quite a success.

The play Iranian Nights *was occasioned by the Rushdie affair. It was a time when different kinds of efforts were being made to defuse the situation. Your response was a play. What is your sense of Rushdie as a writer and as the author of* The Satanic Verses?

I think Salman Rushdie is an exceptionally gifted writer. My essay on *Midnight's Children* in the *New Left Review* was a public acknowledgment of that fact. In fact I liked *Shame* even better. I still believe that *Shame* is Rushdie's best novel to date. The hullabaloo over *The Satanic Verses* had nothing to do with the literary merits or demerits of the work. The book became a football in Iran where the more fundamentalist clerics used it as a weapon to defeat their opponents.

Iranian Nights *and* Moscow Gold *were written together with Howard Brenton. Did the collaboration work well?*

Howard Brenton is a playwright I have long admired. *Iranian Nights* and *Moscow Gold* were ideas which originated in my head. Howard is a superb crafter of scenes and I wanted to work with him. Happily he agreed. I hope we will work together again.

There is a curious distinction between Iranian Nights *and* Necklaces. *The first play raises several issues about religion but it was not about the various things that happened after the fatwa. Its mode is different, almost abstract and intellectual.* Necklaces *is about something equally topical, but it deals with it in a manner that is very referential.* Necklaces *is also a very disturbing play, and I think my own background of having grown up in Sri Lanka and my concern about what is happening in the country have a lot to do with the effect the play has on me. The problem you deal with is a very complex one. What is the relation between violence and morality? At what point does violence turn self-destructive and affect the psyche of the perpetrator? The play does not offer*

any easy solutions. What was your point of view when you wrote the play?

Necklaces was written after reading an essay on violence and morality by an old friend, Norman Geras. The model of the play was Brecht's "Lehrstuicke" (Learning) plays. Short and polemical. The debate itself is universal. I only used South Africa as a model because the "necklacing," i.e. burning political opponents by putting a rubber tyre around their necks and setting it on fire, originated in the townships. The play raises problems which apply to the situations in Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Burundi, the former Yugoslavia, Palestine and Guatemala.

How did the audience respond to the play? Was it controversial?

The audiences were small, but very involved. There were a few occasions when some Winnie Mandela supporters walked out in a rage, but that just shows that political theatre can be effective.

Necklaces *is a longish play.* Iranian Nights *is actually a short one. How did the length work in relation to the audience and all the conventions that go with performance?*

We used to put it on at six o'clock, before the main show in the theatre. It was finished at 6:45. In that sense it was quite an interesting strategy and the Royal Court people were surprised that during the two weeks they put it on, the theatre was packed.

You mentioned that you thought Shame *was probably Rushdie's best novel to date. Your own narrative mode in your two novels is very different. You don't really use that mode of magic realism in your writing.*

No, not really. That's not my style of writing. I do think that even *Redemption* is a realist novel.

I found Redemption *vastly entertaining and somewhat puzzling. I wish I knew more about the context to understand the satire. Why did you decide to write such a novel?*

Redemption was written over two months beginning over New Year's Eve. I wrote it partially to amuse myself, but also to make a few serious points about the self-damage which Troskyism inflicted on itself during sectarian wars which lasted for half a century. It is a *roman a clef* but quite a few people have told me that it made them laugh even though they had no idea of who these strange characters were based on. The novel was written as a satire. Some liked it. Some hated it. Always a good thing.

One of the issues about Redemption *that has puzzled me is the notion of androgyny. What was the purpose of androgyny in the novel? It seemed an*

important motif.

That was the surreal side of the novel. Under extreme pressure, reality becomes surreal. That was the point I was trying to make, and actually, I think in one of Marge Pierce's novels—probably *Woman on the Edge of Time*—that image is important. However, the notion of a man beginning to lactate to feed his baby is something that just came to me. There was no purpose as such. It just came out of my head. I think in extreme conditions men can wet-nurse infants. I thought it made Ezra a better human being. Here was something he did even though it had not been predicted in the Transitional Programme of the Fourth International.

That mode of convening a Congress and working back to the various people who were involved—was this something you found appropriate for your preoccupation?

Yes.

You mentioned that the novel was very much therapeutic.

It was very therapeutic. It was my way of getting all that politics out of my system. Some aspects of it, in retrospect, were a waste of time, and I just wanted to be rid of it, and *Redemption* emerged.

Your latest novel, Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree, *has just been awarded the Archbishop's Prize for the best foreign-language fiction by the students in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Your novel is quite a ferocious attack on Catholic fundamentalism, but here they are giving you an award.*

I was really very touched by this award. The novel has done very well in Spain and, for that matter, in Germany. But it was Spain where it was really appreciated, because it is a fictional reconstruction of their own past.

Jean Arasanayagam

Jean Arasanayagam was born in Sri Lanka into a Dutch Burgher family and was educated in Sri Lanka and Scotland. In addition to being a writer, she also teaches English at a teacher's college in Sri Lanka.

In *Such a Long Journey,* Rohinton Mistry includes the somewhat unusual episode involving Major Bilmoria, a Parsi like the rest of the characters in the novel, and his participation in a major political scandal involving huge sums of money. The micro-narrative is unusual mainly because the Parsis have remained, for the most part, outside the political scene, detached from national ideologies that have given rise to ethnic and communal violence. The Burghers in Sri Lanka have been no different, despite political and cultural pressures of various kinds, and their role has been largely that of observers. Hence the apolitical stance of, say, Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family.*

The dichotomy that one perceives between the early work of Jean Arasanayagam—a Burgher married to a Tamil—and her more recent writing, is the one between the need for detachment and the inability to remain unaffected by the cultural and ethnic conflicts devastating the country. The early writing looks at the Sri Lankan experience through a sensibility that is largely personal and insular. These are not free of conflict—for the crisis in cultural identity caused by marrying a Tamil is already a significant strand in the poetry. The watershed was 1983, when the ethnic violence between the Sinhalese and the Tamils foisted upon her a Tamil identity. This becomes a moment of transformation in her writing, as she tries to come to terms with the dilemma of having to defend a culture that was not always willing to accommodate her.

Arasanayagam's recent work, of which *Shooting the Floricans* and *Reddened Water Flows Clear* are significant examples, is about conflict. At one level, it is about the need to come to terms with the Tamil culture of her husband, a culture whose richness is a constant source of fascination and whose rigidity and narrow-mindedness often leads to frustration. Added to that is the trauma of political marginalization, of having to flee violent mobs, of seeking shelter in refugee camps, of being forced to assume an

identity that is alien to her. These intersections give to her work that special texture, that awareness of what it means to occupy a borderland, of having to recognize that polarities of centre and margin, of personal and public, are less rigid than they appear. In one of her poems, appropriately titled "Exile" she poses the question:

You tell me to pack up my bags and go
But where? I turn my face towards
Country after country
Silently I lip read their refusal
What do I call myself
Exile emigré refugee?

Her work is an attempt to give expression to that predicament of alienation, of the need to access areas of experience rarely dealt with in Sri Lankan writing.

INTERVIEW

Twenty years ago, when you published Kindura*—your first collection of poems—you projected the persona of a detached, self-reflective, self-sufficient artist. Would it be accurate to say that at times you were preoccupied more with the "poetic" and less with the experiential?*

Kindura was a different exploration of self, of relationships, of the landscape, but within that collection lay the germ of certain latent themes which were to surface time and time again in other poems. My detachment was not from life; my preoccupations were with the life I was leading at that time. Perhaps some of these experiences were yet to be fully explored. Discoveries must be gradual, and I had to wait for events to happen in my own life which would assume significance; and these things did take place, ultimately. During this period, I was bringing up a young family; there was my marriage, my career, keeping body and soul together. The sense of urgency to write as I do now also comes with new freedoms, purchased at a cost . . . Life was hard during that phase and it is seen in two stories of mine, "A Fistful of Wind" and "The Innocents of the World."

Wasn't this the period of the insurgency as well?

The insurgency of 1971 had taken place; I was aware of its implications, but at that time, I was ensconced within the perimeters of a Roman Catholic college, whose youth had not been affected. I had to emerge out of those confines. I was aware of the separate worlds in which we dwelt—the moralities of our relationship with missionary endeavour, proselytization and the Imperial lessons. We did not even have a national anthem of our own. I had to begin somewhere.

What was the context in which you began writing? Were you influenced by any particular writer? How did you respond to the literary scene in Sri Lanka?

There was in me a sense of urgency to create an alternative life, to see beyond the world, to inhabit that world beyond the actual—not through escapism but something dimensional, non-spatial. I wanted to search for the new metaphor that was still to be discovered and for a new language. Sometimes I was the single inhabitant of that world of my own creation, and I could move in and out of at will. I had the whole tradition of English and European literature, and I had the knowledge of indigenous folk tales and Indian poetry and knew epics in translation. Tagore I had read in my early teens, and I had studied Latin and read Virgil, Ovid, and Cicero. The entire language and metaphor, parable and allegory of the Bible, the Psalms, the Methodist hymnal (lots of translations from early Latin and from German . . . Cowper, John Wesley) were available to me.

As for influences, Yeats and Hopkins even more than Eliot. I also liked Dickinson. I read translations from French poetry. As for Sri Lankan poetry, I used to read Guy Amirthanayagam and Godfrey Goonetilleke in the Union Magazine that my brother used to bring home in his student days. We also had a great deal of song and music in my home. My father sang many ballads and lyrics—Scottish, Irish, and English. We also had Sandeseya poetry at the Sinhala classes. In the midst of all this I was still searching for my own voice and for the authenticity and value which lay within the context of my own experience and locale.

When you started writing you were a teacher, and in some ways you continue to be involved with teaching. That world—of students, parents, peers etc.—does not figure very prominently in your writing. Did you make a conscious choice not to include certain areas of your experience in your writing?

I would not say it was a conscious choice by any means. Sometimes, experience in retrospect takes on greater, more meaningful dimensions. Sometimes, experience needs a longer period of gestation. The world of

students, parents, and peers was very much a part of my life; I just needed time and some major happening or upheaval to transform the experience into literature. Much later, all this was to happen, what was vestigial in my focus was converted into something formal and structured. I think, basically, I never wanted to trivialize what I felt was important.

When you published Kindura, *the insurgency had already taken place, and you make that the subject of a few poems. But such poems constitute a very small portion of your total work. For someone who was to become very "political" later, you show a remarkable detachment. Why is the insurgency, or for that matter the political context, not more central to your early writing?*

First of all I had to understand what the insurgency was all about, being in the environment of a Roman Catholic institution where there was no involvement by both students and staff—the experience was to a certain extent distanced. I was certainly aware of its implications, of the desire for radical change that was sweeping over the country, but to write about it, I had to deal with it on a very different level. I felt a deep need to write about the movement but I had also to tie it up with other happenings to avoid any kind of superficiality. I can write about it now with greater assurance, perhaps as a result of being myself exposed to cataclysmic forces. The gunfire was more distant then. It's nearer to home now and we feel every tremor, much more so than during that period. I suppose the quake had to undermine our own status quo to make us feel.

I know that your poetry has appeared in various journals in Sri Lanka and abroad. Did these journals and writers, particularly those connected with Sri Lanka, have an effect on your writing?

Well, I first wrote and the next stage was to think where my work would fit in. It was important to have a readership that extended beyond the borders and frontiers, both physical and let's say figurative, of one's own country. I began to realize that certain journals abroad had specific interests in certain themes and fields of reference, so I channelled my work in that direction. What I had at hand would, I felt, fit in beautifully here, or here, since there was so much of interest in the experiences of the postcolonial writer. The radicalization, the openness, the political awareness and involvement of the writer are very welcome in many journals abroad.

I was also very conscious of the kind of writing that was surfacing in Sri Lanka, especially the writing in *Channels, Navasilu, New Lankan Re-*

view, Phoenix and *New Ceylon Writing* (that came from Australia). There were writers whom I read with great interest—we were all part of the shared experience, we were all writing within a similar context, the climate of fear, polarization, alienation, war and violence, ethnicity and identity. We were, of course, all writing differently, sometimes even diametrically opposed to each other—that's the way it had to be.

With Apocalypse '83 *you move to a new phase, one that is marked be a more direct style, a greater consciousness of the violence around you. What happened to bring about this change? Did the political scene impact on you in a manner that made it impossible for you to write in the old manner?*

Apocalypse '83 emerged out of an experience that tore my world apart. No longer could there possibly be distance or detachment. I was plunged, together with my family, into the most horrifying, the most terrifying moments of my life. The world would never be the same again. The old dispensation had to be discarded with finality. My husband escaped death by the skin of his teeth. My children too, I would have lost forever. Possessions counted for little. Life was all that mattered. Were we to be considered less than dust to be effaced from this world for no justification whatsoever, except an identity? Everything crashed around us when the mobs came to destroy human life and when we had to seek asylum in the refugee camps. But the terror and fear remained too. Who was going to write about it all? I had witnessed much, we had been victims; I listened to what many others had undergone and I had to document it all. If I had not been in the camps myself, if I had not experienced all that fear and degradation, I would not have felt I had the right to record it all. It was authentic, and from that point there was no turning back for me.

I was struck by the powerful lines in the poem "Fear":

at last history has meaning
when you're the victim . . .

In what sense did history acquire a meaning?

We have looked long enough at history from the point of view of victor or conqueror. It's the victims of conquests, invasions, holocausts, battles, massacres whose stories have the greatest force.

How was Apocalypse '83 *received? Did it alienate you from readers who now felt that you had chosen to adopt a Tamil identity? Suddenly you had chosen to write of events that people would rather forget, and that is sometimes frowned upon.*

Apocalypse '83 won a National Award but it was only because the

judges at that time were impartial, unbiased and strong enough to accept the truth. Yes, it certainly alienated me from certain people who voiced their opinion in no uncertain terms. Many elements felt that there was justification for the events that had happened. Many chose to be blind to the traumatic events of that period. I was advised not to publish it but went ahead anyway.

Trial by Terror, *which came out a few years later, deals with the same theme and in fact includes some of the earlier poems. In some of the poems that are reprinted, changes have been made. "Halt" and "If the Gun Speaks" have been edited. Why were these changes made? Did you feel that the earlier versions were too direct, too tendentious to be good poetry? Do you often revise your writing?*

The changes made were at the discretion of Dr Norman Simms of the University of Waikato who edited this collection. Simms preserves the sense of pressure and tension inherent in them. I now tend to revise my writing, more than I did in the past. I've reached a stage where I have written so much that I have decided not to write fresh poems until I've spent time working on what is now at hand.

Despite the strength of Apocalypse '83, *I think you found your voice in* A Colonial Inheritance. *Here you seem to fuse the personal and the public in a manner that is complex and rich in texture. In a poem called "Ancestors" you speak of*

Leaving me in a kingdom
Without a name
To roam among
A Disinherited race.

Did the ethnic rots of '83 bring you a new awareness about your own predicament?

A Colonial Inheritance could not have emerged without *Apocalypse '83*. One had to follow the other. Without a doubt, my personal predicament gives strength to my lines, but beyond that there is the extension of universality—the feeling that there are "other lives" besides one's own. I came up sharply against that overwhelming need to seek an identity that was separate from the turmoil which my marriage had drawn me into. I really needed to grow very strong in my self awareness, in my being "me" with whatever historical or ethnic strands that made up my psyche. This entailed a total revelation of those beginnings from where I had my existence. I go back in history, search out my ancestors—and wonder what connections I have with them? How have they shaped my desti-

nies? How did they shape theirs?

The formal sophistication of A Colonial Inheritance *is very different from the earlier poetry, where raw experience is given priority over form. In "Roots," for instance, you combine a real concern with identity with a very metaphoric mode. The imagery strengthens and distances the experience at the same time. Were you conscious of writing a very different kind of poetry at this stage?*

One had to find a new metaphor to describe so complex a search for identity. Here too, I would say that I consciously sought a metaphor which derived from indigenous sources as well as from the ocean/voyager/colonial background. Yes, I feel "Roots" was taking me on into the exploration of identity in a very different way from the earlier poems. I was taking a pretty ruthless look at my position in having a colonial ancestry. There was that feeling of isolation, of loneliness and alienation—the searching question too of "Do I belong here?" and "Where do I belong?"

Some of the most moving poems in this collection are concerned with your personal sense of alienation. Having written from a very Tamilian perspective, you appear to have faced the crisis of rejection by your relatives. Is it paradoxical that you felt the need to write about a society that refused to accept you?

Oh yes, quite definitely. It was a crisis in my life, one that I found very difficult to accept, especially since much of the rejection was generated by the women in the family—my husband's family. They just shut me out from every happening in their lives. They didn't ever want to think of my feelings. When my mother-in-law came on a reluctant but traditional visit to see her newly-born granddaughters (twins), she slipped gold bracelets on their wrists, and addressed me directly, saying, "I came only to see whether my son was happy." There were countless other rejections, still I had to understand what it was all about and why. It's something I feel I have finally achieved.

Out of Our Prisons We Emerge *came out the same year as* Trial *but the two are very different in subject. What was the context of* Prisons*?*

I spent thirteen months (1985-86) in Scotland. *Prisons* dealt with very personal experiences in Glasgow. I enjoyed my new freedom, moving out of the narrow niche I had occupied in my country. Once more it was a case of being so wholly and totally on my own and my sojourn in another country yielding a set of rich and complex experiences.

Prisons *is also a remarkably unified collection. Its unity is not so much thematic as tonal and metaphoric. If* Apocalypse '83 *is bound together by the ethnic violence,* Prisons *is connected by a pattern of imagery that includes*

prisons, caves, cages, wombs, and so forth. Were the poems in this collection written to make up a book?

No, not consciously so. In my room in the very heart of Glasgow, in Baird Hall, I would write these poems really for myself and for a few friends to whom I would read. There was no other audience at that time as we were all engaged in academic work—exams, dissertations, etc. It was when I returned home that I felt that I needed a kind of permanent record of those feelings I had experienced there. I selected just a few, there are many others that I need to look over again.

You have been to Iowa, Scotland and more recently to Exeter. Have these experiences changed your writing?

My travels are contained within my writing—everything finds its way into my work. A whole lot of poems have surfaced out of the American experience; likewise Scotland, Exeter, India and Australia. The metaphor changes with each sojourn, together with the language, shape and form. With my visits to England especially, I am aware of the colonial and postcolonial aspects for the reassessment and the rewriting of history.

I remember reading your comment that you are concerned with the question of women's identity. How important is this in relation to your corpus? In what sense does gender become an important issue for you?

Women's identity is becoming increasingly important to me both in my poetry and in my fiction. In five of my plays too, women figure very prominently. I write about women from all strata of society in my country, and about the burning issues of the day—which include rape and prostitution, the battered woman, the martial feminist, etc.

Why did you choose to make poetry your main genre rather than the novel, although you did publish one novel?

The novel *The Outsider* was published some time ago at Nagasaki University, edited by Le Roy Robinson. It dealt not only with the theme of a mixed marriage but also with the loss, fragmentation and displacement within a family that leaves the traditional village in the north of the island and moves to the city. It deals very much with family relationships within a tight-knit Tamil, Hindu, Vellala family.

Somehow I felt that my metier was poetry. Poetry came very naturally to me and I could write on a variety of themes . . . . There were never-ending sources from which I could draw my inspiration—sometimes the poem itself appeared whole and complete in my mind and drew me along unrouted ways. However, I am now beginning to explore the tremendous potential of the novel. Many of my publishers have ex-

pressed a desire for a novel. I feel too that there's a wider readership for a novel, and stylistically one has more freedom in writing one.

Your short stories, at least those that appear in Fragments, *are more eclectic than your poetry. Here again, in relative terms, this is a small component in your total corpus. What are your thoughts about the short story? Are you likely to be doing more along the same line? "The Outsider" is a lot more critical of Tamil society than* Bhairawa. *How would you explain the shift in attitudes?*

I think much of my poetry centres around themes I make use of in my fiction, but I think this will be more apparent in the new collections of short stories that will appear shortly. My poetry is also beginning to make use of a wider spectrum of themes. I have published only two short-story collections, but all that is changing radically, now that I have found important and responsible publishers. *Kunapipi* found great potential in "I Am an Innocent Man" and made it the lead story in one of its issues. That really set me on. Then "Mother-in-law" appeared, and "Voice of Women" was translated into Sinhala. It was very well received. I now have requests from various journals abroad for my fiction. The stories have really been piling up all these years. I suppose I was waiting for the right publisher and the right time.

It has taken me about seven to eight years to get "The Outsider" into focus. I've rewritten parts of it, pulled out certain sections and included others. It is a necessary and powerful piece of work. I am not looking just at myself and my relationships with a particular family—there's so much else too. Even if the family had accepted me, I would have probed into their lifestyle, including the tragedy inherent in the dichotomy of their lives. They had so much richness, so much ritual within the village—of course it was inevitable that they had to move, but so much has been lost as a result. I wouldn't say that I am critical of Tamil society—it's really something else—a deep, traumatic hurt for what the family made me feel—the exclusion, the lack of love. They would not accept me for what I was and I was determined not to remain the onlooker. Also I think that a heritage is valuable but it should not blind you to what others possess. I have had Tamil friends who shared that life with me, the life which I wanted so deeply to know. This keeping of yourself apart does not help. "The Outsider" has been very difficult for me to write but it had to be written. One shouldn't isolate oneself within a culture. I had to overcome my lack of knowledge too—I wanted to learn—and they excluded me. No one should be hurt the way they hurt me.

To move back to poetry, Reddened Water Flows Clear *gives the impression of a more ambitious undertaking than many of the earlier works. What is the*

significance of the title?

The title comes from a line in the poem "Naked they bathe in the springs." Let me quote:

Naked they bathe in the springs
Wipe the bone clean of blood
Let the sap seep slowly back within
The marrow feel the water gush
Through the rock, cleanse the flesh
That has long been polluted by
The stench of death bare their
Wounds to the sun, red flowers
That stunned the dark now fade with light,
Blood leaps and dances,
The reddened water flows . . .

It is my vision of the world where that great cleansing from the wounds of death have taken place and where pristine beauty and wholeness may be seen once more.

The texture of the poems here is, I think, unlike anything you have done before. You seem to have experimented with this kind of writing before, but you have perfected it here. What one sees is a careful orchestration of voices: the literal merges with the metaphoric, the formal with the colloquial and the solemn with the comic. Did you need this mode to express a new consciousness?

Yes, you have encapsulated the thought and idea most expressively. Every facet you comment on is contained within those poems—"the new consciousness," is I think a very significant way of describing my poetic mode. I'm glad you commented on the juxtaposition of the solemn with the comic as well. These are the voices I hear in my mind, these are the motifs and patterns that form the work as a whole.

There is also in this collection a growing awareness of history—both personal and colonial. Were you becoming increasingly conscious of the need to focus on history?

Yes, there certainly is a growing awareness of history in many of my works—especially in my poetry—and this awareness is both personal and colonial. I need to be specially aware because of my own colonial connections through European forebears and my travels, especially in England. For example I am writing a series of poems which emerged out of the Exeter experience where I lived in one of the great country houses of a family that belonged very much to the colonial era—Reed Hall, Streatham Drive. I was strongly affected by the ironies of myself inhabit-

ing its history-laden rooms, walking in the Italian Garden, reading about the floricans (here was my metaphor for the colonial/postcolonial experience) and much else. I spent time with many former Empire builders too, listening to their reminiscences, and with many women who had once been part of the structure, of the administration of that Empire. Their reactions and responses to my work were very interesting.

Could you comment on "Mother-in-Law"? As a person, she figures in several poems, but it appears to me that she is also more than an individual. The problems you experience with her are also symbolic of a more personal crisis. What was the impulse behind the poem?

Over the years, my attitudes have varied towards my mother-in-law. I see her as a matriarch, but firmly entrenched within her hierarchy of birth, family, caste, and religion. The personal crisis probably lay within the fact that I had moved out of my own Burgher enclave and into a completely new culture. I didn't even realize how important caste figured in the life of my husband's family—"high caste," "good caste," "Vellala caste"—I just found certain things in common with my husband and felt we could make a go of our relationship. I didn't know that all these appendages were attached to family relationships and marriage. Initially, I also needed their support in day-to-day problems and crises of bringing up my children, working etc. This they withheld. Time and time again it was my own family, all of them, who stood by me. I wanted to get to know my mother-in-law but she would have none of me—nor would the others, including my husband's sisters. Strange isn't it, that women should have so little sympathy towards their own kind?

It was when my mother-in-law grew old and displaced herself that she came to me. We had to resolve a great deal of conflict. Forgiveness is there, mixed with pity for her own personal tragedies. I feel much more for her now than the traditional, accepted daughter-in-law! One of her compliments was that she likened me to the woman poet Auvaiyar. We have a little more time left for those deep wounds to heal completely.

The alienation you draw attention to in such poems is in striking contrast to the love with which you write about Navaly in Bhairawa. *Did you choose Navaly and the character Arasan because of your husband? Were these tales gathered as a result of your visits to Jaffna or were they told by your husband?*

"Playing with Ganesh" was about my husband's childhood in Navaly. He drew me into his culture by telling me about everything that took place in that life of his. I was fascinated and there's a great deal of tenderness too in my attitude towards this child who grew up to be my

husband. Navaly was a different world and I was privileged to glimpse its groves, its deities, rituals, inhabitants—it was the true village of the North. The fact that I had visited Navaly before I embarked on the book helped—and this was before war erupted. My husband was fortunate enough to grow up in that world. Navaly was my husband's village and that was certainly the reason why I wrote about it—but then things had happened there, things worthy of being documented. Here was a way of life never to be experienced again even in those regions.

Bhairawa *is a poignant work, one which captures the texture of a way of life. Why was it so difficult to find a publisher for the work?*

Well, I wrote the book, won an award for it, put it away, since there was so much else happening in my life, and then suddenly awoke to a realization of its importance in the light of what is happening today. I approached just one publisher, called Navrang, and after some time had elapsed, they made their decision. Three people made me realize how important the book was—one of them was yourself, and the two others are Reverend Lewis Julian, and Professor Peter Schalk of Uppsala University.

Shooting the Floricans *is an eclectic collection, but one that reveals—and here one is reminded of poets like Walcott—a sensitivity to your own status as a Burgher. You devoted quite a few poems to this aspect of your history. At this stage were you attempting a kind of reconciliation between the past and the present?*

Yes, now more than ever before I am conscious of being a Burgher. There are metaphorical definitions to be analyzed. I find that what once was taken for granted as ordinary, even mundane, is now certainly considered, can be considered, unique. My identity, shaped by so many disparate strands, is important to me. I continually summon the experiences of the past. *Shooting the Floricans* expresses and describes not my historicity alone but that of others and my relation to its universals.

Shooting *also includes a fair number of political poems, but they are somehow more distant and objective. Now that the experience of '83 is behind you, are you able to contemplate the political scene with some measure of detachment? Even the more topical poems like "The Dark of Civilization" are laced with classical and intertextual allusions that distance the experience. Do you now see recent events as part of ongoing cyclical patterns?*

Detachment but not acceptance—scrutiny without resignation. I need everything to get my message across. There was the raw reality of *Apocalypse '83*—I haven't finished with that, just extended it to different gen-

res. I also think there is more cynicism in my attitudes. "Man without a Mask" is about surviving in a brutalized world. One can summon up parallels, references, allusions, and relevances. My study of the Classics has contributed to my allusions. I seem to mention Ovid, Cicero, Virgil quite a lot. At Exeter recently at a lecture by Professor Peter Faulkner on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, I was struck by the poem "Ovid in the Third Reich." You see, one can no longer say "I have my work and my children"—it's just not enough. We have also to think of the victims of history. This I feel can be established in many ways—through the Classics, through mythology and the epics. At the moment I am reading the *Ramayana*—that's another discovery.

Since 1983, there has been a lot of violence in the country. In fact, the political situation has become a lot more complex and perhaps a lot more destructive. You do draw attention to the contemporary scene in a few poems and stories, but for the most part you steer clear of politics. Is this a result of personal disillusionment or do you see your role as a writer being difficult now?

I think the story will unfold in my next collection. I do have a great number of political poems, hitherto unpublished. They will see the light of day in the near future. It is in my fiction now that you will see a reflection of the destruction and violence. For instance, in stories like "All Is Burning","Man without a Mask", and "Fear" I am very much aware of my role as a writer, which I see as an influential and responsible role. I am a witness of history. As for personal disillusionment—we have been through so much, seen such violence, and experienced such violence ourselves, how much more can we endure? Today writing must need be a powerful statement. However, people are more cynical, more blasé.

I know you are interested in painting. How has that influenced your writing? You have written some concrete poetry but I am sure the influence must be more pervasive.

Yes, the sensibility of the painter has influenced much of my poetry. If one were to look at the titles of some of my poems one would observe a progression of styles. In my early poems, the painter is seen as a kind of Genesis creator, as in "Painting a Picture," "Kandyan Landscapes," and "Homage to Marc Chagall." I look at landscapes, interiors, and in the later poems—the political experience. Yes, there is a close relationship between my painting and my poetry.

What are you working on now? Are you likely to continue being predominantly a poet?

I am currently working on poems which I have already written, and on short stories with a strongly political and social bias and two novels, entitled *Dragons in the Wilderness* and *Fear.* I feel at ease among all genres, that's the discovery I've made. I feel most intensely about my poetry and there's so much happening there—I feel so vibrantly alive when the act of creation begins. There are new forms and new experiences within that exploration.

A final question. You write about sensitive subjects and that could well alienate some of your Sri Lankan readers. What is your assessment of your readership? Do you write with a Sri Lankan audience in mind? In other words, are you comfortable in your role as a writer in Sri Lanka?

My readership lies not only within my country but has extended widely outside of it too. Within my country I wish there could be more translation of my work in Sinhala and Tamil. What I write certainly has relevance to the two communities. Since I have been very frank in writing about sensitive issues I have had to experience much contumely, within my country. But then, I owe some of the most powerful and moving aspects of my writing to the experiences I have undergone here.

Much of my work begins as a kind of self-questioning, as a kind of private dialogue with myself. I am Sri Lankan to the marrow, and the needs and concerns of my country and its people take precedence. I see my role as one that is most responsible, most powerful, and most influential. I want it to have universal appeal. I have to reach out. I have been privileged to travel, to read my work, in many countries, to many people, and I know that what I write has great significance to them. As for its being a comfortable role, as long as you write of controversial subjects, it can never be that; so, much courage is needed because I don't play to the crowd.

David Dabydeen

Born in Guyana, David Dabydeen emigrated to England at the age of twelve. He read English at Cambridge and London and received his PhD in 1982. A novelist and poet, he teaches English at the University of Warwick.

> Soon, I go turn lawya or dacta,
> But, just now, passage money run out
> So I tek lil wuk—
> I is a Deputy Sanitary Inspecta,
> Big-big office, boy! Tie round me neck!

In this poem, appropriately subtitled "The Toilet Attendant Writes Home," the migrant worker chooses to create a present, one that masks the reality of humiliation and disillusionment and offers the family at "home" a version of what they would like to hear. What remains unsaid but implied in the poem is the history of slavery, of indenture, of colonial exploitation and the pathetic mimicry of the colonizer. Given the context of oppression, displacement and despair, how does one write without the distance afforded by parody, satire and caricature?

In David Dabydeen's two volumes of poetry, his two novels and his most recent long poem, one is constantly struck by that urgency, that awareness of ancestors who "lie like texts/Waiting to be written by the children/For whom they hacked and ploughed and saved." While the more breathless quality of the novel *The Intended* establishes a very different tone from the more relaxed and meditative *Disappearance*, both texts are in fact explorations of a fragmented history. The latter, a self-consciously Naipaulesque work, is both an acknowledgement of the genius that lies behind *The Enigma of Arrival* and a revelation of its inadequacies. And the quest for identity is at its best in *Turner*, an epic-like poem, which both resists the colonial version of Caribbean history and celebrates its own formulation.

Not unlike Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott, Dabydeen too feels a need to create a past that validates the Caribbean experience. And in *Turner*, the result is a curious combination of Africa and India, both as

historical markers and tropes for the expression of a particular experience. The Africa that is created is also a thinly-veiled version of an Indian pastoral landscape. The character Manu is an African whose name recalls an Indian ontological bias. The past is thus acknowledged without the essentialism that accompanies nostalgia. The imagination transforms history and offers a palimpsest, at the bottom of which lies the sea. The sea erases, conquers and levels out differences. In its depth of imagination, and in its lyrical intensity, *Turner* is probably Dabydeen's major achievement, as significant as the poetry of E W Brathwaite and Derek Walcott.

INTERVIEW

Let's begin with your long poem Turner, *which is in many ways a remarkable work. A painting provides the immediate context, but how did the poem itself originate? Why did you think of writing a poem that encompasses both Africa and India?*

Although it is a poem about our history, and about the loss of memory, for me it was also about being an immigrant in Britain, and what migration meant in terms of forgetting where one came from. Migration entailed a dispersal of my family. I have family all over the world now because of the whole process of decolonization. The CIA and the British government "fixed" Guyana's history. They fixed it historically and when they left they fixed who would be in positions of power. As a result of that political corruption we all had to flee. So we migrated to various places, wherever we were given a visa. So in a sense you never see your family for years and you only go to their funerals. Although *Turner* was a poem about a dead African, for me it was about today, about how our history is fixed by other people and how it leads to separation and irreparable losses in terms of not being able to go back home; we have lost the language and gestures and habits of what used to be home. That was the immediate impulse.

I can understand your rejecting the world created by Turner, *but you reject the African world as well.*

Yes, I reject any notion of home that is idyllic. When I talk about not having a home I don't mean that if I had that home, that would necessarily be comforting or comfortable. I don't believe in any ideologies of

return based on a pattern of romance. I don't believe in the fictionalization of the past.

But don't you need a sense of the past to validate the present?

Yes, I do. Except that in the West Indies we have fabricated a sense of the past by replacing what we lost with a kind of romantic fiction. India was a desperate, and, in some ways, turmoiled place. We were also enslaved in the caste system and the women were enslaved in the sati system. I have no romance about India or Africa. In other words, I would rather have a home that is real.

In short you reject anything exotic or essentialist as a substitute for home?

Exotic is the word I am looking for. To exoticize is to play into people who fixed our history.

It is interesting that you bring up India because in Turner *you mention the character Manu in an African context. Did you deliberately make that Indian and Hindu connection in Africa?*

The poem is about the African experience, which is the parent experience of the Caribbean, but it is not entirely about the African experience. It is about the Caribbean, particularly the Guyanese West Indian experience. If you read the poem carefully, you will find that the landscape that the African imagines with a cow being central to it is an Indian village landscape.

Yes, I was struck by that unusual juxtaposition.

Even the reference to the juti necklace connects with the Indian choota, a kind of ritual pollution. I took Indian words from a slightly different context and changed them. Turner is for me a very Indian and African poem. The reference to Manu was pure intuition. I knew the name Manu and I wanted an Indian name, but I never realized that Manu was the Noah of Indian mythology until I read a review of the poem in a newspaper by an Englishwoman who knew Hinduism very well. It was a kind of intuitive process. A happy accident. I didn't have the idea of the Flood when I wrote the poem.

Did you have the hegemonic aspect, the Brahmanization of India, in mind when you included the name?

Not really. At the same time in a sense I did because I grew up in a Hindu environment as a child. So some of the ideas of codification and canonization were in my mind. I grew up in England among immigrants and some of them were Hindus. One picks up memories as one goes along. That is something that a critic would probably read into the poem.

I believe that at the end of the day, as Derek Walcott has said, it is all an accident.

The Walcott comparison is interesting because he constantly uses the sea as an important metaphor. That is quite central to Turner *as well and you use the sea image in a very curious kind of way to talk about new beginnings; at the same time you have a strong sense of the past. Is the sea an important trope because of the geography of Guyana?*

The sea is important because Guyana is below sea level. One is constantly aware of the sea as a threat, as a place of great peril. The sea as a place which drowns little boys. A boyhood friend of mine drowned in the sea. I don't swim, I never could. The idea of the sea for me was also Adamic; we don't have the Garden of Eden, which was how the Caribbean was described by Jean Rhys. I wanted the Garden of Eden to be the sea, which has no landscape, no land, no nationality or ethnicity. A sea is a place of erasure. I wanted that to be the place where Adam could be born. It didn't work out that way. It was a stillborn child and a dead African in the poem. The sea becomes an empty Eden in the poem.

With the vague possibility of something life-giving emerging from the sea?

There is that possibility although the poem denies it. I would hope the music of the poem offers some element of hope, even though the theme is bleak.

The sea is used very differently in the novel Disappearance.

Do you think so?

In that novel the sea is a threat of a different kind and human effort is always directed at erecting dams and controlling the destructive potential of the sea.

Yes, but the novel ends with the hope that the sea will wash away the dam, break it into neat pebbles and make humanity realize that it is a dot in the cosmic landscape. In *Disappearance* the idea of the sea as erasure is present and hence it symbolizes the condition of erasure. The sea has no trail back to Africa or India.

As a metaphor for countering notions of nationalism the sea becomes useful.

For me it is very important. It is also a very beautiful metaphor of the possibility of total originality. Not only erasure but absolute originality.

Is it because it contains life and death?

The sea has no memory in the way land has memory. You can't mark the sea. When the *Titanic* sank in 1917 it was an enormous blow to British prestige and British industrialization. The *Titanic* symbolized the greatness of Britain, and the sea—excuse my language here—just fucked it up.

The sea sank the *Titanic* and put Britain at the bottom of the ocean. I like the enormous power that the sea has to deny nationalistic and imperialistic efforts.

Does the poetic become political?

Of course it does. It becomes a weapon against all form of tyranny because the sea resists all enclosures. Even the land cannot enclose the sea. At the top of the Himalayas, the stone is corralled, because the Himalayas used to be below the sea at one stage. I couldn't believe it. That was remarkable. The sea in the Caribbean used to be a land mass running from the Andes to Miami and then the sea washed in and those islands are the tips of mountains.

The texture of Disappearance *at certain points reminded me of Naipaul, particularly of* The Enigma of Arrival. *Did you expect the reader to make that connection?*

Sure, it was a conscious nod in Naipaul's direction. After writing the first novel, which was consciously untidy and Creole, replicated on the structure of Creole movements that have no grammar, I wanted to write a very English novel. The model is obviously Naipaul. It has three parts and twelve chapters. It is very engineered and it shows its hand and reveals itself as a piece of engineering. Obviously that is very much like Naipaul, because he is a beautiful engineer of prose.

The politics of Naipaul is probably very different from what you were trying to advance?

I think Naipaul is very narrow in his response to life and living. I think there is a deep honesty in him but I also think it is miserable. It is a kind of misery about Naipaul that I can't stand. Even with all the bleakness, one needs to believe in some kind of life force. You have to believe in consciousness and beauty and I don't find that in Naipaul. I wanted to create a character who was Naipaulian. The engineer was a version of Naipaul.

I just finished a third novel in which the main character is called Vidyar. And he is very weak and vulnerable and concerned with money. He can't make love with relish. In my mind I was thinking of a Naipaulian character. I grew up on a diet of Naipaul. The first West Indian novel I read was by him.

I guess he was an important influence or presence?

Absolutely. For an Indian in the Caribbean, Naipaul was a father figure. One tends to hate father figures.

There is an important difference between the narrative mode of the first novel and the second. One is a form of realism and the other is more poetic in its structure. Do you have a preference for one over the other? How do these relate to Turner*?*

I don't know. *Turner* took about four years to write. I started it in '89 and completed it in '93. I wrote it in bits and pieces, a couple of hours at a time. In the meantime I was writing prose and I published a couple of novels. I was much happier with *Turner* than with the two novels. Novelists tend to write travel writing between novels. I think poets write novels between poems. It is a way of killing time.

Was the poem a greater challenge?

Much more, and it was more joyous. It was much more emotional. My instinct is for poetry.

In your introduction to Slave Song*, you talk a great deal about language and the need to use a certain kind of language. And in* Turner *you don't employ that kind of nation language but rather something more formal.*

Yes, I use a language that plays with blank verse with echoes of the iambic pentameter.

Did that constitute a problem?

Not really. I write in Creole and English. It is not one against the other. The novel I have finished is partly in Creole and the rest in English. Twenty-five pages are in Creole. It depends on who is speaking. If it is a Guyanese cane-cutter speaking, I use Creole. Turner couldn't be written in Creole because it was writing to Turner; the whole idea was to use the language of Turner, which was very English. It didn't start as a Creole poem. If it had started that way I could have continued it.

You also mentioned that medieval verse has been an important influence in your writing. How did that come about?

Well, when I was young I was obsessed with medieval alliterative poetry. I remember being overcome by the kind of energy and the lyricism of that language. Medieval poetry was very much like the Creole. The medieval period too was beautiful and innocent. I wish I was a medievalist without all the slavery stuff. It was all precolonial, about the green man, not the black man. You almost begin to love England when you read medieval literature.

The poems in Slave Song *recreate the rhythm of the people. Was this rhythm created by you or were you drawing on an indigenous tradition? Was there an oral culture that you were tapping into?*

I think it was both. It was an attempt to put down on paper something of the music of those peasant villagers with whom we grew up. At the same time there are all kinds of English rhythms that come in as well, like the medieval alliterative tradition. If I were to read the poems again I would probably pick up a lot of that medieval rhythm. I acknowledge it in the notes.

So you blend that with the indegenous.

Yes but it was not a conscious effort. Those medieval lays, those wicked little songs about getting up in the morning and your mistress is around and realizing that your wife is somewhere else, all those traditions of mischief in the appropriately named "lays" are also part of the influence.

Among the issues you deal with, one is that of ethnicity. For other writers from the region, including Wilson Harris, that issue isn't central.

It is something I am trying to move away from, but you are right it is central. In a way if you come from the other end of the earth, which is Guyana, and the centre is England, you know that you are marginalized. Every Guyanese knows that he or she is marginalized. You can't get away from ethnicity. Was it Seamus Heaney who talked about the difference between the expression of grievance and the expression of grief? I am not going to make being in the margins a source of grievance because like Wilson Harris I believe that it is not until you are in the margins that you can tilt the plane of the centre. Being in the margins gives you an enormous amount of weight. So I believe in writing out of the freedoms you get by being in the margins.

But specifically the kind of ethnic tensions that are very much a part of the political life of Guyana?

Everything I write implicates that kind of racial violence in Guyana. I grew up with it. I was about ten or eleven when people started killing each other. I was very conscious of that kind of intimidation and terror. The novel I have just finished is very open about that kind of racial feeling. I write openly about Indian people calling black people niggers. At one level it is as simple as that.

But isn't there a need to come to terms with that?

Absolutely. The only way to do that is to write about it. I get attacked from both sides. People say that the novel is anti-black or anti-Indian. You write according to the way you remember. I also believe that all this is very temporary. There is a tremendous effort that people make to live together and transcend these differences. You see it in Guyana. We don't

have genocidal tendencies. We had that bitter episode in the sixties. But that apart, I can't think of any instance where we killed each other openly like they do in Sri Lanka or India. We might call each other coolie and nigger and worry about who is getting the money and who is running the government, but there is a tremendous decency as well. I have a friend who told me that why we live together is because we were all reduced to the lowest common denominator. Then a kind of humility develops.

One final question that has to do with the treatment of women in both your novels. This is particularly true of The Intended *although it is true of* Disappearance *as well. You seem to portray women as both emotionally and even physically stronger than men.*

I guess it is not that the women are stronger than the men, it is just that the men are weaker than the women. The men fumble, they are always inept. I am being autobiographical as well here.

Is it a result of the colonial past, the kind of pressures that men had to face?

There are all those theories about impotence, and so forth. There is probably a certain element of truth about a certain kind of impotence. I use the term impotence quite a lot. There is self-mutilation as well as a feeling of helplessness. The men in Guyana were the ones doing the fighting for political freedom. They were given access to education. They were also being beaten and humiliated. That creates in the eyes of their wives and girl friends a kind of humiliation. Maybe there is a historical basis. I was more interested in the idea of men being weaker.

Arnold Harrichand Itwaru

Arnold Harrichand Itwaru was born in Guyana and came to Canada in 1969. A writer, painter and critic, he is a sociologist by training. He holds a PhD in Sociology and teaches at York University in Toronto.

Arnold Itwaru's most recent critical work entitled *Closed Entrances* also recalls a poem, appropriately titled "arrival" that appeared in the collection *Body Rites*. In this poem the author writes:

there are special songs here
they do not sing of you
in them you do not exist
but to exist you must learn to love them
you must believe them when they say
there are no sacrificial lambs here

The politics of marginalization, the hegemony that masquerades as liberal humanism, the coercive narrative that flaunts itself as multiculturalism—all these become the subject of the poem as they do of Itwaru's critical work. As a study of literature, of culture and of politics, Itwaru's *The Invention of Canada* and *Closed Entrances* are among the most significant that have appeared in recent years in Canada. In addition to warning the unwary reader of intellectual constructs that parade as truth, the critical works help shape a sensibility that is responsive to and aware of the nuances of immigrant writing in Canada.

Without such an awareness, and without a sense of alternative aesthetics, one could well miss the strength of his book, *Shanti*, set in Guyana, and concerned with the many oppressions faced by women who worked in the plantations in the Caribbean. It is a book—one uses the term "book" instead of "novel" in order to acknowledge the author's objection to a term that implies a Western norm—about colonialism, about its ruthless exploitation of people, about the many antagonisms and self-disgust it bred. It is about loathsome men like Booker—the name is not without significance—raping innocent girls like Shanti—here again the

name is ironic. A tale of unrelieved misery is told with intense lyrical beauty. Here one sees the confluence of the author's theory and practice, for a linear narrative about a plantation economy, about the fetishization of commodities, is told in a mode that constantly interrupts linearity. The narrative stance and the poetry capture the beauty of a people whose daily lives have very little to celebrate. The book is at once allegorical, realistic and lyrical. It is about dismemberment—both cultural and literal—and the prose captures not merely the present but also the long history of oppression and fear that disfigures the psyche of a people:

> The moon grew higher in the agitated baying of dogs and the nightly reign of the dreaded Dutchman, and the enslaved dead, buried alive, arose again in vengeance from the quicklime pits and fossils of empire, and the factory returned, hissed and puffed and snarled away, and the crocodile crept ashore and waited, its eyes ablaze in the shadow of Kissoon's face. (86)

INTERVIEW

Let me begin with your work entitled "Matins," one which has appeared in several places, including most recently in a collection called The Whistling Thorn. *The story, for want of a better term, is about many things, but it is also about suffering. Suffering is a central issue in your work. Why do you stress this aspect?*

A great deal of my life has been spent in the midst of a large number of people whose lives have been disfigured, people for whom survival meant literally suffering on a daily basis until in a vast majority of instances they couldn't just go on. They fell ill and suffered in various ways. There were also incredibly strong individuals who endured in spite of the pain. This is the kind of background for that particular story. It seems to me that to talk about what has happened is also to necessarily talk about the pain which has been created. This is what generally I write about. There is an unarticulated pain in the psyche, disfigured and mended in various ways in what is called the colonial experience. It is out of this suffering that I write. I think that to talk about this pain is also to talk about strength in these people.

But this story was not purely allegorical. You seem to be talking about

suffering caused by economic and social factors.

You are right. This is real suffering by which I mean that people I knew intimately did suffer in real ways. I am not writing in the manner where suffering becomes a fashion. Not at all.

Even in Shanti *the suffering is not offset by nostalgia or a sense of wholeness or spontaneity that you often get in writers who write about the past.* Shanti *is underpinned by suffering.*

I don't want to fall into the danger of romanticizing what has happened. I think I have a serious responsibility to tell as much as I can, as I see it. Part of this entails the recognition of the factors which are at work in the circumstances that constrict and comprise the lives of those people. This is not novel-oriented at all. It is a work that comes outside the European mode of the novel. The language itself is situated very differently. It is not the Queen's English that I use. The melodic movement as well as the action function in various ways. These are the circumstances that need to be looked at. To put it in any other way is to romanticize the experience. The circumstances have shifted now and the Shantis in Guyana are now probably prostitutes. The tragedy has been replicated in various ways in that society today.

When I first read the novel, I had Wilson Harris, Roy Heath and several other Guyanese writers in mind. Shanti *was very different. They too speak about the experience of Guyana but in very different ways.*

I have often wondered about Harris's influence in my work. There is a certain amount of Harrisian influence that I consciously tried to excise. The early Harris of *The Palace of the Peacock* I liked. I liked his play with language and form and the questioning of situations that seem obvious but are not so, and in which multiplicities of meaning reside. I have dealt with the ground and footpaths of meaning. I have dealt with consciousness which has to be answered to, with imagination born out of pain. Anything like European notions of tragedy and comedy don't fit. I am talking about tragedy as atrocity politically committed.

You also bring into Shanti *an aspect of Guyanese life that very few writers have dealt with, and that is the notion of ethnicity. Did you think it was something that needed to be dealt with?*

Oh yes, for several reasons. Much of the fiction did not deal with Indians in Guyana in any sustained manner. Some of it was done quite disparagingly. All kinds of ugly stereotypes, such as the miser, were played out here. I lived in a very vibrant place where a lot of things were happening. I would have been irresponsible to not talk about it. These

are the ways in which the atrocities of colonialism get played out. All these are constructed circumstances where people who should be friends are seen as enemies. Race problems are sharp in Guyana.

An incidental point about Shanti. *Your use of names appears to be significant. I have in mind names such as Gladys, Booker and Shanti. I wondered why you chose the name Shanti.*

I like what it means. Part of my upbringing was among Hindus. My father was a Sanatanist and chants to Shanti were very common. And it was a common practice for parents to name their children Shanti in the name of peace. There is an irony in the use of the name here. The very idea of peace suggested by the name is violated and this is emblematic of what has happened to the vast majority of Indians in Guyana. I also admire strong, courageous women. There were many Shantis there. Hence the creation of this polyglot person.

The name Shanti *brings to mind India as well. How important is that?*

It is very deep and is difficult to talk about. The Indian Independence was very special to us in Guyana. The Indians never really accepted Guyana as their home. The failure of expectations could have something to do with this. They thought that if they worked hard they would be rewarded. Most of those who came were Hindus but a fair number of them were Muslims. Among the Hindus there were the Sanatanists and the Arya Samajists. There is a story they tell in Guyana that beneath the waters of the Atlantic there is actually a river that runs all the way to the river Ganga. The violations of colonialism never really severed that kind of connection. The popular Indian music and movies were also very much a presence. The first thing you hear in the morning is Indian music. Kali Mai Pooja is very common, for instance. Large mandirs were constructed everywhere. India is a symbol of their distinctiveness, of not being African. That is why when an Indian Guyanese comes to Canada and is told that he is black he objects to it very strongly.

The book was a powerful statement about oppression of various kinds. In Critiques of Power *you make a strong plea for not using the novel form to disseminate ideas. You indicate that a preoccupation with ideas would lead to a dissection of art. How does this relate to* Shanti*? It is a very tendentious book in some ways.*

Yes, it deals with issues. But it does not deal with issues with an objective in mind. It is not a book in the genre of socialist realism. Despite the issues that are conflictual, the work itself is a work of art. And it is a work that refuses to be dissected. The work is not programmatic.

The language provides multiple layers of meaning. And yet in one of your essays you use the phrase "don't rock the boat" to talk about language and to show the manner in which language gives you the illusion of freedom but shackles you in the process. But one has to use that language to liberate oneself. Isn't that paradoxical?

Language is paradoxical. I am not trying to excuse myself here. What I have to do on a daily basis as a writer is to be extremely vigilant about language. I have to constantly inquire into language which is to a large extent politically constructed and ideologically layered. When I use language I have to strip it. The language changes when I utter it. It is mine and not mine. Take *Shanti* for instance. This was a very long book and I kept paring it down. It was out of a desire to refashion the language and decolonize it. I am trying to invent the language anew. The language is then not the language of the colonizer but one that leads to the articulation of a resistance. It is a language that expresses the nuances of thought outside anything Eurocentric.

I have a question about the narrative voice. The narrative voice is what enables the linearity to be disrupted. The book seems to operate at various levels primarily because of the narrative voice. And yet the narrator comes across as being far superior in intellect and vision to the characters who are being described. Did that pose a problem?

There are several voices in the book. When I was working on it I was very conscious of the writer as the articulator of a position. The invisibility of the narrator was not something I wanted. I wanted a narratorial presence. It is a kind of multiple telling. It is not necessarily a voice that is imperial at all. It is a voice which enters to make the interrupted narratives work at several conceptual levels.

It is interesting that you talk about different ways of telling the tale. In Closed Entrances *you discuss the notion of plot in some detail and you discuss the limitations of plot. You draw attention to the ideological underpinnings that go with the notion of plot.* Shanti *is not all plot, but there is a strong sense of it.*

That's only hindsight. I don't know if there is a plot in *Shanti*. Where the plotting occurs it is deliberately done. The real occurrences are moments outside plotting. I didn't work with a plot in mind. It was a way in which I was rethinking myself. There is a difference in the telling.

The women appear to be very strong in the novel. Is it the way they are?

This is the way they are. This is something that has struck me over the years. The man and the woman live in the same kind of harsh world. The woman additionally has the children to look after. In many respects the

burden on the woman is much more. After a while it is the man who has a psychic collapse. He starts drinking and brutalizing. He gets into trouble and destroys himself. He is the one who collapses and the women survive despite their burdens. And this isn't just the Indian women. It includes the Africans as well.

To come back to the story we started with, your short story has a lot to do with Christianity. What is the function of Christianity in your perception of Guyanese life?

Christianity played a role in colonialism. In Guyana Christianity came in various denominations—the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, the Canadian Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and so forth. A lot of Guyanese people, and most of the Africans are Christian. Among the Indian population, most of the Christians are Lutherans. The Church also had schools. The Hindus and the Muslims were not allowed to have schools. I loved the Christian church and nearly became a Lutheran pastor. About forty percent of the Indian population would be Christian.

Your interest in language leads to the idea of invention, an idea that is expressed in The Invention of Canada. *The idea that Canada is an invention to serve ideological ends is perhaps true. Is it also likely that the invention of immigrants is also that?*

Yes. I talked about reality and language as chameleons. It is a complex situation. We construct notions of order and in the process invent versions of reality. People who come here also invent. Sometimes it is invented before they come.

And yet you perceive a hegemony in one kind of invention.

Yes, because there is, and we are dealing with power. The invention is based on an elitistic notion of what is best for everyone. That kind of invention is very hegemonic in its design. And that works insidiously to undermine to a large extent the other inventions that I referred to. So there are different types of inventions of reality. It is within the ordering of people's lives that various inventions come about, more associated with state power.

Given that line of analysis, it is surprising that you have so many reservations about multiculturalism as theory and practice. But you also make the point that in a country like Canada "no ethnic group existing under the domination of a macrological power different from itself maintains its traditional uniqueness for very long." In which case the problem is not with multiculturalism but with the demographic makeup of the country. In other words, assimilation would be an inevitable process, according to your line of argument.

What we are dealing with is at one level the macrological powers that exist are the ones that are talking about multiculturality. And proposing at the same time that we maintain our ethnic identities. And participate fully in national life. All these lead to severe problems. At one level the whole idea of identity becomes ethnicized. Inevitably a racialistic discourse about identity comes into being in which it is proposed that you can maintain your identity and participate fully in Canadian life. When Canadian public life demands that you dispense with most of what constitutes your identity—and that is not simply food and dance, it is how you think and live. How can, for instance, a practising Muslim be accepted in public life when the country is hostile to providing time for prayers. Yes, people change. But what multiculturalism proposes is that you can change and yet not change.

Are you suggesting that multiculturalism is in some ways an illusion?

It is a discourse. It is a state ideology that relates to its own fantasy. Hence the business of identity is always a worrisome question. When I am told that I can be myself and also behave like a white person, there is a contradiction. We are talking about impossibilities. The desire to retain what you had becomes even stronger when you come to an alien place. It becomes an emotional need. And that is an illusion here. The need to articulate your aspirations in the midst of splintering realities is what intensifies the agony. We become slowly transformed into the melting pot as in the States.

Do you have a sense of an alternative? Is there a pragmatic solution to this issue?

We should be very careful about easy solutions. Why I talk about this is because the state, through its intervention, furthers its exploitation of the people. This is how states all over the world work. As long as you have people living together in this artificial environment this is bound to happen. We should be aware that the state conceals its racism through the policy of multiculturalism.

I agree, but don't you think life as we know it now is in part a colonial invention? There is a large part of us that is colonial. Is it accurate to speak about identity and ethnicity in terms of binaries?

I don't think I am using binaries. I think the situation is very complex. The problem is that the state is interested in creating a dependency on its mechanisms of containment and its consortiums of power. It is one of its main concerns, and in order to do this, it alters peoples' consciousness and various forms of ideologizations take place. Universities are places

of ideological power. The state is in this sense against the people that it claims to be working for. How one comes to terms with it entails looking at various interventions. But I agree that we must not simplify the matter.

A lot of the complexity comes across very powerfully in the poem called "Arrival." In what context was that poem written? Did you have Naipaul in mind when you chose the title?

Not consciously. Of course I have read Naipaul. I was reflecting on the nature of my own experience and what I have learnt from talking to a large number of people, especially from the Caribbean but also to people from Africa and Asia. The whole issue of success and its importance for some people and then the response of people like me who wanted other things. I think the poem was written before I read *The Enigma of Arrival*. I was dealing with my sense of arrival.

A number of your poems are personal whereas your fiction gives the sense of detachment. And your poetry is sometimes more accessible than your fiction. Were there different impulses at work?

There were. I feel closer to my poetry. Fiction or narrative discourse involves a different kind of struggle. The situations I comment on in poetry are more personalized. It is a small "i" in the poetry. Poetry is more direct. Fiction is a reflective process that goes on for years. It comes out of more systematic working. The poems I write obsessively. In the poems there is a conscious and unconscious articulation of intuitive understanding. There is a directness of involvement. Fiction cannot handle that level of experience.

In your fiction it is more apparent how the content determines the form. Would that be equally true of poetry?

Somewhat. In my fiction you see the process of an experience coming into being as art. In my poetry you see the end of a process of reflection. The metaphor I would use for my poetry is sculpture. One keeps chipping away until the right form appears.

Is there a link between your painting and your poetry?

I think there are significant connections. When I write I try to convey a very visual quality. The techniques of painting—the preoccupation with colour etc.—that is also a connection. But I find poetry more excruciating. Painting is more pleasurable. I need to make poems speak the way I want them to. I agonize with the poems. Words have all kinds of associations that I have to free myself from in order to try and say what I want to say.

Is it likely that you opt for a certain kind of medium to deal with a specific experience? Your non-fiction deals with forms of oppression in Canada, with racism, multiculturalism, and so forth. Your fiction takes you to Guyana. Your poetry is indeterminate. Does your painting insist on yet another dimension?

My poetry is set in Guyana as well. My paintings are evocative moments of a consciousness in which form and colour merge. But you are right about my fiction. I suppose you are right in a general sense.

Are you likely to write a book like Shanti *set in Canada?*

The answer is probably yes and no. I have been thinking about a work of fiction like that. I am working on a book that is about leaving and returning to Guyana.

I think I asked the question because Roy Heath in his memoirs talks about not being able to write about London despite having lived there longer than he has in Guyana.

Like Roy I am writing about my experiences, but I would write about my life here as well. I feel that the experiences here need to find expression. These haven't been talked about adequately. Maybe Roy should write about London.

Let me move for a moment to your nonfiction. There is noticeable difference in tone and style between Critiques of Power *and* Closed Entrances. *You almost seem to have two different audiences in mind. Was this "toning down" a result of wanting to be accessible to a larger reading public?*

While I am at one level pleased with *Critiques of Power*, I am at another quite embarrassed about it. The select few who read it appreciated it. I paid a lot of attention to language in that book. My argument takes place at a different level. The work is limited in the sense that it doesn't reach many people. When I wrote *Closed Entrances* I was very conscious of not wanting to write hermetic prose. My life has changed considerably since then too. I have been trying to become more reachable. I am always changing.

I wondered about the tone of Closed Entrances. *For an objective reader, the polemical tone would be acceptable. For an antagonistic reader would the tone have an alienating effect?*

Probably yes. I had a particular audience in mind for the book. I am writing for all the readers and students designated the Other by the various constructions of the state. I don't care if some are angry or turned off by the book because, if they are, then I am not convinced that they could be seriously interested in any form of change. Their antagonism

will realize what the book is all about. Yes, there is a lot of anger in the book, but that is not merely me; it's a collective anger.

Let me move to a related topic. You make a reference to the Mahabharata *in your book, and you do that in order to reveal the limitations of a Western tradition from the perspective of the Other. The Indian epic too is a very hegemonic text, not very different from any colonial text. How then does the comparison work?*

What I wanted to say was that the people who came from another reality and had another set of references and other notions of what constituted a great man use the text very differently. That is very different from the Shakespearanizing of people's consciousness. It is mentioned as a recognition of an ancestral culture that is profound. I wasn't looking at it as a hegemonic text here. It is the symbol that is important. But you are right about the *Mahabharata* and I do have a lot of problems with that text.

The point you made about the CBC Journal*'s presentation of Vassanji's* No New Land *was again very significant and you were absolutely right in pointing out the limitations of the production. Quite specifically, you mentioned that the people who commented on the novel were not really qualified to do so. You also mentioned that in a panel discussion later, on another show, all the questions on multiculturalism were directed at you. And that you felt was an example of a certain kind of stereotyping. Put the two together and you have a somewhat contradictory situation.*

The *Journal* people exoticized the novel and the author. They reduced it to a kind of curiosity. There was a kind of racism manifest there. At the panel discussion on Imprint I was invited to speak about literary criticism but people were asking me about multiculturalism. The episodes that were shown on TV were trivial. They dealt with whether the character should eat pork or not, for instance. And the novel is not the best of Vassanji's work. Why then did the Journal feature it? And then they had the gall to say that they didn't have qualified people to comment on the novel.

You end Closed Entrances *on a very ambivalent note about the Caribbean festival and the Royal Ontario Museum. You seemed to suggest a lot more than you actually say.*

I should have written more about that. What alarmed me was that the people who were upset about *Into the Heart of Africa* were either exhausted by this time or were placated by the statements that were made. Here was a vulgarization of Caribbean culture and nothing was said

about it. I didn't get into all the details but this the sum of what I wanted to talk about. The larger issue of exoticization of the Caribbean I saw as a violation.

I liked the part where you talked about the crude drawing of Shiva with several hands holding a hammer, brush, etc. to indicate that maintenance work was in progress. I was reminded that I saw something similar in one of the amusement parks which had a ride called "The Fury of Shiva."

I wasn't aware of that, but this is what I was talking about. They do these things so casually. If one did this about Christ, think about the kind of responses one would get. These things really bother me because they constitute a violation and a form of appropriation.

Suniti Namjoshi

Suniti Namjoshi was born in Bombay, India. She completed a PhD in English at McGill University and then joined the University of Toronto as a professor of English. In 1987 she moved to Devon, England, where she presently lives and writes.

In a significant poem entitled "In that Particular Temple," Suniti Namjoshi concludes with the lines

> When we make love
> you and I
> are both sacred and secular.
> The goddess' limbs
> begin to move.
> Balanced underfoot
> the world spins.

The poem is at once an inversion of the legend of the dance of Shiva, and a celebration of secular, lesbian love. In this poem, as in many others, one observes a characteristic duality that suggests both detachment from and active participation in a culture that is distinctly Indian. The politics that distinguishes the work of Namjoshi is, for the most part, a result of migration, of being radicalized by the West. The imagery that contains the subversive material is insistently Indian. The combination is striking, for it gives the poem a particular texture, a level of meaning that erases the politics of centre and margin without diminishing the force of resistance against hegemonic systems.

Namjoshi's most characteristic work, however, is not poetry or fiction, although she has produced an impressive quantity of both, but fable. Sometimes they appear in the form of short fables, as in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, but more often in the form of lengthy narratives that are still fabulous. *The Conversations of Cow*, for instance, is her typical, and perhaps most distinctive, form. Structured in the form of a novel, the plot is primarily concerned with two figures—Suniti, a feminist and lesbian,

and Bhadravati, a Brahmin lesbian cow. What follows is a narrative of metamorphosis, comic, human, self-reflexive and fabulous. The immediate context is Britain, but the imagination is at least in part Indian.

The concerns of *The Conversations of Cow* have little to do with the politics of nationalism. In fact very little of her work recreates social or political events. Rather, one encounters the politics of sexual and cultural identity told with sympathy, humour and often understatement. In her recent works, one encounters more questions than answers, and in the indeterminacy lie their strength. A recent fable entitled "Cross Elephant" describes a patient and forgiving elephant which is finally sufficiently annoyed to dunk a hunter in the river. Having described the episode, the author poses the question: "Why was the elephant cross?" Three possible answers are given: (a) Because she was an elephant; (b) Because she probably was not an elephant; (c) human nature. None of the answers is probably right and perhaps even the question pillories the reader who habitually seeks absolute answers. However, if one returns to the fable, one wonders about the nature of patience, of impediments, of unintentional harm and of consequences that do not necessarily relate to origins.

INTERVIEW

I must admit at the very outset that I don't understand a part of your work. The part I understand I like very much; the rest is somewhat obscure and I was hoping that in some ways this interview would help explain the dichotomy between some poems, for instance, being straightforward and others being difficult to access.

You could see it as a dichotomy in my writing or you could see it as a dichotomy in yourself. We have several things in common—the Asian background, and the fact that we speak English and teach English literature. What we don't have in common is gender. That may have something to do with it. I have never deliberately tried to be obscure; I've bent over backwards trying to be clear. No writer sets out to be obscure.

I found it unusual that your first collection clearly indicated that you didn't want a biographical note. And your next collection provides a very brief, almost clinical, account of yourself, in such a manner that the language almost subverts the significance of the information that you give. Was this deliberate?

I have absolutely no recollection. If you are asking me why one has a

biographical note and the other does not, I would have to say I honestly don't know. But perhaps my following remarks might be helpful to what you are getting at. *Poems* and *More Poems* were written in Columbia, Missouri, at least quite a lot of them were. That must have been in '67 or '68, and at that time I must have been twenty-six or twenty-seven. Some of the poems in *Cyclone in Pakistan* are taken from *Poems* and *More Poems* and the rest were written during my first or second year at McGill.

Was your period of stay in the United States significant in relation to your overall sensibility?

I had grown up in India and hadn't left India until then. Columbia, Missouri was my first encounter with the West, let alone America or the midwest. My head was like a waste-paper basket which had information in it that said things like, "Here they have no bus stops, the bus stops at the corners of streets; or, in order to make a phone call you need a dime." These are the more obvious things. And then there were more subtle things like "I understand the language, but I don't really understand the context, despite my reading of literature." So, for example, one chap asked me at Columbia: "Miss, have you ever smoked grass?" to which I said, "The cigarettes I smoked in India were a bit cheap and I think they were filled with cabbage leaves but grass, no" with absolutely no notion that he was speaking of marijuana. Or another told me: "I have a pen pal in Cuba," and my response to this was to make a mental note that even university students and graduate students in America have pen pals, with no understanding that this person was telling me something about his political affiliations. This is the period in which these books were published. I hadn't been politicized either in terms of feminist politics, which comes much later, or race. I had grown up in a country where I was mainstream. So I actually didn't understand racism at that stage. And when it happened to me, I didn't realize that this was racism. It didn't even occur to me that this was ethnocentricity. I just thought it was bad manners. So if I thought about politics or context at all, then there was a simple-minded aestheticism to the whole thing. A poem is a poem and yes the language matters, and technical problems to do with language matter, but context hadn't really hit me.

But at that stage you were still conscious of having been mainstream in India.

No, when you're mainstream you are not conscious of it. It is when you are not that you suddenly begin to realize it. Remember, I am fifty-three now and we're talking about when I was twenty-seven or so;

it was a long time ago. But some of the questions one can ask oneself much later are: "Why did it take me so long, and why are my reactions different from those of some other Asians living in the West? Do I perceive a difference between the reactions of those who grow up in the West and those of us who grew up in the old country? Yes, I do. Part of this difference in the response I attribute to the fact that those of us who grew up in the old country grew up mainstream in one sense or another. This may not apply to someone of Tamilian background from Sri Lanka or someone of Muslim background in India in quite the same way, but nevertheless there is a sense in which one is normal in India or in Sri Lanka in a way that one is not necessarily so in the West. That may be at the back of your question.

That's true, but you grew up at a time when important things were happening in India and other authors have tended to talk about it either in their essays or in their fiction or poetry. But you haven't talked about those issues. You rarely talk about the Partition or the days of the British. Were there some aspects of political or cultural life that you were de-emphasizing or screening out?

No, I think the main reason for that is that I am not a realist writer. But what I do describe—and nobody realizes it—is the Maharashtra landscape, the landscape of Western Maharashtra. That is inside my head and that comes out sometimes. But because the setting isn't realist, that does not always come through. If you get anything that is Indian in my writing, that is a Marathi sensibility; it is there in the sensibility, not in the content. Marathis are known for their sarcasm and for their irony. You cannot offer a compliment in Marathi without sounding as if you were being ironic or teasing. It's a sensibility that is Marathi, but people don't look for sensibility, and it's harder to see that in description or content. If you are not a novelist primarily, but a poet or a fabulist—you are not going to get realism along those lines.

Is there something special about that sensibility?

There are some things I can think of, but that might be true of a lot of Indian writers. One is that with a Western sensibility even when people aren't practising Christians, their very language is informed by Christianity. Similarly, even if one is not a practising Hindu, because one breathes Hinduism in through one's pores growing up in India, one's thinking is informed by it. Consider some of the differences which affect the way one writes, differences caused by religion. Their God creates out of nothing and there is a separation between God and creation. This

creation reflects the glory of God, but if within Christianity you say that God is in creation, then you are guilty of pantheistic heresy; Hinduism is pantheistic. The West has tended to think that we worship idols but really polytheism is an offshoot of pantheism and once you have pantheism you are going to get polytheism. This means that you don't have to think twice before seeing a God or something sacred in anything. The only time you get this in the West is when you go back to Greece before Christianity. There is also the notion of personal immortality. When Christians are resurrected, they remain themselves. We don't have that concept. I once told a Christian friend that only a Hindu could have written *Conversations of Cow*, but few people realize that. In the West, readers tend to think that the book is concerned with a quest for identity. But a Hindu grows up thinking that identity is arbitrary.

In what sense is it arbitrary?

Because you are one thing in this life and another in the next. You may not believe it, but it is a metaphor and that becomes part of your thinking.

But identity is also central to your writing, although in a different kind of way.

Yes, but it is not the same approach. My head, like yours, contains two different traditions. One is Indian and the other is a language which holds another tradition. So we are both. We are also affected by individualism, which is a strong force in the West.

In Because of India, *you raise this as an issue. You discuss the complexity of living in two worlds. Was this something you had to grapple with in order to write?*

What I had to grapple with was trying to make a language say what was alien to that language. How does one talk about the familiar in a language that makes it exotic? There are other aspects as well. It is when people ask me what is Indian about my writing that I begin to think about these things. My partner Gillian is a Christian. One of the obvious differences between us is that she is always interfering with others—trying to do good. I prefer not to interfere, and let people make their own choices. I am concerned with saving my soul. Gillian is concerned with saving the world. We are both right but the emphasis is different.

How does this relate to your notion of individualism. Indians don't think of themselves as individuals, and yet you are concerned about saving your soul. Is there a contradiction here?

These are some of the paradoxes of religious thinking. There is also the

fact that I was a child and a teenager in India and I am now in my fifties. As you get older you become mellower and try to put things together. In Hindu society, one always has a place whether one likes it or not. It's like Gulliver being tied by a thousand strands. But it is also like a net that holds you in place. The community is so strong that it requires enormous individualism to break free.

You must have felt very strongly about certain aspects of the community in order to rebel. After all, there is a certain comfort in being part of that world.

It can be that one feels very strongly and therefore rebels or it may be that one feels safe and therefore can afford to.

In a curious way is the rebellion also not a rebellion?

Of course. I think that is a point at which you might find great differences among Indian writers. I've read a lot of Bharati Mukherjee's work, and it always startles me when reviewers comment that she writes like an American or an Indian American. Wherever I live I don't lose India because I am made up of it. Let me explain this with the Rushdie affair. My mother and several others in India asked me what the Rushdie affair was all about. I told them that a Hindu may not be able to understand it. He blasphemed. He made up stories about the Prophet. They said that they too make up stories about Vishnu. I couldn't quite explain that. It is a very different mindset.

Some would argue that among expatriate writers you are, in certain ways, the least Indian. You don't write like them, not even like Rushdie in Midnight's Children.

But then I am not a novelist. I am a fabulist. When Gillian came with me to India, one of the first things she said was that she could never get a straight answer to a question. She was also struck by our attitude to animals. I am always asked why I write fables and why I write about animals. I try to supply answers, but the honest truth is I don't know. We don't separate animals from human beings. As for animals talking, why not?

I guess I am less perplexed by the presence of animals than by the worldview of which they are a part.

It doesn't bother you, or the Indian newspapers, but it does bother people in the West. What does bother the Indian newspapers is that so many of the animals are female, and that doesn't bother the West. The Indian newspapers also get the politics wrong.

But the animals are ambivalent and in Indian myth that's not necessarily so.

One can change the system. We are allowed to make up stories in Indian myth. Take Hanuman, for instance. All over India there are little shrines for him and there will be local stories about him as well. We literally have household gods. The religious fabric is huge and it includes the personal element.

Your fabulism is a self-conscious one, unlike the fabulism of local stories. There isn't the same sense of artifice.

Now I call myself a fabulist, but when I started writing I didn't know anything about it. Every time a story is repeated, it changes. When it changes dramatically, people call it a reworking of myth.

A writer like R K Narayan also works with myth, but in his work you get the sense of walking through a South Indian town; the characters are real and mythical at the same time, but you seem to use the mythical level as subtext, at the level of how people perceive events rather than how people act.

What I see is the Maharashtra landscape, with its burnt grass; we have little water in Maharashtra, and the rivers are dry in the summers. What I see is the blue sky, which, because of the dust and heat, is white at the edges. I haven't been educated in Marathi; I have been educated in English, but I can hear the tone of Marathi in a way that I can't in French, where my vocabulary is far more extensive. I can see the trees, the great banyans, and the little trees with black trunks, and the silver thorns. That is the landscape that is permeated by the harshness, the irony, the clarity, and the sensibility of Maharashtrans.

I expected you to talk about the fabulosity of Marquez, and writers who use magic realism.

It doesn't mean anything to me and I'm sure it should, and I'll read it if it's useful to me. I've read *Aesop* and the *Panchatantra*, but then everybody has.

But you use it in order to further certain ideas; you use traditional forms, but the content is often very different; you deal with issues of gender and feminism.

Sometimes I do, but the fable can be used as a didactic form. I don't start off saying that I want to make a point, so I will now write a fable. Usually it's an image that I work with. You know the story of Apollo and Daphne. When you start thinking about it, you see the tree, the leaves, the trunk and the women and you wonder what this image means. And the image generates the fable. Now that particular fable makes a feminist point. But really if all it did was make a feminist point, it wouldn't be much fun. And the last line can be read as making a feminist point, but also its pure fun.

There is an element of fun in most of your writing.

Yes, but that's Indian too. Sometimes people from the West misunderstand Indian manners because they misunderstand the basis of our manners. They don't understand that what we are trying to do is make something pleasing as a whole.

It's a different aesthetic.

And a different sense of respect as well.

Is it a bit disappointing that you haven't had that sort of response in India?

No, but for a long time I kept my books out of India.

Deliberately?

Of course. If you had written *Conversations of Cow* would you want your mother to see it?

But that's the challenge you took on very early. And it's obvious that there was a need to do that in India.

Yes, but not *Conversations of Cow. Feminist Fables* should have been published in India or translated. Remember, this is '94, and I must have left India in '67. Many things have changed in twenty-seven years. Many people in India are now talking about gay liberation. Also, I come from a huge family; they all live in India, and it's not an immigration-oriented family. My grandmother died in '84, my grandfather in '78. My mother is still alive, my father was killed in a plane crash thirty years ago. I left India because I didn't want a scandal. So, another thing is that it is easier to be in the West if you don't belong to it. Beyond a certain point I don't care what the people in the West think of me. But it's harder not to care what the people who know you ever since you were born think of you.

I guess there is a lot more pressure in India.

Far more pressure.

Do you see yourself as part of the community?

No I don't, but because I am Indian I don't have a choice as to whether I see myself as part of the community or not. But if I'm fifty-three, there are people in India who have known me for fifty-three years. It's different.

How has the reception of your books been in India?

Strange.

Is there a lot of resistance?

No, the Indian response is very peculiar, seen from a Western perspec-

tive. It has to do with our history, Independence, constitution, voting rights for women, fundamental rights, and all the rest of it. Revolutionary ideas in the West or what the West thinks of as revolutionary ideas, when they come in to India, suffer a sea change. All the ideas of the West, even nationalism, are put into a totally different context. They alter completely. So coming out as a lesbian in the West is one thing, and you understand that you are facing a head-on battle. In India I can get a review that says "Suniti Namjoshi, is a fabulist, a feminist, a lesbian, and a poet" all in the same breath. And for the reader of the review it wouldn't necessarily have the same impact as it would in the West. God help me if my mother or one of her well-meaning friends saw such a review.

That reminds me of the fable "The Stumbling Block." It's a very puzzling piece in some ways because the Blue Donkey is right and so is the caterpillar. The fable had a tremendous impact on me because of its preoccupation with choices, with violence and the whole question of what is right and wrong. Did you intend all that?

Of course. With the fables, it depends on who is reading a particular fable, what they think it is about, and what particular issue they think it's about. In India, for example, they didn't think that the Blue Donkey fable had anything to do with racism. One reviewer wrote that it had something to do with male domination. And you think about it and you realize that in India, it's only in the past few years that I've heard the word racism used commonly, and they call it racialism. And they use it to denote the caste system. "The Stumbling Block" also has to do with the subconscious assumptions of well-meaning privilege. So it has to do with the well-meaning unpleasantness of men to women; they are not even conscious that they have done some harm but they have. Again, you come from Sri Lanka, and I come from India, and the very fact that we live in the West and teach at the University of Toronto means that we did not come from very poor families. And you think of all those unthinking years.

Yes, that aspect didn't occur to me.

And especially if you come to the West and don't even know how to boil an egg, you soon realize that you must learn how to boil an egg. Our rupees don't go a long way. You have to work at jobs like dish-washing and waitressing and you begin to get an inkling of what it must have been like for the others.

Would you have had a much greater effect if you had written about these

kinds of consciousness in a manner that relates directly to class, social structure, and so forth?

Yes, but I would have had to be a different writer. You see, I could have been a polemicist or somebody writing articles about these peoples, or perhaps a realist writer.

Does it trivialize that whole experience when you distance it?

You could argue that it does that, that it makes less impact about a particular point than someone saying this is what we've done. On the other hand, one can argue that this goes on and on and on whereas that speech makes an impact and then it is over.

Why do you use the myth of Eurydyce?

It fascinates me. When I say it fascinates me, I refer to the image. It is not really a point one wants to make out of it.

That's true. The myth has been given a particular focus in theological interpretations. How did you read the myth? In fact, in one poem you advance a feminist perspective.

Yes, but I don't like that particular sonnet very much . . . but I like the Medusa one. I think I had just finished writing *From the Bedside Books of Nightmares*, which was a very bloody book to write, and I wanted a rest. So I thought I'd amuse myself writing these poems, using sonnet forms and couplets and taking a rest from the blood and guts, and just playing with technique.

You give the impression of being very conscious of form and technique.

You can't teach at the University of Toronto for seventeen years and not be conscious of form.

That's true. The relation between form and language, in your writing, is not always clear. When you write prose, sometimes I get the impression that you are still writing poetry.

Of course, the fable form is much closer to verse. It's much closer to poetry than the realist novel, and that is why I am pleased that I write these fables in what looks like prose or what is prose. Or else the damn thing wouldn't sell at all; the reader thinks "Ah, this is prose, we can understand it; justify the right hand margin and we'll buy it."

Why does poetry appeal a lot more to you than prose?

That's where my heart is. I wrote my dissertation on Ezra Pound.

Do the formal constraints help you to get to the meaning in a manner that has a greater impact?

Everything has a constraint, even prose. Even when I'm writing prose, or what looks like prose, I hear every word of it, I read it out loud, and I do my best to get every comma right; I try to get the sound of it exactly right. It's not the only thing about poetry; there is the intensity, the myth, the image, the sound, and the thing itself contained in the sound of the vision. The discursive elements of writing—if you read this novel you will be able to find your way around Bombay—don't interest me at all. I couldn't care less. And I don't read very many novels myself; there are two books lying here, neither of which I want to read because I've got a dozen things to do. I'm extremely unlikely to read the novel but however awful the poetry, I am likely to read it.

I've noticed that in The Conversations of Cow, *for instance, it's very difficult to read the book as prose and understand the way it works. Because when you read a novel you tend to adopt a teleological approach. In poetry we make those connections in a very different kind of way. Your prose is more associative. It's not linear although it has the potential to be linear. Is that a fair comment?*

I wouldn't want the connections to be solely linear. For that book to work the connections have to be this way, that way, and every way.

Yes, you mentioned that you worked on Ezra Pound, and that was your doctoral thesis.

Yes, it was hard, *The Cantos* are not easy.

In terms of ideology, how did you respond to Pound?

I found Pound in India. I did my masters, and then joined the Indian Civil Service. And then I said three cheers, thank God I don't have to read what they tell me to read, and I can read anything I like, because I was no longer in an academic context. So I read a lot of poetry and a lot of science fiction at the time. It was when I was reading a lot of poetry that I came across Pound's selected poems and I loved them. Then a few years later when I was at McGill, I wanted to do my dissertation on Pound because I thought that from this poet I could learn how to write poetry. I thought I was going to do *Personae*, then I got dumped with *The Cantos*. I worked on it night and day; when I walked down the street I was thinking about Pound and Confucius—I was dreaming about it. It was hard. Louis Dudek told me that I had to do the metaphysics of *The Cantos*, and I said that just because I am Indian doesn't mean I understand metaphysics. Anyway, it was not for the ideology, but for the poetry that I read Pound.

Yes, in that sense Pound did launch the careers of several writers.

This was in '72, and at that time Pound was still in disgrace; there wasn't a big Pound industry or anything like that, but it was just my luck that Louis Dudek was one of the few who, like me, thought that Pound was a wonderful poet.

That whole element of Modernism is very striking and very noticeable in the early poetry; there is that sense of trying to capture an image, the need for perfection in form.

But doesn't every poet try to do that?

But there is a big difference between the kind of poetry that you wrote in the seventies, the poems that Lal's Writers' Workshop published, and the ones written later. There is a difference in the texture.

I was younger then. The ones published in *Cyclone in Pakistan* would have been in '69-'70. The ones I wrote in the 70s are in *Jackass and the Lady*, which was also published by Lal. Yes, I think that was just me being a product of my time and trying to be a good poet. And one of the things that you have to do with learning to write poetry is to get rid of everything extraneous, and make every word or line do at least six different things at the same time; you have to concentrate like mad. Otherwise one might as well write discursive prose.

That's true, but has there been a movement from a certain kind of poetry with which you began to ones in the middle phase where the tendentious element is very strong? The more recent poems are a blend of the two. Do you see yourself becoming more philosophical?

I would say, very roughly, before 1978, I was trying to write good poetry and that's all I thought about. After '78 there is this feminism and the gay liberation, so I took those considerations into account; but I have never written anything just for the sake of making a point. If I can't do it beautifully I don't want to do it at all.

You wouldn't sacrifice the aesthetic.

I couldn't, it would not be good, and it would not be a poem or a fable. Think of a fable as a poem and you will see that it wouldn't work. But the last book *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* and the one I'm working on now mark a different phase again. I don't know how to describe it; one does the describing after one's done it, but it's different. I'm not sure if the primary force is aesthetic or political, and maybe it's neither of those things.

Is it distinctive in terms of form?

It will be, but so was *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* simply because when

the content changes, the form has to change. Again I've never gone for the form for its own sake in order to do something gimmicky, or different or new. I've just used whatever I've had to use because that is what the material required. It was the only way that I could find for whatever I was going to get done.

In a general sense, how important is the idea of multiple voices to your writing?

To tell you the truth, I don't do that on purpose; I don't tell myself that I'm going to provide as many voices as possible; that's just how it happens. I think it might be connected to multiplicity of perspective, resulting from having grown up in India. We have that inherited culture in our heads and we have another culture linked to our language. Right from the beginning we are aware of things being relative.

How does the whole notion of being ironic resonate with the more holistic conviction you are intrinsically Indian? Irony always has a target and deals with dualities.

I don't know what "holistic" means but I don't see the difficulty about the Hindu background or being Indian and being aware of the irony of things, because if you accept the notion that everything is an illusion, then that in itself involves a measure of detachment. There is another irony which is evident, for instance, in some English poets like Blake who say that you get what you deserve. Then you think of reincarnation which says that you get what you want, and that is terribly ironic.

That also suggests a layering of paradox. For instance, the title "Maya Diip" is almost an oxymoron.

It might be. You get paradox when the language you have doesn't allow you to say what you want to say without sounding paradoxical. It may be an aspect of language. You can push and alter language to some extent, but you are constrained by its inherited framework.

In From the Bedside Book of Nightmares *you devote a whole section to Caliban. Why?*

I love *The Tempest.* I think all poets like it.

How about the politics of the play? You are probably the first person to create a female Caliban.

That is because I am a woman. I think the reading of *The Tempest* that influenced me the most was Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror.* It connected with a lot of things I got from *The Tempest.* One feels sorry for Caliban because this creature was the king of the island. I think that is inherent in

the play. Ferdinand is such a wimp by comparison. Prospero is often very rude in all his machinations to control others. The ambivalence is all there in the play.

What was the impulse behind Nightmares*?*

I was politicized in '78 or '79. I had a lot of questions which I worked out with *Feminist Fables*. These were ways of questioning the institution of the family, the relations within the family. I am very fond of my family, but I thought in all honesty I had to consider what these values meant in terms of my real affection for the family. It was a way of telling the truth to myself. My whole family comes into that book. In the previous book, *The Authentic Lie*, there is a long elegy, which is for my father. When there is love and questioning, it is hard and bloody. The Prospero section is abstract patriarchy. My real father died when I was eleven.

Quite often in your writing you refer to yourself as Suniti. Why do you adopt that strategy?

Bhakti poetry for instance has a lot of such self-reflexive comments. That is not really new or shocking. And it also allows you to do different things. For example, when I was writing *Cow*, I was beginning to feel the pressure of the party line and I wanted to satirize it or at least ask some questions about it. I don't like bashing particular people. Ideas, yes, not people. So, if someone was going to be satirized, let it be me, the speaker. The book was a lyrical satire. It's written in the present tense. None of them has a past. How does one make something believable without bothering about the past? In *Saint Suniti* there are other reasons. Again I wanted to satirize the wanting-to-be-good. But some of the issues raised have to do with the morality of saints and writers. Wherein lies the morality for writers? Is there any decency in writing? For these it was useful to have at least three different versions of Suniti. One is the Suniti of the cover; the second is the person who is writing a straightforward diary; and the third is the person who is satirized. The context needed that. I never do anything just to be innovative.

You begin Flesh and Paper *with an introduction which says "Let us invent who we are." Why not "announce" or "celebrate" rather than "invent"?*

I think the reason has to do with the notion that whoever controls language also controls our understanding of language. Things mean what the mainstream says they mean. And they mean what the mainstream understands them to mean. If you were not mainstream and did not want to take on that label, you had to invent yourself and alter the language and the context.

Satendra Nandan

Born in Fiji, Satendra Nandan was educated in Fiji, India, England and Australia. He served as a minister in Timoci Bavadra's government, which was overthrown by the coup in 1987. Nandan now teaches at the University of Canberra.

The narrator of *The Wounded Sea* recalls at one point a startling comment made by a young boy in a war-torn country.

> When the journalist had asked him about his happiest day, the boy had replied:
> "When my brother died."
> "Why?" enquired the man, disbelievingly.
> "Because I could wear his shoes," answered the boy, smiling.
> The beer in the glass lost its autumnal glow. It tasted almost like yaqona, only infinitely more bitter. (25)

The narrative provides very little by way of commentary, and given the associative and digressive mode of the novel, a detailed explanation of the episode would have seemed awkward. The boy's remark serves as a synecdoche for the themes of possession and greed, of betrayal and fragmentation that underlie *The Wounded Sea*. For the Indians, the descendants of the indentured workers who left the subcontinent a century ago to forge a new life in Fiji, the coup that toppled the democratically elected government of Timoci Bavadra in 1987 signalled a sense of dispossession far more complex than the response of the young boy. For the author, who was then a minister in Bavadra's cabinet, the betrayal was as personal as it was collective, and it is this sense of despair that is explored in *The Wounded Sea*.

The metaphor of shoes acquires a specific resonance in the Fijian context. At one level it encapsulates the humble beginnings of the *girmit* people, their labour to survive and to preserve a way of life, and their attempt to gain material prosperity within a colonial system. The narrator too gets his first pair of shoes when he passes the Examination, a

moment that begins both prosperity and exile. More significantly, the trope is also a reminder of the *Ramayana*, the Indian epic, and its account of exile, suffering and return. As Birbal comments in the novel, "Rama had *his* sandals. He leaving them behind when he gonna into exile" (21). In the epic the sandals are a reminder of loyalty, and in the text they suggest a splintering of attachments.

The novel's primary concern is with politics, with the transformation that followed the coup. And yet the author is aware of the dangers that attend a narrow nationalist response through fiction. Hence the sense of multiplicity that gives the novel its particular texture, its mixture of autobiography, realism and artifice. Nationalism, according to Nandan, "transmutes not only people but the places they dwell in" and since the land and its history become ideological constructs, "we are prepared to kill and be killed for these." On the other hand, "literature has to be subversive to that concept of nationalism" (*Westerly*, Autumn 1992, 59-63). The novel is an attempt to be both involved and detached from the claims of a nationalist cause. As a realist work, the novel gives expression to the profound sense of despair that followed the coup. One leader quite rightly says, "This is a conquest of one race by another" (141). As a work of artifice, the novel is about the history and vitality of a community, about a way of life that is sustained by its acceptance of hardship and its quest for happiness.

INTERVIEW

I want to begin by suggesting that you are in a much better position than most other contemporary postcolonial writers to talk about the relation between politics and literature. How do you interpret the relation between the two? And how do you define your preoccupation with both politics and literature?

I have always believed that for a writer his or her life constitutes the text. How you live that life is significant. Everywhere one encounters values that writers actively promote and even foist on others. But only a few writers are prepared to take the plunge. If you believe in humanism or freedom of mind and spirit, then you have to change certain structures within society. Any writer, in that sense, should be a profoundly political person. The difference, of course, is what we mean by politics—it shapes

our thinking, our society, and inculcates new values as part of a larger vision of ordinary people. These things were in my mind as a writer. I must confess that it was only when I started reading Commonwealth literature at Leeds that my sensibility changed. I had read Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, and they were taught as literary texts, parts of the Great Tradition, not as constructs that explored life in all its myriad forms. And one of the significant forms is politics because every text to me has a political aspect or dimension to it. We were taught in such a way that *King Lear* and *The Tempest* were not seen as political texts. Who knew the French Revolution better than Wordsworth, and yet that was never stressed. Historical movements and forces were then unimportant to us. When I went to Leeds and started reading Naipaul, Soyinka, Achebe and Patrick White, suddenly a catalyst was placed in my mind. I found these texts to be profoundly political. I finished my masters, returned briefly to Fiji and then came back to ANU [Australian National University] to work on Patrick White.

Was that a turning point in your life?

Yes. In December 1977 I was back in Fiji and by June 1978 I was in the thick of politics. I felt that if I truly believed in the importance of politics then I must live it. I am a very small writer and some may also say that I have been a tremendous failure as a politician. I do not believe that to be the case. I spent ten years of my life writing in Fiji, writing political speeches as a member of the opposition, and that has in significant ways changed my imagination and, I'd like to believe, changed to some extent the nature of Fiji politics. I wrote some of the most important speeches given by the Leader of Opposition in Fiji and later for the Prime Minister of Fiji, Timoci Bavadra.

Why was your political writing so important?

For example, the constitution of Fiji was such that Indians could never come into power. But we came to power through the force of words. And that demonstrates the impact of writing. And those words were not uttered only by me; I was writing a lot of the words that others were saying. One tended to create a different level of political consciousness amongst the people. Words were our most common and popular means of communication. Fiji had no TV. Radio reached every home, every hamlet. Powerful words can be like magic mantras!

You paid a heavy price for your writing?

We have had two coups and I am no longer there, but I have brothers who are in politics. Some of us are extending the boundaries of Fiji

politics to Australia and New Zealand, countries that affect our lives in many ways. I tried to live a life that related to what I had read in literature. It is not easy to do that. One pays a heavy price for one's choice, but to have attempted anything less would have been disappointing.

You worked on Patrick White and he wasn't as overtly political as you were, and yet he was a major postcolonial writer.

White is, in my opinion, (and this comes out in his book of essays) a profoundly political writer. In *Voss*, for instance, he is dealing with issues of the Australian landscape, history and life. He is being political, but not in any superficial way. He is not concerned with politics as a pragmatic instrument of governance. He is looking at the aboriginal situation, at migrants in society, and at multiculturalism. Australia is washed by the Indian and Pacific oceans, and the country did not allow Asians or the Pacific Island people to come in because of the White Australia policy. This concerned him. The only thing I like about White Australia policy is Patrick White! And he was responsible for changing it. In the last twenty-five years, I think, Australia has undergone significant changes. I live and teach in Australia and I can see the changes. They are subtle and significant ones. They are permanent and positive. Even White's spirituality had a political edge to it—almost like Gandhi's.

In that sense I guess White was a very political writer.

Yes, he was radicalizing the Australian imagination. How could one not see in *Voss* that the megalomaniac Voss was trying to reach the centre of Australia with such arrogance? And yet he is totally destroyed by the land. Instead of discovering the centre of Australia he discovers the centre of his own self. The novel is also about the importance of the aboriginal people. Only two people survive the journey—Judd the convict and Jackie the aborigine. The two rejects survive because they are different from those who seek to conquer and colonize. To me *Voss* is one of the most political novels in postcolonial literature. Politics does not depend on which party you belong to. It is about the way you think, the way you've come to think the thoughts you do.

Unlike Patrick White, who was in some ways marginalized, you were at the centre in Fiji. You were a prominent member of the opposition party and then a minister. Does that make a difference? Does that provide a wholly different perspective on politics and writing?

I spent ten years in politics and fought two elections. There are a lot of similarities between a politician and a writer. To some extent both are

liars, but often they reach some illumination at the end. The politician's speech is often fiction. Perhaps that's why I went back to writing fiction! One of the challenges of the third world is politics. Wherever people are colonized in any form, politics becomes important. We couldn't afford the luxury of a Naipaul. He could go to London and write movingly and powerfully about his situation. After all, Naipaul's books are about his human condition. But we were in a different predicament. I felt that I had to move one step further and connect the life of the writer to the centre of one's life. Whatever happened in Fiji—racism, political manoeuvring, coups, etc.—were not acceptable. It was not possible to live and teach in Fiji without being involved in the things that shaped the country of one's imagination, the nation of one's grandparents, parents and children. So it was inescapable that I went into politics. Some have told me that I should have just been an academic, but I have no regrets. Politics has given me levels of understanding that reading and teaching alone would not have done. Maybe I am also profoundly influenced by Hindu texts like the *Mahabharata,* the ultimate political document for modern man.

Yes, you refer to the Mahabharata *quite often in your writing. The epic becomes a significant intertext in your work.*

Look at the *Bhagavad Gita,* for instance, a magnificent poem written on the eve of a holocaust. I am proud that some human being could think like that. What is emphasized in the text is the need for action and contemplation. Whatever our thoughts are, they have to be put to practical use in the lives of people. I am very conscious of the fact that I have left my country, but I hope my actions and words would inspire other people. And I don't think we should limit ourselves to the boundaries of our countries. I have travelled in many landscapes—I was born in Fiji, studied in Delhi, Leeds and London and went back to Fiji and then to Canberra, and so forth. I do not believe that one should confine oneself to one culture, one country or one community. If you ask for a symbol that defines my life, I would probably name a river. If you search for the source, you would find an infinite number. Sometimes, though, one feels like Tennyson's Ulysses: "that we are, we are . . ."

Isn't that the point of the poem "Voices in the River?"

Yes, exactly. The river is human consciousness. And although I hear the voice of the Ganges, I also hear the voice of the Nandi river. The voices are not necessarily those of the great rishis, but also of little children in Fiji—Indians and Fijians. Whatever happens in Fiji in the future, the fact that I have written "Voices in the River" and *The Wounded*

Sea would remain in the consciousness of at least a handful of people.

In The Wounded Sea, *you refer to an anecdote about the mystery of Fiji. In response to a question asked by a teacher about the mystery of the country, a student claims that the mystery can be located in the coming of the Indians. And the teacher, who happens to be an Indian, scornfully dismisses the idea. The teacher clearly has a linear and narrow vision of history. That is a significant moment in the novel. I couldn't reconcile that anecdote with your fascination with the* Mahabharata. *The epic is homogeneous; it is hegemonic and it valorizes the Aryan race. It is that kind of attitude, held by some people who wield power, that appears to have disrupted your sense of a paradise in Fiji. How do you see the relation between the two?*

In the book I am also saying that Indians saw their exile in Fiji in relation to Rama's exile in the *Ramayana.* I have argued that the *Ramayana* is a very colonizing text. It gives us the Aryan view of the world and pushes the Dravidian people down. I wanted people to know that my sensibility was fragmented and shaped by some of these metatexts. In the novel, this teacher, who had studied in Madras, had no sense of history. We (the Fijian Indians) did not really bother to study the Fijians. They had been there for four or five thousand years and our grave mistake was that we were not interested in their lives. I am not glorifying the events of the *Mahabharata,* what I am saying is that it shows us that every epic grows out of a local quarrel. It can happen in Fiji if the people are not aware of the holocaust that is caused by things that happen between brothers or cousins. In the *Mahabharata,* when the five brothers want five kingdoms, they are denied even five villages. This is exactly what some Fijians in power are doing to the Indians. Ninety percent of the land belongs to the Fijians. The Indians live on rented land. Now there is a choice and the Indians can leave. The Pandavas did leave and go into exile. But ultimately everyone returns. This is why the *Mahabharata* is such a devastating poem. Greater than anything else I've read. It is so much a part of our daily world.

You have written a poem about Abhimanyu and his magnificent gesture of courage. The episode you choose to deal with is extremely significant. Why did you focus on that particular episode?

Well, it grew out of my own life. When I read "Voices in the River" I sometimes wonder how I saw ten years ago the possibility of a catastrophe. In that particular poem I saw myself trapped like Abhimanyu. Krishna had taken away his father and there was this warrior who felt that he must defend his people. I used that as a symbol. Ultimately

Abhimanyu dies, but he gets his strength from a broken wheel. I was trying to say that the *girmitya*—the man who came under the indenture system—may give us the strength when we need it because of his capacity to suffer and not lose his or her humanity. The Fiji Indian has not killed anybody and he does not own any native land. Until this day he wouldn't fight—not in the normal sense. And to me the *girmitya*, the outcast, was as important as Krishna and Arjuna. I was saying that one should not discard the broken wheel, because the *girmitya* will one day be a source of strength and renewal.

You constantly go back to India in your work. In the episode in the novel where you deal with the first pair of shoes owned by the boy, India becomes significant. What kind of attitude do you have towards India? With all your reservations, you have a tremendous allegiance to India.

My most formative years, from 18 to 24, were spent in India. Where I grew up, the chances of getting an education were very slim. We were very poor village people. Our secondary school was founded by the Ramakrishna Mission. This was the first school for Indian children. There was one other school, but it was mainly for children of civil servants and a few businessmen. In 1949 I went to this school. For four years I studied for the Senior Cambridge examination and then I went to another school. At this time I got a scholarship to study in India. I had never travelled outside my village except to my one-street town and a trip to Suva, the capital of Fiji. I went to India, lived, married and taught there. I spent six and a half years of my life there. Since I grew up with the Indian epics in Fiji, my imagination had a romantic vision of India that was shaped by the texts. I was also growing up at a time when Gandhi, Nehru and Vivekananda were great names. All that influenced me greatly. India as a country is both generous and disappointing. The India of my imagination, its multiplicity, affected me significantly. Its past has a tradition of acceptance and creative synthesis. People came, conquered and lived together. To me that was important. The idea of a monolith, which is what you see now, is very disturbing. I have written a poem on Ayodhya which I called "The Second Banishment." People have forgotten that the name Hindu does not come from a text but a river. It enriches itself from many tributaries. The fact that the Indus is no longer in India is itself significant.

You are very critical of colonialism but you also include many allusions to British texts. Don't you find that contradictory?

I gave a talk at the Perth Writers' Festival in 1990 which was called

"New Writings, Old Landscapes." I talked on nationalism and literature and one of the things I said was that we are all children of colonialism. If you constantly struggle against it, then you become victims of history. We become manacled by colonialism. The one way for us to go beyond Prospero and Caliban is to accept colonialism as part of our inheritance. We could then use this as a springboard for higher ground. When Indians accepted the various influences, they were able to create wonderful things. I am saying that we need to be aware of history but history is like the rear-view mirror through which you see what is passing and what is past. But if you concentrate too much there, you are not seeing what is in front. And that is my attitude towards colonialism. Let's face it, one of the great enrichments of our life is the literature of England. One has to accept that to move forward. Today it's all part of literature, part of literature in English.

Your attitude tends to be more holistic.

Yes, more holistic and personal. How can I deny English literature, which is part of my heritage? When I read Wordsworth I find strength. In the last part of my novel, I talk about my being confined, and at this time Wordsworth's poems gave me strength. People wanted to listen to what I had to say. There were bankers and politicians who had no idea of how people survived the holocaust of the heart. You have to go to *King Lear*, the *Mahabharata*, Wordsworth and Milton at such times. I talked about them. My colleagues and friends during those six days of terrible confinement would acknowledge that somehow these writers and their works gave us a sense of perspective and understanding about our condition. We had been taken from parliament and we could have said and done terrible things to ourselves, but in Shakespeare and Wordsworth we found strength. Rama, exiled on the eve of his coronation should have committed suicide, but he didn't. We felt the same way. What happened to us was very small compared to these massive images of art.

You in fact start your novel with an epigraph that draws on these images.

It is from a great poem and I came across it by sheer accident. It was written in honour of some Indians who died in South Africa.

You mention in the novel that you hoped that Australia and New Zealand would send in troops when the coup occurred. Does that express your sense of regional solidarity? Did you expect these countries to intervene and restore order? What is your attitude to Australia and New Zealand?

I had been totally against Australia's nuclear policy. Our party was

openly committed to the idea of a nuclear-free South Pacific. Australia was so much under American domination that it took a different stance. What was significant was that there was a labour government in the two countries and ours was a labour party. Of course, we were clutching at straws during those days of trauma. People were telling us that the labour parties would take some action. They made noises but that was all. It would have been tragic though if they had sent forces. We would all probably have been killed. You can't militarily intervene in situations like that unless you are prepared for the loss of lives. But there was this false notion that the labour governments would take diplomatic action. The governor was not dethroned and he was still the Queen's representative. We almost brought the derailed constitutional train back, until the second coup, which was more fatal, and much more brutal in some ways, took place. A year later I met the Australian defence minister of that time, and he said to me that they should have done more but couldn't because they had their own problems. There was, however, a regional consciousness. But the leaders kept their shameful silence. The Queen didn't say a word, and I am glad that we have become a republic. We were very fond of the Queen but we don't miss her much.

The last part of The Wounded Sea *is very powerful. But I also thought that in terms of narrative structure you were up against a problem. On the one hand, what happened in Fiji was a bloodless coup and on the other, in the mind of the narrator, there was a sense of tremendous violence. But there was no action. You were trying to show both. How did you, from an authorial perspective, deal with that dilemma?*

The last part is a fragment of the memoirs I have written. The entire piece is coming out next year. My editor felt that it would be useful to have three parts that include a description of a young boy growing up in a village and then the sense of sudden turmoil. He took bits and pieces from the 200 pages I had sent him and juxtaposed them with the rest of the narrative. And that caused the structural difficulty you perceive. But it deals only with the six nights of confinement under military guard. In fact I wrote about thirty or forty pages during those nights and before our captors released us they took all those pages out of my bag. And the pages I quote from I had kept in a pair of socks. The last part is fragmented, and there is no violence, but I was trying to bring out the violation. I have known people being assassinated, but never have I known ten masked gunmen taking a whole government out of a parliament. I felt so stunned by that. Fiji was a small, dynamic democracy with a tremendous sense of freedom. When we lost parliament we had lost the

sun of freedom. Every other freedom was reflected from that sun; once that went there was darkness everywhere. To this day I have not been able to accept that moment of horror. I wrote a story for the *Canberra Times* last Christmas which communicates my thoughts at that time. The coup was a deep betrayal. It took quite some time for me to be able to write my thoughts about that terrible, treacherous incident. As White said: "a moment can be eternity depending on what it contains."

Your novel begins with an anecdote in which when you are asked how you feel, you mention that you are glad that your father is dead because he couldn't have survived this betrayal. Why should the betrayal be more intense for your father than for you?

In a sense, I consider myself to be much more educated than my father. He couldn't sign his name, couldn't speak English. I felt that in my heart I was more aware of the tragedies of our larger world. My father was a much simpler man. His father had travelled from an obscure village to Fiji, which he thought was in the Bay of Bengal. There was this quality of innocence about him. There was a conviction that Fiji was their homeland. I was the first to go back to India after almost ninety years. They did not read newspapers and had no sense of the outside world. I am able to accept this betrayal because I know that these things will be repeated. To go from *Things Fall Apart* to *Anthills of the Savannah* does not take seven generations; it takes fewer than seven novels. In a single lifetime, I am always conscious of such a possibility while my father wouldn't have understood. He gave everything he had on that ten acres of land to that country, and never thought of migration. I've travelled to many lands. Today, after the coup, the situation is very different. I visited Fiji after five years and we sat in my village and counted about a hundred members of my extended family who have left for other shores.

That is a massive exodus.

Yes, I was concerned about that and the betrayal that caused it. The betrayal of the faith of these people who knew no other land. Suddenly they were being harassed. A recent book called *Treason at Ten* provides a graphic description of what happened and the suffering it caused. There is nothing called a bloodless coup. The colonel caused a massive haemorrhage.

Is this why in your novel you constantly use the motif of women betraying men or men betraying women?

I use this imagery because I could see how corruption was setting in, and the corruption was moral rather than political. And that corruption

came to full bloom in the betrayal of the government to which the colonel and his men had sworn allegiance. The moral centre of Fiji disintegrated overnight. People who were friends would not visit you. My colleagues did not want me at the university. So it is that kind of inner corruption that sexual corruption reflected. Individual life may depend on one's karma but life's basis is *dharma*. I'm convinced of it.

Is there a sense of betrayal within the family? You recall an incident in which you talk about shoes and the comment of a brother that he is glad that his brother died because he could have his shoes. Was there a sense of betrayal within as well?

The story was written in 1976, and has a prophetic quality to it because I left Fiji. I had betrayed the land for a pair of shoes. Now I realize that if I were dead my shoes would be owned by my brother, my Fijian brothers more particularly.

There is an equally powerful pastoral image associated with the woman who is considered insane by the community. The juxtaposition of an Edenic atmosphere with insanity is powerful. Did you intend something specific with that?

That was a statement about outcasts. The image of this woman holding on to the man who was hanging reminded me of my own predicament. As a politician and a writer when you leave your country you commit suicide in some respects. And who would now regard me with love except perhaps some mad woman?

In fact you end one of the poems with the lines "Only the fish shall live/ unless we learn to forgive."

The idea was that unless you forgive and rebuild you are constantly dissipating your energy. I was trying to say that if you don't see history in those terms, if you constantly want to take revenge, then you will be diminishing yourself. After all it is not the white man who is doing the killing in Africa, India or Sri Lanka. Why does this happen? Fortunately in Fiji we have not killed anybody. It is significant that in other countries people have lived together for thousands of years and they are more cannibalistic than the so-called cannibal isles of Fiji. We (Indians and native Fijians) have lived together for only a hundred years and we have not killed each other. So there is some lesson there for us. And I was saying that unless you transcend these problems, you will go back to the mother of all life—the ocean—and there the fish alone shall live.

In fact you make the point that internal racism, like local liquor, is worse than the imported variety. Is that something that we as critics and readers ought to be focusing on rather than colonial issues?

One of the important things about postcolonial literature is that the journey becomes more exciting when it turns inward. We are so much concerned with problems of imperialism that we do not look inside. We are always blaming "those bastards" but we must be aware of the bastards within us. We need to look at what we are doing to ourselves. If colonial racism is unacceptable, why should internal racism be acceptable in Fiji? Where is the morality of this? Both are political apartheid. The new constitution in Fiji is primarily based on the principle of apartheid. And that is the road to disaster. One of the great ironies is that just when South Africa is dismantling apartheid, in Fiji we are creating structures of apartheid. The reason for the coup was the bad constitution we got in 1970. But we had accepted it as in interim constitution that would be improved upon to bring people together. The present constitution—the supreme law of the land—is absolutely corrupt and corrupting.

Despite the subject matter of your work, your audience is probably the West. You provide glossaries, for instance, to facilitate reading for a Western reader. Who is you primary audience?

When I wrote my poems, I had in mind a few friends in Fiji. Now I realize that few knew anything about Fiji outside the country. Fiji was mainly seen as a tourist resort. By writing, I was giving the people a face and a feature and a voice. The audience is now much wider. I am very conscious that people who influence our lives in Australia are powerful people who ought to know about us. They knew very little about us. The Indian presence was almost totally hidden. Very few people know that the Indians were taken there to save the Fijian way of life, which would have disappeared but for Indian indentured labour. The Fijians would have lost their sense of pride and self-respect. The Indians saved them from that tragedy. And that very fact became a noose around the Indian neck. They are now the dispossessed and the disenfranchised.

Do you see yourself as a permanent migrant or is there a possibility of going back to Fiji?

I can only go back now in my imagination. India, Fiji and New Zealand matter to me, and Australia has been very generous to me and my immediate family; so it looks as if I am going to be in Australia for some time, but I define myself as a Fijian-Indian-Australian. At one time Australia didn't mean much to me, but after Patrick White it has become a country of exciting possibilities and loving people. Besides, it keeps me closer to Fiji.

Is Australia a welcoming society?

To some extent, yes. It still has a long way to go. Two hundred years of history cannot be destroyed overnight. But there is an opening of the Australian mind to Asia-Pacific. The original Australians have a great deal to teach us. Aboriginal culture is the oldest continuous culture in the world, whereas the European presence is barely two hundred years old. Major tragedies took place in Australia, but it has a future. It is an island-continent of enormous potential and, I hope, of compassion.

And what are your plans as a creative writer? What direction will your writing take?

My memoirs will come out soon. Then I hope to bring out a book of poems called *Lines Across Black Waters*, which has some old poems and several new ones. It is being published by the Centre for New Literatures in English, University of Flinders, Adelaide. Then I hope to write a major work that is set in India, Fiji and Australia. It will be a big work, not as voluminous as that of Vikram Seth (incidentally, he was my student at Doon School and I'm immensely proud of his writing), but certainly the biggest I have done. It will be historical, political and imaginatively humorous. You'll have to wait and see. Politics will take a lot of my time and effort.

A final question. All kinds of interesting things are happening in Australian writing. How do you locate yourself in relation to that body of work?

I don't really consider myself a part of the Australian literary tradition. To be mainstream or peripheral is not important. Ultimately one's position as a writer is determined by the quality of what one produces. I was recently in Fiji and I visited a secondary school where one of my friends is a teacher. They were teaching two of my short stories in that school. I talked to the students and it gave me enormous pleasure to respond to their questions. To me that is important. That response I don't get in Australia yet. My position in Australia, however, has not been one of my major concerns. It could become important later. It does not preoccupy my mind at this stage. When I write more, I guess I will begin to think about how I am treated by the mainstream. The reviews of my first book were remarkably generous. But I need to write and write. . .

Vikram Seth

Born in Calcutta, Vikram Seth had his education in India, England and the United States. He also spent more than two years in China gathering data for his doctoral thesis. A full time writer, Seth now lives in Delhi.

> And thus his meetings ended, and on he went to the next meeting . . . a man whose greatness of heart won the hearts of others, and whose meandering pleas for mutual tolerance kept a volatile country . . . safe at least from the systemic clutch of religious fanaticism. (1256)

Thus writes Vikram Seth about Jawaharlal Nehru, the man who guided the destiny of India in the turbulent fifties, in *A Suitable Boy*, the author's most recent and perhaps most ambitious work. The earnestness with which such sentiments are expressed is surprising, notwithstanding the sheer scale of the novel, for the mode of the narrative is closer to that of Jane Austen than to Walter Scott. The social scene, rather than the political or historical, is the ostensible concern of the novel, as four large families are brought to life in all their complexity and made the subject of the novel. Inevitably, almost unobtrusively, the political concerns of the time, particularly the upheavals faced by the landed gentry, enter the lives of the characters, leading to a complex convergence of the private and the public.

Seth's achievement is all the more striking because it seemed almost impossible for any contemporary Indian fiction not to acknowledge the contribution of Salman Rushdie. In many ways, Rushdie had transformed the Indian literary scene by his experiment and his magic realism. Seth writes without a trace of this influence. He moves back to the mode of Tolstoy, to a realism that encompasses the totality of human experience without subscribing to self-conscious artifice or essentialist romanticism. *A Suitable Boy* is the perfect antithesis of *Midnight's Children*, and if the latter is about the events that led to the fragmentation of a nation the former is about the humanity and determination of a people that preserved the country during its moments of turmoil.

Great novelists are hardly ever equally great poets. Seth is one of the rare exceptions. Even if *The Golden Gate*—that wonderfully imaginative novel in verse—had not been written, he would still have been a major poet. Short poems, often unpretentious and traditional in metrical form, but intense, perfectly balanced and nuanced in tone, reveal the author at his best. His meditative poems, like the ones included in *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, demonstrate his capacity to write without a sense of having to struggle with language and yet achieve a complexity in no way inferior to, say, poets of the stature of Alamgir Hashmi or Jayanta Mahapatra. One is constantly struck by the quiet appeal and power of poems such as "Dark Road" in *All You Who Sleep Tonight*:

The road is dark, and home is far.
Sleep now, in the poor state you are.
Tonight be dreamless, and tomorrow
Wake free from fear, half-free of sorrow.

INTERVIEW

I met Satendra Nandan a few months ago and he mentioned that at some stage he was your teacher.

He was, when I was at Doon, I think in what was known as a D form, when I was fourteen. He taught me English literature.

Have you read his work?

No, I haven't, and that is because I haven't been reading novels during the time I was writing *A Suitable Boy*. I have kept my voluntary reading to a minimum because there is so much to read in terms of trying to understand the background of the characters in the book. One of the things I am looking forward to doing, now that I am slowly getting out from under the weight of the book, is to read again.

When Satendra told me about having been your teacher, I wondered about the school, and your years in India. One often hears about your research in China and the States, and so forth, but not much about your high school years, and the events that led up to your interest in literature.

I really liked reading, but it seemed pointless to study literature as a subject, so I began by studying pure maths, applied maths, physics, etc. Later I had to shift a little. I stuck to pure maths, but I also had to do

German at O Level because I needed a European language. I got into university in England to read literature, but before I went to university I decided to study philosophy, politics and economics. This was largely because I felt if I studied literature I would lose my taste for literature, especially because one has to read so much criticism. And then you might be assigned huge novels which you might not be in the mood for.

What was Doon School like?

It was an Indian school run on public school lines in the British sense of the word. It was a good school, but like all public schools, it had its drawbacks as well. It gave you a fairly well-rounded education but it was also a situation where everything was run by the boys and they controlled your psychological well-being as well.

Was the school very colonial in its assumptions?

Well, it emphasized sports, but it also emphasized dramatics, debating and many other subjects. So it was fairly well balanced in that respect. I think the main disadvantage of a school like that is the ethos it creates. The senior boys have tremendous power over junior boys, more than a prime minister would have over an ordinary citizen. That may be true of most boarding schools. I wouldn't say that there was anything specifically colonial about it.

Did you have to be fairly affluent to attend that school?

Yes, but in our case, I wouldn't say that my parents were affluent. We have never been able to afford a house of our own, except very recently. My parents spent most of their income educating my brother and me. It is just that they had that priority.

In your novel you have the character Pran Kapoor lament the uncritical adulation of T S Eliot in India. Was this in some way your viewpoint as well?

Well, I liked Eliot but I do think we as a country tend to give him undue adulation for a couple of reasons: he appears to be a very intellectual poet and we admire intellect. The second reason was that he gave a great deal of respect to India. We are delighted when anyone pays us any attention and so we give adoration where we receive interest.

Your first collection of poems is quite eclectic in style and content. You experiment with certain forms, you touch on a wide range of topics. Could you say something about the forces that shaped your early writing?

My reading is fairly erratic and also there are huge holes in it. I would be hard pressed to explain what my influences are. Clearly, the tradition of English poetry that uses form is one. Most of my poetry uses form.

When I find that form represses or constrains one's emotions, then the poetry doesn't appeal to me very much. If the poetry is very cerebral, then that doesn't interest me. However, modernism has had such a long innings. Modernism has been the academic, entrenched stance for eighty years. Amazing that it is still called modernist. And it hardly permits anything with rhyme and metre to breathe because it condemns it as reactionary or passé in some sense. I guess one should be just more tolerant. If something works, that is good, whether that is in rhyme and metre or in free verse. Similarly, if one were to face the opposite dogma, where everything has to be in rhyme and verse then that would be equally stupid.

But isn't the choice of form determined by subject matter?

Not always. Take a love poem. You find some love poems in free verse and some in form. I think partly the subject and partly the predilection of the poet determines whether something would be in form or not. It could be something fairly untrammeled like blank verse, or something with a greater degree of rhyming constraint such as, say, a sonnet, and then you can get to more complicated forms like the stanzaic pattern I use in *The Golden Gate.*

Was your choice of metrical pattern influenced by anything Indian?

Well, certainly both the Hindi and the English poetry that we read at school was in rhyme and metre, whether it was Kabir or Tennyson. So obviously part of my Indian education gave me an idea of what poetry might be. Subsequently there was an overlay of modern poetry and at that stage I thought that what I liked writing was completely out of date and had no relevance for the modern world and didn't speak of my time. It was trying to get out the overlay that helped me to discover rhyme and metre. Part of the pleasure of poetry is the music of it and the meaning and the music are intertwined in such a way that the music makes it more memorable. And if it is memorable it will come back to you at times when you need poetry. If it is in completely unstructured forms then it will be ephemeral. If I ask you to recite to me a paragraph of your favourite novel, you won't be able to do it. But you can probably recite stanza after stanza of your favourite poem. If Frost had written "I have quite a few promises I have to maintain" you wouldn't remember it.

The poems in Mappings *are personal, anecdotal and somewhat autobiographical, unlike* The Golden Gate. *Were you attracted to this kind of poetry at that stage?*

I really don't know. Not only my influences but also my inspirations

are erratic. I might be writing *Mappings* or *All You Who Sleep Tonight*, etc., all of which are individual books of verse. Or I might be writing *The Golden Gate* which is a novel in verse or *A Suitable Boy* which is a large novel in prose, or translations from Chinese poetry. It is not that at a particular stage I felt that this is the right ashram in life. I am very much a prey to somewhat unpredictable inspiration. I would like to have a more analytical hold on myself. When I am asked what I hope to do next I sometimes fob them off by saying that I will write a play set in England, but honestly I don't know. If tomorrow I am inspired to write "An Unsuitable Girl" I would do it.

Certainly the novel ends with the notion of a suitable girl.

Yes there is a certain symmetry in Mrs Rupa Mehra's demands for her youngest son.

I wondered about the notion of exile as a motif in your work. You speak of tenuous fixity in one of your poems, and the poem "Divali" is preoccupied with exile. In your next collection you include a poem called "Homeless" which begins with the lines "I envy those who have a house of their own." You are not an exile in the conventional sense of the term. Why does this preoccupy you?

Well, I don't see myself as an exile now. But I wasn't sure when I went to England. I wrote "Divali" when I was in my early twenties. And that time I didn't know what was coming and where I would be. I missed home and couldn't afford to go back home.

Was there some aspect of India that prompted you to become an exile?

Not really. My studies took me away and my homesickness drew me back.

A number of poems in The Humble Administrator's Garden *deal with your experiences in China. And I want to talk about the title poem which is also a very effective sonnet. It looks at various dichotomies—permanence and transience, pleasure and guilt, etc. Do these dualities express your attitude to China?*

Well we have a stream which is advait, but the Chinese idea of yin and yang makes them see things in dualities. I am not sure if my view is necessarily polarized. I think for a poet to see these things in brightly contrasting ways is to reduce the necessary complexity of them.

Take a poem like "Research in Janzu Province." It is a very witty, ironic poem about your academic pursuit.

There is a sort of ironic comment on it as it goes along. But towards the end of the poem it ends with Mrs G looking at her grandson.

Does that imply the limitations of one kind of inquiry?

Yes. I suppose most poems of inquiry have their richnesses and limitations. To see things from one point of view from that of a politician or a sociologist, has its own problems and strength. So when I look at myself launching the flotilla of my PhD, I also realize that they are half-truths—they don't tell you about human suffering or the individual aspirations. One needs to have some sense of that to view these necessary numbers.

You are one of the few writers who have made use of China. To what extent was this important?

I did not see China as a large market for the imagination. I drifted into it. I love Chinese poetry. I read some work in translation. If the translation has the power to move you so much, then there must be something in the original. The only way to learn Chinese was to combine it with my research which later I really became interested in. I lived there for two years. Anywhere you live is going to be important in your life.

You also include a poem in The Humble Administrator's Garden *which ends with the line "O travellers may you not sleep alone." That seemed to anticipate your recent collection* All You Who Sleep Tonight.

This is the kind of thing that a writer might never see and a critic might well see.

Do you see continuities between the two collections?

I do but not necessarily in that one. However, unlike most critical connections, there is truth in that one. Many of my poems are set at night. Maybe because night is quiet and it is a time when you are alone and when you meditate as it were. I have no doubt in one case you are in a particular place, you are still, you are looking up at the emptiness above. In the other you are travelling on a train, the darkness falls, the starlight and the idea of aloneness become very poignant.

The aloneness is soothing in Humble. *It leads to insights and has a calming effect. You recognize that with contraries there is something to be loved. That kind of sensibility does not spill over into the next collection.*

It is jarred again. But remember the first came out in '80 the next in '85 and the other in '91. As the years pass, continuity will take you only that far.

The poems in this collection relate to war, dispossession, destruction, etc. Life is bleak in this collection.

Equally difficult to say why this is true of *Beastly Tales.* You might well say why there is a flippant side to me. I don't know. I am not even sure if

it is a good idea for a writer to analyse oneself. You do it too much and you might look over your shoulder when you write your next work.

A lot of these poems deal with love, sexuality and so forth. And these preoccupations take a different form in The Golden Gate *and* A Suitable Boy. *Is it a motif that runs through your work?*

Yes, I investigate its various parameters. But then point out one person for whom love is not important. I do, but only insofar as it is important for the book. If my characters had only monetary ambition, for instance, there would be very little love in that book. My job as a writer is to understand the characters and speak with their voice. Otherwise it is a sort of imposition on your characters. How is it possible to be a mullah inciting a mob and an Agarwal inciting the legislature against people who want to support Urdu? In a sense to understand multiple points of view, one has to be both a courtesan and the man who is infatuated with her. And so since love is such an important part of people's lives, for a novelist it has to have that element too.

What I was getting at was that you were not treating love as a symbol or a metaphor.

No I use very little symbol, metaphor, allegory in my book. One can make that kind of connection. One can say that Lata's choice is India's choice, but I leave that to the readers. *The Golden Gate* is not obviously only the San Francisco Golden Gate. It is also the golden gate of friendship, happiness, etc. But basically it is supposed to be taken at its face value. It's not necessarily to decry the fact that there are other connections. But at least at the first level it should be transparent. If I am talking about Charlemagne, I am actually talking about Charlemagne.

I want to move for a moment to Heaven's Lake. *That book draws attention at one point to Naipaul and his treatment of India. What was the connection, apart from the obvious one that Naipaul has written travel books?*

I happened to be carrying that book with me. If I had been carrying Molière, I would have probably commented on that.

I wondered about it because a lot of Naipaul's reputation is based on his travel writing. Was he in any way an influence on your writing?

I have read very little travel writing. I guess *India: A Wounded Civilization* is a travel book. Insofar as he writes directly and clearly he is one of the many people whose prose I admire. I haven't read a lot along those lines. I have read *An Area of Darkness* and started reading *A Million Mutinies* but I am ashamed to say I haven't read *A House for Mister Biswas.*

What was your response to An Area of Darkness? *That was a very controversial book.*

I guess I have made a few comments about *A Wounded Civilization* in *Heaven's Lake*. Yes, Naipaul's later comments about Ayodhya and so forth, I think I find ignorant and harmful as well. But that is not to disacknowledge one's debt to someone who is very exacting and tells things precisely as he sees them. And that is a rare virtue.

The India he saw was inefficient and corrupt and decadent. The India you portray in A Suitable Boy *is spacious.*

Yes, it is a point of view. Naipaul's latest book shows a certain kind of tolerance. I think there is a place for all of us and the only things I take exception to is when Naipaul says things such as "this is a kind of movement that is bound to happen" or "all this is part of a process." To think that these dreadful forces that have been let loose can be looked upon with a philosophical acceptance—that I find fearsome.

To go back for a moment to Heaven's Lake. *One of the things about the book is that it is not judgemental. You sometimes choose the perspective of an insider although you are conscious of being an outsider. Is this a particular kind of balance you seek to establish?*

It is true of not only that book but also of *The Golden Gate*. I lived in China for two years and couldn't help being involved with the lives of my friends and Chinese people in general. So there is that aspect to the book. There are passages in that book where I try to contrast China with India—give a kind of balanced feel after having lived in both countries. In general, I think it is better to let the reader make his or her judgement rather than spell it out.

Your approach tends to be more inclusive rather than regional. Is that right?

The idea of Asia as an entity does not seem to be plausible. It is a European idea. India and China are so very different from each other. Other than Buddhism which went across so many centuries ago, there is not enough to make people have a common consciousness. The East Asian zone is a sort of civilization of its own. India is another. I wouldn't merge those.

I was going to mention that the book is also about barriers. Barriers caused by natural disasters and some are linguistic. Sometimes these are caused by officials but the people are often helpful.

I think you are right. I am not aiming for inclusivity. If you understand people's lives, it is difficult to view them as specimens. I've read some

travel books subsequently, and although they are sometimes witty, they don't wholly convince me because they seem to be a trampoline from which the writer bounces off into jokes at the expense of people about whom he is writing.

The Golden Gate *was a remarkable achievement because it changes our notion of genre. We associate the sonnet with certain traditions and the novel with a kind of comprehensive vision. How did you arrive at this synthesis?*

I would like to take credit for this as an emanation of genius but sadly I can't. The idea is Pushkin's. If I had not read Pushkin I would never have dreamed of writing a novel in verse. I would never dream of reading one either. The thought of reading 300 pages of verse is opaque to me. The idea of a novel in verse, the idea of marrying the formal sophistication of verse with the comprehensiveness of the novel, and the actual stanzaic form were got from Pushkin. And if you want to read a wonderful version of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* read the one in the Penguin Classics translated by Charles Johnston who was British High Commissioner to Australia. It is a wonderful translation.

Why did you choose the sonnet? Free verse would have been easier.

Yes, but I don't think it would have kept my attention or the attention of the reader. If you are to use free verse you may as well use prose. There is no aspect that tells you these are the breathing pauses, etc. People say it is constrained but you may as well tell a *Bharata Natyam* dancer that the dance is constrained because she is limited to certain steps. Eventually you become free within the form and that is the pleasure of form. It is necessary artifice but in the service of a larger vision. I don't think I could have chosen any form other than the one that inspired me. And the one that inspired me was Pushkin's work. English doesn't really use feminine rhymes in its prosody but the Russians do it a lot and so do the French.

The verse comes across as if it were prose. It reminded me of eighteenth-century work in its epigrammatic force, its juxtapositions and so on.

Pope is one of my favourite writers. English also has a wonderful narrative tradition. Not all its poetry was lyrical. You may ask why *The Canterbury Tales* wasn't written in prose. Maybe it should have been, but there is a great pleasure in verse. So there is a lot to draw inspiration from. But I wasn't looking at the English tradition. I was looking at a particular novel in verse in translation. But Pushkin himself was inspired by a bad French translation of Byron's *Don Juan*. And maybe Byron was inspired by Italian models. It seems to me that writers scramble around

and if they find something they can use, they use it.

There is one point where you draw attention to Andrew Marvell.

Yes, and also to Swift.

It seems to me that in The Golden Gate, *apart from a few self-reflexive sonnets where you draw attention to yourself by name, the poem need not have been written by an Indian writer. There is nothing Indian about it, if you know what I mean.*

Well, I tend to follow my characters. I didn't want to inject a spurious Indianness to the book. I have been taken to task on this—one of my agents said I must develop the foreign characters in this book. The foreign characters have very minor roles and I was not going to expand them artificially in order to latch on to the possibility of a foreign response. Many critics have found all kinds of Indianness in *The Golden Gate*. There was one theory that my love of animals was based on the premise that as an Indian I saw all creation as one in a cyclical and reincarnative form. And I as an Indian believed more in arranged marriages and not ones based on passion. There are hundreds of ways to Indianize the book, but there the constraint is the fertility of the mind of the analyzer rather than what is in the book.

One of the problems with critical approach is that writers like Achebe or Walcott or Soyinka have at various points talked about their objectives. You haven't.

I am not sure I have objectives.

The year 1952 is an important year in A Suitable Boy. *That was an important year in Indian politics. Was it a conscious decision to choose that year?*

I thought I was going to begin there and rapidly move out of the boring fifties into interesting periods like the Indo-Pakistan conflict, the Emergency, etc. I never got out of it. I got more and more fascinated by this period. I realized that this was a signficant time. The only reason one doesn't think so is because the British had gone and the changes that were taking place were not as flamboyant as those that took place in 1947.

I wondered about that. In a book that has this scope it would have been a temptation to write about the Partition. But you stayed clear of that.

It was something of a deliberate choice. I didn't want my work to be a Raj book. We have already had books about that period. I wanted to write about a period that I knew about.

There is one point at which Amit talks about a huge novel and draws a connection with Middlemarch. *Did you consciously work out the assumptions that go into a novel like this?*

I thought at the beginning that the book would be quite slim. I didn't think it would bring in the land reform, the leather trade and Calcutta commercial life, and so forth. As it widened, the depth prevented me from writing in chronological length. *Ulysses* takes place in one day. I didn't think at that stage of other things. But as I went on I realized that the book was going to be a long one and then I drew any inspiration I could from many books—Victorian, Chinese, etc.

The book took me by suprise for various reasons. After Rushdie wrote Midnight's Children *it seemed that a different kind of novel had come into being. Several writers after him endorsed that sense by writing in a more postmodern, antireferential manner. Suddenly you have gone back to a very realistic novel. Did you think your form would encompass the experience of India?*

I wasn't thinking of a very ambitious novel. And since I like certain kinds of novels I didn't see why I should write the kind of novel I didn't enjoy reading. For me a novel that is too obsessed with its own navel, with arcane academic concepts is not something I as an ordinary reader from the ignorant realm of economics enjoy writing. And then since I tend to appreciate the plain style, when the book expanded, there was no reason to change the style. Of course the plain style, strangely enough, is difficult to write. Someone said that easy writing makes hard reading. I think the opposite is true as well.

After I finished reading the novel, I wondered why you had left out certain aspects—you deal with a certain class and leave out others. In short what I am getting at is that you give the impression of carefully screening out certain facets of experience. Was it considerations of length?

Partly that. No book is really comprehensive. You usually have an important cast of characters. Other characters gate crash. But they gate crash because they have a connection with the other characters. It is not as if you can say that you are going to talk about every caste and class. You are limited.

For instance, notions of caste which are becoming increasingly problematic now in India.

I can think of areas where I dealt with those. In the early fifties when the electorate has just been expanded sixfold, that is when the issue of caste entered really powerfully into the electoral equation and you get touches of it in the novel. In the Ram Leela for instance all the shorubs

are from the Brahmin caste and the scheduled castes are trying to make sure that since they contribute to this function they should be allowed to choose at least one of the four shorubs. This is such a shocking idea—it is completely unacceptable to the Ram Leela organizers. One touches upon various issues. With the leather trade, there is quite a sense of the polluting nature of the trade. How can it affect the views of the traders and the foreigners who don't have the same hangups and set up an industry of that sort? It is one of many strands. Maybe I emphasized religion more than caste because that was more important at that time, at least in Brahmpur.

One of the things that the novel turns on is the Zamindari Act. How significant was that in relation to the political climate?

I would say that in the early fifties, if there were two or three major legislative concerns, they were the Hindu Court Will and the Zamindari Act. In one case it changed the structure of domestic society. The other was the Zamindari Act which was fought tooth and nail first in the legislature and then in the courts. The effect of all this not only on the land owners but the retainers, the courtesans and the musicians who depend for patronage on the system was great. It was a huge event. At first I thought the Zamindari was boring, but the more I got into it the more I realized it was at the heart of things.

A question about your reference to Nehru. There is a point at which you talk about Nehru as the champion of secularism, as one who tried to prevent systemic fundamentalism.

At least during his lifetime, from the systemic clutch of fundamentalists. There was plenty of fundamentalism but it didn't enter the innards of the system.

A final question. In a wonderful quatrain called "Kent" you include the lines, "They tell the truth that fiction never dies . . ." Would this be a fairly accurate statement about your craft?

To get a feel for what things were like at any given period, one needs to go to the creative writing of the period as much as to the statistics. If on the one hand I say that fiction is truth I must admit that it is only a half-truth; numbers too are only a half-truth, though they are more factual in a sense than fiction.

Bapsi Sidhwa

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Karachi to a Parsi family and grew up in Pakistan. She has taught creative writing at various universities in the United States, including Columbia, and currently divides her time between Pakistan and the United States.

The idea of postcolonial literature as the expression of collective identity, as sustained allegory of the nation, has more than a passing significance for Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*. Ayah as a symbol of India, desired by all and later betrayed and ravished by those who claimed to love her, works remarkably well in the text and offers the possibility of an allegorical reading. Even in more general terms, the novel is concerned with the lives of ordinary people—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Parsis—suddenly confronted with the bestiality of the Partition.

The allegorical dimension receives a jolt when the narrator Lenny visits Gandhi for the first time. It is a moment that shifts the angle of reality and depicts the saintly figure as cold and forbidding, and in the process reveals the relation between ideology and history. Later, the novel talks about Jinnah: "His training at the Old Bailey and practice in English courtrooms has given him faith in constitutional means, and he puts his misplaced hopes into tall standards of upright justice. The fading Empire sacrifices his cause to their shifting allegiances" (170). The idea of collective identity becomes problematic as the novel lays bare the constructedness of history, of how the roles of hero and villain get created by subjectivities.

Told from the perspective of a young Parsi girl, *Cracking India* also becomes the tale of a marginalized group, of how they stood apart, and how in times of such horror distancing oneself is hardly possible. As Parsis, Lenny's family is left alone, but when their Ayah is taken away and raped, they too become victims of collective insanity. The novel includes a wonderful episode about the arrival of the Parsis from Persia, their initial rejection and their symbolic gesture of stirring a spoon of sugar in a glass of milk to indicate how they would like to live in the new land. When the horror of the Partition erupts, the characters in the novel

do take sides, but not to favour the Muslims or the Hindus, but rather to save the group that was victimized by all—the women.

The multiple narratives of the novel hardly permit a univocal reading of the novel. The novel is at once about provisionality and the need to transcend that ambivalence. It shows how difficult it is to assign blame and how one must accept responsibility to move ahead. The complexity of the novel is what makes *Cracking India* probably Sidhwa's most significant achievement, notwithstanding the obvious strengths of *The Crow Eaters*, her hilarious novel about the Parsi community, *The Bride*, which charts the story of a young girl's flight from an inflexible patriarchal order and more recently, *An American Brat*, which explores the ambivalent space of exile.

INTERVIEW

The two novels that preceded Cracking India *adopt a relatively traditional narrative mode.* Cracking India, *on the other hand, seems to mark a new phase in formal sophistication in the use of various literary strategies, narrative voice, and so forth. Was it intended to be a point of departure in your career?*

I don't think so. I am not a very self-conscious writer. I write when I feel like it, and I guess I have naturally grown as a writer. This is very much a complex book and is perhaps more sophisticated, although I am very fond of *The Crow Eaters*. I won't be able to write like that again. That was a very spontaneous, exuberant book. With *Cracking India*, the point of view has made it sound sophisticated, because here is a small child narrating the tale, but a childish voice would have made the book boring. And a very adult voice might have made it very artificial. I had to maintain this balance so that the voice is childlike but sophisticated enough to involve the adult reader. I sort of inhabited my childhood. But the adult consciousness is always there.

Is that duality a result of having lived through a particular phase in Indian history?

Yes, it is the phase I am dealing with, the Partition of India and Pakistan, and I was pretty much the same age as this child then. It was natural for me to write from this point of view. I did see certain things; I heard the mobs chanting, which was a very frightening sound. I saw a lot of dead bodies on my road and I saw houses burning. It was to me very

threatening. And that scene where the people ride into the house to kidnap Ayah has been fictionalized, but it did happen in real life. My maiden name was Pandara; after the Partition, the riots had almost given over, the mobs thought that here was a Hindu house that had not been looted, so a lot of carts did ride into the house, and our cook came out and said that we were Parsis and they went away.

This leads directly into the next question. You have changed the title of Ice-Candy-Man *to* Cracking India *in the American edition. Was it because the Partition is so central to your consciousness? It appears in all your novels.*

It was published as *Ice-Candy-Man* in Germany and in Britain. But here the publishers wanted to change the title. My publisher said that the American readership will not relate to *Ice-Candy-Man*, because Ice and Candy are euphemisms for drugs here. So that it would be better to give a title based on what the narrator says in the novel about the Partition. Of course my idea was to talk about the Partition. I feel that not enough has been written about the Partition.

In spite of all the Indian novels that have dealt with it?

Which ones? Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* perhaps. Much later Rushdie dealt with it a little, but that was not dealing with the Partition. I grew up with stories of the Partition, stories of what happened to individuals, about millions of refugees who flooded Pakistan. So it was an intimate experience. I don't think *Midnight's Children* is about the Partition at all. But there are books like *Freedom at Midnight* which tell you more about the Partition, although that is written with a very strong British bias which I don't like. A book has come out by Surebai in India, and he had access to letters of that period in the archives of the British museum which were not supposed to be released for some years. All my views in *Cracking India* have been vindicated by that book. I do regard Gandhi partially to blame for the Partition. This book says that Annie Besant resigned from Congress when Gandhi joined it after he came from Africa. And she resigned because she said that he changed it from a secular Quit India movement to a Hindu movement. She resigned in protest. That is when the Muslim community started to get nervous. They felt that the majority was not going to care for their interests. Jinnah did not leave the Congress for a very long time. Eventually when he did, he went away to England and did not want to have anything more to do with politics. He was invited in the late thirties to head the Muslim League. This was just before the Partition. And then again he put forward some demands, which stipulated, for instance, that

a Muslim should be the first prime minister. Here Gandhi agreed but Nehru and Patel had by this point become very arrogant. They knew the British were going, and they decided not to concede anything to the Muslims. And if they had conceded these points there would not have been a Partition. It is very sad on reflection because I think that the Partition was a mistake.

In the process of writing along these lines, are you giving a new perspective to history and historiography?

I meant to. There is very little written about this and what has been written is by Indians or the British. No book has been written by a Pakistani. Naturally the British have brought Mountbatten and the British perspective to be heroic. I blame Mountbatten a lot. He has left us with so many problems. In the Punjab and Kashmir we are still trying to solve those issues. Naturally the Indians have brought out their own perspective, to deify Gandhi and Nehru. Well, the world had deified them. No doubt, these are men of great stature, but in the interim the Muslim role has been vilified altogether. Jinnah has been made out to be a villain. I first became conscious of this when I saw the film *Gandhi*. I saw it in Boston with my daughter and her friend. I saw it from the point of view of somebody who was conscious of pre-Partition India too. I had tremendous respect for Gandhi and still do. But my daughter saw it in a different light and when the film was over she said that she and her friend were very angry. She said: "Didn't you see what they did to Jinnah? They caricatured him, and he is our idol, and why did they do that?" And I explained that if Gandhi is to be the hero then Jinnah has to be the villain.

The Partition looms very large in this book, but it is not entirely about the Partition. It is also the story of a young girl growing up, of what happened to the poorer people when the politicians so heartlessly played around with their lives. They suffered the most. Being a Parsi, I wrote it from an objective perspective. Not Pakistani, not Indian, but as far as I could make it, objective. And history is something novelists do handle and have to handle.

Does the fact that you are a Parsi give you a very different perspective? In certain ways you belong to a marginalized group.

Yes, being a Parsi marginalizes and it also gives a better perspective. My family and my community were not hurt; and the Christians weren't. The fight was between people who were to gain by it, who were going to be empowered by this, and they were the Hindus, Muslims and the

Sikhs. The battle was theirs but as a Parsi, my emotions were not aligned one way or the other. I could keep an objective point of view to some extent.

In the preface to The Crow Eaters *you talk about the love for the Parsi community that gave rise to the novel. Is there something about the consciousness of that community that needs to find expression?*

Yes, I feel that the Parsis are an endangered species. We are less than a hundred thousand in the world now. When I wrote that book I believe we were a hundred and twenty thousand. I had just finished *The Bride* when I started writing *The Crow Eaters*; although *The Crow Eaters* was published first, I wrote it second. I wanted to preserve my regard for this vanishing community; I felt it had so many charming manners, an exuberance and a sense of humour. They were a beloved community. It was the first time the Parsis were written about in fiction. And there was a bad reaction to the book; the Parsis stopped talking to me. That is the natural reaction of a minority community when it is written about for the first time as fiction. Like all minority communities, they have little books glorifying themselves, and they were not used to having themselves portrayed in this manner. The protagonist is not totally an honest hero, he is more a picaresque hero. But he is not as bad as a man can be.

He is in fact quite endearing at times.

When I was questioned about this, I said that he was my ideal of a man. He was firmly rooted on this earth. He was a man of action, and no matter what he said he did more good than a do-gooder would have done. And he was pragmatic and tactful. In Karachi I have now been accepted wholeheartedly as a writer. But this is because I recently won a citation called the Satayar Imtiaz. When someone else accepts you then the whole community accepts you. In India I have still not been forgiven.

For writing The Crow Eaters?

Yes, they objected to the title, which only means "people who talk too much." But they think it is a derogatory remark on the Tower of Silence, our burial system. It is amazing how they misconstrue so many things. This book was finally published abroad, by Jonathan Cape in England, and at that point I wrote in the preface that this was a labour of love.

But you present a few characters as leaving the community and thereby suggest that the community has many weaknesses.

Parsis are no angels by any means. This book is almost a three-generational saga of the Parsis. There will be all types of people inhabiting the book. I have described their strengths, weaknesses, and the strength of

their women. Even in *Cracking India*, the Parsi women are portrayed as being quite strong. They can be quite strong. The men too are quite strong so they are a good match for each other.

The humour that goes into The Crow Eaters *is not repeated in the subsequent novels. Has that got anything to do with the changes in the nation?*

It has to do with a change of subject matter. I first wrote *The Bride*, which was almost a wholly serious book. I heard the story of a young Punjabi girl who was seen in the mountain area. The army was building a road and the conscripts suddenly saw this girl and an old tribal taking the girl across to the wild unadministered territory. I first heard that she had been married across the river and then that she had run away. A runaway bride is an intolerable insult to the whole tribe. So, according to the story the girl lived for fourteen days in those mountains. She had somehow managed to reach the river, but then the husband found her and killed her. And this story haunted me when I came to Lahore. I wanted to write about the tribals, their looks, and their harsh code of conduct. That is how I came to write the book. I thought I was writing a short story and it became a novel. So the subject matter was serious in the book. But the minute I write about the Parsis, I burst into burlesque and lampoon, and parody.

You switch very quickly from the comic to the solemn in a manner that is unusual.

It is I guess unusual—several critics in London have commented on that too.

Not very much is known about your background. Your education, family, and so forth.

I wonder whether that would help or disillusion people. As a child I was very sick, and subsequently I was not sent to school. I went to an Anglo-Indian governess for two hours a day. She taught me very lightly. I heard that the doctors had commented that I was not going to be a professor; I was going to get married and raise children. I eventually did become a professor and did teach at Columbia University and several other places in America. I devoted my time from the age of eleven to nineteen—when I got married—to reading. That was my life. Since I belonged to a minority community in Lahore, I didn't have many friends. So I had to pass my time and I lived in the books. I read voraciously. And that taught me subconsciously how to write.

Were you influenced by any particular writer more than others?

In *The Crow Eaters* I was influenced by Dickens. I was teaching a

course on humour in the novel at Columbia and when I reread Dickens for the course it struck me how much I must have absorbed as a child.

When I read Cracking India *I was reminded of Sterne, of Gunter Grass and other writers who had used narrative voice in innovative ways.*

I haven't read Sterne but I have read Gunter Grass. But I am not sure if I was influenced by him. He goes into magical realism. The earlier part of the book is grounded in some kind of realism, which is a kind of fantastic realism, and that I think my book also has it. But I don't think I was influenced by Gunter Grass.

How strongly did you identify with the characters in Cracking India*? Did you see any merit in someone like the Ice-Candy-Man?*

I could be identified to some extent with Lenny, but not with Ice-Candy Man; of course every character in the novel represents the author to an extent. When you write about evil, for instance, you sense that evil in you. You sense the mercurial dimension that the Ice-Candy-Man has within you.

You had given a handicap to Lenny, and she gradually tries to become whole. Is that a metaphor for what you perceive to be India and Pakistan?

A book works at many levels and has many dimensions; and when a reader like you finds these connections I believe these works contain such resonances. The writer, at a subconscious level, probably has these ideas in mind. Ayah, for instance, is not really symbolic of anything. But afterwards looking back I felt that she could be representing India in a way. There are people who desire her so much, and each one of them, when he has a chance, ravishes her. So the book does have these resonances which many readers pick up.

With Ayah in Cracking India *and Zaitoon in* The Bride*, you end on a very mild note of hope, but the reader treats that hope with considerable scepticism. How does that relate to your notion of gender, which appears to be central to your writing?*

Yes I do write with a feminine sensibility, although I was very complimented when a lot of reviewers in England didn't know that Bapsi was a woman's name. When reviewing *The Crow Eaters* they referred to me as Mr Sidhwa. So there my feminine sensibility is not so obvious. In the other two novels it is. I hate to preach about feminism, but I let the characters speak for themselves and what the characters go through illustrates what a woman goes through in our part of the world. During those riots women were kidnapped and sold for ten rupees on the streets. Everybody turned bestial. I had ended *The Bride* with the girl

dying. But I felt by this time that I had partially identified with the heroine. She became a deep part of me, and then I felt that she must be made to live. So I changed the ending of the book. In the case of the Ayah tragedy, she is at least alive, although she has been scarred very badly. Ayah's reactions are dead and her reactions to Lenny are dead.

Do you see yourself as creating a space for women to speak rather than have men speak for them?

Very much so. Whenever men speak for women, they come out with very weird statements. They utter their own wishful thinking.

Would you make a distinction between Western versions of feminism and the Asian situation?

Yes, very much so, because our concerns are quite different. Whether it is India or Pakistan, the whole issue is so much mired in the physical. Women are still being burned to death; they are being kidnapped and put into prostitution, and so forth. In Pakistan, it is quite alright if a man kills his sister because she has been having an affair, or if a father kills his daughter if he believes that she has been doing that. Our concerns are very different. And because of this we sometimes tend to think that Western concerns can be a little trivial, but that is not true. They have their own problems and their own perspectives on them.

What is the relation between colonialism and gender in India?

Colonialism humiliated the men and they in turn humiliated the women. So whenever the condition of society is weak or humbled, the women suffer the most. And that pattern continues with expectations of subservience from the women.

While I found The Bride *to be very moving, I was curious about one aspect of the novel. On the one hand, through Carol, you talk about romanticizing India and creating an exotic Orientalist perspective. And your novel, almost wilfully, does the same thing by creating adventures, patterns of romance, and so forth. I wasn't sure what the objective was. Were you playing off one against the other?*

Carol was like a mirror. Pakistan is in some respects culturally so removed from the Western world that the readers here would just not understand what was happening unless some of it was filtered through Carol's eyes. It was to provide some credibility. For even a Pakistani, the world that I am writing about, the tribal world, is exotic. And that is why I wrote about it. This was the first time I had heard about their strange codes of honour and customs. Some of them still inhabit the cave era, and they are like genetic specimens trapped in the mountains. So maybe

that element of exoticism has crept in.

Do you have a theory of narrative or an aesthetic with regard to your fiction? The movement from The Crow Eaters *to* Cracking India *is so immense in some ways that it is difficult to assert that you write in a particular way.*

I am not stuck on one type of writing. Mentally I feel bored if I don't change. All my books have different styles, with each style consistent to a book. And yet those who know my work identify my style. So I do have a voice after all.

Some time ago, Anita Desai drew attention to you and a few others as experimental writers who are forging new directions. If I remember right, she talked about you in relation to writers like Allan Sealy. Do you see yourself as being different from the traditional canon of Indian authors?

Having been brought up in Pakistan, I was not exposed to Indian literature. The only book I had read was *Train to Pakistan.* And by some strange chance I came across *Kanthapura* which I adored. Narayan I started reading last year and I fell totally in love with him. So now I feel that I was deprived of that part of the world. I am doing my best to catch up. Anita I had read a little bit, but then I read much more of her once I had access to books from India.

What do you think of Anita Desai's writing?

She has a delicacy of expression and an originality which to me as a writer is very striking. We have to create a language to describe several concepts that are not Western. And in doing so we find ourselves being different from Western writers. Another Indian writer I admired was Khushwant Singh. I liked *Train to Pakistan,* but when I read *Delhi* I thought that this was not what I wanted to read. Recently I came across his collection of short stories and thought that he was a superb writer. It blew my mind that he could write that and *Delhi* as well.

Are you familiar with the writings of Zulfikar Ghose?

I was the one to reintroduce him to Pakistan. Pakistanis didn't know of his existence. He had been for some reason aloof, and suddenly I discovered his wonderful novel *The Murder of Aziz Khan.* Now many people are aware of him. I think *The Murder of Aziz Khan* is an important work. After that he has been writing books on Brazil that neither the Brazilians nor the Pakistanis buy. So I hope he starts writing about India and Pakistan again.

In all your novels you deal with the cultural conflicts that result from the British and Asians trying to relate to each other. These include hilarious

episodes involving Freddy and Carol, the Rogers, and so forth. Do you see that motif as central?

I suppose a part of it is natural to my consciousness. We have all grown up with a British complex. In our part of the world the British influence is still very strong. The American influence has now replaced it in Pakistan. Everything that is associated with the West one believes to be superior. And one resents that as well. So my books do reflect that preoccupation with the Raj.

You don't seem to project a vision of returning to something precolonial, but you arrive at a synthesis.

If you go to Pakistan you might wonder if the Raj had ever been there. It has been totally obliterated. In India you don't feel that so much. I think the overall influence is much greater in India.

Is the experience of exile central to your writing?

I have not really experienced exile. I have chosen to be in America. The minute I feel like an exile I go back to Pakistan. I have been lucky to be able to do that. And I don't feel exiled in Pakistan as such. The Parsis were exiled thirteen hundred years ago. But they have such a strong sense of identity that Parsis, wherever they are, behave the same. So that sense of exile does not penetrate very deeply. In Lahore, because we are so few, I sometimes feel marginalized. That is because I have this stern consciousness that my children cannot marry out of the faith, that nobody can visit our temple, and so forth. This is probably our fault. Otherwise I think that Parsis have done very well in Pakistan.

You are writing in a language that is not accessible to a lot of Pakistanis. You are also using a language that comes with a definite ideological baggage. How does that affect your writing? How do you reconcile yourself to this contradiction?

English is for me a vernacular. I never studied abroad. In our house we speak Gujarati, which is the language of the Parsis. With my friends I speak a mixture of Urdu and English. As a medium of writing, I don't think English bears that load of prejudice. I have been rooted in Urdu poetry as well, and grown up with the values of that culture. But I chose to write in English because that is the language in which I feel I am most at ease. If I were to write in Gujarati my audience would be very limited. In English it is a larger audience.

What is your audience?

I am writing primarily for the Western world. When you write about

your part of the world you are giving a reality to South Asians, and they are no longer part of that so-called horrible little third world. They start becoming human beings. Then it becomes a little more difficult to destroy them. At the same time, my readership is Pakistani too. I don't think anybody in Pakistan has sold as much as I have. I have been pirated extensively. One bookstore alone had sold 4000 copies of *The Crow Eaters*. I do speak for and to the Pakistanis. They know me well and like my writing. I am critical and what is nice is that many people said that they are not different from the tribal husbands I portrayed. They trust me as a writer.

But I guess there is also censorship and a sense of definite lines beyond which you can't go.

Censorship is an interesting issue. *The Bride* was first not published in Pakistan. *The Crow Eaters* was published in Pakistan in 1978. And this was because Jameed Iqbal, the great mystic poet, read the manuscript and said I must publish it. He said that *The Bride* might arouse sensitive feelings. So *The Crow Eaters* was published first. Ironically *The Crow Eaters* created more of a backlash from the Parsis, and *The Bride* was totally accepted, especially by the women there. In Urdu you cannot write any of this. In English you can write, although until recently not about politics. It is now possible to write about politics even in Urdu because censorship disappeared a few years ago. *The Bride* has been translated by a very famous poet into Urdu, but the publishers are very nervous, even though it has so little obscenity. Everything is turned into symbols. In any case what is quite innocent in English sounds quite obscene in Urdu. This obsessive morality is very strange considering we have the highest birthrate in the world.

Is politics in itself not taboo any more?

No, not any more.

You make a lot of intertextual references in your writing, particularly in Cracking India. *What function does this have?*

I am very fond of Urdu poetry. There is four percent literacy among women. Maybe eighteen to twenty percent among men. But even for them poetry is very much a part of their lives. I am not referring to other works so much as exhibiting my love of that poetry. I am trying to introduce that to the Western reader.

Do you see yourself as having a Pakistani identity, or would you define yourself as South Asian?

I think that depends on the book one has in mind. *The Bride* is about

the identity of Pakistan. *The Crow Eaters* handles the whole of India. It is typically Parsi but also South Asian. *Cracking India* handles all these communities.

One final question. The notion of "Cracking India" implies cracking an egg or a nut . . .

I was afraid of that connotation and had reservations about the title. But then it is a child's mind thinking about the possibility of breaking or cracking a country. It is a child's notion of how absurd it is to break a country.

But the title would also imply opening something to see what is inside.

Yes, that is true too.

Kirpal Singh

Kirpal Singh was born in Singapore. His father was a Sikh and his mother a Scottish Jew. He received his PhD in English in Australia. Currently, he is a professor and Chair of the Department of English at Nayang Technological University in Singapore.

In a provocative and insightful article that appeared in *Ariel*, Jan Gordon advances a critique of Singapore writing in English, pointing to the inherent paradox of using a language that serves national—i.e. ideological—purposes to write about cultural realities. The notion of a "second tongue" he finds totally inadequate, and in his assessment, most of the writing from this country is either elitist or imitative to the point of being irrelevant. According to him, "the linguistic and hence political circumstances of creative activity—conspires to produce a very narrow audience and a limitation to the kind of formal experimentation that constitutes most contemporary poetry written in English" (15, 4 [1984], 45).

One thinks of the major writers that Singapore has produced, including Lloyd Fernando, Catherine Lim, Arthur Yap, Edwin Thumboo and Kirpal Singh, and the dilemma that Gordon points to appears more as a challenge than as an insurmountable impediment. The problem of language, the preoccupation with material and technological advancement, the state-sponsored articulation of cultural values, the dichotomy between multicultural diversity and national homogeneity—all these are constitutive aspects of Kirpal Singh's work.

Kirpal Singh's writing—both his poetry and his fiction— is an attempt to recognize the complexity of personal experience in a country where boundaries do exist. The "public" poems are often accessible, and here the poet as critic looks at social norms, incongruities, and the obsession with material comforts with superb irony. The "Singlish" of these poems is also an indication that the language is not alien to the readers in Singapore. Rhythms of speech and expressions that evoke a distinctively Singaporean sensibility are thus used to reveal the viability of the country's own "nation language."

More significant, in many ways, are the short stories and the "private" poems of the author, all of which reveal a more meditative, nuanced language, drawing attention to notions of change, of issues that arise from identity, of living with and making sense of multiple intersections. Hence the quiet tone of several poems in *Palm Readings* and the minimalist technique of, for instance, "Smoke and Ashes." The short stories too form a discontinuous narrative, returning to his concern with alienation, with cultural hybridity, with relationships that are both personal and allegorical.

INTERVIEW

Your essay "Travelling Australia" begins with an episode involving Jack Davis. Using Davis's comments as a preamble you discuss issues that relate to racism, xenophobia, alienation, etc. Are these mainly perceptions of Australia or are they also connected with your sense of personal and national context? Why did you structure the essay in that particular kind of way?

It is interesting that you should call that piece an essay, which is yet another label given to it. When I submitted that piece to *Westerly* for publication, I called it a personal narrative. They then called it "ficto-criticism," in their table of contents. In a sense, that reveals the interlinkages that are possible in reading that piece. I don't think the essay is specific to Australia. Let me use an anecdote here. The first time I set foot in England, I had a very interesting experience. I was young then and I was a total alien in the world of London—in a physical sense, though perhaps not in an intellectual sense. I stopped a person at Gatwick airport and said, "Could you tell me how to get to War-wick?" He looked at me and said "Where did you say you want to go?" I repeated what I said. He wanted me to spell it. He then put his arm around me in a very benign, gentlemanly way and said, "Young man, you mean War-ick; of course I can show you the way." That was to me a very sober reminder that language is important, and that the pride that comes with it is more than just the use of words. It connects people to the land. When I went to Australia, as a foreigner I was more accepted by the Australians than Davis, the original Australian, as he likes to call himself. It is only later that I began to find the term "aboriginal" very interesting. The word comes from *ab-original* as in "abnormal." So the original was presumably

the white male and the abnormal version was the aboriginal. The piece deals with Australia but is not exclusively Australian in its sensibility. I like to think it crosses boundaries. Nationalistic fervour and racism I find very bothersome.

The notion of being an outsider must have been something new when you went to Australia. In Singapore you don't see yourself as an outsider.

It was new only in a limited sense. The episode in England, for instance, was new. That was an occasion when I found myself in a territory where I felt I didn't belong. When I went to Australia I had had the experience of London and New York. The first trip I made in 1972 took me to London, New York and Mexico, all in the space of three weeks. And I found out a lot about belonging and not belonging. As a label or category to come to terms with this was not new.

Was it a coincidence that you refer to The Criterion Hotel at the beginning? The whole essay, as it turns out, is about criteria.

That hotel no longer exists, and a "historical site" that became a marker in my consciousness is gone. In my subsequent visits to Perth I have tried to track it down, but it has become something else now. The old timers there remember the hotel. Yes, I absolutely agree with you. The notion of criteria is central to what I am concerned with.

The style and mode of that piece are typical of the way you write. You seem to adopt the method of building up your work in a manner that gives the impression of being linear but is not necessarily so. Rather, what we see is an associative process. Would that be a fair assessment of the way in which you write certain narratives?

I haven't actually analyzed my own style with that kind of critical eye. But let me share with you the common responses to my work. One is that it is so metaphysical and esoteric that people refuse to engage with it. The other is that it is too blunt and simplistic and combative. Either way it is considered disturbing.

You begin your poetry, for instance, without an immediate sense of serious preoccupation. But the seriousness gradually builds up and the reader makes various connections. It is probably a way in which you establish the boundaries of your work.

The notion of boundaries is fascinating to me because I do try to cross boundaries. In fact the novel I have been working on has had several titles up to now, and invariably all the titles relate to the metaphor of crossing. That metaphor is an important one in my work.

Would the term eclectic *define your work?*

Yes, that is a possible term, but I do try to make sense of my world. The sense of alienation and not belonging is significant to me. The yellow identity card that I carry around with me defines me as a Singaporean. Singapore and Malaya are probably the only two countries in the world that require this by law; it is a constant reminder of the sense of belonging. People have told me that when they hear me on the phone, they never guessed that I am a Sikh. Very often they are surprised. In Singapore when I tell them that I am Professor Singh, they put it down as Sing. Sing is a Chinese name. Even my Sikh friends tell me that mine is not a Sikh voice. So there is a kind of disembodiment here. And my name gives the impression that I am of one blood when in fact I am of mixed blood. Even in Singapore there are times when I feel that sense of alienation, not in any legalistic sense but in a metaphysical sense. Does one ever belong? In my case, I was born in Singapore and was taken to Malaya when I was six months old, about five hundred miles north in a little place called Epo, which was then the biggest tin-mining centre in the world. And I spent six years there and was brought back to Singapore for my education. My heart takes me back constantly to Epo.

Has that landscape had an effect on you?

Yes, very much. Sometimes it comes out in my work but more often it comes out in my critical awareness of things around me. I am very keen on taking my loved ones to this other world connected by the causeway. I must have crossed the causeway that connects Singapore with Malaya hundreds of times now. Once you are there you are among plantations—banana, papaya and so forth. It is a completely different world in Epo and Malaya.

Does the concept of crossing that you mentioned also include India?

Not immediately. Let me illustrate this. Last week my cousin who lives in Singapore told me that one of my aunts had told him that there are huge resources of land in my village in India. And my aunts want me—the oldest in the male line—to claim that. Apparently it is worth close to a million and a half dollars. When my father came to Singapore in 1911, his youngest brother was in India. Now all the males except him are dead and he is the custodian of the land. The only living son is me. There is thus a moral weight to claim that land. But it has never bothered me in any real sense. I have never been to Jalandhar where I come from. I have been to Delhi, Bombay, Mysore, etc, but I haven't been to Amritsar. Does that say something?

Writers like Satendra Nandan and M G Vassanji have felt the need to go back and reclaim something of their heritage in India. But you haven't felt the same urge?

Not yet. Since 1977 I have toyed with the idea of visiting India over a sustained period. Maybe it is fear that keeps me away. Until now I have not felt the urge to visit India as I have felt the urge to visit Malaya or Scotland. I visited Glasgow in 1990. So I have gone the maternal way. India doesn't seem likely in the near future.

You write with a great degree of authority about Australia. Particularly a poem like "Australian Landscapes" brings in a whole world of texts. To what extent did your period of study and engagement with Australia affect your writing?

Oh, to a very large extent. If you ask me what single factor has contributed to a reshaping of my intellectual self, I would say the three years in Australia. Not only was it a sustained visit—I made a point not to come to Singapore even once during this time—it also gave me distance and sustained immersion in a different culture. I don't think I have ever quite recovered from that. But then I wonder whether I need a recovery. Recovery implies sickness. Some may consider certain aspects of me "sick"—not in tune with the Singapore ethos, such as the absurd obsession with individual rights which I am well known for. One of my first public talks when I got back from Australia was to assert that one should not see homosexuality as a crime, or a sickness, but as an alternative lifestyle. People in the audience were shocked that I had the temerity to say this in public. I know for a fact that my superiors were told to advise me that certain things were off limits. That was 1978. Now people do talk a lot about homosexuality.

You have also been interested in the work of Patrick White. He is a very different kind of writer. What is the connection?

When I was looking around for an honours thesis in Singapore, Edwin Thumboo suggested that I do something Australian. He referred me to someone else who gave me a copy of *The Tree of Man*. I got very absorbed in the novel. Its epic sweep was very impressive. It reminded me of the old days when I used to be a cowherd. If you think of Patrick White as displaced and you think of his characters as displaced, then there is a lot that links me to all of Patrick White. I do see myself as a person in search of self.

Patrick White is also concerned with language and that is an important motif in your writing. But it is a very different kind of preoccupation.

In the early White, the obsession with language was very interesting. In his later books I think he moved away from that to other kinds of obsessions, which transcended the language. If you read the later novels, you will find the language to be somewhat regressive. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, for instance, the language is stilted. In that sense the early White fascinates me. When White returned from England and wrote "The Prodigal Son" he said he wanted to show his countrymen what his country was really like. My own obsessions with language are getting controversial and intense even in the context of Singapore. When I talk about language it is the English language that I am preoccupied with. My daughters speak at least two "English" languages, maybe even three. The two they definitely speak are the Received or Standard English they get in school and the Filipino English at home because the maid speaks Filipino English. The third level is Singaporean English. So of course language is an obsession. When we say that we speak English what do we really speak? Going back to the idea of criteria, who is to judge? In my writings I try to experiment. I deliberately misuse words and I often ask myself whether I should be afraid of doing this. Would I be castigated for not knowing grammar? For me these are examples of the hold that colonization has on people. When you start getting successful in your campaign for a certain kind of linguistic direction, the forces that resist it are very strong. In Singapore the anxiety surrounding Singaporean English is intense. There is an edict in the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation that you cannot use Singapore English or Singlish. That raises an interesting question. If some of my poems which use Singlish were to be read over radio would they ever reach the public?

Does Singlish have that kind of energy that Caribbean writers refer to as nation language?

Definitely. Not a sloppy use of the language but the way an educated Singaporean would use the language. I speak Singlish. A Singaporean would say "I will bring you to the airport" not "I'll take you to the airport." It is so typical of Singapore. Who is to say if this is right or wrong. Another example is that we rarely say "I live here." We say "I stay here." In Singapore "stay" and "live" mean the same thing. It is a very mobile society—that is part of the ethos. Singaporean English has the energy to capture the ethos very well. It worries people in authority who have been schooled in Oxbridge. This is a very serious issue here.

In what sense would it have an ideological function—that function of resistance? How does it help to create a distinctive identity?

It serves that purpose although we are decades late. What Brathwaite did in the seventies we are doing now. If you ask school children to cite the books they think are worth reading, they will cite authors who use a lot of Singlish. They won't cite Arthur Yap or Edwin Thumboo because they are rarefied. Instead, they might mention Robert Yeo, for instance. That registers a change. Singlish is likely to become the norm, and because it serves that function the Establishment is not very happy with it.

In what sense would this be perceived as a threat to authority?

It is a very mistaken assumption made by those who are so deeply colonized that they cannot accept their children or colleagues using a language that is ungrammatical and bad. Singlish incorporates words from Tamil, Punjabi, Malay, and Chinese dialects and is rich in its mixture, and that gives it energy. Those who speak only Standard English don't understand us in the first place. So it is a threat to them.

Would this language serve a proactive function in the cultural makeup of the nation?

It should and will, given the chance. My worry is that because the day-to-day concern of Singaporeans is making more dollars, the issue of language would cease to be of much consequence. That is understandable. We live in difficult economic times. If you don't achieve today more than you did yesterday, then you are considered a failure.

One of the important poems that deals with these issues is "Self-Rumination." What is the context in which the poem was written?

I was in Canterbury at the 1989 ACLALS Conference and had been listening to writers like Desai, Walcott, Wilson Harris, etc. And listening to them talking about identity suddenly created in me the urge to write a poem. I wrote this poem and one called "Me." The first includes a chant in Malay—corrupted by Chinese—which doesn't mean anything. It is a jingoistic taunt of the Sikhs. These were the taunts that the Malay and Chinese boys would sing as you passed by. It is their way of saying that you are an outsider. That was the context of the poem but it gave me a chance to search myself. The Sikhs were the bogeymen then. When I started dating Sandy in 1972, it was not a common sight to see a turbaned Sikh with a Chinese girl. And Sandy was attractive, which angered them even more. In Canterbury as I listened to these writers, suddenly I was reminded of my own inheritance. These two poems are among the most private I have ever written and they are emphatically clear statements about how I saw myself in relation to the worlds I have

inhabited.

In one of your essays in which you talk about literary perceptions of India by Australian writers you also argue for cross-cultural perceptions. And this poem is a clear example of the need for a strong national context to understand it. As a poet you seem to write things with a local and national sensibility; as a critic you argue for a transnational understanding.

I knew I was schizoid! In my poetry I want my readers to know the me that is not normally seen in my scholarly writing. There is a context to all this. Syd Harrex in 1977 invited me to teach Narayan and Anand to his students at Flinders University. There were six students and by taking the course they had indicated the desire to cross cultures. Very quickly, however, I had complaints from students about having to do so much homework in order to understand these writers. I remember asking the students why it was alright for them to read about the War of the Roses and the Thirty Years War and not complain. Why was it so much of a problem if they had to do a bit of homework to understand contemporary Indian writers? Why couldn't they cross cultures in criticism? Whether or not that particular emphasis on having a global perspective can ever get translated into the very act of creation I don't know. Certainly in my poems, I think there is a range. In some of them I try to cross borders. "The Australian Landscape" is basically about me; it's an attempt to put myself between titles and phrases of Australian literature and say that I'm so immersed in it that I begin to ask myself if this is also an imaginary life. What you refer to as dichotomies, I think of as transcendence.

Singapore is in the unique situation of being both a postcolonial country and a very successful one. Is there a need to have a certain kind of understanding in order to appreciate what is going on here in the literary world?

Yes. The writer should be authentic and original. I think I am more cosmopolitan than many others in Singapore. On the other hand, I am defined by the blood that is in me. The critic, on the other hand, must bring to bear a sensibility that enables him or her to appreciate something that is not in his or her own blood. In "Self-Rumination" I talk about "this thing on my head" and "countless children I have fathered." The latter is obviously metaphoric. I haven't fathered more than three kids as far as I know. "This thing on my head"—can you imagine someone in Sussex trying to decipher this? In order to understand that poem you need to go behind the image, as it were. We can spend enormous energy trying to understand daffodils dancing, for instance.

Similarly, a person wanting to understand my poem needs to do hard work. He or she must cross cultures, must try to understand what it is to wear a turban in Singapore. I could have phrased that differently, but I chose not to. I have written another poem called "Wearing a Turban" which again picks up the same issue. People don't taunt a Sikh any more—courtesy has become a way of life here with "Courtesy Month," and so on. But they play other games. Now they pinch each other when they see me walk by and in Malay or Chinese say "what colour." That is what the poem deals with. The game is about who pinches whom first.

The notion of having to tell your reader—is that a crucial aspect of your writing? Your typical mode is reflective and meditative. It is not always social. You are comfortable with the meditative long poem.

That is true of my prose as well I guess.

How do you see yourself as a writer. Do you feel the need to tell or describe?

I have a constant recurring dream. I see myself in white robes as a preacher. One part of me is fascinated by world religions. I have been called a didactic writer by my colleagues. If telling is not an exercise in individual adulation and if it is one where someone else is targeted, then it is not totally self-reflexive. It tries to be social. Every single thing I have written is supposed to mean something to somebody. And increasingly that person is not myself. So I do write to tell.

If a story like "The Interview" is meant to tell, one like "Monologue" calls for a different kind of response.

You are right. Those days when "Monologue" was written *The Exorcist* was a popular movie. It may help to know that I was lying down under a high ceiling fan in a stilt bungalow in Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea at that time. And that meditative story took place then. I also hope I succeed in telling my reader that I brood a lot. It is another side of me.

It is curious that the "Other" writer, who is self-absorbed, reveals a sensibility which subjects itself to more universal standards, and the non-Other writer is more national and local. These establish a strange relation to each other.

The reason why one appears to be more universal is I suppose because you as a reader may find a kindred sense. You may have meditated on your life and find it easier to connect. As you read me you may be also reading yourself. Whereas a poem like "Westin Singapore" immediately connects with this huge monstrosity in the country, and that is very national. "Self-Rumination" does both in a sense. That is meant to be a performance. In Singapore once five hundred voices joined me—and

mocked me. They thought it was fun. Only later did they realize that it was a kind of sad fun. What had begun at my expense had then become at their expense. This was a trick taught to me by John Agard, the Caribbean poet. At Harbourfront in 1983 he used the phrase "Go Garlic" and we all joined in without realizing that it was at our expense. He had not only given a wonderful performance but he had also demonstrated that people were gullible, and that even the most educated sensibility can become stupid and naive. I tried to do something similar.

In "Monologue" you refer to long hair—did that have something to do with the laws in Singapore regarding long hair?

Definitely. I first visited a nudist beach in Australia in 1976. And I went with a fine old Australian gentleman and his daughter-in-law. I did away with everything except my turban. And I noticed that everybody was looking at me strangely. That made me nervous until one person asked me to take my hat off. I took my turban off and let my hair down and I was like any ordinary hippie. Everything became relaxed. I have often thought of experimenting in Singapore doing precisely that. I may let my hair down and walk along the street and see if anyone identifies me. And if they do, what would happen? Translate it to Singapore and you have an interesting situation. Hair is another obsession with me. In "Jaspal" the protagonist comes to terms with himself and says that he wears his hair long simply because of a promise he made to his grandmother. So sometimes we do things because we believe in keeping a promise.

Is Jaspal like one of Frank Moorhouse's characters who keeps coming up again and again in different narratives?

Yes, Jaspal is my one character constant. The other would be the character Lucy, who is Jaspal's wife; she keeps recurring too every now and then. Whether he is like a Moorhouse character in terms of providing connections, that I am not so sure. I haven't written too many stories with that kind of deliberate purpose in mind. I should alert you to the fact that most of these stories had been written at significant moments in my own experience. I don't attempt any kind of deliberate craftsmanship. Some of the connections do emerge as I become the critic of my own work. Wherever Jaspal occurs there is always some connection with ethnicity.

Ethnicity doesn't figure prominently in your work. You deal more with the social scene, or with your private self but rarely with ethnicity as an issue, or with the ritualistic and cultural aspects of a particular community. You don't

write the way that Catherine Lim does. In The Serpent's Tooth, *for instance, she deals with a community in a kind of domestic way.*

Some of my poems are "domestic" in that sense. They are religious and definitely deal with a community. But I think you are right. Even these contain a sense of the larger world. I have never seen myself belonging exclusively to the Sikhs. Ethnically I am a misfit. I don't fit into any neat category. My mother is Glaswegian Jewish, and my father is Jalandhar Sikh. My wife is Singapore, Hokain, Cantonese Chinese. My children have Hebrew names from the Old Testament. My best friends are Chinese. I don't know where I fit. If ethnicity features, it does as an issue rather than as a category. Catherine Lim is Chinese. She writes about Chinese folklore, rituals, legends, myths and so forth. And it is easy for her to do that because she is totally that way. I couldn't begin to do that. I try to do that in the story called "Jaspal" but the fact that his wife is Chinese interferes with the sequence of thought.

Does that "absence" not circumscribe you in some way?

I think it is liberating. It allows me to do what I preach in my critical writing—that is cross-cultural sensitivity. I am very conscious of that because of my own makeup. If you ask me whether that can be negative, I suppose that can be. The sense of strength that comes from belonging to a community is not there. While the Sikhs in Singapore have a high regard for me and they want me to serve on temple committees and boards, they signal their displeasure with my other life in many ways. In that sense I am not part of the inner circle of Sikhs.

But what is the reality of Singapore? Inter-ethnic connections are public rather than private. If communities mix on the basis of ethnicity, and if you deny yourself that, aren't you also denying yourself a large part of an experience that you could draw on?

In that sense my inter-ethnic self is a comfortable one. Another reason why I have not dared to write about my Sikh world is because of a legislation stipulating that all discussion of race, language and religion is taboo. Of course if you write a fictional thing about it you may get away. But it is also unreal to do that. This is why *The Serpent's Tooth* has never been regarded as one of Catherine's major books. It is too exclusive a world in that novel. I think it is also not real to the Singapore experience. Nobody in Singapore can claim not to have crossed cultures at some point. You can hardly go one hundred metres in Singapore without coming across people who are different and yet alike. Singapore is quite unique in that way. So to write about a domestic world is to me some-

what unreal. And it worries me because there are people who constantly amaze me by remaining exclusive.

Is this why you sometimes tend to write in a distinctly allegorical manner?

If you want the honest answer, allegory is a fascinating form because it enables you to say things without actually saying them. I think people in power in Singapore are comfortable with that. Whether it is me or Arthur Yap who talks about the obliteration of the past, in allegorical ways, the government is comfortable with that. If I say things in an outright manner, it will worry them because they have a regard for me, although they also appreciate that there is a part of me that is not comfortable with some of the things they are doing. All they don't want me to do is become a politician—a kind of fanatic who uses platforms to condemn them and push self-centred attitudes. Allegory is a good way to circumvent that.

But aren't you also denying yourself something in the process. To give a specific example, in the short story "Strange Meeting" the first few paragraphs provide a glimpse of what you could have written. Then you move to an allegorical mode. If you had continued to write in that initial mode, I wonder if it would have given expression to a different kind of experience?

The story deals with quite serious matters of expulsion, artistic freedom, etc. These were issues that were being hotly debated in the press. The whole issue of artistic freedom and whether or not a person who is an artist should be put in charge of some kind of public service was a big issue in the early eighties. And I found myself halfway through the story getting afraid of my own position. In fact I have been told many times that one reason why I should not publish my stories is they may make life difficult for my bosses. And in a way they may be right. If you want to be a free artist, then don't do it at the government's expense. If you want your sustenance to come in a very material way, then that comes with some kind of compromise. The character in the story tries to publish things anonymously and the principal gets calls about that. That is based on a very true incident in Singapore. I switched to the allegorical mode at least partly because of cowardice. Are you suggesting that the story would have been better if it had been in a single mode?

It succeeds in that it suggests multiple possibilities. But had you stayed with one mode you could have had a different impact. Let me ask a related question. Is satire central to Singapore writing?

It is central. Satire is again a mode that covers you up to a point. My poems are freer than my stories, for two reasons. The stories are older.

The stories that are new are the extracts from my travel experiences. In that sense satire is a defence mechanism. And to the extent that all writers in Singapore are nervous about how they are perceived by the Establishment, satire is a natural mode.

Satire implies a norm. What kind of norm does the story "Julie" imply?

I was questioning a norm in that story. What I wanted to do was merely document the moral values which my generation was accustomed to—about premarital sex, women, etc. I was also trying to achieve two things. One was the question of affluence—the idea that Singapore is going to be very rich. But there is also going to be a high human cost to that. There is a cynical side to that too. Behind it all there is a certain sadness. I think "Miss Julie" tried to document what I thought was a sad situation. It also tried to say that it is easy to judge without realizing the complexities of the situation. Also, in some ironic sense to suggest that was the way Singapore was going. In a culture that is so obsessed with money, moral values have a very different meaning. Values become modified until they are not recognizable. At one level the responsibility of a writer is to be moral. But then what is right and what is wrong? I see the story as a challenge to any smug complacent attitude.

The notion of intertext is valuable because a lot of your writing is intertextual. Sometimes it is obvious as in the poem about Achebe, sometimes it is more subtle in its reference to, say, Yeats.

Yes, sometimes it is very deliberate. "Parabolic Poem" for instance, was a very deliberate exercise. In some of the stories the allusions to Yeats and Eliot were spontaneous. Yeats and Eliot have epitomized the two ways in which we could all go. One struggling to be sane and not quite getting there and the other struggling to be mad and not quite getting there either. That too has been my life. Yeats's later poems are a continual obsession with me, as are the *Four Quartets*.

When you make these connections do you see problems with your earlier assertion about the need for a local language, a need to decolonize English?

I think I have acknowledged my poverty in local languages as it were. And that is because in Singapore there isn't a long enough history. The need to be more alert to the use of foreign expressiveness should not cancel out the whole ethos in which one has been educated. For me the use of the Singaporean idiom does not necessarily mean jettisoning Yeats. They have become part of me. In my own small way I think I contain multitudes within me. I guess Yeats and Eliot are more universal than Guru Gobind Singh would be. Guru Gobind Singh was the martyr

saint. And if I were to use him, the universality would be minimized. Yeats and Eliot are more universal. It could be also that I use them as convenient tools to convey a lot. If I use Singapore poets exclusively, not even Singaporeans would make the connection.

Is it this kind of multiplicity that makes you claim in an article that writing in Singapore has a special role to play in that it goes towards the consolidation of a city nation? Is it because you bring in this scope?

For me, yes. Increasingly I don't find that multiplicity of viewpoint. It is not encouraged as aggressively as it was when I went to school. The outlook among school children is now not as wide-ranging as mine was. Maybe that has to do with the success of Singapore. Now the Singaporean does not have to know about Yeats and Eliot. Along with that is the absence of a larger, educated imagination. That is what a lot of current artistic obsessions are about in Singapore. Creative imagination goes into the sciences, as in aviation engineering, which is a big concern in Singapore. If instead of saying "red as a rose" you said "black as a rose," that's fine in the classroom because people say that you are eccentric. When you start writing articles about that in the newspapers, as I did for three years, people become very uncomfortable. They feel that you are encroaching on their sensibilities. The flip side is that some educated Singaporeans are beginning to ask questions about the black rose. I like to think that people like me have contributed to that process of thinking.

In fact it is evident in Articulations, *which is one of your early collections. In the preface to the book you mention a club that you were associated with. Was it a gathering of poets?*

Yes, this was a group of disenchanted people who got together and sat at coffee centres and talked about culture and our directions. We decided to seek legal status for it and the club lasted for ten years. It was called Club for the Advancement of Constructive and Meaningful Living. It had a newsletter. For seven years I was its president. It was all very exciting. Then we went our different ways.

How do you relate Singapore writing, your own work, and postcolonial writing in relation to your role as a teacher? Do you advocate any particular approach to this body of literature?

I think I am becoming more aware that I belong to an international community of teachers and scholars who are deliberate about their purpose. As a teacher, even if I am teaching eighteenth-century English poetry, I try to draw references to the fact that in India at that time

something else was going on. In Australia, for instance, the aborigines were being massacred. This makes students sit up and wonder about the connections. While the English language was doing one thing in one place it was doing other things elsewhere. In that way there are connections among all the selves. I am very conscious of that. In everything we teach there is at least a forty percent postcolonial content. The book I edited, *Through Different Eyes*, is about this notion.

You have also talked about regional identity in your essays.

Singapore is too small to be self-sufficient in some ways. And so its immediate neighbours must give it a point of reference. If Singapore were to lose that and connect itself with nations further away, we may be in trouble. It cannot ignore the existence of Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. That is something I always insist on in my teaching.

What about future work? I know that two collections are going to come out. Are they going to mark a new phase? Are you going to write a novel?

There is at least one novel in the works. Certainly a book of stories should be published soon. It has the catchy title *Why Make Love Twice?* The title has all kinds of political implications. I don't know if they mark a new phase. The poems are new; they are more relaxed and they go in various directions. Then I have the prose poems, which I am happy with. These poems always engage the audience. I seize every opportunity to read in public because I think that is important. I try to contextualize what I read and perform. My next aim is to bring out audio cassettes of my readings. In the long run the novel would come out. I have arrived at the point when I do need critical feedback and nourishment which will clarify for me what others perceive in my work. I think this has been denied me for a variety of reasons.

Shashi Tharoor

Born in England, Shashi Tharoor grew up in India. He received his high school education in India, and then earned his master's and doctoral degrees at Tufts University. Currently, he works for the United Nations in New York.

> Question, Ganapathi. Is it permissible to modify truth with a possessive pronoun? Questions Two and Three. At what point in the recollection of truth does wisdom cease to transcend knowledge? How much may one select, interpret and arrange the facts of the living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy?

In a moment of uncertainty about two competing truths, each with its claim to be more significant than the other, the narrator of *The Great Indian Novel* pauses to address the scribe, the god Ganapathi, directly, before continuing his tale. It is a moment that self-consciously recalls Salman Rushdie's novel, as does the title of the chapter, "Midnight's Parents." As with Rushdie's novel, the tone—playful, satiric, subversive—is important. *The Great Indian Novel,* too, is a modern epic that retells the *Mahabharata,* not only revealing the spaciousness of the past but also the multiplicity of the present. In that sense, Tharoor's novel is very much a post-Rushdie work, one that is noticeably different from the realism of earlier writers.

The novel makes no attempt to hide its debt to Rushdie. In fact, the novel celebrates intertextuality by constantly reminding the reader of several authors, including Kipling, Forster, Hemingway, and Paul Scott. Through the formal strategy of invoking the names of several authors and a host of characters from other texts, the author suggests that his text, not unlike the *Mahabharata,* is an act of collaboration, a product of collective knowledge. The oral tone that the novel carefully preserves adds to the sense of an associative process.

If the connections with Rushdie are important, so are the differences. The ontological premise of Rushdie is one of indeterminacy, and his novels acquire their texture from the inclusion of voices that reinforce indeterminacy. Tharoor's mode is encyclopedic, and his overall premise

is that the present can be understood in relation to the past. Notwithstanding the digressions, the signposting that suggests multiple intersections, the novel is about modern India, told in Joycean terms. The project, ultimately, is recuperative and holistic. Despite the playful disclaimer at the beginning that states that some readers may feel that the work "is neither great, nor authentically Indian, nor even much of a novel," *The Great Indian Novel* is, in fact, a work of immense depth and imaginative power.

INTERVIEW

I would like to begin with your review of Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India, *which appeared two years ago in the* New York Times Book Review, *in which you called the author the finest English-language writer in Pakistan. Is that still your perception?*

I thought I said the book confirms her reputation as that. I didn't want to imply that I knew enough about English-language writing in Pakistan to judge for myself that she was the best. However, I thought the book was of exceptional quality. In other words, if the book wasn't very good, I might have said I can't believe this is her reputation, can't Pakistan do better? In this case, I thought the book was good enough to suggest that her reputation was merited.

The novel has attracted readers for various reasons. What was it about the novel that appealed to you?

It was probably the capacity to reduce grand events into small dimensions. As you know, in my own writing, I tend to go the other way. As a reviewer, I have a special admiration for those who do things that don't come naturally to me. There is a wonderful evocation throughout the novel of the perspective of a not-so-healthy young girl and the world is seen through her bewildered eyes. After all, in Pakistan, the Partition is not seen the same way as it was seen in India. It is not really seen as the unmitigated horror as the people of India consider it. We cannot think of the moment of Independence without the admixture of grief and deprivation and loss. We had a sense of having the country amputated. Pakistanis by and large think of Partition not as amputation but as liberation. And here is a Pakistani novelist showing the human tragedy from their side of the border and through the eyes of a little girl.

Were you interested in the narrative form as well? The formal strategies of the novel are very different from your own.

I certainly believe that there is no hard and fast rule about form. I am certainly open to various ways of looking at experience. For myself I have tended to experiment a little in both my novels. I have attempted to use forms that are integral to the subversion that I have attempted. At the same time I think it is perfectly legitimate for a writer not to find it necessary to do that. Bapsi's writing is certainly close to what one might call conventional. To me that enhances the accessibility of what she is trying to say. When you are trying to portray the world through the eyes of a child, the simpler the form the more authentic it is to that portrayal. There is a story in my recent collection, *The Five-Dollar Smile*, which is written from a child's point view, and it is done in very much that mode. The structure is different in that it cuts in and out, but the perspective of the child is integral to that vision of the story. It has to be written simply, with some of the confusion and bewilderment that children face when confronted with a world larger than their own experience.

In some ways I guess the narrative form is determined by the subject matter.

In Sidhwa?

Yes.

I wouldn't want to speculate but I think all her novels seem to be written in a straightforward manner, and that is fine. Vikram Seth has shown that you can write a large, ambitious and well-received book in a style that hasn't departed in any significant way from nineteenth-century writing. I don't think that style is in itself a determinant of the scale of a writer's achievement. But I do believe that style, structure and content are all interlinked in the narrative. I am not a theoretician of my craft, but it seems to me that they have to be consistent with one another.

Style and language appear to be crucial to your writing. You are not unconcerned with issues, but you seem to take great pleasure in playing with words, in stretching the possibilities of language. Is this connected with your own poetics?

To some degree one writes as one can. I have been writing for a long time, and not all of my early work is awfully good. The fact is that one arrives at a style through a process of experimenting with words. I have had the good fortune or misfortune to have been in print from the age of ten and a half. And in that process one comes to a recognition of one's own way of expressing oneself. One of the things that would be apparent to you from my short-story collection is the stylistic variety, the different

voices I have attempted to develop in my formative years. I certainly couldn't suggest that I have settled on any particular voice. One of the delights of reading and writing is the pleasure that language affords. Not to explore the potential of language would be an act of self-denial. If I were to write a simple spare story with all the flourishes cut out, I can assure you that it would have taken a great deal of self-denial and self-censure to do that. In the art of expressing myself on the page, I would want to use the potential of language. When a word emerges from my pen, I immediately think of other ways of expressing the same idea or subverting the idea that I have expressed.

It surprised me that some of the stories in The Five-Dollar Smile *were written when you were in your teens.*

The earliest one was written when I was fifteen, but most were written a few years later.

What was the context—literary and cultural—which enabled you to choose certain themes and write from certain perspectives?

India in the sixties had a flourishing magazine culture. When I was growing up there was no television in either of the two cities where I went to school—Bombay or Calcutta. So if you wanted entertainment, you read books and magazines. There were two major women's magazines in Bombay, and there were also two good national youth magazines—*JS*, which began life as *The Junior Statesman*, and the *Youth Times* from the Times of India Group. All these were actively read. I read them and wrote for them. There was already an audience for my writing—it was an audience of Indians like myself, who not only read English but also used it very naturally in their daily lives, much as I used it in my stories. There is one short story called "Friends" which has a lot of infantile punning, and that is absolutely authentic to the kind of conversational chatter one would hear from these people and which I used to hear in college cafeterias and the campus of Delhi University at that time. So it was very much reflective of the world from which it emerged, though of course it was perhaps a very narrow stratum of Indian society from which I was emerging and which I was writing for. But it was a very real world and I got a lot of feedback when I wrote something. It was not an elevated literary culture but it was certainly an embodiment of popular—though not "mass"—culture. We must remember that we are talking about a society where only an estimated two to five percent could read English. You are not talking about a mass market in that sense, but you were writing for people for whom the world you were

writing about was part of the nature of their daily lives.

How did you have access to the scene in Kerala? What gave you the experience to deal with the rural scene in South India?

It does emerge very much from my own life. We used to go there every year. My parents were migrants from Kerala. My father left Kerala for England at the age of eighteen or nineteen, and my mother was a village girl until he came back and married her. She then went off to England with him. And when we moved back to India, my parents continued to refer to Kerala as home—a somewhat disorienting thought for children for whom "home" is where their parents are. Every single year we used to go for an annual vacation to Kerala. A month of each year was spent in my ancestral home, surrounded by my relatives. My ancestral home was in the middle of the village—we weren't from urban Kerala. So I had a good sense of the rhythms of rural life and the values and issues of that world, but seen from the perspective of one who visited it briefly once a year. The contrast was always apparent to me because I lived that contrast. While the stories set in Kerala are largely fictions, the world from which they emerge is very real. In the Indian edition of *The Five-Dollar Smile* I have included several introductions to the stories, which place these stories more firmly in the context that we are talking about. One of the best compliments I have had as a writer was an unintended one, when the story "The Death of a Schoolmaster" appeared in *Illustrated Weekly* and a Malayali doctor in Singapore told me that it read like a straightforward account of my upbringing in Kerala. He couldn't understand the look of astonishment and delight that passed my face because of course I had no Kerala upbringing. The fact that a man who had been born and brought up in Kerala should think that my story was so authentic was for me a great compliment. I have since then heard gracious things from others including the great Malayali novelist M T Vasudevan Nair, who also complimented me on this particular story.

One thing that struck me about that particular story was that it dealt with the commitment of the artist, and the extent to which the author is permitted to say certain things and not be held responsible for what he or she said. Would that be true of your later writing as well?

I don't shirk the responsibility for what I have said. Both my later novels emerged from more than a desire simply to write fiction. Clearly *The Great Indian Novel* is a statement about India and the forces that made India and nearly unmade it. I was a student of history and have a PhD in international politics; India mattered to me, and through my writing I

hoped to matter to India. I have been working in the United Nations in the world of decisions rather than the world of conclusions. But one needs to come to conclusions as well and part of the responsibility of the writer in looking at the world around him is to come to conclusions. I have always seen myself as a human being with a number of responses to the world, some of which are manifest in my writing and some in my work. I try to keep the two worlds apart, but it is almost impossible to divide one's psyche, one's soul. So I do have a larger set of concerns about the world that I want my readers to engage with. At the same time both novels are about the stories a society tells about itself. In *The Great Indian Novel* I have taken ancient myths and legends from the *Mahabharata* as well as the more recent nationalist myths and have tried to reinterpret them in a way I hoped would raise questions about both. Even in *Show Business*—which some Indian critics found difficult to swallow from the author of *The Great Indian Novel* because they thought the subject was irremediably trivial—I am concerned with stories, in this case with the popular myths of the Indian cinema. You have a country where more than half the population is illiterate and popular cinema has supplanted or complemented folk tales as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the literary experience to the vast majority of the Indian public. So what are the stories that India is telling itself and in the process what is it telling about itself? These are very much my concerns in both novels.

In writing Show Business *you have paid a great tribute to the film industry—despite the irreverence and satire—and the novel acknowledges the power of the medium. Would there be something similar that you hope for English writing as well?*

I certainly think that people like myself have to accept the fact that we are writing for a small minority. I have been often asked what my principal audience is, and I have said that I write for people like myself who emerged from the same upbringing. At the same time, you are talking about two to five percent of the population who read and write in English. That already delimits the audience. In my own writing—I am not sure if this is true of other Indian writers as well—translations into Indian languages have proved virtually impossible. Two attempts have been made to translate *The Great Indian Novel*—one into Hindi and one into Bengali—and in both cases they don't capture the complex ironical, satirical mode that the English language has made possible. Ironically, the novel exists in French and Italian translations, and German is on its way. But getting it into Hindi and Bengali have not worked that easily. So

in that sense I don't expect to have that kind of impact at home. At the same time I don't know if that matters because in any semi-literate society, the written word is only one kind of artistic expression. If my books can reach a fairly large segment of the thinking, reading population, then they would have served their purpose. It is very gratifying to me that *The Great Indian Novel* is in its sixth edition in India. It is particularly gratifying because what one has said in fiction seems to have struck chords that go beyond fiction. To find a place in the national consciousness of educated Indians—that is not something trivial.

You do demand a knowledge of the Mahabharata *and a fairly comprehensive knowledge of modern Indian history.*

I am not sure I agree with that. *The Great Indian Novel* is a book which can be read at many levels by different readers. My British and American publishers did not know the *Mahabharata* or Indian history; and they tell me they liked my novel for the stories it contained and for the way in which it unfolds. Of course as intelligent readers they could see that certain kinds of subversions are being attempted—subversions of facts, of language and so forth, and this intrigued them, but they didn't feel the need to go out and dig into Indian history or the *Mahabharata* to judge if the book would work as a novel. I think in some ways—maybe I use this argument more abroad than in India!—the reader who does not come with preconceived prejudices about the epics or about Indian history, gets more out of the novel as a novel. There is also the situation where people have told me that, after reading the novel, their curiosity was sufficiently piqued to lead them to read short histories of India or translations of the *Mahabharata*. Maybe they will then reread the novel and react differently. In a curious way the Indians who think they know the *Mahabharata* well may not necessarily know some of the other things I have tried to do. They may not have a sense of the literary canon that I am trying to subvert and the various allusions to the Raj and the allusions to various other literary attempts to explore the same historical territory—such as my headings, from "The Duel with the Crown" to "The Bungle Book." I think it will be the rare reader who will have an equivalent amount of insight into the *Mahabharata*, Indian history and into twentieth-century Anglo-Indian British literature about India. In that sense it is possible to argue that no one is really going to catch everything in the book.

Does the scope of the novel imply a well-informed readership?

I was once accused, not entirely in jest, of having written the book for

a generation of PhD students. Even the throwaway lines, the names of minor characters, the jokes, all are referential to other larger things. There is no carelessly tossed off word or place name in the book. The scene of my retelling of the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre is set in the "Bibigarh Gardens"—a name redolent of the Mutiny, which Paul Scott used as the site of the rape of an Englishwoman in *The Jewel in the Crown*. My purpose is to suggest that, if rape is to be a metaphor for the colonial connection, it is somewhat strange that the English are victims of it. So I reclaim the name of the Bibigarh Gardens for a place where Indians are massacred. Even the minor character who draws the border lines of my equivalent of the Radcliffe Commission is given the surname of Beverly Nichols who wrote a nasty book called *Verdict on India;* another pathetic British figure in the novel gets the "Beverly." I am not expecting all my readers to see all these connections. And precisely because there is so much in the novel that so many people will not get, it really wouldn't matter if you simply read it as a novel.

One of the episodes that I found vastly entertaining was the one involving Mohamed Ali, or Karna, his attempt to lift the wheels of the chariot and his death which results from the exertion. I wondered whether this is fair to Jinnah and Karna. If you know the epic you think of Karna in heroic terms, and if you are a Muslim the name Jinnah evokes similar feelings of heroism. Here you combine the two in a tone that is detached, although not entirely irreverent. How and why do you achieve this combination?

There are two questions here; the second one is a larger one to which I will return in a moment. The specific episode of the death of Jinnah, or rather of Karna. There are a number of comments to be made about it. You know how it unfolds in the novel—the narrator does not depict the scene. Dhuritharashtra lying on his massage table hears about it from an aide—so you are already told as a reader that you are hearing a second-hand view by an ill-disposed person, so that there is not necessarily a narratorial endorsement of the terms in which the story is reported. This is an important strategy which I use in other places as well. I am frequently concerned in the novel with the question of the authority of history. There is the episode shortly after Independence about how Drona, now a minister, receives an Englishman who has lost everything and how he treats him; and suddenly the narrator says that he wishes it had happened this way but in fact it didn't; Drona was too gracious to behave in this manner to the Englishman. So suddenly you get two versions of the same episode and you have to ask yourself which one you trust. Do you trust the first version or that of the narrator who might

have an interest in portraying the episode in a certain way to posterity? At one point I ask in the novel if truth can be modified by the personal pronoun. This is not a new idea, and the novel speaks about a land of multiple realities and truths. It is a novel that in its telling points to the multiplicity of truth and history.

Now let me move to your larger question. To some extent the entire process of creation is a mystery. Unlike Vikram Seth, for instance, who plans very carefully and charts each episode, I am quite the opposite. I sit down at my wordprocessor not knowing where the novel is going and where it will be when I get up from it the same evening. So in writing there is a sense of discovery. I have indeed taken, in some cases, historically recognizable characters and merged them with fictional ones. I have been interviewed by Pakistani journalists who were deeply offended by the portrayal, and I have found other Pakistanis who found it a matter of great honour that Jinnah was portrayed largely in a positive light and that he was equated in the epic with the resplendent hero Karna who is regarded as a heroic figure by most Hindus. I have also met Hindus who were offended that their Karna was given the role of the man who divided India. If it is possible to get these different reactions, I feel that I have done something in drawing these connections which provoke people to think. The entire purpose of my novel is to make them think in different ways.

In your portrayal of the events in Kashmir, the Maharaja is portrayed as a clown; would that conform to the notion of multiplicity you strive for?

Don't forget that the narrator is after all a character; he has the wonderful facility of being outside the story and part of it, both detached from the characters and in some cases the progenitor of these characters. And with this ability comes a persona which is essentially of this aged and somewhat cantankerous nationalist; it will be untrue to that persona to be completely exempt from prejudices. I think that somebody like that would have had that attitude. Again he has heard it secondhand. He heard it from Vidura, who is the principal protagonist of the undoing of the Maharaja. The book doesn't seek in any case to be above the events it describes. Frequently the narrator relishes getting into these events and manifests openly his prejudices, likes and dislikes. I am not suggesting that when you speak of multiplicity of points of view that it should necessarily imply that the narrator does not have his own point of view. But throughout, the way in which his point of view is told gives the reader the choice to disagree with or discredit that point of view, or to be persuaded by his version. The book is full of references to this, and in the

last thirty or forty pages, the message is driven home when the narrator talks about the fact that every Indian carries with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India. At the very end he says that he might have been entirely mistaken and would have to start all over again. Here is a narrator subverting his own omniscience.

There are moments when the narrator falls back on dreams and tries to provide alternative closures. Was that your way of expanding the limits of the epic or was it simply a sign of the times?

I think that was integral to the concerns I was trying to talk about. It was necessary from the novelistic point of view, because when one is seeking to interweave these two disparate public histories, the one of the epic and the other of modern history, something has to give at some point. Mine is a twentieth-century story, so you don't have any miracles, deer turning into Brahmins, etc. Instead you have Pandu being struck by a mundane heart attack. You have the twentieth-century as the governing principle. Rather than abandoning the *Mahabharata*, when its episodes were so relevant to what I was trying to do, but at the same time eschewing the temptation of magic realism, I converted some of the episodes I needed to use into dreams. VVji, by dreaming, sees these things through a form which suits the epic. His dreams are essentially of classical, legendary events and characters.

When I first read the novel, I was very curious to see how you would deal with the epic battle, which is the heart of the epic. You didn't sidestep it, but I thought you were going to link the Partition with the battle. Was there any particular reason for not doing that?

One reason was that Partition was too facile a parallel and I didn't want to do that. In any case it wouldn't have worked with making the Kauravas the Congress Party and the battle wouldn't have been between the Pandavas and the Kauravas any more. But also I wanted to stress that one should not see the *Mahabharata* in terms of the climactic battle. We are superimposing a rather modernist sensibility in seeing the epic as a series of events leading to an epic battle. I pointed this out quite deliberately throughout the novel. When the moment arrives in the narrative, VVji says that this particular cathartic moment, this Kurukshetra, which in my book is the election, is not going to change everything. We are constantly fighting battles, and in these battles there are no clear-cut victories and defeats. If there are victories, then these are won at the cost of things one holds dear. I was quite anxious not to let the *Mahabharata* and the wonderful lessons it offers to be reduced to a symbol of the clash

of arms on the battlefield. To me there is the business of history as process, as continuation. You have this minor episode when VVji is asked to tell a story and the child he is telling the story to wonders what happens in the end, and he says that the end as a concept doesn't mean anything to him. Ultimately we realize in our constructs that life is a series of sequels and that there is no end but a series of new beginnings. To see "The End" at the end of a movie, even in tawdry melodramas, is wrong; it really should be "To Be Continued."

The strategy of a narrator and a writer reminded me of Rushdie. In some respects this is a post-Rushdie novel in the way it approaches its subject matter. To what extent were you influenced by Rushdie and did you feel that you should create your own space?

I make no bones about my very great admiration for *Midnight's Children*, but amusingly enough, the device of the narrator dictating to a scribe was suggested by the *Mahabharata* itself. In many recensions of the work it is Vyasa dictating to Ganapathi. Mine is therefore not a post-Rushdie novel in its use of that device nor is there any involvement with the magic realist school. In my case, the magic and the realism, as the *TLS* reviewer put it, are kept apart with a firm hand. I feel that while magic realism is a very effective technique in some writers' hands, it is a technique that can also lead to a certain amount of preciousness and, in some cases, a degree of sloppiness as well, when magic enables some writers to escape the responsibility for their characters. I am not referring to Rushdie here. More important to me, Rushdie in both *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* did blaze a path in the conversion of history into the stuff of literature. The idea that one can use fiction as a vehicle for advancing the notion of history was one that Rushdie helped to create. His greatest achievement was widening the realm of the possible for Indian writers of fiction. You can see how aspects of Rushdie's work have suggested possibilities to other writers. I am perhaps not much in the line of direct descent, but in broader issues of history and fiction I am quite happy to doff my cap to the trail blazer.

There are probably similarities in the way both you and Rushdie approach historiography.

I am a student of history and I think I am more explicitly concerned with the recording of history. I would have thought that Rushdie is less closely tied to the historicity of material. He places himself very much in the tradition of oral storytelling. My work is much more conscious about the various ways that history can be told and recorded.

Rushdie has a habit of not being able to say something without subverting it, and you too have that tendency.

Some of these tendencies are inbred.

Has this something to do with the kind of education you received. One critic, a few years ago, suggested that this was part of the St Stephen's atmosphere.

I was not profoundly impressed by that article. It was written by a friend and contemporary of mine. I feel that my language has been shaped by my education in India. Three years at St Stephen's was inevitably a part of that. The fact that so many contemporary writers have emerged from St Stephen's may or may not point to something. But by the time you get to St Stephen's you are too old to be taught how to write. You may develop a certain view of the world and there is a certain elitism to the college. There was also a tradition of subversion in the college. But whether those influences are predominant in determining the nature of my writing, I am not really sure.

In The Great Indian Novel, *you also draw attention to Scott, Forster, and several others. Were you rewriting their novels in some ways.*

The references emerge from my appreciation or lack thereof of their work. Despite what I said earlier about the Bibigarh Gardens, I do admire Scott immensely. What he has to say about British officers in the final days of the Raj cannot be bettered. There are, however, very basic errors in the books, such as having a "Rajput" called Chatterjee or a Venkateshwara temple in the Northern City. Despite that, I thought he struck at the larger truths. *A Passage to India* is a book I do not much care for and that comes across in my references to its author in my novel. Forster is a great writer but this particular book enjoys a reputation that is vastly in excess of what it deserves.

Before we move to Show Business, *I would like, for a moment, to talk about a short story you included in* The Five-Dollar Smile, *entitled "The Solitude of the Short Story Writer." Jennings is probably not an author surrogate but you do talk about issues of realism in the story. Were you self-consciously trying to talk about your craft at that point?*

Most of the other short stories in that book had been published at this time, but I suppose this story foreshadows problems I had to grapple with in novels that I had not thought about, let alone written. For me it was mainly a conceit tossed off during the Christmas period when I was not at graduate school. I had probably read too much about neurotic professors and psychiatric couches and I wanted to try my own take on that. Having said that, the issue of what happens when you depict reality

too meticulously and the consequences for the writer who presumes to interpret the lives of people he really knows only through fiction, is one which certainly relates to my two novels.

You establish a nice balance between "The City Girl" and "The Village Girl." If you read each story individually, what strikes you is the theme and some of the dualities that are inherent in the stories. You read them together and the fictive aspect comes across. In other words, reading them together foregrounds the artifice. Reading them individually focuses on the theme.

The Indian publisher, probably for this reason, did not bring them out together. I guess he thought that the effect of one story would be undermined by the other when they are juxtaposed. I had done these two purely as an exercise for myself. In fact someone told me when I published "The Village Girl" in an Indian magazine that while the story was interesting she wondered what would happen if the roles of the two central characters were reversed. So it was largely a result of being provoked that I thought it would be useful to write the other version.

One motif that runs from the short stories to Show Business *is one of infidelity, particularly in the case of women. The men are not virtuous, but the way you present them one feels that they are not expected to be virtuous. Women begin by projecting themselves as embodiments of tradition, virtue, etc., and then they betray those ideals at the end. Was this used allegorically or is it a statement about perceptions of gender issues?*

I was not really aware of a recurrent concern with fidelity. I am concerned with integrity in a certain sense. I have an abiding curiosity about the entire notion of Dharma which as a ruling principle has been lost in recent years. There is something frightening and comforting about an age where everyone knew his or her place in the world. If you look back at the *Mahabharata*, Ekalavya eavesdrops on the lessons of Drona and becomes a skilled archer. Drona discovers this and demands that this man cut off his thumb. The man surrenders his thumb because it was not his role as a non-Kshatriya to acquire those skills. It is an appalling story in some ways, and I had to reinvent it with a different outcome in my novel. I didn't intend focusing on issues of marital infidelity except in as much as that is reflective of other things. In *Show Business* this is one of many ways to delineate character.

This motif was very striking at the end of the novel when Maya is shown to be unfaithful and Kalki fails in his role as redeemer. What did you intend with such a closure—Maya shown to be unfaithful and Kalki the redeemer not fulfilling that redemption?

The story of Kalki in my novel is a thinly-veiled allegory of the Emergency. The evil queen is Indira Gandhi and there are allusions to her crushing of the railway strike, her censorship of the press, her arrest of Jaya Prakash Narayan. On the larger question, in *Show Business* I am asking what stuff heroes are made of and what is good and evil. These are questions which are left as questions. I would rather that each reader come up with his or her own answers. I just wanted the questions to be noticed. Remember that Maya is the only character of any real consequence who does not have a monologue of her own. That was very deliberate. Maya is always seen through the eyes of others—this pure, almost virginal person. You have Ashwin and Pranay describing her in different ways. You have Ashok taking for granted certain qualities—but these are the more traditional qualities. You thus see Maya entirely through the eyes of other men. In fact at some point she says that she has been deprived of a voice. It was very important to suggest at the end of the novel an autonomy of action that leads the reader to question the depiction of her through the eyes of others. In both novels there is the implicit and sometimes explicit suggestion that narrators are unreliable. The unreliability of the narrator is brought out by what is said by others. At one point, for instance, Ashok says that his father doesn't have the imagination to question a particular law, whereas in the father's monologue a few pages later the father uses the very same words which reveal to the reader that indeed he has questioned that very law. You are made to realize here the gulf of incomprehension between son and father. One of the reasons for different narrations is to point out the limitations in each character's awareness of the other.

I guess the content also enables you to deal with the multiplicity of the political arena, and this constitutes an important aspect of the novel. I liked the way you brought in M G Ramachandran and Rama Rao into the narrative. But they were able to succeed as politicians in South India and as actors. Ashok is unable to do that.

The juxtaposition of the world of politics and the film is central to the novel. The novel is also about issues of reality versus illusion and the life of the surface versus the internal life. It also deals with the distinction between attempting to do something where the script is written for you and it almost doesn't matter what the content is, as against finding yourself in an arena where things are of consequence and you have to carve out your destiny for yourself. Perhaps it is true that the success of people like MGR and Rama Rao has not necessarily been for the benefit of all the people who voted for them. I don't want to take a political

stand on them as individuals, but I thought it was important to make the point that when you move into the other arena there has to be a degree of accountability and commitment.

Your entire novel reads like a film script. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the narrative proper and the film script. Was that intentional?

Very much so, as was the deliberate use of the names of the characters in the film scripts. Ashok would not necessarily be playing the role of a character of that name but it was important to call him that so that you could see easily who was who. The book is soon to be a motion picture. An Indian producer in America who is connected to the Bombay movie establishment is interested in it. He says he is going to be as faithful as possible to the novel. It will be interesting what someone from the movie world would make of this novel.

Were you consciously aware of the continuities between The Great Indian Novel *and* Show Business*? You were moving from one kind of myth to another.*

Well, yes. The main connection is the kind of stories that a society tells about itself. Both are satirical and the reason why I use satire is because it seems to me that part of the mark of the maturation of a society is its ability to laugh at itself. As a satirist, I believe with Molière that you've got to entertain in order to edify. There are larger lessons embedded in the novels. In *Show Business* the entertaining elements should not be allowed to crowd out the serious messages that I expect my more demanding readers to perceive.

Satire turns on the idea of a norm. The kind of narrative mode that you adopt does not allow for one authoritative voice. How does satire work in that context where a normative voice does not predominate?

Take *The Great Indian Novel* for instance; you have a situation where the epic is received wisdom, and to that degree the epic is the norm. Similarly, there is the second narrative of Indian history about which there is a hagiographic norm associated with the nationalist movement. The subversion of both those norms is satire. If you look at the *Mahabharata*, it is the longest epic poem in the world, though many of its translators have rendered what is poetry into prose. At the same time the *Mahabharata* evolved through a series of accretions. It is a tale that has been retold many times with many additions and interpolations. No one can thus say that some part is more authentic than the other. It is a tale of many tellers even though it is ascribed to one. In my novel I have done several things to make this apparent. One is the way VVji often talks

about things he has learnt secondhand. Here you can see that it is a tale to which others have contributed: VVji is talking about things he couldn't have possibly known. And stylistically, some of the translators—P Lal is a good example—have translated the epic into prose while occasionally breaking into poetry to convey something of the poetic quality of the original. I have seized on that device to deliberately subvert my own prose, by breaking into light verse, often doggerel, to change the mood, break up the pace of the narrative, and move from one kind of depiction of character to another. If you look at the way that device has been used, it simultaneously goes back to the epic itself. What is being reinvented is a great epic poem, and in the manner of its reinvention it both recalls and subverts that norm.

One final question. Writers like Achebe and Soyinka have talked about their work and in the process placed themselves and their works in relation to the postcolonial world. It is often fascinating to see how Nigerian writers see themselves very differently from, say, Australian writers. Do you see yourself within the postcolonial framework?

I have the dubious distinction of being hailed by someone in the *Calcutta Statesman* as India's first truly postmodern writer. (Ever since then when I come across critics I tend to slink into alleyways.) But I don't know what the "postcolonial" label implies. I am an Indian who has grown up in postcolonial India. I am very conscious and proud of being an Indian. With that label comes a whole lot of historical responsibilities, a whole sense of what being an Indian means. I have written in various places about my reaction to what has been happening in India in the last few years. To me those events are very troubling because they undercut what it means to be an Indian. In that sense I am very conscious of my Indian identity. I am also conscious of the kind of India that I would like to stand up for. Having said that, I must admit that I was born abroad in London and have spent a great deal of time abroad as a result of my work; but I have throughout remained an Indian. So I have been able to retain my Indianness in a way that writers who have emigrated and taken new passports and found new societies within which to work cannot. I do not see myself as part of the "literature of migration" that we hear so much about these days. So if you asked me to choose between the adjectives "Indian" and "postcolonial" to describe my writing, I would pick "Indian."

M G Vassanji

Born in Nairobi, Kenya, M G Vassanji grew up in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. He then went to the United States, where he earned a doctoral degree in Physics. Currently a full-time writer and editor, Vassanji lives in Toronto.

The discovery of a book—specifically, a diary owned by Alfred Corbin, a British colonial officer in Africa—becomes the occasion for the exploration of complex and largely unrecorded history in M G Vassanji's novel *The Book of Secrets*. The diary is important for the information it contains, but more significantly it remains an emblem that suggests the complexity of attempting to retrieve the past. The past here is the lives of the Indians, particularly the fictional community of the Shamsis, in East Africa, who having migrated from India, settled in various parts of Africa, adapting to new conditions and striving to prevent the fragmentation of their culture. That the novel begins with an Englishman's diary is not without significance, for it suggests both the convergence of multiple influences and the sources of knowledge as well.

The task of the author becomes, then, to provide a fullness to the eclectic jottings of a colonial officer. Inevitably, other sources, which include oral narratives, letters, newspaper clippings, and so forth enter the narrative, complementing and problematizing the notes of Corbin. What emerges at the end is a complex collective history, narrated with a sense of wanting to be comprehensive while always being aware of the contingent nature of the project.

The Book of Secrets marks a definite point of departure, notwithstanding its obvious connections with the author's first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, and his collection of short stories entitled *Uhuru Street*. Characters and thematic preoccupations from the earlier novel reappear in *The Book of Secrets*, reinforcing the need to see the author's work as a continuum. Yet what distinguishes *The Book of Secrets* is its self-conscious narrative mode, its refusal to speak with an authoritative voice. Mariamu is clearly an allegorical figure in the novel, and at one level the objective of the novel is the more straightforward one of retrieving a past that exists largely as oral narrative. At another, the novel acknowledges its method

of understanding the past, and thus implies that a reading of the past, however rigorous, can only be that.

As the novel moves to the present and to Britain, the lineage of the characters becomes increasingly difficult to trace. Thus Ali as the son of the shopkeeper Pipa could be Indian or, as the son of Corbin, could be part British. If neat polarizations were possible in the past, they hardly are in the present. Colonialism may have been harsh and exploitative, but for the descendants of that era, such distinctions take on a different guise. While the past cannot be forgotten, it can be hardly the only basis for organizing the present. *The Book of Secrets* is as much about the past as it is about the present, and it is in the capacity of the novel to speak without nostalgia or narcissism while constantly being aware of the need to celebrate and preserve the past that its significance lies. If *No New Land* is the most topical and most "Canadian" of Vassanji's novels, *The Book of Secrets* is probably his most profound and multiplicitous work.

INTERVIEW

Why is the narrator of The Gunny Sack *called Salim, a name that recalls the narrator of Salman Rushdie's* Midnight's Children*? Was the reference intentional and if so in what way did you see yourself as re-working Rushdie?*

The name brings to mind not only *Midnight's Children* but also Naipaul's *Bend in the River;* but my initial reason was to choose a name which was deliberately ambiguous, one which could be both Indian and African and thus describe my narrator. And Salim lends itself to such a duality; as does Juma, the surname. I knew that both Rushdie and Naipaul had a Salim but that did not bother me. I was doing something different.

But was the reader expected to see the connection and see your narrative as being different but connected?

I suppose I was being a little cocky and defiant—the question of literary ancestry had been on my mind. *The Gunny Sack* was my first novel—I began writing it in 1980—and I knew that Naipaul had dealt with similar material although I had not read much of his work. I had read Rushdie and admired him but I knew that what I had was very different. In any event Salim is an Everyman kind of name and the spelling I used is very distinct.

How much of the subject matter of the novel is autobiographical? You seem to provide clues in it that are difficult to miss.

There are circumstances in it that are similar to some of those in my life. I was born in Kenya in Nairobi at just about the time when the narrator Salim in *The Gunny Sack* was born there. Salim's childhood in Kenya and Tanzania is similar though not identical to mine. But there are important differences. I gave Salim deeper roots in Africa, by making one of his ancestors an African, a slave woman. That fact is the driving force in the novel, its African spirit. The novel has its own logic that is omnipotent, that even the author's life cannot violate.

How many generations before you had been in Africa?

My great grandfather on my father's side was the first to come to Kenya and on my mother's side my grandparents came from India. They went to Zanzibar and from there they went to Mombasa and to Dar es Salaam.

The Indian connection is interesting because The Gunny Sack *begins in India and towards the end of the novel Ji Bai visits her childhood home in India. I was wondering how you relate to India.*

It is very important. Even in Africa although we were Africans we were also Indians. We were brought up within Indian communities. We grew up speaking two Indian languages—Cutchi and Gujarati—and we also understood Hindi from the movies we watched. And then we were also brought up speaking Swahili and English. We had all of this within us. In my generation the schooling was entirely in English and there was a very strong tendency to look down upon and even deny the Indian connection. This was colonial influence. But once I went to the US, suddenly the Indian connection became urgently insistent: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots in India that we had inside us. There was a very strong religious tradition from Gujarati we had absorbed through psalms or songs—the bhakti tradition. I made my connection to India through that. The need to comprehend my Indianness became so strong that I studied Indian history and philosophy, and Sanskrit, at the University of Pennsylvania and seriously started translating the Gujarati songs or poems into English. This was medieval stuff, so you needed a knowledge of how languages develop from Sanskrit through Prakrit and Apabhramsha and so on—a lot of philology. A fascinating subject. In another life I might have taken it up full-time . . . if I had not written novels.

The narrator of The Gunny Sack *is called Kala. Kala is a very Indian name*

but within the context of the novel it is also very African, because it has connections with the colour black. Was that an attempt to involve a complex legacy?

Kala in the book is obsessed by his Africanness, which has been shrouded in mystery and innuendo. Sona his brother has an intellectual fascination with the Indian origins. One's a dreamer, a poet; the other, a scholar. And there is even a play on colours. The Tanzanian flag is black, green, blue and gold. In fact gold and black—sona and kala— are very African colours.

Given the confluence of the three streams—the colonial, the Indian and the African—how would you define your perception of identity? How would you define your world view?

I've been called an Afro-Asian and I thought that that was rather apt, it describes my origins—but I am other things as well. Africa and India mean a lot to me. I am not an immigrant who believes that you leave everything behind. In the modern context, with what we know and observe of the whole world, that notion of immigration is simply weird. Yet it seems to be promoted by certain sections of the host culture, especially in Canada, in their national insecurity and search for a real Canadian essence. The "pilgrims" came to Boston—forgive me for using an American example—and built a town, a university (Harvard) modelled on what they had left behind (Cambridge). The Irish came to Boston and transformed it. The Italians, the Jews, the Afro-Americans—they all transformed, themselves as well as what they encountered; there is always a memory, collective, individual. I think ultimately I see myself as everything that's gone into me—Africa, India, Britain, America, Canada, Hinduism, Islam. The search for essences I find deeply offensive, it's a kind of fundamentalism.

Do you see the possibility of combining the African and the Indian?

I'm not sure what you mean—unless it's intermarriage—not much of that has happened. Give it time and it will. Our Indianness was already transformed into an Africanness. In Africa—as opposed to outside of Africa—there are many ways of being African. In South Africa, I don't think there is any way of considering the whites as not African because they have lived there for three centuries. Africa accommodates these new infusions. The number of Indians in Africa, though, is very small.

How does the idea of infusion relate to a sense of belonging? The notion of legitimacy appears to be an important motif in your novel, not only in relation to birth but also in relation to the act of re-telling another story. The Gunny

Sack *belongs to one who is legitimate, but the narrator is in some ways illegitimate. But to the narrator falls the task of re-telling the story of one who is legitimate. Were you playing off one against the other?*

Yes, that was very deliberate.

It seemed significant that the three books that are a part of the inheritance in The Gunny Sack *cannot be deciphered easily. And even when they are deciphered their message is elusive. Is that a comment on your novel?*

In some sense yes. The past in the book is deliberately murky to some degree. I did not see, or want to give the impression of a simple, linear historical truth emerging. Not all of the mysteries of the past are resolved in the book. That is deliberate. It's the only way.

Why do several characters in the novel carry a strong sense of guilt?

I have never thought of the community that I come from as carrying a deep, biblical sense of guilt; in the incident of the cheating mukhi in *The Gunny Sack,* there is guilt vis a vis betrayal of the community, which I am more familiar with. But perhaps guilt in the book reflects more my own sense of guilt. Of having left and not having enough courage in me to be in Africa without my people, the Indians I grew up with. A feeling of helplessness about not being able to do anything. I think that guilt I carry with me.

The character who is beaten up by thugs in No New Land *decides to go back home. You deal with that return in a very parodic manner. And strangely enough you transform a baker into a painter and thereby suggest links with the role of the artist. Was the episode intended to be parodic?*

It is not completely parodic. What is suggested is that he had *something* in him, otherwise he would not have been obsessive about his painting. But that something could not be realized here, in Toronto, where he was painting masks in a very imitative, kitschy, tacky way. He had to go back to find out what he was doing, why he was obsessed with painting only these masklike figures. In fact this turns into a strength because in Africa masks do have a significance, do belong to ongoing artistic traditions.

Is that a statement about your own position as a writer in a land where the mainstream is very different?

It was to some degree, yes, although writing crosses over traditions more easily than painting does or has done. The African painting tradition is very different from the Western one. It is possible to write in English in Africa and be read elsewhere. And don't forget that here we

are altering the mainstream tradition. But the point—the immigrant artist working in a vacuum and out of context—is valid, because there are times when you wonder, who understands you as anything more than a mere immigrant? It is an artistic challenge to bring a place like Dar es Salaam to Canada—to the Western world really—and I wasn't sure how I was going to do it, but I knew that was what I was going to do.

The Gunny Sack *constantly involves movement, travel, shipwreck, accidents, and is very different from a traditional realistic novel which has a very fixed sense of time and place. Do you see yourself as writing a different kind of novel, because you are dealing with an experience that is unusual in relation to the classic realistic novel?*

I don't see myself as writing any particular kind of novel. I have a story to tell, and the novel grows with more stories, characters and voices as the need emerges. Then the form appears. At least *The Gunny Sack* appeared that way, and partly *The Book of Secrets*. If you look around you at any given moment, how many people do you see who have lived in one place, who don't traverse times, mentally. We live in an age where exile is becoming the normal state. And as for newness—Naipaul, Conrad and Greene have all written of movement, travel and transition.

Before we move to The Book of Secrets, *could you comment on the reasons behind writing* No New Land*?*

I can tell you about the circumstances that inspired it. I used to take my son for babysitting in the Don Mills area of Toronto—an area dense and brimming with life, in the raw—not your suburban life with trim lawns and closed doors and barbecue smells. You feel you would see so much if you spent a few months there—it's how I feel about Old Delhi. In any case I thought then that it would be nice to set a novel there. I had an incomplete short story and so I expanded it into the novel.

At one level the novel seems to be a criticism of racism, prejudice etc, but the novel is also equally critical of immigrants. Did you intend preserving a certain balance?

I would not use the term "criticism." I was not lecturing. I tried to be honest about the racism, which was the most brutal in the seventies and early eighties, and the humour and foibles of immigrant life. Many immigrant communities arrive carrying a deep resevoir of humour, as a sort of protection. It is what often sustains them. My objective was to tell a story about an ordinary, simple, immigrant man. By the time you finish such a novel you realize what you always knew—there is no such thing as an ordinary, simple person. You'd be surprised how many kids I've

met in universities who have identified strongly with the book and its characters.

There are obvious intertextual connections between The Gunny Sack *and* The Book of Secrets. *Notwithstanding the important differences, one gets the feeling that you wanted the reader to be aware of the connections. In what sense did you perceive the connections and how did you intend* A Book of Secrets *to be a point of departure?*

I needed those connections to tell the story, but I am not sure if the readers needed to know them. For instance, they are not likely to know that the character Sona also appears in *The Gunny Sack*, and that is probably not necessary. In my mind both novels deal with the same world, but from different perspectives. The two novels deal with different ways of reclaiming history. They can be read separately.

The gunny sack, as a metaphor, becomes a repository of collective knowledge. In your recent novel, there is the character Pipa whose name literally means "barrel," which in a sense holds things, like a sack. Are these two connected?

In *The Book of Secrets*, the book, or rather the diary, and the novel become the same at the end. In the previous novel the gunny sack becomes the novel. The book itself is a metaphor for the novel. The notion of a barrel is deliberate but it is also deliberate in an accidental kind of way. You see it coming and you allow it to happen.

The notion of a book, or a diary, becoming a symbol of both overt and hidden knowledge is a curious device and a subversive one because the diary belonged to an Englishman. It is used ironically at times, but there is also the sense that in a real way Corbin was implicated in the lives of the Shamsis. What made you choose such a strategy?

The diary is the starting point for reclaiming history. In *The Gunny Sack*, memory is the starting point. When I wrote *The Gunny Sack*, I found it amusing, ironical, startling, that so much of my detailed information came from British sources—the memoirs, travelogues and diaries of the colonial administrators. And so with this book, I decided I would begin with such a document and see where that took me. A diary needs an interpreter-reader, it needs textual as well as oral corroboration. And finally, the diary draws in the historian-reader himself, he realizes he is not as objective and outside of it as he thought. And so the novel grows.

So you provided an alternative book.

Yes.

At the end of the novel, the reader is left with a sense that the process of

understanding the past is inevitably problematic. However rigorous one's methodology might be, the result is not likely to be entirely accurate. As a writer, do you see it as a dilemma to be at once impelled by a desire to know and be frustrated by the awareness that all knowledge is subjective? Did you expect your readers to be responsive to this?

I was a little nervous about making the uncertainty an integral part of the novel, but there was really no choice. Most readers saw no problems. The reviewer from the *Montreal Gazette*, however, seemed to take personal affront.

Were you conscious of the tremendous responsibility of trying to write the history of a people whose lives have remained, for the most part, unrecorded? What you write becomes the story of the community. It, in fact, becomes a version of history.

Only a version—the novel allows other writings to take place. They *must* take place, it says. That's the whole point. As for responsibility, yes, every writer has the responsibility to be honset to himself and thus to others. And don't forget, I've fictionalized the community.

In the way you implicate the British, one wonders whether you were being politically incorrect?

If you look at the novel closely, you will see the realities of colonial rule. I didn't want to say what Achebe had said forty years ago about what colonialism and imperialism meant, and what Ngugi said a little later. But I was of course very conscious of how ludicrous it was for Indians and Africans to be fighting a European war. That was a comment on the contradictions of colonial rule. But the fact is that the British administrators too were human and I don't know if it is politically incorrect to say that. There is always a danger of wallowing in the victim syndrome—"Look what they did to us." This is far more so in immigrant communities. In Africa, the Caribbean, India—they've moved on to other concerns. There are real, newer problems and circumstances. We have to address *our* own failings as people and human beings—there is no point in blaming Rwanda, Idi Amin, the horrors of Indian communal conflicts, Islamic fundamentalism, only on the Belgians, the British and so on. And we have to be aware of the *new* imperial order.

Mariamu in The Book of Secrets *is a very intriguing figure. The possibility that she had a relationship with Corbin suggests complicity of a kind. The mystery surrounding her violations renders the allegorical dimension even more problematic. One wonders about the notion of ancestry and contamination.*

The problem may be a literary-critical one. Mariamu and Corbin are human beings, their relationship is utterly plausible. But people have moved well beyond those origins. Those living in the West are in some ways the children of Corbin. But they are also Indians and in that sense Pipa is very much their father. That is the real genealogy. What they have become after a hundred years interests me immensely. Look at someone like Ali. He is both an Englishman and an Indian. But of course, questions remain, and that is the historian-narrator's dilemma—how much *can* we know, how much *dare* we know . . .

You also made Pipa a spy and he spies for both sides. In a novel like this one, the individual tends to stand for the collective as well. How does this connect with the role that Indians were called upon to play?

Some of the Africans and Arabs too were spies. For me it is obvious that neither side—the British or the German—meant anything deeply to the Indians, Africans, or Arabs. Pipa didn't have much of a choice. Some others had a choice but decided to spy anyway. It was important to point out that quite often the choices were made for them.

Towards the latter part of the novel, Gregory plays an important role, and certain aspects of the plot become evident through him. But why is he given so much importance? He is a stock figure—the eccentric colonial who chooses to remain, but Gregory achieves a fullness that goes beyond the stereotype.

He is an artist and in some ways detached from the society he lives in. He is not a part of the imperial enterprise. Neither is he an active collaborator of the administration. I have a deep sympathy for that kind of character—an artist-exile. He is the mirror image of what can happen to artists in this country. I recently received a phone call from a Bangladeshi writer in exile who wanted to meet other writers. But he writes only in Bengali. Imagine his predicament.

You treat the British characters in the novel with great sympathy. The evil is concentrated in characters like Maynard, but the others are not negative at all.

They are human, but if you look at some of the letters that Corbin writes about Pipa you realize that he has a feeling of revulsion towards Pipa. He is naturally but more benignly racist. Would you deny such a character may have existed? Would you or I have been better under the circumstances? Corbin's wife is also removed from the people who work for her. At the end of the novel she meets Ali and for her and for him these are two very different encounters. For her he is just one of the people from the colony and is no part of her world at all. This is what colonialism has become now. The rage and anger has been spent; now we

have individuals who remember their stay in Africa in a bittersweet manner. How else can one deal with this situation?

Does that mean that we have moved beyond that stage of writing about the collective oppression of colonialism?

The oppression has definitely left a mark on us. I wonder how many of us can react to England in a neutral way. The feelings are real but you cannot really pinpoint an enemy, and that makes a difference.

If it is important to explore that African aspect of the Shamsis, maybe it's equally important to retrieve the Indian aspect of their history. Particularly the events that led up to their migration are likely to be of considerable significance. Are you likely to write a novel along those lines?

I would like to do that.

Awarding the Giller Prize for The Book of Secrets *was an important gesture by the Canadian literary community. Do you think that the reading public in Canada has become more aware of the potential and richness of non-mainstream writers now?*

I hope you're not saying the prize was simply a gesture. There is obviously a greater awareness, and that is evident in the fact that some of these "non-mainstream" books have been on the bestseller list. But that doesn't mean there is no resistance to our books, and this is not a matter of simply apportioning blame. I think our ways are still alien here. India and Africa are alien places to a lot of the readers here. But there has been a reaching out by certain segments of the literary community. It is sometimes too much to expect people to embrace wholeheartedly what is so alien to their experiences. I feel a sense of gratitude that my book was so well received. I am conscious of the generosity of the reading public which includes in large measure the immigrant community, that should not be forgotten. For a writer it is not automatic that there should be readers. Non-acceptance and marginalization lead to bitterness and acrimony that only poison one's creativity. Acceptance gives the writer the space to grow. But of course there is the danger of compromise. It's a treacherous path.

This leads me to a related question. We as readers and critics are always confronted with the need to create classifications and put books in different categories. And this often leads to polarizations and writers then get slotted as South Asian or mainstream or universal. Such groupings have political and ideological implications as well. As a writer, how would you locate yourself? Is this a concern at all?

Not really, at least not recently. I think we all have many labels. I

would be uncomfortable with a single identity. You can still be identified as a South Asian provided that label allows for different qualifications. We all have our own particularities. In Canada I am not considered African, and the people who are classified as African are themselves often from the Caribbean and have never set foot in Africa let alone speak an African language or recall an African landscape. That doesn't bother me. These labels are conveniences; we use them and discard them when they are no longer necessary. They are academic—they are not what you think about when you write.

A related question about language. The language you use, namely English, has very strong ideological roots and is linked to a particular culture. Has this posed a problem?

There is nowhere I can run to, from English. It's all I have to write in. But my English is not that of Martin Amis or Philip Roth or Wole Soyika. That is the difference. In fact for the world even slightly to tilt our way (I mean, here, towards the non-Western people), some of us from there *have* to write in English. We have come, we have found a beachhead and we will expand in English—that's what I say when I feel pompously positive and aggressive (all I need is a cigar) about this question which never seems to be put to rest.

You were the editor of The Toronto South Asian Review. *Was that experience a significant one? Did you see the journal doing something vital?*

Trying to help a new writing emerge in Canada has been exciting at one level. We helped publish writers from Canada and the US. We have been very effective, which is another way of saying there was, and remains, a strong need for it.

The journal changed its name about a year ago and is now called The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad. *Why did you feel the need to make the change? Has that made a difference in the overall focus of the journal?*

There is greater variety now in the submissions. But in relation to the work we do I don't think it makes much of a difference. We were always open to many things. The change in the name makes us feel more comfortable. It was clear from the first years that the focus of the title was too narrow for what we were doing. It simply took a long time to find an alternative title.

Rajiva Wijesinha

Rajiva Wijesinha was born in Sri Lanka. His PhD thesis was obtained at Oxford. He then returned to Sri Lanka and worked for the British Council. In addition to being a writer and critic, he is also an editor and a professor of English.

Describing his visit to Pakistan, Wijesinha comments with characteristic irony:

> In Peshawar, later, the Librarian at the British Council, again a most urbane man, was equally scathing. Benazir Bhutto dressed immodestly, he said. She was even supposed to have visited nightclubs when she was abroad. I refrained from mentioning that I had gone to one with her (91).

Much of the writing in *Beyond the First Circle*, the travel book in which the comment occurs, reminds the reader of V S Naipaul. In both one observes a careful attention to detail, a capacity for intelligent observation and a tone of quiet amusement. Both are, in fact, serious writers with a penchant for forthright criticism. Understatement is as true of Wijesinha's travel writings as it is of his collection of short stories entitled *The Lady Hippopotamus*. Here again the parallel with Naipaul's *Miguel Street* is inevitable. A complex array of characters, often funny and always human, find their way into the stories of both authors.

Yet the parallel with Naipaul hardly does justice to the real achievement of Wijesinha. Unlike Naipaul, he decided not to remain on the margins, and the conviction that politics was as much the writer's concern as social comedy was probably the impetus to write *Acts of Faith*, a magic realist work about the ethnic riots of 1983 and the geopolitics of the region during that time. In many ways a watershed in Sri Lankan writing, the novel began an active politicization of the literary scene. In a country where, apart from a few, most writers chose to ignore the realities of ethnic polarities, Wijesinha's novel, along with his critical works about the erosion of democracy in Sri Lanka, marked an important point

of departure. The romanticism that permeated the fiction of the sixties and seventies needed to be jettisoned and replaced with a literature of commitment. Wijesinha's contribution to this process of decolonization hardly can be ignored.

Perhaps the author's most important work, very much in the Rushdie mode, is his more recent *Days of Despair*, which provides another political allegory about the forces that divide the country. For those familiar with the political scene, the allegorical figures express familiar and new dimensions of meaning. Episodes and speeches that intensified ethnic violence are now transformed to reveal the full extent of their potential for harm. For unfamiliar readers, the impact is no less intense, for the human tragedy is still profound, and the imagination that permeates the novel is as striking as anything written by Rushdie. Despite the caricature, the humour and exuberence, *Days of Despair* remains disturbing in its prophetic tone and apocalyptic ending.

INTERVIEW

How would you comment on the contradictions that characterize your writing and your personal and political decisions? On the one hand, your academic training in England was in nineteenth-century literature, and on the other, you now write a great deal about the politics of Sri Lanka. Your work is sometimes experimental and at others very mimetic and accessible. You are an outspoken critic of the political system but you have chosen to remain in Sri Lanka. How do you reconcile all these divergent tendencies?

I don't really think that these are contradictions. I went abroad when I was very young—I was seventeen—and came back after having spent eight years in England. Coming back helped me to appreciate the plus points of Asian society. And although the decision to stay seemed unusual at the time, it wasn't a difficult one. I went back to write my thesis, and this was partly an escape valve because it gave me a choice. However, when I went back I knew I would return to Sri Lanka and settle down. I started working at Peradeniya and I resigned on a political issue because I was disappointed with what I thought was the real politics of Sri Lanka. I thought that we had moved away from a socialist government to an open economy and to what seemed like an introduction to democracy. I found that what we had was in fact an attempt to emulate

the so-called Singapore model—rapid development accompanied by political repression, but without even the financial honesty that Singapore managed to maintain. And we turned into the classic third-world banana republic. So I went back at the wrong time politically, but it was exciting.

In some ways Sri Lanka had moved towards greater sectarian politics, a greater sense of ethnic divisions and a militant nationalism, and yet you found the climate exciting.

When I went back in 1978 conditions were in some ways infinitely worse. The ethnic issue was a telling one because in the first couple of years I was there I used to think it was a major problem. There were the genuine grievances of the Tamil population which could have been settled with a little sympathy and understanding. In 1978 one thought the government was prepared to do that. But in actual fact things got worse. I did an interview with Shiva Naipaul on radio in 1983 and he said that people did not understand that they were living in a horrible country. I felt that it was not that bad. Two months later the riots broke out and I realized that Naipaul, with his acid view of life, knew much more of what was going on in Sri Lanka than I did. To me this was a great eye-opener. Between 1983 and 1988 things got worse. Naipaul's point was right that we were living in a dreadful society, but having gone back I thought it would be cowardly to leave. And I was relatively safe from personal threat. I certainly led a more cushioned life than the majority of the Tamils.

Did you advertise your political stance and expose yourself by resigning from your teaching position at Peradeniya?

Yes, but it was an exposure to dangers that were not very serious. It was true that having resigned I was very unpopular. The government made sure that I didn't get the next job I applied for. And then I also experienced some of the difficulties of the Sri Lankan system where one is expected to conform. I was perhaps lucky in that I found work at the British Council which was then very much an idealistic aid agency before it became money-grubbing as it has in the last couple of years. The salary was better than what I received at the University. I enjoyed the work and I learnt much more there about the school system than I did at the University.

What was your resignation a gesture of?

I went to parliament on the day the former Prime Minister Mrs Bandaranaike's civic rights were stripped. She was the chief opposition leader and a candidate for the Presidency. She wasn't a very good politi-

cian but the way the government was saying that they were not going to tolerate dissent seemed to me the beginning of the end. I must say everyone who disapproved of what I did subsequently said that I was perfectly right. I felt someone had to say something to the government. People said at that time that I could afford to do it. This was true, but a lot of people who could afford to didn't. The same thing happened two years later with the referendum when the government postponed the elections. I thought this was outrageous. And there were idealistic middle-class people not willing to make the slightest sacrifice.

Did you experience a conflict regarding your own privileged position? You had returned from England and your prospects were good.

Well, the general opinion was that these so-called foreign-returned people with their potty ideals did not understand the realities of society. I didn't see it that way. Democracy was democracy in any guise and you can't deprive people of choice. My Tamil friends in Colombo found all this a joke. Mrs Bandaranaike was not a serious politician and the UNP [The United National Party] was the redeemer of the Tamils. Three years later there were waves of protests and I couldn't resist the temptation of saying that people knew what was happening but for them the social set of the UNP was perfectly acceptable. And they negotiated with a bunch of thugs who burned down the Jaffna Public Library.

What was the major factor in your decision to become a writer?

It was mainly political. I wanted to write a political novel about the 1983 ethnic riots because at that time government troops attacked Tamils in Colombo as they had done earlier in Jaffna in 1981. What happened in 1981 was that government-sponsored thugs attacked Tamil homes. The President then got on television and said that in actual fact this was the perfectly understandable response of the population. And he was encouraging this attitude by bringing in legislation that discriminated against the Tamils. The other thing that happened was that I read *Shame* during that period and suddenly it came through to me that this work had the appropriate method for trying to express the political and social realities of a country like ours.

But Shame *was written in a different context because it was easier for Rushdie to write from England. You were exposing yourself more readily by writing from within the country. And yet you went ahead and wrote* Acts of Faith.

The novel had to be published in India. Sri Lankan publishers and even booksellers were wary of handling it. The one thing that I could be

sure of was that any direct response by the government would have drawn attention to *Acts of Faith* and it was in their interest to pretend that it hadn't happened. So in one sense writing in English is less a threat to the government.

How did you resolve the issue of audience? If the government did not perceive the novel as a threat because the readership was small, then your audience must in fact have been very small.

I suppose in Sri Lanka you are writing for a small but significant audience. And it is important to recognize that a lot of decisions are made by them. I think my role was to point out realities to those who did not have a clue. I drew attention to facts that otherwise would have been ignored. In that sense *Acts of Faith* and my book of political commentary did draw attention to certain realities, and both are accepted and recognized as books that said what needed to be said.

The history of English writing in Sri Lanka had been very different before. Do you locate yourself in relation to that tradition?

I have written a couple of essays on what happened to English writing in Sri Lanka. We faced the extraordinary situation of deploring English writing as part of a potty nationalism. The idea was that one must write either in Sinhala or Tamil. A related factor was that a lot of writers tried to deny they were part of the middle class and they wrote about wonderful pleasantries. The people who tried to do that were beaten on the head by critics. Punyakante Wijenaike and James Goonewardene tried and they were deplored by critics. I think in the late 1970s English writing was almost dead in Sri Lanka. It revived in the 1980s partly because of the ethnic conflict and partly because some of the important writers to emerge at that time—Jean Arasanayagam is a case in point—wrote about the suffering of the Tamils. This was true also of the poetry of Richard de Soyza who was subsequently killed by the government. They produced exciting work because they dealt with real issues. My own fiction was an attempt to say that we should talk about what is happening to people like us.

How different is James Goonewardene writing about an idealized village and your own writing that is experimental and not very accessible?

Well James wrote his first fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. It was straightforward fiction. His book *The Awakening of Doctor Kirthi* is an important collection that looks at middle-class problems. It uses a variant of stream-of-consciousness. He tried in the early 1980s to shift to more political fiction with *The Acid Bomb Explosion* and *An Asian Gambit*. I

didn't find these works particularly convincing, but then again he shifts his narrative style much more. Unfortunately James later tried to move into a narrative style that he calls Hemingway, but which is occasionally a substitute for not enough revision. And I find the style, which is no longer straightforward narrative, a bit confused. I don't think James would approve of the form of magic realism that I use. It is not his style at all.

Did you have any particular reason for choosing a kind of fabulous, fantasy-oriented writing?

Well, I was impressed by Rushdie. I had also been working towards a paper on how important this kind of writing is to third-world fiction and politics—it allowed you to relate to reality in a way that straightforward fiction couldn't do. Straightforward fiction creates what purports to be a real world that is only fictional whereas what we do is create fictional worlds that are based on reality. In fact you are drawing in strands from what has happened in the real world but you are tying them together more meaningfully by using nonrealistic methods and techniques, which help to show the connections among those real roots. For instance, in *Acts of Faith*, the ministers are called Mark, Luke and John who among them combine the traits of real politicians of Sri Lanka. But by combining those traits and calling them evangelists—which perhaps means publicists as well—I try to show how they manipulate the media and public relations, and so on. I think I am also making connections between the policies of several people who might seem different but who in the end pursue the same shameful goals.

In Days of Despair *you make the point that it is difficult for you to get any more realistic than what you were doing. So in some respects you must have thought of magic realism as giving you more access to reality.*

Yes, one of the things I found was that some of the incidents I created as absurdities turned out to be true. *Days of Despair* describes a situation where an opposition politician is killed. He is assassinated while making a speech. And the President decides that to counter public sympathy he would bump off one of his own people. Now in Sri Lanka in fact just a month ago, you had this ludicrous situation where an opposition politician was killed. And waves of feeling were building up against the government which was suspected of being involved. I don't think one can be sure they were, and they probably weren't, but public feeling was that the government was involved and then the next week the President was killed and public feeling changed the other way. This was precisely

the kind of thing I described in my fiction.

I was surprised by the title Acts of Faith. *When I first read it I thought that you were going to deal with the Insurgency of 1971. But the novel turned out to be about the riots, which was not an act of faith but just political turmoil.*

Well, the title was ironic of course. But at the same time it was based on the idea that for a lot of these people their actions during the riots were acts of commitment, and various politicians were doing things they were committed to. My point was that while the government pretended they had nothing to do with the riots, the riots were a consequence of government policies. Conversely of course, the acts of commitment by the forces opposed to the government, which included the "peace march," were meant to offer an alternative and a genuine act of faith.

As you move from Acts of Faith *to* Days of Despair, *you get increasingly close to the immediate reality. It is possible to identify the characters as real people. Is that a shift in perspective? Are you trying to provide better signposting for the readers?*

Days of Despair was actually written in a sense of great outrage and sprang from what happened in 1987 as a consequence of what had been going on before. The Sri Lankan government entered into a pact with the Indian government and it seemed to me clear that what the President at that time realized was that he had to make peace with somebody: the Sinhalese, the Tamils or the Indians. He chose the Indians, thus betraying the Sinhalese and the Tamils. This was a way of perpetuating his own power. The pact was presented as a statesman-like act when it was nothing of the sort. He was not doing anything nice to anybody except to his own government and the Indian one which he was afraid of. The consequence of this was the assault of the Indian army against Jaffna and the Tigers. The novel grew out of a sudden realization that occurred to me that there was no solution that did not involve a lot of suffering. Up to that point there was talk that the situation could be resolved. And suddenly it became clear in 1987 that nothing could be done that would provide a solution, and that is the despair of the book. It was a bitter book that was written very swiftly. As a result it suffered and it should probably be rewritten.

The ending of the novel reminded me of Shame*—it had that kind of apocalyptic ending; at the same time the final pages seemed very much like a compromise. Was that a closure that smacked of liberal humanism? Were you suggesting that everyone should pay a price for the cycle of suffering to end? Wasn't it part of the problem of Sri Lankan politics that people tended to rely on*

basic human values but didn't try to go beyond that to underlying issues? In a novel that is as politically engaged as Days of Despair *why would you choose an ending in which all the main players are killed off? There is no blame attached to anybody.*

Well, I think I would disagree with your reading of the closure. The ending is apocalyptic because it is meant to remind one facetiously of the end of the ring cycle where all the corrupt forces are blown up. It was one way of saying that by this stage the main political players were hopelessly corrupted and feeding on each other and had to go. Part of the problem had risen from geopolitical realities. In Sri Lanka it involved India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. And to me it seemed that a lot of our problems spring from mutual suspicions that we have of each other, which is of course partly a colonial legacy, exacerbated by certain aspects of British and American policy that play these countries off against each other. The positive vision at the end of the novel is some sort of loose confederacy among South Asian countries that would then prevent the taking of advantage of minority groups within a country and their exploitation. So there is a positive feeling but it is also a lame-duck feeling because I was not sure this was a solution and not a cop-out. But I don't see any other solution that would get rid of the mutual suspicion among groups.

If Days of Despair *is about Sri Lanka it is very difficult to interpret the authorial point of view. What made you create Rajiv as the "hero"? Assuming that Rajiv is connected to Gandhi, his involvement in Sri Lankan politics was to some extent minimal and yet he is the hero.*

I don't know if *hero* is the right word. He is a central figure but that is again an indication of the role India can play. Rajiv is a very passive figure and that sums up my view of what was happening. The argument that he was central to all the political decisions that took place is probably not true. I think he inherited the legacy from the manipulations of his mother which had a lot to do with imposing Indian will all over the subcontinent. What I was trying to suggest by introducing this figure was a possible alternative to what was going on in Sri Lanka. And I was trying to suggest a Rajiv who was not Indian alone but who possibly could build up connections based on a lack of aggression with all the other countries. But whether he is as much a victim of the past as anyone else is a question that I can't really answer.

Speaking of victimization, you connect yourself, or rather the narrator, with Rajiv in a kind of metafictional way. How does that parallel work in the text?

Well, I suppose it came simply from the accident of our common names. But it also allows me to make comments in my own person which can then be transferred to one of the fictional pivots. And this introduces ideas that the other characters could adopt, about internal politics and international relations. I found the device convenient, although whether it is actually coherent is another matter.

I know that you have special interest in androgyny. And you create Rajiv as an androgynous figure. Does that represent a possible ideal?

I don't know whether you would call it an ideal. It could even be called a cop-out. The idea is really based on an Indian myth. I suppose what I am suggesting is that it is possible to get rid of some traits of aggression associated with masculinity. Paradoxically, of course, one of the villains of the piece is Rajiv's mother who is a woman but who is not feminine at all. Androgyny allows for a lot of sexual interplay which I use metaphorically right through the book.

Rushdie got into a lot of difficulty with what he had to say about the Widow. And then you do pretty much the same thing with her son. Wasn't that a risk?

Well, I don't know if the risk was great. The one thing that I believe about the Indian political dimension is that when Mrs Gandhi took on Rushdie she did so in civilized terms. She sued him, she didn't bump him off. And I do believe that in that respect the Indian political system is much more advanced than ours. You can oppose people but you do it through the rules. Rushdie took a risk and Mrs Gandhi fought him on the one point on which she could fight him. She didn't fight him for his characterization of her. She took a particular incident which was false and fought him on that. This is one aspect of Indian politics that I respect. Mrs Gandhi's Emergency was monstrous but she did have a fair election after that. She allowed the people to decide. She did wrong but she did wrong in good faith unlike the Sri Lankan politicians who did terrible things and then made sure that the people did not have a chance to change them. The Indian political tradition is stronger and maybe that was one of the things I was trying to bring out in *Days of Despair*. I do see the future of South Asia as bound up with an India that really has to come to terms with itself.

Do you see the connections in relation to regional solidarity? Is that the way you would interpret what happened in Sri Lanka?

I think we need much more regional awareness. Since *Days of Despair* I have moved more thoroughly to the view that we need a larger regional grouping to incorporate Southeast Asia, including former Indo-China,

which has close cultural links with both Hinduism and Buddhism. The colonial tradition has South Asia apart from Southeast Asia, when in actual fact the regions have a tremendous cultural affinity. I think a regional grouping at that level is perhaps the idealistic solution.

The two novels are very dramatic and almost cinematic. Even the title Acts of Faith *draws on this metaphor. Do you see the second novel as a sequel to the first?*

Well, *Acts of Faith* was initially considered a novel in itself, but later I wanted to make the connection. And I was thinking of the three cardinal virtues—faith, hope and charity. The second one becomes despair, which is really something negative. I am in fact planning a third novel which is going to tie up the trilogy which I call *The Limits of Love*.

Why did you choose a form that drew on classical mythology? It was very eclectic the way you brought things together. That makes it difficult for the reader and it suggests a position that you take in relation to your writing. And the cultural baggage you bring to your writing is implied in this. You could have chosen Buddhist or Hindu mythology. Why did you choose Diana, for instance. Why do you quote at length from Western writers? Don't you see that as a legacy from colonialism?

Yes, but that was the reality of Sri Lanka. And Sri Lanka more than any other colonial nation has been brainwashed by the British. We were the one country where the upper classes pride themselves on speaking perfect English. It does not happen in India or Pakistan to the same extent. So we are a cultural mishmash and I was being representative of my country. All that is part of the baggage of the English-speaking Sri Lanka. I think you would notice a parody of that in the speech of the President. I hope my references are not entirely inaccurate. Presidents are almost always inaccurate and that represents the reality in Sri Lanka. The last President used to be categorized as a learned person because he could quote from the classics and Shakespeare and he invariably got things wrong. He was not a very disciplined or educated person but the Sri Lankans thought he was terribly clever. I think the classic example is when he delivered a speech in which he talked about Nelson at the battle of Waterloo and the papers the next day had to report this, and they said that the president didn't say "Waterloo" but "Trafalgar." My point is that the Sri Lankan audience just lapped it up.

In your works you don't promote the idea of going back to something precolonial as a solution.

No, not at all.

A lot of the relationships you project are incestuous in some ways, and I couldn't quite understand what you were getting at.

I think that reflects Sri Lankan society. I am not saying that sexually the relationships are incestuous. The point I was trying to make was that a lot of decisions are made on the basis of family relationships that are indecent—not sexually—in the way people actually influence each other, and the alliances that are built up are often based on family connections. This happens in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh as well. So that kind of incestuousness does occur, and by adding a sexual dimension to it I was focusing more tightly on that. I suppose a great deal of sexuality that occurs is part of the rumour mill of Colombo and all sorts of references to what people get up to. I thought that to put it in black and white would make it quite amusing.

In the process of writing like this you are making certain assumptions about the reader and you are demanding from the reader an awareness of local conditions. Is that the way you see yourself as a writer in relation to society and your audience?

I think the two novels are written primarily for a Sri Lankan audience. I had hoped to allow the non-Sri Lankan reader to get the general point and follow the relationships without necessarily understanding the base on which they were built up. They do demand a sophisticated response. *Acts of Faith* goes down more easily with people because they can follow it through, and because a lot of the characters are mishmashes. Apart from the President and the Bishop no one else is really based on any one particular character.

Do you see yourself the way Achebe saw himself twenty years ago as the growing edge, as a teacher; is that the role you see for yourself?

Very much so. I don't have an active involvement in politics but I belong to a political party. In 1988 I took part in an election which I absolutely hated but it seemed to me important. Provincial councils had been set up, and I am a great believer in devolution and there was the terrible situation where the government contested the elections but on the basis of its alliance with India, and the opposition boycotted the election. It seemed the party to which I belonged had a case for promoting devolution based on the principle that participation of the people is more important than political pacts. We suffered threats from both sides, and this was slightly worrying. There was, for instance, the leading candidate threatening to kill all of us.

You were aware of the risks, though.

Yes, I was worried. Richard de Soyza, who was a political person, was taken away to a ring on the bell at two in the morning.

I was going to ask you about that. You are not very different from Richard in your stance. You were prepared to speak out against the government.

In Richard's case it was slightly different. As a journalist he had very close contacts with people involved in terrorism and I think the government—totally absurdly of course—got it into their heads that he was a dangerous element. If I am also a political commentator, it is very much on the cerebral level. While I am not taken too seriously, Richard was seen as one who was more involved. Maybe they felt that because of his political connections he had the capacity to spread discredit on the government. His death came as an appalling shock and in one sense it announced to the middle classes in Colombo that they were not immune from danger. Correspondingly, the fuss it created I think led to the abolition of the death squad. The overt killing came to an end. I am not saying that killings stopped but they were no longer overt or direct.

The introduction that you wrote to Richard's collection of poems was curious because while it paid a great tribute to him as a person it was a lot more cautious about the quality of his writing. You were not as effusive in your praise of the poetry as your were of the person. You seem to draw a distinction between political engagement and maintaining aesthetic standards. How would you approach that issue?

Well, I was probably not effusive, but I was being complimentary because I think his poetry is quite tremendous. I do think that he was developing all the time and perhaps the point I was trying to make was that the collection of poetry suggests a great talent that was going further. I don't think it was brilliant, but it was certainly very good. I think the combination of skill with political commitment makes it more memorable.

How would you define your own objectives? Which takes precedence?

I think content is the urgency but you should carry it in a case that is readable and interesting. Also one that enables the reader to make connections that pure narrative cannot. So I think one would need both.

If you had the choice, would you have written in Sinhala or Tamil?

No. I am not really as fluent as I should be in either. But I think I prefer to try to deal with the sort of political issue that would be more difficult to get across in Sinhala.

So despite the fact that the language is a colonial inheritance, you feel that

there are advantages to using the language.

Yes, and I think we have gone past complaining about the colonial heritage. Now we find that the average Sri Lankan from a rural background is keen to learn English because it is the international language. I think also the metaphors we try to introduce are colonial ones. English can become a Sri Lankan language just as it is now recognized as a Caribbean or Indian language.

If one looks at your fiction together with your critical writing on the politics of Sri Lanka, one name that occurs much more than the others is the former president, J R Jayawardene. Have you targeted him more than others? There were lots of politicians making mistakes, but he is singled out for a lot of attack in both your fiction and your study of Sri Lankan politics. Why single out one person?

I think he was totally responsible for what happened. My approach to the rest of the ministers is that I consider them all guilty but I think I would be prepared to accept a statement of regret that any of them would indulge in. I am not blind to the fact that they played along with J R for their personal advantage, but he was an extraordinary figure and a very powerful character and because of his age—he was centuries older than his closest associates—and his experience in politics, he was thoroughly looked up to and he got away with murder. I think he corrupted the rest of them. My personal belief is that all the second-rank players, if they had been ministers under another President, would not have turned quite so nasty or vicious. In that sense I hold J R totally responsible for what happened. His whole approach to the Tamil question was wrong. J R is a deeply racist figure.

We actually didn't get around to talking about the short stories. They have a strong political undertone but they are also very different. They are more realistic in form and content, humorous, anecdotal and nostalgic. I was puzzled by that shift. For instance, the distance from Days of Despair *to "Lady Hippopotamus" was striking. Was that for a different audience, or did you have something else in mind?*

"Lady Hippopotamus" was written in 1983 before the riots. It was the period of innocence, if you like. The first three stories in the collection were early ones before the realities of politics took hold of me. And I don't know if I would be able to write like that again. But some of the other short stories which are much later are different.

What future directions do you have in mind?

I have brought out a book of travel essays. There is also the third novel

in the trilogy. I am working on a fictional memoir which is really an account of family structures and relationships that could be construed as feudal. I bring in a lot of extended family and I have done five short episodes so far and I am hoping to include another ten or fifteen. A couple of them have been published already in *Channels*, a writer's cooperative magazine.

Could you comment on the journal you edit?

I edited the *New Lankan Review* for eight years which I began with Richard de Soyza. And then I stopped partly because by then we had set up an English Writers Cooperative which brings out a biannual journal. The editorship is rotated. We have had ten issues so far edited by ten different people. It has been a superb initiative because it has allowed everyone to participate.

Is your ESL teaching a way of bringing together the various ethnic groups in the country?

Perhaps. The program has been very successful where there are both Sinhalese and Tamil students. They have to talk to each other in English.

Epilogue

The book is about the possibility of forging connections among different authors, about the need for a theoretical matrix to unify disparate texts, in spite of the inevitable and anticipated interruptions, some caused by authors who stubbornly refuse to accept convenient classifications and others occasioned by the logic of an argument that is as much centripetal as it is open-ended. Ethnographic or spatial connections are probably the easiest ones to establish, simply because all the authors in the book do trace at least a part of their ancestry to India, but these are also probably the weakest bases for an inclusive taxonomy. A more abstract and attractive reasoning might suggest that all these writers, at some subconscious level, share similar cultural assumptions, ones that are evident in their use of language, form or myth. Wilson Harris strongly argues for such a cross-cultural approach in his impressive critical study entitled *The Womb of Space* (Greenwood Press, 1983) and his argument remains a viable one, provided we choose our texts and our methodology carefully. Here again Tariq Ali's *Redemption*, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*, Zulfikar Ghose's *Don Bueno* and Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* are likely to prove recalcitrant texts that threaten to subvert the homogeneity suggested by a cross-cultural imagination. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that it is precisely these texts, which connect in abstruse ways, that prove the viability of a paradigm based on a theory of origins. All the authors in the book keep returning to a relatively small number of significant themes, which include race, identity, sexual politics, nationalism and exile. If this is a consequence of being sensitive to contemporary concerns rather than belonging to a South Asian ancestry, then again the South Asian label becomes a tenuous one. It is likely that most contemporary authors are in fact preoccupied with such issues. Perhaps the mode, the imagery and the sensibility that shape these themes suggest an identifiable South Asian quality in the writing. If, for instance, Satendra Nandan, Suniti Namjoshi and Rajiva Wijesinha are all sensitive

to Indian myth, despite the significant differences in their thematic concerns, then critical practice probably needs to look closely at the categories it establishes to interpret texts. While critical stances that insist on "national" or "universal" models are no less important, these similarities do serve as a reminder that alternative approaches should not be ignored as less legitimate or unworthy of serious attention.

The objective of this book was, however, a straightforward one. It was to test the significance of writing in English in the context of dispersal, of migration over a period of time to lands where the transported culture was accepted, celebrated, ignored or scorned. It was also to observe the transformations and continuities caused by the vicissitudes of history. In some countries a hyphenated identity, such as in Fiji, reflects a deep-seated antagonism between communities and the predominance of politics in writing. In Sri Lanka, the Indian connection is referred to in order to establish differences, and that has led to the irony of creating foundational myths that deny a common ancestry. Caribbean writers living in England or in Canada reveal a doubling or a palimpsest as multiple influences converge in their writing. The choice of contemporary authors from seven countries was an attempt to offer the possibility of a broadly cultural model that, despite its spatial connotations, transcends traditional national boundaries and stops short of global categories. Thus the book occupies a middle ground between the narrowness of, say, nation-oriented terms such as Sri Lankan writing and more ideologically motivated labels like postcolonial literature.

Inevitably, a selection such as this one can never be complete or comprehensive. One is always left with a nagging sense that other writers may have provided different insights. Adam Zameenzad might have commented on the political scene in Pakistan. Hanif Kureishi, for example, could have discussed the predicament of being born and raised in England, although with the consciousness of an Indian lineage. Bharati Mukherjee's contention that expatriation is not a homogeneous category and that Canada and the United States differ significantly in their attitudes to immigrants might have led to a very different sense of how one approaches South Asian writing. Perhaps even a writer like V S Naipaul would have been a useful addition, for he might have shown why these categories are less important than one that foregrounds a British or Western norm.

At best the collection serves as a sampling of authors who work within very different contexts and whose works reveal a rich diversity, but who are conscious of and responsive to historical and cultural origins. Their

work can hardly be contained within the label "South Asian" but to deny the validity of such a taxonomy would also be to ignore constitutive aspects of their writing, and to miss the rich ambivalence of a body of literature that suggests regional affiliations but has less to do with nations than with inherited cultures and shared assumptions.

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Jean Arasanayagam, 1995

Kirpal Singh

Chelva Kanaganayakam with Satendra Nandan

Satendra Nandan with his former student Vikram Seth (1994)

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Suniti Namjoshi

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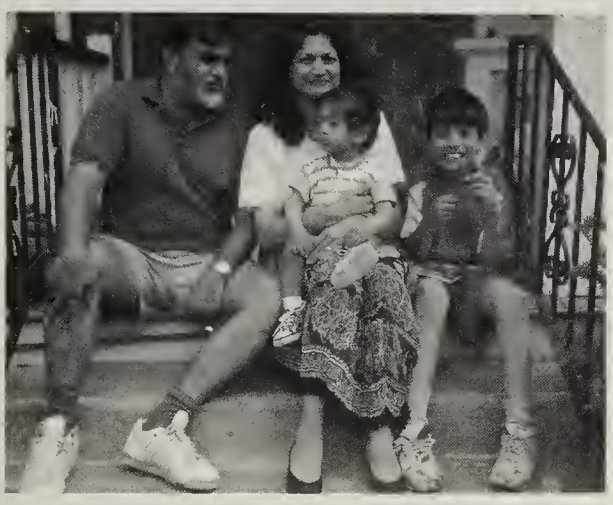
Shashi Tharoor with wife Tilottama, and twin sons Ishan and Kanishk (1994)



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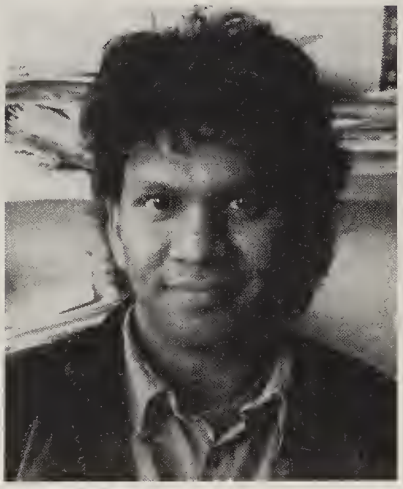

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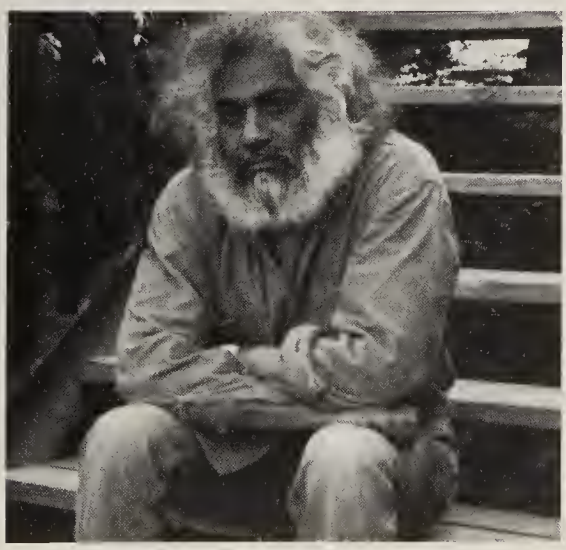

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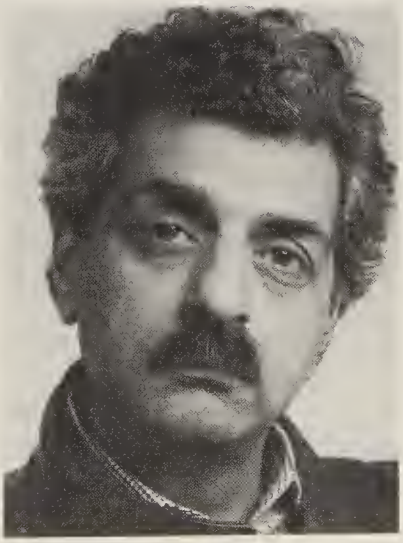

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Toronto author Chelva Kanaganayakam seeks out 12 of today's most prominent South Asian writers across the globe: from Colombo (Sri Lanka) to New York, London to Sydney (Australia), Singapore to Toronto, who talk candidly about their life and work. In his turn, Kanaganayakam complements the picture by revealing the salient features behind the works, and the media, critical and public responses. What emerges is a fuller, insightful and sometimes surprising picture of some ot today's most important and prolific transnational writers in their self-created world.

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