

A talk with David Dabydeen

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Q.: Is it possible to discuss black writers or black characters in fiction without considering racism?

D.D.: Unfortunately no, because the sort of social circumstances and contexts in which black writers operate are charged with race. I said «unfortunately» because V.S. Naipaul¹ once wrote that race is not a great enough theme for literature, or words to that effect, I might be misquoting him. I think what he was trying to say is that just to write about race is to be reductionist; it is limiting your art to a singular, monolithic experience, so while the white society in which you live might impress certain racial marks upon you, nevertheless, the burden on the black writer is to transcend those designations or categories. Which means, ultimately, writing *out of* experience rather than *from* experience. This can be extremely difficult, but in some ways it can be deeply liberating because then you are writing purely imaginatively, you have as your subject a purely imaginative one. That could be a real liberation, a real emancipation in a sense, maybe the final emancipation. The first emancipation was in 1833² and that was, if you like, a physical and social emancipation. Now perhaps a psychic emancipation has to come about if we are to be really and genuinely post-Columbian. Writers like Wilson Harris³ have been arguing this for years, that we can't be trapped in hurts and history; even though white society defines us with false historicism we have to somehow transcend, rewrite, revise. Those are the challenges: imaginative liberation, liberation of the imagination. The negatives of course are that you can't cease

1. V.S. Naipaul, who was born in Trinidad in 1932, has published over twenty books of fiction and non-fiction. In 1993 he was awarded the first David Cohen British Literature Prize, the most valuable literary award in the UK, which is given in recognition of a lifetime's achievement.
2. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834, but it was not until August 1, 1838, that the last imperial serfs, nearly all black Africans, were officially emancipated.
3. Wilson Harris is a Guyanese writer and critic. C.L.R. James, who died in 1989, was a leading Trinidadian novelist and Marxist intellectual. Edward Kamau Brathwaite is a Barbadian poet.

to be what you are because at the end of the day you are your despised colour, you are your despised appearance as well. And you don't really want to abandon responsibility to certain ethnic experiences, because if you don't write them, who will?

Q.: *Doesn't all this mean though that you're all jumbled up inside, that you are never certain of who you are?*

D.D.: Well, let me just think about this for a minute. You see, C.L.R. James, who was one of our writers and intellectuals, wrote that we West Indians are creatures of our colonial inheritance in that we were made and manufactured in Europe by the Europeans. Other writers like Edward Brathwaite have argued a kind of native position which is that we retained our Indianness or our Africanness and those qualities went through profound modifications and hybridizations, which resulted in what is called the New World person. What we should be looking at are the processes of transformation and creolization that created this new state, this New World person and not keep emphasizing the European ingredient. In fact what we should start considering are the ways in which contact with Africa and India altered the European psyche profoundly—in other words, the impact we made in creolizing them, exciting them, teaching them, re-making them, liberating them from strictures of form, language, aesthetics, and so forth. I hardly need to mention our influence on Stravinsky, Picasso, Modigliani, D.H. Lawrence, and modernism and post-modernism in general.

Q.: *Your second novel, Disappearance⁴, is set in the English countryside and has an Englishwoman who in her passionate intensity seems almost a creole character. Why did you write about the countryside?*

D.D.: When ex-colonial writers deal with England, they are terrified of confronting the English landscape, the English rural landscape and so the bulk of writing is set in cities. No black writer, apart from Naipaul, has ever dealt intimately with the English rural landscape, with village life and this is because the English landscape is an archetype of the English identity and we are still made to feel that we are immigrants and therefore outsiders. It's interesting to note that in Naipaul's novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) he cannot look at the Wiltshire landscape except through the eyes of Constable and Wordsworth. When he sees a character moving about the landscape, he automatically thinks of Wordsworth's leech gatherer. We still have not got away from being trapped in the allusions that have been inherited, the European allusions especially. Our identities are so fluid that I think you can say we are made of a set of allusions. We echo Europe, we echo India, we echo Africa. We are just like one of T.S. Eliot's allusions in *The Waste Land*. I don't have the sense of being *rooted* in England's rural landscape, but I have a sense of being able to

4. *Disappearance* (Secker & Warburg, 1993).

describe that landscape, like Naipaul, through Constable and the Romanticists. Although I can't yet *live* the rural experience, I can *describe* it, or imagine it. The real change in England will come about only when we actually begin to live in its cottages and add a dash of «blackness» to the «greenery and pleasantry».

Q.: Hostility towards blacks can be traced back to Elizabethan times. Would you agree that fear and distrust of blacks is an innate characteristic of the white British? Would you agree that it is something that lies dormant for, maybe, generations, but will at a particular time, burst out?

D.D.: I think that demonology about blacks in the English imagination has replaced the demonology about wild men. I think the Negro replaced the [medieval] green man, the black man replaced the green knight if you like. It was green and then it was black. A whole empire was centred around this demonology, and the black has remained the symbol of darkness and disorder in the English psyche up to today. There seems to be a need in England for recognition and description of the Other, of that which is not yourself and yet, at the same time, that which is the deepest echo and reflection of yourself. The black man has satisfied that need for the description and recognition of the Other. I think of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when Marlowe, describing the blacks in the bush, said that the horrible thing when they danced and yelped, was that they were not different, that they were ourselves, they were reflections of ourselves and that *that* was the horror. Blacks in the bush were our (and by «our» I mean English) capacity for obscenity and for a kind of a revelry and carnival that were not permitted here. So it seems to me that the white encounter with blackness was a way of the whites' transgressing all the boundaries (Victorian, Edwardian or whatever), that circumscribe their own existence. These are sexual boundaries, mostly. I think there was a kind of release into a world of lasciviousness that was not permitted. It was Conrad's phrase «going beyond the boundaries of permitted aspiration». I think Africa and blacks, paradoxically, allowed the liberation of the white imagination, whilst the blacks themselves were being incarcerated in baracoons and slaveships and plantations.

Q.: If we consider that in Britain today roughly ten percent of the population belong to, what we might call, a cultured elite and that among this ten percent non-whites are underrepresented, how do you feel about belonging to this elite?

D.D.: I'd say that I quite enjoy the ironies of having been definitely invited to join the white elite, in that through a university like Warwick, which is an English institution, you gain access to other English institutions and you think that this is a beginning of a new movement in England towards a kind of egalitarian society. Or is it that you are just being drafted in to add colour to panels or colour to boards and committees? You are never quite sure at any one moment whether there is a deep liberalism in the society in which you live, whether it is just a masquerade of liberalism. This is exactly

why the British Empire lasted for 400 years and it outlasted other empires, because the British were Janus figures. They were able to show a deep decency in a sense of justice —there were white colonial figures who were radical in the context of their own times, concerned, Christian, compassionate and yet, there were other aspects of the colonial experience that was brutal and brutish. Sometimes that brutishness emanated from those very Christian gentlemen and gentlewomen, so I think the poor native was totally confused and didn't know whether to have a reverence and respect the decent foreigner who at other times exhibited a dumb brutality. Why the Empire lasted for so long was because, as colonized people, we could not resolve the contradictions in the British character. Today you are constantly being pulled in two directions in terms of your attitudes towards England. You recognize a genuine liberalism in society and at the same time you come up against all kinds of manic and depressive violence. It may well be that that kind of schizophrenic experience has impeded radical action on the part of the black community. We really ought to have blasted the place apart by now, don't you think, after the centuries of treating us as niggers? Poor Enoch Powell and his unfulfilled prophecy of the Tiber-Thames foaming with racial blood!⁵ To be serious, though, we don't kill white people because we are human and we recognize their own humanity. The greatest gift we can give white people is a sense of their own humanity.

Q.: Would you agree that being British today has changed dramatically to being British thirty or forty years ago, that now it seems that the periphery is taking over from the centre?

D.D.: The first thing we ought to do is to get rid of these critical terms like «centre» and «periphery» because the more we use them, even though we claim to be using them with a degree of subversion, what we are really doing is to concretize them, legitimize them. The centre has always been peripheral in a way, because if you look at the colonial conquest of India, it was deeply superficial, if I can put it like that. Values from the centre, if the centre was England, the colonial power, had minimal impact on Indian culture, on the Indian imagination. Today, the great writers of India are not those who write in English, the great writers of India are those who write in their own languages and remain deeply inaccessible to the English, as the English have to make an effort to understand them. Most people don't speak the English language in India; things go on as they have always gone on, they go on in an Indian way. So the centre was peripheral even though the centre likes to think that it had conquered the globe. It just scratched the surface of, in this case, Indian culture. On the other hand, you could argue that

5. Dabydeen is referring to former Conservative MP Enoch Powell's highly inflammatory speech made in April 1968, in which he foresaw great evil befalling on Britain unless black people from the former colonies were barred entry into the country.

the periphery, which was India in this case, had a tremendous impact on the English. The English started building, creating architecture, like the Brighton Pavilion, that was influenced by Indian forms. They started setting up at Oxford and Cambridge schools for Sanskrit studies, Eastern religious studies, and so on. You could argue that you could not have got a writer like Laurence Sterne with that sort of saga-like way of writing, digressions all over the place, coming back to the core narrative, and digressions again, unless Sterne had possibly encountered something of Indian stories, and ways of telling Indian stories. Even today India is a hallowed destination for the English traveller. So you could argue that England, the centre, was more affected by the periphery, that the periphery was more centred than England and that the centre, England, was more peripheral in India. At the end of the day though we just have to get rid of these distinctions which merely fuel an immature rivalry and competitiveness. We should avoid simplistic and hateful rivalries. Certainly some of the best writing in England now is being done by people who have a colonial background but these authors don't write out of vengeance. Of course there is that nice sense of retaliation in, for example, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*⁶, where he takes a kind of quintessential English symbol, the butler, and slowly reveals all kinds of fascism that lie beneath this surface of servility. But Ishiguro writes with such restraint and grace that after a while you marvel at the style and form of his novel rather than at its retaliatory content. At the end of the day he is a writer and has married art and polemics with supreme ease. The real retaliation therefore is in his command of English prose.

Q.: It appears that the differences separating the West from the so-called Third World are increasing instead of diminishing. The West has knocked down the Berlin Wall but has built another «European» or «Western» Wall in its place. This «wall» represents an unsurmountable barrier, getting higher and higher all the time. Would you agree that East and West or North and South have never been so far apart as they are now?

D.D.: You mean the Kipling cliché that «never the twain shall meet». I think that the main barrier is no longer a cultural barrier, in the sense that texts and people who construct or write those texts are becoming more accessible. Writers travel all over the world and can be made accessible to different language groups. There is no longer a kind of cultural arrogance associated with writing in English, unless, say, people in India want to believe that somehow their writing in native languages is inferior. That's their business, to me that's their failure if they believe that. I think that the wall is no longer a cultural one, since our literature is increasingly being received in Western societies. I am being optimistic of course, for the sake of my own sales. The

6. *The remains of the day* (Faber & Faber, 1989).

barrier is definitely economic and ecological. I mean the West is slowly destroying not just large parts of the planet, those parts that are specifically in the Third World by a kind of an indiscriminate, almost a brutish use, of resources. America produces nearly a third of the carbon dioxide that threatens the globe. That is shameful. I mean what is it - they breathe more deeply, they breathe more heavily than the rest of us or what? I'm sure they consume most of the oxygen as well! So they just consume, they just waste, don't they, and all the stuff that they waste comes from resources in the Third World. So we are slowly poisoning and destroying the Third World, ecologically. There's drought and famine, and all those phenomena: climatic changes that threaten the very existence of certain islands and certain countries. I mean Guyana, where I come from, is below sea level and if the ocean rises another few inches, that's the end of Guyana, never mind Guyanese literature. We'd have to be writing from boats! And the writing's bound to be up and down, you know with the waves!! The West will find all sorts of stupendous technological ways of survival: they build Thames barriers, they'll build pyramids of technology to save themselves. Economically of course the fact is that we still bleed the Third World. There's more money coming in from debt repayments into the West than there's going out in terms of new loans. That's taking from poor people, it's as simple as that. Every year, I've forgotten how many billions, come in from debt repayment, and how many billions go out in loans. There's more billions coming in than going out in loans. That's just robbing the poor. It's like mugging a beggar, the next day you give him ten pence or whatever, a couple of dollars, to bandage his wounds, and then you mug him again! They talk about the blacks in Western societies being the muggers, blackness in this country is associated with mugging, but the mugging is much more unobtrusive than snatching an old woman's handbag, it's very unobtrusive, it's just the banks grabbing chunks of rain forest, and chunks of people's hard-earned foreign exports.

Q.: Is it still a sign of success for a «Third World» writer writing in English to become a «name» in Britain?

D.D.: It's unfortunately true, an Indian writer in India tends to be more known when he or she is legitimized by the West, legitimized in terms of critical receptivity, and I think that this is still one of the shameful legacies of colonialism that we slowly have to purge ourselves of. However, having said that, it's good to be read by anybody, it's a privilege to be read, so that if more people are reading you in England, than are reading you, in my case, Guyana, for whatever reason, (the main reason being economic, they can't afford the books in Guyana, and we don't have the publishing systems to produce very cheap books for markets that can only afford books at that price), as an individual, I'm still glad to be read, and to receive royalties that accrue from that. So whilst your question has a wide political dimension, I think the individual writer has to get on with the business of writing and being read whoever reads you.

Q.: In your novel *The Intended*⁷ why is the main character so enamoured of Englishness?

D.D.: I wanted to show how that character misrepresents what England is by taking on official English definitions of themselves. The English define themselves in terms of a heritage of language, a very glorious heritage of achievement, of elegance, of order, of civilization. This black character who wants to be English, gravitates towards the myth of England rather than trying to seek out the reality of England. I wanted to write about a black character trapped in myth, because it seems to me that most of the white characters in fiction written in the colonial period, by Buchan, Henty, Ballantyne⁸ and so on, those white characters are trapped in myth, about what Africa is, and what India is, and what they themselves are in terms of being English, so really I just wanted to show how that process of myth-making, is still relevant in England today, and to make that myth-making the business of this particular black character. I find him very infuriating myself because what he does have, being an outsider, is a romantic sense of what England should have been, how it should have lived up to its images. I think he wants to recover nobility in England, he doesn't want to see England in terms of what it is today, the violence and disorder and discrimination and sexual violence. He wants to see England as a place of order and civil values and common decencies. I thought it was rather poignant that he is trapped in the myth of England that the English never believed in because if they believed it in previous centuries they wouldn't have gone out and colonized in the ways that they did. They would have gone out and given Shakespeare and Milton and the best of England to other people. The best of England only arrived in the Caribbean in spite of the English. I think you'll find that the best of English literature was actually taken in spite of the colonial powers-that-be. The people from the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office were not interested in taking the best of England, they were just interested in taking the money. They were interested in the East India Company and the Royal African Company. Shakespeare and the Bible only got to the Caribbean because of individual acts by eccentric Englishmen who actually believed in English values. Or else it was very important to provide a justification for colonial robbery and justifications lay in the sense of England's glory and in a sense of responsibility towards the «dark races». So Shakespeare and Milton were then taken over as part of the imperial process. Anyway, coming back to *The Intended*, the protagonist's black friends say to him «You're only a coon in the end, don't think that Oxford will give you anything». So there's this kind of chorus of satanic voices, a litany of satanic voices off-stage that keep

7. *The Intended* (Secker & Warburg, 1991).

8. G.A. Henty, John Buchan and R.M. Ballantyne are examples of what might be called «writers of the Empire» as their novels, written during the second half of the nineteenth century or in the early part of the twentieth, tend to portray black characters rather unfavourably, and at the same time insist on the racial superiority of the whites.

undercutting his desire to be proper, to be a proper Englishman. I was interested in the comedy of the clash between this litany of satanic voices and his own public voice (pronouncements about the beauty of England) and his own private voice which actually tells him that he is being silly.

Q.: *Is Patel*⁹ *right when he says that «All they [the British] have over us is money»?*

D.D.: I would say that the saddest thing about England as opposed to other places in Europe I visit is you get a sense of an absence of rich culture. There is culture but it can strike you in your more ungenerous mood as being philistine culture. People hardly read, people hardly sing, even in churches people don't sing, they don't celebrate, there's no joy. When I go to Italy, the culture is apparent in the architecture, the culture is apparent in the food. I just think that after twenty years of living in England I'd have to say that it's philistine compared to the rest of Europe, and I also I have to say that the English are very proud of this philistinism, the fact they have access to no other language but English and even then only a «half-English», because most people in this country can't speak English. They speak a kind of mangled «half-English» which means that they can't express themselves, a kind of yob English, you know, it's «Chelsea, Chelsea, Chelsea», it's a kind of primitive chant. So there is a kind of paganism in this society which I find, not disquieting, but terrifying. Whenever you confront the pagan it is terrifying, these chants at football matches, this yob language on public transport, this subcultural violence. The lower orders do as much violence to language as the BBC one did. Even when they curse you racially they do it in a yob language, all grunts and gutturals. I don't mind being cursed but sometimes I wish they would curse me grammatically or in felicitous language. You get a sense of living in an inarticulate community rather than in a community of language. The British Asians speak four or five languages, and inevitably are bringing a richness to the country and they bring religion and they bring God back into England. Nobody gave a toss about God before. You opened the papers and they would be writing that Jesus was a homosexual or Mary was the mistress of Pontius Pilate, and nobody cared, but the Muslims care about spiritual life. So apart from bringing ancient languages into the society, they have brought spirituality into the society, they have brought morality into the society. Margaret Thatcher talked about a return to Victorian values. Well, all these things that we talk about in our public political discourse, like family values, language values, spiritual values are what the Asians are reintroducing in society, so if England is philistine, the way out is to listen to what the Asians are saying and finding out who they are. Asians can be as narrow-minded and cash-orientated as any one else, but they also come bearing richer gifts.

9. Patel is one of the Asian friends of the nameless narrator of *The Intended*. He continually reminds the narrator of his debt to the black, rather than the white, community.