

## **The Dance of Light and Shadow**

**By Lakshmi Persaud**

*(Slide: Themes)*

Colleagues, Friends. Children of the Caribbean, Ladies and Gentlemen

I must first congratulate the Vice-Chancellor of this thriving University, Prof Floud; its Chief executive, Brian Roper; the Caribbean Studies Centre, and the resourceful Professor Clem Seecheran of this University and Centre for arranging a Black History Month public lecture.

I express my appreciation for being asked to do this lecture.

Content for multicultural studies requires scholars and writers with appropriate background and experiences. Those who sponsor lectures which give encouragement and exposure to such scholars deserve much credit.

This evening I would like to talk to you about a few of the themes which recur in my novels and why they are important to me. These will be explored by my readings from the novels and will be placed in a vase which I shall call the mysteries of writing i.e. the inexplicable nature of writers and their writings.

*(Slide 1: Transition. Transition from Youth, from childhood, from Innocence)*

I wish to start with all our beginnings, for we all began with innocence. At present I am looking at the varying shades of innocence i.e. innocence as ignorance, as opposed to understanding and knowledge; Innocence as naivety, as opposed to the wisdom that comes with experience. And finally, Innocence as complete trust as opposed to being guarded and cautious.

The citizens of many newly independent countries were innocent in all its shades. They offered a child-like trust to their politicians who ruthlessly abused it, and in not understanding the nature of power, nor the mechanism of governance, these citizens, willingly handed over their human rights and in many instances that included their right to life itself.

The length and complexity of the road, that innocence, naivety, and child-like trust must travel, before maturity and wisdom comes, I now propose to show. How fragile are our beginnings, how ignorant of life we are when we are born.

*In this reading* from my first novel, *Butterfly in the Wind*, here is a young girl doing her homework while listening in to a conversation her grandmother is having with two other women in the next room. Here Kamla, the protagonist in the novel **Butterfly in the Wind** speaks:

*The Readings are taken from Butterfly in the wind page 21-22.*

*(Slide2: The Abuse of Power)*

I would have preferred not to choose this theme, but the current state of countries and institutions gives me little choice.

The abuse of power is nothing new. Its wide prevalence has led me to suspect that it came into being when life itself was born.

In the developed world, with its deepening democracy--- vibrant and healthy --- the excesses of the powerful are reigned in, however, at the international level where such national controls, checks and balances are not yet established, one recently saw the contempt of the powerful. The Bush administration can say to the United Nations that it is irrelevant. Not wishing this family of nations to remain out in the cold, the administration kindly offers it a criterion for relevancy. You could either continue to being a debating society, it states or become relevant by endorsing Washington's plans for invading Iraq.

*The Abuse of Power* I saw as a child, sadly, continues today in our homes, schools, at work, in our prisons, mental hospitals, in the army, the police force and other institutions. I recall I was no more than nine at the time, when I experienced for the first time an understanding of an abuse of power so vast that it swallowed the North and South Americas that were once there. I was returning home from the cinema. It was a cowboy and 'Red Indian' film. I was just about to cross the railway line when suddenly a flash of insight struck me, and this gigantic wave of light cleared my thinking of all the clever spinning of conquerors and discoverers.

And then it was that I saw for the very first time that the people who lived there, referred to as Red Indians, were not savages, as western films were portraying them but as men and women, trying to defend their homes, their land, a way of life, their thinking, from the plunder and savagery of a war-like people from overseas with weapons of mass destruction of the time.

This decimation of a culture and its people and their history is called, and to our shame we refer to it as, the discovery of America or the opening of the West.

In this reading from the novel *'For the Love of my Name*, see the sophisticated spin in a developing country. See a politician's camouflage, how skilfully he makes cheating at the polls respectable, how he turns democracy, into a fool's game, showing a contempt for democratic elections and yet captivates his audience. Why this is, and continues to be so in places, gives us much to reflect upon. The Reading is taken from the novel **For the Love of My Name**. Here a Dictator speaks candidly to us.

*Reading from 'For the love of my Name' page 191 - Games played.*

*(Slide 3: Courage - The Defiance of Fear)*

This brings me to the next theme: The Courage of the Powerless. Defying Fear. When power is usurped and abused, the only hope lies in the courage and defiance of the common people.

I have opened this theme to find there are two halves to it: ***The courage of the powerless, their defiance of the powerful, is one half and the other is the enormous human Cost of that defiance. I shall look more closely only at the first half.***

***Defiance and courage:** I have always admired the courage of individuals who defy powerful systems, who defy a whole machinery of thought born from the womb of Empire and Imperialism. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and many others who sacrificed themselves to defying fear, that understandable fear of an overwhelming, ruthless power that sought to reduce their worth.*

*India was the first non- European country in the British Empire, to free itself. It provided a beacon light to ships seeking a passage to betterment.*

*Here a father speaks to his daughter who later joins other school children on a celebratory march.*

*Reading from Butterfly in the Wind pages 185-186*

*(Slide 4: My next theme is Remembrance. Acknowledging, giving thanks to the beautiful, the magnificent and path breaking contribution of ancient civilisations, that gave us the firm fine foundations of our present progress)*

The continuity of the development of human knowledge is far too often forgotten and we are made to believe that civilisation itself and all that it entails is Western in origin and in greatness. We forget that our present understanding and exploration are only possible because of the contribution of the ancient civilisations. And it is here that we find some of the most beautiful and powerful, of man's imaginative concepts.

I refer to the ancients' contributions to the fields of mathematics, language medicine and philosophical thought.

I refer to their capturing the 27 or more distinct passing sounds of the human voice and attaching a symbol and meaning to it, that is so simple that all homo sapiens can become ancient Mandarins i.e. literate, making it possible, for us to capture our present and prevent what has been learnt and discovered from being lost to the generation to come. These were far seeing men and women. **It was the beginning of democracy, of individualism.** It enabled us all to send our innermost thoughts far and wide.

And let us not forget that other giant invention of the ancients: Numbers as we use them today; the simplicity and power of the invention of Zero, the decimal system, complete with that insignificant looking, but substantial in its stance ---the decimal point; and there is also algebra , the very basis of calculus, so opening venues to complex formulae, that so empowered space explorations, probes into distances and environments alien to us. and equally important the fields of questioning our very being; of life itself—i.e. the realm of philosophy and what is referred to as the great religions of the World came from their meditation, their thinking.

I cannot leave this theme without referring to the magnificent way of thinking that comes from a mature and wise civilisation that enables a Man dela, wrongly imprisoned for most of his life by a demeaning regime, not to seek revenge , not to speak of hunting down the evil, that took away the prime of his life, but instead, to return a statesman, to lead a warm, generous and affectionate people.

*The Readings are taken from the Novel Sastra pages 24, 25, 26. Here we see a father, Surinder, teaching his three year old to write the letters of the alphabet. Let us see how he goes about it.*

*(Slide 5: The Mysteries of Writers and Writing)*

**It is time to look into the vase holding these flowering themes.**

### **Mysteries of writers and writing**

The central mystery of writing is that writers do not understand the life beat of their work and so are not in control of the process. There are many aspects of their art they cannot explain. Listen to this. Haruki Murakami in 1997 speaking about himself:

‘When I write I write weird.’ I write weird stories. I don’t know why I like weirdness so much. I’m a very realistic person. I don’t trust anything New Age or reincarnation, dreams, tarot, horoscopes. I don’t trust anything like that at all. I wake up at six in the morning and go to bed at ten, jogging every day and swimming, eating, healthy foods. I’m very realistic. But when I write, I write weird.’

In an attempt to explain the mystery of writing, why we all look but see differently Marcel Proust says, ‘The truth of art lies not in the object but in the mind.’

*(Slide 6: Loyalty)*

**The next theme is loyalty, the nature of loyalty.** Loyalty has two faces. A simple face and a fractured, Picasso-like one. The simple face of loyalty is shown when it adheres to the decent thing, i.e. what is morally correct.

The fractured face of loyalty. is skewed. Its visage, a grimace. This is a loyalty based on colour, class, caste, culture, nationality, race and religion.

A strong unswerving loyalty to these, when practised either in the developed or developing countries leads to the destruction of what is worthy in life. This skewed loyalty perpetuates some of the great human tragedies of mankind. I think of the Church's silence for generations on its paedophile priests, the tragedy of Rwanda; Guyana, the life taking gun culture allowed to grow in Jamaica and the harrowing kidnapping that is presently taking place, largely with impunity in Trinidad and Guyana, destroying many of its citizens and which if allowed to continue much longer would destroy the very fabric of that society. No family will like to be living in a place where their Governments have known for quite some time now, that the only choice the kidnapers open to them is, either having a member of their family murdered, or be robbed of their entire life's savings. To whom are the custodians of these societies loyal?

Nevertheless you and I are aware that the loyalty that demeans humanity, vibrates in every continent with a primeval energy Why?

*Readings are taken from For the Love of my Name, page 106, The Nature of loyalty*

*(Slide 7: Maturity versus Youth)*

**My next theme is: The Attainment of Maturity. What is the fabric of Maturity? How is it attained?**

Maturity is a beautiful thing. Let me be candid. It is not synonymous with age and so does not come automatically with time. Maturity has to be earned. It is the wisdom that accrues from having lived a thoughtful life through the many seasons of the human condition ---its birth and growth, its hopes, sorrows and joys.

Yet strangely in cruel times, in times when survival is difficult, you can find maturity in a child and, it is a wonderful thing. Maturity has insight, acts speedily if it must, and courageously in the face of danger. I lived in Jamaica for four years and whenever I think of the beauty of its varied landscape, I recall a strong and vigorous clump of bamboo, that was before my window, bending low, its branches dragged in the mud by cutting wind and pelting rain and destructive hurricanes, then, later, slowly, quietly when the storm is over, lifting itself with its inherent buoyancy, standing tall, waving to passers-by, welcoming butterflies. It has not been uprooted. This is the very essence of maturity.

In this reading you hear the innermost thoughts of a young woman having faced the death of her husband and struggled with the up bringing of two young children, you hear her new resolve to close her period of mourning and re-enter life again, to build anew the joys of living.

It is the weave of maturity.

The reading begins as she enters an empty house believing her husband's spirit to be there searching for her. It is the house in which he died.

*The reading is taken from the novel Sastra: page 268-269*

*(Slide 8: Untying an ancient conundrum)*

**Now for adding cool water into the vase that holds the stems of these themes.**



I have written, and years later looking at the work, I am not only detached from it, but happy that the book has left me and has a life of its own. There is another inexplicable thing. From time to time to my consternation, I find that I have written something I had no intention of writing when I sat down to write. And yet, there it is on the page.

So, what is writing? Marcel Proust explains: ‘A very slight degree of self-acquaintance teaches us that a book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices.’

If that is so, why is it so? What then of the mystery of writing? Will it remain? I think for the time being it will, for Art springs from the human mind, which remains a great unknown. Our understanding of it, is yet too undeveloped, the subject of the mind too vast.

**And finally, to the last theme of the evening.**

*(Slide 9: Change - Travelling or standing still)*

**The theme of Change, the need for change, for re-thinking, re-evaluating re-assessing this theme** is strongly represented in all my novels.

My fourth novel ***Raise the Lanterns High*** will be published next year by Black Amber. The novel tells the tale of a young woman who on the very eve of her wedding, discovers by chance that her arranged marriage is to the rapist whose face she could not see at the time. She was but a schoolgirl then, a form two pupil cycling home, but on hearing the pleads, the stuttering anguish of a young girl, approaches quietly and sees through the curtain of razor sharp, sugar cane leaves. What she saw , remains, in her mind. What can she now do?

***In the novel, Raise the Lanterns High*** we hear her internal struggles and follows her into time past, as she gains from meeting three women facing the burning pyre to become suttees. The novel reveals the lives of women in different cultures and the immense courage it takes to defy or

to accept the tyranny that is more often than not woven seamlessly into the very fabric of the tradition into which they are born.

**Change**, but more particular, Social Change is painful and difficult to embrace. Many feel threatened by it. They fear their very identity would be negated were they to let go any aspect of their custom. And yet, in order to grow, we must become our own architect of change. From time to time we will need to make intimate adjustments to our thinking; living propels us in that direction.

We may have to put aside part of what we identify with, while adjusting to something outside our custom. In other words removing cultural impediments that stand in the way of self-realisation and fulfilment, but within a cultural evolutionary context, certainly, not root and branch change that negates our identity and so ourselves.

***The Readings are taken from the novel Sastra pages 83, 84 85***

Here is a character who manages this, though he lives in a racist society. Listens to his thoughts.

We have all grasped changes that have enriched our lives. Men first travelled on foot, then by horse and carriage; today we fly through the air.

Are aeroplanes simply the extension of the capabilities of the horse and carriage? Of Course not! Consider then the radical leap in thought, in understanding, that was necessary so that we may enjoy flight. Yet, when it comes to social flight, we are still at the horse and carriage stage which shows how difficult it is to make changes in our intimate thinking and how much more effort is required to free ourselves to a larger life.

As we celebrate Black history month let us be thoughtful that in spite of the persistence of racism and extreme cultural nationalism in some quarters, in this our new home there is a strong

underlying basic, liberal outlook, checks and balances and the rule of law, which allow progress forward towards a culturally enriched society. Let this be an example of how much more productive and beneficial our countries of origin can become were we to embrace the wisdom of the larger world.

As children from the Caribbean, we have come from small islands. our Nobel laureates Arthur Lewis, Derek Walcott and Vidya Naipaul have shown us that we need not allow our small island origins with all their inherent limitations and petty nationalism to prevent us from developing ourselves, further yet on the wider world stage.

This evening I have attempted to bring a few of the dancing flickering lights of human endeavour, its courage and innocence, our challenges and affection, one for another, as well as life's shadows, our griefs and traumas, our harrowing sufferings brought by the abuses of power, by men's loyalty to ugly, hateful, limiting ideas.

In these novels there are other themes like the joys of food and of family life and gender issues and yet more. You will find and see what I could not have brought to you this evening, time being our censor. But your own inclination and interest will assist you. in discovering them.

I write in order that I may understand a little better this whirl of time and space, in which I have my being. I write to better understand what it is to be human. Writing forces me to focus, to think It just may be that by writing I shall be brought closer to that wisdom gleaned by Shakespeare from his own observation of men, so that in the darkest of nights, when alone, I shall be, at ease with myself.

'To thine own self, be true, and it will follow as night the day, thou canst not then, be false, to any man.'

Ladies and Gentlemen I wish to thank you for being here. Thank you for listening.

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