

Interview with Lakshmi Persaud

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The Indian sensibility permeates all your works. You celebrate the Indian cultural inheritance in your novels. In your speech on the occasion of Trinidad's Indian Arrival Day, you have spoken of how this inherited culture and philosophy have contributed to the Trinidadian society. What other ties do you have with India?

The ties I have with India are deeply felt and would have begun at birth. The sounds and chants I heard as a baby, the aroma from the kitchen, were of Indian origin. The country from which my forefathers came offered me my name, the food I eat, the films I saw as a child with my mother, the pujas, kathas, birth, marriage and death ceremonies— these rites of passage of an individual— form part of my Indian inheritance. This attachment grew as I matured, partly because of my parents and grand-parents, partly because of the wide choices that Hinduism offers.

There are also strong 'invisible ties' with India, I refer to the philosophy of the Upanishads, and that of the great epics which seep into one's thinking imperceptibly from childhood. We had in our home, the biographies of Nehru and Gandhi which I read. Shivratri, Divali, Kartik kay Nahan and the spring festival of Holi, were all observed with fervour. The Moslems in Trinidad also celebrated the deaths of their martyrs, kept the faith and its traditions and built beautiful mosques.

My respect and regard for the religion, belief and culture of others also came from India, it is not surprising therefore that Hinduism, is not a proselytizing religion. What Hinduism offered my parents were tolerance, avoidance of violence, and a disposition to think and re-think, assess and re-assess continually. These they knew are the wheels of the carriage of progress. Added to this, I now see that what the Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen's observed of 'The Argumentative Indian' was also true for members of my extended family.

Have the contemporary Indian writers influenced you? If yes, please tell us in what ways.

The short answer is no. The people who have influenced me are those that were close to me: my parents, and now my husband and children.

I was also influenced by Aesop's fables and the stories from the great Indian epics, the bible, Eastern and Western philosophy, and the great men of our time, Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Martin Luther King, Mandela as well as the Suffragettes, Madam Curie, George Orwell and events as the English Peasant Revolt of 1381, and more recently the spirit of the common man that rose in the London march of many hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women, many in wheel chairs, others with their ailing elderly or with babies and young children who came out on that cold Saturday to say to a labour Government, "Do not invade Iraq."

Our great march, with placards raised high, was democracy working at its best, which is alas becoming a rare event even in democratic states, as governments are moving with speed to override many of our hard earned human rights, in order they say to protect us from terrorism a term that members of the United Nations cannot define.

Even when I was a child, the courage of the weak and the vulnerable, as they face enormous odds, to gain a place for themselves, moved me deeply; this has stayed with me over the years, for to my mind, it reveals the awesome magnificence of what humanity is.

You have been primarily concerned with the lot of the Indian women, especially with the question of education which is a major issue in Raise the Lanterns High. What are your views on Western Feminism?

The word feminism is a hornet's nest; I try to avoid its usage, for there are as many interpretations of it as there are strong, articulate, independent minded women. If women in the West continue to open doors that are presently closed to them, for example, bringing about equal pay for equal work at all levels of employment, this is a movement forward. In the upper echelons of all fields –the absence of women in the board rooms, and in consultant posts in the professions, are well known. There is much to be done even in the first world. It is not only women who are finding that it is almost impossible to crack the hard tortoise shell under which an exclusive 'white male culture' thrives happily

Having said that, to my mind, what we need urgently at this time in our history, is to think through a system at the work place that will enable women who wish to have a family and have a job comparable to their abilities, are able to do so without the excessive stresses and strains presently experienced by them. There are capable and able women, who would very much like to make a contribution to worlds, the domestic and the public. This is something their husbands have always done.

Do you think Western Feminism can be applied to the situation in the Third World?

Several countries from every continent form the Developing World; therefore the present place of women in these societies will vary between countries and within countries. However, feminism in the Developing World should mean giving women a wider choice of life styles, by improving the means by which they can effectively have equal opportunities to education as well as jobs outside the homes. Feminism will then be providing a ladder to women in the Developing World to attain a far greater fulfilment of their lives. In this process, they enrich their own lives and enhance those of others.

Before this is attained, in patriarchal societies with a strong sense of old traditions, parents may first have to begin to think that their daughters must be fed, and looked after in the same way as their sons, because their daughters too, can have worth outside the home, can become teachers and doctors. Much work is required to change old ways of thinking. Change must come quickly, for this large source of brain power, more complex and powerful than the finest computer, lies dormant in far too many daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts. This harmful social discrimination, is wasteful, is uneconomical. It has continued far too long and now, Wisdom cries out to Ignorance, "Let my daughters go."

What has been your experience as a migrant writer living in London?

Thirty five years ago, when I came to London with my family, I was struggling to know this vast metropolis, but after a while I could drive into Hyde Park at the height of the rush hour without fear. I have grown to love the city, its challenging theatre, its vast museums, very fine libraries that are user

friendly, its neat parks, lively canals and awe inspiring bridges, the amazing “London Eye” that enables you to see over the heads of tall buildings make it an exciting, thrilling place. Its cosmopolitan make up helps to make it less foreign to foreigners. This is seen in the choice of restaurants available, the varying dress codes of the people and the variety of sounds heard on a train, bus or on the pavement.

London is a city that is knowledge-based - a good thing for a writer. The central hub of what was once the British Empire provides today, a mine of information in its libraries and museums for researchers on Commonwealth countries.

Air travel, the telephone, the fax machine and the magic of the internet which opens books, journals and reports when asked, help the writer and assist in bringing the far away in place and time passed, closer. It is a good place for any writer.

What does being creative mean to you?

Being creative is the essence of the good life, of a life well lived. Mahatma Gandhi was creative, in getting the British to leave India, in the way he did. So did Mandela in a different time and in very different circumstances. Nehru was creative, in enabling the British to see that though an Independent India cannot be a member of the British Empire, it can be a member of a new concept—the Commonwealth. Such fine forms of creativity have long- term implications for the good.

In my ideal world, all my primary schools would enable children to be creative by giving them the appropriate incentives, the means, the time and the environment.

As you see from the examples I have given, there are varying kinds of creativity, most of us are engaged in one form or another .e.g. arranging flowers in a vase, preparing a delicious meal, designing a beautiful friendly hospital, where healing is encouraged by the lay out, the lines and space enclosed. Composers, designers of fine clothes, etc are all being creative. Business men, economists and traders too.

Being creative has encouraged me to be interested in all aspects of life, to have a better understanding of it, to be more patient as well as accommodating of behaviours I would have previously measured with a small jeweller’s scale of perfection and found them greatly wanting. Writing has helped me to begin to understand what it is to be human.

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