Afrindian Fictions

Rastogi, Pallavi

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Rastogi, Pallavi.
Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27851.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27851

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1144785
Interviews

I conducted the following interviews in South Africa in December 2005 and January 2006. I am extremely grateful to the writers for their hospitality and their time. The interviews have been edited for length. Any changes and omissions from the original, usually because the audio in the original transcript was unintelligible, have been made in parentheses or with the use of ellipses.

I hope the interviews foster the book’s project of listening to the unheard stories of South African Indians. I have included interviews with Aziz Hassim and Ronnie Govender, two very important South African Indian writers, whose work could not be studied in this project for reasons of space. The interviews with Hassim and Govender will serve as an introduction to their writing as well as give readers a fuller picture of the complexity and range of South African Indian fiction.

Interview with Deena Padayachee

DURBAN, DECEMBER 25, 2005

PR: Let's talk about why you write short stories rather than any other prose genre? Why does the short story work for you particularly?
DP: It appeals, because, basically of my time constraints. I have always found it very difficult to get my thoughts down on paper, to have the time to get [them] down, organized in the proper manner. Poetry also, I find, does not need as much time as a novel. I can concentrate on something and get it done properly. Also, I find short stories allow me to tackle a subject from many angles, and then I can analyze a situation. I usually focus on injustice, racism, humiliation, which is endemic to my country. And so I found that short stories allow me to do all this, but I find a novel much more difficult to write.

PR: And what about poetry?

DP: I love writing poetry, but poetry is more inspirational. I find that you have to have a certain feeling that will allow the poem to come out, so I can’t dictate how a poem should be written. I can’t sit down and say: “Oh, I’m going to write a poem today about something.” But with the short story, I have the idea of a plot, and that’s my main focus, that there’s an idea and some issue that I want to really get to grips with. And in my short stories I like to be fair to all concerned. So I usually, or very often, make the villain of the piece the narrator, or I try to give his viewpoint first.

PR: . . . How does your poetry differ from your fiction?

DP: Quite frankly, the poetry and the prose deal with the same things—it’s injustice, basically—but, I find irrationality, irrationality of people and of life, the value systems, that’s one of the things that drives me to write. I find again and again, especially growing up in a country like South Africa, so much that was irrational was taken as normal by highly educated people, a simple thing like putting a sign on the door that said “Europeans Only. No Dogs Allowed.” Now, professors went along with it. They said this was fine. Professors of ethics. So it’s that irrationality that I grew up with, that I needed to come to terms with in my own mind . . . a lot of that writing came out of that need to clear things in my own mind about what was going on. Now, poetry, I find, you need to be very [critical] about each word that’s in that poem, so I think poetry is very difficult to write, and I find prose much easier.

PR: What is the significance of titling your collection after Tina Turner’s song What’s Love Got to Do with It?

DP: I didn’t do that. What happened was . . . “What’s Love Got to Do
"Interviews"

with It?” was the working title that I used for that short story, and when the Congress of South African Writers asked for my collection of short stories after what happened with the Nadine Gordimer Prize, then I sent over my collection to them, and they said that that was the best title. I didn’t like it because of the song, but the publishers explained to me something that was pretty obvious, that every story was concerned with love: love of country, love of home, love of family, love of your career, love of life. So it was appropriate from that point of view, but I think it is a bit off-putting for some readers.

PR: Well, not really. . . . I really like the title, and it didn’t occur to me that every story was necessarily connected with love, but I felt that the title . . . connected to a global black culture. And I do think that your collection was trying to connect with black oppression all over the world . . . it is significant that Tina Turner is a black singer. And the African American experience in the U.S. is very similar to what nonwhites have endured during apartheid, so I [thought] that the title was making this global connection between oppression [in various parts of the world].

DP: That’s a nice way of putting it. Yes, I never thought about that, but I find this again and again. I find that readers of my work come to me and come up with fresh and new ideas . . . my writing is usually done very fast, like “Visitor” was written in half an hour—really quickly, just before the idea disappears from my head. I just want to get it done. It comes out exactly like that, and then I edit it obviously, over a couple of years sometimes, but very often when I’m writing it, I am not thinking about all the issues . . . that sometimes come to you later.

PR: And sometimes you are guided by your subconscious as much as by your conscious mind. You are really not completely in command of what you write.

DP: Exactly! You are not in command. There’s something, I honestly believe—look, it’s not only me, a lot of writers will feel this way—we seem to be tapping into something else . . . some sort of global consciousness, and so the words come . . . almost by themselves.

PR: So, do you agree with your publisher’s assessment that all the stories have to do with love?

DP: Actually, I do. I do.
PR: Because my next question was—and I think it has been answered—can we use the song to interpret the stories in the collection?

DP: Yes, I think so. I find in the bigger picture, the love that is focused on in the book is the love that destroyed apartheid. Because apartheid nurtured and encouraged hatred between the cultures and colors, religions, and everything. So what destroyed apartheid was love.

PR: Let’s talk a little about the individual stories. And let’s talk about “The Visitor,” which was one of my favorite stories. I want to talk a little about the significance of the figure of Gandhi. Clearly, the old man is the ghost of Gandhi and the spirit of Gandhi, a sign of Gandhi . . .

DP: And his values, yes.

PR: So, can you talk a little bit about the significance of the figure of Gandhi in this short story?

DP: . . .[H]e was destroyed. I saw him being destroyed.

PR: And do you feel in some ways that what Gandhi represented was also destroyed?

DP: Yes. It was destroyed. We actually see that. The peace went out of this place. As a medical student I went there, because there was a free medical clinic and I used to go there to recharge my batteries. It was a place where I felt a great deal of peace. I read a great deal about Gandhi, and so I respected the person as the person who began the movement that shattered Western control of the world. So I adored him. I worshiped him. And so when I saw that the people he was trying to liberate were destroying a place of peace by violent means, it was very shattering for me. [Padayachee is referring to the looting of Gandhi’s ashram, Phoenix, during Indian-African riots in 1985.]

PR: In that story Gandhi tells the looter, “‘Look after these things,’ he said in his gentle, squeaky voice. ‘They’re from Africa.’” This is my favorite line in the entire short story. But I wanted to talk a little bit about what he says, because among the things that the looter is looting is a copy of Gandhi’s book and his desk. I want you to talk a little bit about what it means that Gandhi’s things are of Africa, and therefore what Gandhi means for South Africans Indians as a community.
DP: Yes, his genesis as [mahatma] was here, and then Natal means birth, and so the birth of the movement to free the world began in Natal, and, ironically, this was the last place to be freed from colonial oppression. So it begins and ends here. . . . And he says: “Look after these things,” because he has left a legacy. Unfortunately, I feel, it has been abused.

PR: Can you explain a little bit how?

DP: Well, the violence. The violence of this place—they were destroying his home and in a symbolic way they were destroying his legacy. Everything he stood [for] was being pulled apart in that ashram.

PR: So then it seems Gandhi is this really important person in the South African Indian psyche, because the fiction I read—Ahmed Essop, Farida Karodia, your work, Agnes Sam—all of you mention Gandhi one way or the other, and I was wondering whether you could just follow up a little more on the role that Gandhi plays for you and other South African Indian writers, and also for the community as a whole, the nonliterary community.

DP: What I’m going to say is not very nice, but the fact is that this is the effect of the writers, the intelligentsia. The general Indian populace, unfortunately, because of the brainwashing of Western education, has very little idea about Gandhi, and they don’t follow his philosophies, and they become very materialistic, and there is much more violence now in the Indian community compared to a generation ago, and much more divorce, and much more disrespect between families, between parents and children, so I’m afraid, as far as the general Indian community is concerned, in my opinion, we have become very distant from the message of Gandhi.

PR: And why do you think the writers are also influenced by Gandhi in so many ways? Because even Christopher Heywood in his book says that one of the characteristics of Indian fiction is this incorporation of satyagraha. . . . Why do you think the writers themselves follow Gandhi?

DP: Because for us, who are aware of his message, we obviously feel the need to honor it. And we feel the need to spread his message among not just the Indian populace, but all sections of the South African population and the world population, about the goodness that was in that man.
PR: Let’s move to “A Different Kind of Standard Four,” which was again one of my favorite stories. Can you comment a little bit on the title?

DP: Yes, well, actually my father had a standard four [fourth-grade education] and he did so much with this standard four that it was an inspiration for us. So what we have is a situation where my father showed us in that story just what his generation had to go through, so that we could get an education. He enabled me to respect the older generation and the whole apartheid system taught disrespect and dishonor, so he turned everything on its head and that was really good.

PR: But . . . the father in the story is also talking about a different kind of education, because the apartheid system didn’t give Indians or blacks their own history . . . it was basically Western history. So [he was] talking about a different kind of education also.

DP: Exactly . . . the concluding paragraphs focus on that . . . And I’m afraid that even today we don’t have much liberation history of countries, whether Vietnam, or India, or Arabia—we don’t really know our own histories and so we have less pride in our heritage than the whites have. So that is still a major problem.

PR: So what would a perfect educational system look like?

DP: There is no perfect educational system, but if I had anything to do with it, I would say, know yourself first before you know the world. . . . I have met a lot of Indians from India—and they just have a different kind of quiet confidence, compared to us here. Indians here don’t know their history. So they don’t have that sense of respect for their own color, their own culture, their own heritage, even the educated ones.

PR: When you talk about “their own heritage, their own culture” what exactly do you mean? Do you mean the history of their arrival in South Africa?

DP: No, much more than that. I’m talking about Ashoka. I’m talking about the Ramayana. I’m talking about inventing the zero and technology and geology and algebra and plastic surgery, like the short story [“A Different Kind of Standard Four”] talks about . . . the Taj Mahal. These are things we need to know, and, unfortunately, many of us don’t. They are part of our conquest.
PR: Do you think Indians don't know even much about their own history in South Africa?

DP: Oh, yes, that is a major problem. The generation that Gandhi worked with—when I read about the things he did with them, I marvel, because I couldn't do those things with the people today . . . they are so different from that time. And I find the same problem with my own children, because they don't want to know what happened to me when I was five years old and couldn't get to use this little boat in the paddling pool. They are not interested. . . . I can understand in a sense why they want to distance themselves from something which is quite painful, but at the same time I can see how a parent can have such problems getting a message down to their children . . . So with books—especially, if our [Indian, non-white] books are prescribed at school—that makes it easier to get our message across. I think that will enable greater respect from the children towards the parents and from the parents towards the children. A lot of what we did when we were still teenagers was for our unborn children, and then it is very painful for us now to see our children turning away from our history. And that's because of the Western domination.

PR: And that's the purpose of “A Different Standard,” which is for children to understand what their parents have done?

DP: Absolutely.

PR: And in a way . . . what you are pointing to is that the children who have grown up in the postapartheid era are taking their privileges for granted and don't understand what it was like to live [like] that.

DP: In a way it means we have succeeded . . . but then, beyond that, it also means that . . . we have a situation where we are in an environment which is fundamentally racist, because it is a Western-dominated environment that we are in, and the West immediately assumes third world inferiority. It immediately assumes cultural superiority, and so we look down on ourselves and we undermine our own culture.

PR: And what has Afrocentrism contributed to all of this? There has been a lot of tension between the Indians and the Africans, here in Natal particularly.

DP: Yes, well, that now is a different . . . aspect of things, obviously. See
because I wouldn’t call it Afrocentrism, but we are now faced with a problem that Africans have been empowered. Previously, the Europeans were empowered, so they did terrible things to us, and the Africans in their powerlessness also did terrible things to us, but now that they are empowered, we have affirmative action. So now what happens—I call it reparative action, rather than affirmative action—but at the same time we are now paying the price.

PR: Let’s get back to your short stories. Many of your short stories use metaphor, and I really like that a lot about your work because I read a lot of short stories that were composed during the period of apartheid, and they tend to be much more straightforward . . . because their whole purpose is political, not literary, and I understand that and I sympathize with that. But what I like about your stories is that you are able to use these literary devices along with politics, so that the two go hand in hand. It’s not that the literary is . . . considered subservient to the political, and one of the ways I see you do this is by using devices such as metaphor and allegory, like “A Pestilence in the Land,” for example, which is about the subterranean vermin plotting a takeover, things like that. And so I was wondering whether you could talk a little bit about what function metaphors and allegories serve for you, because you use ghosts in “The Guests.” You use the spirit of Gandhi in “The Visitor.” . . . [T]here are so many instances in your book. . . . [W]hat purpose do they serve for you and why do you think they work better for you than straightforward narration?

DP: For me these things actually come naturally. I sort of conceive them in my head and quite frankly I never thought about them too much. I just wanted to write something interesting, entertaining, and to get a message across. And I find, as you said, that a straightforward narrative, for me anyway, would be boring. I have to like what I myself write, and if I don’t like it then I don’t publish it. So that is why I did that, because I obviously read a lot and I know what works for me. And for me allegory and metaphor work. That’s why I use those devices. . . . And as far as the ghosts go, for me there is a spiritual dimension to life . . . and I also have scientific training, and in scientific training you do double-blind trials to work out whether something will work or not, whether it’s a drug, medication, that kind of thing, and you use evidence-based results. . . . Now the spiritual dimension can’t be quantified, and so I use the fact that there are forces beyond quantification, which need to be taken cognizance of, when we are perpetrating evil. So the wheel turns; there is karma, and that’s why
I tend to use the figure of Gandhi, the spirit of Gandhi, then I use the ghosts in “The Guests,” in the short story “The Guests,” which for me is one of my little . . . joys. I feel so good that I wrote that story. I really love the fact that I wrote it . . . even though I wrote it thirty years ago. I come back to it and read it and say, “Hey, I really did something there!” And I feel good about it. I can also understand the pain of somebody who would read something like “A Letter to the Mayor” and feel very distressed, because he wouldn’t want his children to study what he did to us. But I think it is so important that people study stories like this, so that in their lives, if they are ever persuaded to engage in evil, they would understand that they are dealing with human beings.

PR: So why do you have a little white boy as the protagonist in “The Ghosts”?

DP: Because he is innocent of this whole thing. It is important to get an innocent person to understand what his parents are doing. His parents know fully what they are doing, but he doesn’t. He just sees a human being that he loves.

PR: And it’s significant that the parents can’t see her [Vimla, the ghost], obviously, because that’s what allows them to perpetrate the evil in the first place, so they see don’t see Indians as human beings. They [are] invisible. I think that’s why the metaphor of “ghosts” works so well.

DP: And I also think that children are closer to God than us. That’s just a feeling I have always had . . . and that’s why I’ll always be drawn to children, because children have a beauty . . . and they lose that beauty as they get older. But certainly as children they can sense a great deal that we can’t.

PR: . . . Race relations between Indians and Africans seem to be an important theme in this collection, and you are very critical of Indian racial attitudes also in this book. . . . Can you talk a little about Indian racial attitudes and the way you represented them in your book?

DP: Yes, I think they got this thing from India, the caste system, the color consciousness thing, is something really deep in the Indian psyche, and so we have a situation where Indians worship the pale skin, and they almost are in fear and hate of the black skin. And I, as a very dark-skinned Indian, had to endure this my whole life. . . . [N]ow those attitudes have
been transmitted unfortunately to the African people, and so I am very, very disturbed by this, because the Africans are the majority here, and if we are going to discriminate against the majority, and be racist towards them, then our children will have no future.

**PR:** Do you see Indians trying to be white during apartheid?

**DP:** Oh, yes. Even now. It is a very big phenomenon, the children as well. They’re trying to be as Western as possible and they jettison a lot of Eastern values. They think they are important if they color their hair and use blue contact lenses.

**PR:** So what does the title story, then—“What’s Love Got to Do with It?”—what does that tell us about African and Indian relationships, because the last line of the story is “Goddamn coolie marrying an Indian girl.”

**DP:** Yes . . . the way we used “coolie” at medical school wasn’t derogatory. We often called each other coolie . . . and we used it almost as a term of affection, but if a white person used it on us, we would be upset. But this African was our friend, and if he used it, it wasn’t a problem. And what I say in this story is that it is possible for us all to be friends if we can just all better understand where we are coming from.

**PR:** How has politics shaped your writing?

**DP:** As I said in my e-mail to you, I think that if there was no apartheid in South Africa, then this would not have been . . . I probably would not have begun writing, because it was the sheer irrationality of my childhood that made me write, and my adulthood, because I had to come to terms with what was happening, and also in my writing I found that I was writing for myself. I was writing to understand the world around me, and I found myself coming up with thoughts and ideas that I didn’t even know I was thinking, and I find the same with my *Sunday Times* column. I find very often that thoughts that suddenly come out of me that I was not aware of. So it is a lovely way to drench your own mind and analyze things, this ability to write.

**PR:** Do you think the postapartheid period has given you similar creative inspiration the way the apartheid period did?

**DP:** Well, apartheid did much more, but . . . I think certainly for myself
that is true, one uses very little of one’s brain in the course of one’s normal daily activities, but when one writes, one uses much more of one’s mind, and that for me is a joy. But now writing is much more difficult, because writers tend to be critical of what’s happening—well, certainly my kind of writer is very critical about what’s happening around him—and now when you criticize, you criticize an establishment in power . . . and so you are now criticizing sometimes the majority . . . and there is far less tolerance. There wasn’t much tolerance in my time, but I think there might be even less tolerance nowadays. For instance, if I wrote about the 1949 riots, or I wrote in a very critical way of affirmative action, I might get a bad reaction from the new people in power, and that can be very difficult. Or if I wrote about the crime; I certainly get that kind of reaction when I’m writing about the crime, because I’ve had people in power tell me: “Oh, there’s crime all over the world, not just here.” And I find that difficult, because I find that one must be truthful, and I think it is very wrong that people who have actually participated in the struggle, and who shed their blood, were incarcerated and all that, can now turn around and say false things to fellows who they are against.

PR: What are some of the major themes in your writing? You have touched upon irrationality and oppression, but could you talk a little bit about other [themes]?

DP: Yes. Racism, humiliation, the oppression of women, our history, our heritage, trying to bring our country to life at a particular time.

PR: What are some of your major literary influences?

DP: Khushwant Singh from India, who was editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, something I read in the 1970s, because I used to get the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, I subscribed to it, and I loved his writing. . . . I enjoyed the lucid way in which he writes. He writes in a very clear, simple way, and I think reading, some kinds of reading, can be seen as for the highly educated and for the upper classes and that kind of thing, and I think it’s just so important for reading to go to everybody and to write in a way that everybody can interpret and understand, and not just the highly sophisticated academics.

PR: And you try and write in that way?

DP: Yes. And the other writers who write like that and who I like very
much are John Steinbeck and Berthold Brecht, and I think to an certain extent also Ahmed Essop, André Brink.

PR: Are there any South African Indian writers who influenced you?

DP: Ahmed Essop, yes. Other than Essop, not really . . . [poets] . . . Shabbir Banoobhai, yes. And the other writer [who] is very good and I like very much is Alan Patton.

PR: Why has South African Indian literature been largely ignored so far?

DP: There is something very deep in the Western psyche, which I think comes from the Greek experience, probably even more from the Roman experience. . . . So they see the East as a problem . . . and so they still have this antagonism to us. And so they reject anything Eastern. So we find that, for instance, Indian music, Indian art, literature, religion, culture, dance is all marginalized in KwaZulu Natal. . . . Again, I wrote in my last column about the fact that when I was invited to Denmark, a large part of the delegation that was going was Indian, but what they did was, they had the Drakensberg Boys Choir—this is 1999—this is five years after Mandela comes to power, and so what happens is, you have the Drakensberg Boys Choir—this is happening in Durban, by the way, which has more Indians than whites—and you have African dancing but you don’t have anything Indian done at an event before we go to Denmark.

PR: Is this changing, or is it still a problem for South African Indian writers to be published?

DP: Some Indian writers, I think, are in a very difficult situation. I find that publishers in KwaZulu Natal and throughout the country seem to be much more amenable to African writing than to Indian writing, so like, for instance, the University of Natal Press—I went to a book launch recently, and they published a large number of black writers, but not a single Indian writer. And I constantly get badgered by Indians who have manuscripts ready and can’t get a publisher, so it’s very, very difficult. And most of our Indian writers . . . they’re all printing their books themselves.

PR: Hasn’t anyone thought of setting up a printing press?

DP: See, the problem is for it to be financially successful . . . you need
bookshops that need to be prepared to sell our books. . . . But we’ve got this major problem that we have what I call the prison system of the Western culture, [people who are] all for Western books to be sold, Western theater, Western movies, Western music. They see us as a problem. They don’t want our books. . . . They are very hostile to Indian books. . . . There is no culture within the book trade with a passion for your own indigenous writing; there is a hostile attitude towards our writing, because our writing very often deals with the suffering from so-called civilized people, you see, and they don’t like that. They get very upset when they see what we’ve written, and I can understand that, but at the same time we are South Africans, and we have the right to have our books in our own bookshops.

PR: So why do you think then that there is an interest in publishing books by Africans and not by Indians, because even the books by Africans would be addressing the same issues [“suffering from so-called civilized people”]?

DP: Well, that’s very interesting, because the whites used to tell us around 1990, that we shouldn’t write about apartheid; we should no longer write about racism, because it’s all in the past. We shouldn’t be bothered by it anymore. So, for instance, when we have the writer’s festival in Durban, the Africans will come on and they are not talking about persecution and suffering, because they know the whites won’t like it. Now the whites are publishing their books, and they will be talking about taking the bus to work and having a shower, and that’s what they are reading. They won’t be talking about what’s affecting them really, in a deeper sense, in their country, so the whites are orchestrating what is being written, and when we want to write what we want to write, then there is a problem.

PR: And is it possible that they—the whites—don’t consider Indian writing even important?

DP: Well, obviously, my whole life they made it seem like what I was writing was not worth publishing, but obviously that is a false perception. It’s more that they feel threatened, and because they feel threatened by our writing, then they say that it is bad.

PR: But they will also probably say that: “Oh, you are such a minority, you are not important. [You] are only 3 percent of the population” and I wonder whether anything has to do with that?
DP: Well, in the past they used to say: “. . . Indians don’t buy books.” And so it’s not even worth their while to put it in their bookshelves. But we know that our writing is of relevance, not just to South Africans, over 40 million of South Africans, but is relevant all over the world. So that argument doesn’t hold water. . . . That’s what they say. They are using any strategy.

PR: What would you like a scholarly audience to know about your work? A scholarly audience . . . that [may not] even know that there are Indians in South Africa. You have to start at a basic level. What would you like them to know about your work?

DP: That to me is a difficult question, because I write as a South African first, then I write as an Indian South African. I would like them to know that Gandhi actually lived here for twenty-one years, and I’d like them to know that the West has done a lot of good for South Africa, but there have been many aspects of Western impact on South Africa that have not been good for us and that if America wants to continue its hegemony in the world, then it has to be seen as a force for good. . . . My writing has been very critical of the Western impact on the people of this continent, and I think it is important for people in other countries to know where they have gone wrong and what they’ve done to us. I think that answers the question.

PR: So your writing addresses this issue of what the West has done to South Africa and to the Indian people in Africa?

DP: Yes, because a lot of the whites are actually acting as representatives of England or America and Holland and Germany, for that matter. . . . Gandhi put it nicely. He said: “Western civilization. That would be a very good idea.”

**Interview with Ahmed Essop**

LENASIA, DECEMBER 18, 2005

PR: Has there been a change from the apartheid to the postapartheid period in your fiction, particularly in terms of the way you have represented relationships between Indians and blacks—so The Third Prophecy, for example, it’s not very optimistic about the relationship between
Indians and blacks, whereas something like Noorjehan or Hajji Musa tends to be much more optimistic about a viable relationship between Indians and blacks—so I’m wondering if you agree with that assessment of your fiction and if you think that you represent in your fiction this kind of decline in the relationship between Indians and blacks?

AE: Yes, well remember in the early apartheid era we were separated from blacks, they worked as servants, and in that era, of course, there wasn’t really an idea that some changes were going to occur in the country and that one day there will be a democratic [South Africa] where you could live where you wish to and everything that goes with that. The new era is different in that I perceive this as an era where all the earlier restrictions against races have been removed, but I don’t see it as one where essentially blacks and Indians cannot integrate or cannot live together. They are living together now to a small extent[:] in an area like Lenasia there are a few blacks who have homes. But what does keep them apart I think are the various cultures. . . . [T]he Indians tend to hold on to their cultures and the blacks have essentially lost their tribal cultures, they lost it over a hundred years ago, and as they move into cities and they become urbanized the tribal culture disappears and Western materialist culture takes over. And, of course, it is taking over among Indians as well, propagated by television, propagated by the newspapers, the new lifestyles that . . . that we see now.

PR: So let’s talk about The Third Prophecy still a little bit while we are on the subject of your later fiction. It seems to me that the recurring theme in The Third Prophecy is the fact that a Muslim cannot become president in this current dispensation. And I was wondering if you wanted to talk a little bit about this, about the role of Islam in South Africa now. Do you think the larger community, black and white, is ready to accept Muslims? Because that seems to be one of the fundamental themes of The Third Prophecy, that Salman has this anxiety of not being fully accepted, no matter how secular he is, because he’s a Muslim.

AE: Well, look, the [Muslim] community is a small community in South Africa, right, in the first place. And with Salman Khan, it’s a delusion he suffers from, the idea that he could become president, because he has been removed from a very important portfolio of education and reduced to one which he felt was a reduction of his status, that is, as minister of prisons, and he found that very hard and the only way he could now rise up would be one where the prophecy of Dr. Roma gets fulfilled. So
he eventually comes to believe that well “I’m the man . . . who might be able to take part of that prophecy.” He deludes himself in thinking that perhaps he is a descendant of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan. . . . [H]e also believes his friend Mr. Khamsin, [who] says, “[P]erhaps you are the man” . . . so that is a delusion which he suffers from and it will never be realized in a country where the majority [is] predominantly black.

PR: And not Muslim.

AE: And not Muslim, it cannot be realized.

PR: So you think a Muslim will never be able to become president in South Africa?

AE: Well, I won’t be very positive about that, one can’t predict the future.

PR: You are not Mr. Roma.

AE: Yes that’s it [laughs]. But the essence of the book is also where I deal with the nature of democracy. I see that there is a grave fault in [that] the politicians who run a country do not require any qualifications of any sort, neither intellectual nor moral, and there I think there is a very serious thing.

PR: Do you think Salman has the qualifications?

AE: I wouldn’t say he has the qualifications, because there is a question of personality as well. And then . . . also people change when they hold positions of power, they are no longer the same ones. . . . [P]ower can corrupt an individual.

PR: Do you think your book is then a reflection on democracy in South Africa in the present?

AE: Yes, definitely I do think that. I’m also trying to show that the ideals that were set down by the political movements are no longer being realized, former communists have all become capitalists, and I made this judgment in one of my stories called “The Banquet.”

PR: I remember that one and I do want to talk to you about that collection too. Moving on then, I’ve noticed that in much of your fiction,
characters who we encounter in a previous text, we reencounter them in another text, so that in “The Banquet,” for example, we encounter Mr. Khamsin, we encounter Shareef Suhail, and then in The Emperor we encounter Zenobia, and then we meet her again in The King of Hearts collection. So I wanted to talk to you about this as a literary strategy. Can you tell us why you do this, because I was really fascinated with the way these characters keep appearing in different books?

AE: Yes, what I consciously do is that, since I’m dealing with a particular locality and a particular range of people, the Indian community, many people in the Indian community, I like to integrate them in the stories. I feel that then the stories become part of a world. They become part of a world and I find great joy in bringing them back. Even Guru, who appears in the “Hajji” and dies in a story called “Labyrinth” in a motor accident, I bring him back to life in the novel The Visitation. I felt that I needed a man like that now, so I bring him back, and then he appears again, he’s briefly mentioned again in The Third Prophecy. And he forms the background of a story called “The Novel,” in which a local gangster in Fordsburg now says “... I am the man that you have portrayed in the novel ‘The Visitation,’” and it is very comical.

PR: So you think, then, when you say that you like to integrate them within a particular world, in your mind ... all your books taken together form this kind of unified world?

AE: And I also try to present them in different dimensions as they appear in different stories, like Shareef Suhail is now a fully matured character in Third Prophecy and he only appears very briefly in “The Banquet”... [H]e’s the only man who ever resigns from parliament.

PR: If you read about Shareef Suhail in The Third Prophecy, his character in “The Banquet” takes on a different tone ... so they both work with each other.

AE: And, remember, I bring Zenobia and Kamar back. [They are] old friends of Salman Khan, and Zenobia does pose a number of questions to him, in that “Why did you take away art from the school curriculum?” ... She realizes that, well, he is very disturbed by his demotion, so-called demotion, from his minister of education [portfolio]. Then there is something new that I brought in Said ... from the background of resistance against the drug dealers that have taken over the country now. ... So,
what I want to present is South Africa as it is now, South Africa as it is now, the present time, and moving away from the apartheid era, which is over and done with.

PR: Can you tell me why you write in the novel [form sometimes] and why sometimes you choose to write short stories. . . . [D]o you [think that] one idea works better in a novel and therefore it becomes a novel?

AE: First of all, I read many short stories. I liked Maupassant a great deal when I was young. And there was the South African writer Bosman, I enjoyed his stories, and I enjoyed various stories of English writers but I felt sometimes that a theme just doesn’t carry into a novel, it cannot carry into a novel and that, again, the novel is one of a larger world, you see. The short story is, as I mentioned previously somewhere, that it is a very demanding kind of thing, I’ve got to reduce it, it’s got to have an impact, which is brief but significant.

PR: Let me ask you another general question. Where, and again in terms of your fiction but even more generally, where do Indians fit in South Africa? Do you think South Africa has failed to live up to its promise as a “rainbow nation”? Do you think Indians are being excluded from it?

AE: No, I don’t think they are being excluded, there are quite a number of Indians in parliament. But do you know what? Parliamentary debates seem essentially one where members of a party seem to have lost their critical intelligence . . . and the Indians who are part of the dominant party, they say nothing. They resent criticism of any sort and they make no criticism. And they will defend the ruling party, whatever they may do.

PR: But in “The Banquet,” for example, they keep talking about Afrocentrism.

AE: Yes.

PR: And Shareef is the only one who says Afrocentrism might be worrying because it might end up being exclusive.

AE: Yes.

PR: So do you think that anxiety, that fear, has it come to realization in the new South Africa?
AE: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think so. Indians have now moved into the world of materialism, really. . . . All their views and their ideas seemed to be shaped by television and desire for material things such as motor cars and so on, mansions and big homes and . . . they are becoming Westernized. Though, of course, there are religious groups that are trying to hold on to the moral values.

PR: So you think South Africa has lived up to its promise of the “rainbow nation”? In terms of the government, has the government done everything that it should have done?

AE: Well, I don’t think they have done very much. . . . I think crime has taken over the country.

PR: And what about . . . , for example, the Zulu singer [Ngema] who wrote that song “AmaNdiya,” who said that Indians are more exploitative than the whites and that the real enemies are the Indians. . . . [T]here does some to be this kind of friction between Indians and blacks now in the new South Africa . . . particularly perhaps in Natal.

AE: It’s not an open friction, it’s not open friction, politicians fortunately have not made those sort of accusations.

PR: But do you think it is there at the level of ordinary people?

AE: It could be. . . . I don’t have much knowledge of that level really, but there could be some friction, but I don’t think it’s very serious really. No. I don’t see it as very serious. . . . If this government, the ANC government, collapses, it could become serious . . . where certain communities are seen to have prospered.

PR: Let’s talk about South African Indian fiction. Why do you think South African Indian fiction has largely been ignored? And do you think now it’s acquiring shape as a distinctive literary form?

AE: Let me say this: there were not many writers, Indian writers, in the first place even during the apartheid era. There are not many writers in the first place. And schools and universities were essentially colonial. In that literature meant English literature: Dickens, Conrad, Shakespeare, Hardy, Lawrence, and others, you see, it’s colonial literature. And that also, secondly, at schools and universities all black literature was excised. . . .
[T]he government banned certain works by black writers—fortunately, my works [were] not banned, but they banned certain works by black writers—so students were not aware of black writing or Indian writing or of my own writing, they were not aware. . . . I do feel now, of course, that Indian writers have a better chance of having their works read at universities and schools.

PR:  Like Deena Padayachee’s, for example

AE: Yes.

PR:  Let’s talk a little bit about your major literary influences, you mentioned Maupassant but who were some of the other writers that have [influenced you]?

AE: The first was Dickens . . . followed by Conrad, followed by Shakespeare. And then, of course, I did a BA majoring in English and an honors course in English. So English literature was my background, right. Then I went on to read Indian writers: Narayan, Anita Desai, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, and Naipaul—and I read those, and I read some West Indian writers such as Wilson Harris. And black writers in Africa, Chinua Achebe and Naguib Mahfouz, translations of his work, Nadine Gordimer, and other South African writers: Coetzee and, of course, all the works of Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith and Bosman.

PR:  And have you read any other Indian South African writers?

AE: Well, I’ve read Deena Padayachee’s work mainly, Achmat Dangor’s writings, those two and unfortunately I’ve never seen the collection of Govender.

PR:  Since you talked about Dickens, let’s talk about satire, because . . . among the many things that I really like about your fiction is how you use satire and how you use wit and humor. Could you talk a little bit about that?

AE: Yes, well, one of my perceptions of literature is that I want to present many dimensions of life . . . the various dimensions of life. I don’t want to focus on one aspect of life only. So I enjoy writing, looking at human beings, satirizing them, looking at them with some irony and sarcasm, and [seeing] their follies and their strengths and the humor of situations,
such as in the story called “The Film.” Essentially I’m a happy person. And I don’t focus on misery only, as I think that John Coetzee does. And I think also those dimensions make literature interesting and enjoyable. It is important that one derives some delight from literature and those aspects give delight . . . for instance, George Orwell’s Animal Farm, which I enjoyed very much, and Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels; when I was young I enjoyed Gulliver’s Travels a great deal.

PR: You named your main character Salman in The Third Prophecy and you mentioned Salman Rushdie at least two or three times in The Third Prophecy, and I was wondering if Salman Rushdie himself has influenced your writing in any way?

AE: Well, look, he is a modernist, as he says, and there are a few modernist elements in The Third Prophecy, where there’s an exchange of letters between the president and Shareef Suhail and also an essay on democracy by Shareef Suhail, which is also in there. I read The Satanic Verses and it’s a very impressive piece of work, though I think that the strength of the satire cannot be appreciated, the strength of the satire on Islam cannot be appreciated, if one does not know the early history of the Prophet Mohammad. He satirizes him in sections 2 and 6 . . . and his own belief is that religious ideology is dictatorial. He believes that firmly. [As for] the name Salman Khan. Well, I needed the name Khan because Salman Khan believes that he is somewhere or another a descendant of Genghis Khan.

PR: Right, and he looks it up in the dictionary.

AE: He looks it up in the dictionary and so on. Well, Salman is quite a common name among Muslims. . . . [M]y mother’s brother was known as Salman. . . . Really it’s a corruption of Suleiman.

PR: We’ve already touched on it, but can you talk about it just a little more on what it was like to write as an Indian under apartheid.

AE: I came naturally to writing, in that, firstly, when young I was exposed to English literature. I was an English teacher and, looking in hindsight [at] the three years I spent at home, during which I prepared myself for a case against a department, I spent a lot of time reading and I could then . . . [sit] down to read and write, so that in a way was in certain senses favorable to me. . . . I’ve always enjoyed English literature, all my life.
PR: But did you encounter any difficulties under apartheid?

AE: No, I had no difficulties. I was very fortunate. There was a publishing firm, Ravan Press, able to place me and my work, and there were literary magazines that accepted my writing. Essentially, they were run by whites, all run by whites.

PR: Can you talk a bit about how . . . you and your fiction have evolved? So starting from, say, *Hajji Musa* and ending with *The Third Prophecy*, how have you grown as a writer? How have some of the themes and preoccupations of your work altered and shifted?

AE: Well, it hasn’t really shifted. I’ve been interested in the human condition from the beginning. The stories in *The Hajji* take place around the fifties and sixties period . . . and the others move upwards, right upwards . . . to the present era. And I still wish just to look at the human condition and I’ll continue to do that, I think. Taking into cognizance the new circumstances that arise, the new responsibilities, the new perceptions that have taken place in the community. I write about the Indian community because I’m still living in an Indian area and I know them best. Of course, there are some white characters, black characters in my novels as well, but to present life in the [Indian] community is what I can do best.

PR: How has politics shifted your fiction?

AE: Yes, it has, it has. I present the political realities in my fiction, right. But I am weary of all politicians. I am weary of all politicians because politicians hold power and power invariably corrupts them.

PR: What new [writing] are you now working on?

AE: Firstly, I have a collection of stories, new stories . . . some stories relate to the past, some relate to the present times and . . . I am also writing a novel at the moment, called *The Citadel*, relating to the present time, using the present as circumstances, but the story takes place in a different continent, or in a different state, not in South Africa.

PR: But it is a metaphor for South Africa in a way, like *The King of Hearts*?

AE: Yes, that is right, it is a metaphor for South Africa, but I’m writing
that. I hope to write one more novel. And of course I’ve completed an essay on the story of the prophet Mahound in Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses, looking at the satire and the symbolism and filling in the historical background of that story. . . . I hope somebody would publish that someday.

PR: My [last] question is that this [book] is going to be read by an audience . . . who would know nothing about South African Indian fiction, so what would you like to [say] about your work in particular and South African Indian fiction in general?

AE: Well, I would say those that are interested in literature should be aware of, right, that firstly South Africa is a country that underwent a unique change in that power was handed over to a majority without the agony of a revolution. And that [people] should be interested not only in the history of South Africa, but also in the change that has taken place and how that change is reflected in my work. . . . [T]here are very few revolutions, I think, that have ended in the way . . . they have in South Africa. Whether the change is going to benefit the people of the country . . . the ordinary people, the people who are still steeped in poverty, I am unable to say. I cannot prophesize that. I am unable to say that. In that I see it moving dangerously towards a capitalist-oriented society, a society of capitalist orientation, where the poor become poorer and the rich become richer. It’s a gloomy view, but at the present time this is how I see it.

PR: I think it really comes out very clearly . . .

AE: In The Third Prophecy.

PR: In The Third Prophecy as well as in The King of Hearts collection.

Interview with Farida Karodia

JOHANNESBURG, DECEMBER 21, 2005

PR: Unlike someone like Ahmed Essop, you do not write of Indian themes exclusively. Some of [your works], Coming Home, for example, deals with a much broader spectrum of South African identity. Can you comment on [the] literary choices that you make?
FK: I hate being restricted to one theme. I like broadening my perspectives because I always thought that South Africa consists of many other races other than the Indians. And being from a sort of mixed race background myself, it has had a great influence on the themes I choose to write about. I write about white South Africans as well, and I’m not limited in how I write about them. I write about the people that I know . . . which [are] basically the Afrikaners, because I grew up among the Afrikaners. I also write about the Coloureds, because I grew up amongst them, and I write about the Indians, because I also grew up amongst them. And so . . . I draw on what I know, I draw on my background. I am also expanding my horizons and setting a story in Canada, and this is a story about a Canadian woman, a white Canadian woman, and so I also know the Canadians as well. I also know people who live in the Calgary area, and so I feel that I can write about them. . . . It might surprise people that I try to break free of race restrictions and write about so many different people, but I enjoy it and that stretched me in many ways as a writer.

PR: And that’s what I really enjoy about your work, too, that there is such unexpectedness in terms of content. . . . Other Secrets [is] a great book, but I love all your other work, too, like your collection of short stories, . . . Coming Home, for example.

FK: Coming Home is a really old collection.

PR: Yes, but it is a great collection, because it . . . brings out the diversity of the South African experience. . . . [I]t is given to us in so many voices, the idea of coming home and the [context] of apartheid, and I really like that. I really like the fact that I am reading one story, say, from a white perspective, and I turn the page and I am reading a story from a Coloured perspective.

FK: And it’s not something that I do. I do not sit down and plan it like that. A lot of times I do not plan my writing; the characters come to me and they are quite persistent. And I feel I need to write about them. An Afrikaner face might appear and someone from my past reminds me of that, and so that’s my choice. I am going to write about them in the same way that I might write about a black experience, and here is one area that I am very limited in . . . the black experience, because I only have the black experience from the time when I was living in the small community and that was a very limited experience too. So I am not very familiar with the black culture. I am sorry that I’m not. I would have loved to speak an
African language, and I could have, because in the area that we grew up in, of course, I was being spoken to in Xhosa—it was the Xhosa area and I’m sorry and now I regret it. And it’s too late for me, because when at my age you try to start learning a language it is enormously difficult.

PR: My next question is turning to Daughters of the Twilight and Other Secrets. . . . Can you talk a little bit about . . . why you turn to Indian identity in those two novels, because those are the two novels, out of all your work, those are the most preoccupied with the idea of being Indian in South Africa. So why did you choose to write those novels? What was the inspiration behind the novels?

FK: Perhaps the inspiration for those two novels was a little bit from my background. Having grown up as Indian, because my father was Indian, and that feeling of split identity is a preoccupation in the book, and probably, once again, originates from my own experience. But I didn’t plan Other Secrets, and in fact Yasmin came to me quite unexpectedly, and I felt that I had to write about her and I needed the kind of setting for her that would propel her out of her situation. And so I chose to set it in the area in which I grew up, but I thought that Yasmin was a phenomenal individual . . . and it’s not based on anyone that I know, so it’s purely from my imagination.

PR: . . . I prefer Meena.

FK: Do you really?

PR: I feel like Meena never gets enough attention and that is obviously so much a part of the novel too . . . that it’s always Yasmin, Yasmin, Yasmin, but she seems to be a finer and stronger character than Yasmin. Yasmin [is] everything you say she is, but there is this very selfish streak in her, I think.

FK: Yes, but she’s also a fighter and that’s something I admire . . . she has chutzpah, which is what Meena didn’t have. And when I wrote Daughters of the Twilight . . . that was the beginning. I didn’t think that the story would continue, but what happened was so many who had read Daughters of the Twilight came to me and said “Well, what happened to Yasmin . . .?” And fortunately I had written the first novel, Daughters of the Twilight, in such a way that I had allowed . . . an opening for a continuation, and it wasn’t intentional either. So I got tired of all these questions of what happened to Yasmin, and I thought I better expand this.
PR: But I like how Other Secrets also follows through on Meena’s life, because I found all those things that Meena was going through also really interesting. Since we are talking about the relationship between Other Secrets and Daughters of the Twilight, some critical work that I read on those two works says that Other Secrets changed Daughters only in minor ways. Do you agree, or do you feel that [in] the first part of Secrets and the first part of Daughters there are some sort of major differences?

FK: No, I think there are major differences. . . . I couldn’t write the entire novel just based exactly on Daughters of the Twilight. I had to change Daughters in order to continue the story. I mean this is an accepted fact.

PR: . . . I do think that there are major differences also. . . . One difference that I thought was interesting was . . . Abdul's origins, because in Daughters you say very clearly that he came as an indentured laborer and in Other Secrets you say that he came around the time of Mahatma Gandhi, but it's not that clear that he is an indentured laborer.

FK: . . . [D]id I say that in Daughters? I can't remember. I must actually take a look back and see, because it was never my intention to state that he came as an indentured laborer, and it was an easy explanation. I have had problems getting a publisher for this novel because they [said it was] too parochial. . . . I can't remember what the reason was for that, but I think it allowed me a lot more freedom in dealing with Abdul, because Abdul was a very real and powerful character in the book. Abdul was there, Abdul represented the male population in South Africa, although he was Indian. He represented the male who is actually quite voiceless.

PR: The nonwhite male?

FK: The nonwhite male. Abdul was as emasculated as the nonwhite men in South Africa were . . . powerless. There are all these things that happen to his family and he is powerless to stop it. I mean, he tries his little things but he doesn't have the power to stop it. I chose to represent Abdul in that way so that it reflects what happened to the male population in South Africa, and I think somewhere in the novel I do say that the men are emasculated.

PR: And even though he is powerless, he is still a major influence in the novel? And . . . because he is powerless in the public sphere, he has to enact this kind of power over his daughters and wife.
FK: Yes, [he is a] very patriarchal figure.

PR: And since we are talking about favorite characters, I have to say the character of Abdul just broke my heart. Especially the way he . . . goes in for an operation and then he dies on the operation table. . . . And I think in Other Secrets particularly there is this tenderness for this patriarchal domineering character.

FK: No, you’re absolutely right about that, because in the private sphere he was the patriarch that ruled and he ruled his family that way.

PR: The change in the novel, does it reflect any change in your own writing? Does it depict any evolution on your part as the writer?

FK: Yes, the fact I moved Yasmin out of South Africa in to London, moved her overseas, it does not matter where, was an indication for me that my writing is moving, is going beyond South Africa into other spheres now. . . . And the collection of short stories that I am working on right now is set in all different countries, and I have one story set in India.

PR: But yet, in a way, in Other Secrets, South Africa never leaves the novel. . . . So, the characters can physically leave South Africa, but when Meena is in exile she keeps thinking about the warmth of McBain and [how] Soraya’s problems might be cured if she could go back to McBain, so that South Africa remains still a strong structuring presence in the novel.

FK: . . . And it is the whole theory of not wanting to leave our home countries. I mean, a lot of Indian writers that I know in Canada, for example, write about their Indian backgrounds. But I have moved away now in many respects . . . and I had to keep away from South Africa. There is another novel about the daughter, the granddaughter [Ashleigh]. That will continue . . . and she will move back into the Indian community.

PR: Why did you write about the fifties [and sixties]? We have talked about how in a way it is based on life in your own community, but can you tell me why you focus on the fifties or the sixties? Why did you choose this particular slice of time?

FK: Because I think that was a period when apartheid was most rife in South Africa. Yes, the fifties and the sixties, when there were mass removals,
when people were moved out of one area into another; lives were thrown into turmoil, there were upheavals, and even in Other Secrets there were families torn from their home and moved into the veld. This happened [in] South Africa during that period. In the seventies things started slightly changing. There were children. Children were on the march. There was the Black Consciousness movement. There [were] a lot of protests. . . . There was lot of resistance. In the fifties and sixties the resistance was minimal. I mean, there were pockets of resistance, but this was when the government really started its relocation programs.

PR: And that still goes back to the theme of powerlessness that you were writing about. That is obviously a major theme then in both these novels and that for you the fifties and the sixties represent this time of powerlessness and it is focalized in Abdul’s powerlessness as the powerlessness of the community as a whole.

FK: There is also a strong female presence. The women were very strong, and this is true of that entire generation. Now, even now, the grandmothers are the strong ones in the family. They know everything that is going on, AIDS and all that. Grandmothers are the ones that have come up to bat. . . . They are there for the grandchildren. They are supporting the grandchildren; and taking care of them. . . . And in those days the women . . . weren’t aggressive in any way but they had their own way of protesting. They were strong. The kitchen for me was like a base of strategy. This is where strategy was always planned and formulated. So the kitchen for me was a very important part of the house. And the women had a very important role in that kitchen; they were like the generals planning strategy in the kitchen [like Nana, for example].

PR: I want to talk a little bit about Islam in both the novels, because Abdul is clearly a very devout Muslim. . . . [C]ould [you] comment a little bit about Islam and what role does Islam play in the novel, because you write so much about it[?]

FK: I think it has an important role in the early development of the girls, but because there was this split, and it’s not really common, because generally when there is an intercultural relationship or a marriage and a non-Muslim marries a Muslim, the non-Muslim converts to Islam, and in the mother’s case she didn’t really convert, so there was always this split. I mean, the kids went to a [Christian] religious concert . . . and at home they were devout Muslims and as far as I know there are a lot of families
where this happened. . . . And so this is, in my mind, what happens in a few families, where you have this diversity battle. . . . The kids . . . decide who they are culturally, where they fit culturally, and the sad thing about these families is that they weren't always accepted by either culture, and it was a rather sad situation in South Africa, but I think it happens all over . . . where you have interracial marriages.

PR: And this is complicated by interreligious [marriages], and not just interracial. . . . [In Other Secrets] there is this scene . . . when Meena sees this Islamic plaque, and she looks at it and the letters are falling off, and then she remembers how her parents had fought about it and how her father had said that it should be in the front room, which was the right and proper place for it, and Meena says she is going to take it back with her to England. Is that Meena's way of remembering her father, or is that Meena's way of realizing that Islam is always going to play a role in her life?

FK: I think a little bit of both, because her father has such a strong influence in her life, not in Yasmin's . . . and you realize in the end why Yasmin is what she is. But in Meena's life, her father has always been the focus, and this was something that she associated with her father. But also, the falling off of the letters is a signal in the novel for the falling off of religion. . . .

PR: It seems like Other Secrets focuses more on the idea of hidden sexual encounters between different races than Daughters of the Twilight. Daughters really focuses primarily on the rape of Yasmin, but with Other Secrets you then get to see Yasmin's history: who her father is, the fact that Soraya has an affair with a white man too. Why did you choose to bring this out in the later book, because this would have been an issue even while you were writing Daughters; so why did it come out [then]?

FK: No, it came out then because it was at a point when—I mean, Daughters was an earlier novel—what was the date?

PR: Nineteen eighty-six.

FK: Nineteen eighty-six, yes, that was still the date of the apartheid . . . and what changed was that we were no longer in that apartheid, but what I wanted to show [in Other Secrets] is the different reactions of the mother, the grandmother. . . . [T]he grandmother talks about the grandchildren
and makes it black on the outside and white on the inside, yes, but also, given that it was Yasmin, I thought it would be unlikely for her to choose a nonwhite. Given her background, and given her rebellious nature. . . . And also to choose a married man first and then . . . it was kind of typical for her to do this. I thought it was [in] her character. . . .

PR: Can you talk a little bit about the significance of the Group Areas Act in both novels?

FK: Yes, it is a very important issue in both novels, because it was also during the time when relocation was taking place and this was one of the major issues in South Africa. People were being uprooted from their homes and from communities that have been their whole lives. . . . Generations have lived in the same communities. . . . I’m from that era, so I know what it was like to be uprooted and being thrown into an environment that was absolutely sterile. There was nothing. Some of those communities were so vibrant, so full of life, they were mixed communities. . . . You lived alongside an Indian; there was a white in the community; the Coloureds living [beside] you. And there was so much joy in these communities. Joy and life despite . . . despite apartheid, there was such a community spirit that prevailed, and all of this was destroyed when they moved people and uprooted them and separated them. The Indians in one area, the Coloureds in another, so they actually tore these communities apart. So . . . it was a very important issue and I wanted to show how it affected people by using this one family [as] a microcosm of what was happening inside South Africa that affected lives in such an enormous way.

PR: Exile seems to be an important theme, not only in this novel, but also in some of your other [work]. . . like Coming Home, for example. And yet . . . when she [Meena] does return home, she thinks this is going to be this triumphant return, but yet exile isn’t. She feels like she wants to go back to London when she comes to South Africa, because she realizes London is her home. I wanted you to talk more about the ending of the novel, really. What does it mean that . . . Other Secrets . . . ends with Meena suspended in this nether zone? She is neither in London, nor in South Africa. She is in the airplane, in the middle of Europe and Africa.

FK: It reflects her feeling of not belonging anywhere, anymore. Having lived in London for so many years, having being exiled in London for so many years and coming back and finding that she has grown away from
South Africa, that people have grown away from her, there is nothing to hold her in South Africa any more. South Africa has changed so dramatically that she can no longer connect with it as it used to be. . . . I did this deliberately, because she doesn’t belong anywhere.

PR: But then, why does she not belong in London again?

FK: She doesn’t because, and it is a very difficult thing to explain, when something is taken away from you, you want it. You want what’s been taken away from you, and you want it at any cost. So she came back to South Africa to get back what she wanted, and I know—I’ve gone through that—but going back it leaves you with a lot of unresolved [questions]. . . . Now she’s got what she wants, or she’s dreamed of, going back home, and now that she’s home, the weird thing is that it’s different. . . . [H]er mother is selling up. Her mother is going to London. It’s no longer a base for her to return to. But she doesn’t feel really that London is her home, either, even though she’s going back there. She’s just going back there because her family is going to be there, or she thinks everybody is going to be there. But she has the ability to change; that’s why I have left her in the air. If she wants to come back to South Africa, she can do that.

PR: Why did you make her a romance novelist in particular . . . some of her titles, such as Strangers in Love, for example, or Forbidden Love, because . . . in an interesting sort of way, they seem to evoke apartheid-era [attitudes]. So I was wondering whether you could talk a little bit about that?

FK: Because she had nothing else to read, growing up, and there were always fly-spattered romance novels hanging in the windows of the shop. . . . This is something that she gravitated to . . . and finally realized that she could write one of them, because she had read so many of them. . . . Because Meena is who she was, this quiet, introverted [character], these romance novels were actually a form of escape for her. She could dream about these characters. She could dream about lost love and fabulous faces that she thought she would never see and connect in some romantic way with a life, a romantic life, that was nonexistent for her. . . . [S]he was the good girl; she was the one who stayed home and listened to her father, and this is her escape, because she never thought that she would find a lover or a man. . . . So that was her history, because she had a very bad self-image, and it is just a natural way for her to gravitate to [romance novels].
PR: But I have to say, I wanted you to be the romance novelist and let Meena marry Said and have a happy romance . . . it was so sad when he [Said, Meena’s lover] died. I think that . . . was more satisfying in a literary way; it was the better thing to do in a literary way, otherwise it would have been too much of a romance novel, but there was this part of me that wanted her to be happy romantically. But let me ask you this, then: Why did you want her to be single at the end? Because she really is alone; she’s only got her writing. Said is dead, she’s feeling . . . cut off from her family, Soraya has died . . . so why did you isolate her like this in the end?

FK: I think for her to continue writing, I had to isolate her.

PR: Since we are talking about Meena at the end, this was one of my favorite sentences in the novel, where she says . . . : “We all have our own places. I discovered mine much later; a place which reflected the geography of my soul.” What does the geography of Meena’s soul look like?

FK: I think it’s geography in a more figurative sense. . . . [I]n her mind she has this place that she belongs to, and this place has really not existed until she thinks that this is it, because she is willing now to settle for whatever falls her way. . . . She stopped, I think, at this point in her life, where so much is happening, Meena has decided that she’s going to stop looking, and so she’s settling for whatever there is now.

PR: Is the ending of the novel for you happy, sad, peaceful? What tone do you get when you read it?

FK: I think it is peaceful. Just peaceful. This is the geography of Meena’s soul. She wants peace now. She has gone through all this turmoil and she finds in the plane that this calmness comes over her, and she picks up her manuscript. . . . Yes, so I think it is more peaceful than anything else.

PR: And through the act of writing she finds peace. Is that autobiographical in any way?

FK: I think so. Maybe a little bit. I would not have chosen to write romance novels . . . but I think it was a space for Meena. Making her a writer was a space for Meena to go to, to get away from her life, to live another life, and even though she is in England, I think this has always been Meena’s fate: to become a writer, a romance writer, fine, but to become a writer, because of the way she grew up, in a family, but virtually
alone. . . . [S]he was always spiritually alone. And she seemed to be quite happy in that solitude. Not happy, but peaceful.

PR: I think in many ways she seems to be the most restful character in the entire novel.

FK: And that’s why when you asked me that question, that’s the first thought that came to my mind, peace. And she tried to instill some of that restfulness in Yasmin. . . .

PR: What does the name Ashleigh Fatima Mohammed signify? Because I find all your names are significant. . . . Soraya is named after the empress of Iran, and [she] was also biracial, and she lived in exile all her life, like Soraya did, and she died in exile. But so what does Ashleigh Fatima Mohammad mean?

FK: I tried to introduce a Western, non-Muslim name, which is significant, because I wanted to indicate that this is now going to be a non-Muslim child, growing up in a totally different environment; that’s why I gave her a Christian name.

PR: But do the names Mohammed and Fatima suggest that even though the child is going to be non-Muslim, Islam is going to come into her life?

FK: Yes.

PR: Well, just in terms of whatever you are ready to say at this point about the book you are working on right now, [what] can you tell me?

FK: I am trying to work on a collection of short stories, like I mentioned, which I hope to have published in South Africa and a novella. . . . [T]he title of the collection will be called Transitions. And it is about change, so about people who have left the country, people who have come back, people who are planning to leave the country . . . a lot of stories are set in other countries, like Canada, United States, India, England, and so on.

PR: How has your work evolved from your first book to your most recent ones? So, in other words, what are the changes that you have detected in your own work as a writer, thematically as well as aesthetically?

FK: This is a difficult question for me to answer. . . . The changes that I
am aware of are that my work has moved outside of South Africa. That’s a major change. Thematically I think my themes are broader than they were in South Africa, much broader. I have finished an early draft of a novel, which I am hoping to submit to a Canadian publisher. I’m having a bit of a problem with the voice. . . . I am sure you know that writers have that problem from time to time. But it’s set in Alberta; it starts in India, goes to the UK, and ends up in Alberta.

**PR:** What makes you choose to write a novel versus a short story? Is it again something that’s generally out of your control, or is it a conscious decision?

**FK:** I like writing short stories, and I like writing them in between my novels, in between big novels. . . . I find that often I am . . . sitting at an airport, for example, and I can get started on a short story, but I wouldn’t dream of getting started on a novel. And so, for me, it’s more portable [the short story] and some of the short stories, I think three of the short stories that I will include in this collection have been published before, but in overseas publications. I’d like to keep them all together in one collection now.

**PR:** Do you yourself identify as a South African Indian writer?

**FK:** No. I don’t want to be labeled. I am just a writer.

**PR:** Why has South African Indian fiction not been read or critically analyzed or written about? . . . Because right now black fiction is getting a lot of attention, and I wonder whether it is the same problem with South African Coloured fiction, too, that it doesn’t get the same kind of attention that black or white writing gets.

**FK:** I agree with that. I don’t know what the reason for that is now. I mean, if we were talking apartheid, this would be an easy question to answer, but I have no idea why this is happening. . . . [T]he literary audience is a very small one in South Africa. I mean, it’s almost impossible for writers in South Africa to survive, because there are so few readers. Most people can’t afford to buy the books; the people who can afford to buy the books, the middle class, are more electronically oriented. The white population is actually the reading population, and even there it is only a certain percentage of the white population that would read serious fiction. And so I think that is basically the problem. If you look at people like Rohinton Mistry, and Mukherjee, and Vassanji . . . they are phenomenally
successful in Canada, and that’s because people read. But here this is the problem, and unless a book goes into schools and schools are forced to buy them, writers . . . sell very few copies.

PR: Who are some of your major literary influences?

FK: I have such an eclectic taste in literature. I can read anything. I don’t think I can claim anyone to be [a major influence]. I have always loved Salman Rushdie’s work [and Zadie Smith]. But like I said, I have a very eclectic taste in reading, and I read quite a number of Indian writers too from time to time. I try to keep up with what’s current out there.

Interview with Praba Moodley

DURBAN, DECEMBER 29, 2005

PR: I want to talk a little bit about why you chose to revisit the past. . . . [W]hy did you choose to go back to the indentured experience and write about the experience of the cane fields?

PM: When I was in matric [school] . . . I had to do a history assignment and I found there was such lack of information. Everything was documented . . . we read about it through textbooks, but there were no human feelings or anything of that sort. And during the process of my research for my assignment, I came across areas that I thought were fascinating. And I think it just planted a seed and it just grew.

PR: Let’s talk about the research you conducted. . . . Where did you conduct it? What were some of the discoveries that you made about . . . the indentured background? What were some of the frustrations of doing this research? Some of the surprises? Some of the joys?

PM: The initial dry facts came out from the history textbooks. But there’s the Indian Opinion [a newspaper]. . . . It has such a lot of stories. . . . It gives you such a rich feeling of a different time span, and you actually feel for people that lived in that time. . . . They’re going through the same emotions and the same feelings and everything else that one would go through now. And that’s what caught me, actually. That they may have lived in a different time frame, but everything that you go through is [the same] . . . it’s just another generation.
PR: And what are some of those issues?

PM: They were personal issues that people had: personal problems, marriages were falling apart, people were having relationship issues, family problems. . . . The newspaper actually conveyed human feelings and emotions that you would never have picked up in the history textbooks.

PR: So what were some of the frustrations, because as you were saying . . . there aren’t all these stories available . . . ?

PM: We [are] living in this modern era, and you take things for granted. And just going back to everything the way we, our forefathers, came through, and you actually feel their pain and realize that it was hardship that actually brought us where we were today. . . . One of the difficult things during writing this was that it took such a long time to actually get the material, the research. Whereas now, you just type something into Google on the Internet and you pick up a whole lot of info. So it was actually frustrating during the research period to double-check your facts and make sure that everything was right.

PR: Let’s talk a little bit about specifically the novel. Why did you choose to use a love story as the center of your story?

PM: It wasn’t supposed to be a love story. When I started the concept of the story, it was supposed to be about the lady that gave birth on the ship, because it was a new idea. They were coming to a new land. They just had a baby, the Pillays . . . actually when you write you find that some characters come alive and some don’t. And what happened was the lady that delivered the baby, Chumpa, when she started to come alive in my story, she had more to say and more to give to the story, and it was actually a family saga. If you look at it, it’s a family saga because it’s about her family and her children and the decisions they’ve made.

PR: Absolutely . . . the novel ends on her, so it comes full circle.

PM: Yes. It starts with her giving this life. She’s delivering a baby, and with her birthday at the end. And actually . . . when I started it, it was supposed to be about this new couple that came in and their trials and tribulations, but the other family just grew.

PR: Can you talk a little bit about the fact that it did become a love story.
Particularly . . . an interracial love story. . . . Why did you choose to focus on that?

PM: Because that came up when you do your research. As I said, the Indian Opinion, they had stories about people that had these relationship issues . . . and in those days often white men abused [non-white] women and one in a million would actually fall genuinely in love. And I thought that would be very good.

PR: And is there evidence of those genuine love relationships in the Indian Opinion?

PM: I can’t honestly remember proper evidence of such, but it gave me the seed that I needed. I can’t quote you names and families that I’ve come across in there.

PR: So, then, to the character of Albert, what were you trying to say and do? Because I do think . . . you are countering the stereotype of white men as always being the abuser. . . .

PM: But there were cases, you notice there’s good and bad. . . . And there were good whites that took care of the indentured laborers and there were others that abused them and that came across in the story. So that I picked up from the reading and the research.

PR: Did you see, in your research, any kind of interracial relationships between Indians and blacks too at that time? Or did they not come into much contact, because there aren’t too many black characters in your novel, right?

PM: I will be very honest. I have not come across that so I couldn’t put down things that I didn’t really feel strongly about or come across. But there was . . . I wouldn’t say openly acknowledged, but you can see products from a mixed relationship in terms of a black and an Indian, but when I was writing my story I didn’t pick that up, so I didn’t use that too much in it.

PR: Did you pick up, during your research, any kind of interaction between Indians and blacks at that time, or were Indians basically working so hard on the plantation that they didn’t have any time?

PM: They did have blacks, but . . . in my book, I mentioned that the
blacks were not as hard-working as the Indians. And that happened. They just didn’t want to work so hard. So there was this friendship that grew with the blacks, but I think also the Indians knew that they were more hard-working, and they were used because of that.

**PR:** How does going back to the past in your novel . . . help us understand Indian identity in the present-day South Africa?

**PM:** The reason why I actually decided to write this book was because I never found personally, for me, a book that educated people in an entertaining manner. And that’s what I wanted to do, was just make a story that would give people reading [pleasure] and [make them] realize, “Hey, you know, we can’t just take where we come from for granted. There was more to us.” And I found that, strangely enough, people wrote back to me and contacted me and said, “Thank you for writing this. It actually made us appreciate where we come from, and we never realized just how difficult life really was.”

**PR:** And do you think in any way you are trying emphasize also the Indian contribution to South African life?

**PM:** Yes, greatly so. Yes, I think we did contribute. We may not have received very much in the past. But as a community, joining together and building schools and building community halls and temples and mosques, that happened a lot in the past . . . . People did band together; the community banded together.

**PR:** Can you talk a little bit about why your focus [is] on so many different life stories. . . . [Y]ou begin with one family and that one family then splits into these different narrative arcs . . . you have Sita’s story, Gopi’s story, Chumpa’s story, Rani’s story, which leads to Gopi’s story, Mukesh’s story. So can you talk about . . . what you were trying to achieve with all these different narratives?

**PM:** If you look at a family, every person in the family has a story to tell. And that’s what happens here . . . . *The Heart Knows No Colour* is actually a two-layer title . . . the first one is the interracial [relationship] between Albert and Sita. Then, within the home, it’s the cultural issue. Gopi is Hindi and Rani is Tamil speaking . . . there is a color difference as well because I mention that she’s dark skinned in the book. It shows you it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t have to be different race groups or different colors. Your emotions and your feelings are still the same.
PR: So, in a way, Rani and Gopi’s story parallels Sita and Albert’s story.

PM: And they made it. They married and they fought it. She [Sita] couldn’t. She had to follow the traditional role. She fought against it in the beginning and then she accepted it. She became a good role model and a good mother. But she always, at the back of her mind, [knew] she was living a lie. And that had to come out in the end. So, basically, you cannot live your life with lies. . . . I say that everything you do has an effect in life. Every decision you make.

PR: So why did you choose to end [your novel] in 1919? Why did you decide not to go further or even earlier?

PM: My characters came to a close. All things tied up nicely at the end. And I like doing that. I like setting it, ending it, in a way [with] one era finishing off for me. I’ve got another one coming up but it’s not a sequel . . . it starts in the early 1900s, but it ends in the 1930s. But what I like to do is build stories over time and say how society has changed, how the Indian community progressed.

PR: And how do you think the Indian community progressed in the time span of your novel . . . from the time that they came as indentured labor to the time that the novel ends?

PM: I think they make great progress, absolute great progress. If you think about the first five years of indenture, where they had to give everything, and in the process of giving, they also learned to save, and they were planning, planning a better life. And that’s what happened in reality. People did that. They refused to carry on being indentured laborers. There were some that were very scared, the older generation that just lived and worked and died on sugar cane plantations. And then the others . . . who . . . came into the city and lived their lives and they got education, they worked, they married, they moved out of Durban, as well. People have moved away and that’s how we found Indians moving up to Johannesburg . . . they worked in the diamond and gold mines, as well. So there was progress . . . they couldn’t be stunted. I think that’s where we have to be very grateful. That they spread their wings.

PR: What role do women play in this novel?

PM: I think women are often the backbone in a family. In Indian society, we tend to often give men more status in the home, but basically, I think
it’s often run by women. . . . [T]he man goes out and earns the income, comes home, but you’d find with the indentured laborers women worked and toiled in the field as well, and they had to run their homes.

PR: . . .[B]y the end of the novel there’s this kind of happy ending. . . . Chumpa feels like Natal is finally her home. She’s celebrating her seventy-fifth birthday amidst these riches. And Sita and Hemith have reconciled and Sita’s secret has come out. But in the midst of this happy ending, I feel like the character of Mukesh strikes a somewhat discordant note . . . and I was wondering if you had to imagine him thirty, forty years, or even ten years later [what would he be like]?

PM: He is in my head . . . if I have to do a sequel, it will be based on him and his emotions . . . and how he adjusts to being a product of an interracial relationship.

PR: He’d be very confused. And angry. I think that was the dominant emotion that came to mind with Mukesh. That he is extremely angry. But who is he angry at? Is he angry with his mother? Is he angry with his biological father? Is he angry with the society that’s done this to him?

PM: He’s angry with his mother for living a lie. . . . [H]e has forgiven her because he loves her so much. . . . I think in all relationships, if you think of a product of an interracial relationship, it’s a hard thing to [be] because now you’re going to have a confused identity. You’re brought up as Indian, but now you know for a fact you’re not totally Indian. So where does the other part of you come from? And you want to find out more. So if I ever do a sequel, it will be a lot based on him.

PR: So why has he become so politically active? . . . [H]e is the only member of his family who is really politically active.

PM: Because now he’s going to get to a point . . . you must remember he grew up with Hemith. And he [Hemith] was a man that looked at right and wrong, and he stood up for his society. So he grew up with . . . knowing you must fight for your rights. And now to know that you have part of white blood in you . . . where do you fall? It can confuse you.

PR: Do you think Heart was political?

PM: Yes, it was. My intention was that . . . it tells you where you come from and to educate the people in the sense of politics. But this one
Moodley's next novel, *A Scent So Sweet* is a little bit different. . . . You won’t get a lot of political background, because now the situation is that they’re second-generation Indian. They’re more set in their ways. The families that I talk about are more well established. There are . . . the class differences within the community that I talk about. We’re not drawing too much on the white oppression anymore. It’s the choices you make in your own Indian community now. That’s what’s happening in this one, yes.

**PR:** Are you planning to write only novels, or are you thinking of writing . . . short stories or poetry?

**PM:** No, I enjoy doing novels. I did do a short story that was published many, many years ago in the *Natal Witness*. But I enjoy doing a novel. I like a story unfolding.

**PR:** Do you think you’ll keep writing about the Indian community?

**PM:** I think it’s important to write about what you know. I honestly can’t say where I would go as a writer because you grow with each experience. I just found it interesting to write about the past and grow from there, just follow and see how the Indians have grown and what we’ve achieved and the stumbling blocks that we’ve had. We’ve had numerous stumbling blocks. I mean, up till now you still find we’re stumbling a lot, although we’ve been given so many new opportunities. In all fairness, we have to give blacks a chance as well. They’ve been just as segregated as we were in the publishing [world]. And I think Kwela has done such a wonderful job, because they’ve opened up this whole avenue of nonwhite writers. They’ve really done so.

**PR:** What does India mean for you? What does it mean for your characters, and is the Indian identity we encounter in the novel . . . is it a South African Indian identity? So let me start with the first part: What does India mean for you?

**PM:** It’s my motherland. I haven’t been there, but I do find a sense of Indianness that comes across. It’s just to say, this is where my ancestors have come from. . . . If I do visit the land, I can’t tell you exactly how I would feel, whether I would feel a visitor or part of it, I don’t know until I visit it. So that is a difficult part, but we watch . . . a lot of movies, and I see that there are such differences between Indian Indians and South African Indians. . . . In South Africa, we are truly South African Indians.
PR: Can you explain a little bit what that means, for you, what it means to be South African Indian?

PM: We actually brought about our own identity. We've learned from the land. We've come across people that have taught us differently. We learned so much . . . it's very difficult, actually, to speak our own language. I don't speak any of the Indian languages. I speak English and I can speak a little bit of Afrikaans. That's because we were brought up in this country as South Africans. So I see India as where I have come from . . . but not necessarily as being part of it totally, because I am South African.

PR: And what does it mean for your characters, then?

PM: In *Heart*, they still felt they were from India, and they were fighting for identity in this country. And I think by the end of the novel, after they passed their period of indenture . . . the characters began to feel very South African. . . . When you're actually born here, you become part of the country. I would say, as a South African Indian, I benefited a lot from the country. . . . In the past, our great-grandfathers may have found it very difficult. They've . . . had to fight for what they have. And we because of the fight, we benefited. And especially now, with the new democracy, it has also done a lot for Indians as well.

PR: And I think in this novel you're trying to show the fight that your ancestors fought, [the results of] which now your generation is enjoying.

PM: That's right . . . don't forget that the struggle was there and now we're reaping the rewards off it.

PR: The last part of that question was: is the Indian identity we encounter in this novel a South Africanized one? You've talked about how your own identity is a South African Indian one. Can we talk a little bit about that as it is represented in the novel?

PM: As I said, the South African identity in the novel grew. . . . [I]in the beginning they came in as indentured laborers. They had the opportunity to go back, and they chose . . . to stay and make this home. So they did become South African without losing their Indian identity. Because if you look at tradition, we may not be totally traditional in everything, but we have our culture kept intact.
Interviews

PR: And do you think your characters are like that in some ways? In many ways?

PM: Yes, they never became totally Westernized. They may have become Westernized to improve their lifestyle, but the sense of family and tradition . . . it was still there, it was still there.

PR: Why has South African Indian writing been ignored for so long, both in South Africa as well as . . . abroad?

PM: I’m going to talk from my own personal experience and the feedback that I got when I submitted my work. I didn’t only submit my work to South African publishers. I did try overseas publishers. And they said to me that there was no market for it. The story was very good, very exciting, very interesting, but there was no market. And I thought that was not fair. Because when you say no market, you’re already saying Indian people don’t read. And that I thought was highly insulting, because we very readily read books by white authors, African American authors, black, anything. I read from across the globe. I don’t select, so I thought that was highly insulting. And I think they felt that Indians just don’t [read] so there is no market. It’s not worth publishing a book when they can’t get financial gain from it.

PR: And this was publishers abroad or even South Africa?

PM: Both. I found the door locked . . . a lot in South Africa.

PR: That’s what people said yesterday [at the seminar discussed in the conclusion] too. The same thing, that it’s a perception that Indian writing . . . there’s no market for it. And . . . that’s an erroneous perception, and it’s completely not true. . . . [A]ll the South African Indian fiction that I’ve read, it seems to appeal not just to an Indian audience, but to a much larger audience.

PM: I’ve got some e-mails from Afrikaner white males, African female students, male black students, Indian students, Coloured. They were so excited about the book because they weren’t exposed to what the Indians went through. It was more an education while entertaining them. And it taught them about family values. . . . [I]f you look at the Afrikaner background, it’s very similar to the way we Indians live, in the sense of family relationships and their struggle with the English in this country. So there
was a sense of identifying and realizing it was just the color of your skin that we didn’t relate to.

PR: What would you like a Western . . . as well as a scholarly audience, to know about your work . . . your writing?

PM: It’s more to tell them wherever you go, whoever you are, if you leave your country and settle down into a new country, you must remember you’re putting down roots. And it’s going to be difficult, but if you persevere, and you decide that this is what you want to do, you will be successful.

PR: The one character I was quite fascinated with in your novel is not an Indian character and it’s not Albert. It’s this Zulu woman . . . and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about her, and . . . why you chose to put her in the narrative. What does she stand for? How are we supposed to interpret her?

PM: I came to a point in my story where I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with Rani, whether she should have this baby or not. And surprisingly enough, this person [at] work—it’s so interesting . . . your research gives you new opportunities to create new things, and educate people in your book. . . . I work in the science faculty, and somebody, one of the students, handed in a PhD thesis, and they talked about using herbs and natural products in terms of inducing labor. And I thought this was so wonderful. And I know that the African tradition . . . [i]t’s an old [tradition], and now people in South African society are becoming more into herbal remedies. So it fitted into that. And Sangoma are a people that are highly respected in the Zulu community.

PR: Yet Rani seems a little scared of her?

PM: Yes, because if you meet a Sangoma for the first time, and you’re not exposed to them. . . . [T]hey dress differently. They have all these colorful beads. And . . . it’s an alien sight to an Indian. But they’re actually harmless. And they have such wonderful character. And a Sangoma is somebody who is like blessed. They’re gifted . . . and it just shows you that she comes from a different culture. And her intentions were not evil. . . . She was helping. It’s a different way of saying I can help you. I come from a different world, a different society, but we can come together when there’s a need. That’s what it is actually saying. It doesn’t matter which culture you come from.
Interview with Aziz Hassim

Aziz Hassim is the author of the epic novel *The Lotus People* (2002). Hassim's novel has received much critical acclaim, including the 2001 Sanlam Literary Award for unpublished work. The Lotus People traces the lives of two Indian families through various generations. Set in Durban's Casbah, it captures the diverse spirit of this Indian area with its wide cast of characters as well as recovers the history of the Indian community in South Africa and its participation in the struggle against apartheid.

DURBAN, DECEMBER 28, 2005

PR: What made you write *The Lotus People*? . . . In terms of South African Indian fiction, this is the first novel that can be called an epic . . . because it spans generations, it has the long chronological sweep. So, what made you want to write an epic? Did you plan a big book that spans generations, or did it just take a life of its own?

AH: It took a life of its own. . . . I wanted to write about our people, about what life was like at the time, because I thought it was disappearing and I started off with that in mind and the book just grew on me. . . . I had no idea that it was going to be an epic. I was just writing a story. . . . [T]here is a misunderstanding of the Indians in this country . . . there is a belief here that they came here very much in the same way as the British came, as settlers. The difference, of course, is that the Indians who came here from India came and worked, if they owned a piece of land they bought it, if they put up a building, they built it with their own money. They didn't come with an empire behind them that gave them guns and cannons to take over, so they were not invaders.

PR: But people do see them as the invaders and aggressors, when they were actually the victims. And I think your book does a very, very wonderful job of showing the victimization of the Indians as well as how Indians fought against that victimization and that they were not just the passive victims, they actively agitated against their oppression.

AH: Yes. Mahatma Gandhi did a great job, I think he really revitalized things, but the resistance had started even before then, he gave it a sense of purpose.

PR: You've called this novel your “personal TRC”. . . . [W]hat truth are you trying to tell and who are you trying to reconcile with?
AH: History is recorded by the victors, always. And in South Africa, the truth of the Indian people, the contribution to the freedom struggle, is recorded nowhere. You cannot go and research anything anywhere that will tell you these things; if you go to the old newspapers as a last resort, you’ll find nothing. Because newspapers were all white-controlled, and they, of course, wrote what would please the masters. But I lived it. I’m seventy now so of the one hundred years that I’ve covered, 70 percent of it I was there, and I remember this is wrong, the story of our people has not been told in truth. I have a personal philosophy. . . . I like to believe the truth that remains untold is the beginning of a lie, its just my own philosophy and I felt that this was a truth that had not been told, has never been written about and that’s what I meant when I said it was my personal [TRC]. . . . Also . . . I’ve dedicated the book to Dr. Kesavaloo Goonam. Dr. Goonam was an enigmatic person, while she was very strong on her religion—she was a Hindu—she was a very open-minded person, she contributed greatly to the freedom struggle, which is forgotten, completely forgotten. That is another part of my own odyssey, so to speak, that how can you forget these people? They were the forerunners in the freedom struggle. And that is one of the reasons why I dedicated the [TV version of The Lotus People] series to her.

PR: The second part of my question is, then, who are you trying to then reconcile with? . . . Whites? Blacks? South Africans in general?

AH: I am Indian . . . very Indian. . . . I don’t want it to seem as if I’m being ethnic, I’m not. I just feel as though there was a time when the Indian community was a very united community. If in the forties, 1940s, early fifties, if we were to have an election, we would have had a half a dozen Indian leaders that the whole community regardless of religious background would have voted for. I think we’ve lost that. We’ve lost the ethos of those days, in the sense that we all celebrated Diwali, we all celebrated Eid, we all celebrated Christmas. . . . [T]oday we’ve become a little distanced. If you go out into the townships like Phoenix, Chatsworth, that ethos still remains. But in the city, in the nearby suburbs, some of that is gone, and I am saying why, and I’m trying to reconcile people back to that ethos.

PR: Can you talk a little bit about the title of your novel, The Lotus People? Was it your title? Did the publishers give you the title?

AH: It is my title, in fact I was quite insistent that the title remain for several reasons: one, of course, is that the lotus flower is very Indian. . . . [I]t is the national flower of India. Secondly, from my understanding the
lotus flower grows in the muck. But look what it blooms into and this was
my analogy in a sense. To say the Indian in this country was kept totally
down, wasn't allowed to having a decent living place or whatever, a sort
of muck and look how he bloomed . . . then, of course, there is Greek
mythology, where there were a group of people who were called the lotus
people, I'm not quite sure of my facts here . . .

PR: There are the lotus eaters also . . .

AH: Lotus eaters, who apparently migrated, . . . believed in the truth,
[then] they forgot their origins and forgot their philosophy of speaking the
truth. So there was that influence too.

PR: What role does politics play in your writing? It seems to play a big
role . . . and it seems that you are writing against the dominant political
structure. But perhaps you could talk a little more about that.

AH: I was never a politician. . . . I was never involved in politics, in any
area. I grew up in the streets. . . . I come from a family of traditional bar-
bers from Porbander in Gujrat. Now, barbers, as you probably know, don't
make a lot of money. And mine wasn't a wealthy family; we grew up in
the streets. And I had far more pressing issues, such as making sure there
was food on the table, than going out and getting involved in politics. So
politics per se had no part in my life. But as the years went by, I became
aware of the restrictions that were placed on the people. Of course I lived
in a classified area. And as I said, as I grew, I had my own anger against
the system, but it was a question of priorities. If I had a family that was
self-sufficient, I might have got into politics. But I had greater priorities. I
had to see to my family's security, as opposed to the security of my people
in the community. So I never really got involved in politics, I was never a
political activist myself. That wasn't me.

PR: But this book seems to be . . . an exercise in political activism because
. . . it's a very political novel. It's about the political structures and how
the Indian community has participated in politics. . . . [T]he act of writing
has always been a political act . . . people think that writing is not politi-
cal, like politics is always taking a slogan and board and going out in the
streets but . . . writing is a political act. . . . I wonder if you agree that this
is . . . a very political book . . .

AH: [The Lotus People] is very political. . . . I have this personal philoso-
phy that says the truth that remains unspoken is the beginning of a lie. I
like that and I like living by that. And there are too many truths that have not been spoken by this country. Even the TRC doesn’t bring it out. . . . If a person was truly politically active, somewhere someone would have written about it, even if it was somewhere in the papers. These are the people that I thought were my icons. . . . I just felt that, I’m now seventy years old, when my generation is gone who will remember enough to write? . . . And how many people [who] have lived during those times remember it, or care to remember it? And of those who remember, how many would write? So I thought, maybe do it while I can; fifty years from now it will be on somebody’s shelf who will say, “Hang on, we didn’t know this.” Well, they will then know it. That was my prime purpose.

PR: You also show . . . racial solidarity in your book . . . with Indians joining hands with the blacks. . . . [I]s this again something that happened? Is this reality that you are depicting . . . are you also trying to challenge . . . the stereotypes that I have read about a great deal, that Indians . . . secretly want to be white and they disparage the black people?

AH: Let me just say, what you have said is partly true. But it was a class thing, more than a philosophy . . . insofar as the racial thing is concerned, you have to look at it as two groups of people. You have to look at the Indian, who was wealthy, who lived in . . . suburbs and the majority of the Indians who lived down market, so to speak. That lot that lived down market, there was a very close relationship between the blacks and the Indians, extremely close. We who are from the streets have black friends that we are very, very close to, and we never saw them as being black. There was this philosophy in my days that you were a bru, a bru is a brother. See, that existed . . . to an extent. It was when apartheid took root that it changed. They moved those blacks that were in the city center out of the city and moved whites [into the city].

PR: Let’s move directly into the novel . . . One of the things that I really liked was the language, that there [was] this particular dialect which you were using which seemed to capture the way South African Indians really speak, and there were certain words you used, for someone like me, who is not South African, which . . . I didn’t know. Like “lightee” and “larnee” and I had to figure those out . . . Can you talk a little bit about the language? You seem to capture the spirit of the language and the way people really speak; is that again something you do consciously or is it something that just happened?

AH: I was writing about those times, I had to be true to time and that is
how people spoke, even academics spoke in terms of lightees and larnees and that sort of thing.

PR: Two interesting comments in your novel and I just want to read them out and then we can talk about it a little bit more. On page 415, you say, “The women in our family, [Jake] said turning to Sam. . . . They are the real fighters, put them in the front line and the war.” Then on page 440, Sam says, “[M]y God, these mothers of ours” and then he adds, “[P]ut the women in the front line, that’s what Jake said that night, . . . will we ever learn?” And I was wondering what role women played in this novel?

AH: Indian women have mastered the art of leading by following. I really believe this because the men sat around the place . . . like a rooster in the barnyard, making a lot of noises, shouting and screaming and that sort of thing. But then, by the end of the day, it is a woman that quietly controls things from the background. It is what she says that is carried [out]. She allows him to rant and rave, make his fuss, and then she’ll say, “You know what, this is how it’s going to be.”

PR: Let’s move to children because that’s the other thing I noticed that by the end of the novel it seems like the children almost are calling the shots. . . . I was wondering if you could comment on the end of the novel which was very powerful . . . it worked beautifully for me where the children seem to have taken over the battle of their parents and their parents are sort of on the [fence] . . . ultimately they decide to join the children but . . . they vacillate. . . . a lot. And it’s the children who say, “We’ve got to do this,” and can you comment . . . about that, the end of the novel, with the balance of power . . . shifting to the children?

AH: In the eighties . . . the apartheid government was locking all the leaders up, either sending them in exile, sending them to Robben Island, or putting them in jails . . . and there was a vacuum which . . . was filled by the children, they decided then that they would form their own leadership. . . . There was this mistaken impression that they were fighting for better education. That was not the case; they were fighting for freedom. As I said, they found leaders from within themselves. They had a very good rallying point: the schools. . . . And this was throughout the country, Cape Town, Johannesburg. Durban, the children took up the cudgels, more so after Sharpeville, [when they] saw what was being done. The political icons, the political fighters, were as I said either in Robben Island or wherever they were . . . people like my characters, the Sams and Jasons of the world, were busy making a living, and the children were left to fill the gap.
PR: I’m going to read another quote from the book which I thought was interesting. This is Sam’s mother telling Zain that he is an Indian first and foremost and I wanted to talk a little bit about that. . . . She says, “You my son are an Indian first and foremost, in this country the [others] . . . behave as if that is something you should be ashamed of, don’t let that affect you . . . it’s always a loser, the envious person who resorts to such tactics” (471). Can you talk a little bit about what you mean being an Indian first and foremost? And what it means to be an Indian in this novel as well as in South Africa in general?

AH: . . . If you attend any kind of a function, a Zulu will say, “I’m a Zulu, but I’m a South African.” He won’t say, “I’m a South African, but I’m a Zulu.” An Afrikaner will say, “I’m an Afrikaner” meaning “I’m also a South African.” So would the English: “I’m British originally, but now I’m South African.” And so why can’t I say, “I’m an Indian”? I’m also South African, but I’m an Indian of Indian origin, this is where I come from and I am proud of it. As an Afrikaner or a Zulu or whoever, and I mean, in that light, why can’t I have the same right that they demand for themselves? And that is what I mean by saying, “I’m an Indian.” I’m also suggesting that I’m of a different culture and this has got nothing to do with religion, you can’t confuse a person’s origins and his religion. . . . I gave a talk recently, where somebody asked me, “The way you write, I can’t make up my mind whether you are Hindu, Muslim, Christian; you’re so open about things. Are you Hindu, are you Muslim?” And I said, “Well, I suppose I’m a Muslim for the past one hundred years and I’ve been a Hindu for the [last] five thousand years.” Which is where I’m coming from. . . . And I’m saying, “Yes, I’m an Indian.” I make no apologies for it. I’m a South African, I will fight and give my life for South Africa, but . . . why can I not acknowledge where I came from? When it’s acceptable for the Zulu to say he is a Zulu or the Afrikaner or the British or whoever, or the German, nobody objects.

PR: What you are doing in this book . . . [is] . . . trying to make the Indians proud of being Indians . . . because you’re uncovering all these buried histories of courage, bravery, commitment.

AH: We have everything to be proud of. . . . I don’t see why we should be ashamed of being Indians. But definitely, especially here in South Africa, [the idea exists] that to be an Indian is something to be ashamed of.

PR: Many of the most attractive characters—like I found Jake to be one of the most attractive characters . . . just this incredibly powerful
and charismatic figure—they support violence as a form of resistance. I want to again read out something on page 510 . . . where you specifically talk about passive resistance and the need for some kind of nonpassive resistance, perhaps: “[T]he concept of passive resistance was born in this country, what was the government’s response? You know the answer: they resorted to violence, imprisonment and murder.” And then it says, “So responding to violence with violence is the only option . . . they used violence and force to stay in power, they are not democratically elected, they have no legitimacy as a government” . . . and there is this sense that . . . when you have this brutal oppressive government that doesn’t understand any language other than violence you have to respond with violence. But I was wondering . . . how you would place that in context of passive resistance and Gandhi and nonviolence because those are values that the Indian community all over the world, not just in South Africa but even in India, hold very sacred and dear. . . . Could [you] talk about the role of violence as a means of winning freedom placed against this context of passive resistance?

AH: Know where you are coming from first. Taking the first part, the Indian philosophy of nonviolence always . . . that’s me, that’s my culture, that’s where I’m coming from and I come from Porbander, which as far as I’m concerned is my Mecca . . . that’s where Gandhi comes from. . . . And that is my ingrained philosophy. Then there is the philosophy I acquired out in the streets, where if you survive you fight. Survival required you to fight, you couldn’t, if a man came to you in the night, you couldn’t reason with him and say, “No, hang on, according to our philosophy we can settle this,” I mean, they will kill you. . . . [T]he one is my culture and my people and . . . then [there’s] the violent one in which I grew up in and [in] that environment in the short term, not the long term, but in the short term violence was more effective. In the long term, of course, it didn’t help at all. So that part that you read, Jake is responding with “street-cred,” which is where he grew up, but he’s an Indian and as an Indian he’s got that nonviolent philosophy. But he says, “no, but here it won’t work, because we applied from the time of Gandhi right through almost one hundred years this philosophy of ‘come let’s talk, let’s be civilized about it,’ which got you nowhere.” It suited the apartheid government, “You keep talking I’ll keep taking.” I mean, they’re a bunch of looters. . . . Now, if it didn’t work over those one hundred years then Jake is saying . . . “what do I do but wait another hundred years?” No, this guy has got to fight back. And that is why he responded so violently when they came home and invaded his home to issue that ejection notice, he went and shot the guy . . .
because earlier in the book when he is a little boy, he says, “The only way to handle this is you fight back.” . . . “If you do that,” Sandy says, “if you do that they’ll deliver your body to us.” That’s very early in the book.

**PR:** And they do do that.

**AH:** Exactly that. I am saying that violence does not solve a problem. There is the hidden meaning that there is a guy who said it [that he will fight back with violence] when he was a kid and there you are, his body was delivered, violence did not solve anything. . . . Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence is the only way, but how are you going to get that across to people who come out of the streets?

**PR:** Who come out of such a brutalized atmosphere.

**PR:** You’ve . . . touched on this . . . but if you could just summarize it for me, what role does India play in your literary imagination? So not being Indian in South Africa, but India in South Africa? Does it have a role?

**AH:** No . . . remember, I was born and bred in South Africa, right. My father was born here. India plays a role in the sense that . . . my ancestral home in Porbander is right next door . . . to Gandhi’s home. My Granny and Gandhi were playmates. . . . Now I would listen to my Granny and she’d talk to me about Gandhi, right. . . . I grew up with this belief that I am an Indian first and foremost, and then of course I also became very South African. Because of my life and everything around me. My friends were both white, Coloured, African . . . that perhaps took a bit of the Indianess out of me. Made me more tolerant perhaps, I don’t know. But you must understand . . . and I must be very honest, I’m not an academic, I’m not a philosopher, I wrote what my life was about at the time. Now how it comes out is now how I am, not as a result as some reasoned process.

**PR:** How would you situate *Lotus People* within South African Indian literature as a whole . . . where would you place it . . . what do you think your contribution has been to South African literature?

**AH:** I’ve never thought of it like that . . . I was very chuffed when I got all the reviews . . . very glowing reviews in every newspaper you can think of, and the people who reviewed it were academics. There were some that said it was the first true Indian novel written by an Indian. There were others who said it’s probably the best history, some call it a historical
romance, a historical fiction . . . historically accurate. Stephen Gray, who is probably our greatest literary academic, he wrote at length about it. . . . I get very angry with some of the books that have been written by Indians [in South Africa]. I’m going to finish my second book by the end of January, but this time my character is coming out of the cane fields and the horrors of the cane fields. And I want to be really fair, that whilst the white settlers abused the Indians in the cane field, abused them badly, the Indian merchant class in Durban was equally as bad in the way they abused their own people who worked for them. So one has to be fair.

PR: Why has South African Indian literature traditionally been ignored and what is its future?

AH: Well, what has there been? What Indian literature has there been? I mean there are books like Dr. Goonam’s book (Coolie Doctor) . . . [but there has been] a paucity of Indian writings really. I can’t think of a book, say, twenty years ago, that was written by an Indian.

PR: Ahmed Essop has been writing for a while . . .

AH: Ahmed Essop has been writing for a long, long time. And he got his fair amount of fame or credit for his writing. . . . But we [are talking] about literature as opposed to “a” writer. You’ve got Ahmed Essop, but who else?

PR: Do you think that’s changing, then?

AH: Very fast. It’s changing very, very fast. . . . I went and got a group of businessmen together and I floated what is called the Ronnie Govender literary award, which is an annual award, it has a cash prize of 20,000 rand for anybody . . . I named it after Ronnie because, in fairness, besides the fact that Ronnie’s my friend, I think he has done a lot. . . . [H]e’s a great playwright and that’s important. But I wanted a literary award and I named it after him.

PR: You say your next book is going to be finished in January [2006]; can you just summarize it in a sentence or two?

AH: You see, as you probably know, the Indians in South Africa have been classed into two categories: those who came as indentured servants and those who came as the business class. There is not much—well nothing,
as far as I know, has ever been written of either class. But the indentured
workers who went into the cane fields lived a life that was no better than
the slaves in America. They were flogged, everything. And I don’t think
anybody has bothered to write about that and I don’t know why. So one
of my characters is coming out of the cane fields and the horrors of the
cane fields. It’s a fictional work, but again it’s like The Lotus People, it is
historically accurate. Anything I say in The Lotus People I can back up.
Anything I am going to say in my second novel I’ll be able to back up. See,
historically it’s accurate, but it’s a work of fiction or historical fiction.

PR: And again it seems to be performing the same function as The Lotus
People, which is trying to tell the truth before the silence becomes a lie.

AH: Exactly, exactly. And also to be very objective and fair. We keep saying
the white man did this and the white man did that . . .

PR: But what did we do to ourselves . . .

AH: But what did we do to ourselves. . . . [I]n this context I’m referring
to what I call the “Grey Street Businessman.” Grey Street is, of course,
our Durban’s major street, business street. They had their own system of
slavery but, of course, they . . . were . . . employing Indians and treating
them as slaves. And saying . . . yes the whites were bad but some of our
own guys . . . were not much better . . . and that’s where my two char-
acters are coming from and then they will meet. How it’s going to end, I
don’t know. Although I’m a month away from completion, it’s the comple-
tion part I’m at now. How The Lotus People ended, I never planned it, it
just happens.

PR: What would you like a scholarly audience . . . to know about your
work?

AH: No more than that they read it. . . . [I]f they read it, then they’ll
know where I’m coming from, which will tell them where all the Indians
are coming from.

PR: What would you like . . . a reading audience in America to know
about your work, even a nonscholarly audience?

AH: Well, I’d like them to know, first of all, that the Indian didn’t come
into this country as an exploiter. He came in this country and he built this
country, he made a major contribution in spite of his small numbers. That he imbued this country with a philosophy; Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence was formulated here in South Africa . . . satyagraha was conceived here. . . . I'd like people to know that. It has now become a philosophy that the world should live by.

PR: And which the world doesn't, of course . . .

AH: Doesn't, of course. But wasn't that great in itself that it was formulated here, in South Africa alright. And I think that alone speaks volumes. Here is an Indian, from India, comes to South Africa with the same philosophies that we Indians here live by, and he comes here and he says, "Hang on, I like what my brothers are doing, let me refine their thinking," and he then develops a philosophy of satyagraha. But here. That is what I would like people to know. That forget the greatness of Gandhi for a moment, and the man was great . . . and just look at where that greatness was nurtured: it was here. Prior to that, there was nothing . . . But I'd like the world to know, the scholars to know, hang on if you think Gandhi's philosophy is great, don't you think you should see where it was nurtured? What brought it out? . . . South African Indians. This is what I believe gave birth, this was the fetus that gave birth [to Gandhi].

PR: This is where Gandhi became Gandhi or Gandhi became the Mahatma.

Interview with Ronnie Govender

Ronnie Govender can be credited with inaugurating the genre of South African Indian theater. Govender is the author of plays such as Beyond Calvary; The Lahnee’s Pleasure, also among South Africa’s longest running plays; and At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories, a collection of short stories. At the Edge was published in 1996. The collection describes life in the community of Cato Manor before the Group Area removals; it was awarded the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for the best first book in the Africa region. Govender has also published a novel Song of the Atman (2006) and is working on his memoirs.

CAPE TOWN, JANUARY 2, 2006

PR: How does your fiction differ from your plays? Do you tell the same
stories in both mediums? . . . [H]ow are the pressures of writing drama different from the pressures of writing short stories?

**RG:** I would say that my experience with writing plays actually certainly stood me in good stead in writing these short stories [At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories]. For one . . . I think literature is about economy. And that is no more so than on the stage. . . . [Y]ou’re presenting the whole world, a whole time span, in an hour and a half, or so. So that discipline assisted me in the writing of these short stories. But it is a different genre. It affords you so much more opportunity to explore . . . which, of course, . . . you can’t do on stage. Stage you do the actual action . . . so that would, in essence, be . . . the linkage that there is from my playwriting past to my tackling fiction.

**PR:** And do you write about the same themes and the same issues . . . ?

**RG:** I’ve been called a political writer . . . and I make no apologies for that. I believe that a writer must have a political consciousness . . . that’s apart from a very narrow, parochial kind of politics, politics dealing with personal power. . . . I think politics governs our entire lives. This is what it’s all about. So if you don’t have a kind of political consciousness, the characters and people in your work are in limbo. . . . [F]or them to be three dimensional . . . the backdrop, the landscape, the life that they live, and they grew up in, is political . . . between some of the accusations that have been leveled at me, conveniently by those people who have resented my works and who call themselves critics but who are actually upholders of the establishment viewpoint. . . . They found it convenient to label me as . . . as a protest writer. I am a protest writer, in a sense. But I’m not this one-dimensional pamphleteer or propaganda machine. And I tell the stories of people. I tell stories, essentially, but I don’t ignore the fact that the people that I write about come from a certain milieu, a socioeconomic political reality. And you can’t ignore that, you see, and if that shows through, then I would have succeeded. For in that, my writing is political.

**PR:** But there is an aesthetic element which seems to be important to you in your work . . . in your short stories?

**RG:** Very important. I think that is implicit in my work. I strive for that, and I hope I have achieved that . . . some time back there was a professor, a French professor, who incidentally, I think, translated my play, The
Lahnee’s Pleasure, into French. And he noted the difference between the general kind of protest play that was extant in South Africa and my play The Lahnee’s Pleasure. As far as he was concerned, it was a story, essentially, a story.

PR: I want to talk a little bit about the composition of these stories. . . . I understand that you composed these stories in the sixties? Was that the case?

RG: Well . . . the memories have been there from childhood and I reduced them to stories whenever I had the opportunity. Of course, I [wrote] in my spare time, it would mean at four o’clock in the morning because my day was packed with lots of other activities. And so, whenever I had the opportunity, I would tackle a story and put it away. And, not realizing that it would be published as a collection . . . the more important thing for me was to get these stories done . . . because Cato Manor was destroyed, willfully destroyed by human greed. And there were all these wonderful people, those wonderful memories. And I didn’t want them to die.

PR: And you didn’t want them to fade from record. So what was the period in which you were writing them?

RG: . . . Well, I think most of them were finished in the fifties . . . sixties.

PR: When you were going to publish these finally, did you revise them in any way? Did you rewrite them or rework them?

RG: Largely not. But I did tamper with them a little bit during publication. . . . I saw opportunities . . . to enhance the story a little bit here and there. . . . [O]ne of the things that one strives for is that the word becomes . . . [the] purveyor of everything, the feeling and all that.

PR: . . . Should I, as a reader, think of them . . . as about the apartheid period? Or while you were editing them in the postapartheid period, [did] a postapartheid consciousness ever enter the way that you edited them? Because I find it fascinating that these were written in the apartheid period, so reflecting . . . the sensibility of that time, but they were published only in the postapartheid period.

RG: . . . In this instance, I dramatized the stories in the early eighties.
So it was published in a sense . . . [but] I didn’t interfere with the sense of what I meant. . . . I would hesitate to designate it as an apartheid collection. I would much rather say it was about people . . . living in the apartheid times.

PR: What does Cato Manor mean to you, in particular, and to the Indian community in general? So obviously as an entity, Cato Manor, as a community, occupies this really powerful meaning in your psyche, which is why you wanted to preserve these memories in literary form. So if you could talk about that meaning a little bit, both to you as a writer and as an Indian, and also, if it has any meaning to the Indian community in general.

RG: I was born and raised in Cato Manor. I was schooled in Cato Manor. And . . . [there was] this traumatic experience of suddenly being forced out, families being kicked out. One hundred eighty thousand people, peremptorily kicked out at somebody’s whim. It was soul crushing, of course. And for me, a devastating blow. It destroyed an entire community. A community that had made itself self-sufficient, picked itself up by its own bootstraps. I recall those things. I recall how they struggled against penury, despite apartheid, and succeeded against the odds. I mean, they built their own schools. . . . And produced people of outstanding caliber in the different fields: education, sport, in all walks of life. And then suddenly there was this wonderful community that was just shattered overnight. And . . . this stays with me. . . . You’re born in a place, and you’re raised in a place, and you have an attachment to that place, but in life generally people go on. One place is just like the other. But when something like this happens, it gives you a very special kind of linkage to that place.

PR: It seemed like Cato Manor, for me, as a symbol, also represented . . . the success of a community and the harmonious life that a community lead before it was . . . exploited.

RG: Yeah, the burgeoning kind of racial interaction that was taking place, which, if left unhindered, it would have led to a South Africanism which we so dearly long for.

PR: The second part of my question was what role does Cato Manor play for the [Indian community]? . . . Does it have any kind of significance in the mind of the Indian community . . . as it does in your mind?
RG: I can’t answer that question . . . in an objective way because . . . things like that have to be researched. . . . But interestingly, when I went out to schools to talk . . . and the kind of responses I had from children. . . . They’re very . . . wonderful responses. Children responding to things they didn’t know about and [that were] initially dead to them. And [those things were] suddenly coming alive and [they were] seeing this community and understanding where they, themselves, come from. It was wonderful. It was like an awakening for them. . . . And of course also the dispelling of all these distortions about ethnic culture, all that kind of nonsense.

PR: Moving into this collection now, I noticed that—this is just my observation—but the stories seem to get more political, obviously political, as they moved along. So we ended with the story about the Group Areas Act, “Over My Dead Body,” which I think is the most obviously political story in the entire collection, though I think all the stories are political. But politics seem to be more of an undercurrent in some of the stories, and as we move along they seem to get more and more political till [the political tension] culminates in this story, which is about political upheaval and political oppression . . . but did you do this deliberately, this kind of progression where the last story is the most overtly political story?

RG: I think possibly I was governed by . . . again, the discipline that I gained from writing plays.

PR: So like a climax, usually.

RG: In a sense. . . . And I’m happy that it came over in a kind of organic fashion, rather than a kind of contrived, forced way.

PR: What is the significance of the title At the Edge? And I’m wondering if we can use this idea of being “at the edge” as a way of thinking about the collection as a whole.

RG: . . . I witnessed this incident of exorcism on my grandmother and the tremendous spiritual kind of power . . . I witnessed this, you see. And for me, that was, for me, [who had been] rebelling against all the myths and ritual and things like this as a young man; suddenly I had been brought up to the edge of . . . prevailing realities. And you suddenly were at the edge of another kind of consciousness. Perhaps this was also a metaphor for Cato Manor’s destruction and people being pushed to the edge.
PR: And also Cato Manor itself, because it’s being demolished. Existing on the edge of memory and reality. So there’s always that. Again, I thought, as a title it really worked well for me. And I somehow had this idea of being at the edge constantly on my mind.

RG: It’s a pity you didn’t see the play.

PR: And the play was called At the Edge, too, right? And it was about the same story?

RG: . . . I was concerned [when the play At the Edge was being performed] because I had been accused, also, of being culturally specific . . . again, these terms come up . . . when people like James Joyce or Chaucer or Shakespeare write about culturally specific things, we have to accept that—

PR: As universal.

RG: As universal. But when we do the same thing, perhaps with even greater clarity, we are looked down upon for being culturally specific. It’s something that I always have resisted. So I was worried about that. And people here, who I think, to an extent, had been indoctrinated, who had lost their own souls in this Eurocentric kind of supremacist kind of atmosphere that you’re brought up in . . . the West is great [as is] the English language, which itself was procreated in terms of the conquest through the colonies. . . . And I resisted this. I said no. I said, we have a legitimacy. Although I write in English, but I write about what is ours. . . . But generally . . . these people themselves had been so colonized in their thinking. And I then I myself got a bit concerned about it. But when it played in Edinburgh and I saw Scottish women weeping at the scene, the one where my grandmother tends to the sick lady. . . . To me, that was a transformation . . . here was something that was transported from a small little place in Cato Manor, and Scottish women in Edinburgh were reacting to it.

PR: The other thing that I really liked about this collection was the use of humor and satire so that even when . . . you had these high tragic moments in your short stories, there was also this undercurrent—well, not undercurrent—I think it was a very obvious “overcurrent” of humor and satire. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.
Does that again come from your drama and is that again something you are consciously trying to do? And what does it achieve for you?

RG: . . . I come from a background that celebrated life. . . . I look at my uncles and they were boxing, great boxing, champions, and they were fishermen and things like that. And the women in our family are strong women . . . coping with all . . . the poverty around us, etc., the lack of opportunity, and all that. But they never lost the sense of themselves, their sense of humor. I was reared in that kind of thing. And it struck me quite consciously later . . . when you look back at many of the things you've done in the past, and what you will have considered embarrassingly painful or even something that you were very upset with, you can look back at it from a distance and see the humor in it. At the end of the day . . . things pass. And so I think, it's to look at something in totality, not just in isolation.

PR: Let’s talk about women. You already mentioned strong and powerful women, but I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the women in your stories. Because I noticed many of your stories are women-centered, and your women characters are, to use a phrase that you just used, very three-dimensional. And they’re very strong women characters who I think often challenge the stereotype that we have of Indian women—and not just in South Africa—but all over. So could you talk a little bit about the women characters and why you depict them the way that you do?

RG: You must understand one thing about so-called Indian culture . . . just look at the kind of sexism that exists. There’s no denying that there’s heavy sexism, again, entrenched through mythology. . . . But how women themselves have coped with this kind of heavy repression and not only just survived, I think, but have triumphed. . . . [T]o a great extent, Indian culture and religion have been manipulated to maintain a kind of sexism. And as opposed to that there have been these strong women that have really sought their own dignity and have achieved it. And I look at my grandmother. . . . When my grandfather died she was left with a huge family and how she not only just survived but . . . she was so strong culturally. She passed this on to her children and this is recalled a little bit in my book Song of the Atman. . . . It’s passed on, the strength. And women are very much part of that. I look at my grandmother. I look at my mother, and I can think of the day when at the age of fifteen, I watched my mother, I stood and watched my mother making the bed, taking it for granted. . . . And then I had to look at myself and say . . . what a chauvinist I am.
And I must confess I do retain some of that chauvinism even up till now. Happily my daughter . . . is a member of parliament, and she grew to be very strong . . . and has been acknowledged as one of the strong gender activists in the country and internationally also.

PR: Moving on to children. I’ve noticed that many of your stories use the figure of the child . . . “Incomplete Human Being,” “Heavy Weights,” “The Cosmic Clash,” “Call of the Muezzin,” I loved those stories also. And [they all use] . . . boys barely out of adolescence . . . was it deliberate? And what does the figure of the child suggest and mean to you as a literary idea?

RG: We have these quaint notions as to what it is to be grown up. What does it mean to be grown up? Does it mean carrying on with some of the forced notions of the past, which we’ve fixed in convention? Sexism, for instance. We just accept that. . . . Even up till now, you go to an Indian function, you see the Indian women on one side and the men on the other, knocking it back, and the women in the kitchen. Sometimes this is done quite—to use this word again—naturally. But all those things continue. This subscribing to weird dogma. Is that grown up? And prejudices, racial prejudices and things like that. Is that grown up? Or fixed ideas. Is that grown up? . . . And then look at the child and the freedom in that child. . . . I look at my grandson, and I see this wonderful, this gregarious approach to life. And to me that’s wonderful. That’s a celebration of life.

PR: So you think the child is a celebration of life?

RG: . . . The child is so much closer to nature, and, this may be a cliché, but very much so.

PR: The next question is about Indian identity. . . . What kind of Indian identity are you presenting in this collection? Is it a pure Indian identity or a South Africanized Indian identity, and how is it South Africanized, if you do say it is so?

RG: I don’t consciously set out to posit a specific kind of position on that aspect of identity. But, in thinking about it quite consciously, if you look at the forces that seek to make you an alien from the hearth that you were born in and should belong to, and then you look at the historical kind of processes from which you, yourself, emerge . . . we cannot deny that these things [such as identity] impact on our consciousness. And I suppose they
play a major role in your affiliation to a society and a nation. And if you look at what happened after liberation—when the Natal Indian Congress had to go out of existence, in pursuit of its own aims of an egalitarian society [because] it was an anomaly to have an Indian people in the opposition. But [now] you're in the classic situation where the people themselves hadn't been conscientized against the very forces . . . that impacted on their lives . . . this kind of racial consciousness. So on the one hand, you have this theoretical kind of thing [the advent of democracy]. On the other hand, you have the reality of lingering prejudices and lingering habits. And it was a political thing. And you needed to address that. And what you had was immediately after liberation, when you had your first elections, and you had Indian people, who in the past had participated in the fight against colonialism—they actually led, in some instances—this massive uprising against colonialism and against apartheid. And they made huge sacrifices . . . and they joined in the liberation front. And suddenly they were voting right wing [in the postapartheid elections]. They were voting for the Democratic Party. What happened? What happened to this community during the [postapartheid] elections. During the Tricameral elections [in 1984; set up to divide the nonwhite groups], they returned a poll of under 4 percent. Probably a record in the world for an election of that kind. What happened? This struck me. What happened in the meanwhile [from the Tricameral elections to the postapartheid elections]? Did it happen because it was an Indian community, and such? Or did it happen [because they were] leaderless, in a sense? So . . . again now, because of this, it was a question of knowing who you are and what you are. . . . And there were disturbing tendencies, in which even within the Indian community you had very strong say Hindi movements, Tamil movements, Gujarati movements, Muslim movements . . . and that was very disturbing.

PR: And you think that the community that you present here in this book shows a more unified Indian community?

RG: Organically what was happening was that they were a people that were interacting, living together, getting to know each other, and understanding each other. And poor people, living cheek by jowl, begin to see each other . . . as they really are and form very strong bonds and relationships. It's bound to happen.

PR: We've talked about what role politics play in your writing. I'd like to flip that around and talk a little bit about what role art plays in political
liberation, and how does fiction achieve this differently from drama?

RG: Let me answer by pointing to that fact that throughout history, in terms of conquest, you kill ideas. And you can [then] . . . subjugate a people. And art is all about ideas. Art is about challenging the frontiers of life, the conventions of life, looking for . . . meaning in things and trying to get to grips with this wonderful thing called life. And going beyond all those . . . self-imposed kind of barriers. So you stop a man thinking, and you can imprison him. You imprison his mind; you imprison his soul; you imprison his body. And so art can therefore be dangerous.

PR: So art is a very powerful force in political liberation?

RG: Very powerful. And in South Africa there was a conscious move to deny people their own sort of cultural development.

PR: And how do you think fiction achieves this political liberation differently from drama?

RG: I think drama [can inspire people], because of the fact that things happen before one on stage. And you’re part of something that is happening. It has a great immediacy in that sense.

PR: What does fiction have that compensates for this sweeping in the moment?

RG: I would hesitate to box things, put things into neat little boxes because again . . . a few lines can be . . .

PR: Of poetry can stir you up.

RG: Can stir you . . . “Don’t go soft into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

PR: Why has South African Indian writing, across genres—I think theater has got more attention than fiction—but why has it been ignored for so long? Because people are now increasingly aware of the white writers—and I’m speaking from a western perspective, living in the U.S.—everyone knows Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, André Brink, and Athol Fugard. Now . . . gradually people are getting to know black, as in African, writers more. Somehow South African Indian writers get left out. They got left
out in the apartheid period, and they’re getting left out even in the post-apartheid period. Can you comment on that?

RG: Well . . . speaking for myself, I’ve had to make choices. I was one of the pioneers of the cultural boycott. . . . [W]e felt that we should close ranks against this crime against humanity, which meant . . . a sacrifice in one form or the other. Comrades were dying so . . . for a writer, the best possible thing that can happen is exposure for your work, whether it’s to stage a play to audiences or to get your work published. When my play *The Lahnee’s Pleasure* in the seventies became South Africa’s longest-running play [with] the most number of performances . . . I had to make a choice. I was invited to London with the possibility of that becoming a film, in which case it would have preceded *East Is East* by about three decades. And it’s a similar thing . . . very based on the kind of dislocation of a community. And it’s a comedy. Yes, I had to make a choice. If I went overseas I would have got more exposure as a young writer then, which . . . I think every writer needs . . . international exposure. I turned it down, consciously, as opposed to other people, some of the names you mentioned, who went overseas. And I’m not, for one moment, saying that they didn’t do any good because . . . much of their work was seen outside and attention was drawn to the [injustice of the] country. . . . But . . . as a writer, you’re not above the struggle. . . . In one way or the other, you have to be part of this completely, and so I had to make the choice. I spoke to Lewis Nkosi and . . . we were talking about it. And Lewis said, “no . . . you should have [shown] your work overseas.” He had a view, you see, that was different from mine altogether. I don’t know whether I did the wrong thing. It certainly deprived me of great exposure at that time, which would have meant . . . opportunities, etc. But that’s the choice I had to make. I can’t speak for the other writers. When we started our theater group, we started in a back room. We had nothing. We didn’t have any kind of facilities, no funding whatsoever. And we were dealing with a community which was its own worst enemy. And we had to get them to believe in themselves. And this is why we consciously wrote plays that dealt with our lives . . . so I think that, in my case . . . support for the cultural boycott did, in fact, prevent my work from being seen by a white audience.

PR: What would you like an academic . . . audience to know about your work? Both your fiction as well as your [plays]?

RG: What any audience, anywhere in the world, [should know]: I would want them to be able to celebrate with me the people that I write about
and experience their joys, their sorrows, their failures, their achievements. And to look with them and to see life from . . . the viewpoints of these very many people that I write about or create. [Also that] I’m deeply conscious of . . . the fact that part of the oppressive machinery is stereotype. And I think that the Indians have been particularly subjected to the stereotype. Mississippi Masala, I thought was a horrendous portrayal of the Indian stereotype. The Indian male was presented as a wimp. And . . . there are prejudices in the community . . . there are very strong prejudices also in the caste systems . . . but that doesn’t mean that other communities do not have their own prejudices also. There’s nothing very special about the Indian community . . . Mississippi Masala presents the Indian as a . . . weak, weak person, prone to this kind of racist behavior. And a wimp also . . .

PR: When it comes to theater, and also South African Indian theater and literature, you’re very much the forerunner . . . you’ve really inaugurated South African Indians into theater. What would you say has been your contribution to the world of letters in general and to Indian writing in particular?

RG: I hope my writing speaks for itself . . . every writer wants . . . the widest possible audience.

PR: I think your work, your plays in particular—from all the Indian writers that I’ve spoken to—they really seem to have inspired other people to write and to know that . . . their stories are important and that people want to hear their stories.

RG: Whenever I hear this, it really . . . warms my heart. And I hear it quite often from young people, and when I go to schools, particularly, and children come up to me, saying things like . . . your work made me feel proud to be an Indian. Now . . . proud to be an Indian. What does that mean? . . . [T]he wonderful things that are there in our scriptural legacies, in our cultural legacies . . . the universality of the essence of Indian culture . . . the striving for moksha or liberation and this oneness of life. Those things mustn’t remain hidden . . . nice cultural artifacts to be celebrated every now and then. They must be living, a living thing.

PR: And the last question is . . . your future projects. You say that you’ve written a novel that’s going to come out in March [2006]. What else are you working on?
RG: I’m writing my memoirs. . . . It’s kind of a rambling account of things I was involved in, various things, and my growing up. I’m quite enjoying it. I’ve attempted to write this in the third person. I don’t know how that’s going to work. . . . So I’m looking at this guy who gets himself into one mess after another. I’m calling it In the Manure.