WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

A Conversation with Yasmine Gooneratne (1994)

R.P. Rama, with a new introduction by Gillian Dooley

Yasmine Gooneratne with Gillian Dooley at Viharagala Bungalow, Sri Lanka, November 2018

***Gillian Dooley writes**:*

Yasmine Gooneratne, literary scholar, novelist and poet, was born in Sri Lanka, educated there and at Cambridge, and moved to Sydney in 1972. She taught at Macquarie University for many years and has published more than 20 books and many essays and articles. Sri Lanka has always been a part of Gooneratne's literary world. As a scholar she has done extensive and impressive research on the cultural and literary history of Ceylon, and her three novels all approach Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans in different ways. Her most Australian novel is her first, A Change of Skies*, published by Pan Macmillan Australia in 1991, which concerns the migration of a Sri Lankan academic and his wife to Sydney.*

In November 2018 I was lucky enough to be among a group of Australian scholars who visited the historic Viharagala Estate Bungalow in Haputale, in the beautiful south-facing central highlands of Sri Lanka. The bungalow was built in 1876 and is now owned by the Gooneratne family. We held a mini-conference there, and were delighted that Yasmine Gooneratne was present for the occasion and throughout our visit. I had decided I would give a paper on Yasmine's work and its links with both Australia and with Jane Austen, and in the course of my research I came across this fascinating interview with Dr R.P. Rama of Rajasthan University, Jaipur, published in SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies *in 1994 (Volume 38, no. 1). The interview was conducted in Sydney in 1994 and discusses the genesis* A Change of Skies *in some detail, along with a discussion of the state of postcolonial studies in Australian universities in the 1990s.*

Dr Rama has kindly given permission for us to reprint the interview.

A Conversation with Yasmine Gooneratne. R.P. Rama (1994). Introduction by Gillian Dooley.
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***R.P. Rama writes**: Shortly before my first visit to Australia I had read Yasmine Gooneratne's* A Change of Skies *during a stay at Mussorie in June 1992. The present interaction recorded here, however, took place in Sydney. It was a beautiful winter morning and Yasmine Gooneratne generously shared her reflections with me.*

R: Perhaps I could start by asking you to say something about your novel, *A Change of Skies*.

YG: Many people have asked me if *A Change of Skies* is an autobiographical novel. My answer is, I have certainly drawn on my own experiences, and those of my family, as well as those of people we know, people from many different cultures as well as people from South Asia, so from that point of view it is very closely related to fact. At the same time, I was writing fiction, and fiction of a special genre, too, that of satirical comedy. As a result, everything in the book is a little bit exaggerated, because satire makes its points through exaggeration.

In 1986 I published a book that was autobiographical in nature, an account of my late father's family.[1] I think that was a significant step for me towards writing fiction, because I'd never tried writing fiction except in the form of short stories, never a sustained long book. There are a number of strong personalities in my family, real 'characters', people who did all kinds of strange things, not always people that one could be proud of, but then again quite often they were. One or two were scholars, several were lawyers and judges, others wrote, painted, travelled, or made careers in politics, and in the arts and sciences. As one of my cousins, a Cambridge criminologist, reminded me, 'Don't forget we have some spectacular criminals in the family as well as patterns of propriety'. So in drawing such characters from life, recreating them in my own words and in theirs, I was creating near-fictions, and placing them in a social context, as novelists do.

The members of my father's family are very interesting conversationalists, and as a child at family occasions I was listening all the time. And observing too, I suppose. I am delighted that this book has been so successful. It was published in 1986, in Britain and in the United States, had wonderful reviews in both countries and in Sri Lanka, and is still being cited and read.

So, when I came to write about Asian characters in Australia, I drew once again on family story and legend. There is a story in my father's family dating back to the 1880s, about a headstrong young man who quarreled with the father, walked out of the house, and disappeared for five years, at the end of which he came back having developed skills he certainly hadn't had when he left. He had developed, for instance, an unusual understanding for livestock: he knew how to control a charging bull. And, so I'm told, it turned out that he had spent five years in Australia.

And then there's the well-documented history of the one occasion on which about 500 Sri Lankan people sailed to Australia, having entered into contracts to work on Queensland sugar plantations. The ship in which they sailed was the SS Devonshire, and these people had been recruited at the suggestion of British settlers who had made fortunes opening up Sri Lanka's coffee plantations in the 1860s, and now expected to make a second financial killing in Australia.

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[1] *Relative Merits. A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1986).

It occurred to me that if I could get my angry young man to stow away on the Devonshire, a family legend and historical fact could be bought together in a fiction. That's one side of the novel, the nineteenth-century side. The contemporary side is provided by a young Sri Lankan academic and his wife who opt to spend five years in New South Wales, he having accepted a position in a university that is quite like Macquarie University – although, of course, it isn't Macquarie only, but contains elements from many campuses in Australia and overseas. (A Canadian colleague, has told me he 'recognised' the yellow-brick road that leads one through the campus at the University of Guelph in Ontario.)

As for how the story got written: around the time of the Australian Bicentennial celebrations, graffiti appeared in the streets and on university walls which included many deeply insulting references to Asians in Australia. Much of this seems to have been inspired by remarks that had been publicly made by senior Australians who were at that time very well-known in political and academic life as well as in the media. The result was a full-scale 'Immigration Debate' conducted in the press, in the course of which all 'Asians', whether they were visitors, immigrants, boat-people, business persons, or fourth-generation Chinese and Indian Australians, came to be pictured as enemy aliens, potentially destructive of Australian (Eurocentric) cultural values.

Now, we have a number of young people from Malaysia and Singapore studying at Macquarie, and their bewilderment and their hurt reactions to what I can only characterise as an outrageous assault on their peace of mind reminded me of an incident that occurred during my own years as a postgraduate student at Cambridge University: it was in the early 1960s, and Mr Enoch Powell, a British politician with distinguished academic background, was making speeches about immigration, warning that London streets would run with blood if West Indian and Asian immigrants were not repatriated. I heard him on radio, and for the first time in my life I, who had up to that time felt very much at home in Britain, as well as in the English literary tradition in which I had been educated, felt dispossessed. I have never, since that time, been able to regard with complete respect a society in which such views went largely unchallenged.

Knowing in 1972 rather less than I do now of Australians' problematic relations with the Chinese people who came here to work in the goldfields, I had responded warmly to my Australian neighbours' and colleagues' openness and friendliness to newcomers. The events for 1988 therefore surprised and deeply disappointed me – I knew Britain to be insular and racist (individuals always excepted, of course), but I had thought better of Australia! It was, altogether, a very sad and disillusioning experience that I and many other Asian Australians went through in 1988. Laughter, however, is a great medicine for all ills of the spirit, and I wrote a story to get those feelings out of my system, and called it 'How Barry Changed His Image'.

There are two south Asian characters in the story who bring to their Australian experience all sorts of anti-Australian bigotry learned during their past as British subjects: as you know, many English-educated South Asians absorbed attitudes that made them often more British than the British! They then bend over backwards to conform to what they see as Australian cultural values, changing their names, their car, their suburb, their way of life, the very idiom of their speech. I felt that if my innocently insular, unconsciously racist Asian characters were to come up against fictional Australians who were racist themselves, largely due to their own colonial hang-ups, maybe they'd cancel each other out. I sent the story off to *Meanjin* which, to

my great surprise, accepted it enthusiastically for its 'Writers in the Park' special issue, and asked me to read it at the launch of that issue in Sydney.

Then came an interesting surprise: I received a proposal from an Australian film producer who had been present at the launch. She wanted to make a film of it. Now, this was very exciting, but I am an admirer of R.K. Narayan, and I have read his wonderful description of what happened to his novel *The Guide* when movie-makers turned it into a film. I didn't care for the idea that somebody else, however skilled, would be developing my characters before I'd had a chance to develop them myself. So I began working on my story with some urgency, and found that one of my characters – Jean – developed in what seemed to me a very remarkable way. In the short story she is a beautiful, rather vain air-head, an unreliable narrator, a butt for satire. But as the novel developed, she grew into a person with a mind and a heart, someone I could really believe in and respect.

As a result of that experience, I find the whole writing process very interesting.

R: A reader in another country, Canada or India, would become aware of a well-read sensibility. I mean there must be many books behind this book.

YG: There is twenty years' experience, first of all, but there are many books behind this book. And I have a background similar to yours – training in English literary reading.

R: What is the field you researched in?

YG: My first inclination, in researching for a PhD degree, was to write on a favourite British author – Jane Austen or Dickens. When I discussed these ideas with my father (he was fiercely nationalist in a kind of British way – if you can imagine such a contradiction), he said: 'Why do you want to write the 500th book on Jane Austen? Why don't you write on Ceylon?' (Of course Sri Lanka was still 'Ceylon' then: it was 1959.)

Writing a thesis that traced the development of a colonial English-language literature from 1815 to the last 1870s taught me a good deal about my own homeland and about the colonial and post-colonial experience that – intensively English-educated as I am – I had not really thought about until then. Other contributing books – well, Jane Austen, her themes and her methods have always provided me with an ideal of good and responsible writing. (Two of the very nicest things that have happened to me – of a literary kind – are, that I was given the chance to write a book about Jane Austen for Cambridge University Press in the 1970s, and invited twenty years later to be the Patron of the Jane Austen Society of Australia.) Austen's novels, the poetry of Pope, the essays and stories of R. K. Narayan, and the fiction of V.S. Naipaul and of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. I suppose there is some significance in the fact that the writers I admire most are all serious writers with a highly developed sense of comedy. I am fortunate in having been given opportunities to write on all of them. I took special satisfaction in writing on Jhabvala: she is not very popular in India, and I was keen to try and set the record straight.

R: She has a good circle of admirers, and Indians did appreciate her screenplays very much.

YG: I think that at the time – which was long before 1975 when she suddenly attracted world attention by writing her novel *Heat and Dust* – she was still seen as an Indian writer. After I read *A New Dominion*, I became deeply interested in her work. I met her for the first time when I visited New Delhi for a conference in 1977. Then Orient Longman suggested that I write a book about her, which gave me a chance to read everything I could by her and about her. We have continued to keep in touch, though she now spends most of each year in the United States.

R: You mean your India and her India would converge at some point, would you say that?

YG: Well, she sees and writes about life in India – and now about life in New York – from the point of view of a European, whereas I see India and the world, I suppose, from the point of view of someone born and educated in the south Asian region. Maybe I was in a good position to write a book about her because, as a non-Indian myself, I could understand her 'European' mentality better (perhaps) than most India-born critics might. I also happen to have sympathy for what her family must have gone through as Polish Jews in Nazi Germany. Ruth Jhabvala deals with tragic problems through comedy and humour, she makes serious points in an amusing way. Also, while studying her early novels I learned very quickly that she had used Jane Austen for her own purpose: her first novel, *Amrita*, is clearly *Mansfield Park* in an Indian setting. So I may have recognised in her work certain technical possibilities that carried a message for me. I deeply admire her writing, her themes and that very subtle technique.

R: Your novel is different.

YG: Oh, very much so. For one thing, we are probably very different in temperament. And then again, I am (unlike the writers I admire) a professional teacher of English literature. Since I came to Australia, which was twenty years ago, I've been teaching the eighteenth-century – Dryden, Pope, Dr Johnson, Goldsmith, Fielding, Sheridan, Austen – all those eighteenth-century satirists. And in the second half of nearly every academic year I've been teaching a course titled 'Modem English Writing of Asia'. This gives me a chance to get acquainted with, and introduce my students to, writers from Indonesia, India, Japan, China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. This has been very instructive for me, as a writer.

Take R.K. Narayan – he uses English without strain to create convincing and endearing south Indian characters. There's Raja Rao's work, Rushdie's Midnight's Children, Ishiguro writing of Japan. All in all, coming to Australia has been a great educational experience. I don't think I would have had a chance to undertake such diverse teaching if I had staying on in Sri Lanka.

R: What about women's experiences in literature? Women's literature, or women's studies, whichever way you like to put it?

YG: The interest in women's studies here is very great. My reading tells me that Australian women of the 1950s were not unlike Sri Lankan women of the same period, in the sense that in both societies women seem to have believed their proper place was in the home, and their main purpose in life was to make a good mother and establish happy, healthy families. There seems to be quite a sizeable portion of Australian women who would rather not be thought feminists,

because to them the word stands for everything unfeminine. But in the intellectual world, especially the Australian academic community, there are many outstanding women academics, and of course a large number of outstanding women writers in Australia, so that it would be impossible to ignore them. I am told by my women colleagues that the Australian academic world is very much a male-dominated one. If this is the case, I have to say that I do not feel myself to have been adversely affected by it. I have never felt myself put down or held back in what I wanted to do by the fact that there were men at the senior level. In fact I was very much encouraged by my first Australian head of department – the late Professor H.W. Piper was a Coleridge scholar who valued research, and was interested in building a good department. When you published something, he regarded it as something to celebrate. This is not always the case among senior academics, male and female, who quite often regard research activity in their younger colleagues as a challenge to their own expertise and reputation. I think I have been fortunate, on the whole, in my colleagues at Macquarie.

R: And your experience of society in general?

YG: The women writers I've read tend to be no longer reluctant to take very strong individual points of view. They don't toe any party line. I have come across very few writers who take what male readers might call an aggressively feminist point of view. Feminists are often pushed into being aggressive, and stridency can become very boring. When that happens, readers shut off, and that's a pity.

R: In your novel I observe that you take quite a few narrative stances. In a way, it's multi-layered, and the women's persona is not insistent but is quite strong at the same time.

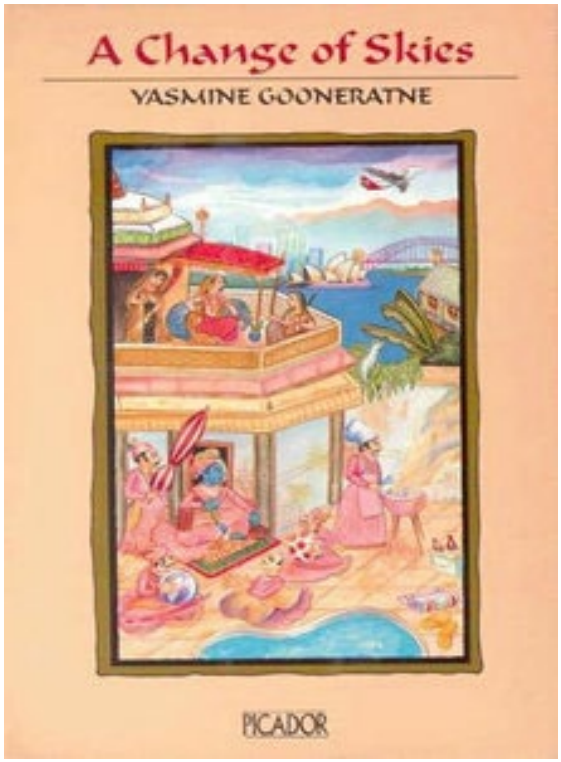
YG: I have always been interested in the theatre, and fascinated by the idea of talking in many voices, different voices. For instance, since I was writing a novel set in Australia, I thought I would like to present not only Australian characters but Australian narrators, reflect Australian speech without stereotyping. That's how Bruce Trevally entered *A Change of Skies* as one of the narrators.

As regards the development of the women's persona, this was made interesting for me by the fact that I approached the problem through a favourite Indian fairy tale, the story of Dorani a merchant's daughter and skilled musician who married a prince, but maintained a secret artistic life by escaping on a flying chair to the paradise of Brindavanam, and playing her veena there for the pleasure of the gods. The idea of flight provided an appropriate metaphor for my Asian travellers, who are also 'in transit', and the fairytale as it first appears is related by my Edwardian 'angry young man' as a tale of masculine gallantry and adventure. At the end of the book, however, Jean's daughter Edwina remembers her mother telling her the same fairytale as a bedtime story, and we find that in the retelling the emphasis has changed: the story of Dorani is now a document about the choices which life bestows on women, especially artists and other creative personalities.

Many Asian women who move away from their conservative societies to the West find, over the years, that they have developed a life and interests of their own. They have become

individuals in their own right, and can no longer see themselves as having no existence outside being somebody's daughter, wife or mother.

R: In relation to the fairytale element, I would like you to comment on the painting on the cover of the novel, which to some is very puzzling.



YG: I am very attracted to the style and themes of Indian miniature painting, especially to the art of the Kangra Valley. (As you see there are quite a number of reproductions in postcard form on the wall of this study.) I had sent one such picture as a Christmas card to my literary editor at Pan Macmillan. It showed a maharaja and his queen entertaining guests in a summer palace beside a lotus lake. She had the wonderful idea of making that card the basis for the cover design, passed on her idea to Bill Wood, the Australian artist, and he came up with a brilliant sketch which Pan was kind enough to send on to me for comment. (This was nice of them – I don't think publishers make a habit of allowing authors a say in the choice of cover designs.)

R: This was a very happy idea.

YG: A marvellous idea! And it is cleverly and wittily carried out – as you see, Bill had retained the traditional elements of the original, and its delicate colours, so that at first glance it looks like an Indian miniature painting. It's only when one takes a second look that one realises it's an Australian backyard barbecue, the maharaja's lake of lotuses having been transformed into a swimming pool. Since the novel takes the concept of 'change' as one of its themes, this visual expression of metamorphosis, a literal 'double-take', seems to me a perfect reflection of what I was attempting to achieve in the novel.

When I was shown the design in draft, I noticed a detail that I didn't understand: on the right side of the picture there stood a little plant in a pot. Since there is no reference to such a plant in my novel, I suggested that an esky containing ice and beer cans should be substituted for it. When I next saw the design, the esky was in place, but the little plant, far from being deleted, has been moved by the artist to the upper storey of the maharaja's 'summer palace'. Well, this particular plant – which I had never encountered until that time – is Mother-in-Law's Tongue, so named for its long sharp pistil (so I'm told), and often found in Australian backyards. It seemed that Bill Wood had been inspired by an incident in the novel, in which a young Asian professor, asked what made him decide to visit Australia, replies: 'To place as many thousands of miles as possible between myself and my mother-in-law.'

Well, the plant stayed in the design, and it's one of nineteen or twenty Australian icons in the picture. Others include a Qantas jet, the Sydney Opera House, a rolled up towel, a white cockatoo, and a pair of thongs.

R: It's a real transformation.

YG: Bill picked up the book's theme of change, and that gave me a great deal of pleasure. It is a delight to an author when someone reads a book, and responds to its ideas in a creative way. Writing and reading can become a kind of conversation, a delightful (but serious) game.

The naming process in this novel promotes game-playing and reader participation of a different sort. It comes out of the fact that *A Change of Skies* is a novel about a peaceful confrontation of two cultures, the Australian and the 'Asian', both of which have tended over quite a long period of time to view each other rather uneasily, and in terms of stereotypes – 'the inscrutable Oriental', 'the uncultured Aussie', and so on. In naming my characters, I adopted two systems 'traditional' to the respective societies and, incidentally, little known outside them: Australian sea-food for the locals, and the Sinhala *ge*-name for the Asian visitors. Within the first, the existence of suggestive names ranging from John Dory to Flathead gave me plenty of choice in naming characters appropriately (my Professor John Dory, Head of the Department of Linguistics, for instance, is a very fine fellow indeed, and Ms Maud Crabbe and Dr Francesca Sweetlips are among his colleagues at Southern Cross University).

For the Asian names I used whole Sinhala phrases and sentences. To the English reader unfamiliar with oriental languages these look like 'typical' long Asian names. The clue to character is built into the language: for instance, Mr M.K.B. Koyako's long name when read in full warns the reader that he is a hypocrite and a liar. As a frank Australian tells Mr Koyako: 'That's some name you've got, mate. Almost a short story.'

There is a lot of fun in writing fiction, I've found, especially when one's writing between cultures. I enjoy crosswords and word-games, and this novel gave me a chance to put that interest to a serious purpose.

R: After fiction, to talk of academics and teaching sounds very mundane, but that's what our routine is.

YG: Oh, I couldn't have written fiction if I had not been a teacher of literature. What am I working on now? Well, a good deal of my time goes into administration these days: Macquarie's Postcolonial Literatures and Language Research Centre, which I direct, was established in 1988. It has grown to its present status from 1977: in that year, a group of six Macquarie academics and postgraduate students attended the ACLALS Triennial Conference in Delhi, and came back with a new understanding of the way in which Australian literature and our respective research interests fitted into Commonwealth Literature studies. That was how the Macquarie Unit for the Study of the New Literatures in English (MUSNLE) came into being, and eleven years later it has been formally established as the Postcolonial Literatures and Language Research Centre (PLLRC).

The Centre focuses on research and teaching, and we are very well equipped to cover all the main areas in the field, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. My colleague, Dr Rosemary Colmer, is a specialist in African literary studies, and currently runs courses in

Postcolonial Literature at both 200- and 300- level. Associate Professor John Stephens teaches Children's Literature. Mark Macleod (whom we have recently lost, alas, to Random House and the publishing industry) and the poet Alex Craig used to handle the teaching of Australian Literature, and their places have been taken by Manfred Mackenzie and Dr Nick Mansfield. A course that I mentioned earlier, Modern English Writing of Asia, has been offered since 1973, continually taking in new texts from different parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

R: A bit of a shift from the area we used to call 'Commonwealth Literature'.

YG: The Asian Writing course is one that allows me to move on from the 'Commonwealth' idea to the 'Postcolonial', since it can include texts from Japan, China and the Philippines, regions that were never part of the British Empire. I have no problems myself with the term 'Commonwealth', by the way, which I have always regarded as denoting a cultural rather than a political entity – in the sense that the literatures included have in common the great wealth of the English language. But 'Postcolonial' goes further, includes more, and is not only more relevant to our own Asia-Pacific region but makes possible certain theoretical explorations which the 'Commonwealth' concept would have limited.

I suppose I have been 'in' Commonwealth/Postcolonial studies from their very beginning, since my Cambridge PhD research examined the literature of a colonial culture (Sri Lanka) even before the area was established as a subject at the University of Leeds. When the late Arthur Ravenscroft began to edit the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in 1965, he invited me to compile the annual JCL bibliographies for Sri Lanka. I compiled them for more than a dozen years, continuing to do so even after I left Sri Lanka for Australia, but I asked to be released from this task when Arthur himself retired as editor. Compiling those bibliographies was a very instructive, a very educational experience, since it meant keeping in touch with everything that was being published in the country. I became aware, for instance, of the feeling among the English-educated that it was time Sri Lankans gave up imitating British models and wrote out of a distinctively local experience. The shift in attitudes was quite similar to what has been going on in Australia during the last 50 years, and in India since well before Independence. In both India and Sri Lanka, writers often looked back to village life, as though what was 'authentic' in the country was only to be found in the rural areas.

R: Yes, *Kanthapura* and *Mano Majra*.

YG: But I have always felt that all parts of a country are authentic aspects of its true self. Nothing, surely, should be excluded as non-authentic. Santha Rama Rau's lovely novel *Remember the House* is set in urban Bombay, but it's not less Indian for that. As a matter of fact, when I first read it, it spoke to me of the Colombo I knew – she had done more than describe a narrow regional setting, she had transmitted an outlook, a whole way of life.

The Commonwealth/Postcolonial concept gives a place to indigenous sources such as oral history, folk tales and songs, regional languages, images and themes. And these, besides being rich and interesting in themselves from a literary point of view, give us a position from which we can look more objectively, critically, and often more appreciatively at what used to be called the 'classics' – the canonical texts of English literature. I was a student in Britain when V.S. Naipaul's

A House for Mr Biswas **was published, and I remember very well the feelings of profound shock with which British reviewers woke up to the fact that this brilliantly constructed, super-sophisticated novel had come from the West Indies. (It was not, I suppose, unlike the way commentators in Britain and USA reacted in the 1930s to the news that the Nobel Prize for Literature had been awarded to an Indian with an unpronounceable name: Rabindranath Tagore.)**

As soon as truly great writing emerges from the colonies, or from nations which used to be colonies, writers such as Patrick White in Australia, Chinua Achebe and J.M. Coetzee in Africa, Derek Walcott, George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul in the West Indies, Margaret Atwood in Canada, Narayan and Jhabvala in India, certain questions begin to be asked: How is this possible? What has caused such a flowering on the imperial/colonial periphery? And – why does the metropolitan centre seem unable to produce anything of the same value and interest?

Such questioning goes on side by side with feelings developing in ex-colonies, even in societies such as Australia, societies that had developed a markedly Eurocentric tradition and outlook, that a free nation needs to develop and establish its own cultural identity. Such societies are no longer content to place Britain at the centre of their thinking, and to regard their own writings as necessarily second-rate, an inferior branch of English literature. Indeed, they have begun to see Britain itself (as a former colleague of mine, Professor Gareth Griffiths, put it once) as just another point on the periphery.

Professor Griffiths is one of the three authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, a very influential theoretical text in the postcolonial field. One may agree with its propositions or one may not, but either way, the book has already been profound in its effect on the way we think and write. It has much more real relevance to our literature, and to the literature of our region, certainly, than a number of the French and American theoretical imports currently in vogue. It is possible that some of my own creative writing has come out of the shift from 'Commonwealth' to 'Postcolonial': I love English literature, and I live and teach in the light of it, but I have found it a liberating experience to apply the new concepts that have come out of postcolonial theory to some of the 'classics' that I have admire very much, and that are generally regarded as central to English literary studies.

Shakespeare, for instance. Dickens. Jane Austen. Reading the West Indian critic David Dabydeen's study of the connections in the eighteenth century between English high culture and the slave trade on which British prosperity was founded, I was reminded that in *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas Bertram's fortune is founded on sugar plantations he owns in Antigua, and that in *Emma* Jane Fairfax compared the life of an English governess to that of a slave on a plantation. I began to understand that Jane Austen must have known – and felt – a great deal more about life outside her little world in southern England than we generally give her credit for. And then, other interesting parallels call out for attention. In the last pages of *David Copperfield*, Dickens packs Mr Micawber and his large family off to Australia, while in *Great Expectations* he has Pip scorn the fortune of a convict and decide to earn his own living in – of all places! – Asia, which the British were already busy exploiting for its spices and silks.

Postcolonial critical theory is grounded firmly on historical fact, which makes it much more appealing to me than abstract inventions. And having lived through the colonial experience to

some extent myself, I have the ability to put it to a personal test, as well – so to speak – and include it in my fictional text.

R: One observes there are several streams in postcolonial thought, the West Indian writers overseas, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin and Bill Ashcroft on this side of Australia, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge on the other. Do you visualise all these streams converging, and becoming one strong movement of thought?

YG: I think they are already aspects of a very significant movement, inside and outside Australia. The critics are not only in touch with one another, but their findings and theories relate consistently to actual texts, their theories are intellectual without being abstractions. Mishra and Hodge are looking, in *Dark side of the Dream*, at something which happened here in colonial times, something on which an autobiography such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* provides both perspective and deeply felt, personal illumination. The Morgan book and Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* (a book which tells an 'ordinary' Australian life story that indirectly and modestly reveals great moral courage) have done a lot to awaken Australian writers and critics to the fact that there is a whole untried area of literature in this country, untried because Australia has invariably turned its gaze outward towards Europe and the west.

When I came to Australia in 1972 I was very anxious to find out as quickly as I could how the landscape and society had been interpreted by Australians, Aboriginals as well as later European and Asian settlers. I had begun writing poetry seriously in 1969 in Sri Lanka, and I was aware that a change of location for a writer often involves a drying up of inspiration: sources for imagery have been left behind, new ones are as yet unrevealed, ideas and themes have become disconnected, memory can no longer be a rich resource because everything around one is new and unfamiliar. I read all that I could of Aboriginal dreamtime myths, hoping to learn something of the ways in which the first Australians regarded their trees and mountains – as you know, in Asia, in Sri Lanka and India, every tree, every mountain has a legend connected with it, which makes folk tradition a rich source for a writer.

R: How do you see the study of literatures written in English moving now?

YG: The experience of people is what inspires and drives literature, and the postcolonial world being what it is, I think it inevitable that there will be increasing activity in New Literatures. It used to be a given in English literary studies that truly great writing emerged only when a writer was rooted in some 'dear, perpetual place'. Well, that, of course, arose out of the fact that the British were so insular: a good deal of the 'classic' English writing naturally came out of fixed locations – Hardy writing out of Wessex, Dickens celebrating London, Austen moving exclusively in the counties of southern England. It's not surprising that Forster's *A Passage to India* and Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*, both books that take up the experience of English people living in Asia, never seem to have received in Britain the attention they deserved. A book such as Naipaul's *In a Free State* forces a review of such theories – that is a book about people in transit, constructed by a writer who is himself the product of the profound shifts in location that were often brought about by the imperial/colonial experience. As you know, Naipaul's origins are Indian, his family moved from India to Trinidad to work on the plantations there in the

nineteenth century, and then he went to Oxford for his university education, following that with life as a travelling reporter. No one's life could he more peripatetic and ambulatory than Naipaul's, and yet there's no denying his status as probably the finest writer in English of the twentieth century.

How did this happen? Clearly, the literary world has had to adjust its ideas in order to understand the literatures that have come out of the experience of moving, of transition, of immigration, of flight. Two world wars and any number of local disturbances in our century have caused millions of people to become displaced, re-settle elsewhere, or live out sad lives in refugee camps in border areas.

Look at Australia, a society made up entirely of immigrants, whose earliest settlers seem to have come out of Asia a very long time ago. People have come to this country at different stages of its history, and made distinctive contributions to its culture. These I see as part of what makes living and working here such a fulfilling experience: which it is, for writers and artists who are sensitive to what lies about them and are not obsessively dreaming about the worlds they have left behind.

Writers and academics are today continually on the move. Many contemporary Australian writers are – or have been – refugees from some terrible political conflict, they have enormously interesting stories to tell. Writing here and elsewhere is going to be increasingly cosmopolitan, and increasingly we will find, I think, that it's not going to defer humbly to Britain and America as has been the case in the past. Nations have become conscious of their own identities, and proud of them. Presses are being established in different parts of the world. Australian writers, I see, are at last becoming impatient with American publishers who force them to change their idiom to suit American taste. This is surely a new and refreshing phenomenon – I imagine that up to twenty years ago, they would have put up with almost anything in order to get published in America. All the 'rules' regarding acceptable writing were made and laid down by publishing houses in what used to be called the metropolitan centres.

Teaching is likely to make a difference, too. The growing interest Australians show in Asia's culture and arts is a significant advance on what was the case fifty years ago. Nobody then wrote, taught or admired anything that wasn't 'true blue'. The general understanding seems to have been that nothing of real value could be produced in a colonial country: anything colonial was necessarily second rate. The work of writers such as Patrick White, Naipaul and Rushdie has killed this myth stone dead. And I find it exhilarating to be teaching in a university and in a society that has given up the colonial cringe, and instead honours Australian artists and writers.

R: We were talking earlier about how India's case might be different from that of other countries. Since you are in touch with Indian academics, would it be possible for you to give your perceptions of the Indian literary scene?

YG: I suspect there's something of a gap between what seems and what is, where India is concerned. Take Dr Gayatri Spivak, for instance. She is an extremely articulate Indian-born academic who lives and works in the USA. Her translation of Derrida, the contemporary nature of her critical stance, and her professional association with Professor Edward Said, author of the very influential *Orientalism*, guarantee that she is very well-known and highly-respected in academic circles outside India. Whether her views arc in any way representative of academic

and critical opinion within India – and whether she wants them to be – is, on the other hand, problematic. Or there is Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee, who has written several precisely reasoned, critically objective books focused on Indian literature, and has recently published a study of Jane Austen in which she applies (among others) feminist and postcolonial ideas to this 'canonical' author. On the creative side, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan are writers of the older generation who are still active. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala published her eleventh novel, *Poet and Dancer*, in 1993.

R: You and I met at the ASAL Conference in Ballarat.

YG: Yes, it was my first Australian Studies conference, mostly because, though I teach Australian literature, I would not – until 1991, anyway – have described myself, or expected anyone to regard me, as an 'Australian writer'. So I was surprised and pleased to hear myself introduced in that way. I feel that one of the contributions I can personally make to Australian letters is to awaken Australians to the fact that Asia is not merely a stopping-place on the Qantas flight to London, Paris or New York (as it used to be a stopping- place on the old P & 0 route 'home'), but a rich source of inspiration and ideas. This is something I can do as a teacher, because I am currently teaching in the areas of English, Asian and Australian literature.

For the present, I am very nicely (in the sense of *precisely)* placed exactly where I want to be: I'm teaching what I love to teach, and I've just discovered that I can write fiction.

And that is a great joy.

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