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Interview

David Dabydeen

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Interview

Abstract
David Dabydeen's first novel, The Intended, was published by Seeker & Warburg in February 1991. Frank Birbalsingh interviewed David Dabydeen prior to the publication of the novel.
David Dabydeen

INTERVIEW


*I always found it puzzling that you came to England so young.*

I came in the migration from the West Indies to Britain in the 1960s. I was born in Berbice, Guyana, and grew up surrounded by half eclipsed memories of India that were gained through watching films or through observation as a boy of Hindu rituals. I was also fascinated by the fact that every three months or so some pandit would come along to bless something or other. I remember, we had moved to the town of New Amsterdam which was largely Afro-Guyanese, and relations between them and us Indo-Guyanese were cordial and normal, apart from the normal biases and innocuous prejudices which operate on a day to day level. I went to school in New Amsterdam. But, in the 1960s I remember all of us had to move from New Amsterdam, back to our Indian environment, because of race riots. I remember all of us packing up everything that we had in New Amsterdam and getting on a bus and going back to the Indian villages in rural Berbice.

*How old were you then?*

I was about seven or eight. I was very conscious of being surrounded by our belongings, of people whispering and being afraid of what would happen to them. These were Indian people, getting on the bus and arriving in a village and spending three months there. In other words, one's nascent sense of Indianness was intensified by this experience of racial hostility. It didn't mean that I could speak a word of Hindi, although my grandmother and my great grandmother could. The whole environment was one of cows and wooden houses propped on stilts, and agricultural patterns of living. My uncle used to live in a mud hut, and owned a couple of cows and sheep. People dressed with malas on their heads and big silver bracelets. They were bare-
footed. This was my sense of Indianness, and it was intensified and contradicted by watching Indian films. We thought of India as being glorious, full of wealth and opulence, of people and palaces, instead of mud huts.

Where exactly was your village?

It was a village called Brighton, on the Corentyne coast. We stayed there for about three months until the riots were over. Then we went back to New Amsterdam. There was always constant journeying back to Brighton village. Every three months, during the short holidays, we went back to Brighton village – that’s where most of my family were. In the Caribbean you always return to your grandmother’s house.

How long were you at school in New Amsterdam?

Until I was about ten. Then I got a scholarship to Queen’s College, Georgetown, the capital city. I was there for about two years.

Did you have family in Georgetown?

No, I boarded with people. This was a very important experience for me. There was a very bright Indian boy called Bacchus who was my very good friend in New Amsterdam. We both got scholarships to Queen’s College, and went off to Georgetown and boarded separately; but, bright as he was, he could not afford to live in Georgetown, and had to give up the scholarship. That disappointment demolished him. About four years later he had a chance to emigrate illegally. He went to Canada to start a new life, but someone reported him and he had to go back home. When I saw him five years ago in Guyana, he had turned Christian. After preliminary greetings he said: ‘Are you saved?’ That question meant that our whole boyhood had disappeared: because of poverty, migration, and the racism in Guyanese society. Although his family were Moslems, he grasped the last straw left to him which was evangelical Christianity. He even joined the People’s National Congress which has ruled and ruined Guyana continuously for twenty-six years already.

When and how did you come to England?

In 1969. My father had separated from my mother and he came to England to make his fortune, as many other West Indians had done.
When he made sufficient of his fortune, he sent for us. An elder sister came, then me, and then a younger sister.

Then you went to school here, and on to University?

I went to Cambridge.

And then you went to do a Ph.D. at London University in 18th century literature and art. You were also a post-doctoral Fellow at Oxford, and I believe, Yale?

Yes, I spent three years at Oxford and a brief time at Yale.

Where does your writing come in? What are the beginnings?

There were two people who were very influential in my writing career. One is an old black man called Mr. Spencer, who was headmaster in my primary school in New Amsterdam. He was really important to me in terms of wanting to achieve things. He had been abroad and he would tell us stories of how things were done abroad. So at a very early age he planted in my mind the idea that I had to go abroad to see how things were done. He pushed me, as he pushed many others to scholarships etc. The other person taught me at Queen’s College – John Rickford, who is now a Professor at Stanford University. He was the head boy, and he got a scholarship to America to do his degree. He was such a brilliant debater and a wonderful teacher. He made us set up a newspaper with stencils to type, and gave us stories to write. If we wrote a good story or poem, he would let us read it out in front of the class. So he was an extremely creative teacher who inspired us all to write. He had asked us to write a story about a day in the life of a frog, and I had written one of the nicest stories. He read it out to the class. That gave me an audience for the first time, and the pleasure has stayed with me.

Those were the two main influences in your life, that you can recall?

The most important influence of all was my whole family – who saw education as absolutely important and urged me to achieve. I was lucky in that one of my uncles had already gone to Oxford – straight from the bush. He grew up in Brighton village went to school there, then to Berbice High School, where he got a scholarship to Queen’s College. He did his ‘A’ levels and went on to the University of the West Indies where he got a first-class honours in History. This was all in the late
'50s, early '60s. He then went on to study for his doctorate at Oxford. So there was already someone in the family who had ventured out, all the way from Brighton village to Oxford. Therefore, I grew up under that influence all the time. Uncle Raja was a little god figure to us. So apart from the outsiders there was also the importance of education in the family.

You felt inspired by the memory of your uncle having achieved things.

Yes. When I went back in 1976 to Brighton village, I saw some of the books that he read for 'A' levels, when he was seventeen, for example, Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*. I was in my second year at Cambridge before I came across Trilling. Guyanese of this time were far more advanced than we were. What rather saddens me is that under this P.N.C. Government that we have had for so long, although we had the reputation of being the intellectuals and writers of the Caribbean, we Guyanese are now statistically at the very bottom of all the examination leagues in the Caribbean. That is the greatest indictment against this government: they have not just impoverished the people economically, they have impoverished their capacity for expression.

Is *Slave Song* your first book? I assume by that time you had already written your Ph.D. thesis.

No, I hadn't written my thesis then. *Slave Song* was written when I was at Cambridge. I was about twenty or twenty one, still an undergraduate. It was published six years later in 1984.

When you say 'written' do you mean in the form in which it finally appeared?

I had written four or five of the poems in *Slave Song* while I was an undergraduate at Cambridge. Whilst I was an undergraduate I had the chance to return home. It had been about ten years since I had been home. Leaving as a boy and going back as an adult was probably the most creative process that I've been through. I spent three months at home as an adult, and I had gone back with an apparatus of texts. I had also gone back with Western modes of behaviour as well as modes of reading, and I think the tension between the home environment and the Cambridge environment just created poetry. I immersed myself in that atmosphere for three months, and I found that going back to Cambridge released an enormous amount of creative energy. It reminds me of what C.L.R. James says about West Indians: we have the privilege of being insiders as regards English society, but we are also outsiders.
It is the same with our homes, our own villages: we are insiders and also outsiders, and it's that tension of being both insiders and outsiders that makes for excitement.

Did the poems in Slave Song come in exactly their final form, or were they changed much afterwards?

They were written in the form that they are at the moment, but obviously they were revised and shaped as they were being written.

And what about the notes that followed?

I thought of three things in writing an extensive introduction and a series of notes: it was a literary joke – hence I referred twice in Slave Song to T.S. Eliot, because Eliot had also joked and provided a kind of spoof gloss to The Waste Land. On another level, we had been arguing for a long time that Creole was a distinctive language. We made a lot of politics out of that. It was part of the nationalism in the 60s. We had our own airline, environment, landscape, and fruits, so we should have our own language. If we were going to take that seriously we should provide translations to our poems. But the third reason is the most serious. I wanted to write in a minimalist fashion, and I wanted to question the relationship between the work of art and the critical industry that arises because of that work of art. In other words, I was being the critic and the artist together in one book. It was in the '70s when I went to Cambridge that modern critical theory – structuralism and deconstruction – was taking root. Art was being eclipsed altogether. Therefore I was engaged in that whole Cambridge mood where the artist was being eclipsed and the critic became re-writer of art. That book came out of the intellectual environment of Cambridge; but it was also obviously nourished by the Guyanese imagination. It was a deliberately conscious work of literary criticism. It posed the question, which is so central now with Derrida and others, as to the relationship between the artist the critic, the creative work and the critical work.

What do you think would have happened if those notes and translations were not there?

I think the notes and translations take the poems into the realms of prose – very fine, elegant English prose. This throws up questions about the relationship between the prosaic nature of the English language and the intense, rhythmic nature of Creole. I see Slave Song as a whole book. It is the book of poems, but it is also a book with literary
criticism in it. I don’t see how you can separate the two. I’m glad that Wilson Harris, in his review of the book, actually pointed out that it is the juxtaposition of the prose and poetry that creates an added dimension of excitement. If you like, it’s mixed media. You have poetry and paintings. Well this is poetry and literary criticism.

I wonder about matters of audience. Obviously, English readers would respond more warmly to this mixed media presentation because it includes explanation and interpretation, and it is therefore easier to follow. But don’t you run the risk of the West Indian reader being put off a little, perhaps even being irritated by the fact that he can understand the Creole language directly, yet he has to face the intrusion of the explanation and interpretation?

I don’t think so for two reasons. I see that Brathwaite, in X Self, has followed me in providing a series of extensive notes even though he has abbreviated them. I think that Slave Song did have an impact. Don’t forget that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this kind of writing was not unusual: you had poetry but also extensive introductions. In Pope’s case, for instance, he supplied massive notes to his already extensive footnotes. Pope’s own introduction to his poetry tends to be very detailed, and he also footnoted his own poetry. Now I’m not saying that we have to go back to the eighteenth century. What I’m saying is that it has influenced people like Brathwaite, whether they wish to acknowledge it or not, in terms of how they present their own poetry to the West. More importantly, I do not think that our own people, because we happen to be West Indians, understand our own language, or indeed the nuances, or evocations of our language. Just because you can speak a language doesn’t mean you can inhabit it creatively and intellectually. I think West Indians will benefit from the notes, if they benefit at all, or they will benefit as much as the English. The notes leave off from the poems at a certain stage and then they just take off in their own direction. They are little prose pieces by themselves.

I found the sexuality of the poems very interesting. I was particularly interested in what you call ‘the erotic energies of the colonial experience’.

Well I think that the Empire has been looked at from the perspective of sociology, history, political economy et cetera; but the Empire was also an enormous erotic project. What I was interested in was bringing to the surface the latent eroticism of the encounter between black and white, because it seemed to me that that would be revealing a relatively unexplored aspect of imperial relations. I know that Vic Reid had written a book on the Mau Mau called The Leopard which looked at this
matter. But it was sensational. It wasn't playful enough. What I did with my re-formation of the eroticism of plantation life was in fact to contextualize it in English medieval traditions of romantic expression. So that you get a Creole poem that quotes the ballad tradition of medieval poetry. One has to be playful with the potentiality of eroticism, otherwise one can get into a very ugly and sensational way of writing. So I ‘distanced’ myself from the eroticism by overlaying the poems with references outside the plantation experience.

You leave me somewhat confused about the exact object of this erotic type of writing. As you say, writing about colonialism has traditionally brought out aspects of economic exploitation, and of the enormous physical abuse of slavery, and so on. I am a little confused about the playful treatment of the erotic aspect of writing poetry.

First of all one has to say, the pure delight of writing in Creole about erotic experiences is a very sensuous pursuit. Also, you strip away the surfaces of colonial relations to reveal what takes place at the basest level of human emotions and actions. In the same way *Heart of Darkness* ceased being an exploration of a different geography and landscape, and became a Freudian exploration of the energies that people exchange. In other words Africa ceases to be a geographical entity and becomes the territory of the human sub-conscious. Now that is revealing something else about our colonial relations. I think also that it was linguistically important. I was a bit disappointed in a lot of Creole poetry, including my own and Brathwaite's, because I felt that the poets were largely using the Creole in a social realist manner, without a sense of its psychic energy and disturbing quality. They didn’t take the Creole to the very edge of breakdown because they didn’t have the themes, and unless you stretch a language to its very limits in the way that Salman Rushdie is stretching the English language at the moment, you cannot see the full potentiality of the language. Now the theme that I had which was eroticism allowed me to adventure with the language and to ‘pervert’ the language, as opposed to Eddie Brathwaite's desire to ‘purify’ the language.

You speak of the vulgarity of the language and of pushing it to breaking point. You also mention exploring the extremities of language. I would have thought that that was exactly what Brathwaite has done: to mix Creole with standard English, and marry that mixture with music. So in fact he was pushing beyond linguistic borders into the realm of another medium – music.
Brathwaite's project was absolutely innovative and he's the best poet we've got. But at the end of the day, his Creole is still what I would call 'polite'. It still works within boundaries, and it isn't until you take the language to the very edge of the boundaries of expression that you really see its potential for literature. I think Brathwaite was absolutely important in validating the use of Creole. He is superb in the way that he marries Creole with standard English and imposes a jazz rhythm onto that, but even that is still conventional, it is not adventurous in a literary way. It works within a limited context and has a limited achievement. You have to use language as Joyce does, as Rushdie, or as Lawrence tore and perverted the language in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. In other words, you have to take the language far ahead of descriptions of social conditions, or indeed of the intellectual projects which seek to marry say standard English with Creole and jazz. That is still a very intellectual project, and it can betray an absence of feeling for Creole. I think that Brathwaite's poetry, paradoxically, has a feeling for the Creole language; but it doesn't possess the language instinctively. His reputation is partly based on the use of Creole, but if you look carefully, he cannot feel that language in depth in the way that Wilson Harris can. Harris had creolized the English language from a different perspective. This is why people say they find it difficult to understand Harris: he has creolized the English language, confused all the clauses, let the sentences run on endlessly. He has stretched and pulled the language everywhere; I don't think Brathwaite has done that. This is an enormous charge to make against a major literary figure, also a major black literary figure whose Creole has always been seen as a province for the expression of black things. I am of Indian stock. I am not re-colonising Creole; neither do I want to appropriate it. It is, or used to be, my language, and the language of my family.

*There is tension between Indo- and Afro-West Indians in Guyana and Trinidad. Do you think this tension is represented in the language spoken by either group? Are there significant differences between the Creole of Indo-West Indians and the Creole spoken by Afro-West Indians?*

Brathwaite did make a call a few years back for people to start researching into the Indian contributions to the creolization of language in the Caribbean, because all the research is really about the survival of African retentions, and I would hope that what *Slave Song* does is to show how Indian the Creole is, not just in the use of Indian diction – there are many Indian words like 'chamar', 'belna,' 'pookne' – but also in the whole setting of cows, and houses on stilts, and savannahs and paddy fields. That agricultural experience is very Indian, and it is
arrogant to marginalize us, to think that we can be on the land, day in and day out, since 1838, and not feel for that land and not belong to that land. You see when you are in the city you don’t belong anywhere because you are metropolitan. You are marginal. It is those city based populations in the West Indies that are the most marginal people. They are the non-West Indians, for they have imbibed all the metropolitan values. We who cut cane and grow rice and get bitten by snakes, are the West Indians who inhabit the spirit of the land, certainly in Guyana. I can’t speak for Jamaica and other places where agriculture was sustained by non-Indian traditions.

Roy Heath has also spoken of the urban experience reducing people to a sameness like other urban experiences. Its very title Slave Song encourages me to think about the Afro experience of slavery in the Caribbean, and there are some poems about slavery and master-slave relationships in the book. But the poems which leap at me as most deeply inspired are the Indian poems. I realize that this has come about because of a specific historical context in which African slavery and the plantation system created an environment into which Indo-Caribbean experiences were fitted.

To describe the Indian experience you really have to start with that parent experience if you like, or you have to acknowledge, or fix it. In other words, what I was trying to do in Slave Song was to see a continuum of slave and indenture experience.

Is it not dangerous to speak of different Caribbean experiences if one set of people suffered more than another set?

If I am writing about an Indian on a plantation, I will inevitably also convey echoes of the African on the plantation. But if Afro-Caribbean experience is only an echo in my work, it doesn’t mean that I am marginalizing the African. It just means that my theme is Indian. There are echoes of Africa always in writing about the Caribbean plantation, but they’re becoming more and more inaudible because the African has moved away so far and so fast from plantation life, certainly in Guyana, that the African presence is probably an intellectual memory now.

When V.S. Naipaul produced A House for Mr. Biswas, he was attacked for being ethnocentric, and he defended himself by saying that Trinidad Indian experience was all that he knew. There is no doubt that this experience was conditioned by such factors as displacement, exploitation and alienation, which also influenced Afro-Caribbean experience. But he had to write about what he knew. For this reason, it is not hard to understand why the strength of your
inspiration is in your Indian-based poems. Perhaps it is for the same reason that I was very impressed by the success of your novel, The Intended, in capturing the context of Indian life in the Caribbean. I don't think previous writers have captured quite the same mixture of drunkenness, wife-beating, violence, aspiration and economic cunning. Having the access to raw Guyanese Indian experience which you have reproduced so well, are you now to be considered a Black British writer of a West Indian, or a Guyanese Indian writing in England? In passages, for instance, where you interpret the contradictions between Caribbean and British experience, or the person caught in that contradiction - you are superb.

Writers are privileged when they have a variety of sources to draw from, for example, a variety of landscapes that they have lived in, sometimes partially, or in a variety of languages they have spoken, even though they may overlap, like Creole and English. Writers are absolutely privileged to have this kind of plural, complex, contradictory, background. Art is nourished by paradox. So in terms of self-definition I am glad I'm, if you like, a three of four footed creature, a kind of latter day Anancy as many West Indians are, a spider figure with certainly one foot planted in Africa through my scholarship which was really about the representation of Africans in Western Art and Literature. Intellectually, I have a foot planted in Africa. I certainly have one foot planted in India in an equally ambiguous way, because I can only re-capture India in an intellectual way through books, or by visiting Indian friends. Because I am Indo-Guyanese I am already removed from India. And certainly one foot is planted in Europe because, as C.L.R. James says, we are very much created by Europe, not wholly but partially: we grew up with Shakespeare, we see the English countryside as Naipaul does in The Enigma of Arrival, through the lens of Constable and Wordsworth. We can't just have a direct relationship with the English countryside. We must see it through the literary or visual text. So we've got a foot planted in Europe, and then we have a foot planted in our own society, Guyana, and Guyana has its own foot planted in South America. So it is potentially an endless series of poetic feet, landscapes, modes of feeling and thinking, and experiences that are available to us. We should see it as such a privilege. Instead, we see it as a grievance. Historically, some West Indians have said 'Oh God, why can't we go back to Africa? Why can't we go back to India?' To me that is a negation of the imagination, or the sign of an impoverished imagination, an atavistic impulse. It is refusing to see that we are modern people in the sense of having the potential for living in complex states. But we refuse to be complex. This is why in England we set up silly little political parties, or we fall back on narrow
nationalisms like the Monsteratt Association, the Barbados Association, the Trinidad Association. When we are not terrified of our complexities, we turn them into a source of grievance.

Historically, they have been a source of grievance.

I think they have been a source of grievance, but I also think that paradoxically the middle passage was profoundly creative. It wasn’t meant to be creative, but by removing the African and Indian from home it set up all kinds of tensions. Diaspora set up all kinds of tensions and possibilities for growth. The middle passage was creative, by liberating the imagination from home. Writers have to live outside before they can write about inside; you need that distance. The middle passage gave us a distance from Africa and India. But also it liberated us physically as well. I lost all sense of caste affiliation. I would not have lost that if the British had not moved us to the Caribbean. I would have been possibly a peasant labouring under one of the most oppressive systems on earth, which is the caste system.

You lost your caste but you also lost your language.

We lost our language, and it is an irreparable loss. It’s a very felt loss to me. I’ve always wanted to learn Hindi or Urdu. But you have to take what you have.

I accept that the complexity of the Caribbean experience may include certain benefits. But living here in England as an Indian-looking person, without an Indian language, are you not at a disadvantage when you are subjected to racism for example? Would it not be an advantage to have a language other than English to express your difference?

Yes, but I think I can try to express my difference using the English language. All I’m saying is that if I had Hindi with the same fluency that I have English, then I would have felt more strengthened, more whole. But possibly even more boxed in, because in a sense only having the English language to express my difference means that I have to be so fantastically creative with the English language. I have to do things with the English language that maybe it doesn’t have the ‘natural’ capacity for. The English language does not readily allow me to express my Guyanese experience. I have to force the weight of my experience on it and therefore modify the language. New challenges arise out of being trapped in mono-language and having to express differences in
it. That in itself creates wonderful tensions that can be exploited by the writer.

You’re speaking of literary advantages.

Yes, but I see myself as having the protection of a creative imagination. I draw a distinction between the artist and the immigrant. If I didn’t have art, then I would be an immigrant, and I would have nothing to console me in this society which, as you say, is so racist.

You don’t live here as an isolated artist, you live among people like yourself: what is your responsibility to these people who look like yourself, but don’t have the literary advantages to express themselves creatively in the English language, and have to go out and suffer from English racism?

But the artist has to go out there and suffer the same. I have to wait at bus stops, and sit on trains. The Whites don’t know that I am an artist, and they don’t necessarily care anyway, so I am treated like other immigrants in this society, in certain situations, that is. When I speak of the ‘protection of the creative imagination’, I mean an awareness of, or confidence in self, which means you can speak out, or write out. But you have to see all these things in context. I come from a society, Guyana which is as racist and traumatised by race, perhaps more traumatised than British society. Even if we argue, as some historians have, that it was the British who created racism in the Caribbean, I was born into a racist society, one in which race was a very important and privileged factor. Coming here, in fact, for me has been as liberating as it has been oppressive. There has been a deep liberal mood in Britain from Magna Carta Days to today. The British initiated and participated in the slave trade. At the same time, abolition of the slave trade was the first major philanthropic movement in this country. So whilst there is illiberality, there has always been a liberal mood, and we have to exist in that liberal mood. So I wouldn’t dismiss England as a racist society. That is too simplistic. It is racist, but it also has anti-racist elements, and it is our responsibility as immigrant writers to support, sustain and contribute to the anti-racist elements, by helping to develop the society as a whole, and by contributing our arts and sciences, education and business skills and whatever else to the society; for this is our home.

So the future is here?
There is no other future – the discernible future is in Britain. This is home now, and we have to make it home. I am not arguing for indiscriminate integration, or for loss of the cultural baggage that we brought with us to this country. What I am arguing for is our contribution to all aspects of society, even bearing with us a sense of our difference. And I do believe that England is spacious enough to tolerate difference in the society; it is big enough to want difference. In the West Indies, in those tiny little islands, if you are different you are a lunatic; you are ostracized, and called an artist or a madman. That is why Naipaul’s fiction is so full of different people called ‘mad’. In this society you have greater allowance to be ‘mad’. This society is much more liberal than our own society. When we riot in England, sometimes for very good reason, it is also a refusal to contribute to society. Riots are as negative as they are inevitable.

That’s realistic. Whatever the colonial past, it has happened already. People who have come here must accommodate themselves to conditions here. I agree with you. And whereas I am aware of racism in this society, I think you are right to acknowledge anti-racist and liberal elements working against it.

I also agree with E.P. Thompson who said that there have always been common decencies operating between people in England. People might be racist in a philosophical or abstract sense. They might talk about Pakis in the abstract sense, but if they sit down side by side in a bus, or if they encounter a Paki in the street, in some personal way, the racism diminishes, it is not as intense or as overt as you might think it would be.

I agree these prejudices stem from an intellectual dislike produced by historical factors which are themselves the product of narrow and ignorant attitudes about other cultures. There is the commitment to the normal, social exchanges.

That’s at one level. At another level this is a society of books. It’s a textual and artistic society. It’s a contradiction to say that a society of books is a society of hatred: it has its hatreds, but it also has its books.

You sound like V.S. Naipaul in the early days when he first came to England and encountered civilized social decencies which he had not experienced at home in Trinidad.

I wouldn’t say that I never experienced it at home, because I’ve experienced great acts of generosity in both societies.
But the generosity at home is more personal.

Yes, it is more personal and family based whereas the generosity here is much more social. We just have to have the confidence and courage to keep saying that this is our society, even if a lot of white people say it is not. We must keep saying it is our society, and believing it not only in the abstract, but in the way that the Indians and Asians coming from Uganda and Kenya in the 60s with all the ‘disadvantages’ of an alien language, alien foods and ways of dressing nevertheless made enormous waves in the cities, and created businesses that are now major employers in Britain. We West Indians can learn from the Asians. It seems to me a tragedy that Indians have become alienated in the West Indies. What Indians did to the Caribbean was quite revolutionary. In spite of conditions of indenture they brought a sense of voluntary labour, the feeling that labour gains rewards. Up to 1838 labour did not bring rewards in the West Indies, because the people were slaves. We brought back the work ethic into the West Indies. Why is it that we don’t have a major publishing house in the West Indies? That shows you how impoverished we are as a region. So there’s an ambiguity in West Indians attacking England. We ourselves can be incomplete, certainly in Guyana’s case. We don’t even have our own publishing house to give expression to our writers and teachers. It is because we spend our money on our army as a way of stemming the political fury, that we are so backward and incompetent. We have messed up our own society. It’s not enough to blame the white man for messing up our society. He may have introduced the elements of mess, but we completed that job with superb finality. That is why everyone in Guyana wants to leave.

In defence, I can say that, in the twenty-five years or so since the white man formally left, the structures of colonialism have remained in place in social and economic terms.

All over the Caribbean we had the middle-classes inhabiting positions that the white man had vacated, and behaving just like the white man at his worst. I think that the scholarship of Clive Thomas and other economic analysts in the region shows that we lost economic markets, not because these markets were dominated by the West, but because we didn’t have the capacity to fulfil them. LOME under the EC convention guarantees that they will purchase our sugar. But we cannot produce that sugar. Why? Because of administrative and ultimately political incompetence.
Let us get back to literature, and your novel The Intended. I think it is a very successful novel with much love, sex, and everything. It has an authentic sense of Guyanese life. But how does the structure work? Is there a pattern or significance in the relationship of the Guyanese sections and the English ones?

The narrative structure of the novel has no focal point. It's an unstable narrative. I think that one has to exploit the creativity inherent in creolization, by which I mean that there is a confusion of the past, present and future tenses in the Creole language, and I wanted to exploit the space that that confusion offers. So there is no linear narrative in the novel, even though there is a certain direction to the constant flashbacks and flashforwards. Now that flashback and flashforward are related to one's linguistic condition - the Creole with its confused tenses. I also wanted to convey the immigrant experience which is not linear, because immigrants are liable to appear and disappear. This is what migrant life is: you appear in one society, then you disappear; you are either deported or move on somewhere else; you are always moving on. That's the structure. It's set on buses and trains, and there is a lot of waiting at bus-stops, a constant sense of travelling which ends up with a boy waiting for a taxi. There are taxis, buses, planes and trains which represent the constant affliction as well as the creative potential of migration or diaspora. So there is a kind of intellectual migration going on as well. The main character migrates to England, but in England he migrates away from his friends.

You have a very good passage on that. I think it was the hero reflecting on the British security and his insecurity, and the mixture of feelings that produces.

I didn't want to get involved in the parade of grievances. One of the old themes in West Indian literature is the crisis of identity. I have a multiple identity. There is no crisis. There is a kind of delight as well as a kind of an anguish in jumping from one identity to the next. It's like electrons which have their own energization circles. Sometimes they jump from one to the next and release an enormous amount of energy; then they jump back to another circle: little elections jumping. That is not a crisis. That is delight and poignancy, and hopefully a release of energy. To see it as a crisis would be to invest in historical grievances. To call myself black, and to hate the white is to get back to manichean systems of operating in the world. It seems to me that our West Indian writers have invested too heavily in the monolith of 'the folk'. This is not true for Wilson Harris and V.S. Naipaul who came from different
positions, one cynical and the other Blakean, yet both making the West Indian feel that he is on the threshold of some capacity.

*It is interesting that the names of Naipaul and Harris have recurred throughout this interview. But Harris can be so remote. His writing is not very accessible. How is it that he is so influential?*

I think Harris’s ideas are very stubborn, and ideas have to be converted into art. Lawrence said that the business of the novelist is to reconcile his metaphysics with his actual sense of living. I think that Harris does this brilliantly at times when you get the most sensuous passages about Guyana and the Guyanese landscape. But then sometimes, there is the sudden loss of that sensuousness and there is a struggle for the formulation of philosophical ideas which ought to belong in an essay rather than a work of art. I think that when he succeeds there is nothing like it in West Indian literature. There are sudden ideas which emerge out of what he calls a half eclipse. In the middle of a novel an idea will surface, or a few sentences will be thrown up which will suddenly open up a whole new way of seeing things. These fantastic illuminations always come with Harris. The prose is always being illuminated although it is so dark and dense at times.

*We used to talk about the fragmentation of colonialism and now this is being interpreted in a more positive way as multiplicity. It is as if the old fragments can now nourish each other in loose association rather than remain broken or useless as in the previous interpretation. Does Harris’s work reflect this positive interpretation of multiplicity? Was that there from the very first book Palace of the Peacock?*

I think Harris has seen, in the deepest, most uncanny way, the potential of this fragmentation or multiplicity. All his novels really are about a kind of quantum imagination, as Michael Gilkes calls it, where there are no physical laws that are rigid. There are no identities which cannot be transferred or modified. This is what he struggles to convey in his novels. Whether he succeeds is another matter. I think he does mostly. All art fails ultimately, or fails at critical times. At least Harris has taken a different position from Naipaul. Naipaul’s position strikes me at times as being similar to that of Negritude, in searching for a stable community or a stable set of ideas. The search for stability is always in Naipaul. To me that can show an unwillingness to adventure into realms of anarchy and confusion which is the modern condition, which is why Naipaul always seems so magnificent, so 19th century in the impeccable, chiselled nature of his prose. His writing seems so colonial
as opposed to post-colonial. Post-colonial writing is one of confusion. It has thrown up its own literary form of ‘magical realism’. Naipaul does not see in the confusion the possibility of a new re-grouping of citizenship. He doesn’t see in the babel of languages which exist in London, the possibility of a new language emerging or indeed old languages co-existing within the babel. Why does Babel have to fall down? Still, I would agree with Enoch Powell, whose position in politics seems similar to Naipaul’s in literature, and I think to Brathwaite’s in his poetry, namely that you must have boundaries. All this revelling and confusion can, at one level, mean an enormous loss of the self or self-confidence. In other words, you cannot be cultural unless you have a sense of boundaries. Now Brathwaite drew African boundaries in the Caribbean, and Naipaul shows the terror of an absence of boundaries. Harris, it seems to me, revels in the absence of boundaries, and that can be very dangerous. It can mean that you are a dilettante, that you are loose and have no roots or attachment or commitment. But I do hope that I can be intensely Guyanese, or intensely Berbician, or English, or European. In other words, one has the possibilities of inhabiting different masks intensely. I’m not just saying, take one mask, put it on, throw it away, then take another one and throw it away.

This is a protean vision of something being broken and remade constantly, something in which a process of dissolution and regeneration is always active.

The amoeba never breaks its boundaries, it always has a skin, a shell. You always have the nucleus of your soul.

From the very beginning Harris always talked about that singularity, that unity within diversity. There is always a nucleus.

Sometimes the nucleus shifts within the body of the amoeba, but the nucleus is always there, and there is always a skin or boundary.

So that the person is still whole. The self is still whole.

Lamming sees the skin as a castle of skin. He would see colonials constructing their skin out of stone. But stone is not fluid. You can either just obey stone or you can crumble and destroy it. I prefer to think that the boundary of your skin is not immovable or made out of stone. It is not something that you have to blow trumpets at and smash down like the walls of Jericho. It’s amoeboid.