

Building on Common Ground

An Interview with Neil Bissoondath

PVT: Tell me about your family history.

NB: Both sides of the family left India to come to Trinidad as indentured labourers to work in the sugar cane plantations. It would have been my great grandparents, around the turn of the century. And they decided to stay. The Naipaul side were from the state of Madhya Pradesh. My uncle [V. S. Naipaul] has written about a sad trip he made to the village in *An Area of Darkness*.

PVT: And you've never attempted such a trip?

NB: No, I have no particular attraction to India.

PVT: As the eldest child in a literary family, was there pressure on you to do something or be somebody?

NB: When it comes to my immediate family, there was never any pressure in particular to *do* anything. There was simply the idea that you *would* leave Trinidad, you *would* move to another country to live, and there was a good chance you would not return. I left Trinidad willingly, happily, looking forward to a new kind of life. The idea of being a writer, which was one that came to me at a very early age—around nine or ten—was something that I could not do in Trinidad, and was something that I was looking forward to trying to do in this country. But there was never any pressure. There was a sort of passive support. It was simply a question of "You do what you have to do." They let me do it with their fingers crossed. Certainly with my mother there were fingers crossed. My mother died in 1983, in fact just a few months before my first book was published, which is something that I'll never quite

get over, the fact that she never saw it. After my mother died, about a year or a year and a half later, my father remarried and they then moved to Toronto, but not long after arriving in Toronto my father discovered that he had cancer. So he returned to Trinidad and died there in 1990.

PVT: You've written a good deal about parents and children, and the tensions that exist beside strong bonds of gratitude and loyalty and love.

NB: Leaving Trinidad at eighteen, I never really got to meet my parents as an adult. My mother died before any of that could be done. And so when my father moved to Toronto, I thought, this is my opportunity to try to get to know him directly, as one adult to another, and to talk about things openly and honestly and without rancour of any kind, and with love. But of course, we could not meet on that level. My father was not the kind of man who was capable of discussing things other than politics and sports. It simply wasn't possible to meet him on the emotional level that I wanted. He was shaped by his own life. It was not a society in which people talked to each other in the way I wanted to talk to my father. But at least I had the opportunity to try. I'm hoping that I won't fall into the same traps as my father, and that I'll be able to have a different kind of relationship with my daughter.

PVT: Is Alistair Ramgoolam based on your father?

NB: The Alistair Ramgoolam in "Insecurity" was not based directly on my father. He was based on a kind of businessman that I knew in Trinidad. Whereas the Alistair Ramgoolam in "Security" was informed more by my father, and the kind of life I saw him leading in Toronto. It was not a successful move to Toronto. He had come out of one kind of society and tried to insert himself into another, and I don't think he was happy in the end. He started to move towards a kind of Hinduism, a kind of ritual belief, or a belief in ritual.

PVT: Was that Hindu element present in your home when you were growing up in Trinidad?

NB: No, it was not a religious household. My grandparents practiced Hinduism. My parents never did. I am very skeptical about religious belief and mysticism in general. It's not something that I understand. So many people just seem to depend on the ritual, in a hollow gesture that's unsupported by any kind of philosophy.

PVT: From your account of your father's inability to communicate certain ranges of feeling and experience, would it be valid to infer that Trinidadian society is very much a male-dominated society?

NB: Yes, Trinidad is a very macho society. Canada was different. It was a kind of liberation. I grew up in Trinidad never really feeling quite at home there. I grew up in a family that read—which was my mother, and her sisters, the Naipaul family—but very few people in Trinidad enjoyed reading or the things that concerned me. So it was a society from which I felt fairly alienated. I was born in Arima, but I never actually lived there. My parents lived in a town called Sangre Grande, and that's where I grew up. My grandfather, like all his brothers, owned a store, so my father worked for him. The store was in Sangre Grande, and I went to Presbyterian primary school that had been started by Canadian missionaries. When I was about 13 or 14, my parents decided to build a house in Port of Spain, so that we would be closer to school. I went to Catholic high school, St. Mary's College. The school in "An Arrangement of Shadows" is based on St. Mary's.

PVT: I gather that your family were in relatively comfortable circumstances financially.

NB: That's right. There are a substantial number of East Indians who have risen into the professions, so have become doctors and lawyers, and particularly businessmen. But I would think that the vast majority remain field workers. They cut the sugar cane.

PVT: Did you feel, as an East Indian, that you were part of a racial/political minority in Trinidad, despite your family's relatively privileged financial position?

NB: There was the knowledge that politics would be divided along racial lines. But you also grow up with the attitude or belief that everybody's a thief. And it didn't matter really who formed the government or who formed the opposition. It just gave you greater opportunity to steal, and whoever was in power would steal. I suppose we were very cynical about politics. Everybody knows who is stealing politically, and then, in the class, in the circles in which we grew up, we were not really aware of the rural Indians. Although my grandparents started off life working in the rice paddies and the sugar cane fields, by the time my generation was growing up, we were traveling the world. We were thinking professionally, and that cut us off from the kind of life my grandparents had known, and that the majority of Indians still know in Trinidad.

PVT: *A Casual Brutality* reads at times like autobiography.

NB: There's an autobiographical connection in almost everything that I've written, but it's autobiographical on different levels. It's not the story of my

family, which remains to be written I think. But the people I've depicted are based on a variety of people that I knew when I was growing up in Trinidad. The grandmother, for example, is the archetypal Hindu Trinidadian grandmother. Everybody had one.

PVT: One of the things that novel seems to do is say farewell to Trinidad. Was there any sense in which you wrote *A Casual Brutality* to explain to yourself, or to anybody else, why you left?

NB: That's a very interesting question. I've never thought of that. I felt when I'd finished that book that I had written it out. I was dealing there with things which had obsessed me for a long time throughout my growing up to the age of 18 in Trinidad. And then after that too, just hearing from family what was going on there. It's also things like the invasion, the take-over, on Grenada.

PVT: So you're running various places together.

NB: Yes, Casaquemada is not simply Trinidad. It's a mixture of Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Grenada. What I've tried to do in creating Casaquemada is to create an island that will remind people of many places. The reason I didn't use a real island in the West Indies was to get away from any particular identification with one island and its particular problems, to try to internationalise it.

PVT: *A Casual Brutality* has been criticised for precisely this lack of historical specificity.

NB: That would have come from someone who assumed that I had some kind of political agenda. I have no political agenda.

PVT: Has your experience of Trinidadian society and politics shaped your views on Canadian multiculturalism?

NB: Absolutely. Absolutely. When you look at the kind of life that I had in Trinidad, the kind of upbringing, the attitudes that were offered of other races, the way various races viewed each other, I understand the kind of vision that creates apartheid, and I abhor it. I have seen people insist on dividing themselves for racial reasons, and religious reasons, and ethnic reasons, and I reject any idea of division. My reading of multiculturalism as practiced here in Canada is that it is a policy of division. It's a policy that falsifies the vision it pretends it wants to preserve. I find it simple-minded at best and I think it holds some dangers for us if we continue with it.

PVT: But surely the political implications of division depend on whether it is voluntary or imposed, and even then, the outcome can be ambivalent.

Secession can be a way of avoiding being swallowed up by another society, but it can also trap people on a lower stratum of the vertical mosaic.

NB: Yes, it's very complicated. I have to say that the criticisms that Bharati [Mukherjee] has leveled at Canadian multiculturalism I wholeheartedly agree with. I disagree, though, with her view of the United States and the melting pot. The American system likes to pretend that it is possible for individuals to shrug off their past, to pretend that it does not exist, and assume a new identity. Whereas the Canadian one says that it is possible to freeze the past, and maintain it as it used to exist, while the country one left, by the way, continues to evolve. The melting pot and the mosaic—they're equally false. There has to be a middle way. And the first part is to have governments and bureaucrats get out of it. I feel very strongly about that. And so my attitude, simply put, is leave it to the individual. Tradition is all very important, but it is up to the individuals and their families to preserve these things. When you start getting Government policy shaping this, we're entering some very dangerous waters.

PVT: You view Canadian society in a more positive light than, say, Himani Bannerji or Aruna Srivastava. Do you see the racism they speak of as being bound up with sexism?

NB: That's very difficult for me to say. It may be. It's very difficult for me to talk about, because racism exists. I know it does. I keep thinking, my God, I grew up with more racism in Trinidad than you would find in this entire country. I have seen racism. I have lived with it. I grew up with racism. I know what racism is about. One of the areas in which I disagree with Bharati Mukherjee is where she talks about her preference for the United States because Canadian racism is always so polite—"You'd never know he's racist." Whereas the American racist is up front and direct. But my response to that is that I would rather have a racist who ignores me, or who says "Good morning" and then turns away, than one who puts a gun to my head and kills me.

PVT: You've seen that in Trinidad.

NB: Exactly. I have seen the brutality, and I would rather live in a society where racism is unacceptable enough that even racists are not quite prepared to proclaim it openly. That isn't to deny that racism exists but that's how you deal with it.

PVT: Having grown up in a highly racist society, do you ever find yourself falling into racist patterns of thought?

NB: Yeah, I do at times. We all catch ourselves at different moments. Sometimes I hear my father's voice in myself. I don't like it, but I know where it comes from. For example, when you hear reporting from the Middle East and I think, my god, those damned Arabs. And I think, No, wait a minute, think about this.

PVT: One critic has accused you of turning your back on your people.

NB: Who are my people? I fear the automatic assumption of racial allegiance. My friends are of different colours, genders, sexual preferences, religions and so on.

PVT: As a writer, do you see yourself as part of any group of community, or as participating in any particular school or tradition?

NB: I think I'm on my own path. When you get right down to it, when you're sitting in front of the typewriter or computer, you are working on your own path and no other path matters. Yet at the same time I've rather enjoyed belonging to one group I've been put into, and that is the group of writers who have emerged from the former British colonies. What is it—the empire strikes back? Although the only thing that unites us is the fact that we have a certain similarity of historical background. Apart from that, when I'm asked how I describe myself, I respond, "I am a Canadian writer," for the simple reason that that entails so much. It's a wonderful big box. You can put just about anything into that. Anything smaller would make me feel, I suppose, sort of enclosed.

PVT: You once mentioned that you dislike experimental writing.

NB: I don't know why people would bother to not use periods or commas for example. I rather like paragraphs. I like a page that looks like a page. When people start using visual tricks on the page, I feel I'm being cheated, and I feel that this is somebody who has to stand on his head to transmit what he wants to say, and I don't think that's really necessary. I get irritated very easily by these kinds of things. And I cannot now read most of the Latin American writing. Mario Vargas Llosa is one exception. I love his work.

PVT: What are you trying to accomplish in your detailed descriptions of houses, streetscapes, and landscapes?

NB: In the descriptive passages I'm trying to get as precise a feel for the place in which my character is as it's possible to get. What I'm interested in is individuals in a context, and the context is as important to me as the individual. The context informs the individual, and so the description is important to understanding the character, because what you're seeing is

description not through Neil Bissoondath's eyes but through the character's eyes. How the character sees things tells you a lot about the character.

PVT: Do you see your descriptions functioning on symbolic or metaphorical levels as well?

NB: No, I don't think on those levels at all. I'm not aware of them.

PVT: How do you think your work has changed or evolved since the stories of *Digging Up the Mountains*? In *The Innocence of Age*, your immediate focus moves away from the Caribbean, yet some of your earlier themes and preoccupations—things apparently derived from your Trinidadian background—remain.

NB: Well yes, there are universal themes. The universality of human emotion in the end will inform all of my writing. The writer in Afghanistan whose son is killed by a Russian bullet, she feels the same pain as the mother in Latin America whose son is killed by an American bullet. That pain is the same. And where the damn bullet is made makes no difference. And this is the universality. When you strip away all the exoticism of different societies, you come down to the same basic naked emotions.

PVT: When so many people are striving to assert social difference, you're working in the other direction, looking for the common ground.

NB: I think it's very easy to split people apart. I'd like to think I'm looking for the common ground. And I think that's more difficult. I get accused of all kinds of things. I've been called all kinds of nasty names. There's this controversy over appropriation of voice. What is amazing to me is that a lot of the people who are saying that one does not have the right to appropriate another voice—to use their word—are also the people who march against apartheid. Those who would keep voices apart in literature are the ones who want to bring them together by getting rid of apartheid. There are basic contradictions in this stand. We spend our lives appropriating. And it's a basic human thing to do. It's one of the ways we learn from each other, and we learn to get along.

PVT: Some of your critics have taken issue with your portrayal of women. They say the women in your stories aren't real.

NB: Well, I disagree with that. I like to think that my women are very real. A number of women—most of my readers seem to be women—have come up to me at readings and various functions, to talk to me about my women characters. A story like "The Cage" for example, about a Japanese woman, it's one that people still comment on continuously and positively. After reading

that story, one woman from Malaysia told a friend of mine “I’ve never met him but it’s as if he understood something of my own life.” Now all I can do is go on that kind of reader reaction. I like women, and in fact I think that sometimes my female characters are more convincing than my males.

PVT: In *The Innocence of Age*, the women were more real. I guess I found Jan in *A Casual Brutality* a little less...

NB: Yes. Jan has brought up a lot of adverse comment. One person said, “God, what would Canadian women think of the portrait of themselves through Jan in *A Casual Brutality*?” But my point is I am not writing about Canadian capital-W Woman. I’m writing about one woman, and I insist on that always, that my characters are individuals unto themselves. They are not representative of any group, any race, any culture, any more than any of us is. I’m not a representative of my gender. I’m not a spokesman for my race, and my characters aren’t either. Jan happens to be the kind of person she is. She may not be a very nice person, but, hey, I’ve met some people who aren’t very nice, and some of them are Canadian women. Some of them are West Indian women, or West Indian men, or American. The problem is that this kind of criticism is almost a misunderstanding of what fiction, from a novelist’s point of view, is all about. I’m writing about individuals.

PVT: Has having a daughter changed your perception of what it means to be a female in this world?

NB: I don’t think it’s changed it. I think it’s sharpened it. I don’t think I ever had any illusion about what it means to be a female in this world. And I think every man continues to learn. You can’t live in Montreal where the Polytechnic massacre took place without appreciating what it is like. You can’t grow up in a family of women as I did—with many aunts and a working mother—and not realize what it’s like in a society like Trinidad. When our daughter grows up I want her to learn karate, because I want her to be able to kick the balls out of any guy that tries to take advantage of her. I have lots of friends who are female and professional and you hear lots of stories of what goes on. It’s unbelievable what goes on even among the most supposedly educated and liberal and open and professional people. I am determined that our daughter will do whatever she wants to do, will have none of these barriers put in her place, otherwise I’m going to have to kick a few balls myself.

PVT: Do you confer with anybody when you write?

NB: I write completely alone. But the first person to read it once I’ve done

it and am completely happy with it is Anne, my partner. And I listen to her very carefully. She's a very good reader. I trust her opinion. It's wonderful to have someone that you can actually trust. It's indispensable. I've made some significant changes on her advice.

PVT: Where do your ideas about writing and literary value come from?

NB: I think they have just come up from my own reading and writing—being forced to think about it because people like you ask me questions. There's no formal thought behind it. It just evolved. I never studied English literature at university. In high school in Trinidad, the teaching of English literature was horrendous. There are writers I still cannot read. Like Henry James. The teachers at high school took these books, these things that I loved, and forced us to do autopsies on them, and of course you know what happens at the end of an autopsy. What are you left with? Certainly not anything that's living and breathing. And so when it came time to decide what to major in at university I decided to go for French for the simple reason that I liked the language. I'd studied it in high school, and I was determined never to take the chance again of having my love of English writing destroyed.

PVT: You studied Spanish at high school as well.

NB: That's right.

PVT: And English was always your first language?

NB: That's right.

PVT: Was Hindi ever spoken in your home?

NB: Not a word. Never. The only people who spoke Hindi in Trinidad when I was growing up were my grandparent's generation.

PVT: When were you last in Trinidad?

NB: In 1983 at my mother's funeral.

PVT: Ten years ago.

NB: God yes, ten years. A long time ago now.