

Interview

Interview with Zakes Mda

Venu Naidoo

What are the earliest influences on your writings?

There are many things that influenced me. The main one being that I come from a family of readers. From an early age I started reading comics and books which I still read to this day. These are the same comic books I used to enjoy as a child. Also of course my father was a teacher and later he became a lawyer. He was reading all the time and he was writing as well. These were political writings. So, growing up in an environment where everyone was reading, one developed that habit of reading. I strongly believe that to be a good writer you need to read. Actually, reading made me a writer, because when you read stories, you are fascinated by these stories, and you want to create your own stories. I didn't start as a writer as such, obviously, because you need to be literate in order to write. Those were my early influences. I did not start as a writer. I started as a painter, drawing and such, which I still do today. Later when I learnt to read and write I started to write as well. I started with poems and short stories in Xhosa. My earliest published work, which I no longer have now, was a Xhosa short story called 'Igqira lase Mvubase'. I was about thirteen or fourteen at the time when I wrote it.

What would you say were the main concerns in that story?

I cannot say exactly, but I do recall that it was about some fake traditional witch-doctors. It was set in a village but I do not remember the details.

Was this story influenced by African folklore and orature in any way?

Well, I think that it was influenced by the stories that I read at that time, and included children's stories and prescribed reading at school.

Were there any teachers who might have influenced you to write?

No, not really. None of my teachers influenced me in any way.

From the writing of short stories did you progress to writing musicals?

I never really wrote short stories, except for the one in Xhosa which was published. Since then I haven't written any other short stories. Well, I don't think so.

A number of black writers started their careers by writing short stories which were published in magazines such as *Drum* and *Staffrider*.

I find short stories very difficult. A short story requires special skills, which I don't think I have. So, I won't want to dabble in writing short stories. I can write plays, that's fine, and novels where you can tell the story using sustained prose. I find short stories much too demanding.

Do you recall the early plays that you wrote while you were a pupil at school?

Oh yes, I remember all of them. When it comes to the writing of the plays I know exactly who and what influenced them. It was Gibson Kente. I was in High School at Lesotho. I used to read lots of plays. I read Wole Soyinka, Joe Orton, Harold Pinter and a number of other playwrights. But without really thinking of writing my own plays. Then one day I saw a Gibson Kente play called *Sikalo*, which was being performed in Maseru. At that stage I vaguely remembered watching a performance of the very first play by Kente called *Manana the Jazz Prophet*, a few years earlier, and it did not have any impact on me. When I saw *Sikalo*, I was still at high school and I was quite fascinated by the fact that it was quite a terrible play.

Terrible in terms of its dramatic structure?

Yes, I thought it was a bad play. I enjoyed the music and the dance and so on. But even then, although I was still in High School, I thought that it was a truly awful play. I felt that I could write something better. So that is how Kente influenced me. He was so terrible that I thought I could do something better.

What was the first play that you wrote?

After watching Kente's *Sikalo* I started writing my play. It was called *Zhaigos*. Zhaigos being the name of the main character. This is while I was still at Peka High School in Lesotho. I was in grade eight at the time. I wrote this play called *Zhaigos*. It was very much influenced by the same type of township musical theatre that Kente was doing. But I believed that my story line was much stronger. I don't know if it was, but that's what I thought at the time.

What followed after this?

After *Zhaigos* I wrote *A Hectic Weekend* which was set in a park. This play took a completely different direction from the first play which was Kenteesque in many re-

spects. But when I wrote plays such as *A Hectic Weekend*, now that I look back, I see many influences of the African playwrights that I was reading at the time. Soyinka and other West African playwrights influenced me because those were the people that we were reading in those days. But also, on the other hand, there was Bernard Shaw, whom we were reading at school. Plays like *Androcles and the Lion* which also had some influence on me. Later there was Athol Fugard, who definitely influenced the kind of plays I was writing at the time.

I get the impression that when you say 'influenced' you are saying that you created your own space for your particular type of theatre even then.

Well, I have always created my own type of theatre. But then as a writer who also reads other writers, and becomes highly impressed by a specific writer, you cannot help but have traces of that writer in your work. Only recently someone who saw my play *The Dying Screams of the Moon*, commented that there was a lot of Athol Fugard in it as far the structure is concerned, and so on, and I won't say no to that. In fact I think that I owe a lot of my style to Athol Fugard, by either reading or seeing his work. I created a different type of theatre from Fugard, it was completely different, but still there was a lot of him too in the style that I used then.

How would you comment on the view expressed by some critics that there are influences of Beckett and Brecht in your work as well?

When I wrote *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* I had never even heard of Beckett or Brecht. But when the play was first performed in Johannesburg I was surprised to hear people say that I was closer to Beckett. When I wrote *The Road* much later, when I was in America, I was still compared to Beckett. When I went over to America to study Theatre, it was then that I came across Beckett. Then I thought, well, there was something in that comparison in that there is a lot that is absurd in my work as well. Even though I had not heard of theatre of the absurd when I wrote my early plays. It was very clear that there were many elements which were quite absurd in the type of theatre that I was creating.

Magic realism is clearly an important element in your writings. Would you agree that magic realism is evident very early in your career as a writer?

Yes, you are quite correct. The earliest ones starting with *Dead End*, *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* and *Dark Voices Ring* all have in common elements of magic realism. At the time I did not even know that there was a literary movement such as magic realism.

How do you see the use of magic realism in your writings?

As it was with absurdism, the same thing happened with magic realism, in that I had not heard of magic realism when I started writing those plays. It is something that I have always done in my writing. I make things happen the way I want things to happen, however much that might contradict what you might call objective reality. Basically I felt that these were my creations. The world that I was writing about was the world that I created. I am in the God business. I am the God of that world, so I can make things happen the way I want them to happen. Whether in the so-called objective reality things would happen in that way, or not, is not the issue for me.

Have you used any strands of African Cosmology in the type of magic realism that you have created, particularly in your novels *Ways of Dying* and *She Plays with the Darkness*?

Not consciously, no. But as Africans we always live with magic. When I wrote the novels I was at the stage where I was familiar with the movement called magic realism. When I wrote the novels I had read people like Marquez. I had read *A Hundred and One Years of Solitude*. I read that and I fell in love with that mode of writing, precisely because I felt that the Latin American writers were doing what I had always been doing myself. When I started with my first novel *Ways of Dying* I was conscious of a movement called magic realism and that I was writing a magic realist novel. But basically I was doing what I had done much earlier. Here in Africa there is magic happening all the time. There are many belief systems and in fact a lot of the things that the western world refers to as superstition. For me such things actually happen and I portray them as such in my writings.

Perhaps this might explain why magic realism is such a popular mode among postcolonial writers whether they come from Latin America, Africa or India. One need only think of writers such as Borges, Marquez, Okri, Rushdie and Chandra to name just a few of the writers who have used this form of literary representation. The use of magic realism by these writers appears to be anchored in the belief systems of the people that they are writing about.

Yes definitely, this is so.

Could you comment on your transition from writing plays to writing novels.

This transition, if you can call it a transition at all, took place because I have always wanted to write a novel. For the past twenty years or so I have always wanted to write a novel. But I never thought that I would be able to do it. I did not think that it was possible for me to write sustained prose because I am really a dialogue person, more suited, I thought, to the writing of plays. I thought that I needed particularly special skill to write a novel. After I wrote my PhD thesis of more than four hundred pages, a

process which I found difficult and painful, I realised that I could write sustained prose. I had gained the confidence that I needed to write a novel, but shelved the idea of writing a novel thereafter.

How did you actually commence writing your first novel?

In 1991 when I was a visiting professor at Yale I decided to buy a computer. All my writing, even *When People Play People* had been done by longhand. I decided that it was time to get modern. After I bought the computer I asked myself what next? What do I do with it? So I said, well I might as well write a novel. Then I started writing *Ways of Dying*. If I had not bought that computer I would not have written *Ways of Dying*. On Christmas Day I wrote the first line 'There are many ways of dying ...' and I continued writing the first few pages. That explains why the incidents on the very first pages of the novel take place on Christmas Day. Even the bells that are mentioned early in the novel were actually ringing while I was writing. The story was actually unfolding while I was writing it on that Christmas Day.

Writers such as Mphahlele have mentioned the 'tyranny of place' in reference to the inhibiting effects that being separated from South Africa had on their creative work. Did you experience a similar problem when you were at work with your novel?

With me it was quite the reverse. My distance from South Africa actually helped me to write. This was the situation even during the days of apartheid when I was writing my plays. I am grateful to the fact that I was far away from the situation here.

How do you explain this?

Those writers who were living within the situation here could have perhaps created much greater theatre than they ever did. Because they were living within the situation they could get their characters and their stories from what they saw around them. Apartheid itself was so absurd that it created the stories for these writers. Many of the theatre people who became famous during those days were actually reporters who would take a slice of life and put it on a page and thereafter on the stage, and hey presto they had great theatre! With me there was no such advantage. I was far away from the situation itself. I was forced to use my imagination in order to recreate the situation as I remembered it, or as I thought it would be.

Are you in fact saying that in your case it was a matter of deliberately ensuring that the creative impulse was being put to work?

Yes. That explains why even today when apartheid is gone I still create, because I had learnt to create from my imagination.

Perhaps it could be said that with the demise of apartheid many writers find that they are no longer equal to the task of functioning as writers.

Quite so. Now the author is dead, and the author was apartheid. Apartheid created so many stories and these writers took ready-made stories. When I taught a course on Pan-African literature in America, one of the books I prescribed was a book by André Brink called *A Dry White Season*. When I started reading the novel I realised that it was actually a newspaper report of things that were happening here. Nadine Gordimer did the same thing as well in her novels. I did not have that advantage. I had to imagine things and had to create from my imagination.

One could say then that in your writings you were actively engaged in constructing a literary landscape that went beyond mere reportage. There is also the sense of a creative impulse that led to your use of literary modes such as absurdism and magic realism, long before you encountered them in the work of other writers.

Yes. If I had remained in South Africa there would have been no reason not to do what everyone else was doing, be it Barney Simon or Matsemela Manaka or anyone else. Barney Simon would actually tell his actors to go out and find the stories out there. Those were the stories that were already composed by the apartheid system.

Would you say that Fugard was any different, especially when one considers the fact that he used actors such as Kani and Ntshona in a great deal of experimental theatre in which scripts were created from workshopped sessions?

He was certainly doing the same type of thing. However, I did not enjoy such a luxury. Being away from South Africa, I couldn't just go off to Park Station or some other such place and eavesdrop on what people were saying, or observe what people were doing. I had to rely solely on the resources of my imagination to create the type of situations that might occur here.

Some critics have alluded to the sense of prophecy in your plays. In *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*, and *You Fool Don't Let the Sky Fall Down*, in particular, there is a hint of the kind of situation that might even pertain to this country. How would you respond to that?

I have just been approached by producers to have *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* filmed, but they have expressed concerns that the play might be viewed as a statement against the present government. I was certainly not writing about the new government in South Africa in those plays. The present government was not even in existence when I wrote those plays. Although the plays do not attack the present government, some people could choose to read them as such. I have merely made astute observations of politicians and human nature in these plays.

With regard to your novels, *Ways of Dying* and *She Plays with the Darkness*, would you say that once you started writing, the stories gained a momentum of their own.

Well, once I started writing *Ways of Dying* it did gain a momentum of its own in that sense, because it is about ways of dying, and I talk about many deaths there. Every one of those deaths happened, those were deaths reported in newspapers. These were deaths that I had read about in the *Sunday Times*, and *City Press*. Those were the two newspapers which were the source of my information on the deaths. There might have been one or two cases from the *Mail and Guardian* but the *Mail and Guardian* was not involved in that kind of journalism. The very first death mentioned in the novel, however, didn't come from a newspaper, but is actually based on fact. It happened to a cousin of mine, and I have reported it exactly as it happened. So, all those deaths actually happened, and all I did was to take these deaths and put them in an imaginary story with a professional mourner.

Is the concept of the professional mourner your own creation?

It is my own creation because I had never heard of professional mourners before.

I suppose the Nurse is someone who actually exists and performs the functions you have described in *Ways of Dying*.

I only heard recently, long after I had written *Ways of Dying*, that professional mourners existed in Europe, perhaps during the time of the bubonic plague. I find that quite fascinating, because I think the idea of a professional mourner is a ridiculous thing. The concept of the Nurse however is a real one. Among the African people, I think mostly among the Basutho people, the Nurse has an important function at funerals. He is called the Nurse because he is supposed to have nursed the dead person during his or her last moment on earth. The Nurse is also someone who may have not nursed a person, but who might have knowledge of how someone died. The Nurse is therefore a funeral orator who could tell people how a person died.

Do the characters in your novels have names that are of special significance? I know that Dikosha, for example, means 'one who dances', and as one of the central figures in *She Plays with the Darkness*, she does spend most of her time dancing in the sacred Cave of Barwa.

The names don't mean anything really. Toloki and Noria, for example, just sounded good to me. There is no special significance to the names that I have chosen for my characters. Dikosha, however is a Tswana name that means one who dances or sings.

In your novel *She Plays with the Darkness*, there are elements of African Cosmol-

ogy. I am thinking here of the mist that is mentioned in the first page of the novel; and then there is the case of the sacred cave in which the spirits come alive; and the communal voices of the people. Have you consciously included these aspects of African Cosmology in the novel?

No, I don't consciously give attention to that kind of thing. What you see in that novel is actually the way people live in Lesotho. The caves mentioned in the novel are actually there in the mountains in Lesotho. Those are the bushmen caves with the paintings, and unfortunately they are fading away now because people have written all over them. The village that I have mentioned in *She Plays with the Darkness* is actually based on a village that is high up in the mountains in Lesotho, and it can only be reached by plane.

The voice of the communal narrator you have used in *Ways of Dying* seems to be very much a product of African orature. Or is it a creative device used specifically for the novel?

It is very much from orature, really, because the story can be told in the plural form. This is how African people tell stories. But this need not be the case all the time.

In both your novels you have chosen a literary style that is very clear, and precise. There is certainly no evidence of unnecessary details or needless descriptions. At the same time one senses a creative impulse that is rather intense. Is that how you felt when you wrote your novels?

I have mentioned how difficult it was for me to write my doctoral thesis. I had always imagined that writing a novel would be agonising, as well. But when I got down to writing the first novel and then the next, I really enjoyed myself. It was the easiest writing I had ever done in my life. The stories simply flowed the way that I wanted them to. I did not have to sit and think, what next?

It would seem that you found the experience of writing your novels enjoyable.

Yes, I had great fun writing my novels. More fun than I ever had even when I was writing my plays. Writing some of those plays was quite an agony. I wrote many of those plays in a matter of two or three weeks, or even less time than that. Mike Nicols, who is a friend of mine, has told me that it takes him about two to three years to write a novel. Many writers that I have met have told me that the shortest period they require to complete a novel is at least one year. But I have taken three months to complete each of my novels. I started *Ways of Dying* on Christmas Day, 25 December and on 1 April I wrote the last sentence and the last full stop.

To what would you attribute your ability to achieve such short time frames, espe-

cially when one considers the sustained effort required in any creative writing enterprise?

I can do this because I can actually sit down and have a good time with the characters that I have created.

Did you find the creation of the characters in your novels more enjoyable than the characters in your plays?

Yes, definitely.

I am interested in your use of twins in *She Plays with the Darkness*. Many of the writers who have used the mode of magic realism in their novels have used twins as the protagonists in their novels. One thinks of Marquez, Rushdie, and Chandra as examples, and I am wondering whether you had in mind the idea of a split self constantly in search of itself.

No, there is no such reason. Actually I cannot really say why I choose to use twins.

Are the characters in your novels based on people that you knew?

No, the characters in my novels are not based on people that I knew, except Radisene in his later life in the city. His life at that stage was based on my experiences as an articulated clerk when I worked for a lawyer. The person I worked for was really an ambulance chaser who would send his clerks out in search of accidents. But Radisene's earlier life in the village as a teacher is purely imaginary.

A very strong feature of your writings is your concern with issues that affect people who are socially and economically disadvantaged. One sees evidence of this in your plays, and in your educational and communication work with peasant communities. Do you see yourself as the voice of the people?

I don't see myself speaking on behalf of anyone really. I see myself as speaking for myself. Some of the things I say happens to coincide with what many people are saying. Therefore we are saying the same things, but it just so happens that I have a platform to say those things, in a more audible way, than they are able to.

Where do you see yourself at present. Are you concerned with issues of transformation and transition that affect our country?

Yes I am quite concerned about such issues. That is why I continue to write occasional pieces for newspapers on what I think is happening.

Do see your self as a postcolonial writer?

Well, I am definitely postcolonial, because I am here, now, writing after the colonial era.

Do you see any commonalities between your work and any of the other postcolonial writers?

I must admit that most of my time is spent writing and I have not been reading as much as I would like to, but I leave that to you, the critics, to say whether that is so.

Could you say a little more about your use of magic realism, particularly in your novels. Could you elaborate on this?

After I discovered magic realism as a literary mode I became quite fascinated by it. As I have said I had been writing in this mode without knowing that it existed as a literary movement, or how it actually worked. When I looked at other works and what other people were saying about it I found that what they were saying was what I was doing as well. I remember writing some notes for myself on magic realism, in order to understand what it was that I was doing and to trace the origins of magic realism itself as a literary concept, as a critical concept rather than as a practice. If I may quote from my notes, 'In magic realism the supernatural is not presented as problematic'. That is what I tried to do in my work. I write about the supernatural, but I don't present it as being problematic, in other words my characters take it for granted. In *She Plays with the Darkness*, for example, the characters are not surprised by the sudden appearance of the mist. Another example: 'An absurd metamorphosis is described as if it did not contradict our laws of reason'. That is also what I do, or what I try to do, depending how the reader sees it. Things that seem to contradict the laws of reason, happen in my novels, even in my plays for that matter. They are put there as a matter of fact, as though they do not contradict empirical reality. I see that in a play like *The Road* for instance. The Farmer who is a white Afrikaner, meets the black Labourer during the day, and they share the shade of a tree, because it is very hot. The Farmer is not wearing sunglasses and he looks directly at the Labourer while they talk, but he does not see that the Labourer is black. In a real life situation that would contradict the 'laws of reason'. In the world that I create this actually happens and it is taken for granted without anyone being surprised at such an occurrence. In my novels as well, this is exactly what I am doing. The unreal happens as part of reality. It is not a matter of conjecture or discussion. It happens and is accepted by the other characters as a normal event. That is what I try to do, and this is in contrast to fantasy, or the fantastic type of writing, where the supernatural or the magical is disconcerting. In science fiction as well there has to be a scientific explanation when something strange happens. The phenomena that I portray are certainly not problematic as it would be the case in fantasy.

How do you react to the assertion by some critics that the occurrences you have described are in fact surrealistic?

I don't know whether I would call it that. Perhaps one would need to define surrealism first for us to see whether this is what I am doing. One would need to look at the characteristics of surrealism as we have done with magic realism, in order to establish a valid argument that there are elements of surrealism in my work rather than magic realism.

Would you see yourself as a novelist a year or two from now?

Yes, I would be writing novels a year from now. I will continue to write novels.

Will magic realism continue to play an important role in your novels?

Just as it has played a role in my work the last twenty five years or so. And it will not be influenced by the South Americans or Germans or who ever. I will do it as I was doing it even before I came to know about magic realism as used by writers in those countries. I will continue to use magic realism and I will continue to be as innovative as I have always tried to be. I will attempt to bring other elements of magic realism into my novels as I think of them. Perhaps it might even be a different type of magic realism from the one I am using now in my novels. But the fact is I will still be writing, I will still be creating different types of works, novels mainly, and perhaps even the occasional play. I don't see myself as a playwright anymore, I see myself as a novelist. I will write a play only when I am commissioned to do so. But I won't go out of my way to write a play because I don't find them challenging anymore, especially now that I have started writing novels. With the novels, for the first time, I find that I am actually enjoying what I am writing. The writing of plays on the other hand becomes quite a chore and I am relieved when it is all over. But when I write novels, the process of writing itself is such great fun that when I am finished I find that I miss the characters with whom I have been interacting.

Your novels in particular signal a radical shift in the type of literature that has come out of this country. There has been a tendency for South African literature to be classified as either black or white. With your novels, however, one senses the emergence of literature that is truly South African in a sense, rather than one that is merely the product of a black or a white writer. At the same time it is also the type of literature that can take its place on the international stage. What would be your response to that?

Well, I don't really know about that. I just get down to writing. I do not tell myself that I should be writing African literature that should be written as a black or a white. I have a story to tell and I tell my story.

Are you saying that being black is of no consequence to you, and are you there-

fore different from those Black Consciousness writers who stressed their blackness and the fact that they were functioning as the voice of their people?

For me being black is something I take for granted, because I know that I am black. At the same time I must say very strongly that Black Consciousness was very essential at the time in which it came. It served a very important political function at that time, and I have no problem with Black Consciousness. But I am a Pan-Africanist. I must stress though that when I speak of Pan-Africanism I do not speak of a political party called the PAC. When I speak of being a Pan-Africanist I am talking of my outlook. I believe that in South Africa the ANC is actually more Pan-Africanist than the PAC is. So when I am talking about Pan-Africanism I am talking about the outlook that recognises the common history of the African people in Africa and the diaspora, and this should not be seen as a racial term. Pan-Africanism to me *acknowledges* and *celebrates* the common history of the African people. Also the common interests and common destiny of the African people on the continent and in the diaspora. That common history is manifested very much in the culture of these people. One sees it in their literature, in their customs, in their traditions. In Jamaica and Brazil for example many of the practices such as the oral tradition originated from Africa. This is what Pan-Africanism means to me, and my whole outlook is informed by that kind of Pan-Africanism.

Bearing in mind the important role your father played in the formation of the PAC, do you think he would agree with you, if he were still alive?

My father was different in many respects in that he was an African nationalist. He believed in African nationalism, and formulated that philosophy of African nationalism. I am not a nationalist. I see myself as a person of the world and I find nationalism rather inhibiting and destructive. I have just returned from a film project in Europe involving twelve nations, and I have heard what nationalism is doing there. It is a force that I am afraid of, be it Afikaner nationalism or African nationalism. I am not a nationalist in that sense. I do not even believe in man-made borders because I see myself as a person of the world. But that does not contradict the Pan-Africanism to which I subscribe.

In your novel *She Plays with the Darkness*, the characters are forced to engage with history. Was that a conscious decision on your part?

Yes, because that story happened within that particular historical context, and the fate of some of those characters was tied in with the political situation in Lesotho then. Those grand historical events had a great effect at a personal level on those little people who had no part in them. But it is crucial to emphasise that the characters themselves are also creators of history and they struggle to create their own histories.

Do you find the novel as a literary genre particularly suited to the process of retrieving the history of black people in this country, especially when one considers the manner in which apartheid denied black people a place in history?

It might not be, if one considers the fact that novels are only read by the elite. But I believe that is what I do best. However, I use different types of communications for different people. I cannot hope that a peasant in Lesotho would interact with the messages that I have created in my novels. I would, however, create another form of communication for the peasant out there. A form of communication which he or she has access to. My television programmes are designed to reach a wider audience. Therefore I am a participant in different types of communication.

How do you see the role of English language here and in Africa as a whole? Do you agree that the language should be 'appropriated' and 'abrogated' as writers see fit?

English has an important role to play as a means of communication. This is the case even in Europe when people from a number of different nations need to communicate with one another. I think it is now generally accepted, that English is the kind of language that we could use, for effective communication among different people all over the world. We cannot wish it away, whether we like it or not. It is the language we need to communicate with the rest of the world. However, there are also the dangers of cultural imperialism, coming from countries such as America. In that sense English has messed us up. But that does not negate the fact that we need to have our own languages and to promote them. And to create literature in those languages. The fact that those languages are alive today, means that those languages serve an important function and will always be there.

How do you see the reception of your novels thus far?

It has been quite overwhelming. They have been very well received, perhaps even better than my plays were. The novels have also been favourably received internationally although they have not had the same exposure that my plays have had. The novels are published by South African publishers, and only now attempts are being made to market the novels outside the country.

Would you say that there are any common threads that run from Zakes Mda the painter, the poet, the playwright to Zakes Mda the novelist?

I do not know really. I suppose it is for the observer to make such a comment. When I paint I do not think of poems or any other aspect of literature. I think in terms of the painting that I am doing at that time.

Your publication *When People Play People* is proving to be a valuable source for the theory of communication theatre. Could you comment on some of the successes that you have had with this aspect of your work?

I have a play on AIDS awareness, done by the Market Theatre Laboratory, that has been touring the townships now for the last three years. I have just been invited to do a project with mine workers from Secunda. I am quite keen to go there and assist the miners to create their own type of theatre.

Can you give me some information on your novella *Melville 67* which is due to be released soon?

It is set in Johannesburg in 1997, and in Ghana, West Africa a thousand years ago in one of the empires there. The actual story develops in a bus, *Melville 67*, as it moves from one town to the next. The characters are passengers in the bus, and they interact with each other, in the present, and some of them feature in the past, a thousand years ago, as well.

You mentioned earlier that your novel *Ululants* is scheduled for publication early next year. What are the essential features of this novel?

Ululants also deals with two periods in history, 1856 and 1997. In the novel those two periods merge although they are still distinct. The characters move in time and space from one period to the next.

You are evidently using the mode of magic realism again in this novel. The movement in time and space from one period to the next is very much a characteristic of magic realist novels.

Yes, I am not using a flashback technique. It is the kind of novel that has no respect for time and space. The characters of the present time interact with characters in the year 1856 on different levels.

How do you see the representation of women in your novels?

I write about women the way I write about all my characters. I do not make any conscious effort to portray them any differently. What comes out of that exercise then is not contrived. When I write about women it is as I have observed them, and I write about them naturally.

Could you comment on the way in which you depict sex in your novels?

Well if it happens, it will happen. But I have changed from the type of writing in the past where I have enjoyed writing such naughty bits. I like writing about sex as I have done in *Ways of Dying*, for instance.

Can one expect any explicit descriptions of sex in your novels in the future?

No, not really. I find that rather cheap in the sense that anyone can write a detailed description of sex. But I think it is far more meaningful as I have done it in *Ways of Dying*. That is the type of sex that I would like to read, the type that is shrouded in some mystery of sorts. Earlier in the novel, for example, I describe the herdboys watching Noria having sex with Napu, rather than actually giving a description of the sexual act itself.

Thank you for your time. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No, not really. Everything I want to say, I have said already in my novels.

CSSALL

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