From Village To Global Village

by Marina Budhos

I BEGAN SMALL.

A few summers ago, I sat hunched before my brand-new Macintosh computer, staring gloomily at a trilogy of stories written in graduate school. They were slices of memory, of childhood summers spent in England, tales that burst from me all of a sudden. As I wrote them, I began to envision a series of short stories based on these same characters in England—my Indian aunt and English uncle, my half-Indian cousins, and my own half- Indian, half- American family.

I was only able to write one more short story—"Guyana Stories"—then the material began to erupt and teem over in unmanageable proportions. It was an odd, circuitous process, for the form of this novel eluded me again and again. I started it at least three or four times, each start an energetic sprint that took me into unconscious and fanciful material but didn't yet add up to a novel.

Two years later, I received in the mail my author's copy of "Guyana Stories" published in *The Caribbean Writer*. I was, truth be told, mortified. Though others liked the story, to me the piece was raw, unfinished, part of something bigger I did not yet have my hands around. As I recovered from my embarrassment, I began to realize that my writing in bursts, and not in strict chronology, was the content of the novel. The pages I had saved in folders, but mentally thrown away, were really

the research into a complex cultural and family history. Each start served as a dive into more background, and intellectually and emotionally, I was much further along than I thought.

I always wrote short stories before this, out of this habit of writing in bursts. Seized with a sudden flash of a situation and characters, I would scribble them down, though they teemed with so many other external ideas and preoccupations. While my peers in graduate school wrote slim, accomplished glimpses of interpersonal relations, minimalist carvings of people's lives, I struggled with ideas that seemed better suited to a nineteenth century novel—only crammed into the language and limitations of a woman in her twenties writing in the 1980s.

Yet the nineteenth century novel is what originally led me into writing itself—what gave me an idea of "The Novel." I wanted to write "full" novels. In high school, instead of reading the assigned Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, I plunged into George Eliot and Jane Austen. I suspect, in reading those long books, I was mentally creating the landscape of an idealized England, where I'd spent three important summers of my life, and where I experienced the closest thing to an extended family. Back in America I had no family; I belonged to no clan, no easily defined community. Because we were a mixed family, we would always be outsiders, even among those we were cast with, often Indians and West Indians. The experience of England imbedded itself in me; being Indian and foreign and American all at once. Only the feelings were so tremendous and complicated—as were the various bloodlines and cultures of our different members—that nothing I wrote down contained the control or brevity I held as an aesthetic ideal.

Although I loved the nineteenth century novel, I had none of the pacing of a nineteenth century novelist. These euphoric bursts of writing were always accompanied by profound discouragement when I read what I had written. I changed character names, voices, emphasis. Yet...somehow...this loopy, imbalanced approach started to accrue and accumulate into solid material, and it was with that dismay of witnessing one of my scenes plucked from my raw and incomplete novel and put into print, that I began to gain some hope.

The other source of hope and focus—not simply the memories residing in my unconscious—was the influence of a particular writer: V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul's voice—particularly in his non-fiction, his unrelenting critical eye, the hammering echo of alienation and cultural homelessness—has always provoked in me a kind of kindred reaction. I do not presume to have had experiences similiar to his. I have lived in America my whole life, and was never transplanted as an immigrant. But Naipaul carved out a history that remained wholly unarticulate to me, and which seemed to explain the background for my fitful writing.

V.S. Naipaul's presence in my thoughts is not surprising. Born twelve years after my father, he belongs to the same generation of young, colonial Indians who made their way to the Western world in the years following World War II. In his novels and essays, Naipaul articulated their journeys, their pasts and particular torments and comedies of what it means to be post-colonial Indians. Though my father came to America as a student, he was by no means a man of letters. Like many, he arrived for an education, with aspirations to return to the Caribbean as either a lawyer or doctor. But once

he stepped into the New World, there was no returning—fascinatingly similar to the journey his great-grandfather took in the nineteenth century from India as a coolie, when, despite a five year contract, there was no returning to the Motherland, either. The push was always forwards, never backwards. For men like my father, their embrace of America and its values of economic opportunity and success, was far better than the old.

But Naipaul, driven in his quest for self-knowledge and desire to be a writer, circles again and again to his native Trinidad, or to those East-Indian Trinidadians displaced into England. Over the years his circle became larger—it encompassed the post-colonial world as he ventured into Africa and India and the Arab nations. He has become (and in my opinion, often justifiably so) an often-reviled voice of the post-colonial experience, given his harsh criticism of these developing societies. His subject is the fluctuating experience of "flotsam of Asiatics," as he dubs his fellow immigrants in the *Enigma of Arrival*, arriving in London in the fifties, a migration pattern he was a part of and which he would eventually turn to as the source for his writing.

It is no surprise that my father, who hardly read anything other than a newspaper, knew Naipaul's work well. To him, Naipaul was his national writer, even if he, too, winced at his harshness.

But I am an American. I have an American mother, never have set foot in my father's country, and, when I was growing up, disdained to identify myself with the Indian and Caribbean immigrant families who arrived in the sixties, and who seemed so crudely "foreign." Not only did I grow up with

aspirations to be completely American, but I wanted to leap over the first hurdle of material success. I harbored fantasies of a literary life, though I had no idea what this might be, but for the Penguins I wedged into the back pocket of my Levis as I took the local bus to school in Queens.

Years later, when I arrived at graduate school, I discovered how old-fashioned my notion of a writer was. By this time, my fantasy was coddled along by the sepulchral figure of Virginia Woolf, whose diaries I ingested as if I were reliving her life. I fantasized a modern-day Bloomsbury life, taking tea in a wide-brimmed hat on an English lawn, uttering perfect pearl sentences.

Though I longed for the company of writers, in graduate school, presumably among my peers, I felt out of place. In a strange way, I felt like an immigrant. Everyone else savored a more contemporary idea of the short story. They wrote snappily, funnily, with a great eye for detail and the American landscape. Things *happened*, quickly and keenly, in their stories. I felt as if my work were a relic dragged onto the carpet of our workshop room. So my work changed. I began reading whom everybody else read: Raymond Carver, Anne Beattie, Alice Adams, David Leavitt, Lorrie Moore, countless *New Yorker* stories, as well as the meta-fictional experiments of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover. When I was supposed to be working a job in the library, I consumed literary journals. It was an education into contemporary America and I began to copy that landscape of suburban settings, trailers, and plain and cynical talk in my own work.

On the sly, though, I was reading such people as V.S.

Pritchett, Nadine Gordimer, Ruth Prawer Jabhavala, and Graham Swift. Very English and in and post-colonial—very aware of the layers of social conventions nearly invisible in the work of many contemporary American writers. However, for those who feel themselves on the outside these nuances are blatant and real. Even Naipaul, who is ironic about his archaic fantasies of literary England, constructs sentences that resemble the elongated, river-like flow of the English novel. In reading his *Area of Darkness* and *A Wounded Civilization*, the detached, exiled voice struck a pitch that both moved and angered me, for often, he turned the rawness of colonial anger into cultural self-hatred. Somehow, this hovered nearer to my own still-nascent material. When among my peers who wrote blithely of relations between people crystallized in numbed and hardened American landscapes, I often had the sense that my stories were missing it; I was far wide of that sensibility.

But why? Was I simply inobservant? Perhaps. That voice of outsideness reached deep into the experiences of both my father and a Jewish-American mother—herself keenly aware of her own alienation and the complexities of marrying a foreigner of another race—and imprinted itself on me and my manner of coping with my own culture. I was American, yes, but there was an ironic, half-detached quality to my point of view that could not surface in brief, delicate glimpses which were the form of much of contemporary fiction.

Since Naipaul's arrival in the West in the fifties that "flotsam" of Asians has turned into a tide altering the landscape of American, Canadian, and English, and some European cities. They have come in successive waves since then, and the

uprootedness and plurality which is the timbre of American experience has been started all over again. When I returned to New York City after eight years away—from the Korean delis to Brooklyn neighborhoods filled with Caribbean and African immigrants to my Flushing neighborhood with its swelling Indian and Korean population—the changes could not have been more astonishing. This was a place where, when I walked with my father years ago, we were the only Indians. The early migration I'd been connected to was now subsumed into an explosion that we are all feeling the intense and sometimes unpleasant pressures of.

Since those earlier immigrants of the fifties did marry—perhaps non-Asians—settled and had children, it is to this generation that I belong. We are the children of Naipaul—and also the ranks of Chinua Achebe, Thomas Landoo, Buchi Emecheta, and other post-colonial writers—with experiences complicated and enriched by the fact that we do not carry the burden of a colonial upbringing. The colonial past is more a mysterious, flickering presence. For me, it was in my father, and in the milieu of recently immigrated Indians who populated the early years of my childhood and came to provide the material for my novel.

If a writer goes toward that which is mysterious and unknown, if fiction itself is powerful for its articulation of the question, not the answer, then my own question seemed solidly located in this question: why do I feel as if I only half-belong to my own culture? I have many times gazed at our photographs of Guyana, which give me some visual impression of this mystery of half-belonging. When I stare at the faces of aunts whom I have never met, squatting in bare feet

over pails, washing clothes, the chicken coops, flat muddy stretches, and palm trees, I am staring, like any Westerner, at a photograph of women in a Third World village. But then I recall my father mentioning how much I resemble one of them, or how that haggard woman in the headdress is my grandmother, and I am baffled by this continuation, this quirk of history in my bloodstream.

Perhaps writing is often a pursuit of the Other. Perhaps my own fascination with the Other, the mystery on the other side, was easily found, since it resides inside me, in these mysterious black-and-white, grainy images which supposedly I bear a connection to. And it remains in my own experience, where, in the crapshoot of chromosomes, despite a mother with fair skin and green eyes, I came out looking full-blooded Indian.

The same is true of my half-Indian cousin in England, who is dark and tall, the spitting image of his mother. He towers over his father, a fair-skinned man of English and German descent. When they walk in the street, no one for a minute assumes they are father and son. I always found this amusing, a kind of synapse of association. What a shock, however, when it dawned on me that the same is true of my mother and me! Though we talk and quarrel like mother and daughter in public, no one for a moment assumes we are related. As far back as I can remember, we have been separated by racial distinction in the outside world. And yet I played with white children, spoke like an American, watched the same TV shows. My experience then, was a kind of disorderly fluctuation of views—sometimes completely unaware of my ethnicity—other times, too aware.

The narrator in *The Enigma of Arrival*, describing his journey to America and England, also mentions the shock of being categorized as "colored." His own reflex is to find solace in the company of a black Trinidadian, a man whom, in his own country, he would have nothing to do with. But the journey is over; Naipaul now writes of a healing and settling in as he explores a Salisbury cottage and gardens, thirty years later.

But there are indelible histories, cultural habits, and attitudes we continue to live with, which we mix into the potion for coping with modern-day living. A lot of contemporary American fiction, following Hemingway, is concentrated on the static surface of the here and now. It is like the television, which we have absorbed as our most potent American emblem and medium, with its fleeting moments, its plots and characters meted out in ten-minute segments between commercial breaks. Often in these works, memory travels no farther than our own backyards. Social commentary, except in the most oblique way, has all but disappeared from works of fiction. As has been observed ad nauseum, characters in today's stories are history-less, rootless, moving through a landscape of K-marts and alcoholism and divorces. The less-is-more aesthetic, which first began in the works of people like Mary Robison and Frederick Barthelme, proliferated into a style which aimed to speak to the experience of being an American in the seventies and eighties.

Despite Tom Wolfe's controversial criticism of the minimalist trend as a rejection of social commentary, I admired many of these writings. I could see how they were liberating for those writers—given their context. Personally, however, it was not a form I could ever feel liberated by. If anything I

felt shackled by its insistence on a distinctly "present tense" vision of characters' lives. For me, there was always another kind of sensibility, an experience connected to the idea of history, and which now surfaces in our literature. The Asians and other Third World immigrants settling in the West express a hybrid, if schizophrenic, point of view. It can be seen in the anarchic, multicultural vision of Hanif Kareshi's screenplays, the mother and daughter conflicts of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, or that wonderful beast of a memoir, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.

But in order for this literature to continue to be interesting, to bear us into the next stage of articulation, so we reach a controversial, worldly vision such as the one Naipaul attempts, or, even the "dangerous," iconoclastic one of Salman Rushdie, it means dealing with the once upon a time of the cultures left behind, and the here-and-now reality of the transplanted foreigner who is part of this new, fluctuating river of North American and English life. Some of this shows up, for instance, in the work of Bharati Mukherjee, whose modern Muslim and Hindu characters speak from a wacky, off-kilter view, and whose compressed, episodic encounters scatter them like marbles from Toronto to America's Southwest.

This is a literary sensibility that embodies a kind of social schizophrenia, as characters move from the village to the global village. As Americans we will start to recognize that our forced encounter with the East—the gruesome newsclips of Vietnam massacres that flashed on our living room television screens twenty years ago—have been transposed into yet another human, migratory phenomenon. Americans notice more and more Asians punching our cash registers,

driving our cabs, graduating from our universities, writing our books. Westerners themselves must change. The fascination with a kind of gauzy, colonial East—as in the BBC "Jewel and the Crown" series—must give way to a more contemporary vision, as we start to voice the ways in which the Other has already been absorbed into our world.

I would hardly assert that we have entered an age of renewed moral fiction, but the sameness of our visions has meant we've tuned out some fascinating demographic and cultural changes in the American, Canadian, and English landscapes (and in Europe) that now demand attention. It also means dealing with our "unpure" mingling—a very American experience—such as my own, which bears the weight of several perspectives: Indian, colonial West-Indian, Jewish, and American. It is this disquiet, the "impurity" of our perspective, and not some parochial ethnic celebration that remains to be written about. If not only the content but the point of view—who is speaking—changes, our form will necessarily change.

Now I know that the alien, half-in, half-out experience I wanted to articulate could not fit into the strictures of a brittle, pared-down aesthetic. These days my fiction concentrates on the peculiar comedies of this experience, both in my short stories and the novel I have completed. And though I may not be that colonial journeying to the West, I am the child of such a man, and his experiences, his Caribbean-Indian attitudes mingled with mine as an American, still imprint themselves on my imagination.