



A Medley

Women, Writing, Freedom

Muthal Naidoo

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Paradox

condition of existence

anomaly

not anomalous

Not knowing

smiling inscrutably
barely visible
in the dim light
a young buddha asks –
why don't you know?

noting the serene calm
the supreme confidence
the embodiment of certainty,
the old woman answers
"it is not knowable,
there is no beginning

and no ending
not knowing
is awareness
acceptance
of here and now –
the still point –
in the flux of infinity --
with a beginning,
and an ending

Not knowing
is not negative;
it is the fire
of imagination
pure energy
inspiring
the meaning
of existence.”

Women in Fiction

(2016)

There is tremendous pressure on woman to accept her reproductive function as the primary reason for her existence. In addition to the pressure exerted through familial and community expectations there is also the presentation of marriage and childbearing as the ideal of womanhood through the stories and literature of a society, through theatre, television and film dramas, and through everyday advertising which focuses on the body beautiful.

A woman's biology is presented as the prime determiner of her function in society. And in every culture, she is conditioned from childhood to focus on her child-bearing capacity. As a child she is given dolls to play with, and as she grows and develops she is being prepared for marriage. She learns from fairy tales – which generally end with the notion of marriage as the gateway to living happily ever after – that her purpose in life is to wait for the arrival of the handsome prince. He, the conqueror of dragons and other monsters, will claim her as his prize and become her provider and protector. She begins to dream of a wedding day and to see herself decked out as a bride.

Women who have not married are pointed out as anomalies and referred to in negative terms: spinster, old maid, frigid, bluestocking, witch. In fairy tales, witches – ugly single women – stand in the way of marriage and are abusers of children.

They teach us to think of single women as evil. Single women, considered unnatural, are often pitied or despised and may even pity or despise themselves for their unmarried status.

Those who submit themselves to society's scorn of their single status do not understand that they are free. In these women the will to power has been stanchd and they do not identify with witches.

But witches in fairy tales have great power. This power is presented as evil – the ability to thwart and destroy. It is part of the conditioning that keeps a woman in place, in a home as wife and mother. Nevertheless, the witch is recognition, though perverse, of a woman's will to power, her ability to explore innate capacities unrelated to sex and reproduction, capacities that lead to independence of spirit, mind and action.

Such freedom to develop intellectually and contribute to society in all its organizational and exploratory aspects was once considered the preserve of the male of the species. Literature, in general, rarely presents positive images of truly independent self-determined women. Powerful women are generally some form of witch – as in the film, *The Devil Wears Prada*, which reflects the continued vilification of the powerful woman.

In advertising, women models are chosen for their physical allure. To advertisers a woman is first and foremost a sexual being. That is how writers present her as well in a somewhat less obvious way. In literature, her physical and emotional qualities are more highly valued than her intellect. Film adaptations of literature reinforce these aspects that reduce her to an instinctual being. Take Natasha in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for instance. She is loved for her beauty and innocence and the *joie de vivre* that emanates from a tender, "pure" nature. As the embodiment of instinct and emotion, Natasha

is the perfect complement to Pierre who functions through his intellect.

Jane Austen attempted to challenge such a portrayal of woman. The emphasis in Austen's novels is on woman's need for security. She shows women condemned to accept marriage as the only option in life. And so it was – before middle and upper class women were allowed equal opportunities in education and could earn their own living. As the need for security put women in the position of supplicant, in order to convince a man that she was worthy of his patronage, she had to make herself attractive and amenable.

Finding male partners, who can provide her heroines with comfortable homes and appropriate lifestyles, becomes the main theme of Austen's novels. And within that constraint, her women struggle for recognition as intelligent beings. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is beginning to assert the independence of woman but even she has to give in to circumstances which make her dependent on male benevolence. Nevertheless, she demands recognition of and respect for her cognitive capabilities.

What Austen shows us in her novels is that a woman, who is not economically independent, has to submit to marriage in order to survive. Austen herself almost fell into the cage of marriage but thought better of it. Being economically independent, she could be free. But it was Elizabeth Gaskell who was the more forthright advocate of women's liberation in her time; in her novels there are women who resist marriage and child-bearing in pursuit of personal and intellectual freedom.

Most literature, especially the Mills and Boon type of novels, keep women enslaved to the notion that romance-sex-child-bearing is the only true fulfillment of a woman. Literature in general, conditions us to accept women's economic

dependence on men and, consequently, gives a man the right of choice and the right to propose. Women, in general, never propose. They must wait to be asked and to be acceptable as marriage partners they have to be modest as well as chaste. Unlike men who do not bear the obvious consequence of sexual activity, women are constrained to be faithful and committed to a single partner.

Though the Don Juans of the world win sneaking admiration, the Mary Magdalenes are treated with contempt and are subject to abuse. Men are allowed multiple partners but women are not. Women must be faithful to ensure the paternity of the line of descent. Mothers are easily identified; fathers are not.

In the TV series *Judge John Deed*, the writer G.F. Newman, presents the paradoxical situation where the judge, a Don Juan at heart, wants marriage with Advocate Q.C. Jo, a woman with whom he is totally compatible. His need for marriage is a contradiction and represents a confused desire to be "normal". His impulses are free but his mind is conditioned to the conventional notion of marriage. He consciously wants a formal marriage but subconsciously repudiates it.

Jo is amenable to marriage but more importantly wants fidelity. She sees that the judge has never restricted his sexual freedom and is unable to conform to society's requirement of fidelity. Though there are attempts to punish him for his disregard of it, there is no serious attempt to do so. Furthermore, he is rewarded by all the women who succumb to his charms. The fact that he sleeps only with intelligent women does not make him a progressive – he is still only after sex not intellectual connection. And why do the women love him? As in most literature, the hero is a man with power and it is power that turns women on.

However, in the *Judge John Deed* series, the judge's many casual affairs reveal a variety of women who, like him, are not looking for commitment to marriage. They represent free women who are quite content with the occasional encounter. They are able to exercise their independent will. They are freer than Jo who wants the traditional commitment to faithfulness in response to the judge's proposal of traditional marriage. Neither Jo nor the judge adheres to tradition in practice.

Faithfulness is necessary in marriage mainly for the purpose of identifying paternity. But in relationships where sex is simply a physical expression of existing intellectual and spiritual compatibility – the judge and Jo, for example – it is simply confirmation of mutual affection. But we are conditioned to think of sex not simply as a passionate expression of friendship but as a sacred part of marriage. It is still considered illegitimate outside of marriage even though in modern society extra-marital sex has become commonplace.

Poets and writers like D.H. Lawrence, who place sexual fulfillment on the highest plane, have created a culture in which sex has been made the supreme expression of love. Men are free to express themselves sexually as they do not bear the consequences of indulgence; women cannot be so free – even though the modern woman is freer than women of yore, she still has to be careful and has to take precautions.

When a man looks at Shakespeare's sonnet 116, *Let me not to the marriage of true minds*, he may believe that the Bard is referring to a passionate, i.e. sexual, attachment, but Shakespeare calls it a marriage of "true *minds*". Such love transcends the physical and is therefore sustainable. And as it is not gender specific, it is not imprisoned in marriage.

And a woman who is exploring her own intellectual and spiritual creativity is able to establish permanent and fulfilling

relationships with people of like minds. She is free of the need to be a sex object despite the advertising industry's main objective to reduce her to one.

Most importantly, she is free to love *all* those with like minds. For the health and welfare of society, most religions place restrictions on physical love and, in general, reduce it to marriage of one man to one woman. Physical love thus becomes fraught with demands of faithfulness and commitment to one person for a lifetime. There are no such restrictions on "marriages of true minds." In such marriages, an individual can explore his/her full intellectual potential with many partners in a variety of spheres of life.

Liberated Woman

out of the tomb
of the womb
liberated
from home
not wife
or mother –
other!
released
from the prison
of the oldest
profession
into the world
of power
free at last
to be at last

Authenticity in African Writing (2008)

July 2005 was the first time that I became aware that the authenticity of African writing was in question. My short story *Jail Birds* had been short-listed for the Caine Prize for African Writing (a British award for short stories) and I was in London. At a meeting organized for the five short-listed candidates with publishers and literary agents, the question of authenticity in African writing came up for discussion.

I had never thought about the authenticity of any writer's work before and the question caught me off balance. As a pensioner, who has taken up writing stories since my retirement in 2000, I found myself thrown in with young writers, who were familiar with this kind of discourse. I suddenly realised that sitting alone in my study in Pretoria, writing about the people around me, I had missed out on great intellectual debates taking place in the real literary world.

As the question of authenticity was new to me, I became defensive, felt the need to justify my impudence in attempting to be a writer, took for granted that the question about authenticity was a valid one and immediately became involved in specious arguments to authenticate the authenticity of my writing. I looked at ethnicity, place of abode, language, traditions and customs, none of which provided me with

a clear-cut understanding of authenticity and I eventually decided that I am an African writer because I say so – my conclusion as ridiculous as the quest.

I look back now after a few years of conscientious writing in which I have been discovering myself as a writer and find the question of authenticity quite absurd. A writer writes from her understanding and experience of life. What can be more authentic than that? No one questions the authenticity of writers from other continents who write about anything and everything under the sun and even beyond. How does a writer of science fiction explain the authenticity of his writing? What experience does he have of wormholes and other galaxies, Cyborgs and Klingons? Who questions the authenticity of Alexander McCall Smith, who writes about Africa but is not African?

I assume that it is the diversity of African writers, ethnic, residential, cultural and experiential, that makes people question their authenticity. As so many are in the diaspora and write about experiences that go far beyond the continent of Africa, they suddenly become suspect.

Is there perhaps a feeling that writing about other cultures, Western culture in particular, is not the appropriate domain for African writers, even though they describe their personal experiences?

I remember seeing a documentary on Gerard Sekoto. In one segment, when the artist, living in Paris, began to depict the life around him, he lost his popularity. He was accepted as long as his paintings reflected African people and circumstances. But living in Paris, he began to paint Parisian subjects and scenes. His critics believed he was not being authentic. Did they see him as an upstart whose depictions of Parisians were

inappropriate and unwelcome because he was African? Had he evoked hidden racism? Was their former acclaim simply paternalism?

Understanding of authenticity that depends on a narrow extrapolation of what is African, seems to me to preoccupy the thinking of those who question the authenticity of African writers. They would like all African writers to conform to set, stereotypical criteria. And that is racist.

The question, really a pseudo-intellectual inquiry, hides discomfort at seeing the world depicted through African eyes, eyes that understand and make judgments about situations beyond the African village. Writing should be and generally is, judged by its quality and its ability to depict with flair and imagination any situation. It should not be judged by the extent to which it conforms to conventional notions of Africa or any other place.

African writers, like any other writers, write from personal experience. That is what authentic writers do. They are aware of the diversity of influences in their lives and are glad of them for they give writers the power to be creative.

Foreword to *Jail Birds and Others*, 2004

(Stories about Women)

For me, a writer is a filter of experience – experience both lived and observed. So when I write, I am inspired by real people and I write about real people. My characters do not come straight out of my imagination. They leap out of life into my imagination where they become involved in a struggle for freedom because that is what I am interested in – defining freedom.

I see writing as the documentation of the individual's pursuit of freedom. Because freedom has positive connotations and we assume we know what it means, we take it for granted. But, in fact, total freedom is frightening. It makes the onerous demand that one take responsibility for creating one's life. To avoid that responsibility, most of us submit to the security of social norms and values even when these become restricting.

The characters in my stories are women for whom life within the social contract has become a jail sentence. Some break through the regulations and find the freedom to be themselves; others, fearful of breaking rules remain trapped in the prison of social conditioning and never find themselves

Story

Mynah's Lodger (2005)

"Look there. What's that?"

Mynah turned around and watched as the crown of a soft garden hat began, like a tendril, to push its way up in slow motion and burgeon, over the edge of her garden wall, into a floppy brim over a face whose eyes were scrupulously fixed on the ground below. This was the second time that this exotic bloom had attached itself to that very spot on the wall. It was a vantage point from which her entire little lounge could easily be scrutinised through the patio doors.

The day before, while seated at lunch with Thabo, an ex-student, and Elna, her lodger of two days, she had become aware of the strange outgrowth bending to the purple, pink and white petunias planted low along the wall outside. *So what was he doing way up there?* She had dismissed the thought. It had been a momentary distraction. But she recalled the first sighting now that her lodger had drawn her attention to the reappearance once more of the blooming phenomenon.

On seeing the head of her neighbour perched above the wall, Mynah turned to Elna, "Is he looking at you?"

"Yes, staring straight at me," Elna was amused, titivated and flattered.

But Mynah was flabbergasted. She immediately jumped to a whole set of conclusions. Such blatant prying – 007, in the guise of shrubbery! Her neighbours must have seen the Correctional Services car that had come to her house on the day before her lodger arrived. When she brought Elna in the next morning, 007's wife, 008, had been right behind her in her Mercedes and had smiled and waved. Later that day, the Correctional Services vehicle had appeared again and Elna had gone out to sign their log. It had come again the following day and had probably been seen yet again.

008, aware that Mynah visited women in prison, must be wondering if she had brought one of them into the complex. She had. But the whole point of a complex is to keep criminals out, not bring them in and nurture them.

Mynah laughed to herself, *Goodness, I have created a situation!*

Hence the appearances of the surveillance flower. So now she waited for the next thing – the reconnaissance! It happened – two days later. Mynah had just fetched Elna from work. They were sitting in the kitchen having tea and there was a smiling 008 at the open kitchen door. Mynah smiled back and 008 walked in. Normally 008 stayed at the door; she never had time to visit, but on this occasion she came in.

“Oh, I didn't know you had company.”

Mynah introduced Elna and 008 smiled and greeted her. Then Mynah invited her into the lounge and she sat down – her nausea at the pensioner's furnishings forgotten for the moment.

“We're having tea. Will you join us?”

“No thanks, I just popped in for a moment.”

“Are you on holiday now?”

“Yes, thank goodness, we’ve shut up shop for the year. I can relax at last.”

“Going away for Christmas?”

“Yes, looking forward to a marvellous vacation at the coast.”
oo8 turned to Elna. “And where are you from?”

A question like this, a perfectly normal question, had been expected. Still, there was just a hint of embarrassment as Elna replied that she was from the city.

So Mynah explained, “Elna is lodging with me for a while.”

oo8 must have realised that they were not going to volunteer information so she changed the subject. “Actually, I’m here because I want to invite you to a *braai* that George (oo7) and I are organising – a get-together of all the people in the complex.”

“Oh, what a novel idea! We’ve never had a get-together. What a nice way to round off the year.” Mynah, the first black person in the complex, had moved in several years before and hardly knew her neighbours.

“Well. It’s not actually an end of year party; it’s a New Year party.”

“Oh, so when will it be?”

“About the middle of January.”

“Oh! ... Well, it will be a good way to start the year – getting to know one another.”

oo8 stood up and Mynah walked with her to the kitchen, where oo8 collected her umbrella – much needed showers had been falling since the beginning of the week – and they went out through the garage.

When Mynah came back, Elna was laughing. “Well, now she knows what a serial killer looks like.” Elna would have

continued but she saw the umbrella bobbing along the spy wall and checked herself. When it disappeared, she said, "So you've been invited to a party. You had better mark it down in your diary or you'll forget. ... Oh, but you don't have a date." She laughed again. Then she frowned, "They won't make trouble for you, will they?"

"Just let them try!"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have come."

"Rubbish! They don't scare me. They're just inquisitive that's all."

That night as Mynah tossed and turned, she saw secret meetings at which alarming drops in property values and strange old Indian biddies were the main topics. She saw herself hauled before the body corporate, and found herself listening to accusations of improper conduct and threats of eviction. Then she was rushing off to the Human Rights' Commission demanding justice. Yes, she would take the matter to the highest authority.

But in the morning, she decided on discretion. She asked Elna, "Do you think you could ask Correctional Services to wait at the entrance gate when they come? You could go out to sign. It's not that I am afraid but there's no need to attract attention."

Elna, a parolee, agreed and from then on Correctional Service vehicles did not enter the complex.

Still, interest in the lodger did not abate; it took a new turn. A few days later, a couple of men walking past the house, suddenly turned their heads, like soldiers at the 'eyes right' command, to stare at Elna who was sitting on the sofa. Elna was an attractive blonde, nearing forty, whose good looks had reached full maturity.

She was always telling Mynah, "They all love me at work. I'm the only woman there and they love me."

She was a warm, bright and breezy person and it was not surprising to Mynah that men were attracted to her.

"Bafana is in love with me. He wants to marry me. He suggested that he and I and Rudolph rent a flat together. But I don't trust him. Rudolph is okay, but I don't know about Bafana." This was before she had moved in with Mynah.

At the time, Mynah had known she was angling for a room in her house. She had been hinting at it since she got out. And Mynah was on the point of making the offer. She felt sorry for the woman, had seen the place where she was staying and had for several months been involved in a tremendous internal debate. She would lose her privacy and total freedom of action if she brought her into her home. But she realised she was being selfish so she did it.

It never occurred to her that she would lose a great deal more – her seclusion. In the forty years that she had lived alone, she had ignored everyone and everyone had ignored her. And she treasured her solitude. Now, suddenly, her home was the talking point and focus of interest in the complex. Why? Because Elna was white? Young and attractive? An ex-con?

One morning, before Elna left for work, she told Mynah that women talking loudly outside her window had awakened her; she hadn't caught what they were saying except when one of them exclaimed, "So, this is the new South Africa".

Mynah was amazed and her imagination jumped into overdrive. *It's only in soap operas that discrimination has disappeared altogether and there its demise has a mostly prurient value. Maybe that applies here as well. I have lived*

all alone in the complex for at least six years with hardly any visitors. People often think that single women are closet gays. Perhaps my neighbours think I have now taken a lover. Mynah chuckled quietly to herself. People always speculate about recluses; perhaps she was now acquiring a far more interesting persona.

Elna, a young, vital woman with very worldly interests, was flourishing under all the male attention. She took to playing her guitar in the garden and singing romantic songs. And the wall behind her began to bloom, first with that single flower, then several blossoms, then bunches of flowers and finally the most elaborate bouquets. Her recitals were followed one day by contrapuntal renderings from the other side of the wall, first from a *belle canto* duet, then a trio, a quartet and eventually a full-blown chorus with contraltos, sopranos and mezzos in recitative. It rose to a crescendo and all the voices blended into a momentous resolve.

That evening after work, Elna picked up her guitar and went out into the garden as usual. As she began to strum, the white blossoms, their anthers sticky and dropping pollen, surfaced along the wall and as her voice rose in full-throated richness, it was accompanied by a male humming chorus. But all was suddenly drowned out by strident Valkyrie voices descending on the wall.

Mynah, whose nose was in a book as usual, jumped up in shock, ran to her bedroom window and found herself looking out on a wild and furious battle scene. She clutched at her heart, which was beating uncontrollably as she saw the radiant blossoms suddenly plucked from their perches and sent scuttling off, raucous Valkyrie laughter whipping them from behind. And as the thunder faded into the distance, she hoped it was all over now that her wall had been deflowered.

But within seconds, the clarion call announcing the beginning of the major skirmish shook the skies and she saw the troops mustering to begin the descent upon her garden. She ran out to warn Elna, who was calmly seated on the patio trying out new melodies, but she was too late.

The wives, pouring into her garden like a flood, swept her aside, slinging her into her plumbago bush. They hauled Elna out of her chair and, as the chords of their triumphant chorus crashed all about, frogmarched her out of the garden, down the pathway to the entrance gate, and out into the street. They stood at the gate dusting their hands off and watching till she disappeared from view.

Mynah kept calling from above, “She has nowhere to go,” but of course they couldn’t hear her even though she was hovering just over them.

Mynah watched oo8 lead the troops back into the complex and as they dispersed to their various homes, she skimmed over the entrance gate and floated after Elna who was marching down the road. Mynah called to her but Elna simply turned the corner, walked round the block, came back to the complex and opened the gate with her remote control. No one saw her as she walked back to the house, entered the garage and went into the kitchen. Mynah followed her as she searched the house and kept calling to her to look up and see her but Elna couldn’t hear her. Eventually Elna went into the garden.

Mynah went out with her and from the patio roof, took one look below, and saw her body, covered in blue flowers, lying in the plumbago bush.

“Oh for goodness sakes, I’m dead. So what happens next?”

But she would have to figure that out later. Her concern now was for Elna. Mynah had suddenly become clairvoyant or something and *knew* the terrible thing that was going to

happen. Still, she wanted to stop it. When Elna saw Mynah's body in the bush, she froze in horror.

Mynah knew she was going to scream and she shouted with all her might, "Don't scream! Don't scream! Whatever you do, don't scream!"

But Elna's cry resounded all through the complex and the women came streaming back into the garden.

When they saw Mynah's body, oo8 immediately called the police and before the night was over, Elna had been arrested for murder. oo8 looked most satisfied. "Well, girls, this has been a very good night's work. Good old Mynah, she finally did the right thing. Now she's gone to a better place and Elna is back where she came from. We'd better make sure that the next owner of this house understands what it means to live here."

Mynah's house was put up for auction and a very suitable family, newly escaped from Mamelodi, moved in. In no time, they showed a complete understanding of security complex living. Like all their white neighbours, they put in a house alarm and had a security company monitoring their property.

"Why am I hanging around? There's nothing I can do." Mynah, who had been sitting on her TV aerial, suddenly took off into the wild blue yonder. "Oh well, at least travel is free now."

Community

control
of primal urges
for living together
without fear
without violence
placing action
within law and order
placing sex
within marriage
foregoing freedom
for conformity
to ensure safety
survival of the species

community
point of definition
anchor in the flux
of universal expansion

Autobiography, Biography, Memoir: Restoring the authority of the personal

My participation in a Panel Discussion at the First Cape Town International Book Fair: 17 June 2006

Good afternoon Madam Chair, Panel and Friends, when I looked at the topic for this panel discussion, I struggled with the phrase 'authority of the personal.' I wasn't sure whether it referred to writers or the subjects being written about.

If it referred to the writer, was it with reference to empowerment, freedom of choice? If it referred to the subjects was it a reference to respect and human dignity. The phrase also suggests a personal endorsement, like the signature of an artist at the bottom of a painting that declares this is mine and I am proud of it.

But the word 'restoring' which suggests both the past and the present, implies that writers lost 'authority of the personal' in the past and are regaining it in the present.

Putting all these random thoughts together, I decided to concentrate on the writer rather than the subjects of writing and to look at how differing circumstances influence writers.

First, considering empowerment, the belief in oneself implied in the phrase 'authority of the personal', I asked, 'Who gives the writer this authority?' and realised that there is only one

person who can do that and that is the writer herself. The authority to write is inherent in the act of writing so it does not matter when you write, during apartheid or after, the moment you set pen to paper, you write with personal authority. Without that assumption of authority, there would be no storytellers and we would not have a list of admired writers from the apartheid era.

So storytellers of the past did not, could not, lose their authority.

Did they have freedom of choice? In terms of subjects, I believe they did. They didn't have to write about the horrors of apartheid; I am sure that there were many writers who did not. But many of the ones we admire, chose to write about apartheid conditions because they were so deeply affected by its inhumanity. Writers do not avoid such situations. Are there not many stories about the holocaust, war, terrorism? Doesn't human fallibility provide the most fertile ground for story telling?

If they had freedom of choice, did writers in apartheid times have freedom of expression? I believe that I have at last hit upon an area of restriction. But even here, though they were not allowed to criticise, being writers and ingenious people, they found ways around constraints: they changed names and places, created allegorical situations, found parallels from the past, in fables, in classics and they satirised. Restrictive conditions discourage only the weak, but to authors, who understand their authority, they offer challenges that often lead to their finest works.

The only way in which the writers could have lost their authority, besides being detained or assassinated, would have been to give it up voluntarily. But they did not; they wrote. The mere fact of writing demonstrated their authority.

So why do we speak of restoring the authority of the personal as though it did not exist before 1994? Is it because pre-1994 writers concentrated on the injustice and inhumanity of their times in their writing? Do we believe that they felt obliged to inveigh against these conditions? That their writing had become protest literature? Are we saying to them that what they wrote had no literary merit? Are we saying that Sol Plaatjie's *Mhudi* is not worth reading today?

If the answer is no, then we cannot pity them for having lost their authority. Instead, we have to admire them for their courage and perseverance in the face of tyranny – the assertion of their authority.

According to Salman Rushdie: 'Language is courage: the ability to conceive a thought, to speak it and by doing so to make it true.'

And writers of apartheid times were courageous people, extremely courageous, because they didn't simply speak their thoughts, they wrote them down and gave them substance.

So they were not only courageous but also dangerous. They used their authority, used it to undermine an iniquitous system. That is why so many of their works were banned. And the stories they told of their times, bore their personal stamps. That is why we are able to differentiate between writers like Zakes Mda and Es'kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing, Agmat Dangor and Don Matera, all of whom wrote during the apartheid era.

Now in a new dispensation that has outlawed prejudice and discrimination, circumstances that influence how writers use their personal authority have changed. As we slowly divest ourselves of feelings of superiority and inferiority, we are beginning to find a new respect for ourselves and others. So many more people are beginning to write, to celebrate the

release from self-doubt and self-hatred. We are now finding inspiration in our birth communities, in old traditions, in our histories, as well as in new associations and new encounters.

But we have to be realistic. We are not yet free of apartheid. For the most part, we still live in racially divided areas, and have not yet begun to think of ourselves as members of one community.

Thus when writers look into what is still referred to as 'their own communities,' they are in danger of being declared politically incorrect, ethnocentric or irrelevant.

In our post-Apartheid society, if historical descriptions of our still ethnically divided communities do not somehow reflect a non-racialism that wasn't there in the past, one is considered ethnocentric. One invokes the contempt of the superior non-racialist, who, nevertheless, still thinking in apartheid terms, slots the writing into a ghetto and relegates it to a sub-culture because he does not see it as part of his new culture. It is not easy to eradicate racism; it often gives way to other forms of discrimination such as xenophobia.

Unlike the writers of the past who were secure in their personal authority, the many new writers of today are in the process of establishing theirs.

That brings me to that implication in the phrase 'the authority of the personal' which suggests endorsement and carries us into the future. When the writing demonstrates a sustained level of mastery and the author proudly says, 'This is mine,' we are no longer speaking of political situations, of considerations external to the writer. We are speaking of the writer whose writing has become an expression of her total being; a writer who has dedicated herself to the muse and whose belief in herself, her vision and talent and her commitment to truth, courage, and knowledge are total.

When a writer reaches this level of self-assurance, her personal authority is no longer private; it is universally perceived. I don't think any author will describe herself as having reached the pinnacle of her achievements and for her there are still heights to be scaled, but, for her readers, she is a master.

And because Salman Rushdie exemplifies, such a writer for me, I am going to read an excerpt from his *Satanic Verses* that deals with people trapped in other people's perceptions of them

The manticore ground its three rows of teeth in evident frustration. 'There's a woman over that way,' it said, 'who is now mostly water-buffalo. There are businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails. There is a group of holidaymakers from Senegal who were doing no more than changing planes when they were turned into slippery snakes.

I myself am in the rag trade; for some years now I have been a highly paid male model, based in Bombay, wearing a wide range of suitings and shirtings also. But who will employ me now?' he burst into sudden and unexpected tears.

'There, there,' said Saladin Chamcha, automatically. 'Everything will be all right, I'm sure of it. Have courage.'

The creature composed itself. 'The point is,' it said fiercely, "some of us aren't going to stand for it. We're going to bust out of here before they turn us into anything worse. Every night I feel a different piece of me beginning to change. I've started, for example, to break wind continually...I beg your pardon...you see what I mean?

...

'But how do they do it?' Chamcha wanted to know.

'They describe us,' the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.'

(The Satanic Verses, 174)

So far, I have been considering the authority of the personal only as it applies to writing in general.

But our topic is Autobiography, Biography and Memoir – and the implication is that these genres are the prime expressions of the personal. As these forms deal with personal historical fact, they combine subjectivity and objectivity. They present the facts of a person's life from the point of view of the writer.

Biography is the most difficult of these three genres. With autobiography and memoir, the writer is in control of the material and can take liberties with expression. But with biography, the subject knows the material better than the author. So who has the authority? The subject or the writer? If the biographer and the subject understand each other perfectly, the writer's authority will not be questioned. If not, the writing becomes a course of frustration and conflict.

To end, I want to look at Anthony Sher's assertion in his book, *Beside Myself*, that writers write about themselves. That is true but does it mean that everything that authors write is autobiographical?

That brings us to what it is the writer does when composing a story. Writers get ideas for stories from newspaper reports, from casual remarks, from things observed, experienced, dreamt and so on. What they do then is to grow these ideas inside themselves, inside their own understandings and

perspectives on life. Like a baby in the womb, the story, which takes its nourishment from the author, will inevitably reflect her characteristic view of life.

Writers aren't the only ones who use themselves as resources in this way. I believe all artists do.

Take the actor, for example. Stanislavsky, who wrote extensively about acting, gave actors many ways in which to become the character; one of his techniques is called 'emotional memory.' When an actor is called upon to portray a character with whom he has very little in common, he brings that character to life by going deep within himself to find experiences as close to those of the character as possible in order to recapture emotional and psychological states that will give authenticity to his performance.

In the same way, writers go deep within themselves to find the contexts, the feelings and the thoughts of their characters. So their writing does contain elements of the autobiographical because writers supplement from their own experience to give their work its fullness. But the writing is not autobiographical. The stories that they tell are not the stories of their lives though they reflect their understanding of life.

Just as one distinguishes between the actor and the character, one has to distinguish between the author and the writing. The writing is influenced by the writer's understanding of life and she interprets her subjects in terms of that understanding. It is how all human beings, whether they are writers or not, interpret the people and occurrences in their lives. Writers have formalized this natural tendency and turned it into an art. Their writing is subjectively about others and objectively about themselves.

Jealousy

a cage
to house a beast
keeping it from view
feeding it privately
till its bloated form
bursts through
to devour
the other
in you

And then put out the light (2007)

Kneeling beside him, Latifa puts her arm around his shoulders and begins to stroke his cheek. She feels the incipient beard lurking beneath the pores. He doesn't have to shave every day. He hasn't today. She gazes into his eyes, two dark islands in wide wastes of whiteness, staring intently at her. When he sings and dances, his eyes sparkle with the light that shines through his whole being and shoots through her body, driving her wild with desire. But there is no light in them now. She must bring it back. She leans forward to kiss the dear orbs and her lips meet shutters that come down into darkness. She cannot kiss his lips – the tape over his mouth – so she draws his head onto her breast and begins to stroke and kiss the thick dark waves.

She is back in the audience, back before their marriage, being pulled into him by the magic of haunches riding high, sinuous shoulders thrusting back and forth, legs strutting, cheeky and joyful. Latifa sees in his every teasing gesture, in his rhythmic bopping, hears in every melodious sound, the world in which he had lived as a child – the houses with *stoeps*¹, the little tearooms, the vendors at their stalls, the streets rolling up inclines, the carefree gaiety of people in shiny, colourful

1 verandas

outfits, dancing and parading under a rainbow of bright parasols. What joy as he sings and dances! Faces all around her are suffused with the brightness that emanates from his being. Musician, dancer, singer, creator of musical theatre – he is there for everyone in the audience – she, just one of many. That is painful.

Sitting next to Gadija, his wife at the time, Latifa sees the tiredness in the woman’s eyes as she watches him performing. He has grown, become a giant; he bestrides more than the narrow world of The District, the womb of his inspiration. The umbilical cord being cut, he has floated free; has grown into a global entity, a Colossus with feet planted on Broadway and in London’s West End. Left behind in the closed circuit of her consciousness, Gadija’s searching fingers reaching constantly for the familiar, find only a void where her husband used to be. Standing solid in her *abaya*², her lips moving silently, Gadija prays for guidance, mercy and blessing. Still a beautiful woman, the lines around her eyes and mouth, drawn in graceful, artistic strokes, serve to enhance her dignity and charm.

Latifa, ten years younger, in the full bloom of her beauty, understands it is only age that gives her the advantage; she cannot compare with Gadija. But she knows she can have him because she is not of the *zenana*³; she is engaged in the wide, limitless world that encompasses his being. He has looked into Latifa’s eyes, has seen her power, is tantalised. Gadija can hold him no longer.

But *she* was never the real threat – it is that performer on the stage, who glows with a lustre that nothing else can match.

.....

- 2 full-length dress
- 3 women’s quarters

Now, kneeling next to him, Latifa searches his eyes for the old desire and admiration. But she is seeking in a void; her gaze elicits only questioning – the estranged alertness of the hunted.

Oh God, she has become Gadija.

The first bail application fails.

Cindi Smith's murderer, who beat her up more than ten times, threatened to kill her several times and eventually shot her, got R2000 bail. Stephan Komane who shot and killed his girlfriend and her cousin was given bail. Fred van der Vyver charged with bludgeoning his girlfriend with a hammer and stabbing her to death is out on bail. What makes Latifa, a woman, so much more dangerous? If it were only a matter of killing again, she would probably get bail – but they fear that she will flee the country. And justice must be served.

Silent. The scarf over her hair forms a frame around a mature face, still beautiful, but dark glasses turn it into a mask, expressionless, impassive. She presents a picture of vulnerability and weakness, a woman whose mental state is precarious, has always been. Her enemies say this is a lie. Latifa is a performer, better even than her husband. And now she too has become a celebrity; an overnight sensation, known to the whole nation not just to crowds in a theatre. She has appeared on every TV in every home, is on the Internet, the radio and in newspapers. People scour the media looking for that face, trying to get behind that mask. And just one event, not a series of shows, has rocketed her into stardom. Now her name, eclipsing his, is on everyone's lips. People, who had never heard of either, now know her, not him.

But hers is a different show.

The second bail application.

After the first, at which pleas of her children's needs, of her fragile psychological condition, and the fear of suicide in detention did not prevail, she fired her legal team and the advocate now representing her, has brought in her son, Nawaal, to plead on behalf of his mother. At the arraignment, he had collapsed in tears and had had to be escorted out of the courtroom.

Now at the second bail hearing, Nawaal, the son of her first marriage, tells of the great love between his mother and his stepfather – whom he calls Uncle – a joyous ecstatic connection. And in his account of money laundering, illicit diamond trading, and involvement in underworld activities, implies a gangland strike. US dollars, millions, were apparently stolen from the scene of the crime. He offers this new evidence in protest against his mother's detention.

Her financial manager confirms that she and her husband always made joint decisions. To obviate noxious assignment of motive, he assures the court that they had taken out insurance policies *together* on their children from their previous marriages, on their six-year old daughter and on their own lives. The advocate reminds the court that under South African law, a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty; being held without recourse to bail is presumption of guilt and unconstitutional. Unjust!

This woman loved her husband passionately.

Lying and storytelling, often used synonymously, are both forms of fiction. Storytellers, aware of the laws of libel, tell us that their characters are fictitious. Liars, however, embroil us in stories that we take for fact about themselves and the people they encounter. Always the main actors in their stories, liars present themselves as innocent victims of cruel, vindictive

villains who cause them great suffering and leave them bereft of worldly possessions. They perform with such sincerity and emotion that they easily elicit audience participation and people pour out their sympathy in the form of goods and money. With great humility, the liar accepts his takings – box office remuneration for an absorbing performance.

When we eventually discover that it has all been an act, instead of becoming delirious with excitement as when we attend a rock concert, we are filled with shame and embarrassment because we believed. We didn't know it was a performance; we were duped and we revile the liar.

Storytellers, unlike liars, state outright that they create fiction; any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental, quite unintended. But it is uncanny how their characters and situations resemble real people, real happenings. Though they claim it is all fertile imagining, we can see that their fiction has its basis in fact.

So what makes a story fiction? Place and name changes? No. James Bond's fantastic exploits, though they emanate from the real world in which his author operated, carry us beyond, into the realm of fantasy in which the impossible is made possible. Fiction is revealed in the ability to break out of narrow bounds and boldly go where no man, or woman, has been before.

That's the thing, you see. Writers do exactly what liars do. They take reality and turn it into fiction. The liar won't admit to doing so because he believes his own lies so his tale, limited to those around him, keeps us earthbound, while the storyteller launches us into outer space. And that is what we applaud, that ability to lift us out of the mundane.

Latifa and her husband, in their individual ways, are both storytellers of the popular kind – his stories for the stage; hers for the courtroom.

Performing artists make money; more in Hollywood and Bollywood than on Broadway and the West End. But, creating and being their own commodity, they cannot compare with people whose commodity is money itself. He cannot compare with her. Latifa is an expert. From the early days of watching *fahfee*⁴ runners at the family shops and then her marriage to the son of a prominent businessman who knew how to make money multiply, she learned and eventually became an entrepreneur extraordinaire. Her ability to negotiate in the business world, in unofficial stock exchanges, in underworld markets, enables her to amass wealth and remain independent. Once upon a time that power had filled him with admiration and had allowed her, queen of the Valkyries, to eclipse Gadija and carry him off.

Her energy, her initiative, her power – the aphrodisiac that kept him addicted, had held him fast when he was on tour in Europe and America. But that had waned. It couldn't compare with the magic of coupling with an audience through his own power as performer.

Latifa, standing before the mirror, cannot see herself. Where is the beautiful, slender body, where the shapely hips, the silky smooth, flat abdomen? Who is the monster staring back at her out of distraught, desperate eyes? This is *jadoo*⁵; someone has tricked her; found a witch doctor to provide the *muti*⁶ that shows her an inflated abdomen, pushed out in folds, like bags of garbage, hips and buttocks merged into a globe and thighs blown into elephantine cylinders. She stares at this reflection, eyes full of loathing.

.....

- 4 numbers racket
- 5 Black magic
- 6 potion

As the surgeon maps out areas on the abdomen, *he* appears in the mirror behind the monster, and stares, eyes full of loathing. Fascinated by the abomination, *he* cannot turn *his* eyes away; they search for the sylph swallowed up inside the mound of lard. She wants to shatter the glass, blind those eyes and block out that alienated gaze, the look in his eyes before he left for New York. But it will change – after all the procedures. She will be an alluring leading lady again. And he will forget the audience, will dance with her, her husband. He will be back in a few weeks. She has to be ready for him when he returns. The King must find his Anna.

But when he comes back to encounter yet another of her selves, the disgust, though suctioned out of his look, is not replaced by an infusion of desire. Instead his pupils reflect images of Gadija, the comfortable, nurturing ex-wife, tall, beautiful Gadija, well preserved in the *zenana*. If it were some blonde, blue-eyed floozy from New York or Paris or London, Latifa would understand though not forgive. But Gadija? Why Gadija? She can feel the pressure building up at the top of her head.

Then she hears him on the phone telling his sister he plans to move out.

The bail hearing, part 2. More grounds for bail. Her daughter needs her.

The magistrate puts two and two together, gets four and is not inclined to let the little girl have her mother. The magistrate, a do-gooder, is trying to protect Ruwaida and can't see that two and two don't make four for her. 'I want my Mummy. Why have they taken her away from me?' Ruwaida, Latifa's little daughter, is attached to her aunt, his sister, Ghatoen, who saw to all her needs while Latifa ran her businesses. But now the child will have nothing to do with Ghatoen-ma. She is angry

with her aunt who has spread lies about her mother. That's why they took Mummy away from her. She doesn't have a father or a mother anymore. Ruwaida is not an actress, she needs her Mummy but the judge cannot be swayed on that account.

Next – bail on medical grounds. Latifa's psychiatrist's evidence is set out on the table – bipolar mood disorder, large amounts of medication, electric shock therapy, psychotic relapse, anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medication, sleeping tablets, tranquilisers, parasuicide⁷, and an urgent medical appointment for the next week.

The Prosecutor lifts up the last item, finds under it an appointment for liposuction treatment, and gleefully upstages the Defence Counsel's assumptions with his own. Drama queen, actress, making herself beautiful – what for? Her husband is dead. He does not see that he is giving credence to the Defence Counsel's pleas of mental instability. He concludes that she is a normal person and therefore has criminal responsibility.

The police investigator, his next witness, declares Latifa a definite flight risk. Give her bail and you will never see her again.

At that, the court transforms into Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. The groundlings in the gallery clap and boo, 'Give her bail and we'll take care of her,' raucous laughter, the flash of a cellphone camera, confiscated immediately, but the drama is not over. Outside the courtroom, Capulets and Montagues, freed from propriety, go at one another with pickets and insults.

'He drove her insane, like he did his first wife!'

7 A suicidal gesture in which the aim is not death

'She is not to blame!'

'She killed him!'

'Bring back the death penalty!'

From marriage have come insanity, parasuicide, murder and feuding. Happily ever after is where fairy tales end. Romeo and Juliet driven by passion and too young to know, clung to fairy tales. But he and Latifa? He had been married before; she had been married before, yet they still clung to the fairy tale ending. So they had bonded again, with each other, only to discover again that bonding is bondage.

Ruwaida walks around the house with large frightened eyes; she cannot forget the night they came. Those men in balaclavas. She sees again their big eyes and thick lips through the holes; doesn't want them to touch her. They grab her and rush into Nawaal's bedroom, grab Nafisa, Nawaal's wife, and Nawaal who is carrying the baby, and push them all into the bathroom. They shove them against the washstand, search Nawaal and his wife roughly, take away Nawaal's cellphone and watch, pull the necklace off Nafisa's neck, and pull off Ruwaida's bangles. Then they lock them in and leave.

The same horrible men had tried to kill Mummy a few weeks before. They had caught Mummy just outside the house, pointed a gun, pulled her out of the car and told her they would kill her if Daddy stayed in show business.

For Ruwaida this had not been an act.

Now they are back. They have come to kill Mummy. Ruwaida tries to scream but the terror in that bathroom is so thick, it slides down her throat and forms a tight noose around her vocal chords. She huddles together with the others, frozen, waiting, waiting, waiting – what are they waiting for? Then suddenly, a loud explosion! Ruwaida screams. 'They've killed

her. They've killed my mummy.'

This is not an act; Ruwaida is too young to pretend.

Back in court again, still the bail hearing – part 3 of a four-part show.

Defence Counsel asserts that Latifa wasn't even present when it happened. She had been locked in her bedroom. Why is she being held?

The Prosecution brings in the sister, Asma. Latifa listens silently as Asma describes her brother's unfortunate liaisons, first with Gadija, then her. Two marriages; two disasters. The first insidiously abusive, the second openly vicious, a nightmare in which an enraged woman constantly threatens her husband, once with a knife; a nightmare in which they are strangers living under the same roof; they do not share the same bed, do not pray together.

The Defence decries Asma's evidence. Latifa's is a bipolar disorder; she has suffered a psychotic relapse and has attempted suicide. She is under continuous medical supervision; receives electric shock therapy, takes anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medication, sleeping tablets, tranquilisers. And he, the loving husband, had administered these medications to a beloved wife; had carefully noted dates, times, doses in a diary.

But the state psychiatrist continues to pour scorn on such evidence, declaring Latifa's mental state part of a well-rehearsed scenario. She knew exactly what she was doing; she has criminal responsibility.

But criminals don't take responsibility. That's what makes them criminal. They can't be responsible. Liable, yes. But liability still has to be proven.

And we wait again – for part 4. Of a bail hearing!

But waiting for bail is like waiting for Godot. It does not come.

Behind those dark glasses, Latifa is watching. The music is loud and lively. It is Salma's, twenty-first birthday party; Salma, his daughter by Gadija. Latifa sees Gadija smile as she meets her ex-husband's eyes, as he reaches forward to pull Salma out to dance *langarm*⁸. They glide over the floor. Other couples join them and soon there are swirling forms all around the hall. Then the band segues into the familiar, the local *vastrap*⁹ and all the spaces disappear, displaced by rolling shoulders, shuffling feet and swaying hips. He doesn't even see his daughter's boyfriend until the lad cuts in and spirits her away.

As he turns to move off the floor, he suddenly finds himself being spun around. Latifa, of the time of romance, is in front of him. She has abandoned *hijab*¹⁰ and *abaya*. Her brown hair cascades in waves to her shoulders. Shimmering in her blue evening gown, she flings her arms around his neck and suddenly they are jiving together, with energy, complementing each other in every movement, perfect harmony, completely in sync, but the eyes are at war. His, wary, alert – hers, fixed and compelling, their embrace a trap that holds a prey. There is no magic.

The music ends; she disappears like Cinderella but her shoes are intact. He escapes to the band, takes the microphone and sings to the dancers to dispel the alarming tattoo in his chest.

She eventually returns to sit with her son and his wife – they are not, have not been, aware of the woman in the blue gown.

8 Social ballroom dancing

9 jig

10 veil

She is again the woman under *abaya* and *hijab* whose heart has turned to stone.

Soon after they had arrived home from that twenty-first birthday party, there were people outside, seeking entrance. He had answered on the intercom – relatives – and went to open. Men wearing balaclavas had rushed in, grabbed him, dragged him to the upstairs lounge, tied his hands behind his back, tied his feet, taped his mouth and pushed him onto his knees. One stood over him with a gun while the others charged into the bedrooms. Only after all the other occupants of the house were safely locked up, did she come into the lounge.

Kneeling beside him, Latifa puts her arm around his shoulders and begins to stroke his cheek. She feels the incipient beard lurking beneath the pores. He doesn't have to shave every day. He hasn't today. She gazes into his eyes, two dark islands in wide wastes of whiteness, staring intently at her. When he sings and dances, his eyes sparkle with the light that shines through his whole being and shoots through her body, driving her wild with desire. But there is no light in them now. She will bring it back. She leans forward to kiss the dear orbs and her lips meet shutters that come down into darkness. She cannot kiss his lips – the tape over his mouth – so she draws his head onto her breast and begins to stroke and kiss the thick dark waves.

She kisses him for the last time, then stands behind and shoots him in the back of the head. The adrenalin rush through her body is exhilarating. She pulls one of her hirelings into a frenzied dance around the limp and bleeding form.

Being Human

we walk
on a bridge
of faith
into
the unknown
and
as we move forward
it crumbles
behind us
but
we are
builders
and
it grows
before us

Story

Life is for Living (2008)

This winter day, sitting in her car, which is sunning itself with its nose thrust out of the garage, Mynah Bird is reading while absorbing her gratis daily dose of Vitamin D. A passing car stops and she sees the driver's lips moving. She rolls down her window and hears, 'Are you well?' 'Fine,' she replies. The car moves off and Mynah goes on reading but her focus has shifted from her book to the passing driver, 007 of the complex. Another inquiry after her health. Mynah suspects Bond of a touch of Munchausen-by-proxy and thinks she must be a great disappointment to 007 as she refuses to succumb to the persistent desire for her decline. But 007 is patient, never gives up. She thinks she'll get Mynah yet – after all the bird is seventy-two.

The week before, when Mynah went to pay her levy, she had bumped into 007, who had twice referred to her loss of weight. The bird had not responded, had not told her of the strict diet she had been on for several months. She had left it to Bond's imagination to concoct the usual calamities associated with people her age.

And she is working at her novel when it happens. She doesn't think of herself as a novelist; she is a short story writer but some four years ago, someone looking for a biographer had approached her and she had agreed to write his life story

because that's how she writes, vicariously, through other people's experiences; and here was someone voluntarily offering his story. She had felt extremely lucky, but then found that she wasn't adequate to the task as he would not let her get underneath superficial facts. So she had asked if she could write a novel instead based on the outline she had been given. That would allow her to use her imagination and would not curtail her ability to express herself. He agreed; all he wanted was to make money and was aware that his life provided a rich source of happenings that could lead to a bestseller and movie rights. But Mynah isn't John Grisham or Stephen King; she is just someone learning how to write a novel.

So four years on, still learning, she is busy creating a honeymoon in Kashmir, when she accidentally touches her breast. That's when she feels it. Well, well, well. On Madiba's ninetieth birthday. It's strange how events in Madiba's life impinge on her own. When he was released in February 1990, she had organised a huge celebration at the tertiary institution at which she was teaching, was detained by security cops and spent a month in detention. The cops had been driven crazy by the changes happening in the country. Now this, on Madiba's ninetieth birthday. Of course these are just coincidences.

So she has a lump.

007 would be delighted but Mynah doesn't tell her or anyone else. Why should she? She is a loner. Besides she doesn't need anyone's horrified sympathy or funereal looks. She doesn't have time for dying and goes on trying to find the right words for the Kashmiri honeymoon.

The next day, she goes to see Anna, a fellow volunteer at Irene Homes' Curiosity Shop, who had unexpectedly been diagnosed with breast cancer almost a year before, had accepted it as one of those things and had come through surgery, chemo and radiation calmly and sensibly. And as luck would have it, Anna had recently been to Kashmir, so Mynah is killing two birds with one stone; she finds the cliché quite amusing, dark but amusing. During her visit, she and Anna move effortlessly from Dal Lake and houseboats to lymph glands and chemotherapy, *shikaras*¹¹ and floating islands of lotuses to biopsies, chinar trees to carcinomas, Srinagar to radiologists. Mynah is full of admiration for her friend who mentions in passing that when she was diagnosed it had made her feel strange.

Mynah understands immediately.

Discovering the lump had disoriented her a little as well. Her routine had threatened to fall apart and she had suddenly felt the necessity of putting all her affairs in order, mainly getting all her writing published. So she has begun to juggle layout artists, mammograms, printers, biopsies, and a specialist, Dr. Hyde.

The specialist is a tall, good-humoured man with whom she shares her interest in Jekyll and Hyde, in the false dichotomy of good and evil. Amazingly, he talks of the relativity of time, how one patient sees two months as a long time while another finds nine months very brief. And when he says that Mynah has been off HRT – hormone replacement therapy – a long time, for Mynah it has been a short time. She realises that as we see events in relation to one another, their contexts lengthen or abbreviate them. Compared to the time she had been on HRT, the two or so years she has been off, is short to her.

She has always been fascinated by perceptions of time. For

11 A boat, similar to a gondola

her, Lady Macbeth's statement, 'I feel now /the future in the instant,' is most startling, a collapsing of time into present action. Other of Lady Macbeth's lines, suddenly occur to Mynah, 'Come to my woman's breasts, /And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers.' Now if Lady M had developed breast cancer, one could understand, but this old bird? Mynah had expected to take off with a heart attack or a stroke in the family tradition. But like Cleopatra, she had applied the HRT asp to her bosom herself.

This morning looking for a ripe papaya for breakfast, she finds one with a fungus around its nose. She cuts off the diseased end. *There – now you've had your mastectomy.* She is beginning to see everything in terms of cancer. A few days after the biopsy, she had found an apple with a large soft brown section. Cutting off the cancer and looking at the firm white flesh, she had decided that a mastectomy was probably the answer. Now that she is actually looking straight at one, she has to admit to some anxiety. She has been for blood tests and a complete sonar scan of her abdomen.

She goes for consultation with the surgeon who informs her that as far as they can tell, the cancer is localised in the breast. He is in favour of a lumpectomy, calls mastectomy mutilation, but says it is entirely her choice. He offers the following Wednesday for the operation. But she needs more time and puts it off to the Wednesday after; that will give her ten days to get some of her publication projects in order. She agrees to the lumpectomy. After she gets home, and mulls over it all night, she changes her mind. With a lumpectomy, you still have to go for radiation every day for five weeks to kill off any remaining cancer cells. She wants them all out in one go. She definitely does not want to prolong being a patient. In the morning, she calls the doctor and changes the procedure.

She has ten days to get her affairs in order. She sets off to see her printer and is given a rude shock when she gets the quotes for the children's books she wants printed and gives up her grandiose notion of being a publisher. She goes home quite defeated and to numb her mind turns on the television, but its vacuous content only intensifies the disturbance in her spirit. She turns off the TV and slumps into self-pity. She has been looking forward to getting the books out. She has imagined sending them to special friends and taking them to schools to see if they would buy them for their libraries.

Suddenly she jumps up, looks at this old bird all crumpled up, feeling sorry for herself, and is disgusted. She will apply for funding. She *will* publish her books.

In the midst of all this, a few days after the biopsy, a call from her niece, a researcher for a television show. Women's day, August 9, is coming up, would she appear on a show about single women? Just after the biopsy results, the producer of the show telephones to make arrangements for the interview. Then the blood tests and the day after, the television crew arrives, the interview begins and she is drawn into a minefield of stereotypes and clichés. Trying not to become entangled in myths of soul mates, humans as beings not becomings, and loneliness as the milieu of the single, she hopes she isn't making a fool of herself. Having to justify never having married instead of celebrating being single, she is in unfamiliar territory and feels hamstrung, unable to convey the single person's sense of inordinate freedom and joy.

And people insist on addressing her as Mrs, which she finds insulting. She celebrates being in the singular and pooh-poohs the notion that unmarried women are more prone to breast cancer. She smiles wryly at this new emphasis on her singularity. She is going to be a single-breasted bird. Though violated by a bunch of oncogenes, rape isn't marriage. She isn't going

to hold hands with this insidious partner and its attendant bridesmaids of treatment till death do us consummate. She will do her best to continue to walk free. She despises the notion of being owned or of owning anyone. It is the notion of ownership that bedevils intimate and familial relationships. She will not own a carcinoma nor will she let it own her.

But there isn't time to reflect on cancerous relationships. She has to make the application for funds. She needs two referees and calls two friends. Next, she has to get parts of the manuscripts printed to submit with the application and her colour cartridge needs replacing. Meanwhile she has completed checking the layout of another book, a collection of her plays from the early 1980s. She finds that the two women to whom she has given the layout work, being young, are quite rigid. They take new trends in layout design as sacrosanct whether they suit the work or not. Consequently, they haven't seen the need to communicate and discuss with the old bird.

Actually, Mynah has been quite disappointed to find that the only contribution they have made to the book is in the choice of fonts. They have simply laid out the book as Mynah had it in the manuscript. As they work mechanically without reading, they have made wrong assumptions. With either a phobia or fatwa against italics, they have reduced all stage directions to plain type. There is going to be trouble over that. The old bird spends the entire week between tests and consultations with doctors and the TV interview, painstakingly making corrections. She has phoned, but doesn't seem to have the right number, has sent several email messages but as the young women do not see the need for communication, she hasn't heard from them. This project flounders.

Today, 8 August 2008, she spends the afternoon glued to the TV set. It is the opening ceremony of the Olympics Games,

a celebration of the human physique in the perfection of its form. In Beijing, it is also a celebration of the Chinese contribution to calligraphy. And the history of a people inscribed in human pictographs unfolds on a giant scroll that rolls out over the floor of the stadium. At ground level, cameras capture the thousands of precision performers, a swirling mass of sumptuously dressed individuals that overhead cameras transform into an intricate script that flows from shape to shape and texture to texture, to record the splendid accomplishments of the Chinese from the beginning of time. Fireworks displays, creating and recreating the firmament in many hues and patterns, punctuate the scenes below while flying figures, like spectral beings, engrave the air between.

At the end of the mighty epic, battalions of athletes from over two hundred countries, joyous, smiling, troop into the stadium behind national flags.

After speeches, former Chinese champions, bring in the Olympic Flag lying inert on their shoulders. It awakens as it rises up the flagpole and flutters out its message of a common humanity. Finally, the Olympic flame enters the stadium and is relayed through to the last bearer, who is hoisted high into the air. As he runs in his harness, a huge new scroll soon to be inscribed with the tremendous feats and superlative triumphs of the world's best athletes, unfolds behind him along the circular wall of the arena. At end of the scroll, he reaches the flue that in a lightning flash draws into a huge torch towering over all, the flame of *ubuntu*¹² that dispels the darkness of oppression. A paean to the enduring human spirit!

And the old bird flies with all those thousands of human beings who in these moments in that stadium are held together as one.

12 A person is a person through other persons

And tomorrow is Women's Day in South Africa, a day that commemorates the march of twenty thousand women to the Union Buildings in 1956: a historic march demanding freedom and respect for all without reference to race and colour – a euphoric flowering of courage in the face of oppression.

Totalitarianism, racism, fraud, corruption, all cancers: we live with them but they cannot stop us from celebrating life.

Destiny

not pre-determined
self-created
you
the author
with authentic choice
your voice
your own
you are not
ventriloquist dummy
your destiny
is
in your hands
the gift
of a universe
with no beginning
and no end

Thoughts on Freedom Day:

27 April 2005

Eleven years ago on 27 April 1994, for the first time, South Africans of all races went to the polls to vote for a democratic system of government. Since then April 27 has been designated Freedom Day. And we will be celebrating freedom today; celebrating the fact that we voted out a government that believed in the hierarchical ordering of races and voted in a government that believes in equality and opened the ghettos in which poverty and crime were dammed and freed them to flow all over the land.

Massive poverty and crime, the legacy of the old regime, constitute the worst problems that face the new regime. The problems are of such magnitude, that government and opposition attempt to obliterate them only with a war of words. Meanwhile in our new democratic dispensation, we now have beggars, black and white, on our streets, and squatter camps, which we euphemistically call informal settlements, spreading right into suburbia.

And we are forced to take note of this poverty because of the rise in crime, so we call for better policing, for incarceration, for longer jail sentences and for the death penalty – as though they are solutions. We complain that there are not enough policemen and policewomen, but the number of law enforcement officers can never be adequate where poverty exists on a large scale.

We have developed slogans such as “the war on poverty” but our strikes are against the poor – the enemy, whom we capture and incarcerate. We hide behind a concern for “the poorest of the poor” but our prison population is burgeoning. Judge Hannes Fagan, the Head of the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons, in an episode of the TV programme, *Special Assignment*, which dealt with overcrowding in prisons, referred to the locking up of petty criminals as vindictive.

Some of our biggest prisons are filled to four times their capacity and a cell in such centres may hold as many as forty people. Most people initially enter prison for petty offences but once in that environment, they develop into hardened criminals. Throwing people in jail does not reduce crime; it multiplies it and prison is simply a training ground for debased and inhumane behaviour

Prisons stand as monuments to our inability to eradicate poverty. They are not bastions against evil and crime; they are factories of evil and crime. But we focus on the crime and the criminal because instinctively we believe that evil is innate and that criminals are born, not made.

However, a documentary on gangs in prison, one in a series entitled, *Our Nation in Colour*, showed that prison mass produces criminals. Before they are imprisoned, people are transgressors not criminals; in prison they become criminals. They become dedicated rapists, murderers and thieves.

Inside the prison, to recapture lost self-esteem, they set up structures to control and order their lives but the structures are tyrannical. They inculcate strict adherence to authority through fear, hatred and coercion. Such control is a decadent display of naked power – power not cloaked as it is in society by the humanitarian idea of service. Vengeance and punishment become the credo of this locked-up community, a credo reinforced by incarceration, which in itself is vengeance

and punishment. So schooled, inmates turn themselves into monsters, preying on one another and making their imprisonment a living hell.

Once they have been inside, God help the society outside when they are freed.

And we become involved in schemes of prison reform. But you cannot reform a prison; you can only burn it down. The prison itself is the problem. Human beings confined in small spaces, with no freedom of thought and movement, no privacy, lose their humanity and take to evil ways. But we keep the prisons because we don't see them as inherently evil and we don't look for alternatives.

And when we hear of the depravity of that locked-up community, we are horrified so we embark on superficial reforms such as changing the language of incarceration, hoping that concomitant attitudes and behaviours will flow from the new jargon. We no longer speak of prisons but of Correctional Services, prisoners are "clients," warders and wardresses, "members." Meanwhile the "clients" still live under strict supervision in confined and controlled spaces. Changing the jargon does not change the reality of imprisonment and does nothing to address the real crime, poverty, which is outside the prison.

And still we call for imprisonment and the death penalty as answers to the terrorism that arises out of poverty; and still we deal with the symptoms and not the root cause of our malaise. Gandhi wrote that the worst crime is poverty and to 'have' in a society, in which millions 'have not,' is to be privileged. But those of us, who are the 'haves,' see the worst crime as our loss of privilege.

It may have taken a few centuries but we have eradicated a serious crime in South Africa – official racism. That was easy

compared to eradicating poverty. Now our 'haves' are both black and white and our 'have-nots' both black and white. Our government comes up with schemes of self-development, skills training, economic empowerment but these become the purlieus of the middle and working classes and the squatter in the squatter camp still ventures out of his makeshift shelter, to sit on pavements in cities, towns and suburbs, soliciting for decent survival. And when the frustrations of no money and no food get the better of him, he employs his creativity in finding new ways to rob, steal, hijack and take hostages often to the accompaniment of rape and murder.

On Freedom Day, I think of a visit I made last week to my nephew's house to deliver, for his children, a storybook, *Monkey Business*, written by my sister Seetha. I hadn't been to his house for probably more than a year. When I got to the address, I had to look hard before I recognised his place. There was now a fence up around the property and a motorized gate. I couldn't get in. I had thought to slip the envelope under the door because I knew that my nephew and his wife would be at work. But I couldn't get near the door.

Ironically, Seetha Ray's *Monkey Business*, set in Calcutta, depicts a rich man who, having locked himself out of his home, tries to climb over the high fence, slips and is caught on the gate by his clothes. He hangs there upside down until a poor man who makes his living on the street with trained monkeys that dance and sing, rescues him.

As I had no intention of clambering over the gate, I looked up and down the street for a neighbour to whom I could entrust the envelope, but all I saw were fences and security gates lining the pavement. They hadn't been there the last time I had come this way.

And I said to myself, "Welcome to the new South Africa." All the haves, and that includes me, are living in their own home-made prisons and all the have-nots are marching toward the official ones.

And today, 27 April, we celebrate Freedom Day.

Freedom

eternal fantasy
of those
in community
tied together
for security
dependent
on consistency
the foundation
of harmony

freedom
romantic atavism
trade-off
for safety
in society

Fear

not love
or compassion

FEAR

foundation
of civilization
basis of community
laws of society
religion, tradition,
routine, ritual,

requiring conformity:
contractual obligation
expressed in duty
in rule, regulation
honour and obedience,

INSURANCE

fence against
human volatility

FEAR
basic instinct
for survival
iron fist
in the glove
of compassion
and love

Égalité

since 1789

liberty, fraternity, equality

slogan revolutionary

theme song of democracy

demanding acknowledgment

of human dignity

freedom in equality

freedom to vote

for

bureaucracy:

the control of freedom

reducing behaviour

to standardized predictability

outlawing individuality

égalité

recognition of the individual

as potential criminal

Absolute Truth

justice, honour,
ten commandments
law and order

fences against
infinity
the unknown
immeasurable
eternity

against
relativity
mind-body
ambivalence

absolute truth
fantasy of reality
nothing is
but what is not

Corky Conquest

2017

Now Corky is not what you would expect in a car. She is a total nonconformist. When she discovered the paradoxical nature of existence – you know, according to karma, one can never be certain that any action is either good or bad as we live in an open-ended universe, or to put it in Nietzsche’s words our situation is “beyond good and evil”, or as Shakespeare would have it, “nothing is, but what is not” and all this she connects with Chaos theory, of which she has no real knowledge, – she made up her mind that the absolute nature of laws and rules was not absolute and there was plenty of room for individual initiative.

She actually has a sneaking admiration for South African minibus taxi drivers, who are nonconformists par excellence. When the light is red and there is no traffic, they move. Boy, what nerve! Corky tends to look at me as rather a stick-in-the-mud as I sit waiting for the lights to change.

In May, when I got back from Boone, North Carolina in the USA – where the Theatre and Dance Department of Appalachian State University had put on my play, *Flight from the Mahabharath*, an absolutely magnificent production directed by Dr Ray Miller, which is now in my personal Hall of Fame alongside Peter Brook’s circus theatre production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Robert Lepage’s Metropolitan

Opera production of Wagner's Ring Cycle and Yuri Grigorovich's ballet, *Spartacus* – Corky found me changed

I actually fastened my seat belt. After having been reprimanded several times by cars in Boone, I had during my short stay learned to conform. Corky is not one of your new cars that insist that you fasten your seat belt, so now when I put on my seat belt, she laughs. I hope the novelty of it will soon wear off.

Corky is a maverick – she loves Clint Eastwood films.

By Muthal Naidoo:

A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals (2004)

Jail Birds and Others (2004, Short Stories)

Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar (2007, Biography)

WIP Theatre Plays (2008)

Gansie in Kammaland (2011, linked stories)

The Keshwars from Dundee (2011, Biography)

Emerging Heroes (2012, Children's Stories)

Rhulani's Dilemma (2013, A Novella for Teenagers)

Metaphoric Being (2014, Essays)

Kaliyuga (2014, Prose-poems)

Mirroring Nature (2015, Essays)

The Paradox of Being (2015, Essays)

A Life in Fact and Fiction (2016, Autobiography)

Ramy Pillay: Yuga Purushar (2016, Biography)

Pocket Poems (2016)

My Search for Meaning (2017, Essays)

Finding Hassan (2017, novel)

Edited by Muthal Naidoo

New Old Ways (2017, short stories by Sharmini Brooks, Mala Gounden, Muthal Naidoo, Sudhira Sham, Tom Swart)

