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Abstract

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We are here meeting within the context of 'Antwerp 93' in Belgium. From what I understand, this country is not alien to you?

I was here from the ages of six to twelve. For the first three years, I was at school at Les Dames de Marie in Brussels, which is where I learned French. It was quite an extraordinary experience – the atmosphere was very different from anything I had known before and I didn't speak a word of French when I first went there. It was a convent, with all the walls painted with enormous frescoes representing great moments in Belgian history and the lives of the saints. Quite a big school and an intensive drill which I had never been used to: we were all marched in line and we all sang songs together and we learned everything by heart. I learned a bit of Flemish. And it was all a great novelty.

And who sent you there?

After the war my father opened an English bookshop in Cairo, and it had been burnt down during the first wave of anti-British riots in 1952 – I hope one day to write about this, something to do with the colonial situation and growing nationalism. His shop was picked out because the books he sold were in English and French and were a symbol of cultural imperialism. My father thought Egypt was an extraordinary place, a very cosmopolitan place. And then in the war he met people who owned Smith's, the book chain; they had made friends. He was very bookish, and he thought it would be a good idea to serve the international community in Cairo.

Your father is English but your mother is Italian?

She's from Puglia – Ninfania in *The Lost Father*. My mother was called Terzulli and she was the youngest of four daughters. The book is very carefully faithful to the structure and chronology of my mother's life. I wanted to use that as a kind of armature. It's like taking the sonnet form and working with it: it gives you boundaries, a framework within which to explore the themes; it sets aside extraneous inventions because you have givens of the historical record. What was interesting to me as I began

researching the Italian background of fascism in the South and the immigration to America and all that was that I found that my mother's family were completely typical: the exact time that they attempted to emigrate to America, the time they came back, the time they went again, all these were peaks on the graph, so that in a sense they were very symptomatic of the social upheavals of the time.

Sicily comes up in In a Dark Wood.

That does not come from my mother's life; that arose from my own interest. I used to love going to Sicily (and I will probably go back at some point). Sicily is quite different from Puglia, though they do share a lot in common, with the Normans and the Greeks – and that is not immaterial. One of the things I was concerned about in *The Lost Father* was the way southern Italy was seen as a benighted place of poverty and cruelty and a kind of emptiness. And I wanted to reverse that and show that it is one of the most ancient parts of Europe and that it is very deep, with problematic aspects like the machismo they all suffer from. In the novel both the men and the women suffer from the cult of the strong man.

You said somewhere that, given that Europe was first raped by Zeus, one should remember the feminine origin of Europe.

I tend not to think of these things as fixed. It is not so much that Europe is feminine in origin; it is that half its history must have been feminine at some point and that there are both secrets and stratagems within that feminine side which we forget or ignore at our cost, our great cost. The exchange of fictions, the exchange of dreams and fantasies are very ancient forms of survival. Of course, it can work both ways. Unfortunately, what we are seeing now with the growing number of states is a nationalistic use of folklore in an aggressive, nationalistic, ethnic-pure way, and we must be aware of that. But at the same time there is a cultivating of common history through story-telling and the exchange of ideas which does cut across borders and frontiers while maintaining differences, because of course, all stories are told with local variations. In a way the story is a site of both particularity and a medium to universal experience and a sort of universal communicability.

And stories seem to be passed on from woman on to woman.

Of course, that is something very important, something that I have been working a lot on in the new book that will come out next year about fairy tales. It is a critical study of fairy tales, and it is particularly about how human voices, especially women's, are at work in the fairy tale.

You explored that aspect – the feminine side of history or her-story – in the fairy tales in Indigo. Feeny retrieves Ariel's story.

In fact *Indigo* grew out of my work on fairy tales. I really wanted to write the book on fairy tales but I stopped *From the Beast to the Blonde* and wrote *Indigo* instead. The idea for *Indigo* grew so strongly that I couldn't keep it at bay. I couldn't finish the fairy tale book: I had to write *Indigo*. A lot of the ideas in the fairy tale book are worked out in fictional form in *Indigo*. And what is sad but part of the human condition is that Feeny tells the story of Ariel as she has been told it.

But you ultimately retrieve it and set the record right, as it were.

In a way, what the novel perhaps suggests is that Feeny weaves another story within that story – the 'Beauty and the Beast' story. In that one, she's free of the historical burden. She teaches Miranda to rethink the world; she herself can't do it because she's a colonized subject: she loves the Everard family, she has been their nurse, she loves Anthony. In a sense she has been incorporated and colonized; she's an island that has been taken over. But at the same time, through her possibilities of rethinking her lot and distributing rewards and punishments, she stands for me as the exemplary fiction writer who can be colonized and still speak. Another example would be an African writer writing in English. The Anglophone writer is in a position to reach more people, so that out of the colonized position, he or she addresses a larger audience and then reinvents the experience that audience has received historically. Maxine Hong Kingston is a very good example – the Chinese American writer: in the way she takes the Chinese baggage of superstitions, the weight of the Chinese past, and she tells it in a new way, she recasts it as an American, if you like.

There's a Chinese background too in In a Dark Wood and you told The Guardian that you always wanted to learn Chinese. Why China?

I think it came from a comic strip, actually. In *Rupert Bear*, there's a character – a Chinese emperor, I think – who flies around on a carpet. And this made me feel that China was the most wonderful place. It was a dream of the Other when I was growing up. It was *the* fabulous country. It was moot between Arabia and China, really: I could have chosen *The Arabian Nights* but I just went a bit further. My dream of the Other was China. I suppose it came from my father; he was so interested in history. China's antiquity made it seem magical and the Chinese value-system appealed to me because they valued the poet, the writer over the soldier. They practised writing as a sort of magic art, divination by writing. It appealed to me as a child, as a civilization. It was different from the Romans, you know, marching across the world in straight lines

of roads built with slaves. What the reality of China is and was is a different matter: it is a horrendous place of oppression.

And you could have talked about another 'Other', if I may say so. You talk about 'a touch of the tar brush'. What does that mean? Do you have a Creole background?

The thing is, you see, we never knew that we had it. My sister and I - at the period when I was in love with China - had no idea that our family was connected to the Caribbean, no more idea than we might be Chinese. Nobody was more British than my father and his family. Partly because my grandfather was this quintessential English thing: he was the captain of the English cricket team. In those days, the captain of a cricket team was the alternative to the King of England. It was the national game, highly structured in social terms, very much Gentlemen vs. Players. There was such a hierarchy in the game itself. Cricket epitomizes the British view of its own colonialism - mannerly, courteous, calm and effective. It crystallizes in itself the British view of themselves as colonizers. They were not Goths or Huns; they came in with cricket, the civilizing art of cricket. C.L.R. James wrote *The Black Jacobins* and *Beyond the Boundary*, in which he talks about race and power, class and cricket to show how they are absolutely bound together in the former power which the British exercised.

So my grandfather belonged to that world. Nationality laws were recently passed in England: my father wouldn't qualify today as a British citizen because his grandfather was born in the West Indies and his greatgrandfather and so forth, for many generations, had been born in Trinidad or Antigua. So he would have been excluded. It was strange to me that he could be so completely British and yet not British.

When my father went back to Trinidad for the first time, he discovered lots of Warner cousins, some of whom were black. Now there are three possible reasons: one is that in the present some have intermarried. But before that either they were called Warner (because slaves took the names of their owners) or they were actual children.

There's a story with which I started *Indigo* and then did not write - I don't plan my novels very strictly. The kernel of the *Indigo* novel is really the story of Ariel; baby Roucou. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Warner, who was the first settler of the island of St. Kitts in 1623, and was made Governor of the West Indies by the King of England, was married to a local woman. By that marriage he had a son who was known by the name of Indian Warner; he was appointed by the British Governor of Antigua. Thomas Warner's white son (by his English wife) inherited the Governorship of St. Kitts when his father died. The two brothers fought a very bitter battle, in the course of which the white Philip Warner tricked Indian Warner and massacred him and his entire crew, on a boat where

they were having a peace talk. And for this Philip Warner was actually brought back to England and tried in the Tower of London and found guilty. He wasn't beheaded but he lost his governorship. So, way back in the seventeenth century, there was already intermarriage. But the story of intermarriage in the early colonies is never told. Because by the time the empire was established as the Raj, as in Africa and so forth, at much later stages, you get severe segregation, and a different kind of imperial culture, more like apartheid, more like South Africa, more regimentation and hierarchy.

In that respect, do you feel close to someone like Jean Rhys, in Wide Sargasso Sea? Because there is a brief mention of 'her hapless waifs' in The Skating Party (p. 73).

Wide Sargasso Sea is a book that I absolutely loved when I read it. She is a writer I read a lot twenty years ago. When I thought of *Indigo*, I did not actually go back and read *Wide Sargasso Sea* because I was worried about its influencing me. If there are overlaps, that would be because the work is deep in my unconscious.

What about Virginia Woolf, The Voyage Out? Was that somehow at the back of your mind?

I also felt a sort of kinship with her. She is somebody I read when I was young like Jean Rhys and she meant a great deal to me. *The Waves* was a revelation. I haven't yet written a book as truly experimental as that.

Are you looking for, let's say, a woman sentence? Do you feel that linguistically you are searching for a feminine way of saying things?

One of the things that makes me want to write fiction is that it's very hard to write non-fiction from that side of the mind. People have tried to make autobiographical criticism, some people successfully but it's not as satisfying as the fictional enterprise. One of the things that I'm pleased about in the reception of *Indigo*, and even more strongly in the response to *Mermaids in the Basement* is that after all these years of writing I seem to have won a little bit of ground, that people accept what they used to criticize before terribly: they used to say that my writing was lyrical, flowery, old-fashioned.

What about the use of colours in your work? There are touches of colours here and there as if you were dipping in bowls of colour. In Indigo, of course, it is completely structural. But also Paula in In a Dark Wood mentions 'rolls of rainbow-coloured skeins or ranges in sequence of colours.' It comes up again and again, as well as dyeing and weaving.

Well, it's traditional female work and I'm keen to write it. We English have this metaphor of spinning a yarn for telling a story. A lot of early records of story-telling have to do with weaving. In the *Iliad*, for instance, Helen is weaving her own story; and when Paris comes back, he sees that in her loom she is weaving the story of the Trojan war. She's actually a figure in her own story, the story is unfolding as she weaves. That's a very real metaphor for female creativity.

I'm actually interested in limits of language and of course colour is one of the areas where there's a difficulty. The eye perceives more than language can tell. Consider, for example, the colour of one's eyes. Language cannot follow the complexity of human perception. So in a way, to some extent, the whole task of writing is to try and catch perception, to make a record of it, to capture its fleeting impulses. Consciousness is filled with minute impulses. And of course emotions are also very difficult to capture. Besides, there's a sensuous side to it: I do like looking at pictures a lot.

Talking about which, you mention painting quite a bit. Paula in In a Dark Wood paints; there is the 'Judgment of Cambyses', Gerard David's diptych in Bruges, which is mentioned in The Skating Party. So you are interested in painting and other forms of art. And talking about female figures. Would you agree with Paula who says in In a Dark Wood, remarking on 'the hatred of women which constantly turns up in the stories', as in the stories of Ariadne (and you take up the story again in Mermaids in the Basement), Adromeda, Amazon and about Hercules and Dejanira she says 'Yet another piece of sexist trash.' Would you tend to agree with Paula's somewhat feminist statement?

I had no idea that the problem bothered me as long ago as that! That's what my book on Fairy Tales is about. I was worried: if these stories are told by women, if women are relating their history and then striving for survival, if these memories are carried by them, why are there so many dead mothers, wicked sisters, wicked mothers, murderers, ...?

Is that why Miranda is such a key figure in Indigo? It is to some extent a rewriting of The Tempest, but you seem to focus on Sycorax and Ariel and Miranda as if it was like some sort of unholy matriarchal trinity.

Yes, it was meant to be the converse. Shakespeare was writing the father's plot. Prospero works out the plot for his daughter. Prospero's wife is conspicuously absent. The only woman is Miranda, the others are off-scene, but also obscene (like Sycorax). So I tried to write the daughter's plot, to take the story from the other side and show how the daughter extricates herself from the father's plot.

What about a recent reworking of *The Tempest* by Greenaway in Prospero's Books?

I saw the film after I'd written my book. I didn't want to be influenced, to find his images in my head. And in fact some people have said to me that when they read *Indigo* they see his film. But this is completely wrong. Greenaway is very sadistic to bodies, both male and female, and he's addicted to spectacle. The play is very empty, very unpeopled, eerie.

I think Shakespeare advisedly moved the drama to this 'cell', the idea of the enclosed watery space. The film's crowdedness completely flouts the spirit of the play. The other things I didn't like about it was the extraordinary, somnambulist, spellbound condition of Miranda. Also, it's almost disgraceful how little thinking had gone into the Caliban part; when you consider how extraordinarily interesting and pregnant with meaning this figure has become for our time, it's shameful to have there a sort of baboon, with hanging red testicles. Greenaway pretends to be intellectual, to be interested in current thinking about issues such as violence and racism, yet he allows a very fine dancer, Michael Clark, to interpret Caliban in this simplistic, brutish way. I'm sure he could have been inspired to do it differently. Sycorax is a completely conventional hag from hell. Of course, I was in a way pleased that he hadn't thought of the play in another kind of light.

*I'd like to move to another issue, the way you talk about human sexuality. There are overt sexual accounts in *The Lost Father* if you recall (Tomasso 'jerking off') with vivid details. Do you feel that sexuality should be straightforward? Because that is certainly not lyrical, if you have been accused (rightly or wrongly) of lyricism. I would not expect that almost macho writing. There's a masturbation scene in 'Full Fathom Five' in *Mermaids with Noah* and also the rape in Suzanna's story.*

There are violent scenes in *Indigo* too. Well, the masturbation scene comes from direct personal memories because I am a pre-pill child. So all my early experiences of sex had to do with male masturbation. Writers magnify little things that have happened in their lives. Some of these stories could take place in contemporary settings, in bed-sitting-rooms, but for some reason I need to put them in some imaginative distance from myself. But certainly a lot of them happened to me. I'm quite sensitive to explicit sexual writing in other writers. I'm not very keen on it, I find it difficult to read. So I'm surprised when I seem to do it myself. It's not something I particularly identify myself with.

What about gay relationships, lesbianism? You do incorporate some of these elements in the short stories, possibly also in the novels. Are you trying to make

a statement when you talk for instance about retreat for women only? Is that harking back to your experience in convents or is it a commitment to gay rights?

I read aloud the 'Ariadne after Naxos' story the other day, one of the early stories in the collection, – I wrote it in 1981 – and it was interesting to see how much it had dated in terms of sexual politics. The convent of women was a fairly recognizable representation of a certain sort of feminist position which was not particularly lesbian. That is what has changed and it shows how polarized feminism has become. If you had to set a story now in a convent where women lived alone, the place would probably have to be doctrinally lesbian. Sexual politics would be part of the retreat, whereas in 1981, when I wrote it, it was perfectly plausible for women to separate themselves from male society, but not because of their sexual preferences. I may be backward in that; in America it had happened by the 70s already. People like Kate Millett were already writing about the Lesbian Nation in the 70s. We were behind in England, but it was plausible. Whereas I could see it would have to be changed now. Ariadne would have to experiment with lesbianism and then decide that she was bisexual and that it was not for her.

Are you perceived as a feminist (whatever that means now) in England?

I am seen as a feminist by the enemies of feminism, seen in that light by journalists or spectators who like to sneer at feminism of any kind. But feminists don't see me as a feminist. I am sort of caught in between. That isn't true of all feminists, but I am perhaps not socially and politically active enough, more literary and cultural. I think the fairy tale book is very feminist, but I'm not sure it will be seen as that. British feminism is a strange, multi-faceted creature, some of it deeply psycho-analytical in French style. People like Jacqueline Rose (author of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*) at one extreme. I can identify with her, her work is very cultural and literary. She has a strong engagement with Lacan and she has quite a following. That's one pole. Then there's the strong historical pole, working on the experiences, the economics of working women past and present; practical historical feminism. I don't really fit into either of these groups, I'm rather a hybrid. But I would like to be identified with the movement. Sometimes I feel rejected.

Are you perceived as a postmodern writer or as a post-colonial writer. Have any of these labels been applied to you?

Well, one or two people since *Indigo* have thought of me as such. In fact I'm rather pleased because I have been invited to take part in the Black Writers' Convention which is happening in mid-November, and I'm one of the very few white writers. So I'm very honoured that they think I can

take part. And I think that it's because *Indigo* rewrites experience in a post-colonial way, and of course I acknowledge freely that my influences include that kind of writing, some of my earliest loves. Jamaica Kincaid was a writer I loved when she first started publishing. And Caribbean lyricism has always interested me a lot. I like Derek Walcott, whereas a lot of English critics find his work too lyrical, too flowery, too orotund, too sort of easy; they want the acerbity of Larkin or Auden. I like Aimé Césaire as well and George Lamming. I've always felt a great kinship with that richness of language and this heightened register of feeling.

Do you feel any kinship now with contemporary English writers like (Nigerian-born) Ben Okri? Which brings me to ask you about English literature and the way it is heading. Kazuo Ishiguro is considered an English writer ...

There's a new phenomenon: writing in the English language that is not American (we have to take American out of it because the rhythm and pitch are so different). 'Commonwealth Literature' is one of its misnomers. It suggests something rather cosily universal. Besides, Kazuo Ishiguro doesn't come into it that sense.

It is better to say 'New Literatures in English' or 'Literatures in English' where English is a new lingua franca.

Yes, we can consider the case of Ian Burnma, who wrote an interesting novel about cricket, called *Playing the Game*. It's worth looking at. It's about masks and identity, about an Indian cricketer who becomes an Englishman through cricket. Ian Burnma interprets it for himself, as a Dutchman, who has become an Englishman. So he's writing in English even though he's Dutch: this cannot be Commonwealth literature. I admire Ishiguro a lot, but he's a very elliptical, chaste, austere, spare writer. I don't identify with him. Besides irony isn't my main mode.

Do you like Margaret Drabble? John Fowles? Any other contemporary writer?

I haven't read her for a while. I'm not quite sure why not because I like her very much. I feel disloyal. I loved *Possession*, of course: it's wonderful, marvellously witty, a great achievement. I liked Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* a lot. I read it before it won the Booker Prize; so I was able to read it with an open mind and I was able to enjoy it free of its glory, which can spoil a reading really. I thought it had marvellous visionary elements in it. I used to like John Fowles but I haven't read him for a long time. His fiction is more nineteenth-century, ample. I don't see myself as writing ample books, but they come out longer than I think. I expect them to be fragmentary and then they turn out more monumental than I intend.

Do you see yourself writing both critically and creatively? Because you do seem to alternate.

Partly because I like pursuing a dual search, at several levels of inquiry, historical and imaginative. It is like a treasure hunt. I had a lot of fun with the book which will be called *From the Beast to the Blonde*.

What about the Legs of the Queen of Sheba? Because there is a short story in there. There is also the children's opera which was performed two Christmases ago.

They did it terribly well. The idea also turns up in *The Lost Father*. But the short story came first. It's a story which obviously obsesses me because I've done it in different forms, treated also in my theoretical essays. She enters medieval folklore as a wise queen, but as an anonymous outsider figure, which has to do with her blackness: she's identified with Ethiopia and becomes the mother of Menelek, founder of the Ethiopian royal house. This is all legend, but because of that, she's identified in the folklore as an outsider. I was interested in the idea that the outsider holds the secret of the story, that she knows the riddles. She presents a forerunner of the story-teller, the Mother Goose figure.

You like to retrace the ancestry of things -like that of St Cunera and Snow White. Do you see yourself somehow writing more about women?

Yes. People are asking me why I am not writing about men for a change. I feel there's more to explore with women.

Do you feel somehow history has to be supplemented?

Yes. More has to be uncovered. There are many purloined letters; many aspects of female experience have not yet been handled even though a lot of work has been done on the hidden voices of women in history. That's the enriching part of feminism. You're right, history does have to be supplemented. Angela Carter, for whom I have a huge admiration, took a lot of traditional material, like music hall jokes about women, and she speaks against it, in high spirits, in a sort of comic vein. I really admire that. It's another strategy which people can use. I've just reviewed the new Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*. I enjoyed it, it's very entertaining. She's a master of narration. She also takes misogynistic themes, but she tends to retain them without inversion and she's not merciful. She lacks Angela Carter's tonic good nature, her belief in prosperity, laughter and love, not in a tender or soapy way but with robust, ironical colouring. There are images of tragedy too in Atwood, but in the novel I am talking about Atwood is straightforward about the hatreds of women for one

another. The figure of the Robber bride herself is a fairly conventional destructive femme fatale.

We have spoken about female writers. Anyone you feel kinship with in Africa?

From Africa, Lessing and Gordimer. Doris Lessing had a huge influence on me many years ago, in her sense of immediacy and her direct style. Maybe I learnt something from her.

So you have many ancestors.

I am afraid so – No, I'm glad it's so.