

though many Indians living abroad take the question as an offence.

"I was born there."

"Where?"

"In the Punjab."

"What district?"

"Hoshiarpur."

"That is where I am from," I volunteered jubilantly. "What town?"

"Moran Wali."

I was stunned; I had heard the name of my own town. And then the life-giving recognition hit me. "Neelam, Neelam Prashad. You're Neelam Prashad!"

"Now I am Neelam Khan," she corrected me. Her tone was calm but assertive. She stressed the "Khan."

Later over coffee, our conversation was like a dream — charming and vivid one moment, sad at the next.

"My parents must have written about me."

"Yes, they wrote that you were not with them any more." She did not understand what I meant.

"They broke all relations with me when I decided to marry a Moslem. We have not seen each other since." She told me about how happy she was. She adored her husband, a civil engineer, and her son who had just started kindergarten. The family lived in a stylish house in the suburbs, and she enjoyed her part-time job at the bank. Except for the parental rejection, her life was in order.

Later on in my hotel room, I dressed for an evening of reminiscence at Neelam's house. I thought about myself and Neelam; we were the children of partition and grew up hearing horror stories from our parents. From those stories I could understand our parents. Having known bloodshed and slaughter, they would find it difficult and unconventional to accept a mixed marriage. But so many years had passed that their hate seemed pathetic.

Neelam's husband Khalid was handsome, affable, and understanding. He welcomed me with enthusiasm and said, "You brought a touch of joy into my wife's life. It is nice to know that someone from back home accepts her as she is." We discussed politics, the economy, ethnic problems, and his job. Intentionally, soon after dinner, he left us alone.

We were both in a pensive mood and stared at each other.

"Have you been in touch with your parents?" I asked.

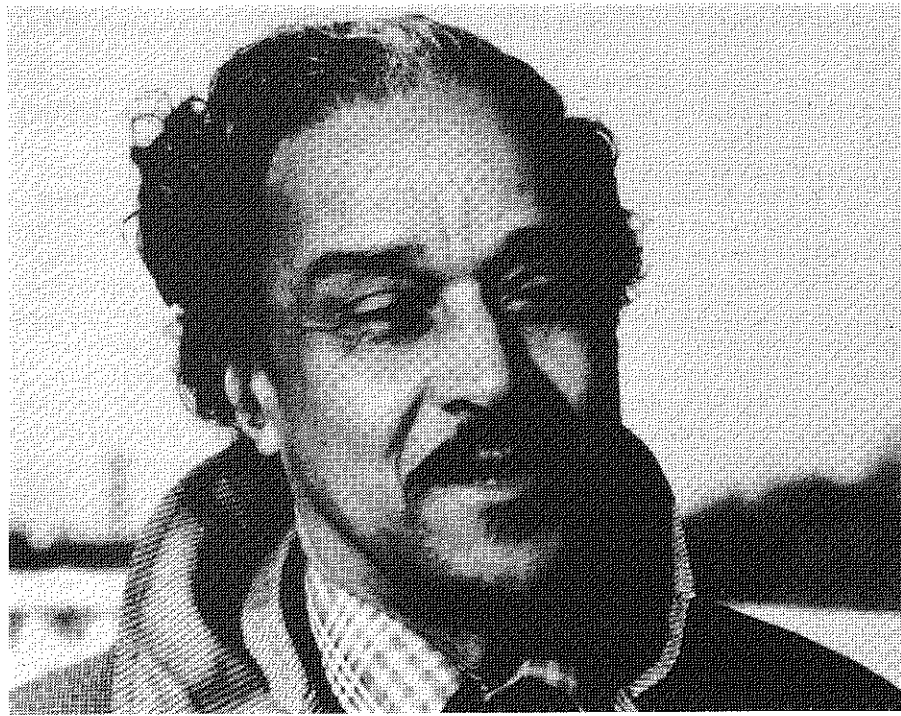
"No," she said quietly. "My parents believe that children who do not follow their parents' mores are dead."

"Did you know that before you decided to marry Khalid?"

"Of course," she said. "Saying yes to an arranged marriage would have been to sacrifice my whole life to something I could not control. Saying no to the marriage devastated my much-loved parents. It was a dilemma. What could I do?" Tears began to roll over her cheeks.

I had no consolation to offer her. My own mind filled with silence.

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Marc Glassman

Wilson Harris was born in Guyana when it was still a British colony, in 1920. He took advantage of his position as senior land surveyor for the government to become intimately acquainted with the people of the interior in then British Guiana. Harris steeped himself in the myths and legends of the "natives" while maintaining a cultural veneer befitting a colonial official. He moved to England in 1959 and published his first novel, Palace of the Peacock, to great critical acclaim the following year.

Harris' first four novels form a group which explores the mythology of his homeland. The Guyanan Quartet consists of remarkable works which create a cross-cultural pollination, dealing as they do with a combination of European archetypal adventures grafted onto a mysterious evocation of the Guyanese landscape and population. Guyanese natives are Caribbean Indian, African, South American and Asian in origin, so the possibilities for cross-fertilization are endless, as Harris has clearly discovered.

His novels, poetry and essays reveal a sophisticated sensibility with an awareness of Third World economics, Jungian psychology, African mythology and linguistic theory. He was interviewed by Marc Glassman after his appearance at the Fall 1988 Wang International Festival of Authors in Toronto.

Marc Glassman: I'm interested in you as a writer but also as a person who has come from one culture and is now living in another. Would you tell me something about that transition?

Wilson Harris: I left Guyana in 1959; I was 38 and I had traveled extensively in the interior of Guyana, which means that I sensed the different kinds of landscapes, because the terrain changes quite complexly and sometimes dramatically as one moves from the coastlands into the interior. Now in regard to the question of moving from one culture to another, I think that if I had left earlier, I would not have been able to visualize it the way I did, and if I'd left later, then I might have been a bit quiescent about those sorts of issues.

I appear to be speaking intellectually about an issue which is really a deep-seated intuitive one. (I must establish this caveat, that when one attempts to intellectualize what exists in one's fiction, in a complex and perhaps truly authentic way, [one places] a different emphasis on the discourse.) What seems to me peculiar about Guyana and indeed about South America and the Caribbean is that for many generations, there were very powerful European models that had been imposed on the native cultures. Now these models, let us call them archetypal myths (and I use the word myth in a profound sense to imply ways in which the colonizing power sought to articulate its moral position), those very formidable structures

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were implicitly inter-archetypes or myths eclipsed by the Euro- problem was, how to bond and to arrive at the European model different kind of rela- archetype, to create Prior to that historio- tional self-realization- logue at all, there wa- tion, but deep inside- isted the seed of pot- this meant that one- situation in such a w- dable European myt- luteness, its total sov- to its partiality, to it- we moved into a dif- in relation to the na- ing a different kind- which altered the pr- nation, transfiguring- much more profound- a new kind of key w- colonial complex th- visualization and res- been deeply buried a-

Let me give you a- this. In *The Secret La-* Perseus has a potent- the surveyor who tra- River, is in part a Pe- burden of the Perseu- There are two figure- Perseus: Fenwick, th- one of the members- They pick up a nativ- ize that] they have b-

Interview with Wilson Harris

were implicitly interwoven with the native archetypes or myths. Often those native archetypes or myths were temporarily eclipsed by the European models. The problem was, how to break that kind of bond and to arrive at a position in which the European model would come into a different kind of relationship to the native archetype, to create a different dialogue. Prior to that historical moment of national self-realization, there was no dialogue at all, there was simply a domination, but deep inside that domination existed the seed of potential dialogue and this meant that one had to open up that situation in such a way that the formidable European myth would lose its absoluteness, its total sovereignty and confess to its partiality, to its biases. In so doing, we moved into a different kind of position in relation to the native archetype, creating a different kind of nourishment, which altered the previous mode of domination, transfiguring it into something much more profoundly universal in which a new kind of key was planted into the colonial complex that released cultural visualization and resources, which had been deeply buried and eclipsed before.

Let me give you a demonstration of this. In *The Secret Ladder*, the myth of Perseus has a potency, because Fenwick, the surveyor who travels up the Canje River, is in part a Perseus figure, but the burden of the Perseus myth is broken up. There are two figures who are playing Perseus: Fenwick, the surveyor, and Ryan, one of the members of the survey party. They pick up a native Guyanese and [realize that] they have begun to secrete into

themselves elements to do with the apparition of the Gorgon. In fact, the camp attendant, Jordan, becomes a Gorgon figure. And the dialogue Fenwick has with Jordan is one in which he is invited to succumb to certain temptations of authority, to impose himself on his troops, to impose himself as the European masters impose themselves, to treat his crew as pawns to be moved around. So Fenwick, the native Guyanese, has to face that temptation, but in facing that temptation, he begins to break out of that mould and to begin a much more profound dialogue with the members of his party.

In addition to this, there is the African descendant of a slave, and he is given the name Poseidon, because he is half land and half water. You know, the Guyanese landscape is a very peculiar landscape in which the watersheds are all broken and a lot of river capture occurs. As a result, the country has become a natural reservoir. But in addition to this, it is the sort of place into which the slaves would run, because you have great islands, surrounded by moats, and they could hide themselves on those islands. It was very difficult for the Dutch, who were their masters in that period, to get all of them. Poseidon is supposed to be the descendant of one of those slaves who escaped in the 17th century. So Poseidon is rooted in an African archetype, but when he is inadvertently killed by Bryant, it sets up a state of terrifying tension that recalls the ancient Greek model, in which the Perseus figure intervenes. The dread and devastation which is intended does not happen because of a series of events in which this

myth is articulated in a new way, incorporating not only the European but the non-European elements, and as a consequence you being to release [something new] from the [Caribbean] soul. So the European model enters into a dialogue with the new archetypes and out of that you get an apprehension of the universality of the myth, keyed by elements of the native soil which had been disregarded as irrelevant.

When you were a young man did you spend much time with people who would have been specifically "native" in their upbringing and in their culture?

Guyana is the only territory that relates to the Caribbean in which you would find a pre-Columbian presence. [In my youth,] we called them all Amerindians — even though they were all different kinds of people — you see that's how the European model functions. It functions in an implicitly fascist way, or if not fascist then authoritarian. Nevertheless, there were values in that model that had to be salvaged.

My point is this, that those people who believe that you can return to some ground purity in which you dispense with the European heritage, I believe are quite wrong. These things have been woven together for centuries.

Cover art from *Carnival* by Chris Brown



The question that arises is whether one can open up that in the way we've been discussing. There is no possibility of going back into some remote past in which you can come back to some pure pristine basis and reject the colonizer or the conquistador.

You cannot do that because they are interwoven, and people like myself, for example, are of mixed blood, so I have antecedents on both sides of the fence. And that's true of many Guyanese and South Americans.

In Guyana, you had, for example, people of African descent, Indians who came in after the emancipation in the 1830s. There were Chinese. There was that kind of potential for cross-cultural exchange. The women were always at a pre-

mium because the immigration policies were so bad, they always brought more men than women. As a result, inevitably, you did have interracial relationships. In the 19th century, there was a growing middle class of highly intelligent mixed people who had begun to be taken into the civil service by the British, who were then ruling. But it doesn't mean the British were encouraging interracial relationships.

When did you decide to leave?

Looking back, I realize this was something I had to do, but there were various reasons, some of which I won't discuss with you because they are private, but also a very great help to me was the fact that my present wife, Margaret, who is a Scot, and I have had an absolutely marvelous relationship. When I arrived in the United Kingdom, we were married. I had been married before.

There were all sorts of complications. All I can say is that at that moment, precisely because of what I was discussing, I was able to go to Europe and begin very serious work, because for the first time, I could sense an opportunity, writing the kind of novel which seemed to me immensely important to the South American/Caribbean situation. It wasn't a comedy of manners novel. It wasn't in the 19th century European genre.

It arises from deep necessities. In other words, the social fiction that I have been writing is not abstract or arbitrary at all. It has its roots in complicated pressures and political historical events that one had to cope with. One couldn't run away from it.

And so to write something much more conventional would have been a total betrayal of everything. When I went to Britain, the important thing was to break through at a philosophical level which critics are just beginning to look at seriously.

You are distinctly individual as a writer, yet you stand for a lot of things that are important in contemporary literature. In the last 25 years there have been many changes,

and two generations have grown up since that time. Do you find both cultural and political discourses changing?

I think they are. Guyana has very severe economic problems, as you probably know. Perhaps a change in political orientation is occurring. Guyana is a marginal society, one that relates neither to the West Indies, nor to South America. In a way, it has a cross-cultural potential that could reach beyond the West Indian establishment as such and could penetrate the South Americas, in an innovative way because of the peculiarities woven together there. There is a Protestant kind of tradition which comes dutifully into conversation with the Latin thing in South America, so both potentials are there. I believe that Guyana has that kind of future, but it's not going to be easy.

I was delighted to go back there recently (to receive the Guyana Prize for Fiction). They're thinking of themselves, this question of awarding important prizes. Mind you, they had a very carefully selected panel of judges. One man had come from England, he was on the Arts Council, another was from the University of the West Indies. The chairman was a West Indian poet of Scottish descent, Ian MacDonald, but his ancestors have lived for a long time in the West Indies, so he's Creole.

The difficulties there are enormous and there's no use evading them. The possibility exists that the authoritarian thing will raise its head again. But then, this is happening all over the Third World, it's one of the patterns that must be broken. But I think it's a kind of recurrence of the whole domination in which people are gripped by the fallacies of the past, which they have not sufficiently investigated or undermined in culturally creative terms. As you know in the Western world there is a drift to the right and all parties are becoming virtually the same, because that's the only way they can win the electorate. Therefore the Labour party has to move more to the right. Some people (in the Labour party) are moving rightward as they want to move deeper into some preoccupation with issues which they cannot easily define but which they feel are important. All over the world there is this drift, but in the Third World it tends to become authoritarian. But in essence it is the same assertion of dominance, of conquistadorial model, and the needs to be broken by the kind of detailed exploration that begins to sense the dialogue we have been discussing. The fabric of narrative changes, because to a large extent these people accept a realism that is authoritarian, that is one-sided. However sophisticated it may be, it does not allow for other texts to come up and break the mould of the authoritarian realism.

This notion of rupture comes through in your books in very powerful dreams that create a parallel structure, or an alternative way of thinking through the character's dilemmas. I see that as an example of fighting

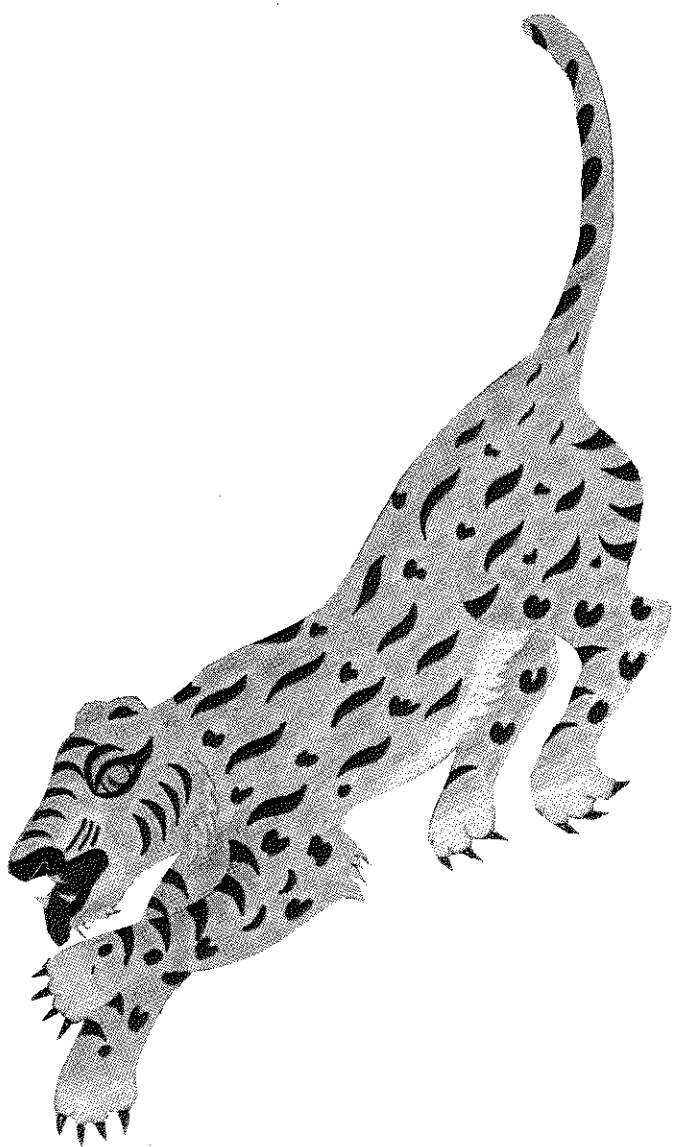
against a dominance and the previous comedy of continually employed. In *Satanstoe*, for example, he goes on for one-fifth of reverie, a dream of a man going mad. And Muslim take it to be the truth of written out on paper. V to get across in *Satanstoe* an opposite notion to a viewing religion. And I write there is often this reality, if I might use the

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When I speak collectively, it's through I can think of Jungian way, subtle evolution, ring so that unconscious form. These come through that have to particular particular moment Guyana or in America, fissure. So one is sublimated dream in a way.

As one revises, one finds clues planted in the novel to be planted by another strategy appears which concentrate more and strategy may be valid, contentness of which or example, in *Carnival*, placed after the book as I saw the very first things of the soul after adventures, a journey which is itself a godded rebirth", I realized that running through the novel knew nothing of this novel. But the strand through in a static way edges and complication despite the horrors of one finds oneself, one is ing the traumas of im reverie. But suggesting through, a dimension forfeited but not complete

Cover art from *The Guyana Quartet* by Chris Brown



against a dominance and narrative tone that the previous comedy of manner writers continually employed. In Salman Rushdie's latest book, for example, he has a sequence that goes on for one-fifth of the book that is a reverie, a dream of a man who is probably going mad. And Muslim fundamentalists take it to be the truth of course, because it is written out on paper. What I think he wants to get across in *Satanic Verses* is a parallel or an opposite notion to a standard manner of viewing religion. And I find that in what you write there is often this parallelism or poetic reality, if I might use that terminology.

Yes, that is true except that my apprehension of these matters may place a deeper emphasis on the collective unconscious. All dreams of course come from there.

When I speak of the collective, it's the one term I can think of in a Jungian way. There are subtle evolutions occurring so that collective unconscious is not uniform. These evolutions come through fissures that have to do with a particular place at a particular moment. In Guyana or in South America, fissures occur. So one is subject to the dream in a very complex way.

As one revises, one finds that there are clues planted in the narrative which seem to be planted by another hand. Then a strategy appears which begins now as you concentrate more and more, and that strategy may be validated by some ancientness of which one knew nothing. For example, in *Carnival*, an epigraph was placed after the book was written. As soon as I saw the very first line, "The wanderings of the soul after death, our prenatal adventures, a journey by water in a ship which is itself a goddess to the gates of rebirth", I realized that that was a strand running through the novel, though I knew nothing of this while composing the novel. But the strand isn't running through in a static way, it has different edges and complications. The result is that despite the horrors of the world in which one finds oneself, one is not simply reversing the traumas of imperialism in a dream reverie. But suggesting there is a breakthrough, a dimension we have almost forfeited but not completely forfeited, so that

the past is not locked away from us. In fact for South Americans, the past is very uncertain. We know there are cultures that disappeared but we don't know why. Those uncertainties can be woven together to release a complex rehearsal of possibilities which were ignored in the past but which are still profoundly relevant to the present and as the present moves into the future. Consequently there is this tension which arouses uneasiness among critics. What this suggests is that there are potentials which could lead us into the position in which the very psyche, the very nature of man, begins to change. I don't want to use the abused term "a change of heart," but it means that in a way, that something else can come into play. I don't know to what extent writers who use the dream reverie as parallels are pushing in that direction, and whether this has anything to do with a kind of religious state. I must confess that despite my despair at times, I have a profound religious faith. I use it, for example, in *Carnival* where there is the Thomas figure and the Thomas mask. Now Thomas as you know put the wounds in Christ. [I am] suggesting that that gesture is much more significant than it appears to be. If you take it as a static gesture, that's the end of it. But I'm saying there's a revolution, in seeking the wounds in a society that has hardened and those wounds have disappeared. The Czar was supposed to be the substitute for Christ (and Hirohito was supposed to be a God), and the Czar was murdered brutally. But I am suggesting that the men who murdered him were revolutionaries, blind to the fact that they were once again seeking out the wounds in the body of Christ. They were doing this in an utterly blind manner, therefore they could never really understand the impulses that drove them, so they became more and more terrorist, more and more hungry for blood. At no point could they understand the religious seed which lies at the heart of revolution. But if that religious seed is there, then it is possible to see that whole wounds can be transfigured. They do not have to fester into total disease. Salman Rushdie said that allegory is diseased; this is a point I would have liked to have made. Allegory is diseased because the wounds that are supposed to relate to allegory have festered. This is because there has been a blindness to the obsolescence of the institutions, which we continue to call sacred. Therefore you get this catastrophic assault on the sacred and impose on it allegory. Allegory in the modern sense can be transfigured so that the wounds which allegory sustains can become visionary.

The notion of allegory being diseased has to do with the fact that the institutions themselves are not changing, if anything they are becoming that much more what they always have been. There was a hope, say 20 years ago, of a time of great change, great openness, willingness, greater dialogue being effected, but now when we look at institutions, whether the Church or most states in the world, we find that there is less recep-

tiveness, not more. It is on this level that one wonders if it is possible... certainly it is possible to re-examine works of art and recuperate them; certainly it is possible to reclaim essential moments in civilization such as the Crucifixion and talk about that and make that a recuperative moment, but on a more banal level or specific level of what is going on today, I wonder whether it really is possible.

That's a very good point. I think that the obsolescence of institutions results in an eruption from the unconscious which becomes very destructive. So we live in a world of terrorism. For example, nowadays there is a guard around the politicians, you may have to have guards around academics going to university, because these obsolescent institutions are not inactive because of their obsolescence. They erupt in us and in the society at large, and the society at large succumbs to terrorism because the society then, no matter how sophisticated it may be, has to function within a tautology in which violence overcomes violence, so violence becomes absolute violence. That kind of tautology is crippling.

The eruption in the unconscious is also a way of addressing us catastrophically about our blindness, [telling us] that it is happening. We are seeing, though, that the wounds which we are inflicting on the body of our civilization are wounds which we must address, but address more deeply than we do address them.

To do that requires an imaginative strategy that begins to alter the very fabric of what we call the creative adventure. Rather than having a fabric which you simply cut up and make different escape routes, or even when you do formidable parallelism and reveries, you may still not have touched what our blindness signifies, our very clarities may be false. We have to address that. If we can address that and accept that, then we can look for other resources in the fabric of a fiction. I believe those resources are there but they are unfathomable in the sense that you can never pin them down. You can ignore them, you can try to eclipse them. They come back in this horrific way. But there is a different way of responding to the obsolescent institutions to allow us this breakthrough when the wounds become transfigurative. Through the carnival mask, you can revisit the phantasmagoria with all of its diseases in such a way that guidelines and openings begin to appear that can lead to a re-assessment of very ancient myths.

Marc Glassman is a Toronto bookseller, writer and film programmer on the Board at Northern Visions, producers of the Images Video and Film Festival.