

**Manisha Amin**

## **What Writers Write and Readers Hear**

### Abstract:

One question that can preoccupy a writer is, when is material appropriated and when is it appropriate to use? That is, where is the fine line between authenticity and exoticisation? As a writer living in Australia, writing a novel set exclusively in India, this is a question that has come to haunt my creative and research life. It is my contention that narrative cannot necessarily stand on the merit of the writing alone, that the author, and the reader's view of the author, will always impact on our reading of her work. As creative writers, do we write about what we know? Undoubtedly. Do we write what people think we should? Hopefully not. But how are our words received by the reader? And does the writer have a place or a voice once their work is published? By assessing the response to V.S. Naipaul's work in India, and the debate surrounding the popularity of 'Indian' writing written by those living in India and elsewhere, I seek to come to some understanding of this issue.

### Biographical note:

Manisha Amin was born in Kenya to Indian parents and immigrated with her family to Australia in 1974. She is currently completing a non-traditional PhD in writing and this paper will form part of her thesis, which focuses on writing, longing and belonging through the lens of her own work.

### Keywords:

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Why do we write what we write, who do we write for and how do readers read our work? These questions began to concern me as they perhaps do many new writers.

I had begun to write my first novel. The story was situated in India, in a small village somewhere in Gujarat, the place of my ancestors but not a place where I had spent any length of time. My intention was that the work would move from this beginning to Australia with detours through England, maybe even America, along the way. However, the work itself, refused to move. I found myself writing an 'Indian' novel situated in India, despite myself. This concerned me deeply. As an Australian writer, born in East Africa, of Indian descent, I felt that somehow this novel wasn't one that I should be writing. That I'd tapped into someone else's past. As a person who had visited, but not lived in India, I became increasingly concerned that my work would be read as inauthentic.

This paper focuses on both my personal experience as well as that of others, using the model proposed by Gregory Ulmer. He says:

To approach knowledge from the side of not knowing what is, from the side of one who is learning, not that of one who already knows, is to do a mystery. What is the experience of knowing, of coming to or arriving at an understanding, characterized as following a path or criss-crossing a field, if not a narrative experience, the experience of following a narrative? (qtd. in Arnold, 2007).

Through this paper, I wish to enter the discussion of that "debated point of view: that a writer must be judged and assessed by his writing alone" (Chaudhuri, 2001). By exploring this notion both through the lens of other authors and from my personalised one as an author-in-training, I hope to find a few answers for myself and for the audience as readers of my work.

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to define the reader as the individual who reads the book and the writer as the person who writes the book. Reading and writing are for the most part solitary acts. In addition, I will talk about the audience as the society in which a piece is read, and the author as the writer's social self—the external self that appears in public.

While a writer can be a reader, and we are all part of the audience, I have used these terms to aid in differentiating between the functions we undertake in order to explore the tensions between reading and writing, and people's world views. The writer is not connected with the reader in the way that musicians or stage performers are connected with their audience. As Ong notes, "for the speaker, the audience is in front of him. For the writer, the audience is simply further away, in time or space or both" (1975: 9).

Yet we don't write books simply for the purpose of writing. We hope to be read. A friend of mine used to say that every time a person picks up a book they make a contract with the writer. This contract starts with the first word on the first page and is only met if the book satisfies the implicit promise it made on the first page. I agree, but feel that this contract will always be in a state of tension, with different expectations on both sides.

As a child I used to play cat's cradle with my sister. The two of us would make shapes by first weaving a looped string between my fingers. My sister would pick parts of the thread, and then pull. Like the tension in the string, the space between the two hands and the many patterns that could be formed, the tension between the reader and writer, the author and their

audience provides symmetry and a space for ideas, depending on the side you view the structure from.

### The Audience

I remember the furore in the early 1990s over Helen Darville's *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. The novel had won the Vogel and Miles Franklin prizes, supposedly on the merit of the work; my interest lay in the fact that much of the media commentary seemed to focus on Darville's surname and fictitious ethnicity. Surely the work was the same regardless of whether Helen Darville or Demidenko wrote it? Don Anderson, writing in the *Australian Humanities Review*, suggests that "Helen Demidenko did herself a disservice by adopting her Ukrainian persona. Her first novel can stand on its own imaginative legs. Indeed its achievement is more considerable if claims of faction or non-fiction are ignored" (Anderson, 2004).

This case, and others like it, remind us that the author and her persona do matter. In *What is an Author?* Foucault argues that the name of an author does not refer simply to a particular person, but rather signifies a role that is created by the ways discourse is treated in culture, and serves a particular function in the circulation of texts.

Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words. Rather, its status and manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates. (Foucault, 1972: 123).

The three specific characteristics of the function that Foucault's author performs according to Hendricks, are: "First, as a means of classification—an author's name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others". Second, the author's name "establishes different forms of relationships among texts," such as "homogeneity, filiations, reciprocal explanation" (1977a: 123). When a group of texts is connected as the work of one author, this signals that it is then appropriate to look for similarities, connections, ways in which one text can be used to supplement and help explain questions brought up by another. The third characteristic is that an author is given a certain status by the society in which it is disseminated" (Hendricks, 2002). Foucault elaborates:

One of the main ways in which modern, Western culture defines which texts have authors and which do not is through the system of ownership—those texts that are considered property, over which one or more individuals has some form of ownership rights, are the ones with 'authors' (Foucault, 1972: 124) .

So texts connected to an author's name exist, are circulated and received, in specific ways that differ from those that are not so connected. Foucault and others like him do not see this as something positive, and indeed argue for a future without the author-function. Foucault suggests that we might try to publish books without authors, allowing the writer to refuse to play the part of the author. However, western culture looks to fill a void. I am reminded here of Nikki Gemmell, who sought to be anonymous when writing *Bride Stripped Bare*. While she found freedom in writing when she decided to publish the novel anonymously, she was shocked at the speed with which the media sought to expose her as the author of the book. "I was unmasked very brutally by the British press—kind of really terrier-like, 'We are going to

find out who you are, we are going to publish, even if you deny it' [they said]" (qtd. in Denton, 2003).

Regardless of the future of the author, Foucault's view also supports the contention of the coexistence and tension between the author and the audience—the society in which the text exists. One didn't have to have read *The Hand that Signed the Paper* to have a public view on the work and the author. And in Gemmell's case, the audience's hunger for an author, over-ruled Gemmell's wish for anonymity. This view of the author and the tied relationship between the author and the audience is articulated in a different way by Sainte-Beuve who contended that a literary work could not stand in isolation—that is on its own merit. "It must be read in relation to the complex set of factors influencing its author and leading to its production" (qtd. in Brewer, 2005: 67).

The Darville and Gemmell cases are extreme examples of audience response to what they perceive as a broken promise; however, the issue of the author and authenticity are also experienced by authors who do not change their names or identity. The authenticity of an author can be judged on a number of levels. For me, my identity as a person of colour, and as a second-generation Indian who has never lived in India, and who has had more than one home, may be some of the factors that come to bear on the audience who reads my work.

Morrison, in her work *Playing in the Dark*, acknowledges the relevance of the audience—the other hand pulling the string if you like—when she writes,

My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about and wrestle with the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society (Morrison, 1992: 3-4).

In Chaudhuri's insightful book *Clearing a Space*, he speaks about his experiences as an Indian writer who writes in the English language. When appearing at author talks for a western audience, there are two questions or variants of them that will always be asked. 'Which audience do you write for?' and 'Are you exoticising India for a western audience?' (Chaudhuri, 2008: 85). The second of these questions concerned me as I wrote. I was surprised that it was being asked of Chaudhuri, and others who I thought of as indisputably Indian. I didn't realise that this issue was not about the writer's identity as much as the audience's interest and concern about the subject matter (i.e. exotic India) as well as a reflection on their engagement with writers who were not white. This should not have surprised me. The audience in a global world context will never come from exactly the same place or perspective as the author.

Mikkelsen, in her essay *Insiders and Outsiders*, raises the issue of authenticity in multicultural stories for children as being of concern to scholars, academics and critics alike. She asks a number of questions:

who will produce the literature of parallel cultures, An author of the characters' own particular culture or anyone? And for those that feel it doesn't matter, (that anyone who can tell a good story should do so), we must ask, what makes a story good? Replicating reality to its fullest? Getting the facts and feelings right?...But for the good of whom? (1998: 33).

These questions, to me, reflect the views of an audience dealing with an increasingly complicated world. The world is not a place of black or white, but rather shades of the

rainbow—each colour resonating differently. The view of the audience, then, is also more complicated and dispersed. Mass media and globalised distribution mean that as a society we can access texts that would have been difficult to purchase in the past. And authors if they choose to do so, can become personalities in their own right. The cult of the author is not new; however, the access that we have to texts and authors is perhaps different. This makes the issue of authenticity more complicated and the response of the audience sometimes too simplistic.

This problem is well understood by writers. Virginia Hamilton, a children's author, says:

It's very difficult when you are black to write outside of the black experience. People won't allow it; critics won't allow it. If I would do a book that didn't have blacks, people would say, 'oh what is Virginia Hamilton doing?' Yet a white writer can write about anything. (qtd. in Mikkelsen, 1998: 33).

As a person with my feet in more than one country, my perspective, and the place that I write from, is doubly important. In addition, the questions that Mikkelsen asks are not limited to a western audience. Even in India, some writers' work is given more credence than others.

Chandra, in an article on the cult of authenticity, writes of his experiences at a reading in India, with an Indian audience. Here, like the western audience quizzing Chaudhuri, the audience quizzes Chandra and the other writers on the panel, who all write in English, about the perceived bias to a western audience. In the following months, Chandra observes an anxiety in India about Indian-ness and the "notion of a real reality that was being distorted by 'third World cosmopolitans' ... [a] fear of an all-devouring and all distorting west" (Chandra, 2000: 2). He tells the story of a Delhi University syllabus revision committee, trying to decide on one Anglo-Indian (in this context an Indian novel written in English) for the modern Indian literature course. The suggestion of *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie "was shouted down." Salman Rushdie isn't Indian, the majority of the professors asserted. Amitav Ghosh, however, was found to be sufficiently Indian, and so his *Shadow Lines* was accepted into the canon. The issue was decided not on the basis of the relative merits of the books, but on the perceived Indian-ness of the authors, and by implication, the degree of their assimilation by the West (Chandra, 2000: 2).

The matter of authenticity becomes an issue for any author who is seen as a transnational, someone who crosses boundaries and the extent that they work with or against the tide has a direct bearing on their reception.

I find it interesting, reading Amitav Ghosh's response to Naipaul's decision to consecrate his Nobel prize to England, "his adopted home, rather than to India." He writes, "this leaves unnamed the places to which he owes his true literary debts: Trinidad and the Caribbean" (Ghosh, 2001). This comment had nothing to do with the quality of text but everything to do with one author's view of another and their place in society. It reflects the difficulty that society has in categorising the transnational, and also highlights the dissonance that can exist between the author's view of themselves and that of the audience.

## The Author

Salman Rushdie has addressed this issue in his essays in *Imaginary Homelands*. He argues

that people from more than one country have the benefit of the insider's view, as well as that of distance. He notes that Indians now come in many shapes and sizes. Indian writers in England include "political exiles, first-generation migrants, affluent expatriates whose residence here [in England] is only temporary, naturalised Britons and people born [in England] who may never have laid eyes on the subcontinent" (1992: 17). This definition could just as easily apply to Indians in Australia, or other "migrant" communities. Rushdie says:

so if I am to speak for Indian writers in England I would say ...we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage; which heritage includes both a Bradford-born Indian kid's right to be treated as a full member of British society and also the right of any member of this post-Diaspora community to draw on its roots for its art, as the world's displaced writers have always done (1992: 15).

I draw comfort from his words. They speak directly to me, as does Rushdie's contention that the work of the Indian writer looking back at India is different. He speaks of his own experience as being that of looking through "guilt-tinted spectacles" (Rushdie, 1992). There is a quality of nostalgia or bitterness of regret, or in Naipaul's case, the inclination to "see the humour and pity of things" (Naipaul, 2001), that comes with distance. It may form part of the story or just inform it. Rushdie's view may not be that commonly held by the audience, but it does allow the writer additional freedom and flexibility in writing. It also supports the view that a writer can write about a place as an outsider and tell a very different, though still legitimate, story to that of the insider.

However, just as the 'Indian' writer may now come from Sydney, New York or Bombay, audiences from these countries have specific expectations of authors who "belong" in the family. So while Rushdie's view of the diasporic Indian provides freedom and a justification for the author to choose subject matter from anywhere in their frame of reference, it can be a double-edged sword, as a different set of challenges emerge. V.S. Naipaul's work and its reception in India is a case in point. At the time when Naipaul won the Nobel Prize, both Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhuri reflected on the impact that this man had had on them as writers. It is interesting that both had a similar Naipaul story from their early childhood in India. Chaudhuri writes:

I first heard of Naipaul when I was 12 or 13 years old ... he was mentioned as a curiosity, an Indian who was not quite an Indian ... he apparently visited "our country, took advantage of our hospitality and said unpleasant things about India". He had written a book *An area of Darkness* in which this hospitality had evidently been described, misrepresented and thoroughly betrayed ... [the titles of this and *A Wounded Civilisation* were enough to displease people even before they had read a word of what he'd written. Indeed I had no idea that Naipaul's most important achievement, and his special magic, lay in the realm of fiction in the genre of the novel, until I was about 23] (Chaudhuri, 2001).

My supposition is that had Naipaul been European, or Japanese, the reception of this work in India would have been very different. Whether positive or negative, I doubt that it would have been as personal. The view on the other side of the ocean was not much better. "The pessimism of his later work too," says Chaudhuri, "has disconcerted western readers, for it has fallen to writers from formally colonised societies to bear the burden of being perennially effervescent" (Chaudhuri, 2001).

## The Writer

Naipaul's speech on receiving the Nobel Prize is, however, illuminating. He said: "Proust has written with great penetration of the difference between the writer as writer and the writer [or author] as a social being" (Naipaul, 2001). In his essays *Against Sainte-Beuve*, Proust argues against the view that to understand a writer it was necessary to know as much as possible about the exterior man, the details of his life. "This method of Sainte-Beuve, Proust writes, ignores what a very slight degree of self-acquaintance teaches us: that a book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices" (qtd. in Naipaul, 2001). This statement gave me a new insight. I see this as the very critical difference between the author—the person or role of author-function—and the identity or nature of the writer while in the actual act of writing. Naipaul writes:

All the details of the life and the quirks and the friendships can be laid out for us, but the mystery of the writing will remain. No amount of documentation, however fascinating, can take us there ... In fact, Proust writes, "it is the secretions of one's innermost self, written in solitude and for oneself alone that one gives to the public" (2001).

Naipaul sees his background as "exceedingly simple and exceedingly confused" and I think this is in part the issue faced by many-placed people. Where is home? Why is my memory of a place so different to the place itself? Which island can I really call my own? How do I make sense of my patchwork history? These questions and others like them travel as the writer does, implicitly or explicitly, depending on the writer and their work.

The author as a social being is different to that of the writer. One way this may be summed up is perhaps the difference between a literature class and a writing class. Chaudhuri talks about his experiences at Columbia University, where he saw an uneasy relationship between the Writing Division and the Department of English and Comparative Literature. The writing department would accuse the English department of being "hostile to literature", while the English department saw the writing students as "historically naive and badly read" (Chaudhuri, 2008: 141).

Coming from a writing rather than literary school myself, I have noticed the very real disparity between those courses that focus on the writer and those that focus on the author. It is the difference between craft and context. However, as a writer and author one must deal with the challenges that face us on both sides of the divide. Ong writes:

Writing calls for difficult, often mysterious skills. Except for a small corps of highly trained writers, most persons could get into written form few if any of the complicated and nuanced meanings that they regularly convey orally (1975: 12).

Ultimately what I think is important to writers when someone reads their work, it that it is well written. It has to speak to the reader at a fundamental level and it must work as a text. Rushdie says, "Literature is self-validating. That is to say no book is justified by its author's worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written" (Rushdie, 1992: 14) However, there are other groups who feel the content itself is far more important than the "art".

Mikkelsen, in her essay, is concerned about the content and who should morally be allowed

to write for African-American children. She illustrates the tension between society's concerns and the very act of reading and writing. She tells the following story:

A second-grade Anglo-American teacher told me recently, my students love Grace ... !" And when I described to her some of my concerns about authenticity, she replied ... that none of these things bothered her ... Amazing Grace was [for her] a colour-blind and gender-blind book. She had bonded with the story (1998: 40).

Later Mikkelsen notes that writers also view authenticity differently. The notion of equity and freedom, to write and explore as one wishes—to not be constrained by the expectations of the audience and to have the time to grow as an artist—are of greater importance. "You need to grow as an artist" says Walter Dean Myers, "and you can't do that if you're forced into an ethnic kind of role" (1998: 47).

While it is fair to say that writers draw on their roots, something within, when they write, the craft of writing and the teachers who teach them are not necessarily from the same place as themselves. Ghosh talks about the impact that Naipaul had on him as a writer—"Naipaul moments", he says that "surface in my memory like aching teeth" (Ghosh, 2001). He notes, "Naipaul's work [was] a whetstone against which to sharpen my own awareness of the world." In another essay, Chandra replies to the criticism Anglo-Indian writers are too western by arguing that:

the Indian novel itself is a form that grows out of interactions between Indian and western forms of narrative. Good Indian writers have never been self-isolating, inward-looking mandarins afraid of the pollutions of foreign contact. Bankim Chandra [for example] was an avid reader and follower of Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens ... (Chandra, 2000: 3).

Moreover, Ong argues that if a writer wishes to succeed in writing, it will be because he draws on the work of writers before him. That is,

he can fictionalise in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were fictionalising in their imagination audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers, and so on back to the dawn of written narrative. If and when he becomes truly adept, an "original writer," he can do more than project the earlier audience, he can alter it (Ong, 1975: 11).

As writers, we may be influenced in our understanding of the craft by other writers, past and present, who come from the global village, although the act of writing is an isolated one. Unlike the presenter or speaker, writers do not have an audience that provides you with direct feedback as they go along. "I am writing a book [says the writer] which will be read by thousands, or I modestly hope, by tens of thousands. So, please get out of the room, I want to be alone" (Ong, 1975: 10).

In *Making Stories* (Grenville and Woolfe, 2001), readers get an inside view at the ways a number of writers worked in the creation of their novels. The writer sits at their laptop, talks into a dictaphone, or writes in long-hand. They may draw pictures and diagrams as they go or not. They may workshop drafts of their work, but all of them have a period of isolation. It is then that the act of writing occurs and the person is focussed not on themselves, or how their work will be read, but on the act of transferring something onto a blank page. Those words can be refined but they are, in my view, a mystery to the writer as they first appear on the page.

As writers—and all writers are different—we have the opportunity to write from a place of exploration. Naipaul says:

Whatever extra there is in me at any given moment isn't fully formed. I am hardly aware of it; it awaits the next book. It will—with luck—come to me during the actual writing, and it will take me by surprise ... I have an idea when I start, I have a shape; but will fully understand what I have written only after some years (Naipaul, 2001).

The writer learns about themselves and their work, just as readers do. I know that in my own case, it was only as the story progressed that I realised what I was writing about. The critical concerns that my characters explored as I travelled with them over unfamiliar terrain bubbled up, as if from nowhere, for me to puzzle over. If I told you that my novel was not about a boy in India, but a story about location and dislocation, I'd be correct, because this is what the story, in its first draft stage, says to me. However, just like writing, reading is a solitary practice. For another traveller, now reading my work, it may be about women, and their relationship to death and power. To others it may be an idealised and exoticised view of a country I know little about.

### **The reader**

The reader is also a participant—a character in the work—who brings and takes from the work something different and is just as valid as the writer. Then who do we write for and who are our readers? I think this question can be answered on any number of levels. Hamilton writes “I write from the black experience for an audience as free and as large as I can find” (qtd. in Mikkelsen, 1998: 45). This is one truth, that resonates at a social level. Even Gemmell, while wanting to be anonymous, wanted her work to be read by a diverse group of people—the public, people that the writer would never meet, except through the pages of the book. For many of us, there are also personal considerations. Gemmell initially didn't want her partner to read her book. Rushdie notes that for many of us who are of Indian descent, we write in English because, amongst other things, this will be the language our children and their children grow up speaking. There is also a third audience for the novel, one that sits between the mass market and the personal. While Rushdie acknowledges that you cannot write for a narrow market, he makes the point that “with *Midnight's Children*, if its subcontinental readers had rejected the work, I should have thought it a failure, no matter how it had done in the west” (Rushdie, 1992: 20). So writers have a view of the groups or communities that they want to be heard in. And this will always be perhaps subconsciously at play when they write.

But what of the reader? The other hand pulling at the string? Mikkelsen says, “studies have shown that students want literature about people they have commonalities with” (1998: 35). I am not sure I agree. I believe that readers, like writers, engage with a text on a personal level. Something in the work needs to speak to them. I do not believe that readers need to come from the same cultural background or even have the same frame of reference. A text works on many levels and is subjective. Otherwise, why would I read the same novel as my sister, and love what she really doesn't connect with?

This situation isn't black and white. It is not a competition between a focus on the text or the author's position as the writer of the text. When readers read, they must be aware that the

author has made decisions, that are more about the writer and their internal questions. Chaudhuri notes:

It's not only the reader who takes the decision of rejecting or accepting a writer, the writer too, depending on what his objectives is at the moment, and how he means to achieve it, gives himself to or withholds himself from the reader (Chaudhuri, 2008: 90)

The reader, then, has a responsibility when they come to the work, with a view to getting as much out of a text as the author has put in. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison talks about approaching texts as a reader the way she approaches them as a writer; that is, engaging in “writerly” reading. For her, this way of reading “taxes us with the pain of recognizing those strangers we cannot know” (qtd. in Nowlin, 1999: 188), just as it does the writer. It is in this space that we are confronted with the questions that make us human, that lurk in the cracks and corners. Questions that we explore as writers and that hopefully arise from texts, through the characters, the letters on the page and the sound of the words, to the reader. The power of the writing and reading, then, is to “unsettle the reader and dissolve the predictable” (Nowlin, 1999: 159). Naipaul quotes Proust:

The beautiful things we shall write if we have talent,” Proust says, “are inside us, indistinct, like the memory of a melody which delights us though we are unable to recapture its outline. Those who are obsessed by this blurred memory of truths they have never known are the men who are gifted”. (qtd. in Naipaul, 2001)

## Conclusion

These views give me heart. They tell me that that a string tied between two hands can only make the wonderful shapes it does, not despite, but because of the tension between the author, audience, reader and writer. Writers create small and beautiful worlds of words.

Giving people permission to view that world and take of it what they want doesn't change what *the writer* created, or the lessons *they* have learned while writing. The fact that the audience is not personal and close to an author gives the audience the opportunity to explore their own questions through the work. This makes the tension between the writer and the audience something to rejoice in. It means that writers can play a fundamental role in changing the world. With their very distance, writers can give people permission to engage with work on a social as well as personal level. One critiques differently when one doesn't have a personal relationship with the author. And, maybe, as an author, a person can also choose whether they wish to be an active participant in the discussion or whether their only contribution is the writing.

This gives me hope as a new writer. The author isn't dead, but is one of the many participants in the construction of a novel. All of us have the opportunity to be part of a wider dialogue. If people find my work inauthentic, then that too is something to engage with, as it is a reflection of what my work brings to current discourse rather than just a function of my work as a text in isolation. The act of engagement—for good or ill—adds to our participation in, and understanding of, the world in which our work exists.

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