

Muthal Naidoo
Octogenarian Adventures



OCTOGENARIAN ADVENTURES

Muthal Naidoo

*The back cover of this book reflects my
gratitude to Carl Sagan who shared his
knowledge of the Cosmos with all of us.*

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*“The unexamined life is
not worth living”*

I understand this to mean
that I should examine and
understand the foundations
on which I base my beliefs.

NEW CAREER

In 1998, when I was two years away from retirement as a lecturer at Giyani College of Education, I was frog-marched out of the campus by a mass of students. I had no idea what their intentions were. Kathy and Shobna, two of my colleagues joined the march, worked their way to the front and led it to the police station. This clearly frustrated the students who had had some other destination and some form of retribution in mind. Kathy and Shobna may have saved my life.

It was soon after 1994 and the students, empowered by the demise of apartheid, were using their new found sense of authority, to throw out lecturers who stuck by the old tradition of hard work and learning. I was the third woman to be dealt with thus; hurrah for democracy, no gender discrimination.

Other witches were being turned out of other colleges in this homeland. Male chauvinism, cultural tradition, and racism go hand in hand.

Having been retired by the students, two years earlier than I had anticipated, I returned to Pretoria and began my new career. I am one of those who believe that retirement means freedom to follow your real vocation. So the students had given me the gift of two additional years of freedom. Now with a small pension, I had financial security and didn't have to continue to be a drudge of the system.

I could do what I wanted – write! As writers create from their own experience, I too would write about the life I knew. I would begin by recording the achievements of the people of the former Asiatic Bazaar of Marabastad in Pretoria, where I had lived for a decade as a child – the decade before the official proclamation of apartheid in 1948.

Though segregation is beginning to disappear in South Africa, we still live in separation, no longer in terms of where we live, but in terms of our social, political and cultural conditioning. And despite the great achievements of people of Indian descent,

being a historically despised minority community, I believed that their contributions would never be recognized if they were not recorded. So my work was clearly cut out for me.

I armed myself with a tape recorder, pad and pen and went to seek out the unknown heroes of the former Asiatic Bazaar, now of Laudium and Claudius, the “Indian” areas of Pretoria.

As interviews for *Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar* took several years, I worked on two other books at the same time. One – a book of short stories about women, *Jail Birds and Others*, was inspired by the month I had spent in Haenertsburg Prison in 1990 for my association with political activists in Giyani.

The other was *A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals*, which the late Sinthumbi Naidoo asked me to write when I went to interview him for *Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar*. He referred me to his son, Ronnie Naidoo, a Tamil priest, who would provide me with the information needed.

Being an atheist, I have no knowledge of religious rituals. So I sat down with Ronnie and wrote the book at his dictation. I visited the Marieamman Temple in Pretoria and the Melrose Temple in Johannesburg and took photographs. Gumani Makhado, with no intimate knowledge of Hinduism, designed and laid out the book beautifully. It was published soon after *Jail Birds and Others*, both in 2004. I am very glad to have worked on the book of rituals; it provided me with insights into Tamil culture that are useful in writing biographies of people from that community.

In 2007, I published *Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar*. In addition to being an author, I have also become a publisher. All, but four of my books, are self-published. For my first books, I did try the recognized publishing houses but when they informed me that there was no market for my work as “Indians” do not buy books, I decided I could do without them. *Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar* and *A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals* are my most

popular books, despite the view that “Indians” don’t buy books.

These two books also provided background material for the biography of a philanthropist and photographer, Ramy Pillay, which I wrote in 2017. Kuben Pillay, Ramy’s son, managed the project so efficiently that we breezed through it in six months. After Kuben published and launched the book, there were two more requests for biographies; the first was abandoned when the subject became seriously ill.

The second was from people who, like Kuben, wished to have their father’s story told. They decided that they would provide the information that went into the book. As it came in very slowly and over a long period, I got busy with other books.

I had written *The Obverse side of Ubuntu*, a few years before under the title, *Murder Montage*, and had not published it. It is based on three widely publicized murders committed by South

African women in the first decade of the new century. We were now living in a ‘free’ society in which the rights of women were recognised. So what did that mean? Were women now free to commit murder? Two of the murders were of husbands, the third, of a child, the off-spring of an unfaithful partner.

These were happenings in the new South Africa. So what difference had the change from apartheid to democracy made? I began to see democracy in terms of the expediency of human existence as expressed in the Hindu concepts of *maya* and *karma*. That inspired a new book of poems “Karma: The Dance of Life,” – a work in progress.

As I believe that each of us makes our own understanding of existence, my view of karma may or may not correspond with other people’s interpretations. For me, karma makes a good deal of sense in terms of what scientists have discovered about the ever expanding universe. As we have no conception of a beginning or end of time and space, we cannot foresee all

the consequences of our actions so all our actions are expedient and we are simultaneously builders and destroyers – all gamblers.

I completed work on the *Obverse Side of Ubuntu* and when I was satisfied that I could do no more with it, I sent it off to be laid out and printed. When it was ready, I went to pick up my twenty copies. My writing is not of the popular kind and I print only twenty copies of a book. I do not look for affirmation of my work; living in South Africa I have learned to do without it. I just do the best I can and that is sufficient for me. Fortunately, I am a pensioner and do not need to earn a living from my writing.

I have recently begun reading Dean Koontz, whose books I enjoy as they are also commentaries on the ways in which we are conditioned in society. And after writing about the film, *Shawshank Redemption*, based on a Stephen King, novella, I decided to read Stephen King as well.

Koontz, King and other popular modern authors are wonderful storytellers. I read them and know that I am not a storyteller. I am only an explorer of events. That is why I like writing biographies. I do not have to invent a story; it is already there and my job is to set it in its historical context and unravel its meaning. The Stephen King novel that I picked up was *The Dark Half*. I found it intriguing as it revolves around the idea that writers write about themselves, as Anthony Sher suggests in his book, *Beside Myself*.

In *The Dark Half*, the two main characters, who represent a good and an evil self in the novel, are the same man and both are writers. I see the book as a modern version of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I was most interested to see how King would resolve the dilemma of the split personality. Stevenson and Wilde destroy their psychotics; King finds a supernatural solution and destroys only the evil identity. So *The Dark Half* became a fairy

tale for me.

In the long intervals between work on the biography begun the previous year, I wrote and published *Love is a Story* and *The Obverse Side of Ubuntu*.

Then I began my adventures.

SOCIALIZATION

I live in South Africa and am of Indian descent but I am not Indian; I am South African. Born in South Africa, brought up in a ghetto for people of Indian descent, I was declared “Indian” and of inferior status and ability. As I belonged to a powerless minority, like others in the community, I grew up accepting the notion that I was of inferior status, but not of inferior ability.

I also took for granted the racial hierarchy, with its gradations of inferiority for all black people and became a racist in a society of racists. This was long before apartheid. As a matter of fact, the promulgation of apartheid, which attempted to make racism a legal, as well as a social fact of life, gave rise to the revolutionary movement that brought official discrimination to an end.

But I grew up as a racist and did not question the notion that some people were superior and others inferior in terms of power as well as ability and I accepted my inferior status, as well

as the inferior status of others of colour.

Though I saw people of all “races” in the streets, in shops, in official capacities everywhere, every day, I conformed to the ethos of separate development.

Our culture was a culture of segregation that forced us all into false “racial” identities and to regard ourselves as very different from one another. However, there were also unrecognized counter forces at work – the education system, for example. Though we conformed to racial segregation, we were at the same time, going to school and being inducted into the history and culture of the West. In forcing us to adopt their culture and way of life, White authorities, were actually creating a common culture that challenged notions of “racial” difference.

Though classified African, Coloured or Indian, and provided with separate curricula and syllabi, all children were learning through the medium of English or learning English, were

reading English literature and European history, and imbibing the cultural values, not of Africa, and India, but of the British rulers. So how could we, being educated by the British in a British colony, remain distinctly African, and Indian?

Education does not simply mean learning facts as Dickens's Mr Gradgrind would have us believe. Education inducts us into a culture and if it is not the culture into which we were born, we can no longer regard ourselves as people of a single culture; we become multi-cultural beings. In South Africa, it meant becoming South African.

Though the government tried to lock us into mono-cultural identities, the education system was inducting us all into a predominantly British culture. Education, therefore, was in a sense, anti-racist; it was creating a new South African culture that was bringing us all together.

Now, in 2018, though released from official

racial discrimination, there are still those who cannot adapt to the wonderful freedom of being multi-cultural human beings. They stick rigidly to what I call racist traditionalism.

In the “Indian” community, there are those who cling to ways that, in my opinion, belong to apartheid. Their insistence on strict maintenance of cultural traditions demonstrates the effectiveness of apartheid conditioning. They consciously adhere to an understanding of mono-ethnic and mono-cultural identities, while they adopt benefits derived from a growing world culture and are unaware of contradictions.

I accept that each of us lives according to a personal understanding of existence so I do not interfere with other people’s beliefs. Unfortunately, others do not have the same respect for my right to my beliefs. Because I am of Indian descent, others who do not question their identification as “Indians,” expect me to conform to their understanding of identity. For instance, I have been addressed in

accordance with Indian custom as *Ucka* (Elder Sister) as a ‘form of respect’. But such respect is confined to the designation; it does not extend to me, the person. My opinions and requests are ignored. So I find the adherence to tradition an escape from genuine respect; especially as tradition supports male chauvinism.

My repudiation of old ways is, I know, threatening as it undermines fixed belief in tradition. And traditionalists always need affirmation of their beliefs as they have adopted them reflexively, as part of a heritage. I do not require affirmation of my beliefs as they are derived from my exploration of ideas of existence. So I know what I believe and *why*. Those who follow tradition do not subject their beliefs to any form of examination; they believe them to be absolute.

Living in South Africa, my heritage has not been Hinduism or Telugu/Tamil culture. I never learned an Indian language and my parents were not particularly religious. My mother did

not follow tradition; she dressed her daughters in shorts and slacks and our hair was bobbed – shocking in the “Indian” community of the 1940s.

Mother was also a woman who yearned to follow a career; marriage was not sufficient for her, but she was stuck with a family and there were no opportunities for her in her time.

Nevertheless, she was one who did not take things for granted. As a child I did not realize that she was awakening in me the need to question and though I look back with sadness at her personal frustrations that I had not understood, I am very grateful for what I learned from her.

In my fifties, when I turned to a study of Hinduism and read the books by Klaus Klostermaier, I came to my own understanding of the religion. As the books deal with the philosophy of the religion, not rituals, I was mesmerized and developed personal interpretations of *maya*, *Brahman* and *karma*.

For me they correspond with ideas of an expanding universe, of ever evolving human action and its unforeseeable consequences.

And I have found interpretations of Hindu philosophy in Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Milan Kundera and Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. So, as I see it, the breadth of Hinduism, lies not in ritual and tradition which confine and imprison initiative in a safety net of conventions. The significance of Hinduism lies in its exploration of the meaning of existence.

Traditionalism
bound to ritual
not renewal
strict compliance
absolute reliance
on past values
ancient views
mummification
of superstition
looking backward
not forward
not up
to see a man
land on the moon
no conception
of universal expansion
proudly chauvinistic
completely atavistic

KARMA MEANS ACTION

Being human, we are unaware of the extent to which we are robots. We see movies like *The Matrix*, read novels like George Orwell's *1984*, and don't see that they are based on the way we live in society. Science Fiction Writers write about the ways in which our lives are controlled by all the processes that have come about as a result of modern technology – turning us into cyborgs, without our conscious perception but with our willing co-operation. We are not aware that we are being programmed.

Living together, conforming to laws, conventions and new technologies, develops mechanical responses in us, making us part-robot, reducing our individuality to make it easier for us to communicate and cooperate. Conformity allows us to anticipate and predict behavior. And as observers of convention, we develop intolerance towards those who do not conform to the general understanding of acceptable social behaviour.

I like to imagine that I do not conform to mindless requirements of convention, especially in its social and material forms. But, living in society, one is continuously being subjected to the mechanistic views of those whose mantra is: “this is the way it’s done.” And those bound by convention, seeing a person over eighty with white hair and an old face, automatically assume a total lack of intelligence, independence of spirit and self-reliance. Even Shakespeare has contributed to this kind of stereotypical thinking.

*Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans
everything. (As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 7)*

Sadly, most people my age accept this view of themselves and simply conform to ridiculous notions of second childhood. They are the ones for whom younger people organize the mindless ‘fun’ sessions for ‘senior citizens’ – annual celebrations to congratulate them on

their useless longevity.

People see me marching down streets, but one look at my hair blinds them to my energetic striding and all they see is a helpless, old woman who invokes their pity. They cannot see that this old woman looking at them, pities them for their inability to think for themselves. As they are bound by convention, when they are eighty-two, if they get there, they will probably hobble along with a walking stick or ride in a wheelchair – simply marking time, waiting for death.

Even some, who employ me as a writer, don't see me as an intelligent human being. Their interest in me as a person is limited to queries about whether I suffer from constipation or would like an invitation to the annual Senior Citizens' dinner.

And there are bemused queries about my unmarried status. I have been asked if it was a case of not being able to find someone. The answer of course is "No – I was not looking."

Fortunately, as a child, I escaped the brainwashing that sees marriage as the natural outcome of becoming an adult. My own view of marriage is that it is the human way of legitimizing sex, keeping it under control and ensuring the survival of the species.

Being in love expresses a readiness for sexual activity, which is an emotional and physical need. For men, in whom the need for sex is much stronger, it is an adventure; but for women, it leads to a form of slavery. Those women whom we call “prostitutes”, for whom sex is a job, could be fairly independent human beings – if they ran the business themselves. Their way of earning a living is generally condemned and regarded as immoral, but all it does is remove the romantic veil that is placed over sex, showing it to be pure appetite.

The majority of women are programmed to think in terms of marriage from the time they are little children. It begins with dolls, continues with fairy tales that end with marriage and living happily ever after, followed by novels

that end in the same way. And menstruation is taken as the signal that they are ready for marriage.

Meanwhile girls live in homes with mothers whose dreams of self-exploration are closed because they are trapped as caregivers in families. So it is quite ironic to hear an aria like, *La Donna è Mobile*, sung by a Don Juan who goes chasing after skirts all over town in pursuit of sex, and denies women the freedom to explore and discover themselves. Love and sex may coincide but they are not the same thing. If they were, there would be fewer divorces.

Even Jane Austen, who gives her novels the fairytale ending, undermines her own message of ‘happily ever after’, in her portrayal of the relationship in *Pride and Prejudice* of Mr and Mrs Bennet, two quite incompatible souls. She even makes us laugh at the woman trapped in the limited opportunities that her marriage offers her.

In romantic fiction, which is conventional and

very influential in keeping sex within the bounds of marriage, women who delight in sex for the sake of sex are condemned as wanton. Libertine men are not as severely censored as women. They are considered macho but women are called whores.

In the Danish TV series *Matador*, Brigitte Graae, is presented as a “loose” woman because she does not adhere to the rules that govern sex. She, like a man, follows her instincts, and defies convention.

In *Matador* (the Danish word for Monopoly, the board game, and for a business tycoon), the hero is Mads Andersen-Skjern. He is the business tycoon and represents capitalism in its positive sense. For most people capitalism means exploitation, but that is only one side of the story.

Capitalism, like everything human has two sides; on one side it represents a means for the unscrupulous to exploit – that is the reverse side.

On the obverse side, capitalism is actually the way in which humans have organized their living conditions. It simply means working together for the good of all and in this positive sense, it is democratic.

A family is capitalism at its most basic level. A man and a woman come together to build a family in which ideally there is mutual and co-operative support and development. We build societies based on this simple capitalistic principle.

Mads in *Matador* is a man with vision and the ability to build. He comes to the little town of Korsbæk which, under the aristocratic control of the upper classes, is dying. In a closed system of privilege, progress is not possible as it is not capitalistic in its positive sense but only in its negative sense of reserving wealth and progress for the few. Mads, with his democratic view of capitalism, opens up the society, creates opportunity for all and the town begins to thrive.

Mads is a man and we applaud his ability to knock convention on the head, use his initiative and build. The writer presents him as an example to be followed.

When it comes to women, however, the author, Lise Norgaard¹, shows them struggling against convention. Women are limited in terms of what they can achieve as their freedom is restricted by their biology. They bear the children and are responsible for nurturing them.

In *Matador*, a woman who repudiates traditional expectations of women is Brigitte (Gitte) Graae. She flouts conventional notions of the role of women, and becomes a ‘Donna Juanita’. She is not presented as an admirable person as she uses sex as her capital to get what she wants from life. She, like the women we call “prostitutes”, is despised but, she is free and independent.

As convention makes greater demands on women to conform, Gitte is seen only in a

¹ Lise Norgaard turned 101 on 14 June 2018

negative light. Nevertheless, she lives a freer life; one that she controls, and it is filled with laughter and gaiety.

The difference between Gitte and Mads is that he supplies commodities to fulfill people's needs; but she has turned herself into a commodity; and women are more than objects. However, as we see in all literature that ends with the theme of "happily ever after", women are presented as sex objects and are given as prizes to heroes. So-called loose women, like Gitte, merely capitalize on this understanding of a woman's function in the world. Though they are censured, 'loose' women are somewhat freer as theirs is a conscious choice.

In *Matador*, Lise Norgaard also shows us traditional women caught in the "happily ever after" trap; the most pitiable one is Maude Varnæs because she gilds the cage in which she lives and is the chief ornament in her home. She is convention's slave and a most unhappy woman. She often takes to her bed to avoid facing up to the fact that her life has little

meaning.

Lise Norgaard, the writer, being a woman, presents Mads as a man who, for the most part, recognizes in women, their intellectual and managerial potential and gives them opportunities to develop their skills. That turns him into a modern day Prince Charming, one for whom a woman is more than a vagina in a glossy covering. But with success comes power and Mads develops into the typical manipulative capitalist exploiter. Norgaard then places opposite him a woman with initiative and vision, as bold and creative, but one who does not allow power to corrupt her. In Agnes, we continue to see capitalism in its positive capacity to build society.

A woman is more than her womb and even in the little community of Laudium in Pretoria, there are women who demonstrate that – Maniben Sita for example. Maniben is ninety-one. Until she fell and broke her shinbone, a couple of years ago, she walked about vigorously in Laudium and drove her little blue

bakkie (pick-up truck) between Pretoria and Lenasia, the former “Indian” township in Johannesburg. The accident has seriously affected her mobility but she still lives alone and refuses to think of herself as a dependent.

Like her father, Nana Sita, she devoted her life to the fight for democracy. In the old days, she spoke out vociferously against racial discrimination at mass meetings and spent several terms in detention. She has received many awards and honours for her heroism.

Growing up as the daughter of Nana Sita, a dedicated follower of Gandhi and totally involved in non-violent resistance to oppression, she was inspired and saw her life very differently from the majority of women for whom marriage is the ultimate goal. Though always a loving and dutiful daughter, sister and aunt, she believed in the democratic principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and mapped out for herself a life of resistance to injustice.

And at 91, she can quite confidently say that

she did her duty. Though one may see that only in terms of service to others, what her life really demonstrates is that she took charge of herself and lived up to her own understanding of the meaning of her existence. She did not conform to traditional expectations of women: she determined her own destiny.

Critics find Polonius's words, "To thine own self be true," expedient and self-serving, as they are *his* words, but their meaning applies to Maniben in the purest sense. She has been true to herself. In dedicating her life unconditionally to fighting for freedom from racial prejudice, she acted in accordance with her own beliefs and wishes.

Though she is a tiny little woman – she fell and broke her leg because she could not get the size four-and-a-half shoes that she requires – her spirit, nobility and courage are immeasurable. Believing in herself and not simply following tradition that limits women to servitude in the home, she has lived a fulfilled life. She can say with complete confidence, "I am happy".

Furthermore, she is also a writer. She is the author of a cookery book for vegetarians and is now busy working on her autobiography.

Only those, who cannot see that life offers unending opportunity to create one's own destiny, sit idly waiting for death.

Maniben's life demonstrates what I understand by karma – it is action, the creation of one's destiny.

OLD FOOL

Though I am perfectly self-sufficient – I live alone in a one-bedroom flat and take care of all my needs without servants – I am still viewed in terms of all the stereotypical thinking that goes with being a woman– and with white hair.

And for my neighbours next door – only a wall separates the living rooms of the two flats – one look at the hair and they saw opportunity.

Since this is South Africa, and though we got rid of legal discrimination, the racism, to which we were conditioned through segregation, still flourishes. So my neighbors saw in me, an old woman, helpless and idiotic – but not only that, an old *Indian* woman – therefore one with means. Though they are from Zimbabwe, they have grown up in similar colonial circumstances as South Africans, and hold similar racist views; people of Indian descent are typically seen as exploitative and wealthy.

As a single woman with a small pension and simple needs, I am comfortably off, but by no

means rich. However, to the couple next door – our flats so close we could almost have been living in the same one – I was a godsend: old, alone and idiotic –therefore exploitable.

Being newly “liberated” and having abandoned Ubuntu – the inevitable consequence of independence – South Africa is still a place of rich pickings for Zimbabweans whose people have long been picked dry; their independence happened in 1980. In South Africa we have not been independent long enough for that, but we will get there.

Though I am a loner, and one who luxuriates in her aloneness, I am not unapproachable. When I am out shopping, I greet and smile at all and sundry; and am delighted when a cold, stern looking face suddenly lights up with a smile. When I used to go for morning walks – I have had to stop recently, the beginnings of arthritis in my right leg – I would greet all the strangers I passed on the street and all the neighbours I encountered in this housing complex in which I live.

My friendliness, as well as my obvious idiocy as an old person, made me the perfect prey to my neighbours, whose front door is cheek by jowl with mine. Having sized me up as a representative of capitalist wealth, they put their plan into operation.

Soon there were sounds on my security gate – you cannot easily knock on the door as it is set a little beyond knocking distance from the gate; the sounds – always in the evenings when few people were about. When I opened my door, I would find Nyarai, from next door, a splendid housekeeper, who kept her flat spic and span, and looked down on untidy me. She was always there to borrow money on behalf of her husband. She always promised to pay back within a few days and always did.

But this borrowing bothered me. I kept hearing the voice of Shakespeare's Polonius: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" and what bothered me most were his words, "borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry." I realized that I was actually not doing them a favour; they would

never learn to manage their resources. I decided to stop lending them money. At the same time, my neighbours, who had really been putting me to the test, had come to the conclusion that I was ripe for the plucking.

When Nyarai came to my door one evening in late November, I told her I had no money to lend her. But she insisted that I hear her out. She then explained to me that her Uncle had hidden 15,000 U.S. dollars in a package that he had sent to her. The customs authorities had found and impounded the cash and had imposed a fine of ten thousand rands before they would release it. She wanted R10, 000 (about 800 dollars) from me which she promised to pay back on the same day. Her husband would go immediately to the airport, pay the fine and collect the package. As she always paid back on time I believed her – I had been conditioned you see.

She was my neighbour, but I did not even know her name so I asked her to write it down. Later I would discover that it was a false name.

The next morning, I took her to the bank and withdrew the money from my private medical funds – I can no longer afford Medical Aid Insurance, so I have ‘kick the bucket’ savings. She did not pay back the same day as promised. Over the next few days she kept making excuses. And soon after, she disappeared from the complex never to return. I realized I had lived up to my image as an idiotic old fool.

In the New Year, I learned that the couple had pulled the same scam on their friends, and compatriots, Parity and Patrick Mukari, who live in Flat 41 below. The terraces in this complex are made up of sets of four flats; two above and two below. Knowing they could not demand the same amount from Parity and Patrick, Michael and Nyarai had inveigled them of R2500. I felt very sorry when I heard about it from Reckson, the Security Guard, from whom I was making inquiries about the swindlers.

Soon after, when Parity learned that I too had been robbed by Nyarai and Michael, she came to see me. She and her husband, Patrick, had

been to the police, who had asked them to get a letter of demand from the Small Claims Court. The letter of demand, which the police would deliver to the husband, would require repayment within fourteen days of receipt. Non-compliance would lead to arrest.

Michael had not absconded; probably in the belief that no action would be taken and if there were, he would simply dissociate himself from Nyarai, assume innocence and not accept responsibility for the crime. Employed as an accountant in Sandton, he probably did not think it feasible to abandon a good job and felt safe in dissociating himself from his wife.

But Patrick and Parity wanted justice. As they felt they needed a stronger case in order to get instant action, they wanted my co-operation. Parity came to see me and asked me go with them to the Small Claims Court. I had had no intention of prosecuting Michael as I felt I had been a fool, and as the money was from my savings, it did not affect my present circumstances. But I felt sorry for Parity and

Patrick and agreed to go with them the next day; I was going simply to corroborate their story.

When we drove into Pretoria, I could not get my bearings as all the names of the streets have been changed. I had never had problems driving around Pretoria in the old days but with all the name changes, inadequate street signs and no new maps, I was completely lost.

Patrick was not and took us to a court, but it was the wrong court. The policewoman there gave us directions to another court, about four blocks away. So we left the car where it was, parking is a problem in the Pretoria CBD, and decided to walk.

We walked and walked and walked and could not find the court to which she had directed us. We trudged down Bosman Street for at least half an hour before admitting we were on a wild goose chase. Then Patrick asked for directions from policemen that we encountered and we were sent to a court which simply gave

us the address of another court that would send us back the way we had come.

Having lost confidence in the directions given by policemen, I decided to ask a shopkeeper who was standing outside his shop. He did not know and pointed to a taxi driver. Patrick spoke to the taxi driver who told us that the Small Claims Court was in the Magistrate's Court that was just behind the first court to which we had gone when we had arrived.

We found the Magistrate's Court, went up to the Small Claims Office, and got our documents. I had had no intention of making a claim against Michael and Nyarai, but then decided I wanted to stop them from preying on people, so I took the document of demand. That had taken all of ten minutes. We had spent more than an hour just searching for the place.

We went back to Lyttelton, to the Police Station to present our documents. As the policewoman there regarded my claim of ten thousand to be beyond the limit of a small

claim, we had to wait while another Police Officer, Officer Gumbe, examined our documents. He was shocked to see my claim for ten thousand. Looking at me and, as is customary, seeing an old, idiotic woman, was outraged that this scam had been pulled on someone so old, stupid and helpless. Parity admitted to me that they wanted me with them so that the police would see this as a serious matter because I was old and had been swindled of a large sum. And my claim so impressed Officer Gumbe that he set out immediately for the complex in which we live.

But Michael, who is an accountant, was at work somewhere in Sandton, Johannesburg. Officer Gumbe went back to the station but returned after five that evening. He ordered Michael to come to the police station. Patrick also went with them.

After about an hour, he came back to tell me what had happened there. Michael had denied collusion in the fraud, had insisted that Nyarai was not his wife, just his partner; so this matter

did not concern him. Gumbe had told him that as they lived together, he had equal responsibility. Michael did not sign the documents of demand – for which we had trudged up and down Bosman Street. Signing would have been admission of guilt and acceptance of responsibility for reimbursement.

To divert responsibility from himself and avoid possible arrest, Michael had informed Officer Gumbe that Nyarai was in Germiston and had given him her phone number. She had not gone back to Zimbabwe; she had given us that impression to mislead us.

So Patrick, Parity and I would have to go back to the Small Claims Court – at least we now knew where it was – to fetch warrants of arrest. Unbelievable! Were we now a part of the police force?

As the next day, Wednesday, was a holiday, Sharpeville Day, we had to wait till the day after to go for the warrants.

On Thursday, Patrick and I went into Pretoria,

to the Magistrate's building and waited outside the Small Claims Office. When it was eventually our turn to go in, we were told that we simply had to wait the fifteen days of the demand and then report to the police who would then make the arrest.

We needed affidavits of our claim, not arrest warrants, which we were to get from the police station. And we would have to pay R300 each. When we got to Lyttelton, the police officer there told us, that the documents we had were affidavits. But, as we found out later they were not.

At the time, we had assumed that the Small Claims Official's reference to the police station had meant the Lyttelton Police Station; later we would discover it was a reference to the Sheriff's Office which supplied affidavits. We would learn that the hard way.

So Patrick and I had spent the whole morning chasing our tails – thanks to police administrative 'efficiency' and 'courtesy'.

After fifteen days when we report, we will probably be sent on more wild goose chases. I had had no intention of taking this matter to the police; now that I had, I found it to be simply a venture into K's Castle, as I had suspected it would be.

Though I had had no interest in prosecuting anyone, during all of this I had become caught up in the logic of retribution. Justice may wear a blindfold and carry a sword but what can a blind woman do. I was selling my soul for thirty pieces of silver. I am just a silly old woman after all. I had thought I was now a sanyasini seeking the meaning of human existence; instead I found myself still grubbing in the stink hole of human greed.

After fifteen days, Patrick and I went to report that Michael had ignored our claims for the money his wife had taken from us. I asked Patrick to go first to the Lyttelton Police Station to make sure that that was not where we were supposed to report. There was a queue that stretched out of the entrance and down the

flight of steps outside. I went up, entered through the second entrance, and saw the reason for the long queue; there was only one policewoman dealing with all the people waiting there. I went to the other side of the desk where another policewoman was going through papers. She saw me and ignored me. I eventually gained her attention and asked whether we had to present our documents there or at the Small Claims Court Office. Patrick was right we had to go to the Small Claims Court Office. So we got back in the car and drove into Pretoria.

At the Small Claims Court Office we had to wait a while as there was a small queue. Eventually we got in and the Officer looking at our documents shook her head. We had not filled out the reasons for our claims. Nowhere on the documents was it indicated that we present the reasons for our claims. So Patrick and I had to go out, fill in the reasons and wait again. When we were called in again, the official completed the forms and handed them

to us asking us to present them to the Sheriff's Office. We would have to appear in court on May 7 when the matter would be heard.

When we asked where the Sheriff's Office was, we were told it was in Centurion where we live. The Officer asked Patrick to photograph the address of the Sheriffs' Office. So we had the information on his cell, but it was not clear as it had been hand-written.

We drove back to Centurion, went to the Police on Napier Street to ask for directions and were told we had to go down Lenchen Avenue to Centurion Mall.

When we got close to the mall, Patrick called one of the numbers that he had been given by the official at the Small Claims Court and was told we had to go to Hennops Park. We did not know where that was, but Patrick thought it could be on the Old Johannesburg Road. We drove along the Old Johannesburg Road but could not see any offices or police stations.

I remembered a couple of years before, when I

was the victim of a smash and grab just before Christmas, I had to come to a police station on this road. The window on the passenger side of my car had been smashed and my handbag snatched from the front seat on which it was lying. I had reported the matter to the Lyttelton Police who said the matter was not within their jurisdiction, even though it had happened on Lenchen Road. They sent me off to a police station on the Old Johannesburg Road, where the officials also claimed that the matter was not within their jurisdiction. So the matter was never reported. I thought that perhaps we would find the Sheriff's Office at that police station. So we drove along the Old Johannesburg Road, but could not find a police station.

When we saw that we were going out of Centurion and into the suburb of Valhalla, we turned back and stopped at a Shell Station where a service station attendant gave us directions to the police station. It was in Valhalla; so we drove back.

We found the Police Station. It was the one I

remembered; and a place, as all police stations are in my experience, where police regard you as an intruder. A man was walking out. Thinking he was a police official, I asked him if we would find the Sheriffs' office there. He informed us that he was a stranger here, but he took out his cell phone which has access to maps and began to search for the Blackwood Road address that Patrick had on his cell. His prompt attention to our query, made me realize, he could not possibly be a police official. He found the Sheriffs' Office, gave Patrick directions from his map and we were on our way.

We drove to Blackwood Road but still could not find The Sheriffs' Office. We asked a couple of vagrants sitting on a pavement; they had no idea. We checked the address on Patrick's cell phone again, saw that it was 209 Blackwood, so we drove around looking for number 209. We stopped again where a woman and some men were working on a gate or fence. They had no idea of a Sheriffs' Office on this

road. They sent us to some official looking guards nearby who pointed down the road.

We still could not find the number. So we drove back and this time a man came out through the gate of the fence. He and Patrick began to converse in Shona. Patrick had recognized his accent and realized that this man was also a Zimbabwean; in fact, he was from the same town as Patrick. Patrick asked him to go with us and he took us to number 229 Blackwood. We had misread the number because it had been partially erased and we had seen 229 as 209. Here was a Zimbabwean who knew this place better than South Africans.

At 229 we were told we had to come back as the office was closed for lunch. Patrick took his compatriot back to his workplace and we came back and sat outside the Sheriffs' Office for half an hour during their lunch break. And I needed the loo.

At 1:30, we went in through the fence. The Office was not open, so I asked where the toilet

was. When I came back, Patrick told me that though this was the address that he had snapped with his cellphone camera, it was still not the right office. The people in this office had given him another address in Centurion, right near McCarthy Toyota, where he is employed as a mechanic.

So we drove to the new address. We had been informed it was on the corner of Hilda and Theuns Streets. But the buildings there did not indicate any connection with Police or Sherriff. We drove down Hilda – nothing. We came back and Patrick drove into the parking lot of a place on the corner of Hilda and Theuns Streets and we were told to go all the way down Theuns. At last we came to a place with a sign over the door – Sheriff's Office.

We went in and were told we had to pay R250 each for their service. I had brought my bank card but they required cash. Patrick kindly lent me the money.

They took our papers and told us we had to

collect them for the court case on 7 May. Fortunately, Patrick works right near this office so that would not be a great hardship.

We had driven around for four hours trying to deliver papers from one office to another. Patrick shook his head. “It’s not really worth it. In addition to the loss of money through the fraud, with all the effort and additional payment to the Sheriffs’ Office, it is not worth it.”

Then a week later, Parity came to see me. She and Patrick had acquired Michael Chawaka’s phone number. We had not had that number when we went to the Sheriff’s Office and as they required it, Parity and I drove to the Sheriffs’ Office and gave it to them.

Now we wait to see whether anything will come of all our efforts.

That evening, I watched again one of my favourite films, *Shawshank Redemption*, and it confirmed what I had learned from it and other films – *Les Miserables*, for example – that prison is not a place of rehabilitation.

Anyone going to prison is treated like an animal and is only confirmed in his view of life as a dog-eat-dog world.

So I see myself pursuing a course which I do not really endorse. The Bishop in *Les Misérables* shows us that punishing crime is not a deterrent. Being kind and forgiving, he reformed Jean Valjean. However, being kind and forgiving himself, did not work for Valjean. When he forgave the police official, Javert for his cruel persecution, Javert could not understand and in despair killed himself. Inspector Javert was a creature of the system; he never broke a rule so he could not understand Valjean's actions which went against rules.

As human beings we are not perfect and our actions are karmic. As I understand it, karma means that as we are not able to predict the outcome of our actions with absolute certainty, we can never be absolutely certain of the consequences of our actions. The law, moral as well as official, provides only a framework

within which we, for the most part, can operate without causing harm; but our actions are only expedient, karmic, as we cannot foresee every eventuality. So our moral and official laws cannot always solve our problems. It is necessary, therefore, that we do not, like Javert, take rules as absolute and condemn human behaviour without taking into consideration mediating circumstances.

While we were waiting to see what would happen as a result of our recourse to the law, the owner of Parity and Patrick's flat, also the owner of Michael's flat, gave notice that he was selling these properties. That worked out perfectly for Michael, who was in the process of making his escape from the complex to avoid the legal repercussions of his crime. At the end of the month he moved out while we were still waiting to hear whether the Sheriff's Office had served him with the demand for repayment.

The date on which we were asked to appear in court was still a week away.

Police action is really a kind of fantasy. It only becomes a reality when you do not bring your car to an absolute stop at a stop sign.

Two days before our court appointment, I decided that it was necessary to find out from the Sheriff's Office whether we still had to appear in court since Michael, having absconded, would not be there.

Patrick had assumed that we were no longer obligated to appear. I suspected that we would have to appear; we had had the temerity to invoke justice – we had to pay – serve time in K's Castle. If we did not show up, we would be regarded as irresponsible.

So on the morning of 7 May, I went to the Sheriff's Office and was told that we still had to appear in court where it would be decided what further action would be taken. Apparently Officers from the Sheriff's Office had come three times to serve Michael with a summons and had not found him.

Patrick had taken photos of Michael's car and car licence for me to present to the Sheriff's Office, but the official there said they would not be able to follow up on Michael. As he could no longer be found, we would have to employ tracers to find him. K's Castle rules.

I did not think it was necessary for us to be throwing away more money and I was quite sure Patrick would agree.

On the afternoon of 7 May, Patrick drove us into Pretoria. We went to the Magistrate's Court, only to be told that we had to wait in the entrance foyer of the building as the Small Claims Court did not open until 5 p.m. But Patrick insisted on going up to the Small Claims Office, so they let us in and we went upstairs to the second floor. At the Office there was a small queue so we sat down to wait. Then an official came to inquire from all of us waiting there what we needed. When he came to us, he said there was no point in waiting as they would not be able to do anything for us. We would have to find out where Chawaka was

and provide an address so he could be apprehended.

So Patrick had been right after all; it had not been necessary for us to come to court as we could not produce Chawaka. But now we knew for certain that nothing would be done about our claims. Patrick had imagined that the system would go after Chawaka. He finally had to accept that we had been on a wild goose chase. For his sake, I was very sorry to have been justified in my lack of confidence in law enforcement. I had expected nothing, but he and Parity had believed they would recoup their money.

Earlier when I had been making enquiries about whether the Sheriffs' Office had sent officers to serve papers on Chawaka, the caretaker of our complex had joked, "This is not about Jacob Zuma. " Later I discovered that this caretaker had not allowed the guards to open the gate when the men from the Sheriff's Office had arrived to serve Chawaka with the summons. Whether the caretaker was in cahoots with

Chawaka or was simply pushing his weight around, I didn't know.

I decided to inform the management of the complex and the Executive of the Body Corporate as I was concerned about his reliability. I sent them the following letter and a copy of the report from the Sheriff's Office that indicated they had not been able to deliver the summons.

Jotam Management and Body
Corporate Chairman and Executive
Committee of 238 Basden Complex

10 May 2018

Dear Sirs and Madams

As a resident of 238 Basden Complex, I wish to bring to your notice a matter of concern.

In November 2017, Parity and Patrick Mukari of Flat 41 and I (Flat 44) were swindled of large sums of money by Mr and Mrs

Michael Chawaka, residents at the time of Flat 43.

The matter was reported to the police and in April this year, when the officials from the Sheriff's Office attempted to serve summons on Mr Michael Chawaka, they were not allowed into the complex. As the caretaker of the complex is the only one aware of the three attempts to serve summons, it is clear that he was the one who interacted with the Sheriff's personnel. Mr and Mrs Mukari and I were never informed of the attempts to serve summons.

I was not aware that there was a caretaker living in the complex. In making assumptions about the whereabouts of Mr Chawaka and not allowing the Sheriff's Officers to proceed to Mr Chawaka's flat, the caretaker has made it impossible for Mr and Mrs Mukari and me to receive justice. And now Mr and Mrs Chawaka have absconded.

I hope that the caretaker's intervention was only the result of misuse of authority and not of collusion. The security gate of the complex is meant to keep out criminals. If there are criminals living in the complex, the security gate should not be used to secure immunity from prosecution.

Please inform your caretaker that he should respect officers of the law. I enclose a copy of the Sheriff's Report.

Thank you.

I expect the letter will be ignored. It was a last effort – after which no more venturing into K's Castle.

My only intention in writing it was simply to try to prevent the same thing happening to someone else. But I had discovered some time ago that the Body Corporate officials were really a kind of internal police force under the government of

the managing agents and their main concern is policing garbage disposal. I was once confronted by one of them when I went to put out my garbage bag, in accordance with their stipulation, at the foot of the staircase. Now we have a new rule; garbage to be placed in bins at the entrance gate. This is actually a reversion to the original rule.

I wait breathless with excitement for the next thrilling adventure with my garbage bag.

Democracy
freedom
primary illusion
amandla awethu
demos cratos
power to the people –
voting delusion
in reality
public authorization
of diversified
autocracy
all government
all administration
many-headed monsters
of corruption;
apartheid
open
unendorsed
exploitation;
democracy
covert
enfranchised
exploitation

CHANGE?

I am glad I was born in South Africa, in a despised minority community; it led me to where I am now – disabused of romantic notions of existence.

As I was growing up, I was exposed to all forms of hatred. Being of a minority, therefore less feared by government, and not as strictly controlled as the majority, I could feel resentment and hatred from above, below and alongside from the race that was a parallel minority group. Living in such circumstances one could not take one's existence for granted. One was always conscious of difference; of being in the midst of inimical otherness. As a child I grew up wary of otherness. That was in Pretoria where people of Indian descent were a small, insular group.

When I was twelve, we relocated to Durban where there is a large community of people of Indian descent.

And living in the city centre, we were more

frequently exposed, in formal situations, to people of all races. At school in Pretoria, I had had white teachers. Though they had been kind and friendly, they conformed to the system and their friendship could only be a form of condescension. In Durban, with a Jewish principal and “Indian” teachers, who, with no choice but to comply with the system, nevertheless repudiated racism and segregation, I was being made aware that systems were not immutable.

This was powerfully confirmed by my uncles, my father’s brothers. In Pretoria, we had lived to some extent as aliens. My father’s family was from Durban, and my mother’s family from Pietermaritzburg, so we had had no relatives in the Asiatic Bazaar in Pretoria. Now in Durban, we had uncles and aunts and cousins.

Uncle MD Naidoo, my father’s brother, a young man in his twenties, was a Communist and member of the Natal Indian Congress. From him I learned about Darwin and

evolution. Though I did not really understand, I could connect with his atheism as I had been alienated by the religious rituals to which I had been exposed in the Asiatic Bazaar.

Uncle MD was passionately engaged in revolutionary activities. He and Dr G.M. Naicker had led the first batch of Indians in the Passive Resistance Campaign of 1946 and had spent six months in prison. When we arrived in Durban in 1948, he was vigorously working in the movement to unite all races against segregation which had just been made official in the policy of apartheid. My parents, middle-aged, intimidated by the system, were equally intimidated by young MD's courage and determination to oppose racist tyranny

As MD became more and more involved in subversive revolutionary activities, his visits to our home became less frequent. But his younger brother, MJ, kept us informed of the progress of the revolutionary movement. Following in his brother's footsteps, he too was deeply involved in subversive activities to

overthrow the government.

My uncles' repudiation of the system awakened in me the need to look beneath the routines imposed by racial domination and I began to see the conventions, customs and rituals of life in the "Indian" community as forms of escape from the tyranny of apartheid. I had always repudiated them, but now I understood why there was this clinging to tradition.

As a young adult, circumstances dictated that I become involved in the most basic struggle – survival – and all my efforts were concentrated on obtaining and providing the bare necessities of life. I worked two jobs and studied to improve my qualifications so that I could earn more.

As our material conditions improved, my sister, Seetha, and I became involved in theatre work with Ronnie Govender, who was openly opposed to apartheid. He wrote plays which depicted the plight of Indian South Africans in a society of discrimination. He established a

small theatre group with actors who had attended workshops conducted by Krishna Shah in 1963, the year after he had brought his off-Broadway production of Tagore's *King of the Dark Chamber* to South Africa.

I worked in Ronnie's little theatre group, known as the Shah Theatre Academy (STA), as a director and put on plays by Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller and Molière. Then members of the group started writing one-act plays that examined life in the "Indian" community.

Soon after, as a result of my productions of American plays, I was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and went to study Theatre and Drama at Indiana University (IU)

I lived in the USA for eleven years. After I graduated from IU, I worked with the Black Artists' Group (BAG) in St Louis. I used what I had learned at IU about Commedia dell' Arte and created scenarios that were the bases of improvised performances. These little

improvised plays reflected the injustice of being black in America.

When I came back to South Africa in 1976, just after the Soweto Uprising, the revolutionary movement had grown and there were many playwrights writing about racist inequality. I joined in and wrote a few anti-apartheid plays.

When the fight against constitutional discrimination was eventually over in 1994, I believed we had arrived at the heavenly gates of democracy. As an atheist, what idiocy to believe in heaven!

Before 1994, I had taken for granted that revolutions were about liberty, equality, fraternity. Though I had read *A Tale of Two Cities*, had seen the movie, was moved by Sydney Carton's words, "It is a far, far better thing that I do," and saw the guillotine as a symbol of mindless human depravity – I still had a romantic view of revolution. Now I have, I hope, lost all of my illusions.

After 1994, even though ours was a fairly bloodless changeover, I have what I consider to be a realistic understanding of revolution. I no longer see it in romantic terms. I see it as it is; stripped of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Revolution is simply the guillotine; the beheading of one repressive system and its replacement with another – merely power changing hands. And we have moved from one set of governors who openly affirmed their ability to garner all the benefits that derive from power to another set of governors who garner all the benefits behind closed doors.

Revolution is about power – *not* liberty, equality, fraternity. And it does not matter what governments call themselves – autocratic, democratic, socialist, communist – all are oligarchies and only the first operates without the mask of benevolence. Lord Acton told us a long time ago, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. The vote is simply the means of giving absolute power to governments.

And government is absolute power; elected and legitimated by our votes.

Enfranchisement

*the vote
does not denote
democracy
only oligarchy
empowerment
of the minority
by the majority
to live in luxury
the vote
simply denotes
the essence
of capitalism*

NEW ACQUAINTANCE – A FELLOW WRITER

I live in a complex of terraces of flats on two levels, ground and first floor. My flat is on the first floor. The flats are in sets of four. The first floor pairs have doors right next to each other on a tiny common landing with a little brick stairway of a dozen steps leading up to it. The complex was probably built before 1994 and originally occupied by white tenants. Many of the white occupants have moved out and the complex is now occupied mostly by African tenants with a sprinkling of White, Coloured and “Indian” tenants – a more up to date representation of our demography. We are all generally people of the lower middle income group.

I moved in here about three years ago, some months before I turned eighty, when my pension had become insufficient for proper maintenance of the house in which I was living. Now in 2018, with the cost of living rising

steadily and the price of utilities becoming somewhat exorbitant, more and more people are beginning to move out of this complex. I hope that I will not be forced to move again.

A couple who lived on the ground floor in the terrace opposite the one in which I live, moved out about a month ago and a new family is now settled in.

This morning, Vusi, one of the Security Guards of the complex, came to tell me that there was someone at the gate for me. He had not let him in as he was not allowed to let in friends who came unexpectedly. With liberty, equality and fraternity has come greater need for security all over the land. No one is safe anywhere, not even in one's own home as I had discovered after being scammed by the couple next door. With thieves for neighbours, keeping out friends who call unexpectedly, is quite ironic.

I went to the gate and found Mike Stainbank waiting there. Mike was the man who had created the concept, "The Apartheid Museum"

and he has spent the last two decades trying to get recognition from the law of the fraud committed when the concept was stolen from him.

I let Mike in and walked back to the flat while he drove in and parked. As I got to the stairs, I found two little girls standing at the bottom. I greeted them and went up. Mike stopped to chat with them and told them that I had books for them to read.

After he came in and while we were chatting, there was a knock on the door. When I opened, I found the two little girls outside. They wanted to know what books I had for them. I went to fetch a couple of copies of a book, *Rhulani's Dilemma* that I had co-authored and published about five years before.

It dealt with the problem of tribal circumcision of teenage boys. I gave each of the girls a copy of it – I did not have anything really suitable for them.

Then Mike and I settled down to discuss the

problem of the abuse of the elderly; someone he knew was being abused by her adult children. We were interrupted by another knock on the door. One of the little girls, Naledi, came to tell us she had finished reading *Rhulani's Dilemma*. As I had no other children's book, I gave her a copy of a book of my plays that I had published in 2008 and I lent her the only copy I had of *Emerging Heroes*, a book of children's stories involving soccer, that I had written for the Soccer World Cup which took place in South Africa in 2010.

It was a book Mike had published when he was CEO of the Es'kia Institute². Mike asked me to sign and date the books. Then he told the girls that my play, *Flight from the Mahabharath*, had been staged at Appalachian University in the USA in 2017.

When Mike left I went to open the complex gate for him, and when I returned, found Naledi on the stairs, paging through the book of plays.

² Founded by Mike Stainbank to celebrate the writings and work of Es'kia Mphahlele

I invited her in and she told me about her interest in writing. She asked me for an explanation of the word “discrimination” that she had found in one of the plays. Naledi is in Grade 3. We chatted about writing and reading and she was curious about my living alone. I could see she found that odd and probably regarded my activities of writing, reading, watching DVDs, and working on jigsaw puzzles desultory and meaningless. Then she heard her mother calling and left.

So after three years in this complex, I now had a friend; *and* a fellow writer, about eight years old. That I am an octogenarian doesn’t put her off as it does adults. She sees me as a normally functioning human being, and more – a writer. How wonderful to be a child whose view is not corrupted by conventional ideas of someone my age and can see a human.

Three weeks later, I have not had another visit from Naledi. I am not sure why. Perhaps she was told not to visit me. It made me think back to the time I had lived in Giyani and was

teaching at Giyani College of Education. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, it freed young people, including students at the college, from all the pent up resentment of years of living under discrimination and they went on a rampage in the villages, burning the homes of single women living alone and killing them. Single women were regarded as evil witches, as they did not conform to the social norms of marriage and family. In some irrational way, they symbolized the oppression under which people had lived. As an old, single woman, living alone, I expect I elicit something of that kind of superstitious fear.

It is retribution.

When I was a child living in the Asiatic Bazaar, there was a tiny little white-haired woman living next door to us. She tied her sari in the way old Tamil women did, with the end tucked in at the back and hanging down like a tail. Though she lived with a family, she seemed always to be alone. She spoke Tamil and would stand at her door singing Tamil

songs. All the children were afraid of her. We regarded her as a witch with supernatural powers but that did not stop us from taunting her. We would bang on her door, run away and watch from a safe distance. She would come out, stand on the veranda, and curse us in Tamil.

And that was our fun. How crude we were!

White Hair

*living in conformity
conditioned by society
looking at a white head
people see
the walking dead
a person
in a coffin
they cannot see
a sanyasini
with a mind free
still seeking
life's meaning*

Vultures

*ringed round
by enterprising
birds of capitalism
sharp beaks
picking out
ID numbers
in transactions
sharp eyes
seeing my age
my cell phone squawks
with competing offers
of funeral directors
to bury me.*

and *SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION*

When I was coming back from the bank this morning, I was pulled off the street by a traffic cop. As I was wearing a hat, I pulled it off to reveal my white hair, and it had the usual effect of reducing me to an old, incompetent fool. So the policeman, on whom it had the desired effect, simply warned me about not making a complete stop at a stop sign, declaring that I was lucky that he was lenient; others would not have been; they would have fined me. But I knew it was the hair that had saved me.

Though I am eighty-two, my reflexes are still sharp. When I come to a four-way stop, it takes only a second to determine whether the way is clear to proceed. Apparently, I am breaking the law because I don't shift to neutral and bring the car to a complete stop when there is no cross traffic.

To my mind, when the road is clear and you bring the car to a complete stop you are performing obeisance to a stop sign – you know

the octagonal red shape with the word STOP on it. Being an atheist, I am not a worshipper of symbols of any kind. If there are other cars at a four-way stop, I wait and take my turn to cross. If there are none, I slow down, check and move. Apparently, rolling stops are illegal.

And cops being completely programmed are unable to use their initiative. To them a stop sign means stop because the sign says so; to me a stop sign means be aware of other vehicles and stop if there is cross traffic. Of course, living in a capitalist society, the main reason for these checks in this quiet neighbourhood, is to make money.

Having quick reflexes and using your intelligence is quite non-conformist. As a loner with no connection to anyone else, I am able to assert my individuality as completely as is possible without harming anyone. I know I elicit much disapproval because I do not live or behave in the way that others do; but as an independent, unconnected individual, I enjoy and value my freedom. And I am delighted by

disapproval; it confirms my freedom from mindless conformity.

I have this theory about conformity; like all things human it is expedient and, therefore, ambiguous.

On the one hand conformity requires observance of conventions and laws. Obedience and compliance ensure safety and promote communication. And people working or living together, set up routines that enhance cooperation and compatibility.

On the other hand, conformity limits freedom, imagination, individuality, initiative and creativity. Creative people are often regarded as odd or as threats as they break rules and introduce new ways of thinking about life and existence. In the old days, they often paid with their lives for their creativity.

In general, conformists find change threatening and need guarantees and evidence of safety. Fortunately, geniuses are people who believe absolutely in their visions and have the courage

to follow them up. When we finally come to recognize the benefits they offer us, we applaud them, accept what they have to offer, apply their improvements as new conventions and go back to the safety of conformity which is our way of reducing threats to our way of life.

Conformity is the means of combating fear of difference; deviations from the norm are often seen as threats to society. Minor deviations at the social level are dealt with through ridicule, punishment or training in acceptable social ways.

What we strive for with all our laws, conventions and rituals, is conformity; the ability to predict behavior is our way of combating fear. Difference is often seen as deviant and inimical. Cultural and racial differences, which reflect major deviations, lead to segregation. If that is not possible, differences are dealt with through assimilation, as happens with colonization and conversion. In tyrannical situations, racial and cultural differences lead to annihilation – obliteration of

difference – as in Nazism and other forms of fanaticism, mainly religious or political.

And we have devised means of rewarding all forms of conformity. We honour those who show a superlative understanding of and adherence to conventions. They are given awards, citations, trophies. We even place them on a hierarchical ladder of achievement. That begins at school with pupils being placed in a hierarchy according to examination results. So we have Top Tens in every field of endeavor. Top achievers are our heroes; they live up to our highest expectations and we do our best to emulate them.

And we celebrate heroes every day in literature and movies. Heroes in fiction demonstrate wonderful adherence to societal norms. They may seem to deviate from norms in their efforts to protect and deliver us but their deviance is expedient and adopted only to restore what is acceptable. Heroes are ingenious, honest, trustworthy, compassionate, courageous, determined and have a great capacity for love.

All this is summed up in their physical appearance; they are beautiful people. And as protectors of society and its values, they present inspiring examples for us to follow.

In Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, he shows us how humans created the varieties of domestic animals by nurturing those that could serve us in various ways. And as we favoured those that appealed to our aesthetic sensibilities, we created various pedigrees of animals. It occurs to me that we use similar procedures with regard to people and have thus created class and star systems in societies.

Occasionally, you get a book or film that challenges the conventional understanding of what is considered acceptable. Such a film is *Shawshank Redemption*. When I first saw it, some years ago, I immediately put it into my personal category of wonderful films that would sustain me for as long as I live.

Though I loved the film from the very first viewing, as I watch it again and again, I realize

that my first appraisal of it was superficial. I had seen it in the usual terms of acceptable norms – Andy Dufresne, the main character, good-looking, noble and brave. Watching it again recently, I see Andy Dufresne, not simply as the typical hero, but as one who supersedes such romanticism. He demonstrates a real understanding of the meaning of existence, or, at least what I accept as the meaning of existence. He rises above conformity and achieves what we all seek, total freedom.

The film is based on *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, a novella by Stephen King. Shawshank is a prison. How is redemption possible in a prison? That should be an easy connection to make as prisons are thought to be places of rehabilitation.

But the reality is that the conditions under which prisoners live make it impossible for them to function as normal human beings. Being places of punishment and distrust, prisons reinforce anti-social feelings and behaviour. Convicts do not leave prison

reformed but confirmed in their negative understanding of human society.

Victor Hugo, in *Les Miserables*, showed us a long time ago, that if you treat a person with compassion, he will begin to see a different way to be. Prisons, therefore, can never be places of rehabilitation. To change a person, you have to treat him humanely and give him the opportunity to be humane in return. Prisons only confirm violence and antipathy.

Andy Dufresne is innocent of the crime for which he is sent to prison and it is his experience *in prison* that turns him into a criminal. Stephen King based his novella, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, on a story by Leo Tolstoy, *God sees the Truth, but Waits*, in which an innocent man goes to prison where he turns to God and does good works in the prison. That is his redemption. For me, that is a fairy tale.

In his story, King also incarcerates an innocent man, but his man's experience in prison turns

him into a criminal, forces him to escape and fulfill his potential as a creative human being outside of an imprisoning environment. And that is his redemption.

What Frank Darabont, director of *Shawshank Redemption* says about Quentin Tarantino's movies applies equally to *Shawshank Redemption*.

I find Quentin's work very interesting, because he does dabble so well in the nihilistic world, but yet, there's a real streak of humanity in his work. It's not about the nihilism; it's about people in a sense operating as honorably as they can in a nihilistic world. [Darabont interview in Creative Screen-writing].

And in Darabont's film, Andy operates as honorably as he can in a nihilistic world.

In Shawshank Prison, Andy meets Red, the only man in prison who admits to his guilt. That sets him apart as a non-conformist; he is aware of how one is conditioned in one's environment. And Red survives in prison

because he knows ‘how to get things’. His is a quiet, inconspicuous manipulation of the system that allows him to survive but he remains a victim as he conforms, on the surface, to the system’s restrictive requirements.

But his undercover activities indicate that he has the potential to change. His three parole hearings demonstrate his movement from fear to courage. In the first two, he says what the parole board wants to hear and is not paroled. In the third, he tells the parole board to shove their parole up the usual place. This is a challenge to their power over him, and to reassert it, they award him parole. It is still a means of keeping him under their thumb. So he breaks parole, becomes an outlaw, embraces the offer of freedom that he has received from Andy, doffs the straight-jacket that society puts on people and runs free.

Being a more assertive individual, Andy is a threat to the system. So he is punished, confined and forced into submission. But he

never gives up; he will take control of his life.

In King's book, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, though Andy believes that as humans we can make wonderful lives for one another if we cooperate with caring – in prison, he is forced to become a criminal in order to survive. But with his understanding of what it means to be human, he never conforms to the stark distrust and self-hatred to which prisons condition people. And as he understands that life is what you make it, he begins to change conditions in the prison.

At first he uses his skill as accountant to help one of the guards, one who interprets authority as sanction to be callously cruel. Andy draws up papers to protect an inheritance that the guard has received.

Thereafter many of the prison staff come to Andy for help with their financial problems. So he is transferred to work in the prison library, where he is more easily accessible to the prison staff as a financial assistant.

But Andy also sees the library as opportunity and builds it into a place of recreation for prisoners. When he plays "*Canzonetta sull'aria*" from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, a song about a trick to be played on the Count by the Countess and her maid, he breaks the rule of playing music in the prison. All the prisoners are enthralled and moved by the beautiful singing.

It is somewhat ironic as the song is about deception. And Andy has been forced into fraudulent banking operations for the warden. Then with the arrival of a new prisoner who has information about the murder for which Andy has wrongly been imprisoned, he has a chance to prove his innocence. But his attempt to seek redress brings down the wrath of the warden on him; the warden has become completely dependent on Andy's ability to manipulate the financial system and make him rich. By subjecting Andy to cruel solitary confinement, the warden forces him to continue embezzling funds for him. And Andy, in going through the

most cruel torture, exemplifies what the director of the movie, Frank Darabont, believes:

If you're going to succeed, you've got to be like one of those punch-drunk fighters in the old Warner Bros. boxing pictures: too stupid to fall down, you just keep slugging and stay on your feet.[Oct. 1994, "Premiere" magazine]

The treatment Andy receives inculcates in him the same desire to punish and he uses his financial skill against the Warden. Fraud, retribution and punishment are lessons, learned in prison for use *in prison*.

Andy is not by nature, vindictive. He has been forced into criminal activities in order to survive in a situation that offers no positive means of survival; it is a situation of inimical power that corrupts and fills men with greed and cruelty. Andy, however, will not live life as an animal. He will be human.

And when he is ready, he literally flushes himself out of the system, escaping through the sewerage system so that he can be the man he

believes himself to be and achieve true freedom. He leaves the shit behind and fulfills his potential as a human being.

At the end of the film, he is shown standing on a beach, in shorts and open shirt, unconfined in any building, free and clean. He is working on a boat which signifies further adventures in a world free of artificial constraints.

The name *Rita Hayworth* was discarded from the film title; and the word *Redemption* in the title, is a cover over the reality of prison, just as the poster of Rita Hayworth is a cover over a hole leading into sewers.

There can be no redemption in prison. If you want to be humanely human, you have to escape its venomous influence.

Andy is free and Red joins him in freedom. The film ends with Andy embracing Red on the beach. And for me, theirs is a true friendship of love and respect. Andy and Red are soul mates. In prison, each found ways to assert his belief in himself under the most dehumanizing

conditions – Andy in more dramatic and striking ways than Red. But each understands that life is opportunity and one must take it in both hands. Their friendship is based on genuine esteem and respect.

Prisons do not inculcate respect and esteem. In South Africa, we lived in the prison of colonial segregation and discrimination for at least three centuries. And in that prison, we became racist criminals.

Justice

*Victor Hugo's
Inspector Javert
a police official
not a criminal
conditioned to obey
never broke a rule –
wearing the blindfold
and carrying the sword
of justice,
he finds instead
human compassion
and unable to fathom
action humane
falls into the Seine;
the police official
–not the criminal –
The Miserable
could not see:
justice
without compassion
is blind retribution*

ASU in the USA

In 2017, when I was only eighty-one, I went on an unexpected adventure. I had received a request from Appalachian State University (ASU) in Boone, North Carolina to stage my play *Flight from the Mahabharath*. This was the second request from an American university for this play. The first, in 2016, was from Megan English of Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pennsylvania. At ASU, it was Dr Paulette Marty who found the play. Megan English and Paulette Marty, two women; I was delighted – the play is about women liberating themselves. ASU followed up by inviting me to attend the performances of the play.

I had recently downsized from a three bedroom house to a single bedroom flat and had given up all thought of travel forever.

And then – this invitation! And an all-expenses paid trip! To see *my* play performed!

It was nothing short of miraculous.

I live inconspicuously in South Africa and suddenly to be recognized by an American University! I did not die and go straight to heaven right then and there; being an atheist, that was out of the question; and ASU being real, was much better than a symbolic heaven.

My good friend, Rogen Moodliyar, helped me with all the requirements for the trip such as Medical Insurance, which I do not have, for the period I would be away, and he organized transport to the airport.

I had given up all thought of ever riding in an airplane again. And airplanes have such meaning for me; I rejoice, every time I see one in the sky. They, more than anything, symbolize for me, the human spirit of ingenuity, creativity and progress. How glad I am that there are geniuses amongst us.

Faith
acceptance
celebration
of heaven on earth

*not heaven above –
belief in
human ingenuity
human ability
to create, build,
overcome gravity*

*Faith is
riding on air
in an airplane*

When I arrived in Atlanta, I got my bag from baggage claim and as I was making my way to the airport's internal railway system, a smiling member of the ground staff, asked me to leave my bag with him; he would get it on the flight to Charlotte International Airport in North Carolina. I remember this, which to most people would seem trivial.

To me, it was not. Being from a country in which the rabid racism of the past has infected all people with suspicion, fear and hatred of difference; we are still very race conscious. And people, interacting with someone like me, on impersonal matters such

as assisting passengers, do it with dour indifference or don't offer at all.

I got on the airport train and was whisked away to my terminal. While I waited for my flight, I stood at the window of the airport lounge, watching planes landing and taking off – rejoicing in the wonder of human achievement.

I don't remember anything at all of the flight to Charlotte. All I can see in my mind's eye is standing at the baggage claim area at Charlotte International waiting for my bag, and turning to look at people behind, seeing someone with a sign with my name on it.

I went up to her and discovered that she was Dr Jessica Wood from Appalachian State University; she was here to welcome me and take me to Boone, where the university is situated. She helped me get my bag and then we were off to Boone.

It was a beautiful drive with trees and hills all along the route. We stopped at a town on the way to visit a very comprehensive book store.

I had been looking for a book by Amos Oz for some time and I went searching through the store but did not find it. Instead, I bought a book of Sudoku puzzles. Dr Wood was somewhat disappointed; had thought, I suppose, I would pick up something really intellectual. But I love Sudoku and jigsaw puzzles. The difficult ones require more than simple logical thinking; they force you to look for hidden connections.

When we got to Boone, Dr Wood took me to the Country Inn and Suites, where I would be staying for the next few days in a huge suite about as big as my flat in Pretoria.

In the afternoon, Professor Kevin Warner, the Chairman of the Theatre and Dance Department at ASU, came to fetch me and asked if I would be willing to attend a meeting with students in the Multi-Cultural Student Centre.

Apparently, African-American students had raised objections to the composition of the cast of the play. For a moment I felt, I was back in

South Africa with students shouting, “Pass one, pass all!”

I went to the meeting but could not really figure out the objections of the students. What I got from the meeting did not make much sense to me. It seemed that the students were objecting to the fact that no Indians had been cast in the play. That made no sense; were there Indian students in the Theatre and Dance Department? This was America.

I found the objection odd. Here I was, a person who had long repudiated identification as “Indian”, and now to be thought of in terms of race, I felt I was back in Pretoria and not in Boone.

The fact is that racism infects those discriminated against more deeply than it does those who impose it. I explain that in the following extract from a biography that I undertook after I returned from my visit to ASU.

“As we tend to take our existence in a society for granted, we do not examine what it means to live in society, so we remain unaware of the extent to which our thinking and behavior is conditioned by the system in which we live. And if it is a system of racial discrimination and intolerance, we do not see that we all become racist, the oppressed, as well as the oppressors. Simply living in such a society and conforming to its dictates, we adapt to the values it imposes. If it is a system that disparages us, we learn to disparage ourselves, as well as others oppressed in it.” ...

“In a system like apartheid in which there are obvious oppressors and victims, the victims are unaware of the extent to which they imbibe the prejudice to which they are subjected, and though they are victims of prejudice, they also become practitioners of prejudice.”

“We are human beings and in the twenty-first century, with all the scientific and technological advances that are being made, people of all races and cultures are interacting more and

more closely and we are beginning to look at ourselves as *human* rather than racial beings.”³

I refuse to think of myself in terms of race; sticking to racial identification means looking backwards. I do not think of myself as “Indian” but as human. It is quite incidental that I wrote a critique of gender discrimination using the *Mahabharata* as a vehicle. It just happened that I was watching the Indian TV series of the epic at the time and was struck by the oppression of its women.

But back to ASU and the meeting with students still focused on race. Kevin Warner dealt with the situation in a very understanding way. He promised community wide advertisement of auditions for productions in the future. Then he invited all the students at the meeting to attend performances of the play free of charge. I don’t know if any of them did come to see the play.

I would soon become aware that the Department had been influenced in its choice of

³ Muthal Naidoo, Sooboo, Chapter 6

my play by the fact that there is a community of Indians living in Boone and this was a way of accommodating them. So the students who had spoken out against the play were quite wrong in assuming that the Department was indifferent to Indian people.

As a matter of fact, I could see that there had been close collaboration between the Indian community and the Theatre and Dance Department. The production had a clearly Indian setting; and the chanting, music, gestures, costumes, the mandala on the stage floor, had to have come about through consultation as well as research.

On my second day at ASU, I was taken on a tour of the Theatre and Dance Department. This was the day of the opening performance and I met the director, Professor Ray Miller, the cast of the play and the people who had worked with him in creating the production. I also visited the playwriting class and spoke to the students.

As I had spent the last nineteen years writing stories, poems and novellas, I was quite out of touch with playwriting, playwrights and theatre. And I had no idea of the theatre scene in South Africa. But everyone was kind and did not seem to mind my lack of knowledge.

Then, that night, the grand premiere! And I was blown away. In the opening scene that Dr Ray Miller had created, all the characters are shown enclosed in a cage of curtains, singing or chanting traditional mantras. Then one by one the women begin to break out of that restricting environment, until only one is left imprisoned in the cell of transparent curtains. I had never imagined such an opening scene and I was thrilled by what I saw. In addition, Dr Miller had solved a problem in the script that I had overlooked – that of a woman wearing a blindfold having to enter through the audience. He had dealt with it brilliantly. While the other women fled, the woman in the blindfold remained trapped on stage in the cell of curtains and that represented imprisonment in tradition.

The whole production lived up to that wonderful opening moment. It was such a huge affirmation, seeing people expressing their own magical creativity through a vehicle I had provided.

And the cast of young Americans, performed with energy and obvious enjoyment. Amanda Ufer, who, as Radha adopts the role of Duryodhana, the villainous cousin of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*, portrayed an Indian demon in just the way that I, as a child, had seen in Indian movies. In the context of my play, it was hilarious. And I watched with fascination, the fingers of T.J. Lewis, the young African-American who played Sikhandi, expertly pleating the sari that he had to wear. In the *Mahabharata*, Amba, a woman, is reborn as a man, Sikhandi. That had given me the licence to introduce two gay characters into the play and to have fun with the famous sari incident in the *Mahabharata* in which Dushashana tries to disrobe Draupadi. In my play, he disrobes Sikhandi, only to discover

he is a man. The other gay character in the play, is the great hero, Arjuna. Born and brought up in South Africa, I tend to be somewhat iconoclastic.

When I was writing the play in 1992, I saw my effort as repudiation of tradition, not only cultural but also theatrical. Influenced by Brecht's theory of Epic Theatre, which breaks down the separation of audience from actors, I was writing a play in which lighting and curtains would not separate players from spectators. And the action, with elements from different cultures, would not be exclusively Indian.

Dr Ray Miller's production included all kinds of Indian cultural elements that were perfectly in keeping with the fact that this was a play set in the context of the *Mahabharata*. With his introduction of traditional Indian elements, Dr Miller had turned the play into a superbly artistic production.

Plays have many creative minds working together to bring them to life. The author gives life to a play in words; the director brings the play to life in action. The play belongs to the author only in the book. On stage, it is the property of the director.

And I thought back to 1970, when I saw Peter Brook's circus theatre production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Brooklyn Theatre in New York. The production had the characters scrambling up and down tall ladders and Titania and Bottom suspended in mid-air on a swinging platform. At the end of the performance, I knew Shakespeare was next to me, giving it a standing ovation.

Though dressed in an Indian epic, *Flight from the Mahabharath*, really reflects the influence of Professor Mary Daly of Boston University, a feminist, whose ideas I tried to capture as I was writing the play in the early 1990s, after having read most of her books. So the play reflects a strong American influence, and is about gender

discrimination. Those fixated on race, such as some of the students I had met in the Student Centre, would actually miss that.

In about 1992, when I wrote the play, I sent it to the Speech and Drama Department of Natal University in Pietermaritzburg, but it was rejected on the grounds that the play lampooned a time-honoured and cherished masterpiece and they could not offend the “Indian community”. I don’t suppose any of them would do something like Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* either.

So in 2016, after almost a quarter of century, when Megan English got in touch and wanted to do the play, I was absolutely delighted.

And on 26 April, 2017, to be sitting in the Valborg Theatre at ASU, watching it being performed was enough to drive me completely insane with happiness. I loved the performance. Dr Miller had given it the full dramatic treatment with the addition of music,

song and dance and I was overwhelmed.

The next day, Thursday, I collapsed. Not as a result of the performance but being in this new exciting environment, I had completely forgotten about my medication. I have to take a course of pills every day. I am from a family of diabetics, who suffer from hypertension and other irritating conditions that need constant appeasement. So I spent the day in bed and missed all my appointments. I probably missed the show as well that night; I don't remember.

I was back in circulation the next day, Friday, and watched the play again. On Saturday, my nieces from Nashville arrived at Country Inn. The Department had generously provided them with accommodation and tickets to the show.

My nieces and I were invited to Kevin Warner's home for tea. Sunita and Ragini are the daughters of my late sister, Seetha. They had brought Sunita's daughter, Peri, with them. They are three stunningly beautiful women;

they made up for their drab old aunt and great-aunt.

I watched the play again that night but did not sit with my nieces. I did not wish to inhibit their reactions to the play – they had to be free to disapprove, not of the production, but of the play. I sat with Dr Ray Miller and his wife, Dr Jessica Wood. But I had not taken my medication – had still not remembered about it – and I was coughing. I think I spoilt the show for them. Fortunately, they still had one more performance the next day, when I would be safely out of the way, being driven to Nashville to spend a couple of days at Ragini's home before flying back to Pretoria.

Now, when I think about the use of authentic traditional Indian elements in Dr Miller's production, I am reminded of *Fiddler on the Roof*. There is Tevye singing "*Tradition*" while his daughters are busy breaking with it; the first takes a small jump away; her younger sister, a radical leap, and the youngest jumps right out of it.

Being at ASU, among people whose whole endeavour is to make beautiful works of art, made me think back to my days as a student in the late 1960s, at Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington, where I had had the phenomenal privilege of seeing the world's greatest artists in the IU main theatre; legends like Marcel Marceau, Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington, Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha; and theatre companies such as the Kathakali Dance Theatre and Kabuki Theatre.

And I saw practically every opera that the Music Department presented in its theatre.

In the IU Theatre Department itself, staffed by legendary scholars like Dr Oscar Brockett and Dr Hubert Heffner, there were also students who would become Hollywood stars – Kevin Kline, Steven Macht and Barbara Tarbuck. Dr Douglas Bristow, on the staff, was a wonderful director, who gave us exciting performances of many plays, including *Hotel Paradiso* and *Prometheus Bound*.

In addition, in the town of Bloomington, there was a cinema that showed the movie masterpieces of the time; films by Fellini, Kurosawa, and Satyajit Ray, among others.

Those little university towns in the USA are heavenly havens for those involved in the performing arts.

MY HAT

In general, non-Christian women of Indian descent in South Africa, do not wear hats. I am not sure when I started wearing a hat – probably when I lived in Bloomington, Indiana. Winter snows make a head covering very necessary. At any rate, I now wear knitted hats. In South Africa, where we see people in terms of race, that makes me African rather than “Indian.” Though one could do without a hat in South Africa, I have discovered good uses for mine.

As I have indicated, it changes my identity. I am no longer seen as “Indian” – which I am not, being *South African* of Indian descent. I am seen as African. And I use that for my convenience. When I drive around, my white hair not visible, my identity altered, I am no longer an obvious target for thieves. And car guards at shopping centres no longer expect tips from me, so they do not rush to guide me out of parking spaces with their frantic waving.

When I visit the stationers at our little shopping centre, where I was quite well known by the former owners, I now find myself being chased around the shop by a zealous white assistant who sees me as a thief. It's the hat; it turns me into a much more arresting and colourful personality.

I recently attended a book launch wearing my hat. I had debated with myself about wearing the hat as I would be attending an "Indian" function, but I had to cover my head. My barber had made me almost bald and I had a short white hedge standing up all over my scalp. I needed a hat.

I arrived early at the book launch as I am always punctual. It is the most consistent mechanistic factor of my life; I am a punctilious clock-watcher. It is a dreadful failing and I am ashamed of it, living as I do among those who believe in the relativity of time and are free.

At any rate, when I got to the launch, I found that my hat gave me wonderful privacy.

People saw the hat and turned away. I took an aisle seat in the back row and pulled out a book to read. I always have a book on me; one that I have written – egocentric, that’s me. And the hat gave me a whole row to myself, especially as it is not a posh chapeau, just a cheap denim hat with a floppy brim. It kept all decent “Indian” folk away from me.

Then the host of the occasion came to speak to me; it was an enquiry as to whether I was at the right place. When I assured him I was here for the book launch; he was at a loss, but let me be. It had probably shocked him to learn I had been invited by his cousin, my friend Rogen Moodliyar. A little later, he came back to me and introduced himself; after he had spoken to me, he had gone away trying to figure out who I could be. Then he remembered.

Apparently, we had met at the launch of the biography of Ramy Pillay – a book that Rogen had commissioned me to write. After confirming my identity, the host brought his wife and introduced me to her. I tried to be

intelligent about the book they were launching but I had no information and did not know that this was a book that had been written by their daughter, now deceased.

Later when proceedings began, I would see that this was a memorial service for the author as well as a book launch. Her parents had organized the publication and the launch.

When Rogen and his wife, Thamianthi, arrived, they made their way to where I was and sat with me. After that, the row filled up. I learned from Thamianthi that the young woman, whose book was being launched, had committed suicide. She had been in her final year at a medical school in China. She had two months to go before graduation and was a month from her twenty-fourth birthday, when she was found hanging in her room. She was a person of great promise, had matriculated with distinctions in every subject and the book that was being launched had been written when she was a teenager; the first chapter, when she was eleven years old.

A person of outstanding ability – possibly a genius – why had she killed herself? Why?

Thamianthi suggested that it may have been because she was being bullied by other South Africans at the medical school in China. I couldn't see that as sufficient reason for ending one's life. She had been in China six years and could speak Mandarin fluently so it could not have been a feeling of estrangement – or could it? It was a mystery; perhaps I would find a clue in her book.

When all the formalities were over, I went to look for the Ladies and when I came back, Rogen presented me with a copy of the book. It was very kind of him but I was embarrassed; Rogen is a very generous person and I am constantly in debt to him.

When I got home, I started reading the book; I was hoping it would give me a clue to the mystery of the author's suicide. I knew that was a bleak possibility; she was still a teenager when she completed the book.

In light of her suicide, I found her parents' explanation of the meaning of her name at the beginning of the book, something of a contradiction.

*Kaliasha's name is a unique one. It is derived from two Hindu words; Kali and Asha. Kali is the Hindu goddess who is a manifestation of the divine mother; the destroyer of evil forces, sins, ignorance and decay –she destroys in order to recreate. She is the power or energy with which Lord Shiva acts. Asha is a Sanskrit word that means hope or wish. Therefore, Kaliasha is the divine mother, power of hope and wish, who destroys ignorance, sins and evil forces.*⁴

The title of Kaliasha's book is *The Adventures of the Clubhouse Girls and other stories*. I found that odd; as far as I am aware, Clubhouses do not feature in South African "Indian" children's play activities. This is the

⁴ Kaliasha Pilay, *The Adventures of the Clubhouse Girls and Other Stories*, Reach Publishers, 2018, p.7

opening sentence of the first story: “Emma opened a clubhouse with her two friends, Whitney and Courtney.” The character, Courtney, as I understood it, was the persona adopted by the writer. The story is set in the US, in what I presume is an understanding gained from TV of life in America. I found this flight from reality strange. But I am an old woman, living alone; I no longer have any idea of children’s experiences.

I began reading but could not relate to what I was reading. I could only see, in what was being described, an escape from reality. This was a child of Indian descent, presenting herself as white. I had seen that kind of self-denial in the days of apartheid; I was shocked to find such a clear manifestation of it now in 2018, in this book.

It made me wonder whether I was the one who had lost touch with reality. Was I encountering a new norm? In the old days, terms such as “play-white” were common; they applied to those who adopted the ways of the dominant

race and repudiated their own ways.

But we were all “play-whites” as we had all adopted the norms and values of the dominant group; so the term really applied to those who adopted attitudes of superiority, in imitation of white people, and looked down on the rest of us. They spurned their origins in order to assert their difference from us as a declaration of their superiority. It was a means of survival in a racist society.

I was struggling to make sense of this phenomenon in a *post-apartheid* society. I am aware that we are all still very race-conscious in South Africa. Ordinary white people still treat black people as inferior and the various black groups still adopt inimical attitudes towards one another. I had assumed that this young writer had attended a formerly all-white private school, and had naively expected her to have lost the feelings of inferiority that are inculcated through segregation. But here she was, fantasizing, not only about being white, but also American. In her fantasy life, she had

cut herself off completely from South Africa.

When I discovered, on the back cover of the book, an excerpt from the only story set in a local milieu, I turned to it as I was looking for understanding.

The story is set in the white community of Vryburg, in the North-West Province of South Africa where, again I assumed, the author had never lived. The narrator of this story is a teenage white girl, Kaylin, the daughter of a racist Afrikaner father and a liberal English mother. When a Coloured boy is admitted to her school, Kaylin becomes a lone fighter against the racism of her white friends. She even fights her racist father.

It occurred to me that I had made the completely false and simplistic assumption that black children, attending the former white private schools, would, in those environments, lose their feelings of inferiority and learn to accept and respect who they were. After reading this story however, it seemed to me

that being in a formerly white private school had only exacerbated a confusion of identity.

In 2018, to read the writings of someone born and brought up in the so-called new South Africa, someone who probably went to a non-racial school, and to find a total denial of her identity in her writing, was a shock. In light of her suicide, I could not regard it simply as creative intelligence at work.

My hat had been even more inappropriate at her book launch than I had realized.

RACISM

The basis of racism is fear of difference which is related to the fear of change. It is an unacknowledged primal fear. Dr Karl Albrecht identified five types of primal fear: Extinction, Mutilation, Loss of Autonomy, Separation or Abandonment, and Humiliation – fears that apply to the individual. Racism, includes all the above, but is derived from group fear of difference and contamination.

This fear is clearly illustrated in Science Fiction which presents “alien” beings so very different from us that we can only imagine that they come to loot and destroy.

Racism is the end product of adherence to rite, ritual, custom, tradition, and religion – i.e. of culture. As culture forms the glue that binds people together into separate groups, deviations from norms of a given culture lead to fears of group dissolution.

The obverse side of culture is cohesion; the reverse side is racism.

Racism is the inability to recognize that differences in culture have arisen from the ways in which humans in varying environments have adapted to their natural surroundings.

“Apartheid was based on the idea of racial difference – but there is only one natural difference between human beings – the gender difference. The rest are acquired differences that have arisen out of human responses to living in different environments. Adaptation of our forebears to the environments in which they were born, forms the basis of what we call culture; and differences in culture lead to the concept of race. Different environments gave rise to different ways of living – differences in belief, language and customs, and even to minor differences in physical appearance.

Superficial differences – in facial features, skin colour and hair textures, as well as differences in tradition, custom, ritual and religion – evoke notions of alienness. Consequently, human differences are not seen as the result of

adaptation and evolution but as intrinsic. That leads to concepts of race and difference, which in turn lead to racism and discrimination.

So we put up borders between human beings on the basis of these acquired differences. And each cultural group imagines that its survival is threatened by interaction with those of different traditions. And for a long time cultural borders were as rigid restraints as physical borders; people feared cultural contamination.

Apartheid was simply an excessive expression of such paranoia. Its excess forced us to look below cultural differences to find our common humanity. And people are beginning to recognize that cultural differences are acquired not inborn. They are like the clothes we wear; underneath clothes we are all human.”⁵

It is time to abolish the concept of race and to depend only on nationality, i.e. identification as a citizen of a country.

⁵ Muthal Naidoo, *Sooboo*, Chapter 2

Books

[Available at www.muthalnaidoo.co.za]

Biography

Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar (2007)

The Keshwars from Dundee (2011)

A Life in Fact and Fiction (2016,
Autobiography)

Ramy Pillay: Yuga Purushar (2016)

Sooboo : The Spirit of Defiance (2018)

Children's Stories

Emerging Heroes (2012, Children's
Stories)

Rhulani's Dilemma, co-author Danielle
Davis (2013, novella for Teenagers)

Essays

Metaphoric Being (2014)

Mirroring Nature (2015)

The Paradox of Being (2015,)

A Medley: Women, Writing, Freedom
(2017)

My Search for Meaning (2017)

Novellas

Gansie in Kammaland (2011, linked stories)

Finding Hassan (2017)

Love is a Story, co-author Seetha Ray (2018)

Poems and Plays

WIP Theatre Plays (2008)

Kaliyuga (2014, poems)

Pocket Poems (2016)

Karma: The Dance of Life (2018 poems)

Religious Practices

A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals (2004)

Stories

Jail Birds and Others (2004)

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

The Obverse Side of Ubuntu (2018)



Life is a Miracle