

INTERVIEW by Triplopia with LINDSEY COLLEN on her novels

This interview of Lindsey Collen was on the Triplopia website from the time when it was conducted in 2005. As this excellent internet literary website seems no longer to be on-line, Lindsey Collen has agreed to let us publish the interview with her on our site (uploaded in May 2011) as researchers have been requesting to be able to read it. [Re-up-loaded on revamped LALIT website on 12 Dec 2015, again on request.]

Triplopia: Your novel, *The Rape of Sita*, opens with a poem, the speaker of which is Time. Can you offer us any insight into your own sense of how this poem relates to the text of the novel proper? For example, how do you imagine this poem being delivered? It is, in a sense, outside of the text altogether, placed, as it is, before the Preface of the novel, or is it perhaps a framework within which the novel is meant to be understood, or again, would it be more properly imagined as being delivered by the narrator of the novel? How do you imagine time as informing the events chronicled in this novel?

Lindsey Collen: I think the poem is a bit of all the things you mention, but most consciously for me it acts as a reminder of the human situation, our intense consciousness, our moral responsibility because of this consciousness, and we are situated in the eternal changes imposed by an amoral relentless Time. I do see the poem as outside of the book, in the sense that I am very conscious that prose-readers may not even read it. But I hope people read it because it stands like a kind of doorway, like Mauritius is, that could lead from other places into India. And some of the assumptions about Time, about moral dilemmas, about life, lean heavily on what I see as an Indian perspective. At the same time, Time and memory are central to the novel and its story of rape.

T: Your response suggests that moral responsibility stands in a causal relationship with the fact of human consciousness, and that this moral responsibility, relative to "amoral" forces such as time, is in a state of tension with those natural forces within which we are obliged to act.

L.C: Yes that's exactly how I feel it. A tension.

T: A chance to clarify the philosophy behind this, then: how might you describe the mechanics by which the fact of consciousness leads to moral responsibility?

L.C: Consciousness, meaning that we know what we are doing, we know what we are thinking, and we can choose what to do next, almost tautologically involves the possibility, at least, of moral responsibility. It also, simultaneously, and problematically, means that we have the burden of trying to work out what effect, if any, our actions will have. So that there is always a dilemma for humans, rather than a rule. Always the need for reflection about what has happened, too, rather than a cut-and-dried moral regulation. And the dilemma comes perhaps from divergent and/or conflicting principles that our consciousness can produce, by the very fact that our grammatical structures create the possibility of generalization. A very strange thing, and risky.

T: In what manner do you see this tension between natural forces such as time and more human forces such as moral responsibility as shaping our experience? Do you see the relationship between the two as reciprocal or uni-directional?

L.C: Most certainly reciprocal. With the discovery of relativity, the nature of time itself is even more problematical than we pretend it is during our daily lives. But the discovery certainly helps us to relate to nature with one more step in the reciprocity. I am sorry that I was not taught about relativity when I was very little, and I wish children now were too, so that instead of having to get my head around it every time I think of it, or of

quantum physics, it could have been integrated into my own consciousness more naturally, much the way more linear physics has been. It is as though humans have become much more humbled through this physics, as if our language doesn't help us understand time and speed very easily. And yet, it is also as though we have been made even more conscious of ourselves and the universe, thus even more morally responsible.

T: How do you see the above description of the human situation as reflective of an Indian perspective?

L.C: What I think is Indian, and this is only through part of the mythology I'M FAMILIAR WITH, i.e. the part I like, whereas there is other equally Indian philosophy which is very reductionist, is the ability of ordinary people to stop and pose the question as to what to do. The classic example that everyone knows is Lutchman, in the Ramayana, who is asked by his brother, Rama, to take care of Sita. Not to leave her. So, he had undertaken this. And not with just anyone. With his older brother. Then he hears that his brother is in difficulty. His brother needs his help, and is far away. Now the thing I find "Indian" is that people are pleased to find this question asked. They may not even want to know the answer, or even think there is one. But, I hear my neighbours in Mauritius, when they find a dilemma, being so pleased to see it.

T: The "dilemma" becomes an important theme, I think, in those novels of yours I have read. In your opinion, how closely tied is our moral framework and our language? To what extent do you think our language expresses real limits to our field of perception, and to what extent do you think those limits can, or should, be overcome? Would you regard your own sense of how language and moral responsibility relate to each other as being central to your own sense of your work as a writer?

L.C: Yes, I do think for me as a writer, language and moral responsibility and their relationship is central to my work, and in some ways to other aspects of my life, too. Language certainly does give us immense possibilities for creative thought. I would say infinite possibilities. But it is also a very narrow structure in some ways, with all its binary branches, and we need consciously to open up all the dialectical possibilities and directions, especially amongst children and young people, to allow language to be creative and moral responsibility to be reasonably developed. I would also say that perhaps school education, together with the limits of most religious teachings and prejudices learnt in the family and neighbourhood, all add up to severe and unconscious restraints on our language and thinking. These restraints take on the form of an emotion: a fear of thinking. You meet it everywhere, but nowhere so much as on the subject of human language itself. We are really trapped between two sets of unquestioned beliefs. There are those who believe or take for granted that God gave us language so as to differentiate us from other inferior creatures and link us to Him (definite higher cases), so they are afraid of setting language against a background of its evolutionary development in case this casts doubt on their religious convictions, even if they have controlled this fear in respect to other aspects of evolutionary ideas. And, then there are those, on the mainstream left side, who are terribly afraid that if one looks at language from an evolutionary perspective, that one may somehow be saying that some people are inferior to others. This latter fixed belief is dependent on the generalized prejudice, which exists even amongst otherwise progressive people, that some languages are more developed, thus better, than others; and they are completely unaware that this is false and has been known for some fifty years by linguistics experts to be false.

This fear of thinking is very widespread, and it is often linked to fear of where language might lead one. People can become very angry, very emotional, with someone who poses a question – maybe even for interest's sake – that puts into question a central belief. And how can we explain the relative absence in school syllabuses of important developments in human language and thinking? Whether it's evolution, dialectical materialism, psychoanalytic analysis, relativity, or linguistics, all huge breakthroughs over the past 100 – 150 years and they are not introduced in schools for children to benefit from. This

fear seems to be linked to a restrictive moral code. Of course, there are the vested interests in keeping the multitudes in a moral straight-jacket, keeping you at your machine working and otherwise not causing trouble, and this is done, of course, by mindless and patently immoral media coverage of things, as well as by narrow-minded formal schooling. Maybe this leads to an important function of writing fiction. It's perhaps a way of getting out of these straight-jackets.

T: *The Rape of Sita* is actually quite a controversial book, in the community within which you live, at one point having been banned by the Mauritian government, and carrying with it some very real consequences for yourself. Can you give us a quick overview of the controversy surrounding this book?

L.C.: *The Rape of Sita*, when it came out, put me in a very difficult position. I was immediately attacked by a small group of rather violent fundamentalists and at the same time attacked by the State. This is a very bad mixture. The fundamentalists attacked me through marginal newspapers, anonymous threats by telephone and letters (threatening death, public rape, and getting acid thrown in my face), and through, in one place, huge hand-painted letters on a wall threatening me with rape. The State attacked me through the person of the Prime Minister standing up in the National Assembly, making use of a rarely resorted to procedure called a "Prime Minister's Statement", announcing that the novel was blasphemous, and clearly an outrage against public and religious morality under the criminal code, and that the police should "take action". Their main objection was to the title itself. Sita, who is a goddess, but not directly from the main pantheon and thus perhaps an insecure goddess, should not have been that closely linked to the word "rape", they seemed to be saying. Although of course those attacking me, in their articles, printed the title of the book many more times than we ever did.

From then on, together with the workers' education publishers, Ledikasyon pu Travayer, and also supported by the quasi-totality of women in the country, the totality of artists in the country, I set off on the long journey of getting the book back on the shelves. This included, as a first step, which we actually took before the Prime Minister's Statement, withdrawing the book from the bookshops, and announcing that we were prepared to discuss what it was in the title that offended some people, and that if anyone were to convince us of their point of view, we would change it. I had to go into hiding for a few days, while the police were looking for me, waiting for any hysteria to subside.

I should mention that because I am known as a political activist in a left party, Lalit (which means "struggle" in Kreol and "beautiful" in Hindi), that most people, if you were to have asked them, would have said that the Government was getting at me because I was a political adversary. And, of course, there was always an element of this.

When the police came to confiscate the books from the publishers, I happened to be there, together with my husband, Ram Seegobin, and a handful of other friends. We said that the law referred to by the Prime Minister said that the books had to be "exposed for sale" and they were no longer exposed, so the police would not be able to take them. A long conversation continued. We feel we have to bring out the human in people, I suppose. And the conversation then moved from this legal issue, to me asking who the new ecclesiastical and literary squad were in the police force. The police officers smiled. Then I asked if any of them had been in charge of reading it, before coming to seize it. The high-ranking officer present said he had. I asked him if he liked it (sometimes writers are incorrigible), and he said yes he did. When I asked what it was he liked about it, he said the bits about the police. A junior officer who was with him, kept seeming to want to say something. And then finally came out with it: "Do you remember me?" he asked my partner. Ram replied, well your face is familiar, but no, I can't say I know where from. The man then said that he had been at primary school with Ram, and that when he had been hungry at school, and then he began to look very moved and there was this tender moment when he said that Ram had shared the bread he brought to school for lunch with him.

So, the books were not confiscated. No charges were laid. But the books had been withdrawn. Stalemate. With us losing. So, now what could we do?

This is where it was life-saving that I am a political militant, and also an activist in the women's movement. It also helped that we had published the book as a kind of co-operative venture. The publishers had brought out coupons for one hundred rupees, as they had done for my first novel, *There is a Tide*. Then after selling about one hundred and fifty coupons, they went to print. So, my friends delivered the one hundred and fifty copies to those who had paid for them, home visit by home visit. And this way the book could be read by people, who could judge for themselves. Many people started to write critical evaluations of it, in the press. And my colleagues in the women's movement continued to sell the books, in plain wrappers, one by one, by visiting other people who had not even bought coupons, explaining to them and winning them over.

Women friends one day said they would go and paint over the nasty threat on the wall against me. But when we discussed this plan, we thought it was not up to us to do that. So together five of us instead went to the police station near the slogan threatening me with rape, and I put in a formal deposition, saying that threatening people is against the law, and people are threatening me. They asked what I wanted done and I said I want those responsible warned not to do this kind of thing, and I want the police to paint out the horrible words. Then we said we would sit in the police station until they did something about it. Within about an hour, they had telephoned up the ranks and further up the ranks, and got their orders. In fact they went and bought a little pot of oil paint, and painted out the slogan. My colleagues and I watched them, in front of an assembled crowd.

This kind of thing, together with all the debate we nurtured, gradually changed the balance of forces until I was confident enough to walk around any time of day or night alone again. After about four years, the book quite quietly got back on to the shelves.

T: You mentioned Lalit. I have, of course, been directed to and spent some time at the website, and I understand there are a few ongoing campaigns undertaken by Lalit that inform not only *The Rape of Sita*, but your other novels as well. Of most immediate topicality are those issues surrounding the island of Diego Garcia. Can you give us a brief overview of those issues?

L.C: The issues around the military occupation of Diego Garcia island, part of the Chagos archipelago that is part of Mauritius, have come into the news in a big way recently. In Lalit we had been hammering away at the three or four interconnected problems for years, in fact since the gains made by big street demonstrations we were involved in in 1981, and then suddenly they all came centre stage. And the whole issue became wildly unstable, proving that however powerful powers-that-be are, they can't always cover up political crimes indefinitely.

In brief, there were three inter-related crimes: the USA state apparatus, in the 1960's already wanted a nice island with no people on it for a military base in a place from which to control sea-routes, the Middle East and Asia; Mauritius, and all the islands that make up Mauritius, was getting Independence from its most recent colonizer, Britain, at the same time; what could be easier, for the apparently all-powerful, than to arrange things nicely? Britain did the theft of the Chagos Islands, which is not only against UN resolutions but against the UN Charter itself because a colonizer is obviously not allowed to split a State as a condition for Independence. To do this behind the UN's back, the British State had to lie and keep secrets from its own people and even from their Parliament. They also used things called "Orders in Council" which the Monarch puts a signature to on the instructions of the Executive. And they invented a brand new little colony fiction called "British Indian Ocean Territory" with the Chagos and some Islands nicked from another of its colonies, the Seychelles, and which Seychelles negotiated back

when it later got its Independence.

The USA was the receiver of the stolen goods, taking over the whole of Diego Garcia for a massive military base. To do this, it had to keep secrets from its people, too. The beautiful horse-shoe shaped atolls were turned into a nuclear base. The US and Britain together arranged first to trick, then to cajole, then to starve, then to force the two thousand people who had been living there for generations, to get on board ships which would transport them to the dockside in Port Louis, and dump them there.

What happened recently to catapult all these crimes back into the news 30 years later were a series of related and unrelated events. The Diego Garcia base was used for B-52's to take off from for bombing Iraq, then Afghanistan, then Iraq again. This made the news. The 30-year rule under the British Official Secrets Act came up in 1998, and allowed the proof that no-one ever had of the three crimes committed. This allowed the Chagossian people to put a case in the British Courts, which they won for the right to return. It is very interesting that in the judgment the Law Lords relied on the Magna Carta of 1215 for deciding that the State cannot banish its people. More recently, the Chagossians are in the process of getting a case into the US Courts for compensation for human rights abuses, and for genocide. The case is against the US State and also against certain individuals who were sometimes businessmen involved in the corporations that got base contracts and sometimes part of the State apparatus. Some names are interesting. Like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. More recently still, there have been repeated news stories that Diego Garcia has been used by the US as an "undisclosed location" for keeping or rendering illegal prisoners. You can read up on this on the Lalit website by clicking on the photo of the cover of the book on Diego Garcia on the home page: [www.lalitmauritius.com](http://www.lalitmauritius.com)

T: *The Rape of Sita* draws heavily from the *Ramayana*. This is, I understand, a major source of controversy surrounding this novel. For those who are not familiar with the traditions informing the story of Rama and Sita, can you describe the source of this controversy, and the reasons for it?

L.C: There are many versions of the story of Rama and Sita. In the *Mahabharata*, the story of Rama and Sita sees Sita, after having been abducted by Rawan, being repudiated by Rama, then being vindicated by the elements as being blameless, and then being taken back by Rama. The *Ramayana*, has Rama repudiate her, because his subjects demanded her repudiation. And the Earth takes her back into it. My novel being a modern-day story does not try to have any one-to-one or linear relationship with any of the vast number of different interpretations to this narrative, but rather to engage with this rich story around the question of rape somehow being the women's crime. Clearly the word "rape" in English is problematic, too, and also useful, meaning either or both abduction and violation.

The controversy is clearly not so much to do with the novel as with political events in Mauritius at the time. There was a general election coming. The then Prime Minister was weak, and looking for a kind of ethno-religious push of some sort. At the same time, by pure coincidence, there were two or three politico-religious scandals at the time around the question of rape. As the book was going to print, I realized that the title would be misinterpreted in the light of these contemporary issues. But then again, fundamentalists of all ilk tend to be on the look-out for some issue they think may be politically "paying".

And we artists, when we bring a new way of looking at past things, often run the risk of being attacked as I was. This does not mean we intentionally provoked the attacks. It means we do not avoid re-thinking myths that make up our psyches.

Two true stories may interest readers: When the publishers and I announced that we might change the title if we were convinced by arguments that it was offensive, an old and religious lady came up to me and pulled at my arm. She said quietly to me, "Don't ever change the title. Your title means that women who have been wronged can walk with their heads high." That was her interpretation of the controversy, without her having read the book. The other story is that a group of women who met once a week to chant the Ramayana, when they heard of the controversy, got hold of a copy OF MY NOVEL, read it, and said it made you think about the meaning of the ending of the version of the Ramayana they were chanting. So, women's reactions were very interesting.

T: Do you feel the controversy surrounding this book has had a measurable impact on your own choices as a writer? If so, how would you describe that impact?

L.C: I was left afraid I would not be able to write again. That maybe I would vacillate between being too scared of censorship and being unnecessarily defiant. That words would become too difficult to choose. And my next novel *Getting Rid Of It* helped me get over that. For that alone, I love that novel. It got me over something. One of the minor characters in it, The Boy Who Won't Speak, maybe helped me. I think the fear was most acute in the phase when I was just musing and writing bits in second-hand ledgers. I would write them down, and then they would look back at me. And I felt I might have lost the sense of what they mean. Of shared meanings. Everything about language, as *Alice in Wonderland* tells us, is to do with shared meanings. And once there is a break in this, like when a writer is badly threatened, I think it can make a writer lose his or her sense of language. What is so natural, becomes so self-conscious. Preparing for *Getting Rid Of It* was very difficult, but, strangely, once I started writing it, I'm now remembering, it was exhilarating. Everything came easily. It was as though the characters in it, themselves, saw me through it.

T: Poetry factors not only as a framing device, but symbolically within the text of *The Rape of Sita* as well. For example, there is the repetition of lines from both *The Wasteland* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Both poems inform the present text, of course, but there's an interesting moment in which the narrator of the story poses the following question:

"Or should a woman always be vigilant. Always be, as it were, peeping over the top of T. S. Eliot's poems in order to make sure no harm is coming around the corner?"

The image of a woman on guard for possible harm—peeping over the top of T.S. Eliot, as in the above question—while reading a body of poetry that, in spite of once having been considered a "radical" poem, has come to be associated with an alignment between poetry and the center of political power. That is, Eliot has come to be regarded as "monumental" in substance, "patriarchal" in its sense of social order. How do you see the events related in "The Rape of Sita" informing—or being informed by—the above debate?

L.C: I think this is at the centre of the novel: insidious forms of patriarchy, its invisibility. And maybe that these are at the heart of the balance of forces, that then, in turn, permit the perpetuation of the more grotesque symptoms of the abuse of power.

T: As a point of clarification, is the "balance of forces" here describing two forms of patriarchy, i.e., an insidious form, one that often masks itself as "subversive," as opposed to an explicit form, one that expresses itself openly in politics as *sang-froid* carried to the point of bloody-mindedness? Or is there, at the centre of the novel, something beyond a statement of the problem at hand? Some force that balances patriarchy in all of its forms, thus providing some sense of a solution to that problem?

L.C: Sorry, I wasn't very clear. What I mean, I think, is that what allows abuses like rape to exist at all (I mean it is weird for me as a woman to accept that a man would want to defile his own sexuality by rape; I've in real life got a credibility gap as to what it is in a man that confuses his own sexuality with assault) is something that is soaked into the whole fabric of society, and that when you add up all the insidious and often invisible aspects of patriarchy, then you end up with a balance of forces between man and woman, which allows a man, if he wants to, to violate a woman, and to *know* that he can get away with it. Because every day women are already meted out a million insidious, invisible reminders of patriarchy. And the rapist is only acting on this. To know that he is only acting out the full logic of the everyday sex war that patriarchy lets loose on us. And I don't mean just between men and women, but also between macho men who tap into patriarchy to dominate all women, all children and most men.

Let us look at the abuses at the Abu Graib prison. Maybe irreducibility got reduced there. There is no more patriarchal a structure than a military prison in an occupied country. So there we have it. And women have been recruited into it. At the level of prison guards. And a woman, curiously was prison commissioner. And then there was a woman in charge of all the prisons in Iraq at the time, Condeleeza Rice. So the patriarchal structure is there. A prison. The hierarchy of the whole thing. And the abuses seen in the notorious photographs are really exactly what one means by the word "rape". And yet, by the intentional recruitment by the powers-that-be of women into the patriarchal structures, women end up being the perpetrators. Shows how on our guards we in the women's movement have to be about our demands. Look how the "gender equity" strategy is the opposite of emancipation or liberation. It was never a demand out of any women's movement, this "gender equity". It was a kind of con-trick, masquerading partly as one of our demands, partly as a little something in the right direction, meanwhile, since we weren't getting anything else just yet. A woman friend of mine in Lalit described this, when she realized how bad the "gender equity" politics is, as "Like we are finding ourselves inside the Trojan Horse that's finding its way into our own village."

As to what could change this—and perhaps this is what the novel is an investigation of—all those social structures that allow rape to seem normal, are changeable. The fact that rape was not known in Chagos, and that the women from Diego Garcia had no fear of it, only goes to show how it is something very hard to understand. Where men and women are equal, as they were in the paternalistic escalavagist society of the Chagos, men do not consider raping women, and women have no fear of rape. The idea itself does not make them quake. It seems the man is making a fool of himself if he does the act. What this means is that we can think up, and collectively bring about situations which undermine patriarchy, and presumably other hierarchies of power.

T: There are at least two levels upon which the concept of rape expresses itself in this novel: in a literal sense, the problem of rape, with all the questions of how power, in its most abusive form, expresses itself through this act, and a second, more metaphorical sense, in which Sita's dilemmas are reflective of a far larger set of problems, also to do with power, but on a much more impersonal level. Do you think the sense of solution, or lack of same, is equally applicable in both the literal and the metaphorical sense of Sita's dilemma?

L.C: The political level of rape as in colonization, and rape as a physical act on a woman, seem similar. In that because of the power, rape is possible, and because one has raped or does rape, one has power. I suppose, but I don't know how much this comes through in the novel, the political hierarchies and the personal ones are very clearly linked, through the way modern-day production and reproduction are organized. And yes, both can be got out of.

T: It occurs to me that any solution to the problem, so stated, might be based upon

making the invisible visible. Perhaps I'm over-reaching with that thought, but one might be forgiven for thinking that this is precisely what *The Rape of Sita* is attempting to do, through a fairly precise examination of how the act of rape might manifest itself in deed.

L.C: Yes, that's perfect.

T: There is a unified speaker throughout the novel, named Iqbal, who seems to function on a variety of fronts. He provides an ongoing thread of self-commentary, interrupting the story at many points to address the audience directly. Looking at the structure of the novel's opening, we begin with a poem, one that is not explicitly given an author, then move to a Preface, ostensibly authored by the narrator of the novel as a whole, then Iqbal describes his attempts to tell the story to an audience that is present, in the flesh, at the telling—all of this occurs before we actually enter the "narrative proper". What function do you see these framing devices playing in the unfolding of the novel?

L.C: I think it is three things. These were not necessarily conscious intentions, but things I was aware of. At the surface, it is a kind of instinctive fear of the censor. A Medieval device—which didn't work, I may add. And then it is like for deep-sea diving, stages of pressure, for the reader to go through. And then thirdly, it's a kind of unveiling.

T: One of the functions of Iqbal's narration is to frame the story in terms of mythology, a function that allows you to draw parallels between contemporary characters and those gods and goddesses populating the *Ramayana* in a way that is explicit and yet removed from the world inhabited by the figures of myth. For example, Not only is Sita based upon a goddess within the *Ramayana*, but her partner is named Dharma, her father, as Sita's father is within the *Ramayana*, is given the name Janaka, her attacker the name Rowan Tarquin, etc. Is the name Iqbal drawn from the same tradition? If so, what is the story of this personage within that tradition?

L.C: Iqbal's name does not come from the same tradition. He is, relative to the mythology, an outsider. Which is one of the dynamics of the novel, in the sense that he is the most "insider" person in the novel, and yet an "outsider" to the central myth. He is also an outsider to the sex war. In this way he is a bit like Ton Tipyer, who taught the stories to Iqbal in the first place. But when I was writing it, it was the modern story that was driving me to write. The myths are the background in which it exists.

T: Do you understand Iqbal to be "retelling" the classic story of Sita's abduction, or telling a contemporary story? How reliable a speaker do you think Iqbal thinks he is?

L.C: I think he's more telling about real flesh and blood people he knows. And I think he's reliable as you get. For the inventive kind of story-teller. And I think that maybe myths are often transmitted with such a major distortion. The tradition in which Iqbal is telling this story is one I relate more to African traditions, both as I know them from my childhood in South Africa, and also as they live on in Mauritius. This means that as an oral story-teller in Mauritius, especially in the women's movement, I have the role, together with my story-telling colleague, Anne-Marie Sophie, of re-telling a true story anew each time. And it has to be different each time. People say, "Oh, Lindsey, tell the one about the riot police and the chain!" And when I give in and tell it, Anne Marie has the role of doing the reality check. Quite formally. She does a lot of miming too, and formalistic over-acting, as if she speaks on behalf of everyone who knows the previous story. "But you didn't say that bit last time, have you just made it up?" Or "You've missed the main point of the story this time?" Then I go over to her and she whispers in my ear, and sure enough she's remembered it as it was. So I have to bring in that bit that I have left out in the retelling. But I may also have to justify why the way I just told it now is somehow "more true".

I should also say, in brackets, that although I have read the first five or six books of the *Mahabharata* and the whole of the *Ramayana*, that my feeling for the mythology and



philosophy comes more from what I learnt from some individual real people in Mauritius. In particular, my father-in-law, who came from a very active Arya Samaj family and was himself a very scientific mind, and who was someone to whom I was close, gave me a very living and instantly understood feeling for all these issues. My husband, Ram, too has always shared with me his musing observations, often critical, of many of these stories.

T: How do you see the revised ending of this story reflecting the present-day reality of those societies informed by the *Ramayana*?

L.C: I do think the novel reflects reality in societies like Mauritius, and readers feel this too. Not only women readers, but men readers are sometimes deeply moved by the reflections they see in it. But maybe it reflects realities of the mind as well. Not just external realities. And at this level, perhaps it reverberates for readers. Perhaps my view on this is that I recognise that people have already thought enormously about myths, pondered over them, argued over them, dreamt through them, opposed them, gone along with them, questioned them, been hemmed in by them. And by a story which is essentially about modern-day people, a story with its own dynamics, I hope to bring in this wealth of knowledge and experience that people already have, so that when they read this story, they maybe give to and get from their existing internal wealth of narratives and symbolisms.

T: Iqbal is a male speaker, yet his gender is kept ambiguous, most prominently in his repetition of a more contemporary line of poetry drawn from a Beatles song. How do you see Iqbal's ambiguous gender functioning within the story?

L.C: I was throughout the writing of the novel haunted by something like the silence of the irreducibility of the sex war at the point of rape. I don't know if that sentence makes sense, or more particularly, if it conveys what I feel – that's why I have to tell stories. Iqbal's ambiguous gender, and his moving into and out of Sita, helped me bridge this frightening silence.

I would like to mention that I write a lot of non-fiction, and this is a choice. And when I write fiction, it is two things. The first thing is that there is a certain joy I experience in the telling of a story. And there are elements that I see as a puzzle for the reader. Not any kind of test, but maybe layers that can be undone. Then again the hard work involved means that as well as the joy of telling a story, it also has to be about something where there's a profundity of feeling that drives me to go on writing until I'm finished. And that I can't quite express in any other way except through the story.

T: In regards to the manner in which the question of rape is handled, there are two points at which disagreements often seem to pivot: one, what is the clear signal, in any exchange approaching the sexual, with which consent is unarguably denied, and two, to what extent is it possible, or likely, for a woman to abuse power in such a situation, by, for example, claiming to have denied consent where consent was in fact clearly signalled. Both of these issues are dealt with in *The Rape of Sita*, and the reader is given the benefit of having a fairly clear understanding of the mental state of both Sita and Rowan. In the novel, Rowan is clearly an aggressor, and Sita is clearly not giving consent. There remains, however, an important gulf between the facts of the case and the manner in which the case is likely to be perceived by the public, and it is precisely on this point that the real value of Iqbal, as narrator, comes to the fore, because he is able to express the reservations arising from this gulf, while remaining in close association with Sita's perspective. At what point in writing the book did you become aware of the need for a narrator who could fulfil this role?

L.C: The narrator came first. He got born out of the death of a young man in the village we live in, who was this kind of outsider. And a story-teller. This kind of mediator of different peoples' realities. He got hit into by the trailer of a tractor, the real person, and

died. And, out of mourning, Iqbal got born some years later. Without Iqbal, the novel could not have existed, because the point is this mediation.

I think the question of how to be sure consent is being withheld, and of consent having been given and then subsequently denied, is about as contingent on this whole knitted fabric of patriarchy that binds us in, till now, as the very idea or concept of rape itself is. So long as the idea of rape exists, its possibility exists, and the questions of consent and of denial of consent will presumably follow. I'm not sure I'm making myself understood. Where there is no longer such a threat, there would be no confusion at all. It would be clear as a bell. Rape would seem laughable, presumably, and childish, like a child peeing in front of everyone on the carpet or something. Either two people do want to have sex or they don't (not just in Clinton's definition, but including it), just as they do want to do anything else together or don't. You can't imagine one forcing the other. Similarly, any vested interest in denying consent would evaporate. There wouldn't be anything to gain from falsely accusing a man of doing something merely ridiculous. And of course, rape would no longer be the woman's crime.

The same can be said of war as a solution to conflict. It could conceivably become completely anathema. Not just immoral, or an unjust war in particular, but considered ridiculous, and the very thought of war as a solution being considered a sure way of sullyng oneself. Much the same as if most of us thought of just going up to someone and punching her/him in the face, or stabbing them, say, because of something we had heard that they had said about us, or done to someone else, we would feel sullied by the very thought. This feeling at this thought is presumably the result of a whole fabric of social realities that now exist where we are so far in confronting domination. We've got a long way to go, though.

T: I suspect that many readers might argue that the attitude toward rape enjoyed in Chagos was, at least in part, the product of a fairly closed society, and that establishing similar attitudes toward the same question—that is, understanding one who rapes, whether in a literal or a metaphorical sense, as ridiculous rather than powerful—on a global scale would require a pretty radical shift in thinking on the part of the human species, especially given our history. What are some practical steps toward that goal, and how do you envision this attitude being adopted on a wider scale? Is it compromised, necessarily, by concepts such as tribalism and nationalism, which allow one to perceive members outside of their own group as "other"? Or are such concepts, in your view, manifestations of the same phenomenon?

L.C: The practical solution is to fight for equality. And I mean something extremely practical and easy. Gaining it, which is not as easy of course, would bring the result of making rape ludicrous. In the meantime, the fact of seeking equality and refusing to settle for less, is itself an immense source of liberation. And anyone can get it just by saying it and believing it and accepting nothing else as the ultimate aim.

And this brings in the question of the "other". Perhaps I'd like to start with the "other" within one society, before going on to the inside and outside "others", and relate it to political strategy. If we want mere (and I mean mere) gender equity or race/religious equity and settle for this "legitimization" of inequality, by sharing inequality out between sexes and amongst ethnic or religious groupings, we get nowhere nearer equality. We are still trapped in the inequality mode, even in our minds. We accept it. We want it to be here to stay. We just want to have more equal chances of being unequal, no matter which tribe we are in. We are thus still slaves to the history of inequality – through feudalism, slavery, patriarchy, indenture, wage slavery – and blinded into feeling the inevitability of inequality, and afraid even to stand up for it. Otherwise why would a nice person agree that inequality be shared out "legitimately". Maybe the very nicest person of all those suggesting that inequality be portioned out fairly amongst groups of people or genders, would suggest that a roulette spun at birth would be best. Note that peoples' lack of even the barest sincerity about this "equal opportunities" strategy is patent when

you see how few ever question inheritance customs and laws. This would be well nigh blasphemy, of course.

The desire for human equality, the refusal to settle for less, is in some ways the result of a certain liberation. Such are the dialectics. And if we work towards emancipation (which means freeing ourselves) of women or working people, this means we want equality, not just equal opportunities to be unequal. And then it becomes important to find that democracy is the best tool for seeking equality. And not just this limited form of electing a king, after an advertising campaign between two carefully pre-selected princes, but the broader forms we already learn about through good unions and associations, where there are annual elections, where there's the right to recall, where all members are, in fact, equal. And it's not so difficult to demand this kind of organization where we work. Just those that control things don't want it. That's what we need political strategies for.

T: In your fiction, you make extensive use of your own experiences in politics. All three of the novels I have read are, for example, set in Mauritius, all three feature characters who are politically active, all three are closely concerned with Mauritian politics, and in the final acknowledgements in *Mutiny*, you make reference to having drawn from a wide array of experiences—your own and others—in the writing of the book. In fact, in *Mutiny*, one of the unifying mechanisms is a set of ongoing quotations from the Mauritian penal code. Are these quotations in fact direct quotations from that set of codes?

L.C: Yes, can you believe it, they are direct quotes. The law is named underneath, if I remember rightly, with its date.

T: Judging by both those books of yours I have read, along with the description you provided of the method used in distributing the initial run of *The Rape of Sita*, I'm guessing that any real attempt to draw a hard line between your work in politics and in literature is missing the point.

L.C: Yes, it's true, I don't easily draw the distinction between the two – the political and the writing self. But it's also true that I laugh at myself a lot, and we in Lalit (most of us) laugh at ourselves rather more than some activists may. Maybe I don't take myself too, too seriously. Well not all the time. Like I'm Laurel and Hardy.

T: To what extent do you think your work as a writer is informed by your work as an activist, and how is this evidenced in your writing?

L.C: I write what I know about, and I happen to know about political struggles and grass roots movements, because I'm always in them. For some of the experiences I know about through my political involvement, I can only seem to find expression in writing, mainly in novels. I suppose I also believe that one of the main components for any revolution in the future will be "shared experience". This "shared experience" is what hastens consciousness beyond the day-to-day drudgery we are all, maybe as women even more so, often involved in, to a level that can be creative. So, I try to learn from other peoples' experience – I listen to the stories of other peoples' struggles, and read about them, and in turn I tell of mine, and sometimes make up stories around mine.

So, in both *The Rape of Sita* and in *Mutiny*, there are characters from Diego Garcia. In *Getting Rid of It*, there is the ludicrous situation of women being suspect if they have a miscarriage, which becomes the theme of the book. Even the structure of the books is

sometimes formed by my political experience. Just one example, in *Getting Rid of It*, before the book starts, the three main characters have all lost their jobs. They were all women who lived in tied housing as domestic servants. They lost their jobs for the most innocent of reasons: their bosses, all women, each, for different reasons, committed suicide. This threw the women out of housing, and out of employment. Then the book starts with them having staked out a big of land for what they call a house, but no more than a shack, illegally on State Land. And there again, in real life, I had been with women and children, who had done this. And later I had also been sitting in the middle of the road to stop bulldozers from breaking up their homes. I had seen the Government officers carrying out and noting down, the tables and chairs and children's homework books, before wrecking the whole house. These things get into novels easier than into political speeches or pamphlets.

T: Based on your own experience in both political activism and literature, would you describe writing as primarily a political act?

L.C: Writing novels, and for that matter reading them, can be a political act. For me it is. And yet it is not my primary motivation. My primary motivation is to tell a story. To entertain you with a story that is riveting. To tell a story that is strange. To have characters who we can perhaps smile at. And I get very close to some of my characters. Say Mama Gracienne in *Mutiny*. I feel her as a grandmother I've had. Or Shyneen in *There is a Tide*. Sometimes even the minor characters become very real to me. They mix in with people I know in my mind. And some of my close friends find they have the same experience. My characters prompt them to start saying to someone "Oh, I know a woman who ..." and then having to trail off because they realize she's only a fiction. But, I would never have the determination to finish a novel if it didn't have for me this overwhelming political meaning. Not a message. Just a meaning.

My writing relates to Lalit's political strategies in a vague and irrational way. Coming out of them, and then because members have read the novels, perhaps informing them, in turn, maybe emotionally as well as in terms of background information. In some ways the novels are a product of Lalit and the women's organization I'm in and the homeless peoples' struggles. And then maybe the novels also allow transmission of not just my own, but many peoples' experiences, to other people who happened not to be there.

T: In describing the initial distribution of *The Rape of Sita*, you describe yourself as a "political militant." The word "militant" has pretty clear connections with the word "military," and is thus suggestive of the use of military strategy to achieve political aims. One of the clearest points of division between activists on the left seem to revolve, not so much around the goals to be achieved, but the means by which one might achieve those goals. To put the matter as succinctly as I can, one of the difficulties arising from the left is that many advocates of leftist solutions see militant structures--hierarchies, organization, institutions, and the like--as part of the problem, whereas those on the right have no problem with such structures. Those on the left who are more inclined toward the pacifist point of view tend to advocate, at their most active, actions that points out the absurdity of such organizational structures—by putting flowers into gun barrels, for example. The militant point of view, as I understand it, tends to advocate a course of action in which the tactics and strategies employed by the right are used against the right, resulting in a political viewpoint in which the maxim "The ends justify the means" is likely to be embraced. A more pacifistically inclined activist might argue that using militaristic means to effect pacifistic ends smacks of the same doublespeak encountered in the phrase "War is peace"—and further, that by employing such means, the result is that when power is seized, the means used to seize that power then become the modus operandi of those who gain power—in short, replying to the assertion "The ends justify the means" with a counter-assertion: "The ends and the means are generally one and the same." From the stance of a militant, a pacifistic approach, even when valid, is perceived to be ineffectual. How do you, in the capacity of a self-described "political militant," find yourself responding to this basic conflict among those sharing the goals of

the political left?

L.C: Let me start first with the word, then with the vital philosophical point underlying your question. The word "militan" in Mauritian Kreol is not closely connected to anything military. Perhaps I forget this when I use the similar word in English; it isn't really equivalent. What "militan" means in Mauritian Kreol is a member of a union, association or even movement, who is not just a dues-paying one, but committed. Maybe committed to action. It sort-of portrays "energy".

But the point remains, and anyway I did use it in English. Which opens up this fantastic question. I would say that I think the nature of the structures we are in do define us, and that we should always be seeking those structures which are less hierarchical, more responsive. Humans, I believe, are always in associations. For a few minutes at a bus stop, during a series of *Scrabble* games, having regular lunches together. And then there are more formal associations, of equals, for more formal aims. A political party, at its best, is one of these associations, and different only because its aims are so wide as to cover almost everything. People come together, as a rational choice, around a set of demands, demands that they believe it useful to work towards in the short run because of their additional effect in the long run. And this is what a manifesto is, really. What you agree on, and how you agree on getting there. Say, a society where there is freedom, and not the kind of slavery we have had for the past 250 years, where a social relationship around wages divides the world into mainly two groups of unequal size and inverse proportions of power, one giving wages and one getting them. A society where one day everyone shares in decisions as well as in the fruits of the decisions in a way that we all think just. And where we all take care of Mother Earth. Say. And that you intend to get there by people consciously organizing to get there. Knowing what it is about this particular demand that you agree on today that makes it more useful than a million other similar ones in getting to your aims. For example, what demand to put forward relative to the question of rape. In Lalit, we thought about this, as we did in the women's organization I'm in. And briefly, there was the possibility, as the women's movement in South Africa did, to ask for more women police officers in each police station, to make the victim feel less threatened. Or, what we decided to demand: that Government set up a small Rape Crisis Unit (that comes into existence the moment there's a rape) in each major hospital. So, the rape victim goes to the hospital. This means she is immediately cared for. She is in a health care situation. And then the trauma health care people, and the psychologists, and the STD's and the morning after pill people all come to the Unit. Then a police doctor sees her for the purposes of the inquiry, in his doctor role, more than in his police role. And the policewoman who comes to take a statement takes it at the Unit, not in the ultimate of patriarchal structures, the police station. The demand we chose does not further strengthen this patriarchal structure.

Anyway, when once you are joined in this association, you have many even more temporary agreements on what demand is better in that it will work towards the long-term aim better. On the other hand, I don't think the end ever justifies the means. The means, if it is anathema to our end, will not work towards that end.

T: Along that same train of thought, your novel *Mutiny* seems very much to advocate the tactic of using those tools already available within power structures against the structure itself, with a coda that focuses, specifically, on technology. Were I to describe *Mutiny* as, in part, advocating militant political tactics, would you consider such a description to be fair? If you would, how would you respond to those criticisms likely to arise from those advocating a more pacifistic approach?

L.C: Perhaps not so much the existing power structure, no. Rather the existing working knowledge. The existing capacity to create. Perhaps in *Mutiny* the prison is a kind of allegory for society. And the technology is so over-developed that it will be its own undoing. With a little bit of help from those who, in any case, do the work, what we call

the technicians today. And also the innate capacity for language is what will help get us out of the worst prison. The fact that we associate, naturally, through language. And just as the language of the Criminal Code can enslave us, the language of recipes can help sustain our hearths, and the language of rebellion can free us. Because the language is part of not just our understanding, but our acting.

I would not intend *Mutiny* to advocate military political tactics, but activist ones. I believe in maximum pacifism possible in any action, and I believe that everyone, as they become part of a movement for change—which, when it comes, is sometimes shockingly sudden and fast-forward-moving—should be convinced to share this ethos of the maximum pacifism possible. I have experienced a three week nation wide general strike, and it is this, going from meeting to meeting from 4 in the morning to 12 at night, and not getting tired even, and knowing how brilliantly capable people can get, and how quickly, that makes me know that when there come those moments when it seems to be either barbarity or socialism, that socialism is possible. But not inevitable. I always thought that the phrase “socialism or barbarity” was invented by Rosa Luxemburg, but recently I read where she first said that and she credited Engels with it. Anyway, it’s still spot on. Maybe even more so, with the dreaded weapons and the dreaded destruction now available. Imagine the hideous barbarity people are right now experiencing in Iraq or in Palestine, to give just two examples, and also how many people there are right now trying to create something that goes beyond this, from within it.

Pacifism from soldiers who are part of an occupying army is a wonderful thing. But pacifism is not always useful, if we remember that people do rise up in rebellion when there is tyranny. And that it is important to organize the possible conscious aims of a rebellion, so that instead of leading to massacres or riots, it has more chance of actually changing the nature of power itself. Perhaps some of these questions will be better investigated, though never answered really, in the novel I’m just trying to do the final, final rework on.

T: The narrator of *Mutiny* is educated, through her work, in matters having to do with both technology and linguistics. How do you see these two areas of human “achievement” as being related? Would the reader be terribly mistaken to see a connection between the call to use technology against itself and the craft of writing, i.e., that in the act of writing, a similar “militant” stance might be represented through the strategy of using language against itself?

L.C: I think you’re near. Both technology and writing are, so far, mainly in the hands of the powerful, but neither need necessarily be. In fact they may both have been linked directly to the beginnings of mass social inequalities, from say 10,000 at most years ago; technology, in that it both permits the agricultural revolution that allows stocks and then develops the weapons to guard these stocks in an ongoing way; written language being closely interlinked to the keeping of stock lists, and, also to writing the laws to protect them from others who did not have control. Our ability to invent tools, that is means to get out of a situation, must be the clue to future hope for mankind. It is solitary work, thinking how to invent a tool, and also collective work, deciding one is needed, and discussing how one might make it. Just as our ability to generate grammatical structures in the conditional, or as teleological entities, and even just pure future tense; our ability to say “let us” grammatically speaking; or to generate the idea “we should” or “we shouldn’t” with arguments must surely be another clue to hope for the future.

I should really say that, when I was writing *Mutiny*, I was only just conscious of this. Conscious, but sort of conscious as one is in the “dream creation mode”. Maybe at this point I should say how I have crafted the novels I’ve written so far. This is how they have happened. In four phases. Phase one, I write down the odd word, the odd little drawing, the odd line from a song, an idea for a character. I write them down in second-hand ledgers, from which the used pages have been torn or cut. This way there is no feeling of a smart page before me. *Excel* is thus a potential enemy, as it replaces second-hand

ledgers. Phase two, and this is the most difficult one, one I never feel I'll ever be able to do again. The dive off the high diving board. And I have to just feel ready. All my colleagues know this moment is coming, and they replace me in everything. I pack my computer, and go and live by the sea for about three weeks. My husband, Ram, comes at night and we have dinner together and sleep together. Then he sets off at dawn. And I just write the whole novel at the rate of ten or more hours a day straight off on to the computer and that's it. I don't listen to the radio, read newspapers, and no-one telephones me for this and that. Phase three, I go back to normal life, work on it every morning for a couple of hours most days. Seeing it now, from a reader's point of view. Is it balanced. Maybe that character should be scrapped. That kind of thing. Phase four is reworks. After four friends of mine read it. Then after my literary agent, and editor read it. All this to say, that at that phase two part, I write as if I've harnessed and have conscious control of the bit of my brain that in my sleep invents dreams. But only just. I sort of let the novel write itself. I put the second hand ledgers next to me, as a work on the computer looking over the sea. But I don't actually open them.

This of course means I feel very exposed by my novels. And quite vulnerable about them. And I have to be brave to have everyone read them. Not because of criticism of what I've written. This I haven't so far minded. But because of feeling naked, and thus open to attack. I only just have faith enough in humans to do it. And of course my faith got a bit shaken when I was, in fact, so violently attacked on the publication of *The Rape of Sita*. But I think I share this feeling with all artists. That I've shown my private mind to the public.

T: How central would you say this willingness to open one's self up to attack is to the overall goal of being a writer? Does it express itself only in responses—or potential responses—to a finished product, or does it express itself in other ways, as well? If you were faced with an inexperienced writer who found their writing hampered by precisely this possibility, what advice might you give them?

L.C: A writer has to brave opening one's self to attack, although this would not be the goal so much as the risk of the adventure. The goal, strange as it may seem because I write on what seem like perhaps heavy subjects, is to please people. Not in a flattering way, but in some other deep way. By the story itself, with all its surprises, and then also by perhaps giving people a chance to recognize things in themselves that I have found in myself and knitted into the story. Things that are, at some level, already known to the reader, and seeing them "out there" gives pleasure.

Advice to a young writer who might be daunted by fear of exposure, I'd say that it's a fear you have to live with. That if you have been as honest as you can be in your story, then readers and even critics are very generous in appreciating this sharing. Of course, you can also get the very rare rather sadistic person who now knows what might hurt you and uses it. But this is really their problem, rather than the writers', and with experience, one can, just in time, realize this.

T: You mentioned a character in *Mutiny*, Mama Gracienne, as one you became very close to during the writing of that novel. This is a character I found to be particularly easy to empathize with, though in sometimes very problematic ways. In truth, Leila and Juna, the other two inhabitants of the prison cell, should probably have been much easier to relate to, as their life experiences are probably much closer to my own, at least in a relative sense. Mama Gracienne is much more elusive—almost ghost-like at times—and much less clearly physically defined for me than either of the other two. Of specific interest to me was the description of the events leading to Mama Gracienne's incarceration, in which she responds to the uncertainty surrounding her daughter's death by claiming responsibility for that death. Mama Gracienne strikes me as being, in this episode, the antithesis of that drive we spoke of, in regards to *The Rape of Sita*, to "make visible," through her own decision to "hide the unknown" as well as hide from it. This is contrasted with Juna, who, through all her thoughts and actions, demonstrates

both her thirst for such knowledge and her basic mistrust of the official version of that knowledge. Yet, in the Postscript to *Mutiny*, Juna replaces Mama Gracienne in a sense, with her observation that "In here, it's me, of all people, they call 'Mama' now." The question I have, in this regard, is not to do with any "real meaning" of the novel, but the crafting of same. In your description of the way the writing process unfolds for you, you describe four phases, the third of which finds you moving into a more objective relationship with the novel by asking, for example, how a reader might see the same words. How conscious are you of relationships such as that between Juna and Mama Gracienne as you are redrafting a novel?

L.C: Perhaps what was more conscious for me was that the response of Mama Gracienne is the one from someone under feudal, or indenture or slave, domination, and we all still presumably have some of that in us, while Juna's is the response of not just a proletarian, but of someone who works in a knowledge production environment. As I wrote *Mutiny*, I was painfully aware of the difference in characterisation of Mama Gracienne, Juna and Leila. In that way, they exist in the novel. In my mind they are also partly the past, the ghost-like presence of Mama Gracienne, the present, the attempt that Juna is involved in at living the very moment and trying to do it in good faith, and the future, in the sulky, unpredictable, slightly opaque and heavy presence of Leila. But it is still strange that Mama Gracienne, crafted so much in a dream mode, should feel so close. Maybe, as I think of it now, the genesis of the characters come from different types of experience. Mama Gracienne was born of a real life experience Ram and I had of the reaction of two women we know very well to an unexplained and unexplainable death. So, she was born of a weird experience we shared. Of an unusual *atmosphere*. Something quite ghost-like that we lived. Whereas Juna was born from knowing and consciously thinking about the position of youngish women technicians who I know in Mauritius. Perhaps people don't often realize that with delocalization of soft-ware production and data-capture and data organization, a whole generation of people in poorish countries, who work as technicians suddenly know all sorts of amazing things: they know the trend in fiction in three to six months time in Europe, or what's coming out in the scientific world soon, or how museums are going electronic and cyber, or how water works privatizing companies plan their take-overs. They know all this because they type it and proofread it, at one level, and they organize how to plan the storing of this information, at the level of the higher technicians. So Juna was born out of my contemplation of the meaning of this for their consciousness. And then Leila was born of a kind of regret. Close friends of ours, but who we had lost contact with for about ten years, had problems with their daughter having got arrested and fallen into "bad ways", and they formally asked if Ram and I would have her to stay when she got out of Borstal, the children's reform prison. They said she would have liked that, and she was very angry with them. And Ram and I being in a political struggle, really could not accept. So, Leila got born out of the deep regret I felt at our not being able to have the child stay. Out of a feeling.

T: You mentioned two languages, Kreol and Hindi, and in fact, your most recent book, *Boy*, is an English reworking of a novel you originally wrote in Mauritian. What is the relationship, politically and socially speaking, between these languages, in Mauritius? Is there social status associated with knowledge of each? How conversant are you in each of these languages, and how do you see knowledge of these various languages informing your writing?

L.C: The most important language in Mauritius is Mauritian Kreol. It is the language we almost all live in. And yet it has until very recently been all but banned by the authorities



and elites. In the workers' education association I'm a member of, one of our two main aims is to nurture and promote Mauritian Kreol. Through this work, I've learnt that far from being "inferior languages" as colonial ideology claimed they were, or "broken French" or "gutter talk" (I once heard a Francophone man refer to them in a formal debate as this "charabia et baraguin") that the Kreol languages of the world, maybe around a hundred of them, are uniquely efficient. And if you can crack their grammar – which is remarkable similar for all of them – it's as though you've understood human grammar. Because Kreol languages are languages born suddenly, out of a cataclysm, like, say, slavery. And they are not overlaid with all sorts of socially compulsory but grammatically useless forms, as many languages that have evolved slowly are. And for the first time last year, 2004, the Government of Mauritius, in response to long political struggles against successive government's policies, announced that the mother tongues will be used in written form in schools and in Parliament. So far, it's announcement. But this is a major change, because the State has always suppressed the mother tongues, mainly Kreol and Mauritian Bhojpuri, an Indian language that has taken a Mauritian form.

The official language and the language, until now, that is the medium in schools from primary level (and often even preprimary, until they were taken to court for it) is English, the languages of the most recent colonizers, which hardly anyone speaks as their language. That's what children learn their arithmetic in, and later their physics and art and commerce in, and it is a major handicap. The language of the elite is French. It is claimed to be spoken by some 2 to 3 percent of the population, according to the Official Census, but the press is largely in French—though recently, direct quotes are all suddenly turning into Mauritian Kreol.

Similarly, but with less crass elitism, the Oriental languages taught at school do not include Bhojpuri which is still an important rural vernacular, spoken by some 15% of the people as their first language. Schools from primary level give a choice of Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Marathi, Tamil, Mandarin and Urdu. Interestingly, most of the people who speak a Chinese language speak Hakka, while in school only Mandarin is offered.

How all this affects my writing I don't really know. I think it may have given me a "trained instinct" for the relativity of language. Maybe I'm just a little bit too conscious of language, as I use it. I should also mention that I learnt to speak in three mother-tongues in South Africa. And I was the unique human in the small society I lived in from 2 to five years old who could translate all three. So I became quite aware of linguistic relativity and socio-linguistics from a rather young age.

T: On a related note, you earlier mentioned your story-telling work with Anne-Marie Sophie, and your own association of Iqbal's story-telling with South African traditions. I note that Anne-Marie Sophie is mentioned in the acknowledgements of *Mutiny*, which was first published in 2001. How long have you been working with her?

L.C: Perhaps since about 1985 in quite a formal way, with a recent break while she was both looking after her son with a malignant growth and having a new baby girl. She didn't have the time or really the peace of mind. But our gig is starting up again as her boy's health has stabilized and the little girl is getting bigger.

T: The form you describe, in this story-telling, in which there are two people on stage, one charged with telling the story differently each time, and the other with remembering the original version—and correcting it on stage—is suggestive of a form that, were it encountered by an audience from the United States or Britain, would probably be most closely associated with comedy. How much laughter is involved in being publicly corrected?

L.C: This is always funny. And stylized. And I have to accept what she says as gospel. There's always laughter.

T: In light of your work in story-telling, how communal an effort do you regard literature to be, in both its written and spoken form, and what features would you identify as primary distinguishing characteristics between literacy and orality?

L.C: Writing a novel, however individual it is when you see someone sitting there all alone at a computer, is actually is a collective endeavour at all sorts of levels. Of course, the raw material in one's memory, which is the stuff of which novels are made, comes from collective experiences. Sometimes quite consciously so, sometimes partly consciously so. At a deeper level, the words a writer uses, the grammatical structures, the symbols, the idiom, all exists as a collective heritage, too. And this, too, we craft quite consciously. In a way, I feel I write in relation to all that I've ever read. Some of what I've read obviously influences me directly, overtly, even in a specifically chosen way, but most in a way that it's there, in relation to what I'm writing. I become very aware of the contrast, for example, when I wrote *Misyon Garson* in Mauritian Kreol. It was the first ever full-length novel in Mauritian Kreol. So, in a way, writing it was more lonely. And I was acutely aware of the words of existing Mauritian playwrights like Henri Favory and poets like Dev Virahsawmy, whose work I have read. And when writing in a little written language, one is both free of the historical weight of written words and also burdened by all sorts of craft issues, from spelling to commas, and we find ourselves creating the literary language, feeling it develop its dynamic relationship with spoken language. One is free to write, knowing that when the reader sees something in writing for the very first time ever, although it exists in spoken language quite definitely, it has a special wonder all of its own, already built in. Often a kind of sudden-laugh comic aspect. This may come from the natural human capacity (given that one has lived collectively, in a society, and is not an enfant sauvage, and conceding that the specific language/s one speaks is/are socially determined) to speak a language, or sign language, while it is a very specific learning experience to acquire reading and writing capacities, nothing natural in it at all.

Writing is collective also, in the way I find myself writing for people. This feeling that writing is a kind of instinct to give. For me, it's writing for specific friends. For some friends, they are with me throughout my writing, while for others, I write a bit for someone particular. I know they will like it. Although, strangely, I would not specifically ask them if they had noticed it, or anything. So, as I reply to your question, I'm realizing that it's a kind of internal process really. A theatre of my mind.

And then, writing novels for me also involves the very real driving impulse to write in novel form to give shape to some experience that has a deep, perhaps political or social meaning for me, and that is not expressible in any other form, in particular any other form that it would be easier for me to express it in. This last phrase implies, and accurately so, that I am partly hedonist. I enjoy life, and writing, while pleasing in all the ways I often mention, it is also sometimes quite burdensome. Maybe the size of a novel. Maybe sitting down too long. Maybe losing faith that it'll ever be of any value to anyone who reads it. Right now, as I write these words, I'm feeling the burden of an umpteenth re-work of *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*, which I'm still in the middle of. Let me refer to one of the impulses for part of *Boy*. While do-gooders in Mauritian society went hysterical about the real problem of drugs, the Mauritian government responded by introducing the death penalty for drug dealing. And the very first person arrested was a very young woman, hardly of age, from the countryside in India, who had brought drugs in a suitcase with a false bottom for her employer. She worked as a cleaner in a Bombay hotel. How does one deal with the enormity of this in just an article?

Finally, there is a stage, and this in a much more literal sense, when I actually change my finished draft in direct response to helpful comments by my first readers in Mauritius, and my literary agent and editors. They all add a lot to the novel. And the people who plan the layout, the typeface, the book design in general, and the printers and binders, all add to making a novel a collective work. Even to get hold of one, one has to negotiate a whole network of wholesalers, shippers, retailers, sales personnel, and to rely on

suggestions by critics and work-of-mouth recommendations. Or, like one reader who sent me a lovely letter: she picked up a copy in a cheap hotel in Chili when she was travelling around Latin America. The previous guest had left it there.

Telling stories orally is more collective in a palpable way. The audience has to request a story, or at very least, badly want it. The atmosphere has to be created anew every time. And there has to be a very direct response. The honesty of the relationship is challenged on the spot. They will know if you are not saying what you intend yourself to say. And if you accede to their demands, or to the questioning of Anne-Marie, for example, it has to be after a second's genuine reflection, that you genuinely take the point. If you just accept it, it wouldn't make sense.

T: Has your work as a story-teller ever served as a prompt, with an idea for a written story originating in this format? Do you find it functioning as a means to hone a story—or to explore potential variations on a given story? How close a relationship do you think your work as a story-teller and your work as a writer share?

L.C: Although I had always been longing to write novels, and I have them queueing up in my head by the demi-dozen at any one time, I don't think I would have ever managed even one novel had I not fallen into this story-telling mode with Anne-Marie. This is what made me love telling stories, and this is my main driving force to write a new novel. There are bits and pieces of these oral stories in all my novels, often reworked out of all proportion, but still recognisable to everyone who knows them, and they sort of weave in and out. This means that my friends (who I must admit I actually write for, when I'm writing, rather than for any more general public – other readers are a sort-of extra plus for me, something exceptionally generous life has given me, readers I don't even know!) have got all sorts of additional extra levels in the stories. This has become such a part of life, that friends now say "Can you put such-and-such a thing into your next novel Lindsey?". I mean they do requests like on a radio program, and I usually answer, "Yes, I'll oblige!" The dog in *Getting Rid of It* was a specific request. And then sometimes, there are just little individual presents: the way a character puts her tika on for one friend, the name of a character for another, a shard of a private story that no-one else will recognise for someone else.

In some ways I see story-telling as something like making a gift. A kind of gift relationship. And when people like the gift, it is a source of pleasure in addition to the preparing of it. This means that there is some conflict in my feelings when I see a book maybe becoming a commodity. And it is important to me that people read beyond this commodity, and I think many people do. One woman, her psychiatrist told me, had come to Reunion Island because she wanted to commit suicide by jumping into the live volcano there—this really is a true story—and the gendarmes and helicopters were then sent out and "saved" her, and she ended up at the government hospital under the psychiatrist's care. The psychiatrist couldn't get through to her much, because she was very disturbed, from very early-life maltreatment, and very self-destructive. And he had a copy of *There is a Tide* on his desk. It caught her eye, so he asked her to translate it into French. She knew English very well. And through the process of translating it, and discussing it with the doctor, it became what he called bibliotherapy, and kept her with a link to life for nearly a year. A few years later, she did die at her own hand anyway. But maybe the stories in that novel helped her a bit, and others maybe could have stabilized her enough to live a happy life, who knows? So maybe literature has use. I'm sure it has in more vague ways, too.

T: How aware of that listener do you think you are in your writing? Clearly you see a link between that "gift relationship" characterizing your storytelling and a conflict arising from the possibility of a book being regarded solely as commodities. It seems to me that those points upon which you are willing to defer to the listener, what listeners you are more likely to defer to, and what is likely to constitute good grounds for so deferring to a listener are all important components of the writing craft, as well as being central to a

writer's sense of their identity within that craft. How would you describe this relationship, and how do you see it shaping your writing?

L.C: One has to defer to one's readers a lot, I think. To respond. To have them with one. To listen to their hearts as well as one's own. This relationship is central to my writing. But this is not the same as something sold through advertising campaigns designed to trick people, as indeed so much of what is around us is. Books, being just one.