

Interview with Priya Basil

Introduction

Born to Indian parents in London in 1977, the author and political activist Priya Basil has lived in many different places: Nairobi, Kenya; Bristol, UK, and now Berlin, Germany. After her English Literature studies at Bristol and working in advertisement for three years, she started writing. It is safe to assume that she has experienced many transcultural encounters.

In her two novels, cultural entanglements are often central to the characters' stories. Her debut novel *Ishq and Mushq*, published in 2007, tells a family tale between India, Kenya and Britain which was influenced by Priya Basil's own family history. In her second novel *The Obscure Logic of the Heart*, Priya Basil gives us insights into the lives of two star-crossed lovers who have to overcome various personal obstacles concerning religion, family expectations and personal wishes in a globalized world. Again, the story spans three continents, dealing with both South-South and North-South relations.

In 2011, Priya Basil published her first short story "Strangers on the 16:02" within the frame of Quick Reads. She has further written multiple articles and essays for the *Guardian*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Lettre International*.

In 2010 Priya Basil initiated the platform Authors for Peace; she is also a supporter of the Control Arms Campaign. The dialogue between the female British Muslim protagonist Lina and her Kenyan Asian lover Anil ("You are always making plans" - "Because plans are how you tame the future") might tell us to take action and plan our future in order to create a more peaceful one. In fact, Priya is convinced that literature can shift people's minds to make a difference in the world.

Priya Basil, thank you for taking the time for this interview within the frame of this AFRASO conference here at Goethe University Frankfurt. In another interview with Deutsche Welle a few years ago, you remarked that Frankfurt is more multicultural than Berlin. Would you say that this is still the case?

I got on the tube on Tuesday afternoon soon after arriving here, and I did feel again like this city is, at least from a visual point of view, more multicultural. I think that Berlin is diverse, but it is mainly a kind of white European or Anglophone internationalism. I see many more black people in Frankfurt than I do in Berlin where there's a very different kind of internationalism because of the city's art and culture scene.

With regard to your writing, you have remained "at home" in the English language. Still, you integrate Hindi and other languages into your novels. This is also the case with your first novel's title: Ishq and Mushq. You or the publisher opted for giving an English translation of those two words on the cover. On which grounds did you choose the title and its translation on the cover?

I've used Hindi and Swahili words in my first two novels. I was surprised when the publisher kept the title of the first novel. I expected to be told "That title is a bit too foreign and strange for people". I really thought they would ask me to change it. So I was pleased that it went through. I guess the publisher hoped readers would be drawn

to something they do not understand. But, at the same time, they didn't want to leave the reader puzzled for too long – so a translation of the title is also included on the book cover. The translation is also the first sentence of the novel and so in a way it leads you right into the story. It was a pragmatic decision, on the one hand to attract through strangeness, on the other hand to not strand the reader in that strangeness for too long.

Now we would like to address issues vital to the research project AFRASO, and want to start with the broad question on which relations you see between Africa and Asia today? What are your thoughts on Africa's Asian options?

For me, those places have always been connected because of my own family history. My grandparents came from India during the British Raj to work on building the railways in East Africa. So these worlds were always linked in my mind, and this seemed to me the most natural thing – so much so that until now, reflecting on this fact in the context of the discussions we were having today [symposium 21/01/16] – I hadn't considered this perspective as especially remarkable. It's been interesting to find my 'normality' referred to here as a "South-to-South conversation". I never considered it in those terms. It is also strange for me as a writer who deals anyway in these issues to come to such an event and to suddenly find that there is a label for what you took for granted. That happened to me before when I took part in an event titled "Third Culture". I went into it wondering, "third culture" – what is this? Sometimes, people put you into categories that you then have to define yourself within or against. I realized that the term "Third Culture" applies when you are born into one culture that is not yours and then you move into another culture that is also not yours – so you end up three cultural steps from where you started. I thought "Wow, how nice that this condition, which I have always been in, has a name!" So, while labels and categories limit, they can also serve to make you more conscious of something which you were grappling with anyway. I guess there will always be tension between how far the labels help and how far they restrict.

Africa's Asian options... that's more complicated. In a way, I am inclined to see the new involvement of China in Africa in a critical light. I recently read David Van Reybrouk's book *Congo*, and when I saw how the Chinese are involved in the mining industry and the condition under which they employ people, it really made me think about a new kind of colonization. On the other hand, it was really interesting to see that there is also very active movement of people from Congo to China and that loads of young African entrepreneurs are going to Guangzhou, buying stuff there and taking it back to sell in their own countries. And these people really appreciate what this possibility has opened up for them: new trade connections and new prospects of prosperity. So, I think, as always, there's a double bind. There are really good things that come from these exchanges and there are also consequences that are not positive. In Kenya, we have some better roads thanks to the Chinese, and now China is involved in building a cross-Kenya railway line. You could argue that there is a major difference with British colonialism in the sense that the Chinese are in Kenya at the behest of the Kenyan government.

In terms of Kenya and India, there is a strong trade relationship. I think India is one of the largest exporters to Kenya. The Indian community in Kenya is small (around 80,000) but economically influential. I am not sure about the extent of cultural relations

between India and Kenya, though in recent years the Indian government has offered scholarships in various fields to Kenyan students.

Thinking about the “myth of return”, would you say that Africans who go to China definitely have the intention to return eventually?

There are some who remain there. In Van Reybrouk’s book the Congolese who went described how at first they were really regarded as novelties in China because of their appearance, in the way that white people were when they first went to Africa. So there was curiosity and sometimes friendliness, but eventually most of them experienced racism and resentment. So many of them do not remain because of this and also because it is quite difficult to stay on legally. But there are some who do manage to find a way. Most are just traveling to China for commercial reasons; they are trading, buying a lot of stuff and taking it back and selling it.

In your novel Ishq and Mushq you used historical connections between India, Africa and England to build the story. How has your research for this novel influenced your knowledge about these connections? Which new facets, if any, did you discover while writing?

That is a really good question. Let us say that the discoveries were in the details. No major, new overarching connections emerged that I was not aware of when I started. For me, it was quite clear that there was this trajectory, there was this journey between continents and I knew why it had happened, but not enough about how parts of it would have been. I had no idea what it was like to be on one of the ships coming from India to Kenya in the 1940s. I did some research, speaking with my grandparents, speaking to other people who made that journey. I also was unaware of how it was during Partition in India, about the refugee camps that people ended up in and the extent of the violence. My knowledge was too general. I had heard family stories, but reading to find out more gave a context to these stories and deepened my connection to them. Family stories have a kind of mythic quality. They are not so tied to time. When you write something you place it in time and you start noticing things in relation to each other in a very concrete way. For example, my fictional character Karam goes to the UK at the time of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth – a concrete, actual event. I began to see that things are happening simultaneously – the personal story, the fictional one and history. The public record helped to root the private one. History grounded the family legends, made them more commonplace. It fixed them to temporal reality, which was also interesting because they became smaller somehow in the wider historical dimension. That was unexpected for me. With the first novel, I did not do so much research. It was more about how to find the flesh around what I knew. With the second novel, which was partly set in Sudan, there was literally new territory that I had to go learn about from scratch. I guess, that is sometimes the bonus of the first book, of a personal, more biographically-driven story. You have to grapple with so much anyhow when you start writing. There are so many challenges that it is quite nice if the skeleton of a story is already there and you do not have to work so hard on every single element: to research, as well as invent a plot, as well as create characters, as well as just figure out how to write. Writing is hard enough and it is quite nice if some aspect is already a given the first time.

What do these relations between the two continents, and more specifically between Kenya and India, mean to you and to your everyday life?

The fact that my dad and my brother, and a few old friends, are still in Kenya means that I remain connected to the place in a tangible way. Otherwise, I'm not sure my link with the country would feel so 'live'. When I read about terror threats or attacks on Kenya, for instance, I'm not just troubled in a general way, I'm immediately also worried about the implications for the people I know who are there. I think this is very human, this sense of feeling more attached to a place and more affected by what happens there because of concern for loved ones who live there.

So Kenya is still very much part of my psychic geography, even though I do not feel any kind of nostalgia for my life there. I don't have a strong desire to go back.

The connection to the country has also been kept alive through my writing. Parts of my first two novels are set there. More recently, for the Tübingen Writer's Lectureship, I wrote a long essay about my childhood in Kenya and this involved a painful reckoning with the past. For the first time I confronted the racism inherent in my own upbringing and this made me realize how decisive my relationship to Kenya still is.

The fact that Kenya is part of my biography means that I am often considered as an 'African' writer as well, and asked to contribute in various ways on the basis on this identity. For example, I was invited to moderate an event with young rappers from Kenya at the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Berlin. I really like such opportunities because they help to maintain my connection to Kenya, even growing it, in different ways. So although I may sometimes resent being labeled 'African writer', it has some real advantages: certain parts of myself that would perhaps stay quieter are suddenly brought to the fore again and activated. This can be very inspiring.

I have started to think about my past and the migration story of my family in a different way since the summer of 2015, and the new migration reality in Germany. I was always the one who moved, who joined a new society. Now, I am the one in a society where people are arriving in large numbers. I am in the society which feels that something is changing in a big way and is trying to work out how to respond. This is quite a new experience, to see it from the other side and to be the one who must receive others and consider your responsibility to others. How much can you ask of another person? How much must you change? What matters the most? These old questions have all come up in me again in a very fresh way. So in that sense, the Kenyan and Indian parts of me are alive and resurgent in a different way, even if not specifically as those particular identities.

I suppose my Indian side does find more every day expression. I cook a lot of Indian food. My husband and I are vegetarians, and it is a very good cuisine for vegetarians. I still speak Punjabi to my grandmother, and we talk quite regularly, so the language is still vivid to me. I was very sad when my grandfather died two and a half years ago because there is a special greeting we have in Punjabi – Sat Siri Akal – and he was the person I said it to the most often and I hardly say it anymore because he is not there. It is very strange to realize that you begin to lose parts of your culture because you lose the people with whom that particular expression of the culture was possible.

In my latest novel, the main character is an Indian artist who is already dead when the story begins. He was an orphaned child, brought to the UK from India while still a

baby, and the place in the world where he ends up feeling most at home is a mountain in Italy. The whole question of identity – what makes the individual, and how much of the self can be fashioned by one’s own choices – was very present as I wrote the story. I guess this preoccupation with identity emerges from my own effort to reconcile the different parts of myself. The Indian, Kenyan, British heritage now has to contend with a new European identity which has developed after living in Germany for more than a decade.

As this interview is connected to the conference “World Literature from the Global South”, we are very much interested in your own notion or definition of world literature. Could you state some of your thoughts on what makes a piece of literature “World Literature”?

Well, I was very grateful for this invitation because it was an opportunity to reflect on these categories if only in a kind of very doubting, questioning and antagonistic kind of way. Having listened to different people’s arguments about “World Literature”, I feel even more ambivalent about the term. I see its value more and I also see its value less. It is a very strange position to have arrived at but then again maybe it is not so strange. Being in the academic context of the conference made me aware of how tricky it is to define anything because the moment you make any statement you set up its opposite – which is not necessarily a contradiction. Arguments can become very cumbersome as you try to accommodate complexity and qualify any position. This confirmed my sense that fiction is really the best form for exploring ideas because it accommodates complexity and contradiction in a nuanced and intense way that no other mode can match.

I mentioned [during the conference] that at one point I wondered if the very international settings of my books gave them this quality of being “World Literature”. Yet I know from books that I love reading, which are very precisely situated in just one small place, that how a book or how a novel affects you has nothing to do with its geographic scope.

“Literature” is such a wonderfully capacious word in itself. Good literature takes the reader out of her world into a new one, or shows a known world anew. Maybe the word “world” belongs next to the word “literature” ‘only’ in this sense.

So, you did not actually think about the term before, you never used it for yourself, to describe yourself.

No.

This shows that you can be in this category without knowing its name.

I have heard and read about the term “global novel”. I always felt a little bit at odds with it, for the same reasons that I am ambivalent about “World Literature”. On the other hand, as I said [during the conference], somebody remarked after reading my latest book that it is a “global novel”. I found this interesting because the novel is not so sprawling in its geography as the previous ones. The comment pleased me, maybe because it spoke to an insecurity I feel of having written something that is not entirely reflective of the way I feel in the world, which is to say many sided, a bit spread out all over the place. The person used the word “global” for my novel because, in her view, its themes have a particular relevance for the whole world right now. I thought that was an

interesting way to conceive of “global”. At the same time, it also seems rather reductive, to think that something is “world” or “global” because it is relevant to everyone. I like it when things seem completely irrelevant but make a claim on your attention and emotion. I believe in literature as a space where writers can use any means to provoke, inspire and touch the reader.

You would like to get people moving. In other interviews you have mentioned literature’s importance and value in German society (e.g. length of readings, fixed prices for books etc.). Could you tell us about the author’s role in African/ Kenyan and Indian society?

This is a really interesting question, but I don’t think I can answer it because I have only really been a writer in Germany. I have not really experienced life as a writer in the UK, or only in a very limited way – through participation in some events and festivals. My sense of myself as a writer has developed here in Germany and I feel that it is actually a great country in which to be a writer, possibly the best in the world, because books really matter in this society. The fact that there is still a Fixed Book Price in Germany has ensured that there are many thriving independent bookshops, and people are prepared to pay reasonable amounts of money for books. You do not have any of the 3 for £10 offers that are common in chain bookshops and supermarkets in the UK. Writers also get paid to do readings – something that is not common in the UK where every event is presented as an opportunity for PR, which the writer should be grateful to be granted.

Germany invests a lot in the Arts and there are various stipends and residencies, which can sustain a writer through difficult periods. In the UK and the US, many writers end up teaching creative writing as a way to earn a living and keep writing. In Germany, I think there are only a couple of universities which offer creative writing as a degree course, so this is not a viable option. For me, the most striking thing is that writers in Germany are valued not just for their writing, but also for their political views. Writers are often asked to reflect on politics and some even get actively involved. Politicians meet with writers and other artists for informal talks about current affairs. The Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier also holds public discussions with authors. I think this dialogue between literature and politics is fascinating.

I do not know personally how it is to be writer in India or in Kenya. I have not toured with my book in India at all, so I do not even have that distant experience of being received as a writer there. I did do a couple of interviews when I was in Nairobi a few years ago, but they were more one-to-one and radio and newspaper interviews. I think it is much tougher to be a writer – and live from your writing – in India or Kenya, certainly this is my impression from speaking to other writers, like Mukoma wa Ngugi. If you write in English you immediately have easier access to the publishing industry and the rest of the world. English is an official language in Kenya and India, but there are many other languages and dialects in both countries. Writing in one of those must make it even tougher to establish yourself as writer.

Do you then write with the thought in mind that this book will be mostly read in Germany or the UK? Or maybe do you not think about who is going to read your book at all or you just write it for yourself?

No, I am not really thinking about who is going to read it. I am writing the sort of book

that I would like to read. Books are always a really wonderful chance to explore - I mean from a very selfish point of view - the things that interest you, or that are troubling you, or that you want to work out, or are just somehow demanding your attention at any given moment, perhaps for reasons you cannot even explain. I still feel it is an enormous privilege to be able to sit alone for hours and have the chance to grapple with these ideas that are in your mind, and to find a way to give them shape and personality and purpose in the frame of a story.

Priya Basil, thank you so much for the interview.

Interview conducted by Michelle Stork und Noemi Hendrich (Frankfurt, 21 January, 2016)