WRITERS MOSAIC

Niven Govinden

In Conversation with Roopa Farooki

Roopa Farooki (RF): Hi, I'm Roopa Farooki.

Niven Govinden (NG): Hi, I'm Niven Govinden.

RF: And we're here in the RLF basement to talk about Niven's work. Niven's an amazing writer who I've been wanting to chat to for a while, so I'm really glad that we managed to get him here to talk about his five novels, which show an incredible trajectory in terms of themes explored, moving from the personal to the very political; particularly taking into account his latest work. Now, I wanted to talk to you about your books because for me, they demonstrate a real daring and intimacy, and they're hugely varied. And I wondered if you could tell me a little bit about the very start of your journey.

NG: So, I guess I was just a very, very, precocious child and I knew from a really young age, probably from about 10, really, that I really enjoyed writing; and I think I had a very clear notion from about the age of 15 or 16, when I first read Hubert Selby

Jr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and also I started reading Hanif Kureishi at that time, that actually if there was a job I wanted to do, that was what I wanted to do. And I started to think very seriously about how I could actually make that happen.

RF: Which Hanif Kureishi was it, out of interest?

NG: Well, when I was coming of age in the late 80s, early 90s, he was having a very prolific period. The very first thing I read actually was the script for *My Beautiful Launderette*.

RF: Oh wow, yeah.

NG: About, sort of about 16. And then he was just very much on my mind. And at that point then um, what's the first novel called?

RF: Um, *Buddha of Suburbia.*

NG: *Buddha of Suburbia.* Um, and then actually, I read all his play texts first while waiting for *Buddha of Suburbia*, which was '91. So, that was when I was 18. And then *London Kills Me*; *My Son the Fanatic.* So, there was a period of about five or six years where he was very much like one of my cornerstones. He came from punk. He was really radical; I mean *My Beautiful Launderette* is about identity, it's about family, it's really radical, it's unapologetically queer.

So, just all those things really appealed to me as a teenager, and he was very much the first sort of modern writer when I was that age who not only could I see myself in the work, but more specifically in a more mercenary way, I could sort of see—actually I could see myself as a writer because I can see him as a—and not just a writer, as a superstar writer; because he was, you know, he was always in really cool magazines and he was like a little pop star running about; and that kind of really appealed to me.

I was a really prolific reader, you know, all through my childhood but especially my teenage years; I was reading everything because I knew that I really wanted to write. But outside of that like, you know, I was really influenced by street culture and music and fashion and particularly fashion writing of the sort of mid to late 80s just from reading *i-D* (magazine) when I was like 14 and 15 and being influenced by everyone from like John Godfrey to Judy Blame and Mark Lebon and all those people who was mixed with all those things that had a real clear impact on what I wanted to write and what I wanted to see in literature that I didn't see in literature. So, I was really looking at trying to use that energy and take what I was feeling and seeing but putting it in a literary way.

RF: And then you had your background in conceptual art, is that right?

NG: I did a film degree. It was half making films for three years, but the other half was critical theory. In those days, you didn't have writing degrees the way you do now and especially not for, you know, for an undergraduate degree. So, I was just kind of doing all those, you know, following all those kinds of lines of enquiry

because I just wanted to sort of hoover up a lot of knowledge and also making films for three years really taught me the essence of narrative in a way that I wouldn't have if I had gone—if I'd just done an English degree. Throughout that time, that three years I was doing my degree, I was literally writing stories every week. I was constantly, constantly, constantly writing. It was the only thing that I really, you know, wanted to do; I was consumed by it.

RF: So, that kind of unique apprenticeship and all those images and ideas and that music, that all coalesced into this kind of explosive zeitgeist-slicing first novel, *We Are the New Romantics.*

NG: Yeah. I mean, it really put a full stop on everything I had written up to that point because everything I had written up to that point was very much about nightlife and young people and it was the same sort of territory that Irving Welsh was mining at the same time; but mine was very different. It was very diverse, you know, we would now say it was intersectional. But, you know, the clubs I was going to at the time were really, you know, you'd be dancing with, like, builders; you'd be dancing with little, sort of, west London girls. It was a real mix and, you know, street culture. There was a real sort of dynamic to London at that time. So, I guess that was what I was trying to capture, and I wanted it to feel sort of a bit bratty and a bit punky, and a bit anarchic; but also that it would feel really intelligent at the same time because also, you know, I was really obsessed with writing really strong sentences. I guess I was a real snob about literature [RF laughs]. So I always knew, I always knew what was good and what was bad. You know, when I was at university, I worked in a bookshop for a couple of years part-time, like on Saturdays, and hanging out in Covent Garden

with all the fashion people; and I worked in the bookshop across the road. And I always knew the books that I wanted to read and the books I didn't want to read; and that really informs the kind of books you want to write, I think.

RF: Do you think that's why you didn't give them a happy ending?

NG: I don't really want to go for the obvious endings and also, life isn't necessarily about that. I mean in a perverse way, you know, I'm actually a very 'half-full glass' kind of person. I'm not—I'm a pragmatist but I'm not a pessimist. I think that's the difference. But actually when I'm writing, I'm really, really always thinking about the characters I write and what I'm trying to write about. I'm trying to give something that has truth to it and, for me, happy endings aren't really an ending; they're more of a semi-colon.

RF: So, how would you describe that first novel, *We Are the New Romantics* to people who don't know about it and wanted to know a little bit more about your work?

NG: It's revisionist take on Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night.* So, you've got a guy and a girl. They do their sort of version of a grand tour in a 90s sort of way. So, literally they're just going across town, cities across Europe: Madrid, Paris, they go to the South of France, they go to the Auvergne; and they're literally just going to clubs and hooking up with unsuitable people. I wanted it to feel on a political level that it felt unapologetically queer; so it's really quite cruisey.

And there's two narrators: the guy, DJ, and his best friend, who's a girl called Amy. And the book sort of uses both their voices to sort of tell you the story of their relationship, as they're travelling around Europe. And you kind of get the feeling that it's probably going to end badly because they're both quite sort of narcissistic. I mean people sort of said at the time it felt sort of quite nihilistic and it's got that sort of party atmosphere. I really wanted to convey a sense of anxiety in a certain young, queer sensibility.

So, you've got a very sort of hedonistic, young kid who's grown up as a child in the shadow of AIDS, but he's come of age in a sort of post-AIDS environment where, you know, the pharmaceutical industry has taken away the fear of being a sexually active young person. And also, this is in a pre-social media world. There's a massive anxiety about forming strong relationships that actually last; not only in terms of sexual relationships but just like solid friendships. So, it was really an exploration of that sort of level of anxiety. There is a sort of really wonderful period, I think, in your twenties, where everything is in front of you. But that period does end, and you have to think about what happens next and they're in that, they're living that period to such an intensity, they're too scared to really think about what comes next. And that's what I was really trying to explore.

RF: And then in your next piece from having looked at what it's like to be that kind of, that person in their twenties who, you know, are in that absolute golden age, you went right back to these teen friendships and they're traumatic teen friendships and ultimately quite tragic. And on the cover of the book it's very funny because it says, 'This happens in Surrey where nothing ever happens.'

NG: Yeah.

RF: And then this is the story where *everything* happens. You kind of put the tragedy face up, I think, on the first couple of pages.

NG: Yeah.

RF: And then it's the unfolding of that. What made you want to voice those kind of, I guess, disenfranchised teen characters?

NG: My first motivation for *Graffiti My Soul* was that I really wanted to write a love letter to the suburbs. So every book I do is always a reaction to the last one, which is sort of a natural thing for most writers, because when you commit to a novel, you know, for me, and also because I write by hand, it takes ages. It takes me between like three and five years to write a novel, really. So, if you're going to commit for that amount of time, you have to be really sure that you believe in what you want to do. So, I don't necessarily start on a whim; I start from a really strongly held belief. I have an idea what I want to talk about, and I have a sort of rough idea of what the structure might be.

I also really wanted to write a sort of coming-of-age story; and because most people do that as their first book, I sort of felt I could do it for my second book. So, the book is about a guy called Veerapen who's half-Tamil, half-Jewish. He lives in Surrey with his mother. His parents have split up; he's quite angry about it. And he's a really

talented runner and he basically is trying to—he's really been encouraged by his running club, and he's got the potential to actually compete, but he's got the potential to compete at quite a high level, if he really puts his mind to it, and the same thing, in terms of what he's like at school. He's incredibly clever and he could really go far, if he puts his mind to it. But he doesn't want to put his mind to it; he wants to hang out with his best friend who's a bit of a—I don't want to say 'thug', but he also has stuff that makes him angry about his life and they, you know—this was sort of in the period when 'happy slapping' was just sort of becoming a thing, and they literally ran around on bikes, and they sort of beat people up and filmed them just because it's fun. And what I really wanted to sort of get across which, you know, Kureishi was doing as well, it exists in a lot of stories, you know, in America they 'do it' in the suburbs.

It was really about the violence of the suburbs that really just comes from boredom. It isn't from an ideological belief or any kind of hatred; it's really because we're bored, and we've got nothing to do. What's interesting about this book, I think, is more complex than the first one is that the characters themselves are incredibly complex in all their different situations.

So, ultimately Veerapen feels, you know—my protagonist should feel like a hero, but he does lots of really terrible things. So, you as a reader will go through a whole load of emotions about how you feel about this character. And when you read a book, you bring all your experience and baggage to your reading of that book. So, when it came out, it was interesting because the reception I was getting, whether you—people immediately identify Veerapen, or were on his side, as compared to other

readers who were really horrified and like, ‘Why am I supposed to like this guy? I absolutely hate him. I’ve got no sympathy for him.’ It comes from what you bring as a reader and I found that really interesting.

RF: Yeah, and I think the, um, the sadness of Veerapen in some ways is what redeems him because, you know, he’s not absolutely likeable. He does, you know, compete with his friend in this kind of casual violence.

NG: Yeah.

RF: There are lots of things that are unlikeable about him but, at the same time, he gives his trainer the only chance.

NG: Yeah, he has an emotional intelligence which I think is really important, and he’s generous and he’s, he has humanity. Veerapen’s athletics trainer is a guy called Casey, who’s a trainer who is sort of down on his luck and he’s not really getting any chances because previous to working with Veerapen, he had an accusation; he had a molestation accusation which was unfounded but now no one will work with him. And because Veerapen likes—he had a reputation, and he likes the idea of working with an underdog, they form a really interesting friendship. And he sort of takes on a sort of parental role that he really, really needs in his life.

RF: So, in the, kind of, the heart of that book as well as this life in the suburbs and bringing that to light, there was very much that relationship, that emotional, unrequited relationship between Veerapen and—

NG: Moon.

RF: —and Moon.

NG: Well, they have a relationship but it's a young teenage relationship so it will go through periods of intensity, but then nothing happens at all. And he's obviously fighting himself and he also—there is this sort of tension between him and his best friend anyway. So yeah, I mean it's all about sort of misfirings of intent within relationships, I think.

RF: Yeah, and they never quite—they have this very strong friendship, but it never quite develops the way that he wants. I mean, it's interesting the way you talk about the trajectory of your work, how one book informs the next and so on. Your next book was this very close focus on a couple who seem to have it all. So—and it was actually—that was the first one of your books that I'd read.

NG: *Black Bread White Beer*.

RF: Yeah. And it—I mean, for me, it's just a very kind of microscopic investigation of what it is to be a young couple who seem to have everything and then have it all pulled away from them in just one moment—

NG: Yeah, sure.

RF: —and you explore their life over a day.

NG: Yeah.

RF: I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about it.

NG: So, *Black Bread White Beer* is set over the course of a day, and it's narrated by a guy in his thirties called Amal, who's married to Claude. They've been married—they haven't been married for that long, but they've been together a while and she became pregnant, and she's literally just had a miscarriage the night before.

So, he—the book starts with him sitting in the park waiting to get a call from the hospital to pick her up and take her home. And after he's taken her home, they're going to drive down to her parents for an event that's happening in the country where—in the village where she lives. And it follows them over the course of the day as they drive down to Sussex, and it really explores the—it's quite a microscopic sort of exploration of their relationship in the wake of this miscarriage, which really opens up—they seem perfect but there's actually a lot of fissures; and there's not really antagonism per se, but it's really about—what I really wanted to show was when they're expecting a baby, it sort of opens up possibilities and the sudden closure of those possibilities temporarily, and what that means for them reappraising the other possibilities in their relationship.

And also, I was very interested in this book exploring the reality of (a) mixed-race relationships; relationships where there's a difference in class or financial power; and

also the difference between being a sort of mixed-race couple in a very comfortable metropolitan life and then moving down to the country; and looking at micro-aggressions and all those kind of things before we were giving micro-aggressors that name.

RF: And then in the next book it's another couple and they're not meditating on a day, it's on an entire life.

NG: Yeah, sure.

RF: And again, it is a man in some way who has been made in some ways helpless by what he has done for his partner because he is her muse, so he is—there is a male muse and there is an artist and there is a lifetime of painting and work that is that, they're basically meditating on at the end of days I guess—

NG: Yeah.

RF: —what is, what has been the result of their shared life together.

NG: Yeah. So, *All the Days and Nights*, so I very much see this as a novel about art and physicality. It's about portrait painting and it's set on the east coast of America and the—there's a married couple, and Anna Brown is a really famous portrait painter. And all her life she's—you know, they're in their eighties. All her life she's only painted two people: her muse, who is her husband. They met, you know—he was sort of an itinerant worker, travelling around America and he ended up at her

farm and she just painted him, and he just stayed there. So, she paints him, and she paints uh—I don't want to say—she's like a, what we would now say is, like an art assistant but, essentially, she's sort of a housekeeper.

So, those are the two people in her life, and she only paints them; and I was really interested in this idea of that level of intensity within art, where you say, 'I'm not interested in—I'm interested in the world, so I'll sketch things but actually, in terms of my major work, I want to basically paint you in every stage of your life in everything that we do. That is where my art is and that's what I'm going to try and give you something.'

So, she's dying, and he basically leaves her, and he travels around America to look at some of the paintings that she's painted over the years wherever they're found, to try and make sense of, 'Has this life been worth it?' And while he's doing that, she's actually doing her last painting, which ends up being like her um—

RF: Her agent.

NG: —Yeah, her gallerist. So they're both—but it's only narrated by her. She speaks to him as he's travelling 'in second person'. She's saying, 'Where are you? I can see you here. I can see you there.' And it was, it was a real challenge to write, but it was a real joy to write that book. And also, I really wanted to use it as, as my sort of treatise on what creativity is.

RF: And within the trajectory of your work, um, you can really see how your previous works built up to this and allowed you to do this; because even though it's not about youth, and it's not about race, it's very much about 'difference'.

NG: Yes.

RF: And it's about that kind of, that obsession that one person can have for another, as well, which is something that we've seen from the kind of, from the very early works of that kind of toxic friendship to those, kind of, obsessive relationships.

NG: Yeah, I mean, I suppose I'm very much interested in characters finding a way to sort of live freely, or be free, in the way that they want to be, so that's an extension of it, you know.

RF: So, having written from that kind of quite tricky 'second person' for much of that book, in your fifth novel, you have this epic that is written in an even trickier [they laugh] mainly 'first person' plural for much of it. And that's very much about danger and about 'difference'. And, I guess also duty and the beauty within particular communities; particular communities in New York that are less seen. I mean, specifically you were focusing on the drag community, and it felt very much you were speaking as the narrator, Teddy, in his sections. He's speaking as a scribe for his tribe. He's trying to stand out and speak up for those who are—who cannot be heard.

NG: Yeah, I mean it's a—again it's a novel of sort of interlocking tensions between characters. I very much see *Brutal Houses* as a protest novel. And, when I finished *All the Days and Nights*, I knew that there was something in that tonally that interested me that I didn't necessarily want to let go and I was interested in exploring a different sort of epoch in America in terms of a twilight age where something is sort of dying out and people are trying to make sense of what comes next.

And so this novel is about the ball voguing community and the mothers who were basically the sort of founders of the great sort of voguing houses in New York. And the book starts on City Hall in New York, and they start a silent protest to protest against the disappearances of children within their houses. And by children, I mean, the kids who became part of their chosen family, who compete for them in Vogue Ball. So, it's very much like a little bit of a team sport I suppose per se. And children have disappeared from the streets for years, whether through homophobic, transphobic violence, poverty, many other, you know, just structural inequality that has—is a marker of queer life for maligned communities in New York. So, I knew pretty much straight away that I was going to write in a group voice, and I wanted to use 'we' because I really wanted to, to (a) I wanted it to feel like it's a sort of unspoken social history and for it to feel choral. So, I'm looking for using the novel in a different way.

So, you know, I'm constantly just trying to push myself into (a) what the novel can do for you as a reader, but what it can do for me as a writer and really how I can sort of just experiment with form and stuff. And I like, perversely, having half the book

narrated by the mothers in a group ‘We’ as a chorus, even though they don’t speak for most of the book. It’s a silent book for half the book.

Occupy was really just starting in New York, Washington and just sort of starting in London, so I was just thinking a lot about okay, well the power of protest in terms of the people remembering and also in queer culture just because, there again, there had been globally this move towards this sort of heteronormative model within legislature and just within social norms about, ‘Oh well, we’re all like each other.’ But, actually, what it’s important to remember, actually we’re not like each other when you have social injustice of kids being taken from the street and nothing being done, then that’s why these mothers needed to protest.

So, as I was writing this book, so I was thinking about Occupy, but also just having flashbacks to when I was a late teen and in my twenties in the early 90s and thinking about things like Act Up and radical queer protests and how we needed to see that again. And then suddenly as I was writing then Black Lives Matter was happening then Me Too, then Time’s Up, Extinction Rebellion, March Against Trump; it was just amazing timing, because when you write a book you have no real conception of when your book’s going to come out and what climate it will come out in because it takes such a long time.

RF: And ironically, for a book about silent protest, it’s giving a ‘voice’—

NG: Yes.

RF: —to those who cannot speak.

NG: Yeah, very much so.

RF: And, you know, you've spent five years writing this book and something you casually slipped in earlier, you wrote it by hand! You write all your books by hand?

NG: Yeah, I write them all by hand. Um, it just works for me. I mean, *We Are the New Romantics,* I wrote half by hand and then half by typewriter; because, when I was a teenager, there was a couple of typewriters in the house and my first stories I was always writing them on typewriters; but they all start by hand. And it just really works for me. I really—I trust that process in a way that I don't really enjoy just having and opening a laptop and having a blank thing and trying to fill it with nonsense. It's a very physical process to write by hand; and what it means is (a) you are completely removed from any sort of digital stimulus; that's brilliant. Um, (b) you don't—because it's so physical, you don't get caught up in letting your pen run away with you and going off on stuff that just looks or sounds pretty; it has to really, really work.

So, I finish it by hand, and I sort of breathe a massive sigh of relief and I think, *Oh God, now I've got to type it up!* And I'd always think of Robbie Cheadle would write by hand and he would send it off to someone and they would type it. And I did think, *Should I do that?* But no one would ever be able to read my writing. And what happens is I write it and I'm sort of editing it as I'm writing it, so there's lots of asterisks and arrows everywhere. And then when I type it up, I think people say to me, 'Oh, that's how you edit it.' And I say, 'Well actually, I don't edit it when I type it

up at all.' What happens is I'm typing it up and I think, *Oh, okay, well, this should change; I should change that to this phrase*, and then literally I turn the page and I've done it. And it's such an amazing reminder to me every single time just to trust my instincts because I'd already thought—

RF: Your first drafts must be beautiful because you actually cared at the level of the sentence while you are physically writing out that sentence.

NG: Yeah, no, no, but that's the kind of writer I am. I'm not, I'm not the sort of writer who—this is why it takes me a long time. I'm not the sort of writer who just wants to get something down and use that as a sort of, you know, *that's the dough that I'm going to shape something*. I literally write it as I want to see it. So, it just takes—it's mentally and physically very intensive, but it really, really works for me.

RF: Now, we've talked about the personal and political in your writing; you know, the personal, that intimacy of those relationships, those friendships and also, the political I think, you know—I've seen really, really clearly in your later work. Do you feel that your books are always meant to be political? Do you feel they all are political, or do you think that's just the nature of having any group that is dominant over another, whether we're talking about race, whether we're talking about gender, whether we're talking about particular communities?

NG: I think it's a bit of both but I think, ultimately, you can't be a writer of colour and you can't necessarily write about queer lives without it being political. So, I think by nature, my writing will always be political whether I intend it to, or not.

RF: And, I guess, a final question: Your books are really fearless, and they celebrate ‘difference’ with all its difficulties, as well. And I think they show that many stories deserve to be heard. So, how would you encourage new writers who might be listening to this; people who have yet to find a voice or an idea: how would you—what advice would you give them, as they start when they are searching for that story, that idea?

NG: I think the best advice I can give is to write the thing that is truest, that feels the truest to you, and write the thing that is really on your mind; because it’s got to be the thing that you feel the most passionate about. Because if you can write with a level of emotional honesty and intensity, that is the thing that will come through on the page.

Niven Govinden was in conversation with Roopa Farooki

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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